

Lobbying

It's not much of a story that someone who was Prime Minister six years ago lobbied the Treasury on behalf of a business he is employed by, only to be turned down. To make it interesting the ex PM would have to break the rules over conduct out of office, and he would need to be successful in his lobbying. We are told neither of these conditions were met.

The facts are not going to get in the way of those who nonetheless want a debate about lobbying. Energetic lobbying is a part of a healthy democracy. Charities spend large sums on their lobbying for legislative change and access to spending programmes. Businesses organise themselves into trade Associations and nationwide lobbying bodies to get favourable changes of policy for their sectors. Trade Unions spend large sums on setting out their policy demands. The BBC and other media regularly give privileged slots on news and comment programmes for lobby groups to make their case prior to interrogating any Minister who dares to say No to the lobby proposal. Maybe the media is too kind to these lobbyists and ought to question their motives and views more thoroughly before running their demands.

Ministers of course need to understand what the business or other interest of a person is when they talk to them or have a meeting with them. This usually flows from the person having to make clear who they represent or work for to get the meeting in the first place. Ministers need to have shed all their own business interests, or to exempt themselves from any decision where there could be a conflict of interest. Much of the detailed commercial interface between government and business is handled by impartial officials who are trained to assess bids and proposals on their merits rather than favouring friends of the government. It appears that the wide ranging access Greensill had to UK government in the Cameron years was arranged by the Cabinet Secretary himself, the ultimate policeman of propriety and procedure in government. The interesting questions about the arrangements then in government relate to why the UK state needed to introduce supply chain finance, and why if the problem was late payment of public sector bills they did not just pay them more quickly. Tragically the Cabinet Secretary died young so we cannot find out from him what led him to give Greensill such access.

Some want to believe that a few billionaires have particularly favourable access to governments and end up making the policies that rule us. The answer to that is Ministers have free choice about who they listen to and which arguments they find attractive. We need to concentrate on what Ministers say and do, as they have the power. Usually the policies which most annoy the critics are international policies embedded in treaties or set out by membership bodies like the UN. In the case of the EU they are of course strongly binding on member states through their own court and legal system. These are more difficult for governments to amend or ignore as that may entail renouncing the relevant treaty.

Ministers have daily to defend their choices to Parliament, the public and

media and if they are taking bad advice they feel the results. Chasing the possible influencers can divert us from the real task of debating and changing what government itself decides to do, or debating any damaging rules and guidance of the international bodies we belong to. Chasing individual outside advisers is only relevant if there is corruption. As Margaret Thatcher wisely said, Ministers decide and advisers advise. That is usually true. Any adviser who overreaches or ceases to please can be dismissed. Oppositions are there in part to call out influence or lobbying which crosses the line from the acceptable.