

## Written evidence submitted by More in Common

### Summary

More in Common<sup>1</sup> welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament. There is no doubt that the conduct of our elected representatives and the way in which they are held to account for that conduct has a real impact on the public's attitudes to the state of our democracy. Our opinion research has made clear that recent revelations about Downing Street Parties, MPs second jobs, and inflammatory smears on the Leader of the Opposition's role in prosecuting Jimmy Saville have convinced the public that more needs to be done to hold MPs to account for their actions. As such, we believe the expectations of Members of Parliament, as outlined in the current Code of Conduct, are no longer fit for purpose and welcome proposals to improve them.

### Recent research on climate-related behaviour change

In Autumn 2021, More in Common published 'Democratic Repair' one of the largest research exercises in understanding what Britons think about our democracy and what they want from it. That study, based on polling and focus groups in the UK, alongside comparisons with four other countries in which More in Common operates, gave us a unique insight into some of the challenges our democracy faces and public attitudes towards our elected representatives. At the end of 2021 and the beginning of this year, we have supplemented that analysis with further polling of over 4,000 Britons as well as a series of focus groups across the country.

### Our response

While the findings from our report, which is available in full [here](#) are relevant to many issues covered in the consultation document. We believe that they are most relevant to the following areas of the inquiry:

- Adding an additional principle of "Respect" to the Code
- Adding a new rule to prohibit a Member subjecting anyone to "unreasonable and excessive personal attack", in any medium
- Whether the Speaker should have the option to refer a matter of conduct in the Chamber or in a Committee to the Commissioner for investigation
- Greater clarity of language and expectations around lobbying and MPs second jobs.

### What Britons think about our democracy and their MPs

Britons are proud of their democracy and our democratic heritage. They overwhelmingly opt for democracy as the best way to govern Britain (9 in 10) and two thirds believe our country is a genuine democracy. More than half (54 per cent) rate the importance of living in a democracy as ten out of ten.

However, Britons do not think that our democracy is a cohesive one, 62 per cent think that our country is divided – and in fact 'divided' is the public's top choice when asked to choose a word to describe the UK today. From our focus group conversations with Britons across the country, we know that they lay a large degree of responsibility for that division at feet of those 'in charge', and in particular politicians who they blame for creating false divides for short term political gain.

At the same, while supporting the ideal of democracy many Britons are deeply disappointed with how it is working in practice. Nearly eight in ten think that the UK system is rigged to serve the rich and powerful. Even before recent scandals, 83 per cent of Britons thought that MPs were corrupt, with more than half saying that recent events have convinced them that MPs are even more corrupt. People are three times as likely to say they distrust than trust their local MP. Taken together, this manifests itself in a feeling that MPs are in it for themselves and not interested in the concerns of ordinary people.

A healthy level of scepticism of politicians is a good thing for a democracy, but these findings, as well as the insights we have gained from our focus groups, show that the discontent goes well beyond the normal grumbles about decision makers. Instead, low trust groups are increasingly becoming attracted to populist and

<sup>1</sup> More in Common is an international initiative set up in 2017 to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarisation and social division. Our teams in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media, and government to connect people across lines of division.

anti-democratic alternatives – especially those who are able to present themselves as being ‘on the side of the people’ against an out of touch political class.

### **Drivers of discontent and MPs conduct**

Our conversations with the public have uncovered two primary drivers of discontent that related to the conduct of Members of Parliament, which are relevant to this consultation.

### **Disrespect and offensiveness**

*“Politicians in general, if they come on the TV, now I’ll turn the TV over because I’m sick of the bullshit they’re giving us. The stories change from day to day. So I get upset when I watch them. So I thought right, if I don’t listen to them, I can’t get it. So now I just live me life” Alan, Bolton*

It is undoubtedly the case that a large majority of the public blame politicians for fermenting division. In focus group conversations, we are often told about how hyper-partisan and occasionally offensive behaviour means that real issues get ignored and make wider society more polarised. In fact, 60 per cent of the public say that they are worried that division in politics spilling over to violence and hatred in society at large.

The public do not want to see politicians’ freedom of speech limited and 73 per cent believe that free speech needs to be protected over regulation against causing offensive. But that does not mean they think MPs should have free reign to use harmful or dangerous language. Clear majorities of the public also agree that more is needed to protect people from dangerous and harmful rhetoric. What is more the public agree by 48 per cent to 35 per cent that it is right that people should lose their job for saying grossly offensive things. This is something they believe should apply equally to a Member of Parliament as any other job. Indeed, in focus group conversations with the public a common complaint is that if they were to do many of the things MPs do they would lose their job, but MPs do not.

This concern about offensive language extends particularly to the internet where more than a third identify the divisive impact of social media as one of the key challenges facing our democracy. Here the public support tougher online regulation to clamp down on hate speech online. **The code should more clearly set the expectation that MPs act as role models to the public at large on social media, rather than amplifying the worst excesses of online echo chambers.**

We also know that when MPs engage in deeply personal attacks or promote conspiracy theories or smears against their colleagues/other public figures that in turn further radicalises those on the fringe. In recent years we have seen two MPs murdered by extremists. While it is impossible to draw a direct line between these tragic murders and the rhetoric used by those in public life, there is no doubt that an increasingly no holds barred political culture – which attempts to ascribe not only different points of view, but active bad faith to the other side – is inspiring a greater volume of abuse, threats and in some cases, violence directed against both MPs and other public figures.

**For these reasons, we welcome the suggested addition of ‘Respect’ to the principles of the code of conduct and proposed definition. We also welcome the addition of a new rule which prohibits MPs from subjecting anyone to an unreasonable personal attack in any medium.**

However, we are concerned that the continued exemption of conduct within the House of Commons Chamber from the proposed changes is a missed opportunity. While it is entirely right, arguably more than anywhere else, that free speech must be protected in the House of Commons Chamber, we also know that what is said in that Chamber has consequences outside of it. As we have seen, the recent false allegations about the Leader of the Opposition’s time as Director of Public Prosecutions have been picked up by extremist groups and were chanted back at him when he was recently mobbed by anti-vaxx protestors. But there are countless other examples. The fact is that the current powers of the Chair are limited only to disorderly conduct, and not to grossly offensive or false statements that could potentially put other members, or others in the public eye at risk.

**For that reason, we welcome the suggestion that the Chair should be Speaker should have the option to refer matters of conduct in the Chamber to the Commissioner – particularly in the cases of bullying and**

harassment. However, we do not believe that such referrals should be limited to the speaker, but instead that the option to make a complaint about Members conduct in the chamber should be open to any member of the public.

### Lobbying, second jobs and integrity

*I think this wishy-washy approach of, yeah, you can follow the rules if you want to follow the rules, you don't have to follow the rules. It's up to you. It should be precise. You have to follow this rule. These are the rules. – Kunal, London*

*I guess sort of political nepotism, I'd like that to go, so that they weren't giving their jobs to their friends and contracts to their friends and sucking up to people of influence at the expense of, you know, the wider public. – Maggy, Dronfield*

The public recognise the value in having parliamentarians from diverse walks of life who bring different experiences to bear in the role. However, they resent the idea that MPs treat their role as something secondary to other sources of income and are actively frustrated when Members of Parliament seek to use their position to make money.

The sense that MPs are 'on the make' is something that we hear time and time again in our focus groups. It is undoubtedly the case that while many MPs do excellent, unforgiving work, the actions and attitudes of a handful of their colleagues' taints opinions of the whole political class. The extent to which the perceived greed of some MPs taints impressions of the whole political class is seen most clearly when asking about MPs pay, time and time again it is clear in focus groups that perceptions of MPs pay are far higher than the reality, and when we asked in a recent poll about the percentage of government spending that goes on MPs pay, the average response was 8% of all overall government spending – ranked at a similar level to spending on transport, debt interest and net zero. All of which is a product feeling MPs are in the job to make money – the recent second jobs scandals have only exacerbated.

When discussing the recent Owen Patterson scandal in focus groups, participants were clearly appalled at both the behaviour and the perceived attempts on the part of his colleagues to stop him facing any punishment. But the sense that MPs use their influence and access for financial gain is deeply rooted and will only change when people see that MPs are held to a tight set of rules. **For that reason, we support any efforts to both ensure MPs are held to high standards in office, and that there are clear sanctions for failing to live up to those standards.**

It is worth highlighting that the sense of MPs being on the make is particularly acute in the three low-trust groups identified in More in Common's Britain's Choice mapping of people's values and social identity (Further details in the appendix). These groups are not only more likely to feel that politicians look down on them, but are also, as a result, more open to non-democratic alternatives'

*As we said in our Democratic Repair report 'We should not be surprised that if the rules of a game are being ignored, participants will eventually become disillusioned with the game. The same is true with public attitudes towards our system of democracy. People feel that the structures of accountability such as codes of conduct, reporting systems and conventions are applied or ignored as it suits those in power. While ordinary citizens pay a price for breaching standards, they feel that political elites do not – and few issues ignite as much public anger as this impunity. If the rules are not being followed, people become much more open to rule-breaking populists who portray themselves as being on 'the side of the people' against the system. Demonstrating to the public that officials and elected representatives are accountable for their actions would strengthen confidence, restore trust, and challenge widespread cynicism stemming from a belief that the system is being run for the benefit of elites.'*

We have also seen among those low trust segments a clear link between a sense that politicians don't follow the rules that they impose on others, and a greater willingness to ignore public health messages. If politicians are not seen as having integrity or to be objective and uninfluenced by outside interests, it is far less likely that the public will follow their lead on other issues – it is no surprise for instance that the two most disengaged groups we have identified are the least likely to get Covid-19 vaccinations or boosters.

**Given this very widespread perception that MPs use their position to further their own financial interests and its damaging effect both on public confidence in MPs, and in raising the appeal of non-democratic alternatives, we welcome the committee's proposals to tighten up the rules about MPs declarations on outside interests, and to better clarify the principles of public life – particularly those of integrity and objectivity.**

## **Conclusion**

More in Common welcomes the proposed amendments to the Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament, particularly in providing greater clarity around outside interests and creating an expectation that MPs will engage with each other and the wider public respectfully.

Both steps will go some way towards addressing three of most pressing public complaints about the state of our democracy – namely that politicians too often foster division, that they are not in politics for the right reasons, and they are not held accountable for their actions.

However, while recognising the limits of the committee's jurisdiction and the need to involve other actors such as the Speaker and Cabinet Office, we are concerned that these proposals will not go far enough to rebuild trust. Specifically, we are concerned that the rules do not do enough to give the public confidence that they will focus on role as an MP as their primary job. Nor do they do enough to ensure that MPs do not use language or promote falsehoods that ferment extremist thinking (and ultimately endanger other MPs or members of the public). The importance of free speech, in Parliament more than anywhere else, is paramount, but equally important is the public's expectation that just as they would be held to account on their language or conduct, the same should apply to their elected representatives.

*10 February 2022*

## **Appendix 1: The British Seven segments' views of democracy**

More in Common worked in collaboration with Climate Outreach, the European Climate Foundation (ECF) and YouGov to build a model that maps the British population not according to their party, age, income or other demographic factor, but according to their values and core beliefs. Analysing a representative sample of more than 10,000 people in partnership with YouGov and conducting focus group conversations and one-on-one interviews with hundreds of Britons, we have identified seven distinct population groups – the 'British Seven'.

**Progressive Activists (13 per cent of Britons)** A passionate and vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity, and who seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups based on their race, gender, sexuality, wealth, and other forms of privilege. They are politically engaged, critical, opinionated, frustrated, cosmopolitan, and environmentally conscious.

**Civic Pragmatists (13 per cent of Britons)** A group that cares about others, at home or abroad, and who are turned off by the divisiveness of politics. They are charitable, concerned, exhausted, community-minded, open to compromise, and socially liberal.

**Disengaged Battlers (12 per cent of Britons):** A group that feels that they are just keeping their heads above water, and who blame the system for its unfairness. They are tolerant, insecure, disillusioned, disconnected, overlooked, and socially liberal.

**Established Liberals (12 per cent of Britons):** A group that has done well and means well towards others, but also sees a lot of good in the status quo. They are comfortable, privileged, cosmopolitan, trusting, confident, and pro-market.

**Loyal Nationals (17 per cent of Britons):** A group that is anxious about the threats facing Britain and facing themselves. They are proud, patriotic, tribal, protective, threatened, aggrieved, and frustrated about the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

**Disengaged Traditionalists (18 per cent of Britons):** A group that values a well-ordered society, takes pride in hard work, and wants strong leadership that keeps people in line. They are self-reliant, ordered, patriotic, tough-minded, suspicious, and disconnected

**Backbone Conservatives (15 per cent of Britons):** A group who are proud of their country, optimistic about Britain's future outside of Europe, and who keenly follow the news, mostly via traditional media sources. They are nostalgic, patriotic, stalwart, proud, secure, confident, and relatively engaged with politics.