



HANSARD
SOCIETY

Under Pressure

Are we getting the most from our MPs?

Edited by Greg Power

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This paper is published by the Hansard Society as a contribution to the debate about Parliament and political reform. The views expressed in this paper are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Hansard Society.

The job of the Member of Parliament has changed in the last few decades. The modern MP is expected to combine the skills of a legislator, scrutineer and party politician in Parliament with those of a local councillor and personal counsellor social welfare officer in the constituency. Some of these roles are newer than others but in almost every category the burden falling on our elected representatives has increased. The House of Commons is under pressure to meet these new demands.

At Westminster, the volume of legislation going through Parliament each year rose dramatically over the course of the twentieth century and appears to be expanding with each session. The complexity of modern government means that the scrutiny of ministers and their activities by agencies can be an onerous task for MPs on the departmental select committees. While outside of Parliament the amount of constituency work Members undertake has increased from a handful of letters each week in the 1950s to sacks at the beginning of the new century. The sheer diversity of cases brought before MPs makes this role all the more taxing.

At the same time the context within which MPs work has changed. All the parties place a premium on party discipline within the Commons, and although not new pressure, it can make the task of reconciling allegiance to party with holding government to account difficult. The representation of interests has also been qualified by the work of the Nolan and Nield Committees on Standards in Public Life, which not only set down ethical standards for MPs conduct, but have also initiated public scrutiny of their activity.

It is perhaps ironic that these greater restrictions have been implemented at a time when the standing and influence of MP and Parliament are at a low. The combined effect of judicialisation, greater use of judicial review, membership of the EU, the importance of the media as an alternative forum for political debate, and the growth of single-issue parties and direct action, give the impression that Parliament is being marginalised, and further increased pressure on MPs. MPs have not though, been passive bystanders during these developments, and the increased workload is partly of their own making. As more people enter Parliament hoping for a career in politics, so the job has become a full-time occupation for the majority. Being an MP is one of the few jobs where there is no job description, although politicians have become full-time professionals. Parliament remains more suited to the needs of the part-time amateur than the full-time professional working in an office.

As Anne Campbell illustrates in her chapter, the up-ability of the Commons working hours is not only frustrating, but also inefficient. Yet despite the best efforts of some MPs, retaining them has proved remarkably difficult. The attitude of older MPs towards new entrants has almost a direct parallel in the medical profession. Whereas the vast majority of the public think it absurd that junior doctors work for 36 hours at a stretch, the latter did not say that, attitude prevails amongst their senior colleagues. The consequences of such lengthy working days on the efficiency of the institution seem not to matter. As Campbell notes, nobody gets into politics expecting life as an MP to be anything but very hard work. The current arguments about the strings of the Commons are not about shortening the hours, but rationalising them, making them more predictable and improving the efficiency of the House.

Similarly, Rush and Giddings highlight the lack of training available to new entrants of Parliament, so that for the most part MPs rely on the advice of older colleagues. They note the greater demand amongst newer Members for a more professional approach to induction, regarding their role at Westminster as a job. They expect to be inducted into and equipped for it as for any other job.

Reinventing the member of Parliament:
A rational approach to the MP's work
Anne Campbell MP
Learning to be a Member of Parliament
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Party politics vs. people politics:
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Introduction

The job of the Member of Parliament has changed in the last few decades. The modern MP is expected to combine the skills of a legislator, scrutineer and party politician in Parliament with those of a local councillor and personal counsellor, social worker and Citizens' Advice Bureau in the constituency. Some of these roles are newer than others, but in almost every category the burden falling on our elected representatives appears to be increasing, and MPs face mounting pressure to meet these new demands.

At Westminster, the volume of legislation going through Parliament each year rose dramatically over the course of the twentieth century and appears to be expanding with each Session. The complexity of modern government means that the scrutiny of ministries and their satellite agencies can be an onerous task for MPs on the departmental select committees. Whilst outside of Parliament the amount of constituency work Members undertake has increased from a handful of letters each week in the 1950s to sackfuls at the beginning of the new century. The sheer diversity of cases brought before MPs makes this role all the more taxing.

At the same time the context within which MPs work has changed. All the parties place a premium on party discipline within the Commons, and although not a new pressure, it can make the task of reconciling allegiance to party with holding government to account more difficult. The representation of interests has also been qualified by the work of the Nolan and Neill Committees on Standards in Public Life, which not only set down ethical standards for MPs conduct, but have also intensified public scrutiny of their activity.

It is perhaps ironic that these greater restrictions have been implemented at a time when the standing and influence of MPs and Parliament is waning. The combined effect of devolution, greater use of judicial review, membership of the EU, the importance of the media as an alternative forum for political debate, and the growth of single-issue politics and direct action, give the impression that Parliament is being marginalised, and further increase the pressure on MPs.

MPs have not, though, been passive bystanders during these developments, and the increased workload is partly of their own making. As more people enter Parliament hoping for a career in politics, so the job has become a full-time occupation for the majority. Yet at the same time it remains curiously amateur. Being an MP is one of the few jobs where there is no job description, and although politicians have become full-time professionals, Parliament remains more suited to the era of the part-time amateur. In short, parliamentary procedures, working hours, office support, induction, training, and resources are not sufficient for the modern MP.

Anne Campbell illustrates in her chapter that the unpredictability of the Commons working hours is not only frustrating, but also inefficient. Yet despite the best efforts of some MPs, reforming them has proved remarkably difficult. The attitude of older hands towards newer Members has almost a direct parallel in the medical profession. Whereas the vast majority of the public think it is absurd that junior doctors work for 36 hours at a stretch, the 'never did me any harm' attitude prevails amongst their senior colleagues. The consequences of such lengthy working days on the efficiency of the institution seem not to matter. As Campbell notes, nobody going into politics expects life as an MP to be anything but very hard work. The current arguments about the sittings of the Commons are not about shortening the hours, but rationalising them, making them more predictable and improving the efficiency of the House.

Similarly, Rush And Giddings highlight the lack of training available to new Members of Parliament, so that for the most part, MPs rely on the advice of older colleagues. They note the greater demand amongst newer Members for a more professional approach to induction, regarding their role at Westminster as a job. They expect to be inducted into and equipped for it, as for any other job.

The growth of constituency work has presented a different set of problems for Members. As the work has grown so MPs' attention has been diverted from Parliament to their own area of the country. Although improved resources have helped MPs to cope, the majority of MPs would like more staff and many are struggling to balance Westminster and constituency demands. As 'Party politics vs people politics' sets out the problem is exacerbated by the fact that the links between Parliament and constituency are weak. Rather than the two sides of the job complementing one another, they can often seem contradictory. It suggests that reform of parliamentary procedures might enable MPs to use their constituency experience in the Commons more effectively, improving the relevance of Parliament to the public, and increasing the efficiency of MPs.

However, as it stands, MPs' current working conditions – the hours, the lack of training, the procedures of the Commons – appear to be having an effect on the emotional and physical health of our representatives. In 'Stress and the Politician' Dr Ashley Weinberg shows that levels of psychological strain are higher amongst Members of Parliament than for other comparable professions. As he notes, the solution lies partly in rationalising working hours, but also in training and support. In one particular area, this training may be particularly appropriate: As the authors in the final chapter point out, MPs are almost permanently at the centre of disputes which they are expected to resolve. The introduction of a training programme which included mediation skills might enhance not only the ability of MPs to cope with their workload, but also their rate of success.

In summary, the workload of the MP is greater at the beginning of the 21st century than at any time in the history of the House of Commons. Public expectations of our elected representatives have also grown. Yet this increased pressure has not been matched by concomitant improvements to facilities, hours or procedures. In order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Parliament, and its Members, tangible reform is required. The alternative is a growing disparity between expectation and reality, which can only lead to a further erosion of support for Parliament.

Greg Power

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Reinventing the member of Parliament: A rational approach to the MP's work

Anne Campbell MP

The shock of the new

On realising that I had been elected Member of Parliament for Cambridge in 1992 with a very narrow majority I was in a state of shock for several days. The shock did not diminish as I contemplated the unknown future. At that stage, my employers were expecting me to return to work the following Monday, and I realised that was now impractical. I had no office, no staff, no computer and no idea of what I was supposed to do in my new role. I did not know anyone who was an MP and none of my family had been involved in national politics previously.

My predecessor rang to wish me well and to say that he did not think I would want to take on his secretarial staff as they strongly disagreed with my political views. I realised that I had about 2000 letters and cards, which required responses and no means of processing them. Shock turned to panic.

The day was saved by a friend who had helped me get elected. He knew someone who was already an MP and suggested I gave him a call. I discovered I was entitled to free post and parliamentary stationery, an office costs allowance and an additional allowance for living in London. Everything started to fall into place. The lack of a desk and a telephone at Westminster did not resolve itself for several weeks, but I managed somehow. Eventually I discovered the Fees Office and arranged to be paid. Then I appointed some staff and bought some equipment. Fortunately my last job had involved me in running a department so I knew something about office procedures.

What a contrast to the time when I began my last job! I was appointed 3 months before taking up my post, so I had been able to spend some time with the person currently in post, who later became my boss. On my first day there was an interview with central administration and the personnel department, before I was let loose on my new department. Induction followed and I was gradually eased into my new position. It took me several months to fully understand the complexities of my new responsibilities, but at least it was orderly and efficient.

Eight years after first being elected to Parliament I am still learning new procedures. There was a very basic induction course when I first became an MP. Since then I have been learning on my own. During the first few weeks, one useful ploy was to sit in the tearoom and ask more experienced Members what they thought I ought to be doing. That was when I discovered Early Day Motions, Parliamentary Questions and adjournment debates. Now I find myself still uncertain about the more arcane points of parliamentary procedure and I find that most of my fellow MPs are in the same position.

I am glad that the induction process had improved considerably by the next election in 1997. There were many new Members who were even more shocked than I had been at their new status. However, there is little continuing professional development, team working is an ad hoc arrangement for a particular committee or campaign and there is almost nothing in the way of shared facilities. Until very recently, even the Members' library had no computers with a word processing package for MPs' use. It is far easier to buy a drink at Westminster at 2am than it is to send a fax to a constituent. Messages from constituents waiting to see an MP are carried by a messenger round the building until the MP is located. On average it takes such messages four hours to reach me, by which time the constituent has, of course, long departed. This is all the more curious as messages left by telephone on the central messaging system can be and are relayed to my pager. The pace of technological change differs greatly in the different departments of the parliamentary estate.

The unpredictability of working hours

During the parliamentary session, priorities are dominated by an unpredictable parliamentary timetable and also by a Member's duties in relation to committees. Those Members who would like to give more time to their constituencies find themselves in awkward discord with their whip if parliamentary business is unexpectedly prolonged. On one occasion I recall one of my colleagues representing a constituency some 200 miles from Westminster starting out to drive there at 6.30am to keep an engagement arranged several weeks previously. She could not have predicted that the previous day's business would continue until 4am. She was angry that she felt compelled to make a dangerous and probably irresponsible journey because of the lack of ability to plan more sensibly.

Being selected for a standing committee for a lengthy Bill can play havoc with previously arranged diary commitments. Members on standing committees are required to be available from 10.30am until 1pm and then from 4.30pm until 10pm every Tuesday and Thursday for several weeks. Committee membership does have its compensations. Line by line scrutiny of a Bill is valuable educationally and has the potential to help develop speaking and debating skills. A contentious Bill sometimes attracts press interest at this early stage and so there is always the potential for national press coverage. However, Members on the government benches are often constrained by the whips to say as little as possible so that the Bill can go through its committee stages in the shortest possible time. Little wonder then that it is becoming more and more difficult to find willing volunteers for these onerous duties. Hours and hours of listening to tedious arguments from Opposition MPs, without the license to argue back is not a great incentive to seek committee membership.

There are no computers in committee rooms and the use of one's own laptop is forbidden. Information, which might be needed to inform a particular debate, has to be carried in one's head or on a mass of paper. When I inquired of one of the Speaker's Chairman's panel why this particular rule was in place, I was told that it was because MPs might be tempted to do their own work and not pay attention to the Committee if they had a computer to work on. I regard this as gratuitously offensive to member's intelligence and commitment. There is a sharp contrast between a complete lack of direction for most procedures and petty restrictions, which undermine MPs independence. Life at Westminster is often very frustrating, time wasting and inefficient.

Balancing Parliament, party and constituency

There are rewards for loyal members, as the spirit of patronage shines brightly at Westminster. The ultimate of these is promotion to a junior government post. But there are lesser rewards such as a place on a select committee, a large and convenient office or even a trip abroad. What is often missing is any sense of the way in which a backbench MP is a part of the wider picture and that ideas, political debate and points of view are regarded as a valuable addition to the executive powers of the government. Indeed there is an obvious conflict between the wishes of a backbench MP to raise an issue on the floor of the House and the government's desire to get legislation through as quickly and painlessly as possible.

Most Labour MPs joined the Party because they believed in its objectives and seek to further these when they become MPs. There was huge support amongst Labour MPs for legislation to introduce a national minimum wage, even though it took an all-night sitting to achieve it. Many MPs felt that this is what they had been elected to do and were pleased to have been part of that historic parliamentary occasion. However, there are other pieces of legislation where the achievement of Labour Party objectives is less clear. It then becomes a difficult task for the whips to persuade their Members that this is worth the exhaustion of a sitting until the early hours

Apart from the trials of Westminster, a Member of Parliament has other duties. There is a role in

relation to the constituency and yet another in relation to the Party. The constituency role has changed considerably over the years. One of my colleagues told me that his predecessor used to visit his constituency infrequently. When he did so the local people considered it such an honour that they sent a reception party to the railway station to meet him. Now most MPs visit their patch every week and it is common for MPs to live within the constituency.

Similarly, many of my colleagues have located their offices in the constituency rather than at Westminster. The advantages are that staff are on hand to sort out constituency casework and to receive telephone calls. It also gives the MP a permanent presence in the constituency. The disadvantages are that office rental and telephone bills have to be paid out of a very meagre office costs allowance, whereas offices and telephone calls in the Palace of Westminster are provided free. It also often means that an MP cannot afford any secretarial or administrative support in the Palace of Westminster.

The changing habits reflect MPs' different priorities. Since there is very little central direction or management structure, MPs have to decide whether they wish to pursue a Parliamentary career at Westminster or fame and influence through their Party structures.

However, regardless of these considerations, MPs ignore their local parties at their peril. The constant threat of reselection acts as a powerful incentive for MPs to keep their local parties informed about their activities and of government policies. In practice this means attendance at a monthly meeting. If constituency parties are helpful the general committee meeting will have been arranged for a Friday evening so that the MP has a reasonable chance of attending. Any other night of the week means a regular monthly negotiation with the whips in order to make attendance feasible.

For many MPs, especially those recently elected the most urgent priority is to build on their constituency support. Although after a hard week at Westminster, it is often difficult to summon the energy to join party members for Sunday morning canvassing, many MPs find this a valuable opportunity to stay in touch with the electorate. Pressure to campaign also comes from the national party when there are parliamentary by-elections. It may be possible to take a day off from Westminster and travel to the constituency to join local activists. However, many MPs give up their weekends in order to assist the local effort.

Membership of the National Policy Forum requires attendance at three weekend meetings a year in addition to attendance at numerous local and regional policy forums. Labour MPs who are not members of the National Policy Forum will be expected to attend these local and regional meetings. They will normally take place for the whole day on a Saturday. It has to be said that these tend to encroach on family time rather than on other political activity. It is not surprising that personal relationships sometimes become strained in this environment of 7-day working weeks and 24-hour days.

Rationalising life at Westminster

None of us anticipated that life as an MP could be anything but very hard work. But it could be made less cumbersome and less irritating and it does not need to deprive MPs of their sleep to the extent that happens at present. There are three potential changes, which would make a difference to the efficiency and effectiveness of MPs. The first of these is to change the hours at Westminster. The second is to have a Parliamentary timetable which is set for the year and not just a week in advance. The last is for a technological overhaul of the House with adequate resources allocated to MPs to do the job for which they were elected.

Unlike a great deal of parliamentary procedure, the history of the working hours of the House of Commons is notable for its inconstancy rather than adherence to tradition. Sitting times have

always been responsive to the needs of MPs, and in the last few hundred years just about every permutation has been tried.

Interestingly, in the sixteenth century the parliamentary day was a mirror image of the situation today. The House sat in the morning and Committee meetings were held in the afternoons. Often the House sat in the very early morning, at 7 or 8 and even, on one recorded occasion in 1604, at 6. The sitting times partly reflected the fact that it was very difficult to conduct business later in the day when natural light began to fade

The dietary habits of parliamentarians throughout the centuries have also frequently provided the impetus for change. The situation after the Civil war reflected the fact that it became common to take luncheon at 2pm rather than noon. Before the introduction of the post of Deputy Speaker in the middle of the 19th century, there would be an adjournment in evening sittings known as the 'Speaker's Chop' to allow the Speaker time for dinner and in 1906 the starting time was changed from 2 to 2.45 to allow more time for lunch.

After the Second World War, the decision was made to convene the House at 2.30 on Monday – Thursday. (During the war the House met until no later than 6pm in order to conserve fuel.) In 1998 the House accepted the proposals of the Modernisation Select Committee to move sitting times on Thursdays forward to 11.30. This allows MPs to return to their constituencies on Thursday evenings provided that there is no pressing parliamentary business the following day. This change has proved enormously popular amongst MPs who can now spend more time with their families and be on site to deal with important constituency matters. Parliamentary business has not suffered and it will, I hope remain a permanent feature.

Despite a relatively early night on Thursday, however, many MPs remain exhausted after a week of gruelling late sittings. During the past twenty years MPs have been required beyond 10.30pm on roughly 8 out of 10 sitting days. Sittings can often go on well into the early hours, and occasionally all night. The most recent example of this was over the Disqualifications Bill on 25 January this year, which lasted a marathon 29 hours. This was a rather depressing start to the new Millennium.

Needless to say, nerves can easily become frayed. In his diaries, the late Alan Clark records the House "still sitting after a hideous night of divisions and ill-temper..." It is doubtful that anyone is at their most alert at 2 or 3 in the morning, especially after a pick-me-up or two in the House of Commons bar.

During the 1966-7 session the House experimented with morning sessions on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, but this proved so unpopular that it was almost immediately abandoned. Opponents cited the danger of clashes between standing committees and debates in the chamber, yet minor changes to the timetable could have avoided such problems. The affair revealed a deeper, cultural problem, illustrated in the comments of Richard Crossman, then Leader of the House, who stated that Parliament could never follow "normal" office hours.

Is this still true? No doubt it is, up to a point. There must be enough time put aside to complete the business that needs to be completed. But there are other issues involved. At a time when the Government is emphasising the importance of a life-work balance it is necessary that it be seen to be practising what it preaches. An 11.30 am start would give time for committees to meet earlier in the day and to conduct part of their business without competition from the main chamber. It would also mean that the main parliamentary day could end at 7pm rather than at 10pm.

A change to the working day would be insufficient without altering the procedures which permit filibustering. This is the practice by which a handful of opposition MPs can keep the House going until the small hours of the morning discussing such trivial issues as to whether there should be a

comma in the middle of a clause. These debates add nothing to parliamentary democracy, though some opposition MPs claim that it is their only weapon against a government with a large majority. If all bills were timetabled with a set period for the debate of each clause, it would allow government members to make their point of view as well as members of the opposition. In return for giving up this weapon, opposition parties could be given the powers to determine the timing of contentious debates and the length of time allocated to them. The ability to time a debate so that it takes place in prime TV time should be a more powerful tool than simply bludgeoning MPs with exhaustion. The public should hear more of the real arguments that take place on the floor which divide the House, rather than the insults hurled at Prime Minister's Question Time.

The timing of debates would mean that the parliamentary timetable could be prepared many months, if not a whole year in advance. MPs would be able to plan with more confidence for constituency and other engagements. Preparation for debates would be on a longer time scale and parliamentary scrutiny would be more effective than at present.

Finally the House should be brought up to date. There is no excuse for outmoded technology. The library should be extended with banks of networked computers, so that any MP can call up their own files from a central server at any time. Committee rooms should also be properly equipped with computers. The messenger system should be replaced with data processors. Systems should be in place to notify MPs immediately when visitors arrive. Administrative help such as photocopying, emergency typing and sending faxes should be available through a pool of central staff. The voting system should be modernised to make use of the available technology, so that MPs do not have to spend hours filing through the voting lobbies.

These reforms are not technically difficult to implement, but there must be the will to see them through. If they were implemented they would bring Westminster into line with modern Parliaments in other parts of the world. All of them would make an enormous difference to the efficiency and effectiveness of parliamentary representation.

LEARNING TO BE A MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT: THE INDUCTION PROCESS¹

Michael Rush and Philip Giddings

Introduction

At the General Election of 1997, 243 Members of Parliament were elected to the House of Commons for the first time. Labour's massive victory in 1997 and the doubling of the number of Liberal Democrats produced a turnover in membership of the House of Commons of 40 per cent, twice the turnover in 1992 (when there were 127 first-time MPs elected), which at 19.5 per cent was close to the post-war average of about a fifth.² New Members, once elected, face the daunting task of learning how to do the job - how actually to be a Member of Parliament. Most, if not all, will have been too busy preparing for and then fighting the election in the weeks and months beforehand to worry about preparing for what would happen after the election. Given the almost unprecedented scale of the Conservative defeat in 1997, some of those newly-elected were very surprised to find themselves in the Commons. Even for those anticipating success in the election, there is very little time actually to prepare. The initial days and weeks are therefore crucial: from the day of the election constituents (and others) will be contacting newly-elected Members and the new Parliament meets within two weeks, often less.³ There is therefore no gentle period of induction for new MPs. From the start the demands of constituents, and of the whips, apply equally to members old and new.

This article reports on the first research done on the post-election process - how newly-elected MPs begin to learn about their new job. The research, under the auspices of the Study of Parliament Group,⁴ was begun in January 1992 just prior to the 1992 General Election and, with the assistance of an ESRC award, is continuing into the Parliament elected in May 1997. Its objective is to explore the learning process of new Members and the longer-term question of the socialisation of Members of Parliament.

Our methodology is a combination of questionnaire, interview and the study of documentary materials. A questionnaire was sent to all newly-elected MPs immediately after the two elections but before Parliament had actually met. The purpose of this first questionnaire was to elicit the views and expectations of new Members before they had any direct experience of Westminster. It was followed eighteen months later by a second questionnaire, which seeks to find out how far new Members' expectations have been borne out by experience. At the same time a questionnaire asking essentially the same questions is sent to a sample of longer-serving MPs.⁵ The questionnaires have been complemented by a programme of interviews with a smaller number of newly-elected and longer-serving Members and with various officials of the House of Commons. Documentary materials issued to new Members by the House authorities (including videos in both 1992 and 1997) and by the parties have also been examined.

In this article, on the basis of the findings from our first questionnaires, we report on the perceptions of those newly elected in 1992 and 1997, of the relevance of their previous occupations, of the assistance offered by the House authorities and the political parties to the newly-elected, and of their experience in appointing staff and acquainting themselves with the procedures of the House.

Seeking Advice

Newly-elected Members were asked from whom they had sought advice about the work of a Member of Parliament *before* they were elected. In 1992 overwhelmingly, and not surprisingly, nine out of ten had sought the advice of sitting MPs (Cons. 92.9 per cent, Lab. 88.9 per cent). This was followed by advice from party officials (Cons. 46.4 per cent, Lab. 33.3 per cent) and from the prospective MP's family (Cons. 21.4 per cent, Lab. 33.3 per cent), while a fifth of Labour MPs

had sought the advice of trade unions and other organisations. Again not surprisingly, once elected, nine out of ten new Members sought advice from MPs of their own party, with the staff of the House of Commons Library not far behind, accounting for four-fifths of respondents. Similarly, the 1997 cohort most commonly sought advice before their election from sitting MPs (Cons. 92.9 per cent, Labour 85.5 per cent, and Lib. Dem. 73.7 per cent), but in 1997 more Labour Members (47.4 per cent) than Conservatives (21.4 per cent) had approached party officials. Advice from their families came third, at almost the same level (1992 - 29.5 per cent, 1997 - 27.3 per cent), and again a fifth of Labour MPs had sought advice from trade unions and other organisations.

Although such findings were predictable, what makes them interesting is that a rank ordering shows that new Members appear to replicate the behaviour of longer-serving Members in their own parties. Longer-serving MPs, however, were significantly more likely to consult MPs of other parties and longer-serving Conservatives were more likely to consult officers of the parliamentary party and ministers. Generally speaking, such advice was found to be very helpful or quite helpful, though this was less so with advice from MPs of other parties, officers of the parliamentary party, and party officials.

The House Authorities

For the 1992 Parliament the various departments of the House of Commons collaborated to produce a *Members' Handbook*, to be available to all MPs via the whips. In the event that method of distribution proved to be a mistake, since not all new MPs picked up their copies. The production of the 1992 *Handbook* resulted from representations made by MPs after the 1987 election, when information was provided separately by various departments. The 1992 *Handbook* was fairly comprehensive, but the amount of detailed information varied considerably from department to department. Some of it was produced specifically for the 1992 *Handbook*, but much of it was drawn from existing material, including in one case a *Library Factsheet*.

The 1992 *Handbook* contained a map of 'The Parliamentary Estate', that is the Palace of Westminster itself and the other nearby buildings used by MPs, their staffs and parliamentary officials, and a plan of the principal floor of the Palace (a copy of which was also included in the section produced by the Department of the Serjeant at Arms). In addition, there was a list and locations of all departmental offices with each department providing more detailed information in separate sections. The Department of the Clerk of the House gave procedural advice, information about standing and select committees, and, briefly, about overseas organisations, such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the Council of Europe (though not the European Parliament). The Serjeant's Department covered access to parliamentary buildings and security matters, accommodation, car-parking, stationery, internal communications, arrangements for the disabled, medical facilities, and the cleaning and maintenance of parliamentary buildings.

It also contained information on the House of Commons Library information and research services, the work of the House of Commons Public Information Office, POLIS (the Parliamentary On-Line Information System), and the Vote Office,⁶ which supplies MPs with parliamentary and other official publications. The House of Commons Library also produced a video describing the services it provided. Unlike the *Handbook*, this was sent to all new Members, along with leaflets about library services and a compendium of key *Library Factsheets* about the House and its procedures from the Library's Public Information Office. Tours of the Library were also offered to new members, as they had been in 1983 and 1987.

In preparation for the 1997 intake the House of Commons authorities, through the House's Administration Committee, reviewed the arrangements that had operated in 1992. As a result more systematic and extensive arrangements to help newly-elected MPs were put in place for 1997. A new and improved edition of the *Members' Handbook* was produced and issued to all

MPs during the course of the 1992-97 Parliament and a third and further improved edition was prepared and sent to *all* MPs immediately after the 1997 election. Both of these editions were much more co-ordinated efforts, produced in a common format. In addition, a short video on the work of the House and the work of a Member of Parliament was produced. Over and above this and as they thought appropriate, the various departments made their own plans to assist new MPs.

In 1992 the Department of the Clerk had made no specific provision for the induction of new Members, but in 1997 it produced *A Short Guide to Practice and Procedure* and put on a series of seminars on procedure and the services offered by the Department. New MPs were also given the name and extension number of a senior Clerk, whom they could consult for information and help. The *Short Guide* undoubtedly fills an important gap, not least since Members are not supplied with free copies of the 'Parliamentary Bible' - Erskine May's *Treatise on the Law, Privileges and Usage of Parliament*, nor is it available on the Internet. The *Guide*⁷ consists of some 60 pages covering over 40 items related to the procedures and operation of the House, arranged alphabetically, and, where appropriate, providing departmental contact numbers and listing further sources of information. Yet more information, but covering a much wider range, is now available on the Parliamentary Intranet. How much the additional arrangements made by the Clerk's Department, especially in producing the *Guide*, helped the 1997 newcomers familiarise themselves with parliamentary procedure remains to be seen, but the pattern that emerged in 1992, with Conservatives claiming a greater familiarity, was repeated in 1997. However, although the Labour figures were similar for both elections, in 1997 a much higher proportion of Conservatives said they were 'somewhat familiar' (1992 - 42.8 per cent. 1997 - 64.3 per cent).

The Parties

Before the election parties and candidates are, of course, primarily concerned with the election itself. Moreover, candidates fortunate enough to have inherited safe seats are a distinct minority and those selected for marginals cannot be certain of election, however hopeful they may be. Only limited pre-election efforts by the parties to prepare candidates for the role of being a Member of Parliament might therefore be expected. This certainly proved to be the case with the Conservatives in 1992 in that fewer than a fifth were offered assistance and advice by the party organisation before election, but in marked contrast more than half (53.9 per cent) of new Labour MPs did receive help. This contrast remained after the 1997 election, when only one in three of the Conservatives said they had received help from the party at Westminster, compared with four-fifths of Labour Members. In both cases, however, this was a marked improvement on the past: less than 10 per cent of longer-serving Conservatives and only 29.0 per cent of longer-serving Labour MPs said they had received post-election help from their parties.

With the election over, the parties represented in the House all made their own arrangements for welcoming and helping their new MPs, although among the small parties, including the Liberal Democrats, these were largely informal. Indeed, in 1992 the Scottish National Party had no new Members to welcome. However, of the two major parties, the arrangements made by the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) were much more elaborate than those made for new Conservative MPs. For the latter the only formal occasion was a meeting with the party whips some three to four days after the meeting of the new Parliament when a fairly narrow range of matters was considered, mainly relating to the whipping process and party meetings; all other assistance was ad hoc and informal.

Labour

In contrast, the day after the election the Secretary of the PLP sent a detailed document entitled 'The Induction of New MPs' to all new Labour Members. It was sub-titled 'So you've won, now it gets difficult!' and covered a wide range of matters in a helpful and logical fashion. After a brief introduction, there followed a valuable piece of advice:

During your first two or three months as an MP, try not to make any decision about your job that you cannot easily change, in the light of experience.⁸

The document went on to give notice when the PLP would first meet, instructions about expressing preferences for membership of party committees and select committees, and sections on each of the following: financial arrangements, arriving at Westminster, accommodation in London, office accommodation at Westminster, computers, hiring staff, constituency work, travel allowances, the weekly Whip, PLP meetings, elections, PLP committees and regional groups, the PLP Resource Centre, PLP staff, parliamentary documentation, procedural advice, the making of a maiden speech, and, last, but not least, the transfer of pension rights. Curiously, however, the PLP induction document made no mention of the major innovation made for the 1992 intake - the PLP's induction course.

In 1980-81 the PLP had conducted a major review of its activities and operation, including the induction of new MPs. As Bryan Davies (now Lord Davies, then MP for Oldham East), the former Secretary of the PLP, related, 'Before that new MPs were dropped in the deep end!'

As a result of the review, after the 1983 election the PLP used three experienced MPs, Willie Hamilton, Jeff Rooker, and Andrew Bennett to talk to new MPs. After further improvements were made in 1987, another review of the induction arrangements took place in 1988-89. The working party took the view that the House authorities should do more and both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats agreed. As noted, this resulted in much better documentation in 1992 than ever before, notably in the form of the *Members' Handbook*, but, of the parties, only Labour put on a formal induction course for its new MPs.

The course lasted several days and involved a series of meetings with the whips and senior backbenchers on a variety of subjects, such as parliamentary procedure, the geography of the Palace of Westminster and the various outbuildings, and the operation of the PLP. Notice of the course was sent to all new Labour Members immediately after their election and, although not all attended, the great majority did.

If the House authorities listened to the demands for more help for newly-elected MPs in 1992 and made changes for 1997, the response from the parties was more mixed. In 1992 nearly a fifth of the new Conservatives (17.9 per cent) had said they had received offers of assistance from the party organisation before their election; in 1997 not a single new Conservative MP recalled any offer of assistance. This is hardly surprising, since the Conservatives made no additional arrangements in 1997, merely holding a meeting with the party whips.

Labour, however, put on an improved induction course, preceded in October 1996 by sending all Labour candidates a *Pre-Induction Guide for Labour P[rospective]P[arliamentary]C[andidates]*. The purpose of this was to draw 'attention to some of the main practical and logistical issues that Labour PPCs may want to consider in advance of being elected'.⁹ The guide dealt briefly with the immediate aftermath of election, accommodation in London, office accommodation at Westminster, the hiring of staff, the organisation of the PLP, MPs' parliamentary duties, pay and allowances, and advice on 'cash flow' for those who would be without continuing or immediate income. In addition, an improved version of 1992 induction document, now called *A Guide to the PLP*, was produced.

This effort clearly bore some fruit in that the proportion of new Labour MPs saying they had received assistance from the party rose from 53.3 per cent in 1992 to 71.4 per cent in 1997. That more than a quarter of new Labour Members (28.6 per cent) in 1997 could not recollect being offered any assistance by the party is probably a reflection of several factors: first, nursing and fighting the seat is the priority, rather than planning for what happens afterwards; second, to

be unable to recall a short document on what to do if elected from amongst the mass of paper handled by most candidates is understandable; and last, but by no means least, a significant proportion of Labour's new intake did not expect to get elected.

The Liberal Democrats

In 1992 the Liberal Democrats had four new Members. No pre-election preparation was provided, but with such a small number it was not difficult to integrate them fairly quickly into the parliamentary party. The Liberal Chief Whip saw each of them and his secretary gave them a brief training session on how to table a parliamentary Question, an early day motion, an amendment to a bill and so on. However, in 1997 the Liberal Democrats had no fewer than 26 new MPs. Once again no pre-election arrangements were made, but soon after the election the Liberal Democrat Chief Whip, Paul Tyler, and his colleagues in the whips' office divided the whole parliamentary party into what they termed 'portfolio teams'. These were mixed groups of more experienced and newly-elected Liberal Democrats, each between three and six in number and led by an experienced Member. The intention was not only to help the new Liberal Democrats to learn as quickly as possible how Parliament operates, but to involve them from the start in the discussion and promotion of party policy. Newly-elected Liberal Democrats were also advised to make use of the briefings offered by the House authorities and encouraged to seek advice and support from the Chief Whip's Office. Outside Parliament the Association of Liberal Democrat Councils provided constituency management advice and training.

Other Sources of Advice

As far as we are aware, no other organised sources of advice were available to newly-elected Members in 1992. However, in 1997 advice for new MPs came from at least one other source - *The House Magazine*, which, with the co-operation of the House authorities, produced a special issue and a *short MPs' Guide to Parliament*. In the twelve months before the 1997 election copies of *The House Magazine* were sent to all prospective candidates in the main political parties. Then, immediately after the election a special issue was prepared. It was published on 12 May and contained a list and photographs of every MP, plus brief details of the Commons' business from the Queen's Speech on 14 May until the following week and of significant dates, such as the deadline for motions for adjournment debates, the date of the ballot for Private Members' bills, and, finally, a full list of the members of the Parliamentary Press Gallery and their telephone extension numbers.

The idea for an *MPs' Guide* had been considered by *The House Magazine* as long ago as 1990, but no guide was produced for 1992. However, as the 1997 election approached it became clear that a larger than usual number of Members would be retiring¹⁰ and the opinion polls continued to indicate a likely substantial Labour majority, suggesting that there would be a much greater number of new MPs in 1997 than 1992. *The House Magazine's* editorial group therefore decided that a *Guide* was essential for 1997. After an initial but unproductive approach to the Serjeant's Department to find out what plans it had for the induction of new MPs, approaches were made to the Clerk and to other departments of the House. The Clerk was supportive and all departments at the House co-operated by supplying information and, in a number of cases, copy for the *Guide*. The latter consisted of 114 pages including brief but informative accounts of each department of the House; the arrangements for the election of the Speaker and the swearing-in of Members; the organisation of business (including the role of the whips' offices and the 'usual channels'; various aspects of procedure (such as Questions, debates, the legislative process, and committees); the role of the House of Lords; and a brief section on Parliamentary Private Secretaries and special advisers. In addition to the information and copy provided by the House authorities, the then Chair of the Lobby contributed a section on the Parliamentary Press Gallery and Lobby, with the remainder being produced by a member of *The House Magazine's* editorial team who had had experience as a research assistant to a former Conservative minister. The *Guide* also contained twenty plus pages of potentially useful advertisements, in that they included a

number of trade associations, political consultants, several major firms and corporations, and some pressure groups, reflecting a wide range of interests. The *Guide* was sent initially to all new Members, but subsequently to all MPs. *The House Magazine* later produced a *Guide to the New Select Committees*, with a one-page summary on each committee by its chair and photographs of all its members.

Learning about Procedure

Perhaps one of the most obvious tasks facing new Members is that of learning about parliamentary procedure. *The Members' Handbook* and Labour's induction document sought to address this. Before arriving at Westminster only 6.7 per cent of new Members considered themselves to be 'very familiar' with parliamentary procedure, comprising 10.7 per cent of newly-elected Conservatives but only 2.4 per cent of new Labour Members. However, a further two-fifths of Conservatives (42.8 per cent) and nearly half of Labour MPs (47.6 per cent) said they were 'somewhat familiar'. By the time they had had eighteen months' experience the proportion claiming to be very familiar or somewhat familiar had risen to 83.3 per cent of Conservatives and 76.9 per cent of new Labour Members. This compared with 100 per cent of longer-serving Conservative and 96.8 per cent of longer-serving Labour MPs.

A similar picture emerged in 1997, with only 4.6 per cent of new Members claiming to be 'very familiar' with procedure and again more Conservatives (7.1 per cent) than Labour (2.7 per cent), but as many as 64.3 per cent of Conservatives though rather fewer new Labour MPs (49.3 per cent) regarding themselves as 'somewhat familiar'. The Liberal Democrats ranged from the 11.1 per cent who considered themselves 'very familiar' to the 50.0 per cent 'not very familiar'. It will be interesting to see in due course what impact the availability of *The House Magazine's Guide* and the Clerk's Department's *Short Guide to Procedure* have had on the 1997 intake.

The Reaction, 1992 and 1997

Provision by the House Authorities

Our questionnaires found that there was widespread appreciation amongst MPs newly-elected in 1992 and 1997 of the efforts made by the various departments of the House to assist them.

Table 1 details the reaction of the 1997 intake:

Table 1: How helpful were the arrangements made by the House of Commons authorities after your election?

A. The Fees Office

Party	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	80.0 (8)	10.0 (1)	10.0 (1)	-	-	100.0 (10)
Lab.	51.0 (53)	43.3 (45)	4.8 (5)	0.9 (1)	-	100.0 (104)
LD	47.4 (9)	42.1 (8)	10.5 (2)	-	-	100.0 (19)
Other	(1)	(1)	-	-	-	(2)
All	52.6 (71)	40.7 (55)	5.9 (8)	0.7 (1)	-	99.9 (135)

B. The House of Commons Library

Party	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	60.0 (6)	40.0 (4)	-	-	-	100.0 (10)
Lab.	44.2 (46)	45.2 (47)	6.7 (7)	1.0 (1)	2.9 (3)	100.0 (105)
LD	26.3 (5)	73.7 (14)	-	-	-	100.0 (19)
Other	-	(2)	-	-	-	(2)
All	42.2 (57)	49.6 (67)	5.2 (7)	0.7 (1)	2.2 (3)	99.9 (135)

C. The Department of the Serjeant at Arms

Party	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	30.0 (3)	50.0 (5)	20.0 (2)	-	-	100.0 (10)
Lab.	14.6 (15)	56.3 (58)	14.6 (15)	11.6 (12)	2.9 (3)	100.0 (105)
LD	-	78.9 (15)	10.5 (2)	10.5 (2)	-	99.9 (19)
Other	-	(2)	-	-	-	(2)
All	13.4 (18)	59.7 (80)	14.2 (19)	10.4 (14)	2.2 (3)	99.9 (134)

D. The Department of the Clerk of the House

Party	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	44.4 (4)	33.3 (3)	22.2 (2)	-	-	99.9 (9)
Lab.	18.6 (19)	32.3 (33)	20.6 (21)	5.9 (6)	22.5 (23)	99.9 (105)
LD	5.3 (1)	63.1 (12)	15.8 (3)	-	15.8 (3)	100.0 (19)
Other	-	(1)	-	-	(1)	(2)
All	18.2 (24)	37.1 (49)	19.7 (26)	4.5 (6)	20.5 (27)	(132)

E. The Administration & Finance Department

Party	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	44.4 (4)	22.2 (2)	22.2 (2)	11.1 (1)	-	99.9 (9)
Lab.	18.0 (18)	34.0 (34)	18.0 (18)	4.0 (4)	26.0 (26)	100.0 (100)
LD	5.3 (1)	57.9 (11)	15.8 (3)	-	21.0 (4)	100.0 (19)
Other	-	(1)	-	-	(1)	(1)
All	17.7 (23)	36.9 (48)	17.7 (23)	3.8 (5)	23.8 (31)	99.9 (130)

F. The Police

Party	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	87.5 (7)	12.5 (1)	-	-	-	100.0 (8)
Lab.	31.4 (32)	41.2 (42)	5.9 (6)	2.9 (3)	18.6 (19)	100.0 (102)
LD	21.1 (4)	68.4 (13)	10.5 (2)	-	-	100.0 (19)
Other	-	(1)	(1)	-	-	(2)
All	32.8 (43)	43.5 (57)	6.9 (9)	2.3 (3)	14.5 (19)	100.0 (131)

Almost all new Members found the assistance provided by the Fees Office and the House of Commons Library 'very helpful' or 'quite helpful'. Four-fifths of Conservatives and a similar proportion of Liberal Democrats found the Sergeant at Arms' Department helpful, but the corresponding figure among Labour MPs was nearly ten points lower at 70.9 per cent. Attitudes towards the Clerk's Department, the Administration and Finance Department and the police followed the same patterns between the parties, with Conservatives reporting on them the most favourably, followed by Liberal Democrats and then Labour, always exceeding 50 per cent, but only just for Labour MPs in respect of the two departments.

Table 2: How useful did you find the following?

A. The Members' Handbook

Party	Very useful	Quite useful	Not very useful	Not at all useful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	20.0 (2)	60.0 (6)	20.0 (2)	-	-	100.0 (10)
Lab.	28.2 (29)	56.3 (58)	7.8 (8)	5.8 (6)	1.9 (2)	100.0 (103)
LD	10.5 (2)	68.4 (13)	15.8 (3)	-	5.3 (1)	100.0 (19)
Other	-	(2)	-	-	-	(2)
All	24.6 (33)	59.0 (79)	9.7 (13)	4.5 (6)	2.2 (3)	100.0 (134)

B. The Library video

Party	Very useful	Quite useful	Not very useful	Not at all useful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	-	60.0 (6)	20.0 (2)	10.0 (1)	10.0 (1)	100.0 (10)
Lab.	9.9 (10)	39.6 (40)	23.7 (24)	8.9 (9)	17.8 (18)	99.9 (101)
LD	5.3 (1)	47.4 (9)	21.0 (4)	5.3 (1)	21.0 (4)	100.0 (19)
Other	-	(1)	(1)	-	-	(2)
All	8.3 (11)	42.4 (56)	23.5 (31)	8.3 (11)	17.4 (23)	99.9 (132)

C. The Short Guide to Practice and Procedure

Party	Very useful	Quite useful	Not very useful	Not at all useful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	-	70.0 (7)	20.0 (2)	10.0 (1)	-	100.0 (10)
Lab.	19.6 (20)	51.0 (52)	13.7 (14)	4.9 (5)	10.8 (11)	100.0 (102)
LD	10.5 (2)	63.2 (12)	10.5 (2)	-	15.8 (3)	100.0 (19)
Other	-	(2)	-	-	-	(2)
All	16.5 (22)	54.9 (73)	13.5 (18)	4.5 (6)	10.5 (14)	99.9 (133)

Substantial majorities of new MPs found the *Members' Handbook*, *The Guide to Library Services*, and *The Short Guide to Procedure*, helpful, but only half found the Library video helpful.

Table 3: Are there any improvements you would like to see in the assistance provided by the House authorities to newly-elected MPs?

Party	Yes	No	Total
Cons.	50.0 (4)	50.0(4)	100.0 (8)
Lab.	78.6 (66)	21.4 (18)	100.0 (84)
LD	76.5 (13)	23.5 (4)	100.0 (17)
Other	-	(2)	(2)
All	74.8 (83)	25.2 (28)	100.0 (111)

In spite of the widespread appreciation of the efforts made by the House authorities, three-quarters of new Members thought that more assistance should be provided, although new Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs held this view much more strongly. This view was supported by more than two-fifths of longer-serving Members, with Labour MPs (73.1 per cent) again feeling more strongly than Conservatives (54.2 per cent). The most frequent suggestion was for a wide-ranging induction course spread over the early weeks of the new Parliament, rather than the first few days, and for periodic sessions on procedure during the first twelve months. There were extensive complaints about the allocation of accommodation, which, it was argued, should be available as soon after the election as possible, so that MPs could be 'up and running' well before the opening of Parliament. A number of respondents felt strongly that the House authorities and not the whips should allocate office accommodation. The message reflected in Table 3 that a substantial majority of the 1997 intake thought that more should be done to help newly-elected MPs was also expressed by the 1992 intake. It was a message that was clearly heard by the House authorities and reinforced by an in-House survey of Members. Yet the proportion of the 1997 intake believing that further improvements were necessary was marginally higher, not lower. Apart from what may be underlying deficiencies, this suggests that expectations, far from decreasing or levelling off, are as great as ever. This is reinforced by the fact that, although the 1997 respondents do not differ markedly from their predecessors in 1992, the proportions recording 'very helpful' were lower in 1997 and the proportions recording 'quite helpful' higher.

Provision by the Parties

Table 4: If your party provided assistance after your election, how helpful did you find it?

A. Conservative

Form of assistance	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't know	Total
Formal meetings with whips	-	3	-	-	-	3
Informal meetings with whips	1	1	-	-	-	2
Documentary material	-	1	2	-	-	3

B. Labour

Form of assistance	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't know	Total
Formal meetings with whips	10.9 (6)	45.5 (25)	29.1 (16)	9.1 (5)	5.4 (3)	100.0 (55)
Informal meetings with whips	25.4 (17)	49.2 (33)	17.9 (12)	4.5 (3)	3.0 (2)	100.0 (67)
Documentary material	9.6 (7)	61.6 (45)	21.9 (16)	6.8 (5)	-	99.9 (73)
Induction course	9.8 (6)	47.5 (29)	24.6 (15)	11.5 (7)	6.6 (4)	100.0 (61)

C. Liberal Democrat

Form of assistance	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't know	Total
Formal meetings with whips	-	2	3	-	-	5
Informal meetings with whips	-	2	3	-	-	5
Documentary material	-	2	3	-	-	5

Reaction to the help provided by the parties was more mixed, however. The much lower response rate among Conservatives and Liberal Democrats reflects the limited help their parties provided, but the responses suggest greater dissatisfaction among Liberal Democrats. By contrast, well over two-thirds of new Labour MPs appreciated their party's documentary material and threequarters found informal contact with the whips helpful, while formal contact with the whips and the induction course elicited a positive response from more than half. This needs to be measured against the fact that no longer-serving Conservative and only one in ten longer-serving Labour MPs had found party assistance at Westminster helpful when first elected.

Table 5: Are there any improvements you would like to see in the assistance provided by your party for newly-elected MPs?

Party	Yes	No	Total
Cons.	40.0 (4)	60.0 (6)	100.0 (10)
Lab.	83.7 (77)	16.3 (15)	100.0 (92)
LD	73.7 (14)	26.3 (5)	100.0 (19)
Other	(1)	-	(1)
All	78.7 (96)	21.3 (26)	100.0 (122)

In spite of the efforts made by the PLP, more than four-fifths of new Labour Members thought that party help should be improved and this view was shared by 75.9 per cent of longer-serving Labour MPs. Conservatives, however, felt much less need for help from the party: only four out of ten new Conservatives and only a third of longer-serving Conservatives, thought there should be an improvement in help from the party. The most frequent suggestion for additional party help was that experienced Members should act as mentors, a proposal which struck a chord in all parties, but especially Labour.

Provision by The House Magazine

As noted earlier, in 1997 *The House Magazine* also provided help to newly-elected Members by providing a parliamentary guide and sending prospective candidates with copies of *The House Magazine* for several months before the election.

Table 6: Copies of *The House Magazine* were sent to prospective candidates for several months before the election. Did you find them useful in preparing to become an MP?

Party	Very useful	Quite useful	Not very useful	Not at all useful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	10.0 (10)	30.0 (3)	30.0 (3)	10.0 (1)	20.0 (2)	100.0 (10)
Lab.	8.1 (8)	27.3 (27)	29.3 (29)	21.2 (21)	14.1 (14)	100.0 (99)
LD	-	31.2 (5)	31.2 (5)	25.0 (4)	12.5 (2)	99.9 (16)
Other	-	-	1	1	-	(2)
All	7.1 (9)	27.6 (35)	29.9 (38)	21.2 (27)	14.2 (18)	100.0 (127)

Table 7: Did you find *The MPs' Guide to Parliament* produced by *The House Magazine* useful?

Party	Very useful	Quite useful	Not very useful	Not at all useful	Don't know	Total
Cons.	20.0 (2)	30.0 (3)	10.0 (1)	10.0 (1)	30.0 (3)	100.0 (10)
Lab.	21.3 (22)	50.5 (52)	5.8 (6)	4.8 (5)	17.5 (18)	99.9 (103)
LD	17.6 (3)	47.1 (8)	5.9 (1)	-	29.4 (5)	100.0 (17)
Other	-	2	-	-	-	(2)
All	20.5 (27)	49.2 (65)	6.1 (8)	4.5 (6)	19.7 (26)	100.0 (132)

Receiving copies of *The House Magazine* was appreciated by more than a third of new MPs, rather more strongly among Conservatives, whereas the *Guide* found favour with more than two-thirds, but more strongly among Labour and Liberal Democrat respondents, although a fifth appeared to have no recollection of it. However, given the demands of nursing a seat and campaigning, it is doubtful whether much attention would have been paid to *The House Magazine* until after the election.

Although attitudes differed between respondents of different parties, it is clear that in 1992 and 1997 newly-elected MPs felt that more should be done to help them learn about the practicalities of being a Member of Parliament and to help them adjust to the demands of both constituents and their parties. Since only limited pre-election preparation is possible and, arguably, sensible, the time

available to learn and adjust is very short - a matter of three weeks at the most, inevitably making the learning curve a steep one. That more could be done is obvious enough, but precisely what and by whom is less clear.

The support for an induction course was strong and a good case can be made for such a course being run by the House authorities. Certainly, a House-based course is likely to be more wide-ranging and systematic, but there are matters which could and should be left to the parties, such as the role of the whips, party committees and, possibly, all-party groups. One possibility would be an induction course run by the House authorities, but with some separate sessions being taken by the parties.

It is also clear that there was a great deal of dissatisfaction with the arrangements for allocating accommodation for Members, which remains in the hands of the whips. Accommodation, is a useful weapon in their armoury for maintaining party cohesion, rewarding the loyal and punishing the disloyal and holding out the prospect of better or worse for those whose loyalty may be in doubt. However, it is not merely a matter of 'more desirable' versus 'less desirable' accommodation; it is crucial to the provision and installation of basic operating facilities for new Members - a telephone, a fax machine and computer, without which it is extremely difficult for a new MP to be 'up and running' by the time the new Parliament meets. This also raises the question of whether there should be a longer period between the election and the meeting of Parliament to conduct public business. In 1997 the period, though not untypical, was short and the very large number of new Members made the situation more difficult. Of course governments want to get on with the business of governing, especially when it is a new government coming into office, but this is far from dependent on Parliament actually conducting public business. Steepening the learning curve is not conducive to creating efficient and effective Members of Parliament; on the other hand, for governments and parties it has its advantages.

Conclusion

The 1997 General Election doubled the normal turnover of MPs. In 1997, as in 1992, those newly-elected considered themselves to have occupational expertise and skills that would prove useful to their role as Members of Parliament. However, in this respect, judging from the evidence from our 1992-97 questionnaires, newly-elected MPs do not differ from their longer-serving colleagues. It is not surprising that MPs have such a confident view of their own capabilities, but the newly-elected may still be socialised into the House's traditions, customs and complexities. If they are not socialised and significant 'modernisation' does not take place, then there is a considerable risk of a dangerous build-up of frustration, of which there are already some signs.

It is clear that one of the principal ways in which the culture - customs, values, ethos - of the House are transmitted is through newly-elected seeking advice from sitting MPs. For the 1992 cohort sitting MPs were twice as significant as party officials as sources of advice: this remained the case in 1997 because, although a higher proportion of new Labour MPs turned to party officials, the proportion of the new Conservative Members doing so halved. Sitting MPs are still, therefore, the principal source of advice to new MPs.

It is also clear that the House authorities have been devoting significantly greater resources to the induction process as a result of pressure from MPs. This was true in 1992 in comparison with 1987 and in 1997 in comparison with 1992. It is also clear that expectations have risen at the same time: as more has been provided, so more has been expected. Although we do not yet have direct evidence of what the 1997 intake think of the more extensive provision made for them, the 1992 intake were both appreciative of what had been done - and wanting yet more done. The product of their response (presumably) was the more elaborate provision made in 1997, as most apparent in the new and improved edition of *Members' Handbook*, the Library videos, the *Short Guide* produced by the Clerk's Department, and the information exhibition/reception point provided by the Serjeant's Department. The House authorities had clearly listened to the 1992 cohort's views and

responded and the same process is now being repeated in preparation for the next election.

That the same cannot be said in such clear-cut terms of the parties partly reflects a difference in attitude: the Conservatives, especially longer-serving Members, were less convinced of the need for help from the party for the newly-elected, but it is surely also a reflection of the nature of the 1997 result. The Conservatives made no additional arrangements in 1997 whereas Labour, presumably having higher expectations of their number of new MPs, not only put on an improved induction course but provided a *Pre-induction Guide* for all PPCs in October 1996. The number of 'unexpected' Labour victors may explain the relatively low recognition of these arrangements received in responses to our questionnaire. What is, however, still very clear is that the expectations of MPs on all sides of what their party should provide for the newly-elected is likely to continue to rise. Labour expectations are high and responses from the new Conservative Members in 1992 suggest that they were not greatly impressed either by the documentary material they were sent by the party organisation or by the meetings with their whips. This may explain why six out of ten of the new entrants thought there needed to be an improvement in the help provided - a distinct difference from the attitude of longer-serving Conservative MPs. If it was a call, it fell on deaf ears at both Central Office and in the 1992 Committee. This suggests expectations will continue to grow. And that suggests that demand for improvement will continue to be expressed, especially as expectations continue to grow.

Another indication of generational differences is suggested by the responses to questions on appointing staff. In 1992 under half the new entrants - 43 per cent Conservatives and 49 per cent of Labour - expected to appoint research assistants. In 1997 we found that these proportions had risen dramatically to 71 per cent and 80 per cent respectively. Anticipated difficulties in appointing staff seem in most cases to have been successfully overcome. There was, however, a marked difference between the major parties in 1992 in where they chose to locate their staff, with Labour MPs more likely to locate their staff in their constituencies, in contrast to the Conservatives' preference for Westminster. It will be interesting to see whether this difference is reinforced through the life of the 1997 Parliament, given the exceptionally large majority the Blair government enjoys.

To become acquainted with parliamentary procedure is the most obvious task facing a new MP. The 1992 survey evidence suggests that experience is a good teacher: the proportion of new entrants claiming to be 'very familiar' or 'somewhat familiar' with parliamentary procedure rose to over threequarters in the case of Labour and four-fifths in the case of the Conservatives within eighteen months of their arrival at Westminster. However, it remains the case that dissatisfaction with the style and form of proceedings is marked amongst new MPs: the then Leader of the House remarked specifically upon it in her first speech on 'modernisation' in the new Parliament¹¹ and 'style and form of proceedings' was one of the four items to which the government invited the Modernisation Committee to give particular attention in its written evidence the following month.¹² Monitoring the impact of the work of this committee and any consequential changes to the workings of the House on the attitudes of newly-elected Members will be a significant feature of this research. The comment of one of the 1997 Labour intake does not augur well: 'I have been surprised at the difficulty of persuading colleagues that parliamentary procedures designed 50 years ago or more for MPs who were part-time, male and rarely visited their constituencies just might not be entirely appropriate now.'¹³ That comment may tell as much about the socialisation of MPs as it does about the attitudes of new-elected Members.

Accommodation has been another prime cause of dissatisfaction amongst newly-elected MPs. Whereas in the 1960s and later this was focused on the widespread lack of accommodation and the sheer inadequacy of much that was available,¹⁴ in the 1990s dissatisfaction¹⁴ has centred more upon the slowness of the process of allocating accommodation, which remains in the hands of the whips as part of their armoury of controls. New members, many used to the availability of facilities such as telephone, fax and computer as a matter of course in their previous occupation, find their initial

absence at Westminster deeply frustrating, particularly as there is no corresponding diminution in the flow of business from the constituency (or elsewhere) whilst the allocation process is taking place. One new Conservative Member in 1992 complained bitterly that the temporary accommodation she was allocated was not confirmed until a fortnight later and that her telephone was not connected until three weeks after her arrival at Westminster. Andrew Stunell (Lib. Dem) says his took six weeks.¹⁵ A Labour Member, who found himself without an office for seven weeks, commented that it was 'astounding that accommodation cannot be efficiently and properly allocated'. It was this same Member who said that the best advice he had had from a sitting MP was, 'Be nice to Ray Powell!' - then Labour's accommodation whip; perhaps he was not nice enough! Another new Labour MP in 1992 was allocated a desk in the Commons' Cloisters, only to find that it had been 'colonised' by a Labour frontbencher! Any idea that 1997 was different can be summarily dismissed: our questionnaires and interviews produce a similar crop of stories. The view of newly-elected MPs is clearly that such facilities should be in place by the time the new Parliament meets.

Such expectations about facilities and accommodation are one consequence of the way in which the job of being an MP has become professionalised over recent decades. The other findings from our questionnaires about new Members' concerns for an even more effective induction process reinforce that perception. New MPs see their role at Westminster as their job and they expect to be inducted into and equipped for it, as for any other job. Although they rely heavily upon longer-serving Members as a source of information and advice, in this respect at least the process of socialisation has yet to change the opinion of the nature of the task for which they have successfully sought election.

Footnotes

¹ The authors gratefully acknowledge an award from the Nuffield Small Grant Scheme, which funded the early stages of this research, and an ESRC Award (RO 000222470), which is providing funding for the 1997 Parliament. Thanks are also due to those MPs who responded to questionnaires and requests for interviews and to various parliamentary and party officials.

² MPs elected for the first time constitute the overwhelming proportion of the turnover at general elections, although a handful of former Members are elected on each occasion. The largest turnover this century was in 1945, when it was 73.8 per cent, the consequence of the scale of Labour's victory and the fact that there had not been a general election for ten years.

³ Of the fifteen Parliaments since 1945, seven have met six days after the election, one seven days, one eleven days, 4 twelve, one eighteen, and one nineteen. In the latter two cases Easter intervened. The 1997 general election was held on 1 May and Parliament met on the 7 May.

⁴ The Study of Parliament Group was founded in 1964 and consists of academics and Officers of the two Houses of Parliament who have undertaken research on Parliament. Most of its work is conducted through study groups; it has been responsible for a number of major books on Parliament and its members frequently present evidence to parliamentary committees.

⁵ The response rates to these questionnaires in 1992 were 61.4, 49.6 and 31.2 per cent respectively. For the 1997 Parliament the first and second questionnaires had response rates of 47.7 and 56.0 per cent and that to longer-serving MPs 30.1 per cent.

⁶ Then part of the Department of the Library, now in the Department of the Clerk.

⁷ The *Guide* is periodically updated; the 4th edition was issued in December 1999.

⁸ The Parliamentary Labour Party, *the Induction of New MPs: So You've Won, Now it Gets Difficult*, London, April 1992.

⁹ The Labour Party, *Pre-Induction Guide for Labour PPCs*, London, October 1996, p. 1.

¹⁰ 117 sitting MPs retired in 1997, compared with 79 in 1992, 87 in 1987, 77 in 1983, and 61 in 1979

¹¹ HC Debs., 294, 22 May 1997, c. 909

¹² HC 190, 1997-98, Appendix 1, para. 3

¹³ Dr. Phyllis Starkey, MP, *The House Magazine*, 27 July 1998, p. 22.

¹⁴ See Anthony Hill and Anthony Whichelow, *What's Wrong with Parliament?*, Penguin, London, 1964; Bernard Crick, *The Reform of Parliament*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1st edition, 1964.; Michael Rush and Malcolm Shaw (eds.), *The House of Commons: Services and Facilities*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1974, pp. 75-83, 94-9 and 249-52; and Michael Rush (ed.), *The House of Commons: Services and Facilities, 1972-82*, Policy Studies Institute, London, 1983, pp. 70-83

¹⁵ *The House Magazine*, 27 July 1998, p. 24

Party politics vs. people politics: Balancing Westminster and constituency

Greg Power

Constituency work is an indelible feature of British politics. For the general public and politicians themselves, it is an accepted and expected part of the MP's role. Around 60% of the electorate say they would contact their MP if the need arose, making it one of the most popular forms of political activity. Amongst MPs, a survey for the *House Magazine* in 1997 found that 86% of the new intake regarded the most important role of the MP as "being a good constituency member".¹

However, the volume of constituency work has increased dramatically in recent years, so much so that many MPs are now struggling to cope with the demands made of them. For some, the balance of work has shifted too far in favour of the constituency at the expense of the MP's parliamentary role. Betty Boothroyd, for example, voiced her concerns in 1998 about the effect on MPs discharging their duties in Parliament. She challenged plans to alter the Commons calendar, arguing that MPs' main task was in the Commons - holding the government to account and scrutinising legislation - and not in their constituency.

There is an undoubted value to constituency work. MPs testify that it is a rewarding part of their job and that, furthermore, it plays a valuable role in highlighting problems with legislation or policy. Many politicians will use phrases such as 'keeps my feet on the ground' or 'makes me aware of public opinion' when describing their work away from Westminster. As such, the politics of the constituency often informs and influences MPs' activity in Parliament. The problem, however, is that the formal links between constituency and the Commons are weak. Although the constituency may inform the outlook of an MP, there are very few ways of translating that experience and applying it in the House of Commons. There are few opportunities to reflect the concerns of constituents, and often constituency and Parliament can appear as two separate jobs.

Constituency activity should not prevent MPs from carrying out their duties in Parliament. The challenge is therefore to balance and improve the links between the two roles. However, solutions do not lie solely in the constituency or solely in the Commons. Attempts to redress the balance must take account of both areas of work, requiring reform of House of Commons that strengthens the links between the people politics of constituency with the party politics of Westminster.

The growth of constituency work

The modern constituency role is essentially a post-war development. In the inter-war period there was some constituency activity but it was the exception rather than the rule. Labour MP Jennie Lee, first elected in 1929, was told soon after her arrival at Westminster, to make up her mind whether she was going to be a Socialist MP or 'another bloody social worker'.² Stories abound of MPs visiting their constituencies once a year, and being treated in the same manner as foreign dignitaries. For example, "A Labour newcomer in 1945 told of his first visit to the constituency after the election. A top-hatted station master met him to ask whether he would be following the previous Member in paying his annual visit at that time of year."³

During the 1940s and 1950s although constituency activity had grown it still remained small by today's standards. Because they received, on average, only two or three letters a day⁴ most MPs responded by personally writing each letter long hand. It was not until the 1960s that MPs were given a secretarial allowance, and during that decade constituency work increased dramatically. The number of MPs holding regular surgeries grew from just over 60% to over 90% and the amount of mail MPs received almost trebled during the course of the decade with most MPs receiving between 25 and 74 letters a week.⁵ This trend has continued unabated in the last 30

years so that whereas in 1964 10,000 letters came in and went out of the House of Commons each week. By 1997 that figure had risen to 40,000 letters coming in and 30,000 going out.⁶

Following the 1997 election many first-time MPs were overwhelmed by the volume of mail from constituents, with some reporting that, in the first few weeks of the new Parliament, they were receiving between 100 and 200 letters every day. Although the post-electoral increase appears to have levelled off since, it is clear that the overall trend is upwards, and that many MPs are finding it burdensome. The periodic reviews of parliamentarians working hours suggest that on average they work over 70 hours a week, with the single most time-consuming activity being constituency work.

The most obvious problem for MPs is one of sheer overwork and, as Ashley Weinberg points out in his chapter, the associated effects on the mental and physical health of our politicians. In recognition of this there have been attempts to adapt the hours of the Commons to these increased demands, with the introduction of constituency Fridays in the mid-1990s and the more recent alteration of hours so that Thursday sittings finish at 7pm. The Labour Party, after the election, introduced 'constituency weeks' for its own backbenchers, allowing MPs one week in six to tend their patch, but these were formally stopped in 1998.

An alternative solution put forward is to increase the office allowance for MPs. Whilst it is true that most MPs feel they need more staff, solutions which focus solely on the hours of the Commons or secretarial support, tend to miss the nub of the problem, focusing on symptoms, rather than causes. This is not to reject either proposal, but long-term solutions must take into account the reasons for the growth in constituency activity and the impact that it is having on the work of Parliament.

The 'proper job' of the Member of Parliament

Criticism of the constituency role is usually based on one of two premises. The first is that it requires MPs to get involved in areas of activity that are not part of their 'legitimate' work. The second is that the growth of constituency work is deflecting politicians from effectively carrying out their duties in the House of Commons. Underpinning both criticisms is the assumption that constituency activity is not the 'proper' job of the MP.

Defining 'legitimate' casework

The first problem lies in defining what constitutes 'legitimate' constituency work. MPs are expected to deal with a range of issues that are not officially part of their remit and over which they have no official jurisdiction. Despite the number of mechanisms available to help the citizen complain in their dealings with private and public bodies, such as the Citizens' Advice Bureaux, numerous ombudsmen systems and the Citizen's Charter, people are still most likely to contact their MP if they have a problem with a government service.⁷

Unlike other complaints bodies, the MP is an identifiable and accountable figure. Whereas the individual can never be sure what priority their case is being given by an organisation against which they have a complaint, contacting the MP seems to have a reassuring effect. Many MPs have commented that individuals simply want to know that their voice is being heard and the involvement of the MP seems as good as a guarantee. As a result, "constituents come to the Member as a person of perceived authority who can help them when they need influential and informed intervention to break through bureaucratic barriers."⁸

It is this 'grievance-chasing' aspect of the job which is the most time consuming and which attracts most criticism from political scientists and from some MPs. Reflecting the content of much of this work it is often derided as 'social work', and constituency MPs described as super-councillors, welfare officers, or even 'nursemaids'.⁹ The typical constituency mailbag will contain issues as

diverse as the immigration service, the Child Support Agency, the local authority, entitlement to benefits, schooling, housing, and tax self-assessment. Yet for the vast majority of cases the MP has absolutely no official power to solve them.

Although it may not officially be part of their remit, MPs take up such work because there is clearly a demand for the service and few other viable options open to constituents. Despite the existence of many ombudsmen, specifically designed to deal with such cases, they do not have the legitimacy or authority of similar systems in other countries. Rather, because of their low profile, they are often seen as 'faceless bureaucrats' - exactly the sort of people who constituents are likely to have a grievance against.

The task in pursuing cases is, though, becoming increasingly difficult due to the complexity of much casework. The Child Support Agency provides a useful example, having created more casework for MPs in recent years than any other single issue. The Act which created the Agency is now widely regarded as an example of legislative failure. Whilst MPs were as one on the principle that absent fathers should pay for the upkeep of their children, the bill was poorly drafted, not properly scrutinised in Parliament and, once implemented, found to be hugely flawed. As a result MPs were deluged with cases. Yet the very complexity of the legislation and the concomitant problems for recipients confounded most MPs. Many admit that all they can do in such circumstances is to write to the Agency's chief executive and ensure that the CSA is dealing with the case.

The complexity of modern government means that for the most part MPs act as advocates for their constituents. They do not have the resources, the expertise or the jurisdiction to solve the vast majority of cases, but they can take up the issue with the relevant authority and argue its merits. However this is normally very effective, and at the CSA or Benefits Agency, the MP's intervention normally ensures priority treatment. In such areas, their status as an elected representative gives them considerable influence, but little tangible power.

In summary, MPs have taken on much constituency work by default, due in large part to the unavailability of other mechanisms that enjoy public trust. However, given the taxing nature of this work it is not clear that chasing the grievances of individual constituents is the most effective use of the MP's time and limited resources.

The 'decline' of Parliament

The related concern is that the sheer volume of work means that they are neglecting their role at Westminster. The perception that constituency work is being pursued at the expense of Parliament was articulated by Betty Boothroyd, as Speaker of the House of Commons, in 1998. Responding to proposals from Ann Taylor, then chair of the committee examining modernisation of the House of Commons, she questioned the intention to re-arrange the MP's working week, allowing them more time in the constituency. One of her specific concerns was that constituency work is now so dominant that it detracts from MPs' ability to perform their other roles. She emphasised that MPs need to balance their constituency role with that of scrutinising legislation, holding the Executive to account and debating issues of national importance.

However, Boothroyd's comments highlight a key factor in politicians' willingness to undertake constituency work. That is, that many MPs do not have an official role in the House of Commons. Ensuring scrutiny and accountability may be central to Parliament's role, but the House of Commons is not structured so that every MP can contribute to these functions. The Departmental Select Committees, which scrutinise government departments soak up around 200 backbench MPs, but there remain another 200 or so other backbenchers. Some of them may be used on standing committees, but MPs with an expertise are rarely chosen for such jobs. It is far more useful for the government to pick loyalists who can be relied on to vote the right way.

Even on the floor of the House the chances to debate issues of national importance are restricted. There are a limited number of slots to ask questions in even the most routine sessions, let alone for Prime Minister's Questions. During debates senior MPs have tended to dominate. Being chosen by the Speaker is still regarded as a privilege accorded to the longer serving Members, and it is a source of continuing frustration amongst new MPs that their attempts to catch the Speaker's eye to make a speech or simply an intervention often come to nought.

Yet this has only come to the fore relatively recently as more MPs have sought a full-time role. Although some MPs still practise law, journalism or hold company directorships, the vast majority regard being a Member of Parliament as their profession. As Peter Riddell has noted, the House of Commons "is increasingly dominated by career politicians ... who have dedicated most of their adult lives to entering the Commons, staying there and advancing to become ministers or spokesmen."¹⁰ This rising number of professional politicians has contributed to the changing workload. The lack of work at Westminster has meant that MPs have had to look elsewhere for gainful employment, and for the ambitious MP being active in the constituency holds a number of benefits.

In the first place, there is an obvious electoral incentive in tending to the needs of constituents. It is not clear how far constituency activity can increase an MP's share of the vote, but politicians and academics are agreed on the deleterious effects of being seen to neglect the constituency. Stephen Twigg, MP for Enfield Northgate, attributed part of his success in 1997 to Michael Portillo's attitude to the constituency - "not only because he was seen as uninterested in local issues, but because he did not see it as his job to take an interest."¹¹

Such developments reflect a changing political culture, and changing perceptions of what constitutes proper political representation, inside and outside the Commons. Although being regarded as a 'good constituency member', is still seen by some as a back-handed compliment, disregarding the constituency can be a bar to promotion. The political parties, and notably the Labour Party have laid increasing emphasis on nurturing the constituency, with the introduction of 'constituency weeks', so that MPs spent one week in six away from Westminster, the most obvious manifestation of this trend. A less public development was the 'contract' distributed to new Labour MPs shortly after the election. This document gives Members ideas for campaigning within the constituency. It stressed the need for MPs to build a high local profile and set targets for voter contact, so that each MP was expected to contact 100 voters a week (or 26,000 households by 2002). In return for this level of activity their seat would be designated 'key seat' status at the next election.

Despite these developments, the motivation to undertake constituency activity is not solely based on electoral considerations. The constituency, in marked contrast to Westminster, can provide a valued and valuable role. Whereas it is rare for parliamentary activity to produce concrete achievements, in the constituency even run-of-the-mill activity can produce tangible results such as establishing a constituent's benefit entitlement or finding accommodation for a local family. Constituency work is one area where even the humblest backbencher can have an influence, and thus provides a sense of purpose and outcome.

The decision to focus on the constituency is, therefore, an entirely logical response to a job where the principal requirement of the backbench MP is to vote with the party. The problem, however, is that the constituency role has risen as an alternative, and not a complementary, activity to that in Parliament. As Andrew Marr points out, the concern should not be that MPs are active in their constituencies, "The job of helping constituents is still a real one. But this used to come low in the hierarchy of MP's self-justifications. Now it generally comes first, and sometimes on a list of one."¹²

Connecting constituency and Commons

Improving the balance between constituency and Parliament means in the first place accepting that constituency work is an essential feature of British politics. It would be impossible, and undesirable, to remove the constituency role. MPs have a legitimate role in the constituency, but they also have duties in the Commons. The task is to assess the most valuable elements of constituency work and seek to improve the links between those and activity at Westminster.

Although the grievance-chasing aspect of the work involves many issues which are entirely beyond what MPs should realistically be expected to pursue, many politicians argue it has a strategic value in the Commons. Casework provides MPs with information about policy and legislation from the perspective of the service user, and is regarded by MPs as an important political weathervane. As such, MPs are often made aware of problems with legislation or service delivery through the experience of their constituents and, perhaps more tellingly (given the public reaction to petrol prices in September 2000), constituency work helps to keep MPs in tune with public opinion.

However, outside of the departmental select committees there are limited opportunities for MPs to apply this experience at Westminster. In the first place there are few formal mechanisms for channelling such issues into the Commons. MPs may raise concerns at party meetings, private meetings with ministers, or backbench committees, and these can be very influential forums for influencing Government policy. But, in cases of legislative or policy failure, such as in the case of the Passport Agency outlined below, it is difficult for MPs to feed these concerns into the parliamentary process.

The second limiting factor is the 'agencification' of Government. The introduction of *Next Steps* agencies was designed, in part, to improve accountability, by making those responsible for the delivery of government services more easily identifiable. However, their responsibility for areas which form a significant part of an MP's mailbag, such as social security benefits, child support or passports, has meant that the redress of grievances is something which increasingly bypasses the Houses of Parliament. Whereas MPs previously sought answers from departmental Ministers in the Commons they now write to the chief executive of the agency. This may well be a more effective system (although comparing the responsiveness of the two systems is difficult) but it complicates the line of accountability, and effectively means that the Commons is no longer the principal arena for airing such concerns.

The constituency as early warning system – the case of the Passport Agency

The lack of confluence between constituency and Parliament was illustrated by the troubles faced by the Passport Agency in 1999. The installation of a problematic new computer system in the agency, combined with an increased demand for passports because of the introduction of passports for young children, led to delays in the distribution of passports early in the year. The first sign of difficulties arose in February when the Passport Agency decided to prioritise applications by date of travel, in an effort to ensure that applicants had their passports in time, and in March applications were being diverted to Belfast because of the overload on the mainland system.

By the end of April it was clear that most MPs were dealing with aggrieved constituents, frustrated by non-appearance of their travel documents. Lib Dem MP Andrew Stunnell, articulated this concern in the Commons, requesting that Home Secretary Jack Straw be brought before the House to answer questions on the situation. In reply, Leader of the House, Margaret Beckett, acknowledged the extent of the problem, stating that "I think that the whole House ... will be aware of how great are the difficulties being experienced by the Passport Agency and of their serious effect on the service available to people."¹³

Despite the fact that many MPs, facing an increasing number of constituency cases, raised the

matter (in debates which had little to do with the Passport Agency), Parliament's first opportunity to discuss the issue did not occur until 29 June, two months after it was originally raised. By the end of June the situation was reaching crisis point, and there was a clear political value for the Conservatives in using one of their Opposition Day Debates to highlight the problems.

That this was a slow burning issue meant that, several months into the crisis, the parliamentary debate still had a wider public significance. Yet the case highlights the difficulties for MPs to force debates on topical and substantive issues. MPs had known of the problems for some time through the sheer number of constituency cases with which they were having to deal, yet Executive control of the Commons timetable means that there was no way of translating these concerns into a substantive debate.

Opportunities exist for backbenchers to raise issues through Early Day Motions (EDMs)¹⁴ or to initiate an adjournment debate. Adjournment debates are often regarded as the most significant means of raising constituency issues. Backbench MPs, chosen by the Speaker, initiate a debate, and Ministers are obliged to provide a response on behalf of the Government. The debates allow MPs to highlight the concerns of their constituents in Parliament and are able to re-assure their electorate that the matter was 'raised in the House'. In addition, such debates are often used by MPs as a method of attracting media coverage in their area. Yet their value is limited - the subjects discussed are often parochial, reflecting the interests of a minority and, combined with the fact that there is no substantive motion for MPs to vote on, this means that debates are usually poorly attended.¹⁵

The fact that no backbenchers initiated an adjournment debate on the Passport Agency in that period, suggests that MPs did not regard it as the most effective way of raising the subject. The case of the Passport Agency highlights the value of constituency work and Parliament's failure to capitalise on it. The source of the problems was mainly maladministration, and as such, a non-party political issue (in the sense that MPs of every hue had to deal with the consequences). This constituency experience could have been used to the Government's and electorate's advantage, in identifying the problems at an earlier stage and finding a solution, but this requires a parliamentary mechanism for allowing such issues to be raised by backbenchers from all parties.

The reform of Parliament

Reform should aim to make Parliament more topical and responsive to public concerns. This would involve reforming the proceedings of the chamber to improve opportunities for debating matters of concern to constituents, and enhancing the role and capacity of the select committees. Underpinning both should be an attempt for Parliament to draw more effectively on the experience of its Members, and give the constituency role a practical application in Parliament.

Public interest debates

Other European democracies have a facility for 'interpellations' or short debates, whereby a cross-party grouping of MPs can force a minister to answer questions on a topical matter. The Scottish Parliament has attempted to redress the shortcomings of Westminster by introducing a Petitions Committee, whereby any petition presented to the Parliament with enough signatures can force a debate. By comparison Westminster has few 'topical' debates, and its procedures are not well-suited, either in questions or debates to deal with matters of public interest which cut across the party divide. As such the proceedings of the Commons can often appear out of touch from public opinion and less than relevant to wider public concerns.

Given the centrality of the constituency to the lives of most Members, a Westminster alternative could be linked to constituency concerns. There should be specific provision for 'public interest debates' motivated by policy failure or maladministration on a broad scale (as opposed to constituency-specific concerns). MPs would have the opportunity to call a short debate and

require a ministerial response on such issues where there is a clear case of policy failure, specifically linked to the concerns of constituents. The trigger for such debates would be a specific number of MPs (it is suggested between 150 and 200) drawn proportionately from all the parties. The cross party requirement would prevent their abuse by pressure groups, or manipulation by the whips. The system would effectively allow Early Day Motions to force a debate, but given the number of signatures and the cross-party balance they would only happen in the rarest of cases.

Reforming the departmental select committees

However, reform should not stop with the proceedings in the chamber. The fact that agencies now deliver so many government services, and create a good deal of constituency casework, warrants greater attention by the departmental select committees. Although the agencies were introduced partly to improve accountability, in practice, there is little evidence to suggest they are more accountable to Parliament than the previous system, but rather that the situation has got worse.¹⁶

At present, the committees are responsible for scrutinising the expenditure, administration and policy of their department and each of its related agencies. However, they operate with limited resources and usually have between 11 and 15 members. Given that the Home Affairs committee has responsibility for dealing for issues as diverse as electoral law, immigration, drugs and crime, it is not surprising they failed to pick up at an early stage the problems of the Passport Agency. But the current structure of the committees does not lend itself to the systematic scrutiny of departments.

Increasing the size of the committees would address a number of these problems. In the first place it would give each committee more resources on which to draw. The enlarged membership would allow the committees to establish sub-committees responsible for different projects, such as monitoring the work of agencies. The committees would also give every MP a degree of expertise, which could be utilised by Parliament in the scrutiny of legislation.

Perhaps more significantly it would give a greater number of MPs a tangible role inside Parliament. In this way it would provide a parliamentary alternative to constituency work, but at the same time, give more MPs the opportunity to pursue constituency concerns in the Commons. Greater scrutiny of agencies by the committees (or their sub-committees) would only emphasise the links between constituency and Commons.

Conclusion

There is undoubtedly a significant value for MPs in conducting constituency work, but for it to be fully realised, the parliamentary side of their work must be tied more closely to the constituency activity. There does need to be a better balance between the two sides of the job. This is likely to involve some reduction of constituency work, and particularly the grievance-chasing aspects. There are no simple ways of achieving this. Constituency work is ingrained in British political practice, accepted and expected by both MPs and the electorate. The current volume of constituency work cannot be attributed solely to the demands of constituents, it is also a reflection of common work patterns and accepted cultural practices amongst Members of Parliament. Solutions must therefore address both demand and supply.

This chapter has contained no specific recommendations to address the problems of demand from constituents (although a revamped public ombudsman system, which acts as complaints mechanism for the public and a support resource for MPs, is one recommendation which could be pursued). Instead it has focussed on reforming of the House of Commons so that it draws on the constituency experience of Members and provides an alternative focus for MP activity, but at the same time improves the effectiveness of the Parliament.

The House of Commons, in its daily business, must be more responsive to the world outside. The September 2000 fuel crisis was used by many as an example of its irrelevance, yet these largely overstated the case. Parliament was not sitting at the time, and this had an effect on the way the media perceived the crisis, and few commentators considered the implications of recalling the Commons. But aside from the fuel crisis, what is clear is that Parliament's procedures must enable it to respond more swiftly to issues of public concern. There are a whole range of issues, of the calibre of the Passport Agency (out of the ordinary, but not necessarily emergency), that largely bypass the floor of the Commons, but which every MP is aware of through their constituents. In an era when faith in public institutions and traditional party politics is on the wane, Parliament must make itself more relevant to the concerns of the electorate by reacting more quickly to events. The modernisation of Parliament cannot address these issues soon enough.

Footnotes

- ¹ *The House Magazine*, 13 October 1997
- ² Hollis, P. (1997), *Jennie Lee: A Life*, OUP, p.37
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- ⁸ Radice, L., Vallance, E., & Willis, V., (1990), *Member of Parliament: The job of a backbencher* (Second Edition), Macmillan: London, p. 109
- ⁹ Finer, S. E., 'The contemporary context of representation', in Bogdanor, V., (1985), *Representatives of the People? MPs and their constituents*, Gower: Aldershot
- ¹⁰ Riddell, P., (1996), *Honest Opportunism: The rise of the career politician*, Indigo: London
- ¹¹ Quoted in Power, G., *Representatives of the People? The constituency role of MPs*, Fabian Society: London, p. 6
- ¹² Andrew Marr, 'A dull job in need of some imagination', *Independent*, 1 August 1995
- ¹³ HC Debs, 29 April 1999, Col. 487
- ¹⁴ An EDM is a motion which MPs put their name to in the hope of highlighting an issue of concern to MPs. However, because of the number put down very few succeed and many are trivial - an EDM from November 1999 raised MPs worries about the relative price of mash in the House of Commons canteen (no. 108).
- ¹⁵ Some of the more parochial debates in May 2000 included economic development in the Isle of Wight, the Teeside chemical industry and mental health services in Sutton.
- ¹⁶ See for example, R.A.W. Rhodes, 'New Labour's Civil Service: Summing-up joining-up' *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 2, April-June 2000; Weir, S. & Beetham, D., (1999), *Political Power and Democratic Control in Britain*, Routledge: London

Stress and the Politician

Dr Ashley Weinberg

In the last thirty years increasing demands have been placed upon individuals by changes in the worlds of work and family life. The technology revolution has meant that for many the experience of work has changed. Communication is faster and access to information unlimited. Large organisations now have an unprecedented influence on how we lead our lives, whether in reshaping and removing jobs, or influencing our own consumer behaviour.

The question for an occupational psychologist studying behaviour in and around the workplace, is about the impact of these changes on our working lives. Are expectations of what we should be doing too high? What happens to us if we try to take on too much, or conversely try to resist the forces which draw individuals into many roles? Or are these forces a natural part of how our lives should be? This article assesses the impact of the new world of work on our national politicians and the institutions in which they work.

The issue of stress

The many changes in our work and non-work lives has been accompanied by a recognition that more and more people are struggling to come to terms with daily pressures. The word 'stress' is used increasingly as a description of this experience. Many meanings are attributed to it depending on the situation. It can be used to represent a source of pressure (e.g. high workload, family illness) or the consequence of dealing with prolonged or chronic strain, including how we feel (e.g. headaches, chest pain, anxiety, depression). These many uses can add confusion to an already complex equation which finds individuals attempting to balance the various aspects of their lives with their own health and feelings of well-being. Therefore this article will attempt to avoid confusion where possible, by focusing on stressors (i.e. the causes) and strain (the outcome).

The vast numbers of days off work caused by 'stress-related' illness, not to mention the rapidly increasing numbers of legal cases where 'stress at work' is being alleged, have focused public attention on some serious drawbacks. Yet these factors, which exist above the waterline of many organisations, are only part of the story. Beneath this organisations, very much like their employees, are struggling to come to terms with the pace of change. The symptoms of organisational ill-health are there to be seen if we look a little closer: low morale, impaired customer service, high turnover and errors. These errors can be as simple as calculating the wrong change or as complex and catastrophic as making the wrong decision about a plant shutdown. Whatever the role of psychological strain in making an error, it is surely worthy of scrutiny.

The psychological health of national politicians

It should come as no surprise that politicians are subject to the same kinds of pressure as the rest of us. Members of Parliament are responsible for legislation and policy decisions which affect the entire country. They are also the focus of discontent when things go wrong. The last thirty years have seen dramatic changes in the way politicians work and in the expectations people have of them. There has been a huge increase in MPs' workloads, including a steady growth in the volume of legislation, select committee activity, numerous backbench committees, not to mention the dramatic increase in constituency work since the mid-1960s. Given the scope of their activity it is important that the quality of their decisions is of the highest order.

Professor Hugh Freeman, the editor of the British Journal of Psychiatry, has examined the interaction between the quality of political decision-making and incidence of stress. For example, former Prime Minister Anthony Eden was said to be on amphetamines and drinking excessively

during the Suez Crisis. Similarly, the fact that President Kennedy regularly used amphetamines prescribed for his Addison's Disease, combined with the pressure from numerous other world events may have contributed to the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961. In both cases it could be presumed that their decision-making capacity was impaired due to their personal strain. And, in this light, how will history judge Boris Yeltsin's decision to fire his entire cabinet following his own heart problems or even President Clinton's involvement in the bombing of Iraq near the time of his indictment following the Monica Lewinsky affair? Closer to home, the media reaction to Tony Blair's badly-received speech to the Women's Institute in June 2000 focused almost entirely on the stresses and strains of combining Prime Ministerial office with the birth of a new child.

Taken in respect of any job, the availability of a supportive and competent team of colleagues is obviously important. At a national level, it would be expected that a government cabinet could take the pressure off any one individual, but in order for this to happen, that individual would have to actively signal this to them. Yet this requires that the individual has an insight into how much pressure they are experiencing and, secondly, a high degree of trust in colleagues in an occupation where power is invariably at stake. The existence (or not) of these factors might explain why history provides so many examples of poor decisions by politicians at all levels in times of personal strain. One solution is to plan ahead, but that requires good foresight and planned leave, as in the case of Tony Blair's parental leave. An alternative, in reaction to events, is to take a back seat, as the Norwegian Prime Minister did in 1998, when acknowledging a bout of depression following a major economic crisis.

To consider world leaders on such human and individual terms may seem to some misplaced. However, their job-related status does not necessarily confer on them a special immunity to psychological strain, nor errors of judgement. We might expect our representatives to be able to cope better with stress, they may well be ambitious and thrive on risk. But do any of these factors decrease the vulnerability of politicians to strain? Does it mean that the public will feel happier about a given situation should things go awry? The answer to each of these must surely be 'No'. The nation has seen the last two Conservative ex-prime ministers moved to tears as they reflected on their job situations. The UK has also been deprived of many capable and talented politicians who have prematurely succumbed, physically or emotionally, to the pressures of their work. This is not to say that people who are vulnerable in this way should be precluded from doing the job, rather that everybody is, to some extent, vulnerable. Therefore it is important to create job conditions for politicians which will not push them to breaking point.

My own research into psychological strain among Members of Parliament has shown that the prevalence of symptoms of poor psychological health is increased on entering the job and is higher than is reported in other high pressure jobs. Politicians are not immune from psychological strain and no amount of financial reward or the perceptions of currently hardy politicians can alter that. In 1991, in evidence to the Jopling Committee's scrutiny of MPs' working hours, prominent politicians from both sides of the House testified to the 'trail of broken marriages, ruined health and exhausted irrationality' left by the job, often resulting in a situation where 'outside bodies usually know far more about impending legislation' than those who are supposed to debate it.

Since the publication of the Jopling Committee findings almost ten years ago, many national politicians have argued that the House of Commons has been slow to respond to the impact of changing demands on its individual members. It is almost 150 years since John Stuart Mill recognised that 'what we require in a democratic society is enlightened individuals who will be mature and responsible because they reflect upon the issues which face them'. Evidence suggests we are still some way from Mill's goal.

Evidence of Psychological Strain among National Politicians

My initial research into MPs' emotional health followed the publication of the Jopling Committee's

report on their working hours, which acknowledged the job toll being paid in personal terms by members. A survey was sent to every sitting MP and was completed and returned by 124 individuals. This response (20%) became the first in a series of surveys which has involved over 400 national politicians in England, Scotland and Wales in an attempt to assess their psychological well-being. In addition the surveys have tried to identify the causes for reported symptoms of strain and for any change in those levels of strain. This section will focus on the prevalence of these symptoms and compare these findings with similar occupational groups.

Given that the House of Commons had documented some of the difficulties encountered by MPs, the survey conducted in the year following publication of their report put this into a health context. On average the sample of 124 MPs reported higher levels of *physical* symptoms of strain than U.K. senior managers, who might also be expected to shoulder heavy workloads, make effective decisions and face demands from a variety of colleagues and clients. These symptoms included problems sleeping, tending to eat, drink or smoke more than usual, indigestion, tiredness and exhaustion. One in three politicians reported the frequency of such physical symptoms in excess of the quantity expected, when compared to managers. However, these MPs were less likely than managers to report *emotional* symptoms of strain at this stage: e.g. losing sleep over worry, feeling unhappy or depressed, lacking concentration, losing confidence and feeling less capable of making decisions.

An examination of the working lives of MPs might help to shed some light on these findings. 41% of this group of MPs stated that they worked on average more than 70 hours each week, while a further 40% estimated their weekly working hours between 55-70 hours. Two-thirds of the sample devoted over 20 hours each week to office-based work, with half of these tied to the office for more than 30 hours every week. On average, MPs had administrative/research support equivalent to 8 days/week, typically split between the constituency and Parliament. 40% reported that they had the same, or less than, this level of back up. Most MPs had access to computing and fax facilities, although at one extreme of resource provision, one backbencher noted that he had been sharing a corridor with 14 other members by way of an office. Others remarked how they had been shown a desk and a phone on arrival at the House of Commons and expected to work out the rest of the job and the necessary resources for themselves. Given the interface between their work and home lives, over 75% of MPs agreed that they did not spend enough time with their partner, 80% felt the same about the lack of time spent with their children, and more than 60% did not have time for hobbies. Most politicians found that the job spilled over into their home life in negative ways and almost 75% recognised that work pressures caused or exacerbated arguments at home. Over 80% found it difficult to switch off from the job when at home. More than one-fifth of the survey's respondents agreed with the statement that they had not done the best job they could at home or at work.

In 1995, three years after this initial survey, the House of Commons voted to adopt the recommendations of the Jopling Committee in making the working hours more 'user-friendly'. My second survey of a broadly similar sample of MPs aimed to assess the impact of the introduction of these reforms after they had been in place for a trial period of nine months. These findings showed that not only had the levels of physical symptoms of strain increased among MPs, but so had the emotional symptoms, meaning that both levels were in excess of the average for the comparable group of managers. This corresponded with a decrease in the satisfaction MPs reported in the balance between work and home lives - the very area which the Jopling reforms had sought to address by ending all-night sittings and related measures. The results seemed to indicate that the reforms had not been sufficient to reduce the personal cost being paid by MPs after all. The implications of this will be discussed later, but it is likely that the constituency aspect of the job was unaffected by the changes introduced and that future reforms would need to look more widely than the hours scheduled for debates.

Having demonstrated that symptoms of strain were widespread among MPs, the challenge remained to demonstrate whether this was due to the job or other factors. If it could be shown that individuals who had never performed the role of national politician experienced an increase in such symptoms, then some conclusions about the impact of the job could also be drawn. The General Election of May 1997 provided such an opportunity. Questionnaires were circulated to prospective MPs some weeks before and three months after the General Election, as such data from comparable samples of pre-election candidates (29 who subsequently won their seats) and post-election MPs (65) was obtained. This totalled 40% of all new members, 34% of which were women.

Comparison of the pre- and post-election groups revealed an increase in both psychological and physical symptoms of strain. In itself, this overall difference was not statistically significant, but further analysis did confirm a significantly greater proportion of individuals with poorer psychological well-being in the sample of newly-elected MPs. Further comparison of newly-elected Government and combined Opposition samples revealed significantly more Labour MPs suffering psychological strain. Perhaps this reflected the weight of expectation upon them or even the impact of such a large swing to Labour which may have propelled some of them rather unexpectedly to Westminster. Other findings showed that MPs in the 40-50 year age band reported more psychological strain than other age groups. Also politicians whose constituencies were closest to or farthest from Westminster, and those MPs with pre-school age or teenage children, recorded the most symptoms of both psychological and physical strain, both findings reiterating the difficulties involved in juggling the conflicting demands of work and home life. Indeed when asked to highlight personal stressors, the most reported were the long hours, conflicting work and home roles, demands placed by the job on family relationships and the toll of considerable travel. All of these found resonance with the sources of pressure highlighted by MPs in the original surveys in the early 1990s.

In short, the findings confirm that the job of MPs does impact in a negative way on individual well-being, in both psychological and physical terms. This is partly explained by the pressures of a new job, particularly one where there is little induction or training. One year after the General Election a follow-up survey, with almost three-quarters of the sample of new MPs, revealed that their overall levels of psychological strain had reduced to pre-election levels, but these were still higher than would be expected in comparison to the general population.

How can the job be changed?

In addition to pinpointing the areas of personal strain, many of the new MPs had commented on a range of organisational factors in the House of Commons which constituted obstacles to their job performance. These included often 'archaic' or 'opaque' procedures and 'bizarre, time-wasting voting practices', the adversarial/combatative nature of debates, together with poorer resources than they had been used to in previous jobs. Perhaps the removal of these obstacles would improve the working conditions as well as politicians' well-being and functioning. As such, the election of the new Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly provided an opportunity to assess the impact of more modern parliamentary working practices, and compare these with the older and more traditional Westminster approach. Not only did the Edinburgh and Cardiff institutions incorporate new technology into everyday working life, but a family-friendly approach to the new chambers was promised and a more congenial working atmosphere was anticipated as national, as well as party considerations, came to the fore. With this in mind, national politicians in Scotland (MSPs) and Wales (AMs) were surveyed before occupying their places on the new elected bodies and again six months later. Well over half responded to the initial questionnaire and approximately one third at the follow-up.

Despite the marked differences in working practices, the pattern of increasing psychological and physical strain after taking on the job of politician was also found among both the Scottish and

Welsh representatives. The sources of pressure reported by MSPs and AMs made familiar reading. The average weekly working hours were in excess of 70 hours for one third of all Edinburgh and Cardiff members, with a further half working 55-70 hours each week. In comparing Westminster MPs with their new counterparts, higher proportions of the latter acknowledged the following to be sources of pressure: long hours, work overload, spillover of the job into family life, the impact of the job on relationships at home, the resources in the workplace and the travel. Over half of MSPs and AMs felt that their working hours were having a 'slightly negative' effect on their health, family lives and job performance.

Given the more modern working conditions and family-friendly timing of debates, it would seem on the surface rather puzzling that there should be so little difference in the sources and experiences of pressure among MSPs and AMs, compared to MPs. A number of conclusions could be drawn from this. Taken as a whole, the above evidence would seem to indicate that the job of national politician brings with it inherent strain of a psychological and physical nature, whichever nation a politician is representing. It might further be concluded that the efforts to improve working practices, both at Westminster and in Edinburgh and Cardiff have not sufficiently addressed the main causes of pressure for their political representatives. Each group highlighted the battle for their time as a major stressor, compounded by requirements to travel and the sheer quantity of mail which needed answering. Furthermore, the introduction of new technology has not reduced workload, but instead appears to have repackaged the way in which it is tackled. 80% of MSPs and AMs were satisfied with the provision of new technology, but one wonders whether it could be used in a more innovative manner to permit participation in certain parliamentary or assembly activities via communication links. This might cut down on some of the need for travel which members find draining and does occupy considerable time.

These findings suggest that the solution does not lie solely in revising the working practices of the Parliament. Politicians returning to the constituency are not free to concentrate on family life, but face a series of constituency demands and engagements. As Greg Power notes elsewhere in this publication the different parts of the MP's job cannot be tackled in isolation. Many manage constituency issues with the support of their family and/or support staff, however, this does not remove the pressure on politicians' time in the constituency. Resources for dealing with constituents' demands have increased in recent years, but remain below the requirements of many Members. How viable would an ordinary business prove with two branches staffed for the equivalent of four days each week? This research has shown that this is the prevalent situation for many of our national representatives, whose 'customer base' runs into tens of thousands!

The response of the individual's family to the job of national politician is of obvious importance. One fifth of families of newly elected representatives to Westminster, Edinburgh and Cardiff were reported to have experienced difficulties in adapting to the job. These difficulties tended to stem from the separation and it is therefore not surprising that some of the highest levels of psychological strain were reported by parents of pre-school children and also of young teenagers, arguably key periods in child development. The reduction in the number of days devoted to debates could only be expected to provide limited respite, even if that time could be spent away from constituency matters.

As one MP described it, the job is 'a way of life' - how much better then would it be to provide 'in-house' child-care facilities for very young children and perhaps even some educational/vocational provision for appropriate age-groups. Although this might only benefit politicians whose constituencies were close to the capital, those parent-politicians based further away from the parliament or assembly might find the innovative use of new technology in communication links of benefit in cutting down time spent away from their children. For politicians with families generally, the availability of some form of support network, informal or formal, perhaps administered by a parliamentary or assembly body might help to incorporate them

in to this new way of life, rather than leave some of them to struggle, perhaps isolated, with a new set of circumstances which can resemble an avalanche of demands and pressures. Again this would not be appropriate to all, but might be of considerable benefit to those experiencing difficulties.

The likelihood of these ideas taking shape may be somewhat minimised, given the fairly unusual attitude all three legislative bodies seem to have towards the welfare of their workers. 41% of newly elected MPs and 81% of MSPs and AMs received little or no induction package on taking up their new posts. Although as Rush and Giddings point out in their chapter, the situation is improving, it is a state of affairs which few other large organisations would tolerate. Some representatives have been involved in seminars run by their political party while others have taken a detailed tour around the building under the guidance of officials, but a consistent and coordinated approach to induction is certainly lacking. With regard to health care for employees, the House of Commons is actually ahead of its new counterparts. For some years, an Occupational Physician has had an office inside the parliament building, which has been utilised by MPs, however 94% of the politicians in Edinburgh and Cardiff were not aware of any such provision within their organisation.

What can be learned?

These conclusions further beg the question, what can and should be done? The research I have described seems to indicate that our main political institutions have much to learn from the workplaces with which many of us are familiar. Sensible measures could help to tackle some of the pressures highlighted: induction packages for new employees, uniform access to childcare and to occupational health provision, the resourcing of constituency offices on a par with small businesses and the exploration of how new technology might reduce rather than reconfigure workload and travel demands. The House of Commons has already recognised the need to end all-night sittings and provide advance notice of debates, yet struggles to continue implementation of these sensible reforms. The role of family life in the context of the demands on a politician needs a more fundamental consideration, as the interface between work and home is an issue for all workers. 'Family-friendly' policies should mean what the term suggests and ensure that parents are not disadvantaged. These suggestions place more of an emphasis on the organisation and the reason for this is simple. The incidence of psychological strain is widespread and the reasons for it do not lie wholly with the individual. Where a considerable proportion of an organisation's employees, or of a given occupational group, register elevated levels of symptoms of psychological strain, then the nature of the job must come under scrutiny. The job of national politician does appear to induce such effects in a higher proportion of individuals than in comparable occupations. While we may consider that politicians have selected their profession and are well paid to pursue it, we may be in danger of ignoring the key question. Rather than focusing on their individual rewards, can we afford not to provide the necessary practical means, which would enable our politicians to do their best in representing us, the electorate?

Caught in the middle: Training MPs in dispute resolution

Bernadette Coleman, Stephen Coleman, Ernesto Spinelli and Freddie Strasser

What qualifications are required to become an MP? For a post without any job description or agreed working practices, this is a notoriously hard question to answer, presenting problems both for recruitment of suitable MPs and intelligent evaluation of their job performances. The benefit of this amorphous status is an eclectic mix of elected representatives rather than standardised graduates of an administrative sausage machine. The downside is a lingering uncertainty, common to practitioners, commentators and the public alike, as to what qualities or skills a good MP ought to be exhibiting.

When MPs are asked, they say that serving their constituents is their most important role. This stems partly from electoral dependence upon constituents' favour, but also from two salient facts: that most of an MP's office time is spent reading and answering constituents' correspondence, and meeting with them; and that most MPs are excluded both from Government office or major scrutiny roles (in select committees) and are therefore more needed and respected in their own constituencies than in Parliament, party or the executive.

MPs spend a great deal of their time helping constituents to deal with conflicts that are intimidating or incomprehensible to the average citizen. These include disputes between neighbours and within families; with local authorities; with Government departments and agencies; with corporations and public services; and with international bodies. For many people, an appeal to their MP is a final recourse in cases where they feel frustrated and overwhelmed. MPs are commonly regarded as being the ultimate 'quick fixers' whose powers are assumed to be almost miraculous in scope. Sometimes MPs' special knowledge of how bureaucracies work or what legal regulations mean can provide satisfactory outcomes, but quite often disputes are complex and less straightforward than they might first appear. Resolving such disputes takes time, patience and a capacity for sensitive judgement as to the real motives and interests of the contending forces in a conflict. Social workers, lawyers and Judges, who receive long training for their jobs, are all too often perplexed by the multidimensionality of conflicts. How can untrained MPs, who must fit in such cases alongside their many other obligations, hope to play a useful role in constituents' conflict resolution?

In this chapter we consider one form of skill-training that could enable MPs to perform a valuable role in helping to resolve conflicts. We shall first look at the origins and principles of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), specifically mediation; we shall then turn to look at how psychotherapeutically-informed mediation techniques are being used to train lawyers in better, more efficient ways of seeking solutions to apparently intractable conflicts; and we shall conclude by examining some specific ways that MPs as mediators could perform a useful role for their constituents and improve their own credibility.

Principles of Mediation

Alternative Dispute Resolution has been recognised and practised increasingly in the UK since the 1980s, although it originated in the USA some decades earlier, where contingency fees and more litigation-conscious clients provoked creative alternatives to going to law.

Basically, ADR is dispute resolution involving a structured process with third party intervention. The three pillars of ADR are negotiation, mediation and adjudication. Negotiation involves the two (or more) parties preparing their cases, meeting in a neutral environment and trying to reach resolution of the dispute between themselves, with the help of advisers, usually a lawyer, accountant or engineer if a commercial dispute or a trained counsellor in a family dispute.

Mediation is the option that most parties to ADR choose. It involves the parties, their advisers

and, crucially, the assistance of a mutually agreed neutral third party. Essentially, it is still a process of negotiation but it is structured and influenced by the third party who helps them keep on track and focus on shared solutions.

Adjudication usually takes place in cases where mediation fails to arrive at an agreed settlement. It entails a neutral adjudicator reaching a decision to resolve the dispute without recourse to litigation. It takes place soon after the end of the mediation process.

All mediations are held in private - as opposed to open civil court cases. All parties, advisers and mediators agree to be bound by confidentiality (also different from litigation.) Each party pays their own costs and both parties pay for the cost of the mediator, the venue and the use of any experts the mediator may introduce. In mediation, settlement of quite substantial disputes can be resolved in short time periods; for example, CEDR (Centre for Dispute Resolution) has experience of taking one day to resolve an £800,000 professional negligence claim and only four days to resolve a four party multi-million pound construction dispute involving several counterclaims.

How are such major disputes, which could take months and years to resolve, draining the parties financially and mentally, resolved so quickly in mediation? A key factor is the role of the mediator and the qualities he or she brings to the dispute. The momentum and dynamic that a mutually trusted independent mediator brings to a dispute means that there is a much greater chance of success than in party to party negotiations which can lose sight of the need for an agreed settlement. Without a good mediator it is hard for conflicting parties to avoid oneupmanship and restating resentments and fixed positions.

Mediators are primarily concerned with establishing a fair and unbiased process of reaching resolution. The parties decide the result, not the mediator, but the latter focuses the parties on settlement while guiding them through the tried and tested stages of mediation.

A typical structure is an initial joint meeting for opening presentations, where each party's grievances are heard without interruption and responses are acknowledged. This is followed by a series of private caucus meetings between the mediator and each party and then a final plenary meeting. However entrenched, parties have come together in mediation with a view to achieving a settlement. This factor alone accounts for much of the success of mediation.

Good mediators are essentially skilful process managers, usually having expertise in the issues in dispute, but primarily being concerned with the process and its outcome rather than the issues in dispute. Mediators need to be concerned with fairness, possess a robust, natural authority, and be sensitive to possible underlying impediments to progress, such as fear of losing face or lack of information about each party's case. Mediators should be challenging without being confrontational. They should ease communication, being neutral listeners to aggrieved clients, capable of reviewing obstacles and spotting options for progress, providing an outsider's 'reality test' for parties who may never have felt heard or who have lost sight of the options. Mediators are good facilitators who can move between the parties with offers, counter-offers and concessions, gradually building up packages or deals that can constitute a consensual agreement. Mediators are often lawyers, now increasingly undergoing training in mediation, though only family mediation is at present legally aided, but there are also many non-lawyers who are skilled mediators. Advisers to the parties, often lawyers but not necessarily, also support the settlement objective, more by taking a principled rather than a positional negotiation stance.

In environmental or public policy disputes the term *consensus-building* is often used as a substitute for mediation. In such cases, such as a dispute about the location of a chemical plant, a third party consultant tries to identify the interest groups and facilitates consultation and movement towards

agreed positions. Consensus-building helps to combat the 'nimby' phenomenon ("not in my back yard") on the one hand and on the other hand the defective political process of decision-making that can be summed up as "Consult - Announce Decision - Amend Decision (as those consulted to realise the decision does not meet their interests, and battle politically or through the courts to amend it.)"

ADR in the UK now has its own structures, theory and practice. It has won the support of the Lord Chancellor who has stated that 'There is a proven need for alternatives to court-based adjudication. And ADR itself needs support - in consultation and discussion and publicity, to make people aware; so that they can make informed choices among the various forms of dispute resolution.' (1.1.11.98)

There is now extensive training available in ADR for lawyers and non-lawyers alike. Although lawyers have experience and expertise in helping clients in dispute, the focus of ADR training is not on rules and regulations, or on reaching decisions on the balance of probabilities according to rules of evidence, or on the advocacy or research skills of a lawyer, or indeed on 'winning' at all.

The Psychology of Conflict Resolution: the value of psychotherapeutically-informed mediation

The principal focus of mediation so far has been within the legal profession, but its success has convinced us that this novel stance towards dispute resolution can be of benefit to a diverse range of professions and areas of expertise. So, how does it work?

During the *caucus sessions* - private meetings between the mediator and an individual party - the suitable and secure environment where agreement can be facilitated serves as an essential backdrop to the clarifying process whereby the participants in dispute are better enabled to reflect upon their own private attitudes, beliefs, feelings and values regarding the issues raised by the dispute. In this way, crucial questions addressing fundamental - if often implicit - aspects of the dispute are presented to each participant for consideration and honest appraisal. Such questions might be: 'What are my most significant and deeply-held interests in the entire dispute?' 'How can these be made explicit with regard to their impact upon the conflicting situation?' 'How might these interests be addressed in order that they may be resolved or, at least, reduced?'

Psychotherapeutically-informed mediation (PIM) focuses upon the various stances that people adopt in order to find meaningful and secure relations with themselves, others, and the world in general, and, examines how those very same strategies towards existence may, themselves, provoke the problems and concerns that arise in people's lives.

PIM seeks to clarify the various inter-relations we create and maintain in our day-to-day life. More specifically, it considers three main forms of inter-relations: 1) I-focused forms which deal with and expose the vast array of assumptions, judgements, values, beliefs and fears we hold about ourselves; 2) you-focused forms which deal with and expose the vast array of assumptions, judgements, values, beliefs and fears which we hold about how others view and relate to us or who they "want us to be"; 3) we-focused forms which deal with the immediate and currently-experienced way of being that exists in the present encounter between us and which may contradict, as much as they might conform to, our pre-set stances toward "I" and "you". The challenging exploration of these three focus points in any interaction has been shown to be the critical variable in promoting the resolution of inter-personal conflicts.

So what are the specific psychotherapeutic skills derived from existential therapy that can be employed in a mediation setting in order to transform the various inter-relational antagonisms and conflicts held by the disputants into a working alliance?

PIM aims to facilitate the means by which the disputing parties become much more explicitly aware of their underlying *worldview* in order to “own” and challenge the ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes which both structure and maintain the worldview. A person’s worldview encompasses the totality of his or her way of relating to self and others. PIM exposes the implicit value systems, and the person’s (often rigid) attitude towards it, since it is via this focused investigation that the “lived and felt concerns” which unnecessarily impact upon disputes can be highlighted and, in turn, their influence minimised or defused from conflict.

The exposed worldview also clarifies the person’s sense of his or her *self-esteem* which may govern persistent and problematic interactions with “I” or “you” and between “us”, so that true motivations may become clearer. More often than not, inadequate awareness and understanding of one’s varying motivations allows competing concerns and interests to remain unclear and unseen.

For instance, consider the following brief vignette of a mediation meeting where a claimant’s presenting aim was that of gaining as much money as possible from the person with whom he was in dispute. Yet, as a result of PIM sessions, it transpired that no money would have assuaged the claimant’s demands. The claimant’s worldview was much more complex than such straightforward motives might have initially suggested. Instead, a more attentive clarification of the claimant’s worldview revealed that just as, if not more important to him than the gaining of money, was his determination to maintain his prestige, not only in the public arena but also within his family setting. Knowing this, the amount of money to be paid in compensation became far less important than the more psychological issues surrounding the claimant’s sense of private and public prestige. In addressing these more subtle, but pivotal factors, the mediation process was accelerated and produced satisfactory results for both parties.

If parties come to understand their worldviews in a far more accurate and widely-encompassing fashion and, through this face their own sets of demands and vulnerabilities, then this in turn may evoke a far more open and empathic attitude towards the other party. Such a possibility helps to create a wholly different atmosphere in the mediation. An antagonistic attitude can be replaced by a mutually-created and mutually-responsible working alliance through which both sides may succeed in extricating themselves from a commonly-felt disagreeable situation.

The skills that are required of a PIM mediator are those which are directed towards the complainants’ more explicit and accurate recognition, in the briefest possible time, of their worldview and its complex of competing and contradictory motivations. Equally, while this can be deeply challenging as an experience, it must also be a prerequisite skill of the mediator that all these explorations are carried out in an atmosphere of care and concern. Principally, the goal is not to force any alteration in the maintained worldview but, rather, to open it to non-judgmental scrutiny. One of the great paradoxical lessons of PIM (and of psychotherapy in general) is that the less you feel required to alter something, the more willing and able you will be to alter it.

PIM mediators place substantial emphasis upon the empathic and accurate exploration of each disputant’s worldview. Of equal import within the task is the attempt to bring to light those shared universal ‘givens’ or common denominators, which we all experience as human beings. For example, we all share the experience of facing and confronting the uncertainties of living. These may be personal (such as issues surrounding health, employment, romance) or more socially-focused (the eruption of unforeseen conflict within one’s company, or country, or between competing organisations or nations). A second “given” might be seen as being that of the desire for approval and respect. And this, too, can be expressed at the personal level as well as at wider social levels. When the anxiety regarding any experience of one of life’s givens becomes intolerable, we attempt to initiate ways designed to reduce or remove that anxiety. This same “equation” holds whether our focus is upon the conflicts that are experienced “within” an individual person, or between a couple, a family, as well as between members of the same or

differing organisations, societies, religious groups, and nations. Our unique worldviews will determine what aspect of felt anxiety we respond to and how we will respond to it.

Highlighting and the recognition of shared “givens” by the disputants - even if, as is typically the case, their ways of responding to these “givens” vary radically - permits the means by which each party becomes more willing to consider the worldview of the other with greater clarity, empathy and respect. This development not only speeds up the mediation process, it also reveals further, if previously implicit, shared stances and assumptions held by both parties which, in turn, will further move them toward more honest and co-operative assessment of their conflict and its resolution.

One brief example of what is being suggested can be found in a PIM reading of the case of *Highlands v Stretcher* wherein Lord Stretcher entered mediation, ostensibly to fight for substantial financial gains. However, it emerged that a far more significant, if initially unvoiced and implicit motive played a pivotal role: He did not want his family, friends and social circle to discover that his reputation had been tarnished. Through an empathic caucus and through skilful interpersonal interventions in caucus, Lord Stretcher became more willing to realise and consider his own personal vulnerabilities which structured his worldview. This, in turn allowed him a better understanding of his opponent’s point of view. At that point, his stance toward his opponent altered from being that of an antagonist to that of a more co-operative and respectful participant in the negotiation of conflict.

Via its mediators’ trained ability to suspend immediate and personal worldview perspective judgement, to avoid premature judgements, and how and when to employ such skills as: active and empathic listening and communication, the empathic challenging and reflecting back of rigid, or “sedimented” values and assumptions within and between worldviews, PIM has succeeded in promoting a cooperative mediative atmosphere which has been extremely successful in achieving mutually responsible and respectful dispute resolutions.

Over the past years, PIM has been taught to hundreds of UK barristers and solicitors the vast majority of whom have expressed the profound impact it has had upon them both personally and professionally. For instance:

PW, a solicitor, wrote: ‘[PIM] has provided a totally different insight into the process of dispute resolution.... a substantially different style of approach and way of thinking about issues.... This course is to be strongly recommended.’

Similarly, TL, a barrister, reported: ‘My introduction to the psychology of mediation has had a profound effect upon the way I think, the way I advise clients and the conduct of my civil practice.’

And MD, a former Chancery Master concluded: ‘A fascinating course which I shall certainly recommend to others.’

The success of the PIM programme for lawyers and solicitors has led to its being restructured for other professions and services - such as those of medicine and education - where successful dispute resolution has become an increasingly necessary skill..

Working with the same principles as discussed above, and maintaining the same aim of exploration and clarification of the various worldviews already highlighted, one could develop a structured programme focused upon the enhancement of MPs’ potential for effective dialogue and mediation. Specifically, such a programme could address a number of the most significant, and stress-provoking, areas identified by MPs as requiring further enhancement of understanding and applied ability. In general, their focus rests upon the MP’s ability to communicate actively and receptively with constituents, media representatives, Ministers and colleagues and the MP’s skill in

serving as an effective mediator within a wide variety of disputational situations.

In order to be both meaningful and effective with regard to MPs' specific concerns, a PIM programme would centre upon the training of such skills as:

- the ability to apply the specialist mediative qualities developed by the PIM approach;
- the ability to adopt methods/skills with which to establish, maintain, share and bestow effective qualities of leadership;
- the enhancement of the MP's decision-making abilities so that these can be applied effectively within real-life circumstances and limitations;
- the ability to clarify the other's need for self-expression and the desire to be understood so that you can utilise this knowledge as an effective tool for dialogue and communication;
- the ability to recognise and respond effectively to the influence of time upon circumstance, behaviour and attitude;
- the ability to unravel quickly and accurately people's underlying motivations and implicit worldviews;
- the ability to respond to and challenge effectively rigid and inflexible communications;
- the ability to deal effectively with expressed anger, distress, frustration and/or cynical scepticism;
- the ability to utilise all of the above from a professional standpoint designed to establish, maintain, share and bestow effective qualities of leadership.

If, as has become increasingly apparent, the wider area of mediation is on its way to becoming a more generally recognised and accepted pathway toward effective and respectful dispute resolution, its impact possibilities lie in a very broad constituency. In such circumstances, the potential benefits to MPs of an approach to mediation which is structured by the efficacy and expertise of psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge would not only be obvious in their direct consequences but, just as important, would have their lasting benefit upon the more indirect concerns of alleviating unnecessary and dysfunctional level of stress and improving morale and satisfaction.

MPs as Mediators?

There are several reasons why ADR would not be readily embraced by MPs.

Firstly, there is a belief, deeply embedded in the British outlook, that psychological notions are at best oblique and at worst irrelevant babble. In the best spirit of self-taught amateurism, politicians claim to have an intuitive feel for problem-solving, which no amount of psychological theory will improve. The obvious comparison is with senior managers. Like MPs, they often have a sense, born of experience and native wit, about how people and situations should be managed - but few of them these days would dismiss as irrelevant the many techniques of persuasion, consensus-building and conflict-containment that can be acquired from the field of psychology.

Secondly, there is an underlying assumption within political culture that real conflicts must produce winners and losers. The mutuality and consensuality of mediation may seem like an attempt to avoid such harsh reality. It is quite true to say that there are some conflicts of interest which can only result in victory or defeat. But not all. Most MPs have had to deal in recent months

with countless problems associated with the Child Support Agency. Mothers feel imposed upon and denied the financial support that they deserve; absent fathers feel that the CSA is their enemy; CSA officials feel like victims of a poorly-designed institution which leaves them little opportunity to solve problems. It is hard to imagine that such problems will be resolved without the presence of a respectful neutral party who can try to see the problem from the perspectives of all concerned. Attempting to solve the problem of single-parent families by creating winners or losers is unlikely ever to work; only an alternative means of resolving such disputes could work.

Thirdly, it could be argued that mediation is all very well, but takes up too much time. In legal disputes mediation tends to save time as well as money, but lawyers are not under the same pressures as MPs to attend to duties beyond their case-load. MPs could benefit from mediation skills, but this will not free them from the burden of over-crowded schedules.

The essence of good mediation is good communication. And MPs tend to be good communicators. Traditionally, politics has been about communication from the elite to the many. Broadcasting is a good example of this. As communication technologies are transformed and the transmission of political messages and ideas becomes more interactive and dialogical, with the emergence of unprecedented connections between representatives and those they represent, there is scope for MPs to adopt a more inclusive style of communication.

The great success of political mediation in the past decade has been in Northern Ireland. Here was a conflict replete with deep historical antagonisms, rigidly adversarial positions and a sad record of failure to reach binding resolutions. Leaving aside the cause of the conflict, as far as anyone can, it had become clear that many of the attitudes brought to the conflict-solving table, both by political parties and factions and by the wider public, concerned emotive issues of identity. All sides yearned to be better understood; few made much effort to understand their rivals' worldviews. A large part of the success of the Northern Irish peace process resulted from politicians abandoning the win-lose rhetoric of traditional politics and beginning to adopt the outlook and practices of mediators. This did not only happen at the highest level: in communities across Northern Ireland energetic efforts towards dispute mediation have been made, often resulting in an easing of tensions that had once seemed intractable. The Northern Ireland Mediation Network, formed in 1991, has 70 trained mediators working in communities on conflicts ranging from neighbourhood disputes to the routes of parades. Brendan MacAllister of the Mediation Network has written that:

“Reconciliation should not be confused with reconciliation. Reconciliation is a difficult and arduous journey which has reconciliation as its ultimate destination, the place of harmony. Fundamental to the work of reconciliation is the task of building or rebuilding relationships. In some parts of Northern Ireland whole communities live in enmity with each other while in many other places whole communities are estranged from each other. People have been turned away from each other, sometimes through violence and trauma; sometimes simply through disappointment in each other. Either way, between and within the nationalist and unionist traditions relationships have been damaged or estranged and, in many cases, destroyed by conflict. One of the most basic ways for people to build new relationships is by communicating with each other. However, communication becomes difficult when people are estranged or hurt with each other, or, indeed, do not trust each other. There are hard things which need to be said and hard things which need to be heard if conflicted relationships are to progress. Mediation helps people have difficult conversations. (*Fortnight* magazine, 4.2.00)”

Perhaps that is the most valuable skill that MPs could bring to their job: the capacity to facilitate

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Footnotes

¹ Mackie, K., Miles D. and Marsh, W., *Commercial Dispute Resolution: An ADR Practice Guide*, Butterworths, 1995, p.44

Finally it could be argued that mediation is all very well, but takes up too much time. In legal disputes mediation tends to save time as well as money, but lawyers are not under the same pressures as MPs to attend to duties beyond their case-load. MPs could benefit from mediation skills, but this will not free them from the burden of over-crowded schedules.

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