

Britain: MPs' expenses provoke outrage

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Changes in mass consciousness happen suddenly and unexpectedly. The processes that bring them about have taken place over a long period of time and in a subterranean fashion. But eventually they break out onto the surface of social life, producing an overnight change in the way that the majority of people across many classes and social layers view the world.

In the course of the past week, Britain has experienced just such a change in consciousness as a wave of anger has erupted over the question of allowances granted to Members of Parliament.

BBC studio audiences have heckled and barracked startled MPs. Newspapers have been overwhelmed with correspondence from furious readers. In some cases the response has been physical. Julie Kirkbride who, with her fellow Tory MP husband, claimed for two second homes, had a brick thrown through the window of her constituency office.

The anger shows no sign of abating and the effect is palpable. The nerves of the political class have been shaken. Westminster is in state of "shock and fear", according to the *Financial Times*. The ground has shifted beneath the feet of the political class and they are reeling with disorientation.

"It's a very strange mood. People who have been there [Parliament] for 20 or 30 years say they've never seen anything like it", Tory MP for Monmouth David Davies told the *Times*. Many, he said, are considering quitting.

The *Financial Times* quoted unnamed senior sources who pronounced that "the result is paralysis in the civil service. We may see a few initiatives over the coming weeks, but basically everything is on hold until after the general election. Ministers don't expect Labour to be re-elected and nor do their officials. No proper work is being done".

Some MPs have tried to brazen their way through the situation. Labour Minister of Housing Margaret Beckett faced an angry audience on BBC's "Question Time" when she insisted that she had acted within the rules in claiming £3,250 for food.

Shahid Malik, Labour's Junior Minister for Justice and MP for the deprived constituency of Dewsbury in West Yorkshire also showed no contrition when it was revealed that he had claimed £2,600 for a home cinema and £730 for a massage chair while renting a house from a local slum landlord for a peppercorn rent. But Prime Minister Gordon Brown was

obliged to suspend him from the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Other more senior MPs have escaped without official censure. Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling "flipped" the designation of his second home four times in one year to avoid tax. Minister for Communities Hazel Blears saved £13,000 in tax when she sold her London flat. Transport Secretary Geoff Hoon, who with his wife is thought to have a property portfolio amounting to millions, made £300,000 when he sold a property in Lambeth that had previously been designated as a second home.

Most blatant are the MPs who have continued to claim expenses for mortgage interest when they no longer have a mortgage such as the now suspended Labour MP David Chaytor and Elliot Morley, a former Labour environment minister.

Brown has now vowed to make MPs pay back dodgy claims and promised that "Any MP found to have defied the rules will not serve in my government".

This is unlikely to be enough to salvage his party's position at the next election.

The crisis began as a campaign by sections of the pro-Conservative media, led by the *Daily Telegraph*. The presumed intention was to hasten Labour's downfall by repeating the process that finished off the Conservative government of John Major. But events have spun rapidly out of control. The Tories should never toy with the idea of using sleaze against their opponents and revelations swiftly followed that Conservative MPs have been financing their country estates at taxpayers' expense, often on a grander scale than the Labourites.

Sir Michael Spicer claimed £620 for cleaning a chandelier and a similar sum for cutting the hedge around a "helipad" at his Worcestershire manor house. Viscount Douglas Hogg claimed for the cleaning of the moat around his 13th century property. Tory policy chairman, Oliver Letwin, claimed for repairs to his tennis court. And the area in which Tory MPs benefit most from their position, second jobs, has not yet been brought under scrutiny.

This has done severe damage to the efforts of leader David Cameron to rebrand the party. He has attempted to present himself ready to take decisive action announcing that he would pay back the £600 he claimed for clearing the wisteria from his country cottage and calling on his MPs to do the same. But his performance and Brown's follow-up do not resolve the

problems that now confront the entire political class.

Most MPs were indeed following the rules that they themselves had laid down in Parliament. They did so because a system has been created to allow them to hide their true level of pay from the electorate.

At a little over £60,000 for backbench MPs and £90,000 for ministers, they are lower paid than many public servants, such as school principals or senior police officers. But MPs are still in the top four percent of earners. Rather than vote themselves a pay rise in the 1980s during Margaret Thatcher's premiership, at a time when the government was waging a full-scale offensive against working people and social services, with millions unemployed, MPs were encouraged to rely on the Additional Costs Allowances (ACA). This now stands at almost £24,000, equal to the average wage.

When the Freedom of Information Act threatened to expose the ACA scam the government, with opposition support, fought disclosure through the courts. In May 2007 the courts finally forced the Westminster authorities to agree to hand over the records of expenses, but they delayed this by setting up an elaborate procedure to "prepare" the documents for publication. A year later, this procedure has been short circuited by the leak of the records in unredacted form.

The *Daily Telegraph* bought the records for an undisclosed sum. It is a visceral Tory paper, rather than a publication that toes the party line and is owned by Sir Frederick Barclay and Sir David Barclay, who live as tax exiles on the island of Sark. They have distinguished themselves there by making one sixth of the island's population unemployed when they pulled their investment out of local hotels after the population refused to vote for their candidates in an election.

Undoubtedly, there is a right wing political agenda involved here. But the repercussions of the disclosures have been explosive because they have taken place in an environment in which the political class and the financial oligarchy, of which the Barclay brothers are a part, have become so completely detached from the mass of the population.

MPs clearly regarded themselves as entitled to live at the taxpayers' expense. Their expectations are conditioned by their role as representatives of the upper echelons of society. They envy the financial aristocracy they rub shoulders with and want nothing more than to emulate them.

The wave of anger that has overwhelmed MPs is fundamentally an outcome of the economic meltdown and its impact on the vast majority of the population who live outside the charmed circle of the financial aristocracy and their hangers on. The collapse of the banks, the realisation that savings are depreciating, falling house prices that threaten negative equity, the erosion, or outright loss, of pensions, mounting debt and job losses have found expression in the fury that has been directed against MPs.

Matthew Paris of the *Times* dismissed the expenses scandal, writing "In ten years time it's my guess that, looking back, we

will scratch our heads at the intensity of the outrage given the size of the sums involved." Martin Kettle, writing in the *Guardian*, denounced the "over-mighty press" and pointed out that "there have been far worse abuses of public money for private gain".

All of which is true. But the MPs are implicated in many of those abuses. Moreover, the public reaction is conditioned by the far worse crimes committed by MPs, such as their support for war in Iraq and Afghanistan and their imposition of a pro-business agenda while millions face growing hardship.

Times columnist David Aaronovitch denounced a single working mother who pointed out that she has struggled to keep her family together, pay her mortgage and her council tax and has not had the luxury of relying on the taxpayer. Aaronovitch arrogantly declared that, as a single mother, she too has probably been subsidised by the state. In reality her anger is an elemental expression of class consciousness from an oppressed section of society, for whom the MPs' expenses revelations has been the last straw.

Those columnists now warning that the media has gone too far in inflaming public sentiment represent a section of the elite who want to call a halt to the frenzy over expenses before it does irreparable harm to the entire system of parliamentary rule. But however much political commentators try to diminish the significance of the MP's expenses scandal, the entire facade of parliamentary democracy is crumbling before our eyes.

There are very real dangers in the fact that the response of the mass of the population is at present politically inchoate. This allows the possibility of right-wing forces exploiting the present crisis to urge an authoritarian response to the deepening social and political crisis. It raises to a degree of utmost urgency the need for the working class to begin constructing a new political leadership.



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