



House of Commons  
Committee on  
Standards and Privileges

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**Conduct of  
Ms Diane Abbott**

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**Second Report of Session 2003–04**

*Report and Appendix,  
together with formal minutes*

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## Committee on Standards and Privileges

The Committee on Standards and Privileges is appointed by the House of Commons to oversee the work of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards; to examine the arrangements proposed by the Commissioner for the compilation, maintenance and accessibility of the Register of Members' Interests and any other registers of interest established by the House; to review from time to time the form and content of those registers; to consider any specific complaints made in relation to the registering or declaring of interests referred to it by the Commissioner; to consider any matter relating to the conduct of Members, including specific complaints in relation to alleged breaches in the Code of Conduct which have been drawn to the Committee's attention by the Commissioner; and to recommend any modifications to the Code of Conduct as may from time to time appear to be necessary.

### Current membership

Rt Hon Sir George Young Bt MP (*Conservative, North West Hampshire*) (Chairman)  
Ross Cranston QC MP (*Labour, Dudley North*)  
Mr Andrew Dismore MP (*Labour, Hendon*)  
Rt Hon Derek Foster MP (*Labour, Bishop Auckland*)  
Mr Michael Jabez Foster MP (*Labour, Hastings and Rye*)  
Mr David Heath CBE MP (*Liberal Democrat, Somerton and Frome*)  
Rt Hon Andrew Mackay MP (*Conservative, Bracknell*)  
Mr Kevin McNamara MP (*Labour, Hull North*)  
Richard Ottaway MP (*Conservative, Croydon South*)  
Mr Stephen Pound MP (*Labour, Ealing North*)  
Mr Simon Thomas MP (*Plaid Cymru, Ceredigion*)

### Powers

The constitution and powers of the Committee are set out in Standing Order No. 149. In particular, the Committee has power to order the attendance of any Member of Parliament before the committee and to require that specific documents or records in the possession of a Member relating to its inquiries, or to the inquiries of the Commissioner, be laid before the Committee. The Committee has power to refuse to allow its public proceedings to be broadcast. The Law Officers, if they are Members of Parliament, may attend and take part in the Committee's proceedings, but may not vote.

### Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at: [www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/standards\\_and\\_privileges.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/standards_and_privileges.cfm). A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Parliament is at the back of this volume.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Dr Christopher Ward (Clerk), Ms Charlotte Littleboy (Second Clerk) and Lisa Hasell (Secretary).

### Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to The Clerk of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, Journal Office, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6615.

# Contents

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<b>Report</b>	<i>Page</i>
<b>Conduct of Ms Diane Abbott</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Appendix: Memorandum by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Formal minutes</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Reports from the Committee on Standards and Privileges in the current Parliament</b>	<b>12</b>



## Conduct of Ms Diane Abbott

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1. We have considered a memorandum by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards relating to the complaint against Ms Diane Abbott, Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, by Mr Andrew Rosindell, Member for Romford. The Commissioner's memorandum is appended to this Report.

2. The complaint centred on Ms Abbott's work, since January 2003, as a co-presenter of a BBC television programme "This Week". Ms Abbott accepts that she should have registered her work for this programme. She has properly taken full responsibility for the failure to register, has cooperated fully with the Commissioner in his investigation and has apologised to him for her oversight. We welcome this.

3. At the time that Ms Abbott signed her original contract with the BBC, she should have checked the potential implications for her Register entry. Her co-presenter for the period January to April 2003 registered his interest on 4 February 2003. She also appears to have given no thought to this matter when she agreed successive extensions of her contract with the BBC.

4. It is Members' personal responsibility to keep fully up to date with changes to the registration requirements, taking advice as necessary from the Registrar of Members' Interests. A factor in this case is Ms Abbott's admitted failure to take on board the changes approved by the House in May 2002, which meant that, with only very limited exceptions<sup>1</sup>, a specific entry in the Register became necessary where income from any one source of remunerated employment exceeded the registration threshold of 1% of a Member's salary. The November 2002 issue of the Register, the last published edition, was compiled on the revised basis, so Ms Abbott should have been aware of the requirements when she first began presenting "This Week".

5. The effect of Ms Abbott's failure to declare her work for "This Week" is that an interest from which she has derived a substantial financial benefit—£17,300 in the calendar year 2003—has been omitted from the Register for about a year. She should apologise to the House for her oversight by way of a personal statement.

6. In order that readers of the Register are made aware of such oversight, we have asked the Commissioner to ensure that the relevant entry appears in the next published issue in a distinctive form, and with an appropriate reference to this report<sup>2</sup>. In future cases where rectification of an entry is necessary as a result of a report to the House, we expect to make similar requests.

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1 A declaration is not required for media work which is wholly unrelated to parliamentary affairs (see paragraph 54 of the Guide to the Rules).

2 There is already a similar requirement in respect of Register entries in respect of which the Commissioner has exercised his discretion to allow the Member to use the rectification procedure (see paragraph 88 of the Guide to the Rules).

# Appendix: Memorandum by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards

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## Contents

	<i>Page</i>
<b>Complaint against Ms Diane Abbott</b>	<b>5</b>
Introduction	5
<i>The Complaint</i>	5
<i>Relevant Provisions of the Code and Guide to the Rules</i>	5
<i>Ms Abbott's Response</i>	5
Findings of Fact	6
Conclusions	6
<b>Appendices to the Appendix</b>	<b>9</b>
Appendix 1: Letter to the Commissioner from Andrew Rosindell MP	9
Appendix 2: Letter to Ms Diane Abbott from the Commissioner	9
Appendix 3: Letter to the Commissioner from Ms Diane Abbott	9

# Complaint against Ms Diane Abbott

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## Introduction

### *The Complaint*

1. On 4 December 2003, Mr Andrew Rosindell (the Member for Romford) wrote drawing to my attention the fact that Ms Diane Abbott (the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington) had not listed in the Register of Members' Interests any payment for her work on the BBC Television programme "This Week". Mr Rosindell pointed out that Ms Abbott's co-presenter on the programme—the Rt Hon Michael Portillo (the Member for Kensington and Chelsea)—had included his work for the programme in his Register entry and expressed surprise that Ms Abbott had not done so as well. He asked me to investigate what he described as "this anomaly". A copy of Mr Rosindell's letter is at Appendix 1.

### *Relevant Provisions of the Code and Guide to the Rules*

2. The Code of Conduct for Members approved by the House on 14 May 2002 (HC 841) provides that:

"Members shall fulfill conscientiously the requirements of the House in respect of the registration of interests in the Register of Members' Interests and shall always draw attention to any relevant interest in any proceeding of the House or its Committees, or in any communications with Ministers, Government Departments or Executive Agencies".

The requirements referred to are set out in the Guide to the Rules relating to the conduct of Members, the latest edition of which was also approved by the House on 14 May 2002.

3. Under category 2 of the Rules, Members are required to register any employment which is remunerated or in which the Member has any pecuniary interest. Paragraph 54 of the Guide to the Rules contains detailed provisions about media work by Members. Members who register any form of media work under category 2 should declare the remuneration they receive for each commitment, or group of commitments for the same organization or audience in the same calendar year, in bands of (1) up to £5,000; (2) £5,001–£10,000 (and thereafter in bands of £5,000). Under paragraph 54 (c) of the Rules, registrations are not required where the total remuneration from the same source in the course of a calendar year does not exceed 1% of the current parliamentary salary (roughly, £550). No declaration of the amount is required if the work is wholly unrelated to parliamentary affairs.

### *Ms Abbott's Response*

4. Having acknowledged Mr Rosindell's letter, I wrote to Ms Abbott on 11 December seeking her comments on his complaint. A copy of my letter is at Appendix 2. Ms Abbott replied on 23 December (copy at Appendix 3).

5. In her reply, Ms Abbott said that she had been a co-presenter of “This Week” since January 2003. During 2003, the first year of the programme, she had earned £17,300 in respect of her work. She accepted that the work did not fall within the exceptions to the registration requirement set out in paragraph 54 (c) of the Guide to the Rules, and therefore acknowledged that her work for the programme should have been registered.

6. Ms Abbott said that her failure to register the work had been “completely inadvertent”. There had been no attempt to conceal her involvement in the programme and “it did not occur to me that anybody would think that I was not being paid for it”. Ms Abbott accepted complete responsibility for the failure to register. She added by way of explanation that her personal assistant of 12 years standing had left her employment in the spring of 2002 and she had then had a series of temporary assistants, so that many aspects of the administration of her office had not been adhered to as in the past. Ms Abbott also pointed out that she had originally been taken on by the BBC for four weeks only and her contract had been subject to a series of extensions.

7. In tendering her explanation, Ms Abbott apologised for her failure to register this media work in accordance with the House’s Rules.

8. Ms Abbott came to see me on 12 January to discuss a draft of the factual sections of this report. She said that she had included in her Register entry in years prior to 2002 an entry indicating that she undertook occasional lecturing and journalism. This entry was omitted from the Register published on 4 December 2002 because of changes in the Rules relating to the registration of media work approved by the House in May 2002. Unfortunately Ms Abbott had not appreciated that, as a result of these changes, a general entry of the type she had previously made was inappropriate and Members were required to make a specific entry where earnings for media work from a particular source exceeded the registration threshold of £550. This had meant that, when she had begun to work for the BBC in 2003, she had failed to realise the need to make a specific entry relating to that work.

## Findings of Fact

9. There is no dispute about the facts in this case. Ms Abbott undertook media work as a co-presenter of “This Week” which she has acknowledged that she should have registered. Both the nature of the work and the amount Ms Abbott earned bring her role in this respect clearly within the registration requirement of the Rules, as set out in paragraphs 2 and 3 above.

## Conclusions

10. Ms Abbott should have registered her paid employment as a co-presenter of “This Week”, as she has readily accepted. I therefore uphold the substance of Mr Rosindell’s complaint.

11. Ms Abbott argues that her failure to register was completely inadvertent. There was no attempt to conceal her involvement in the programme and it did not occur to her that anybody would think she was not being paid for it.

12. Ms Abbott's involvement in the programme could hardly have been concealed, given its nature, and most people aware of it might have assumed she was being paid for it. This does not, however, obviate the need for her to register her remuneration for that work. One of the key principles underlying the Register of Members' Interests is transparency: the Register's main purpose is "to provide information of any pecuniary interest or other material benefit which a Member received which might reasonably be thought by others to influence his or her actions, speeches or votes in Parliament, or actions taken in his or her capacity as a Member of Parliament." Unless she registered this interest, not everyone would necessarily be aware of Ms Abbott's involvement in the programme and few would know the scale of her financial interest in it.

13. Ms Abbott had previously shown awareness of the need to register media work but had not realized the significance of the changes approved by the House in May 2002, which meant that a specific entry was required where income from any one source for such work exceeded the registration threshold of 1% of a Member's salary. I take this opportunity to remind all Members of the importance of including information about such work in the Register.

14. Responsibility for registering interests lies clearly with the Member concerned. Whilst it is understandable that Ms Abbott should wish to refer to the changes in staff in her office, she is therefore right in herself taking complete responsibility for the failure to register. She has also referred, by way of explanation of her lapse, to the fact that she was originally employed by the BBC for four weeks only and that her contract has been subject to a series of extensions. Assuming, which Ms Abbott has confirmed would not be unreasonable, that her remuneration for four weeks work alone would have exceeded the threshold for registration under category 2 (ie, currently £550), this latter argument does not, however, appear convincing, particularly as the series of extensions of her contract by the BBC might equally reasonably be thought likely to have reminded her of the need to register.

15. On the other hand, Ms Abbott has responded promptly and openly (both in writing and during her meeting with me) to the complaint, has accepted full responsibility for her error and has apologised for it. She has asked for an appropriate entry to be made when the Register is next updated. The Committee will no doubt wish to take these points fully into account when considering her case.

16. It may also assist the Committee to know that I have considered whether to apply the rectification procedure in this case, that is the procedure under which the House and the Committee have authorized me to make a retrospective but differentiated entry in the Register of Members' Interests without making a written report to the Committee, in cases of admitted failure to register an interest where the interest involved is minor or the failure to register was inadvertent. I have thought it right to report in writing to the Committee, not least because of the size of Ms Abbott's unregistered financial interest.

17. On a final point, Ms Abbott notes in her letter of 23 December that Mr Rosindell did not send her a copy of his letter of complaint to me. I remind Members that, as stated in paragraph 85 of the Guide to the Rules, it is a basic courtesy, which the House expects to be observed, that at the same time as writing to me, a Member should copy their letter to the Member about whose conduct they are complaining, and that this should be done before anyone else is told of the complaint.

*27 January 2004*

*Sir Philip Mawer*

# Appendices to the Appendix

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## Appendix 1: Letter to the Commissioner from Andrew Rosindell MP

With the release today of the new register of members' interests, I took the opportunity to examine my own and other MP's entries.

I did notice that Diane Abbott MP does not have listed on the register any payment for her work on the BBC television programme "This Week".

It is my understanding that her co-presenter, Michael Portillo, on this show has made declarations to the register of interests, so I am surprised that she has not.

With this in mind I would ask that you investigate this anomaly.

*4 December 2003*

## Appendix 2: Letter to Ms Diane Abbott from the Commissioner

### Complaint by Andrew Rosindell MP

I enclose a copy of a letter I have received from Mr Rosindell, in which he suggests that you have failed to include in the Register of Members' Interests an entry relating to your role as co-presenter of the BBC television programme "This Week".

The requirements regarding registration of media work are set out in paragraph 54 of the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members, the text of which you can find on the Parliamentary Intranet. In the light of those requirements, I should be grateful if you will give me your comments on Mr Rosindell's complaint. In particular, it would be helpful if you will let me know:

1. how long you have been a co-presenter of "This Week";
2. what your earnings have been in this respect in each calendar year since you became a co-presenter;
3. whether you accept that this work does not fall within either of the exceptions to the registration requirements set out in paragraph 54 (c) of the Guide.

I am also enclosing a copy of a procedural note which gives advice to Members who are the subject of a complaint.

I look forward to hearing from you.

*11 December 2003*

## Appendix 3: Letter to the Commissioner from Ms Diane Abbott

### Complaint by Andrew Rosindell MP

Thank you for your letter enclosing the above complaint. In response to your specific questions the answers are:

1. I have been co-presenter of the BBC 1 programme This Week, since January 2003.

2. My earnings in respect of this have been £17,300 in this calendar year (the first year of the programme).

3. I accept that this work does not fall within either of the exceptions to the registration requirements set out in paragraph 54 (c) of the Guide.

I apologise for failing to register this media work in accordance with the rules. It was completely inadvertent. There was no attempt to conceal my involvement in the programme and it did not occur to me that anybody would think that I was not being paid for it. I take complete responsibility for the failure to register. But please note that my personal assistant of 12 years standing left my employment in spring of 2002 and I then had a series of temporary assistants so that many aspects of the administration of my office were not adhered to as in the past. I would further point out that I was originally taken on by the BBC for four weeks only and my contract has been subject to a series of extensions. I would further note that Mr Rosindell did not send me a copy of this complaint.

Please do not hesitate to contact me again should you require any further information.

*23 December 2003*

# Formal minutes

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**Tuesday 27 January 2004**

Members present:

Sir George Young, in the Chair

Mr Andrew Dismore  
Mr Derek Foster  
Mr Michael Jabez Foster  
Mr Andrew Mackay

Richard Ottaway  
Mr Stephen Pound  
Mr Simon Thomas

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report [Conduct of Ms Diane Abbott], proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 6 read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Memorandum from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards be appended to the Report.

*Ordered*, That the Appendix to the Report be reported to the House.—(*The Chairman.*)

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[Adjourned till Tuesday 10 February at 9.30 am.]

## Reports from the Committee on Standards and Privileges in the current Parliament

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### Session 2003–04

First Report	Conduct of Mr George Galloway	HC 73
Second Report	Conduct of Ms Diane Abbott	HC 285

### Session 2002–03

First Special Report	Standards of Conduct: Letters from the Committee on Standards in Public Life	HC 516
First Report	Complaint against Mr Nigel Griffiths	HC 195
Second Report	Eighth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life: "Standards of Conduct in the House of Commons"	HC 403
Third Report	Complaints against Mr Michael Trend	HC 435
Fourth Report	Complaints against Mr Henry McLeish	HC 946
Fifth Report	Complaints against Mr Clive Betts	HC 947
Sixth Report	Pay for Select Committee Chairmen	HC 1150
Seventh Report	Guidance for Chairmen and Members of Select Committees	HC 1292

### Session 2001–02

First Report	Complaint against Mr Geoffrey Robinson: Supplementary Report	HC 297
Second Report	Complaint against Mr Roy Beggs	HC 319
Third Report	Complaint against Mr John Maxton	HC 320
Fourth Report	Restrictions on the Initiation of Parliamentary Proceedings: A Consultation Paper	HC 478
Fifth Report	Complaints against Mr Keith Vaz	HC 605–I&II
Sixth Report	Registration of Interests by Members who have not taken their seat	HC 624
Seventh Report	Complaints against Mr Nigel Griffiths	HC 625
Eighth Report	Complaints against Mr Archy Kirkwood	HC 755
Ninth Report	A new Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules	HC 763
Tenth Report	Complaint against Mr Peter Brooke	HC 1147