

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The Work of the Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards, HC 1630](#)

Tuesday 27 January 2026

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 27 January 2026.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Richard Baker; Markus Campbell-Savours; Charlotte Cane; Sam Carling; Lauren Edwards; Peter Lamb; John Lamont; Mr Richard Quigley; Luke Taylor; Michelle Welsh.

Questions 1-41

Witness

[I](#): Sir Laurie Magnus CBE, Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Laurie Magnus CBE.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning, Sir Laurie, and thank you for joining us. You are the independent adviser on ministerial standards, or the Geppetto of the Prime Minister, sitting on his shoulder, giving advice as and when required and requested. Thank you for finding the time to join us this morning. We do not need to rehearse with you the importance of standards in public life, nor the necessity of having an effective standards system. Let us just take those as mutual givens. What we would be interested to hear is your current assessment of the adequacy of the standards system in the UK, in terms of both giving confidence within and throughout Government and, crucially, in the minds of the public.

Sir Laurie Magnus: Thank you for inviting me to come before you. There is an issue of perception and, to an extent, reality, and the perception is pretty awful. We all would agree with that. Public opinion polls and the rest indicate a real decline in trust in people in public life and particularly those in central Government. I have now been in this job for just over three years, I have met quite a lot of Ministers in the previous Government and in this Government, and I generally have found a real sense of recognition of the importance of the Nolan principles and doing the right thing.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The challenge in a world of total 24-hour media scrutiny is that it is so easy to miss something, and that makes it very difficult. There is also an expectation that people will be completely clean as a whistle in everything they do. That is a challenge. But with those I deal with in the civil service and with Ministers I have met, and indeed quite a number of Members of Parliament—I am sure you all share this—there is a real belief in the importance of high standards in public life.

Q2 Chair: How does one face into that conundrum and not just see an unchangeable inevitability about it?

Sir Laurie Magnus: I am an optimist, and I hope we all are optimists. There is still more work to be done. You can go back to Lord Nolan and his golden thread, where he talked about the importance of codes of conduct, the importance of independent scrutiny, and very importantly, the importance of education. One issue is the understanding of the importance of the Nolan principles, in particular, and the behaviour that comes from that.

Now, it is understood, but actually we do not as a group talk about the Nolan principles enough and live and breathe them enough. That is important. It is about culture. I have been fortunate enough to work for two Prime Ministers who completely appreciate that culture. They get it, and that makes my job much more feasible. Developing that culture is the key. You may go on to ask me about the Ethics and Integrity Commission. That is good news because it raises the profile of the importance of standards in public life.

Q3 Chair: I am not going to ask you to comment on any specific cases that you have adjudicated on—that would be invidious—but is there an understanding in your mind, and arguably in the Prime Minister's mind, that, to use an everyday phrase, Ministers marking their own homework has gone, and a way of restoring confidence is that there is somebody who is understanding of the process but separate from it, who adjudicates and imposes a decision, rather than merely advising somebody what they might or might not do but it is only non-binding advice?

Sir Laurie Magnus: You are absolutely right about the way it works with Ministers. Ultimately, the responsibility for disclosing conflicts of interest or connections that may have an influence on their work lies absolutely fair and square with the Minister concerned. I have regular dialogue with Ministers about their disclosures of interest, which they are required to discuss with their Departments and share with me.

There are some occasions where Ministers will ask me for advice, and then there will be occasions where I actually say, "Look, I need to understand the background here. Can we have a meeting and talk about it? It is important to have a meeting." I will provide advice, and I will generally expect Ministers to follow that advice. Ultimately, the decision is up to them. If I am concerned about it because it raises an issue of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

potential conflicts, then I will escalate that, if necessary, ultimately, to the Prime Minister, because I have to—

Q4 **Chair:** What happens then?

Sir Laurie Magnus: We are talking somewhat hypothetically, and I obviously cannot talk about any case, but I would fully expect to be supported in the line that I have taken. That is important because when I produce my list of relevant Ministers' interests, I say that I am satisfied that conflicts or potential conflicts have all been addressed and mitigations have been put in place. I need to be able to say that, and if I cannot say it, then that is an issue to raise.

Q5 **Chair:** That system works on the enduring good chaps, does it not? I am a pessimistic optimist. As desirable as that might be, is it sustainable in the mid to late 2020s going forward against that rising tide of cynicism and mistrust in the public mind? There are people who are serving time in prison today who did not agree with what the judge decided, but the judge came to a judgment, issued the sentence, and that is that. They did not have discretion as to whether to abide by what the judge and the jury—while we still have them—determined. It is now time for that step change, is it not, before we reach breaking point?

Sir Laurie Magnus: When you say step change, are you talking about trying to move to some form of statutory underpinning?

Chair: It is either statutory underpinning, or the decision or judgment that the holder of your office has arrived at is binding and not advisory.

Sir Laurie Magnus: First, my office has been in existence for 20 years. During that time, the powers—if one can call them that—that my office has have significantly increased. We have a quarterly publication of the list of Ministers' interests, but the most important part of it is the ability to investigate allegations of wrongdoing without requiring the consent of the Prime Minister. Where I conduct an investigation, whether at the request of the Prime Minister or indeed as a result of a self-referral by a Minister or at my own behest, my investigation is published. The result is published in the form of a letter to the Prime Minister. That is a very powerful deterrent, and I am very confident sitting here that that is something that I have made work and can make work.

Q6 **Chair:** Yes, but—there is always a but—it is that peculiar constitutional thing that the Prime Minister of the day appoints his or her Ministers and dismisses them. That is perfectly proper because they have the duty given to them by the sovereign to form a Government. But a lot depends on the robustness of the Prime Minister, does it not? The presumption that the Prime Minister of the day knows the difference between right and wrong and understands the importance of rectitude. Twenty years ago, we might be laughing to think that we might be in a situation in this country where we might have a Prime Minister who did not, but stranger things have happened.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It relies fundamentally on the Prime Minister being able to be a good butcher, to be ahead of the public curve and say, "My adviser has found this. They are telling me I have no alternative other than to relieve you of the burdens of ministerial office," not, "I've had this piece of advice. It's going to destabilise the Government because it's somebody from the right, or the centre, or the left, and it alters the tilt and the balance of the coalition of all parties and so on. I'm not feeling strong enough to dismiss them; I'm just going to have to wait for the storm of public opinion to deliver the inevitable coup de grâce." That is fine from the political point of view, but the enduring damage it does to the confidence of the public in the institutions remains an ever-suppurating wound, does it not?

You kindly came in for the earlier session, and given what you heard Lady Stuart say, and what we all recognise and you have intimated, we do not have the luxury of that headroom, do we?

Sir Laurie Magnus: My office has been well established and well recognised, and where I have got involved in investigations, there has been a considerable amount of attention given to that, and the Prime Minister's support for the advice that I have given him. Clearly, it is possible that a Prime Minister might choose to disagree with the advice of the independent adviser, and indeed, that happened, as you—

Chair: You might have a Prime Minister who does not think they need an independent adviser.

Sir Laurie Magnus: Ultimately, you and this Committee and Parliament have the ability to hold the Prime Minister to account in that situation. Yes, you have the good chaps. I am a good chap, if you call me that, but there is a degree of moral authority that I carry at present. Indeed, if there was not to be an independent adviser—if the Prime Minister was saying, "I don't need this. I don't need an ethics adviser or whatever"—that would be something for Parliament, and more broadly a question about public trust in the system.

Q7 **Peter Lamb:** Exploring this theme, we have already had Prime Ministers who have dismissed advice they have been given and dismissed advisers. Would you believe that a Prime Minister of a Trump model would in any way concern themselves with any letter or advice that you provided them?

Sir Laurie Magnus: I have not met Mr Trump, and that is a theoretical question.

Chair: But you are aware of his *modus operandi*, are you not?

Sir Laurie Magnus: I am aware of his *modus operandi*, but for that *modus operandi* to actually take hold in this country, it would require an election. It would therefore have to have democratic authority, which would then remove my role.

Q8 **Peter Lamb:** The question the Committee is delving into with a number



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of different regulators and advisers is whether there are sufficient constitutional safeguards against someone who is potentially elected to office, and whether we believe the constitution stands above whatever the Government of the day happens to be. The good chaps theory is not simply about whether someone would follow the advice in the immediate term. To me it is more that there is a wider cultural shift in our society where people no longer hold these things as being significant, or where sufficient numbers do not believe they are currently sufficiently upheld so it doesn't matter what someone does.

If you have a Prime Minister who comes in and does not acknowledge what is right or wrong, or care, and who has a party of people elected, say, for a company that they solely own and who have been appointed solely to support them in that role, with an electorate who are sceptical about conventional news media and think everyone is at it anyway, the idea that there is a safeguard because there is a consequence to that decision no longer exists.

Sir Laurie Magnus: Well, I hear you. I am not a constitutional expert. Of course, in this country we have a fairly unwritten constitution as such. What you are suggesting is that there should be some form of written constitution. That is way above my pay grade, to be quite honest.

Q9 **Peter Lamb:** I am also asking whether there are parts of our existing framework that require greater embedding than is currently the case.

Sir Laurie Magnus: What I would say to you is—again, this goes somewhat above my pay grade—I can make this role work at present. I hope I have demonstrated that I can make it work. I have a relationship with the Prime Minister, as I did with the previous Prime Minister, of being able absolutely to speak truth unto power and have an open conversation. I fully believe that the incumbent Prime Minister will respond to my advice. It is difficult for me to give you a view on what might happen in the future.

Peter Lamb: That is a fair comment.

Q10 **Mr Quigley:** I will be very brief because I know Markus would like to get in. You say the Prime Minister gets it, the previous Prime Minister got it, Ministers get it, and it is all very encouraging, and your office has existed for 20 years, but the gap between what Governments think we are doing and public perception gets wider and worse. I do not expect you to give me a full answer and solve that problem, but the Nolan principles are very, very clear, yet we still end up in the position we find ourselves in.

Is the issue that despite them being very, very clear, they are very difficult to measure against? We do not have a scorecard that tells the general public at the end of every year how we have performed against them. It is not until we breach them that it is a problem. Do you get what I mean? Everything seems to be very clear, but nothing is getting any better.



Sir Laurie Magnus: I believe Lord Nolan said that the important thing about the principles is that they are principles and not rules. Somebody in my position needs to make a judgment because they are principles, and you can only assess compliance, as it were, by making a judgment whether a Minister has complied with them. I come back to what I was saying about education: we possibly do not talk enough about the Nolan principles, and that is one thing that will very much be a focus with the formation of the EIC.

- Q11 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** You have just touched on the creation of the EIC and its replacing of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. What is your view on this change? I believe you used to attend the former informal meetings that were arranged by the chair of the CSPL. Perhaps you could touch on the comparisons. Are we losing anything from the informal nature of the old arrangement? Are there any risks to the new formal arrangement?

Sir Laurie Magnus: Of course, it is early days for the EIC. It has been going only since the announcement in July, in effect. You are seeing Doug Chalmers at some point in the future, who will give you a better view, I am sure. My perspective is that it is a good thing. It is excellent that there is going to be a letter to the Prime Minister annually, where the chair will set out the health of the standards landscape. It is good that it is raising the profile of the importance of standards and the importance of codes of conduct and extending those to arm's length bodies.

There is what they call a network of standards bodies that meet. We had a meeting last week under the auspices of the EIC. There has not been a huge change in that. The important thing is for the group of us to be able to sit around the table and share issues of concern—obviously not casework or anything like that, but issues of concern. It may have been Baroness Deech who talked about the benefit of therapy coming from those meetings. That is certainly the case. There are one or two members who have talked about concerns. For instance, the Electoral Commission talked about the concerns about the wave of intimidation across the country around elections. It is important that we share that. It is very positive.

- Q12 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Are the right people in that network as it stands? Is there scope for bringing other people to the table?

Sir Laurie Magnus: That is very much a question for the chair. Baroness Deech mentioned the Judicial Appointments Commission and the honours committee—I cannot remember. It is always useful for those who are involved in some form in appointments or regulating standards to be able to be present around the table, because it is good to share experience.

- Q13 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Beyond the network, what relationship do you envisage your office having with the EIC, and what role do you think it should play in monitoring the conduct of current and former Ministers?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Laurie Magnus: As your Chairman said, my role is to report to the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister is the author and owner of the ministerial code. The EIC will take an interest and actually takes an interest and raises questions such as would concern this Committee, but it is more about the general processes rather than specific case matters.

Q14 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** What would success and failure for the EIC look like further down the line?

Sir Laurie Magnus: In five years? I come back to talking about the golden thread and education. First—I referred to this in my annual report, and it is relevant to Ministers but also across the board—is better induction and mentoring of people coming into public life, particularly for Ministers. It is a massive change suddenly to find yourself as a Minister, with all the responsibilities, surrounded by civil servants and a diary that is almost impossible to manage. That is one thing I would want to see as being understood and encouraged: more of the Nolan principles—the culture of the Nolan principles.

I also feel that success would include, drawing from the Nolan principles, less acrimony in public debate and more courtesy, frankly. All the opinion polls suggest the lack of courtesy in public debate is something that really causes negative feelings. In five or 10 years, to have better mentored Ministers and people coming into public life, as I say, with a better understanding of the Nolan principles and more courtesy, would hopefully then move the dial in increasing levels of public trust in public service.

Q15 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** What kind of public profile do you think it would have? Do you see it as something that the public would be far more aware of and conscious of communications from than other existing bodies within the network?

Sir Laurie Magnus: The EIC? I see the success of the EIC and the success of what we are all trying to do is to move that dial of public trust in a more positive direction.

Q16 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Does it have a more direct role? Could it have a more direct role in communicating with the public and widening that gap between what someone has described as—

Sir Laurie Magnus: The annual letter to the Prime Minister is an important document, which will address the health of the standards landscape. I would hope that gets published and is given proper attention across Whitehall.

Q17 **Lauren Edwards:** This Government have made a number of changes to your role, including the slightly Monty Python-esque changing of your title from the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests to the Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards. What has this meant in practice, in terms of how you do your job?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sir Laurie Magnus: The actual change in title has not made a huge difference; it is just that the title better reflects my role. People did not really understand what Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests meant, so ministerial standards is much clearer. There have been the changes I referred to, particularly the quarterly publication of the list of Ministers' interests, the ability to conduct investigations without requiring the Prime Minister's consent and, more recently, taking on responsibility for advising on the business appointment rules, as far as ex-Ministers are concerned.

Q18 **Lauren Edwards:** In a letter to the Committee in response to our ministerial statement inquiry, you told us that you consider your role as focusing "on the conduct of Ministers as individuals and not on the actions, policies and collective decisions of the Government". How do you make that differentiation? To play devil's advocate a little, are you acting as an adviser on ministerial standards if you are not advising on their adherence to the ministerial code and the actions they take as Minister?

Sir Laurie Magnus: I am obviously advising on the ministerial code. Your Committee has very helpfully produced a report on a particular issue that you wrote to me about and I wrote back on, which is the whole question of rule 9.1 in the ministerial code, or the principle about statements to Parliament. I hope the Government will respond to your recommendations in due course. As I said in my letter, my job is to look at the individual behaviour of Ministers. I cannot hold the whole Government to account for collective decisions. The most important statements to Parliament will be collective decisions of the Government. I hope that distinction is clear.

Q19 **Lauren Edwards:** You are commenting on the individual behaviours and decisions of Ministers as they relate to the ministerial code and nothing broader, in terms of the way the Government conduct themselves.

Sir Laurie Magnus: Yes.

Q20 **Lauren Edwards:** You were also given the power of your own initiation. Have you had any cause to use this power yet?

Sir Laurie Magnus: No.

Q21 **Lauren Edwards:** What fundamental difference to your role does this power make?

Sir Laurie Magnus: Oh, it makes a very, very fundamental difference. It increases my authority, and it certainly constitutes a degree of deterrent, to an extent. If I say that I want to see a Minister or raise a query about something, that gives me a degree of authority to be taken very seriously. Certainly, my experience has been that I am taken seriously and that I receive really good responses from Ministers and their private offices.

Q22 **Lauren Edwards:** Previously, you had the power to initiate an inquiry



HOUSE OF COMMONS

subject to the agreement of the PM, and now, as you have said, you have the power to launch regardless of the PM's views, although it was normally given. You have talked a bit about the benefits; are there any risks of you having this new power that need to be managed?

Sir Laurie Magnus: Risks? Well, I suppose the risk is that I go off-piste to an extent. I am very conscious of that. I am independent. I am a solo operator. It is really important that I recognise banana skins all over the place, but also that I think very carefully about the steps I am taking. In that, I have the benefits of a very good secretariat, some of whom are sitting behind me, who keep me up to the mark. I encourage that. I want to be challenged, because it is really important as one person in this office.

Q23 **Mr Quigley:** Considering your role in relation to the general public, if somebody believes they have evidence of a breach of the ministerial code or business appointment rules, do you think they should be able to raise it directly with your office?

Sir Laurie Magnus: Generally, where that happens, it comes to my office anyway, because it comes through the press or whatever. Your question may be about not having a direct website. I obviously have my work for the Prime Minister, I am available for Ministers, and I also make a point of answering letters from Members of Parliament, because that is really important and the right thing to do.

When it comes to letters from members of the public, they come through, from the Cabinet Office, and I try to answer them. Often, allegations of breach tend to build through the media, maybe through Members of Parliament, and that is a much more likely way that things come to my attention.

Q24 **Mr Quigley:** Would you encourage MPs, other stakeholders and the general public at large to contact your office, or is the route through the Cabinet Office?

Sir Laurie Magnus: MPs contact my office. I find occasionally that MPs write letters that appear in the press before I actually receive them, but I encourage that because that is important, and it is an important part of my role.

Q25 **Chair:** Sir Laurie, the Prime Minister is both the owner and ultimate judge in relation to breaches of the ministerial code. Given what we recognise as the challenging political and public landscape, is this still the best way of doing it?

Sir Laurie Magnus: My terms of reference give me the ability to advise the Prime Minister if I believe there has been a breach of the ministerial code. That is an important part of my remit.

Q26 **Chair:** Which is an interesting answer to a question I did not ask. The question I asked you was: is this the best way of doing it? You have told



HOUSE OF COMMONS

us the way that it is done; I am asking you whether it is the best way.

Sir Laurie Magnus: Well, it is a good way of doing it.

Chair: It may be a good way, but given the public's cynicism, is it still sustainable?

Sir Laurie Magnus: The question is: what is a better system? I see myself as independent. My appointment will not be renewed—that is part of the terms of the appointment—and it is really important to be able to give independent advice without fear or favour in speaking truth unto power. Does the system work? Ultimately, it is for you to make the judgment and, indeed, Parliament to make the judgment.

Q27 **Chair:** You can speak truth unto power, and that system works when truth is heard by those in power and when the ability to differentiate between the acceptable and the unacceptable, the right and the wrong, the palatable and the unpalatable, is part of their DNA. There is a growing concern of the political class, in the broader sense of the term, being slightly ostrich-like in failing to face into the pressing requirement to better future-proof the systems that we use as guardrails that help to shape the delivery of our public life.

You have told us what the way is, and you have described it as a good way. My question remains: given what we know and what we fear, is it sustainable? Is the protection of the current system—evolving as it has slightly, as Ms Edwards has referenced—doing the service to the British state and its preservation that actually needs to be done?

Sir Laurie Magnus: At present, yes, it works. I am in this position; I would not be here if I felt I could not make it work. That is really important. What you are talking about is the possibility of a change that would involve some form of statutory oversight or something similar, and that, in a way, is above my pay grade to comment on.

What I can tell you is that I can make this work. If you ask me whether I share your fear, my view is that the ethics regime, as enhanced by the formation of the Ethics and Integrity Commission and the additional powers I have, overall—you have had a number of the standards bodies in front of you—constitutes a pretty powerful group. Of course, we could all be swept aside, but that would be a major, major upset.

Q28 **Chair:** Yes, it would be, and there would be some who would just say, "And? We're in the business of causing upset because it's all been too cosy. We must disrupt." Of course, it presupposes that the independent adviser can tell right from wrong, and it is a direct prime ministerial appointment. Would a useful handrail be that casting forward—I am not seeking to apply this retrospectively—there might be sense in subjecting your successor to a pre-appointment hearing by Parliament?

Sir Laurie Magnus: In a way, my answer to your question has to be that it is above my pay grade.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q29 **Chair:** No, no, no. I am asking for your sincere observation, because I could think, "Right, now, duty says, or public perception says, that I have to have an independent adviser. I wonder what Al Capone is doing this week. Let's call up Al Capone and see if he wants to be my independent ethics adviser, because he's just going to nod through anything and everything." There is a presupposition that the Prime Minister knows right from wrong, there is a presupposition that the adviser knows right from wrong, and Parliament has no way of examining that because there is no pre-appointment hearing. Should there be, in the interests of transparency under Nolan?

Sir Laurie Magnus: First, when I appeared before this Committee about two and a half years ago, which was a post-appointment hearing, I said that I had gone through I think three interviews, and I understood that there was a shortlist for my appointment. I know that there are quite a number of bodies, including the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which recommended that the appointment of the independent adviser should be through a full public appointment process.

It is not my remit to give you a view, but the one thing I would absolutely say, very strongly, is that the relationship between the individual and the Prime Minister is really important. It is important that the Prime Minister—assuming a commitment to standards in public life, as the current one has—is able to appoint somebody in whom they have trust and with whom they can have an open conversation. It is also important that the person is able to conduct their business in total confidence.

Q30 **Chair:** I go back to this question of contemporary sustainability: is it not just naive in this day and age to assume?

Sir Laurie Magnus: Contemporary sustainability? In many ways, you need to be the judge of that. I am very confident that as it stands at the moment, this works.

Q31 **Chair:** But you must surely be aware that when you publish a highly critical letter in relation to a Minister's conduct, the court of public opinion says, "Gosh, that fellow Magnus, he's just arrived at a decision. He's the arbiter on all these things. His word is law, he's the sermon on the mount, the Ten Commandments and all the rest of it." Then they get slightly perplexed that, in essence, all you can do is advise the Prime Minister of the day to take a decision on the behaviour of somebody whom that Prime Minister appointed to do a job. Then they say to themselves, "In no other walk of life would that be an acceptable way of dealing with these things."

Sir Laurie Magnus: I would push back slightly.

Chair: Push back as robustly as you wish.

Sir Laurie Magnus: In major companies in the world—I come from the corporate world—an investigation of a director will be normally handled by an independent employee, or a compliance officer or whatever. A chief



HOUSE OF COMMONS

executive, who would have appointed the person being investigated, would have to take the advice, partly because they might have a regulator overseeing them, but actually because that is the responsibility within a board. I see this as equally applying with the Prime Minister: the chief executive, or chairman of a board, receiving independent advice on the behaviour of an individual member of that board—that is, a Minister—and taking and acting on that advice. It is a matter of proper, good governance practice.

Q32 **Chair:** What happens when the Prime Minister is reading the advice that you have given about the Prime Minister?

Sir Laurie Magnus: That has happened in the past. My predecessor conducted an inquiry in relation to the decoration of the flat in Downing Street. It is perfectly feasible. Indeed, you will have seen there was an exchange of letters between me and the Prime Minister concerning his involvement in the appointment of the chairman of the Football Regulator. We obviously had a conversation about that before leading to that exchange of letters.

Q33 **Chair:** So it works because it works, because the people who work it know how things work and can tell right from wrong?

Sir Laurie Magnus: Yes. That is not a bad thing.

Chair: It may not be a bad thing; the question in my mind is whether it is a justifiable and/or sustainable thing casting forward. But you are right, Sir Laurie, to point out that that is a political decision, not for you to come to.

Q34 **Peter Lamb:** You have now taken on the role of administering the business appointment rules for Ministers. What is your view of the rules?

Sir Laurie Magnus: Coming from the perspective of somebody who has worked in the commercial world, those business appointment rules are surprisingly restrictive, actually, in the sense that in the commercial world it would be very difficult to stop somebody from taking a job for two years, probably even for one year, particularly when you are not paying them.

It is three and a half months since I have been involved in advising on the business appointment rules for former Ministers, supported by a very good team who were previously advising ACOBA. The sense I have is a real readiness on the part of ex-Ministers to ask for advice and to follow the advice. That is a good thing. Maybe I am leading on to it, but what has been good to have achieved is a more efficient management of the advice provided under the business appointment rules, so as to answer inquiries more rapidly than was happening hitherto.

Q35 **Peter Lamb:** You specify that they are very strict, and I suppose to a large extent they are, but there have been concerns expressed that the enforcement mechanisms are not currently sufficient. We can think of one



particular example who seems to regularly violate the rules without particular consequence. Do you feel that changes are needed around this in order to ensure there is better compliance?

Sir Laurie Magnus: Of course, the Government have introduced changes for the future, with effect from the middle of October when I took over. Ministers who breach the rules going forward would be expected to repay their three-month severance pay for a serious breach. Having now been involved in something like 40 cases, there is a real recognition by ex-Ministers of the need to comply with the rules. It is logical that Ministers come under the independent adviser in respect of the rules, because we are looking at Ministers' interests, as Ministers, while they are Ministers. They also attest to comply with the ministerial code, and of course, chapter 11 of the code refers to the business appointment rules, so there is a logical link.

Q36 **Peter Lamb:** I can certainly see the benefit of marrying the two together. Is it another area where we are reliant on people being good chaps, in order to agree to follow the rules, where there may be one or two people who, by virtue of the money they might make doing something else, will not see the penalty as being particularly significant?

Sir Laurie Magnus: You are right. I would have to say that from my experience most ex-Ministers are good chaps, as far as the business appointment rules are concerned. There will always be one or two people who breach those rules, so for the future we now have the sanction of withdrawing the severance payment.

I accept that if somebody is going off working for some sort of AI tech company being paid gazillions, obviously repaying their severance pay will be chicken feed. But there are other things, such as the shaming of those who breach the rules. I would have no hesitation in going public if I saw evidence of that. There are other things one might think about, such as whether the honours committee and people like that would take notice of it, just generally to reinforce that these rules need to be complied with.

Q37 **Peter Lamb:** Are there any other changes that you might make to the system, if you were able?

Sir Laurie Magnus: At the moment, I need to have more time, frankly.

Q38 **Chair:** I am playing devil's pessimist to your angelic optimist, Sir Laurie, but shame applies only when you understand it, when you can feel ashamed and be shamed. If you have a brass neck, it does not matter, does it?

Sir Laurie Magnus: That is where the system arises. Shame is an important factor, which has considerable weight. If you are looking at some criminal sanction and things like that, that is a different order of magnitude.

Q39 **Mr Quigley:** You have two years left of your term. What do you think the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

main challenges will be in that period? How do you hope to achieve or overcome them?

Sir Laurie Magnus: When I was first appointed, the Cabinet Secretary at the time said, "The best success would be that we never hear about you or hear from you." That has not really happened. What I would hope in the final two years is that I can help to see the advice provided under the business appointment rules delivered efficiently.

I would hope that I would not have to undertake any investigations into Ministers that see the public light of day. The reason for that is I would hope that there would be a real understanding by Ministers of the importance of the ministerial code, and the management of interests and disclosures and the rest of it. I would hope to be able to hand over to a successor who has the confidence and support of this Committee to carry on.

Mr Quigley: The renewal of faith in Government.

Chair: Perhaps I could revive it in this meeting. I have lulled you inadvertently into a false sense of, "Gosh, I can get out of here." We have one more set of questions for you, Sir Laurie, if you do not mind taking it.

Q40 **Lauren Edwards:** The interim chair of ACOBA, before it was abolished, told us that she had concerns about the Government's transparency reporting. Do you feel that Ministers are sufficiently transparent about the meetings with those seeking to influence Government policy, or would you make any changes to the level of detail or the timeliness of the reporting?

Sir Laurie Magnus: My responsibility is for Ministers' private interests and the management of those, in terms of enabling them to do their jobs. Of course, the Government have increased the transparency of disclosure of gifts and hospitality, which previously Ministers disclosed every three months. They now have to disclose it every month, which is in line with the parliamentary disclosure regime. I am not involved in the disclosure of meetings, which is a Cabinet Office responsibility. That is still disclosed every three months, but it is not part of my remit to take responsibility for that.

Q41 **Lauren Edwards:** Does it not have an impact, though, when you are checking whether Ministers are abiding by the ministerial code and are not engaging in activity that is conflicted, either actual or perceived?

Sir Laurie Magnus: What I would hope is that in looking at the Ministers' interests, which include constituency interests and the rest, we would have agreed with their Departments and with the relevant Minister on mitigations if there are potential conflicts. Therefore, I look to the private offices and the Departments concerned to monitor that. It will come to my attention at a later stage if there is an allegation of some impropriety, possibly when the details of those meetings are published. I do not have a team conducting due diligence on Ministers' disclosures of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

meetings, so it would be reactive. I rely on the private offices to monitor Ministers' activities.

Chair: Thank you. Are there no other questions from colleagues? No. In which case, Sir Laurie, thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning.