

From Dr G.P Cubbin (Bolton)

Party Time

I do not share the current consensus view on politicians. A lot of their permanent unpopularity is due to evasiveness. But that is the result of party solidarity. The public would dislike it if every MP gave his true opinion on every subject. They would not know what they were voting for. The party line is inevitable in democratic politics.

Home Sweet Home

More importantly, there is also in the short term a perceived scandal over second homes. Clearly there are instances of abuse.

But I should say that public anger is overdone. For ten years I commuted 200 miles every week from Bolton to Cambridge and therefore have experienced at first hand the strain of living in two places. Few members of the public will have lived in this way. *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner.*

Needs change gradually as the distances of constituencies from London increase. But there are also some sudden jumps - which makes rule-making difficult. For example the lack of through trains means that Altrincham and Bolton are over an hour further from London than Stockport, though only 15 miles. Similarly Spalding is less commutable than Bath. This situation is liable to lead to complex rules to cover all circumstances, and if instead the matter were left to the judgement of an arbitrator, then heaven help the arbitrator.

Age Concern

It would be even worse if, as well as the nature of the constituencies, members' age and family circumstances were taken into account. For example, no-one should reduce their standard of living by serving in parliament. This sounds simple enough until you remember that public opinion is virtually unanimous in holding that the husband of a Sainsbury's heiress should suffer some loss of amenity, to say nothing of the members whose domestic water features qualified them for an ad hoc sacrifice in the court of public opinion.

Waive the Rules

A further problem (as with all rules) is that people are entitled to mitigate their impact on themselves. Natural justice implies a right of appeal (with a team of lawyers) against adverse rulings. Rules are therefore best avoided.

The Solution

Despite these complexities and problems I venture to propose a simple solution:

Each candidate should state on his/her nomination paper the annual sum that he would claim for all purposes - salary and expenses. The successful candidate would get this sum of money and keep as much for himself as he wanted. No rules, no receipts, no audits. There would be a tangible saving in public administration (such as audit fees) and every incentive for MPs to live as cheaply as possible.

An apparent disadvantage might be that well-funded groups or wealthy individuals would try to buy their way into parliament by submitting low bids. My own MP feels that the scheme would favour the rich. But would people really vote to save £50,000 a year per constituency if it meant the danger of closing hospitals, joining the euro etc? The amount claimed might be a major issue at the moment, but once the current storm has subsided, the salary claim would be a very minor aspect of the election campaign.

I think that over time a consensus would emerge. Candidates of all parties would claim maybe £300,000 for a London constituency and £400,000 for country constituencies to cover themselves and five or six staff.

I see the real disadvantages as follows: first it is too simple. Bureaucrats who have daily experience of complex systems dislike the idea of simplification as this puts casual users of a system at less of a disadvantage. I am a former bureaucrat.

Secondly it may be easier to catch villains if you have a few regulations.

Thirdly it is too much of a revolution and not enough of an evolutionary step.

Fourthly the public mood is inauspicious. At the moment venting anger is more important than constructive planning. This is hardly the time to suggest that MPs should set their own salary. However, your remit is not the next 20 days but the next 20 years.

A fifth snag is that MPs would have to vote to subject themselves to a system which exerted downwards pressure on the resources available to them. A process of tendering is always an unpleasant test of nerve and judgement.

Sixthly salary and expenses are intermingled. This strikes me as bad in principle but I cannot put my finger on why. The current furore arises from a feeling on the part of MPs that they are making up a shortfall in their legitimate salary. Under my scheme the arrangement would be less furtive: and the perfect is the enemy of the good.

A seventh snag is that some minor rules would possibly be necessary. A seat with a huge majority, for example, may tempt a huge cash claim from a candidate who regards herself as a certain winner. It will not be beyond the wit of your committee to devise a solution to such dangers. For example no MP should receive more than the fiftieth highest claim: the most expensive 50 MPs would all receive the same - that is the amount claimed by the 50th most expensive. Or simply leave it. The mega-rich candidates would doubtless hand over the cash to their parties who would then need less from the public purse in the form of communications allowances etc.

These objections amount to little more than a vague discomfort at the novelty of the idea. It takes 20 years for ideas like this to evolve from pillow-talk to reality, but I hope that you will give this idea your active consideration as part of your current deliberations.

Yours faithfully

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