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Review of MPs' expenses
The Committee on Standards in Public Life
35 Great Smith Street
LONDON
SW1P 3BQ

Dear Sirs

I write to make an input to your review as an informed member of the general public. I should say that I am a member of the Liberal Democrat party, and also a former Civil Servant.

I think that the present system of accommodation and supplementary expenses allowances clearly suffers from being both over-complex and over-generous (and perhaps from the fact that MPs are both its beneficiaries and also responsible for drawing up, implementing and policing it). The more complex any system of allowances becomes, the more open it is to abuse. A radical simplification would therefore seem to be in order.

My views are formed by two basic observations: Firstly, that in most employments, employees are expected to organise their lives around their job, in particular either relocating or travelling at their own expense; and, secondly, that MPs are in principle only different in that their employment has two centres, one at Westminster, and the other in their constituency.

I think that it is appropriate that some form of recognition is given to this two-centred employment, particularly as the associated additional costs will vary widely depending on where an MP's constituency happens to be.

I would suggest the following basic structure:

1. MPs should be paid a London accommodation allowance, based on the annual rental cost of a small furnished flat within walking distance of Westminster, plus a small fixed amount for additional living costs, plus weekly return travel to and from their constituency. (An alternative model might be to use rental costs in the constituency as a base. That would obviously be more complex to administer. It is not clear to me which might be considered fairer).

2. Except that this allowance should not exceed the cost of daily return travel between their constituency and Westminster – so MPs in London and, probably, the home counties would be paid less.

3. How MPs use this allowance would be entirely up to them. They could live in a West End mansion or sleep in their office. No receipts of any sort would be required. MPs who choose to live neither in their constituency nor in London would have to pay any extra costs they might thereby incur.

4. Special provision would clearly need to be made for MPs provided with official accommodation in or near London – eg the Speaker and the occupants of numbers 10 & 11 Downing Street.

5. No additional expenses of any sort should be paid, other than those legitimately incurred on Parliamentary business (for which Civil Service rules should be applied). I do not see any case for reimbursing the sort of domestic expenditure which has recently been detailed in the newspapers – insofar as that is additional to that incurred in a 'normal' life, it should be covered by a flat-rate allowance as above.

The level of the accommodation allowance should be set in an independent, objective, and external way, eg by yourselves.

Obviously, many details remain to sort out, but I hope that you will agree with me that this basic framework offers a simple, transparent and generally fair basis for a new system of accommodation allowances.

I am sending this letter both in hardcopy and by email, and also copying it for information to my constituency MP, Mr Martin Horwood.

Yours faithfully

R. J. Smith