

# **Keeping Up Appearances: MPs' Expenses and the Hidden Dimensions of Rule in Britain Today\***

Martin Gainsborough

University of Bristol

© Martin Gainsborough

**School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies**

**University of Bristol**

**Working Paper No. 03-11**

Martin Gainsborough is Reader in Development Politics in the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies at the University of Bristol. He is a specialist on the politics of development, with an area specialism on South East Asia, and expertise on state theory, governance, and corruption. Gainsborough has also conducted research on politics and development in the UK, notably on MPs' expenses and on Britain's inner cities. Gainsborough is known internationally as one of a handful of specialists on Vietnamese politics – a country where he has lived, worked, learnt the language, and conducted fieldwork for over 20 years. He is the author of *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* (Zed Books, 2010) and *Changing Political Economy of Vietnam* (Routledge, 2003), and the editor of *On the Borders of State Power: Frontiers in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region* (Routledge, 2009) and *Enterprise and Welfare Reform in Communist Asia* (Cass, 2003 with Peter Ferdinand). He can be reached at [Martin.Gainsborough@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Martin.Gainsborough@bristol.ac.uk)

\* *Draft (not for citation without author's permission)*

## **Keeping Up Appearances: MPs' Expenses and the Hidden Dimensions of Rule in Britain Today**

### **Abstract**

Taking issue with standard account of MPs' expenses, which occurred in Britain in the summer of 2009, the article argues that the usual analysis of MPs' expenses suffer from an unquestioned statist bias and erroneous assumptions about what is normal in British politics, resulting in a narrowing of our understanding of the political. In contrast to the standard account, the article depicts MPs' expenses as being fundamentally a crisis of appearances where the appearance that there is sharp public-private divide broke down. Such an interpretation is more revealing than simply describing MPs' expenses as a 'legitimacy crisis' since in our analysis we get at the heart of what this means. Crises of appearances like MPs' expenses do not happen in such a pronounced way very often, the article argues, but when they do, they strike at the heart of elite power with implications for how it is exercised both domestically and globally. It is this which gave MPs' expenses the character of a serious political crisis, and it was this that explained the hasty, panicky but united and robust response by an elite class comprising politicians, senior civil servants, journalists and academics.

## Introduction

The MPs' expenses scandal of summer 2009 will be remembered – at least in UK political circles – for some years to come.<sup>1</sup> It broke as the Daily Telegraph newspaper published unredacted expense claim details of UK MPs following the purchase of a disk leaked by someone connected to the office responsible for processing MP expense claims. The rest – duck houses, moats, and non-existent mortgages – is, as they say, history, and well known. While MPs' expenses has already been subject to an in-depth post mortem in political and media circles – few commentators (academic or other) have yet to engage in what might be regarded as a 'critical' review of the episode. Consequently, the presumed significance of the episode – described apparently uncontroversially as a 'crisis', 'a scandal', as the cause of 'public outrage', and as part of a longer term decline in public trust in politics and politicians – has so far been left to stand.

While there may be much truth in such characterisations, this article revisits these common or garden interpretations of MPs' expenses, exploring what such interpretations leave out, and indeed what they might conceal regarding the true nature of British politics. In doing so, the article offers a distinctive window onto the character of Britain's elite, how rule occurs, and the phenomenon we call 'corruption'. Central to the interpretation of the crisis offered here is a re-examination of the usual assumptions underpinning our understanding of the categories of 'state' and 'public', and their binary opposites 'society' and 'private'. To date, such assumptions have not been subject to scrutiny in relation to MPs' expenses, and yet,

as we will see, how one understands these categories is fundamental to how MPs' expenses is understood.

The article is based on an examination of qualitative data on MPs' expenses, mainly comprised of press reports generated at the time, along with media, academic and think-tank analysis produced after the event. Some of this data is presented in tabular form at the end of the article. The interpretive framework advanced in the article owes its inspiration to a reading of the scholarly literature on corruption and state theory, including ideas about public and private.

In the article, I first look at the way in which MPs' expenses is usually characterised in academic, media and politicians' discourse on the episode. I then highlight a series of questions which are not answered in the standard account, also making the point that the usual analyses operates with a set of unquestioned assumptions about what is 'normal' in British politics combined with an unexamined statist bias. How I understand the statist bias will be explained at the relevant point in the article but the point I will make is that both sets of assumptions result in a narrowing of our understanding of the political, which is fortuitous for those who rule. Next, drawing on revisionist literature on corruption and the state, I present an alternative interpretive framework, which, I argue, allows for a less depoliticised reading of MPs' expenses. Having done this, I re-visit the MPs' expenses data showing how it can be more fulsomely interpreted. I conclude by asking what the preceding analysis leaves us thinking about (state) rule, the character of Britain's elite, and the phenomenon we call 'corruption'.

## **Mainstream interpretations of MPs' expenses**

The presumed meaning and significance of MPs' expenses is generally felt to be clear. 'Why would one want to revisit MPs' expenses?' is a remark one often hears if you say you are doing research on it, or 'Hasn't everything been said already?' is another. Moreover, to revisit MPs' expenses is to invite suspicion that what one is really interested in is yet more gratuitous MP bashing, or joining in the tide of general cynicism towards politics. This, however, is not the intention. That said, given that research on MPs expenses invites these responses suggests that it may indeed merit further study, particularly for those interested in politics.

So, how are the now infamous events of summer 2009 usually understood?

Based on my analysis, the 'standard' commentary can be divided into eight broad elements.

Firstly, the revelations surrounding MPs' expenses are commonly referred to as a "crisis". Nigel Allington and Gillian Peele, for instance, refer to it as a "legitimacy crisis" (2010: 386). Michael Kenny, moreover, called it the "biggest crisis of legitimacy" faced by the British political system "for a century" (2009: 2).

Second, MPs' expenses is generally seen as something out of the ordinary. Allington and Peele called it as "a very unusual event" (2009: 386). Kenny wrote, albeit somewhat vaguely, that "something big and strange [was] happening" at Westminster (2009: 2).

Third, the usual tendency is also to refer to MPs' expenses as the 'MPs' expenses *scandal*'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, try referring to MPs' expenses without inserting the word 'scandal' and one finds it is quite difficult. However, using the word 'scandal' also captures this sense that MPs' expenses represents something unusual, since by definition a scandal implies something out of the ordinary. To refer to MPs' expenses as a 'scandal' is also to insert a moral judgement about what is alleged to have happened since the word 'scandal' automatically conjures up the idea of something disgraceful.

Fourth, those who have commented on MPs' expenses have placed considerable emphasis on what it meant for the British 'public', with widespread agreement that the episode contributed to high levels of public anger and a loss of trust towards politicians on the part of the British electorate. Indeed, comments on alleged public anger caused by the episode are possibly the most pronounced of all the comments on MPs' expenses. Speaking as MPs' expenses broke, Sir Christopher Kelly, the head of Committee on Standards in Public Life, described the "tide of public fury about what has been going on" as "overwhelming" (BBC 2009a: 2). The journalist David Hencke wrote of how the revelations released what he called an "unbelievable tide of public anger" (2009a: 51). Amongst academics, Tony Travers spoke of public "revulsion" and "outrage" (2009: 92 and 95). Ruth Fox referred to "public wrath" (2009: 673).

Politicians also frequently depicted themselves as being the guardians of the 'public interest', or sympathetic to the public mood. For example, as MPs' expenses started

to break, the Labour MP Sir Stuart Bell said the Speakers' Estimates Committee, on which he sat, would get to the bottom of who had leaked the MPs' expenses data – “in the public interest”, he emphasised (BBC 2009b: 1). Professing sympathy with the public, the then shadow defence secretary, Liam Fox, said they have “every right to be angry” (BBC 2009c: 2). Meanwhile, many commentators situated the public anger allegedly caused by MPs' expenses in the context of a longer term decline in public trust in politics and politicians (Fox 2009: 675; Kenny 2009).<sup>3</sup>

Fifth, if much writing on MPs' expenses focuses on what it meant for the British public, other accounts draw attention to its consequences for Britain's political class (Kenny 2009: 7; Travers 2009: 92); the credibility of parliament (Allington and Peele 2010: 387; Hencke 2009b: 83); and in some cases (liberal) democracy itself (Hencke 2009b: 83). Allington and Peele, for example, cited a drop in parliament's approval rating following MPs' expenses, arguing that its impact on “parliament's reputation was profound” (2010: 387). Hencke wrote that the damage to parliament “and democracy” was “enormous” (2009b: 83). Kenny spoke of a “significant loss of moral authority for politicians and perhaps for government” (2009: 7) while Travers wrote of the damage done by “the scandal” to “the British political class” (2009: 92). Not surprisingly, many analysts focused on what MPs' expenses meant for the Labour Party as the then government of the day with many of them predicting (rightly as it turned out) that it spelled defeat at the forthcoming general election (Allen and Birch 2010: 18).

Sixth, and building on the observations just made, mainstream accounts on MPs' expenses frequently offered comment on what the episode revealed *objectively* about

the state of Britain's political system. While views vary, it was not uncommon for commentators to assert that the revelations demonstrated – at least in part – the rotten, or partially rotten, nature of Britain's politics. Hencke, for instance, said that the Daily Telegraph revelations contained the “grisly details” of a period of “over indulgence” (2009a: 51). Nicholas Allen and Sarah Birch spoke of what they called “sleazy and disreputable behaviour” on the part of MPs (2010: 18). Kenny also bought into the idea that MPs' expenses offered an objective window onto the state of British politics when he titled his article ‘Taking the Temperature of the British Political Elite: When Grubby is the Order of the Day’ (2009: 1). However, Kenny suggested that while individual MPs had abused the expenses' system, it was wrong to view all politicians as “venal” (Kenny 2009: 5).

Seventh, coverage of MPs' expenses included plenty of comment about what *should* happen in the wake of the episode as well as a series of bold (but in retrospect not always very accurate) predictions about what was *likely* to happen. Here, the focus was primarily on the need for ‘reform’ to sort out the perceived ‘mess’ of MPs' expenses. In terms of the future, many commentators predicted that the expenses “crisis” would result in far-reaching changes in relations between MPs and the electorate. Hencke, for instance, predicted that MPs' expenses would result in a “sea change in the attitudes towards the claiming of money by the UK's elected representatives” (2009b: 78). Kenny said that the episode was likely to have “major consequences for the ways in which politicians manage their lives and present themselves to the public” (Kenny 2009: 7). Adopting an information technology perspective, Allington and Peele said MPs' expenses was “highly likely to change

both party and public expectations about the regularity and immediacy of information made available to voters in the future” (2010: 385).

Eighth, when discussing the likely consequences of MPs’ expenses, many analysts drew attention to the atmosphere of ‘panic’ which reportedly gripped Westminster following the Daily Telegraph revelations. Allen and Birch, for instance, specifically used the word “panic” to describe the atmosphere prevailing in Westminster following the revelations (2010: 5). Kenny, meanwhile, spoke of an atmosphere of “near hysteria” on the part of Britain’s elite (2009: 5).

Given such a climate, some commentators expressed concern that an over hasty response to MPs’ expenses would result, leading to rushed legislation and hence inappropriate reforms. Ruth Fox, for example, was critical of what she called the “smorgasbord of reform options” put forward in the wake of MPs’ expenses, calling instead for a more “nuanced response” taking into account the “complexity of public views” on engagement and participation in politics. Only this, she argued, would lead to improved levels of public trust in politics, and a strengthening of the “democratic ‘chain of command’ between the elected and the electors” (Fox 2009: 673).

Based on the account offered above, we can see that the significance of MPs’ expenses is understood as follows: as a scandal and a crisis; as the cause of public anger; as another nail in the coffin in terms of declining public trust in politics; as evidence of at least some venality in British politics; as highly damaging to parliament, the political class, and perhaps even democracy itself; and likely to

produce significant changes in the way MPs claim expenses and relate to the electorate more generally.

However, if this is the dominant way in which MPs' expenses has been analysed, what do we make of it?

### **The mainstream account critiqued**

There are clearly many things which could be said about the standard account of MPs' expenses. Here, I want to raise a series of questions for consideration while also highlighting some of the key assumptions underpinning the usual analysis. My argument is that these assumptions, which in large part relate to particular understandings of 'the state' and the 'public' realm, along with perceptions of what is 'normal' in British politics, serve to conceal the true nature of politics, resulting in an impoverished account of MPs' expenses. Again, for those interested in an incisive account of British politics, this ought to be of concern.

Let us begin with some questions.

Firstly, what is the significance of referring to MPs' expenses as a 'legitimacy' crisis? Can we not, in fact, be more precise about what kind of a crisis MPs' expenses was? Moreover, can we not do this in a way which is more revealing in terms of an understanding of the political than is achieved by viewing MPs' expenses simply as a legitimacy crisis?

Second, to what extent is it correct to view what happened at the time of MPs' expenses as something 'out of the ordinary'? Or, again, can we not be more precise about what was out of the ordinary about MPs' expenses and what was not?

Third, referring to MPs' expenses as a 'scandal' inserts a moral judgement into the prevailing discourse. However, is the moral judgement quite as straightforward as people tend to think?

Fourth, what are we to make of the fact that so much attention is focused in the standard account on public anger? Moreover, how real is the officially stated sympathy towards 'public' anger, and to what extent might such a focus serve to deflect our attention from something else?

Fifth, what do we make of the claim – evident in the mainstream account – that MPs' expenses reveals something *objective* about the state of British politics (i.e. that it is sleazy to some extent). How sure can we be that MPs' expenses tells us something objective about British politics? Or, could it be telling us something else about British politics that we have not anticipated?

Sixth, the standard account makes much play of the 'panic' evident in Westminster around the time of MPs' expenses. However, can we be clearer as to what the panic was about?

I will now move from questions which I believe are not properly answered in the standard account of MPs' expenses to some of the assumptions which underpin this account.

Looking closely at the mainstream account, what one notices is that it operates with two related assumptions, neither of which is ever questioned. The first concerns what is 'normal' in British politics and the second involves assumptions about 'the state' and the 'public' realm.

Let us examine each in turn.

Assumptions about what is 'normal' in British politics can be seen – somewhat obliquely – in the assertions made in the standard account about what is abnormal. Thus, by asserting that MPs' expenses was 'out of the ordinary', and indeed by labelling it a 'scandal', the claim is being made that politicians do not usually exploit their public position for private gain, and that public and private are usually separate and distinct. As we will see, both points can be questioned.

Second, the standard account of MPs' expenses operates with a set of entirely unexamined assumptions regarding the nature of 'the state' and the 'public' realm. Thus, it is taken for granted without exception in the literature on MPs' expenses that the entity we call 'the state' stands apart from and is external to 'society'. This can be seen in the frequent references to 'public' anger following the Daily Telegraph's revelations, where 'the public' in this case refers to 'society', which is believed to be distinct from 'the state'. Such assumptions can also be seen in the tendency – in the

usual account of MPs' expenses – to see the media and 'critical' academics as being on the 'society' side of the fence, drawing attention to the misdemeanour of 'state' actors (i.e. MPs and cabinet ministers) on the other.

In the standard writing on MPs' expenses, the same assumptions can also be seen operating in relation to the terms 'public' and 'private', where like state and society the 'public' realm is understood as being distinct from the 'private' realm. So, for example, with reference to Hencke's "grisly details" of MPs' "over indulgence" or Allen and Birch's "sleazy and disreputable behaviour" on the part of MPs, there is a clear – but again unquestioned – assumption that there really is a 'public' realm distinct from a 'private' one, and that MPs by virtue of holding 'public' office and in some way 'abusing' the expenses' system have confused one with the other.

But is this right or is it misleading to view matters in this way?

This article argues it is misleading. However, to explore these ideas further, I will now look at the revisionist literature on the state and corruption, considering how they might help us move toward a more politically nuanced reading of MPs' expenses.

### **An alternative interpretive framework**

The problems I identified in the previous section with regard to assumptions about 'the state' and the 'public' realm are generally referred to in the state theory literature as the 'statist bias'. While the statist bias means different things to different people – and is sometimes deployed rather misleadingly in the literature – it is understood in

this context as viewing the *appearance* that the state stands apart from and intervenes in society *as reality*. The key point to make is that the state is not an entity with a real perimeter – like say a table – but rather it is a conceptual abstraction. Or, as Timothy Mitchell puts it: the state is the “powerful, metaphysical effect” of practices that make it appear to have a real perimeter and hence distinct from society (Mitchell 1991: 90 and 94).

To talk in such terms is not to suggest that the state does not exist, which would clearly be a mistake: witness anyone who has been on the receiving end of the application of state power. However, what this approach does is to emphasise the importance of taking the elusiveness of the state-society boundary seriously not as a point of “conceptual precision” – as so many scholars do – but as a clue to how rule occurs (Mitchell 1991: 78).

Being circumspect about what the state is, and hence distinguishing between appearance and reality, is useful because it enables us to acknowledge the power of the political arrangements that we call the state while at the same time accounting for their elusiveness (Mitchell 1991: 94-95). From this perspective, the key is not to view the distinction between state and society as a boundary between two distinct entities but rather as a “line drawn internally within the network of institutional mechanisms through which a social and political order is maintained” (Mitchell 1991: 78). The ability to have an internal distinction appear as though it is an external boundary between separate objects is central to how rule occurs (Mitchell 1991: 78). It is also a technique which accounts at least in part for the state’s longevity as a political form.

While Mitchell is one of the most illuminating writers on this subject, other scholars can be seen rejecting the statist bias as well. Alan Finlayson and James Martin, for example, refer to ‘the state’ “not as a ‘thing’ but as a practice or ensemble of practices” (2006: 155). Rather like Mitchell, Finlayson and Martin also refer to the state as the “*outcome* of political activities as well as a *contribution* to them” (2006: 155; italics mine). Statist writing, it is worth noting, tends only to see the state as *contributing* to political outcomes – as an actor – and hence neglects the fact that the state is also an *outcome* of political activities.

Continuing some of these same themes, Richard Ashley speaks of the ‘figure’ of the sovereign state as “nothing more and nothing less than an arbitrary political representation always in the process of being inscribed within history, through practice” (1988: 252). While Ashley’s wider point is that ‘orderly’ national realm on which the ‘anarchic’ international realm is thought to rest is not quite as orderly as people think, the key point for our purposes is again that our perception that ‘the state’ has clear boundaries and stands apart from society is misleading.

As with viewing the appearance that the state stands apart from society as reality, scholars have noted a similar tendency in respect of reifying the ‘public’ and ‘private’ realms – i.e. taking their appearance as separate and distinct as how it actually is. In his book ‘Everyday Life and the State’, Peter Bratsis writes of how we often end up believing that there “truly are” two, distinct, modes of existence, namely public and private, when as with state and society, it is purely a conceptual distinction. Tracing the emergence of this way of perceiving to the rise of the nation-state, Bratsis says that while we know that a person holding public office only has ‘one body’, “we act

‘as if’ we did not know”, hence cleaving to the idea that they can move seamlessly between ‘public’ and ‘private’, with ‘the public’ automatically ‘devoid’ of particular interests (2006: 43 and 47). Bratsis calls this the “fetish of the public”, namely where we treat something as if it is not what it actually is (2006: 47). In effect, this is the same point that Mitchell and others make about how scholars commonly view ‘the state’.<sup>4</sup>

For Bratsis, the ‘public’ sphere is actually an impossibility – i.e. it can never be purged of private interests. This leads to some novel ideas regarding how we understand ‘the state’, the ‘public’ realm, and indeed ‘corruption’ itself. For instance, on Bratsis’s reading, contemporary anti-corruption practices – like those initiated by a range of government and international agencies at home and abroad – never really seek to purge the private from the public, despite claims to the contrary. Instead, they aim to establish boundaries between what constitutes a “normal presence of the private within the abstract body of the public and what constitutes a pathological presence” (Bratsis 2006: 50). Continuing, Bratsis writes:

“The language of corruption has had the historical effect of creating a large and legally regulated series of practices that legitimise the unavoidable and systemic presence of private interests in the ‘body politics’ by treating *only some forms* of this presence as being a subversion of the public by the private” (2006: 50; italics mine)

Bratsis illustrates his account with an analysis of political donations and lobbying rules in the United States, noting the entirely arbitrary nature of the cut-offs in relation

to what is permissible and what is not. A similar arbitrariness can also be found in respect of the UK. For example, why must a donation to a British political party over £5000 be registered in the name of the donor while if it is under £5000 it does not need to be (as detailed in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000)?<sup>5</sup>

For Bratsis, it is all about appearances:

“Given the impossibility of removing ‘private interests’ from...the real bodies of public servants...a series of rules and practices is instituted in order to purge the *realm of appearances* from acts that challenge the categorization of society as divided into two mutually exclusive registers, the public and private.” (2006: 67; italics mine)

In light of the preceding analysis, it is evident that what we call ‘the state’, or think of as the ‘public’ sphere, or as ‘corruption’, is not as stable or self-evident as we commonly think. Echoing this point, Finlayson and Martin talk about the state having an “evolving and unpredictable character”, always facing the “possibility of conflict and potential disaggregation”, and continually confronting “resistance to its efforts” often, they say, as a consequence of its own activities which expose the partiality and contingency of its claims (2006: 162 and 164). Bratsis, meanwhile, writes that the state lives with the constant threat that the “real impossibility of the public” will be exposed (2006: 52). Making a similar point, Mitchell notes how once the state is seen as metaphysical effect, it no longer has the “coherence, agency, and subjectivity” that the term usually presupposes (1991: 90).

However, as these same authors note, there is a considerable amount riding on the state *not* being seen as arbitrary, or the impossibility of the public sphere *not* being revealed. Bratsis writes of the threat posed to “the entire conceptual framework that supports the state and capitalist productive relations” if the true nature of the public realm becomes apparent (2006: 52). Mitchell argues similarly that the appearance that state and society are separate things is part of the way social, political and economic order is maintained (1991: 90).

From the perspective of rule, the result is that anything which undermines the idea of the state as a distinct and bounded entity which stands apart from society, or interferes with the idea of the public realm devoid of private interests, needs to be downgraded or sidelined in respect of how we discuss politics (and academics are not immune in this respect). However, it is through this process of downgrading and sidelining that our discussion of the state and the public realm – and in turn MPs’ expenses – is depoliticised (Finlayson and Martin 2006: 166).

With this last point established, much of the academic literature in this field can be seen to be concerned with how this process of de-politicisation occurs. While the topic is a broad one, a key theme is how we as citizens – elite and non-elite – become very good at policing ourselves by, for example, not mentioning, denying, or re-interpreting practices which do not fit with a clearly demarcated ‘state’ or ‘public’ realm. This includes constant assertions about what is ‘normal’ in politics even when the facts clearly do not stack up.<sup>6</sup> As Bratsis says, success in this domain relies upon two interrelated principles: hiding, eliminating, or regulating practices which citizens are likely to perceive as involving the ‘private’ in the ‘public’, and trying to influence

what citizens are likely to view as corruption (Bratsis 2006: 67) Most of the time, this occurs fairly unproblematically. However, just occasionally – like in summer 2009 – things unravel.

I now turn to consider what these ideas mean for a more politically nuanced reading of MPs' expenses.

### **MPs' expenses revisited**

In light of the previous analysis, it is now possible to reframe our interpretation of the MPs' expenses data, in turn shedding light on the questions I posed earlier.

Firstly, we can now say that the significance of MPs' expenses lies in it being an occasion when the appearance of their being a sharp boundary between public and private came unstuck. It is this which fundamentally gave the episode the character of a political crisis. Yes, we can call it a crisis of legitimacy, if we wish, but if we are to move away from a sanitised account of politics we need to be explicit that the basis of this legitimacy crisis lies in the unravelling of the appearance that there is a clear boundary between public and private. No writing on MPs' expenses to date has made this point.

With this point made, the way is then open to advance a more politically nuanced interpretation of MPs' expenses data on other fronts as well. To do this, I will focus my remarks in six key areas: first, what was at stake in MPs' expenses; second, elite responses to comparisons being made between Britain's politics and that of other

countries in light of MPs' expenses; third, elite efforts to close down discussion of MPs' expenses; fourth, elite panic; fifth, elite expressions of concern for 'the public'; and sixth, media, public, and academic responses to MPs' expenses. In the penultimate section before the conclusion, I will take stock of our findings in these areas to consider their implications for how we understand (state) rule, the character of Britain's elite, and the phenomenon we call 'corruption'.

*MPs' expenses: what was really at stake?*

Viewing MPs' expenses as a crisis of appearances, we can now see that the stakes were indeed high. In fact, they were far higher than was typically imagined in the usual references to it simply as a 'crisis of legitimacy'. This was not only because the crisis struck at the very foundations of elite power in Britain – which rests centrally on the perception of a clear separation of public and private – but also because MPs' expenses potentially had ramifications for the exercise of UK power globally. This is because UK foreign and international development policy is premised on a vision of UK society which includes, amongst other things, an assertion that British politics is constituted by a clear separation of public and private.<sup>7</sup> That such a separation exists, or more accurately is perceived to exist, is important because it provides the basis on which the UK can claim superiority over political systems where such a separation is said not to exist. Of course, such assertions of superiority are not usually shouted from the roof tops but it is a crucial, implied, part of the jigsaw. It is on the basis of this alleged superiority that the UK justifies intervening overseas.<sup>8</sup>

*Don't compare us with them!*

In light of the above, we can say that British elite rule – understood as operating globally – rests not only on maintaining the appearance of a sharp public-private divide but also on Britain’s political system being seen as distinct from other political systems, particularly in the global south. Moreover, the data on MPs’ expenses clearly supports this interpretation. Central here was the fact that any suggestion that there might be parallels between Britain’s politics and that of countries more commonly regarded as ‘corrupt’, which were quite commonly made in the summer of 2009, were strongly rebuffed. The then deputy leader of the Labour Party and cabinet member, Harriet Harman, for instance, did just this when she questioned whether the House of Commons was “scarred by corruption on the scale of other political systems”, emphasising that while the revelations “look[ed] bad” most MPs still “believed in the cause of public service” (BBC 2009d: 1). The then Home Secretary Jacqui Smith also refused to be drawn when questioned on the same point by John Humphreys on BBC Radio 4’s Today Programme (BBC 2009e).

### *Closing discussion down*

As well as trying to put clear blue water between the British political system and that of other political systems, members of the Britain’s elite can be seen adopting a variety of tactics designed to ‘close down’ discussion of MPs’ expenses. In the language of this article, this is about trying to reinstate appearances of a sharp public-private divide by putting such discussions off limits. Such tactics took a number of forms, and strikingly were pursued in equal measure by politicians, journalists, and academics. Some called for “perspective” in the coverage of MPs’ expenses (Vallely

2009: 13). Others blamed the media for creating a distorted impression of British politics (Besley and Larcinese 2010: 3; Kenny 2009: 5; Mandelson in BBC 2009f). Others still suggested there were ‘more important things’ to focus on (Milliband in BBC 2009g). The then Labour Justice Minister, Shahid Malik, called for the “bloodfest to stop” (Malik in BBC 2009h)

Writing in the Financial Times, Philip Stephens called the coverage of MPs expenses a ‘distraction’ from the “underlying forces shaping the future of British politics”, adding that while some of the alleged “chicanery” of MPs was real, “much [was] imagined” (Stephens 2009: 1). However, in light of the interpretative framework offered here, it makes more sense to argue that by trying to close down the discussion of MPs’ expenses, it is Stephens who is offering a distraction from the underlying forces of politics. For Stephens, these underlying forces were to do with party politics (e.g. the expected fall of Gordon Brown as prime minister and the rise, as anticipated at the time, of a Conservative government). However, to talk in this way is to conceal the underlying elite consensus which lies at the heart of British politics, and which MPs’ expenses reveals so well.

Further illustrating our point that the stakes were high, MPs’ expenses was also an occasion when elite claws came out in a bid to reinstate appearances. This was evident in a bad-tempered television interview with the Labour peer Lord Foulkes by the BBC’s Carrie Gracie in which turning the table on Gracie, Lord Foulkes demanded to know how much she was paid, and accused her and other journalists of ‘talking rubbish’, ‘harassing’ MPs, and ‘sneering at’ and ‘undermining’ democracy (BBC 2009i). In relation to the interpretation being offered here, this is again about

closing down the discussion and reinstating appearances of a sharp public-private divide. In what became a familiar refrain of MPs' expenses, Lord Foulkes was also quick to emphasise that most MPs 'do a good job' (BBC 2009i).

A similar sense of the elite going on offensive to close things down was evident in an interview with the Labour MP Sir Stuart Bell just as MPs' expenses was breaking. Commenting on reports that details of MPs' expenses were being offered for sale, Sir Stuart Bell described the act as "theft" and "probably a breach of the Official Secrets Act" before adding rather menacingly "...we will get to the bottom of it...In the public interest, by the way" (BBC 2009b). In light of the interpretation being advanced here, it can be seen that Sir Stuart is confusing elite interests with the public interest. Moreover, his remarks were clearly designed to put on the back foot anyone considering purchasing MP expense details, or indeed publishing them (i.e. a good example of a member of the elite flexing his political muscles).

*Elite panic: panic about what?*

In light of the preceding analysis, it is now possible to be much clearer regarding what the 'elite panic' generated by MPs' expenses – and the associated hasty moves to try and 'clean things up' – was really about. As a crisis which struck at the very foundations of British elite power – with potential global ramifications – Britain's elite might be forgiven for being panicky. However, as we have suggested, the scramble to respond was fundamentally about reinstating appearances, notwithstanding the usual gloss that is put on the standard elite response as being about 'reform' or 'cleaning up' politics. Furthermore, what is striking is that it is as if

elites know instinctively how to respond in such situations without even being aware that they are moving to try and reinstate appearances.

*Elite concern for the public: concern for what?*

Earlier, we noted the way in which members of the Britain's elite professed concern for 'the public', saying things like they had every right to be angry, and often depicting themselves as 'guardians of the public interest'. However, in light of the analysis offered here, this can be seen as disingenuous. Elite concern is first and foremost about appearances not public sensibilities. This comes across clearly from the fact that prior to MPs' expenses, MPs' fought a long-running court battle to prevent their expense details being made public (BBC 2009j). This suggests that elite instincts are towards secrecy, and that they are in fact fairly contemptuous towards the public – notwithstanding assertions to the contrary. Table 2 presents a timeline of MP efforts to prevent their expense details being made public.

*Media, public and academic responses to MPs' expenses*

Finally, it is worth revisiting media, public, and academic responses to MPs' expenses, which as we saw, were depicted in the standard account as being at loggerheads with MP perspectives – in a classic state vs society rendering of politics. At one level, of course, MPs, the media and the public, were at loggerheads: for instance, members of the political elite were clearly very alarmed at all the attention given to MPs' expenses, and journalists and MPs undoubtedly locked horns on the matter. However, at another level, one can detect just the same assumptions about

what is 'normal' in British politics in the media, public, and academic response, which suggests that these very same accounts are serving – like their politician counterparts – to reinstate appearances.

Ironically, such a gloss can even be put on the combative interview between Lord Foulkes and Carrie Gracie where by depicting MPs' expenses as an 'outrage' – with clear intonations about what is normal/abnormal – Gracie's language is in fact as constitutive of the status quo as Foulkes. Thus, despite the bad-tempered nature of the interview, Foulkes and Gracie are much more on the same page than they realise!

So, what is the significance of all this? In particular, what is the significance of our revisionist interpretation of MPs' expenses for how we understand (state) rule, the make-up of Britain's elite, and the concept we call 'corruption'?

### **Significance?**

Firstly, we can say that in light of the preceding analysis, an important dimension of rule is about maintaining appearances. However, this is an interesting finding because it is not how rule would normally be characterised in the usually rather anodyne writing which equates rule with governance (see, for instance, Peters and Pierre 2006).

Second, we can see that the composition of Britain's elite needs to be understood in a broader, less differentiated, way than we usually tend to think – i.e. more like C. Wright Mill's 'power elite' or Ralph Miliband's conception of the elite, incorporating

in the empirical case studied here, politicians, senior civil servants, journalists and academics (Miliband 1969; Mills 1956). As we have seen, there is often very little to choose between politicians, senior civil servants, journalists and academics, who in talking and writing about MPs' expenses all cleave to similar notions of what is 'normal' in British politics, operate with an unquestioned statist bias, and in their different ways worked to close down discussions of MPs' expenses and, in turn, 'put Humpty back together'. Witness, for example, how whether it is Harriet Harman, Sir Christopher Kelly, Philip Stephens, or Michael Kenny – to name just four – they all sing from a very similar hymn sheet.

The character of Britain's elite, i.e. incorporating a wide range of seemingly different actors, can also be seen from the fact that at times attempts to close down discussion of MPs' expenses can be seen to come from unlikely quarters. For example, at one point during MPs' expenses, even the actor Stephen Fry weighed in, criticising the interest shown in MPs' expenses, saying "Its not that important, it really isn't" (BBC 2009k: 1). While at one level Cambridge-educated Fry is not an unusual candidate for Britain's elite class, what is striking about MPs' expenses is the way it demonstrates *empirically* how members of this class act together when their collective interests are threatened.

Thirdly, in light of the analysis advanced here, it is really much less clear what 'corruption' is – not least given Bratsis's observation that the private can never be expunged from the public. This, in turn, raises important questions about what was 'out of the ordinary' about MPs' expenses. In this article, I have argued that MPs' expenses was out of the ordinary as an occasion when the appearance of a sharp

divide between public and private came unstuck. As was suggested, this does not happen in such a dramatic way very often. However, based on the reading of corruption offered here, MPs' expenses was *not* out of the ordinary for public and private being mixed up *per se*. This happens all the time. It is just we choose not to see it this way. Moreover, once one's eyes are opened to this perspective, the data on this stacks up very clearly, as we see one incident after the other where the impossibility of the public is apparent. Data supporting this in the period prior to MPs' expenses is contained in Table 3 in the Appendix.<sup>9</sup> However, the substantive point is that cases of public and private 'blurring' come to light too frequently for them to be dismissed as a one-off, or an aberration.

Fourthly, what does our analysis say about 'reform', and any kind of moral judgement about what occurred with MPs' expenses? Based on the analysis offered here, 'reform' is what elites propose when appearances need reinstating but it is never going to seriously get the 'private' out of the 'public' as this is an impossibility. Consequently, all the bold predictions contained in the standard account about radical change in light of MPs' expenses look rather fanciful, and once again can be seen as part of the elite onslaught to put Humpty back together again.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, while we may choose to adopt a moral position in relation to MPs' behaviour, perhaps so as to cling onto some notion of 'order' in politics – which is not necessarily a bad thing! – this new way of looking at MPs' expenses does indeed suggest that the moral judgement is less straightforward than it first appears since the moral judgement is made on the basis of an arbitrary conceptual distinction and

because we are all by definition blurring public and private all the time, including in the academy.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that the usual accounts of MPs' expenses suffer from an unquestioned statist bias and erroneous assumptions about what is normal in British politics, resulting in a massive narrowing of our understanding of the political which is convenient for those who rule.<sup>11</sup> In sharp contrast to the standard account, I have depicted MPs' expenses as being fundamentally a crisis of appearances where the appearance that there is sharp public-private divide broke down. Such an interpretation is much more revealing than simply describing MPs' expenses as a 'legitimacy crisis' since in the analysis offered here we get at the heart of what this means.

Crises of appearances, I have suggested, do not happen in such a pronounced way very often but when they do they strike at the very heart of elite power with implications for how it is exercised both domestically and globally. It is this fact which gave MPs' expenses the character of a serious political crisis, and it was this that explained the hasty, panicky but united and robust response by an elite class comprising politicians, senior civil servants, journalists and academics. Humpty needed to be put back together again, and fast.

## **Bibliography**

Abrams, Philip (1988) 'Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,' *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 1, no. 1: 58-89.

Allen, Nicholas and Sarah Birch (2010) 'Political Conduct and Misconduct: Probing Public Opinion,' *Parliamentary Affairs*: 1-21.

Allington, Nigel F.B. and Gillian Peele (2010) 'Moats, Duck Houses and Bath Plugs: Members of Parliament, the Expenses Scandal and the Use of Web Sites,' *Parliamentary Affairs* vol. 63, no. 3: 385-406.

Armstrong, Chris and Judith Squires (2002) 'Beyond the Public/Private Dichotomy: Relational Space and Sexual Inequalities,' *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 1, no. 3 261-283.

Ashley, Richard (1988) 'Untying the Sovereign State: A Double Reading of the Anarchy Problematique,' *Millennium*, vol. 17, no. 2: 227-262.

BBC (2008a) 'Conservative MEP to be expelled' November 13: 1-2.

BBC (2008b) 'Hain not charged over donations' December 12: 1-3

BBC (2009a) 'Warning over PM's expenses plan', April 23: 1-3.

BBC (2009b) 'MP claims 'on sale for £300,000'', April 17: 1-3.

BBC (2009c) 'Tories' expenses claims revealed' May 11: 1-4.

BBC (2009d) 'Cabinet expenses under scrutiny' May 8: 1-3.

BBC (2009e) 'Jacqui Smith on Today: Your response' April 7.

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_7987000/7987519.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_7987000/7987519.stm)

(Last accessed November 16, 2010)

BBC (2009f) 'Ministers defend expense claims,' May 8: 1-3.

BBC (2009g) 'Expense system 'wrong' – Blears' May 11: 1-3.

BBC (2009h) 'Justice minister Malik steps down' May 15: 1.

BBC (2009i) 'Peer turns fire on BBC presenter,' May 12

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8045414.stm> (Last accessed November 11, 2010)

BBC (2009j) 'Commons loses MPs' expenses fight', June 10: 1-3.

BBC (2009k) 'Fry on expenses: 'It's not important'', May 13

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/8045371.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8045371.stm) (Last accessed November 11, 2010)

BBC (2009l) 'Blunkett announces wedding plans' January 28: 1-2.

BBC (2009m) 'MP Conway ordered to repay money' November 18: 1-2.

BBC (2009n) 'Peers respond to cash allegations' January 27: 1-3.

BBC (2009o) 'MP Spelman told to repay £9,600' March 4: 1-2.

BBC (2009p) 'MPs expenses inquiry considered' March 23: 1-2.

BBC (2009q) 'No charges over Labour donations' May 7: 1-3.

Besley, Timothy and Valentino Larcinese (2010) 'Working or Shirking? Expenses and Attendance in the UK Parliament,' *Public Choice*, published online.

Bratsis, Peter (2006) *Everyday Life and the State* (Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers).

Doig, Alan, Stephanie McIvor and John Moran (1999) 'A World Desperately Seeking Scandal? New Labour and Tony's Cronies,' *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 52, no.4: 677-687.

Eggers, Andrew C. and Jens Hainmueller (2009) 'MPs for Sale? Returns to Office in Postwar British Politics,' *American Political Science Review*, vol. 103, no. 4: 513-533.

Finlayson, Alan (2007) 'From Beliefs to Arguments: Interpretive Methodology and Rhetorical Political Analysis,' *British Journal of International Relations*, vol. 9, no. 4: 545-563.

Finlayson, Alan and James Martin (2006) 'Poststructuralism' in Colin Hay, Michael Lister and David Marsh (eds) *The State: Theories and Issues* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan): 155-171.

Fox, Ruth (2009) 'Engagement and Participation: What the Public Want and How our Politicians Need to Respond,' *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 62, no. 4: 673-685.

Gaber, Ivor (2009) 'The Slow Death of the Westminster Lobby: Collateral Damage from the MPs' Expenses Scandal,' *British Politics*, vol. 4: 478-497.

Gupta, Akhil (2006) 'Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State,' in Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (eds) *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing): 211-242.

Hay, Colin (2007) *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press)

Hehir, Aidan and Neil Robinson (2007) *State-Building: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge)

- Hencke, David (2009a) 'Why a Commons Club Fouled Up,' *British Journalism Review*, vol. 20: 51-55.
- Hencke, David (2009b) 'What Price an MP?' *Public Policy Research*, June-August: 78-84.
- Howarth, David R (2000) *Discourse (Concepts in the Social Sciences)* (Buckingham and Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press)
- Kenny, Michael (2009) 'Taking the Temperature of the British Political Elite 3: When Grubby is the Order of the Day,' *Parliamentary Affairs*: 1-11.
- Miliband, Ralph (1969) *The State in Capitalist Society: An Analysis of the Western System of Power* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson)
- Mills, C. W (1956) *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Mitchell, Timothy (1991) 'The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics,' *American Political Science Review*, vol. 85, no. 1: 77-96.
- Oliver, Dawn (1997) 'Regulating the Conduct of MPs. The British Experience of Combating Corruption,' *Political Studies*: 539-558.

Peters, B. Guy and Jon Pierre (2006) 'Governance, Government and the State' in Colin Hay, Michael Lister and David Marsh (eds) *The State: Theories and Issues* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan): 209-222.

Stephens, Philip (2009) 'UK government heads towards cliff edge,' *Financial Times*, June 4.

Stoker, Gerry (2006) *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan)

Transparency International (2010) <http://www.transparency.org/>  
(Last accessed November 24, 2010)

Travers, Tony (2009) 'Time for Change? Electoral Politics after the Local and European Elections,' *Public Policy Research*, June-August: 91-96.

Vallely, Paul (2009) 'Get some perspective on MPs' cash,' *Church Times*, May 15: 13.

World Economic Forum (2010)  
<http://www.weforum.org/en/initiatives/gcp/Global%20Competitiveness%20Report/index.htm> (Last accessed November 24, 2010)

## Appendix

**Table 1. How the MPs expenses episode is usually understood**

	Scandal	Crisis	Cause of loss of public trust/public anger	Cause of panic amongst political class	Evidence of corrupt nature of the political system (in some cases qualified)	Damage to Labour Party; political class; parliament; democracy	Part of a longer term trend in public dissatisfaction with politicians/political system	Likely to have significant longer term consequences (of various kinds)
Allen and Birch 2010	x		x	x		x		
Allington and Peele 2010	x	x	x			x		x
Besley and Larcinese 2010	x							
Fox 2009			x				x	
Gaber 2009	x							
Hencke 2009a			x		x			
Hencke 2009b			x			x		x
Kenny 2009		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Travers 2009	x		x			x		

**Table 2. Timeline of MP efforts to prevent their expense details being made public.**

January 2005	Freedom of Information Act 2000 came into force Journalist Heather Brooke requested MP expense details for all MPs; House of Commons says this too costly. Brooke made further requests, including for second home details for all MPs. All refused.
July 2006	Brooke appealed to Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas, after her request for expense details for 10 MPs was refused. Request considered for one year along with two other similar requests from Sunday Telegraph journalist Ben Leapman and Sunday Times journalist Jonathan Ungood-Thomas
May 2007	MPs voted in favour of Freedom of Information (Amendment) Bill which if passed into law would exempt MPs from the 2000 Act. (The Bill was later withdrawn because House of Lords were unwilling to sponsor it.)
June 2007	Information Commissioner ordered release of some information; Commons' authorities object.
February 2008	After referral to an Information Tribunal, it was ruled that the Commons' authorities had to release information on 14 MPs. Speaker appealed against the decision on behalf of Commons on behalf of 11 MPs.
May 2008	High Court ruled against the appeal, saying that the information had to be released. Information released later the same month.
January 2009	Leader of the House of Commons Harriet Harman tabled a motion to prevent any further disclosure of information under a Freedom of Information request; motion later dropped and Commons' authorities announced full disclosure of MPs' expenses would be published in July 2009.
May 2009	The Daily Telegraph obtained unedited details of MPs expenses
July 2009	Edited details of MP expenses were released by the House of Commons

**Table 3. Examples of public-private blurring involving politicians prior to MPs' expenses**

NB. Using data relating to episodes which occurred prior to MPs' expenses, the aim is to show that public and private are blurred all the time. The point is reinforced if one remembers the various other political 'scandals' which have occurred through successive UK administrations (e.g. Cash for Questions in 1994 or Cash for Honours in 2006)

Name and position of politician	Date and brief description of incident	Source
1. David Blunkett (Labour cabinet minister)	Resigned in December 2004 when it emerged that he had fast-tracked a visa for the nanny working for his lover	BBC 2009l
2. Den Dover (Conservative MEP)	Paid £750,000 in staff and administration costs to a family owned firm thereby benefiting his wife and daughter; dismissed from the Conservative Party and required to repay some of the money in 2008	BBC 2008a
3. Peter Hain (Labour cabinet minister)	Late declaration of £103,000 worth of donations to his Labour deputy leadership bid (came to light in January 2008); Crown Prosecution Service said they could not prove Hain handled the donations	BBC 2008b
4. Derek Conway (Conservative MP)	Paid his sons as researchers for work which was not carried out to the extent claimed; required to pay back nearly £17,000, suspended from the House of Commons for ten days, and removed from the Party whip in 2008	BBC 2009m
5. Lord Snape/Lord Taylor of Blackburn (Labour peers)	Caught in 2009 in an undercover journalist sting allegedly offering to accept money to change legislation	BBC 2009n
6. Caroline Spelman (Labour cabinet minister)	Used Commons expenses to pay her nanny passing it off as constituency secretarial work (came to light in 2008); Commons Standards and Privileges Committee described the breach of the rules as 'unintentional' but required Spelman to pay back the money	BBC 2009o
7. Tony McNulty (Labour cabinet minister)	Claimed second home allowance on a property lived in by his parents; note that this came to light in March 2009 ahead of MPs' expenses proper but it pointed the way to what was a common occurrence	BBC 2009p
8. David Abrahams (property developer)	Made £600,000 of donations to the Labour Party using the names of other people in contravention of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act 2000 (came to light in 2007)	BBC 2009q

---

The author would like to acknowledge the helpful comments on an earlier version of the article of Terrell Carver, Jago Penrose, John Sidel and Mark Wickham-Jones.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, I will simply refer to it as ‘MPs’ expenses’ to refer to the generic episode which occurred in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Travers described MPs’ expenses as “an all-embracing political scandal” (2009: 92).

<sup>3</sup> See also Hay 2007 and Stoker 2006 for a general discussion of declining public trust in politics.

<sup>4</sup> Note, there is an extensive feminist literature which questions the public/private dichotomy. See, for example, Armstrong and Squires 2002.

<sup>5</sup> For details of the Act see <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/41/contents> (Last accessed November 16, 2010)

<sup>6</sup> For scholars who all shed light on this issue see Abrams 1988; Ashley 1988; Bratsis 2006; Finlayson and Martin 2006; Mitchell 1991.

<sup>7</sup> This point is based on a reading of the influential state building literature. See Hehir and Robinson 2007: 1-14 for authors who operate with these assumptions

<sup>8</sup> The various global league tables ranking countries according to perceived levels of corruption or the quality of the business environment clearly play an important role. See, for example, Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International 2010) or the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Report (World Economic Forum 2010).

<sup>9</sup> I provide data showing public and private being mixed up *prior to* MPs’ expenses to support my argument that this happens all the time.

<sup>10</sup> See also Finlayson 2007 in terms of his discussion about the role of rhetoric, and the importance of persuasion in relation to contested ideas, beliefs and meaning in politics.

---

<sup>11</sup> Put more theoretically, I am offering a Foucauldian view about how regimes of truth create 'common sense' understandings, and a Gramscian view that dominant elites do this hegemonically. See Howarth 2000 for background.