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HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

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Sir Christopher Kelly KCB  
Chairman  
Committee on Standards in Public Life  
35 Great Smith Street  
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Dear Sir Christopher

I hope you will accept what follows as a contribution to your investigation into Members' allowances.

There is no doubt whatsoever that so far as trust and confidence in Members of Parliament are concerned, we have never been in a more perilous state and this impacts on the whole political process and therefore on our democracy. To put it bluntly, we are on the edge of meltdown and the drip, drip effect which will undoubtedly continue for some time as more information is made public, is corrosive of everything, including finding a sensible solution.

It is worth reflecting on why the system was set up in the first place - namely to recognise and compensate for the cost of living and working in two places. MPs living outside London were allowed expenses for travel but not to allow them to live reasonably decently both in their constituency area and/or in Westminster or its immediate surroundings.

There seems to be some considerable misunderstanding, possibly deliberate on the part of the press, about the time MPs spend in both places. These days MPs do not "visit" Westminster, nor do they "visit" their constituencies. This may have been the case some 20 or so years ago when many MPs, including high profile Cabinet Ministers on all sides of the political divide, made magisterial appearances in their constituencies. Those days are long gone and hopefully so has the idea that the "political class" are London-based. But whilst this view of the world is still reflected in the London-centric British media, this must not be the case when determining how best to enable MPs to do their job.

In truth, there are two jobs - one in the constituency and the other in Westminster and beyond. MPs are not like civil servants visiting headquarters or businessmen making similar visits or checks on outlying investments. So the job is a full-time job, if not two full-time jobs as the



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work of an MP runs into the weekend on a regular basis, as well as into the night.

This is why having some sort of simplistic allowance which presumes that MPs stay in hotels is a nonsense. It is not just about having a roof over your head and a bed to lie in but actually needing all the normal requirements of living, including clothes, household equipment and the like. It also needs to reflect the fact that it is not possible to simply dib in and out of accommodation. There are those who historically stayed in gentlemen's clubs but if anyone thinks that this, or hotel accommodation, is the answer, then I suggest that they be asked to try it - and over a long period of time.

Given that an MP's salary is just about the same as a deputy head in a reasonably sized comprehensive school, it would be interesting to see how any individual in that job could survive for long if they had to work in two schools in two different parts of the country.

I am putting down my thoughts as someone who has been in parliament for 22 years and who, thankfully, does not have a fear of being unable to make ends meet - which is not the case for many MPs, particularly those with young families. What we are talking about is a 52 week a year ongoing commitment to doing the job, combined with all the uncertainties and insecurities that go with it, particularly for MPs in marginal seats.

Had the system introduced from 1 April 2009 been in place some time ago, with sensible rules in respect of London MPs, then the present furor would have been avoided. It is too late to turn the clock back so more drastic change is clearly necessary, even though, in one sense, it may lead to entirely new anomalies and would be more rational to revise what we have got. The fact that we now have total transparency and the publication of receipts will in themselves curb excesses and be the driver of change.

There are a number of options -

The most drastic change would be for all new MPs to be provided directly with properly equipped accommodation within a five mile radius of the Palace of Westminster. There would also need to be a small overnight allowance to take account of the need for two lots of personal facilities in each home, plus the additional cost of generally having to eat out, given the pattern of voting, irrational timetabling and bizarre hours, despite the reformed Westminster system.



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An alternative would be to have a very rigid set of rules about what could be claimed in relation to rent and mortgage interest payments, plus an overnight allowance but again taking account of 52 weeks a year and not just 3-4 night stays.

A further alternative would be to have neither of the above but instead a standard allowance available for overnights in London when parliament was sitting, and for overnights in the constituency area when not. The myth that MPs work only when the House of Commons is sitting needs to be knocked on the head as it is a total nonsense. Despite the view that the allowance should somehow arbitrarily be reduced, any such flat rate claimable allowance must be high enough to make it possible to survive.

However, the most logical change would be to bite the bullet and to pay MPs the kind of salary they would expect to be paid in equivalent jobs - head of a further education college, a doctor after several years in practice, or a senior civil servant (but not the current spurious benchmarking). There would also need to be a very clear and understandable agreement with HM Revenue and Customs in relation to modest deductible elements that reflect, as in other walks of life, a genuine and transparent cost arising out of living outside London. This is crucial if London Members are not to be rewarded for no apparent definable purpose.

Whatever system is adopted, there has to be a recognition that MPs with constituencies (and presumably homes) within say 25 miles of Westminster should not be treated in the same way as those who genuinely have two places to work and two places to live. Of course it would be possible to have a combination of some of these ideas but this would need to be kept extremely simple - although I recognise that simplicity and equity do not always go together! The system would need to be understandable and therefore explainable, even to the most mischievous journalist.

For the vast bulk of the country, there is little understanding of just how costly it is to live in central London. There appears to be a touching belief right across social classes and within the media that parliament should be filled with well-meaning amateurs who dip in and out of politics and whose main life and concern should lie elsewhere. Even the international business editor of the Times newspaper holds this view so you can see we have an uphill struggle in political literacy, as well as in obtaining real transparency.

That said, there needs to be an acknowledgement of how the public see it and what to do. Bearing in mind the nature of some of the claims, their



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reaction understandably has been nothing short of total disbelief. Unless we face up to this and deal with it, then we will still be open to ridicule.

On a different tack, it is surely time to provide direct funding from the centre to cover the expense of the rent and national business rate for constituency offices for MPs outside London, up to an agreed square footage, perhaps 1200-1500 square feet. A small reduction in the current AOE would obviously have to be made to offset these direct funding costs but this would make an enormous amount of sense.

Finally I have to stress that unless we find a solution, with a common sense long-term approach to actually meeting genuine costs, it is unlikely that young people will ever think of coming through the political process and seeking a place in parliament. In fact this is currently the subject of investigation by the Speaker's Conference of which I am a member.

I hope you find this helpful.

With all good wishes.

Yours sincerely

DAVID BLUNKETT  
MP for Sheffield Brightside

cc The Prime Minister