

Senior Tory quits over cash-for-access scandal

Conservative Party treasurer Peter Cruddas has resigned after being caught in a sting operation by Sunday Times reporters. Secret film appears to show him selling access to the Prime Minister.



CITIZENSHIP
HISTORY & POLITICS

Two years ago, David Cameron warned in a speech that political lobbying was 'the next big scandal waiting to happen.' The issue, he said, 'exposes the far-too-cosy relationship between politics, government, business and money.'

Yesterday, Cameron was proved dramatically, disastrously, right. The Prime Minister had identified a ticking political time bomb. Now it has gone off in his face.

Explosive footage published by the *Sunday Times* shows Peter Cruddas, co-treasurer of the Conservative Party, in a meeting with people he thinks are representatives of a foreign financial firm – with wealthy Middle Eastern backers.

They claim to be willing to make a major political donation to the Tory cause. But, before they write their cheque, they want to know what they will get in return.

The answer? A lot – at least if Peter Cruddas is to be believed. A quarter of a million pounds, he says, would put the

CONSERVATIVE PARTY DONATIONS

WHAT YOUR MONEY GETS YOU

 OFFICIAL	 £25 PER YEAR JOIN THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY	 £2,000 PER YEAR JOIN TEAM 2,000 ATTEND <small>'A LIVELY PROGRAMME OF DISCUSSION GROUPS'</small>	 £50,000 PER YEAR JOIN THE LEADERS' GROUP <small>ATTEND DRINKS PARTIES WITH DAVID CAMERON AND SENIOR MPs</small>
 ALLEGED	 £100,000 PER YEAR 'BOTTOM OF THE PREMIER LEAGUE' <small>'AWESOME FOR YOUR BUSINESS'</small>	 £250,000 PER YEAR 'THINGS WILL OPEN UP FOR YOU' <small>ASK THE PM ANYTHING OVER PRIVATE DINNERS IN DOWNING STREET</small>	

firm in the 'premier league' of donors. 'Things will open up for you.' 'It'll be awesome for your business.'

'Premier league' donors can expect to be invited to Cameron/Osborne dinners, Cruddas continues, at which they can ask the Prime Minister, 'anything'. These meetings are completely confidential.

And this face to face contact, he makes clear, can be very valuable indeed: donors get 'key bits of information' about upcoming policy decisions. If policy isn't favourable, 'we'll listen to you and we'll put [feedback] into the policy committee at No 10.'

The financiers agreed that this sounded like a good deal. One problem: the 'financiers' were really undercover reporters, recording every word Cruddas said.

Within hours of the footage being released, Cruddas had resigned and David Cameron had given a statement vehemently denying any suggestion that access to him could be bought, or that donors could sway policy.

But voters in Britain already have a deep distrust for politicians – of all parties. Confronted with this latest scandal, many will assume the worst.

WESTMINSTER BUBBLE

Very sensible, cynics exclaim. The whole Westminster establishment inhabits a bubble which is a million miles from ordinary people's concerns. These politicians, lobbyists, bankers, millionaires and tycoons are all in the same cosy club. The only principle? Looking out for number one.

The tragedy of scandals like this, others reply, is that they distract from the fact that most MPs and ministers genuinely want to do the best they can. Sometimes rules get broken (and the UK's political funding system doesn't help) but the average politician is a passionate, committed man or woman who does an exceptionally hard and not terribly well paid job, simply because they want to make their country a better place.

Q & A

Q I'm afraid I don't think I'm ever going to be rich enough to become a 'premier league donor'!

A Very few of us are. But that doesn't mean this doesn't matter. The principle of a democracy – one that it's worth clinging to – is that every voice and every vote should be

worth the same amount. If money talks too loudly in government, policy decisions that affect many people may be determined by very few.

Q But how can money be kept out of politics?

A It's not at all easy. Suggestions include forcing politicians to keep public records of all meetings with lobbyists; capping dona-

tions at £10,000, or even banning donations altogether. Parties would then need to be funded by the state.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Where there is power, there will always be corruption.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Senior Tory quits over cash-for-access scandal

WORD WATCH

Foreign financial firm – The fact that the fake donation was to come from abroad is an extra reason for concern. Accepting donations from foreign donors is illegal, but Cruddas was happy to suggest ways round the rule. And a lobbyist later confirmed to reporters that when given a large sum of money, party officials ‘don’t pry’ into where it has come from.

Deep distrust – According to the anti-corruption campaign group Transparency International, British voters ranked politics ‘most corrupt’ in a list of key sectors in British public life.

Westminster – Better known as The Houses of Parliament, the Palace of Westminster was built in the gothic style during the 1840s. There has, however, been a royal residence on the site since the 13th Century.

Political funding system – Unlike in most Western democracies, the UK does not impose a limit on political donations. Parties also do not receive much state support. This leaves them dependent on donations to fund election campaigns. The Conservative Party raises most of its money from private donors. The Labour Party gets most income from trade unions.

YOU DECIDE

1. Do you trust politicians?
2. What is wrong with donors getting privileged access to the Prime Minister?

ACTIVITIES

1. If you could be invited to a private dinner at Number 10 Downing Street, what would you ask the Prime Minister? Write down your suggestion and compare your idea with others in the class.

2. Many people think the Cruddas scandal is proof that parties should be funded by the state, not by donors. But this is not a straightforward solution. In groups, see if you can think of any disadvantages to the idea.

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 **NOTES**

