

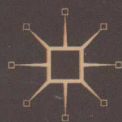


Parliamentary Socialisation

Learning the Ropes or Determining Behaviour?

Michael Rush and Philip Giddings

UNDERSTANDING GOVERNANCE



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Michael Rush

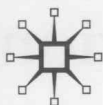
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Foreword by Peter Riddell

Members of Parliament (MPs), like the rich, are not like the rest of us – or that is what we, the public, think. Talk about the ‘Westminster village’ – Parliament has its share of village idiots – reinforces this belief that, once people arrive in the House of Commons, they behave differently and become cut-off from the public.

But do MPs really change, and how, once elected? Michael Rush and Philip Giddings offer a comprehensive, structured and convincing account of the influences affecting MPs. Their starting point is that most MPs do not arrive at Westminster as complete neophytes. As I noted in my 1993 book, *Honest Opportunism – The Rise of the Career Politician*, the formidable hurdles involved in being selected by a party in a winnable seat favour those who are already committed to a life of politics – and have experience as political advisers and researchers, as lobbyists and as local councillors. Just look at the current three leaders of the main parties – David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg: the vast majority of their pre-MP careers were devoted to full time political activities.

The complete political virgin – a term used about some of the Social Democratic Party candidates ahead of the 1983 general election – is a rarity, particularly in safe seats. For every Rory Stewart, with no party background, there are many times more already committed politicians. Landslide victories, as in 1983 and 1997, do admittedly throw up unexpected, and in some cases, reluctant, MPs. But they are in a minority. Most new MPs arrive with long-established views, and, above all, committed to their parties.

However, as Rush and Giddings show, while new MPs mostly have clear-cut political viewpoints, few know much about the way Parliament works. Well under 10 per cent of MPs in 1992 and 1997 were ‘very familiar’ with parliamentary procedures. So, as they write, ‘a degree of socialisation is inevitable: newly elected MPs have to learn how to do their job, how the House of Commons operates, how to use various parliamentary procedures and how to deal with constituency issues and constituents’ problems’. We have moved a long way from the ‘jumping in at the deep end’ approach of the past, where no help was provided to new Members. In May 2010 the Commons authorities and the party whips offered a well-organised induction programme, supplemented by

the Hansard Society and the Institute for Government. This 'functional socialisation' allows MPs to make a mark quicker than in the past – asking questions, as well as the chore of serving on legislative (public bill) committees.

The most fascinating part of the book is what happens then. This is not a static process, but is dynamic, depending on a combination of values, attitudes, personalities and experience. The authors underline the importance for most MPs of their role in looking after their constituents – the personal bond which many Members view in an almost proprietorial sense (it is always 'my constituency'), even though most cruelly find out that this does them little good when the national political swing goes against their party. Defeated MPs have to reflect on how limited their constituents' affection is for them personally.

At Westminster, the key factor is party. MPs were elected as members of parties and this shapes their attitudes and behaviour within Parliament. Crucial here is whether their party is in government or in opposition. That affects attitudes towards scrutiny, seen as a much greater opportunity by opposition MPs. But this does not mean that Westminster has been static. Not only are more MPs now full time – and the vast majority of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs believe they should be – but party cohesion has been challenged by the increasing number of MPs willing to defy their party whips (as documented by Philip Norton and Philip Cowley).

Of course, MPs serve in many different roles during their time in the Commons, in part obviously depending on the safeness of their seats. A surprisingly high number of those serving in two or three Parliaments serve either as ministers or on the opposition frontbench at some stage. While it is wrong to draw too clear-cut a distinction between frontbenchers and backbenchers – in view of movements between the two – many MPs are clearly executive minded, either in currently serving on the frontbench or aspiring to do so.

Some MPs are marked out as highflyers from the start, serving a minimal amount of time on the backbenches (often just a year) before going on the frontbench and remaining there for most of the rest of their careers. That is true of both David Cameron and Ed Miliband, as well as Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Michael Howard and William Hague. Such men, and occasionally women, of office have different attitudes and ambitions from the lifelong backbenchers. Many would probably not enter the Commons but for the prospect of office. This area deserves more attention than it receives in the book.

The main trigger – if not underlying cause – for the public's disapproval of MPs has been over their ethics, notably their personal financial affairs: in the 1990s their outside interests, and, most recently, their expenses. This is the clearest case of a distance between most MPs and the outside world: where their socialisation at Westminster, or, rather, their response to the rules on expense payments, puts them at odds with the views of their constituents.

The research was mainly carried out during the 1992–97 and 1997–2001 Parliaments, augmented by work that the Hansard Society carried out after the 2005 election. But there has not been time to update the surveys for the 2010 general election. The authors do, however, acknowledge how the creation of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition could change the attitudes and behaviour of the Liberal Democrats, previously the least socialised and integrated into Westminster, of the main party MPs. There could be a division between the ministerial MPs and backbenchers. The Commons has already changed since the May 2010 election and could change further. 'There is a window of opportunity: a potentially vulnerable coalition government; a public mood of dissatisfaction with the way the Commons has been performing; a large group of new MPs elected with a commitment to bring about a change in the style of politics; ministers, and opposition leaders, also committed in principle to effecting change.' The authors have made the case for a second edition.

Peter Riddell is a Senior Fellow of the Institute for Government and has chaired the Hansard Society since 2007. Until July 2010 he was chief political commentator of The Times and has written six books on British politics.

Preface

This book has its origins in a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Study of Parliament Group (SPG)¹ some months before the 1992 general election, at which one of us – Giddings – suggested a research project on how newly elected Members of Parliament learned how to do their job and whether, in the longer term, MPs were subject to a process of socialisation. It so happened that the other of us – Rush – was about to have a book on political sociology published, a chapter of which dealt with political socialisation.² An SPG study group was set up and financial support was provided by the Nuffield Foundation through its Small Grants Scheme. This financial support and the efforts of the study group enabled us to administer a series of questionnaires to MPs first elected at the 1992 general election and to conduct interviews with key officials in the House of Commons and with party officials. Our findings were fed back to the House authorities and party officials in anonymised and aggregate form, but as our ultimate interest was whether a process of parliamentary socialisation had been at work, we continued the research for the length of the 1992–97 Parliament. However, as the next election drew near, the combination of a large number of MPs retiring and Labour's persistently substantial opinion poll lead presaged a large number of new MPs. In the event, it was twice the post-1945 norm. We therefore decided to repeat the research in the 1997–2001 Parliament and successfully applied for an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant.³

By covering two Parliaments rather than one – one in which the Conservatives were in government and Labour in opposition, and the

¹ The Study of Parliament Group was founded in 1964 and has rather more than a hundred members, most of whom are either academics with an interest in Parliament or the devolved legislative bodies in the UK or are officials or former officials in the House of Commons or House of Lords or the devolved bodies. Over the years the Group has presented evidence to parliamentary committees and, through its study groups, has produced a number of authoritative studies on Parliament and the workings of parliamentary government.

² Michael Rush, *Politics and Society: An Introduction to Political Sociology*, Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1992.

³ ESRC Award R000222470.

other in which their roles were reversed, we intended to provide a fuller picture and explore more effectively the concept of parliamentary socialisation. In both cases we also extended the behavioural aspects of the research into the succeeding Parliament – 1997–2001 for the 1992–97 Parliament and 2001–05 for the 1997–2001 Parliament. We have also been able to take advantage of research undertaken by the Hansard Society into the experience of newly elected MPs after the 2005 general election.⁴

We believe that our research findings show not only how newly elected MPs learn about their job but also that they are subject to a process of parliamentary socialisation. The latter is not a totally deterministic process but one of a number of factors affecting how MPs do and view their job. It is also important to note that as a process it allows for change as well as continuity. Thus, the House of Commons in 2010 is not a fundamentally different institution from that elected in 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005, but nor is it the same. Changes have taken place in the way it works and yet more may follow, and not merely because 2010 produced the first coalition government for 65 years. The scandal of MPs' expenses raised questions about the standing of Parliament and its role in British politics. Whether significant change takes place depends in part upon the attitudes and behaviour of MPs, especially those first elected in 2010: 1997 produced the largest number of new MPs since 1945 and 2010 came close to equalling it, but the changes in the way Parliament operated that followed 1997, though important, were limited; will those that follow 2010 be more fundamental?

We could not have carried out this research nor written this book without the help and support of many people and organisations. It would not have been possible in the first place without the support of our two universities and grants from the Nuffield Foundation and the ESRC, for which we are most grateful. Nor could it have been completed without the co-operation of the MPs who completed and returned our questionnaires, not least because most were asked to do so not once but three times! A number of our respondents provided us with valuable additional information by writing in detailed comments – the source of many of our quotations. We would also like to thank those Members who gave us interviews, particularly at the beginning of the two Parliaments. Similarly, the advice, information and support we received

⁴ See Gemma Rosenblatt, *A Year in the Life: From Members of the Public to Member of Parliament*, Hansard Society, London, 2006.

from various House of Commons officials was invaluable, and particular mention should be made of Helen Irwin, Carole Andrews, Oonagh Gay, Richard Kelly, Paul Evans and Andrew Kennon. We also received valuable help from party whips, but especial thanks are due to Alan Haworth (now Lord Haworth), former Secretary of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), who helped us circumvent the ban the PLP placed on Labour MPs responding to questionnaires after 1997. A number of our academic colleagues helped with planning and advice at various stages of the project: Nicholas Allen, Sarah Childs, Nigel Jackson, David Judge, Philip Norton, Judith O'Carroll, Colin Seymour-Ure, Malcolm Shaw and Donald Shell. We would also like to thank the Hansard Society, particularly Gemma Rosenblatt, Matt Korris and Ruth Fox, for providing us with data from the Society's 2005 project on new MPs. We are grateful to Palgrave Macmillan's anonymous reader, whose advice helped us improve the book, but its publication owes much to Amber Stone-Galilee, Palgrave's Commissioning Editor for politics, and Liz Blackmore, her assistant editor and those responsible for the very efficient copy-editing – Priya Venkat, the Project Manager, Jackie Mace, the Language Editor, and Shanmuga Priya, the Technical Editor. Finally, we owe a debt to our wives, Jean and Myfanwy, who, like us, have lived with this project and book for more years than we care to remember!

Michael Rush,
Philip Giddings

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