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THE LOBBY IN TRANSITION

What the 2009 MPs' expenses scandal revealed about the changing relationship between politicians and the Westminster Lobby

Ivor Gaber

The 2009 MPs' expenses scandal was one of the most significant political stories of modern times. It raised questions, not just about the ethics and behaviour of MPs but also about the relationship between politicians at Westminster and the political correspondents who follow them on a daily basis, known as 'the lobby'. For the significance of this scandal, in media terms, was that the story was not broken by members of the lobby but came from outside the traditional Westminster news gathering process. This paper examines why this was the case and it compares the lobby today with that which was described and analysed by Jeremy Tunstall and Colin Seymour-Ure in their respective studies more than 40 years ago. The article concludes that the lobby missed the story partly because of the nature of the lobby itself and partly as a result of a number of specific changes which have taken place in the media and the political systems over the past 40 years.

KEYWORDS journalists; political correspondents; Westminster; parliament; politicians; MPs' expenses; the lobby

The lobby is dying. I find the lobby briefings so boring, so content-free, that I hardly ever go. (Nick Robinson, BBC Political Editor¹)

Introduction

The Westminster MPs' expenses scandal, which broke in May 2009, was one of the biggest, if not one of the most important, stories to have come out of the British Parliament since the war. And yet, despite there being more than 150 members of the Westminster Lobby² the story did not originate there. This paper seeks to investigate why and asks if this symbolises a more general, systemic, failure in the functioning of the Westminster media/politics nexus³

The scandal was triggered by the theft of a computer disk containing details of MPs' expenses. The stolen disk was offered to a number of Westminster-based correspondents; some picked out the odd story to use (e.g. the expenses claim by the then Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, for the renting of 'soft porn' films) others rejected it altogether, but none saw its true import until, that is, it arrived at the offices of the *Daily Telegraph*, there the paper's Deputy Political Editor, Robert Winnett,⁴ spotted its significance and thus began a series of front page exclusives which the *Telegraph* ran for over a month in May and June 2009 (Winnett and Rayner).

Significantly, when the *Daily Telegraph* did set to work on the disk, they decided to base their operation away from Westminster, utilising a training room at their Victoria headquarters that was dubbed 'the bunker'—this was partly due to concern that running the operation out of Westminster would not be secure (Winnett and Rayner 121). It is perhaps worth noting that the political correspondent who spotted the significance of the information on the disk was not in the mould of the 'typical' lobby correspondent. Matthew Bell in the *Independent on Sunday* described Winnett as: 'The quiet, young, former personal finance reporter, known affectionately by colleagues as "rat boy" for his scoop-sniffing cunning'(Bell). Bell went on to note:

It was luck that Winnett took the call when John Wick, the ex-SAS officer handling the disk's sale, rang the *Telegraph* news desk. Wick had offered the disk to three other papers, but it was Winnett who, after being given the expenses claims of two MPs as a sample, immediately saw its potential.

The importance of the scandal, in terms of the media, was not the story itself (although its implications for politicians and the reputation of Westminster were immense) but what it can be seen to represent—an important moment in the changing relationship between MPs and the lobby. This paper suggests that the failure of the lobby, collectively, not just to spot the significance of the information on the disk, but to have largely missed the MPs' expenses story in the first place, was in part an institutional failure, built into the fabric of the lobby, but was also the result of trends and changes in parliament, politics and the media that have been gaining momentum in recent years and which, in retrospect, made what happened, if not inevitable, at least explicable.

The last two major studies of the Westminster Lobby were published more than 40 years ago, they were Colin Seymour-Ure's *The Press, Politics and the Public* published in 1968 and Jeremy Tunstall's groundbreaking *The Westminster Lobby Correspondents* published in 1970. Both books painted a broadly similar picture based on a recognition that the lobby system was far from a perfect way of gathering political information, that it had many shortcomings but, implicitly, was still broadly carrying out the historic monitoring functions of the press as encapsulated in the phrase the fourth estate.⁵ Seymour-Ure said, of the relationship between MPs and journalists, that there is always '... mutual suspicion between Press and politicians is an inevitable general feature of our kind of society' (Seymour-Ure 185).

There have been no major studies since,⁶ so it is perhaps useful to look back to the lobby described by Seymour-Ure and Tunstall, and compare it with the lobby in 2009, when the MPs' expenses scandal broke and to investigate those similarities, and differences, in journalistic practice that can help throw light on why the expenses scandal initially bypassed the lobby.⁷

Changing Composition of the Lobby

One of the most obvious differences between then and now—and it is being argued here, particularly germane to this discussion—is the enormous change in the balance in the lobby between national and regional political reporters. Seymour-Ure notes that originally the early lobby correspondents were mostly from the regional press because the

main points of contact between ministers and national newspapers were the London editors themselves, he writes 'The need for a Lobby Correspondent, one might say, was in inverse ratio to the quality of an editor's contacts' (Seymour-Ure 199).

When Tunstall studied the lobby in 1970 he found that of its 109 members, 54 represented regional newspapers and 47 represented the national press, radio, TV and the news agencies, 7 fell into a miscellaneous category.⁸ In terms of newspapers, regionals outnumbered nationals by 54–38 (and excluding those representing Sunday papers whose presence in the lobby was far from daily) the balance was 53–39 in favour of regional correspondents. Compare this with the situation, 40 years later⁹ in which the balance between regional and national correspondents had dramatically changed—there being a total of just 16 correspondents representing regional newspapers and 62 representing national and Sunday newspapers. Even if we add in the regional broadcasters—given that the bulk of regional representation at Westminster had shifted from the press to radio and TV—the change in the balance remains, with there being 86 national press and broadcasting representatives in the lobby as against 33 representing the regional media (Table 1).

The significance of this dramatic change is simple. It is a statement of the obvious to note that most members of the lobby focus far more attention on the Prime Minister and his or her Cabinet (and to a much lesser extent the Shadow Cabinet) than back-bench MPs; and this is, and was, particularly the case for those working for national media organisations. But for regional journalists, it is the MPs from his or her patch who are particularly important contacts. This is because their primary role is not to duplicate the work of the national lobby correspondents, but to report on the activities of their local MPs and their issues. For the national correspondents, 40 years ago as today, the back-bench contacts are only of limited value as '... sources of information about their reactions to policy developments or to Parliamentary or political events, and about their attitudes to the party leadership' (Seymour-Ure 226).

The relevance of this to the MPs' scandal is that, as a result of the decline in regional newspapers and the concomitant reduction in the number of regional newspaper correspondents at Westminster, there has been a decline in the day-to-day contacts between backbenchers and reporters. There are still broadcast regional correspondents in the lobby but they have far bigger patches to cover than their newspaper colleagues. The average BBC or ITV regional correspondent can have anything up to 50 MPs in their region, whilst the correspondent of a regional daily or evening, covering just one urban area,

Table 1
Members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery holding lobby passes

| | 1970 | 2012 |
|-----------------------|------|------|
| National press | 38 | 62 |
| Regional press | 54 | 16 |
| National broadcasters | 5 | 24 |
| Regional broadcasters | n/a | 17 |
| News agencies | 9 | 17 |
| Miscellaneous | 3 | 18 |
| Total | 109 | 154 |

Source: Tunstall 4 and Press Gallery website <http://www.pressgallery.org.uk> (accessed 2 July 2012).

might be monitoring fewer than half a dozen MPs. Thus, over time, reporters at Westminster have increasingly lost contact with the daily lives of the MPs they were covering. David Walter, one of the authors of 'Sources Close to the Prime Minister', and for many years a political commentator for *The Times* and the *Guardian*, observed:

Remember some of the expenses excesses took place outside Westminster. Apart from brief forays at election time most Westminster 'journos' never get close to the constituency dimension of MPs' lives. Friday, the day MPs tend to go to their constituencies, is a day off for Westminster journos. They never see MPs' constituency bases, so never would have been likely to witness spending on second homes, legal or otherwise. (Walter interview)

Joan McAlpine, who covers Scottish politics for the *Sunday Times*, reveals how a journalist's ongoing contact with a local MP can affect the way he or she reports them. She told how she sympathised with Labour MP Jim Devine, who was later imprisoned for his abuse of the expenses system, recounting how seeing Mr Devine in his constituency at a football match, made her instinctively more sympathetic towards him:

... the human connection makes us more tolerant. Knowing the person at the heart of a scandal means we are more willing to see the nuances, and less likely to condemn absolutely. (McAlpine)

This is a point echoed by Ben Leapman of the *Sunday Telegraph*, who latched on to the expenses issue a long time before most. In 2004, whilst working for the *London Evening Standard*, he pursued Conservative MP, John Wilkinson, about some of the expenses he was then claiming. However, in 2009, following the *Daily Telegraph's* revelations, he admitted that he had been aware that there were other expenses stories 'locked away' but, as a lobby correspondent, he underestimated public reaction to the expenses abuses—perhaps, as he wrote, because he had developed 'instinctive sympathy' for MPs:

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. (Leapman)

But for most correspondents of national media organisations, even those who thought they had good back-bench contacts, the revelations came as a surprise. Peter Riddell, at the time *The Times's* political editor, admitted:

It was just that we didn't know— I was startled by the disclosures about MPs I thought that I knew quite well. It wasn't a matter of holding back, I, along with virtually all other political journalists, wasn't even aware of the smoke, let alone the fire. (Riddell interview)

Nick Assinder has been in the lobby for the past 30 years, and in that time has worked for regional newspapers, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the BBC. He was equally surprised and believed that the main cause of the story coming to light was the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act:

As far as I can tell, the extent of the expenses abuses came as a genuine shock to lobby/ political journalists. The really big stuff like ‘flipping’ (a term I had never heard before) of second homes was not known about . . . There was no FOI and so long as MPs and the fees office operated a form of ‘omerta’, the fact such large scale abuses were going on would probably have remained a secret. The FOI changed all that. (Assinder interview)

Changing Focus

The decline of regional correspondents, and with it the decline in the closer relations between journalists and politicians, is clearly one major difference between today’s lobby and how it operated four decades ago; and it goes some way in explaining why the ‘expenses enhanced’ lifestyles of some politicians were not picked up by Westminster journalists. However, another part of the explanation lies in the fact that increasingly parliament, and therefore backbenchers, are less and less of a focus for political correspondents (though there are some signs in 2012 that this could be changing (Gaber ‘The Transformation of Campaign Reporting’)). Peter Riddell has observed:

. . . Parliament itself is increasingly being bypassed. Compared with the 1950s, and even perhaps the early 1970s, the floor of the House of Commons is no longer the central arena of politics. The sources of political news have changed out of all recognition. (Riddell interview)

This is not so suggest that the main role of lobby correspondent ever lay in just reporting the outcome of votes. Most of their work has always been about reporting politics in the round—their focus is on ministers and their shadows and a handful of what are invariably dubbed ‘senior backbenchers’, rather than the activities of ordinary back-bench MPs. Seymour-Ure’s description of the role as being ‘. . . keeping abreast of developments in government and party policies and the interplay of personalities’ (314) remains an appropriate job description 40 years on. This has meant that journalists at Westminster have to try and maintain good contacts with key ministers and shadow ministers and also with those back-bench MPs seen as ‘influential’. Staying ahead of the game, prophesying what is likely to happen, and explaining what had just happened has always been a crucial part of the parliamentary game. This has led to the suggestion that one of the major reasons why the lobby missed the story was, paradoxically, because whilst there had been a diminution in the contacts between journalists and backbenchers, in terms of the crucial ministerial sources, MPs and journalists had got too close. David Hencke, who at the time of the expenses scandal represented the *Guardian* in the lobby and chaired the Parliamentary Press Gallery, asked:

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 contacts. Despite the demise of non-attributable briefings, the club atmosphere is still rife in Westminster. (Hencke)

But this view is not accepted by all lobby journalists. Peter Riddell says, ‘It certainly wasn’t a matter of keeping quiet to protect sources—that sort of cosiness disappeared a long time ago’.

Riddell's view is supported by a close observer of the lobby, former *Daily Mirror* editor, Roy Greenslade, now a media commentator, who wrote:

... the idea that there is still some sort of cosy club, in which journalists get too close to MPs and fail to scrutinise their activities, no longer holds true, especially since the reform of the lobby that began under Tony Blair's communications chief Alastair Campbell.

However, Greenslade goes on to point out that with all specialist journalists there is an issue about deciding how big a story has to be, before it is worth alienating what might be a very useful source:

... as with all specialist journalists (be they covering crime, sport or, like me, the media) when stories break that involve a source, a value judgment has to be made. Is the story sufficiently important to run and therefore damage the relationship with the source?

David Hencke is sympathetic to this argument:

... there is a reluctance among some (not all) lobby journalists to probe too deeply into the habits of their contacts for fear of losing them. The main political correspondents on the print and broadcast media need daily contact and cannot afford to miss out on a major developing story so they tend to avoid or are hostile to sleaze tales dominating the press. They don't regard sleaze as the real stuff of politics. (Hencke)

Sky News' political editor, Adam Boulton, admits that a 'blind spot' about MPs' expenses did develop:

I don't think it was the lobby per se, and I don't think it was because political journalists were too close to, or, protective of MPs. It was more that everybody knew how the system worked, it was on the record, and reported, and therefore not regarded as a story. ... Thatcher and Blair were both pretty explicit that they wanted to hold down headline MP salaries but would take a pretty relaxed attitude to expenses. Several MPs told me quite openly that the pay was bad but that they expected to become 'property rich'. This was not a story because it was what the rules stated. (Boulton interview)

And Michael White, who has been reporting parliament for the *Guardian*, for the past 30 years concurs:

Were expenses used as a substitute for pay increases? Of course, from Maggie onwards no government was prepared to bite such an unpopular bullet. Many older MPs thought – think – they had allowances (i.e. to be claimed with no questions asked), not expenses claimed against expenditure. MPs in all parties tell me that the old fees office said 'you're not claiming enough'. (Michael White interview)

It is pertinent to note that the national media journalists quoted above, by definition, had less contact with backbenchers than with frontbenchers, and in this context it is significant that those MPs who were eventually prosecuted for their abuse of the expenses system, none were frontbenchers, from either side. Of the 611 MPs referred to in the course of the *Daily Telegraph's* investigations, only Jacqui Smith and Hazel Blears were obliged to resign from either the Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet as a result of the revelations.¹⁰ In other words, there are grounds for arguing that among those politicians best known to the lobby, that is, ministers and their opposite numbers, as opposed to backbenchers, a smaller

proportion was involved in the scandal. Hence, this can account for some of the explanation as to why most members of the lobby were unaware of the depth and breadth of the abuse.

News Intensification

Another factor explaining this failure relates to the nature and quantity of the work of the average political correspondent, and how that has changed over the past 40 years. Tunstall asked his respondents how they spent their time. The replies he received, in order of magnitude, were 'writing and sending stories, face-to-face contacts with politicians, talking to other journalists, reading documents, phoning sources and attending press conferences ...' (Tunstall 48). Today a very different list would emerge from a similar question. This author has coined the phrase 'news intensification' to describe a process that has involved an increase in both the supply and demand for news which has dramatically changed the working lives of journalists based at Westminster (Gaber 261). This intensification dates from the introduction in 1989 of 24-hour news on Sky News and BBC Radio's 5Live. As a result, lobby journalists today now spend much of the time that used to be devoted to face-to-face contacts, to both monitoring and contributing to, the 24-hour news channels, the Twitter feeds, the blogspots, the websites and so forth. As David Hencke notes:

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. Reporters have quadruple the amount of work. 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. . . . while two decades ago a reporter could get away with just one story for next day's issue, now that same reporter can find him or herself with quadruple the amount of work. Not only does the paper's website want an instant story, but it may require a political blog on that story, an update for the next day's paper and a podcast for that evening's refreshed website. (Hencke)

This lack of time, and increased pressure to produce copy, is another example of what the *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies, in his landmark study of the growing trivialisation of news *Flat Earth News* (Davies) termed 'churnalism'¹¹—the practice of journalists being metaphorically chained to their desks, only having time to process press releases and listen to phone briefings, resulting in a significant diminution of the power of the modern news media to properly fulfil its classic 'watchdog' function.

The other side news intensification that has added greatly to the pressures bearing down on political correspondents, is that along with having more outlets to service, journalists have also suffered, if that is the right word, from an over-supply of incoming information. Not only do they now have access to the online stories being filed by their competitors, but they also have to keep across the social media—Twitter, Facebook and the blogosphere—not just to monitor their media rivals but also to monitor what the many politicians who use the social media are saying. (According to Tweetminster over half the MPs (354) now 'tweet'.)¹²

In addition, all manner of public and private bodies now choose to communicate through these online media, including government departments, campaigning groups, PR companies and so forth. But perhaps one of the lobby's most important sources of information, and of competition, is to be found in the political blogosphere. Journalists are not only having to monitor blogspots such as *Guido Fawkes*¹³ and *Conservative Home* on a more than daily basis but in recent years a number of their senior colleagues have left the lobby in order to focus more of their time and effort on the blogosphere. Paul Waugh, for example, formerly of the *Evening Standard* now edits the *PoliticsHome* web portal and is a frequent, and well-regarded blogger, as is Benedict Brogan formerly of the *Daily Mail* who now blogs for the *Daily Telegraph*. Neither of these two senior political commentators currently hold lobby passes.¹⁴

The Empty Lobby

This drift into cyberspace by journalists has meant that the physical space of the Members Lobby, which used to play such a crucial role in the interactions between MPs and the lobby in the past, is now frequently no more than just that—a lobby. This change predates the rise of the blogosphere, Twitter and so forth, but technology has nonetheless played a key role in emptying this space, compared to 40 years ago. In the days of Tunstall and Seymour-Ure, if a journalist wished to make contact with an MP they could phone the member in their office, but this was often fruitless because ministers and backbenchers could be found in a wide variety of alternative locations in Whitehall and Westminster. So a system, that still exists today, was developed. It consisted of giving a note to an official messenger to be delivered to an MP; the messenger would then attempt to find the member (and failing that leave it in his or her pigeon-hole). This archaic form of communication meant that it was worthwhile for the journalist to spend time waiting around in the Members Lobby in the hope of making contact with the MP being sought. And those MPs who had something they wished to tell a passing journalist would ensure that en route through parliament they went through the Members Lobby. Today such encounters are rare and unnecessary, since in order to contact an MP, all the journalist has to do is call the member's mobile, send them a text or an email or use their Twitter or Facebook accounts.

Another technological factor which reduced the amount of face-to-face contact between politicians and journalists was the introduction of television into the chamber in 1989. This meant that MPs did not need to attend the chamber to follow debates but could spend their time in their offices, or even in their constituencies, watching the chamber on television. This change was encapsulated by Andrew Roth, the founder and editor of *Parliamentary Profiles* who patrolled the Members Lobby from 1952 to 2009, who wrote:

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 before me at the Vote Office's open window, also collecting their Hansard and other documents. Talking to Commons civil servants, colleagues still in the lobby and veteran MPs, either still in the Commons, or 'retired' into the Lords, there is one main

topic: 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.

The role of the lobby journalists has also been diminished because politics at Westminster over the past three decades has been mainly set against a background of large government majorities. In the 30 years between 1979 and 2009, there were just 5 years (1992–1997) when the party of government did not have a large majority (usually of more than 100) over all the other parties. These massive majorities meant that the Commons chamber ceased to be the central focus of British politics in the way it had been 40 years previously. In the 1960s and 1970s, governments with knife-edge majorities struggled to win votes in the House of Commons. But since those heady days, whilst parliamentary rebellions have not been rare in themselves, they have rarely been able to threaten the survival of the government.¹⁵ As a result, correspondents based at Westminster, and in particular those with access to the lobby where the voting intentions of recalcitrant MPs could best be gauged, lost their pre-eminent position and hence their need to cultivate good contacts on the backbenches.

The decline in the Members Lobby as a space where journalists and politicians interacted has not been accompanied by a rise in importance of other points of contact. Most famously Annie's Bar—described as the place 'where members of the cabinet drowned their sorrows alongside Fleet Street's finest' (Summers)—closed in 2006, and the terrace of the House, another common meeting ground 40 years ago, was, in 2009, out of bounds to journalists.¹⁶

Spin Control

Another factor that has impacted on the working lives of the political journalists—and makes a sharp contrast between today and the Tunstall Seymour-Ure era—has been the huge increase in the ability and resources of the political parties to work with, and against, the media.¹⁷ One aspect in particular is worthy of mention, and that is the rise of the ubiquitous spin doctor which has reduced the amount of direct contact between politicians and journalists. It is important to recognise that whilst the term might be relatively new, politicians and their advisors have been trying to 'manage' journalists for as long as journalists and politicians have been doing business together (Andrews), exemplified almost 100 years ago by Lloyd George's memorable aphorism 'What you can't squash you square and what you can't square you squash' (Margach 5).

However, it is undeniable that in recent years the activities and, arguably the effectiveness, of politicians' attempts to manage the media have been increasing (Jones *Soundbites and Spin Doctors*; *Sultans of Spin*; *The Control Freaks*). This author, in his time at Westminster, observed the increasing sophistication of the spin doctors, particularly following the election of New Labour in 1997 and the success that Alastair Campbell and his team achieved in ensuring that media coverage of the Labour government was, for the most part favourable (Barnett and Gaber; Price). Measuring the impact of spin, and spin doctors, on the lobby is impossible—it is in the interests of both sides to minimise such impact. Nonetheless, the growing number of special advisors who have managing the media as their main core of activity, attests to the fact that whether they are right or wrong, politicians certainly believe it is worth investing resources in seeking to refine and define their

media messages.¹⁸ Whether successful or not, spin adds one more obstacle that the political correspondent now has to negotiate in order to maintain a flow of stories from Westminster that he or she would regard as accurate. This was less of a problem for those correspondents surveyed by Tunstall; indeed his study contains no references to press secretaries, spokesman or PR officers. And when he asked lobby correspondents to list their key sources of information, the three quoted in the study replied:

Prime Minister and four or five of the most important Ministers, three or four key backbenchers, Chief Whips of both parties, and intruders in the Opposition, 'a) Leading politicians who make decisions, b) Young aides of the leading politicians who know what their masters are doing and c) "Elder statesmen" who know what's going on.' And 'Frontbenchers of both parties; men of ideas among backbenchers'. (Tunstall 46)

Arguably the 'young aides' quoted by the second source is the nearest equivalent of today's 'spin doctors' but the general absence of any reference to the sources that play such a key role in the interactions between politicians and journalists today is striking. Andrew Roth, captures the change well when, writing about life in the lobby under the last Labour government, he speaks of how:

New Labour MPs are adoring of their Ministers in public and avoid spending time talking to lobby journalists in the Members' Lobby or Annie's Bar. Or even to one another in the Tearoom. They behave as if Millbank and the Whips have put the frighteners on them.

Owning Up

Clearly there is more to the failure of lobby journalists to spot the expenses story than the factor listed above. MPs who were over-claiming expenses would, presumably, have been doing their utmost to conceal the fact and they were only frustrated in their efforts by the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act and the efforts of journalists such as Heather Brooke, to expose the claims that MPs were making (Brooke). Lance Price was in the lobby for the BBC, and then went on to serve as deputy to Alastair Campbell in Downing Street; he recalls that there was both deliberate attempts by politicians at concealment but this was combined with a reluctance among journalists to probe this matter too zealously:

...we all had a sense that they did well out of their expenses but MPs were understandably reluctant to brag about how much they were profiting (any more than journalists in the good old days of wholly fictitious exes. in Fleet Street and indeed in the BBC). Even those of us with MPs as friends were shocked at the extent of the claims. You might have thought it takes a crook to catch a crook but lobby journalists who enjoyed generous expense accounts were undoubtedly too close to those MPs and ministers that they took out on those very same accounts. So in a sense they were all in it together. (Price interview)¹⁹

Adam Boulton of Sky News concurs:

... in our profession 20 years ago there was a widespread culture of padding expenses, often with the active connivance of line managers. But times move on but because of self-regulation MPs missed out on changing times. (Boulton interview)

According to David Walter, who was in the lobby for the BBC for 20 years, there was another factor at work and that was, quite simply, that most lobby correspondents were not that interested in the day-to-day workings of parliament:

Westminster journalists rarely if ever (in my experience) look at the House of Commons as an institution, and pay little or no heed to how it operates The various committees that ran the Commons (and still do) never elicited journalists' attention or interest. The operations of the Fees Office would have been a closed book to them. That doesn't necessarily mean journalists were too close to MPs. But they were too close to the institution, never subjecting it to critical gaze or bothering to find out much about how it worked, its finances or its (insidious) culture. (Walter interview)

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the failure of the majority of the lobby in 2009, not just to spot the significance of the information on the disk that arrived in the offices of the *Daily Telegraph*, but to have largely missed the MPs expenses story in the first place, can be explained partly by the nature of the lobby itself and partly as a result of a number of specific changes over the 40 years since the last major studies of the lobby were published. These changes were:

- The reduction in the numbers of lobby correspondents representing the regional press; these were the journalists who had the closest relationships with MPs, which entailed knowing MPs in both their Westminster constituency contexts.
- The ever-greater focus by the lobby on frontbenchers, and in particular the shift in the political journalists' focus from parliament to the television studios and cyberspace.
- The linked news intensification process, which has dramatically increased the workload of correspondents and made it that much more difficult for them to investigate stories in depth that are not on the mainstream news agendas.
- The emptying of the Members Lobby as a result of a number of factors, all of which have combined to mean that the amount of face-to-face contact between MPs and journalists has dramatically declined.
- The vast increase in the 'spin machines' attempting to influence how politics is reported, adding considerably to the distractions affecting political correspondents.
- And finally the combined impact of those MPs who were abusing the expenses system doing their best to conceal the fact alongside the fact that for many in the lobby, the issue of the allowances that MPs were entitled to claim was not, for the reasons outlined, seen as much of a story.

Whether all this means that had the expenses scandal broken in 1969, it would have been picked up and reported by the lobby in a way that did not happen in 2009, is one of those 'what ifs' of history that are impossible to answer. But one clue might lie in a quotation from Harold Wilson, when as Leader of the Opposition in 1962, said: 'The relation between politicians and lobby journalists is a relationship of complete trust and no politician has ever been let down' (quoted in Sparrow 134). If this is an accurate reflection of how relations between journalists and politicians were then perceived, then it is not difficult to

believe that revelations of MPs abusing the expenses system might not, as in 2009, have been seen by lobby journalists as a story worth pursuing.

Notes

1. Speaking at City University London on 4 February 2012.
2. The Parliamentary Press Gallery site currently (2 July 2012) lists 214 members but identifies 154 holding lobby Passes. See <http://www.pressgallery.org.uk/>.
3. Whilst the term 'the Lobby' has, in Westminster parlance, three distinct meanings—the physical space of the Members Lobby outside the Commons chamber, the twice daily briefings given by the Prime Minister's Press Secretary and finally to those members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery who are allowed exclusive access to the Members' Lobby (and to the second of the two daily briefings)—in this article the term will be used only to refer to the group of accredited lobby correspondents.
4. At the time of writing (July 2012) political editor.
5. Attributed by Thomas Carlyle to Edmund Burke (Schultz 49).
6. In 1980 Cockerell, Hennessey and Walter published 'Sources Close to the Prime Minister' an overview of government/media relations which included a devastating critique of the lobby.
7. Like the two earlier studies, this paper will address the media/politics nexus from the journalists' perspective.
8. Tunstall 4.
9. Based on information to be found on the website of the Parliamentary Press Gallery viewed July 2012, see note 2 above.
10. *Daily Telegraph*, 8 May 2009.
11. Although the term was, reportedly, first coined by BBC Midlands journalist, Waseem Zakir, in the late 1990s (see http://www.thejournalist.org.uk/html_Apr08/noir.html, viewed 2 July 2012).
12. Tweetminster reports—137 Labour 130 Conservatives, 37 Liberal Democrats and 13 MPs from other parties now have twitter accounts <http://tweetminster.co.uk/mps>, viewed 2 July 2012.
13. Giving evidence to the Leveson Inquiry (8 Feb. 2012) Paul Staines, who blogs as Guido Fawkes, claimed that his blog has been accessed by between 50 and 100,000 users every day.
14. Parliamentary Press Gallery site <http://www.pressgallery.org.uk> viewed 6 Feb. 2012.
15. See Phillip Cowley's website www.revolt.co.uk.
16. This ruling was introduced by Speaker Michael Martin but was partially reversed by the new Speaker John Bercow in 2010.
17. See Gaber 'Moment of Truth' for an exposition of this phenomenon in the 2010 election campaign.
18. Under New Labour the number of special advisors, compared to the previous Conservative Government went up from 38 to, at its height in 2004, 84; and has remained more or less at that level since, reaching 85 in June 2012 see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/jun/18/number-political-special-advisers-rises> (accessed 2 July 2012)
19. Lance Price interview 20 Dec. 2010.

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Tweetminster – www.tweetminster.co.uk

Interviews (all conducted December 2010)

Nick Assinder, Political Editor *PoliticsHome* website (former lobby correspondent for regional newspapers, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and BBC Online)

Adam Boulton Political Editor *Sky News*

Peter Riddell Political Editor *The Times*

David Walter, freelance journalist and writer (former BBC and ITN Political Correspondent, leader writer and commentator for the *Guardian* and *The Times*)

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