

**Submission from the
Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church
and the United Reformed Church**

Committee on Standards in Public Life – Inquiry into the Review of MPs’ Expenses

1. We are at a critical time in our political life, facing the global challenges of economic downturn and climate change alongside a widespread disillusionment in political processes and politicians. We need faith that our political institutions will be able to deal adequately with the problems that society faces. We confront serious challenges relating to the restoration of public trust in democratic institutions and the ordering of our common lives to build a more relational, just and equitable society.

The Churches and politics

2. This response is made jointly by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Methodist Church and The United Reformed Church.¹
3. Our churches believe in politics. We think democratic processes are the best way to achieve change, to benefit the causes of peace, justice and the integrity of creation. We therefore want the whole political system to earn respect, to be effective and to represent the wishes of the people.
4. As democratically elected representatives, MPs are expected to be motivated by a desire to serve their constituents for the common good. This is the social contract which binds citizens and the state and enables the flourishing of human individuals and groups. It is based on the requirement that no individual or group is to be excluded from enjoyment of the benefits of social, economic, and cultural collaboration. Human wellbeing requires more than the satisfaction of basic needs and must be guided by a more comprehensive vision of a life worth living.
5. We believe that the vast majority of men and women in public life are good people. Choosing to stand for election can be for many politicians a form of vocation. It is right that appropriate resources are available to enable them to do this well. Society needs to recognise this, and to respect those who serve in this way with decency and integrity.
6. We believe that the recent controversy which has led to this inquiry is extremely serious. The scandal over MPs’ expenses is part of a wider political disillusionment and disengagement. A much greater renewal and reinvigoration of our democracy is now needed.

Forgiveness

7. The anger provoked by the revelations over expenses has meant much of the debate has focused on the punishment of those who are seen as having broken the rules or interpreted them for their financial benefit. As Christian Churches we would wish the debate to include a proper understanding of the concept of forgiveness.
8. We understand forgiveness to be vital in restoring trust within relationships and believe this to be equally true in the case of the relationship between Parliament and the public. For us, forgiveness does not mean simply “letting someone off the hook”. The Churches understand forgiveness as a process, which often begins with acknowledgement of wrong doing. This can be followed by stages of appropriate punishment and reparation, with forgiveness and importantly the restoration of trust being offered in return.
9. We as churches would wish to actively encourage both Parliament and the public to engage in this process, as without forgiveness this key relationship for the democratic process will continue to flounder.

A new system for expenses

10. This committee is expected to produce a new set of regulations for MPs’ handling of expenses. One failing of the previous regime was it neither encouraged nor rewarded virtuous behaviour. An understanding of moral behaviour in this area should inform new regulations and be clearly communicated both inside and outside of Parliament.
11. Rules should not be seen as a limit to what is acceptable, but an intrinsic part of the ethos of our democratic institutions which help shape the culture into one which promotes goodness. In a similar way to which the Nolan Principles outline standards (not mere aspirations) to be met, the new rules governing expenses should model the virtuous behaviour we would expect from our politicians.
12. To encourage adherence to the moral values embodied in new rules, the body tasked with overseeing MPs expenses could be given the power not only to police the regulations but also declare an MP outside of the spirit of the regulations even if this carries no further formal sanction.
13. We offer the following guiding principles for you to consider as you reflect on your recommendations for the review of MPs’ expenses.

- i) **Service**

MPs are servants of the people. This means they should be equipped with the necessary resources to be able to serve them to the best of their ability, but not be furnished with the means to gain undue personal benefit.

- ii) **Transparency**

Openness is necessary to restore trust. All relevant details about MPs’ expenses and income should be made public, with privacy being respected where the disclosure of such information is not in the public interest. Preferably details should be in one central place, such as the Parliament

website, where members of the public can examine them. The expectation of transparency will encourage MPs to take considered judgements about their own expenses, and will remove the current fear of public exposure.

iii) Independence

MPs should not be allowed to set their own conditions for expenses. These functions should be transferred to an independent body which is trustworthy and free from political interference, and which is perceived as such.

iv) Stewardship

The body charged with overseeing a reformed expenses system must have stewardship of resources as its driving principle. As guardians of public funds, they must act in the interests of the public to make sure that only legitimate and reasonable claims are reimbursed. They must also be aware that the reputation of politics is dependent on the rigour of their work.

iv) Clarity

The new system of expenses must be clear and easily understood for it to have the respect and confidence of the public.

vi) Reasonability

The new system has to be reasonable and be seen to be reasonable by the majority of people. Expenses should only be paid if the money was spent on something directly related to the MPs' work of representing their constituency.

vii) Fairness

MPs need to be paid a fair amount for what they do. Remuneration needs to be sufficient so that it is not an overwhelming disincentive for people who are well-paid and thinking of moving into politics. Nor should MPs be put in a position where they are unable to carry out their duties professionally because they are unable to employ sufficient secretarial or research support or cannot afford to live or work in their constituencies or near Parliament. Allowances should not be used as a basis of supplementing MP's salaries but should be capped to cover essential needs such as accommodation and transport. Expenses should only cover out-of-pocket expenditure in the direct line of duty.

viii) Realism

MPs must understand their financial situation compared to the vast majority of the public, many of whom think that they are already very well paid. MPs' expenses should not be excessively lavish or ostentatious. The average UK household income is between £25,000-£30,000 per year. MPs' choices regarding their standard of living paid by expenses or allowances should take into account the daily lives of their constituents.

ix) Personal Responsibility

MPs must be responsible for their own claims, and they should be prepared to face the consequences if they cannot justify why they have made them to their constituents.

14. Public service is a public trust. Citizens expect public servants to serve the public interest with fairness and to manage public resources diligently on a daily basis. Public service ethics are a prerequisite to, and underpin, public trust, and are a keystone of good governance.
15. When relationships break down there is conflict, distrust and fear. To bring peace, trust and hope we need to have faith in the people that we have relationships with. MPs need to be trusted by the public, and the system needs to be constructed in a way which makes it easier for relationships to be built, and harder for them to be broken.
16. We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to your inquiry. We have tried to confine our submission to broad ethical considerations and the principles behind a restructured system of expenses for MPs. We have taken soundings across our three churches and hope that the following reflections may be useful to you in your deliberations. They are offered to you in a spirit of earnestness and encouragement.
17. We wish you well as you prepare your recommendations and offer leadership on this issue. We would be able to give oral evidence to the Committee if requested.

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ⁱ The **Baptist Union of Great Britain** (BUGB) is the Baptist family in England and Wales (there is also the Baptist Union of Wales). It is made up of churches, regional associations, the national resource centre and Baptist colleges. The Union works with others in mission locally, regionally and internationally. There are some 150,000 members of Baptist churches associated with the Baptist Union of Great Britain. www.baptist.org.uk.

The **Methodist Church** has about 265,000 members and 800,000 people are connected with the Church. It has about 5,800 churches in Great Britain, and also maintains links with other Methodist churches totalling a worldwide membership of 70 million. www.methodist.org.uk.

The **United Reformed Church** comprises 100,000 people in 1600 congregations. It has brought together English Presbyterians, English, Welsh and Scottish Congregationalists and members of the Churches of Christ. Worldwide, more than 70 million Christians are members of the Reformed family of churches, the largest Protestant tradition. The name 'Reformed' is used because the churches began to emerge with reform movements in the sixteenth century. www.urc.org.uk.

The three denominations are the largest of the Free Churches in Britain.

The **Joint Public Issues Team**, created in September 2006, combines the expertise of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church in the area of public issues. Through close collaboration, the churches aim to increase the effectiveness of their engagement in public life and parliamentary affairs. www.jointpublicissues.org.uk.