

## REBUILDING TRUST IN POLITICS AND RESTORING INTEGRITY IN PUBLIC LIFE

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Trust in politics is at a [record low](#), and there is [strong appetite](#) for significant reforms to uphold public integrity.

This is no surprise given the recent extent of scandal and impropriety in Westminster and Whitehall, including:

- the sale of privileged access to the Prime Minister, including to those [linked to the Kremlin](#), and well-founded concerns about [foreign interference](#)
- government awarding [£1.6 billion in PPE contracts](#) based on political connections rather than performance, and over £1 billion of development funds on the basis of [party political interests](#)
- ministers making [‘unlawful’](#) decisions to favour party donors’ interests at the public’s expense
- the award of [life peerages](#) to those who have made generous political donations
- An MP [caught](#) lobbying ministers in return for cash and another [suggesting](#) he was corrupt and “for sale”, MPs tabling favourable questions in Parliament [‘on behalf of’](#) corrupt and repressive regimes, and accepting [high-paying second jobs](#) that inevitably hinder the performance of their public duties
- [secretive lobbying](#) by a former Prime Minister seeking commitments from ministers that would put tens billions of pounds of taxpayers’ funds at risk

These follow decades of scandal over expenses, cash for questions and cash for honours.

### **Systemic problems with our democracy leave it vulnerable to corruption and undue influence.**

Decisions that are meant to be taken in the public interest risk being taken for the personal benefit of those making them and their allies. This jeopardises fair economic development for Britain’s poorest families, and undermines effective responses to national emergencies. Cumulatively, corrupt decision-making can put vast sums of taxpayers’ funds at risk, **money that could otherwise fund our health care system, education, housing or social care, or help to deliver the country from a crushing cost of living crisis.**

Government commitments to improve standards in public life fall far short of what is needed. In July 2023 it [accepted](#) some recommendations from [three separate independent](#) reports on strengthening ethics and integrity in central government, but included no timeline for their implementation and only fully accepted a [minority of recommendations](#). The Cabinet Office recently [promised](#) a “substantial update to the guidance” on standards and ethics; this is yet to appear.

The UK needs a bold and comprehensive plan to clean up politics, not piecemeal, sporadic tweaks. This would help protect against further abuses of power by vested interests, increase accountability underpinning our democracy, and restore integrity to public life.

## A PLAN FOR RESTORING INTEGRITY IN PUBLIC LIFE

### **Reform the House of Lords**

Our democracy should work for everyone, but it serves a privileged few far better than the rest of us. [With research](#) showing a strong correlation between those who make large donations to political parties and those who receive a peerage for life, nowhere is this more apparent than in the House of Lords.

- The process for nominations to the Lords should be reformed to prevent the perception of corrupt or inappropriate appointments, by:
  - Placing the House of Lords Appointments Committee (HOLAC) on a statutory footing
  - Making all nominations subject to vetting for candidates’ suitability and propriety
  - Providing HOLAC with the power to veto nominations they deem unsuitable or improper

- Strengthening the HOLAC guidance so that the corruption risks connected to party nominees – especially for those who have held a fundraising role – are considered more explicitly in the vetting process.
- A cap should be introduced on the size of the House of Lords to reduce political patronage.
- To deter impropriety and prevent rogue conduct damaging the reputation of the House of Lords, there should be a process for withdrawing peers' titles where they engage in egregious misconduct.
- To prevent peers benefitting from their titles while avoiding scrutiny, Lords should remain subject to the rules and reporting requirements when taking leaves of absence.

### ***Prevent rogue conduct in Parliament***

Recent political scandals have led the public to question the behaviour and standards of their elected representatives.

- Rules that prohibit paid lobbying by MPs should be robustly enforced to avoid the perception or reality that those in public office are acting on behalf of outside private interests.
- There should be tighter controls on who can fund parliamentarians' overseas visits. Trips sponsored either directly or indirectly by corrupt and repressive regimes may present the perception or reality that parliamentarians' judgement and actions are influenced by the intent of their hosts.
- There should be greater limits on parliamentarians' outside activities to prevent conflicts of interest between elected roles and second jobs.

### ***Raise and enforce government standards***

Our democracy can no longer rely on restraint and self-regulation as a means of reinforcing or upholding ethical standards. As a first step, the government should bring forward Lord Anderson of Ipswich's [Private Members Bill](#) (the PMB) which would [implement](#) ethics reforms recommended by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL).

- The role of government transparency as a central tenet of a healthy democracy should be taken seriously, with Freedom of Information requests being responded to in a timely matter.
- There should also be much greater transparency over those lobbying government. The best way to achieve this is through a statutory lobbying register that covers all lobbyists, as well as better quality, more regular government disclosures, with a strong accountability mechanism to ensure departments file the right information on time.
- The Ministerial Code should be reconstituted as a code of conduct on ethical standards, and there should be a statutory requirement for the Prime Minister to issue it (see PMB) – similar to the codes of conduct for the civil service, special advisers, and the diplomatic service – to prevent it being discarded or disregarded.
- The Independent Adviser on Ministerial Interests should be truly independent, with the ability to initiate investigations (see PMB). They should have the resources and powers to do so properly, and the ability to report findings and recommend sanctions without the Prime Minister's permission.
- The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACoBA) should be either be placed on a statutory footing (see PMB) or replaced with a statutory body with the resources and powers to prevent the abuse of the revolving door. In the meantime, government should give details of its [ongoing work](#) on strengthening enforcement of the Business Appointment Rules and introducing sanctions for breaches.
- There should be a new, clear statutory offence for corruption in public life that includes abuse of function and trading in influence, in line with the UK's international commitments, to ensure those who commit serious abuses of power for private gain can be held criminally accountable.

### ***Clean up political finance***

Money is openly solicited in return for political access, influence, positions of public office and titles of recognition, exposing our democracy to manipulation by outside interests.

- Spending and donations should be capped in line with recommendations by the CSPL to end the corrosive influence of big money in politics.
- Reporting thresholds for donations should be consistent with permissibility thresholds, currently £500, to increase transparency over political donations without unnecessarily increasing the administrative burden on political parties.
- The rules should be tightened to ensure UK companies can only make donations that are from genuine operating profits to prevent money of unknown provenance entering our political finance system.
- In order to further help prevent foreign state interference and dirty money from entering our political system and to restore public trust, there should be a) proper checks on the source of party donors' funds, b) much stronger enforcement of electoral law, and c) a review into whether existing laws in this area are sufficiently effective.

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