

Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP
Chair of the Procedure Committee

by email to prococom@parliament.uk

16/2/2022

Dear Karen Bradley MP

I am writing to ask the Procedure Committee to consider whether changes to the standing orders are required. These changes would be designed to enable the Speaker to tackle repeated instances of misinformation being conveyed in the House.

This is not something the Speaker has the ability to address at present as, in his words, 'it is not the Speaker's function to adjudicate on the accuracy of a particular answer in what can be fast moving proceedings'. I understand why this would be problematic for the Speaker.

However, action is needed. Members of the public struggle to understand why an MP can be expelled from the Chamber by the Speaker for pointing out when another MP has lied. But the Speaker cannot take firm action against the MP who has deliberately misled the House.

By way of example, there have now been a number of occasions when the PM has repeated claims **that have already been debunked**. These falsehoods have also then been repeated by other Ministers. Full Facts have documented the following instance: a claim by the PM that, "We now have 420,000 more people in employment than there were before the pandemic began."

This is incorrect as the cited figures don't include people who are self-employed. Views cannot differ on the accuracy of these figures, the PM's claim is simply wrong. Mr Johnson has made similar claims at Prime Minister's Questions on 24 November, 5 January and 12 January.

The PM's words have then given licence to several Cabinet Ministers and MPs to repeat the claim, including Nadine Dorries on 13 January and Mark Spencer and Suella Braverman on 12 January.

Full Fact contacted the Prime Minister, the Cabinet Secretary and Downing Street no fewer than six times asking the Prime Minister to correct the official record.

More recently the PM has falsely claimed in the House that “we have been cutting crime by 14%”—[*Official Report*, 31 January 2021; Vol. 708, c. 24.]

The Office for National Statistics found instead “a 14% increase in total crime, driven by a 47% increase in fraud and computer misuse”.

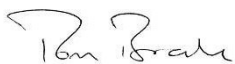
Unfortunately, most of the alternative means available to challenge or correct these falsehoods (such as written questions) do not attract the same attention as the original claim and occur after a time delay. Urgent Questions are more immediate, but I doubt it would be feasible for Mr Speaker to grant an Urgent Question for every transgression.

In these circumstances I believe it would be appropriate for the Procedure Committee to investigate changes that would enable immediate action to be taken against any MP or Minister who repeats a claim which has already been proven to be false. This could have a sobering effect on wayward MPs as they are immediately forced to put the record straight and, in the cases where they have made a false gross accusation about another member, to apologise in the Chamber.

There is certainly a public appetite for action. A few days ago, we carried out a survey of our supporters, over 2,000 of whom responded. In this survey 97% of our supporters thought that the rules of the House of Commons should be changed so that there are consequences for MPs who deliberately mislead the House

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely



Tom Brake - Director of Unlock Democracy

PS I have written in a similar vein to the Speaker.