

## Written evidence submitted by Transparency International UK

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Transparency International (TI) is the world's leading non-governmental anti-corruption organisation. With more than 100 chapters worldwide, TI has extensive global expertise and understanding of corruption.

Transparency International UK (TI-UK) is the UK chapter of TI. We raise awareness about corruption; advocate legal and regulatory reform at local, national and international levels; design practical tools for institutions, individuals and companies wishing to combat corruption; and act as a leading centre of anti-corruption expertise in the UK. We are independent, non-political, and base our advocacy on robust research. TI-UK welcomes the Modernisation Committee's inquiry and the opportunity to submit evidence.

As an anti-corruption organisation focusing on improving political integrity, our submission suggests topics primarily within the committee's strategic aim of "driving up standards". We also propose topics within the strategic aim of "reforming Parliamentary procedures to make the House of Commons more effective."

## 2. DRIVING UP STANDARDS

In recent years, there have been ample reasons for the public to question the integrity of politicians. From members of parliament promoting themselves to fictitious companies in exchange for payment, to the tabling of parliamentary questions 'on behalf of' corrupt and repressive regimes.<sup>12</sup> These events have contributed to worryingly low levels of public trust in politics.<sup>3</sup>

This highlights the importance of the Committee's strategic aim to drive up standards, and why this presents a crucial opportunity to reform the rules on parliamentary standards and behaviour. Below we outline four areas we recommend the Committee prioritises for this agenda. It is likely that all of these suggestions would benefit from the experience and expertise of the Committee on Standards, which recently published a review of the Code of Conduct.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-65193097>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/bob-blackman-azerbaijan-lobbying-javanshir-feyziyev/>

<sup>3</sup> National Centre for Social Research, *Trust and confidence in Britain's system of government at record low*, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2024, <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/trust-and-confidence-britains-system-government-record-low>

<sup>4</sup> Committee on Standards, Code of Conduct consultation, <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1670/code-of-conduct-consultation/publications/>

## 2.1 Reforms to the rules on second jobs.

As already included in the ‘Memorandum’ of the Committee, a key area in need of attention is the rules on MPs’ second jobs. The Government recently removed a few exemptions, including the exemption that allowed MPs to provide advice on current affairs and the exemption which permitted advice in general terms about how parliament works. This is a welcome step, but the rules still allow room for inadvertent or deliberate mischief by parliamentarians.

Allowing MPs to take up second jobs outside the boundaries of simply maintaining their professional qualifications leaves them open to corruption risks. As it stands, jobs such as consultancy roles or non-executive director roles are still permitted. In a recent case where a former MP was found in breach of the lobbying rules, he was undertaking consultancy roles for private companies.<sup>5</sup> As was the case at the time of the investigation and is the case now, his activities advocating on behalf of the private companies are banned, but roles like these leave MPs vulnerable to performing lobbying tasks.

A simple solution might be to ban ‘consultancy’ roles, but the rules can’t specify every job title that an MP can and cannot take, it would be impractical and likely become an endless ‘whack-a-mole’ of banning job titles. To protect MPs from slipping into or knowingly undertaking lobbying activities, all second jobs should be prohibited except those that maintain a professional qualification, are political activity or provide an essential public service, such as army reservists.

**Recommendation: Restrict all second jobs except those that maintain a professional qualification, are political activity or provide an essential public service, such as army reservists.**

## 2.2 Overseas trips

There should be tighter controls on who can fund parliamentarians’ overseas visits, as is the case for political donations. Trips sponsored either directly or indirectly by corrupt and repressive regimes may present the perception or reality that parliamentarians’ judgement and actions are influenced by the intent of their hosts.

New research from Transparency International UK found that MPs have accepted over £4.5 million worth of visits abroad funded by foreign governments, parliaments and regime-linked groups since 2001.<sup>6</sup> This includes:

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<sup>5</sup>Committee on Standards, *Committee on Standards publish report on the conduct of Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2021, <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/290/committee-on-standards/news/158246/committee-on-standards-publish-report-on-the-conduct-of-rt-hon-owen-paterson-mp/>

- over £460,000 worth of visits to Qatar funded by its government and embassy
- over £400,000 worth of trips to Saudi Arabia, paid for by the country's government and embassy
- over £200,000 worth of visits to Bahrain, funded by the country's' government and embassy
- over £140,000 worth of visits to Azerbaijan funded by its government, parliament, and regime-linked groups

Other comparable democracies have explicit rules regarding overseas trips funded by foreign governments. For example, the US does not allow foreign governments to fund US federal employees, including Members of Congress, to travel outside the US unless there is a Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act agreement with the foreign government in place.<sup>7</sup> The US Department of State approves these agreements upon application by the foreign government.

In order to address the loophole that allows foreign governments to donate to political parties through in-kind gifts of foreign travel, the Committee should prioritise reforming the rules on overseas trips. As the current threshold for permissibility checks of donations is £500, checks which identify foreign influence, we propose following a similar logic and prohibiting foreign paid travel above £500.

**Recommendation: Parliamentarians should be prohibited from accepting paid foreign travel costing over £500, other than from prescribed organisations, to counter the risk of foreign influence in our democratic system.**

### 2.3 Updates to the sanctioning regime for breaches of the parliamentary code

There should be clear and credible deterrents for serious breaches of the code of conduct whilst the sanctioning process should also be proportionate and fair.

Under the current system, to predict how a breach of the parliamentary code of conduct might be investigated and sanctioned, a member of the public or an MP would have to examine every case the Standards Commissioner has investigated and make assumptions based on the findings in these cases. This is impractical and imprecise.

We support a recommendation from the Standards Committee to introduce greater consistency in imposing sanctions.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the publication and standardisation of what

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<sup>6</sup> Transparency International UK, *Cheques and Balances – countering the influence of big money in UK politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2024, <https://www.transparency.org.uk/publications/cheques-and-balances-countering-influence-big-money-uk-politics>

<sup>7</sup> [https://ethics.house.gov/house-ethics-manual/travel#\\_Travel\\_Paid\\_for\\_1](https://ethics.house.gov/house-ethics-manual/travel#_Travel_Paid_for_1)

<sup>8</sup> Committee on Standards, *Sanctions in respect of the conduct of Members*, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2020, [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmstandards/241/24103.htm#\\_idTextAnchor000](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmstandards/241/24103.htm#_idTextAnchor000)

constitutes a ‘mitigating’ or ‘aggravating’ factor. This is essential to maintain fairness and equity of treatment as well as public understanding of the process, both essential ingredients to support accountability for wrongdoing.

**Recommendation: Introduce greater consistency and more transparency in imposing sanctions for breaches of the code of conduct.**

#### 2.4 The rules on gifts and hospitality

Events over the summer highlighted the public’s concern over gift-giving in Westminster. It is positive that in response to media attention, the Government introduced reforms in this area. These, however, focused only on how Ministers handle gifts and hospitality; the rules for members of parliament are yet to be updated.

The Ministerial Code of Conduct states that Ministers should not accept gifts and hospitality that would place the minister ‘under any obligation’ or ‘might reasonably be seen to compromise their judgement’. Whilst not watertight, these are reasonable rules around how to handle donations like these. MPs are not subject to similar rules. Parliamentarians are required to follow the general principle of ‘integrity’, included in the code, but there is no explicit rule or guideline on the acceptance of gifts and hospitality except that they must be declared if above £300.

It seems prudent to also introduce similar rules for parliamentarians. For example, by adding a clause in the Commons’ code of conduct reminding parliamentarians to treat offers of generous gifts and hospitality with caution. Even stronger, the Committee should consider aligning the Commons rules with the ethical rules for UK Government ministers, and members of the Senedd and Holyrood, which prohibit accepting benefits that appear to influence or potentially influence their activities.

Additionally, recent media stories have demonstrated that there is a case for reducing the reporting threshold. MPs have boasted about accepting tickets and other hospitality just below the reporting threshold thereby allowing them to avoid the transparency requirements.<sup>9</sup> The reporting threshold for ministers is already the lower amount of £140.

**Recommendation: The UK Parliament should address concerns about politicians accepting inappropriate gifts and hospitality by:**

- **advising its members to treat them with caution and reject any that could appear to influence or potentially influence their activities, as is already the case for UK Government ministers, and members of the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru.**

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/mps-labour-tory-party-rishi-sunak-lucy-powell-b2315664.html>

- **Consider reducing the reporting threshold for the reporting of gifts and hospitality.**

### 3. REFORMING PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURES TO MAKE THE HOUSE OF COMMONS MORE EFFECTIVE

#### 3.1 Building on parliamentary transparency

When an MP submits a written question they are asked if they have a registered interest that would be relevant to the content of the question. This is a useful step in managing conflicts of interest. They are also asked what that interest is. However, when the written question is published, this latter detail is lost in translation and only the simple fact of whether or not the MP has an interest is noted – not what it is. This seems counter-productive if the information is already being collected and obscures transparency, something that civil society organisation My Society has recently highlighted.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, when a member speaks in parliament and declares an interest in proceedings, they often do this by stating ‘refer to my register of interests’. Unless versed in the transparency of parliament, it seems unlikely that individuals would know how to cross-check these declarations of interest with the register. This short-hand measure was introduced so that debates wouldn’t be bogged down in long explanations of MPs’ interests, but it seems that by avoiding this extreme, another extreme of ambiguity was introduced. Short additional details as to what this interest is would help to mitigate conflicts of interest and improve transparency.

**Recommendation: To build on transparency that already exists and further manage conflicts of interest, the Committee should look to integrate MPs’ interests in their written questions and consider requiring MPs to state short explanations of their interests in parliamentary debates.**

#### 3.2 Removing parliamentary passes for former MPs

In a strange quirk of parliamentary procedures, former MPs are allowed to keep their parliamentary passes to Westminster. As with any career, these former MPs go on to work for new employers, often private companies or consultant lobbying companies.<sup>11</sup> Maintaining their pass gives them VIP access to legislators, a highly priced commodity for their new employer. Given the inherent risks of awarding these passes to past parliamentarians, many of whom go on to work in the PR industry, this practice should end now.

**Recommendation: Remove parliamentary passes for former parliamentarians.**

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mysociety.org/2024/10/31/better-declarations-of-interest-for-parliamentary-questions/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/sep/13/revealed-ex-mps-use-parliament-access-passes-over-2500-times-year>

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