

HOW CAN RISHI SUNAK DEMONSTRATE, INTEGRITY, PROFESSIONALISM AND ACCOUNTABILITY?

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Meg Russell, Alan Renwick, Sophie Andrews-McCarroll and Lisa James

Summary

This briefing outlines how Rishi Sunak can keep his promise to put integrity, professionalism and accountability at the heart of his government by:

1. Strengthening the standards system
2. Rebuilding the scrutiny role of parliament
3. Defending the rule of law
4. Abiding by long-established constitutional norms
5. Defending political institutions, checks and balances

Background

In his first speech as Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak promised to put [integrity, professionalism and accountability](#) in government at the heart of his premiership. This promise is to be warmly welcomed – commentators and experts have raised consistent alarms about [slipping constitutional standards](#) in recent years, and research shows that the [public care deeply about honesty and integrity](#) in their politicians.

But what might such a pledge look like in reality? Against the backdrop of Boris Johnson's resignation this summer, precipitated by concerns about his approach to standards, integrity and accountability, Meg Russell, Alan Renwick and Robert Hazell issued [five questions for the then leadership candidates](#) to address on rebuilding constitutional standards and restoring integrity. The subsequent premiership of Liz Truss [aptly demonstrated](#) these questions' continuing relevance. This post sets out the five core tasks, links them to Sunak's stated goals, and suggests what the new government might do to meet them. It demonstrates close agreement with proposals by [respected experts from other bodies](#) in response to Sunak's pledge.

1. Strengthening the standards system

The system for maintaining government and parliamentary standards was placed under great stress during the Johnson premiership. Successive [Independent Advisers on Ministers' Interests resigned](#), ministers unwisely [attempted to derail](#) a House of Commons Committee on Standards investigation, and a Privileges Committee inquiry into whether [Johnson himself misled parliament](#) is ongoing. Truss's subsequent claim that her personal integrity was a sufficient bulwark against standards breaches fell far short of the [serious commitment to institutional arrangements](#) needed to safeguard integrity.

Rishi Sunak's commitment to appointing a new Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests, [expressed during the summer leadership contest](#), and repeated by the Minister for the Cabinet Office [yesterday in the House of Commons](#) (albeit following the [somewhat problematic](#) reappointment of Suella Braverman), is therefore welcome and important. Sunak should also move to strengthen the existing system. The independent [Committee on Standards in Public Life](#) (CSPL) made recommendations last year to increase the effectiveness of the Independent Adviser, including by giving them the power to initiate investigations into alleged breaches of the Ministerial Code. This proposal, along with various others made by CSPL – such as placing more regulatory codes and roles on a statutory footing – is currently before parliament, via a [private members' bill](#) introduced by Lord (David) Anderson of Ipswich. Providing government backing for the Anderson bill would be one clear and simple way for Sunak to demonstrate his commitment to integrity.

2. Rebuilding the scrutiny role of parliament

A further [crucial mechanism](#) for both professionalism and accountability lies in the scrutiny role played by parliamentarians. Recent years have seen increasing concerns raised about [rushed legislation](#), the [heavy use of delegated powers](#), [evasion of select committee scrutiny](#), and the problems that these cause: both in terms of democratic principles and the increased risk of poorly thought-through policy. The Truss mini-budget was given only [two hours for debate](#) in the Commons, compared to the usual five or so days for a budget, despite the scale of its content.

Some of these problems can be addressed by setting clear expectations of ministers – for example, that they will prioritise select committee attendance. Others will require Sunak to address the mechanisms by which his predecessors limited parliamentary oversight of their policy-making. The [Retained EU Law \(Revocation and Reform\) Bill](#), which is currently in the early stages of its parliamentary passage, offers an early opportunity to do this. [Various experts](#) have [criticised](#) the scale of the delegated powers that the bill would give to ministers, allowing thousands of pieces of law to be amended or scrapped with only minimal parliamentary oversight. The [extent of the ministerial powers](#) in the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, currently before the House of Lords, has likewise caused alarm. It is probable that the House of Lords will seek to increase the parliamentary controls on the delegated powers contained in both bills; government openness to such amendments would be a further indication that the Sunak administration is serious about getting democratic accountability back on track.

3. Defending the rule of law

Integrity and accountability in government both demand a renewed commitment to the [rule of law](#), and to respecting both domestic and international legal obligations.

Domestically, there have been attacks on the courts, as further outlined below. And ministers have too often resorted to using '[ouster clauses](#)' to remove certain areas of decision-making from legal challenge.

Significant [concerns](#) have also been raised about the willingness of both the Johnson and Truss governments to risk [breaching international law](#). The most high-profile instances of this have concerned their approach to the Northern Ireland Protocol. Sunak now inherits the [Northern Ireland Protocol Bill](#), which began its life under Johnson and was championed by Truss. The bill, which is currently before the House of Lords, has been described as '[not constitutional](#)' by the (Conservative) chair of the Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and as a departure from the [UK's international obligations](#) by the chair (again Conservative) of the Commons Justice Committee. The Lords is expected to amend the bill significantly, at a minimum to raise the bar which ministers must

meet if they wish to breach international law. Sunak should think carefully before whipping his MPs to vote against such amendments when they return to the Commons, and should put significant efforts in the meantime into finding a negotiated solution to the Protocol controversy.

4. Abiding by long-established constitutional norms

Also essential to integrity, professionalism and accountability is adherence to the conventions and traditions which underpin the UK's political constitution. One important step would be a pledge to abide by the recommendations of the House of Lords Appointments Commission, which vets peerage nominees for propriety. Sunak should also take care over the number of members appointed to the Lords – Johnson's appointments ([87 while in office](#) plus another [26 handed on to Truss](#), and others possibly to follow) [flouted the recommendations](#) of the committee established by the Lord Speaker to manage down the size of the chamber. Excessive prime ministerial patronage is [deeply unpopular with the public](#), and Sunak should return to the standards of restraint [established by Theresa May](#).

The Johnson government was also notable for its willingness to risk drawing the monarchy into political controversy – whether through the [unlawful prorogation](#), suggestions in 2019 that Johnson might '[dare the Queen to sack him](#)', or Johnson's [reluctance](#) earlier this year to rule out requesting a dissolution of parliament in order to circumvent his removal from office by his own MPs. This indicated a willingness to push constitutional arrangements to their limits, and undermine the non-political status of the monarch. The Sunak government should resolutely avoid taking such risks.

5. Defending political institutions and checks and balances

Finally, a critical aspect of restoring professionalism to public life is repairing the relationships between government and the various constitutional actors which provide [institutional checks and balances](#) in policy-making. In addition to parliament, these include the courts, regulators and the civil service. One simple way of demonstrating respect for these institutions would be avoid rhetorical attacks on the [judiciary](#), [legal professionals](#), and [civil servants](#) which appeared to be sanctioned by both Johnson and Truss. Sunak should also refuse to tolerate the scapegoating of senior civil servants – seen most recently through the unorthodox [sacking of Tom Scholar](#).

The Johnson and Truss governments sought in particular to sideline institutions which they saw as defenders of 'orthodoxy'. While policy disagreements are legitimate, attempts to shut down or circumvent potential critics are incompatible with professionalism in government. Such efforts were most recently evident in the Truss government's attempt to bypass the usual [independent economic assessments](#) for its mini-budget, and strained relationship with the [Bank of England](#) – with very damaging effect. Sunak has promised a different approach, and this welcome recognition of the value of checks and balances should extend to other areas.

Conclusion

For Rishi Sunak to emphasise integrity, professionalism and accountability as central to his leadership is not only constitutionally sound, but also politically astute. Recent [Constitution Unit research](#) has shown that members of the public care deeply about honesty and integrity in their politicians. They support an independent and professional civil service, a stronger role for regulators, an ongoing, powerful role for the courts in preventing abuses, and deeper parliamentary scrutiny and accountability. There will be ample opportunities for Rishi Sunak to demonstrate his commitment to these principles in the coming weeks and months.

About the authors

Meg Russell FBA is Professor of British and Comparative Politics at UCL and Director of the Constitution Unit

Alan Renwick is Professor of Democratic Politics at UCL and Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit

Sophie Andrews-McCarroll is Impact Research Fellow at the Constitution Unit

Lisa James is Research Fellow at the Constitution Unit

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Contact us: +44(0)20 7679 4977 | constitution@ucl.ac.uk

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