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Profile in Public Integrity:

Laurence Cockcroft

Author, and Co-Founder of Transparency International



A development economist and author, Laurence Cockcroft co-founded Transparency International in 1993 and served as Chairman of the U.K. chapter from 2000-2008. Cockcroft has drawn from his experience with Transparency International to author [Global Corruption](#), as well as [Unmasked: Corruption in the West](#), recently published in the U.K. and the U.S. by I.B. Tauris.

How did you first become interested in the anti-corruption field? Did your experience as a development economist in Africa play a role in your commitment to this work?

My involvement in African development issues certainly led to my enthusiasm for the birth of [Transparency International](#) (TI). I had worked for the governments of Zambia and Tanzania in the late 1960s and early 1970s when corruption was minimal; I later worked for the corporate sector and as a consultant on a range of mainly rural and agricultural development issues across at least ten countries in eastern and western Africa. As the 1980s unfolded it became clear that corruption was undermining many of the otherwise reasonably formulated development projects in those and other sectors. It was also clear that the “donor community” was unwilling to address the question—mainly, I think, because doing so would potentially undermine their *raison d’être* and the political support they needed at home. At that time this certainly extended to the big nonprofits like Oxfam.

In 1991 I was working quite closely with Joe Githongo, a senior Kenyan accountant, on several consultancy assignments. It was Joe who pointed out to me that “development types” from the north should be much more focused on corruption issues, at that time becoming conspicuously dramatic in Kenya itself. Joe was also a friend of Peter Eigen, then the World Bank Director for Eastern Africa, who was mulling over the possibility of setting up an international nonprofit devoted to fighting corruption. We jointly penned a short proposal. By 1993 Peter’s work worldwide had more or less crystallized the underlying concepts for this potential new entity.

Driving this effort was a shared view that the impact of corruption was escalating and holding back progress in fighting the urban and rural poverty that characterized Africa both then and now. It was as if the success quite often achieved in various projects at the grassroots level could be completely outweighed by the huge sums stolen from the public purse by well-placed political and business elites.

In 1993, you joined the first international board of Transparency International. Looking back over the last two decades, what are some of the key lessons you learned as a leader in the anti-corruption movement?

As you can see from the above TI was launched with plenty of enthusiasm and personal commitment. Its underlying principles were (a) to be a membership based organization, with “chapters” around the world—hopefully; (b) to seek to work through a coalition of government, business, and civil society; (c) to avoid the investigation or exposure of individual cases, and (d) to seek to persuade the big global organizations like the [World Bank and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) (OECD) that it was essential to address corruption as part of their mandate. By the early 2000s, most bilateral development organizations had accepted that.

It's fair to say that all of these assumptions and objectives were well formulated and—in so far as TI has been successful—stood the test of time, with one exception: (b), the coalition approach. For example, the early “TI success” of the OECD Anti Bribery Convention of 1997 had a mediocre impact at best.

The concept of a membership base was always a good one and will continue to work well for TI with its particular mission. It can be contrasted with that of the equally successful anti-corruption nonprofit [Global Witness](#), based on the investigation and exposure of major cases of grand corruption and functioning without a comparable membership base.

The lower-key forms of corruption prevalent in the West do not go unnoticed in the rest of the world

During these years I had also played a central role in setting up [TI's UK chapter](#) and witnessed early problems in the 90s of gaining acceptance for the international anti-corruption agenda. There were one or two people in government—such as Lynda Chalker—who understood the issues, but most believed it threatened British business interests abroad. It was a long haul to the Bribery Act of 2012 which finally made a bribe paid overseas a criminal act. I also initiated a program within TI UK, now spread worldwide, to address the issue of corruption in the defense industry and in its global operations, an initiative which has had considerable impact even within the corporate world.

Your new book, *Unmasked: Corruption in the West*, is a deep look into corruption in Europe and North America. How do corruption issues, and anti-corruption measures, vary across the west?

In researching and writing the book, which looks at corruption in North America and Europe, my co-author and I came to see that the issues in the two areas were quite close—each of the nine sectors we looked at were prone to corruption either directly or indirectly. Of course the level of incidence varies: banking and finance conspicuously corrupt in the US (on our definition); sports much more corrupt in Europe. But areas of shared incidence would include the lobbying “industry,” organized crime, the role of corruption in undermining climate mitigation measures, and the role of offshore banking (taken to include British Caribbean dependencies and US states such as Wyoming and Colorado). I would not say that the role and impact of corruption is of a different order of magnitude in these cases. Populist politicians on both sides of the Atlantic are using the issue to further their cause.

In what ways is corruption in Western countries similar to, or different from, the corruption you observed in Africa?

There is a tremendous difference between countries where corruption is endemic (say below 50 on TI's [Corruption Perception Index](#) and true of nearly all Africa) and those—as in the US and the most of the EU—where it influences policy outcomes and specific public investments but has only an irregular impact on specific sectors such as retail banking. In the first case the whole population below a very elite level has to survive and access public services by paying small-scale bribes to “public servants.” Much of the public sector is really a private domain and low-income groups are further impoverished by the prevalence of corruption. Public leaders in the political realm are often successful in externalizing very large sums to secrecy jurisdictions, at the expense of society as a whole.

In the second case only a very small proportion of the population (probably under 5%) is ever requested to pay a bribe, but there are many ways in which outcomes that work to the disadvantage of low-income groups and taxpayers in general are determined by forms of corruption both subtle and unsubtle.

What can CAPI members do to advocate for increased transparency and stronger anti-corruption measures in the United States and abroad?

The lower-key forms of corruption prevalent in the West do not go unnoticed in the rest of the world, which has an important and negative impact on global attitudes on this issue. From a general perspective, which has held for the last twenty years, the US has rightly prioritized support of key international steps taken through the [United Nations Convention Against Corruption](#) (UNCAC), the OECD Anti Bribery convention, money laundering regulations and the fight against organized crime. On the domestic front, some of the Dodd-Frank provisions (notably in support of country-by-country corporate reporting) have been copied in the EU and elsewhere with a beneficial effect. The Obama administration was engaged in trying to end the anonymity of beneficial ownership in various states. With the Trump Administration much of these successes are in doubt. In February, Congress actually modified the Dodd Frank Act to end the principle of country-by-country reporting, and the President signed off on it, calling into doubt whether the EU would follow suit.

It follows that the key priority should be to preserve the positive steps made so far. Every repeal or retreat which the US makes from hard-won international measures is a blow to a pattern of progress in the anti-corruption endeavor. Equally significant is the tone set in domestic areas such as campaign finance. Campaigns to rebuild that system must be sustained until they ultimately succeed.

In the next few years the key requirement may be simply to keep the anti-corruption flag flying, and to reassure those who are fighting in dangerous contexts that they are backed by real international support.