



Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards

COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION

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PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AND BEHAVIOUR SESSION

Thank you for inviting me to address this year's conference on the matter of Parliamentary standards and behaviour. With your permission, I will speak only briefly and will then be very happy to answer questions and address comments.

Parliaments around the world are facing an accelerating problem of diminishing trust between the public and the political class as a whole, resulting or reflected in an increase in disaffection and disengagement. This poses serious risks to the efficacy of the political process and, as a result, to the rule of law.

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One of the most commonly cited reasons for disengagement and disaffection with the political process is a general perception that the behaviour of politicians as a class is tainted by widespread corruption, abuse of power, and misconduct of various kinds.

Speaking for the UK Parliament – and I have no reason to believe that this is not a common picture – I have no doubt that this reputation of politicians as a class is undeserved. The vast majority of members of the House of Commons, in particular, are dedicated to public service and strongly committed to high ethical standards in public life.

The primary problem is that the relatively small number of politicians who do not show proper regard for conflicts of interest, or who abuse their power in some other way, dominate the traditional media headlines, monopolise the attention of social media, and by those means effectively traduce the reputation of politicians as a class. The process then enters a spiral of increasing focus on misbehaviour, making it increasingly difficult to concentrate attention both internally and externally on public policy and matters of genuine substantive political concern.

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The result of this is that standards of Parliamentary behaviour have ceased to be a peripheral issue, in so far as they were in times before the media, and social media in particular, focused attention on every infraction and misdemeanour and allowed them to dominate public attention. The battle for the maintenance of Parliamentary standards is now symbiotic with the battle for the preservation of that degree of trust between public and politicians that underpins the rule of law that in a democracy rests, ultimately, on government by consent.

I took the view when I began my term as Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards at the beginning of this calendar year, that it is not enough for Parliament to be seen to be addressing cases of non-compliance with the Code of Conduct for Members, for two principal reasons.

First, dealing effectively with breaches of the Code would not prevent misconduct from dominating the narrative. Secondly, and more importantly, however, the grim reality is that there is comparatively little that Parliaments can do by way of disciplining the relatively few members who insist on disregarding the code of conduct. Suspension of members, the ultimate deterrent in the sanctions book, primarily disadvantages Members' constituents, rather than Members themselves; and apologies and other lesser consequences are unlikely to appear convincing or compelling to an already largely disaffected public.

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The task is therefore to shift the narrative, so that standards of conduct in Parliament are not seen simply as a set of technical rules, which people must aim to avoid breaking and compliance with which is routine and unremarkable. The Code of Conduct in the United Kingdom is underpinned by a statement of the seven Nolan principles of standards in public life: openness and accountability; honesty and integrity; objectivity and selflessness; and leadership. There is nothing technical about these: they are inspiring and demanding principles presenting a continuum of commitment that is capable of setting the agenda internally and ultimately recapturing the narrative externally.

The daily life of political service contains many examples of the practical application and implementation of the Nolan principles, in a form of which politicians can be justly proud. In addition to my necessary investigatory work in relation to breaches of the Code, therefore, I have begun a series of activities designed to give politicians the space to articulate and express what best practice in relation to standards in public life looks like in a Parliamentary context.

For example, I am commencing a series of seminars for staff of Members of Parliament, in which they will meet on a cross-party basis to share their experience of what commitment to each of the Nolan principles looks like on a daily basis, with a view to articulating and publishing case-studies and best practice benchmarks that can be used as real-world tools in establishing and maintaining relationships between politicians and the public.

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I am also placing an emphasis on outreach and engagement work, concentrating in particular on universities and other forums for younger members of the public, where I can create space for discussion of the positive side of Parliamentary standards, laying the foundations for a discussion that politicians can pick up and continue in their own way.

In general, these initiatives have been received enthusiastically by politicians and the public alike. There are, predictably, some who are nervous that however politicians seek to portray their own behaviour it will be misconstrued and presented in a negative light by a cynical media, and that the safest thing to do therefore is to say as little as possible about Parliamentary standards. In my view, this is a defeatist attitude at a time when accepting defeat in relation to the reputation of politicians is tantamount to accepting defeat for the rule of law, for the reasons that I have already adumbrated. More importantly, however, it simply belies the reality of public service, which, for the most part is solidly founded on a commitment to inspiring principles that deserve to be celebrated and shared.

It is undoubtedly challenging to aim to portray a more positive picture of parliamentary life, but it is a challenge that brings its own rewards.

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For example, dealing with misogyny and misconduct in public life is undoubtedly important, and we must continue to search for effective methods of prevention and remedy, to the fullest extent practically possible. But from a reputational perspective, this can never be more than an exercise in damage limitation of doubtful effect. Concentrating on practical methods of celebrating diversity, enhancing equality of opportunity, and building respect into the fabric of the Parliamentary community is a much more exciting enterprise, offering a challenging but fulfilling spectrum of achievement, capable of soaring far beyond an attempt to repair damaged reputations, and giving scope for the articulation of principles in the pursuit of which Parliament can be part of setting the societal agenda, demonstrate the leadership principle which should be at the heart of practical politics.

This, and its equivalents in relation to other areas of conduct and principle, will inevitably be a slow and difficult enterprise, but it is equally definitely one deserving of our investment. It is also an area where different parliaments around the world share many of the same issues and as a result can support and assist each other to great effect. I look forward very much to working with colleagues in other jurisdictions, and in the Commonwealth in particular, to share ideas, to support each other's ambitions, and to play an important and shared part in the preservation of the democratic process.

Thank you very much.

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