

By Opit Hop

While revelations over MPs' expenses over the last few months may have rocked Westminster and damaged public confidence in politicians, they have also prompted us to ask important questions about the rules governing the behaviour of our elected representatives.

Significantly, some MPs have been attacked as 'part-timers' for having business and other interests above and beyond their parliamentary duties. Particular ire has been heaped on those MPs who hold well-paid directorships with major companies. It is, critics argue, inappropriate for parliamentarians to have outside business interests.

But the people who say this are wrong. MPs with second jobs are better MPs and help to make our democracy more effective and more representative.

By taking additional paid employment, it is argued, MPs provide less value and a poorer service to their constituents. Yet, in reality, MPs with outside interests tend to add value to the legislature and provide a better service. Backbench MPs in particular have flexible hours and tend to work accordingly – if the House is sitting late, or if there is a 10pm vote, no-one expects them to work solidly all day without a break. And many of the outside jobs that have received the most attention represent a very modest time commitment – as low as a few days per year and typically a day a month.

We have a right to hold our representatives to account – but they have a right to choose how to use their spare time. Some MPs may choose to use this time to see their families and children; others might use it for recreation and leisure; and others might use it for a second job. It's their choice. And simply because an MP has an outside interest, it does not mean he or she devotes less time to their constituents. Parliamentarians should be judged on their overall effectiveness and there is one very powerful mechanism for this – if you don't think your MP is doing his or her job, vote them out, or threaten to. To paraphrase Johnson, there's nothing like an impending election to focus a MP's mind.

No-one is suggesting that being an MP is not an important full-time job. But outside interests keep parliamentarians in touch with the real world. MPs with outside interests tend to be more rounded and effective individuals. And, after the recent expenses scandals, we should be encouraging more MPs to look beyond Westminster and to become less institutionalised. Banning second jobs would have the opposite effect. Many commentators have criticised the effect of the 'Westminster bubble' in clouding legislators' judgement: by encouraging parliamentarians to have outside interests, we are helping to burst this bubble, or at least to reduce its viscosity.

The media focus has – understandably – been on those MPs with highly-paid business

interests. But what about the rest? A couple of MPs are special constables (a demanding 16 hours per month); some are part-time soldiers; others are practicing GPs or pharmacists; and many act as trustees or sit on the advisory boards of charities. Virtually every MP does a number of pro bono activities daily – speaking at events and seminars, attending dinners or writing articles for magazines. And a surprising number of MPs are local councillors or members of regional assemblies.

And the most common and time-consuming second job is that of being a Government minister.

One MP in particular stands out as having a second job that consumes almost all his time – the right honourable member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, Dr Gordon Brown MP.

A lot of MPs do a lot of things that aren't directly related to their main job as an MP and the criticism of second jobs in the media has been very selective. The issue isn't so much about the time spent on these jobs but, rather, about the money paid and the risk of conflicts of interest arising. Yet even on these points the critics aren't on firm ground.

Some jobs that MPs do are paid a lot; others are not paid at all (e.g. as a charity trustee); and others are used to help meet the costs of running a members' office. But whatever role an MP has in an outside organisation, why should he or she be paid less simply because he or she is an MP? It seems manifestly unfair that a parliamentarian who is a non-executive director of a company should be paid any less than someone similarly qualified who is doing the same job and who has the same responsibilities. If an MP writes a good book, why should he or she be paid less for doing so than anyone else? That William Hague gets a high advance for his work as an author reflects the fact that he's a very good, very popular author. And how would a cap on MPs' pay be administered? It would be neither sensible, nor practical, nor fair.

What the recent debates over second jobs have exposed is one very important point: that our representatives should be accountable and be part of a transparent system that effectively avoid conflicts of interest and maintains public confidence. For this reason, it seems not only sensible but obvious that ministers and others should not have significant outside interests. Moreover, if MPs are taking on 'parliamentary consultancy' roles that are no more than paid lobbying, their job description should make that clear (that would make them think again). A clear description of what elected representatives do outside Parliament is essential. But trenchant regulation would not only be an administrative minefield, but would also further entrench the dominance of professional politicians over people with real-world experience.

Politics is an all-encompassing business and therefore needs all-encompassing people from diverse backgrounds. By providing transparency and accountability, we can create a system that both creates public confidence and recognises the value of outside employment. MPs and political parties should not be afraid to make this case and should not hold back from extolling the importance of parliamentarians having second jobs and real-world experience. Voters have a right to a fair day's work from their MP. A second job can help make that a good day's work too.