



**BRIEFING PAPER**

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# Parliamentary Private Secretaries

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## Summary

A Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) is an unpaid assistant to a Minister, selected from backbench MPs to be the 'eyes and ears' of the Minister in the House of Commons. They often advise the Minister on the state of parliamentary or party opinion, and act as a two-way channel of communication between the Minister and backbench MPs.

PPSs are not members of the Government: they remain private MPs. Nevertheless, there are restrictions on their involvement in certain proceedings both inside and outside Parliament.

The *Ministerial Code* states that PPSs are expected to support the Government of the day, including voting with the Government in divisions. Any PPS who does not vote with the Government cannot retain his or her position.

There are also restrictions on PPSs asking questions of the Government department they are associated with in the House of Commons, and on their sitting on departmental select committees. The Code states that although PPSs are not prevented from serving on select committees, they should withdraw from any involvement with inquiries into their appointing Minister's department. PPSs should also "avoid associating themselves with recommendations critical of or embarrassing to the Government".

According to the *Ministerial Code*, PPSs must not make statements in the House nor put Questions on matters affecting the department with which they are concerned. They should also "exercise discretion in any statements outside the House".

While PPSs are not members of the Government, they still form part of the payroll vote, that is, those MPs who can be relied upon absolutely to vote in support of Government policies.

There have been calls to limit the number of PPSs. Most recently, in 2011 the Public Administration Select Committee recommended that PPSs should be limited to one per Secretary of State.

# 1. Role of a Parliamentary Private Secretary

## Summary

A Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) is an assistant to a Minister. They are selected from backbench MPs to be the 'eyes and ears' of the minister in the House of Commons. It is an unpaid role but one sometimes useful to gain experience of working in government. PPSs are not regarded as members of the Government, but the *Ministerial Code* does make it clear that they should support the Government in divisions in the House.

## 1.1 What is a Parliamentary Private Secretary

A Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) is an unpaid assistant to a Minister, selected from backbench MPs to be the 'eyes and ears' of the Minister in the House of Commons. They often advise the Minister on the state of parliamentary of party opinion, and act as a two-way channel of communication between the Minister and backbench MPs.

PPSs are not regarded as a member of the Government, and they cannot speak in Parliament on behalf of the Government from the front bench. By convention, PPSs sit on the bench behind the treasury bench.

According to Lord Norton, Professor of Government at the University of Hull, becoming a PPS is often seen as the first rung to achieving ministerial office, and "MPs are variously chosen as PPSs because they are perceived to have ministerial potential".<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 How are PPSs appointed

The *Ministerial Code* makes provision for Cabinet Ministers and Ministers of State to appoint PPSs with the written approval of the Prime Minister, and after consulting the Chief Whip:

Cabinet Ministers and Ministers of State may appoint Parliamentary Private Secretaries. All appointments require the prior written approval of the Prime Minister. The Chief Whip should also be consulted and no commitments to make such appointments should be entered into until such approval is received.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.3 The role of a PPS

The duties of a PPS can vary depending on the relationship between individual ministers and their appointee. The *Ministerial Code* makes it clear that PPSs are "not members of the Government". However, the Code also states that they are expected to support the Government in divisions in the House: "No Parliamentary Private Secretary who votes against the Government can retain his or her position".

Lord Norton has provided a general summary of the role of a PPS:

<sup>1</sup> P Norton, *Parliament in British Politics*, 2013, 2nd edition, p58

<sup>2</sup> Cabinet Office, [Ministerial Code](#), December 2016, para 3.6

A PPS is an unpaid assistant to a minister, helping with the ministers political arrangements, providing a link with back bench opinion and ferrying messages between the civil servants' box in the Chamber and the minister on the front bench.<sup>3</sup>

Lord Norton has also written elsewhere that PPSs are “important channels of communication”, and keep an eye on moods within the parliamentary party, reporting likely reaction to proposed measures. They also help the Minister with a variety of tasks, including, according to Norton, “farming out friendly parliamentary questions”. They can also be included, at the discretion of the Secretary of State, in meetings of the ministerial team.<sup>4</sup>

An article written in 1966 likewise described the various facets of the post of PPS, describing the role as acting “as a liaison between the Minister and backbenches”, noting that this was a two-way process:

On the one hand the PPS is a kind of “public relations agent” for his Minister, explaining the policy of his department to MPs and defending him against his critics... On the other hand, the PPS will hear and keep his Minister in touch with backbench opinion and channel comments and complaints to him – although he may have his limitations in this capacity since the knowledge that the PPS is a “good scout” for his Minister is likely to inhibit Members’ conversation in his hearing.<sup>5</sup>

The former Labour MP, Chris Mullin, gave a less positive account of the role of PPSs in an article for *The Times* from 2009. Mullin said that:

They [PPSs] are all over the place, engaging in a whirlwind of political activity, planting patsy questions – even planting the supplementaries.

Much of this activity is pointless, but it does have the effect of neutralising intelligent individuals who might otherwise make a rather more useful contribution to the proper functioning of Parliament.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.4 Access to official information

PPSs have limited access to departmental information. The *Ministerial Code* states that:

Official information given to them should generally be limited to what is necessary for the discharge of their Parliamentary and political duties. This need not preclude them from being brought into departmental discussions where appropriate, but any such access should be approved by the relevant appointing Minister. They should not have access to information classified at secret or above. Any proposal to visit a secure government establishment requires the approval of the Head of the establishment.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Norton, *Parliament in British Politics*, p58

<sup>4</sup> Philip Norton, ‘Neither Minister nor Backbencher’ in *The House Magazine*, 10 February 1997, p18

<sup>5</sup> R. K. Alderman and J. A. Cross, “The Parliamentary Private Secretary” in *The Parliamentarian*, Vol 48, No. 2, 1966, p70

<sup>6</sup> Chris Mullin, ‘Now prise off the tentacles of patronage’, *The Times*, 26 May 2009

<sup>7</sup> *Ministerial Code*, December 2016, para 3.8

## 1.5 History

The origins of the PPS are obscure. It is not possible to be definitive about the date of the establishment of the office. In the 1730s Prime Minister Robert Walpole used the services of his brother and fellow Member, Horace, as PPS, to act as a liaison between the PM and the backbenches, to take the political temperature of the parliamentary party and report back, and to act as an intermediary.

PPSs were not always drawn from the ranks of junior Members. The practice in the 19th century was to employ private secretaries who were not Members. The 1941 Select Committee on Offices or Places of Profit under the Crown (the Herbert Committee) identifies the PPS as, primarily, a modern development:

The "PPS" as he has come to be called is a modern institution, but it has become the custom for nearly every minister in the House of Commons to get a private member of the House to act as his PPS. The PPS has no recognised official position; he acts as the confidential friend and assistant of his minister and necessarily enjoys in very large measure the confidence not only of the minister personally but of the minister's department and the officials in it. Thus he must necessarily be to some extent imbued with the "team spirit" which is part of the life blood of the ministry; thus, too, his independence as a member of the House must be liable to be impaired to a somewhat greater degree than that of an ordinary member of the party supporting the Government in office for the time being, although it would be a great mistake to regard his relations with the Government as being close or intimate as in the case of even the least important under-secretary in the Government.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on Offices or Places of Profit under the Crown*, HC 120, 1940-41, p. xvi

## 2. Restrictions on post holders

### Summary

Although PPSs are not members of the Government, there are restrictions on their involvement in certain proceedings both inside and outside Parliament. The *Ministerial Code* states that they are expected to support the Government of the day, including voting with the Government in divisions. There are also restrictions on PPSs asking questions of the Government department they are associated with in the House of Commons, and on their sitting on departmental select committees.

### 2.1 In general

PPSs are not members of the Government: they remain private MPs.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, there are also restrictions on a PPS's involvement in some Parliamentary proceedings. They must support the Government in any divisions in the House. No PPS who votes against the Government in a division can retain their position.<sup>10</sup>

PPSs are not formally bound by the doctrine of collective cabinet responsibility. However, their association with the Government is so close that successive Prime Ministers have in effect bound PPSs by the collective responsibility of the Government.<sup>11</sup>

#### Box 1: What is collective responsibility?

Collective responsibility is a fundamental principle of the British constitution, whereby the Government is collectively accountable to Parliament for its actions, decisions and policies. Decisions made by the Cabinet are binding on all members of the Government. This means that if a Minister disagrees with a course of action or policy, they must still publicly support it. A Minister is able to express their views privately within Government, but once a decision of the Cabinet has been reached, it is binding on all Members of the Government.

### 2.2 Select Committee Service

The *Ministerial Code* places restrictions on PPSs involvement in select committees inquiries into their Minister's department. The Code states that although PPSs are not prevented from serving on select committees, they should withdraw from any involvement with inquiries into their appointing Minister's department. It also states that they should "avoid associating themselves with recommendations critical of or embarrassing to the Government".<sup>12</sup>

In practice, a PPS would be unable to serve on a departmental select committee scrutinising the department of their appointing Minister. In 2007, the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, ruled this out:

<sup>9</sup> Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code*, December 2016, para 3.7

<sup>10</sup> Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code*, December 2016, para 3.9

<sup>11</sup> Rodney Brazier, *Ministers of the Crown*, 1997, pp 127, 267

<sup>12</sup> Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code*, December 2016, para 3.10

Parliamentary Private Secretaries...will not sit on the departmental Select Committees for which they are Parliamentary Private Secretaries. I can give...that assurance.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.3 Parliamentary questions and debates

According to the *Ministerial Code*, PPSs should not make statements in the House nor put Questions on matters affecting the department with which they are connected.<sup>14</sup>

As they are not members of the Government, PPS cannot speak from the front bench or respond to Parliamentary Questions on behalf of the Government. The *Ministerial Code* notes that Ministers answer to Parliament for Government policy.

### 2.4 All party groups

All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) consist of Members of both Houses of Parliament who join together to pursue a particular topic or interest. Nothing in the rules on APPGs prevent a PPS from serving on an APPG,<sup>15</sup> and the *Ministerial Code* does not specifically address the issue of PPSs and APPGs. A PPS is associated with the Government, however, and the *Ministerial Code* makes it clear that they should not say or be associated with a statement that criticises the Government.

### 2.5 Statements outside the House and constituency issues

PPSs should “exercise discretion in any statements outside the House”, according to the *Ministerial Code*.<sup>16</sup> It is particularly specific on a PPS’s involvement in any planning issues in their constituency. It states that all PPSs, particularly those in departments with planning responsibilities, should take “special care when making representations to Ministers about planning issues”. In particular:

they should not discuss planning cases with interested parties or imply that they have any influence over planning decisions. In representing their constituency interests they should abide by the guidance in section 6 of this Code. Permanent Secretaries should be advised of any such interests.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.6 Overseas visits

The Prime Minister’s approval is required if a Minister proposes to take a PPS (or another Parliamentarian) on an official visit overseas. According to the *Ministerial Code*, official overseas travel by a PPS “should be exceptional”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> HC Deb 18 July 2007 c277

<sup>14</sup> Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code*, December 2016, para 3.10

<sup>15</sup> [Guide to the Rules on All-Party Parliamentary Groups](#), Published March 2015 and slightly revised May 2017

<sup>16</sup> Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code*, December 2016, para 3.10

<sup>17</sup> Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code*, December 2016, para 3.12

<sup>18</sup> Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code*, December 2016, para 3.11

## 3. The payroll vote

### Summary

While a PPS is an unpaid job, they are still considered part of the “payroll vote”. This restricts their ability to speak against or question the Government.

There have been calls to limit the number of PPSs. Most recently, the Public Administration Select Committee recommended that PPSs should be limited to one per Secretary of State.

### 3.1 Number of PPSs

The position of PPS is an unpaid one. However, PPSs are recipients of a level of official patronage and they are regarded as part of the “payroll vote”, that is, those MPs who can be relied upon absolutely by the Government to vote in support of their policies.

### 3.2 Number of PPSs

#### Recent information

It is very difficult to compile accurate and up to date lists of PPSs. Turnover is often high and vacancies can be left open for some time. Official lists are rarely published and updated.

#### Approximate number of PPSs in post

	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017
MPs acting as unpaid PPSs*	40	40	41	45	58	45	46	41	46
Total MPs counted as "payroll vote"	122	123	125	134	146	135	140	132	139
% unpaid PPSs counted as "payroll vote"	33%	33%	33%	34%	40%	33%	33%	31%	33%

#### Sources:

Dod's Parliamentary Companion, 1980,1988, 1993, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2011  
 Hansard lists of HM Government  
 House of Commons Parliamentary Information Lists  
 Who runs Britain - List of Parliamentary Private Secretaries: a reply from No. 10

#### Notes:

\* The figures for PPSs are only approximate. Appointmetns have been changed frequently and without public notice. Posts are often left vacant for weeks or months. Figure for 2015 taken from response to FOI request published on the "Who Runs Britain" blog, 24 November 2015 .

<https://whorunsbritain.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/2015/11/24/list-of-parliamentary-private-secretaries-a-reply-from-no-10/>

#### Historical information

In the past, *Vachers Quarterly* contained separate listings of PPSs from 1992 to 2005, as did the annual *Dod's Parliamentary Companion* from 1998 to 2006.

The Commons Library maintains a list of [PPSs to the Prime Minister since 1906](#).

### 3.3 Calls to limit the number of PPSs

There have been calls to limit the number of PPSs in recent years.

In 2009, then Labour MP Chris Mullin argued that the number of PPSs had grown “exponentially in recent years, to the point where even

middle-ranking ministers have one". He argued that "only Cabinet ministers should be entitled to appoint a PPS".<sup>19</sup>

In their March 2010 report, *Too many ministers*, the Public Administration Select Committee recommended that the Ministerial Code should be amended to limit the number of PPSs to one for each department or Cabinet Minister.<sup>20</sup> They recommended that the limit in the *House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975* on the number of Ministers sitting in the House of Commons should include all those who hold office connected to the Government, including PPSs.<sup>21</sup> Overall, they recommended that the payroll vote should be limited to 15% of the membership of the House of Commons. In a House of Commons of 650 Members, that would mean no more than 97 ministers and PPSs.

The Committee returned to the matter in 2011 with their report, *Smaller Government: What do Ministers do?*<sup>22</sup> This noted that the proportion of those holding government posts would be exacerbated by the proposed reduction in the size of the House of Commons. They argued:

Currently 141 Members—approximately 22% of the House of Commons—hold some position in the Government. This is deeply corrosive to the House of Commons primary role of acting as a check on the Executive, and will be made worse by the Government's plans to reduce the number of MPs. One simple step the Government should take immediately to limit this size of the payroll vote would be to limit the number of Parliamentary Private Secretaries to one per Secretary of State. If this was done it would result in 26 fewer Members being on the payroll vote.<sup>23</sup>

Calls for restrictions on the number of PPSs are not new. The 1941 Select Committee on Offices or Places of Profit under the Crown noted the fact that "the existence of parliamentary private secretaries is, not without reason, regarded as increasing the voting strength and influence of the Government in the House of Commons". The report continues by stating that such posts may "however improbably" be "improperly used for this purpose" as there was nothing stopping ministers appointing more than one. The report noted that the functions of the PPS were very useful not only to the minister, but the members of the House so they should not be abolished, but that some steps might be taken to limit their number:

Your Committee are therefore of opinion that some steps should be taken, otherwise than by legislation, to reduce or at least limit the number of parliamentary private secretaries. It should usually be unnecessary for than one parliamentary private secretary to be appointed in respect of one government department, and where more than one ministerial representative sits in the House of Commons, one parliamentary private secretary should be sufficient. It is suggested that a statement on the subject in the

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<sup>19</sup> Chris Mullin, 'Now prise off the tentacles of patronage', *The Times*, 26 May 2009

<sup>20</sup> Public Administration Select Committee, [Too many ministers](#), 16 March 2010, para 33

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, para 35

<sup>22</sup> Public Administration Select Committee, [Smaller Government: What do ministers do?](#) 1 March 2011, HC 530 2010-2011

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, summary

House on behalf of the Government might establish a convention which would be generally followed, or, if thought necessary at any time, the House might deal with the matter by a resolution.<sup>24</sup>

The following year, the Deputy Prime Minister, Clement Attlee was asked Mr Stokes to respond to this recommendation. Attlee noted that PPSs performed a valuable service “not only to Departments but to the House as a whole” and therefore to reduce or limit their number “would not serve the best interests of the House at the present time”. He continued

... I would remind the House that these are not official or paid appointments but are voluntary associations entered into by private arrangement between Members whose freedom to do so cannot be challenged.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Report from the Select Committee on Offices or Places of Profit under the Crown*, HC 120, 1940-41, p xvi

<sup>25</sup> HC Deb 19 May 1942 c26-27

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