



From: Cl Simeons

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Cley-next-the-Sea

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Sir Christopher Kelly KCB
Chairman The Committee for Standards in Public Life
Palace of Westminster
London SW1

Dear Sir Christopher,

I am taking the liberty of putting views obtained during my time as a Member of Parliament for Luton, and since, in case some aspect is of assistance to your committee's deliberations.

Entering Parliament should return to being an honour, not a road to riches, offering temptations to those unable to make the grade elsewhere. There should be some element of sacrifice or service. How many of the current MPs who lose their seats will be able to find employment after the next General Election?

The first essential is to get the right mix in Parliament, through a diversity of professions and callings, irrespective of gender and ethnic background. Women of ability will always rise to the top as did Betty Boothroyd, Margaret Thatcher and Barbara Castle, but the problem lies with selection committees which have been reduced to local activists with little experience of selection. The selection process should be broadened out to the point of a primary.

With early retirement, a search for local candidates with invitations to consider selection is essential to obtain good quality people with experience. This would, to some extent, solve the problem of constituency homes. Generally speaking, experience of the work place, for 10 years, especially those with a manufacturing or scientific background should be required as a qualification for all candidates for Parliament. As Baroness Boothroyd observed, it took her 15 years and 6 General Elections, to get elected.

The coming by-election in Norwich North might be an occasion to try this out, may be with the people in the area putting forward an independent and mature candidate with public endorsement.

Once elected, there is considerable merit in those MPs with suitable experience having outside work, to keep them in touch with the real world, so long as it does not produce a conflict of interests. They should not hold ministerial or shadow portfolios associated with that work, or obtain consultancies in the areas of responsibility when they lose office, as happens at present. Whether MPs should work or not should be in the hands of each constituency which selects them. In some places it would be totally inappropriate, but in others it would not interfere with parliamentary work. It should not be for the State to decide, although there might be a requirement for a minimum number of attendances to vote, when failure to achieve that number could mean disqualification.

I hope that this is of some interest.

Yours sincerely

C. Simeons

Standards in Public life 1

To decide what is relevant for today, one needs to go back to say 1950

Then, the local Priest still dealt with human concerns. People became councillors because in many cases it benefited their business. They had prior knowledge of what was going on.

Some entered Parliament for similar reasons, but its prestige was such that it was often a stepping stone to greater things. Others had reached a point in their careers, where they were secure, not far off a pension, and brought experience over a wide range of activity. Then, the electorate was divided roughly into three, Conservative, Labour and floating voters. Today, the core voters (including the Lib- Dems) are greatly reduced and the electorate is much more volatile. A seat for life is a rarity.

When I entered Parliament in 1970, we were not allowed to read speeches as they do today, it was a debate. Most of us had faced large hostile crowds, in my case, 3000 at Vauxhall Motors three times, as well as open air meetings. And so we were used to public speaking, off the cuff. That intake included a whole range of occupations, an accountant, brewer, bullion dealer, mine manager, civil engineer, colonel, supermarket owner, school teacher, banker, lawyers, former director of the Institute of Directors and Shell, stockbroker, farmer, and horse race dealer. I had spent 5 years in the Army, including the Italian campaign, flown a Tiger Moth, time on the Bench, run a factory producing fine chemicals and a Cheshire Home for the disabled. My children were nearly off my hands but as I would not have been able to return to my former work, it was a big risk. I was one of the few who acquainted themselves with effluent treatment and water pollution, so organisations connected with the Water Industry came to me with amendments to the legislation, for which I was not paid. As perhaps the former leading producer of photographic gelatine, Kodak gave me a consultancy for a year, so that my expertise would not be lost, which I turned into one of advising on aspects of health and safety, as the legislation developed. When I lost my seat, they continued to hire me for a further twelve years as an adviser on H & S aspects of Toxic Substances. I had developed my own consultancy - quite remote from Parliament - on the development of legislation in this area internationally, with conferences in London and Washington D.C. attended by OECD, EU and national legislators and representatives of "chemical" companies from 15 countries.

I relate this experience to show that unless people are allowed to do outside work, Parliament will be filled with professional politicians made up of researchers, lawyers, teachers, welfare workers and the like who have work to go back to when they lose their seat, but devoid of any experience in industry or commerce, as is the case with the Opposition Front Bench today. With only some 40 Members being able to speak, during a debate, there are long periods of idleness, during Parliamentary sittings which offer opportunities for appropriate work to be done without affecting the service to constituents

However, the major political parties have sought to attract the electorate by trying to ensure that more women are elected as well as ethnic groups, and weak constituency candidate-selection committees have pandered to the demand. The workings of Parliament have been changed to suit the convenience of those with families, ignoring the effect, which this has on electors needs. While this may suit those living within say an hour of Westminster, it means idle evenings and more expense, for the remainder. The reduced working hours have left more legislation than usual without scrutiny

The likely domestic demands of those seeking election should be considered at the time of selection. For instance, was it right that in some 10 years, one woman MP and Cabinet Minister should have four children at the expense of proper attention for her constituents? Can young women with children really give the service that men are able to give, unless they can afford nursemaids or have relations to help. This is not a suggestion for reversal of the trend, but rather that those women chosen should be able to give the same attention to the job that a man can give. It is vital that the choice of candidates is left to the constituencies so that the best person for the job is chosen, irrespective of background. What is most important is a diversity of experience, which comes from a workplace environment.

Standards in Public life – Parliamentary costs.

In 1970 we were paid around £3000, offered £250 towards the cost of a secretary (out of London the going rate was around £1000), train or car travel to and from the constituency, free postage, free phone from the House of Commons and tax relief on any legitimate expense, which was very little. Most MPs were established and so had some other income, but others didn't. Hours were from 2.30 pm, Monday to Thursday, until the close of business, rarely before 10pm, and sometimes all night.

There was often a requirement for MPs to have a house in the constituency or nearby, but the more wealthy either owned one there anyway, or had a house in London. I was one of the exceptions; not wealthy but I had lived in my constituency, Luton, 35 miles from London for the past 24 years and worked there. It was not easy for a local person to be chosen by the selection committee, although once the candidate, they were often elected, as I was ultimately,

MPs, could be divided geographically into three - those;

- who lived in London
- within say 40 miles of London therefore able to return home most nights, (extending to Cambridge or 60 miles, now that the House rises earlier.)
- outside this range and needing to stay in London for 3 nights a week.

The original hours suited 1 and 3, above, and I found them to be reasonable unless there were a number of very late night sittings, when I might use a club, for which my income from outside work became essential. I could claim the fare home, but not that of an over night stay. Meals in the restaurant or cafeteria were heavily subsidised so the cost of food was not a problem, however, the change in hours has altered that for many, "Out of Town MPs" (more than 60 miles) who now have time on their hands and have to buy meals at commercial rates.

To raise salaries all round, and abolish overnight allowances, would hit the "Out of Town" MPs very hard. Their costs would be much higher than the London or 60-mile group, who need no overnight costs. So the salary, at whatever level needs to be the same for all, with payment by the administration office for specified extra costs essential to their work. The problem with fixing the level of salaries is that unlike civil servants, MPs do not require any qualifications. In the day of Trade Union Leaders, they were seen to be people of ability, or they wouldn't have emerged, but today, many have arrived on a party ticket and were the only choice offered to the electorate. Selection should be broadened out, with one local candidate at least (assuming there is one) offered at the final stage.

There might be an allowance sufficient to pay for a one bedroom flat, either in London or elsewhere, for those outside the travel zone. There is no reason why the taxpayer should pay for the whole family, any more than a company would do. Where mortgages are found to be cheaper than renting, any capital gain should be refunded to the paymaster.

The more contact a sitting MP can have with his constituents, the better from his point of view, but it is expensive in administrative costs. This practice has seen as a shift of the burden from the parish priest to local councillors and on to the MP. Local issues should go to councillors, once again, the MP dealing only with problems directly the responsibility of government. The lower the staffing allowance, the less attractive it will be for MPs to seek cases to deal with, or they will find more efficient working methods. Payment made to MP's office staff should be direct by the Fees Office, and should include only those with appropriate experience. However, where an MP lives in the constituency or nearby, and is contacted at his home, some payment should be available for his wife/partner. My wife would have 5 or six calls every night, which awaited me when I returned from Westminster. She was unpaid.

With current technology, I believe allowances can be reduced considerably, without loss of efficiency.

Charles Simeons.

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