

May 2014

# FREE

# No room in lobby?

POLITICAL journalism was on the agenda at April's London Freelance Branch meeting. Our speakers were David Hencke – formerly of the *Guardian* and now with online service **ExaroNews.com** – and Adam Bienkov, parliamentary lobby correspondent for **politics.co.uk**

David, who has “been doing political reporting for a ludicrous number of years,” described the Westminster Lobby in 1986. It was “totally secretive... You weren't allowed to report anything that had happened.”

In the 1980s Parliament had “17

bars. Today's reporters watch tweets from the lobby to work out the line of the story. There are now some women political journalists, but few from ethnic minorities. You're still not allowed to report on MPs being “obviously drunk.”

Hencke discovered that the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office *did* question MPs and expose scandals even in this secretive world – his breakthrough came when he wrote a piece on committee scrutiny of the privatisations of Rover (a car manufacturer,

into the appendices.” A Whitehall mole tipped David off about Student Loans Company chief executive Ed Lester's £182,000 tax-free and NI-free “self-employed” package: see [tinyurl.com/7cbukfd](http://tinyurl.com/7cbukfd). It turned out that some 2500 civil servants were “self-employed”. Rules were tightened, but there has been “only a cursory look at the NHS” and how its senior people are paid.

Adam Beinkov has been based in the lobby for only five months, for **politics.co.uk** which has “no restriction on how many stories” it reports from the lobby. It has to cover a lot of “daily stuff”, but “as you get better at that” you have more time to devote to investigative reporting.

Adam, whose London blogs including **snipelondon.com** were significant in getting him his current gig, feels “the press gallery at Westminster is surprisingly parochial – mostly men,” from the “same schools, the same universities, male, pale and stale.”

While the “Conservatives haven't won an election in two decades... the lobby is a safe seat for them,” believes Adam. He noted the lobby widely assumed in the run up to the last general election that Cameron would get in comfortably.

The expenses scandal had been going on for years with “hardly a raised eyebrow” in the lobby, says David, and the “Sexminster” scandal around Lord Rennard didn't originate from lobby people either. The revelation that an independent Scotland could keep the pound sterling was a rare example of a story actually coming from the lobby – but the vagaries of its system mean we don't know from which minister it came.

While the “expenses scandal went on so long it shook the lobby system... they haven't learnt anything,” in David's view. There's now an edict in force for Tories “not to be seen drinking champagne” at party conferences, but Maria Miller's “arrogance in not answering questions” about expenses was “sadly typical.”

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David Hencke (L) and Adam Bienkov: photo © Hazel Dunlop

bars and one library... if you saw a woman in Parliament and it wasn't Thatcher or Edwina [Currie, health minister], you assumed she was a secretary.” Named for the architectural location where journalists and, er, lobbyists meet MPs, the Lobby is a group of journalists accredited to attend briefings and sit in the press galleries. Rumours of a special handshake are unreliable. Written rules forbade its members reporting anything accidentally overheard between MPs. In parts of the Palace of Westminster you were “not even allowed a notebook.”

Now briefings by government to the lobby journalists are published on the internet, and Adam says that stories are more likely to emerge from Parliamentary cafés than from

for younger readers) and British Aerospace. After publication he got a call from someone who said four pages of the MPs' report were missing. David's editors were hauled before the Public Standards Committee for their offence of disclosing documents meant for MPs only, and asked “every single question except who was the source.” The prospect of Parliament using its power to send journalists “to the Tower” was so ludicrous that the Committee eventually “dropped it.”

David now concentrates on investigative journalism. With 650 MPs and all those Whitehall committees, “by digging around you pick up far more stories.” Of Westminster press releases he advises: “read the appendix first: all sorts of stuff is sneaked

## Please help campaign for fair contracts

YOUR UNION needs you to tell us of your experiences with contracts for use of your work, of attempts to impose contracts without negotiation, and of copyright infringements and plagiarism. Having had issues with getting it online, we have extended the survey. Please go to [www.fluidsurveys.com/surveys/fic/freelance-copyright-](http://www.fluidsurveys.com/surveys/fic/freelance-copyright-)

**survey-2014** by 1 June. By the time you read this, the European Federation of Journalists will have met with the Secretary-General of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the United Nations body responsible for copyright and authors' rights. The issue of unfair contracts will be on the agenda. In Europe, your responses will feed

into our responses to a study being conducted by the European Commission. The European Federation of Journalists marked World Copyright Day on 23 April with a declaration denouncing unfair contracts. In the UK, your responses will inform a dossier requested by Viscount Younger, the minister responsible.

See COPYRIGHT on p3

LFB meetings  
12 May  
'How I paid my mortgage chasing rip-offs of my work'  
9 June  
Dealing with unfair contracts: tips  
See back page &  
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