

N F Taylor

From the outset I should make it clear that I am a card carrying member of the Liberal Democrats but the views expressed are my own and may, possibly, be at variance with those of the party.

Scandals over 'perks' by Members of Parliament are, of course, nothing new and, in the days before they were paid, there was one famous case where some members were using the free postage facility for commercial mail and pocketing the money given to them.

Although the salary is not being looked at it is of importance. It is sufficiently large to insulate M.Ps. from any variation in taxes and is greater than that enjoyed by most of the electorate. (There is, of course, an argument that they should be required to live on the income of the 50th. percentile of the population, which is far less than the average wage. There would be a radical change in the taxation system and they would understand the people they represent far better than at present.)

The cry of many is that "It's within the rules". It may well be within the letter of the rules in many cases but surely they must be aware that it is hardly within the spirit of the rules. Another thing which is alienating a lot of people is the sheer arrogance with which they claim that nothing they've done is against the rules. The other 'excuse' that they didn't know the item was on the claim or that they didn't know it wasn't a permissible item must bring into question their ability to be an M.P. (In many others jobs they'd be instantly dismissed for gross misconduct and often the subject of a police investigation.) One of the most objectionable aspects is that those who have decided not to stand again over these matters have chosen not to resign their seat but to continue to milk the system by retaining their seat until the general election and getting a 'golden handshake' from the disgusted public - and they have the gall to criticise bonuses to incompetent bankers. There appears to be no other job that is so generous in the way of expenses and allowances, with the exception of the European Parliament. (I am pro- Europe but that doesn't blind me to a system that can be so readily abused by some members who have little belief in service to the public and more in the 'trough'.)

References are made to the "fees office". Who staffs this? Why do they seem to have such a cosy relationship with M.Ps? Why do they allow things that are strictly forbidden elsewhere and the legality of which, e.g. claiming for advice to fill in a tax form, is questionable?

The view of many is that M.Ps. are in the House of Commons primarily to milk the system. Obviously there are many who don't but the 'sleaze' appears to involve ministers and front bench personnel and is such that the reputation of Members of Parliament, which was already on a par with journalists and lawyers, will take several decades to recover. It is not helped by the fact that there are now too many career politicians and at least one party has rules that virtually prevents persons over 50 and not previously an M.P. or M.E.P. from standing.

For simplicity allowances and expenses will be treated collectively rather than as two separate categories.

Housing benefits.

We are told that due to the irregular hours that they work M.Ps. need two homes. The “irregular hours” are a relic from Parliament prior to 1911 when many M.Ps. had to have a job outside parliament to earn money - this is no longer the case. Hundred of thousands of their constituents commute to London each day from Birmingham, Bournemouth, Essex, Kent, Poole, Swindon, etc. with a lesser number coming from further afield such as Bristol, Wolverhampton and the like. There is no reason why parliament should not switch to 0900-1700 on Mondays to Thursdays with Fridays ‘off’. (A goodly number of those commuting long distance each day are working mothers and if they can do it, on far less than £60,000 per year, there is no reason why an M.P. can’t.)

Therefore all members living within, say, a radius of 120 miles from Westminster do not have a lodging allowance except on an occasional basis where there is a justifiable and verifiable reason for it being incurred - which would normally apply only to ministers. Those outside that area would be allowed to claim at the rate for a three star hotel, the amount could be fixed, for every night it is incurred, i.e. Sunday night to Thursday night, against receipt. If they choose to rent a flat or purchase a second house the amount would not exceed that given for those using an hotel and on the same basis, i.e. Mondays to Thursdays when parliament is in session.

Vacations

The number of vacations enjoyed by Members of Parliament are excessive. A long week, i.e. 24th. December to 2nd. January, both dates inclusive, and a month in summer , together with Public Holidays and the like. (Still more than many persons. Many cannot afford to go away in any case.)

Travel

Most commuters have to pay their own travel costs from their salary. It is, however, unreasonable to expect members from distant seats to pay their own travel costs and there has to be a similar rule for all. For essential journeys in connection with their job, including travel to and from Westminster, reimbursement at the lowest priced standard class rail fare rate (or a season ticket where cheaper) - there is no essential reason for them to travel first class and they can always pay the difference. For journeys that have to be made by car (Dr. Beeching’s legacy) reimbursement at ‘casual users’ rate i.e. no lump sum, necessity for the journey shown and a mileage log kept with meter readings - common enough in the real world.

Secretarial/Office Costs

For a start no close family member to be employed. (Over the years the wives and family members of the clergy, doctors and, when they existed, rural policemen have always been expected to act as unpaid message takers and, sometimes, secretarial aides as well.) There would be a need to define “close family member” but parents, siblings, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts and in-laws could be a starting point.

M.Ps. allowed to employ and appoint two secretaries at Westminster paid for by the taxpayer at a fixed rate laid down by an independent assessor and paid from an officer independent of the member concerned. They would not be civil servants as such but would, of course, need to be strictly vetted and subject to the Official Secrets Act.

(There is of course the fact that the House of Commons is not fit for purpose in the 21st. Century. Office accommodation is at a premium and purpose built office space, with appropriate security, needs to be provided. One does not begrudge money spent on providing essentials to allow M.Ps. to do their job efficiently.)

In the constituency the M.P.’s. office is often the party office and staffed by party members and the distinction between the two aspects can be somewhat indistinct. Each constituency should have an office, provided at public expense and adequate for purpose, which is for the post, irrespective of the holder, with essential equipment and one secretary, not a member of any party, who is paid a given rate by a body independent of the M.P. in the same manner as those at Westminster. Although there would be a need for the secretary and M.P. to work together it is envisaged that, for the sake of continuity if nothing else, the post holder does not automatically change with the M.P. (Party work, of course, is strictly forbidden by the secretary or in the office and no party political pamphlets should be on display or available.)

Other notes

It is obvious that the present system is such that it leads to abuse by those who seek to obtain financial gain. The cosy arrangements with the fees office seem to be ineffectual in disallowing improper claims. Any system needs to be independent of M.Ps. and capable of being scrutinised to verify such independence. It needs to ensure that no M.P. can make a profit from the system - they don’t have to take a job that pays £60,000 per year, although it would be interesting to know how many took a drop in pay to enter parliament.