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Don't swallow myth of a golden political age

By GREG ROSEN

After the revelations surrounding the expenses claims of some MP over the last few days, polls suggest that it will be a long time before the average voter will accept on trust the description of MPs as “honourable members.” As an appellation for Members of Parliament, some have always regarded it as a curious choice of words. For others, the temptation to hark back to a supposed golden age has been hard to resist.

Already articles have appeared comparing unfavourably the denizens of today’s House of Commons with the generation before: “a generation of giants is often followed by a generation of pygmies,” writes Janet Daley in the *Telegraph*, “The Thatchers and the Foots, the Keith Josephs and the Tony Benns, walked a larger stage than the one that is left to the present bunch.”

But there was no golden age. Daley’s generation of “giants” had feet of clay. It was the generation beset by the “Poulson” corruption scandal that brought about the resignation of Conservative Home Secretary and deputy leader Reggie Maudling (whom Margaret Thatcher saw fit to resuscitate as her Shadow Foreign Secretary despite his disgrace) and the imprisonment of the most famous local government leader of the era: T. Dan Smith. Alongside Foot and Benn on the Labour benches sat those pillars of propriety Robert Maxwell and John Stonehouse, both of whom, eventually took to the ocean wave sans boat in order to escape the consequences of their fraudulent behaviour. And alongside the giants were plenty of pygmies. Do we really have to remind the Conservatives of the saintliness of Cecil Parkinson, or the towering stature of Patrick “brush your teeth in the dark” Jenkin or John Moore [Note for younger viewers: John Moore was a man briefly touted as Thatcher’s anointed heir]. Were Labour Cabinets really better when they counted as members the likes of Stan Orme or Lord Longford.

What does set apart Thatcher, Joseph, Benn and Foot from many of today's politicians is that they were (or indeed still are in the cases of all apart from the late Sir Keith Joseph), persons of independent means. Margaret Thatcher married an independently wealthy husband. Sir Keith Joseph, a second Baronet, was the son of a former Lord Mayor of London and scion of the Bovis construction family. Michael Foot and Tony Benn are both the sons of Liberal MPs of sufficient prosperity to send them to private schools.

When the Thatcher, Joseph, Benn and Foot generation entered politics, there was not the generous system of expenses allowable to MPs that there is today. As late as the 1960s, MPs had to pay for their own stamps and phone calls to constituents out of their meagre salary. They had, it is true, free house of Commons stationary for official purposes. But only four dozen sheets of writing paper and envelopes per day. Pity the MP who might have a constituency controversy affecting more than fifty people at once. They also enjoyed free phone calls within London: not much good if you are the MP for a seat north of the Watford Gap, never mind north of Hadrian's Wall.

A (small) salary for MPs “to enable men to come here, men who would render incalculable service to the State... but who cannot be here because their means do not allow it,” had been introduced by Lloyd George in 1911, over great protests from the Tory benches. Nevertheless, so small was the stipend, without family money, the support of a rich sugar-daddy or trade union, or a second job, it was still very difficult to afford to serve in Parliament.

In the 1950s an official enquiry found that some MPs were unable to afford meals in the House of Commons dining room. This was apparently an improvement on the situation revealed in a survey conducted under the 1937 Conservative government, which, according to the memoir of Sir Henry Morris Jones MP (a government whip), found that a number of fainting attacks among Labour MPs were caused by mal-nourishment.

Go back a few decades more and you enter an age when it was expected that MPs would not only have their own income but bring with them a personal pot of cash to fund the local campaigns of their political party. Candidates effectively “bought” their seats.

Some of today’s politicians, such as David Cameron and George Osborne, would have sufficient family money to serve in parliament were we to return to that system. But could Donald Dewar or Robin Cook have done so? Or Jim Sillars? Or Alex Salmond?

The expenses system that Westminster has been using has clearly been abused. But the lost world that Janet Daley idealises, where MPs had family money or second jobs, was one where Parliamentary scrutiny of government waste and incompetence was even less adequate than it is today. It is good for democracy that MPs are able to employ parliamentary researchers to help them hold government to account, and to spend time both in Westminster and in their constituency.

It is shocking that MPs have been so reluctant to embrace the ready alternative solutions that would have avoided this ugly mess. They could have embraced the system of openness and disclosure that has served Holyrood so well. And there seems to be no convincing reason why MPs should not embrace the proposals advanced by Nick Clegg, or Labour MP John Mann, that would ban MPs from playing the property market with their second homes allowance, yet give MPs without family money the ability to live in both in their constituency and in London without having recourse to joining the tent city that Westminster’s Parliament Square seems to have almost permanently become.

But if public outrage at the abuse of the system were to enable those with rose-tinted delusions about the past to turn back the clock to the days when only people of “independent means” can afford to serve as MPs, and MPs visited their constituency barely once a month or less, the real loser will be democracy.

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