



Parliamentary Private Secretaries

Standard Note: SN/PC/04942

Last updated: 9 May 2011

Author: Keith Parry and Andrew Dommett

Section Parliament and Constitution Centre

This note sets out the history and development of the position of Parliamentary Private Secretary as well as discussing the role and functions of the post and the limitations placed upon its holders. The *Ministerial Code* regulates the conduct of PPSs and the relevant provisions of the latest version of the Code are reproduced in this note.

The Prime Minister's Office published a list of PPSs in November 2010. This note lists various sources that may be used for updating that list or for compiling lists of PPSs for earlier years.

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

Contents

- 1 History 3**
- 2 Role 4**
 - 2.1 Ministerial Code 5
 - 2.2 PPSs and select committee service 6
- 3 Lists of PPSs 7**

1 History

The origins of the Parliamentary Private Secretary 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, to act as an intermediary and an approach.¹

PPSs were not always drawn from the ranks of junior Members; the use of junior Members as PPSs is not an unbroken tradition. The practice in the 19th century was to employ private secretaries who were not Members. The 1941 Select Committee on Offices for Profit identifies the PPS as, primarily, a modern development.

There is quite naturally a tendency (possibly an unavoidable need) with the general complexity of affairs generally, and government administration in particular, for government departments to extend and for the number of ministers to increase; but Your Committee consider that there is not, and so far as it is possible to foresee the future, not likely to be, any necessity for a long period to make any appreciable increase in the number of ministers whose membership of the House of Commons is essential to the present system of relations between the executive government and Parliament. If this opinion is correct, it would certainly seem desirable that definite steps should be taken in the direction of checking the tendency to increase the number of ministers with seats in the House of Commons.

In this connection reference should be made to the class of members known as "Parliamentary Private Secretaries (unpaid)". The "P.P.S." 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 P.P.S. The P.P.S. 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.

Your Committee cannot disregard 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; it might (however improbably) be improperly used for this purpose, and there is nothing to prevent a minister appointing more than one parliamentary private secretary. Being unpaid and appointed by the minister personally he is not the holder of an office or place of profit from or under the Crown; moreover he could not be disqualified for membership, even if that were desired, as the whole essence of his position is his membership of the House, and to abolish him does not appear practicable nor indeed particularly desirable. He performs functions very useful not only to his minister but to members of the House of all parties and groups as a liaison between the ministers and Members. 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

¹ Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont: John Perceval, 1683-1748. Vol I, Cd 8264 (1923)

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 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.²

The following year, the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Attlee, replied to a parliamentary question on the subject from Mr Stokes:

...whether he is now able to make a statement with reference to the recommendations by the Select Committee on Offices or Places of Profit Under the Crown, proposing that steps should be taken to reduce or, at least, limit the number of Parliamentary Private Secretaries to Ministers; and that not more than one such secretary should be necessary for each Government Department?

Mr Attlee: The Government have noted the views of the select Committee in regard to Parliamentary Private Secretaries. Members who act as Parliamentary Private Secretaries to Ministers perform valuable services not only to Departments but to the House as a whole, and in the opinion of the Government the adoption of the Committee's suggestion to reduce or limit the number of these unofficial appointments would not serve the best interests of the House at the present time. 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.

Mr Stokes: Is the Deputy Prime Minister aware that the Report of the Select Committee states that there are no fewer than 80 Ministerial posts, and if each Minister has a Parliamentary Private Secretary, those Parliamentary Private Secretaries, with their Ministers, form about 25 per cent of the possible strength in this House?

Mr Attlee: I am afraid that the hon. Member has omitted to notice that not all Ministers sit in this House.

Sir Edward Campbell: Is it not the case that Parliamentary Private Secretaries, while not able to speak for their Ministers, can speak for themselves?

Mr Stokes: What we object to is that they vote for the Government.³

The convention that PPSs do not vote against the Government is long established. This is illustrated by the action taken by the Labour Government in May 1949, when five PPSs voted against the Government in a division on the *Government of Ireland Bill*. Four of them were dismissed, following a letter from the PM to the ministers concerned, and the fifth saved himself from the same fate only by prior resignation.⁴

2 Role

The scope of their duties varies tremendously depending on the relationship between Minister and PPS. Philip Norton has, however, delineated a series of functions that can be applied generally:

They sit behind the dispatch box, running messages between the officials' box and their ministers. They also serve as important channels of communication between

² HC 120, 1940-41 *Report: Select Committee on offices or places of profit under the Crown* p. xvi

³ HC Deb 19 May 1942 c26-27

⁴ Alderman, R K and Cross, J A "The Parliamentary Private Secretary – A danger to the free functioning of Parliament?", *Political Studies*, Vol XIV (1996)

ministers and backbenchers, keeping a weather eye on moods within the parliamentary party and reporting likely reaction to proposed measures. They may also serve as an important means of communication with the party and bodies outside the House, providing a political – as opposed to an official departmental – line of access to ministers. They help ministers with a variety of tasks, including farming out friendly parliamentary questions. They may also be included at the discretion of the Secretary of State in the regular meetings of the ministerial team (ministers, senior officials, special advisers) and may be used by the minister as an additional sounding board for proposals.⁵

The PPS thus benefits from a high level of access to the government machine and the job is, for this reason, often regarded as a political ‘training ground’ for future ministers. This is illustrated by the fact that most junior ministers have seen some service as PPSs before being appointed to the Government.

The ambiguity of the position of PPS centres around their unofficial, and unpaid, nature. These characteristics are intrinsic to the office and this, along with their growth in numbers during the twentieth century, has created a cause for concern amongst certain commentators. An article by R K Alderman and J A Cross, for instance, has seen in the increasing tendency to appoint a PPS to more Ministers the concomitant growth in government activity. PPSs have therefore been enlisted to cope with the problem of ‘government overstretch.’⁶ The following table, taken from *Twentieth Century British Political Facts 1900-2000*, illustrates the rise in numbers and the growth of government in relation to this:

Size of Cabinets and Governments 1900-2000 (as at 1 Jan)												
	1900	1910	1917	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	1999
Cabinet Mins.	19	19	5	19	19	9	18	19	21	22	22	22
Non-Cab. Mins	10	7	33	15	9	25	20	20	33	38	33	34
Junior Mins	31	36	47	47	30	40	43	43	48	47	48	49
No of M.P.s in paid Govt. posts	33	43	60	58	50	58	68	65	85	86	80	82
No of Peers in paid Govt. posts	27	19	25	23	8	16	13	17	17	21	22	24
Total paid Govt posts	60	62	85	81	58	74	81	82	102	107	103	106
Parliamentary Private Secs in Commons	9	16	12	13	26	25	27	36	30	37	47	47
Total no. of MPs involved in Government	42	59	72	71	76	83	95	101	115	123	127	129

Source: D Butler and G Butler (eds), *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts, 1900-2000*, 8th ed. 2000, p71

2.1 Ministerial Code

The *Ministerial Code*, available on the Cabinet Office website, defines the responsibilities and restrictions incumbent on a PPS. The current version, issued in 2010, reads as follows:

3.6 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.

⁵ Norton, P, ‘Neither Minister nor Backbencher.’ In ‘*The House Magazine*’ p18 (10/2/1997)

⁶ Alderman, R K and Cross, J A, ‘*The Parliamentary Private Secretary*’ in the ‘*Parliamentarian*.’ Vol XLVIII Vol 3 (3/3/1967)

3.7 Parliamentary Private Secretaries are not members of the Government. However, they must ensure that no conflict arises, or appears to arise, between their role as a Parliamentary Private Secretary, and their private interests.

3.8 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. Nor should they have access to secure government establishments.

3.9 Parliamentary Private Secretaries are expected to support the Government in important divisions in the House. No Parliamentary Private Secretary who votes against the Government can retain his or her position.

3.10 Parliamentary Private Secretaries should not make statements in the House or put Questions on matters affecting the department with which they are connected. They are not precluded from serving on Select Committees, but they should withdraw from any involvement with inquiries into their appointing Minister's department, and they should avoid associating themselves with recommendations critical of or embarrassing to the Government. They should also exercise discretion in any speeches or broadcasts outside the House.

3.11 Where it is proposed to take a Parliamentary Private Secretary on an official visit overseas, the Prime Minister's approval is required. Official overseas travel by a Parliamentary Private Secretary should be exceptional.

3.12 Parliamentary Private Secretaries, 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.⁷

2.2 PPSs and select committee service

The existing situation with regard to membership of **select committees** was summarised as follows in 2009 by the Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons:

Membership of a select committee is open to any member of the House. In 1979 the then Chair of the Committee of Selection told the House that the committee would not nominate Ministers, PPSs or Opposition front-bench spokesmen. This has remained the general practice, so far as circumstances permit. In practice, PPSs have served on committees scrutinising departments other than that in which they serve; and it has proved difficult for committee membership to keep up with the frequently changing membership of the Opposition front-bench. There are no similar constraints on membership of some temporary select committees such as Modernisation, which is chaired by a Minister and has Opposition front-bench membership, or Regional select committees. The House can of course object to the membership of a committee when it is first proposed in the House, but not in practice thereafter.⁸

Successive versions of the *Ministerial Code* (first issued in its current form in 1997) have stated that "Parliamentary Private Secretaries are not members of the Government" and that

⁷ Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code*, May 2010

⁸ Select Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, *Rebuilding the House*, 24 November 2009, HC 1117 2008-09, para 53

they “... are not precluded from serving on Select Committees.” PPSs are specifically debarred solely from sitting on those Committees which scrutinise the work of their Minister’s department. On the same principle of conflict of interest, or the perception of such, they are required to withdraw from any inquiry touching on the work of their Minister’s department.

There are also restrictions on membership of the **Committee on Standards and Privileges**. In 2002, the Committee on Standards in Public Life published its report *Standards of Conduct in the House of Commons*. On this particular issue, the CSPL concluded:

... the authority of the [Standards and Privileges] Committee and of its decisions rests to a considerable degree on the way in which it is perceived. We have, therefore, sympathy with the argument that the membership of PPSs on the Committee leaves it vulnerable to challenge about its detachment.

On balance, therefore, we believe that the Committee on Standards and Privileges should follow the practice of Departmental Select Committees and that PPSs should be excluded from its membership. We extend this exclusion to membership of the Investigatory Panel. We should emphasise, however, that, in making this recommendation, we mean no personal criticism of those PPSs who have been or are currently members of the Committee.⁹

The House debated the CSPL’s report on 26 June 2003 and agreed its proposals that: (a) the chairman should be drawn from the opposition parties, (b) no single party should hold a majority on the Committee, and (c) that PPSs should not be members of the Committee.¹⁰

3 Lists of PPSs

The Prime Minister’s Office published a list of PPSs on 17 November 2010.¹¹ It is possible to update the list from the *Dods People* database on the parliamentary intranet.¹² In the past *Vacher’s Quarterly* contained separate listings of PPSs from 1992 to 2005, as did the annual *Dod’s Parliamentary Companion* from 1998 to 2006. Since those dates, both directories listed the name of any PPSs under the name of the relevant minister.

The reference book *British political facts* by David Butler and Gareth Butler provides a list of PPSs to each Prime Minister since 1900.¹³

⁹ Committee on Standards in Public Life, *Standards of conduct in the House of Commons*, 8th report, Cm 5663, November 2002, paras 7.26 and 7.27

¹⁰ See Erskine May, 23rd ed, 2004, p783.

¹¹ Prime Minister’s Office, *Government publishes list of Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPS)*, 17 November 2010

¹² Select ‘MP’s, then filter by post (‘Parliamentary Private Secretary’).

¹³ David Butler and Gareth Butler, *British political facts*, Palgrave Macmillan, 10th ed, 2011, pp84-5