

Cope 27

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Nothing is quite so destructive of the credibility of politicians as hypocrisy.

For as long as I can recall politicians have harangued the public on the need for wage constraint and occasionally legislated to enforce it. They have "led by example" in limiting their own basic salaries. Now we learn that surreptitiously, behind closed doors, they developed a system of allowances and expenses that not only enabled them to circumvent their own legislation but to greatly enrich themselves at the public's expense.

Almost all politicians profess commitment to equality of opportunity, the rule of law and the creation of a meritocracy. In the spheres in which they have most direct influence they appoint their relatives and friends. While in corporate life, the public services and the professions this is rare and guarded against; amongst the political class nepotism and cronyism appear deeply entrenched.

The practice of MP's employing their relatives, whether paid or unpaid, is very undesirable. It insulates politicians from the views and interests of the wider public. It gives privileged access to the milieu of power and influence from which others are excluded. Ultimately, it can be the basis for the creation of a self-perpetuating elite that shares little with those it governs. With regard to the law it would appear that some practices are in breach of minimum wage legislation, while the employment of relatives by predominantly white anglo-saxon politicians must surely involve indirect discrimination which is an offence under The Race Discrimination Act. There are of course countless examples from history, and internationally, that show a direct link between nepotism, financial corruption and other abuses of power.

We should be following the lead of legislatures in Scotland and Wales in banning MP's from using public funds to employ relatives or contract commercial services from them. This prohibition is both necessary and proportionate. To allow MP's and their employed relatives up to 5 years to adjust to change would be an excessive indulgence given the seriousness of the abuse and the illegalities involved. No one standing for election or re-election in the forthcoming contest should assume they have an entitlement to employ their family members at public expense.

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