

Unite Parliamentary Staff Branch
Submission to the Procedure Committee Inquiry
“Sittings of the House and the Parliamentary Calendar”
11 April 2011

We are the Unite Parliamentary staff trade union branch representing staff of MPs, both in Parliament and in constituency offices. We have over 500 members from all political parties, and work on a cross-party basis to represent the view and concerns of our members and the wider staff who work for MPs. We would like to thank the Procedure Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry into the Sittings of the House and the Parliamentary Calendar. We have restricted our submission to the questions that either impact MPs’ staff or to issues branch members have asked us to raise with the Committee.

How the role of an MP has changed in recent years

MPs’ staff are well-placed to comment on how the role of an MP has changed in recent years. One of the most common complaints the union branch executive receives from its members and other MPs staff is that the staffing budget level determined by IPSA is inadequate for dealing with the increase in correspondence in recent years. The increased use of email campaigns by charities and pressure groups means that at a click of a button constituents can send a model email to their MP. Many constituents are signed up to multiple campaign email lists and can generate large amounts of work for MPs’ and their staff. Many Members’ offices are currently under-staffed and are struggling with the amount of policy casework generated by the internet and campaign cards. Many constituents have an expectation that their model email will generate a response from the MP in a matter of days and weeks at the most. Traditional notions of the ‘role of an MP’ and working patterns have had to change to respond to these new campaigning techniques.

The last time MPs’ offices and their workload was thoroughly audited was in the ‘Review of Parliamentary Pay, Pensions and Allowances 2007’ conducted by the Review Body on Senior Salaries. This report made numerous comparisons with the previous report by the Review Body on Senior Salaries in 2004 and demonstrated that the assumptions made about the way to calculate staffing needs in 2004 no longer applied. It was this that led the 2007 report to recommend that the staffing budget should be increased to provide support from 3.5 members of staff from the previous 3 staff members.

The report found that the number of MPs employing 3 or more staff had increased from 14% in 2004 to 87% in 2007- over a six fold increase. This was due to increasing volumes of work handled by MPs and their staff, including the growing popularity of emails. By undertaking this research the 2007 review was able to determine that MPs staffing needs had changed in the intervening three years since their previous review. The review also suggested that, “there is every reason to suppose this trend [of increasing workloads] will increase”. The report also based its conclusions on the assumption that they

would be valid for four years, at which time a new report should be commissioned, saying, in recommendation 4:

“...future reviews of parliamentary pay, pensions and expenditure should henceforth normally take place at four-yearly intervals...”[1]

It is therefore reasonable to assume that MPs’ workload has increased even more significantly since this review was undertaken and the Branch would like to see another similar review take place as soon as possible and staffing budgets raised accordingly.

The additional demands of IPSA are also forcing staff to spend longer each week processing expenses. According to our recent staff survey, virtually 70% of staff who processed claims under the old system spent less than an hour a week doing this, with much smaller proportions spending longer. Under the new system, only 8% spend so little time; 58% spend 3 hours or more a week, and 26% spend more than 5 hours each week processing claims.

The recession, and the ongoing effect of budget cuts at the central Government and local Government level, has also generated large amounts of work for caseworkers. It is likely that the workloads of Members and their staff will come under increasing strain due to budget cuts in the legal aid and debt advice sector in particular. With funding to these areas being reduced, constituents may go to the MP as the only resort for assistance, rather than the last resort as has traditionally been the case.

What the role of an MP should be and how this is reflected in time spent at Westminster and in the constituency

There are different opinions as to what the role of an MP should be, and particularly the proportion of time that should be given to Parliamentary work compared to constituency casework and vice versa. We think is a question for individual Members themselves. Their decision about what sort of MP they will be will be based on many factors including career plans, majorities, the make-up of the constituency they represent and local issues.

We think it is important that Parliament makes it possible for Members to choose their own path. We were disappointed, for instance, with the Speaker’s response to the recent IPSA annual review in which it was suggested that some staff should be relocated out of Westminster to save money. For many staff and researchers in particular, working on the Parliamentary Estate and having access to facilities like the Library, or being able to attend all-Party staff meetings are a key part of the job they do for their MP. MPs should be able to arrange and staff their offices based primarily on their idea of what their role should be and not theoretical savings to the House budget.

^[1] Review Body on Senior Salaries: *Review of parliamentary pay, pensions and allowances 2007, report No. 64, Vol 1. P viii.*

What are the defects and strengths of the current patterns?

The strength of the current patterns is that MPs from constituencies far from London have enough time to travel to Westminster on the Monday, thereby preserving Sunday as a personal day. There are some branch members who make this trip frequently themselves and this means they do not have to give up their personal time to travel to London. We think the 2pm starts on Mondays should remain.

Another strength of the current Parliamentary sessions is that the summer recess gives MPs and their staff time to focus on work in their constituencies and to plan for the year ahead. The media portray this period as a long holiday, but we think it is a necessary break from intensive Parliamentary work. Other Parliaments, such as the Australian Parliament, have even more regular breaks between Parliamentary sittings:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/sittings/2011/11sitpa.pdf>

Whilst we are not advocating a switch to the Australian model, we include this example because it shows that other Parliaments recognise that being an MP is not just about what happens in the Chamber and allow sufficient time for MPs and staff to focus on other areas. Just because MPs are not in Parliament making speeches does not mean they or their staff are on holiday. Parliamentary sittings should not be expanded if the only rationale is to show the media and the public that MPs are 'working'. It is important that constituency work is valued too and perhaps the Procedure Committee could look at how constituency-based work can be better explained and demonstrated to the public.

One of the defects of the current patterns is late night sittings, which although rare, can have a detrimental impact on Members' staff. This was commented on mainly by Parliamentary Researchers, who sometimes have to work beyond their contract hours when their MP is planning to speak in a later debate and additional research or last-minute changes to a speech are required. This can place a great deal of pressure on Member's staff with caring responsibilities who need to leave work at set times. It can also be expensive because Members may have to pay their own staff overtime, as will the House authorities for House staff. We recommend action be taken to prevent late-night sittings and to make sitting times more family-friendly for all who work in Parliament.

What pattern of timings for sittings on days would be most effective?

Some of our members have commented that the current timings for some sittings mean that MPs are not travelling to and from work like their constituents. They suggested it would be beneficial if more Members had to travel at peak times and experience the same problems that the general public does. It would also mean Members would experience the same issues with childcare that affect their staff and the rest of the working population. We recommend sittings on Tuesday-Thursday are changed to reflect the more common working hours of the rest of the population. In particular, we see little rationale for the 2:30pm start on Tuesdays when MPs are already in Westminster and don't need the travelling time like they do on Mondays.

What other factors should be considered in proposing changes to sitting hours?

Any change in the sitting hours will have an impact on MPs' staff who work in Parliament. We recommend that any proposals emerging from the Procedure Committee's inquiry are discussed with MPs' staff groups. The two cross-party groups, the UNITE Parliamentary staff branch and the Members and Peers Staff Association (MAPSA), have a joint memorandum of understanding with the House authorities and should be consulted ahead of any changes. These two groups can help disseminate information about any changes to sitting hours to MPs' staff and collect and feedback any information on their effect.