

York Region MPs all say their new pay hikes are 'fair'

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\$109,500.

"Nobody likes to deal with pay issues, it's distasteful," said Oak Ridges MP Bryon Wilfert. "But this came from an independent commission that is formed after every election. In 1993, they called for a zero per cent increase and in 1997, they recommended a 2 per cent increase. I stand on my record and I don't think it's out of line."

But he said he intends to listen to people in his riding in the 90 days he has before making a final decision whether to take the increase — though he's certainly leaning that way.

"If you want to attract people into public life, there has to be fair pay. I didn't go into it to get rich, but I don't think people go into it to get poor either."

Markham's John McCallum took a huge pay cut when he stepped down

from his job as the Royal Bank's chief economist to represent the riding at the request of Prime Minister Jean Chretien.

"I'm working as many hours and I'm away from my family more often," he pointed out. "It's far more stressful — people don't usually call to tell me what a great job I'm doing, they usually call with problems — and there's very low job security."

"I hope I can justify it to my constituents; I know I can

justify it to myself," McCallum said, adding he's received "a number of letters and calls and they are not positive."

He said he's not shy to take the money but "it's somewhat embarrassing to be voting for it myself. I don't like to see us awarding ourselves a pay increase. It's unseemly, but there's no other way to do it."

It's the last time MPs will find themselves in this position. In future, raises will be

tied to increases earned by Supreme Court Justices, with the Prime Minister's salary keeping in line with that of the Chief Justice.

Vaughan-King-Aurora MP Maurizio Bevilacqua was unapologetic and had statistics to back him up.

"It's a question of fairness," he said. "Between 1991 and 2000 our salaries rose by six per cent. In the public sector they rose by 15 per cent and in the private sector by 22 per cent. Basically we're just keeping up."

He said Canada ranks ninth of 12 countries surveyed recently on legislator salaries.

"During the 1990s, members of Parliament didn't get much of a raise due to our fiscal situation. It looks like a lot, but it's merely catching up."

He added he's received only nine calls on the issue — one positive — compared to the 100 his offices took on

subsidizing National Hockey League teams.

"After 12 years in public office, people know the work I do," he said.

Thornhill's Elinor Caplan said she believes public service should be available and accessible to people who aren't rich and a fair salary is part of that.

"Canadians value the prime minister and the MPs who work hard for their constituents," she said. "Leaving personalities out of it, the prime minister should make at least as much as the chief justice."

In York North, Karen Kraft Sloan agreed.

"It's coming from an independent commission that I feel looked at an appropriate increase and yes, I think it's justified."

After speeding through the House of Commons in three days, the bill now moves to the Senate for debate.

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