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# **An observational study of the information seeking behaviour of Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom**

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**Abstract** *This paper describes the results of an observational study of the information seeking behaviour of Members of Parliament. It is argued that political life functions on a flow of information and that information itself is a prime resource. The study sought to determine the characteristics that impact upon the manner in which information is sourced and used by parliamentarians. For this project a shadowing methodology was adopted. The conclusions drawn include that UK Members of are subject to a range of triggers of information seeking, in an information rich environment where the amount of information presents decision makers with difficulties. Public accountability results in demands from a wide variety of individuals, groups and associations. MPs are also expected to be knowledgeable about a wide variety of issues, while information need is frequently unpredictable and reactive. Members must be efficient information gatherers and managers and they must be flexible in their attitudes to information seeking, while retaining the capacity to critically appraise the quality of sources.*

## **Introduction and methodology**

It might be argued that representative members of legislative assemblies are the most influential decision makers in any society. As such the quality of information feeding into and impacting upon the decision making process is of paramount importance in ensuring that informed and effective government can take place. There are rising expectations amongst constituents for a speedy and informed response from members. Equally, the abundance of information, often unsolicited, available to MPs does not necessarily improve the quality of its retrieval, evaluation and use.

Despite the significance of the topic, there has been little research into MPs' information seeking behaviour. Barker and Rush<sup>1</sup> noted that 'politicians are advocates of public issues and use information of various kinds to support their opinions... This basic device of choosing information on an issue to suit an already firmly settled opinion appeared in our survey interviews in various forms'. Shepherd<sup>2</sup> provided the MP's perspective on information need, highlighting Members' 'incessant and relentless need for information' as one of the characteristics of the role. Factors identified by Shepherd as affecting information need include, the high level of demand from constituents, the growth in the lobbying phenomenon, the need for a speedy response and the continuing growth in need amongst MPs for digested and easily retrievable information. Shepherd's paper forms part of a useful collection of

essays, edited by Englefield, which also includes discussions of the role of Members' personal staff, by Griffin-Smith<sup>3</sup> and Colquhoun<sup>4</sup>, and special aspects of information need, such as Clements<sup>5</sup> description of the use of statistics by politicians. Franklin and Norton<sup>6</sup> analysed the special function of the parliamentary question as an information seeking tool and detailed the results of a survey into its use.

Levin and Stonefield<sup>7</sup> found that the House of Commons Library was considered to be a crucial source of information in support of decision making, by both MPs and their staff; while Tanfield<sup>8</sup> examined the challenges facing the House of Commons Library Department in seeking to support the differing information needs of Members and the public. Lock<sup>9</sup> described the role of subject specialists as part of the Library's services. Two earlier MSc dissertations focused upon the House of Commons Library service to MPs<sup>10</sup> and the information needs of Members of the European Parliament.<sup>11</sup> Martell<sup>12</sup> described the services of the Parliamentary Labour Party Resource Centre.

The annual House of Commons Commission report includes an annex<sup>13</sup> appraising the performance of the Library. In 1998/99, for example, the report included an acknowledgement that growth in demand for Library services may 'have begun to slow down ... partly attributed to the Library's continuing efforts to provide information to Members, and their staff, in electronic form'. The report also referred to the results of a recent internal survey showing that the library continued to be highly regarded by users.

Englefield<sup>14</sup>, Menhennet and Wainwright<sup>15</sup>, Siswell<sup>16</sup> and Wainwright<sup>17</sup> discussed the design and effectiveness of POLIS, the Parliamentary Online Info System; while Hancock-Beaulieu<sup>18</sup> investigated the use of on-line searching at the House of Commons. Michalowski and Nawrocka<sup>19</sup> described the developments in and growing demands on parliamentary research services through a comparative study of eleven parliaments.

This paper describes a study which sought to determine the unique characteristics of, and special factors impacting upon, the information seeking behaviour of Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom.

The objectives were:

- to gather data about the sources of information available to MPs;
- to identify strengths and weaknesses in observed approaches to information seeking; and
- to consider which environmental and user characteristics impacted upon information seeking behaviour.

An observational technique was used in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the information seeking behaviour of Members of Parliament, as it was felt that other data collection tools, such as questionnaires, might gather very superficial responses and might be completed by staff members rather than MPs. While it is fully acknowledged that the small sample used in the present study (two MPs from the same party) is not generalisable to all MPs, it is felt that the findings may help to suggest hypotheses that could be tested more generally in the future. The observational approach was considered appropriate as 'observation is a good technique for looking at user behaviour because it is objective and only records what actually happened'.<sup>20</sup>

For this study two Members of Parliament (one for an English constituency, the other representing a Scottish seat) were selected, both Labour Party backbenchers, each having entered Parliament for the first time in 1997. The researcher observed the two cases over an extended period of four weeks, and a log was kept detailing each Member's information seeking behaviour. Direct information seeking by the cases was recorded, as were instances where the Members brought about information seeking through others. The log was analysed by classifying activities and events. Data gathered by the researcher allowed hypotheses to emerge with respect to the information handling competencies required of a Member of Parliament.

### **The Members observed for the present study**

*Member 1*, aged 44, was formerly a schoolteacher and is active in the Fabian Society and in the Co-operative Party. The Member's political interests include the environment and s/he currently sits on the Environmental Audit Committee. S/he has been instrumental in raising the profile of many issues, including the Home Zones Campaign which relates to the slowing down of motor cars in designated streets and in the use of alternative fuels such as Liquid Petroleum Gas. An active 'Westminster' politician, the Member headed part of the campaign to elect Tony Blair as Labour Party leader. S/he claims to have received more media coverage than any other new MP.

*Member 2*, aged 48, was previously an advocate prior to the election and has a long record of Labour Party involvement, including the post of Permanent Private Secretary to Donald Dewar. The Member sat on the Select Committee on Northern Irish Affairs and was an official observer at the South African elections. S/he currently sits on the Select Committee on Public Administration drafting the Freedom of Information Bill.

At Westminster, MPs are restricted to a maximum of three staff. The experience and qualifications of a Member's staff have a bearing on the quality of information seeking undertaken. Many are young and inexperienced. Most interns are graduates and may have research experience.

The workload of MPs is perceived to have increased. Today MPs tend to receive larger quantities than previously of post directly from constituents covering a wide range of subjects and issues, although many of the topics raised do not lie within the purview of the Members. A large volume of mail is also received from increasingly professional pressure groups.

The offices observed for this study had differing staff profiles. Three members of staff were employed at the Case 1 Westminster office on a part-time basis. The most senior post was that of Political Advisor, a doctorate holder with many years of Westminster experience for several MPs, whose duties included preparation of briefs, speechwriting, compiling parliamentary questions and research. A secretary was responsible largely for clerical and administrative duties, including organising the MP's diary, arranging meetings and manning the telephones. Collectively these two members of staff had almost fifty years of Westminster experience. A research volunteer was also employed to prepare briefs, research and prepare parliamentary questions and liaise with media and other groups. Member 1's

constituency office was staffed on a part-time basis, providing constituency secretarial and administrative support, organising the Member's constituency diary and the weekly surgery.

Two members of staff were employed at the Case 2 Westminster office, one full-time, one on a part-time basis. The full-time assistant had previously worked at the House of Commons Library and was responsible for office administration, preparation of press releases and research. A part-time research assistant (shared with a Minister) provided research, prepared press releases and briefed the MP on a wide range of topics. Member 2's constituency office was staffed by three employees: a full-time secretary, who had worked for the former constituency MP, a part-time administrator and a young, part-time clerical assistant.

In the Case 1 office, staff meetings were not held and staff were not systematically apprised of information need. This style had drawbacks in that the strict demarcation of roles within the office may have hindered the flow of information. The office often felt hectic and pressurised and the lack of full-time staff was not conducive to the full exploration of information possibilities.

The Case 2 office was characterised by its openness and by the manner in which the work in hand was discussed. Regular staff meetings were held which allowed for free discussion and delegation of the workload. Staff could develop a clear understanding of the information required and of the parameters of the search to be conducted.

### **Case MPs' use of information services**

The House of Commons Library: 'provides impartial and confidential information and research services for Members of Parliament in connection with their parliamentary duties, and for staff working on behalf of Members'.<sup>21</sup>

The Research Service at the Derby Gate Library is staffed by subject specialists who prepare research papers on topical issues which may be requested by Ministers or their staff. Members who wish to find information on a particular subject often start their search by determining whether such a paper has been produced. During observation, the Library's Social and General Statistics Section was asked by Case 2 to provide information on the Scottish and Welsh elections to their devolved Houses. Members frequently seek information relating to their constituencies. The library produces these to order, giving summaries of employment, unemployment, earnings and other information. Constituency profile requests are handled by the Statistics Resources Unit within a few days.

The Members' Library in the Palace of Westminster stocks United Kingdom official publications, a wide range of reference materials, numerous newspapers, and political, economic and legal journals. MPs can call in person or make contact with the Library's enquiry service by letter, e-mail or telephone. The staff employed at the Members' Library also act as intermediaries between MPs and the Research Service staff. The more complex the enquiry the longer the time taken to deliver the information. For this reason Members are encouraged to be specific as to their requirements. Michalowski and Nawrocka note that 'requests for private briefings by researchers for individual members makes up a growing share of their [the Library's] services'.<sup>22</sup>

Two typical instances of library use were observed:

- A phone call was received which the Member took personally. The information requested was a contact address and phone number for a specific Member of the European Parliament (MEP). The MP used the Members' help line service and the information was received after a few minutes.
- The constituency office called requesting information on behalf of a constituent who sought information and contact details on the Social Security Ombudsman. A member of staff contacted the Members' help line and explained the query. The information requested was ready to be collected later that day. Along with information about the specific ombudsman, library staff had included additional general information about the role and power of ombudsman services.

Member 1 used the library five times in total during the month of observation, with staff members using Library services by telephone or in person several times a week. Member 2 used the library three times and was observed to call the Members' help line on five occasions. One of Member 2's staff had previously been employed at the Library and it was felt that this contributed to the frequency of use of the library as she was familiar with the facilities and resources available.

A frequently overlooked aspect of the Library is that it provides a place where Members can work undisturbed. It is also situated close to the Members' lobby, convenient for MPs entering or leaving the Chamber. The Library's quiet room is also used by Members to write speeches. Case 1 was observed using the Library on two occasions for speechwriting, while Case 2 was logged using it once to construct a reply to a local newspaper.

Both MPs and their staff demonstrated positive attitudes to and high levels of awareness of the library. Library services were exploited on all appropriate occasions. Neither Member used the private briefing service during observation: however, one had done so shortly before observation began.

The Parliamentary Data and Video Network (PDVN) gives access to the Internet and the parliamentary intranet, to Members and their staff in Westminster and constituency offices. The POLIS database, available via the PDVN covers a wide range of relevant material, including: parliamentary proceedings; debates; questions; legislation; reports of Members' contributions; recently deposited papers and reports; the progress of current bills; European legislative proposals; and European Union publications. The system is also linked into the Early Day Motion database and the House of Commons Library's online catalogue.

Case 1 did not personally use POLIS or the PDVN during the period of observation, although s/he was aware of their potential value. While his/her staff accessed the Early Day Motion database twice, this member did not encourage staff to use electronic resources for information gathering and, despite expressing a desire to have a web page, did not see the development as a high priority. Case 2 displayed greater enthusiasm for electronic information resources and actively encouraged electronic retrieval by staff, with the MP regularly using e-mail, the parliamentary intranet (on two observed occasions) and electronic

news services via the Internet. Material was also sourced electronically on several occasions by Case 2 staff.

Each office at Westminster has a television set giving access to the parliamentary annunciator system, which provides textual information and live broadcast of debates. Televisions are also provided in corridors, committee rooms and other places. Time can be saved by Members remotely viewing debates, although this may lead to a fall in the standard of debates and a lesser likelihood of Members making a spontaneous contribution.<sup>23</sup>

All political parties devote much time and effort to the collection and dissemination of information, in order to keep Members up to date with party initiatives and policy developments. The Parliamentary Labour Party Resource Centre is an additional party supported facility, established in 1991 and located in Westminster Hall. It provides an information and current awareness service to Labour Party Members and their staff, via weekly and daily briefing sheets, faxed to Members' offices at Westminster and in constituencies. Other useful services provided by the Centre include factsheets in support of campaigning, assistance in the preparation of press releases and newsletters for use in local constituency work.

Despite its accessibility, neither of the MPs observed used the Centre personally during the observation period. It was, however, used five times by Case 1 staff: twice for information to be used in press releases, on foxhunting and transport respectively; for information for a speech in the Chamber on transport; to collect a budget briefing pack; to gather information on the 'right to roam' legislation; and to collect a media information pack giving information on press release structure and content. Case 2 staff did not use the Centre during the observation period but had used it in the past and expected to do so in the future.

A weekly running order of House business is produced by the party Whip's office. This informs Members of the name, nature and times of debates and of their whip status, enabling MPs' diaries to be organised around the times when they must be in attendance in the House.

The Labour Party Policy Unit also disseminates policy information to Labour Party MPs, including information relating to their constituencies. The policy unit hosts the Excalibur database which provides analyses of constituency information. The researcher observed one example of the unit's services being used during the study when Member 1 requested information for a debate on public and private transport use in the case constituency.

At Westminster, MPs can meet with Ministers, officially or unofficially, and much information can be passed during such sessions. A Member's ability to obtain a ministerial hearing depends on timing, on the matter(s) to be discussed and on the particular MP's status within the party. During the observation period, Case 1 met with a Minister on three occasions, twice at Westminster and once during a constituency visit, discussing respectively, transport, health and the opening of a new facility at a local college. Case 2 had one meeting with a Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, regarding social security payments for ancillary staff in schools.

Increasingly 'special advisors' are used by government. Through such advisors, MPs have access to high quality information. Neither case approached special advisors during observation.

Away from Westminster, Members have their constituency parties who also seek to influence the Member's actions. An MP with few local connections may be disadvantaged through having little contact with their local party or the networks which extend from it. Members who have represented their constituencies for a lengthy period have had the opportunity to build relationships which add layers of information possibilities through personal contact and knowledge. Equally, 'constituency' MPs often have a far greater involvement with their local parties than 'Westminster' MPs, as a result of which local information may be more readily available to them. Constituency visits also provide opportunities to open or strengthen local information channels.

Involvement in parliamentary groups provides Members with opportunities to impact upon government policy, to raise the profile of issues and to work together with others who have similar interests and concerns. Such groups have a huge range of specialist or technical information available to them through their contact with special interest groups and professional associations. Parliamentary groups frequently arrange seminars and conferences to review issues and encourage debate.

One of the observed MPs facilitated information flow for a parliamentary group, the All Party Parliamentary Inland Waterways Group. Literature received from the Inland Waterways Authority was distributed by the MP to others in the group. The new information encouraged the group to step up its promotional activities.

Lobbying, or interest articulation, has become much more significant and professional in recent decades. Lobbying may take a number of forms, including petitions, organised writing campaigns to MPs and direct contact between interest groups and MPs. Lobbying can be undertaken by commercial or non-commercial groups, by individuals or professional lobbying firms. Many of these groups maintain offices at or near Westminster, from which they liaise with MPs, build contacts and disseminate information.

Both cases maintained links with lobby groups. The bottling plant of the largest whisky distiller in Scotland is located in Member 2's constituency and this Member has spoken in debate in the House on behalf of the whisky industry. The researcher observed one meeting with representatives of the whisky industry at Westminster. A regular supply of information comes to the Member from the Scottish Whisky Association.

Member 1 has an interest in environmental policy and is actively involved with environmental groups promoting 'clean' fuels, with companies producing such fuels and with the lobbying organisations employed on their behalf. With such an issue, scientific and technical information is required and this is frequently disseminated by interest groups or the lobbyists representing their interests. Information produced in this way is not designed to be objective and the case MP did not rely solely on sources provided in support of one side of the argument, but sought to gain a balanced perspective. Lobby groups can often provide unique and valuable information, but are likely to be subjective and partisan sources.



Relations with national and local media may be regarded as a two-way conduit, with information flowing in both directions. Both case MPs have columns in their local newspapers and both appear regularly on local radio programmes. The researcher logged an average of two to three appearances per week on local radio by the case MPs, and observed the negotiations between the MPs and radio reporters about topical, newsworthy items. Local media can monitor and distil a large body of public opinion with a far wider reach than any political party. Case 1 sought the opinion of a media contact on the level of enthusiasm in the local community for a local college seeking university status.

The parliamentary press lobby at Westminster contains representatives of national, regional and local media and is an integral part of the life of the House, used by (and using) Members as information sources. Given that the more senior of the Westminster press corps have a highly developed intelligence network and a wealth of experience of the House, their usefulness to MPs is recognised. The knowledge network displays strong links, the press and MPs mixing in a very small circuit. The observed Members both have media links, developed throughout their political careers. One of the cases has particularly significant media connections including personal friendship with the political editor of a national daily. MPs and the media tend to meet and share information informally in the refreshment rooms at Westminster.

Both MPs conducted regular media watch sessions, where they and their staff scan the local and national press for pertinent items. Newspaper stories which could form the basis of a future campaign were particularly sought by one of the MPs, as were items relating to the Freedom of Information Act. The monitoring could be a brief process lasting at its shortest a few minutes or on occasion several hours if pertinent stories were found which required further research.

### **Information gathering techniques by Members of Parliament with respect to specific caseload material.**

Several logged examples illustrate the extended process of information seeking from problem identification through to resolution and a sample of these are detailed below.

#### **Case History 1: The Child Support Agency**

The first case concerned a constituent with a long running complaint against the Child Support Agency (CSA). Following the receipt of a letter from the constituent, the MP contacted the constituency office so that details could be checked. The MP then outlined the case to the staff at Westminster, one of whom was asked to read through CSA literature with the MP. The member of staff continued alone, as the MP returned to the telephone to speak to the constituent to clarify points. The MP then phoned the CSA Parliamentary Officer who was given the details of the case, with more complete details being faxed simultaneously. The resultant information led the MP to consult the CSA literature once more with a member of staff who had now produced notes on the literature. The next day the MP had an unobserved meeting with the appropriate Minister of State at which the case was raised. It was felt that the information need had been met satisfactorily at this point.

## **Case History 2: School ancillary workers**

The MP had been contacted by two constituents about social security payments to school ancillary workers out of term time. Details of contracts, wages and correspondence had been collected into a file by constituency office staff. The MP contacted the local trade union representative by telephone, and then called the Parliamentary Officer of the Department of Social Security. The Parliamentary Officer of the relevant trade union was then contacted by the Member: this officer was able to furnish the MP with advice on specific similar difficulties and faxed relevant information to the Member's office. After considering the information gained from these sources, the member made an appointment to meet with the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Social Security. The unobserved meeting was held three days later. The topic remained an ongoing area of information need, aspects of which required further clarification.

## **Case History 3 : Control and restraint techniques**

Following a violent incident when a technique for controlling and restraining had been used, an Afro-Caribbean constituent had died whilst in the care of a nursing home which was situated in another constituency. The MP was asked to investigate the case by a family member. A series of telephone calls between the Member and the relative took place, followed by a meeting in the constituency office. The Member was then contacted by the local media who were interested in the story. The MP contacted the Member of Parliament in whose constituency the clinic was situated in order to gain local knowledge and develop a joint strategy. An Early Day Motion (EDM) was tabled by the case MP and a circular letter was sent and telephone calls made in order to encourage support for the EDM. As a result of the considerable publicity generated, the Parliamentary Office of the mental health group MIND contacted the case Member offering to contribute information about the conditions of patients in mental health institutions. A second organisation, INQUEST, a charitable organisation that seeks to ensure that inquests are held where disputes over cause of death have arisen, also contacted the case MP.

Together the MPs, MIND, INQUEST, the family of the deceased and the media all contributed information. Both of the MPs asked questions in the Chamber and the case Member asked a question at Prime Minister's question time which again raised the profile of the issue. The case MP had been informed by the Speaker's office that the name of the deceased constituent could not be used in questioning as the matter was sub judice: however, interestingly, an unsolicited call was received from yet another Member at this point informing the case MP that the constituent could be named.

A number of types of information were utilised, including: statistical data on deaths in mental health institutions; guidelines and regulations regarding the notification of relatives and the support and guidance offered to relatives after a death in a mental health institution; an oral reply by a Minister on the support and guidance offered to relatives; documentary material on the systems required to be in place in mental health institutions to deal with medical emergencies resulting from the use of control and restraint techniques and drugs; a written reply from a Minister regarding staffing levels and policies for responding to emergencies; a written response from a Minister on the collection of statistical data; and literature provided by the specialist mental health and inquest organisations.

#### **Case History 4: The Westminster Parliament and the ‘West Lothian Question’**

In response to a speech by William Hague raising the issue of Scottish Members having voting rights on English matters at Westminster, while English MPs do not have the same rights on matters devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, one of the case MPs sought to develop a political line on the issue. The Member began by calling together staff for a free discussion around the subject. A press release was drawn and circulated to local media, and a series of informal meetings was organised between the Member and other Scottish MPs and Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs).

A staff member was delegated to visit the House of Commons Library to research the question. The Parliamentary Data and Video Network (PDVN) was used to access POLIS for references to the ‘West Lothian Question’. Newspaper articles dealing with the topic were also located via the PDVN. Journal articles were located in the library and included in the materials assembled, as were the Hansard debates, second reading, on Scottish devolution (1978 and 1997). The MP took the assembled research findings to work on during the recess in order to plan a strategy for the next session of Parliament.

#### **Case History 5: The Freedom of Information Act**

One of the observed MPs sat on the Select Committee on Public Administration deliberating the pre-legislative stage of the Freedom of Information Act. The quantity of information available to members of Select Committees is vast, as the consultation exercise tends to be wide ranging. This particular piece of legislation has also attracted much press coverage. The MP delegated a researcher to become familiar with the draft legislation, the consultation exercise, documentary material circulated to committee members and media coverage of the issue, in order to prepare a brief and suggest questions for the MP to ask of expert witnesses.

The researcher observed one meeting of the Select Committee, at which a Minister was questioned about the Government’s proposals. Following the meeting, the Member discussed the conduct of the meeting, expressing the view that the Minister’s response had been ‘political’ and that the information content of this particular committee session had, therefore, to be decoded ‘politically’ with the intentions of the various actors being understood in this light.

The MP met with another committee member informally, when the issue of the Freedom of Information Act was discussed. Other informal meetings took place between the case Member and an MP not involved with the Select Committee but of high standing in the legal profession, where the FOI Act was raised.

#### **Conclusions**

The research facilities at the House are excellent and a wide range of information sources were used to satisfy information need in the above cases. Formal and informal contacts were the most significant sources in Case Histories 1 and 2. Specialist organisations were very important sources in Case History 3 as, with their expert knowledge of the subject, they were

able to provide a wealth of pertinent and usable information. Publicity generated interest amongst a wider group, which also resulted in additional information being unearthed. In Case History 4 the library was particularly helpful as its stock of readily accessible information enabled research materials to be assembled swiftly. Case History 5 demonstrated the procedures of a Select Committee and the means employed to gather information in support of committee work.

In all cases, formal and informal sources provided pertinent information and hard copy sources were supplemented by information accessed from on-line services. However, there are variations in the extent to which Members will exploit electronic sources. Equally, there are likely to be differences in the extent to which Members can draw upon informal networks, both at Westminster and in the constituency. The cases of information need described above tend to demonstrate the significance of informal networks at Westminster and its 'village' atmosphere. They also show that information seeking by Members is frequently not a self-activated nor sole activity: Members are often passive recipients of information which they have not solicited and which may come to them by chance or as a result of the activities of others, who may have quite different reasons for becoming involved.

MPs used a wide range of information sources, in each instance on a relatively infrequent basis. These cases demonstrate the importance of flexibility in approach to information seeking, as well as the need for MPs and/or their staff to filter effectively the information available, in order to reach both a usable mass and to focus upon reliable and valid sources. MPs frequently require guidance from expert sources in dealing with what may be unfamiliar and highly demanding topics. Literature alone was often insufficient to explicate highly complex and often contentious issues. MPs tend to access information typically through one or more levels of intermediary, through for example research assistants and library staff. This may lead to problems in that the greater the number of mediations, the more likely it is that there will be some divergence from original information need. Thus, while MPs are subject to the same difficulties as other decision makers in using information, there are certain unique characteristics which apply to MPs and not to other professions in information rich environments.

Several conclusions have been reached as to the qualities of MPs seeking and using information, largely in agreement with those of Shepherd<sup>24</sup>. Firstly it must be noted that not all MPs come from an equal professional level. Personal skills and professional abilities appear to have an impact upon the way that a member conducts his or her business. It would be fair to surmise that previous experience of information rich environments does have a bearing on a Member's ability to not only cope, but to thrive in an environment where a wide range of issues must be understood quickly and in a degree of depth. Issues arise very quickly in the world of politics and Members must be able to cope with the demands made upon them by the information possibilities and be able to retain useful information - a skill in itself.

Members of Parliament often portray themselves as being independent and autonomous actors in the political world. This assumption is a factor that must impact upon their information sourcing and handling behaviour. However, MPs who belong to an established party are not independent: the working lives of MPs represent, therefore, a collaborative endeavour. Ideology or the need to keep in step with party lines can often limit information seeking behaviour to seeking a reinforcement of that which they already believe or which the party

line expects them to follow. This has been noted by Barker and Rush<sup>25</sup> in their study where they noted the ‘device of choosing information to suit an already firmly settled opinion’. This can be viewed as a strength in what is often a hectic and rushed environment where information must be quickly collected and acted upon. It may also be deemed a weakness in that such a closed mindset limits the range of information which a member will seek or consider in reaching a decision. Such tendencies would appear to be context dependent from the results of the present study.

The researcher did not observe any form of information audit being conducted by the central party apparatus. An audit could identify the strengths and weaknesses of information sourcing and use and help to promote best practice. Such a model would be of benefit to the party, the representative and the represented. A difficulty here is that such an initiative by the central party apparatus could be seen as jeopardising the independence and autonomy of MPs by placing members under greater scrutiny. The differences between back and frontbenchers in terms of resources is great as frontbenchers can also draw upon Ministerial departments to satisfy their information requirements. The quality of a Member’s staff is also highly significant. Arrangements for staffing differ enormously, with no systematic career structure and a loss of continuity is seen as staff tend not to stay with the same member for long. The desire to have a career structure and some form of grading system was expressed through several interviews conducted as part of this study. The difficulties of putting in place such a structure within the architecture of the central party apparatus are apparent from the failure to agree such arrangements for the Scottish Parliament where such an initiative was rejected as impinging upon an MP’s autonomy.

The triggers for information seeking amongst MPs are, in many instances, unpredictable, emanating frequently from constituents’ demands and from issues receiving attention in the media. The MP is almost unique professionally in having little control over the subject areas in which s/he may have to become involved and quickly expert, in response to party, constituency, public and media demands. Information need is, therefore, very often reactive and, as a result, information seeking may be rushed, unsystematic and uncritical.

There is no other professional equivalent where a body of individuals, from diverse backgrounds and with widely varying qualifications, is expected to carry out demanding new duties with no professional or educational preparation specifically for the tasks involved.

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