

**Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt, Member of Parliament for Leicester West**

**House of Commons  
London SW1A 0AA**

Sir Christopher Kelly  
Chair  
Committee on Standards in Public Life

12 May 2009

Dear Sir Christopher

Thank you for your recent letter about the Committee's Review of MPs' Expenses.

I share your view that the present situation is unhealthy for our democracy. In my view, radical changes are needed, both in the expenses system itself and in the process for deciding these issues.

It is the public who elect us and pay for us – and the public who should be directly involved in deciding the future system of MPs' expenses. I welcome the fact that your Committee will be holding public hearings, but I would like to see you go further.

There is now extensive experience in the United Kingdom and elsewhere of innovative forms of public engagement or deliberative democracy. As Health Secretary, I commissioned a major public consultation that culminated in a 1000-strong Citizens' Summit and formed the basis for the White Paper, *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say*. A similar approach was taken on pensions policy. In both cases, participants were recruited from the electoral register so as to be broadly representative of the public as a whole. Independent evaluation confirmed that this kind of public involvement is far richer and more significant than the usual consultation process or, of course, opinion polls.

Your Committee would be doing a great public service if you initiated a large-scale public engagement of this kind. It would break through the present media firestorm and allow members of the public to give a properly considered response to the complex issues raised by your enquiry. Ideally, at least part of the public engagement events would be broadcast or web-cast, with the wider public able to contribute via the internet. I have little doubt that the public's common sense would produce sound solutions; but equally or even more important, the very fact of public engagement would strengthen public confidence in the outcome.

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Turning to the issues of substance that you raise, I would like to make the following suggestions on two key issues. But I want to stress that I would like to see my own and other proposals subjected to full public deliberation.

### Constituency offices

Constituents are entitled to expect a proper service from their MP, including a constituency office of reasonable standard. It is quite wrong – and open to constant, deliberate misinterpretation by the press – to treat MPs' office expenses as a 'personal allowance'. I understand that in Australia, Parliament provides an office in each constituency for the Member's use. That is the system we should adopt here. The House would then take on the responsibility of finding, paying for and maintaining a suitable office in each constituency (a task that could, of course, be contracted out to an expert agency or firm.) With most of the office costs directly met by Parliament, each MP would then need only a fairly small 'constituency costs' budget – in particular, to cover communications – which would of course need to be properly audited.

I also believe that MPs' staff – although they should continue to be appointed and managed by the individual MP – should be directly employed by the House of Commons.

### Second homes

I hope it would be generally accepted that MPs who live in out-of-London constituencies should have somewhere to stay in London while the House of Commons is in session. But the system of paying an allowance for this purpose is comprehensively discredited. I would therefore take the same approach that I have suggested for constituency offices, with Parliament providing appropriate furnished accommodation for MPs' use, whether bought or rented by the House of Commons for this purpose. MPs who prefer to stay in a hotel could have those costs met up to a specified limit.

A number of MPs, including myself, have their family home in London. I think it would be a grave mistake to go back to the days when an MP whose home was in London had to stay in a hotel or their agent's spare room when in their constituency. I have always had a home in my constituency and believe that is what constituents are entitled to expect. But rather than pay an allowance, again I suggest that Parliament should make appropriate accommodation available. By 'appropriate' I mean both appropriate to the MP's family circumstances (it is very important that partner and children should be able to join the MP on occasion when s/he is away from home) – and appropriately modest.

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An arrangement of this kind would do away with the whole paraphernalia of determining how much MPs should be able to claim for a second home, what kind of furnishings are appropriate, who should check the claims and so on, as well as removing the issue of MPs being able to buy a property using public funds.

In conclusion, I hope that you will find these specific suggestions helpful. But above all, I hope you will take very seriously the need for proper public engagement on this issue. Because so much damage has been done to public confidence in Parliament, another decision by the House of Commons on MPs' expenses – even a decision based on your Committee's report – will not be enough.

Yours sincerely

PATRICIA HEWITT