

# The Westminster Bubble gone bad

*Code of Conduct:*

*Why We Need to Fix Parliament – and How to Do It*

Chris Bryant

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## John Newsinger

**C**hris Bryant is a public school-educated former Church of England clergyman, now a Labour MP. He is a committed Christian Socialist and champion of gay rights. He is the author of a number of books, including a history of Christian Socialism; a two volume history of Parliament; biographies of Stafford Cripps and Glenda Jackson; an insufficiently critical history of the British aristocracy; and a very good account of how a number of gay MPs, most of them Conservatives, opposed and fought against the Nazis in the 1930s and during the Second World War. He also has a forthcoming book about the last two men to be hanged for being gay in 1835, *James and John*.

Bryant is something of an enigma. His history of Christian Socialism, for example, *Possible Dreams* (1996), culminates in the election of a certain Tony Blair as Labour Party leader, a man whose efforts to rebuild the Labour Party were 'essentially moral . . . a return to an ethical rather than a "scientific" socialism . . . Blair has written his own job description as leader in prophetic terms that sound like Solomon's building of the Temple'.<sup>1</sup> Really! Three years before this Bryant had edited a collection of essays, all by Christian Labourites, *Reclaiming the Ground: Christianity and Socialism*, a collection to which Blair contributed the Foreword. Now to be fair, Blair had not yet had a chance to show his true colours; and even though Bryant voted for the Iraq War, he eventually aligned himself with Gordon Brown and played a part in bringing Blair down. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling the conversation that another Christian Socialist, A H Halsey, the eminent sociologist, had with Blair back in 1995. Halsey was very taken with Blair's commitment to 'liberty, equality and community' and also regarded him as very much 'an ethical socialist'. But he

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Bryant, *Possible Dreams: A Personal History of the British Christian Socialists* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996) p. 295.

had one nagging doubt: when they had discussed who, after Jesus, was the most interesting man in the New Testament, Blair nominated Pontius Pilate. Halsey was appalled and insisted that surely it must be the Good Samaritan: 'here was the case of a member of a despised ethnic minority engaged in direct action, while Pilate was the established undemocratic boss'. Blair smiled that smile and 'begged me to understand that the powerful were also deserving of our political sympathy'.<sup>2</sup>

Being taken in by Tony Blair back in the 1990s is one thing. Much more disturbing is Bryant's longstanding affiliation with the right-wing Henry Jackson Society (HJS). Founded in Cambridge in June 2005, its Westminster launch in November of that year was hosted by Michael Gove and the then Labour MP Gisela Stuart. By the end of 2006, the Society 'had emerged as the leading institutional expression of British neoconservatism'.<sup>3</sup> It champions a militaristic and interventionist foreign policy and has been tainted by Islamophobia. Among the other MPs who have been associated with the HJS are the likes of Robert Halfon, Greg Hands, Michael Ancram, Margaret Beckett, David Willetts, Denis MacShane, Dominic Raab and Nadine Dorries. It is a registered charity but it has been criticised for a lack of transparency regarding both its funding and the use to which it puts those funds.

On the plus side, Bryant relentlessly went after the Murdoch press during the phone-hacking scandal (the *News of the World* had hacked his phone) and it was he who secured Rebekah Brooks' admission that News International had bribed police officers. (Mysteriously, she was never prosecuted.)

One thing that is clear from his list of publications is that he is obsessed with Parliament, and stood for election as Speaker of the House of Commons in November 2019. He was chair of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, confronting a tidal wave of Tory scandal, before being appointed a shadow minister by Keir Starmer in September. One would have thought that nobody was better placed to explore the scandals that have engulfed Parliament since that posh conman Boris Johnson was installed as Prime Minister. How good a job does Bryant do? How convincing is his diagnosis and how likely are his

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<sup>2</sup> A H Halsey, *No Discouragement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996) pp. 118 and 120

<sup>3</sup> Tom Griffin, Hilary Aked, David Miller and Sarah Marusek, *The Henry Jackson Society and the degeneration of British neoconservatism: Liberal interventionism, Islamophobia and the "War on Terror"*, 2015, p. 23 at <<https://tinyurl.com/mr26af47>> or <[https://purehost.bath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/167838132/Griffin\\_et\\_al\\_Henry\\_Jackson\\_Society\\_spinwatch\\_report\\_web.pdf](https://purehost.bath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/167838132/Griffin_et_al_Henry_Jackson_Society_spinwatch_report_web.pdf)>. See the review by Tom Easton in *Lobster* 70 at <<https://tinyurl.com/msyf9ax>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/70/the-henry-jackson-society-and-the-degeneration-of-british-neoconservatism-liberal-interventionism-islamophobia-and-the-war-of-terror-by-tom-griffin-et-al/>>.

remedies to make a difference?

Bryant does not exactly inspire confidence in his judgement, when he tells his readers that 'Every MP I know went into politics for noble reasons. They want to change the world for the better. When I look around the Commons, I see dozens of people who have made a lasting difference for good'. Even those MPs whose political ideas 'may to [his] mind be completely round the twist, unfeeling and cruel' nevertheless did not start out 'misguided, let alone evil'. (pp. 14-15). This seems to be taking Christian charity way too far.

Is this the worst parliament in history, Bryant asks? He goes on to look at the evidence:

The charge sheet is long – and damning. At the time of writing, twenty-two MPs have either been suspended by the House, resigned their seats or left the chamber before being suspended for a day or more since the general election in December 2019. That is statistically the worst record of any parliament in our history, by a long chalk. (pp. 23-24)

And, of course, under Boris Johnson lying and dishonesty became endemic. With Johnson dishonesty was a character trait – he just could not help himself and lied all the time about everything. But the routine lying has continued, except under Rishi Sunak, it is now calculated rather than compulsive. Let us consider one telling example Bryant gives: Sunak told the Commons that the backlog of individual asylum claims was half what it was when Labour left office. In fact, the number in June 2010 was 18,954 and when Sunak made the claim in 2022 stood at 166,261. And then there is the claim that is still being made to this day, that Britain under Johnson had the fastest vaccine roll-out in the world. In fact, at the end of 2022, 'the UK had fully vaccinated just 76 per cent of the population' and far from being world-beating, 'the UK languished behind forty-three other countries'. Bryant goes on to make the point that 'Parliament doesn't work if you can't rely on ministers to tell the truth'. (pp 121-123) Of course, the Conservative governments that have been in power since 2010 hardly have a monopoly as far as lying and dishonesty is concerned – a point we shall return to – but what about blatant, open corruption?

Bryant finds plenty of evidence of corruption – although he is careful with his choice of words – in the awarding of Covid contracts. The celebrated 'VIP lane'<sup>4</sup> is still a shocking episode, with some £10.5 billion of contracts being awarded between March and July 2020 without any competitive process. This was a pretty straightforward reversion to the politics of the eighteenth century

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-59968037>>.

'Old Corruption'. According to the National Audit office, companies that bid via the VIP lane 'were ten times more likely to win a contract than others'. Bryant provides some examples: 'Meller Designs, which was co-owned by David Meller, who had backed Michael Gove's bid for leader and donated £60,000 to the Conservative Party, was referred by Gove and won £164 million in Covid contracts'.<sup>5</sup> There was Greg Hands who 'passed on a recommendation . . . which led to Luxe Lifestyle, a company with no published accounts at the time and no history of providing PPE, getting a £25.8 million contract'. Most hilarious of all, Health Secretary Matt Hancock was sent a WhatsApp message that led to a former publican and personal friend of his securing '£50 million of government work supplying vials for the test-and-trace programme'.<sup>6</sup>

And then there is case of Michelle Mone and PPE Medpro.<sup>7</sup> All this, Bryant admits, 'made my blood boil'. (pp. 106-109)

He follows up his devastating account of the VIP lane scandal with an equally incisive dissection of the Tories' allocation of funds to local authorities. Supposedly part of Johnson's mythical 'levelling up' policy, in practice it was the introduction of 'the politics of the pork barrel'. The way money was distributed made it 'difficult not to suspect that this was a ministerial slush fund in all but name'. Once again, what he reveals is still shocking: 'In the first round of bids, sixty-one out of the hundred poorest areas received no funding'. In the financial year 2021-2022, the South-East of England, the richest part of the country 'received £9.2 million', while the North-East, the poorest region, 'received £4.9 million'. And he cannot resist telling his readers that 'Bedfordshire Council (MP Nadine Dorries) got £6.8 million for a roundabout' and 'Sunak's constituency of Richmond in Yorkshire, one of the wealthiest in the land, received £19 million'. As he puts it with admirable restraint: 'it smacks of corruption'. (pp. 112-113)

Which brings us to the House of Lords. The mere existence of this 'very powerful second chamber consisting of 668 appointed life peers, 91 elected hereditary peers . . . and 26 lords spiritual (i.e. Church of England bishops)' is 'bonkers' as far as Bryant is concerned. Although only recently published, Bryant's figures are already out of date with the number of life peers having gone up to around 700. (Boris Johnson created 87 peers – 29 for every year he was in office, whereas Blair created 357 – 35 for every year he was in office.)

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<sup>5</sup> In September 2023 Meller was installed as an advisor at the Board of Trade.

<sup>6</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/h3fm39h5>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/26/matt-hancock-former-neighbour-won-covid-test-kit-contract-after-whatsapp-message>>

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, <<https://tinyurl.com/4bfvhsz>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/dec/09/revealed-the-full-inside-story-of-the-michelle-mone-ppe-scandal>>.

'Bonkers' is much too generous a characterisation. The very idea of people being installed in a legislative chamber for life, without even the pretence of democracy, is positively obscene. It survives not because of 'British love of pomp and circumstance . . . or a nostalgic admiration for the past', as Bryant puts it, but because it is convenient for both the Conservative and Labour leaderships. They can reward their creatures and cronies, look after themselves as well, and even sell the privilege in return for political donations and support. Attempts to clean up the appointments system are doomed. This is easily demonstrated by Johnson's appointment of Harry Mount, a former Bullingdon Club member and author of that inimitable volume, *The Wit and Wisdom of Boris Johnson* (London, Bloomsbury, 2013), to the House of Lords Appointments Commission. (pp. 69, 72) Bryant has himself accepted a knighthood, another feudal remnant. Will he be able to resist the offer of a peerage when his time comes? We shall see.

He concludes that the way things are going, democracy itself is at risk unless the elected representatives of the people in the Commons reassert themselves and start holding the government to account. One problem with this, as he himself acknowledges, is drink. He writes of MPs gathering 'in the bars waiting for votes. Some got paralytic'. And he quotes a Tory MP complaining 'of people going through the division lobbies reeking of booze [. . .] She added that she has seen colleagues miss votes or vote the wrong way because of alcohol'. The situation today, however, is far better than it used to be, but even so he has seen 'Older male MPs slapping women's bottoms, drunken MPs hugging colleagues who clearly didn't want to be hugged, members being "helped" through the lobby by whips, or being propped up in case they collapsed in a drunken heap'. (pp. 164, 167)

Not that there is anything new about MPs getting drunk at work. Looking back on his time in the Commons between 1929 and 1931, Archibald Fenner Brockway remembered one Labour minister 'winding up a debate on unemployment' while only able 'to stand with difficulty'. As he points out: in any other job this would get you the sack. Brockway had spent three years in prison for his opposition to the First World War and it was his considered opinion that he saw 'character deteriorate in Parliament more than in prison'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left: Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison and Parliament*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1942) pp. 205-206 and 222-223. Brockway later served as a Labour MP from 1950 until 1964. Then, having called for the abolition of the House of Lords for nearly fifty years, he finally accepted a peerage and indeed he found the Lords to be 'one of the friendliest places I know': A Fenner Brockway, *Towards Tomorrow* (London: Hart-Davis MacGibbon, 1977) p. 242.

As for the appropriate punishment of those MPs like Boris Johnson who break the rules, in the first volume of his history of Parliament, Bryant describes the fate of Sir Giles Mompesson following a 'Partygate' style scandal in 1621: he was expelled from the Commons, stripped of his knighthood, fined £10,000, sentenced to prison for life and ordered 'to be dragged up the Strand with his face in a horse's anus'.<sup>9</sup> Just a thought!

This leaves two further questions worth considering: first, is this really the worst Parliament? And second, is Bryant so focussed on the Westminster bubble that he has been looking at the symptoms of the disease, rather than the cause? A good case can surely be made that the worst Parliaments in modern political history were those when Blair was Prime Minister. There was, of course, the invasion of Iraq, justified by the claim that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, a claim that was known to be false. The world is still experiencing the aftermath of this disaster, which cost hundreds of thousands of lives. The Commons that voted to support the invasion was also the Commons of the great expenses scandal, that saw 5 MPs sent to prison. (And that was with the authorities bending over backwards to avoid such an outcome.) In any other line of work, fiddling your expenses in the way that many MPs did, would have cost you your job. They merely had to pay money back. One of those MPs required to pay back expenses was . . . Chris Bryant. Even a very sympathetic profile of him in the *Guardian* on 5 August, occasioned by the publication of *Code of Conduct*, observed that he was 'less keen to mention the expenses scandal from which he didn't emerge well. Bryant flipped his second home twice in two years and claimed over £92,000 in expenses in the five years leading up to the scandal'. And after the scandal, he moved out of the apartment which he owned and now let out for some £3,000 a month. Then 'between July 2010 and January 2015 [he] claimed £84,350 in expenses' to pay for the rent on the new home he had moved into.<sup>10</sup> Bryant represented the Rhondda constituency in Wales, where thousands of people lived in poverty that was to get worse during the same period.

At a time when considerable effort is being expended to try and brush the scandals of the Blair years from history, it is important to remember just how pro-business and pro-finance they were. Who can forget the famous occasion when Blair discussed the state of the country over a £3,000 bottle of claret

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<sup>9</sup> Chris Bryant, *Parliament: The Biography* Vol 1, (London: Black Swan, 2015) p. 227. To be fair, Mompesson had been engaged in massive fraud more on a VIP lane scale. Unfortunately he fled the country before the horse was ready.

<sup>10</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/428hekxy>> or <[https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/aug/05/labour-chris-bryant-interview-code-conduct-book\\_](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/aug/05/labour-chris-bryant-interview-code-conduct-book_)>

with New Labour's favourite businessman, the boss of BP, Lord John Browne. (Browne had been given his peerage by Blair and was one of his so-called 'people's peers'.) It was Tony Blair and Gordon Brown who brought the business and management consultants, most notably the US firm McKinsey, into government contracts. And, thus, the generation of profit from state or public sector activities became a priority of the private sector. This was as important as anything accomplished by Thatcher and produced billions of pounds a year in consultancy fees. Brown recognised that in a world dominated by big business and the banks, public expenditure was only acceptable if money could be made from it. This is his great contribution to 'Socialist' thought.<sup>11</sup> And Blair was certainly not above 'freebie' holidays which, according to one 2012 estimate, were worth some £775,000 during his time in office.<sup>12</sup> Eat your heart out Boris Johnson!

One last point worth making is with regard to New Labour's introduction of University tuition fees. Priced at £3,000 a year, they came into effect in 2006, and dealt a massive, indeed historic, blow to social mobility.<sup>13</sup> When Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, the decision was taken to allow the fee level to be raised and a review, headed by Lord Browne, was set up to recommend this. The review had a derisory £100,000 to spend on research into the multi-billion pound funding of British Higher Education, but even then spent only £68,000. The reason for this is quite simple: the review had been set up to give a pre-determined recommendation courtesy of the McKinsey consultancy.

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<sup>11</sup> According to David Craig in *Plundering the Public Sector* (London: Constable 2006), p. 2, the amount spent on consultants by New Labour governments might well total as much as £70 billion. While New Labour went down the road of outsourcing, Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) and Public Private Partnerships (PPE) rather than celebratory privatisations on the Conservative and LibDem model, it is worth remembering one forgotten scandal: the privatisation of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. The US Carlyle Group which bought into the PPP, QinetiQ, that New Labour established saw the value of its investment increase from £42 million in 2006 when privatisation was completed to £374 million three years later. The chairman of the company, Sir John Chisholm saw his £129,000 investment increase in value to £23 million. To say the least, QinetiQ had been scandalously undervalued when it was privatised.

<sup>12</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/2z9duzrv>> or <<https://www.standard.co.uk/hp/front/blair-s-decade-of-freebies-total-ps775-000-7195454.html>>

Keir Starmer has listed a freebie holiday (only worth £ 4500!) in his register of interests. See <<https://tinyurl.com/bdewj544>> or <[https://www.reddit.com/r/LabourUK/comments/17398rm/starmers\\_latest\\_4500\\_family\\_holiday\\_paid\\_for\\_by/?rdt=57277](https://www.reddit.com/r/LabourUK/comments/17398rm/starmers_latest_4500_family_holiday_paid_for_by/?rdt=57277)>.

<sup>13</sup> I can testify that the introduction of tuition fees effectively eliminated the mature student. When I started teaching at university, something like one in five students was a mature student, but after the introduction of fees they disappeared. Among those ministers supporting this was John Prescott, who had only been able to go to university as a mature student because there were no fees. While the burdening of young people with enormous debt is appalling, the elimination of the mature student generally goes unremarked.

Michael Barber, the head of McKinsey's Global Education Practice, was on the review alongside the CEO of the Standard Chartered bank, Peter Sands, who had been a McKinsey consultant for thirteen years. (Lord Browne himself was very much a McKinsey man.)<sup>14</sup> The New Labour government had decided to increase fees and had set up a McKinsey-dominated review to recommend it and British students have paid the price ever since. It is certain that fees would have been increased if Brown had won the 2010 general election, but the likelihood is that there would have been a big differential between the fees charged by the 'top' Universities and the rest. One last point: just before the 2010 general election, a McKinsey report on the NHS, paid for by the New Labour government, had recommended 137,000 job cuts. Brown went into the general election promising big business and the banks a programme of austerity and radical privatisation.

The real problem with Bryant's diagnosis is that he is too focussed on the Westminster bubble – on how MPs either keep or break Parliamentary rules, whether ministers lie or tell the truth – rather than the pain successive governments have inflicted on the country since Margaret Thatcher took office. If we look at what has been happening *outside* the Westminster bubble, starting in the Thatcher years, there has been a massive aggrandisement of the super rich that has transformed the context in which Westminster operates. Governments – of whatever political complexion – today dance to their tune. Meanwhile many people's living standards fall, housing conditions deteriorate, public services are rundown or dismantled and working conditions become more insecure and exploitative. And that is without even mentioning the privatised water companies and their literal mis-treatment of sewage. This is, of course, a global phenomenon. Bryant does not really address this at all. Unfortunately, his *Code of Conduct* will change nothing.

John Newsinger is a retired academic.

His latest book is *Chosen by God:*

*Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism*, published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>

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<sup>14</sup> In 2015 Browne, together with a number of McKinsey consultants, published a book, *Connect: How Companies Succeed by Engaging Radically With Society*. This included an interview with Tony Blair and that is advertised on the McKinsey website. The book has been highly praised by Alastair Campbell.