

Paid-up members

How can MPs properly represent us when they are earning up to 95% of their income from outside interests?

William Hague, according to the new register of members' interests, makes about 20 times as much for not being an MP as he makes for being one. We don't know exactly how much he is paid for his other 54 jobs, because members are not obliged to reveal the price of work which doesn't relate directly to their parliamentary duties. But he must have raked in about a million last year.

Even so, he's probably not the richest person in the house. According to the parliamentary code of conduct, you must declare any shareholding worth more than the current MP's salary. Dame Marion Roe, the Tory MP for Broxbourne, has 18 declarations, which suggests she owns liquid capital worth at least £1m. Archie Norman, the Conservative party's former chief executive, has 17 registrable shareholdings and five external employers. Michael Ancram, the party's deputy leader, lists, with aristocratic modesty, "farms ... houses and miscellaneous property on Scottish borders". Note the unquantified plural.

But there is little sense anywhere – in parliament, in the press or among the public – that MPs' second and third and, in Hague's case, 55th sources of income equate to any kind of problem. Thanks to the rules laid down by the committee on standards in public life, you would now have to be both staggeringly stupid and staggeringly greedy to take cash for parliamentary questions.

The potential contest between our MPs' duty to represent the public and their interest in representing their other employers is generally deemed to have been resolved. They are

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forbidden to act as paid advocates “in any proceeding of the house”. They can’t speak or act on any issue in which they have an undeclared interest. Their sources of income are listed on the internet. The system is transparent and seemly. But it appears to me that all the commission has achieved is to legitimise a series of disastrous conflicts of interest.

The most obvious of these is a conflict which MPs appear capable of understanding only when it involves other people, such as the consultant physicians who are supposed to be working for the NHS. If MPs are permitted to moonlight, and if their salaries are paid whether they do their jobs well or not, they have a permanent incentive to spend as little time on them as possible, and as much time as they can making money elsewhere.

There are some MPs who have extraordinary reserves of energy. Chris Smith, the former culture secretary, who now supplements his salary by providing services to another 17 employers, tells me he works between 70 and 80 hours a week, and devotes at least half to his parliamentary duties. Howard Flight, a Tory MP with 11 directorships, works an astonishing 100 hours a week, of which, he says, 80 are spent representing the people. But these MPs are surely exceptional. Research by the Labour member Peter Bradley reveals that MPs with outside interests participate, on average, in 65% of Commons votes, while MPs with no other paid employment attend 91%. One representative I spoke to argued, in effect, that this is because they have nothing better to do. The problem is that this is true in both senses.

Perhaps more importantly, the more money MPs earn, and the more they associate with other directors and lawyers and consultants, the less like their constituents they become. There are surely two components of representation: representing the people and being representative of the people. MPs’ pay (at £57,500, more than twice the national average) already removes them from the economic lives of most of their constituents. Outside earnings push them into the richest 1%. The servants of the people can employ the people as their servants.

All the MPs who defend second jobs argue that the other work they do informs and improves their parliamentary performance, as it keeps them in touch with the outside world. I would be more inclined to believe this if they were moonlighting as hospital porters or assembly-line workers. But no MP takes a second paid job unless it is either prestigious or lucrative. They have no simultaneous experience of soul-destroying drudgery. Howard Flight argues, reasonably enough, that those MPs who are sponsored by trade unions remain informed by the worker’s point of view. The problem is that 76 MPs are paid by corporations, and only six are sponsored by the unions. (More MPs have declared gifts of pheasant and grouse shooting than union support.) The trade unions have less money than the corporations, so they can purchase fewer loyalties.

The MPs counter this by pointing out that their constituency work brings the whole

world through their doors. Ian Taylor, a Conservative MP with seven directorships, told me: “I don’t have to be a hospital porter to understand the problems hospital porters are facing.” This is true. Being true, it disposes of the argument that external employment is necessary to understand the outside world.

Perhaps the biggest problem arises not from the interventions MPs might be prompted by their interests to make, but from those they are prompted not to make. Eighty-seven MPs, including the leaders of the three main parties and eight cabinet members, earn at least £5,750 a year by renting out property. As a result we are unlikely to see action taken against one of the UK’s biggest social problems: house price inflation caused by people buying to let. Even if MPs were inclined to attack their own interests, they would expose themselves to the charge of hypocrisy. So they keep quiet and incur no penalty. No one has to declare an interest in what he is not saying, and no code of conduct could make him do so. The clash is perpetually and inaudibly resolved in favour of money.

Ask yourself what can be done about it, and you are immediately apprised of a fourth, overarching conflict. We could propose, for example, that MPs should be forbidden to work for anyone other than their constituents. Or we could suggest that they are allowed to continue working or owning houses and shares, but that the money goes either to charity or to the exchequer. The problem is that the last people who are ever going to vote for such measures are the people they would penalise. Peter Bradley was forced to withdraw his attempt to prevent MPs from being paid for neglecting their duties when the Tories promised to talk it out of time.

What all this shows is that transparency is not enough. We can read the register of members’ interests and immediately discover who is moonlighting and for whom. We can search Hansard and discover whether they are using their parliamentary roles to pursue their own economic interests. But this information simply confronts us with our own powerlessness. Transparent corruption is doubtless an improvement upon opaque corruption, but it seems only to have dissuaded people from pressing the case for no corruption at all. If there is one job which should command a person’s undivided loyalties, it is surely the job of representing us.