

Committee on Standards in Public Life
35 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BQ

Dear Madam Sir,

I write with regard your seeking the views of members of the public regarding the MPs' expenses.

It seems to me that MPs have 'forgotten' that the expenses system was put in place and is there now to enable them to do their work. The intention and the spirit behind the expenses system is that no person should be prevented from becoming an MP or from doing their work as an MP because they do not have a private income or other means to support their parliamentary ambition and duties. It is not intended as an extra source of income of an MP, her/his income is or rather should be their salary.

What seems to have happened is the opposite: From being a financial help to ensure no one is prevented from serving the public as an MP, MPs turned the expenses system into a covert form of increasing their own salaries especially at times when it was inopportune to publicise just such an increase; for instance when public sector workers were asked by government to tighten the belt and scale down their demands it would not have been received well by those workers and the public in general if MPs had awarded themselves significantly higher pay rises at the same time. Instead MPs opted to increase their allowances while their salary rose only 'modestly'. Such a strategy is a breach of public trust.

It also demonstrates the contempt in which parliamentarians held/hold the public: MPs realised what was acceptable to the public and on the face of it abided by that public will while they identified and used another way within which to increase their personal remuneration which mocks those public demands of decency and parity between (for instance) public sector workers and MPs.

It has struck me that during the current expenses scandal, MPs are unwilling to acknowledge – or simply too removed even to realise – that the spirit of the allowances is such that MPs should only use them in as much as they need these allowances to make possible their work as parliamentarians, in other words they should ask themselves before they make any claim: Is this expense really necessary for me to fulfil my duties as an MP?

The MPs do equally not acknowledge that - who in other contexts they like to call – 'hardworking families' (which by the way also includes taxpayers without families) are those who pay for their expenses. I have not witnessed in the media a recognition by any of the MPs whose expenses claims have been challenged of the link between taxpayers actually working for the money they pay in taxes which in turn funds MPs allowances. The taxpayer pays the allowance so that their representatives can represent them – and

those who are not paying taxes – well, and only for that. MPs do not publicly recognise this mandate associated with and in turn limiting the extent of the expenses allowances. Rather it appears that they consider the allowance claims system as a sort of cash machine, where according to some rules money can be had in return for a receipt. What these MPs lack is a sense of direct responsibility and accountability *to the represented*. MPs show disrespect for the work taxpayers have had to undertake to fund their representatives.

They show a misconception of democracy by their ignorance of their own role within the system: They are the few that are elected and funded to represent the many and those few serve the many in return. MPs caught in the expenses scandal do not address this mandate, instead they profess the opinion that as long as they acted within 'the rules' what they did was acceptable. The utter disconnectedness of MPs from democracy and hence the public and shows itself in their lack of understanding that the allowance system's function and intention is to ensure that no MP is prevented from or hindered in doing their work as a representatives of the people on financial grounds. This lack of comprehending their own role is the aspect that undermines democracy, and which amounts to an abuse of public office.

What can be done now?

1.

The first step is to make utterly transparent everything about MPs expenses claims:

Methodologically: Put all the information online.

Organise it per MP/constituency.

Content: Publish the rules. Publish all claims made by MPs whether granted or not, including the receipts and accompanying letters.

Publish all decisions in full by the fees office regarding every claim.

2. Awareness raising amongst MPs about their role and their mandate from the public:

Methodologically: A brochure and briefing to be received and attended by all MPs outlining their role and responsibility and the public's/taxpayer's role and responsibility (such as the obligation to fund our MPs).

Content: The intention and spirit of the allowance system as outlined above.

Enforcement: Recall powers at constituency level: if an MP oversteps what the constituency deems a reasonable level of expenses claims and/or received allowance.

Online update on a yearly basis: A summary attached to each MP's parliamentary page summarising their expenses claims and received allowance for the current parliamentary period.

Online update on a yearly basis: A summary attached to each MP's parliamentary page summarising their attendance in parliament in percent versus the actual hours/times parliament was sitting for the current parliamentary period, include other work parliamentarians have undertaken in so far as it is part of their role as MP.

3. The allowance rules:

I am no expert on the rules, and can make no concrete suggestions here. They need to be examined one by one to weed out outdated allowances (Is the second home allowance still justified now that parliament sits only once a week in the evening and not for very late) and to reset the limit for each allowance to a level that reflects what is necessary for enabling the work of an MP rather than to allow for accrual of financial gain (in the form of for instance allowance as extra income/allowance to fund house purchases /capital gains tax evasion).

4.

Do not farm out the mechanisms of control to an 'independent body' or 'experts' and 'consultants':

The Daily Telegraph could make sense of the data and the general public could understand the data. There is no need for experts here. On the contrary there is a democratic need for MPs who represent the public to be directly responsible to the public, bearing in mind that such financial control would not interfere with MPs' political room for decision making within parliament. Do not give that control and power to some third group of experts as Gordon Brown has suggested. Such a third group would not be democratically elected and legitimised. Any such third group would be appointed by someone and might well be susceptible to certain pressures by that someone (quite likely for instance the government). Their future employment does not depend on the public but on whoever appointed them etc. It also adds another level of expensive bureaucracy. Direct responsibility to the electorate ensures that MPs will remember the direct connection between the allowance and their work as parliamentarians that is the connection between the many paying expenses for the few so that those few are not prevented from representing the many.

Hence it is preferable, desirable and sufficient to make the expenses claims transparent to the general public – which also makes them available to the media – and give the public powers to make MPs responsible for wrong doings (to the extent of an MP losing their status as MP during the parliamentary period).

Yours sincerely,

B Reiber

London