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Chris Bryant MP
Chair, Committee on Standards
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0PW

18 July 2022

Dear Mr Bryant,

**Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK:
Recommendations on upholding ethical standards**

You may recall that on 6 April 2022 we at the UCL Constitution Unit sent you a copy of our recent report on the results of our Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK. **The members of this Citizens' Assembly have now asked us to seek your response to some of their conclusions** – particularly those relating to upholding ethical standards among MPs.

Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK

The *Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK* ran over six weekends in the final months of 2021. It comprised 67 members of the United Kingdom public who were carefully selected to be representative of the country in terms of age, gender, education, location, political attitudes, and more. On the basis of their deliberations, the Assembly members produced a series of recommendations, relating to how the functioning of democracy in the UK could be improved, which form the basis of the [report](#).

The Assembly forms part the [Democracy in the UK after Brexit](#) research project, which examines what kind of democracy people want. The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It is supported by an Advisory Board whose members span all the main political parties and include a wide range of independent experts and advocates.

Assembly members have asked that we seek responses to their recommendations from policymakers. We are therefore writing to relevant ministers, shadow ministers, and committee chairs in both Houses. These issues matter not only to the Assembly members, but also to the wider public, as evidenced in a [major survey](#) we conducted in summer 2021.

Recommendations within the remit of the Committee on Standards

Of particular relevance to your position as Chair of the Committee on Standards are the Assembly's conclusions about ways of **upholding ethical standards**. Assembly members agreed that the existing arrangements were insufficient. They wanted MPs to take responsibility for themselves, buttressed by stronger independent regulators. I would

therefore particularly like to draw your attention to this section in the report (pp. 60–63). Key recommendations include:

1. The role of regulators

(6.1) The public should be able to expect members of parliament to conduct themselves ethically in their work and that regulators will investigate conduct that appears dishonest or self-interested, or lacks integrity. (96% Assembly member support)

(6.2) The Code of Conduct for MPs, peers and government ministers needs to be strengthened to give clear guidance on what a breach will result in. Regulators need to recommend consistent sanctions to all parties and levels of office, and the public should be able to expect these to be imposed. (98% support)

(6.5) In matters concerning the conduct of MPs we need to be able to rely on the political process, supported by independent regulators, to result in action by parliament. Matters relating to ethical behaviour should only be a matter for the courts if there is evidence of illegal activity, like fraud or theft. (93% support)

Members placed great importance on those in public life upholding high ethical standards. They believed in protecting those standards through the political process, where decision-makers are accountable to voters. But they did not have confidence that elected politicians would police standards sufficiently on their own. They therefore believed that **accusations that expected standards have been broken should be investigated by independent regulators**, and that sanctions proposed as the result of an independent investigation should be implemented.

2. Lying to parliament

(6.4) Lying or intentionally misleading parliament should be able to be identified as ‘contempt of parliament’. As well as being made to give a public apology, MPs who break this rule should be fined or otherwise punished. (98% support)

This recommendation reflected a widespread concern among Assembly members that politicians frequently do not tell the truth in parliament, and face few consequences for doing so. Members felt that the existing system was inadequate in holding politicians accountable, and that this contributed to a lack of public trust. Significantly, **this recommendation received the strongest support of any at the Assembly.**

3. Consistent application of sanctions

(6.6) In the workplace MPs should be subject to the same sanctions as other employees regarding the treatment of staff. Bullying or harassment should not be tolerated. (93% support)

Assembly members were also exercised by the perception – fair or otherwise – that laws and rules in the United Kingdom do not apply equally to all. They therefore sought to ensure that **staff in government and parliament would have sufficient protections from people in privileged positions** around them.

Building on these recommendations, the Assembly’s proposals might be best implemented by adopting the relevant recommendations from the Committee on Standards in Public Life’s [*Upholding Standards in Public Life*](#) report; reforming the Codes of Conduct for ministers,

MPs, and peers to give clearer guidance on the consequences of a breach; and reforming the process around accusing a Member of the House of lying, to make it less cumbersome.

Assembly members would be keen to know whether the Committee on Standards has a position on the matters they raise, and whether these issues are likely to be investigated or reviewed in the near future. If you, or any members of the Committee would like to discuss the Assembly's recommendations further, I would be happy to meet you to do so.

In the interests of transparency, we will place a copy of this letter and, with your permission, your reply on the public record. I look forward to reading your response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alan Renwick". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Alan Renwick
Professor of Democratic Politics, UCL, and Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit