

From: 30 May 2009 09:14  
Sent: Inquiry  
To: Submission to review of MP's expenses  
Subject:

E378

Importance: High

Dear Sir / Madam

I welcome the opportunity made to the public to comment in this inquiry. There are a number of points that I would wish to make, some answering your questions directly, others that relate to points of principle.

While your remit does not exactly cover the setting of the actual salaries of MP's, the key thing I would like to make is that MP's positions are in my mind, not comparable to other positions. The argument that these individuals could be paid more in the private sector, or other jobs in the public sector, is irrelevant. Candidates in my mind, should seek election to parliament on altruistic grounds: they are interested in influencing policy and life in Britain. Financial recompense is of secondary nature. If they start complaining they are not paid enough, this indicates that their own financial circumstances are more important than the job and they should be voted out. Indeed with a salary at over double the national average, I think they are handsomely paid. If they are expecting a lot more than they are in it for the wrong reasons.

I shall now respond to each of the questions.

1. Any expenses system must be fair and transparent - with detailed criteria set objectively by a body independent from Parliament. An independent body must adjudicate claims and enforce the rules. All information (with the exception of addresses and family members names) should be publicly available.
2. No it is not right that parliament sets its own criteria. there is a conflict of interest in setting rules for yourself when you are there to represent the best interests of your constituents, but you are the beneficiary of the system. It should not be allowed. Instead, the scheme should be the same as with local government officials, exactly - with the second homes allowance etc the only difference. Whoever monitors the local government scheme should govern the Westminster scheme. If it is Westminster, then maybe a cross-party grand committee from the House of lords, the devolved governments, the Greater London Authority and English Local authorities should be formed to set the criteria and budgets. No MP should be involved at all.
3. In principle, most of the categories of items are correct however it appears there is too much vagueness for MP's to claim substantial amounts. If a list is come up with for items, it should not be benchmarked against "John Lewis" but a budget retailer: IKEA comes to mind. If the MPs want higher cost items, they pay the difference: we pay the minimum!
4. The policing of the system is inadequate. The new system should be run by the National Audit Office, not parliamentary authorities.
5. It is correct that no financial advantage should occur. With reference to mortgage interest, I do believe that it is more cost effective for homes to be purchased than renting, or MP's being put up in hotels or a Dormitory kind of thing. It is important that they don't get lost in the Westminster world and having a home with their families in London will at least keep the link with the rest of the real world. But the change I would make is to say that for second homes the government pay for the whole mortgage (capital and interest) and own the property outright. The people then get any capital gain from any sale. In addition, given that the London market will continue to be more expensive, I would suggest that the London homes are paid for by the government. MP's can do what they want in their constituencies with their own money - but if they are in London and have a second home - it is the London property that the government should own. This would need specific limits set on the size and cost of the house - but allowances should be made for the size of the dependent families - as you still want children to live with their MP parent. The corollary is that if MP's are a couple

- then only 1 second home can be claimed for.

6. I do not believe, for backbenchers an increase in basic pay is warranted. I refer you to my first paragraph on the role being altruistic and reiterate that they earn more than double the average income in the UK and are in the top 5% paid in the UK. Given that the House has very little power when there is a large majority and a rigid whip - backbenchers impact is very little anyway. A basic MP may have a staff of say 5. A head teacher would have possibly over 100 staff and hundreds of kids to look after. The level of responsibility is not comparable.

7. Constituency offices should be funded directly by the government. Staff should also be funded by them. Ideally constituency offices should be government owned and be transferred to the incumbent MP, much like 10 Downing street goes to the incumbent prime minister. As far as office expenses goes - some fixed costs for utilities pcs and other hardware should be met by the host authorities. A per constituent rate should be made for communication materials (paper/postage) is the only thing they should be allowed to have control of.

8. If they are in London, accommodation should be provided as described above - with no food expenses. If they are in the constituency, living expenses should be met from their own pocket. If in any other location they should follow civil service rules on staying in hotels (both what hotels are allowed and the overnight subsistence rate for food). The current rules on travelling expenses seem fine - but should be receipted at all times: including for petrol.

9. No discretion allowed. As per answer to 5 - London home can be second home - but must be owned or rented by the government, not MPs.

10. In principle, family members should be allowed to be employed in MPs offices. However, as with other public bodies, this should only be allowed where an interview process has shown them to be the best person for the job and detailed job descriptions provided and records of duties provided. All office staff should go through competency based interviews carried out by the Commons HR team and the MP concerned before the appointment is made.

11. Yes receipts for all reimbursable expenditure should be required.

12. All expenditure should be publicly available on the web. If anything is personal, they are well paid and should meet it out their own pockets.

13. It is fine for MPs to have other interests - as long as a) they make these interests known on campaign literature when seeking election and b) this is maintained in the register of interests and c) they deliver a minimum of a 35 hour week in parliament.

14. this is tough one: as long as it is about their work; not just what their party is doing. This should be covered off in office expenses; but each newsletter verified by any new expenses body to show that the MPs own work is described - if it is party work generally claims should be refused.

I really do think that a root and branch review of the constitution and power of parliament is provided for. The executive is too powerful and because they come from parliament, MP's cannot call the government to account. I do believe that there should be a separation of the executive and the legislature, an independently elected upper chamber and proportional representation. MP's complain that PR will give control to parties if via a party list. That is not the only PR system. There is such a thing called the single transferable vote (STV). This maintains the MP constituency link, but just ensures that in the end of the day ranking of choices will see all views accounted for. The people are intelligent enough to rank votes, not just mark a cross.

A constitutional convention should be established post an election. However I do not believe that politicians who may seek further re-election should sit on the convention: as they still have a conflict of interest in that they will still be tempted to design a system that benefits them. It has been suggested to me that this is what happened in Scotland now, where the PR arrangements from all accounts were concocted to ensure the SNP could not get a majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament.

Instead, to restore the confidence in democracy, ordinary members of the public should be allowed to seek election to the convention, on the pre-requisite that they commit

to never seeking election to parliament. They may say they hold particular views, but by having to agree to not seek election to parliament this removes the direct link to future self-interest. This body, like a jury, could sit for a year and consider submissions / proposals by whatever groups - whether political parties, lobbyists for constitutional change, constitutional lawyers/ historians and then negotiate a completely new constitution, that would then be voted on at a referendum.

I think this arrangement would, at a stroke restore public faith in the political process. People would feel that the public designed the constitutional settlement - not the political elite. It will make the public feel it is their system and we control the politicians, not the other way round. Afterwards I am sure we will be happy to then vote for candidates and parties again, based on their manifesto's, but safe in the knowledge that we set the rules by which they govern us. Much like the Magna Carta set the principle of royal government by consent of the people via parliament, this could extend the principle that politicians govern with our consent on the framework in which they govern.

I hope these suggestions will be informative for your review. Please let me know when a consultation statement will be published and when recommendations are to be published.

Yours sincerely

J. Bryson

Kinross

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