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## Corruption in the UK

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*This is the basic text of a speech in Grand Committee (in the Moses Room) of the House of Lords this afternoon. I was the fourth speaker and there was a seven-minute speech limit.*

My Lords, I am grateful to Baroness Jones of Moulscroomb for securing this debate, urgent as it is, and – unnervingly but possibly appropriately – overseen by Moses himself.

I was pleased to see that both the UK Anti-Corruption Strategy 2017-2022 and the Library note for this debate begin with definitions or corruption. Broadly speaking, they define corruption in terms of the abuse of office or illicit procurement of personal gain – the misuse of entrusted power, as Lord Evans put it. That is reasonable enough; but, I want to offer another definition: *Corruption happens when integrity is reduced to expediency and principle to mere pragmatism.*

Of the many possible examples we could draw to mind, we might just fix on the years of complacent steering of Russian money through the sewers of London. Despite many warnings about both the nature and impact of this, it was financially convenient and politically cost-free. Then, once Vladimir Putin went off-piste in Ukraine, suddenly the language changed to that of moral outrage. Same money, same people, same oligarchs, same 'brutal dictator', same banks. The only thing that had changed was temperature and political expediency. Principles of integrity, transparency – the virtues extolled by Nolan – were frequently mentioned and comprehensively ignored when convenient money was involved.

In the wake of the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the tortuous years of subsequent legislation the House heard many challenges to the abuse of language, the 'normalisation of lying', the 'corruption of the public discourse'. Virtue received a nod while those in the highest power in our land sought to ignore both the claims and consequences of corruption. Because corruption is not primarily about systems; rather, it is about character. Individual and corporate. And what do we see in today's papers? Reports in the Times of a letter from the chair of the House of Lords Appointments Commission to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition asking them to avoid promoting candidates who are "unsuitable". I don't need to name examples who, by virtue of their nomination, bring our polity into disrepute.

## Money. Power. Influence.

Now, I am not naive and I don't speak from some pedestal. Lord Acton's famous dictum – that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" – was, after all, addressed to an Anglican bishop (Creighton) and related to the writing of history about the Inquisition. In fact, his point was pertinent to this debate today – he wrote: "I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men, with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong." Which is why it matters when those with power throw integrity and virtue to the winds while enriching or protecting themselves. This is utterly corrosive of public ethics and the common good.

Earlier I referred to what I call the corruption of the public discourse. Corruption begins with language. The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk writes that the nature of our public discourse matters because "moral and political aberrations almost always start with linguistic neglect." Edmund Burke understood the powerful influence of abstract terms such as 'liberty' or 'equality' which have the power to move people without enlightening them. Yet, politicians who revere Burke also seem to see fit to defend draft parliamentary legislation that proposes to breach international agreements (and, therefore, the rule of law), give unlimited power to ministers to fill in the detail of skeleton bills, see accountability as a nuisance, and ignore conventions such as correcting on the record things that have – to put it generously – been misspoken in our parliamentary houses.

These things matter. Behaviour and language are not neutral. Never. And the insidious truth is that corruption ignored, downplayed or spun opens the door to corruption elsewhere in both individual and corporate life. So, why no ministerial ethics adviser? Why no anti-corruption tsar? Why still no real pinning down at a systemic level of cronyism, dodgy lobbying, unaccountable political donations that lead to personal reward? Why a laughing dismissal of hedge fund professionals who game a mini-budget and make millions out of the economic and social misery caused to the rest of the population? (No champagne parties for the losers.) Why do we tolerate a legal system that is being run down – as if justice does not require adequate funding and resourcing? Why a Ministerial Code that reduced moral accountability on the part of ministers? What just recompense for the public whose money was used to pay billions in contracts to government cronies during the covid pandemic? I won't mention the honours system.

All this is in plain sight. If we choose to ignore what is evident, we incur ethical judgment on our neglect. This is not incidental. If democracy and the rule of law are to mean anything, if integrity in public life is something to be honoured and not mocked, if public virtue is not to be shrunk into political or economic pragmatism or expediency, then this parliament must clean up its own act, pay attention to its use of language, show an example of transparent accountability in its vital work, and demonstrate the power of humility in setting a public culture.

Positive proposals for the minister? Set up an Anti-Corruption Board with teeth and independence. Appoint an Ethics Committee in Downing Street or the Cabinet Office with the power to hold the powerful to account.