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The Political Lobby System

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Introduction

At the heart of the political system in Ireland, inside Leinster House, is a small group of journalists who cover politics. They are the political correspondents. They have a privileged position, their own rooms, access to politicians in their place of work, access to government ministers and regular briefings from the government press secretary and from the press officers of the other political parties. It is these few journalists, working together, who write the first story on any event, who decide what to cover and how stories should be covered. It is to these journalists that the government press secretary goes following a cabinet meeting to give them what he wants them to hear, all off the record. On radio and television, in the morning and evening newspapers, his words will appear as a 'government source', a 'source close to the government'; or more obliquely, 'indications are' or 'it would seem that the government intends'. At times, the words of the Government press secretary, a civil servant, have appeared as a source speaking for a political party. What is most important is that what is said can often be denied by the Taoiseach or government ministers, if they do not like the reaction.

There are more intangible privileges of lobby membership. In Ireland the political correspondents work in a small parliament, rubbing shoulders with their main sources every day, using the same bar and the same self service restaurant. They spend most of their working time in Leinster House, away from their newsrooms and newsdesks, working with colleagues from rival news organisations.

How these journalists operate and what they do has not been a major subject for study by either academics or by journalists. Professor J. J. Lee's monumental study, *Ireland 1912-1985 Politics and Society* has no chapter dealing with the press or the media, indeed in the index there are only two references to the media. Only the later editions of Basil Chubb's work, *The Politics and Government of Ireland* include a chapter on the media and then a purely descriptive one. There are many anecdotal accounts of Irish journalism by journalists: Andrew Dunlop's *Fifty Years of Irish Journalism*, published in 1911, J. B. Hall's *Random Records of a Reporter*, published in the 1920s, Richard Pigott's *Recollections of an Irish Journalist* published in 1882, right up to 1992 with the publication of *More Kicks than Pence*, by Michael O'Toole. None of these include accounts of working in political journalism.

Apart from some histories of the press in Ireland historians and social scientists have used the source and have not analyzed it as a player in the political game. This failure to analyze the media in terms of its relationship to the political process and government has not been the case in Britain where there has been a large body of work devoted to the Westminster lobby system, to the role of political correspondents and their relationship to government. Analysis of British political journalism dates possibly from the publication of Jeremy Tunstall's *The Lobby Correspondent* in the early 1960s and ends with Robert Harris's *Good and Faithful Servant - The Unauthorised Biography of Bernard Ingham* in 1990.

Similarities between Ireland and Britain

The Irish political system has inherited much from the British system - including a similar relationship between Government and the media - one so similar to that found in Britain that the critiques of the British system can, I would argue, be applied to Ireland. In Britain there is a news gathering system at Westminster which many academics and media observers believe is open to manipulation by the increasingly sophisticated Government press relations machine. There are also a number of journalistic practices and routines which lend themselves to manipulation, such as off-the-record briefings and the so-called "lobby terms", a fact which was highlighted during the controversial tenure, as Government press secretary, of Bernard Ingham. Mr Ingham's use of the system for the benefit of the Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, was so blatant, political and in some ways so public, that sections of the media in Britain assumed that his departure meant the end of manipulation, rather than view the system as one which allowed Mr Ingham to operate as he did for the years he was Press Secretary.

The independent Irish State inherited much from the British including cabinet government, a parliamentary system, the common law system and a body of legislation. It also inherited a similar press with common journalistic practices. Those practices were also taken on by the electronic media, first with Radio Eireann, then, in the 1960s, by Radio Telefís Eireann (RTE), when Irish television was established. These similarities in the organisation of Government - especially the cabinet system and in the way the media works - has led to a further similarity in the way the press and the political system relate to each other. In Britain this system is formally called the Westminster lobby system. No such formal name is used to describe the Irish system, though the term 'the lobby' is often used by journalists and politicians as a form of shorthand to describe the group of political correspondents.

At first sight it would appear that there are few if any similarities between the media and politics in Britain and Ireland. The political correspondents in Ireland do not operate with the same 'curious mix of mystery and ritual' (Negrine, 1989:157) as their Westminster counterparts do; they have no secret written rules on how to behave; they do not use code words to keep their meetings with leading Government figures secret from their colleagues. Irish political correspondents do not surround themselves with an aura. In Westminster the lobby system does not officially exist, nor does the room where they receive their briefings. In recent years television cameras were allowed in once and the rules, for a body over 100 years old, were only published a short while ago.

But despite appearances to the contrary, the essence of both systems is the same. Leinster House might not appear to have much in common with Westminster but both are clubby and exclusive even if one club has, as it were, a more casual dress code. In both parliaments a form of membership has grown up with reporters, who have access, being given collective, off the record, briefings. In both parliaments named journalists are appointed, not as specialists, as in the case of industrial, economic or education matters but as generalists who cover a place. The political correspondents' room in Leinster House does not have the same mystique as the lobby correspondents' room in Westminster but it operates on the same exclusive basis, excluding all journalists who are not political correspondents - even specialists who write on the subject of a particular briefing - from briefings.

It is hardly surprising that there are similarities in political reporting between Britain and Ireland. Until 1922 Irish politics, in the constitutional sense at least, took place at Westminster and Irish newspapers had their own parliamentary reporters and lobby correspondents covering the Imperial Parliament. Furthermore, there has always been, and continues to be, movement among journalists between British and Irish newspapers

and other media, facilitated by the fact that Irish and British journalists are mainly members of the one trade union and, of course, speak and write in the same language. Even today the Irish press has greater access and privileges in the British House of Parliament than journalists from any other country, and it still maintains, even if it rarely uses, lobby rights which no other foreign press is allowed.

Many journalists working in Ireland previously worked for British media, or for the London offices of Irish newspapers or RTE, and brought back with them some of the traditions and practices of Fleet Street. In the early 1960s the management of RTE recruited in Britain for senior news staff to come to Ireland to work for the new television station which meant that the earliest journalistic practices either came from newspapers or from Britain. And of course, the British media is widely available in Ireland, accounting for thirteen per cent of daily newspaper sales.

Finally, there is the historical link. As with so much else in British constitutional and political life, the lobby developed due to the turbulent nature of the relationship between the two countries.

The Westminster Lobby

The Westminster lobby was created as a method of limiting access to Westminster following a Fenian bombing which damaged part of the Palace of Westminster and the House of Commons. The lobby list, which names those with access to the lobby, and more importantly, the lobby briefings, is still kept by the Speaker of the House, as decided in 1884.

Mr James Margach was the longest serving political correspondent in Westminster when he retired as political correspondent and lobby correspondent of the *Sunday Times* in 1979 having covered governments under twelve prime ministers. In his *Anatomy of Power* (1981) he describes how the lobby was established and emphasizes that this was not

inspired by any ideals for more open government. Its purpose was to create a new group of insiders and exclude the public and the mass of writers of countless newsletters, pamphlet-sheets and weeklies who had overcrowded the Members' lobby.

(Margach, 1978:125)

Margach wrote two books based on his experience of the lobby, *The Abuse of Power* (1978) and *The Anatomy of Power* (1981). What makes his work important is that not only is there no other history of the lobby but many of the lobby files were destroyed when the House of Commons was bombed in 1941. His memoirs rank, therefore, as one of the few accounts we have of the early years.

In *The Abuse of Power* he writes of the 'tempestuous and never ending war between Downing Street and Fleet Street, Whitehall and the press'. The first priority for all prime ministers has been to win this war.

They desired to enrol and exploit the media as an arm of Government. Two objectives possessed them. First, to establish and fortify their personal power; and second to reinforce the conspiracy of secrecy, to preserve the sanctity of Government behind the walls of Whitehall's forbidden city.

(Margach, 1978:1)

The main function of the organized lobby is to preserve what are known as 'lobby terms'.

Margach explains that lobby terms

allow lobby correspondents to report as their own view and discoveries the opinions and possible policies of prime ministers and others confided to them in a House of Commons committee room, never to be acknowledged by the minister concerned. They know better than anybody they are playing a game of compulsory kite flying by reporting views of high authority anonymously and unattributably after communion with the political saints.

(Margach, 1981:126)

According to Margach, a major change took place in the lobby when Ramsey MacDonald appointed Britain's first government press secretary (then called Private Secretary Intelligence). Officially he was to liaise with the political correspondents and the lobby, the reality was a personal role 'to plug the numerous leaks taking place from MacDonald's National Government' (Margach, 1981:127). Margach is clear in recognizing George Steward's appointment as the beginnings of the modern lobby: 'That was how the incestuous relationship between government and the Lobby on an organised and corporate basis started.' (Margach, 1981:127). After Steward was appointed to liaise with the lobby all lobby members started to receive the same briefing from ministers or approved sources. What might have looked like a move towards open government meant a change in the status of the journalist: 'The old style competitive outsiders were converted into a fraternity of organised insiders' (Margach, 1981:137).

For Margach the close relationship between the lobby correspondents and the Government is almost inevitable:

This relationship between Government and the media concentrated in the lobby is unique in the western world, circumscribed and made inevitable as it is by the Officials Secrets Act, the Privy Councillor's oath and parliamentary privilege. Each needs and feeds upon the other, one offers publicity and fame, the other the highly marketable commodity of news and power. Both Government and the media are compelled by the unlimited demands of modern communications to co-operate, yet by all basic tests they are opposing and rival forces.

(Margach, 1981:129)

But why do Margach and others believe that the British parliamentary system almost demands the lobby be established? Clive Ponting (1990) maintains that Britain has one of the most extensive systems for controlling the flow of information of any western democracy. When Britain exported its parliamentary model to its former colonies, including Ireland, it exported more than simply the notion of an elected chamber, electing a government from amongst itself. It also exported a number of other concepts such as collective cabinet responsibility, the anonymous civil servant, the secrecy sworn by ministers when they become Privy Councillors, parliamentary privilege and, of course, the cabinet system, a system that almost demands that the prime minister maintain a tight control on media, surrounded as he or she is by his or her rivals and potential successors around the cabinet table. itself. As Jeremy Tunstall argues:

The national nature of both politics and the media in Britain, and the peculiarities of an unwritten constitution, in which the respective roles of parliament and cabinet are somewhat unclear, has led to a peculiar set of arrangements for political journalists.

(Tunstall, 1983:130)

Parliamentary privilege does, of course, give journalists some protection in reporting parliament. If an MP libels a person in the chamber, for example, the journalist is not liable if s/he repeats the libel in the next edition of a newspaper in a report of parliament's proceedings. However, it also allows the government to control when information is made available, ensuring that it is not made public until the government decides. This makes it possible to give journalists information, knowing they cannot publish until the report or paper is formally announced in the House. Collective cabinet responsibility, once a method of protecting individual members of the government from dismissal by the king, now ensures that important differences of opinion over policy rarely get into the public domain. It allows the prime minister, through the press secretary, to control what comes out of cabinet and thus be the main source of information from cabinet. But the ultimate privilege is the privilege of allowing the lobby correspondents to operate at all. As Colin Seymour-Ure says:

The lobby journalist operates in conditions which are ultimately under the control of the Commons. They are in practice self-governing; but rather in the sense of a self governing colony, with a strictly limited area of discretion.

(Seymour-Ure, 1968)

The linking of the formation of the Cabinet with Britain's obsessive secrecy has been noted by a number of writers. Cockerell, Hennessey and Walker in *Sources Close to the Prime Minister* (1984) point to the paradox that, as Britain was moving towards becoming a fully fledged democracy by extending the vote to all, mechanisms were being created to frustrate popular participation, to control, channel and even manufacture news. The authors see no accident in the fact that the lobby was created in 1884 and the first Official Secrets Act was passed only five years later (p34). They talk of a compliant press working in a system of 'profound administrative secrecy' (p7). 'Political correspondents are players in a sophisticated game of private briefings, official steers and all manner of guidance from civil servants whose instincts are not towards public disclosure' (p10). Cabinet meetings are secret, except when the Prime Minister's press aides tell the press about them: 'What they tell the press is often tainted' (p20).

The lobby's 150 or so members are briefed, and what the prime minister's press secretary says is what the prime minister wants the press, radio and television to report, without identifying the source. The press secretary has thus been the anonymous provider of more stories than all the Whitehall officials and cabinet ministers put together. He is the ultimate source close to the prime minister, he is frequently referred to in this oblique way, but almost never cited by name as the source

(Cockerell et al., 1984:31)

Bernard Ingham

More recent criticism of the lobby has tended to focus on the style of a particular government press secretary, Mr Bernard Ingham, and the former Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher. Critics saw in Ingham a man who used the lobby to create something called 'Thatcherism'. The lobby itself worried about being managed, of being used as a weapon in internal cabinet battles. It was during Ingham's term of office, the longest of any press secretary, that the first cracks appeared, with one national newspaper refusing to enter the lobby and another leaving.

Ingham has two notable firsts to his name. He was the first Government press secretary, the ubiquitous source, to be mentioned by name in the House of Commons and he was the first serving civil servant to be the subject of a biography while still in office. *Good and Faithful Servant – the unauthorised biography of Bernard Ingham* by Robert Harris covers the years he served Mrs Thatcher from November, 1979 to November, 1990. Sir Bernard, as he became on retirement, had been a journalist, first on his local newspaper and eventually on the *Guardian* as part of that newspaper's labour staff. He had also been a labour party activist and contributed an unsigned weekly column to the *Leeds Weekly Citizen*, and labour Party newspaper. He left journalism in the late 1960s, entered the Government Information Service. He was Mrs Thatcher's second press secretary after the short reign of Mr Henry James, whose appointment was made on the recommendation of the lobby itself (Harris, 1990:71).

Harris maintains that given a ruthless prime minister and an ambitious government press officer, the lobby became a superb instrument for imposing Number 10's view, pre-empting debate and undermining dissenting ministers. Harris claimed that Ingham may have created the Thatcher image of the tough woman prime minister. He would say it, the press would report it and she would live up to it (Harris, 1990:86-87). The lobby soon realized that he had an inside track, and the fact that his background was Labour and he had worked for the *Guardian* gave him a credibility with the lobby.

All commentators have their own incidents which for them highlights Ingham's role during the Thatcher years. Harris cites a number of such incidents, but nearly all have the common thread of marginalizing the Prime Minister's rivals within the Cabinet. One incident concerned Mr Francis Pym, considered a 'wet' in cabinet terms. He gave a speech which was not considered as up-beat as those the prime minister was giving at the time. While Mrs Thatcher was defending her Foreign Secretary in the Commons, Mr Ingham was giving a deniable briefing to the lobby on Mr Pym at the same time. His 'rubbishing' of Mr Pym, as the process became known, took precedence over the Prime Ministers defence of Mr Pym in the following day's newspapers. That incident Harris described as 'premeditated abuse of the main channel of communications between the government and the media' (Harris, 1990:92).

Negrine points to the Falkland's war as bringing to light 'practices of news management, that is, the deliberate feeding of (sometimes inaccurate) information to journalists in the hope of confusing or duping the enemy (or the reader)' (Negrine, 1989:156-157). Harris maintains that during the Falklands War and the general election that followed, Ingham played a decidedly political role. He also claims that Ingham was protected by the 'discrete conventions of the lobby' (Harris 1990:96-98). Mrs Thatcher let her views of her cabinet colleagues be known, not through a political aide, but by an official announcement, off the record, by a civil servant spokesman for the entire Government in twice daily contact with the lobby. There was, of course, little any one could do about it because technically these briefings did not take place.

During the controversy surrounding the Thames Television programme, *Death on the Rock*, the investigation into the death of members of the Provisional IRA in Gibraltar, Ingham went on the record denouncing the media. The Labour Party denounced him as a creature of the Conservative Party, while he defended himself, saying the Government was free to express views on the media (Harris, 1990:160).

The Prime Minister was able to use the lobby system as part of her own policy of centralizing the government, to chop ministers off at the knees, while publicly supporting them. Her own 'passions and prejudices' were aired in the media as if they were government policy. Harris also sees the rise of Bernard Ingham and the creation of Thatcherism as being made possible by the lobby system. 'Nods and winks, kite flying

and speculation are the stock in trade of a system which is not attributable' (Harris, 1990:163).

As mentioned previously, during 1986 the lobby received its most severe blow in its more than 100 year history, one newspaper refused to join and another announced it was leaving. The London *Independent* launched that year announced that if it was to live up to its name it could not be a member of the lobby. The editor of the *Guardian*, Mr Peter Preston, took a slightly different line. His journalists would attend lobby briefings, but would refer to a Downing Street spokesman or Mrs Thatcher's spokesman and quote from him.

The *Guardian's* new policy was announced in that newspaper on 25 September, 1986, when the editor published a letter from him to Ingham and the reply. Preston said he had long been unhappy about some of the workings of the parliamentary lobby.

I've always wanted, as a first and most basic step, to see a situation where the Downing Street spokesman of the day – a civil servant – gives his regular rendition of the government's policy views on the record at meetings that happen, rather than off-the-record at meetings which 'don't happen'. But, until very recently, there has been no momentum for change.

Preston said that he had instructed his political staff to attend as normal the daily briefings, 'but instead of employing any of the customary and increasingly threadbare circumlocutions they shall refer openly to a Downing Street spokesman, or Mrs Thatcher's spokesman and, as relevant, quote what that spokesman says.'

There followed a debate in the *Guardian* about the lobby. Former political correspondents were critical. Former government press secretaries warned of the consequence of not having off the record briefings.

On 28 October, 1986, Mr Hugo Young wrote an article, headed, 'Honest lobby will be the best policy, the arguments for and against the parliamentary lobby of journalists.' To change the lobby and attribute information and guidance would still mean that the non attributed private briefing would take place. What you would have is two classes of information,

part of it sourced and *en clair*, part of it coded into background guidance... The same duality affects all reporting. The fact that one seeks attributable information does not make it dishonest to seek unattributable information as well. It may be less convenient for the sources. For the reporter, anywhere outside Whitehall and in every free country outside Britain, it is normal practice.

On 29 October the lobby voted 67 to 55 against a change in the rules of non-attribution and by 68 to 58 in favour of an inquiry into lobby practices. The ballot was held following an earlier meeting called to discuss the *Guardian's* decision to break the non-attribution rule at lobby briefings.

The two newspapers remained out of the lobby until Mrs Thatcher fell from power and was replaced by Mr John Major who appointed a new government press secretary, a former Treasury official, Mr Gus McDonald. There was no debate as to whether the lobby was now reformed, but both newspapers became full members of the lobby accepting the rules and lobby terms. Unlike the debate that took place over the earlier decision, the return to the lobby was low key. The *Independent* announced its decision on 17 October, 1991 on page three, the last item in a column of news in briefs under a single column headline, 'Lobby Decision'. It stated that the political staff would begin

attending briefings. The editor, Mr Andreas Whittam Smith was quoted as saying that under Mrs Thatcher the lobby system was entirely unattributable and had been used to rubbish ministers and political opponents anonymously.

Under Mr Major, however, the system has altered so that attribution to Number 10 or the prime minister's office is generally the rule. Nor has the machinery of Downing Street briefings been used, as we see it, in a repugnant way.

But Mr McDonald's appointment did not entirely end the debate over the lobby, even if Mr Whittam Smith believed this to be the case. The following month the BBC's *Late Show* carried a long item on the controversy (5 November 1991). David Walker, a journalist and long time critic of the system and one of the authors of *Sources Close to the Prime Minister*, spoke of the system as a parliamentary conspiracy and a 'private rendezvous with public power', where the prime minister gave out a line of events, or a version. He said that after the *Guardian* and the *Independent's* decision to leave the lobby, political reporting was looking more honest.

Honest because political reporters could name Bernard Ingham and report how a civil servant, bound by a code of political neutrality had become Mrs Thatcher's alter ego. They used plural sources, they could make their own minds up free of the pressure of the lobby line. McDonald had said that from now on the media would be allowed to attribute what was said to a Downing Street spokesman

or even, daringly, to the prime ministers office. With this decision the newspapers decided quietly to rejoin. The implication was no more Bernard Ingham, no more manipulation. But Ingham's departure did not alter the basis of the lobby system. It is still pernicious ... What is wrong is the way the lobby obeys the instincts of the herd.

Walker concurred,

The parliamentary lobby briefing system is a prime example of how a self defence mechanism works. Everybody belongs, no one breaks ranks, the same low grade stories are produced and everyone is happy. It is a crutch for crippled journalism.

With so many journalists receiving collective briefings every day, strategically set just before deadlines, there is no time for plural sources or different angles.

For Whittam Smith, speaking on the same programme, the fact that the newspapers had left was a major victory and they could do so again. For Walker, however, the lobby was an institution with its rules and its own personality. How can we take it on trust that it has changed. To do so is to give the Prime Minister a huge gift of credibility.

Conclusion

108 years after the lobby was established in Britain it still exists despite criticism and attacks. David Walker would probably argue that it is as strong as it ever was, having survived an inquiry and the trauma of a newspaper like the *Guardian* withdrawing and the *Independent* refusing to join.

The similarities between the Westminster lobby system outlined in this essay and the Irish system are enough to warrant a comparison to see if the operation of the lobby in Britain could justifiably be compared with what goes on in Ireland and if the critiques

of the Westminster lobby system can be applied to Ireland. The earlier part of this essay has argued that there are strong similarities in both systems. However, similarities in structures and organization could possibly hide a system which allows greater independent inquiry, while maintaining elements of the British lobby terms. It might be the case that the developments of the British system into one where collective briefings and 'pack journalism' is the norm did not develop to the same extent in Ireland, possibly because of the smaller size of the Irish parliament.

However, the similarities noted above go further. Some political correspondents themselves speak privately of government manipulation of the exclusivity of a club. Only those who are full-time political writers can attend briefings. The author, while education correspondent of *The Irish Times* had to sit outside a room and listen through an open door to a briefing given by the then Minister for Education, Ms Mary O'Rourke. The Minister was not aware of this arrangement. Reporters working on political stories have been refused access because they have not been appointed full-time political correspondents.

If critics of the British system are correct when they identify British secrecy as leading to arrangements such as the lobby, then there is further cause for concern. Brian Farrell, in a paper entitled 'Cabinet media relationships: Approaches to a comparative typology' (1989) looked at moves towards allowing wider access to official documentation as part of a comparative study of media cabinet relationships in Europe. Ireland and Britain

remain at the closed end of the spectrum with very broadly construed Official Secrets Acts, stringently applied to prevent - except in the case of the politically contrived leaks - all unauthorized publication of official documentation.

Farrell clearly sees Britain and Ireland operating a similar system.

...a lobby system in which regular briefings are only given to a select group of accredited journalists usually on a non attributable basis. This creates a much more secretive form of Cabinet-media relationship, frequently characterised by leaks, often inspired and manipulated.

Having noted numerous similarities in practice and style, as well as development, between the British and Irish system, it does not necessarily follow that the criticisms made of one automatically transfer to the other. Negrine (1989) believes that one of the problems in the Westminster lobby is the sheer size, with membership of between 100 and 150 journalists. He says that such numbers impose their own constraints on the ability of individuals to gather information. In Leinster House, with the number using the political correspondents room numbering about twelve that constraint might not exist.

If Irish political writers have found a way of combining collective background briefings with individual investigation, so much the better. However, the relationship between government and media is an important one and it is necessary that more research takes place so that we can know the degree of manipulation that takes place and the ability of the journalists and the system of information gathering to resist it.

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