



Ministerial Code QSD on 12 March 2020

On 12 March 2020, Lord Tyler (Liberal Democrats) is due to ask Her Majesty's Government "what steps they are taking (1) to review, and (2) to strengthen, the Ministerial Code".

Summary

The [Ministerial Code](#) is a set of rules and principles issued by the prime minister which outlines the standards of conduct for government ministers. The code applies to all government ministers. In addition, sections apply to parliamentary private secretaries and special advisers. An unofficial form of guidance for ministers has [been in existence](#) since at least the second world war. In May 1992, an official guidance note for ministers, *Questions of Procedure for Ministers*, was published for the first time.

The [code covers a range of issues](#), including: the principle of collective responsibility; proper and transparent engagement with Parliament; avoiding potential conflicts of interest; propriety and ethics; and how ministers work with the civil service. The code is regularly updated, with the most recent update being in August 2019. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, stated in the [foreword](#) of the August 2019 code that:

There must be no bullying and no harassment; no leaking; no breach of collective responsibility. No misuse of taxpayer money and no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The precious principles of public life enshrined in this document—integrity, objectivity, accountability, transparency, honesty and leadership in the public interest—must be honoured at all times; as must the political impartiality of our much admired civil service.

Section 1.4 of the code outlines the process where a breach of code is alleged. In this circumstance the prime minister, having consulted the cabinet secretary, decides whether an investigation should be called. If an investigation is called "he may ask the Cabinet Office to investigate the facts of the case and/or refer the matter to the independent adviser on ministers' interests". Following any investigation, the prime minister will decide whether a breach of the code has occurred.

In a [recent urgent question](#) on specific allegations of "apparent breaches of the ministerial code" the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, stated "it is not enough to just refer this to the Cabinet Office". Instead he called for an independent investigation led by an external lawyer, as requested by the FDA civil service union. The Minister for the Cabinet Office, Michael Gove, argued that the Cabinet Office investigation would be "thorough, rapid, independent and authoritative".

Heather Evennett | 5 March 2020

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Further Information

- Cabinet Office, [Ministerial Code](#), August 2019

Code of rules and principles issued by the prime minister which outlines the standards of conduct for government ministers.

- Institute for Government, [The Ministerial Code](#), 26 April 2019

Short ‘explainer’ outlining: the background to the code, to whom it applies, what it covers; its constitutional status; who enforces the code; and how often it is updated.

- House of Commons Library, [The Ministerial Code and the Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interest](#), 17 January 2018

Briefing outlining: the history of the code; suggestions for reform; the process for investigating breaches of the code; and changes to previous editions of the code, particularly changes to the 2018 code.

Parliamentary Statements and Questions

- [Urgent Question on ‘Ministerial Code’](#), HC Hansard 2 March 2020, cols 609–23.
- [Oral Statement on ‘Ministerial Code: Breaches’](#), HL Hansard, 2 March 2020, cols 430–4.
- [Oral Question on ‘Ministers: Training’](#), HL Hansard, 27 February 2020, cols 276–8.
- House of Commons, [‘Written Question: Ministers: Conduct’](#), 3 October 2019, 29226.
- House of Commons, [‘Written Question: Ministers: Conduct’](#), 2 October 2019, 291542.
- House of Commons, [‘Written Question: Ministers: Conduct’](#), 9 May 2019, 250734

Press Articles and Comment

- Ashley Cowburn, [‘Priti Patel must step down over bullying row, Abbott says’](#), *Independent*, 4 March 2020
- Harry Yorke, [‘Labour accused of coordinating bullying allegations against Priti Patel’](#), *Daily Telegraph* (£), 4 March 2020
- Rob Merrick, [‘Alun Cairns: Rape victim says inquiry into former Welsh secretary’s alleged lists about aide was “a sham”](#)’, *Independent*, 9 January 2020
- Leighton Andrews, [‘Brexit, Cabinet norms and the Ministerial Code: Are we living in a post-Nolan era?’](#), *Political Quarterly*(£), 18 November 2019
- Heather Steward, [‘PM warns ministers over bullying, leaking or trying to stop Brexit: Johnson demands “highest standards” of discipline in new ministerial code of conduct’](#), *Guardian*, 23 August 2019
- Oliver Wright, [“‘Priti Patel and Damian Green” clauses added to ministerial code of conduct’](#), *Times* (£), 10 January 2018