New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Expenses*

On Friday 8 May 2009, the *Daily Telegraph* published details of the expenses claimed by the prime minister, Gordon Brown, and other cabinet ministers, over the last four years. This inaugurated the story that obsessed the British media for the next month. It set off public rage against politicians as a class, with unforeseeable consequences for who will stand for the House of Commons at the next general election and, in the long run, for the reconstitution of parliamentary democracy in the United Kingdom. It may even put an end to self-congratulatory assumptions about 'the Mother of Parliaments' and the supposedly unique record of British incorruptibility.

John Wick, formerly an officer in the Special Air Service, disclosed that he was the middleman who passed to the *Telegraph* the computer disc ('leaked', appropriated in the public interest, 'stolen'), which holds every receipt, every claim and every piece of correspondence between Westminster MPs and the fees office staff who deal with reimbursement — some four million separate bits of paper. Neither Mr Wick nor the newspaper has confirmed if he or anyone else has been rewarded for this historic scoop. In May compared with April the *Telegraph*'s circulation went up by almost 19,000 copies a day, perhaps not a very dramatic escalation in a population of 40 or 50 million potential newspaper readers. On 20 June *The Complete Expenses Files* appeared, a special weekend supplement, artfully delayed to contrast with the official list that was finally published by the House of Commons, but which was predictably so drastically censored to protect MPs' 'security' (home addresses, bank account details, and suchlike), that suspicions of congenital malpractice were of course only more deeply entrenched. Page after page of 'allowances' claimed by MPs in support of their labours for constituents, relentlessly appearing day after day, mired Honourable Members in a morass of derision. The public could see 'for the first time', as the *Telegraph* trumpeted, 'the uncensored expenses of all 646 MPs, ranging from the notorious 'phantom mortgages' and duck house to the ludicrous claims for dog food and horse manure – plus the saintly few MPs who resisted temptation'.

Worked up by the other newspapers, popular outrage led to MPs demanding the resignation of Michael Martin, Speaker of the House of Commons, the first to be forced out of office since the late 17th century, and, as it happens, the first Catholic to serve in the role since

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the Reformation. In 1695 Sir John Trevor, a Welsh lawyer, was expelled for accepting a bribe of 1000 guineas, about £1.6m in today's money, from the City of London to expedite a bill through the House: he was not asked to refund the bribe. Mario Conti, Archbishop of Glasgow, writing in the *Scottish Catholic Observer*, granting that the expenses scandal had exposed a 'shameful culture of greed, selfishness and secrecy', went on to argue that some MPs had decided to shift 'the spotlight away from their own misconduct by hounding the Speaker from office'. This act, Dr Conti insisted, did 'irreparable' damage to Parliament.

As regards his own expenses, the Speaker reportedly claimed £1,400 for taxis to ferry him around his Glasgow constituency, including trips to Celtic football matches. One of the most interesting features of the *Telegraph* exposure is the revelation of MPs' personal habits, cultural background and even position in the British class system. For years Gordon Brown, who declined to live in the 'grace and favour' apartment in Downing Street to which as Chancellor of the Exchequer he was entitled, continued to claim £650-a-month mortgage payments, council tax, utility bills, and so on, on his 'second home', a flat nearby. David Cameron, when he saw the details in the public domain, decided to repay £680 for trimming the wisteria at his Oxfordshire home and also 99p for a stapler. One Tory MP claimed for clearing the moat at his country home; another for the 'duck house' that floated on his pond; another for dung; and a fourth for the repair of the drainage pipe under the tennis court. One Labour MP, about to retire, who still inhabits the ancestral home (though mostly open to the public), claimed for appropriate shelving to hold his set of Hansard. One Labour MP claimed for a bar of chocolate. Ludicrously, George Osborne, shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, heir to an Anglo-Irish baronetcy and to the fabric and wallpaper designers Osborne and Little, claimed £47 for DVDs of his speech on 'value for taxpayers' money'. Most comically and excruciatingly (for her), Jacqui Smith, then Home Secretary, claiming over £15,000 in 2007–08 for her family home in her constituency, included the cost of a couple of 'adult videos' (for her husband, it was then said, claimed in error and now refunded).

About half a dozen cases are currently being examined by the police, involving what looks playing the system to create a lucrative portfolio of properties. But it's the derision at the absurdities, rather than the anger at the scams, that will be hardest to live down.

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