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Re-thinking corruption in post-1950 urban Britain: the Poulson affair, 1972–1976

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ABSTRACT: The Poulson affair is central for the agenda of post-1950 British urban history. Particularly, it suggests that corruption is a key facet within the politics of planning and the rebuilding of Britain's urban environment. Poulson provides a useful route into an examination of the place of corruption because of the scale of his activity both in terms of volumes and types of constructions he planned. His networks and the geographical concentrations of his work also provide a regional dimension. Perceptions of Poulson have been fashioned by investigative and satirical journalism and television. A re-evaluation in light of official government sources and Poulson's autobiography raise important issues concerning the ethics of public officials and private businessmen; and the consequences of the interaction of public and private markets. Poulson's business was driven by the twin engines of government funding and the activity cycles of the construction industry. The fluctuation in his planned commissions provides a useful barometer of the planning environment. Poulson's demise exposed the complex relations between business, civil servants, ministers and local councillors contributing to growing public distrust of the workings of government. Finally, it is suggested that the affair was a critical factor in re-shaping central–local government relationships.

Introduction

In the final volume of the *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, Martin Daunton speculates whether an urban history of Britain after 1950 is 'feasible'. For those who might support such a position, he suggests that they would claim that an 'urban variable' is no longer sufficiently distinct because Britain is an urban country and therefore a 'separate urban history is no longer realistic'.[1] He then proceeds by way of refutation to set out a potential agenda for a post-1950 history of urban Britain. It includes *inter alia* an understanding of the processes that have led to the marginalization of urban government; an analysis of the environmental and infrastructural issues which affect modern cities; the rise and fall of modernist planning concepts; the growth of conservationist thinking and policies; the fluctuations in the growth and size of the urban housing

[1] M. Daunton, 'Epilogue' in M. Daunton (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. III (Cambridge, 2000), 833.

market and its relationship with the wider national economy; as well as studies of on-the-ground urban processes such as 'gentrification'. Although he gives some brief account of the factors which contributed to the diminishing status of local urban government – not least the ideological onslaught of the Thatcher governments in the 1980s – he does not instance the revelations of corruption in urban planning in the 1960s. It is contended in this article that corruption in the urban planning process should be a key item in the post-1950 history of urban Britain.

The orthodox view of the Poulson affair

Incalculably evil man.[2]

John Poulson (1910–93), successful architect, filed for bankruptcy in 1972. His case opened in Wakefield in June; and as a consequence of his own evidence he was charged with numerous counts of corruption and committed for trial at Leeds Crown Court. It was the biggest such trial in the twentieth century with 21 people including Poulson being convicted. Summing up, the prosecuting barrister described Poulson as an 'ambitious, ruthless and friendless man whose object in life was to get as much money and work as he could by bribery and corruption'.[3] The judge when sentencing called Poulson an 'incalculably evil man'. The sense of astonishment was further emphasized: 'To offer corrupt gifts strikes at the very foundation of our system. To accept them is a betrayal of trust.'[4] Poulson was sentenced to seven years in prison but was paroled in May 1977 after serving three years. The bankruptcy file and subsequent corruption trials were the climax of a long career of corruption which had begun prior to the World War II. It expanded in scope during and immediately after the war as Poulson recognized the potential volumes of work to be had from the Ministry of Works, Department of Health, British Railways Board, the National Coal Board as well as from local government authorities. Poulson's corruptions became more audacious from 1962 onwards when his association with T. Dan Smith, the charismatic Newcastle-upon-Tyne city boss, enabled him to obtain work in towns in the north of England. Smith had set up 14 public relations companies to which he appointed local councillors as paid consultants.[5] In return, these councillors, contrary to the Local Government Act 1933, voted for Poulson's architectural schemes without declaring their interests. The

[2] Justice Waller, summing-up at Poulson's trial, *Times*, 12 Feb. 1974.
[3] *Independent*, 4 Feb. 1993. Poulson had paid £155,000 to T. Dan Smith for public relations work and had also donated £22,000 to the Adeline Genée charity which was actively sponsored by Reginald Maudling's wife.
[4] Justice Waller, sentencing Poulson, and George Pottinger, *Times*, 12 Feb. 1974.
[5] L. Chester, 'Obituary: T. Dan Smith', *Independent*, 28 Jul. 1993; N. McCord, 'Smith, Thomas Daniel [T. Dan] 1915–1993', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004–08) visited at www.oxforddnb.com on 15 Dec. 2009.

political fall-out from the affair also snared a number of MPs and the home secretary, Reginald Maudling, who had resigned from the cabinet in July 1972 because of his links with Poulson. Additionally, Ted Short, the Labour MP for Newcastle Central was also tainted because of his association with T. Dan Smith. By May 1974, it was apparent that there were more than 300 people who might be investigated but the attorney general resolved that only cases of potential importance should be pursued.[6] Nevertheless, the 'scope of Poulson's network of generosity and mutual obligation'[7] was clear.

The Poulson affair has been perceived as a scandal because of its presentation by investigative journalists alongside other scandals, of which the Profumo affair is the most notable. Historians, both popular and academic, have tended to use Poulson as an illustration of British decline and the passing of an older order. The case is used in an emblematic fashion with Profumo and Joseph Kagan whose link with Harold Wilson helped to paint a pervasive picture of malaise and a general moral disintegration of politics and public life.[8] This tendency is perhaps derived from the fact that there have been a number of popular histories of post-war Britain that have relied on the early journalists' accounts.[9] More scholarly works have either ignored the Poulson affair or given it scant attention. Thus, the collapse of the Heath government is attributed to 'bad luck' and Reginald Maudling's involvement with Poulson.[10] More recently, it has been argued that 'respect for British political institutions' began to break down and Poulson is cited in a list starting first with Suez and second with Profumo.[11] At the same time, the Poulson's case appears as a key feature in political biography.[12] Maudling had become a director of one of Poulson's companies. Poulson had hoped to use Maudling's reputation to secure hospital contracts in Malta. These studies, though, are concerned to illustrate a purpose outside the Poulson affair itself. Nevertheless, we know it had a significant impact on MPs and it also resulted in the establishment of a Royal Commission on Standards of Conduct in Public

[6] M. Pinto-Duschinsky, 'Corruption in Britain: the Royal Commission on Standards of Conduct in Public Life', *Political Studies*, 25 (1977), 274–84.

[7] J. Garrard, 'Scandals: a tentative overview', in J. Moore and J. Smith, *Corruption in Urban Politics and Society, Britain 1780–1950* (Aldershot, 2007), 26.

[8] Kagan had links with Tony Hill, brother of Marcia Williams honoured by Harold Wilson as Lady Falkender.

[9] A.N. Wilson, *Our Times* (London, 2008); A. Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (London, 2006); D. Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London, 2006); A. Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: What Really Happened to Britain in the Seventies* (London, 2009).

[10] C. Cook and A. Sked, *Post War Britain* (London, 1979); K.O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History 1945–1990* (Oxford, 1990), 343.

[11] B. Harrison, *Finding a Role: The United Kingdom 1970–1990* (Oxford, 2010); and his 'The rise, fall and rise of political consensus in Britain since 1940', *History*, 84 (1999), 301–24. Other cases include Lords Jellicoe and Lambton, John Stonehouse, Jeremy Thorpe and Sir Eric Miller.

[12] L. Bastin, *Reggie: The Life of Reginald Maudling* (Gloucester, 2004).

Life, which reported in 1976. A Parliamentary Select Committee had also been established to consider members' interests earlier, in 1969; and a further Committee on Members' Conduct reported in 1977. It also affected local government as Edward Heath had appointed his Committee on Local Government Rules of Conduct.[13]

The journalists' accounts including those by Raymond Fitzwalter and David Taylor[14] have been important, setting the tone of the affair. They were in the revelatory and sensationalist genre of investigative journalism promoted by Harold Evans who edited the *Sunday Times* from 1967 until 1981. Evans became editor of the *Northern Echo* based in Newcastle in 1961. Thus he was well located to understand the politics of the north-east of England where the Poulson–Smith axis achieved such traction in local planning. Evans' journalism was openly campaigning in character especially when it came to exposing wrongdoing perpetrated by politicians. Fitzwalter was a deputy news editor on the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* when he had written his first news articles about Poulson in 1970.[15] He was later a member of Granada Television's *World in Action* team whose coverage of the Poulson affair proved so controversial.[16] Added to these investigative accounts were the more polemical and lampooning reports provided by Paul Foot and *Private Eye*. Foot worked for *Private Eye*, first, between 1967 and 1972 and his political activism as National Union of Journalists' delegate to the TUC and a Socialist Workers' Party candidate in the Birmingham, Stechford by-election in 1977 make his political credentials clear enough.[17] Once the initial reports of Fitzwalter and Foot had appeared, then, the mainstream national press reported the case. Foot's account of Poulson's business activities – 'The Slicker of Wakefield' – in *Private Eye* set the tone. Finally, the *World in Action* programme heightened the sense of political crusade against Poulson and the various officials, civil servants and the local and national politicians that he had corrupted. The problem with much of this coverage is its concentration on Poulson's flawed personality: his bombastic and bullying character; his social climbing and craving for honours; and his membership of secretive organizations such as the masons. It is still a good tale provoking an almost voyeuristic fascination. For those interested in urban history, however, and Britain's post-1950 urban development, the questions that can be asked of the journalists are limited. Instead, we

[13] House of Commons Papers, *Report of the Select Committee on Members Interests*, 20 May 1969; *Report of the Select Committee on the Conduct of Members*, 13 Jul. 1977; *Prime Minister's Committee on Local Government Rules of Conduct*, Cmnd 5636, May 1974.

[14] R. Fitzwalter and D. Taylor, *Web of Corruption: The Story of J.G.L. Poulson and T. Dan Smith* (London, 1981); M. Tompkinson and M. Gillard, *Nothing to Declare: The Political Corruptions of John Poulson* (London, 1982).

[15] 'The master builder', *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*, 9 Apr. 1970.

[16] *World in Action* programme, 'The friends and influence of John L. Poulson', was banned by the Independent Television Authority but later shown as 'The rise and fall of John Poulson' on 30 Apr. 1973.

[17] *Who's Who* (London, 2001), 705.

should look at the relationship of Poulson's architectural businesses with the construction industry more generally.[18] Additionally, that Poulson's corruptions were largely confined to Labour party fiefdoms merits re-examination. Finally, some re-evaluation of those corruptions against the traditions of corrupt practices that prevailed in local politics also warrants scrutiny. Thus, the fact that the prime narrative is seen through the prism of the radical campaigning journalist, although providing some ready-made accounts can, potentially, deflect us from an analysis of the Poulson affair.

Following the bankruptcy hearing and the corruption trials, a Royal Commission on *Standards of Conduct in Public Life* 1974–76[19] was set up by Harold Wilson, whose intention was to shunt the affair into a siding. Its report revealed the response of the political and social elite and it identified themes that are of potential interest to urban historians. In particular, it noted that the issues surrounding planning decisions in local government for housing projects, schools, civic buildings and shopping centres were areas where the 'stakes' were high and where public sector institutions were 'vulnerable'. Further, the conditions which had been created by governments 'in the field of planning law and in urban housing development [had] put a greater strain than has generally been realized upon our system of locally elected councils'.[20] Perhaps more telling, though, was the report's observation that local councillors were often 'handling matters on a financial scale quite beyond their experience in private life'. The local authorities that were the most vulnerable were, apparently, those where one party had 'unchallenged dominance'.[21] Opposition parties were often unable to confront the ruling party with any effectiveness. Many decisions were being taken in closed party group meetings prior to a full council or committee meeting. This was certainly the case in Newcastle when T. Dan Smith was so powerful. If the grip of the ruling party was especially strong then potential complainants felt unable to act because of the pervasive feeling that there 'was no way round the party machine'.[22]

One of the commissioners, Audrey Ward-Jackson, highlighted the problem that much of the agenda about Poulson had already been set by the press and television. She had been a senior civil servant with a background in the Ministry of Works, Town and Country Planning, and Housing and Local Government as well as the Treasury.[23] She recognized that the press had exposed the shortcomings of the police: 'the police take

[18] P. Dunleavy, *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain, 1945–1975: A Study of Corporate Power and Professional Influence in the Welfare State* (Oxford, 1981).
[19] *Royal Commission on Standards of Conduct in Public Life 1974–76*, Salmon Commission, Cmnd 6524; and *World in Action* programme, 'A question of standards', Granada Television, Jul. 1976.
[20] *Standards of Conduct*, para. 37, 11.
[21] *Ibid.*, para. 39, 12.
[22] *Ibid*.
[23] *Who's Who*, 2167.

the view that it is no part of their duties to seek out evidence of malpractice but only to start enquiries after information indicating corruption has been provided to them'.[24] She recognized, too, the potential tensions between the elected committee chairman, claiming modest expenses for his attendance to council business and the professional officials whose earnings he might have envied. The committee chairman 'may find himself sniped at by the media and despised by the public as a featherer-of-his-own-nest, while he himself believes that he is being inadequately rewarded for the work that he is doing'. She also saw that the likes of T. Dan Smith could capture a council through what she described as the 'Robin Hood syndrome'.[25] She quoted Smith directly, 'The people ought to have better housing, fine city centres, first-class recreational facilities ... and if the ordinary processes of government do not provide these, then the ordinary processes of government must be stretched and bent until they do so.' Thus, it was not just the 'selfish and the greedy' who needed to be limited but also the idealistic who may have regarded themselves as 'above the law'.[26] She posed questions about urban politics and the complexity of building-planning issues as part of the urban process: 'Several witnesses expressed to us the view that the buildings constructed by Mr Poulson were generally of good quality and no more expensive than those provided by others. Why then did he need to bribe?'[27] This might be answered by securing understanding of the relationship of the work of an architect, such as Poulson, with the cycle of public expenditure for public building projects and how that cycle was affected by fluctuations of activity in the construction business. Poulson's planned commissions, in Britain, peaked in 1965–66 when he had 59 in progress. In 1971–72, when he faced demands from the Inland Revenue, these had dwindled to 35.[28] At his trial, he lamented that 'the building trade suffers more than any other in the stop–go policy of any government and they are the slowest to recover'.[29] The Salmon Commission was not, however, the last word on Poulson. The Select Committee of MPs on Standards of Conduct had already been set up in March 1969 but its report eschewed the delicate matter of a register of members' interests. In essence, MPs were expected to declare their interests when tabling a question.[30] The Poulson affair, however, did

[24] *Standards of Conduct*, Ward-Jackson Addendum, para. 8, 119. See also J. Calder, 'Obituary: John Poulson', *Independent*, 4 Feb. 1993.
[25] *Standards of Conduct*, para. 9, 119–20.
[26] *Ibid.*, para, 9, 120.
[27] *Ibid.*, para. 10, 120; and *Architectural Review*, 148 (1970), 54.
[28] Poulson's Project – Drawings and Plans, West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS) C391/2/1 to C391/2/211.
[29] *Times*, 3 Jan. 1974.
[30] *Times*, 23 May 1974; House of Commons Papers, *Report of the Select Committee on Members Interests*, 20 May 1969. It was not until 12 Jun. 1975 that MPs approved a Register of Members' Interests.

force the issue and a further Select Committee was set up in November 1976.[31]

Re-evaluation

I have been a fool surrounded by a pack of leeches.[32]

This section will re-evaluate the Poulson affair in three respects: public reaction and the nature of contemporary debate, including Poulson's own views; the broader economic and political environment that fuelled the building boom of the 1960s from which Poulson profited; and finally some observations about the nature of power in the urban political environment in 1950s and 1960s Britain. Salmon gives us an initial glimpse of the affair but it had little impact and was limited as an investigative instrument as it was powerless to compel witnesses to give evidence; its proceedings were slow; and many of the witnesses were employed by public bodies or represented them as elected figures and they may not have been entirely frank. It did not 'survey the scene beneath the waterline'[33] and it took a complacent view about the extent and prevalence of corruption in public life for fear of damaging morale in local government and the *espirit de corps* of the civil service.[34] We should instead apply different perspectives to the problem. First, however, we should establish some definitions of corruption. It certainly involves the abuse of public roles and or resources for personal or private benefit.[35] What might be regarded as such an abuse has varied over time and from society to society. In Britain prior to 1832, the use of public office for personal gratification was not regarded as an abuse. Indeed, the whole point of seeking public office was seemingly to gain personal advantage benefiting from feasts, using corporation property and acquiring privileges. Legal definitions of what was regarded as corrupt have changed over time; but critically what has become illegal has widened as politics has become more representative, more democratic and apparently more accountable because those seeking office claim, in order to get elected, to be acting in the public interest. Therefore, gaining a personal benefit was breaking the rules. Additionally, the scope of the law changed over time as the scale of government decision making and local authority contracting became more extensive.

Let us begin with the contemporary debate about corruption in local, specifically, urban politics. The Poulson affair attracted attention because

[31] *Report of the Select Committee of Inquiry on the Conduct of Members*, chaired by Michael Stewart MP, 13 Jul. 1977.
[32] *Times*, 4 Jan. 1974.
[33] Pinto-Duschinsky, 'Corruption in Britain', 274–84.
[34] *Standards of Conduct*, para. 42, 12.
[35] M. Doig, *Corruption and Misconduct in Contemporary British Politics* (London, 1984); G. Searle, *Corruption in British Politics 1895–1930* (Oxford, 1987); C. O'Leary, *The Elimination of Corruption in British Elections 1868–1911* (Oxford, 1962); M. Clarke (ed.), *Corruption* (London, 1983).

contemporaries thought it a rare and therefore a shocking occurrence.[36] The vehement reaction of the judge when passing sentence was indicative of this shock and apparent rarity. Corruption is a slippery term but it certainly implies a departure from expected standards of behaviour and the value system that those standards imply. Specifically, there was a conflict of values as articulated by the national elite – judges, civil servants, churchmen and some cabinet ministers – who expected high-minded public duty rather than the grubby ethic apparently prevalent in local government. Above all, it was the naked venality of Poulson's bribes that dismayed so profoundly. In the post-1950 period, the conduct of local politicians was prescribed by three pieces of legislation: the Public Bodies Corrupt Practices Act (1889) which made it illegal to provide gifts, loans, fees, rewards or advantage as an encouragement to any public office holder was a first step to define ethical boundaries. The Prevention of Corruption Act (1906) extended the scope of the 1889 Act enabling prosecution of agents or intermediaries; and finally the Prevention of Corruption Act (1916) increased the penalty for corruption to seven years' imprisonment. The increase in the severity of the penalty was no doubt a reflection of changing perceptions on the part of politicians and wider society about loyalty to the national cause. Such an adjustment revealed that the threshold of tolerance could be adjusted at particular points in time according to circumstance. For instance, Ernest Marples, minister for transport, was also the founder of the civil engineering company Marples Ridgway which secured the contract for the Hammersmith Flyover in the late 1950s.[37] It was sufficient for Marples to make a personal statement to the House of Commons which the Speaker accepted, adding that the issue was not open to debate[38] as the honour of MPs was assumed unless proved otherwise. This had not applied, however, to local alderman and councillors who had been required to declare their interests since the Local Government Act (1933), which disqualified them to speak or vote on matters where they had an interest. Significantly, Poulson's corruptions were uncovered at a time when the increased scope of government management of the economy generally, and building and planning specifically, had never been greater. Poulson's activities entailed numerous offences against these acts. To Lord Salmon's commissioners, the Poulson case made them acutely aware of the problem of standards in public life and their tension with practices in the private sector. The structure of urban politics in the north of England and Smith's use of public relations techniques which were widespread in business and advocated by

[36] J. Moore and J. Smith, 'Corruption and urban governance', in Moore and Smith (eds.), *Corruption in Urban Politics*, 3.
[37] *Times*, 23 Jan. 1960.
[38] *House of Commons Debates*, 28 Jan. 1960, 380–1.

Wilfred Burns, an acknowledged expert in town planning,[39] all highlighted the dangers when large public building contracts were at stake.

The complex nature of local planning reveals the limiting quality of legal definition in respect of corruption. Poulson maintained that he was as much a victim as a perpetrator of wrong doing. His experience in Yorkshire during World War II had taught him that once a building contract had been granted, then the local authority, Knottingley Urban District Council in Poulson's career, was likely to retain the same architects and builders for subsequent contracts. So what was the price to be paid to secure repeat business? He sometimes over-priced contracts providing a completion date that he knew he could beat. Completing under budget and on time could set the scene for further work. Once these tactics had worked, it was then a small step to disperse the potential surpluses in later contracts in the form of bribes, gifts, holidays and even home improvements for councillors. Later, he secured work in Birmingham where, he claimed, local businessmen were 'sliding around rigid wartime rules' and where councillors and officials colluded in these activities: 'In wartime it was not always expedient to bring their wily developers to book for such misdemeanours.'[40] Poulson claimed that he had been corrupted by William Shee, a Health Department official, who sought a 'loan' of £600 from Poulson. It was a commission for the fact that Shee had secured Poulson the Stanley Royd hospital contract.[41] Poulson said that he had been duped by T. Dan Smith, being ' blind to his [Smith's] facile charms and empty assurances'.[42] However, Poulson recognized that Smith 'enjoyed favours' and so after Smith's heart attack in 1964 Poulson paid for a holiday of convalescence. Subsequently, he paid for many holidays for other associates claiming that they were 'restorative' for those working in the demanding and pressurized world of business. He accepted, though, that his association with Smith was 'the crux of [his] own downfall';[43] and that it was the *Private Eye* campaign against Reginald Maudling that was ultimately so damaging. Nevertheless, Poulson accepted his wrong doing but believed that he was 'stupid' rather than 'evil' paying a high price for his misdemeanours: 'I was their scapegoat . . . I was also the victim of a legal and political machination with immense powers of censorship.'[44] What are we to make of all this? Was it the rather pathetic defence of someone found out? Or should we be prepared to consider the proposition that corruption was more widespread than Salmon's report admitted? Poulson's defence at his trial may appear simply to be laying the blame elsewhere: 'I have

[39] W. Burns, *New Towns for Old: The Technique of Urban Renewal* (London, 1963). Burns had been involved in the post-war planning of Coventry; had worked in Newcastle with Smith and gave evidence to the Salmon Commission.
[40] John Poulson, *The Price: The Autobiography of John Poulson, Architect* (London, 1981), 24.
[41] *Ibid.*, 60.
[42] *Ibid.*, 62.
[43] *Ibid.*, 69.
[44] *Ibid.*, 183.

been a fool, surrounded by a pack of leeches. I took on the world in its own terms, and no one can deny that I once had it in my fist.'[45] His vaunting ambition is apparent here but he also displays the attitude that he would sustain in his autobiography: 'I have been brought up that it is a greater pleasure to give than to receive.'[46] He also claimed, 'I have squandered money on people I thought were my friends. They conned me. I did not realise what an old twit I had been until I heard some of the evidence here.'[47]

Journalists and historians alike have presented Poulson's corruption as illegal and immoral using the case as illustration of wider moral turpitude. Corruption then is seen in terms of binary opposites: legal–illegal; moral–immoral.[48] In accounts of developing and especially post-colonial societies, corruption has been presented as an instance of the rational bureaucratic state in conflict with an older more traditional even patrimonial, tribal, clannish culture. Weberian concepts that link modernization – the imposition of rational legality on traditional cultural practices – may not sit well with Poulson's behaviour;[49] but in Asian cultures, gifts, provided that they are presented with appropriate etiquette, are regarded as normal conduct and not in any breach of social rules. So, in his autobiography Poulson, extolling his self-made-man credentials, refers to his grandfather who had established a successful pottery business at Ferrybridge, Yorkshire, in the nineteenth century. His grandfather employed a large number of people and was 'open handed and generous to an extreme and in a way which was far more acceptable in his day than it was to be in mine'.[50] At first sight, this may be regarded as a self-deception, particularly if we adopt the conceptual construct of binary opposition. However, none of those who benefited from Poulson's generosity had reported the matter. So was the protocol of 'giving' acceptable in the environment in which Poulson operated? Was Poulson so skilled as to allow those with whom he came in contact to regard their own rewards as legitimate? By setting aside binary opposites, we could consider that many activities were often regarded by participants with ambivalence. However, the conduct of the law and the discourse of politicians adopted the stark counterpoint of right or wrong, good or wicked. There is, though, a close but contradictory relationship between these apparently polarized positions bordering on furtive fascination fuelled by gossip, rumour, conspiracy, innuendo and accusation.[51] Thus, Muir Hunter QC

[45] *Times*, 4 Jan. 1974.
[46] *Ibid.*
[47] *Ibid.*
[48] M. Nuijten and G. Anders, *Corruption and the Secret of the Law: A Legal Anthropological Perspective* (Farnham, 2007), 1–24.
[49] S.P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1969); M. Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York, 1968)
[50] Poulson, *The Price*, 14.
[51] Nuijten and Anders, *Corruption*, 1–24.

Table 1: *Cases proceeded under the Corruption Acts 1964–78 in Magistrates' Courts*

	Proceeded against	Committed for trial
1889 Act	24	24
1906 Act	720	493
1933 Act	13	10
Total	757	527

Sources: Adapted from information in *Standards of Conduct* and Doig, *Corruption and Misconduct*, 387–401.

Table 2: *Cases proceeded under the corruption Acts 1964–78 in Crown Court*

	Total for trial	Total guilty
1889 Act	24	23
1906 Act	52	45
1933 Act	13	10
Total	89	78

Sources: See Table 1.

certainly exploited this: 'Mr Poulson, you were distributing largesse like Henry VIII'; but Poulson pleaded he did not bribe but made gifts to his friends. 'What friend gives a house to a friend?' asked Peter Taylor QC prosecuting Poulson and George Pottinger the senior Scottish Office civil servant. 'He was living in a Poulson house, driving a Poulson car, wearing Poulson suits, and travelling on Poulson expenses.'[52] The trial reports displayed particular glee in the revelations of Poulson's gifts; but perhaps we should consider whether Poulson's corruptions were not especially unusual. Between 1964 and 1978 there were 757 cases of corruption brought before magistrates' courts and 89 were committed for trial in Crown Court of which 78 were found guilty. These included Poulson and the 20 other people caught-up in his schemes.

Over the period 1964 to 1978 179 people in Magistrates' and Crown Courts were convicted under the Corruption Acts including 14 councillors; 70 local authority employees; 17 civil servants and 31 employees of various nationalized industries. Thus, the Poulson case accounts for slightly more than a tenth of all the cases. Overall, however, the 21 convictions involved in the Poulson case represent less than 3 per cent of all the cases proceeded against in both the Magistrates' and Crown Courts.

[52] *Times*, 2 Feb. 1974.

Further, the 84 councillors and local authority employees represented a very small proportion of the 26,000 local councillors and the 7 million people employed by local authorities in 1976. So, in some respects, public alarm was conceivably disproportionate. There was, nonetheless, sufficient for us to speculate that the extent of corruption in 1950s and 1960s Britain was greater than Salmon's report acknowledged, despite press coverage, and that television had brought the case into people's homes in a new and dramatic way.[53]

Poulson's case was perhaps just another instance of wrong doing with only the nature of its revelation being something new and extraordinary. Indeed, there has been a tradition which portrayed municipal government in the late Victorian and Edwardian period as symbolic of a 'golden age' when high-minded probity apparently prevailed.[54] However, in Salford in 1887, the corporation's gas manager attempted to bribe a local coal contractor. The coal contractor was lauded in the press as a hero who had struck a 'blow for public and commercial ethics'.[55] A case of particular audacity was that of an accountant clerk to Wolverhampton's education committee who defrauded the corporation of over £84,000 between 1905 and 1917.[56] More humdrum was James Strain, a Glasgow bailie, who took bribes in exchange for favourably located stalls at the meat market in 1933. The case generated a heated campaign and several Glasgow and Clydeside MPs called for an investigation under the terms of the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act 1921 which would have allowed immunity from prosecution for those that gave evidence.[57] The sense of outrage from social and political leaders was characterized by a stern anxiety: 'The affairs and administration of the city are doomed to disaster unless corruption is banished from it, and it is the duty of every citizen to report at once any attempt at bribery and corruption.'[58] The Roman Catholic archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Bourne, went further in his Lenten Pastorals (an open letter to Catholics) in 1934 saying how the

> revelations which have recently shocked us in our own country regarding the untrustworthiness of men holding important and confidential positions who have abused those positions in order to make money for themselves ... We used to pride ourselves upon the purity and incorruptibility of our public life and those

[53] 'The rise and fall of John Poulson', *World in Action*, 30 Apr. 1973.
[54] H. Laski, *Century of Municipal Progress: The Last Hundred Years* (London, 1935). For a valuable explanation see B. Harrison, *The Transformation of British Politics 1860–1995* (Oxford, 1996); M. Loughlin *et al*., *Half a Century of Municipal Decline 1935–1985* (London, 1985); A. Byrne, *Local Government in Britain: Everyone's Guide to How it All Works* (London, 1986).
[55] J. Garrard, 'Scandals: a tentative overview', in Moore and Smith (eds.), *Corruption in Urban Politics*, 24.
[56] J. Smith, '"Ingenious and daring": the Wolverhampton council fraud 1905 -1917', in Moore and Smith (eds.), *Corruption in Urban Politics*, 113–15.
[57] *Allegations of Bribery and Corruption: Report to the Honourable Secretary of State for Scotland*, Jun. 1933. Cmnd 4361.
[58] Lord Morrison quoted by *Times*, 22 Feb. 1933.

entrusted with its guardianship. What we have learnt recently gives reason to fear that such pride is no longer justified.[59]

The same sense of anxiety arose with the Poulson case. Corruption was something that happened in other countries, or so politicians schooled in Britain's imperial past liked to imagine, and therefore it was all the more shocking when it was present here. MPs were markedly sensitive to the revelatory nature of the case: 'The public's immediate reaction was – how many more companies and how many more MPs are involved in this sort of thing? Every MP immediately became suspect in the public's mind as possibly being in receipt of kickbacks, backhanders and other sorts of payouts.'[60] Politicians also played the same game as the press, concentrating on the more lurid implications of the scandal. Thus, David Steel, the Liberal Party chief whip, addressed his constituents in Hawick: 'We have been quick in the past to crack down on politicians guilty of some sexual peccadillo. Far more corrupting in any nation's morality is the misuse of politicians and public officials of their positions for private gain.' It was a good issue for the Liberals to dwell on and Steel showed little restraint:

> Financial corruption is common place in the public life of many countries, not just Africa, Asia, or South America but also in Europe and even the United States ... In Britain it is rare [but] ... if we are not to drag ourselves to the status of banana republic the Government must act to remove any possibility of improper or personal gain on the part of those holding high office.[61]

Notwithstanding the post-imperial cast of Steel's remarks, and that the suggestion of corruption in high places was always a good Liberal issue, his alarm was palpable. In a more measured way, though, the Salmon Commission recognized that there were different standards of behaviour that applied in public life to those which might prevail in private business. The commissioners were disappointed that the scope of their inquiry excluded private business but observed that 'the ethics of society at large must have a bearing on the standards observed in the public sector'.[62] Lord Houghton believed the case was so shocking it merited an investigation into the standards of conduct in commercial and industrial life, lamenting that this 'mischief mainly lies at the meeting points along the boundary between public service and private interests'.[63] With Poulson, this concerned the arrangements that prevailed between the construction industry, civil engineering, the planning process and public bodies because post-war governments had built a consensus around the re-construction of Britain's urban fabric. The Macmillan government had

[59] *Times*, 12 Feb. 1934.
[60] John Pardoe, MP, House of Commons Debates, reported in *Times*, 8 Jul. 1972.
[61] *Times*, 10 Jul. 1972.
[62] *Standards of Conduct*, para. 30, 10.
[63] *Ibid.*, Lord Houghton's Addendum, para. 5, 121.

used house-building statistics skilfully to appeal to the electorate.[64] So the period from 1950 until 1969 was a bonanza for building including council houses, redeveloping town centres, hospitals, office blocks, schools and public baths. Between 1961 and 1970, there were 3.2 million houses built in England and Wales and 685,000 slums demolished. This was more than two times higher than the building that had taken place between 1938 and 1950 and 26 per cent higher than the volume built 1951–60.[65] Much of Britain's housing stock was decrepit, encouraging wholesale demolition with the result that over a million houses were demolished between 1951 and 1970, replaced by high-rise blocks built quickly and cheaply using the Skarne and similar construction systems. Conservative governments of the 1950s relaxed the system of licences for granting planning approval and this was against a background of de-industrialization where building and construction was regarded as a source of economic growth. At local level, problems of new building and development were expedited, from the politicians' standpoint, by negotiated rather than competitive tendering. Poulson was adept in this environment, having built up a network of contacts from before World War II. His business was large and its impact on post-war urban Britain was considerable with over 240 planned projects. Indeed, he was responsible for designing a range of urban structures from schools and colleges; hospitals; swimming baths; shops and town centre developments; industrial buildings; office blocks; National Coal Board headquarters, colliery buildings and offices for gas companies; civic buildings including town council buildings and libraries; and railway stations. He also designed domestic dwellings, including individual bespoke structures for private clients as well as local authority housing estates and specialist provision for pensioners in the form of sheltered housing schemes. Lastly, there were plans and designs for working men's clubs, sports complexes and a tourist centre.[66] In addition to individual designs, there were also town centre redevelopment plans for Felling in Tyne-and-Wear, Mexborough in Yorkshire and Southport in Lancashire. His work had particular geographical concentrations: over 170 commissions in Yorkshire with Bradford, Pontefract–Knottingley, Leeds, Sheffield and Wakefield accounting for half of all the Yorkshire plans. The Stockton-on-Tees and Middlesbrough–Hartlepool area accounted for 19 commissions; and Darlington, Durham, Consett, Newcastle and Sunderland account for the majority of the rest. There was work in Derbyshire, London, Surrey and Scotland. His mark can be found all over Britain. This should be set alongside the fact that the construction

[64] Dunleavy, *Politics of Mass Housing*; A. Ravetz, 'Housing the people', in J. Fyrth (ed.), *Labour's Promised Land* (London, 1995); and P. Larkham, 'Rebuilding the industrial town: wartime Wolverhampton', *Urban History*, 29 (2002), 388–409.

[65] A.H. Halsey, *Twentieth Century British Social Trends*, 3rd edn (London, 2000).

[66] The tourist centre was at Aviemore in Scotland and owed much to Poulson's link with George Pottinger of the Scottish Office.

Table 3: *Geographical concentrations of Poulson's plans*

Yorkshire	No. plans	Teeside	No. plans	Newcastle and NE	No. plans
Bradford	17	Hartlepool	1	Darlington	3
Knottingley	9	Middlesborough	8	Durham	3
Leeds	16	Stockton-on-Tees	3	Felling	3
Pontefract	24			Newcastle	11
Sheffield	5				
Wakefield	8				

Source: Constructed from Poulson's company records in WYAS C391/2/1 to C391/2/211.

Table 4: *Poulson's plans in Britain*

Schools	Hospitals	Colliery	Industrial	Swimming baths	Shops	Water	Civic	Domestic	Other
53	31	12	18	22	13	4	23	33	32

Source: See Table 3.

market in the public sector was dominated by just seven companies – Wimpey, Concrete, Laing, Wates, Taylor Woodrow, Camus and Crudens – and Poulson had links with at least four. Finally, we should note that Poulson as an architect was not alone in resorting to corrupt practice. In Birmingham, Alan Maudsley the city's chief architect 1966–73, dispensed considerable patronage over negotiated contracts and he gave out, in return for payments, work to a small local architectural firm – Ebery and Sharp – that transformed its business.[67]

The structure of Poulson's businesses was innovative combining numerous functions – architectural planning together with engineering – which enabled him to plan in many diverse settings. At its peak, his companies employed 750 staff with offices in Pontefract, his original base, but also in London, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Beirut and Lagos. His prime company, Open Systems Building, offered clients an all inclusive service with design and construction engineering.

Poulson's business activity was vulnerable to the changes of tempo in the overall economy, which was in turn subject to the calibrations of the government. The construction industry was highly sensitive to these changes and it was the slow-down in building activity that caused Poulson's bankruptcy. Increasingly, he looked overseas and this was why

[67] For a comprehensive examination of Birmingham's redevelopment and Maudsley's role see Dunleavy, *Poltics of Mass Housing*, 292–301.

Table 5: *Poulson's planned commissions 1960–73*

1960–62	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973
27	14	19	31	28	13	13	19	19	11	24	16

Source: See Table 3.

he thought Reginald Maudling's status as a former cabinet minister would open doors.

However, from 1969 onwards, the construction industry moved into recession and this was to prove critical in Poulson's downfall. In January 1970, John Silkin, minister for housing, met with construction industry leaders who were seeking some mitigation from the effects of the credit squeeze, the Selective Employment Tax and dwindling demand.[68] The London Brick Company had already begun to cut back on production closing plants in Bedfordshire and Leicestershire. London Brick supplied 38 per cent of the national brick market. Its managing director stated that the number of public and private housing starts had declined by 24 per cent between 1967 and 1969.[69] Although government was sympathetic to the construction industry, the budget measures of April 1970 were too little too late. Even in July, the National Federation of Plumbers' and Builders' Merchants reported that the volume of materials bought was still 4.9 per cent below the level recorded in July 1969. Further, although the raising of the school leaving age was expected to boost the local authority schools' building programme, it was too late for Poulson. Indeed, the rate of bankruptcies reported had almost doubled between 1964 and 1970 and construction companies were among the biggest losers. Architectural commissions were also a function of planning and anticipated building activity. The chairman of the London Association of Private Architects wrote to *The Times*: 'Most private architects have been painfully conscious of the drastic reduction in work load since the end of 1965 when the results of restrictions and financial controls began to be felt ... The architectural profession is a very sensitive barometer of the public and private confidence.'[70] He went on to speculate that even with relaxation of credit, the existing recession would not abate for two years. Poulson's own house-building plans had reached their peak in 1965, and although he had a diverse portfolio, his overall planned commissions in Britain had shrunk by 47 per cent between 1969 and 1971.

Poulson had been able to profit from the building boom because he was already well placed. Central government's decision to make the

[68] *Times*, 12 Feb. 1970.
[69] *Times*, 30 Dec. 1969.
[70] *Times*, 14 Jan. 1970.

construction industry the engine of economic growth was undoubtedly decisive. Poulson, T. Dan Smith and Alan Maudsley profited from these circumstances as did property developers such as Sir Charles Clore and Jack Cotton.[71] However, the demand for public building projects was essentially inelastic and so when the economy moved into recession, Poulson sought work overseas far and wide from Angola to the United Arab Emirates.

Finally, the Poulson affair revealed the nature of power in post-1950s Britain at least until the break-up of the post-war consensus after 1979. The programme of reconstruction was an ideal vehicle for central government to direct resources through local authorities in the name of social justice and economic recovery. The use of block grants in aid of the rates and regional economic development councils were seemingly achieving utopian solutions to the problems that had benighted Britain in the 1930s and 1940s. Poulson's bribes, though, brought into question the efficacy of local government as the tool for such a grand purpose. The convergence of the lessons of the Salmon Commission and the Redcliffe-Maud report on local government helped to create a new view that the existing urban government structure was ill-suited to the management and direction of large infrastructuctural projects. Local councillors were ill-equipped to deal with such tasks and the tendency for central government to adopt *dirigiste* solutions became stronger still. The affair also revealed that the nature of power was transactional and that the relationships it structured were asymmetrical. In this sense, Poulson was located at an intermediate to low point in the hierarchy of power. He was dependent on the patronage of T. Dan Smith or was clutching at the cachet that Reginald Maudling's name might lend to his business prospectus. Paying for that patronage or that social association was indicative of Poulson's dependency on others. Further, the fall-out from the case revealed complex relationships between ministers, civil servants, public officials and local councillors. The leading executives of large construction companies certainly had more leverage than Poulson as only a licentiate member of that gentlemanly organization, the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Conclusions

Architecturally undistinguished and structurally unsound – it was said to be sliding down the hill – the hospital was still streets ahead of the ex-workhouse at Lancaster or the old St. James in Leeds.[72]

Alan Bennett's observations about his mother's mental illness and her residential respite in one of Poulson's hospitals revealed the sense in which the Poulson affair passed into folklore as a kind of short-hand to

[71] O. Marriott, *Property Boom* (London, 1967).
[72] A. Bennett, *A Life Like Other People's* (London, 2009), 62.

talk about local politics and the rebuilding of the north of England. There was, perhaps, a stoic acceptance that this was how things were done; but from this analysis, we can see that the nature of our understanding of Poulson has been constrained by conflating the affair with other scandals. Further, it has been limited by legalistic and political discourses that have defined corruption as a simple contrast between probity and vice when in fact the participants regarded their day at the races or a test match as legitimate perks, as natural accoutrements of business life. Poulson's brazen audacity compromised the assumed gentlemanly conduct of politics that had evolved from the construction of the liberal state since 1832. The rationality of that state had been founded on the principle of 'voluntary self restraint'.[73] The conduct of Poulson, Smith, Maudsley and Maudling flew in the face of that principle. It suggested that politicians – especially local government politicians – were unable to manage their own ethical boundaries. Consequently, public distrust of politicians grew. Indeed, a public opinion survey published in 1973 suggested that as many as 4 out of every 10 voters agreed with the proposition that 'many local councillors get a dishonest financial advantage from being on the council'.[74] The ramifications of this loss of trust as well as a lack of competence were not immediately apparent but they were to become so after 1979 when Margaret Thatcher's governments resolved not only to break local government[75] but also to create new organizational instruments – Corporations and Housing Trusts for example – to deliver urban redevelopment projects. Moreover, there was after 1979 a growing hostility towards local, particularly urban, government and a mountain of legislation eroded its powers. New auditing arrangements, curbs on tax raising and spending powers, starving it of funds,[76] and out-sourcing municipal government services all came in to play. This was as much politically motivated as anything else but the Poulson affair had done much to sully the reputation of local government. It should, then, be central in an examination of the processes which caused the marginalization of urban government which went on apace after 1979. Salmon had demonstrated the vulnerability of local government institutions and the shortcomings of its office holders when large building projects were at stake. Poulson's own business experience and his bankruptcy was an illustration of the vulnerability of the construction industry and architectural businesses to national government's management of the economy. The affair, then, was crucial in dissolving the post-1950 consensus around urban planning, economic management and the powers of local government which went on apace after 1979. Undoubtedly, it contributed to the growing cynicism

[73] D. Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain, 1832-1998* (Oxford, 1998), 314.
[74] *Times*, 6 Aug. 1973.
[75] I. Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism* (London, 1992), 143–6, 212–20.
[76] G.C. Baugh, 'Government grants in aid of the rates in England and Wales, 1889–1990', *Historical Research*, 65 (1992), 215–33.

about politics and the affair reveals neatly the interplay between journalists and the media on the one hand and politicians, national and local, on the other. Thus, Poulson's corruptions merit a place in the urban history agenda of post-1945 Britain since it sits in a mesh of complex themes: changing moralities as to what constituted corrupt behaviour; the business cycles of the construction industry; and the nature of political power in urban Britain, particularly in the north of England.