

Lobbying – a necessary part of politics

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Lobbying is once again a dirty word. The case of Liam Fox and Adam Werritty has led to bigger questions being asked about the accountability and transparency of British public life, more so than at any time since the expenses scandal of 2009. Yet lobbying is an inevitable, longstanding and relatively harmless part of politics. Notwithstanding the drama of defence policy and Cabinet resignations, its significance can also be grossly exaggerated.

Media concern over lobbying often leaves the impression that access to Ministers and influence over policy is murky and secretive, with power being wielded far away from the public gaze. The reality of attempts to influence policymakers is far more banal – characterised as it is by written submissions to consultations, oral evidence to committees, and well-briefed grassroots activists making appointments to see their MP. Yes, commercial interests engage in lobbying, but so too does the public sector itself, alongside charities, voluntary groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The NGOs in Britain project at the University of Birmingham has recently been exploring the role and influence of NGOs in British public life since 1945. These groups have proliferated since the end of the Second World War, as increasingly affluent, educated and therefore discerning citizens have turned away from the mass political parties, and sought other ways to champion causes close to their heart. In order to justify this growing public support, NGOs have found themselves increasingly compelled to engage with politics, and since the 1970s particularly, have professionalised their lobbying operations.

In doing so, NGOs have turned themselves into policy experts in their particular fields, and have sought to deploy this expertise to leverage political change. They have lobbied on behalf of their supporters on every imaginable topic – from international development to doorstep recycling schemes. This lobbying has overwhelmingly taken place either in public, or in official meetings with civil servants and Ministers. Moreover, it has tended to concentrate on incremental change in the specific details of policy. In the face of a strong, determined government, tinkering around the edges is usually the most a lobbyist can hope for.

All of this is a far cry from the Machiavellian fantasies that get aired whenever the question of lobbying comes up. Yet the idea that lobbyists wield vast amounts of unaccountable, secretive power is just that – a fantasy. The mundane reality is that the policy making machinery is too big, and too complex, to be distracted by whispers in even the most carefully-chosen ear.

For more information about the NGOs in Britain project, visit www.ngo.bham.ac.uk (<http://www.ngo.bham.ac.uk/>).

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