

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary provides an overview of the key insights from the 2010 survey on public attitudes to standards in public life. The survey was conducted about eighteen months after the height of the MPs' expenses scandal and nearly eight months after the General Election of 2010 and the creation of the current coalition Government. The survey took place before the height of the phone-hacking scandal in the early summer of 2011.

The analysis conducted on the data, in relation to previous surveys, allows us to chart changes over time and to see which demographic factors and political orientation (such as age, social grade and party-affiliation) are related to particular attitudes. Although the analysis cannot definitively identify causes for changes in attitudes, it is reasonable to consider the changing patterns of response against the background of the political events prior to the survey and to hypothesise about possible connections. The bullet points below identify core findings, drawing attention to especially significant patterns of relationships between attitudes and demographic factors. The subsequent passages of commentary suggest possible explanations for changes between the surveys. A fuller discussion can be found in the report's Overview.

## 1 Key Changes in Overall Perceptions of Standards in Public Life

- Previous surveys showed that most people in GB have a neutral or guardedly positive view of the overall standards of conduct of public office holders in the UK. In the 2010 survey people rated standards of conduct less positively. In the previous three surveys at least four in ten people rated standards as high but by 2010 only about three in ten people rate them as such. In comparison to the last (2008) survey, the number of people rating standards as high dropped by almost 10 per cent and the proportion rating standards as low rose by about 4 per cent. Similarly, the proportion thinking that

standards had deteriorated increased, and the proportion of individuals who thought that standards had improved fell.

- When respondents were asked how they thought standards today compared to those of a few years ago almost half said they thought that standards of conduct amongst public office holders had deteriorated; only about two in ten respondents thought they had improved.
- Overall, supporters of the three main parties, people in higher occupational categories, and ethnic minority respondents have more positive views. Men and young people are also more positive about changes in standards relative to, respectively, women and older people.

The evidence collected shows a long-term decline in public confidence in those holding public office between 2004 and 2010. On many issues, the 2010 results show a steeper decline than in the previous period. It might have been anticipated that there would be a growth in positive attitudes following the General Election and the change in government. In fact, the results suggests that there was no 'bounce' in public confidence following the election, or that any such bounce had collapsed by the time of the survey, or that there was a bounce, but that does not appear as a positive change but serves to mask an even steeper decline in confidence than is reported here.

It is not possible to identify with certainty the cause of people's declining confidence, but it is possible that the expenses scandal has had an impact on people's views and appear to have fed into and exacerbated the long-run trend of increasingly negative evaluations of politicians.

## 2 Trust in Public Office Holders to Tell the Truth

- As in previous surveys it is clear that some professional groups continue to command

public confidence. Front line professionals are rated highly in terms of telling the truth; those working in the media are less trusted, although there is considerable variation between types of media and types of newspaper. Politicians, especially those with whom the public has less direct contact, are rated poorly. In this survey, against the background of the expenses scandal, levels of trust in local MPs fell, and confidence in the media increased across the board. Over the four surveys confidence in tabloid journalists and TV news journalists has increased by 9 per cent.

- As with the assessment of standards, statistical analysis shows that levels of trust in MPs in general and Government ministers tends to be higher among younger voters, those in higher occupational categories, and those from ethnic minorities. Supporters of the parties in government (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) were more trusting of politicians than supporters of Labour and Other parties.

In relation to questions about ‘trusting people to tell the truth’, the evidence is that confidence has declined in local MPs, but not in other professional groups, and there has been some increase in confidence in the media. This suggests both that people do have confidence in areas of public service manned by professionals, but that these views do not affect, and are not (as yet) affected by, their attitudes to politicians. At the same time, it may be that the rise in confidence in journalists is linked to their perceived role in exposing the expenses scandal. How robust that confidence will prove in the face of the details of the phone-hacking scandal remains to be seen.

### 3 Expectations and Perceptions of Westminster MPs

- People’s views as to how national politicians should behave and the priority that people attach to specific criteria of propriety have remained similar since the survey was first conducted in 2004, suggesting a broad and consistent consensus among members of the public on what general standards of conduct are appropriate in politics. The public places particular emphasis on basic honesty, financial prudence and selfless dedication to public service. However, there are also some fluctuations in people’s ranking of the importance of these standards compared to previous years:

- the proportion of individuals ranking not taking bribes in the top three behaviours fell sharply in 2010 (from 42 to 25 per cent);
- being in touch with what the public thinks is more likely to be rated as important;
- not using power for personal gain, and being competent at their jobs on the other hand remained relatively consistently evaluated in comparison to previous surveys, with about 25-35 per cent of respondents ranking these amongst the three most important criteria of appropriate conduct.

Overall, the proportion who state a preference for the criteria of propriety that rated most highly in 2004 has declined, whereas the proportion selecting those rated least highly has increased (in each case between 2008-2010).

- As in previous surveys, the 2010 survey suggests a mismatch between how people think national politicians should behave and what they think actually happens in practice. MPs fall short of what people expect of them on all of the dimensions covered in the survey – with the exception of not taking bribes. The 2008 results suggested the public attached major importance to four key areas of conduct in which MPs are thought to be doing particularly badly.

‘telling the truth’  
 ‘making sure public money is used wisely’  
 ‘being in touch with what the public thinks is important’  
 ‘owning up to mistakes’

In 2010, three further areas enter this list:

‘being dedicated to doing a good job for the public’  
 ‘not using power for their own gain’  
 ‘being competent at job’

- Public satisfaction with the conduct of MPs has declined on every measure except taking bribes since the last survey was conducted. Most worryingly, between 2008 and 2010, the proportion thinking that most MPs are dedicated to doing a good job for the public fell by twenty percentage points (from 46 to only 26 per cent); the proportion thinking that most MPs are competent at their jobs fell by ten percentage points (from 36 to 26 per cent); there was a 14 percentage point drop in the proportion thinking that most MPs are in touch with what the public thinks is important (from 29 to only 15 per

cent); and there were also large drops in the proportion thinking that most MPs set a good example in their private lives (from 36 to 22 per cent), make sure public money is used wisely (from 28 to 18 per cent), that they explain the reasons for their actions and decisions (from 25 to 17 per cent), and that they tell the truth (from 26 to 20 per cent).

In 2010 there was no change in levels of trust in ministers and MPs in general, although some decline in trust in local MPs. However, these more detailed and probing questions about standards of propriety that the public expect MPs to demonstrate do show considerable changes in people's confidence that MPs will conform to these standards.

One possible explanation is that the impact of the MPs' expenses scandal has been considerable, and has exacerbated a trend that earlier surveys identified. Confidence in relation to MPs' conduct has fallen on practically every measure. The results also suggest that concerns with bribery or associated risks of outside influence on political decisions have been overshadowed by concerns with self-serving behaviour on the part of MPs. The increase in the number of areas of concern is most likely a further reflection of decreased public confidence in MPs generally.

#### 4 MPs and Voting in Parliament

- When respondents were asked in 2010 about the kinds of reasons that ought to influence MPs when voting in Parliament, they were slightly less likely to select selfless motives and slightly more likely to accept self-interested motivations relative to previous surveys. In general, however, acting in the public interest remains important. Voting in accordance with what the MP's party election manifesto promised, and therefore honouring a pledge to the electorate, is also widely seen as acceptable. Most people do not want MPs to prioritise their own interests when voting on national issues.
- As in previous surveys, many people seem to reject party loyalties and political leadership as legitimate influences on the decisions that individual MPs take, although these motivations have become more acceptable. The wishes of local party members are seen as a more legitimate influence than the interest of the party at national level. There is little consensus on which single

factor MPs would be most likely to take into account when voting. The most common view, given by a quarter of respondents, is that most MPs would base their decision on what would benefit the country as a whole, which is also the factor most likely to be viewed as a reasonable basis for the decision.

People's views on which factors most influence MPs' decisions appear to have changed to some extent over time. More people believe that MPs base their decisions on what the party's election manifesto promises, and on what would benefit people living in the MP's local constituency. On the other hand, fewer people believe that MPs base their decision on what will make their party more popular or what might affect their political career.

These results suggest an increased complexity in terms of expectations of politicians – with a greater acceptance shown towards the influence of parties at both the national and local level than in previous surveys. It is possible that the experience of coalition government may have had an impact on people's views of the legitimacy of manifesto promises and party influence.

#### 5 Public Office Holders and Accountability

- Respondents are evenly split over whether the authorities are committed to upholding standards in public life. Most respondents are confident that the media will generally uncover wrongdoing by people in public office; fewer have confidence that the authorities would do this, and still fewer had confidence that public office holders will be punished for misconduct. Nonetheless, the levels of confidence in the authorities to uncover and punish wrongdoing are slightly higher than in the 2008 survey.
- In broad terms, confidence in the authorities' and the media's ability to improve standards and uncover wrongdoing is higher among young people, supporters of mainstream parties, and people from the higher occupational grades. People from ethnic minority backgrounds were more likely than White-British respondents to feel confident in the authorities' ability and commitment to improving standards and uncover wrongdoing but had less confidence than White-British respondents in the media's ability to uncover wrongdoing.

Given declining levels of trust and confidence in MPs' conduct, the relatively stable, and in some respects improved, evaluation of the role of the authorities in uncovering offences and punishing offences suggests that while people's evaluation of MPs is affected by the expenses scandal, they retain their confidence in the more general institutions which police public standards was not affected. This, together with a good deal of evidence collected in the surveys over time (such as levels of trust in professionals; the consistency with which certain values are supported; and the reasonably high levels of confidence in wrong-doing being uncovered) suggests that the increasingly negative evaluations of politicians remains framed by a less fluctuating confidence in many British institutions and practices.

## 6 Party Funding

- The 2010 survey included a number of questions on the funding of political parties to assist the Committee in its inquiry into party finance. Most respondents believe that this is an important issue and that it is 'never acceptable' for politicians to do special favours in return for contributions. Respondents are most concerned about large donations, whether from activist groups, large companies, trade unions, or individual donors. Moreover, people largely assume that substantial donations are made for self-interested reasons. About a third of respondents believe that politicians 'very often' do special favours for people and organisations who give large donations; about two in ten respondents think that MPs 'very often' decide what to do based on what their political contributors want. About half of respondents believe that MPs' decisions are conditioned by donations, with very few thinking this was never the case.

The picture in relation to party funding is reasonably clear. A clear majority of people see large donations (over £100,000) as a source of major concern, with at most a fifth of the population thinking that they are not a concern. Moreover, most people believe that donations come with expectations of influence or benefit to the donor, and the vast majority of people believe that, in one way or another, donors do get special favours or do influence MPs' decisions.