

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Returning officers play a very important role in our democracy, notwithstanding some of the difficulties that we saw in 2010. They need the statutory protection of their appointment to make sure that they are not influenced by council groups or Members of Parliament at election time. The costs that they incur in running elections are fully justified, but it is my strong contention that the fees that they are paid personally for their services are not justified, and cannot be justified at this time, and that the continued payment of these massive fees to returning officers is wrong and must be stopped. At a time when there are cuts in mobile libraries, bus subsidies and some leisure services, we continue to pay these enormous fees.

Let me give some examples from seven different authorities. In Liverpool, the returning officer was entitled to £14,000 on top of a salary of £217,000. In Islington, there was an entitlement of £13,800 and the returning officer had a salary of £210,000. In Newcastle city, there was an entitlement of £9,880 on top of a salary of £150,000. In Manchester, there was an entitlement of £19,251 on top of a salary of £199,000. In Leeds, there was an entitlement of £27,654 on top of a £176,000 salary. In Bedford borough, there was an entitlement of £18,241 on top of a £170,000 salary. Lastly and most enormously, in Glasgow city there was an entitlement to a £44,000 fee on top of a salary of £170,000. How can we justify such payments? Those sums are many times the amount earned by many of my constituents.

If the Deputy Leader of the House is asked by the Leader of the House, the Deputy Prime Minister or the Prime Minister to do an extra job, he does not say, "I'll do it for an extra £5,000 or £6,000." He gets on and does it, because he is a public servant in a leadership position. Why should we have extra payments for returning officers? In my view, we need urgently to amend the relevant sections of the Representation of the People Act 1983.

These fees are a large, undeserved cherry on top of an already very well-iced cake, and it is time that they went. I look to the Deputy Leader of the House to do something about it.