

The Truth About Westminster

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'This country has always been in a frightful mess. Parliament has always been held as a place of no repute.' Lord Weatherill (1920 -)

The Prime Minister was visibly sweating under the studio lights as the sound technician adjusted the clip-on microphone for the third time, making way for a last-minute fluster by Make-up in the closing seconds of the commercial break

Another scandal, another row, another inquiry, another report, another long week in politics, but

in every interview there is the same nagging problem. It affects opposition and government alike; it dominates and overshadows every interview; it undermines every public statement and fuels speculation out of every spoken word. The issue is this: 'Will I come across well? Do I look like I'm telling the truth? Will people believe me?'

Recent polls show clearly the nature of the credibility crisis which threatens to wreck our democracy. In 1993, a MORI survey found that only one in ten people thought government ministers could be trusted. There are very few polls which produce such a decisive result. It is hard to imagine a more serious situation than 90 per cent expressing mistrust. It could be said that the Cabinet and junior Ministers have been condemned as unworthy of office by almost the entire nation.

But what of the rest of Parliament including the opposition? A mere one in seven generally trusted Members of Parliament to tell the truth. In contrast, doctors and teachers ⁵ were trusted by more than eight out of ten. In 1994 most people thought that the majority of MPs were making 'a lot of money by using public office improperly'.

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Three-quarters of those polled agreed that 'the ethical and moral standards of British politicians have been declining in recent years'. Only one in four said that 'most MPs have a high moral code', while nine out of ten said that 'most MPs ⁷ will tell lies if they feel the truth will hurt them politically'. ⁸ A year later 78 per cent said that 'most candidates for Parliament make promises they have no intention of keeping'.

As we will see, 'economy with the truth' is deeply embedded in the psyche of Westminster and is the root of many of the problems we will address, for what is open can be judged and the electorate can then exercise the power of the ballot box. Secrecy means power in politics.

So then, politicians on television are usually assumed to be dishonest by viewers and probably by those who interview them. But the most important question of all is this: what happens to a democracy where every electoral pledge is suspect, every claim is discounted and every 'fact' disputed? The result is that the democratic process itself begins to die. This is the sad reality of politics in Britain today, and the saddest thing of all is that the last people to see it are often politicians themselves.

This crisis of confidence affects not only how politicians are regarded, but also the way people feel about the whole political process. British democracy may have been a model for the world, but the majority of the British people now think that the model is failing. In an eighteen-nation Gallup Poll, the British scored sixth from the bottom in a league of satisfaction ratings for the way democracy works. This was lower than Thailand, Taiwan and Chile, and higher only than India, Venezuela, Hungary, Mexico and China.⁹

In the light of these things, it is hardly surprising that pressures are growing for reform. In 1995,

a MORI 'State of the Nation' survey found 78 per cent in favour of a Bill of Rights and 81 per cent wanted a Freedom of Information Act. Two-thirds said that rules for MPs' conduct should become part of criminal law, 78 per cent wanted allegations of 'serious misconduct' against Ministers to be investigated by the police or an independent commissioner, while only 11 per cent were happy for the Prime Minister to continue to be the final judge.

These polls show that people are fed up and angry at the 'nauseating' way in which there seems to be one law for ordinary people but no law for MPs, because they sit in judgement on themselves: the 'distrusted', 'dishonest'---and despised judging the disgraced, with few if any punishments ever given.

Three-quarters of respondents wanted to improve the way we are governed (up from 63 per cent four years previously and 49 per cent in 1973). Only 43 per cent still believed Parliament works fairly well, the same as the number satisfied with their local MP. Four out of five wanted a written constitution 'providing clear legal rules which government Ministers and civil servants are forced to operate'. ¹⁰

Fair assessment or a jaundiced view? Few alive today have more experience of the 'Gentleman's Club' that is the House of Commons than Bernard Weatherill. Made a Peer in 1992 after thirteen years as Deputy Speaker and Speaker of the House of Commons five years as Chief Whip, in the Commons for twenty-eight years, he has clarity as well as charm. His views are vitally important because he represents a ground swell of opinion within Parliament.

I asked Lord Weatherill whether he thought we were facing a crisis- He agreed that there were problems but declared that they were nothing new, and that things were not as bad as they seemed. He thinks the problem in Britain today is that we spend far too much time 'denigrating our achievements'.

'Please believe me. This country has always been in a frightful mess. Parliament has always been held as a place of no repute.' He quoted William Wilberforce in 1801: 'I dare not marry - the future is too uncertain,' and described how William Pitt in 1803 saw 'nothing around but ruin and despair', while in 1849 Disraeli at the Ministry of Commerce came to the conclusion that there was 'no hope'.

'In the end politicians had made such a mess of it that they said the only chap that could sort it out was the great Duke of Wellington, no less. He was made Prime Minister and he also failed. As he lay on his death bed in 1852, he said: "I am glad I am going so I shall not see the consolation of ruin that is gathering around us." ¹¹

However, even if we accept Lord Weatherill's argument that things have always been bad, it does not help settle the nation's wholesale distrust of politicians today. Sleaze does indeed have a long history and the past does affect the current crisis.

A short history of sleaze

In previous centuries corruption was an accepted part of public life: dubious practices by today's

standards were considered normal and necessary. For example it was common practice to buy support, as happened quite widely under Henry Pelham, Prime Minister from 1743 to 1754. Even today the government Chief Whip is called the Patronage Secretary. Although the nature of rewards has changed, many of the principles remain, as we will see.

Parliament was a protected enclave of the wealthy elite until the Reform Bill of 1832, which significantly expanded the small numbers eligible to vote. However, you still had to be a man who owned property to qualify. If we accept that the advent of true democracy in a country like South Africa has only dawned with a universal voting system for all adults regardless of status, colour, sex or creed, then we have to say that true democracy only became a reality in Britain as recently as 1928, less than seventy years ago. It was only in that year that all women were able to vote at the same age as men (twenty-one).

Political scandals in the twentieth century are nothing new, although they have certainly become more frequent. Between 1911 and 1913, a huge scandal hit the government over irregular share dealings. Lloyd George, then the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and a second government Minister bought shares in the American Marconi company, knowing that the British government had just placed a huge order with the Marconi company in Britain. The government Chief Whip also bought shares on behalf of the Liberal Party.

The shares doubled in value when they went on sale to the public shortly afterwards. At first the Ministers tried to cover up what had happened. When they were found out they resorted to claiming that they had done nothing wrong. The Commons Select Committee split along party lines and the press were uninterested; Lloyd George became Prime Minister, while the other became Lord Chief Justice and Viceroy of India.

After the First World War there were many worries over how wartime contracts had been awarded. The coalition government had also been selling honours to raise political funds. Ministers then lied to Parliament by denying honours were for sale. The last straw for King George V was when he discovered that a peerage had been granted to a man convicted of fraud which he declared was 'little less than an insult to the Crown and the House of Lords'.

Maundy Gregory was accused of brokering patronage over an estimated 26 peerages, 130 baronetcies and 481 knighthoods paid for between 1916 and 1922. Immediately following this, the Royal Commission on Honours was set up, with all political honours vetted by three Privy Councillors as happens today. Lloyd George was also linked to a love affair conducted by him in Downing Street at a time when such behaviour was far less acceptable in society generally than today.

In 1941, Bob Boothby was forced to resign by Churchill, over a conflict of interest involving a campaign to release Czech gold. In 1948, the Labour junior Board of Trade Minister John Belcher left the government after an investigation by the Lynskey tribunal. ¹² He had accepted gifts from a number of businessmen which it was feared had affected the issuing of government licenses and permits. In 1962, Tam Galbraith was wrongly accused of involvement in the Vassall sex and espionage scandal. He resigned, was later cleared and then given a senior government position.

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In 1963, the Secretary of State for War, John Profumo, was linked with a sex and spies scandal after a much publicised affair with Christine Keeler. The problem was that she was also very friendly with Captain Ivanov, a Security Officer at the Russian Embassy, and this was at the height of the Cold War. Profumo tried to bluff his way through it, doing enormous damage to the government at the time. ¹⁴

Apart from these few incidents, there was little sleaze reported from the time of Lloyd George until the Poulson scandal in the early 1970s. ¹⁵ John Poulson had paid civil servants, local councilors, council officials, nationalised industry and NHS employees, and Members of Parliament various amounts in cash and in gifts in a bid to secure contracts. A number of people were jailed as a result. The Home Secretary Reginald Maudling was also criticised. The Royal Commission into Standards in Public Life followed (the Salmon Commission) with new rules for local government.

In 1973, the then Prime Minister Sir Edward Heath refused to believe reports from M15 that the War Minister Viscount Lambton was having sex with two prostitutes at once. M15 arranged for the News of the World to take pictures and the Minister resigned. The following day the Prime Minister asked the remaining Ministers if they had anything to tell him. It emerged that Earl Jellicoe had also been seeing one of the girls and he too stepped down from office. ¹⁶

Despite these experiences while he was in office, Sir Edward Heath, as the most senior Member of the House of Commons, has a rosy view of Westminster. 'I have been an elected Member of Parliament for forty-five years, and I have rarely encountered cases of wrong-doing by my colleagues on either side of the House. Most of those I have served with have been men and women of integrity and honesty and that continues to be so today.' ¹⁷

If that is the case, then it should be a relatively easy matter to deal with national mistrust of politicians through greater openness and transparency, so that nobility can be revealed and respect restored. Unfortunately the petty dishonesty seen in day-to-day political posturing tends to undermine this. A prime example is where an opposition MP attacks the government for policies which he or she knows would not be reversed if they were in power.

There have been other significant changes over the last few decades which are very relevant to the way scandals have been handled, as we will see in the rest of this book. There has been a growth in the role and power of the Cabinet, also huge growth of government expenditure, and increasing domination of government by successive Prime Ministers, particularly where, more recently, there have been large majorities. This control of the government executive by one person has been made possible by frequent Cabinet shuffles and sackings.

The ability of Parliament to scrutinise the executive has been weakened, reducing government back-benchers and opposition MPs to mere spectators, and frustrations have grown. Meanwhile the House of Lords has remained relatively stable as a Conservative-dominated but almost powerless 'improving Chamber', occupied by a number of free thinkers who are constantly seeking to modify or delay hasty and ill-thought-out legislation.

This concentration of power in the hands of a few over a long period is unhealthy. If those few are entirely benevolent and utterly beyond reproach then the result could be a benign dictatorship of sorts. But what if those with such unprecedented political powers are fallible, frail and all too human?

New generation of MPs fights back

More recent recruits to parliament are in no doubt that Westminster is in disgrace. Simon Hughes became a Member of Parliament in 1983 and has been on the Liberal Democrat front bench ever since. He told me: 'It is not trite to say that the parliamentary process is hugely discredited in this country.' It worries him greatly. 'All we do should be geared to restoring a belief in the political process.' 18

Jerry Hayes was first elected at the same time as Simon Hughes. Now a Parliamentary Private Secretary he admits: 'Most people do regard us as corrupt. They assume we've got our fingers in the till and they also assume we've got our leg over our secretary.' However, 'The truth is depressingly mundane. The majority of MPs work very hard for their constituencies and work as best they can.'

Teresa Gorman is a passionate, strong-minded Tory backbencher who entered the House of Commons in 1987. She is highly critical of the way in which Members of Parliament conduct themselves and says the place is run like a boys' school. 'That is why women are treated as an anomaly. The whole antique structure needs shaking out. That can only be done by a party that wants to. modernise.' 19

Ken Livingstone also has a gloomy view. He claims the appalling public image of MPs is well deserved: 'Every government since 1951 has squandered opportunities, has deceived people. I don't think people would be terribly worried about who's screwing whom if they felt confident and secure about the economy.' 20

David Amess, Tory back-bencher since 1983, is angry about sleaze, blaming 'the huge vanity of all Members of Parliament'. He thinks the media have had a huge effect. '[MPs] are stupid to think that the more publicity they get, the more they talk to the radio, television and newspapers, the more they will be loved. If they only kept their mouths shut, none of this nonsense would have started in the first place. It all started with the televising of Parliament: one of the stupidest things my colleagues could have done.' The media 'latch on to someone, build up a relationship, bang they're created, bang they're destroyed and move on to the next person'. 21

So, Parliament has had its sordid and glorious moments in the past, yet the common view is that there has been a recent deterioration in standards and behaviour, bringing Westminster into disrepute. While the new generation of MPs is far from happy with what it feels it has inherited, the old school sees things rather differently. For them the finger should be pointed mainly at newer MPs who have lower standards. As we will see, the changes in culture and standards have certainly been dramatic.

Corrupted by money

It is widely held that the most damaging allegations involve money rather than private sexual morality or supposed lack of it. We need to look first at some of the urgent concerns that led to the setting up of the Nolan Inquiry in the autumn of 1994: payments for special treatment or extra attention, hidden directorships, lucrative lobbying consultancies, Cabinet members going onto the boards of the corporations they have privatised, and MPs or Peers finding other (controversial) ways of enhancing their incomes.

While many MPs have a far more relaxed approach to these matters than twenty years ago, the public still hold remarkably strict and consistent views. A Gallup survey in November 1994 asked what the public thought MPs should and should not do. 22 Around half of those responding felt that MPs should not even allow someone else to buy them a meal - which seems to me to be rather Draconian. However, the message could not be clearer: the country expects the highest standards of integrity and is strongly against any extra perks or benefits.

It is possible that any softening of attitudes has been hardened by the stream of 'sleazy' news items about politicians. Some of the responses below are so puritanical that they could almost be described as a backlash in an otherwise very liberal society.

% who think this is wrong

Payment for asking questions in Parliament 95%

A free holiday abroad 92%

Money/gifts in connection with parliamentary duties 89%

Payment for advice about parliamentary matters 85%

Free tickets to Wimbledon/other sporting events 69%

Free lunch at restaurant 47%

Bottles of wine or whisky at Christmas 45%

So, the public are clear about what they expect from those they elect, but what has happened in practice? There is always a danger in focusing on mistakes made by some, because the reputation of all becomes tarnished. However, as we will see, the unwritten rules of the 'Club' have changed over the years, creating an atmosphere which positively encourages abuse of privilege at every level. It would be a serious error therefore to write off all that follows as the aberrations of a few, failing to recognise the underlying malaise.

MPs for hire

For some years there were persistent rumours that companies were paying MPs to ask questions in order to gain a commercial advantage.

On 10 July 1994 the Sunday Times published a sensational front page article claiming that David Tredinnick and Graham Riddick had each accepted £1,000 for tabling a parliamentary question and that a third Member, Bill Walker, 'agreed to table a question in return for £1,000 before telephoning back and requesting the cheque be made out to his favourite charity'.

The newspaper added, 'The revelations confirm parliamentary rumours that some MPs are prepared to "sell" their services.' Many were concerned about the allegations but also at the subterfuge of Sunday Times reporters, posing as businessmen offering money for parliamentary activity.

All MPs and Lords have the right to ask any Minister any questions they like, usually in writing, and these are passed to officials to compose a reply that the Minister signs. Replies on sensitive subjects are often evasive half-truths, but they are better than nothing and often have commercial value.

The Thatcher regime created a market in almost every part of the government, ranging from running hospitals to cleaning streets and building motorways. Billions of pounds every year were now up for grabs to the most competitive bidder, but details of competitors' bids were often secret, and so was much of the tendering process. Written answers from Ministers were often invaluable in winning big contracts.

On 12 July the Speaker of the House of Commons announced a formal inquiry and what follows is based on the official report.²³ The Speaker quoted from a 1991-2 committee: 'Members who hold consultancy and similar positions must ensure that they do not use their position as Members improperly,' and added: 'A financial inducement to take a particular course of action may constitute a bribe and thus be an offence against the law of Parliament.' However such financial inducements are not an offence under criminal law, so long as the payment or benefits relate only to parliamentary activity.

The Speaker also reminded MPs that established practice was that 'the offering to a Member of either House of a bribe to influence him in his conduct as a Member, or of a fee or reward in connection with the promotion of ... any ... matter or thing submitted or intended to be submitted to the House ... has been treated as breach of privilege'.

The committee decided that 'the offer of payment to table a question ... is not of the same character as the offer of payment for a Member's vote, and does not seem ... to fall into the definition of bribery ... nevertheless, such an offer if made and accepted ... is certainly dishonourable and damaging to the standing and reputation of Parliament'.

But what had actually happened? The committee began by asking for all the tape recordings made secretly by the Sunday Times together with all notes made at the time and other records. They also interviewed all those involved.

The Sunday Times said that they had been informed some time ago by a businessman that he had paid four named MPs to ask questions on his behalf, and that the 'going rate' was £1,000. The Sunday Times had been unable to check out the story or print it without compromising the anonymity of their source and so had decided to carry out a limited experiment of their own, approaching just twenty MPs picked 'at random' with a similar offer, ten each from the two main parties. However they did exclude paid Members of the government and Members who had no declared outside interests. 24

The official transcripts of the tapes are a fascinating insight into attitudes. Let us take for example the conversation at Westminster on 7 July between David Tredinnick and Jonathan Calvert. from the Sunday Times.

Calvert said: 'I don't know if it is the sort of work you do or maybe . . .'

'It's hardly work,' replied Tredinnick.

'I mean I will pay for it.'

'I think, I mean, I'm not sure that I'm . . .'

'It's worth about £1,000 to me, partly because I can, you know, negotiate with them and really, I mean, I don't want to put in a lot of money and find at the end of the day that I've wasted my money really.'

'Okay. Well - I'm just going to check on the ... [inaudible] ... I don't see any reason why I shouldn't do it.'

And a little later Calvert says: 'I can pay you here and now. I've already made out the cheque in case you wanted it.'

'That's very kind of you. I will put the question down . [inaudible].'

Later that day, Calvert rang to confirm. 'You tabled the question this evening?'

'Yes.'

'Fine. Brilliant.'

'So you'll get an answer on Tuesday.'

'Right, okay.'

And a little later: 'I'll send you the £1,000 in the post now then.'

'That's very kind of you.'

Sir John Gorst's response was quite different. He expressed distaste at the idea of receiving cash just for asking a question, for although (as he rightly said) it was legal to enter into such an arrangement, he felt that it was contrary to the spirit of Parliament. Sir John Gorst indicated to Jonathan Calvert that he was only interested in entering into a long term consultancy arrangement. To be fair to Mr Tredinnick, he explained to the Committee of Privileges that he regarded the payment offered to him by Jonathan Calvert as constituting 'some form of retainer' for a consultancy arrangement.

Jonathan Calvert began: '. . . this sort of consultancy work. Is it the sort of thing you do?'

'Yes, I could do it, certainly,' replied Sir John Gorst. 'Though my preference is for doing things that are on a longer-term basis rather than just a sort of one-off particular question. My speciality, if you can call it that, has been more in giving advice than necessarily implementing it, but obviously I can see that what you want is a bit of information.'

'Yes, a straightforward piece of information, really. It seems that the only way I can get it is by asking a written question in Parliament. I would be willing to pay for this.'

'Let's leave the question of that aside for the moment, because obviously the nature of one's position in Parliament is that it's legal, but it doesn't look very nice if you simply ask questions

because you have been paid to do so.'

Jonathan Calvert then raised the issue of money again. 'Look, I mean, I've sat down and worked out what it's worth to me, and I'm investing quite a lot of money. I mean, it is worth about £1,000 to me to get this information. If I got it from a market research company . .

Sir John Gorst replied: 'Let me put it this way. If you were interested in a sort of longer-term relationship, public relations/public affairs advice, that would be more my field. I'm quite prepared to ask the question, and forgetting any question of a retainer or anything like that, simply in order to establish what the information is about this. And then, if at some subsequent stage you felt there was something we could make an arrangement about, we could discuss it on that basis - simply to establish the facts, to get an answer to a question. I think that would not be, in my view, a breach of the spirit of the parliamentary - one's position relative to Parliament.'

MP Bill Walker was also approached, and agreed that £1,000 should be sent to a named charity. He never intended to accept any personal financial reward for asking parliamentary questions. Indeed, he agreed to seek the information which Mr Calvert wanted before any suggestion of payment was made by Mr Calvert. Graham Riddick asked for a cheque payable to him to be sent to his own home.

On one occasion Jonathan Calvert asked him, 'Who were you going to talk to? The Members' Interests people?'

'Yes. I don't see any problem,' Graham Riddick replied.

'There's no problem at all?'

'No.'

'Well I mean, how much ... ?'

'I'm quite happy to go ahead.'

'How much information will you have to give when ...

'What I will say is something like this. I would put: "July 1994 - Consultancy project carried out for Mr Jonathan Calvert".'

A minute or so later Jonathan Calvert again mentioned payment. 'What do you want me to do about paying you the £1,000? Would you like me to put the cheque in with the r6sum6 or would you rather do it after the question has been raised or . . .?'

'I don't really mind. I mean, why don't you send that, why don't you just send it to me? To my home address?'

'Yes, okay.'

'You can send it there.'

The committee decided that Graham Riddick's action 'fell short of the standards the House is entitled to expect of its Members'. They pointed out that 'Mr Riddick had concluded before it was exposed that the transaction was not a proper one, that he had returned the cheque at the earliest opportunity, and that he had acknowledged his fault and apologised to the House.' Nevertheless they recommended that the MP be suspended from Parliament for two weeks with loss of two weeks' salary.

The committee noted that David Tredinnick was under great work pressure at the time, and that he had been influenced by the belief that the approach had come via a senior and respected colleague, 'but we do not think these factors are sufficient to outweigh an action which was in itself a serious error of judgement, and which must be taken together with an apparent intention

to register a one-off consultancy on the basis that the transaction would be "confidential between the two of us". The committee recommended that David Tredinnick be formally reprimanded, and suspended without pay for twenty sitting days.

They concluded that Bill Walker had never 'intended a personal financial reward by tabling parliamentary questions.' However, although in Mr Walker's mind there was no direct link between his tabling of parliamentary questions and the suggestion of a payment to charity, the manner in which this was raised made it virtually obligatory on Mr Calvert to make such a substantial donation to charity.

'It must be wrong for a Member to link payment to a charity or any other body however worthy, more especially one for which he has any direct responsibility, with asking a parliamentary question or tabling a Motion or an Amendment or making a speech. In our view such conduct diminishes the standing of parliament and, if it became prevalent, could lead members of the public to think that such a contribution would give them an advantage in dealing with their MP.

'We conclude that Mr Walker acted unwisely ...(which to his credit he acknowledges) and specifically that he committed an error of judgement in suggesting a donation to charity in these circumstances.' However, no action was recommended. The committee also criticised the Sunday Times for clandestine methods. Of course John Gorst's response, being entirely exemplary, attracted no criticism whatever.

My own view is that these events were not isolated examples. It is hard to believe that out of sheer luck, hunch and intuition these reporters were able with twenty calls to locate the only two MPs out of 651 who were willing to ask questions in similar financial arrangements.

The inquiry almost became a farce, delayed by a bitter row about whether proceedings should be held in public or in secret. The Labour Members insisted on openness and walked out, while the Tories said that public hearings would only make witnesses nervous, and wanted all evidence to be published with the verdict.²⁵ Tony Benn then began publishing his own records and was thrown out.

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These committees are not like a court. They offer no legal protection for defendants or witnesses and the chairman does not have the power of a judge to rule certain questions out of order. Witnesses are able to make highly damaging, libellous and sensational allegations under the protection of parliamentary privilege, without any threat of being sued or even of cross-examination.

For these reasons it was even more important that hearings were in private at the time and only published with the verdict, preventing a media circus. Incidentally, the Labour protest was surely a prime example of political mischief; the sort of thing that brings politicians into disrepute. Labour MPs gave the impression that the Conservatives were trying to keep the evidence secret, That was highly misleading and factually incorrect. The only issue in debate was whether the evidence should be published day by day in the press, or whether verbatim transcripts would all be published with the verdict.

The Conservatives were in favour of late publication in line with previous custom.²⁷ The row dominated media reporting of Parliament with Labour MPs making flamboyant gestures of protest, gaining enormous political capital in the process. Having read the detailed transcripts of oral evidence and written submissions, I cannot see how the term 'secret' could possibly be applied to the process. Unfortunately these sorts of emotive comments and distortions are all too common from those of all parties. The result is that many media interviews degenerate into near farce with accusation and counter-accusation, but with little serious discussion of the real issues about which most MPs are in agreement.

Graham Riddick told me afterwards that he had been deeply disappointed at how the whole investigation by the committee had worked, in a process described by one journalist as 'an insult to the judicial instincts of kangaroos'. 'I had genuinely believed that I would get a fair trial,' he said. He was particularly grieved that he was prevented from challenging the journalists from the Sunday Times when they gave evidence - not allowed even to be present or to read transcripts. He wished that he had been allowed to have proper legal representation, and pointed out that he only saw all the evidence used against him on the day of the verdict.²⁸ Similar concerns have been raised over the Scott Inquiry, although much of those proceedings was held in public. Nevertheless, the alternative is expensive and lengthy court hearings which would have constitutional implications.

Despite Graham Riddick's concerns, he made it clear that he was not 'whingeing' and accepted the verdict, although he felt it was harsh. He had apologised to the House soon after the incident, despite the fact that he never actually accepted any money for the questions he placed. His constituency has been very supportive.

The tapes of the Sunday Times calls are to me a damning indictment of the state of Westminster. I do not accept that the response of Riddick and Tredinnick was a 'freak incident', as many other MPs have tried to claim, but was partly a result of the way the whole 'Club' had been operating.

As if sensing the dangers of guilt by association, there was a loud chorus of moral outrage and indignation from many of the remaining 649 MPs, directed at Riddick and Tredinnick. Yet there seems to have been more than a trace of collective hypocrisy in this since, as we will see, many of these MPs were themselves accepting money for consultancies and some of the moral issues were similar.

I asked Lord Weatherill for his own verdict as a member of the Upper House. He was severely critical of the two MPs: 'I don't think they should stay,' he said bluntly. 'Their political careers are finished.'²⁹ However not everyone sees things in such black and white terms. Lord Archer felt that the practice of accepting money for questions was 'a very grey area'. I asked if the MPs should resign. 'Now this has come out in the open, it is what the constituencies will demand. They will get rid of them.' Lord Archer said that the practice was not confined to the Commons. 'I am told Members of the Lords do it as well which always surprises me, because I can't imagine what anyone thinks they are going to get from asking a junior Minister something in the House of Lords. It seems to me a complete waste of time.'

Nevertheless, as we will see, the whole lobbying industry has been built on a heavily promoted idea that influence and access can be bought. This may be a myth, but society tends to inflate the image of public office, and it is widely believed that individual MPs and Peers do have some power.

But how common among MPs was the practice of asking questions for money, or of receiving payment for short-term consultancy projects which included the asking of parliamentary questions to order? Robert Key has been a Tory MP for over twelve years with recent spells in government. He feels the two MPs are an exception. 'Every time I am offered a free lunch I ask why. I was shocked by the conduct of Tredinnick and Riddick. A couple of clots! In my view the Sunday Times carefully targeted them - two out of 649 others who would not even have considered it, and anyway in the end they didn't even take any money. It was just a temporary error of judgement.' However he considers that being a paid consultant is acceptable: 'I do feel that money for questions is entirely different from consultancy. I never agreed to be a consultant to ask questions - only to give expertise.' 31

Nevertheless, in practice these distinctions are hopelessly blurred. After all, what is the definition of a consultancy? Is it just that the arrangement must last more than a week? It is almost impossible to make an absolute distinction on the basis of logic. Graham Riddick, seems to display some uncertainty and confusion in the tapes, as does David Tredinnick, for understandable reasons.

Simon Hughes blamed lack of guidelines. 'There are rules for the conduct of Ministers but there are no rules for the conduct of MPs. When I got elected, I discovered that in a way this was the most wonderful job in the world, because my contract was a blank sheet of paper. We needed a place where MPs could go to take advice on an impartial basis as to whether something was right or wrong.' 32

Tony Benn sees greed at the root of it all, threatening democracy itself. 'Unless the whole philosophy of putting profit before service, and the culture of secrecy, are challenged and completely rejected in public life, the whole fabric, both of democracy and society, could be undermined. One very early statement of what is expected of us is contained in the Prayers for Parliament read by the Chaplain of the House of Commons at the beginning of each day's sitting, one of which reminds us of the moral aspects of this matter by calling upon all members to lay aside ". . . all private interests, prejudices, and partial affections ..." 33

Those words could hardly be clearer. but where do you draw the line between the gift of a book by an author, a friendly lunch., tickets for the theatre. a weekend away for two, free use of a car for a year, a house in the country or an income for life?

Alistair Burt, Minister of Social Security, agrees that it can be hard to decide. 'One person may be innocent and one person may not be. because it all depends on price. I don't have a problem in being taken out to lunch by virtually anyone, because no one, I believe, can seriously think

that I would alter the course of policy just because someone has taken me out to lunch.

' Now I suspect that, as you go further up the scale this either retains or loses credibility at a certain stage. I believe, for instance, that if someone offers to buy you a house in the country, or gives you a few thousand a year, then the inference would be the other way. Nobody would do that for you unless they were getting something for it. Between those two extremes somewhere the line crosses, and I think that is the difficulty. There are people who earn very little in life for whom £5,000 a year is a lot of money.' He pointed out that for most people in the House of Commons it would be utter madness to risk the whole of their political career and considerable future earnings for the sake of such a sum.

'The problem is that some of the people looking at it are outside the system and don't know, but the danger for those inside (and how standards slip) is that it can be terribly easy to take for granted certain things where other people might say, "Hold on a minute. Why did you do so and so?" It forces you to think, "How would outsiders see this relationship?" That is difficult to judge. It's very, very personal.' 34

But standards in public life are surely far too important to be left in a way which is 'difficult to judge' or 'very, very personal'. Far clearer codes of practice were needed which reflected public opinion more closely. In any event, one thing is absolutely clear to me: once payments are accepted in cash or in kind, an obligation is created that is likely to weaken independence and objectivity. Such obligations are in direct conflict with public duty, which by definition requires an even-handed approach.

All such obligations therefore are likely to one degree or another to be corrupting in nature, since the end result could be the abuse of power in favour of a few, rather than its use for the public good. While a meal in a restaurant is hardly likely to undermine the integrity of a politician, other more substantial benefits could do so, given the inherent weakness in human character.

Unfortunately, these problems are far more widespread in Westminster than isolated examples of cash for questions. Buying and selling of MPs' time has taken place on a breathtaking scale, and was the real reason behind the cash-for questions episode. As we will see, almost every recent 'scandal' in politics has its ancestry in other less serious but generally accepted behaviour patterns. There has been no moral slide, but more a gradual step-by-step erosion of common values.

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