

**ANDREW GEORGE MP**

Sir Christopher Kelly  
Chair – Committee on Standards in Public Life  
35 Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BQ

5th June 2009

Our ref: 09/32.21/ag/umc

Dear Sir Christopher,

**REVIEW OF MP EXPENSES**

I have a few comments in response to your call for Evidence and in the context of the most recent pre-occupation of the press and also some of the reporting of my own experiences.

An important principle of any allowances system should be that those in receipt of the allowances should not be able to make financial gain, private profit or capital from the use of those allowances. I have always argued that so long as Members of Parliament are able to make a profit/capital gain from the accommodation allowance there will be an incentive for impropriety.

The element of the property or the whole property (where that is the case) which is subject to mortgage interest relief being provided through allowances should be redeemable to Parliament. Indeed, if a property is simply handed back to Parliament with all of the furniture that has been bought with Parliamentary allowances this would provide Parliament with a property it could then let to a future MP. Parliament should consider entering into the property letting sector itself. The alternative would be that when the property is sold (or when the MP retires but intends to retain the property) a valuation or open market sale should take place and any “profit” should be disbursed according to the proportion of investment made by the taxpayer and the Member of Parliament.

Secondly, a Member of Parliament should designate where their main home is at the beginning of each Parliament and not be given the opportunity to alter that for the whole duration of that Parliament. I cannot see any good reason why a redesignation should be permitted.

Thirdly, we should move towards a system where all staff who are paid through Parliamentary allowances should go through a proper and transparent recruitment process – preferably involving an officer of the Commons and the MP. That would mean recruitment in constituencies requiring a visit from an officer of Parliament.

Fourth, an MP has both a right to privacy and a right to family life. I bought nearly a third of my own property in London outright with my own resources and have called upon the use of the accommodation allowance to cover the remaining two-thirds through the claiming of mortgage interest relief. I have also supplied much of the furniture, fridge, cooker, etc, for the property without any call on Parliamentary allowances.

As, like most MPs, I work about an 80 hour week, I do not see much of my family, even when I am at my family home in the constituency in West Cornwall. I do not think that the public expect an MP to live in solitary confinement when they are away from their main home. For that reason, I believe that it is reasonable to allow a Member of Parliament to have members of his/her family with them, particularly in circumstances like my own where I have made a significant contribution towards the accommodation itself. It would be very helpful to have a clear ruling on this.

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As a result of what I obviously consider to be unfair reporting and a misrepresentation of the facts, my family have been intimidated by the media, snooped upon and my daughter stalked. If I am wrong in believing that a Member of Parliament has a right to retain some kind of semblance of private family life then it would be helpful if your committee made clear its view on this matter. After my case hit the press on 13th May 2009 virtually every Member of Parliament I met who has family expressed their surprise and astonishment that I should be pilloried for allowing members of my family to come and stay with me in my London flat. Each one of them admitted that they did precisely the same thing (even in those cases where Parliamentary allowances were paying for 100% of the mortgage relief on the value of the property). Of course, quite understandably, none of them wished to go public on this as they feared that they would have their own private arrangements and details of expenses mischievously misrepresented in the press as well. So I was on my own!

Above all, what this episode taught me was just how vital it is for reasonable privacy to be respected. A photograph of the flat was splashed over many of the press and when stalking me outside the property, I heard members of the media discussing with any other members of the public without hesitation details of my address, who I was and what the basis of the allegations were against me. This prompted some of my neighbours (who I had never met) to collude with the press and send pictures of me coming and going from the flat to the press, to snoop on me and send emails to me about when they thought I should or should not have cycled home. Because I hadn't got home by 11.30 pm one evening, I received an email demanding an explanation!

My daughter, who I was keen to come and stay with me in the flat as often and as long as she wished, went into hiding and I was unable to see her and worried about her welfare. This also happened at a time when she was facing very important university exams and the climate in which the stalking, snooping and unwarranted press reports were going on created an almost impossible environment for her to perform well.

I know that your Committee cannot issue recommendations for the behaviour of the press, but I think that it is important that Members of Parliament – and especially their families – are given reasonable protection from unreasonable intrusion and also a degree of privacy.

In normal circumstances I prefer not to cut myself off from the public and to always have my home telephone number in the local telephone directory and am aware that many people know precisely where I live within the constituency, what my family do, what my family and my social and recreational habits, etc, are. This is all part of what I consider to be an important element of my work to make myself accessible. I am not simply seeking a privileged right to privacy merely a reasonable one.

The actions of the media have placed both my family and I in jeopardy. If it were just a matter for me then I probably wouldn't bother making the point, but I think that my family (who after all have not stood for election or to go into public life) deserve better.

Therefore, MPs deserve a level of reassurance that those Parliamentary authorities who hold personal and confidential data and addresses, etc, are competent to protect the privacy of MPs' families.

Equally, the same applies to all members of staff and their families too.

Fifth, the House of Commons will never have any credibility so long as MPs are considered to be able to set and vote for the nature and size of their own salaries and expenses regime. Any alternative is better than that.

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Sixth, the principle that representative democracy should not be or become an exclusive preserve of the independently wealthy is fundamental to any scheme.

Finally, on the remaining matters I have a few comments:

1. Clearly the policing of expenses is not adequate as demonstrated by the examples given in the press and media. Some of these may have been exaggerated, but even if partially true, these demonstrate a system which is clearly not fit for purpose.
2. Receipted claims followed by a robust independent audit is probably the best mechanism for addressing most of the concerns. That is certainly better than one which is based upon media disclosure, public lampooning and witch hunts.
3. I think that the level of detail should include broad headings of, for example, office equipment category but not the supplier nor the make or brand, etc, of item. Whether an item of equipment is considered appropriate or necessary should be a matter for other authorities who are there to judge the appropriateness of the expenditure.
4. I primarily use the communications allowance to ensure that my website is operational and up-to-date and provides information for the many constituents who use it to keep up-to-date with my work as MP. This is monitored by the Fees Office and I believe that this is an appropriate expense. The other main use of the communications allowance is that of circulating an annual survey to constituents on issues which are relevant at the time and which help me to do my work in terms of seeking the view of local people on matters which are either likely to be or will be under consideration. Whilst purely 'promotional' material should be controlled these other uses are more appropriate, I feel.

I hope these comments are helpful and if you have any questions about them or would like to receive further information or evidence to support or back them up then please contact me.

With good wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew George MP