

Summary of Standards and Principles workshops

With two groups of students from school years 12 and 13

Held on 12 November 2019

Report by the secretariat to the Committee
Facilitated by Ed Moss independent facilitator

20 November 2019

Commissioned by the **Committee on Standards in Public Life** as part of the 25th Anniversary of the Committee.

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Context

The Committee on Standards in Public Life marked its 25th anniversary in part by asking how far the Seven 'Nolan' Principles of Public Life still reflect people's belief in guiding principles for maintaining trust and confidence in public officials.

This report was created in collaboration with the Secretariat for the Committee on Standards in Public Life (the Committee) and Ed Moss, the independent facilitator who ran the sessions, to summarise the discussion across two workshops for sixth formers arranged by the Committee.

The workshops took place in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association room in Westminster Hall, Palace of Westminster, on Tuesday 12 November 2019; each workshop lasted for two and a half hours.

The aim of the workshops was to understand the relevance and meaning of the 7 principles to a group of young people.

The participants

A total of 26 students aged 17 or 18 years old participated across the two workshops. All were currently studying politics or have an interest in politics. Each student was nominated by their school or college. The CSPL invited schools who were part of the House of Commons Education Service's Teachers' Ambassadors programme to take part in the workshop. The CSPL accepted all nominations received. The students travelled from across England, Wales and Northern Ireland from a range of urban and rural locations. There was a balance of male and female students in the group and also a balance of BAME participants.

Considerations and Limitations

There are limitations with this type of workshop, which may have influenced students' participation and the Committee's ability to draw conclusions from outcomes of the discussion.

1. This group of participants is too small to make any larger scale generalisations or statistical extrapolations. The group provides a snapshot of how students who do not all know each other responded to the topic and the process of exploring it.

2. Second, almost all of the students were studying politics at A-level, were already interested in the topic area and had some understanding of the topics covered. This was clear from the materials they submitted prior to the workshops. For example, there was an acceptance that principles are necessary for a well-functioning public life and a high value was placed by the students on the public having a set of standards to ground expectations of those in public office. They could see the possible consequences of an absence of these standards for the officials, and the public. For example, a number referred to expenses scandals including the one that created the circumstances for the establishment of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the “Nolan Committee”.
3. Given the length of the workshop students might not have had adequate time to immerse themselves in the subject matter. They may also have found the venue intimidating. These risks appear to have been countered by the participants starting from a relatively high base level of interest and understanding of the topic (compared to the wider population for this age bracket). This facilitated a reasonably deep interrogation of the Principles in Public Life and of expectations of public officials. The willingness to travel long distances testifies to the high levels of motivation and a certain level of confidence among participants.

The students’ starting point

Before the workshop participants were invited to have a structured conversation at school to explore their understanding of key terms that may be used during the discussion: standards, principles, values and ethics. 10 students responded to the task. The committee should take note of where there are agreements with the committee’s definitions (taken from the website) and where perceptions of the key terms are expressed differently as this gives a sense of the perspective the participants arrived with and where the discussions started.

- **Standards:** Students largely shared the Committee’s understanding of Standards
- **Principles** were generally referred to as something that applies to self that you use to create standards to measure yourself
- **Values** ranged in their understanding, from personal and around guiding priorities to being a reflection of morals or also referring to collective behaviours.
- **Ethics** mostly was understood as something that was moral or religious in context and source and could be applied to individuals or groups.

Outline of the session

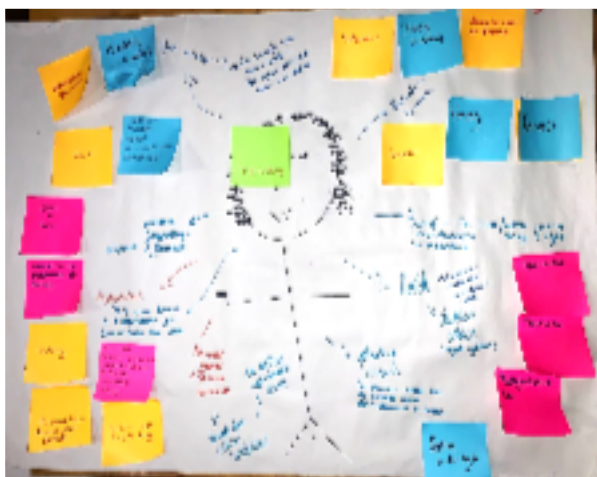
Introduction

Students took part in exercises to familiarise them with each other and the facilitator and create a safe space to explore the themes with some clear boundaries of expectations set.

Part A exercise

Students were invited to consider a persona of one of five public officials - a judge, a police officer, a local councillor, a surgeon and a teacher. They were asked to think about and express

- what it was appropriate for members of the public to expect of these office holders in fulfilling their roles.
- what situations, including ethically problematic situations, the person might face, and how they should act in those situations
- how they should act at all times, and how they should be seen to be acting.



In response, students looking at the role of “the judge” discussed the following qualities as being important for the job of being a judge:

“Being able to to be impartial and knowing the law well so they can make fair decisions”

They found the following scenario challenging:

- Tension between situation ethics and absolutism in decision making
- That judges are part of the community and are not in a vacuum
- Personal and political beliefs influencing decision making as you get variations in judgements across the country depending on the judges

Students discussing “the police officer” persona thought the following qualities were important for the role:

- community minded, fair, non judgemental, decisive

They found the following scenario involved competing expectations on the police officer:

- On whether the police officer was able to put their own beliefs aside to ensure that the good and safety of the community and the law was maintained.

This group should consider the following things in resolving those conflicts:

- There is a difference between what a police officer would do as an individual and what they would do as an officer
- Their interaction in a community policing context may conflict against their personal beliefs - such as any prejudice they may have toward any group.

The resolutions the students identified:

- Having codes of conduct and also looking at monitoring of which groups they are engaging with in their communities.

Students discussing “the teacher” persona thought the following qualities were important for the role:

- kind, open, honest, understanding and compassionate

They found the following scenario involved competing expectations on the teacher:

- Teachers often have longer term relationships with students. When teachers enter the role of teaching to teach and then are expected to carry out broader welfare roles with students which may take up time usually spent on teaching.
- Similar to police officers, the parts of the curriculum they are requested to teach may be in contradiction to their own personal views or what they believe students should know about. Examples of sex and relationships education being a current example

This group should consider the following things in resolving those conflicts:

- That teachers are responsible for delivering the curriculum and because they are paid to do a role they should be expected to teach the curriculum.
- The resolution for the conflict of student welfare was not really addressed in the discussion as it seemed to be taken as part of the role.

Students discussing “the surgeon” persona thought the following qualities were important for the role:

- being decisive and clear and also fair with their patients.

They found the following scenario involved competing expectations on the surgeon:

- that there was a tension between doing private and NHS work over which they may prioritise what they might recommend to patients.

Students were also asked what made a good and bad MP. This part of the session gave participants the chance to develop ideas independently of the original Seven Principles structure. Subsequently, having been asked to listen out for commonalities the participants were asked to identify 5 principles that should apply to all the examples they discussed. Having done this, the Nolan Principles were introduced (using the terms, but not the descriptors).

The rest of the workshop involved the students comparing and contrasting their list to the Seven Principles, rating the Seven Principles for relevance (and giving grounds for their rating) and looking at challenges and ideas for meeting the principles.

Outcomes

Selflessness

The principle that was most readily identified by participants as well as being rated as one of the most important to underpin a healthy society when in a public office was selflessness. Selflessness in the context of the discussions was defined to mean a range of positive or negative actions, including:

“putting aside your own values and beliefs in order to ‘do the job well’”

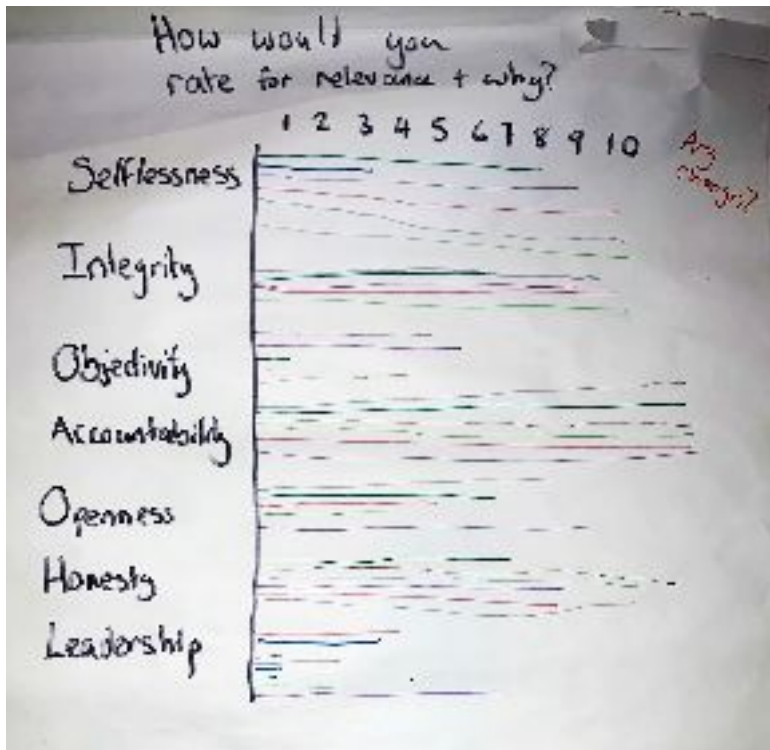
Corruption was often defined as its converse – looking after your own interests only.

“The issue with corruption is that it's about only looking after yourself, when you are in position of power you have more opportunity to do this and it can be more tempting, I guess.”

Other words which emerged around what it means to be selfless were being personally **adaptable** - that is, to accept the principles as contributing to the definition of one's official role, even if they were not personally important; students talked about public officials being **representative** of the people they are serving and holding their values and views; they emphasised the importance of responding to the **diversity** of thoughts and people they serve; they thought **impartiality** when making decisions was important; and finally, they saw it as important that public officials took **responsibility** for their actions and decisions. Responsibility was often seen as capturing what ‘selflessness’ was really about.

Accountability, Selflessness and Leadership

During the discussions, particular emphasis was paid to accountability, selflessness and leadership in relation to a range of public officers. In these conversations, participants discussed the difference between what public officials *should* do and what these officials *do do* to abide by these principles, particularly in relation to the police and MPs.



Another thread concerned leadership and different leadership styles. In particular, the perception of the 'best' senior leadership style as necessarily masculine, more directive, hierarchical or authoritative in style. Students recognised that inclusive styles of leadership, using flat structures could still maintain accountability and be principled. Students listed **competence, authenticity, integrity** and **honesty** as being important leadership qualities.

Objectivity

One group had a lengthy discussion about objectivity towards the end of their session. The group found it difficult to agree on a definition or descriptor for being objective that they felt captured the responsibilities and challenges of a person in public life. They felt other principles lent themselves to a more clear-cut definition. The group spent time exploring how one might be objective in the discharge of a public duty, and where it might be challenging to be so. One particularly articulate participant declared their view that objectivity is impossible for those in public life and felt strongly that it should not be a standard to which all are held.

"The ability to stand back from the situation and look at it through a different perspective" Student talking about objectivity.

While this was not a view held by the whole group, it was acknowledged that this principle was less easy for them to think about. The group agreed that it would be difficult to create a standard to measure objectivity. The difficulties with measuring whether an individual was living up to the principles formed a theme in many of the discussions across all the principles.

Fairness



Students referred frequently to 'fairness'

- One student defined fairness as 'similar to equality'
- Another student talked about the appearance of being fair (and whether this was the same or different to impartiality)
- Students also discussed the importance of being fair to unequal members of the public in executing the duties of a public office, such as police or judicial responsibilities.

This discussion on fairness then expanded into **open-mindedness** (contrast with openness, which was perceived as being about

transparency) **equity, accessibility and interactiveness. There is more detail on these points in the following sections.**

"When people are open-minded, they are more likely to be able to see more perspectives which is fairer"

In a discussion about equity and accessibility, students expressed a desire for public officials to be understanding of those who are different. Students saw the role of public officials as balancing inequity and also to make what they do more accessible (or relatable?)

"Equity is about ensuring everyone has what they need to take advantage of everyone having the same opportunity, public officials should come from different backgrounds to understand this"

Fairness was also expressed as a duty to be **flexible** and responsive to circumstances, especially where the official held power over members of the public, as with judges and police officers. During this discussion one group thought this could be achieved by using

‘situational ethics’, or context dependent conceptions of ethical responsibilities as against an absolute set of moral standards.

There was discussion about whether applying situational ethics would make the role of a judge, for example, more or less fair and for whom.

In contrast to suggesting that fairness be included as a new principle of public life, students thought existing descriptors of the principles could be changed to incorporate fairness.

Expectation of those in public life

1. Interact with the public

Students thought it important that those in public life interact with the public, and in particular, the beneficiaries of their service. This discussion seemed to cover the idea that public life should be done through a series of interactions, rather than a process of “consult and inform”, which students viewed as a means for those in office to impose their own views on others.

“ Things being interactive means we can be involved in shaping something which is fairer because we pay taxes and should be involved in making sure public roles reflect society ”

2. Experience and competence

Students in one group felt keenly that those in public life should be competent and shouldn’t undertake such roles without the necessary education and experience to carry out the responsibilities of public offices. Education and training were taken to include both formal and informal education. Experience seemed to be understood as interactive and immersive.

In describing why experience, competence and the ability to carry out the responsibilities of public life, was important, students said:

“You want your judge and the police to know the law, just like you want your surgeon and teacher to be well trained and experienced so you know they can do their job well”

Respect

Students saw **Openness, honesty** and **transparency** entailing public officials being respectful. Other students explained that respect could be described as 'summarising' the above principles, rather than being on par with them as a principle.

"If a police officer is arresting a climate protest, whether they agree with the protester's motivations or actions they should treat that protestor respectfully and elevate themselves from their personal feelings; difficult though that may be. If the police start beating people up because they don't agree, it breaks down trust"

The students took the view that teachers and police officers ought to demonstrate **respect** in their work, especially when dealing with vulnerable people. A number also expressed in strong terms their view that it is especially the responsibility of those in roles with a greater power differential (teachers, doctors, police officers) to be **open, honest** and to be **transparent** as a way of building trust in the community.

"Teachers are the most influential people in our lives at this age apart from our families and friends as we are exposed to them everyday, we pick up what is right and wrong from their interactions with us"

Concerns about the impact of pressure on people's conduct when acting in such roles were examined. The role of police officers is such that, when under pressure, they are understood as having to prioritise maintaining law and order. For example, openness, honesty and transparency might need to be put to one side in moments where the public were not open or honest with the police.

Honesty

Students appeared to assume that honesty was a prerequisite for those in public life, without necessarily verbalising why this assumption was made or the merits of the principle itself.

Honesty was almost taken as a given in many conversations. Honesty arose as an issue before the Nolan principles were introduced in the workshop, then again after they were introduced. Following more extensive discussion, students ranked honesty as less significant than other principles. Those discussions identified more complexity, particularly in relation to problems of criminality and threats to national security, which emerged as in tension with honesty and openness. When asked whether people who had committed crimes should hold public office, it was commented that many people in the past had committed criminal acts to overturn a perceived injustice and had gone on to hold elected office.

“The suffragette movement was famous for members breaking laws and then members holding elected positions once they won their right to do so”

Another example was if national security was at risk, was it in the public interest, to be honest?

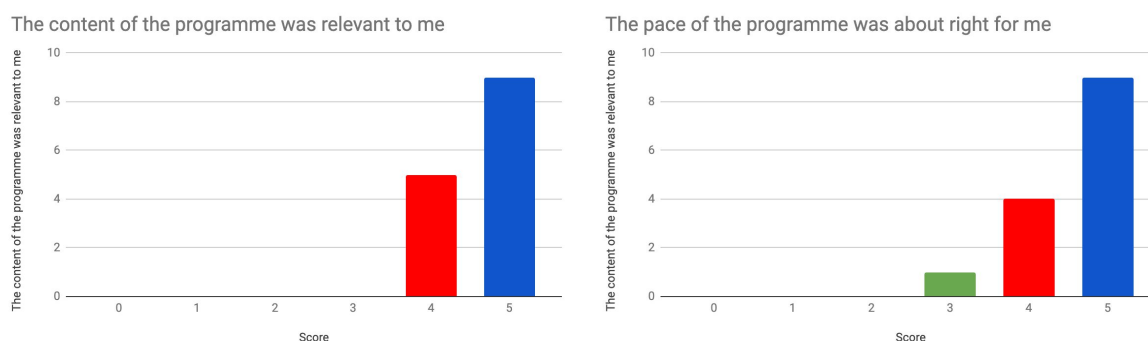
“Should prime ministers be bound to share something which could make the country less safe, it’s one of the problems with security, its an area there isn’t much public accountability over”

These two conversations led to honesty being ranked as less important. However, it was recognised that it was very important that people in public office did not break trust. When trust is broken, it prompts questions about how far it is possible to hold people accountable before actions are taken or only afterwards.

Annex 1 Participant engagement and feedback

At the end of the session, participants were invited to give feedback which focused on their reaction to the day and what they may have learned.

A total of 26 participants were invited to offer feedback; 14 completing feedback forms.



Asked to all respondents who scored 9 or 10.

What led you to score a 9 or 10 out of 10?

- Really thought-provoking session on a subject I had given very little thought before hand
- It was really interesting and allowed for an open discussion about all topics. We were able to branch for the original ideas and develop from them
- Informative session, useful in enhancing understanding of political language and processes
- It was interactive and made everyone feel included
- Valuable discussion
- Because Ed was really friendly and approachable!!! The music was a nice touch bit quiet
- I really enjoyed the event, was just the right amount of time and the tasks prompted some quite enjoyable discussions.

How did this session impact on you?

- Broadened my understanding and opinion on how public figures and servants should be expected to act
- It has made me more interested in different aspects of the political process and has helped me to be more confident around new people
- Improved my understanding of what should be expected from those in public service; enabled me to question how they could be held accountable
- It was very informative and gave me a broader understanding of public life in views beyond my own
- Made me think more about what I want from the people representing me
- Understanding more how committees work. Stronger appreciation (of) and resilience to other

people's views.

I learned the opinions of a variety of people and it was interesting to talk to people in this field.

If you were describing to a friend or colleague about the session in a sentence or two, what would you say?

Session about the expectations the public should have about those who protect, help and represent them.

It was interesting. It allowed everyone one to have their day in a discussion and it feels as though all ideas were represented and respected.

The session was informative and engaging. Although rushed at times, the discussions allowed us to develop our ideas collectively and leave with a greater understanding of political concepts.

It's a great opportunity to broaden your horizons on matters that influence our lives that we often lack understanding of

Engaging and informative debates

We went to Westminster and visited parliament and a committee where we participated and gave our opinions about how people in the public sector should act and behave.

Brilliant way to discuss the current political system and identify and learn what's in which it may add or detract from our lives personally.

For those who scored a 7 or 8

What led you to score the session a 7 or 8 out of 10?

Just felt about right really. A good score but not life-changing

It was good, very interactive and allowed great discussion and very engaging

There could have been more information beforehand

Asked to all respondents

What's the one action point you are taking away from the programme to put in to practice?

The role of a public figure

How I view the word "objectivity"

Be more confident in new situations

How to widen public understanding of what's expected from those in public service positions

To cooperate with a variety of people to come to conclusions rather than forming them based on your own limited judgement

Responsibility

Hold people in public life to more scrutiny

We have taken away an appreciation that public sector jobs are actually quite challenging that we first thought

perhaps talking to some of the people that work in the public service sector and ask their opinions on the nolan principles and compare them to our views of an 'ideal' professional in this area