

Western Morning News

THE VOICE OF THE WESTCOUNTRY

Do ex-MPs deserve to get generous golden goodbyes?

In the real world people who lose their jobs can generally expect some sort of pay-off. But not many redundancy packages come anywhere close to the pay-outs pocketed by MPs who lose their seats in elections or choose to stand down.

Today the *Western Morning News* reports on the golden goodbyes given to the MPs in the South West who are no longer serving their constituencies. In every case by collecting their pay-offs, which range from £32,383 up to an eye-watering £64,766, they were doing absolutely nothing wrong. The payments were due to them under the rules and despite changes in other areas of MPs' pay and expenses packages, they remain largely intact. But can they be justified?

Politics is a precarious business and to encourage as wide a cross-section as possible to get involved the rewards need to be fair. Although it may be desirable for an MP to have gained experience outside of politics before getting elected few would want to go back to the days when the only way members of parliament could support themselves and their work was through extensive outside work which effectively meant politics was little more than a hobby or because of what might loosely be termed "sponsorship" by trade union, big business or pressure group requiring political favours in return for cash.

So MPs need to be properly paid, their genuine out of pocket expenses need to be covered and they need to be able to give their whole attention to the business of looking after their constituents and carrying out their

role as legislators without the need to compromise their principles in order to earn enough to support themselves. That, at least, is the ideal. But if David Cameron's oft-repeated claim, when trumpeting the need for belt-tightening, that "we're all in this together" is to be believed then it is important to more closely match the pay and perks of MPs with the rest of the population. That means recognising it is an important job and should be rewarded as such but it does not mean offering the kind of hefty gold-plated "insurance" if things go belly up.

Many of the MPs on today's list who stood down did so because they were at or close to the natural retirement age. The rules on compulsory retirement have very recently changed and employers can no longer tell a worker who reaches 65 they have to leave. But it would still be almost unheard of in the private sector for an employee of pensionable age to voluntarily leave their job and collect a hefty "redundancy" pay-out on top of his or her pension. Yet that, in effect, is what has happened to many ex-MPs.

The priority for all politicians in the wake of the expenses scandal had to be to win back public trust. MPs and ministers - with some exceptions - were already held in relatively low esteem even before that scandal broke. They sank just about as low as it is possible to go when those revelations became public. The new House, after the election, is - we sincerely hope - a significantly cleaned-up place. There is, however, still room for improvement.

Eden goes even greener

No one can doubt the Eden Project's commitment to green initiatives - the very concept of the giant biomes was inexorably tied-up with the environmental agenda and, in particular, raising awareness of the delicate balance between all forms of life on planet earth. So efficiency measures that aim to cut CO2 emissions from the tourist attraction by around one quarter during the next two years are welcome and worthy.

There are two ways of looking at efforts like this by attractions that rely on visitors travelling hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles to enjoy

them. The cynic says that Eden - and every other large scale and popular attraction - is responsible for most of its CO2 precisely because it is a honeypot for visitors. The tourists that pour in cause far more damage to the planet with their cars than the emissions that come from running the attraction itself. The other way of looking at it, however, is to say that tourist attractions have a greater responsibility than most to be green, to offset some of the COs expended by the millions of visitors. And since we need tourists, cutting CO2 locally is the best we can do.



The estimated population of badgers differs widely but the fact there are very many more than previously is clear from the volume of road-kill

One way or another we need a thriving badger population

With a cull of badgers in the South West becoming a distinct probability, Farming Editor **Peter Hall** looks at the whole issue of the country's badgers - and their future

The controversy about badgers and bovine tuberculosis rumbles on, with increased calls from the farming community that the Government should make up its mind swiftly over a cull.

After a lengthy consultation period, Environment Secretary Caroline Spelman was expected to make an announcement about a cull back in the winter. But she didn't and we are still waiting...and likely to wait for a little while yet.

Culling 70 per cent of badgers in a hot-spot area - and not just sick ones, which was what was first proposed - makes a huge difference to the whole process, of course.

So no wonder, given the implications, that there is a possibility the administration will shy away from the whole issue and concentrate on perfecting a vaccine for both badgers and cattle - and getting EU acceptance for vaccinated beef.

But a cull now seems much more likely, which is when the proverbial manure will hit the cooling system... and how.

It might be worth, at this juncture, to stand back and look at the issue of badgers as a whole. Just suppose they could not catch TB, or pass it on. Take TB out of the equation altogether, and what are we left with? Answer: a burgeoning

badger population that just goes on growing, with no natural predators, apart from man.

The estimated population differs widely depending on what source you use, from around the 350,000 mark to nearly three times that

amount, and clearly there will have to be more detailed research. But the fact there are very many more than previously is self evident if you consider the volume of

'There is a possibility the administration will shy away from the whole issue'

road-kill that is all too obvious these days.

The Protection of Badgers Act 1992, introduced under a Conservative administration, consolidated three others. All were aimed at animal welfare and stamping out, once and for all, the disgusting pastime of badger baiting, when trapped animals were set on by dogs for the purposes of betting.

But actually badger baiting was banned in 1835 by the Cruelty to Animals Act, which also banned dog fighting, bull baiting, bear baiting and cock fighting. And a good job too.

Apart from the obvious cruelty angle, the 1992 Act

made it an offence to take, injure or kill a badger, interfere with a badger sett, sell or possess a live badger, and marking and ringing badgers.

All very admirable - though it duplicated other earlier legislation, and what were not considered were the implications of a wild-animal species breeding without controls, to such an extent that its numbers proliferated beyond available food supplies.

The result, as thousands of farmers and vets will bear witness, is the evidence of starving badgers, animals in very poor physical condition that are obviously more susceptible to disease, including bovine TB.

The impact on other wildlife species has been considerable, too, with hedgehogs and ground-nesting birds decimated by hungry badger populations. But environmental organisations are well known for closing ranks, particularly on the issue of badgers - so you won't hear a lot of complaints about the situation from them.

Now move the whole scenario forward by several years: there is no more bovine TB, not in cattle, nor in badgers, nor wild deer. A disease eradication programme has proved 100 per cent successful.

But, of course, you are left with too many wild badgers.

How about eating them? After all, we eat other wild animals - rabbits, hares, deer, pigeons, duck - that are not farmed or "put down" under a game-keeping programme. So why not badgers? They are evidently palatable, and for many hundreds of years they were eaten by our ancestors. Grey squirrel has found its way on to the menu in many a renowned restaurant, quite a trendy ingredient, a voguish little sideline that, admittedly, may not be to everyone's taste.

Badger steaks and hams are evidently delicious, and in times past were very much part of our national diet. Somewhere there will even be recipes for them.

All very far fetched? Probably. But in a world of food shortages, where public susceptibilities will inevitably be changed, blunted, who can say for sure what we shall be eating in years to come?

It is a pleasure and privilege to have badgers (and other wild animals) on your land, but there really has to be a policy that will, once and for all, see them continue and flourish as a species of healthy wild animal, a managed programme everyone can sign up to in the future.

Somewhat, though, you will never be likely to find me queuing at the van for my badger burger at the local county show.