

Britain: MPs concealing massive expenses claims

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Britain's Members of Parliament are to look at new ways to avoid scrutiny of their expense claims after the High Court upheld demands for their release under the Freedom of Information Act.

For almost three years, MPs had blocked the release of their Additional Costs Allowances (payable to those who represent constituencies outside inner London), arguing that these were not covered by the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

As much as £200,000 of public finance was reportedly spent as the Court of Westminster sought to prevent the action initiated by the *Sunday Telegraph* and *Sunday Times* journalists and campaigners Heather Brooke, Ben Leapman and Jonathan Ungood-Thomas in 2005. They had sought to get the details of the expenditure of 14 MPs—including former prime minister Tony Blair, Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Conservative leader David Cameron—released under the Freedom of Information Act covering the right to access information held by public authorities.

Acting on behalf of the 14 MPs, who were not personally involved in the litigation, a Commons official had argued that expense details were covered by the Data Protection Act 1998, which protects sensitive personal information.

The Information Tribunal, which rules on freedom of information issues, had said in January that the data must be released by March 25 this year. But this was challenged by the Commons Commission before the High Court, which claimed that full disclosure would be “unlawfully intrusive,” “would be liable to discourage the most able citizens from seeking election to the House” and would contradict “the reasonable expectations of MPs,” who were not aware at the time of making their expense claims that they could be made public. It also argued that the publication of MPs addresses would compromise their security.

These claims were rejected by the High Court last week, which upheld the Tribunal's demand.

In their ruling, Sir Igor Judge, Lord Justice Latham and Mr. Justice Blake noted the evidence that suggested one MP had claimed for “a property which did not exist.”

Sir Igor Judge said, “We are not here dealing with idle gossip, or public curiosity about what in truth are trivialities.” The use of public money to fund MPs allowances “is a matter

of direct and reasonable interest to taxpayers,” he said, with repercussions for “public confidence in the operation of our democratic system at its very pinnacle, the House of Commons itself.”

The High Court also rejected claims that national security would be compromised by the release of the information. “An individual who is determined to discover the residential address of an adult, law-abiding citizen is likely to be able to do so by one legal means or another,” it ruled. “And where the person concerned is a holder of public office and in the public eye, an inquiry is likely to be easier.”

The Commons was ordered to pay over £33,000 in court costs and to release the information requested on the 14 MPs, including receipts covering the period 2001 to 2006. A further detailed breakdown of all MPs' expenses backdated to 2004 is also due for release in autumn.

The efforts resorted to by MPs to prevent public knowledge of their allowance claims speak volumes. The MPs benefit from a political set-up that is entirely divorced from any genuine democratic accountability and control, and are deeply hostile to any challenge to their privileged position.

And with good cause, for even the details of allowances that have been published indicate widespread money-grubbing. The Freedom of Information case revealed that MPs are claiming £90 million a year under the so-called “John Lewis list” of acceptable expenses. These include a £23,000-a-year second homes allowance, which can be spent on mortgage repayments and up to £10,000 refurbishing a kitchen and £6,335 for a new bathroom. It can also be used to fund food, utility and phone bills.

The petty, money-pinching nature of some of the claims is underscored by Gordon Brown's receipt for £15 for light bulbs, and for his subscription to Sky Sport TV and former minister Margaret Beckett's request for £600 for garden plants. Labour's Barbara Follett, the wife of millionaire author Ken Follett, claimed more than £1,600 for window cleaning.

Just as revealing is the extent to which MPs had cashed in on rising house prices, using taxpayers' money to build up what is effectively personal property portfolios.

Much attention in this regard has focused on Labour's health minister Ann Keen and her MP husband Alan, dubbed “Mr.

and Mrs. Expenses,” who used their allowance to fund a Central London apartment on the South Bank of the River Thames, despite having a constituency home just nine miles away.

The Keens purchased the £500,000 flat in 2002 with a mortgage and an additional loan on their family home in West London—the interest payments on both mortgages were then charged to expenses. In addition, they took out life insurance policies worth almost half a million pounds, and charged the £867.57 monthly premiums to the taxpayer.

The Keens are not alone. Conservative leader David Cameron has been claiming almost £2,000 a month for his second home, while the Conservative’s shadow chancellor, George Osborne, claimed £1,560 a month for his.

Leading the way, however, is Tony Blair, who claimed on a £90,000 mortgage for his northeast constituency property, despite it costing just £30,000.

Between April 2001 and April 2005 Blair claimed £59,446 on mortgage repayments. Documents indicate that this property was then re-mortgaged to the tune of £297,000, almost 200 percent greater than its estimated value of £150,000 by this time, with the interest repayments charged to the taxpayer.

Reports say that it was at this time that Blair was negotiating the purchase of a £3.6 million Georgian house in Central London.

In addition, the Blair’s property portfolio includes two flats in Bristol, purchased in 2002 for £260,000, and a mansion in Buckinghamshire bought for £4 million this year.

Earlier this month, the *Sunday Times* revealed that one year’s worth of Blair’s claims for household expenses during his premiership had been shredded.

Jon Ungoed-Thomas reported on May 18, “It is a criminal offence to destroy documents to prevent their disclosure under freedom of information (FOI) laws, but Westminster officials say they were unaware that the files were the subject of a legal challenge. They insist they were destroyed by mistake.

“It has now emerged that some of Blair’s files covering claims for Myrobella, his constituency home, were destroyed by Commons officials after they rejected the *Sunday Times*’s FOI request in January 2005 to see his claims for £43,029 of public money covering a three-year period.”

Writing in the *Guardian* on May 26, Max Hastings opined that the rewards apparently accrued by British MPs “are insignificant alongside those prevailing in the European parliament, not to mention the US Congress. When British MPs are caught taking bribes, which does not often happen, foreigners are amazed by the paltry sums involved.

“French mayors, and for that matter presidents, not infrequently pocket millions. Italy possesses a gangster political culture. In Britain, however, those MPs open to corruption sell themselves for mere thousands.”

The difficulty facing British MPs, Hastings went on to suggest understandingly, was that of “comparability. They

spend a lot of time with people who earn much more money than they do. They dine in big houses, receive hospitality from tycoons and companies at Wimbledon and Ascot, sniffing the heady perfume of other peoples’ wealth and conspicuous consumption.

“Consciously or subconsciously, many start to ask themselves: ‘Why should he or she have all this, when I am just as clever and hard-working as them, and I don’t?’” he continued, arguing that such expense claims only showed the degree to which “Britain ... has become obsessed with money.”

MPs “are as much products of the times as the rest of us,” he wrote.

In reality, the parliamentary representatives of the major parties are welcomed to “dine in big houses” because they have provided the framework in which the wealth of the top 1 percent of the population more than quadrupled in just a decade.

The rise in social inequality to record levels is the result of this deliberate policy, in which the living standards of working people are systematically undermined in order to finance tax breaks for the corporations and super-rich.

Having legislated to slash public spending, implement a minimum wage that guarantees poverty pay and impose a below-inflation pay award on millions of public sector workers, MPs have felt entitled to a slice of the returns for themselves.

This is not a question of individual “fiddles.” Everything claimed by MPs has been signed off as above board—an entirely legitimate return for services rendered.

The privileges accrued by MPs are, of course, nothing new. But the degree to which they are considered a right to be vigorously defended—even while demanding that the vast majority of the population must be prepared to make “sacrifices”—underscores the profoundly corrupting consequences for the entire body politic of Labour’s transformation into yet another open representative of big business.

According to reports, some MPs are considering challenging the release of their data under the European Convention on Human Rights, while a Commons Committee is said to be drafting new proposals that will see MPs awarded an annual £24,000 block grant, freeing them from having to submit expense claims.



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