

Roger Gale, MP - North Thanet (1983-present)

The following is a case study of one back-bench Member of Parliament who hails from what would probably be regarded as a “middle class” background, enjoys neither private nor inherited wealth or trades union sponsorship and has endeavoured to make his own way in life and in politics.

I was born in Poole, Dorset, in 1943. My father was a local solicitor and my mother died when I was five years old. I was raised by my father, as a single parent, and my grandparents until my father re-married when I was seven.

I was educated at Hardye`s (boys grammar) School in Dorchester, as a boarder, and then at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama from which I emerged with an LGSM&D. My college course was paid for through a County Technical Scholarship and my board and lodging was paid for by working evening and night shifts as a stagehand in London theatres.

On leaving college I worked as an actor in repertory theatre and in two Shakespearian plays at the Shaftsbury Theatre. I then worked for two years as a broadcaster (“disc jockey”) with the offshore (“pirate”) radio stations Caroline, Scotland and 270. Although these stations were called “pirate” this activity, at the time, was perfectly legal.

With the passing of the Marine Offences Act I returned to London and resumed my career as a stage, television and film actor and subsidised my unemployment through part time work as a cook, in market research and as PA to the General Manager of a major film company.

During this time the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia and I participated in and spoke at a massive demonstration at the Russian Embassy. The enormity of this event had a profound effect upon me and I determined to pursue, ultimately, a career in politics. I joined the Conservative Party and became an activist.

With the birth of my daughter (by my second wife) I recognised the need for a more secure income and joined BBC Radio London as a freelance reporter. I was asked to apply for a post as producer in Current Affairs and Magazine Programmes, BBC network, to work on the embryonic Radio One “Newsbeat” programme. I progressed from there to the Radio Four “Today” programme and then, in order to become more politically active, transferred to Children’s Television. I moved from the BBC to Thames television to direct a series of programmes and to create, produce and direct the BAFTA nominated “White Light” television teenage magazine.

Like a great many other individuals, I pursued a professional career in parallel with following my political interests.

Upon the death of the sitting Member of Parliament, Jocelyn Cadbury, I fought the Birmingham Northfield by-election in 1982 losing by 279 votes. I did not have the resources to nurse a seat at long-distance from my place of work and informed the

Party that I would not be able to do the constituency justice until a General Election was called.

I was then fortunate to be selected, at very short notice, to fight the newly created North Thanet parliamentary seat in April, 1983.

At the time I was, as an independent television producer and director, earning in the region of £60,000 per annum. My wife was a fully qualified executive secretary and party political agent enjoying an employment package worth £17,500 per annum. My wife and I owned a fully restored four-bedroomed terraced house in Fulham and we had a daughter in secondary education, a son at prep school and an infant son (two years old).

Upon election to Parliament in June, 1983 my salary fell to below £20,000 and my wife's income, as my only member of staff, fell to £8,500.

Having given an undertaking to make our main home in the constituency area we sold our newly-renovated period house in Fulham (at the time it was not permitted to use the London Living Allowance to pay mortgage interest and we do not have private wealth or means) and purchased Street Farmhouse, the home that we have lived and brought up our family in ever since.

At today's values the town house in Fulham is worth, at a conservative estimate, £600,000 more than Street Farmhouse. This loss, to our family, will never be recouped but at the time we regarded the move as a necessary measure to enable us to keep a number of promises that I had given to the electorate and to provide a good service to my constituency.

(I use the plural "we" because my wife, Suzy, was and remains, as committed to the task as I am myself and I quite simply could not have devoted the time and energy that I have put into parliamentary life without her rock-solid support and backing not only as my wife but as what is now known as my "Chief of Staff".)

I was fortunate in being able to obtain, after two years in the House, some consultancy work as a media "expert" and advisor. Such outside interest was not only anticipated but actively encouraged at the time as a means of enhancing a deliberately low income (Parliament was a vocation, not a profession or a "job") and also of keeping MPs in touch with the outside world of business and industry. The after-tax income from consultancy work enabled me to subsidise our under-funded office costs by an average, over a ten year period, of £10,000 per annum.

Additionally, we provided (at no rental cost to the taxpayer) a parliamentary office in an outbuilding at the back of our house. This, of course, saved the authorities the cost of space in the Palace of Westminster and all of our office costs (heat, light, telephones, business equipment etc.) were met out of the Office Costs Allowance and my personal subsidy.

My predecessor as a Member of Parliament belonged to a generation of politicians that regarded themselves (possibly correctly) as legislators rather than as social

workers and who did not, therefore, engage in the copious amount of correspondence that we now handle.

With the advent of electronic communication (we were amongst the first users of fax machines and, more recently, were the pilot scheme for the use of House computer services in “satellite” offices) contact between me in the House of Commons and my parliamentary office in Kent has improved. However, the volume of communications received has also increased dramatically.

I open and process all my post myself (I am ordinarily in my office at 06.45 when the House is sitting) and mail it by special delivery to Kent for typing and posting. We are now handling an estimated 100-150 communications a day and aim to turn most of them around within 48 hours.

The increase in workload and ease of access to our office took a toll on my wife’s health and upon our marriage, which nearly reached breaking point. This came to a head when I wakened at three o’clock in the morning, some twelve years ago, to see the office light shining on our lawn and to find my wife working “because I’ve got to keep the work up to date”.

Having failed to notice the warning signs I made immediate arrangements to move the office out of our home and to rent at first half, and currently three quarters, of the property owned by the North Thanet Conservative Association in the centre of the constituency. This means that my wife has a twenty minute drive to work but it also means that she does less (although more than I would wish) casework from home.

I have endeavoured to engage in what I understand is now known as “management by walking about” and regard contact with my constituents as vital to the task in hand. This entails regular attendance at constituency engagements and meetings with the very many local voluntary groups, charities and businesses as well as regular correspondence and newsletters. All of this is in addition to work in the House of Commons as a Member of Parliament endeavouring to hold (without too much success) an overweening Executive to account.

I spent the first years of my parliamentary career as a backbencher serving on Select Committees and learning the procedures and machinery of the House. I was invited to become a Parliamentary Private Secretary and working with two Ministers of State for the Armed Forces before resigning over a matter of principle and in order to free myself to vote against my own government on a Criminal Justice Bill .

Following the 1997 election, which I survived with a dramatically reduced majority, I joined the Speaker’s Panel of Chairmen and currently chair legislative committees, debates in Westminster Hall and legislation taken as a committee of the whole House. I also serve as a member of the Procedure Select Committee and play an active part, through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the IPU in the promotion and development of democratic processes and parliamentary democracy at home and overseas. (I have worked as an international election observer in the past and also take part in “democracy workshops” from time to time in places such as Sierra Leone).

I am, additionally, engaged in the active support of a number of local and national charities with which I hold office.

To support all of this work I now employ, in addition to my wife as Parliamentary Office Director, an Office Manager and a part-time senior secretary. I keep a research assistant on an honorarium as a retainer and employ the services of a computer engineer and website designer. The employees are based in the constituency office with all the usual equipment and, of course, an enormous filing system for all my casework and policy papers

Although many of my regular constituency advice surgeries are held in a public library and local council office in different parts of my constituency, due to its' central location my constituency office is frequently used for surgeries and meetings with constituents. My office receives a stream of visitors coming in "off the streets" - all these callers receive immediate and courteous attention.

With this volume of work, at present I am exhausting and still subsidising my Incidental Expenses (Office Costs) Allowances, under spending slightly on my staffing allowance and using about half of my Communications Allowance.

I am also, currently, using approximately 25% of the Additional Costs ("London Living") allowance.

Domestically, my wife and I initially shared accommodation with my mother-in-law in Fulham (her home had a small self-contained flat within it) while our children lived in Kent cared for by a mother's help. (Our two elder children were at boarding school).

In order to give our family the attention that they needed and deserved we bought, on a mortgage, a basement flat in a converted house in Lewisham and Suzy returned to work full-time in Kent. The flat was at an inconvenient distance for late-night sittings in the House (3am finishes were at that time not uncommon) and in a less than "fashionable" area but had the advantage of easy access to the M2/M20 motorway systems and meant that Suzy was able to bring our youngest son to see me mid-week and still get him back to nursery school in Kent by 09.00 on the following morning.

The interest on the mortgaged capital of the flat was claimed against the (then) London Living Allowance as were the rates and running (service charges, utilities and maintenance) costs.

In 2004 we took a joint decision that I would fight the 2005 and 2010 general elections and then review our future in the light of our health, the political situation and the wishes of my constituency association.

After seventeen years of wear and tear caused by children and domestic animals the flat, which we had originally furnished, carpeted and curtained entirely at our own expense, was dilapidated and I took the decision to clear the property during the Summer recess and to start again.

The flat was re-decorated, re-carpeted and curtained and furnished with Argos flat-pack furniture at a total cost of well under three thousand pounds. The project was cleared in advance with the Fees Office, approved and paid for against receipts. The amortised cost, over seventeen years, represents an expenditure of £154 per annum and was, I believe within the letter and the spirit of “reasonable and sufficient for the purpose without extravagance”.

In February of 2006, after re-election, my wife had a serious car crash resulting in a broken hand/wrist, followed by a fall which left her with a broken ankle. She then required an operation on her hand and wrist. She was wheelchair-bound and, although she continued to work in our constituency office throughout her recovery, she was unable to climb stairs.

This incident caused us to re-appraise our domestic arrangements and to make changes, in the light of our altered family needs, to see us through to retirement and beyond. I accordingly sold the flat at a modest increase over the purchase price and paid the requisite Capital Gains Tax on the transaction.

I then rented the back room in Tooting in a flat owned by a friend (herself disabled) of ours and in which I now stay when in London. I installed, in the room (which is small) a fitted chest of drawers in the fireplace and a fitted wardrobe in the chimney breast. I had some essential wiring (of the bedroom) and plumbing carried out and purchased thick curtains to exclude the glare of a security light at adjacent business premises.

The cost of this work was again approved in advance and paid against receipts as was expenditure on a replacement television set purchased at a cost of less than half the additional charge for renting an identical set over six years.

In that year my ACA expenditure was, at under £9000, less than half of the allowance and in the most recent year for which figures are available (2008/2009) has fallen to under £6000 for rental, rates and contribution towards the costs of utilities etc.

Personal Conclusions:

No Member of Parliament could fail to be aware of the anger that has arisen as a result of the apparent exploitation, by some, of the Additional Costs and other allowances. It is clear that the reforms that are well overdue (I published an article on this following a vote of the House in July 2008) must now be introduced.

That article, together with details of my expenses for the past six years have been published on my website for about two years.

It is, however, vital that we do not over-compensate for justified public concern and, through the law of unintended consequences, deter many good people who might otherwise have entertained the prospect of public service from so doing.

My own family's changing circumstances, and the metamorphosis of the varied tasks of a Member of Parliament indicate, I think, that there cannot be a "one size fits all" solution to this problem.

It is facile to suggest, conveniently, that MPs should be "provided with a room in London" when many Members already have homes in London bought long prior to election and also have young families with whom they quite properly wish to spend time.

Equally, the needs of those men and women with young families differ markedly from the needs of those of us whose families have grown up and whose spouses choose and prefer to live in the constituency rather than in London.

We are led to believe that after the next general election it is likely that as many as half of the elected Members of Parliament will be new to the job. Many of them will have devoted time over three or four years of political activity to nursing a seat at the expense of their private lives, their careers and their incomes. As a result, many will arrive in Parliament in debt and some may well only serve for one term before being defeated at the ballot box and finding it necessary to try to resurrect a previous business or career.

It is essential that MPs are enabled to secure accommodation for themselves and, where appropriate, for their families either in the constituency or in London and to do so at reasonable cost to the taxpayer. Without granting carte blanche for extravagance reasonable financial provision must be made for housing and, in addition, for furnishing a second home. I emphatically do not subscribe to the view that it is in order to use the maximum Additional Costs Allowance to pay the mortgage interest on a large country house but improper, in some way, to use the same allowance for the purchase of modest furnishings.

Any review of Members' terms & conditions of employment must be comprehensive and must include salary, pension scheme and all staff and personal and office costs. The latter must take account of the charges borne by Members who base their parliamentary offices in the constituency and the hidden subsidy of those who use all of the "free" facilities of the Westminster estate.

The review must be wholly independent and the findings should, I believe, be accepted by the House and implemented in full after the next general election and not "cherry picked" as has been the custom in the past. Given that Members' incomes have fallen, in real terms considerably in recent years (five years ago on a par with the remuneration of the Head Teacher of a secondary school, now at the same level as that received by a Head of Department) it is inevitable that some unpalatable adjustments will have to be made and it is important that this is done on independent recommendation and passed by this parliament for the next.

I have a very real concern that unless the comparative imbalance in the remuneration package is addressed then Parliament will become the playground of those with inherited or other private wealth supported by career politicians with little or no experience of life or business and industry and whose only aspiration is to receive a salary that they would be unlikely to achieve in another walk of life. If that is allowed to happen then Parliament will cease to be the broad and representative church that it has been and very many talented men and women who have hitherto regarded membership as a vocation, a privilege and an honour will shun the prospect to the detriment of the nation. That must not be allowed to happen.

I would be pleased to discuss all or any of these issues in person if to do so would prove helpful.

Roger Gale MP
May, 2009.