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From:
Sent: 09 May 2009 11:43
To: Inquiry
Subject: Parliamentary Allowances - proposal for seven rules to be applied.

Dear Sir or Madam

The ongoing row and revelations about MP's expenses is doing considerable harm to the standing of Parliament and respect for MP's of all parties. I suspect that most people would not object to MP's being paid certain expenses if the basis upon which they did so was known, easily understood and subject to public accountability. Whilst I expect that an MP doing their job diligently works far harder than most people realise, the general public do not see that. What they see is that the job of ruling the country is a privilege where once you take into the candidate selection process and the elections themselves, there are dozens of candidates for each post, and the job is a relatively well paid one. They also see themselves working hard at their own jobs and want their MP's to live by the same rules that apply to themselves. It seems to me that there are seven simple rules that could be applied to MP's Parliamentary Allowances for Accommodation, and adapted to cover any other expenses claims which would help put things back on a proper footing in the public mind.

1. An MP should be entitled to an allowance for accommodation where the MP is be required to commute an unreasonable distance on a daily basis to attend work. I suggest that the measure of an unreasonable commuting distance is where the nearest boundary line of the constituency is more than 50 miles from the House of Commons.
2. An MP should be entitled to an accommodation allowance which entitles them to rent or buy a property using a loan to pay all or part of the purchase price, and to pay for any reasonable legal expenses involved in purchasing the property. Since the purpose of this second home is to allow the MP to do their job whilst in London, the maximum size of any accommodation bought or rented should be 1 livingroom, 1 bedroom, 1 bathroom, 1 kitchen. Since this is public money being used, and since employees of private business and local authorities are required to produce receipts for any expenditure that they wish to have reimbursed, payment of any claim should only be on the basis of production of a lease, rent demand or loan repayment statement.
3. If a property is rented then it should not be eligible for an allowance where the landlord or owner of the property is a spouse, civil partner or relative of the MP or is a partnership or a company which has a partner, director or secretary who is a spouse, civil partner or relative of the MP. Similar rules apply in relation to claims for Housing Benefit, and MP's should abide by the same sorts of rules that are applied to the general population. I would suggest that they also lead by example and apply the highest possible standards of probity.
4. An MP is entitled to an additional allowance for furnishing and decorating a property which is bought or rented unfurnished. The maximum amount of that allowance should be £5,000. Payment of any sum claimed should only be made on production of a receipt which is dated no more than three months from the date of the claim and no more than 12 months from the date of entry into the property. Payment of the allowance should only be made once in respect of any individual property. Payment of the allowance should not be made in respect of any further property after the first claim except in the circumstances provide for in Rule 5.
5. An MP should be entitled to be reimbursed for the cost of moving property, or for furnishing and decorating a different property from one subject of an earlier claim, if the property they own is compulsorily acquired, or if they are served with a legally valid notice to quit by their landlord.
6. An MP should be required to insure any property they own against fire, flood, and damage and such insurance shall require to include cover for alternative accommodation pending repair or rebuilding of the property. An MP should be entitled to reclaim the insurance premiums on proof of suitable insurance cover being provided (policy details and a receipt).

7. Where an MP sells any property whose purchase is funded in whole or in part by the Parliamentary Accommodation Allowance, the whole proceeds of sale should be repaid to Parliament, subject to a deduction in respect of any original capital contribution by the MP and any estate agency and legal expenses reasonably incurred in the sale.

If you wish to stop Parliamentary Allowances from being seen as a gravy train then it is necessary to make sure that they are directed only at what is necessary, and that MP's are not seen as profiting from the public purse. I suggest that these seven rules fit the bill.

R Sutherland

Edinburgh

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