

# MP's Expenses And The Media: chequebook journalism pays for political lessons

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This is the [biggest political story of the year](#) and yet also the smallest. While Britain plunges into recession we are arguing about whether a hard-working politician should be allowed to claim for a few hundred pounds of gardening, house repairs or plumbing.

Cheque-book journalism by a right wing newspaper has laid a Labour Government low and yet no-one seems to be blaming the media with any success. The charge of corruption, indifference and disdain levelled at the politicians of all colours seems to have too much resonance for anyone to worry seriously about the messenger.

If you are interested, let's think through two aspects of this. The journalistic and the political. They are linked.

Firstly, when should journalists pay for this kind of information? I am led to believe that the Telegraph shelled out about £90,000. If this figure is true it is far less than the oft-quoted £300k. Either way, I think it is terrific value compared with the way that the Telegraph has set the agenda and given the public some extraordinary information.

## Coughing up cash

But it still raises the principle of whether you should cough up cash for information which was almost certainly 'stolen' or appropriated in some way that the owners of said information would say breached rules and possibly even the law.

In this case I think that the public interest defence overwhelmingly slaughters any ethical conundrum. No-one can doubt that we have every right to know this information. The only people who were seeking to keep it secret were the people who benefitted from the closetted, corrupt arrangement. That is, the MPs. If we waited till they unveiled it in the summer we would have gained less information and on their terms.

This brings me to my second point. What does it say about the transparency of British politics? Polis is pushing ahead with a series of research projects which seek to highlight the critical role of the news media in holding corrupt governments to account in Africa. The UK Government says it cares deeply about transparency and accountability when it comes to those developing countries who take our aid money. Yet in the UK, politicians are hardly setting a great example.

## Youtube If You Want To

Recent efforts to take government and politics online made me think that Parliament was perhaps starting to catch up with the late 20th if not 21st century. But, in fact, politicians see new media technology like YouTube and Blogs as fresh weapons in old wars rather than than a fresh way of doing politics. That is why we got the [McBride email/blogging smear scandal](#).

Yes, they were going to release a version of the information on expenses in the summer but it would have lacked the crucial details which reveal the cheap tricks employed by the MPs to garner extra income from you, the taxpayer. And remember, these are the politicians who are chasing benefit cheats and who promise a government of 'thrift'.

Why don't MPs get it? Why do they think it is enough to say that it is 'within the rules'. Why do they resist transparency while insisting on their right to invade every aspect of OUR lives? They must have a sense that their profession (like mine) has never been less attractive to the public. So why do they do the one thing that confirms the citizen's prejudices about politics and those who practice it?

I understand that they may deserve more on their basic salary. On top of a pay rise I personally would advocate a very simple London Allowance scheme by which any non-London MP gets say, £20k a year and all MPs get a fixed rate for their other expenses of perhaps £20k.

### **Failure to understand**

But that kind of detail is boring and can be easily worked out. What is stunning is their complete failure to understand that politics is utterly in crisis. Mainstream media has learned the lesson that it has lost connection with the public. The [London Evening Standard](#) even based an advertising campaign on apologising for it. Now politics must do the same.

If David Cameron and Nick Clegg have any sense they will agree to a fundamental review of MP's pay run by an independent authority. It appears that at a very late hour – after trying to connive at all sorts of fixes – Gordon Brown recognises that is the way forward. After trying to use [YouTube](#) to spin a tactical victory it seems that he now recognises that [something more radical is needed](#).

I congratulate the Telegraph on this story. They committed the money and the effort and are spinning it out over a sustained period so that no political faction can escape its implications. We have about a year before the next election. I hope that anyone considering standing learns these lessons.

Online politics will be the subject of one of the [Polis/Channel 4iP debates](#).

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