



Brian Coleman

'Pay peanuts, you get monkeys'

MUCH nonsense has appeared in newspapers in recent months about politicians' salaries and expenses.

The so-called "John Lewis" list of what rates MPs can claim for furniture and fittings for their second homes has provoked many articles by outraged tabloid journalists whose own expense claims are no doubt backed up by self filled-in receipts.

Locally, councillors' allowances (very modest by London standards) have provoked mock indignation by an assorted collection of local journalists looking for an easy story, ex-councillors and the usual suspects who complain if Barnet Council spends money on anything at all.

Britain is fortunate in that the cases of corruption among politicians are few and far between. Who now remembers the Poulson affair of the early 1970s that finished the career of the then Home Secretary and Chipping Barnet MP Reginald Maudling and sent sundry civil servants and local government figures, most noticeably the leader of Newcastle council T Dan Smith, to prison? The recent scandal at the London Development Agency, involving millions of pounds frittered away on goodness-knows-what, with accusations that the agency was used as "Livingstone's private bank" was all the more shocking because it was so unusual in the UK where we are not familiar with the "pork barrel" politics common in America.

The salaries paid to members of parliament are, frankly, ridiculously low and while the allowance system may be outdated and open to abuse, the alternative



Fare enough? Brian Coleman claimed £8,000 for taxis last year

of paying a market rate salary to our politicians, whose duties are often seven days a week, 15 hours a day seems unpalatable to an electorate which expects its politicians always to be available but is unwilling to recognise the strains and stresses of the job. Likewise the Local Government Act of 2000 has virtually created a class of full-time councillors entirely changing the focus and nature of the job and ending the days when local worthies could "dabble" in politics for the reward of a few civic dinners a year. Only in the City of London Corporation does that type of local government still exist.

"If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys"

as the saying goes, and it is as true in public life as any other profession. If we want people of calibre to stand for elected office, nationally or locally, and do the job full-time, the public has to pay the costs – and that includes politicians' expenses.

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