

## **The Gem puts MP Madeleine Moon in the Spotlight.**

IT was on a Saturday when Madeleine Moon MP asked The GEM to go through her expenses and report back to readers in the county borough. We met in a coffee shop in Porthcawl and she explained that rapidly-growing public resentment was the reason, and that she was upset that people had such a low opinion of MPs.

At the time, she had not featured in The Telegraph<sup>1</sup>'s series of revelations, all based on the leaked CD.

I accepted the offer. She paid for my coffee, asked for the bill and the waitress, with impeccable comic timing, paused and said straight-faced<sup>3</sup>Would you like a receipt?<sup>2</sup>

I laughed and so did Mrs Moon although her laugh was a little more strained than mine. Given the events since, and the escalation in public anger, I doubt if she could manage even a faint smile now.

The following Monday, she was in The Telegraph. Not for 'flipping<sup>1</sup> the designation of her second home, or for avoiding capital gains tax. Not for cleaning her moat, or for an ornamental duck house.

She had arranged for furniture to be delivered to her home in Porthcawl. Furnishing a second home in Westminster is OK, but not your primary residence. The fact that she was 'Furniture Parliamentarian of the Year<sup>1</sup> made it irresistible to headline writers.

She explained that, because she already had a large number of items in her Porthcawl home that she could use to furnish the London flat, she had sent everything in one go via a local remover. It also meant that she could take delivery in one go, rather than waiting in the flat for different deliveries from different suppliers. She told The GEM: 'Furnishing that flat for a total of £4,000 was good value.'<sup>2</sup>

The GEM can confirm that her Additional Costs Allowance file does include a bill for transporting furniture from Porthcawl to London, of £599 including VAT.

So, what did The GEM get to see? Mrs Moon left me alone to wander through computer files covering three areas: The Additional Costs Allowance (ACA); the Incidental Expenses Provision (IEP); and her Communications Allowance. The records covered the period from May 2005 (when she was elected) to February 2008.

These files are due to be released to the public in July, and are in the 'redacted<sup>1</sup> version. That means that many addresses are blocked out to comply with the Data Protection Act.

This means, for instance, that I can see that Mrs Moon employs a cleaner for her London flat and pays her £75 a month when the Commons are in recess, and £100 a month when it is sitting.

I cannot see the cleaner's name and address, but then I am not sure I need to. Something else, however, that is not in the redacted files is correspondence between Mrs Moon and the fees office. More seriously, I can't see the address that Mrs Moon has designated as her second home, and this information has exposed the practice of 'flipping'. However, The Telegraph has seen the un-redacted version, and reported that her London flat is her second home.

Therefore, as an MP, Mrs Moon is entitled to claim the cost of the mortgage in her Additional Costs Allowance (ACA).

So, in July, anyone with access to the net will be able to confirm that she has a mortgage of £250,000 with the Co-op. The first 59 payments (just over £1,000) are at a fixed rate (5.09 per cent), and only then does she transfer to a variable rate. Solicitors' fees were £4,080 and the Co-op valuation and survey was £425.

The Telegraph asked what Mrs Moon would do with any eventual profit from the second home, and she replied that she would return any profits to the public purse.

Having bought in October 2005, however, that may depend on how the property market recovers.

Going back to those three categories, the ACA, the IEP and the Communication Allowances, let's look at them one by one.

The Communication Allowance is the most straightforward. It was introduced in 2007/08 and it enables sitting MPs to let their constituents know what they have been doing.

The most common form of communication is a newsletter.

Now these are not popular with candidates running against sitting MPs. Those candidates believe it gives the MP an advantage. I'm not entirely convinced, because I know a number of people who start frothing at the mouth when one of these newsletters drops through their letter box.

However, what you can say is that this cash has to be spent on communication expenses, and nothing else. An MP can't divert it to any other use. Madeleine Moon believes it helps keep her constituents informed about current legislation and other important issues, and spent the full allowance in 2007/08. (In fact, she inadvertently overspent by £287, something that she will have to balance out in 2008/09.

Incidentally, Mrs Moon has not spent one penny of this Communications Allowance with The GEM.

Items relating to the second home tend to appear in the Additional Costs Allowance (ACA). The biggest item is the aforementioned mortgage. Another significant item is a six-monthly general service charge on her flat of £836. Council tax on the property is £1,187.

However, Mrs Moon did up-grade her second home over the next three years. A rug (£250) was bought in January 2007, and a bedside cabinet (£73) and a fridge (£192) was bought in May 2007, and a chest of drawers (£211) in July 2007. In March 2008, she replaced her cooker and washing machine at a cost of £805.

In June 2006, she bought a combined TV and DVD home unit for £820. She also showed me recently-taken digital images on her lap top of her London flat - with the items in situ.

Mrs Moon also claims for food when in Westminster. She claims nothing when the House is in recess, but she insists that her normal routine is to eat breakfast, lunch and an evening three-course meal there four days a week. She says that House of Commons meals are not as subsidised for MPs as people imagine. Her average food claim (per week) is about £85. There are also the usual bills for insurance, gas and electricity.

Mrs Moon's total spending on the ACA has been as follows: 2005/06 - £21,634; 2006/07 - £22,110; 2007/08 - £22,902.

The next section, Incidental Expenses Provision, is pretty much as it says although many of the items relate to office costs.

The biggest item by far is the rent and council tax at her Bridgend constituency office in Nolton Street, which adds up to £7,800 per annum. (Mrs Moon is not charged any rent on her Westminster office).

The stationery costs look quite significant, but then all letters from constituents have to be replied to. Also, a postcard campaign, with hundreds of people sending the same message, can add to the costs.

Mrs Moon is allowed to take a taxi to Westminster from Paddington when she travels, and she can take one back to the station when she returns to her constituency. A taxi to or from her flat (a 20-minute walk away) is not claimable. Therefore, her average taxi bill of about £85 per month pays for eight trips to and from Paddington.

One parliamentary mobile phone is claimed per month, at around £48 per month. The petty cash for the two offices in Westminster and in Bridgend works out at £3,000 over the year.

There is also a payment to The Western Mail and Echo of £1,459 in May 2007.

There are also, as would be expected with two offices, regular payments to BT, gas and electricity.

Mrs Moon's spending on the IEP has been as follows: 2005/06 - £27,348; 2006/07 - £21,104; 2007/08 - £18,994.

There is one other significant account which I was not allowed to see, and that

is the staffing allowance. We are given access to an overall total, but not individual salaries. Over the three years, the expenses are as follows: 2005/06 - £76,580 (four staff); 2006/07 - £81,902, 2007/08 - £93,206 (five staff).

People can, and no doubt will, argue over how many staff an MP needs. However, Mrs Moon is fiercely defensive of them, and says she would pay them more if she could. Certainly, the ever-increasing public anger has had its effect on her staff, and the ones that I met looked as much under strain as their MP.

When it became known that I was going to be looking through Mrs Moon's expenses, I was surprised at some of the comments I received. One acquaintance, in an unexpectedly poetic turn of phrase, said: <sup>3</sup>The bonfire of public opinion has been lit - and you know what your job is...

So how does Mrs Moon feel about the current climate? She said: <sup>3</sup>I feel defiled. I am blazing angry at how my work is being destroyed by innuendo and unfounded allegations against my integrity.

She added that she was aware of a rumour around Porthcawl suggesting that she was having a large house built in Mawdlam. She insisted: I have one home here in Porthcawl, and the flat in Westminster - and nothing else.

There are 646 MPs. In 2006/07, Mrs Moon was 251st in the expenses league issued by TheyWorkForYou.com. This list ads up all the various categories of expenses claimed by MPs. In 2007/08, after an increase in staff costs, and after using her Communications Allowance, she had drifted up to 78th.

For comparison purposes, her Labour neighbour in the Vale of Glamorgan, John Smith (who has just announced that he is standing down for health reasons) was 565th in the expenses league in 2006/07, but moved up to 296th in 2007/08 (again primarily as a result of spending his Communications Allowance). Ogmore's Huw Irranca-Davies was 49th in the expenses league in 2006/07, but fell to 258th in 2007/08.

Finally, in the interests of balance, it takes a little searching to find a Welsh Conservative MP, but David Davies in Monmouth was a frugal 593rd in 2006/07, but jumped to 99th in 2007/08.

The Welsh Lib-Dem MP who springs to mind most readily is, inevitably, Lembit Opik, who was 390th in 2006/07, and 52nd in 2007/08.

Once again, Mr Davies and Mr Opik spent their communications allowance, and this is clearly a factor in their rise up the expenses league table.

So, where does this leave Mrs Moon? Well, that could depend on that <sup>3</sup>bonfire of public opinion<sup>2</sup> whether it burns out or carries on getting fiercer.

Is she right to be upset at being singled out so early in the Telegraph

revelations? Certainly, both before and after her appearance, there have been some horrendous transgressions transgressions where the MP had no defence to offer at all. How, for instance, did Margaret Moran manage to get that £22,000 dry rot bill passed?

Gordon Brown recently described the MPs' expenses system as a 'Gentlemen's club' and having read through the redacted expenses, I would have to agree.

I think it is inevitable that in future, MPs' accounts will be independently audited, and this article is not an audit.

We all know by now that the rules were loose and open to various interpretations. 'Transparency' is the new buzz word, and people will be expecting much more detail in future.

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