



University of
Salford
MANCHESTER

Understanding and preventing corruption: Lessons from the UK expenses scandal

Newell, JL

Title	Understanding and preventing corruption: Lessons from the UK expenses scandal
Authors	Newell, JL
Type	Conference or Workshop Item
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/10373/
Published Date	2010

USIR is a digital collection of the research output of the University of Salford. Where copyright permits, full text material held in the repository is made freely available online and can be read, downloaded and copied for non-commercial private study or research purposes. Please check the manuscript for any further copyright restrictions.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: usir@salford.ac.uk.

**Understanding and preventing corruption: Lessons from the UK
expenses scandal**

JAMES L. NEWELL

School of English, Sociology, Politics & Contemporary History

University of Salford

Salford M5 4WT

j.l.newell@salford.ac.uk

Paper prepared for presentation at the Karlsruhe Dialogues, 'Organized Crime – The Dark Side of Globalization', 5 – 7 February 2010, Centre for Cultural and General Studies, University of Karlsruhe, Germany.

Understanding and preventing corruption: Lessons from the UK expenses scandal

JAMES L. NEWELL

Introduction

2009 is likely to be remembered by most British parliamentarians as one of the most traumatic in their careers as politicians; for that was the year of the great MPs' expenses scandal, which saw hundreds of MPs publicly accused of having abused, for personal gain, the system for reimbursement of expenses incurred in the performance of their duties – leading to large numbers of resignations and dismissals; an unprecedented degree of public anger, and pressure for political reform going well beyond the issue of expenses itself. One of the most high-profile of the MPs involved, the former cabinet minister, Hazel Blears, explained her resignation from the Government by saying,

I'd had four weeks of intense media pressure, the like of which I have never known, not just on me but on my husband, my dad, my family. At that point I'd had enough (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8097955.stm)

Meanwhile another MP wrote on her political blog that the scandal had created such an unbearable atmosphere at Westminster that everyone there feared a suicide, and that many of her colleagues were 'beginning to crack' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8063005.stm).

Of course there is nothing new about scandals arising from allegations of financial impropriety on the part of those in public life. What I think makes this particular scandal significant is first of all its scale: Britain had never really had an affair of this kind of quite these dimensions in recent decades but now seemed to take its place alongside other European democracies in having had a scandal that seriously damaged confidence in the probity of an entire political class: one thinks here of the great 'Bribe City' scandal in Italy in the early 1990s, for example. But second – and this is the issue I want to focus on here – it is significant for what its characteristics have to say to us with regard to current concerns about organised crime. This might seem like a very odd thing to say given the sheer gulf that separates the world of the average parliamentarian from that of criminals involved in drug trafficking, arms smuggling, product piracy and so forth. But I want to argue that the characteristics of the saga have four important things to say about these matters, the first of which concerns the nature of organised crime as a concept.

The organised-crime concept

In this regard, the first important point to note about the expenses scandal is that little or nothing of what has come to light can actually be said to be illegal. Rather, what outraged the public about the revelations was really two things, first, the fact that Parliament had attempted to prevent disclosure despite the passage, in 2000, of the Freedom of

Information Act which gives the public a general right of access to information held by public authorities. There are certain absolute and qualified exemptions under the Act with the right to appeal to an Information Commissioner where an applicant for information believes his or her request has been wrongly rejected. And in fact the scandal originated in October 2004 when the journalist, Heather Brooke, began to ask for details of MPs' expenses and when refusals led to a series of appeals which in their turn led to the attempt – through a House of Commons motion debated in January 2009 and then withdrawn under public pressure – to exempt MPs' expenses from the scope of the Freedom of Information Act. In the meantime, a series of media exposés culminated in May with the publication by the *Daily Telegraph* of a leaked copy of all the expenses claims, which it revealed in instalments from 8 May over several weeks.

What scandalised the public in the second place is that MPs appeared to have taken advantage of a loose specification and application of the rules on expenses to profit financially. For example, the so-called Green Book parliamentary expenses rules allowed MPs to claim the costs of running a second home in recognition of the fact that they in effect have to live in two places: in their constituencies and somewhere in or near London to enable them to attend Parliament. This so-called 'additional cost' allowance enabled MPs to claim up to £24,006 per annum for things like the mortgage interest payments and the utility bills associated with a second home – but officials also allowed claims for furniture and refurbishments, electrical items and food, and it came to light that MPs were able repeatedly to switch the designation of their second homes, enabling them to claim for renovating and furnishing more than one property. MPs could use renovations significantly to add to the value of a property and then sell it, or claim for a second home while in fact renting it out. They could also designate a property as their second home to the parliamentary fees office while designating it as their primary residence with the tax authorities in order thereby to avoid paying tax on any capital gain when they sold it. When submitting expense claims, MPs had to sign a declaration confirming that the expenses had been incurred exclusively and necessarily for the purposes of performing their duties as a Member of Parliament, but they did not have to provide receipts for anything under £250 and it seems that fees office staff were unwilling to challenge members who had declared that their expenses were legitimate. Consequently, a number of the revelations, when they were made, provided the material for stinging media satire, the claims of Tories Douglas Hogg (for clearing the moat at his manor) and Peter Viggers (for an ornamental duck house) being just two of the most memorable examples.

But, to repeat, very little if any of this activity can be said to have been illegal and indeed MPs sought to defend themselves by saying that they did not even break any rules, lax though these rules may have been. While a handful of claims are being investigated to determine whether they provide the basis for a *prima facie* case of fraud or false accounting, no criminal charges have as yet been brought. Much less have any allegations of actual bribery been made. So there are significant obstacles in the way of using the term 'corruption' in connection with anything that has happened.

However, what is also clear is that the reserve is equally true. To deny that the term is applicable to the case also faces large obstacles. Impressionistically, the term

'corruption' seems to have been widely used by the public in commenting on the affair and this is not surprising: with whatever justification, MPs' behaviour was perceived by the public as falling short of their more or less precisely understood notions of integrity and accountability: this is why they were angry. And whatever else it means, the term 'corruption' refers to an infringement of rules – where a 'rule' is a criterion of behaviour that indicates right and wrong ways of doing things; is something that can only exist in virtue of social interaction, and is something whose infringement is to some greater or lesser degree morally condemned in the group whose social existence gives rise to it. Therefore, to describe given acts as 'corrupt' is to condemn them as illegitimate according to the standards of one's own group or at least the group with which one identifies – which in turn means that we cannot know what counts as corruption unless we know something about the moral codes of the group to which the person seeking to apply this label belongs.¹ In short, 'corruption' is a social construct, not something that exists independent of people's perceptions of it.

I would suggest that terms like 'terrorism' and 'organised crime' belong to the same category. Terms in this category cannot refer to extra-discursive objects of knowledge. Thus, it is impossible to define these terms in such a way that we can expect universal agreement that given actions are covered by them. If 'terrorism' 'involves the commission of outrageous acts designed to precipitate political change' (Cronin, 2003: 33), then we are obliged to acknowledge that for many, the US and British invasion of Iraq was an outrageous act designed to precipitate political change. If 'organised crime' refers to 'Criminal activity carried out by an organized enterprise' (*West's Encyclopaedia of American Law*, 1998), then one wants to know, how organised the enterprise has to be: 'There is some degree of organization even in a group of two middle-class girls who, on the way home from school, drift into Woolworths and shoplift some lipsticks' (Cressey, 1972: 12).

What *is* clear on the other hand is that terms like these are routinely deployed by political and social actors themselves in order to advance their goals and manage power relationships; for, given the extraordinary evaluative load these terms carry, their usage in everyday discussions has real political and social consequences. For example, if the agents of law enforcement are able to convince us that 'organised crime is on the march', then they are likely to succeed in increasing their budgets and raising their own status. Tony Blair and George W. Bush would never accept the label 'terrorist' for themselves because to do so would be to demolish at a stroke any claim to occupy moral ground higher than that occupied by Bin Laden. Where dissent is risky, allegations of corruption can be one way of taking a regime to task without directly challenging its claims to rule (Johnston, 2005: 5). What is interesting when it comes to academic analysis therefore, is less to explore the causes of 'organised crime', 'terrorism' or 'corruption' defined in

¹ The centrality of moral codes to what counts as corruption remains even in the case of those definitions of the term that appear to render it independent of such codes: for example, principal-agent definitions – of the most widely used definitions seemingly the most independent of public attitudes – are independent only in appearance, for they make the difference between corrupt and non-corrupt actions turn on the principal's – socially informed – decisions about the interests and preferences the agent is to be required to advance.

some more-or-less arbitrary way, than to explore the extent to which these concepts are used discursively (by politicians, other academics, the mass media and so on) – how, why, and with what consequences. So if the first thing that the expenses saga has to say of relevance to the issue of organised crime is that we should be mindful of the socially constructed nature of concepts like this one, then the second thing that it has to say to us is that in order to understand better the nature of reality we should explore the actual usage of these terms by real actors in political and social life.

Its deployment as a term

Under this rubric, a first and most obvious point is that since the beginning of the 1990s the terms have had a much higher profile in public discussion than they did before. We used the LexisNexis Professional on-line database – which contains full-text articles from UK national and local newspapers – to explore the occurrence, in *Guardian* headlines, of three sets of words or phrases over the 25 years from 1984 to 2008: ‘corrupt’ and ‘bribe’ and their derivations (‘corruption’, ‘corrupting’, ‘corrupted’, ‘bribery’, ‘bribed’ etc.); ‘terrorism’, ‘terror’ and ‘terrorist’, and finally, ‘organised crime’. Figures 1 to 3 present the results. In all three cases there are clear upward trends so that – for example – the average for ‘terror’ and its derivations is 181 per year during the first five years and 439 in the last five, while the corresponding figures for ‘organised crime’ are 172 and 551. A similar situation is true for the terms related to corruption.

If we ask about the causes underlying these increases, then while some things can be said with a degree of certainty, other suggestions are necessarily more speculative. In the first place, one cannot help being struck by the massive boosts given to the terms by one-off events of a highly dramatic nature. In the case of the terrorism terminology, the impact of the Twin Towers attack comes through so clearly in the data as hardly to require mentioning. In the case of the corruption-related terms, the impact of the general election of 1997 stands out. This was an election in which the Conservatives sought to defend themselves against allegations of ‘sleaze’ – an umbrella term covering acts of sexual impropriety, misuse of office, and material greed – from a position of weakness which the then Prime Minister (PM) had created for them by calling for a reassertion of family values and private morality in a ‘back-to-basics’ campaign launched in October 1993. The subsequent revelation of conduct on the part of prominent Conservatives that was clearly at variance with what the PM was claiming was the party’s core values could not, in an election year, have been other than thrust centre stage by journalists for many of whom the unveiling of official hypocrisy is seen as a way of pursuing their calling as guardians of the public interest (Thompson, 2000; Moncrieff, 2005).

Turning from journalists to party political actors, we encounter a possible explanation for the growing deployment of terms such as corruption and so on that is based on the changing structures of incentives and opportunities to which these actors are subject. In terms of incentives, a salient feature of party competition in recent years, not only in Britain, has been the decline in major ideological differences between the main party actors: in many respects the old divisions based on the pursuit of socialism or free enterprise have given way to much harder-to-detect differences between the parties with

the result that they have been obliged to mark out their distinctiveness in other ways. One of the ways in which they seem to have done this is by having greater recourse to what political scientists refer to as 'valence' issues as opposed to 'position' issues. Valence issues are ones that allow parties to compete on the basis of being more competent than their rivals, because they are issues revolving around states of affairs that everyone wants. And it is noticeable that corruption, terrorism and organised crime are all valence issues in that sense: everyone wants less corruption, less terrorism and less crime; no one wants more of them. In this respect, valence issues are fundamentally different from position issues, like public ownership of enterprise, taxation, welfare services and so on, typical of ideological conflict, and in relation to which people *do* take alternative stands. Here parties offer to achieve not the same outcome but different outcomes. A second effect of parties' search for alternative bases of competition concerns the growing presence in political discourse of corruption-related terminology in particular; for the declining relevance of ideology and position issues seems also to have been accompanied by a growing tendency of parties to compete by throwing mud and attempting to damage each other by fomenting scandal, as the Lewinsky affair in America showed so forcefully – a phenomenon that Ginsberg and Shefter (2002) have called 'politics by other means'.

The heightened incentives on parties to compete in these ways are intimately connected to the greater opportunities to do so. Parties' claims to be more competent than their rivals concentrates their listeners' attention on the personal qualities of their candidates, something that has arguably been underpinned by what students of party politics have referred to as the shift of recent years from 'party-' to 'candidate-centred' campaigning. The suggestion is that the development of opinion polling has given political actors unmediated access to information about voters, while television and other electronic media, have allowed candidates to appeal directly to voters – both developments having diminished the requirement for good party organisation and thus the attention to party itself in campaigns. Meanwhile, media developments have rendered the lives of the individuals who walk on the public stage 'much more visible than they ever were in the past' (Thompson, 2000: 6). If this has enabled politicians to compete by presenting themselves not just as leaders, but as human beings and therefore as 'one of us', then by encouraging their audiences increasingly to assess them in terms of their character as individuals (Thompson, 2000: 39-41) it has rendered them more vulnerable to the above-mentioned drives in the direction of politics by other means.

In the third place, it seems no accident that all of this has coincided with the end of the Cold War, once the ultimate underpinning of the left-right ideological conflict that now seems so hard to discern in party competition. The end of the Cold War may have been influential in another way. The power of a regime is reinforced when those subject to its authority are fearful of external enemies. It may be simplistic to suggest that growing concerns about corruption, terrorism and organised crime are linked to a search for external enemies and that this is linked to the demise of communism, the former enemy; but a reasonably convincing tale can be told here.

In their celebrated book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1967) point out that humans apprehend the social world around them

by recourse to ‘typifications’ (that is, the recognition that the action of another conforms to a pattern), in terms of which that world and that action is ‘dealt with’. The recurrent patterns of interaction that are established by means of these typifications constitute the social structure and its corresponding institutions. Institutions control human action by setting up predefined patterns of conduct that antedate the birth and outlive the death of the single individual. This is rather fortunate; for the biological fragility of humans makes institutions essential to their survival: By narrowing choices, institutions enable activity to be carried on with the greatest economy of effort. By rendering action *predictable*, they entail that ‘[e]ach action of one is no longer a source of astonishment and potential danger to the other’ (Berger and Luckman, 1967: 75). But they are also inherently fragile; for they only exist in virtue of humans’ on-going interaction, and this means that they are vulnerable to *altered* typifications and thus to *altered* patterns of interaction:

Because...all social phenomena are *constructions* produced historically through human activity, no society is totally taken for granted...Every symbolic universe is incipiently problematic...The intrinsic problem becomes accentuated if deviant versions of the symbolic universe come to be shared by groups of ‘inhabitants’ [or if] a society is confronted with another society having a greatly different history (Berger and Luckman, 1967: 124-5).

On the one hand, then, the alternative universes inhabited by communists, terrorists, corruptors and organised criminals pose a threat because their very existence

demonstrates empirically that one’s own universe is less than inevitable. As anyone can see now, it is possible to live in this world without the institution of cousinhood after all. And it is possible to deny or even mock the gods of cousinhood without at once causing the downfall of the heavens. This shocking fact must be accounted for theoretically, if nothing more (Berger and Luckman, 1967: 126).

On the other hand, accentuating, or exaggerating the threat these universes pose, provides one with some of ‘the best possible reasons for the superiority of one’s own’ (Berger and Luckman, 1967: 126): for its institutions, by definition, embody shared knowledge about ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ forms of behaviour. Thereby, one’s universe provides ‘the [taken-for-granted] framework within which anything not yet known will come to be known in the future’ (Berger and Luckman, 1967: 75).

The reality of organised crime

For these reasons – and this is the third thought that is induced by reflecting on the expenses scandal – one feels inclined to treat with a degree of scepticism many of the claims made about organised crime and like phenomena by journalists, law-enforcement officers and others with a vested interest them painting them in lurid colours. An appropriately sceptical approach suggests that some of these colours are surely out of place. I have never had an opportunity to question an organised criminal or bribe-taker

but suspect that if I did I would come away feeling that their activities are every bit as prosaic as those of most inhabitants of the so-called upper world.

For one thing, media images, which see organised crime as the activity of powerful, mysterious organisations having a complex internal division of labour, seem hard to credit. The illegality of the transactions in which organised criminals are by definition involved, makes it impossible for them to have recourse to the state for the enforcement of contracts, while the knowledge that this is so creates a strong incentive for market actors to swindle and cheat each other. In turn, the absence of trust presumably places enormous obstacles in the way of large-scale organisation. All else equal, it means that enterprises cannot retain large numbers of employees, or integrate upstream or downstream, as all these things increase the number of points of potential information leak, thus increasing the chances of arrest and confiscation of assets. It means that enterprises cannot get access to capital for expansion as they can offer no credible guarantees to creditors concerning the security of their capital. I would therefore expect to find most so-called organised crime groups to be small, ephemeral and lacking in sophistication – as indeed most of the empirical evidence, so far as I am aware, confirms.²

In the second place, I am struck by the lack of a sense of culpability so often uniting those accused of wrong-doing, and by the degree to which the attitudes expressed are often easy to understand in the sense that we can imagine ourselves having the same views were we in the position of those involved. This thought is directly prompted by the expenses scandal one of whose most distinctive features has been the protestation of many MPs that media handling of their cases has been out of all proportion to the gravity of their alleged offences. The MP, Nadine Dorries, quoted in my opening section spoke for many of her colleagues when, during the course of a BBC interview, she said that ‘MPs are all human beings and they do not deserve to be treated like this’ (BBC News Channel, 22 May 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics_/8063005.stm). These attitudes are not surprising: the disclosures in fact took place over an extended period of time drawing ever wider circles of politicians into their net as the focus of investigations daily shifted to different individuals. In this respect – as in a large number of others (Newell, 2009) – the saga closely reflects the ‘Bribe City’ affair, which likewise provoked significant resentment on the part of the politicians involved that they were being unfairly targeted for conforming with a system – of illegal party funding in that case – that was widely known about and accepted. In that case too there was the strong sense that an entire political class was on trial – with media handling of the revelations, and politicians’ fear and uncertainty about whether they would be the next to be exposed, and for what, bringing massive pressure to bear on them. To take a third example, T. Dan

² Indeed the findings of one author lead to the conclusion that paradoxically, the trade in illegal commodities, such as drugs, is difficult to eliminate, not because law enforcement agencies are faced with powerful large-scale criminal organisations, but because they are actually faced with the opposite situation. That is, since the drugs market is supplied by large numbers of small-scale traffickers, each with his or her own supplier, even the seizure of large amounts of drugs rarely has an impact on availability. For example, ‘in 1994 over five tons of cocaine were seized on the outskirts of Milan. As a key expert put it, ‘the news of the day was not the seizure, but the fact that the Milanese market did not run out of cocaine even for half a day’’ (Paoli, 2003: 37).

Smith, charismatic leader of Newcastle City Council, imprisoned in the 1970s for his involvement in the Poulson affair involving bribes for the provision of re-development contracts, noted:

the implication of so many...authors...was that I was a crooked councillor...Nothing could be further from the truth...I think (Poulson) behaved in a way...common to most businesses, of offering holidays, entertainment. If that is corrupt,...the boxes at Ascot and Wimbledon are full of the recipients of the same kind of inducements (quoted by Garrard, 2005: 16).

The line between legitimate gift-giving and illegal corruption is indeed difficult to draw precisely. Reflecting on his interview-based research among those involved in EU fraud rings, David Nelken (2003: 228-9) refers to 'the banality of organised crime' noting that 'those who are actively engaged in EU fraud do their best to argue that everyone (or almost everyone) is corrupt – or at least corruptible. In seeking to 'condemn the condemners'...they adopt an all embracing concept of corruption even describing the EU itself as a gigantic fraud'. Reading Nelken's observations one feels prompted to say that when, in 1999, the entire Commission was forced to resign precisely because of massive fraud, his informants might have felt that they had suddenly been given some empirical support for their view about the EU.

Such attitudes, if difficult to defend, are easy to explain in terms of the notion of reciprocity. Especially when it is widespread, illegal activity appears to affect the content of social norms, here understood as answers to questions of fairness, morality and justice, which indicate socially acceptable behaviour. To take the 'Bribe City' example, one of the things that investigations into this case revealed was that the systemic nature of the bribery involved eliminated actors' sense that they were doing anything illegal. Enzo Papi recalled:

When I was appointed Cogefar managing director I was given a booklet where all the 'obligations' and payment dates of the company were recorded: a list of names and numbers; an obligation that was to be rigorously honoured. Illegal dealings were so common that I did not feel I was perpetrating a criminal act (quoted by Varese, 2000: 7).

It appears to be the case that most if not all cultures have norms of reciprocity. Therefore, where behaviour that is formally illegal is widespread, and not therefore perceived as morally reprehensible, it comes to be expected that the recipient of a favour will reciprocate by himself being willing to do something illegal when asked; that recipients of bribes will 'honestly' fulfil their side of bargains without cheating, and so forth. Under such circumstances, the intervention, in a given instance, by agents of law enforcement breaks norms of reciprocity prompting the question on the part of those targeted: since everyone engages in illegal activities or is prepared to do so if necessary, why target me rather than someone else? (Varese, 2000: 12)

What to do about it

None of this is to suggest that in the globalised world of 2010, what is commonly referred to as organised crime is of little account. To make such a suggestion would be an affront to those who regularly die or are injured as the result of criminal activity – whether through the elimination of law enforcers and witnesses or when, for example, bribery and fraud lead to the adulteration of food, the diversion of funds away from much-needed infrastructural projects, or the collapse of buildings erected without regard to safety standards. If these pathologies are to be eliminated, then it is essential that citizens perceive those in public life as behaving in accordance with norms of integrity and accountability. Otherwise, the state's capacity to demand the loyalty of its citizens is undermined, thereby diminishing its capacity in fact to provide the protection citizens demand, and legitimising the search for alternative, illegal, means of obtaining security in a vicious circle. The Sicilian Mafia is merely one of the more extreme examples of this phenomenon – while some empirical evidence of the effects of citizens' perceptions on their allegiance is provided by Figure 4 showing the inverse correlation between perceptions of corruption, and willingness to participate in elections. The final thing the expenses scandal has to say to worries about organised crime, therefore, is something that concerns the measures that might serve to increase the degree of citizens' confidence in the probity of those in public life.

From this perspective, it is significant, in my view, that the scandal broke at the end of a long period, beginning in the early 1990s, that had seen an unprecedented volume of legislative activity ostensibly designed to improve the standards of those holding public office (for details of the legislation see Newell, 2008). Much, if not most of this activity, has stemmed from the annual reports of the Standards Committee, set up in 1994, by the then PM, John Major, as a standing body to provide advice to the government of the day on a continuous basis. Also significant, then, is the fact that this activity appears to have had very little impact on perceptions as far as one can tell. It coincides with a decline in the UK's Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index score from 8.6 in 1995 to 7.7 in 2008. Table 1, based on data drawn from surveys carried out in 1983, 1993 and 2003, shows a small improvement in the trust placed in politicians and civil servants, but little or no change in the placement of these groups relative to others asked about.

If we ask about the reasons for this apparent oddity, we are prompted to suggest that, paradoxically, the attempts to assuage public anxieties may have helped to increase them by raising and keeping high the general salience of public probity as a political issue. First, the result of the activity has been to create an 'institutional ethics framework' all of whose bodies now publish annual reports 'which ultimately inform the public on the ethical state of the country' (Doig, 2004: 446). Second, the growing volume of legislation may have increased the likelihood of misconduct through a multiplication of the rules there to be broken – and thereby the likelihood of public outcry given the 'increasing disengagement of the media in reporting on politics as an activity rather than focusing on scandals and personalities' (Doig, 2004: 448). This, as the recent activities and reports of the Standards Committee suggest, then gives rise to demands that

perceived gaps in the integrity system be plugged – resulting in further reform, and a further twist to the circle.³ Third, the growing profile and complexity of the ethical framework increases the opportunities for the launching of vexatious complaints and a ‘heightened political tit-for-tat antagonism’ (Doig, 2004: 444) in conduct cases – which must necessarily contribute further to keeping the profile of the issue high.⁴ We may thus – assuming the legislation has in fact improved standards of integrity – be in the presence of an example of Tocqueville’s paradox.⁵ This draws attention to the way in which improvements in states of affairs can actually increase rather than decrease levels of discontent because of their impact on people’s *expectations*. If this suggestion is true, then matters will not have been helped by the tendency of the Standards Committee to cast its net very widely, its recommendations having touched on issues that border on questions of financial probity but actually spill over into other areas (for example, discrimination, favouritism and freedom of information).

Conclusion

I am therefore led to conclude as follows. Reflecting on the characteristics of the MPs’ expenses scandal suggests first, that corruption, terrorism and the specific concern of this conference – organised crime – are socially constructed so that – second – understanding them requires us less to search for their causes than to understand how the concepts are deployed by different categories of political and social actor and for what purposes. Doing this – third – enjoins us to be appropriately sceptical when assessing the claims about these matters of those with an obvious interest in ensuring that some understandings of them prevail over others. Scepticism places us in a better position to meet our obligations as citizens and as academics to speak truth to power. Combating illegality and the harm that it does requires citizens who are trustful of their representatives (and by extension, trustful of each other). It requires, in short, good stocks of what people like Robert Putnam (1993) would call ‘social capital’. It seems unlikely that this social capital can be accumulated through legislative activity alone – suggesting the rather pessimistic conclusion that problems of bribery and other types of crime – the

³ For example, having persuaded Parliament, in the 1990s, to reform itself through acceptance of its recommendations for a code of conduct, a Commissioner and more detailed rules on the declaration of interests, the Committee on Standards has, on more than one occasion since, reviewed the reforms, each time proposing amendment. See, for example, its sixth report and its eighth report available through its web site, <http://www.public-standards.gov.uk/>

⁴ It was said, for example, that because of her zealotry, and the way she handled investigations, the second Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Mrs Elizabeth Filkin, created a climate in which there was an increase in cases driven by ulterior, political, motives (Doig, 2004: 444).

⁵ ‘Tocqueville’s paradox was based on his studies of the French Revolution which led him to observe

that in none of the decades immediately following the Revolution did our national prosperity make such rapid forward strides as in the two preceding it... It is a singular fact that the steadily increasing prosperity, far from tranquilizing the population, everywhere promoted a spirit of unrest. Moreover, those parts of France in which the improvement in the standard of living was most pronounced were the chief centers of the Revolutionary movement.... It was precisely in those parts of France where there had been most improvement that popular discontent ran highest. [Pp. 174-76]’ (Wolf Jnr., 1970: 790)

two being empirically linked, the one being a condition for the other – are likely to be with us for some time to come.

References

Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckman (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Cressey, Donald R. (1972) *Criminal Organization*, London: Heinemann

Cronin, Audrey (2003) 'Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism', *International Security* 27(3): 30-58.

Doig, Alan (2004), 'Ethics, Sleaze and Codes: the Politics of Trust', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 57, no. 2, pp.435-452.

Garrard, John A. (2005), 'Scandals: An overview', pp.13-29 in John A. Garrard and James L. Newell (eds), *Scandals in Past and Contemporary Politics*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Ginsberg, B. and M. Shefter (2002), *Politics by Other Means: Politicians, Presecutors, and the Press from Watergate to Whitewater*, 3rd edition, New York and London: W. W. Norton.

Johnston, Michael (2005) *Syndromes of Corruption: Wealth, Power and Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moncrieff, Chris (2005), 'A journalist looks at political scandal', in John A. Garrard and James L. Newell (eds), *Scandal in Past and Contemporary Politics*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Mortimore, Roger (1995), 'Politics and Public Perceptions', pp.31-41 in F. F. Ridley and Alan Doig (eds), *Sleaze: Politicians, Private Interests and Public Reaction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nelken, David (2003), 'Political corruption in the European Union', pp.220-33 in Martin J. Bull and James L. Newell (eds), *Corruption in Contemporary Politics*, London: Palgrave.

Newell, James L. (2008), 'Ethical conduct and perceptions of public probity in Britain: The story so far', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, vol. 9, no. 1, April 2008, pp.39-52.

Newell, James L. (2009), 'Nice 'n' sleazy does it', *E-Pol*, vol. 2, no. 3, October, pp.30-4, http://www.political educationforum.com/site/content_home.php.

Paoli, Letizia (2003) 'The invisible hand of the market: the illegal drugs trade in Germany, Italy and Russia', pp.19-40 in Petrus van Duyne, Klaus von Lampe and James L. Newell (eds), *Criminal Finances and Organising Crime in Europe*, Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers.

Putnam, Robert (1993), *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Thompson, John B. (2000), *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Varese, Federico (2000), 'Pervasive Corruption', <http://www.colbud.hu/honestytrust/varese/pub01.PDF>

Wolf Jnr, C. (1970), 'The Present Value of the Past', *The Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 78, no. 4, pp. 783-792.

Figure 1 Guardian headlines containing the roots 'corrupt' or 'bribe' or 'embezzle' or 'fraud' or 'sleaze'

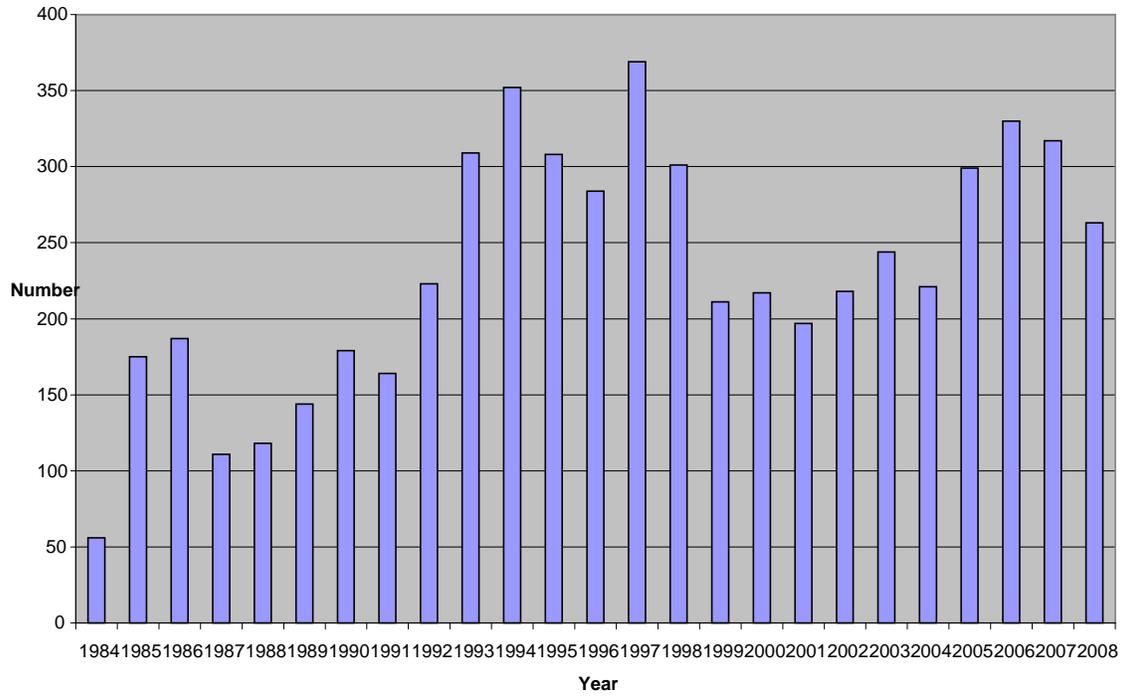


Figure 2 Guardian headlines containing the words 'terrorism', 'terrorist' or 'terror'

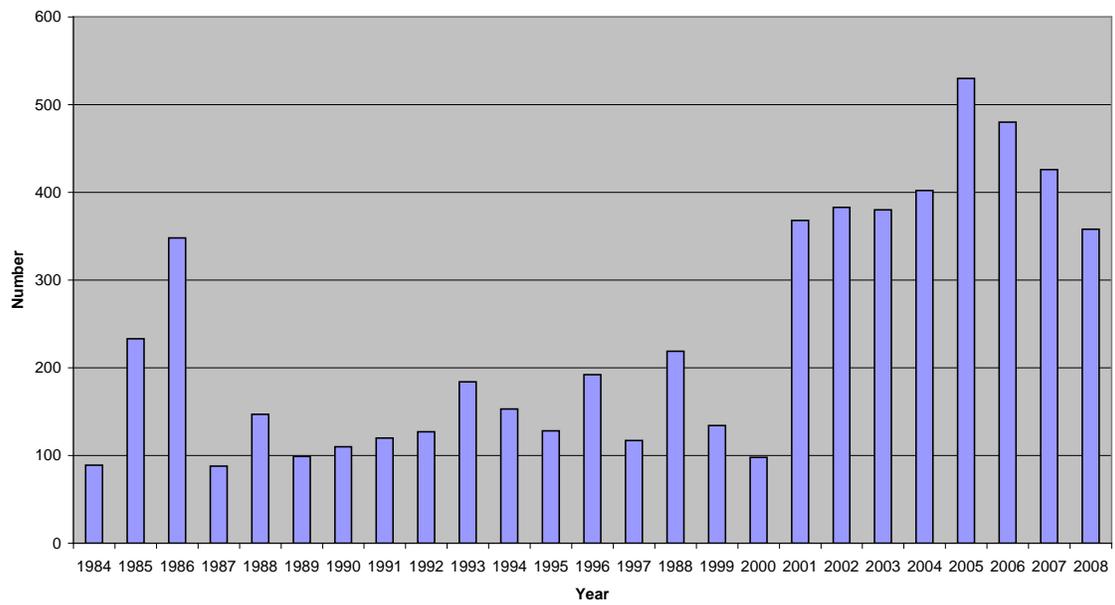


Figure 3 Guardian headlines containing the phrase organised crime

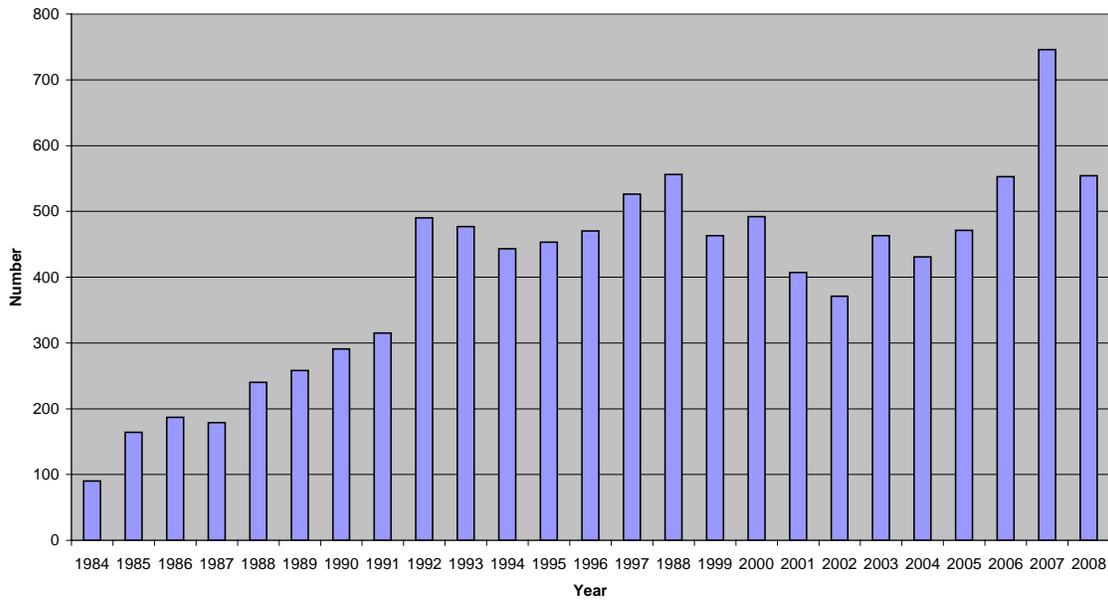
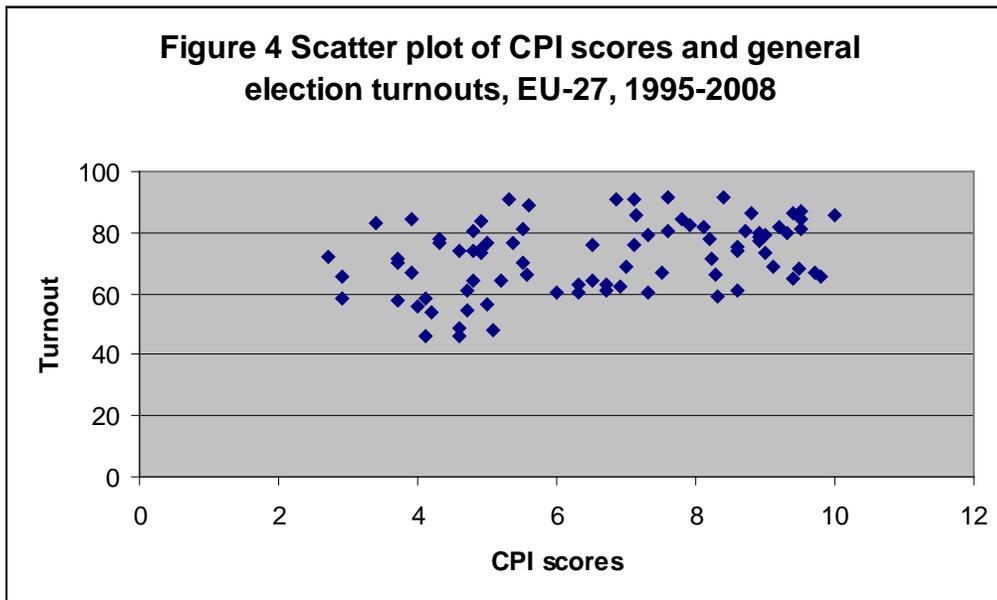


Figure 4 Scatter plot of CPI scores and general election turnouts, EU-27, 1995-2008



Note: each point represents the turnout at a general election in one of the EU-27 countries, and the corresponding CPI score for that country in the given year. The figure is based on all elections in all the countries between 1995 and 2008 for which the relevant data were available. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient = 0.37

Source: own elaboration based on election turnout data taken from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance website (<http://www.idea.int/>) and on CPI scores taken from the Transparency International website (<http://www.transparency.org/>)

Table 1 Groups trusted or not trusted to tell the truth, 1983, 1993, 2003

	Tell truth				Not tell truth			Net improvement 1983 – 2003
	1983	1993		2003	1983	1993	2003	1983 – 2003
	%	%		%	%	%	%	± %
Doctors	82	84	Family doctors	92	14	11	8	+16
Teachers	79	84	Head teachers in schools	83	14	9	13	+5
Judges	77	68	Judges	79	18	21	16	+4
The Police	61	63	Local police officers on the beat in your area	77	32	26	17	+21*
			Senior police officers	67			27	
Television news readers	63	72	Television news journalists	49	25	18	46	-35
Civil servants	25	37	Top civil servants	37	63	50	54	+21
Politicians generally	18	14	MPs in general	28	75	79	66	+19
Government ministers	16	11	Government ministers	24	74	81	69	+13
Business leaders	25	32	People who run large companies	23	65	57	68	- 5
Journalists	19	10	Journalists on newspapers like the <i>Sun</i> the <i>Mirror</i> or the <i>Daily Star</i>	7	73	84	89	- 28

Sources: Mortimore, 1995, table 2; Survey of public attitudes towards conduct in public life 2003-04, BMRB Research.

Notes:

In 1983 and 1993, the question was: 'Now I will read out a list of different types of people. For each would you tell me whether you generally trust them to tell the truth or not?' In 2003, the question was: 'These cards show different types of people. Please put them on this board to show which you would generally trust to tell the truth and which you wouldn't'

* Net improvement calculated by using, for 2003, the mean scores for 'local police officers on the beat in your area' and 'senior police officers'.