
Introduction

Right now in this place, there are not high hopes for ethical standards. It is unstructured. No one tells you what is expected of you. There is no guidance. You are pretty much left on your own.

A member of parliament

The ethical standards of the British House of Commons, as an institution, depend almost entirely on the personal ethical determination of its individual members. The same cannot be said of many other legislatures: the United States Congress, for example, has constructed a substantial regulatory edifice – composed of statutory restrictions, codes, and bureaucratic watchdogs – to govern, direct, and shape the behaviour of its legislators, as well as to enforce its own ethical self-image. While this more formal system does not guarantee a more elevated political morality, it does provide its membership with a host of tangible rules, prohibitions, and guidelines. To a greater or lesser extent, other legislatures have followed suit, codifying and specifying their ethical expectations.

In the House of Commons, however, only a few broad normative generalizations express Parliament's ethical self-conception, and the paucity of formal structures make it difficult to examine in any detailed or accurate way the interactions and mechanisms that govern the ethical behaviour of MPs. Individual members are given wide latitude in interpreting for themselves which types of activities are appropriate and which are inappropriate. Each MP is ultimately expected to make such decisions based on the dictates of his or her own conscience. A guiding body of specific rules, restrictions, 'official' interpretations, and precedents is notably absent. Instead, MPs must build and maintain personal ethical standards to govern their behaviour.

The primacy of individual attitudes in shaping institutional behaviour means that an understanding of these attitudes is fundamental to a comprehensive view of Parliament. The perceptions, judgments, and preconceptions that shape the ethical decisions of MPs are the foundation of British legislative ethics. Unfortunately, almost nothing

is known about the substance of these attitudes. MPs are exhorted to avoid “activities inconsistent with the standards the House is entitled to expect from its members,”¹ but as the opening quotation indicates, there remains a great deal of uncertainty over what those standards and expectations encompass.

The image of the honourable member permeates the institutional structure of Parliament, its internal procedures, and even its rhetorical conventions, which dictate that MPs refer to one another through the formulaic epithet “the Honourable Member from ...” To impugn or challenge another member’s honour remains the gravest of insults. Election to Parliament is assumed to confer heightened ethical insight into public affairs. Thus Parliament presumes that deviation from the standards of honour will be entirely attributable to the rare and unfortunate election of a scoundrel who perverts his honourable calling. In a field of “honourable gentlemen,” such an individual would be easily identifiable. Yet this simplified, black-or-white moral world may have little correspondence with the reality of conflicting interests and motivations of contemporary members of parliament.

Thus several disturbing possibilities exist: members’ behaviour may be less consistent with these nebulous standards than expected; some or even many members may be unclear as to the actual content of the standards; or the standards that are in fact prevalent in the House may be quite different from formal requirements. If it is true that MPs are not sufficiently informed of what is expected of them, their real attitudes may vary widely from the “honourable member” ideal promulgated by the traditions and etiquette of the House.

Further, despite a resurgence of scholarly interest in the political attitudes of the parliamentary elite, the extent to which the ethical perceptions of MPs are aligned and integrated remains unknown.² Parliament implicitly assumes the existence of a broad ethical consensus among its members, but this assumption has not been verified empirically. Measurement of the perceptions and views of individual members may indicate that, as Searing found to be the case with respect to the “rules of the game,”³ this important ethical consensus is a hopeful illusion.

The implications of ethical dissensus are far-reaching. Should there be a multiplicity of competing ethical standards operative in the House, rather than a single common standard, then much of Parliament’s ethical strategy is dependent on a false axiom. If different members cannot be expected to resolve similar ethical quandaries in the same way, then, in the absence of coercive regulatory mechanisms that do not rely on this expectation, Parliament’s means of controlling its own ethical atmosphere is severely weakened. Individual conduct considered

“unparliamentary” can flourish and eventually become institutionally accepted. This ethical deterioration leaves the House vulnerable to progressively legitimized abuse, misconduct, and corruption.

The importance of MPs’ attitudes is heightened by the extensive intermingling of public and private roles and resources in Britain, where “grey zones” of behaviour are frequent facts of life.⁴ A good example of such intermingling has been the problems of a number of select committee chairmen, notably Michael Mates, who, while chair of the Defence Committee, served as a paid consultant to a lobby company specializing in helping defence manufacturers secure contracts. His entanglements and those of his colleagues have come under scrutiny by both the media and the House Select Committee on Members’ Interests.

A more complete understanding of the ethical underpinnings of Parliament is especially important in the current climate of increased attention to ethical matters. Legislatures worldwide have in the last decade been preoccupied with ethical introspection and reform: studies have been undertaken and, in many instances, reform packages introduced. Yet the “Mother of Parliaments,” reluctant to probe its own norms and procedures, risks being left behind by its offspring as a source of inspiration and a model for emulation. During this same period, Britain has undergone significant sociopolitical and economic change. Parliament’s system of ethical management, premised on the concept of *noblesse oblige*, may have been overtaken by the ascendancy of a neoconservative ideology that encourages fewer restraints on self-interest at all levels of society.

At the same time, other cultural forces have been at work from the opposite direction. Researchers have pointed to an ongoing value shift in western industrialized states.⁵ The transition to a post-materialist society embodies a growing desire for participation and inclusion in the political process. A materialist electorate may have tolerated or ignored ethical irregularities as long as they did not significantly impede the provision of basic services. Post-materialist voters, however, tend to focus more closely on process rather than result. Increased attention to ethical issues is one byproduct of this shift.

This concern, however, cannot focus on anything more substantial than supposition, tradition, and the occasional leak or scandal. What is missing is empirical information about how MPs make their ethical decisions, decisions that are the fundamental building blocks of British legislative ethics.

This book is an attempt to supply the missing data. Based on interviews with one hundred randomly selected members of parliament, it explores, both theoretically and empirically, the attitudes of

MPs towards political corruption and legislative ethics. By systematic analysis of the MPs' perceptions on general and specific ethical issues, a description of the overall ethical disposition of the House will be constructed. The variations in these perceptions, especially the readily apparent and wide division over what does and does not constitute corruption, will be broken down and examined by means of an attitudinal typology of MPs. The differences of opinion and attitude depicted in this typology will be assessed in order to understand their origins, their strength and persistence, and their consequences.

Chapter 1 discusses the theory and operation of legislative ethics in Britain. The existing, largely informal framework that governs the ethical behaviour of MPs is summarized. The reliance of the system on the discretion and honour of individual MPs is noted and examined. This overview leads to the identification of two major interconnected problems that challenge the system. Parliament must ensure that the large amount of discretion it grants to its members is exercised wisely and in accordance with institutional goals. Yet this effort is confounded by the multiple roles MPs are required to play, as competing legislative, representative, and private interests come into conflict and circumscribe the autonomy of members.

In Chapter 2 the research methodology is discussed and explained, and the information gathered in the interviews is categorized. Based on their observed tolerances for a number of potentially corrupt acts, the MPs in the sample are divided into a fourfold, two-dimensional typology of ethical attitudes. This chapter explains how the typology was constructed and introduces the four types of MPs – Puritans, Servants, Muddlers, and Entrepreneurs.

Chapters 3 through 6 explore in detail the attitudes, perceptions, and characteristics of each of the four types of MPs. Included is a general perceptual profile, and a background and personal profile, which outlines the various political, spatial, and socioeconomic traits and factors found to be significantly associated with MPs' attitudes. These chapters will also reveal the MPs' reflections on a number of ethical issues, such as the Register of Members' Interests, outside employment, lobbying, and sanctions and discipline. Finally, the comments of the MPs will be used to pinpoint the ethical strategies they employ in the parliamentary environment.

Chapter 7 synthesizes the profiles of the four types and examines how they can be expected to interact in the context of ethical reform. Types that would favour or oppose particular efforts are identified and the possibility of shifting alliances between groups of MPs with different goals and perceptions is examined. At the same time, these interactions provide a blueprint for the ethical ecology of the House.

The conclusions arrived at in this book will provide a picture of what is and what is not ethical in the minds of British legislators. Specifically, the research will indicate what the political elite believes constitutes a corrupt act; the factors that shape and determine MPs' attitudes towards corruption; the degree of consensus among the elite; and the factors to which existing subcultures can be traced. This book has relevance not only for social scientists but for policy-makers as well. An empirical record of the attitudes and perceptions of MPs is an essential tool for the assessment of the effectiveness of existing ethical guidelines, and in the creation of new mechanisms to ensure the ethical conduct of legislators.