

MP pulls back expense curtain

Liberal parliamentarian goes it alone in revealing financial secrets online

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OTTAWA—Michelle Simson learned a simple lesson as assistant branch manager at a Scarborough bank: when handling other people's money, account for every penny spent.

Her grandfather had instilled a similar message of responsibility in her father, and her father passed it on to her. So it was quite a surprise when Simson arrived in Ottawa after last fall's election to find that this thinking would cast her as a renegade on Parliament Hill.

The Liberal MP for Scarborough Southwest joins a club of one this week when she becomes the first federal politician to post on her website all of the expenses that she claimed for the 2008-09 fiscal year. There is about \$95,000 to set up and run an office for five months, 75 per cent of what she was entitled to use; a negligible amount to wine and dine officials and constituents; and close to the maximum of about \$25,000 that MPs are granted to rent and maintain a second home in Ottawa.

Disclosing the claims is the simplest of actions. It could easily have gone unnoticed in the sleepy summer months. But in choosing to reveal how she has spent taxpayers' money since the October federal election, she is bucking a trend of secrecy that crosses party lines and



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Scarborough Southwest MP Michelle Simson says she learned lessons about accountability from her father and grandfather.

is fiercely guarded.

"I have been a taxpayer a lot longer than I ever have been an MP, and as a taxpayer this was a real bone of contention," she told the *Star*. "It in fact goes back to my father and my grandfather. It was all about accountability."

The decision comes after a *Star* investigation into the shroud federal politicians have placed over the \$128 million they claimed in personal expenses in the 2007-08 fiscal year. Each fall, the House of Commons publishes the totals MPs have claimed to run their constituency offices, to travel to and from Ottawa and to carry out their daily duties. Yet the public has no right to

access the individual claims that lead to those annual totals.

Of the 37 MPs that the *Star* contacted last month, only six agreed to divulge how they spent a portion of the funds. All were Liberals. The Conservative party restricted all of its MPs from releasing any expense details, a decision backed by the Board of Internal Economy, a panel of eight MPs from all parties that governs everything from expenses to politicians' legal fees to the management of the House of Commons.

A scandal over MPs' expenses in Britain has led to the resignation or retirement of almost two dozen politicians and has destabilized the

ruling Labour government. A number of other countries have vowed to publish the detailed expense claims made by elected officials in the hope public scrutiny will be enough to prevent similar headaches, but not Canada.

"There are differences (with the British scandal), but Canadians don't know that, as far as I'm concerned," Simson said.

"They don't know that there are a few more safeguards but, that said, it's their money. That's the bottom line."

The Canadian Taxpayers' Federation, which advocates for responsible government spending, is hailing Simson's decision as groundbreaking and one that all MPs should follow.

"I was wondering myself whether or not any MP would have the guts to stand up to their colleagues through the Board of Internal Economy and do what's right, so good for her," said national director Kevin Gaudet.

Simson sees this tiny first step as her chance to bring light to a subject covered in shade.

"I may not succeed, but in my little piece of the world, my constituents can go on my website and will be able to see how the money is spent," she said.

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