

I am writing to respond to a number of issues raised in your consultation document. I am very glad that this process has been set up and I am fed up with the way in which a number of MPs have exploited the system for their own personal gain. I would welcome any measures which improve the transparency of the system and stop the petty theft, corruption and influence peddling which has strangled the effective work of Parliament over the past few years.

That being said, having read through the consultation document, I am worried that a number of the measures you have outlined as possible solutions will do little to increase transparency and fail to acknowledge the fact that working for an MP presents a number of challenges.

I have a number of specific points I would like to raise

1) At the meeting between the IPSA and Parliamentary Staff today, a number of staff raised the issue of the proposals to define what applies as Political and Non-Political work and to subsequently ban MPs staff from undertaking any work which is deemed to be political. This proposal is very applicable to people employed as researchers but could also apply to caseworkers.

I am employed as a Researcher by a Liberal Democrat Frontbencher and as such my job is to provide research and legislative support to my employer. In addition to providing research I am also responsible for managing his office in Westminster, dealing with press enquiries and The very nature of this job is to provide information, briefings and research which highlights the problems with the way the system is working or any proposals for reform the Government may be putting forward. If I do my job well it is likely that my MP will be better informed than he would otherwise be, he is also likely to receive media attention which may advance the position of the party on an issue. What can start off as an entirely non-political issue can become a very political issue in a short space of time.

I am unclear as to where the line can be drawn between my work for an MP and work which is done for the party. While there are things which are clearly political and non-political, that the vast majority of work done by researchers at Westminster falls into a very grey area. MP's researchers are often responsible for drafting amendments to bills, parliamentary questions and early day motions which are expressly political but also relevant to the MPs job representing his or her constituents. I don't see how it would be possible to distinguish between the two roles.

I feel that creating a clear divide will prove impossible and subsequent attempts to enforce it would be challenging. The meeting this afternoon left me with the impression that the IPSA do not understand enough about how things work in MPs offices to be in a position to put forward a workable framework on this issue.

2) Your consultation makes repeated reference to the need for MPs to adopt common employment practices in line with Civil Service guidelines. What mechanisms will the IPSA have to enforce these recommendations? I think it is important to look at both the concrete problems (such as the fact that the vast majority of Parliamentary staff earn considerably less than civil servants doing similar jobs, the existence of a culture which demands large amounts of unpaid overtime and unsociable working hours, and a line management system which can prove problematic due to the amount of other work MPs have to do) and the abstract ones as raised in my first point.

3) Point 7.17 sets out rules relating to the purchase of tickets for travel. I am supportive of the introduction of a standard class only restriction but I think that the suggestion that MPs should only be able to book open tickets in some circumstances betrays a lack of understanding of the rather chaotic nature of MPs diaries and the short notice changes that regularly occur. I think that this will lead to a large number of tickets being booked and subsequently unused - at substantial cost to the Taxpayer.

In the case of my employer, it is possible to get advance tickets for about £16 return from Norwich to London if you book many months in advance. Given the nature of an MP's job it is a regular occurrence that he has to stay later than planned in Westminster or Norfolk. If you chose to book a ticket approximately a week before travel, it is likely that an inflexible ticket for defined trains as suggested in your consultation document will cost a minimum of £30.

Because of changes which occur to the timing of votes, decisions relating to urgent questions or ministerial statements or the need to schedule meetings at short notice, it is very unusual for an MP to be able to guarantee their travel in advance to any degree of reliability. Changing a ticket on National Express East Anglia costs £10 per leg plus the additional fare for the ticket which can often be substantial. It is also not possible to change the ticket for an alternative advance fare after 6:30pm on the day before travel.

Given that an off-peak return costs £44, on most occasions these proposed changes will probably increase the cost of travel, lead to a large number of wasted tickets and take up a lot of staff time. I would ask that you consider this point and the unintended consequences it will have for MPs and their staff. I can not see why a restriction on the use of open tickets would be advantageous. This lack of flexibility will also have the effect of encouraging MPs to travel by car as this will be the only way to ensure they have the flexibility they need.

4) I am unsure as to how the reforms outlined in your consultation document will address the lack of transparency and accountability elsewhere in the system. In recent weeks it has been highlighted that the Conservative Shadow Secretary of State for Health both accepts donations from individuals closely linked to the area he shadows and is employed by a company who do promotional work for multiple clients in the health sector. I believe that these types of engagement need to be much more tightly scrutinised and it strikes me that there is a strong case for banning MPs from having outside interests which in any way impact upon their decisions.

Regards

Andrew Forth