

Write-offs

Recently, our newspapers have been dominated by revelations regarding widespread abuse of the 'second-home allowance', a facility intended to give MPs help in maintaining a London base. I must confess, I've been somewhat shocked by these sensational headlines - after all, MPs with their snouts in the trough is hardly newsworthy....and certainly not front-page material. But at least it has forced party-leaders to clamp down on the worst excesses, and they now seem quite keen to derail the gravy-train.

And so, the honourable Rupert Ponsonby-foulkes has been obliged to pay back the money he claimed for his gold-plated bidet. The extension to the servant's quarters has been deemed extravagant, and if he really *must* convert his private golf-course from nine holes to eighteen, he'll be doing it without the help of public funds.

Likewise, Syd Arkwright (MP) will have to pick up the tab for pebble-dashing his outside lavatory. He has learnt, to his cost, that the addition of garden-gnomes does not constitute an essential upgrade to his property....and that his tasteful wall-montage of flying ducks - interspersed with paintings of semi-clad tribal dancers - has more appeal to *him*, than it has to the taxpayer.

But is this type of stuff really anything new? Wasn't it Rupert (or one of his predecessors) who employed both his sons as research assistants - and his mistress as a secretary - on the public payroll? Didn't Syd habitually claim overnight allowance, while actually staying with Rita from the chip-shop? The truth is, this kind of low-key milking of the system has always been with us.

The State of Virginia once acknowledged the extent of corruption in the political arena - it was so endemic, they effectively legalised it. They brought in a law prohibiting bribery and corrupt practices by anyone... *other than by political candidates!* Over here, a cynic may tell you that Westminster is largely populated by people who are primarily interested in self-aggrandisement, and making shedloads of cash. Of course, a more accomplished cynic might add that these characteristics are the politicians' best claim to being truly representative of the electorate.

It's a dismal picture of public life, but we should remember that it's not the whole picture. I'd like to flag-up a different dimension: Amid the scandal and the headlines, there are individual MPs who have not been mentioned - it is as if they don't exist. They represent various parties, but their common bond is that they try to serve the nation with diligence, with integrity....and without ever once padding their expenses. In an environment like Westminster, it is people such as these who are *really* newsworthy....people who *haven't* abused the laughably ineffective regulations, and will not be any worse-off under stricter ones.

It's easy to write-off whole groups - whether that's MPs, or perhaps immigrants, or even teenagers. I try not to categorise people in that wayafter all, God could have done that with me - but didn't. And if he has been kind enough to treat me as an individual, shouldn't I do the same for others?