



Global Ethics and the Effective Parliamentarian

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October 16th marks the inaugural **Global Ethics Day**—a day spearheaded by the [Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs](#) on the occasion of their centennial celebrations. When I first learned of the day, I immediately turned my thoughts to ethics in politics. As a program advisor at the [Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption \(GOPAC\)](#), when I think of questions of ethics I am inevitably drawn back to issues of corruption. Ethics is vital to the work of parliamentarians and crucial to functioning democracy. Without ethics the entire infrastructure of democratic institutions falls apart.

Picture the following scenario. A legislator is a member of a committee that is overseeing the spending on a major public infrastructure project that involves a multi-million dollar budget and a long-term planning horizon. The legislator frequently receives guests in his constituency office to discuss matters of concern. Throughout the parliamentary session, the legislator receives repeated visits from senior management of a construction company bidding for the very same building project for which the legislator is charged with providing oversight. The legislator succumbs to the pressures of the lobbyists and begins to make decisions and offer advice in committee that would be favourable to the construction company bidding on the public infrastructure deal. Unknown to the legislator, certain members of the senior management team with which meetings were being held are part of a criminal organization that has illegally financed the political campaign of a colleague and has offered to do the same, in the lead up to the next election, for the legislator in question.

How does democracy look now?

When revelations of corrupt and unethical behaviour surface, on the part of public officials or parliamentarians, it has a direct impact on the democratic process. Trust and integrity are difficult to acquire, easily lost, and even more difficult to regain. The effectiveness of a parliamentarian is directly correlated to his or her ethical standing and capabilities.

In light of the importance that ethics plays in the work of parliamentarians, I was led to explore how parliamentarians in their work of serving a greater good are in essence actual “common goods”. I was intrigued by the notion that something as precious and yet often misunderstood as the legislature, a democratic institution, could succumb to the very same tragedy that other “goods”, e.g. natural resources or common land, could be made to suffer. That is, the “tragedy of the commons” or abuse of something held in common interest.

Sure, parliamentarians are not your typical example of common property. I do not know of any self-respecting politician who would agree with the notion that they are actually, physically the property of others. However, from a philosophical and institutional perspective, I would hope that my own member of parliament would see that they are part of something bigger. A legislature is a sort of “institutional commons”. Therefore, it should be protected in the same way one would protect against the abuse of other commonly held resources.

Without the proper ethics and conduct regimes in place, parliamentarians are susceptible to the very same mistakes anyone could make if constantly under pressure from multiple interest groups and lobbyists. In my experience most parliamentarians are fully conscious of the public trust they hold and the responsibilities of their position. However, it is always easier to maintain one's integrity when there is a clear map to follow. This is particularly true of professions that frequently involve the treading of uncharted waters.

Parliamentarians need to build and safeguard strong and clear rules on conflicts of interest, in parliamentary ethics and conduct regimes. This goes to the heart of advancing the integrity of democratic institutions and protecting the greater good, the common good.

Jean Pierre Chabot is a Program Advisor at the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC). He recently authored a GOPAC position paper titled [Preventing a Tragedy of the Commons](#).