

Full Fact – Commission on Digital Democracy: digital scrutiny

Our evidence raises four points:

- One of the biggest and most sustained concerns about Parliament is that MPs don't tell the truth. We offer practical suggestions for giving people a better alternative to blind cynicism.
- We also make three suggestions for making Parliament's scrutiny more comprehensible to outsiders:
 - There should be a standard opportunity for select committee witnesses to explain their relevance.
 - Published written evidence should link to a unique number e.g. charity or company number to track trends over time.
 - An amendment should be accompanied by plain language description of its effect.

Full Fact is an independent factchecking organisation. We provide free tools, advice and information so anyone can check the claims we hear from politicians and the media. We write about political claims with a non-specialist audience in mind, and often direct others to information that is publicly available but difficult to find.

There are lots of organisations that exist to get people re-engaged with politics or make it easier to participate in some specific way, for example emailing an MP or starting a petition. They make it clear that they're on their users' side, pointing, rather than beckoning, to Westminster. Their language is casually inclusive – they want you to be involved, not in awe.

Parliament can't and shouldn't pretend to be outside the establishment like this. But there are things it can do to stop people feeling so alienated and respond to the deep distrust that many feel for its members.

More information so people can judge for themselves

The Committee on Standards in Public Life's [Public Attitude Surveys](#) have found consistently that truthfulness and basic honesty are one of the public's main concerns:

- In 2004, “should tell the truth” was found to be respondents' **single most important attribute** for national politicians. (page 6, box 4)
- In 2006: “**Truthfulness is highly prized**. Three-quarters of the public think it's ‘extremely important’ that MPs and government ministers should tell the truth – only the requirement that they should not take bribes is rated as important by more of the public.” (page 12)
- In 2008, with a more nuanced survey, still “most respondents (76%) considered it ‘extremely important’ for government ministers to tell the truth, but only a small proportion felt that all or most government ministers did tell the truth (resulting in a net rating of -21%). It is therefore a **high priority for improvement**.” (page 35)

- In 2011, “**the public places particular emphasis on basic honesty.**” (page 9)

It’s outside the scope of Parliament to control what members say, but it can put in place measures that make it easier for people to understand and judge for themselves what they can trust. For example,

- Backbench MPs should have the chance to formally correct the record like Ministers do,
- Ministerial corrections should be reflected in online versions *where the original inaccuracy occurred*,
- The sources of Ministers’ factual statements, particularly during prepared statements and in written answers, should be linked to on Hansard.

The response to the MPs expenses scandal was to give people the information to judge for themselves: now anyone can go online and see what their MP has claimed. Constituents are no longer forced to choose between blind trust and blind cynicism.

Select committee witnesses and identifying submissions

When a select committee takes oral evidence, they usually dive straight into the evidence without many preliminaries. Witnesses identify themselves but don’t explain their credentials or background. This is alienating to an outsider who’s not familiar with the topic or the way Parliament works, and even more so to someone watching online, hundreds of miles away from the committee room corridor.

There should be a standard opportunity for every witness to explain their relevance to the hearing, even if this is limited to just a sentence or two. It could take place after they’ve identified themselves.

Details of written evidence should be linked to a unique identifying number, so that it’s easy to analyse over time: what kinds of people or organisations are giving evidence, how often, when were they first called, and so on. The number could be a registered charity or company number.

Plain language descriptions for amendments

Legislation is very reflexive and the language is stylised. Amendments are highly specific, and if you are not familiar with a bill or the legislative process more generally, they can be impenetrable. There should be a plain language description of what an amendment does. Such explanations are already generated by civil service bill teams for Ministers. They should be published.