

**MPS' OUTSIDE INTERESTS  
ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY**

**HELD AT 9AM ON THURSDAY 15TH MARCH 2018**

**Committee on  
Standards in  
Public Life**

**PARTICIPANTS:**

*Stuart Bruce, Chartered Institute of Public Relations*

*Dr Dominic Burbidge, University of Oxford*

*Professor Rosie Campbell, Birkbeck, University of London*

*Professor Cees van der Eijk, University of Nottingham, CSPL Research Advisory Board*

*Professor Matthew Flinders, Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics*

*Jon Gerlis, Chartered Institute of Public Relations*

*Steve Goodrich, Transparency International UK*

*Professor Robert Hazell, Constitution Unit, UCL*

*Dr Abby Innes, LSE*

*Professor Gillian Peele, Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford*

*Professor Mark Philp, University of Warwick, CSPL Research Advisory Board Chair*

*Rt. Hon Peter Riddell CBE, Commissioner for Public Appointments*

*Dr Jonathan Rose, De Montfort University*

*Alexandra Runswick, Unlock Democracy*

*John Sills, Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority*

*Heather Wood, Registrar of Members' Financial Interests (observing)*

*Lord Bew, Chair, Committee on Standards in Public Life*

*Jane Ramsey, Committee on Standards in Public Life*

*Monisha Shah, Committee on Standards in Public Life*

*Simon Hart, Committee on Standards in Public Life*

*Rt. Hon Lord Stunell OBE, Committee on Standards in Public Life*

## **BROAD THEMES DISCUSSED:**

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule. The themes identified below reflect the comments made by a range of participants in attendance. The roundtable was held to inform the Committee's ongoing review of MPs' outside interests.

### **Working Lives of MPs**

- The nature of MPs' working lives, and how they interact with members of the public, was seen to have changed remarkably in recent years. This includes the rise of constituency casework.
- Concerns were expressed about the need for Parliament to be open to a wide range of people, from a range of professional backgrounds, and that more should be done to promote this. A suggestion was made about job sharing for MPs.
- The professional background of MPs was seen as one factor of change in recent years. There was a concern that an overly restrictive system regulating outside interests could have the effect of preventing some people whose professions require the maintenance of professional registrations, including doctors and nurses, from choosing to enter Parliament.

### **Reasonable Limits**

- There is significant divergence of views surrounding the definition of 'reasonable limits' for MPs' outside interests.
- The public's estimation of what a reasonable limit is, both in time and in extra income, is likely different to an MP's, and there seems to be a real division amongst Members of Parliament (and political parties) regarding what is 'reasonable' for them to earn from outside interests.
- It was suggested that an acceptable definition of 'reasonable limits' would be that which precludes conflicts of interest and the possibility of the abuse of public office for private gain – outside interests that could lead to actual or perceived conflicts of interests were seen as far less acceptable than those which did not necessarily interfere with their jobs as MPs.
- Public opinion research shows that there is a strong distrust of high remuneration with regard to MPs' outside interests.
- It was argued that setting any kind of limit on hours or earnings for outside interests would prove unenforceable and that transparency about where the remuneration came from was potentially more important – on the whole, participants did not think that it would be helpful to enforce legislation or requirements that could not be met by MPs.
- Public perceptions are important and the "type" of outside interest clearly makes a difference to how acceptable it is seen to be – it is not necessarily about MPs having second jobs, but rather having jobs which are perceived to be "good" in some way (there seems to be a distinction, in terms of MPs working beyond Parliament, in relation to day-to-day practical work in a profession and remunerated positions on the boards of companies).

- A number of participants made clear the importance of quality and diversity of representation of MPs, stressing that restrictions could have the unintended consequence of creating a political system in which only those with personal wealth could afford to step into the political arena.
- Outside interests were also seen as a way by which MPs could maintain a connection with the 'outside world'.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

- Issues may arise with outside interests where MPs hold roles which provide a direct conflict of interest between their private and public affairs. It was argued that the boundaries between MPs' private and public affairs was becoming increasingly blurred.
- The public's concern about outside interests, and perceptions and implications for public trust in Parliament, was seen to be based on the nature of an MPs' outside role, including the prospects for conflicts of interest.
- It was suggested that a profound problem exists around consultancy work, where MPs provide consultancy on parliamentary affairs to external organisations, for example. This was because of the potential for preferential access to policy making and prospects for actual or perceived conflicts of interest to arise.
- Transparency in outside interests was seen as one way to combat any actual or perceived conflicts of interest arising from MPs' outside interests.

### **Transparency**

- Transparency was seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition. It was suggested that more could be done to promote public understanding of politics, to give the public sphere the ability to have conversations about standards in public life, and to build trust in politics and politicians more generally.
- It was noted that there was not sufficient transparency to the public on the Register of Members' Financial Interests – it was described as not digitally accessible, and concerns were raised about the way in which information was captured and published (including a lack of consistency in the way the data is recorded).
- On the issue of declarations within Parliament, it was suggested that technological solutions could be adopted, such as flagging interests, to increase transparency and in turn, public trust.
- In terms of outside interests, public attitudes appear to be more lenient when MPs are transparent about where their external income is coming from, what they are doing with it and how they have earned it.

### **Undue Influence**

- Participants were in agreement that outside interests can lead to a risk of undue influence being brought to bear on Parliament and Parliamentarians.
- Concerns were raised about ensuring MPs are open to legitimate representations from a range of groups, but that transparency around lobbying is essential.

- The current regime for transparency around lobbying was criticised for being too limited in scope, and not accessible enough to the public.
- There were concerns surrounding outside interests that are directly related to public policy making, particularly in a system of self-regulation.
- Suggestion that strengthening the lobbying register and making it more comprehensive would improve transparency – for need for large companies, charities and organisations with in-house lobbyists who are meeting with Government to be registered, and for lobbyists to be required to be more clear about what meetings are about.

CSPL Secretariat

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