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*a year in the life*
from member of public to member of parliament

*gemma rosenblatt*
A Year in the Life:
From member of public to Member of Parliament

Gemma Rosenblatt
A Year in the Life:
From member of public to Member of Parliament

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We set the agenda on parliamentary reform through our work with parliamentarians and others to improve the operation of parliamentary democracy and encourage greater accessibility and closer engagement with the public.

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The least boring job in the world
Lynne Featherstone MP

The letters ‘MP’ give you access all areas
Ed Vaizey MP

MPs are victims of their own desire to be loved
Charles Walker MP
Acknowledgements

This report could not have been written without the participation and support of MPs elected for the first time in 2005. In particular, thanks is due to the 21 MPs who participated in a series of rolling interviews throughout the year, who in total dedicated many hours to this research project. I am also grateful to the MPs who took part in one-off interviews for this project and to those who spared the time to complete surveys at the beginning and end of the year. A full list of participants is set out in the Introduction.

I am thankful to colleagues at the Hansard Society, in particular Alex Brazier, Clare Ettinghausen, Ross Ferguson, Susanna Kalitowski, Nicola Matthews and, for sub-editing this report, Virginia Gibbons. During the course of this project, many others contributed to this work, including James Robertson at the House of Commons, Michael Rush and Lord Tyler. I am also grateful to Jill Stuart for assisting with the data and to all those who commented on drafts, especially Jackie Ashley, Philip Cowley and Peter Riddell.

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It is widely thought that politicians are distrusted, but perhaps this is no more the case than it has always been. Symptoms of this distrust include a pervasive sense that an MP’s lot is an easy one, with long summer breaks and automatic membership to what was once described as the best club in the country.

But what is parliamentary life really like? What motivates a person to stand for election and what expectations do they have of life the day after the votes are counted? What are the challenges they face and how well equipped do they feel to take them on? Do they have a work-life balance? In short, what stands between them and being a high performing Member of our legislature?

This Hansard Society report addresses these issues and identifies important lessons that Parliament may find useful as it confronts the challenges it faces. And, in the process, it shows that commonly held views about the life of an MP are often very different to the reality.

Far from being driven by the prospect of financial reward, some MPs reported taking a pay cut when they were elected. Nor are they moved only by the prospect of gaining the red boxes that accompany ministerial office. More likely than not, a new MP is motivated by a desire to make a difference, by their passion for politics or through an existing affiliation with their constituency. Indeed, even a year after their election, the vast majority of those surveyed believe that dealing with constituents’ problems and promoting the constituency are their two most important functions.

But when they arrive at Westminster they find themselves facing many of the challenges of running a small business (managing one or more offices, employing staff and controlling budgets) as well as searching for somewhere to live.

Frustration with Parliament as a workplace is evident. We view those elected as our MPs the moment the Returning Officer announces the result on election night and, not surprisingly, new MPs want to get started quickly. But it can take six weeks or more for an office to be allocated and even longer for a computer to be installed. And although the authorities have tried to make life more tolerable during these early days by providing laptops, no one can escape the fact that Sir Charles Barry’s gothic palace was not built with hot-desking in mind.
What about work-life balance? In part, MPs have become the victims of technology. What was once a morning mail delivery has now become a 24/7 electronic bombardment from constituents, pressure groups and industry. By the end of their first year, new MPs reported that they were working an average of over 70 hours a week.

Understanding the realities of life at Westminster is an essential first step in building trust in the political system and thereby increasing the numbers of people participating in the democratic process. Accenture has sponsored A Year in the Life because we believe it will become an important and influential contribution to the debate on the role and priorities of MPs, and will help to shape Parliament’s approach to catering for the needs of Members in the 21st century.

Lis Astall
Managing Director for Government for Europe, Africa and Latin America, Accenture
Introduction
The project

This report tells the story of what happens when members of the public become Members of Parliament. We give an insight into what actually takes place after the votes are counted, the acceptance speeches made and the champagne drunk. In other words, once the real work begins.

Election to Parliament is an exciting, daunting, challenging and emotional period. There are approximately 60 million Britons, of whom just 646 have the letters ‘MP’ after their name. Once a person is elected to Parliament, he or she becomes a member of the exclusive club that is the House of Commons, one of the central institutions of the UK political system.

With election comes a sense of honour and achievement, but also a sense of duty. Those elected in May 2005 were acutely aware of the responsibility they had to the thousands of individuals who live within the area of the country that they now represent.

Of course, electoral victory did not always come cheaply. In the run-up to an election, prospective candidates were to be found pounding the streets and campaigning in the local area. Once in Parliament, few regretted the decision, yet there were obvious personal sacrifices. A few days after electoral victory, MPs left their families and headed to Westminster. With the exception of London MPs, this was to be a journey repeated on a weekly basis. Some would come to welcome the journey as a chance to catch up on work; others would resent it for its tiresomeness and the time it stole from their lives.

Many MPs also experience a sense of guilt about leaving domestic and parenting responsibilities in the hands of a partner who more often than not stays behind. Their family unit has to manage without them during most of the working week.

The new MPs are busy from the outset. They have to learn the parliamentary ropes, whilst also being a responsive constituency representative. In the early weeks, the new MPs undertake this without the support of an office and, in many cases, the assistance of staff. Many know little about the system in which they are now operating – and they have to learn quickly.
New Members soon realise that almost everything has to be done in a hurry if they are to stay on top of their workload. From the moment that the Maiden Speech has been delivered, the MPs are fully-fledged parliamentarians. They have overcome their first big hurdle – performing in the Chamber of the House. This report considers the hurdles that follow. It looks at the experiences of the most recent intake of MPs and how they set about learning their new trade.

Our study

The Hansard Society spent 12 months monitoring a group of 21 newly elected Members of Parliament as they settled into the role and shaped their approach to the job. It is hoped that such information will assist in developing public understanding of the role of MPs at a time of disengagement towards the political process and cynicism towards those within it. A majority of the public know little about what their elected representatives actually do and how the political process or Parliament operates. Six months after the 2005 general election, only 44 per cent of the public could correctly name their local MP.¹

Participants spoke about their expectations, aspirations and experiences at different times during the year. This was to be a source of knowledge about the newest intake of politicians. But this report is not simply the story of a diverse group of individuals who happen to do the same job. Collectively, MPs constitute the House of Commons and any institution is only as effective or ineffective as the individuals within it. By looking at how new Members become an established part of that institution, it is possible to gain a new and unique perspective into our democratic processes.

Although the 2005 general election did not result in a change of government, it did deliver a turnover of almost a fifth of the House of Commons (19 per cent). As with any organisation or institution, a significant influx of new members is liable to shape the environment in which they operate. It certainly has an impact upon the political and policy agenda.

This project was an opportunity to view the UK political system through the eyes of those who had recently entered at its centre. We considered:

• The background of politicians entering the House of Commons in 2005;
• The experience of entering Parliament as an elected representative;
• The motivations that drive the latest generation of MPs;
• What they hoped to achieve during their time in Parliament;
• How they perceived Parliament and how this changed over the year;
• How they approached their role and prioritised their work;
• How Parliament and the parties could best support them in their role.

Interviews: The project was based on one-to-one interviews with each participant at the beginning, middle and end of the 12-month period beginning May 2005. The 21 participants are listed below, and more information about the interview process is set out in Appendix A:

- **David Anderson**: Labour MP for Blaydon
- **Philip Davies**: Conservative MP for Shipley
- **James Duddridge**: Conservative MP for Rochford and Southend East
- **Tim Farron**: Liberal Democrat MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale
- **Lynne Featherstone**: Liberal Democrat MP for Hornsey and Wood Green
- **Michael Gove**: Conservative MP for Surrey Heath
- **Andrew Gwynne**: Labour MP for Denton and Reddish
- **Mark Harper**: Conservative MP for Forest of Dean
- **David Jones**: Conservative MP for Clwyd West
- **Susan Kramer**: Liberal Democrat MP for Richmond Park
- **Peter Law**: Independent MP for Blaenau Gwent
- **John Leech**: Liberal Democrat MP for Manchester Withington
- **Anne Milton**: Conservative MP for Guildford
- **Greg Mulholland**: Liberal Democrat MP for Leeds North West
- **Mike Penning**: Conservative MP for Hemel Hempstead
- **Linda Riordan**: Labour MP for Halifax
- **Dan Rogerson**: Liberal Democrat MP for Cornwall North
- **Alison Seabeck**: Labour MP for Plymouth Devonport
- **Angela Smith**: Labour MP for Sheffield Hillsborough
- **Jo Swinson**: Liberal Democrat MP for East Dunbartonshire
- **Charles Walker**: Conservative MP for Broxbourne

All first-time MPs had been informed about the research and invited to take part in this project. Interviews with additional new MPs were conducted during the course of the year. The four new MPs who participated in one-off interviews are listed below, and more information about this can be found in Appendix B:

- **Martin Horwood**: Liberal Democrat MP for Cheltenham
- **Sadiq Khan**: Labour MP for Tooting
- **Kitty Ussher**: Labour MP for Burnley
- **Ed Vaizey**: Conservative MP for Wantage and Didcot

We sought to compare the views and experiences of new Members with those of their longer-serving colleagues. In addition to existing research, we spoke to the MPs listed below. This provided a context to the comments of participants and enabled a more comprehensive assessment of generational and life-cycle differences between groups of parliamentarians.
• Gwyneth Dunwoody: Labour MP for Crewe and Nantwich (first elected in 1966)
• Mark Fisher: Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent Central (first elected in 1983)
• Julie Kirkbride: Conservative MP for Bromsgrove (first elected in 1997)
• Joan Ruddock: Labour MP for Lewisham Deptford (first elected in 1987)
• Dari Taylor: Labour MP for Stockton South (first elected in 1997)
• Rt Hon Sir George Young: Conservative MP for North West Hampshire (first elected in 1974)

A total of 70 interviews were conducted during the course of the year.

Surveys: In addition to this qualitative research, the Hansard Society sent surveys to all new Members immediately after their election to Parliament and then again in May 2006. This enabled us to gather the views of a wider group of new Members and to contextualise their priorities and how they operated with the responses of earlier intakes. We received 42 responses in May 2005 and 52 responses in May 2006. More information about these surveys is set out in Appendix B.

The report

This report contains the views and thoughts of a group of MPs talking openly about what the role of MP entails. It provides a framework to consider who our MPs are and what we want them to do. All quotes in this report are taken from interviews by the author with participating newly elected and longer-serving Members, unless otherwise indicated. Quotes made by longer-serving MPs are referenced with the year they were first elected to Parliament. Some quotes are anonymous at the request of participants.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the participants. It sets out their lives before Parliament, their motivations to stand for election and what skills they believe are important for MPs to have. Chapter 2 then considers their early days as MPs and the range of emotions they felt when entering Parliament for the first time as elected representatives. It looks at how the House of Commons welcomes its newest Members, including who assists them in learning the ropes and what information and guidance is given to them at this early stage.

Chapter 3 sets out how the new MPs operated and how they perceived their role. It looks at their day-to-day activity and what factors influenced their actions and voting behaviour. Chapter 4 then examines their initial objectives, ambitions and expectations and how these developed during the course of the year. In so doing, it also examines how MPs measured their own success or failure.

Chapter 5 looks at what the new Members knew about Parliament when they arrived and the extent to which their knowledge increased during the course of the year.
Alongside this, it sets out their views on how Parliament operates as an institution, and considers how opinions towards parliamentary procedures changed as they became more familiar with the workings of the Commons.

In Chapter 6, the newly elected share their views on colleagues and consider whether a process of institutionalisation has occurred. They analyse the degree to which their intake has been moulded by the norms and traditions of Westminster. Finally, the conclusion considers what the findings of the project tell us about new MPs, their experiences in Parliament and how our political system operates.

The report presents a year in the life of those newly elected to represent the public in Parliament. It pieces together the different aspects of 12 months in the Commons, from learning the ropes in the early days and weeks, to the views of new Members on becoming embedded into the institution and how their actions, perceptions, behaviour and knowledge changed and developed as a consequence. **There is a commonly held prejudice that MPs are ‘all the same’ or ‘just in it for themselves’. This report challenges and rejects this view.**

It is hoped that *A Year in the Life* will stimulate debate and discussion about how MPs learn to adapt to life in the Commons and balance competing responsibilities; how Parliament operates as a working environment; and the wider implications of this for our democracy.
Chapter 1
The new MPs

Introduction

There isn’t an obvious way of becoming an MP. It’s not something you get in your careers advice service. – Julie Kirkbride, first elected in 1997

In May 2005, 119 people were elected to the House of Commons for the first time. The intake was made up of 51 Conservative MPs, 40 Labour MPs, 20 Liberal Democrat MPs, seven MPs representing the minor parties and one Independent MP. The intake included 38 women and five black and minority ethnic MPs. The average age of the new Members was 41.

The House of Commons remains predominantly male and middle class. Today’s politicians are drawn from a broad range of professions, but the degree of socio-economic variation between Members of each political party is no longer as broad as it has been in the past. This chapter considers who the new MPs are, why they stood for Parliament and what skills they believe are required to become a good MP.

Paths to Parliament – where do they come from?

Like their predecessors, the 2005 intake brought a range of skills and experiences with them to Parliament. Although no two MPs are ever the same, participants have been grouped into a number of categories which describe their path to Westminster: ‘elected politicians’, ‘politicos’, ‘returners’, ‘converts’, ‘professionals’, and ‘public sector workers’. These are not definitive categories, rather they are broad themes that we have devised to illustrate their backgrounds and varying routes to Westminster.

The elected politicians: Many of the 2005 intake were serving or had previously served as elected representatives in other bodies. Lynne Featherstone and her colleague John Leech had been local councillors. However, Featherstone had not always planned to enter politics:

I didn’t come from any sort of political background. My parents owned a shop…There weren’t these political conversations at the dinner party that I so
envy when I read about people like Shirley Williams. That didn’t exist and I didn’t think people like me could become politicians. I didn’t study it, I didn’t know anything about it, and I didn’t think I was allowed to have opinions about it.

Featherstone did not join a political party until the age of 40. She explained: ‘In terms of politics, I found myself leader of the opposition on Haringey council when I barely knew what a councillor was.’ From there, she was elected to the Greater London Assembly for the Liberal Democrats and then stood for Parliament. Her professional background had been in design and Featherstone identified parallels between these worlds: ‘you’re working in a male world, you have to persuade people to agree with your ideas, and you have to be able to sell that message to a wider population’. John Leech continued serving as a Manchester city councillor when elected to the Commons. He had been on the council since 1998:

*I didn’t have a particular career as such. I was effectively a full-time politician. I worked for the RAC but it was only to pay the bills, it wasn’t a career. I was deputy leader of the [council] opposition until I got elected.*

### Training grounds

Local government continues to be an important training ground for politicians, although Conservative MPs have traditionally been less likely than their counterparts to have worked their way up the ranks this way. MPs tend to have served in local government rather than the devolved legislatures and this was the case for half of the 2005 intake. Four members of the intake had served in the European Parliament, three in the National Assembly for Wales and five had been elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Two members of the 2005 intake had served in the Scottish Parliament. Relatively few Members of the Scottish Parliament have been elected to Westminster since devolution, although several MPs have moved north to take up seats in Edinburgh.

### The politicos

*The politicos:* MPs can face criticism nowadays for being ‘career politicians’ who are drawn from a political class and bring with them no real knowledge of the ‘outside world’. Kitty Ussher admitted: ‘I hate the phrase “career politician”, but I suppose that’s how some people will see me since I used to work in the Westminster village before I came into Parliament.’ She had always known that she ‘wanted to have a go at being an MP at some point’ and said: ‘Politicians weren’t those strange things over there. I knew them. I knew it could be done.’ After university, Ussher worked as a researcher for a series of Labour MPs. She later worked as an economist before becoming special adviser to Patricia Hewitt MP.

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Alison Seabeck's family background was 'steeped in politics' and she described herself as having a long and varied history in Parliament:

I worked for six years for Roy Hattersley, deputy leader of the Labour Party, and for 12 years with Nick Raynsford – in opposition when he was shadow spokesperson and then as a minister... that has been enormously important in giving me a good grounding in what goes on in Westminster. I have done every aspect of the job, if you like, apart from standing in the House and giving major speeches.

She had not intended to work in the political field from a young age, but arrived at the point where she no longer felt challenged by her work and so overturned her 'conscious decision to not be directly involved in politics'.

The 'career politician'

Labour MPs are increasingly drawn from the ranks of 'career politician'. Yet many of the participants spoke disparagingly about a trend in which graduates become political researchers and then politicians.

One of the problems for the last 10 years – happening in the three main parties – is the career politician. People who from age seven dream of being an MP, do politics A-level, a politics degree, become a researcher for the Party’s headquarters, and then become an MP. The public want three-dimensional parliamentarians, people who had a life before they became an MP, who have got families, who have other life experiences. That will give them more confidence in MPs and in Parliament. – Sadiq Khan

The returners: Charles Walker worked as a researcher in Parliament in his early 20s. He explained his decision to then start working in public relations and marketing: 'I was always interested in politics, but being a researcher is not a long-term job as it has no career structure.' Several participants followed a similar path to Walker; namely, working in politics at the start of their careers, before deciding to gain experience outside this field. James Duddridge was a banker, having worked at Barclays for almost 10 years. However, while at university he worked for the Conservative Party and later became a research assistant to Bernard Jenkin MP. Duddridge decided to return to politics because he found it rewarding and believed 'you could make a difference as an MP that you couldn’t make as a banker or businessman'.
Spurning the 'insider' route

Many among the 2005 intake, particularly on the Conservative benches, made a conscious decision to work outside Westminster for several years before standing for election to the Commons. While aware of their electoral ambitions, they spurned the 'insider' route in favour of a career outside politics. Their motivation was to acquire useful skills for a future political career, but also ensure that their employment prospects did not depend solely on the unpredictable world of politics. Many who followed this route were critical of those who had only ever worked in or around politics.

The converts: Several participants had worked outside politics for many years, before circumstances led them to return to education, to then work in the political world, and finally to be elected to the Commons themselves. Mike Penning left school at 16 and spent several years in the army before becoming a lifeguard and then a fireman. He left the fire service due to back problems and subsequently went to university. He began to shadow Teddy Taylor MP and worked freelance for national newspapers. He then acquired considerable experience working for the Conservative Party, including as deputy head of news and media at Conservative Central Office. Another mature student amongst this Parliament’s ranks is Labour MP Angela Smith. She had been a secretary, working for the NHS and banking sector, before returning to university and then teaching in further education for nearly a decade. Her time as a secretary equipped her with administrative skills, and 10 years as a local councillor provided her with insight into the process of discipline and the Whip system, as well as etiquette in the Chamber. She had no previous work experience around Westminster before becoming an MP.

The professionals: Mark Harper, Conservative MP for Forest of Dean, trained as a chartered accountant before working in finance and marketing. Lawyers are also well represented amongst the ranks of MP and David Jones and Sadiq Khan both practised law. Jo Swinson, the youngest Member of Parliament, had volunteered as a local party campaigner, but had not undertaken paid work in politics. After university, she worked in business and marketing. Swinson discovered a passion for politics after standing as the Liberal Democrat candidate for Hull East in 2001. She felt that the private commercial world did not offer sufficient opportunities to develop her own ethics in the workplace and decided to make politics her day job.
The 'marketing Member'

Alongside the trend of 'career politician', we may be witnessing the emergence of the 'marketing Member'. The House of Commons has long attracted those from the legal profession. Nowadays, however, the number entering Parliament from a career in marketing is on the rise. One of the most common backgrounds for participants in this project was marketing and public relations, with around a fifth of the intake having worked in this field at some point.

Public sector workers: Anne Milton, Conservative MP for Guildford, thought that too few public sector workers stand for election and believed that more Members should have frontline experience in careers such as nursing. Milton had worked as a nurse in a variety of jobs, but immediately prior to election she was self-employed as a medical adviser for social housing providers. Milton commented on the 'big leap' between being a parliamentary candidate and being an MP. While undecided as to whether no previous experience in Westminster was a positive or negative feature, she nonetheless recognised that it gave her a greater freedom to 'carve out an individual style', as she was less likely to imitate the approach of others.

Why enter politics?

MPs receive kudos and respect from some quarters but mockery and cynicism from others. The role entails long hours, hard work and, for the majority, many miles of travelling between constituency and Parliament. This does not deter candidates, who spoke of incurring high financial costs on the path to the Commons. The participants explained that they had been spurred on by a range of factors, including an affiliation with the constituency, a passion for politics, the desire to make a difference, a public service ethos and the honour that the role brings. If the desire for 'fame and fortune' was indeed a motivation, it was not shared with us.

Affiliation with the constituency: Linda Riordan is an example of an MP who was motivated to stand by a strong affiliation with the constituency. Riordan had been working in the constituency office of her predecessor, Alice Mahon. She had come to politics later in her career, having returned to university following the onset of rheumatoid arthritis. Having watched Mahon, she was aware of what the job entailed and that it was hard work. However, her desire to represent Halifax meant she was willing to invest the required time and effort. She firmly believed that the best representative for the constituency was somebody whose 'heart and soul is there'.

Passion for politics: Tim Farron explained that he was 'passionate about change'. He described himself as 'an opinionated person with a sense of indignation about the
“bad guys”’. Having been involved in politics since the age of 16, he had wanted to be an MP for much of the last 20 years. Conservative MP David Jones had been interested in Parliament and politics since he was a small boy: ‘I think the truth of the matter is that you want to come here because you get a buzz out of politics and this is the place where you get the biggest buzz.’ Becoming an MP had been his long-term ambition, and Jones had been a political activist from the age of 18.

**Making a difference:** As a trade unionist, David Anderson discovered a passion for representing people. He came to believe that Parliament was the best place to make a difference:

> I think I can make a contribution on behalf of ordinary working people, not just in my own constituency but across the country...It’s the old cliché: I want to change the world. It’s harder than changing your socks, but I do want to see changes. I want to see my government being more progressive.

Anderson began his working life as an underground mechanic in the coal mines before becoming a care worker at the end of the 1980s. He had no illusions about the impact that one person can make, yet was aware that ‘if people from my background and with my interests are not here arguing, there will be people here from other backgrounds and interests who will.’

Philip Davies recognised that everybody tried to make a difference in what they do. He had never worked in politics or around Westminster, but wanted ‘to do something about the things that matter to me’:

> When you’re not happy with things and you think the country should go in a particular direction, rather than going to the pub and complaining about it with everyone else, you should try and do something about it.

**An ill-defined concept?**

Almost all MPs come in with some, perhaps ill-defined or not very well thought out sense that you can, in that very irritating modern phrase, ‘make a difference’. That you could actually change things. Few of us, certainly in my generation, knew very much about the House of Commons or the parliamentary system or how things could be achieved or changed. – Mark Fisher, first elected in 1983

**Public service ethos:** Michael Gove had been a journalist since leaving university and before his election to the Commons he was an editor and columnist at *The Times*. He
had spent a lot of time writing about politics, but his formal experience of the Commons was limited. As time went on, Gove began to develop a greater sympathy for those who discharge political functions and responsibilities. He decided that it was ‘about time’ that he did something worthwhile:

*Being an MP seemed to combine some of the skills that I have with a job that would, I thought, be endlessly fascinating and hopefully worthwhile.*

**An honourable profession:** Charles Walker was motivated by the honour of being an MP:

*It beats a 9-5 job. It is not the money that draws me to being an MP but the wonderful honour. If I die tonight, I die a happy man.*

He also thought he could be good at the job and hoped one day to be regarded as a great parliamentarian. Similarly, Mike Penning wanted to do his bit to ‘restore the prestige of politics’.

**Last minute circumstances:** Short-term circumstances and opportunities can prompt people into standing for Parliament. Most candidates have been preparing for election for several years, but there are some who find themselves in the right place at the right time. This happened to the Independent MP Peter Law. He decided to stand for the Commons after the Labour Party put in place an All Women Shortlist for the constituency of Blaenau Gwent. When asked what motivated him to stand, he explained:

*The people decided. The Labour Party put in place positive discrimination. I felt this was unfair and the public reacted with me. It was a way to give someone a position because they are in an influential position and I thought this was a disgrace...people stood up and said ‘we’ll show you’.*

Law continued to also be a Member of the National Assembly for Wales, believing that it brought a synergy to the role – a so-called ‘one stop shop’. Once elected, Law wanted ‘to speak for my people and for poorer people’. When asked what he would like to achieve as a parliamentarian, he highlighted his socialist beliefs and the desire to tackle social exclusion and poverty. Sadly, Peter Law died during the course of the year.

**What does it take to be a good MP?**

*Any job description that you draw up would automatically bar half of us from the job.* – David Anderson
You don’t necessarily need to be an intellectual but you do need common sense. – Alison Seabeck

The participants identified what skills were needed to perform their role. They believed that an MP has to be a 'people person', a good listener, have good communication and management skills and, of course, stamina.

A 'people person': New Members had to spend time courting people and were aware of the importance of getting on well with those from all backgrounds and viewpoints. Dealing with distraught constituents or attending a variety of events required the MP to be a so-called 'people person'. Philip Davies described it as the one and only quality you need. Linda Riordan agreed that 'people skills' are needed to effectively fulfil the role; the ability to relate to people is, she claimed, 'the most important skill an MP can have'.

A good listener: To be a 'people person' requires MPs to absorb what is taking place around them and to be responsive to constituents and colleagues. James Duddridge noted that the most valued skill in Parliament may indeed be the ability to debate and argue, but he believed that the most important quality for an MP to have is to be able to listen. Duddridge highlighted that the skills needed to get elected are not necessarily the skills needed to become a good Member of Parliament.

Communication skills: Several participants identified communication skills as vital to their new role. Anne Milton emphasised the importance of being able to explain complex issues to constituents in straightforward language. This skill is also essential for the Member who wishes to make an impact in the Chamber or at a meeting at No. 10, as Angela Smith commented: 'If you have 20 minutes with the Prime Minister and there are five other people in the room, you need to make sure you make an impact. As far as I can see, that's part of the job of being an MP – to get your point across when it matters.' Consequently, Smith identified the ability to communicate as the number one skill for an MP.

Management skills: Mark Harper pointed to the management skills needed by MPs. Each Member has an allowance that can be used to hire staff and to pay for premises in the constituency. In the early weeks and months, newcomers had to decide what work to devolve to staff and how best to manage their offices. Mark Harper pointed out that this was more difficult for those of his new colleagues who had never before employed staff. Indeed, several participants said that managing staff was particularly time-consuming and they were aware of a variety of problems encountered by colleagues as a result of hiring the wrong person for the job.

Managing the work of others had to be complemented with managing their own work. Members had to be 'ruthless' with time management; they had to be able to
say 'no'. Labour MP Andrew Gwynne explained: 'When you are first elected, you feel obliged to say yes to everybody to not disappoint them, but you soon realise you don’t need to.'

**Stamina:** The job demands long hours and often seven-day weeks. One MP, Susan Kramer, placed the ability to go without sleep at the top of her list of skills. Without a huge amount of energy, MPs would crack (and some do). As David Anderson put it, 'If you’re a clock-watcher, don’t bother putting yourself up for the job.'

### Advice to would-be MPs

The Members were asked what advice they would give to would-be MPs. Some responses focused on career preparation in advance of standing for election, whilst others gave warnings about operating within Parliament and having realistic expectations. Angela Smith, for example, warned prospective candidates to 'take it slowly in the first year' and not to 'think that you have to be a fully-fledged MP in the first three or four weeks'. A longer-serving Member, Julie Kirkbride, acknowledged that the role brings huge amounts of satisfaction, but advised: 'Whatever achievements you have in politics, don’t expect any gratitude for them, because you will be sorely disappointed... you have to have a fairly thick skin and accept the knock-backs.' Greg Mulholland believed that anyone who wants to be an MP should think about the role in terms of opportunities: 'If you can raise the right things, in the right way, at the right time, you can find that you are achieving far more than you ever thought possible.'

### Conclusion

New MPs arrived at Parliament through a variety of routes and collectively they brought experience from a wide range of professions. Unlike other organisations, there is no clear career path for entering the House of Commons. There may be a current trend towards ‘career politicians’, but this was not exclusively the case. Although many had been interested in politics since a young age, others moved into politics later in their careers. Increasing numbers were drawn from the marketing and public relations sector.

The participants highlighted the need for politicians to be drawn from varying backgrounds and professions and to bring different perspectives to the role. They pointed out that this is to the benefit of our representative democracy. The skills identified by them as important for MPs to have were not intrinsic to one profession or another. Rather, qualities such as being a 'people person', being a good listener and
having stamina are as likely to be personality-based as professionally taught. It was noted that **the skills and experience needed to fight an election campaign are not necessarily the skills needed to be an effective Member of Parliament.**

Personal gain was, perhaps unsurprisingly, not mentioned by participants as a reason for standing for Parliament. Rather, they expressed a desire to ‘make a difference’. The constituency emphasis was strong, but an attachment to one’s local area cannot be, in itself, enough to sustain candidates through competitive selection and election campaigns. All had an underlying interest in politics and throughout the year they illustrated their experiences and perceptions through the viewpoint of their own political philosophy.
Chapter 2
The early days

Introduction

You find out you are elected on a Friday morning. You are absolutely exhilarated, but it’s 4.30 in the morning and you are about to keel over because you have been campaigning non-stop for the last six weeks and probably for 18 months. The emotional tension has been huge. Everybody can barely manage to stagger a step forward. Within two hours the first calls have come in to try and track you down because there is a constituent with an issue. You are trying to set up a constituency office and something in Westminster, you have to find out what’s going on, you have to unwind the campaign and close down all of that. And of course, your key people have all gone on holiday because they have been on the verge of collapse. This is all on Friday. Then you find the news media is solidly in contact with you and you spend the whole time in the studios. And on Monday you are at work in Parliament...You are getting an avalanche of calls as your constituents have had no-one to turn to for a month; everyone who got fed up talking to your predecessor now has someone new to talk to; and you don’t know your way around anywhere. This moment, when it absolutely comes in floods and you have no staff, there is no structure at all. – Susan Kramer

Election night was an exhilarating, yet exhausting, experience. After weeks of campaigning, the successful candidate felt a sense of jubilation, anticipation and relief. Election to Parliament was a near certainty for those standing for an ultra safe seat and a complete shock to those who overturned sizeable majorities. Nevertheless, arriving at Westminster was a memorable moment for each and every newly elected Member.

On their first day, they meet and greet other new colleagues. But that is almost where the similarities between Parliament and other places of employment end. The new MPs had ‘got the job’ only a matter of days before taking up the post and had little guidance or instructions. As Susan Kramer explained, the new MPs quickly found themselves thrust into setting up offices in Parliament and the constituency, hiring staff, responding to hundreds of letters, learning about procedure in the House of Commons and preparing for their Maiden Speeches.

This chapter considers the range of emotions that one’s arrival at Parliament stirs. It reviews the induction process provided for new Members and what they wanted to
be told at this preliminary stage. This has resonance for the Commons Authorities and political parties, but also wider importance for any institution or organisation considering the welcome it provides for new members of staff.

Their arrival at Parliament

In the days following the election, the new MPs headed to Westminster. The majority had previously spent time in Parliament, although to varying degrees. However, visiting the House of Commons during a trip to London or even working there for years as a researcher did not diminish the range of emotions felt as they entered Parliament as elected representatives for the very first time.

**Daunting:** Arriving at the imposing Palace of Westminster, walking past security and into the grandeur of the building was an unforgettable moment for first-timer John Leech. A surprise winner, Leech had visited Westminster only once prior to his election to Parliament. He was quite overwhelmed at first and all too aware of how easy it is to get lost. For Philip Davies, the experience was 'a combination of daunting and excitement'. Like many of his colleagues, Davies compared entering Parliament to 'starting at a new boarding school'. This analogy was used throughout the year by many new MPs to explain their experience. It not only describes the atmosphere and surroundings, but also the rules in place and the sense of hierarchy that existed between the new kids and the older ones.

**Imposter?:** The new MPs had been elected to the House of Commons club. For some, the very process of election brought an automatic sense of belonging; yet many started their career in the House feeling unsettled. Michael Gove initially suffered from impostor syndrome, as if he were 'not really an MP'. Instead, he felt as if he were 'on work experience or part of the reality TV programme *Faking It*'. Mike Penning described it as a 'great thrill', but also a strange experience. Having worked around Parliament for many years, he felt as if he were poacher turned gamekeeper. For Alison Seabeck, however, it 'actually didn’t feel any different', because she had been there so often: 'all the faces were familiar and they were all being very nice'. It was not until she sat down on the Chamber’s green benches that her new position really sank in.

**A sense of privilege and opportunity:** Upon election, Peter Law enthused: 'Coming here is awesome for someone like me.' Linda Riordan also described feeling very privileged and wanted to ‘get on with the work’. She had visited Parliament many times when working for her predecessor, but being an onlooker was not comparable to being the MP. Similarly, Ed Vaizey, who had previously worked in Westminster, found that there was 'a qualitative step-up in how the place treats you. The place exists for
Members of Parliament. You can do pretty much anything you want.’ For Vaizey, this meant not only going to the library and asking the staff for advice or assistance, it also enabled him to ‘start to play with the toys’. Parliamentary questions, speaking in the Chamber and Early Day Motions, for example, were now at his disposal.

Susan Kramer described entering Parliament for the first time as, ‘quite literally a shiver down your spine as you come into a place that has so much history and is at the centre of British politics’. She went on to describe ‘the feeling that you’re just the latest generation of an institution that has shaped British history’. This chimed with the comments of David Jones, who described the ‘immediate sense of history and tradition’, as well as the ‘overwhelming physical size of the place’.

**Take it in your stride:** Not all new MPs were daunted by the process. Tim Farron said he was ‘not terribly fazed by it all’, although he acknowledged that being in Parliament is comparable to ‘working in a Stately Home’. James Duddridge had expected to be in awe of everything but discovered that, ‘in reality there isn’t time to be nervous, you just get on with everything’. David Anderson said that he ‘didn’t expect to be overawed by it and wasn’t’, although he did confess to pre-Maiden Speech nerves.

**Life-changing:** Our interviews revealed an acute awareness amongst new MPs of the significance that election to Parliament would have on the course of their lives. Angela Smith remembered thinking, ‘This is it now – this is real. This is where my life changes forever.’ What she had regarded to be the most special place in Britain was now open to her. There is also the satisfaction that comes with having achieved a lifetime ambition. Greg Mulholland, for example, described the realisation that he was now a Member of Parliament, an ambition he had ‘dreamt of for some time’, having wanted to be an MP since the age of 16. His colleague, Jo Swinson, described an initial numbness. Having devoted the previous few years of her life to being elected, the fact that she was actually at the Commons felt unreal: ‘You kept expecting to pinch yourself and wake up and it’s a dream.’ The brutal and arduous process that getting to Parliament entailed was also mentioned by Charles Walker. Consequently, arriving in Parliament was ‘overwhelmingly exciting’ and Walker was ‘almost in tears’.

**Expecting the unexpected?**

In the early weeks, participants were asked whether anything had surprised them about being an MP. Almost all of them answered ‘yes’:

*I hadn’t mentally prepared myself for the amount of visits that I was going to be doing early on and the amount of casework that would be coming in.* — John Leech
I didn’t really think about what the day-to-day side of it would be like. I’m pleasantly surprised at the camaraderie there seems to be. The Chamber, which seems pretty daunting on television, is quite small and cosy in real life. – Susan Kramer

You feel the responsibility on your shoulders more every day. You get tremendous pangs of guilt if you come across an email a week on from someone with a genuine problem and you haven’t replied to it. – Michael Gove

How scared I was when making my Maiden Speech. I have done a lot of things in life, but nothing frightened me as much as that. – Mike Penning

I followed politics as much as anybody, and yet I am astonished as to how hectic it is...Lots of people ask if it’s what I expected it to be like. And the honest answer is I don’t know. I didn’t come in with expectations. I never thought about it. My whole focus was on winning the seat. – Philip Davies

How they learn the trade

On election night in May 2005, each newly elected Member received an introductory note from the Clerk of the House of Commons, setting out arrangements for accessing the parliamentary estate and a reception area for new MPs. This was to be the beginning of an induction process that formally lasted a matter of weeks. In reality, becoming embedded into the House of Commons can take years.

A formal induction process is standard in many types of organisation, but it is a fairly new initiative for the House Authorities and political parties. Longer-serving Members told us that they could not remember an induction into Parliament. Those elected in the 1960s and 1970s did not always know when to head to Westminster. Even those elected in the 1980s and 1990s could not recollect an induction programme. One longer-serving Member told us that when she first became an MP, everything was designed to make new Members of Parliament feel inferior and experience a sense of discomfort.

Nowadays the new Members are given a range of information and are no longer left to wander the corridors without guidance. Yet, with few occasions on which to test and develop an induction programme, there were clearly hiccups that needed resolving.

*Induction by Parliament:* Parliament’s formal induction process centred around a reception area in Portcullis House. The range of services provided by the House were presented by different stalls and Members had the opportunity to pick up a vast array of material:
The Palace had department stalls on the first floor of Portcullis House, which I think ran for two weeks. All the different departments had a stall and staff there, which was incredibly useful. You could wander round in your own time and chat to people and then go back and chat some more, as well as ordering your computers and all that sort of thing. – Anne Milton

This was a new initiative on the part of the House Authorities and those members of the 2005 intake who had previously worked in Parliament were aware of this change. Alison Seabeck explained that she had watched previous intakes walk around the place with their mouths open, looking completely lost. This time, she thought the induction process was very good, but admitted that the new intake were ‘still a bit bemused’.

### An adequate welcome by Parliament?

**Survey results**

The Hansard Society surveyed all new Members following the May 2005 election, asking whether Parliament provided an adequate welcome for them. Sixty-eight per cent believed they had, but almost one-third disagreed.

Many of the new MPs asked for more information on procedures and processes. This ranged from general information about the Chamber and voting, to Finance Bill procedure, signing Early Day Motions, tabling questions, more concentrated training at the beginning, a short video explaining the Chamber and a session on how to word questions. Some respondents noted that ‘learning is on the hoof or by mistake’ or that ‘rules are found by trial and error’. One person asked to be told ‘how it all works in real terms’.

### The right stuff?: Expectations as to what information would be desirable during the induction process varied considerably between participants in this project, but it was widely agreed that the process covered ‘the basics’:

*I think Parliament’s induction process was pretty good actually. It was the basics: this is how you claim money, as you will have a lot of outgoings at first, this is how you get your staff on contract, this is how you get your passes, sort your post out... At that level it was very good.* – Dan Rogerson

However, there was little consensus about what additional information should be provided during the induction. The participants had different priorities at the outset, as one MP explained:

*For some of us, the priority was sorting out our cash – fees; for some of us it was getting up and running as a parliamentarian – making our first speeches, putting*
down our first questions; for others it was getting the staff together in order to start processing constituency mail and following up on the campaign. – New MP

Participants complained that better co-ordination was needed between the different departments of the House. They needed to be told what was important for them to know at the start. James Duddridge commented that, ‘we went round carrying bags full – some of it was nuggets that must be read straight away that we didn’t know, and some of it was rubbish’. This led Angela Smith to recommend that new Members be given a checklist. She was positive about the range of information provided but pointed out that, ‘no-one gave you a list of people you need to see or things you need to do in the first three days’. The MPs were often unaware as to what it was that they needed to do in the early days and weeks.

**The mystery of parliamentary procedure:** One particular issue of concern and contention was the amount of information provided about parliamentary procedure. The demand for briefings varied, but a significant proportion of those interviewed indicated that information was either insufficient or poorly presented. Others suggested that time pressures meant they could not attend briefings or fully utilise the resources available:

*We are not taught how the Chamber works.* – Charles Walker

*No-one actually told me I had to bow to the Speaker. I found that out because I noticed other people doing it. So there are still plenty of other things that we should be told and we’re not.* – Greg Mulholland

*From speaking to other new MPs, I think a lot of us felt either not knowing enough information about where to be and what to do and what happens next, as there’s no quick guide to being an MP. Or information overload because you suddenly get handed all these huge piles of documents and you don’t have time to read them all.* – Jo Swinson

Many of the participants professed to having only a limited awareness of parliamentary etiquette. Lynne Featherstone explained that the induction process did not sufficiently equip new Members about the way things are done:

*My first thought was, ‘Am I doing this right?’…I have gone in fear and trepidation of doing the wrong thing at the wrong time, in the wrong place... There isn’t a book on etiquette and as etiquette counts for so much in this particular forum, it might be really helpful.*
Some of our participants did not believe that an induction process could ever fully prepare MPs for the role and highlighted the importance of ‘learning on the job’:

_You don’t need to know all the Standing Orders from day one. The best way of working out how it works is to go in there [the Chamber]._ – Anne Milton

_The only way, to a large extent, to learn – like most jobs – is to actually do it. Making the mistakes and learning as you go along. At the end of the induction I wouldn’t say I’d become the world’s leading expert on what you need to do, but it was probably a good start. It was okay._ – Philip Davies

In addition to procedural aspects of the role, the new recruits have to get to grips with the practicalities of managing an office, notably the financial aspects of this. This is often overlooked by outsiders, but it concerned MPs from the outset. Hiring staff and running an office required knowledge and understanding about the administrative side of Parliament. Several Members told us that they would have appreciated further briefings and to see a typical set of accounts for the year:

_The issue of finances is quite a complex area for MPs, in terms of ensuring that you do things quite properly and in an above-board way. I think we might have needed a longer session just to talk us through some of the possible pitfalls and ensuring salaries and pension schemes are properly sorted. Because the last thing you want is your staff not being paid._ – Alison Seabeck

Participants would also have appreciated greater induction and training on the specific scrutiny processes of Parliament. Indeed, the Hansard Society’s report on parliamentary scrutiny in 2001 drew attention to the fact that there was very little training or support for new Members in this area. While there may have been slight improvements since that time, some of the intake seemed unprepared or confused about the various scrutiny and accountability mechanisms at their disposal.

**Inductions by political parties:** Political parties also provided an induction programme for their newest recruits. Participants did not consistently distinguish between the induction by their party and that provided by Parliament. Yet some new Members did praise their party:

_The Labour Party itself organised some pretty good inductions on parliamentary etiquette. The sort of things you can’t say in the Chamber._ – Sadiq Khan

_The Conservative MPs laid on two days of induction; I found it all incredibly useful._ – Anne Milton

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The parties organised a mentor system for their newest parliamentary recruits and this produced mixed results. Feedback ranged from, 'I have a mentor, who gave me very valuable advice about getting my priorities right,' to 'the mentors don’t know what they’re meant to be doing and the new kids don’t know what they’re meant to ask.'

In 2005, there were clashes in the timetabling of induction briefings between the parties and the House Authorities. Lord Tyler, a former chief whip for the Liberal Democrats in the Commons, told us that: 'The parties’ Whip system in the Commons tends to deny its new Members too much information – it is the Whips who should be a navigational guide.' He believed that from the perspective of the Whips in the Commons, 'too much information is a dangerous thing. Significantly, in the House of Lords this is not the case.'

There are early indications that scheduling clashes will be avoided in future, with greater co-operation between the political parties and the House Authorities. Both have a responsibility to assist new MPs in preparing for their role.

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**An adequate welcome by political parties?**

*Survey results*

Our first survey to all new MPs found that political parties were more organised in 2005 in terms of welcoming and inducting their new Members into Parliament than they had been in earlier elections. Nevertheless, almost one-fifth of respondents said that their party had not offered them any specific assistance when preparing for the job of being MP.

The survey also found that new MPs seek advice from a range of sources when preparing for the job; 86 per cent reported that they spoke to other MPs, 45 per cent sought advice from party officials and the family was cited by almost 30 per cent.

**Informal and formal channels:** New Members often relied on informal channels of communication, including their colleagues. Jo Swinson said, 'There was a lot of camaraderie between the new MPs. It’s all a nod-and-wink how you find out these things, but at least it is a helpful atmosphere.' A couple of participants were surprised at how friendly colleagues were, having been led to believe that this would not be the case.

The MPs also depended on House officials, as Philip Davies explained: 'One thing that did definitely strike me is how helpful and friendly all the people who work here are. They can’t do enough for you.' Or as Anne Milton commented: 'I tend to always ask staff because they know so much.'

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6 In 1997 the Study of Parliament Group found that 51 per cent of new Members reported that their party had not offered them specific assistance in preparing for the job of being an MP, although there were significant party variations (unpublished research, supported by ESRC Award No. R000222470).
A decline in interaction?

Longer-serving MPs identified a move away from informal learning from colleagues. Gwyneth Dunwoody, first elected in 1966, attributed this to the modernisation of hours:

When I first came in here, one of the best ways of learning was to go and talk to people in the smoking room, the dining room and the tea room. Largely those have now been discounted by the fact that people are not here.

Catering for different needs: New Members stressed that the induction process should cater for the specific needs of individuals. In particular, they referred to two key differences within the cohort. The first of these concerned MPs who had won their seat from another party. Such Members were often overwhelmed in the initial weeks and months by the task of establishing offices and building support networks, especially if it was the first time that their political party had won the seat in that particular constituency. They lacked the infrastructure that was in place for other new MPs:

I was amazed [that] neither Parliament, nor the parties, seemed to take account of the fact that it is completely different for those MPs who have won a seat from another party...Within our party, we had several people taking over from colleagues and they inherited a fully operational parliamentary and constituency office, with excellent staff who all know what they’re doing. And they basically just slotted in as the MP, which must be wonderful. In our case, on May 6 you woke up with nothing. – Greg Mulholland

The other key difference between new MPs related to their living arrangements. Those representing constituencies outside the London area needed to find accommodation as soon as possible. For some MPs this proved to be a relatively straightforward process; others would have appreciated guidance:

My first priority was to find a flat in London. Parliament still doesn’t help new MPs with this. It could give, for example, a list of reputable estate agents. This would be a little thing that would save time and make life easier. – Angela Smith

A room of one’s own: To work properly, MPs needed a base. The most frequent source of dissatisfaction was the inadequate provision of office space and the delay in allocating offices in the weeks immediately following the election. The parliamentary estate divides offices proportionately between the political parties, and these are then distributed to MPs by the respective Whips Offices. This is an arduous process, complicated by a hierarchical approach which dictates that returning Members deserve the more desirable offices in Parliament.
In 2005, office allocation was further delayed by attempts to have party balance within each building in the parliamentary estate and along each corridor. This was not achieved, but the manoeuvring delayed the process into the summer months and led to almost universal frustration amongst the new intake. Once an office was allocated to a new Member, which tended to be about six weeks after the election, he or she then had to wait again for the delivery of computers and other necessary office equipment. Complaints were frequent:

If you start any new job, you usually have an induction, get shown round the office, you’re given a desk and a chair. This place was ridiculous. I was getting casework from constituents but I had no office, no computers, no desk to work from. It was about three months before I had an office. Then I had no computer. Then I got computers but no furniture. Then I got furniture but no stationery. – Sadiq Khan

I had a pile of things to reply to – but no computer, no phone, no desk, no staff. What I used to do was stay up until 2.30am handwriting letters. I had nowhere to type them and nowhere to print them off. The only option was to handwrite them. – Philip Davies

The House Authorities sought to assist new MPs by distributing laptops and setting up hot-desking areas. These spaces could be useful for networking with colleagues and learning from others, and were appreciated as such by some. However, they were widely regarded as insufficient and were resented as being ‘really difficult because you had everybody and their dog initially wanting to use them’. Decamping to the corridor was a frequent alternative:

I would literally sit in corridors with my mobile phone. There were times when the corridors here would look like a shelter for the homeless, with MPs trying to do bits of work. – Susan Kramer

Post-election services

A report on Post-election Services by the House of Commons Administration Committee recommended that the political parties and the House of Commons Service should aim to provide all Members with permanent office accommodation within a month of a general election. The Committee also called on the House Service to increase the capacity of temporary accommodation.7

Conclusion

Upon election the first-time MP may be sleep-deprived, but a new government is keen to implement its legislative programme and the new House of Commons is assembled quickly. Arriving at Parliament can be daunting, exciting and life-changing. Not all were in awe when entering the Commons, but all the new MPs recognised that they had reached a significant point in their lives.

Starting work as an elected representative is not comparable to starting any other new job. MPs represent, on average, 68,000 constituents. As soon as they arrive in Parliament they need to get to know parliamentary colleagues, set up an office and recruit staff. The list of ‘immediate tasks’ is endless, so it is no wonder that some participants described a sense of shellshock. There is probably less preparation, support and training for MPs than for any comparable professional position.

To become a fully-functioning Member requires assistance from colleagues and the House Authorities. The House Authorities sought to improve inductions for new Members and are aware of the need to build on this progress next time round. There was a degree of satisfaction amongst participants, but complaints arose in relation to the allocation of offices, provision of office equipment, information about procedure and the absence of specific assistance for those who had won a seat from another party, or were relocating to London.

Some of their practical ideas for improvement were a checklist for inductions, a guide to parliamentary procedure and more information on finances and hiring staff. These are provided by other professional organisations when employing new members of staff. New Members were busy from the outset and struggled to attend many of the induction briefings provided for them. Consequently, information provision and training should be ongoing in both the short and medium-term and new Members must feel comfortable contacting House officials for advice.

Finally, political parties should co-operate with the House Authorities to ensure that the best possible induction is provided for all new Members. Knowledge should not be a bargaining tool, but a resource to be shared.
Chapter 3

How they operate

Introduction

I don’t know how other MPs organise their work and their life. I think they are slightly secretive! – Anne Milton

Members of Parliament are expected to hold the government of the day to account and scrutinise legislation as it makes its way though the House of Commons. They are elected to represent their constituencies in Parliament but also operate as community leaders in their local area and act, as one participant described it, as the local ‘Queen Mother’ figure. Most MPs are elected on a party ticket and so therefore feel a responsibility to work on its behalf.

There is a general understanding that each individual needs to find an acceptable approach to balancing these roles in order to be adequately fulfilling the job he or she was elected to do. In reality, however, the absence of a job description gives Members considerable scope to interpret the role of MP as they choose. There is no prescribed list of responsibilities, only conventions, customs and the desire to be re-elected.

Participants explained how they approached the job and how they divided their time between constituency work, time in the Chamber, committee work and other areas. Alongside this, MPs told us the extent to which they allowed the advice of party leadership, personal opinion, constituency opinion and interest or pressure groups to influence how they act and vote in Parliament. This chapter sets out what additional factors shaped the work of new MPs, from family and personal circumstances to the size of their electoral majority.

Day-to-day activity

The judgement as to whether parliamentarians are effective in their roles is for others to make, but there is no doubt that they ‘put in the hours’. In 1982, MPs reported working, on average, just over 62 hours a week; this rose to 69 hours a week when the House was sitting, and fell to 42 hours over the recess.8 By the end of their first year, the 2005 intake reported working an average of 71 hours per week. This ranged
between Members from a low of 50 hours a week to a high of 100 hours a week. In terms of how this time was allocated, MPs were asked in surveys to differentiate between constituency work, the Chamber of the House of Commons, committee work, and other work.

* In May 2005, the new Members were asked: ‘How do you expect to divide your time between the various aspects of your job as an MP?’

**Constituency work:** MPs are now easily accessible to their constituents and longer-serving Members have noted the change in culture this has produced. Working practices have evolved to adapt to new technologies. The use of computers and then the internet and email have changed the way in which most of us work and MPs have not been immune to this phenomenon. Emails arrive 24 hours a day, with the expectation that a response will be immediate. It is not surprising that compromises were sometimes made in terms of the parliamentary nature of the role:

*We [MPs] have become the extended family, the social support, the information centre.* – Dari Taylor, first elected in 1997

*The biggest chunk of time and biggest role in terms of importance is the constituency MP bit. I would be surprised if that takes up less than 90 per cent of my time.* – Tim Farron

*The calls on your time from the constituency are immense. It takes quite an effort of will to start to turn down opportunities in the constituency and concentrate on Parliament.* – Ed Vaizey

*I now get several hundred letters and emails a day.* – Susan Kramer

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At the outset, new MPs had anticipated spending 46 per cent of their time on constituency work. When asked about this a year later, in May 2006, they reported spending 49 per cent of their time on constituency work. The amount of time allocated varied significantly between MPs, with one reporting spending 15 per cent of his or her time on this, compared to the 97 per cent reported by another respondent. The samples are small when broken down by party and cannot therefore be regarded as conclusive. However, it is worth noting that Labour Party respondents reported that 40 per cent of their time was allocated to constituency work, compared to 59 per cent by Conservative MPs. The greatest proportion of time spent on constituency work was reported by the Liberal Democrats (62 per cent).

Underlying this focus on the constituency was the notion of a permanent campaign. Taking on casework and attending events in the local area is one way to build a network of supporters in the years between elections:

*Most MPs will do what they think helps them get re-elected...Is going to open a local school going to help you get elected more or less than standing up and arguing a clause on the Climate Change Bill?* – Philip Davies

A handful shared their frustration with the constituency aspect of the role. One MP protested at the end of the project that her role was not to be a social worker. The framework by which she viewed her responsibilities had shifted during the year. She came to see her objectives in light of her national duties, with her profile in the constituency placed second. The MP in question admitted that she barely ever read constituency casework, leaving it in the hands of her staff. She was very unusual in this respect.

**In the Chamber:** Immediately after their election to the Commons, new MPs anticipated spending 24 per cent of their time in the Chamber. **Over the course of the year, the amount of time MPs actually devoted to the Chamber declined.** The MPs were now spending 14 per cent of their time on the green benches. The greatest proportion of time reported to be spent by an MP in the Chamber was 40 per cent. In contrast, one respondent admitted to spending only two per cent of his or her time there.

There are a range of explanations for a drop in the amount of time new MPs spent in the Chamber, not least their frustration with its proceedings – which is considered in Chapter 5. The reduction of time in the Chamber could also indicate that they were beginning to adopt the working patterns of their longer-serving colleagues. Surveys conducted during the 1997–2001 Parliament found that almost 90 per cent of MPs spent fewer than 10 hours a week in the Chamber.⁹

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The Westminster week

A close look at the weekly comings-and-goings of participants found that many did not stay in the Commons for the whole parliamentary week; the constituency often encroached on their Monday to Thursday routine:

*I do four days in Westminster and one day in the constituency. Although I squeeze that to three days up here and two days in the constituency if I possibly can, because actually there is a lot of pressure on me to visit local organisations and to see people in the constituency and I don’t have enough diary time currently to do that quickly enough. Then I obviously do some weekend work as well.* – Anne Milton

*Normally come down on Monday and get the very last train on Wednesday if I possibly can.* – Tim Farron

*Monday to Thursday in the first few months, I was exclusively in Parliament. I needed to do that to get myself established. I’m now blurring the lines a little.* – James Duddridge

Committee work and ‘other’: After their election to Parliament, the new Members anticipated allocating 16 per cent of their time to committee work. Twelve months on, they were spending 14 per cent of their time on this. Some MPs spent no time at all in committees, possibly because they had not been allocated to one, whilst others believed it took up to 70 per cent of their time.

New MPs often developed a niche that related to their membership of a particular select committee. Appointments to a select committee (or two select committees, as happened in some instances) could not only shape an MP’s approach to the role, it could, in some instances, dominate the diary. For one participant, Linda Riordan, her appointment to the Crossrail Committee has meant that half her time in Parliament is spent listening to legal petitions on this matter.

There was an increase in time allocated to ‘other’ responsibilities, which included responsibilities relating to a spokesperson position, commitments with All Party Groups or writing a column in the local newspaper. The new MPs had anticipated spending 14 per cent of their time on ‘other’ work. By the end of the year, they were in fact spending 22 per cent of their time on this category.

*I am still learning how to balance the responsibilities of the frontbench with constituency duties discharged here and being a proper constituency Member. I don’t think it is possible for anyone to feel after their first year that they have the balance quite right.* – Michael Gove
When I was first elected, I concentrated so much on the constituency stuff. I was really wanting to do that, and make sure that people knew I was around, and how to get hold of me...now I am probably starting to use the opportunities up here a little bit more. – Dan Rogerson

Enjoying the role

Participants were asked midway through the year if they were enjoying the role. The response was unambiguous:

Sometimes you will be sitting on the benches and get this complete wave of happiness that I can’t describe. And it only comes in little shots, like drinking a strong whiskey – ‘wow, I am here, I made it’. – Charles Walker

About 95 per cent of the time I love it to pieces, the other five per cent, when I have done something wrong, I love it less! – Lynne Featherstone

I’m enjoying it very, very much. More than I thought I would. – David Anderson

What influences their actions?

The majority of those in the Commons are members of one of the three main political parties. Yet to a great extent, all MPs operate as individuals and the Commons is often said to contain 646 separate businesses:

There is a great sense of being on your own, to get on with it. As a councillor, there was a bigger sense of team ethos; there is less of that up here. – Dan Rogerson

This place does not encourage you to build networks, partly because you are very isolated in your offices. – Susan Kramer

Very few MPs appreciate, and I think it is true of all generations, how much you work by yourself here. In a better organised, more rational world, the MPs of each party in each generation would act much more corporately and collectively and we would make intelligent use of each other’s time and skills. – Mark Fisher, first elected in 1983

A range of factors shaped how individuals operated, including the particular political party which they were elected to represent, the location of their constituency, the size of their majority and family responsibilities.
**Political party:** The experience of new MPs depended on which political party they were elected to represent. There were clear differences between those who arrived as a member of the governing party, those who belonged to the main opposition party and those elected for the third party. All MPs, new and longer-serving, are affected by the fortunes of their party and the performance of its leadership.

In 2005, the Labour Party won a third term of office and its newest Members arrived into a parliamentary party that was settled into the business of government. The Conservatives had just lost a third election but nevertheless had an influx of new and younger members. The Liberal Democrats saw a steady gain in the size of their parliamentary party. Like the Conservatives, their intake was young and ambitious. Chapter 6 considers this in more detail.

Arriving as a member of the governing party meant that Labour MPs tended to have better access to ministers. However, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members felt that they had more opportunities to influence their party’s policy. As one Liberal Democrat MP explained:

> As a backbench Liberal Democrat, your immediate grasp on the levers of power is a bit limited! So it’s about influence and raising issues, moving debate forward, checking government on particular items of policy and trying to get your agenda across. – New MP

**Location of constituency:** The location of an MP’s constituency was a talking point amongst participants. The distinction between MPs representing an area a commutable distance to Westminster and those who would travel back to the constituency only at the end of the parliamentary week was noted frequently. The London MPs emphasised the mid-week pressure to attend to the needs of the constituency; the rest raised concerns about being unable to attend to the needs of the constituency whilst at the Commons:

> Not being able to attend things in the constituency during the week is something that worries me about being in London. The constituents know I’m an MP but don’t twig that I’m in London. – Kitty Ussher

**Size of majority:** Becoming embedded in the local area is more urgent for some than for others. Those elected with a small majority or on a big swing were ever-conscious of the need to nurture the constituency. Some commented wistfully (or resentfully) about colleagues representing ‘safe’ seats.

Those MPs in target seats undoubtedly worked hard on constituency matters and many spoke of the need to consolidate their position in their local area. The first term
of Parliament was seen as the time to become established in the constituency, so even those with significant majorities would highlight the importance they placed on constituency work.

**Family responsibilities:** The year appeared to be dominated by work and the desire to establish oneself as a respected politician. Yet MPs, like everybody else, have personal lives outside of work. Balancing family time with their work could be difficult and the pressures on MPs varied according to their individual circumstances:

*You are here as an MP, but you have other life experiences. I got married two years ago and we just had our first child. That’s had a profound effect over the last few weeks on how I view things and how I handle the job. And I am sure as I experience other things in family life and external life, it will change the way I interact with Parliament.* – James Duddridge

*From a personal point of view, I am also making a judgement about what I am capable of doing at this point in my life. I am 26 and I don’t have children. If there is a time when I can do everything possible in the constituency and go to everything and be there, then that is now.* – Jo Swinson

Work tended to encroach on the time that MPs spent with their partners when they returned to the constituency. Weekends became overrun by events and visits and many participants worked seven days a week:

*If you have a partner who is not supportive, then you are finished – either finished as a partnership or as an MP. It’s one or the other, but something would have to give.* – Andrew Gwynne

*You give up a lot. You give up a lot of family time. In some cases you give up money. Some people come here and really don’t like it and go away because they can’t deal with it… It is very make or break. People don’t realise that it can be a very destructive system.* – Gwyneth Dunwoody, first elected in 1966

**What influences their vote?**

This project sought to find out not only how MPs approached their role, but what factors shaped how they act and vote in Parliament. Our surveys to new Members asked them to rate the influence of party leadership, personal opinion, constituency opinion and representations from interest and pressure groups.
Chapter 3: How they operate

The findings illustrated that at the beginning of the year the new MPs anticipated that the advice of party leadership and personal opinion would be the two most important factors in influencing their vote.

**Advice of party leadership:** After their election to the Commons, 43 per cent of new MPs expected ‘nearly always’ to be strongly influenced by the advice of party leadership when deciding how to act and vote in Parliament, with 48 per cent expecting that this would ‘usually’ be the case. Ten per cent anticipated that they would ‘sometimes’ be strongly influenced by the advice of party leadership and no respondents thought that this would ‘never’ be the case.

One MP later explained that at the start of the week they are provided with a list of Bills and the Whips tell them how to vote. Admitting that the public would probably be horrified if they knew how little MPs often know about the things on which they vote, he said that:

*In under four days, you couldn’t possibly have the first chance of sitting in the Chamber all the time and listening to all the debates, you couldn’t possibly read all the legislation before the House of Commons to be an expert on what you’re voting on.* – New MP

From this perspective, the influence of party on the voting behaviour of MPs is essential in ensuring an efficient and workable legislative body. Moreover, MPs were indebted to their political party; they were not under the illusion that they would have been elected without the words ‘Conservative’, ‘Labour’ or ‘Liberal Democrat’ after their names. This imbued them with a responsibility to promote the party line in Parliament:

*On big issues, issues where the party is very strong and takes a principled stand, then rightly you are expected to vote with current party policy. But I wouldn’t necessarily need the party to tell me that. I’ve been elected by the hard work of hundreds of Liberal Democrat activists and you would really feel like you were letting people down if you didn’t.* – Jo Swinson

*18,600 people voted for me and I would guess 18,500 voted not for Philip Davies, but because I had the word Conservative after my name. And so you have got a responsibility to promote the Conservative line in Parliament, because that on the whole is what most people who voted for me want me to do.* – Philip Davies

By May 2006, the balance between those expecting to be ‘nearly always’ influenced by the advice of their party leadership and those ‘usually’ influenced had swung...
marginally in favour of the former. Fifty per cent of the new MPs now expected to be 'nearly always' influenced by this, with 44 per cent 'usually' influenced. Only six per cent said they would 'sometimes' be strongly influenced by the advice of their party leadership and once again, nobody said this was 'never' the case.

Yet some did indeed vote against the party line and we were told of the difficulties faced when this happened. They did not enjoy voting against their party, but did so when they felt compelled by the circumstances. By the end of their first 12 months, 36 new Members had voted against their party.¹⁰

**Personal opinion:** At the outset of the year, 45 per cent reported that they would 'nearly always' be strongly influenced by personal opinion and the same proportion said they would 'usually' be influenced by this. Nobody said that personal opinion would 'never' be a strong influence.

Andrew Gwynne explained that while a combination of factors influenced how he approached the role, ultimately, 'it is your own personal choice, so long as you can defend what you have done'. For Michael Gove, the starting point was, 'the set of principles, beliefs, prejudices or values which I have'. While personal opinion is brought to bear on most issues, this was particularly the case for free votes.

However, at the end of the year there was a slight move away from personal opinion as the key determining factor in deciding how to act and vote in Parliament. The number reporting to be 'nearly always' strongly influenced by personal opinion dropped from 45 per cent to 39 per cent. Forty-eight per cent now reported themselves to be 'usually' influenced by this and 14 per cent to be 'sometimes' influenced.

**Constituency opinion:** The constituency featured heavily in the priorities of new MPs, but only 17 per cent of respondents said they expected to 'nearly always' be strongly influenced by constituency opinion following their election to the Commons. Over 80 per cent believed they would 'usually' or 'sometimes' be strongly influenced by constituency opinion (48 per cent and 36 per cent respectively).

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**Their most important role**

*Survey results*

The new MPs were asked to rank the most important aspects of their job. They were asked to distinguish between:

- supporting the party
- holding the government to account

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¹⁰ The party breakdown for this was: seven Labour MPs, 26 Conservative MPs and three Liberal Democrats. Data provided by Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart. More information on rebellions can be found at www.revolts.co.uk.
• scrutinising legislation
• dealing with constituents’ problems
• informing/consulting constituents about government activity
• protecting/promoting the interests of the constituency

At both the beginning and the end of their first year, MPs ranked ‘protecting/ promoting the interests of the constituency’ and ‘dealing with constituents’ problems’ as more important than ‘holding the government to account’ and ‘scrutinising legislation’.

The most common first choice at the beginning of the year was ‘protecting/promoting the interests of the constituency’. Twelve months later it had been overtaken by ‘dealing with constituents’ problems’. At the other end of the scale, ‘informing/consulting constituents about government activity’ was the factor most commonly ranked as their least important role. ‘Supporting the party’ was also regarded as one of the least important aspects of the job.

Constituency opinion may incorporate the views of the local party, as well as all individuals who live in the local area. There was a general awareness that the views of those who are active in the local party do not always correlate with the views of constituents as a whole. However, MPs may only be aware of the views of a relatively small proportion of the constituency’s residents. People who have made the effort to contact their MP do not necessarily hold views that are representative of those in the constituency as a whole:

*If it is a constituency problem, then my view is that anyone who has a legitimate complaint has a right to some of my time and energy to try and solve it...when it comes to the constituency party, they have an absolute right to time, to access, to consideration. But MPs recognise that the constituency party is only ever a portion of those whom they represent.* – New MP

*If it is a contentious issue, I will ask the opinion of one or two key people in the constituency...I need to keep my colleagues and friends on board. I'm only here because of the support they have given me in the first place.* – John Leech

There was a small increase during the year in the number who reported themselves to be strongly influenced by constituency opinion. Twenty-one per cent reported that they were ‘nearly always’ influenced by constituency opinion; 46 per cent reported themselves to be ‘usually’ influenced; and 33 per cent said they were ‘sometimes’ influenced.

**Representations from interest or pressure groups:** Over four-fifths (81 per cent) of the respondents believed they would ‘sometimes’ be strongly influenced by
representations from interest or pressure groups. Only two per cent said they would ‘nearly always’ be strongly influenced by such representations, and 10 per cent said they would ‘sometimes’ be influenced. Seven per cent of respondents thought this would ‘never’ be the case.

During the year, several new MPs expressed their surprise at the level of lobbying activity that takes place within the House of Commons. Others were disdainful at the quality of this lobbying, describing it as ‘extremely low grade’. Postcard lobbying in particular was very unpopular. However, most believed that pressure groups did make a positive contribution overall to the decision-making process.

There was a willingness to meet with charitable organisations, but sometimes a wariness about business interests. Greg Mulholland explained that he had ‘relationships with pressure groups that I want to, and pretty much ignore the rest’. Local constituents were prioritised over the lobbying of interest groups, as Jo Swinson explained: ‘Being lobbied by a pressure group does not have a huge impact; being lobbied by a constituent on behalf of a pressure group has more of an impact.’

The proportion reporting that they were strongly influenced by representations from interest or pressure groups remained fairly consistent over the course of the year. There was a small swing towards those who said they were ‘never’ influenced by such groups (14 per cent). Two per cent reported that they were ‘nearly always’ strongly influenced by such groups, six per cent reported that they were ‘usually’ influenced and 77 per cent said ‘sometimes’.

May 2006: In deciding how to act and vote in Parliament are you strongly influenced by:

- **Never**
- **Sometimes**
- **Usually**
- **Nearly always**
A year to the day – their promotions

A year to the day of the general election, a Labour Party reshuffle placed first-timers into more senior government roles. For those appointed to such positions, changes to their way of operating were inevitable.

By this time, a third of the intake had some form of party spokesperson position. This was more common among Liberal Democrat Members, as smaller parliamentary parties give positions more readily to newcomers. However, about a fifth of the Labour and Conservative intake also held positions. During the year, our participants expressed pleasure at their appointment to such roles and described the impact that this had on their workload and their approach to the job:

*It alters the way you approach the job – you feel more directly involved in shaping the outward perceptions of the party. Before, as a backbencher, your primary concerns would have been servicing your constituency and then carving out a niche particular to yourself. Now you have to concentrate a little less on pursuing those things that interest you and much more on fitting in with the rest of the team.* – New MP

*I love the police spokesperson position that I was given. I have had a baptism of fire in terms of having to handle things that you might not expect to have to handle in your first few months as an MP...to be on the frontbench during the terror debate and see the Government defeated over something I feel passionate about. It feels as if you are taking part in history.* – Lynne Featherstone

Conclusion

The absence of a job description by which independent evaluation can be conducted means that MPs are free to decide their own priorities. Yet the approach that MPs take to their role does not only define their effectiveness as individual representatives; collectively, their approaches ensure the success or otherwise of our central legislature and therefore our democratic system.

At the outset, new MPs rated the advice of party leadership and personal opinion as having comparable importance in determining how they vote and act in Parliament. **By the end of the year, the advice of party leadership had risen in importance and personal opinion had declined somewhat.** However, whilst the participants recognised that political parties are a guiding hand, ultimately all believed that party came second to other priorities. The MPs operated as individuals within Parliament.
We found that MPs were working over 70 hours a week on average. Some of the participants looked sufficiently tired to ensure this was believable! They arrived at Parliament with a firm focus on the constituency, but also a desire to learn how to be effective in the Commons. **They did not want to pigeon hole themselves into being either a ‘constituency MP’ or a ‘parliamentarian’**. They wanted to tick both boxes.

Participants were not always certain how their colleagues organised their time. Over the year, our surveys found a small rise in the amount of time the new MPs allocated to constituency work. Yet several participants acknowledged that as they became more comfortable with the workings of Parliament they began to devote more attention to Westminster. This gave a mixed message.

The new MPs hoped to improve legislation that affects their constituents on the ground but were also aware that it is through their parliamentary work that they could raise their profile in Parliament. Speaking in the Chamber could impress colleagues; attending standing committees could please the Whips; and networking in the division lobbies could improve their chances of promotion. The first step of the junior ministerial ladder was within their grasp. The next chapter looks at what the new MPs hoped to achieve during their time in office.
Chapter 4
What they want to achieve

Introduction

*We all start as equals. The people who succeed will be the people who show they can do the job.* – Ed Vaizey

For many new MPs, their long-term ambition was election to the House of Commons. As candidates, they could not see beyond victory at the polls and were reluctant to 'count their chickens'. Whilst the newly elected knew what motivated them to enter politics, they were sometimes less sure about their personal ambitions once they had arrived at Westminster. Or less willing to spell them out. Yet they were now in a position to more clearly define what they wanted for their constituency, for their party and for themselves.

It is often taken for granted that people enter politics for the power it confers. MPs, as a group, are assumed to be an ambitious bunch. To be elected to Parliament requires tenacity, self-belief and perhaps even a ruthless streak. This chapter considers to what extent these assumptions about MPs are borne out in reality. It outlines the range of aspirations and ambitions of first-timers and how these changed over the course of the year. It considers how they judged their performance, how they measured success and whether they had any regrets about how they have approached the role.

Objectives, ambitions and expectations

Following their election to the Commons, participants in our study were asked what they wished to achieve at the outset of their parliamentary career and in the longer-term. Some clear themes became apparent.

*A good constituency MP*: Given the findings of earlier chapters, it was not surprising that the desire to be a ‘good constituency MP’ became something of a mantra. MPs not only wanted to deliver for their constituents, but to establish a good reputation in their local patch. It is no longer enough for MPs to be working on behalf of their constituents; the constituents must be aware of their efforts.
Alongside this, many new Members referred to specific constituency matters that they wished to address. Some spoke in broader terms, such as Michael Gove, who wished to be an 'effective constituency campaigner', or Angela Smith, who sought to 'get a good deal for Sheffield'. Others were more specific, including Linda Riordan, who wanted to raise the profile of sport in Halifax, Philip Davies, who highlighted planning and transport issues in his local area, or John Leech, who emphasised the importance of Metrolink for his Manchester constituency.

Prioritising their constituents
Survey results

After their election to the Commons, all new MPs were asked to rank the following roles in order of importance:
- representing the nation as a whole
- representing their constituents
- representing their political party

They were asked this question once again at the end of their first year in the job.

In 1997, 74 per cent of the then new MPs had ranked representing the constituency as their most important role as a representative.\(^{11}\) Eight years later, in 2005, over four-fifths of the new MPs reported that representing constituents was their most important priority as a representative, with just two per cent putting this behind both the nation and the political party. Over the year, the proportion that ranked representing their constituents as their most important role rose from 81 per cent to 90 per cent. The proportion who ranked this in second place was eight per cent, while two per cent continued to rank this in last place.

![Bar chart showing the proportion of MPs ranking each role as the most important over time.]

\(^{11}\) Unpublished research by the Study of Parliament Group, supported by ESRC Award No. R000222470.
By the end of the year, the proportion who ranked their political party as the most important factor when carrying out their role had dropped from 17 per cent to nine per cent. The proportion marking it as their second priority rose to 60 per cent and 32 per cent now placed it last. Fewer MPs believed representing the party to be their most important role but fewer also believed it to be their least important role.

**Policy objectives:** National policy objectives were often mentioned second to proclamations of wanting to be a good constituency representative. Policy objectives were focused on shaping party policy and subsequently strengthening the political party and shoring up support for it. A substantial number of first-timers also set out specific policy areas on which they hoped to focus. For example, Michael Gove emphasised foreign affairs and education and David Anderson expressed an interest in Northern Ireland.

In May 2005, immediately after their election to Parliament, our surveys found that nine out of 10 new MPs expected to specialise in one or more policy areas. While participants recognised the importance of developing a niche interest in Parliament, not all wished to restrict themselves at too early a stage. A couple of Members emphasised that the role of MP was based on the premise of being a generalist rather than a specialist. Whilst hoping to have a meaningful impact on future policies, they nevertheless did not want to limit their input to a handful of issues.

**Ministerial ladder:** The majority of participants did not articulate ministerial or shadow ministerial ambitions at the outset. Tim Farron explained that he was 'happy to rise up the party, but it is counter-productive to push yourself too early; competence shows'. Kitty Ussher made it clear that: 'If you are only in it for the red box, you will be miserable a lot of the time.'

A handful expressed their reluctance to climb the ministerial ladder:

_I made a very conscious decision before I started that I don’t want a job in government. I want to stay on the backbenches so that I can stand up for the things that matter to me and my constituents._ – Philip Davies

**Ambition**

Shortly after arriving at Westminster, 71 per cent of new Members said they would like to become a minister in due course, whilst 21 per cent disagreed with the statement.
Confidence in Parliament: There was an awareness amongst new MPs that they needed to develop their knowledge of procedures and their confidence in operating in the Commons if they were to realise their ambitions. A handful of MPs associated the desire to be confident in Parliament with the wish to be recognised as a good parliamentarian. Indeed, in some cases this was perceived to be more important than climbing the ministerial ladder.

Re-election: Charles Walker articulated the views of many first-timers when saying, 'I would like to stay in Parliament until I am ready to leave on my own terms.' He added: 'But of course, my constituents will have a large say in this!' The desire of MPs to be re-elected is considered in more detail later in this chapter.

Holding back?: In the early months, several MPs were reluctant to state their future ambitions because they felt themselves to be at a learning stage. They anticipated developing specific objectives over time, once they had the opportunity to fully immerse themselves in parliamentary culture.

The participants were aware that the very nature of politics can make it difficult to formulate ambitions that will remain consistent over the longer term. David Jones said that the most interesting aspect of Parliament is that imperatives change on an almost daily basis. Another new MP said:

> It is a very interesting time in politics and in 10 or 15 years I have no idea where my party, or other parties, will be...there is everything to play for, and I wouldn’t want to tie myself down. – New MP

MPs with little previous experience within Parliament were the most reluctant to spell out their ambitions at this early stage.

Hopes and concerns

When participants returned in October 2005 from their first summer recess, they expressed a range of hopes and concerns. Some focused on their personal development as Members or mentioned a spokesperson or committee responsibility that they planned to develop; others were more concerned about shaping the legislative programme or influencing decisions in the local constituency.

Jo Swinson hoped to get to grips with parliamentary procedure and improve her parliamentary skills in order to highlight and work on issues in her constituency. She was concerned about managing the lifestyle, staying healthy and getting enough sleep. Anne Milton hoped to become an effective and relaxed speaker in the
Chamber. She was concerned about operating ‘passively’ and wanted to take action on issues rather than just responding all of the time. James Duddridge wanted to get on top of work in the constituency office, to speak more frequently in Parliament, to table more written and oral questions and to maintain his profile in the constituency and the local press.

How and why their ambitions change

Participants were asked once again at the end of their first year what they hoped to achieve as MPs. Some responses remained consistent, while for others there were identifiable changes in relation to their ambitions. This section considers why and how the first-time MPs changed their objectives over the course of 12 months in post.

Growing confidence: There were a range of reasons why their objectives changed during the year. One factor, set out earlier, is that novice Members had not always determined what they wanted to achieve in the role. As their confidence and their knowledge of Parliament increased, they became more able and willing to express longer term ambitions. But some MPs remained hesitant about stipulating specific objectives even at the end of the year.

Ministerial and shadow ministerial positions: Another common reason MPs gave for altering their objectives was attaining a ministerial or spokesperson position. Those who had been given such portfolios readily admitted a change of perspective in their approach. Specific policy issues that had been identified in initial interviews were often put to one side, enabling the participants to focus on their new subject portfolio.

Climbing the ‘greasy pole’

To be appointed to a ministerial or shadow ministerial position required, for some, a compromise in how they operated or a more calculated approach to building networks with colleagues. One new MP explained that:

People become ministers because they are friends with the right person. I will not get into particular cliquey groups just for the advancement of my career. I would rather plough my own furrow and see what comes. – New MP

Watching others: Participants changed or consolidated their perceptions of holding office as a result of being able to observe how ministers or shadow ministers
operated. Many interviewees spoke more frankly at the end of the year about their desire for ministerial office. Anne Milton said she ‘would like to be Secretary of State for Health...Maybe!’ Andrew Gwynne commented: ‘One day I hope to be on the frontbench, and I hope it is not the opposition frontbench.’

However, one participant told us of the fresh doubts she had about a frontbench position, having witnessed the pressure and exposure that ministers endure. A handful of participants stated that they did not have ministerial ambitions:

*Being a minister looks like a rather crappy job, to be honest. We are moving towards a more presidential style of government and being a junior minister for paperclips looks extremely uninteresting...It is a thankless task.* – Charles Walker

**Red box reluctance**

By the end of the year, 60 per cent reported that they hoped to be a minister in due course, compared to 71 per cent at the outset of the year. The proportion who did not want to be a minister had risen from 21 per cent to 35 per cent.

The proportion of first-time MPs seeking to specialise in more than one area had also dropped, from 91 per cent to 85 per cent. Fifteen per cent reported that they did not seek to specialise.

**Party and boundary changes:** Over the year, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties held leadership elections and there was much speculation in relation to the Labour Party. Leadership contests can have significant implications for individual members of the parliamentary party. It was therefore to be expected that the ambitions of new Members would change in line with their party’s electoral fortunes and as a response to changing party responsibilities.

Boundary changes directly affected only a small proportion of MPs. However, when this happened, its impact could be all-consuming. The enduring struggle to remain in office always takes precedence over all else.

**How they judge themselves**

*The worst crime you can commit in this place is to lose your seat.* – Sir George Young, first elected in 1974

The ambitions of new Members and the approach they have taken to the role should be considered in light of how they perceived success or failure. For the vast majority,
success as an MP was dependent upon, and defined by, re-election. Returning for another parliamentary term was uppermost in the minds of participants. It was this thought, rather than ministerial achievements, or even 'making a difference', that shaped the responses of the intake:

*The final judgement on your work is through the ballot box.* – Anne Milton

*If you have been a fantastic MP and lose your seat, you have failed.* – Greg Mulholland

However, it was also pointed out that re-election may be beyond their control:

*You could be the best MP in the world and not get re-elected if things go pear-shaped nationally.* – Alison Seabeck

Other measurements for success and failure were more nuanced. Several Members told us about indicators that they used to judge their performance on a daily basis. Examples included: prompt and courteous responses to constituency correspondence; making a clear point in a meeting; persuading people of their viewpoint; making a relevant and succinct intervention; receiving positive press coverage; and unearthing information that was not in the public domain.

### Setting performance indicators

James Duddridge was notable for developing detailed criteria by which to judge his performance. Duddridge identified three key objectives and then formulated performance indicators by which to measure his success in meeting these objectives. His articulation of specific and detailed targets reflected an approach to working life that is rare within Parliament. As with a job description, there is no appraisal process for MPs. Appointment to a ministerial position does not equate to a thorough assessment of a Member’s performance. An election every four or five years is the only concrete feedback on which MPs can depend.

There is a new trend for MPs to be ranked on their performance by a range of websites. Such sites hope to provide information to the public about the actions and choices of those who represent them. There was little doubt that the majority of new MPs (as well as a significant number of their longer-serving colleagues) monitored their ratings on these sites. They were aware that any 'poor' ratings would be pounced upon by political opponents and the media and used against them at the next election. However, the measures used to judge MPs are often crude, incomplete and
sometimes arbitrary. Consequently, while websites that rank MPs on their performance had a direct impact in shaping their work, this was not necessarily for the good of our parliamentary system.\textsuperscript{12}

Their achievements

Midway through their first year, participants were asked to identify what they were most proud of and whether they had any regrets.

**Helping constituents:** MPs and their staff members spent many hours chasing problems raised by constituents on issues such as housing, immigration or even street lighting. Some constituents were destined to become dissatisfied customers whose requests were not met. Yet the MPs did help many individuals and were subsequently rewarded with thank you letters, words of appreciation and gifts. New Members often described the pleasure they took from such expressions of thanks:

> I get some lovely letters from constituents, some super letters... If you feel that you are helping your patch, I think that is the biggest kick you get. – David Jones

It was not only the gratitude that pleased new Members, but the sense that they had provided direct assistance to individuals in their local area. Dan Rogerson explained that it was the small things that kept him going – what may have been a little win in casework terms but made a real difference to someone’s life. Likewise, John Leech told us that, ‘Making a difference locally is what I feel is my best achievement.’ He had pursued immigration casework that could be both frustrating and unsuccessful. However, he was pleased to have prevented the deportation of some individuals in his constituency.

**Promoting the interests of the constituency:** Several MPs also spoke about the satisfaction they gained from promoting the interests of their patch, particularly when there was a tangible outcome. Michael Gove was pleased to have, ‘actually persuaded the government minister to spend some money in my constituency – and getting cash for Surrey from a Labour Government is never going to be easy’.

For a handful of new Members, a major incident or event occurred in their constituency during their first 12 months in the role. Such MPs felt a sense of pride in how they had handled a difficult and challenging situation on behalf of their constituents:

> I am still proudest of the role I was able to play in the aftermath of the discovery that the 7/7 bombs were made in my constituency. I was thrust into quite an extraordinary situation after only 10 weeks of being an MP... into the role of being our community representative at times of need. – Greg Mulholland

\textsuperscript{12} Rosenblatt, G., ‘A Fantasy League?’, The House Magazine, 10 July 2006.
Similarly, Mike Penning acknowledged that, ‘The handling of the Buncefield explosion was a seat of the pants experience.’ Such events in the constituency could consolidate a new Member’s position, bring recognition from voters and strengthen his or her reputation in the local area.

**Recognition:** Recognition is always welcome and even more so for those who rely on the votes of their constituents at the next election. Several MPs described their pride at recognition they had received for their work. In some cases this followed nominations for awards, in others it was a more informal process of recognition via comments from those they represent or even colleagues in the House.

Being appointed to a position of influence is another form of recognition for the new Members, and often a great source of pride. This was the case for Andrew Gwynne when appointed to be a Parliamentary Private Secretary. For Mike Penning, election to the 1922 Executive Committee brought a sense of pride. However, some MPs tempered the satisfaction they took from an appointment at this early stage in their career. As Michael Gove explained:

> Being made shadow housing minister was amazingly flattering, but is also a test. So at the moment I feel that I cannot take any satisfaction until I’ve achieved something in doing it. At the moment it’s just a title, not an achievement.

**Impact in Parliament:** Satisfaction from parliamentary performances or work was also a source of pride. This enabled some to feel that they were having an impact within Parliament, whilst others were pleased to have the chance to participate in a key debate. For example, Mark Harper spoke against a 10-minute rule motion to give children the right to vote. He identified this as an illustration of ‘opportunities for individual MPs to actually make a difference’. His colleague Michael Gove was pleased to have been called to speak on the Religious Hatred Bill, managing to ‘make a speech in the way that I wanted to do and in a debate that I felt mattered. And it was in a debate where people were listening to the arguments.’

Lynne Featherstone was most proud of taking the Violent Crime Bill through the committee stage for the Liberal Democrats. Many opposition Members also mentioned the first Government defeats on the terror legislation, as Susan Kramer illustrated: ‘There is a collective pride in the position we all took on the Anti-Terror Bill on the 90 days’ detention.’

**Speaking out:** Making their voice heard was an important starting point for MPs, as was standing up for the issues they believe in. Philip Davies explained that he was:
Most proud of stimulating a debate on issues that people have been refusing to debate here but that people talk about in the country. For example, calling for us to withdraw from the European Union; questioning the whole sense of sex education in schools; calling for prisoners to serve their sentences in full.

Likewise, his colleague Charles Walker explained that he was proud of, ‘standing up for what I believe in, even if it has made me unpopular’.

Their regrets

When asked whether they had any regrets midway through the year, most of the new intake said ‘no’. They were generally effusive about their decision to become an MP. For those who did express some form of regret, it tended to be in relation to minor events or inevitable situations, as the quotes below demonstrate:

\textit{Not yet. I have made mistakes, obviously, which you learn from. But nothing major, no. I think a lot of the mistakes you make are procedural.} – Angela Smith

\textit{Only regret is that I didn’t become an MP earlier – all those years spent sounding off.} – Mike Penning

\textit{I regret the fact broadly that there isn’t enough time to do all the things that I want to do.} – Michael Gove

Conclusion

Many participants were hesitant about articulating ministerial ambitions immediately after their election to Parliament. Instead, they focused on being good constituency MPs, specific policy objectives, on gaining confidence in Parliament and on their re-election. It was clear that not all MPs entered Parliament with only government in their sights. \textit{While the political world often defines a successful politician by how high he or she climbs up the political ladder, at this stage the participants were more concerned with parliamentary longevity.} They are reliant for this on the public’s support.

The MPs did not enter Parliament with a fixed end point in sight. \textit{Ambitions and objectives fluctuated and were dependent on a range of factors that were often beyond the control of the individual.} By the end of their first 12 months, some participants had more clearly defined their objectives than others. Ambitions changed or were reinforced as Members became more confident in Parliament and
as they were appointed to ministerial or party positions. Party political circumstances also had an impact in shaping objectives; new leaders meant new appointments for many of the participants. As they continue to gain experience in Parliament, their ambitions will continue to develop and change.
Chapter 5
Their views on Parliament

Introduction

If any private business ran itself this way, it would be out of business. It is one of the most inefficient set-ups I have seen. Old hands tell me that it works in the end. But I somehow think people lose an objective look at this after they’ve been here a while. And I have said on the day this all seems normal I shall go out the front door and keep walking. – Susan Kramer

Looking at Parliament through the eyes of its newcomers provided a unique opportunity to understand and assess how the institution operates. We examine below how participants viewed parliamentary procedures and traditions shortly after their election to the Commons. This included speaking in the Chamber, the quality of scrutiny, voting in division lobbies and sitting hours. The chapter considers whether there was a desire for change among the new intake and their willingness to act on any such desire.

We monitored how perceptions of the institution changed as MPs became more familiar with the workings of the Commons and integrated into the House. To contextualise these findings, the extent to which their levels of knowledge about Parliament increased over the year is also considered.

Their views at the outset

New Members inevitably brought their life and work experiences to bear when judging the current set-up of the UK Parliament. Many who had little or no previous experience around the parliamentary estate were somewhat alarmed by how the system operates and its stark contrast with the outside world. It is too often presumed that the newly elected are familiar with basic parliamentary procedure. In fact, they entered Parliament with widely varying levels of knowledge about the institution and the procedures that guide our political system:

No-one told me how to vote – so I missed my first vote. I turned up when the bell rang and sat on the benches. I knew there was this thing about the lobby –
but I thought when the bell rings, everyone will go to the Chamber and then they would say ‘now you vote’. So I sat there, and towards the end I said to one of my colleagues, ‘when do we actually vote?’ Surprised I hadn’t voted, he told me to go through that door. Of course, as I leapt up the door was slammed. Why didn’t anyone tell me? Why is there a mentality that by osmosis or telepathy we are assumed to know what we are doing by day two of the job? Teachers get a year’s training, doctors get six years, vets get seven years; MPs get virtually nothing but a couple of optional seminars. – Greg Mulholland

Why should I know the difference between a standing committee and a select committee? For the new intake you might just as well call it the green committee and the blue committee – absolutely no meaning to us at all. – Susan Kramer

Parliamentary traditions have to be learnt. They are inherent to how the Commons operates and inevitably come to shape the work of new MPs and how they approach the role. Yet the rules and customs of Westminster tend not to resemble those of the world outside.

From the moment the new MPs entered the Commons, they were expected to develop an awareness of ‘the way things are done’ in Parliament. Both the Commons and the Lords can be prone to operating like the Members’ clubs that they are. Outsiders may struggle to comprehend the rules and conventions, but many within the system appreciate them wholeheartedly. Consequently, new Members in both Houses can pose a threat to the established guard.

Assimilation in the Lords

Emma Crewe is an anthropologist who spent two years monitoring the House of Lords. She described the pressures to conform in the Upper House, observing that:

The House assimilates and socialises most newcomers, however tricky, with awesome smoothness…Conversion from critic to defender is seen by most insiders as a rational process: participating, it is felt, removes the scales from the eyes of unbelievers…but not all newcomers are swept off their feet by its charm; there is a remarkable range of social forces at work ensuring that Peers do not step out of line.13

Like the House of Lords, new Members in the Commons did indeed convert from critic to defender, though not all were critics to begin with and some remained critics throughout. Many participants dismissed parliamentary customs as a distraction

from the job in hand. The Commons appeared to them to be inexcusably out of touch with modern society and they were disturbed by justifications for seemingly inefficient and irrational practices. As one person said, ‘Procedure and process is everything; decisions and the quality of decision-making is not.’

However, other participants revelled in the customs and working practices of Parliament. John Leech liked what he described as the ‘outdated rules’ because he believed them to be part of the charm of the Commons. Concerns were raised by others in relation to changing a system that they believed to be functioning well:

_On the whole, Parliament operates quite well. I am concerned by what’s called ‘modernisation’. Certain things are done the way they are done for particular reasons. It may not be immediately apparent, but over time you may come to see there are good reasons._ – Philip Davies

Many, though not all, new MPs described at the outset their frustration with a raft of parliamentary proceedings, including the order of speaking in the Chamber, the scheduling of Bills, the quality of scrutiny, parliamentary hours and the method of voting.

**Speaking in the Chamber:** Parliament often operates as a hierarchical system, particularly when Members are called to speak in the Chamber. There is no fixed order of speakers for debates in the Commons. Rather, an MP will inform the Speaker’s Office that she or he would like to contribute to a particular debate, then sit on the green benches and wait to be called. Seniority is widely perceived as an important factor in determining the order of speakers. Philip Davies explained that: ‘You’re the first year, with the 6th form pushing to the front of the queue.’

The desire to contribute to a debate can result in MPs sitting in the Chamber for many hours, with no guarantee of being called to speak. This was frustrating for Members of the intake and a continual source of complaint. There was an additional downside for brand new MPs, as many were unaware in the early weeks that ‘tea-breaks’ were permitted. Several participants told us that they had sat in the Chamber for up to seven hours without anything to eat or drink and not knowing whether a ‘loo visit’ was allowed!

**Time wasting:** On similar lines, the repetition, padding out and over-the-top courteousness of many parliamentary speeches was regarded as crude time wasting by several new women MPs. The fault was seen to lie with an inflexible system and individuals who take great pleasure from the sound of their own voices:

_Speaking goes on forever! It’s just like high school debates. I would be very happy to clip everybody’s time limit down. If I hear one more speech with the entire history of a clause, and how wonderful the Chair is that day – I’m going to throttle someone._ – Susan Kramer
You will be sitting in a debate, and the debate will be timetabled for a set time. And nobody has got anything different to say, so you have all these people hopping up and down, making exactly the same point. – Alison Seabec

The culture of the Chamber placed pressure on the participants to speak for a longer period of time than they may otherwise have done.

**Language in the Chamber:** Debates in the Chamber tend not to reflect normal everyday conversation, not least because of the language and terminology that is used. Several Members commented that the terms used help to ensure that debates are conducted in a civilised manner. Yet they seemed alien to some MPs who believed them to be a barrier to public engagement:

*I find the procedural aspect of what goes on in Parliament is probably the most intimidating thing, with slightly arcane language and ways of doing things.* – Dan Rogerson

*Some of the routines – such as using the terms ‘the other place’ and ‘honourable friend’ – are old fashioned and mystifying. It seems antiquated and this doesn’t help Parliament’s image.* – Angela Smith

**Scrutiny and topicality:** Whilst most participants chose not to comment at the outset on the quality of scrutiny that takes place in the House of Commons, concerns were raised by some new Conservative MPs. Charles Walker asked for more time to debate Bills on the floor of the House. He believed that ‘scrutiny has gone by-the-by as Bills are pushed through’. His colleague, Michael Gove, argued that, ‘There are huge areas of legislative scrutiny where what Parliament does is inadequate, a joke almost.’

Yet not all were critical. Anne Milton believed the debates and questions at the beginning of each session provided good opportunities for scrutiny. Philip Davies asked:

*Where else is the leader made to justify themselves weekly by the legislature? It is an underestimated event – a unique showcase we should cherish.* – Philip Davies

Concern about what takes place on the floor of the House was not only in relation to scrutiny. Mark Harper believed that the Chamber should better direct and respond to the political agenda. He was concerned that topicality was missing from the Chamber:

*It would be helpful to address the timeliness aspect: if a controversy arises it would be nice if there was a better way of making sure the Commons grabs the issue of the day and of debating it here in the House. If some big issue arises today, we’re not going to be talking about it in the Chamber.* – Mark Harper
Sitting hours and days: Parliamentary hours were supposedly resolved in the last Parliament, yet most new MPs still wanted to contribute to this debate. A range of perspectives were expressed by the MPs in our study. Linda Riordan said she ‘knew the hours’ when she decided to stand as an MP. She explained: ‘I don’t want them cutting now because it would be “easier for me”’. However, many of the participants called for sitting hours to be ‘more family-friendly’.

At the outset of the year, several new Members expressed the need for a longer break before Parliament returns after an election. Whilst aware that this may not be a popular choice with the public and some colleagues, they nevertheless believed that it would allow a period of recuperation and the opportunity to set up offices and familiarise themselves with parliamentary procedure:

In America they get a certain amount of time to sort things out before they take office. I think there is probably some justification to saying it would be better to do things like that. But it will never in a million years happen in this country. – John Leech

There was also dissatisfaction amongst a couple of new Members about the length of the upcoming recess.14 Whilst some defended the length of the summer break, welcoming the opportunity to bed down in the constituency and have what they regarded as a well-deserved rest, others were disgruntled:

When debates or standing committees are curtailed due to the lack of time, and then MPs get 80 days off in the summer, there has to be something wrong with the system. – Philip Davies

Recess

MPs are frequently criticised for their long summer break, but the newest intake did not stop working when Parliament stopped sitting. Most participants reported taking a holiday that was no longer than two or three weeks. The 2005 summer recess began a couple of months after the general election, so much of their time was spent setting up constituency offices and interviewing for staff. The MPs also reported that they attended constituency events; campaigned in the local area; held advice surgeries; met with various people and organisations; produced newsletters; dealt with casework; and caught up on reading. They also enjoyed reclaiming their weekends.

Pushing for change?: Whilst participants advocated a raft of parliamentary changes at the outset, many were aware that dissatisfaction with an aspect of Parliament

14 In November 2006, MPs voted not to resume September sittings.
should not be voiced too loudly at this stage. They believed that a greater understanding of Parliament should first be acquired:

*Having been here eight weeks, my demands that X or Y should change shouldn’t be pressed too vigorously...I have strong views about certain aspects of the House of Commons, but I wouldn’t want to go all guns blazing and issue a fanfare and demand the change yet. I still want to test some of my ideas and make sure my instincts are right...Even though a rule may be silly, it is part of a set of rules that make this place function relatively well. If you start saying that this part of the tapestry is wrong, you risk unravelling everything.* – Michael Gove

*Whilst I may moan about how long I have to stay in the Chamber to get called, I certainly recognise that listening to a debate first allows you to know what has been said before and thus not repeat the same points. But also, I saw a Member come in and make an intervention so she was called – she wouldn’t get called to make a speech. It was totally inappropriate, she had got it entirely wrong, and the whole House gasped from both sides because she hadn’t heard the discussion or the mood of the debate. With something I thought was completely mad, I now see there is logic in it being there.* – Lynne Featherstone

**What they knew by the end of the year**

*If someone asked me if I’d go and talk in front of a school and explain the process of the House of Commons, I would struggle.* – New MP

Twelve months on the participants reported an increased awareness of the workings of Parliament. Yet survey findings from the intake as a whole showed a relatively modest rise in the proportion of MPs claiming to be familiar with parliamentary proceedings.

In May 2005, new MPs were asked how familiar they were with parliamentary procedure. Half of those surveyed believed themselves to be ‘somewhat familiar’ with parliamentary procedure, with only seven per cent believing they were ‘very familiar’. In contrast, 33 per cent said they were ‘not very familiar’ and 10 per cent reported being ‘not at all familiar’.
A year later, the percentage of respondents who reported themselves as being 'very familiar' with parliamentary proceedings rose to 15 per cent and the proportion who were 'somewhat familiar' with parliamentary procedure was 60 per cent. On the other end of the scale, 23 per cent still believed themselves to be 'not very familiar' and two per cent thought they were 'not at all familiar'.

These findings were supported by the comments of participants. Many said they were now more familiar with proceedings but did not pretend that they had mastered the process. On the contrary, several explained that it would take four to eight years to be fully familiar with how Parliament operates and others said that the learning never ends:

"You still see new Members who arrived to Parliament 12 months ago who are still not observing parliamentary protocol; still not addressing the Speaker but addressing the other Member directly. – Mark Harper"

"This week I was talking to someone who had no knowledge of the process of how you get your seat and how, if you happen to be in a select committee, you can have a pink card rather than a green one and not turn up to prayers, and all that kind of nonsense. So there are lots of things you assume people know but they don’t. – Tim Farron"

"I know that I haven’t used the library properly; I haven’t really done a proper stint on a select committee; I have only been on one Bill committee. It takes at least a full parliamentary term before anyone feels they know how the institution works and how to extract value from it. – Michael Gove,"
Yet despite residual concerns, most new MPs were now familiar with day-to-day procedure and much of the early angst had dissipated:

*It is sometimes difficult to remember how much you have learnt. You leap into the middle of an issue, using all sorts of jargon, which leaves most people completely bamboozled, and you forget that constituents, even people interested in politics, have very little idea of even basic procedures.* – James Duddridge

**Their views on Parliament at the end of the year**

*It’s growing on me.* – Andrew Gwynne

*There is a danger that as you become more familiar with the system and as you develop an understanding of how it works, that you can become an unconscious defender of things...being here can be seductive and nice in all sorts of ways.* – New MP

Views on how Parliament operates were mixed at the outset and remained varied throughout. The responses ranged from the very positive to the very negative and tended to focus on the areas in which new MPs had some experience. As participants came into contact with other parliamentary procedures, a wider range of issues were raised as either concerns or examples of good practice. For example, MPs were more likely to mention standing and select committees in later interviews, or comment on Private Members’ Bills or the Whipping system.

### Parliamentary reform?

**Survey results**

In the survey sent to new MPs at the end of their first year, the intake was asked whether there were any aspects of Parliament that they would like to reform. Twenty-nine per cent did not comment, perhaps indicating that they were satisfied with the current workings of Parliament. However, a significant proportion (71 per cent) of the respondents highlighted areas for reform. Their comments ranged from ‘simplify the legislative system’, ‘the voting system is archaic’, ‘the late hours and length of days are counter to any time with family’, ‘Tuesday sitting hours should be the same as Wednesdays’, ‘family friendly features – such as a crèche’, to views such as ‘power of patronage’, ‘would like to abstain in person when necessary’, ‘boorish behaviour tolerated in the Chamber’, ‘axe the “men-in-tights” culture’; and even ‘dress code – no ties please’.
There remained some consternation about the extent to which old-fashioned traditions dictated the workings of Parliament. Liberal Democrat MPs in particular were more likely to refer to the Palace of Westminster as 'archaic'.

**The Chamber:** Several MPs praised the quality of debate in the Chamber. Lynne Featherstone said there had been very few occasions when she had sat in the Chamber and not learnt something new or been interested in what was being said. Anne Milton explained how her opinion of the Chamber had changed:

> I think my views have changed slightly, as I have been impressed with the way people speak in the Chamber. There is a lot of focus on things like Prime Minister’s Questions, which is very much a bear pit, and in fact that is half an hour of every week only. That actually the debate in the Chamber is intelligent and articulate and thoughtful, and I don’t see people on the whole being politically opportunistic in their contributions. I think it’s a lot more genuine than the public think. – Anne Milton

Yet, as mentioned in Chapter 3, over the year there was a small decline in the amount of time new MPs spent in the Chamber. Frustration with procedures was a contributory factor and participants explained their dislike of current practices. Many told us that they would be more encouraged to take part in debates if they knew when they were going to be called to speak. Philip Davies said that waiting to be called was, ‘the biggest frustration that I and all of my colleagues have’.

> In terms of how Parliament runs, my biggest gripe is the seniority stuff. It happened particularly with the education debate. If we are not going to be called to speak, let us know. We have to sit there for six hours and listen to people telling us how great they have been in Parliament for the last 25 years. I am sitting there in the hope that someone will say I can speak for five minutes, after someone else has spoken for 25 minutes. – David Anderson.

The new MPs identified the hierarchical approach to selecting speakers as a specific source of concern, and one which deterred them from attending the Chamber. Longer-serving Members were equally aware of the seniority rule. Some recognised the disadvantage faced by their newer colleagues, but believed that they had to patiently climb the ladder. Their answer to first-timers tended to be that it gets better. But not all sympathised. Gwyneth Dunwoody said that when she was first elected to Parliament, it was accepted that ‘if you got called once a month, you were doing very well’. She noted that dissatisfaction amongst newcomers was not unique to the 2005 intake:

> A lot of new Members in 1997 thought they were being particularly hard done by, because the minute they got to their feet they were not called. If you have
650 MPs, it’s extraordinarily difficult to call everybody in every debate. – Gwyneth Dunwoody, first elected in 1966

Moreover, not all members of the 2005 intake objected to the current system:

If you have someone who has been a cabinet minister for that area of policy, or knows an awful lot about it, it would be silly not to call them and listen to their words... They try and balance it out, and it goes in swings and roundabouts. You don’t often see new colleagues going to talk to the Chair, but maybe they’re not aware of that. Usually you get clear guidance about whether or not you will get called, or not till later. – Mark Harper

A handful of MPs called for more significant changes to the Chamber, including the creation of a round Chamber, in which all MPs have their own seat and electronic voting takes place. This would enable them to continue with their work during lengthy debates and would, they believed, prevent the so-called schoolboy behaviour that was seen to prevail.

The Commons vs. the National Assembly for Wales

Being in Parliament is a completely different experience from the Welsh Assembly. This is a far more ‘serious’ environment and there is a feeling of being ‘at the centre of politics’ here. The Welsh Assembly has far more limited powers and as a consequence, and as a much more recently-established institution, it tends to lack Parliament’s gravitas. – David Jones

Voting: To vote in Parliament, MPs have to pass through the division lobbies. They register their intent by walking through the ‘aye’ or ‘nay’ lobbies. This system of voting was increasingly praised during the year. The MPs were aware of how it cut into their day but also pointed to the advantages for the backbencher:

I have discovered why we walk through the lobbies to vote – because it is your one chance to nobble someone. I have grabbed a minister who was proving exceedingly elusive. Otherwise, you don’t see a minister for love nor money around here. – Susan Kramer

As Susan Kramer illustrates, the division lobbies were believed to be an opportunity to meet with senior members of the party and ministers. But Greg Mulholland disagreed: ‘I don’t need to have to vote in a ludicrously archaic system just to meet people.’ A few of his colleagues also complained about the inherent time wasting that this system involves and believed it to be archaic.
**Scrutiny:** The relationship between Parliament and the Executive was raised by several, primarily Conservative, MPs in interviews throughout the project:

The way it works at the moment favours the Executive and it has been configured in such a way as to diminish the opportunities for people to hold government to account. – Michael Gove

Many in the party wanted to improve scrutiny of government and ensure a better balance between Parliament and the Executive. Proposals for change included better notice of when statements will occur, less of a time lag between questions being submitted and answered, and a greater opportunity for debates to be triggered by backbenchers or the opposition when urgent issues arise. Other suggestions included reducing the number of ministers and creating alternative career paths within Parliament.

The role of the House of Lords in scrutinising legislation was rarely mentioned. However, John Leech came to appreciate the importance that Peers have in this respect:

I had a particularly strong view that we should have full reform of the House of Lords and have some sort of directly elected second chamber. Now I’m not so sure. I think the Lords in their current form have a role to play. One of the benefits the Lords have, as opposed to MPs, is that they are able to spend an awful lot more time looking at legislation and trying to make it better. We have to concentrate on our constituencies. So I’ve changed my view on the House of Lords. – John Leech

**Other changes:** Participants mentioned frustrations with other aspects of parliamentary procedure. In some cases, their irritation resulted from the failing of the Commons to adapt to modern times. Jo Swinson wanted to change the current system of Private Members’ Bills, believing it to be a flaw in the democratic system when ‘votes are not won or lost by the strength of someone’s argument but by the fact that one or two people literally talk it out of the Chamber’. Her colleague, Lynne Featherstone, said:

The way they present Bills and amendments has to be out of the ark. So that you end up, which I am sure the lawyers love, with 19 bits of paper that you have to juggle to find out where the amendment fits in and what someone else’s amendment was.

Featherstone wanted Parliament to make better use of what she described as ‘enabling technology’ to resolve this problem.¹⁵ Likewise, Andrew Gwynne said that now the technology is in place, MPs should be able to sign Early Day Motions via email.

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¹⁵ There has, in fact, been some progress on this front. In November 2006, the Commons voted to adopt proposals by the Modernisation Committee to reform the legislative process, including taking steps to computerise standing committee papers and providing on-screen access to papers in committee rooms.
**Pushing for change?:** By the end of their first year, MPs were divided as to whether to push for change within Parliament. There was an awareness among some participants that whilst things were not perfect in their entirety, ensuring that Parliament operates to an optimum requires a fine balance. Change should therefore be minimal and well-considered:

*I still feel that although some of the rules are quite archaic, on balance most of them are very sensible and are designed to embed a degree of courtesy and respect into the system.* – Angela Smith

Those who vocalised their dissatisfaction did not always translate this into action. Peer pressure and intimidation can weigh heavily on newcomers in all organisations. New Members face hostility from those who believe they are too new and junior to have an informed opinion. Longer-serving Members can and do resent those who advocate change from the outset. Consequently, new MPs are wary of rocking the boat or of making mistakes:

*If you want to be promoted and you are kicking against, then you are seen as frankly a bit of a bloody nuisance...The second level of that is insecurity...the insecurities about what you are saying and how you present yourself are clearly there.* – Dari Taylor, first elected in 1997

Pushing for change is not always high on an MP’s list of priorities. New MPs want to settle into their constituency work and make an impact on the policy agenda. Moreover, they come to accept that whilst a particular practice or tradition may indeed be inconvenient or objectionable, parliamentary practices are not easily amended:

*I am not here to reform Parliament. I am here to be as good an MP as possible and to represent my constituents as best as possible.* – Greg Mulholland

**Conclusion**

As with longer-serving Members, the views of participants varied in relation to parliamentary proceedings. Some dismissed many of the traditions as an unnecessary inconvenience that inhibits the work of the legislature. Others acknowledged the so-called archaic nature of many practices, but believed it gave colour and life to the Commons and that the traditions had a proven track record in terms of effectiveness.

One common cause for complaint amongst new Members was the conventions that dictate the order of speaking in the Chamber. The consequence of such dissatisfaction was less a visible push for reform and more a change in how the individual Member operated. This helps to explain the reduction in time that MPs spend in the Chamber.
Another aspect of parliamentary practice mentioned by the majority of participants was the sitting hours of the Commons. The new MPs had not been in Parliament when the votes were taken to change the hours. Had they been, it is clear that they too would have been split on reform. Many expressed frustration that Tuesday sittings were once again late night, after a trial of early Tuesday sittings in the last Parliament. However, there were some exceptions to this, as other participants thought that late night sittings should be reinstated for Wednesday evenings.

Longer-serving Members do not always appreciate their newer colleagues dismissing traditions that have developed over centuries. However, it is important for the effectiveness of the Commons that the experience and knowledge of its new Members is harnessed at the outset. Looking at Parliament through the eyes of its newest recruits is a useful indicator of desirable and undesirable practices. It is also likely to be the closest reflection within Parliament of how members of the public view the workings of the Commons. Indeed, the levels of knowledge about parliamentary proceedings showed that new recruits were not experts from the outset. It takes time for them to learn the ropes. In some cases, quite a lot of time.
Chapter 6

Through the eyes of the newcomers

Introduction

It’s a bit like ‘Stepford Wives’, we will all be traded in for these robotic figures that churn out sound bites. – Lynne Featherstone

The public often perceive MPs as ‘all the same’. Perceptions tend to encompass competitive hierarchies and clans who operate within the insular world of Westminster. MPs are seen to follow a prescribed script and to be disconnected from the people they represent. Once elected to Parliament, they cease to be ‘one of us’ and become ‘one of them’. This chapter considers whether and how MPs change their behaviour as they become immersed into the culture of the Commons.

The participants shared their thoughts on colleagues and how they operate. They explained what it means to become socialised into parliamentary ways of working and whether such a process is common to all big organisations. Finally, the new intake identified how socialisation has come to shape the practices of those who arrived with them in May 2005 and the tell-tale signs of this.

What they think of each other

In the end, it doesn’t matter where you come from: politicians have more in common and are more supportive of each other than they ever acknowledge in public. – Susan Kramer

I have a good relationship with MPs from other parties...It’s not the yah-boo politics relationship that you see at Prime Ministers Questions. – Alison Seabeck

Midway through their first year as MPs, participants shared their views on colleagues.

Labour Party: In 2005, for the first time, a major political party had a new intake in which women formed the majority. The party had 40 newly elected Members, of whom 26 were women. However, the experiences of the new MPs were influenced less by their gender and more by entering Parliament during their party’s third term.16

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After three general election victories, it was hardly surprising that of the three main political parties, their intake formed the smallest proportion of the parliamentary party, at just 11 per cent.

Labour MPs tended to comment on the party’s changing circumstances, noting that Labour must now defend a smaller majority. Unlike the Members of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat intake, they were less likely to throw around words like young, ambitious, or determined. As Kitty Ussher declared: ‘We are just newer ones of them. We are on a learning-curve – it is like college or school, you are the young ones, learning from the old.’

There was a collegiate feeling among Labour’s new intake, who referred to themselves as the 5/5/5 group. The new MPs continued to be an identifiable group months into the Parliament, with many of them meeting regularly on Monday evenings for dinner in the Members’ Dining Room. Joan Ruddock, an MP since 1987, noted that ‘this group seem to be sticking together more and probably for longer’.

**Conservative Party:** There was a clear sense amongst Members of the Conservative Party intake that those elected in 2005 were distinctive from longer-serving Members. Anne Milton felt this instinctively, yet was wary of second-guessing the views of existing MPs. She acknowledged that, ‘maybe every intake feels they are different’. One new MP responded with conviction when asked if anything distinguished the 2005 intake from longer-serving Members:

> [We are] Chalk and cheese. Clearly we are going to be younger; we are more representative…more informal, more normal, more in touch with reality. It’s not something we’ve attempted to do. It’s just that we’re a product of the outside world and have lots of interests, experiences that we bring from outside. Our norms of life are different. – New MP

Several of his colleagues remarked that the Conservative intake tended to be younger, state-educated, and representative of a broader cross-section of society. Ed Vaizey identified distinct differences between them and their longer-serving colleagues, but could not guarantee that these would remain over time:

> We are less institutionalised. But that may well change. In 10 years’ time we could easily be the stuffy people who say, ‘you must understand how Parliament works’. But at the moment, we are ripe for revolution.

The 2005 election was the first occasion since 1983 that the Conservative Party welcomed a significant number of new Members into Parliament. The 51 new MPs, forming more than a quarter of the parliamentary party, were bound to have an

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17 For more information on the educational background of candidates, see D. Kavanagh and D. Butler (2005) The British General Election of 2005, (Palgrave Macmillan: London). They found that ‘the new Conservative intake was less elitist’ in terms of their education than the parliamentary party as a whole. (pp.164-166).
immediate impact on the Conservatives. Many of them had fought hard for their seats. This left them, in their own words, feeling battle-hardened. Several identified the new intake as being better campaigners, quicker to see a political point, and more ambitious:

As a group, we have reinvigorated the party in Parliament. We have brought enthusiasm and a willingness to get stuck in. I think we have added a spring in the party’s step, to a certain extent. – Philip Davies

They are much more enthusiastic, professional, organised, committed than I was when I got here...I think they have probably had to work harder to get here. I think they are more committed. – Sir George Young, first elected in 1974

**Liberal Democrats:** Liberal Democrat MPs also referred to themselves as the 5/5/5 intake. Like Members of other parties, they were more likely at the outset to establish networks and contacts with those in their own party. Consequently, they struggled in the early days to give an informed view on the 2005 intake as a whole.

They believed that the intake would have a significant role in shaping the Liberal Democrats, as they comprised 32 per cent of the parliamentary party. Ambition was a common theme amongst them. Jo Swinson described the intake as fresher and more open to change. For Susan Kramer, the new intake was distinguished by their successful careers, which she believed would have important implications for the future of the parliamentary party.

**Are they institutionalised?**

The biggest worry I have is becoming establishment and being sucked into Westminster. – Lynne Featherstone

The Palace of Westminster is often regarded as a closed village, whose Members benefit from a range of privileges and who thrive in an insular, elitist atmosphere and plush surroundings. Over time, the Members of this village are believed to take on a certain mindset that distinguishes them from ‘ordinary folk’ – the outsiders. A process of so-called socialisation takes place as the newly elected become embedded into their surroundings.
Living in the Westminster village

Someone asked recently, ‘What’s it like living in London?’ And I said I don’t live in London, I’m an MP. I explained that I come down on the train on a Monday, come in to the office, put my laptop on and then I’ll go to listen to a debate, or committees, or briefings. Then I go home again on Thursday. And in that time I never leave the place, except to go back to my flat, which is 20 minutes away. And I won’t be there before 11 o’clock at night. So it’s very, very institutionalised. You come down here and you are in an institution for three or four days. You’re not in London, you’re in the Houses of Parliament, the Palace of Westminster. – Greg Mulholland

While perceptions of the Commons as a closed village may be extreme, there is undoubtedly a process by which the new Members of Parliament become acclimatised into the House and into its unique traditions and ways of working.

Character traits: Several participants identified the characteristics associated with becoming institutionalised or ‘going native’. This included losing a sense of perspective about Parliament and how the institution may appear to someone who is not a Member:

The entrenchment can be seen in an acceptance of some of the things that go on in Parliament – such as the talking out of Private Members’ Bills. My colleagues amongst the 2005 intake of Liberal Democrat MPs felt equally frustrated by the process and want to bring about change. But there was almost a shrug of shoulders approach amongst longer-serving Liberal Democrats... [who] have come to accept the way the process works. – Jo Swinson

Symptoms of going native include joining too many All Party Groups, social groups here, going to all the dinners...becoming too imbued with a sense of how important this place is and how important you are to be in it. Talking about ‘we’ and ‘us’ about the House of Commons and Westminster as if you somehow belong here and have a right to be here... A centring of yourself in the culture of this place, rather than in the culture of your constituency. – Tim Farron

Others identified the following factors:

Leaving all the work for other people to do. Liking the sound of their own voice a bit too much. Generally thinking that because they are an MP, they should have an opinion about everything. – John Leech

MPs do develop certain habits, such as poor punctuality and failure to engage in eye contact. These are the habits of busy people who are under stress. – Michael Gove
You do feel very secure here. It could make you wary of going into the outside world, if you're not careful. Certainly, I suspect, with some individuals it could lead you to disregard what you are hearing from outside. – Alison Seabeck

**Splendid isolation?:** Some MPs identified contributory factors to the process of socialisation. Anne Milton believed that there was a big difference between the MPs who can get home to their constituency in the evening, and those who cannot: 'If you come up here on a Monday morning and don't leave till a Thursday afternoon, you inevitably become institutionalised. You probably choose to eat breakfast here rather than eat it alone in your flat.' Likewise, Andrew Gwynne acknowledged that, 'You could spend all day, every day, in this place. You could have no contact with the outside world, and not know what is going on out there.'

Participants also spoke about how they prevented themselves from becoming too cosy in Westminster:

> It is important for MPs to remember to spend time in the constituency talking to voters, not just party members... The danger is that you get caught up in the Westminster world, which is all about who has what job, who is up or down – and you forget what real people are interested in. – Mark Harper

> Most MPs spend three days a week outside London, so that keeps our feet firmly on the ground. – Philip Davies.

**We are all susceptible:** However, becoming socialised is not, as several of the new MPs pointed out, peculiar to Westminster; many institutions or organisations have their own particular ways of operating to which newcomers gradually become familiar:

> You probably are institutionalised to a certain extent – you have to say the right thing and do the right thing. But I am not sure if that is any different to what it would be like in any other organisation. If you want to get on, you’re unlikely to want to upset the boss. – New MP

Moreover, a handful of the participants believed that becoming socialised into Parliament may be a ‘good thing’ because it enabled MPs to operate within the House of Commons in a more sophisticated and civilised manner, which correspondingly ensured that the institution operated effectively. David Jones believed that socialisation encourages new Members to appreciate that people from the other parties ‘haven’t got two heads’ and that you may be able to get along with them, despite disagreeing with them profoundly on occasion.
Reverse socialisation?

A new intake of MPs can also shape how Parliament and longer-serving Members operate. The 1997 general election saw a significant turnover in membership of the Commons, with a subsequent emphasis on a modernisation agenda and consideration of how Parliament could better accommodate family-friendly working. The 2005 election brought in Members who were very experienced in technology and campaigning techniques. Longer-serving Members may be forced to adapt to such ways of operating.

Yet several participants stated that they had no intention of becoming socialised into Parliament:

*If you get drawn into it, you begin to lose touch with reality and life on the ground...I think it is important to maintain a sense of perspective and not get carried away with the idea that you are super-human or super-important – because you’re not. Everybody is disposable and everybody can be brought back down to the level of the man on the street.* – Angela Smith

*Never think you have your feet under the table. Never go native. Never be an apologist for this place in the outside world.* – Tim Farron

**But has it happened to them?:** Participants were divided on the question of whether other Members of their intake had become institutionalised into Parliament. Some did not believe that the mindset of their colleagues had begun to change. Susan Kramer said that her intake had not yet adopted a Westminster village mentality, but several of her Liberal Democrat colleagues disagreed. Greg Mulholland believed that there was ‘no question’ that Members of the intake had become ‘sucked into’ Parliament. He had witnessed people becoming too cosy with the culture and the lifestyle. John Leech was also concerned about how ‘this place changes people’:

*You can see some MPs falling into the trap of turning into what is a stereotypical MP...To a certain extent it is very easy to fall into that trap, because you have lots of people telling you how important you are now that you are an MP and trying to wine and dine you...Within a 12-month period you see change in some people from when they first came in and now. People too easily feel they are part of the furniture...a lot of people just think they have a god-given right to be here.*

James Duddridge described a certain loss of humility, which he could recognise in colleagues’ reactions to each other. He had been told:

*You spend the first six months wondering how you got here, and the rest of your career wondering how everyone else got here!*
Proving socialisation is tricky. **There is no definitive answer as to what exactly it means to become socialised into Parliament.** Dari Taylor, a longer-serving MP, identified the evidence for institutionalisation in ‘tolerances to activities which in rational terms there should be serious question marks placed against’. Alison Seabeck thought that as a group, the latest intake of MPs are 'slightly less respectful of some of the old habits and customs of this place. A few feathers have been ruffled already in certain quarters.' She wondered whether they would be able to maintain this or if they too would 'become part of the establishment'.

**Going to their heads?**

*If there is ever an issue where constituents’ concerns conflict with my party, then I need to deal with that. A good example is concerns over the Smoking Bill. I met Patricia Hewitt and Caroline Flint. Things moved and we got a free vote.* – New MP

**Conclusion**

MPs praised the support they had received from colleagues and described how the new intake had established formal and informal networks in the early months after the election. The participants were also quick to point out the similarities which MPs of all political parties share. **Whilst their political perspectives may differ widely, they will have had many common experiences and operate together in a unique working environment.**

Many of the newly elected said that they brought fresh blood to their respective political parties. **When considering their longer-serving colleagues, most were quick to identify traits which they were wary of adopting.** The concept of becoming indoctrinated into a Westminster village mindset was undesirable, but as they become integrated into the Commons it is inevitable that some form of socialisation takes place. The degree to which this happens and the impact that it has on their way of working will become more evident over the years to come. Some identified a process of change as having already taken place amongst their contemporaries and expressed disappointment that their colleagues had 'fallen into the trap'. From their new position of privilege, participants stipulated the need to remain grounded.

**New MPs have, to some extent, a different perspective from their longer-serving colleagues. At the least, they themselves believe this to be the case. This is inevitable in any institution. It would be to the detriment of Parliament as a whole if those unsullied judgements were ignored and the impetus for change was lost.**
Conclusion

Themes and findings

This report, and the project on which is it based, has looked at the first year in the life of Members of Parliament. It has described the initial impressions and experiences of a small group of individuals who, along with their colleagues, make up the most important political institution in the United Kingdom.

Some of their experiences will be familiar to anyone who has started a new job; unfamiliarity with surroundings, immersion in a new culture, making sure that mistakes are avoided (or at least go unnoticed and unpunished). However, there are profound differences between the first-time MPs and anyone else who may have started a new job in May 2005. Perhaps uniquely, MPs can be privileged, powerful, impotent, admired, mocked, respected and despised (if not necessarily in equal measure). The potential trajectory of their career is also unlike any other. On the one hand, power and a place in history may be waiting (Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher were new MPs once) while for others, anonymity and an early electoral defeat beckon. Indeed, over the year the paths of individuals gradually began to diverge. MPs were given varying responsibilities within Parliament and on behalf of their parties.

Nonetheless, initially there was more to unite than divide this group of first-timers and a number of important themes became apparent. Some of these themes provided insights into the role of MPs and the varied, and sometimes conflicting, demands on them and therefore shed light on how our representatives operate and how a crucial part of our political world works in practice.

Additionally, some observations point towards potential improvements to the way that MPs begin their parliamentary life and also suggest reforms to Parliament more broadly. It is clear, for example, that the induction process for MPs, certainly in terms of the practical services offered by Parliament (for example, providing briefings, claiming fees) has improved in recent years. Longer-serving Members contrasted their experience of being left to make their own way with little help. Yet a significant portion (around a third) felt more could have been done to provide a comprehensive induction. In most organisations, if that level of unmet need was identified by its senior partners, something would be done to address it. There should be no reason why Parliament should be any different.
One particular issue of concern was parliamentary procedure. A significant proportion of those interviewed indicated that information about procedure was either insufficient or poorly presented, while others suggested that time pressures meant they could not fully utilise the resources available in the early weeks. Of course, nothing is going to make parliamentary procedure appear straightforward and all professions involve their own complicated knowledge and arcane detail. However, the difference between MPs and most other professions is that the latter tend to have several years’ education and training, while MPs have just a few days after their arrival at Parliament. Some MPs called for easier guides and more training, although others accepted that learning on the job was inevitably the most effective method.

On the rituals and traditions of Parliament, there was also a division of opinion. Some thought the way the Commons operated was outdated and inefficient but others revelled in its ancient quirkiness. The reality is that new members of any institution – and Parliament is certainly no exception – have the least clout in terms of advocating change. Perhaps insecure about their position and the depth of their knowledge, they are less likely to question current ways of working, mindful that no-one likes a whining, troublesome newcomer. By the time they are in a position to push for change, they may have forgotten their initial reactions and regard the institution as perfectly normal. The phrase ‘going native’ was indeed used many times by our participants to describe their colleagues. This is unfortunate, as the perspectives of brand new MPs may be more in line with the impressions of the public (of which they were members until very recently) than those of their more institutionalised colleagues.

The study also looked at how new MPs considered the different elements of their job. Unsurprisingly, a survey of all new MPs showed that just over four-fifths regarded representing their constituency as their most important priority, up slightly from 74 per cent of new MPs in 1997. Moreover, when the 2005 cohort were asked the same question a year after their election, the number citing constituency representation had risen to 90 per cent. Therefore, even after becoming more acquainted with Parliament and the avenues it provides for scrutinising legislation, holding the government to account and using procedures to raise issues and promote campaigns, the constituency function appeared to have become even more dominant. There are those who fear that the unique role of MP as parliamentarian is becoming subservient to the MP as constituency advocate and social worker. While it is understandable that new MPs of every intake tend to spend their first term in Parliament becoming embedded in their local area, it seems that the trend of MPs to focus on the constituency is becoming more pronounced for each new intake. This trend has profound implications for our parliamentary system given that securing accountability of government and passing the most effective laws possible requires the active involvement and time of MPs.
The future for the new MPs – and the future work of the Hansard Society

The participants were aware that during the coming years they are likely to modify their perceptions of the role and change the balance between constituency and parliamentary work. They will continue to develop their expertise on the workings of Parliament and may refine their ambitions for the post. Some are likely to rise through the ranks and to be found one day – perhaps not too far into the future – sitting round the cabinet table. Others will end their political career without ever leaving the backbenches. That end may be in three or four years’ time or it may be in 30 years’ time.

The Hansard Society looks at how Parliament operates and the functioning of the UK political system. Gathering information about Members of Parliament and their initial perceptions of the legislature has helped to inform and shape our work. This report has identified changing trends in the nature of the work of Members of Parliament and how representatives perceive their role. This is an issue that the Hansard Society will continue to look at in future years.
Appendix A

Participants

The Hansard Society set up this project immediately following the 2005 election. We contacted all 119 first-time MPs to invite them to take part in a year-long study on the experiences of new Members. Many participants subsequently contacted us to express their interest in the project. We then sought the participation of additional MPs to improve the gender and party political balance.

The participants were interviewed shortly after their election to Parliament, then again in the period December 2005 – January 2006. Final interviews were held approximately a year after the 2005 election. All the participants below were interviewed on three occasions, unless otherwise indicated:

- **David Anderson**: Labour MP for Blaydon
- **Philip Davies**: Conservative MP for Shipley
- **James Duddridge**: Conservative MP for Rochford and Southend East
- **Tim Farron**: Liberal Democrat MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale
- **Lynne Featherstone**: Liberal Democrat MP for Hornsey and Wood Green
- **Michael Gove**: Conservative MP for Surrey Heath
- **Andrew Gwynne**: Labour MP for Denton and Reddish
- **Mark Harper**: Conservative MP for Forest of Dean
- **David Jones**: Conservative MP for Clwyd West (two interviews)
- **Susan Kramer**: Liberal Democrat MP for Richmond Park
- **Peter Law**: Independent MP for Blaenau Gwent (one interview) 18
- **John Leech**: Liberal Democrat MP for Manchester Withington
- **Anne Milton**: Conservative MP for Guildford
- **Greg Mulholland**: Liberal Democrat MP for Leeds North West
- **Mike Penning**: Conservative MP for Hemel Hempstead
- **Linda Riordan**: Labour MP for Halifax
- **Dan Rogerson**: Liberal Democrat MP for Cornwall North
- **Alison Seabeck**: Labour MP for Plymouth Devonport
- **Angela Smith**: Labour MP for Sheffield Hillsborough
- **Jo Swinson**: Liberal Democrat MP for East Dunbartonshire
- **Charles Walker**: Conservative MP for Broxbourne

Participants were very generous with their time and interviews generally lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. The interviews were held in varying locations in the

18 Peter Law sadly died during the course of the year.
Palace of Westminster. Many cups of tea were consumed in the Pugin Room in the House of Commons and the Despatch Box coffee bar in Portcullis House. Other interviews were held in individual offices scattered across the parliamentary estate. Many of the participants also sent written information to us once they returned to Parliament after the 2005 summer recess.

The majority of interviews were recorded on the basis that attributed quotes would be checked with participants before publication. All MPs who were interviewed during the course of this project, including those in Appendix B, were contacted about direct quotations in the report. Some participants consequently asked for quotations to be made anonymous or to be removed.

A total of 70 interviews were held during the course of the year. All interviews were conducted by the author.
Appendix B

Additional interviews and surveys

Interviews

We conducted one-off interviews with the new Members listed below:

- **Martin Horwood**: Liberal Democrat MP for Cheltenham
- **Sadiq Khan**: Labour MP for Tooting
- **Kitty Ussher**: Labour MP for Burnley
- **Ed Vaizey**: Conservative MP for Wantag and Didcot

Martin Horwood was interviewed immediately after the 2005 general election. The other Members were interviewed between late 2005 and early 2006. They were asked a broad range of questions, relating to those asked in the first and second interviews for participants in Appendix A.

We sought to compare the comments and experiences of new Members with those of their longer-serving colleagues. This was not a comprehensive assessment of the differences between the 2005 intake and other MPs. However, it did enable consideration of whether differences are generational or life-cycle. We interviewed the following longer-serving Members in early to mid-2006:

- **Gwyneth Dunwoody**: Labour MP for Crewe and Nantwich (first elected in 1966)
- **Mark Fisher**: Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent Central (first elected in 1983)
- **Julie Kirkbride**: Conservative MP for Bromsgrove (first elected in 1997)
- **Joan Ruddock**: Labour MP for Lewisham Deptford (first elected in 1987)
- **Dari Taylor**: Labour MP for Stockton South (first elected in 1997)
- **Rt Hon Sir George Young**: Conservative MP for North West Hampshire (first elected in 1974)

Surveys

A survey was sent to all 119 first-time Members following their election in May 2005 and 42 responses were received (35 per cent of the intake). A follow-up survey was then sent to all first-time MPs in May 2006. Fifty two completed surveys were returned, making up 44 per cent of the intake. The surveys were anonymous, but respondents were asked to indicate their political party and gender.
Further publications from the Hansard Society

Parliament in the Public Eye 2006: Coming into Focus?
(Edited by Gemma Rosenblatt)
(ISBN 1 900432 43 8), Free, November 2006

The Fiscal Maze, Parliament, Government and Public Money
(By Alex Brazier and Vidya Ram)
(ISBN 0 900432 08 X), £12, July 2006
Report of the Hansard Society’s inquiry into Parliament’s financial scrutiny functions which analyses the system’s strengths and weaknesses and makes proposals for change.

(By Alex Brazier, Matthew Flinders and Declan McHugh)
(ISBN 0 900432 62 4), £10, June 2005
Report analysing the modernisation of parliamentary procedures and practices that have occurred since 1997, and exploring whether they have been successful in strengthening the role of Parliament and considering what future steps should be taken.

(ISBN 1 900432 77 2), £12, May 2005
Chaired by Lord Puttnam, the Commission examines whether Parliament is failing in its democratic duty to communicate with the electorate. The report looks at the need to re-establish the crucial link between Parliament and the people, and sets out a practical route for much needed change.

Parliament, Politics and Law Making: Issues and Developments in the Legislative Process
(Edited by Alex Brazier)
(ISBN 0 900432 57 8), £20, December 2004
To follow up its influential 1992 report, Making the Law, the Hansard Society has published a collection of essays exploring recent issues and developments in the legislative process.

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