

## COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE

### SUBMISSION TO PROCEDURE COMMITTEE INQUIRY ON CORRECTING THE RECORD

#### Background on the Committee

1. The Committee on Standards in Public Life is an independent, non-departmental public body that advises public office holders on the arrangements for upholding standards of conduct across public life in England. The Committee does not have investigative powers or consider individual cases. Please see **Annex A** for the Committee's remit.
2. The Committee articulated the Seven Principles of Public Life – commonly referred to as the Nolan Principles – in its first report in 1995: honesty; objectivity; openness; selflessness; integrity; accountability; and leadership. These principles apply to all public office holders, including those who are elected or appointed, and to private providers of public services.

#### Consultation response

3. CSPL welcomes this Procedure Committee inquiry into correcting the record in Parliament, which is timely.
4. There has been a significant transformation in how parliamentary information is published and communicated since 2007. We have been glad to see a shift to same day publication of Hansard online and improvements in online video coverage, both of which have improved the availability and transparency of information in Parliament.<sup>1</sup>
5. One of the ways that Parliament increases the accuracy of information in the public domain is through the obligation on Ministers to correct the record when they have given inaccurate information to Parliament. Full Fact told us in recent evidence that there are “lots of examples” where MPs and some Ministers have responded positively and quickly to correction requests,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that the House's corrections system is being used as intended in many cases.
6. However, we have also heard concerns from Full Fact and others that there has been “an unwillingness by some parts of government to engage with questions of accuracy” and correct the record where there has been pressure to do so.<sup>3</sup> In a recent letter to the Committee, Debbie Abrahams MP, Caroline Lucas MP and Layla

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<sup>1</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmproced/541/54104.htm>

<sup>2</sup>

[https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/final\\_response\\_committee\\_for\\_standards\\_in\\_public\\_life\\_standard\\_s\\_matter\\_2.pdf](https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/final_response_committee_for_standards_in_public_life_standard_s_matter_2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

Moran MP said, “this is clearly unacceptable and contributes to the erosion of trust between the public and politicians”.<sup>4</sup>

7. CSPL is of the view that all Ministers should take individual responsibility for the principles of openness, honesty and leadership, and aim to correct mistakes and inaccuracies in a timely manner to facilitate proper transparency and accountability.
8. However, given that there are cases where Ministers have repeatedly failed to correct the record, there may be legitimate concerns around the limited recourse to hold Ministers to account for not doing so.<sup>5</sup> We would encourage the Committee to consider how the House might more formally play a role in following up with Ministers who have not corrected the record to ask them to do so.
9. CSPL agrees with the Speaker that “all members should correct the record if they make an inaccurate statement to the House”.<sup>6</sup> We encourage the Committee to consider a more formal mechanism for backbench MPs to correct the parliamentary record in order to facilitate this.
10. We would also like to see better labelling of corrections online in Hansard so that corrections can be easily identified. For example, when a correction has been made, the original statement is currently published in Hansard followed by a link to the correction, which is labelled as an “official report” followed by the date, volume number, and the abbreviation “MC”. The original Hansard report does not make clear that this “official report” is a ministerial correction until you click on the link, which opens a new page labelled “letter of correction” (see example in footnote).<sup>7</sup> Including the abbreviation “MC” does not sufficiently draw attention to the correction, which means the correction could easily be missed.
11. For the corrections system to function effectively, members of the public and MPs should be able to check Hansard to see whether and where any corrections have been made. It should also be easy for the public to search for corrections online, which is not presently the case. In our 2018 report, MPs’ Outside Interests, we recommended that a system could be developed to identify and flag wherever

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/983720/050521\\_Letter\\_Chair-CSPL.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/983720/050521_Letter_Chair-CSPL.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

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<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-03-11/debates/D8F4BC4C-9DEC-4590-B29C-10026B520E58/Speaker%E2%80%99SStatement?highlight=speaker%20cannot%20dragged%20into%20arguments%20about%20whether%20statement%20inaccurate%20not#contribution-15F12575-A214-4C8D-9EBB-77788B091EEB>

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<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-06-08/debates/B987D8A1-ABC0-4DB0-956C-DE7BD0FB064D/Levelling-UpAndRegenerationBill#822> and  
<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2022-06-13/debates/B7B5E134-FA02-47E3-BC76-7275A27797C4/HousingCommunitiesAndLocalGovernment#2MC>

declarations of interest had been made by MPs during proceedings.<sup>8</sup> Given that the transcripts of all parliamentary debates are published online, the same could be done for corrections, which would greatly improve the transparency and accountability of corrections.

12. In MPs' Outside Interests, we also said that the thresholds and guidance for the registration of interests needed to be made clearer, so that MPs and the public know what needs to be registered.<sup>9</sup> The same argument could be made for greater clarity around what corrections and clarifications should be recorded by whom and how.

**CSPL**

**October 2022**

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/721697/CSPL\\_MPs\\_outside\\_interests\\_-\\_full\\_report.PDF](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/721697/CSPL_MPs_outside_interests_-_full_report.PDF), p.49

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p.43

## Committee on Standards in Public Life

The Committee on Standards in Public Life is an independent, advisory Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB). The Committee was established in October 1994, by the then Prime Minister, with the following 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.*

The Principles of Selflessness, Objectivity, Integrity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and Leadership remain the basis of the ethical standards expected of public office holders and continue as key criteria for assessing the quality of public life.

The remit of the Committee excludes investigation of individual allegations of misconduct.

On 12 November 1997, the terms of reference were extended by the then Prime Minister:

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

The Committee's terms of reference were further clarified following the Triennial Review of the Committee in 2013. The then Minister of the Cabinet Office confirmed that the Committee:

*Should not inquire into matters relating to the devolved legislatures and Governments except with the agreement of those bodies. Secondly the Government understands the Committee's remit to examine "standards of conduct of all holders of public office" as encompassing all those involved in the delivery of public services, not solely, those appointed or elected to public office.*

Committee membership:

- Lord Evans of Weardale KCB DL, Chair
- Rt Hon Dame Margaret Beckett DBE MP
- Ewen Fergusson
- Professor Dame Shirley Pearce DBE
- Professor Gillian Peele
- Rt Hon Lord Stunell OBE

Rt Hon Sir Jeremy Wright QC MP's term of appointment ends on 20 November 2022.

The Committee's work is supported by a Research Advisory Board, chaired by Professor Mark Philp.