

Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (House of Commons)

Select Committee Announcement

11 July 2012

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Plans for statutory register of lobbyists should be scrapped, say MPs

New regulation should cover ALL those who lobby professionally

In a report published today, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee calls on the Government to scrap its plans to introduce a statutory register of lobbyists

The Coalition's Programme for Government published in May 2010, contained a commitment to "regulate lobbying through introducing a statutory register of lobbyists and ensuring greater transparency". The proposals in the Government's consultation paper, Introducing a Statutory Register of Lobbyists, focused the register on those who undertake lobbying activities on behalf of a third party client.

The Committee says that under the Government's proposals, a lobbyist who worked in house for a large company such as News International, or Tesco, would not be required to register, however a 'one-man band' lobbyist would be required to register, name their clients, and pay for the privilege.

The Committee has seen no evidence to suggest that third party lobbyists are a particular problem within the lobbying community, indeed the Government's own records of ministerial meetings suggest that third party lobbyists make up less than 1% of all meetings with Ministers. The report argues that the proposals single out third party lobbyists in an attempt to create a narrow focus for a register that will meet a Coalition pledge, but do little to improve transparency about lobbying.

The Committee recommends that the Government scraps its plans to introduce a statutory register of third party lobbyists, and instead introduce regulation to cover all those who lobby professionally, in a paid

role, including those who lobby on behalf, of charities, trade unions, and think tanks.

The Committee recognises that regardless of whether the Government chooses to implement a statutory register, there is much that Government can do to improve transparency about who is lobbying whom. The Committee specifically recommends the Government:

- publish information about ministerial meetings no more than a month after the month in which the meeting occurred (some Departments take up to 8 months to publish meeting details)
- improve the level of detail in meeting disclosures, so that the actual topic of a meeting is disclosed, rather than obscure terms like 'general discussion';
- publish, where applicable, the company or charity number of any organisation that meets with Ministers or officials, so that the identity of the organisation can be properly verified; and
- standardize the format of meeting data, with a view to publishing all ministerial and official meetings on one website, rather than on many different Government websites

Graham Allen MP, Chair of the Committee, said: "The Government proposals target third party lobbyists, yet would produce little more than the current regime of voluntary regulation, without even a statutory code of conduct to regulate behaviour. The UK Public Affairs Council warned that such an approach could even reduce regulation of the lobbying industry.

The difficulties around this issue were illustrated by the strong views expressed by different Committee members during the course of the inquiry. On the one hand, Paul Flynn was of the opinion that multiplying the scope of the proposals beyond major lobbying companies could lead to resistance to change, burden charities with unnecessary costs and limit the scope for reforms, and he warned that experience in Canada and the EU had shown that lobbyists could find loopholes in a system of medium regulation. He also felt that it would be unwise to miss the opportunity for a thorough strong reform rather than choose the half-way solution of trying to traverse a chasm with two leaps.

On the other hand, Simon Hart was of the opinion that it was not clear that there was widespread public concern about lobbying and that no statutory register would be better than what the Government currently proposes.

However, it is to the great credit of Members that the Committee agreed the recommendations in the final report."

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Committee Membership is as follows: Mr Graham Allen (Chair) (Nottingham North), Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch), Paul Flynn (Newport West) Sheila Gilmore

(Edinburgh East), Andrew Griffiths (Burton), Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East), Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire), Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central), Mrs Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest), Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) and Stephen Williams (Bristol West).

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