2010 and Beyond

Is there evidence that MPs’ behaviour and attitudes are changed when they actually experience what it is like being an MP? To what extent do newcomers to the Westminster Parliament become ‘accustomed to’ its ways of working and, in parallel, ‘persuaded by’ the opportunity of doing things differently? These are the central questions we have been exploring in this book. Our findings show that MPs’ behaviour and attitudes do change and that the degree of change (including no change) is influenced by socialisation – functional, attitudinal and behavioural. What is the significance of these findings? Are they unique to the parliaments we have examined, with their particular political circumstances? Are there implications for future parliaments? Does our research have implications for parliaments, or other forms of legislative assembly, in other states?

We approached this task as neither reductionists nor absolutists: we did not believe that it was likely that there was one single explanation of legislative change, or lack of it, nor that socialisation was the sole explanatory factor or even always the most significant one. The findings of our research have confirmed that a variety of factors has been at work, which we have drawn together in our model of parliamentary socialisation in Chapter 7. We note there in particular the significance of the differences between the three main parties and whether MPs are supporters of the government of the day or not. We have also noted the importance of the opportunity Westminster’s procedures and cultures, and the wider political system, provide for MPs to ‘shape their own space’. Party plays the major role, mediated through the procedures, norms and practices of the House of Commons – which are themselves interpreted through the prism of party. Although ‘clones’ and ‘mavericks’ are still a significant feature, the majority of MPs are
neither one nor the other: they are content to conform to party norms for much of the time – but nevertheless work out their own way of being a Member of Parliament. Thus, although the attitudes, values and behaviour of (virtually) all MPs are shaped by party, they are not shaped to the same degree.

**Political context**

In assessing the significance of our work we have to take into account *political context*: the extent to which our findings depend upon the particular, even unique, circumstances of the period of parliamentary politics in which our research was conducted. We began this study in the final year of the Parliament elected in 1987. That Parliament had begun with Mrs Thatcher’s Conservative Party winning a ‘historic third successive election victory’\(^1\) and the second largest post-war overall majority of 102. During that Parliament the Prime Minister was controversially deposed by her own party and replaced by the ‘more moderate and reasonable’\(^2\) John Major whose personal and governmental styles were very different. With a rejuvenated, and judging by the opinion polls, relatively popular Opposition, it was widely expected that there would be a change of government and a substantial number of new MPs. In fact, Mr Major led his party to an unprecedented fourth successive election victory, leading one much respected political commentator to suggest Britain ‘no longer has two major political parties. It has one major party, the Conservatives; one minor party, Labour, and one peripheral party, the Liberal Democrats.’\(^3\) There were, as we have noted, relatively few new MPs and the Government’s overall majority was a small one (21), which during the course of the 1992 Parliament was to be eroded by defections and by-election defeats. This was certainly an unusual, if not unique, parliamentary situation in which to begin an exploration of the way in which MPs at Westminster ‘learn the job’.

In contrast the Parliament of 1997–2001, as we have noted, contained an exceptionally large number of new MPs as a result of the first of three electoral triumphs won by Tony Blair’s New Labour in

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3. Anthony King, *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 April 1992 and cited by himself in Newton, op. cit., p. 224 where he suggested Britain was showing signs of becoming a Sartori-style ‘predominant party system’.