

# Britain: House of Commons speaker resigns as MPs expenses row continues

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Speaker of the Commons Michael Martin told a packed House that he will resign from the chair on Sunday, June 21, and that a new speaker will be elected on June 22.

His decision to step down follows unprecedented scenes on Monday when MPs from all sides of the House demanded his resignation. His entire statement on Tuesday afternoon took less than a minute, and the House went immediately to the next business of Foreign Office questions without further discussion.

Despite the perfunctory nature of the event it has a historic significance. Martin is the first speaker to be forced from the chair in over 300 years. According to parliamentary convention, the speaker is above party politics and all MPs accept his rulings on matters of procedure, in public at least, without protest. The removal of the speaker in this way indicates the depth of the political crisis gripping parliament, which is rapidly assuming the dimensions of a constitutional crisis.

His removal has the character of a small coup. On Monday MPs repeatedly challenged Martin's ruling that a motion calling for his resignation could not be discussed on the floor of the House. He read out a statement apologising to the public for the MPs' expenses scandal and his part in it. His role as a chairman of the committee that oversees expenses means that he is closely identified with the procedures that have been called into question. But he gave no indication that he would resign.

Tuesday's announcement was a dramatic turn around. Martin went after being effectively instructed to step down by Prime Minister Gordon Brown. He intervened in an attempt to pull the teeth of a sustained campaign by the right wing of the Tory Party to destabilise the government that has now reached the point of demands for an immediate general election.

Martin was among the first to have his expenses challenged by the press campaign, led by the *Daily*

*Telegraph*. This included petty "offences", such as flying business class from Glasgow to London using air miles gained from official trips, and his wife using taxis for shopping.

He had also been accused of authoring repeated attempts by Commons authorities to block details of MPs' expenses coming out under Freedom of Information legislation.

Martin was heavily criticized for his statement that there should be a police investigation into the source of the leak of details of MPs' expenses to the *Daily Telegraph* and his criticism of MPs that questioned his handling of the issue.

This culminated in a call for him to step down by Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, and the drawing up of an early day motion to this effect by Tory backbenchers that was also supported by some Labour MPs.

Martin also made clear that he intends to step down as MP for Glasgow North East, which will force a by-election in what has been considered a safe Labour seat.

A group of Tory backbenchers have been lobbying for Martin to go for several months, primarily as a means of weakening Brown. Douglas Carswell was the MP who tabled the motion. He is a member of a party group called Direct Democracy, which advocates measures to facilitate major cuts in public spending under the guise of "decentralisation" and greater "public accountability".

The source of the leak Martin wanted to be investigated has now been made clear and is equally right-wing. John Wick is the head of International Security Solutions Limited (ISSL), the private security firm that offered computer disks containing the details of MPs' expenses to at least two newspaper groups. He is a former soldier who is said to have served in the elite Special Air Service (SAS). His collaborator is Henry Gewanter, a US born businessman.

The two men first sold some of the material to the *Daily Express*, which broke the story that the husband of Home Secretary Jacqui Smith had bought pornographic films on her expenses. Wick and Gewanter then sold the two disks to the *Daily Telegraph*, which has been running the story for almost two weeks.

The *Telegraph* has not openly called for an early general election, which would in any case have discredited its pose of high moral concern. But prior to Martin's decision it editorialised, "If Mr Brown continues to prop up the speaker, voters will draw their own conclusions. With [Conservative leader] David Cameron petitioning for an immediate general election, that could have significant consequences".

Brown seems to believe that, having ditched Martin, he can hang on at least until the autumn. Financial share prices have begun to rise on the world's stock exchanges. Brown sees himself selling the government's stake in the failed UK banks at a profit and presenting himself to the electorate as the man who steered the country through the economic crisis. He had tried to balance a package of (delayed) spending cuts, with an increase in the top rate of tax to 50 percent.

But demands, made most forcefully by Rupert Murdoch through his media empire, have been made for the "spirit of Maggie" Thatcher to be invoked. The *Sunday Times* had also denounced Brown's government as "rudderless" and "drifting towards electoral defeat" next year.

At that point, however, Murdoch's News International empire does not seem to have endorsed the efforts to destabilise Brown by leaking MPs expenses. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the *London Times* had been approached to buy the material, but refused and made a point of naming the two men alleged to be involved.

But with the crisis worsening, and Cameron promising that the Tories will implement an "age of austerity" and make savage cuts in public spending immediately, Murdoch has made a decisive move against Brown.

An editorial in Monday's *Sun* called for a snap general election, and Rees Mogg, the veteran journalist, made a similar call in the *Times*. Cameron responded by calling for a general election that same afternoon at the launch of his party's European election campaign.

The *Sunday Times* stated that, as leader of the opposition Cameron cannot himself trigger an election. But the *Daily Mail* is suggesting that he could force one if he insisted that all Tory MPs "do a David Davis"—that is force hundreds of by-elections in Tory constituencies. It is a suggestion that gives a sense of how impatient forces

within the ruling elite are to reshape the political landscape in Britain.

Their sense of urgency comes from the collapse of the economic model on which they have relied since the 1980s and their aim to impose the full burden of the economic crisis on the backs of working people.

Many workers are outraged that MPs are drawing the equivalent of the average wage in expenses and have used this privilege to speculate on the housing price bubble. But they have no means of giving a political expression to this anger, because there is no party that represents their interests.

The ruling elite presently enjoy a monopoly over official politics. It calculates that Labour will do nothing that will endanger its relations with big business and will respond to the attacks being mounted by promising whatever is now demanded of it. This allows far-right forces to dominate the course of events, manipulating public hostility to corrupt practices amongst MPs to portray themselves as a reforming alternative.

It should be noted that Carswell is co-author with Daniel Hannan of *The Plan: Twelve Months to Renew Britain*. The book is promoted by the TaxPayers Alliance. Formed by "libertarian" Conservatives, and with an advisory council stuffed with leading figures from the Thatcher years, the TPA is dedicated to slashing what it claims is a "bloated" public service by running right-wing, populist campaigns against "fat cats" funded at the taxpayers' expense. The TPA joined forces with *Daily Mail* in threatening private prosecutions against MPs accused of fraudulent expenses claims.

The ultimate aim of the instigators of the current scandal is to ensure that the downfall of a widely hated Labour government takes place on their terms and that Brown is replaced by a government determined to take on the working class.



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