

# THE CONVERSATION

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## Why PR agencies and their spin should be the subject of greater scrutiny

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It was one of the biggest and best-known British PR agencies around. So when Bell Pottinger came crashing down earlier this year, you could be forgiven for wondering why it hadn't prepared a better crisis strategy to deal with the fall-out.

You could also be forgiven for wondering why it was involved in work which ended up with it being widely accused of stirring up racial tension in South Africa.

But Bell Pottinger was never shy of signing up controversial clients. It infamously lobbied for former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet when he was arrested in London in 1998, held multiple contracts with arms of the Bahraini government and represented Asma al-Assad, the wife of the Syrian dictator.

The company going into administration might appear to have drawn a line under this sordid track record. But sadly, the grim truth is that there are many companies and consultants willing to spin and shill for despots, tyrants and oligarchs.

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One does not have to delve far into the client roster of leading global PR firms to find some rather unsavoury individuals and interests. Rival communications agencies are now no doubt busy courting Bell Pottinger's former customers.

The UK part of American firm Hill & Knowlton worked for the Ugandan government to burnish its image with international donors and rebut criticism from human rights groups. It was also associated with the fake news story about Kuwaiti babies being thrown out of incubators by invading Iraqi soldiers to build support for US intervention in the first Gulf War. Other notorious accounts include advising the tobacco industry and big oil.

Another PR company, Burson-Marsteller, serviced a series of repressive regimes including Saudi Arabia (after 9/11) and Indonesia.

It specialises in handling crises for corporations and politicians. B-M advised Apple supplier Foxconn when dealing with the fallout from multiple worker suicides amid sweatshop conditions. Indeed, its notoriety is such that one US commentator is said to have observed: "When evil needs public relations, evil has Burson-Marsteller on speed dial."

It would be naïve to think that the reputational downsides to representing torturers and theocrats would make conscientious consultants and socially responsible companies steer clear. This is risky business to be sure, but it is also very lucrative.

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And while the multinational clients of some PR firms work may raise eyebrows, it is worth noting the characteristics of some key people who do sensitive political work inside PR agencies. Very often they are former senior government ministers, political advisers or officials.

Take for example Tim Collins, the erstwhile managing director of Bell Pottinger. His political CV includes stints working as a press advisor for the former UK prime minister John Major, speech-

writing for a host of Tory ministers and moving into the Number 10 Policy Unit, before being elected as a Conservative MP. After losing his seat in 2005, a career in public affairs opened up.

Another former Bell Pottinger executive who has passed through the revolving door between politics and lobbying is Darren Murphy, who spent eight years as a special adviser in the Blair government. He then went into the private sector as a political consultant “specialising in services to governments”.

This is fairly typical of the close connections between lobbyists and government, which has given rise to concerns about conflicts of interest risks and potential corruption. The long-awaited reform of ACOBA (the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments) has still to materialise, meaning the revolving door between government and business continues to spin. Moves to put this body on a statutory footing are an important first step to protect the probity of public service.

### **Spin doctor, heal thyself**

The probity of the public affairs business is another matter. But there may yet be some lessons that can be learned from the Bell Pottinger scandal.

The various trade associations that represent lobbying and PR firms are busy reassuring all and sundry that the profession is best safeguarded by its codes of conduct and guidance on professional practice. Yet the Bell Pottinger affair exposes some of the key weaknesses of industry self-regulation.

While the PRCA crows about how it outperformed other bodies involved in industry self-regulation, in fact it did nothing to uncover or police the activities of Bell Pottinger. The PRCA reacted to a complaint from a South African political party and expelled the company long after the events in question.

Nor did professional charters, training or codes of conduct do anything to counter the toxic culture within the agency – or protect those working there.

In fact, bodies such as the PRCA exist to protect their industry – not the public. Real solutions to dubious lobbying and deceptive spin are likely to lie elsewhere.

We need to support and take seriously investigative research – whether undertaken by media, citizen journalists or civil society group – which scrutinises the powerful and seeks to hold them to account.

Wider reform of the relations between government and private sector is also needed. But the pace of reform is painfully slow. In the meantime some renewed vigilance and scepticism among journalists – a profession very friendly with its sources in PR – would not go amiss.

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