The UK is certainly not alone in this. Governance quality is permanently on a downward slope, though this is by no means unique. The principles established in its wake of the expenses scandal have survived, despite striking and unremitting scrutiny from a range of parliamentary select committees. Along with the Institute for Government and the Study of Parliament Group, David Hine and Gillian Peele have been helping the Authority think through the issues of accountability, transparency and governance quality it faces as it goes about its task. From this work next year, a Study of Parliament Group volume on the experience will emerge.

What these experiences point to is the need for a systematic account of why we think certain forms of behaviour are acceptable, and others not, and of how, when we form a view of this, we implement the values which our accounts entail in ways that give them a reasonable chance of bedding down with existing British institutions. This forms the basis of various articles David Hine and Gillian Peele have written individually and together (see inter alia Conflict of Interest in Public Life, ed. Trott and Gash, CUP, 2009, and The Social Construction of Corruption in Europe, ed. Tanzler and Guennocoupolos, Ashgate, 2012, forthcoming), and a full-scale volume analysing the institutional implications for UK government of the ethics revolution of the last two decades, currently in preparation.

But rules and regulators are only as strong as the underlying values, which takes us back to the starting point. What are British values, and how do they get created and transmitted? We referred to research on the elusive values at the public. No less elusive are those of our office-holders. The next stage is to understand these values better, starting with the next generation of MPs, the 232 who entered the House of Commons in 2010 after one of its largest postwar clean-outs. A grant from the University’s John Fell OUP Research Fund has helped us make start on this question, and work continues.

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