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18th May 2009

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Dear Sir Christopher,

R.E Review of MPs Expenses

Having graduated with degrees in British Politics and now working for my local Member of Parliament and being a grassroots Labour Party member, I wanted to write to submit my thoughts as part of your committee's review of MPs expenses.

In the run up to the local and European elections in June, I have been talking with residents in Broxtowe on a near daily basis. Since the Telegraph exposed what I can only describe as the scandalous claims made by some MPs, it has been shocking at the contempt with which a large number of residents, citizens and voters now hold not just Parliament but the body politic. Indeed, the anger is exacerbated still further given that during the recession we now find ourselves, many families, struggling to make ends meet and provide for their children now read on a near daily basis of MPs using taxpayer's money for luxuries many could only dream about such as heating tennis courts, cleaning swimming pools and maintaining moats.

For our system of democracy to work, it is vital that we take whatever steps are needed to establish the public's trust in a political system which should be there to serve the public, and establish and enact policy to address people's everyday concerns and problems. As a politically active young person, it is upsetting to see the crisis of democracy which now exists, with the image of Parliament being one of self serving MPs who put their own needs and wants before those who both elect and employ them.

In light of recent events, I wanted to submit a number of proposals which although unlikely to re-establish trust in our parliamentary system alone, could I believe go some way to doing so.

1. First and foremost, it is clear that the system by which Parliament is able to both set and police the rules it uses to accept expenses claims by MPs and Peers is out of date and antiquated. In view of the contempt and low esteem that people now hold our Parliament, it seems odd to think that a system can work by which Parliament acts as both judge and jury on its own rules. In light of this, I would suggest that it should be for the National Audit Office to process expense claims by Members of Parliament and Peers, and for them to judge whether such claims are not just within the rules but within the spirit of the rules, with a mind to the public interest to maintain a Parliamentary system that commands the public's trust and confidence.
2. It is often said that transparency is the best way to hold those in public office to account. It seems odd to think that some MPs would have made the claims they did, had they known that such claims would be laid bare for their constituents to judge on. Indeed, in light of the revelations in the Telegraph, it would not be surprising to see expenses claims fall quite dramatically over the next year. Given this, I would urge the committee to

seriously consider supporting the approach adopted by the Scottish Parliament, namely a system by which MPs expense claims are published on a quarterly basis.

3. Possibly the most contentious expenses issue has been that revolving around claims for second homes. By its very nature, the job of MPs outside London necessitates living and working both in their constituencies and London. Indeed, to perform their job effectively, I would argue requires members to have the financial support to sustain such a lifestyle to perform their duties properly. However, it remains curious that members are able to use taxpayer funds to develop and improve accommodation, for them only to sell it and make a profit for themselves. In light of this, for MPs outside London, I would support the approach adopted by my own MP, Nick Palmer who I understand either has or will be making representations to your inquiry. In essence, the suggestion is that the Commons authorities purchase what I believe is the now vacant County Hall opposite Parliament. This could in turn be transformed into a series of furnished flats for MPs. The Commons authorities would then act as a landlord for the property, and it would be for them, rather than MPs to perform maintenance tasks, and establish what is and is not essential work.
4. A further bone of contention relates to second jobs. It seems an anomaly that a number of MPs are able to earn significant incomes from outside interests and jobs, whilst also using taxpayer money to fund second homes and lifestyles. For many members of the public it is clear - if you have the money to sustain a life that enables you to perform your duties as an MP effectively, it is simply wrong to also be claiming from the taxpayer extra money which they could easily cover from their own incomes. Given this, I would suggest that the register of member's interests should now include space for members to declare their total incomes from outside interests and employment.
5. There has been much discussion of late over the role of the communications allowance, with many suggesting it is a £10,000 effectively used to promote MPs. I would suggest otherwise. For members to be held to account effectively, requires them to have the resources to keep constituents informed of what they are doing. Likewise, it is vital that members are able to proactively communicate with their constituents and lead campaigns that residents look to their Member of Parliament to lead. I would oppose any moves to scrap the communications allowance.

Whilst these measures alone are unlikely to be the panacea needed to establish the public's trust in the political system, I do believe they have a potential role to play in moving in the right direction. As such, I would be grateful if you and your committee could seriously consider the suggestions and points I have made.

Many thanks and best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Youth and Student Officer,