

UK lobbying scandal balloons

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The lobbying scandal around former UK Prime Minister David Cameron and finance company Greensill Capital is rapidly expanding.

After Greensill collapsed this March, a series of investigations by the *Times* and *Financial Times* revealed that Cameron had become an advisor for the company in 2018 and tried to use his political and personal connections to secure government financial backing. Cameron reportedly held millions of pounds' worth of shares in the operation. Founder Lex Greensill had been a special advisor to the Tory government under Cameron, where he used his position to push a policy which benefited his company.

Cameron's actions implicated Chancellor Rishi Sunak and Health Secretary Matt Hancock. Sunak promised Cameron he would "push the team" at the Treasury to find ways of supporting Greensill. Hancock had a private drink with Cameron and Lex Greensill in 2019, after which the company secured a major contract within the National Health Service (NHS) without a competitive tendering process.

Since these original investigations, more government figures have been exposed for their close connections with Greensill. Earlier this week, it was revealed that senior civil servant Bill Crothers—for a time the government's chief procurement officer, overseeing £40 billion of spending—took a job as a paid adviser to Greensill two months before stepping down from the civil service in November 2015, an appointment agreed to by the Cabinet Office. Crothers became a director at the company in 2016 and reportedly accrued shareholdings worth £5.8 million by 2019.

A few days later, another senior government adviser, David Brierwood, was found to have been a director on Greensill's board for the entire three-and-a-half years he was working in Whitehall. Brierwood had been a banker at Morgan Stanley and was brought into government under Cameron in 2014, two years after Lex Greensill. Within two months, Brierwood was working at Greensill Capital.

Greensill evidently made a special point of securing advisers with government connections. Its work in the National Health Service (NHS) was carried out by

subsidiary company Earnd (now also in administration) whose advisory board included former Labour minister Lord David Blunkett and former leading Tory adviser on homelessness Dame Louise Casey.

Outside of Greensill, former BP executive John Mazoni kept a £100,000 a year directorship at alcoholic and soft drinks company SABMiller when he became chief executive of the civil service under Cameron. He gained a knighthood last year before leaving the civil service and becoming chairman of energy firm SSE and a non-executive director at drinks giant Diageo.

For scores of business interests, there is quite literally an open door into government. Recent analysis by the *Mirror* of the list of people given passes for access to the Houses of Parliament by members of the House of Lords—reserved for secretaries, researchers, drivers and carers—found more than 100 people with declared interests as lobbyists or representatives of interest groups.

The scandal has created a panic in the political elite, all swimming in the same gutter, with different factions rushing to cover themselves and shift attention elsewhere. There are now three select committees carrying out investigations into the scandal—the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Treasury committee and Public Accounts committee—in addition to an independent inquiry commissioned by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, a Whitehall review ordered by Cabinet Secretary Simon Chase and a review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Crothers's history was revealed by the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (Acoba), chaired by Conservative Lord Eric Pickles, as part of an attempt to shift focus away from the Tory Party and onto the civil service. The effort is undermined by the fact that all of this has been taking place on Acoba's watch.

On Wednesday, the *i* newspaper revealed that a member of Acoba, former Conservative council leader Andrew Cumptsy, is the leader of two lobbying firms—Cumptsy Communications and the Enterprise Forum. The latter advertises itself as a "link between the leaders of UK Industry and the Conservative Party Cabinet". Cumptsy Communications acts on behalf of the All-Party

Parliamentary Group (APPG) for SME House Builders, a lobby group for small and medium-sized property developers. The president of the Enterprise Forum is Pickles—a role he failed to declare before becoming Acoba's chair.

Johnson's inquiry is itself an exercise in cronyism and corruption. It will be chaired by corporate lawyer Nigel Boardman, the son of a former Tory cabinet minister. He still holds a prestigious position at the British Museum, given to him by Cameron.

Boardman also works as a non-executive director at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, for which he has been paid £20,000 a year. The department had significant dealing with Greensill through the British Business Bank. Boardman's law firm, Slaughter and May, worked closely with the Treasury to set up the COVID Corporate Financing Facility (CCFF) which Cameron tried to secure access to for Greensill. The law firm briefed against lobbying reforms proposed by Cameron in 2014 and Boardman himself conducted a whitewash of the government's handing out of contracts to the private sector during the pandemic.

Johnson, while widely known to be less than friendly towards Cameron, is desperate to shut the scandal down before he and his close allies are pulled deeper into the mire. The prime minister is still in the middle of corruption allegations over his relations with Jennifer Arcuri. Johnson had an affair with the businesswoman while Mayor of London, during which time she gained access to thousands of pounds of public money and was given positions on trade missions to New York and Tel Aviv.

The whole Tory government is implicated in the handing out of billions of pounds worth of contracts to the private sector to provide personal protective and testing equipment—a large chunk of it with no competition or transparency and to close friends of the Tory Party. Prince among thieves is the Health Secretary. In the last few days, it emerged that Hancock was gifted a 20 percent stake in Topwood Ltd, a company part-owned by his sister, just a month before it was awarded a contract by NHS Wales.

Labour have sought to capitalise on these events, accusing the Tories of "sleaze". Shadow cabinet minister Rachel Reeves unsuccessfully pushed for a parliamentary inquiry, saying Johnson's "has all the hallmarks of another cover-up by the Conservatives."

This is rank hypocrisy. Labour's being out of power for 11 years has merely left its MPs with fewer opportunities to get their noses in the trough. But where the party does hold power, in the local councils, its representatives are no less rotten than their Tory counterparts. Labour-run Lambeth council in London is currently carrying out the latest in a

long run of social cleansing operations in close collaboration with private property developers. A leading role is played by Tom Branton, appointed as the council's Director of Regeneration in 2020. Branton was a lead officer at Southwark council a decade ago, where he organised a similar scheme involving property developer Lendlease. He left the council to join the company shortly afterwards, managing the project he had just authorised.

In Liverpool, Joe Anderson, Labour Mayor since 2012, was arrested last September on suspicion of conspiracy to commit bribery and witness intimidation—he denies any wrongdoing.

A report by local government executive Max Caller has found that up to £100 million of public money may have been misused by Liverpool council due to the awarding of "dubious contracts", a lack of record keeping and "an environment of intimidation". The report revealed that a firm run by Anderson's son was given a role in a demolition project, despite having "no published highways experience", on the "direct instruction" of the council. It noted that many senior councillors had not declared gifts or hospitality in the register of interests.

In a profoundly undemocratic move, the city has been placed in the hands of commissioners appointed by Tory local government secretary Robert Jenrick.

Last summer, Jenrick himself overruled a planning inspector to quickly approve a £1 billion pound development scheme run by Tory donor and former pornographer Richard Desmond, a day ahead of new infrastructure charges coming into effect. Jenrick's intervention saved Desmond's company £30-50 million, lost to the local council. Jenrick also allowed the number of affordable housing units to be slashed, saving the company another £100 million. Desmond had paid £12,000 to attend a Tory fundraising dinner in November, sitting next to Jenrick.

British capitalism has abandoned all pretence of fair competition, impartial regulation and democratic accountability. From a body which defends the interests of the capitalist class in general, the government has degraded into little more than an auction house for the sale of personal favours. The Greensill scandal threatens to become a major national crisis by exposing this reality.



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