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The Role of the Member of Parliament

But what do you *do* as an MP, daddy? (Keith Simpson, Conservative MP for Mid Norfolk, 1997–2010, for Broadland since 2010 general election)¹

In his book, *the Accidental MP*, Martin Bell remarked, ‘Becoming an MP is one thing. Being an MP is quite another.’² Bell had not expected to become a Member of Parliament (MP). Standing as an anti-sleaze candidate in 1997, he famously defeated the sitting Conservative MP, Neil Hamilton, who had been accused of abusing his position by accepting payments in return for parliamentary favours.³ Bell was unusual in that he was the first fully Independent MP to be elected since the abolition of the university seats in 1950; all other ‘independents’, of whom there were four, had been dissident party MPs who had successfully defied their party machines.⁴ However, Bell was not unusual in not expecting to be elected: all general elections produce candidates surprised to find

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⁴ These were Sir David Robertson (Independent Conservative, Caithness and Sutherland 1959); S. O. Davies (Independent Labour, Merthyr Tydfil 1970); Dick Taverne (formerly Labour, Social Democratic, Lincoln 1973 and February 1974); and E. J. Milne (Independent Labour, Blyth February 1974).
themselves MPs, especially when one or more of the parties achieve unexpectedly large electoral swings, but most do so as candidates of an established party. It is hardly surprising that such unexpected MPs should be uncertain of what awaits them at Westminster, let alone what is expected of them. But Bell’s distinction between becoming an MP and being an MP is an important one, applicable not just to those who did not expect to be elected but also to many who expected to be elected and for the first time. To paraphrase Bell: arriving at Westminster and taking the oath or affirming is one thing; learning how to be a Member of Parliament is quite another.

As an Independent MP, Bell was at a particular disadvantage when first elected because he had no party whip to tell him what to do. On the other hand, as he himself relates, there was no shortage of advice:

Since my new colleagues did not see me as a threat to the system, but rather as a curiosity and an anomaly and a bit of a lost soul, they showered me with advice… Ivor Stanbrook, former Tory MP for Orpington, sent me a copy of a useful little manual he had written, the fruits of twenty-two years in the House, ‘How to be an MP’. His counsel to new Members was to bide their time and keep their heads down for the first five years. But the first five years would probably be all the years I would have! Paul Flynn, the independent Labour MP for Newport West, sent his list of ‘Backbenchers’ Ten Commandments’, containing the rather contrary advice to make as many waves as possible.

Every Parliament sees an influx of new MPs, but the numbers vary markedly. Apart from the exceptional case of the general election in 1945, in the post-war period they have ranged from 7.5 per cent

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5 In contrast, their equivalents in the House of Lords are sufficiently numerous (more than 200) to have their own intra-parliamentary organisation and website http://www.crossbenchpeers.org.uk.
6 Stanbrook, in fact, had retired from the Commons in 1992, having served as MP for Orpington since 1970.
8 Bell, op. cit., p. 59.
9 In 1945 there had not been an election for ten years because of the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. More than half (50.2 per cent) of those elected