

Scandal: Just how corrupt is Britain?

Rotten banks, dodgy cops, MPs on the fiddle. A conference on public life has evidence to topple long-held assumptions

Jonathan Brown

Looking across the seas at political scandals surrounding the likes of Silvio Berlusconi and Jacques Chirac, at match-fixing in Pakistani cricket and Italian football, or claims of tax avoidance on a nationwide scale in Greece, it was said jingoistically for many years that humble Britain could never compete with the explosive corruption scandals that "Johnny Foreigner" seemed to specialise in.

Yet recent British scandals can compete with the best Europe can offer. Besides MPs fiddling their expenses and Jimmy Savile's history of paedophilia, racing has been hit by Frankie Dettori's six-month drugs ban, we've seen London-based banks Barclays and UBS embarrassed by the Libor rate-fixing scandal, and BAE Systems has been investigated over its arms deals.

The police have become embroiled, too, with Detective Chief Inspector April Casburn jailed for offering to sell information to the now defunct News of the World and evidence of a cover-up on the Hillsborough disaster. And while none of our Prime Ministers have yet had to stand before a court, MPs including Jonathan Aitken and Margaret Moran have been convicted and Neil Hamilton famously lost his libel claim against Mohamed al Fayed over the cash-for-questions affair.

Even royalty has not been immune, thanks to the tabloid sting that saw Sarah Ferguson offering access to Prince Andrew for cash.

With this weighty list and other cases to examine, it will be claimed today that corruption has in fact become an everyday part of British national life.

A conference of campaigners and academics, entitled "How Corrupt is Britain?", will hear evidence that wrongdoing is not confined to a few corrupt officials but is systemic within leading institutions. The conference organiser, Dr David Whyte, of the University of Liverpool's School of Law and Social Justice which is hosting the event, said the aim was to challenge two "long-outdated" assumptions. "First, that corruption is a problem that happens in far-away places, in governments that do not have our traditions. Secondly, that corruption is something that we can understand merely as a problem that stems from the actions of a minority of public officials who are 'on the make', rather than something that is routine in our most venerated institutions," he said.

Among the speakers will be Carole Duggan who has campaigned on behalf of her late nephew Mark Duggan who was shot by police in Tottenham, north London, in an incident that sparked the summer riots of 2011. An Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) report into his death is still not complete and investigators have not spoken to the firearms officers involved. She claims she has faced persistent collusion between official bodies preventing her bid to find out the truth – with her lawyer, Michael Mansfield, arguing earlier this year that the cases showed the IPCC was "not fit for purpose".

She believes that society as a whole has become more corrupt because of the anger at the high salaries and bonuses still paid in the City despite its financial failings.

"Corruption is now endemic – just look at the bankers," she said. "They are teaching kids to just take what they want – which is why they were taking trainers from shops in the riots. That is what they are being taught by the greedy people."

Joanna Gilmore, of the Northern Police Monitoring Project – an organisation which brings together campaign groups across the north of England – said many sections of the population were losing faith in public bodies particularly the police and the IPCC.

Ms Gilmore said: "Corruption and violence is central to what people have experienced. Communities feel powerless when they try to seek redress through official channels. They are hitting a brick wall when they make a complaint."

Organisers hope that by sharing their experiences groups can pool expertise and find new ways of dealing with systemic corruption across the whole of public life.

Co-organiser Richard Garside, director of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, said there was an urgent need to view corruption as a nationwide problem that spanned both public and private spheres of national life. He said: "In Britain it has often been thought that corruption is something that happens in other countries, not ours. The conference will join the dots across the public and private domains, and begin a dialogue between campaigns for police accountability, tax justice, executive pay, political and corporate accountability. "Rarely, if ever, do we talk about those things in the same place. This conference will make links across those different spheres of public life."