

The Werritty affair shows that now, more than ever, we need a statutory register for lobbyists.

Lobbying in politics is nothing new, but the recent resignation of Liam Fox from his ministerial post due to his close relationship with Adam Werritty has placed a new spotlight on the activities of lobbyists and the power they wield inside government. [David Beetham](#) of Democratic Audit argues that the growth of lobbying, often shrouded in secrecy, is worrying. More transparency, in the form of a statutory register of lobbyists, is needed.



The recent disclosure that a Dubai-based businessman paid thousands of pounds to a lobbying firm with Tory connections to arrange meetings with Liam Fox through the mediation of Adam Werritty was not in itself particularly startling. What was unusual was Werritty's position as [informal confidant](#), advisor and travelling companion to the Secretary for Defence, which brought about Fox's resignation. However, the affair has served to put the spotlight on the activities of lobbyists as a whole, and the lack of transparency with which they operate.

The activity of lobbying ministers and senior civil servants about policy or legislation by interested parties is a normal feature of democratic politics. What has changed over the past two decades is that this activity has become increasingly professionalised, with units dedicated to government relations in the larger corporations, and a huge growth in lobbying firms both advising on and securing access to government decision makers for a fee. This development is disturbing from a democratic point of view for a number of reasons:

- It means that access to a minister can in effect be bought, even though the financial transaction is indirect, and no advantage accrues to the minister personally.
- It encourages the '[revolving door](#)' in both directions between government, business and lobbying firms, with inside knowledge and contacts rated at a premium.
- Lobbying activities are shrouded in secrecy, though it is possible to research the key personnel and clients of the main lobbying firms through their websites.

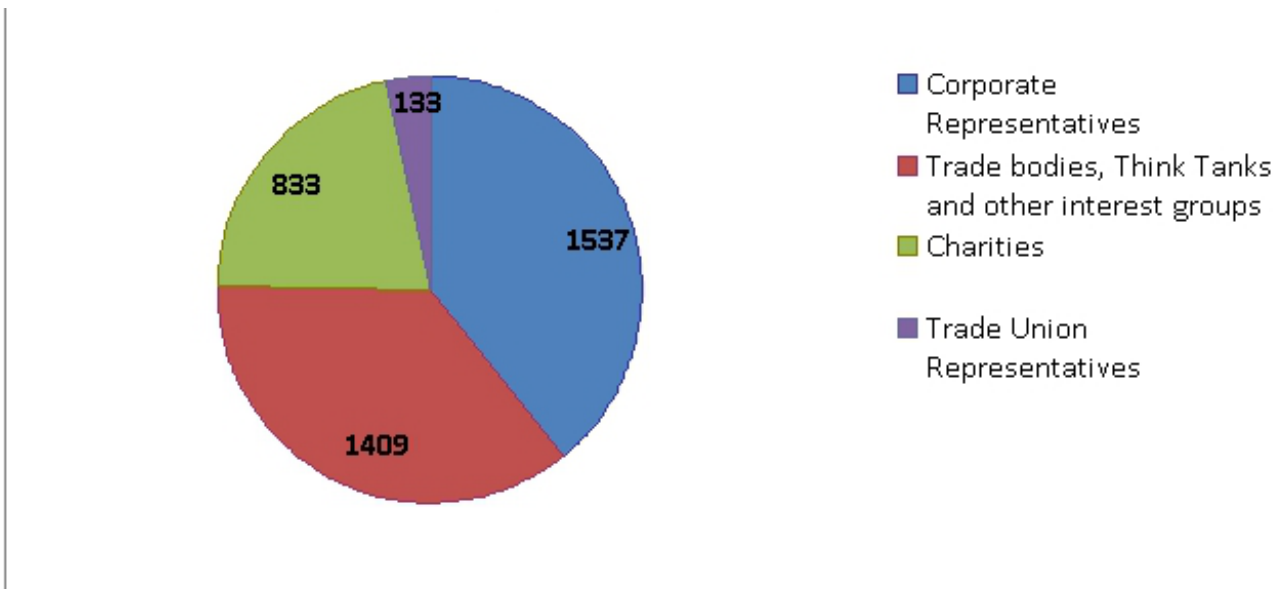
A recent report on the leading 25 firms in *The Independent* [revealed](#) a total of 61 former ministers, MPs, political aides and advisors, and relatives of these, on their payrolls. Their clients include most of the major UK corporations, as well as many US ones.

To deal with the lack of transparency in the lobbying business a 2009 report of the Commons Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) recommended a statutory register of lobbyists, to include information on the following:

- the names of all organisations and individuals carrying on lobbying activities;
- the names of their clients;
- a record of any public office previously held by lobbyists;
- career histories of key decision makers in the civil service;
- details of all contacts (conversations as well as meetings) between lobbyists and decision makers.

In response the Labour Government initially dismissed the idea of a statutory register, but it did institute a system whereby departments would be required to publish on-line information about ministerial meetings with interest groups on a quarterly basis, though not civil service meetings. To date this is the only official information we have about lobbying activities, but from the outcome rather than the input side as it were. It is on the basis of records of such meetings between May 2010 and March 2011 that researchers from [The Guardian Data Blog](#) have been able to calculate a breakdown of meetings between ministers and interest groups as follows:

**Interest groups' meetings with Ministers
May 2010- March 2011**



Source: Guardian Data Blog

These figures exclude several hundred round table meetings where numerous companies were represented. It should also be noted that many think tanks promote a free market, pro-business agenda, and some are registered as charities, so the lines between categories are blurred.

In a [speech in February 2010](#) David Cameron identified the influence of lobbyists as ‘the next big scandal waiting to happen. We all know how it works,’ he went on. ‘The lunches, the hospitality, the quiet word in your ear, the ex-ministers and ex-advisors for hire, helping big business find the right way to get its way.’ Yet the Conservative Party manifesto for the general election that year called only for self-regulation of the industry, and it was only under pressure from the Liberal Democrats that the coalition programme committed itself to a statutory register of lobbyists. The idea of a purely voluntary register later became discredited with the [publication](#) in March this year of a register organised by industry-wide bodies, in which only ten per cent of lobbyists were included. The information it did contain, according to Austin Mitchell MP, was ‘riddled with errors, omissions, inconsistencies and redactions’.

In the aftermath of the Werritty affair, a statutory register of lobbyists is now promised for the legislative session of 2012-13, while discussions with the industry continue in the meantime. This, however, is an issue that concerns us all, not just members of the industry. What we need is a statutory register that includes all the information itemised in the PASC report of 2009, and includes meetings with senior civil servants as well as ministers. Given the Conservative preference for ‘[nudge](#)’ over regulation, we are unlikely to see really robust proposals emerging. And it hardly inspires confidence that the minister in charge of lobbying transparency, Mark Harper, has so far [refused](#) an FOI request for details of his discussions with lobbyists to be made public!