

The UK needs to rethink its approach to the upholding of standards in public life

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Is it time to re-think the UK's public integrity strategy? **Alan Doig** argues that a new approach should be considered to take over from successive iterations of an increasingly ineffectual Committee on Standards in Public Life.*



Research on integrity and trust in European states was published by the Hertie School of Governance at the end of 2015, paid for by the Dutch Government which currently has the [Presidency of the EU](#). And how did the UK do? Well, in the five years since 2008, we mistrust Parliament and governments more, a sentiment in line with a number from other western European countries (named as Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg and The Netherlands) and reflective of the overall EU country average.

We don't think our politicians and civil servants are any more corrupt than those of other western European countries' respondents but, along with every country except Croatia and Belgium, our trust in the EU and its institutions is – unsurprisingly – on the slide; the majority in most countries think corruption persists in the institutions. On the other hand, the UK now trusts local government more than in 2008 (contradicting, apparently, every other country apart from Denmark, Hungary and Luxembourg). We don't generally believe that favouritism influences access to health, education, or the police but, conversely, we do think that successive governments have not been very effective at combatting corruption, again reflective of responses both of other western European countries and, indeed, the overall EU average (although we do quite well in the even more recent 2016 [Rand Corporation study for the European Parliament](#), elevated at one point to that of one of the 'Magnificent Seven' group of countries).

In terms of Hertie's overall index of the strength of the EU's public integrity framework (marrying various subsets that include audit standards, use of e-government and judicial independence, and so on) the UK has slightly declined recently but is still well above the EU average and on a par with other western European countries (although

overtaken by France, Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and The Netherlands). But since most of these countries don't have a Committee on Standards in Public Life where does that leave the Committee or, to put it another way, what has been its added value since 1995, the year of its first report?

One interesting – and simultaneous – publication from the Dutch alongside the integrity and trust report was on its approach to public integrity which, like the French, has taken a different institutional approach to public integrity. This report is about the National Integrity Office which was set up in 2003 (like the Committee following a national scandal, although in the construction industry rather than among MPs). This and subsequent blogs will look at both the usefulness of the current iteration of the Committee and whether we should go Dutch (or French) in the future.

The reason for the need to re-think how the UK approaches public integrity lies in the Hertie report and its belief that reduced trust reflects the 'failure of current policies to redress it'. While there continues to be research in what has made certain countries more honest than others (Finland and Denmark are the current two being unpicked for answers) there is less discussion as how such countries can maintain or sustain their level of public integrity. The Dutch approach does ask questions both about that of the UK and whether, after nearly two decades of one way of addressing public integrity, consideration should be given to another, more engaged and strategic approach to take forward the promotion, maintenance and monitoring of public integrity in the UK.

Certainly the Committee on Standards in Public Life has in recent years been expressing concern at a number of aspects of the effectiveness of its own work and that of its predecessors. In 2013 it was able to suggest that 'much of the basic infrastructure to support high standards' was in place (although one might ask as to what the Committee thinks comprises a basic infrastructure and what evidence it has as to what is not only in place but is also working effectively). It has also raised concerns that 'many of those whose integrity has been called into question in recent months and years seem to have behaved inappropriately not because they were unaware of what was expected but because they did not find it expedient' (and one might also ask whether this is more evidence that that the basic infrastructure is less than fully effective). In 2014, while claiming that most of its expectations were being met in terms of induction training, it had to admit that there was no real way of demonstrating whether or not that training was having any impact, particularly when the key institution, Parliament, was not only the most disengaged in the process but failed to include a major concern the Committee wanted addressing in that training (that of lobbying).

Of course we all know the regular number of media stories on the continuing inability of MPs to stop mis-claiming expenses, the sound of revolving doors, and the increasing influence of money in parliamentary and party politics. We know that successive governments are loathe to undertake serious reform to the current (and often self-regulatory and non-statutory) institutional and procedural means to sustain public integrity (the critical 2012 comments by the Public Administration Select Committee over the effectiveness of the post-retirement and post-resignation regime overseen by the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, for example, only mirror those of a Commons committee over a quarter of a century earlier).

We know that current patchwork arrangements for regulation and advice – many the consequence of the reforms proposed by various iterations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life – continue to attract concern over strategic effectiveness, whether the Committee's own view in 2013 that many of the reforms 'by themselves are not enough', or susceptibility to government changes, with the outgoing Commissioner on Public Appointments warning in 2016 that 'twenty years of progress is at risk.' We also know about various concerns over the application of the reforms in practice, raising questions, for example, about the credibility of current approaches to resolve potentially-unacceptable parliamentary behaviour. These latter range from the ability to identify which MPs are complained about to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to the contrast in procedures, criteria and conclusions undertaken by the Standards Commissioner to those of Ofcom and the High Court in relation to the same cases.

On the other hand, of course, what we don't know is whether these are the residual contra-indicators of improving public integrity or, indeed, whether it is getting better or worse, whether in Parliament or elsewhere in the public sector. Like the effect of induction training, we don't really know one way or another but what we do know is that examples of behaviour that led to the establishment of very first committee continue to resonate, whether in the

media or as the subject of official reports, including gifts and hospitality, expenses, trading in influence and lobbying, conflicts of interest, honours, private sector-style perks and profits in government departments and public bodies, voting fraud, party funding, political patronage, protecting whistleblowers, private sector appointments on resignation or retirement, and so on.

I have already suggested that the Committee is increasingly ineffectual in maintaining the UK public integrity framework (and here I note the structured, strategic and engaged approach by the Dutch and the rather limp current work plan published by the Committee). I feel that the time has come to explore why and then look in more detail at the relevance of the Committee's approach and what could and should be done to really get to grips with public integrity.

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Alan Doig is Hon. Senior Research Fellow at the International Development Department, University of Birmingham; Visiting Professor, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University and Board member, Management Board, North-east Fraud Forum.

