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OPINION:

The cash-for-access scandal that has rocked England in recent weeks has lifted the

petticoats on the normally secretive world of political-party donations, corporate

lobbying, influence peddling and privileged access to key politicians.

It's given a rare glimpse into the way some wealthy individuals and corporations

are able to influence governments, in exchange for political donations, and the way

in which policy can be surreptitiously bought.

And while the scandal took place on the other side of the world, it has important

lessons for New Zealand, and what we need to do to ensure that big chequebook donors and corporate lobbyists are not able to exert undue influence over government policy.

The scandal erupted when the Conservative Party's lead fundraiser, Peter Cruddas,

told two undercover reporters for the Sunday Times that, for a donation of about

[PndStlg]250,000 (NZ$482,000) they could get a private dinner with the prime minister,

and the opportunity to have policy ideas fed through to the prime minister's policy

unit.

"Within that room everything is confidential - you can ask him practically any question

you like," Mr Cruddas promised. "If you are unhappy about something, we will listen

and put it to the policy committee at No 10. It will be awesome for your business.

You will be well placed."

What has outraged Britons is that he was not only offering the chance to attend dinners

with the prime minister, he was dangling the prospect that for a large donation he

could expect to influence government policy.

British Prime Minister David Cameron denounced Mr Cruddas' actions and Mr Cruddas

was forced to resign. And to try to defuse the political storm, the prime minister

has pledged to publish a list of major donors who attend future fundraising dinners,

and push for the reform of political-party funding.

But even so, the saga has raised serious questions about the privileged access political

donors and lobbyists enjoy, the influence they are able to wield, and whether political

policy is open to being bought by vested interests.

It has emerged in the wake of the scandal that both major political parties in Britain

have donor clubs where companies and individuals are offered access to party leaders

in return for large donations.

The Conservative Party has eight clubs that donors can belong to, depending on the

size of their donation - including the leaders' group, the treasurer's group, the

frontbench club, and the premier league club where wealthy donors are offered dinners

with Mr Cameron and private telephone chats with him.

Ad Feedback

The Labour Party (which was outed in 2006 for offering honours to wealthy donors)

runs its own donor exclusive club, the Thousand Club. Members receive invitations

to networking breakfasts and lunches, party conferences and access to leading party

figures, depending on the level of their donation.

The scandal has also drawn attention to the secret world of corporate lobbying.

The lobbyist the undercover reporters employed to arrange the fateful meeting was

Sarah Southern, a former aide to Mr Cameron who had worked for seven years in the

Conservative Party. She boasted that, for a retainer of [PndStlg]15,000 a month,

she could give corporations direct access to the prime minister and key policy- makers.

Ms Southern's role in the scandal has resulted in calls for greater transparency

around lobbying, and disclosure of discussions between politicians and private interests

over government policy.

Ironically, in a speech in 2010, Mr Cameron warned that lobbying was the next big

scandal waiting to happen.

"We all know how it works," he said. "The lunches, the hospitality, the quiet word

in your ear. I believe that secret corporate lobbying, like the expenses scandal,

goes to the heart of why people are so fed up with politics. It's an issue that exposes

the far too cosy relationship between politics, government, business and money."

During the speech he pledged to "shine the light of transparency on lobbying, so

that politicians can come clean about who is buying power and influence". And he

promised to limit the access that lobbyists enjoy.

He has finally acted on this pledge, and the government is introducing a statutory

register of lobbyists.

SO WHAT can we learn from Britain's cash-for- access scandal, and what relevance

does it have here?

There's certainly no reason for complacency and I believe we need to take similar

steps to ensure that our democracy is not for sale, and that policy cannot be surreptitiously

bought by vested interests and powerful donors.

It's time, too, for more openness and public scrutiny around the whole issue of political-party

donations and corporate lobbying.

Does the same thing happen here? Do our political parties have donor clubs that offer

access to key politicians in return for donations?

Can meetings with key ministers be bought for a fee, and can significant donors expect

dinners with party leaders and other privileged access?

Why doesn't our prime minister publish a list of the people he meets on official

business, as his British counterpart does?

And why don't we have greater transparency around lobbying and political-party donations?

Lobbying is entrenched in our political system and has become increasingly important.

Long before bills reach Parliament, corporate lobbyists will have been meeting with

public servants, MPs and ministers, seeking to influence the legislation.

Lobbyists also arrange meetings and carefully tailored social events with ministers

and MPs, where their clients can brief them about their needs and concerns - or legislation

they would like to scupper.

On any given day, corporate lobbyists can be found scuttling around Parliament, lobbying

on behalf of various industries and corporations.

But it all takes place in secret, under the radar. The Speaker refuses to reveal

which paid lobbyists have special access passes to Parliament.

It's not clear how many corporate lobbyists operate in New Zealand. But across the

Tasman, where there is a Register of Lobbyists, lobbyists outnumber MPs four-fold.

While it's perfectly legitimate for corporate lobbyists to make a case for changing

government policy or legislation, it is not if it's done in secret, and in exchange

for substantial donations.

That's why other countries have set up a statutory register, which requires lobbyists

to reveal who they are lobbying, what policies they are seeking to change, and how

much they are spending.

We need one in New Zealand, as a step towards more open government, and a way of

ensuring that corporations and wealthy donors are not able to buy influence over

policy or to sabotage policies that are in the public interest.

Fortunately, a Green party member's bill that would require such a register has been

selected from the parliamentary ballot, and will be debated in Parliament shortly.

Let's hope all political parties support it.

The reality is that people who can afford to hire corporate lobbyists or make substantial

political donations have a much better chance of being heard than the rest of us.

They can get to see the prime minister and leading figures in government, or even

dine with them privately.

Housing tenants, struggling beneficiaries and the rest of us can't do that.

So we need to make sure that as a result of their frequent meetings with political

donors and corporate lobbyists, governments don't end up representing the interests

of corporations and those with money and resources, far more than the interests of

the rest of us.

And we need to make sure, too, that a cash-for-access scandal never happens here.