

**THE SLOW DEATH OF THE WESTMINSTER LOBBY: collateral damage  
from the MPs' expenses scandal**

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## ABSTRACT

Much has been written about the potential impact of the MPs expenses scandal on the standing of MPs and overall trust in government. One, admittedly less important fall-out from the scandal has been to exposed the Westminster lobby as being perhaps too close to politicians and too far from their audiences. This article suggests that the scandal represented for the Lobby a terminal moment in its continuing slide into irrelevance and decline. However, this decline did not begin on the 8th May when the *Daily Telegraph* began its coverage but can be traced back several decades earlier and can be attributed to a number of major changes in the UK's political and media environments that have been taking place over the past thirty

years. Specifically these changes are: the nature of politics at Westminster, changes in the wider body politic, developments in media and communications technology, changes in the UK's media culture and finally, the small 'c' conservative culture of lobby journalists themselves, who have played a crucial role in presiding over their own demise. The scandal provided a graphic illustration of how out-of-touch both MPs, and the journalists who report on them, have become. The scandal has not caused the demise of the lobby but it can be seen as symbolising its increasing irrelevance.

## **THE SLOW DEATH OF THE WESTMINSTER LOBBY: collateral damage from the MPs' expenses scandal**

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"These days I put a figurative mourning band on my arm as I walk from the Commons Central Lobby to the once-bustling Members' Lobby. As I pass through the swinging doors, all that greet my ageing eyes are one or two Lobby journalists and perhaps an MP or two.... We all cry on each other's shoulders, figuratively speaking, about the "death of Parliament" and with it, the "dying gasps" of the Lobby system of Parliamentary journalists."  
*Andrew Roth, author of 'Parliamentary Profiles'*<sup>1</sup>

"Basically it is a plot of suppression and it is done at the expense of the reader... "  
*Tony Howard Veteran Political Commentator*

"Not only did the Lobby fail to break the story but it seemed as blissfully unaware as the general public about the scale or size of the claims."

*David Hencke Chairman of the Lobby 2009*

### **Introduction**

Foretelling the death of anything that is not yet firmly in the ground is always a tricky business. Thus, in suggesting that an august body founded more than 100 years ago is now more or less extinct, represents a high-risk activity. Nonetheless what is being argued here is that the revelations by the *Daily Telegraph* in spring 2009 about the abuse of MPs' expenses will be come to be seen as the moment when the Westminster lobby, if it didn't actually die, did reach a terminal moment in its continuing slide into irrelevance and decline.

However, the lobby's decline does not begin on the 8th May when the *Telegraph* began its coverage with a story (one of its weakest) about how the Prime Minister's brother was arranging for Gordon Brown's cleaner to be paid<sup>2</sup>. Its decline can be traced back several

decades earlier and can be attributed to a number of major changes in the UK's political and media environments that have been taking place over the past thirty years. Specifically these changes are:

- the nature of politics at Westminster,
- changes in the wider body politic,
- developments in media and communications technology,
- changes in the UK's media culture and finally,
- the small 'c' conservative culture of lobby journalists themselves, who have played a crucial role in presiding over their own demise.

### **Defining the 'Lobby'**

But to begin with some definitions. The term 'the lobby', confusingly, has three distinct meanings in and around Westminster<sup>3</sup>. Officially it refers to the Members' Lobby just outside the chamber of the House of Commons, open only to MPs, officers of the house and those journalists officially recognised as 'members of the lobby'. And this is the second meaning - that group of journalists (now around 200 in number) whose names are held on a list kept by the Serjeant at Arms, who have a parliamentary pass with a large 'L' in the middle, which denotes that they have access to the members lobby and its corridors. (It is worth noting that this specifically excludes those journalists – gallery reporters and sketch writers - who sit in and report from the press gallery or who attend and report committee meetings.) In theory all conversations that take place in these restricted areas are assumed to be on 'lobby terms' i.e. non-attributable, unless it is agreed to the contrary. The final meaning of the word is the one that tends to be used exclusively by members of this exclusive club; and that is the one that refers to their twice daily (previously secret) meetings with the Prime Ministers' Press Secretary in which they are briefed about the day's political events and the Government's view on current

issues. The morning meeting, at 11, used to take place in a basement room in Downing Street and only members of the Lobby were allowed to attend. However, in 2002 Alistair Campbell, in an act that many members of the Lobby saw as a hostile attempt to rein them in, opened this meeting to any accredited journalist and placed a summary of these meetings on the Downing Street website. A move denounced by lobby member Peter Osborne in characteristically virulent terms - but in a way that revealed the sentiments of those who argued that the Lobby, for all its imperfections, was a help not a hindrance to the business of political communication:

“The lobby changes that Downing Street pushed through during the early summer are an interesting example of this. Alastair Campbell and government ministers assert that this is about bringing a new openness and transparency to political reporting. At first glance the government story appears plausible, but in fact the reverse is the truth. Though it had its weaknesses, there was a kind of rough democracy about the old lobby system.”<sup>4</sup>

However, the afternoon meeting at 3.45pm, which takes place in a garret not far from Big Ben, remains a private gathering open only to members of the lobby and thus, given that it is arguably the more important of the two meetings, continues to provide its members with a continuing sense of privilege and exclusivity.

In this paper, unless otherwise indicated, the term ‘the lobby’ will be taken to mean the group of journalists who are members of the Parliamentary Lobby.

## **A Cosy Club**

Members of Parliament long disputed the public’s ‘right to know’ about their deliberations. However, in 1771, as a result of vigorous campaigning by the printer/MP John Wilkes the freedom to report parliamentary proceedings was established in law. However, it was not until 1884 that the current lobby system was established, and although the official reason for the establishment of a list of privileged reporters was the need for greater security following a Fenian attempt to bomb Parliament, it in effect established a system that was designed to ensure that reporters based at Westminster were fed enough material to satisfy their editors

and readers but not enough to embarrass the Government or Opposition. In the words of Lloyd George: "What you can't square you squash, what you can't squash you square."<sup>5</sup>

The success of Lloyd George's mission, from the politician's perspective, was captured by Sir Alexander Mackintosh a member of the Lobby who first started reporting Parliament four years before the Lobby was formed. In his valedictory book, published 65 years later, Macintosh describes the role of the journalist at Westminster, not as a member of an independent fourth estate, but as an 'intermediary':

"Political correspondents, especially those with the entrée to the Lobby, a privilege I enjoyed for fifty years, have better facilities now for obtaining authoritative information. The value of their liaison work as between Government and public is more frankly appreciated and is well understood by the leading statesmen."<sup>6</sup>

A few years later, one of Mackintosh's colleagues in Parliament articulated the sense of '*esprit de corps*' felt by all the inhabitants of the 'Westminster Village':

"As a whole, Parliament is a little self-contained world with an *esprit do corps* of its own. Ministers, backbenchers, officials, journalists, attendants, police and the staff generally all contribute to the spirit of the place. There could hardly be a pleasanter or more fascinating little world to work in."<sup>7</sup>

So cosy, and successful, was this club, that in 1962 Harold Wilson, then Leader of the Labour Opposition opined: "The relation between politicians (Conservative and Opposition) and lobby journalists is a relationship of complete trust and no politician has ever been let down."<sup>8</sup>

However, Wilson's sanguine view of how well the lobby worked for the benefit of all its member - a view that did not survive his Premiership two years later and led to him temporarily abandoning lobby briefings - was not universally shared. Two prominent commentators of the time were both scathing in their denunciations of the Lobby. Academic David Butler noted that "scoops are surprisingly rare" as were useful background stories "... papers reported events but did not do enough to put them in their long-term context." he wrote.<sup>9</sup> Anthony Howard, a political journalist who was outside the lobby, was even more scathing, he wrote:

"In what is meant to be an open political system it has always struck me as extraordinary – and I think frankly unhealthy too – that so much secrecy and mystery should surround the work of the political journalist."<sup>10</sup>

When Ted Heath came to power in 1970 he, and his press secretary Donald Maitland, had come to the view that the lobby system was in need of reform<sup>11</sup>. In particular Maitland came to see the convention that when briefing the Lobby he could only ever speak 'off-the-record' as faintly ridiculous. He told the then chairman of the Lobby, Keith Renshaw, that there were all manner of pronouncements that he was making to journalists who were not in the Lobby on-the-record but, when repeating them to the Lobby, he was obliged to go off-the-record.<sup>12</sup> He urged reform but was rebuffed by Renshaw who told Maitland that his speaking to the Lobby on-the-record, would represent such a fundamental change in their practice as to "dilute the atmosphere of confidentiality and confidence which has been our greatest asset in news gathering for decades."<sup>13</sup> And one of the veterans of the lobby at the time, Guy Eden, commented that allowing the Prime Minister's Press Secretary to speak on an attributable basis would mean that members of the lobby would be reduced to 'mere reporting' which would "erode the very foundations of the bases on which the lobby worked".<sup>14</sup>

## **Centre Stage**

One of the arguments that this paper will later develop is that it has been the existence of large government majorities at Westminster over the past three decades that has been one of the major factors contributing to the growing irrelevance of the Lobby. It is for this reason that the period of the late seventies can be seen as its last sustained period of significant power and influence. Between 1976 and 1979 Jim Callaghan's Labour Government held a precarious grip on power, finally losing a confidence motion in March 1979, which opened the door to a general election and 18 years of Conservative rule. Throughout this time there was genuine news to be had 'in the lobby' and the 100 or so men (and few women) who then made up its membership were in a position to report real breaking political news of great national significance. As the Callaghan Government staggered on its parliamentary majority began to ebb away, a pact with the Liberals (as they then were) came and went, proposals for devolution also came and went and all was played out against a growing tide of industrial militancy that

culminated in the 'winter of discontent'. In this situation lobby correspondents' reporting was critical. Issues such as which MP was thinking of defecting, which one resigning, what motion was being cobbled together that might attract the support of the minor parties, were centre stage - and it placed the lobby journalists there as well.

Of course, all this happened away from the prying eyes of the television cameras which were not allowed into Parliament until 1989 – indeed the sound broadcasting of Parliament only started on a permanent basis in 1979. Hence, the nation was, to a large extent, dependent on those who had access to the inner sanctums of Parliament to tell them what was going on and to explain its significance.

In these the last days of the Lobby's sustained pre-eminence, the primary source of the media's political intelligence was that which could be garnered by lobby correspondents spending time in and around the Members' Lobby and in the bars and restaurants of Westminster. Here they would pick up news, gossip, rumour and innuendo and then display the wit and ability to write this up in a way that could either be deemed as 'insiders' political intelligence' or, as often characterised by politicians, 'mere tittle tattle'.

But if most members of the Lobby were broadly satisfied with the job they were doing, not all outside observers were. Three political journalists, who were not members - Michael Cockerell, Peter Hennessy and David Walker – denounced the Lobby and all its works in their book 'Sources Close to the Prime Minister' (the lobby's well-worked code for the Prime Minister's Press Secretary or even, at times, the Prime Minister him or herself.) The authors<sup>15</sup> argued that non-attribution, so beloved by the Lobby, enabled its members "... on occasion to give their stories an entirely undeserved authority."<sup>16</sup> They wrote about "...the present twisted relationship" between journalists and the Government<sup>17</sup> and described the Lobby as practising, "... spaniel journalism"<sup>18</sup> In a telling phrase, which reflected their view about co-option (which became the Lobby's undoing during the MP's expenses scandal) the authors wrote about how "...in return for their obeisance towards parliamentary procedure the Lobby correspondents were soon co-opted as honorary MPs"<sup>19</sup> As if to exemplify these compliant attitudes one of the



veterans of the lobby the Press Association's Chris Moncrieff is quoted as saying, "If anything happens in the Members' Lobby like a punch-up between MPs, which once did happen, you are blind. You do not see it."<sup>20</sup>

### **The Plates Begin to Shift**

But not all members of the Lobby were satisfied that it was an effective mechanism for government/media communications. In 1986, frustrated by the system in general and what they saw as its abuse by Bernard Ingham, Press Secretary to Margaret Thatcher, in particular, three newspapers - the Guardian the Scotsman and the leader of the pack the newly-launched Independent - announced their withdrawal from the Lobby. Writing shortly before his death in 2001 Anthony Bevens, who spearheaded the ultimately unsuccessful revolt, said the Lobby encouraged "the insidious laziness of the hacks" and was a "crutch for crippled journalism".<sup>21</sup> That revolt petered but dissatisfaction with the way the system was, or was not working, continued to bubble under both inside and outside the Lobby.

It is important to point out that much contact between politicians and journalists took place, and still does, away from the lobbies – in restaurants, bars and at party conferences – and not always by accredited lobby correspondents. Nonetheless the Lobby remained the focus of attention and, as former BBC Correspondent Steve Richards recalls it had achieved a sort of 'mystical status', within the BBC at least:

"When I worked as a BBC Political Correspondent a few years ago, the lobby briefings had an almost mystical status within the organisation. Probably they still do. Armies of producers used to await the return of the lobby correspondents almost shaking with excitement. The secrecy made the briefings seem much more significant than they really were. During the great political dramas of the mid 1990s I recall one senior producer at Westminster shrieking to the BBC political correspondents : "Get to the lobbies !" Not knowing what really went on, she seemed to believe we each had a separate lobby to attend, rather like confession, in which anonymous spin-doctors whispered potent words into our ears. "The correspondents have gone to the lobbies !" she would sigh each mid-morning and mid-afternoon, as if we had all been sent out to the trenches in the First World War."<sup>22</sup>

One of the reasons why the lobby had gained such a mystical status was that this was a time when MPs could still only be contacted by means of 'old', sometimes very old, technology. There were, then, three main ways of making contact.<sup>23</sup> First, there was the possibility of a face-to-face encounter in or around the lobby. Second, they could be contacted by phone (or in person) in their offices - where they were usually not. Thirdly, and most usually but most uselessly, they could be contacted via an antediluvian messaging system, which involved leaving a message in the Member's Lobby with a 'badge messenger' who then searched for the MP around Westminster's committee rooms and corridors. As difficult as making contact was, there were further problematics in drafting the note. By saying "Meet me in the lobby"? one was committing oneself to waiting, what could be, literally hours for an encounter that might never take place. "Phone me in my office" was equally problematic since it meant leaving the lobby to sit by, or near, one's phone in the hope of receiving a call that might never come.

Then along came pagers, followed by mobile phones, email and all the other means of online communication. These technologies meant that MPs were no longer elusive, they could be tracked down, messaged and interviewed, all without any face-to-face contact. This made life easier, much easier, for lobby journalists but it also meant that their monopoly of access to politicians, via the Members Lobby, was broken – if they could reach MPs by these modern means of communication then so could anyone else. This author recalls passing the time of day with an MP in the Members Lobby who then received a pager message from another journalist - not a member of the Lobby - which resulted in the MP stopping the conversation and going off to find a phone to speak with the caller (who was clearly perceived as having more urgent business than the author).

## **The Tyranny of the Majority**

But it wasn't just technology that was beginning to threaten the Lobby Correspondent's centre stage role in the drama of British politics. Important changes were happening at Westminster which had nothing to do with technology, nor the media, but were impacting on the position of the lobby journalists. In the 30 years that have elapsed between 1979 and the time of writing (2009) there have been only five years – 1992 to 1997 - when the governing party did not have a very large majority over all other parties. This was the period of the Major Government, and because of the small majority and Major's constant problems with a coterie of anti-European Tory backbenchers, genuine news was still to be found in and around the Lobby - but this is <sup>24</sup>probably the last period when such a statement holds good. Since 1979 government majorities in the Commons, over all other parties, have averaged 103. This had two effects, both detrimental to the influence of the Lobby.

First, back in the days of slim majorities it would not be uncommon for the main television news bulletins to begin with a live report from the House about the latest 'cliff-hanger vote'. This report might well consist of the lobby correspondent reporting the latest rumours swirling around Westminster and him or her speculating about the likely result of the vote. When the result of the vote was declared the bulletin would often return to the Commons to hear further speculation from the correspondent as to its significance. And the following morning's newspapers, would also be full of reports of the vote and conjecture as to its meaning, spiced with 'off-the-record' quotes obtained on 'lobby terms'. But as such cliff-hangers became fewer and fewer, the eyes and ears of the nation, or more specifically its political editors, turned away from Parliament. As one indicator of this, an analysis of political news between 1975 and 1999 on the main terrestrial television news bulletins, reveals that over this period there was a decline in the time given to political news from 27.4% of the bulletin to 15.9% bulletin <sup>25</sup>

The second change resulting from these large majorities was that there was a significant increase in the power of the whips, and a concomitant reluctance on the part of backbenchers to confide, or gossip, with members of the Lobby. This increase stemmed from two sources. First, the competition for ministerial posts intensified; this was because there were roughly the same number of ministerial jobs available but the number of government backbenchers (in

both the Thatcher and Blair years) had increased considerably. Hence, with more people chasing fewer jobs backbenchers were ever more anxious to avoid doing anything that might bring them into disfavour with the whips office. To be seen to be chatting with journalists in the Members' Lobby, was a dangerous occupation, especially since the doors to the whips office led straight off this lobby. This author recalls talking with a Labour MP in the Members' Lobby shortly after the 1997 election and having the conversation suddenly broken off by the backbencher who said 'We've been told not to talk to the media, I'd better go before I am spotted by the whips.'<sup>26</sup>

The power of the whips also grew as a result of the greater discipline that was being exercised by the party machines in the whole process of candidate selection, campaigning and election. First introduced by New Labour this new sense of party discipline soon rubbed off onto the Tories who, like Labour, began selecting MPs with a much stronger sense of party discipline. Many of the new MPs entering Parliament in this period had themselves been either party officials or had worked for MPs and hence took it for granted that talking with journalists on an unattributable basis, the *sine qua non* of the Lobby, was a risky enterprise.<sup>27</sup> Thus the increase in party discipline which began with the Thatcher Government, and increased with New Labour, meant that the well of political gossip began to dry up, as a former BBC Political Editor, Andrew Marr, noted:

"When New Labour came in the lobby died. New ministers were warned against randomly walking in the vicinity of journalists...But it was also the huge majorities of 1997 and 2001 meant that few votes counted."<sup>28</sup>

### **Changes Outside Westminster**

But it has not just been changes in the nature of politics at Westminster that has undermined the position of lobby journalists. Public disengagement from the business of politics, as practised at Westminster, has played an important role. One only needs to look at the impact of the MPs expenses role on perceptions of MPs to see how dramatically this has played out. New research conducted by the British Election Study shows that 59% of the British public believe

that the scandal “proves that most MPs are corrupt”, 87% disagreed with the statement that despite the media coverage the scandal was not important and a massive 91% said the scandal “makes me very angry”.<sup>29</sup> But perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of the public’s declining interest in conventional politics has been in the turnout figures for general elections, which averaged between 75% and 80% in the post-war period and then fell to an average of around 60% in the last three elections.

Hence, in the face of this perceived decline in the efficacy of parliament, it is hardly surprising if proprietors and editors have taken the view that news from Westminster is no longer a priority for their audiences. That is not to say that the coverage of politics *per se* has declined, for as news from the political frontline has declined, there has been a concomitant rise in the amount of political commentary carried by the British media. Hobsbawm and Lloyd recently identified no fewer than 300 commentators writing in today’s newspapers – this represents a vast increase over time, as they note:

“The late Hugo Young of the *Guardian*, among the most respected of columnists, wrote in an introduction to a collection of his columns published after his death in 2003 that, when he began in journalism in the 1950s, there was only one political column signed by its author. In the early 2000s, Young met an acquaintance who told him that he was compiling a list, for No 10, of all national newspaper columnists; he had reached 221, and was still counting. Editorial Intelligence now counts over 300 national newspaper columnists, summarising over 50,000 words of comment each day. That growth, in this most market-sensitive of industries, is driven by perceived demand. The demand comes from readers who want to be entertained.”<sup>30</sup>

This demand “to be entertained” represents another factor in the decline of the Lobby. Debates about the so-called ‘tabloidisation’ of the media have been taking place over several decades. One of the first substantive critiques of contemporary journalism came from Franklin who in 1997 wrote:

“ Journalism’s editorial priorities have changed. Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more ‘newsworthy’ than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news values have been undermined by new values; ‘infotainment is rampant.’”<sup>31</sup>

Most of this debate has focussed on newspapers, whether or not there has been a shift towards a more tabloid news agenda on the part of the television news providers is a matter of debate.<sup>32</sup> However, what cannot be denied is that the actual amount of political news on mainstream television bulletins has been in decline as the figures quoted earlier indicate.

But it is not just the rise of the 'Commentariat', or the triumph of tabloidisation, that has betokened changes in the reporting of politics at Westminster that have, in turn, contributed to undermining the standing of the Lobby. Other changes in the practice of journalism have also had their part to play.

The rise of the specialist journalist has been a significant factor. In the post war era the number of specialist journalists working in the national media was limited – all newspapers had political, diplomatic and crime correspondents, but beyond these three categories, specialists were few and far between. But as daily news coverage came to be increasingly dominated by radio and television (and latterly the Internet) the need for newspapers to have small armies of general news reporters available to cover breaking stories, has diminished. In its place newspapers have become, more and more, sites of specialist knowledge and commentary. The number of specialist correspondents has increased so greatly that today national newspapers employ more specialist than general reporters (and the same trend can now be seen in television and radio).

This trend has led Whitehall departments to build up more positive relations with those specialists who cover their own areas, whom they tend to see as more knowledgeable, and friendlier, and hence easier to deal with than their Westminster counterparts, who are inclined to be more interested in the process behind, and significance of, any new policy pronouncement rather than the pronouncement itself. Specialist correspondents, by definition, generally focus on content rather than form. Thus they tend to get priority treatment from Whitehall press officers which puts them at an advantage over their colleagues in the Lobby; an advantage that has increased since 2002 when specialists have been able to attend the daily

morning lobby briefing if their subject was likely to be on the agenda. This preference for specialists was evidenced in an internal report for the Home Office Press Office which recommended that the press office should develop a "gold card list of top priority journalists (e.g. the Home Affairs Correspondents of national newspapers and broadcasting organisations) and ensure that these journalists have a priority route into the Press Office."<sup>33</sup> Lobby journalists would, with some justification, argue that this type of treatment would likely lead to incorporation of the specialists into the 'mind set' of the Department they were covering and, for this reason their role, as interested outsiders should be protected. Whilst there is some merit in this assertion, the same dangers of incorporation exist for lobby journalists themselves – as will be discussed later.

Lobby journalists themselves, report that the biggest single change in their working lives has been the rise of the 24-hour news culture and the growth of the internet and the rise of the blogosphere. This has placed enormous demands on political correspondents to be constantly updating their stories, even when there is no new development to report, and also to be responding to stories (frequently un-sourced) being produced by the ever-expanding political blogosphere. This forces Lobby journalists to spend a lot more time on 'output' i.e. filing stories and a lot less time on 'input' – gathering and verifying stories. The Chair of the Lobby journalists at the time of writing, David Hencke, outlines the pressures thus:

"Modern Lobby journalists work much harder than their counterparts did two decades ago, but their focus is much narrower, with the result that it is easier to miss fresh stories. All of them are slaves to the breaking-news culture of 24-hour TV channels, which is always focused on a limited number of issues....Not only does the paper's website want an instant story, but it may required a political blog on that story, an update for the next day's paper and a podcast for that evening's refreshed website."<sup>34</sup>

## **The Spin Machine**

Perhaps the biggest single factor behind the diminished role of the Lobby has been the irresistible rise of 'spin' as a major component of the Westminster scene. Whilst news

management by politicians is hardly a new phenomenon it is unarguable that New Labour, both in opposition and then in government, took it to new heights, or depths.<sup>35</sup> The Lobby's unofficial historian, Andrew Sparrow, summed up the problem thus:

"At the heart of the problem was spin. The political journalists did not trust [Alistair] Campbell because they thought he was out to manipulate them, and he did not respect them because he thought they were determined to spin whatever he said to suit their own political or journalistic agendas."<sup>36</sup>

Writing after having stepped down from the role of Tony Blair's Press Secretary, Campbell himself, perhaps unsurprisingly, took a slightly different view:

"There was a sense that politics and the media were involved in a dialogue from which the public was becoming excluded. It was as if something was going on that had absolutely nothing to do with them and with their lives.....Perhaps it is time for the press to think seriously about how it should address the problems and for the debate within the media about the media to become less superficial, less defensive, less clubbish."<sup>37</sup>

In pursuit of this 'less clubbish' atmosphere, in 2002, Campbell introduced major changes to the way that business was conducted between politicians and journalists at Westminster. These included allowing himself to be quoted as "PMOS" (the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman) opening up the morning briefing to all accredited journalists (and away from Downing Street to the Foreign Press Association) and placing an edited summary of both the morning and afternoon briefings on the Downing Street website.

Despite Campbell's claims that these changes represented an attempt to introduce more transparency into the relationship between government and the Lobby, many of its members saw these changes as simply Campbell's revenge. Adam Boulton's Political Editor of Sky News gave a typically robust response to criticisms of the Lobby and Campbell's moves to 'reform' it:

"Far from being a conspiracy between politicians and journalists against the public, the lobby is a conduit from politicians to the public - and sometimes a very frank one at that. No 10 has tried to downgrade the briefings by moving them to rented premises near Piccadilly at the Foreign Press Association (FPA). ...However, the lobby frustrated any attempt to let the morning briefings dwindle into insignificance. Organisations such as the *Sun* and the *Evening Standard* lay on daily limos for their grantees to make sure that the Government is held to account, and television companies have spent thousands so that correspondents can report live from the FPA."<sup>38</sup>



Two years later an official inquiry into Government Communications under Sir Robert Phillis reported that Campbell's attempts to improve communications between journalists and the Government had failed:

"The evidence we received is that the lobby system is no longer working for either the government or the media – with the understandable exception of the Chairman of the Lobby, no one we heard from argued for the status quo. Both government and the media have seen their credibility damaged by the impression that they are involved in a closed, secretive and opaque insider process."

Among Phillis' many recommendations was that both morning and afternoon briefings should be on-the-record and broadcast live. This did not happen and four years later the House of Lords' Communications Committee, re-examining Government Communications, was told by Phillis himself that the proposals to televise the Lobby met with "no enthusiasm at all".<sup>39</sup>

Nicholas Jones, a former BBC Political Correspondent who has subsequently become one of the fiercest critics of Government 'spin', told the Lords Committee that the fault lay as much with Whitehall as with the Lobby, and it symbolized the Lobby's determination to carry on with 'business as usual':

"Despite its acceptance of the Phillis recommendations, the Government made only a half-hearted attempt to persuade Lobby correspondents to accept on-camera briefings and it was no surprise that the Lobby voted to maintain the status quo, anxious to defend at all cost the un-attributable and anonymous briefings which have become the lifeblood of modern political journalism."<sup>40</sup>

## **The Lobby Under Pressure**

This episode gives something of the flavor of how relations between the Lobby and Downing Street declined under New Labour. A fuller picture was given by a revealing BBC documentary about Alistair Campbell which showed both sides of the equation in a poor light. Alan Rusbridger the editor of the *Guardian*, commenting on the programme said:

"The interaction between Mr Campbell (even on his best behaviour) and Her Majesty's Lobby appears close to what psychotherapists term an "abusive relationship" – one in which the partners feel trapped in a downward spiral of passive-aggressive behaviour"<sup>41</sup>

At the same time Elinor Goodman, who was the Political Editor of Channel Four News, suggested that there was something fundamentally rotten in the relationship between the Government and the Lobby:

"I think it is arguable that political journalists have been a corrosive force over the past 10 years. My own view is that the symbiotic relationship between politicians and the media has helped create an age of cynicism in which it's extremely difficult to have a rational debate."<sup>42</sup>

However, this was not the first time that there had been questioning of the quality of journalism produced by the Lobby. As long ago as 1965 Anthony Howard was suggesting that journalists who were not in the Lobby pursued the reporting of politics with far greater robustness than their counterparts in the Lobby. Speaking on the BBC, Howard said that the public got 'a far cleaner tougher standard of political reporting 'during the 1964 election because much of it was done by reporters outside the lobby system who were not 'cribbed, calmed or confined by all the sanctimonious self-denying ordinances of Westminster'.<sup>43</sup> This is an observation that could have been repeated at every election since. During an election campaign members of the Lobby are assigned to follow the party leaders, and other leading politicians around the country, but in so doing they rub shoulders with other members of their craft who are not part of the charmed circle and who are often the ones to be found asking the difficult questions. This phenomenon – of tackling politicians in ways that are seen as outside the usual rules of behaviour - can be observed in its most extreme form when members of the public, who recognise no 'rules of the game', get the chance to confront the party leaders directly. In this context one thinks of Diana Gould who, on the BBC's 'Nationwide' in 1983, confronted Mrs Thatcher about the sinking of the Argentinean battleship the Belgrano in a manner that no journalist, up until that point, had dared to; equally there was Sharon Storer the woman who angrily confronted Tony Blair outside a Birmingham hospital during the 2001 election campaign. Such incidents dramatise the extent to which interactions between politicians and journalists contrast so sharply in tone, if not in content, with those between politician and the public and help explain why the 'Westminster Village' can appear so out-of-bounds to the non-professionals outside.

One way in which that gulf is being seen to be bridged is as a result of the rise of the new media and their access and interactivity that it provides. A recent report reveals that 92% of MPs use email (which still means that there are over 50 MPs who do NOT use email), 83% have a personal website, 23% use social networking and 11% of MPs blog<sup>44</sup>. And it is in this latter category that has most impacted on the work of the Lobby – not so much the blogging activities of MPs but in the rise of the political blogosphere. This domain has two distinct but related spheres. First there are the blogs created by bloggers and second category there are those blogs run by either political journalists themselves or by their media organisations.

The key issue, debated by bloggers and non-bloggers alike is what, if any, is the impact of this new form of political communication? Iain Dale, a political blogger who monitors these matters more closely than most, publishes an annual list of all the political blogs that he can identify. In 2009 Dale listed 2001 separate political blogs currently operating.<sup>45</sup> Most are probably read by nobody but that author and his or her family and friends, but a few do manage to stand out and have some have become ‘must reads’ for the Westminster village and beyond. Dale claims that last year his blog, Iain Dale’s Diary, had just under 600,000 unique users in 2008.<sup>46</sup> As sources of political news, they now rival the Lobby itself. In the past year a number of major political stories have emanated from, or been significantly moved forward, by the political blogosphere. Perhaps the blogosphere’s biggest story to date came in spring 2009 with the revelations that Damion McBride – then one of Gordon Brown’s media advisers – planned to launch a political blog dedicated to spreading malicious (and unfounded) rumours about Tory politicians.<sup>47</sup> In terms of coverage in the mainstream media, two of the most influential blogs – Guido Fawkes’ ‘Order Order’ and ‘Conservative Home’ achieved, respectively, 601 and 652 mentions in the mainstream print media between 2001 and 2009.<sup>48</sup> Thus, for good or bad, blogs clearly now play an important role in the political conversation if not as mainstream media then certainly as, what this author in an earlier work, described as the ‘feeder media’<sup>49</sup>

### **The Lobby and MPs’ Expenses**

Despite all the change outlined above, at the time the expenses story broke, the Lobby was still essentially unchanged. Lobby Chairman David Hencke described how it was unsurprising that the story did not come from within the Lobby:

“So why doesn’t the Lobby ferret out stuff? Partly because it still operates in too much of a club atmosphere and because many Lobby reporters – possibly understandably and not alone in editorial specialisations – don’t want to upset their contracts.....Despite the demise of non-attributable briefings, the club atmosphere is still rife in Westminster.....this can even lead to the hack compromising a story to protect the minister, rather than going for the throat in print.”<sup>50</sup>

But long before the MPs’ expenses story broke, some lobby journalists were smelling that something was ‘rotten’ in the state of Westminster. In 2004 the, Andrew Marr, then the BBC’s Political Editor wrote:

“By the second half of the twentieth century, the leading political journalists and the leading politicians were coming, pretty much, from similar social backgrounds. The grammar-school boys who won scholarships to Oxbridge, and were rising through the Labour Party, were not so different from the journalists reporting them. We are all the same kind of people, sharing the same strange interests”<sup>51</sup>

Kevin Maguire, now Political Editor of the *Daily Mirror* but at the time working in the Lobby for the *Guardian* described how the system worked in a way that made the Lobby’s failure to spot the story, almost inevitable: “Westminster works on nudges, winks and a quiet word here and so on..... They pull you in and try and make you part of the club.”<sup>52</sup>

And then along came the MPs expenses scandal and the Lobby proceeded to self-immolate. For perhaps the most damning part of the saga was that, despite the prominence of the issue for many months, when the damn finally burst it took place a long, long way from the Lobby. Indeed the *Daily Telegraph* set up its entire MPs’ expenses operation outside of Westminster and cut off even from its own news operation, “... in a "bunker" based away from the main newsroom “ according to the journalists’ trade paper.”<sup>53</sup>

Thus the scandal broke and was developed away from the watchful eye of the Lobby which begged the question, to what extent was the fact that MPs were ‘generous’ when it came to their own expenses, common knowledge around Westminster but something that the Lobby did not see as a ‘story’?

Whilst no current member of the club has put his or her hand-up and said “I missed it because I was too much part of the system that saw that as normal behaviour” a former member has come perilously close. Ben Leapman, who was in the Lobby for the *Guardian*, first started investigating MPs expenses in 2004 - in particular he was pursuing the case of Conservative MP John Wilkinson. But Leapman left the *Guardian* to join the *Sunday Telegraph* and stopped pursuing Mr Wilkinson. However, a month after the scandal broke he wrote an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* in which he made his own *mea culpa*:

“Following my conversation with Mr. Wilkinson five years ago, I knew that there were plenty of scandals locked away in the expenses files, and that their publication would end a few careers. But having spent five years in the “Westminster village” as a Lobby correspondent, I feel an instinctive sympathy with politicians, and I underestimated the level of public anger that the revelations would unleash.”<sup>54</sup>

A similar argument, but from a different perspective, came from Professor Anthony King, one of the founder members of the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life. Writing in the *Daily Telegraph* shortly after the scandal broke Professor King suggested that members of the Lobby were in fact ‘honorary members’ of the conspiracy of silence that had surrounded MPs expenses:

“How have the MPs on the take managed to get away with it? The answer seems to be an almost literal conspiracy of silence. Members of Parliament were either on the take themselves or did not want to make enemies of those MPs who were. After all, no one wants to break the informal rules of any club to which they belong. A club's informal rules and norms are often the most tightly binding. Political journalists were often honorary members of the same club.”<sup>55</sup>

Partly, if not in defence of the Lobby, but by way of explanation, it has to be noted that an ethos of ‘expenses fiddling’ has been part and parcel of the journalistic culture for many years. Chris Mullin MP, a former journalist, has robustly challenged the right of journalists reporting the expenses scandal to suggest that all MPs should be tarred by the expenses brush:

“The only place I have ever worked where they were “all at it” was Mirror Group Newspapers in the early 1970s, where my first week’s expenses claim was rejected by the man who was supposed to vouch for its accuracy on the grounds that it was so low that it would embarrass my colleagues. I was then treated to a short course in how to construct fraudulent expenses, which, when no one else was looking, I threw away.”<sup>56</sup>

Most members of the lobby still come from newspaper backgrounds and hence a culture of ‘generous’ expenses might not have struck them as particularly heinous.

But this brings us back to the key issue - the culture of the Lobby. It has been changing over the years but it remains very much an exclusive club within, what has been described as the 'best club in London'. And despite the recent increase in the number of members, now up to 230<sup>57</sup>, the sense of exclusivity has only been sharpened. This has partly come about because of the introduction of new anti-terrorism measures at Westminster which has created a heightened the sense of being an 'insider', as members of the Lobby stride past the long queues of the public, protestors and other journalists, who wait patiently to pass through Westminster's evermore intensive security procedures. And once inside the 'clubbiness' continues - MPs and Westminster journalists still share many of the same restaurants and bars and frequently socialise together. In such a context is it any wonder that, on occasion, empathy develops and the lines between 'them' and us' and get blurred a little?

The MPs' expenses scandal has provided a timely reminder of what this cloying closeness can lead to and how out-of-touch both MPs, and the journalists who report on them, have become. The scandal has not caused the demise of the lobby as such, but it has come to symbolise its increasing irrelevance. No death certificate has yet been issued but the body is doing little more than twitching into irrelevance, in the words of David Hencke, "...the fact that so little was exposed by the Lobby is an indictment of the Lobby system itself. Journalists in the Lobby really need to be more independent and less tempted by the attractions of being members of an exclusive club."<sup>58</sup>

Ends

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<sup>1</sup> Roth A. (1999) The Lobby's "Dying Gasps"? British Journalism Review Vol. 10 No. 3 1999 p. 21

<sup>2</sup> *Daily Telegraph* 8 May 2009 'The Truth About the Cabinet's Expenses'

<sup>3</sup> The author worked as a member of the lobby in the 1990s

<sup>4</sup> Peter Osborne "A Flea in the Government's Ear" British Journalism Review Vol. 13, No. 4, 2002, pages 32-40

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Margach (1978) p. 4

<sup>6</sup> Mackintosh P 161

<sup>7</sup> Clepham Palmer p 42

<sup>8</sup> Ibid P. 130

<sup>9</sup> David Butler 'Political Reporting in Britain' *The Listener* 15 August 1963 quoted in Sparrow p. 129

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Howard 'The Role of the Lobby Correspondent' *The Listener* 21 January 1965 quoted in Sparrow p.129

<sup>11</sup> See Margach (1978) p. 157 - 171

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<sup>12</sup> Sparrow (2003) p. 134

<sup>13</sup> Ibid p. 135

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p. 136

<sup>15</sup> The authors were all political journalists – working for the BBC and *The Times*- but none were members of the Lobby

<sup>16</sup> Cockerell et al P 33

<sup>17</sup> Ibid p. 34

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p. 40

<sup>19</sup> Ibid P. 36

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p. 36

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Ann Treneman “Off the record, it's all a game” *The Times* May 9, 2002

<sup>22</sup> Steve Richards May 4, 2002 *The Independent*: Why didn't they just kill off these silly secret meetings?

<sup>23</sup> Between 1991 and 1998 this author had experience of working in Westminster, initially with just a Parliamentary Pass and then as a member of the Lobby.

<sup>25</sup> Barnett et al

<sup>26</sup> Personal recollection

<sup>27</sup> The Nuffield Election studies spanning 1987 to 2005 show that the percentage of MPs coming from previous employment in politics, either as a politician, organiser or researcher, virtually trebled from 5.4% to 14.1%. See House of Commons (2005) Library ‘Social background of MPs’ Standard Note: 1528 17 November 2005

<sup>28</sup> Marr A. (2004) P. 127

<sup>29</sup> Clarke H et al (2009) “Public Reactions to the MPs Expenses Scandal: evidence from the British Election Study paper presented to the Political Studies Association’s Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Group Annual Conference in Glasgow August 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Hobsbawm and Lloyd p. 18

<sup>31</sup> Franklin (1997) p. 4

<sup>32</sup> See Ofcom (2008) “New News, Future News: The challenges for television news after Digital Switch-over”, Hargreaves and Thomas (2002) “New news, old news” ITC and BSC Research Publication and Barnett S, Gaber I and Seymour E (2000) “From Callaghan to Kosovo: the changing face of television news” University of Westminster



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- <sup>33</sup> Underwood and Gaber P 25
- <sup>34</sup> Hencke D (2009)
- <sup>35</sup> See Barnett and Gaber (2001) Jones (1995) Jones (2001) Wring (2005)
- <sup>36</sup> Sparrow (2003) P. 191
- <sup>37</sup> Campbell (2002)
- <sup>38</sup> Adam Boulton "Adam Boulton, in the lobby , with the SMS the *Independent* April 4, 2005
- <sup>39</sup> House of Lords P. 21
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid P. 22
- <sup>41</sup> Alan Rusbridger ' No More Ghostly Vices" *Guardian* 15 March 2000
- <sup>42</sup> Quoted in Ibid
- <sup>43</sup> Quoted in Sparrow (2003) p 129
- <sup>44</sup> Williamson A (2009)
- <sup>45</sup> <http://www.totalpolitics.com/politicalblogs/> viewed 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2009
- <sup>46</sup> <http://iaindale.blogspot.com/2009/01/nearly-600000-individuals-read-this.html> viewed 3rd September 2009
- <sup>47</sup> This story first broke in the *Daily Telegraph* but was given to them by political blogger 'Guido Fawkes' who feared the libel consequences of publishing the story on his own site (personal information)
- <sup>48</sup> Figures taken from the Newsbank electronic cuttings archive.
- <sup>49</sup> See Barnett S and Gaber I p. 43 where it is argued that the significance of 24-hour news channels lay far more in the quality, rather than quantity of their audience i.e. that whilst small in number their audiences contained a high proportion of so-called 'opinion formers'
- <sup>50</sup> Hencke op cit
- <sup>51</sup> Marr (2004) P. 185
- <sup>52</sup> Quoted in Barnett and Gaber p. 125
- <sup>53</sup> Alison Battisby "How Daily Telegraph 'bunker' tackled MP expenses" *Press Gazette* 10 June 2009
- <sup>54</sup> Ben Leapman When will they come clean?; The censored publication of MPs' expenses reveals a deep-rooted culture of secrecy *Daily Telegraph* June 19, 2009
- <sup>54</sup> Anthony King "Where do they go from here?" *Daily Telegraph* May 12, 2009

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Watson op cit

55 Anthony King "MPs' expenses: where do they go from here?" *Daily Telegraph* 11 May 2009

<sup>56</sup> Mullin C. (2009)

<sup>58</sup> Hencke op cit

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