

I will come back to this theme several times over the next several months, but I am fascinated by the concept of a corruption-free public procurement system. As much as we advocate for efficient public procurement systems and in our grand pursuit of 'best practices', we always have to address the nagging doubt that our public procurement processes are being derailed by corruption.

It seems that allegations of corruption fall more readily and more easily on poor Third World countries. When such allegations are made against governments in rich countries, they are quickly forgotten. Can you imagine if the allegation was raised, about a poor developing country, that its representatives in Parliament regularly accepted money from persons to raise questions in the legislature; or that the members of the legislature consistently, and uniformly across party lines, had established a tradition of making fraudulent claims on the government for maintenance expenses; or that a government would give tax credits for bribes made overseas; or that the central bank gives business persons foreign exchange permission to pay bribes overseas; or that the government would support the executives of one of its strategic enterprises paying bribes to members of a foreign government; and when evidence of the latter misconduct is made public, the government used its control of the prosecuting agency to prevent the prosecution of those involved.

If these allegations were made against an administration in a Commonwealth Caribbean country, it could hardly stand. It certainly would have great difficulty getting through an election. If those allegations were true, we have no difficulty at all concluding that the country where those circumstances existed was a corrupt country.

Yet these allegations have been made against the United Kingdom, and there is no doubt that they are true. Yet no one, and most certainly not the UK politicians themselves, seem to regard the UK as a corrupt country.

So the world is not fair and poor countries carry greater burdens than rich ones in all sort of ways, not in the least how their public procurement systems are regarded.

Our challenge is to design schemes for public procurement which are efficient and which include all the modern best practices, but also address most aggressively the concerns about corruption. My argument is that to achieve this, you need first to have a good theory. We need a theory that will provided clear objectives of where we need to go and clear guidelines of what we need to do to get there.

My solution is to promote greater transparency. A more transparent system is a less corrupt one, and thus our public procurement systems should promote greater transparency. A very useful test in any any public procurement exercise is whether the public procurement officers would be happy for the public to know everything they are doing.