

The “job” of an MP

With the arrival of many new MPs at Westminster this week for their first year in office I will write a few pieces about the role of an MP, inviting your comments on what you want us to do.

Being an MP is not just a “job”. It is a way of life. My first advice to new colleagues is you are an MP 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Your time “working” may be closer to the standard 40 hour week of a “full time” employee, but for all 168 hours of the week you are an MP.

You are on call all the time in case some disaster strikes your constituency or our country. The constituency cases and emails come in at week-ends as well as during the week and sometimes need urgent replies.

You may be sitting at home listening to the news, but that may trigger some need to intervene following a news item. You may be in the local shops, but may then see something which needs following up for the sake of constituents.

I have included the 56 hours you are asleep or relaxing in bed though you would be wise not to take your MP work to bed with you. I do so because if you spend time in the wrong bed or share a bed with an inappropriate person you would soon find out that the media and public thought your bedtime a matter of public concern and debate.

Let us suppose you manage to carry out your duties in Parliament and answering emails, and dealing with constituency queries and cases in say 40-50 hours a week on average, you will have to accept that some weeks your working hours will be much longer. My second piece of advice is do not fight the need to be in Parliament when it is sitting and debating and voting on important matters. Surely that is what you have struggled to be able to do. Some MPs no sooner get elected than they are nagging the whips to allow them free time when Parliament is debating and deciding important issues. This leaves them tense and the party feeling a bit let down by them as the whips agonise over which request they can allow. There are days when we sit beyond 10pm and need to be there for a variety of good reasons. You also cannot do constituency correspondence on an iPad whilst taking a serious interest in a debate or Question time. If you are in the chamber it needs your attention.

Parliament meets to hold votes and make decisions about matters of interest to most people around 100 days a year. If those days coincide with a wedding anniversary, an important family birthday or a social event you just want to do you are likely to be disappointed. Explain in advance to friends and family that there are times when Parliament must come first. It is always possible to make up for that unfortunate truth by having a bigger and better celebration at the next available Friday or week-end when Parliament will not be wanting you in the evening or at all. Other Parliamentary days totalling around 70 offer debates which you may or may not wish to join, without votes you have to attend, so they offer more flexibility. For around 17 weeks a year or 85 week days Parliament is in recess, and there are 104

weekend days off. This allows considerable flexibility on how to organise events outside Westminster, meet the need to do things in the constituency and have time for yourself and your family. It is always a good idea to book out family time for non Parliamentary days well in advance and to stick to it in most cases.