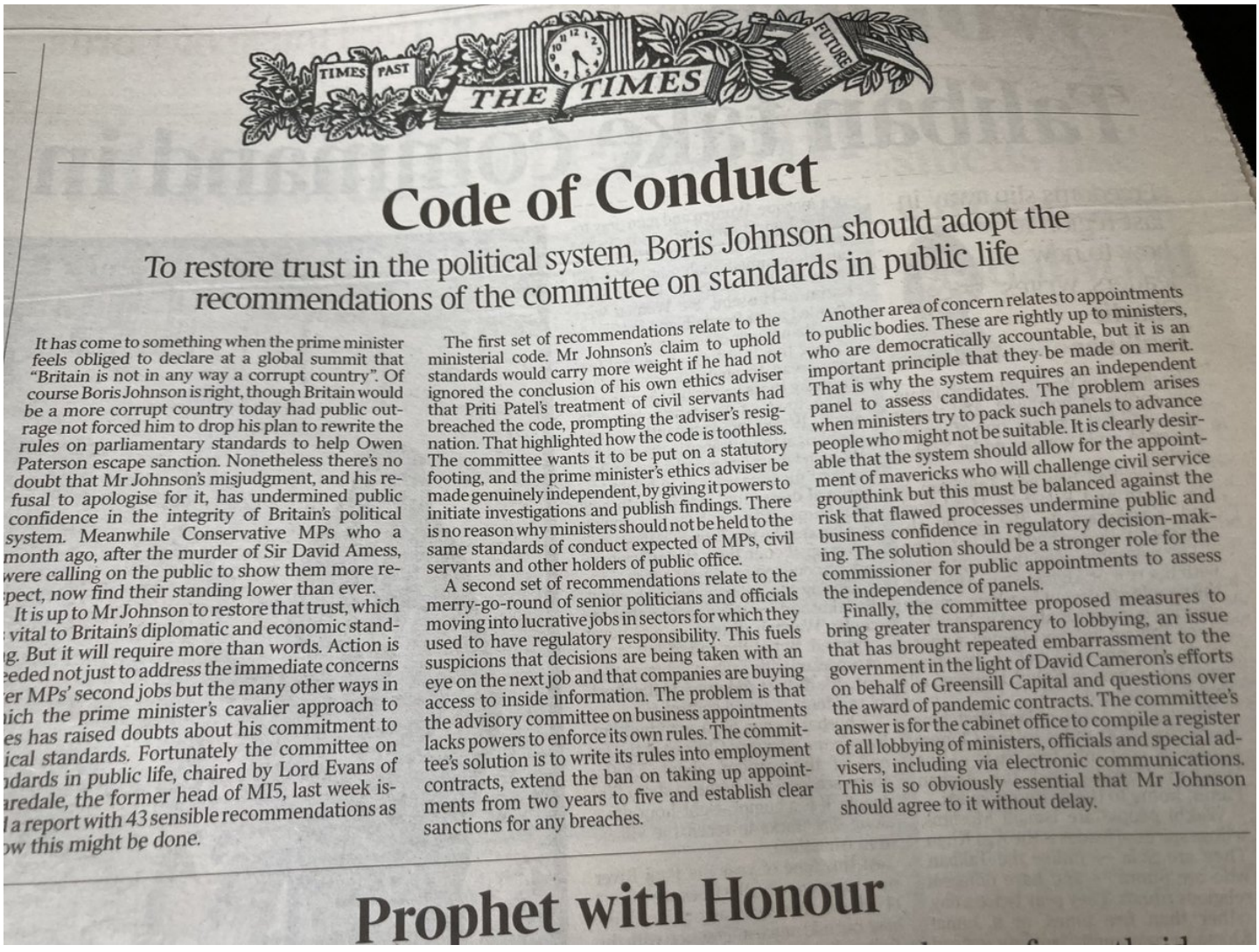
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Every word worth reading



TIMES PAST THE TIMES FUTURE

Code of Conduct

To restore trust in the political system, Boris Johnson should adopt the recommendations of the committee on standards in public life

It has come to something when the prime minister feels obliged to declare at a global summit that "Britain is not in any way a corrupt country". Of course Boris Johnson is right, though Britain would be a more corrupt country today had public outrage not forced him to drop his plan to rewrite the rules on parliamentary standards to help Owen Paterson escape sanction. Nonetheless there's no doubt that Mr Johnson's misjudgment, and his refusal to apologise for it, has undermined public confidence in the integrity of Britain's political system. Meanwhile Conservative MPs who a month ago, after the murder of Sir David Amess, were calling on the public to show them more respect, now find their standing lower than ever.

It is up to Mr Johnson to restore that trust, which is vital to Britain's diplomatic and economic standing. But it will require more than words. Action is needed not just to address the immediate concerns over MPs' second jobs but the many other ways in which the prime minister's cavalier approach to rules has raised doubts about his commitment to ethical standards. Fortunately the committee on standards in public life, chaired by Lord Evans of Weardale, the former head of MI5, last week issued a report with 43 sensible recommendations as to how this might be done.

The first set of recommendations relate to the ministerial code. Mr Johnson's claim to uphold standards would carry more weight if he had not ignored the conclusion of his own ethics adviser that Priti Patel's treatment of civil servants had breached the code, prompting the adviser's resignation. That highlighted how the code is toothless. The committee wants it to be put on a statutory footing, and the prime minister's ethics adviser be made genuinely independent, by giving it powers to initiate investigations and publish findings. There is no reason why ministers should not be held to the same standards of conduct expected of MPs, civil servants and other holders of public office.

A second set of recommendations relate to the merry-go-round of senior politicians and officials moving into lucrative jobs in sectors for which they used to have regulatory responsibility. This fuels suspicions that decisions are being taken with an eye on the next job and that companies are buying access to inside information. The problem is that the advisory committee on business appointments lacks powers to enforce its own rules. The committee's solution is to write its rules into employment contracts, extend the ban on taking up appointments from two years to five and establish clear sanctions for any breaches.

Another area of concern relates to appointments to public bodies. These are rightly up to ministers, who are democratically accountable, but it is an important principle that they be made on merit. That is why the system requires an independent panel to assess candidates. The problem arises when ministers try to pack such panels to advance people who might not be suitable. It is clearly desirable that the system should allow for the appointment of mavericks who will challenge civil service groupthink but this must be balanced against the risk that flawed processes undermine public and business confidence in regulatory decision-making. The solution should be a stronger role for the commissioner for public appointments to assess the independence of panels.

Finally, the committee proposed measures to bring greater transparency to lobbying, an issue that has brought repeated embarrassment to the government in the light of David Cameron's efforts on behalf of Greensill Capital and questions over the award of pandemic contracts. The committee's answer is for the cabinet office to compile a register of all lobbying of ministers, officials and special advisers, including via electronic communications. This is so obviously essential that Mr Johnson should agree to it without delay.

Prophet with Honour