

**JANUARY 2010**

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**MPs'  
EXPENSES**

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**DEBATING MATTERS**  
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**MOTION:**

**“THE RESPONSE  
TO THE 2009 MPS  
EXPENSES SCANDAL  
WILL STRENGTHEN  
DEMOCRACY”**

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## KEY TERMS

Accountability

Parliamentary sovereignty

Representative democracy

Transparency

# INTRODUCTION

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In May 2009 the Daily Telegraph newspaper obtained previously unpublished details of the expenses claimed by Members of Parliament (MPs) and paid in addition to their salaries [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]. When the paper ran a series of articles revealing some of these expense claims, a scandal erupted [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]. It transpired that most politicians, of all parties, were claiming more than the public had expected, and that some were claiming extravagant amounts. Rather than claiming only for work-related travel or to cover office costs, for example, some MPs claimed for expensive items for personal use, such as widescreen TVs, or, notoriously, a duck house [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. MPs are also allowed to claim for the costs of a second home, since they have to spend time in Parliament in London as well as in their often far-off constituencies, but some MPs 'flipped' between homes in order to claim as much as possible, or even claimed for homes used by other members of their families [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. The media filled up with angry condemnations of these practices [Ref: [Sun](#)], and demands for reform [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. The government responded by establishing the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to propose changes. Some see this as an opportunity to restore faith in politicians [Ref: [Independent](#)] and strengthen democracy [Ref: [Western Morning News](#)], but others worry that the anti-politician mood is more likely to institutionalise cynicism and damage democracy [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

## THE MPS' EXPENSES DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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### Why did MPs expenses become such a big scandal?

Even when they are directly elected by the public, politicians are rarely very popular. In the past generation, though, membership of political parties has declined, and the public has shown much less interest in politics. Critics worry that whereas politicians in the past often had experience in business or the trade unions, and had a proper understanding of their constituents' needs and interests, today's 'political class' is cut off from the rest of society. The expenses scandal seemed to confirm the suspicion that politicians were only out for their own interests. Partly because of their unpopularity, however, politicians have long been reluctant to vote for higher pay for themselves, even in line with rising salaries across the rest of society, and expenses thus became an informal supplement to MPs' pay. In that sense, the scandal reveals a deeper problem with the relationship between politicians and the public [Ref: [Open Democracy](#)]. Moreover, coming amid a major economic downturn, the issue became a lightning rod for broader dissatisfaction with the political class, even expressing a loss of belief in politics itself [Ref: [spiked](#)].

### What changes have been proposed?

In general terms, critics of MPs' expense claims - as well as politicians themselves - have called for greater transparency about how MPs are compensated. Some have argued that they should be made to make do with less, but others have suggested they should be given a pay rise [Ref: [The Times](#)] to enable them to live reasonably well without questionable expenses [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Crucially, though, it is widely agreed that MPs should no longer be allowed to decide their own pay. While this might seem an odd privilege that should obviously be got

rid of it is important to remember that MPs are elected by the public. According to the principle of parliamentary sovereignty, no outside body has the right to interfere in the business of our elected representatives; if we are unhappy with their conduct, it is up to us to vote them out [Ref: [Parliament](#)]. Nonetheless, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority looks set to take on responsibility for deciding MPs pay when it becomes operational in April 2010, and it is expected to be a popular move with voters.

### What is at stake in the debate?

One important aspect of the debate is a conflict between different ways of thinking about MPs. Those calling for change often ask why politicians should have special treatment: in any other line of business, employees have to account fully for their expenses, so why should MPs be any different [Ref: [Guardian](#)]? And given that they work for us, shouldn't we the public have full knowledge of how they spend our money? Others insist that, as elected representatives, MPs are not just civil servants, but delegates of the people, and thus worthy of respect [Ref: [London Review of Books](#)]. From this perspective, treating MPs like naughty children actually degrades democracy, while rules imposed by unelected officials undermine the principle of parliamentary sovereignty [Ref: [The Times](#)]. The House of Commons is the one part of the state directly elected by the people, and thus traditionally takes precedence over other political institutions. Supporters of this principle argue that only MPs themselves have the right to make and change the rules, as only they are directly accountable to the public. Nonetheless, the expenses scandal has highlighted the fact that few people

## THE MPS' EXPENSES DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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today look up to politicians as leaders, and the proposed changes would reflect a more modest and mundane understanding of the role of MPs. Whether this represents a degradation or strengthening of democracy depends on what kind of democracy we want. Supporters of these changes argue that, with a general election pending, curbing the power of MPs to set their own pay will help restore public faith in government [Ref: [BBC News](#)].

Critics argue that bashing politicians and curbing the authority of parliament will weaken rather than strengthen democracy [Ref: [spiked](#)].

## ESSENTIAL READING

A message from the little people to MPs: You disgust us  
Trevor Kavanagh *Sun* 11 May 2009

MPs' prestige at low ebb – Carey  
*BBC News* 10 May 2009

Complete MPs' expenses guide  
*Telegraph*

## FOR

From anger into change  
Anthony Barnett *openDemocracy* 23 June 2009

Democracy 'will be strengthened by scandal'  
*Western Morning News* 23 May 2009

Seize this moment to bring in real constitutional change  
Polly Toynbee *Guardian* 18 May 2009

We're at a true turning point. The future must be fairer  
Steve Richards *Independent* 15 May 2009

## AGAINST

Who else was going to cut my lawn? The cat?  
Anne Widdecombe *Independent* 25 May 2009

A climate of loathing towards all MPs is bad for democracy  
Andrew Rawnsley *Observer* 24 May 2009

Paying politicians is good for democracy  
Tim Black *spiked* 14 May 2009

Pull the bath plug and let out the dirty water  
Matthew Paris *The Times* 9 May 2009

## IN DEPTH

The Irresistible Itch  
Colin Kidd *London Review of Books* 3 December 2009

Why I couldn't draw a full MP's salary  
Anneliese Dodds *Guardian Comment is free* 23 November 2009

Lord Chief Justice warns of dangers over MPs' expenses body  
*The Times* 15 July 2009

Taking refuge in the rhetoric of reform  
Frank Furedi *spiked* 26 May 2009

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# BACKGROUNDERS

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The scandal of MPs' expenses

*Guardian* 27 December 2009

Parliamentary Fatcats 2009

*Adam Smith Institute* 2009

Expenses, the loss of trust and why self-regulation is what we need

Angus Kennedy *Battle in Print* October 2009

How does your pay compare with an MP's?

*BBC News* 28 May 2009

Parliament must clean up lobbying as well as expenses

Tom Griffin *OpenDemocracy* 23 May 2009

MPs' expenses: the Queen has a role to play in stabilising government

Simon Heffer *Daily Telegraph* 18 May 2009

MPs' expenses: what price democracy?

Mick Hume *spiked* 12 May 2009

House of Lords

House of Commons

UK Parliament

Pay and allowances for MPs

*Parliament*

Committee on Standards in Public Life Report on MPs' Expenses and Allowances

*Committee on Standards in Public Life*

## ORGANISATIONS

Members Estimate Committee

Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards

Public Administration Select Committee

Standards and Privileges Committee

Standards in Public Life

The Committee on Standards in Public Life

The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

## IN THE NEWS

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## NOTES

'Humiliated' Tory MP Peter Viggers quits over duck island expense claim

*Guardian* 23 May 2010

MP: My expenses are among the lowest

*Heywood Advertiser* 29 December 2009

Police hand over more files on Westminster expenses

*Guardian* 23 December 2009

Eighty MPs challenge auditor's expenses rulings

*Guardian* 17 December 2009

More than 50 MPs flipped second home, new expenses figures show

*Guardian* 10 December 2009

MPs expenses: Towers and Garlic Peelers

*Sky News* 10 December 2009

Cameron demands all MP expenses totals to be published

*ThisisLondon.co.uk* 9 December 2009

Will MPs accept expenses reforms?

*BBC News* 4 December 2009

MP in expenses furore resigns

*Financial Times* 16 October 2009

Expenses: Some MPs could face criminal investigations

*Guardian* 18 June 2009

Expenses system 'wrong' – Blears

*BBC News* 10 May 2009

How MPs' expenses became a hot topic

*Daily Telegraph* 8 May 2009

How MPs take home 28 times the average voter's pay

*Daily Mail* 12 April 2009

MPs facing police over expenses look to ancient Bill of Rights for protection

*Daily Telegraph* 3 January 2009

Police raids herald new era for MPs

*BBC News* 29 November 2008

Hague tops MPs' earnings list

*ePolitix.com* 17 April 2007

Blunkett joins the Commons rich list thanks to memoirs

*Independent* 17 April 2007

Anger at MPs' '66% pay rise call'

*BBC News* 4 December 2006

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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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**IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA**

