Committee on Standards in Public Life: Overview of the research programme

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- The Committee
- Background and purpose of research programme
- Development of Public Attitudes Survey
- Impact of Public Attitudes Survey
- Background to work on Seven Principles

The Committee: *Establishment*

1994 - announcement to Parliament by John Major, arising from concern about unacceptable behaviour in public life

- cash for questions
- Ministers' appointments on retirement
- political appointments to public bodies

The Committee:
Terms of reference

"To examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office, including arrangements relating to financial and commercial activities, and make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements which might be required to ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life"

The Committee:
Additional TOR1997

"To review issues in relation to the funding of political parties, and to make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements"

The Seven Principles of Public Life

Selflessness

Holders of public office should act solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other benefits for themselves, their family or friends.

Integrity

Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity

In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

The Seven Principles of Public Life

Accountability

Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness

Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decision and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

The Seven Principles of Public Life

Honesty

Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the

public interests.

Leadership

Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

The Committee:
Areas investigated

- House of Commons and House of Lords
- Ministers and the Civil Service
- Funding of political parties
- Local Government
- Non-Departmental Public Bodies
- National Health Service Trusts and local public spending bodies

Background to the research

Research Programme Objectives

- Long term programme of research
- To explore public opinion about standards of conduct of public office holders
- To establish a benchmark of public opinion about standards of conduct
- The research focus is on the expectations of the general public, rather than the attitudes of holders of public office themselves

Basic questions

- What do public see as the key conduct issues?
- Public attitudes to particular kinds of conduct

Research projects so far

- November 2001 Advisory Board set up
- Developmental work for National Survey of Public Attitudes 2002/3 NatCen
- First National Survey 2003/2004 BMRB
  - Coverage GB
- Second National Survey 2005/6 Ipsos Mori
  - Coverage GB and Northern Ireland
- Review of descriptions of the "Seven Principles of Public Life" BMRB
- Third National Survey 2007/8 BMRB
  - Coverage England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Why do the National Surveys?

- Widespread adoption of Seven Principles by organisations suggests agreement
- Little or no knowledge about what the public feels
- Research enables the Committee to monitor public expectations and perceptions of standards of conduct in public life over time

Aims of the surveys

- What does the public see as acceptable/ unacceptable behaviour for figures in public life?
- How far does the public see figures in public life as having acceptable/unacceptable standards of behaviour?
- How far does the public think that wrongdoing will be uncovered and punished?
- More recently – provide comparisons within UK England, Scotland, NI and now Wales

Impact of National Surveys

- Repeated every two years to track public expectations and perceptions over time
- Provides evidence base for Committee
- Wide dissemination to public office holders
- Has stimulated considerable debate about trust and confidence in public office holders – in particular those elected to office
- Stimulated re-examination of definitions attached to Seven Principles of Public Life - work may be continued

Longer term

- Helps to keep the Committee focused and connected to public concerns
- Risk of being sucked into Westminster Village pre-occupations
- Provides important reality check on standards
  - Public expectations of conduct not theoretical
  - Although influenced by media, public know standards they must comply with at work etc.

Challenges

- Initial and continuing scepticism among some members
  - ‘What people think is just what they read in the newspaper’
- Impulse to say ‘But they are wrong’/’They don’t know and don’t understand’
- Need to maintain quality of product – powerful opponents with an interest in rubbishing the research
- The ‘No-but-really-what-does-influence-opinion?’ problem