

Custodians of the Palace of Westminster

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While the Palace of Westminster, the home of the UK Parliament requires an extensive programme of repairs and action to implement (or even agree) this programme—known as Restoration and Renewal—has been hampered. This article explores the concept of custodianship and poses a question: who are the custodians of the Palace and for whom do they preserve the Palace? Drawing on two research projects, this article explores differing interpretations of custodianship in this context, and whether decisions made about the parliamentary building are made to preserve the history of the Palace, improve working conditions in the present, or with the future of the building (and institution) in mind.

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1. Introduction

The Palace of Westminster, the home of the UK Parliament, ‘faces an impending crisis which we cannot responsibly ignore’ ([Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster, 2016a](#), p. 5). These words, from a specially convened select committee, preceded a warning that ‘unless an intensive programme of major remedial work is undertaken soon, it is likely that the building will become uninhabitable’ ([Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster, 2016b](#), p. 5). The loss of this iconic building is almost unimaginable, yet action since this 2016 warning has been slow and incomplete. In 2018, MPs and Peers made a preliminary commitment to move out of the Palace for a major refurbishment—Restoration and Renewal

(R&R)—to take place. In the final speech of the Commons debate on the issue, former chartered surveyor, Peter Aldous, spoke of the duty of parliamentarians to take decisions about the building:

The Palace of Westminster is the most iconic building in the UK. It is not ours; it belongs to the nation. We are the custodians, with the responsibility of passing it on to the next generation in a better condition than we inherited it. (HC Deb, 31 January 2018, c927)

The use of the word ‘custodians’ in relation to the Palace forms the basis for this article. It brings together political science and management theory to explore the concept of custodianship and how it is understood and deployed by parliamentarians and officials in the debates about the future of the Palace. We ask the questions: who are the custodians of the Palace and for whom do they preserve the building? In other words, what is the motivation for their custodial work?

1.1 Methodology and structure

This article draws on qualitative data from two separate research projects. The first research project entailed 35 semi-structured elite interviews with MPs, Peers and parliamentary staff carried out between 2018 and 2019, which aimed to explore the understanding of each actor about the proposals to rebuild the Palace of Westminster and their role in the decision-making process, with interview data complemented by extensive textual analysis of parliamentary papers.

The second project involved two types of interviews: 22 standard ‘sit-down’ interviews and 9 walking interviews, sometimes known as ‘go-along’ interviews or commented walks (Raulet-Croset and Borzeix, 2014) with various stakeholders of Parliament between 2018 and 2019. In contrast to shadowing which is likely to involve more observations and analysis of behaviour with less interaction between the researcher and the people she/he observes, walking interviews were interactive and dynamic in nature. In all cases, it was the interviewee who decided on the route of the walk and the focus of discussion. Walking interviews gave the researcher richer insight into embodied, sensory and affective experiences. In both types of interviews, the interviewees were asked about their experiences of working in the Parliamentary buildings, their hopes and fears related to the restoration of the estate, and the role of ceremonies and rituals.

All interviewees from the second study remained anonymous, addressing the historic absence of the voices of the Parliamentary stakeholders in the political debates: librarians, customer service managers, doorkeepers and support staff. Providing them with a ‘safe anonymous space’ (also taken up by some parliamentary staff in the first study) enabled greater openness and elicited some more critical perspectives on restoration. When interviewees from the first study were

named, this was done with written approval and in line with the ethical approval process for the project.

The second study also involved participant and non-participant observation in various buildings of the Parliamentary Estate in a variety of spaces. An observation schedule was developed, which included categories relating to spaces/places and situated dimensions of practices within Parliament. The study was conducted within the tradition of interpretive ethnography (Denzin, 1997; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2004), which acknowledges that people's experiences are mediated by symbolic representations further interpreted by the researcher. The study focused on the shared beliefs, customs and behaviours of people working in Parliament. The data analysis for the second study comprised two stages. In the first stage, the data were coded with a view to identifying themes related to organisational spaces and how these spaces affect people's behaviours. In the second stage, analytical induction (also described as 'emergent' analysis [Elliott, 2018]) was used to assess the data to identify the potential for change, and the extent to which discussion about the restoration of Parliamentary buildings becomes a proxy for debate over the future of the institution.

The two data sets were analysed separately and then the findings were compared. While each study provided rich data individually, we have found that the benefits of drawing together research from two different disciplines outweighed any negatives (arising, for example, from one study focusing on political processes and the other on management processes and thus slightly different methodological approaches), given the complementarity of the key findings around custodianship. This has helped us bridge the gap between the two disciplines and offer findings relevant to both management studies and political science.

This article is divided into five sections. This first section introduces this article and its methodology. The second defines 'custodianship' and explores the temporal nature of the concept. The article then moves to consider the case study of the Palace of Westminster in the third section, which seeks to answer the question 'who are the custodians of the Palace of Westminster?'. In the fourth section, this article explores how the custodians of the Palace consider their duties towards the building temporally: first looking to their role as custodians of the past Palace, then to their duty to the building in the present, and then to their responsibility to the Palace—and institution—of the future. Finally, this article concludes by considering the value of the concept of custodianship for understanding the R&R of the Palace of Westminster. It argues that the decisions made by custodians of the Palace of Westminster are not inevitable or intrinsically rational. Instead, they can be best understood using a temporal lens: are the custodians seeking to preserve the past, prioritise the present, or improve or maintain the Palace for future generations? Choosing to prioritise the past, present or future is a political choice, informed by views about who the building is for and its purpose.

2. Custodianship as a concept

The primary usage of the word ‘custodian’ is ‘a person who or organisation which has custody or guardianship of something or someone’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022a). ‘Custody’ itself is defined as ‘the charge or care of something or someone; protection, defence; guardianship’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022b). The specific responsibility of ‘charge or care of something’ is what separates out the custodians of the Palace from any interested citizen: the custodian has the agency to act.

The basis of custodial work is that institutional actors do not necessarily act self-interestedly and opportunistically but they are guided by an ongoing sense of obligation or duty to others (Hernandez, 2012). The concept is less commonly used in political science, but exceptions, such as Miller (2021) shows that it can provide a valuable perspective. Indeed organisation scholars have demonstrated how the stability of institutions relies on the ongoing forms of custodial work (Lok and de Rond, 2013; Dacin *et al.*, 2019). However, custodians, as well as being the guardians of stability, are also active agents and make political choices in order to achieve certain goals (Shils, 1981). Custodial work is not only about the persistence of actions across time but also about continuous work of interpretation that captures the connections of the past, present and future (Giddens, 1994). This is why custodians have agency and the authority to make choices, and how they choose to enact this agency is open to interpretation.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 963), in their sociological essay, define agency as ‘a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)’. Unlike other conceptions of agency, Emirbayer and Mische’s perspective takes into account the flow of time. The authors identify different simultaneous agentic orientations towards the past, the future and the present, arguing that institutional actors adjust their orientation towards one or another of these orientations within an emergent situation, and adjust their actions accordingly. Organisational theory in recent years has experienced a ‘temporal turn’ (Tsoukas, 2019; Hernes, 2020) and recent theories of agency call for research to consider forward-looking thinking (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013), as the future orientation enables institutional change. Alimadadi and Davis (2022) argue that orienting towards a ‘desirable future’ can facilitate transformative change, while steering away from an ‘undesirable future’ and focusing on the past encourages efforts to preserve the existing arrangements.

The temporal perspective is important as, after all, many phenomena studied by organisation scholars and political scientists—traditions, rituals, legitimation or institutionalisation, for example—are the result of processes that occurred over long periods of time (Reinecke *et al.*, 2020). These processes reach into the distant

past, but also stretch into the unknown future (Bluedorn and Denhardt, 1988; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Lee and Liebenau, 1999; Goodman *et al.*, 2001). The various ways in which the past of material objects has a bearing on the present and the future of an institution and its related traditions, myths, rituals and ceremonies (Dacin *et al.*, 2010, 2019). It is no exaggeration, therefore, to claim that buildings are carriers of institutions, sometimes over long periods, and their role and agency can also be analysed within the flow of time. The analysis of the interview data very strongly pointed towards the temporal dimensions of materiality, but it also offered excellent illustrations of the role of buildings as carriers of institutions (Scott, 2008). Buildings shape not only parliaments; they also shape other institutions: churches, universities, professional associations, accounting firms or banks, but an interesting empirical question arises—how does this effect happen? These studies allowed us to identify these ‘effects’ of buildings but in our effort to maintain thematic coherence, we did not include these observations in this article.

Management scholars (e.g. Suddaby and Greenwood, 2009; Suddaby *et al.*, 2015; Foster *et al.*, 2020) articulated some of the benefits of institutional analysis conducted through the temporal lens, most importantly that this lens enables a processual view of institutional change. A number of important contributions threw some theoretical light on the temporal dimension of spaces, artefacts and the ways in which a building’s past is a resource in the present (e.g. De Vaujany and Vaast, 2014; Arena and Douai, 2019; Jones *et al.*, 2019). Political scientists have also, in recent years, accentuated the importance of time in political analysis. For example, Hom (2018) developed a framework for political analysis which takes account of the political origins of time and enables further opportunities for temporal research, for example, into phenomena like war and identity.

This concept of custodianship also draws heavily upon the interpretive turn taken within parliamentary studies (e.g. Crewe, 2005, 2015, 2017b; Geddes, 2019; Rai and Spary, 2019; Miller, 2021). This approach, in the words of Bevir and Rhodes (2003, p. 1), is founded on the argument that ‘to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the belief and preferences of the people involved’. This approach does not reject the importance of institutional structures in shaping beliefs, but argues instead that power and interests are interpreted phenomena within institutions. The interpretive turn is particularly useful for considering architecture and design: as Geddes (2019, p. 30) notes, ‘space privileges certain types of behaviour, allowing some practices to occur, while others are seen as illegitimate, wrong or inappropriate’. Accordingly, this article seeks to understand the beliefs of key actors within Parliament regarding the physical space surrounding them, and crucially their temporal perspective on action related to the restoration of the Houses of Parliament. The time horizon in custodianship matters hugely; the interests of today’s stakeholders are not necessarily those of future groups. In this article, we have considered the stakeholders in R&R with a view to evaluating their

temporal orientation. To do so, however, we first need to identify the custodians of the Palace.

3. Who are the custodians of the Palace of Westminster?

If the custodians of a building are those with custody or guardianship, for whom does this apply in the Palace of Westminster? There is no clear answer to this question—speaking to a wider problem of parliamentary governance: as noted by Norton (2017, p. 201), there is no single individual who can ‘speak for Parliament’. Instead, this research identifies three groups of actors: MPs, Peers and Parliamentary staff, each with differing formal responsibilities and, crucially, different interpretations of their roles and the roles of others. These groups of actors may operate collectively in a group, or be led by a single individual (e.g. the Leader of the House of Commons) or governance body (e.g. the House of Commons Commission). The groups may work together or in isolation, but there is no mechanism to adjudicate or resolve disputes over custodianship (as noted in Flinders *et al.*, 2018).

When decisions have been made about the Palace of Westminster, the duty of custodianship has often been cited. Responding to an R&R report in October 2012, the House of Commons Commission argued that ‘fulfilling their obligations as custodians of the Palace of Westminster requires informed, considered decision-making by both Houses of Parliament’ (House of Commons Commission, 2012). This would suggest that it is parliamentarians who are the custodians of the building. Jacob Rees-Mogg, speaking to MPs when Leader of the House of Commons, confirmed that he shared this view:

The coming months are an important period, during which we, the parliamentarians—the custodians of Westminster’s history, but also those responsible for protecting taxpayers’ interests—make our expectations clear [...] safe in the knowledge that we are doing the right thing for our constituents and for our country in preserving both the cockpit of our democracy and the means of its proper functioning (HC Deb, 20 May 2021, c908).

Rees-Mogg’s reference to ‘constituents’ suggests that while he viewed **all** parliamentarians as the custodians of the building, this role took on a different form depending on whether they were elected or not. Indeed, he has separately gone further, and specified that it is current MPs who have the primary responsibility to make decisions about the building:

We are the ones accountable to constituents, so it is quite right that we will be the Members of Parliament—the Members of this current Parliament—who make the final decisions on how to proceed. (HC Deb, 4 February 2022, c1134)

While Rees-Mogg links custodianship with electoral accountability, it is worth recognising that neither MPs, nor Peers, have a legal responsibility for the building. Instead, the legal responsibility falls upon the Clerk of the House of Commons and Clerk of the Parliaments, the most senior officials in each House, who serve as Parliament's Accounting Officers, accountable to the Public Accounts Committee for taxpayers' money spent maintaining the building. The Clerks also have legal responsibility for the safety of people on the parliamentary estate, as the Corporate Officers. Lord Lisvane has discussed how the 'penalties prescribed by the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act' caused him 'sleepless hours' when he was Clerk of the House of Commons (HL Deb, 6 February 2018, c 1972-3). He discussed this further in an interview, noting that it was a responsibility borne by an official, not a parliamentarian:

I felt that there was an extremely high level of risk which we collectively, and I as Corporate Officer, were not in a position to mitigate [...] one of the things that one is very conscious of as a corporate officer, is that you carry—no member carries it—not even the Speaker, you carry the legal responsibility if something goes wrong. (interview, June 2018)

This is a critical point. Unlike government ministers, the Speaker or backbench MPs, officials have specific responsibility for protecting the building. The current Clerk of the Commons, Dr John Benger, echoed this view in evidence to the Public Accounts Committee in March 2022:

If you were to have a queue of people who want this building to be fixed, the two people at the head of that queue are sitting here [referring to himself and Simon Burton, Clerk of the Parliaments], because we are corporate officers and, ultimately, if there is a catastrophic failure and if life is jeopardised, it is our legal responsibility. It is no one else's. It is not the Commissions', the Leaders', the PAC's or the Government's. It is ours, so we are at the head of that queue; I can promise you that ([Public Accounts Committee, 2022](#), Q96).

The parliamentary scholar and peer, Lord Norton of Louth, has noted, however, that while responsibility for the building falls with officials, power to act falls with parliamentarians:

'They are restricted [...] they have legal responsibilities but of course they don't have the political position which is necessary for leadership; they might prompt, they can advise those in leadership positions, but they are reliant on the political leadership to act' (Interview, Norton, September 2018).

This conflict places officials in a difficult position: being neutral—as staff would, by convention, be on all issues before the House—could be viewed as failing to fulfil their legal duties (as Accounting and Corporate Officer for the Clerk of the Commons and Clerk of the Parliament) and their responsibility to the institution itself. Taking a position on R&R, however, risked their reputation for impartiality: a necessity for the role. Anthropologist Emma Crewe noted how impartiality had caused some MPs to think that the subset of parliamentary staff known as the Clerks, were opposed to any modernisation:

They can't even say why they think what they think, so MPs sometimes find them obfuscating and assume they don't like change. The proportion of Clerks who favour innovation is surprisingly high, but even this can't be revealed to all MPs because it implies criticism of the status quo. The protection of secrets of politicians was greater and more tolerated in the past. (Crewe, 2015, p. 221)

The custodian role with regard to the Palace thus caused a significant shift in how MPs understood the roles of parliamentary staff. In a break from the usual 'relationship of trust' between Members and Clerks (Crewe, 2017b, p. 109), some MPs viewed officials as engaged in an explicit campaign for full decant: Sir Edward Leigh described Sir David Natzler, the Clerk of the House of Commons between 2014 and 2019 as 'absolutely fanatic for moving out', adding: 'I think he's behind this' (interview, May 2018). Despite officials having no powers in the decision-making process, Sir Edward described them as 'the people who run the House of Commons', and described staff as 'determined to kick us all out' (interview, May 2018). Another opponent of full decant, Shailesh Vara, agreed, stating: 'they wanted everyone out of this place' (interview, 2018). Lord Haselhurst noted a concern among MPs that 'if we go out of this place, then they will never let us back in'. Lord Haselhurst said he questioned who the 'they' were, and was told 'officials. Civil Servants' (interview, May 2018).

This suspicion—that officials were trying to remove parliamentarians from the Palace and then prevent them from returning—was not widespread throughout the whole of the Commons—and indeed runs counter to a more common suspicion among MPs (albeit described by Crewe as a 'misrecognition') of the 'caution or resistance to change' of Clerks (Crewe, 2017b, p. 111). But as Leigh and Vara's comments above show, it was a genuinely held belief. Pro-decant MPs reported how the suspicion extended to doubts among some MPs about the risks to the building. Mark Tami MP said:

There are people that are convinced, there's a great conspiracy at work here, to make us leave, and it's all made up [...] some people will be just like 'no it's fine, there's nothing, I don't, it's all lies, all this stuff'. [...] I've had people say to me "oh they set the fire alarms off on purpose, you know" (interview, Tami, May 2018).

Multiple scholars have identified that parliamentary staff have a duty to the institution: *Yong et al.* (2019, p. 377) wrote that ‘clerks also see themselves as having a set of long-term, institution-wide responsibilities as well: a stewardship role’. *Geddes and Mulley* (2018, p. 39) describe parliamentary clerks as ‘non-partisan servants of their House’. *Miller* (2021, p. 306) uses the custodianship concept directly: ‘members of the House service are custodians of Parliament’. This does not mean simply conserving the past: as *Crewe* (2017b, p. 116) argues, ‘Clerks perceive innovation as an integral part of their work’. The concept of having a duty to the institution or the building suggests by its very premise that such duties may be separate from their duty to Members. When these duties conflict, as has been shown during R&R, it can provoke hostility and suspicion from Members.

Some Members appear unthreatened by the role of staff as custodians, however. Conservative MP Suzanne Webb sought to expand the custodian role away from simply legal responsibility and place it in the staff as a whole—including the most junior.

But what strikes me most is how much this building—this great place—means to those who work here: the staff who make this place work, from to the Clerks, to the Doormen, to those in the Tea Room [...] With their dedication, their loyalty, their own sense of history and purpose in being here, and their pride, they are truly the loyal custodians of this great place. (HC Deb, 16 July 2020, c1781)

For Webb, therefore, in acting as custodians for the building, the staff are also custodians for the institution itself. The timing of Webb’s statement—just seven months after her election—is interesting. Does suspicion of staff as custodians increase the longer a Member has been in Parliament? Perhaps the permanent nature of the parliamentary staff, many of who spend their entire career working for the institution, is perceived as a threat to Members who, no matter how many services they devote to Parliament, are always a general election away from losing their seat. This leads us to consider the third group of potential custodians: members of the House of Lords (Peers).

Evidence from interviews revealed that parliamentarians on the red benches were far more supportive of the R&R programme, even from its earliest stages, than those who sit on the green benches (interview, anonymous official, 2018; interview, Baroness D’Souza, July 2019). The proceedings in the Lords debate on R&R on 6 February 2018 revealed that Peers were almost unanimous in their belief that both Houses needed to move out of the Palace entirely during R&R. Peers were far less likely than MPs to prioritise concern about the cost of R&R over the safety of inhabitants. This has been attributed to this difference in part to the appointment for life for Peers, compared to the far shorter tenure for most

MPs (interview, Norton, September 2018). There was a wider belief reported in our interviews that members of the House of Lords were freer to support R&R because, without constituents, they had less of a concern about a public backlash about the costs than MPs. The lifelong appointments of Peers also meant, one official suggested, that it was more likely that they would feel a 'sense of legacy and national pride' that would compel them to save the building (interview, anonymous official, 2018). Peers were also less likely to have partisan differences regarding the custodianship duty, which we found to be an issue in the Commons: when MPs voted on R&R in 2018, over two-thirds of Conservative MPs (who took part in the division) voted against full decant, while in contrast, 94% of Labour MPs (who took part in the division) voted for full decant.

This part of the article has shown how there are multiple groups who claim to be, or are viewed as, custodians of the Palace. Even within these groups, there is no single way to act as custodians and this article moves next to consider how different actors within these groups carry out their roles as custodians.

4. Acting as custodians

In considering the range of actions taken as custodians of the Palace, this article will examine these actions within the temporal lenses identified in Section 1.

4.1 *The past*

For many MPs, the duty to the Palace is about preserving the history of the building, as demonstrated by the below quote from the Commons debate on R&R:

All those of us who seek to represent people should be daily reminded of that national story when we come here [...] We need to be reminded of that story as we go past the memorial to suffragettes, as we go past the statues and paintings of those who made such a contribution to past political battles and debates, and of those who were part of the story of wresting control from the monarch and establishing the right of many more people to vote and have their voice heard through Members of Parliament. That proud history makes this more than an iconic building, more than a world heritage site; it is a living part of our democracy. (John Redwood MP, HC Deb, 31 January 2018, c918)

Such feelings were not confined to MPs: many staff too expressed a sense of awe at the architectural beauty of the Palace and its symbols of power and history. Pomp and circumstance and everyday rituals are strongly linked to enchantment and the sense of awe emanating from the history of Parliament:

It's important to the people to see the Speaker's Procession in Central Lobby. It reminds us all that Parliament sitting is a fantastically important thing for the democracy and this is a nice way just to flag up that we are all taking it seriously. (Interview, Heritage professional)

Parliament's long history was raised by many interviewees who demonstrated a sense of pride in that heritage, a sense of custodianship and a desire to preserve the historical heritage rather than modernise the institution. Those opposed to restoration believed that Parliament is one of the country's key institutions and that it represents the continuity of the British constitution and the Crown in an age of rapid change and uncertainty, consequently, maintaining the historic fabric of the buildings is crucial for the cultural and political significance of the institution.

Ian Paisley MP discussed his own history of visiting the building where both his parents served (his father in both Houses and his mother in the Lords) as a 'wee boy', and how he connected to the wider history of the Palace:

'Every time I walk through St Stephen's Hall, I try to think of the words of William Wilberforce echoing for 28 years trying to change slavery, you know, all of those things just are in this building and in this fabric.'
(Interview, June 2018)

With such comments, Paisley was not just following the literal footsteps of his predecessors, but also their metaphorical footsteps. Past MPs had also referred to the very fabric of the building promoting its history. John Wilson Croker MP said of St Stephen's Chapel in 1831:

'He could not forget that it was the place in which the Cecils and the Bacons, the Wentworths and Hampdens, the Somers's and the St. Johns, the Walpoles and the Pulteneys, the Pitts, the Foxes, the Murrays, and the Burkes, had "lived, and breathed, and had their being" [...] as long as the human mind was susceptible of local associations, he could not disregard the beneficial effect that might be felt from their continuing to assemble on the scene where so many illustrious actors had performed such splendid parts. If patriotism could grow warmer on the plain of Marathon, and piety amid the ruins of Iona, the zeal and talents of British senators might also be exalted by the religious and legislative sanctity with which time and circumstances had invested the ancient chapel of St. Stephen' (HC Deb, 11 October 1831, c558-9).

This speech took place during a debate over the future of the old Palace, following calls for a new Commons chamber. Over a century later, when decisions were again to be made about the future of the Commons, after the Palace was damaged by Luftwaffe

bombs during World War Two, the same predecessors were again invoked. Dr Russell Thomas MP argued for Parliament to stay within the same building where ‘Burke, Sheridan, Charles James Fox, Pitt and others there laid down the foundations’ of parliamentary democracy’ (HC Deb, 28 October 1943, c452).

These decisions are then cited as precedent for future MPs exercising their custodian duties. There were several references to the decision of the Commons to use the chamber of the House of Lords during World War Two, including from Sir Edward Leigh:

When the chips were down in 1941, Clement Attlee and Winston Churchill decided that this Chamber would not move from this building. (HC Deb, 31 January 2018, c909)

Leigh’s speech and his amendment to the motion were based on a belief that the Commons should not meet away from its historic home, again proving the power of precedent. But precedent can be a poor guide for what to do in the present or future, particularly when the broader context changes substantially, as has been seen in Parliament, and when there is no clear view of the building’s current status. This has fed directly into discussions around R&R. For example, a Principal Clerk of the House of Commons objected to the building being described as a workplace by citing the building’s history and arguing that:

[the] Houses of Parliament is not a workspace, it’s a political organism, and a village. When the Palace was built in 1851 or 2, forty percent of the floor area was taken up by private residences, (...) Members didn’t have any space at all they were expected to live within walking distance and only come in when they needed to and so there’s been this notion that it’s a workplace so I don’t think, it’s been sort of changed into a workplace but it’s not really a workplace it’s a forum, it’s a marketplace for ideas. (Interview, 2018)

In contrast, the former Leader of the House of Commons, David Lidington, tweeted after leaving office:

If it were any normal place of employment (several thousand ppl [sic] work at Palace of Westminster) or tourist venue it would almost certainly be closed on health and safety grounds (Lidington, 2021)

This opens up the next part of our article: what is the duty of the custodians of the Palace to the current occupants?

4.2 *The present*

Reminiscing about the past, our interviewees showed some concern for the present, sometimes in the form of consideration for the welfare of the users of the

building. The Labour Leader in the Lords, Baroness Smith of Basildon, spoke of the responsibility parliamentarians have to the current users of the Palace, arguing that: ‘with 8,000 staff, around 15,000 pass holders and hundreds of thousands of visitors coming to this place, either as tourists or for meetings, we have a duty of care’ (HL Deb, 6 February 2018, c1995). The risk facing all users of the building is clear. As the then Leader of the House, Andrea Leadsom, told MPs in 2018:

Over the past 10 years, 60 incidents have had the potential to cause a serious fire. Secondly, there is a huge amount of asbestos packed into the walls that needs to be carefully and expensively removed to enable repairs. Thirdly, many pipes and cables are decades past their lifespan, with some now being impossible to access. The likelihood of a major failure grows the longer the systems are left unaddressed. (HC Deb, 31 January 2018, cc880-1)

As Leadsom notes, the risk continues to increase. The Strategic Review of the R&R Programme in 2021 found that ‘the building is now deteriorating faster than [sic] it can be fixed through ongoing maintenance and individual improvement works’ ([Houses of Parliament Restoration and Renewal, 2021](#), p. 3). The review reiterated the need for a full decant, but was met with scepticism by the Government and the House of Commons Commission, who requested a further review into the prospect of staying in the building during the works. The focus here remains on the working conditions for the current population of MPs. Sir Edward Leigh, an opponent of full decant, argued that MPs’ views about working in the historic Palace should be accorded weight in the decision-making process, suggesting:

You know, being an MP is not the easiest of jobs, one of the upsides of it is that you are working in a bit of history. (Interview, May 2018)

In February 2022, the House of Commons Commission announced its intention for Parliament to abolish the independent governance system for R&R, in order to replace it with an internal body which would be directed to develop plans to ‘reduce the need for a complete or nearly-complete decant of the Palace’ ([House of Commons Commission, 2022a](#)). This decision appears to prioritise the wishes to remain in the Palace over the duty of custodianship.

In evidence to the Public Accounts Committee in March 2022, the Clerk of the Commons, Dr John Benger, told MPs what staying in the Palace during the works would look like:

You have to think what that would be look like. It is almost like a polytunnel from the Northern Estate, Portcullis House and Norman Shaw North, where all the Members are, to this small, protected area

availability with a building site all around it. That would carry an enormous amount of risk, and potentially cost as well. ([House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2022](#), Q132)

The next words from Dr Benger confirmed, however, that even this image and the accompanying risk were not sufficient for MPs to put aside their own feelings about moving out of the Palace temporarily:

I do not think that the House was signing up, when it passed those resolutions, to being out of the Chamber for 20 years. In my heart of hearts, I do not think that motion would have got through, if Members had been told that they are going to be denied the Chamber until 2050. ([House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2022](#), Q132)

Further to the PAC hearing, the House of Commons Commission and House of Lords Committee met to discuss their new approach. In what appears to be a response to the suggestion that the safety of the building—and its current users—had been deprioritised, the statement following the meeting declared:

the Commission members agreed a new approach to the Restoration and Renewal programme that recognises not only their collective duty as custodians of the globally iconic building – part of a UNESCO World Heritage site – but also their responsibility to ensure the safety of all those who work in and visit the Palace. ([House of Commons Commission, 2022b](#))

In addition to current working conditions, opposition to decant can also be attributed to a fear of a loss of traditions and customs by moving out of the Palace, even temporarily. Charm and exceptionalism are often used to justify poor working conditions, for example, a lack of access for people with disabilities. As Susanna Lumsden, then the Departmental Accommodation Manager, in the Commons has written:

whilst there is a subtle charm to getting lost, especially in the Palace, indeed it is a sort of rite of passage on starting work in Parliament it reinforces the hierarchies of old versus new and does not express the spirit of an open and transparent Parliament. ([Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster, 2016](#), p. 107).

In a separate walking interview, contemporaneous observation notes highlighted the hierarchical nature of the design:

Status order is evident everywhere. In X's office there is a sofa for some people, while the more important people sit at the table. Tacit rules

regarding the doors in the Y office there is a door for Y and his guests, and a door for support staff. My interviewee and I walked through the “privileged door” because it was Friday and Y wasn’t there. (Observation notes, 2018)

The Palace of Westminster, with small, dark offices, is not designed to accommodate modern ways of working. Some parliamentarians have recognised these failings of the building, with frustration expressed by MPs and their staff about the accessibility for their constituents with disabilities ([Administration Committee, 2014](#)). This level of frustration may be higher if the building itself did not act as a barrier to political involvement: as discussed by [Evans and Reher \(2020\)](#), the number of MPs disclosing a disability is far lower than 20% of the UK population. Dr Hannah [White \(2022\)](#) notes that:

current MPs are, by definition, a cohort who have chosen to stand for election to the House of Commons as it is currently configured [...] Logically, there must also exist a cohort who would have made brilliant MPs but who have looked at the role of a member of parliament and decided it was not for them. Among many possible reasons, this might be because of what they could see about parliament’s physical environment [...] It would not be surprising if an individual with a physical disability thought they would find the Palace of Westminster difficult to navigate. ([White, 2022](#), p. 167)

The greater support for R&R among the Lords compared to the Commons has been attributed, in part, by parliamentarians and officials (interviews, 2018), to the greater proportion of Peers living with a disability and experiencing the building’s faults. The approval of R&R by the Lords in February 2018 was notable for Peers reporting their own experiences of inaccessibility and linking this to the duty of custodianship (e.g. HL Deb, 6 February 2018, c1930).

Addressing the accessibility of the building—and all its other faults—was viewed as a duty of parliamentarians, as the Leader of the Lords, Baroness Evans of Bowes Park warned:

As many noble Lords have said, we and Members of the other place are merely custodians of this Palace. It would be irresponsible of us to ignore the pressing concerns that have been expressed around the Chamber”. (HL Deb, 6 February 2018, c1999)

For Baroness Evans’ predecessor, Baroness Stowell of Beeston, the duty was not owed just to the current occupants of the building, but covered the whole population of the UK:

We can work out how a restored and renewed Palace of Westminster will be, and feel, more open and accessible to the people in whose interest decisions are made in this historic place. We are the custodians of something precious that belongs to everyone. (HL Deb, 6 February 2018, c1932)

This broadens out the net of responsibility not only geographically, but temporally, setting up our final temporal lens.

4.3 *The future*

The Labour Leader in the Lords, Baroness Smith of Basildon, argued that the duty of care parliamentarians have for the building and its current inhabitants ‘extends to the future. We are the trustees and custodians of this building for future generations’ (HL Deb, 6 February 2018, c1995). The former Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the Lords, Lord Wallace of Tankerness, made a similar point:

It is important that we are able to share this building with those who visit us because it does not belong to those of us who at any particular time have the good fortune to be a Member of the House of Lords or the House of Commons—rather, we are custodians of this building. We hold it in trust for the people and for future generations. (HL Deb, 6 February 2018, c1933)

Lord Laming, Crossbench peer, agreed:

We must recognise that this building is not owned by us. We are the custodians of it. Therefore, we have a duty to do all we can to preserve it and to make it fit for purpose for future generations. The privilege—and it is—of working in this building must be assured for those who follow us. (HL Deb, 6 February 2018, c1947-48)

Interestingly, future orientation is more evident in the position of Peers, as shown above, and also from officials. During periods of inaction and indecision between 2012 and 2018, it was the parliamentary staff who continued to press for action on the state of the building, for example, through taking MPs and Peers on tours of the basement which demonstrated that the ‘problem’ of the dilapidated infrastructure had not gone away (and, in fact, had worsened due to inaction). Despite these tours, a House of Commons librarian expressed their frustration with the short-termism of MPs:

I think the tragedy about R&R is that the current set of members that are not future proofing the plans, and I think that’s a big mistake. (Interview, 2018)

A House of Commons manager echoed this sentiment:

I hope that R&R will give us workspaces that are future proofed so that as things change, and the way people work change [...] I hope that you really get start thinking forward and thinking of how can we be adaptable. (Interview, 2018)

A few MPs have spoken out to support this view. The then Speaker, John Bercow, argued that to value the parliamentary democracy and the institution of Parliament, ‘we should not merely respect its past, but make the changes required for it to be of maximum possible value in the future’ (Bercow, 2018, p. 852). As this article shows, however, this belief is contested within Parliament due to an inherent conflict between the duty to the dead and the duty to the current and the future generations, and different interpretations, by different groups of actors, of the temporal aspect of the custodian role. The final part of this article explores the conclusions we can take from this conflict.

5. Conclusion

The decisions made about the future of the Palace of Westminster are drawn from the views of key actors within—the custodians—about their responsibility to the building. In this way, we build on the interpretive turn within parliamentary studies by considering the temporal nature of the interpretations custodians make about the building. As this article has shown, for some actors, this has focused on preserving the past by maintaining the current structure without change, others for making the building safe for current occupants, and for some, focusing on the responsibility to ensure the building survives into the future. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argued that as institutional actors move between different unfolding contexts, they switch between their temporal orientations—past, present and future—and they are capable of becoming more inventive and reflective in relation to the constraining and enabling contexts of action. In other words, actors who are positioned at the intersection of temporal contexts are able to develop a greater capacity for creative intervention. In the case of the UK Parliament, it has often—although not always—been the Parliamentary officials and the unelected House, rather than the MPs who subscribe to the long-term vision for the restoration. Some of these figures have tried to bridge these temporal aspects: Sir David Natzler, the then Clerk of the House (the most senior official in the Commons—and thus the one with the legal responsibility outlined earlier in this article), said that the argument he used with decant-sceptic MPs was: ‘Because you love the building you have to save it’ (interview, 2018). This may be the most effective approach for success for the R&R programme: changing the orientation from reminiscing about the past, to focusing on the problems of the present with a

view to preserving the Parliament for the generations of the future. This does not mean ignoring the past, rather what is needed is a reformulation of the temporal orientation and the construction of a sense of future connected with the past—or echoing Aminzade's (1992, p. 470) words: 'conceive the binding power of the past, the malleability of the future, or the capacities of actors to intervene in their immediate situation.'

Custodial work involves maintaining the stability of Parliament, but it also involves responsibility for institutional change. This article has sought to show that the decisions made by custodians of the Palace of Westminster are not inevitable or intrinsically rational. Instead, there is value in using a temporal lens: are the custodians seeking to preserve the past, prioritise the present or improve or maintain the Palace for future generations? While this is not the sole consideration during decision-making on R&R—our research highlighted other factors such as party politics and financial considerations—choosing to prioritise the past, present or future is a political choice, informed by views about who the building is for and its purpose. Being cognisant of these choices can help us understand the future shape of the R&R programme. It can also offer value to other legislatures considering the future shape and nature of their physical spaces, such as Canada and Austria, as while the precise nature of the interpretation of custodianship will be specific to each individual and thus their institution, legislatures in general face similar challenges of determining for whom should be the focus when considering their legislature building.

This leads us to our three main conclusions. First, we find that applying the concept of custodianship to new case studies can develop the idea within management and organisation studies, increasing its utility. Second, we argue that the concept of custodianship offers a value specifically in the study of parliaments, due to the specific nature of legislatures as institutions. Recognising the role of custodians and how the role is interpreted and executed will offer a clear policy impact. Linked to this, our third and final conclusion is the recommendation that legislatures define a clear and specific responsibility of custodianship. The priorities of parliamentarians will intrinsically favour the short-term and personal interest over that of the institution: this is not a value judgement, but reflects the incentives faced by elected politicians. With this in mind, legislatures should specify how the future of the institution will be protected and how this can be balanced against democratic accountability. In the specific case of the Palace of Westminster, this would be a necessary safeguard in case the designated custodians—the senior clerks—find their role untenable due to the conflict between their legal responsibility and lack of decision-making power on the future of the Palace. Being explicit about the temporal lens can help make complex decisions—such as the future of the Palace of Westminster clearer. But it can also go further in helping our legislatures secure their own institutional future.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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