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British MPs Pad Their Expense Accounts

We actually paid to dredge a moat.

By **QUENTIN LETTS**

London

This week couldn't get worse for Britain's politicians. Their expense claims, long kept secret, are being disgorged daily in London's newspapers. An appalled and exuberantly entertained nation is learning just how much its elected parliamentarians have been charging taxpayers for domestic cleaners, swimming-pool maintenance, chauffeurs and more.

One former minister has submitted receipts included a £2,000 (\$3,021) bill for dredging the moat at his country house. Another had the public purse pay the price for horse manure for his garden. All of this is coming at a time when politicians are trying to persuade the country to accept public-sector cuts during a sharp recession.

It's hard for voters to take these pleas for frugality seriously when their members of Parliament have been claiming must-have supplies such as mock-Tudor architectural effects, lawn mowers, dog food, cookies and, in the case of the multimillionaire secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Muller Crunch Corner yogurt. One cabinet minister tried -- unsuccessfully -- to claim her floral hanging baskets. A senior member of the opposition Conservatives was luckier: House authorities paid for his piano to be tuned.

The scandal about Westminster allowances and expenses, which has caught even the prime minister in its tendrils, has caused merry mayhem among the political set here. Some have called for an immediate general election. Others want the police to pursue the greedier claimants. The tax authorities are sharpening their scalpels and may well take a surgical look at the tax returns of London establishment dignitaries.

For years the allowance details of MPs were kept confidential, a matter only for Commons paper-pushers and for the politicians who, like foxes running a chicken farm, supervised their own juicy rewards. An informal understanding developed that allowances were elastic devices, to be stretched if an MP was feeling a bit short on cash. Politicians' salaries did not keep pace with inflation because whenever they came up for consideration there was press outcry about "overpaid MPs with snouts in troughs." The allowances, hidden from public view, were the solution.

All that changed when the current Labour government ruled that MP expenses fell under the Freedom of Information Act. The politicians, suddenly realizing that they had created a monster, fought a tenacious legal battle (and spent another £100,000) to suppress the information.

Even when they lost the case, the MPs tried to cover themselves. They announced that the expenses would be released in full -- millions of tiny receipts, with the addresses blanked out by hand -- in July, just as they went on their summer holidays. That was the idea, anyway.

But then a samizdat disc containing the data was hawked around Fleet Street and one newspaper, the Daily Telegraph, decided to publish and be damned. For the past five days the Telegraph has been cheerfully detailing the MPs'

excesses. Other newspapers, broadcasters and bloggers have piled on.

Westminster feels under siege. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, already struggling in the opinion polls, is now accused of paying £6,577 of public cash to his brother to arrange for a cleaner for his infamously untidy apartment. (Downing Street claims there is nothing improper about the payment.) Chancellor Alistair Darling, for his part, is accused of getting Parliament to pay for his stamp duty (a tax required with the purchase of a new house) -- a tricky position for any finance minister. Foreign Secretary David Miliband has been accused of running up an excessive gardening bill, in addition to his attempt to get the state to pay for his baby's stroller. And though the Conservatives had been surging in the polls, stories about their grandees hosing down their stately gardens with public cash will do nothing for their claim to be a party of revived popular empathy.

Amid all the frenzy, one unconsidered cost is the damage this has done to public faith in democracy. That will certainly come -- but only once the excitement of the scandal has faded.

Mr. Letts is parliamentary sketch-writer for the Daily Mail of London.

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