podcast

the public good ™

Honesty

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Jaco Marais: Hello, and welcome to the Good Governance Institute, the Public Good podcast. In this episode, we'll be having a conversation about honesty. Is honesty the best policy? Does the truth come at a price? What is truth? Can we handle the truth? And why do politicians lie? My name is Jaco Marais, I'm your host, and I think you'll want to listen to this.

This episode of the Public Good podcast was pre-recorded with Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales and the world's only minister for the unborn, and with Mark Butler. Mark is a partner and executive director with the Good Governance Institute. He has devoted his career to ethical decision-making, and is a national expert in cultural and organisational transformation, specialising in governance reviews, board development, public and staff engagement, and investigations.

Hi, welcome to the Public Good podcast, and thank you for joining me. Sophie, what does honesty mean to you?

Sophie Howe: I think, in some ways, it's quite a complex question, isn't it? Because you immediately think of someone telling the truth or not. But the truth can sometimes have many different facets, and perhaps what we consider to be a truth is something which is constructed of societal norms, which is not necessarily a truth. So for a long time, for example, as a society, we have believed that we can do whatever we like with the planet, we can consume, we can generate more emissions, we can take and take and take. And

yet in fact, we've put more carbon into the atmosphere since the UN published their first framework of evidence on climate change, since Al Gore published his first *Inconvenient Truth*; we've done more damage to the planet, knowingly, since that point, than at any other time during human history. And yet, we've almost constructed our ability to do that, and that being fine, as a basis of a sort of societal truth.

So, whereas I think the basic level answer to that question is that it's about someone being truthful, it's about not lying, it's about integrity, and so on, I think it's a more complex answer when we look at the series of issues that have just played into that one example, which are probably lots of mistruths being told, probably lots of things being ignored, probably lots of facts being massaged, or sexed up or sexed down, if you like, and therefore the truth - what is the truth - becomes quite a difficult concept to grapple with.

So when we talk about trust, I think it's important to question not just the basics of trust and honesty, but the very sort of foundations of our belief system, if you like.

Jaco Marais: Can society engage with this type of complexity Sophie is talking about when we've become so used to engaging with the world on Twitter in 250 characters or less?

Mark Butler: You can run on 250 characters, because actually, you shift from 'we need to see evidence for this' to 'believe me, the elections were fixed, follow me to the Capitol'. So it becomes very personalised and in 10-12 words, when you've built up a followership of many hundred thousands or millions or

whatever, you can mobilise that, and whatever the evidence may be, it doesn't matter. Because what matters is I'm following whatever it is that I believe in, or something that I want to be associated with. And that's the really powerful and difficult thing around social media.

I think it's not so much about the loss of or the countering of critical skills. I think there's quite a lot of that, and attention span, certainly, and all of those things that us older folks see. But I think young people are quite savvy to that and see that themselves.

The case for the alternative, as it were, the case for snail mail, which is what we represent - which is, take your time, work things out, get multiple reference points, are they validated, is this a reputable source and so on - they say, 'well, who needs that? What matters is I've got an opinion I can follow and lots of people who I respect and have time for are doing exactly the same, so therefore it's enough.'

But that's why it makes public institutions really important. GGI is exploring some very interesting territory at the moment around the importance of good governance in the way we define it as being as important to democracy. Because it's about the integrity of the public institutions, and the people who lead that and the honesty and the integrity and the transparency of the transaction of

these organisations that have a mission which is for the public good.

So governance then becomes very important - as important as government. But just as important is democracy, because democracy is about, to an extent, following leaders who are making decisions on your behalf, and trust - we need to talk about trust in a minute. But if you're on a board of a public organisation, you're making decisions equally on behalf of others, but you're in a position where you shouldn't necessarily be quite as attuned to the populist dynamics that are in social media. You can, as a board, take further time, seek evidence, engage with communities. That's your obligation in truth, to influence, to shape, to do something, which politicians can also do, but they're on the receiving end of a set of juggernauts being driven by people who aren't accountable to anybody. They just have opinions that resonate.

So I think boards, public sector organisations, can - he says, in a hopeful way - be a very important grounding around long-term decisions that affect people's lives still, when the swill around is very much about the immediate and the opinion.

Jaco Marais: Are we cynical about honest politicians and honest leaders of public sector organisations? Are there ways where we can keep our politicians and public sector leaders honest?

Sophie Howe: Well, if you look at all of the opinion polls, then yes, we are certainly cynical. Trust in government and politicians is at an all-time low. So yes, we are. But just coming back on some of the points that Mark made there, I think whilst I definitely agree with the points that the role of boards and the role of governance is not just to be looking at the populist opinion but to be looking at the broader evidence, that is critically important, but there's also something in terms of the way in which boards interact with people. So Mark was talking about going out and engaging with communities and so on.

Arguably, I think that has been the poor relation of board governance, in a way, and that's where I think people get frustrated that they can't understand how decisions are taken. They don't feel often that people taking the decisions connect with their real lives,

or understand their real lives. When we talk about experts I don't think there's a recognition that people being their own experts is just as important as an academic expert, scientist, whatever it might be.

So that's where I think you do get then people thinking, 'well, if they're remote from me and they don't understand me, and I don't understand them, I'm not part of this system, and I'm going to create my own system over here'. Arguably, perhaps that's why it was that, certainly in Wales, the communities that had had the most funding from the European Union, had the most benefit, but were our poorest communities, perhaps the most marginalised and isolated and least involved in decision-making, those were the communities that voted in their masses to leave the European Union, because they felt it was something that they weren't part of.

We all have a part to play there in terms of the way in which perhaps organisations have done to, rather than done with, communities. I think there are some real challenges that we've got there for organisations to be really investing in that ongoing involvement and dialogue with communities rather than just saying, 'we've decided what we're going to do and now we're going to "consult" you about this.' Unless we take decisions based on actual knowledge of the communities we're serving, then I don't think we're going to get those decisions right, however well intentioned, or whatever governance processes we might have in place to do that.

Jaco Marais: Do you think it's dishonest for leaders to engage with the beliefs and opinions of people rather than their experience? Isn't that a dishonesty in itself?

Sophie Howe: I don't think so. I think you need to engage to understand where people are coming from. Because we all frame our thinking based on our lived experiences. We're all unconsciously biased in some way, aren't we? And therefore, the more we can expose ourselves to other points of view, which we may or may not agree with, to understand perhaps where those points of view are coming from, the more rounded our own thinking and our own decision-making is likely to be.

There was some really interesting work that a guy called George Marshall, who's actually a Welsh author, he wrote a book called *Why Our Brains Are Hard Wired To Ignore Climate Change* and he went off - he spent quite a lot of time in the US talking to the Tea Party movement, and so on, the real hard climate deniers. His conclusion was really the more we tell people that they're wrong, the more they become ardent in their beliefs that they're right. And the more we clash with them, the worse the situation becomes.

So the best thing that you can possibly do is to reach out and form ways of having dialogue with people that you disagree with, and find out where they're coming from. It might not even be people you disagree with, it might just be people, situations, communities, lives that you don't understand, because, let's be honest, there are very few people from a council estate who sit on the boards of a health institution, or who are elected as local councillors.

But in that governance mechanism, we do

have a real problem with the profile of people who are taking those decisions, and how well they can connect back to the lives of the people that they serve. So therefore, they have to go even further to try and make that connection. You can agree to disagree, but you at least have to understand the perspective that people are coming from, and where that perspective might have emerged from in terms of the lives that they are leading.

Mark Butler: I think one of the things that comes out of that, though, is that perhaps what's been lost in recent years is not so much about the evidence and the seeking of the honest truth and all the rest of it, it's about dealing with difference and not seeking a single view, but actually having an engagement with different perspectives, but there still needing to be a decision made.

So that's the bit why governance, I think, is quite an interesting discipline to have. Because it's a full cycle. It's not just the gathering of the intelligence and the information and the seeking to both shape it and listen, which is the front end; it's also about explaining, and engaging with what the choices were and why the choices that have been made have been made so that this is seen as something that people have active agency in. But they have to be active.

The thing about the social media, and the following model that there is, is actually, you don't have to do any of that. Someone's done it, who kind of looks a bit like someone you might trust or someone whose haircut you like, or whatever else it is. I'm not denigrating that. That's just a more sophisticated way of how people work and have worked through all

time. You associate with people who are similar to you, and who reinforce your view of the world. Only a minority seek out people who have different or contrasting or incredibly annoying views that they don't agree with.

So the governance bit, because it's more impartial, because it's a full cycle which includes the explanation, reporting back and then going through that cycle again, allows I think the bit that's been missing for the last few years, which is how do you deal with disagreement? Does there have to be consensus? And if there is consensus, does that involve me imposing myself on you? Or is there a way of doing this that allows me to have a different view from you on this particular issue, but you don't have to make me feel denigrated, unreasonable, useless, and that kind of black and white definitiveness, because I believe it and the people around me believe it, there's no evidence for it, but we believe it, and that's enough? It's that full picture that I think is the problem.

So unlocking any of that, I think, means you have to put honesty and integrity in terms of the main actors and transparency all together. The Nolan Principles are interesting, because although they operate at a very high level, they've got quite a lot of this stuff in, but they've become themselves really rather stale and used as a prop for relatively privileged, largely middle-class people who are in their

second careers as non-executives in boards to justify. And executives are incredibly cynical. I don't think I've met many executives who say, 'I abide by the Nolan Principles, I have it on my bathroom wall.' It's all part of the game to justify.

I think the issue with Nolan is probably to add honesty in there as a goad, but to rethink what the implications of all of those principles are so they come alive again. Because they are mostly right; they just aren't executed, or taken seriously enough. They're just a part of a narrative or a game. It's a gaming mentality, and gaming is really dangerous.

Jaco Marais: The Nolan Principle of honesty requires holders of public office to be truthful. Do we need to add something to this description to make them come alive again?

Sophie Howe: Yeah, I mean, before I go into that, I just wanted to give a kind of reflection of what we were talking about a moment ago, around how do you bring people together, how do you understand conflict and different views? Here's a snippet from the First Minister of Wales, who I think absolutely nails this. He was under a bit of pressure in the Senedd, the Welsh Parliament, on the issue of transgender women participating in sport.
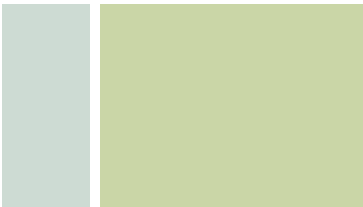
The question put to him was, can you do something that many other Labour politicians have failed to do so far, which is define a woman? Obviously, a massively controversial subject. He basically says his starting point is that transgender women are women, that's fine. But he goes on to say: 'It's a difficult area where people feel very strongly on different sides of an argument and an argument that divides

people who agree on most other things. What I say to the Member is that in such a potentially divisive issue, the responsibility of elected representatives is not to stand on the certainties of their own convictions, but instead to work hard to look for opportunities for dialogue, to find ways of promoting understanding rather than conflict, and to demonstrate respect, rather than to look for exclusion. I do not understand the point that the Member makes that you can be too inclusive. To me, inclusivity is absolutely what we should be aiming for here.'

Now, that is a politician who really gets what not just politicians, but board members, anyone who is in that governance space, the approach that they should be taking. I suppose if you could wrap up some of the things that are missing from Nolan or, say, in an expression in the Senedd of how that should be actually played out, I think a lot of it is in those words from the First Minister.

I mean, I'm sure he has faults in other ways, but actually, I think he's a pretty decent guy, and I think the polls in Wales, and the differences in terms of trust in politics in Wales versus trust in politics in Westminster, probably supports that argument.

So I do agree with Mark that it's kind of the Nolan principles, yes, we like to have these things, don't we? We feel if we've written something on a piece of paper, our job here is done. But it's not about what's written on paper and not about you signing up in your public appointment to say 'yes, I agree with the Nolan principles'. It's about how you live and breathe those things and the way you act and the way you respond to things like those
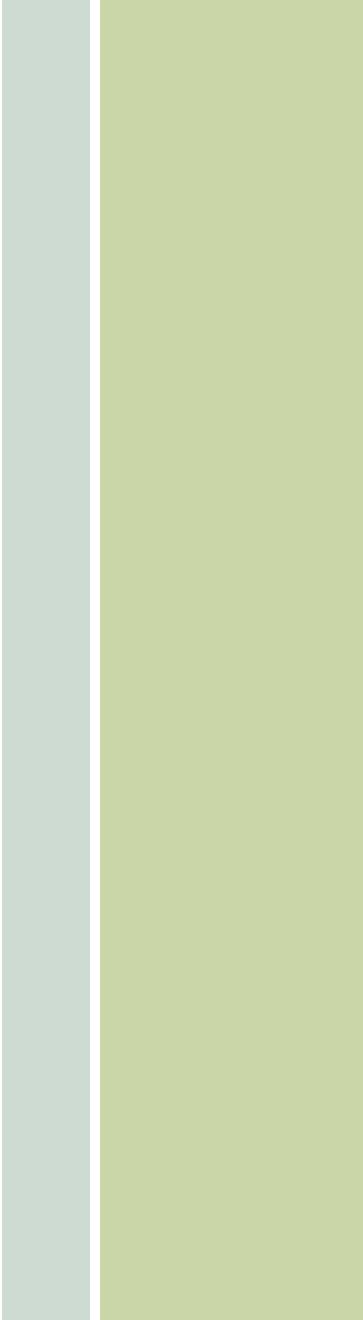
sorts of questions, or the way you respond to how you're going to spend the entire of your government's budget, your health board's budget, or your council's budget, and how you're going to live those principles in the way that you go about doing that.

So I think that having principles are important, but just getting them nailed down on a piece of paper is not where the journey ends. If we think that that's where it ends, perhaps we're in the wrong job.

Mark Butler: There's another worry here as well, isn't there, which is what gets lost in all of this. It's that, ultimately, somebody, or a group, or an organisation, is making choices on behalf of others. That's the basis of government. That's the basis of governance. It's not a populist sort of democratic thing where everything goes on the app and if it gets 84% it gets done, and if it gets to 20% it doesn't. That's terribly unsophisticated - but that's kind of becoming a default in some people's minds. 'Why should you as a politician, why should you as a board, feel you can make decisions on my behalf? What I want to happen is this, and if you're not doing right, then you clearly are dishonest, you have your own agendas, not my agenda.'

So the bit we've got to fight for, and really preserve, and Nolan needs to get into this space more - be seen in this space - is people acting on your behalf. That's what's going on. You have to accept that that's the role. If you don't accept the role, then you've got a problem, because that undermines all of the institutions, all of the processes of democracy, on which the liberties are based that you are enjoying by holding that view.

So that thing for me is really important, getting back to the point where someone's making a choice on your behalf. If you don't buy into that, and lots of people don't, and they have a reason, a rationale to be dishonest, 'I haven't been involved in the process sufficiently,' even when they have sometimes, and it's all about, 'do I agree with this or not? Is the thing that's being done something that my group believes is right, and fair and honest and all the rest?'

But it doesn't have to be evidence-based. The fundamental thing is, do I want these people to make choices on my behalf or not? Do they have to look exactly like me? Do they have to share exactly my views so I can just sit back

and say, 'they're doing all that for me really'? Or do you have to be active and argue your points on the basis of evidence and get to the point where actually you're influencing those people who are acting on your behalf? It's that exchange, which I think is lost in an awful lot of the public discourse around government and governance.

Sophie Howe: I completely agree with you there, Mark. I think we're just in this vicious cycle, aren't we, because we've got a lack of understanding about how decision-making happens, how our democratic system works, and I would say there's probably more understanding of how the mechanics of a board operate.

So, massive lack of understanding of that. You've got the kind of dumbing down, I suppose, of complex decisions on social media platforms and others, you've got the profile of decision-makers, therefore, which is a vicious cycle in itself, because the less we understand how the system works, the less people think this is a system that I want to get involved in or that I can make a contribution to, the more that perpetuates this isn't a system for me, and so on and so on, and a lack of people from diverse backgrounds coming forward to be part of that system. There's not one problem here. There are multiple problems almost corralling into a perfect storm, which is playing out then in these challenges of lack of trust in politicians, politics, governance, in particular.

So I think we've got to get to all of those issues. There's got to be - I hate to say it, because the poor education system is always the solution to everything, apparently - but there's got to be better education, somehow.

I've been supporting a programme called Democracy Box in Wales, where I'm actually working with and paying - because often, here's another issue, we want people's input as experts in their communities, we're definitely not willing to pay them the same as we might pay actual experts. There's an issue. Sorry, I could do a whole other podcast about that.

But in this programme, I'm working with young people who've come forward to co-create with me and my office ways in which we can talk to, engage with, interact with, explain democracy, explain the Future Generations Act in Wales to other young people, because they're much better at doing it than I am. And I'm valuing the skills and the experience that they bring to that.

I think there are different ways that we can do some of that educational piece, but it certainly is lacking at the moment. But then that's just one part of this bigger problem.

Jaco Marais: I'm very interested in this conversation, and how it's developed, in that evidence can be corrupted and evidence can be used by different people for different purposes. Would it help if we added fairness to the list of Nolan Principles and how would you define fairness? Or what should be included in the definition of fairness?

Sophie Howe: I think it would be helpful. In fact, as I was jotting down the Nolan principles, the first up there for me was fairness. Coming back to that book by George Marshall about how do you not just continue to make people more ardent in their conflict, in their positions, but how would you bring them together? His conclusion was that you bring people together

through conversations around the common things that unite us as humans, and fairness was actually one of the things that he found to be one of those principles.

A number of years ago, I used to work in the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Now there was lots of debates around are equality and fairness the same things? Well, probably pretty close. But actually, in terms of the wording and some of the polling that we did, focus group work that we did there, is that fairness played much better across a wide section of different types of people from different types of backgrounds, different types of demographics and so on.

So I think there is something in this fairness principle and, okay, you may need to unpick exactly what that means, but I definitely think it's something that's right up there, that unites a lot of people who perhaps don't unite on other issues.

Jaco Marais: There you have it. Holders of public office should be truthful. But the real question is, are we being heard? Thank you to my guests, Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, and Mark Butler, our national expert, for joining me on the Public Good podcast to discuss the Nolan Principle of honesty.

I really look forward to your comments, but I think the discussion really flipped the script on honesty, truth, belief, and the importance of public engagement.

If you have any questions or comments related to today's discussion on the Public Good Podcast, please don't hold back. We look forward to responding to you on Twitter, at @ goodgoverninst and by email advice@good-governance.org.uk