

Political reform to meet the moment in an age of contempt

This note sets out a practical policy agenda to restore integrity to public life in this parliament. It is designed to address the most visible weaknesses in the UK's political standards system: patronage in appointments, the role of big money in politics, opaque lobbying, and the lack of statutory safeguards against future democratic backsliding. It highlights immediate steps that can be taken to show that there are high levels of ambition about rebuilding public trust in politics.

We present the overwhelming case for action before recommending the following agenda – transformative and ambitious enough to address the issues, visible and strong enough to reassure the public, whilst realistic and sober enough to remain achievable this parliament:

- Immediate reform to the Lords appointments process
- Ending risks of cronyism in public appointments
- Meaningful constraints on the role of money in politics
- Comprehensive transparency register – no more lobbying in the dark.
- Statutory powers for standards regulators to future-proof the system

The case for significant reform – a public moving from disillusionment to contempt

Serious public disillusionment with politicians is making serious long-term government harder and boosts populists and extremists who argue the whole system is corrupt and should be torn up. Failure to bring forward radical reforms that address the causes of this public contempt is threatening the foundations of our democracy.

More in Common's July 2025 [Shattered Britain](#), based on polling 20,000 people and focus groups, says 87% of Britons have "not very much" or "no" trust in politicians, and that this distrust extends beyond healthy scepticism into "**deep-seated contempt**" for a political class seen as self-serving and out of touch. **Confidence in the government's integrity is getting worse** and across the best long-running measures ([NatCen / BSA](#)), the public has moved further towards the view that politics is self-interested, dishonest and structurally broken.

Ambitious reform addressing serious shortcomings this parliament

The public will not be reassured by another standards review, voluntary code, or promise that politics will be conducted differently. The common feature of the reforms proposed in this note is that they remove discretion from those who benefit from the current system. They replace prime ministerial patronage, opaque lobbying, unlimited donor influence and non-statutory ethics safeguards with rules, transparency, independent oversight and enforceable limits.

These reforms are needed now, not just to rebuild public trust, but to strengthen the constitutional safeguards against abuse by any future government, who may have little regard for the rules.

1. Immediate reforms to House of Lords appointments

The House of Lords appointments process has become one of the most visible symbols of perceived cronyism with regular appointments of political apparatchiks. Taking immediate action to limit the PM's unconstrained power of patronage over appointments, and implementing proposals to cap the size of the Lords and ensure no outright party majority would send a powerful message.

Recommendation

The Government should use the Removal of Peerages Bill to put the House of Lords Appointments Commission on a statutory footing and give it a binding veto of candidates on grounds of propriety and suitability, and a clear duty to report to Parliament rather than merely advise the Prime Minister.

The Removal of Peerages Bill should also implement the existing proposals made by the Lord Speaker's Committee on the Size of the House and ensure no one party holds an outright majority. This process does not preclude wider action, but we must not follow the decades old practice of letting the best be the enemy of the good.

2. Ending risks of cronyism in public appointments

Prime Ministerial and Ministerial appointments are still governed largely by the restraint of those in power. This system to safeguard independent appointment processes has consistently failed to stand up to significant pressure, leading to unaccountable appointments of unsuitable individuals for extremely high profile and powerful positions. This corrodes public trust and undermines the independence of core institutions.

Recommendation

The Government should look at upgrading the Governance Code and giving the appointments Commissioner a stronger statutory basis and more robust powers. A new code could remove ministers' ability to appoint candidates judged unappointable, require genuinely independent panels for significant appointments, and give the Commissioner power to halt or rerun flawed competitions.

Direct appointments and exceptional appointments should be tightly limited, time-limited where possible, and subject to prior approval by the Commissioner. The Commissioner should report directly to Parliament, not simply operate as part of the machinery of government.

3. Meaningful constraints on the role of money in politics

The public rightly sense that money buys access and influence. Political parties are overly reliant on large donors, and in an age of highly-targeted, sophisticated social media advertising mega donations have the capacity to utterly transform our politics.

Sir Philip Rycroft's 2026 review has created a strong basis for going further than the current Representation of the People Bill to tackle undue influence in our politics. But its focus on foreign interference set a limit to its ambition. The opportunity to go further and faster to restore trust in politics and create a level playing field at elections must be seized.

Recommendation

The Government should legislate for a new political finance settlement built around three simple principles: no mega-donations, no year-round spending arms race and an empowered electoral regulator.

First, an immediate upper limit on political donations in the Representation of the People Bill. This should be high enough to allow parties to raise the resources they need, but low enough to end the era in which a small number of individuals or entities can fund major parts of the political system, potentially capturing the policy agenda of an entire party in the process.

Second, much fairer spending limits should apply across the year. It is absurd to allow unlimited spending one day and apply a significant cap the next when a relevant 'election' period begins. Political campaigning has an effect all year round, and should be regulated to match.

Finally, the Electoral Commission should be given an enhanced statutory role in setting, reviewing and enforcing spending limits, and donation caps, and for robustly enforcing a ban on donations in cryptocurrency.

In the longer term, the government should properly consider - and consult on - public funding for our politics. Other countries do it, there are clear benefits in limiting the role of private wealth in politics, and we are even beginning to see donors themselves make the case for reform.¹

4. A comprehensive transparency register: no more lobbying in the dark

The perception that those with wealth and privileged access can set the government's policy of the day, while ordinary people's views are disregarded, is at the root of deep public cynicism about the political system in Britain. Just [20%](#) of people in 2024 believe the UK's political system allows them a say in what government does.

Various independent bodies and parliamentary committees have found that current transparency arrangements for meetings with government are not fit for purpose - with too little

¹ <https://www.babelfish.news/politics/a-labour-donors-case-for-ending-donations/>

information provided to enable the public to scrutinise how public decisions are being influenced.

Recommendation

The Government should create a single, comprehensive Transparency Register covering details of those who meet with ministers, special advisers, senior civil servants and relevant public office holders as well as government releases on what these meetings covered. The register should be simple, searchable and published at least monthly. It should cover both consultant and in-house lobbyists, and include think tanks, trade bodies, campaign groups and professional associations that lobby government.

Additionally, the government must be more radical in finding ways to prevent policy capture and ensure greater citizen participation in the big issues of the day. Rewiring the state to make sure ordinary people feel that their voice is heard is critical for building greater public trust. It should use innovative participation mechanisms, more accessible and transparent consultations, and publish stakeholder engagement plans – rebuilding public trust in the policy-making process.

5. Statutory powers to prevent backsliding and future-proof the system

The deepest flaw in the UK's standards framework is that too much of it depends on convention, prime ministerial discretion and regulators without sufficient statutory power. The Committee on Standards in Public Life was clear in 2021 that ethics regulators and codes should be placed on a statutory footing to give them clearer independence and more robust protections.

Public perceptions run deep that the politicians who set the rules get to live by different rules than the rest of us, and as a result face less accountability or consequences for wrongdoing. Meanwhile, the weak institutional constraints on executive power in the UK too easily allow unscrupulous actors to take a sledgehammer to the convention-based rules that underpin our democracy. This government has a historic responsibility to make the system fit for purpose.

Recommendation

The Government should establish a clear statutory architecture for political integrity, covering the Ministerial Code, the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests, the Commissioner for Public Appointments, HOLAC, a comprehensive transparency register, and the Ethics and Integrity Commission.

These bodies should have powers to initiate investigations, compel information, publish findings, require corrections, recommend sanctions and report directly to Parliament. Their leadership appointments, budgets and remits should be protected from day-to-day ministerial control. The Act should also include anti-backsliding protections. Ministers should not be able to weaken codes, narrow regulators' remits, dilute transparency requirements or reduce enforcement powers without requiring public consultation and parliamentary approval.