New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12138

Comment: *How corrupt is Britain?*

Of course it depends what you mean by corruption. Most of us, over a certain age at any rate, born and brought up in the United Kingdom, have always assumed, in a naively chauvinistic manner no doubt, that business and politics and other institutions and practices become subject to bribery and kickbacks only when we step off the boat on the other side of the English Channel, or anyway when we reach our destination in any Mediterranean country (Italy, Greece . . .), let alone in the Middle East, India, Pakistan, and other such far-off places.

We have a good idea what goes on in these countries, so we think. Naturally, we have never regarded ourselves as inhabiting a society in which anything worth labelling 'corruption' is to be found — that was always only in foreign countries, with their indigenously dishonourable and dodgy ways. Now, however, with the publication of *How Corrupt is Britain?,* a collection of studies edited by David Whyte (Pluto Press, 2015), we British can no longer so easily regard our society as so exceptionally honest and straightforward.

For a start, would there be commercial banking in London or Edinburgh (remember Fred the Shred?) if it weren't for bullying management, the mis-selling of pensions, endowment mortgage fraud, the payment protection insurance scam, the improperly operated London Interbank Offered Rate (Libor), insider trading and all the rest? Nobody has yet been held criminally liable for any misdemeanour in that range of discreditable practices; anyway, successive governments have systematically weakened the laws that might have revealed and constrained them. The City of London is the world's leading tax haven, it is hardly controversial to say, controlling as it does 24% of all offshore financial services, offering global capital a secretive regime which assists not just billionaire tax evaders but also (perhaps less deliberately) smugglers, sanctions busters and money launderers. Or again the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), so favoured by the Blair-Brown administration, which channels public money into the hands of private corporations, for decades to come, secure against accountability. And so on.

Policemen, adopting the identities of dead children, even fathering children by victimised activists before disappearing, have infiltrated peaceful campaign movements in order to report on them. Even if these are rare cases, it is now emerging that police forces may have protected paedophiles, such as Knights of the Realm like the eminent

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12138 Published online by Cambridge University Press

politician Cyril Smith and the celebrated media personality Jimmy Saville, the latter shielded also by the NHS and the BBC, as well as much praised for his charitable work by churchmen (think of the funeral in Leeds Cathedral). Horrifying as revelations are of sexual abuse of children by priests, and dismaying as were the miserable attempts to cover things up, such corruption (as officially established inquiries are now documenting) has spread far beyond the Catholic Church in the United Kingdom.

Then there was the saga of Members of Parliament's expenses. Investigative journalists have recently showed how large donors to political parties become members of the House of Lords. There has been the phone-hacking scandal. Citing the evidence as it piles up in Whyte's book, we might question the underselling of Royal Mail, and massive overspending by the Ministry of Defence (all just incompetence by civil servants?). What about allowing corporate executives to draft the laws affecting their businesses? What about government ministers and senior civil servants who retire and soon take lucrative consultancies in corporations with which they formerly had to deal? Or what about supposedly improving the welfare and prison services by turning certain sectors over to private contractors who have to make profits for investors? Or what looked like price-fixing by energy companies? And much else, in a range of what may well look like unconnected isolated events, at least some of which may be explicable and even justifiable on their own, but which, taken together, create what seems a miasma of shameless greed and moral squalor.

Of course, the catalogue of misdemeanours set out in Whyte's book is freely available and has been widely reviewed — something that would be impossible in many countries around the world, in which reference to corruption in public institutions would be ruthlessly suppressed. Furthermore, in Britain, we don't live in a culture that keeps going only on a daily routine of kickbacks and bribes. Also, we are spared government by leaders who simply loot the State's resources and squirrel their wealth away in secret bank accounts abroad. On the other hand, whether things have got worse or it's only that more is revealed, it is time for the usual suspects to lay off castigating corrupt politicians and business leaders in countries at which we have long looked askance, in order to consider the plank in our own eye.

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