

REVIEW OF MPS' EXPENSES

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(WIMBLEDON)

INTRODUCTION

I have worked as a House of Commons Secretary since 1984, and have worked for my husband since his election in 2005.

PAY FOR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

The bottom line has to be salary - £64,766 may sound a good deal to many but is not enough to run two homes or indeed to purchase/run a family home in Central London. My husband's constituency is Wimbledon – the cheapest one-bedroom flat is currently around £250,000 and tiny, and could not be a family home. If MPs have not already made money then it is a struggle for increasing numbers of younger MPs to bring up a family on this salary. I would imagine that most MPs' spouses work to maintain an income.

Since all the recent controversy has surrounded expenses/allowances, it would seem to me that the most transparent way forward would be to increase their salary to around £100,000 per annum in order for them to spend as they wish. They would of course pay tax on this money.

The current salary is demeaning, particularly when the Chief Executive of our small London Borough (Merton) earns in excess of £175,000 per annum, and a GP earns in excess of £100,000 per annum. The salary is less than that earned by many headteachers.

Members of Parliament often work long and anti-social hours and, with the expected requirement that they live in the constituency, cannot go off duty. Weekends are often spent doing a round of engagements and the family generally comes a poor second – I speak from experience. When I was a child my local Member of Parliament came on a 'state visit' once a month to Salisbury from his home in Chichester – now they are expected to work every weekend. Opposition frontbench MPs have a particularly hard time as they have the constituency work and the frontbench work to cover with very little support.

EMPLOYMENT OF SPOUSES

My case may well be unique. I have worked in the Commons since 1984 for a number of MPs. At the 2005 General Election the MP for whom I was working retired and I agreed to work for his successor, David Gauke MP. However, my husband was also elected to Parliament in 2005 so we took the view that I should work with my husband rather than for another MP to avoid any conflict.

I have therefore spent around twenty years employed by other MPs and four years employed by my husband – the job I do now is exactly the same as I have performed for others. I feel that I can do a much better job for the constituents than anyone else. I know Wimbledon extremely well as we live there, and can from time to time represent my husband at meetings in the constituency when he has to undertake Shadow Transport business. I have built up a very good relationship with various organisations in the constituency and can advise constituents in an informed way as a result of my long service in the Commons and my thorough knowledge of Wimbledon. When he was selected for the seat, the fact that I already worked in Westminster was seen as very helpful.

I would take very strong issue with the comment that employing family could be seen as an ‘unusual concept’ as this practice is extremely frequent in small businesses. Parliamentary life is not just a job but a lifestyle and it takes over MPs’ lives whether they are in Westminster or at home in the constituency. We spend huge amounts of time working at weekends because e-mail means that constituents are constantly in touch via this means. As a result, they get a much better service.

I work between home and my office in Westminster, and am listed in the Commons telephone directory. I go into the Commons every day apart from some Fridays. I would suggest that all employees of an MP should be listed in the directory which could then ensure that they are able to be contacted and some work is being carried out. The practice of encouraging MPs to employ staff outside Westminster/in the constituency has, I am sure, led to wider abuse of the system.

REMUNERATION OF OUTSIDE INTERESTS

I do not believe that MPs should be stopped from having outside interests as long as this is transparent. This should not however place a burden on Commons-employed staff – I was once employed by a Member of Parliament who was a Master of Wine and wine journalist, and expected me to type up wine lists all the time!

COMMUNICATIONS ALLOWANCE

I do not believe that MPs should receive this – the only requirement should be a sum of money to support their website. I believe that their newsletters should be funded by the local political party as this allowance gives a huge advantage to all incumbent MPs.

RECEIPTS

I do believe that receipts should be provided for all expenditure and I do not approve of the provision of petty cash. The only problem which has been experienced by my husband is that he only has a small office and, as a Shadow Transport Minister, has frequent meetings which have to be held at the tables in Portcullis House. He spends a considerable amount each month on coffees and teas for visitors which would be provided free of charge in any other business. Can some consideration be made for this?

OFFICE ACCOMMODATION IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

My husband is a 'new' Member of Parliament having been elected in 2005. He has, however, considerable responsibilities as a Shadow Minister. However, because he is new, he has the least good office accommodation which is historically organised by the Whips Offices of each Party. Offices are allocated on how long people have been elected, and not on seniority. Surely it would make sense for Shadow Ministers to have better office accommodation than less busy older MPs who occupy the best office accommodation!