

10 July 2009

The Committee on Standards in Public Life
35 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BQ

Populus Limited
Northburgh House
10 Northburgh Street
London EC1V 0AT

phone +44 (0)20 7253 9900

fax +44 (0)20 7253 9911

email info@populus.co.uk

www.populus.co.uk

Dear Sir,

Inquiry into MPs' Expenses

Although the date for submissions to the Inquiry has passed, I hope that you will be able to take the concerns expressed in this letter into account during your deliberations.

As a company that regularly explores political and social attitudes for a range of media clients, we have a clear understanding of the depth of public concern about the way in which the system of MPs' allowances has operated. However, we are concerned that the rules on the declaration of outside earnings contained in the Parliamentary Standards Bill and the revised 'Guide to the Rules relating to the conduct of Members' will have a negative impact upon the ability of research companies to conduct research into the views of Members of Parliament and will significantly reduce transparency.

Populus, along with other research companies, is regularly asked by clients to conduct research interviews with Members of Parliament. Our clients wish to gain a better understanding of the thinking of key legislators on issues of public policy and corporate reputation and employ us to conduct research on their behalf. We believe that this research bring broader public benefit by helping to ensure that business understands the concerns of legislators and the people that they represent.

Our interviews – which range from short largely quantitative surveys to in-depth qualitative conversations – are conducted anonymously so that the client does not know the identity of the interviewee, although a 'long list' of MPs with relevant interests is always agreed in advance with the client so that they know that the views expressed are of relevance to their issues and concerns. Populus, in common with other research companies, thanks Members of Parliament for the time they spend by making donations on their behalf to a charity nominated by the Member of Parliament or to the MP's constituency party organisation. These payments, which are relatively small – typically between £50 and £100 - are either made directly by us or else a cheque is sent to the MP (made out to the relevant organisation) for the MP to pass on personally. We do not believe that these payments should be considered to be 'outside earnings' since they do not financially benefit Members of Parliament.

Our understanding of the new rules is that in future any MP taking part in research will have to register the fact, record the amount of time they spend completing it and declare the

payment (even if the payment has been made directly to a charity). This will add an unsustainable administrative burden onto MPs and we have been told by a number of them that they will, therefore, no longer be prepared to take part in research.

We believe that the new rules will adversely affect the ability of companies to understand opinion within the House of Commons and that this will have a negative impact upon corporate policy making. It will also impact upon the funding of hundreds of charities – large and small – that are the regular recipients of payments from research companies.

I hope that you will be able to take these points into account and would be happy to provide further information should it be helpful.

Yours faithfully,

M Simmonds
Founder & Managing Director
020 7553 3011
msimmonds@populus.co.uk