

Written evidence submitted by GMB Union

Thank you for your invitation to contribute to the Modernisation Committee's report on improvements to Parliament.

GMB are the largest trade union branch in Parliament, representing several hundred staff in Westminster and constituency offices. Our membership is cross-party, covering everyone from office managers to interns. We are all united in our desire to improve the working lives of MPs' staff.

The Gemma White report (2019) found widescale bullying and harassment of MPs' staff, most commonly from the MPs employing them. Since then, numerous news stories have covered these incidents, bringing the reputation of Parliament as a workplace into disrepute and even leading to the exclusion and recalls of Members.

In 2022/23, we took part in the Speaker's Conference which focussed on the working conditions of MPs' staff. We put forward a proposal, following a survey of our membership and a branch vote in support, to remove employment responsibilities from MPs and bring MPs' staff employment in-house. Unfortunately, while there was clear demand from staff (and a motion passed at GMB Congress 2022), the support was not there among the majority of the Conference membership. Helpful changes were recommended in the final report, but our position remains that we must go further. And with a new election bringing in hundreds of new MPs, we know that many have been shocked by the huge amount of extra work involved in being employers, so we have reason to believe support has grown significantly with this new cohort.

The Modernisation Committee consultation presents another excellent opportunity to seek stronger rights for staff, improve the culture of our workplace, and importantly, bring about those reforms to our employment that are long-overdue.

Our submission focusses the second theme: Improving culture and working practices.

Summary

The GMB holds that the current model of 650 MPs employing their own staff, effectively running their own small businesses, is not effective, efficient, and in some cases is harmful. It does not serve the best interests of staff, MPs, or constituents.

There are many examples of local and national democracies functioning well with staff working for a politician but being employed centrally - from the Australian and the European Parliaments, to Metro Mayors here in the UK. There is precedent for this, and our Branch firmly believes now is the right time to take this step in our Parliament.

We have outlined our reasoning below:

MPs

Members of Parliament are elected to represent the interests of their constituents and the country, in the House of Commons and in their constituencies. From time-intensive casework issues to bill committees, local campaigns to Westminster Hall debates or even Ministerial duties, an MP's diary is pressured with items of high importance.

It is not necessary, nor is it beneficial, for MPs to also hold responsibilities of employment over as many as 10 members of staff. The minutiae of annual leave, landline rental, contractual changes and the like should not have to take up their vital time. MPs cannot be expected to have skills with managing budgets and HR issues.

The existing system also fails MPs as the lack of career progression, reliable pay increases, and HR problems can lead to a high staff turnover. This then brings the headache of recruitment, which can be very costly financially and timewise. For many MPs, they would rather be able to focus on the issues troubling their constituents and any specific policy interests they have, than have extra obligations that are unrelated to their primary purpose.

MPs would still choose their staff - they would just not be their employer. We would also recommend IPSA take on the role of sourcing a constituency office and all of the leasing arrangements, equipment purchase, renovation etc involved.

Staff

While many MPs are brilliant employers and managers, for those who aren't, it can make work miserable for staff. It can become impossible to progress in your career, get the pay rises you deserve and contributes to poor mental health. Low self-esteem in turn has an impact on productivity, creating a cycle of criticism and upset. Staff can experience very low job security, with short-term contracts and the whims of bosses leading to staff having to leave a job they dreamed of having.

The current small business model means staff have no HR department, no continuity of service agreement, no clear way to rise up in pay grades (unlike the Civil Service and other organisations) and lack the ability to enter into collective bargaining. Staff who are hired for their other attributes often end up being tasked with HR responsibilities despite not having relevant experience, and the software used by IPSA only suitable for HR professionals.

Under our proposal, staff would still apply to work for a particular MP (presumably one they were politically aligned with, if the role was political), but their employer would be the House of Commons (or IPSA). The new employer would take over HR responsibilities, which they are much better-placed to do.

Permanent contracts would state that the role exists until A) a MP stands down, or B) the next General Election. If the MP is returned, the contracts are renewed. If the MP stands down or is not re-elected, contracts would end with the existing wind-up period available.

Constituents

It is not beneficial for constituents to have their Parliamentary Representatives also be employers. They elect their MPs based on what offer they are making to the constituency and/or the country. On no campaign literature does it state that MPs will spend a significant portion of their time managing staff, office space or budget.

The breakdown in staff-MP relationships, as well as the relatively high level of stress and consequential sick leave among staff, leads to lower productivity and less work done for constituents. When experienced staff leave due to reasons expressed above, constituents can suffer due to cases being dropped and the new staff lacking in knowledge. Constituents are best served by staff who stay longer, and by MPs who can devote their time completely to constituency and Parliamentary business. Indeed, that is what they expect their taxes to be paying for – not for employer duties.

Conclusion

The employment of staff has changed drastically over the past 100, 50 and even 15 years. In 2025, it is time we took the next step to modernise the way MPs operate and take this additional burden from them – which in the process, would give staff much stronger security, better career progression, stronger rights, and give constituents better service.

Ultimately, staff who are well-paid, well-treated and who work in a positive atmosphere are always going to be more motivated and produce better work for their MPs and the constituents – it's common sense. But sadly, from high profile news stories over the past 6 years, we know that abuse and maltreatment is too common behind the closed doors of MPs' offices. We cannot continue to allow for this model purely using the excuse that "Parliament is a special workplace" – or Parliament will increasingly be known as "unique" in very bad ways.

Thank you for your consideration of this very important topic. We look forward to hearing more and speaking further in due course.

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