

Statement to The Leveson Inquiry

Committee on
Standards in
Public Life

September 2011

Chair: Sir Christopher Kelly KCB

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC LIFE

SELFLESSNESS

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends.

INTEGRITY

Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their official duties.

OBJECTIVITY

In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

OPENNESS

Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

HONESTY

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

LEADERSHIP

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

Background

1. The Committee on Standards in Public Life is an independent advisory non-departmental public body (NDPB) established in 1994.
2. The Committee has wide terms of reference.

To examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office, including arrangements relating to financial and commercial activities, and make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements which might be required to ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life.¹

and

To review issues in relation to the funding of political parties, and to make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements.²

3. All members of the Committee are appointed by the Prime Minister. The Chair is appointed for a non-renewable term of five years. A further six independent members are appointed for renewable terms of three years. In addition, the three main political parties each nominate a representative.
4. In its first report 'Members of Parliament, Ministers, Civil Servants and Quangos' (Cm 2850), the Committee established the Seven Principles of Public Life – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership – as a guide to the standards of behaviour expected of all who serve the public in any way. The Committee seeks to promote the Seven Principles through its work. Because the Committee is an advisory body, not a regulator, it does not have powers to enforce these standards.
5. The Committee fulfils its role primarily through its formal inquiries. In the past these inquiries have covered topics such as the relationship between ministers and civil servants, standards of conduct in NDPBs and MPs' expenses. The Committee is currently in the final stages of an inquiry into the funding of political parties. A major part of the evidence gathering for the

¹ Hansard (HC) 25 October 1994, col. 758

² Hansard (HC) 12 November 1997, col. 899

inquiries consists of hearings held in public. All written evidence submitted is published.

6. The Committee also routinely monitors and considers issues and concerns relating to standards in public life and contributes to the development of public policy through meetings, seminars, speaking engagements and by responding to consultation papers on relevant issues.
7. The Committee's remit does not extend to investigating individual allegations of misconduct.

The Committee's biennial survey and trust in the media

8. Every two years the Committee commissions a survey to track public attitudes to standards in public life. The survey includes questions about trust in public office-holders and in a range of comparators, including journalists.
9. Broadly speaking, the surveys tend to show much higher confidence in broadsheet journalists than in tabloid journalists. The latter tend to feature towards the bottom of those about whom questions are asked in terms of the public's confidence that they will tell the truth. The Committee's most recent survey, carried out in December 2010 and January 2011, showed an increase in confidence in both types of journalists³. 41 per cent of respondents trusted broadsheet journalists to tell the truth, compared with 36 per cent in 2008. 16 per cent of respondents trusted tabloid journalists to tell the truth, compared with 10 per cent in 2008. An online version of the survey, conducted for comparative reasons, showed much the same picture.
10. It is possible that this increase was a result of the perceived role of the media in uncovering details about MPs' expenses. If so, the effect appears to have been short-lived. Working with the Committee's research as a baseline, researchers at Nottingham University re-ran the online version of the survey in July 2011. Their results suggest that confidence in the media's truthfulness has now fallen back to previous levels, with trust in broadsheet and tabloid journalists falling by almost a quarter compared with the Committee's own survey. The Nottingham researchers have surmised that these results may be a direct consequence of the phone hacking allegations.
11. A copy of the Committee's biennial survey and comparisons from the two online surveys are

³ Grasso, M. and Rose, J. (2011). *Survey of Public Attitudes Towards Conduct in Public Life 2010*. September 2011. London: Committee on Standards Public Life.

included as annexes.

The media and public life

12. The media as such do not fall within the Committee's terms of reference. They have therefore never been the subject of a formal Committee inquiry. But they clearly impact on wider standards issues and the Committee's work in a number of ways. In particular:

- Investigative journalism has had a major role in ethical regulation by uncovering wrong-doing, or publicising it, as in the case of MPs' expenses. The Committee itself was established in the wake of the 'cash for questions' scandal, which was brought to light by investigative journalists.
- The media provide the mechanism through which openness about the activities of those in public life is given effect. The Committee's experience is that transparency is often a much more effective promoter of high standards than any regulator can hope to be.
- The way stories are reported can have a significant effect on public perception of an issue, and thereby impacts on confidence about standards in public life.

13. These effects are illustrated by the subject of our current inquiry, the funding of political parties. The current regulatory regime, established mainly in 2000, relies largely on publication of the names of all those giving amounts of more than £7,500 to a national party or £1,500 to a local party to prevent the possibility of large donations being solicited or offered in return for improper favours, such as a shift in policy which advantages the donor. This only works as a control mechanism if the information is then analysed, which usually means by journalists. Various shortcomings in the legal framework, such as the fact that it did not initially apply to loans, have since been remedied. It was investigative journalism that was largely responsible for identifying those shortcomings and creating the pressure for them to be addressed. Continued media stories attempting to make links between particular donations and subsequent political decisions have contributed to negative perceptions of the success of the regime in preventing corruption, even as actual standards have almost certainly improved – although it is difficult to demonstrate that convincingly.

14. While holders of public office need to listen to the views of different stakeholders, the principle of integrity requires that they do not place themselves under any financial or other

obligation to individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their duties. The main reason for public concern about large donations to political parties is because of a belief that donors are afforded an unacceptable degree of influence in return for their donations. The same concern has been expressed about relationships between senior politicians and the media. Many believe that the personal agendas of editorial staff and proprietors are given undue prominence because of the influence the media can bring to bear on public perceptions and on electoral success.

15. In addressing this concern there are a number of lessons from the Committee on Standards in Public Life's experience which the Leveson Inquiry might wish to bear in mind:

- When major breaches of standards come to light it is seldom the result of a few rogue practitioners. It often reflects a much wider culture in which such behaviours are at best tolerated and at worst encouraged.
- Such cultures seldom exist in a vacuum. They often reflect the leadership of the organisation, or a failure of it.
- There is no substitute for robust, independent regulation, armed with appropriate sanctions in preventing wrongdoing and bringing it to light. It is clear that self-regulation, without a strong independent element, has failed too often in the past and is most unlikely to attract any degree of public confidence in the future.
- The temptation is often to introduce overbearing regulation in the wake of a scandal. The regime can then take some time to adjust to a more reasonable and proportionate risk-based system.

16. The goal of regulation in any field of public life is to create a culture built around the Seven Principles, which encourages the individuals within it to uphold high standards of personal behaviour and integrity. The experience of the Committee is that the minimum needed to achieve that goal is clarity about the standards expected, strong leadership and independent regulation. The importance attached to these conditions by all involved in the media will be pivotal in creating a culture whereby standards and doing the right thing come first.

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