

British Parliament Expense Scandal

The darkest day for shell-shocked Parliament as expenses scandal claims two scalps

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Parliament suffered its blackest day in memory yesterday.

The Commons expenses scandal claimed a Labour and a Tory scalp - and two Labour peers faced the shame of being the first members of the Lords to be suspended since the dark days of the English Civil War.

Parliament has become the least popular institution in the land and is now less well-regarded by voters than the European Union according to a shocking poll for the PoliticsHome website.

Politicians tried desperately to maintain a sense of business as usual. But Government announcements, Labour's local election campaign launch and debates were all swept aside by a tide of sleaze.

Paralysis gripped the House as shell-shocked MPs, fearing a voter backlash, let go of the reins of democracy and instead concentrated on saving their own careers.

Only 14 honourable members turned up to the Commons to discuss swine flu.

Until yesterday Labour, Tory and Liberal Democrat MPs accused of having made dubious claims had simply written out cheques, with £129,000 in refunds to the taxpayer pledged to date. But now some are beginning to pay with their jobs.

Former Labour minister Elliot Morley's career lay in ruins last night as he was suspended from the Parliamentary Labour Party and from his post as an environment adviser to Gordon Brown.

He admitted claiming £16,000 in second home expenses for a mortgage he had already paid off.

The Prime Minister was facing criticism over his flatfooted response to the scandal after it emerged Labour chiefs were alerted to problems with the MP's claims 'one or two weeks ago'.

But Mr Morley was hauled over the coals only after details were leaked and became public yesterday.

Conservative leader David Cameron lost one of his closest aides, Tory MP Andrew MacKay, after internal party checks revealed he had made 'unacceptable' second home claims.

Mr MacKay is married to Bromsgrove MP Julie Kirkbride who had a brick thrown through her office window by a furious constituent in a sign of the increasingly ugly public mood.

Pressure was growing on Cabinet ministers, including Alistair Darling, accused of 'flipping' the designation of their second home between properties to maximise their benefits after a colleague described the practice as 'reprehensible'.

Labour's chief whip Nick Brown said: 'Of course there can be good reasons for these things, but the allowances are not really to enable people to play the property market.

'I think that's a pretty reprehensible thing to do.'

Tory environment spokesman Greg Barker, who was accused of making £320,000 buying and selling a London flat he bought with the help of Commons expenses, said he was making a voluntary five-figure payment in capital gains tax.

Tory grandee Douglas Hogg agreed to repay expenses totalling £2,200 after claims that he used the money to clear a moat at his country home.

To compound the sense of a tide of sleaze engulfing Westminster, two Labour peers faced the humiliation of being the first members of the Lords to be suspended since 1642.

Lord Taylor of Blackburn and Lord Truscott were found to have offered to amend legislation for money.