

What is it like being an MP?

Today I cease to be an MP. I can now tell you more of what it is like, free of criticism that what I say is to put a favourable spin on how I undertook the tasks. As we embark on choosing new MPs we should discuss what we want them to do and how they should behave.

I never saw it as a job but an important part of my life. You are an MP 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year. It is not a 9-5 office job with holidays as some seem to think it should be.

You are on call all the time. You dread one of those calls that there has been a big fire, or train crash or other disaster because you want nothing to go wrong. If one occurs, as I remember only too vividly, you need to be present but must not get in the way of the emergency services. You need to be brief and be briefed so the people coming to help know the local circumstances and you grasp their expertise and way of handling the crisis. You may be able to call up additional resources or to offer comfort to those affected.

You are the complaints department for anything to do with public services. People annoyed with government do not readily distinguish between Council, central government or independent quango and see the MP as the person to sort it out. During my weekly walkabouts and drives I went to see for myself. Resolving problems with local services and national services supplied locally was an important part of the task and you need to see the impact they are having locally. The email and post bag is a good guide to when things go wrong, but personal visits also reveal additional issues more directly.

You are part of the chain gang with the King's Representatives and Mayors to be present at important events and ceremonies. Annually we meet to mourn the lives lost by armed forces personnel. We meet to commemorate national anniversaries. Communities and individuals do like recognition and public thanks.

You need to be a self starter with an enquiring mind. The whips and your party leadership will give you an agenda and ask you to back their judgement, but you need to read and see for yourself and where necessary disagree. You need to be vigilant for anything about to happen that may do harm to your constituents, and lobby, speak out or ask questions to head it off. Where need arises you should run a campaign to get support for something you and your constituents need to be changed. Your party has no monopoly of wisdom and no immunity from error. You need numbers of MPs to support a good cause as well as good arguments to get action.

There are 650 different ways of being an MP. There is no one single right way but there are some wrong ways. I have been amazed at how many MPs have lost office through ill judged comments, bad behaviour, and criminal activity. Do not become an MP if you want to take drugs, get drunk or bad mouth people. I have been dismayed when the occasional MP is laid low by

false allegations.

There is said to be some disagreement over whether an MP should be more like the people they represent or whether their behaviour should be better and more discrete. I always found it was good to seek to understand the point of view of whoever you were dealing with, and to be courteous in reply even when you were being provoked or abused. As I regularly explained, I would represent everyone where they had a case or cause, whatever their view. That did not mean however I could agree with everyone. I had views of what was best, set out in an election prospectus. Constituents disagree a lot with each other so there is rarely a unified constituency view. An MP does need to provide a lead and provide a consistent general view of where we are aiming to go, whilst making sure the minority view can be put to authority and answered by them.

A large volume of email correspondence takes the form of special campaigns organised by lobby groups. These are usually minority views and some are the worst kind of special pleading. Increasingly they relate to policy and attitudes in foreign countries where a UK MP's writ does not run. An MP should engage but remember that they are not usually the majority view. It is also important to remind correspondents that the view of an individual UK MP is unlikely to change the action of a foreign government. The UK government may have some power of influence but will use it only where it will not make things worse and is a justified attempted interference in another country's affairs.