



November 2021

Dear Constituent,

Thank you for your recent communication raising the issue of MPs having outside employment or financial interests.

Please see for yourself what is declared under my name in the Register of Members Financial Interests, and you will be able to compare my entry to others, and to look at prior years: <https://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-financial-interests/parliamentary-commissioner-for-standards/registers-of-interests/register-of-members-financial-interests/>

Members are also obliged to declare in their speeches (in debates, committees etc) if they have a relevant interest, which might be construed as a conflict of interest, even if they are not obliged to declare it on the Register.

Every MP has to navigate conflicts of interest all the time; conflicts between the national interest and the party interest, or with their private interests. We have to deal with conflicts of loyalty: to friends inside and outside Parliament; to party and to constituency interests. Generally, MPs try to put the national interest first, then their constituents, and then their party's programme and policies. We should talk more openly about the fact that this is never simple, and it is hard to reduce these conflicts to a simple set of hard and fast rules. One rule however that we must always adhere to is that MPs should never act in their own private or personal interests.

MPs are regulated by the House of Commons Code of Conduct and the House of Commons Behaviour Code. This creates quite a complicated landscape of principles, rules, investigations and adjudications, and the House of Commons Standards Committee is looking to make this simpler and easier for MPs and the public to understand.

We all have values (personal values; public service values) which we try demonstrate in the way we carry out our daily lives as public leaders. We all strive to observe the seven principles of public life which are the true guide to our attitudes and behaviour in our role as MPs.

Following the terrible murders of Jo Cox and then Sir David Amess, we also acknowledge the need to show more kindness to our colleagues and to our political opponents in debate and on social media. Finally, there are the Rules and Guidance of the House of Commons Code of Conduct. These must be observed to the letter, and if in any doubt, we are obliged to seek advice from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards or from Registrar of Members' Interests.

In the end, however, the Rules are not an end in themselves. They are only a backstop. I cannot comment on any individual case, nor give my views on what the rules might mean in relation to any case. Anyone who thinks they may have broken the Rules or Guidance, intentionally or accidentally, or finds themselves under investigation, should go and see the



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Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, and take her advice on whether any rule may have been broken, and, if so, how to rectify the situation as quickly and as simply as possible.

On the question of whether MPs should be able to have outside jobs or outside interests, the first principle is that no MP should be able to misuse their position in the House of Commons as a means of earning additional income. The Committee on Standards in Public Life has said that MPs should not be able to act in the role of a “parliamentary consultant”. This is one of the things which the Standards Committee says they are now looking at, in the aftermath of Owen Paterson.

It is also very clear that MPs cannot be paid lobbyists. ‘Paid advocacy’ has been against the rules for 100s of years. The rules around this should be tightened up. Any MP employed as a consultant should have a written contract (which Owen Paterson did not have). That contract should set out exactly what the consultancy is about; what the MP is expected to do. It should be explicit in the contract that any MP employed by an outside body is not being asked to lobby, or to give advice about, lobbying.

An MP might also be an accountant, or management consultant, or a specialist in some field like finance, or IT. Being an MP is not intended to prevent an MP from continuing in their livelihood or profession – such as being a lawyer, company director, GP or dentist. A consultancy should not be about “Oh, you are an MP, therefore we want to employ you as a consultant.” If it looks like that, then the MP should not take on that role.

Being an MP does not mean you are so busy you do not have time for anything else. If you take on an outside interest, of course you must fit that around your primary responsibility as an MP. It depends how many hours you really want to work. Some MPs do not take on outside interests, but frankly do not put in so many hours. In the end, we MPs are judged by our constituents, and voters can remove lazy MPs at elections.

It can seem attractive just to ban all outside jobs and interests for MPs, but it does depend upon what sort of Parliament you want. Do you want a citizens’ Parliament, drawn from all walks of life, where some MPs are continuing with their profession or livelihood, such as management consultant, a GP or a dentist, or a lawyer, or company director, while they are also serving as an MP? Or do you want a Parliament of entirely professional politicians, which might not be so attractive? Do you want a Parliament which retains people with experience, who can combine work outside Parliament with their continuing role as an MP, such as ex-ministers? Or do you want more people with experience and seniority to leave politics, and because that is the only way they can return to their profession or livelihood? That may mean you have to pay MPs bigger salaries. I think most people would say no to that.

Banning all outside jobs may not mean you would abolish MPs from having any outside interests. The most important thing is that MPs outside interests are declared and transparent, which is why we have the Register.

A farmer or business owner cannot suddenly stop owning a farm or a business when they become an MP, or an author who is earning from books already published. If you banned just earnings from employment or business, how would that be fair when other MPs receive income from stocks and shares, or from inherited wealth, or from renting property?

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There is no denying that the past week or two have been terrible for the reputation of MPs and for the House of Commons. We can and must do better. I very much hope that not just the tightening of some of the rules, but a more public debate about the values and principles which should support the best attitudes and behaviour of MPs will lead to better and deserved public confidence in MPs. It is certainly my aim to help to achieve that.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Chris'.

**CHRIS HEATON-HARRIS MP  
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR DAVENTRY**