**How corrupt are politicians?**

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*The word ‘corruption’ is being frequently used in US political exchanges at present, and in the UK Jeremy Corbyn has taken this as a theme of his general election campaign.  Is that because politics is more corrupt, or is the term simply being used more by politicians****?  Robert Barrington, Professor of Anti-Corruption Practice at the Centre for the Study of Corruption,*** *argues that over-use of the word risks de-basing the currency and opening the door to greater corruption - which reinforces the urgent need to improve defences against political corruption.*

"Let me tell you, I'm only interested in corruption," [Trump said](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=Z-jGflI5QMX8vHSWsLMLEEuIn_ohbbpBMJB1Klq8jwhKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fedition.cnn.com%2f2019%2f10%2f06%2fpolitics%2ffact-check-trump-corruption-context%2findex.html). "I don't care about politics. I don't care about Biden's politics.... I don't care about politics. But I do care about corruption, and this whole thing is about corruption... This is about corruption, and this is not about politics."

President Trump has taken to describing his enemies as 'corrupt' - notably presidential hopeful Joe Biden and his son, but more recently ‘corrupt politician Shifty Adam Schiff.’  Meanwhile, [Mr Biden says](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=TML7efk8PWn0uGFQSH5Aj21Hg8D-YjON6kX0QSUiOgZKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fjoebiden.com%2fgovernmentreform%2f) 'Donald Trump has presided over the most corrupt administration in modern history'[.](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=OPRvIrUsjt1RhcSapcqOL74TsCsRWyghtqsp8kgbeBpKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fjoebiden.com%2fgovernmentreform%2f.)

Former candidate [Hilary Clinton now describes Trump](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=xwTWtzirzQHGWUFoNkuu84XivT_u2-WRHnj1PuTqE29KWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fedition.cnn.com%2f2019%2f09%2f26%2fpolitics%2fhillary-clinton-cbs-sunday-morning-interview%2findex.html) as a "corrupt human tornado"; and not long ago, he was saying she “may be the most corrupt person ever to seek the presidency."  During Mr Trump's time in office, a variety of others have been called corrupt, and fire back with the same accusation.  We should also remember that he campaigned on a promise to "drain the swamp" with all the unspoken implications that carries about years of unethical behaviour in Washington, which clearly resonated with the electorate.

This is not new.  For years, politicians across the world have been accusing each other of being corrupt, often with good cause.  But in the US, it seems there are two things happening in tandem: the more frequent use of the term ‘corrupt’ as an allegation, and a genuine debate about whether there is more ‘corruption’ in politics, or people are acting more ‘corruptly’ – not just the existing ‘swamp’ that Mr Trump had previously identified, but an additional layer of corruption introduced through the addition of his own Presidency.

In the UK, by contrast to what is happening in the US, corruption has – to date - seldom been an accusation from one mainstream national politician to another.

But although not yet mainstream, the notion of corruption is also seeping into the British political discourse.  Twitter is awash with voices calling Boris Johnson and members of his cabinet like Priti Patel corrupt, and many others besides.  Most significantly, Jeremy Corbyn has taken the notion of a [‘corrupt system’](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=pbH3CJxvqwBBJTRIvOJpZX0OGSsKq50m5F_9lC-DvjJKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2flabour.org.uk%2fpress%2fjeremy-corbyns-first-major-speech-of-the-general-election-campaign%2f++) – in which he includes the ‘establishment elite’ - as a centrepiece of his general election campaign.

Towards the political fringes in the UK, it has been common for both the distant left and the distant [right to describe the establishment as corrupt](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=RW8xwsPsRm0gq7VttWcjZJ4V112HwuATSrqedXUsyntKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=+https%3a%2f%2fwww.thesun.co.uk%2fnews%2fbrexit%2f9133539%2fnigel-farage-brexit-party-thrashing-elections%2f); and there is plenty of comment on social media criticising, for example, Mr Farage's approach to parliamentary expenses, personal financial gain from Brexit and running election campaigns as corrupt.  But to have senior mainstream politicians describing each other as personally corrupt is a line that has yet to be crossed.

The Prime Minister is, however, now regularly accused by critics of lying, something that itself would have been almost unthinkable only a few years ago – a line that was effectively crossed in the Brexit campaign.   They claim Mr Johnson is not just being misleading or economical with the truth, but an out and out liar.  In fact, a 'reckless liar' according to the [Shadow Foreign Secretary](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=xXC3USZMCMy8rAXyMTq5pm3kfVnA8rZ9POeudwm9ODJKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=+https%3a%2f%2fwww.mirror.co.uk%2fnews%2fpolitics%2fquestion-time-boris-johnson-called-19573413), more kindly described by his predecessor [David Cameron](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=PRuGp0M-AI63jfJ9Q8ItB3vsvcRIA9QKPtaEYmhjFaJKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fwww.harpercollins.co.uk%2f9780008239282%2ffor-the-record%2f) as 'leaving the truth at home.'  Lying is not the same as corruption.  But they have things in common: not least, that when senior politicians push out the boundaries of a system that pre-supposes politicians will not lie or act corruptly, we see that the institutional defences against such behaviour are much weaker than we might have hoped.

Does it matter?   In one sense, using the word corruption might be just like any other political insult, and may just be written off as part of the rough and tumble of political life, a new insult that can be co-opted while it still has the power to shock.  In another sense, it may have some deeper ramifications.  Here are three observations:

*1. Still a big insult*.  Calling someone or something corrupt seems to be about the worst thing you can say - it has echoes of a very basic meaning, the idea of a rotting carcass.  Definitely a step further than 'crooked', another favoured Trump epithet.  It is not simply accusing someone of breaking the law (or lying) - as corruption research often tells us, a lot of corruption, particularly in politics, is surprisingly legal.  There is something about using the word corruption which seems to give the message 'it is self-evidently wrong such that I don't need to elaborate further.'  In a wider sense, that has echoes of the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC); although widely denounced as having been ineffective in practice, UNCAC has 140 State signatories all signing up to the principle that corruption is a bad thing.  There is global consensus on this.  So when one politician calls another 'corrupt' they are in effect accusing them of violating a global norm, as well as being a rotting carcass and possibly acting illegally.  That's quite a satisfying amount of accusation packed into a single word.

*2. Debasing the currency.*  Precisely because ‘corrupt’ is still a big insult, it is tempting to use it.  Inevitably, the more and the more loosely the word is used, the less powerful it becomes.  This risks debasing the currency in a way that opens to door for more people to behave more corruptly in reality.  Here’s how that would work: if the electorate comes to believe that all those standing for election are loosely corrupt, because they all accuse each other of being so, voters might as well disregard the corruption factor and vote for a candidate on other grounds such as economic competence.  That seems to have happened already in some countries, such as Brazil and (potentially) the US.  The consequence of de-basing the power of the word ‘corrupt’ may therefore be that it leads people to disregard corrupt behaviour in making electoral choices.  Assuming a fear of being labelled corrupt has a deterrent effect, this normalisation of the concept that all politicians are more or less corrupt thus removes a key deterrent within a system that relies to large degree on established norms and personal integrity.

3*. Perhaps politics has actually become more corrupt.*   Alongside the greater frequency of allegations is the possibility that there is also more corrupt behaviour.  There is a genuine question over whether President Trump’s is 'the most corrupt administration in modern history.'  For those who are interested, the Global Anti-Corruption Blog from Harvard University has been [tracking this](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=e7QbkjlnIieKjQ7cifekeEAYPO28BC4RvgwM6wCrWphKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fglobalanticorruptionblog.com%2fprofiting-from-the-presidency-tracking-corruption-and-conflicts-in-the-trump-administration%2f); and closer to home, Prof Dan Hough of the Centre for the Study of Corruption (CSC) has an analysis of ['The Winter White House'](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=e13wcvm4fvTXx-3TNNIPwYzd3SHzGnms7gyXVB6KVWdKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fscscsussex.wordpress.com%2f2017%2f02%2f12%2fdonald-trumps-winter-white-house-and-definitions-of-corruption%2f). The accusations about Mr Trump are not just that he is corrupt himself - but that he has also corrupted the system around him by introducing other figures who are themselves either corrupt or happy to defend and facilitate his own approach - an approach generically described by Harvard professor Lawrence Lessig as ‘institutional corruption.’  In the UK, this territory is so far more contested: while Mr Corbyn describes the UK as having a ‘corrupt system’, his predecessor [Tony Blair responds](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=q1nQmwqOXS4sWQpHaAHFCyU-65souvh8i_66oVwK6tlKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fwww.ft.com%2fcontent%2ff8dda012-fe19-11e9-a530-16c6c29e70ca) ‘I can take you to countries whose systems are corrupt. Ours isn’t.’  In the UK, we might be seeing the forerunners of corruption seeping into our political system, and not just into the discourse. This is perhaps not as blatantly as in the Trump administration, but certainly a number of political conventions, or norms, are being broken left, right and centre, and behaviour that even recently would have been cause for censure or resignation is now being overlooked or rigorously defended by those who are prepared to support it in the cause of a greater (usually Brexit-related) goal.

There are therefore two things going on here at the same time:

1.     Political discourse uses the term corruption a lot more. This has implications, regardless of whether it is reflective of more actual corruption.

2.     Politics may also in reality be becoming more corrupt; politicians are certainly flouting established norms and unwritten rules a great deal, and this trend seems to be happening around the world.

What should be done?  In the US, we can see that the system of checks and balances to abuse of power is under severe strain.  By one interpretation, Mr Trump is operating within the rules and not doing anything that others have not done.  Another interpretation is that he is exploiting every loophole to the limit, stretching an already vulnerable system to breaking point, and skirting the edges of the law all along the way: mostly for personal benefit and not to serve the public interest.

Looking at the US makes it all the more concerning that the UK's own national [Anti-Corruption Strategy](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=thoKZERMaaF8AIwZ91khHmU8tZ_fY-PKL_HpYru7-otKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fwww.gov.uk%2fgovernment%2fpublications%2fuk-anti-corruption-strategy-2017-to-2022) makes hardly any mention of political corruption. Perhaps what seemed less obvious when the Strategy was written a couple of years ago has now become rather more pressing.  For example, a recent blog from CSC's Director Prof Liz David-Barrett highlights the urgent need for the [UK to revise its approach to conflicts of interest](https://exchange.sussex.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=d_VmoELGQyY6gihkNkc85MgzRVNgp4_4W8di3Xj4_wRKWQknZXLXCA..&URL=https%3a%2f%2fscscsussex.wordpress.com%2f2019%2f08%2f29%2fconflicts-of-interest-are-undermining-trust-in-uk-politics-we-need-better-regulation%2f).

The conclusion is simple.  Many trends in the US come to the UK, and it looks like this one will too.  At minimum, this means getting used to seeing lots more allegations of corruption amongst senior politicians, and being prepared to work out the difference between allegation and reality.  At worst, it means that lots more individuals who are elected to public office will feel able to act more corruptly.  Democracy may take this course: yet we can prevent the abuse becoming too damaging by making sure there are some robust defences.  At present, as in the US, the UK's defences are too weak.  If they are not strengthened soon, we may have missed the boat.