

Sir Christopher Kelly, Chair, Committee on Standards in Public Life

SPEECH TO STANDARDS ASSEMBLY 13 OCTOBER 2008

Thank you for that introduction.

I am here today as chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. I have been asked to say something about why standards matter.

I have been doing this job— which sounds like something out of George Orwell - for 9 months.

When I meet people in the role I often get one of two reactions.

The first is to assume that my Committee is somehow responsible for every instance of poor behaviour by politicians and other public officeholders.

In a way that is flattering. But it vastly overestimates our very limited resources.

And it is usually followed by questions as to why we are not doing something about X or Y, depending on what scandal is currently in the media.

It also misunderstands our role.

We are not a regulator. We are an independent Committee which provides public policy advice to the PM (and occasionally others) on issues of standards and propriety.

That may not sound like a big deal. But in fulfilling that role my predecessors have had a considerable impact over the years on the ethical framework currently surrounding public life. To give just one example, our 3rd report led to the setting up of the Standards Board. Our 10th report led to its reform into something closer to what the committee had originally envisaged and the return to local standards committees of first responsibility for considering alleged breaches of the code.

So if the standards framework has become overcomplicated and disproportionate, as some allege, then we must take some of the blame for that.

And if standards have improved, we can take some of the credit for that too.

The second type of response I get is why bother? Why spend time on standards issues when the world is going to hell in a hand basket and there are so many other big issues to sort out. Locally, why bother about the behaviour of elected members if the rubbish is collected properly? And so on.

The answer is I hope obvious. At least to this audience.

High standards of behaviour in public office holders are not an optional bolt on. They are an essential part of the democratic process. Public office holders have to take a

lot of difficult decisions, some of which will be unpopular. Research indicates that people are more likely to accept decisions which affect them adversely when they have confidence in the way those decisions were taken.

There are plenty of examples outside the UK of what happens when decisions are not regarded as legitimate. There are even some nearer home.

That is one of the most important of several reasons why local politicians and others need to be able to show not just that they are making the right decisions but that they have robust and transparent processes for reaching them.

That they are not influenced by any considerations of personal gain.

And that there is sufficient accountability for their decisions and scrutiny of them that the rest of us can have confidence that these conditions are met.

So I regard my role, as I hope you do yours, in a very positive light...

It is not just about stopping people doing things. Or sitting in judgement on them when they transgress. There has to be an element of that, of course. A compliance system with no teeth is no system at all.

But equally important is the work standards committees and monitoring officers do alongside council leaders and chief executives in supporting local democracy.

In helping elected members to understand how they can discharge the responsibilities they were elected to undertake within the spirit of the rules, without feeling stifled by those rules.

In giving the majority who behave well reason to hope that the reputation of all of them will not be tarnished by the poor behaviour of a minority.

You do not need me to tell you that this is not a straightforward task.

For one thing codes can only get you so far.

The shift from the good chap theory of political conduct to a more rule based system has helped to clarify and build consensus about what is and is not acceptable. But there are always going to be shades of grey.

Ultimately individuals from the Prime Minister downwards have to take personal responsibility for abiding by the spirit of the law as well as the letter.

And changes in organisational culture need to be reinforced by leadership, by peer pressure and by performance management frameworks that don't focus only on ends and neglect the means.

For another thing, there must be a danger of overkill. Regulation introduced with the best of intentions can run the risk of stifling the very thing it is designed to protect. So it is crucial that it remains proportionate.

I note in passing that locally elected members seem to be much more hedged about with restrictions than their national counterparts. This is so even though many of the concerns that led to the creation of the Standards Board were actually about national politicians.

The final issue, and the one we all have to worry about as citizens, and take some responsibility for, is that although standards in public life probably have improved, at least if you take a long enough timescale, the public do not believe it.

An optimist might say that this reflected the collapse of deference and the growth of healthy scepticism. Both are arguably good things.

But scepticism can easily become disengagement. Which is bad for democracy.

And much as I might personally applaud the ending of old style deference I cannot welcome the cynicism, the low levels of trust and the very low esteem in which the political class is currently held. I do not regard it as very healthy, for example, that our own surveys show that a substantial number of people believe that a significant number of Ministers are open to bribery, even if you interpret that to mean improper influence rather than brown envelopes.

I hope we will return to these issues over the next 24 hours. I hope also that you will leave this conference with renewed commitment to our common task. All our lives will become the poorer if we cannot maintain a stable and trusted political system.

Thank you.