IPSA
Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

Funding Democracy

2025

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Introduction: the purpose of this document

It is 15 years since the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) was created, to rebuild public trust and confidence in the use of public money to support MPs' work.

In this time, the social, economic and technological context within which MPs serve their constituents has changed dramatically. Looking forward, technological developments like AI have the potential to further transform the way MPs and their staff go about their duties.

Today, IPSA works to ensure MPs have the funding they need to do their jobs, to support trust in democracy, and provide the public with assurance that the funding we provide is transparent and legitimate.

We have gathered this collection of essays, from academics, policy makers, members of wider civil society groups and former MPs' staff to shine a light on what an MP's work entails and how this has changed over time; what workplace conditions are like for MPs' staff; how the public perceives an MP's work; and how technologies such as AI can transform parliaments. They also provide an insight into how this compares internationally.

We are grateful for the authors' contributions, which are invaluable. Gathering different perspectives is vital to effective and evidence-based policymaking. These valuable insights will form part of a wider conversation we want to have with the public later in the year about funding democracy in the UK.

Disclaimer

This paper has been developed to support and inform IPSA's thinking on how we fund democracy in the future. The opinions expressed are solely that of the authors and do not reflect IPSA's policy. IPSA cannot accept any liability for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained within the paper.

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A brief history of taking the constituent seriously

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Every parliamentary constituency in the UK is a geographical territory with a single representative. The relationship with the people who live in that constituency is an important part of the role of MP, but the precise form it should take is a longstanding subject of debate and has changed over time.

MPs perform a variety of tasks and act on behalf of many different groups. In part, they work for the interests of the UK as a whole. Their code of conduct tells them they are responsible for pursuing the public interest. They are normally elected as candidates for a particular party, which will influence what they do in Parliament.

MPs might have an interest in supporting particular groups or causes. They might see their own identity as important to what they do and act upon their own personal judgement at times, even if it means defying the party whip.

Finally, they work on behalf of their constituents. This group includes everyone living within their constituency, regardless of whether they can vote or who they vote for. While it contains rules that regulate their behaviour and are designed to ensure they do not abuse their position for personal gain, the code of conduct does not prescribe exactly how MPs should go about serving their constituents. Nonetheless, there are a series of powerful expectations (and resources available to help fulfil them).

It is now assumed that MPs will have an active presence in their constituencies as well as at Westminster, communicating with the people there, helping them resolve problems, and representing their collective and individual interests, for instance by tabling questions in Parliament and corresponding with ministers.

Historical debate

Debates about these kinds of functions and how they fit within the wider constitutional role of the MP have a long history. In his famous 1774 election address to voters in Bristol, Edmund Burke sought to stress that the MP does not simply follow instructions from those who elect them but applies their own

wisdom to a given subject in a parliament that should act collectively on the behalf of the entire polity.

Still, Burke recognised that the relationship with the constituency was of crucial importance. As he put it:

"...it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living... Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion... parliament is a *deliberative* assembly of *one* nation, with *one* interest, that of the whole... You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not member of Bristol, but he is a member of *parliament*."

The history of the interaction between MPs and constituents is difficult to separate from other matters, such as debates over and changes in who was allowed to vote and to sit in Parliament.

Expansions in the franchise from 1832 onwards saw increasing numbers of men (1832, 1867, 1884, 1918) being given the vote, then some women (1918), and by 1928 all people having the right on the same terms.

An MP interested in securing re-election had a lot more voters to engage with by 1928 than they did before 1832, perhaps implying a need to work harder and in a more structured way.

The overall population per constituency (voters or otherwise) has also grown larger. Between the 1870s and the 2020s, the UK population has roughly doubled from the low 30m to the high 60m. The number of MPs, on the other hand, has remained roughly the same – in the 600s.

Parliamentary reform and payment

A key group involved in campaigning for parliamentary reform in the mid-19th century were the Chartists.

Their celebrated six-point programme, first agreed in 1838, sought to democratise society, providing ordinary people with a firm place in the political system. Their objectives included an expansion of the franchise to include all adult men at a time when only a small minority had the right to vote. Another of the six changes they sought was payment for MPs. Their motive was to make it possible for people without personal wealth to be able to serve as MPs, meaning social groups previously excluded from Parliament could become a presence within it.

In this sense, this early demand for the public resourcing of MPs was part of a radical platform intended to make Parliament a more genuinely representative institution.

Like many other aspects of the Chartist programme (excluding their call for annual general elections), payment for MPs eventually became a reality. MPs were first provided with salaries in 1911.

In as far as being an MP is today regarded as a full-time job, of which engagement with constituents is a crucial part, their being paid is key.

Constituent engagement

In parallel with the payment of MPs, there was support for their activities, which might imply the possibility of interacting with local people.

From 1911, some stationery was provided, and from 1924, MPs were allowed free travel between their constituencies and Westminster. In 1945, this was extended to cover travelling to their home, using sea travel and flying.

In 1954, the Select Committee on Members' Expenses referred to, without advocating in favour of:

- the possibility of provision of free phone calls to constituencies
- affordable housing near Westminster

- spouses' travel
- postage
- secretarial staff
- (more) stationery
- payment during elections
- an allowance for petrol

The final item on that list was implemented in 1961. Little other progress was made, but then in 1969 a secretarial allowance was introduced.

From 1972, MPs were permitted to employ a research assistant from this budget. Expenses for office equipment were given a formal basis in 1977.

A significant later development came in 2007 with the introduction of a communications allowance that would support "the work of communicating with the public on parliamentary business", set initially at £10,000 a year (c.£16,000).[1]

Professionalisation and changing attitudes

These changes made it increasingly possible for MPs to be professionals providing a service to constituents. But why might they act upon this possibility? There is a wider political and social context.[2]

The expansion of the public sector during the 20th century, and particularly in the post-Second World War environment, led to more contact between people and public services, giving them more reason to raise issues with their MPs.

Society became more diverse in a variety of ways, creating a more complex set of needs to be met.

From the 1950s onwards, deference was arguably in decline. People became more willing to assert themselves with respect to authority figures, including MPs, to raise complaints and to seek redress. Initiatives such as the Parliamentary Ombudsman from the 1960s and Citizens' Charter in the 1990s channelled and perhaps heightened such tendencies. The latter in particular encouraged people interacting with public services to regard themselves as consumers with rights.

Austerity from the 2010s created a new set of reasons for complaints about the quality and availability of services, which might prompt people to turn to their MP for help.

Party influence

Voters arguably became less attached to particular parties in the way they once had been.

An MP seeking to maintain electoral support might feel an increased need to establish a personal link with their constituents rather than relying on partisan loyalties.

Power dynamics within parties could encourage a greater focus on constituency – although rather than the whole constituency, those who were activists within the party of the given MP. Divisions within the Labour Party in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, were related to efforts to decline reselecting certain sitting MPs as parliamentary candidates.

This threat could encourage MPs to focus more closely on their constituencies. Such an emphasis might be desirable from the point of view of the party hierarchy if it helped secure electoral success.

Furthermore, if MPs are more focused on local matters, they might be less prone to making difficulties for their leadership at Westminster. However, potentially a strengthened connection to a locality might lead an MP to prioritise views being pressed upon them in their constituency, perhaps giving them a reason to rebel against the whip.

Technology, the media and engagement

Technology and methods of communication have always been crucial to the way in which MPs have interacted with their constituents.

Developments in transport such as trains, cars and planes made it more plausible for MPs to travel back and forth between constituency and Westminster regularly and swiftly (especially if given financial support to do so).

Changes in media have had an impact on the way in which Parliament interacts with the outside world. From the 17th century onwards in particular, the printing press facilitated greater public awareness of what was taking place inside the legislature, including the activities of particular members. Individual constituents were therefore able to find out more about their particular representatives and potentially use printing to support campaigns intended to pressurise parliamentarians. Local newspapers (which have more recently experienced serious decline) became an important means by which MPs could communicate with their constituents.

Radio and then television created new ways in which parliamentary business could be covered and broadcast. But other technologies were more important to two-way communications between individual MPs and their constituents.

Telephones were a way of contacting MPs, as were fax machines. Then with the rise of the internet, especially from the 1990s, the means of conducting the relationship between MP and constituency transformed.[3]

Technology such as websites, email and social media applications including Twitter/X and YouTube created various opportunities for MPs to reach out to their constituents, and for their constituents to access them.

The mySociety project was linked to initiatives including TheyWorkForYou, which provides details of parliamentary activities including the voting records of individual MPs.

In the 21st century, the internet in its various manifestations has become the predominant mode of communication between constituents and MPs.

Between 1997 and 2000, the percentage of the population with internet access rose from two to 33. Already by 2004, research suggested that 10% of people had contacted their MP in the past two to three years, of whom 10% had done so by email.

In 2006, 57% of households had internet access. By 2019 the figure was 93%, and by 2020, 96%.[4]

Constituent focus

Against this general background, a substantial tilt among MPs towards constituents took place from the post-Second World War period onwards.

In a 2005 article, Oonagh Gay brought together a range of evidence pointing to this trend. During 1964, the House of Commons received 10,000 letters per week. By 1997, the figure had quadrupled to 40,000.

Constituency surgeries became the norm – already by the end of the 1960s, 90% of MPs were holding them.

Between 1971 and 1982, the number of hours per week that MPs spent on constituency business increased from 11 to 16.

Parties at constituency level took an increasing interest in whether prospective candidates intended to live locally. By 1987, for the first time, more than half of MPs confirmed they did.

A survey of new MPs conducted following the 1997 General Election found that 86% regarded their most important function as being representing their constituency well, while only 13% thought that holding the government to account was more important.[5]

Taking constituents seriously was now, for most MPs, the central part of the role – a position that seems firmly entrenched.

Endnotes

1. For this overview, see: Richard Kelly, *Members' pay and allowances – a brief history* (House of Commons Library, London, 2009).
2. For example, see: Lawrence McKay (2020) "Does constituency focus improve attitudes to MPs? A test for the UK", *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 26:1, 1-26.
3. See: Andrew Blick, *Electrified Democracy: the Internet and the United Kingdom Parliament in history* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2021).
4. Office for National Statistics figures available at: Internet access – households and individuals, Great Britain: 2020, last accessed 26 August 2024.
5. Oonagh Gay, "MPs go back to their constituencies", *Political Quarterly*, 2005.

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Servicing constituents: a comparative perspective

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Members of legislatures essentially face in two directions:

- towards the legislature as a collective body for debating and assenting to measures of public policy (law), and
- towards those electors who form the constituencies that they have been chosen to represent[1]

They act as the buckle between the executive and the people.

The legislature is the body through which the electors speak to the executive and through which the executive speaks to the legislature.

The Member of Parliament (MP) represents constituents in expressing views on their behalf on measures coming before the legislature and in giving voice in pursuit of their interests and grievances.

MPs differ in the form in which they are chosen (electoral system) and in the nature of their constituency.

In some nations, there are defined geographical units each represented by one MP. In some cases, the legislature comprises purely members of this type.

In others, there is a mixed system (individual constituencies, regional lists) or multi-member constituencies or in rare cases a national list system. This affects therefore whether the MP is representing a defined and unique geographical constituency or a wider body where the representation is shared with other members.

The role of the representative

The nature of the constituency affects both how the MP views their representative role, and the resources needed to fulfil it.

Where there are individual constituencies, as in the UK and the USA, members of the legislature may see their role differently to those members elected in multi-member seats, where no one member has an exclusive body of constituents and where electors may be voting not for an individual candidate but for a party list.

The form of the electoral system may determine how much the member is focused on the constituency role – in the Republic of Ireland, for instance, there is a notable emphasis on localism – and how much focused on the legislative role.

In some systems, taking up constituency casework is deemed an important part of the job, in others, such as Portugal, where the constitution stipulates that MPs are not the representatives of the multi-member constituencies that elect them, but representatives of the country as a whole, it is a largely alien concept. Portugal is an example of where, according to Braga da Cruz, "the real electoral relationship is not between electors and MPs, but between electors and party".[2]

The constituency role of the member of parliament thus varies between nations. It has also varied over time.

In the UK, it is possible to identify seven roles of the constituency MP:

- safety valve
- information provider
- local dignitary
- advocate
- benefactor
- powerful friend
- promoter of constituency interests[3]

Over time, the benefactor role has declined in significance, whereas the others have increased in importance.

Constituents increasingly seek a redress of grievance or some action on public policy through their MP, the capacity to do so being enhanced markedly through advances in technology.

The pattern is not necessarily replicated globally.

In some nations, the benefactor role remains significant, especially in those where members of parliament are allocated a constituency development fund (CDF) to support local projects.

Constituency offices in some countries see constituents form queues to seek some benefit from their MP.

The differences in the form of representation between nations as well as changes in demands by constituents over time affect the resources needed by parliamentarians to fulfil their roles effectively.

The role of staff

In some cases, members need constituency offices and staff dedicated to constituency casework, whereas in some systems the concept of constituency casework is not especially relevant.

As a consequence, there is no uniform pattern of provision for staff to deal with constituency work. There is therefore something of a patchwork quilt of staff provision across parliaments.

Comparative analysis is also limited by the fact that there is no common terminology that captures staff activity and roles in full.[4]

Different staff designations may mask tasks that transcend formal roles.

In so far as generalisation is possible, the study of Western democracies shows that staff growth was marked between 1940 and 1970.

“Parliamentary staff in Western democracies developed from minimalistic enterprises to much larger and much more professional operations.”[5]

It also shows that the number of staff in a legislature is correlated with population size[6] and that MPs’ staff are more likely than other staff to be recruited through personal and partisan networks.[7]

The difficulty of comparative study is apparent when we examine the budget allocation for staff in a range of parliaments.

We focus on staff in selected Westminster parliaments and in devolved legislatures as the most salient comparators. Doing so is sufficient to demonstrate that there is no clear pattern of provision.

Westminster parliaments

There is a family of legislatures that are deemed "Westminster" parliaments.[8] It is sufficient to look at a select few.

Australia

In Australia, members of the House of Representatives receive electorate allowances depending on the size of the constituency represented.

There are three bands:

1. less than 2,000 sq km – $32,000 per year (£16,174)
2. 2,000 and less than 5,000 sq km – $38,000 per year (£19,212)
3. 5,000 sq kms and over – $46,000 per year (£23,257)

Members are also entitled to a private-plated vehicle for use for parliamentary, constituency or official business and in lieu of having such a vehicle may claim an additional electorate allowance of $19,500 (approximately £9,856).

New Zealand

In New Zealand, MPs are paid a constituency allowance, varying between $8,000 and $20,000 (£3,652-£9,130) depending on the size of the electorate.

Although the Remuneration Authority in New Zealand did a comparative study of members' salaries, it did not do the same for constituency allowances.

Canada

In Canada, each MP has a substantial office cost allowance of £363,600 to cover employee salaries, operating costs and wireless devices.

India

In India, where an MP's annual salary is R1m (£9,205), there is a constituency allowance of R70,000 (£644), which is separate from an office expense allowance, comprising R20,000 (£184) for office expenses and R40,000 (£369) for secretarial assistance.

Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, each MP, in addition to travel allowances, receives an allocation of Tk 5 crore (£332,028) for their constituency.

Ireland

In Ireland, TDs are entitled to employ one full-time Secretarial Assistant, plus either one full-time Parliamentary Assistant or an annual allowance of £41,092 fully vouched-for secretarial assistance or a contract for service to undertake defined work such as secretarial assistance, PR or training.

Nigeria

In Nigeria, an MP's annual salary of 2.4m naira (£1,289) constitutes a small proportion of the 46.8m naira (£25,141) that they are able to claim.

Among the allowances is a 4.9m naira (£2,632) constituency allowance, separate from 621,000 naira (£333) to hire a personal assistant.

Devolved legislatures

There is not only considerable variation between Westminster legislatures around the globe, but also considerable variation between legislatures within the UK.

Scotland

In the Scottish Parliament, each constituency MSP has an office-cost provision of £21,100, an engagement provision of £17,400 and a staff cost provision of £156,900.

There is some scope for virement (or "flexing") between the first two.

Wales

In the Welsh Senedd, a member is entitled to claim staffing expenditure costs up to a maximum of £130,602 where the costs are wholly, exclusively and necessarily incurred to enable the performance of the member's duties.

Northern Ireland

In the Northern Ireland Assembly, members' staff must be graded at one of three levels, with four categories of staff costs existing – staff salaries, other capped staff costs, ancillary staff costs, and replacement staff costs.

The maximum cost payable for the first of the categories (staff salaries) is £80,000 a year.

Variations

There is clear challenge in seeking to identify staff allocation to constituency work.

Data available on the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) website indicates that in most, but not all, national parliaments some staff are employed directly to work for members. However, even in some parliaments where staff are not employed to work directly for members, the members may claim a constituency allowance.

In some cases, a constituency allowance is to enable the member to visit the constituency.

In Vanuatu, for example, out of an allowance of Vt7,594,600 (£50,113), Vt292,200 (£1,928) is paid directly into the MP's bank account and the member is required to use this money to purchase tickets so that they can visit their constituencies and carry out their responsibilities. Each MP is also entitled to an allocation of Vt3 million per year (£19,778) for community development activities.

In some parliaments, as we have seen, there is a dedicated constituency allowance (as in Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria), but not in others. Where it does exist, it is not clear to what extent is covers employing staff for constituency work.

Where members get an allowance to hire staff, it is not apparent how many do devote, or are required to devote, themselves to constituency casework as opposed to fulfilling a range of other tasks (advisor, information broker, advertiser, scribe, compromise facilitator, planner).[9]

Tasks that are constituency related may not be confined to assisting constituents directly but rather may be focused on promoting the member to constituents, for instance, through social media and disseminating a member's newsletter or through writing a column in the member's name for the local newspaper. Constituency casework may be part of the work undertaken.

The available data reveals how practice varies from nation to nation, with no clear pattern or patterns emerging, and so provide no authoritative guide to how to go about determining what financial support should be available to parliamentarians in constituency-based systems to fulfil responsibilities as constituency members.

Those responsibilities, as we have said, may vary, both between nations and over time. Even within the legislatures within the UK, there is no commonality.

Although some founding members of devolved legislators were drawn from Westminster, the method by which members are elected differ, as to do the size of constituencies.

In parliaments utilising the additional member system, there is a difference between constituency and list members.

Determining support

In determining what support should be provided to parliamentarians to fulfil constituency responsibilities, there is the problem of determining what those responsibilities are and then deciding what support is necessary for a member, as a constituency representative, to fulfil those duties, serving constituents irrespective of party or group affiliation, be it of the member or the constituents.

Giving members a capacity to fulfil a benefactor role, such as a constituency development fund, and thus giving them a benefit denied to other candidates,

may be deemed an undesirable use of public funds as well as having the potential for facilitating favouritism.

A starting point would be drawing on the roles ascribed to the constituency MP, in effect drawn from the experience of the specific system, and then evaluating their importance to serving constituents and the funding necessary to facilitate the role being carried out to the benefit of the constituency.

In examining roles, there is an important distinction between representing the interests of the constituency and pursuing the grievances and views of individual constituents.

Each is important, one to many or all constituents and the other the specific individuals or groups, but they require different skills and resources. The latter task is especially time-consuming and has grown exponentially decade by decade.

Ensuring that resources keep pace with the demands is problematic, both in terms of funding and in terms of desirability. Should members be resourced to engage in grievance-chasing activities that may be better and more appropriately fulfilled by bespoke grievance-chasing agencies?

In terms of MPs engaging in constituency casework, success breeds success and being seen to fulfil such casework can encourage more. There is a cost to the MP, not least in terms of opportunity cost, and a cost to the public purse.

There is, in short, not just an analytic exercise to be undertaken in determining the constituency responsibilities of an MP, but also a debate of principle to determine to what extent those responsibilities, defined in terms of consequences, are appropriate and worthy of public funding. There is thus a debate to be had derived from first principles. It is not clear that this debate has been undertaken, either here or elsewhere. What information we have of practice in other nations does not permit generalisation, though it may provide some warnings in terms of the undesirability of funding parliamentarians to distribute benefits to favour-seeking constituents.

There is one other challenge. We know from survey data that electors put serving the constituency above the legislative-facing tasks of MPs, generating demands that MPs seeking re-election attempt to meet, but electors do not willingly support funding to enable MPs to fulfil that role. There is also a fundamental problem in as much as growing constituency demands occupy the time of individual members at the expense of what only MPs collectively can do in scrutinising proposals for law and holding government to account. Good law may be the victim of constituency casework.

Endnotes

1. Philip Norton and David M Wood, *Back from Westminster: British Members of Parliament and their Constituents*, Lexington KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993, Ch 2.
2. Quoted in Cristina Leston-Bandeira, "Parliament and Citizens in Portugal: Still Looking for Links", in Philip Norton (ed), *Parliaments and Citizens in Western Europe*, London: Frank Cass, 2002, p 131.
3. Philip Norton, "The Growth of the Constituency Role of the MP", *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol 47, 1994, pp 705-20.
4. Gijs Jan Brandsma and Simon Otjes, "Gauging the roles of parliamentary staff", *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol 77, 2024, p 538.
5. Simon Otjes, "What explains the size of parliamentary staff?" *West European Politics*, Vol 46, 2023, p 393.
6. Otjes, p 387.
7. Jacob M Montgomery and Brendan Nyhan, "The Effects of Congressional Staff Networks in the US House of Representatives", *The Journal of Politics*, Vol 79, 2017, pp 745-61.
8. See Philip Norton, "Is the Westminster system of government alive and well?" *Journal of International and Comparative Law*, Vol 9, June 2022, pp 1-2.
9. Otjes, pp 376-8.

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What young people expect from their MPs

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In light of lower levels of engagement with electoral politics among younger people and ongoing demographic change, it is important that elected politicians work on building trusting relationships with young people.

The government's plan to lower the voting age to 16 for all UK elections means that an additional one-and-a-half million young people are soon expected to join the electorate.[1]

This makes it particularly timely to think about what young people – for the purpose of this essay, broadly viewed as anyone up to the age of 25[2] – expect from their MPs, and what can be done to build trusting relationships between elected politicians and their youngest constituents.

Perceptions and behaviours

Elected representatives have some influence on shaping citizens' perceptions and behaviours.

Authentic communication and good relationships with citizens contribute to satisfaction among voters and increased contact with politicians.[3] This is particularly true for interactions with young people, where good relationships foster trust, political expression and efficacy, and can even raise young people's aspirations to stand for office.[4]

In contrast, a gap between citizens' expectations and the reality of interactions with MPs may affect political behaviour, including turnout in elections, if people feel their vote influences election outcomes but not policymaking.[5]

Interaction and engagement

Establishing meaningful interactions between young people and MPs is a necessary requirement so that all citizens, including the youngest, can feel part of the political process. It is also important to ensure that future policies are fair and reflective of the needs of all generations and marginalised groups.

Young people are systematically underrepresented in political institutions. This underrepresentation risks skewing the political discourse and policymaking towards the interests of older, more numerous voters and can exacerbate intergenerational inequalities, for example in areas such as housing, employment, social security or environmental protection.

Much research has focused on young people's declining engagement with institutions of electoral politics.

What young people specifically expect of their elected representatives and how political institutions can better meet the needs of their youngest constituents, however, is a largely under-researched area.[6]

Understanding young people's expectations of MPs benefits representatives so they can better meet the needs of their constituents. It also allows to evaluate how far MPs' actions correspond to and are appropriate for the youngest citizens, to guide practice on what MPs can do to strengthen democracy.[7]

Based on existing research and conversations with practitioners of political youth work, this essay provides an introduction to what is known about young people's expectations of their elected representatives and points to good practice that can help build meaningful relationships with young constituents.

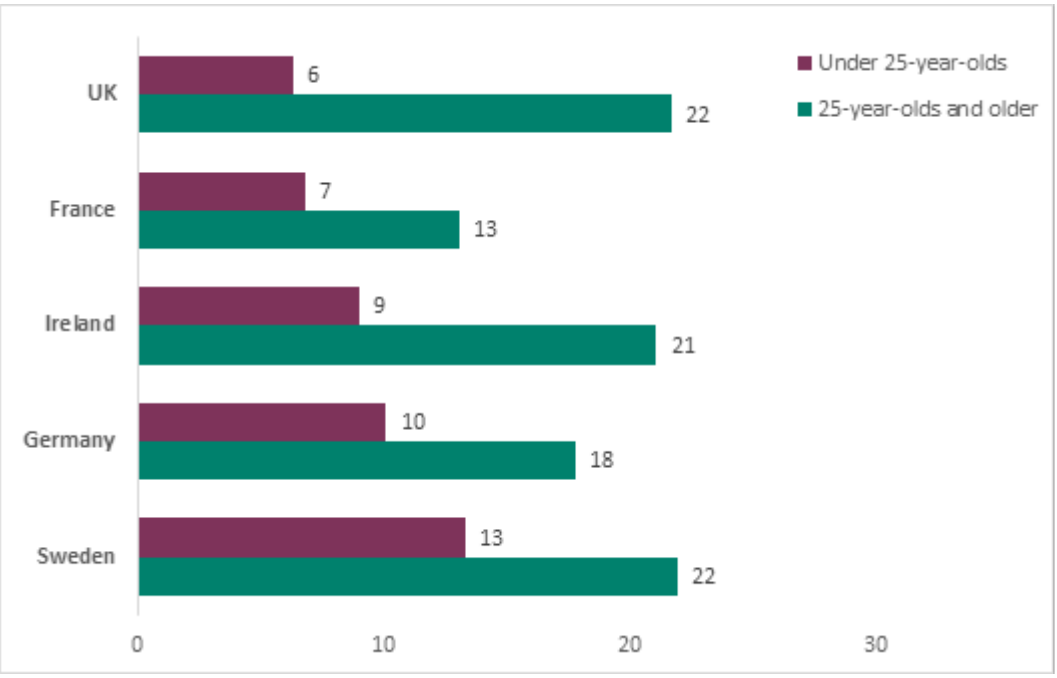
Understanding the status quo

To date, few young people interact with their elected representatives.

Survey estimates suggest that during 2018-2023, only between 5-7% of under-25-year-olds contacted their MP or other government or local government officials.[8]

This is far fewer than among older constituents, where around one in five say they have contacted their elected representatives in the past 12 months (Figure 1), and also fewer than in other European democracies such as Germany, Ireland or Sweden.

Figure 1: proportion of respondents who state they contacted an elected politician in the past 12 months in the UK versus other European countries, by age, European Social Survey 2018-2023.



Based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), waves 9-11 (2018–2023), weighted by analysis weight, unweighted sample sizes for the UK N=4,973 (of which N=301 14-24-year-olds), France N=3,976 (422) Germany N=4,761 (577), Ireland N=5,906 (369), Sweden (only 2018) N=1,538 (139).

Places where young people meet – secondary schools, further education colleges or youth groups – are not regularly visited by political representatives. A 2021 survey of secondary schools in England found that less than 5% of schools are visited by an elected politician, whether in person or digitally.[9]

There is also an imbalance in the kinds of young people that get to interact with, and the schools that are visited by, politicians. Independent (fee-paying) secondary schools in England are more likely to offer their pupils contact with

politicians compared to maintained (state-funded) schools (around 12% compared to 5%), and particularly schools that serve the most deprived communities often miss out on visits by elected representatives.[10]

Practitioners remark that among MPs there is often a false sense of interaction with young people. Contrary to many MPs' beliefs based on their own best efforts, it is few and often the same among young people whose schools are visited by politicians and who get to interact with elected officials.

The shortage of spaces for interactions, like school visits, is partly driven by the particular role gatekeepers play in facilitating and shaping interactions between young people and MPs.

Gatekeepers – parents, teachers or youth workers for example – mediate young people's interactions with politicians. By facilitating or limiting access to young people, preparing them ahead of a visit or filtering discussion topics, gatekeepers shape the nature of young people's engagement with MPs to an extent that is not the case for most adults. Consequently, the resources gatekeepers have for facilitating interactions – and the imbalance in their distribution – often determine what young people experience.

In addition to the role of gatekeepers, what is different about young people in contrast to older constituents is their great diversity in lived experience.

Although they share the experience of being younger than others in society, young people are highly diverse: some live with parents, others alone or with friends, some will already have their own family and children, some are in education, others in employment, some will have remained in their local area and others will have moved elsewhere.

It is therefore important to avoid essentialist views of young people as one homogenous group. Rather, MPs who interact with young people need to be sensitive to a wide range of experiences.

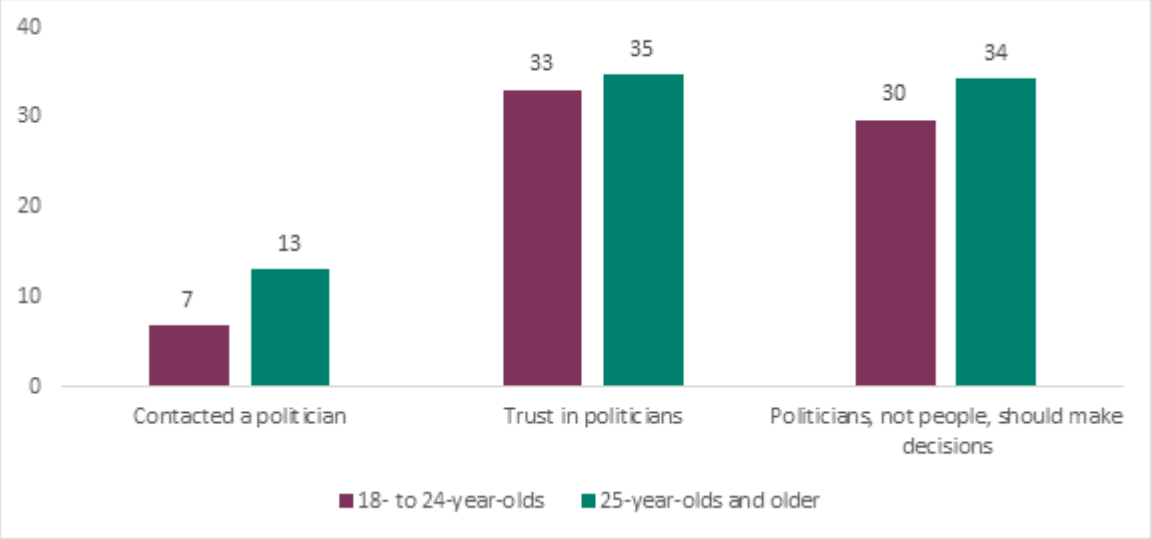
Expectations of elected representatives

Even though young people overall display lower levels of engagement with elected officials and electoral politics, many of them are not less interested in political

contact or less trusting of elected politicians compared to older citizens (see Figure 2, based on data from the 2019 British Election Study).[11]

Young people do, however, often report finding it harder to relate to MPs or local councillors and, compared to older people, they have different needs and expectations for relationships with their MPs.

Figure 2: proportion of respondents who state that they contacted a politician, trust in politicians and think politicians, not people, should make decisions, by age, British Election Study 2019.



Based on the British Election Study 2019, Post-Election Random Probability Survey, weighted by self-reported vote, N (unweighted)=3,946 of which n (unweighted)=231 18-24-year-olds, for the third item the proportion shows respondents who (strongly) disagreed with the statement "People, not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions", N (unweighted)=2,537 of which n (unweighted)=157 18-24-year-olds.

Challenges of interaction

There are three reasons why young people often have a harder time relating to their MPs.

Firstly, young people are more likely to find MPs and other elected officials to be unrepresentative of the wider population.[12]

One plausible explanation for this is the underrepresentation of young people in parliaments and political parties.[13]

Even though young people do not necessarily prefer younger representatives or political candidates,[14] being underrepresented in combination with ongoing social and demographic change means that when young people look at who represents them, they are less likely to see people who reflect a part of their social worlds in terms of age, gender identity, ethnicity or socio-economic status.

Secondly, compared to older citizens, young people tend to be less constituency-focused.[15]

For many young people, increased residential mobility – for example during periods of study, when changing employers or moving out of the parental home – can weaken the link to their local constituency, and consequently mean that an MP's constituency work is less important.

This is in contrast to preferences among the wider electorate, who generally expect MPs to focus on constituency work,[16] as well as trends among British MPs who do increasingly more hours of constituency work[17] and more than parliamentarians in other European democracies.[18]

While young people often care about local issues, their focus is frequently on how local issues tie into broader, often global, concerns such as environmental sustainability, human rights, peace and equality.

Many younger voters expect MPs to bridge the gap between local and global challenges, particularly around areas that will affect the future.

Thirdly, young people are also found to have different preferences and needs in terms of the relationships they seek with their MPs.

In contrast to older citizens, younger people are more often in favour of closer relationships and more direct interaction between voters and politicians. This is linked to many young people's weaker attachment to institutions of electoral politics and to their preferences for individualised and issue-based political action.[19]

People who feel more disconnected from political institutions will likely want individual constituents to have greater control over processes and policy, which can be achieved through more direct relationships with elected officials.[20]

As a consequence, younger voters often expect a more personal and direct relationship with their MPs. Research finds that for many young people, the preferred model of representation is that of a delegate, where MPs are expected to actively listen to and advocate for the views of their constituents.[21]

This stands in contrast to preferences among most older voters for more passive, descriptive representation, where MPs are expected to act according to their own judgement and what they think is in the best interest of voters.[22]

Building meaningful interactions

These findings highlight how interactions between young people and MPs need to adapt for two purposes:

1. to become more frequent and systematic, opening up spaces for more and different kinds of young people to express and discuss their views with elected representatives;
2. to meet the expectations young people have for closer, more personal and direct relationships with their MPs.

What might this look like?

More rigorous research on what young people expect from interactions with MPs is needed. In designing such research and guidance for elected representatives, it is helpful to think about four aims for the engagement of and with young people:

1. Space – young people must be given the opportunity to express a view.
2. Voice – young people must be facilitated to express their views.
3. Audience – the view must be listened to.
4. Influence – the views must be acted upon as appropriate.[23]

In the next section, we point to good practice that can help build meaningful and impactful relationships between young people and MPs regarding each of these four dimensions.

Systematically creating space

To create more opportunities for young people to express and discuss their views, politicians and political parties need to engage in spaces where young people are present.

This can happen in person or virtually, synchronously or asynchronously.

The Politics Project, a non-partisan democratic education organisation[24], facilitates a programme of Digital Surgeries, in which groups of 10 to 30 young people have an hour-long discussion with a politician who represents them.

To help with scheduling, these discussions take place via video call. This eliminates travel and supporting staff time and, crucially, allows Westminster MPs to make appointments while away from their constituency.

Rather than just engaging with those schools or youth groups that contact them, parliamentary offices could engage in a systematic approach of scheduling such virtual discussions to give more – and more diverse – young people opportunities to build relationships with their MPs.

If an MP were to give an hour each week to speak to a group of 25 young people in their constituency, over the course of a year they could meaningfully engage with 1,300 young people, or more than half of a cohort of 16- and 17-year-olds in the average constituency.

This would require more dedicated resources for politicians' offices as it would need help to coordinate, support and facilitate these interactions.

A more systematic approach to scheduling engagements would also allow for greater transparency and help politicians show themselves to be directly accountable to their youngest constituents.

Asynchronous communication online is increasingly important as young people often value more frequent interaction and direct feedback, and a greater degree of accessibility and transparency.

The vast majority of young people use social networks and online media to get information about political issues, and many want their MPs to be active on social media, to engage in online discussions and to promptly respond to concerns. This can take different forms, for example an Instagram Live, WhatsApp voice message channels or reel-type short video responses to questions submitted by constituents.

Given the large number of available platforms and channels, and the constantly changing landscape of platform-specific uses, algorithms and social cues used by online communities, it is important to work with young people to produce relevant content and engage in meaningful dialogue via social media platforms.

A study of online communication between politicians and young people in Germany showed it was helpful for politicians' offices to work with a young person, for example as part of an internship programme, or be advised directly by young people to ensure that communication and interactions are always appropriate and youth-centred.[25]

Improving the quality of interactions

Young people's preferences for closer, more personal and direct relationships with their MPs mean that many want more immediate and informal channels of communication and authentic interactions that allow for dialogue and prompt responses.

Interactions must enable young people to express their views, and these views must be listened to and acted upon.

To achieve authentic dialogue, interactions best take place in small groups. Evaluation data from the Politics Project's Digital Surgeries shows that addressing a large group of young people, for example in a school assembly, can have a negative impact on relationships between young people and politicians. Young people in groups of fewer than 20 are more likely to trust the politician with whom they are speaking, while those in groups of more than 60 are less likely to develop trust.[26]

To ensure the time MPs spend with young people is focused on dialogue, it can be helpful for young people to enter interactions prepared.

This is important because time spent on explaining the political system and what MPs are responsible for is bad use of politicians' time. Instead, MPs should spend their time with youth groups on listening to and speaking with young people about their specific concerns.

The Politics Project provides workshop guides that can be used by teachers or youth workers to prepare young people so they can feel efficacious and able to express their views. They also provide suggested structures for conversations between MPs and young people that centre on dialogue.[27]

One of the most effective ways for politicians to raise the quality of interactions and build trust is to take action on behalf of the young people they meet and speak with. This can range from making sure more picnic benches are installed in the local area to raising a relevant issue in Parliament.

To foster experiences of political efficacy among young people, it is important to close the feedback loop and report back to the young people how their views have been listened to and acted upon. This could happen asynchronously, for example in the form of a reel-type short video response, but it can also be in person.

MPs who engaged in Digital Surgeries with The Politics Project report they are much more likely to meet and be approached in the street by students they met online, showing how authentic and personal interactions can break down barriers and enable dialogue between young people and their elected representatives.

Foster trust and strengthening representation

To date, few young people interact with their elected representatives. Building meaningful relationships between young people and MPs is essential to fostering trust and strengthening the representation of younger generations in political decision-making.

As the potential lowering of the voting age to 16 could soon notably expand the electorate to include more and younger people, it is critical for elected

representatives to better understand and meet the expectations of their youngest constituents.

This requires more frequent and systematic interactions, tailored to create spaces for more and more diverse groups of young people to express their views, and have them heard and acted upon.

This can happen in person or online, ideally in small groups, where young people can build authentic connections with MPs, and should best be designed in close collaboration with young people to ensure interactions are appropriate and youth-centred.

Beyond this initial advice for good practice, further research is necessary to better understand what exactly young people expect of interactions with their MPs, and to guide MPs in strengthening democratic participation and ensuring that policies reflect the needs of all generations.

Endnotes

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2. For analytical purposes, we deem it helpful to define what we mean by "young people". However, there are many different and valid definitions of "young people", often referring to people aged anywhere between 10 and 34 years. It is important to acknowledge that what constitutes youth is a matter of debate, frequently rooted in distinctions between childhood and adulthood and "performative or processual" accounts of behaviours and competences that are different among younger people from those of adults (Valentine, 2003, p 38). For further discussion see: Graham, P (2004), *The end of adolescence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Osler, A & Starkey, H (2003), "Learning for cosmopolitan citizenship: Theoretical debates and young people's experiences", *Educational Review, 55,* 243-254; Valentine, G (2003), "Boundary crossings: Transitions from childhood to adulthood", *Children's Geographies*, 1, 3-52.
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MPs and the public: expectations, misconceptions and finding agreement

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Recent evidence suggests a significant malaise with politics in the UK.

Three-quarters of the population believe MPs to be out of touch[1] and only 28% believe that an MP cares about their local area[2], with a recent report demonstrating that trust is at an all-time low.[3]

While such concerns may be alleviated, partly, by evidence suggesting that people feel more positively about their own constituency representative[4], the level of public cynicism about the political system suggests a disconnect between what MPs actually do (an average working week of 69 hours, for example[5]) and what the public feel MPs do (nearly half the population believe MPs are generally lazy).[6]

This essay examines this tension to reflect on the need to increase public understanding of politics. It first considers the level of public knowledge and understanding around MPs' work, to then examine what the public think MPs should do.

What do MPs do?

There is no job description or clear outline of required duties for members of Parliament.[7] Some attempts have been made to collate a list, with the Commons Modernisation Committee, for example, publishing six "commonly recognised tasks" for MPs in 2007:[8]

1. supporting their party in votes in Parliament (furnishing and maintaining the Government and Opposition)
2. representing and furthering the interests of their constituency

3. representing individual constituents and taking up their problems and grievances
4. scrutinising and holding the Government to account and monitoring, stimulating and challenging the Executive
5. initiating, reviewing and amending legislation
6. contributing to the development of policy whether in the Chamber, Committees or party structures and promoting public understanding of party policies

This list is not exhaustive and, crucially, not prescriptive.

As the Committee on Standards in Public Life stated:

"The ability of MPs to determine for themselves how best to do their job is an important aspect of parliamentary privilege."[9]

MPs will choose to prioritise different tasks at different times, whether due to the parliamentary timetable (an increased focus on constituency work during the recess, for example) or at different points during their career.

Such lists have also been criticised for failing to reflect the 'politics' at the heart of everything an MP does.

Tony Wright, on his retirement from the Commons in 2010, reflected on the Modernisation Committee's list:

"Now the trouble with a list like this (...) is not that it is wrong, but that it does not really describe what MPs actually do. It is altogether too high-minded and unpolitical. For example, absent altogether from the list is an activity that could be called 'campaigning to get re-elected', yet this drives almost everything that MPs do."[10]

Public perceptions of MPs and the House of Commons

How does the public think parliamentarians spend their time?

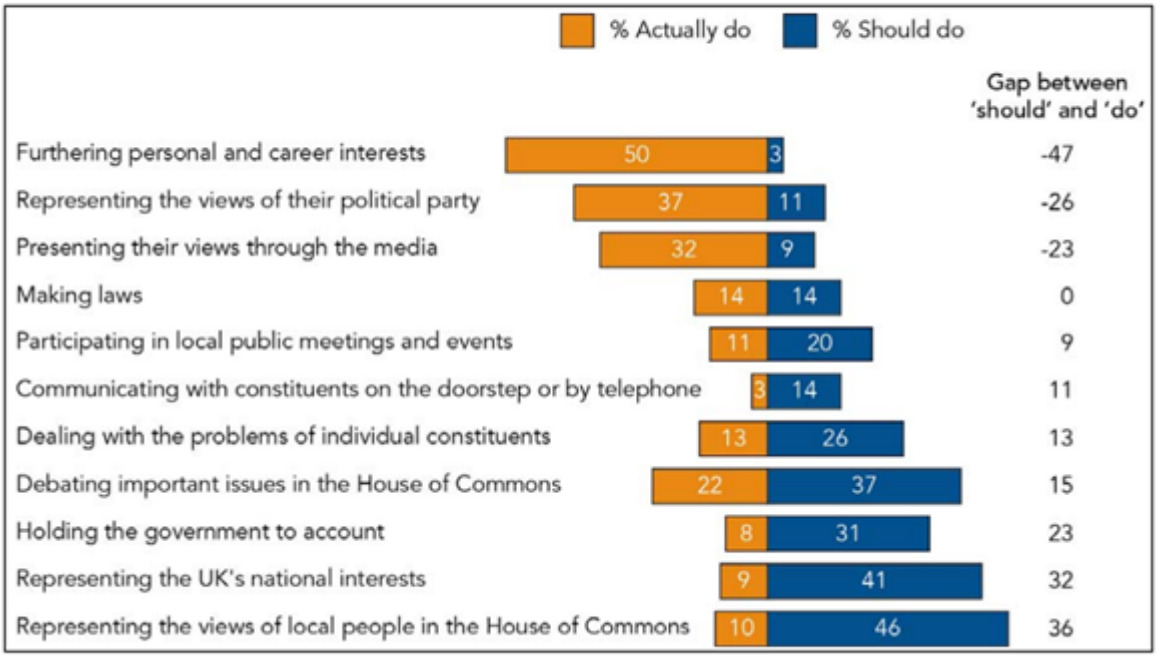
Campbell and Lovenduski found in 2015 "low levels of public knowledge of what MPs do but quite high expectations about what they should do".[11]

Hansard Society research sets out a significant disconnect between the two, with the public believing that MPs spend their time "furthering personal and career interests" when they should be "representing the views of local people in the House of Commons".[12]

As Figure 1 shows, only 13% of the public identified casework as one of the two or three tasks MPs actually spend their time doing.

Figure 1: public views about what MPs should, and do, spend their time on.[13]

Q. Which two or three, if any, do you feel are the most important ways that MPs should spend their time?
Q. Which two or three, if any, do you feel that most MPs spend their time doing?



Source: Audit of Political Engagement 7. Base: 1,156 GB adults 18+. Fieldwork dates: 13-19 November 2009.

The misconceptions are broader than just the work of individual MPs.

In 2019, one in four people were "not at all interested in politics", with one in five saying they "know nothing at all about UK Parliament".[14]

This is particularly concerning as the level of knowledge varies considerably across socio-economic groups: whereas 74% of people in social class AB say they know a great deal or a fair amount about Parliament, this decreases to 25% in social class DE.

How do misconceptions occur?

There is a lack of political knowledge, often affected by an inability to differentiate between Parliament and government.

Citizens form their views about politics through school, their households, the media and social media.

Among all these sources of information, it is often difficult for Parliament and MPs to communicate about their work. Yet we have seen great strides over the past couple of decades in communication efforts – for example, the expansion of Parliament's education service, and the way MPs now regularly explain what they do via social media and annual reports.

However, there is often a tendency to broadcast rather than to listen[15] and communication is not uniform between MPs – Auel and Umit found that "MPs in safe seats spend less on communicating with constituents".[16]

In addition, while monitoring sites such as TheyWorkForYou.com can offer valuable insights into parliamentary votes and contributions, it has been criticised for creating "an incomplete and skewed picture that has led to considerable misunderstanding among constituents".[17]

MPs may also, intentionally or inadvertently, damage the reputation of Parliament, thus damaging the collective image of MPs, through their own anti-establishment positioning. In doing so, they may be reinforcing misconceptions about MPs.

What does the public want from MPs?

Vivyan and Wagner carried out a survey of voters[19] to infer what constituents would prefer their MPs to do once elected. They found that voters prefer "MPs who spend three days of a typical working week on constituency matters and two days working on national policy".[20]

This emphasis on constituency work echoes other studies.[21] This raises questions about the implications of MPs increasing their constituency-based work and whether this is feasible within the current financial and procedural frameworks. On the latter point, would quotas for constituency work conflict with

parliamentary privilege and an MP's right to determine how they exercise their role, for example?

To provide background to such a question, we now consider the issue of casework in depth.

Casework

The increase in MPs' constituency work may explain some of the misconceptions about what MPs do, as much of it is hidden from the public.

As Parker cautioned, "observing a member's efforts to develop a constituency service profile is challenging. Casework files cannot be accessed, and it is difficult to track the surgeries the members hold".[22]

Casework may garner votes at an individual level but, as Gay noted, "the type of people most helped by constituency casework were those least likely to vote".[23]

As with all MPs' tasks, no set time is specified to spend on casework.

By 2007, the increase in constituency work was "out of control" according to Professor Cowley,[24] with MPs representing constituencies in England shown to spend far more time on casework than almost all other European countries.[25]

This must be understood within the reality of electoral politics.

As Professor Norton stated in 2007, MPs are "very bad at saying no to constituents",[26] with the convention that an MP will only act on behalf of their constituents also implying that an MP **will** act on behalf of their constituents, even if the constituent does not vote for them, or if they cannot vote at all.[27]

Rawlings' seminal 1990 study of casework found that MPs refuse to act in only 0.6% of cases[28] – it is fair to assume this will have remained the same if not decreased since.

While accepting the private nature of casework, it can have a positive impact on an MP's reputation. While Norton cautioned that only a small minority (estimated

between 10-15%) of constituents ever contact their MP,[29] knowledge of MPs' capacity to support constituents can be well known.

This can be cumulative for long-standing MPs – ahead of the 2019 General Election, campaign leaflets for Dr Alan Whitehead stated that "everyone knows someone who has been helped by Alan", referring to his 22 years of casework as the MP for Southampton, Test.[30]

Casework is also an important part of an MP's job. Searing argued that casework is "interwoven with British concepts of representative and responsible government", noting how it is deeply rooted in the role of the House of Commons.[31]

The Modernisation Committee in 2007 suggested that the constituency work of MPs was "vital"[32], and a 2005 survey found that MPs valued this part of the job.[33]

Indeed, MPs argue that you cannot delineate between constituency and parliamentary work as the latter is driven by the former, with casework informing what they pursue in Westminster.[34]

Conclusion

This essay has considered the disconnect between what MPs do and what the public think they do. It has highlighted the complexity of this task by noting the lack of a job description and the shortcomings in collating such a list. It has summarised the evidence, showing what the public think MPs actually do and considered the reasons why such misconceptions have developed and persist. Finally, it has summarised the evidence of what the public want MPs to do and explored the issue of casework in depth.

It has shown that focusing on casework may have benefits for MPs while also meeting the public's expectations. But it has also noted the increased workload faced by constituency offices in recent decades.

If MPs were to further increase this part of their role, it would raise questions around practicality, funding and even parliamentary procedure.

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AI in parliaments: transforming MPs' work in the Chamber and constituency

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Founder, Democratise

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force and its impact is being felt in many places.

The evolving landscape of legislative issues and the ever-growing demands from constituents have prompted parliaments to explore innovative solutions.

Among these solutions, Generative AI (GenAI) has emerged as a topic of much interest, having the potential to transform parliamentary processes and redefine the work of MPs.

Parliament could use AI to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of legislative functions, and to lower barriers to engagement between constituents and their representatives.

However, although AI brings considerable opportunities, it also creates ethical concerns and challenges in its implementation.[1]

This paper explores ways in which AI can impact parliament and MPs, highlighting its potential to enhance MPs' capacity to represent their constituents, redefine staff responsibilities and transform representative democracy.

An important caveat is that this paper is a summary and cannot describe all the potential of AI or its challenges. Many remain unknown, as AI comes with hyperbole and grand promises. Time alone will reveal its true impact.

While its focus of this paper is the UK, the paper gathers insights from legislative bodies across the globe, including from Brazil, Chile, Estonia, Finland and Italy.

Though largely addressing the potential of GenAI, the broader term "AI" is used to be more inclusive of other, particularly emerging, modalities of artificial intelligence.

Situating generative AI

GenAI has the potential to accelerate content creation and introduce innovative methods of generating content[2], but there are concerns regarding transparency, accuracy and responsible usage.

The functioning of these systems relies on the analysis of large quantities of data, referred to as Large Language Models (LLMs).

Consider a scenario where an AI application has processed all legislative documents in a parliament and uses these to assist in drafting new bills.

Although the ability to quickly create impactful and valuable content is considerable, it is equally important to recognise that these systems can also generate content that is false or even malicious.

Enhancing constituency work

AI could enhance MPs' ability to serve their constituents. By leveraging advanced data analysis and machine learning (ML) techniques, AI can provide MPs with sophisticated insights into the needs and concerns of constituents, enabling more targeted and responsive representation.

Improved data analysis allows AI algorithms to process vast amounts of data from various sources to identify trends, emerging issues and areas of concern. This enables MPs to stay ahead of local developments, proactively addressing potential problems. For instance, an AI system could analyse social media sentiment and local news reports to flag a growing concern about healthcare wait times.

AI-powered chatbots, already being deployed in the European Parliament and the Parliament of Estonia, among others, can provide a more human-centred wrapper for routine questions about parliament, ongoing legislation or local services. This can free up valuable time for MPs and their staff to focus on more complex constituent issues.

Third, AI enables more personalised and efficient communication with constituents. Natural language processing (NLP) and ML algorithms can help MPs

tailor their messages to different segments of their constituency, ensuring that communications are relevant and engaging to each recipient.

While these AI-driven enhancements offer exciting possibilities, it is important to consider and address issues of data privacy, algorithmic bias and the potential for the depersonalisation of constituent relationships.

Facilitating constituent engagement with MPs

AI can enhance the way constituents engage with their elected representatives by creating more accessible, responsive and interactive channels for citizen participation in the democratic process.

AI-driven platforms for submitting and tracking concerns can use NLP to categorise and prioritise constituent messages, ensuring urgent matters receive prompt attention. These systems can provide constituents with real-time updates on the status of their enquiries, fostering transparency and accountability.

Sentiment analysis of constituent feedback helps MPs gauge public opinion on various issues, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of constituent sentiment beyond traditional polling, surgeries or public meetings.

While these AI-facilitated engagement methods offer exciting possibilities for enhancing democratic participation, challenges such as digital exclusion and data privacy must be carefully navigated. The goal should be to use AI to lower barriers to engagement, increase transparency and foster more meaningful dialogue between constituents and their representatives.

Transforming the role of parliamentary staff

Integrating AI into parliamentary work will have significant implications for the roles of parliamentary staff. As AI takes on more routine and data-intensive tasks, staff work is likely to shift towards more strategic, interpersonal and specialised functions.

Staff will have more capacity to focus on tasks that require human judgment, empathy and complex problem-solving. This could involve deeper policy analysis, more extensive constituent casework or developing strategic communication

plans. AI will become a powerful tool for research and briefing preparation, allowing staff to prepare more comprehensive and insightful briefings for MPs in less time.

The enhanced capacity for complex analysis is another way AI will transform staff roles. By automating data collection and initial analysis, AI frees up staff to engage in more nuanced and contextual policy and legislative evaluation, potentially leading to a more evidence-based approach. This approach can also be applied to the analysis of public submissions to committee inquiries.

This transformation will raise concerns about potential job displacement. As AI systems become more capable, some traditional staff roles may become obsolete, underscoring the need for reskilling and continuous professional development in parliamentary offices.

The current trajectory of AI suggests it will undoubtedly change the nature of MPs work. It also presents opportunities for staff to engage in more meaningful, impactful work. The key will be managing this transition effectively, ensuring that staff are equipped with the skills needed to thrive in an AI-augmented workplace.

Transforming culture and process

Implementing AI in parliamentary systems requires a fundamental transformation of culture, procedures and processes, which in turn presents both challenges and opportunities for modernising parliament. The IPU's Issue Brief on AI in parliaments[3] warns that where AI "is implemented in core parliamentary systems, such as those used for legislative drafting, parliaments will need to exercise caution, control and oversight in order to ensure reliability and accuracy."

Using AI in drafting legislation, analysing public feedback or conducting impact assessments will likely necessitate new protocols for review and approval. Training and change management for MPs and staff is crucial for successful AI integration, involving fostering a culture of innovation and digital literacy within parliament.

Updating legal frameworks to address the use of AI in the legislative process is another critical aspect of this transformation[4]. Existing laws and regulations often cannot keep pace with the speed of technological change. These need to be reviewed and potentially revised to account for AI's role in parliamentary processes, including new provisions for algorithmic accountability and data rights. However, new regulations need to be flexible and non-prescriptive, focusing on concepts and use rather than specific technologies or platforms.

This cultural and procedural transformation, while challenging, presents an opportunity to make parliaments more efficient, transparent and responsive to citizens' needs. However, balancing tradition and rigour with technological innovation will be a delicate task. Parliaments must incorporate AI without undermining the practices and symbols that lend legitimacy to the democratic process.

Ethical considerations and risks

Embracing AI in the work of MPs means grappling with significant ethical considerations and potential risks. Addressing these challenges carefully is necessary to ensure that AI enhances, rather than undermines, democratic processes. However, barely one-in-ten parliaments are subject to specific legal regulations and only 14% have internal regulations governing their use of AI.[5]

Bias in AI systems is a pressing ethical concern. AI algorithms trained on existing data can reflect historical biases, potentially leading to skewed recommendations, perpetuated inequality and flawed analysis. Social media and the internet have fuelled disinformation and misinformation. AI exacerbates this and along with the potential to manipulate facts. These threats to democracy must be addressed.[6]

The transparency and explainability of AI-driven processes, along with their potential for hallucination[7], manipulation or misuse, are key ethical and governance considerations. As AI systems become more complex, it is increasingly difficult to understand how they arrive at particular recommendations or decisions. This "black box" problem[8] undermines accountability in democratic processes. Robust cybersecurity measures, full

explainability of results and ongoing independent system audits are essential to mitigate these risks.

Privacy concerns and data protection represent another significant challenge. Ensuring the security and appropriate use of data is crucial for maintaining public trust.

Maintaining human oversight and accountability is vital. AI can provide valuable insights and efficiencies, but ultimate decision-making power must remain with MPs and their staff. Clear protocols must be established to ensure that AI recommendations undergo human review at all times and that MPs retain full accountability for decisions made with AI assistance.

Challenges of implementing AI

The path to implementing AI in parliament has many challenges and comes with additional costs. The initial investment in AI infrastructure and systems represents a substantial financial hurdle, including not only the AI software itself but also necessary hardware upgrades, data storage solutions and cybersecurity measures.

Ongoing maintenance and updates from another significant cost category. AI systems require constant refinement and adaptation to remain effective and secure. Training costs for MPs and staff to use AI must be considered.

Potential resistance to change and adoption barriers present non-financial but equally significant challenges. Some MPs and staff may be hesitant to embrace AI, whether because of scepticism about its benefits or concerns about job security. Overcoming this resistance will require careful change management strategies and clear communication about the role of AI.

The UK versus the global perspective

Around 29% of parliaments are using AI, an increase from 10% in 2020. This is primarily for translation and transcription, or to support members' or public access. Only 2% of parliaments are currently using AI directly in the legislative process, such as for bill drafting or managing amendments.[9]

The UK Parliament, with its long history and deeply entrenched traditions, faces some unique challenges in AI adoption. However, many of the opportunities, issues and challenges facing parliaments embracing AI are universal. In comparison, parliaments in younger democracies or those implementing extensive digital transformation programmes may have greater flexibility to integrate AI more seamlessly. Parliaments such as the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, the European Parliament, the Parliament of Estonia and both the Chamber of Deputies and Senate of Italy are early adopters and pioneers in implementing AI[10].

International collaboration and sharing of good practices will be crucial as parliaments globally navigate the AI landscape. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) guidelines on the use of AI in parliaments has arisen out of the collaborative networks of the Centre for Innovation in Parliament and are a unique resource, written by parliaments for parliaments.

Future prospects and unknowns

The potential of AI to transform parliamentary work is vast, but so are the unknowns and risks involved. AI could enhance legislative drafting and analysis, helping identify inconsistencies or unintended consequences in draft legislation, incorporating amendments and helping compare proposed laws with existing statutes and constitutional principles. This is already happening in the Senate of Italy and the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies.

AI's role in improving parliamentary oversight and scrutiny could expand, with ML algorithms analysing vast amounts of government data to assist parliamentary committees in their scrutiny function. This could lead to more effectively holding the executive to account and better-informed policy decisions. Such AI-based systems are already in use in both chambers in Italy and in Brazil.

These advancements raise questions about the long-term implications for representative democracy. As AI systems become more sophisticated, there may be calls to give them a more direct role in decision-making processes, potentially altering the nature of representation and the role of MPs.

Ongoing research, addressing ethical considerations and adaptive, evidence-based policymaking will be crucial in navigating these unknowns. Parliaments must remain agile, ready to harness new technologies while also being prepared to address unforeseen challenges and put in place good practices learned from others.

Opportunities, challenges and risks

Integrating AI into parliamentary work represents a transformative shift in how democracy functions in the digital age. From enhancing MPs' ability to serve their constituents to transforming legislative processes, AI presents many opportunities to make parliaments more efficient, transparent and responsive to citizens' needs.

These opportunities come with significant challenges. Ethical concerns must be rigorously addressed, and the cultural and procedural transformations required will need strong leadership and careful management. Moving forward, it is crucial that integrating AI into parliaments is guided by democratic principles and a commitment to serving the public good, and that implementation, particularly around core legislative functions, happens with extreme care. AI usage must be underpinned by appropriate legislation and rigorous parliamentary guidelines[11].

Ultimately, the potential of AI lies in its ability to revitalise democratic institutions, empowering them to effectively tackle the complex challenges of the modern era. Achieving this goal requires an approach that is considerate, ethical and inclusive, with democratic representation at its core.[12]

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7. In AI systems (and particularly large language models) “hallucination” refers to instances where information or responses are generated which are false, nonsensical or not based on their training data. These fabrications can appear convincing but are essentially AI-generated misinformation, often occurring when the system attempts to provide answers in areas where it lacks accurate knowledge or context.
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Recognising the role played by MPs' staff

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UK members of Parliament (MPs) employ staff to support them in their work. As a UCL Constitution Unit report concluded:

"Today it is almost impossible for an MP to fulfil their multiple roles effectively… without the support of staff."[1]

I would go further – an MP with no staff simply could not meet the expectations of constituents, the media, or citizens.

In 2023 just over 3,500 staff were working for MPs with most MPs employing three to five people. All 650 MPs had at least one employee.[2]

These staff are hired by MPs and funded through IPSA's staffing budget, while political party staff are employed using "Short Money" (public funding to cover the cost of opposition parties to do their work).

Funding for MPs' staff was introduced in 1969 as the "office costs allowance", amounting to £500 to employ one full-time secretary. With an incredible increase in MPs' workloads in the last five decades, mostly due to a rise in constituency work and 24/7 news and digital communication, so too the allowance has risen.[3]

The 2024-25 allowance is set at £268,550 for London area MPs and £250,820 for non-London area MPs and the range of salaries allowed by IPSA span from £22,402 to £55,630.

MPs' staff roles

Since MPs' staff work in supporting roles, understanding the work that staff do requires an overview of MPs' multiple work roles.

In the UK MPs between them have five main responsibilities:

1. Representing a constituency.
2. Collectively forming a government, administrating government departments and implementing laws.

3. Collectively forming the opposition, scrutinising the executive and holding the government to account.
4. Passing laws (including finance bills or budgets into law) and holding policy debates.
5. Sitting on select committees that hold inquiries into government, law-making and policy issues.

The reality is even more complex, because often these roles overlap, rise and fall in importance during a parliamentary session or even during a week, depending on whether an MPs is in one of the main large parties or a small one, and which party is in government.

The responsibilities change continually and become entangled in ways that make it hard to separate them.

The impression given by media coverage – with its emphasis on Prime Minister's Questions and policy arguments on political shows – is extremely misleading. Most MPs and their staff spend far more time in the constituency, in select committee meetings, receiving visitors and preparing for parliamentary debates or law-making than they do talking to the media. But the public rarely see what goes on behind the frontstage of parliamentary politics and journalists or pundits prefer to focus on drama, power struggle and scandals.

Most political work is far quieter even if relentless.

MPs' staff assist with all these functions, except for supporting government, which is accomplished by civil servants and special advisers employed by government, party political work done by those funded on "Short Money", and assisting select committees, which is the job of parliamentary officials.

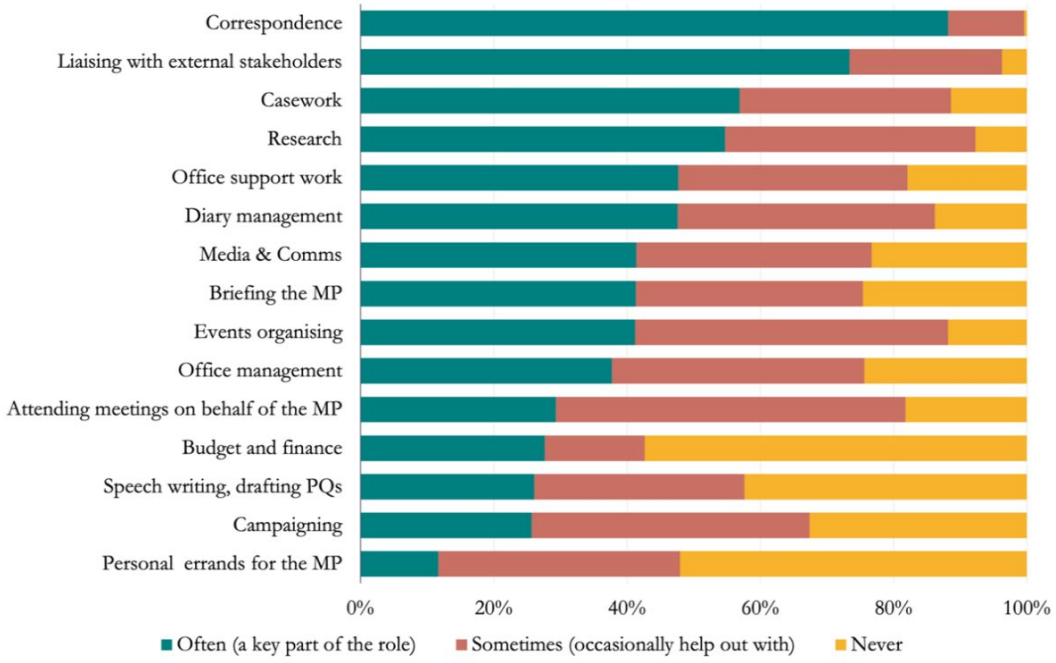
MPs' staff often belong to the same political party as the MPs but are not allowed to undertake any party political or campaign activity while contracted and paid by IPSA.

Although MPs tend to employ three distinct categories of staff:

- working on research and policy (34%)
- constituency casework ("executive" in IPSA categories) (39%)
- administrative (26%)

There is huge variation, and the staff often help each other out across roles, depending on workloads.

Activities carried out by MPs' staff[4]



Source: MPs' staff survey 2019, Constitution Unit UCL.

Who are the staff?

Caseworkers have often had experience as social workers, citizens' advice workers or charity support work.

Researchers similarly are often expected to have had policy-oriented research experience.

In 2019 they tended to be relatively young, only 7% people of colour and slightly more often women.

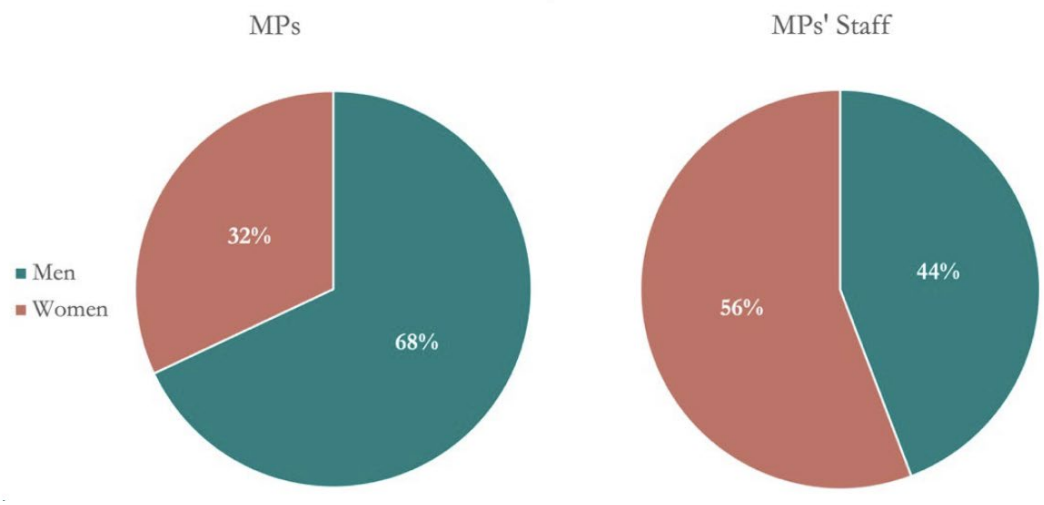
There are more men in the role of researcher (55% male: 45% female) and more women acting as caseworkers (54% female: 46% male) and administrators (72% female: 28% male), resulting in higher pay for men and more opportunities to make use of a research job as an apprenticeship into politics.

As Rebecca McGee explains in her 2023 report:

"These findings raise a number of concerns. Research staff, despite overwhelmingly being young and male, are employed and paid at a higher level than executive or administrative staff (due to the absence of a level 1 for research). In addition, if jobs at Westminster (and particularly in research) are a gateway to a career as an MP, the results show that the pool of talent is skewed in important respects."[5]

The ratio of men to women as MPs as opposed as staff is very roughly reversed. (With the 2024 General Election bringing in 40% women as MPs, these numbers will have changed but the predominance of women among MPs' caseworkers and men among researchers is longstanding and is highly likely to be roughly the same[6]).

Gender



The work of staff is strongly influenced by the geographical location and political economy of the constituency that the MP represents.

This also influences whether MPs put their staff in their office at Westminster as opposed to their one in the constituency:

- 5% had all their staff in Westminster
- 11% had all in constituency
- 68% had most in constituency
- 18% had most in Westminster[7]

While staff in Westminster act as administrators or researchers, constituency staff tend to be administrators or caseworkers.

Case work has increased exponentially in particular over recent decades. MPs are caught in a double bind. Their time is incredibly pressured, and they face ferocious demands from multiple groups to be in Westminster. But their heart is often with their constituency, and they want to respond to the increasing requests from constituents for assistance.

Faced with multiple failures of the state, including local government departments, citizens turn increasingly to MPs and not local councillors to intervene on their behalf. MPs can get the attention from local agencies, and certainly from national ones, more easily that local councillors so they often get positive results.

As most MPs become more and more responsive each year, they become victims of their own success – word gets around the constituency about their positive reputation, so still more people contact them.

Although some regret this shift, it has the advantage of educating MPs about the impact of policies and laws agreed by the Parliament on real people over a period of time.

Constituent response

In practice, it is MPs' staff who respond most often to the visits, letters, emails, phones and even tweets from constituents asking for help at all times of day and night, sometimes with alarming impatience. They then report back to the MPs at regular interviews.

MPs hold weekly or fortnightly surgeries, set up by their staff, to discuss the more complex cases, but mostly it is the caseworker who represents the MP in assisting constituents.

This case work requires an encyclopaedic knowledge of area and the local services (governmental, voluntary, private companies) as well as excellent relationships with key agencies and officers who might agree to help.

Cases are almost never about only one issue – they are complex, with many strands of difficulty, which constituents point out are never adequately dealt with by one local service.[8]

Staff assess cases about housing, immigration, benefits, health, education, or often a mix, and write/speak on behalf of the MP in representing their constituents' interests, conveying how urgent the case is so that those agencies can prioritise and act fast when needed.

The range of knowledge needed is in evidence in the guides produced by the Commons Library and a website called W4MP, run by MPs' staff.[9]

Emotional impact

The work of MPs' staff can be extremely emotionally demanding.

Emma Crewe and Nicholas Sarra interviewed MPs' staff in a Scottish constituency and found that there were three main aspects to this emotional labour.

First, the constituency office is always suffused with affect and emotion, as constituents present their cases in the hope that MPs and their staff will deal with complex, multiple, interwoven challenges. They are often there as a last resort, having tried many other avenues. The caseworkers will identify and resonate with the constituents' difficulties but also have to negotiate with them about how to take it forward. With the huge volume of cases each week, they are forced to treat some as more urgent than others. As I wrote elsewhere about MPs, but it applies equally to their staff:

"They aim to treat all constituents, irrespective of whether they are supporters or even voters, as equally deserving of attention and usually take care to avoid assessing the merits of the case explicitly in their conversation with the constituent. Refusing to take any action at all is extremely rare. But when writing on behalf of a constituent an experienced MP will give hints about the severity of the case … MPs would destroy the goodwill of government and voluntary agency contacts if they gave the impression that fast and time-consuming responses had to be made equally in all cases. So they signal the level of urgency without making it explicit to the constituent."[10]

This can cause frustration among constituents which then creates stress for the staff.

Second, the proportion of cases at least partly about mental health is on the increase – we estimated at least half related to mental stress or illness in this constituency and on talking to other MPs' staff in other places, they did not find it surprising.

Third, the anger towards politicians, or the state more broadly, can be taken out on their staff, so they have to deal with verbal and even sometimes physical violence.[11]

Ashley Weinberg has carried out surveys with MPs' staff in collaboration with the Wellness Working Group[12], and also found many are struggling with the vicarious trauma of helping desperate people and a "worrying upturn" in the number of suicidal constituents seeking help. 42% of MPs' staff are experiencing psychological distress, which is at least twice as high as the national average.[13] In the words of an anonymous staffer:

"The days often start the same: working through an inbox filled with abuse, pictures of maimed children in war-torn countries, constituents in desperate need of help, and whatever else the issue of the day happens to be. The phone rings and a distressed voice on the end of the line is contemplating suicide. Or perhaps it's a victim of childhood sexual abuse relaying details of their awful experiences and seeking support for their mental health."[14]

In recognition of the distress of this work, and increasing threats of violence, Mind has produced a guide for MPs and their staff about looking after their own mental health as they try and help others.[15]

Quiet contribution

In effect, much of the work of MPs' staff benefits both parliament and constituents although their contributions often go unnoticed. They are the "unsung heroes of Westminster".[16]

Parliament has been showing more appreciation recently, for example with a Speaker's Conference on the employment conditions of MPs' staff reporting in 2023.[17]

Among other recommendations they suggested that it is vital that the public understand the value of MPs' staff to the effective functioning of representative democracy and that allowances do not form part of MPs' salaries as they are never used by MPs themselves.

MPs' staff enhance the effectiveness of our elected representatives, and therefore Parliament more broadly, by responding to constituents' requests, making use of their specialist technical knowledge and emotional skills to deal with immensely complex cases, but they do far more than this.

The research carried out by MPs' researchers allows them to respond to the specific policy challenges they are negotiating for in their constituency but also in Parliament (whether intervening in a debate or a select committee inquiry).

It means MPs and others they work closely with can also stay up to date with the latest developments in the causes close to their heart, whether local, national or international rather than relying on political party research that all MPs in their party get access to.

Their staff may promote the MP as well, through local press reports or tweeting out images of them working, but the bulk of their time – the most pressure resource in Parliament – is dedicated more directly to the public and matters of public interest.

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IPSA
Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

Factoring in incivility: budgeting for abuse in MPs' offices

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On June 16, 2016, a woman went to work and never came home.

While on the way to her constituency advice surgery, Jo Cox MP was shot and stabbed. Five years later, on October 15, 2021, Sir David Amess MP was murdered in a similar context, while helping constituents at his advice surgery. In between these two events, on March 22, 2017, PC Keith Palmer was killed while protecting Parliament during a terrorist attack.

These murders shocked Parliament, the nation and the world. Political violence of this nature is relatively rare in 'stable', developed democracies, especially in 'peacetime'.[1] Yet, politicians around the world, face even more insidious, regular abuse.[2] Many MPs and their staff now see dealing with online and in-person threats as "part of the job".[3] As well as contributing to parliamentary debates and managing constituency case work, MPs' offices' workloads increasingly include implementing security protocols, reporting threats to the police, and preparing for court cases.

Parliamentary authorities have taken steps to improve the security of MPs' offices. The Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC), Parliamentary Security Department (PSD), Members' and Members' Staff Services Team (MMSST) and Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team (PLAiT) provide support and advice for MPs' offices. The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) now reports security spending for MPs collectively rather than against individual MPs' offices.[4]

Many of these changes have been made in response to the apparently growing problem of threats towards MPs. Former Prime Minister Theresa May also asked the Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL) to carry out a review about intimidation in public life,[5] which put forward a range of recommendations, many of which have since been implemented. The UK Government set up a Defending Democracy Task Force.[6] Sir Lindsay Hoyle, Speaker of the House of Commons, has prioritised members' security.[7] In 2025, he launched the Speaker's Conference on

the security and candidates, MPs and elections.[8] The Jo Cox Foundation launched the Jo Cox Civility Commission, in consultation with a range of stakeholders, to put forward practical recommendations to address violence, abuse and harassment towards elected representatives in the UK.[9]

In this essay, I explore the existing and possible measures to budget for preventing and addressing abuse towards MPs. I draw on the work I have been involved in at The Jo Cox Foundation Civility Commission and through my academic research at the University of Oxford, as well as the growing academic and advocacy work in the UK and around the world to address violence and abuse in democracies.

A note on scope: this essay focusses on the issue of abuse directed towards MPs from the public. It does not specifically cover abuse towards staff from MPs and others, which has been a focus of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme (ICGS).[10] I encourage reading other expert research and advocacy on this crucial issue.[11]

The rest of the essay proceeds as follows. First, I outline the problem of abuse in MPs' offices: the growing prevalence and its impact on the workings of democracy. Then I summarise the current provisions available to MPs' offices to address this growing problem. Third, I reflect on possible further solutions before offering a hopeful conclusion that we can strengthen our democracy.

The problem of abuse in MPs' offices

Available data shows that the level of abuse is growing. MPs who are high-profile, female, and/or of ethnic and religious minorities are at particular risk of abuse.[12] The reasons for abuse are various and often complex. Nearly everyone we consulted for the Jo Cox Civility Commission cited a regular reason for abuse was a lack of understanding about how MPs' offices operate and the powers of parliamentarians, including the use of their budget. There have been many examples over the years of when appropriate spending is framed as a misuse of public funds – for example on MPs' staff' home office equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic.[13] Other incidents can spike in response to certain policy decisions and debates, such as military intervention and welfare cuts.[14]

Abuse takes a range of forms and can be perpetrated by a range of people from constituents desperate for help to anonymous online trolls to members of the same political party. A 2024 parliamentary survey found that 96% of current MPs have personally experienced threatening behaviour.[15]

Unsurprisingly, this level of abuse impacts the well-being of MPs and those around them. MPs are working in a context in which two of their colleagues were murdered doing the same job as they do. MPs' families are also often involved in preventing and addressing abuse towards the MP practically and emotionally.[16] A growing part of the workload of MPs' offices involves dealing with abuse. MPs' staff, often responsible for dealing with incidents against their employers, are also seriously affected. In a recent survey, more than half of the staff of MPs experienced clinical levels of distress.[17]

Also of concern is how abuse impacts the way that MPs and the public interact. The UK is relatively rare globally in its practice of open advice surgeries; a practice that many defend as crucial to the character of British democracy. Yet, given the increased threat levels, MPs, parliamentary authorities and the police attempt to strike a balance between security and openness. Some MPs limit their interaction with the public because of security concerns. Conversely, some MPs resist security advice, fearing that measures such as demanding appointments for advice surgeries and the presence of (even plain clothed) police officers could create barriers to already vulnerable constituents to seek support.[18] In the principles of democratic openness, social media platforms were initially embraced as a positive way for politicians and the public to meaningfully engage. Yet, the prevalence of abuse online means that some MPs limit their social media activity.[19]

Some evidence suggests that abuse is impacting MPs' broader political participation. Many MPs who chose not to run for re-election in recent years have cited abuse for part of their decision.[20] Others may not speak on some policy issues because of the risk of abuse to themselves and their staff: the Fawcett Society found that 58% of all MPs (rising to 73% among female MPs) "do not use social media to speak up on certain issues because of the abusive environment online."[21]

Beyond the impact on MPs' offices, such abuse has serious implications for representative democracy. Those tasked with carrying out crucial functions of our representative democracy are increasingly spending precious public resources navigating abuse.

Current resources to address abuse

In terms of navigating abuse, MPs offices have access to a range of preventative and reactive measures. For example, the Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC), a joint Metropolitan Police Service and National Health Service (NHS) unit provides training to MPs' offices as well as manages cases from fixated individuals.[22] The Parliamentary Security Department (PSD) provides support for MPs' offices to implement security advice and measures, such as alarms in constituency offices and bespoke guidance. Partly in response to the recommendations from The Jo Cox Foundation, security colleagues have improved the guidance available to MPs' families.[23]

Operation Bridger, a national security strategy for protecting MPs, was set up in December 2015 "after the fraught parliamentary debate on bombing Syria saw an upsurge in concern about threats of violence."[24-25] Following the murder of Jo Cox in 2016, the Parliamentary Liaison and Investigation Team (PLAiT) was set up to improve coordination with local police services on security threats to MPs.[26] Each local policy force has an Operation Bridger Single Point of Contact (SPOC) to advise on and respond to threats towards MPs. Recently, in response to the recommendations from The Jo Cox Foundation, centralised resources have been updated for all police forces to clarify the roles and responsibilities related to supporting elected representatives.[27]

Since April 2023, The House of Commons manages the security spending for MPs, instead of The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA). IPSA is still responsible for reporting MPs budget spending. IPSA has made efforts to communicate its decision around the security spending reporting changes, striking an important balance between transparency of the use of public funds and the sensitivity to the need to withhold some information for security purposes.[28]

IPSA has stated that "to reduce risk to the MP, their staff and their families," security costs are now reported collectively, rather than by individual MPs' offices.[29] Other changes include not reporting the specifics of travel routes. These changes mean that the specifics of MPs' security precautions and their whereabouts are not revealed to would-be attackers. Another apparent benefit of this policy change is that MPs may be more likely to take up security support without fear of being overly-scrutinised for this aspect of their office spending.[30] Spending on security in 2022-23 was £3.3 million, which is over 80 times higher than the cost when IPSA was first established.[31]

With various bodies responsible for different aspects of the problem, Parliament has improved its coordinated information sharing to MPs and their staff, for example through the Parliament Members' and Members' Staff Services Team (MMSST). Increased coordination for advice and well-being support for MPs offices has also improved, especially in response to the Speakers Conference on the employment conditions of Members' staff.[32] 2024's induction for new members and their staff was updated to be more comprehensive than it has been in the past. MMSST expanded its remit, including the capacity to provide HR advice. There are also a range of formal and informal staff associations which allow peer-to-peer support between MPs and/or staff.[33]

Future resources to address abuse

While there have been dedicated improvements in resources to address abuse, more could be done by IPSA and others to further grapple with the experience of intimidation and abuse towards MPs and those they directly employ.

While IPSA has made important strides for transparency and information sharing, a general lack of public understanding about public finances seems to persist. The Jo Cox Civility Commission recommends "awareness campaigns for the general public aimed at increasing understanding of the role of elected representatives and promoting civility".[34] More specifically this could involve IPSA, alongside government and civil society partners, implementing dedicated public awareness campaigns about how MPs' budgets are spent and allocated, as well, as the role of MPs and their staff. Transparency, accountability can and should coincide with civility.

The high levels of staff experiencing clinical levels of distress indicate that those who support MPs should be better supported themselves. Parliamentary authorities have made important changes. These developments, such as the new remits and capacities of the MMSST to provide HR advice to members' staff, should be closely monitored for their effectiveness.

Potential future improvements, small and large, should also be considered. While it would involve a large structural change, parliamentary authorities could review the possibility to resource a centralised Human Resources department for MPs' staff.[35] Since each MP's office currently operates as its own entity, such centralisation could be a significant transformation. It may be that the recent changes to improve HR advice are sufficient for providing support to MPs' offices. However, larger changes should not be completely 'off the table'. Further professionalised coordination and centralisation with Parliament as the employer may allow for more practical and emotional support for MPs and their staff than the current structures.

Addressing abuse faced by MPs is not only the responsibility of parliamentary authorities. As we recommend in the Jo Cox Civility Commission, MPs have a responsibility to model civil behaviour as well as report all incidents of abuse so that security forces can build up an accurate picture of the problem. Political parties should ensure the proper implementation of their codes of conducts.[36] Members of the public and journalists can take care to hold politicians to account in a robust and civil way. Again, the values of accountability, transparency and robust debate can and should live alongside civility in our political culture.

Conclusion

While the growth of abuse in politics may leave some pessimistic about the future, I am hopeful. Growing awareness of the scale of the threat to our democracy provides us with an opportunity for culture change. Addressing abuse and strengthening our democracy requires all of us to take seriously the problem and work towards a more positive future. At The Jo Cox Foundation, we envisage a "a political culture in which diversity is celebrated and robust debate brings us closer in the spirit of Jo's message that 'we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us'".[37]

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What I learned about my 3,500 MPs' staff colleagues

Georgina Kester-Harrison MBE
Former Chair of the Members and Peers Staff Association (MAPSA)

Imagine if you will an organisation with its headquarters in central London, and some 650 branches across the UK, each run by a business manager, employing in total circa 3,500 full and part-time staff.

Then imagine all staff needing to be fully conversant in every conceivable profession, from accountant to counsellor, policy expert and speech writer, to social worker and housing officer.

Only now can you come close to truly appreciating the role of an MP's staffer.

The office

When people ask how an MP's office operates, they are always surprised by the answer.

The honest response is "differently". There is no one-size-fits-all approach, even though perhaps there should be.

Each MP runs their office as an individual business and all of them come with a different skill set, often not involving HR or office management.

The common denominator across all 650 offices is the staff. Fiercely loyal and passionate about what they do, they recognise the privilege and honour of working in these roles and do their best to ensure every office functions properly.

Many members of the general public are not familiar with the workings of an MP's office. They have never really considered the mechanism of Westminster and are not aware that every MP is required to be in the House of Commons from Monday to Thursday evening.

MPs can only appear to be in two places at once because their staff are their trusted voice, answering phone enquiries, researching and resolving casework, scanning local issues, and ensuring every constituent receives the support they require.

How many times have we all heard the retort, when explaining the MP isn't in that particular office: "Oh! So, they are off having a jolly somewhere, probably claiming expenses for it too."

I was privileged enough to work in Westminster for over 14 years.

I had a fantastic boss and incredible team, but the job was nothing like I thought it would be despite having been involved in politics in previous roles.

I could have earned twice as much in the private sector and yet I stayed year after year, because I believed in what we did and was proud of what we achieved.

I was lucky – others are not.

Wanting to do what I could to correct this imbalance, I took on the voluntary role of Chair of the Members' and Peers' Staff Association (MAPSA) to facilitate, alongside other groups and unions, change for staff, wherever they worked, and to act as their voice.

The staff

As indicated, the true job description for a top-quality Parliamentary staffer would include many of the following attributes and skills:

- speech writer
- accountant
- HR manager
- counsellor
- therapist
- advocate
- diary manager
- tour guide
- travel coordinator
- policy expert
- database manager
- social media expert and communications expert
- website manager
- events organiser and more

Many would say I am exaggerating the role – one person can't be expected to fill all those criteria, and the job is unreasonable.

Sadly though, that is the reality and while speaking to colleagues the same phrases come up again and again:

"More than just a desk job."
"I'm a jack of all trades, master of none."
"It's nothing like I thought it would be."
"I do anything and everything to allow my MP to do his job."
"The job is great, I love it. I just can't afford it."

Yet the applications flood in for every job advertised because working in Parliament is an invaluable grounding for many external roles.

Some staff will go on to stand as MPs, while others will become Government Affairs Managers or work in PR, journalism, thinktanks and NGOs.

But should we be expecting people to fulfil all these roles, and do they get the support, salary and training while they do it?

The answer is no.

While many MPs are good employers who do their best to pay fairly, provide training and career progression where possible, the reality is that in an office of four or five people, with increasing workloads, these opportunities are limited.

Staff are resilient and many find their own coping mechanisms, forming close friendships with others on their corridors and bonding over a drink in the Sports & Social bar or Red Lion pub.

However, constituency staff do not necessarily have this ready-made community and can feel disconnected from Westminster as a result of their remote working locations.

All staff rely heavily on WhatsApp groups and Teams meetings for contacts and advice.

Support and community

Peer support is invaluable in a job where confidentiality is paramount, so organisations like MAPSA and the unions, all run by staff in a voluntary capacity, are essential. They reach out to those who may lack the confidence to throw themselves into the social scene, or those working for MPs who do not allow training or fraternising with other offices.

Unbelievably, this is still a reality in some offices.

Not long ago, a staffer contacted me in tears to ask if he could chat about the disciplinary process he was facing. It transpired he was 18 and this was his first ever job. His office was in an isolated part of the Parliamentary Estate, he had only met the MP at his interview and the Office Manager was only in one day a week.

Wanting to do the best job possible and trying to act on his own initiative, he had made an error in something he was asked to do. It wasn't a major mistake and, with the right support and training, should never have happened. His job was terminated anyway, and he left Parliament vowing never to return.

Since the introduction of the Members' and Members' Staff Services Team (MMSST) in Parliament, staff have been able to access a network of their contemporaries, as well as the people and services of the House.

This has been invaluable, but ultimately the only person who can mandate change in an office is the MP. Should that still be the case?

There is no compulsory induction for staff wherever they work, but in Westminster this should, at the very least, be essential for the basic operations of the Estate and how to use the many resources available to staff.

IPSA sets terms and conditions for salaries, notice periods, pensions and contracts. Should there not be a similar requirement for it and other House departments to ensure MPs are running their offices effectively?

Checking they are conducting proper recruitment/HR processes, staff are being fairly remunerated for the work they are doing and receiving sufficient and relevant training, while still acknowledging that the MP remains the ultimate employer?

Hiring an office manager with no budgetary experience and then asking them to annually manage over £350,000 of public money is a recipe for disaster.

Similarly, expecting caseworkers to deal with distressing and harrowing cases with no support, counselling or prior warning this could be part of the role, is unfair and potentially unsafe. Yet it happens time and time again.

We owe it to staff, MPs and constituents to rethink how some offices operate to ensure they are providing the best service available.

Staffers told me:

“I had no idea that people brought such problems to their MP since we are not the right ‘service’ for anything, but we are the last port of call when people are in distress and if we can help, we always do try.”

“The majority of casework that comes in is not within an MP’s remit, let alone their staff. Most cases need referring to the local authority or suggesting that they seek independent legal counsel. There is a widespread misunderstanding about what an MP can and cannot help you with, and until this is redressed, casework will seldom be manageable. It's also worth noting that MPs and their staff face considerable abuse from constituents who turn to them for help that they fundamentally cannot render.”

Perception and abuse

In 2009, the public image of MPs changed dramatically following the expenses scandal.

Duck houses, moat cleaning, dog food and second homes – everyone was tarred with the same brush regardless of whether they had committed an offence of not.

Sixteen years later it remains an ongoing issue.

Local and national press, social media and the general public never fail to raise the issue at every available opportunity, and it quickly becomes very wearing.

“Are you going to put that on expenses?” is a regular retort MPs and their staff get used to hearing.

It's an easy one to brush aside and to point them to IPSA's website where further information on the costs MPs can and can't claim are available. However not everyone reads the information and some wilfully don't want to hear the truth.

It would be nice if this was the only negative commentary MPs' offices had to cope with. Regrettably, with the rise in electronic communication and social media came an increase in abuse.

Threatening behaviour is not tolerated, and extreme threats are sent to the police, but it doesn't stop them being received and read, often by the staff before the MP.

These are just a couple of examples of abusive emails sent to MPs in their original form:

"Couldn't have happened to a worse politician and human being. I sincerely hope you crawl back under the rock from which you came and we never have to suffer your arrogance and incompetence again."

"I hope someone sends Margaret's Thatcher's skull crushed up through your letterbox you nationalist scumbag bastard." [sic]

Staff receive abusive phone calls, letters and emails, in person at surgeries or just going about their daily business.

The tragic deaths of Sir David Amess and Jo Cox are never far from their minds.

While they continue to meet constituents and help them wherever possible, the toll it takes on them should not be underestimated. Whenever an MP votes for, or against, a contentious policy the messages flood in and, because they care, staff try to shield their MP from some of the worst of it.

On one occasion I was awake at three in the morning removing emails from the inbox because my boss, in his capacity as Chief Whip, had made a controversial decision. He was exhausted and emotionally drained from the experience and this was a little thing I could choose to do to help, so he didn't see a barrage of abuse when he first logged into his emails the next day. I would report the death threats and show him them later in the day. We would probably have a laugh about some of the choice language used, but only when the time was right.

This happens in the majority of offices, often on a regular basis where the MP is high profile or public facing, but for others it can be as the result of a local decision or a constituent not liking the answer they have been given.

No one should ever have to face this level of abuse while carrying out their daily role.

Greater training, professional support and guidance are essential, and MPs need to be reminded it is their responsibility as an employer to ensure the welfare of their staff. This is vital if we want to attract the best people to work for MPs, and also retain them.

Moving forward

The vast majority of MPs' staff members are extraordinary people.

They deserve every accolade available for what they achieve and for their dedication and devotion to Parliament.

However, we owe it to each and every one of them to take the time to understand what resources and finances their offices need, and to acknowledge the individual pressures and requirements that may not be immediately apparent.

Staff are experts at "making do". When supporting such vital work, that shouldn't be the answer.

My time as MAPSA Chair was emotional, exhausting and heartbreaking, often leaving me wrung out and distressed by how little I could influence. Parliament appears to move at a glacial pace where change is concerned. However, it does move, and staff must continue to call out bad behaviour, to work with the House, IPSA and the ICGS, and affect change. This takes courage, but given all the other attributes staff already possess, what is one more?

A total of 2,023 people working for MPs lost their jobs at the 2024 General Election, but an equal or greater number replaced them.

Now is the perfect opportunity to ensure theirs is the best Parliamentary employment experience yet.

IPSA
Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

Understanding workplace conditions: an international perspective

Jennifer Lees-Marshment

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This essay applies a human resource management (HRM) perspective to understand the challenging environment politicians and their staff work in.

Problematic workplace behaviour in politics, including bullying, harassment and law-breaking, has been noted in repeated practitioner reports, parliamentary reviews and media stories around the world.[1] What has received less media and public attention is the substandard conditions under which politicians and their staff work.

Historically there has been a profound lack of basic HRM practices in place to orientate, train, manage and support both politicians and political advisors. While holding people accountable and regulating their behaviour is important, more effort should be put into creating appropriate HRM practices to support politicians to do their job – and do it well.

Work by pioneering civil servants and political advisors/staffers in parliament and parties has begun to develop more effective processes and support, but much more investment is needed to create comprehensive HRM that is fit for purpose, designed to suit the political nature and unique characteristics of these roles.

This essay explains why the political workplace is often challenging for politicians and their staff, making the case for more investment to support improvements, and offers research-led recommendations for where such investment should be focused. In doing so, it builds on international research in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK, which included 66 interviews with political advisors who worked in prime ministers' offices and civil servants who worked in close association.[2]

High demands on politicians and their staff

Diverse and demanding jobs that require extensive and diverse skills

While the most visible part of political jobs features politicians making noise in parliament, speaking in front of a podium or being interviewed by the media, research has identified that the job of both a politician and a political advisor or staffer requires extensive and diverse skills and attributes.

The job of a politician "carries great responsibility, requires complex problem-solving, creativity and long-term thinking".[3] MPs have to effectively run a small business when managing a political office.[4] Job analysis has made clear that it requires multiple skills including interpersonal skills, leadership, management, communication, adaptability, drive and resilience.[5]

Likewise, politicians' staff need to have multi-faceted abilities and attributes. Political advisors who recently worked for prime ministers in Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the UK made clear when interviewed[6] that their roles involved diverse capabilities including political reasoning, strategic abilities, people skills, advisory aptitudes, coping capability and specific expertise for their particular role focus.

Multi-faceted capabilities of political staffer jobs

- Specific expertise – event management; project management; market research skills; media monitoring and management; communication skills
- Political reasoning – applying a political lens; political judgment, nous or acuity
- Strategic abilities – strategy and forecasting; risk and crisis management and checks; thought leadership, brainstorming and puzzle solving; understanding public opinion and voters
- People skills – emotional intelligence; horizontal cross-functional working; internal and external relationship building and management; negotiation, legislative management and diplomacy; staff management, recruitment and employment issues
- Advisory aptitudes – agility and openness; ability to speak up; creative, outside-the-box thinking

- Coping capacity – self-starter; hardworking and willing to do long hours; extreme resilience to manage pressure
- Fit with politician and political office – fit into the team culture; committed to the work, party and ideals; good match with politician and their thinking; loyal and trustworthy

The jobs require accepting abysmal working conditions

The hours and rights politicians and their staff experience in practice are very challenging, and in some cases would breach common employment laws:

The table below outlines working conditions that can exist. While this does not apply to all political staff in all offices and countries, and at all times, the data from interviews with advisors who had worked for ministers and MPs suggests it is more common than we would like, and that such challenges also apply to politicians.

Working hours	• Excessively long, commonly working 80-hour weeks including early mornings, evenings, weekends and public holidays • Permanently on call
Workload	• Excessive, never ending • High pressure, high speed • Under extreme public scrutiny
Leave	• Variable capacity for annual leave to be taken • Historically limited access to parental leave and other rights
Work-life balance	• Poor – “always on” even at nights and weekends
Benefits for being on call	• None or little – not comparable with civil service
Salary	• Typically lower than equivalent jobs outside of politics
Job security	• Staffer – none, tied to politician and not their own performance • Politician – dependent on elections, other politicians and non-performance-based factors
Potential for burnout	• Extremely high
Turnover and/or problems recruiting	• Staffers – very high • Politicians – becoming a problem

The stressful nature of the work is strongly conveyed by political advisors when interviewed. Senior political advisors' descriptions of the political workplace include:

“A world of over-constrained work”
“Always on”
“Because the media runs all the time, the job doesn't stop”
“You had to have your phone on at all times, even when you're sleeping”
“The pressure-cooker world of politics”
“Frantic”
“Everything changes from moment to moment”
“Things are just thrown at you”
“Chaotic and unstable”
“On fire”
“No room for error”
“Under an extraordinary amount of stress”
“One of the least stable jobs in the country”
“We can all be there one day and gone the next”
“It’s brutal”

Of course, other professions are also highly stressful and pressured. But political advisors who have worked in business as well as politics say there is a difference. For example: “I've worked in big corporates and there's nothing like it. You take more decisions in an hour if you're Prime Minister than the average CEO will take in his or her tenure.”

The lack of effective HRM for politicians and their staff

Given the demands of the job, it would be logical to expect that the HRM infrastructure would be extensive and highly developed in politics and government. However, analysis of data from interviews with advisers in the four countries suggests that the individuals we elect as politicians to govern us and the staff we pay to support them do not, as yet, universally receive enough appropriate training, performance management or support.

There is the need for much more development across countries and political parties. Important work has been and is being done to try to improve that – as

highlighted by the Speaker's Conference in the UK.[7] However, to be fully effective, much greater resource needs to be put into this area to address gaps and deficiencies and enable political advisors and politicians to perform to their full potential.

Unique workplace with a historically limited appropriate HRM infrastructure

The political workplace is like no other. There is no handover from the party who lost to the party who won. Job retention depends – rightly so in a democracy – on the votes cast by citizens in elections, a judgement that only loosely reflects individual performance. The HR we experience and rightly expect in other organisations just does not exist in politics.[7] Most parliaments "lack anything resembling a human resources department"[8], and HRM practices are "often ineffective"[9]. Advisors call politics "the Wild West", arguing HRM is unregulated, outdated and forgotten, or made up as they go along.

Ineffective orientation and training

There is typically a lack of fit-for-purpose orientation and professional development for these political roles. Civil servants are understandably uncomfortable in supporting political roles for fear of crossing the line of neutrality.[10] Existing induction programmes are often limited to technological aspects such as office and IT access, health and safety, and formal rules[11], and do not adequately prepare politicians or advisors to do their job.[12]

Politicians who assume leadership roles rarely receive training in managing their colleagues, advisors or a government department. We elect politicians to represent and serve us and then throw them in the deep end and their advisors are, as one who worked in Number 10 described it, "parachuted onto a ship that is bouncing around in four metre waves."

Limited – if not deficient – performance management

Formal performance management is infrequent, not least because line-management is blurred. Who is an MP's boss – the Prime Minister or the voter? Voters cannot provide appropriate professional feedback. Ferguson and MacCaulay's research found that in practice, politicians receive informal, ad hoc feedback from party whips, the Leader of the House, party boards and their own senior advisors.[13] Feedback and rewards for good performance of MPs are rare, and

sanctions for poor performance lacking, unless it develops into a major public and media issue.

Feedback for political staffers depends on the capacity and willingness of their MP to engage in feedback or on senior staffers in charge of the team. Advisors recall "I had no meaningful line management at all" and "I don't think I had a single performance review when I was there."[14]

Rising mental health problems

Politicians and their staff thus face significant challenges and stress. Weinberg pioneered research on concerns about the mental health and politicians,[15] concluding that long hours and a poor work-life balance have a negative impact on MPs' psychological health and ultimately their ability to function effectively.

BBC Radio 4 broadcast a programme focusing on politicians' declining mental health.[16] The Apolitical Foundation's global survey of politicians found that politicians had worse mental wellbeing than emergency-service employees.[17] Recent surveys of MPs' staff also found that half showed clinical levels of mental distress from their work and felt under-resourced to deal with their workload.[18]

Why it matters

Ineffective HRM and problematic workplace conditions matter for everyone.

- Politicians make decisions that affect millions of people – we need to support them to make the best possible judgement.
- We all need training and support to do our job – politicians are no different.

What we can do about it: the case for more investment

We cannot just wave a magic wand and reduce the demands on politicians and their staff. But what we can do is help them do their job better by investing more in developing effective orientation, training, management and support that is fit for purpose.

The core recommendation is to create a properly resourced and permanent Office of Political Staff Support.[24] This should provide support to elected MPs, ministers, shadow ministers, political parties, party leaders and the prime. A permanent office would transcend disturbances arising from leadership changes and

election outcomes, provide continuity of support for political advisers, and enable exponential improvements in the management of advisory staff over time, helping government and parliament be more effective.

The Office should build on appropriate existing initiatives carried out by pioneering practitioners from both the civil service and political staff but be able to go much further with appropriate resourcing and remit.

It needs to be led by civil servants, human resources (HR) professionals and political advisers, combining their expertise, and ensuring all involved are HR literate and politically astute so they fully understand the nature of the working environment that political staffers operate in. The Office can then connect staff across parliamentary and governmental offices to develop and foster a professional community that can support politicians effectively and improve the functioning of political offices.

The new Office should support, facilitate and offer multiple aspects of HRM either through direct provision or collaborating with other experts and practitioners, especially in two key areas: fit-for-purpose orientation and peer-mentoring, and development of a professional community and ongoing training, which are outlined below.

Develop fit-for-purpose orientation and peer-mentoring by:

- Creating and sharing succinct written information such as a staff handbook that covers the different jobs, expectations, common acronyms, etc.
- Training office/team managers to provide specific induction that includes clear expectations of the role.
- Facilitating formal mentoring, connecting new politicians/staffers with experienced politicians/staffers to support ongoing peer learning, sharing tips and coping strategies.

Create a professional community with bespoke ongoing training through:

- Investment in organising regular meetings for all politicians and advisors for both formal events and informal interaction to support peer-learning, support and socialising.

- Facilitating ongoing training, including partisan content delivered by current/former politicians/staffers, political parties and outside experts.
- Covering non-partisan content relevant and specific to the political role and workplace, including bespoke skills, tips and tools for challenges in the role and policy and socio-economic-environmental updates from the Civil Service.

  Offering specific training for those managing political offices or teams to discuss strategies to help build effective political offices within a demanding political environment, such as maintaining motivation, acknowledging challenges and providing adequate feedback.

Potential benefits of improving workplace conditions in politics

To help politicians help us, we need to ensure they and their staff are well-prepared to do their jobs. Ensuring politicians and especially their staff are effectively trained, developed, upskilled, supported, healthy, happy and retained will bring long-term dividends for both the individuals doing the job and for the country. It will help attract the best people to these roles and enable them to perform at a high level. Higher-functioning political offices will lead to better outputs: more being delivered, more effective government and voters better represented by politicians they elect.

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