

Written evidence from J Wills (CDR 16)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee The Government's Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission

Thank you for providing the opportunity to recommend additional topics for inclusion in The Government's Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission.

Please include honesty in Politics and Political campaigns. It should cover the level of honesty required by government, its advisors, politicians, political campaigners, and the press, and its effective enforcement.

Politicians and Political campaigners are in a privileged position and the level of honesty required in other walks of life e.g. advertising and trade law, is relaxed for them particularly during election campaigns. This privilege has been abused recently and examples include;

- the Prime Minister lied to the House of Commons during prime minister's question time [1],
- there is an unacceptable secrecy surrounding very large contracts for Covid-19 related goods and services which appears to be covering up award of overpriced contracts to unsuitable contractors [2].
- we are about to leave the EU in a way that does not meet any of the expectations raised by the leave campaign [3].

I believe this level of dishonesty in many but not all of our politicians is the biggest factor in the low level of trust in the current government and must be corrected before making other changes to our democratic processes.

My experience

During the 2016 referendum campaign I looked carefully at the claims made by the leave campaign. I calculated that £360 million a week only represented 2.7p in the pound of Government expenditure so wasn't significant and found that all of their claims were debunked by fact checking websites. I expended considerable effort verifying the fact checking sites and looking for the source of the Leave campaign information but couldn't find anything to support their claims. I found it so difficult to believe the leading UK politicians would lie on this scale that I began to doubt my ability to use internet search engines until I found Professor Dougan's "Lying on an industrial scale" video that showed the lies were far more pervasive than I had thought. As a result;

- I do not trust anything this Government this government says. I have never felt this way about any previous UK government even on the occasions the party in power was not one I had voted for.
- I have become far more politically active and supported the Brexit Justice campaign, the Good Law Project etc. signed a few hundred petitions, attended all to the London marches, and written to my MP. I have not taken this action because I'm a remain bad loser but because the decision-making process was not fit for purpose.
- I have become a republican. If the Monarch could not ensure Her Privy Councillors upheld Her Governments principles for holders of public office, then the Monarchy is irrelevant and pointless.

- I have lost confidence in most of our free press and news agencies who at best failed to call out the dishonesty and, in many cases, amplified the dishonest statements [7].

I had a conversation with a couple of relatives after the vote and both said they voted leave because of the vast sums of money we sent to the EU. They were surprised and looked rather sheepish after I showed the gross 360 million a week was around 2.7 p in the pound and the net amount it only represented 1.5 p in the pound of government expenditure.

Why Honesty is necessary for Democracy

- It requires much less effort to create a lie than to correct it. This increases the cost for honest campaigners and has the same effect as allowing one side to spend more than the other.
- It requires lower intellect to create a campaign based on lies than to prepare an honest fact based argument. Lies provide a route to power for people with lower intellect that needed to lead the country properly and this could be the reason for the UK's abysmal performance in combatting the Covid 19 pandemic [8].
- If politicians lie convincingly during an election campaign it is not possible to tell if they are lying in future and this undermines trust in government.
- Use of lies false promises and fake news raise the level of intellectual ability needed by the electorate to make an informed choice. This effectively removes the right to a free and fair election from a section of less able members of our society. If there are enough of them to swing the vote this removes the right to free and fair elections for everyone else. Universal suffrage is right and proper, but it is wrong for politicians, who are responsible for the laws that enable it, to use loopholes in that law to exploit less able members of our society.

Honesty requirement.

It is not sufficient to refrain from lying. To have a fair and free election all members of the electorate must be given information in a way that allows them to make an informed choice. The notorious sign on the bus provides an example where even an honest statement is not good enough. During the Referendum rules debate in Westminster Hall Peter Lilly said, " I doubt if the outcome would have been any different if the leave battle bus had painted £200 million per week on its side, rather than £350 million ". 200 million is an enormous sum of money for an individual, someone on minimum wage would have to work for around 13,000 years ago to earn it but it only represents 1.5 p in the pound of Government expenditure of approximately 700 billion per annum. We cannot know how many people would have voted to leave to save 1.5 p in the pound and in a country with 17 million adults with poor maths skills many people would have had difficulty with the calculation. It is a poor democratic process that asks the electorate to make an important decision about the country's future and expects them to untangle information presented like this. It should also be of concern that a member of parliament claimed to know how the electorate would have voted if given accurate information.

I realise that legislating for honesty in a way that allows effective opposition is difficult but our Judicial system deals with difficult concepts, including reasonableness and intent, already so we only need our politicians to draft and agree effective legislation.

During the 2016 referendum campaign we saw the then Lord High Chancellor, the most senior of the Great Offices of State, supporting a campaign [6] based almost entirely on lies [4], fake news [5], and false promises[3], and which employed consultants to send personalised messaging, not seen by the opposition, to those most susceptible to being influenced by them [5]. Democratic processes that allow this to happen are severely broken and must be fixed. I feel that the proposed Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission is a good place to do this.

Thank you for considering this request.

Supporting evidence for Statements in this submission

[1] PM lied to Parliament

Hansard 13th May 2020

Keir Starmer

... In his speech on Sunday, the Prime Minister said that we need to rapidly reverse the awful epidemic in our care homes, but earlier this year, and until 12 March, the Government's own official advice was—and I am quoting from it:

“It remains very unlikely that people receiving care in a care home...will become infected.”

Yesterday's Office for National Statistics figures showed that at least 40% of all deaths from Covid-19 were in care homes. Does the Prime Minister accept that the Government were too slow to protect people in care homes?

The Prime Minister

No, Mr Speaker, and it was not true that the advice said that ...

Later that day the leader of the opposition wrote a letter to the Prime Minister copied to the Speaker requesting an apology for lying to the House <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/uk-politics-52646258>.

[2] Unacceptable secrecy surrounding Covid related contracts.

Three MP's; Caroline Lucas, Debbie Abrahams, and Laya Moran, and the Good Law Project are sufficiently concerned to have started legal action over the Governments lack of transparency over contracts for PPE and Covid-19 goods and services: <https://goodlawproject.org/case/fight-for-transparency/>

The Good Law Project are pursuing separate actions over the Governments test and trace contract and other procurements. For further information on some see:

<https://goodlawproject.org/case/procurement-case/>

<https://goodlawproject.org/case/money-for-dominic-cummings-mates/>

<https://goodlawproject.org/case/operation-moonshot/>

[3] Examples of expectations raised by the leave campaign that have failed to materialise.

All taken from the document "Why Should We Vote Leave on June 23rd" on the Vote Leave web page http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why_vote_leave.html

- "There is a free trade zone stretching all the way from Iceland to the Russian Border. We will still be part of it after we Vote Leave". I accept that we were still part of it after the vote but there appears to be a very low probability that we will be in it after the transition period.
- "Taking back control is a careful change. not a sudden step - we will negotiate the terms of a new deal before we start any legal process to leave." Article 50 was triggered before negotiations started.
- "We will stop handing over £350 million a week to Brussels" . The UK Statistics Authority stated clearly that we did not hand over £360 million a week <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/uk-statistics-authority-statement-on-the-use-of-official-statistics-on-contributions-to-the-european-union/> so we can't stop doing it.
- "We have better relations with our European friends" - The Internal Markets Bill appears to be a significant barrier to that.
- "We regain our influence in the wider world and become a truly global nation once again ". Acceptance of this statement by the UK population has fallen according to a recent Mori poll: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/britons-lose-confidence-great-britains-position-and-influence-world>

[4] Examples of Dishonest Statements by Vote Leave

All taken from the document "Why Should We Vote Leave on June 23rd" on the Vote Leave web page http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why_vote_leave.html and the document "Why Should We Vote Leave on June 23rd" on that page.

- "Lets Take back control of our borders": The UK was not part of Schengen so had retained passport control on most of its European borders. The exception being Ireland and that arrangement resulted from the Good Friday agreement so would remain after leaving the EU.
- "We send the EU £350 million a week" - This statement was said to be misleading by the UK statistics agency: <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/uk-statistics-authority-statement-on-the-use-of-official-statistics-on-contributions-to-the-european-union/> but repeated as if an alternative view of reality. In the video "Why vote leave won the referendum" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDBRxH9Kiy4> approximately 8 minutes from the start Dominic Cummings stated that this form of the message was included to annoy the opposition.
- "We will have to keep bailing out the Euro". David Cameron had agreed with the EU that countries outside the Eurozone would not have to do this.
- "Turkey is one of the Five new countries joining the EU". This is misleading as it implies the UK would have little say in the expansion and would have to leave the EU to avoid it. In a letter to the UK Government from Michael Gove, Boris Johnson and Gisela Stewart http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/letter_to_the_prime_minister_and_foreign_secretary_getting_the_facts_clear_on_turkey.html they point out that the UK government was supporting Turkeys inclusion in the EU and and asked if the UK intended to use its veto to keep Turkey out. It was clear from this letter that the Vote leave campaign knew that the UK could prevent Turkey Joining the EU without leaving it.

[5] Vote Leave Targeted Adverts

Information Commissioner's Office, Investigation into the use of data analytics in political campaigns, A report to Parliament, 6 November 2018, paragraph 3.6 The relationship between Aggregate IQ (AIQ), Vote Leave and other Leave campaigns, reports the number of Facebook adverts created by Aggregate IQ and run by AIQ and Vote Leave.

The links in the document https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Ads-supplied-by-Facebook-to-the-DCMS-Committee.pdf no longer work but some of the adverts can be seen on: <https://www.joe.co.uk/news/brexit-facebook-adverts-192164>

[6] Lord High Chancellor and the Vote Leave Campaign Committee

The Wikipedia Entry https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Gove states that Micheal Gove held the office of Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain from 9th May 2015 - 24th July 2016.

The Wikipedia Entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vote_Leave#Campaign_Committee shows that Michael Gove was Co-Coordinator of the Vote Leave Campaign Committee form March 2016.

[7] Example of Fake news and amplification by the press

The "Now the EU wants to ban tea kettles! " Facebook advert <https://www.joe.co.uk/news/brexit-facebook-adverts-192164> is a sufficiently distorted description of the EU's proposals to regulate energy efficiency of domestic appliances that it can be seen as fake news. An example of the press amplifying this is seen in the headline here <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/669525/Boris-Johnson-EU-kettle-toasters-hairdryers-ban-Brexit-referendum>

[8] UK performance controlling the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2019 the UK was ranked 2nd in the global health index <https://www.ghsindex.org/>

By November excess deaths for 2020 reportedly reached 70,000 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-54976362#:~:text=Rising%20numbers%20of%20Covid%2D19,by%20628%20in%20a%20week> that is over 1 in every 1000 or 0.1% of the population.

For data to October 23 presented on <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/07/15/tracking-covid-19-excess-deaths-across-countries> only 5 Countries, USA, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, and Peru, had higher numbers of excess deaths than the UK and 4 of those have much higher populations.

November 2020