

MPs and money

Quite a lot of MP s get into trouble over money.

A few extreme individuals turn out to be thieves or fraudsters. Submitting false invoices to be paid or cheating people or the state out of money is common theft and will end in tears.

Many others are brought into dispute by their use and abuse within the rules. There are some areas to watch for those of you concerned to see value for money from your representative.

Does the MP undertake a lot of travel directly charged to expenses? Does the MP undertake many paid for and sponsored trips abroad?

An MP can claim travel expenses between the constituency and Westminster on the basis that the MP works in two locations. A company usually reimburses a staff member for travel to another branch or office. MPs can also claim for necessary trips beyond their constituency for research and Parliamentary approved purposes. There are numerous MP groups who take sponsor money to pay for meals, events and travel. MPs can push the rules a bit far about claims. They can overdo the sponsored events. Some sponsored trips become notorious for the conduct of MPs on them.

Anything an MP does for the party has to be paid for out of party funds. Some MPs want to spend heavily on leaflets and events for political purposes. They need to raise money from donors and need to report that. Some donors can become a difficulty for the MP. Care needs to be taken to avoid conflicts of interest.

The public is very critical of expenses. Most of the expenses are legitimate costs that do not reward the MP. Each MP needs an office, office equipment, broadband, headed notepaper and staff. In most people's work this is supplied by the employer who just pays the bills. No one thinks they need to add office costs to an executive's salary when working out the pay package.

What is worth probing is the total cost as a measure of efficiency and value for money. I ran my MP office with just two staff who did a great job following up casework and responding promptly to constituents. I did all my own research and writing as I needed to know what I said and why I said it. Many MPs hire staff to write speeches, social media comments and press statements. That can lead to inconsistency and confusion if staff change or more than one might produce something. It also produced much higher office costs than I charged.

The burdens of office and the problems of straight talking

MPs are often accused of pulling their punches or not telling the truth. In practice an MP is always speaking as an MP and may anytime be picked up for what he or she has said, even if it were a private observation born of frustration, anger or whatever. When you talk you need to bear in mind the views of your constituents, the view of the government, and the views of your party. If the government, party and constituents all hold broadly the same view it is easy and you are lucky. Where they differ, you need to tread a careful path understanding how each will criticise you. You must of course exercise your own judgement and provide a lead, but it must be a lead informed by your view of the greater good. Sticking with the party line can leave you looking stupid or forced to do a U turn. Listen to the difficulties for Labour interviewees over the Diane Abbott saga. How to answer if you want to be loyal but do not know whether she is out or in?

My best advice to a new MP is your word needs to be a strong reliable currency. Repeat too many twists, turns and U turns you are given to say and soon your word is debased. Those who put you in a hole may not rescue you.

I always felt very responsible as an MP even though I was usually having to defend or criticise others for doing and saying things I would not have said. It was a rare event to be given a straight interview on my own views. The interview particularly if from the BBC usually plunged into getting you to condemn a fellow Conservative for a foolish statement or deed. Often the BBC just wanted you to play a role in their script and frequently cancelled when they realised your view was not the one they wanted. I increasingly responded by saying they should interview the out of line speaker, not me if that was their main interest.

I did feel bad about the way various public services let people down, and did work hard behind the scenes with my staff to remedy. Whilst I had clear views and opinions of my own, often the task was to distil the best or the consensus amongst my constituents to frame a response. It is frustrating to have to repeat public sector promises of better conduct and improved service, when you have heard them before and doubt whether this time will be different. You do not want to condemn the many public staff that do a good job and mean well, but you do need to speak out for improvement when well paid senior public sector managers fail to deliver a good service. I often used the formula that the service has said/ promised, adding I would try to get them to deliver if necessary.

Talking straight is a difficult balance. Not having a view and principles leads to weak and contradictory speech which is bad. Just having a strong view of your own means you do not represent many of your constituents much of the time and places you in regular dispute those you need to work with. The skill lies in backing the right causes and campaigns, and in dealing fairly with constituents of all persuasions. It also lies in finding ways to express

problems and propose their resolution that wins over more people than it upsets. Politics may indeed be the art of the possible, but that should not become an excuse to settle for the mediocre or bad.

What is it like being an MP?

Today I cease to be an MP. I can now tell you more of what it is like, free of criticism that what I say is to put a favourable spin on how I undertook the tasks. As we embark on choosing new MPs we should discuss what we want them to do and how they should behave.

I never saw it as a job but an important part of my life. You are an MP 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year. It is not a 9-5 office job with holidays as some seem to think it should be.

You are on call all the time. You dread one of those calls that there has been a big fire, or train crash or other disaster because you want nothing to go wrong. If one occurs, as I remember only too vividly, you need to be present but must not get in the way of the emergency services. You need to brief and be briefed so the people coming to help know the local circumstances and you grasp their expertise and way of handling the crisis. You may be able to call up additional resources or to offer comfort to those affected.

You are the complaints department for anything to do with public services. People annoyed with government do not readily distinguish between Council, central government or independent quango and see the MP as the person to sort it out. During my weekly walkabouts and drives I went to see for myself. Resolving problems with local services and national services supplied locally was an important part of the task and you need to see the impact they are having locally. The email and post bag is a good guide to when things go wrong, but personal visits also reveal additional issues more directly.

You are part of the chain gang with the King's Representatives and Mayors to be present at important events and ceremonies. Annually we meet to mourn the lives lost by armed forces personnel. We meet to commemorate national anniversaries. Communities and individuals do like recognition and public thanks.

You need to be a self starter with an enquiring mind. The whips and your party leadership will give you an agenda and ask you to back their judgement, but you need to read and see for yourself and where necessary disagree. You need to be vigilant for anything about to happen that may do harm to your constituents, and lobby, speak out or ask questions to head it off. Where need arises you should run a campaign to get support for something you and your constituents need to be changed. Your party has no monopoly of wisdom and no immunity from error. You need numbers of MPs to support a good

cause as well as good arguments to get action.

There are 650 different ways of being an MP. There is no one single right way but there are some wrong ways. I have been amazed at how many MPs have lost office through ill judged comments, bad behaviour, and criminal activity. Do not become an MP if you want to take drugs, get drunk or bad mouth people. I have been dismayed when the occasional MP is laid low by false allegations.

There is said to be some disagreement over whether an MP should be more like the people they represent or whether their behaviour should be better and more discrete. I always found it was good to seek to understand the point of view of whoever you were dealing with, and to be courteous in reply even when you were being provoked or abused. As I regularly explained, I would represent everyone where they had a case or cause, whatever their view. That did not mean however I could agree with everyone. I had views of what was best, set out in an election prospectus. Constituents disagree a lot with each other so there is rarely a unified constituency view. An MP does need to provide a lead and provide a consistent general view of where we are aiming to go, whilst making sure the minority view can be put to authority and answered by them.

A large volume of email correspondence takes the form of special campaigns organised by lobby groups. These are usually minority views and some are the worst kind of special pleading. Increasingly they relate to policy and attitudes in foreign countries where a UK MP's writ does not run. An MP should engage but remember that they are not usually the majority view. It is also important to remind correspondents that the view of an individual UK MP is unlikely to change the action of a foreign government. The UK government may have some power of influence but will use it only where it will not make things worse and is a justified attempted interference in another country's affairs.

Leaving Parliament

Packing up is never easy. There are many reminders of old battles fought and won or fought and lost as I tidy the papers and take away personal effects from the office. There are friends and colleagues to say Au Revoir to.

Today I wish to thank all the people of Wokingham for having me as their MP through 9 elections. We worked together well as I sought to represent their views, get redress when government wronged them, pressed for things we needed as a community and set out a vision of how Wokingham and our country could grasp greater prosperity, freedom and success.

For much of my time Wokingham came out high in surveys of best places to live. Unemployment was low most of the time, with many larger and smaller

businesses coming to invest or growing from their home base. There has been an abundance of talent and energy to set up and grow enterprises, to volunteer to run events, to help charities and improve our local environment. I have visited many homes with well tended gardens, and watched with delight as bushes and trees have flourished in what were new developments, covering over the bare newness. I have argued to keep the green gaps, the farms and the fields that intersperse our towns and villages and provide some balance to the urban settlements.

I have often been the person who pushes the case for our public services and spaces to catch up with the housebuilding and private commercial parks. The early days I needed to help secure pavements, primary schools and shops for new Earley, through the days of working with the Council to freshen and modernise Wokingham Town Centre. It took a long time to get a new railway station which was much needed but we got there in the end. We did welcome new surgeries, new schools and improved roads under the previous Council.

I have backed home ownership which is the majority experience and the aspiration of many in Wokingham . I have pushed a better deal for small businesses and self employed, as Wokingham is enterprising. I have enjoyed the cultural life of our Borough, enriched by the choirs, concerts, local artists and craftsmen and women. I have helped the Council get more money for potholes, social care and a number of good causes.

Every day as MP I asked myself what can I do to make life better for the people I represent. Every day 365 days a year I wrote a blog to keep people up to date with what I was saying and doing, and to seek views on what the problems are and how they should be tackled., It has made for a fascinating and lively conversation.

Thank you all. Thank you so much to those of you who have contributed so much to our community. I shall miss the privilege of being able to thank you as MP.

I want to stay living in the Borough I love, and will still be running a modified website encouraging a wider debate about how best we can proceed together as a nation. I am full of optimism for Wokingham and for our country, as long as local and national government reflects the common sense of the people. Government has power and money to do good, but can abuse its privileges or make bad mistakes which set us back. A free Parliament needs to be a noisy Parliament, capable of correcting error and holding accountable those who let us down.

Great British Energy- a disastrous

idea or a con?

Labour is declining to promise much for fear of letting people down if it wins. Its biggest of just six first steps or pledges is to set up Great British Energy, bringing bills down by £300. There is no way such a body could cut bills.

The lengthy paper that purports to explain the soundbite proposal is long on words but short on detail. Great British Energy would have wide ranging powers and duties. It would directly invest in nuclear, solar and wind, as well as in experimental new technologies for hydrogen and storage.

How would it taking on responsibilities for the build out of Hinkley and Sizewell make any difference to the long time they are taking to complete? How would it accelerate the work already underway to support and then commission a fleet of smaller nuclear reactors? What does Labour and GB Energy know that would enable them to extend the lives of existing nuclear stations due to close. If there is a safe way to do this it should be done by the current managers and safety inspectors.

The only cost/spend number in the paper is a budget of £1 bn a year for local energy projects and Council owned companies. I highlighted yesterday how several of these lost us millions and some went bust. This could be more good money after bad.

The idea Labour could get to all no carbon UK generated power by 2030 is absurd. They admit they need to quadruple the size of the grid, criss crossing our countryside with avenues of pylons. They have hugely ambitious targets for onshore and offshore wind and solar. They say they can add almost 100GW by 2030. There is no way enough projects can be designed and financed by then for such a huge increase. Most current nuclear stations will close by 2030 .

To help force the pace of these investments the state would need to borrow tens of billions of pounds. They may want it to be off balance sheet, but however they do it it will be taxpayers and energy buyers who will pick up the bill. This is all unaffordable, will not happen and will not lower bills.