

A Day in the Life of an MP

By Georgia Luscombe



Diary

On Wednesday 8th July 2009, I went to London for the day to shadow my local MP (Lorely Burt, MP for Solihull). I arrived at quarter to nine in the morning, outside Portcullis House, and was greeted by Lorely's assistant and researcher, Ben Rathe.

He was incredibly welcoming and friendly, taking me to Lorely's office whilst asking me all about myself; which school I went to, which year I was in and which AS levels I would be taking next year. Lorely was equally friendly, offering me an armchair in her office and asking me similar questions.

We also discussed our shared interest in women in Politics. She told me about the work she does to support women become MPs and then get elected. She is the first woman to become head of Business, Industry and Skills and she told me about the work she has been doing to encourage women in business. She recently went to the United States, where twice as many women are Director of their company as in the United Kingdom, to find out how they do it. Apparently American women are far more ruthless than us! It must be our impeccable British manners that stop us achieving the same success.

My first activity of the day was to shadow Lorely in a meeting with Peter Ibbetson, the Chairman for Small Business Banking at the Royal Bank of Scotland. He also was very friendly and I was surprised at how much he asked me about myself (whether I wanted to go into Politics, etc). I felt very privileged to be sitting at this meeting, listening to all of the things RBS have been doing to help small businesses in the recession. It was fascinating to hear all of the things the government are doing to help too, and I was glad to hear that things are slowly getting better for businesses suffering in the current economic climate.

Without a break, Lorely, her advisor Andy Clegg and I were off to another meeting, this time with Sue Robinson, the Director of the Retail Motor Industry Federation. This time I learnt about how the recession is affecting car manufacturers and dealers and again what the government are doing to help.

Lorely then went to attend Prime Minister's Question Time in the House of Commons, but unfortunately there were no tickets left for me. As Gordon Brown was away at the G8 Summit and Harriet Harman was standing in instead, I wasn't all too disappointed. Ben took me on a short tour of Parliament, and then we went back to Lorely's office.

I learnt how to filter Lorely's post; what she would like to read, what goes straight in the bin and what requires a response. I was given letters from Lorely's constituents to read and reply to (using a template and some added personal comments). Letters concerning Lorely's constituency are classed as 'case work' and all have to be filed and photocopied so that she can keep a record of issues that need to be raised in Parliament or dealt with when she goes back to Solihull.

I wrote one letter that was going out to over 100 licensed establishments (concerning a vote in the House of Commons the previous day about beer tax). I felt very important to be given that responsibility; Lorely said my grammar and layout was 'impeccable' - just one advantage of a King Edwards VI High School for Girls education I think!

For lunch I was taken to the café in which MPs and their researchers eat. Everything was displayed to the highest standard and I took about ten minutes to decide what to have from the vast array of food. What's more, I stood in the queue behind the Home Secretary! Needless to say, I was somewhat star struck.

The rest of the afternoon was quite quiet compared to Lorely's usual timetable, so we spent a lot of time doing case work, opening post and 'stuffing' letters (putting them into envelopes). Anywhere else I suppose this would have been slightly boring, but there is always something to keep you on your toes; Lorely may urgently need something for another meeting or somebody very important will be on the phone.

I left at about half past five, having thanked Lorely and Ben enormously for looking after me so well and teaching me so much. Lorely was impressed by the work I had done and invited me to come to her office in our constituency to help with her campaign work, in the build up to the next election. I will be sure to take her up on this offer very soon!

I think I can safely say I learnt more from one day in Parliament than I would have done in a week anywhere else! I would strongly encourage other people to take up the opportunity, as there is so much to experience that would not be possible without going there yourself.

Glossary (useful terms and phrases)

Constituency – this is an area for which an MP is responsible. For example, if you live in Birmingham or Edgbaston, this is your **constituency** and your MP is Gisela Stuart.

Constituent – someone who lives in a constituency.

Adjournment debate – this is just a debate in the House of Commons that does not require a vote at the end. The main business in the Commons includes debates on **legislation**, general topics of interest or issues raised.

Legislation – this begins with a 'Bill' which either starts in the House of Commons or the House of Lords. In each House it goes through the same process: reading, second reading, committee stage, report stage and third reading. Any amendments are added and when both Houses agree on it, it is signed by the Queen and passed as a law.

Questions – these are put forward to government ministers by MPs (often on behalf of their **constituents**). As well as *oral questions* in the House of Commons, MPs can send *written questions*, which the minister then has to reply to in writing. The question can be about anything from tax to foreign policy.

EDM (Early Day Motion) – these are motions put forward by MPs that do not have any legislative power. Other MPs can sign them (like a petition) to show their support. **EDMs** can be referred to when an MP is asking a **question** to show support for that particular issue.

Portfolio – an MP may have an area in which they specialise (e.g. Business). This is called their **Portfolio** and requires them to look after any issues that arise within it.

Daily Business

In the House of Commons a daily schedule will look like this:

- Prayers (this practice began in about 1558)
- Question Time (where **questions** are asked)
- Ministerial Statements
- Divisions (these are votes made by members of the House)
- **Adjournment Debates**

An MP does not sit in the Commons all day. They will also:

- Attend meetings
- Answer letters and e-mails
- Attend publicity events, e.g. having a radio/TV interview

Helpful Tips

The best experience you can get of what it is like in Parliament is to go there and shadow your local MP for the day.

1. Check with your parents that travelling to London for the day is possible. If not, there are opportunities to shadow your MP in your own constituency.
2. Write a letter to your local MP. They *have to* respond, so you have nothing to lose! Make your self sound interesting and also genuinely interested in Politics. MPs are keen to involve young people in their work, so you'll be surprised at how much they will appreciate your letter.
3. If your response letter from them is positive, they will probably give you a number to call to arrange a date. Call as soon as possible and have a *range* of dates ready, which you have checked with your parents. Wednesdays are best as most MPs are in Parliament for Prime Minister's Question Time (where MPs can ask questions to the Prime Minister). You may see some famous faces!
4. Next you may receive an e-mail from your MP's personal assistant or researcher, who will be your point of contact. They will answer any questions you have and arrange the finer details of your visit.
5. Turn up in London! The best way to get to Parliament is on the tube. The nearest station is Westminster, on the District Line. Have a look at a tube map on the internet and plan your journey carefully.
6. Make sure you are punctual and dressed smartly. You will not see one person in Parliament wearing jeans! You will probably be met outside Portcullis House and taken to meet your MP by their assistant.
7. Your MP will ask you questions about yourself. Have answers prepared so you're not too nervous; such as what your interests are, why you are interested in Politics, which subjects you are taking for GCSE/A-level.
8. The rest of the day will be quite specific to your visit. You may go to meetings with your MP, study casework from the constituency, watch debates in the House of Commons or have a tour of Parliament. No matter what you are doing, it is sure to be exciting! Be polite at all times and ask as many questions as you want to.
9. Whilst you are there, there may be opportunities to answer letters that have been written to your MP by their constituents. Therefore, you should have perfected your grammar, layout and general letter-writing skills before you go. If your MP is impressed by the work you can do, they may offer you further opportunities.
10. Gain as much as your can from the experience; ask questions, go and see anywhere you're interested in, do as much as possible to help out. Most of all enjoy it!