

Curruptio optimi pessimal

Dr. Steven McCabe

Curruptio optimi pessimal is the *Latin* phrase translating as ‘the corruption of the best is the worst of all’. Corruption and sleaze are words much bandied about in the last week since the vote in Parliament, including the Leadsom, on Conservative MP Owen Paterson.

As many within the Conservative Party must surely wish, if only Paterson had taken the original punishment of 30 days suspension from Parliament, which would have allowed a recall petition giving the possibility of him having to face a bye-election, this story would, given everything else going on at present, have quickly faded from public consciousness. Followed by the *opendemocracy/Sunday Times* story of Boris Johnson “overseeing ‘scandal in plain sight’” of party treasurers donating £3 million “almost always” being offered peerages (Thevoz, 2021), this has not been a good week for the government.

That some MPs engage in activities which break Parliamentary ‘code’ is hardly a revelation.

In considering the level of behaviour expected of MPs, it’s necessary to consult the ‘bible’, *Erskine May*, the “Treatise on the law, privileges, proceedings and usage of Parliament” now in its 25th edition, (House of Commons, 2021). This book featured significantly in the frenzied debate concerning the UK’s departure from the EU.

Though there’s been a Parliament in this country since 1215, following the signing of the Magna Carta, which created a forum for barons, (wealthy landowners, to discuss matters of concern to the Monarch, no formal set of rules existed for the behaviour of those who sat in Parliament until 1844. Thomas Erskine May, then a young assistant in the House of Commons library – he would eventually become the Clerk of the House, the Commons’ most senior official – produced a set of rules which was intended to provide guidance of the rules governing the actions of Parliamentarians.

May was undoubtedly aware that following the passing of the Representation of the People Act in 1832, creating the basis of our modern representative democracy in this country and allowing ‘commoners’ to sit in Parliament, there was a need for a rulebook. *Erskine May*, a significant tome when first published, remains the authoritative source of guidance on what is and what is not allowed under Parliamentary rules by MPs (those sitting in the House of Lords having their own ‘Code of Conduct’, House of Lords, 2021).

With respect to the issue causing so much consternation, Corruption or impropriety, Erskine May is categorical about what constitutes behaviour that would be seemed to be such under paragraph 15 (28):

“The acceptance by a Member of either House of a bribe to influence them in their conduct as a Member, or of any fee, compensation or reward in connection with the promotion of or opposition to any bill, resolution, matter or thing submitted or intended to be submitted to either House, or to a committee, is a contempt.” (*ibid*)

In the case of Owen Paterson, what was at stake when MPs voted on his suspension from Parliament as well as a supplementary Leadsom amendment to overhaul the process by which MP’s behaviour is judged by the Commons Standards Committee, was his relationship with companies who, since 2015, have paid him over £500,000.

Following what would appear to be an exhaustive investigation, the Standards Commissioner for Parliament – an employee – Kathryn Stone had ruled that Paterson, the MP for North Shropshire,

had “repeatedly” used his position as an MP to “benefit” medical diagnostics group Randox and meat processor Lynn’s Country Foods. As Stone stressed, having breached of lobbying rules on twelve occasions, Paterson was deemed to have acted in an “egregious” way (defined by the Cambridge Online Dictionary as meaning in an “extremely bad in a way that is very noticeable”, 2021).

However, as further details emerge about the companies Paterson was paid for, some, including Labour Leader Sir Keir Starmer, are asking questions about the fact that one, Randox, was awarded two contracts for Covid testing equipment that are worth about £500 million (McCormack, 2021). As is described in this BBC online report, the Department of Health confirmed the two contracts awarded to Randox were not advertised and would, were it not for the urgency caused by the pandemic, would have been subject to a much more detailed process.

What’s fascinating in any scandal is how fast events move and the way details concerning Paterson and others becomes known. Once, Sir Geoffrey Cox, continued to work as an MP, including voting by proxy, whilst based in the Caribbean and earning almost £900,000 from an international law firm in the past year as well as more than £130,000 from other legal work (Line and Groves, 2021).

We can expect the press to expose the additional earnings of every member of Parliament in a way that will ensure the public, not for the first time, associate Westminster with sleaze and, in some cases, borderline or actual corruption.

All of this is, inevitably, reflects negatively for the government. PM Johnson, a student of classics, will be aware ancient history is littered with accounts of leaders who, because of vanity and greed, overreached what was acceptable. In ancient Rome, this frequently resulted in their bloody despatch.

Johnson need not worry about being deposed in such a bloody way as a number were by the Praetorian Guard. Nevertheless, Johnson is under pressure from, in particular, MPs who won in former ‘Red Wall’ seats in December 2019. This would have seemed inconceivable even a week ago when, Johnson travelled by private jet from the Cop26 climate conference to have dinner with Charles Moore, a Telegraph columnist who’d been lobbying on behalf of Paterson.

One wonders whether Johnson understands history as well as he might like us to believe. The awarding contracts on the basis of patronage is never advisable. Indeed, it was the ‘emergency of war’ with France in the eighteenth century, resulting in contracts being awarded for food and clothing for soldiers, that were being corruptly administered. Money was siphoned into the pockets of Whig supporters which led to the Tory Party of the time, which evolved into the Conservative Party, to vigorously campaign against such practices.

As Warwick University’s Professor Mark Knights explains in his blog, ‘Corruption Now and Then’, the Tories prosecuted future Prime Minister Robert Walpole, a Whig, for a corrupt contract awarded to cronies which contained built-in ‘kick-backs’ and who ended up in the Tower of London for ‘a high breach of trust and notorious corruption’ (2021), As Knights goes on to explain, “throughout his long tenure as prime minister the Tory rallying cry against him was that he corrupted government and the political system. Anti-corruption was a key part of what it meant to be a Tory” (*ibid*).

Some three hundred years later, arguments made then, albeit now directed against the Conservative Party, feel eerily resonant.

That Boris Johnson is a flawed individual is hardly news. Given how much we know about his upbringing and emergence as a celebrity columnist before he entered politics, it seems there is little

we don't know about his character and approach. With a degree of foresight that has been echoed by many others who have come into contact with Boris Johnson, Martin Hammond, who taught him classics as well as being his housemaster, stated in a report to his father Stanley, "I think he honestly believes that it is churlish of us not to regard him as an exception, one who should be free of the network of obligation which binds everyone else" (Rahim, 2019).

For anyone who's never read what seminal historian, journalist and former editor of *The Telegraph*, where he was Johnson's boss, Sir Max Hastings said about him in his Guardian article, 'I was Boris Johnson's boss: he is utterly unfit to be prime minister', just before he became leader of the Conservative Party, is an excoriating condemnation of what a poor leader he would make (2019).

Whatever concerns there were about him, in becoming leader of the Conservative Party through the support of 66.4% of its members (92,153) in July 2019 and having illegally prorogued Parliament as well as expelling a number of very senior MPs, he decisively won the General Election in December.

As many contend, Johnson's disregard for rules and comedic schtick as 'Boris the clown', honed at Eton, has served him well. Whether, following the current scandals cause him to change his approach in a way that other issues, such as unwillingness to follow scientific advice to implement lockdown earlier – and is believed to have resulted in thousands dying – is a moot question.

After all, the vitriol of former chief political advisor, Dominic Cummings who he sacked a year ago, that Johnson is unfit to be PM, does not, until now, appear to have made the slightest difference. The argument of his supporters that, having achieved the office he'd spent his adult life craving to attain, we'd see the 'real' Boris Johnson, is left open to interpretation.

What's plain to see, is an administration, as we'd been warned by critics, that's as dysfunctional and chaotic as predicted. Beyond having achieved as 'hard' a Brexit as possible short of no-deal, as well as the continuous repetition of alliterative, but vacuous, slogans such as 'levelling up', there's a paucity of coherence policies.

Johnson's, government seems to go from one crisis to another, many of which are self-inflicted. It's extremely worrying.

As to what happens next, who knows?

What Johnson has proved, however, is a remarkable ability to survive crises and incompetence that would have ended the careers of far more able and talented politicians.

Johnson, similar to other populist leaders, seems not to have to comply with the normal rules. That could be about to change.

Perhaps, we should reflect, there is something fundamentally wrong with a system that has allowed someone as narcissistic a person as him to have flourished.

Not for the first time, the principle of the 'good-chap model' of government is found to be wanting (*Economist*, 2018). Indeed, as Frank Herbert, author of the *Dune* books posits, "All governments suffer a recurring problem: Power attracts pathological personalities." Boris Johnson may be viewed as the latest, arguably worst, incarnation.

However, as Herbert contends, "Good governance never depends upon laws, but upon the personal qualities of those who govern. The machinery of government is always subordinate to the will of those who administer that machinery. The most important element of government, therefore, is the method of choosing leaders."

Being associated with corruption and sleaze is unlikely to garner votes in the next general election.

Given events in the last week it's highly possible Johnson may not be leader of the Conservative Party by then. In the meantime, he, and those around him, should learn that behaving as if he's a Roman Emperor immune to normal rules of behaviour will significantly undermine the credibility of his government and the reputation of the UK abroad.

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Exploring the Green Economy, Issues, Challenge and Benefits* (ISBN-13 979-8532032347) and companion text, *Green Manufacturing, What this involves and how to achieve success* (ISBN-13 979-8751284619), both recently published by Bite-Sized Books. He's also working on a text examining how to solve Britain's house price problem. Additionally, his chapter, 'Al Promised You a Miracle – Life Under 'Greased Piglet' Johnson', is included in *Populism and the Media*, published by Abramis Academic published in June.

References

Cambridge Online Dictionary (2021), 'egregious', <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/egregious>, accessed 9th November

Economist (2018), 'Britain's good-chap model of government is coming apart', *The Economist*, 22nd December, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2018/12/18/britains-good-chap-model-of-government-is-coming-apart>, accessed 9th November

Hastings, M. (2019), 'I was Boris Johnson's boss: he is utterly unfit to be prime minister', *Guardian*, 24th June, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/24/boris-johnson-prime-minister-tory-party-britain>, accessed 10th November

House of Commons (2021), *Erskine May*, <https://erskinemay.parliament.uk/>, accessed 9th November

House of Lords (2021), *Code of Conduct for Members of the House of Lords*, <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/lords-commissioner-for-standards/hl-code-of-conduct.pdf>, accessed 9th November

Knights, M. (2021), 'Corruption Now and Then', *Personal Blog*, <https://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/historyofcorruption/>, accessed 9th November

Line, H. and Groves, J. (2021), 'Top MP earns fortune for working in tax haven: Former attorney general Geoffrey Cox has second job that saw him vote remotely from the Caribbean', Mail Online, 9th November, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10179601/Former-attorney-general-Geoffrey-Cox-second-job-saw-vote-remotely-Caribbean.html>, accessed 9th November

McCormack, J. (2021), 'Owen Paterson: Call for investigation into Randox contracts', *BBC News Northern Ireland*, 8th November, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-59214966>, accessed 9th November

Rahim, Z. (2019), 'Boris Johnson showed 'disgracefully cavalier' attitude to studies, school letter reveals', *Independent*, 4th October, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-rory-stewart-eton-college-letters-live-a9142711.html>, accessed 10th October

Thevoz, S. (2021), 'Want a seat in the House of Lords? Be Tory treasurer and donate £3m', *opendemocracy*, 6th November, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/want-a-seat-in-the-house-of-lords-be-tory-treasurer-and-donate-3m/>, accessed 9th November

