



Trust, governance and the future of the Nolan Principles

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In the latest Ipsos Veracity Index – the longest-running poll on trust of professions in Britain – the only group with a lower trust rating than government ministers and politicians were advertising executives.

This may come as no surprise, especially after the events of recent months, but it also highlights a serious problem.

Politicians and government ministers have long languished at the bottom of the index, which suggests either that we continue to make poor choices about who we elect to office or that there is an ongoing cultural issue at the heart of the legislature and, just as acutely, at the heart of government itself.

It's interesting to note that those professionals who have a real, direct impact on our lives, such as doctors and nurses working on the front line, are way up at the other end of the approval ratings.

Why governance?

Within any system, including our government, there need to be checks and balances that define and guard the proper conduct of those in the positions of responsibility and power. Governance is designed to guard against misconduct and guarantee accountability.

In a recent interview with GGI Judge Professor Mervyn King said: "To have an ethical culture – and that means how we do things around here when no-one is watching us - requires fairness. Responsibility, accountability, fairness and transparency are inextricably intertwined. If you're going to be fair, you've got to be responsible, you've got to be accountable."

In his 1861 book *Considerations of a Representative Government*, John Stuart Mill established the concept of 'constitutional morality'. For its many strengths, the UK constitutional democracy has a weak spot: its integrity is contingent on the conduct and spirit of government and the character of those who make it up. Voltaire observed that the liberty of the English Parliament was a result 'not of the constitution but of the character of the people [in it]'.

Unsurprisingly, given the resignation of Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick after her poor handling of racist, misogynist and homophobic messages shared by a group of her officers, the Ipsos poll showed a significant decrease in trust in the police. This should be a warning to the leaders of all organisations.

The problems are not confined to the public sector, of course. Business leaders are just two places higher than government ministers at the foot of the poll – a position that is unlikely to improve for as long as high-profile incidents such as the recent P&O Ferries mass sackings continue.

In too many institutions and organisations, we see significant power wielded without adequate

governance to fairly constrain it. In such systems the culture, values and characteristics of the leadership play an especially fundamental role in good governance.

A return to the Nolan Principles

The Nolan Principles were first introduced in 1995 following the “cash for questions” affair, in which it was alleged that two Tory MPs had received thousands of pounds in return for asking parliamentary questions on behalf of Mohamed Al Fayed’s Harrods group.

To address public concerns about the probity of those in public office, prime minister John Major established the Committee on Standards in Public Life as an advisory non-departmental public body, (‘A body which has a role in the processes of national government, but is not a government department or part of one, and which accordingly operates to a greater or lesser extent at arm’s length from ministers.’)

Announcing the new committee, the prime minister said: “This country has an international reputation for the integrity and honour of its public institutions. That reputation must be maintained and be seen to be maintained.” (House of Commons Debate, 1994).

The Nolan Principles broke new ground, due to their focus on behaviours and culture rather than process. And as a framework they’ve stood the test of time very well.

The Nolan Principles have been refined several times over the years. But, in the wake of Brexit and the Sue Gray Report, and dubious PPE contracts, and the NHS’s failure to perform against its own anti-discrimination objectives, and many other scandals, is it possible to express such confidence in the international reputation for the integrity and honour of the UK’s public institutions? Has our political leadership forfeited its right to claim any association with the Nolan Principles? And is it time to add to the list of principles?

The importance of trust in governance

The government’s shaky position highlights the central importance of trust for leaders. It is desperately hard won and very easily lost.

To win trust, leaders must genuinely embody all of the Nolan Principles. They must be honest and open, objective, accountable and selfless, and they must show integrity and leadership by doing what they say they will do, treat others with respect, and challenge poor behaviour when they come across it.

But they must also demonstrate another quality – one that we would argue belongs on the list of principles of public life. They must be – and be seen to be – fair.

Fairness

Fairness can mean different things to different people at different times. Following our internal discussions about how to articulate a new Nolan principle based on fairness, we have arrived at the following working definition:

“Holders of public office must not abuse their position of privilege. Decisions and policies should be made and fairly applied without discrimination. When people are elected or appointed to a public role, they become accountable to the public as a whole and future generations, not just those who voted for or appointed them. Decision-makers must make a conscious effort to engage representatives from a diverse group of people.”

During this year’s Festival of Governance we’ll be offering leaders across the public, third and private sectors an opportunity to collaboratively refine this important new principle and explore how principled governance can create better, fairer organisations.

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