

If Hunt does not go the consequences for government will be catastrophic since the message is that all rules are up in the air

Patrick Dunleavy argues that Jeremy Hunt has run roughshod over the Ministerial Code in his dealings with the Murdochs over the Sky bid, and if Cameron won't pull the trigger there may be severe implications for government in the long-run.



Jeremy Hunt's conduct shows the ministerial code is like the pirates' code in *Pirates of the Caribbean* – mere guidelines which are not worth the paper they are printed on. Under long-established and clearly-defined constitutional law, a minister performing a quasi-judicial role is acting under powers derived directly from the Crown and is personally responsible for the consequences of his decisions. He can draw on factors beyond the law when making a decision but must at all times act in an uncompromised and non-partisan way.

If Hunt had been procedurally correct in the way he had set about dealing with the Sky bid, the argument of Conservatives who have come to his defence that his personal sympathies coincidentally aligned with his honest judgement of the merits of News Corporation's case might be sustainable. But by driving a coach and horses through due process with the unbelievable amount of interaction between his office and NewsCorp any credible claim that can be made along these lines is shattered.

There is no evidence from Adam Smith's testimony at Leveson a week ago that he behaved in any other way than a special adviser should, by doing his master's bidding.

Normally a Prime Minister will get rid of a minister at the point at which their reputational damage becomes a drag on the popularity of the government, or some spark of moral courage on the part of the minister causes them to resign. That point was reached four weeks ago with Hunt and for whatever reason – frozen like a rabbit in headlights by the wider scandal of Leveson or because he is unable to face up to reality – Cameron has failed to pull the trigger. The government is in a popularity slump and while Cameron's allies can persuade themselves that the public doesn't care about the Sky bid, the public does care about rules and does not like to see ministers behaving in an arbitrary, sleazy or corrupt manner. In the long run, if Hunt does not go, the consequences for government will be catastrophic, since the message is that all rules are up in the air.

This article will also appear in today's edition of [The Evening Standard](#), page 65.

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About the author

Patrick Dunleavy is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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