

Administration Committee

Oral evidence: General Election Planning and Services, HC 209

Monday 12 December 2022

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Members present: Sir Charles Walker (Chair); John Cryer; Michael Fabricant; Marion Fellows; Mrs Pauline Latham; Dame Maria Miller; Jessica Morden.

Questions 68-94

Witnesses

[I](#): Luciana Berger, former Member of Parliament.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Luciana Berger.

Q68 Chair: Luciana, thank you for coming to see the Administration Committee and for giving evidence to our inquiry into general elections. This session is focusing on the way that Members of Parliament are treated when they leave this place.

We will ask you a number of questions, but I suppose the first question is this: when you failed to win a seat at the 2019 general election and your tenure in this place came to an end, in the departing process overseen by the House and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, please tell us what worked and then tell us what did not work? Is that all right?

Luciana Berger: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Sir Charles. It is a pleasure and a privilege to join you all here today to share what I think is the experience of many former MPs of what happened at the last election. I was reflecting on the fact that it is now coming up to three years since then. I spoke to some of my former team in preparation for today to gather some of our reflections; it is fair to say that as time passes, you perhaps don't recall all the details.

What I do remember of that time is that we got a questionnaire—a survey—to ask us how the process had been a number of months after the end. I was so incensed that I failed to fill it out; I had to just walk away at that moment. But on behalf of colleagues who might leave at the next election, I really welcome the fact that this Committee is doing this report. I think anything that can be done to improve the process for current and future Members of Parliament is to be welcomed. That is not because I think MPs deserve special consideration or some sort of special treatment—and our staff, because this is not just about what happens to MPs; it is our staff as well—but I think it is really important that the House models good behaviour that we expect of other employers and of the civil service. There are some very specific circumstances when it comes to vacating MPs that you perhaps don't experience in other workplaces that deserve some attention, because they are so specific and wouldn't happen anywhere else.

Q69 Chair: Would you describe those for the Committee, please?

Luciana Berger: Absolutely. The first reflection is very visceral. When the election is called, everyone leaves very quickly because you are going to fight a campaign. There is no time to think about what happens in the intervening period. It was at Christmas time—December 2019. It was pretty cold, much like the weather we are experiencing today. When you don't win an election, you are told that you have a week to vacate your parliamentary office, but it is not a week, because—

Q70 Mrs Latham: Can I just interrupt? I can't remember—did you leave voluntarily, or were you beaten? Did you lose your seat?

Chair: No, she lost a seat.

Luciana Berger: Yes, I lost a seat. For background, I stood in a different constituency. I had left the Labour party in February 2019 and I fought for a different seat in that general election.

Mrs Latham: Okay, sorry. That is much more difficult because it is not planned.

Luciana Berger: Yes, although any election is not planned, whether you are fighting for your own seat or another seat. You go into election mode; you can't think of anything else. If you're fighting an election, you're in it because you think there is a chance that you might win it. You can't really consider what to do or what might happen if you don't win—

Chair: So you were given a week.

Luciana Berger: You're given a week, but it is not a week. It is a week from the day of the election, so it is actually only four working days. I had the privilege of serving as an MP for just shy of a decade, and I reflect on that experience with great warmth and affection for my constituents and as the amazing privilege that it was. In that time, as I am sure colleagues present with more years of experience than me will know, you accumulate a wealth of materials, letters and correspondence—I am just speaking to what happens in your office here in Westminster. I had 10 years' worth of letters and cards that people had sent me and things constituents had sent to me. It was 20 boxes of stuff—big boxes. You essentially have four working days to pack up all your things; I think it is fair to say that it didn't really feel like there was any preparation done in advance of that to adequately help Members at that moment.

Q71 **Chair:** This is from 12 December, you're saying.

Luciana Berger: Yes. You come into the office where you have all this stuff. Again, it is not just the outgoing MP who has lost an election or a campaign; it is also our staff, many of whom will have often worked with us for a number of years, who are dealing with the shock of the fact that they are going to lose their jobs. But, out of the kindness of their hearts in that circumstance—when you probably want to be mindful of your employees; you want to give them some space and time—they will roll their sleeves up to help, as I saw many staff of former MPs doing.

Those four days were certainly not enough to adequately box up my stuff. That is just in terms of a very practical point. I know we are going to come on to talk about what happened at the Non-returning Members' Centre. The very act of having to pack up your stuff after 10 years, as anyone who has had, essentially, a work home will know, is a challenging task. Just the time alone in that period was quite tricky. I remember coming back into the building, into Portcullis, and it was almost quite Americanised. It felt like I was coming into a Disney theme park. You had people wearing T-shirts and caps: "Welcome to Parliament" to all the new MPs. That was wonderful for all those new MPs, but to come into the building as a non-returning MP—we will come to talk about the specifics of what happened at



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the back of the building, where the non-returning Members were relegated—was pretty tricky.

I think that is where this experience is different from other workplaces. It might be difficult if you have a workplace that goes through a reorganisation, restructure or massive redundancy, where you are dealing with lots of employees who are having a very difficult time, and that is awful. Here, you have the stark contrast of exuberance—of new Members who are full of life coming into the building. There is a job to do to welcome them—and rightly so—but you are balancing that with people having to pack up their things and offices and to vacate the building. It was a very stark contrast, and it felt pretty challenging.

Q72 **Chair:** Okay. Tell us about the Members' Centre, and then other colleagues will want to come in and ask you questions. Was it called the retiring Members'—

Luciana Berger: I actually took a photograph of what it looked like at the time. You had to laugh, otherwise you would cry. I say that in jest now. It is not funny, because there were outgoing Members who were crying. These are people's lives. These are things that people have done and given of themselves, for however many years they have served in this place. I took a picture, which I still have on my phone. I went back to it. It was this big printed sign on a proper plastic banner that was attached to the bins at the back of Richmond House. I have the picture here. If you have not seen it, I will share it.

Q73 **Chair:** Will you forward it to our Clerk, please?

Luciana Berger: I will, yes. It says, "Welcome to the non-returning Members centre". I spoke to my outgoing office manager. I am very much still in contact with her today; we are really very close. She called it "inhumane". She came with me. In fact, she was not allowed in the room with me. She was my office manager, and we were also very close at the time. She was not allowed to come to various meetings and discussions, and it would have been helpful, because she was at my side, if she could have helped with the process. Certainly that was her language and her description, in preparation for today.

Q74 **Michael Fabricant:** Sorry to interrupt. What you are saying is fascinating. When you say she was not allowed in with you, was that because there was not the room, or what? Who told you?

Luciana Berger: You went into various rooms. You were sort of escorted around this centre. You were taken into specific rooms to be told what you owed IPSA, what your responsibilities were when it came to data, and about all the equipment that you had to return. But she was not allowed to come into those rooms with me. They were rooms that would have very easily fitted another person, but she had to wait outside. You were escorted from one room to the other. I think I was also escorted to the toilet on one occasion. They had a plate with some remnants of some Quality Street—it was obviously Christmastime. Again, you have to laugh, otherwise you would cry.



I am not making light of the situation. It felt so awful at the time. I would not want anyone to be treated in this way. You come out of an election when you are losing the thing that you have given your life to, for however many years. I have taken that as an experience of how I would not want to treat my employees today. It was an experience of what not to do rather than what to do. You immediately had your pass removed. You had to be escorted everywhere, whether it is around that centre or around the building. At moments, it felt like you were a criminal.

Q75 Chair: And then, of course, you have to worry about your staff and making them redundant. The wind-up takes time. You probably did not really have time, in those early months, to look for a job or even think about a job for yourself, but then again there is no resettlement grant and there is a limited amount of redundancy. How long did it take you to sort your life out, before you could even start thinking about looking for work?

Luciana Berger: I come back to the specific time that this happened. It was just before Christmas, so you have just a few months, but then a couple of those weeks are Christmas and new year. We were also in the run-up to Brexit, so that had some financial considerations when it came to people's homes. Certainly, I had to try and sell my home very quickly, because I couldn't maintain two homes; I wasn't in a financial position to be able to do that. I wasn't in a position to secure a mortgage, because—

Chair: You didn't have a job.

Luciana Berger: Because I didn't have a job, and I was very worried about what would happen to housing, so a number of concurrent processes were happening at the time when it came to my personal circumstances. I had a baby who was 10 months old and a daughter who was two, so again, I was trying to do all of this at the same time as having young children in two cities.

If it wasn't for the fact that I pay for additional childcare and was very fortunate to have grandparents in both cities, in both London and Liverpool, again, my office manager said, "I just don't know how you would have managed to practically do everything that had to be done—to wind up the office and do everything that was required when it came to handing over cases and doing all the administration that was required from IPSA." There was a lot. Again, my former office manager reflects on a time when I was heavily laden with suitcases and had to go on to a train. She said, "I felt like I was just chucking you on." You had to do so much between the two cities in order to physically close down two offices and to do everything when it came to the redundancy. She said, "You didn't have any time to think about the job that might come next," so to your question about how long it took me, it took me a long time.

Chair: Luciana, time is limited. Do you mind me bringing colleagues in, because you've painted a pretty bleak picture here? I'll bring Maria in, then Jess, and then Pauline and Michael.



Q76 Dame Maria Miller: Luciana, thank you so much for coming along today. We are really grateful to you for taking the time to give evidence. Can I ask you two questions: first, how long did it take you to wind up your office from beginning to end, particularly taking into account the point you make about Christmas? Secondly, of the support that you received from the House of Commons and IPSA, is there anything you would say did work well, and is there anything additionally you would like to see improved?

Luciana Berger: I will try to canter through answering all those questions, because they are really important ones. I would reflect that the staff in the House of Commons were very kind. The processes weren't in place, but they certainly tried to be helpful; they just didn't have the things at their disposal to make it easy, but there was certainly kindness that I saw from those people. My office was formerly in Norman Shaw, so certainly the staff around there were trying to be as helpful and kind as possible.

There were so many challenges with IPSA. They were incredibly slow; they were incredibly inflexible; and there were massive delays when it came to receiving payments for things, which had an impact on cash flow, particularly at Christmas and new year. Officially, I think we had two months to wind up, and that is to IPSA's timescales—that is expecting everything to happen as they wished, but it didn't.

I have it formally on my record that I did not pay back part of a deposit for the most recent office accommodation that we had. That was because, despite our best efforts, the ownership of the office had changed hands on a number of occasions. Our best efforts could not recover this money—I forget how many hundreds of pounds it was, but on a point of principle, I wasn't going to put my hand in my pocket and pay for it, because there were so many other things that I had to pay for. It's like a stain on my record, because I was unable to recover this money despite mine and my outgoing office manager's best efforts, so you felt like the finger was pointed at you.

I was presented with a list of all the equipment that we were supposed to return, and there were certainly things on that list that I had no record of having received. Again, it was this whole challenge where we were supposed to return something that we didn't even know we had in the first place. It was particularly challenging trying to sort out transferring the London accommodation that I had lived in into my personal name—the date at which I was allowed to do that, or when I had to start paying for it myself—as well as paying for two homes. It was particularly tricky. There are many things that I would change; I can't say that I reflect on that process very fondly. As I said, it was a lesson of what not to do, rather than what to do.

Q77 Dame Maria Miller: Roughly how long did it take you in the end to wind it all up?



Luciana Berger: We just about stuck to the IPSA timescales, but that doesn't allow individuals any time to do their own affairs. It's almost like I had to do everything that I had to do to wind up the two offices, to make my staff redundant and to do all the practical things required, but I wasn't able to do anything when it came to my—you know, what happens as a result of living in two cities, having two homes and two very young children? All of that element of it, at the same time.

That's before you even think about trying to find alternative employment as well, so it's kind of like a three-stage process where you're expected to do all three things concurrently, but you're not really afforded the time or space to be able to do that. You know, "You must do x, y, z, boom, boom, boom, boom. This is what we expect of you. Here's a timetable." There was no accommodation extended to the fact that it was the Christmas period, when things obviously slow down and it's really hard to get hold of people.

Dame Maria Miller: Chair, that's a really interesting notion—a three-stage process.

Chair: Yes. I think we are going to capture that. I will bring in Jess.

Q78 **Jessica Morden:** Thank you very much for coming in. I have certainly heard people say before that you've got equipment that you didn't have and also money being deducted, or payments being delayed, because it was treated as a kind of deposit—returning this thing. Is it true? How fast was your loss of office payments, for instance? I would be quite interested to know about that.

What advice and support did you receive for helping staff who were effectively losing their jobs? And that tension between wanting them to help you wind up and wanting them to get other jobs—how could that bit for staff be improved?

Luciana Berger: Again, I asked my former staff about their experiences and they said that the access to courses was good; they would have perhaps liked more of a variety, but they thought that just the act of providing that was helpful.

There were some particular challenges for MPs if you stood in a different constituency that IPSA was not able to answer and that impacted on my staff at the time. I appreciate that that is a very particular circumstance that doesn't apply to that many outgoing MPs, but it was certainly the experience of my staff.

There were tight timescales around redundancy. They did say that the advice was helpful when it came to the redundancy. But again, there was this assumption on the timescales that everything could be done in a very tight timetable—boom, boom, boom, boom. And again, in the Christmas period, obviously some staff had accrued holiday and wanted to go away. Again, no accommodation was really given to allow people just time and space to let the news sink in.



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Of course people know we're in politics and nothing is certain in politics, and you may not be returned, and that extends to our staff, too. But knowing that and actually experiencing it are two different things. Certainly, I know that it was very challenging for my staff.

I was very mindful to try to be supportive to them—taking them out and spending time with them. That was really important as well. There was some support, but it always took a long time to get the answers. It didn't feel like there were enough people there to expedite the requests. The expectation placed on outgoing MPs was, I thought, imbalanced, in terms of what the expectation was for us to manage that process.

Sorry, what was your first question?

Jessica Morden: It was about how long it took to get the loss of office payment and whether part of it was deducted because you still had equipment and stuff.

Luciana Berger: It was so traumatic that I can't give you the answer to it, about exactly what the outcome was, because I just know I took hits, but I just wanted it done and wrapped up.

It felt very much that we were assumed to be not doing the right thing—it didn't feel like a very positive or helpful process. And I'm sure—I'm almost certain—that there would have been things that I should have got or didn't get, but there was just so much to deal with and contend with that I just let it go.

Q79 **Michael Fabricant:** On the equipment, was it the Parliamentary Digital Service, or PDS, asking you for equipment, or was it IPSA?

Luciana Berger: I think it was IPSA that oversaw the whole process at the non-returning Members' centre. I don't know who was designated to give you the piece of paper that listed all the items that you were expected to return. I don't know how that responsibility was distributed or—

Q80 **Michael Fabricant:** But whose equipment was it?

Luciana Berger: Forgive me, I don't know who technically would be in charge of it. You'll recall—obviously, you're here now, so—

Q81 **Mrs Latham:** You obviously had a pretty torrid time. Just a very practical thing: you said that you'd got 10 large boxes for your office here. What happens to those boxes?

Luciana Berger: It was 20, 20 massive boxes. I paid to put them in storage, because I had nowhere to put them and I had no time to sort them out properly. I probably spent in the region of £1,000 to store them until I was in a position to put them anywhere. All my personal items from my home in Liverpool had to go into storage. I then got stuck in a very small flat because of the pandemic.

Q82 **Mrs Latham:** Would they have transported them if you had room at



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home to take them? Not many people do get 20 boxes like that, but who transports them, if anybody?

Luciana Berger: I did not ask. I just knew that I didn't have the space to put them anywhere. The option given to me was to put them into storage, and I would be responsible for paying for that storage. That is what I did, because I knew that I had nowhere to put them and I didn't have—

Q83 **Chair:** You did not have the time to go through them before you had to vacate your office, and you didn't have a home to put them in because you were trying to sell homes and find new homes.

Luciana Berger: Yes.

Q84 **Mrs Latham:** How long did it take for your staff to get re-employed? Were they re-employed here or did they go out into the real world?

Luciana Berger: All my staff in Liverpool got jobs in and around Liverpool. As for the staff in my parliamentary office, one went to do something completely different and one got a role outside Parliament as well.

Q85 **Mrs Latham:** So nobody stayed within Parliament?

Luciana Berger: No. One took longer than the others to find their next role, so I am not sure whether the redundancy would have covered all the time that it took them to find alternative employment.

Q86 **Chair:** We know it certainly does not cover many colleagues, because many colleagues get basically a month's salary in redundancy. We know of colleagues who have taken months, if not more than a year, to find new employment. We know it is very difficult.

Luciana Berger: I know you had a question about my experience of trying to find alternative employment. As I said, there is a process of closing two offices, making staff redundant, and then trying to work out what to do in two cities. Then you have the space and time to think about getting another job. I didn't get any support from the House in any way, shape or form on what might have happened next. It is particularly tricky for MPs. We love what we do in this place; we live and breathe it. You cannot do in its entirety what you do as an MP anywhere else. It is difficult to find what that alternative role might be, particularly if you wanted to continue being an MP. It is also difficult for both headhunters and employers to work out where MPs fit. We then lay a pandemic on top of that. Trying to find alternative employment was particularly tricky for me, as it was for many outgoing MPs. I count myself as fortunate that I was able to get a job after eight interviews on Zoom. That certainly wasn't the case for everyone.

I will be forever grateful to the people outside this place. I put on record my thanks to Allen Simpson and the people around him. Allen Simpson is the head of strategy for London & Partners. He and some others outside this place took it upon themselves, literally from the goodness of their hearts, to support a number of outgoing MPs and to help us write CVs. I



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hadn't written a CV in 13 years. I did not know what I should put on my CV or how I should present it. They provided some very practical support to MPs who had left this place, but that certainly did not come from here.

Q87 Mrs Latham: Is that Alan Simpson who used to be here?

Luciana Berger: No.

Chair: Another Allen.

Luciana Berger: He doesn't know that I am mentioning him today—

Chair: I would like to thank Allen Simpson for the help he gave. Any person out there who helps departing colleagues has my thanks, and I suspect those of the Committee. We have heard this as well: a lot of people think they have a great network, and amazingly—maybe unsurprisingly—that network vanishes as soon as you don't have "MP" after your name.

Q88 Michael Fabricant: Luciana, you mentioned that you fought a different seat. We know the reason for that, which is perfectly legitimate. In fact, there could be quite a number of colleagues who will be fighting different seats this time, simply because of the boundary changes. This is relevant to a line of questioning that I want to pursue with you: when you fought your different seat, did you have a reasonable expectation that you would win?

Luciana Berger: Yes.

Q89 Michael Fabricant: You did. So it was as if you were defending your existing seat?

Luciana Berger: It wasn't the same, because I departed a constituency that I had loved and lived in for 10 years, where I had 70% of the vote. To find that anywhere else is quite unusual. However, I fought a seat where I came second—not too far behind. I believed I had a good chance of winning.

Q90 Chair: You were fighting to win then?

Luciana Berger: Absolutely.

Q91 Michael Fabricant: Would you have welcomed advice from the House of Commons, even though you expected to win? Let's say you were still fighting your Liverpool seat, where you would certainly have a reasonable expectation of winning. Would you have welcomed advice on careers from the House of Commons, or advisers employed by the House, about what you might do on the off chance you weren't going to win?

Luciana Berger: I believe that advice and support should be given to MPs as soon as they join this place—as soon as they come into the House. That is because of the particular challenges that present when you depart—you can't transplant this role somewhere else. MPs need to think about their own career development and progression, and their own continuing professional development, as you would expect of anyone else in a senior



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role outside this place. That should equally apply to MPs, and it is something to be done when MPs enter this place.

I do not think when an election is called, and all eyes are on you and all energy is directed into trying to win an election campaign, would be the appropriate moment for that advice. But certainly, anything that could be done to professionalise what happens in this place to support MPs on that journey—which is a career—would be good. It is still a job; it might be a vocation, but it is still something that people are dedicating themselves to, and through which they accrue skills. One of the challenges is that you leave this place not knowing how to calibrate those skills.

- Q92 **Chair:** They are not captured, are they? How do you capture those skills and then present them to a future employer? We need help, as I think you touched on earlier, with how we capture all the amazing things we do, and the skills that we develop, in this place.

Luciana Berger: Absolutely.

- Q93 **Michael Fabricant:** We had two groups of witnesses that reflect what you and the Chair are saying. One group of witnesses were former armed forces people, who talked about the duty of care that they owe people who work for them. They said—like you said just now—“It starts as soon as they join us; the duty of care while we employ them and also the duty of care to look after and guide them after they have left us.” That sounds very much like what you are saying. We then had a different group of witnesses, who were specialised headhunters, who said, “Actually, it is not that easy for Members of Parliament to identify the skillset they have and can offer to future and different employers.” My question to you—and it is a long question—is would you welcome that sort of advice from headhunters, and ongoing advice about what might happen if you lose your seat? Would you have time for it as an MP?

Luciana Berger: Absolutely. I think it is critical and crucial that that is introduced. We do not know what is going to happen at the next election. It could be that a large swathe of MPs find they are not returned to this place and need to find alternative employment, either because of boundary changes or changes in electoral support for various parties. The time is now to think about that, rather than at election time in two years’ time. We have talked a lot—rightly so—about how we best support people in this place in terms of our staff. Again, in the same way that we expect employers externally to support their staff on their career journeys and development, that should apply to MPs too. MPs need support and understanding to be the best managers of their team, but they also need to think about themselves when it comes to their career journeys and progression.

I was completely untested when I went and secured my first role outside of this place. I had no idea if my skills would calibrate against the outside world. I think it is fair to say that the first employer that I joined took a punt on me, when it came to the role that I took. Again, because of lockdown, I was not even meeting everyone face to face. However, it



turned out that I have some really good skills, and that spending 10 years in this place—essentially managing my own social media, writing and editing everything that went out, and managing stakeholder relations at the highest level, both at a constituency level and as a shadow Minister—meant that I had lots of skills to offer. It turns out that I was very entrepreneurial and able to manage a business, but I did not know that, coming out of this place, or how my skills could be applied in a different environment. I count myself very fortunate that I got that first job. Again, it was after quite a few months; I didn't start that role, part time, until May 2020, and full time until July, so it took a good—

Chair: Five months.

Luciana Berger: Yes.

Q94 **Michael Fabricant:** Would you mind sharing with us what types of roles you have had since you left? Also, I did not quite catch it—you mentioned it, but the Chairman was talking to me at the time—what did you say your skillset was before you became an MP?

Luciana Berger: I did not share that, but I did a number of roles. I started my professional working life with what was previously called Andersen Consulting, the management consultancy that, today, is called Accenture. I was with them for a number of years. I then worked for the NHS Confederation, as their Government and parliamentary manager, then I went on to run the Labour Friends of Israel.

When I came out of this place, my first role was as the managing director of public affairs and advocacy at Edelman, which is the UK's largest communications agency. Most recently, I have become the chief executive of iNHouse Communications, which is an all-services communications agency.

Michael Fabricant: Thank you.

Chair: But it took you five months. You started in mid-May on a temporary basis. I think it is important to note that.

I would just like to thank you. We will go into a private session in a minute, but it is important to say that I have reflected on what you have said, and about 509 people have now had a conversation with me about my leaving Parliament. If I were leaving a law firm, as a partner, they would say, "Are you going to another law firm as a partner, or are you going in-house with a client?", or, "Are you leaving an accountancy firm to go in-house, or to another accountancy firm?" If you say you are a Member of Parliament leaving Parliament, they go, "But what are you going to do?" That is extraordinary. That is the only response you get—"But what are you going to do?"—because nobody really has a clue what ex-Members of Parliament get up to.

Michael Fabricant: Or there is the expectation that we are unemployable.



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Chair: Yes. So thank you for giving a very frank exposé of life post-Parliament. I am going to say, "Order, order", and we will go into private session.