

France's deliberately opaque expenses system means that it is paying more than its neighbours for MPs. But this may be about to change.

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In 2009, the UK government was rocked by a scandal over its MPs' expenses. According to [Rainbow Murray](#), France is now due a similar scandal, as MPs' expenses are not currently scrutinised, and many hold multiple offices (and draw multiple salaries). While the new Socialist government is taking measures to address these problems, it remains to be seen if they will be truly effective in reforming French MPs' culture of entitlement.



The expenses scandal that rocked the UK in 2009 was a transformative moment in British politics. In France, newspapers covered the events across the channel, but a thorough investigation to similarly scrutinise French MPs did not unfold. France's newly elected Socialist government has now promised political reforms on a number of levels, and the first tentative steps have been taken towards opening the pandora's box of MPs' allowances. Charles de Courson, a right-wing independent deputy, set the ball rolling with an amendment calling for more transparency, which was swiftly defeated. Allowing the public greater scrutiny of their expenses would be, in the eyes of most French deputies, like turkeys voting for Christmas.

Given how favourable their current situation is, it is unsurprising that deputies are not embracing change. A [recent study](#) found that France spends considerably more on the combined costs of its MPs than either the UK or Germany. French deputies currently benefit from several sources of income. Firstly, their salary, including a generous non-taxable pension scheme. Secondly, an allowance for hiring staff. They are given a lump sum and are free to spend the money as they see fit. Most deputies have at least one assistant working with them in parliament, and another in their constituency. The sum provided is sufficient to pay for three staff members, although a stingy MP could get away with paying people less in order to hire a fourth or even fifth person. Similarly, a deputy could employ only one or two people, with remaining income being used to offer more generous salaries, or being diverted into the MP's expenses account.

Expense accounts are designed to cover the operational costs of life as a deputy. Even though deputies travel for free, they incur other costs such as the need for accommodation in Paris, an office in their constituency, newspaper subscriptions and other necessities. Their expenses are not scrutinised, on the understanding that deputies are sufficiently responsible to decide for themselves how to allocate the funds. Receipts and careful records of the kind that fuelled the Telegraph's inquiry in the UK are not available in France. The system is deliberately opaque.

While many deputies would insist that their expenses funds are all disbursed properly in the performance of their job, a handful have now removed their halos and admitted that this is not always the case. Although some deputies find themselves



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subsidising their work out of their own pocket, for others, the funds operate as a supplement to the deputy's salary. According to [Mediapart](#), one deputy used his expenses to fund holidays abroad. Courson claimed that "everybody knows that some deputies don't use all their funds for legitimate expenses – don't play innocent!" Yet the cautionary tale of the UK experience has motivated French deputies to shy away from transparency rather than embrace it.

Courson's amendment proposed that any money not spent on legitimate expenses should be considered an additional form of revenue, and taxed as such. This would require deputies to account for how they spend their money – something they have never had to do. Some deputies opposed the amendment on the grounds that "if deputies are obliged to justify every expense, they will no longer be free". The absence of ridicule in the French media for such a preposterous statement was, in itself, enlightening. Other deputies were more willing to accept the need for greater transparency, but argued that deputies should return all unpaid monies to the state rather than simply paying tax on the surplus. Ultimately, only 24 deputies voted in support of the amendment.

Expenses are not the only aspect of deputies' lives to be subject to possible reform. At present, most deputies hold multiple elected offices simultaneously, combining their parliamentary role with a local office such as mayor. This practice is justified in terms of local anchorage and better representation of local issues, although in my interviews with deputies, they all insisted that their role was first and foremost to represent the national interest. The holding of several offices provides a local powerbase, along with multiple resources including more than one salary. The total income that a politician can receive is capped at 8,300 euros a month. If their combined salaries from more than one job exceed this limit, they can nominate a colleague to receive the surplus. This has led to corrupt practices, such as the deputy Patrick Balkany, who transferred the surplus from his salary as a local mayor to the vice-mayor – who was also his wife. The National Assembly approved an amendment last year to abolish this practice, only to be overruled by the Senate. However, the Socialists have promised to clamp down on multiple office-holding.

Financial impropriety aside, this practice results in deputies who try to do multiple full-time jobs. The consequences are a chaotic and exhausting schedule for the deputy, and a limited performance of each role. Many local tasks are delegated to subordinates, while parliamentary work is often sacrificed for local priorities. Most deputies attend parliament only on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, with some being in Paris barely 36 hours a week. Too much is crammed into these two days, with conspicuously empty seats for the remainder of the week (parties have even created a rota compelling a few deputies to remain in Paris each week so that the cameras do not portray a completely empty house). The ability of deputies to discharge their duty of representing the nation, enacting legislation and scrutinising the executive is severely compromised. The chair of a leading parliamentary committee is now trying to schedule additional committee meetings on Thursdays in order to compel deputies to devote sufficient time to their parliamentary work.

Ultimately, the French are paying more than their European neighbours for their MPs, and in return they are getting deputies who are rarely present, who are able to engage in corrupt practices without being held to account, and who are resistant to attempts at reform. The incoming government has created a (derided) new committee to reform public life, comprised of political outsiders and has-beens, indicating that the promise of reform may only be half-hearted. Although many French politicians are decent, honest and extremely hard-working, public acceptance of the current system looks increasingly unsustainable. In order to avoid the widespread anger and disillusionment resulting from the British expenses scandal, French deputies would be well advised to jump before they are pushed.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Rainbow Murray – *Queen Mary, University of London*

Rainbow Murray is a Reader in Politics at Queen Mary, University of London, and a visiting research fellow at CEVIPOF (Sciences Po, Paris). Her research interests lie in political representation, gender and politics, candidate selection, French and comparative politics, political parties and elections. She is currently conducting a major study of the French parliament. She is the author of [*Parties, Gender Quotas and Candidate Selection in France*](#) (Palgrave, 2010).



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