



Parliament-government liaison

By Aileen Walker & Alex Brazier

GPG's *Guide to Parliaments* series explores the processes and functions of parliaments around the world. The series highlights key elements from GPG's work on the design and delivery of effective parliamentary strengthening projects. This paper discusses the importance of coordination between national parliaments and government ministries and explores some mechanisms to improve the level and quality of liaison and communication between the legislature and the executive. A case study is also included: a description of work to support effective parliament-government coordination undertaken by GPG's Sudan project team.

1. Introduction

In order to fulfil their oversight role, parliaments need to liaise effectively with government ministries. Governments also need to liaise effectively with parliaments, in order to deliver their policy objectives and legislative programme. Yet often the two bodies work in isolation with minimal structured coordination. Parliaments complain that they don't get the information they require – too much, too little, wrong format, or too late; ministries complain that they don't get enough information about the parliamentary agenda and processes. Improved liaison and coordination between parliament and government delivers benefits for both sides and can also lead to improvements in overall governance and efficiency.

2. Need for effective coordination

Regardless of constitutional requirements

or parliamentary rules of procedure, there are common types of business which entail coordination between the legislature and the executive.

The primary one is **legislation**: the government presents draft legislation to parliament to get approval for new laws. Parliament may amend the proposed law before approving it and the legislative process often involves much negotiation and coordination between government and parliament before the law is finally enacted.

Ministerial accountability: Generally, there is some system for government **ministers appearing before parliament** - on a rota, by invitation, or in response to urgent matters. Ministers are questioned or make statements, and sometimes decisions will be adopted or undertakings given. **Written answers and statements** may also be made.

Authorisation of public expenditure: Ministries are usually required to present **reports to parliament** on their performance and the government needs to get approval for its **budget and expenditure**.

Committees are another way through which parliament can exercise its scrutiny function. Committee reports can look at legislation and aspects of government policy, expenditure and administration and may make recommendations, asking for government action.

In **debating issues of national concern**, parliaments will require government

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ministers to respond to challenge on their policies relating to national priorities and circumstances.

Some parliaments have **petition systems** or other mechanisms by which the public can press for action. These may require communication through the parliament to the relevant part of government.

In some countries, particularly those with federal political systems, there is also a need for effective liaison and coordination to be both horizontal and vertical. In other words:

- Between parliament and government
- Within and between government ministries
- Between the national parliament, the central (federal) government, and the provincial assembly and state governments.
- And, if relevant, between chambers/houses

Ministers need officials to help prepare them for the parliamentary requirements on them, officials who understand both ministry priorities and parliamentary processes.

3. Common issues and challenges

Within these various ways in which parliament and government do business with each other, there are common challenges that typically arise, the key ones being:

- **Lack of parliamentary knowledge within ministries:** often, civil servants will not have detailed knowledge of parliamentary processes. Staff working in a legislative bill team, for example, are more likely to be policy experts rather than parliamentary proceduralists.
- **Lack of dedicated liaison staff within ministries:** ministries understandably prioritise policy work. Often, responsibility for relations with parliament is tacked on as one aspect among many of someone's role. Which means (especially if that person is senior) the parliamentary liaison work is side-lined, as other work always has higher priority.
- **Reliance on key individuals:** effective relationships can be built up, and staff within ministries can learn about parliamentary processes to help their own work. Parliamentary officials can likewise build constructive relationships with key individuals in ministries. But what happens

when they move on, if there are no structured information and communication processes?

- **Inconsistent standards of information:** if there are no commonly agreed processes, information from different ministries will come in different formats and to different timescales (for a range of different reasons).
- **Tracking systems, record-keeping, archives, and other tools:** there are often problems keeping track of decisions, responses, follow-up actions etc.
- **Coordinating and managing many different individual relationships:** The one-to-many relationship that a parliament has with all the individual government ministries poses problems in itself. These problems are exacerbated if there are no standard procedures, no common expectations, and frequent changes in ministers and staff.
- **Providing information on government responses to parliamentary reports:** One area that is central to good liaison and coordination is transparency about how or whether government has taken action or is following-up decisions of parliament. For example, with parliamentary committee reports, post-legislative scrutiny reports, or other parliamentary decisions or motions, it is crucial to know whether committee recommendations have been accepted and then implemented by government.

Such challenges are an issue for both parliament and government. Each side is reliant on the other to achieve its own objectives: whether that be effective oversight and scrutiny or delivering legislative business and policy objectives. Some thought on how liaison could be improved would bring benefits to both sides.

There are clearly great benefits for ministers from better liaison. Being better informed about what parliament is doing means that ministers are less likely to have to deal with surprises arising from parliamentary requests, and they are less subject to potential embarrassment or difficulty arising from these surprises. Also, greater advance notice of invitations to enable ministers to prepare before attending committee meetings would be more likely to lead to more productive and useful meetings.

4. Key players in executive and legislature liaison

The two key protagonists in legislature-executive liaison are clearly the national parliament, and the government. The government, however, is actually a collection of government ministries, each of which has an individual relationship with the parliament. If the parliament is bicameral, there are additional coordinating complexities.

The need for coordination is recognised in various organisational ways. On the government side, there is often a specific government ministry established to coordinate the individual ministries (for example: the *Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs* in the UK; the *Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs* in Jordan). These ministries tend to be responsible for coordinating within government (that is - among government ministries, not between government and parliament).

In some countries there is also a government office (if not a whole ministry) responsible for relations between the government and the parliament (for example: the *Office of the Minister for the Council of Ministers* in the UK; the *Office of the Minister for the Council of Ministers* in Sudan). Ideally, this office is physically located within the parliamentary building, so that the government staff get to know the functioning and rhythm of the parliament and are able to act as a two-way communication channel to improve coordination. (See also section 7 below).

In relation to legislation specifically, liaison and coordination may take place via the team of lawyers who draft government legislation, if there is such a team (for example the *Legislation Drafting Team* in the UK). Their role is highly specialised however, and relates purely to primary legislation. The lawyers drafting legislation liaise with ministries (ministers, bill teams, and policy teams) and with parliamentary officials on matters of drafting (not on policy or politics).

5. Designated liaison staff

In order to address some of the common challenges encountered, an official in each ministry is often designated to be the focal point for parliamentary liaison within the ministry. This could be in the minister's executive/private office, or attached to the communications service or strategy team, or there could be a separate small parliamentary

section. Often, however, the designated official will have many other responsibilities alongside this role.

To realise the full benefits of the liaison role, there should ideally be a designated official – a “**parliamentary liaison officer**” – who has this as their sole responsibility. Their key responsibility is to understand how parliament works, not in a theoretical sense, but by familiarising themselves with the parliamentary business processes and by developing effective personal relationships and lines of communication with parliamentary officials. Their job is to help bridge the gap between the ministry and parliament. Insight and communication flow both ways through this role.

Ministries, however, may need to be convinced of the value of devoting scarce resources to such a role. Officials may need to show how a current and practical knowledge of parliamentary processes will help the minister get business through parliament and illustrate how such knowledge can help avoid wasted time and embarrassment. Understanding the priorities and objectives of both sides puts the parliamentary liaison officer in a key position to help smooth the progress of ministry business.

6. Network of liaison officers

If each ministry has a designated parliamentary liaison officer, further benefits and efficiencies can be realised by setting up a network of liaison officers.

Benefits: By establishing a professional network, best practice can be shared and valuable peer support extended. Staff can move between ministries with a recognised set of skills and experience. The quality of the service offered to ministries is therefore likely to improve. Establishing a network of parliamentary liaison officers helps build capacity among government staff – not only in parliamentary knowledge, but also other key skills such as communication, personal effectiveness, and stakeholder management. Staff development, capability and retention levels are likely to increase. And ultimately, all this will support and improve the government's ability to deliver its policy objectives and legislative programme.

Efficiencies: The efficiency of the tasks expected of parliamentary liaison officers can be improved by introducing agreed

standards, systems and templates. Desk manuals can be developed to help support the role. Recognising the role as a distinct set of skills and responsibilities means that staff recruitment, training, and development can be coordinated across government, bringing efficiencies and flexibility. With the use of standard formats and systems, efficiencies can also be realised on the parliament side.

7. Liaison and coordination office

If a network of parliamentary liaison officers is established, thought has to be given as to how it will be coordinated, in order that the benefits and efficiencies are realised. Ideally, this will be recognised and approved at the centre of government and resources allocated accordingly. The obvious place for the coordination function to be based is in the parliament itself, so that the work is informed by close proximity to parliamentary business, staff and processes.

Establishing a government office in the parliament can fulfil several functions. It can fulfil a **coordination function**: simple things like maintaining contact lists of the parliamentary liaison officers in the network are useful. It can convene meetings of the network to share best practice; organise speakers and seminars on topics of current interest; develop templates for standard reports etc; oversee the training programme for parliamentary liaison officers; and develop desk manuals for the role.

It can also act as an **information hub**: disseminating parliamentary news and information out to parliamentary liaison officers in ministries and receiving information and queries in from ministries. Getting to know the parliamentary administration and being able to advise ministry staff which parliamentary official to talk to is really valuable. Being closer to the parliament, the office can develop itself as a source of more expert knowledge on parliamentary rules of procedure and alert ministries about changes to procedures or the business agenda.

An information hub would be able to provide information to MPs and parliamentary officials about who is responsible for certain work and policies within the executive. It may also provide information on whether decisions of the parliament, or recommendations of parliamentary

committees, are being acted upon and followed up.

Ideally it should be a responsibility of both the government and parliament to ensure that the system works as well as possible and they should devise procedures and policies to ensure that this happens. A first step could be the joint production of a manual for ministry staff detailing the ways that government and parliament have to interact and coordinate their work, and outlining the relevant parliamentary processes. An example of a manual is the UK's

produced by the Office of the Leader of the House of Commons in conjunction with the administrations of the House of Commons and House of Lords. A common parliamentary training programme for ministry staff could also be beneficial.

8. Other liaison mechanisms

Embedding a government coordination office in the parliament building will help ensure that the parliamentary liaison officers have a central information and communication hub close to the centre of parliamentary business.

Similar benefits can be gained by seconding parliamentary officials out to work in key government ministries. In the UK, there is a rolling secondment to the Cabinet Office and to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as well as other ad hoc secondment arrangements. A mid-career parliamentary official spends two or three years in one of these designated posts in government, both to act as a knowledgeable two-way communication channel to help bring about better mutual understanding, and also as a means of professional development. In some countries there are also national audit office staff secondments to the parliament, with similar envisaged benefits.

Parliamentary procedures can seem confusing from outside. To address the common lack of parliamentary knowledge within government ministries, parliaments could also consider running a specific training course specifically aimed at civil servants. This might be done through a national government or parliamentary training institute, if one exists, or through parliamentary outreach staff.

9. Case study - Bringing key players together in Sudan

One way to highlight the benefits of improved legislature-executive liaison and coordination, and to discuss and agree ways to achieve improvements, is to hold a workshop to bring together the key participants from government and parliament. During the course of GPG's recent work supporting the National Assembly of Sudan it became apparent that there were many concerns about the effectiveness of the relationships between the legislature and the executive. These concerns included:

- The need for an improved flow of information between the executive and legislature in order to achieve better legislation and oversight.
- Concerns that the quality of the information that the Government sends to the National Assembly is very variable in quality, particularly so in the case of financial matters.
- Concerns about the level of knowledge and understanding between the two branches of government, and the level of executive knowledge of parliamentary procedure.
- The perception that coordination and liaison with the National Assembly was assigned a low priority by parts of the Executive. The lack of formal coordination was thought to be particularly acute when it came to Government following-up the work of the National Assembly; for example, Committee reports or decisions of the National Assembly.

To address these concerns GPG undertook a programme of work to improve executive-legislature coordination and liaison, including working closely with the executive, most notably the Minister of the Ministry of the Council of Ministers (the Ministry responsible for coordination among government ministries and for executive-legislature relationships), and with the National Assembly.

Some **key themes** emerged from this work, including the benefits of improved coordination and liaison:

For the Government side: It would help to deliver policy objectives and legislative business.

For the Parliament side: It would help to deliver improved oversight functions and manage parliamentary business more efficiently.

Furthermore, improved mechanisms would be likely to assist efforts to make relationships more complementary and collaborative.

The objectives of the workshop were:

- To bring designated contacts from each ministry together to share best practice and support the development of the role of parliamentary liaison officer.
- To establish the value and benefits of an active network of parliamentary liaison officers within government ministries.
- To agree training requirements for the network of parliamentary liaison officers.
- To discuss ways to enhance the role of the Ministry of Council of Ministers office at the National Assembly as an information and liaison hub.

A seminar was held with around 80 participants. This was the first time they had all come together to discuss matters of common concern. Participants included:

- Staff from Government ministries including a designated liaison person from the executive office of each Government ministry
- Assistant Secretary General and key staff from the National Assembly
- Members of the National Assembly, including those on the Members' Capacity Building Committee
- Officials of parliamentary committees

At the seminar, two initiatives were identified as the priorities for change:

A: Developing the professional role of parliamentary liaison officers

The proposition that there should be a formal post of "parliamentary liaison officer" in every ministry was widely welcomed. This post to be the focal point for liaison and coordination between the ministry and the National Assembly.

The participants supported the proposition that the parliamentary liaison officers should be established as new positions and that these officials should be given full responsibility for parliamentary liaison and co-ordination. By giving the parliamentary liaison officers this level of responsibility, they would be more likely to ensure that ministries give sufficient priority to executive-legislature relations.

A professional process would need to be established in order to appoint and train the

correct people for the role of parliamentary liaison officer. Training would involve communication skills and report writing, as well as training in all aspects of parliamentary procedures and practices.

There was also agreement that a network of parliamentary liaison officers should be established to provide support and an information exchange for the officers. This innovation would allow parliamentary liaison officers to meet regularly and therefore coordinate their work, and the relationship with the National Assembly, more effectively.

B: Enhancing the Office of the Ministry of the Council of Ministers in the National Assembly

The small Ministry of the Council of Ministers Office in National Assembly (MoCoM Office) already played a significant role in providing liaison, coordination and information within the National Assembly. It was agreed that there was potential for this work to be strengthened.

The production of a manual detailing the work of the MoCoM Office was thought to be needed. Also, job descriptions should be produced for all those working in executive-legislature relations including the MoCoM Office and the parliament liaison officers. Training provided for MoCoM Office staff should include communication skills and report writing.

Next Steps: For all those involved with executive-legislature liaison – whether ministers, government officials, Members of the National Assembly, Assembly officials - this workshop represented the beginning of a process that could eventually lead to enhanced and effective liaison, communication, coordination and cooperation between government ministries and the National Assembly.

10. Conclusion

Those countries which do invest specifically in formal systems of parliament-government liaison clearly feel that they derive value and benefit from the investment. It is to the mutual benefit of both sides that there is understanding and communication in both directions.

In particular, an improved flow of information between the executive and legislature can

lead to better quality legislation and more effective oversight. A more efficient and better-informed system of government can ultimately lead to more responsive representation of the public by Members of Parliament and greater accountability of the government to parliament. More broadly, improved liaison and co-ordination mechanisms may assist efforts to make governmental-parliamentary relationships more constructive and collaborative.

Appendix – Sample job description for a Parliamentary Liaison Officer

Overview

To support the ministerial team with parliamentary business in order to deliver the government's policy objectives.

Key responsibilities

- To create and maintain constructive relationships with parliament
- To develop strong relationships with policy teams within the ministry
- To ensure ministers receive quality briefings for parliamentary questions, ministerial statements, and debates
- To support bill teams to ensure smooth progress of ministry legislation
- To be an expert in how to pass regulations to implement ministry policies
- To be the key link with relevant parliamentary committees

Duties

- providing advice to ministers and ministry staff on parliamentary procedures
- providing support for ministerial parliamentary business (questions, statements, debates)
- working closely with the ministry bill team on progress of primary legislation
- managing laying of ministry secondary legislation in parliament
- managing and tabling of written ministerial statements
- coordinating and submitting briefing for government business statements
- managing the relationship with relevant parliamentary committees
- laying ministerial papers and reports
- disseminating relevant parliamentary information/news within the ministry
- liaising with other government ministries where necessary

Competencies

- interpersonal skills and relationship building
- knowledge of key policy objectives of ministry
- experience of, or aptitude to quickly acquire knowledge of, parliamentary procedures
- excellent oral and written communication skills
- self-motivated
- attention to detail

About the Authors



Aileen Walker worked at the UK Parliament for over 30 years in a variety of information, research, communications, and change management roles. As Director of Public Engagement in the House of Commons, she led a significant expansion in the UK Parliament's education, information, outreach, and visitor services.



Alex Brazier is a specialist in parliamentary procedure and reform, including legislative process and financial scrutiny, parliamentary committees, parliamentary and constitutional reform. He was the Hansard Society's Director of the Parliament and Government Programme. Previously, he was a Committee Specialist for a House of Commons Select Committee and also worked in the House of Commons Library.

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Joe Power

gpgovernance.net
hello@gpgovernance.net

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