

8.4 The role of an MP

The representative

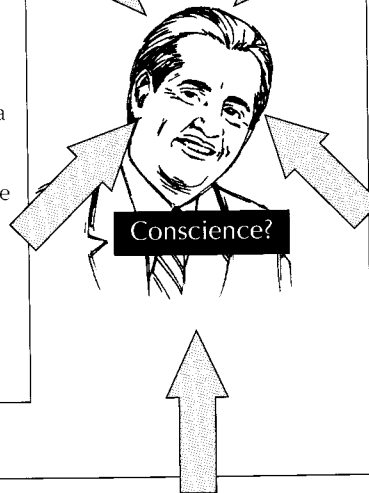
MPs are representatives rather than delegates (see Ch 1.2). Most MPs hold regular surgeries in order to deal with constituency issues and gauge opinion. Some MPs (such as the Prime Minister and members of the government) may have difficulty in representing their constituents as effectively, due to the demands on their time. Others (such as the Speaker and Deputy Speakers) might be restricted in what they can say due to the nature of their jobs. Voters can remove MPs through the ballot box, but in reality most MPs owe their positions more to those who selected them as their party's candidate. Few MPs have sufficient personal support to be elected without the party label (Martin Bell in 1997 and Dr Richard Taylor in 2001 being recent exceptions) and many can be said to have been elected purely due to their party label.

The loyal party drone

Most MPs are elected by virtue of the party label that they carry during the election. It is logical, therefore, the parties would argue, that MPs should toe the party line once in Parliament. To this end the party whips (see Ch 6.3) cajole and punish troublesome MPs. Such MPs might find their chances of promotion limited. Those that persistently ignore the whips might have the whip withdrawn. This effectively throws the MP out of the parliamentary party and leaves them vulnerable to de-selection in their constituency. Some MPs choose to resign the whip or even cross the floor of the House and join another party by taking that party's whip. They can do this without seeking re-election because – in theory – they are elected, not the party.

The watchdog

Traditionally, MPs within Parliament have had the role of holding government accountable through the various debates, committees, Prime Minister's and Ministers' Questions and – ultimately – by voting on government bills. This is crucial, but a government usually has a big enough majority to over-ride rebellions and MPs, controlled by whips, are often too fearful to act as a watchdog, particularly in the age of the 'career politician' (see below). Though there have always been MPs who prioritise this role (Tony Benn and Dennis Skinner, for example), individuals such as the Parliamentary Commissioner and bodies such as the Public Accounts Committee probably carry more weight than individual MPs.



The local trouble-shooter

Regardless of whether or not MPs ever follow the views of their constituents rather than the party whips, all MPs play an important role in trouble-shooting within their constituency and representing the interests of constituents facing problems either within the constituency or abroad. In 2002, for example, MPs were at work making representations on behalf of the British plane spotters arrested and charged in Greece. MPs can also intervene in disputes between constituents and local government bodies. Many MPs also find that domestic problems are brought to their surgeries. This troubleshooting role has seen some MPs described as glorified social workers.

The legislator

For a bill to become an act, it must be passed through the House of Commons. As a result, MPs have total power over legislation. In reality, however, the situation is far different. MPs, as we have already noted, are under pressure to conform. Parliamentary debates can be cut short, committees and committee chairmen leaned on. Ironically, as the passage of the recent anti-terrorism legislation has shown, it is often the Lords who offer the more spirited opposition to government policy; a fact particularly true during the Thatcher years.

The future for MPs

Many writers have observed the increasing number of what are called 'career politicians' in the House. Whereas MPs in the 1940s served an average of only five years in Parliament, today's MPs often linger for 15 or 20 years. The job has changed: MPs now often have more comfortable office accommodation in Portcullis House, they receive a reasonable salary and over £50 000 in allowable expenses on top of that salary, and the hours of debate have been moderated. The accompanying desire to secure and then retain such a position is likely to lead to greater party loyalty within the Chamber. At the same time, however, many voters are becoming unhappy with the extent to which their representatives represent them and by the continual allegations of sleaze and scandal. The resulting disillusionment has – it is argued – contributed to lower turnout in 2001 as well as to the election of non-party parliamentary candidates (for example, Martin Bell and Dr Richard Taylor). This disaffection with MPs will need to be addressed.