

Committee on Standards

Oral evidence: Outside employment and interests, HC 620

Tuesday 20 May 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 20 May 2025.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Alberto Costa (Chair); Paula Barker; Gill Furniss; Sir Francis Habgood; Professor Michael Maguire; Mehmuda Mian; Dr Rose Marie Parr; Anna Sabine; Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst; Gareth Snell; Dr David Stirling; Carys Williams.

Questions 110-167

Witnesses

I: Sebastian Enser-Wight, Chief Strategy Officer, Global Media and Entertainment, and Tom Cheal, Senior Managing Editor, LBC.

II: Professor David Hine, Emeritus Fellow and Tutor in Politics, Christ Church, University of Oxford, Rose Whiffen, Transparency International UK, and Alex Parsons, Democracy Lead, mySociety.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Transparency International UK](#)
- [Professor David Hine](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sebastian Enser-Wight and Tom Cheal.

Q110 Chair: Good morning and thank you very much for appearing before the Committee on Standards in this public evidence session as part of the Committee's inquiry into MPs' outside employment and interests. To begin, what steps do you take to make programmes objective?

Tom Cheal: Good morning. I am Tom Cheal, the senior managing editor at LBC. We have a long history at LBC of trying to bake impartiality into how we conduct our programming. It might help if I briefly touch on the nature of our output.

We have a tradition stretching back to 1973 as the first commercial radio broadcaster in the UK, and we have always sought to put the audience at the heart of what we do. We actively invite listeners to engage with our output and to debate topics of conversation with our presenters. In doing so, we very proactively seek to ensure that we achieve a range of views in any programme that we host on LBC.

We start from a position of having a set of facts that inform a debate. There is scope for presenters to share a view or express an opinion on a particular issue, but they proactively invite the audience to engage with that point of view. They make it very clear that they want to hear from people who may disagree. More often than not, we prioritise those voices on air, in order to ensure that any listener is in receipt of a breadth of different viewpoints on any given topic that we discuss.

Primarily, we drive this through callers. We have hundreds of phone calls to more or less every programme on LBC, so we can cherry-pick the most informed, best voices—those with the most relevant experience to the topic under conversation or debate. But partly thanks to the modern technology with which we are all now increasingly familiar, there are many other routes for audience members to engage with the programme, should they not wish to phone in. They can send emails to the studio, the presenter or the production team. They can engage through social media channels, text messages and WhatsApp. That also enables us to present a rounded perspective on the topic under discussion and the subject being debated on air.

Perhaps I can add, as a final point, that we have two news bulletins fixed in every hour—we call it the “top of hour” and “bottom of hour” in radio—and those are delivered from a separate studio by a newsreader. It may or may not overlap with the topics under discussion on air at that moment, but it covers the wholly objective and impartial stories of the day that we deem to be important for our audience to hear.

Chair: Thank you.

Sebastian Enser-Wight: Tom has covered that thoroughly, so I have nothing further to add.

Q111 **Chair:** I should have said at the beginning: do you want to introduce yourself? Forgive my eagerness to ask a question that the Clerk had suggested.

Sebastian Enser-Wight: I am Sebastian Enser-Wight, the chief strategy officer at Global, where I have been for nine years. Global is home to LBC, but it is also one of the leading broadcasters in the UK, and it is home to Capital, Classic FM and Heart, to name a few. In addition, we are the No. 1 outdoor advertising company in the UK.

Q112 **Dr Shastri-Hurst:** Good morning. What is the value in inviting sitting MPs to host current affairs programmes on LBC? In particular, can you set out whether there is a rationale or a difference between being invited on as guests as opposed to hosts?

Tom Cheal: It is probably safe to say that we invite MPs on as guests almost every day of the year. That is very much part of the rhythm and tenor of the output, where they will appear—as I am sure you are familiar—for short interviews on a particular issue.

On the specific role of MP presenters, LBC has always sought to connect the public with decision makers and people in positions of power and responsibility. Going back as far as Margaret Thatcher and through to Sir Keir Starmer, we have often invited Prime Ministers of the day and other leading political figures on air to answer questions in a phone-in format.

In the last 10 years or so, what has evolved through LBC is the opportunity for MP presenters to host programmes, which affords them and the audience more time to delve in some depth into topics and issues of public interest. For instance, if someone were to appear for half an hour with one of our regular presenters, we would cover perhaps six or seven calls in that time in topical questions from the audience, and there may be other messages that come into the studio, as I described a moment ago. The space and time afforded by an MP presenter hosting a show across three hours offer scope for more direct engagement with the public, for the politician and the audience to engage at length, and frankly for people to share more of their own experiences and insights with politicians, which is an important counterweight to the soundbite culture that is often criticised in other parts of the media.

I think it is fair to say that we have seen a shift in audience habits, in that there is clearly an appetite for this type of engagement with political figures. The data that we see is that these programmes are very popular: we have hundreds of thousands of people tuning in whenever we have politicians on air. Whether it is programmes like that or other evolving formats such as political podcasts, which are an opportunity for people to discuss issues at greater length, we see a clear audience appetite. For LBC, it is one way of meeting that audience need.

Q113 **Paula Barker:** Thank you very much for being here to give evidence. On the distinction between MPs being guests and MPs being hosts, how do you decide who you want as a guest and who you want as a host? As MPs, we get calls all the time to pop along to radio shows, television interviews

or whatever. What is it that makes you go that step further and invite an MP to be a host?

Tom Cheal: It is not something we rush into. It is normally quite a lengthy process. Typically, we will have had that MP on air very many times, perhaps initially as a guest and subsequently for one of the lengthier phone-ins that we conduct on air. It is then a question of assessing the interest from the audience, the engagement, and the way in which that person connects with an audience. That is fundamental for us.

It is fundamentally radio, albeit that there are many routes to consume it now, so we need to be certain that that person has the voice, delivery and communication skills that we are looking for. Critically, we also need somebody who is open to being challenged. To be frank, were we to have somebody on air who was parroting party soundbites for three hours, it would make for very dull radio. We need to make sure that anybody we seek to engage on this basis will embrace the way we do things on LBC, be open to the challenge that will come through at times from audiences, and be happy to reflect a range of views on any given topic.

Sebastian Enser-Wight: Tom has cut to the chase. Ultimately, we are a radio broadcaster: it has to be something that appeals to our listeners, because really our success is measured by how many people tune in. That is the key.

As a layperson, having been down to the LBC studios a few times, I know that there is also a technical element. Without a lot of training, I am not sure that I would have the capability to host one of these shows. It is not just about sitting and taking phone calls; they have to be watching the clock, making sure that they hit all the breaks, monitoring different screens and seeing what is coming in from their producers. It is quite a technical background, and of course they need to understand media law, compliance and all the Ofcom regulations to ensure that what they are doing on air is impartial and not libellous.

Q114 Paula Barker: When you engage a host, how do you ensure that they are fully cognisant of all the legislation, for example?

Tom Cheal: That speaks to the process that I touched on. I should probably say that there are times when we invite people to host a one-off show, as part of what we call a guest host week, and there then is a stage beyond that, which historically has seen an MP presenter host a regular weekly show. If we think that somebody has the potential to host a show, our senior management team, be that me or one of my senior colleagues, will sit down with the individual concerned and sometimes with the team they work with, to walk through the requirements of Ofcom's Broadcasting Code and the other media law considerations that Seb touched on.

We will pilot people before we put them on air. That is not necessarily a single moment; if we feel it appropriate, we will go through several stages to ensure that we are satisfied that we can meet our obligations. Fundamentally, that is to ensure that our audience retain trust in the output, but also to ensure that anybody who goes on air, whether they are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

an MP presenter or a regular presenter, is given the best chance of delivering what we are all looking to achieve for the audience.

Q115 Sir Francis Habgood: I am Francis Habgood, one of the lay members. Thank you for coming this morning. Do you think MPs acting as radio hosts could have a special authority in the eyes of the public?

Tom Cheal: That is an interesting question. I do not know if I would call it an authority. I think for the period of time that they are on air, and beforehand and afterwards, there is certainly a greater level of visibility or profile. I would point to the fact that, because this is open and free debate across three hours, any presenter—be it an MP presenter or a regular presenter—is never entirely sure what somebody on the end of the phone line might say or bring into the conversation, so there is a degree of jeopardy that is attached to what these people are doing across three hours. I am not quite sure I would call it authority, per se, but I can see the point that the question is driving at.

Q116 Sir Francis Habgood: What do you think the appeal for MPs is?

Tom Cheal: I think some of them enjoy the cut and thrust of debate. It is, thankfully, on LBC a large and very engaged audience. I describe it often as Britain's biggest and best focus group. We are very grateful for the fact that we have so many people who are engaged with what is going on in the world and interested in ideas. They have views and opinions that they want to share. We very deliberately invite them on stage with our presenters in order to have that conversation.

For people who are, as MPs, interested in ideas, public sentiment and what people think about particular issues or policies, I can imagine there is a real value to that. I am sure he would not mind me saying, but the current Foreign Secretary, as you may be aware, did host a programme on LBC. He would say that people often think it is about talking, but actually, it is about listening, and he thinks that it arguably better equipped him as a politician to listen to the range of voices, views and perspectives.

Q117 Chair: In fairness to that person, how do you know he would say that? Is that through discussions he has had with you?

Tom Cheal: He said that a couple of times at party conference.

Chair: So it is on record.

Tom Cheal: It was not on the platform at the party conference. It was in a fringe event. I think those are some of what underpins the appeal.

Chair: Sorry to have interrupted.

Q118 Sir Francis Habgood: You described earlier, in answer to Paula's question, how you ask MPs to come on the show. You are asking them because they are MPs—is that right?

Tom Cheal: As interviewees or as prospective MP presenters?

Sir Francis Habgood: If they were not an MP, would you be going to the same set of people who were then going to act as radio hosts or guests? Is

it the status of them being an MP that makes them attractive to you to come on to your show?

Tom Cheal: It is part of connecting our audience to the democratic process. We think that is an important strand of what LBC does, and we think it is part of what makes our station distinctive. Whether as an MP presenter, or inviting them on to field questions in a regular phone-in, or even as a guest, those are three different routes that we think have a value. Clearly, to a degree, it hinges on the fact that they are representatives in Parliament.

Q119 Sir Francis Habgood: Among the areas that have come forward in the submissions we have been receiving are caps on earnings and the time that people spend not doing their parliamentary activities. How do you determine the amount of earnings for or regularity with which an MP might appear on your shows?

Tom Cheal: Broadly speaking, we have a fixed fee, which reflects the amount of time and the preparation and commitment, alongside the duration of the programme. In terms of the commitment that it entails, we have never had an MP present a standard weekly weekday programme on LBC. Typically, it has been confined to weekends. Our guest host weeks, which run from Monday to Friday, will very often be in recess. We are very alive to the primacy of parliamentary responsibilities, and we seek to work around them if we do offer people the opportunity to present a programme.

Q120 Sir Francis Habgood: Do you think that this work could be a distraction from the parliamentary duties of an MP?

Tom Cheal: I suspect that an MP who has done it might be better placed to answer that. My feeling would be that, within reason, it can enrich what they do as an MP. We will always make allowances for the parliamentary timetable. I think that there is a value in connecting the public with their representatives, particularly—this is one of the most pleasing things—by drawing in younger audiences. I appreciate that it is a fine balance, but I think there is a strong argument that it can draw in audiences and give them a better understanding of what is going on in Parliament.

Q121 Carys Williams: I am also a lay member of the Committee, just like Francis. Thank you for coming to speak to us today. I would like to follow up on one of Francis's questions. Some of the written evidence that the Committee has received has suggested that perhaps MPs should not accept paid opportunities to host or present if those have come primarily because of their membership of the House. What are your reflections on that suggestion?

Tom Cheal: I think I would return to the fundamental point, which is that this means of communication with the public offers an important avenue to reaching a broad cross-section of the public. There is a long history, whether on radio or by other forms of communication over the decades, that has shown that there is a value to that. We do not currently have any MP presenters on LBC, but we would be reluctant to see that freedom too

heavily curtailed because, as I say, there is a value to connecting the public with their representatives in a responsible way.

Chair: We will now turn to public perception, on which my colleague Paula will ask you some questions.

Q122 **Paula Barker:** Do you think that the public perceive politicians who host current affairs programmes differently from regular hosts on LBC?

Tom Cheal: We go out of our way to signal the fact that they are an MP before they even appear—before the mic fader goes up and they say their first words. Through social media and promotion ahead of that appearance, we will make clear that they are an MP. Thankfully, we have a well-versed and intelligent audience on LBC, so I think that the level of audience expectation is such that they appreciate the difference between an MP presenter and a regular presenter.

As Seb mentioned a moment ago, the responsibilities of the MP while they are on air are the very same as they are for a regular presenter. I think that the audience appreciates that, because of their role in Parliament, an MP can bring to a debate a set of perspectives, an outlook or an understanding of the issues that a regular presenter may not be able to draw on. I think that that is an important distinction.

To go back to the way the shows are formatted, we very clearly separate out the current affairs programming from the news bulletins that we have at the top and bottom of the hour. That is signalled through the jingles and the on-air signalling that we provide for that. I think there is an appreciation that, in some regards, MPs might offer an extra perspective because of their broader experience, but the audience are alive to that distinction.

Chair: We will turn to the Broadcasting Code.

Q123 **Dr Stirling:** Clearly, the role of parliamentary politicians is not necessarily to be impartial, so could you outline the editorial steps you take to ensure that, when an MP is presenting a radio show, they are both impartial and accurate?

Tom Cheal: As I touched on a moment ago, we sit down with them well ahead of any broadcast and take them through the key elements of the Broadcasting Code—specifically, section 5, to which you alluded. Clearly, if we are on the verge of an election, it is a very different consideration and we would not have them on air. We walk through the requirements of the code and talk about how we need to meet them.

Again, we make the point that they need to be prepared to be challenged. That is how we can provide for our audience a broad range of views and perspectives on any given topic under consideration. Our callers really lean in to the debate and are very happy to challenge the MP's perspectives. In coaching people as broadcasters and presenters, we are very clear that we are there to try to create the most interesting and gripping conversation,

and invariably that comes with people exploring a debate from different perspectives, so it is very much baked into what we do.

We have very clear editorial and compliance controls. When we have MP presenters in, our most experienced output producers and executive editors oversee that programming. By the nature of the free-flowing conversation and debate that we have, if we feel that something needs to be addressed, we can do that very quickly. It is not a heavily prebuilt programme, with preproduced elements that need unpacking. Those factors all feed in to how we do things. As I say, we have that rich, constant influx of information, and different views and perspectives that come through as messages to the studio, which can broaden the perspectives expressed.

Sebastian Enser-Wight: To underscore to what Tom said, when we have MPs presenting, they field calls from listeners; they are not interviewing colleagues and do not have guests or other parliamentarians in. To an extent, that ensures they are kept honest and helps to remove the risk of an echo chamber or soundbites coming out.

Q124 Chair: We recently had a helpful evidence session with Ofcom, and they described their role as a post-broadcast regulator. Clearly, they receive a number of complaints, as I am sure you do, about material that has been broadcast. How do you use that audience feedback to modify your editorial decisions about what an MP is contributing? Do you listen to the public, in terms of how they perceive the role of an MP in broadcasting?

Tom Cheal: We do. We have been keeping a close eye on the work that Ofcom is doing on this issue. By the very nature of what we do and the level of engagement from the public, minute by minute, we can get from our audience a very good reading of how they feel about this type of programming and gauge their views on it. I would point to the way that LBC's approach has evolved. As I said at the outset, programmes that we do with MPs prove popular, and we think they meet an audience need. They clearly need to be done responsibly, and we need to keep that under review to ensure we are doing it in an appropriate way for the audience. A lot of the feedback that we get feeds into that, as does some of what Ofcom chooses to look at.

Q125 Dr Stirling: You described the distinction at the top and bottom of the hour and said that you cut away to separate news provision. Are you comfortable and confident that the audience recognises the difference between your news output and your current affairs output, to which the MPs are contributing?

Tom Cheal: I think so, yes. We have huge loyalty from our audience. They listen typically for 11 hours a week and are very familiar with the format. The presenters refer to those news bulletins as the news, we have the jingles, so the on-air imaging signifying that we are heading to a news bulletin, and it is scripted as opposed to free-flowing conversation and so tonally it is different. I think there is an understanding that is an important



HOUSE OF COMMONS

part of what LBC offers but is distinct from the current affairs content, if you like.

Chair: We have a supplementary question from Gareth and I am then going to come to Rose Marie, who has questions specifically about Ofcom.

Q126 Gareth Snell: I was going to follow up on Neil's point. With an MP paid to present for three hours, fielding phone calls, would there be any noticeable difference in the quality of the output and the understanding of the listener if, rather than being a fee-paid presenter, that MP were a non-paid guest with somebody else curating the calls coming in who is an independent arbiter of what is happening?

Tom Cheal: We in effect do a shorter form version of that, which I think is what you are driving at. I would say that across three hours, it would alter the nature of the conversation. Radio is a very intimate medium and there is a great power in hearing a back and forth between two voices. From a production point of view, for that duration I think three might be a crowd. As a broadcast product, I think there is a better case for having an MP who fully understands all those responsibilities while they are on air conducting a conversation with a range of callers, as opposed to someone on the fringes where you are never quite sure if they might interject or interrupt the flow of a programme.

Q127 Dr Parr: I am also a lay member. Thank you for appearing before us. To go back to the Ofcom consultation that is out just now, what impact has the High Court JR in favour of GB News had on the work of LBC? Has it changed what you do?

Sebastian Enser-Wight: I do not think it has changed how we operate at all. Obviously we monitor it closely. It is a slightly different situation in that, as I said earlier, we do not put MPs on air with other MPs one-on-one. We have a different setup where they are taking calls from the public. We are closely monitoring it, but it has not impacted what we do. As Tom said, as it happens we do not have any MPs on air at all at the moment.

Q128 Dr Parr: As a follow-up to that, if politicians were restricted from presenting news in any type of programme, what would the implications be for LBC?

Sebastian Enser-Wight: Day to day, there would not be any. We welcome, and are still digesting, the Ofcom consultation but it explicitly says that "politicians are allowed to present current affairs programmes such as audience phone-ins and discussion programmes". So we do not think that as drafted it would impact day to day. There is also an exception in there that if it is "editorially justified" there is an exemption. Tom will be able to talk in more detail about where we would see that happening, but were there to be the death of a monarch or something while an MP was hosting a phone-in I think we would see that as exigent circumstances where, as a one-off, they may need at least to pass over to a newsreader. We do not see any impact. As I say, we are still digesting it. There are many pages of detail, but on the face of it we are encouraged by where they are landing.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q129 **Dr Parr:** Thank you. Lastly from me, do you have any idea of numbers of current MPs on your books, for want of a better word, who would host one of your programmes?

Tom Cheal: No current MPs whatsoever. We do not have any regular MP presenters currently.

Chair: Thank you, Rose Marie. Does the Committee have any further questions?

Q130 **Professor Maguire:** Do you view impartiality within programmes within that programme, or within the totality of the output?

Tom Cheal: Within the programme.

Q131 **Professor Maguire:** What steps do you take to ensure that?

Tom Cheal: They are that presenters need to ensure that they are reflecting a breadth of view. They may have a particular opinion on a story, but they also then need to elucidate the fact that there are other viewpoints. They can do that most obviously with callers, given the nature of LBC's output. There are alternative ways of bringing in those different opinions and views, as I said, with messages and other forms of communication. You could also use the reporting team that we have to expand on a particular issue and say, "Well, this might be an opinion that you have expressed, but there are also these views and other people say these things as well." It is about ensuring that the audience in that moment, in that programme, is exposed to a different and a broad range of opinions.

Q132 **Professor Maguire:** Who manages that process—is that the presenter or is it production?

Tom Cheal: It is presenter and producers, with editorial oversight from the senior management team.

Q133 **Sir Francis Habgood:** I am interested as to why you have no MPs working with you at the moment. Is that a conscious decision, just a moment in time, or a reluctance on the part of MPs because of what is going on with outside employment?

Tom Cheal: No, I think it is just a more practical matter—that we have a full house, as it were, on air of current slots. We just haven't had something open up where we thought, "Actually, perhaps this might be appropriate for an MP presenter." It is certainly something that we think is an important part of the choice that we can offer audiences.

Q134 **Chair:** Would anyone else on the Committee like to ask any questions?

Gareth Snell: That was my question.

Chair: That is fine. No? In which case, is there anything else that you would like to contribute to the Committee as we undertake this inquiry? Any final comments?

Tom Cheal: I don't think so, no.

Sebastian Enser-Wight: I think we have covered it all; thank you very much for your time.

Chair: In that case, I thank you on behalf of the Committee for appearing before it and helping us undertake this important inquiry. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor David Hine, Rose Whiffen and Alex Parsons.

Q135 **Chair:** Good morning, and thank you to those of you joining in the second panel of this morning's session into the Committee on Standards' inquiry concerning MPs' outside interests and employment. Before I invite my colleague Michael to ask the first questions, could I invite you to introduce yourselves, please?

Rose Whiffen: Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence today. My name is Rose Whiffen. I am from Transparency International UK. For those not familiar with Transparency International, we are an anti-corruption organisation. We are the UK chapter of a wider movement and we operate in over 100 countries. I personally work as a senior research officer in the UK chapter, working on political integrity.

Professor Hine: I am David Hine. I was professor of politics at Oxford, but am now retired. I am a bit surprised that I am still in one of these chairs. I have not sat in one for quite a long time. In the latter part of my career I developed an interest in standards in public life and in the rise in concern with the quality of democracy, and nowadays the survivability of democracy. I guess that is why I am here.

Alex Parsons: I am Alex Parsons, a senior researcher at mySociety, which is a charity that runs a series of civic tech websites in the UK and around the world. TheyWorkForYou and WriteToThem is a key area of my work.

Chair: Thank you and welcome to the Committee on Standards. Michael will ask the first question.

Q136 **Professor Maguire:** Good morning. I am Michael Maguire, a lay member of the Committee. I have a question for the three of you: how effective are the rules and the Code of Conduct in regulating MPs' employment and interests? I will begin with Rose.

Rose Whiffen: Overall, we would say we very much welcome the recent changes on paid advocacy, which I believe this Committee also recommended. But we think the current rules could be more effective. For example, the rules rely heavily on transparency as an effective tool for accountability. In that case, you need to ensure that the transparency is meaningful, and that the public have easy access to the information registered. We also believe that the current rules, which allow MPs to take up second jobs outside the boundaries of simply maintaining a professional qualification, leave parliamentarians vulnerable to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

undertaking behaviour such as lobbying, which is expressly banned. It opens them to corruption risks such as favouritism and quid pro quo arrangements. For example, as it stands, consultancy roles or non-executive director roles are still permitted. Our analysis, using the most recent Register of Members' Financial Interests, found at least 39 roles taken up by MPs which appear to be of that higher-risk bracket—consultants, directors, advisers, partners and non-executives—and those roles were in industries such as property, energy, technology and finance.

In a recent case that this Committee will be well aware of, a former MP was found in breach of the lobbying rules. At the time he was undertaking a consultancy role for a private company. As was the case at the time of the investigation and is the case now, his activities advocating on behalf of the private companies is banned. Roles like these consultancy roles do leave MPs vulnerable to performing lobbying tasks. Were this secondary employment not permitted, the potential for wittingly or unwittingly straying into an advocacy role would be removed.

A simple solution might be to simply ban "consultancy" roles, or similar high-risk roles, but we understand the practicalities of a solution like that. The rules cannot specify every single job title that an MP could or could not take. You might have a sort of whack-a-mole situation where you had a role to get around these rules, such as "strategic marketing adviser", and you just kept adding and adding. We believe that, "To protect MPs from slipping into or knowingly undertaking lobbying activities, all second jobs should be prohibited except those that maintain a professional qualification" or provide an essential public service.

We also believe that, in addition to the restriction on secondary employment, there could be a strengthening of the current lobbying rules as well. Currently, the definition of a financial or material benefit as stated in the rules has to be interpreted narrowly, but we believe—and have previously recommended to this Committee in the Code of Conduct consultation—that it should not just be about whether or not an MP could be advocating on behalf of a specific company that employs them. We think that if they are lobbying on behalf of the wider sector, that would still incur a financial benefit for that company, and so should still be banned. So largely our two improvements would be restrictions on second jobs and strengthening lobbying. We also believe there are transparency improvements that could be made, which I am happy to elaborate on later.

Chair: Thank you.

Professor Hine: I will be brief. From a historical perspective, the rules work pretty well, and things have improved gradually over time. If we look back at 1992 or 2008—when there were major discontinuities in the rules—things have improved enormously, and from an internationally comparative perspective, the system works well. For my part, I would not change the partially self-regulatory elements of the process. There are risks, and I absolutely agree that the transparency risk is problematic. In

some ways, the more information you put out there, the more it can be misused. That is clearly a problem.

Many of the problems we grapple with when we look at parliamentary standards come from a situation where the rules are actually quite adequate. The problem is the individual, and that brings great discredit to Parliament. That very often happens towards the end of an individual's career. We cannot discount the fact that political life is up and then down—sometimes spectacularly down—and is pretty insecure. Towards the end of a period of disappointment, someone might move from what looks like a perfectly respectable piece of consultancy to a much more questionable form of activity. That, clearly, gets Parliament's reputation into trouble even though, strictly speaking, the rules prevent it. I don't think much can be done about that, other than better training, better awareness, and better dialogue between the Committee, the Commissioner and others, to try and inform more and more MPs that they must have proper regard for Parliament's long-term reputation at any stage in their political career.

My answer would be that the system does pretty well. Clearly, we are going to talk about areas where there are issues—probably transparency, and probably the question whether you can make something of the principle of full attention—and those are certainly areas where something needs to be done. But I am not convinced that the situation we are trying to deal with is disastrous, notwithstanding what happened between 2019 and 2024.

Alex Parsons: There is a mixture of questions here. One is in terms of what the purpose of the rules is; and if the question is one of the goal being to align the role of an MP with public expectations of what an MP does, there remains a significant gap between the allowances for second jobs and expectations of MPs as a full-time role. Going by YouGov polling, there are very few second professions that have majority support—it is pretty much just doctors and maybe authors, so even other professionally regulated ones like lawyers are not held in great esteem. Similarly, even for GPs, there was an interesting survey experiment which had a penalty for increased income for a GP as it went up towards being a full-time job. In terms of the distance between the current rules and that strict, "there is one job" mentality, there is still a significant difference remaining.

Even in terms of the rules as they exist, as the others have said, there are significant transparency problems.

One thing we have done this year with volunteers is to go through the register, with the expectation that we would add details that were not available about what different companies did. But we found in practice that it was very hard to answer questions about a range of second jobs because the basic information in the register was not up-to-date and had not been changed recently. Even jobs that should be relatively straightforward—like an MP being a councillor—we found very difficult to answer with updated information. Our two questions would be: is transparency enough to align MPs' behaviour with public expectations; and

if that is the approach, how can transparency be improved to make that more the case?

Q137 **Professor Maguire:** You are talking about the new register.

Alex Parsons: Yes. This was reviewed in the September 2024 register. As a lot of new MPs joined, there was an initial good set of disclosures about what the state was as of after the election, but as we were looking at it coming into January, there were a lot of instances where we would have expected to have seen an update—is this ongoing, or is it not—and this was not quite as we had expected to see. Basically, there is room to ensure that these things are regularly updated to be clear about what those second interests are, if they are to continue.

Q138 **Professor Maguire:** Clearly there are arguments for and against further regulation. What do you think this Committee needs to focus on if deciding that further regulation is required? I ask David this time.

Professor Hine: I think it will be steered in any case by the Modernisation Committee, so perhaps we should start there.

I have a lot of sympathy with the full attention principle. I think that some of the reputational damage that has been done to Parliament has been the result of the public—or, rather, those who interpret things for the public—finding it very hard to believe that anything like full attention can be given to the role of MP as an MP if they have such very high earnings. If you are to get on top of that, something needs to be made of the full attention principle.

I worry about that, however—if I may flip to the other side immediately—because I think it is very difficult to enforce. I have read carefully what the Commissioner has said about that, and I understand all the issues of enforceability that surround it. I also understand that as a principle, as opposed to an enforceable rule, it may actually have quite a strong behavioural influence, and I hope that that would be the case, but it does seem to me that some more attention needs to be given—I am sure that it will be given—to the question of giving at least some stronger indication of what full attention means.

There are various ways of going about that. I am happy to go into that now, if you want me to. The problem is, you can justify outside employment in two ways. One is, what sort of previous professional experience is useful to Parliament and enriches its life and, we hope, ensures that the people who are selected for Parliament include those who have been through strong, rigorous and useful training processes? I have to say, I have some doubt about that. The selectorate process is serendipity pretty often, but that is one way of going about it—justifying it on the grounds of a selected list of occupations.

The other way is to say, “Look, full attention does not mean that that is the only thing you do in life,” with which I have a lot of sympathy. We all have other lives, and the question is, how do you make that reasonable? In my professional life, I saw lots of people doing other things throughout



HOUSE OF COMMONS

their career. Most of them behaved pretty reasonably and understood intuitively what the limits should be, and that they could, as it were, enrich their academic career by doing some other things. But some behaved outrageously and ignored their duties. The question is, how do we communicate to those people that they must not behave in that way?

What doesn't help is if you earn £500,000 a year—which you don't in academic life, but in some walks of life you can. It doesn't help public credibility at all that you are cognisant of the limits that private life imposes on you if you earn very large sums of money. The transparency of earnings means, inevitably, that we know, and the way in which that is mediated to the public means that it is exaggerated and manipulated for the purpose of the person who has communicating it. That is bad news, and I don't know how you get around that, except to say that private life only consists—in my view—of one day a week and no more.

One day out of six or seven, depending on which way you look at it, is not very much, and I think that there should be some sense in which MPs are required to say, "Yes, that is how much time I am spending on this and no more." That would be some kind of reassurance. If someone then earned £500,000 one day a week, people might start to wonder whether they were telling the truth. Ultimately, this has got to come back to how much damage an MP is willing to take, and as I say, that will depend on what stage of his or her career he or she is in. It may be very difficult to do, but I do think some substance has to be put around full attention, and when I wrote a paper for you, I thought it could probably be done by defining the sorts of occupations MPs can do. I am doubtful about that now, but I do think indicative limits on earnings or hours is a way forward.

Q139 Chair: Did you say that you are doubtful about that now?

Professor Hine: Yes, I thought about it more.

Chair: Would you like to correct your written submission?

Professor Hine: If it counts as evidence, I had better do that. I have been out of this game for rather a long time now, and when I wrote it I had not thought of it quite as evidence of my opinion, as a rather old observer. I am sure you agree that this is an iterative process, where we work through these things, and if we change our minds we should put our hands up and say so.

I see a lot of difficulties in fairness and good sense. There are loads of ways in which someone can be useful to the House. More importantly still, I think political life is very short—and sometimes nasty and brutal as well—and you have to give MPs a reasonable prospect of having a life afterwards.

Q140 Chair: One might argue that it is extremely volatile, and that the days of more than 20 years serving as an MP might be fading into the distance. Does that add weight to your evidence?

Professor Hine: I guess it would, except that that was not my evidence—my evidence went in the opposite direction. But we must be permitted to

change our minds. I don't think I would change my mind on the hours or earnings, or something like that—some kind of scale that would give MPs a guide to what they might or might not do, and also to what the public can say is a reasonable expectation as laid down by Parliament.

Q141 **Professor Maguire:** I am interested in Alex's and Rose's responses, because despite what has been said, there clearly is a potential benefit to Parliament in having MPs with outside interests, in terms of the experience that they bring, the opportunities for next careers, and so on. Presumably you have a different view; how do you respond to that?

Rose Whiffen: We don't have a completely opposing view to that. The carve-out that we do have in our recommendation for professional registrations and public service is a way to try and create that balance between wanting to ensure a diverse pool of candidates to be MPs while also addressing the clear corruption risk that having secondary employment does present. You ask where we think regulation should focus, and as an anti-corruption organisation, we are concerned about the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. How it relates in this circumstance—and what we are particularly interested in—is how the Code of Conduct can deter MPs from acting in their private interests. These may be a secondary employer or their own private interests—businesses they own, for example. We want to avoid as much as possible MPs' having a conflict of interest. These conflicts of interest may manifest when they are speaking in a debate, and where the topic relates to an interest, they must ensure that their contributions align with what is best for public policy. Connected to this, we want to avoid a situation where businesses have undue influence over our politicians, which could then distort public debate and the policymaking process.

Q142 **Chair:** Can I just ask, because you touched on it for a second time, about unwitting advocacy. Do the rules on declaration, as distinct from registration, not currently address that risk?

Rose Whiffen: You will have seen that in some circumstances in the past year or so, there are MPs who have been found in breach of the rules on declaration, so these are not being followed all the time. We also think that declaring is not necessarily enough to mitigate the corruption risk here. There needs to be a strengthening in the lobbying rules as well with, as I mentioned, there not being a narrow interpretation of what a financial interest is. As it stands, we do not think it is mitigated enough with the declaration rules.

Q143 **Anna Sabine:** I do not want to go down a rabbit hole but do want to touch on the full attention point. We have talked a lot about how as MPs we are not employees but postholders; that we do not have a job description and that no one tells us what time we are supposed to be spending on the job. We might all have our own sense of what full attention is. It strikes me that an MP could not have a second job but still in my mind not be spending their full attention on being an MP. They could be golfing or doing whatever they want. They get held to account by the electorate. Have you given thought to how one might measure, quantify or



HOUSE OF COMMONS

investigate what full attention looks like?

Professor Hine: I have had thoughts, but it is a pretty tough call. I said in my paper that there are many different ways in which an MP is fulfilling her responsibilities, and people choose different routes. Some are happy to be on the Back Benches for a long period of time and spend a lot of time in their constituencies. The moment that you start to create an algorithm or calculus of these things, I think you would get into trouble.

Using the term “full attention” as a principle in a code of conduct seems to me to run the risk that the public believes this to be your full-time job even though, I agree, being an elected representative is not necessarily best seen as a full-time job. After IPSA came along and started to pay you salaries, I think you get closer to being full-time employees. I do not think there is any getting away from the fact that is how the public sees it. If we are talking about trust as the ultimate problem, then they do see it in that way.

I think you can say, “Yes, Parliament is enriched by activities while the person is an MP that can be useful” and it is quite easy to reach for a list of good things, like the Army reserve or being a doctor or dentist. I would enter the caveat that there are plenty of potential risks in those areas too. If you think about the health service and its gradual privatisation, and the way in which people with medical backgrounds and roles might be tempted to advocate certain outcomes in public policy, then you can see that is just as much a risk as in business. Indeed, it is business. However, I think the real problem is that it is hard to discriminate between different roles and jobs. Therefore I think you have to fall back on the private life bit, which is what we all do aside from our roles. Possibly many of you think you do not have a private life, but you do, somewhere! I think that is the justification. That is why I think you have to put some kind of limit on it.

Q144 **Professor Maguire:** Alex, how would you respond to that? There are risks in everything we do, from what Rose says. Yes, there are potential risks in MPs having outside interests but you cannot mitigate against all risks. How would you respond to that?

Alex Parsons: I think the way to understand risk in this sense is collective. If you ask this question in 1992 you get a very different answer, because lots more MPs at that point had much more second employment. At the moment, the number of MPs in substantial second employment is not massive. I will talk about collective benefit in a second, but most of the benefit of that employment is private to that MP, whereas the reputational risk is collective to Parliament and all MPs.

So the sense of the question of the rules is: how do you mitigate that collective risk of headlines about corruption, second jobs, when most MPs do not have personal agency to stop that happening because they do not take those jobs? The ones that do derive a financial benefit from it, but a lot of the benefit from that is private to that MP. The goal of these rules is to weigh up restricting that private benefit versus the collective risk of, as

Rose says, corruption in general and that reputational risk of are MPs working for their constituents or are there secondary employers going on there?

To come back to that question of the benefits to Parliament from second employment, I think that these exist—in the sense that people have experiences, and so on—but is that the only way to get those benefits? If you set out to create a Parliament that is in touch with a range of occupations and expertise, would you say that everybody has to go and get a second job, or would you devise ways in which people could stay in touch with sectors? MPs do a lot of work talking to people in their constituencies and in their previous professions. That would be my question about the collective benefits of MPs with second roles: can you get those benefits in better ways, that do not have the substantial risks associated with second employment?

Chair: Thank you. I am going to move onto Rose Marie, and then I will touch upon principles-based rules.

Q145 Dr Parr: In many ways, as you have mentioned already, this comes back to defined lists and what that might or might not look like. What sort of roles and occupations, if any, do you think should be exempted from a potential prohibition on outside employment and why?

Rose Whiffen: I have mentioned earlier that the main exemptions should be roles which maintain professional registration—for nurses, I think it is about 150 hours they have to work per year—or which provide an essential public service, like army reservists or those providing lifeboat services. This is to maintain that balance between avoiding conflicts of interest and also ensuring doctors and nurses, for example, do become MPs.

To go down a small rabbit hole, I am aware that in some of the submissions to this Committee for this consultation, there was some criticism of and issues with those MPs who currently own their own businesses and who are also doing several hours per week or per month maintaining those businesses. You might have noticed that the recommendation I have outlined does not have an exemption for directors and business owners. This is because there is still a conflict of interest that would be live if MPs continued in those roles, and there is still the opportunity to use the privileged position of being an MP to lobby Ministers on behalf of their own company. Secondly, we do worry that if we had it as an exemption, it might become a bit of a loophole for other paid employment.

On the other hand, we would not deter candidates who have business backgrounds—that is important experience to bring to the table—and we also would not want MPs' businesses to suffer. We have been thinking about how to balance those two areas, and to this end, perhaps this restriction we are putting forward could have a six-month pause, or transition window, to allow parliamentarians to introduce arrangements that would mean that they are not involved in the day-to-day



HOUSE OF COMMONS

management of these businesses while they are an MP. Additionally, it is worth noting that we are not saying that there should be a restriction on any shareholding, so they could obviously maintain shareholdings in their businesses. So the two main exemptions are ones which maintain professional qualifications and those providing essential public services.

Q146 Dr Parr: Any other views around our prohibition and that list, as well as how that looks in our Code of Conduct and how it might be maintained?

Professor Hine: I do not necessarily disagree with anything you have just heard. It is a balance. I certainly think that for people with businesses, you probably need a transition period, otherwise you may well be deterring people whom you find valuable. I would not want to think that a class of potential MPs, those who had built businesses and shown the range of skills required to do so and to be successful, would be somehow more deterred than others because the transition arrangements are going to be pretty formidable for them. Notwithstanding what Rose has just said, if you are a shareholder, and you have prospects of going back into business, you are probably under similar sorts of pressures.

My worry is that the more you think about these things, the more complicated it becomes to exclude almost anybody. It is better to fall back on the declarations and prohibitions that the existing Code of Conduct offers. I guess I am a bit limp-wristed on this. I cannot think of a way to get a satisfactory list. I have come to that conclusion since I wrote my evidence, by reading better evidence, I think. I am not sure. I think you may get into trouble; it might be quite controversial. I imagine it could even be divisive in the House that some people are able to do things that other people are not.

For me, most importantly, as the Chair said, life is nasty, brutish and short. You cannot expect to be here—you may not be here in six months' time, any of you; we don't know. I think you must have some reasonable prospect. Otherwise, the pool from which you draw MPs, which is already problematic in some respects—that is a question for party selectorates not this Committee—will get narrower and narrower. That will be a huge loss to public life.

Q147 Dr Parr: Alex, do you want to add anything?

Alex Parsons: Just that although there are arguments for more expansive lists, there are several advantages of a relatively tight list, in being able to clearly enumerate exemptions. That does more clearly align with public evidence and public expectations that the number of exemptions should be relatively small. We can start from a few principles and there will be weeds to get into. That is kind of the job of working through it.

Just because there will be a footnote that explains things in more detail does not mean it is not a good idea. It is my sense that there will be problems posed for individual people but, over the course of 10 or 20 years, this will work itself out naturally in some respects. There is a lot to say for a relatively restrictive list, as Rose talked about.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q148 Chair: Before I come to Mehmuda, I want to touch on what you have already discussed, Professor, which is a principles-based approach. I want to flesh that out a bit. The Committee has received evidence from you and others about a proposed principles-based approach to implement a qualified prohibition on outside employment. Can you expand on your views of what those principles are? Would they capture the right type of secondary activity? Do you think that they could be effectively enforced? If so, how? Are there different principles that could work better than others? Would you like to expand on the principles-based approach that you have suggested?

Professor Hine: I think you have three principles that you are working on, don't you? One is almost automatic—no monetarisation of your role as an MP. You must not take a job that is offered to you simply because you are an MP, that could not be offered to somebody else. The other one is conflict of interest, which I think is relatively cut and dried. I do not have problems with either of those two principles. I am pretty sure they are enforceable, not that enforcement is something you reach for immediately, it is the last resort. There are not that many enforcements in that sense, out of 640 or whatever MPs who are presently in the Palace of Westminster. I think that would work.

I come back to the fact that, when things go wrong, they often go wrong despite the rules, and it is hard to imagine what the rules would be that would have stopped that individual doing what he or she did.

Q149 Chair: If somebody is corrupt, then they are corrupt. No amount of rules will stop them.

Professor Hine: Yes, absolutely, that is right. You are very lucky to be in this legislature rather than in quite a number of others. That is because of the socialisation process and decades of building a Code of Conduct that largely works. Notwithstanding fears of the long-term decline of trust, I would not have thought that there is a parallel long-term decline in behavioural attitudes inside the House of Commons. That is the first one.

The conflict of attention principle worries me a lot because I do not think it is enforceable. I think the Commissioner said he cannot see how he could enforce it. Even if I recommended that it was no more than one day a week, with a limit to earnings and so on, there might still be a problem because I think these would have to be indicative rather than full. I would not envy the Commissioner's job in trying to enforce the full-attention principle. It seems to me that, with all of them, it has to be something that is internalised by MPs, and there will be bad apples.

There is not much that you can do about that, except continue with the life that you lead in the Committee on Standards, with its independent members, the Commissioner, the Commissioner's staff, the Registrar, and so on. With a bit of luck, and more training of MPs as they come into Parliament—although that is not the vulnerable end; I think it is the other end, when they go out, that is vulnerable—all those things are the way to do it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

But if you are going to have that principle, I think you have to face the risk that the public—or those who interpret things for the public—say, “It says here that everybody’s got to work full time, and yet they’re not, and they’re earning a certain amount of money; this looks like you’re not enforcing your principle.” I do not quite know what to do about that, other than, as I say, to have some indicative and relatively modest limit on how much time you spend and hope that you can persuade people to follow that.

And by the way, if KCs are inhibited from becoming MPs for this reason—if some MPs are inhibited—I do not think that is a great loss; I am sure there are plenty of other KCs who are quite happy to do equally as good a job without needing to earn half a million pounds a year as well. That is my view.

Chair: For conflict of attention, I think most MPs on this Committee might well agree that we are well aware of the conflict of attention in our private lives, and how it always suffers, as the workaholics that we all are.

Professor Hine: You cannot resign from your private life, I’m afraid.

Q150 **Chair:** Indeed. Are there any other comments on a principles-based approach from the other panellists. Can we start with Rose, please?

Rose Whiffen: I think that there have been a lot of thoughtful considerations with these new principles, and we do welcome those into this debate; it ignites some really helpful conversations. Just to give our perspective on a principles-based approach, we see rules and principles, working in tandem, as the most effective way to ensure integrity and avoid corruption risks.

Principles have been found to be effective in culture setting and norm setting, and they are important as, obviously, you cannot set a rule for every single eventuality. But that being said, principles only go so far, and rules create clarity and clear expectations, as well as a mechanism for parliamentarians to be held to account, in that they can be investigated when those are broken. We would not necessarily disagree with the principles that have been set out, but we would see them more as complementary to a stricter rule on outside employment, rather than a substitute.

To echo some of David’s points, when introducing a new reform, it is very important that the public see that it is working. I think that is a similar point to the one that David was making. If it is a new principle and the intention is that it will ensure more integrity, the public are going to want to see that it is working. Thus, you do need a clear enforcement mechanism for that.

Alex Parsons: I would make similar points in that, as you say, if someone is corrupt, they are corrupt, so, to an extent, you need processes that can deal with people who are not going to comply. I think there is a risk with some principle-based tests of making it about character. That works for 99% of people, but, for the people who do not have character, it does not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

catch them at all. I think it is important to have systems that are independent of someone saying, "This role I have taken is not corrupt," because that is not enough to actually stop people who are really going through the system.

In general, we want to think of systematic risk rather than individual risk. A focus on individual roles can sometimes lead down a path where it is hard to validate what someone is doing with that role. Although the Parliamentary Commissioner can currently ask for people's written job descriptions, it would be useful if they were published more generally. There is no particular reason that constituents should not have access to a contract, if it exists, for MPs doing separate work.

In general, the question to ask is about the risk of the organisation employing them, rather than the specific role they hold. For instance, you could imagine a situation in which someone effectively has a semi-fake job. There is a job description, but that is not what they do; what they are really doing is about contacts or asking parliamentary questions. Questions about their written contract will not matter, but questions about the organisation that is employing them—"Do they take Government contracts? Do they separately lobby Parliament?"—will be good indications of the corruption risk of the role. Regardless of whether it is a benign role or a corrupt role, that is the question to ask about the collective risk: is this an organisation, regardless of what its people say they are doing, that you want employing an MP? That principles-based approach—looking at organisations and asking questions about the organisations, rather than about what MPs specifically do—is a helpful way of cutting past some of these questions.

Q151 Dr Stirling: David, the first principle that you highlighted was that Members should not monetise their membership of this place and should not take roles that have been offered to them just because they are MPs. We have recently heard evidence from broadcast media, where clearly people are employed because they are MPs. Do you have a view on that?

Professor Hine: I have lots of views. I imagine that it is a minefield because of the risk that you appear to be suppressing freedom of speech. That is the critical underlying problem. I have to say that I feel uncomfortable about the idea that somebody who is an MP presents news and chairs sessions. I do not feel at all uncomfortable about people writing anything, and probably being paid for it, although there may be some issues there.

I do think that the media and particularly new social media, as well as the monetisation of that, present real risks. There is lots and lots of research out there—my colleagues probably know much more about this than I do—on how social media can now target particularly sensitive electoral groups, and how individual politicians play a role and get money from it. There is a very interesting piece of research on the recent German election. The way in which social media was used in that election is hair-raising.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ultimately, social media is probably a bigger risk than conventional media, but I do not quite know how you go about dealing with it. There was a case in the High Court that forced Ofcom to rethink its approach; that is now probably back in this place to be dealt with. I do not have any particular views on that, other than to say that I hope it can be resolved, because it looks to me as if that High Court decision was quite worrying, for those who worry about it.

Q152 Gill Furniss: I want to talk about reasonable limits, because the debate is not over yet. Could any of you could suggest to the Committee what a reasonable limit is and how we would monitor and enforce it?

Alex Parsons: I have reviewed the recommendation from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and the notable thing about the reasonable limits is that it tries to sidestep defining what they are. This is, in part, why it is useful to think about roles and principles. The obvious ones are limits on time and limits on money, but the trouble is that if you pick either one of those, you can find a role and say, "Well, this doesn't apply for this." The problem with the time-based approach is that you end up not being able to regulate lawyers earning a lot of money, just because some people write books. If you are defining by role, it becomes a bit easier.

These things all nicely go together. If you are defining semi-reasonable limits in terms of money, it works nicely to define some of the role aspects as well. Ultimately, I think the reason that people struggle to define reasonable limits is that all the roles raise different questions. Going by role solves some of those questions.

Rose Whiffen: I remember that in, I think, its submission to the 2021 Code of Conduct consultation, the CSPL included a rebuttable presumption, which is in a way similar to our ban, in the sense that roles that were more along the lines of public services or professional registrations, which might be above a time limit, would also be allowed in consultation with the Commissioner. Even those who have advocated for a limit recognise that there is sometimes a bit of wiggle room for particular roles.

Professor Hine: I do not have much to add to what I have already said. I think I would adopt a rough and ready measure, if it is private life, which is that it is probably no more than one sixth of your time. I am sure there are situations—especially coming out of a business when you first become an MP, adjustment times and keeping up with qualifications—that will require more than that. I do not see that bit as a huge problem.

It may be that we identify some people we definitely want to be able to attract to Parliament, and they need to do a certain amount of practice; I had a quick look and I actually found it quite hard to find many examples, but I am sure there are some. If they need more than one day a week, so be it, for a time. If I were a dentist or something and I said, "I definitely need to go on a course to learn these new techniques, and for several weeks I won't be around very much, but I will do my best and get my staff



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to help," that would be a reasonable position to take. If the media made much of that, they would not succeed. When you take leave for a year to go on a celebrity programme, it is rather different, and that is pretty easy to swat, I would have thought.

Q153 Mehmda Mian: Good afternoon. I am Mehmda Mian, one of the lay members. Do you have any concerns about Parliament itself deciding what are deemed acceptable forms of outside work, particularly since they could impact on MPs' parliamentary time and/or attention?

Alex Parsons: My general point here is to be concerned about Parliament making decisions with a tendency to overvalue the opinions of people who are here already. There are a lot of MPs who already have second jobs. In general, the average opinion among MPs is more towards allowing things than is the case for the average member of the public. That would be my concern: it tilts it a bit too much in favour of that direction.

If there were serious concern about Parliament wanting to do it itself, you could, as other Select Committees such as the Justice Committee, the Home Affairs Committee and the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee have done, convene a citizen panel of a representative group to get into the weeds on some of this stuff. If it were a question of, "What about this, this and this?" there are ways of deferring the question in a way that would not take it out of hand, but would help to get into more details in a way that goes beyond big public polling, which can be a bit imprecise.

Professor Hine: I always get a bit muddled here, but this is a debate that comes up in a number of areas of public life. Internal self-regulation means, I suppose, the House of Commons deciding its own rules and procedures. Anything else seems to require full legislation and undoubtedly outside consultation, advice and so on. If it requires full legislation, it is still Parliament that is deciding. The other House is involved in it, but it looks quite similar to me. Although we academics and others sometimes say, "They are marking their own homework and setting their own rules," I am not sure that that is a very widespread public concern, so I do not feel very strongly about it, I must say.

Rose Whiffen: There may be concerns about vested interests, and the roles that Parliament has overall could be earmarked as exemptions. But I hope that the process would also include the Commissioner as a layer of independence, and also this Committee, which has not only parliamentarians who have the lived experience of being an MP, but lay members, who bring an additional layer of independence to the decision-making process, so it cannot be seen as marking your own homework.

Q154 Mehmda Mian: We have already touched on my next question, but I will ask it for the sake of completeness. What should the rules be regarding outside interests that do not fall under a specific occupation, for example delivering speeches or writing books? Professor, you said that you do not have considerable worries about delivering speeches or writing books forming part of outside interests.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Professor Hine: It seems to me inherent in the role of an elected representative. They are not there simply to say, "I have heard from my constituents, so I must do X"; they are there to lead as well. They are there to aggregate policies and to make their opinions known, and they do that in all sorts of ways.

If you are in a privileged position, compared with other MPs, rival parties or whoever in various ways, to disseminate your views, obviously we worry about that—but we worry about that on many fronts, to do with party funding and the role of leadership versus followership in parties altogether. In general, I do not worry too much about it; I expect MPs to do this.

As I say, I worry very much about social media and the ability to acquire, as it were, a position in public life—maybe even before formally entering public life—and then monetise it. The relationship is based on you getting a benefit and you persuading voters that your particular authority is the reason why they should look in a particular direction. Given the polarisation of political life in all advanced democracies, I think that that poses quite serious risks. I think it is the biggest risk in the room, to be honest.

Rose Whiffen: It is a really interesting question. There are some additional trade-offs with speeches, newspaper columns and additional income sources. We recognise that parliamentarians can contribute to the public debate through writing and giving speeches. A column in a local newspaper, for example, is a way of engaging with the public more informally and perhaps more accessibly. We would not want to undermine or restrict those kinds of contribution.

From an anti-corruption perspective, we have two areas of concern. The first is conflict of interest, for example where a Member participates in a debate on Ofcom or on newspapers. We hope that those types of conflict of interest would be mitigated by strengthening the lobbying rules and the existing declaration and registration rules.

We are also concerned that those offering to pay for speeches or writing may have motivations. They may be trying to ingratiate themselves with parliamentarians or use the credibility of parliamentarians to speak on their behalf, and/or the payments may also be a loophole for undermining the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act and the acceptance of permissible donations.

It raises the question of when those types of payments are actually donations. If it is not permissible for a foreign media mogul to make campaign donations to a political party, why would it be permissible to employ a parliamentarian and fund activities such as speeches or writing books in other ways?

We highlighted this in our submission to the Committee, but it might be that the Electoral Commission has a role here. One way to look at it might be to examine the payment. Is it a modest amount or an exorbitant



HOUSE OF COMMONS

amount? Is it above commercial rates? There is actually a precedent under PPERA for doing this with conference costs: the Electoral Commission determine the reasonable cost for the hire of a standard party conference. That is just one example of where you can measure what the commercial rate would be, and see whether it is being done above the normal rate. As I said, if that is the corruption risk that they are trying to avoid, there can be restrictions on permissible donations.

Alex Parsons: Because it is a fairly important part of an MP's role to be part of shaping public discussion, I think that it sits in a much more ambiguous box than second jobs. Having nuance and fine-grained rules, as Rose talked about, is probably the way forward.

There is probably an interesting distinction to be made with writing books, where I think it is hard to argue that people cannot make royalty payments. At the same time, I think there is a question about MPs accepting advances before you get to the manuscript stage, as that is an implicit way of saying, "Please finish this book. Spend your time on this." That is not necessarily what we want. Potentially, we would want to work something in, just to ask, "Is this really something that is happening in your own time, and what is going forward from that point?"

Q155 **Chair:** Alex, I have a supplementary to Mehmuda's first question about the impact on MPs' parliamentary time or attention. In your helpful written evidence, you said, "Interests interfere with being an MP—it means a worse service to constituents because rather than being a full-time MP, they are doing work elsewhere." Is that an opinion, or is it based on evidence of MPs that have second jobs?

Alex Parsons: I am afraid that we did not submit written evidence to the Committee. That may be from something we have written elsewhere. I do not recognise it, but I will believe that I wrote it.

Chair: Does it sound like something that you might have written?

Alex Parsons: It sounds very possible. In answer to your question whether that was based on evidence: if I wrote something like that, it was not based on interviewing lots of MPs about distractions from the job. But inherently, if people are drawing significant second income from places, it sort of implies that their attention is spread in different ways. Maybe some people can do that, but I think there is an inherent fuzziness.

Chair: But there is no evidence to suggest that a worse service to constituents is being provided by MPs who have second jobs or interests?

Alex Parsons: I do not think that I would back that up right now, if that is my evidence.

Chair: That is very helpful. I just wanted to clarify that.

Professor Hine: If you will permit me, Chair, there is a certain amount of academic evidence on this. Some academics have gone around the world trying to measure whether there is better service or worse service



depending on how many outside interests an individual has. The answer, I think, is that it is inconclusive. The way in which those sorts of things are written will not be terribly helpful to your inquiry, but people have thought about this. You could construct an argument to say that sometimes you get better service when people are very engaged, but that is not factoring in their personality and all sorts of other elements.

Q156 Chair: For what it is worth, my experience is that in my 10 years as an MP, there have been very occasional times when I have had complaints about the service provided by other MPs. When those complaints come to me, they are not about those MPs who have second jobs. They are about those MPs who might be classified as lazy—and there are one or two, as there are in every walk of life.

Alex Parsons: May I add something? There is a distinction between conflict of attention and conflict of interest. Some interesting research was done on MPs who had significant directorships. That led to more attendance in Parliament, in part because they were in London for their second jobs, and they had more attendance and more votes for the same reason. It is an interesting question. Attendance is not necessarily a good measure of distraction, because it can come from the same thing. That is not always in the interests of constituents, so it is a difficult thing to measure. But yes, I agree with the broad point.

Q157 Gareth Snell: I will just make a point on attendance, because it does not apply to the MPs whose political position is abstention from this place. To equate attendance here with a good service would essentially cause all sorts of problems in Northern Ireland. I genuinely want to understand; we have spoken about “service” as an MP, but no one has defined what the services of an MP are. Is there an agreed understanding of what the services that MPs provide are, which are good or worse depending on attention elsewhere?

Rose Whiffen: We do not advocate for a job description or something like that. For us, it is not about indicating what the services should be, but what behaviour there should not be. That is around conflicts of interest and the corruption risk. For us, it is not about dictating what you should do; it is about looking at the areas that you should not be engaging in.

Alex Parsons: Similarly, I think we are in favour of a very broad job description, which, if nothing else, is just to be a bit clear on what the areas of activity are. Some MPs serve on Committees, some do not, some have Government jobs, and there are a range of activities in the constituency that can also be important. It is important to have a definition of the range of additional activities, but also, as Rose says, that there is a sense of what is not meant to be happening with your time. I think there is a whole separate discussion about MPs as a service, which applies to some aspects of casework, which has developed over the last 50 years and sits oddly with some other definitions of the role. For the purposes of second jobs, what is not happening is more important than a clear description of what should be.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Professor Hine: I do not really have anything to add, I am afraid. I think what determines how hard MPs work is pretty varied and it depends, as the Chair says, first of all, on whether they are committed to working hard or whether they are lazy. Secondly, it depends on where they are in their career and whether they are unhappy and resigned. It also depends on how marginal the constituency is. If you are sitting on a majority of 500, you have to spend a lot more time in a constituency than if you are sitting on a majority of 20,000—that used to be the case, maybe it is not anymore. Those sorts of things will be behavioural determinants. What should be the case will I think be hard to define. You train each other and talk to each other about it much more than any outsider could help you with, I suspect.

Q158 **Paula Barker:** I have a quick supplementary question. Alex, you might be able to help with this, because of TheyWorkForYou and so on. There has been some interest—I suppose that is the word I would use—in the past, because you can google your MP and see how many times they have spoken in the Chamber and how many EDMs they sign and so on. But the role of an MP is far greater than how many times someone speaks in a Chamber. David, you just spoke about Committees and so on. I know colleagues, for example, who have applied to be on Select Committees, but the demand and interest has been so great that unfortunately it goes to a vote, and they are unsuccessful in it.

Not that I am suggesting that there is any source of impropriety going on, but sometimes when you sit in the Chamber for four or five hours, having prepared a 15-minute speech, and you are the last person to be called, you have to cut down that speech to two minutes. Sometimes you then have to ask: is that the best use of your time on that particular day when you could be doing a whole range of other activities that fall within the remit of parliamentary duties and are assisting constituents? Is any of that taken into consideration when these figures are released? I know that some MPs are hailed as heroes for speaking the most in the Chamber, and some are hailed as complete lazy oafs because they are way down the pecking order. I would be interested to understand that.

Alex Parsons: In terms of our stuff, the statistics became much vaguer on this almost immediately. This was before my time at the organisation, but at around 2010, the explicit rankings died away. We have not published what we used to call the numerology section in about five years, I think.

Q159 **Paula Barker:** Which section?

Alex Parsons: The numerology section—all these numbers. We publish a lot less of that than we used to, in part because of concerns about emphasising some aspects of the job over others. We have opinions about what makes an effective Parliament or MP, but those do not always side with what is easiest to measure. In terms of the question, we do a lot less than we used to. It is one of those things—it's difficult because it is fuzzy if you pick on it at any particular instance, but roughly speaking some people speak a lot less and some speak a lot more. That is not to say that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

for those who speak a lot that is necessarily a waste of their time, but they have specialised in that way. There are lots of different ways of being an MP—it is almost helpful for MPs to say “I am this kind of MP. This is what I value. I value my work on the Committee; I value my work in the constituency”. It is about what standard you want to be judged against. That is helpful for us in how we think about things going forward. There are different kinds of MP, and it helps to judge what they are trying to do well to understand what is happening.

Q160 Carys Williams: We have heard a lot of information from you today, and I am almost asking you a question to try to validate my understanding. I appreciate that you are three individuals and may have differing opinions, but I have heard a lot of similarity in terms of “principles-based” being the way to go. I heard that if we have additional guidelines such as reasonable limits on time, money or expectation of what is declared before somebody is elected, that should be used as guidance rather than hard and fast rules—Alex, you pointed out that for some roles people might acquire more at different times of the year. I heard that we should just provide that guidance to the Commissioner, so that when he is undertaking his investigations, he has something as boundaries, but MPs also have somewhere where they can send to check on what they are doing in terms of outside work. Would that be a fair summary of some of the key information that you have given us today, or is there some nuance that I have missed out?

Professor Hine: For me it’s a fair summary. I guess I have taken my cue in everything I wrote and what I have said here from the Modernisation Committee and its intent. It is very keen on what it calls the “principles-based” system. In a way, if we had been sitting here 30-something years ago, when Lord Nolan had just enunciated his principles, we would have said that principles and self-regulation was the right way to do. After Lord Nolan’s report on the principles, and their enunciation in the code, you might say, “Oh yes, that was a good self-regulatory principles-based system”, although it did depend on the elucidation of more and more precise rules over time, to ensure that people understood what the Code of Conduct meant, and to give the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards something to get his or her teeth into when difficult cases arose.

What I conclude from that is that principles are the overriding set—they are the generalities we are aiming at, and they are the ethical basis of what the rules are trying to do, but in certain areas you will certainly need rules. There will be a difficulty where the principle doesn’t necessary lead to a particular rule. I still think that is the case with the full attention principle. I don’t have any problems with the others. Parts of the Code of Conduct deal with monetisation and the conflict of interest, and can be used as a read-across. I do not think there is an easy read-across with full attention. I think it may have to sit there as a principle, and run the risk that it is a principle that gets Parliament into a bit of disrepute, precisely because it is not enforceable, or justiciable—whatever you like to call it. It is just sitting there as something that we hope MPs will have full regard to,

with the qualifications that are put around it regarding what you can do as an outside interest. It is the principle that will bear the weight there, rather than the rules underneath it—unless rules are found, but I suspect they cannot be. I don't know whether that helps.

Q161 Carys Williams: I have been regulated and been a regulator, and I am always thoughtful about putting rules in place that are easy to understand, to implement and to enforce to make everything fair and consistent. You do not put rules in place to catch people out; you put rules in place because the majority of people want to do the right thing, and they want guidance around it. As a Committee member, I am very thoughtful about that, which is why I was so interested in your opinions. Alex, do you have something to build on that?

Alex Parsons: Just the general idea that it is useful for everyone to have guidelines about how they should be behaving in ambiguous circumstances. People want to do the right thing, but to change the overall picture on second jobs, harder rules are required. If there are things that actively want to be discouraged, then there need to be rules about that. If there are things where there is genuine ambiguity—stuff around speeches and writing, where it is an ambiguous space—it is incredibly useful to have principles about what to consider. But when it is something that we want to happen less, and that needs a bit more than transparency, we need to say that this is something that we have decided is not allowed.

Q162 Carys Williams: As a Committee, when we are putting rules in place, should we be very clear about what the risk that we are trying to mitigate is?

Alex Parsons: Yes.

Rose Whiffen: Just to echo what I said previously, our stance would be that only introducing additional principles would not be enough. We would like to see a tightening of the rules around lobbying and secondary employment. That echoes something that you said in your question: the rules are a protection, because they create clear expectations of what behaviour is expected. It is those rules, rather than the principles, that create that protection and clear expectations.

Q163 Chair: We have not mentioned that we have got a few systems of governing Parliament, and of course, most Ministers are Members of the House of Commons. Do you have any comments about that in respect of conflict of attention? If we do decide to go down that route, how would we ensure that those people who are Ministers are not prejudiced against by demonstrating a conflict of attention with their MP role? How would you propose to do that?

Professor Hine: I do not think I could. I did note in my evidence that there was one very big exception, and if you justify it in terms of contribution to parliamentary life, it is the biggest contribution of all—it is the essence of parliamentary government. If you want your Executive not to be the bureaucrats who sit in the Berlaymont but elected representatives—Members of the House that gives the system its



HOUSE OF COMMONS

democratic legitimacy—then you have got to devolve to them the responsibility to be Ministers, and ultimately Prime Minister. I do not really have a problem with that; it is just a fact of life. I have never been in a constituency in my life where there has been an MP who was a Minister, so I have never felt particularly deprived as a constituent. But that argument has not come up in my lifetime very much; it is just a fact of parliamentary life. I think it is a good thing.

Rose Whiffen: In response to our main recommendation, we hear this a lot—that some parliamentarians obviously take up ministerial roles, so if they can take that on as a time commitment, then other secondary employment should be allowed. It is interesting to note, however, that once a parliamentarian becomes a Minister, there are a number of things that they can no longer do, such as speaking in debates, asking questions in Parliament, and serving on Select Committees. Lots of the activities of being an MP are suspended while they are a Minister. If and when they are no longer Ministers, their constituents might expect that their free time would now be filled with those MP duties again. There is a lot of time commitment that is freed up when they become a Minister due to the suspension of those MP duties.

Alex Parsons: I think it is a different type of second job, in the sense that the employer is effectively the same. There isn't a conflict, in terms of where the money comes from—it still comes from everyone. There is another question that relates a bit to the dual mandate question, in terms of serving as Mayors, councillors and Members of devolved Parliaments. There is a question of whether there are different constituencies involved and whether that is a particular thing to get into. I think, from the YouGov poll, that being a councillor is more approved of than other kinds of second jobs, but that relates to the question about elected democratic roles that might nevertheless conflict with aspects of MPs' roles. That is an interesting but distinct question from that of accepting private employment.

Chair: Thank you. Our final area is media appearances.

Q164 **Sir Francis Habgood:** The first question I would ask is about whether media appearances create particular difficulties. David, you answered that a bit when my colleague David Stirling asked a question. Alex and Rose, do you think media appearances cause particular difficulties, in terms of secondary employment?

Alex Parsons: It causes a different kind of difficulty, in the sense that it is an ambiguous space. You can clearly say that some aspects of it are entirely appropriate inside an MP's role. At the same time, because of that ambiguous space, there are grounds for abusing that. It would be useful to separate it. If we decide media appearances are a legitimate form of work, separating that out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, with appropriate fields to capture that kind of work, would be an enormous help, because it is distinct from large, ongoing employment. If it is legitimate, capture it better.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Rose Whiffen: Similar to my answer on speeches and writing, I think we should ask whether the media appearances are a donation by another name. Are they just an act of patronage? Additional to what Alex highlighted, I would add that.

Q165 **Sir Francis Habgood:** David, do you want to add anything?

Professor Hine: No. I was very struck by something that happened in a previous hearing of this Committee, when the Commissioner pointed out that you will need to think about what roles in the media give somebody automatic added authority, and whether or not that is something you particularly worry about. The days of Sir Geoffrey Johnson-Smith, who became a Conservative MP—most of you won't remember him—are long gone. He immediately stepped aside from media roles. Indeed, it seems to go the other way.

I think a sort of false authority is given by people who are MPs, and I think the public probably struggles to understand that. I don't know whether that is something you should engage with; it is a very difficult one. I worry about the blowback, which may possibly come from the other side of the Atlantic, about freedom of speech when you start involving yourself in that. I really do worry that we are living in a very dangerous period for democracy, and you have to think of all those sorts of things when you make moves of this type. Certain individuals may blow themselves out more easily than being put out, if I can put it like that.

Q166 **Chair:** Lovely. Thank you, Sir Francis. Are there any other questions that the Committee might like to ask the panel? No. Are there any other points that have not been made that you would like to explain to the Committee?

Alex Parsons: Just in terms of the effectiveness of the transparency system of the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I said, we went through this exercise, getting volunteers to go through it trying to understand what is going in there, and they ran into obstacles in terms of the data quality. One of the things we think is important is that Parliament should take more of a collective interest in the standard of that data quality. At the moment, it is very much seen as an individual's responsibility—it is on you to declare accurately and informatively—but the risk is collective when things are not easily understood. There should be an interest in raising the quality of data through things like systematic efforts to prompt MPs to update previous entries, or periodic audits of what makes sense. Again, that is not to catch anyone out. If people do not understand this form correctly, how do we change the guidance and get that better? If transparency is the solution to balancing these different principles, it has to be done well, and that has to be seen as a collective exercise, not an individual one.

Professor Hine: I completely agree with that. One thing we have not really talked about much today is transparency—we keep touching on it, but I guess it is not quite within the remit of the Modernisation Committee at the moment. I would personally be in favour of the publication of a sort of *Sunday Times* rich list, as applied to outside earnings, if it could become



HOUSE OF COMMONS

authoritative. The *Sunday Times* rich list is amazingly up there—ahead of everybody else. It may be spurious in all sorts of ways, but people pay attention to it. I would love to see a list that becomes authoritative—the go-to place to understand how much your MP is doing.

Q167 **Chair:** Unfortunately, that goes two ways. I was billed by the media in Leicestershire as the highest-earning MP without a second job—it was merely donations to my association—so one has to be careful, but that is an interesting point. The final word goes to Rose. Do you have any final comment?

Rose Whiffen: What an honour. My additional point would have been transparency too. There have been some recent changes to how the Register of Members' Financial Interests is published. It is now downloadable, which we welcome. I think this Committee has been advocating for that for a long time. There are a few improvements that would be quite easy to implement but would make a big difference. For example, on how the data is collected, there should be more consistency in hours worked. Sometimes it will be per month, per week or per year, and trying to analyse that becomes really difficult. If the data is more consistent when it is collected, that would alleviate the issue completely.

Chair: Lovely. On behalf of the Committee on Standards, I thank you for this lengthy and very informative session.