

Daily Telegraph, Friday April 4, 2014 (Michael Deacon, Parliamentary Sketchwriter)

Sketch: A sorry excuse for an apology
Maria Miller, the Culture Secretary, is ordered to repay thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money and apologise to MPs after an official inquiry into her expenses claims

As I'm sure we all know from everyday experience, it's very easy to accidentally accumulate large sums of money to which one isn't entitled. Only the other day I was cheerily making my way to a Russian paramilitary-themed fancy dress party when I realised I had no cash upon my person, so I popped into a bank to withdraw some.

It has subsequently been brought to my attention that the woman behind the counter misunderstood my reasons for wearing a balaclava and carrying an assault rifle. Unfortunately, I was daydreaming so blissfully about the party that I failed to notice that, rather than the £40 in cash I'd requested, the cashier flung three quarters of a million pounds at me in a large holdall, while screaming, "Please, please, take anything you want, just don't shoot!"

Humming innocently, I slung the holdall over my shoulder and strolled out of the bank, wholly unaware of the administrative error that had just taken place. It could, of course, have happened to any of us, as I'm sure the judge will recognise.

Another victim of financial misunderstanding is Maria Miller. Today it was found by the Commons' standards watchdog that, while filling in her expenses forms for the mortgage on her second home, the Culture Secretary inadvertently over-claimed taxpayers' money to the tune of several thousand pounds. The watchdog also accused Miller of hindering its inquiry by providing "incomplete documentation and fragmentary information". Perhaps that was inadvertent, too. At any rate, it ordered her to repay £5,800 and apologise to MPs. Although not to taxpayers, obviously.

Just after midday, Miller arrived in the Commons and took her rightful place on the back benches. Eager to lend their support during this difficult time, her colleagues Sir George Young, the chief whip, and Anne Milton (Guildford) sat either side. Jeremy Hunt, her departmental predecessor, sprang from the front bench and rushed gallantly to join them.

Miller rose. "I wish to make a personal statement in relation to today's report," she announced, with the terse, thin-lipped defiance of the wronged woman.

Before moving on to the trivial matter of her enforced apology, she noted that the enquiry had arisen from a formal complaint about her expenses by a Labour MP, John Mann (Bassetlaw).

"The committee," she said with icy satisfaction, "has dismissed his allegation." The committee, she went on, had "recommended" she apologise for her failure to assist their inquiry with greater enthusiasm. "I of course," she concluded, with an air of regal magnanimity, "unreservedly apologise."

From start to finish, this unreserved outpouring of contrition, this wail of repentance, this distraught plea for clemency - lasted a grand total of 32 seconds.

If any MPs shouted "Shame!" or "Resign!" they must have done so very quietly, because I'm afraid I didn't hear them.

Ellisfield Website editor: To be totally accurate, Mrs Miller also added:

"I fully accept the recommendations of the Committee, and thank it for bringing this matter to an end."