

Submission to IPSA Consultation

I would be grateful if you would please consider the following points:

Employment of family members

Whilst I do not believe that there should be a ban on MPs employing family members and that no existing family member working for an MP should lose their job, there ought to be a more professional and transparent employment process when MPs employ staff. At present many MPs simply appoint staff without going through a proper selection process and this is more apparent when the member of staff is also a family member. Additionally, many family members are employed in a position of authority, again without having to go through a selection process, rather than being employed as a junior member of staff and they can receive a disproportionately higher wage to other staff members. Option 2 (8.20 of the report) would ensure a fairer and more open employment process. However, it is important that consultation takes place between MPs, their staff and staff representative bodies (e.g., Unite Union) to ensure that any changes to the employment process are efficient and effective and do not, in particular, disadvantage MPs staff.

Establishing a Human Resources department for both MPs and their staff would be of benefit and would encourage better employment practice.

If your recommendation is that MPs should be banned from employing family members, it would seem equitable that existing family staff members be allowed to remain in post until their Member either loses their seat or retires.

Interns

It has long since been the practice that some MPs believe it to be acceptable that they take on interns and treat them as full time paid employees, with all the responsibilities that come with that. If an MP has someone working for them on that basis, then they should be paid.

I was dismayed to hear views expressed at the consultation meeting held on Monday 8 February that interns should not be paid and that even the minimum wage level should not be introduced. I can only assume that those expressing these views have the financial resources to support themselves or are being supported. This is not the case for many who wish to work for an MP and seriously disadvantages those who do not have the money to sustain unpaid employment. I would urge that the National Minimum Wage be implemented for interns.

Any changes to the practice of taking on interns should not impinge on academic internships which form part of a university degree. This type of internship is usually time limited and has enormous benefit for those taking part.

Transitional provision

At 8.23 you mention the use of recruitment agencies to provide temporary support for a time-limited period after a general election.

This suggestion does not appear to be workable. As soon as an MP has been elected, their casework begins and they need to have someone with experience working for them who knows their way around Parliament. Because all staff members need to be politically sensitive it is impractical that temporary staff be recruited through agencies. Particular qualities are needed for caseworking and researching in Parliament and it is questionable whether recruitment agencies would be able to provide qualified temporary staff in adequate numbers in a short space of time.

Another aspect of this suggestion is that of cost. Should this suggestion go ahead, recruitment agencies across the country would need to be involved. Presumably a team at Westminster would need to be established to engage with agencies, proper procedures would need to be in place for the recruitment, screening and interviewing of temporary workers and the agencies would all demand a payment for their services. And all of this financial cost would be incurred simply to supply MPs with temporary workers whilst they go through the process of employing permanent staff.

A simpler process would be to allow MPs to employ someone who they already know has the experience and political sensitivity needed on a temporary 3 month contract. After every election there are always MP's caseworkers and researches who have been made redundant either through their employer retiring or losing their seat, so there is a ready pool of experience available. During these 3 months, the MP will have adequate time to advertise and appoint permanent members of staff. This would ensure that MPs have access to already existing experienced staff but with the open recruitment process they will be able to offer employment opportunities to others from outside of Parliament.

An additional point is that of security. It can take up to 6 weeks to be given security clearance to work in Parliament. At the time of an election because of the numbers involved this process can take considerably longer. Temporary staff appointed by a recruitment agency would need to have full security checks which would inevitably delay their start. Staff of MP's who have lost their seat or retired are already security cleared and would be able to take up any offer of employment immediately.

Employer contributions to staff pensions

I am unclear as to where this suggestion has come from and why. Certainly MP's staff do not consider this to be a helpful suggestion nor to my knowledge have MPs requested they assume this responsibility.

I have worked for my MP since November 1992. At that time the Fees Office (now the Finance & Administration Department) contributed from public funds an amount not exceeding 10% of annual rate of salary to an approved pension scheme. If a staff member of an MP wanted to participate in this scheme, they had to tell their MP who would then notify the Fees Office who would then arrange contributions to a scheme chosen by the member of staff. On a personal note, this was a tedious and long drawn

out process which took nearly two years to complete and throughout my MP was supportive and did what he could to assist. I was lucky in that respect. My MP informed me of the scheme and notified the Fees Office on my behalf. Many other staff members were not treated so well. Up until 2001 when pensions were administered by the House authorities, many staff members were not even informed by their MP that they could participate in a pension scheme, even though the funds did not come out of the MP's allowances.

This is why I strongly believe that the current pension arrangements should remain in place. The present arrangement ensures that MPs staff are notified automatically by the Finance Department upon employment and the process to choose one of the schemes available is straightforward and painless. The MP is relieved of any involvement in the process. Any change along the lines suggested would be a detrimental step backwards.

Particularly in the case of new MPs, once they arrive at Parliament they will be inundated with things they have to do and ensuring that their staff are signed up to a pension scheme with them making the arrangements will come very far down their list of priorities and in some cases drop right off. This is not taking into account any MPs who simply will not be bothered to do this for their staff – and experience has taught me that there will be a fair number of these.

In your suggestion, no mention is made as to whether the overall staffing budget will be increased to cover the cost of the pension contribution. Neither is there any suggestion that the pension budget will be ring fenced so the MP cannot use it for anything else. If no additional funding is made available for a pension, this will in effect mean an across the board reduction in wages of 10%.

I would hope that you will seriously reconsider this suggestion and ensure that MPs staff pension arrangements remain the same as they are now and are not transferred to MPs.

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