

Submission to the Committee chaired by Sir Christopher Kelly on Parliamentary Expenses from Tony McWalter.

Tony McWalter was the MP for Hemel Hempstead from 1997 to 2005.

I make this submission for a variety of reasons.

- (1) I believe that the system of parliamentary allowances was introduced to achieve a laudable purpose, and in the current furore it might well be that that purpose is entirely ignored in any changed set of arrangements for helping MPs manage the financial burdens of office.
- (2) I believe that the current public hatred of MPs is fuelled by a set of misconceptions which ought not to go unchallenged; and if those misconceptions are left entirely unchallenged, any new arrangements for supporting MPs in their work will compromise both the efficient conduct of Parliamentary business and the rights of representation of the British people.
- (3) I believe that there are no mechanisms by which the point of view of hard-working and diligent MPs can be brought to light.
- (4) I believe that the current campaign by the Daily Telegraph, while it has performed a service to the public, has also failed to discriminate between those MPs who have made entirely reasonable claims on the public purse and those who have been guilty of abuse. The current atmosphere is that anyone who has ever claimed for anything is a kind of cheat. Since everyone has claimed for something, everyone in Parliament is either at risk of being described as dishonest, or they have actually been described as dishonest. When one arrives at a conclusion like that, it is much more probable that the ethical framework being deployed is defective than it is that the judgments being made are true. I believe the majority of MPs on all sides of the House are honest, and I hope that in this submission I can do something to provide a context in which honest conduct can be recognised.

I will perforce in this submission say something about my own circumstances, but I want to focus on generalities, so I hope the Committee will attend carefully to my arguments even if one result of submitting them is that I make the headlines of the Daily Telegraph as someone who can be portrayed as dishonest. This is the danger of making any submission at all, and I am concerned that not many submissions to your Committee will have the expertise and personal experiences which those who have served in Parliament can bring. I would hope that you will regard my submission as contributing to your deliberations arguments of sufficient gravamen that you will think it worthwhile to question me further about what I have to say. I would further add that I have no intention of seeking a seat in Parliament, so it should be at least clear that I am trying to support MPs not from a position in which I might hope to gain any personal benefit, but rather from a position in which I think that many honourable people have been unjustly maligned; and I would like to do something to redress the balance.

Although there are exceptions, MPs in general do have a principled justification for how most of them have behaved with regard to their accommodation expenses. That perspective has been drowned out by a series of personal allegations, so that each MP has been left trying to defend their own position. To my knowledge there has been very little attempt by anyone to put the behaviour of MPs into its proper context. When someone accuses you of dishonesty, you are hardly in a position to start arguing about the fine points of the system within which you were working; and there is not a single MP now serving whose behaviour in one context or another could not be portrayed as dishonest. As I have said, that alone suggests that the ethical framework in which MPs are being judged is actually radically defective.

There are four main elements to my submission. I maintain:

- (1) MPs have a job to do.
- (2) Resources are needed for them to do that job.
- (3) Historically, the resources made available to MPs were totally inadequate for them to be able to perform their duties effectively. Historically, there have been many people both within and outside Parliament who have wanted MPs to be lazy, ineffective and supine; and hence the failure to allocate resources was consolidated both by forces within Parliament and by forces outside it.
- (4) Recommendations.

I include also an appendix which calculates that winning an election cost me a quarter of a million pounds. That might act as an antidote to the perception which has been fostered in the public arena in recent times.

I MPs have a job to do

This might seem rather an obvious claim, but in fact I think it is the odourless deadly gas which has been the fuel for the current crisis. In this section I am going to say something about how I spent my time as an MP. I don't think my experiences at all atypical. But what emerges from this short story is that there is a job to be done; and it is a real job. Those who are served by an MP's work would usually find their lives a great deal worse if that work were not to be done, or if it were to be done badly.

If we just take an average Tuesday for me as an MP who was never given office either as a Minister or as a party functionary, and as someone who always registered a zero earnings from outside activities, my day began when I arose from the bed in my flat at about 6.30 am. Usually I would drive home, getting there at about 7 am, and I would then make breakfast and walk with my children to their local primary school. Breakfast and the school walk constituted pretty much my main quality time with the children. I would then drive back to the flat, which was right next to the station, park there and catch the 0943 train to Westminster, getting there at about 1030; or I would have constituency appointments from 0945.

Already this sounds very privileged. How many people can walk their children to school? How many people get to their desk at about 10 am? How many people get fully reimbursed for their first class train journey? If one were doing nothing with one's time, the taxpayer would have every right to complain about all of this.

A minor change in this schedule can be recorded. I welcomed the fact that I could get a first class rail ticket, because it meant I could work on the train. However, because I was not going in at a prime rush hour time I was usually able to get a seat. So very early in my time in Parliament, once I had figured out how to reconcile travel time with working, I stopped getting the first class ticket to which I was entitled. This was not saintly, and people who travel first class should not be labelled pigs-at-the-trough: It was just that in my particular circumstances this expenditure was not necessary. For many MPs I submit it is important that when travelling they are able to do so sufficiently comfortably so as to be able to work, and that is especially significant for those who are frequently travelling very long distances.

Once at my desk in a corridor in the place of Westminster (I preferred to work there, or in the library, rather than in the windowless cupboard which was the office I had been allocated; not all MPs' offices are like those in the television programme "House of Cards"), I was faced with an absolute mountain of work. Just to deal with all the stuff going on in Parliament – the main Chamber, the bill committees, select committees, all-party groups dealing with a huge variety of special interests, visits from constituents, meetings with colleagues, reading a selection of government papers – would itself make for a very full day. But that is before one has any dealings with constituents. Back at the constituency office my secretary would be opening mail, taking phone calls, dealing with personal callers – and very often I needed to be kept abreast of all of that. The biggest volume of work these days is through email, because constituents know that they can get through to their MP directly and immediately through this mechanism. As the week went, on a schedule for my Friday night and Saturday morning surgeries in the constituency would build up, as well as a schedule on constituency activities on Friday during the day, and for visits to constituents homes for those who needed to see me at their home or who had some kind of disability.

There are some MPs who deride this constituency work; and there are others who do as little as possible of it. Some of these also have a very effective publicity machine, so that they can portray themselves as hard-working constituency MPs while actually they are pretty inaccessible to their constituents. This work is a two-edged sword. The more accessible you are, the more help you are, the more work you get. The upshot is that, if you work hard at this aspect of the job, no matter how long the hours you work, you always have more work to do at the end of the day than you had at the beginning.

It is my submission that this constituency work is absolutely at the centre of our democracy.

Some people say that an MP is a “glorified social worker” in this role, but there is much more to it than that. To start with, if someone comes to you and what they need is a social worker, you can put them in touch with those with appropriate expertise; and such a case can be on to and off your books pretty quickly. But most of those who come to see an MP do so because that is entirely appropriate. If the law on X is awful (say, as was the case with the Child Support Agency or the protection of pensions) then victims of that awful law had no-one to go to expect someone who had the capacity to get things changed both legislatively and administratively. The MP could empathise, and the constituent could be supported in the knowledge that the isolation and desperation they felt was actually grounded in a gross injustice which others understood, but the MP could also integrate that person’s particular experience into an understanding of the system and how it should be changed. And when finally something comes back to the floor of the House before it gets to the statute book, it is that detailed knowledge an MP has of a huge variety of personal circumstances and situations which helps him or her evaluate the new projected law or the new projected set of administrative arrangements.

I am suggesting, then, that the job of an MP is to be accessible to constituents, to a sufficient degree that he or she really understands how the legal framework and its operation needs to be changed or developed to address injustices or justified grievances. This is a very demanding job if done properly, and I submit that many MPs do it, and they do it properly and to the best of their ability, which is why often people who claim that all MPs are corrupt or lazy will nevertheless say of their own MP that he or she is the exception to that “rule”.

If the MP is the intermediary between the personal circumstances of those whom they represent, and the set of legal and administrative arrangements which affect or afflict citizens, then few can claim that it is not a job, or that it is unimportant. It is of vital importance to any country which calls itself a democracy.

I will turn shortly to the resources needed to do this important job, but I want first of all to say why being a Member of Parliament is such a wonderful thing to do, and why it is right that many people aspire to the office. It is wonderful because, in response to representations by your constituents and others, sometimes you can make a huge difference to their lives by using your powers wisely. **In 20 minutes as an MP you can do more good than perhaps you can do in the whole of the rest of your life put together.** I think many people know, deep down, that that is what the job is like; and regardless of party affiliation I think that is the real motivation for many of those in Parliament.

If the core role of the MP is as I have described it, then the office is an honourable one, even if some of those who hold the office fail to live up to the specification. It is worth noting that in these days of ready communication each MP represents about 100,000 people: I include children in that number, of course, because they occasion at least as much work per capita as adults. For anything coming before Parliament, a conscientious MP will know how this affects people in a huge variety of different circumstances and conditions, and that knowledge can be integrated into his or her understanding of what might be done to effect improvements.

I have characterised the job of an MP as very hard work, and immensely worthwhile. I have further claimed that it is because the public are entirely unaware of this that the current antipathy towards parliamentarians has become so strong. How is it that the positive view of the work of an MP is not shared by most members of the public?

My first point is that 90% of the work of an MP is under the radar. When you find out in your political surgery just how awful it is for someone who suffers from liver cancer to endure not only the dreadful agony of the disease, but the dreadful exacerbations of the condition caused by utterly stupid arrangements in the NHS for the delivery of care, it is not usual for such a constituent to want publicity, or to be named in Parliament. In practice the MP might debate in Parliament matters which relate to this, such as the impending decommissioning of productive health plant worth £100 million by distant health quangos whose members have never actually seen the plant involved, but the very important work of listening to and supporting such constituents through their trauma is typically entirely unseen. It does give them some comfort if they knew the case is being pursued with vigour, and it is this conduit for the experience of citizens which is such a vital component of our democracy. Of course, the general public usually do not know if their MP has seen 10,000 constituents over the course of a year, or 100. And they do not know if this “seeing” involves giving appropriate time to

significant concerns, or if it is a peremptory tossing of a letter to a Minister in the confident knowledge that it will probably get an utterly meaningless and bland reply from a civil servant who has no experience at all of this kind of first-hand knowledge of the conditions in which citizens find themselves. In short, most people in a constituency do not know what is the quality of the work or their MP, and they do not know if he or she takes their concerns seriously or whether their instinct to look for a way of dealing with problems which involves kicking them into the long grass. But I can aver this: I have been immensely impressed by the efforts by MPs on all sides of the House of Commons to do a really good job, and to devote the huge amount of time which doing a good job requires.

Dealing with constituents' mail is a huge job these days, and many MPs delegate much of this work to an assistant. But the stronger the delegation, the less contact the individual elector has with his or her MP. Once again, I have been struck by just how hard most MPs work to keep properly abreast of the concerns of their constituents, and once again, this is a huge volume of work which goes entirely unnoticed in the public calculus. And in this there has been an enormous change just because of the allocation of resources. In the old days, MPs had to pay for their own paper and stamps from a very poor salary, and there was no email – so unsurprisingly most MPs sent out very few letters and they had correspondingly a very small caseload. That is not how things are now.

Of the 10% of the work of an MP which is on the public stage, only a very small portion actually gets noticed. During my time on the Procedure Committee, for instance, when we were dealing with real Parliamentary scandals – as for instance how bills are timed so as to preclude amendment or beneficial discussion, or how the government whips will whenever possible only appoint to bill committees MPs who are utterly compliant and silent – there was never a single representative of the press present. The government and ministers of all parties have always sought to silence MPs, so when under the inspiring chairmanship of Sir Nicholas Winterton a number of recommendations for change in these dreadful practices were proposed, the government were indeed perfectly happy that they attracted absolutely no attention. It might not be news that governments treat backbenchers as lobby fodder, but it is no way to run a democratic system in the twenty-first century.

This failure to report nearly all Committee work is absolutely typical of press disengagement. The press gallery is full for prime minister's questions, but it is empty most of the time, and it is a rare journalist who actually really tries to understand a complex issue and to report really the work that MPs are doing on it. Journalist can be drawn to a Committee by the Joanna Lumley effect, but it is almost impossible to get their attention for a n important but complex matter; and that simply was not the case eighty years ago. And you can be sure that if the Committee is sitting late at night, there will be no-one from the press there to witness your efforts. As an MP you actually stand a better chance of getting press interest in your concerns if you go down to the Strangers' Bar than if you slog it out on a Bill Committee. But that interest will only extend to headline issues, and I can still feel the sense of chronic disappointment I felt when work I had done on Science for Africa failed entirely to make any impression on policy despite its being strongly commended by the department of international affairs. Many MPs will be able to report similar disappointments after they have worked on an issue for many months.

There are hundreds of issues which are too subtle for a headline, but which cause MPs to work long and hard to rectify injustice or to challenge stupidity. Some of this work is in the public domain – but those whose job it is to report it are in general not interested. In this environment it is not surprising that people think MPs have an easy life. They think that MPs are well paid for doing nothing, and not unreasonably they resent it.

There is a cycle of decline in Parliament, as backbenchers become ever more busy with helping constituents at a personal level while the real levers of change which would most assist their troubled constituents are denied them. A lacklustre press, and a government with many mechanisms rooted in "parliamentary tradition", ensure that it is really very difficult for MPs actually to be effective advocates for their constituents. Once the press desert the gallery, MPs who want to publicise an injustice or a radically defective administrative system know that their concerns will not ever get attention, so they themselves desert the Chamber for the all-party groups, their offices, and the library. This cycle of decline could be ended if there was much greater control of press passes, so that those members of the press who hold a pass but who only appear in the House for a vanishingly small portion of each day should have the pass reallocated. I think MPs should be clocked in and clocked out, but this

regimen should also be used for journalists who are a vital but increasingly negligent part of our democratic system.

Recent suggestions that the number of MPs should be lowered, or that some MPs should float free of the constituency link, both make it even more difficult for citizens to gain access to their representative in the legislative council. It is because there is a widespread prejudice that MPs have little to do that such suggestions can gain ground. Personally, I found representing 100,000 people rather a demanding task. It is interesting that these suggestions to diminish the MP-constituency link often come from Party leaders or Ministers who have inevitably spent most of their time removed from the business of representing the interests of their constituents. Just because some people in Parliament do it as a part-time job, it is not in its nature a part-time job, and Parliament itself for its effective functioning requires a large number of Members to attend to their constituency duties very assiduously if the whole system is to work.

II MPs need resources to do their job

This should be obvious, but if there is a temptation for the press (and hence the general public) to say that since being an MP is not a job, it would then follow that any resources allocated to them would be a sheer waste.

The only person I have heard in recent times who has tried to say that MPs have a time-consuming and difficult job was Ming Campbell in his recent appearance on Question Time; and he was howled down for saying that in the week prior to the programme he had worked for 73 hours. Just because he was not listened to, it does not follow that he deserved to be derided, and perhaps the argument might now be reconsidered in a cooler way.

I mentioned in the previous section my own working schedule, but I did not say what happened at the end of my day, or indeed when it ended. All I said was that there was a lot of work to do, and the work was worthwhile and important.

Even four years after my defeat in Parliament I still have the times of the trains back from Westminster inscribed indelibly in my brain. In those days, the last tube train from Westminster station was at 0027, so that was the usual end of the working day. I changed at Blackfriars, from where I caught the 0058 up to Hertfordshire. Since my flat was near the station I could be in bed by about 2 o'clock, and the alarm clock would go off four and a half hours later. If I missed the last tube, or the 0058, I could get a train from Farringdon at 0127. Usually it was impossible to get a taxi, and in any case I didn't feel I could justify the expenditure on one, so I would have to walk there from the House of Commons. (It was easier to get a taxi from the public road than it was from the House entrance; one example of the ineffectiveness of the House arrangements. I also used taxis very rarely anyway, as they were especially expensive at night, and the expense was not reclaimable.)

In the current circumstances, it will be asked why I stayed at a flat (with expenses but none of the capital chargeable to the taxpayer) rather than going all the way home (a further eight miles). Firstly, I did that to start with, but my wife's sleep was severely disrupted by my arrival home at half past two every night. Secondly, it meant I was driving while very tired. On one occasion I fell asleep, luckily without consequences, while on another occasion I encountered a body lying in the road. Fortunately, on the second occasion I was vigilant enough to do an emergency stop, and the person turned out to be merely a drunk who had fallen off his bicycle; but if it had been a device to steal my car (or worse), at that time of night I would have been very vulnerable. And thirdly, the flat was on the doorstep of my constituency, which meant that if my first appointment was there I would be on hand, and I could have a better night's sleep (but I would then not see my children that day).

There has been thirty times more coverage of this matter of the second homes of MPs than there has been of North Korea's nuclear tests, so I hope to just say here how the system worked, in the hope that any replacement system will continue to enable MPs to do their work.

My first representation is that it seemed a very big step to take, to purchase a flat not long after I had been elected. Firstly, I was aware that some MPs who bought in 1987 had lost money, so after defeat they were facing not only the loss of their income but also a potentially crippling financial liability.

Secondly, it became clear that there was absolutely no way that the amount of money available, at that time about £19000 p.a. as I recall, was enough to acquire anywhere in Westminster or its environs. Thirdly, the prospect of getting affordable hotel accommodation in London seemed not sensible. I had stayed one night in a hotel near the House of Commons, and a few nights in less salubrious and less accessible places, but late at night the train timetable (and the fact that any taxi fare would not be reimbursed) dictated that only certain areas were remotely feasible.

The decision to purchase a flat, then, seemed the best way of managing quite a tricky series of problems. The Fees Office saw itself at that time as an institution which recognised (a) how important the job of MP was and (b) how difficult it was to manage on the money available. **They tended to take the view that it was pretty well bound to cost you more than the allowance to spend time out from home, and hence that no matter what you put on the chit the expenditure would be honoured.** This is now regarded as utterly disreputable, but I notice that no-one who views in this way has actually made a sensible and economic proposal about how the overnight accommodation of MPs is to be handled.

This for me is the context of the current “scandal”. Now the response of many people will be: “That is outrageous. How could you see this money as a series of blank cheques drawn on the taxpayer?” Well, first of all the cash was strictly limited. Secondly, property prices were such that even if you spent all the money on mortgage interest you would still be forced to purchase at the very bottom end of the market. And thirdly, it seemed that one was exposing oneself to a considerable risk, should property prices fall. Above all, the problem was that one needed to stay out at night unless one’s home was located very conveniently indeed – and whatever you do, providing for that is going to be expensive. I believe that when the system was brought in, it was described as being the cheapest method available – and that is of course in part because any risk associated with the decline of property values was taken by MPs themselves, and in part because the system did not require a building programme.

What is also clear is that the rules governing claims on this allowance were permissive just because the general perception was that it was not going to be easy for MPs to manage within the limits of this allowance. This feature of the system has now been entirely forgotten.

Much has been made of the conflict between this system and the system which obtains for other taxpayers, where the expenditure on the property would be only acceptable if it were necessary for the conduct of one’s duties. In this regard there was however a quid pro quo. **The Fees Office and the tax authorities both accepted that there would be a great deal of expenditure by an MP of taxed income which was not claimable.** I have mentioned taxis already, but my most major expense was on providing meals and refreshments for those who came to the House to help me do my job. You just could not sensibly ask the Chief Constable or the Chief Executive of a company which was a major employer, to take half a day off work to come to a meeting at the House of Commons, and then either ask him for the cost of his dinner or else simply give him a cup of tea. The dining room is a work place as well, and indeed while I was an MP it was a very important annexe to the office. I no longer have the figures before me, but I could doubtless get them. I only ever ate in the Strangers’ Dining room on business (or occasionally with family or friends, which was perhaps 10% of this expenditure); my estimate is that my outgoings on this expense, which is out of taxed income and is entirely unclaimable, was of the order of £400 per month. That brought my real net income as an MP to well below my salary as a senior academic, and I have not heard too many people say that those in the latter employment are wildly overpaid.

The Fees office and the tax authorities both accepted that it was reasonable for an MP to turn his second property into a place which was not merely functional, but it would over time gradually become comfortable. The “John Lewis list” – which came in in about the year 2000, was an expression of the fact that an MP could choose to have wooden bookshelves rather than chip-board, provided of course that he or she stayed within the budget limit overall.

In my own case, the flat I purchased was pretty squalid, but over time it became more comfortable once the mortgage rates dropped so as to create room in the allowance to permit improvement in fixtures and fittings. I hadn’t expected to be defeated in 2005, and I confess that had I won that election I would have thought of “up-grading”. There were no affordable properties near the late-night station in my constituency, so I was forced to be near the constituency rather than in it; so I was

hoping perhaps eventually to get a small conveniently-located two-bedroom house rather than persist with a one-bedroom flat one mile from the constituency border. I would submit that this aspiration was entirely reasonable, and that as personal circumstances and financial circumstances change, the configuration of assets an MP uses to do the job would also change. As it happens, I never did move second home, and I didn't serve long enough ever to get a new bed, for instance – so I still slept in the one that the previous occupant had died in! – but some of the claims being made by current MPs are for items that I would also have acquired given time. And I was perhaps fortunate that my circumstances were pretty settled. Some of those who have been vilified are those whose careers have had a great deal more fluctuation than ever I had.

I want now to deal with the issue which has occupied the press extensively – the issue of the goods purchased by an MP for his or her second home. Basically, as I now understand it no MP would want to claim for anything. But that means that all items for the second property would have to come out of taxed income. The take-home pay while I was an MP averaged £2900 per month, with a significant reduction from the gross salary a result of the pension contribution and 40% tax. To run one home out of this was OK. To run a second one, given the aforementioned considerable expenses involved just in being an MP, would in my case have been absolutely out of the question. The flat was not the best destination after a long day's work, but the idea that it would have remained for the whole time absolutely as squalid as when I bought it would unquestionably have impeded my efficiency at work. At least when I got back to the flat I could sit in a comfortable chair, listen to music or watch television, and relax.

There is clearly a question over what happens to the flat and the goods in it in the longer run. In my case, I had to store stuff temporarily in the garage at the property while I sorted out my affairs post-defeat, and there was a flaw in the roof which resulted in a flood. But my intention anyway was simply to take most of the stuff to the local furniture project – and that is what I did with the items that escaped the flood damage. Perhaps there needed to be some guidance on what to do with the contents of the flat once one was defeated, but the general view was that it was one's own stuff to be disposed of as one thought fit. There has recently been quite a lot of suggestions that the taxpayer would like to retain ownership of the property and its contents. That would be fine, but that was not the system which actually prevailed until the recent meltdown in the system. For MPs who owned a flat to be told it was not really theirs, and for it to be seen as a scandal that they did own such properties, is all well and good; but the system was designed accommodate MPs as cheaply as possible, and to ensure that any risk in terms of property depreciation was taken by the MP; and the taxpayer cannot really have it both ways.

The market for second-hand furniture is very low. Any MP who is trying to feather some sort of nest out of the allowance for a flat would have to be desperate indeed.

It is of course true that when I was defeated I then had the benefit of owning an asset which I could sell, and after capital gains tax I gained about £60k. This is of course much better than many people get who lose their jobs, so perhaps it is understandable that there is public outrage – particularly if the public perception is that MPs are idle leeches. But since losing my seat I earn a great deal less than I would have earned if I had **lost** the 2001 election. The public at large think former MPs go on to the House of Lords, or they get highly paid consultancies from their extensive "contacts", and this probably fuels their rage. The reality is utterly different. I do not think I am especially feeble or unemployable, but that is how I was treated in the numerous job applications I made. I have five university degrees, but after having been an MP the only person I could find who would employ me was myself!

I submit in an appendix a brief calculation that my election victory in 2001 is scheduled to cost me overall about £250,000, and perhaps this also needs to be weighed in the balance when the public evaluate the financial affairs of MPs.

I have concentrated here perhaps more than I should have done on the position of someone like myself coming from a modest background who gives up a good job to be an MP. I want to say something about the resources of a very different group – those who are very wealthy, who perhaps already own two nice homes when they get into Parliament. The general coverage of such people has been a mixture of mockery and contempt. I can't do much about what has happened to real Parliamentarians who have been absolutely unflinching in the way they have carried out their duties as

MPs, and who are now going to retire because of the “expenses scandal”, but I do not recall anyone anywhere saying that if you were rich you are expected to subsidise your job as an MP to an inordinate extent. I suspect most of those who are rich still want to do the best by their families, and eventually to pass on to their families or to worthy causes the fruits of their labour, and I simply do not accept that even the wealthiest of people should bear the whole cost of running a second home when the system requires them to have two homes available for them to do their work. As I have intimated already, in reality the real cost of running a second home is certainly not covered by the parliamentary allowance – so all wealthy MPs were doing was claiming for a modest portion of their costs, which were of course considerably greater than the costs that someone like me had. By focussing on small items the “MP expenses” scandal has made people look like penny-pinching hogs; and by focussing on items which are outside the normal expenditures of families, the scandal has made the people look utterly profligate and uncaring about their bills to the taxpayer. But the context for all this is simple: The amount of money was never enough to run a second home in any degree of comfort, and many MPs were not very careful about itemising their claims because the context was the perception that overall they were actually subsidising the taxpayer. In my rather limited interactions with rich MPs, I would say that they did frequently subsidise the job to a considerable extent.

Given that MPs need to stay in the vicinity of Westminster to do their job, and given that travel even to some places in London is difficult late at night, there needs to be a mechanism by which MPs are reimbursed adequately for a reasonably commodious accommodation. I am grateful to Anne Widdecombe MP for pointing out that those of modest means will simply not be able to afford to be MPs if an adequate system is not put in place. If I knew then what I know now, I should have given up my seat after one Parliamentary term, to protect my family’s longer-term financial security, but of course it is very difficult to give up doing something you love for such a reason.

III Historical Observations

IV The Way Forward

I think that former MPs should be invited formally to make representations about what facilities are needed to do the job, since they cannot be accused of special pleading for their own case, while they do understand what the job involves. The people assessing parliamentary salaries and conditions have, I submit, not a clue about the demands of elected public office, for the duties exceed very considerably those of many in the public sector who are paid double the salary of an MP.

In my view there needs to be an accommodation block for MPs within easy reach of the palace of Westminster. I do not think that the Olympic village is too far, providing that there is a late-night bus service laid on for the many MPs who have to work late. The difficulty of this arrangement is that no government wants MPs to be conscientious. The essence of lobby fodder is that it does not think for itself. If the government can eschew this ancient and utterly defective model of democracy, perhaps we might get the renewal which Parliament now sorely needs. The way office accommodation works at Westminster is a case in point. You can be denied a nice office if you vote in a way the whip does not like. Any system of accommodation must be independent of what are called “the usual channels”, or it will conduce to a further weakening of our representative democracy.

Although I feel angry about the Prime Minister’s U-tube appearance, in which he decided that he didn’t need to get feedback from parliament about his ideas, I am in favour of his recommendation that MPs should claim for attendance, but I think that should go further now that the main Chamber of parliament is falling into desuetude. There should be a requirement to attend in the Chamber of N hours a week, where N will vary with circumstances, and for n hours a week in other public duties. This discipline should apply also to Ministers, who increasingly appear in Parliament only to deal with “their” business. If they are to be paid as MPs, there should be some evidence that they actually do the job. Our Parliament needs reinvigorating, and part of that is to bring MPs back into proper and informed debate. The same regime should also apply to the press, and a new Speaker should institute a programme of reform so that the press also become much more familiar with what is actually happening in Parliament, whether or not they then choose to write about it.

As a subsidiary suggestion, I do think that the allowance for food is vital for an MP's work. Not many people have jobs where the only meal they have at home is breakfast, and I was fortunate in that regard as my constituency was near London. This allowance did have the effect of subsidising one's expenditure on working lunches and dinners, but perhaps any allowance should also be linked to attendance and be perhaps 50% of the cost. I do think it is a scandal that claims were made under this heading for people whose attendance at the House was very poor.

Longer term there needs to be forged a new relationship between Parliament and the press. Press passes are issued and renewed to people who have no serious interest in Parliament and its operations, and who think that a stint in the bar will fill them in on what is happening. MPs should be expected to attend in the main Chamber and in Committee for a sensible (but variable) amount of time, depending on their other duties, but for no one should the time be zero. We need the Prime Minister and other holders of high office sometimes just to sit in the Chamber and listen to what others are saying, and if they are MPs they should not find the experience too purgatorial. That might also do something to obviate their tendency only to evaluate the capacity of their MPs through the reports of whips – because as I have argued above the operation of that system is itself a real scandal.

After hundreds of years during which covert methods of payment have been used to keep our parliamentary system going, those systems of remuneration must be finally abolished. The practice of seeing an MP's position as part-time must also be ended, so if people choose to work with outside bodies they must do so unremunerated.

We have the opportunity to renew our democracy, to revitalise parliament, and to abolish those aspects of our system most steeped in the dubious practices of the past. A first step has to be to ensure that MPs are paid the proper rate for the work they do, while ensuring also that those who are not conscientious are given short shrift. Regrettably it feels now as if the only change will be some kind of financial clampdown; but for the renewal of our system, real resources need to be applied intelligently and efficiently so that our citizens increasing willingness to contact their MP is met with an appropriate response.

There are scandals in our system. Expecting an MP not to represent vigorously the interests of his or her constituents is now utterly unacceptable. The whip system seeks to suppress an MP's activities to support his or her constituents, and it denies those constituents their rights. It should be abolished or drastically changed.

Those who work for MPs are paid very badly, with almost the assumption that they will do a lot of work on a kind of voluntary basis. MPs should be able to pay their principal assistant a salary commensurate with the responsibilities -- £50000 per year, and three further staff members with a combined salary of £75000. There needs to be clear demarcation lines between the work of the MP, and his or her campaigning activity, so that no monies are allowed to seep from staff salaries into the campaigning budget.

MPs need to stay away from home. The best option would be to have bespoke accommodation in the ownership of the taxpayer, with the current system being phased out over three years. Because the job is exhausting and one is forced to be away from home, one would hope that any such accommodation would not be Spartan, although in the current atmosphere perhaps the rage of the public might be assuaged if all of the beds were nail beds.

The way forward is for MPs now to get a salary commensurate with the huge and important job I have described. Subject to attendance requirements, the real rate for the job should now be £150000 per year.

Appendix: The Cost of Electoral Success

I deal here with the claim made in the text that my actual and projected losses from winning the general election in 2001 are of the order of £250,000. Since I come from a background of modest means – my up-bringing was in a council house never purchased, my father was a painter and

decorator and my mother cleaned offices at 5 am every morning – this will seem at least to those of my background as a barrier to standing for election.

The main problem with my successful election in 2001 is that the university which employed me as a Principal Lecturer in Philosophy informed me immediately that my tenure would thenceforward be terminated. The salary in my post was of the order of £50k. Following my defeat in 2005 I was left unemployed at the age of 60 and 1 month, whereas if I had been defeated in 2001 I could have expected to earn about £50k per year until the normal retirement age of 65. My take-home pay as an MP was on average £2900 per month after stoppages, but before expenditure on hosting meetings in the House (which cost me on average about £400 per month out of taxed income). My real income situation was in fact much the same as an MP as it had been as a principal lecturer, despite the apparent marginal improvement in gross pay, so there has only really been a divergence since my defeat in 2005.

Once I was defeated I was given £30k severance pay to cover six months; and when I sold the flat I made £60k profit (after capital gains tax), so this in total is about 30 months of my academic salary. I still had a mortgage on my home, so in practice this money was used to pay off some of that. I certainly needed a job, but no job was forthcoming, and after over 100 applications without a single short-listing I had to accept that the only person who was going to employ me would be myself. So despite my five degrees and my experience at the heart of British science policy as a very active member of the Science and Technology Select Committee, I had to retrain myself. I am now a teacher of maths, physics and chemistry, in which areas I have done mainly private tuition and some casual university and school work. Despite twenty five years at the university I am regarded as not a qualified teacher, so my income is very low, and it is now my wife who pays our mortgage and provides for the family. Happily I have just got through my probationary period at the Open University (as an associate lecturer), but as this title suggests I really have had to begin my career all over again. This is the real cost to individuals of the failure by prospective employers and society at large to understand the considerable skills that are developed during one's time as an MP. It was bad for me, but it will be much worse for those leaving parliament at the next election, when collectively they will be seen in a very negative light. The vast majority of them are decent people who will not deserve to be thought of as dishonest, but currently the perception that anyone who employs an ex-MP will be employing a knave.

So far I have indicated merely that I had less income from being an MP than I would have had if I had resumed my academic duties in 2001, and the shortfall is about £90k if I had been employed as a senior academic from 2001 to 2010. But what I had to do was take early retirement, very reluctantly indeed since I am in excellent health and spirits, where my academic pension and my parliamentary pension were all bundled together within the parliamentary scheme. At £1800 per month (net) this pretty much erodes any shortfall from what I would have earned as an academic, so that the calculation so far had me pretty much even on earnings for the period 2001 to 2010 whether or not I was elected in 2001.

The real cost of election is as follows: I assume I live to be 82 (the expectation for someone of my age with my state of health). If I hadn't taken the pension early, it would have been worth a great deal more, as the parliamentary pension scheme has a punitive early draw-down clause. Had I lost in 2001, and returned to academic life, I could have waited to draw my pension until the proper retirement age of 65, and this would have been 50% more every year. In addition I would have built up five more years pensionable service at the university, which would have been worth a gross £4000 per year, or about £300 net per month. In total, then, my pension is £1200 per month (net) less than what it would have been if I had been defeated in 2001, and with an expectation of seventeen life-years that comes to £250,000.

There has been much talk in newspapers of "generous" parliamentary pensions. In practice, my total pension from serving in parliament and teaching in a university for many years is exactly the same as it would have been had I simply stayed at the university. Compared to many people I shall not be in penury if and when I ever retire, but that is in good part because I was a university lecturer. The "clawback" clauses in the parliamentary scheme, which make it much less generous than the 11% contributions would suggest, simply go unpublicised.

In this context, clearly the profit from the flat has taken £60k off my losses; but that is very different to the "feeding at the trough" which has been the public image of MP remuneration. Perhaps also some of the money spent on making the flat more pleasant helped sell it, but the price was simply in line with the RPI, so it's hard to think it had much effect. Finally, the much-publicised additional items were close to negligible. If one's home is furnished, and one sells a second home, one really doesn't have much need for a second three piece suite – so it ended up in the local furniture project where hopefully a family in need got it cheap.

I suspect the reality is that most MPs make very significant financial sacrifices to get to serve in parliament, and then they make very considerable sacrifices once they are there; but these go entirely unreported.

The reality of being an MP is that despite the fact that the media use the term "generous" always to describe the expenses system, I found that the core activities were either not covered, or covered insufficiently. Most MPs have to pay their staff quite badly, for instance, and that will continue as long as the press portray the money given to MPs to run an office as somehow their personal income.