

There is real cause for concern when the persuasiveness of a story depends more on public attitudes than the facts

democraticaudit.com/2015/11/05/there-is-real-cause-for-concern-when-the-persuasiveness-of-a-story-depends-more-on-public-attitudes-than-the-facts/

By Democratic Audit UK

2015-11-5

*What does the recent public shaming and subsequent exoneration of Jack Straw and Malcolm Rifkind over accusations of 'cash for access' tell us about British democracy? Nothing good, certainly. But did the investigation by Channel Four and the Telegraph lift the lid on the secret world of British politics as intended? **Phil Parvin** suggests not, and argues that the readiness of the public to believe negative stories about politicians means that these 'stings' can damage perceptions of British democracy far beyond what is justified by the facts of the case at hand.*



We like to think that we have a reasonably good idea where power lies in a democracy: it lies with the people. In mass democracies comprising millions of citizens and characterised by often radical forms of diversity, people voluntarily entrust this power to a smaller group of people charged with the responsibility of governing in the people's interests and on their behalf. Government is thus charged with enacting the will of the people within a system of institutional checks and balances designed to hold decision makers to account and, ultimately, to remove decision makers from power if they are seen to be out of step with public opinion.

The [Dispatches/Telegraph investigation](#), which saw the politicians offer to represent the corporate interests of a fictitious company in return for substantial fees, challenges that familiar story and, in doing so, plays on enduring and widespread fears among the public that something is rotten at the heart of the political system. The fear is that power in contemporary democratic states like Britain does not lie with the people, but with rich unelected organisations; that the government does not act in the interests of citizens, it acts in the interests of big business; and that the political agenda is not set out in the open by the people, but behind closed doors by small groups of powerful insiders.

The idea that democracy is a sham and that real power lies with shadowy insiders capable of shaping the political agenda according to their own interests is one that is very prevalent among the British public in general but also

among many academics, politicians, and activists who are fundamentally opposed to one another in virtually every other respect. It's probably fair to say that Noam Chomsky and David Cameron, if forced to have a conversation with one another, would not see eye to eye on many issues. But they would agree on one thing, at least: that lobbyists are a bad thing, and are a symptom of a wider problem for democratic states arising out of the ugly clash between money and power.

And if anyone is in a position to know about the state of British democracy, and to affect change, it is presumably the current Prime Minister. Cameron took the issue of influence and access seriously enough to make it a central plank of his 2010 election campaign. In February of that year, Cameron [described lobbying](#) as the 'next big scandal waiting to happen' to British politics. Quoting [research that I had conducted](#) for the Hansard Society, Cameron claimed that the ability of rich organisations to influence policy and shape the political agenda had 'tainted' British politics for too long and that new measures were needed to improve transparency and increase accountability. It wasn't a difficult sell, and neither was it difficult to see why Cameron of all people decided to elevate the issue of lobbying in the public consciousness in that way at that time. The public, still outraged in the wake of the MPs expenses scandal, were keen to hear how the political parties planned to clean up politics and wrest power from fatcats, big business, and corrupt politicians and give it back to the people.

Cameron's strategy was grounded in a combination of localism and a tighter regulation of special interests. Neither amounted to much. Localism has all but fallen off the political map entirely since its heyday in 2010 when almost everyone seemed to be of the opinion that power should be devolved from central institutions to local communities. And the promised legislation – the [2014 Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning, and Trade Union Administration Act](#) – has since emerged to almost universal criticism from anti-lobbying campaigners as well as lobbyists working in the for profit and non profit sectors.

So the Prime Minister has failed to deliver on his promise to tackle the issue of lobbying and the public remain as concerned as they ever were about vested interests and the power of unelected organisations to decide policy. How concerned should they be? The driving worry is that in Britain money buys power. But while there is some evidence of this, it is not as straightforward as is often assumed. One of the central findings of my Hansard Society report that David Cameron didn't mention in his speech was that the popular assumption that economic advantage straightforwardly translates into political advantage is not born out by the evidence. Of the many MPs that I consulted in the writing of that report, a majority claimed that they would be more likely to meet with, and champion the causes of, non-corporate lobbyists than lobbyists working in the for-profit sector. They are more likely to offer non-profit organisations access than businesses, especially big businesses that have little or no immediate connection with the economic prosperity of their constituencies. Similarly, unlike the testosterone-saturated picture of lobbying presented by its many critics, there exists a palpable despondency among many lobbyists from different sectors about their chances of making a difference to policy. One senior lobbyist for a high-profile environmental organisation that I spoke to while writing my report claimed that they intended to lobby for changes to the Energy Bill that was passing through Parliament at the time, but believed that doing so would have little chance for success, as the energy companies had more money to spend and so would probably get their way. His counterpart, who worked for a major energy company, however, claimed that *their* efforts to resist changes to the Bill would likely fail because in the end, the majority of the public and politicians hate energy companies and try, if they can, to side with environmental organisations. The picture that emerges, and which is corroborated by other evidence too, is of a political system populated by organisations who seek to influence policy but who are often not at all confident in their ability to do so, or that their efforts are anything other than a waste of time.

The point is not that big businesses do not often get their way, or that money is irrelevant. On the contrary, there is ample evidence that often big businesses are able to exert greater pressure on politicians than other organisations on account of the money they are able to bring to bear on the issue. It is also not to say that the rules governing lobbying should not be reformed and clarified. They should. The coalition government's Lobbying Act singularly fails to ensure transparency or clarity and this is a problem for all concerned in the business of devising and implementing policy, and for citizens who are worried about the power of special interests. Rather, it is to suggest

that the picture we are so often presented is too simplistic and lacking in nuance. Politics is messy, complex, and fluid. Mechanisms of decision making and policy formation in states like Britain are subject to all kinds of sometimes overlapping, sometimes clashing forces. Individual MPs are contacted by around 100 or so organisations a week from different sectors and about different issues. They are also subject to pressures from their local constituents, wider public opinion, and the media, as well their own party leaderships. Ministers are charged with taking difficult decisions in changing circumstances often characterised by imperfect information. Governments work with other governments in a complex global political context, and are subject to global political and economic forces, that both constrain and facilitate, and which are themselves subject to profound and often sudden change. The idea that policy making in such a complex, volatile, and often unpredictable context can be explained in terms of a straightforward causal relationship between money and power misses so much that is crucial to the process by which decisions are made and policies formed. Money is a factor. But policies are not simply decided in favour of those who are able to throw the most money at the issue. If they were, then cigarettes would be much less invisible in our public spaces, shops, and advertising media than they currently are. And non-profit organisations like [Liberty](#) and [Friends of the Earth](#) would not be the formidable lobbying organisations that they currently are.

The vast majority of the public won't care that Rifkind and Straw have been cleared of any wrongdoing. Most won't even be aware that any such accusations were made. Of those that are, many will ignore the fact that they have been exonerated while many others will just continue to assume that they were guilty anyway, and cling to the popular notion that the system in general is somehow broken or unable to police itself, a view compounded by the failure of the government's Lobbying Act. Mud sticks. No matter that Kathryn Hudson, the parliamentary commissioner for standards, claimed in not so many words that the Dispatches sting had been a hatchet job, edited in such a way as to mislead the public and encourage them to draw 'conclusions which do not stand up to detailed scrutiny'. No matter also that the piece was described by the commissioner as unfair, inaccurate, and an impediment to the wider debate about the appropriate conduct of politicians.

The principal contribution made by Channel Four and the Telegraph in this case will be to strengthen the widespread and enduring sense among the British public that politicians are all out for themselves, that politics isn't worth the trouble, and that democracy is rotten at its core. Certainly, Rifkind's claims that he has enormous amounts of time on his hands and that he considers the time traditionally set aside for meeting constituents as 'quiet time' best suited to walking and reading reveal something about Rifkind. But events such as these feed a general and widespread cynicism about politics in Britain: in a general climate of cynicism in which people are only too willing to believe the negative stories constructed by the media, individual cases do not stay individual cases, they are held to reveal something about the state of politics in general. Rifkind's comments don't just tell us something about Rifkind, they tell us something about all MPs.

Except they don't. In years to come what most people will remember about this issue is that Straw and Rifkind were implicated in some kind of political corruption. They will not remember that of the twelve people approached by Dispatches, half didn't respond, one was unwilling to go any further without further information about the company, and another claimed to be uninterested in working with the company. They will not remember that the principal case against the two featured politicians was, [in the words of the parliamentary commissioner](#), selective, unfair, and inaccurate. The public are all too sympathetic to stories that cast politicians in a bad light or seem to confirm background suspicions that they have about the nefarious acts perpetrated behind the closed doors of Parliament. The readiness of the public to believe negative stories about politicians, and the shortness of the public's collective memory about the specifics of these stories, means that these stories have a power and persuasiveness far beyond what is justified by the facts of the case at hand. And when the persuasiveness of a story depends more on the wider attitudes of the public than the facts, we have real cause for concern.

Lobbying needs to be transparent. It needs better regulation. We need to ensure that policy making is not dominated by well-resourced organisations at the expense of smaller ones. But we must also not fall into the trap of believing so completely in the negative and inaccurate picture of British politics and politicians that we are so often presented with that we believe every negative story that we are told. Doing so only lets the media off the hook,

reduces their accountability, and hands them more power, to the detriment of democracy.

—

Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

—

Phil Parvin is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at Loughborough University. *Friend or Foe? Lobbying in British Democracy* is available from the Hansard Society [here](#).

