

## Parliament, MPs and the public - Hansard Society facts and figures

The Hansard Society is the UK's leading non-partisan political research and education charity which exists to strengthen parliamentary democracy and encourage greater public involvement in politics. Our recent research offers insights into the modernisation of Parliament, how the work of Parliament is communicated, the role of MPs and what the public think of MPs and Parliament.

### Modernising Parliament

*New Politics, New Parliament?* (2005) reviewed parliamentary modernisation since 1997. Some of its key recommendations were:

- The House of Commons should establish a Business Committee responsible for managing the parliamentary timetable.
- The introduction of a formalised procedure for the establishment of parliamentary commissions of inquiry, reporting to the House or a specific select committee, rather than to ministers.
- The establishment of a Commons Merit Committee to serve as a sifting mechanism to identify those Statutory Instruments that are important and merit further debate or consideration.
- The establishment of a Petitions Committee to assess issues of public concern and, if appropriate, to make referrals for debate or committee inquiry.

Further details of the recommendations made by *New Politics, New Parliament*, can be found at: [http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/assets/Hansard\\_Society\\_research\\_-\\_a\\_summary.pdf](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/assets/Hansard_Society_research_-_a_summary.pdf)

### Communicating the Work of Parliament

*Members Only? Parliament in the Public Eye* (2005), the report of the Puttnam Commission, examined the communication of parliamentary democracy. Some of its key recommendations were:

- A Communications Service should be established for Parliament, bringing together various communication activities within a departmental remit.
- A single Joint Committee of both Houses should be established, responsible for communication matters, though MPs or Peers should be able to consider separately matters solely relevant to their respective Houses.
- A communication strategy for Parliament should be adopted, with annual evaluation against targets. This must be accompanied by a necessary and long-term budgetary commitment.
- Legislation should be enacted to provide for the House of Commons Commission to be elected by secret ballot.

A follow-up report, *Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: Coming into Focus?*, considers the progress made in the eighteen months since the launch of the commission's findings. Further details of the Puttnam Commission recommendations can be found at: [http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/assets/Key\\_Recommendations.pdf](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/assets/Key_Recommendations.pdf)

### The role of MPs

*A Year in the Life: From member of public to Member of Parliament* (2006) looked at the experience of new MPs and found that:

- Only 7% of those entering Parliament for the first time in May 2005 believed themselves to be 'very familiar' with parliamentary procedure; twelve months later, this stood at 15%.
- Over the year, new MPs spent less time in the Chamber than they had anticipated at the

- outset (May 2005: 24%; May 2006: 14%); they reported spending almost half their time on constituency work.
- 71% of new MPs highlighted areas for parliamentary reform, including simplifying the legislative system, rejecting powers of patronage and introducing family-friendly features.
  - In May 2005, 43% expected to be 'nearly always' strongly influenced by the advice of their party leadership; in May 2006, this figure had risen to 50%. Yet by the end of their first 12 months in the Commons, 30% of the intake had voted against their party.
  - A third of the new MPs had some form of party spokesperson position at the end of their first year in Parliament. But while 71% of the new intake hoped to become a Minister when they were elected in May 2005, this had dropped to 60% by May 2006.

The full text of *A Year in the Life: From member of public to Member of Parliament* can be found at: <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/node/view/694>

### **What does the public think of MPs and Parliament?**

The *Audit of Political Engagement* is a yearly report measuring the nature and extent of political engagement in the UK. The fourth *Audit* demonstrated the public's opinion of MPs and Parliament.

- 35% of the public are satisfied with the way that the Westminster Parliament works and 33% are dissatisfied
- 30% of respondents are satisfied with the way MPs in general are doing their job and 41% are satisfied with the way their individual MP is doing his/her job.
- The public believe that media (54%), local councils (48%) and business (37%) have more impact on their everyday lives than the Westminster Parliament (26%).
- Constituents believe that the most important ways for MPs to spend their time are: representing the views of local people in the House of Commons (43%), debating important issues in the House of Commons (32%); holding the government to account (31%); and dealing with the problems of individual constituents (31%).
- Lack of time and lack of interest are the two most commonly-cited factors that prevent people from getting more involved in politics (32% and 22% respectively).

The full text of *Audit 4* can be found at:

[http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/assets/Audit\\_4\\_final\\_2007\\_without\\_pics.pdf](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/assets/Audit_4_final_2007_without_pics.pdf)

### **Improving Financial Scrutiny**

*The Fiscal Maze* (2006) looks at how Parliament holds government to account over the money it raises and spends. It argued that Parliament could and should do more to make an impact and secure full accountability from government. The report's key recommendations include:

- Parliamentary committees should make greater use of the time between the pre-Budget report and the main Budget to take evidence on the government's plans.
- A parliamentary committee should consider the entire Finance Bill in draft.
- Parliament should improve its scrutiny of tax legislation and administration; options include establishing a separate Tax Administration or Taxation Committee in the Commons or a Joint Committee on Tax Administration.
- Parliament should consider piloting a Finance and Audit Sub-Committee for selected select committees.
- There should be more systematic follow-up of the reports of the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee.

To receive a free PDF copy of *The Fiscal Maze: Parliament, Government and Public Money* please email: [r.allen@hansard.lse.ac.uk](mailto:r.allen@hansard.lse.ac.uk)