

**The James Brokenshire Memorial Lecture**  
**Restoring Faith in Politics**  
**7 July 2022**

**WELCOME**

Thank you Bronwen for that introduction.

I'm delighted to join you all today to give the inaugural James Brokenshire memorial lecture - and I'm delighted that Sophie and Gemma have been able to join us too.

I congratulate you on your timing – what a week in which to hold this lecture but for the avoidance of doubt, this is the speech I would have given regardless of circumstances.

This is a speech in memory of James Brokenshire and I'd like to thank Cathy Brokenshire, Jeremy Wright, Chloe Smith, and the Institute for Government for their work in establishing the lecture.

It is a fitting and lasting memorial to James, who was not just a valued and trusted colleague, but also a wonderful friend.

I can think of no better place to initiate this lecture series than here at the Institute for Government.

This is an organisation dedicated to making government more effective.

Dare I say it effective government needs effective Ministers - and I can think of no more effective Minister than the late James Brokenshire.

James joined the Home Office as one of my junior ministers, already highly knowledgeable on home affairs having shadowed the brief for four years.

He served first as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Crime Reduction, then for Crime and Security, then as Minister of State for both Security and Immigration - grappling at once with two of the most important and complex areas of policy.

In fact, I recall the then Permanent Secretary remarking that as James was responsible for two-thirds of Home Office business what on earth were the other ministers going to do?

On becoming Prime Minister, I appointed James to the Cabinet as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and subsequently as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

He was later reappointed to the Home Office as Minister of State for Security under the new government.

James was respected by all those he worked with and civil servants liked working with him.

He took the time to understand the issues, thought carefully about them, and would challenge officials when necessary.

But they always knew that the challenge came because he wanted the policy to work.

He wanted government to be effective.

He was always respectful of officials, understanding that good government requires politicians and civil servants to work together as a

team - everyone determined to provide the best practical solution for the public we all serve.

When thinking about James and why he was so effective, three elements come to mind, and it's these three that I want to develop in this lecture, as I address the issue of restoring faith in politics.

Those three elements are, firstly, that he was a good constituency MP, recognising that it is in the constituency that we can see the impact of policy.

Secondly, James respected Parliament - understanding the importance of the scrutiny that Parliament provides.

He accepted both that Parliament can improve legislation and that sometimes there has to be compromise in order to get legislation through.

Another element of this was his willingness to work across the House to find solutions.

This came most naturally in relation to his work as Security Minister - but in other areas too, he would take the time and trouble to speak to his opposite numbers.

And thirdly, he knew that Ministers have to get to grips with the issues.

It isn't good enough to just 'wing it' or prioritise getting the headlines.

An effective Minister takes the time and trouble to really get into the detail of the issue.

## **CONSTITUENCY FIRST**

James was a dependable, safe pair of hands, and I always had confidence in him.

But when I look back at the sort of man he was, James wasn't merely competent.

He was unmistakably somebody with deep-rooted values.

He exemplified decency, honesty and integrity - values that I believe are essential in public life if we are to have faith in our politics.

As was remarked at his memorial service, James came into politics to serve, not to be served.

I have said before that parliament is the worse off without James.

I would also say that our politics and parliament would be more likely to be trusted by the public if there were more politicians who clearly showed they shared James's values.

Public service was perhaps James's strongest motivation.

He was a consummate Member of Parliament - and he knew that his increasingly successful Ministerial career was only possible because his constituents had sent him to Parliament on their behalf.

And he didn't just represent their views - he was deeply embedded within the local community.

He brought people together and, through service to his constituents, earned their respect.

In our modern representative democracy, it's no longer enough simply to turn up at Parliament and shuffle through the voting lobbies.

The public rightly expect us to be fighting their corner, taking up their concerns, visible in the community and working for them on local issues and interests.

They expect us to be making a tangible difference to their everyday lives.

This was a concept often misunderstood by fellow ministers internationally.

I particularly remember one of my opposite numbers when I was Home Secretary remarking on the peculiar arrangement in the UK of being both a Minister and an MP, asking what it was like.

I replied: "put it this way - today I am at this international summit discussing international counter-terrorism. Tomorrow I will open a community vegetable garden."

While these seemingly frivolous constituency engagements might not have the glamour of international summits, they have always been just as important to me and I know that was a view shared by James Brokenshire too.

I spoke on my last appearance at the despatch box as Prime Minister about the vital link between every single member of the House and the constituencies we represent.

I called it the bedrock of our parliamentary democracy and our liberty.

Because without strong relationships with the communities we serve, how can we expect to build faith in our politics as a whole?

## EROISION OF TRUST

The strong relationship James had with his local community is particularly inspiring at a time when trust in politicians has been eroded.

A recent YouGov [poll](#) for the IPPR found that 63 percent of people believe their politicians are ‘merely out for themselves’.

More shockingly, 5 percent - just one in twenty people - believe that MPs are ‘in it for the interests of their country’.

A recent [poll](#) for Carnegie UK found that over three quarters of the population ‘don’t trust MPs very much, or at all’.

Now distrust in politics is not a new issue.

We were asking the same questions of the public 80 years ago.

The difference is - when asked in 1944, just 35 percent of the population agreed that politicians were ‘out for themselves’ compared to two thirds of people today.

The Carnegie survey also identified nine values often thought of as being desirable in public life and asked people which they felt was most important.

Almost half of the representative sample chose “honesty and integrity”.

By contrast, fewer than 5 percent of people prioritised other values, including “individual liberty” and “strength and security”.

Of those who most valued “honesty and integrity”, only 8 percent agreed the government has this value.

The figures make for sobering reading.

But they demonstrate that if we are to accommodate voters' priorities, we ought to be placing at least as much - if not more - emphasis on improving honesty and integrity in public life as we do in other areas of public policy.

Those of us engaged in politics must grasp just how significantly the electorate feel their expectations are not being met.

## **PLAYING BY THE RULES**

One of the fundamental expectations of the people we represent is that we play by the rules.

No double standards.

No taking advantage of the position one holds.

It's that inherently British sense of fair play - originally popularised of course through our nation's greatest sport. Cricket. A game that - in a time of Empire, inequality and class divide - brought together aristocrats and labourers on an equal footing under one set of rules.

In cricket it's not enough to avoid breaking the rules.

In fact, the game requires adherence to its traditions as much as its laws.

Law 41 - "the captains are responsible for ensuring that play is conducted within 'the Spirit of Cricket'... as well as within the laws".

Respect is essential - respect of one's teammates, the opposition and the authority of the umpire.

Players must “create a positive atmosphere by their own conduct and encourage others to do likewise”.

For any action which is seen to abuse this Spirit “causes injury to the game itself”.

I take the same view of politics.

Breaking the rules - and breaking the spirit of the rules - causes injury to the standing of our democracy.

In politics of course, playing by the rules means following the law.

It's not unreasonable to expect those of us who write the law of the land to follow its letter and spirit.

It also means adhering to the *rule* of law.

The doctrine that all people and institutions - including the state itself - are accountable under the law as it stands.

It protects the liberty of the individual against the arbitrary use of power.

It underpins political and economic stability - and our standing in the wider world.

And as I have said before, we cannot claim as a country to operate in line with the rule of law if we flagrantly abuse our own obligations under treaties we have signed.

Playing by the rules also means not changing them on a whim to suit short term or personal interests.

The government's decision back in November to attempt to change the rules on parliamentary standards was ill-judged and wrong.

It's right that Ministers have since apologised, but the episode did little to improve faith in our politics and spelled the beginning of an unhappy period for the government and for our public life.

Playing by the rules means following them not because you have to, but because you do so willingly, recognising that the damage from breaking them may not be direct or immediate, but can be severe and lasting.

It's the Spirit of Cricket again.

It's especially pertinent in our constitutional system, where adherence to convention is an important element of our democracy.

The flexibility afforded by our un-codified constitution has served us well over centuries.

By and large, its slow evolution has enabled it to meet the requirements of the day, where other countries have found themselves caught in a legal strait-jacket.

But our system only works if conventions are not cast aside wholesale or at least not wilfully misinterpreted.

It rests on those in positions of authority being trusted to uphold the values and traditions of our public life.

Now, of course, in our parliamentary system the role that exemplifies that the most is the Speaker of the House of Commons.

The one person above all others who is expected to be neutral in their work.

The practical exercisable power held by the Speaker to shape public debate and the work of our legislature is often underreported.

The workings of the House are determined officially by the standing orders.

But the interpretation and application of those orders is entirely within the hands of the Speaker.

In areas where the standing orders are not clear, we consult works of authority - such as Erskine May - and adhere to proven historical conventions.

Longstanding practices, like the government of the day determines the business of the House.

Or the proper use of a 'humble address', which until 2017 had not been used substantively since 1866.

On that occasion, 2017, the Labour Party leadership sought to disregard the longstanding conventions of our legislature for short-term political gain.

In so doing, breaking another of our most fundamental practices - in not seeking to involve the Monarch in our political debate.

If we depart from the spirit of our established constitutional rules to suit short-term interests, we undermine faith in our system.

Another well-known convention of the House of Commons of course is the way we refer to fellow Parliamentarians.

We are all - in the House at least - *honourable* members.

Convention dictates that we don't address one another - instead pose our questions and responses to the Chair.

Convention prevents us from calling one another liars and traitors.

For over 150 years these practices – admittedly perhaps odd-sounding to the outside world - have helped to make the cut and thrust of debate less personal and direct - and have helped in a small way to maintain the dignity of the House and the honour of its members.

Because politics *is* an honourable pursuit.

And in my experience - of over 30 years in public life - the vast majority of those who seek political office are motivated to improve the lives of others and fight for what they believe to be in the best interests of the country.

That was certainly true of James Brokenshire.

## **CONDUCT**

There have been some notable exceptions.

And, sadly, it takes only a few isolated instances of poor conduct to rubbish the reputation of us all.

That's why the accepted standards of conduct in public life must be a high bar.

This is to engender a *culture* of high standards, and avoid a situation where the increasing number of isolated incidents begin to resemble a general trend.

I am not suggesting that public servants should live faultlessly.

None of us are infallible.

Nor am I naive enough to suggest there was once a time when British public life was free from scandal of one sort or another – as anyone who has read Matthew Parris' book, *Great Parliamentary Scandals*, will know.

But we should all be mindful of perceptions - often amplified by the media - of MPs serving themselves rather than the common good.

Of our public life being satirised as little more than a culture of excess.

I have always held the view that Parliament is a place of work.

Yes, we are elected, but that does not make us a breed apart.

We must reject the culture of exceptionalism - that because Parliament - and Government - might be unlike other workplaces, the usual rules somehow don't apply.

To the contrary, having a role in public life requires us to think more carefully than others about our actions.

Culture can shape behaviour just as much as any rule, or process, or threat of enforcement.

It pervades our institutions and once established can be hard to change.

The incidents shown to have taken place during the pandemic in Downing Street and Whitehall over the last two years have done little to dispel these perceptions of excess and exceptionalism, at a time when the rest of the country was making sacrifices.

Breaking the rules - and the perception of breaking the rules - damages faith.

In response we should be focusing our collective efforts on driving up standards and establishing a better culture - in which those in public life can be trusted to act responsibly.

But as we have seen as recently as this week, the excessive consumption of alcohol continues to be responsible for frontpage news.

Over recent years we have seen an alarming number of accusations and instances of abuse.

Sadly, in my own time as Prime Minister, I had to deal with several incidents concerning the conduct of other politicians.

My time in office aligned with the 'MeToo' movement which rightly gave victims the confidence to come forward.

And I remember sitting down with the MPs and Peers Staff Association to hear their experiences of Parliament as a workplace.

I was truly shocked by the extent of the bullying and harassment that was taking place.

In the wake of these events, I felt it was important to make changes, both in Parliament and in the Conservative Party, so that victims voices could be heard.

In Parliament I sought cross-party support - and thanks to the work of the then Leader of the House, Andrea Leadsom, and the review by Dame Laura Cox - Parliament established the Independent Complaints and Grievances Procedure.

And the Procedure has been updated further thanks to the work of Gemma White and Alison Stanley.

I also introduced several measures within the Conservative Party, including a new Code of Conduct and a hotline for reporting potential breaches, to ensure victims of mistreatment could come forward and receive a fair hearing, and to make explicit the standards expected of those who represent the party.

Although these changes are not the solution to stamping out this harmful culture, they have given confidence for victims to come forward and investigations to take place.

It isn't just recent incidents that have shaped the public's perception of politicians.

The expenses scandal - over 13 years ago - has left a deep scar on voters' consciousness. The sense of systemic wrongdoing has not been forgotten.

Unsurprisingly these portrayals only breed apathy and weaken our democracy.

Because faith in our politicians is the cornerstone of faith in our politics.

## **STRENGTHENING OUR DEMOCRACY**

Strengthening our democracy is about demonstrating the highest standards of conduct in public life.

The Nolan principles have now underpinned the ideals of public service in this country since they were first established in 1995.

Selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

While that report was authored over two decades ago, these principles are still fundamental to our public life.

I have touched on some of them already.

But perhaps the most important is leadership.

For without responsible leadership, the other principles wither.

I say *responsible* leadership because faith in politics is underscored by the taking of responsibility.

Taking responsibility for one's own actions rather than blaming others.

And for those in positions of leadership, taking responsibility for the actions of those we lead.

It is particularly inexcusable to see the civil service repeatedly and publicly vilified and blamed when policy isn't working in the way politicians' intended.

Over the years, I have had the privilege to work alongside thousands of dedicated officials and have seen at first hand the professionalism and commitment they bring to their roles.

I'm afraid in our system the buck stops with Ministers.

The seals of office do not confer power without responsibility.

The Nolan principles should guide the use of political power at all levels - whether that might be spending taxpayer's money on local amenities, making public appointments, passing laws which impact how people can live their lives or even decisions of war and peace.

They apply at *all* times - because scrutiny doesn't just take place every five years.

The ballot box alone is not a sufficient check and balance against conduct in public office.

We don't vote in elections to give those we elect carte blanche to behave as they wish from one election to the next.

## **SCRUTINY: THE EXECUTIVE**

We do of course have a long tradition of scrutiny in this country.

Yes there are elections.

But we also have a free press, which scrutinises all of us in public life.

Parliament has its own checks and balances - some more effective than others.

And there are rightly rules in place to regulate the conduct of the executive.

Because faith in our politics depends on a belief that our system of checks and balances is fit for purpose.

Many of these rules have evolved over time and sadly they can sometimes be confusing to the public.

The Ministerial Code is a case in point.

I offer no view of the rights and wrongs of individual ministers' conduct over recent months.

Allow me instead to make some observations on the structures themselves.

All ministers have a duty to abide by the Ministerial Code.

But enforcement of the code is expressly a matter for the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister is supported in his or her role as arbiter of the code by the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests.

And I hope someone will be appointed to that role soon.

But the adviser has had no power to initiate investigations, or publish the outcome of investigations, except on the instruction of the Prime Minister.

These and other issues were examined by the Committee on Standards in Public Life last year.

In its report, the committee identified "lack of independence in the ministerial code" as being in "urgent need of reform".

Sadly a full response from the government has not yet been forthcoming, but should be taken up as a priority.

There have been some changes such as the ability for the Independent Adviser to initiate investigations albeit that should be discussed with the Prime Minister.

I can understand why some may question if the Independent Adviser actually has the independence the title suggests.

We should think very carefully, however, about what reform of this system looks like.

Certainly I believe it would be a mistake to establish new regulatory bodies with greater powers, which could risk undermining democratic accountability.

And nor do I believe the Ministerial Code should be placed on a statutory footing.

The Prime Minister must be unconstrained in his or her ability to hire and fire Ministers.

Because, as guardian of the ministerial code, he or she is uniquely and rightly accountable for the conduct of the government.

It's the responsibility of being first among equals.

A status sustained not by right, or by law – but by convention.

By confidence.

By trust.

And there comes a time, as a leader, when you have to recognise that trust no longer exists.

Because faith in our politics goes to the very top.

## **SCRUTINY: PARLIAMENT**

Nowhere is effective scrutiny more important than in Parliament, where our *fusion* of powers allows governments to dominate - particularly those with large majorities.

Questions, debates and the committee system all help to hold the executive to account - although they depend to an extent on government's willingness to engage.

I can say, as somebody who has spent literally hundreds of hours at the despatch box and at committee - the experience can be demanding.

Nevertheless, I believe that over recent decades the balance of power has shifted incrementally from the legislature to the executive.

You might think it's convenient I'm saying this now.

But these have been longstanding views.

I recall looking at this very matter, as a member of the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons back in 2006 - and working on the issue as Shadow Leader of the House.

Of course during the Brexit debates we saw efforts by Parliament to wrest control of the agenda from the government.

But we have over the years seen a more general change in the balance of powers between the executive and parliament.

I speak in particular of the shift in emphasis from primary to secondary legislation.

Acts of Parliament are increasingly drafted in the broadest and vaguest of terms, with much of the detail left to statutory instruments, created at the stroke of a Minister's pen.

But it's the detail that tells us how the law will actually affect the lives of the people we represent.

Secondary legislation receives substantially less scrutiny.

Particularly under the negative procedure, in which an instrument is signed by a Minister and becomes law before Parliament has had any say in the matter.

80% of all secondary legislation uses the negative procedure.

The instruments cannot be amended, and in practice they are hardly ever rejected.

The last time the House of Commons voted down a statutory instrument was in 1979.

So, if the detail is mainly left to secondary legislation it will not get the level of scrutiny that it could get if on the face of the bill itself.

The pandemic demonstrated just how much of the law is made by Ministers rather than Parliament.

At a time when there was only minimal scrutiny, over 500 statutory instruments were laid in connection with Covid alone.

In the last two calendar years, over 3000 were laid.

It is incumbent on the Government to ensure appropriate use of secondary legislation.

Secondary legislation is not a tool at the Government's disposal for an easy ride – it should not be used to avoid the scrutiny of Parliament.

But in an extraordinary move the Government has not only increasingly reduced the detail in primary legislation but in the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill has gone even further.

Of the 26 clauses in the bill, 15 – over half – confer powers on ministers to make regulations to change things.

Indeed to make “any provision the minister considers appropriate” in relation to the Protocol.

One clause provides that any of these powers can be used to amend primary legislation including the bill itself.

Most concerning of all, clause 18 provides that a minister may “engage in conduct in relation to any matter dealt with” in the Protocol if the minister “considers it appropriate to do so”.

In other words, as Sir Jonathan Jones said a ‘do whatever you like power’.

There are other areas too where Parliament should have a stronger voice.

The quality of legislation can be improved with more regular use of pre-legislative scrutiny.

I am pleased to see the draft Mental Health Bill undergoing this process currently.

Similarly, parliament lacks a systematic approach to undertaking post-legislative scrutiny, to find out if our laws are actually working as intended.

A dedicated joint committee of Parliament could undertake this task effectively, inviting input from the public.

Doesn't it make sense to spend more time asking whether the laws we passed have worked in the way they were intended?

Admittedly, returning to the backbenches after 21 years has sharpened my awareness of these issues.

As Prime Minister you simply don't have the time to think deeply about such things when there are so many other issues in front of you.

But I do believe the time has come for a rebalancing.

Ultimately the power of the House to scrutinise the government and its legislation depends on the effectiveness of the opposition and the strength of the backbenches.

Because the humble backbencher is the fundamental unit of our Parliamentary system.

Those elected to Parliament are - first and foremost - a constituency MP.

Ministerial office is a second job.

## **MINISTERIAL OFFICE**

Not everyone can be a minister of course.

There are only so many vacancies to fill.

Most MPs think they are capable of being a Minister, and many of them think they would do a better job than those currently serving.

But it's less like being a backbench MP and more closely resembles that of a senior executive of a large organisation.

And many of the skills are comparable, including overseeing a large workforce, big budgets and complex projects.

I'm not being unkind to my parliamentary colleagues to say that these are not everybody's strengths.

I have always believed that, regardless of the role you play in our public life, your ability is enhanced by outside experience.

That might be professional, vocational or voluntary experience, but where you have held substantial responsibility.

We should do more to prioritise breadth of experience in the selection of parliamentary candidates.

Because the quality of representation, the quality of decision-making and quality of scrutiny in our system is strongest when those of us in public life better reflect the population we serve.

James Brokenshire had outside experience, serving as a partner at a law firm where he advised businesses on company law, corporate finance and mergers and acquisitions.

His experience beyond Westminster made him a better Minister.

He was analytical, had an attention to detail and was commercially literate.

He always knew his brief.

He was able to truly understand the nuance of the subject matter and empathise with people's concerns.

That grasp of often complex issues engendered respect from the communities he served.

Not least, in his constituency, in Home Office cases, in the particularly delicate case of Northern Ireland and as Communities Secretary.

Because if politicians cannot demonstrate that unmistakable grip of their brief, it proves difficult to ever build genuine faith with the people we represent, or inspire faith in politics as a whole.

And the demands of office only grow throughout one's career.

When reflecting on the frontbench roles I've held, I remember the relative freedom of the shadow cabinet.

Dreaming up creative new policy ideas, identifying flaws in the government's proposals - and popping up every now and then to make helpful suggestions.

Indeed at times it feels like my career has now gone full circle.

But as Home Secretary you are charged with some of the most important issues in our country, including policing, national security and supporting victims of crime.

You see some of the worst aspects of humanity and have to deal with harrowing issues.

In my case, including serious violence and child sexual abuse.

And the responsibilities of the highest office in the land can only really be appreciated by those who have ever sat in that chair.

Because the buck stops with you.

Responsibility for international affairs & our relationships with the rest of the world.

The health of the nation's economy - not just growth - but the public finances, people's jobs and livelihoods.

Schools and hospitals.

The defence of the realm, the welfare of our forces, and much more besides.

Of course there are several briefs in government where many of the decisions you take will never become public knowledge.

James Brokenshire held some of these roles.

I won't elaborate, but I can confidently say that our country is now safer because of the work he did.

Because being an effective Minister is about more than having a technical skill set.

It's about governing for the collective.

Yes, a grip of one's brief is essential - but also genuinely immersing yourself in the issues.

Making thoughtful, considered judgements.

Taking difficult decisions that aren't always popular.

Having a long-term view of the national interest.

These values in office breed faith in politics.

### **Governing, not campaigning**

Governing as a minister of the Crown is not the same as campaigning.

Indeed, if you seek *only* to campaign, you risk neglecting the responsibilities of office.

We only have to look to Scotland - where a single issue party is fixated on campaigning for independence instead of addressing shocking rates of drug deaths or low attainment in maths and science.

Of course in a democracy, campaigning is an important element of winning power.

You might fairly accuse me of failing to win an outright majority in 2017 - though I would point out as an aside that more people voted Conservative than they had done for 25 years.

But there must be a balance between election campaigns and good government.

Only seeking to campaign ultimately drives populism and polarisation - not finding compromise and consensus.

We may have an adversarial Parliamentary system, but when the future of our country is at stake, compromise isn't a dirty word.

I make no apology for seeking to find compromise on the greatest single issue of my political life.

Because to seek compromise is to bridge the differences between us, not exploit them.

Strongly-held issues can pit us against each other.

Brexit did this.

But we see it elsewhere too.

In recent years the trend in global politics has been away from the considered and towards the absolutist.

In place of unity among countries defined by their shared values, we too often see polarisation.

A view of the world through a prism of winners and losers.

Of course, compromise isn't easy.

It's hard.

It requires each one of us to accept something we are uncomfortable with.

But that's the task of governing.

Bridging the differences between us, not driving entrenchment in our politics.

Election campaigns are one particular theatre.

But we should not be constantly searching for so-called wedge issues to divide us.

Invariably, compromise means moderation.

History has shown how moderation and electoral success don't need to be mutually exclusive.

Will a refusal to compromise really drive up electoral participation?

Or civil cohesion?

Will our voters really feel their concerns can be accommodated if there is no centre ground?

Will it really restore faith in politics? I fear not.

As democrats, we must recognise when our system of government comes under strain and seek to remedy the concerns of our electorate.

I offer no single silver bullet.

But I consider the themes I have addressed today to be fundamental if we are serious about this mission.

Constituency first.

Play by the rules & the spirit of the rules.

Reject a culture of exceptionalism.

Strengthen our democratic processes.

Build faith through competence and empathy.

Govern, don't campaign.

And seek consensus over division.

At the heart of it all is trust.

Trust of the elected by the electorate.

The government by the governed.

And it largely comes down to how we treat one another.

Learning from James Brokenshire's example.

Prioritising decency, honesty & integrity.

We can all do more to live up to those values.

**END**