

Against Corruption: A Book of Essays

Quotes

Corruption is the cancer at the heart of so many of our problems in the world today. It destroys jobs and holds back growth, costing the world economy billions of pounds every year. It traps the poorest in the most desperate poverty as corrupt governments around the world syphon off funds and prevent hard-working people from getting the revenues and benefits of growth that are rightfully theirs. It steals vital resources from our schools and hospitals as corrupt individuals and companies evade the taxes they owe. It can even undermine our security, as Sarah Chayes argues in her essay, if the perceived corruption of local governments makes people more susceptible to the poisonous ideology of extremists. The longer I have been Prime Minister, and the more I have seen in this job, the more I believe that we cannot hope to solve the big global challenges of our time without making a major dent in the whole cycle of corruption. If we continue to hide from this problem, how will developing countries blessed with natural resources ever break out of the poverty trap? How will we stop people from risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean unless we enable them to build a better life back at home? In the end, we have to deal with

corruption if we are to have any hope of a truly prosperous and secure future.¹

Corruption incentivises the best and the brightest to spend their time gaming the system, rather than innovating or creating new wealth. Politically, corruption undermines the legitimacy of political systems by giving elites alternative ways of holding onto power other than genuine democratic choice. It hurts the prospects of democracy when people perceive authoritarian governments to be performing better than corrupt democratic ones and undermines the reality of democratic choice.²

Denmark is currently seen as the least corrupt place in the world and many non-Western countries such as Botswana are also viewed as relatively untainted (Transparency International 2015). In most societies, corruption is not normal: it is therefore potentially avoidable everywhere. Corruption is concentrated in pockets because it depends upon common expectations of behaviour. Where corruption is the norm, getting rid of it poses a co-ordination problem: if I expect those around me to continue to be corrupt, why should I change my behaviour? Because of this, pockets of corruption have proved to be highly persistent: the same industries and the same societies remain corrupt for many years.

¹ 7-8 Kindle Ed.

² 19.

Similarly, honesty is persistent. In the first TI survey conducted in 1995, Denmark was rated second globally. This persistence is not a matter of chance. Danes are born into an honest society and so inherit the expectation that they themselves will be trustworthy. Being trusted is a valuable asset: it makes many aspects of life much easier. In consequence, individual Danes have a strong incentive not to squander this valuable asset through behaving opportunistically. Because people have rationally chosen to protect their reputation for honesty, the entire society has stayed honest.³

By any measure, Afghanistan is one of the most corrupt countries on earth. Fifty years of near constant conflict have destroyed both social and institutional controls. The flood of money that poured into the country for reconstruction after the overthrow of the Taliban in late 2001 further fragmented and reduced its systems of accountability.⁴

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³ 36-37.

⁴ 126.