

Room 18,
Parliamentary Press Gallery
House of Commons,
Westminster SW1A 0AA

June 29 2012

Dear Lord Justice Leveson,

I write to you as Chairman of the Parliamentary Lobby Journalists.

Several members of the Lobby have asked me to write following oral evidence from David Cameron and Gordon Brown.

The first concern relates to the following remarks by Mr Cameron on June 14:

“I think the question you've challenged the industry with is the right one and we have to see: is there some way of saying, "If you're not part of this, you're not in the lobby, you don't get any information from government, you don't get this or that", and is there a way of making it that it becomes effectively compulsory? ..”

You replied:

“It's quite difficult to see how the government can withdraw favours, as it were, like the lobby, unless you tell me differently.”

Mr Cameron's suggestion will no doubt be picked over and expanded upon by others, but we would like to ensure that no one labours under a misapprehension about the Lobby itself.

Who is and who is not 'in the Lobby' is not a matter for Prime Ministerial or even Government 'favour' or patronage. Lobby passes are decided upon by the Serjeant at Arms of the House of Commons (on the advice of his Deputy), acting under the authority of The Speaker.

I would not presume to speak for the Deputy Serjeant, but his decisions are normally based upon a news organisation's reach and reputation in covering politics and Parliament, supplemented by a security vetting process of individuals wishing to obtain a pass. The Lobby and the Parliamentary Press Gallery (our sister organisation) would normally be consulted on any changes to the system.

A second concern is over Mr Brown's remarks on June 11. He told the Inquiry:

"You would have to allow in press that are not part of the lobby system at the moment -- and that includes, of course, the new Internet media that is developing".

As a matter of fact, the 'new internet media' is already 'part of the Lobby system'. I am chairman of the Lobby and work for a website (having worked for newspapers beforehand). Moreover, I and my colleagues on PoliticsHome.com are not the exception. Politics.co.uk also have Parliamentary passes, as does ConservativeHome.com and the Huffington Post. This is yet another area where, contrary to some misconceptions, the Lobby has modernised and embraced the world in which politicians and the media now live.

Mr Brown went on:

"It's not the lobby system per se that's the problem, it's this small group of insiders who get the benefit of early access to information, and I think that is one of the problems that prevents the greater openness that we have to see."

The Lobby are given embargoed copies of Select Committee reports and the Prime Minister's speeches and announcements, just as other specialist reporters (health, education, home affairs – for example) receive embargoed reports from relevant Whitehall departments. Politicians like to alert the press in advance in order to secure greater coverage. For our part, it is the most effective way to meet newspaper or broadcast bulletins' deadlines. This is not 'special access' to serve a mysterious, secret cartel, it is a matter of practicality.

But it is Mr Brown's wider point about an alleged 'closed culture' that caused most comment among my colleagues. He told your Inquiry:

"I hope I'm not misunderstood, because my original point was this: that we accepted too easily a closed culture where it was possible for stories about political events to be told to a few people rather than openly by Parliamentary announcement or by speech, and we should have reformed that system earlier, and the system, I'm afraid, is still waiting to be reformed.

"It is too closed a system. It relies on too small a number of people. Of course, it has its heart in the lobby system, but it is actually the exclusivity for some people within the lobby that people rightly, I think, resent."

Mr Brown appears to have confused 'the Lobby' with individual members of the Lobby breaking exclusive stories on Government policy.

Moreover, Lobby briefings are not a place where 'favours' or stories are handed out like sweets on a daily basis. They are mini-press conferences where Number 10 (and the Prime Minister) is held to account.

Our twice-daily meetings are on the record, with quotations attributed to the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman or his deputy. Far from being part of some 'closed culture', they are published on the Downing Street website every day. Morning briefings are open to non-Lobby correspondents, including the foreign press and other specialist reporters. They have operated thus for several years.

As for the "small group of insiders", the Lobby now numbers more than 200 members from a wide range of news organisations. Everyone from the Aberdeen Press and

Journal to the BBC can attend a briefing - on equal terms - to ask questions directly to Number 10. That breadth of representation and its access to the Prime Minister's office is something of which we are very proud.

Many Lobby members feel passionately about their duty to speak truth to power and their historic role in scrutinising the Executive. It is significant that – unlike the White House press corps – we are based in the Legislature. Our accommodation in the House of Commons also allows us to scrutinise Parliament as well as Government.

The one other area where practicality and principle combine is in ‘the Members’ Lobby’ after which we are named. The Members’ Lobby is the space outside the Commons Chamber where MPs gather. Ever since the 1870s, when the Commons first drafted a Lobby ‘list of accredited reporters, this has been a space where Members of Parliament can speak to the press ‘on Lobby terms’, that is unattributably. This is extremely important in protecting sources, a central tenet of journalistic principle.

In practice, reporters and MPs talk off the record on the telephone or in other places rather than just in ‘the Lobby’, but the principle still applies. When the first ‘Lobby list’ was started, practicality was a key consideration: it was a convenient place where a journalist could meet a large number of MPs at one time, and where any MP could meet journalists close to their workplace, the Chamber. The requirement to be literally close to proceedings in Parliament (and Downing Street) is as valid today as it was more than 140 years ago.

Finally, we appreciate the value placed upon the Lobby and Press Gallery by the Commons authorities, who have worked with the media to make Parliament more accessible and relevant. The Speaker himself is a champion of press freedom and scrutiny.

Some members of the Lobby, notably Andrew Grice and Simon Walters, have already given evidence to correct some misapprehensions about our affairs. I would hope that this letter provides further assistance to your Inquiry in reflecting the reality of the Lobby of 2012.

Paul Waugh

Chairman of the Parliamentary Lobby Journalists

(submitted via email)

STATEMENT OF TRUTH

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed..

Date..... 02/07/12