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**Committee on
Standards in
Public Life**

Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee
House of Commons
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CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY 'FAKE NEWS'

SUBMISSION BY THE COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE

1. The Committee welcomes the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee's inquiry into 'fake news': the growing phenomenon of widespread dissemination, through social media and the internet, and acceptance as fact of stories of uncertain provenance or accuracy.
2. The Committee's remit is to promote the high standards of conduct in public life as set out in the well-established 'Nolan' principles.¹ These seven principles apply to all holders of public office and also to those in other sectors who deliver services paid for out of public funds.
3. The principle of Honesty is obviously directly germane to the 'fake news' controversy and we totally deprecate any involvement by any politician or official in issuing or promoting untruthful or factually inaccurate information. In addition, there are wider concerns about 'fake news' which run counter to all seven principles and which could have a substantial impact on public perceptions of public life. Public attitudes towards politicians and political institutions, which are shaped to a considerable degree by media content, are already disturbingly low (see Annex B). Although not perfect, in the

¹ The background to the Committee and seven principles which it promotes are set out at Annex A.

mainstream print and broadcast media there are specific mechanisms and cultural traditions which aim to deter and remedy untrue or inaccurate material. By contrast, no such mechanisms or traditions yet exist for social media and the internet.

4. The Committee therefore wishes to express its concern that if the publication of 'fake news' is tolerated to the extent that it became commonplace, there would inevitably be grave consequences for public attitudes, democratic processes and for the conduct of public life. The risks increase with the spread of the use of social media, but the problems would not be confined to material disseminated through such means. Without reassurance that the false and the genuine are being distinguished, there is a real risk of 'contamination' - with public trust and confidence in public life declining further still whatever the origin of information or its channel of communication.
5. We stress that the Committee itself has not itself researched evidence on 'fake news' and cannot comment on its current prevalence or its potential to spread further. We also recognise that any regulatory or other arrangements which might be put in place are likely to range wider than our focus on holders of public office. Nevertheless, we would encourage the Select Committee's current inquiry to point to some effective ways forward.
6. We would also like to draw to the Committee's attention a seminar we held jointly with University College London's Constitution Unit. This event took place in November 2016 and addressed the conduct of recent referendums in the UK, on the matters of Welsh devolution (2011); the Westminster electoral system (2011); Scottish independence (2014); and EU membership (2016).²
7. The working paper summarising the discussion is attached for ease of reference. The themes that emerged in the first section of the seminar were around the quality of the information available to voters and issues concerning how to combat misinformation at elections.³
8. Participants at the Seminar also raised the wider role of trust in sources of information. Responses to the Committee's biennial surveys on public attitudes towards standards in public life (most recently in 2012) placed particular emphasis on honesty, and 'telling the truth' remained an important consideration for the public with respect to public office holders and those in the public eye.⁴
9. We hope you find our general thoughts on these areas of concern and the report of the seminar useful, and look forward to the report of your inquiry.

² The seminar initiated the Constitution Unit's longer inquiry in referendums; the Committee provided a forum for the debate, and reflected the concerns put to the Committee by the public immediately following the EU referendum on 23 June 2016.

³ CSPL (2017) Working Paper – Referendum Seminar. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/committee-publishes-paper-on-referendum-seminar>

⁴ CSPL (2013) Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2012. p. 13. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/337017/Public_Attitude_Survey_2012.pdf

Committee on Standards in Public Life: Background

The Committee on Standards in Public Life is an 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 Committee's terms of reference were updated in 2013: "...the Committee's remit to examine 'standards of conduct of all holders of public office' [encompasses] all those involved in the delivery of public services, not solely those appointed or elected to public office" (Hansard (HC) 5 February 2013, col. 7WS).

The Committee's terms of reference were further clarified in a House of Lords written Parliamentary Question on 28th February 2013 to explain that the Committee's remit means it "can examine issues relating to the ethical standards of the delivery of public services by private and voluntary sector organisations, paid for by public funds, even where those delivering the services have not been appointed or elected to public office" (Hansard Column WA347).

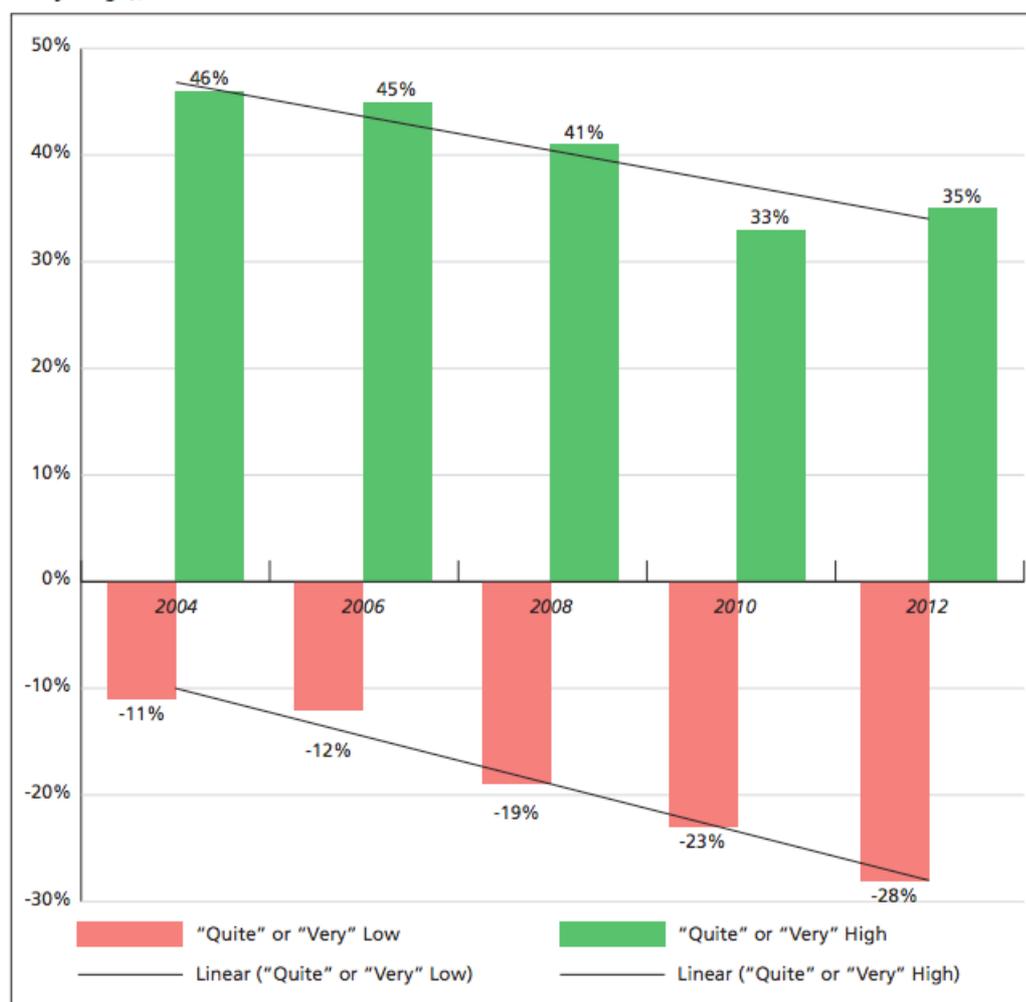
A Research Advisory Board chaired by Professor Mark Philp, University of Warwick, supports the Committee's work.

Evidence on Public Attitudes to Politicians and Political Institutions

Committee on Standards in Public Life Surveys (2004 – 2012)

1. Between 2004 and 2012 the Committee commissioned and reported on five biennial surveys of public attitudes towards public office holders.⁵
2. These surveys revealed a sharp increase in mistrust of public office holders across the timeframe of this quantitative research. As figure 1.1 (from our 2013 report) demonstrates, the percentage of people who perceived standards in general across public life to be “quite” or “very” low almost tripled in the period between 2004 and 2012.⁶

Figure 1.1 Overall rating of standards of conduct (“Quite” or “Very” Low and “Quite” or “Very” High), 2004-2012



⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/cspl-surveys-of-public-attitudes>

⁶ CSPL (2013) Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2012. p. 11.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/337017/Public_Attitude_Survey_2012.pdf

3. In 2012, MPs and government ministers were evaluated less favourably than all other categories (except tabloid journalists). Just 32% of respondents believed that government ministers are trustworthy, and 30% trusted MPs.⁷
4. In the same survey, 70% of respondents thought very few or no MPs “owned up” when they made mistakes, and 54% believed that very few or no MPs made sure public money is spent wisely.⁸

Other Indicators

5. The most recent survey of its kind, the Edelman Trust Barometer 2017 also revealed a decline in trust in institutions in the UK between 2016 and 2017. The UK was one of 21 countries which saw decreasing trust in institutions in this timeframe.⁹
6. Private polling companies, including Ipsos Mori, often find that parliamentarians are trusted less than other professions, such as doctors, teachers, judges and hairdressers. In 2016, while 91% of those asked trust doctors to tell the truth, just 20% trust government ministers and 15% trust politicians generally.¹⁰
7. Further, analysis of Wave 7 of the British Election study (April 2016 – May 2016) for the Committee found that 93% of those surveyed believe that politicians ‘sometimes’ or ‘very often’ do special favours for donors. While 88% think that behaviour is ‘never’ or ‘very rarely’ acceptable.¹¹

Conclusions

8. This evidence leads the Committee to believe that public attitudes towards politicians and political institutions are disturbingly low, and that the public holds politicians and political institutions in increasingly low esteem.

⁷ CSPL (2013) Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2012. p. 13. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/337017/Public_Attitude_Survey_2012.pdf

⁸ CSPL (2013) Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2012. p. 18. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/337017/Public_Attitude_Survey_2012.pdf

⁹ Edelman (2017) 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Annual Study p.11. <http://www.edelman.com/global-results/>

¹⁰ Ipsos Mori and Mumsnet (2016) Enough of Experts? Trust and the EU Referendum. p.2. <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/Mumsnet-trust-report-FINAL.pdf>

¹¹ Goddard, Dee (2016) Public Attitudes to Party Funding in Britain. p.2. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565048/Dee_Goddard_CSPL_Party_Funding_Report.pdf