

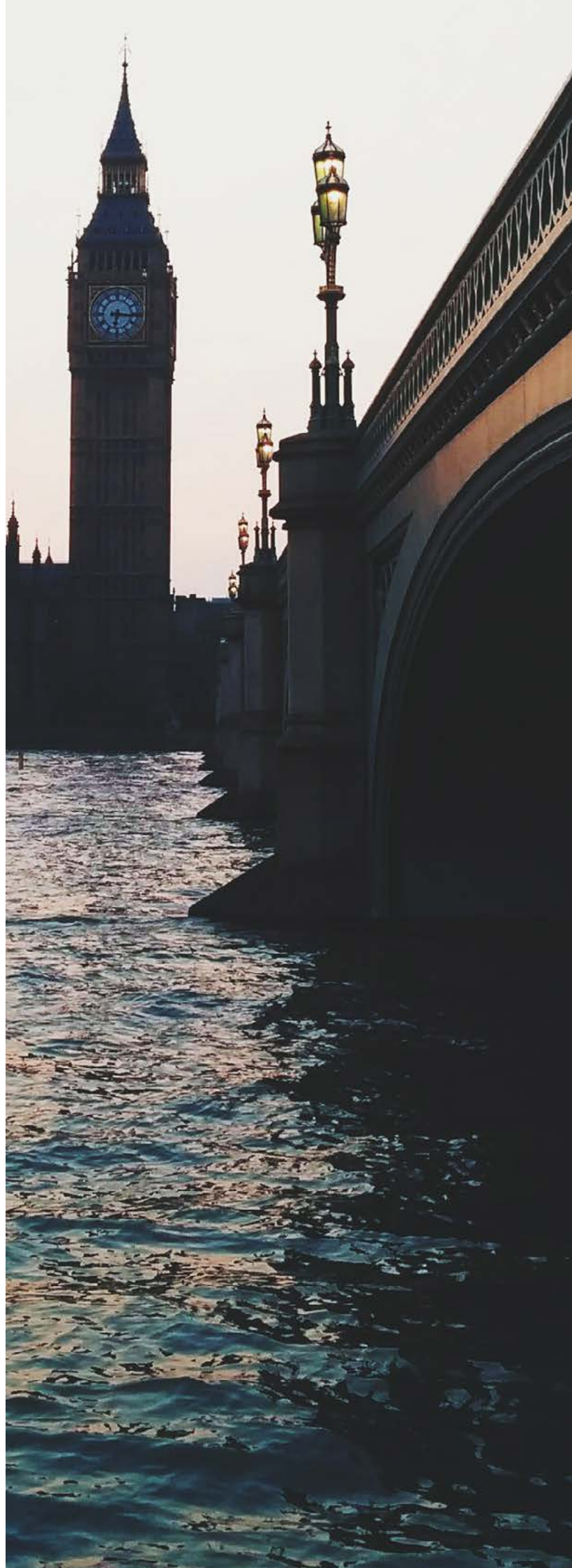


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promoting excellence in psychology

## Cognitive strain in Parliament: How can we reduce psychological stressors to improve policy-making?

Andrew Baldwin, Cynthia Pinto,  
Saskia Perriard-Abdoh,  
& Ashley Weinberg

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## **BPS POLICY TEAM DIRECTORY**

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### **KATHRYN SCOTT**

Director of Policy

### **NIGEL ATTER**

Policy Advisor, Children and Young People

### **ANDREW BALDWIN**

Policy Advisor, Work

### **JOE LIARDET**

Policy Coordinator, Consultations  
consult@bps.org.uk

### **NIC MURRAY**

Policy Advisor, Social Justice

### **SASKIA PERRIARD-ABDOH**

Policy and Government Relations Manager, Health  
and Psychological Government Programme Lead

### **GEORGE WILKINSON**

Policy Officer  
policy@bps.org.uk



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# COGNITIVE STRAIN IN PARLIAMENT

# About the British Psychological Society

The British Psychological Society (BPS) is the representative body for psychology and psychologists in the UK. We are responsible for the promotion of excellence and ethical practice in the science, education, and practical applications of psychology. We have 60,000 members and subscribers across the UK, ranging from students to qualified chartered psychologists.

We support and enhance the development and application of psychology for the greater public good. We set high standards for research, education and knowledge, and seek to disseminate this to increase wider public awareness of psychology and its importance. As part of this work we want to ensure that the value of psychology to society is recognised by policy-makers and used to inform policy development across government.

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# About the Psychological Government Programme

Terms such as ‘place-making’, ‘people-centred’ and ‘wellbeing’ are back on the policy agenda. These are all new potential approaches to developing policy. There is an appetite in government for a ‘new way of doing things’ and developing an evidence-based policy-making framework. However, while the need to bring people (and their psychology) into the policy-making process is well understood, there is often a lack of clarity regarding how this can be done.

Policies fail and governments don’t get re-elected if they don’t connect with the people they serve. This can be linked to an inherent flaw or missed opportunity within the design of the policy itself; a lack of understanding of the environmental or social contexts – namely place; or the failure to understand and include the people affected by these decisions which can in turn lead to feelings of inequality, disenfranchisement, stigma and populism. It is at this junction between people, place and policy that psychology and psychologists can provide insights, expertise and frameworks of thinking.

The BPS Psychological Government Programme aims to offer a way to move past these barriers by identifying, developing and delivering a psychological approach to policy-making, which places people first.

For further information, please contact [policy@bps.org.uk](mailto:policy@bps.org.uk).

# Introduction

*'The workload of the MP is greater at the beginning of the 21st century than at any time in the history of the House of Commons. Public expectations of our elected representatives have also grown. Yet this increased pressure has not been matched by concomitant improvements to facilities, hours or procedures. In order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Parliament, and its Members, tangible reform is required. The alternative is a growing disparity between expectation and reality, which can only lead to a further erosion of support for Parliament'* (Hansard Society, 2000).

Being an MP does not come with a formal job description, and the working realities of our elected politicians are complex. We know from current psychological evidence that work plays a central role in our identity and meaningful activity in life is key to wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> This applies as much to politicians as it does to any other job. While other high-stress professions have been studied from an occupational psychology perspective, this has not occurred to a large extent within parliamentarians. This briefing asks, from a psychological perspective, what the role of an MP actually looks like in practice, and what are the psychological

ramifications faced by our elected representatives once they enter parliament?

Like many jobs, working as an MP opens the individual up to a wide range of additional psychological stressors. Stress, depression or anxiety account for 44 per cent of all UK's work-related ill health cases and 54 per cent of its working days are lost due to ill health.<sup>2</sup> While parliamentary specific figures are not currently available, data shows that those working in public service roles tend to have higher levels of stress when compared to all jobs.<sup>3</sup>

This briefing looks at Parliament through an occupational psychology lens and a framework of nine psychological stressors. Does our Parliamentary system allow us to get the best out of our elected officials, and if not, then what can be done to make parliament a psychologically safer workplace? Through interviews with current and former MPs, researchers and constituency staff, it provides an understanding of the psychological pressures that MPs work under, the cognitive strain this creates, and the impact these stressors can have on work performance. We also aim to develop an evidence-based route to building psychologically healthy workplaces in Parliaments across the UK and beyond.



# Occupational psychology and politics

Psychological stress and cognitive strain are not new concerns. When providing evidence to the Modernisation Committee of the House of Commons almost 30 years ago, Edwina Currie MP highlighted the personal fallout evidenced by, 'broken health, ruined marriages and exhausted irrationality'.<sup>4</sup> In *How to be an MP*, the veteran Labour MP Paul Flynn outlined some of the day-to-day issues that can impact on an MP's psychological health:

*'An ungrateful constituent abuses the staff. A strong case to reverse an injustice fails. A tabloid savages a pet cause. The MP bombs in a crowded Commons. A loved constituent dies prematurely. A constituency firm loses hundreds of jobs. A political enemy wounds with a bull's eye attack.'*<sup>5</sup>

The first study of the psychological wellbeing of MPs took place in 1992 following concerns expressed by politicians themselves about the impact of long and unpredictable hours on their ability to function effectively at work and their relationships with their families.<sup>6</sup> Concerns were raised about the toll of the job on individual MPs and their families, but also about the impact on their psychological and physical capacity to function in their professional roles.

These concerns can have a huge psychological impact on office staff, family relationships, connections with friends and the MPs as individuals. Studies that allow comparison of MPs' wellbeing with other occupational groups and assessments of their working conditions have highlighted:<sup>7</sup>

- The negative impact of long working hours on health and family relationships.
- Links between stress and MPs' perceptions of their decision making.
- The negative impact of the job on those becoming MPs for the first time.

- The mixed impact of reform of debating hours in the House of Commons– with particularly negative results for MPs with constituencies further from London.

MPs' experience of stress can vary over time and is, on average, comparable with the psychological strain reported by senior managers<sup>8</sup> and the general population.<sup>9,10</sup> However, this masks an underlying trend that when factors relating to age and sex are controlled for, rates of poor psychological health are doubled for MPs compared to the general population.<sup>11</sup>

Given the common negative psychological outcomes, it can be difficult to understand the appeal of working in a political environment and what motivates people to pursue this path. However all the MPs and staffers interviewed for this project said that the ability to make a difference for constituents by 'providing people with clarity of how Parliament works, or how a piece of legislation is going to affect their life' and the potential to make lasting, positive political change were important psychological motivators.

One MP pointed out there was 'no other job that I know of where you can create and run your own history'. Another spoke of the honour of witnessing history, by being part of a team that was putting forward, 'transformative policies and that vision for how [society] could be... Being able, as a politician, to have that voice at a national level. To try and push for change [...] was a privilege.' Yet, rewarding work does not mean the absence of stressors and it is important to consider the sources of pressure (stressors) faced by MPs and their staff as they navigate Parliament.

# Psychological stressors in Parliament?

Despite the high public profile it entails, being an MP is still a job. Gaining understanding of what this work entails in reality, as well as the stressors that can impact job performance, is key to defining the workplace practices to best enable productive political work and in turn lead to better policy outcomes.

The psychological stressors framework outlined by Flinders et al., was used to conduct qualitative interviews (see Table 1) to inform this briefing.<sup>12</sup> These include macro-level

issues which derive from the role of MP in wider society, meso-level challenges that arise from working in the context of a political organisation and micro-level problems which can be seen to take a direct toll on individuals. This briefing reviews these nine stressors, while incorporating new findings from anonymised interviews that were conducted with MPs and parliamentary staff (see Appendix A for the topic guide used to conduct interviews).

## EXPECTATIONS

The average size of a constituency is approximately 56,000 people in Wales, 68,300 in Northern Ireland, 67,200 in Scotland and 72,200 in England.<sup>13</sup> Even if only 5 per cent of constituents were to vocalise their expectations or get in contact with their elected representatives, this remains a significant number of people and a huge constituency case-load to manage.

The mismatch in expectations facing politicians is clearest in the gap between what is promised and what can then be delivered by way of policy.<sup>14</sup> Some of these expectations can be embedded in the function of the role itself given the fast-changing nature of politics. As one staffer detailed, 'there is the issue of trying to deal with something very quickly and urgently at the same time as you're trying to follow a more strategic path your politician is trying to achieve'. Another noted that working in parliament is like 'being a very small cog in an enormous machine. You'll often work very, very hard on a brief or a document, about a piece of legislation and then you never see it finished'.

These expectations also manifest in the gap between what constituents believe is within an MP's remit and what isn't. One interviewee suggested 'the public have very high expectations, and sometimes you can't deliver them' and noted the range of issues constituents expect their MP to be able to fix. Examples cited in our interviews include an MP being asked if he could come and clean out a constituent's gutters and another MP being requested to personally reduce the number of geese in the local park. Conversely, other constituents only come to an MP as a last resort and the parliamentary office can be seen as 'the fourth emergency service'.

Many of the examples above could be considered to be issues within the remit of the local council, rather than the parliamentary office. As one MP acknowledged, 'many people in your community don't know you're in Westminster for the middle of the week and that's your prime job. They think you just go for a day to London a week'.

**TABLE 1: KEY STRESSORS ON PARLIAMENTARIANS AND EXAMPLES OF RELEVANT RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Stressor	Meaning	Previous research examples
1. Macro-level (cultural)	1.1 <i>Expectations</i>	High expectations but limited resources and capacity to deliver See anecdotal individual political accounts
	1.2 <i>Distrust</i>	Intense scrutiny of politicians with focus on sensationalism and negativity, as well as forms of public accountability, blame and threat Aktar and Morrison, 2019
	1.3 <i>Political labour</i>	Political labour reflects dissonance between personal and politically required views, carrying a potential personal and professional toll Richards, 2007
2. Meso-level (institutional)	2.1 <i>Organisational Culture</i>	Majoritarian politics is competitive; added challenges include lack of clarity around organisational procedures and induction Kwiatkowski, 2012; Cooper-Thomas and Silvester, 2014
	2.2 <i>Leadership</i>	The impact of leadership style and of responsibility for appropriately handling crises and daily demands Owen and Davidson, 2009; Caprara et. al., 2010; Dietrich et al, 2012; Lilienfeld et. al., 2012
	2.3 <i>Temporal</i>	Electoral cycles provide limited time to enact change; the impact of job loss and an uncertain future after politics Theakston, Gouge and Honeyman, 2007; Weinberg, 2007; Theakston, 2012; Roberts, 2017.
1. Micro-level (individual)	3.1 <i>Lifestyle</i>	All-encompassing, featuring long working hours. The psychological strain of political life is often felt in family life and relationships. Weinberg et. al., 1999, Weinberg and Cooper, 2003; Weinberg, 2015
	3.2 <i>Control</i>	Limited influence over many job-related factors, lack of control over events and also conflicting professional loyalties Weinberg, 2015; Karasek, 1979
	3.3 <i>Skills</i>	Availability of appropriate training and support to strengthen competence, although reluctance to prescribe a 'right way' to be a politician Silvester and Dykes, 2007; Hartley, 2012; Steinack, 2012; Silvester, Wyatt and Randall, 2014

## THE PRESSURES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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The increased prevalence of social media as a conduit for parliamentary/public interactions has had significant ramifications on MPs' workloads, work/life balance and psychological safety. In 2019, a Vuelio report identified that although many MPs saw that social media increased transparency, 81 per cent of MPs believed that public attitude towards politicians had worsened as a result of social media and 42 per cent believed that social media has changed the policy-making process for the worse.<sup>15</sup> That same year, psychologists Shazia Akhtar and Catriona Morrison published the results of their survey on the prevalence and impact of online trolling of UK MPs. It determined that all MPs had experienced trolling, and indeed many were trolled multiple times a day, most often through social media channels.<sup>16</sup>

This was supported by many interviewees. We were told, 'even back in 2010, not everybody was on email, not everybody was on social media. Whereas now everybody is so there is an expectation.' Another staffer stated that 'expectations from constituents are sky high at the moment because you are more accessible than ever before on Twitter and Facebook.' The widespread use of social media makes it much easier and quicker to send targeted abuse to MPs and their staff. As one staffer noted, it takes time and reflection to write a letter, but only seconds to write a tweet.

Yet, as one MP remarked, it is important to remain aware of the practicalities of the job when setting one's own expectations: 'it's up to each individual [MP] to work out what the balance is between solving a problem that is genuinely their responsibility is but then patiently pushing back on things where actually individuals, families, and communities need to be a little bit more resilient (as in the case of disputes between neighbours).' This MP went on to note that 'you have a better chance of being able to manage expectations if you have built up some credibility as someone just doesn't expect respect because [you're] an MP, but deserves sufficient respect because actually [you've] done the work already [for your constituency].'

## DISTRUST

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Aside from political scandals or individual personal failings, distrust in MPs can stem from the challenge of fulfilling expectations from different stakeholders, including constituents, co-workers, political rivals, media, and the general public. Public trust in Parliament has been impacted by a number of high-profile and divisive political decisions and issues. As one MP commented, the challenge of winning public trust is so great that you feel you have done well if you get the line from constituents that MPs are ‘all crooks, charlatans and villains, but our local one is the exception’. As they later reflected, ‘the difficulty of a reputation is that you can build it up over years, but you can lose it in five minutes.’

One interviewee commented that ‘there are terrible emails and there are literally hundreds a day’, while another outlined that this is a problem, because ‘it impacts on everybody who works in politics...you’re constantly fighting a battle to prove yourself’. This pressure often increases while controversial or divisive legislation passes through Parliament. One MP, when referring to a politically divisive piece of legislation, said that ‘the amount of emails, and the rage with some people ... whichever side they were on, was quite stressful for staff in particular, not just me.’ Additionally, the sheer number of routes that can be taken to reach an MP (letters, emails, social media, phone calls, attending surgeries, turning up at the parliamentary office itself) can lead to a

situation where this distrust can invade every moment of an MP’s (or their staff’s) daily work.

One researcher mentioned that watching their MP ‘being torn apart in front of your eyes on social media, or by email, and we receive some truly nasty correspondence... is really unpleasant’. Another alluded to the damage of the expenses scandal, and how this association has become an ongoing punitive lever, with constituents asking ‘how many meals out [did] I pay for you to have’. Another staffer mentioned feeling the effect of this correspondence personally, ‘When I was sometimes labelled collectively with the “you don’t care, you’re not doing this, you’re not doing that”. It really hurt me because... some of us make lots of sacrifices.’

On the other hand, many interviewees spoke about the parliamentary office as a close-knit unit, which can be a source of psychological support: ‘we all feel that shared sense of responsibility. It’s like we’re the MP or the office as a whole is, rather than the individual person’. As a staffer pointed out, ‘we’ve all had our names mentioned on Twitter by angry constituents which isn’t pleasant. We don’t think that’s fair, but you know it happens and it does motivate you to try to do a better job.’

**POLITICAL LABOUR**

MPs are required to fulfil many roles such as being legislators, advocates and lobbyists, all the while fulfilling their operational duties to both party and constituency. A key component is the capacity to represent the positions of one’s political party or grouping. However, this can become a source of cognitive dissonance with an MPs’ own personal views. An MP noted that navigating personal beliefs while being at odds with the leadership or other members of their party could be difficult, but ‘this is a broad church like a family. You’re going to have people within a family you don’t necessarily always agree with but because they’re part of your family you work out a relationship with them.’

In psychology, the term emotional labour is used to describe these experiences. Considerable research has demonstrated the potentially negative impact of a mismatch between what one feels and what one’s public role requires. For example, it takes a substantial psychological effort to be asked by your political party to carry out an action that is counter to your own beliefs in order to fulfil a wider political mandate, and then have to defend it as if it were your own individual decision.<sup>17</sup>

Political labour can also be seen at a deeper level, when the parliamentarian identifies with different groupings, for example:

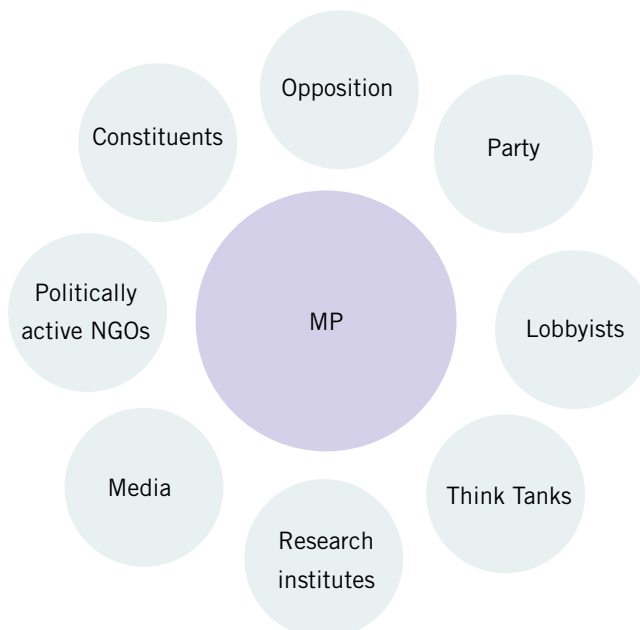
- experienced vs. inexperienced MPs,
- alignment with different wings of the party,
- the additional responsibilities of occupying official government positions

Emotional labour can also be high when individual parliamentarians attempt to navigate their own opinion and those of their constituents in regard to controversial non-party specific policy issues.

For example:

1. MP and Constituency (e.g. advocating for remain from a leave constituency)
2. MP/office and Party (e.g. voting against the Whip)
3. MP and Staff (e.g. individual concerns over an MP’s opinion on something or arguments between staff themselves as they advise their MP on a specific issue)

One parliamentary researcher painted the picture of the politician ‘trying to keep his or her integrity... to keep the line, respond, not just to the party but to party members and constituents and everything else’. Another interviewee agreed: ‘The thing about the different pressures is there’s so many different pressures ... you’ve got constituents, your local party the national party, the media. So, you’ve got different audiences that you’re accountable to. And it’s a complex role.’





Another MP noted that to ‘steer a course between saving your own integrity, and not falling out and being side-lined and alienated by the parties is very difficult.’ Many recent examples have demonstrated the difficulty of walking this fine line without leading to personal or professional cost. From individual MPs voting against the party whip over constituency matters (i.e. the HS2 or Heathrow expansions), which get played out at the national level, to MPs making individual decisions over a specific policy issue that may threaten their position within their party or lead to expulsion. Recently we have also seen MPs voluntarily resigning the whip, swapping political allegiances, or even defecting to create new political parties.

Another challenge is working out how strongly constituents really care about something, or whether those who have sent in correspondence

to the parliamentary office are the vocal yet non-representative minority. One researcher acknowledged the importance of advising their MP to take the time to consider the wider context before making a decision: ‘we’ve had 300 emails about this issue, and therefore you’re wavering towards supporting it. But actually, that’s 300 emails out of 65,000 constituents. So, let’s think about what the other views are and why they haven’t contacted us and why they might be unhappy with that view.’

Psychologically speaking, this prevalence bias is recognisable in Twitter storms and organised campaigns, which can make it appear as though a specific issue or policy position is far more representative of the wishes of the electorate than it actually is in reality.<sup>18</sup>

## ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Organisational culture is often described as ‘the way we do things around here’. It determines the structures and processes of an institution.<sup>19</sup> In relation to Parliament, one interviewee noted the existence of a culture where it can be ‘quite natural to think that it’s okay to sit in Parliament till midnight, but it isn’t. It’s not good for anybody who has children or a family or who doesn’t have someone at home to look after them.’ Darren Jones MP publicly highlighted the impossibility of taking paternity leave while still having to be present to vote in London,<sup>20</sup> while fellow Labour MP Stella Creasy wrote about the intransigence of a system that failed to recognise maternity leave.<sup>21</sup>

Parliament is effectively comprised of hundreds of small businesses, with multiple employees across multiple buildings (see Table 2). There is a broad range of different induction procedures and working practices upon entering Parliament, which can catch MPs off guard. MPs we spoke to noted that their past professional experience had prepared them for their new roles, but that they were concerned for colleagues who had never managed people before. One MP noted that ‘suddenly you’re employing three people and it’s about getting the office to function on a day to day basis.’ Another agreed, ‘The lack of support compared to a traditional organisation where you’d have an HR function and a line management function is very amorphous.’

Adaptability, continuous improvement and the ability to identify and eliminate bad practices are crucial in improving psychological wellbeing at work. However, the lack of clear standards and best practices within parliament as a workplace can cause additional stress. Sarah Child’s report, *The Good Parliament*, makes it clear that many issues of equality and diversity in the House of Commons remain<sup>22</sup> and Dame Laura Cox’s report raises serious concerns on bullying and harassment in the House of Commons.<sup>23</sup>

Our research found a similar story, with interviewees suggesting that concerns over the reputation of the party and fear of repercussions may prevent staff from raising complaints, and that instead they leave their jobs.

While responsibility lies with individuals, any psychologically unsafe organisational culture is one which is less productive.<sup>24</sup> Unsafe working environments and practices can only continue and become an endemic feature of the workplace if the system itself (along with institutional support structures) allows these incidents to happen. As one interviewee pointed out, the MP they work for ‘happens to be good, not because the system makes [them] good.’

What is needed is a robust accountability framework which is psychologically informed, includes accountable metrics, clear reporting processes and a robust inspection regime.

**TABLE 2: NUMBER OF COMMONS AND PARLIAMENTARY INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY SERVICE (PICT)/PARLIAMENTARY DIGITAL SERVICE (PDS) STAFF AND MEMBERS' STAFF**

Year	Commons and PICT/PDS staff	MPs' Staff
1997	n/a	*
1998	n/a	1846
1999	n/a	1849
2000	n/a	1867
2001	1377	1850
2002	1430	2179
2003	1477	2280
2004	1517	2446
2005	1554	2584
2006	1553	2577
2007	1606	2493
2008	1696	2694
2009	1741	2875
2010	1839	2915
2011	1868	2500
2012	2003	2750
2013	1861	3050
2014	2011	3150
2015	2038	3,150

Source: PARLIAMENTARY INFORMATION LIST Number 02411, 3 October 2016

## LEADERSHIP

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Leadership in parliament does not just refer to party-specific cabinet or shadow cabinet positions. MPs are also responsible for providing leadership in their offices, at constituency levels, within informal colleague groupings and in formal groupings such as Select Committees. If a poor organisational culture leads to poor workplace wellbeing, then poor leadership will undoubtedly exacerbate it with damaging consequences to the organisation itself and the psychological wellbeing of the people who work there.

Occupational psychologists outline both the virtues of compassionate leaders who demonstrate and champion the values they want to see in their employees, and the practical theoretical frameworks that can be used to facilitate and foster the development of these compassionate leaders.<sup>25</sup> However, evidence shows that this type of organisational development cannot simply take place at the senior levels of an organisation. One of the key drivers for organisation change are good workplace leaders who bring other employees along with them.

This is difficult to achieve in parliament due to the absence of formal leadership training and systematic management structures. One interviewee expressed concern at the lack of support for MPs who have not managed people before, acknowledging that 'you are a line manager for a number of staff, and you have a duty of care to those staff as well [...] they are owed that we make sure they get the appropriate support.' Another complicating

factor is that, with the exception of certain London-based MPs, many MPs are or employ a line manager over multiple geographic sites meaning that direct leadership isn't always possible.

As a result, a work issue which is taking place in a constituency or parliamentary office, which an MP can only visit a few times a week, might escalate drastically before being brought to the MP's (or office manager's) attention. One staffer with line management responsibilities commented on the destructive impact of 'the stresses that are put on a team that doesn't work together.... It can result in appalling rows and bad relationships because you've added a political edge to it'.

There is a clear need for MPs, as employers, to ensure that their parliamentary office is an effective and psychologically safe workplace. There does not appear to be formal support mechanisms to fulfil this function, and from our interviews we noted there was an absence of systematic disciplinary actions for individuals who neglected or refused to fulfil their responsibilities as employers.

The incentives for going above and beyond are few, notwithstanding parliamentarians' personal beliefs and drive, while formal disciplinary actions for having a poorly performing office or a psychologically unhealthy workplace are virtually non-existent.

## TEMPORAL

As one MP commented, ‘this job is a way of life’, but once an individual successfully wins a parliamentary seat they then face an uncertain length of tenure. One staffer working for an MP in a marginal seat noted that, in addition to national party-specific factors, the office’s work does get ‘crystallized’ at election time. ‘You can actually almost measure [...] the impact of your work by either winning or losing an election since every constituent [helped] is one that might vote for [the MP] next time around.’

The stress and impact on wellbeing resulting from precarious employment is well known.<sup>26</sup> The Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2015 sought to limit this stressor but recent snap elections show the Act’s limitations in reducing uncertainty of tenure. As one staffer stated, ‘those of us who work for MPs with marginal constituencies are permanently on the edge of our seats.’ The potential for situations to change overnight due to factors beyond the control of the individual MP means that political careers can be particularly precarious. However, an MP noted that the temporal nature of the job can also help focus the mind if, ‘you think of it as an amazing opportunity to make a difference, which may happen over a short space of time rather than a longer space then it’s a mindset that enables you to be more resilient.’

One MP described how they sat their team down on the eve of a snap election to explain the possible outcomes and how ‘many [staffers had] not really realised the possibility of losing the job entirely.’ Other interviewees noted that while they were personally more aware, they nevertheless had had to explain that concept to colleagues or to friends who did not work in a parliamentary

or parliamentary adjacent workplace. One staffer recollected saying to a surprised friend during the last election that ‘if my member is not re-elected, I lose my job at midnight tonight.’

These temporal psychological stressors are heightened in marginal constituencies, where MPs and staff can often feel like they are constantly running an election campaign, on top of their other work responsibilities. One former MP who had represented a three-way marginal spoke of rivals constantly campaigning in the constituency while they were away in Westminster. Their main political opponent was ‘very much in the community and very much campaigning, which put me under an awful lot of pressure.’ The un-elected rival only needs to campaign, while the MP needs to both campaign and fulfil their parliamentary responsibilities effectively, which can have a major impact on both their physical health and their psychological wellbeing.

With the often-voiced caveat that MPs and their staff often have advantages and benefits that others in society do not, many interviewees also highlighted the lack of aftercare available when leaving parliament and noted that the transition process could have been handled better. The personal impact of losing an election can have tremendous psychological impact including longstanding effects on personal identity.<sup>27</sup> This stress partly results from existing workplace practices. For example, when someone loses their parliamentary seat, offices must be cleared within four days, in many cases in full view of the opposing party, which can be psychologically distressing.

## LIFESTYLE

The long working hours and late votes in Westminster, followed by constituency surgeries and events that take place over the weekend all take a psychological toll, and this toll appears to be increasing. One MP said that they could ‘remember going through the lobbies, with those with more experience saying “It’s never been like this.”’

Long distance travel to and from constituencies and limited time with loved ones is a perennial issue for MPs. As one former MP noted, ‘you’d come home on a Thursday night, and then Friday would be a constituency surgery. Often, I would feel quite drained by late-night voting or going through legislation [but] the travelling was an issue.’ Those located closer to London may have the option to travel home in the evenings when the House is sitting, but those further away face a lonelier and longer working week. Indeed, MPs with constituencies more than 150 miles from London, have been found to have levels of psychological distress that are significantly higher than the levels exhibited by colleagues living closer to parliament.<sup>28</sup>

This is also true for staffers, many of which noted that their family members knew what they had signed up to. As one staffer remarked, if there is a significant vote, ‘even if I’m in the pub or a restaurant, I’m looking at my phone under the table and I’m thinking whether I want to get the statement out straightaway before or straight after the vote.’ This ‘always-on’ culture was a constant throughout the interviews, though some acknowledged this was often voluntary given the special nature of their roles. Interestingly, there was disagreement over whether this always-on culture was just part of the job, or a challenge that could be addressed.

This constant pressure is physically and psychologically draining, with one former MP remarking: ‘When I first got to parliament, I remember thinking, “who has done this timetable?” You’d see colleagues literally

running from place to place, to get to Portcullis House for an All Party Parliamentary Group or to go to a select committee, to then get to a question at 11.30 in the chamber. Everything seemed to happen at the same time.’ The psychological ramifications of an always-on culture make workers less effective over the longer-term and more vulnerable to physical health problems.<sup>29</sup> Beyond physically stopping work, staff and parliamentarians also need to be able to switch off psychologically. MPs specifically have a clear role in modelling healthy work-life balance behaviours given that the working practices of managers have clear impacts on wider staff.<sup>30</sup>

### Coping and loneliness

The idea of loneliness in such a dynamic working environment may be counter-intuitive, but this came up in a number of interviews. The nature of having 650 different offices within one building can make it hard to meet similar people, especially if you aren’t naturally outgoing. One interviewee said, ‘You can find yourself working in an office in the back end of the building with not another living soul around you.’ Another MP reflected that they had noticed ‘a lot of lonely people in Parliament. It’s like ships in the night really because they’re doing different things at different time.’

This is partly due to the practicalities of the work and partly due to the competitive nature of the job. One MP mentioned that ‘there were very few people in Parliament, where I really felt I could trust them’ while a researcher cautioned that ‘you might want to confide in somebody [but] then you find that everybody else knows about it... you have to quickly find a group of people you can trust and if you do that’s great. If you don’t, it can be lonely.’



## CONTROL

MPs have limited influence over many job-related factors. They lack control over unfolding news events and often face conflicting work responsibilities, which can have a significant psychological toll. MPs can feel powerless to help constituents who ask for support with complicated cases that fall beyond an MP's individual remit. As one MP reflected, 'you can have constituents that expect you to do something for them and you try your best and still nothing happens.' Beyond constituents, the whipping system means MPs may be faced with a situation where they have to vote for

something they don't believe in (see above for political labour).

The problems mentioned above matter because a key part of psychological wellbeing at work is autonomy which gives individuals an opportunity to develop work objectives that fulfil a sense of purpose.<sup>31</sup> Although there is a limit on what one MP can achieve, there is still the general opportunity to 'craft the job'<sup>32</sup> in such a way as to make a difference (both positive and negative) and, as many interviewees noted, the nature of political work does provide variety, excitement, and the opportunity to campaign on policy issues.

## SKILLS

There remains a huge disconnect between the expectation of working in parliament and the actual reality of working in parliament. One interviewee noticed that 'people get elected to Parliament and they think that it's about making speeches in the House of Commons and becoming a minister but your day to day, your office, is the most important thing.' Training in politics may be seen as an anathema to some, but the utility of personal skills development, management training, and coaching is integrated in many senior level career pathways. The fragmented induction courses currently available for MPs and their staff, suggests that there is an opportunity to reduce current pressures on MPs through psychologically informed training.

Interviewees outlined a number of core competencies that helped individuals navigate parliament as a workplace. These included:

- resilience ('a hide like a rhinoceros'),
- adaptability ('thinking quickly and reacting

quickly to the different situations'),

- decision making ('staffers are looking to you'),
- flexibility ('in five minutes you [can] drop everything you planned for today or tomorrow').

Conversely, some skills are present in abundance, like assertiveness. However, these skills can also have unintended consequences. One interviewee pointed out the number of assertive researchers trying to become MPs themselves, 'if you want to advance within that group and be listened to, you need to be very assertive. I think that's a difficult environment for quite a lot of people.'

A greater focus on ongoing training and support, including personnel development and support on the psychology of recruitment and retention, in terms of identifying the best candidates, might help alleviate some of these detrimental side effects.

## Conclusion

*'A lot of the stressors unfortunately are ingrained in the political system. Any extra support to MPs as employers is really welcome. There just has to be models of best practice out there and how to manage staff and how to organize your office.'*  
Interviewed Staffer

The nine psychological stressors outlined above demonstrate the huge pressures faced by MPs and their staff from a workplace perspective, as well as the impact this can have on their psychological health. Support is vital in any job, however, the introduction of psychological support in a job which can depend heavily on political success can be difficult. In an arena where vulnerability can be perceived as a political weakness, pathways of support for elected representatives are often unclear.

The recent establishment of an occupational health facility within parliament is welcomed. The last decade has also seen a positive shift in public attitudes and media coverage towards psychological health in parliament. Indeed, an introduction of counselling services resulted from a public campaign by

a number of politicians who openly discussed their encounters with a range of mental health challenges. But despite these positive advancements recent findings show that 52 per cent of MPs would not be willing to discuss their own mental health with their colleagues or the party whips, and 77 per cent of MPs reported not knowing how to access the in-house counselling services which are currently available.<sup>33</sup>

This poses a serious challenge to our democracy. Being a politician may not be an occupation that is looked upon favourably by the general public, but if political work is completed without sufficient resourcing and in a psychologically unsafe environment, then the price moves from one being levied on the individuals to one which is paid by all members of society. The wellbeing of MPs is an issue for the wellbeing of the electorate. Optimising the occupational abilities, as opposed to political perspectives, of an elected representative can support them to better hear, evaluate and represent the views of their constituents.

## Recommendations

The nine stressors and their accompanying psychological ramifications cannot be eliminated completely. But this does not mean they cannot be controlled and mitigated

by implementing organisational changes to better support parliament as a psychologically informed workplace:

### OFFICE LEVEL

- **Develop a full system of peer support for MPs and staffers** – the evidence shows some MPs and staff can struggle with occupational realities. The establishment of a formal and accessible buddy or mentoring system, which already seems to exist informally, may help reduce the wide range of disparities between people's experiences.
- **Acknowledge the duty of care towards MP and staff** – we recommend that MPs, as employers, pledge to acknowledge and maintain their duty of care towards
- **Clearer line management** – while we acknowledge that many staffers reported having positive working relationships with their MPs, the establishment of clear expectations, line management, and onboarding processes for staffers would serve to establish new work norms across parliament.

staffers by creating a psychologically informed environment within their parliamentary office.

## PARTY LEVEL

- **Extend support for party workers** – staff who are contracted directly by the party may not benefit from the opportunities the House of Parliament authorities have developed. It is vital that political parties get their own house in order as well, including full psychological support, visible reporting structures, inclusive and transparent policies and processes that are supported by an effective HR function.
- **Address long term systemic issues** – there are many long-term issues around work culture in parliament relating to a lack of

training and fragmented party discipline such as clarity of reporting structures and access to support which need to be properly addressed to foster a psychologically healthy workplace.

- **Increase visible pathways of support for staff who lose their jobs as a result of elections** – precarious work has a psychological toll on all workers. Parties should develop pathways of support for MPs and staffers who may unexpectedly lose their jobs due to a snap election.

## PARLIAMENTARY LEVEL

- **Parliament wide induction programme** – Parliament should support those working within its premises with comprehensive job training that outlines the key tenets of psychologically healthy workplaces including ‘ways of working’, ‘workplace values’, and the role and duties of and to parliamentary staff.
- **Psychological training for MPs and staff** – in order to address some of the long-term systemic and cultural legacy issues, MPs and staff would benefit from the availability of psychologically informed training practices and procedures to provide support

for identifying, reporting and dealing with stressors and inappropriate work behaviours such as gaslighting, bullying and harassment.

- **Outreach for constituency staff** – constituency staff may be out of sight, but they should not be out of mind. Parliament should acknowledge the role they play and support their development and psychological safety in the same way as they should for staff based in Westminster.

# Appendix A

## A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

In order to inform this briefing, we conducted a series of anonymised interviews which were subsequently thematically coded in accordance to the framework outlined by Flinders et al., (see Table 1). In order to ensure that different party affiliations and seniority of individuals who work in parliament were included in the empirical section above, interviewees were purposively selected and approached. We had overwhelmingly positive feedback from individuals who were approached with all but one interview candidate agreeing to

be interviewed. In total we conducted eight interviews. Four were with former or current parliamentarians. Four were with current or former staffers. These interviews were conducted informally through an explorative conversation based on the interview guide outlined below. We do not intend this briefing to be representative of the entirety of parliament as a workplace, but we do hope it serves as a useful example which could be relied upon to conduct further, more in depth, research.

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Introduction

- BPS – background to project
- Who interviewer is
- Interested in your views as ...MP/Constituency manager/researcher in parliament
- Confidentiality, tape recording, interview length (max 20 mins)

### Relevant personal background

- Length in role, constituency, set up re staffing
- Parliamentary role e.g. back bencher, committees etc.

### Role

- What are the most rewarding aspects of your role?
- What are the least rewarding aspects of your role?
- Psychologists talk about motivators and stressors in jobs
- For someone in your role what are the motivators? What are the factors which help

you to keep going when things are difficult?

- What are the stressors?
- Some researchers have identified the following. To what extent do you think they apply to someone in your role (with brief description of what each is)?
  - Expectations
  - Distrust
  - Political labour
  - Organisational culture
  - Leadership
  - Temporal
  - Lifestyle
  - Control
  - Skills
- What could be done to alleviate some of the stressors for these groups of people? For each who should be responsible for providing this support?
  - MPs in your position
  - Constituency staff
  - Staff working in parliament
  - Family/people you are close to

## INTERVIEW CLOSE

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St Andrews House,  
48 Princess Road East,  
Leicester LE1 7DR, UK

 [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)  0116 254 9568  [info@bps.org.uk](mailto:info@bps.org.uk)

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