

Déjà vu in the Scott Benton cash-for-questions scandal

09 04 2023

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If the current lobbying scandal involving Tory MP Scott Benton is giving you déjà vu you are not imagining things. In what has been dubbed the [cash-for-questions scandal](#), Benton was caught offering “easy access to ministers” to *Times* journalists posing as representatives of a fake investment fund in exchange for large sums of money. These events eerily mirror the [cash-for-laws scandal](#) that took place in Brussels more than a decade ago. In 2010, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, journalists from the *Sunday Times* posed as a fake consultancy firm offering to pay elected officials in the European Parliament to water down key European banking regulations. In both cases, the journalists used hidden pinhole cameras to film the prearranged meetings. Both the [Benton video](#) and a 2010 video of former [Spanish MEP Pablo Zalba Bidegain](#) are available to the public on YouTube.



Pablo Zalba Bidegain,
former Spanish MEP, in 2010



Scott Benton,
Tory MP, in 2023

That Benton fell foul of existing UK lobbying regulation is clear and “trial by media” is already well underway. Benton was quickly suspended after the events of the newspaper sting and many of his fellow Tory party members have expressed their outrage. The fallout from the 2010 cash-for-laws scandal was more severe. The MEPs that were caught were variously expelled from their posts and faced legal ramifications, including fines and even time behind bars, in their home countries. It also changed the landscape of lobbying regulation in Europe. An improved register of interest groups was quickly put in place. Rules for the receipt of gifts from lobbyists were discussed and greater transparency regarding interest group resources and activities was advocated.

No lobbyists were harmed in the filming of this video

The most striking aspect of both lobbying scandals is that **neither involved a single lobbyist**. Instead, they involved journalists posing as lobbyists representing fake industry actors. Both scandals also involved **inexperienced** elected officials. The video of Benton, who is 35, demonstrates a slick braggadocio reflective of his inexperience. We hear Benton bragging about his ability to take forward requests for the fake industry groups and then boldly discussing his fee. Pablo Zalba Bidegain, the young (at the time) Spanish MEP who was caught red-handed in the 2010 cash-for-laws scandal defiantly refused to resign. Why? He proudly

stated that he was not carrying out legislative favours for the money but rather because the female journalist who approached him “[was very attractive](#)”.

When is a lobbying scandal not a lobbying scandal?

What are we to make of lobbying scandals that do not involve lobbyists? One might argue that the relative ease with which elected officials are willing to engage with (and do favours for) industry groups reflect the real world of lobbying that happens all the time behind the scenes. Most elected officials just don't get caught.

But that is to take a very sceptical view. In fact, the broader context of both scandals is important. In 2010, more than 60 MEPs were approached, and only four took the bait. We know the *Times* contacted at least eight MPs in 2023 sting operation. At this point it appears as if only Benton took the bait. What are we to make of the elected officials who refused to meet with these fake lobbyists? A less sceptical view would be that, when push comes to shove, *most* elected officials know better than to take bribes from (fake) lobby groups.

Perhaps even more importantly, both scandals present an overly simplified view of the nature of lobbying. It is easy to conjure up journalistic horror stories of corrupt lobbyists exercising undue influence via cash inducements. This image has some basis in reality. We need only think of self-proclaimed US super-lobbyist Jack Abramoff who spent several years in prison for actually carrying out the type of cash for laws activities that may have inspired journalists involved in both of these sting operations. The problem with this image of lobbying, however, is that, in reality, it is less the rule than the exception. Most lobbying does not involve this level of corruption never mind the type of old-fashioned pressure and purchase tactics commonly associated with lobbying. Instead, most lobbying sees lobbyists engaging in an exchange relationship with decision-makers. Policymaking is an increasingly complex process, requiring considerable amounts of expertise and technical information that decision-makers alone tend to lack. The currency used in this kind of exchange is expertise. Interest groups are experts on those policies that affect their interests and their members most. Decision-makers, understaffed and pressed for time, find themselves in the market for this expertise if only to reduce uncertainties of potential policy outcomes. Instead of a relationship based on coercion and persuasion (never mind cash inducements), the interest group – decision-maker relationship is much more **sympiotic**. In fact, experts on lobbying tell us the same thing. In a field of research that almost seems immune to cumulative findings, the one thing that most researchers tend to agree on is that most lobbyists spend far less time trying to change the minds of decision-makers who disagree with them than in supporting those decision-makers who already share their preferences. In other words, lobbyists lobby **friends** (those who share their policy preferences) rather than **foes** (those who don't share their policy preferences).

What do these insights tell us? It seems obvious that responding to the Benton scandal by cracking down on lobbyists would be misguided. This is where parallels between the 2010 and 2023 scandals should end. This lobbying scandal is not about lobbying. Instead, it's about testing elected officials. What is certain is that the vast majority of those who were approached by the fake lobbyists did not take the bait. What these sting operations demonstrate is evidence of an operational ethos amongst elected officials about how to deal with unscrupulous inducements.