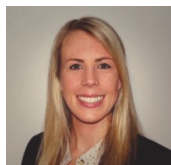# The central problem with lobbying is the lack of data, which only worsens the public's perceptions of the issue

Ben Worthy and **Stefani Langehennig** *discuss the lack of information around lobbying activities, much of which goes unrecorded or is not released. They write that if you want to monitor lobbying, you must get the data yourself, often through FOI requests or following the money on the Register of Interests.*

There are multiple ironies around David Cameron's involvement in the Greensill lobbying scandal. The Prime Minister who would 'sort' the problem of corporate lobbying and interests in 2010, instead came to personify it in 2021. The moderniser so keen on others' openness in office, admitted to using secret channels to influence decisions once he had left. Yet beyond Cameron's own folly, his appearance has also revealed much about why lobbying is such a persistent problem in British politics. His defences and explanations helped demonstrate why, despite the sound and fury of reform, so little has been done, and 'lobbying' and 'interests' continue to be such persistent problems.

Our project on monitory democracy has shown that lobbying is not, as David Cameron said back in 2010, the next big scandal waiting to happen. The problem of corporate influence and 'democratic distortion' has been ever present in British political life. Rather than a 'big bang', since the 1990s it has been a continual, rolling controversy, with major scandals and minor questions about interests and lobbying raised monthly, if not weekly. Underneath the big stories in 2021, we've seen a steady stream of revelations about ex-MPs lobbying, lobbyists with passes in the House of Lords to big tech and APPGs.

The central problem is the data gap. Aside from the drip of revelations, we don't know the scale of the problem or what is happening. This is partly a consequence of the unrecordable way lobbying works. Back in 2010, Cameron explained about 'the lunches, the hospitality, the quiet word in your ear, the ex-ministers and ex-advisers for hire, helping big business find the right way to get its way'. To this we can now add, thanks to David Cameron in 2021, the barrage of texts and WhatsApp messages.

But even where there should be data, there simply isn't. The kind of granular data required to know who is lobbying whom doesn't exist. Cameron's Register of Lobbyists, which he robustly defended in his appearance, committed to making available details of who was lobbying. But the Register was designed only to cover third-party activity, missing both the 'in-house' work that makes up around 85% of all lobbying and Parliament as an institution. Overall, the Register reveals very little. According to one study

> …only about 29% of clients listed in the lobby register appear in the published record of ministerial meetings with outside groups, and less than 4% of groups disclosed in ministerial meetings records appear in the lobby register.

Another study estimated around only 1 in 20 lobbyists were covered. It could well be that the 74,714 meetings you can see here, courtesy of Transparency International, are just the tip of the iceberg.

Many other potential sources of data about lobbying or connections are equally patchy. The Register of Members' Financial Interests, as another example, is not fully searchable (though you can search it here). Data on meetings, gifts, and hospitality, which Cameron also championed, are incomplete or late. Loopholes abound, and some ministers seem unsure if meetings are for private business or because they are minister, while lobbyists can simply switch off their cameras for a meeting not to be officially recorded.

Put together, it means that we are still roughly where we were in 2010, when a soon-to-be Prime Minister complained that we 'don't know who is meeting whom. We don't know whether any favours are being exchanged. We don't know which outside interests are wielding unhealthy influence'. Interestingly, this survey shows that people know they don't know enough, with 'only 15% believing the public currently has enough information about who is lobbying'. The difficulties compare unfavourably with sites like EU Integrity Watch, a platform that allows users to easily search meetings and links. In the US, you can see State level data on lobbyists as well as Congressional level and even the interaction of gender, race, and money.

This lack of data then has consequences for the public and for politicians. Lobbying itself is a necessary and healthy part of our democratic process and helped give us seatbelts and change the conversation on climate change. Yet for the public, the secrecy and gaps are filled by doubt and scepticism. A survey by Transparency International also showed that 76% of the British public strongly believe that wealthy individuals exert undue influence on government. Politicians, they believe, are often self-interested, corporations have too much influence, and politics is probably corrupt. David Cameron's appearance will have pretty much confirmed the 'far-too-cosy relationship between politics, government, business and money'.

For politicians, the secrecy and opacity have a tendency to trigger more digging and more questions, so investigations rapidly gather pace, and run out of control. Greensill began with Cameron's texts but has now been overtaken with 'cash for curtains' in one direction, and a quiet drink with Matthew Hancock in another. Select committees, opposition MPs, journalists and campaign groups are all pulling at different threads and following money and interests in different directions. There is then the start of another damaging cycle of investigations, revelations and (frequently broken) promises of reform.

Our research has shown how, if you want to monitor lobbying, you must get the data yourself. Most often it's the undercover expose, making FOI requests for meetings or room bookings, or following the money on the Register of Interests, or carefully piecing together links and networks. The Greensill emerged through a mixture of patient checking, FOI requests, and leaks. The way in which data comes out often worsens the perceptions and sense there is a problem.

More data won't end the problem of money and politics, but it may end the cycle of secrecy, exposure, and revelation. The presence of granular data may act as a deterrent and could, just like the new expenses regime, make certain actions impossible. In a final twist, could Cameron's scandal kickstart an end to the data gap? Knowing more would be a first step toward lobbying becoming, and being seen as, less of a problem.

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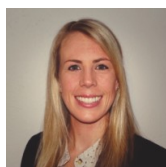
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