

The struggle to define corruption through history

Tuesday 12 May 2015 4:18PM

Stan Correy



IMAGE: A ROUGH SKETCH OF

THE TIMES AS DELENATED BY SIR FRANCIS BURDETT. THOMAS ROWLANDSON, 1819 (USED WITH PERMISSION © THE TRUSTEE OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM)

Most of us believe corruption is not a good thing. Many influential philosophers, from St Augustine to Adam Smith might disagree, however. **Stan Correy** takes a look at the struggle to define what exactly constitutes corruption and how people have historically tried to stop it.

ABC Radio National
Excerpt: Confusing corruption

SOUNDCLOUD
Share

1:42

274

Cookie policy

'If it is corruption, then it is corruption on a scale probably unexceeded since the days of the Rum Corps.'

- Geoffrey Watson SC, speaking to the NSW ICAC in 2012

A few years before the Rum Corps was plying its trade in colonial NSW, the longest corruption trial ever was coming to an end in London. It had gone on for eight years, from 1787 to 1795.

The trial concerned the head of the East India Company and governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings. At its centre was an issue that is still relevant today: the difference between good and bad gifts—when is a gift a bribe?

Hastings had a habit of accepting gifts from a host of Indian princes and local officials. Back in London some British politicians, including political philosopher Edmund Burke, saw Hastings' rule in

Most prominent thinkers in the western tradition were prepared, if not to

India as the epitome of corruption. Eventually, he was put on trial.

According to University of Warwick historian Mark Knights, his defence was that gift giving was part of Indian culture. 'Rulers were expected to exchange gifts;

that was how that culture worked and therefore British ideals about totally un-corrupt behaviour were naive,' says Knights.

In the end, Hastings was found not guilty, but the very word 'corruption' has always been contested: in 18th century London, in Renaissance Florence, in Washington DC, and in the recent High Court decision on the jurisdiction of NSW's ICAC.

The politician, the public servant, the police officer, and the judge have always been at the centre of debate about where the boundary between the private and the public sphere lies. Mark Knights' blog, *Corruption Then and Now*, compares modern corruption scandals with those that occurred in previous centuries. According to him, a recurring problem for governments and courts is the notion of misconduct.

A few years before the Hastings trial, an army paymaster called Charles Bemridge was charged with corruption. He'd neglected to reveal very large holes in the accounts of his boss. Bemridge claimed it wasn't his job to do in his boss, but the court disagreed. The Bemridge case of 1783 was the beginning of the English legal system's attempts to define what official misconduct means and when it strays into corrupt behaviour.

Flash forward several hundred years, and a recent editorial in *The Australian* complained that the ICAC's broad view of corruption was being shaped by activist lawyers. Despite the long list of fascinating corruption trials in English history, however, our conceptions of corruption have been shaped less by lawyers and more by philosophers, especially Aristotle, St Augustine and Machiavelli. All of them had great difficulty working out how to define corruption and how to punish people found guilty of it.

It's easy to say corruption is bad for the political process. However, Yasmin Dawood of the University of Toronto thinks there are two ways to classify corruption. 'The first way is to say corruption basically takes place when you have a public official who uses public office for private gain ... you think about it as the abuse of power,' she says.

'Another way to think about corruption though is in the campaign finance context. So the worry is that you will have a wealthy group of people who will end up controlling a lot of the public policy in the country. That concern is less about the abuse of power and more about inequality.'

In a recent paper titled *Classifying Corruption*, Dawood asked a rather difficult question: why is corruption wrong? Her answer focused on abuse of power and inequality, using the example of changes to US campaign finance laws. Her question is a serious one, though, and it isn't the first time it's been asked.

condone corruption, then at least turn a blind eye to it

BRUCE BUCHAN, GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY



IMAGE: A BRAZILIAN PROTEST

CALLING FOR CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM. THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO'S YASMIN DAWOOD BELIEVES DONATIONS HAVING UNDUE INFLUENCE ON DEMOCRACY MAY BE A FORM OF CORRUPTION. (EVARISTO SA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

Eighteenth century writer Bernard de Mandeville thought that corruption was beneficial to society, a line of argument that influenced Adam Smith, whose ideas on free markets still dominate modern economic life.

Mandeville wrote that private vices were in fact public goods and that states thrive through the encouragement of private interests and private vices. According to Griffith University historian Bruce Buchan, Smith was convinced by de Mandeville's argument but worried about the moral implications.

'[De Mandeville thought] self-interest has a vital role to play and that to some degree it's simply natural to expect individuals in that profit maximising mode to want to engage in purchasing luxuries, and that therefore that creates an industry in creating luxury and that that has economic benefits,' says Buchan, co-author of *An Intellectual and Political History of Corruption*.

De Mandeville wasn't the first person to argue that corruption can have economic benefits, either. According to Buchan, 'most prominent thinkers in the western tradition were prepared, if not to condone corruption, then at least turn a blind eye to it'.

One of the most surprising figures to have turned a blind eye was the 4th century Bishop of Hippo, St Augustine. Augustine had led a dissolute life as young man, but at age 33 converted to Christianity and became one of the most ferocious campaigners against 'earthly corruption'.

As a philosopher Augustine was concerned with the moral and spiritual connotations of corruption and spent an enormous amount of time in his great work, *The City of God*, talking about its dangers.

Yet he also had his day job as a bishop. As a church administrator he had to manage a system in which corruption was rife in the form of purchased legal decisions and church offices.

According to Bruce Buchan, St Augustine conveniently believed that the best candidate for an office could actually be the one who bought it.

So what are the lessons of history when it comes to classifying corruption? Buchan thinks the High Court of Australia's recent narrow definition of corrupt behaviour clashes with the long history of thought about political corruption.

The big lesson, he says, is that corruption is always the norm rather than the exception: 'The history of corruption indicates that corruption is a much more expansive notion and much harder to pin down.'



Confusing corruption

Down

Sunday 10 May 2015

Listen to this episode of *Rear Vision* to understand more about 'The Monster of Corruption'.

[More](#)

Rear Vision puts contemporary events in their historical context, answering the question, 'How did it come to this?'

466 Like Tweet 20 [G+ Share](#) [Email](#)