



COCK & BULL

ON THE HOUSE

The UK parliament is in crisis as an alarmed British public discovers that its politicians are a bunch of money-grabbing crooks.

What's all the fuss about?

Politicians fiddling their expenses claims. Apparently, the price of freedom is not eternal vigilance, but making sure that our representatives are fully stocked with flatscreen tellys, massage chairs and Egyptian cotton bedsheets.

Sounds like the recipe for a good night in.

Well, they're all items that MPs have claimed on expenses in recent years, according to a series of revelations in The Daily Telegraph during the past few weeks, which showed that most of our politicians have the scruples of a happy-slapping hoodie.

So what was the most outrageous claim?

Sir Peter Viggers, Tory MP for Gosport, claimed £1,645 for an ornamental duck house that could be seen from space with Google Earth.

Crikey. No wonder taxes are so high back home...

Viggers' claim was disallowed in the end, actually, so he had to pay out of his own pocket for the ornamental monstrosity, which the ducks hated and never used anyway. And he was still forced to resign just for trying to get it through.



Ouch!

"I have made a ridiculous and grave error of judgment," he said in a statement. "I am ashamed and humiliated."

And as a former taxpayer I feel dirty, cheap and used.

Rather like Jacqui Smith, the former home secretary, who was embarrassed to discover that her husband, who is also her assistant, had "inadvertently" filed a £10 claim for two on-demand pornographic movies he downloaded while his wife was working in London. The Sunday Express referred to her as "shameless Jacqui Smith".

That's rich.

Especially from a newspaper owned by Richard Desmond, who earned his fortune from, err, selling pornography.

Is anybody really surprised that some MPs expenses game the system?

Aside from the few embarrassing claims, the most damaging revelation has been just how many MPs are fiddling their housing allowances to make sure that taxpayers foot the bill for everything from John Prescott's mock Tudor beams to the maintenance of Tory James Arbuthnot's swimming pool. Tony McNulty, a Labour minister, claimed for a second home that was 8 miles from his main home.

Employing your husband as your assistant sounds a bit ropery too.

Oh, that's nothing. Smith's husband did at least actually do something.

Watching movies, it seems.

Well, he also handled the expenses claims, evidently. But Tory Derek Conway was caught in 2008 paying his son £13,000 for doing nothing at all. And was caught a year later doing the same thing for his other son.

Now that's what I call shameless.

Quite. More generally, most people have been amazed to learn just how much of an MP's life is paid for by taxpayers – and how many of the claims were within the rules.

"I'm as straight as they come."

Shahid Malik, a few hours before quitting as justice minister

So what's going to happen?

If there's any sense we would simply pay politicians a sensible salary and only let them claim for legitimate expenses, like any other organisation. Gordon Brown earns about £195,000 a year in total, compared to Nicolas Sarkozy's £235,000 and Barack Obama's £1.4 million.

But safe in the knowledge that sense rarely prevails...?

MPs know it's difficult to pass pay rises through parliament, so the current system suits them and will probably persist. One solution might be to make the claims process even less transparent, to protect against any future embarrassment.