Parliament and Citizens in the United Kingdom

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The relationship that has developed between Parliament and citizen in the United Kingdom has been two-way and multi-faceted. This article examines the input achieved by citizen (as voter, constituent, and member of organised interest) through party, the MP, and the institution; and the output of Parliament to citizen through party, MP, and its own resources. The nature of and need for engagement have been exacerbated by recent scandals and both Houses of Parliament have sought to achieve greater direct engagement with the public through the use of the new social media. Citizens continue to distinguish between the local MP and the institution of which the MP is a member.

Keywords: *House of Commons; MP; constituency representation; casework; constituents*.

The British House of Commons, declared Enoch Powell, 'is a place where government speaks to the people and the people, through their representatives, speak to government' (Powell 1982, p. 169). This observation encapsulates a varied and dynamic relationship. It is a relationship that has developed over centuries and become far more complex since the advent of a mass franchise. It is a relationship that is at the heart of the British political system.

Development of the Link

Fundamental to the relationship between Parliament and citizen in the United Kingdom is a territorial base. The origins of the House of Commons are to be found in England in the summoning to the king's court in the thirteenth century of some knights from the shires (the counties) and then burgesses from the boroughs (leading figures from the towns). They joined the existing lords and churchmen who formed the court and were summoned in order to give their approval to the king's demands for additional taxation. The knights and burgesses eventually came to deliberate separately from the lords and churchmen, thus forming respectively the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

The members summoned to the Commons were there to speak and give assent on behalf of the communities from which they were drawn. The use of the term representation as acting on behalf of a particular entity was common in Britain from the early seventeenth century, but the form it took until the nineteenth century was that which Edmund Burke characterised as 'virtual representation': that is, one could speak on behalf of particular interests without being elected by popular vote (see Pitkin 1967, ch. 8). The representative owed the people 'devotion to their interest' rather than

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'submission to their will' (quoted in Pitkin 1967, p. 176). MPs were sent to Westminster as members from particular constituencies, such as the city of Bristol, but were chosen usually by a small number of leading local figures.

That changed in the nineteenth century. Demands from a growing middle class and artisans led to a growth in the franchise. The political landscape was transformed by the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867. Following the Representation of the People Act 1884 a majority of working men had the vote. The electorate became too large to be contacted – and bribed – by individual candidates. Instead, as Richard Crossman (1963, p. 39) observed, 'organized corruption was gradually replaced by party organization'. Political parties were transformed from cadre to mass-membership parties and came to dominate both electoral and parliamentary politics. By the end of the nineteenth century, candidates were elected on the basis of their party label and party dominated the House of Commons: party cohesion became a feature of parliamentary votes (Lowell 1924, pp. 76–78). In the twenty-first century, party organisation also developed within Parliament and became a marked feature of the House of Commons (Norton 1979).

The growth of a mass franchise and political parties as the means of aggregating the wishes of electors led to the concept of the mandate (see Birch 1964, pp. 116–119). The party elected to office had a mandate to govern and increasingly in the twentieth century acted on a manifesto laid before electors at the general election (see Craig 1970). Crucially, though, the development of representation through political parties was grafted on to the existing territorial basis of representation. MPs continued to be elected to serve defined constituencies – single-member constituencies were the norm from 1885 – and the MP was expected to act on behalf of constituents and the interests of the constituency. The MP often saw no conflict between the party programme and the interests of the constituency – they were seen as synonymous rather than conflicting – but on occasion there were tensions (see Norton 2005, pp. 164–166). There were also interests to be pursued outside the context of party.

Levels of Representation

The nature of change has been fundamental to the development of the relationship between Parliament and citizen. As David Judge (1993, p. 27) has observed, echoing Powell, the parliamentary tradition in Britain has been one of transmitting opinion between the political nation and the executive. Rather than engaging in direct participation, people have looked to their representatives in Parliament.

It is possible to identify MPs as engaging in two types of representation, those of specific and general representation (Norton 1981, p. 56). Specific representation, as the name implies, entails defending and advancing the interests of a constituency and the individuals within it. This is the role of the MP as a constituency MP. The general representation may be described as the defence of the causes of wider non-constituency interests in the country. Party has replaced functional interests as the principal basis of such representation, with MPs now

being returned on the basis of their party label. The MP, though, can, and does, also pursue other interests outside the context of party.

In recent decades, the demands of specific representation have become greater – MPs responding to demands to be more constituency-active – while the role of political parties, previously unknown to the constitution, has become more formally recognised. Only in 1969 did it become possible to put the name of a candidate's political party on the ballot paper. Only early in the twenty-first century did *Hansard*, the formal record of parliamentary proceedings, list the party of the MP in official proceedings. The party name, though, was listed in addition to the MP's constituency and not in place of it.

There are different means through which a member of the public can achieve some input into parliamentary activity in the United Kingdom. These can be related to the different capacities in which a citizen may act: as a voter, as a constituent, and as a member of an organised interest. As a voter, the citizen is represented primarily through party; as a constituent is represented through the local MP; and as a member of an organised interest may be represented through a like-minded MP or MPs. These representative channels are supplemented now by the fact that the citizen may have some direct access to Parliament, with greater specialisation by the House of Commons meaning that members of the public can make representations direct to a committee in the context of a particular inquiry. Citizens may thus, in effect, represent themselves.

However, as Enoch Powell recognised, the relationship is not one-way. Government may use Parliament to speak to the people, but Parliament itself may also speak to the people, be it through party, MPs, and, increasingly, through its own institutional devices. Both Houses of Parliament have recognised the need to engage directly with the public. That recognition preceded, but has been enhanced by, recent scandals surrounding expenses claimed by some MPs and peers. Attempts by both Houses to engage more with the public have relied heavily on the new social media.

The distinction between MPs, parties, and the institution is especially relevant to evaluating the effects of the expenses scandal, exposed in 2009 by *The Daily Telegraph* (see Winnett and Rayner 2009). We know from the existing literature that citizens' views of the local MP can exist independently of the views of the House of Commons (Norton 2005, pp. 195–196). The research of Jürgen Maier suggests scandals may undermine support for politicians and political parties but not necessarily institutions (Maier 2011). To what extent, then, has the House of Commons, unlike parties or MPs collectively, been left untainted by the expenses scandal? Have electors continued to view the local MP differently from how they view the House of Commons?

People to Parliament

Citizen as Voter

The House of Commons has always been structured on the basis of the executive placing measures before it. It began also to be organised on the basis of

competing interests, encouraged by the physical layout of its principal home until the 1830s – St Stephen's Chapel – with pews facing one another. The competing interests took more enduring form as political parties and the procedures of the House of Commons reflected the political reality of one party facing another. For a good part of the twentieth century, two-party competition was not only the norm but also the dominant characteristic of parliamentary politics.

Between elections, parties aggregated the views of citizens. On issues of public policy, electors wishing to make their views known had to work principally through parties or seek to operate outside the context of a particular party either as constituents or citizens coming together in interest groups. Party, though, dominated, certainly in the formulation and implementation of public policy. Parties returned to government had a good record of implementing manifesto promises (Rose 1984, pp. 61–67) and party provided MPs with a protective shield in resisting the demands of those interest groups with which they had little affinity.

Party, however, also served to render Parliament something of a closed institution (Norton 1991), electors having little opportunity to affect party stances and what happened in the determination of public policy. They were observers rather than participants. Though electoral behaviour has become more volatile in the UK over the past half-century, resulting in more intense electoral competition and with more seats in the House of Commons held by members of third parties, it has not directly affected the linkage between citizens and Parliament. The linkage has become more extensive as a result of citizens becoming more active both as constituents and as members of interest groups. This, coupled with changes internal to the House designed to strengthen the House in its relationship to the executive, has resulted in the House of Commons becoming a more 'open' institution (Norton 1991).

Citizen as Constituent

At the level of constituent *qua* constituent, the principal link is the Member of Parliament. A constituent may write to or visit the MP (in the constituency or in Parliament) to pursue a particular concern. There is a parliamentary convention that a grievance raised by a constituent must be channelled through that constituent's Member of Parliament. An MP will not take up a case of a citizen who is a constituent of another MP. The convention is exclusive in that the constituent cannot go beyond the MP for the constituency. It is inclusive in that an MP is expected to pursue a case raised by anyone within the constituency: one does not necessarily have to be an elector – for instance, a minor or a foreign national (such as an overseas student) – or a supporter of the Member's party in order to raise a grievance with the local MP.

MPs did not used to be much troubled by constituents between general elections. They fulfilled important roles in the constituency, not least as a local (though not necessarily regularly visiting) dignitary and sometimes as a local benefactor, but they were not much in demand as powerful friends or information

providers (Norton 1994). It was unusual for an MP to live in the constituency or be a regular visitor. Few constituents contacted their MP.

That, though, changed significantly in the last decades of the twentieth century. Constituents began to contact their MP on an ever-increasing scale. They looked to the MP to be an information provider, advocate and powerful friend (see Rawlings 1990, Norton 1994). Constituents wrote or visited MPs in their constituency surgeries – publicly-advertised meetings to which constituents could come to raise their concerns. Such surgeries soon became the norm. Whereas a typical MP might receive a dozen letters a week in the 1950s, and could reply by hand, by the 1980s the number was typically 20 to 50 a day (Norton 2005, p. 182), mostly from constituents. The combination of a growing number of letters from constituents and from interest groups meant that by end of the twentieth century, and the start of the twenty-first, more than 4 million items of mail were flowing into the Palace of Westminster each year.

The increase in contact with constituents proved demanding for MPs, but also politically beneficial. By 1996, MPs estimated that almost 40 per cent of their time each week when Parliament was sitting was spent on constituency work (17 per cent in the House, 21 per cent in the constituency) and over 60 per cent of their time when the House was in recess (Review Body on Senior Salaries 1996, p. 30). By 2006, new MPs put the figure at 49 per cent when the House was sitting (Rosenblatt 2006, p. 32). However, though demanding – and potentially causing a clash with the time required to fulfil the collective task of scrutinising and examining legislation and executive actions – constituency service delivers a number of benefits to MPs (Norton and Wood 1993, pp. 50–55), not only in terms of job satisfaction and education about constituency issues, but also in terms of enhancing their status. Constituency work usually generates a positive response from constituents, not least those who make contact with the MP, and appears to be the basis for electors maintaining a positive view of the local MP, while having a more volatile view of the work of the House of Commons. Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, those constituents who were satisfied with the job being done by the local MP consistently outnumber those who were dissatisfied by approximately two-to-one (Table 1). Those believing that Parliament did a good job showed notable variations, the evaluation of the institution appearing to exist independently of the evaluation of the local MP. In 2001, for instance, 45 per cent of those questioned by Ipsos MORI were very or fairly satisfied with the way that Parliament did its job, against 30 per cent who were fairly or very dissatisfied, but in 2003 the gap had narrowed to 36 per cent to 32 per cent.

The reasons for the increase in constituency work are varied. The growth of the public sector – generating more contact between citizens and public bodies – and the cognitive mobilisation of citizens identified by Inglehart (1977) provided the basis for constituents having the grounds and the motivation for pursuing grievances through the local MP. Coverage by the local press, and word of mouth between constituents – not least those who had already been in contact with

Table 1: Evaluation of Local MPs

Q. On balance, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the job the local MP is doing for this constituency?	1991	1995	2001*
Satisfied	43	43	42
Dissatisfied	23	23	19
Don't know/no opinion	34	34	39

*Satisfied combines 'very/fairly satisfied', dissatisfied combines 'fairly/very dissatisfied', don't know/no opinion 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' and 'don't know'.
Source: MORI, as reproduced in Norton (2005, p. 192).

the local MP – may have further encouraged constituents to get in touch. Demand was met with a willing supply. MPs not only felt they had an obligation to attend to the demands of their constituents but also did so because they gained various educative and psychological benefits as well as political rewards. At a time of electoral volatility, there was an incentive to maintain a positive profile in the constituency. Though there was little evidence of MPs being able to garner significant 'personal votes', there was some evidence that hard-working constituency MPs could nonetheless make some difference (see Norton and Wood 1990, 1993, Wood and Norton 1992); a good reputation as a constituency MP could encourage supporters not to defect when the party became unpopular.

Only a minority of constituents make contact with the local MP. Surveys generally suggest between 10 and 15 per cent, though that equates to more than 5 million electors. However, awareness of the availability of the MP to act on behalf of constituents appears pervasive. The British Social Attitudes Survey of 1984 found that, in a situation where an unjust or harmful measure was being considered by Parliament, a majority of respondents (55 per cent) would contact their local MP (Jowell and Witherspoon 1985, p. 12); this constituted the most popular form of personal action. It was also the form of personal action judged most effective (by 43 per cent of respondents) (see also Norton 1990a, pp. 24–25). The availability and activity of the local MP is reported by local media, and the development of the Internet, as we shall see, has provided a new, quick, and cheap means of making contact with the MP.

Citizen as Group Member

Citizens with particular grievances can contact their local MP. However, their stance on particular issues of public policy may also motivate them to come together to campaign in support of that policy. This may be a spontaneous campaign, through raising a petition for example, or it may be institutionalised through an interest group. Recent decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number of interest groups in the UK (Norton 2005, p. 203). Not only are there more of them, but some have attracted a membership running to seven figures.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) has more members than the three main political parties combined.

Interest groups seeking to influence public policy have focused on the executive. They have also made contact with MPs, but the scale on which they did so was significantly greater in the last quarter of the twentieth century than ever before. A greater distancing of government from groups and greater specialisation within the House of Commons – especially the creation in 1979 of departmental select committees (see Drewry 1989) – markedly increased the attractiveness of the House of Commons to interest groups as a means of reaching government, with greater independence on the part of MPs enhancing the possibility of change being achieved (Norton 2005, ch. 10). Lobbying of Parliament by interest groups became both extensive and regular, groups maintaining consistent contact with MPs and asking them to table parliamentary questions or speak in debate and on occasion seeking meetings with ministers (Rush 1990). Over 80 per cent of a sample of new MPs elected in 2005 said that they would sometimes be strongly influenced by representations from interest groups (Rosenblatt 2006, pp. 39–40).

The result has been that MPs receive a large mailbag of briefings and other material from interest groups – some sent indiscriminately to all MPs, other material more targeted at interested Members – contributing to the extensive volume of correspondence now received in the Palace of Westminster. The briefing material increases when a particular bill is being considered, not least for those MPs serving on the relevant legislative committee. Contact between members and lobbyists is also notable during committee meetings (Norton 1990b, pp. 185–186). The committees considering bills have also increased in attractiveness in that, since 2006, they have been empowered to receive evidence. Material can thus be submitted to a committee as such, whereas previously it could only be sent to members individually.

Groups seeking to influence Parliament have increasingly drawn on their supporters in their capacity as constituents, campaigns being waged through encouraging supporters to contact their local MP in support of the cause. By acting as constituents, they ensure a response from their MP. On occasion, constituency-level campaigning by groups has been successful, spectacularly so in 1986 when pressure from constituents was identified as the single most important variable in persuading 72 Conservative MPs to vote against the Shops Bill – designed to deregulate Sunday trading – resulting in the bill being defeated (Bown 1990, p. 229), the only time in the twentieth century that a government with a clear working majority lost the second reading of a bill.

Lobbying by groups contributes to the large mailbag as well now as the growing number of e-mails received by MPs – some claiming to receive a three-figure number on a daily basis – and constituency-level pressure is an intrinsic feature of many campaigns. In 2011, for example, campaigners against a proposed high-speed rail link between London and the north-west of England utilised MPs (including ministers) in affected constituencies to oppose

the scheme (Savage 2011). As with the campaign against the Shops Bill, opposition encompassed a range of bodies, but the high-profile objections came from the local MPs. The campaign attracted significant national publicity but constituted the tip of a lobbying iceberg.

Lobbying by mail and meetings is also supplemented in some cases by marches and demonstrations outside the Palace of Westminster. Those opposed to proposals for legislative change, or advocates of it, congregate in Parliament Square or opposite the main entrance to the House of Lords. Some demonstrations are large, involving several thousand people (and not always peaceful), while others may involve no more than a few dozen. As with written material, the significance is that Parliament is the focus of attention by citizens, rather than being ignored (Norton 2005, p. 214).

Parliament to People

Party to People

Parties seek to mobilise support between elections and Parliament, especially the House of Commons, provides a platform for so doing. For the party in government, this is achieved through the enactment of its programme as well as through making its case in debate. For opposition parties, it is through the medium of publicity afforded by debates and Question Time. Party ensures that the government can get its way, but the party system ensures that opposition parties are heard (see Norton 2001, p. 28). The rules of both Houses are highly institutionalised and are designed in order to ensure that both sides are able to make their case.

The manner in which the parties seek to be heard, though, constitutes a mixed blessing for the institution. Behaviour tends to conform to expectations derived from rational choice theory. Parties exploit the rules for partisan advantage. Debates can be highly adversarial, as can Prime Minister's Question Time in the House of Commons, the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition, spurred on by their (noisy) supporters, engaging in verbal duels. Such self-serving partisan activity may be entertaining – and hence attractive to the television cameras – but it also contributes to a negative view of the House. Though deprecating such behaviour, electors nonetheless tend to recognise that the House does hold government to account: more people tend to agree that it does than take the contrary view (Hansard Society 2010, p. 95).

MP to Constituents

The main increase in contact in recent years has been at the level of MP to constituents rather than party to electors. MPs have increasingly sought to make contact with constituents, collectively as well as individually. Before the latter half of the twentieth century, there was very little contact beyond some public meetings, occasional reporting of the MP's activity by the local press, or

writing in response to a (rare) letter. In the latter half of the twentieth century, MPs became more pro-active, utilising surgeries – in the 1960s the proportion holding surgeries increased from over 60 per cent to over 90 per cent (Barker and Rush 1970) – and increasingly more likely to live in or near the constituency (Norton and Wood 1993). Some MPs also began producing occasional newsletters as well as contributing regular columns to the local press. The advent of local radio stations and free newspapers ('freesheets') also offered new media to exploit (Norton 1993, pp. 150–152).

Making contact on a more extensive basis, however, has been limited by time and cost. MPs lack the resources to survey constituents' opinions or to distribute printed material. The development of the Internet, however, has transformed the potential for MPs to contact constituents. To facilitate contact, the House agreed that Members should have an annual communications allowance to cover communications with constituents regarding their parliamentary duties. Introduced in 2007, at £10,000 a year (£10,400 for 2010–11), it enabled Members to develop websites as well as produce other material about their parliamentary work. The allowance, though, proved politically contentious. Though not permitted to be used for party purposes, it was seen as a means of entrenching the incumbent.

Each House to the Public

Historically, there have been no significant means by which either House has sought to inform or engage with citizens. The only official output was *Hansard*, but that reported what Members said and, in any event, had a low circulation. Otherwise, it was a case of being dependent on press reporting of debates (that is, reporting by third parties) or by the actions of individual members. Although MPs were keen to promote themselves, they devoted little time to the collective activity of promoting the institution of which they were a member. They were prepared to use it for their own purposes, but that did not necessarily enhance public awareness of, and support for, the institution of Parliament and at times contributed to a negative perception.

Attempts by each House to promote itself are of recent origin. Both Houses approved, after earlier rebuffs (Norton 2005, pp. 230–231), sound broadcasting of proceedings in the 1970s and televising in the 1980s. Such coverage contributed to greater public awareness of Parliament, but did not necessarily help to enhance support for the institution. In the case of sound broadcasting, it was if anything the reverse: the public were not enamoured of the cacophony of noise blaring out from their radios. Part of the problem derived from editorial selectivity. Prime Minister's Question Time – the epitome of adversarial conflict – was accorded disproportionate air time by broadcasters.

More recent developments, though, have enhanced the capacity for the public to follow directly what is being done in Parliament. Television coverage has been enhanced by direct feeds from both chambers. Coverage by a dedicated channel – BBC Parliament – has been complemented by a website, *Democracy Live*,

providing live feeds from both chambers (as well as the European, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish legislatures). Some meetings of select committees are televised, but all are webcast. In 2010, the BBC Parliament channel was attracting a monthly audience of 1.9 million viewers.

More direct attempts to engage with the public have taken place in recent years. These have coincided with the development of the Internet. This has been the area in which the greatest change has taken place, especially in encouraging greater engagement rather than simply seeking to disseminate information.

Weakening the Link

Though Parliament and MPs have sought to extend engagement with citizens, they have sought to do so against a backdrop of scandals that have affected the standing of the House and its members. In the 1980s and 1990s, controversy surrounded the links between some MPs and political lobbying firms, some MPs being hired by such firms (see Grantham and Seymour-Ure 1990, Hollingsworth 1991) and the links giving rise to allegations of influence-buying. After some MPs proved willing to accept money for tabling parliamentary questions – the scandal resulting in almost two-thirds of those questioned believing that most MPs make money by using public office improperly (Norton 2005, p. 210) – a new committee, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, was established. New rules were introduced and existing regulations tightened as to the extent to which MPs could accept payment to advise firms and other bodies: among other changes, paid advocacy was banned.

Various allegations of misconduct continued to be made, but not quite on the same scale as in the early 1990s. These were overshadowed in 2009 by a scandal surrounding expenses claimed by MPs. Details of Members' expenses were leaked, revealing the extent to which some Members had exploited the rules allowing them to claim for the maintenance of a second home (Winnett and Rayner 2009). In some cases, MPs were found not only to have gone against the spirit of the rules but also to have broken the law: four were tried and imprisoned. The scandal overshadowed Parliament for much of 2009 and several Members were deselected as candidates as a result of their involvement in the scandal.

The public anger over the claims made by MPs provided the basis for undermining popular support for MPs. However, despite the immediate media and public backlash, public support for Parliament and for MPs – especially the local MP – did not collapse. Though satisfaction with Parliament declined – from 36 per cent in 2007 to 27 per cent in 2011 – there was no upsurge in dissatisfaction, more people being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the institution (Hansard Society 2011, pp. 86–87). Two other findings from survey data are also noteworthy. Though there was a marked increase in the percentage of respondents in 2009 who felt the system of government needed a great deal of improvement – 37 per cent, up from 24 per cent the previous year – the percentage had receded to 25 per cent in 2011 (Hansard Society 2011, p. 84). The expenses scandal may have

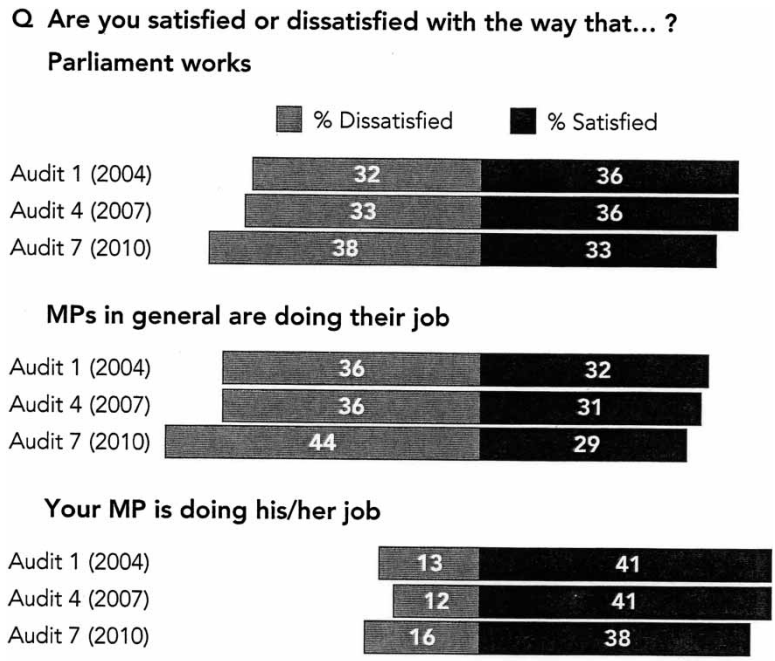
encouraged the blip, but overall, as the *Audit of Political Engagement* observed, satisfaction with the system of government tends to mirror satisfaction with the incumbent government (Hansard Society 2011, p. 84).

The other noteworthy finding is that the view of the local MP, relative to the House of Commons, has been maintained. In 2010, there was a decrease in the percentage of people satisfied with the way Parliament, MPs in general, and the local MP operate, but whereas the percentage dissatisfied exceeded the percentage satisfied in the first two categories, in the third those satisfied with the local MP exceeded those dissatisfied by more than two-to-one (38 per cent to 16 per cent) (see Figure 1).

However, perhaps even more telling was an Ipsos MORI poll at the time the expenses scandal was breaking asking people if they would trust MPs in general to tell the truth and if they would trust their local MP to tell the truth. As can be seen from Figure 2, three-quarters would not trust MPs in general to tell the truth, whereas the figure for the local MP was less than half.

The work of the constituency MP may have limited impact on electors' voting behaviour, but it appears to impact on their perceptions as constituents of the

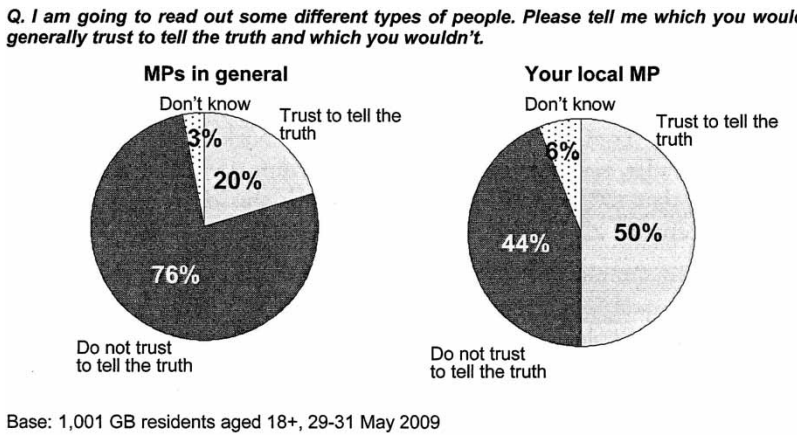
Figure 1: Satisfaction with Parliament and MPs



Base: c.1,000-2,000 GB adults 18+.

Source: Hansard Society (2010, p. 88).

Figure 2: Trust in MPs



Source: Ipsos MORI/BBC, reproduced in Worcester *et al.* (2011, p. 140).

work undertaken by the local MP. The explanation may derive from viewing the local MP as a service provider, working on behalf of local people, whereas the perception of the House of Commons is one of empty green benches and adversarial conflict. As MPs sometimes bewail, electors fail to link the empty green benches with the fact that MPs increasingly have to spend time in their offices dealing with constituency casework.

Enhancing the Link

Reform of the House of Commons over the past 40 years has focused on strengthening the House in its relationship to the executive (see Kelso 2009). However, more recently, greater attention has been given to the link between Parliament and citizen. Members of both Houses have become more sensitive to the needs to engage with the public (see Modernisation Committee 2004, Information Committee 2009). Part of this recognition appears to stem from a realisation that Parliament may be marginalised as citizens exploit new media, with political activity not featuring significantly, and as the mainstream media ignore Parliament in favour of more human interest stories. MPs have sought to utilise the Internet to strengthen contact with electors. Parliament itself has also sought to do so, perhaps with greater effect in encouraging greater involvement by citizens.

MPs have recognised the potential of the Internet, and the use of websites is now pervasive (though not quite total) among MPs (Ward and Lusoli 2005, Norton 2007). Some MPs have also migrated to using blogs, e-newsletters, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Jackson and Lilleker 2011, pp. 86–87). Constituents are able to e-mail MPs, either directly or

through a website (*TheyWorkForYou.com*), and MPs increasingly develop e-mail lists and circulate e-newsletters. Blogs also provide a means for encouraging constituents to comment on what the MP has written. The potential for greater engagement is thus significant, though the actual use made of the new technology still falls short of the potential. Websites tend to be used by MPs to disseminate material rather than encourage a dialogue with constituents (Norton 2007) and blogging and the use of Twitter remain minority activities, albeit increasingly utilised. In 2009 less than 10 per cent of MPs used Twitter (Jackson and Lilleker 2011); by 2011, it was just over 40 per cent (275 out of 650) (Harrison 2011). Where blogs are used, not all Members keep up to date with responding to comments (Norton 2007). Twitter is not necessarily used for informing citizens about MPs' parliamentary or constituency work (Harrison 2011), though, as one analyst observed, constituents could check their MPs' Twitter feed to see if they were attending events in the constituency (Olly Kendall, cited in Harrison 2011). MPs have greatly extended their contact with constituents, but they have yet to break out of the traditional mindset of seeing new technology as a means of replicating traditional means of reaching constituents, who in this context tend to be viewed as electors rather than constituents.

Perhaps the most innovative use of the new technology has been that of the institution itself. Parliament has devoted considerable resources to developing its website (http://www.parliament.uk). The website initially attracted criticism, not being notably user-friendly and being constructed on the basis of parliamentary structures rather than issues that interest people. It has since been extensively re-designed. Both Houses in the twenty-first century have also invested heavily in an outreach programme. This has encompassed an educational service as part of the website, and the appointment of outreach officers in different parts of the UK, working with schools and other organisations to employ the various media available to gain information on, and engage with, MPs and both Houses. In the Lords, a programme of 'Peers in Schools' was instituted, with peers visiting schools to talk about the work of the House.

In terms of engaging with members of the public, various committees of both Houses (select committees and all-party groups) have also utilised online consultations. These have covered topics such as domestic violence, flood management, and, appropriately, connecting Parliament with the public (Norton 2005, pp. 234–235). Though still fairly few in number, the UK Parliament nonetheless is ahead of others in its use of such consultations. As Professor Stephen Coleman told a parliamentary committee in 2004:

> On-line consultations are something that you [Parliament] have in fact pioneered and have done better than any other parliament in the world. There is quite a lot of data suggesting that these consultations have had an effect on the fairly small minority of people who have engaged in them – because they have been deliberative, because they have been expansive over a

> period of a month, and because you have taken people seriously. (Modernisation Committee 2004, pp. 20–21)

The House of Commons in 2011 also sought to enhance contact with citizens through the use of e-petitions. Petitioning, though historically well rooted, was not an effective means of attracting the attention of MPs. Although citizens may devote considerable time to collecting signatures, very little happened to the petition after an MP presented it in the House. There was, as one report noted, 'little sense that petitions to Parliament result in any concrete action on the part of MPs' (Hansard Society Commission for Parliamentary Scrutiny 2001, p. 86). The public appeared aware of the limitations. The 1984 British Social Attitudes Survey found that signing a petition was the most popular collective action that electors would take in the event of an unjust law being considered by Parliament (57 per cent would take such action). However, only 12 per cent judged it to be the most effective action (Jowell and Witherspoon 1985, p. 12). The lack of impact was reflected in a decrease in the number of petitions submitted to Parliament, with more being submitted at the start of the twenty-first century to a website created by 10 Downing Street than to the House of Commons (Norton 2005, p. 194).

The Procedure Committee of the House in 2008 recommended the use of e-petitions (Procedure Committee 2008) but the government, initially supportive, baulked at the potential cost. However, in 2011, the new coalition government threw its weight behind their use, and in August 2011 the website previously utilised to petition 10 Downing Street was resuscitated for e-petitions (http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/index.html) which, if they attracted 100,000 signatures or more, would be considered for debate in the House of Commons. In many respects, this constituted the House of Commons catching up with other legislatures in facilitating petitioning, but it marked a major step forward in providing citizens with a means collectively of input to parliamentary deliberations. The House of Commons had come a long way from the closed institution of 50 years before.

Conclusion

The link between citizen and Parliament in the UK has a longstanding territorial base. Though political parties dominate electoral and parliamentary behaviour, the territorial link has underpinned popular support for the local MP and held, despite scandals of recent years. Between elections, citizens make contact with Parliament through their local MP or, as supporters of particular groups, through Members more generally. The opportunity to do so has increased in recent years, with potential for greater contact as a result of the Internet and e-petitions. MPs have sought to enhance contact with citizens, though the more organised contact, and potential for engagement, has been through the institution itself, Parliament devoting resources to developing its links with the public.

Though the potential still exceeds the practice, with MPs having limited means of knowing the views of most of their constituents (Norton 2009), citizens have at least far greater opportunity than ever before both to see their representatives in action and to engage with them. For MPs, and Parliament, the challenge will be keeping pace with the new technology.

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