

**Parliament on its Knees:
MPs' Expenses and the Crisis of Transparency at Westminster**

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Abstract

In May 2009, revelations made in *The Daily Telegraph* about the way that MPs had used and abused the House of Commons expenses and allowances regime threw the British political system into turmoil, forced the resignation of the Speaker of the Commons along with a number of implicated MPs, and ignited talk about a crisis in parliamentary democracy and a collapse of public trust in politics. This article explores the events that led to this situation, from the structure of MPs pay and allowance system, the Freedom of Information context that framed the disaster, and the crisis of transparency which the House of Commons has itself precipitated. It argues that, talk of parliamentary reform aside, MPs must radically rethink the way that they approach their representative role and the nature of their broader engagement with the public they claim to serve.

In May 2009, members of the Westminster political class were thrown into unparalleled turmoil, along with the system of parliamentary democracy they populate, when *The Daily Telegraph* published extensive, in-depth details of how Members of Parliament had used, and apparently abused, the House of Commons expenses regime supposedly designed to help them perform their representative duties. For day after turgid day, the *Telegraph* splashed across its front pages stories that seemed to confirm the very worst beliefs of those who are cynical about British politics and the politicians who engage in it. The Labour Party faced revelations about how government ministers had used the public funds available through the Additional Members Allowance (designed to help those MPs with constituencies beyond London to pay for accommodation in the capital close to parliament) to make significant personal financial gains. The details listed the upkeep of second homes just a few miles from MPs' constituency homes, the purchase of expensive fittings and furniture for those second homes, and the 'flipping' of properties between constituency and second home status in order to maximise expense claims. The expenses revelations of Conservative frontbenchers served to confirm their worst stereotypes: claims for moat-cleaning, repairs to helipads, and the purchase of chandeliers pointed to taxpayer upkeep of the country estates of 'Tory grandees'. The Liberal Democrats fared relatively better, although revelations about claims for trouser-presses and court summons were nevertheless embarrassing. The stories brought down the Speaker of the House of Commons, Michael Martin, who became the first Speaker to resign under duress since 1695, on account of his handling of the crisis. They also led to the resignation of Labour minister Shahid Malik for expense information that suggested a breach of the Ministerial Code, the resignation of Andrew MacKay, parliamentary aide to Conservative Party leader David Cameron, over dubious second home claims, and the suspension from the Labour Party of former ministers Elliot Morley and David Chaytor, who had continued to claim mortgage interest payment expenses for second homes where the mortgages had already been paid off. Within two weeks of the stories being printed, a number of MPs announced their intention to stand down at the next general election, rather than face the continued glare of publicity over the matter. In addition, police and Inland Revenue investigations began into whether any of those MPs implicated might well be subject to charges of fraud, misappropriation of public funds or tax evasion. During the period that *The Daily Telegraph* stories were revealed, the drip-feed approach kept the issue at the top of the political agenda, and left the Westminster

political establishment reeling at the extent of the public anger engendered. Media pundits speculated that a political crisis of such magnitude had not been seen in Britain in living memory, and that it had caused a collapse in public trust in politicians so comprehensive that the entire basis of parliamentary democracy might well be in jeopardy.

While the media is not immune to over-egging the political commentary pudding, there was much to the various claims made. In terms of public trust in elected politicians, it was hard to miss the seething anger that pulsed from members of the public in the days after the stories emerged, epitomised by the derisory heckling of Labour minister Margaret Beckett and former Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell when they appeared on the BBC's *Question Time* on 14 May. And in terms of the fundamentals of how parliamentary democracy functioned, the initial reluctance of MPs to admit they had acted improperly, the inability of both the government and the House of Commons to deal with the matter authoritatively, and the utter miscalculation of the Speaker, Michael Martin, throughout the entire episode, all pointed to a political establishment whose collective political antennae had snapped off. The idea that the events of May 2009 heralded some kind of watershed moment in British politics was not, therefore, entirely without merit.

This article seeks to explore specific issues about the operation of the pay and expenses system at Westminster, and more general questions about the nature and extent of transparency at Westminster. Although the whole question of how MPs are funded came to a frantic head as a result of *The Daily Telegraph* stories, it has a much longer history as an issue that MPs have simultaneously dodged and fudged for decades, a strategy in which the seeds of the resulting crisis were originally sown. Crucially, in consistently refusing to allow the oxygen of publicity to wash over the system underpinning the public funding of MPs, the political class illustrated the continuing influence of secrecy in British politics, buffered by the notion that honourable MPs can be depended upon to manage affairs themselves free from public meddling. Yet, in the super-charged atmosphere in which the public debate was conducted at the time the expenses revelations were made, there was little coherent discussion about the actual role of MPs in a system of representative democracy, and the resources *in the round* that are required for them to be as effective as possible. Furthermore, the closed and elitist political system that underpinned the expenses crisis is massively implicated in the

professed collapse of public trust in politicians and the representative regime in which they are embedded. This is likely to have long term repercussions for the functioning of parliamentary democracy, particularly in terms of the respect with which parliament is regarded, its reputation with the public, and the extent to which it can legitimately claim to speak on behalf of the nation.

Pay and allowances: Dodges and fudges

For much of parliament's history, those who pursued a political career in the House of Commons did so only if they were sufficiently confident that their private incomes could support them during their tenure as public representatives, because the job itself did not come with any remuneration. It was not until 1911 that Members were first paid what became known as an 'allowance',¹ illustrating the deep reluctance of parliamentarians to sully their position with the idea that, rather than being a calling for society's well-heeled upper classes, the work of an MP was just that – work – which should command a salary. The introduction of the 'allowance' facilitated the entry into parliament of non-aristocratic Members, and particularly aided the growth of Labour Party representation at Westminster, whose MPs did not have the financial means necessary to be there otherwise. Although the level of the 'allowance' was subject to some ad hoc revision thereafter, it was not until 1971 that the entire question of Members' pay and allowances was examined more systematically, by being referred to the Top Salaries Review Body (TSRB), later the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB). Yet, even here, the parameters and purpose of the reviews undertaken were far from clear. Recommendations made by the TSRB were not accepted automatically, and could only be adopted if the House voted in favour of them. Consequently, governments, particularly during the tough economic climate of the 1970s, were reluctant to be seen endorsing substantial pay increases for MPs at a time when other public sector workers were facing pay freezes and redundancies. As a result, since the 1970s, the salaries received by MPs, although far above the average UK salary, have gradually fallen out of sync with those commanded by senior public sector executives and other professional occupations. In April 2009, the basic salary of an MP stood at £64,766, far lower than the six-figure sums paid to public sector chief executives and senior managers.

Yet, the system was never simply about salary alone. At the same time as the TSRB became involved in advising on MPs' pay, the House of Commons introduced the Additional Costs Allowance (ACA), designed to cover the costs of attending to parliamentary business incurred by MPs representing constituencies outside of London, and to address a problem which had, in its worst incarnations, involved MPs from distant parts of the UK sleeping over in their offices when required to attend late night divisions and/or early morning meetings. At its heart, the ACA was designed to ensure that MPs could be effective representatives who did not have to dip into their own pockets to pay for the overnight accommodation they required in order properly to fulfil their parliamentary duties. While the logic of this necessity seemed compelling, what was less clear-cut was exactly how it should be administered. The TSRB originally proposed that the ACA should operate as a daily subsistence rate, but the government rejected this idea, and opted instead for a system whereby MPs would be reimbursed for expenses incurred up to an annual limit.² The allowance was regularly increased after 1975, and, in 1985, MPs were advised by the government that claims for mortgage interest payments could be made under the ACA scheme.³ In that advice, the second home phenomenon, involving MPs owning London properties substantially paid for through public funds, was born. In April 2009, the ACA rate was £24,222, and included not just mortgage interest payment, but also furniture, fixtures, repairs, maintenance and utility bills. The ACA was also supplemented over time by other allowances designed to cover travel, staffing, office and communication costs.

The crucial point in the implementation of the ACA from the moment of its inception was that it operated on trust, and on the idea that MPs were sufficiently honourable to be subjected to nothing more than a light-touch expenses auditing process. Furthermore, the expense claims made by MPs under the ACA were never made public, and the total sums involved were known only to the House of Commons Fees Office, tasked largely with ensuring that MPs did not exceed their annual rates, and whose work proceeded on the basis that MPs first ensured that their claims were within the provisions of the ACA rules before making them. Therefore, on the one hand, MPs pay increases were being suppressed by government so as to avoid bad publicity, leading some to feel, rightly or wrongly, that they were not being paid enough in comparison to other similar professions. On the other hand, the ACA afforded MPs the opportunity, if they wished to avail themselves of it, to claim extensive untaxed expenses which could hugely supplement their income, and on the basis of a system which operated untroubled by the

need to explain or justify in public exactly what was being claimed for and at what cost. As a consequence of these twin strategies of dodging the issue of MPs' pay while also fudging the issue of MPs' expenses, there emerged in the House of Commons, as a collective entity, the idea that ACA expenses could be treated as part of the salary of an MP. There emerged, in other words, a culture of entitlement.

The oxygen of publicity

Fundamentally, this culture of entitlement was predicated on the details of the ACA expenses regime, and, indeed the other allowance systems in operation, being kept from public view. And, for quite a considerable period of time, the expenses regime did remain beyond the disinfecting sunlight of public scrutiny and judgement. However, two related issues served to bring that situation to an abrupt halt.

The first, and most significant issue, involved the Freedom of Information Act 2000. When the government published its white paper on this issue, it originally excluded both Houses of Parliament from being subject to Freedom of Information (FOI) provisions, on the grounds that its 'deliberations are already open and on the public record'.⁴ There was, however, extensive pressure on the government on this point, not least from the Commons Public Administration Committee, which argued that the 'justification for the exclusion of Parliament has not been made out',⁵ and the Act of Parliament which eventually gave life to FOI did include Parliament within its competence. Right of access to information through FOI came into force in January 2005, although included exemptions for Parliament on the grounds of parliamentary privilege and confidential advice.

To ensure compliance with FOI, the Houses of Parliament began, in October 2004, to release information about individual MPs' allowances, giving a total sum claimed for allowances, but not providing a detailed breakdown of the specific expenses claimed.⁶ In the absence of this detailed breakdown, the House of Commons found itself subject to repeated FOI requests after 2005, lodged by FOI campaigners such as the journalist Heather Brooke. Under the leadership of the Speaker of the House, Michael Martin, the Commons authorities appealed against these FOI requests to the Information Commissioner and, eventually, the High Court, on the basis of the parliamentary exemptions in the FOI Act, appeals which were ultimately unsuccessful. When the High Court ruled against the House of Commons in May 2008, it declared that the requests for detailed breakdowns of individual expense claims were in the public interest, given the

purpose and scale of public money involved. Thereafter, the House authorities decided not to continue with the appeal process, and announced that detailed information about the receipts submitted by MPs would become available in late 2008. For three long years, the House of Commons resisted providing access to the information about the specific items that MPs had claimed through their various allowance systems, and forced FOI campaigners to resort to judicial proceedings in order to obtain it. Some MPs even tried to amend the original FOI legislation in 2007 through a Private Members Bill, which passed through all legislative stages in the Commons, but which failed to find a sponsor in the Lords to take it through the upper house. By the time the High Court ruled against the House of Commons, not only had public interest in the issue been thoroughly stoked, but the House had also shown itself to be reactionary and unjustifiably secretive in its approach to interpreting and accepting FOI legislation.

The game seemed to be up for those who did not want to reveal specific expenses details by the end of 2008, but this was not simply down to FOI procedures. During 2007 and 2008, a number of stories emerged which called into question the way that the various Commons allowance systems seemed to operate in practice. In May 2007, *The Sunday Times* published a story claiming that the Conservative MP, Derek Conway, had paid his son, Frederick, a substantial monthly salary from his parliamentary staffing allowance while his son was in fact a full-time university student. The House of Commons Committee on Standards and Privileges subsequently investigated the matter in early 2008, and found that the payments did not seem either acceptable or feasible.⁷ This story was quickly followed, in March 2008, as a result of the continuing FOI judicial hearings, by revelations about the so-called 'John Lewis list', which MPs used to gauge the maximum sums they could claim for second home household items through the ACA regime. Not only was there a media outcry about some of the items on the list, such as plasma televisions and dining room furniture, but when it also became apparent that MPs could receive substantial reimbursement for some items without even submitting receipts, the public outrage was more than palpable. Consequently, by summer 2008, there was substantial public interest in exactly what might be contained in MPs' receipts, given the Conway episode and the revelations of the John Lewis list.

Sensing the public dissatisfaction prompted by these events, MPs themselves began to call for the Commons allowance systems to be overhauled. The Commons revisited this matter repeatedly in 2008, and the Committee on Standards in Public Life committed itself to a review of the entire system. All the while, the Commons was

preparing to release hundreds of thousands of receipts into the public domain, in line with FOI judicial rulings, and it was exactly the expected reaction to the content of those receipts that government and opposition figures alike anticipated when they attempted to proceed with various aspects of expenses reform, including the botched attempt of the Prime Minister, in April 2009, to take the lead on the matter by announcing cross-party agreement on a way forward to reform the ACA, even although none existed. While the Commons authorities were busy redacting receipt information to remove personal information, such as MPs' addresses, and continually pushing back the date of release on the basis that the work involved in redacting was so extensive, *The Daily Telegraph* blew the entire process out of the water by publishing the expense details it had obtained from an unnamed source.

By dragging its heels and delaying the release of the information it had been compelled to make available through FOI, the House of Commons almost guaranteed that some media outlet would see the value in seeking to obtain the information by other means, given the tantalising nature of the details and their likelihood of causing a political uproar. In the years between FOI coming into force in 2005 and *The Daily Telegraph* publishing specific expenses details in 2009, the House of Commons expended every energy and expense conceivable to prevent in-depth information about MPs' allowances entering the public domain. Had it not been for the FOI campaigners, the Commons would never have moved to release information at the detailed level it was eventually compelled by the High Court to do. In so behaving, the House of Commons authorities in particular, most notably the Speaker, and the House of Commons collectively, demonstrated not only that they had much to fear from disclosure, but also that they had long-standing feelings of distrust towards the public, and believed firmly that the public had absolutely no right to question or to know how MPs used the resources at their disposal, resources that were supposedly designed in order to help MPs become more effective representatives of the public.

Justifying pay and allowances

The way in which the expenses disclosure was eventually made, like an incendiary device thrown directly at the political establishment, and the utterly inflamed debate it provoked, both served to obscure the entire rationale of the allowances system and the merits of paying MPs a salary that is commensurate with the job they are expected to

perform. Much of the media coverage about the expense claims firmly suggested that the ACA was being used as a mechanism through which MPs could feather their (many) nests courtesy of the tax-payer, and in terms of the specific revelations made by *The Daily Telegraph*, there is a lot to be said for that interpretation. However, there was also serious questioning by the public, through the various media outlets used to vent its anger, about the justification for MPs having London accommodation provided for them at all. Indeed, through the red-misted media fury of those weeks in May, the very idea that parliamentary representatives required any resources in order to fulfil their various roles was almost completely lost.

Thanks to the House of Commons' secretive approach to the whole question of pay and allowances, there has been a tangible lack of public understanding about the resource requirements of a modern parliamentary democracy on the one hand, and the realities of the life of an MP as they fulfil their individual purpose within it on the other. For this, Parliament only has itself to blame. The truth is that the public have a right to expect Parliament to explain why public money is required to pay for certain aspects of parliamentary functioning and why it is required in the amounts requested. In this respect, the kind of transparent system that the Commons was already reluctantly moving to, before *The Daily Telegraph* intervened, is essential for ensuring that the public can see the volume and destination of the public money that is spent on assisting MPs to do their jobs. The expenses scandal which encompassed the Scottish Parliament in 2005, and which forced the resignation of the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, David McLetchie, over £12,000 of dubious taxi claims, pales in comparison to events in Westminster in 2009, but that instance nevertheless prompted Holyrood to move quickly towards a far more transparent expenses system, where receipt details are routinely published online. The continued resistance of Westminster to such a system of transparency, even although it was shown to operate elsewhere in the UK and to obviously useful effect for all concerned, is testament to the secretive mentality pervasive at Westminster.

Crucially, however, and insufficiently noted either in the media or in the academic literature, the public also has a right to expect some kind of account of the specific way in which the various monies available to MPs through different allowance regimes actually helps them to be better MPs. Members simply take it as a given that the public must surely understand why they need travel expenses, staffing expenses, office expenses,

communications expenses, accommodation expenses and so on. Yet, in the absence of clear evidence about the impact of all that money on the performance of MPs specifically and the effectiveness of the Commons in general, most people will continue to look on in disbelief. In addition, the May 2009 revelations fuelled a media tendency to compare the allowance claims of MPs, a practice that dated back to the first publication of the expense totals in 2004, and to bestow approval on those MPs who claimed the least amount of money. Describing those with the highest expense claims as ‘sinners’ and ‘villains’ and those with the lowest as ‘saints’ and ‘heroes’⁸ served only to paint a hugely simplistic account of what is actually a very complex matter. Even *The Daily Telegraph* sought to provide some balance to the story it had broken by including ‘Saintly Snapshots’ of those with the lowest expense claims.⁹ While there is no question that a great many MPs did not exploit the allowances regime as did their colleagues, any trend towards lionising MPs only because they make small demands on public resources would set a terrible precedent for the future functioning of parliamentary democracy. Equating MPs low allowance claims with the assumption that they must therefore be ‘good’ MPs is entirely mistaken. A ‘good’ MP is not one who makes a minimal claim on public funds, but one who can illustrate just how *effectively* they use the funds which they do claim.

The public sector has for some time been expected to demonstrate exactly how the resources it consumes results in improved outcomes for the services that people receive. While the comprehensive performance measurement and targeting regime used there is far from unproblematic, and should certainly not be simply grafted onto MPs or onto the Commons, there is much to be said for MPs being far more forthcoming about exactly how they use public money in order to fulfil their various representative duties, and what the tangible outcomes of those resources are. They need, in other words, to tell a compelling story about their lives as MPs and how the public money made available helps them to represent their constituents and hold the government to account. MPs have manifestly failed to provide any such story, hence the reason why the validity of all their expenses, from accommodation to communication, is now so fundamentally questioned.

In being able to present a powerful narrative about their job and all it entails, MPs would also find themselves far more able to justify that other tricky aspect in the whole controversy, their salary, and why they think it needs to be higher. The dodged salary issue lies at the heart of the expenses scandal, and if MPs want to convince the public of the merits of future pay increases, to put them in line not only with similar professions in the UK but also with the salary of legislators in other similar parliamentary democracies,

then they need to be in a position to present a convincing narrative about themselves, the nature of the job which they do (a job which should be genuinely full time), and its value to our democratic system, and, therefore, why it is worth a salary that so far outstrips that of most UK earners.

The price of parliament

Democracy is not free: Parliament and MPs require substantial resources in order to function. Despite the content of contemporary public debate on this topic, which has increasingly suggested a significant reduction in the resources available to MPs as a direct result of the abuse of public funds committed by some of them, Parliament actually requires more money, not less.

MPs perform two fundamental functions: they must represent their constituents and they must hold government to account. Historically, MPs approached both roles in the model of the well-meaning amateur, without proper institutional resources and in the absence of any notion of strategic engagement. The various systems of allowances that developed over time were designed to resource MPs at the individual level, while the development of enhanced House of Commons resources and structures, such as a select committee system later underpinned by a Scrutiny Unit, were designed to build the institutional capacity of the legislature.¹⁰ The increased support for MPs over the past three or four decades, both individually and collectively, has been predicated on the argument that, because of the existence of strong executive government in Britain,¹¹ there is a substantial asymmetry between the resource base of the executive compared to the legislature, an asymmetry which undermines the health of democracy and the veracity of representation.

The various resource systems put in place in recent decades have taken time to take shape and make an impact. Office and staffing allowances beef up the support systems surrounding individual MPs and ensure that they do not have to pay for such support themselves, nor spend inordinate amounts of time performing basic research and administrative tasks that detracted from their core functions. Communication allowances help MPs tell their constituents about their work as MPs (rather than as party politicians), how they spend their time at Westminster, and the way in which they seek to represent the various interests of the public. Additional costs allowances support those MPs who essentially have two work locations, Westminster and their (variously distant)

constituencies, thus ensuring they can be both good constituency representatives as well as tireless scrutinisers of the government.

All these resource facilities have come under serious question, not because of what they are designed to do, but because of how some MPs have taken advantage of them. However, reform of these resources should not mean their reduction or their abolition. Indeed, announcements from the Conservative Party in the days immediately following the expenses revelations suggested that the communications allowance should be completely scrapped. This was a political move made not only in poor taste but also in poor judgement. MPs must begin a long process of re-engaging with their constituents and rebuilding political trust, and will need every means at their disposal to do so. It is undoubtedly the case that not all MPs use the communication allowance in the spirit intended (as a non-partisan information tool), just as other allowances have not been used as originally intended. The solution is not to eliminate those resources, but to design the institutional rules around them in a way which not only increases transparency about how they are used, but which creates the conditions by which individual MPs can see the benefits of demonstrating to the public how they use them in order to become better parliamentarians.

Parliament prostrate and the democratic ‘crisis’

For much of the time during which *The Daily Telegraph* published its various revelations, MPs had the air of a ‘hunted species’, according to one political correspondent.¹² The press brimmed with comment and analysis about how trust in the political system had been eviscerated thanks to the behaviour of MPs, and the impact the crisis might have on electoral turnout and the legitimacy of the political classes. The media often refer to ‘watershed moments’ in politics. Such language makes good copy and provides a great many talking points. If the events of May 2009 are indeed a true political watershed as far as long-term electoral behaviour and levels of trust are concerned, then we will have to wait at least some time before we can make firm conclusions on the future data. In this respect, caution is required before announcing a shift to anti-politics or to the expansion of the politically disillusioned.

Nonetheless, there is a very clear case to be made that we have reached a watershed moment as far as Parliament as an institution, and MPs as individual actors, are concerned. For much of its history, Parliament functioned on the basis that it presided

over a deferential and ill-informed electorate, and that the secretive and elitist way in which it conducted its affairs was justified because MPs were honourable individuals who knew best about how to fulfil their jobs and run their House. A broadly deferential public willing to accept such an account of the political system disappeared quite some time ago, and any remnants of that sort of political sentiment have now been entirely blown away. And if the public were historically ill-informed about Parliament, then it was because Parliament, particularly the House of Commons, wanted it that way. After all, although the technical ability to broadcast parliamentary proceedings existed as early as the 1920s, sound broadcasting did not begin until 1978, and television cameras were not permitted into the Commons until 1989.¹³ Parliament in general has struggled hugely with the idea that representative democracy requires open and meaningful contact with the public, not least because the entire idea of representative democracy, as opposed to representative government, is a relatively new concept at Westminster.¹⁴ As it shifts more fully towards ‘real’ representative democracy, and seeks to address its largely mixed record in terms of communicating and connecting with the public,¹⁵ Parliament must accept that transparency means more than empty gestures and platitudes, or else it places at risk the entire edifice of legitimation on which the British system of government rests.

While many previous events have been held up as key moments likely to force Parliament’s hand with respect to the conduct of its Members – John Profumo and the spilling of state secrets to the prostitute he shared with a Russian military attaché, Neil Hamilton and the cash-for-questions allegations, Peter Mandelson and the undeclared loans he received from a fellow Cabinet minister – most of these cases, and others just like them, have been comfortably accounted for as due to the behaviour of aberrant individuals. The expenses disaster of 2009, as almost every political commentator in Britain noted at some point, implicates the entire Westminster political class, not only because so many MPs were found to have engaged in what frequently appeared to be unethical and immoral abuse of the allowances system, but because they themselves were the architects of that system as well as its principal beneficiaries.

Yet if it is a historic low point for the political class, it is also a unique opportunity. Once senior politicians regained their breaths following the kidney punch of *The Daily Telegraph* expose, they very quickly began to talk about the need not just to redesign the expenses regime, but also about the need for substantial reform of parliament and the political system in general, on the grounds that fundamental change was the only way to rebuild legitimacy. Many of the reform proposals made are hardly new in Britain: House

of Lords reform, strengthening of select committees, reducing the power of the executive, and electoral reform are all regularly extracted from the constitutional change closet and given a good dusting off when political circumstances call for it. Yet, amidst the talk of radical political reform, there is another, far more subtle point of which parliamentarians must remain aware: namely, that any change or reform must be underpinned by a reassessment of how MPs conceptualise the representative role they fulfil and how they go about communicating that role to the public. The House of Commons and its MPs have unequivocally failed to tell the public about who they are, what they do, and how they do it, even in spite of much good advice from many quarters on these very points.¹⁶ Parliamentary democracy is not destined to collapse, media speculation notwithstanding, and, hard though it will undoubtedly be, the present moment is an opportunity for politicians, not only to eradicate the expenses gravy train ridden by far too many of them for far too long, and perhaps also to re-examine the institutional architecture of the political system, but also to remove the entire basis for knee-jerk reactions to sensational political revelation by choosing to begin an honest conversation with the public about the work of Parliament and the MPs inside it, about the trials and triumphs of the job, and about the true value of the House of Commons to our political system. Such a conversation would be an honest one if told properly, without the need for embellishment or fabrication. Yet the political class does need to actively choose to have that conversation in all its honesty. The future revival of the reputation of Parliament lies with them, and them alone.

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