

Public Consultation on the Review of MPs' Expenses

The outcry over the way a few miscreants among the Members of Parliament abused the expenses allowance system to their personal advantage should not obscure the deeper problems about the way the Parliament works. My opinion on the questions posed by the Committee on Standards in Public Life has been shaped not only by this latest scandal but also the loans for peerages revelations that formed the backdrop to the review of the system for funding political parties.

The correct context is therefore to determine what we want our MPs to do! I am not going to try to give a full answer here, but wish to make the following observations:

- There seems to be a fair degree of agreement that MPs do not spend enough time scrutinising legislation and the government's legislative programme crowds out private member's bills.
- On the other hand, it is often stated that half our legislation originates in the EU. So why do we need Parliament to sit for as much time as has traditionally been the case?
- MPs claim that they hold the executive to account, but there is precious little sign that they do so at the level of their constituency. 'Holding the executive to account' seems to be a game in which the Opposition parties try to embarrass the Governing party on the floor of the House of Commons or in the media studios. The mechanisms whereby MPs can influence national public authorities (N.B. not local governments) and be a conduit for the public's views in their areas are missing.
- The Political Parties are shadows of the former selves. We do not have Parties that are rooted in civil society anymore, but election-fighting machines that use the tools of marketing and public relations to 'stay in touch' and to craft their appeal to the median voter. With little by way of a mass base and geared towards the 'middle market' of floating voters, the Parties' internal mechanisms have atrophied leaving them in the position of being 'responsive' to the public mood but lacking their own communication channels to influence, persuade or activate civil society. As a result, modern parties in many Western countries rely on the media (which is independent and thus often critical of what the parties want to say and in any case personalise issues), or upon the levers of government, with an impact upon the neutrality of the civil service, to bring about change. Clearly, we cannot turn the clock back to the 1960s when civil society was more organised around trade unions, professional associations, churches, chambers of commerce, etc. But the current situation in which people feel dissatisfied with and remote from government has to be addressed: new channels through which citizens can influence government are needed and MPs (Parliament) must have a role in doing things differently.

My vision for the future is therefore this:

- MPs should meet as a Parliament for two weeks a month (holidays excepted);
- Backbench MPs should spend one week a month in their constituencies, where they would have non-voting seats on public bodies (health authorities, FE colleges

and universities, regional development agencies, etc) and put pressure on the civil servants to up their game locally. The allocation of seats on public bodies to MPs would be done on a regional basis and has to ensure a balance of party representation. Clearly not all hundred or so MPs from a region would sit on the same body: each MP would have a responsibility for overseeing (on behalf of Parliament as a whole) the work of a particular public body in their region. Their role on public bodies would be to see that their constituents' needs were being served and provide feedback to Parliament on the state of things in the country.

- MPs with Government jobs would not be involved in local oversight activity.
- The remaining time that MPs would have in the month would be spent in Parliamentary committees or policy related work for their Party and on constituents' personal problems.

With this framework in mind I answer the questions posed in the Paper of April 2009.

1. MPs should have the resources to undertake their role as the people's representatives, locally, nationally and internationally. Candidates for parliament should not be put off from standing by the need to fund the additional expenses of living for part of the time near Westminster.
 - MPs with constituencies beyond commuting distance of Westminster should receive a London weighting as part of their salary. This salary increment would be calculated on the basis of a survey of the cost of renting a two-bedroom furnished apartment in Central London (including maintenance charges and costs of utilities).
 - MPs with constituencies within commuting distance of London – for example within a radius that allows a total journey time from constituency to Westminster of 90 minutes or less – should receive an allowance equivalent to an annual season ticket for rail and underground.
 - MPs with constituencies within London would not receive any special allowance.
2. No opinion.
3. The type of expenses MPs are able to claim is broadly correct apart from the second homes allowance which should be abolished and replaced with a salary increment for London weighting as described above.
 - MPs should be recompensed for travel and subsistence when undertaking their duties. An administratively straight forward system would be to provide for an annual travel and subsistence grant that could be spent as required by the MP without having to account for the costs of each trip. MPs with a higher than average sized constituency, with scattered communities, would receive an enhanced grant. Unfortunately HM Revenue and Customs would probably tax this grant as a perk. In which case, MPs would have to make a claim each time they had a constituency engagement (assuming they were not getting a fee or reimbursement of expenses as a speaker at the event).
 - MPs should receive an allowance for their constituency office covering premises, secretarial services, office equipment, telecoms, and so on. Claims against the allowance would be on the basis of audited

statements furnished annually. The cost of the audit would be part of the eligible expenses. MPs should be encouraged to operate shared facilities in neighbouring constituencies.

- Westminster office facilities should be provided by the Palace of Westminster to MPs via their Party. Thus a Party would receive facilities at the Palace of Westminster to accommodate all their MPs. The Palace would employ Party nominees as secretarial, administrative support staff, press liaison and researchers as civil servants, who would have all the rights and duties of the Civil Service, but with derogation as regards to their political neutrality. The budget for these facilities and services would be divided among the Parties in accordance with the number of their MPs. Independent MPs would receive a pro-rata provision, which, if they wished to form a non-aligned group, could be more advantageous to them (i.e. by sharing staff) – this is similar to the way the European Parliament works.
 - Parliamentary Committees would have budgets to enable them to obtain professional services or undertake fact-finding missions.
 - Government Minister would not be able to appoint Special Advisers to the Civil Service as these staff would be provided to the Party by the Palace of Westminster.
4. The National Audit Office should be able to check the work of the Commons' Fees Office and the accounts of the Palace of Westminster as a whole.
 5. The proposal outlined at 1 above avoids this problem. If an MP from outside London uses the London weighting (calculated for the rent of a smallish apartment) to buy a property in London or elsewhere then that is his or her decision.
 6. Agree – see 1 above.
 7. Agree – see 3 above.
 8. The concept of a 'main home' should be done away with. The entitlement to an increment in salary (London weighting) will be based on the location of the MP's constituency with respect to Westminster. If the local citizens want to elect an MP whose main home is outside the constituency then that is their prerogative.
 9. This issue does not arise under the scheme proposed at 1 above.
 10. MPs would be entitled to hire family members only at their constituency offices.
 11. It would be simpler for a per diem to be paid for many activities that necessitate an overnight stay in a location that is not the MP's constituency or Westminster. The sum payable would have to be acceptable to HM Revenue and Customs.
 12. The Palace of Westminster should publish an Annual Report that would provide a breakdown of the expenditures it made in relation to MPs and their Parties.

13. MPs should be able to receive remuneration for whatever they do outside their Parliamentary duties and should continue to declare 'outside' interests.
14. No.

A Mitchell

2 June 2009