

‘Would I Lie to You?’: Boris Johnson and Lying in the House of Commons

DAVID JUDGE

Abstract

A prerequisite of ministerial accountability in the UK is the provision of accurate information by ministers and the Prime Minister to Parliament. This form of ‘informatory accountability’, and the expectation that ministers and the Prime Minister will not lie to Parliament, is at the core of parliamentary government. Yet, Boris Johnson’s premiership, characterised by a general propensity to mislead, to misinform, to tell untruths and to lie openly, has led to growing concern within Westminster at the PM’s proclivity to speak untruths in the Commons with seeming impunity. A study of the period from July 2019 to December 2021 examines the paradoxes and procedural problems that arise when the presumption that a Prime Minister will not lie or utter deliberate falsehoods in Westminster is upended.

Keywords: UK Parliament, accountability, parliamentary government, Boris Johnson, Prime Minister

Introduction

A BASIC PREMISE of the BBC’s long-running TV programme *Would I Lie to You?* is that contestants are rewarded for lying successfully. Similarly, commentators and colleagues have identified Boris Johnson’s rise to leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister as reward for lying successfully. In an article headlined ‘What is the PM’s relationship with the truth?’, the BBC’s political editor, Laura Kuenssberg, affirmed that Johnson’s ‘reputation and popularity is certainly not based on the view that he tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but’.¹ A former ministerial colleague of Johnson, Rory Stewart, endorsed this view and adjudged him to be ‘the most accomplished liar in public office—perhaps the best liar ever to serve as prime minister’.² A former journalist colleague and former fan of Johnson, Peter Osborne, somewhat apocalyptically, went so far as to argue that ‘[s]tandards of truth telling ... collapsed at the precise moment that Boris Johnson and his associates entered Downing Street’.³

While Osborne willingly acknowledged that Johnson’s immediate predecessors were all ‘capable of being devious’, nonetheless, they shared a redeeming grace of respecting ‘a common standard of factual accuracy’.

The purpose of this article is not to add to the litany of exposés and critiques of Johnson’s uneasy relationship with the truth in his professional and personal life. Nor is it to chronicle the repeated infractions of ethical standards associated with the PM’s handling of various accusations of ‘Tory sleaze’ within Westminster (most notably surrounding the breach of lobbying rules by then MP Owen Paterson) and his response to ‘partygate’ (and alleged infringements of Covid restrictions within Downing Street). Instead, its purpose is to examine how the PM’s noxious relationship with untruth is seemingly abated when he enters the chamber at Westminster: a place where he, and his parliamentary colleagues, are deemed to be incapable of intentional lying. In essence, the default premise of parliamentary procedure is that PMs, and MPs alike, are deemed to tell the truth. Accusations voiced in the chamber that MPs

¹L. Kuenssberg, ‘What is the PM’s relationship with the truth?’, *BBC News*, 2 May 2021.

²R. Stewart, ‘Lord of misrule: an amoral figure for a bleak, coarse culture’, *Times Literary Supplement*, iss. 6136, 6 November 2020.

³P. Osborne, *The Assault on Truth: Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and the Emergence of a New Moral Barbarism*, London, Simon and Schuster, 2021, p. 3.

are liars or tellers of untruths are treated as ‘unparliamentary language’ and likely to be met, in the arcane but intimidatory phraseology of Erskine May, with ‘interventions from the Chair’.⁴ The paradox of such interventions is, as Dawn Butler (Labour MP, Brent Central) points out, that ‘we get in trouble in [Westminster] for calling out the lie rather than for lying’.⁵

An examination of this paradox, however, reveals further related paradoxes: of public attitudes and trust; parliamentary rules and norms, and regulation of ministerial propriety. Importantly, this nesting of paradox within further paradox goes to the heart of ‘a central aspect of the British constitution: namely the essential ability of Parliament to acquire accurate information about government, even (or perhaps especially) when the government does not want to give it’.⁶ This mode of ‘informatory accountability’—the requirement for ministers to keep Parliament informed—is a key element of the convention of ministerial responsibility.⁷ As such, Tomkins was in no doubt that ‘not lying to Parliament’ was of ‘the utmost importance’ in sustaining the convention. What this article seeks to discover, therefore, is whether, in a supposedly ‘post-truth era’, this remains the case. This paradox is examined by studying the period from July 2019 to December 2021, the first years of Boris Johnson’s premiership and years characterised by growing concerns within Westminster at the PM’s proclivity to speak untruths with seeming impunity in the House of Commons.

Who cares about lying?

Historically, MPs in general have tended to be distrusted rather than trusted by the British public. When citizens are asked whether they trust MPs in general to tell the truth, the pattern in recent decades has been for some 70 per cent

of respondents to answer ‘no’. In April 2021, for example, only 23 per cent of Ipsos MORI’s respondents trusted MPs to tell the truth, little changed from 2004 when 27 per cent expressed the same view.⁸ Predictably, such findings have been used as evidence of discontentment with, and public scepticism of, Westminster parliamentarians and the UK’s political system more generally. Following from these findings, the specific question to be considered here is: while voters’ attitudes towards MPs might display an element of political ‘pricing in’ of dishonesty, in the sense that they expect MPs not to tell the truth, does this necessarily lead to public acquiescence of MPs lying in Parliament?

It appears that the answer to this question is: no. Despite public expectations that MPs do not tell the truth, there is a basic acceptance that politicians who tell lies should suffer some punitive consequences. Just such a sentiment was evident in a survey conducted on behalf of Electoral Calculus in April 2021, where 86 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that ‘politicians who lie should lose office’ (with 55 per cent strongly agreeing).⁹ More generally, a Deltapoll survey for the Committee on Standards in Public Life, found that ‘[a]lthough there is cynicism and resignation, the public clearly believe that MPs and ministers should abide by ethical standards and ... that if unethical behaviour, however minor, goes unchallenged, this will set a dangerous precedent’.¹⁰ This sentiment was also supported by 133,021 signatories to a public petition, submitted to the UK Parliament and Government petitions website in April 2021, proposing that ‘lying in the House of Commons should be made a criminal offence’.¹¹ This

⁸Ipsos Mori, *Political Monitor*, April 2021, p. 21.

⁹Electoral Calculus, *MPs Standards Poll*, April 2021; https://www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/blogs/ec_mpstandards_20210422.html (accessed 2 February 2022).

¹⁰Deltapoll, *A Research Report from Deltapoll for the Committee on Standards in Public Life*, September 2021, p. 5; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1029914/Deltapoll_Research_Report.pdf (accessed 2 February 2022).

¹¹UK Government and Parliament, Petitions, ‘Make lying in the House of Commons a criminal offence’, closed 14 October 2021; <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/576886> (accessed 2 February 2022).

⁴Erskine May, *Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament*, (25th edn.), 2019, para. 21.24; <https://erskinemay.parliament.uk> (accessed 2 February 2022).

⁵*House of Commons Debates*, 22 July 2021, vol. 699, col 1216.

⁶A. Tomkins, ‘A right to mislead Parliament?’, *Legal Studies*, 1996, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 63–83, at p. 63.

⁷D. Woodhouse, *Ministers and Parliament: Accountability in Theory and Practice*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994, p. 29.

was one of nine petitions submitted to the petitions website on this issue in 2021 alone.

Types of lying: deliberate, casual and drive-by

Lying is often defined in relation to notions of intentionality and conscious deception; its essence is ‘the deliberate assertion of what the liar believes to be false, with the intention of creating a false belief in others’.¹² Beyond manifest falsehoods and outright lies, however, is an extensive hinterland of discursive manipulation and misrepresentation. This hinterland is peopled not only by ‘real liars’ but also ‘ordinary liars’ and ‘bullshitters’. ‘Real liars’ are people who tell lies because they want you ‘to believe something false because it is false’.¹³ ‘Ordinary liars’ are people who have ‘the goal of asserting something not because it is false, but because asserting that particular thing serves their purposes, regardless of its truth-value’.¹⁴ ‘Bullshitters’ are people who do not care about the truth of what they are saying and ignore the need to ground their statements in evidence—to the extent of speaking gobbledegook, claptrap or pseudo-popycock.¹⁵ Much thought and great energy has been devoted by philosophers, psychologists and linguistic scholars to understanding these forms of ‘insincere speech’ and to analysing the differences and overlaps between and amongst them.

The objective here, however, is not to engage with this extensive literature, but rather to use it to introduce the possibility that the insincerity of Johnson’s parliamentary speech may not necessarily be characterised as a mode of intentional deception but, instead, may mark a basic indifference to truthfulness. In this sense, it may be characterised as a variant of ‘ordinary lying’ (above),

and might be termed ‘casual lying’, as indifference to, or unconcern with, veracity matched with a desultory and offhand style of delivery. Stylistically, Johnson has mastered the deployment of rapid-fire casual misrepresentations, connotations and deceptions to promote his self-serving ‘boosterism’. In this sense, his technique is akin to ‘drive-by lying’: firing off a false or misleading assertion and then discursively moving on speedily before the untruthfulness can be registered and formally challenged.

Lying in the Commons

Paul Seaward neatly captures the paradox of lying in the House of Commons: ‘The member who has made the accusation [of lying] is called on to withdraw, or rephrase, the allegation; whereas it is rare that anything is done to reprove the member who is alleged to have lied’.¹⁶ Seaward traces the origins of this paradox back to the sixteenth century and to gentlemanly codes of conduct wherein the charge of lying was a potential trigger for ‘gentlemanly violence’, otherwise known as duelling. Whilst the prospect of such violence has disappeared, it remains the case that the charge of ‘uttering a deliberate falsehood’ made by an MP in respect of another Member, is still ‘regarded with particular seriousness’ and generally leads ‘to prompt intervention from the chair’.¹⁷ ‘Intervention’ may result in the offending Member being asked to withdraw the accusation; or to pursue the critical charge by tabling a substantive motion for decision by the House; or, in the event of refusal to withdraw the imputation, suspension of the Member. Speakers of the House of Commons have been particularly assiduous in asking for withdrawal or correction when PMs have been accused of deliberately or intentionally lying or misleading the House. Correspondingly, those MPs who have been asked to make withdrawals, have often been equally assiduous to make sure that their

¹²S. Hansson and S. Kröger, ‘How a lack of truthfulness can undermine democratic representation: the case of post-referendum Brexit discourses’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2021, pp. 609–626, at p. 612.

¹³A. Stokke, *Lying and Insincerity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 163.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁵C. Heffer, *All Bullshit and Lies? Insincerity, Irresponsibility, and the Judgement of Untruthfulness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 195–202.

¹⁶P. Seaward, ‘Lies, personalities and unparliamentary expressions’, *History of Parliament Blog*; <https://historyofparliamentblog.wordpress.com/2021/04/29/lies-personalities-and-unparliamentary-expressions/> (accessed 2 February 2022).

¹⁷Erskine May, *Treatise on the Law*, para. 21.24.

withdrawal or correction still conveyed the essence of their initial charge. Indeed, calibrated retraction has become something of a political art form at Westminster.¹⁸

In recent history, the cycle of accusation, intervention and retraction was notably pronounced during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher between 1979 and 1990. On sixteen occasions, Mrs Thatcher was accused of either deliberately lying to the House or of being a liar; yet only on four occasions, when MPs refused to withdraw accusations of intentional lying by the PM, was the cycle broken. On each of these occasions the recalcitrant member was suspended from the Commons. However, after Mrs Thatcher demitted office, explicit charges against Prime Ministers of intentional lying decreased markedly, with John Major subject to only two such charges and his Labour successor, Tony Blair, facing just five direct allegations. Nevertheless, the cycle of contrition continued, with accusations made, but then withdrawn or corrected on each occasion. Thinly veiled euphemisms were offered as replacement. If PMs were deemed incapable of lying deliberately, they were, nonetheless, still capable of being 'economical with the truth' or 'inadvertently [giving] credence to an untruth'.¹⁹ After Blair left office, his three immediate successors—Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May—had no explicit charges of intentional lying or of being a liar recorded against their names in *Hansard*. The simple reason for this, according to John Bercow, who served as Speaker across their premierships, was that neither Brown, Cameron nor May were 'ever guilty of lying to the House of Commons'.²⁰

All of this changed, however, upon Boris Johnson's entry into Number Ten. In his

willingness to 'repeatedly utter falsehoods', and to make 'demonstrably untruthful claims to Parliament over and over and over again', he was adjudged to be the diametric opposite of his immediate prime ministerial predecessors.²¹ This was an assessment widely shared within Westminster, with the parliamentary leaders of six opposition parties signing a joint letter to Speaker Hoyle in April 2021 to express their 'deep concern that the standing and reputation of the House is being endangered by the lack of truthfulness in statements by the Prime Minister ... This is not a question of occasional inaccuracies or the misleading use of figures: it is a consistent failure to be honest with the facts'.²²

This 'consistent failure' was quantifiable in recorded instances in *Hansard Online* of the proximate connection of the words 'lying', 'liar', and 'Prime Minister'. In the first thirty months of Johnson's premiership, eighteen such instances were recorded, whereas in the preceding forty years only twenty-three instances in total were recorded.²³ Notably, the quasi-ritualistic cycle of accusation, intervention and withdrawal noted above, became almost formulaic after 2019. On several occasions, MPs sought to circumvent the strictures regulating 'unparliamentary language' with reference to Johnson's earlier career—'remember the Prime Minister has been sacked not once but twice for lying'—as evidence that 'he is clearly a person we cannot trust'.²⁴ When the Speaker sought clarification that such statements referred

²¹*Ibid.*

²²C. Lucas, I. Blackford, E. Davey, L. Saville-Roberts, C. Eastwood, and S. Farry, 'Letter to the Speaker about PM's lies', 18 August 2021, <https://www.carolinelucas.com/latest/letter-to-the-speaker-about-pms-lies> (accessed 2 February 2022).

²³A basic search of *Hansard Online* for the period 4 May 1979 to 16 December 2021 results in 564 hits when the words 'lying' (494) and 'liar' (70) are combined separately with the words 'Prime Minister'. The 41 instances recorded in this article, however, are for direct connections only and exclude, therefore, false positives (for example, 'lying low', 'lying down', and so on) and indirect accusations (for example, repeating accusations of lying made by third persons or in media reports, and so on).

²⁴HC Deb., 29 June 2021, vol. 698, col 124; HC Deb., 4 September 2019, vol. 664, col 313; HC Deb., 23 October 2019, vol. 666, col 964; HC Deb., 4 September 2019, vol. 664, col 312.

simply to the PM's former career rather than intended as allegations about the conduct of the PM in the Commons, Johnson's critics tended to plead the former and deny the latter. Ian Blackford (SNP Ross, Skye and Lochaber) was particularly astute at conveying his opinion that Johnson was a liar without incurring sanction by the Speaker.²⁵ One example will suffice: 'Parliamentary rules stop me from saying that the Prime Minister has repeatedly lied ... but may I ask the question: are you a liar, Prime Minister?'.²⁶ In this instance the Speaker ruled that Blackford's comments, although not constituting unparliamentary language, were 'unsavoury and not what we would expect'. A direct accusation that the PM had spent his time in office 'misleading the House and the country and ... [of having] lied to this House and the country over and over again' was still deemed, nevertheless, to constitute unparliamentary language.²⁷ Dawn Butler was suspended from the House for making this allegation, without apology; and she remained adamant that 'Somebody needs to tell the truth in this House that the Prime Minister has lied'.

Butler's belief that Johnson was a habitual liar was shared by many of her parliamentary colleagues. The PM's propensity for casual lying and his indifference to untruth was identified as a hallmark of his premiership in observations of his 'cavalier attitude in ... misleading the House', or his 'consistent failure to be honest with the facts'.²⁸ In this regard, casual lying extended far beyond the deliberate proffering of misleading statements in the House to include the elisions, the misrepresentations and the 'culpable ignorance' displayed by Johnson. Indeed, Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQs) provided

dramaturgic context for Johnson's casual lying, as it provides for short, compressed, fast-paced weekly interchanges between PM and MPs, most particularly the Leader of the Opposition. As a mix of 'Punch and Judy politics' and 'asymmetric warfare', PMQs under Johnson centred upon his often verbose, hastily delivered and jumbled answers which entangled facts and pertinent information with falsehoods and inaccuracies.²⁹ And it was precisely this *modus operandi* that gave rise to the 'deep concern' within Westminster (noted above).

'Getting away with it'

Dawn Butler, when reflecting upon her suspension from the Commons, was convinced that Johnson would 'continue to lie because he gets away with it'.³⁰ She was particularly frustrated that there appeared to be few enforceable sanctions or corrective processes to dissuade the PM from misleading or misinforming the House (whether intentional or not). Notably, the sanctions and corrective processes that do exist are largely based upon constitutional convention and principle.

The first principle is simply that correction will be made 'at the earliest opportunity', where an 'inadvertent error' in the provision of information to Parliament is made by the PM (or other ministers). This expectation is inherited in the *Ministerial Code* which, when updated in 2019, included a foreword signed by Johnson pledging to uphold the very highest standards of propriety. In large part, Dawn Butler's exasperation arose from the repeated failure of Johnson to adhere to the *Ministerial Code* and its principles. In her words, the PM 'didn't have the decency to come to Parliament and correct the record'. Repeated complaints by MPs about the failure of the PM to make such correction led the Speaker to remind the House that: 'All Members should correct the

²⁵Blackford did, however, incur the displeasure of the Speaker shortly after the period under study here. He refused, in the debate on Sue Gray's update on her investigation into 'alleged gatherings' in Whitehall, to withdraw repeated statements that Johnson had 'misled' the House and 'cannot be trusted to tell the truth'. HC Deb. 31 January 2022, vol. 708., cols. 27-29.

²⁶HC Deb., 28 April 2021, vol. 693, col 370.

²⁷HC Deb., 22 July 2021, vol. 699, col 1216.

²⁸HC Deb., 17 March 2021, vol. 691, col 443; Lucas et al., 'Letter to the Speaker'.

²⁹A. Hazarika and T. Hamilton, *Punch & Judy Politics: An Insiders' Guide to Prime Minister's Questions*, London, Biteback, 2018, p. 16, p. 66; see for example HC Deb., 10 February 2021, vol. 689, col 323.

³⁰D. Butler, 'We need to insist MPs tell the truth', *Naked Politics*, 13 November 2021, <https://nakedpolitics.co.uk/2021/11/13/dawn-butler-we-need-to-insist-that-mps-tell-the-truth/> (accessed 2 February 2022).

record if they make an inaccurate statement to the House. They can do so by raising a point of order or in debate, or, in the case of Ministers, they can make a statement or issue a written ministerial statement. ... It is not dishonourable to make a mistake, but to seek to avoid admitting one is a different matter'. Pointedly, he went on to emphasise that 'the Government's own ministerial code could not be clearer about what is expected of Ministers'.³¹

A second principle, also specified in the *Ministerial Code*, is that 'Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister'. However, there is no provision as to what should happen if the PM is the person knowingly misleading Parliament. Although Johnson professed to the Commons' Liaison Committee that he was bound by the code, he was not convinced that infringement of the code by ministers—and by logical extension, therefore, by himself—should necessarily lead to resignation.³² Expectation of resignation following deliberate ministerial misleading of Parliament was undermined further by an absence of criteria in the code as to how intentionality was to be determined and by whom. If intentionality was to be determined in Parliament, then a *Catch-22* conundrum would arise from the Speaker's insistence that: 'We must be very careful about the word "misleading". I am sure that no Member of this House would ever mislead anybody'.³³ Seemingly, the only way of breaking out of this conundrum would be for a Prime Minister to confess to having made a deliberately misleading statement in Parliament. Such an admission of impropriety, however unlikely, might then be treated by the Commons as a contempt.³⁴ However, sanction for contempt is also unlikely, as the House has been notably restrained in dealing with matters of contempt, to the extent that many such acts have simply been 'overlooked', resolved informally, or left unpunished.

What can be done?

Context: uniqueness

If the problem is seen to be uniquely associated with Johnson, in that there is 'no doubt whatsoever that [he] is in a league of his own', then the answer to the question 'what can be done' is simple: get the PM to stop lying.³⁵ However, as his friends and foes alike attest, his personal and professional history provides little hope or expectation that he is willing or capable of resetting his indifference to truth. An alternative simple solution, therefore, is to recognise that Johnson is indeed a liar—whether intentional or casual—and that his indifference to truthfulness should be allowed to be 'called out' by MPs in the House. This would require a fundamental reset of the conventions and courtesies of the Commons in relation to the use of unparliamentary language. These conventions are based upon the presumptions that 'every member of the public has the right to expect that his or her Member of Parliament will behave with civility [and] with the highest level of probity and with integrity'; and that 'Members should be mindful of the impact of what they say'.³⁶ In their combination, probity, integrity and mindfulness of impact underpin the assumption that MPs are 'honourable' and hence would not utter deliberate falsehoods in the House. Accusations to the contrary, therefore, should not be made by MPs and, if made, should be withdrawn immediately.³⁷ Of course, the withdrawal of an accusation of intentional lying makes sense in the context of a House populated by steadfastly righteous members; but the issue raised by Johnson's exceptional deployment of casual lying is whether the context has changed.

Context matters: Erskine May leaves no doubt that what constitutes unparliamentary language 'is subject to the context in which a word or phrase is used'. The significance of context is similarly reinforced in *The Rules of Behaviour and Courtesies* issued by Speaker Hoyle in September 2021. The changed

³⁵Butler and Bercow, 'Order!'.

³⁶Speaker Bercow, HC Deb., 8 May 2013, vol. 563, col 2; Speaker Hoyle, HC Deb., 19 December 2019, vol. 669, col 28.

³⁷House of Commons, *Rules of Behaviour and Courtesies in the House of Commons*, issued by the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, September 2021.

³¹HC Deb., 11 March 2021, vol. 690, col 1001.

³²HC 835, Oral Evidence from the Prime Minister, Liaison Committee, 17 November 2021, Q. 6.

³³HC Deb., 11 June 2020, vol. 677, col 406.

³⁴Erskine May, *Treatise on the Law*, para. 15.27.

circumstances of a government led by a PM with a general indifference to truthfulness might be propitious, therefore, for recognition of the term ‘casual lying’ as defined above. Yet, this remains unlikely given the Speaker’s rigid adherence to the procedural fiction that no MP, and certainly no PM, would deliberately speak an ‘untruth’ or a ‘mistruth’.³⁸ While Speaker Hoyle has countenanced the possibility that the ‘right information’ might not have been provided by the PM on occasion, nonetheless, he has refused to be ‘dragged into arguments about whether a statement is inaccurate or not’.³⁹

Factual (in)accuracy: fact checking and correction

If procedural convention and political sensitivity prevent the Speaker from questioning intentionality, or adjudicating upon veracity, then the onus falls upon others to challenge the ‘rightness’ of the information provided by the PM to MPs. Within Westminster, the Commons’ Procedure Committee was disinclined in 2021 to review the rules governing the accuracy of MPs’ statements and direct dishonesty in Parliament. The chair of the committee, Karen Bradley (Conservative, Staffordshire Moorlands), while willing to countenance that improvements might be made to ‘the visibility and transparency of corrections’, and that evidence on this matter could be taken as part of the committee’s ongoing work, maintained, nonetheless, that the way to uphold the principle that ministers are responsible for the accuracy of the information they provide was through the use of existing procedures and the ‘persistence and initiative’ of MPs themselves.⁴⁰ Similarly, both the independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and the Committee on Standards expressed the view that it would be ‘impracticable’ to devise an internal system for investigating ‘accusations of direct, deliberate dishonesty’ or of

adjudicating on matters of ‘truth and accuracy’.⁴¹ In their opinion, such matters are best left to external fact checking or to internal determination within the rules of Parliament.

Externally, Johnson’s inaccuracies and untruths have been subject to frequent outside ‘fact checking’, and forensic correction, for example by the BBC’s *Reality Check*, Channel 4’s *FactCheck*, by campaigning organisations such as Full Fact and the Good Law Project, as well as by official agencies including the Office for Statistics Regulation and the Children’s Commissioner. Internally, the rules of Parliament already determine that ministers are under an obligation to ‘correct any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity’.⁴² Ministerial corrections are recorded, and cross-referenced with the original wording, in a distinct section of the daily *Hansard* and published online at the earliest opportunity. The online search function for the contributions of each minister also lists the total number of corrections made by that individual. In the case of Boris Johnson, five corrections were made when he was Foreign Secretary, but no corrections were made by him in the first thirty months of his premiership. As PM, therefore, Johnson appeared to be indifferent to the obligations and imperatives of the *Ministerial Code* and the House’s resolution for immediate correction of inaccurate information.

This seeming insouciance might be challenged, however, if the process for recording prime-ministerial, and ministerial, corrections was to be amended to enable non-ministerial MPs to request correction, with the request and the ministerial response then recorded in a distinct correction section of *Hansard*. The incentive for the PM both to make meaningful responses to such requests and to reduce the need for correction, might well be maximised if a cumulative list of corrections was published to enable comparison of the frequency of ministerial corrections across government.⁴³

⁴¹HC 270, *Review of the Code of Conduct: Proposals for Consultation*, House of Commons Committee on Standards, 29 November 2021, paras. 46, 49.

⁴²HC Deb., 19 March 1997, vol. 292, col 1047.

⁴³The Scottish Parliament has a dedicated webpage, ‘Corrections and changes to the *Official Report*’, which provides a cumulative list of corrections. Notably, corrections can only be made by the MSP who provided the inaccurate information recorded in the *Official Report*.

In the absence of such a simple change to the correction process, which would undoubtedly be procedurally problematic as well as politically contentious to effect, other established procedures will continue to be used to highlight the indifference of the PM to factual accuracy. Indeed, the Speaker (and Deputies), along with the House authorities have not been averse to providing advice—both publicly and privately to MPs—as to the appropriate procedures through which ministerial acknowledgement and correction of inaccuracies in the provision of information to the House might be sought. These include points of order, Early Day Motions (EDMs) and debates on urgent questions, adjournment, or a substantive motion.

Points of order have been used to ask the Speaker to use his ‘good offices to get the Prime Minister to return to the House to correct the record’. While there is little expectation that the PM can be compelled to take such action, there is hope that a point of order will draw attention to the charge of inaccuracy and the need for prime ministerial correction. Similarly, EDMs, such as the one sponsored by Dawn Butler on the conduct of the PM in September 2021, may draw attention to the issue. Moreover, MPs may apply for a debate on an urgent question, or on adjournment, to pursue specific instances where the PM has misled the House. Former Speaker Bercow was firmly of the opinion that: ‘if every time the prime minister fibs, he is required to answer urgent question after urgent question or to stay to deal with a torrent of points of order about that dishonesty, it might start to concentrate his mind’.⁴⁴ Yet, Johnson’s past record reveals a consistent unwillingness to answer urgent questions in person or respond to requests raised in points of order. The PM’s obduracy was graphically illustrated by Dame Diana Johnson (Labour, Kingston Upon Hull) in an adjournment debate on funding for Transport for the North (TfN). In querying the factual accuracy of the PM’s answer on cuts to TfN she noted:

Since my exchange with the Prime Minister [at PMQs], I have written to him twice ... to request that he corrects his statement. He has yet to do so, and I have received no substantive

reply to my letters. I have also tabled written parliamentary questions asking when he will reply to my letters and have been told that it will be ‘in due course’. I tabled other written parliamentary questions just today, asking again when I will get the courtesy of a response. I also raised a point of order [and] informed the Prime Minister that I was doing so. With the matter still unresolved, I was advised to apply for this Adjournment debate, which was kindly granted by Mr Speaker. This is the very first time in 16 years as a Member of Parliament—having been in the House with five different Prime Ministers—that I have needed to take such a prolonged course of action to try to correct the record.⁴⁵

Debates on a substantive motion, ending in a vote, enable matters relating to the conduct of MPs, including that of the PM, to be raised in the House, and allow for ‘critical language of a kind which would not [normally] be allowed in speeches’. This provision enabled the SNP to use one of its Opposition Day debates on 30 November 2021 to censure Johnson for lack of probity generally and for untruthfulness specifically. In this context, the Deputy Speaker acknowledged that ‘the specific and particular motion’ tabled by the SNP meant that it was within the rules for the PM to be called ‘a liar’ and a ‘peddler of untruths’, even if it remained ‘preferable that such words should not be used in this place’.⁴⁶ Opposition MPs took full advantage of the provisions of this motion to spotlight the untruths and lies of the Prime Minister; while 321 Conservative MPs took full advantage of the motion to record their support for the PM through their votes at the end of the debate.

Political will

For all the ‘persistence and initiative’ of MPs in deploying existing procedures to try to hold the PM to account for his casual lying, it remained the case in the first thirty months of his premiership that Johnson continued to lie and continued to refuse to correct his untruths. Calls for Parliament to react because it had ‘the power to do so’, or for ‘MPs of all parties who care for the truth ... to get off their bums and

⁴⁴Butler and Bercow, ‘Order!’.

⁴⁵HC Deb., 17 March 2021, vol. 691, col 443.

⁴⁶HC Deb., 30 November 2021, vol. 704, col 840.

demand change', miss the point.⁴⁷ The basic, but elemental, point of UK parliamentary life is that Parliament, as an institution, has little collective identity or few collective preferences other than as the sum of disparate other institutional identities and priorities—constellated primarily around roles and representative practices associated with party and government.⁴⁸ Notions of a unified, cohesive 'political will' in Westminster thus tend to splinter when confronted by parliamentary parties, differentiated by their own allegiances and preferences, and by the overriding fealty of majority party MPs to their Prime Minister. In these circumstances, as the leaders of six parties made clear in correspondence with the chair of the Procedure Committee, 'when the government of the day has a substantial majority ... the influence of the Whips ... renders [existing parliamentary] mechanisms unlikely to either result in objective consideration of the facts or to stand any significant chance of delivering genuine accountability'.⁴⁹

If the adversarial context of Westminster serves to dissipate collective 'political will' to hold the PM accountable for his untruths, then a more expedient unilateral 'political will' needs to be identified. At first glance the Conservative parliamentary party would appear to hold most potential for the embodiment of just such a will. Yet, since 2019, Conservative MPs have either felt beholden, cowed, or seduced by Johnson's manifest popular and electoral appeal. In these circumstances, they have largely been complicit in Johnson's casual untruthfulness, and acquiescent to his drive-by style of lying, in the belief that any particular lie would rapidly fade from public view as he veered towards the next misleading statement. But such acceptance was contingent both upon Johnson's continuing electoral allure, and upon

his capacity to speed away from any single untruth without becoming grid-locked in unrelenting scrutiny and challenge to that untruth. The unrelenting criticism of Johnson's handling of allegations of 'Tory sleaze' and 'partygate' in the closing months of 2021 tested both contingent factors: first, by a precipitous drop in the Conservative Party's polling figures; and second, by Conservative MPs acknowledging that the PM had become 'traffic-jammed', in a congestion of his own making, by persistently making misleading and untruthful responses to these allegations. As one former minister observed, these responses were 'lies. No one believed him. Ministers didn't believe him ... we were constantly misled'.⁵⁰ Significantly, prominent Conservative members also began to place political markers to remind the PM that deliberately misleading the Commons 'would be a resignation matter'.⁵¹

In the grand scheme of things

Boris Johnson's propensity to mislead, to misinform, to tell untruths and to lie openly has been a characteristic of his premiership; whether in relation to mishandling the UK's 'world leading' response to Covid; misleading the Queen over the reasons for proroguing Parliament; dealing with 'Tory sleaze' (in various guises of 'cronyism' and 'wallpapergate') or, more spectacularly in early 2022, responding to 'partygate'. Indeed, the political maelstrom of 'partygate' revealed just how gridlocked Johnson had become by his own 'obfuscation, prevarication, and evasion'—with serial investigations by the Cabinet Office (headed by civil servant Sue Gray) and the Metropolitan Police into the discovery, chronicling and prosecution of wrongdoing related to breaches of Covid restrictions in Downing Street and Whitehall; with seemingly mercenary and transactional calculation by Conservative MPs of the contingency of their continued support for their party leader when set against the electoral fallout

⁴⁷Former PM, J. Major, Interview, *Today*, BBC Radio 4, 6 November 2021; Butler and Bercow, 'Order!'.

⁴⁸See D. Judge and C. Leston-Bandeira, 'The institutional representation of Parliament', *Political Studies*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2018, pp. 154–172.

⁴⁹C. Lucas, I. Blackford, E. Davey, L. Saville-Roberts, C. Eastwood, and S. Farry, 'Further correspondence from Caroline Lucas MPs and other MPs relating to ministerial accountability', Procedure Committee, 3 June 2021; <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6303/documents/69419/default/> (accessed 2 February 2022).

⁵⁰Quoted in J. Elgot, "'No one believed him': Tory MPs mutinous over Johnson's actions', *The Guardian*, 8 December 2021.

⁵¹R. Gale MP, quoted in R. Mason and A. Allegretti, 'No. 10 faces Tory and public backlash over Christmas party video', *The Guardian*, 8 December 2021; D. Ross MP, *BBC News Scotland*, 8 December 2021.

attendant upon his actions; and with a hardening of public opinion in favour of the resignation of the PM over this issue.⁵²

Allegations of wrongdoing and lying had shadowed Johnson throughout his premiership. Yet, what distinguished ‘partygate’ in late 2021 and early 2022 was the intense ‘publicness’ in which these allegations were pursued: in terms of sheer weight of publicity, the scale of public investigation, and the extent of public recoil at events. When set alongside ‘partygate’, therefore, findings that the PM was directly accused of lying in the House of Commons on eighteen occasions across the preceding thirty months and of failing to correct manifest untruths in the House might not be regarded as a big deal. Yet, if ‘informatory accountability’—the simple provision of accurate information to Parliament—is a prerequisite of ministerial, and especially prime

ministerial, responsibility, then not lying to Parliament is a foundational principle of parliamentary government in the UK. This basic principle is not to be dismissed as some peripheral matter: in itself, it is integral to ‘the grand scheme of things’. It matters. It mattered twenty-five years ago when Tomkins concluded: ‘This is a live issue at the moment ... the misleading of Parliament is a pressing concern which requires not only recognition, but appropriate regulation as well’.⁵³ It matters still: it remains a live issue, its malignancy has been increasingly recognised during Johnson’s premiership, and, correspondingly, the need for ‘appropriate regulation’ is ever more pressing.

David Judge is Emeritus Professor of Politics, School of Government and Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

⁵²T. Loughton, Conservative MP for East Worthing and Shoreham, *Facebook*, 15 January 2022; <https://www.facebook.com/TimLoughtonEWAS/posts/3172178959731855>; 63 per cent of respondents to a YouGov/Times survey, conducted on 12/13 January 2022, thought that Johnson should resign; https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/sdo586qdkp/TheTimes_No10Party_220113.pdf (both accessed 2 February 2022).

⁵³Tomkins, ‘A right to mislead Parliament’, p. 83.