

I welcome a number of statements in the paper on the review of MPs expenses, especially its reiteration of the seven principles which should guide those in public office and the desire to take evidence from a wide caucus of people. I am concerned that, especially in matters of public responsibility, we are too often guided by what is within the law or the rules, instead of by morality and the simple rule of "do as you would be done by".

In this regard, the committee should consider the adoption of rules which apply to some others in public life, such as minimising the payment of actual expenses and replacing those payments with a flat rate subsistence allowance payable when certain circumstances arise, such as the business of the house requiring an MP to stay away from the MPs place of work for a period of time. As the constituency elected an MP, my view is that an MP works in his constituency and attendance at the house requires reimbursement of costs in some manner. In my experience in the civil service the payment of actual expenses was frowned upon and would only be considered in exceptional circumstances, for example in conferences or meetings with the private sector at locations where the subsistence payment would leave the public servant out of pocket. This type of allowance will encourage prudence and act against profligacy. It will be considerably easier to administer this type of system and would support transparency, as the expenses would be linked to time spent in the house or at an event or function related to the business of the MP. It may be said that paying a flat rate allowance to MPs would be unfair, as this may not cover the MPs actual expenditure, but it is more moral to pay the same amount and not have to continually make judgments based on individual circumstances of whether a particular item is a legitimate public expense. The short period to respond means that it is difficult to analyse in any detail the impact of such a change, but my view is that it would be welcomed by the public.

I share the early view in the paper that this is not the correct time to reduce expenses and make compensatory increases in flat rate pay. Many MPs may consider that without expenses, their remuneration is below that which they deserve. I doubt whether in current mood of the public that this view is widely shared. The tax status of MPs expenses is a matter of great concern. MPs are not a special case and there is no reason why MPs should be treated in taxation terms any differently from any member of the public, yet I understand that MPs do not have to declare expenses as benefits in kind and MPs homes may be treated as differently for capital gains purposes than the general public.

It is clear from recent consultations and discussions with the government that they feel that they are an elite able to decide and implement public policy, albeit with the approval of the public every four or five years at general elections. This lack of day to day public accountability undermines the confidence of the public in their representatives. We should not need to be reminded of the first principles of democracy, i.e. not just government FOR the people, but also OF the people and BY the people.

P Rowberry, community activist and publicity officer for a group of environmentalists.
Saxmundham, Suffolk