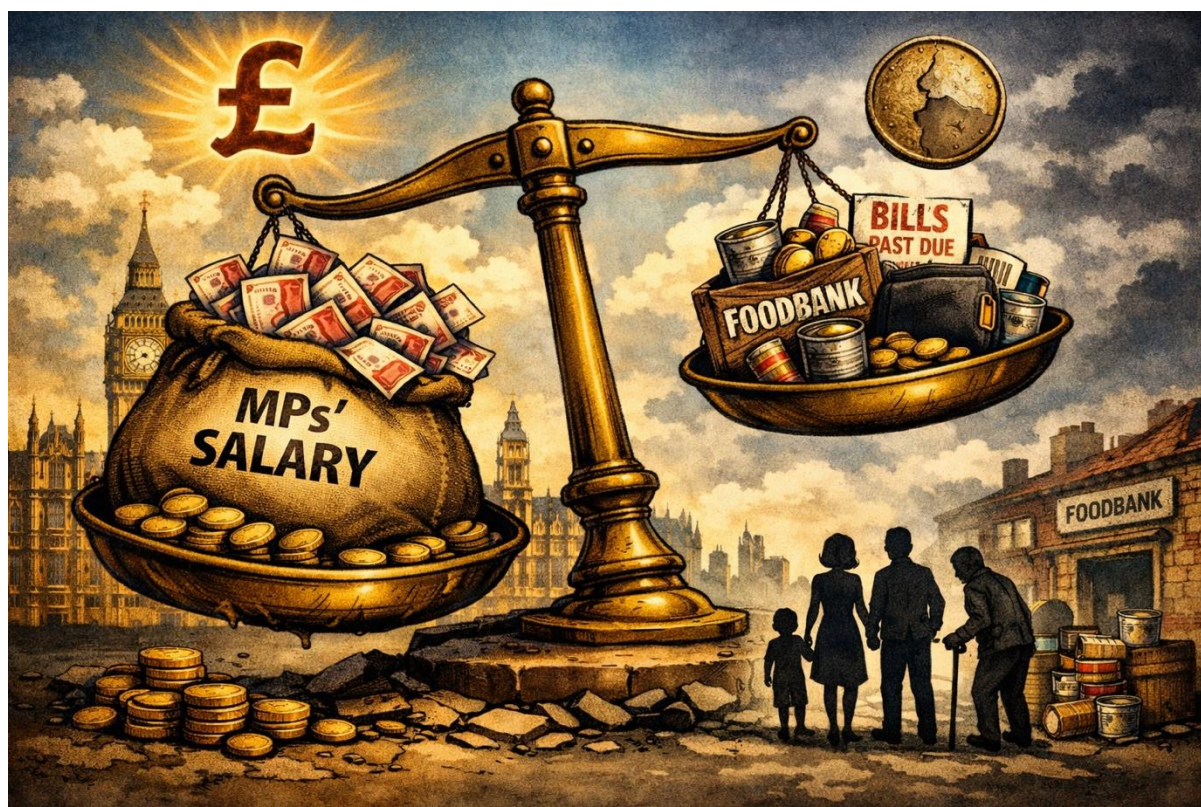


Why MPs Can Afford to Give Away Their Salaries - And Voters Can't

Adam Tugwell | 19 May 2026



The idea of paying Members of Parliament was once rooted in a simple democratic principle: no one should be excluded from representing their community because they lacked personal wealth.

A wage ensured that ordinary people - *not just landowners, industrialists, or the independently wealthy* - could afford to serve. It was never intended to be a reward, a perk, or a pathway to personal enrichment. It was a mechanism to level the playing field.

Yet the modern reality looks very different. Today, MPs receive salaries two to three times the national average, despite the fact that the major costs associated with fulfilling their duties - accommodation, travel, staffing, and constituency office expenses - are already covered. The original justification for paying MPs has not simply faded; it has been inverted.

A Debate Reopened - But Not for the Reasons People Think

The recent attention on Andy Burnham's pledge to donate 15% of his salary to charity if elected as MP for Makerfield on 18 June has reignited the conversation.

Whether his gesture is entirely sincere or partly strategic is irrelevant. What matters is what it reveals: MPs can afford to give away a portion of their income without compromising their ability to live comfortably.

Rupert Lowe, the sitting MP for Great Yarmouth, already donates his entire salary to local charities. As a former high-profile businessman, he is in a position to do so. Again, the point is not to praise or criticise him. The point is that the system allows - even enables - such gestures because the salary is not essential to the role for many who occupy it.

Meanwhile, many of the people MPs represent cannot afford to live independently on full-time wages. That contrast alone should give Parliament pause. It rarely does.

The Role of an MP: Job, Career, or Responsibility?

Being an MP was never meant to be a job in the conventional sense. It is not a profession with a career ladder, performance bonuses, or a corporate hierarchy. It is a responsibility - a vocation grounded in representation, judgement, and service.

Yet the way Parliament functions today makes it easy to mistake the role for a career. Party structures, internal hierarchies, and the pursuit of ministerial positions have created a political class that behaves more like a managerial workforce than a body of independent representatives. Advancement often depends on compliance, not courage; on loyalty to party leadership, not loyalty to constituents.

In such an environment, the salary begins to resemble a reward for participation in the system rather than a support mechanism for public service.

The Misconception of "Attracting the Right People"

A long-standing argument insists that higher pay attracts "better" candidates. But what does "better" mean? Bankers? Teachers? Former military officers? Small business owners? People with lived experience? Parliament already includes individuals from all these backgrounds.

The issue is not who enters Parliament. It is what happens to them once they get there.

Most MPs - unless they reach the upper tiers of government - have limited influence over policy. Party discipline often dictates how they vote. Constituents may assume they elect individuals, but the system encourages MPs to behave as extensions of their party machine. The result is a structure where independence is discouraged, and representation becomes secondary.

Leadership vs. Management

Westminster is filled with people who are mistaken for leaders because they hold positions of authority. But leadership is not the same as authority. Leadership requires independence of thought, moral courage, and a willingness to put the public interest above personal ambition.

Those qualities are not cultivated by a system that rewards conformity. Nor are they dependent on a six-figure package.

Genuine representatives are not defined by their CVs, their networks, or their public profiles. They are defined by their ability to understand life as it is lived by the people they serve - and by their willingness to act on that understanding, even when it is inconvenient.

The Pay Gap That Exposes the System's Blindness

The national minimum wage - £12.71 per hour, or £26,436.80 a year for a full-time worker - is less than a third of an MP's salary. And that minimum wage is widely acknowledged as insufficient for independent living without debt, charity support, or state benefits.

Many MPs argue that those benefits should be reduced.

This is not an attack on individuals. It is a reflection of a system that has become breathtakingly detached from the realities of everyday life. A system in which public money is treated as an abstract resource rather than the product of millions of people's labour. A system where the financial pressures facing ordinary citizens are acknowledged rhetorically but rarely understood in practice.

A Vocation, Not a Pay Packet

If MPs have their essential needs met - *and they do* - then the argument for high salaries collapses.

The role should attract those motivated by service, not status. Those who seek to represent others should do so with a clear understanding that the responsibility is the reward.

This does not mean MPs should be out of pocket. It means they should not be enriched by a role that exists to serve the public.

Until Parliament reconnects with the realities of the people it represents, the debate over MPs' pay will continue to symbolise something deeper: a political culture that has lost sight of what public service is supposed to mean.

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