

Transcript of High Peak Radio interview 29 May 2009

| | |
|-----|---|
| HPR | The one we are going to start with Tom is something that has hit the front pages of the locals this week. Of course it was in the Daily Telegraph on page 7 in the Sunday Telegraph – the wreath – what’s happened here? |
| TOM | Right, what’s happened here is that a mistake was made by a member of my staff a few years ago who inadvertently put in the claim with a poppy wreath for £16.50 on the list. I told her when I realised what had happened that they would not pay it and the fees office duly did not pay it – so the claim was never paid. I should say that in 12 years as an MP I think I have bought something like 20 wreaths. The fact that only one of them appears on this list shows that it’s a mistake – it was a mistake, it shouldn’t have been put in, it wasn’t paid and really that’s an end to the matter |
| HPR | How could it happen though? Surely whoever’s responsible must have known that this didn’t look right, putting a wreath on expenses. |
| TOM | Well it was not long after that particular member of staff had started to work for me – a few months – the first time I think that Remembrance Day had come up. I have I admit a somewhat slack habit of signing a claim form in advance for office expenses and leaving it to the office manager to then fill in the details. This is the one and only one of her decisions that has ever been questioned in this way and she acknowledges that it was a mistake. Indeed, she is writing to the local press about it to put her side of the story |
| HPR | You have explained that it is a mistake but some people are still saying that it’s a horrible mistake – Andrew Bingham saying its appalling, Robin Baldry of course has had his say this week saying he has withdrawn his respect for you. I mean he’s a well respected politician in the area, how does that make you feel? |
| TOM | And he’s fighting an election in a week’s time – he’s playing the game. I would like to put a question back to Robin and that is: who pays for the wreaths which mayors and councillors from Parish Councils lay on the Cenotaph every year? The answer, I think you will find, is that the Councils do and that those individuals by and large do not pay for the wreaths themselves. I have no problem with paying for the wreath myself and, as I say, about 20 wreaths over the last 12 years I have paid for myself and I will continue to do so. |
| HPR | “I feel your actions are abysmal in every way” – really strong words from Robin Baldry – really strong |
| TOM | Well it’s his last chance to get in the local press before the elections next week in which he’s standing. If he thinks that will help him then that is probably why he’s doing it |
| HPR | He’s not alone is he in his thoughts. Question here from somebody called Dom who says “How can Mr Levitt feel justified in trying to claim £16.50 for a war memorial poppy wreath, claims rejected, when people such as Major Packer who lost the use of his legs in a rocket attack feel the need to do charitable events to raise money for our soldiers? (He did the London Marathon). Our troops were sent to fight at a time when the Government cannot take care of veterans from previous wars, they should not be relying |

| | |
|-----|--|
| | on charity.” |
| TOM | Well the answer is I do not try and justify it. It was a mistake, it should not have happened – it was not paid and I have never claimed any of the other poppies back |
| HPR | OK. Second home also came out in this Sunday Telegraph item. £8,000 on a new bathroom, solid oak skirting boards – why do you need such a nice second home, why do you not just do a bedsit, I mean you are there I don’t know how many nights a week but why is it not just acceptable to have a bedroom and a kitchen? |
| TOM | <p>That’s pretty well what I’ve got – what I’ve got is an ex-council flat. It’s 40 years old, it’s in Lambeth, it’s part of a brick block of council flats and why those particular expenditures? Well it was not £8,000 for a bathroom – the limit on bathrooms I think was £5,500 and that was all that was claimed. The issue there is that if you get a bill for materials for £4,000 and a bill for labour for £3,000 of whatever those bills were – they added up to more than the total allowed but I only claimed and only received the total that was received. That’s the one and only time in twelve years that that sort of work has been claimed for and in that respect I think it’s ok. I’d also say that as far as the skirting boards were concerned a decent wooden skirting board doesn’t need painting and therefore cuts down on cost both for materials and labour in that respect and is probably easier to maintain.</p> <p>So I would say that it was a cost effective decision. I would also say that I think it’s very important that MPs are humble about this, but some of my colleagues have been making claims which quite understandably have been seen to be outrageous, whether it’s cleaning moats or duck houses or dry rot in property a long long way away from where it should be. I don’t excuse those claims at all.</p> <p>Where the law has been broken MPs need to face the consequences. Where the rules have been broken MPs also need to face the consequences. The rules have been tightened since these claims that have been published were [put in] and they will be tightened again – but we shouldn’t be all tarred with the same brush</p> |
| HPR | No, but at the same time people – we have been talking about this nationally and by all means you have not done this as much as others – why do you have to push these boundaries? Everyone is saying it’s within the rules but is it sort of ethical to push things right the way and get everything you can out of the taxpayer? |
| TOM | <p>Well I strongly deny that that is what I have been doing. If you look at my Additional Costs Allowance, which is the part of the budget which we have been talking about, you will see I am a long way down the league table. In fact I can tell you that on that London allowance last year I was 270th, the year before that I was 379th on the league table.</p> <p>Now bearing in mind that London MPs – how many of those are there? 40, 50, 60? – they are not allowed to claim a London allowance anyway, so out of 500 and odd MPs I was about half way down the list or lower in fact on that particular allowance, certainly not squeezing everything one can get out of it</p> |

| | |
|-----|--|
| HPR | Hairdryer? For a bald man – exactly! |
| TOM | Yes, well not exactly – I still have some hair and I had a bit more at the time |
| HPR | Ok, fair enough, let's not get that personal! |
| TOM | <p>The fact is that where you have two homes – Parliament and the law of the land and Inland Revenue and everyone like that accepts that in our particular position, where you are living 150 nights a year in one home, 150 nights a year in the other, that MPs have to be indemnified against the cost of a second home in that respect.</p> <p>We are allowed to claim expenses for the running of a second home. We are not allowed to claim for the running of the first home and at no time have I ever done that – but I think that household requisites which have to be duplicated for this reason are reasonable. What we don't want to get into is the position where only those who can afford to be MPs become MPs. I think it's therefore right that MPs are indemnified against the cost of the second home where that is necessary for carrying out their job.</p> <p>I absolutely accept that for MPs in the vicinity of London who have been claiming this allowance it may not be appropriate for them to do so in the future.</p> |
| HPR | Mark Gadd has written a letter to the papers and to us as well on the subject of the hairdryer saying “come on Tom, give the money back”. Will you? |
| TOM | Well, the Fees Office vets every single claim that comes in. It vetted the one for the poppy wreath and they were right to reject it. It vetted the one for the bathroom and they were right to impose a limit on it and they vetted the one on household requisites of various sorts. In that respect, whilst the judgement of the Fees Office has been called into question in some respects, I really don't think it helps anyone to talk about £10 or £15 here, £10 or £15 there and go through a large number of purchases over a large number of years one by one and have an inquest on each of them. My expenses are on my website in full and people are entitled to look at them and make their judgement. |
| HPR | But you don't want them to bring back everything though? |
| TOM | Well, what you will find is that quite a lot of MPs I think have decided already that enough is enough and they have decided that they are going to depart. I think that you will find that many others will find it very very difficult to sustain levels of claims that they have had in the past and I think that you will find that the level of claims made in the future will be considerably down on what it was before, because people will be correctly, because I believe in publishing this information, people will be very wary – more wary than ever before – of what people think of what they are putting in |
| HPR | Tom – its really good to have you here, I appreciate your time – we're going to do more in just a second when you have got some more questions from the public for you. ... |
| HPR | We are back live in the studio for the MP expenses debate. I am joined by Tom Levitt and we are also joined by a listener – this is Mark – Mark, you're a High Peak resident, what's the point you want to make to Mr Levitt today? |

| | |
|------|---|
| MARK | Good Morning Mr Levitt. Mr Levitt if I stole £40,000 would I be expected to be prosecuted and possibly retained at her Majesty's pleasure? |
| TOM | Yes |
| MARK | So why is that MP's can actually get away with it without prosecution? |
| TOM | Well, as I said a few moments ago, if there is evidence that stealing has taken place then the law should take its full force |
| MARK | But will it? |
| TOM | That's a question for the prosecuting authorities – for the police and the prosecuting authorities. If people are referred to the police then the police have to investigate and they will take action. That is their decision. |
| MARK | Do I take it then that the MPs in question have actually been referred to the police and they are currently under investigation at the moment? |
| TOM | I am not aware that that has happened but anyone is at liberty, where they have evidence, to pass information onto the police for them to look at. I am not aware, again in all the Telegraph coverage, that anyone has suggested that illegal acts have taken place. Certainly ill advised acts have taken place and certainly those outside parliamentary rules have taken place but the parliamentary rules are not the law of the land |
| MARK | Well indeed but surely that's a bit of a scapegoat isn't it, because at the end of the day whichever way you dress it up the money has been taken and it has been taken improperly. |
| TOM | Which bit do you think has been taken illegally? |
| MARK | Well, various MPs have taken their expenses – one MP has taken sort of £40,000, various amounts of money – really the amount of money is not in question it's the actual principle of what they have done. Now you know if as I say I were to do something similar I would be prosecuted quite rightly and you know sort of to the full extent of the law. What I can't understand is how these MPs (and I'm not suggesting its just the Labour Party, I'm suggesting its all parties right across the board) - |
| TOM | Indeed |
| MARK | - Have indeed done this and I honestly feel that nobody is going to get prosecuted and this will be swept under the carpet like a lot of issues that happen within Parliament which aren't exactly white, so you know I find it very very frustrating because this will last probably another two or three weeks, it'll die a death, everybody will forget about it, and that'll be it. Nobody will be held to account and I think its totally wrong |
| TOM | Mark, I agree with you that if criminal activity has taken place – and I don't want to prejudge any individual case although clearly people claiming for things that don't exist is wrong in anyone's book. If criminal activity has taken place then the police should be involved and prosecution should be considered. I am absolutely adamant about that and I agree with you on that. |
| HPR | OK, thank you Mark very much for your call today. Of course we do have to stress, as Tom said, the word stealing is perhaps not the right word certainly at the moment until any criminal investigations are carried out Tom, I |

| | |
|------|---|
| | suppose |
| TOM | That's right, as I said before, if there is evidence that the police need to look at then the police need to look at it and take it from there |
| HPR | Aidy in Glossop says on the subject of Tony Blair, where have expenses forms and paperwork gone? Why can't they be found? Are you aware of this story? |
| TOM | Well, I assume, I don't know this for certain as I've not been asked this question before, but I assume that the records that will be put on the website by the House of Commons Fees Office only apply to people who are still Members of Parliament. That is a very interesting question – if we are going to look back at expenses 2004 – 2008 then I think it is legitimate that we look at everybody's over that period. |
| HPR | OK, I believe we do have another caller on the line – no we clearly don't have another caller on the line – we will try and get them back as soon as possible....I mean, in general Tom, what do you think of the way this has been through the mill, the media treatment both nationally and locally. How do you think it has been dealt with in those instances? |
| TOM | Well, the House of Commons took a decision some months – a couple of years – ago I think, that we should in principle publish all claims. The claims were due to be published in July in a form which was compatible with the Freedom of Information Act. Now, that means that it is possible to take out of that information that is published, personal information such as bank account numbers, telephone numbers, signatures – that process of editing had been completed and a document had been produced for every MP – a thousand pages worth in my case – which showed us the information that was going to be published and the information which was going to be withheld. The Daily Telegraph got hold somehow or other of that document covering every single MP... including the information which the law did not require to be published, such as bank accounts |
| HPR | 'Conniving with criminals,' I think you said at the time... |
| TOM | Well the House of Commons authorities, the Parliamentary authorities, did report to the police the fact that the information had been stolen and that information <u>was</u> stolen. Now, what has happened to it since we do not know and the police have said that they don't consider it in the public interest to pursue it as a crime. I suspect they are probably right, because I think they would be lynching policemen from the lampposts as well as MPs if they had decided to do that. But nevertheless a crime had happened in that respect and all that happened then is that information came into the public domain about a month earlier than most of it would have been published in any case. |
| HPR | OK |
| TOM | So the Daily Telegraph has boosted its circulation figures – well done them. |
| HPR | OK, we do have another caller on the line now – who have we got there? |
| PAUL | Paul from Hadfield |
| HPR | Hi Paul, you've got a question for Tom Levitt today? |

| | |
|------|--|
| PAUL | <p>Yes, its just that obviously the expenses problem – every MP I presume claims expenses, some do it legitimately and some don't. What does annoy me is that (the caller from before said exactly the same thing) I've worked for companies where I've had expenses. If I fiddled my expenses or claimed something I shouldn't have done, whether its by accident or not I wouldn't have been working for that company and that is what is rally annoying me.</p> <p>All right, it is not being swept under the carpet but its being fudged. It is definitely being fudged and what you said before about if there is a police investigation fine – that is fair enough as well if there is a police investigation but is there going to be? And those that have also done the tax forms wrong – if I did my tax form wrong the Inland Revenue (I'm self employed now) they would be down on me like a ton of bricks. I would have to go back about five years and all the work I would have to do to show that I've done my tax right would take a phenomenal amount of time – so why is this not happening with MPs?</p> |
| HPR | <p>Tom, we've talked about the legal side and obviously you can't answer the questions but it think his point is are enough people taking account and standing down for what they have done? Like the caller says people would pay the price in normal jobs wouldn't they?</p> |
| TOM | <p>Well, let's put it this way. Were the rules by which MPs supposed to abide the right rules? The answer is probably not, in retrospect.</p> <p>Were the rules properly enforced by the parliamentary authorities? There are clearly many examples where quite honestly that didn't happen.</p> <p>And were the rules fully observed by every MP? The answer again is clearly 'no' although as I say I think that we are all being painted with the same brush because of the excesses of perhaps a few dozen MPs in all of this.</p> <p>But again I don't know if the issue the gentleman is talking about is the one where an accountant's fee was paid out of office expenses which included personal tax advice. Now the rules say you can claim accountants' fees for dealing with your office expenses but you must pay for personal tax advice yourself and it may be that that has happened in that case. Now whether that merits prosecution I don't know, whether that merits the Inland Revenue going back and looking at a person's tax record again in the past, quite possibly, that's a decision for them. But you know we are not talking here by and large about criminal activity and we are not talking about deception. We are talking here about an internal set of rules which were not very good rules, not very well enforced and not very well observed.</p> <p>We must all be humble about that and all put out hands up and say that the system has been too lax and it is not surprising therefore that we have all got our hands burnt</p> |
| PAUL | <p>Well I have just got one more question if that's alright?</p> |
| HPR | <p>Go ahead</p> |
| PAUL | <p>Well obviously just on average how long does an MP spend out of his or her constituency in London and I mean to be fair MPs are not there all of the time, they do spend quite a bit of time in their own constituency. I have worked for companies when I have had to work away from home and I have not been allowed a second home, I've not been allowed a mortgage for a</p> |

| | |
|------|--|
| | second home, I've not been allowed rent on a flat – I've had to get a B&B and in this day and age where computer systems are quite sophisticated – people have laptops, people can get in touch via mobile phones – surely to save the taxpayer the money surely why can't MPs just be put up in B&Bs or maybe rented accommodation for a month or not even that because I just feel that we are being exploited. Why does an MP have to be treated in a different way from the normal working man in the street who would, if he's working away from home – I know plumbers who work away from home, I know builders who work away from home – they are just put up in B&B's... |
| HPR | OK Tom..... |
| PAUL | That's the cheapest way of accommodating people |
| TOM | With respect it isn't, and I will give you the figure in just a moment but let me say that most Sundays I go down to London, sometimes Monday morning, usually Sunday, and I pretty well always come back on a Thursday evening. I work three or four days a week in London, I work three or four days a week in High Peak and if you add those up you will see that that is 7 days a week. I work a 60 to 70 hour week most weeks and I'm not complaining about that – I love the job and it needs those hours and that sort of commitment. But it is a schizophrenic life and you can see from that that I spend 150 nights a year roughly in the High Peak in my home in Buxton and 150 nights a year in London |
| PAUL | Can I just stop you there a minute, do you not get a two month recess period for the summer holidays? |
| TOM | Yes, but I have taken that into account because if I am 36 weeks a year spending 4 nights a week in London then that is about 150 nights a year, so I have taken that recess into account, although of course whilst we are working during the summer we can't claim the daily expenses for that. Now let me just turn to the question of the bed and breakfast that you suggest. London is one of the most expensive cities in the world. |
| PAUL | Agreed |
| TOM | I have a small flat which if I was renting it would be costing £1400 / £1500 per month to rent. My mortgage interest (because it's not the mortgage capital, its only the mortgage interest we are talking about) is £400 per month. So in fact the taxpayer is paying an awful lot less by helping MPs with their mortgage interest. Admittedly, mortgage rates are low at the moment but an awful lot less than they would be if they were paying rent |
| HPR | OK, we'll have to leave it there because we have got a lot to crack on with in terms of everyone wants a say on this one. Question coming through now from another caller – no we've lost that particular caller – no problem we've got plenty to talk about. I mean what does this does do for politics? We've got the County Council elections, we've got the European elections next week – are people going to vote with their feet and just say why vote for politics? |
| TOM | Clearly this has been a huge distraction and every party has come out of this [damaged]. I do however give credit to all three party leaders in fact who came together when the chips were down and came up with a sensible set of interim reforms and they are now being put in place. |

And we are waiting for the Independent Committee on Standards in Public Life to report later in the year so that MPs will no longer be making decisions about the rules.

So that is something good that has come out of it but yes, it has been a huge distraction for politics. It is not the real issues – the way we are coping with recession – and the figures are that this recession is going to be shorter and shallower than people were saying has been knocked off the front pages. The work that has been done to save and create jobs has been knocked off the front pages.

But I do hope that next Thursday people of whatever party and whatever their beliefs will accept that the next four years, how services are run in Derbyshire is very very important. And I believe that the present regime at Matlock, Labour-run Derbyshire County Council, has got an excellent record.

Recording ends here...