

Sir Christopher Kelly
Review of MPs' Expenses
The Committee on Standards in Public Life
35 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BQ

Dear Sir Christopher,

I write on behalf of the Labour Party to submit evidence to your review into MPs' expenses. I am aware that the Parliamentary Labour Party has submitted evidence to your committee, but I thought a contribution from the wider Labour Party would be beneficial to your deliberations.

We have no desire to pre-empt the recommendations of your committee, and as such will not put forward detailed proposals for rules or mechanisms, but will rather focus upon broad principles that we believe will restore faith in our democracy, whilst at the same time enabling our MPs to effectively carry out the extensive duties their role demands of them.

It is important that the review takes account of the present financial climate, and carry the confidence of the public in terms of the overall burden upon the taxpayer. However, the review also provides an opportunity to look at ways of increasing support for those with additional needs or responsibilities, who might not otherwise put themselves forward for Parliament.

Diversity of Economic Background

It is easy to forget in the current climate, that the call for paid MPs was once a rallying cry for progressive change. Before 1911, when MPs' pay was introduced, those from poor or working-class backgrounds could not afford to stand for Parliament, and even those who managed to attain victory at the ballot box were often forced to retire early due to the exorbitant costs a parliamentary career entailed.

Maintaining a home and office both in London and in a constituency is an expensive business, and MPs should receive appropriate remuneration that enables them to properly serve their constituents and support their families. It is imperative that no MP be allowed to profit from the system, but equally, in a democratic society, politics should not be the preserve of rich men, but be open to those from all walks of life.

Additional Financial Support

Improving the diversity of Parliament is a principle agreed to by all the main parties, and financial help is one of the mechanisms by which under-represented groups can be assisted. In particular Parliament needs more women and more MPs who are Black, Asian, or from other ethnic minorities. MPs who are lone parents, MPs with caring responsibilities, or those MPs who require additional resources due to disability, are all examples of where additional support might be given. Their experiences are shared by many voters, and their presence in the House could only benefit Parliament.

A Full-Time Job

To be elected to Parliament is to be entrusted by one's constituents with a full-time job serving and defending their interests. On those occasions when the House is not sitting, it is reasonable for the electorate to expect their MP to be engaged upon casework, or be back in their constituency talking to voters. An MP's link with their constituency is one of the great strengths of the UK political system, and we believe it is imperative that the reforms you suggest should in no way make it harder for the average MP to live, work and engage in the life of the community they serve.

But for an MP to do this effectively, as well as playing a proper role in the legislature, it has to be a full-time job. The electorate deserves it, and our democracy demands it. Where MPs have other income, there should be very clear guidelines to ensure that MPs are not enriching themselves during time that should be spent serving their constituents. At the least, MPs should have to be entirely open and transparent about their financial interests, including any income derived from other work.

The Public Confidence

It is essential that the new arrangements have the confidence of voters, and provide a basis for rebuilding trust in Parliament and politics. It is essential that MPs' salaries and allowances be made by an independent body, able to make clear and objective decisions about MPs' pay, that are easy for the public to understand.

It is essential too that the system is transparent. The public want to see what MPs are claiming for, how much they are claiming, and be able to compare one MP's allowances with another. Only then will they have confidence that their money is being spent upon the infrastructure of their democracy, rather than personally enriching those who claim to serve it.

Staff and Office Costs

In order to properly serve their constituents, it is essential that MPs' staff and offices are well-resourced. It is important that good value for the taxpayer is provided by the new system, but this should not be at the cost of MPs' staff, many of whom work very long hours for relatively low salaries. If we want to make Parliament an example of best practice, then this should extend to its role as an employer. MPs' staff should be employed directly by Parliament, as has been agreed in principle by the House. However, it is important too that MPs retain their autonomy to hire the staff they choose, and that their staff remain accountable to them. It is also important that MPs' office and staff costs are clearly distinguished from their salary, so that this is evident to the public.

Conclusion

We believe in the power of politics to change the world for the better. The majority of MPs are honest, hard-working and dedicated to their constituents, and would welcome a new system that prevents those amongst their number who abuse the taxpayer's trust, from sullyng the names of all.

MPs should not be left out of pocket in the course of their duties, but nor should they be able to turn a profit. We believe this simple principle should underpin all your deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

Ray Collins
General Secretary
The Labour Party