Qualitative Research for the Committee on Standards in Public Life

The Seven Principles

The Seven Principles of Public Life

- Selflessness
- Integrity
- Objectivity
- Accountability
- Openness
- Honesty
- Leadership

These principles apply to all aspects of public life. The Committee has set them out for the benefit of all who serve the public in any way.

Nolan Committee 1995 (CSPL)

'The principles inherent in the ethic of public service need to be set out afresh…We seek to restore respect for the ethical values inherent in the idea of public service.'

First Report of the CSPL (1995)

Origin and Meaning

- Source and rationale for the original principles
- Influence of those concerns on the choice of principles and descriptors
- Scope of principles and descriptors
- Distance from ordinary understanding of the terms

Eg: Honesty

- Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest

- What's missing? Telling the truth. Linked also to candour, integrity etc.

The Rationale for Research

'To examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office, including arrangements relating to financial and commercial activities, and make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements which might be required to ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life.' Terms of Reference for the CSPL

National Centre of Social Research (Oct 2002)

- Exploratory qualitative study of public attitudes to the principles – whether they cover what the public thinks is important

- Focus groups, looking at the seven principles, with a number of scenarios to help test people's intuitions.

- General sense that the principles did track what people were concerned about
- Much less agreement on the descriptors and their adequacy – colloquial vs formal, aspects that the public feel the descriptors leave out, and principles were seen as arcane and elitist.
- Some concerns about overlap between both principles and descriptors
- Most important principle was seen as honesty
- Distinctions are drawn between elected and appointed officials, with some principles being seen as appropriate for elected officials (such as leadership)
- Rather little agreement on the acceptability of conduct depicted in the scenarios.

Further Research BMRB 2003-7

- Mapping between principles and question sets in the quantitative research, testing the prevalence of these views among the public.

- Return to question of principles and their descriptors in qualitative work undertaken by BMRB in association with the Advisory Board between 2005 and 2007

Aims

- To see if it is possible to identify a set of descriptors that more adequately represent what members of the public take the principles to mean, without losing either their applicability to all types of office holders, or their value to office holders as guides for conduct.

Four stage structure

1 Desk research on principles in UK and elsewhere

2 Initial deliberative groups with revised descriptors and scenarios in London, Belfast and Glasgow

3 Testing new descriptors in a series of London-based focus groups

4 Testing new descriptors and structure with public office holders in London

Desk Research (stage 1)

- Found widespread use of the seven principles in the public services, but also in the private sector. The principles had been mapped into a huge range of codes of conduct
- Three areas where other principles were appealed to: a duty to uphold the law; respect for others; and stewardship, or the prudent use of resources
- International comparisons – few countries try to say what the words mean, but similar words used. Many also refer to 'public trust'.

Workshops (stage 2)

- Very limited awareness of the seven principles and very high initial cynicism
- Confusion because of overlap between the principles and a lack of clarity about their meaning
- People were not happy with the style and language of the principles
- Clear ability of people to respond positively to new information and to scenarios and to revise earlier views – positive deliberative process

Stages 3 and 4

- After stage two the principles were simplified as were the descriptors.
- Again widespread initial cynicism
- Positive reaction to the revised principles and their descriptors
- Little substantive disagreement about the principles or their scope
- Remaining overlap was regarded in the main as a positive feature

Five principles

- **Preamble:**
- Honesty:
- Integrity:
- Impartiality:
- Accountability:
- Openness:
- **Scope:**

- Selflessness is deleted – but appears in integrity
- Leadership is deleted but it appears in the preamble
- The order is changed to reflect the importance attributed to honesty
- Objectivity becomes impartiality
- Still work to be done on Integrity
- There are remaining issues – such as:

    exceptional circumstances in openness (freedom of information vs data protection)

    Impartiality and political influence

    Submit to – in accountability

Issues

- Method: partly deliberative, use of scenarios, alternative descriptors, expert input, etc. Initial groups were around 24 (then split into 8s), and held over a four hour period. Requires relatively formal structure and tight topic guide.

- Question of what is being tapped – attitudes that people have, or intuitions that can be tapped; or are people's responses an artefact of the method – and is this positive – showing what people can be brought to recognise, or negative?

- Pattern of legitimation. Trust in public office must rely on parity of expectations. Principles articulate basic expectations – and are appealed to widely (eg university admissions policies); but to work they have to mean the same thing to the office holder and the public.
- Problem of initial cynicism – issue of how deep and meaningful.
- Principles as expectations or rules
- Proportionality of regulation – hence code of conduct
- Public education programme

Conclusion

- Comparison with civil service code
- Concern that there be a broad set of principles that are intelligible to and valued by both the public and those in public office
- Difficulties in identifying the structure of public attitudes with respect to conduct of those with whom they have little familiarity
- Political issues about the outcome of the research