

*Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21<sup>st</sup> century social issues*

GA1

---

# OF MOATS, DUCK-HOUSES AND THE MORALITY OF PARLIAMENT

---

From the extent of its exposure in the national press, one would have to believe that the ‘scandal’ of MPs’ expenses claims relentlessly exposed in May and June this year represented a national crisis several degrees more serious than treason, sedition or total economic collapse.

For several weeks, thousands of column inches in *The Daily Telegraph* were devoted to the minutiae of the claims of hundreds of Members of Parliament. As week followed week, no doubt many readers began to be fatigued by the continuous torrent of information. It has been the longest-running media event since the death of Princess Diana.

On the other hand, it would be misplaced simply to ‘knock’ the media coverage as an overplayed scoop. At the heart of Parliament it did have an effect of ‘earthquake’ proportions. For the first time for 300 years, a House of Commons Speaker was forced out of office. As a result of an unprecedented level of public anger, a considerable number of MPs indicated that they will not be defending their seats at the next General Election. A few have not been given the choice, having been de-selected by their constituency or national parties. One has already resigned and a by-election held in Norwich North.

The exposure of MPs’ expense claims to intensive public scrutiny raises a number of issues which it might have been useful for *The Bulletin* to consider:

- Is it right to make available for public scrutiny this degree of detail?
- What effect will the revelations have on the MPs involved, and should we be concerned about that?
- What effect will the revelations have on popular respect for MPs generally, and Parliament as a whole?
- What effect will the revelations have on the willingness of individuals to become MPs?
- Will the revelations, which have caused a loss of respect for MPs generally, reduce the number of people who will bother to vote at the next General Election?

However, this article does not have the space to address these issues, other than in passing to commend the principle of transparency and openness. In a period of moral weakness and uncertainty, such as we are currently passing through, there is a serious risk that any system which is not transparent will be abused. Openness is therefore politically inevitable, but aside from that it has the practical benefits, which evangelicals ought to support, of increasing public trust and discouraging malpractice.

*The Bulletin* has no room either to analyse the bizarre, arbitrary, confusing and inconsistently-administered system of expense entitlements in which MPs became enmeshed, and which were the focus of *The Daily Telegraph's* disclosures. Although no system will be perfect, whatever arrangements replace this broken cistern will need to be more closely related to an appropriate and just level of compensation for expenses or losses actually incurred.

What this article does need to explore is what the 'scandal' teaches us about the current state of public and personal morality. In the light of our conclusions, it will also offer an appropriate Christian response.

The following are some of the key issues which the 'scandal' has revealed in relation to public and personal morality:

- **Personal moral integrity has been downgraded**

To be a Member of Parliament in the UK is one of the greatest honours and privileges to be imagined. An MP is one of fewer than 700 people at any one time, serving in direct succession to those who have made the laws of this country over many hundreds of years. He or she represents in the legislature a constituency average of about 62,000 electors, and is accorded the kudos and status associated with such a position. There could hardly be a stronger incentive to demonstrate a high level of integrity, and to ensure that personal conduct is beyond reproach. Yet, in scores of instances, it is obvious that MPs have fallen far short of an acceptable standard.

In the case of many MPs, a common feature was that they deliberately varied their personal circumstances in order to give themselves a greater personal financial benefit. The change in circumstances was not necessary, and was of no advantage to their constituents. The two motivating factors were that the change enriched the MP concerned, and that it was allowed under the rules.

When challenged about their published claims, many MPs issued statements which 'denied any wrongdoing' and asserting that everything they had claimed was allowed 'within the rules.' They seemed genuinely to believe that their observance of the rules fully justified their claims and that no other issues needed to be addressed.

What this indicates is that the new type of morality which in Britain today has usurped the role of the former Christian and biblical morality is devoid of any moral assessment. It simply means: 'I only ticked the boxes I was entitled to tick.' The focus is not on whether there was theft, deceit or covetousness which breached the Ten Commandments, but whether there was conduct which breached 'the rules.' Under today's morality, theft and lying are not 'within the rules,' though it appears that covetousness and greed may well be.

A great difference between the old and new moralities is that the old was strongly connected with conscience – an inwardly-felt sense of outrage against a wrong action, or a felt disposition towards a right action. The new morality is based on bureaucracy and procedure – a box-ticking exercise rather than something felt.

It is deeply disappointing that our national morality has sunk to this. The cause of the moral downgrade is the loss of the Christian ethic which once governed the standard of conduct expected across society and was instinctively practised, both at the personal and public level.

- **The public service ideal has been demeaned**

Once upon a time, people in the UK were happy to perform a whole range of public services, including serving as MPs, councillors and in other representative capacities, without it occurring to them that these forms of service would bring them financial reward.

Not only was there no financial gain, but in some roles there could be a considerable personal cost involved, which was borne cheerfully in exchange for the satisfaction of a different kind of reward – the belief that the public good was enhanced by their efforts and achievements.

The public service ideal still persists extensively in the voluntary and charity sector, but is now far less visible in the corridors of national and local power, and in the quangos, agencies and other offices of state. Ambition appears to have replaced it as the driving force which steers people into politics and into the management roles which design and deliver public policy. One result of this change is that on all sides of the Houses of Parliament there seem to be remarkably few statesmen about, compared with former times. The Palace of Westminster seems to be peopled with mediocrity.

- **Public anger demonstrates a residual instinctive sense of righteousness**

When *The Daily Telegraph* hit the streets on Friday 8 May 2009, it sold 87,000 copies more than usual. Over the next few days, as revelation followed revelation, there was a surge of public anger against the conduct of the MPs whose claims had been exposed.

It must be noted that there were many aspects of this outburst of anger which were inappropriate:

- It was disproportionate – there are far more serious issues in the world than whether the duck-houses and moats of our better-off MPs should be provided or maintained from the public purse.
- It was directed too much against MPs generally, rather than merely against those MPs whose individual claims were questionable or excessive. This is most unfair, since a significant number of MPs were found to have acted impeccably, having either made no claims at all or only those demonstrated to be modest and utterly reasonable.
- It was hypocritical, since some who were angry have no doubt been guilty of similar practices, on a smaller scale, in their own contexts. What really angered the public was that it was taxpayers' money (i.e. this angry public's own money) which MPs had appropriated for their own benefit.

However, although this torrent of public indignation may not have been altogether righteous, it is still to an extent reassuring that it was unleashed at all. How dreadful it would have been if the public response had been 'Oh, well...' or 'So what?'; 'Does it matter?' What if no-one had cared, and the revelations had been greeted with nothing more than a cynical 'Well, what do you expect?'

Somewhere in the public mind, there is still a vestige of understanding that the conduct of those elected to Parliament should be of a higher standard than is being practised by scores of those currently in office.

### **How should evangelicals respond to the 'scandal?'**

- We should pray for all Members of Parliament, in the Lords and in the Commons. In particular, each Christian should pray for his or her own MP;
- We can contact our MP to say that we are praying, that we sympathise with him or her in the additional stress which has been caused by the media spotlight on MPs' expenses. We can phrase our letters or emails sympathetically and sensitively, without being judgemental (as we may not know all the facts), but also without condoning any misconduct the MP concerned may have committed;
- Urge the main political parties to reflect on the wider lessons of the expenses 'scandal' and to lay down for their candidates a standard of personal conduct based on biblical morality;
- Are there not more of us in the evangelical constituency who would be willing to enter the political arena and become candidates for election? They can be people of any age, but particularly can we not challenge some of our 40-year-olds, with 20 years of appropriate useful experience behind them, to do this? It will help if they are articulate, healthy, thick-skinned, realistic, generous-spirited and humble. At the same time they will need to know what they believe and what they intend to achieve. On their way to holding office, they will be able to influence political party philosophy, policy, conduct and priorities. Once in office, they can be the kind of example people will respect and follow, and will be helping to bring about a more godly society.

Rod Badams

*The above was published in The Bulletin [July 2009]*

**Salt and Light Papers** is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.