

The London Anti-Corruption Summit: one good day is not enough

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*Issues of financial secrecy took centre-stage at the anti-corruption summit in London on 12 May. **Sam Power** reviews the progress made, arguing that the summit was a small step in the right direction, but by no means the dawn of a new era. With the limelight on the anti-corruption talks already fading away, the summit's success will ultimately depend on the process for translating reforms into action.*



Representatives from over 40 countries, from Argentina, to Georgia to the United States, met in London to discuss all things anti-corruption on 12 May. Proceedings could have got off to a better start than when David Cameron was caught describing Afghanistan and Nigeria as 'fantastically corrupt'. While not entirely inaccurate, it is probably fair to say that his comments were misguided. Furthermore, Cameron was under pressure domestically; less about who was invited than who wasn't.

It is perhaps unsurprising, given the almighty – and continuing – hullabaloo over the Panama Papers that issues of financial secrecy largely took top billing at the event, as well as proposals to crack down on secretive offshore arrangements. And we should perhaps mediate any cynicism we might have towards David Cameron's motives for the summit and its outcomes. While debates can be had about the UK government's record, or indeed wider political will on the subject, talking strong on tackling corruption is not something that Cameron has shirked from in the past.

As well as leading discussions on bringing more transparency to government, Cameron chaired the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in 2012 and published the UK's first anti-corruption action plan in 2014. Further, in a Guardian editorial trailing the 2016 summit he doubled down, describing corruption as 'one of the greatest enemies of progress in our time'.

It should be remembered, however, that history is littered with influential world figures decrying the damage that corruption does to our society. Famously in 1996, President of the World Bank James Wolfensohn placed the fight against corruption front and centre of its governance agenda when he spoke of the 'cancer of corruption' – 20 years down the track even a starry-eyed optimist might stop to wonder if any real progress has been made.

The 2016 summit

It is therefore important to view progress, no matter how small, as a step in the right direction – and the summit has undoubtedly achieved this. In particular, a beneficial ownership transparency initiative (BOTI), putting in place (retroactive) transparency requirements for those companies who own or purchase property in the UK, is welcome. Concealing illicit funds through assets such as property should now, in theory, be considerably harder.



However, the undoubted progress on transparency measures are blunted somewhat in that all jurisdictions are not covered. As the president of the Cayman Islands (who signed up to BOTI) Alden McClaughlin [noted](#), certain US states remain peripheral to such agreements. Indeed, given the relative lack of US figures named, it may be suggested that those who you might expect to be named were not – potentially because it is somewhat easier to continue with these controversial arrangements ‘in house’.

Secondly, although FIFA may have been absent, the summit saw the (pre)launch of an International Sport Integrity Partnership in 2017 and a push for an International Centre for Law Enforcement collaboration. Although promising, the latter outcomes of this summit seemed to lack a key promise, and one that Cameron was explicitly trumpeting before the summit began: ‘political will’.

And it is this lack of political will that is one of the main reasons such little progress has been made since Wolfensohn put the World Bank front and centre in the fight against corruption. Strongly worded statements and international discussions of what might, and might not, work are all very well. However, without significant stakeholder buy-in – from the very top – reforms are unlikely to succeed. This is the challenge of an increasingly globalised phenomenon. It is easy to gather representatives together to discuss (and sing up to) measures – it is much harder to actually get these measures into practice after the event.

So while the summit in London was a step in the right direction, any talk of the start of a new era should be taken with a pinch of salt. International anti-corruption accords run into the double digits. They include the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Anti-Bribery Convention, and the Council of Europe’s Group of Economic States Against Corruption (GRECO), to name but three. This is not to undermine the good work that these (and other) organisations have done, but the ‘youngest’ is 15 years old and anti-corruption is still probably better defined as static rather than progressing.

Ultimately, [the summit](#) was undoubtedly ‘a good day in the fight against corruption’, and David Cameron’s role merits praise. However, its success and failure will depend on the process of getting reforms to work in practice. As Dan Hough [has written](#), the fight against corruption has all the high stakes of a prize-fight, and in the words of Mike Tyson, ‘everyone has a plan until they get punched on the nose’.

As such, and much like many previous summits, the best-intentions of reformers will now meet with the practicalities of governance in the real world. Without real political will driving the reforms forward, the gains will quickly fade into oblivion – or perhaps, as Mike Tyson once said, ‘[fade into Bolivian](#)’.

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