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Supporting Members

Citation for published version:

Geddes, M & Mulley, J 2018, Supporting Members. in C Leston-Bandeira & L Thompson (eds), *Exploring Parliament*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Exploring Parliament

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Chapter 3: Supporting Members and Peers

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Introduction

The previous chapter covered the way that Parliament is administered and organised. In this chapter, we ask more directly what this means in terms of the support offered by Parliament as an institution to Members of Parliament (MPs or Members) and Peers to fulfil their parliamentary, political and policy functions. Though often overlooked, staff play a crucial role in Parliament through the invaluable and impartial support that they offer across the legislature. There are around 2,000 members of staff in the House of Commons and 500 in the House of Lords and further staff in a bicameral Digital Service. As well as providing support to efficiently run Parliament, they offer policy and procedural advice. They also offer an institutional memory and act as gatekeepers or guardians of knowledge, all of which indicates that staff are placed in an important position *vis-à-vis* parliamentarians.

In this chapter, we want to argue three things. First, Members and Peers have a range of sources to support them in carrying out their role (not all of which comes from parliamentary staff). Second, the resources available to parliamentarians has increased significantly over the past 20 years through a range of parliamentary reforms. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the way that parliamentarians are supported in an inherently political decision because of the finite resources available in Parliament and the contested nature of delivering targeted support given the diversity of roles that MPs and Peers perform.

Context

MPs and Peers have a range of sources of parliamentary and policy support available to them. The party with which they are affiliated will provide support, especially around

policy analysis. MPs' staffing allowances are provided from the public purse via the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), but, within that, MPs have discretion to design their own staffing structures and many choose to appoint policy staff or research assistant on whom they may rely to whatever extent they choose (Dale, 2015). There is a mass of lobby organisations and single-issue interest groups that provide information and policy analysis, too, either proactively or reactively. MPs and Peers may join all-party parliamentary groups (APPGs), dedicated to specific issues, which bring together interested MPs and Peers and often involve stakeholders from outside Parliament in their policy work and administration (see Chapter X [THOMAS/FRIER]).

What do officials do?

The support provided to MPs in the House of Commons and Peers in the House of Lords is distinctive in a number of ways. Typically, staff of either House are permanent appointees, serving in one capacity or another for decades or more. Parliamentary staff do not change at the time of a general election or with a mid-term change in the administration. This has long been the position in Parliament and is intended to frame and underline staff independence from the political machinery of party and government. So, support is provided on an impartial basis, one which does not favour one party's position over another, and is equally available to all. This is crucial to ensure the effective functioning of legislative support: all parties need to be able to trust the support given to them by Parliament. The permanence and longevity of impartial support also means that staff can act as an institutional memory for parliamentary procedure.

Staff perform a number of distinctive roles (summarised in Table 3.1). In the House of Commons and House of Lords libraries, policy specialists will concentrate on providing impartial policy analysis on topical matters. Some of this is provided at a generic level through 'debate packs' in advance of debates, others is provided confidentially through the libraries' inquiry services where only the requesting MP or Peer will receive information. In parliamentary committees, officials are essential to the effective functioning of committee tasks. Importantly, this will include a Clerk of the Committee who, rather than being a policy specialist, will have expertise and experience in parliamentary processes. They are crucial to ensure that committees work in a fair manner and comply with the procedures set out by the House of Commons or House of Lords. A

committee will have a broader team of policy specialists and administrative staff (see case study for more on this). Elsewhere, staff provide advice and support to MPs and Peers from specific offices or on specific topics, such as the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. Also known as POST, this offers scientific advice across the Houses of Parliament, and has steadily seen an increase in both its funding and remit since it was introduced in 1989. For example, in 2013 and in partnership with the Economic and Social Research Council (and support from University College London), POST has established a dedicated Social Science Section to integrate social science research across POST. The expanding role of POST has been important to strengthen wide-ranging scientific notes, known as POSTnotes, available to parliamentarians and the public.

[Insert Table 3.1 about here]

It is important to note that the House of Commons and House of Lords services are delivered independently and tailored to the needs to members of each House. As a result, there are differences between the services available from Parliament to MPs and Peers, and it is they themselves that decide from whom to draw their support. There is no obligation to use services provided by Parliament if they feel they do not need them or if they can receive advice from elsewhere. This freedom ensures the primacy of parliamentarians in deciding how to enact their role, but it also makes decisions on the targeting of finite resources an inherently political decision. It means that parliamentary staff would be involved in emphasising certain aspects of an MPs' or Peers' work. To take the support available to MPs as an example, they can be broken down into the following areas:

- Support for their participation in parliamentary functions, such as debates in the main chamber or Westminster Hall, submitting Early Day Motions (EDMs), etc. MPs are not necessarily familiar with all the procedures and workings of the House of Commons, so staff in the Table Office or Journal Office can offer crucial support.
- Support for involvement in law-making, which may include supporting processes and procedural advice (answering questions along the lines of 'How do I...?'), which is largely drawn from specialist staff in the legislation offices in each House (e.g. Public and Private Bill Offices). Alternatively, MPs may want assistance with policy implications, which, at a general level, is drawn from policy specialists in the House of Commons Library (or Lords Library for Peers).

- Direct support for holding the government to account (i.e. fulfilling Parliament's scrutiny function). This may be drawn from the Library or, if an MP is serving on one of the many select committees which exist in Parliament, from the Committee Office staff team. Committee staff may also offer procedural advice to their committee members, especially where this is relevant to the work of their committee. Committee teams are tailored to their committee remits: the Treasury Committee, for example, has among its staff economic advisers, while the Justice Committee staff team often includes a lawyer. Staff in the Table Office may also support MPs in tabling Parliamentary Questions (oral or written).
- Staff may offer indirect support for constituency work. MPs could, for instance, make requests from the Library's inquiry service for bespoke research and analysis to assist with and inform their constituency work. For example, an MP may want details of the breakdown of poverty levels in their constituency, or the number of students in their constituency.

All of these services are available to MPs (and equivalents for Peers) free of charge but limited by capacity. As mentioned in the introduction, there are around 2,000 members of staff in the House of Commons Service, which means that there are finite resources around what staff can offer. This means that, across Parliament, services are largely reactive and provided at the request of MPs or Peers. So, for example, libraries will produce aforementioned debate packs shortly in advance of debates in plenary session; other services are provided following direct requests from parliamentarians. A more proactive service could politicise Parliament's impartial service because it would play a role in deciding what resources to emphasise to parliamentarians.

Growing services

Support available to MPs and Peers has increased significantly over the past 15 years. For example, in 2014-15, the House of Commons Service had over 2,000 members of staff (House of Commons Commission, 2015), which was at approximately 1,3000 in 2000-01 (House of Commons Commission, 2001) (in 1981, staff numbers were closer to 800 (Ryle, 1981)). Meanwhile, the House of Lords currently employs approximately 500 members of staff (UK Parliament, n.d.). These changes have occurred in a range of ways, predominantly through a growth of services (e.g. with respect to POST, as mentioned above) and making those resources more flexible and responsive.

With respect to select committees, there has been a steady growth of support to the secretariat. This has often happened alongside reforms to increase the effectiveness of Parliament in scrutinising the executive (e.g. directly electing chairs in 2010 has led to the introduction of further institutional support). In 2004, the Committee Office introduced a Scrutiny Unit to pool resources and offer specific support for financial and legal scrutiny across committees. More recently, there has been the introduction of a dedicated Media Service and the Web and Publications Unit in an attempt to improve the communication of committees and to produce reports. Increasingly, resources are shared in these units or co-located physically as part of a shift to offer more holistic support. Since 2016, for example, a ‘procedural hub’ has been created, which is a one-stop shop for procedural advice, available to both MPs and their staff – which offers advice and guidance on parliamentary business in a more holistic manner. In the past, procedural advice was drawn from clerks working out of small groups of procedural offices (see Table 3.1). These reforms typify a more general trend in Parliament to provide services which are customer-driven, easier to access and more tailored to the ways in which MPs and Peers work. Co-location and sharing institutional support, for example, ensures that there exists a flexible pool of expertise that can be readily deployed to MPs and Peers in a bespoke manner.

A number of changes identified above took place following wider reforms to the decision-making structures for the House of Commons. In 2014, the House of Commons Governance Committee recommended the establishment of a Director General. This saw changes to allow for a more customer-focused service. The changes are still being implemented, and are identified as only Phase One of much wider reforms to transform the way that the House of Commons serves MPs (House of Commons Director General, 2016). However, while these changes were sparked in response to a specific crisis over the role of Clerk of the Commons, the changes to the way that Parliament offers its support to MPs and Peers reflect wider changes in the role of Parliament in British politics. Importantly, the balance of power between the executive and the legislature has shifted (even if incrementally) to strengthen the scrutiny capacity for Parliament. For example, the shift from appointing members to select committees in the House of Commons (often informally through the usual channels) to a system of elections (direct elections for chairs and indirect for members) has removed an informal power of the whips and given Parliament more control over scrutiny. Committee chairs have since increased their resources to reflect their growing role in the House of Commons. Academic research has

consistently shown that Parliament is an influential actor in the policy process (for an overview, see Russell and Cowley, 2016). Elsewhere, we have seen the growing independence of the role of MP (Cowley and Stuart, 2014), indicating a need for greater resources for MPs that do not rely on their political parties. So, while resources for Parliament have grown, they have done so alongside wider changes to Parliament's role.

Key issues and debates

This discussion, and the developments over the past 15 years, raise a number of further questions. We cannot provide answers here, but pose these questions for further study by parliamentary scholars, students and practitioners. First, there is a question of quantity versus quality of support available. While we have given an indication of the changing way the Service is organised, we give no indication of whether these changes have been effective. There is also an underlying question about the reasons for the growth of resources. While we imply a link between growing scrutiny capacities and resources, this broader institutional account can be supplemented by a more actor-centred analysis; in other words, has the change of resources come about because parliamentarians are dissatisfied with their service or because parliamentary staff believe that politicians need to have further institutional support (were the reforms MP-driven or staff-driven)? This question aims to problematise the notion that support is delivered to MPs and Peers in a neutral manner. Choices over where resources are emphasised (e.g. increasing support for directly elected select committee chairs rather than the House of Lords Library) and who makes those decisions reveals the broader priorities of, and power relationships between, parliamentarians in how they undertake their functions.

Third, and more fundamentally, there is an issue over who staff exist to serve: is it to support the institution of Parliament or to support parliamentarians? This issue is brought out in the following interview with a Member of Parliament: 'MPs want services that will help them carry out their duties more effectively but don't know if these services exist; the House Service provides services but does not understand the work of MPs (quoted in Tinkler and Mehta, 2016, p.16). This question brings us back once again to our belief that the support offered to staff is an inherently political issue. This chapter has predominantly concentrated on the needs of MPs and Peers, but if you look at the perspective from staff, then you come to understand the complexities of the role they must fulfil (see case study).

Even though parliamentary staff are assumed to be politically neutral, this does not quite capture the reality of the difficult choices that staff have to make in offering support for their political masters. Choices over resources have a direct impact on the ability of parliamentarians to carry out their functions. Ultimately, this means that questions about support to Members and Peers are issues about power and issues about politics.

Concluding remarks

Press headlines – especially from tabloid newspapers – do not shy away from pointing out the money that is spent on Parliament. Too often, they also imply erroneously that all expenditure on Parliament is directed at MPs and not also used to sustain a sizeable institution which provides services for others as well. In addition to intense questioning over MPs employing relatives as paid members of staff (e.g. Herbert, 2013; Woodhouse, 2016), the resultant perceptions around parliamentary support available to MPs and Peers is rarely seen in a positive light, especially in the context of the MPs' Expenses Scandal (Kelso, 2009). However, this negative portrayal is often associated with MPs' personal staffing arrangements and less to do with institutional support, and so less is known about the role of permanent parliamentary staff. This is not only confined to the press. Institutional support has received little attention from academic researchers. There are possibly two reasons for this. First, academic research has traditionally focused on institutional relationships, and especially the activities of politicians as part of those institutions, rather than the operational or institutional support available to politicians. This is arguably because parliamentarians are seen as the most direct and explicit political actors. Consequently, the role of staff has not been regarded as an important explanatory factor in UK legislative studies. It may also be that the staffing and administration of Parliament, albeit that it exists almost exclusively to sustain MPs and Pees, appears dull in contrast to the vivacity of politicians. The second reason is one of access. Parliamentary staff rely on being trusted by parliamentarians to offer impartial, confidential and equitable service to all Members and Peers. To achieve and maintain a high level of trust, the organisation and its staff have arguably been reluctant to become subjects of political science.

This chapter has sought to open a debate on the role of staff, which is part of a broader trend in which Parliament is modernising as an institution, becoming more reflective and

open. The 2014 television series, *Inside the Commons*, typified this change with its focus on the administration and functioning of the House and the work of its Members rather than on a specific policy issue. Moreover, academic priorities have begun to shift focus, in part driven by contemporary developments in how support for MPs and Peers is organised. We welcome this change of priorities and the increasing interest in parliamentary staff. As we have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, parliamentary staff offer a crucial level of support to ensure the effective functioning of Parliament. Furthermore, this is often political. So, understanding how staff shape the institution will significantly help us to understand Parliament as a whole.

Further reading

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