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From: S Marshall
Sent: 20 May 2009 23:03
To: Inquiry
Subject: Response to the enquiry on MPs Expenses

Dear Sir Christopher,

Regarding the current enquiry on MPs expenses, there are a number of issues that emerge and all will have to be addressed in order for the public to be satisfied.

Firstly, and one that I do not think will change in my lifetime- is that politicians have to base their ways of operating on the assumption that there will always be one shady, money-grabbing, scheming, power-hungry MP who will look for ways to cheat the system. Any future system should be based on limiting what these MPs can do rather setting huge goalposts and asking MPs to adhere to 'the spirit of the thing'. There needs to be notions of both legal accountancy 'I'm allowed to claim for this' and management accountancy 'in claiming for this, I am certain it will uphold the reputation of Parliament, my position, my party etc'.

A change of culture will have to be initiated too. The Nuremberg defences 'it's in the rules, therefore I'm ok' will simply not wash and neither should the tolerance of other MPs shady accountancy practices be tolerated anymore. If this issue were about bring the House in disrepute in ANY other way, for example by being racist or inflammatory, there would be less tolerance from all parties. The current perception is that MPs live a world away from redundancies, houses losing value, long commutes to work etc.

As an employee of a public sector institution which demands I have expenses, I feel I am well placed to offer advice. I work as an International Officer for the University of Reading so I know that there are unavoidable expenses when I am working away from home.

Firstly, I have to get the most competitively priced flights and hotels. I have to keep records of ALL quotes I get and justify why I have chosen one particular expense over another (the cheapest isn't always the best or most feasible option).

I claim for SUBSISTENCE. This means what I need to do my job, not what I need to make me happy- they are not always the same thing. At my institution, this has no limit. For example, at corporate socialising events, I will pay for alcohol with dinner. However, my pre-flight gin and tonic at the airport, is my own. Equally, chocolate from the mini bar when I arrive late in a hotel is also fine so is the rip-off laundry service because I have no alternative. Other institutions will give staff limits, like £10 on food- which I find a little too prescriptive. Decent expenses systems have to allow for various events but have an innate robustness built in to them too.

My expenses are detailed across travel and subsistence both in the UK and overseas. I have to provide lists, and as many receipts as possible. All advances have to be paid back within a time agreed by myself and the director. She signs off my receipts

If one assumes that all MPs are intelligent human beings, they should be able to base their expenses on this idea - 'do I need this to do my job properly?'. One way would be to have expenses records updated as they happen via They Work For You. I have to keep track of my expenditure- all MPs should be compelled to keep public records of their expenses. Their job carries far more gravity than mine, why not be as clear as possible? The electorate would understand some things will be high cost and we would want them to be, gifts or the latest communication devices- if it helps to foster a relationship or represent those who voted for them more relevantly, then so be it.

I believe the 2nd home allowance should go. It is unnecessary. MPs who argue that it will stop

'poor people' becoming MPs need to look at their current demographic. Most have gone to private or grammar schools, very few are from lower social strata, very little ethnic diversity exists in any party. Expenses and widening political participation are not linked in the fashion MPs would like them to be. If they were linked so closely, MPs would not tend to be white, AB, English men aged between 36-300 with little sartorial elegance! In its very nature, the 2nd home allowance is alien to the majority of the electorate. Most don't have one, those who do maybe losing it in the current crisis and the others have enough income to pay for their own dry rot/moat draining/Feng Shui analysis.

The question of who should control the auditing process is very low priority to most people. If the expertise exists in some quiet corner of Westminster, then keep it within Parliament. Alternatively, another company but still maintain the FOI access and controls. If anything the expenses expose has shown the power of this act. It is clear that the electorate believe in Parliament but cannot stand politicians who mislead and then patronise them. We all have the misfortune to live in volatile times (a mess of ALL of our makings), everyone must cut back. This is an opportunity for all parties to prove they can lead and dig themselves out of trouble, rather than waiting for public opinion and determined journalists to shame them.

Expenses are boring to do, so the system should be simple. Getting your expenses incorrect, is damaging and if intentional, highly illegal. Make it clear to the public, simple and relevant. If they were in an MPs place, they would do the same thing too.

Yours sincerely
S Marshall

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