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Transparency with Public Funds:

What are an MP's Obligations? – ELIZABETH MAY

I had not been elected Saanich–Gulf Islands MP for long when my office had a call from CBC. The reporter wanted to know if I would be willing to post all my receipts (submitted to the government for reimbursement) on a website administered by the CBC.

The background that led to the CBC transparency project was obvious. In May 2009, Auditor General Sheila Fraser got in a tussle with a little known group called the 'Board of Internal Economy.' This committee of the House of Commons oversees over \$140 million of public monies used for MP expenses for things such as travel, entertainment, staff and housing. The Board is made up of the House leaders for each party, the Speaker of the House and a few others. Fraser wanted to look at the books of the reimbursed expenses for MPs. The Board said 'no.'

In the wake of the UK scandal in which MPs had taxpayers reimburse them for outlandish personal expenses, including the cleaning of one MP's castle moat, Canadians might want to look at the details.

The Nova Scotia government opened their records and criminal charges were laid. One MP had the gall to claim the installation of a back-up diesel generator at his home was really for the seniors home down the road. I could see no valid reason for refusing to open the books before I became an MP. Certainly, once elected, I was quick to agree to the CBC challenge.

I assumed that a goodly number of other MPs would also agree to posting all expenses. I was somewhat shocked when the CBC (and Radio Canada) TV crews showed up to interview me about the project and asked me how I felt about being the only MP to agree. My surprise turned to discomfort as they explained how former Liberal MP Michelle Simson was shunned by her colleagues when she started posting her expenses on her website. (She was not re-elected, but does not believe that was due to her campaign for transparency.)

In defence of the other 307 MPs who refused the offer to

make their expenses public, my hunch is that they would have agreed, had their party hierarchy not insisted that every last one of them refuse. The solidarity between the Conservatives, NDP, Liberals and the Bloc is solid. The parties do not want anyone looking behind the totals for the details.

The general categories of expenses are published. Individual members' expenditures are reported and published by Public Accounts (see below). Every MP's expenses are broken down for staffing, travel within the riding, advertising (not related to campaigns), costs of printing and mailing out MP newsletters.

To understand the level of detail, I will use an example. In 2007-08, our previous MP spent over \$21,000 for travel within the riding. That is clear and reported. What we cannot know is the break down: how much on ferries? Personal car? Float planes? Et cetera.

Each MP has a barebones budget of approximately \$28,000/mo, on top of the basic annual salary of \$158,000. That amount must cover the costs of the constituency office (rent and operations), staffing in the office in Ottawa and in the constituency, printing, mailing, advertising, travel within the riding, and assorted other activities. (I find I am already really stretching that budget! I need to provide a lot of help to constituents and track every issue on the Hill, so I am relying on volunteers and interns a great deal.)

Once an MP is asked to perform additional duties (chairing committees, party whip, parliamentary secretary or minister), additional amounts are added to their salaries and resources. Once an MP is a Minister of the Crown, there are additional budgets for travel and expenses.

Completely outside the reported expenses is the system for MP travel to and from Ottawa and the riding. This comes to an additional over \$25 million/year. The travel budget is an art form all its own. It is called a point system. Each MP receives 64 points. Each 'point' is a round trip journey from home to Ottawa or some other location within Canada for

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which MP work requires travel). The trips are booked by the government travel agent and are on Air Canada.

I wondered if Air Canada provided some sort of government discount. No. Any MP ticket is paid by taxpayers to Air Canada at the going rate. MPs are entitled to fly Business Class.

I decided early on that I would stick with flying economy to save money. The odd thing is, due to the fact that the system is outside my office budget and on points, when I fly less and fly economy, my office budget does not benefit from money saved. The government coffers benefit.

I asked the travel agent to tell me how much I would cost the taxpayers in travel for a year (assuming 15 round trips—this includes any staff travel or ‘designated traveller’—a spouse or family member). The total, travelling economy, comes to \$12,000.

Then I asked what it would have cost if I flew Business Class. It would cost \$79,000. And that’s only for 15 trips out of a possible 64 allowed.

Of course, I am also motivated by reducing my carbon footprint. I will always struggle between wanting to be home for important events, even if it means flying on a Friday and returning on a Sunday, versus cost and carbon. My office is also budgeting to buy carbon offsets.

I hope I will not be the only MP providing full disclosure of expenses for long. I hope other MPs will join me and that together we can force openness from the Board of Internal Economy. For now, I am hoping that people who asked ‘what can one Green MP do?’ will think this is a good thing. *For more information on MP expenses go to: parl.gc.ca/information/about/process/housegeneral-information/membersexpenses.* ✍