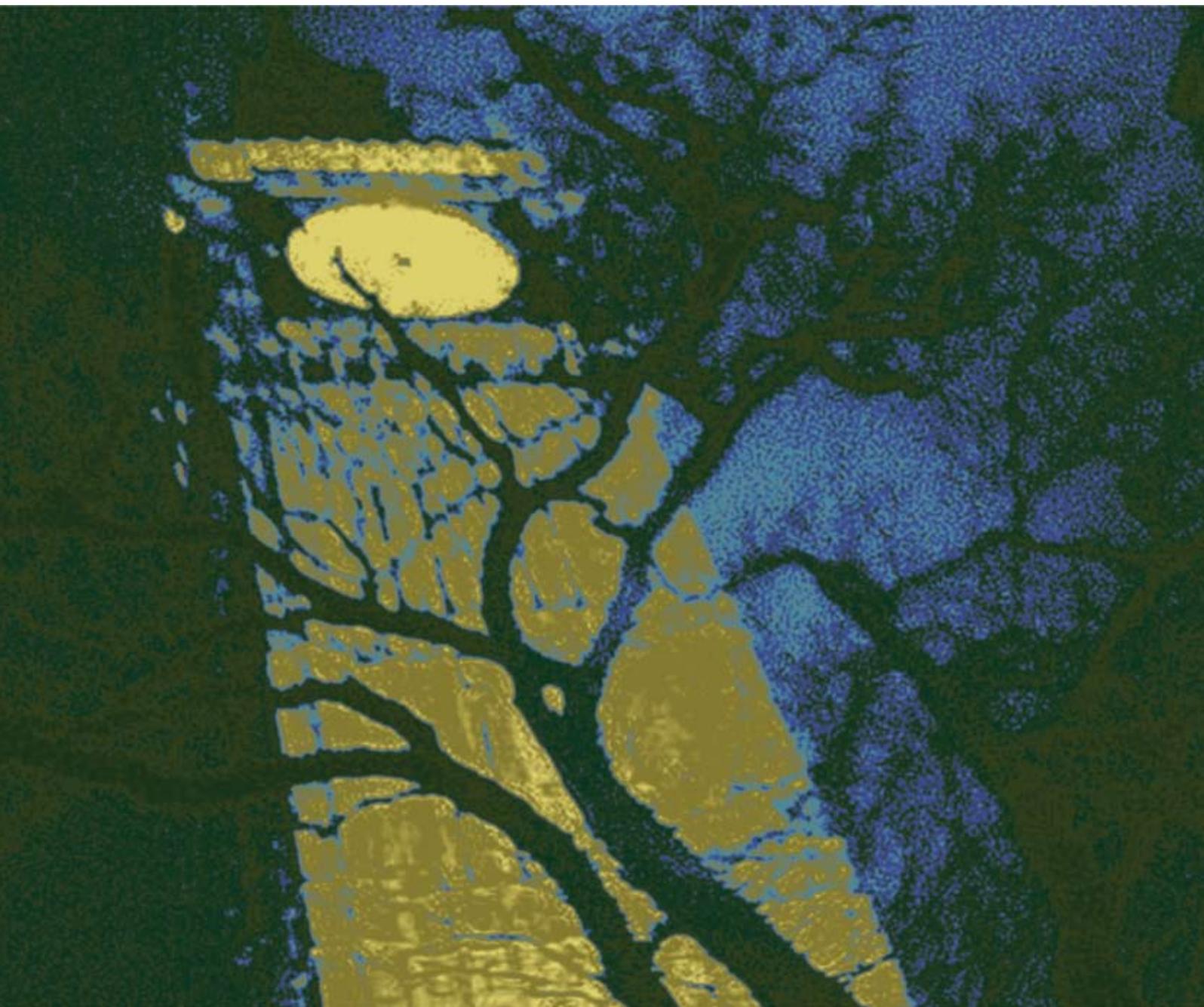


# **LIFE AFTER LOSING OR LEAVING**

**THE EXPERIENCE OF FORMER MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT**



**A REPORT FOR THE ASSOCIATION OF FORMER MEMBERS  
OF PARLIAMENT BY THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

**PRODUCED BY PROFESSOR KEVIN THEAKSTON,  
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## ■ One day every MP will be an ex-MP

Every Member of Parliament has to face the fact that he or she will, one day, be an ex-Member of Parliament. 'If the voters do not see us off', as one MP once put it, 'old age or the boundary changes will.'<sup>1</sup>

Losing a seat at a general election has been likened to being sacked in public, on television, in front of the cheering supporters of the person who has replaced you, and this can be an upsetting, traumatic and humiliating experience, all the more so if unexpected. 'The initial shock is extremely difficult. I didn't see it coming', is how Conservative Harry Greenway described his 1997 defeat; it was, he said, a 'tremendous sock to the teeth'.<sup>2</sup> Defeated MPs can take it very personally. Helen Clark, who lost her seat in 2005, told the press that she felt like one of the 'undead' – 'losing a seat is easy', she said, 'living after losing a seat is not'.<sup>3</sup> It felt like being 'cut off at the knees', was how Peter Bradley described his 2005 election defeat.<sup>4</sup>

### *'Losing a seat is easy. Living after losing a seat is not'*

Equally, those MPs who choose to leave the Commons may also face problems in the transition to a new status and style of life or form of employment. There has been anecdotal evidence of 'ex-Members who have suffered nervous breakdown, divorce, heart disease, alcoholism, depression, serious debt and even . . . suicide'.<sup>5</sup> But there has been little systematic research into what happens to former MPs and the experience of leaving parliament.

## ■ Our survey

To address these issues, we sent a (ten-page, 43 question) questionnaire in October 2006 to 343 members of the Association of Former Members of Parliament (AFMP). Of these, 184 replied, a 54 per cent response rate. Of our respondents, 72 had left the Commons by being defeated in an election (39.1 per cent), while 112 (60.0 per cent) had retired. (Two MPs had resigned during the Parliament and have been added to the next General Election.)

The 'retired' group includes all those MPs who left the Commons without standing in the succeeding general election. Eight (7 per cent) of these saw their seats disappear as a result of a Boundary Commission Review and did not find or did not seek another seat. Two 'retiring' MPs were deselected. A number of retiring MPs had been defeated earlier in their career and returned in the same or a different seat after a short break.

The party breakdown of respondents was: Labour 68 (37.0 per cent), Conservatives 104 (56.5 per cent) and 'other' 12 (6.5 per cent). The 'other' group consisted of five Liberal/Liberal Democrat, one SNP, one PC, three UU and three SDP (all ex-Labour) MPs (see Table 1).

The ex-MPs who answered the questionnaire had between them a total of some 3000 years of parliamentary experience. Retiring MPs had served on average 20.9 years, with 43 years the highest, and defeated MPs 12.1 years, a figure increased by the number of Conservative MPs who had been at Westminster for some time and lost in 1997 what had been considered safe seats. The pattern of length of service for the two types of MP is shown in Table 2 on page 4.

Periods of more than six months have been rounded up to a whole year. Incredibly, three MPs actually served more than 40 years.

**Table 1:**  
Survey respondents leaving the House of Commons by type

General election	Labour retired MPs	Labour defeated MPs	Conservative retired MPs	Conservative defeated MPs	Other retired MPs	Other defeated MPs	Total
2005	15	6	4	0	0	2	27
2001	14	0	7	2	2	0	25
1997	9	0	24	31	1	0	65
1992	3	0	14	9	1	0	27
1987	3	2	5	5	0	0	15
1983	4	4	1	0	0	3	12
1970-79	1	7	2	0	2	1	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>184</b>

## ■ Time to go

There has been an overwhelming expectation amongst MPs in the last twenty years that they should retire at about the current national retirement age (for men) of 65.

Forty respondents specifically mentioned age and a number explained that they had looked at how old they would be at the time of the next general election or at the end of the next Parliament. ‘By the time of the next general election I would be 67 and retirement seemed sensible.’

### *‘I applied for the new constituency but at 74 knew I had no chance’*

A few former MPs did not mention their age, but had been long-serving, or mentioned that they felt that the time to leave had come.

One said ‘enough is enough’, another that ‘67 is a natural retirement point after 18 years as a Minister’ and a Labour MP elected in the early 1960s remembered very elderly MPs at the time ‘shuffling around the corridors and Chuter Ede in his 80s still wearing a wing collar coat and so I decided to go in my early 70s.’

A Conservative ex-MP felt ‘the leadership was not going to listen to a 67-71 year old’ if he had continued into the next Parliament.

In some instances MPs had promised their family that they would retire at about 65 or had announced this to the local party, even as early as their initial selection (though one MP regretted saying this when he did reach 65).

One or two commented that it was better to go now rather than later, ‘it was best to go when the question was why now rather than why is he still here.’ Two former MPs affected by boundary changes felt that age prevented them from getting another seat or that the changes pushed them into retirement. A Labour ex-MP said, ‘My constituency disappeared. I applied for the new constituency but at 74 knew I had no chance.’

**Table 2:**  
Survey respondents length of parliamentary service

Years of Service	0-9 years	10-19 years	20-29 years	30 years or more
2005	18	38	40	20
2001	31	31	6	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>20</b>

## ■ Reasons for retiring

As we have seen, a number of former MPs felt that they had spent enough time at the Commons. In addition, some in their 60s explained that they had other interests which they would now have time to pursue and Tony Benn has famously remarked that he ‘wanted to spend more time on politics.’ Ten (8 per cent) former MPs mentioned illness as a contributory factor to their retirement and for about half of these it seems to have been the main reason for retiring, in two instances on medical advice.

In a few instances the illness of a family member was also significant. One commented, ‘At 68 I wished to devote my remaining years to my wife who had an illness.’ Nine ex-MPs had seen their seat disappear in the boundary redistribution. A Conservative commented, ‘My seat was divided and I felt that I would have to commit myself to two more General Elections to establish myself in one of new seats.’

### *‘Tony Benn has famously remarked that he wanted to spend more time on politics’*

A number of former MPs had specific reasons for leaving the Commons. Three went on to other posts (Secretary-General of NATO, President of the Football League, Chairman of Marconi) and one Welsh and two Scottish ex-MPs had been elected to the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament respectively and wanted to devote all their time to regional politics. The Welsh ex-MP felt ‘it was impossible to deliver the dual mandate effectively.’

A total of 46 of the ex-MPs answering the questionnaire are now members of the House of Lords and while some were honoured because they were retiring, with others the offer of a peerage may have been a contributory factor, and one MP left the Commons to be party leader in the Lords.

Another 14 (11 per cent) left the Commons in their 40s and 50s in order to pursue another career for the next part of their life and a number felt that they would be too old if they waited any longer. A number had found an MP’s salary and pension inadequate. One said, ‘I was offered another job and needed better pay’, another that ‘I wanted to make some money while still at the age to do so, (50)’.

Another wanted to ‘go while I was still ‘young’ enough to take on another responsibility’, another that ‘I wanted to do something new before I left the workforce’, and another that ‘I decided to move on from politics.’

Eight former MPs mentioned conflicts with the local or national party as reasons for retiring, such as the problems of seeking reselection and policy differences. Twelve former MPs mentioned frustration with the House of Commons as an institution or the workload involved. One felt ‘the

Commons was not the same' and another that 'my colleagues were nice to me but I sometimes thought I was on a different planet'.

One ex-MP who left after eight years explained that 'the job was exhausting, I worked 83 hours a week on average and gave 100 per cent for the constituents', another, leaving after four years, that 'I loathed the Parliamentary lifestyle taking me away from the family', and a third, leaving after 8 years, that 'constituency work was creating a "social worker" environment that could only get worse in the future'.

*'The job was exhausting, I worked 83 hours a week on average and gave 100 per cent for the constituents'*

Many former MPs had taken the decision to retire some time before the election. Fifteen (13 per cent) had decided at the time or immediately after the last election, sometimes because of their age. Another 15 (13 per cent) decided over three years before, 26 (23 per cent) over two years before, 24 (21 per cent) over one year before. However, nine (8 per cent) decided between six and 12 months before the election and seven (6 per cent) less than six months before the election.

Eight MPs retired as a result of boundary changes which they would have known about some two years before the election and in some instances either age or failure to be selected for another seat led them to retire.

## ■ Defeat is often unexpected

A third of the MPs who left Parliament as a result of losing an election had not expected defeat (23, or 32 per cent).

Even those in marginal constituencies had sometimes thought that the national swing was going the other way or would not affect them, but the number is made larger by Conservative MPs in 1997 who felt that they were in fairly safe seats. As one commented, 'a 10,000 majority was predicted in my revised constituency and I expected only that it would be greatly reduced.'

Another third of the group of defeated MPs had expected defeat generally because they had a very small majority or because of special circumstances, such as a decision to leave the Labour Party and join the SDP.

One Conservative in 1997 had expected defeat when no one else in the party locally did because of long experience in interpreting the canvass figures. The remaining third who answered the question had middle range positions from 'likely' to '50/50' to 'possible'.

Some knew it would be difficult to hold their seats, for example, 'It was a marginal seat so defeat was never very far from the horizon', and 'It was a risk – I was the first Liberal Democrat MP for the constituency so I expected a tough campaign'. Others, facing an adverse swing still hoped that they might win. 'I thought I might buck the trend because I lived in the constituency' and 'Up to a point. I had hoped that local campaigning might save me'.

## ■ Reasons for defeat

The national swing was cited by 35 (49 per cent) ex-MPs as the main reason for their defeat, and Conservative MPs losing in 1997 in particular spoke of the 'Labour deluge' and the 'national swing which took me out'.

The unpopularity of the Labour Party in 1983 and 1987 and the unpopularity of the Conservative Government in 1997 were also mentioned as the cause of these electoral changes. One Labour MP, losing in 1979, did not see the swing as inevitable but blamed 'Callaghan's folly in delaying the election when it should have been held in 1978'.

One Conservative MP, losing in 1997, saw an underlying factor in the long term effect of 'the collapse of Communism in 1989 resulting in the disappearance of socialism'.

Eight former MPs, largely Labour, mentioned specific national policies:

- Iraq, as one ex-MP said, 'even though I voted against the war'
- tuition fees in the 2005 election
- unemployment
- what one Labour ex-MP saw as 'the so-called Winter of Discontent' for the 1979 election.

## ■ Local and national factors

Only seven (10 per cent) ex-MPs mentioned local factors and in four of these cases they were the local impact of national policies.

- A Labour MP losing in 1979 saw the Conservative Government's policy of selling council houses as a key factor
- A Conservative MP losing in 1987 noted the effect of the Government's 'Poll Tax' in Scotland even though he felt it had been the right policy
- Another Conservative MP losing in that year referred to 'the Government's harsh treatment of the Nottinghamshire miners when they had kept working through the strike'.

Purely local policy factors were hardly ever seen as really significant. A Labour MP losing in 1987 saw a 'rate rise of 62 per cent by the local Labour council' as critical and the Conservative MP who lost the same seat in 1992 explained

that the absence of this factor returned the seat to Labour. A Labour MP losing in 2005 said that ‘a local swimming pool had not been completed and the MP is assumed to be responsible for everything’. Five ex-MPs mentioned the intervention of other parties such as UKIP and the DUP in Northern Ireland, and four believed population change to have had an effect.

A Labour ex-MP who lost in 2005 said, ‘There were very substantial new estates with new residents with very little commitment to the town or knowledge of the area politically’. A Conservative MP losing in 1987 spoke of the ‘heavy population movement of Conservatives out into Cheshire’.

Six (8 per cent) saw boundary changes as an important factor because it changed the party balance but also because new voters would not have any loyalty to the incumbent MP. Only one ex-MP saw local party organisation as significant because ‘I did not have a good enough team’.

Two, one Labour and one Liberal Democrat, losing in 2005 saw the Conservative targeting of marginals as a factor. The former Labour MP spoke of ‘major external funding into the Conservative campaign’ and the Liberal Democrat said ‘the Conservatives were able to spend more in this Liberal Democrat targeted seat’.

## ■ ‘Those who live by the vote die by the vote’

How were MPs personally affected by leaving the Commons?

This question was answered not only by those who left the Commons after being defeated, but also by a handful of other former MPs who had been deselected, lost their seat as a result of redistribution or had been defeated at an earlier stage in their career before returning later.

For most, these experiences aroused strong or even traumatic feelings. Respondents could choose more than one type of feeling from a list and could add their own.

In total:

- 23 (29 per cent) had felt shocked
- 17 (22 per cent) angry
- 18 (23 per cent) emotional
- 31 (40 per cent) upset
- 31 (40 per cent) resigned.

Two had felt depressed, two bereaved, another a sense of regret and failure, one disappointed, one wounded, and two exhausted. One ex-MP had been ‘sad to lose my relationship with the constituency’ and another recalled that ‘I had begun to achieve things as an MP and was frustrated that I would not be able to build on what I had achieved’.

For some MPs the experience was truly traumatic. One felt ‘that my whole world had come crashing down’ and another commented, ‘Politics is the only job where you get sacked publicly’, while another talked of ‘a feeling of sadness that something that consumed you for so long is irretrievably lost’.

## *‘Politics is the only job where you get sacked publicly’*

Several ex-MPs explained that, because they were in the key leadership role for their party workers and constituency and Westminster staff, they had to play a role in comforting others and so may not have been able to fully express their feelings. As one explained, ‘I felt emotional but not for long. It was impossible to wallow in pity as I had two members of staff who had also lost their jobs and needed help to find employment’.

Despite the depth of feelings of most former MPs, 17 (22 per cent) had only said that they felt resigned and 12 (15 per cent) recorded no emotions. One said, ‘I was not surprised as it was a marginal and there had been boundary changes’, and another that ‘those who live by the vote die by the vote’, while one ex-MP felt ‘Relieved. I knew it was coming and I could now plan for the future’. However, even among those who had only felt resigned, one said that the feeling was ‘continuing’, another that ‘I still have this feeling’ and two others had felt like this for over a year, suggesting that in reality they were more than just ‘resigned’.

## ■ ‘A grieving process’

The effect of defeat is felt by a number of ex-MPs for some considerable time. One quarter (19, or 24 per cent) used language which expressed this, such as ‘continuing’, ‘it never goes’, ‘still do to some extent’, ‘12 months but for ever really’ and two ex-MPs specifically mentioned four and six years as the time period. Eight (10 per cent) saw one or two years as the time period for which they were still affected and 15 (19 per cent) for some three to 12 months.

One ex-MP said, ‘there was a kind of grieving process which lasts about six months’ and another, ‘I was depressed and disorientated for about three months’. For another 15 (19 per cent) ex-MPs it was a period of a few weeks to two months.

For 84 former MPs (46 per cent), however, leaving the Commons had led to no decline in self-perceptions and a further 24 (13 per cent) made no comment and so also presumably felt little or no effect. In addition, four felt an improvement.

A Plaid Cymru MP who had gone to the Welsh Assembly experienced enhanced status as a committee chair and member of the largest opposition party. One former Conservative MP felt that status was 'considerably greater after leaving as I returned to self-employment' and another that the change was 'positive as I had achieved everything that I had hoped for as a Minister and frontbencher and so felt respected and now able to enjoy the things that I had missed'.

One well known Labour ex-MP felt that he was 'free at last!' For some there was actually a certain amount of relief. One said, 'I was pleased that I was still the same person' and another that 'I became just another citizen and was quite happy with that'.

## ■ Status

Many former MPs elaborated on why they felt status, worth and value had not been lost. Of the group who felt no change, 15 (14 per cent) found that moving on to another position had achieved this. Six had gone to the Lords and the rest to private or public positions, including a respondent who had won a by-election very quickly.

One commented, 'I received a life peerage so the Commons was merely the close of a stage' and another 'I went to the Lords and I saw more of my family so I was happy'. An ex-MP who went into business felt 'I always thought I was worth more financially outside than in, and I had a job to go to immediately at a far better salary, and so I suffered no pangs of insecurity'.



### **OONA KING** was Labour MP for Bethnal Green and Bow from 1997 until she was defeated by George Galloway in a bitter election campaign in 2005.

At one point, she was reported as saying that she would remain in the area with her constituency office funded from the GMB trade union, attempting to act as an unofficial MP. But by late 2005 she was pursuing a career in the media.

'I wanted to be an MP all my life,' she said, 'and when it didn't work, I thought, well then, I'll just have to go down a different path.' She was asked to stand as

a Labour Party council candidate in local elections in Tower Hamlets but turned down the chance: 'I didn't think it was the right time for me to go back into frontline politics.' She says that she is not a politician but is 'a recovering politician. I can't possibly get politics out of my bloodstream but I can live without being imprisoned in the House of Commons. You are not physically allowed to leave it. You can't go beyond the division bell perimeter. It's the most luxurious prison in the world but it needs to re-assess its working practices. More importantly, we need to change the dysfunctional relationship between politicians and constituents.' She now chairs Tower Hamlets Advocacy Network and has recently become chair of the Institute of Community Cohesion based at Coventry University.

In a profile published in July 2007, she recalled her defeat in 2005: 'I remember on the night people with tears streaming down their cheeks and a lot of people hysterically happy, delighted that I'd lost and the main feeling I had was that it wasn't the end of the world at all.' She conceded that she was devastated politically, because 'negative politics' had won, but not personally. 'A lot of the time (being an MP) made me very unhappy. I didn't like being public property all the time. I didn't enjoy the death threats. I never saw my husband, I never saw my friends. Twenty per cent of the people thought I could do no wrong, 20 per cent thought I could do no right, and the rest just weren't interested', she was quoted as saying. Losing her seat had let her win back her life, she said. 'Now I can choose to concentrate on the political issues I'm most passionate about.'

(Sources: The Observer, 27 November 2005; The Independent 1 December 2005; The Independent, 5 June 2007; The Times Higher Education Supplement, 6 July 2007)

Others had a range of perspectives as to why their status or worth had not changed. Some rejected the idea of MPs having status:

- 'I had a sceptical view of status and worth in the first place and so I always thought I was valuable anyway'
- 'As an MP I did not have too high an impression of my own importance and so there was no great problem in resuming the life of an ordinary citizen'
- 'I did not believe that being elected made me anything special.'

Many former MPs, especially those who were retiring, felt that their worth was expressed in what they had achieved as an MP.

- For one, 'I went to Westminster to promote a cause and not a personal career and I was satisfied with what I had achieved for the nation and for people'
- For another, 'I felt that I had given my best efforts while in the House and so left with my head held high'
- Another said, 'I was able to leave at the time of my choosing and so felt lucky to pursue my hobby as my lifetime career, as one of only 650 of my fellow citizens'
- A fourth ex-MP said, 'I felt I had done a good job nationally and for my constituents. I was pleased and flattered by all party thanks, and acknowledged in my constituency on my retirement.'

Some found themselves still having a local status. One explained, 'Even now after fourteen years of retirement, people still think of me as an MP or Councillor and I'm active in the Labour Party and local Housing Association.'

A Conservative, retiring in 1997, recounted, 'I live in the area that I represented and, although I expected to "fade from the scene", I was asked to become involved in several local projects, charities and so on, and become a school governor. So I was still in public life, but able to live at a gentler pace! Though no longer an MP, my knighthood seemed to give me some status in some quarters.'

### ■ 'Nothing so ex as an ex-MP'

The remaining 76 former MPs (41 per cent) were able to recount effects on their self-perception. For some this was a 'feeling of rejection' or 'sadness only', which in some instances faded fairly quickly, for example 'It was irritating at first but compensated for by a career at the bar' and 'I had initial difficulty in adjusting to changes in my work pattern' and 'there was a sense of loss but it fades with time'.

More often, they explained the impact of suddenly being removed from the centre of things. 'There is nothing so ex as an ex-MP' is a saying that has clearly been current in Westminster as more than one former MP mentioned it, and one attributed it to Sir Walter Clegg, Conservative Whip and MP for North Fylde from 1966 to 1987.

The experience of a Conservative, retiring in 2001, was typical. 'At one moment you are an MP with considerable status in your Constituency and among your colleagues at Westminster and when you leave you have no job or status. It takes time to adjust.'

Another Conservative, defeated in 1997 commented, 'People I had dealt with as a Minister never returned my calls. I became a non-person.' A former Labour MP defeated in 1987 said, 'I felt I was yesterday's man. It was a drop in status and importance', and a Conservative, retiring in 2001, said, 'I recognized very quickly that for most people I had no value, sure perhaps some personal regard, once I had retired.'

Some former MPs found no longer being at the heart of political life difficult, and a Labour ex-MP, defeated in 2005, compared it to 'falling off the back of an ocean liner'. A Conservative, retiring in 2005, felt that, 'I no longer had the unique opportunity to influence areas of personal interest and make a difference.'

A former Labour MP, defeated in 2005, found after the election that, 'I would wake up in the morning, listen to the radio, and form views on the issues of the day and then realised that no one wanted to know what I thought.'

*'People I had dealt with as a Minister never returned my calls. I became a non-person'*

The lack of influence extended to not being able to sort problems out. A former Labour MP, retiring in 2005, explained: 'I appreciated that the avenues of influence would immediately go. I had to persuade others, including constituents, of this. I accepted that I had retired and I was in a new phase of my life.'

Some combined this with losing relationships in the House. A Labour MP, retiring in 2001, said 'I felt out of it. I missed the companionship of the Strangers' Bar. I was now impotent and had no power to get on my horse and sort things out.'

Another former Labour MP, retiring in 2005, explained the problems of losing access to Parliament, 'I realised on the day of departure that once you leave the building you are banned from re-entering apart from visiting as a member of the public. I was separated instantly from many hundreds of people I had worked with intimately, which was so different from when I retired after working in the same place in the Ministry of Defence.'



**SUE DOUGHTY** had been elected as the Liberal Democrat MP for Guildford in 2001 and lost narrowly in 2005. She had been a project manager for Thames Water and then a freelance consultant in this field.

She had been involved with the party for thirty years, 'I broadly knew what I believed and why I supported the Liberal Democrats', she said. She had worked in campaigns but had not sought to stand for office except as a 'paper' candidate in the local elections. The desire of the party by the 1990s to have more women candidates led her to stand for the European elections in 1999 in London and this gave her the confidence to seek a parliamentary seat.

The party in Guildford was seeking a candidate and she was selected and, though she had not expected it, was elected as the first non-Conservative MP for the present county area of Surrey since 1906. It had been a safe Conservative seat but campaigning, the strength of the University and churches (she is a Quaker), and a sizeable Labour vote, which could be squeezed, led to her success.

She still deeply misses being an MP, 'rather like getting over a bereavement', she said. 'It is a complex situation being in the Commons and it takes a couple of years to have an impact on policy, but I was able to influence bills and I still see the effect of what I did and felt that I could have a real influence on people's lives'.

The defeat had also had an effect on the constituency party at first, but they started campaigning again and overwhelmingly wanted her to be the candidate again at the next general election.

She found that finding employment after the election defeat was problematic, especially for a woman in her 50s. It was difficult to concentrate on this in the first few weeks when she needed to support the people in her team – who did then go on to find good jobs – and had to remove a huge number of constituents' files from the office. She did not want to take up non-executive directorships and, as she said, 'the months went by and nothing happened'. 'You lose prospects by being out of your professional area', she commented, 'and although four years' enhanced pension is significant it doesn't fully compensate for this'.

She felt that the arrangement for staff had been generally good but that the winding down allowance for MPs should also include something for training which should be 'publicly funded and transparent'. Eventually she built up her own business in government relations and was recruited by the National Industrial Symbiosis Programme, which aims to promote waste reduction and resource efficiency in industry and to brief MPs and opinion formers about their work. She is President of Women Liberal Democrats and contributes to the party's policy on environment and has run seminars on Women in Politics for US students in the UK.

She has become a school governor for a school with children suffering from emotional, behavioural and social disorders and is an active member of other organisations. She is Prospective Parliamentary Candidate in Guildford, where she still lives, and has been leading the party's local campaigns there.

## ■ 'Feeling battered'

A more direct impact on self esteem was also mentioned by some former MPs. One commented, after being defeated in 1997, 'I realised my working life had come to an end', and a Conservative retiring in 2005 said that it was 'a realisation of age'.

For a few it was more traumatic. An ex-Labour MP, defeated in 2005, 'felt completely worthless. I told people that I didn't enjoy anything or look forward to anything', and a Conservative MP, defeated in 1997, 'just felt lost'.

These feelings, and defeat after a considerable period in the House, made it difficult for former MPs who needed to still work to look for a new job. A Conservative ex-MP, defeated in 1997, recounted, 'Inevitably I felt rather battered and rather disinclined to apply for high profile jobs, which I feared I would not get.'

Another defeated Conservative MP had a similar experience: 'Defeat shakes your self-confidence. At aged 51 it was always going to be difficult to start again. I had sold my small business and home in Cambridge to live in the constituency', while a Labour ex-MP, defeated in 1979, said: 'It was essential to get a job. There was a feeling of loss and I was worried about my family's future.'

Some former MPs tried to be philosophical about the experience. One said, 'Retirement is what millions of people do and I am pleased to say that I lived long enough to join them', while a defeated MP said, 'The loss of status was actual and perceived but probably similar to those affected by compulsory redundancy'. An ex-SDP MP, defeated in 1983, reflected, 'I missed it very much but long ago learned not to say "I used to be."'.

## ■ Long-term problems

Longer-term problems were mentioned by 34 former MPs (18 per cent). Eleven mentioned health problems, mainly depression, while one found a diabetic condition worsened as a result of electoral defeat. One said, 'I felt depressed for several months until I started getting appointments in the public and voluntary sector' while another was 'completely exhausted for about a year'. An ex-MP, retiring in 2005, found that he was 'unable to rearrange my sleep patterns to a normal one. I find I am awake until very late as I was in Parliament'.

For six the impact fell harder on their family. One said, 'I was not deeply affected but my wife was and so were my daughters in their education and examinations' and another explained, 'My wife nearly died from an internal problem brought on by the trauma.'

A final group of 11 (6 per cent) former MPs had to face significant financial problems or the threat of such problems. One, defeated in 2005, said, 'I was fortunate in finding work within three weeks of the election, otherwise the consequences would have been disastrous'.

## *'I was forced to sell my main residence at the bottom of the market'*

Another, defeated in 1992, was not so lucky, 'I was forced to sell my main residence at the bottom of the market. I had no job. Kind friends lent me places to live. I was nearly bankrupted'.

## ■ How the people around ex-MPs react

There were considerable differences in the experience of former MPs in terms of the reactions of others to their leaving the Commons, which was partly, but by no means entirely, related to whether they had retired or lost an election.

An MP, retiring in 1997, recounted, 'I was flattered by party thanks and acknowledgements in the constituency. There was much goodwill, some of which I still enjoy. The local press was very fair and generous. Many party members are still my friends. My family was probably relieved'.

Another ex-MP, defeated in 1992, remembered, 'My family was sympathetic, but that doesn't butter any parsnips. Your political 'friends' turn out not to be real friends. Office staff are tearful and have to be made redundant and are uncertain of their own future. The local media are always hostile and, in turns, indifferent. Nobody gives tangible assistance'.

Forty former MPs (22 per cent) either did not answer the question or did not perceive support and sympathy as necessary. One said, 'I neither received nor required assistance' and another, 'It was only an election defeat, not a death'.

A total of 72 former MPs (39 per cent) expressed a generally positive experience in terms of support and appreciation, and as one ex-MP said, 'They were generally complimentary about my work and sorry to see me go', and another, 'They were mostly brilliant. Office staff and party members were all mutually supportive'.

Many retiring MPs recounted that party members and constituents had tried to persuade them not to stand down and some defeated MPs said that people were generally shocked. This did not always have the intended effect, as one ex-MP said, 'Everyone was very shocked, sympathetic and appreciative of what I had done but, curiously, this made it harder to bear'.

Concrete support seems to have come mostly from family and friends. A quarter of ex-MPs (47, or 26 per cent) mentioned help from their family, with 15 per cent (27) helped by close friends, and a further 8 per cent (15) noted help from their office staff.

Seventeen ex-MPs (9 per cent) pointedly said that there was no help from other quarters. One said ‘otherwise people couldn’t care less’ and another ‘when your back is to the wall you discover who are real and false friends’.

## ■ Party responses

Experience of the reaction of local party members varied. Twenty-five ex-MPs (13 per cent) specifically made positive points about the support of party members and others had said that there was general support which would have included these.

One MP, defeated in 2005, said, ‘Party members were first class in their support’ and a retiring MP said, ‘The Constituency Association were generous in their praise and gratitude and this was expressed in tangible form’.

A farewell party was a significant part of this in many cases. However a smaller number of 11 MPs (6 per cent) found the party unsupportive and a further five were ambivalent.

One said, ‘Some local party members resented defeat’ and another, who had retired, that, ‘Party members couldn’t care less as they have to support the new MP’, while a third, who was defeated remarked, ‘There was great sympathy, though the constituency soon decided that they needed a younger man’.

## ■ The parties

None of the defeated MPs mentioned, in their replies to questionnaires, that they had received any help from the national party.

Particularly telling comments included, from one former Conservative MP, a claim that the party had been ‘totally disinterested.’ However, criticism was not limited simply to the Conservative Party. A former Labour MP stated that ‘committed and loyal as I remain to my party, I am very disappointed at the way past service is taken for granted, one’s future is never considered and one’s welfare entirely overlooked. It is pretty astonishing that major parties don’t seem to have strategies or programmes in place to support defeated MPs.’ Another former MP noted, ‘Don’t expect any help or interest from your party – you are very much on your own.’

In fact, some help was given in both 1979 and 1997, two elections in which a considerable number of seats changed hands. The Labour Party offered a career prospects interview and related advice in 1979 as Ted (now Lord) Graham, then a Labour whip, has recounted.

In 1997 John Major asked Sir Graham Bright, formerly his PPS, to set up what they then called ‘Team 2000’ to help the large number of defeated Conservative MPs. All defeated MPs were invited to Central Office and nearly 90 came. As Sir Graham Bright told us: ‘People were very pleased that this had been organised and at the first meeting talked about the circumstances of the election and started networking. We set up a database of contacts because, with no access to the Commons, former MPs had no details of the people they had known there.’

*‘Don’t expect any help or interest from your party – you are very much on your own’*

‘Team 2000’ continued with monthly meetings set up with frontbench speakers in order to keep former MPs in touch with current politics, and these meetings also allowed them to give their considerable experience to the new frontbench, which also made them feel useful. The former MPs were encouraged to become involved again through their local Constituency Associations and by standing for local authorities. There was advice on CVs and interviews and contacts were arranged with companies. As Sir Graham Bright explained: **‘Those who had lost safer seats were in the most financial trouble because they had made no plans for defeat and might have to pay school fees and could not quickly sell their London or constituency home.’**

The programme was essentially self-funding and organised by Sir Graham, while Central Office provided free accommodation and postage. The limited role of Central Office may have led the former MPs answering the questionnaire to forget that it was a party initiative. The group kept meeting, though less often, for nearly three years and, after that, developed into an annual dinner. By this time the Former Members of Parliament Association had taken over some of its functions. Sir Graham felt that, ‘In future, a similar set of advice services should be set up for all defeated MPs under the aegis of the speaker.’

## ■ Media reactions

Former MPs’ experience of the reaction of the local media was varied. Seventeen (9 per cent) reported positive reactions. One said, ‘the local media was very appreciative of all that I had done locally’, and another that ‘They were pretty

supportive and Regional TV still interviews me sometimes'. Nine ex-MPs (5 per cent), by contrast, had poor experiences of the media. One said, 'The local media was pretty appalling, even though I had been media friendly, and there was not even a retrospective', another that, 'The local press instantly transferred their interest to the new MP, even on the count platform, and this was a jolt to self-confidence', and a third that 'The local press ran a story on "worth losing" on my resettlement grant, which hurt'.

In contrast, former MPs only made complementary remarks about support from constituents and 28 (15 per cent) mentioned this, which occasionally included appreciations from political opponents. Three noted being made a free-man of the local authority area. One said, 'They expressed appreciation for the help that I had given and the stances that I had taken, for example, on Iraq', another that 'There was kindness shown by relative strangers', and another, 'My constituents seemed genuinely sorry'.

Even so, this sympathy could still sometimes be difficult. One former MP found that 'The 700 condolence letters were a strain to reply to', and another that, 'The local public were initially rather embarrassed as with a person who had suffered a bereavement'.

## ■ What former MPs missed about the Commons

When asked about what aspects of the Commons they missed, 31 ex-MPs (17 per cent) declined to identify anything they particularly missed.

One said, 'Absolutely nothing. I was relieved to return to real life', and another, 'I don't miss any of these things. I went of my own accord at the time of my choosing'. However, the reasons for missing the Commons that had been suggested in the questionnaire resonated with most former MPs.

More than half (53 per cent) missed being at the centre of things. For one ex-MP it had meant 'knowing what was really going on', and for another it had been, 'a wonderful educational experience'. Another felt, 'I have always liked to be at the centre and influential. I was proud of my achievement. This was a valuable part of my life'. In total, half of the former MPs (51 per cent) missed being able to influence events.

## ■ Helping constituents

Despite the weight of constituency work, two in five (41 per cent) missed involvement in constituency issues. One had enjoyed 'meeting interesting people, helping constituents and mixing with the community', while another said, 'Very much, it gives a feeling of doing good'. However, a handful of ex-MPs specifically said that they were pleased to be relieved of the burden of constituency casework.

A total of 85 former MPs (46 per cent) missed the company of other MPs. One said, 'I don't actually miss being an MP but enjoyed the chat in the tea room and at dinner'. Another MP reflected generally on the experience, 'I suppose I enjoyed all of these. In particular I felt that the work of a backbench MP could and should be given the status and importance it deserved, but that the means of ensuring that happened was largely the responsibility of backbench MPs themselves'.

Many noted other aspects that they missed:

- Seven mentioned the opportunity that they had had to travel and gain an international perspective, for example on the Council of Europe, the West European Union and in a twinning scheme with Tanzania
- Six former MPs mentioned their Select Committee work
- Five singled out the library and its research facilities
- Three ex-MPs mentioned the historical atmosphere
- For one it was, 'The history which pervades the Palace of Westminster'
- Three missed the Chamber itself and six the club atmosphere of the Commons.

One ex-MP pointed out the problems of going back: 'I miss being able to visit Parliament and having a meal or drink at the bar. Each time I have visited there is a feeling that they think you can't let go and long to be back. This is not so but is difficult to prove.' Several mentioned how the role of MP had been important to them. For one it meant 'feeling that you were making a difference', for another, 'I deeply felt proud to be able to help constituents', and for another, 'The sense that the job was of value to the community and the fundamental importance in a democracy that the job should be done well'.

## ■ What former MPs did not miss about the Commons

Former MPs were also asked what they did not miss. The majority of comments related to workload. A total of 34 (17 per cent) mentioned the hours that had to be committed to political life. For one it meant 'a total time commitment. I was always at work and on view' and for another there was, 'an inability to plan to do much personally or with the family'. Another talked of a lack of time to think or write.

One in six former MPs (27, or 15 per cent) had felt constantly 'on call' especially for constituents and the press. One former MP did not miss, 'the constant mail, telephone calls, people queuing at my door at home' and another, 'telephone calls in the small hours of the night'. Nine (5 per cent) mentioned feeling this as stress with 'a high level of continuous pressure', 'being on show' or, in one case, 'the treadmill of having to satisfy personal standards like regular performance in the House'.

For a few this strain had a more all-embracing character; one was worn down by 'pressure and constant criticism', another by 'being blamed for everything' and another by 'being required to have a view on everything'.

Twenty (11 per cent) mentioned late night sittings, although older members recognised that this was now less of a problem with the recent reforms of the Modernisation Committee. Fourteen (8 per cent) mentioned being away from home and the family as a consequence of the hours of work. One talked of the 'lack of support for one's family' and another of always 'having to disturb the children'. Sixteen former MPs

(9 per cent) mentioned the travelling to and from London and 2 MPs the problems of living in London.

### ■ 'Relentless demands'

Thirty-two (17 per cent) did not miss constituency work with 'advice surgeries taking up the weekend' and, for one ex-MP, 'a few increasingly demanding constituents'. One former MP talked of the 'relentless correspondence' and a postbag which another MP estimated at 9,500-10,000 letters a year.



**RICHARD TRACEY** was elected as Conservative MP for Surbiton in 1983 and was defeated in 1997 – 'I lost by 56 votes after four recounts in the middle of the night', he ruefully recalls. He had had a varied experience as an MP, including being a junior minister for a couple of years and a period on the Public Accounts Committee.

Before entering Parliament he had worked as a BBC presenter/reporter (1966-78) and as a public affairs consultant/adviser (1978-83). 'My life has been conducted in roughly 15 year career periods', he says. After his election defeat, he felt that 'I had done a long enough stint . . . and so I turned another corner.' 'Ex-MPs are not immediately employable in a meaningful way', he says, but, aged 54 and with two children still then in full-time education, finding employment was urgently important. For a while his wife took on an extra job to help the family finances. Things had moved on in broadcasting and he didn't try to go back into the BBC. He established himself as a government affairs/community relations adviser. He hung on to a couple of 'smallish consultancies' which he had as a backbencher and wrote to many contacts and people in the City, and looked out for opportunities, his consultancy work taking about 12 months to build up.

For the last three years he has been spending three days a week working for the owners of Battersea Power Station – a very large regeneration project – as community relations adviser. 'This involves me in fact in very similar things to being an MP', he explains: 'relationships with the local community, with the local council, with the churches, with local businesses.' Mr Tracey also does charity work. He applied for a number of NHS posts and a place on the Police Complaints Authority after 1997 but was unsuccessful. However, for the last year or so he has been chairman of one of the sub-regional Sport England boards in London; as a former Minister of Sport he finds this 'very interesting and it obviously uses some of my contacts and expertise.'

He has remained very active in Conservative Party politics in London. His wife is a senior councillor (and cabinet member) in Wandsworth, where the family has lived for 30 years, and he is chairman of the Wandsworth Borough Conservatives, involved in campaigning, canvassing, parliamentary and council selections and in training council candidates. Now aged 64 he is ready to take on more local and regional political work, having been selected as a candidate for the 2008 GLA elections. Like many other former MPs, he is still bitten by the political bug.

Four mentioned the strain of nursing a marginal constituency and the ‘constant campaigning necessary’ and another four did not miss election campaigns. Nine (5 per cent) said that they would not miss party events. One Conservative found the load of attending all the party branches a strain.

A final area was Parliament itself. Eight former 8 MPs (4 per cent) complained of parliamentary procedure, especially the ‘wasted hours waiting to vote’, and eleven (6 per cent) complained about party control, particularly the whips. An ex-Labour MP complained of ‘being hounded by the whips for not following the party policies of the Parliamentary Party’, and another wrote of ‘the frustrations of Parliamentary life and the lack of influence, as well as the atmosphere around the Parliamentary Labour Party’.

## ■ The practicalities of leaving the House of Commons

Issues relating to the practicalities of former MPs leaving the House of Commons, whether through defeat or retirement, are rather contentious. ‘There is extreme pressure on us to bring everything to an end quickly’, one former MP complained, while others felt that the parliamentary authorities treat those required to clear out their offices after electoral defeat like staff ‘sacked for dishonesty’ or ‘gross misconduct’.<sup>6</sup>

*‘If you wanted to design a system to rub people’s noses in it, you could not come up with a better way than losing an election.’*

While some seem willing to accept a certain amount of perceived brutality or undue haste in their eviction from the House and their parliamentary offices, others feel it is unnecessary and deliberately hurtful, perhaps even a form of revenge by House of Commons staff.

As Simon Thomas noted in his evidence to the Administration Committee in November 2005, ‘if you wanted to design a system to rub people’s noses in it, you could not come up with a better way than losing an election and being flung out of this place.’<sup>7</sup>

Well over half of our total respondents, (110 or 60 per cent) indicated that they had been given adequate time to vacate their Westminster offices, while a quarter stated that they had not. Among those satisfied with the time frame, there seems to have been a certain amount of resignation that the offices needed to be vacated quickly in order to make room for newly elected MPs.

‘There is no point in dragging it out’ was the comment of one Conservative former MP. Another indicated that while the time allowed was adequate, ‘establishment staff could have been more helpful.’ One Labour former MP noted that ‘it was all rather brutal, but I’m unsure there is a better way.’

## ■ Vacating offices

The Administration Committee reported in December 2005 that ‘it is the task of the House Administration to assist those Members who lose their seats at a general election to carry out the necessary business of ceasing to be a Member as sensitively, quickly and painlessly as possible.’<sup>8</sup>

But as that report noted, this was not always the case – something our results confirm. Former MPs who are standing down are asked to have their offices cleared out no later than seven days after the House is formally dissolved; those who are defeated are asked to clear their offices of papers and belongings no later than seven days after polling day. In practice, things do not always go smoothly and some former MPs find parliamentary staff to be confused about the correct procedures around access to offices.<sup>9</sup>

Among those of our respondents unhappy with the time allowed for vacating offices, there appears in fact to have been general discontent about the whole experience and not simply the hurry. One former Labour MP indicated that ‘in the event, the haste to get rid of bruised and battered casualties is not only unseemly and insensitive but also all the worse for being quite unnecessary.’

Others described the experience as ‘brutal’ and ‘quite the most disgusting experience in fourteen years.’ This was compounded by a feeling among some that ‘the House authorities had sacked me!’ One former Labour MP said that ‘the House authorities seem to resent the intrusion of Members when in office and exact their revenge the minute they lose it.’

In terms of the helpfulness of the parliamentary staff, again the majority of respondents (58 per cent) noted that the House of Commons staff had provided them with appropriate assistance. Twenty-two per cent believed that they had not been provided with sufficient help, while the remainder noted that either they did not require help or did not comment.

The Serjeant at Arms did not fair so well among those highlighted for specific criticism (although this was actually a relatively small number of those questioned). One Conservative former MP indicated that the ‘Serjeant at Arms department [was] unhelpful and unsympathetic to my secretary’, while another noted that all other departments had been helpful ‘other than the Serjeant at Arms.’

There were, however, several positive comments, highlighting particularly the work of the Housekeeping staff, suggesting contrasting opinions of those who issue the orders and those who execute them.

In terms of the issues faced when closing down offices, the answers demonstrated a spread of concerns. A third of respondents indicated that they had not experienced any specific issues, while another 9 per cent either did not comment on this question or indicated that it was not applicable to them.

The main concerns were the sorting, archiving and destroying of files (20 per cent), provisions for staff (13 per cent) and the transferring of cases (7 per cent). Questions over how to dispose of files in line with the Data Protection Act were mentioned repeatedly, suggesting a lack of information on this issue.

## ■ Communications

Communications is an area of great concern for former MPs. Three out of five of our respondents noted that e-mail had not been a relevant issue for them when they left Parliament. However, twenty four per cent of our respondents thought that issues had been dealt with satisfactorily in this regard, while only 4 per cent indicated that there had been problems with the process. Of this small number, the main issue seems to have been time, with one respondent noting that 'e-mail addresses were withdrawn very quickly without any forwarding facility or even [a] notification service for correspondents put in place.'

With regards to the arrangements for the redirecting of postal mail, the overwhelming majority of responses to this question were positive, with 82 per cent recording no problems with the forwarding of mail after leaving the Commons. Only 9 per cent indicated that there had been



**HAROLD BEST** was Labour MP for Leeds North West 1997-2005. Aged 59 when he entered the Commons, he was relatively old for a first-time MP. He had previously worked as an electrical technician and had been an active trade unionist.

He decided to retire some three years before standing down in 2005 (in which election the seat was lost to the Liberal Democrats). Opposition to the Iraq war was a factor he cites, but the primary reason was that he had been having health problems and felt that 'the job of an MP is just exhausting (my average working week [was] 83 hours) to do 100% for your constituents.'

He was 67 when he left Parliament. 'Retirement is what millions of people do', he comments. He has always lived in Leeds and has been busy with his family, having grown-up children still in the city. 'I wasn't a career MP', he admits, and he may now be a former MP, 'but I am still a politician and a political activist, and always have been.' Parliamentary service, he says, was a 'brief interlude' in a life-long record of local party-political, trade-union and community activism. 'It seemed to me that whatever I was doing [as an MP], I might still do to some degree as effectively in local politics or in . . . local organizations.'

He is well-known in the community and says 'I am still asked to do things by former constituents. . . people still phone me up'. He has been involved in recent years with community groups and active on some local single issues and planning/development issues. Often it is just a question of knowing 'how the system works', giving advice and helping people to make contact or deal with local councillors and the relevant public organizations. Now (2007) his health issues have in great part been resolved, he says, and 'I wish I was back! . . . If I'd had the strength in the last few years in the House that I've got now, I might have stayed.' He stood unsuccessfully for a seat on Otley town council in the May 2007 local elections and talks about plans to get involved again soon in more directly political issues and campaigns (he mentions CND and the nuclear power issue).

problems with this service and the majority of these negative responses seem to have concerned the length of time allowed for the redirecting of mail.

One former Labour MP noted that ‘the period was far too short and I think the House should develop a programme to keep in touch with former MPs.’ One Conservative former MP believed that ‘the six month rule is unfair’ while another simply said of the mail forwarding arrangements, ‘I wasn’t aware there were any.’ One former Labour MP highlighted a specific concern regarding addresses, stating that ‘it is a disgrace that the PO, fees office and pensions refuse to pass on addresses of colleagues and hide behind the Data Protection Act. Needs an enquiry by a Select Committee.’

### *‘I think the House should develop a programme to keep in touch with former MPs’*

Whether a former MP met the new MP for a ‘hand-over’ session or to pass on details of ‘live’ cases may be affected by the circumstances in which the former MP was leaving. Communication may be easier if a retiring MP is succeeded by another member of the same party, while defeat, particularly in a rather fierce or brutal election campaign, can leave bad feelings.

In the event, 48 per cent indicated that they did meet the new MP while 42 per cent said that they did not. A further 4 per cent noted some form of limited contact (usually via telephone or the forwarding on of certain documents). One member commented that meeting with a new MP ‘is not realistic in the circumstances of a defeat!’ However, 30 per cent of our respondents noted that the new MP had asked to see the former MP, while another 46 per cent indicated that this had not happened.

### ■ Arrangements for MPs staff

The number of staff employed by MPs retiring in 1997 or before was often very limited. Almost one-third (38, or 31 per cent) of retiring MPs indicated that they had only one member of staff, acting primarily as a secretary at Westminster. Seven of these had only a part-time secretary, sometimes shared with another MP or, in one instance, a self-employed secretary who worked for several MPs.

Four former MPs had only their wife as their staff member at Westminster, though in one instance this seems to have been just in the final period when the office was being wound down. One MP commented, ‘my wife acted as my secretary for 40 years and we remain married!’

Eleven (9 per cent) former MPs had no paid constituency staff and in many Conservative constituencies the

Constituency Association rather the MP employed any paid constituency staff, normally an agent. Nine Conservative MPs specifically mentioned this and as one ex-MP said ‘the constituency staff were run by the agent and supporting staff were paid by the Constituency Association’.

In ten (8 per cent) instances with Westminster staff and 2 instances with constituency staff the employees decided to retire at the same time as the MP. As one former MP explained, ‘My parliamentary secretary was over retiring age and I ensured that she would get maximum severance’.

Former MPs often played a role in ensuring continuity of employment for their employees. In 19 (15 per cent) instances Westminster staff, and in 11 instances constituency staff, were transferred to the new MP for the seat. This obviously depended on the new MP being from the same party and then it involved, as one ex-MP said, ‘a simple transition of staff and equipment to my successor’.

In 18 (15 per cent) cases Westminster staff found work with other MPs, and in four cases this was made easier by the fact that they were already working part-time for another MP as well as the retiring MP. The retiring MP often helped, for example: ‘I told old and new MPs of their availability’ though this was not always necessary because, in another instance, ‘My Parliamentary Secretary found another MP through the Secretaries “network” in the House’.

In five (4 per cent) cases former MPs continued to employ their Westminster secretary, for example, in the House of Lords or in a new job that the ex-MP had in a university, and one ex-MP employed both Westminster and constituency employees for four months after retiring.

### ■ Help with new jobs

As we have seen above, most retiring MPs were able to give staff two or more years’ notice of their retirement and this made it easier for them to find new jobs in the meantime.

Former MPs reported 13 (11 per cent) instances of Westminster staff and two instances of constituency staff finding new jobs, not with MPs, by the time of the election. In four of these cases ex-MPs reported actively helping, for example, ‘I helped them with new job opportunities and gave maximum notice and the best possible redundancy payments’ and, in another case, the MP persuaded the local League football club to take the constituency worker on as a fundraiser.

Nevertheless, former MPs, in 30 (24 per cent) instances with Westminster staff and two instances with constituency staff, reported that their staff had taken redundancy. Several former MPs emphasised that they had done their best for their employees: ‘I ensured that they received all possible advice and compensation as well as following the proper statutory procedures.’ Others merely noted what had happened.



**JOHN WATSON** had a 'safe' seat as a Conservative MP from 1979 to 1987 (MP for Skipton and then for Skipton and Ripon). He is an example of the category of former MPs who left Parliament not because they were defeated at a general election, nor because they reached something like the 'normal' retirement age (in their sixties), but because they chose to change careers and do another job.

Mr Watson told his constituency party in 1986 that he would be bowing out. On the 'wet' side of the party, he had risen no higher than the rank of parliamentary private secretary and had lost his appetite for office. He felt that he wouldn't ever reach the Cabinet, and most junior ministers, he said at the time, 'are sacked or defeated at a time when it is too early to retire but too late to embark upon another career.'

He had also become disillusioned with the House of Commons. The parliamentary grind – surgeries, the constituency postbag, travelling, late night sittings, three-line whips – was sapping his enthusiasm. The financial rewards of politics were, he felt, 'not great'.

He left Parliament aged 44 – 'any later, I would have left it too late to get back into industry', he comments. He had worked in industry, with John Waddington plc in Leeds, before becoming an MP and had retained close connections with the company – the chance to take up an executive position there clinched his decision to leave. For about fifteen years – from 1987 to 2002 – although he remained a Conservative Party member, he did not really do any political work. 'It was largely a question of getting off the stage', is how he put it.

His work in various business and industrial positions (in the printing and plastics industries, as a headhunter, and in marketing services) involved, he says, better hours, more pay and less monotony than being an MP. In the 1990s a major focus of his work was urban regeneration in Bradford, for which he was awarded an OBE in 1998.

He was chief executive of Bradford City Challenge, and also did stints as President of the Bradford Chamber of Commerce, Chairman of Bradford Business Link, and Chairman of the Bradford Community NHS Trust. Between 1996 and 2004 he was a director and then vice-chairman of the Yorkshire Building Society.

Turning 60 in 2003, he was pulled back into politics as an opponent of the plans for regional assemblies – he set up and became chairman of the 'Yorkshire Says No' campaign. He remains active at the interface of business and public life in Yorkshire as Regional Chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund, Regional Chairman of Young Enterprise and as Chairman of Partnership Investment Finance Ltd.

In 2005 he was elected as a Conservative councillor for North Yorkshire County Council, taking on the major executive portfolio for children's services and schools. It all adds up to an impressive record of activity and achievement which makes it understandable that he says, 'I don't regret becoming an MP [and] I don't regret standing down.'

## ■ Financial issues in leaving the House of Commons

Former MPs are eligible for a resettlement grant, a winding up allowance to deal with outstanding constituency and parliamentary business, and a parliamentary pension, where applicable. The resettlement grant was introduced in 1991 and is in effect a lump sum severance payment of between six and 12 months' salary, depending on age and length of service in parliament.

Before 1964 there was no pension scheme for former MPs. The Government Actuary reported in March 2006 that the parliamentary pension scheme was paying out pensions to 779 people (including some dependants of deceased former MPs), the average pension received by a former MP in 2005 amounting to £15,700 p.a.<sup>10</sup> (The pensions received by some older former MPs who left parliament several decades ago are considerably lower than this average figure.)

Nearly half of our respondents (46 per cent) indicated that they had received either what they termed a redundancy package or a parliamentary resettlement allowance, while a further 13 per cent did not specify what monies they had received but believed it to have been a satisfactory amount. Another 18 per cent noted that they had not received any funds when closing their office, while 17 per cent either failed to comment on this question or noted that they could not remember the financial arrangements. One former Labour MP indicated that the arrangements were excellent: 'all staff were happy with finance package and support', while another noted that 'the accounting procedures were more onerous than I'd been used to as an MP, which was pretty insulting.'

Over half of our respondents (53 per cent) noted that they had not faced any financial problems when they had left the House of Commons. But of those who had faced problems, issues with either the implementation or the rate of the Pension Scheme were high on their agenda (18 per cent of the total respondents).

One former MP argued that 'a Parliamentary pension which could start at say age 60 would help to clear the backbenches of MPs who have become bored by their work as an MP – there are quite a few of those.'

One former Conservative MP seemed to speak for a considerable group when he noted in response to this question: 'Just the miserable pension!'

Among the other problems highlighted were: a drop in income (7 per cent), no job to move into (9 per cent) and a reorganisation of personal expenses (5 per cent). One former Labour MP stated that 'I found the financial arrangements very poor. A defeated MP has lost his job but his costs go on. Entering Parliament for a marginal seat is very much a risk.'

## ■ Moving house

Two-thirds of our respondents still live in the same place as they did when they were an MP, while one-third do not. However, housing is an important issue for former MPs, as a knock-on effect of leaving parliament may be a house move or sale. In total, nearly half of our respondents (48 per cent) indicated that they had stayed in their residence or had experienced no change in their housing status in London after leaving the House of Commons. Of those, over half were Conservatives (53 per cent) while 39 per cent were Labour. A quarter of our respondents had been renting their properties and relinquished their contracts when they were able to, while another quarter sold their home (of these, two-thirds were Conservatives while a quarter were Labour).

## ■ Current Access Rights and Activities within the House

Access to the Palace of Westminster is another contentious issue for former MPs and one which the Association of Former Members of Parliament (AFMP) has worked to change over recent years. It is, however, still a hotly debated issue. All former members, who have served one or more full parliamentary terms and therefore have applied for and received a Former Members Pass (also known as a Category X pass), are currently entitled to enter the Palace of Westminster and Portcullis House. They are also able to utilize the Terrace Cafeteria and Strangers Bar and, on Monday lunchtimes, the Members Dining Room.

Over half of our respondents (59 per cent) noted that they had not received an access pass when they had left the House of Commons, with 34 per cent saying that they had. An interesting aside here is that of those saying they had received passes to the House, two-thirds were Conservatives, with under one-third (30 per cent) being former Labour MPs. Among those not given a pass, the party split was more even. However, the majority of our respondents say that they now have a pass to the Houses of Parliament (68 per cent), though 26 per cent still do not have a pass.

*Over half of our respondents noted that they had not received an access pass when they had left the House of Commons*

A large proportion of respondents (37 per cent) noted that they had limited access rights to the House, often including access to the Members Lobby. Those of our respondents who are members of the House of Lords (see below) naturally have access rights to Westminster in that capacity.

## ■ ‘Don’t ask!’

This question in our survey appears to have highlighted a certain amount of resentment among former MPs. One Conservative former MP questioned if ex-MPs had any rights at all, while a former Labour MP noted, ‘honestly, [I] don’t know and don’t ask! Otherwise some jobsworth will stop it!’ Another ex-MP confessed: ‘I could get a pass but do not want to hang around the green room “long after the show has finished”’.

## *‘There’s nothing sadder than former MPs haunting the place’*

Some ex-MPs make use of multiple facilities, including the post office, the gym and the library, and/or attend meetings in the House. However, nearly two fifths of our respondents indicated that they make no use of the House of Commons facilities (38 per cent) while a further 16 per cent claimed to use the facilities only occasionally or on a very limited basis.

Only 5 per cent indicated that they used the facilities regularly or fairly regularly. Despite this, two in five former MPs (42 per cent) thought that they should have more access to Commons facilities than they currently do while nearly a third (31 per cent) believed that no further access rights were required.

The majority of comments came from former MPs opposed to further access, and tended to have a fairly similar tone: ‘It is not our place anymore’; ‘I don’t want to haunt the place’; ‘ex-MPs frequenting the House can become a bore!'; ‘there’s nothing sadder than former MPs haunting the place’. One former MP argued that ‘the facilities provided are for elected MPs to carry out their duties at public expense. [These] should not be available to outsiders.’

When asked what new access rights former members should have, the two most popular options were extended access to the dining facilities (19 per cent), particularly with the right to enter with guests or spouses or for private functions, and greater access to the library (10 per cent). A selection of other suggested activities included reunions (7 per cent), greater access to the gallery (2 per cent) and the ability to exchange ideas with current MPs (3 per cent).

## ■ Returning to the House of Commons?

Our survey question here obviously did not apply to retiring MPs but to those who were defeated or lost their seats as a result of boundary redistribution. Retiring MPs saw leaving as final and, as one said, ‘When you retire, you retire and make it work’. But 33 defeated MPs wanted to return to the Commons either immediately or later.

Some made remarks such as ‘determined to return’ and ‘I always intended to’ or ‘felt the job was well worth doing’ and others talked about the continued role they could have. ‘I felt I could contribute and enjoyed 99 per cent of Parliamentary life’. Six former MPs did not initially want to stand again but decided to later, in one case because he was approached for a by-election in a fairly safe seat and found this renewed his enthusiasm.

In contrast, 21 ex-MPs felt they would stand but then later decided not to. In some instances they had developed a new career. As one said, ‘At 54 you have to make a decision. Being an MP was a distraction from other activities. I had to go for a new career wholeheartedly and not look back.’

Others were reluctant to put their family through the selection and election processes. One former MP recounted, ‘I was offered a by-election immediately, but when I asked my wife if she was happy about me going straight back she burst into tears, so I didn’t. Eleven sought selection, not always in their old seat, but in some instances they felt age and distance from the politics of the local party prevented this. A few stood for the European Parliament and Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. Finally, 18 stood for Parliament, often in the seat in which they had been defeated at the last election but only a handful of these were successful.’

## ■ Post-parliamentary work and employment

It is a matter of public record that the work and employment taken up by former MPs ranges from well-paid, chauffeur-driven, business directorships and executive positions at one end of the spectrum to the labouring job with British Steel that one former Labour MP ended up with after visiting the local employment exchange when he lost his seat in 1979.

Just over a quarter of the former MPs we surveyed (53, or 28.5 per cent of our respondents) said that they were able to return to the career or employment they had had before entering the House of Commons. A third (60) reported that they were not able to pick up their former careers or jobs.

Lawyers have often been well-placed to return to their former professional world (and there were half a dozen examples of this in our sample). One of those who could or did not get back into their previous line of work had been in the advertising industry - it was, he said, ‘a young person’s career’.

A number mentioned that, after their parliamentary service, they were ‘out of touch’ with their old profession: ‘the world had moved on in that industry’, ‘I was out of date’, ‘things had moved on’ were typical comments (‘my old business had been taken over’, said one). Age was a factor in some

cases: ‘prospective employers made it clear that I was too old to be taken on’ said one ex-MP; ‘a 67 year old MP was of little interest except for charitable work’, reported another.

## ■ Looking for work

‘The idea that ex-MPs walk into jobs is rubbish’, is how Joe Ashton has put it. ‘They’ve lost their technological know-how; things have moved on; and the older they are, the more difficult it is for them to get a job.’<sup>11</sup>

### *‘The reality is sitting at home sticking CVs in envelopes’*

‘Politics is a non-commercial career’, said the head of a careers advice company for senior businessmen in 1997. ‘Anyone hoping to reach the higher levels of business and the City who then spends time in an environment such as Parliament puts their chances of getting a top management job in serious jeopardy.’ His company reviewed the CVs of 127 defeated Conservative MPs in 1997, concluding that many former MPs did not have the skills or contacts that companies needed.

The company’s analysts were reported as judging that 35 were ‘commercially unemployable at senior management level’, that only 15 had a chance of putting together a decent portfolio of non-executive directorships, and that only four had the experience and credentials to land big jobs with £100,000+ salaries.<sup>12</sup>

‘While the popular image may be of international banks begging former MPs to pop into their boardrooms occasionally in return for six-figure salaries, the reality is more likely to involve sitting at home sticking CVs in envelopes.’<sup>13</sup> A third of our sample of ex-MPs (63) reported having to look for work after leaving the Commons. The experience of those former MPs saying that ‘[work] came to me’, or ‘I was offered [work] at once’, or ‘I had lots of offers’ is unusual. One respondent had already lined up a tentative employment arrangement, knowing he had little chance of holding onto his seat. A couple reported that they were already doing outside work as MPs or continued with arrangements they had made before leaving the Commons. But many had no contingency plans.

Three times as many Conservative ex-MPs (27) reported using personal contacts and networking with associates or friends to find employment than Labour ex-MPs (9), though many of these former MPs (of both parties) supplemented this activity with replying to job adverts, using employment bureaus, headhunters or consultants, and so on. A total of 18 former MPs reported responding to

job advertisements in the press. Three (two Labour, one Conservative) mentioned registering as unemployed at an Employment Exchange. Sue Doughty, defeated as Liberal-Democrat MP for Guilford in 2005, was apparently ordered to report for a suitability-to-work interview by the benefits office she had opened only the year before.<sup>14</sup>

Three of our respondents (two Labour, one Conservative) said that they set up their own companies. One former Conservative MP mentioned ‘endless job applications’ and another ‘no interviews from 22 applications’, but a former Labour MP reported actually making 54 job applications.

## ■ Be patient with the job search

The job search usually takes some time. ‘Get a job quickly and don’t live in the past’, said one former MP. But ‘don’t expect the job offers to flood in’, warned another ex-MP. A year after the 1979 election, 38 Labour MPs still had not got a job.<sup>15</sup> Only a fifth of the MPs defeated in the general elections of 1974 and 1979 found a job in a few days, while a third of that group took over six months to find employment.<sup>16</sup>

A fifth of our respondents (21 per cent) reported that they were able to find employment immediately or almost immediately. (One ex-Conservative MP said that he was offered a job after three days.) For almost a third (31.7 per cent) the job hunt took up to three months, and for a fifth (21 per cent) up to six months.

For one in eight former MPs (12.9 per cent), however, it took up to 12 months to find work, while one in seven (14.5 per cent) took over a year to finally find a job after leaving parliament. ‘Be patient with the job-hunting – it will take longer than you imagine’, was the advice one ex-MP would give to defeated parliamentarians.

‘New jobs are not easy to come by’, said one of our respondents; ‘some expertise in another area than politics is usually necessary.’ ‘Many MPs do not appreciate their skills on entering parliament will not be and are not relevant when they leave’, insisted another former MP. ‘Parliament is just a phase in life. Nobody owes an ex-MP a living.’

Another felt that defeated MPs of working age were ‘left to sink or swim’ by the House of Commons and their parties, and the problem was that ‘some will have difficulty – because of their age and/or the length of time they’ve been out of the job market – getting back into employment.’ As a consequence, one ex-MP wondered whether ‘professional outplacement counselling [should] be automatically available to MPs who lose their seats.’ ‘Don’t think that having been an MP is a guarantee of employment – it isn’t’, commented one respondent.

## ■ Problems in finding work

The former MPs responding to our survey reported a variety of problems in finding work. 'I had little business experience and no qualifications apart from a degree', said one. 'You have a broad range of experience but may lack depth', commented another. A former chartered accountant reported being 'professionally deskilled' after service in parliament. 'I was lucky to find work at all', reported one former Labour MP; you have missed any career opportunities and who wants to employ a man or a woman in a lesser position knowing him or her to have all that experience - it makes prospective employers uneasy.'

'You are effectively unemployable and trained for nothing in the outside world', was what one ex-MP felt. Another's experience was of 'ageism; prejudice against ex-MPs; the sheer number of people applying for public/voluntary posts; [and] no help from [the] Job Centre.'

When there is a big clear-out, as in 1997, there are extra difficulties. 'Ex-Conservative MPs were not specially valuable in 1997, and very numerous', was how one put it. 'No-one was interested in employing the many ex-Tory MPs' reported another of that group. 'It was clear I was one of many who were just yesterday's men.' 'At age 55, former MPs of heavily defeated parties are pretty unwelcome on the employment market', was another comment.



**SIR GRAHAM BRIGHT** was elected in 1979 as the Conservative MP for Luton South and held what had been seen as a basically Labour seat until the landslide election of 1997. 'I had not expected to win in 1997 but obviously couldn't say this in the constituency', he recalled, 'though I took my son aside and explained to him the day before to prepare him'.

He was Parliamentary Private Secretary to John Major from 1990 to 1994. 'I decided that I would not accept a ministerial position as I needed to nurse my constituency and because I wanted to stay on as Chairman of the sweeteners company that I had set up as a family firm in 1970', he explains.

He was able to pay more attention to the family firm again after 1997 and this has helped business to expand greatly but he has also been involved in a range of other activities. He was asked by John Major to organise support for the large number of Conservative MPs defeated in 1997 and has continued to play a major role in the party. He had joined the party in Essex at a young age and had already been leader of Thurrock Council before he became an MP. He is now an assessor for potential parliamentary candidates and Chairman of the Eastern Region of the party and the latter gives him a place on the Central Committee of the Conservative Party.

His involvement with ex-Conservative MPs led him to play a major role in the Association of ex-MPs for which he is currently Treasurer. He is also a Trustee of the Parliamentary Pensions Fund representing former members. The experience in Parliament and with his family firm led him to become Chairman of the International Sweeteners Association for whom he lobbied in Brussels on issues such as the sweeteners directive. He has also helped fundraise for the Leys School in Cambridge and has been involved in turning his old school into a Technology College. He did not attempt to return to Parliament though he stood for Europe but was 'too pro-European and too anti-hunting' to be put high enough on the list to be elected. 'I have tried to use my experience as an MP to help the community and the party', he says.

Among those Conservative MPs who left parliament in 1997 who answered the relevant question in our survey, fully 60 per cent had been unable to return to the careers they had had before becoming MPs (significantly, this is almost twice the average percentage in our survey). And this group of former MPs seems to have taken a while longer to find work than was the norm across our survey. Whereas, overall, 52 per cent of our respondents said that they found work almost immediately or within three months, only 39 per cent of the Conservatives exiting in 1997 did so. The percentage of those whose job-search lasted 6-12 months was twice the average in our survey (26 per cent compared to 12.9 per cent).

## ■ Pros and cons to being an ex-MP

There were pros and cons to being an ex-MP when it came to finding a job. Equal numbers in our survey answered either that it was an ‘advantage’ (43, or 39.1 per cent) or a ‘disadvantage’ (39.1 per cent of those who answered), when asked about this, with 11 (10 per cent) reporting that this status was irrelevant or made no difference and nine (8.2 per cent) reporting it as a mixed blessing. ‘It was an advantage, but not nearly as much as it once was,’ reported one ex-MP.

A number of others agreed it was an advantage, but ‘not enough by itself’, ‘qualifications are more important’, or that ‘it was good that I’d also done several non-executive directorships while an MP’. Many clearly found the ‘ex-MP’ tag something of a handicap, however. ‘You are viewed with suspicion,’ said one. ‘Bosses think you know better than they do,’ was a former Labour MP’s view.

One of the most commonly-cited reasons was the perception of would-be employers that ex-MPs were hoping or planning to return to the House of Commons – the ‘how long will you stay?’ question. Here are a number of typical comments: ‘There was a suspicion that you would be away if given the chance of another parliamentary seat.’ ‘The main problem was the assumption I’d be returning to the House of Commons soon.’ ‘Some employers may be concerned that ex-MPs may be too politically-minded or active for them, and may be more committed to a return to parliament than to the job in hand.’ ‘The first question at interviews was always “Do you want to stand again?”’ ‘Interviewers suspected that I would be a “bird of passage”’.

Perhaps as a reaction against this attitude, one former MP felt that it was important for defeated politicians to ‘make a commitment either to go for a new seat or to get some new career. Don’t start on a new career constantly looking over your shoulder.’

## ■ How do jobs compare with being an MP?

Asked how employment and work compared to being an MP, the broad breakdown was that 41 of the 97 respondents who answered this question (42.3 per cent) emphasized the positive aspects of employment after leaving parliament, while 33 (34.0 per cent) gave negative answers, and 23 (23.7 per cent) described post-parliamentary employment in mixed or other terms.

To quote a range of the positive comments:

- ‘Good to work 9-5, more or less’
- ‘Better life-style; more time for other things’
- ‘I was “the boss” in a challenging and enjoyable post’
- ‘Not being at the public’s beck and call and having a mid-week life again’
- ‘Less stressful’
- ‘Less tense, less overwhelming, less harrying by the media’
- ‘An 8 hour day for 5 days a week, compared to 16 hours for 6 days and on call for the 7th’
- ‘More fun; better paid’
- ‘Much more freedom’
- ‘Wonderful: more money, more fun, shorter hours, more overseas work, bonuses, etc’
- ‘Half the work for twice the pay!’ ‘No three-line whips!’

The negative comments made about post-parliamentary employment included the following:

- ‘Less exciting.’
- ‘Not in the same league’
- ‘Nothing quite compares’
- ‘Not the same, but it paid the bills’
- ‘Almost no job lives up to some aspects of parliamentary life’
- ‘Not as stimulating as parliamentary life’
- ‘Less satisfying’
- ‘Dull’
- ‘Very slow’
- ‘Still regret not being in the House’
- ‘A step down’
- ‘Demeaning’
- ‘Pale comparison’
- ‘It’s a hard, cold, unforgiving world outside Westminster’
- ‘No expenses for motor driving, no secretary, no parking space, part-time only’
- ‘Not being at the centre of things’
- ‘Much less interesting’

The balance-sheet was mixed, according to other former MPs, who answered with comments such as:

- ‘About the same’
- ‘Equal’
- ‘No change’
- ‘Better hours, more pay, less monotony, but less “attention” and influence’

- 'More remunerative, [but] less varied and challenging'
  - 'Much better paid, more interesting but less satisfying.'
  - 'Some pluses, some minuses'
  - 'More relaxed, less hectic, but of lower status'
- 'Less stressful, weekends free – but less flexibility during the week, no recesses!'
  - 'More regular routine, much more time with my family at home – but work less interesting.'



**SPENCER BATISTE** was Conservative MP for Elmet 1983-97. A solicitor before he entered parliament, he kept one foot in the law while an MP (including being Law Clerk to Sheffield Assay Office and as a founding board member of what is now the law firm DLA Piper).

He believes strongly that outside interests make MPs better informed and more in touch with reality. They also mean that there isn't necessarily 'a totally abrupt falling off the precipice' if they lose their seats, as he puts it.

Had he lost his seat in 1992 (when he was 47) - as many expected - he would probably have resumed full-time legal practice. But five years further on, and anticipating defeat in 1997, he envisaged putting together a legal/business portfolio with perhaps three or four different things (some new, some continuing from his time as an MP and before). He didn't plan to stay in full-time politics. 'I anticipated that the party would be in opposition for at least 10 years and in my fifties it was better to start another career.'

In the event, his career moved in a direction which meant having to give up political activity altogether: he became a judge. He replied to adverts and went through rigorous and competitive selection procedures. He made it clear that his political days were entirely over. He was turned down for a post as an Industrial Tribunal chairman for which he had a lot of relevant experience but where, as a result of his work in Parliament in this field, he might have been regarded as carrying too much political baggage (something he has no complaints about). But he did become an Immigration Adjudicator in late 1997 (an area of public policy in which he had not been involved in Parliament). He expected this would be a part-time post and just one element of the portfolio he was planning, but the work almost immediately mushroomed into a virtual full-time commitment, and after 18 months he successfully applied for a full-time position. He then had to drop all his other appointments.

He has since been promoted, becoming a Vice-President of the Immigration Appeals Tribunal and then, following re-organisation, a Senior Immigration Judge on the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal.

Now in his early sixties he is starting gradually to run down from full-time to part-time work over the next few years. He admits that he had faced a steep learning curve but found this area of law and the issues involved fascinating, and rates this phase of his life and career favourably compared to being an MP: he is better off, finds the work very satisfying and intellectually stimulating, and has much more space for private life and his family. 'Decide what you want to do and go for it', would be his advice to an MP who has just lost his or her seat. 'Don't fall between two stools through indecisive objectives.'

## ■ Financial rewards

Financially, it was also a mixed picture. A total of 132 respondents answered our question about pay-rewards: two-fifths of them said that they were worse off than they had been as MPs (53, or 40.2 per cent), one-fifth earned 'about the same' (19.7 per cent), while just over a third said that they were better off (47, or 35.6 per cent), and a further six individuals (4.5 per cent) noted that they were worse off initially or for a while, but better off in the longer run (it is likely that a number of those reporting they were better off had been in this position too).

One former MP reported that he had been significantly worse off for two and a half years, but after that financially better off; two others said that they had been worse off for four years before their financial situation improved and earnings surpassed what they had been in parliament. In contrast, one former Conservative MP reported that he was 'substantially better off from day one'.

## ■ Job satisfaction

In regard to the less tangible aspects of job satisfaction and interest, a quarter of our respondents (24.4 per cent) said that post-parliamentary employment was more satisfying and/or more interesting than being an MP. A larger group – edging towards two-fifths (37.4 per cent) – rated it as less interesting and/or satisfying, while a similar proportion (38.3 per cent) identified a mixture of pluses and minuses, said it was 'different' and not comparable, or said that it was 'much the same'.

The 'positive' comments included: 'Work challenging and interesting and much better than being a backbench MP.' 'Different in some ways – but I am loving it.' 'More enjoyable than being a backbencher – but does not compare to being a minister.' 'Interesting in a different way – absorbing and rewarding.'

On the negative side, many said that 'Nothing compares with being an MP'. Other comments in this vein were: 'Less personally satisfying.' 'Less intellectually satisfying.' 'Awful and dismal. I developed an encyclopedic knowledge of day-time TV schedules!' 'Being an MP was all round the most interesting job I ever had.'

The experience of other former MPs was mixed: 'First post-parliamentary job was much less interesting [but] eventual job was as interesting.' 'Initially less, but became equal, and then possibly more [interesting and satisfying].' 'Not as challenging, nor quite as interesting – but less occasionally tedious, equally satisfying.' 'As interesting, but without the same pressures and indeed excitement.' 'Not intellectually [as satisfying], but financially more than compensated for this.'

## ■ Post-parliamentary political activities and public service

Most former MPs appear to remain politically active in various ways. Asked about party-political activities undertaken since leaving the Commons, only one in five (of the 156 respondents who answered this question) reported that they were not active in this sphere (33, or 21.2 per cent).

Almost half (72, or 46.2 per cent) of those who replied were active in a variety of ways at local levels, including membership of (some chairing) local party committees (at ward or constituency level), canvassing and campaigning at local and parliamentary elections, local fundraising, local speaking, local party social events, and/or contacting the local press.

This compares to a third (51, or 32.7 per cent) who reported various party-political activities and engagement at what can be broadly called a 'national' level. This included membership of (some chairing) national-level party committees or groups (eg policy groups and advisory committees), activity in the national party organisation, activity in the House of Lords, service as an MEP, party fund-raising activity and funding advice, speaking and/or attending media events for the party nationally, involvement in candidate selection and advising candidates at a national level.

### *Almost half were active in a variety of ways at local level*

More than half of our respondents (98, or 52.7 per cent of the entire sample) reported that they were still active in their political parties, compared to just over two-fifths (82, or 44.1 per cent) who said that they were not. Reported levels and types of activity varied greatly – 'occasionally', 'only for about two years after retirement', 'extremely active in all respects' – and included attending local meetings, regional meetings, national conferences, and speaking for candidates.

'All the time I interfere and cause a few ripples', reported one ex-MP adding it was 'mainly to prove that I can still "cut the mustard" [and] satisfy my own ego.' Another reported that 'I still enjoy meeting my former constituents' (this was 23 years after his election defeat!).

## ■ Links with former constituencies

Just over one third (68, or 35.6 per cent) reported that they were still politically active in their former constituency while three-fifths (60.2 per cent) were not. However, a significant proportion – 19 out of 68 – reported that this

activity was: 'marginal', 'not much', 'very modest', 'a little', 'occasional', 'limited', largely 'symbolic', or 'only at election time'.

Some others feel that continued involvement would be a mistake. 'I do not want to encroach on my successor', wrote one. 'Resist the temptation to offer too much sage advice to the new incumbent' was how one former MP put it. 'On retirement, sever all official links with your constituency' advised another. In terms of continuing activity within their former constituencies, the picture is rather varied.

More than half of the former MPs we polled (101, or 54.3 per cent) reported that they were politically active in the local area where they lived now (serving on local bodies, contacting the press or other local media, meeting local groups, and so on). This included non-party-political work with local charities, housing associations, chambers of commerce, youth groups, work on environmental or educational issues, and lobbying on local issues (such as post office closures). 'Many people still rely on me to help them', reported one former MP who was active in such ways.

## ■ New interests

Some former MPs deliberately want to move on from their previous political and parliamentary concerns, however. Harry Barnes, a former Labour MP (1987-2005) insisted that he was 'determined to keep out of local politicking' and moved into a 'whole new political field' when he left the Commons, traveling the country in his role as joint president of the Labour Friends of Iraq movement (and visiting trade union officials in Iraqi Kurdistan).<sup>17</sup>

In total, around a quarter of our sample (49, or 26.3 per cent) report having developed new political interests since leaving the Commons. Some switched parties: Brian Sedgemore very publicly left Labour for the Liberal-Democrats; another former Labour MP fought a seat for the SDP-Liberal Alliance at the election after he left the Commons, subsequently joining the Liberal-Democrats; one former Conservative joined the Labour Party, another joined UKIP.

### *A quarter report having developed new political interests since leaving the Commons*

Other respondents mentioned new policy interests they had developed, including housing issues, health questions, disability, the environment, pensions policy and conditions for the elderly, the 'third sector' and international issues. 'I now look more at the big picture', reported one ex-MP. 'I've developed some interests in more depth than was possible as an MP', noted another.

## ■ House of Lords

As many as a quarter of our respondents (46, or 24.7 per cent) had gone on to serve in the House of Lords as peers. (This figure is broadly in line with the percentage of peers – 26 per cent – among the total group of AFMP members we polled.) Geoffrey Howe (Lord Howe of Aberavon) has written of the 'huge . . . differences' between the two Houses of Parliament.<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein, ten of our sample of MPs-turned-peers said that the Lords had turned out to be a bigger or more considerable contrast to the Commons than they had expected; only one said that it was 'very similar'.

'It's a considerable contrast: much of the pleasure and very little of the pressure', said one. 'Some ex-MPs never adapt', thought another. Four respondents mentioned the absence of constituency work in the Lords, with one respondent claiming to 'miss the day-to-day engagement with constituents'. Several were struck by the way in which the Lords was 'quieter', 'more civilised', 'much more easy going', 'more relaxed' (but also, said this person, 'more serious'), and 'not nearly so busy'. One commented that 'there is more time and more sincerity in the Lords; the Commons is run at a fast pace and is too intense'.

The House of Lords was seen by several as 'less partisan' or 'less political' - there is 'no cut and thrust', and 'there is less political point-scoring and more informed debate'. Lords debates were felt to be more 'thoughtful', 'less tense and more informative', 'more reflective' or 'more rational', and based on a 'wider range of experience' or greater expertise than in the Commons.

'The Lords is politer, more restrained, the speeches are more intellectually stimulating', said one respondent, adding 'but the thing it lacks is power'. 'It's great', claimed one, 'everyone in the Lords is polite to each other; most peers are not ambitious'. 'The Lords is much superior', noted one respondent. 'It's far more grown up', was another view.

## ■ Other public positions

A third of the former MPs we polled reported holding or having held elected or appointed public positions after leaving the Commons. This included (at the time of our survey): five MEPs, two elected to serve in the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales, and nine elected to local/county councils.

Nine reported positions on health service bodies/health authorities. Examples of other positions included: the board of the Historic Buildings Council, a local educational action zone, conducting a review for the Home Office, a UN body dealing with the Middle East, the Police Complaints Authority, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Affordable Rural Housing Commission, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the EU Commission, and Sport England.

One former MP reported offers of unpaid chairmanships but said that she wanted paid work and, in any case, would stand again for Parliament. A former Conservative MP said he had had 'tried for' local health service posts but was 'certain that there is a block on ex-Conservative MPs being considered'.

Another Conservative commented that 'I think many ex-Conservatives in 1997 and beyond were excluded after interview, although we applied.' One former MP reported applying for but being turned down for NHS appointments. 'Civil servants responsible for public appointments are prejudiced against politicians', complained another ex-MP.

A total of 53 former MPs out of our sample (28.3 per cent) reported contacts of various sorts with lobbying firms and/or think tanks since leaving the Commons. Three former MPs reported that they had set up or owned lobbying firms, another was a director of a lobbying company, one a consultant to a lobbying company, and two worked as lobbyists. Two former MPs said that they had been offered jobs with lobbyists but had decided not to take them on.

## ■ Women

The relatively small number of women among our respondents makes generalization about their post-parliamentary activities hazardous.

### *'As an older woman I did not get very far'*

Ten per cent of the 343 former MPs we polled were women (34). Only 14 out of the 184 who replied were women (7.6 per cent): nine Labour, four Conservatives and one Liberal Democrat. Five had been defeated and nine retired (including three whose seats had been reorganized or disappeared).

Five of them were in their fifties when they left parliament, seven in their sixties and two in their seventies. Only two of the five defeated women were under 60 when they lost their seats. One chose to retire early (in her mid-fifties), after two terms, saying she 'loathed the parliamentary lifestyle'.

Three women reported problems in finding subsequent employment, one of whom said she was still not in full-time employment two years after losing her seat. Age was a problem in finding work mentioned by a couple: 'as an older woman I did not get very far'. In contrast three women said it had taken 'not too long' or only a month or so to line up employment. While three were financially worse off after leaving parliament, two reported that they were better paid in their new jobs.

Only three women described themselves as no longer active in politics or public life in one way or another. The rest were still active in a wide variety of ways and forums, including their parties, appointments to national organizations and work with charitable bodies, though none reported being elected onto local councils. Four had gone to the House of Lords (roughly the same proportion as with male former MPs).

## ■ Using the skills and experience of former MPs

'I suspect that ex-MPs remain a huge source of experience, wisdom and insight', one respondent commented. 'Their availability should be more widely known.' When we asked our panel what skills they had as former MPs, a wide range of things came up: chairmanship and committee experience; public speaking, communication and advocacy skills ('you learn how to make short speeches with little warning'; 'how to persuade a sceptical audience'); understanding of 'how the system works' (including: knowledge of parliamentary procedures; understanding how government decisions are taken; 'knowing which doors to knock on and arguing a case'; 'how to approach various organisations to get a satisfactory outcome').

Also mentioned were:

- networking skills
- negotiating skills
- 'knowledge of group dynamics'
- 'ability to assess problems quickly and to suggest workable solution' (or 'seeing through bullshit' as one former MP put it)
- dealing with the media; campaigning skills; contacts ('for a period you have a wide range of contacts and knowledge of how public life works')
- 'good contacts - for a while!')
- the ability to deal with and relate to people
- the 'ability to think quickly on my feet'
- 'common sense'
- 'patience'
- multi-tasking and stamina.

In other words, many former MPs see themselves as still having key process skills and abilities that could be used for the public good.

More than half of our respondents (109, or 58.6 per cent) stated that they did not believe that enough use was being made of the experience of former MPs in our national life. 'We are prize media brick bats', explained one.

A number drew a contrast with the position in this respect in the USA. It was, thought one, 'a monstrous waste of experience', or as another put it, 'it is an entire waste of a valuable resource and collective experience once freed

from party-political stances.' 'Ageism is a problem', believed one ex-MP. Another view was that **'there remains a view among sitting MPs that those who have left are non-persons. It is a sort of British equivalent of when they took down Stalin's picture in the Soviet Union.'**

'Politics is harsh - when you are done, you are done, that is it - over and out', wrote one ex-MP, continuing: 'We all know that is how things are, so no regrets, but it may not be to the nation's advantage.' 'I've got a lot more to contribute if I'm asked', said a Labour MP defeated in 2005. 'Election defeat is an abrupt and arbitrary interruption (sometimes terminal) of an individual's usefulness, irrespective of their abilities.'

Against those views, a small minority - one in eight (12.4 per cent) of our respondents - believed that the national role, profile and contribution of former MPs were about right. 'Reputation is all', said one ex-MP, and 'many ex-MPs have not built a reputation that goes wider than the House of Commons.' 'We have no "right" [to a continued public role]', thought one ex-MP. 'It is for former MPs to find adequate roles for themselves; not for others to find them.' 'Nothing comes easily - the good ones will make it', was another view.

## ■ Conclusion

Our analysis of the survey of former MPs casts light on a wide range of issues in relation to the process of leaving Parliament and about what MPs do after the Commons.

It ranges from more prosaic aspects, such as the redirecting of email, to the often intense aspects of election defeat.

There were broadly three groups of MPs leaving the Commons; those who were around 65 and who had decided that their Parliamentary career should come to an end; those, largely younger, MPs who had lost their seat in an election or, in some cases, as a result of boundary changes; and a smaller group who chose to leave to start a new career. A number of those retiring and defeated went to the House of Lords - a political forum which they generally found more different to the Commons than they had expected.

The research highlighted common problems, such as adjusting to being removed from the political intensity of the Commons and having to sort out the closure of parliamentary offices, though experiences varied and, even more, the reaction of individuals to what happened was different.

Some were resigned or optimistic or relieved at leaving, others suffered financial problems or emotional trauma. Election defeat, not expected by a third of MPs, provided the greatest difficulties.

The constant campaigning needed to nurse a marginal constituency was mentioned by several former MPs but, despite all this work, they felt at the mercy of a national swing or unpopular national party policies when the defeat came. Defeat was an emotional experience for former MPs, who also had to comfort equally distressed supporters and family. For many, it had an effect on their self-perception and led a few into serious depression. This was compounded by the difficulties of arranging for their office staff and closing down their office activity, a process that many found unsatisfactory. By contrast, the staff of retiring MPs seemed to be able to adjust reasonably well.

Although many former MPs rejected the need for support, what was available came mostly from family and close friends, with some from office staff and local party members. However, local supporters and the media sometimes made things more difficult. Some felt that the parties and/or Parliament itself could offer more help to defeated MPs in adjusting and in finding employment.

As MPs, respondents had clearly enjoyed the 'buzz' of the Commons and being at the centre of things, and the status and influence that this gave, as well as the 'club atmosphere' and facilities at Westminster - and they clearly missed these things. This was, however, at the expense of the long hours of work, with their effect on family life, and the feeling of constantly being 'on call' in London and in the constituency. Those who went to the Lords attested to the frenetic nature of the Commons by comparison.

### *Some felt that the parties and/or Parliament itself could offer more help to defeated MPs in adjusting and in finding employment*

Nevertheless, the former MPs replying to the questionnaire appear overwhelmingly as a group of public-minded individuals.

They missed involvement in the constituency and dealing with its needs, even though the sheer weight of letters and individual problems could be exhausting, and they missed being able to have an influence on public policy areas that they cared about. The life of MPs after the Commons shows this more clearly.

Almost all former MPs continued to be active in public life whether with their political party, in local organisations or on public bodies. They felt that they had a range of skills such as negotiating and understanding how policies can be influenced which they could bring to bear. There is a question, however, as to whether this potential 'civil society resource' is as fully used as it might be.

MPs now seem to feel that they should retire at 65, so there are hardly any MPs of pensionable age, even though this group makes up an increasing proportion of the general public.

Although some former MPs do not feel that they need extra access to the Commons or even go back there, many felt excluded from that area of public life. Former MPs who tried to find a new job found that age was often a barrier as was sometimes the suspicion of employers.

This was in contrast to the many constituents and party members who seemed to value their local MP and

expressed regret at their retirement or defeat. The job of backbench MPs only seems to allow its occupants to establish a reputation in the Commons and the constituency, perhaps because individually they are largely ignored by the national media and have little time available for other aspects of public life.

Most former MPs have carved out new public or professional roles for themselves, as well as spending valued time with their families, but the Smoking Room epithet, 'nothing so ex as an ex-MP' summarises the predicament that they face at the point when they leave the Commons.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons debates, 2 May 2001, col. 904.

<sup>2</sup> James Landale, 'There is nothing quite as ex as an ex-MP', *The Times*, 19 July 1997.

<sup>3</sup> 'Thrown out of the house', *The Guardian*, 1 June 2005.

<sup>4</sup> David Charter, 'The Afterlife', *Times magazine*, 29 April 2006, p.32.

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons debates, 2 May 2001, cols. 904-905.

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Administration Committee, *Post-Elections Services; First Report of Session 2005-06*, HC 777 (January 2006), p.33, and written evidence, pp.8, 11.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p.33.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>10</sup> *Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund First Report*, Report by the Government Actuary, 2005-06 session, 30 March 2006.

<sup>11</sup> 'Thrown out of the house', *The Guardian*, 1 June 2005.

<sup>12</sup> 'There is nothing quite as ex as an ex-MP', *The Times*, 19 July 1997.

<sup>13</sup> 'The men who fell to earth: night and day', *Mail on Sunday*, 17 August 1997.

<sup>14</sup> David Charter, 'The Afterlife', *Times magazine*, 29 April 2006, p.29.

<sup>15</sup> House of Commons debates, 2 May 2001, col. 907.

<sup>16</sup> Austin Mitchell, *Westminster Man* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.261.

<sup>17</sup> <http://threescoreyearsandten.blogspot.com/2006/09/house-for-home.html> [accessed 9.1.2007].

<sup>18</sup> Lord Howe of Aberavon, 'Membership of the House of Commons and House of Lords: A Comparison and Discussion', in Nicholas D. J. Baldwin (ed), *Parliament in the 21st Century* (London, Politico's, 2005), p.133.