



The Election Interlude.

April 2014.

By Paul Silk



Global Partners
Governance

The Election Interlude.

An election has been called. Politicians leave parliament. Calm descends and, as parliamentary staffers, you breathe a sigh of relief. You've got the place to yourself, and those bothersome MPs are off your backs. All of us who have worked as parliamentary officials have been there. And how we have enjoyed the break!

But when that break goes on for a little while, we start becoming restless – and when political circumstances mean that the break stretches from weeks into months, then we get fed up.

This paper is intended to stimulate some thought among parliamentary staff managers about ways that what might be called the “election interlude” can be used most profitably.

Not all the ideas here will work in the circumstances of different countries. Many will have been thought about and acted upon already. But lessons learned from other parliaments are always valuable.

Opportunities and threats.

The first thing to say is that you've worked hard and you need to recover. It's good to rest – you deserve it. So do make sure that all staff – including senior managers – have an opportunity to take leave, and to get away from the parliamentary environment for a time to recharge their batteries.

But when the holiday is over and the batteries are recharged, it is depressing to return to work and to sit around with little or nothing to do. Then things can go very wrong. You are bored. Your skills become rusty. You vegetate. You become disillusioned. People drift away mentally, and some people drift away physically by leaving for jobs elsewhere that stimulate them better. And when MPs do eventually get back to work and make demands on you, you resent it. You have become too used to idleness.

So the interlude ought to be a time for re-invigoration. That means gathering strength as individuals through personal learning and development, and also using the opportunity to strengthen parliament as an institution.

It also means being ready to go at full throttle when MPs eventually come back to work. That will be a crucial time – a golden moment when incoming MPs' opinions about the quality of parliamentary staff are fixed. It is vital that it is a moment that you seize. Good impressions made then will last a long time – and bad impressions will be hard to shake off.

Finding out what needs to be done.

Learning from the past is one of the best ways of planning for the future. As managers, you will have your own ideas about what worked in the last electoral period and what did not, but you must not rely on this alone. You need to get the honest opinion of others.

The best way of doing this is by conducting well-designed surveys – of MPs who are departing (this needs to be done before the election is called), of parliamentary staff and also of others who interact with parliament, from contractors to the media. Make sure that those who reply can give honest answers by allowing anonymity and encouraging frankness. And accept that some of things you hear will make uncomfortable reading.

Learning from other parliaments is also very helpful. You can learn quite a lot from published information on-line. But sometimes you need to hear something more honest. Get in touch with people you know in other parliaments who do similar jobs to you and who have been through election breaks. Ask them what they would advise you to do – and what not to do.

But learning from the past, and learning from elsewhere is not enough. You have the difficult job of predicting the demands of the future parliament, and you need to cope with unpredictability and uncertainty. That means planning for different imagined scenarios. Some of these scenarios will never happen, but just planning for them helps you think. So use your imaginations to think what the new parliament might expect of you

Contents.

The Election Interlude.	1.
Opportunities and threats.	1.
Finding out what needs to be done.	1.
Training and development.	2.
Getting things ready.	2.
Induction of returning MPs.	3.
Management's collective responsibility.	4.
A last message.	4.
Checklists.	5.
- Staff who support the speaker/bureau.	5.
- Committee staff.	6.
- Research staff.	7.
- Outreach staff.	8.
- Media services.	9.
- Administrative services.	10.
- Security services.	11.
Author's biography.	12.

“The interlude ought to be a time for re-invigoration. That means gathering strength as *individuals* through personal learning and development, and also using the opportunity to strengthen parliament as an *institution*.”

“Good impressions will a long time – and bad impressions will be hard to shake off.”

– and in particular think how you might cope with really difficult scenarios, whether in terms of tricky political outcomes or difficult demands on your resources – or even reductions in your resources.

If you are really going to understand what needs to be done, you have to ask yourself difficult questions – about the past and about the future. So far as possible, you must avoid complacency. Challenge is key. And challenge will stimulate you and get you in the right frame of mind to meet whatever comes your way. Some basic checklists to stimulate thought among different groups of staff are set out later in this paper.

Training and development.

One thing for which you are almost certain to use the interlude is the training and development of staff. It is the best opportunity in the parliamentary cycle for some serious training – a time when staff can concentrate on learning without being called back to their day-to-day work.

Ideally, you will already have training plans and will know what individual staff members' training and development needs are. If not, this is the time to develop those plans and assess those needs.

Training comes in different guises. You will probably want to offer some generic training – examples might be how to use social media; how to read financial reporting documents; English language skills. A flexible programme of general training courses that can be attended by staff at all levels of seniority, and coming from all parts of the parliamentary service, should be devised.

Other training will be specialist – the skills that particular groups of staff, or staff at particular levels, or individual staff members, may need. These can range from advanced legislative drafting skills for senior lawyers through internet security techniques for the security department to training housekeeping staff to clean rooms more efficiently.

Training could also be offered in two areas that could be described as comparative training. First, you can use the opportunity for different parts of the parliamentary service to learn what other parts do: the researchers can learn about the work of the IT department, or the committee staff can learn about the finance department's work. This will help build up not just understanding but also a sense of mutual respect, camaraderie and common purpose.

Another aspect of comparative training is to study the systems and ways of operation of other parliaments. Parliaments are unique working environments, but each does basically the same job, and there is always something to learn from the approach taken to core parliamentary tasks in another country. A lot can be done remotely, but if you do organise study visits, make sure that those who go on them have the responsibility to pass on what they learn – good or bad – to their colleagues when they return.

Getting things ready.

The election interlude should also be used for getting things ready. At one level, that can mean nothing more than housekeeping: all the bits of building maintenance that could not be done when parliament was meeting ought to be done now. Furniture needs to be repaired or replaced, walls redecorated, curtains cleaned. The focus should be on the rooms that MPs use most – the chamber, the committee rooms and MPs' individual offices.

There are systems to get ready as well. Your audit of what has gone wrong in the past should help you plan your priorities here.

Getting parliamentary systems ready ought to be a priority. What needs to be done to make the Chamber and committees work more effectively? What did MPs complain about most in the last electoral period? Did they get the documentation they needed at the right time? Was it the right sort of documentation? Do physical arrangements (seating, lighting audio systems) need improvement? And is staff support being offered in the areas MPs want and is it of the quality they expect?

The election interlude is also a time to examine the Rules of Procedure and any supplementary Codes of Practice or Protocols: what didn't work as well as it should? How could these be amended? Amendment of these documents is going to have to await

MPs' return, but you can prepare position papers explaining why changes are desirable in advance.

It is important to get other systems ready as well. This includes IT and information systems, office systems, finance systems and security systems. Where were the difficulties and the pinch points? What needs to be renewed or changed so that the systems will operate more effectively and efficiently in the new parliament?

You may have some idea as to who will be elected as Speaker in the new parliament, and who will become members of the Speakership or the Bureau, but you have to be ready for changes you did not anticipate. But whoever is elected, the support of the secretariat to these key MPs is one of the secretariat's most important duties, and it will therefore be vital to ask yourselves what you need to do to ensure that the support services to the Speaker and Bureau are ready for whatever challenges the new parliament brings.

Induction of returning MPs.

Preparing an effective induction programme for returning MPs – especially, but not exclusively new MPs – is another important task for this period.

Too often parliamentary staff do not do this job particularly well. There are examples in many other parliaments of induction being interpreted as the production of long and detailed guides to the Rules of Procedure for new MPs – guides that are destined to gather dust on MPs' shelves because they are not what new MPs either need or can even understand.

Your job is to make sure that the welcome that MPs receive is a good one, and that information is conveyed to them in a way that they find useful – although there will also be some information you need them to know but that they are not so interested in receiving – an example might be letting them know that they must not use parliamentary IT systems to access illicit material.

To help plan successful induction, it is important to find out what MPs really want. Ask retiring MPs what was good and bad about the induction process they went through and what information they think the new set of MPs will need, and when.

Working co-operatively with parties and blocs to plan the induction process is also crucial – they will have plans themselves for new MPs, and your induction programme should fit in with theirs.

The first things that new MPs want to know about are the practical issues: what the security arrangements are; where their offices are; how they get IT equipment, telephones, stationery, photocopying; how and when they are paid; what allowances they are entitled to. It is in this area that you are likely also to want to make sure that they are clear about what they cannot do as well as what they can do.

After this, you will want to ensure that they know about standards of conduct. There are two aspects of this. They should be told clearly about the ethical standards expected of them (declarations of interest and other required standards of integrity). They also need to know how they are expected to behave in parliamentary proceedings – ranging from respect for the Chair and for the opinion of others to the prohibition on firearms.

It is only at the next stage after this that an induction programme should begin to deal with parliamentary procedures and more general issues – how to ask parliamentary questions, how to amend legislation, how to work effectively in committee, what the parliamentary research service can do to help MPs, the petitioning process, constituency work, educational outreach, the process of government, effective use of the media and similar topics.

Induction is about informing, but there are good and bad ways of informing. Don't rely just on producing information documents – getting documentation read is different from getting documentation ready. But you will certainly need well-produced, attractive and readable documents, produced in hard copy and available on line. And think as well about podcasts, videos and social media.

As well as this sort of material, there needs to be a variety of other ways of getting information across – one-to-one briefing, briefing of small groups, briefing for MPs by region, by bloc/party, by areas of political interest. Try to offer a range of briefing opportunities in

“Your job is to make sure that the welcome that MPs receive is a good one, and that information is conveyed to them in a way that they find useful.”

“The Secretary General will win a lot of friends if he or she goes out of the way to meet new MPs personally and establish trust with them.”

“It is not good for individual teams and directorates to work on their own projects without any regard for what other teams and directorates are doing.”

different formats at different times so that there is a format, a subject, a time that will suit everyone.

There is a job here for the Secretary General who will win a lot of friends if he or she goes out of the way to meet new MPs personally and establish trust with them.

“Buddying” is another particularly useful way of helping individual MPs. Assign an experienced and confident member of staff to be the buddy of each new MP. The buddy should be there whenever the MP needs advice about how the parliament operates. The MP should be able to rely on the accuracy and confidentiality of the advice the buddy gives. As well as helping new MPs, it has the advantage of being a very effective way of building up MPs’ trust in the administration.

One final point: induction is really an aspect of training. However, MPs do not like to think of themselves as being trained by parliamentary staff, so do it without calling it training.

Management’s collective responsibility.

For the election interlude to be used most successfully there are two key things that management needs to do. The first is to ensure that there is good planning of the activities that will occupy the period and good delivery of the outcomes of those activities. The second is to ensure that staff morale remains high. Individual managers are not always good at doing both, but the management team collectively needs to be able to do so.

There will be many individual things that need to be done – the checklists later in this paper give an idea of these. Each piece of work – each project - needs to be managed in a coherent way, with a focus on results. That means setting up an effective team, making sure that work is divided up into manageable and controllable stages and allowing flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances.

These teams should not work in isolation. It is not good for individual teams and directorates to work on their own projects without any regard for what other teams and directorates are doing. Cooperation is most likely to achieve the results that the incoming MPs will appreciate – they, after all, are concerned with delivery, not the structure of the bureaucracy.

At any time in the parliamentary cycle it is good practice to cooperate and coordinate and to avoid the “silo mentality”. However, during the busy times when parliament is sitting, it is natural that people keep their heads down and concentrate on their own areas of work. The election interlude is a great opportunity to develop cooperative working – and to make a solid basis for cooperation continuing when parliament is sitting again.

There are ways of helping this coordination. Ideally a Programme Board of senior managers should be set up to coordinate the whole programme of work during the election interlude and to keep an eye on delivery. The Secretary General or one of his or her deputies should chair the Board. This makes it clear that direction and responsibility are being taken at the top of the organisation. The members of the Board should be chosen as key people with responsibility for delivery in all the different areas where work needs to be done.

You should also think about appointing a Programme Manager – a very organised individual, focussed on delivery and empowered by the Secretary General to get results from managers at all levels. The Programme Manager reports to the Programme Board. His or her job is not to deliver himself or herself but to ensure that others do so.

Programme and project management are ways of making bureaucracies work efficiently and cooperatively. But management’s role is not confined to efficiency. Management also has a crucial job of morale-building, making sure that staff are re-energised to work as a team ready to respond positively to whatever challenge the new parliament brings.

A last message.

Enjoy the break. Take full advantage of it. Get yourself in the position to be outstanding when parliament starts working again. It will make others proud of you, and you will be proud of yourselves. Good luck!

Checklists.

To help parliamentary staff use the election interlude as positively as possible, here are some checklists of questions that particular groups of staff may find it useful to ask themselves over this period.

Staff who support the Speaker/Bureau.

Looking backwards

- Have you discussed what went badly and what went well in supporting the Speaker/Bureau during the last electoral period?
- What was missing from the staff skill-set?
- Have documents been stored in a way that will make them readily accessible (electronically or physically) in the future?
- Have documents been weeded so that nothing is stored unnecessarily?

Looking forwards

- What are the likely areas the new Speaker/Bureau will want to change?
- How will these demands change if different people are elected as Speaker/Bureau?
 - » Do you have the skills and knowledge to help?
 - » If not, what do you need to do?
- Do you have briefing packs prepared for the new Speaker/new Bureau?
- Is everything ready for the first session?
- How are you building up external relations?
 - » With government?
 - » With key stakeholders?
 - » With external experts?
- Are you improving operating practices that did not work before?

Committee Staff.

Looking backwards

- Have you discussed what went badly and what went well in committee activities during the last electoral period? In terms of:
 - » Outcomes
 - Were reports written on time?
 - Was legislation well-drafted?
 - What was the reaction inside and outside parliament to the committee's output?
 - » Staff skills
 - What was missing from the skill-set?
 - » Relations between MPs and staff
 - What went wrong and why?
 - What went well?
 - » Relations with stakeholders
 - What went wrong and why?
 - What went well?
 - » Rules of procedure
 - What prevented the committee from operating effectively?
 - What would you like to change?
 - » Operating practices - everything from room bookings to visit arrangements
 - How could these be improved?
- Where there is uncompleted business, have you prepared material to brief the new committee so that they can understand what the issues are and decide whether or not to take it on?
- Have documents been stored in a way that will make them readily accessible (electronically or physically) in the future?
- Have documents been weeded so that nothing is stored unnecessarily?

Looking forwards

- What are the likely issues that the new committee will want to consider?
 - » Do you have the skills and knowledge to help?
 - » If not, what do you need to do?
- Do you have welcome and induction packs prepared for MPs? Have you thought through a training programme?
 - » In committee procedure?
 - » In the committee's policy area?
- How are you building up relations with key stakeholders (including government departments) and external experts?
- Are you improving operating practices that did not work before?
- How are you going to try to get Rules of Procedure changed?

Research staff.

Looking backwards

- Have you discussed what went badly and what went well in research activities during the last electoral period? In terms of:
 - » Outcomes
 - What research had a high impact inside and outside parliament and why?
 - What research did not have an impact and why?
 - » Staff Skills
 - What was missing from the skill-set?
 - Were there key areas where your research was weak?
 - » Relations between MPs and researchers
 - What went wrong and why?
 - What went well?
 - » Relations with external organisations: universities, think-tanks, civil society organisations
 - What went wrong and why?
 - What went well?
 - » Operating practices
 - How could these be improved?
- Have documents been stored in a way that will make them readily accessible (electronically or physically) in the future?
- Have documents been weeded so that nothing is stored unnecessarily?

Looking forwards

- Are there research projects that you were not able to complete before the election that you can complete now?
- What are the likely issues on which MPs are most likely to want research in the new parliament? Are there new or changed political priorities that the research agenda will need to address?
 - » Do you have the skills and knowledge to provide the research that will be wanted?
 - » If not, what do you need to do?
 - Training?
 - Recruiting?
 - Using external experts?
- Do you have welcome and induction packs prepared for MPs?
- Are you building up relations with key stakeholders (including government departments) and external experts?
- Have you improved operating practices that did not work before?

Outreach staff.

Looking backwards

- Have you discussed what went badly and what went well in outreach activities during the last electoral period? In terms of:
 - » Outcomes
 - What outreach activities had a high impact and why?
 - What outreach activities had a poor impact and why?
 - » Staff skills
 - What was missing from the skill-set?
 - » Relations between MPs and outreach service
 - What did MPs like that you did?
 - What did they dislike?
 - » Relations with stakeholders
 - How was outreach sectors such as schools, universities and civil society organisations?
 - » What are the groups you did not reach, and why?
- Operating practices
 - » how could these be improved?

Looking forwards

- Are you building up relations in key future areas of outreach?
- What will MPs expect you to be doing outside the capital, whether in regional cities or in individual constituencies?
- What new things do you expect the new parliament to expect from you?
- Are you using social media effectively? And how are you planning for new social media?
- Have you improved operating practices that did not work before?
- Are your operating practices the ones that your partners are likely to find useful to them?

Media services.

Looking backwards

- Have you discussed what went badly and what went well in media activities during the last electoral period? In terms of:
 - » Outcomes
 - What positive stories about parliament that you promoted had a high impact and why?
 - What negative stories about parliament were you unsuccessful in dampening down and why?
 - Which stories about parliament – positive and negative – did you not predict, and why?
 - » Staff skills
 - What was missing from the skill-set?
 - » Relations between MPs and outreach service
 - What did MPs like that you did?
 - What did they dislike?
 - » Relations with media
 - How well did relations work with broadcast, print, regional and specialist media?
 - How well did relations work on social media?
 - Which media/types of media did you not reach and why?
 - » Operating practices
 - How could these be improved?

Looking forwards

- Are you building up relations with key media?
- What are you doing to get yourselves known and trusted by key media figures?
- What new things do you expect the new parliament to expect from you?
- Have you improved operating practices that did not work before?
- Are your operating practices the ones that your partners are likely to find useful to them?
- Are you preparing comprehensive biographies of new MPs for internal use?

Administrative services.

Looking backwards

- Have you discussed what went badly and what went well in your operations during the last electoral period? In terms of:
 - » Outcomes - examples of these might be
 - Did financial systems work well?
 - Were MPs and staff paid on time?
 - Was there any evidence of impropriety or corruption?
 - Were there any problems with the way buildings worked?
 - Were there any problems with IT or telephony?
 - Were there any problems with transport services?
 - How did catering services work?
 - How did cleaning services work?
 - » Staff skills
 - What was missing from the skill-set?
 - Does the mix between what is provided in-house and by external contractors need to change?
 - » Relations between MPs and administrative services
 - What did MPs like that you did?
 - What did they dislike?
 - How did relations work with contractors and suppliers?
 - Do any contracts need to be renegotiated?
 - » Operating practices
 - How could these be improved?

Looking forwards

- Are you building up relations with key stakeholders?
- What new things do you expect the new parliament to expect from you?
- How are you going to improve operating practices that did not work well before?
- How are you going to improve efficiency?
- How are you going to raise standards of probity?

Security services.

Looking backwards

- Have you discussed what went badly and what went well in security during the last electoral period? In terms of:
 - » Outcomes
 - What security breaches occurred?
 - What 'near-misses' occurred?
 - » Staff skills
 - What was missing from the skill-set?
 - How well did liaison with external security services work?
 - » Relations between MPs and security service
 - What did MPs like that you did?
 - What did they dislike?
 - » Relations with others
 - How well did relations work with parliamentary staff?
 - How well did relations work with visitors to parliament?
 - » Operating practices
 - How could these be improved?

Looking forwards

- Are you building up relations with external security services?
- What new things do you expect the new parliament to expect from you?
- How would you cope in a variety of scenarios – for example
 - » If the new parliament wants to be more open to visitors?
 - » If an MP wants a known security risk to be employed on his/her staff?
- What is likely to change in the external security environment, and how able will you be to respond?
- Have you improved operating practices that did not work before?
- Are your operating practices the ones that your partners are likely to find useful to them?
- Are you ready to issue security passes to new MPs and their staff?

Biography.



Paul Silk is a former Clerk to the National Assembly for Wales, serving from March 2001 until December 2006. During this period he was the most senior official in the Assembly and acted as the principal advisor to the Presiding Officer and was responsible for all the services that are delivered to Assembly Members through the Assembly Parliamentary Service. He was a Clerk in the House of Commons from 1975-1977 and 1979-2001 and contributed to drafting the first standing orders of the National Assembly for Wales. He was Director of Strategic Projects in the House of Commons from 2007 to 2010. He has also worked as Presidential Adviser in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and has written and lectured extensively on Parliament and the constitution. He is an honorary Professor at the Wales Governance Centre at Cardiff University. Paul was also the chair of the Commission on Devolution in Wales.

Cover image by JJ
Harrison - used under
CC-BY-SA 3.0

Publication design by
Joe Power

+44 (0) 207 549 0350
gpgovernance.net
hello@gpgovernance.net

© Global Partners
Governance, 2014

strengthening representative politics.

Global Partners Governance

Development House
56-64 Leonard Street
London
EC2A 4LT

☎ +44 (0)20 7549 0350

✉ hello@gpgovernance.net

🐦 [gpgovernance](#)

www.gpgovernance.net