

UUP Submission to the Committee on Standards in Public Life
Public Inquiry into MPs' Expenses

The Ulster Unionist Party believes that the revelations surrounding MPs' allowances and expenses have severely damaged the reputation of both individual MPs and Parliament itself. The taxpaying public has been rightly outraged by the revelations which have shown that many MPs, regardless of whether they acted within the rules of the system or not, have acted dishonourably. This is a problem that all MPs and politicians must seek to address; it is in everyone's interest to reform the much discredited system.

Underlying principles of reform

The fundamental principle that must underpin reform is that MPs should not continue to determine their own pay and allowances. Pay and allowances should be examined and ultimately determined by a dedicated external body, which can command public respect.

Taxpayers have the right to see what their money is being spent on and we believe that MPs' expenses should be available online.

Securing accountable, cost effective and first-rate representation.

The Ulster Unionist Party strongly supports reform that will regain the public's confidence in MPs and Parliament however, we also believe that any new system should not unduly hinder the crucial job that MPs do both in their constituencies and in Parliament. It is vital that politics attracts the most able and articulate people from all sections of society. The work of a public representative is not nine to five or five days a week. We need to ensure that MPs have a package that is commensurate with demands upon them and with the finances put in place to facilitate excellent constituency and parliamentary representation. In a bid to regain public confidence alongside reform in pay and allowances, the public should have greater access to and knowledge of the work MPs do, taking into consideration constituent confidentiality issues.

The Ulster Unionist Party believes that it is right that MPs are given support for running their constituency and parliamentary offices, provided all claims are reasonable and transparent, all office expenditure should be available for public scrutiny.

Whilst we recognise the concern that has been raised by MPs employing relatives we believe that MPs should be allowed to employ family members, but only if the terms of their employment are open and transparent and a proper reflection of the work they do.

With regards the Personnel Alternative Accommodation Allowance we believe that it is an important principle that in order to fulfil their responsibilities, MPs should be able to maintain a second home, and additionally feel that MPs should be compensated accordingly. The rules governing the current system are flawed and were abused by some MPs, we believe that there is a need for a new system which does away with the second

home allowance and replaces it with a standardised and transparent parliamentary allowance.

Such an allowance should cut the cost to the taxpayer by being set at a lower level; all claims, with full receipts, must be published online and fully open to public scrutiny within a maximum of 28 days; MPs who cohabit as partners should only claim once; there should be mandatory annual public declarations by MPs justifying designation of primary and additional home (including all relevant details – i.e. parents'/ family home). Claims should be made for rent, utility bills, council tax and mortgage interest payments. Claims should not be made for food, furniture, TVs, home decorations, TV bills. MPs should not be exempt from capital Gains Tax liability on second homes.

In light of confusion around the legitimacy and appropriateness of certain claims, we believe that the Green Book is too loose in its drafting and is no longer acceptable in a modern Parliament. There should be tight and clear rules to replace confusing – and uninterpretable – guidance in order to give MPs clarity, and the public confidence, on what they can and cannot claim.


Double Jobbing

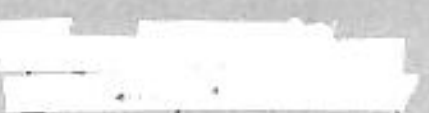
Being an MP is not a part time job. Unfortunately Northern Ireland has the virtually unique problem of MPs who double and sometimes triple job as MLAs and Ministers in our devolved institutions. The public in Northern Ireland deserve the same representation in Westminster, and at a devolved level, as the public in any other region of the United Kingdom. There must be explicit rules that disallow the holding of joint mandates by MPs.

The Ulster Unionist Party believes that any MP who refuses to sit in Westminster should not be allowed to claim expenses for the Westminster Parliament.

Conclusion

A satisfactory outcome to the ongoing problems surrounding MPs' expenses can only come about if it is addressed in a holistic manner which covers all the aspects of a MP's remuneration; pay, pensions, allowances and expenses. Any solution must ensure that the public can have confidence in MPs whilst guaranteeing that high calibre people are attracted to representative politics and ensuring that they can adequately carryout their obligations. MPs should retain personal responsibility for their own behaviour, MPs must maintain a feeling of ownership over the rules that govern their behaviour and not exclusively rely on any new regulatory bodies or rules.


Sir Reg Empey OBE MLA


Danny Kennedy MLA