Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Lobbying (Scotland) Bill

Written submission received from Friends of Craighouse Grounds and Wood

The Scottish Government is keen to tell us that an independent Scotland would be like our wealthy Scandinavian country neighbours, yet we now discover we are not worthy of Scandinavian levels of transparency of government. Neil Findlay's proposals were sensible and proportionate, requiring some paperwork, but (as was pointed out by some representatives to the committee) no more than is already required of charities.

We, like many others, have made specific complaints about poor lobbying activities in Scotland. But they have been ignored. MSPs and lobbyists repeat often that there are "no lobbying scandals" in Scotland, yet no-one investigates any allegations. By watering down the proposed lobbying transparency bill to the point where it is described as "almost pointless" by experts analysing the issue, MSPs are ensuring that any scandalous behaviour never becomes public.

The claim is made that ministers' engagements are recorded publicly and available on a Scottish Government website. In our case, we had to put in an FOI request and challenge delays over several months via both our MP and the Information Commissioner before details of the meeting were released. I have not been able to find this meeting on the Scottish Government website. Although this may be a clerical error (John Swinney's meetings for May 2013 in the published record are all June meetings for some reason) it is still the case that for Craighouse, the current system was not transparent.

It is important to understand what this issue is really about. Lobbying transparency is not about corruption, which is already illegal. This is about good, honest, politicians being given inaccurate information from which to make decisions. It is about the public excluded from the decision-making process, while money buys access and the ability to influence the information put in front of decision-makers.

It is about good governance. Lobbying officials is probably more of an issue than lobbying politicians, because it controls the official reports that elected representatives make decisions on. If those politicians understood that the reports they were reading were the result of speaking to one side and not another, then we believe that would enable them to put those reports in better context.

Countries that have stronger transparency of lobbying are wealthier than Scotland. Transparency will lead to better government through better information available to decision-makers. Scotland deserves better.

At Friends of Craighouse, we support Neil Findlay's excellent proposal and do not agree that it should be watered down.
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29 November 2015