

From : Julia Drown, former MP for South Swindon.

Dear Committee

I write as a former MP (elected in 1997, stood down in 2005). I have been shocked and appalled by the revelations over how some MPs – and I hope it is a minority – have abused the current system.

My belief is that although there are clearly some major flaws with the current system, most of the problems that Parliament is experiencing at the moment is not the fault of the system of expenses but of individual MPs not obeying the spirit of the system.

Transparency

Claims should be published but not individual MPs addresses for the security and privacy of their families and themselves.

The practicality of expecting MPs to commute to their constituencies

If there is to be more emphasis on MPs being able to commute back to their constituencies then Parliament should do more to get its hours more like other business hours. It is not reasonable on a regular basis to ask our MPs to return home at midnight and be back in at work the next day at 10am for committee or other business. There is no doubt that the House could work far more efficiently to allow commuting to be more practical for more MPs. A combination of electronic voting, including from constituencies and greater efficiency in business would allow commuting to be a realistic option for more MPs and reduce costs to Parliament.

One disappointment for me during my time in Parliament was a realisation, given the way that Parliament works at the moment, was that if an MP wanted to see their family for any significant time, then the family would have to be in London unless you had a constituency no further than Reading.

Additional Costs:

Claiming for expenditure vs general pay allowances

Because the experience of MPs is different according to whether they have a London, near London or far from London constituency, and because the life of a single person who is an MP can be very different from those with families, I would not support a system of general pay for all MPs which would not take account of their different needs. Given the work of an MP, it is important to recognise the huge impact this can have on family life. Parliament should work to support rather than tear apart

families. Our democracy benefits from having different people in the House, people from different family units and we should support that by expecting to pay more for an MP who has a family of 5 a long way away from Westminster compared to a single person living in Inner London. The only way to allow for these differences is to be able to claim for the additional costs of second homes and to ensure that the claims are reasonable given the family units involved.

Maximum limits on expenditure

There clearly have to be maximum limits on claims for additional costs but the maximum claimable could be reduced. There should be a general maximum for the running costs of a second home, and a one-off set-up maximum for each MP to claim only once in any continuous serving as an MP for them to buy reasonable but not luxurious furniture if and when they buy or rent a second home.

Capital gains on second homes

If rules are to be created so that the taxpayer gets any gain on a second home (or presumably a proportion of the gain if they funded only a proportion of the gain) the rules would also need to ensure that the MP shouldn't have to cover the capital gain tax due on the property. The rules, to be fair, would also need to provide for the taxpayer funding any loss on a second home (or proportion of the loss).

If Parliament is going to make any gains on sales of second homes it will want to be sure that the homes are being sold at a good price so that the taxpayers receipt is maximised and that could lead to some conflicts between MPs or particularly ex-Mps wanting to sell their homes as they can no longer afford the running costs and so wanting to sell them asap but Parliament not wanting to accept an offer on the second home as it doesn't feel the taxpayer is gaining sufficiently. Procedures for sorting this out would need to be established. I can see this creating as many problems as it solves. If the abuse on the second homes is eliminated then getting MPs to take the risk of gains or losses on second properties would be the simplest solution and would, I anticipate be acceptable to constituents.

Establishing a Main Home

I believe that MPs can state that their main home is in neither the constituency or London so that they can get travel paid to and from their home to the constituency and to Parliament. Travel should only be paid between the constituency and Parliament and not to a third home so that

this part of expenditure is like any normal employment where you are only paid travel expenses from your normal place of work to other places.

Office Costs

It has been crazy for MPs to employ staff. Staff should be employed by the House. I do not object to MPs employing family members if those people are really doing the required work. It does help keep some families together though I recognise it hardly fits aspirations of equal opportunities.

Mechanisms should be explored for MPs or political parties to part fund all members of staff salaries to recognise that a proportion of some MPs time might be spent on political rather than Parliamentary Business.

It would be helpful if MPs were given maximum budgets for non-staff as now, but that those budgets were parliamentary expenditure and not the MPs expenditure so that accounting for the expenditure could be done centrally rather than through each MP. This would reduce the accountancy workload for MPs and their staff allowing more time for constituency business. Of course it would still be important to show how much each MP is using of taxpayers' money, but MPs wouldn't have to do the accountancy aspect of this. This would also avoid the misunderstanding that some people have that the expenditure on paper and staff is part of the MP's salary.

MPs with other jobs.

MPs should generally not be able to have other paid work as the salary currently is sufficient to attract some of the best people we have in the country to serve as MPs. There should be a procedure for approving other work that MPs might want to do, as there could be some cases where an MP might be permitted to carry out some minimal work to allow them to return to their trade or profession when they leave the House, but the work should be kept to a minimum just to allow the person to continue for example to be a member of their trade/professional body.

Travel Expenses

There has been an expectation from many MPs and committees on business that MPs and staff should travel 1st class. I'm not confident that this is justified. An incentive to reduce travel costs could also help save the House funds eg limiting the number of open tickets that could be bought for journeys when MPs might generally know at least the outward day of travel if not the time of travel. Publishing sample travel expense details might help give MPs some incentive to travel more economically.

Some MPs expect not to be questioned on their travel choices or other issues. There needs to be an expectation – just as there is in other employment - that checks will be carried out eg. occasional checks that those using the car park are those claiming for mileage and if others are claiming mileage to the House then finding out why.

Family travel

In the way that companies pay for re-location costs for whole families when, for example, they ask a British person to work abroad for a few years, I do support a limited number of journeys of family members between the London and constituency home.

Communication Expenses

A good democracy depends on communication between elected representatives and their constituents and opposition parties being able to communicate with constituents too. The communication allowance benefits sitting MPs, which you could argue is justified since the press generally like to bash whoever is in power so that the communication allowance provides some balance to this. But, given the internet is now available for everyone to make contact more easily with many constituents, the communication allowance should be abandoned.

Resettlement Grant

The current level of resettlement grant is generous and could be reduced but some resettlement grant is advantageous for our democracy in that retiring MPs can concentrate on working hard for their constituencies up till the general election without having to find a job for themselves afterwards. It allows for a smooth handover to the next MP so that casework is not abandoned half complete and allows MPs to help their staff find other work as well as pack up offices etc. It also wouldn't be reasonable to ask MPs to personally pay up the remainder of lease costs of rented offices so provision needs to be made for this. There may be a case for having an MP's office in each constituency which is funded by Parliament but if so temporary arrangements would need to be funded when there is a change of MP to allow the ex-MP and their staff time to sort out files and casework. This could be economical for Parliament and would help separate parliamentary work from political work of the MP.

General Expenditure in the House of Commons

It was clear to me that the House of Commons could be run much more efficiently. There is little appetite from the House to save costs and as an MP wanting to spend my time on my constituency I did not feel I could devote time to pushing this agenda. The House's unnecessarily unsocial

hours are necessarily more costly as staff need to be paid unsocial hours.

Why in the days of pagers and mobile phones are Sergeant at Arms' staff employed at the message board and to take messages round to people? If electronic voting was allowed, staff wouldn't need to be employed to help MPs get to the voting lobbies in time. And at a very detailed level -why is expensive House of Commons paper provided as scrap paper for MPs to use in the House and at Committee? Why can't MPs drink tap water at committee rather than bottled water (or even bring their own cups of tea and bottles of water)? Why aren't re-usable internal envelopes the norm in Parliament?

Reasonableness

In many of the issues the difficulty is deciding what is reasonable expenditure and a fear that in what appears to be the closed House of Parliament, a gentlemen's club approach to decisions will allow expenditure which the general public would find excessive. If the National Audit Office checks are not seen as sufficient, experiments with citizens juries would be helpful – why not have constituents picked at random to approve sample claims against the established rules and make comments on whether the rules need to be changed? This would involve the public a little more in our democracy.

'Other Expenses'

I understand that Mr Speaker has powers to grant additional allowances to some MPs, for example because they have a particularly heavy constituency workload or have a disability. This is not publicised and the lack of transparency adds to the Gentlemen's club atmosphere that the public does not support. An open procedure needs to be established to deal with exceptional cases such as these.

yours

Juila Drown