

COPEGS

Following the meeting with MP's staff on 8th February in Portcullis House, it occurred to me that there were some issues which needed to be fed in to the process.

I had not understood until the meeting the depth of the lack of knowledge of the IPSA members of what the job of MP or MP's staff entails. I now realise that there is a danger that the proposed arrangements could result in a poorly trained, inexperienced work force trying to address the needs of increasingly demanding constituents.

The comment by a committee member that paying for additional staff time in constituencies with a high level of case work might be a 'perverse incentive' for MPs to do more case work, is one example of the lack of understanding. MPs and their staff do not choose to do casework. Constituents believe that they have a right to have every problem in their lives sorted out by their MP. As cutbacks in public services increase, unemployment and home repossessions as a result of the recession continue to grow in number, there will be more people approaching their Member of Parliament, not less. In addition, all campaigning organisations, including the very newspapers which are driving the attack on MPs, call upon the public to register their views with their MP. We receive on average 30 emails and about 10 postcards every week from people who have been on the website of their favourite charity or pressure group, and responded to the invitation to click on a letter which will be automatically sent to their MP, or who have scribbled on a postcard they have been sent by a lobby group, which then comes to the MP. If a response is not sent to the constituent in response to these emails, they are on the telephone to Westminster or the constituency, so either way it makes more work for MP's staff. In today's culture, choosing or not choosing to do casework is not an option for MPs or for their staff.

The other comment, by a member of staff, was about the recruitment of potential staff for MPs after the next election and into the future. They pointed out that submitting applications to IPSA before a staff member could be employed might result in people without relevant experience or skills being appointed, just because they have a degree in politics. This worries me very much. The Civil Service tends to advertise for people with at least an Upper Second class degree, and lobby organisations demand a First or Upper Second in Politics from a Russell Group university. Those of us with degrees in other subjects, but with 25 years experience working for Members of Parliament might be weeded out in a paper exercise carried out by IPSA. This did not concern me until the meeting on 8th February, but now it has been raised by another member of staff, and in view of the clear lack of understanding on how things work by the Committee members, I am now very concerned indeed, that newly elected MPs will be made to appoint inexperienced politics graduates which will adversely affect both MPs and their constituents, and which will put experienced staff who are looking for new jobs into unemployment.

This leads on to the issue of an employment agency. It seemed to have been made clear to the Committee that the use of a temporary staff agency while they are deciding who new MPs could employ is a non-starter. Again, it is not just the experience of existing staff who are looking for a new employer that is the issue, but also security clearance. Once I realised that the Committee has no idea of how the building works, it started to worry me that they do not understand why security clearance is such an issue. Newly elected MPs do not have time to escort their staff around the building or stay with them while they work in the office. Security is very strict these days – people on visitor's badges have been stopped from using the toilets by security staff because the passholder escorting them was the wrong gender to accompany them. If a newly elected MP has to train a temp from an agency, escort them everywhere because they do not have security clearance, and then go through the same process again with an inexperienced graduate once IPSA has decided who they may employ, it will be impossible for them to do their jobs. You need to realise that a lot of agencies use people from the new EU member states. These are perfectly good employees, with good English, good qualifications, and every right to work in the UK because they have EU passports. The problem is that the security system in the Pass Office takes a very long time to clear people who have come from another country, whether it is EU or not. We have had to wait for months to get passes for Polish and French interns who were here as politics students at the LSE or on the Socrates Erasmus student exchange programme via the EU. People who

already have security clearance are like gold dust to new MPs. We can start immediately and find our own way around.

I am sorry the Committee did not seem to understand the issue of pensions. It is very strange that a proposed new system which is intended to prevent MPs from having unfettered use of public funds seeks to transfer staff pension contributions back from the centre to the individual MP. Even if the MP does allow the staff member to have their 10% contributions, this will leave less money in the salary budget if it is taken from the staffing allowance. There is no reason at all why staff should not continue to receive this central pot of money. It is less expensive than the gold standard pension arrangements provided for staff of the House. Putting a clause in the contract which an MP issues to a member of staff is ridiculous. Half the MPs don't issue contracts at the moment, even though there is a rule stating that they have to. The punishment for not issuing a contract is for the staff member not to be paid until they do – hardly a punishment for the Member. A staff member who complains about having no contract risks losing their wages until it is sorted out. Suggesting training for MPs is also ridiculous. It is not because they have not been on a day's training, it is because they think they know better about how things should be organised. A number of them refuse to pass on pay rises to their staff when they are awarded each year in line with inflation, preferring to collect the increase together to employ someone else for a few hours. Pointing out that this is effectively a pay cut means nothing to them. None of us can understand why the Committee dreamed up this idea to put MPs in charge of staff pensions and to put it into their staffing budget. It does not address any of the complaints or concerns about the current system. It punishes only the staff.

I would hope that IPSA, once their new system is in place, would take the trouble to look at what needs to be done in an MP's office, rather than relying on paper research about what they do in other countries.

Vivienne Windle