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Chapter 25: MPs and their constituencies

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Introduction

MPs are often accused – especially by the popular press, populist parties and politicians, and by the Twitterati – of living in a ‘Westminster bubble’. MPs themselves occasionally casually invoke the term to portray their colleagues at Westminster as insulated and isolated from the daily concerns of the rest of the UK’s populace. Yet, this clichéd and caricatured picture fails to capture the routine, indeed institutionalised, representational pinpricks that perpetually puncture this bubble. Every day, MPs in acting as the representatives of their respective geographical areas inject the opinions, concerns and tribulations of their constituents into the workings of parliament. Such representational work is often overlooked or ignored by outside observers and commentators, but in the words of one ex-MP, Paul Burstow (2016), it provides a necessary ‘reality check’ for all MPs that links them to the lives of those they are elected to represent. Tragically it took the murder of Jo Cox, MP for Batley and Spen, while performing her constituency representative role in June 2016 to remind populists and the wider public, all too briefly, that MPs don’t inhabit a Westminster-centric bubble but are in fact rooted in localities throughout the UK. This chapter examines, therefore, the dimensions of this constituency representative role: of what ‘constituency’ means for MPs and their local electorates; and how perceptions of locality affect the work of MPs and the expectations of constituents alike.

MPs are representatives of territorially defined constituencies

There are two things that all MPs have in common, despite the multiple differences associated with their gender, ethnicity, class, partisan allegiances, or with their parliamentary or executive roles. First, they are all elected representatives. Second, they are representatives of territorially-defined constituencies. Historically, core principles of representation in Britain – of consent, legitimation and the authorisation of decision making – were built upon territorial foundations. Indeed, the origins of territorial representation can be traced back to Medieval English parliaments where, at that time, constituencies effectively constituted geographically defined ‘communities of interest’ and representatives were drawn from local communities simply ‘because

that is where and how people defined themselves' (Rehfeld 2005:71). Since those times an 'implicit theory of representation' has continued to underpin UK parliamentarism. This holds that each MP represents:

'not only a certain proportion of the national electorate but also an area of the national territory which is more than an aggregation of those individuals' homes. Part of the MP's role ... is to represent a place, a spatially bounded territorial unit whose residents have common interests; the place is thus more than a sum of its component parts – and is often equated with the elusive concept of a community'. (Rossiter et al. 2013:856-7)

The continuing importance of this 'implicit theory' still finds reflection in the way that MPs address each other in the Chamber of the House of Commons – by the name of the constituencies that they represent. Attempts to remove this arcane form of address – what *The Independent* newspaper listed amongst the 'absurd rules' of parliament (Stone 2015) – have been countered on the principled grounds that: 'Members do not sit in the House as individual citizens, they are there as representatives of their constituencies: and it is in that capacity that they should be addressed' (Modernisation Committee 1998: paras 38-9). Certainly, the changes to constituency boundaries scheduled to be effected after 2018 – to reduce the number of constituencies from 650 to 600 and to ensure that nearly all constituencies will have an electorate within the range 71,031 to 78,507 – will complicate this mode of address; as new constituencies are given different and often longer names (to reflect the incorporation of two or more separate geographical areas). Equally, as Rossiter et al. (2013:884) note, 'increasingly such names will have less relevance' for 'organic' notions of community, and an 'implicit theory of representation', which embed geographically based communities of interest at the heart of UK parliamentary representation.

MPs represent 'communities of interest'

In a very real sense, however, the notion of representing local 'communities of interest', even before the proposed 2018 boundary changes, has posed complicated practical problems for MPs. If communities of interest are defined, as they were historically in the pre-industrial and industrial eras, primarily in terms of geographically proximate economic interests – of agrarian, manufacturing, extraction industries, or

commercial interests – then it was plausible to claim, as Edmund Burke did in the 18th century (Burke [1780] 1801 vol. 4.73), that there were specific, objective locally-rooted interests capable of representation by constituency MPs. In the ‘post-industrial’, ‘post-material’ world of the 21st century, however, territorial representation conceived in terms of a dominant constituency ‘community economic interest’ is harder, if not impossible, to justify and effect. Alternatively, communities of interest may now be conceived in terms of concentrations of people from the same ethnic, religious, cultural or racial groups, or social class, or other demographic aggregates. Where these groups are spatially concentrated then territory might be taken to serve as a ‘reasonably good proxy for communities of interest that happen to be territorially segregated’ (Rehfeld 2005:158). The difficulty with such an argument is, as Rehfeld (2005:158) goes on to point out, that ‘when territory becomes a proxy for some other community of interest, the “communities of interest” justification no longer justifies the use of territory per se. Rather, territory is justified as a means to represent the other interests for which it serves as a proxy’.

‘Constituencies’ within constituencies

One way to attempt to resolve this problem is to move the analytical focus away from notions of pre-existing local communities of interests and to argue that in many ways MPs have to construct an image of the constituency they seek to represent. This entails examining how MPs conceive of their constituency and the heuristics (cognitive shortcuts) that they use to construct an image of who their constituents are and what they think needs to be represented. Equally it entails examining how the represented themselves conceive of constituency (or how the claims made by the representative about this image are received), and the congruence between voters and their MPs of what the constituency is and what needs to be represented.

In clarifying what ‘constituency’ means to most MPs the work of Richard Fenno (1978) on ‘homestyle’, although published some four decades ago and focused on the USA, still proves to be of considerable value. Of particular note is Fenno’s (1978:1-29) identification of constituency as a series of concentric circles which embrace successively smaller subsets of the population in a geographical electoral area. Indeed, detailed studies of constituency representation in Britain have drawn upon Fenno’s four-fold distinction between geographical, re-election, primary and personal

constituencies (see Cain et al. 1979:520-2; Norton and Wood 1993:27-8; Judge 1999:152-3). The innermost, and smallest, circle is the 'personal constituency' which can be identified as an MP's closest constituency party colleagues, caseworkers and researchers, spouse or partner, and close personal friends. The 'primary constituency' can be identified as the representative's 'strongest supporters'; and approximates, in the UK context, to party activists – party members, and, increasingly, 'registered supporters' – and 'local party opinion leaders', who might include local councillors, and respectively, for Labour MPs, local trade unionists or, for Conservative MPs, officers of local business associations or Chambers of Commerce. The third circle is the 're-election constituency' which consists of voters who voted for the MP; and the fourth, and widest, circle is the territorial entity of the constituency itself.

The size of each concentric circle diminishes rapidly in size, from 'geographical constituencies' with an average size of just over 72,000 electors in 2017, to 're-election constituencies' with less than half that number – with only 23 constituencies in 2017 returning MPs with the support of more than 50 per cent of registered voters, and with 69 constituencies returning MPs with the support of less than 30 per cent of the local electorate. The size of 'primary constituencies' varies across the main political parties. In mid-2016, the national membership of the Conservative party was estimated at around 140,000, but with only two local Associations recording over 1000 members and only 50 more had over 500 members. In the Labour party, in March 2017, national party membership stood at 517,000 (down from a peak of over 550,000 in July 2016). Nonetheless, many local constituency parties had doubled, trebled, quadrupled or, even in some cases, quintupled their membership since 2015. The SNP had earlier witnessed dramatic increases in constituency party membership after the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 and averaged more than 2,000 members per constituency just after the 2016 EU referendum. With increased membership came increased attention to policy congruence between the views of party members and the voting patterns of MPs in Westminster. At the extremes in the Labour party, the spectre of de-selection of MPs, which had haunted Labour MPs in the 1970s and 1980s, re-emerged.

Finally, the fourth and most central of the concentric circles is the 'personal constituency'. Here MPs may seek, from friends, family and their constituency caseworkers, alternative and informal information about the constituency, other than from electoral and partisan circles; or may even seek psychological respite from the unremitting demands of their wider constituencies.

If MPs make sense of their constituencies by reimagining them as concentric nested constituencies; how do constituents make sense of parliamentary constituencies and their connection to their representatives? One way is by invoking notions of 'locality'.

'Locality' is important for constituents, parties and MPs

The notion of descriptive representation, as Chapter 21 makes clear, is central to debates about parliamentary representation in the 21st century. In essence, descriptive representation denotes a correspondence of social characteristics between representatives and the represented. At the heart of a definition of descriptive representation is the notion of 'shared experiences' between represented and representative, which allow the latter to be 'in some sense typical of the larger class of persons whom they represent' (Mansbridge 1999:629). Historically, the 'shared experience' of most significance in most representative democracies has been 'locality'.

Whereas contemporary discussion of descriptive representation has focused primarily upon gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, Childs and Cowley (2011:16) have made a case for a re-examination of the claims for the descriptive representation of locality. Certainly, survey evidence has consistently pointed to the fact that voters have a preference for local candidates that are 'of' a geographical constituency (Cowley 2013:22; Childs and Cowley 2011:5; Evans et al. 2017). Equally, survey experiments have revealed the impact of local residency upon voters' positive perceptions of parliamentary candidates (Campbell and Cowley 2014:754-7), and of constituents' preferences for MPs to work hard on local constituency issues (Vivyan and Wagner 2016: 96). Yet how exactly 'locality' or 'local issues' are conceived by constituents remains undetermined (see Campbell and Lovenduski 2014:693; Judge 2014:81).

Nonetheless, political parties have recognized the potential electoral advantages to be gained from selecting local candidates; and candidates themselves have increasingly stressed in their election materials their local connections – of variously being born, educated, worked, or resided in the constituency (and, in some cases, all of these). In turn, once elected, MPs are aware of potential electoral gains to be made by close attention to constituency matters. While the capacity of MPs to build a ‘personal vote’, through building a reputation as diligent promoters and defenders of local interests and opinions, is restricted in the UK by the primacy of the national focus of party voting, nonetheless, a local ‘incumbency bonus’ has been identified (see Smith 2013; Cutts and Russell 2015:74-6). However, such a ‘bonus’ is subject to the vagaries of the nature of electoral competition in the UK. As the 2015 general election illustrated, Liberal Democrat MPs lost out to Conservative candidates in England largely irrespective of their constituency profile, reputation and standing; and, in Scotland, Labour and Liberal-Democrat MPs were swept aside by an SNP landslide – irrespective of their past performance in relation to their constituencies.

Constituency work and parliamentary work are often counterposed

It is commonplace to counterpose the ‘parliamentary’ work of MPs against their ‘constituency’ work. In essence there is a perceived split between ‘legislative roles’ (focused upon policy advocacy, legislation and oversight/scrutiny) and ‘representative roles’ (focused upon linkage between citizens, civil society associations, party organisations and decision-makers). Indeed, MPs themselves often juxtapose their ‘legislative’ and ‘representative’ roles (Procedure Committee, 2012:7). Thus, for example in 2015, experienced MPs reflecting on their work in the House of Commons revealed that for many a choice had had to be made between ‘politics [in Westminster] and local issues’ and, in choosing the latter, one MP ruefully commented ‘he felt less of a parliamentarian’ (Tinkler and Mehta 2016:10-11).

This choice appears to have become even starker, as more MPs have come to spend a greater proportion of their time dealing with constituency concerns than was the case in earlier decades. At the end of the 1990s Norris (1997:30) noted that constituency work had more than doubled since the 1970s, to the extent that MPs were spending about 30 per cent of their time dealing with constituency matters. More recently, in 2012, a survey of 151 MPs, found a further increase – insofar as 79 per cent of

respondents believed that the proportion of time spent 'dealing with constituency correspondence or casework' had increased since they first entered parliament (Procedure Committee 2012: Ev w105); and 61 per cent stated that the proportion of time spent with constituents had also increased. In the light of this increase, perhaps not surprisingly, 76 per cent recorded that the actual number of hours spent on constituency correspondence and casework had grown, and 59 per cent stated that the hours spent with constituents had increased. In the same survey, 'representing constituency interests' was ranked by 78 per cent of respondents amongst their top three role priorities, which was higher than the 69 per cent who listed 'holding government to account' and the 60 per cent who listed 'scrutinising legislation'. In addition, 54 per cent of respondents also listed 'dealing with individual constituents' as being amongst their top three priorities. Overall, half of MPs claimed to spend more than 40 per cent of their time in their constituency. Fully half of MPs also stated that they worked, in total, 70 hours or more a week during parliamentary sessions (with only 5 per cent working fewer than 50 hours per week).

Not surprisingly, given this increase, many commentators and analysts believe that MPs are spending too much of their time on constituency service. These fears, however, are longstanding. Over a decade ago Philip Cowley raised the spectre that '[t]here must now be a real concern that MPs are so focussed on the parochial they have no time for the national, let alone the international, picture' (Modernisation Committee 2007:Ev.14) More recently, Conservative MP James Gray (2015) asked, what for him, were the rhetorical questions: '[I]s it really our job to deal with immigration appeals, benefits disputes, Child Support Agency arguments, planning applications, school placements and the like? Is there not a risk that it diverts us from our true purpose of running the country and holding the Government to account?'. Indeed, there have long been suggestions that MPs should be restricted, by convention or proscription, from intervening in local matters that are the primary responsibility of local authorities, devolved parliaments or other local agencies (see for example Riddell 1997:18; Procedure Committee 2012: Ev w6). Yet, the response by many MPs to this suggestion is essentially fatalistic: 'Whatever the reasons [for increased constituency workload] it is clear that these pressures, once raised, are very unlikely to diminish' (Procedure Committee 2012:9).

These 'pressures' point to at least two, often discrete, roles nested within the 'constituency service' role. One is commonly referred to as the 'welfare officer role', with MPs carrying out 'casework' on behalf of aggrieved constituents. In this role MPs act as intermediaries, literally to 're-present' the grievances of individual constituents to, and to seek redress from a host of service providers – local authorities, central government departments and agencies, private utilities and private welfare service organisations – and, in reverse, to inform the complainant of the response. The other role is concerned with 'territorial advocacy' – the promotion or protection of constituency interests, such as local industrial and economic development, local businesses or services, environmental improvement, or some other community project. A recurring paradox of this advocacy role, especially for MPs in the governing party, is that party representatives who are mandated to a national electoral programme might also seek simultaneously to promote dissonant local policies in the process of representing constituency interests. For example, the UK press were quick to point out that even David Cameron, as prime minister and as a key advocate of austerity budgeting, was willing to write to Oxfordshire County Council, in September 2015, to record his disappointment with its proposals to make 'significant cuts to frontline services – from elderly day centres, to libraries, to museums ... [and] to close children's centres' in his and other parliamentary constituencies in Oxfordshire. As the Leader of Oxfordshire Council noted pointedly in his reply: 'Central to the [2015 Conservative] Manifesto was removing the deficit. This does mean reductions in public expenditure' (see Hudspeth 2015).

Conclusion

Survey evidence reveals that the work patterns and role prioritisation of MPs correspond fairly closely to the stated preferences of electors. Yet voters, generally, appear largely oblivious to the work done on their behalf by their MPs; with successive Hansard Society *Audits* (2011:32; 2013:51) recording that many constituents were unaware that most MPs held advice surgeries and meetings to discuss local interests and concerns, and that only a minority knew the name of their local MP. Despite fears that voters might make unrealistic demands for constituency service from their MPs, Viyan and Wagner (2016:96) have found that the preference of voters is for a 60:40 time split between national and constituency work, which corresponds closely to the

prioritisation of most MPs. In other words, there is not a zero-sum relationship between 'constituency' and 'parliamentary' work, but rather – when conceived as a representational relationship – the former links and informs the latter. This applies to all MPs, including ministers who – unlike many executive members in other parliamentary systems – still involve themselves in 'constituency service' roles. This linkage is increasingly apparent in the enhanced flows of communication (increasingly digital) in both directions between constituents, either as individuals or as groups, and their representatives in parliament. This linkage is the essence of parliamentary representation, and serves to puncture notions of a 'Westminster bubble'.

Further reading

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Case Study 25: Constituency Casework

Constituency service features prominently in MPs' perceptions of their role, as well as in their daily activities. A key dimension of such service is 'casework' where MPs take on the 'cases' of constituents by assisting them in their interactions – often tetchy and dispiriting – with central or local government bodies and agencies, or private companies and commercial organisations. MPs and their constituency staff, some of whom are known as 'caseworkers', are confronted with an ever changing kaleidoscope of grievances, problems and issues brought to them by their constituents. Caseworkers take on the heavy lifting for MPs by building up a picture of constituents' problems and seeking to resolve the myriad issues. To capture the essence of casework what follows is an indicative aggregated case study, based upon the reflections of two experienced constituency caseworkers – 'Caseworker A' supporting a Labour MP in the North East of England, and 'Caseworker B' who worked for a Conservative MP in Eastern England.

Surgeries

Surgeries provide the opportunity for constituents to meet face-to-face with their local MP and the MP's caseworkers. The location of surgeries varies from the traditional (constituency offices; community centres; libraries; village halls), through more innovative settings (supermarkets; farmers' markets; farms; pubs, McDonalds; hospitals); to the mobile (including an ice cream van, camper van, and a converted bus). Caseworker B noted that her MP held surgeries around a kitchen table within the MP's office in the town centre, on the grounds that the informal space would be less stressful for constituents. These surgeries were held at variable times, alternating between afternoons and evenings, so as to allow people with different commitments to attend. In the constituency in the North East of England the MP, assisted by the senior caseworker, held 'themed' surgeries – with four 'immigration surgeries' scheduled each month in addition to general surgeries. Surgeries may be open access, with constituents free to 'drop-in' or increasingly, after the death of Jo Cox in 2016, by appointment as MPs became more security conscious.

Constituency cases

Constituency cases are many and varied. In terms of numbers, Ronnie Cowan (2017), SNP MP for Inverclyde, for example, recorded 2,248 constituent contacts and dealt with 3,423 constituency cases in the 2015-2017 session; Phillip Lee (2017), Conservative MP for Bracknell, dealt with 1,000 individual constituent cases and an estimated 40,000 casework emails in 2016-2017; and in the same period Jo Stevens (2017), Labour MP for Cardiff Central, held 139 surgeries and provided casework assistance to 2,147 constituents. In terms of variety, our sample caseworkers noted that the practice of ‘assisting anyone living in the constituency’, and that ‘no matter is too big or too small’, led to them dealing with cases from the almost comic through to the truly tragic. As one of them observed: ‘You deal with many weird and wonderful issues as a caseworker. One that sticks in the mind is the man who came to see us in a surgery who wanted a new toilet as his “deposits were too large” and kept blocking the plumbing! We contacted the Housing Association to request the adaptation. Sadly, they refused’. At the other end of the spectrum, testimony was provided of the daily tragic personal consequences of, for example, homelessness and inadequate accommodation, ill health, refusal of asylum applications or UK citizenship, the ravages of addiction, or of abuse – in its variegated racial, sexual, domestic or workplace guises; all of which are issues recurrently raised by constituents to MPs.

Processing cases

Attending a surgery is often the last resort for constituents. Many may be frustrated and distressed. Many may have difficulty in articulating the exact nature of their problem, given the cross-cutting difficulties confronting them. In addition, MPs and caseworkers frequently have to manage the expectations of their constituents.

In seeking to assist constituents, MPs and their caseworkers engage with a vast range of organisations and institutions – local or national, government or non-government, public or private. Given most casework typically involves liaising with local organisations, over time, caseworkers tend to develop networks of contacts within the constituency which may help to expedite the resolution of problems. Caseworker A provided two examples: first, in seeking to resolve the issue of a disabled person who had not received their benefits for over eight weeks, she made phone calls – on the

constituent's behalf – to the Department of Work and Pensions and to a contact at the local Job Centre; second, when dealing with a complaint about 'fly-tipping', direct contact with the local council, and reporting the offence to the police, rapidly cleared the case. In each of these cases, the issue was swiftly resolved with minimal effort, and although it could be said that the constituents could have directed their concerns elsewhere, these examples show the ease with which matters can be settled – and the extent to which organisations become more amenable – when an MP becomes involved. While some cases may be resolved speedily with a phone call from the MP's office, many may take months or even years, and prolonged contact with multiple organisations, to try to reach a solution (not always successfully). Caseworker B provided an example of a fairly typical case: 'Originally from Thailand, Mrs Z married an English man before moving to the UK with him and their son. [When] her husband became abusive and forced her to work in a brothel, [Mrs Z] managed eventually to escape and made an application for Indefinite Leave to Remain on the basis of domestic violence. We contacted the then UK Border Agency to ensure her case was dealt with swiftly and it was processed within six weeks'. After Mrs Z's immigration status was updated, the MP's staff were then able to arrange for Mrs Z and her son to move from temporary accommodation to more permanent housing by lobbying the local council's housing team on her behalf.

Only a small proportion of constituents require the services and interventions of their MPs, but for those who do – particularly those who find it difficult to articulate their problems, or to identify who is responsible for their difficulties, or who is capable of resolving their predicament – MPs not only listen but also transmit the grievances of the powerless to the powerful. This is representative linkage in operation. This is the historic role of the 'redress of individual grievance' performed in the 21st century.

Primary Sources

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Further Case Studies

- Identify a selection of MPs (from different parties, different parts of the UK, different stages of their parliamentary career etc.) and examine the relative prominence of news and information about their constituency and constituency issues on their websites.
- Identify, as a constituent, the various means by which you can contact your MP, what issues they can help you with, and how they can pursue these issues. (Clue: start with www.parliament.uk).
- Using the search term 'constituency casework' on *Hansard Online* (at <https://hansard.parliament.uk>) identify, for a given period, how often and what types of constituency issues are raised in debates in the House of Commons.

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