

Submission from Andrew Robathan MP

3rd June 2009

Dear Sir Christopher

Submission: Review of MPs' Expenses

1. Over the last month the expenses furore has done untold harm to Parliament. My view for a long time has been that the expenses regime should be changed radically and I would like you to consider my personal views on this. Any system should be simple, clear and transparent.
2. The current expenses regime cannot and should not remain. My contention is that as far as possible any expenses payable to MPs should be curtailed or stopped completely. Any claim, as we have seen, whether genuine or otherwise, can damage the public perception of Parliament.
3. It is impossible, in my view, to detach pay from allowances. Any employee – and being an MP is a form of employment – knows that he or she will have a package of pay, allowances and conditions of service. My views on this matter therefore take into account the fact that pay and allowances are inextricably interlinked.

Additional Costs Allowance

4. At my first Election in 1992 and at my Selection, I was frequently asked “would I make a home in the constituency?” I replied that I would, but there was an understanding that I would have to live in two places. Not only were my wife and I London based (she was then working in the City of London), but I have always seen the House of Commons as my primary place of work – although I understood I would be required to work in two places. When I was first a Candidate in Leicestershire, I used to go and stay in a bed and breakfast – I think that I have kept faith with my constituents by not just having a base of convenience, but by making a home there.

5. ACA (PAAE) is worth up to £40,000 gross and I note that nearly 400 Members of Parliament claim 90% or more of it. The reason it exists is that having a second home is extremely expensive, but it seems to me that anything that one charges the public purse – be it mortgage interest, (most of my claims), rent, furniture, council tax or cleaning – lays one open to some form of slur, deserved or not.

6. Therefore it should be abolished. Most of my colleagues could not afford to run two homes on the salary of an MP, so there would need to be a quid pro quo with the salary being raised significantly.

Travel Costs

7. MPs can currently use public transport free wherever necessary on Parliamentary duties, to and from the constituency etc... My view is that no motor mileage should be claimable because it is not verifiable. Of course some people have large constituencies, but their constituents may have to manage on public transport. If we wish to drive our motor cars on business, we should pay.

8. The additional cost that this would add should then be rolled into salary, at say an average of £4,000, taxable. My mileage claims and those of many others appear to be between £3,000 and £5,000.

Staffing Costs

9. Of course Members of Parliament need staff to assist them, but in my opinion there are too many staff employed by MPs. A former Leader of our Party said to me when he was but a backbencher that “you spend as much time looking after a researcher as he or she does looking after you”. In my opinion, many staff, particularly those employed in constituencies in a joint MP and party office, have a confused job description where it is difficult to tell where the work they do on a Parliamentary basis ends and the work they do on a Party basis begins. There is much talk of the need for “caseworkers” and of course one does need assistance, but I do not believe we need nearly as many staff as people employ. There should therefore be a marked reduction in the staffing allowance.

Office Costs Allowance

10. The IEP/AOE used to be described as Office Costs Allowance. Few people in any business pay for their office costs from their own pocket – but at the same time it seems to me the IEP/AOE has become too large. If it were reduced, I do not believe that many people would notice a marked reduction in service.

Communications Allowance

11. The Communications Allowance should be abolished forthwith. It was introduced to bolster the position of a Member of Parliament in his or her constituency. If people wish to put out a “Westminster Report” this should be done by a political Party locally and not paid for by the taxpayer – this used to be done under IEP/AOE, and that practice should be stopped as well. Self publicity is something that every MP may work on if he or she wishes, but not paid for by the public purse.

Administration Costs

12. If one abolishes these complex allowances and establishes a simple and clear system, the cost of administration would diminish dramatically. For those of us that believe in smaller bureaucracies and Government, this would be welcome and it is something that is both desirable and the right thing to do. Most MPs are not accountants and are not good at filling in endless forms.

Reducing the Cost of Politics

13. Everything I have said above would, I believe, lead to a reduction overall in the cost of running Parliament and politics. I would go further since it seems to me that the cost of politics has grown like Topsy over the years. I would suggest that your Committee recommends that there is a reduction in the number of Members of Parliament. This could take place over, perhaps, two Parliaments or ten years and have some form of redundancy payment, but I would aim for approximately 500 MPs. This

may seem like a turkey voting for Christmas, but it is the right thing to do.

14. The “court of public opinion” is extremely angry over the cost of MPs. I therefore suggest that your review should aim to reduce the total cost of politics and Parliament. This is the right thing to do and your review offers an excellent opportunity to improve the situation.

Pay

15. I vowed never to vote again on my pay in 1994. Sadly, as the Conservative Deputy Chief Whip, I voted down two pay rises last year – one recommended by the SSRB and one by Sir John Baker. It is critical that Parliament is consistent and that it should neither vote itself pay increases nor vote that it should not accept recommended pay rises. Part of the problem is that Governments are never willing to accept pay rises – because they do not think it looks good. Of note, gaily and willingly, as an officeholder, I have refused my pay increases this year, because the Leader of my Party thought it appropriate.

16. I have never complained about my pay, on the grounds that other people want my job. And furthermore, most of my constituents earn less than I do. However, I have never been vilified before in this way and that was certainly not part of the package. I believe one way to end the confusion, to give clarity and transparency, and to put some end to the vilification, is to pay MPs sufficient to attract people of quality, ability, intelligence and experience into Parliament.

17. There are many comparators, but my own example is leaving the army aged 37. If I had not, I would almost certainly have become at least a Lieutenant Colonel. An army Lieutenant Colonel is paid more than an MP and may also receive boarding school allowance, subsidised quarters and other perks.

18. I have received messages over the last few weeks from constituents and other friends suggesting we should be paid £200,000 or more. I disagree. However, you might be interested in the enclosed letter sent to me by a constituent, who has written to the Prime Minister. She says “my husband was a railwayman and I was a post lady”, but she believes that MPs should have a big rise in their salaries to compensate for not getting any expenses. As you can see, she suggests that MPs should be paid £120,000. (I would be grateful if you did not publish the name or address of my constituent, since I consider all constituency correspondence to be confidential).

19. Personally, I believe that we should get rid of the Additional Costs Allowance and mileage claims and MPs should be paid something between £105,000 and £110,000. I would be happy to let an outside body determine the sum.

20. Finally, I would be very happy to give evidence in person to your Committee, should you think it appropriate.

Enc.

Review of MPs' Expenses
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