
MPs on 'Income Support'

THE UK GOVERNMENT PAYS Income Support benefit to people who can't for one reason or another do a full-time job and don't have enough to live on. They might, for example, be home carers for a disabled or elderly relative; they might be a single parent living alone with very young children; they might be a severely disabled student. In all these cases the authorities will consider paying a small weekly amount to help out as long as the person concerned has less than £16,000 in savings and doesn't have more than 16 hours of paid employment in any one week.

The benefit application forms are forbidding, they can take weeks to process, and the social security officers who interrogate claimants in minute detail, enforce the rules strictly, routinely prosecuting those who make fraudulent claims. The weekly amounts paid out are stingy to say the least, but they are a Godsend to hundreds of thousands of people living in straightened circumstances.

Now, over the last ten days, the existence of another 'income support' scheme has come to light. This one is for members of the Government who have trouble managing on £143,000 a year, and backbench MPs who have to struggle along on as little as £64,766. These men and women, who are devoted to public service, have often sacrificed lucrative jobs in business or the professions. Consequently, they need an annual supplement of around £22,000 to bump up their income to something approaching a proper professional salary. These supplementary payments to the 646 MPs total no more than £14.5 million a year out of a total annual public spend of around £621 billion. So, the amounts involved in meeting MPs' second-home allowances and other claims are trivial

and have little bearing on the state of the public finances or on the condition of the economy.

By and large, these payments have not been corrupt. A few of the buggers have made plainly fraudulent claims, but most have remained strictly within the rather loose and baggy rules that have permitted them to claim for things “essential for the performance of their Parliamentary duties” like new flat screen televisions, restaurant bills, massage chairs, tennis court repair and moat cleaning.

None of this should, of course, come as any surprise. It has been the received wisdom throughout my life in tea-break discussions, in the work’s canteen, at middle class dinner parties, in hotel bars, workingmen’s clubs – everywhere from ‘the local’ to the cocktail lounge – that politicians are not only “on the make”, but that they are “only in it for what they can get”. This is, and has been for as long as I can remember the view of most people I have met about British politicians and our political system.

Consequently, I have been truly astonished by the uproar caused by the publication of the details of MPs’ expense claims. People who for years have excoriated politicians as money-grubbing scoundrels and corrupt opportunists are now miming their surprise, their dismay, even their horror, at the thought that their local MP has been claiming for expensive furniture and hundred-mile taxi rides. This sense of national astonishment and forthright indignation has given a field day to journalists and commentators (most of whom earn rather more than £85,000 and, no doubt massage their expenses), to pompously bang on about the immorality and corruption of the Honourable Members.

The truth is, that despite the few plainly fraudulent claims, these sorts of expenses are *par for the course* in many areas of upper middle class life. Company executives, leading public officials, senior army officers and the like, often have their children’s private school fees (and their gardeners) paid as perks or supplements to their “remuneration package” – this is

before the other trappings of life at the top are taken into account: the privileged use of luxury apartments, boxes at the opera or the football, private health care plans, share options, large pension pots, and other bonuses. The rather sordid fiddling of expenses by MPs pale into insignificance against the enormous wealth of our university vice-chancellors, our local authority chief executives, our hospital directors, our quango bosses, our leading civil servants, and the board members of our biggest companies.

However, it appears that it is the explicit commitment of MPs to public service, and to democratic accountability, which has rendered them peculiarly vulnerable. They are being hoist with their own petard. After all, they make the laws that they expect other people to live by. Hence, the almost universal pleasure being felt at having caught them with their hands in the biscuit barrel. This pleasure is expressed as shock, sad disillusion, and fury at the injustice of it all. But, I fear that it is likely to turn into a revenge tragedy in which a combination of abstention and voting for right wing populists from the United Kingdom Independence Party and the British National Party will result in serious damage to our democracy.

Bizarrely, we find ourselves on the verge of a constitutional crisis because Justice Minister Shahid Malik thinks that getting the public to pay for his television is a matter of 'natural justice' and Gerald Kaufman describes an antique Persian rug bought at public expense as "a second hand carpet". It is no wonder that these clowns have been unable to stop the payment of obscene bonuses to bankers, to scrutinise European legislation, or to hold the government to account for anything very much. These people are sent to Parliament by us to supervise the government and to make laws. It now appears that they can neither hold the government to account, properly manage their own domestic arrangements, nor reliably regulate the conduct of the country's financial institutions. They are evidently not fit for purpose.

This conclusion has been rammed home during the course of the past week as it has emerged that Tory MPs have been reduced to tears by hate mail from constituents, Labour ministers have attempted to justify their absurd expenses, while the rest of the back benchers have been insisting that they've broken no rules. It has taken days for it to dawn upon them that ordinary voters simply do not understand how it is possible to claim that luxury furniture, electrical goods, mortgage interest payments, and new kitchens are necessary for "the performance of their Parliamentary duties". MPs are supposed to remain in touch with their constituents; they are supposed to have their finger on the pulse of the nation; now we realise that they have little or no grasp of the popular mood and virtually no understanding at all of public opinion. It has taken abuse, the subjection of their partners and kids to catcalls, and "flak at the village fête" before it dawned on most of them that the game was up.

Evidently, we need wholesale deselections – the party leaders in alliance with local parties need to ensure that hundreds of the worst offenders are thrown out and new candidates are appointed to run for the vacant seats. This could be done by forcing a crop of by-elections, or preferably by bringing forward the general election. Once order and honour is restored it would then be necessary not simply to ban these absurd expense claims, but much more importantly to strengthen the capacity of the House of Commons properly to hold the European authorities and the British Government to account. This crisis provides us with a unique opportunity to strengthen parliamentary oversight and to create an institution in which people committed to public welfare can flourish, rather than one in which egits incapable of accurately filling in a claim form and those dazzled by the prospect of ministerial office are allowed to dominate. Then we might be able to look forward with confidence to the reform of the House of Lords, the abolition of ID cards, the proper regulation of banks, and the break up of monopolies.