

Chairperson's Blog: Lifting the lid on lobbying

As recognised in the Transparency International Report on Lifting the lid on lobbying¹ published earlier this year "Lobbying is an essential part of our democracy. In order for governments and legislatures to work effectively they need to engage with those potentially affected by their decisions."

Lobbying is not just carried out by shady people on Golf courses or over expensive dinners and cocktails as we see in American TV shows. It includes but is not limited to the Public Affairs industry, Charities, Trade Unions, Businesses, Industry and Civil Society.

A 2013 survey on lobbying conducted by Burston-Marsteller² provides data on how lobbying is viewed by MPs, MEPs, and senior officials from national governments and European institutions. The survey found that 93 per cent of respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that ethical and transparent lobbying helps policy development, and they also viewed many groups as transparent or 'very transparent': 84 per cent thought this of trade associations, 83 per cent of companies, 80 per cent of trade unions and 76 per cent of NGOs. More than two-fifths (43 per cent) of respondents said that offering unethical inducements was the most frequently committed poor practice among private-sector companies and associations. However, the survey provides little data on how frequently respondents thought unethical practices occur."

Yet according to the 2013 Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer³ public perception is very negative towards influences on Government and Parties;

- *59 per cent of respondents think that the UK government is 'entirely' or 'to a large extent' run by a few big entities acting in their own best interests, while an additional 31 per cent think that this is 'somewhat' the case.*
- *67 per cent think political parties in the UK are 'corrupt' or 'extremely corrupt'.*
- *55 per cent feel that the UK Parliament is 'corrupt' or 'extremely corrupt'.*

The line that struck me was "Northern Ireland is something of an 'all-or-nothing' performer in integrity and transparency".

There is a crisis of trust in politics and political parties here in NI. This is not helped with the current investigations into NAMA and also the latest talk's process. In the Transparency UK report there is some uncomfortable reading for politicians, civil servants Ministers here in Northern Ireland.

According to the report, both ministerial and legislator transparency of lobbying meetings in NI is the weakest in the UK. For example,

¹ Transparency UK Lifting the Lid on Lobbying <http://www.transparency.org.uk/publications/15-publications/1208-liftthelid>

² Effective Lobbying in Europe <http://lobbyingsurvey.burson-marsteller.com/>

³ Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer <http://www.transparency.org/gcb2013>

- *There is no obligation on Ministers in Northern Ireland to keep a record of lobbying meetings.*
- *We do not provide meaningful open data through our reporting and registration regimes.*

However, Northern Ireland has the strongest civil service regime in the UK for protecting against 'revolving door' risks. The Northern Irish code of conduct for civil servants is unique in the level of oversight it applies to the revolving door. All civil servants who meet any of the following criteria must apply to the Northern Irish Office of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments.

The Northern Ireland Assembly have been looking at lobbying and I welcome the Committee on Standards and Privileges Review of the Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members. I also welcome the 'Guidance for Members on dealing with lobbyist'⁴.

However, confidence in our political structures is low! In the 2014 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey⁵

- *66% of respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way Northern Ireland MLAs are doing their job?*
- *Over 80% of respondents felt the NI Assembly had achieved 'a little' or 'nothing at all'*
- *52% of respondents felt 'Making devolution work in a way that is fair to all' was the most important issue for the NI Assembly to deal with*

In Northern Ireland we have the critical issue of political party funding which continues to blight any suggestion that we have an open and transparent system of governance. Northern Ireland citizens are the only people in the UK or Ireland who cannot see the names of the individuals and organisations that give large sums of money to their political parties. Couple this with devolving planning powers to Councils and we have no way of knowing who Party donors are, making it impossible to detect whether planning decisions are being affected by Party funders. Reforming this current model of practice is fundamental to correcting a democratic deficit in Northern Ireland which will help restore public faith in our elected officials and system of governance in general.

Although I don't believe all stories written in the Press, there is a need to address, as some may put it, rogue lobbyists. Without a mechanism or structure in place for politicians, Ministers and Civil servants to be open and transparent in dealing with lobbyists it creates an opaque system of public accountability and exposes officials

⁴ NI Assembly Standards and Privileges Committee Guidance for Members on dealing with lobbyists
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/standards-and-privileges/guidance-on-dealing-with-lobbyists/guidance-for-members-on-dealing-with-lobbyists2.pdf>

⁵ Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2014 Module: Political Attitudes
http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2014/Political_Attitudes/index.html

to speculation, rumours and question marks over their integrity. We need to create an equal and clearer field of play which will help uphold the integrity of both the lobbyist and elected representatives.

The Transparency International report highlights some of the gaps in our system. It offers strong recommendations on how we can become more open and transparent which we must embrace.

The NI Open Government Network will be (when we finish drafting our paper) calling for the establishment of a statutory NI register of lobbyists; and publish registers of interest in an open data format. We will also be exploring the possibility of placing a requirement on Ministers, MLA's, Councillors and mid-level and Senior Civil Servants to make their diaries available for public viewing, again in an open data format.

Edward Snowden was quoted as saying:

There can be no faith in government if our highest offices are excused from scrutiny – they should be setting the example of transparency.

The UK Action Plan offers an opportunity for Northern Ireland to commit to implementing reform ideas that will strengthen our democracy. To do otherwise would send a clear signal to the citizens of Northern Ireland that issues of openness and transparency are not valued by our legislators.

Link to the Transparency UK #TransparencyMatters
<http://transparencymatters.transparency.org.uk/>