

Lies and Parliament

Telling the truth assists democratic debate and good government. I myself always seek accuracy when making statements or writing blogs. In the Commons a lie is called misleading the House. It can be inadvertent, the MP made a mistake or did not know his or her statement was false. The MP is asked to correct it urgently and all is forgiven if he or she does. It can be deliberate, in which case the House may proceed with investigation and punishment.

There are a whole series of lies regularly told by governments and other MPs which are accepted because they are untruths shared by many people and political parties, or because they are essential to sustain policies and government actions that are coming under pressure.

In some cases most can see why someone has to lie. A Labour Prime Minister who had to deny he was about to devalue the pound shortly before he did so had to tell relentless markets he had no intention of devaluing to try to stave off the market forces. A Conservative Prime Minister who took us out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism had to keep denying he would do any such thing right up to the point of collapse of the policy of staying in.

Most of the lies are statements that MPs lazily accept without proper consideration of the facts. Let us take the statement "The Bank of England is independent". The Bank of England is 100% owned by the state. Its huge portfolio of bonds is fully guaranteed by the Treasury. It needs Chancellor permission to buy and sell the bonds. The Governor is appointed on the say so of the government. Chancellors meet Governors for regular chats to ensure monetary and fiscal policy are in step. The Governor has to submit himself to questioning by the Treasury Committees of Parliament. Parliament and government can and do regularly change the Bank's remit and rules.

I have heard a good few Ministers from three different political parties mislead the House from time to time. Belonging to the EU meant Ministers regularly recommended and defended laws the UK had opposed or tried to modify when they had first been drafted by the EU. They never said this was a bad law we did not want, when that was true. Tomorrow I will look at why Ministers may say things that are wrong, relying on civil service advice.