

Confidential

Independent Review Panel

Re:

Financial Support for Assembly Members

Public Meeting held at:

Venue Cymru, Llandudno

On

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Panel Members:

Sir Roger Jones (Chair)

Rt Hon Dafydd Wigley

Nigel Rudd

Jackie Nickson

Evidence of:

SUSIE SQUIRE (p.4)

WILLIAM BECKETT (p.19)

Followed by Public Discussion (p.29)

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SIR ROGER JONES: Good morning everybody. Thank you for coming here this morning.

A couple of housekeeping points, first of all. You'll all have seen the simultaneous translation facilities. Please feel free to use them. The mode is bilingual today. Also, I'm reliably informed that there is no practice fire drill this morning, so, if the fire drill does go off, we should take it seriously and exit down this building and out of the building over there. That's all I have to say.

My name is Sir Roger Jones and I chair this Independent Panel established by the National Assembly Commission to review the financial support provided for our Assembly Members. This includes pay and allowances and I shall ask my fellow Panel members to introduce themselves shortly. The Panel has a very broad remit and wants to hear evidence from the general public as well as organisations in the private and voluntary sectors and also public sector. So, it's a root and branch examination of the system of financial support for Assembly Members and, as I said, pay, allowances, staffing and office costs.

So far, we've held five meetings in private session. We've received evidence from the four main political groups at the National Assembly and also heard evidence from some individual Assembly Members and their support staff. We've also spoken with officials responsible for administering the current system of financial support.

We've adopted a number of principles to guide us in our work and most important of these is that any recommendations must be based on evidence. The main role of Assembly Members is to represent our interests when passing laws that will affect the lives of everyone living in Wales. This is a good opportunity for individuals or groups to submit their views, which we will take into account when we are formulating our report.

With your help, we will get this right to ensure not only any new system of pay and allowances is fair and transparent, but also that it recognises and rewards AMs' skills and provides value for money, and, if anyone saw the television broadcast last night, I think our main role is to ensure that the public in Wales gets value for money.

I will now quickly run through how I intend to run this meeting. At this point, I would like to welcome Miss Susie Squire, Campaign Manager of the Taxpayers' Alliance, and Mr. William Beckett a local businessman. They will each make presentations of about ten minutes and then these will be followed by questions from the Panel. We then will have a refreshment break, after

which you'll have an opportunity to have your say about any issue relevant to our inquiry and please indicate if you want to speak by raising your hand, then wait for the travelling microphone to reach you, and, once the microphone has arrived, please speak clearly stating your name and, if relevant, the organisation you represent. As I said, we have simultaneous translation available, so you can speak in English or Welsh. You've been given a pack which includes a bilingual leaflet with some basic facts and figures about Assembly Members. If you require any other factual information, please speak to the Clerk during the coffee break or after the meeting.

I emphasise that the purpose of the Panel here is to listen to your views. I don't think it's relevant for us to answer questions because you have probably got the information and we haven't. Therefore, we're not going to answer questions, but we are here to listen. It is too early to speculate on recommendations likely to feature in our report as we have not yet finished taking evidence.

I'll now invite my fellow Panel Members to introduce themselves and, then, Susie Squire of the Taxpayers' Alliance will get the process under way.

Let's start off. Here we have Nigel Rudd.

NIGEL RUDD: Morning everybody. Thank you, Chair. My name is Nigel Rudd. I'm the former Chief Executive of the East Midlands Regional Assembly and, until this year, I was also on the Advisory Group for the Centre for Public Scrutiny, and, as the Chair says, I'm here to listen and see what the views are and to help the Panel come to a conclusion on the right way forward and I'm happy to pick up any issues as they arise later on in the meeting. Thank you, Chair.

SIR ROGER JONES: Next we have someone who is probably well-known to anybody here in North Wales: Dafydd Wigley -- the Honourable Dafydd Wigley, I should say.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Thank you very much. I am going to speak in Welsh and answer questions in the way that they're asked. (*In Welsh. Translation partially inaudible*) My background is in industry. I was with Ford; I was Head of Costs *{inaudible}* and Head of Finance with Hoover. I was then elected Member of Parliament in Caernarfon in 1974 and then in the House of Commons for about 27 years and I again moved to the National Assembly for 4 years. I was at the National Assembly. I was Chair of the Audit Commission there which, of course, part of its responsibility is to look for best value for public money -- public money that comes from the

Assembly, of course. At the moment, I'm retired, of course, from the Parliament and the Assembly, and I chair the Consultation Board in Bangor Business School.

SIR ROGER JONES: Thank you. Next, Jackie Nickson. Jackie?

JACKIE NICKSON: Jackie Nickson. Hello. I spent most of my life in Human Resources (what used to be called Personnel) -- 15 years in British Gas. I'm currently HR Manager for a small company of independent financial advisors. I also work for the Police Authority. So, I have a good background -- an all round background -- in the private sector and I hope that's what I can bring to this Panel.

SIR ROGER JONES: Next, we have our Clerk. Chris is keeping a very tight rein on what we do and making sure we keep to our objectives. This is Chris Reading.

CHRIS READING: *Bore da. Bore da,* Panel.

SIR ROGER JONES: Without any further ado -- Susie, can we go over to you?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Hello everyone. I would like to say thank you very much for inviting me to speak here in the first place.

For those of you who aren't familiar with my organisation, I am the Campaign Manager at the Taxpayers' Alliance. We, basically, are a campaign group. We campaign for lower taxes and better Government and we've got over 20,000 grassroots members all across the country. The TPA -- Taxpayers' Alliance -- TPA for short -- led the campaign for transparency and restraint earlier this year on MPs' expenses in Westminster. We're very happy to be part of this process engaging in dialogue. Everything I say today is volunteered in a spirit of co-operation and discussion. I'd be more than happy to take any questions or comments you've got after I have finished speaking.

I've split up what I'm going to say, roughly, into three sections -- one on pay and pay-offs; one on expenses; and one on additional cost allowances, second home allowance -- just because I think that would be a decent way to present it, but they do kind of interlink, as you are probably aware.

To start with: pay and pay-offs. The first thing I'd like to say is, in my opinion, there is no evidence that Assembly Members' pay is too low at the moment. The current Assembly Members are doing a great job on the

salaries they receive. Welsh Assembly Members this year already, to my understanding, received an 8.3 pay rise and this is four times above the recommended salary cap by Central Government. I know Plaid Cymru opposed this, calling it unjustified. This destroys, for me, the argument that Assembly Members are badly paid, which is often linked to arguments about generous expense claims, which I'll come on to later. Further, the main benefits of being an Assembly Member are often intangible. You do a job that is interesting and fulfilling and the candidates' list is long. There is plenty of competition for seats. I don't think anyone goes into being an Assembly Member or, speaking personally, politics broadly because they're after money. If you want to break it down to a personal level, I can probably make more money being an actuary. I don't want to be an actuary. No one says, "Poor you. You could make more money being an actuary. Have a bigger salary" -- certainly not my boss. I think the other thing is that particularly, bringing this up to date, in the recession and with the economic situation we're facing, I don't think that Assembly Members should be taking pay rises, particularly going forward after this year, if they can avoid it. It sends a bad message to the public during tough financial times. I also think on the side of the unions it becomes more difficult because a lot of people, our front-line public service workers, are having to cap it at 2 per cent. That's obviously been a big, contentious issue all over the UK. I think it makes it a lot more difficult to negotiate with the unions if you're taking far above that.

The second point on pay: resettlement grants. I've been having a look through some of the guidelines and I think these are too large by far. Ultimately, and again correct me if I'm wrong, this is money that you receive if you're not returning to the Assembly. In some cases, this payment equals 100 per cent of annual salary in one lump sum upon departure. I think this is potentially rewarding failure. I think there are several points that need to be made here. I don't think you should be paid off for failing to get re-elected. I think that the possibility of not being re-elected is an important part of the democratic process. I think it is an important part of voters being able to hold politicians to account, and, to give people a padded landing when they're leaving office I don't think is the right thing at all. Related to this is, again from my understanding, additional pay-offs: that if at any time during your service in the Assembly you have been a Presiding Officer or Committee Chair, you get an additional pay-off for that; even if the position was, maybe, 5 or 6 years before you left,

you get additional pay-off. We would do away with that at the Taxpayers' Alliance. We don't think that's a good idea. It's the vagaries of public office. You may get voted out during your next term. You know that term is coming. You know the election is coming. You must prepare for that.

I think that pretty much covers pay and pay-offs.

Expenses. Now, here, I think, the key watch words for us are "transparency" and "accountability". I think transparency is also the best way to prevent scandal on this. Many MPs all over the country have told me they feel like this has become a media witch-hunt. I couldn't agree more. I think the problem with this is the perceived opacity of MPs' expenses. People feel that MPs are actively trying to keep their expense claims secret and are, therefore, naturally suspicious. It has to be said that in the Assembly you are much better than Westminster, and you are much better than Westminster in inviting us to speak as well, so, well done for that, but, if you look at the Scottish system, there has been much less of a scandal there. What they do in Scotland is they publish every expense fully and completely and publicly, so, if you can't prove you have spent the money, you don't get paid for it.

I know that you publish your AMs' expenses by category. I would argue that you should go further and actually publish every expense, as they do in the Scottish system. I'm sure you're familiar with that and you can bring it up on-line (it's like "Google Government," as they say.) I think that would neutralise a lot of the scandal around this and stop some people -- like us -- dragging it up through FOIs and then it becomes a big scandal because you're exposing something. If you're honest about it, then I think that's probably the best way to go. The important thing about transparency is, firstly, the accountability it brings. The public can look at it and see if they're getting value for money. The second thing is it's better for AMs because when something is opaque, I think it makes victims of all AMs, MPs, MSPs, whatever, irrespective of their honesty otherwise, and I'll link that back into something else I'm going to say later. What it boils down to is that most honest politicians are not abusing the system and because of one or two very high profile and deeply egregious cases, they're all getting tarred with the same brush. So, if you are voluntarily transparent, you are much less likely to get a tough time. There are good examples of people who've been doing this voluntarily; for instance, in the European Parliament, there is a Conservative MEP called Chris Heaton-Harris who for years has been publishing all his

expenses on his web-site voluntarily. So, when a lot of this scandal broke in the national media about what MEPs are and aren't getting from Brussels, Chris can put his hands up and say, "Hey, guys, you can look at all my stuff on my web-site; there are no secrets here," and therefore didn't get the problems that many of the other MEPs got. So, I think there is a practical case study there of why that's a good idea.

I think the new system should be structured around stopping the abuse of expenses. I think I made that pretty clear. Again, you don't spend it; you don't get the money. I think expenses should be stopped being used as a mechanism to push up MPs' or AMs' wages. I mean, you had Ed Balls on Sky News earlier this year basically admitting that MPs use expenses as a way to push up their salary. That's totally unacceptable. I don't think AMs are underpaid, for reasons I made clear at the very outset, so I think that mindset needs to be got out of. I think furnishing of Assembly Members' accommodation on the taxpayers should be stopped. I did an interview this morning on Radio Wales and I was talking about why things should be published and put in the public domain and the guy I was speaking against said, "The trouble when you publish every receipt as opposed to when you do categories is that people, the media, et cetera are looking for scandal and they cherry-pick certain things" -- for instance, the infamous £2,000 sofa by Labour's Lesley Griffiths, or plasma screen TVs, or Sky subscriptions -- and I said to him, "But why should we be buying televisions at all? I don't expect people to buy me televisions. I don't think that's the right thing. They should be provided with a base" -- and this all links back to a point I'm about to make in a minute. It's most important that all Assembly Members are enabled to represent their constituencies in Cardiff; that's the most important thing, otherwise they couldn't afford to do so, but what they must be given is a base, not a home from home. If they wish to make it such, it must be at their own expense and not the taxpayers'. I think that's very important.

Food. It's a bit of a minor point compared to some of the other points, but I don't think any groceries -- I think that should be stopped because, presumably, if the Assembly Members were at home, they would have to eat. Obviously, we shouldn't expect them to foot the bill for all these expensive dinners. That has to be able to be expensed, but I would call for restraint on some of that. I also understand -- maybe correct me on this -- that there is a subsidised canteen in the Assembly. There is. One of the things we've argued previously is that maybe that shouldn't be claimed

either. It's open to debate. Because that food is already subsidised by taxpayers, I'm not sure that should also be put on expenses.

Now, this is getting a bit more hardcore, but possibly you might want to introduce a full audit of expenses according to private sector standards. I think that would encourage a culture of transparency and accountability. I know it's not going to be the most popular thing. It would probably have to be introduced slowly and gently, but it is certainly something that may be the right thing for the future.

No more employment of family members. Now, I know there are many, many valid arguments for employing family members. I know many MPs whose wives and children work harder for them than anyone they could get off the employment market because they've got their best interests at heart, but, again, I think, due to several, again, high profile and egregious cases of abuse (not mentioning any names, Derek Conway, I think,) I don't think this is a good idea. I think it's an out-dated practice that needs to be consigned to the dustbin of history. You can't, now, go and sack wives who've been employed or children who've been employed, but I think it should be aggressively discouraged and, at some point in the future, possibly done away with because of the public perception of it. There is such public mistrust, if you talk to people about this. You find that around the employment of family members, it just brings a cloud of suspicion, basically, even to people who are honestly employing people who are working harder for them than people like me who come out of uni.

I think the last sort of section is the additional costs' allowance and second homes. I think anyone within a short train ride of the Assembly probably shouldn't get a housing allowance. What I would call an average commute -- and I do live in London, so you have to bear in mind my commute is probably a lot more horrific than most people's, but I think an hour's commute, to an hour and a half, I think, is reasonable. I think it is probably difficult to justify giving people -- whether it's £4,000 or £13,000, which I understand are your two limits, when they could stay at home.

The other thing which I'd quite like you to clear up for me at some point is: there is an allowance even if you live in Cardiff; is that right? If you look, there is a £4,000 allowance even within central Cardiff or Newport. Now, I don't understand why you would stay anywhere but your own home if you live in Newport or Cardiff or Pontypool or Glamorgan and you were sitting in Cardiff in the Welsh Assembly. I don't understand why you need that money.

I think the last point on the ACAs -- again, I would like to re-emphasise that what's most important for us and everyone who loves democracy is that people are allowed to represent their constituency and they're enabled to do this and that's what the budget is there for, for Government, but I do think that they should be provided with somewhere to stay in Cardiff and not an asset. The argument's often made that if you are with a big company and you are told you have to go to Hong Kong for a year that the company will put you in a flat and they'll provide accommodation for you, and that's absolutely as it should be, but my argument would be this has to be the only job in the world where you get to keep the company flat at the end of it. I don't think we should be paying other people's mortgages. I think that flats should either be rented, or on an "as and when" basis for the Assembly Members that will need them in that particular term. There is definitely an argument to be made that the Assembly could purchase some flats that then they own. If there is capital appreciation, it then goes to the benefit of the taxpayer, not of the individual. I just think we need to be very careful because there is no discernible benefit to the taxpayer in paying off someone else's mortgage and I don't think we should be providing MPs with a second home. That's not what this is about. It's about providing them with a base from which they can work so that they can perform their duties.

So, in conclusion, I won't tread over all the ground I've covered because I think I've made myself clear and, obviously, you're going to ask me a few questions, but I think there is one larger point which is really important to make. The problem with a lot of these allowances and special treatment -- I think that many of the MPs and AMs are right in that it has become a witch-hunt and that's very wrong. I don't think it's that people broadly resent MPs or AMs or MSPs doing their job; that's what they're there for; they voted them in and that's the democratic system. The problem with this special treatment is it insulates politicians from things that the people on the streets, specifically their constituents, are going through. If you don't pay your own rent or mortgage, you're not subject to the vagaries of the housing market. If you don't pay for your own food, you don't understand soaring food prices. If you don't pay your own rent and rates, if you don't pay your own council tax, you can't understand whether people are getting value for money out of their public services. The most pertinent example of this I would like to quote would be the bin tax, which MPs were recently going to vote in and then claim back on their expenses. They

would be voting on legislation that they would be singularly insulated from. I think that this is fundamentally wrong and I think that should be problematic to anyone who loves freedom and democracy and fair representation. A lot of this is about making this easier for people in Government, so that they're not victimised, so there are not the witch-hunts and not the problems. I think reforming expenses and pay should be about making things better for everyone: a better system for Assembly Members, a better deal for taxpayers and a better representation for democracy.

Thank you very much. If you've got any questions----

SIR ROGER JONES: Thank you very much. We have a few questions. Dafydd, would you like to ask one?

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Can I thank you for the lucid way in which you've presented the information you've given us and the questions which you've raised. You'd make a very good Member of the Assembly, I'm sure. Some of the points I was going to ask have been covered. I'm right in assuming, aren't I, that you're not arguing that there shouldn't be expenses but that they should be tighter and more transparent and relevant to doing the job properly?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Exactly, exactly.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: You're not arguing that there shouldn't be some support with regard to AMs, particularly from the North or West, who are down in Cardiff to stay overnight; it's a question of how it's pitched.

SUSIE SQUIRE: That's right. As I've said, it's just so important that they're able to do their job and they've got to be allowed to sit there and represent their constituents and that's what democracy is about and that's why they're voted in because people want them in the Assembly fighting their corner, but I think it's making their jobs very difficult because they're getting all this distraction from what they can and can't claim and they're not doing that and they're not doing anything wrong, and that's the really important point to remember -- and haven't done anything wrong, in many cases -- but the rules are not right.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Would you accept that AMs should primarily be living in their constituencies; that it's important that they do have that base?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, I think it's very important. I think constituency work has to come very near the top of their agenda. That's why they're voted in: because people want them to represent them. They're not spending enough time in their constituencies, and this is something, I think, politicians all over the country suffer from, that they're not spending enough time with people in their constituencies; they're not hearing the local problems and challenges that are being faced, and I think that's what representative Government should be all about.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Would you accept, also, that it's important that MPs as formal Committees or people taking evidence, as we are today, should have a presence here in the North and not just in Cardiff?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, I think that's very important for the legitimacy of the Assembly.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Would you accept, therefore, that there are expenses associated with such visits that inevitably have to be reimbursed from some pocket, and that may be for Members whose constituency is in Cardiff but come up to the North as well?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, it works the other way too, right.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: One other point associated with this: you mentioned a short train ride, an hour to an hour and a half commuting. Just interpreting that, you're suggesting that Members within Glamorgan and Gwent might not be eligible for the same level as those further afield.

SUSIE SQUIRE: Absolutely; yes.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Thank you.

SIR ROGER JONES: Good. Nigel?

NIGEL RUDD: Susie, when you are looking at the way that AMs operate, what in your view are legitimate expenses that you would expect to see paid when an AM is operating from a constituency base?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Do you mean in terms of smaller things?

NIGEL RUDD: Yes----

SUSIE SQUIRE: The travel allowance, I think, is important because that can add up a lot. I think that they should be provided with a base, or, if it's the other way round and they're coming from Cardiff to North Wales for a meeting, or West Wales, they have a place to stay for the night. They absolutely shouldn't be expected to foot the bill for any of that. As I've said, I think MPs do have to incur extra expenses that someone like myself wouldn't. They'd probably go out for dinner a lot more and that sort of thing. That's a lot more discretionary. I think the important thing is to put a sizeable cap on this, that someone is not eating out every -- a call for restraint is what I'm trying to say on some of the more discretionary stuff. The trouble is so many MPs have claimed -- I think the luxuries should be done away with. As I say, I don't think we should be buying people televisions and Sky subscriptions and £2,000 sofas; I don't think we should be buying people's groceries. They get a decent wage. They get far above what the average wage is. They should pay for their own food. If it's special expenses like dinners out and that kind of thing, I can absolutely see the reason for it, but, again, I think restraint needs to be imposed. You'd have to do some kind of audit of average expenses and you'd have to see where you can cut down. I haven't seen those figures, but, yes, of course, there must be reasonable expenses. Travel and accommodation expenses we absolutely accept are valid, but, as I say, furnishing of homes and groceries are not.

NIGEL RUDD: Do you accept that AMs all should have a constituency office?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, I think it's important that they have an allowance like a secretary allowance, that sort of thing, staff costs -- is that what you mean?

NIGEL RUDD: Yes.

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, I think that's important. I didn't have time to look into it in detail, but I think things like the propaganda budget, the communication budgets and publicity budgets should be cut because, basically, to me, that is just absurd. I think it's important they have a secretary and they have help, but propaganda budgets, no. I think publicity and communications is something -- we've done consultancy; it's a thing we've done a lot on and how much Councils, and Councillors for that matter, spend on it. Again, I think the same should apply to MPs. They've got to have the back-up staff. They've got to be allowed to go to places

and do things and represent their constituencies, but the propaganda budget should go.

NIGEL RUDD: Can I just clarify, Susie, with you your term "propaganda budget." Are you referring to the communications' budget that Members of Parliament at Westminster have?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, when they're publicising their campaign, when they're running for election; that kind of thing. I think that needs to be cut.

NIGEL RUDD: That is a Westminster MP budget.

SUSIE SQUIRE: AMs don't have that all?

SIR ROGER JONES: No.

SUSIE SQUIRE: Sorry, my apologies.

NIGEL RUDD: Do you have a view, therefore, about whether AMs should have a communications' budget?

SUSIE SQUIRE: I mean, depending on what scale you're talking about, if you mean a member of their own staff just to do communications, no. Communications is a broad umbrella. I think that if they've got a constituency secretary, presumably someone who works a couple of days a week, that should be adequate to do any kind of communications they need. They get an allowance for that salary; that's a staff cost. I don't think there should be a separate communications' budget, no.

NIGEL RUDD: Can I also pick up in relation to staffing that typically AMs would receive a significant number of case-related enquiries. Would you agree that, therefore, some support in terms of case investigation or research was appropriate support?

SUSIE SQUIRE: So, you mean hiring additional staff related to casework?

NIGEL RUDD: Yes.

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, I think, within reason. I think from what I've seen of temporary staff, of costs from some of the FOIs journalists have brought to me, there is a lack of planning, so it's done at the very last minute and that's often why temporary staff are so expensive. So, I think what I'd encourage there is to plan out the

casework, in as far as you possibly can, and to come to an arrangement so you are spreading it out, so you're not hiring at the last minute someone very expensive and specialised to do something, that you are planning your caseload accordingly and planning your workload accordingly, so you can manage your time and manage the time of your staff.

NIGEL RUDD: Okay. I may come back to that. Thank you, Chair.

SIR ROGER JONES: Good. Jackie?

JACKIE NICKSON: I noted with interest your comments about not paying the mortgage payments. We've heard evidence from Scotland that paying mortgage interest allowance is actually more cost-effective than paying rent. However, they decided to abolish that payment because of the public perception. Do you think that still makes sense, bearing in mind that it is less value for money?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Are you talking about on a second home?

JACKIE NICKSON: Yes.

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, I think it does. I don't think that they should be -- as I say, it's got to be a base; it's got to be somewhere to stay. The point is with mortgages that you are actually -- if it's more cost-effective, that's fine, but the message it sends is very bad. Ultimately, you're paying off someone else's mortgage. They're getting the capital appreciation and they're ultimately ending up with the asset. So, the public perception of that is very bad, so I don't think it's worth it, no.

JACKIE NICKSON: Another area that we've been looking at is actually paying an overnight rate rather than putting people into hotels, that they can claim a rate and then it's up to them how they utilise that. Do you have a view on that?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, I think that's quite sensible, actually, because depending on the nature of your representation and what you need to be in Cardiff for, you may only have to stay one night every two weeks, or less than that, so a hotel would then be fine. If you're there all the time, you may need more. I think that's what a lot of private sector companies do. They have an

allowance and say, "Okay, guys, you can't book a hotel over £100 a night," and I think that makes a lot of sense. You'd have to look into the case studies as and when, but, yes, I think there should definitely be a limit on what you can rent and what you can spend when you are staying anywhere. Again, that would work if you had people -- because you do want representation all over Wales and, if you have people from Cardiff coming up here, it would be the same thing. There has got to be a limit on -- there has got to be an allowance for what they can spend if they need to go and stay somewhere. I think that would make a lot of sense.

JACKIE NICKSON: One more question. You were talking earlier about the resettlement grant when an AM loses their seat. Don't you think it's justifiable that they should have some payment to allow them to get other employment?

SUSIE SQUIRE: No, I don't; really, I don't. I think it is part of the job. As I say, I think it's a very important part of holding politicians to account. They may get voted out. You can't reward getting voted out by giving them a lump sum. Let's not forget this sum is often 100 per cent of annual salary. I don't think that's right at all. What someone once said to me was that statistically MPs find it very difficult to find employment after they leave office. I absolutely accept that point, but MPs also often have things on the side when they're in office and a lot of the people -- we're constantly being told MPs must have good wages, et cetera because they're the best candidates and we want to get the best people to represent us. I agree with that, but you can't have it both ways. You can't say they can't get another job and they could be earning more money in the private sector. Do you see what I'm trying to say?

JACKIE NICKSON: Yes, yes.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Can I intervene with a supplementary on that one? Would I be right in saying that if you were sacked from your job, you would have a month or two months' payment for that and would that not be appropriate?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, but I don't think being an AM or an MP is a normal job and I'm not up for re-election. So, if I get sacked from my job, it's not like I know in four years' time, for instance, that my boss is going to review and vote for me. It would be a much more shorter

thing. When you get voted in, you know you are going to have to get re-elected, or not, so it's not a normal job in that sense.

JACKIE NICKSON: Thank you.

SIR ROGER JONES: I, for one, am very grateful for the very clear way in which you expressed those views. I have couple of questions. Does the Taxpayers' Alliance have any views as to how many staff an AM should be allowed to have employed on their behalf? At the moment, it seems that most AMs have three people. Have you any views on that?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes; our view is that it should be as small as possible, but it must obviously be commensurate with their caseload. It depends on the size of their constituency, how many Committees they're sitting on; are they a Presiding Officer? That sort of thing. I think it's got to be done on an as and when basis. We would say keep the costs down as much as you can. If you've got three people and they're all working to the max, that's great. The trouble is when you've got three people and they're under-occupied. So, I think we don't have hard and fast rules on that, no.

SIR ROGER JONES: But, many AMs seem to employ press officers. Is this something you support?

SUSIE SQUIRE: No, we wouldn't encourage that at all. There is no reason why AMs can't do their own press. In many jobs you've got to double up. There is no reason why someone can't be a secretary and book in appointments with the media. I don't understand why AMs or MPs need individual press officers, no.

SIR ROGER JONES: Thank you. One of the principles of the Assembly is sustainability; it's written into the constitution. Therefore, should considerations of sustainability be paramount in claiming expenses? In other words, unless they can demonstrate sustainability, should they be able to claim for things which are non-sustainable?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Can you give me an example of that, possibly?

SIR ROGER JONES: Somebody drives at 40 pence a mile from North Wales to Cardiff or takes the train. Should we say you won't get reimbursed at 40 pence if you drive, but you should take the train?

SUSIE SQUIRE: No, no, I think there has got to be -- you don't want to treat elected people like children. There has got to be their autonomy. They must decide what's best for them. If that's the best way for them to get to work, if it's quicker to drive, drive. Their time is precious and we want them to be representing us. No, I think that should be up to them. I think the reimbursement should be on what they judge is the best way to get into work and the quickest way to get into work in terms of travel expenses, yes.

SIR ROGER JONES: Okay. Thank you very much indeed. We'll leave the questioning----

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Can I----

SIR ROGER JONES: Sorry.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: One we hadn't thought about, but you've raised in the context of the House of Commons, which I think is very important: you mentioned the question of having a full, independent audit scrutiny and the difficulty in the House of Commons. Of course, you are aware that in the Assembly it is much more open.

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: But, you would be in support of being absolutely open and independent for audit scrutiny in the Assembly.

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes; yes, I would.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: One other thing as well: how do you define family members when you say they shouldn't be family members?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Someone who is related to you.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: A third cousin?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, I would actually. I think there is no reason why you should be employing your third cousin above someone else on the labour market at the moment.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: No, it's not a question of being above someone else; it's a question of whether you ban them altogether.

SUSIE SQUIRE: It's like with anything: if you can demonstrate that the person is phenomenally qualified and you are specialising in one area and your third cousin has studied anthropology and you are in anthropology and they've got specialised skills, hire them; you can justify it; but, they shouldn't be hired because they're your family member.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: How would you then say that somebody has been hired just because they're a family member? If the job has been advertised, then a family member is appointed, how can you screen that out? I have a lot of sympathy with the viewpoint you're putting, but I'm just trying to see how it would work in practice.

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, I know, which is why that's the only caveat I would give. You're right; it's a very tricky area, which is why we would always argue it should be banned, but, again, you've got to have a little bit of sensitivity. Just as I wouldn't say, "Go and sack all the MPs' wives who are working for them," I wouldn't say, "Go and sack all their children," because that wouldn't seem fair. I do think that when you are reforming something, this, presumably, is an exercise in best practice. Best practice should be not to employ them.

SIR ROGER JONES: Nigel?

NIGEL RUDD: You raised in your opening remarks the prospect of potentially purchasing accommodation for AMs. Can you just expand on your thinking around that?

SUSIE SQUIRE: My thinking around that relates to what we were just talking about, really, with the Scottish Parliament, saying sometimes a mortgage is much cheaper than renting. So, I don't know -- for instance, many trusts and bodies own property and many organisations have bequeathed them, so they can use it for office space and that kind of thing. My own argument with that was if renting is ridiculously expensive and it proves to be so and you look at the figures and there is a much cheaper way to do it and you decide you're going to go down the mortgage route because it's just so much more cost-effective, that the Assembly could own that as opposed to an individual. I mean, it's a very difficult one because how do you control supply and demand in that sense because you don't know how many people that term are going to need a base in Cardiff? It's just that it's something you could possibly consider: that you own some very basic furnished flats and that you can use those as a base if you don't want to continue renting, or if

hotels become too expensive as time goes on. Then, my only point about that was that at least if there was a massive capital appreciation in property, the benefit would go to the taxpayer because it would belong to the Assembly and not to an individual. So, you wouldn't get the perception of someone making a large profit off something that the taxpayer's been paying for, if you see what I mean.

NIGEL RUDD: If you have a current situation which has legal obligations on existing AMs, do you think it reasonable to look at an approach that gives a period of time for the resolution of the current issues before bringing in a new system?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Do you mean specifically related to the ACAs, or with other things?

NIGEL RUDD: It may relate to a number of things.

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, I think you've got to do it right, and, with anything, if it's done hastily, it probably won't be done right and that's what I'm saying -- and not being radical and saying, "Well, you could sack everyone who's related to an MP." I'm not saying that. I'm not saying chuck people out of their houses or tell them they have to sell their flat. I'm not saying that at all, but, again, if you are talking about best practice, I think you need to start introducing it as soon as possible, and reform is never easy. Yes, you've got to phase things out and phase things in and I don't think anybody should be victimised or put in an uncomfortable position, but it is often painful to do these things. Yes, I think you've got to factor in a period of phasing in and phasing out to do it right.

NIGEL RUDD: Okay, thank you.

SIR ROGER JONES: Any other questions anyone wants to ask? Susie, you have been lucid. Thank you very much indeed. Very, very clear and I'm very grateful to you.

Next, we have Mr. William Beckett who lives locally and Mr. Beckett is a local businessman who understands the vagaries of all that's happening to businesses in the present climate. The floor is yours, Mr. Beckett.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Thank you. It's rather extravagant to refer to me as a businessman. I'm retired, actually, long retired. I am a pensioner in my seventh decade, actually. As far as I represent anyone, I speak for a number of people on the Federation of Small Businesses

and, more importantly, people in my local community, and one thing I don't think has been stressed here is that everything we're talking about comes from local pockets. Every penny that you spend on your hotels and expenses, et cetera, comes from us and I don't think that has been mentioned, much less stressed.

A lot of what I was going to say has already been said by Susie, far more lucidly, as you put it, than I could say it, so I am not going to repeat it. One thing I'm unhappy about and I think a number of people are unhappy about who've had it drawn to their attention is the Panel itself. It is said to be an "Independent Panel." Now, "independent" to me means "without any interest or connection." It seems to me the Panel -- three out of the four, at any rate -- break the rules. You, Sir Roger, are ex-WDA, I believe.

SIR ROGER JONES: Correct.

WILLIAM BECKETT: That is about the most derided organisation Wales has ever produced. Ten years ago, it was never out of the papers for one scandal or another. Then, it was absorbed into the amorphous South Wales Assembly Government, as they call it down here, SWAG. You are also Pro-Chancellor of Swansea University.

SIR ROGER JONES: Correct.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Now, when we had the Objective 1 millions if not billions of pounds, ten or so years ago, applications were made so complicated -- and I had first-hand experience of it -- that very few people could apply, but the universities in Wales were very clever. They organised separate departments who seemed to have no other responsibility than obtaining this money, which has left a very bad taste. Now, on Tuesday, I had to go to Cardiff and back. I drove. My wife and I amused ourselves on the way by trying to see whether we could see any benefit from this Objective 1 and, apart from Cardiff which now looks like New York, we couldn't.

Mr. Wigley----

SIR ROGER JONES: Before you go to Mr. Wigley, perhaps you'll allow me a chance to explain why I do not feel that I am disqualified.

WILLIAM BECKETT: I'm sure you feel you are not disqualified. I'm telling you what people are telling me.

SIR ROGER JONES: With due respect, I would think, particularly in North Wales, people have a great deal of confidence in the fact that I have chosen to pick up this baton and am running with it. Obviously, you are free to have your views; I am also free to have mine and I disagree with you that I am disqualified.

WILLIAM BECKETT: But, the point is the WDA and the universities and the Welsh Assembly are so closely connected that I cannot see how you can really call yourself independent.

SIR ROGER JONES: There is no WDA now, I am happy to advise you, and the universities are still independent, so I fail to see some of the points you are making.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Fair enough. Now, Mr. Wigley is very well-respected in North Wales. You know that. In fact, you've been round to my house. We've spoken. Then, there was an election and you never came back.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: I wasn't elected. I'm sorry that I wasn't elected. I did my best.

WILLIAM BECKETT: I don't see how you can regard yourself as independent when you are dealing with matters of an organisation whom you tried so hard to get into a few months ago and you may yet. Now, every piece of preferment you get that comes from the Welsh Assembly in future, you have a danger of it being linked to this -- "Oh, he increased their expenses; therefore, he's got a bit of preferment." That's the danger for you. You're held in very high esteem locally. You're in danger of having that esteem dented. It may haunt you in your familiar paths.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Chair, I accept that; there is that danger. When I was invited to come on, I did, in fact, raise that in the interview panel.

WILLIAM BECKETT: I think you should have thought harder because you are respected around here. You are one of the few politicians -- well, in Britain, I think -- who is not regarded as slimy, and that is a reputation worth hanging on to.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: You are too kind, but, on behalf of my colleagues, not all slimy, no.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Mr. Rudd. He's tarred with the Assembly brush, I see: East Midlands. I didn't know they

had an East Midlands Assembly. I once lived in a place called Toton; do you know it?

NIGEL RUDD: Yes.

WILLIAM BECKETT: The only exciting thing that happened in Toton was when a Jehovah's Witness banged on the door.

I will spare the lady's blushes because I don't know anything about her.

None the less, the point I'm making is that this is not an independent Panel and, furthermore, the Commission that appointed it, I understand, consisted of AMs. It's rather like an accused man being able to pick his own judge and jury. That is how it seems.

SIR ROGER JONES: All I can say to you is that I am satisfied of the *bona fides* of the people that are here. I, as Chairman, have got to ensure that its independence is maintained. You might disagree with my ways of doing that, but I also have a reputation and I will not allow that to be sullied by losing any aspect of independence in what we're doing now.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Well, we will see.

SIR ROGER JONES: We will see.

WILLIAM BECKETT: I would prefer to see a truly independent Panel, which wouldn't be difficult to arrange and including some people who are truly representative of the people who pay the money. Some pensioners on there wouldn't go amiss.

SIR ROGER JONES: I'm a businessman. I probably pay more tax than you do.

WILLIAM BECKETT: You get paid more than I do.

SIR ROGER JONES: Well, there you are.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Right, now, so much for that. The value for money. Someone mentioned value for money or the product. We could sit here all day coming out with examples of what we get from the Welsh Assembly, and, it's worth remembering, incidentally, that the Welsh Assembly was introduced on the slimmest of margins and there is still a great deal of hostility towards it, particularly in North Wales. Most people in North Wales -- and I, incidentally, come from a Welsh-speaking household -- they all say, "Well, we'd rather be governed

from Westminster as from Cardiff." That is the view here, or a wide view.

I'll give you an example of one or two examples of what we get from the Welsh Assembly. 18 months ago or so, a lot of our roads were suddenly downgraded to 50 miles an hour, and one thing about Caernarfonshire is that we have very good secondary roads. In my experience, they're probably the best in the country. Overnight, 50 miles an hour. Quite unnecessary in most drivers' points of view. So, I rang up the Council and had a moan and discovered, because they made no bones about it, that the chap in the office concerned was an anti-motorist, anti-motoring cyclist and somehow he'd got everyone on his side. So, I had a word with Brynle Williams, the AM. The response I got was, "Bloody well grow up. That's what we're paid for."

Another example -- I won't go on with many; just a couple will do: we had the slate valley initiative in North Wales. I can't remember the detail. It was a few years ago now, but you got your house renovated in some way for about 50 per cent; the other 50 per cent was subsidised, or something along those lines. The village I live in was split in two. They drew the boundary right down the middle of the village, so half the village got it and the other half didn't and there was no obvious reason why one should be excluded. So, I went to our Caernarfon AM (not Mr. Wigley) and put the case to him, which he took away, and I heard no more until I put a prod in about 6 months later and then I got a response that was exactly in the form of the question I put to him in the first place telling me what it was I was complaining about.

They're the sort of things we pay for. That is not value for money and these tales could be repeated a thousand times.

Finally -- and, I think, the one I feel strongest about -- is this airline we've got from Valley to Cardiff. About 25 years ago, someone proposed in the local paper that we should have an air service from North to South Wales and everyone fell off their seats laughing. It was a ridiculous motion and it died a natural in about a week. Then, suddenly, the South Wales Assembly was invented. AMs had to go from North to South Wales. They realised what a difficult journey it was to get from Caernarfon, for example, to Cardiff, so, overnight, an airline became absolutely crucial to the economy of Wales, and we've got it. The terminal at Valley, I think, cost £1.5 million for a hut. The airline is subsidised for 3 years and 95 per cent of people using it go on warrants. In other words, they're not passengers paying for the journey out of their own

pocket, as I would have to do. They're Government officials, Local Government, and people like that who suddenly find a reason to fly to Cardiff. Very nice day out. Is that value for money? I don't think it is.

These views I'm giving you are typical views, local views, locally. If you ask anyone round here whether they get value for money from the South Wales Assembly, the answer is a resounding "No."

That is all I have to say.

SIR ROGER JONES: Thank you very much. Certainly, we have listened intently to the points you are making, particularly the value for money ones. My question is: do you feel that perhaps we could go back to not having an Assembly at all and to go back to having a sort of Governor General figure that operates and governs everything through the medium of the Welsh Office?

WILLIAM BECKETT: As soon as you phrase a question like that, "Governor General"----

SIR ROGER JONES: Yes----

WILLIAM BECKETT: ----that taints the question, with respect.

SIR ROGER JONES: How well did you know John Redwood? Okay. There rests the case.

WILLIAM BECKETT: No, we are part of the United Kingdom. We have a Government in Westminster as good as governments get. We do not need a second Government which has virtually no powers. A better idea would have been to have given the Welsh MPs certain powers, similar to those the Welsh Assembly have. It would have been cheaper as well.

One other, perhaps, example I might give you has come to mind, if I may, and it regards the cavalier attitude in which AMs regard their own rules. I have no interest in this particular issue, but Mr. Black, I think his name is -- he's a Liberal Swansea AM. He describes himself, I believe, as a militant atheist, and he is a close friend of a poet who writes poetry, which even those who don't go to church would regard as blasphemous, and, on 11 December, and I am sorry to advertise the fact, he is using the Ty Hywel rooms in the Assembly for a reading by this poet. The substance of some of his poems include matters such as Mary Magdalene having sex with the poet and Jesus Christ, so I am informed. Now, the rules in Ty Hywel say quite clearly Assembly rooms, which includes those, may not be used for the display or

exhibition of material that may or is likely to cause offence. I put it to Mrs. Clancy, who is the Chief Executive and Clerk in the Assembly, that that rule was clearly being broken and the response I got was that the rules are interpreted by the AMs themselves and therefore the reading would go ahead. I would say that a rule that says Assembly rooms may not be used for the display, et cetera, likely to cause offence, is not capable of interpretation. It is what it says.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Can I ask, Chair, through you, whether you took that matter up with your elected representative, or one of your elected representatives in the North here?

WILLIAM BECKETT: I wrote to the Presiding Officer in the first place and I got the letter -- rather snotty letter -- from this Mrs. Clancy. I contacted Alun Ffred Jones, who is the AM, and brought it to his attention via his clerk. I hadn't heard back from him---

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Is that fairly recent?

WILLIAM BECKETT: Yes, a week or so ago.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: I see.

WILLIAM BECKETT: I've only just picked this thing up.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Fair enough. You've answered my question on that.

WILLIAM BECKETT: It's the insulting way that they've got a rule here which is as clear as the summer sun and they can break it when they want to, and, also, the rooms can only be used for Assembly business. Poetry about Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ having sex is not, I suggest, Assembly business.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: I note what you're saying.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Not value for money.

SIR ROGER JONES: I know Nigel Rudd has a question to ask.

NIGEL RUDD: Given your view of the Welsh Assembly, do you have an opinion that, given its current existence, there should be more scrutiny of what business is undertaken, that there should be more transparency in

relation to the way costs are incurred and that there should be more audit to ensure reassurance to the public in relation to the way the organisation does actually operate?

WILLIAM BECKETT: Well, it's very difficult because once you get an organisation like this it becomes a juggernaut; it attracts all sorts of expenses and it is very difficult. The only answer is the one the Chairman proposed to roll the thing back and to go back to what we had before and, if you need something for Wales that is separate from the United Kingdom, let the Welsh MPs form some sort of Committee within Westminster to realign sections of the budget and that sort of thing. The Welsh MPs, for example, could have brought in the prescription business had they had the powers on their own. They don't need this enormous monolith in Cardiff to do that.

SIR ROGER JONES: Well, Mr. Beckett----

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Hold on. Have you got any questions you wanted to come in with because I've got a couple?

JACKIE NICKSON: I've just got one question which is in relation to a point you made earlier about the fact that people are most unhappy, particularly in North Wales, about the cost and the value for money issues, which is that we are finding, as a Panel, that we are getting very little feedback from the public, and why do you think that is if, in fact, they are so unhappy?

WILLIAM BECKETT: It's certainly true that apathy rules supreme down here and I think it is a great shame. I think it applies to the British generally, particularly to North Wales. We don't riot enough. That's a simple answer. Generally, the North Wales are not really political animals, generally, and they just want to live their lives and go along and it takes a great deal of prodding to make them angry, but they're certainly very unhappy about the Welsh Assembly and you've got to be conscious of the difference between North and South Wales. It's certainly a lot wider than it is -- Cardiff is a lot further away from Bangor than London is.

SIR ROGER JONES: Dafydd?

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: I wanted to pick up the point about the air service from Valley, and the figures----

WILLIAM BECKETT: The Scottish airline, yes.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Yes, Highland Airlines, yes, I think it is. I declare an interest because I have used it on more than one occasion, so you would be valid to throw it at me if you wanted to. You mention a figure that 95 per cent of those travelling were on warrants. Where does that figure come from?

WILLIAM BECKETT: I got someone to dig around, but I shall find that figure----

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: If you could substantiate it and send a note through, it would be very helpful.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Yes, I will.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Secondly, second in association----

WILLIAM BECKETT: One of the benefits I had is I had a lifetime in transport, so I know a bit about ticketing and that sort of thing. By the way, don't believe this story that's going nationally about railway travel being twice or being greater than it was in 1946. It's actually 45 per cent and, if you want to know why, I'll tell you later.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: I'd be interested outside our remit to hear that.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Yes, if you are an honest member of the public, like me, you buy your ticket and you give cash. If you are working for Caernarfon Council or something like that, you have a warrant and the statistics of the airlines -- in fact, all transport companies are divided up into warrants and non-warrants, so it's quite easy to----

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: If you drop a note through via the Chair, that would be very helpful. The other point I've got is the airline appears to have 86 per cent occupancy, for whatever reason, taking your earlier point, but, if the air service was shown to be paying its way, you presumably don't have an objection to it. It's a question of whether it's subsidised or not.

WILLIAM BECKETT: If it's 86 per cent occupancy -- and, I believe, it is about that figure -- but 95 per cent of those people are having their fares paid by the taxpayer because they're on Government warrants, Local Government warrants and that sort of thing, then, of course, it's not; it's just being subsidised right to the

hilt. Every passenger who travels is not paying his own ticket. You can't----

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Can I try differentiating for my own benefit to get it clear in my mind what you're saying? If those people were driving down to Cardiff from Llangefni, let's say, for argument's sake, or close there, that is 200 miles each way, 400 miles total, and that would be £160 in terms of 40 pence per mile, the reimbursement rate. So, flying down isn't more expensive for the public purse. Am I right in saying, therefore, interpreting your question, it's a question of the justification of the journey rather than the mode it is taken in?

WILLIAM BECKETT: I think it is resentment at the fact that before we had a Welsh Assembly, there was no case for an airline. When you've got Welsh Assembly Members as privileged aristocracy suddenly finding they've got to go to South Wales, bingo, we've got an airline, and it's the resentment from that point of view.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Fine; but if, as previously, as you say, before they had the Assembly, those meetings would have been in London, you wouldn't have had any objection to those trips being done by rail to London or by road to London?

WILLIAM BECKETT: No, because that was already existing and that was there for the benefit of all fare-paying passengers. This thing has been introduced not because it's a commercial entity, not because it's of value to ordinary members of the public; it was introduced solely to suit the AMs, and that's the resentment. The joke in North Wales is why haven't we got an airline running from Valley to Manchester, which is where everyone wants to go where all the holidays start? The answer is: because there isn't a Welsh Assembly in Manchester.

SIR ROGER JONES: Mr. Beckett, I'm enormously grateful to you. I'm sorry if I seemed to be, perhaps, aggressive in my response, but I want to finish on three points of information, Mr. Beckett. The Panel was, in fact, appointed by the Commission, by the Independent Advisor. We were not directly appointed by Assembly Members -- as a point of information. The second point is: it is not empowered, alas, to revisit the question of the establishment of the National Assembly. You have spoken eloquently on that issue, but it is way beyond our remit. This business about the poet, that, again, is not really

an issue for this Panel because I know you have been in correspondence with the Clerk and also with the CEO of the Commission on this issue. It's a heartfelt issue. I'm sorry I can't help you with it, but I understand -- very clearly understand -- the sentiments.

WILLIAM BECKETT: I just used that as an instance of the relationship between us and them.

SIR ROGER JONES: Nevertheless, we are very grateful to you and you have our thanks for making those points so well. Thank you.

If we now look to our programme, there are light refreshments, a cup of coffee, in the atrium downstairs, so we'll go there and have 25 minutes to do that and then come back and have a public session proper. Thank you very much indeed.

(Refreshment Break)

SIR ROGER JONES: I think we'll make the start. This is for me the very important part of our meeting. It's the public session. We have a microphone going around. If anybody would like to speak, please put your hands up and away we go. Who is the first one? Don't be shy. There must be somebody here. Yes. This gentleman. Thank you very much.

JOHN PARRY EVANS: (*In Welsh*) John Parry Evans. I'm not happy this morning about the fact that there is only about half a dozen of the public here today as an audience and I wasn't aware at all about this morning's meeting. I wasn't aware at all this morning before I switched on Radio Cymru, on "Post Cynta" -- the programme "Post Cynta" -- and there was an item on the radio this morning about this meeting today. (*In English*) Your publicity for the advertising of this event hasn't reached the public because, as I say, I wasn't aware of the event until I heard an item on Welsh radio this morning and, as I just live down the road, it was an opportunity to come along because it's a subject that I'm really interested in. I feel that the Welsh public as a whole are very interested -- actually, that is wrong -- very critical of the Welsh Assembly for the fact that they have a perception of over-expenditure and the items that are associated with that.

Going to the crucial nub of the subject this morning, which is the accommodation aspect for Assembly Members, Susie has actually taken a lot of my thinking. She's already expressed a lot of my thoughts, actually, but there are just two little items that I would just

like to make a suggestion. It's only a suggestion, obviously. I think that the worst perception of the accommodation aspect is the fact that Assembly Members are able, at the moment, to purchase a second home in our capital city or rent accommodation there. Now, I feel that because of the volume of business that Assembly Members create in Cardiff, that there may be -- I wonder whether the Assembly has looked at a situation where perhaps they can discuss with local hoteliers the possibility of a discounted rate for Members because, bearing in mind that, generally, Members are only in the city from Monday to Thursday, and, obviously, during periods when they're not in session, I think this would actually be much more economical than paying mortgages on second homes, and, then -- I really do think that -- perhaps this is a bit absurd, but I think, again, whether the Assembly in the long-term would perhaps look at a situation of creating a block of flats in Cardiff Bay for exclusive use of Assembly Members and, when they're not in session, they might be able to work out a situation like our universities do at the present time where the tourists are able to use the accommodation when the Assembly Members are not in session.

My last point is not directly concerned with accommodation, but I was very interested to hear the argument that the perception, again, of the new airline that operates between Valley and Cardiff is exclusively for Members of the Assembly and other public authority people. I don't think that is true at all because I used to work in tourism and I know that, for example, there are a lot of people in South Wales who now use that link to come for short holidays, short breaks to North Wales and vice versa, and also that airline is thinking of doing a new route between Holyhead and Dublin and I think that would be tremendous as well.

SIR ROGER JONES: Thank you very much indeed for making those points. We have heard evidence, and, other people giving evidence have pointed to the fact that the office block -- or, having a tower block exclusively for AMs is one people have suggested and I must say there were issues like security, and I don't think they'd all want to live together anyway. Anyway, we have duly noted everything that you have said. Thank you very much indeed.

NIGEL RUDD: Can I ask the gentleman a question? In the early part of your comments, sir, you talked about -- "the worst perception," I think, was the expression you used regarding either the purchase or rent of a second

home. Did you mean to lump those two sorts of methods of living together or was there one----

JOHN PARRY EVANS: One----

NIGEL RUDD: I wondered. Can you just expand on that? What you did mean to say in that point, just to avoid any confusion in the Panel?

JOHN PARRY EVANS: Fine. I think my main point there would be that -- I give the example of a second home. It really would be used officially for short periods, so I am not saying that the owner would do this, but there would be nothing stopping the owner, perhaps, when they were not in residence, to rent out the accommodation as tourist accommodation in certain periods of the year, and, I mean, we as the public are funding the situation and that would be, you know, a serious situation which really couldn't be policed, I wouldn't think.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Can I?

SIR ROGER JONES: Yes, of course.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Did you want to come back?

NIGEL RUDD: No, no.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: First of all, thank you very much for the evidence you have given us. It was very interesting. Thank you very much for that. You mention the way that the public are worried about this element around Members having significant help towards the costs of staying in Cardiff and, particularly, its use if the value of a flat or a house increases and that they then sell it and they get the profit back. Now, if the Assembly took a stake in that, so that they could get the equity back when it was sold, the money then goes back to the public; would that be one way of reducing your concern?

JOHN PARRY EVANS: Yes, I think that's brilliant, yes, very good. I hadn't really thought about that, to be honest with you.

SIR ROGER JONES: Thank you very much for that. Any other questions? Yes, this lady.

ALISON COUSINS: It's not a question.

SIR ROGER JONES: No, no; points.

ALISON COUSINS: It's an observation. I didn't really come here to say anything. I'm the Clerk of our Community Council, which is Capel Curig, and I came to listen and to take back what I heard to the community to ask if they wanted to comment, but, because I didn't have a remit to attend from them, I am here as a private individual, but, obviously, I have got the knowledge of the past 20-odd years from the community.

The first thing I would say is that I'm terribly disappointed that more people haven't attended, but one of the things is that, as the Clerk, I received this letter on 20 November. I have already explained that if a Community Council only meets every 2 months, this letter might have reached a Clerk the day after they had the last meeting. It might not have been circulated or been discussed in the Council, so, hopefully, that might be one of the reasons there aren't more people attending, but I've been assured that anyone can comment -- am I right -- up to the end of December or beyond?

SIR ROGER JONES: Of course.

ALISON COUSINS: So, there isn't a time limit on it, so that's quite reassuring. I have listened with great interest to Susie and Mr. Beckett and, if that's all right, I just made very quick notes and comments.

I think Susie probably covered most of the problems that the public have and the perceptions, whether they're right or wrong. I think Susie covered them very well. I just made a note to say that perhaps the dealings of the National Assembly should be more open and honest, perhaps that means more transparent, so that there won't be these myths of things that just aren't true.

The other thing is I feel quite strongly that once someone goes -- this might be a perception -- to the Assembly, it insulates and cushions the politicians from the world as it is and the problems we all face, especially the problems we're facing now with the economic climate, and I feel very strongly that AMs should actually live in their constituencies so that they can listen to grassroots problems first-hand. Some rural constituencies are huge and a long way from Cardiff, and I feel, as someone who tries to keep our AM in the picture, that they need a base where they can be contacted easily by all members of the public. We, in the rural areas, have to travel probably a minimum of 10, 12, 15, 20 miles to go and consult our AM, and perhaps that should be thought out; how should they be making themselves available? I know some AMs hold surgeries,

but I am not sure that's adequate. I think perhaps it would be more friendly if they had an employee who manned an office to field the questions or to at least liaise. I don't know. I don't know the answer to that one.

We all seem to be talking about the same thing about accommodation in Cardiff, don't we? So, there must be a huge problem, but, listening to people, it's becoming evident that we all seem to have the same ideas to resolve it and I have written down that there should, perhaps, be better housekeeping. Why can't the National Assembly provide the accommodation themselves, perhaps on a B&B basis? The buildings to be purchased by the Assembly, hence the people of Wales, and that building will be there in perpetuity to enable AMs to be more productive and utilise their time to better advantage when they're in Cardiff without having to bother about all the domestics and the looking after the building. Perhaps that is one way of thinking about it. I think that is enough on that.

Mr. Beckett, it's nothing personal, but I was very disappointed that you said you were representing local people, pensioners -- I'm a pensioner -- and local business people. I've been a local business person and I really feel that, perhaps, broader issues should have been discussed, not specifics, because pensioners alone have phenomenal problems in North Wales, especially in the rural areas, and this really needs addressing by the National Assembly.

No matter what we think about the National Assembly, it is here to stay, so we should try to make the best use of it we can and try to influence them from the grassroots and that is one reason I'm here. I am a housewife, a mother, a grandmother, but, if we don't come and have our say, we're not going to influence anyone, are we?

I've got one other little comment, and, when there is such a lack of funding for essential services, it's not bad to be critical of what goes on in the Assembly. In this area, in particular, we have the most phenomenal funding crisis in Conwy. It's for essential services like the local hospitals, all sorts of social services. It is becoming a big problem and the Assembly really need to come up here and speak to us and address it.

I think I've said enough.

SIR ROGER JONES: Thank you for making that point. Does anyone want to ask----

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Yes, if I may, Chair. Thank you very much for those points. You've raised one point which, perhaps, is in addition to the evidence we've had

already, and that is the ease of access or otherwise of AMs within their territory. You referred several times to your AM and, through that, I interpreted that you were referring to one specific AM: the Constituency AM. Of course, everybody has five AMs because there are four Regional ones. How easily do you find----

ALISON COUSINS: Don't ask me who the others are. I know one----

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: In other words, you identify with your Constituency AM, but not quite so easily with the Regional ones?

ALISON COUSINS: No. To be honest, I wish you hadn't asked me that because I'm usually very well-informed and I don't think I could tell you. I know who our local AM is and he is as helpful as he can be, but with his limited time, but the others, I'm sorry, no.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: I understand that point because it is a difficult one to get over to people that there is a multiplicity and it is not your fault at all. A lot of people have the same problem. With regard to the access to the AM's office, would I be right in saying that your AM, your Constituency AM, does have an office----

ALISON COUSINS: Does have an office----

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: ----which is open to the public between 9 and 5, whatever it is, and there is a member of staff there, and you would regard that as an essential requirement?

ALISON COUSINS: I would. It needs publicising better.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: So, how should an AM, given that that needs to be publicised better -- but, we've heard some of the comments we've had about using allowances to publicise things. What's the right balance there?

ALISON COUSINS: I don't know, but I think the funding should be there from whatever pocket to make the AM available for his constituents. I don't know where the funding would come from, but the necessary funding should be given to those AMs. I don't know what happens in towns and cities, but, in rural constituencies, it is vital if we're going to voice our needs and our problems that funding should be found from somewhere.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: One last point, Chair, if I may, associated with this. It has been pointed out to us in earlier sessions that, in fact, all four Regional AMs in North Wales live in the Eastern part in the old Clwyd -- to the east of the old Clwyd, most of them. Do you think it would be easier, with regard to access, if, say, rather than having their own individual offices, which they may have in Flintshire or wherever, that they were using the Government buildings that exist, and new ones are coming on stream in Llandudno Junction, and there was an office for the Regional AMs there that could then serve the whole of the North?

ALISON COUSINS: Not really. It's too remote. How would the constituents get there?

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Yes, the question, as things are now, is of course you have your Constituency AM, that he or she would still have their constituency office----

ALISON COUSINS: Yes, right, I misunderstood.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: But, the Regional AMs who, at the moment, are in one corner, if they were serving from a central office in Llandudno Junction, already paid for by the Government, so they were using capacity -- a point made by Mr. Beckett earlier that we ought to use existing capacity -- it would save the cost of----

ALISON COUSINS: Yes, it would be progress, wouldn't it? They'd be a bit nearer and a bit more available. Yes.

SIR ROGER JONES: Sorry, can I just make one point? In your packs, you will find this map and also the pictures of who the Regional AMs are, so it was well worth coming here this morning.

ALISON COUSINS: It was worth it for this, yes. It was worth a visit.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Is it always necessary to have an eyeball to eyeball meeting with an AM? We have telephones and the internet. From my personal point of view, it is much simpler and easier for me to ring up someone and speak to them than it is to go to all the trouble of motoring over, however many miles it is, to have a meeting in which you are not saying any more to them face-to-face than you would over the telephone.

ALISON COUSINS: I disagree, you know. I disagree because if you are using the telephone, you'll probably get someone else, and, if it is of such importance to you as a person or a family or a business, I think it is vital to be able to speak to that person and to know that they understand because they're from your area, they know what the problems are, and they know who to go to to help to resolve it. The AM might not be the best person to resolve it, but they might be able to pass you on. I'm a dinosaur, really, where internet and computers are concerned; it's a useful tool, but you can't beat meeting your AM and that's why they've been elected for their constituents.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Yes, perhaps you're right.

SUSIE SQUIRE: I think this lady makes a really important point, if you don't mind me butting in there, what she's talking about in terms of them being available to the constituents; that's their job, and, communication budgets aside, they should be available to their constituents. It's a massive part of their job, I think you're right, and the fact that you can't see them or you don't know when you can see them and there is no system in place is a shame, and, I think if you establish that, whether it was, as you say, a consultation period or whatever, and it became practice that that was part of an AM's job description -- and, again, it's not that they're doing anything wrong; it's not fair on them because they don't know what their job description is there -- that would just have to go with the territory. It seems to me that's the most important part of their work, to listen to their constituents. So, I think you're right: it's part of their job.

ALISON COUSINS: And, in time, people would learn this is what they do and this is where they are if you want to consult them.

SUSIE SQUIRE: That's right and it would strengthen democracy because they're hearing what the people in their area want. I can't remember who it was; someone said earlier about once they enter the Assembly they become very insulated. I think it was you. I think that's the problem. It's a lack of contact with people and, whether it is by the phone or email or face-to-face, the fact is that contact with people, listening to their problems is why they're there and why they get their taxpayer funded salary in the first place.

SIR ROGER JONES: Nigel?

NIGEL RUDD: Yes, I just wondered whether you had a view as to how well constituents in an area know which issue to go to to their local Councillor or their AM or their MP? Can you give me a view, and, perhaps, the gentleman who also commented earlier and anybody else in the audience, about how well constituents and members of the public know the differences between those roles?

ALISON COUSINS: I think local people know who their Borough Councillor is, say, and they will phone them up and tell them what the problem is because they probably know them -- in the rural areas, they will know them, more or less personally, and I would know who to send them to if it's like -- well, I don't know; I was going to say if the streetlight goes out, but the clerk probably phones them and gets the streetlight put on, but, if they don't, they can go to their local Councillor who knows most of the people in that area. I must admit that, at the moment, if you have another issue and it is more complex, I send people to see our MP at one of his surgeries because our MP holds regular surgeries and, if he can't help them, he will pass them on to someone who can, or he will write to them. If it's a much bigger issue, I don't think many of the electorate would go to their AM. I would. If it's an Assembly matter, like the A5, I would go to our AM. If it's a big issue and it's funded by the Assembly, I would go to our AM, or, if we need someone to speak out for us in Cardiff, I would go to our AM, but I don't think many members of the electorate would know that they could go to him personally.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Can I just get clarification on this? Am I right in saying there has been a change in boundaries in your area recently?

ALISON COUSINS: There is going to be another one----

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: And that the AM and the MP don't serve the same constituency and the AM is a fairly recent comer, personally----

ALISON COUSINS: And that's very difficult for people to understand because everyone knows Dafydd Elis Thomas and I think there is still that perception and it is very difficult; it's very difficult knowing who your AM is.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Yes, because of the change.

ALISON COUSINS: Yes, I think so, but, in time, hopefully, and if there are more offices and whoever it

is is more available, hopefully people will learn; but, Dafydd Elis Thomas lived in the area, well-known. It's this face-to-face thing, isn't it, and knowing there is someone there who will help you when you are in time of need -- usually time of need.

NIGEL RUDD: Can I ask, Chair, if you have a view about the ability to differentiate between Councillors, and if any other member of the public wish to comment on that?

SIR ROGER JONES: Does anyone else wish to comment on who do you contact: your AM, your MP, or your List AM, or your Constituency AM? Is this confusing?

JOHN PARRY EVANS: It is confusing. I think it is a grey area between AMs and MPs, and another aspect I think a lot of people -- I, for one, don't know every field, every aspect there that the Assembly covers and what aspects they don't cover and what aspects the Westminster MP covers and that would need a bit of research to identify, then, before you get to the right person.

SIR ROGER JONES: Okay. Are there any other questions from anyone from the general public? Yes?

CHRIS PHILLIPS: Just bringing it back to the second homes again, I'm not going to go into the different ways of solving it because I think they've been discussed in quite a bit of detail----

SIR ROGER JONES: Sorry, can I have your name again?

CHRIS PHILLIPS: Chris -- Chris Phillips.

SIR ROGER JONES: Okay; thank you, Chris Phillips.

CHRIS PHILLIPS: What it is, I just thought I'd give a perspective from a lot of people I know around here of why they think it's so bad. I've only just moved out at the moment. I'm now renting a place, but I was determined not to have to rent anywhere. I wanted to be able to get a mortgage with my girlfriend. It saves us lot of money in actually getting somewhere. At the time, I was on £8 an hour, which is a very good wage around here. You are lucky to get a job over the minimum wage. I was working full-time. My girlfriend was working full-time and the highest house we'd have been able to get, at the time, would have been just under £100,000. So, actually, finding a decent house under that price around here is, basically, nothing; unless we had capital to

back us up, we couldn't get anywhere. So, I've actually given up on that idea and I've gone back to university to try to get a better job afterwards; but, obviously, the situation a lot of people are in, they can't buy their own home. So, to hear you're buying a second home with our tax money is ridiculous, especially if you consider the fact that a lot of people are having houses repossessed at the moment. If you consider their views, as well, on the fact that you're buying homes and second homes and TVs and that there is obviously very strong opinions against it. That's all I have to say about that, really.

SIR ROGER JONES: Thank you for making that point. You made it very, very clearly. Any comments?

NIGEL RUDD: Would you think that that view would be the same even if we weren't in an economic crunch period?

CHRIS PHILLIPS: That was before we hit the financial crisis, I couldn't buy a home. With the way things have gone now is what made me decide to go for university instead because, obviously, I've seen the way things are changing. The money I could get now is basically non-existent for getting a mortgage, so I've obviously decided on going to uni. It seems like the right time to be in uni, really. But, my opinion from that came from before there was, actually, the crisis. There are a lot more repossessions going on now because of the crisis, so, even if you consider that, they're all going to have strong opinions now.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Can I be a little bit of a devil's advocate here, just in order to tease the question out a bit? These allowances, first of all, came through Westminster, of course. It was the Westminster system that was adopted by the Assembly with regard to allowances to stay, and, they came, basically, from MPs who, at one stage, weren't paid at all, and then they were paid a pretty low wage. When I was first elected, I think it was £3,750 a year that an MP's salary was and these allowances came in to ensure that it wasn't just rich people who could afford to be in Parliament, but that ordinary working people could be there as well and they needed to be down there. Would you accept that there needs to be some provision to enable them to stay, albeit that may not be the right to buy a place, but to rent a place?

CHRIS PHILLIPS: I think the suggestions that have already been made make sense, like it being owned by the

Assembly rather than individuals and that sort of thing, and, looking at the salary, the average salary of £51,000, to me, that's like a dream, if I could reach anywhere near that. I mean, my wage, my girlfriend's wage and a friend's wage would probably just about reach that and that's for one person. So, obviously, us looking at that, we don't see how that's not enough at all.

SUSIE SQUIRE: That's not the case any more, is it, that they're on such -- that's the point you make very well. You're right, and I've said this before: people have got to be able to represent their constituencies and democracy dictates it's got to be the person who you'll vote for, whatever background they're from. But, this is not the case any more. They're getting a salary that's far, far over and above the average wage and, thus, should be able to, wherever possible, fund themselves.

WILLIAM BECKETT: The problem seems to me to be as soon as you appoint a representative, he suddenly becomes unrepresentative because he goes from virtually no salary at all to become a salaried aristocrat, and, as someone else mentioned this morning, the things like the council tax and all the other things that are the bails of our life mean nothing to him. A 10 per cent increase on his council tax to someone in the Assembly, it's meaningless to him; it's just small change; yet, to us, it's a great deal. You lose that connection as soon as someone is elected and it's that that I think causes the greatest resentment and somehow it's got to be attacked.

SUSIE SQUIRE: I do think that as long as they're paying for it, it's fine. It doesn't matter what salary they're on, as long as they're paying for these things. As I said about council tax, petrol prices and food prices, it's an insulation point, isn't it? If you are insulated from something and you're not paying your council tax or you're not doing those things, you can't evaluate public services. You can't say, "Oh, we're not getting value for money," because you're not paying for it. If you can't get a doctor's appointment for 2 weeks, you are not in a good place, then, to hold that to account.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: You are saying that they should be paying twice for it because they are paying in their constituency homes?

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes; if they've got two homes----

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Yes.

SUSIE SQUIRE: Then, yes, but if the Welsh Assembly is providing them with a base, then, no. That's the point -- but, the bin tax, then, or the food, the groceries, so, council tax is one thing, just because it's related back to public services, which is what was discussed, but there are other things, and I think that is the point: it's the insulation point. You've got to feel what the people you are representing feel, to some degree, to try and understand, to get to grips with it, I think.

SIR ROGER JONES: Any other comments?

JACKIE NICKSON: Can I pick up on this business of paying mortgage interest? If that was a least cost solution, if that cost you, overall, less than renting or putting AMs up in a hotel, would you still be against it?

CHRIS PHILLIPS: I think it becomes the Assembly's property not the individual's because, at the end of the day -- otherwise, they're getting paid a lot more money, yet again, for a second home when a lot of people can't even buy their own homes, so why should they be getting a second home for it? It should just become the Assembly's property.

JACKIE NICKSON: Even if that costs more?

CHRIS PHILLIPS: If they do it as a mortgage through the Assembly, so the Assembly gets the property when that person leaves the Assembly, someone else will have that place to use, so it's going to bring the cost down even more later on.

SIR ROGER JONES: Any more views or comments you'd like to make?

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: Can I prod a bit more, particularly the rural direction that our friend the Clerk of Capel Curig was referring to? In trying to provide an equivalence of availability and service in a scattered rural area and, bearing in mind that you've been in and you are in the Westminster seat still that runs from just outside Colwyn Bay at Eglwysbach -- from Eglwysbach to Aberdovey -- how should it be arranged that an MP or an AM serving that area can be equally available within a short distance for people in such a large, scattered area? Is this an argument that, rather than

having Regional Members, the constituencies should be smaller so that people can get at them easier?

ALISON COUSINS: I don't know what the answer is; I truly don't. I wouldn't know what to suggest to resolve it.

RT HON DAFYDD WIGLEY: That's fair enough. Chair, if anybody has any additional thoughts after this meeting and wants to drop us notes, through the Chair, please welcome them.

SIR ROGER JONES: Please do. It seems to me that the way of making AMs and MPs work more effectively would be by greater use of the internet. Personally, it affords a way of doing two-way communication, but I think the problem is that broadband in rural areas, as we know, is not that good.

ALISON COUSINS: Don't go there; just don't go.

NIGEL RUDD: A number of people have raised the issue about community representatives, AMs understanding and identifying with the needs of their constituents. To be fair, the Assembly has attempted to try and achieve a more diverse membership of Assemblies -- gender and age differentiation, for example -- than some of the other publicly appointed bodies that exist, in order to try and make that connection back. So, we do have younger Assembly Members than, potentially, you find in other organisations. Is the issue one that is not about the people being identified to stand as Assembly Members or representing, but how they fulfil their roles? Are there some issues that are slightly different from that because one of the defences the Assembly might put through is to say, "Well, we do have a cross-section of society that are subject to the pressures" -- whether you're a young person trying to achieve your first home and working on a low wage, or not. Do you think there is any difference in the way that Assembly Members undertake their task or could be improved, in your view?

JOHN PARRY EVANS: Can I just mention one point? With due respect, I feel that some of the younger Members of the Assembly -- I'm sure they're talented in lots of areas, but they haven't had the experience of life that a more mature person gives to their work.

NIGEL RUDD: In playing devil's advocate, in defence of the young person, they would say that they may bring

different perspectives on the issues that are relevant to society.

JOHN PARRY EVANS: I do appreciate that, yes.

NIGEL RUDD: You do try and achieve a balance in relation to the view and representation. Is it not working as well as it might do? That is, I suppose, the question I'm posing.

JOHN PARRY EVANS: I still have this feeling that the experience is very important. Some of the new Assembly Members come over to me as very immature in some aspects.

SIR ROGER JONES: You wanted to make a point?

ALISON COUSINS: Yes. I don't think that's necessarily true because they're going to learn, aren't they? They're probably going to be there for a number of years, so, hopefully, they will learn and gain the maturity and experience. It's just a personal thing. I have four children in their late twenties and their early thirties who've travelled the world and they've come back to live here. They get very low wages. They can't really afford houses, but, that is their problem; they wanted to live here. But, none of them will vote, much to my shame, and I harangue them all the time, because they're totally disillusioned with the whole process, and I don't know how we can get over that because they know there are young people who are AMs, but they don't relate to them, and they're not apathetic; they are very political, but they will not vote, and most of them -- all four of them could be here speaking to you and telling you what their view of the National Assembly is. I mean, apart from the fact that they work very hard and they couldn't come on a Friday morning, but they possibly are the people that you should be trying to engage now to seek their views. I don't know how we -- I have come here with a lot of "don't knows." I don't know how we can get them to do it.

NIGEL RUDD: We will continue to provide a variety of mechanisms, including internet, email and other contact so that we would encourage a wider cross-section of the public.

ALISON COUSINS: You might do that, but they haven't got sufficient knowledge of the Assembly and its workings to make these comments.

NIGEL RUDD: Which I think comes back to how well do the public actually understand the role of the different organisations and democratic bodies that exist?

ALISON COUSINS: It's just their perceptions and they're not totally right.

SIR ROGER JONES: One of the main purposes of this Panel and this exercise is to try and reengage with the people of Wales because the very fact that we have so few people here this morning -- it's not our fault. Perhaps there could have been better communication and better advertising of things, but, by and large, for a whole list of reasons, the public of Wales choose to disengage. Now, I think you can change that. I wouldn't be doing this job if didn't actually believe it's possible to reengage the people of Wales. I wouldn't be doing this. So, watch this space. I think that's as a result, a consequence, of what we're doing. The main recommendations will be this reengagement.

So, I am going to try and summarise now. I'll try and put this one through.

We've heard that the AMs are not underpaid. That was a point that you made there. They should not be paid-off for failure to be re-elected, particularly if they've held office. In other words, when they leave, they may have held office some time ago; when they leave, even the fact that they held office is in their final remuneration.

Expenses. We were told to follow the Scottish model, to publish all expenses and not just by category -- a point that you made. Full audit of expenses is going to be important. In other words, anything that's claimed from the public purse is open to full audit.

No employment of family members. We made a note of that. I can see circumstances where that might be considered draconian, but, no, we have made a note of it.

Commuting by our elected representatives. An hour and a half's commute is not considered to be excessive. Up to an hour and a half is not considered to be excessive.

WILLIAM BECKETT: Excuse me; is that each way or in total?

SIR ROGER JONES: Each way; no, each way.

WILLIAM BECKETT: So, 3 hours a day.

SIR ROGER JONES: I'm interpreting my notes as being each way, 3 hours a day.

SUSIE SQUIRE: An hour to an hour and a half, personally, I think is reasonable.

SIR ROGER JONES: The rental option for AMs in Cardiff is one to be explored, as opposed to the purchase, and, as circumstances change, there is a lot of rental property available in Cardiff at the present time.

An interesting point that you made: AMs should be subject to the same taxation, expenses, rates, et cetera, as their constituents. That's an important principle.

Another important point I think you made was that the planning of AMs' work is important. This business about they're there running around doing heroic constituency stuff completely unplanned; I think they probably need training in better time-management. That's how I interpret that. Is that----

SUSIE SQUIRE: Yes, that's right because the temporary staff bills are so big and a lot of that is because it's last minute and highly specialised. So, it's more about planning the workload and the caseload.

SIR ROGER JONES: Mr. Beckett reminded us, and, again, I don't think we need reminding, where many people in Wales do need reminding, that the money comes from the taxpayer and who are the wealth creators and who are the wealth destroyers?

A point that has been made here: AMs should live in their constituencies -- and that's a point that's been made by several -- otherwise, how would they know what the problems are facing their constituents? It seems almost perverse, does it not, that we pay allowances to live elsewhere, which is a disincentive to that principle that they live in their constituencies? I think that is a better point that, I think, you made.

The point that -- I think it was you who made it -- the National Assembly is here to stay. We're not supposed to discuss this; it's not part of our remit, but I'm just making the point that you made and I'll leave it at that.

I think I am going to draw a veil on the proceedings by thanking you all very much indeed, Mr. Beckett, Susie, and members of the public who came here. Thank you very much indeed. Your views do matter and, believe me, we will be going back to these notes at our subsequent meetings.

(Meeting Closed)

[I certify that I produced this transcript to the best of my skill and ability. H Maclean, MBIVR]