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CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS INDEX 2022: A WAKE-UP CALL FOR BRITAIN

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Another year, another Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) launch.

For those of you who don't know what it is, the CPI combines into one index up to 13 different surveys of business execs and country experts, and their perceptions of public sector corruption. Typically, these ask questions about things like the (mis)management of public funds, the corrupting influence of political donors, and bribery in the award of public contracts. To emphasise, this is a survey of surveys, and one represents expert perceptions of corruption, not real-life levels. The two things may be related but are not the same thing.

Underlying the index is a complex set of calculations that hammer all its constituent parts into a standard score ranging from 0 (perceived as very corrupt) to 100 (perceived as very clean). Put simply, the higher a country scores the less corrupt experts and businesspeople think it is. Due to a methodological tweak in 2012, you can only compare results over time back to then, but there's now a decade of data if you fancy doing this kind of analysis. Oh, and CPI scores can include data from up to two years previous (to help with continuity of results), which is important if you want to read the tea leaves and work out why a country's particular score has gone up or down.

With me so far? Good.

Scandinavia tends to do well, with the top spot often a tussle between Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and New Zealand (their Australasian competitor). The UK has tended to be nearer the apex than not, with a brief stint in the top ten for two years. Not quite Europa League but getting close. While dramatic shifts in scores from year to year are unusual, Team GB has seemed to hit something of a glass ceiling of late. Until this year, that is, when it changed markedly, and for all the wrong reasons.

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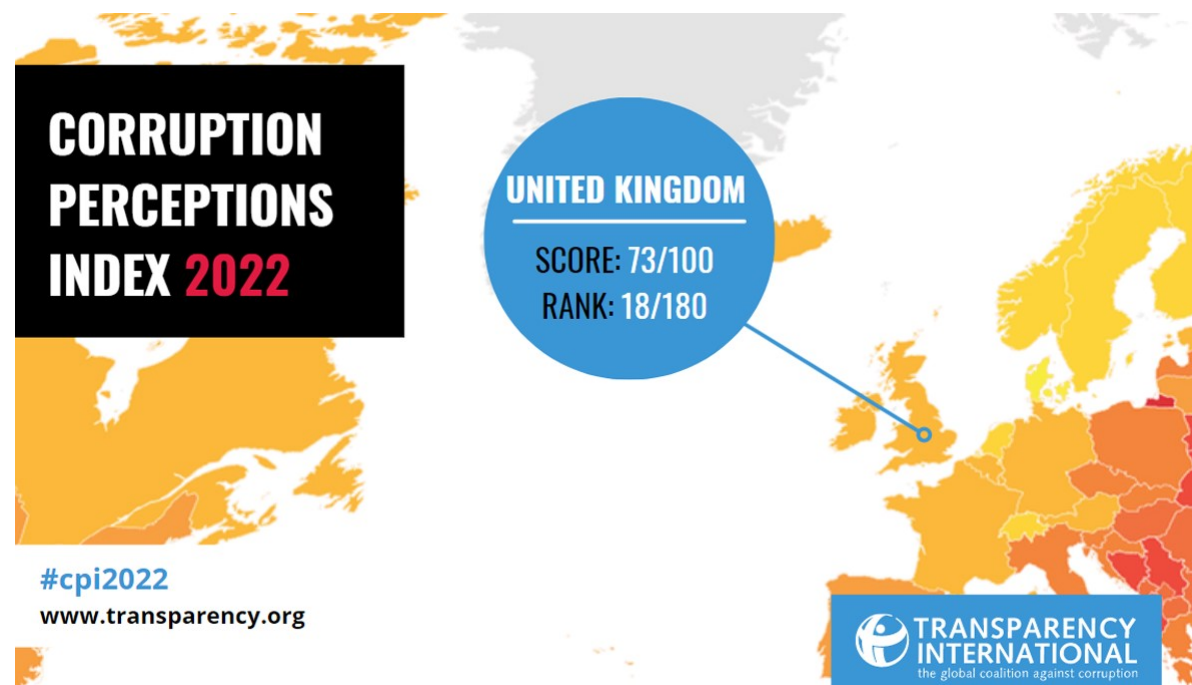
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This week's results [see Britain's score drop five points and seven places in the global rankings to its worst performance since comparable records began](#). Under any measure this is not good, with Blighty slipping at a similar rate of knots to autocracies like Azerbaijan and Qatar. Not great company to keep given the context.

Hopefully this will be a wake-up call for those who've pointed the finger elsewhere when asked where corruption lies. Only last year were ministers using the CPI to defend the actions of its ministers when confronted with allegations of wrongdoing in Parliament. [When asked for his thoughts on the UK's worst-ever performance at this week's Prime Minister's Questions,](#)

Rishi Sunak instead referenced a report from the Financial Action Task Force which has no bearing on the perceived levels of public sector corruption assessed in the CPI.

While the UK is not yet seen as a bastion of bad behaviour, it's in real danger of falling further down this league table of good governance. I won't list the events that may or may not have contributed towards this slump. It's difficult to see how the political and procurement scandals of the past two years would not have played a part, but looking at the underlying data we can't say for certain. However, it is perhaps unsurprising that some peoples' response to this year's score – especially [those that work closely on standards in public life](#) - is akin to a shrug of the shoulders and a 'sounds about right'.

It doesn't take an expert to tell that those in high office have played fast and loose with convention and their conduct in recent years. In many ways, the CPI is telling us what we've all known for some time – that impropriety in public life is in danger of becoming a norm in our country. And it comes with real costs.

The tally of money wasted on faulty COVID-19 contracts – [awarded seemingly based on political connections rather than suitability for the job](#) – is still being counted, but it is in the tens of millions, if not more. The [pork-barrel politics of the Towns Fund](#) has diverted tens of millions more towards electorally expedient projects rather than those serving the most in need. The drip, drip, drip of sleaze will certainly do nothing for trust in our political elites and the resilience of our democracy.

Sorting it out

What is to be done? Well, here's three things that have been put on the 'too difficult' pile too

often over the past decade yet have been at the heart of much of what's gone wrong in recent years.

The Prime Minister [claimed to be a man of integrity and accountability when entering office](#), yet he has yet to translate these lofty words into deeds. That he [appointed a new independent ethics advisor](#) is better than nothing, but in reality the role has no independence at all. Giving them full autonomy and more powers to investigate and report their findings would not go amiss. [Lord Anderson's Bill on ethics and integrity](#), currently in the Lords, would deliver these things were government to support it through Parliament.

Numerous scandals of recent year have come from scoops by journalists with well-placed sources, yet much of what's reported needs to be made available more freely. The lobbying of ministers, whether over public procurement decisions or taxpayer bailouts, should be a matter of public record not a state secret, which is what it feels like sometimes. If the US, Canada and even Ireland can have functioning lobbying transparency registers, it begs the question why we can't.

And central to far too many Westminster scandals is the corrupting influence of big money on our politics. That it's [almost certain £3million in political donations can buy you membership of our legislature](#) makes a mockery of our desire to protect democracies abroad. Capping the amount any donor can give in a year would surely reduce the temptation of any quid pro quo.

I have no pretensions to think any of these will happen overnight. Indeed, I've seen the hopes of political finance reform come and go over the past few decades several times. But given the state we're in currently, I'd counsel our political leaders that the favoured strategy of delaying does not seem to be working.

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