

Labour wants to hamstring Tories who threaten its MPs



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At the 2005 election, Labour MPs coming to the end of their first term in parliament achieved an average vote share 3.3 per cent lower than when they were elected in 2001. In Labour constituencies where the MP was standing down, the new candidate saw a drop in support almost three times as big. In other words, sitting MPs at general elections have a clear advantage over other candidates.

Why could this be? Certainly a sitting MP has the chance to make a name for himself in local media; undoubtedly the most diligent can build a good reputation and loyal support from constituents whom they have taken the trouble to help.

But there is a more prosaic reason why incumbent MPs have such a clear advantage: money.

In April, the Commons introduced a taxpayer-funded communications allowance of £10,000 for each MP to spend on promoting himself to his constituents (though Tory MPs voted against the proposal). In addition, MPs can transfer 10 per cent of their £90,505 staffing allowance to their communications budget, and spend £7,000 a year on postage. Then they can dip into an extra £21,339 each in "incidental expenses provision" (IEP), which can be used to cover constituency office costs, websites and other

means of helping to get their message out. In fact, MPs can transfer their entire IEP to their communications allowance or postage costs – meaning that MPs can each spend some £40,000 a year of public money communicating with local voters.

Few would object to the idea of enabling MPs to stay in touch with their constituents. Inevitably, though, the effect of a glossy newsletter detailing a member's tireless work and record of success, delivered free to every voter, will be to make it more likely that that member will be re-elected. Of course, Tory MPs are entitled to these allowances. But the party that benefits most will be the party with the most MPs: Labour. In the 100 or so marginal Labour-held seats that will determine the outcome of the next election, sitting Labour MPs in effect have a £4 million-a-year head start.

Not surprisingly, the Conservative Party has set up a fund to help candidates in marginal seats compete. This fund is worth about £2 million a year – meaning we can go some way to offsetting the advantage that MPs have awarded themselves. To put this figure in context, it amounts to approximately 15 per cent of the party's total annual spending, and only 10 per cent of what a political party is allowed to spend during a general election.

Two popular misconceptions have arisen about the Tory target seats operation, the first of which is that I pay for it all myself. I have never made a secret of the fact that I contribute to the target seats fund, and I am proud to do so, but I am by no means the only donor – indeed most of the money is given by others.

The second is that I give money

directly to Conservative candidates or constituency associations in target seats. This is also untrue. All contributions, including my own,

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are given to the party's central fund. Candidates are invited to submit campaign proposals to a committee at Conservative Campaign HQ which I chair in my capacity as the party's deputy chairman with responsibility for field campaigning. The committee – which also includes the party chairman, Caroline Spelman, professional party staff and senior volunteers – assesses each proposal and allocates funds to



those we judge most likely to be successful. Candidates who receive funding provide regular updates to the team at CCHQ, which offers advice and expertise and ensures that the party receives the best possible return on its investment.

As well as being in a position to give financial help to the party I support – like Lord Sainsbury, who has given Labour at least £8.5 million in recent years – I can bring a degree of expertise from my experience in business: raising capital, ensuring the best return, maximising the effectiveness of an organisation. David Cameron and I agreed that this experience could be used most effectively in overseeing our strategy for the battleground. As well as identifying target seats, this involves the management of our professional campaigning staff on the ground, opinion research and deciding, with others, on the distribution of central funds to key local campaigns.

This straightforward arrangement has prompted some colourful but wildly inaccurate accusations from our opponents. Martin Linton, the Labour MP for Battersea (and the beneficiary of a handsome £92,975 in IEP since 2001), compared me to a Victorian landowner “roaming the country, signing cheques for £25,000 at the drop of a business plan”. This is a ludicrous caricature. The only difference between my donations to the Tories and Lord Sainsbury’s donations to Labour – other than that his are bigger – is that the public knows how mine are used.

Several Labour MPs have demanded that the Government change the law to restrict constituency campaigning between elections. As well as displaying a fragile grasp of the principles of democracy, they show a breathtaking degree of hypocrisy. In addition to the *de facto* state-funded campaign contributions they receive in the form of parliamentary communications allowances, Labour MPs in marginal seats benefit from donations in kind from the trade unions worth

millions of pounds (on top of the £17 million the unions gave last year in donations and affiliation fees). In 2005, the unions brought in hundreds of volunteers to work on Labour’s campaign in target seats, amounting to thousands of hours’ work. Yet while this kind of campaigning is legitimate, Labour says that Tories who want to compete are taking advantage of a “loophole” that must be closed.

All parties are free to allocate their resources as they see fit between national advertising, research, media relations, local campaigning and so on. This is essential in a free democracy. Labour MPs apparently want to end this freedom, telling parties how they may use the funds they have raised. There is something sinister about a governing party calling for statutory restrictions on how its opponents may campaign.

Lord Ashcroft is deputy chairman of the Conservative Party

Iain Martin is away