2 Contacting the Member

WHICH MEMBER TO CONTACT

After the survey in the previous chapter of the field of responsibility of a Member of the House of Commons, many readers may be anxious to raise appropriate problems with an MP as soon as possible. The questions therefore arise of whom to contact and how to do so.

The simple, general principle is that any citizen in the United Kingdom wishing to contact an MP should first get in touch with his own constituency representative. This usually means the MP for the constituency for which the current electoral register includes the person’s name. When the person has recently moved home from one constituency to another, his name may not yet appear on the register covering his new address, but in most cases it would be considered appropriate for him to contact the Member for the constituency to which he has moved. Prisoners and British citizens abroad whose names do not appear on any electoral register, but who wish to contact an MP, should in general approach the Member for the constituency where their names last appeared on an electoral register.

Sometimes a person may not be sure which constituency covers his address, particularly in remoter rural areas where postal district boundaries differ from constituency boundaries or in the larger towns and cities, divided into several parliamentary constituencies, nor may he know the name of the current MP for his constituency. It is usually possible to obtain this information from public libraries, citizen’s advice bureaux or district council offices (especially electoral registration departments). If, however, the person makes contact with an MP who is not his own constituency representative, usually that MP will advise the person who his own MP actually is; if the contact is by written letter, normally the MP will pass on that letter without comment to the appropriate constituency MP. There is a convention, almost universally observed on all sides of the House.
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of Commons, that Members deal with personal inquiries only from their own constituents. Any other practice leads to an uneven distribution of duties between different MPs, and it would hinder any Member from fulfilling his primary responsibility to his own constituents if he were required also to deal with personal inquiries from other sources. This general position applies irrespective of party political allegiances. I have known supporters of my own political party who lived in a constituency represented by an MP of another party get in touch with me about their problems because they thought they would get no help from their own Member. I pointed out to them that their Member has a constitutional duty to look after their interests regardless of their political opinions and loyalties. Of course such a situation may well lead to disagreement between citizens and their MP over what is the best course to follow with regard to a particular problem, and we shall return to consider such disagreement in a later paragraph, but even then it would be unconstitutional for another MP to become involved. So that an MP can know that any letter is from one of his constituents that letter should give the current home address of the sender.

The practice of contacting one's own MP should be observed regardless of the problem to which the contact relates. I have known persons affected by problems at their place of work write about those problems to the MP whose constituency contains that workplace whereas they themselves lived in another constituency. Since MPs represent people rather than places, their inquiry should have been directed first to their own constituency Member. Similarly, inquiries about public services in some other constituency area should be first directed by any complainant to his own MP, provided of course those services relate to some parliamentary responsibility. The MP may then wish to consult his colleague who represents the other constituency concerned, but it is entirely for him to decide whether to do so. On other occasions, a person may contact an MP, not for his current constituency, but for an area where he has previously lived much of his life and still regards himself as part of the local community; in spite of these considerations, the MP will be correct to redirect the inquiry to the MP for the person's new constituency. When a particular MP is engaged in a campaign on an issue of general importance, an individual citizen living in another constituency may wish to write a letter of support to that MP; but it is always courteous to contact the local MP at the same time, soliciting his own support for the same cause.