

The Truth About Westminster

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'Most people 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.' Jerry Hayes MP (1953-) 1

'The perception of this House has gone down and down. If it doesn't command the confidence of the people, that is a serious threat to our democracy.' Tom King MP (1933-) 2

'Among a people generally corrupt, liberty cannot long exist.' Edmund Burke (1729-1797)

'Will there be a fee?' the old woman asked as she got up to go. The Member of Parliament looked up in horror. He had fought several housing battles for her in the past and had just agreed to help her again.

'Whatever for?' he exclaimed.

'For the letter. You read in the papers . .

'Of course not. I am shocked that you should think such a thing!'

Afterwards the Member of Parliament told me how upset he had felt. 'I was so ashamed that the media attention on the mis-behaviour of just two MPs should have so tarnished the reputation of us all. I wanted to weep. Everything I stand for is being destroyed. There she was, a pensioner on a very low income, convinced that she now had to pay her MP to get justice. One wonders how many others think as she did.

Democracy in Britain is in a dangerous state. Faith in politicians and in our democratic process has sunk to the lowest point in living memory, in the wake of a series of widely publicised allegations of sleaze and corruption, affecting every level of political life. Every new revelation carries with it the expectation that many more are waiting to be exposed, and the certain knowledge that many others never will be. The most shocking thing of all perhaps has not been the scandals themselves, but the obvious failure of senior politicians to understand the damage to the image of public office.

A recent poll shows that many people now think that most MPs are corrupt, willing to 'make a lot of money by using public office improperly', and will 'tell lies if they feel the truth will hurt them politically'.³ As the gap narrows between the main parties, it is likely that personal values will become more important in winning votes than slight differences in public policies.

Some argue that Parliament has always been corrupt, but is less so today than at many other times in the 700 years since Edward 1 summoned the first Parliament in 1295. While this is undoubtedly true, there is much evidence to suggest that there has been a revolution in culture

and attitudes within the 'Club' since the end of the Second World War. There is a generation of elder statesmen in Parliament today who entered public life after military service. They had fought and nearly died together and came into politics to help rebuild a nation ravaged by war. They have had difficulties coming to terms with the new super-breed of young, anti-social, ambitious, affluent and strongly opinionated MPs that have flooded into the House since the late 1970s.

Despite this it is also true that the British Parliament is still one of the least corrupt institutions in Europe and the rest of the world. As a nation we expect the highest standards of those in government and regard our 'Mother of all parliaments' with respect and affection. Hence the sense of outrage and indignation when it appears that politicians have been careless with the reputation of such a priceless heritage.

Much of the public anger so far has been directed at one party with three out of four saying that 'the Conservatives these days give the impression of being sleazy and disreputable'. This compares with only 16 per cent saying the same of Labour.' 4 Half the voters say that the Conservatives are worse than MPs from other parties, and that as a result they are less inclined to vote for them than before. Perhaps more seriously for the future of democracy, almost all the remainder feel that all the parties are just as disreputable as each other.

It seems to many that there is one law for voters and another for those in power. There is ample evidence that when MPs are in trouble, they tend to close ranks with other members of the establishment to protect the accused from public scrutiny, with every appearance of deliberately obstructing justice. But what is it about the 'Club' that has turned so many respected men and women of integrity, calibre and vision into people unwilling to speak out against abuse of power, afraid to vote for what they know is right, covering up for colleagues they know have done wrong, and hurling insults at people they agree with?

I have been confronted many times by this important question through my work as a doctor in the voluntary sector. Over the years I have had many dealings with Ministers, back-benchers and Peers; I have corresponded personally with several hundred of them and addressed Members of both Houses on several occasions. In contrast to their deteriorating media image, I have always been struck by their dedication to duty, their sense of public service, and the common traditions of decency and honour that transcend all party interests.

Yet with every passing week this personal experience has seemed further removed from the

negative public perception, fed by investigative and tabloid journalism and 'sensationalised' broadcasts.

The purpose of this book has been to attempt to reconcile these two conflicting views, not as a journalist, nor as a politician, but as a fellow professional seeking to understand the truth behind the headlines, as someone who comes from a strong family tradition of political neutrality.

If politicians score the lowest trust ratings in society as a whole, together with journalists, then doctors score the highest. Perhaps in part this explains why so many politicians have felt free to talk, revealing their burdens of office, conflicts of conscience and confusion about codes of practice. Researching this book has been a fascinating but disturbing process, and sometimes the full impact of interviews has only hit me later, on transcribing the tape recordings before committing their contents to a bank vault.

The law on libel means that some stories can never be told, or revealed only in part, because those who know the truth are unwilling to testify in court. I regret that, but it has been necessary to protect vulnerable sources and to honour promises of confidentiality. Writing this book has also been made exceedingly difficult because of a stack of writs by a number of well-known individuals. Make no mistake. The truth about Westminster is a complex kaleidoscope of interleaving events and personalities; a mix of the very best and the very worst in human nature and of everything in between.

It is far too easy to lay most of the blame on one party, the Conservatives. Corruption by definition involves the abuse of power and so is always most likely to be obvious among those with most power over the longest period. Therefore it is to be expected that most of the recent examples of the abuse of power will refer to Conservatives in office. We must not be so naive as to think that changing a Prime Minister, a Cabinet, or even an entire government will eradicate the problem.. The Conservatives may well have shown themselves thoroughly disgraced in the eyes of some after more than sixteen years in national office, but the Labour Party faces great difficulties of its own and deeply-rooted financial corruption has been serious for a long time in Labour controlled local government. I therefore have no doubt that recent Westminster history will repeat itself under a Labour administration, albeit in different ways, unless the underlying problems are addressed.

My thesis is that while very few MPs are overtly corrupt, the political process is itself corrupting

and needs urgent reform. However, new codes of practice, or even a constitutional revolution, will not be enough to restore confidence in those who lead our nation. Only sweeping changes in people and their values will cause the radical changes this country needs.

'My purpose is not to condemn or point the finger at those who have fallen, are falling or are struggling to survive, but to understand and to point a way forward. Those who have never had to face the severe rigours of public life should, I believe, be slow to judge. The pressures on these men and women are enormous, particularly from the media. There has never been an age in human history in which those in such positions have been so aggressively exposed before millions of others.

There is no human on this earth today who is perfect in private or in public, and all are prone to mistakes. If we want perfect leaders, then we will have no leaders left at all. Nevertheless, there are certain reasonable expectations which appear to have been systematically ignored by more than just a minority. While one cannot legislate for integrity, steps can be taken to encourage the highest values. It is not enough to 'keep to the rules' if the rules themselves need changing.

It is my belief that anger and dismay at the current crisis will cause a new generation of men and women to enter public life, driven by a vision of a different kind of world and a different kind of Parliament. They will bring a new sense of self-sacrificing purpose, compassion, calling and destiny. I see signs of it already: an awakening of political conscience as we prepare for a new millennium. It could capture the heart of the nation

Patrick Dixon August 1996

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