

The Persuasionists

'Dark arts', 'fat cats': Lobbyists are used to name-calling. But will the government's much vaunted register ever materialise? **Molly Pierce** investigates

In May 2010, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties formed a Coalition to govern the UK, following an inconclusive general election. The various incompetencies that have followed that formation won't be detailed here: but one particular part of the Coalition's statement has come to have a great deal of significance for that part of the communications industry that is involved in public affairs.

The parties will tackle lobbying through introducing a statutory register of lobbyists. We also agree to pursue a detailed agreement on limiting donations and reforming party funding in order to remove big money from politics.

"The government wanted to regulate through this register," said Phil Morgan, director of policy and communications at the CIPR. "But unless the register was to be backed up by a statutory code of conduct, that wouldn't have been possible."

The statement also makes – or rather confirms – a particular assumption about lobbying. The implication that lobbying is something to "tackle", i.e. that it is a negative; an implication backed up by the language of "[w]e also agree to pursue a detailed agreement on limiting donations... in order to remove big money from politics" links together "lobbying" and "big money". This perception, that lobbying is the preserve of moneyed corporations, is one that the profession has fought against for years.

These dual confusions, over what the register's purpose was, whether it was to regulate or simply list; and over exactly how lobbying works and who it works for, have dogged the proposed register for two years. Multiple issues have arisen and been ignored or half-dealt with, but the plans to register lobbyists in the UK persist. So why is it so important to have this register? What will it mean for the profession? And will we ever actually get one?

In the 2006 pamphlet *Friend of Foe? Lobbying in British Democracy* published by the Hansard Society and comms and recruitment consultancy Ellwood and Atfield, Philip Parvin quotes CIPR estimations of the numbers involved in lobbying. The CIPR estimated that the size of the PR profession in the UK at that time was around 48,000, and that around 30% of that number, so 14,000 people, undertook activities that come under the broad classification of public affairs and lobbying. Parvin also points out that the CIPR estimated the worth of the UK PR industry at around £6.5 billion: meaning that public affairs was worth some £1.9 billion at the time – and more now. The chief executive of the PRCA, Francis Ingham, says that approximately a quarter of the PRCA's membership is involved in lobbying. "We know this because of our public affairs register. For some, it's a marginal part of what they do; for others, it's integral to their business," he said.

The numbers involved in the public affairs profession mean that the register is a good idea. "We completely believe that a register is needed," said Morgan. "Lobbyist activity – including the details of who an agency's clients are – should be public knowledge, and the CIPR supports moves within the industry to become more ethical, and more transparent."

Another factor that backs up the necessity of creating a register is the public perception of the lobbying and public affairs industry. A recent investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which was splashed in the *Guardian*, revealed that the financial services industry had spent £92 million in 2011 on lobbying politicians to secure "policy victories". The investigation prompted a slew of accusations that the money spent, and power exerted, by lobbyists were enabling the financial industry to overshadow Britain's wider economic interests.

Another BIJ investigation, printed this time in the *Independent*, captured senior executives at the well-respected comms firm Bell Pottinger ▶