

## RESTORING INTEGRITY IN PUBLIC LIFE

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### INTRODUCTION

The health of democracy in Britain is paramount to our security and economic well-being, as well as our ability to influence effectively on the global stage. So it is concerning that 63 per cent of respondents to a recent Hansard Society survey said they felt the British system of government is rigged to the advantage of the rich and powerful.<sup>1</sup> But it is also unsurprising: our democracy is riven with loopholes that leave the door open to corruption and undue influence, and long-standing conventions around ethical standards in public life no longer seem to be observed as a matter of course.

This slipping of standards and the decisions arising from it risks holding back fair economic development, and undermines our responses to crises here at home. Cumulatively, this can put hundreds of millions, if not billions, of taxpayers' funds at risk, money that could otherwise help to fund our economic recovery.

There has been an unwillingness in many quarters to recognise clear abuses of entrusted power for private gain. It is far easier to castigate the corrupt overseas than to recognise and contend with the risks we face here at home. This reluctance has serious implications for the health of our democracy and our country's reputation as a beacon of the rule of law.

Restoring integrity in public life in Britain is a large but vital undertaking. A raft of interlinked reforms is needed to protect the delicate balance of power and accountability underpinning our democracy and to restore trust in those elected to serve the public.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

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

Restraint and self-regulation can no longer be relied upon as a means of reinforcing or upholding ethical standards.

- The Ministerial Code – like the Codes of Conduct for the civil service, special advisers, and the diplomatic service – should be put on a statutory footing, as recommended by the Committee on Standards in Public Life.
- The Independent Adviser on Ministerial Interests should be truly independent, with the ability to initiate investigations. They should have the resources to do so properly and the ability to report findings and sanctions recommendations without the Prime Minister's permission. There should be an independent backstop, for example a Parliamentary committee, for enforcing the Ministerial Code where a Prime Minister fails to enforce the rules themselves.
- The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACoBA) should be replaced with a statutory body responsible for preventing the abuse of the revolving door.
- 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, and in a timely matter, and with greater transparency over those lobbying

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/publications/reports/audit-of-political-engagement-16>

government, either through a more comprehensive statutory register or better quality, more regular departmental disclosures.

- There should be a clear statutory offence for corruption in public life, similar to the offence proposed by the Law Commission, 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 and potentially influence, has undoubtedly secured positions of public office and titles of recognition, and exposes our democracy to manipulation by outside interests.

- Political spending and donations should be capped in line with recommendations by the Committee on Standards in Public Life to end the corrosive influence of big money in politics, and its perception as a driving force behind political decision-making.
- Reporting thresholds for donations should be consistent with permissibility thresholds to increase transparency over political donations without 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.

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

Frequent political scandals have led the public to question the behaviour and standards of their elected representatives. A constant drip of these scandals in recent years is having a deleterious effect on the public's perception of the integrity of our democratic institutions.

- The ban on paid lobbying for Parliamentarians should be tightened, as per the Committee on Standards' recommendations, and robustly enforced to avoid giving rise to the perception 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, as is the case for political donations. Trips that are sponsored either directly or indirectly by corrupt and repressive regimes may present the perception that Parliamentarians' judgement and actions are influenced by the intent of their hosts.
- There should be greater limits on Members' outside activities to prevent conflicts of interest between elected roles and second jobs.

## **CONTACT**

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