

‘Government Sources Said Last Night . . . : The Development of the Parliamentary Press Lobby in Modern Ireland’, in *Information Media and Power through the Ages*, Hiram Morgan (ed.) , UCD Press (2001), pp. 259-272.

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The history of the parliamentary lobby, the phrase generally used to designate those political journalists with unique and privileged access to governmental sources, is one in which there are notable commonalities between the practices in Britain and Ireland. Indeed, the lobby owes its very existence to the political tension between the two islands in the 1880's, when the Fenian propensity for bombing prominent British targets, notably the Palace of Westminster, led the authorities there to restrict access by journalists and others to the precincts of the houses of parliament. Since 1884, in effect, this restricted list has been kept, and controlled, by the Speaker of the House of Commons (Michael Foley, “The Political Lobby System”, *Irish Communications Review*, 3, 1993, p. 23). Britain passed its first Official Secrets Act five years after the establishment of the first, rudimentary lobby, a successful example of closing the stable door before the horse has even thought of escaping.

The lobby, however, is effectively a list within a list. In Britain, it is comprised of a self-perpetuating elite with written rules, whose members accord government ministers and spokespersons anonymity in return for privileged access to political information. It is less a marriage of equals than, in the words of a distinguished political commentator, the creation of a new group of insiders "to.....exclude the public and the mass of writers of countless newsletters, pamphlet sheets and weeklies who had overcrowded the members' lobby" (James Margach, *Abuse of Power*, London, Transatlantic, 1978, 125). The same writer clearly identifies, without resolving, the central dilemma in any such arrangement: "Both government and the media are compelled by the unlimited demands of modern communications to co-operate, yet by all basic tests they are opposing and rival forces" (James Margach, *Anatomy of Power*, London, Star Books, 1981, p. 129).

There have been two basic theses relevant to the lobby system in Ireland. The first, major thesis (Peter Kellner, 'The Lobby, Official Secrets and Good Government', *Parliamentary Affairs* 36,3, 1983, 275-82), is that this is a system for subverting important press freedoms, for facilitating the manipulation of information and of the media themselves by government, and has important negative consequences for the quality of democracy in those societies of which it is a feature. The minor thesis (Foley, 'Lobby', 21-31), suggests that the Irish and UK systems are analagous, and that the defects of one are mirrored in the other. Another commentator, Brian Farrell, argues that the Irish system, which he sees as operating on a broadly similar basis, "creates a much more secretive form of Cabinet-media relationship, frequently characterised by leaks, often inspired and manipulated" (Brian Farrell, 'Cabinet-Media Relationships: approaches to a comparative typology', UCD seminar paper, 1969, cited in Foley, 'Lobby', 29). Foley, while arguing that "there are strong similarities in both systems" suggests that "similarities in structures and organisation could possibly hide a system which allows a greater independent inquiry, while maintaining elements of the British lobby terms" (Foley, 'Lobby', 29).

This paper is based to some extent on a number of participant interviews with a number of political writers, many of them at one time - or still - members of the lobby, such as Dick Walsh, Bruce Arnold, Michael Mills, Ted Nealon and Sean Duignan. Although it is not necessary to ascribe particular views to particular individuals, the evidence they provide about the workings of the system suggests that both the major and minor theses may not hold entirely true for Ireland, or at least that the historical development of the lobby system in Ireland has diverged from that in Westminster, with important consequences both for journalists and politicians.

One way of examining the similarities and differences between the palace of Westminster and Leinster House lobby systems - is to look at the differing ways in which they have evolved and have responded to particular issues, tensions, and strains within government-media relationships.

Viewed in this context, the Westminster model has remained remarkably static. The creation of the lobby in 1884 was a first merely organisational: it developed an important professional dimension under Ramsay MacDonald, who appointed Britain's first government press secretary (although he was not described as such), George Seward. This, according to Margach, was when "the old style competitive outsiders were organised into a fraternity of organised insiders" (Margach, *Anatomy*, 137).

It was a century after the informal creation of the lobby system that it received its first serious shock (it had, of course, grown in size along the way, but without any accompanying function). This was in 1986, when Margaret Thatcher was British Prime Minister and Bernard Ingham her press secretary. In that year, the newly-founded London Independent decided that it would have no part of the lobby system. The Guardian, possibly somewhat upstaged on this matter of principle, decided that although it would continue to attend lobby briefings, it would henceforth refer to "a Downing Street spokesman" or "Mrs Thatcher's spokesman" as the source for its information. Acceptance of this practice by the lobby would have meant a change in its rule-book, which specified that all information was non-attributable. After a lengthy internal debate, the lobby decided to maintain its rules, and the Guardian left (Robert Harris, *Good and Faithful Servant: The Unauthorized Biography of Bernard Ingham*, London, Faber, 1988, 154-5). It was hardly a crisis, but certainly an embarrassment, and was not resolved until both Mrs Thatcher and Mr Ingham had departed, when a new regime offered both newspapers the opportunity to opt back in, encouraged by a compromise formula which allowed for minimal attribution.

Since then, controversy about the lobby and its functions has been remarkable by its absence. David Walker's derisive description of it as "a crutch for crippled journalists" (M. Cockerell, P. Hennessy and D. Walker, *Sources Close to the Prime Minister*, Macmillan, London, 1984, cited in Foley 'Lobby', 29), like the handful of other criticisms that have been made of the system from time to time, has been greeted by a somewhat costive silence.

The development of the lobby in Ireland has been in some respects slower, in others more organic and healthy. It was slower because the initial relationships between government and media in Ireland were characterised, if not necessarily by hostility, certainly by coolness. In spite of the fact that most Irish national newspapers in 1922 supported the Free State government, their bad behaviour in insisting on reporting the civil war from a journalistic, rather than a political standpoint engendered considerable mistrust in Merrion Street (John Horgan, *'State Policy and the Press'*, *The Crane Bag* X XX XXX-XXX ).

Nor did the change in government in 1932 make things much better. The de Valera administration was viewed with a baleful eye by both *The Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent*, in a context in which the support given to him by the Irish Press was seen as an exercise in politics rather than an exercise in journalism.

The beginnings of a lobby system were created during the war by Sean Lemass, the long-time Minister for Industry and Commerce, who held regular briefings on the supply situation with senior journalists (John Horgan, *Sean Lemass: The Enigmatic Patriot*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1987, 107). It grew in influence after the war was over, and became more formalised. There was at this stage relatively little specialisation; at least the current division between parliamentary journalists and political journalists was not so pronounced. The umbrella organisation for all such journalists at that time was the Parliamentary Press Gallery (which currently has as members only those journalists who report the actual proceedings of the Dail and some parliamentary sketch writers). This was the organisation which helped to put the final nails into the coffin of the Irish News Agency, which had been founded by Sean MacBride in 1949 and which staggered on, weakened by attacks from within and without, until it received the coup de grace in 1957. There is no doubt, reading the files, that opposition to the INA by a powerful and well-organised group of Irish political journalists within the lobby was a major factor in its demise. The alacrity with which Mr de Valera jumped to pay attention to the wishes of the people who were virtually the sole conduits to the public of the proceedings of the Oireachtas and the pronouncements of governmental ministers was transparent (John

Horgan, 'Government, Propaganda and the Irish News Agency', *Irish Communications Review* 3 (1993), 31-43).

It is not possible to identify the point at which the lobby, as such, came formally into existence, but it is certainly possible to speak of phases in the relationship between government and media which is generally characterised by this term. The likelihood is that the lobby began to exist on a formal or sem-formal basis at some stage in the early 1950s, and retained its basic shape unchanged for about two decades. The emergence of this status quo was facilitated by continuity on both sides. On the government side, the watchful presence, either as head of the Government Information Bureau or as assistant secretary of the Department of the Taoiseach, of Padraig O hAnnrachain, ensured that all potentially contentious matters were being dealt with by a safe pair of hands. The measure of this continuity can be gauged from the fact that O hAnnrachain acted in his capacity not only for de Valera, but also for Lemass and Lynch. He continued to act for Haughey but in a somewhat different role.

On the media side, the turnover was low, and it was even some time before the position of political correspondent, even on a national newspaper, became a full-time one: journalists who wrote about politics were often expected to cover other high-profile areas such as industrial relations almost as a matter of course. It was before the era of specialisation, which did not dawn until the early 1960s, and indeed before political coverage as such began to account for a substantial proportion of the overall content of newspapers. Full-time or part-time political correspondents like Michael McInerney of the *Irish Times*, Arthur Noonan of the *Irish Independent* (and later of RTE) and Jim McGuinness and Brendan Malin of the *Irish Press* (later succeeded by Michael Mills) saw many governments come and go, and watched the transition from the de Valera to the Lemass era with a generally benign, almost in some cases avuncular, mien.

Not only was turnover low: the personnel were few. Mills, for example, would do double duty as political correspondent for the *Irish Press* and the *Evening Press*, using

different by-lines; the same would have been true for the *Irish Independent* and the *Evening Herald*.

The political news - as opposed to features - content of the Sunday newspapers was scant enough, and frequently supplied by the same journalists who worked for the daily papers in the group concerned. There was only one broadcasting station. All in all, the lobby consisted of a small, tightly knit group of people, amounting to no more than half a dozen or so. This was in marked contrast to the press gallery - the assembly of reporters who watched and recorded the proceedings of the Dail and Seanad - which would have comprised task forces of up to three reporters from each newspaper or media group. In such circumstances, political control of the lobby was hardly an issue, and the esprit de corps was strong.

Throughout this period, the actual organisation of the lobby was haphazard and reactive, rather than planned or programmed. There were no regular briefings. The job of the head of the Government Information Bureau was to provide answers from the civil service or from ministers to queries from political correspondents. Political "exclusives" were rare. Personality politics were almost non-existent. In 1961, with the arrival of television, the number of people who were entitled to join, or wanted to join, the lobby rose, and this resulted in the provision of a special room in Leinster House in which the political correspondents all had their desks and telephones. This development, positive in itself from the lobby's point of view, had one inescapable consequence: it was possible, under these circumstances, for every political correspondent to overhear each of his colleague's telephone conversations, so that competitive journalism became even more of a rarity. If any journalist left the room in search of an exclusive or private information, the chances were that he would be rigorously interrogated by his colleagues on his return for fear that he was about to upstage them all in the following morning's newspaper. It was, perhaps to an even greater degree than its UK counterpart, an arrangement closely resembling a cartel.

It was a dynamic which was if anything reinforced by one seminal event: the journey to Japan by Jack Lynch, then Taoiseach, to launch a new tanker for the mammoth Gulf Oil company, which was in the process of establishing a major oil terminal in Bantry, Co. Cork. Lynch was accompanied on this trip, which involved stopovers at a number of important points in the US and Australia, by the core group of political journalists of the era, and established relationships with them which were to be of considerable assistance to him and his administration in later years. This particular tour was emblematic of another development; the internationalisation of Irish politics which accompanied our entry to the EEC, as it then was. This process involved the Taoiseach of the day in more frequent foreign travel, and the media 'pack' accompanying him, which was largely though not completely, co-extensive with the lobby, acquired a new sense of its own importance and value in the affairs of the nation. This would be reflected, in turn, in an unwillingness to break ranks and a determination to respect confidences.

Towards the end of the Lynch era, however, a number of factors were beginning to operate which would, in turn, begin to alter the role of the lobby itself. One was the competitiveness between ministers, unknown (or at least successfully suppressed) during the de Valera era, and only in its infancy in the Lemass era.

This competitiveness reached a high point when Lemass resigned and teams of ministers operated on behalf of the two principal contenders, Haughey and Colley, using the lobby as their primary target. The new set of relationships which this engendered would have involved principally ministers such as Charles Haughey, Brian Lenihan, Donogh O' Malley and George Colley, each of whom would have seen himself as a potential successor to Lynch. O' Malley, who died in 1968, was notable for his habit of spurning the private pleasures of the cabinet dining room, and joining the political correspondents for lunch in the communal restaurant in Leinster House.

This degree of openness and more or less overt press manipulation and leaking by ministers downgraded the importance of the lobby as a channel for news and information. This process was if anything accelerated by the substitution of Eoin Neeson for O

hAnnrachain in 1968. Neeson, though an able journalist and historian himself, never managed to win the confidence of the lobby: "no comment" became the standard response to many queries. In fairness to Neeson, it may be that he lacked the authority, within the system as it then existed, to bend a rather traditional and secrecy-obsessed public service to the increasingly pressing demands of the media.

This low point in the development of the lobby, and its usefulness to government, was marked in particular by the defeat of Fianna Fail in the 1973 election. Lynch, increasingly media-conscious, hired Frank Dunlop, then an RTE journalist working for RTE in Belfast, as a press officer for the party in opposition. Simultaneously, the new government - the first non-Fianna Fail administration for 16 years - was also taking stock. It transferred responsibility for government media relations to the new Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, Conor Cruise O' Brien, and drafted in an exceptionally able young television producer, Muiris MacConghail, to act as the new head of a re-structured government information service.

The structural changes were significant. MacConghail was given the rank of assistant secretary within the public service: this gave him the right to obtain information from other government departments at a senior level. He was also allowed to attend some cabinet meetings. There were regular, non-attributable briefings by MacConghail and by individual ministers, although the Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, who was publicity-shy, was conspicuous generally by his absence from these proceedings. The lobby responded positively to this acknowledgment of its status: on one occasion at least, a non-attributable briefing by a plainly distraught (and I do not mean this as a euphemism for drunken) Minister was not communicated to the public in any form because there was no way of doing so which would not have exposed the minister concerned to major, and unwelcome, political consequences. When MacConghail resigned in 1975 he was succeeded by a broadcast journalist, Ted Nealon, whose relationship with the lobby until the end of that government in 1977 was on the whole amiable and well-tempered, although there were occasions when the journalists, sniffing a disagreement between the government partners, were visibly miffed by the spokesman's emollient approach.

When Lynch came back to power in 1977, Dunlop took over from Nealon: in 1978 he became the first person in the particular job to adopt the title of Government Press Secretary. The new title spoke of a new way of doing things, and of an increasingly political use, by the government, of the channels of information at its disposal. The relationship between Dunlop and Lynch's successor in 1979, Charles Haughey, was however, not close, although Dunlop remained in that role until the Fianna Fail defeat of 1982, eventually leaving the civil service in 1986.

Changes taking place within the government press service and its relationships with the lobby were accompanied by changes within the lobby itself. For one thing, it was growing in size. Jobs which had been shared between different papers were being divided; new titles were being started up; politics was bulking ever larger on the news agenda, especially with the election of Haughey, always a controversial figure. A key date is 1980: this is the year in which Geraldine Kennedy, a young journalist from Waterford who had previously worked on the *Munster Express*, the *Cork Examiner* and the *Irish Times*, joined the newly-founded *Sunday Tribune* as its political correspondent (Mary O' Malley, 'Geraldine Kennedy, Political Correspondent with the Irish Times', unpublished essay, M.Sc in Science Communication, Dublin City University, 1999). In 1982 she was to join the *Sunday Press*. Although its significance can perhaps be exaggerated, it is least noteworthy that owing to pressure on space, Geraldine Kennedy was allocated her own room in a separate building, although she attended briefings by government spokesmen in the main building in the normal way. One way or another, the fierceness of her appetite for political news, especially exclusive news, upped the ante considerably for her colleagues: within government, the reaction, although unknown to most outsiders at the time - was even more marked. Alarmed and dismayed at the apparently limitless channels of information flowing between Mr. Haughey's opponents in the Fianna Fail party and Ms. Kennedy, the Haughey administration even had her telephone illegally tapped.

Although she would probably disclaim any major role in what happened subsequently, Kennedy's appointment marked the beginning of a new era. She was to be joined in the political correspondents group by other formidable women journalists such as Una Claffey and Emily O' Reilly: the former cartel became infected by a new spirit of competitiveness and adventure, as government spokespersons learned, sometimes to their cost. Increasingly, unsatisfactory briefings were greeted with a chorus of disapproval or even derision. Hapless spokespersons were sent back, with their tails between their legs, to get answers from ministers to supplementary questions. On more than one occasion, some of them were seen to be close to tears. In the mid-eighties, this renewed, and more muscular, sense of professional solidarity led to the more formal creation of the Political Correspondents' Group, of which Donal Kelly of RTE and Chris Glennon of the Irish Independent became - and remain - joint chairmen. To become a member of this group, the applicant must show that he or she is a full time journalist working exclusively on politics and for a national medium (Edward Power, 'The Political Lobby System', seminar paper, MA in Journalism, Dublin City University, 1997)). Applications for would-be members are decided on by a vote of the Group as a whole, on the grounds that only those who genuinely need this level of access should be granted it. It negotiates with the Ceann Comhairle of the day about office space and other issues affecting the working practices of its members, and now has increased substantially in size.

The 1982-87 coalition government period also saw the development of a different set of strains in relationships between government and the lobby. These strains were caused not by a conflict of personalities within government, but by political strains between that government's component parties. Such strains have been a feature of most coalition governments since that date, leading to the creation of a bifurcated, or trifurcated government information system in which the lobby is briefed independently (and sometimes, when there is conflict, differently) by spokesman for each of the government's component parties. This, it need hardly be added, is substantially different from the UK system. It has been in evidence during the recent series of tensions between the PDs and Fianna Fail; but the most public manifestation was probably during the row about the publication of the Hamilton report on the Beef Tribunal, as Sean Duignan's

diary explains graphically: "4 October 1994. Albert begins writing, in his spidery scrawl, a statement for me to feed out refuting the Labour briefings or as he puts it, 'setting the record straight on Labour disinformation'. He denies trying to railroad Harry through cabinet, points to 'unrelenting briefings from certain quarters' and insists the matter must be 'resolved' as soon as possible. I tell him that Labour will see this as provocation on the eve of the first meeting between Spring and him for almost a month. Labour duly jump up and down....." (Sean Duignan, *One Spin On The Merry-Go-Round*, Dublin, Blackwater Press, 199X, 132).

These developments also underlined the increasing politicisation of the role of Government Press Secretary, dating as far back as the early 1980s. In 1984 Haughey, then leader of the Opposition, took the unusual step of accusing the then incumbent, Peter Prendergast, of news management and vilification. That government, in turn, recognised the implicitly political dimension of the post by changing the rules so that all government press secretaries became, henceforth, not permanent but temporary civil servants, and had to resign their positions at the succeeding general election. Another innovation, dating from 1983, was the creation of a separate, sub-lobby system for the correspondents in Dublin of foreign media.

The lobby, it must be emphasised, was used at least as much for opposition/media relationships as for government/media relationships. The then leader of the opposition, Mr. Haughey, by now had a new press spokesman, P.J. Mara, whose relationships with the lobby have been detailed to some extent in his biography (Tim Ryan, *Mara PJ*, Dublin, Blackwater Press, 1992). Haughey's ever growing unpopularity with the media, commented on publicly by Mara in later years, spawned a tension which Mara's considerable gifts were stretched to dispel. At times, the sense of humour which he generally employed to good effect in this cause became a weapon used against him. On one occasion, it became the core of a controversy in which, for the first time, Mara was positively identified as the source of a particular statement to the lobby. This was on the occasion when, during growing internal criticism within Fianna Fail of Haughey's

leadership, Mara quoted Mussolini's famous phrase: "uno duce, una voce". The journalist who decided to reveal him as the source of this remark was Geraldine Kennedy, then the *Sunday Press*, who argued later that she had not broken any of the conventions, and was within her rights as identifying Mara, as he could see that she had her notebook out and therefore - she presumed - accepted that what he was saying was on the record (O'Malley, 'Kennedy', p. 4). The temptation to print his name in any case must have become well-nigh irresistible as Mara, in the course of delivering this remark, put a finger across his upper lip and goose-stepped up and down the room.

In 1987 saw the return of a Fianna Fail minority government and the appointment of P.J. Mara as Government Press Secretary. (Parenthetically, it also saw the election of Geraldine Kennedy as PD Deputy for the Dun Laoghaire constituency, until she lost her seat two years later). Mara's relationships with the lobby were on the whole good, although he had a difficult job to do on behalf of his principal employer. At Haughey's final press conference in 1992, Mara remarked, in self-defence, that he had never told a lie to journalists on Haughey's behalf. Haughey's response was swift and, in the circumstances, more than consciously ironic: "What was I paying you all that money for then?"

Another, less commented upon feature of the operation of the lobby system at this time, however - and one which I suspect also differentiates it from the UK system - is that it became, unwittingly, part of a two-way information system. Mara was legendary for never committing anything to paper himself: his art was entirely verbal. But as far as information was concerned, he became as much hunter-gatherer as provider. As often as not, he would be sent down to the lion's den, not to put a spin on any particular government announcement or to give a briefing on future plans, but, in his employer's words, to "find out what the fuckers are talking about". An increasingly embattled Haughey needed information the way plants need water - information about the mood of the media, information about the moves being made by his opponents within the party, information about public concerns generally and, in this situation, the equation became

not only one of an exchange of information for confidentiality, but an exchange of information for information. This trend continued under successive governments. As one former Government Press Secretary put it: "There's a myth about politics that some political parties are media driven, and others are policy driven. We all like to think that we belong in the latter category, but the truth is that every party wants to pursue a policy line - but also wants to know how the media will react to it. The media, and especially the print media, think that they form opinion but they form opinion first within political parties, who regard them as the most critical sounding board" (Fergus Finlay, *Snakes and Ladders*, Dublin, New Island Books, 137)

The lobby in the nineties has, therefore, undergone a number of sea-changes which reflect Irish circumstances, and which differentiate itself in at least some respects from its Westminster counterpart. The most obvious difference is that it appears to be more aggressive, and less respectful, than the Westminster lobby. In one recent account, there are frequent and loud echoes of the complaints by political journalists about the extent to which they were manipulated by Peter Mandelson, who was leaking information on behalf of Tony Blair in the run-up to the Labour leadership election (Paul Routledge, *Mandy: The Unauthorized Biography of Peter Mandelson*, London, Simon and Schuster, 1999 154-82). The journalists concerned are so incensed that they fail, perhaps, to realise that their complaints about the effectiveness of Mandelson's press management tactics also amount to an admission of their own ineptness and suggestibility.

The aggressiveness of the Irish lobby was, according to a number of journalists to whom I have spoken, particularly in evidence during the many briefings which preceded and accompanied the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, and for which the Irish and UK lobby systems were, effectively, conjoined. According to these accounts, the spirit of lese majeste on the part of the Irish lobby occasioned more than a little comment among their UK counterparts: the breezy way in which Irish political journalists tackled UK, as well as their own politicians and spokesmen spoke of the emergence of a different tradition on this side of the Irish sea. I would not want to overstate the case, but it is at least arguable. It also seems to be the case that other democratic

assemblies on these islands, free to a greater or lesser extent from Westminster tutelage, are in the process of establishing more open, and less exclusive pathways of communication between politicians and media. The new Scottish parliament (Consultative Steering Group of the Scottish Parliament, 'Shaping Scotland's Parliament', Edinburgh, The Scottish Office, 1999) sets out the principles under which journalists covering the new parliament work: there is no restricted lobby as such, and all bona-fide journalists are welcome on equal terms. Similar changes are taking place in the Welsh Assembly, whose ministers have even taken a decision to publish Cabinet minutes (subject to certain excisions) after a six-week delay (Geraint Talfan Davies, *Not By Bread Alone: Information, Media and the National Assembly*, Wales Media Forum, Cardiff, 1999).

This aggressiveness among the Leinster House press corps is partly a function of the Irish lobby's increased size: over the years, the numerical balance between the two groups of reporters within parliament has swung markedly. New technology has reduced the need for the press gallery reporters to be physically present in the chamber, as has the wide availability of parliamentary proceedings on the Oireachtas website. This in return has reduced the importance of the parliamentary reporter. The lobby, however, which reports the briefings, has probably now reached critical mass, with a membership approaching two dozen. It is still tiny when compared to the UK lobby, which now numbers some 150 journalists: but perhaps, in the latter case, obesity is the problem.

The existence of a large and permanently hungry corps of political correspondents increases the need for a flow of information from government - it is hardly a coincidence that the regular five p.m. briefings are colloquially referred to as "the feed" - and paradoxically, reduces the likelihood of politically exclusive stories emerging from this group of journalists.

This in turn has had two effects. The first is that political journalists in search of exclusives now know that they hope for them in vain from within the lobby system: they have to hunt for them elsewhere. This naturally tends to diminish the importance of the

lobby as an institution in the sense that it operates on an increasingly routinised basis, in which insider status no longer confers proportionately privileged access to high-grade information.

The second, perhaps in the end more significant, is that the role of the lobby as part of a government's news management system has, if anything diminished. There is a visibly altering government set of media priorities, with television and the main evening news bulletin at the top of every politician's list. The existing lobby system cannot always deliver the desired level and type of publicity at this level, because the briefings are non-discriminatory as between a large group of media people. In these circumstances, the lobby can find itself frequently, if subtly, downgraded by a sophisticated use of the sound-bite system in which some journalists become, in George Orwell's words, more equal than others, granted an access that is even more privileged than that accorded to other members of the political correspondents' group because they have high profile roles in particular media.

The paradox, therefore, is that the lobby is becoming of lesser importance in the overall spectrum of government/media relationships (although it was used to considerable effect during the Sheedy affair) precisely because it has grown in size.

On the other hand, the very same development - the lobby's growth in size - has contributed to a much greater competitiveness among political journalists which will in the future, with luck, result in better political journalism for the benefit of the public.

There is one final point which I would make in passing and it relates to technology. The mechanics of the lobby system are essentially those of the nineteenth century: a group of reporters, a government minister or spokesman, a document of press release.

Increasingly, political news is now being made in the open, on the run. And there are many sets of circumstances in which, despite all the resources at their command, political figures may be less well informed than their questioners. No politician giving a press conference, however well briefed, can expect not to be faced, towards the end of the

conference, by an unexpected question from a reporter who has received additional information on his mobile phone during the press conference itself - information which may not be available to the politician. This is a trend which may in time alter, not just the modalities of the lobby system, but the modalities of political journalism itself.