The Ethics Eruption: Sources and Catalysts

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This essay addresses the much heightened level of concern about political ethics in many countries in recent decades. It seeks to identify the sources of this heightened concern, to specify their form and location and to suggest how and why these concerns have arisen.

The chapter is divided into two broad sections; the first will address macro or global sources of ethics discontent. This will discuss concern about political ethics in the broad context of complex processes such as globalization, development, liberalization and democratization. These are clearly huge subjects and there is not space to do justice to their complexities but the aim here is to identify some key aspects which have particularly important implications for increasing concern about political ethics.

The second section is concerned to explore the political aspects of public ethics through a consideration of political scandal because scandals are often cited as the source of unease about ethical standards in public life and as the catalysts for institutional reform.

Sources of Global Discontent About Political Ethics

It is difficult to locate the precise moment when concerns about political ethics began to increase and different countries, different institutions and different parts of the world may have different starting points (Heywood, 1997). It is also difficult to specify whether levels of concern increased steadily to their present pitch or whether concern has been subject to violent fluctuations with sudden, dramatic increases in concern followed by periods of quietude. It is equally difficult to assess how much concern is ‘home grown’ and how much is the product of spillover or diffusion from neighbouring states or distant institutions.

Marking formal political responses to concern about political ethics is a little easier because we can point to particular official reports, new laws or codes and the creation of new public bodies such as the ethics committees created in the US Congress in the 1960s. But in some political contexts there may be action on political ethics which cannot be traced to expressions of concern in a particular locality. Here the concern and the response may be exogenous to the area where the alleged ethical transgressions are occurring. This is most obviously the case where less developed countries interact with developed ones or with international financial institutions. It can also be extended to situations where medium income states are trying to join particular international ‘clubs’ such as NATO or the European Union where the ‘doorkeepers’ require certain standards from prospective new members and express concern about current ethical abuses in applicant states.

Measuring levels of discontent is also fraught with difficulty. It is sometimes as deceptively straightforward as opinion poll or focus group responses to direct questions about political ethics. It could also be expressed in terms of some more generalised disillusionment or disengagement from politics and public life. Recently there has been an upsurge of academic and wider interest in the issue of trust in institutions and in political figures or, more specifically, in the decline of trust (O’Neill, 2002). Tangible, even dramatic events, such as demonstrations, riots and other forms of protest can also be interpreted as reflecting very high levels of concern about the ethics of the political elite. In the extreme case, revolutions or coup d’ états may occur and widespread and intense discontent about the conduct of leaders or the ruling party may be offered as an explanation for political upheaval and transformation.

Thus the timing and level of rising concerns about political ethics as well as the political responses such escalating concerns elicit
need to be further explored. It is a commonplace to observe that because of globalization the world is a smaller place than it used to be. Technology transfer, the electronic movement of data, images and news, the liberalization of world trade, the economic reach of transnational companies, the mobility of people and capital, and improving educational and income levels have all played some part in ensuring that autarchy and isolation are no longer viable options. The era of closed societies and economies has almost passed and, just as island status no longer offers protection from military or economic invasion, so too ethical boundaries are permeated by exogenous influences, ideas and fears.

When the political ethics of leaders cause such intense levels of public concern that they threaten economic and political stability, the concerns of global capitalism to promote trade and protect investments helps spread the concern beyond national boundaries. The concerns of market democracies are to spread ‘good practice’, by which is normally meant current Western practice or perhaps it should be current Western theories of best practice. In this way, companies in less developed countries can aspire to the new standards of ethical business conduct and good corporate governance.

It is the declared intention of major international players such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to use their considerable leverage to ensure that their concerns about political ethics in recipient countries are not only heard but responded to by way of substantive reforms. Where the ethical standards of political elites are perceived as obstacles to growth and development, as undermining public trust and political institutions and generally impairing the ability of recipient states to repay debts to private leaders, donors and international financial institutions, something has to be done (Mauro, 1995).

The particular aspect of the aid regime employed to address public ethics is known as ‘political conditionality’ (Sorensen, 1993) which is an extension and development of the economic conditionality associated with structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s (Caufield, 1996). The international finance institutions (IFIs) were, as essentially economic institutions, slow and reluctant to learn the primacy of the political but once grasped, in 1989, this form of conditionality has been used as ‘a carrot and stick’ to attempt to ensure compliance with Western best practice in political ethics. Such pressure may also be exercised irrespective of whether or not there has been any local expression of concern about the ethical standards and practices of the indigenous political elite.

The timing of this expression of intense ethical concern on behalf of the IFIs was intimately connected to the implosion of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and the rise of unipolar global politics (Naim, 1995). Put crudely, while the Cold War was the first priority, Western concerns about political ethics in less developed countries were often subordinated to the greater cause of resisting and overwhelming ‘the evil empire’ of communism. In consequence, concerns about flagrant conflicts of interest in various African, South American, Asian, and, on occasions, European states were muted or suppressed altogether. The World Bank’s first articulation of political conditionality came in 1989 (World Bank, 1989) and, as such, raised the ethics bar not only for the less developed countries of the Third World but also, by implication, for countries like Italy where the necessity to sustain the anti-communist coalition disappeared with the consequent unravelling of the post-war political settlement and the exposure of the ‘dirty hands’ of Italian political and business life.
One of the rhetorical devices used in relations with both less developed and former communist countries was to wave the banner of transparency. What was termed ‘Glasnost’ in the last days of the Soviet Union and what has become the mantra of IFIs is openness and transparency. With transparency would come accountability and once publics were able to see, to witness and discover the ethical transgressions of their leaders, they could call them to account. What was once hidden and only rumoured and suspected could now be revealed to substantiate and inflame public concerns about political ethics.

Increased expressions of concern about unethical conduct do not necessitate any discernible or measurable increase in such conduct. Indeed, it is difficult to see how any claim of a quantitative kind in relation to unethical conduct could be demonstrated other than by reference to perception surveys similar to Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index which are open to a variety of methodological objections.

It is, of course, slightly more difficult to preach political conditionality overseas through the rhetoric of ‘Good Governance’ (World Bank, 1992) when it becomes increasingly obvious that there is trouble at home. Crudely expressed, there seems to have been a belief, in the UK at any rate, that political ethics improve over time with political and economic development. This leads to the common neo-colonial assessment that once newly independent former colonies were equipped with British ethical standards and practices then, as they ‘matured’ they would absorb the ethical traits of the British Civil Service whose ethical standards were and are beyond reproach. The intricacies and implications of political scandal are examined later but suffice to say at this point that a spate of scandals in Europe and North America from the 1970s onward indicated that ethical problems could not be located in some transitional phase of development or dismissed as a variety of ‘growing pains’ that would disappear as countries reached economic and political maturity (Williams, 1999).

IFIs and donor countries are global sources of ethical concern because they are convinced that the ethical standards of political elites in recipient countries are a major obstacle to the successful implementation of economic and political development programmes. The new concern over political ethics has encouraged IFIs to identify democracy as a cure for unethical conduct, to argue that it is a necessary condition for Good Governance and to stipulate it as a prerequisite for further financial support (Abrahamson, 2000).

How do publics around the globe learn about the state of political ethics and what information do they receive? How are ethical problems specified and how do publics learn what the likely remedies are? The answers, in one form or another, involve the media and some comments on particular aspects of media development which have contributed to escalating ethical concerns are appropriate.

Perceptions of political ethics have been influenced by technology, by the growth of media markets and media conglomerates and by comment on 24/7 news coverage. But some features in the development of journalism in recent decades merit particular attention. First, the relationship of journalists to politicians has profoundly changed and the change is of a character which encourages an escalation of ethics concerns.

A review of the development of media and politics in the United States reveals that in periods characterized by intense concerns over political ethics, journalists and editors have played prominent parts in investigating, reporting, alleging and possibly inventing claims of unethical conduct by politicians. During the Gilded Age in the nineteenth century, newspapers frequently made allegations about the propriety of leading political figures. De Tocqueville lamented the tendency of journalists to ‘assail the character of individuals, to track them into their private life and disclose all their weaknesses and vices’ (Summers, 2000)). What made this period distinctive was that newspapers were overtly partisan, so much so that one observer has claimed that ‘partisanship was a public and ubiquitous phenomenon that defined the very essence of nineteenth century American journalism’ (Kaplan, 2002:1).

But, in the transition to the twentieth century and the Progressive Era, the press refashioned its ways of shaping public discussions. In particular, partisanship declined as newspapers found commercial alternatives to party funding. Some argue that the change in newspapers and journals reflected a decline in public attachments to parties and thus, as party ties to voters declined, so did the partisanship of newspapers and so editors and journalists could seek a new form of independence in reporting on political affairs generally and political ethics in particular. Such trends coincided with the efforts of journalists to establish themselves as an autonomous profession and university schools of journalism, codes of ethics for journalists and even the founding of the National Press Club signified that journalists were now important, respectable people whose judgement deserved public and political attention (Wiebe, 1967).

The new breed of journalists were concerned to make news, to force issues onto political agendas rather than simply report events. Journalists labelled ‘muckrakers’ by Theodore Roosevelt accepted the label as a badge of honour. The ‘muckrakers’ ‘discovered’ and exposed unethical conduct but their discoveries were on a par with Captain Renault’s ‘shock’ on being told there was gambling at Rick’s Bar in ‘Casablanca’. What had been discussed in Washington by political and elite circles now became public knowledge. There was nothing very new about the reports of political misconduct but ‘national magazines helped turn local concerns about political ethics into national concerns’ (Scheirov, 1994:203).

From the 1920s onwards the influence of journalists like Walter Lippman grew and some journalists sought recognition and began to be treated as ‘experts’ whose independence was beyond question and who saw their role as gatherers, interpreters and disseminators of political information. As the claim to ‘objectivity’ was asserted, the wilder allegations of political misconduct disappeared and, aside from the occasional scandal such as the Teapot Dome, the press had little to say about political ethics for several decades after the First World War. The claim of serious journalists to be authoritative required them to seek high level political information from politicians and their links to government and politics began to strengthen and multiply. Journalist organizations such as the National Press Club helped institutionalise these political ties.

But while the benefits of proximity to decision makers for journalists was obvious, it came with a condition of reticence. If journalists were to earn and retain the confidence of their well placed political sources, they would have to protect them from some of their own follies. Getting to know senior politicians socially as well as professionally carries with it some responsibility to protect confidences and exercise prudent discretion about what the public is told about the conduct of their political leaders. Entrance to the exclusive political club brought greater status to certain journalists but this could only be sustained or enhanced by
It may be that the United States is an exception to a general rule about the connections between the media, politics and concerns over political ethics. It may also be true that here, as in so many other cultural fields, the United States is pointing the way for other countries. Certainly in the UK, politicians experience a constant barrage of criticism and personal attack and the strenuous claims of any politician to be telling the truth is more often derided than accepted. Political denials of unethical conduct are greeted with the response first attributed to a witness giving evidence in the Profumo Scandal, Mandy Rice-Davis, ‘he would say that wouldn’t he?’ . It seems at least plausible to consider that the changes in the forms, structures and attitudes of the media are of potential global significance and have implications for the levels of public concern about political ethics wherever an independent media exists.

Although unethical conduct may be no more prevalent than it used to be, the more frequent allegations of misconduct are likely to cause greater public concern and denials by politicians are less likely to be believed. Thus far this chapter has identified observing club rules.

This comfortable and mutually supportive relationship between journalists and politicians has eroded of late but, while it lasted those journalists with privileged access at the highest political levels were the stars of their profession and commanded respect and deference from their peers and the public. But times have changed and while ‘reporters used to gain status by dining with politicians, now he gains status by dining on them’ (Gopnick, 1994). The reasons for the change in the role and attitudes of the media are complex but one observer identifies cites Watergate and the Vietnam War as contributors to the decline of trust between media and politicians with the latter exposing the journalistic dangers of believing and reporting political briefings (Sabato, 2000). No doubt many other factors were in play including the increasing diversity and commercialization of the media but, whatever the precise combination of reasons, the comfortable and exclusive relationship senior politicians enjoyed with senior journalists broke down.

Sabato offers a telling metaphor: the transformation of the press from ‘lapdog’ to ‘watchdog’ and ultimately ‘junkyard dog’ during the twentieth century. If the metaphor is apposite the media’s attitude to politicians and their unethical conduct has evolved from co-conspirators preventing information reaching to public, to watchful sceptics unlikely to accept political rectitude at face value, to cynics concerned with headlines and sales and mindful of the market for revelations of wrongdoing by the political elite. A former editor of Britain’s premier Sunday broadsheet advised any journalist listening to a politician to ask themselves, ‘why is this bastard lying to me?’ (Mulgan, 2004). Those under attack from cynical, commercial journalism complain of the ethical deficit at the core of the information society but the question is who do the public believe and who should they believe? Opinion polls suggest that politicians and journalists are classed among the least trustworthy groups even if they have not quite fallen to the trust levels of realtors and used car dealers.

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Politicians then are likely to respond to stories of their unethical conduct by blaming the messengers. Their problem is that there are more messengers than ever before and, with the growth of the internet, there are few gatekeepers able to decide whose opinions are valid. Whereas prominent journalists once enjoyed authoritative status, there are no Lippmans or Cronkites in the twenty first century because they have been replaced in the public mind with the likes of Matt Drudge and Rush Limbaugh. The journalist as an ‘expert’ insider armed with official information has given way to the fearless ‘outsider’ ready to broadcast any scurrilous gossip or rumour about the ethics of the political elite. Rumour combines with allegation and encounters new gossip which all help set off a ‘feeding frenzy’ in the media and, in such a hostile environment, concerns about political ethics are likely to increase.

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as key sources of the ethics eruption, the global export of ethics concerns by IFIs and other Western bodies and the global spread of new forms of journalistic practice facilitated by political trauma, commercialisation and changing technology. But if these are key sources of escalating concerns about political ethics, what are the mechanisms and catalysts that have helped generate this growing concern?

There are a number of possible responses to this question but one catalyst in particular, political scandal, seems to have had a great influence on concerns about political ethics in the United States and perhaps more widely.

**Scandals as a Catalyst**

Political scandal appears to cause an ethical reaction in both those whose conduct is questioned and in the minds of those who observe and consume scandals. Theorising about political scandal is still at a rudimentary stage and Thompson's work (Thompson, 2001) remains the only substantial attempt to formulate a general causal theory of political scandal. Thompson is a social and media theorist who sees political scandal arising from changes in the media which lead to a personalised projection of political image. The result, crudely summarized, is that politicians present more of themselves to the public and this condition of ‘mediated publicness’ becomes both a resource of and a threat to political power.

Politicians having, so to speak, exposed themselves can never retreat into privacy thus, for example, once politicians have agreed to disclose personal details of the health or finances, they cannot later insist on privacy and any attempt to withhold or conceal such information can become the basis of a political scandal. Another good example of the problems ‘mediated publicness’ can generate is the British royal family. In the 1970s it decided to make public aspects of their personal lives which had hitherto been hidden from public gaze. But, while this helped produce a surge in popular support for royalty, this publicness was later to cause intense embarrassment, even humiliation to royals as their various personal and financial difficulties were exposed to public ridicule.

There are, however, some problems with Thompson’s analysis both in its timings of media development and in its indexation of personal exposure to media development. Most obviously, it denies that politicians have choices in how they are presented or indeed whether certain aspects are presented. And it is the political aspects of political scandal which are so important and which Thompson underestimates.

An important idea offered by Markovits and Silverstein is that accounts of political scandal need to integrate ‘the exercise of, and struggle for political power’ (Markovits and Silverstein, 1988:4). But their own approach is a formal, legal-institutional approach which is confined to notions of political due process. They exclude scandals involving politicians which do not involve abuse of procedural limitations in pursuit of political power. But the point surely is that sexual, financial and other scandals bearing on political and personal reputation can have just as serious political effects and reactions from the public as their more restricted definition of political scandals.

We need a broader conception of politics to capture the generation of political scandal and its influence on political ethics. The most important element in this is the extent of political contestation. In a political scandal it is notable that everything is contested and nothing is accepted. It is partly because so much in contested attempts are made to find an authoritative resolution. This in turn has given rise to what Garment called a scandal generating ‘machine’ (Garment, 1992). This is an apparatus of various official investigating organisations and committees, notably the Office of the Independent Counsel, but including the auditing arms of federal agencies and also congressional committees. Every major political scandal of the past thirty years or so has contributed to developing this ‘machine’.

Thus the United States has developed a scandal investigating machine of great size and resources. Garment’s main focus though is not on the political use of this ‘machine’. The use of the ‘machine’ is regulated by rules designed to minimize the appearance of
improper tampering, in effect to remove human control of the machinery, and this combination has helped to bring massive, costly and time-consuming investigative procedures to bear on the basis of often very narrowly founded suspicions of unethical conduct. In the case of the Clinton Presidency, it appears that once the initial allegations of improper conduct relating to the Whitewater land deal had gained media and political traction, the scandal investigating ‘machine’ kept finding new allegations of unethical conduct for him to address (Rozell and Wilcox, 2000).

After Watergate, the political architecture of the American state significantly changed in ways likely to ensure that potential ethical misconduct would be subject to both formal inquiries and greater publicity. The appointment of a Special Prosecutor or later Independent Counsel provoked headlines as did congressional committee hearings and the appointment of grand juries. In the post-Watergate culture even traditional law enforcement agencies got into the process of testing political ethics, for example, the FBI’s ‘sting’ operation known as Abscam where members of Congress were offered bribes by FBI agents posing as Arab sheikhs (Williams, 1998).

The collective impact of the various elements of the scandal investigating ‘machine’ was to ensure that political conduct was more closely monitored than ever before. Together with the more aggressive, intrusive media, the scandal machine ensured that political ethics were very publicly examined. Those who ignored the changed scandal climate, for example, Robert Packwood and, arguably, Bill Clinton, were likely to find their conduct under close professional and public scrutiny. Unethical conduct which was once seen as a privilege of belonging to a political club and was largely ignored, if not formally condoned, such as improper use of the frank, breaches of employment and earnings rules, and sexual harassment now became serious ethical matters and ended the careers of senior politicians.

An interesting feature of the Clinton scandals is the way that some forms of misconduct were re-cast in order to shift them firmly into the political and legal arena. This is, of course, another feature of political contestation. Hence, where one party concedes a private, moral failing by admitting marital infidelity, Clinton’s opponents sought to frame the ethical and legal questions in terms of perjury and obstruction of justice. As Brock and others have suggested it seems that Clinton was ‘set up’ in his testimony in the Paula Jones case when the Independent Counsel already had knowledge of the Lewinsky relationship (Brock, 2002).

Ginsburg and Shefter have argued that political scandal is a form of ‘politics by other means’ (Ginsburg and Shefter, 1999) and this accords with the stress I have laid elsewhere on partisanship and the escalation of ethics wars (Williams, 1998) where the tension of partisan forces in the separated institutions acts as the power driving this escalation. The escalation of allegations and counter-allegations reached such heights in the US Congress as to prompt the creation of an Ethics Reform Task Force in 1997 (Williams, 2002), and encouraged the House of Representatives to approve unanimously a frequently extended moratorium on the filing of new ethics complaints. The origins of the ethics wars in the House can partly be found in the decades of Democrat control which ended in 1994 and the associated Republican perception that the Democrats had displayed blatant political arrogance, partisanship and corruption. A series of ethics complaints were made against Speaker Jim Wright who was forced to resign in 1989. The subsequent Republican victory reshaped the political and ethical landscape and it was predictable that the Democrats would seek revenge and try to regain their position by any means available. The intensification of the ethics wars was making it hard to find members willing to serve on the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct and a truce was called in the form of the Task Force.

The ethics wars in the House invited parallel with the discourse of nuclear warfare strategy with its language of first strike, overwhelming retribution, escalation and mutually assured destruction. Speaker Wright’s farewell speech warned his colleagues of the dangers of ‘mindless cannibalism’ and those, like Newt Gingrich, who had been among the first to raise the ethics sword for partisan advantage were soon damaged by it.
Reforming ethics regulations in legislatures with a view to preventing ethics eruptions is fraught with difficulty. In the US Congress there is a notorious lack of institutional leadership and members of Congress are more concerned with what their constituents think of them and are less concerned about what they think of the ethics of their legislative colleagues. It has long been recognized that many legislators run ‘for Congress by running against Congress’ (Fenno, 1978:167) and explain poor institutional performance in terms of the failings of their colleagues. Thus other legislators’ ethics are questionable and the blame for the failure to reform the ethics process can also be placed on the shoulders of other legislators.

Scandals over political ethics in Britain have never matched the drama of Watergate or the impeachment of Clinton but they have prompted some reform. Interestingly, such reforms of ethics regulations have rarely occurred when one party has an effective majority. Ethics appears only to stand a chance of getting on the British political agenda when party government has weakened and the executive loosens its control over the political process. One conclusion that could be drawn from this is that governments in Britain are indifferent to the claim that public trust and confidence in political ethics can only be restored by tightening up the regulatory regime and by ending the conflict of interest inherent in self-regulation.

Another way of looking at this issue is by stressing the ‘political’. The ‘political’ aspect of political scandal is important because it influences the motivations of the parties involved, their ideological frame, the processes by which the scandal is resolved and the consequences that ensue. The media - in their new ‘attack’ style - pursue political scandals in search of the ‘smoking gun’ - the incontrovertible proof that unethical, scandalous, transgressive behaviour on the part of a political figure occurred. This phrase was used first by Representative Barber Conable in reaction to an Oval Office tape during the Watergate Scandal (Safire 1993). This pursuit assumes that a particular set of ‘facts’ will resolve the ethical doubt and, very occasionally, it does. But most of the time politics shapes the meanings attached to actions and events. Whatever the ‘facts’, those engaged in the pursuit or the defence of alleged political scandal will attempt to shift the scenery and bring to bear background norms that cast the ‘facts’ in the most damaging or the most favourable light.

In the case of the Clinton scandals, the infamous stain on the dress proved not to be the decisive, ‘smoking gun’ necessary to bring down the president. The Starr Report and the Republican enemies of the Clintons interpreted the evidence against him in accordance with a particular political frame. This politicization then provided grounds for further contestation by the Clintons and their Democrat supporters who then posed questions about the motives of their accusers and made claims of ‘a vast right wing conspiracy’. The final stage of the drama was the impeachment process whose political character was most obviously revealed by the almost entirely partisan way the Senate voted.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has been both very ambitious and acutely selective in addressing the question of what has prompted escalating concerns about political ethics. Much of the literature on political ethics focuses on the experience of Western democracies and it is a useful corrective to make some observations about the extent to which rising concerns about political ethics are a global phenomenon. For reasons of space, less attention has been given to the local, domestic sources of ethics concerns in any particular country or region of the ‘Third World’. But the argument has been put that much of the concern about ethics is generated in the West by the IFIs and their financial leverage has, through political conditionality, placed ethics concerns and their reduction at the top of the political agenda from Addis Ababa to Zanzibar.

The other main source of rising ethics concerns identified in this chapter is the evolving forms, commercialisation and attitude of the mass media which, especially in the West, makes the political ethics of the ruling elite a major topic of critical media discussion. Good news is no news and little attention is paid to identifying good practice or celebrating political figures who act with great integrity. Rather the emphasis has become essentially negative and cynical. Sober, serious journalism has in part given way to sensationalist scandal hunting. And the new media forms, especially the internet, have given mainstream media a never ending source of allegation, rumour and innuendo.

But the blaming the messenger approach does not allow for the ways in which politicians have acted as catalysts in this process. There is evidence that partisan advantage and individual ambition have encouraged a generation of politicians to ‘go negative’ and use accusations of unethical conduct as a political weapon of first resort. This negativity is seen in campaigning and in conduct within political institutions and both are exacerbated by the ways in which they are reported and publicised by the media. Those in government see no political percentage or advantage in taking political ethics seriously and thus reform of any sort is difficult to effect. Readers, listeners, viewers and surfers absorb this negativity and, while there is some evidence that they can distinguish the entertainment function from the political information function (Zaller 1998: Owen 2000), the accumulated effect is to escalate concerns about political ethics.

We know more now than we have ever known about the conduct of our political masters. Accountability and transparency regimes are the norm in public life and yet there appears to be a culture of suspicion and cynicism about politicians and their motives. One problem is how to distinguish ‘rumour from report, fact from fiction, reliable source from disinformant, truth -teller from deceiver’ (O’Neill, 2002: 63-4). Unqualified confidence in both the media and in politicians is understandably rare when we have no means of assessing the veracity of what they tell us. In Britain the press were critical of Parliament’s tradition of ethics self-regulation during the years of Conservative ‘sleaze’ in the 1990s and called for more effective, independent regulation in order to restore public confidence in political ethics. But the same press do not apply the same remedy to themselves and have vigorously opposed independent regulation of the press and their concern for restoring public confidence in editorial and journalistic ethics remains muted.

Ethics eruptions, like volcanic ones, are probably impossible to prevent and difficult to predict. The ethical seismograph has recently registered more audible disquiet about political ethics but we have limited means of assessing where we are on any political equivalent of the Richter scale. An intensification of political scandals can be likened to a sort of ethical lava flow, and while we wait for ‘the big one’, we go about our daily business and wonder whether the rumblings are ominous or simply political hot air.