

Letter in the *Evening Standard*

MPs' expenses: due respect for Parliament

The Archbishop of Canterbury warned last week (Times letters 23 May 2009) that continuing systematic humiliation of MPs over their expenses threatens a heavy price in terms of confidence in our democracy. Inflicting such large-scale humiliation is unconstitutional, and risks breaching parliamentary privilege.

Many MPs have acted improperly, breaking the Commons Green Book's injunction that 'claims should be above reproach'. That does not legitimize the way some prominent people are insulting those who are elected representatives with no proper finding of guilt against them.

Nick Clegg, a Privy Councillor, absurdly said (Guardian, 28 May 2009) 'let us bar the gates of Westminster and stop MPs leaving for their summer holidays until this crisis has been sorted out, and every nook and cranny of our political system reformed'.

Gordon Brown is subjecting elected MPs to what is being called a Star Chamber to call them to account and subject them to discipline. It is one thing to consider in a respectful and polite manner whether a sitting MP should be deselected for the next election. It is quite another to haul the MP ignominiously before a kangaroo court where the penalty is a termination of his or her career.

If the Commons possessed a Speaker who knew his job, he would already have taken firm and strong measures to investigate recalcitrant MPs and subject them to the discipline of the House itself. Self-appointed busybodies who take on this function (and that includes the Prime Minister) risk action for breach of privilege when Parliament resumes after the next general election.

Yours faithfully,

Francis Bennion, former parliamentary counsel.