



Emily Thornberry

Labour MP for Islington South & Finsbury

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Sir Christopher Kelly
Chair
Committee on Standards in Public Life
35 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BQ



Our Ref: FS/COMM01006/01092042

20 May 2009

Dear Sir Christopher

REVIEW OF MPS' EXPENSES – CALL FOR EVIDENCE

Thank you for your letter of 24/04/09, inviting me to comment on MPs' expenses. Over the past four weeks, MPs' expenses have been plastered across the front pages of all the newspapers, and I think many decent MPs have been shocked by the way other Honourable Members have behaved.

The debate has moved on since your Committee's consultation document was published, and I, for one, will be pleased to see an end to ridiculous claims for moats, moles and manure. Public scrutiny can only be a good thing in the long term, although it has clearly been a painful and unpleasant process for some MPs who have been pilloried for very minor mistakes.

As an inner London MP who is lucky enough to represent and live in a constituency only a few miles from Westminster, I am not intending to make any comments about second homes, subsistence or travel – I am sure you will receive many submissions on these issues. Instead I would like to make some suggestions about staffing, office costs and communications, which I feel should better reflect the needs of each constituency.

Since I was elected in 2005 some 17,000 of my constituents have been in touch with me – many more than once. I receive about 1,000 enquiries a month, and the resources available to me through public funds are not sufficient to cope with the workload. **I have been putting about half my own salary into subsidising my office for the past three years.**

The needs of MPs looking after seats like mine have been completely overlooked in the current debate. I would be happy to provide a full breakdown of my finances if your Committee would find this helpful.

My submission to the SSRB in 2006

I raised these issues with the Senior Salaries Review Body in 2006, and I was disappointed by the lack of progress at that stage. I enclose a copy of my submission to the SSRB dated 10/11/06. My suggestions at the time can be summarised as follows:

ON YOUR SIDE

Emily Thornberry MP, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

e-mail: emilythornberrym@parliament.uk web: www.emilythornberry.com

constituency advice line: (020) 7697 9307 Monday, Tuesday and Thursday 2-5pm

fax: (020) 7697 4587

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- MPs' staff allocation should reflect the actual needs of each constituency
- MPs' constituency office funding should reflect local needs and staffing levels
- MPs' constituency office rent and rates should be ring-fenced
- MPs' salaries and allowances should be looked at as a whole

My submission to your Committee – Staffing

I still believe that a fair system would enable more staff to be employed in constituencies where there are likely to be higher levels of demand for assistance from an MP. I also feel that recognition should be given to the skills and commitment expected of MPs' staff, and salary levels should be high enough to enable good quality staff to be recruited in inner London constituencies.

My suggestions on staffing:

- MPs' staff should be recruited by the MP
- MPs should have some input into job descriptions
- All vacancies should be advertised on the w4mp website
- Staff salaries should reflect responsibilities
- London-based staff should receive London weighting
- MPs' staff should be paid by the House of Commons – not expenses
- In general, posts should not be offered to members of an MP's family. Any decision to employ family members should be subject to scrutiny by the HoC – job description, qualifications, ongoing performance of duties
- The HoC should fund one Westminster-based PA, employed with London weighting, and one researcher and one constituency office manager for each MP. London weighting should be offered for these employees where the MP represents a London constituency
- The HoC should fund 1-4 additional caseworkers for each MP, depending on the level of need in the constituency. London weighting should be offered where the MP represents a London constituency
- The level of need should be determined by reference to objective criteria – number of residents, index of multiple deprivation, proportion of social housing, proportion of residents from ethnic minorities etc
- MPs should be permitted to allocate part of their pre-tax salary to the HoC to fund additional staff
- Staff made redundant when their MP stands down or fails to be re-elected should receive redundancy payments above the statutory minimum
- Staff made redundant in these circumstances should be guaranteed an interview if an MP of the same party advertises a vacancy

My submission to your Committee – Constituency Office Costs

I have suggested that the number of constituency casework staff each MP employs should vary according to local need. I also consider that each MP should be provided with sufficient resources to rent an office in her constituency which is large enough to accommodate this number of staff. Clearly, the rent for such an office will vary depending on the location of the constituency.

My suggestions on office costs:

- MPs should have some choice over the size and location of constituency offices
- A maximum size for each constituency office should be set which reflects the MPs' staffing allocation
- The office rent, rates and fuel/cleaning costs should be paid direct to the landlord by the House of Commons – not via expenses
- Set-up costs for each office – phones, computers, desks etc - should be funded by the HoC
- Ongoing office costs – phone, postage, stationery - should be subject to an annual limit, receipted and subject to scrutiny
- MPs who choose not to have a constituency office would be given a fixed enhancement to their salary (3%?), and their names put on a register available for public scrutiny
- MPs opting for a constituency office would not be permitted to change their option until the next general election
- MPs opting for the enhanced salary option would be permitted to change their option at any time during the first two years after election

My submission to your Committee – Communications

In my view, MPs should be encouraged to communicate with their constituents, and it is reasonable to use public funds to do so, provided that the message is not party political. The present system allows a flat-rate Communications Allowance which does not reflect the actual cost of communicating with constituents. I think this matter should be looked at in more detail, to ensure that any new arrangements are fair. I would suggest:

- **Websites** – HoC to cover the cost of hosting and maintenance for one website per MP, plus a one-off fee for design
- **Postage** – HoC to authorise payment of postage on up to two items of unsolicited mail per year to each constituent
- **Annual Report** – HoC to authorise payment of design and production costs of sufficient copies of the MP's Annual Report for one copy to be given to each constituent. Subject to a maximum cost of 50p(?) per constituent
- **Freepost** – all MPs should be allocated a House of Commons Freepost address, allowing their constituents to write to them and return surveys free of charge
- **Prepaid envelopes** – should continue to be available for responding to individual letters from constituents, and should also be available for responding to petitions and surveys. Should be available for limited amounts of unsolicited mail – eg to all the residents of a block of flats where the heating is broken, when one resident has contacted the MP

I think it is essential that the expenses regime is reformed to support the work of hard-working constituency MPs, and to restore public trust. I hope that you find these suggestions useful, and I look forward to receiving your Committee's report.

Yours sincerely

John Baker CBE
Senior Salaries Review Body
Kingsgate House
66-74 Victoria Street
London
SW1E 6SW

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10 November 2006

Dear Mr Baker

Thank you for contacting me about the triennial review of Members' pay and allowances. In my view, Members' pay is adequate, and I would not support an increase above the current average UK wage increase.

However, I would like to see a restructuring of the way Members' allowances are calculated, to take into account the different needs of our constituents. My main concerns are over the amount allocated to Members to employ staff, and the amount allowed for Members to run their offices.

I am an inner London MP, representing one of the most deprived constituencies in the country. In my first year and a half of representing Islington South and Finsbury, over 6,000 of my constituents have contacted me about their problems or concerns. I do my best to deal with all these enquiries, but **I would not be able to manage my caseload without putting some of my own salary towards paying staff.**

My casework team is based in my constituency office, and this means that I have additional costs – rent, phones etc – which would not be incurred if I were to base all my staff in Westminster. The small size of my Westminster office would preclude this, and I also feel that a deprived constituency needs the MP and casework team to be locally based.

My suggestion is that Members' allowances for staffing and office costs should reflect the needs of each constituency. Deprived constituencies which would be expected to generate a high level of casework around housing, immigration etc should attract an allowance at a level to deal with that casework, both in terms of staffing allowance and in terms of rental for office space.

I am not suggesting that MPs should claim allowances based on the numbers of letters they write or the number of issues they take up. However, it would be possible to use objective indicators of need – proportion of social housing, unemployment rate, crime rate, proportion of pensioners/children/people from ethnic minorities etc – to assess how many casework staff are likely to be required.

It makes sense to vary the amount allowed for office costs depending on whether a Member maintains a constituency office. A specific allowance to pay the actual cost of renting a suitable office in the constituency could be ring-fenced, and an allowance for phone costs could be allocated to MPs depending on the number of staff based in constituency offices.

Ring-fencing the constituency office rent allowance would go some way towards dealing with the additional cost of running an office in an expensive area such as inner London. It does not make sense to me that I receive a London Supplement of £2,712 a year on my own salary because I live and work in inner London, and yet I get no additional allowance to pay my staff London weighting or to cover inner London office expenses.

My feeling is that the SSRB should be involved in assessing allowances for staffing and office costs as well as assessing Members' salaries, because there is some overlap in some cases. I'm sure I am not the only Member who finds the present system of allowances inadequate - as I've already mentioned, at present I use part of my own salary to employ constituency staff. It looks as though I will also have to subsidise my office costs this year, as I used over 80% of my IEP allowance in the first six months of this financial year.

I hope you find these comments helpful, and I look forward to hearing from you with a progress report on the review.

Yours sincerely,

Emily Thornberry MP
Islington South and Finsbury