

# Why do we care what our politicians get paid?

Since payments for MPs were introduced in the early 20th century, the rhetoric used to justify them has changed markedly. Initially, writes **Nicholas Dickinson**, any remuneration was almost always construed in terms of broadening democratic representation. Related to a landmark 1971 report, however, MPs increasingly began to be depicted as political professionals. This change in framing allowed salaries to increase, but at the cost of lasting public ambivalence.



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A [common meme](#) about British MPs' pay goes something like this: it presents figures for the earnings of various public sector workers, pointing out that, compared to 2010, in 2018 a police officer's starting salary has fallen by £1,000, a newly qualified teacher can expect to earn just £500 more, and a new nurse earns exactly the same as in 2010. By contrast, in the same period, the pay of a freshly elected MP pay has risen by £11,000 – from £66,000 to £77,000 a year.

For many people this is a damning indictment of the self-serving 'political class' which runs Britain. Versions of the meme have been [retweeted](#) tens of thousands of times, attracting hundreds of mostly hostile comments. Many add that this figure excludes expenses and 'gold-plated' pensions. Others argue that the figure might not be so egregious, were it not for the lucrative second jobs that MPs also hold as consultants, lawyers or on the boards of companies.

None of these complaints will be unfamiliar to anyone who has followed contemporary or historic debates over the compensation of elected officials, nor will the defences offered in favour of the current arrangements. The principal response is usually that, contrary to [frequent assumptions](#) that MPs set their own pay, remuneration is determined by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) – the body set up in the aftermath of the 2009 Westminster expenses scandal.

These regulatory details can perhaps always be expected to pass the public by. More revealing, however, is the extent to which the comparison clearly fails to compare like with like. Though the job of an MP is in some sense an 'entry level' position in Parliament, it is extremely seldom a first job. MPs mostly enter the Commons after careers in other fields, with a history of political experience going back to their teens or early 20s. A more apt comparison than a newly qualified nurse, therefore, would be an NHS GP or Consultant – public sector workers who earn in the range of [£60,000 to £100,000](#).

The deeper question then is not merely how politicians' pay is regulated, but why we find it so hard to treat MPs as we do other highly skilled professionals in the public sector. Why do we fear that paying our politicians too much will endanger democracy when we don't ordinarily enquire whether surgeons are too well paid to ensure they are truly motivated by the desire to save lives? What is so special about politicians?

The modern history of payments to MPs begins in the late 19th century, with the rise of the labour movement and the election of working-class MPs with little private income. The first two proposals for some remuneration in the 1890s were blocked by the House of Lords, and payment of £400 a year was ultimately passed by the Liberal government in 1911 against continuing Conservative objections. Outlining the purpose of the payment, however, Chancellor Lloyd George stressed that the sum was ‘...not a remuneration, it is not a recompense, it is not even a salary, it is just an allowance... to enable men to come here... who [at present] cannot be here because their means do not allow it’.

This ‘representational’ justification would dominate discussions of MPs’ pay for six decades. In the 1940s and 1950s, it was still common to suggest that MPs’ pay might be variable, in order to compensate for the cost of being a member while maintaining members in their original social classes. J.F.S. Ross in *Parliamentary Representation* (1948), for example, argued that ‘a working-class member, used to making ends meet on a few pounds a week’ could manage on less than ‘a professional or business man used to some degree of comfort and obliged to maintain a fairly high standard of appearances.’ (pp. 136–37).

A concern for representation also features prominently in the discussion of MPs’ pay in Peter Richards’ *Honourable Members* (1959). Though jettisoning Ross’ more rigid class-based formulation, Richards argued that low pay meant that ‘the Commons is not formed from a reasonable cross-section of the community... [Rather] it is increasingly restricted to those who, through inheritance or because of a particular type of occupation, can supplement their official allowance’ (p. 239).

These issues came to a head from the middle 1960s as a result of increasingly high inflation. In response, the government established the Top Salaries Review Body (TSRB) to regularly review the pay of senior posts in the civil service, the judiciary and Parliament. The report the TSRB produced on MPs’ pay, released in 1971, echoed earlier reviews in recommending an increase in pay. However, its real significance lay in providing what Michael Rush (1974) at the time called a ‘change in philosophy’ on MPs’ pay and expenses.

Unlike previous reviews, the TSRB sought to establish the principle that MPs were professionals engaged in parliamentary work as part of a career in politics. It employed management consultants to study the role of the MPs and compare what they did to professionals in the public and private sectors.

Guided by this approach, and stewarded by Conservative grandee Lord Edward Boyle, the TSRB successfully established a new basis for the remuneration of MPs – in particular a clear distinction between salary and expenses, and a focus on the adequacy of the former to provide MPs with the ability to do full-time political work in the absence of other earnings.

The 1971 TSRB report thus marked a fundamental but little-noticed change in how MPs’ roles were viewed by the state, with long-term consequences. In the first place, the emphasis on more generous expenses ultimately [resulted](#) in the 2009 scandal. Yet when the system was reformed in the scandal’s aftermath, the ethos of professionalisation established by the TSRB was retained. Rather than return to emphasising representation, IPSA [defended](#) its own controversial pay reforms as providing ‘a modern, professional package’ for 21st-century MPs.

This conceptual shift, achieved largely behind the scenes and away from public view, has created an enduring disjunction between how MPs’ jobs are officially defined and how the public sees them. While the official view holds that MPs are skilled professionals to be paid like judges or GPs, the public continue to see representatives whose remuneration should resemble those who elect them.

Ultimately, therefore, contemporary anger at politicians’ pay reaches the level it does not simply because of pay cuts for teachers or nurses, or even because of gratuitous expenses or gold-plated pensions (whether these really exist or not). Rather, it results more fundamentally from the changing nature of the political class itself and the changing principle on which its pay is based: from democratic representation to professionalised meritocracy.

*This article gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit.*

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## About the author

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