

Sir Christopher Kelly
 Chairman
 Committee on Standards in Public Life
 35 Great Smith Street
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17th June 2009

Dear Sir Christopher,

Reform of the House of Commons Expenses and Allowances System

I am writing to put forward an idea for the future administration of MP's expenses.

I have long thought that although an MP may be put forward as a candidate by one party, following his or her election as an MP more effort should be made to make clear that he must work on behalf of all his or her constituents. At present it seems that an MP's main relationship in the constituency is with his own party agent and selection committee. This can lead to Party Political cronyism or tribalism.

Some measures should be put in place to establish beyond doubt (and act as a constant reminder) that someone who succeeds in being elected as an MP is entering a life of service to all their constituents and to the country as a whole and not entering the life of a member of the " Ruling Class " or of a nomenklatura in which they are " entitled " to privileges or a lifestyle which cannot be delivered to citizens as a whole. The whole ethos of Parliament should be that of service not entitlement. Of course I am writing this during the furore surrounding the Daily Telegraph's revelations about MPs' expenses but it does seem that this sense of entitlement is very deep in our present MPs. Examples include the former cabinet minister who claimed for her furniture following a flood because the furniture was old and worth nothing and her insurers would not pay. She thinks she is entitled to treat the taxpayer as her insurer of last resort. Did the government treat the ordinary citizens of Hull or Doncaster or Tewksbury or Carlisle like that ? Members of the cabinet claim the cost of accountants to complete their tax returns. Ordinary citizens are not allowed to claim that as a tax deductible expense. Again taxpayer funds are being sought to compensate them against the exigencies of life which ordinary citizens must bear at their own expense. (Here I am ignoring the list of grossly inappropriate claims for moats, duck islands, forestry management, pornography, mortgages, flipping, property development, food, etc., etc. But of course they form the background to the present anger of electors.)

My suggestion for the treatment of MPs' expenses is that each constituency should have a small independent scrutiny and liaison committee.

Each MP would submit his expense claims to this Constituency Scrutiny and Liaison Committee (CSLC) which would approve or disapprove in accordance with common sense, the appearance of probity, guidance from the Parliamentary Fees Office Or the independent authority which is to be established and other appropriate principles then submit them to the Parliamentary Fees Office who would only act as payment agents applying the

appropriate tax and National Insurance regulations. This would keep MPs' expense and allowance claims under the continuous scrutiny of their constituents.

This committee could be quite small; I think not more than 9 people.

I suggest it be chaired by someone of the status of a local JP, someone with a reputation for independence. The initial set up work in each constituency could be done by Electoral Returning Officers again to emphasise and maintain independence.

This committee would need a part time employee like the Clerk to a Parish Council or the Clerk to the governing body of a school. I mention those because they are typically paid very low salaries and are frequently done by people wishing to make a contribution to community life.

I think that Political party members could be members of this scrutiny committee but it should never have a majority of members from the MP's party.

Members of this Committee must never be paid any expenses. The expenses of the Committee itself (hire of meeting rooms, advertising for members and reporting to the public, the Clerks salary, photocopying and postage, etc) should be paid through the Parliamentary fees Office or the independent authority to be established.

The overriding principle should be that any expenses or allowances should be that they should be reasonable for the performance of the MP's job. The lifestyle supported should be that of a family living on the average wage in the constituency.

All meetings of this Committee should be entirely open to the public.

Meetings would be monthly and timed to fit in with the processing of expense claims with the payment of monthly salaries.

One meeting each year could be an annual report by the MP to the Committee (and any member of the Public who wished to attend) on his or her work during the previous year.

This committee could have arms length oversight of the selection of researchers, secretaries etc, employed by the member and paid from public funds so as to avoid " Conwayisms "

This Committee must never have any influence over how an MP votes in the House of Commons on any issue. The object is not to change our " Representative Democracy " into a " Delegate Democracy ". I think it is a strength of our system that individuals should use their best efforts in the public interest and should follow their consciences on any issue. Of course many present members of the House of Commons have failed to fill the general public with faith in the strength of their principles or conscience. I do not object to MPs following party whips instructions if members have been elected as party candidates.

It could be debated whether an MP became an employee of the CSLC (which would signify service to the constituents ; In that case some simple method of crediting the employer part of the National Insurance contributions on behalf of the CSLC could be arranged with the Parliamentary Fees Office) or should be self employed for National Insurance and tax purposes (to signify independence).

I appreciate that there may be implications to this proposal which may be constitutionally wider than the strict matter of expenses and allowances which are presently in the public eye. As a consequence some of the attributes, duties, competences of this proposed Constituency Scrutiny and Liaison Committee may need to be varied slightly but I do not accept that reluctance on the part of the members of the present House of Commons should be given any weight in this matter. So many of them seemed to have so little grasp of the concept of right and wrong in its most basic sense that I (and I am sure many other electors and ordinary citizens) can say without hesitation that I do not want them in the legislature of the country that I live in. They are not fit for that role. Our legislature should contain our best citizens. I do not think that can be said of the present House of Commons.

If, as part of wider constitutional reforms, a right of " recall " on MPs were to be established this committee might have a roll in that process. Its independence ensuring fairness, avoiding defensiveness on the part of the MP's constituency party office with its attendant cronyism or tribalism on the one hand and party political animosity on the other.

I will be grateful for an account even if brief of the treatment of this suggestion.

It seems to me that because of the pressure which the furore on expenses is putting on the present political class to accept the proposals which you will make at the end of your enquiry you have a nearly unique opportunity to make your mark on the constitution or from another angle you have a massive responsibility to make appropriate use of that opportunity. The weight of expectation must be great. I offer my best wishes that you can discharge this duty to the benefit of all of us.

Yours sincerely

Patrick McParland

cc. Gordon Brown MP
David Cameron MP
Nick Clegg MP