

Rt. Hon. Sir Alan Haselhurst M.P.'s



Westminster e-newsletter



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Parliamentary expenses

In view of the strong feelings which have been exposed about MPs' pay and allowances I feel that I should provide you with some detailed information about my own distinct circumstances.

I offer first some clarification. I do not have a country estate. I own a family home in the constituency. It has no swimming pool as alleged in the Daily Mail and no helipad as some local reporters seem to imagine. I do not own any other property. My flat in London is rented. I have even been asked how much income I derive from being a director of a family business. The answer is none. The business in question was my father's pharmacy, which he sold on retirement a quarter of a century ago. Both my father and my mother died in 1989. My only recordable outside interest is income from my cricket novels, which sell only in hundreds and not millions.

Do I as Member for Saffron Walden need two homes? Yes. First, I gave a commitment at the time of my selection in 1977 that I would buy a property in the constituency. Secondly, the hours of work for an MP at Westminster have been and are quite unlike those of other people who may be up very early in the morning and/or home late at night. Secondly, for much of my years as your MP, the House of Commons would sit well beyond the time of the last train from Liverpool Street and on many occasions through the night. This did not obviate the need to be present early the next day to ensure that a quorum was maintained in any committees of which you were a member.

My own circumstances altered in 1997 when I became Deputy Speaker. This has involved a much greater commitment to be on the premises at Westminster. When the proceedings of the House of Commons depend absolutely and without the option on your being in the Chair, you simply cannot afford to

turn up late pleading that there was congestion on the M11 or a train failure at Harlow Town. I am frequently in the Chair until the very last word is spoken and this rules out my catching the last train back.

As the employer, the House of Commons has long recognised that MPs do not now come exclusively from the ranks of the wealthy. There is a substantial extra cost in maintaining two homes. So an Additional Costs Allowance was introduced specifically to help Members defray this cost. Its availability has always been a matter of public record. The categories in respect of which claims could be made were as follows:- food, utilities, rent, council tax, telephone, cleaning, services, security, insurance, repairs and maintenance.

Between 1977 and 1997 I made claims wholly and exclusively in respect of my London flat which I have rented (not owned) for 36 years. However, in 1997 when I was appointed as Deputy Speaker I was instructed by the House of Commons that I was then the equivalent of a Minister and accordingly my main home was deemed to be in London. It is important to stress that I had no choice in the matter. Any future claims on the Additional Costs Allowance had to relate to my home in the constituency.

I made no claim without approval and then only to meet costs genuinely incurred. Obviously the type of cost involved in maintaining a home in the country differed from the costs of maintaining a flat in London. Throughout the period of my claims in respect of my home in the constituency I have, of course, met the full costs of my flat out of my net taxed income. The item in my recent claims which has attracted most attention and most criticism is gardening expenditure. The improvements to my garden over the years have naturally been paid for out of my own pocket. Where I have needed help during the

period in which I have spent long hours in London is with some of the heavier maintenance work. I have had gardening help for eight hours per week.

If I am charged that I should have paid this too out of my own pocket, the same could logically be said of every other item for which I have claimed. But that is to imply that Parliament should provide no assistance whatsoever with the additional costs of a second home. This raises a much wider question about the remuneration package of MPs. What I have claimed for is my responsibility. There are many items for which I have not claimed which it seems were no more and no less legitimate than those for which I have. It is not for me to comment on the composition of claims submitted by my colleagues, but I notice that most of them, including David Cameron and Nick Clegg, have been paid the maximum or near-maximum A.C.A.

The more extreme matters which have been exposed, quite apart from those things which were within rules which are now viewed with distaste, have impugned Parliament as an institution. As my late mother would have said, we have brought our pigs to a fine market. The system must alter. Simplicity and transparency are needed. In my view the public should be asked to accept that the remuneration of MPs should be confined to an appropriate level of salary on which we would be taxed and accountable to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. For thirty years successive Governments have been obsessed with keeping down the headline figure of an MP's salary whilst permitting the A.C.A. to increase. This is what has contributed to the present mess.

With agreement from the Leaders of all the political parties, the Speaker has announced new measures to control and curb the

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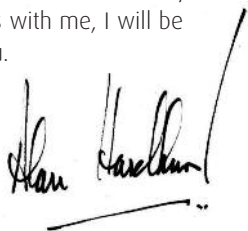
allowances system. We are now committed to implementing reforms which meet the tests of increased transparency and accountability and reduced cost for the taxpayer. Beyond this the Committee on Standards in Public Life under the chairmanship of Sir Christopher Kelly has been asked to produce more far-reaching recommendations and we expect to have a report by the autumn. Ultimately regulation within the House of Commons will be replaced by regulation by an independent body. That is the present intention.

I have served this constituency for over 30 years not for profit, but to be an effective advocate for the interests of the people I represent. In the process I have helped many thousands of my constituents. Published figures show that in fact in respect of all parliamentary allowances I have ranked 582nd out of 646 MPs in the year 2007/08 and was in a similar position in the three previous years. Overall I am far from being an expensive claimant.

Following the publication of new rules earlier this year which give me freedom to determine which to treat as my main home I took the decision five weeks ago to revert to having my London flat as my additional accommodation. Thus in future my only claims will be for those items which have been agreed by the Party Leaders and announced in the Speaker's Statement on 19th May. As to the past David Cameron has established a Scrutiny Commission to examine the claims of all Conservative MPs. There will also be a thorough external review embracing all Members. I shall naturally abide by whatever conclusions emerge from these reviews.

I hope that I have been able to outline adequately the process. However, I recognise that this situation is not just about process. It is about public perception and anger. The headlines in the local press have not only distressed me and my family, but they must also have affected you as one of my constituents. For that I can only apologise. A great many constituents have given me tremendous support for over 30 years and I can assure you that I will continue to serve you all assiduously and strive to address this current problem.

If there are further concerns which you would like to discuss with me, I will be glad to talk with you.



STOP PRESS

I HAVE NOW ISSUED THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT TO THE PRESS:

The expense claims I made over recent years have been strictly in accordance with parliamentary rules. The designation of my constituency home as my second home instead of my rented flat in London was obligatory on my becoming Deputy Speaker. In terms of total expense claims I currently rank 582nd out of 646 MPs. However, my claim for gardening help has caused concern. Out of respect to my constituents I have this week repaid the sum of £12,000.

I deeply regret the public anger which the expenses revelations have understandably generated. The rules governing them are no longer acceptable. The process of reform has already begun. In the meantime the claims of all Conservative MPs are being urgently reviewed by a Scrutiny Commission set up by David Cameron. The claims made by all MPs will be further examined by an independent audit body announced by the Speaker last week. I will naturally abide by whatever recommendations are made.

The Speakership



You will have seen that my name is being mentioned as a possible successor to Michael Martin. I have not yet reached a final decision about putting my name forward. It will depend on the scale of encouragement which I receive from colleagues.

Some wholly unrealistic comments are being made in sections of the press about the responsibilities facing the new Speaker. He or she cannot single-handedly 'clean up' Westminster. The Speaker is the servant of the House, not its master. Whatever lead the Speaker might try to give can go nowhere without the approval of Members. And, if there is no approval from the leader of the majority party, there is unlikely to be approval on the floor of the House. To do Speaker Martin justice, the Members Estimates Committee which he chairs, brought forward proposals to reform the system of allowances last year. They were voted down by the House.

The Speaker can only seek to

influence. In the present sombre mood a Speaker who carries respect across the House may turn out to be effective in promoting reform. But he cannot command support. He can do no more than persuade and cajole. In the end it is Members who decide.

The other traditional role of the Speaker is to be the spokesperson of the House of Commons. The reputation of our Parliament has to be lifted. It is still the cradle of our democracy. Despite the impression created of late, Members come to Westminster to serve the public. They spend long hours in London and in their constituencies carrying out their representative function. Yes, the way the House of Commons works can be improved, but the revolutionary talk being spouted in some newspapers is over the top. Parliament has always reformed itself and will continue so to do. Given the chance it is clear that David Cameron will inject a welcome dose of urgency into this process.