

Registration of Commercial Lobbying Interests Bill

6th December Bill speech

I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a public register of organisations that carry out lobbying of Parliament for commercial gain; to make provision for disclosure of expenditure by such organisations; and for connected purposes.

This Bill has the peculiar position of being very relevant today but also having been around for a very long time, since it was first presented to the House of Commons in 1982 by none other than my father who was then the MP for Keighley. He then presented the Bill again in 1988 when he was the MP for Bradford South.

I do not seek to present the Bill today in a squalid attempt to get in the Guinness Book of Records for presenting the Bill with the longest gestation period in British history.

But I do present it because Britain now has a £2 billion lobbying industry, much of it centred on Westminster and there is, I believe, a strong public mood to make lobbying more transparent and accountable. That will be reinforced by the revelations in today's Independent about what appears to be considerable influence exercised by Bell Pottinger over the government.

The Bill requires that all companies or partnerships who seek to lobby parliament to try to influence legislation or its application as their sole, major, or subsidiary commercial purpose shall be registered.

The Bill would not impede the ordinary lobbyist – any member of the public who has a right to lobby his or her Member of Parliament.

Nor would it affect a company, co-operative, trade unionist or residents' association from lobbying parliament.

My fear is that a local group such as a residents' association cannot exert the sort of heavy influence that big business can exert through professional lobbyists.

During the 1980s when big consortia were lobbying for the contract to build the Channel Tunnel, Jonathan Aitken – ironically in view of later events – said: “What worries me most is that usually lobbying is genuine in the sense that it stems from little interests groups and concerned citizens. Here we see the Panzer divisions of big business, their heavy artillery and tanks trampling over all the small people’s interests which I want to see better defended.”

Well, I have the same view.

Those panzer divisions, that heavy artillery of the lobbying industry is now at work perhaps on a bigger scale than ever before and I suspect that this may be the next big scandal to hit British politics.

Funnily enough the prime minister said the same thing some time ago and has not done anything about it; he promised a consultation paper on just this sort of legislation by the end of last month and nothing has appeared.

There are many large and powerful lobbying firms busy in Westminster. Many of them are lobbying for lucrative health contracts – for instance, MHP, Lexington, Grayling, Citigate Dewe Rogerson.

One special adviser at the Department of Health used to work for MHP. That may be above board but we do not know because there is no transparency in the system.

Some will argue that this Bill is not necessary because the Association of Professional Political Consultants which has a code of conduct.

That simply doesn’t work. For instance, the code bars payments in cash or in kind to any parliamentarian. But Grayling Public Affairs is owned by Huntsworth whose chief executive is Lord Chadlington.

Bell Pottinger Public Affairs is owned by Chime Communications of which Lord Bell is the chair.

That brings us rather neatly to the story in today’s Independent But that Bell Pottinger has been secretly filmed making the most alarming claims to have influence at the very heart of government including inside Number 10.

They claimed to have got the prime minister to speak to the Chinese premier on behalf of their business clients.

They boasted of having access to the Foreign Secretary, the prime minister's chief of staff Ed Llewellyn and his adviser Steve Hilton.

They also claimed to be able to get MPs – presumably from the government benches – to attack investigative journalists.

Reporters from the Independent posed as agents from the Uzbek government, one whose record of human rights abuses is among the worst. Bell Pottinger, the firm that has been very close to the very top of the Tory Party since its founding, never raised even a hesitation about trying to secure an apparent £1 million contract to lobby for such an unconscionable regime.

Tim Collins, the managing director of Bell Pottinger Public Affairs, is a former Tory MP who is not fondly remembered on these benches.

He said: "I've been working with Steve Hilton, David Cameron, George Osborne for 20 years plus. There is not a problem getting a message through."

Strangely, when a spokesman for Number 10 was asked about the Indy story he said: "It is simply not true that Bell Pottinger or indeed any other lobbying firm has any influence on government policy."

If that is true it means all the corporate lobbyists currently working close the government, the serving Tory MPs who have worked in the past as lobbyists, former Tory MPs who now work as lobbyists, all of them have simply been wasting their time and should have been doing something else.

The reality is that this government is very close to powerful vested and corporate interests.

They have not much idea what is going on in most of the country which is being ripped up and eviscerated by their policies but they are close to the City, they are close to big business.

They understand the corporate world.

If the prime minister really wants to clean up his tainted government, he would take on my Bill and put it on the statute book.

If he doesn't, we can only conclude that this government has a great deal to hide.

John Cryer

MP for Leyton and Wanstead