



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Correcting the record, HC 521

Wednesday 19 October 2022

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Members present: Karen Bradley (Chair); Aaron Bell; Jack Brereton; Sir Christopher Chope; Patrick Grady; James Gray; Nigel Mills; James Sunderland; Owen Thompson.

Questions 1-24

Witnesses

Will Moy, Chief Executive, Full Fact; and Alice Lilly, Senior Researcher, Institute for Government.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [CTR 03 – Full Fact](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Will Moy and Alice Lilly.

Q1 Chair: Can I start by welcoming our witnesses? The Committee is, as you know, looking at the way that the corrections process works in the House of Commons and what improvements we might be able to suggest to it. We are very grateful to have you both here. We have Alice from the Institute for Government and Will from Full Fact. We have a number of questions, which I hope will tease out the issues that there are around the current correcting the record system in the House of Commons and any recommendations we might be able to make for it. I will start with a closed question that you can hopefully expand on. Is the House's current corrections system fit for purpose?

Will Moy: No. There are lots of good aspects about the current system, and that is worth stressing. The introduction of the ministerial corrections column has largely been successful in as far as it goes. It is used regularly day in, day out without a great deal of fuss or heat. It enables important errors to be corrected. That is something to welcome.

Where it is not working is that MPs who are not Ministers and who want to correct the record are barred from doing so by the rules of the House of Commons. That is an extraordinary and slightly perverse unintended consequence of the previous changes, I would imagine. MPs who are dishonest—I stress that in our experience, that is not widespread in the way that many cynical people imagine—or choose to repeatedly mislead the House of Commons are not effectively deterred from doing so, and there is not an effective system for responding to a pattern of behaviour like that. Those are the two big problems we see. This is obviously coming from checking examples of hundreds of claims from politicians of all parties.

The more technical problem, which is worth highlighting, is that we now live in an online world. As all of you know, your words are frequently clipped, taken out of context and spread virally online. If those original words were inadvertently mistaken, the original errors can spread widely online. For example, you might say something about covid in good faith that turns out to be misleading. It might get used to say, "Well an MP says this", and it is then used to support the spread of misinformation that can damage people's health.

In the way the current corrections system for Ministers works, the correction only appears later in a separate ministerial corrections column, so it does not travel with the original in the way that is necessary online and normal in other places. That is, I think, a relatively easy fix, and it is an increasingly important fix.

Alice Lilly: I would echo all of what Will has just said. I think the purpose of this system is obviously to make sure that what is said in the



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Commons, the information that underpins the debate and the decisions that are taken in this place are as accurate as possible, but also that people both inside and outside of Parliament have confidence that the information they are hearing here is accurate. As Will says, I think there are some very good things about the current system, the ministerial corrections process being one of them, but at the moment there are still three sets of issues that make it harder than it should be for people both inside and outside of Parliament to correct the record and use those corrections.

One set of issues is the technical issues that Will alluded to—having to know what it is you are looking for in *Hansard* and not being able to track things through. Another set of issues is around the scope of who is able to make corrections. The fact that Ministers can formally do so but other Members cannot creates a real asymmetry between those two groups. The final set of issues is around accessibility and publicity. As Will says, we all make mistakes. That is not a problem. People make mistakes in good faith and generally want to correct the record, but actually it is difficult for them to do so. You want a system where it is as easy as possible for people to correct the record and get the credit for having done so. You create a culture where it is just a step you take to do the right thing.

Q2 Owen Thompson: With apologies to both our guests, I have to leave shortly, so I will not be here for the whole session. There was a report by the Procedure Committee in 2007 on this subject. What has changed since then to justify the proposed revisions?

Alice Lilly: One of the things—Will mentioned this earlier—is that the way people consume information and parliamentary business has changed. The most recent data I could find from the Parliamentary Digital Service was from 2017, and that was already showing that almost half of people consuming *Hansard* were doing so either via tablet or by a phone. Also, the average time people spent on *Hansard* was one minute, so people are looking through this stuff really quickly. What that means is the system needs to be updated, so that it is incredibly clear when people are looking through this that a correction has been made. The second thing, as we have already touched on, is the role of social media. When a remark is uttered in the House of Commons, it obviously can go viral. It can be spread within minutes. Corrections do not always then see the same level of publicity.

Will Moy: I will just add that we now have the example of the Scottish Parliament, which has worked for several years with every Member being able to correct the record when necessary, and that system works smoothly and effectively. Unfortunately, the public are spontaneously saying that a lack of faith in politics and politicians is one of the biggest issues facing the country. That has been a consistent finding in unprompted surveys this year.

There is the serious challenge of the reputation of politics. Obviously, we have been going through a heated and difficult time in politics, and we have seen real clashes where Back-Bench MPs have been unable to do



what they perceive as being their duty of holding the Government to account on matters of honesty. We have seen situations where MPs have been thrown out of the Chamber for trying to draw attention to the importance of honesty. I would suggest that that is bad for the reputation of the House. It is frustrating for individual Back-Bench Members. It makes the Speaker look either impotent or complicit, and that is again bad for our democracy. It also affects the Government, because if the Government are subject to unfair accusations of dishonesty, they do not have a mechanism to conclusively resolve them either. All the evidence, which is increasingly important during a stressful time in politics, is that the Government, the Opposition, Back Benchers and the House itself are all suffering from the lack of an effective approach to corrections in the House.

- Q3 **Jack Brereton:** How do we distinguish that from issues that are matters of debate? Some of these issues are not necessarily shared and agreed on across the House.

Will Moy: Yes, that is very important. The first thing to say is, as far as I know, neither of us is proposing anything other than Members being able to correct the record when they themselves believe they should. When Ministers repeatedly fail to correct the record and therefore have breached their duty to correct an inadvertent misleading of the House, there is a standards issue, which is about behaviours and not living up to your duties to the House. It is not about individual claims. We are suggesting that that standards issue about behaviours ought to be one where there is an effective mechanism for responding to claims. The reality is that there will always need to be judgment in a process responding to such cases.

Sensible people would recognise that you either need a respected impartial figure, such as the Speaker, or a cross-party group, such as a relevant Committee, involved in such a judgment. Those judgments need to be made with restraint because there will be good faith disagreements. What we repeatedly see in our work are clear errors of fact. We are not talking about highly disputed, nuanced interpretative things. We are talking about people saying numbers are going up when they are actually going down. There was, for example, a recent mistake that a Member made that they recognised was wrong but were unable to correct it, and that was saying there were more road deaths than covid deaths. That is factually wrong. The Member themselves realised that once we had pointed it out, but they did not have a practical means of correcting it.

- Q4 **Jack Brereton:** Some of these issues are very easy to distinguish, but in other cases we can have facts that go against one another. It is subject to interpretation, so it is not always quite so clear. It sometimes depends on which facts you use, so there are matters for interpretation.

Will Moy: There are absolutely matters for interpretation. What we are suggesting is that every Member, if they themselves are convinced they have made a factual error, should have the ability to correct it. I think that is a very simple and obvious suggestion, because we expect everybody to correct the record. We all recognise that we all make mistakes, and we



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think that honest people correct their mistakes. It is surprising, if not perverse, that the rules of the House of Commons stop an MP who wants to correct a mistake that they have recognised from being able to do so. That, I would suggest, does not involve controversies about interpretation, because it is up to the Members themselves and their own interpretation of their own words and the evidence about those words.

The area where I think you would get controversies about interpretation is when you get to the problem of a Minister repeatedly misleading the House and failing to correct the record. That, obviously, would have to be dealt with, and dealing with it would need careful political judgment. I refer to the very recent example, which I believe Members have raised with this Committee, of claims about employment going up when it was actually going down being made more than 10 times by the Prime Minister on the record in the House of Commons. He himself accepted that those claims were untrue but failed to correct the record. He repeated them, having accepted that they were untrue. The statutory UK Statistics Authority, which reports to Parliament through the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, pointed out that they were untrue. There was no doubt that he had an obligation to correct the record under the rules of the House of Commons and that he failed to fulfil that obligation, but the House of Commons had no means of dealing with that failure, and I think that brings the House of Commons into disrepute.

Alice Lilly: On a slightly separate point, on your question about interpretation, when I mentioned earlier that the current formal system as it exists has some problems with scope, I think those problems are about the scope and who is able to formally correct the record, not about what kind of corrections are enabled. As you say, often the corrections are purely factual. It is simply the case that somebody has got a number wrong. Those can be dealt with fairly easily. Ministers do have the option to make written statements if there is perhaps something that is more a matter of interpretation, or if they feel that something has been taken the wrong way. At the moment, the scope of the kinds of corrections that exist is the right one, and I would not necessarily recommend at all that that be increased. It is about who is able to make those corrections formally.

Q5 **Patrick Grady:** Thank you both for attending. I do not know if it is entirely accurate to say there is no mechanism for Back Benchers to correct the record. If you take the example of someone who says in good faith, "I have heard" or "There are more road deaths than covid deaths" and then are presented outside the Chamber with the opposite case, I think the Speaker would look quite leniently on someone who wanted to come back in to make a point of order and say, "Further to the record in *Hansard*, I have been advised" or whatever. I suppose the question is: what does a better system look like, or how do we make the current system more visible to the public? How can we cross-reference? That is quite difficult. Cross-referencing in *Hansard* is one thing on an online screen. Cross-referencing, like you say, on video and social media is more difficult. Is it sufficiently clear to the public when and how the record is corrected at present? What other options are there?



Will Moy: The answer to that, obviously, is no. To take your point, what I mean by saying there is no mechanism to correct the record is that all of the options available to Members add to the record, but they leave the inaccurate record there, and anyone seeing that original record is unaware that a correction was submitted. When we have dealt with Members in this situation, typically they have considered speaking in a later debate on the same subject and saying, "I previously said this, but actually", which is an honourable thing to do, but does not help anybody who is reading or listening to the previous debate. Raising a point of order in the way that you said, or possibly writing to other participants in the debate and that kind of thing, are ways of trying to fulfil that basic thing of: when you make a mistake, you try to correct it. But they still leave the mistake on the record with all the official panoply of Parliament behind it.

What we have found is that some MPs are reluctant to do that. We are talking to a Member at the moment who has made a mistake and accepts that they have made a mistake. They want to correct it, but we pointed out that their best option is to do a point of order. They are reluctant to do a point of order; they do not feel that is the appropriate way to proceed. I understand why they feel that way, but that is why I say there is not a mechanism for them to correct the record, as distinct from coming back and trying to revisit the topic in a different context.

Q6 **Patrick Grady:** I do not want to get too philosophical, and I do not want to step on the toes of things that might come up in future questioning, but I suppose this is the heart of the matter. Perhaps we will hear from *Hansard* at some point in the future, but the record is the record; you cannot change the facts. You do get to quite a profound principle: if you change the fact of what was said, that is quite a tricky thing to overcome.

Will Moy: I completely agree. The record should say what was originally said, but it should be accompanied by a correction saying, "This was what was originally said, and this is what should have been said". That is how the ministerial corrections column works, except it does not appear in the place you need it to appear. For example, we work a lot with media when they need to correct the record. Typically, the paper will obviously be out there, and there is not a lot you can do about that. They will print a correction in a subsequent edition of the paper, but the online version will be edited with a note saying, in the best cases, "We previously said this, and this is what we should have said."

Q7 **Aaron Bell:** Thank you both. In terms of the existing procedural means of challenge, there are some out there, some of which are not being used as much as they used to be—for example, early-day motions or written questions. Why do you think that is?

Alice Lilly: There are a couple of issues. A lot of it is simply a practical issue. I am not entirely sure how much clarity there is among all Members about all of the mechanisms they have at their disposal. That is something Will will probably be able to speak to you about better than I can, given the work that he does. I think it may be an unintended consequence of the fact that there is a set process that Ministers can use to correct the record,



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but the system for Members to correct the record is nowhere near as formalised; it is very piecemeal. I think that there is a danger that that creates a very complicated, piecemeal picture for the average Member, which simply confuses things, about how they want to go and challenge what somebody else has said.

I will say something about the system that the Scottish Parliament uses, which we referred to earlier. They have one page that offers a list of all the corrections that have been made, with links to all of them. On that same page, there is also all the guidance for Members and for their staff, both about how they can correct the record and how they can challenge any other inaccuracies that they might feel have been made. I think having all of that information together in one place would be very helpful.

Will Moy: I do sometimes wonder whether we should be asking individual MPs to go through long parliamentary battles simply to get basic honesty from Government Ministers. MPs, clearly, are there to hold the Government to account, but for their decisions. I would have thought it was up to the rules and procedures of the House of Commons to make sure that Ministers are honest with the House and correct their mistakes when they make them. Yes, there absolutely are ways of drawing attention to perceived inaccuracies by Ministers, but there are not effective ways of getting them dealt with. In cases where people have engaged in these long parliamentary battles, as we saw in the case of the employment claim I referred to, it is a huge drain on parliamentary time over something that is very simple and not actually in dispute. I would have thought most MPs would rather be talking about the substance of employment policy, rather than whether the numbers are right.

Q8 **Aaron Bell:** Without trying to make this politically partisan, is there some sort of difference between Government mistakes and Back-Bench Members' mistakes? Morally, obviously, people have a responsibility to correct the record in either case, but, particularly with regard to what your organisation does, there is a lot more focus on the Government because they are the Government. Do you think that there is a difference between mistakes made by Ministers and those made by Back-Bench Members, or Opposition Members?

Will Moy: As you say, the duty of honesty applies to all Members and the public's expectation of honesty applies to all Members. I think in most cases Members' expectations of themselves are to be honest and to correct their mistakes and they are frustrated when they are unable to do so, but the Government runs the country, and so its mistakes have more consequences.

The Government getting something wrong can move markets. It can do real harm; it can mislead people about their health decisions and so on. Individual Members can have some of those effects, but to a lesser extent. Ministers also have the benefit of 17,000 analysts working for the civil service. They have more resources to get things right, and more resources to recognise and correct their mistakes. I think it is reasonable to expect that to be reflected in the quality of their contributions.



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On the question of repeatedly misleading the House, the House is clear that every Member has a duty to be honest. Any Member who breaches that duty in a sustained way is, I think, breaking the rules of the House, and the rules of the House should be enforced. But when that is done by a Government Minister, the consequences are so much more serious for all of us.

You could make a case, if you wanted, that a more stringent scrutiny process for Government Ministers would be beneficial. The flip side is that, if a Government are subject to inaccurate scrutiny, they are put in a very difficult position, and it is reasonable for them to think that the rules should be symmetrical.

Q9 Aaron Bell: I wanted to challenge you on that, but you have anticipated a little. You both refer to social media. There have undoubtedly been instances, some of which have been picked up by your organisation, of Members criticising the Government, tweeting it out and then coming back to the House, or replying to their tweet, to admit that they were wrong—probably because of prompting from the likes of yourselves. Yet they have left the original tweet, with its 20,000 retweets, up there, and the correction gets 200. Should there be an obligation or convention that Members who correct the record in the House should delete social media posts?

Will Moy: Absolutely. We believe that the duty of honesty applies to MPs acting as MPs, wherever they act as MPs.

Q10 Aaron Bell: But they will say that they have corrected it by putting a second tweet out there. We all know the nature of Twitter: the lie is around the world before the truth has got its boots on. It seems that some Members have used the impunity that they have in the House to make an inadvertent error, tweet it out, get the retweets and then correct the record, but the political damage is done to the Government on Twitter.

Will Moy: Absolutely. We would welcome a strengthening of the system and the expectations around Members. One of the things we have studied over the years is how corrections are effective. It turns out that there is a formula for effective corrections: you say that the thing was wrong, you say why it was wrong and you say what was true instead. You essentially replace the original, false idea with a new, true idea. That is the effective way of correcting a record. I think it would be very healthy to set that as the expectation for how correcting the record happens. It seems obvious that corrections should go in any channel where mistakes go.

One of the benefits of the Scottish system, which Alice could tell you more about, is that, when a Member corrects the record using that system, it notifies other participants in the debate, so that they are aware that the correction has happened. That is a good principle, and you could see it more broadly.

Q11 Aaron Bell: We are coming to the Scottish system later; someone else has questions on that.



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Specifically on Twitter, it is the deletion of the tweet. To screenshot your tweet and say, "This was wrong," is fine. But if it is not deleted, that tweet is still circulating potentially many months later. Obviously, that is not a proceeding of the House, but it is worth considering having a convention that Members delete a tweet where they have admitted to the House that they got it wrong. Do you have any further thoughts on that?

Alice Lilly: I actually wanted to come back to your earlier question about the distinction between Ministers and Members correcting the record. As we alluded to earlier, there is an asymmetry. If a Member has to stand up and make a point of order in the House, and that is the best procedural mechanism at their disposal to correct the record, that inherently creates a system in which ministerial corrections and Members' corrections are effectively politicised. There will be an inherent gap between those two groups. I am not sure that that is a particularly helpful thing. It is also worth bearing that in mind.

Aaron Bell: Without wishing to anticipate our conclusions, I think we all get the case being made in relation to simple misstatements of fact. The more contested areas, to which my friend Mr Brereton referred earlier, are different.

Q12 **Sir Christopher Chope:** Can I ask you about another issue? Full Fact seems to be taking it upon itself to restrain expressions of opinion in the House of Commons. I have been on the receiving end of public criticisms made by Full Fact, which I have disputed and not conceded. Full Fact has suggested that I have got it all wrong.

However, Full Fact does not seem to apply any such system to the other areas of social media—Facebook, the internet—where there is vile, abusive and threatening material that we know can result in people committing suicide. You do not seem to be interested in any of that, and I just wondered why you seem to think it is so important to try and police what is said in Parliament while ignoring this great area where a lot of these comments are made with the benefit of anonymity. Why do you seem to be obsessed with Members of Parliament's opinions rather than dealing with that wider issue to which I have referred?

Will Moy: First, you do run the country and I think it is reasonable for citizens to have high expectations of their MPs. However, with respect, everything you have said is wrong. I will tell you a bit about what we do with the media, social media and so on. I would say that, yes, I am aware of the case where we fact-checked you and we had an exchange of correspondence about that.

Sir Christopher Chope: We did.

Will Moy: You took it very seriously, and I think that is exactly what people would expect from MPs. We were sorry that we could not convince you that the correction was needed in that case, but the fact that you took it seriously, you seriously engaged with why you thought that claim was right and considered whether you need to correct the record is what, I think, people expect from MPs.



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Sir Christopher Chope: It was not a question of whether I corrected the record; I did not concede that what I said was inaccurate.

Will Moy: No, exactly.

Q13 **Sir Christopher Chope:** That was the issue. It was not an issue about whether I should correct the record; it was whether your suggestion that what I said was inaccurate was correct.

Will Moy: Yes, but in that case my point is that I think if you had agreed that it was inaccurate, you would have wanted to correct the record. We failed to convince you of that. Ultimately, that is public and everyone can read the fact check and make up their own minds about it. That is how a free society works. When Full Fact publishes something, ultimately, people have to make up their own minds about it.

Full Fact fact-checks social media hundreds of times a year. We are currently actively working with Meta, the owner of Facebook and Instagram, and our fact checks are directly embedded in those products. We have been working with Google and YouTube and our fact checks are directly embedded in those services. We run a WhatsApp helpline. We spent most of the pandemic countering life-threatening health misinformation, most of it circulating online and some of it extremely dangerous. That was very difficult for our team dealing with some of that. We hired doctors on to the staff.

We spend an awful lot of time defending politicians from false attacks. In fact, our last fact check of Boris Johnson when Prime Minister was defending him against false claims made about him. That, I think, is appropriate.

Our job as a charity is to inform and improve public debate. Obviously, we can improve the ways we do that. We are constantly trying to improve, but that covers the whole realm of public debate. Ten years ago, I was giving evidence to the Leveson inquiry about press standards and culture. Our work led to the setting up of corrections columns in the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, for example. We have worked in the media to try to enable better informed public debate, but ultimately, nobody has to do anything in response to Full Fact publishing a fact check. People who choose to correct the record, which include every national media outlet and many MPs and so on, are choosing to do so because they believe that that is part of their obligation as people in public life. They believe that, in that case, our fact check was correct and they need to correct the record.

So yes, we are very active on online misinformation. The pandemic, false claims about MPs and Ukraine have all been big themes of our social media work in recent years. I gave evidence to the Public Bill Committee on the Online Safety Bill, strongly making the case, I should say, for freedom of expression and better protections of that Bill and talking about the threats to freedom of expression from that Bill, but in the context of our work trying to tackle online misinformation. I have regularly spoken about the challenge to our democracy from the awful abuse faced by our



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political representatives and particularly women and people of colour in public life, not just in the House of Commons but beyond. So this is very much an active area for us and I am very happy to talk you through that if you would like me to.

- Q14 **Sir Christopher Chope:** I am interested in what you say, and I am delighted to hear that. But if one looks at the results—or the lack of them—the situation in relation to Facebook and other social media platforms is as I have described. It worries me to read that you are in receipt of the best part of £600,000 a year from Meta and £250,000-odd a year from Google. Do you not feel that those large sums of income on which you are dependent compromise your ability to do the right thing in cleaning up social media in the way that so many Members of this House would like to be done?

Will Moy: It is absolutely a trade-off, but I encourage you to read what I said to the Public Bill Committee, and what I said recently in the *Washington Post* about Google and YouTube. We are very public and trenchant critics of those companies, and they know it. But you can read that and make up your own mind about it.

Essentially, the choices we have had to make are: “Do we work with these companies, get an insight into how they work, use that, bring it to policymakers and make our recommendations about how to improve online misinformation, or do we stay pure and separate but have less of an insight?” There is no perfect answer to that trade-off, but we have made the choice we have made.

We are absolutely clear, though, that you cannot leave those decisions up to the internet companies. The problem here is that Parliament has failed to step in. Until there is a serious online safety Bill that stops leaving crucial decisions about protecting our democracy to decision makers in California and Beijing, we are trusting those companies. I do not think that is wise—I have said that publicly and consistently—but we are waiting for Parliament to act.

- Q15 **Sir Christopher Chope:** If you do not trust those companies, which you say you are very critical of, why are you allowing yourselves to receive the best part of £1 million a year from them? Surely that inhibits you. If that money was withdrawn by Meta and Google, you would probably be out of a job. What percentage of your income comes from those companies?

Will Moy: No more than 15% of our income comes from any single source. By the way, I think the numbers you gave earlier were the wrong way around, but all our funding is publicly declared on our website, so you can see for yourself the full list of anybody who gives us more than £5,000. No more than 15% of our income comes from any single source; we have worked towards achieving that level of financial independence over many years. We can walk away from any of those organisations if we need to, and we actively and regularly consider whether that is the appropriate thing to do.



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When we work with them, we publicly report on how we are working with them and on how they need to change. If you look at what we have said about that, you will find that it is challenging and makes use of the expertise we have to try to inform and improve public debate. I absolutely agree with you that taking money from those sources is a judgment call, and one that is disputable. It gives us more information and resources than we would otherwise have, but it also gives us challenges such as this one.

On the other hand, we do not trust everything MPs say, and we try to do our best to work with you to inform and improve public debate. We do not trust everything newspapers say, but we try to do our best to work with the media to inform and improve public debate. It is not as if there are a lot of clean hands in very powerful rooms. We have to be realistic about maintaining our integrity while working with the widest possible network of partners who can influence public debate and make it better. That is why I am in this room with you today.

Q16 Jack Breerton: It is not just about Parliament; there do seem to be wider societal issues, as we have been talking about. Is your view that there is a general declining trend in what facts people can believe?

Will Moy: That is a great question. I will start by saying that MPs have a duty of leadership. Regardless of what is going on in the rest of society, it is up to the House of Commons and its Members to set an example of honesty and create systems that sustain that. At the moment, the public look at what is going on in the House of Commons and they are not seeing that leadership. The changes that the Committee could make as a result of this inquiry would be a powerful signal on what good and healthy public debate looks like.

Q17 Jack Breerton: Do you feel that we are solely responsible for that?

Will Moy: I feel that you are solely responsible for the procedures of the House of Commons, which are currently stopping MPs from correcting the record even when they want to.

Q18 Jack Breerton: No, I mean the broader trend.

Will Moy: Absolutely not, no. In fact, the broader culture of public life has been—I have been working at Full Fact since 2010; I was volunteering for two years trying to get it off the ground before then. I worked in a non-party political role in Parliament and for an all-party group before that. So, I have been closely watching public life for quite a while and I think that there has been a depressing deterioration in the culture of public life, which has become more bitter and more violent, and more ends-orientated, with less commitment to mutual respect and being honest in trying to pursue people's political goals.

I think that MPs are both involved in making that happen and victims of other people making that happen, but if we just stand around pointing fingers at everybody else who is making the problem happen, we are not going to get out of this hole. It actually does need leadership. It needs MPs to say, "This is the version of democracy we came into Parliament to



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create and be part of and to lead in, and we're going to start by changing the rules of the House of Commons in ways that help to sustain that informed version of democracy." I think you can do that and I think your constituents will appreciate that.

No, it won't solve the whole problem, but I am out there, as I said, trying to tackle the internet companies, trying to tackle the media side of this and challenging other kinds of political campaigners, and you can do that, too. But I think MPs only have credibility to lead in that way when you start by making the rules of the House of Commons work.

Alice Lilly: If I might just add to that, obviously we were asked to come here today to talk about procedures within the House of Commons; thank you.

Chair: I was just about to remind us all of that.

Alice Lilly: I am not a social scientist, but I would agree that there are obviously broader social issues at play here and I think that all of us have seen those. One of the big things that has changed since the Committee last looked at this issue in 2007 is the volume of information out there—the speed with which that information is disseminated to people.

Obviously, those are much broader social issues that go beyond what happens in this place. However, I think what that means is that it is ever more important that the House of Commons is seen as a place where, yes, the information is as accurate as it can possibly be and where people, including Members themselves, feel that they can trust what it is that they are hearing and the information that underpins their decisions.

Chair: Turning back to the topic of the recommendations that we might make about the House of Commons procedures, I call James Sunderland.

Q19 **James Sunderland:** It was getting interesting, wasn't it? I was just starting to get animated and excited by the discourse. And I have a certain empathy with what you are both saying. With my background, I have an equal issue with how we come across and how we need to be more accurate, and the leadership that politicians, in my view, don't necessarily display all of the time. And we can do better. So, thank you for your very interesting input and no doubt the Chair has noted that there is perhaps a lot of protein there for future inquiries. So, I welcome what you have just said and thank you.

It is to my regret that I need to bring you back to a more mundane level of discourse perhaps. I have just a couple of questions. The first one is this: what changes need to be made in order to make the corrections system more effective? Either of you can reply.

Alice Lilly: Perhaps I will start with some of the very technical ones. Forgive me for how detailed this might be about to get, but I think that there are actually some really quite small technical changes that would make a big difference.



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One of the things at the moment—we talked about accessibility of corrections—is that unless you know what it is that you are looking for when you are looking for a correction, it is very hard to find one. So, for ministerial corrections, for the page that exists there is a database. You cannot just see a list of all corrections; you have to input a key word in order to get any search results. So, again, you need to know what you are looking for.

However, if you are not looking for a specific correction and you are just going back and reading the *Hansard* of a particular debate, if it has been formally corrected by a Minister all you will see inserted into the original *Hansard* is a bracketed hyperlink that is simply labelled as the date of the *Hansard* where that correction exists, and you will see the abbreviation “MC” for “ministerial correction” at the end. Unless you know that “MC” means “ministerial correction”, it would not be in any way obvious to somebody reading that transcript that what they are being linked to is the correction.

We know that people spend a very small amount of time reading *Hansard*; they are scanning it, trying to find something. So there is a risk that actually a Minister who has absolutely done the right thing and corrected the record will not actually receive the credit—people will not see that correction. So, it’s a very technical thing, but that is something that I think should be relatively easy to do. However, it would make a really positive difference.

Will Moy: I will address the question of recurring failure to correct the record. By the way, some of us do find parliamentary procedure exciting, although I recognise in a different way from our previous conversation. You are obviously the experts in how the House works, so some of the details of this may not be what you would conclude, but I think there is an opportunity to create a system that generates more light than heat—recognising that there is an awful lot of heat in disputes about factual accuracy in Parliament, much of which distracts from the central issues you care about or want to spend time on. It would be a system that enables Back Benchers to hold Government to account, enables Ministers to discharge their functions and to conclusively rebut allegations that they got something wrong—when those allegations are wrong—and that avoids the Speaker being dragged into the theatre and circus of MPs being marched out of the Chamber, as we have seen in recent years.

The way we suggest that might happen is by building a system that avoids spontaneous and angry allegations that people are misleading the House, and creates a structure and process for allegations. One thing you might say is, for starters, that the only people who can make such an allegation are Members of the House. We are not suggesting a system where, for example, outside campaigning organisations would have the ability to trigger some kind of process. You could see how that could easily become political and dangerous.

Only Members would have the ability to start the process. A Member who wants to suggest that another Member has misled the House and needs to



correct the record could do so first in writing, giving the other Member time to respond and think about it, and giving everybody time to get out of the heat—assuming they are not still in the same debate. When they do so, we suggest that MPs already have the ability to consult the House of Commons Library and ask for an analysis of any question they have—it would be wise for them to do so. It is not that the Library should be asked to give a verdict, conclusive opinion or judgment, but people should rely, as far as possible, on non-partisan sources of information when making an allegation of that sort, rather than, for example, information from campaign bodies.

Having made the criticism in writing to the Member concerned and got a response, we would suggest that if the response does not seem adequate it could be referred to the Speaker. I suggest the Speaker because the Speaker can be a gatekeeper, avoiding a process going further where it is being used for purely political ends. It would be if the Speaker felt there was compelling evidence—or sufficient evidence—to justify a proper inquiry into whether somebody’s behaviour is falling short of the standards of MPs. If they are failing to correct the record—possibly repeatedly—that becomes a standards matter, which should be investigated as a breach of standards. We are not suggesting that every allegation of an individual inaccuracy should be open to a big tribunal of fact. What we are suggesting is, as a bare minimum, protection for the rules of the House. Where there is credible reason to believe that a Member is failing in their duty to correct the record when they have misled the House, there needs to be a predictable and calm process for tackling that allegation—at the moment there isn’t.

Q20 Chair: How would that interact with the Privileges Committee process?

Will Moy: Alice is the expert.

Alice Lilly: Thanks, Will. That is a very good question. Ultimately, that would be a matter for the House and this Committee to investigate, in co-ordination with the Privileges and Standards Committees. What we are talking about here is a process that would hopefully, as Will says, be much calmer, more ordered and seen as a largely routine process, and one that would take place before any allegations of possible contempt being committed. It is about a much more upstream process.

Will Moy: One thing I should say, from our experience in other sectors, is that the existence of a process that is known to be effective seems to have the effect that the process is rarely used. For example, before newspapers introduced their corrections columns—around the time of the Leveson inquiry, at our urging—we would regularly have to go to the press regulator to get any corrections from the media. After it was established that that process works, newspapers regularly correct the record of their own initiative as soon as they realise they have made an error. The backstop mechanism is very rarely used, because compliance is happening, because people know the backstop mechanism exists.



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When we go to Government Ministers, for example, our experience is that it is very unpredictable whether an error will be corrected or not. Sometimes they are. Sometimes they are not. Sometimes the same Minister will be willing to correct or not willing to correct at different times. There is no next place to go, really, after that.

I think that if Ministers knew there was an effective response when they failed to correct the record, the civil service would get the processes in place and it would happen pretty routinely, and not a lot of fuss would be made about it. There are already regular ministerial corrections that are going along without much fuss. It is just those edge cases where that system is failing. It is failing because essentially there is no backstop. That is what I would suggest would be the implication. You would have a mechanism that ends up being rarely used, once people know that it actually works.

Q21 James Sunderland: I want to come back on two points. First, I agree with you, Mr Moy. In my view, not enough MPs get marched out of the Chamber. I would love to see a House of Commons serjeant-major for doing just that, marching them out in quicktime—left, right, left, right, left, right. How good would that be as a way of keeping discipline?

The second and more serious point is to Ms Lilly. You mentioned the difficulty of searching on *Hansard*. I totally agree with that. The keyword is very important—have you got the right keyword? Is it worth considering a separate register of corrections, where if you make a correction in the House, that is listed independently through a separate function on *Hansard*? That leads me quite neatly to my second question. Should a wider range of corrections and clarifications be formally recorded?

Alice Lilly: I would argue—we briefly touched on this in response to an earlier question—that the system as it currently stands for ministerial corrections is perfectly reasonable in terms of the corrections that are within scope. That is essentially factual errors. If you go back through *Hansard* and look at some of the corrections that have been made—if you have the right keyword to search for them—so often it is a Minister has used the wrong term for a particular type of tank or something like that. It is clearly very factual stuff. I think that is what we are talking about.

I mentioned earlier that there is the option of Ministers making written ministerial statements if it is more of an issue of interpretation. I do understand that there will sometimes be edge cases where, for example, somebody gets a number right, but uses it in a context that renders the meaning inaccurate or incorrect. I understand that those things exist and are perhaps more complicated. But when it comes to the scope of corrections, the issue, as I have said before, is more about who is able to formally make those corrections rather than about the types of fact or issue that are being corrected.

Will Moy: On your other point, the way you suggested is the way that Full Fact does it. We have a page listing all our corrections and the corrections



appear on the article that is corrected. I think that is considered standard good practice. For the rest, I agree with what Alice said.

Q22 Sir Christopher Chope: Can I come back on what Alice Lilly said? She seemed reasonably content with the ministerial correction process, but Mr Moy says in his evidence, "Full Fact has fact checked numerous inaccurate statements made by Ministers in the House of Commons in the past year that remain uncorrected", thereby suggesting that there is a big problem. I wondered if Mr Moy could say whether he is talking about tens, hundreds or thousands of such statements, and whether he could let us have a comprehensive list of all of the ministerial inaccurate statements that he has fact checked during the last year.

Will Moy: Yes. They are all on our website as well, but we can certainly provide that list to the Committee.

Just to be clear, there is no disagreement between me and Alice. What I think Alice was saying is that the scope of what can be in the ministerial corrections column seems appropriate—nobody, for example, is suggesting that people should be able to remake a different argument through the guise of a correction. Corrections should be restricted to factual corrections. What we are saying, at that point in our evidence, is that it is regularly the case that Ministers make factual errors that they are under an obligation to correct, under the rules of the House, and fail to correct them.

Alice Lilly: Will has put that much more eloquently than I did, but yes, what I am talking about when I say that the ministerial corrections process is good is all those issues within scope, but also the fact that that process actually exists. I think that is an enormous step forward. The fact that it was adopted previously is a very good thing. Also, as Will has just outlined, it is about saying, "There is a process that exists for Ministers to make corrections." That is enormously positive. It does often happen, and the process is used. There is a mechanism for these issues to be flagged. The problem comes then when you do perhaps have persistent inaccuracies from Ministers. There is an issue around how you enforce the correcting of the record there.

Will Moy: If I may, it is perhaps worth me clarifying that I deliberately haven't said that regular observation that an error fails to be corrected is evidence of dishonesty. That is not what we are suggesting. There are cases where people persistently say things that aren't true and it is very hard to envisage another explanation, but I think what often seems to happen—this is now me speculating, to be clear—is that it is just not that high up the priority list of private office. You turn up and say, "They got something wrong", and you will maybe talk to the parliamentary branch of the relevant Government Department, but ultimately it requires the Secretary of State or the Minister to sign off on something saying they got something wrong, then they need to write a letter to the editor, and it just doesn't get high enough up the pile.



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What I am suggesting is that in those cases, which may be a very significant proportion of what actually happens, a more robust parliamentary system is met by a more robust civil service system that actually gives this the priority that the parliamentary rules suggest it should have.

Q23 Chair: I have one final question to conclude on. We are visiting the Scottish Parliament in a few weeks. I would be interested to hear an explanation of what you think about the Scottish corrections process is good and what we might want to look out for while we are there.

Alice Lilly: There are differences, and there are things you might want to learn from the Scottish Parliament's technical approach and scope. On the scope issue, all Members—all MSPs—are able to formally correct the record. They all do that in the same way. That is a really positive innovation. On the technical side of things, as I mentioned earlier, there is one page that is very easily accessible from the Scottish Parliament's Official Record. It brings together a list of all corrections that have been made and the most recent corrections, and you can just click through to them without needing to know what it is you are actually looking for. It also offers clear guidance on the corrections process for Members and staff, as well as on challenging what other Members have said.

The other thing that the Scottish system does—I think Will mentioned this earlier—is that it has slightly higher requirements around the kinds of publicity that is given to corrections when they are formally made. An MSP would have to write to the Presiding Officer. He would also have to write to any Members who were involved in the debate, and to all business managers around the House, to clearly set out their mistakes. I think those would be the three areas that I would recommend the Committee focus on.

Will Moy: The thing I would add is that the Scottish parliamentary system treats corrections as normal and healthy parts of honest debate, because everybody makes mistakes and the system should let you correct your mistakes. It is strange that the House of Commons system prevents MPs from correcting their mistakes, but when, in the Scottish Parliament, they are enabled to do so, that is a healthy, normal and undramatic part of honest leadership. That is what we should be wanting to see in the House of Commons.

Q24 Chair: Thank you. As there are no further questions, thank you very much for your time. It will definitely help to inform our inquiry. We will obviously be taking further evidence. If there is anything that comes to light later on, particularly from the evidence that we will hear subsequently, you can of course write to the Committee and let us know.

Will Moy: May I just add one thing? Sorry to trespass on your time, but it is worth saying that we have come here to try to make the argument for what we think are modest changes that are important parts of a healthy democracy, starting from the point of view that MPs' work is important, deserves to be done well and deserves support from us, the public, civil



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society and so on. If you ask the public, people are angry about this. Surveys show that what they want is for the police to be called when MPs lie in the House of Commons; they want it to be a criminal offence for MPs to lie. I think it is important that this conversation does not lose sight of the public attitudes side of this equation, which is that people are very, very concerned about honesty in politics. The suggestions we are making here would be considered as scratching the surface of people's concerns, if you go and talk to your constituents about this.

Chair: Thank you very much. Alice, did you want to say anything in conclusion?

Alice Lilly: No. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time. I will bring the session to a conclusion.