



The Internaut

BY DEBORAH HILL CONE

All expenses paid

The sneaky joys of having an expense account.

Black-glitter lavatory seats, Christmas tree decorations, Kenyan carpets, moat clearing, installing fake-Tudor beams in their houses – just a few items revealed as claimed on expenses by House of Commons MPs. It's the “glitzy” detail that makes this scandal so delicious. The trivial sometimes illuminates the larger picture. Remember Tuku's underpants? (In 1997, New Zealanders were transfixed by the \$89 expense claim for a pair of boxer shorts by then New Zealand First MP Tukoroirangi Morgan.) But as **Damian Whitworth** 'fesses up in the *Times*, journalists are hardly squeaky clean over their own expenses. “Evelyn Waugh satirised journalists and their approach to defraying their costs in *Scoop*, where Boot ends up claiming £20 for stones. He was exaggerating only a little.” In his own blog, No Sacred Cows, **Toby Young** finds it a bit rich that Fleet Street purports to be shocked – “shocked!” – to discover MPs have been fiddling their expenses. He says at the end of his first week as a news trainee at the *Times* in 1986 he submitted his first-ever expenses claim. “I was worried it was a little extravagant – I'd claimed for three lunches and two cab rides – and my fears were confirmed when my then editor rejected it. “This won't do,” he said, slamming the form down on my desk. “Get Nick to show you how it's done.” As he ran his eye over my claim, Nick shook his head with disbelief. “This is completely unacceptable,” he said, barely able to conceal his outrage. “If you carry on submitting claims as modest as this, you'll end up making us all look bad.”

tinyurl.com/pbeg59
tinyurl.com/ovoepz

Of course, the newspaper that broke the MPs' expenses story maintains the expose marks The. End. Of. Civilisation. As. We. Know. It. *Telegraph* columnist **Simon Heffer** thunders that the Queen, “a lighthouse of probity” – they really write like that in the *Torygraph* – ought to warn the Prime Minister about the



British MPs: snouts in the trough.

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damage being done. Bet that'll come as a big surprise to him. The *Guardian's* **Jonathan Freedland** is also keen on some drastic steps being taken, such as calling an immediate election or prosecuting MPs for fraud but there is the turkeys-voting-for-Christmas problem. “Trouble is all those steps are in the hands of the politicians themselves.” The *Economist* says politicians have got a bad case of what Jane Clifton would call “entitle-itis”. “As the world goes, British politicians are not corrupt. But a sense of entitlement has grown up ... they earn less than bailed-out bankers, overpaid family doctors, civil servants running big departments or indeed, some journalists.”
tinyurl.com/ojo3fh
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New *York Times* star columnist and liberal luvvie Maureen Dowd is in trouble for plagiarising a paragraph from a blog. She lifted a 43-word quote from the blog Talking Points Memo, written by liberal commentator John Marshall, and changed only a couple of words. But as the *Guardian's* **Dan Kennedy** points out, instead of simply apologising when sprung, she offered a gobbledygook explanation that she got the quote from talking to a friend, without explaining how she or the friend managed to memorise it verbatim.

On the *Huffington Post*, **Alison Kilkenny** says the expose shows Maureen Dowd should retire – to be replaced by Marshall. “Such a silly, blatant violation of basic journalistic values is beneath Dowd, winner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary. Sure, she won for essentially gossiping about a blow job during Lewinskygate, but those fellatio euphemisms weren't going to write themselves, damnit!”
tinyurl.com/p7kohb
tinyurl.com/qc9wpx

There is a hot debate going on about whether or not there is a trend for keeping backyard chickens. **Jack Shafer** in *Slate* picks at the *Washington Post* for claiming, “Legal or not, chickens are the chic new backyard addition”, without providing any figures. Shafer says this is an example of a bogus trend, where journalists hype up something simply to create a neat story. Meanwhile, the *Atlantic's* **Carol Ann Sayle** says Shafer is wrong because her local feedstore in Austin, Texas now sells 1000 chicks a week. She says chooks are lovely pets but Shafer doesn't recommend them. “On the warmth and entertainment scale,” one Albuquerque chicken owner is quoted by Shafer as saying, “they're better than a snake, but not as good as a cat.”

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