

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Correcting the record, HC 521

Wednesday 23 November 2022

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

Questions 25-55

Witnesses

I: Henry Dyer, Investigations Reporter, *The Guardian*; Robert Hutton, Parliamentary Sketch Writer, *The Critic*; Esther Webber, Senior UK Correspondent, Politico Europe.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Henry Dyer, Robert Hutton and Esther Webber.

Q25 **Chair:** I thank the witnesses here to help us with our work on correcting the record. The Committee has received representations that there could be better ways to inform the public and ensure clarity about inadvertent errors made when MPs and Ministers speak in Parliament. You are incredibly important to our inquiry, as you are the ones who report on this, so you are the ones who use the information and help the public to understand what is going on. I ask you all to introduce yourselves, say what you do, give your view on whether the correction system is good, and say what role you play in judging the capacity of MPs and Ministers to give accurate information.

Henry Dyer: Good afternoon. My name is Henry Dyer. I am a reporter on the investigations desk at *The Guardian*. My view of the correction system is that it needs significant improvement, but the framework is there. Also, it is about improving not just the system, but culture. As for our role as journalists working with corrections, sometimes we report on corrections; as we may come on to, we can do so positively or negatively, but I think broadly positively. We also push for corrections, where MPs and Ministers have made errors. We point out those errors and push for them to be corrected.

Esther Webber: I am Esther Webber, the senior UK correspondent for Politico. I tend to cover parliamentary reporting for us. Building on what Henry said, there is a decent framework for corrections, but it definitely could stand improvement. Through reporting, I have become fairly familiar with trying to find different bits of parliamentary information, and with how it all fits together. It can still be difficult to follow a chain of information and corrections; I am sure we will talk about that a bit more.

Robert Hutton: I am Rob Hutton. I am the sketch writer for *The Critic*, but for a very long time before that, I led Bloomberg's political coverage of the UK. I actually didn't know there was a correction system until this inquiry kicked off.

Chair: That's something.

Robert Hutton: A win already! So I went and looked. This afternoon, I was having a look at the ministerial corrections sections in *Hansard*, and I found a corrected answer. It was Rishi Sunak answering Barry Sheerman from a couple of weeks ago; he had said the wrong number. He had said 700,000 and he meant 600,000. Everyone understands how that happens, and no one thinks it is malicious. If you look in the original *Hansard*, there is a link in code underneath the answer, and I now know that if you click on that link, you can see what he meant to say. I conferred with the person next to me, who has been covering Parliament even longer than I



have, and neither of us had the first idea of what that link was. Neither of us would have known. We might have clicked on it—I would click on it now—but we might not have. We might just have assumed that the answer he gave was the answer he gave. That's not great, is it?

- Q26 **Sir Christopher Chope:** That last comment implied that we are wasting our time and spending too long fussing about the accuracy of these answers, because the role that all three of you play seems to be to try to entertain as much as to inform. A lot of the material that you use when you do that is inaccurate and speculative. I am not criticising you for that. Are we being rather ridiculous in saying that we have to ensure that every single answer is absolutely correct, when what the press report about what goes on in this place often gives a very distorted picture?

I will give one example. I stood up on a Friday and said, in relation to a particular Bill, "Object"—just one word. That was used by the press and the media—you are smiling mischievously, understandably—to totally misrepresent what you must have known happened. It was an objection not to the content of the Bill, but to its going through on the nod. If we can't get the press to take issues like that seriously, which results in masses of misinformation going out to the public, why should we be spending time fussing about the dots and commas in a prime ministerial answer?

Esther Webber: I will offer a partial defence of what we are doing. I and others have tried to improve parliamentary reporting over the years, including through correcting misleading reporting on, for example, votes on animal welfare and private Members' Bills, which I have worked on quite a bit. Although some inaccurate reporting may still exist, many people are trying to improve the situation. To read across from one to the other—to say that because some coverage of Parliament is not up to scratch, it does not matter what is said in Parliament—would be a mistake.

Robert Hutton: There is quite a lot in your question. First of all, as Esther says, some of this is about understanding parliamentary procedure and what it looks like. These are discussions that parliamentary correspondents have a lot in the evenings and on the weekends—"Yes, I know it looks like they voted for that, but strictly speaking, it wasn't exactly that. It is a bit more complicated." However, it has to be said that different MPs play different roles in explaining whether different people were voting for or against things, depending on where the political advantage lies. We are not doing this in a vacuum.

On the idea that this does not matter, let's take Rishi Sunak's 700,000 for 600,000. Is that a trivial error? It is, in the sense that none of us thinks that he should resign over it or do anything other than correct it. Should he not correct it, having got it wrong? No, I think he should correct it. Should it be easier to do so, and more obvious that he has corrected it? Yes, I think it should—it should be clearly flagged in *Hansard*, in a way that it is not at the moment. I do not think that would be painful.



Would that help? Working at Bloomberg, I learned that Bloomberg has, by some distance, the most rigorous corrections requirements I have ever encountered in journalism. If you get it wrong, you correct fast, you correct with completely equal prominence, and you explain what you are correcting. That correction stays on the bottom of the story, so every updated version of the story says, "An earlier version of this story got this thing wrong, and we have corrected it." The reason you did that was that it enhanced trust. Bloomberg was an expensive news service, and the people who were using it were trading millions of dollars—betting their jobs that the information they were reading was accurate. You didn't say, "We never make mistakes."

I have been in journalism longer than Henry and Esther, and when I came into British newspapers in the last century, it was very much, "If you make a mistake, cover it up. If you can't cover it up, correct it. If you have to correct it, correct it at the bottom of page 50, in an inch and in very small type." That didn't enhance trust. Bloomberg customers knew that Bloomberg would try to get it right, and if it got it wrong, it would 'fess up and put things straight. That seems to me a good system. I do not see why that would be a bad principle for Parliament to operate on.

Chair: Henry, do you want to add anything?

Henry Dyer: No. I strongly agree with both my colleagues, particularly on the media taking the role of corrections quite seriously. *The Guardian* has a very active corrections column.

Q27 **Nigel Mills:** I am trying to work out what you would like to be different about ministerial corrections. Take the Rishi Sunak example you quoted; do you want the correction highlighting in yellow, or in bold type or something?

Robert Hutton: You could put it in square brackets. You put square brackets in *Hansard* to give a name after "the Member for x". You could put in square brackets, "This was corrected", with a link. There are any number of things you can do to make that clear.

Q28 **Nigel Mills:** You just talked us through the fact that there is a link.

Robert Hutton: There is a link, but the link is in code, literally. I think it says "CM" or something, or "MC", and then there is a number. You would not know; there is nothing that says, "We corrected this bit." I do not think Rishi Sunak is arguing that he got it right, so I do not think he would mind that correction. Surely *Hansard* is now accessed more online than on paper, so it is possible to do this. I do not see why anyone would mind doing this; it seems relatively straightforward and obvious.

Say Henry wrote a piece about you that got a number wrong, and at the bottom of the story, there was some slightly obscure code that linked to a different page that said, "Actually, that number is wrong." You would not feel that was an adequate correction. You have a problem, because you want to record accurately what Sunak said—that seems reasonable—but you also want to say, and he wants to say, "I got this one wrong."



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Q29 **Nigel Mills:** If you look at legislation, a line comes up at the top of the system that says, "There is an ongoing change," or "This was changed on a certain date." You would want some kind of clear strip, highlighting or footnote that said, "An error was corrected—see here."

Robert Hutton: It is not obvious at the moment.

Q30 **Nigel Mills:** At least there is some kind of link now. If somebody orally corrects the record on a different day, there is no such hyperlink. The two are not joined.

Robert Hutton: That is also poor.

Q31 **Nigel Mills:** You think we should join up the two systems, basically. However the correction is made, you should end up in the same position.

Robert Hutton *indicated assent.*

Q32 **Nigel Mills:** Henry, anything different to add on that?

Henry Dyer: To add a bit of detail, I think the links in *Hansard* used to work differently, but at the moment they are really shoddy. Even if you do click on that link, you sometimes do not actually get shown the correction. I have seen examples in *Hansard* where you click the link and it takes you to the ministerial corrections column for when the correction was made in *Hansard* two weeks later or whenever, but that is a blank page that says "Ministerial Correction"; you have to click on the next column to actually get to the correction. You have to know that that is what you are looking for. You need to know that you are looking for 1MC; that the website is not broken and is showing you what it is meant to; and to click "next column". It then might not actually be the correct ministerial correction—I have used "correct" a lot of times there. It may be a different ministerial correction also made on that day. That does not seem a particularly difficult thing to improve; it would be a very simple thing to improve, in terms of ministerial corrections.

Esther Webber: It seems to me as though the basic framework is there, but the pathway has not been fully joined up. As you say, there is the option for someone to make a correction in a point of order, and if there was a way that that could also be linked back, that would seem a sensible way of doing things.

Henry Dyer: When Members make a point of order to correct something, they could say, "I refer to my entry in column x in *Hansard* on day y," just as they say, "I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests." The *Hansard* editors would then know precisely what to look for, and could go back to the original entry and add a link to the point of order.

Q33 **Patrick Grady:** The system that you are describing applies only to Ministers at the moment. There is not a route for Back Benchers. I suspect I could guess what your answers will be, but do you think there is a qualitative difference in importance between a Minister correcting the record and a Back Bencher doing so if they say something inadvertently? Then there is also the question of inadvertent or advertent, but perhaps



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we will come to that later. First of all, do you think corrections ought to apply across the board, to all Members of the House? Do you think it should work in a similar sort of way?

Robert Hutton: Why would you not want to do this? You made a mistake—you said something you didn't mean to say. Fix it. It is what we do. We tweet stupid things all the time.

Esther Webber: I can perhaps understand why the system was set up that way, when that function was first conceived of, but yes, there doesn't really seem to be any reason not to want that option.

Patrick Grady: I do not want to get ahead of colleagues, but perhaps this starts to get us to the point about whether something was said inadvertently or deliberately. Then there is the issue of people who may not be willing to correct. I did something similar recently. I said that Glasgow was 300 miles away from Aberdeen, but it is not—it is 150 miles—so I got up and made a point of order.

Chris Elmore: Shocking.

Patrick Grady: Yes; it is a 300-mile round trip. I genuinely did that by accident, not just so I can keep using it as an example in this inquiry.

Chair: It is very helpful, though.

Patrick Grady: Say I hadn't made that point of order. The Leader of the House could have said the following week, "You said that your staff had to travel 300 miles to Aberdeen. That's not true. They only have to travel 150 miles"—still a long distance—"so you have misled the House." Of course, I apologised and corrected it. This gets to the nub of what needs to be corrected, when and why. Do you have views on that?

Q34 **Chair:** That is exactly the point I wanted to come on to. We have talked about using points of order to do this, but is that the right mechanism? I ask because a point of order can be made at any point in the day. It can be made when everyone has gone home so they won't have realised this is going on. Say that during the Adjournment debate, some Member pops up and does a point of order. Is that appropriate? Is that enough visibility of the correction? Or should we be using some sort of specific corrections mechanism—a point in the day that is not for points of order but is the time for corrections?

Henry Dyer: I think the point of order works quite well, because it will end up on parliamentlive.tv and then, if people, members of the public, want to clip it and point out that their MP has made a correction, they can do so endlessly, depending on their good will—or otherwise, I suppose. I think that if you were to set an assigned time, it might become a bit rote. It could be—I don't know—unseemly to have a string of MPs stand up and say, "These are all the corrections I need to put in." And I feel it would not work for the flexibility of when the House decides to do its business.



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Esther Webber: I agree. It just seems as though the point of order is a system that MPs are used to and familiar with. If that is a means of doing it, why try to reinvent the wheel?

Robert Hutton: For the correction to the Prime Minister's statement that I was talking about earlier, I think he just wrote in to *Hansard*, which for small things—with a lot of this, you know it when you see it. I don't know about the 150 miles, but it seems to me that that is the sort of thing where you could just write in and say, "I said this; I meant that. Please mark this accordingly."

Henry Dyer: I think it depends on the nature of the error. I imagine most errors are statistical errors where one number has been said but it is a different number and the effect of that is not hugely significant. I think errors that are more politically advantageous in the fact that they have been made are the errors that would benefit from more high-profile correction than simply a letter to *Hansard* saying, "I made this mistake." But then you need to be careful, when you make the correction, that it doesn't simply reignite whatever political argument was being had at the time that you made the original error.

Chair: That subjective issue is one of the things we are challenged with. Is it okay for the Prime Minister to just write a note? The Prime Minister's private office presumably wrote a note saying he meant 600,000. Is that acceptable when other Members would have to come and do a point of order? This is what we are wrestling with.

Q35 **Chris Elmore:** On that point about not continuing a political argument, I fear I am about to cause a political argument. Is there, in your opinion—this is to the three of you—something in the idea that, if an official organisation like the NAO repeatedly informs the public that a Minister every week is giving out incorrect information on the Floor of the House, there should be a better and possibly more forced system, through a Standing Order, whereby that Minister should correct the record?

I am not mentioning a particular Prime Minister so that we don't have an argument in Committee, but there was an ongoing and rather embarrassing saga, lasting for many, many months, I think. I think it was employment figures that kept being mentioned as not being correct. It became this argument that ended up being brought up almost every week by one MP or another saying, "This wasn't correct. Here are the facts. Why isn't this being corrected?" So is there something as well about Ministers and shadow Ministers? If this is being done at national agency level, is there a role not so much for the Speaker but for Standing Orders to say that you must correct the record because what you have said is not factually correct, inadvertently or not? I am just curious, because that is another level of all this. That political row went on for months, because of the refusal to correct the record.

Henry Dyer: I am not certain that you can generate policy out of that—that policy is the way to deal with that rather significant issue. It's a cultural thing; it's a personality thing. As I said earlier—well, I don't know



whether I said it—as Rob said, you should correct the record quickly and honestly. That is the case, and most of the time it is politically advantageous to do that. It is fundamentally down to Members to decide when it is done. My view is that Members correct the record when it is politically advantageous, and in the vast majority of cases there is no reason why you would not correct the record very quickly. However, certain Members clearly feel that it is politically advantageous to continue saying things that they have been told are wrong.

Chris Elmore: Good answer.

Henry Dyer: That is their judgment. They can take that judgment on how the public might feel about that. Members have personalities and you can't necessarily change Standing Orders to mean that they change their personalities.

Esther Webber: Part of the problem is that many of the examples you will be able to find are not necessarily straightforward. Obviously, there are cases where the ONS or someone has said "We don't recognise this statement," or, "This is misleading or wrong," but most statistics can be portrayed in a number of ways, so it will be campaigning organisations that say, "This cannot stand," or whatever. In the vast majority of cases, Members will want to correct the record. In an extreme case, where someone is refusing or it becomes a broader issue, there is a mechanism to put a motion to the Speaker to request that it goes before the appropriate legislative Committee, so that possibility exists.

Robert Hutton: Most of what we are talking about here involves consent, and ultimately you are not going to get that consent with some people. Do I think it is a problem in terms of political trust that we had a Prime Minister who just said whatever was convenient? I think it is a massive problem, and I do not know what the solution is. Ultimately, the solution is that political parties and MPs do their jobs. If they do not do that, or they take too long to do it, or they do it too late, they should pay a price for that. We may be seeing that in the polls at the moment. If only there had been some clue.

Q36 **Chair:** We will have a few more questions about public trust in a moment, but may I first conclude the section on visibility? How important is that the public can see, and you can see, that a correction has been made? Should it be on the Order Paper? Should there be a section of the Order Paper that says "These corrections were made this week," or is that overkill?

Robert Hutton: I don't think anything on the Order Paper is overkill, is it? But it is fairly obscure. If I want to look at the record to see what Patrick said about the distance from Glasgow to Aberdeen, I would go to *Hansard*. If I look at the column where he said it, I ought to be able to see that he said it and underneath that or next to it, clearly flagged, it ought to say "He knows that it's only 150 miles," and very few of his voters would hold that against him. That is what I think. That is how we do it in journalism. Politico corrects mistakes when it makes them, and *The Guardian* has a



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very good corrections policy, although I don't make any mistakes in my sketches.

Esther Webber: I think it is intriguing, the idea that members of the public would be looking for a correction on the Order Paper. I don't know. Personally, I use Order Papers to look at what is coming up rather than what has already gone. When I am looking at something that has already happened, I tend to use *Hansard*; I think that probably works fairly well. A separate issue is probably how the public interact with Parliament in general, which tends to be in a quite politicised way through being particularly plugged in to certain issues and campaigns, but having the facility to cross-reference statements and mistakes in *Hansard* is good.

Henry Dyer: If it was a question of taking the ministerial correction system and expanding it to all Members, some improvement would be needed. Alice Lilly may have made a similar point when she gave evidence. At the moment, if you manage to find the ministerial corrections page, which I had no idea existed until I read the Government's evidence that said that it existed, because as far as I can tell, it is not hyperlinked anywhere on parliament.uk. Unless you know the URL, you cannot find it. That feels like something that could be resolved quite easily. It also does not show you anything; you have to search for what you want. If it were expanded to all Members, it should be a chronological listing of every single correction made. You should not have to search for corrections made on the topic of Rwanda, or the distance from Glasgow to Aberdeen. Members of the public do not operate like that. Many of them will not look at corrections, but if they do, they—and journalists—will want to see all the corrections that have been made to the record, and chronologically seems the best way to do that, rather than having to search for specifics.

Chair: We will come on to further questions about the interaction between the public and Parliament. You heard Sir Christopher Chope express his frustration that some websites set out voting records, and it is all very binary, so a constituent gets in touch saying, "You have voted strongly against" all sorts of things you very strongly voted for, or there was no Division and the issue was resolved without one. Of course our job as parliamentarians is to explain that to constituents, but how can corrections and the other matters we are looking at here help the public to understand the job we do? That is what we are keen on.

Q37 **Jack Brereton:** We have talked a bit about the more contentious issues; where it is quite clear that a mistake has been made, there does not seem to be much of an issue, but where it is open to interpretation and more politically contentious, it is more of an issue. How could we deal better with matters that are more subjective and where there are grey areas, so as to get better, more accurate reporting of what is going on in the Chamber?

Robert Hutton: Choose better Prime Ministers? Honestly, I do not think you can have a system where the ONS sits there marking *Hansard*. That would not generate trust, because what happens then is what happened when the ONS intervened regarding the £350 million on the bus: that did



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not lead to general repentance on the part of those associated with Vote Leave; it just led to attacks on the ONS. I do not think the ONS or the National Statistician or any of these bodies would want to do that. It would be horrible and messy. Ultimately in our system, Parliament is sovereign, so no one gets to tell you guys what to do; you have to figure it out for yourselves.

Q38 **Jack Brereton:** Do you think there are system issues that could be improved to address some of this?

Henry Dyer indicated dissent.

Esther Webber: No, it is very difficult if it goes beyond the factual—beyond being able to show clearly that something is wrong. To me, that seems like a quagmire.

Q39 **Jack Brereton:** In terms of that wider public trust issue, how important is this in making sure that we have effective public trust and a system that garners that trust?

Henry Dyer: The framework is there, but people need to use it thoroughly. Most Members do use it thoroughly, but it is the ones who don't that catch the most attention. They catch the most attention because the media report on them quite extensively, because it is our job to do so, and it is the public's right to know when MPs or Ministers are repeatedly refusing to correct something they know is wrong.

You can put procedure in to make it transparent and visible to the public when a correction is made, but you cannot put procedure in to force Members to make corrections. Without a culture of Members being honest and truthful at all times, regardless of the political harm that may come from it, that trust will not begin to be brought back. It is an incredibly difficult task, and this is only one dimension of it.

Q40 **Jack Brereton:** So you are saying it is more about how the system is used, rather than actually the system itself.

Henry Dyer: Precisely.

Q41 **Jack Brereton:** Okay. In terms of Ministers making corrections, do think that the public feel that Ministers are being genuine and that they actually want to make sure that they correct the record accurately?

Robert Hutton: It depends on the Minister. There are some who everyone knows have to be dragged there with their arm twisted. Ultimately, how do you want people to see you? Do you want people to see you as people who only correct things when forced, or do you want people to see you as people who, when they get something wrong, say, "I got that wrong. I mis-spoke. I should have read more widely. I only read one briefing paper and it turns out I need better sources"? Almost all those things create trust. Honestly, nothing creates trust like being honest.

Esther Webber: Yes, I think the more you can point to examples of good practice— I am not saying you haven't still got an uphill battle on your



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hands, but sometimes when we are discussing issues of trust with readers and with the public, it helps to be able to say, "Actually bad practice is not universal. There is good practice, and this is how it works," in order to create a sense of proportion that we can highlight when things are genuinely bad or have fallen short of the standards everyone expects.

Q42 **Jack Breerton:** Do you feel that, generally, there is good practice going on when it comes to corrections?

Esther Webber: The number of corrections that are made through points of order or letters shows that it is happening. I am not saying that everyone deserves a medal for doing what is expected of them, but that does help to build a more entire picture so that you can be more critical when things have gone wrong.

Q43 **Chair:** Going back to what we were saying about points of order, given that it is perfectly acceptable for a Minister to write a letter to say, "Sorry; I meant 600,000, not 700,000," if ministerial corrections were extended to all Members of Parliament, would you want it to be possible for every MP to just write a letter? Or should it be done as a point of order, and should that apply to everybody?

Henry Dyer: I think it would possibly be down to the Member's judgment. I would expect the Member to make a judgment on how severe their error was. If it was a simple statistical error, a letter correcting it in *Hansard* should do the job. As for more serious errors, the use of parliamentary privilege, for instance, is very serious, so if MPs make allegations in Parliament that turn out to be incorrect, that is a serious point. They should make a point of order; it should not just be a case of writing to *Hansard* and saying, "Oh, I got this serious accusation incorrect." There is a spectrum, but it a point for Members to make judgments on themselves.

Q44 **Chair:** If you think about saying 150 miles instead of 300 miles, that correction could simply be done as a letter, but Patrick Grady might prefer to stand up and say something, so that the next time the question comes up, the Leader of the House does not have a go, and suggest that that this was wrong because it was corrected only by a letter. Do you think judgment is an acceptable way to deal with that? I am putting words in the mouths of Esther and Rob, I realise.

Esther Webber: Yes. I would also add that some corrections—quite a number—affect another Member, in that they were made in response to a question or something like that. You can imagine a scenario in which someone has written to make a correction, notifying the Member who was affected, and they might actually stand up and make a point of order anyway if they felt that it was serious enough. There are flexibilities in that system.

Robert Hutton: Yes. I do not know anything about the correction system, but I realised that I did not know whether the Prime Minister, in correcting an answer to a question from Barry Sheerman, was required to send a letter to Barry saying, "I have done this."



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Chair: I think as a courtesy you should, yes.

Robert Hutton: It seems to me that he ought to, but I do not know whether he has to.

Q45 **Chair:** Quite often, a Minister will say, “I will write to the hon. Member,” or “I will get back with further information”. Even in an evidence session such as this, if something came up, a Minister would be expected to write to the Committee if there were further points that had not been made. Clearly, correcting the record would apply to Committee hearings as well as the Chamber. We are sort of focusing on the Chamber, but it applies to Bill Committees and Select Committees too.

Henry Dyer: On the question of letters, the deposited papers page, which is where you find all these letters, is also quite arcane to use. The language is quite difficult to understand, and you click on the page, and then need to click on the letter. These things could be simplified to make it easier for the public to understand.

Aaron Bell: Thank you all for coming in. I hope that you have enough material for your sketch, Mr Hutton.

Robert Hutton: More or less.

Q46 **Aaron Bell:** We have heard from all of you—I think you made common cause—that some honest mistakes are fairly simple to correct. Where things are outright dishonest—where people say that things happened when they did not, or vice versa—there are procedures for dealing with that. It seems that a lot of it is to do with statistics, though, and people’s interpretation of them. You mentioned the bus, but obviously that was not parliamentary. Mr Elmore mentioned the employment figures; the truth was that employment figures were at a record high, but once you folded in self-employment, they were not. It sometimes feels as though political arguments about how to best present crude statistics get carried over into a media argument. Do you think that the media are partisan in that? In some cases, are the fact checkers more likely to check one side than the other—perhaps rightly so, because one side is in government? Is not the political argument being continued in a lot of these cases that come down to statistics?

Henry Dyer: It makes quite a lot of sense to scrutinise the party of Government more than the parties in opposition, because they control the levers of power—or they ought to, at least. That is not partisanship in an ideological sense. The public interest lies more toward the activities of Government than it does toward the activities of Members who are not in government. That even goes for Back Benchers. There is more scrutiny on Ministers than on Back Benchers, because if Ministers get something wrong, that has a greater impact, generally speaking, than if a Back Bencher gets something wrong.

Q47 **Aaron Bell:** To play devil's advocate, the Opposition—either on the Front Bench or Back Benchers—will often present a statistic to show the Government in the worst possible light, and that is not really the full truth



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of the matter; it might be said to be misleading. That never gets followed up in the same way, either by the media or the fact-checking organisations, and that is material to how people perceive the Government and, indeed, Parliament more generally.

Henry Dyer: But it is in these grey zones that statistics are presented in different lights, and sometimes it can be difficult to tell whether they need to be looked at. Certainly, where it is clear that they need to be looked at, there is no reason for the media and fact-checking organisations not to do so.

Esther Webber: Both things can be true. The party of Government is probably more heavily scrutinised, and that is no bad thing. At the same time, a lot of media organisations in this country are partisan. Both of those things are true.

Robert Hutton: It is not as though there are no newspapers in this country that would look to exploit a slip by the Leader of the Opposition; I think you can probably get that story covered.

Over the last 10 years or so, there has been this proliferation of fact-checking organisations, which feels like it ought to be something that we welcome. I instinctively want to welcome it. It is not clear to me that it is changing very many people's minds about anything. The problem is that it often comes down to the fact that this stuff is complicated. As you said, the employment figures are complicated. A lot of the fact-check judgments are "mostly true" or, "That is sort of where it is," because you guys are trying to present your arguments in the best possible light, and that is sort of your job.

I note that there was not a ministerial correction by the Prime Minister between the summer of 2019 and September; there has been one since then. Is that because the Prime Minister did not say anything wrong in Parliament in those three years? I am not convinced. I am afraid that, ultimately, some of this is about who people are, and the best systems in the world will not save you from having to do your jobs.

Q48 **Aaron Bell:** I have on occasion been critical of Prime Ministers during my short time in this Parliament. But this is not just about Prime Ministers; public concern about politics as a whole, and about honesty and integrity, goes back a long way. It is obviously not just about what is said in Parliament; it goes way back to the expenses scandal and before that. Do you think that what we are trying to do—improving bits where people are actively willing to see them improved—will make much fundamental difference? You said that it is obviously worth doing for its own sake, but it doesn't strike me that this will get to the heart of public discontent with politics.

Robert Hutton: I don't think it is going to fix everything. I do think that it is worth making it clear not just when you have made a mistake, but that you are an organisation and people who, when they make a mistake, will be honest about it. To go back to my Bloomberg time, it was enormously useful to us as a news organisation that people knew that we corrected



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mistakes, because we had a few slightly tense moments, and when we said, “We stand by our story,” everybody else knew that we wouldn’t be saying that if we didn’t think it was true. That was not true of every news organisation.

Q49 **Aaron Bell:** There is probably a parallel with individual Members in this House.

Robert Hutton: Yes. It does you no harm, and it does no harm to an organisation for corrections to be clearly flagged, and for it to say, “Sometimes we will get things wrong, and when we do, we will ‘fess up.”

Q50 **Aaron Bell:** Do you think doing that would make any meaningful difference to public opinion?

Robert Hutton: Maybe a bit? I don’t know.

Aaron Bell: You suggest maybe a very little bit.

Esther Webber: Yes. Similarly, from what I have seen, a lot of the time, but not always, when people engage with Parliament, it is because they have seen something that they don’t like, so this would be a small but nonetheless useful counterbalance to that.

Henry Dyer: I think you have to hope so. You do it and cross your fingers when it comes out, because there is a serious issue. You should try to take the steps available to remedy it. This is a step available to remedy it, but there are many others to take. Most parliamentary proceedings are not watched by most people in the country, let alone the details of them being read. Most Public Bill Committees go by—

Q51 **Aaron Bell:** Like this one?

Henry Dyer: Like this Committee, indeed. I hope not—you know, the “News at Ten”—

Chair: We’re the top story! We are running live on all the 24-hour news broadcasters.

Henry Dyer: But even though it is not at the top of the list of what the public are consuming and engaging with, it is still highly significant to the public interest, in the nebulous way that we, as journalists, like to think about the public interest. Working it out is quite difficult, but it comes down to questions of standards in public life.

Q52 **Aaron Bell:** Finally, we talk about what the public think, but if we improved some of this, would the media think better of MPs? What about some of the reporting that we see about MPs—the sensationalism, such as stories about people claiming the heating bills for their second homes, and IPSA stuff about expenses? Do you think the media would trust MPs a bit more, and cut us some more slack when it comes to sensationalist reporting of things that simply are not happening, but are on the front pages, and designed to make us all look bad?



Henry Dyer: I think a lot of stories by many colleagues are there to try to deal with untrue things that people are coming up with on social media. A couple of weeks ago, large portions of Twitter became highly obsessed with the idea that *Private Eye* had reported something about Kwasi Kwarteng that it hadn't. Full Fact put out something saying, "No, *Private Eye* did not report this." *Private Eye* put out something saying, "No, we didn't report this", but these things go round and round. As much as we try, we cannot fully get that out of people's ecosystems because of closed loops. People will just keep sharing it, keep believing it is true, and then start to think that the media are lying to them.

If politicians work on improving their correction systems, then that gives us something to report, and it means that where corrections need to be made, you can make them, and we can report on them.

Esther Webber: It is surely quite a useful riposte to a journalist who is trying to do a gotcha on something if you can say, "No, look, I've corrected that already," or "I am doing it." Then again, I don't think it is our job to portray MPs in a good light, necessarily. I will stand by that.

Aaron Bell: It is certainly not Mr Hutton's job.

Chair: To keep you thinking of us in a good light, I am conscious that we will not keep you much longer. I need to bring in Owen Thompson and Jack Brereton, and then we will conclude.

Q53 **Owen Thompson:** Briefly, and not to open a can of worms, much of what we have been talking about today has been written corrections, including in *Hansard*, but obviously people do not access what happens in this place just through the written word. Granted, we have no control over what goes on social media, and the closed loop there is a separate issue; but do you see merit in applying some of this beyond that—for example, on Parliament's video service? Would it be useful for something to flash up on the video clip to say that there had been a correction to it?

Robert Hutton: You should absolutely do that, yes. It doesn't need to be humiliating; you could just have something across saying, "There is a correction attached to this," or a clickable link or whatever. I believe those things can be done.

Q54 **Jack Brereton:** Do you feel that there has been a declining trend in the accuracy of things said in the Chamber? We just mentioned the potential decline in accuracy in media reporting and inaccuracies with social media. Do you think what is happening in Parliament is reflective of a wider trend?

Robert Hutton: I think reporting in Parliament, if anything, has got better over the last 20 years. That may seem odd, but an organisation such as Politico will spend time explaining the "object" procedure, and what exactly Sir Christopher is so agitated about. That is the one place you might read that. I think that did not exist 20 years ago, and it does now. *The Spectator* and the blogosphere has created far more of that. I don't



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know how far you have to go back before you get to the golden age of fair, accurate and beloved-by-MPs political journalism.

Esther Webber: Yes. I don't think I really have enough data to answer that properly. I have been covering Parliament for 12 years, and I don't think I have noticed any obvious decline from an accuracy point of view. I suppose I cannot resist the impression that recent events have put the issue uppermost in people's minds, so it is particularly thorny at the moment, but that does not mean we should not try to improve it.

Chair: Henry, do you have anything to add?

Henry Dyer: No.

Q55 **Chair:** Any last comments from anyone?

Robert Hutton: My only other thought is that a lot of the problem is not on our side of the table, in the sense that it is not hard to find a Member of Parliament—not all of you—who has created a social media clip to make another Member of Parliament on the opposite Benches look stupid, wicked or venal. With tight elections coming up and people wanting to keep their seats, I would not particularly expect them to stop doing that, but you guys are doing this. Most political stories require, ideally, at least one MP quote, and most of us know which MPs will provide that quote. That is my main thought: if you want to improve trust, think about that.

Chair: Anyone else?

Esther Webber: Not from me.

Henry Dyer: It comes down to a question of political advantage: when is it politically advantageous to make corrections and be honest and, bluntly, when is it not? Elections are a time when sometimes it is not necessarily politically advantageous to be 100% truthful, but that is a cultural thing. That is a mindset in political parties and Members; it is not something that is shared by the public. The public, if anything, at election time expect you to be rather more honest than you are outside of it, because that is when they get their say, and if they are getting their say on incorrect information, they all spend the next five years harassing you, even if you are then actually telling the truth. It is incumbent on Members and prospective Members to be honest in their campaigning at election time, not just during parliamentary Sessions.

Chair: Thank you very much. I encourage you to keep reporting on procedural matters. We are very keen on them, and we know that they excite the public in a way that very few other things we do in Parliament do. Thank you very much for your time; we do appreciate it.