

A prep school, 'Dracula's castle', or where they belonged? First impressions of Westminster from the History of Parliament's oral history project.

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Talk of the new boy at school. I'd been a new boy at school time and again, and I remember the loneliness. You're there, suddenly your parents have gone, the friendly teacher or whoever it is, who said now you'll be alright, there you are in a room, alone. What do I do? Usually, someone tells you what to do. There's a bell for tea, there's prep, there's a sports game, whatever it is, somebody tells you what to do. But in Parliament – I remember vividly – you arrive and there you are; you're on your own. So fine, after all, you've been elected, you're a mature person, you've got to find your way, but I do remember the sense of, golly, what do I do now? Because it's up to you. There's no training path, there's no induction course, you're on your own. Michael Heseltine (Conservative, 1966–2001)¹

It's a terribly confusing place. [...] It's old and it's fusty. The thing that struck me was [...] the darkness. Everything looks inwards. [...] There's no windows to the outside. It is a bubble; you are totally cut off from the outside world in that place. It's dark and there are mice running around in the tea rooms and there are moths fluttering everywhere. [...] The whole place is like a crumbling old Dracula's castle. Do I love it? I love the outside on a sunny day. [...] I don't like Victorian Gothic. Jenny Tonge (LD, 1997–2005)²

*I knew Westminster quite a lot because I'd been secretary of the Fabian Society. [...] What I did was I explored it, physically I explored it. For example, I felt the House of Parliament belong to members of Parliament [...] We'd go around, we'd walk around it and go through every door, on the assumption that every door was my door, unless there was some special reason. So I went into all sort of things, up stairs, I was able to get top and climb on the roof of the Houses of Parliament. I just physically wanted to know what it was like to be absorbed in it. And I thought it was very friendly. **William Rodgers (Labour/Social Democrat/Liberal Democrat)³***

Since 2011, the History of Parliament Trust has been interviewing former MPs about their lives and experiences. These interviews are 'life story' narratives, by which we mean that we are interested in every aspect of a politician's life and not just their time in Westminster. We have interviewed over

¹ The History of Parliament's Oral History Project, Politics, British Library (hereafter C1503); C1503/54 [00:38:55–00:40:05]

² C1503/148 [1, 01:40:30–01:42:30]

³ C1503/18 [01:59:55–02:01:05]

180 former MPs to date. In each of these interviews we ask about their experiences at Westminster: what it felt like to arrive as a new MP, their initial impressions of the culture and atmosphere. There were many different reactions – as demonstrated by the opening quotations – and these were not always those that you might expect from a superficial knowledge of Parliament’s culture or an individual’s political views. In analysing them we open a window into both the individuals who were at the heart of British Politics, but also the ‘prep school’ or ‘Dracula’s castle’ that was Westminster in the late 20th century. This paper is based entirely on reflections from the Trust’s oral history project, and in part it intends to demonstrate the value that this sound archive can have for scholars of Parliament. We have recently published an introduction and guide to the archive, *The Political Lives of Postwar MPs*, to help scholars navigate hundreds of hours of recordings.⁴

1. The Sound Archive

The History of Parliament’s Oral History project was shaped in collaboration with our archive partner, the British Library (BL), and the interviews discussed here are available to listen to in full either online or on site at the BL.⁵ The BL also assist us in training our team of volunteer interviewers, without whom the project simply could not happen. Each interview is based on a schedule of questions provided by us. This is not a questionnaire, but a list of topics that we are interested in and some suggested questions to help to raise these issues with the interviewee. Each interview is different, as they are all led by the career of the individual and the narrative they choose to share. We are just as interested in their childhood or their family life as an MP as we are in party manoeuvring or details of specific legislation. This makes our interviews very long (the longest is 24 hours) and the average is four and a half hours. They mostly take place over several sessions and where possible at the former MP’s home.

We have an enormous potential pool of interviewees: there are around one thousand former MPs at any one time and with limited resources we are unable to interview them all. Practical reasons, such as matching interviewer and interviewee geographically, partly shape who we interview, but as far as possible we have a balance of interviews with MPs from all over the country. Unfortunately there are some gaps in the archive, most notably with MPs from Northern Ireland. We have tried to include as wide a variety of perspectives on Parliament as possible. Of course we try to keep a party

⁴ Emma Peplow & Priscilla Pivatto, *The Political Lives of Postwar British MPs: An Oral History of Parliament* (Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2020). Many of the quotations used here can be found in full in chapter 6, pp.81-93.

⁵ The interviews currently available online are here: <https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/The-History-of-Parliament-Oral-History-Project>

balance, but also a balance in backgrounds, career trajectories, and length of service at Westminster. The majority of our interviewees' were elected and left the Commons before the 1997 election (the first, Denis Healey, in 1952); all had left by the 2010 election. Our interviewees also reflect the gender and ethnic make-up of Parliament at this time. We have many fewer interviews with women than with men, but a higher proportion of women than the proportion of female MPs in this period, and sadly none yet with ethnic minority MPs.

Our interviews are different from interviews with journalists, a format many former MPs are used to, in several key ways. Firstly, the length of interview allows us to explore in depth many parts of a politician's life. Secondly, the interviews take place some time after the interviewee has left the House of Commons. They benefit from this distance in being more reflective and often less concerned with immediate party political controversies. Finally, we offer the opportunity for the interviewee to close the interview in part or entirely for a period of their choice. Whilst many do not take us up on the offer, it helps to build trust with the interviewee: we are not trying to catch them out or make political points, this is their chance to record their memories and impressions for posterity.

2. First Impressions

We chose to investigate first impressions of Westminster in this paper because it helps us to explore what our archive can offer researchers of Parliament and British politics. Whilst our interviewees may well have forgotten the detail of a particular bill, or mix up the timeline of a political controversy, what they can tell us that cannot be gleaned elsewhere is what it was like, for them, to be an MP. Our archive is rich in information about Westminster's culture. For those who have worked closely at Westminster, or have been actively involved in politics, this is likely to be familiar. However, these insights are not always recorded in sources historians would traditionally use, or at least not recorded well.

For example, reports of Westminster's culture in the press can be very politicised. In a recent interview, Nadia Whittome, Labour MP for Nottingham East and current 'baby' of the House, described the Palace of Westminster as 'the weirdest place in London ... It really is like Hogwarts, but the Death Eaters have taken over.'⁶ The political implications of this are clear: the culture is not welcoming to the working-classes, to women, to the Labour party in general, or to ethnic minorities.

⁶ <https://www.dazeddigital.com/politics/article/47282/1/youngest-mp-nadia-whittome-interview-the-time-for-mourning-is-finished> retrieved October 2020

This superficial impression of Westminster: that it was equally loved or hated, it was overwhelmingly white, male, and upper middle class is certainly seen in our interviews. The traditional metaphors: a prep school, a gentleman's club – the very things that Whittome is drawing on – of course feature in our archive.

However, our more reflective interviews, which take place years after an individual has left the House and in most cases (although not all) active politics entirely, present a more complex picture. Our decision to interview politicians from all sorts of backgrounds allows us to see the various cultures that existed within the Palace. We ask every interviewee how they felt on first entering Parliament: a life event that was often the result of years of political commitment that had dramatic consequences on their professional, personal and public lives. These memories are some of the most relatable in our archive: they remind us that Parliament is populated by people who all react as individuals.

There are perhaps three major types of reaction on first entering Parliament: politicians expressed feeling overawed, excited, or facing hostility. These reactions cannot necessarily be predicted by background. Those who expressed a sense of awe and an appreciation of taking their place in history came from all parties and both genders. Labour's Eileen Gordon told us: 'I love Westminster Hall. When you walk across it you just feel that sense of history: wow, Thomas More stood here or Charles I. To walk in their footsteps, it's just stunning.'⁷ At the same time Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, the current Marquess of Salisbury and former Conservative MP, also described feeling 'overwhelm[ed] [...] you're rather a small ant in front of this great institution'.⁸ Salisbury also told our interviewer that some of his earliest memories were of the 'great men' of the time, including Winston Churchill and John Foster Dulles, coming to discuss politics with his grandfather, the 5th Marquess and Conservative cabinet minister; clearly Parliament's magic could affect anyone.⁹ Conservative James Prior, for example, described feeling 'a bit of a fish out of water because I hadn't even got a dark suit to wear. I mean, in those days you had to wear dark suits, all the old boys were wearing striped trousers and black coats and things.'¹⁰ For Labour's David Clark:

⁷ Eileen Gordon (Labour, 1997–2001) C1503/167 [2, 00:38:20–00:39:45]

⁸ Robert Gascoyne- Cecil (Conservative, 1979–87) C1503/131 [1, 00:48:55–00:49:40]

⁹ Robert Gascoyne- Cecil (Conservative, 1979–87) C1503/131 [1, 00:02:40–00:03:30]

¹⁰ James Prior (Conservative, 1959–87) C1503/17 [00:42:00–00:43:00].

You suddenly realise[d] this is where Churchill walked, Attlee walked, Gladstone, Disraeli, all the big players of British politics, and really the changes of British society were done here. You couldn't but, at least I couldn't but, feel impressed.¹¹

Alongside these reflections many described feeling excited, 'exhilarated'¹² or proud of their achievement. The best expression of this is from Ann Widdecombe:

Before Parliament actually met for the first time, I went into the Chamber and I'd always said I'll believe I'm elected when I feel the green leather under me. And so I went to sit on the green leather, and while I was there sitting on the green leather in an empty Chamber, Jacques Arnold, who was the MP for a Kent seat, [...] he came in as well and he said, 'Oh, are you having a bounce?' I said, 'Well, I'm just convincing myself it's real.' So we both did, we both sat on the leather benches and bounced a bit.¹³

Others describe remembering significant members of their families, often those who had passed away. Hilton Dawson, who told us how important his grandmother was to his early political ambitions, said 'I used to feel her presence sometimes standing up in Parliament: Grandma [laughs].'¹⁴ David Hinchliffe described how his recently-deceased father's advice helped him feel less 'inferior', a natural response, he believed, given his background.¹⁵ Others felt a sense of responsibility. Harold Best told us:

It's hard to express how I felt, because I was acutely aware that I'd left behind me something like 70,000 people who were now my responsibility, in parliamentary terms, in the constituency. And I thought: I've got to do this right.¹⁶

Of course, there were others, particularly those who we might consider 'outsiders' because of their working-class backgrounds or gender, who were instantly on their guard and felt excluded by the culture at Westminster. One of our best examples is the opposing reactions to Parliament's traditions. The practice of including a pink ribbon in the cloakroom, supposedly to hang your sword on, was one of the touches that Conservative Vivian Bendall found 'awe-inspiring' or 'fascinating'.¹⁷ On the other hand, Labour's Maria Fyfe, just found it completely bewildering:

I was thinking God this is such a nightmare of a place. Then being struck by how odd it was in a number of ways. [...] You go into the Members' cloakroom, where each of you has got a

¹¹ David Clark (Labour, 1970-Feb 1974; 1979-2001) C1503/170 [2, 00:16:50-00:17:15]

¹² Elizabeth Shields 175 (Liberal, 1986-7) C1503/175 [3, 00:45:40-00:45:50]

¹³ Ann Widdecombe (Conservative, 1987-2010) C1503/176 [3, 00:16:45-00:17:25]

¹⁴ Hilton Dawson (Labour, 1997-2005) C1503/127 [1, 00:03:40-00:05:15]

¹⁵ David Hinchliffe (Labour, 1987-2005) C1503/65 [2, 00:06:55-00:07:40]

¹⁶ Harold Best (Labour, 1997-2005) C1503/41 [4, 00:45:25-00:45:50]

¹⁷ Vivian Bendall (Conservative, 1978-97) C1503/133 [3, 00:05:55-00:06:15]

hanger with your name on it, and there's a pink ribbon. [...] When I asked [what it was for], I was told, 'It's for hanging your sword on.' [Laughs] I said, 'What?!' They've been doing this since the mists of time. This is ludicrous. It's been at least two centuries since men went about with swords and women never. They love their traditions there and I just thought this is ridiculous. So I said, 'In the Chamber of the House of Commons [...] let me get this right, it's two sword lengths apart, but you're not allowed to bring swords into the Chamber anyway even if you even had one – what's the point?' [Laughs] Logic has nothing to do with it [laughs].¹⁸

This feeling was not confined to working class Labour MPs. The Conservative Charles Goodson-Wickes, told us:

[I had a feeling of] utter frustration, coming from a life in which I had a proper, professional military and commercial career, into the House of Commons. [...] I could never understand the mix between arcane procedures and schoolboyish behaviour. I used to sit there thinking, 'What on earth am I doing?'¹⁹

Liberal Democrat Diana Maddock describes feeling that the Commons was a 'mad house' when a committee chairman, 'an absolute stickler for the rules' insisted that men put their suit jackets back on during a hot session, because 'nobody [had] asked' to take them off.²⁰

Whatever their reaction, at the time most of our interviewees took their seats (all 1997 or before) everyone agreed that as new MPs they were thrown in at the deep end. There was little or no official induction; no one told them even when they should arrive, let alone where to go, where to sit, or how the Palace operated. All this a new MP had to find out for themselves, and this is where our three examples in the title: a 'prep school', 'Dracula's castle', or 'where they belonged' come from. These were all reactions to arriving at Westminster and being left to get on with it.

Many were baffled and self-conscious, if not fully out of their depth. For those who had experience of British Prep or Public schools (upper middle-class men) this experience reminded them of their first days at school; as described by Michael Heseltine above but repeated by many others. For Anthony Coombs

I think it was still a bit of a public school, prep school, mentality. It was a very much a male-orientated [place] back in 1987 even. There was a bit of joshing which was not terribly

¹⁸ Maria Fyfe (Labour, 1987–2001) C1503/32 [1, 00:47:20–00:49:55]

¹⁹ Charles Goodson-Wickes (Conservative, 1987–97) C1503/141 [1, 00:45:15–00:46:20]

²⁰ Diana Maddock (Liberal Democrat, 1993–97) C1503/157 [3, 00:08:20–00:09:35]

attractive, I've got to be honest with you. I had quite enough of that when I was at public school.²¹

Kenneth Warren told us it reminded him of his primary school 'which I didn't like very much.'²² The 'first day at school' description is something that has almost become a shared cultural memory, something that MPs hear from others and later repeat themselves. That said, it seems to have been a good analogy for many with an upper-middle class background. It also adds to the impression of Westminster's dominant culture: a masculine, traditional, old-fashioned atmosphere with countless formal and informal rules that a new member was expected to learn, on their own, and quickly.

If the experience of confusion was accompanied with a feeling of exclusion, the Palace could take on the feel of 'Dracula's Castle', as Jenny Tonge describes so vividly above. Outright hostility would more often be the reaction of Labour, working class or female MPs. These include Linda Gilroy, who described Parliament as 'a place that was built to keep people in their place, I think'²³ and Alice Mahon: 'It was a culture shock I'll tell you. The class divide hit me smack in the face. It was pouring out of the woodwork. The patronization that went on, and [...] lots of sexism as well.'²⁴

On the other hand, there were many from all across the House, male and female, who felt 'at home' extremely quickly. As Bill Rodgers says above, 'every door was my door'. This was primarily the response of those who knew Westminster, but also those such as Labour's Ann Taylor, who had been engaged in political activism since childhood and settled in probably more easily than others.²⁵

Giles Radice told us that knowing his way around:

Was a terrific advantage when I arrived [...] I'm beginning to sound very complacent and smug, really, but I didn't feel that I was sort of helpless in this frightening place. I didn't at all.'²⁶

Jim Sillars told us that his experience of being a Labour agent meant that he was not intimidated by fellow MPs 'I was much more cynical because I'd seen them inside out [...] I wasn't fazed; I knew them.'²⁷ Kenneth Weetch's comment perhaps gets to the heart of what these MPs felt earlier than others: 'Once you're there, you feel you belong there because you are treated as one of the Members and you are treated as one of the community.'²⁸

²¹ Anthony Coombs (Conservative, 1987-97) C1503/134 [2, 00:07:05-00:07:25]

²² Kenneth Warren (Conservative, 1970-83) C1503/144 2 [00:39:35-00:40:15]

²³ Linda Gilroy (Labour, 1997-2010) C1503/169 [2, 00:45:40-00:46:20]

²⁴ Alice Mahon (Labour, 1987-2005) C1503/30 [00:30:50-00:31:50]

²⁵ Ann Taylor (Labour, Oct 1974-83| 1987-2005) C1503/81 2, [00:16:15-00:17:55]

²⁶ Giles Radice (Labour, 1973-2001) C1503/160 [2, 00:14:20-00:17:35]

²⁷ Jim Sillars (Labour/SNP, March 1970-9; 1988-92) C1503/110 [2, 00:20:15-00:21:35]

²⁸ Kenneth Weetch (Labour, October 1974-87) C1503/70 [6, 00:17:35-00:18:45]

3. Westminster's 'clubs'

Parliament was a club in many ways. This perhaps is a cliché – it was often described as akin to a gentleman's club – but the fact that the *Members* were treated differently, and in a privileged manner, was something most picked up on immediately and ran through official and unofficial practices. It may in fact be better to say that MPs belonged to a series of private clubs, rather than one club. There certainly was the gentleman's club, complete with wood panelling, the smoking and dining rooms and so on; but there was also the working man's club, as seen in several of the bars, and a women's organisation, found in the various 'lady members' rooms'. Many former MPs remarked on their surprise, often, at the diversity in terms of class that was on display in the Commons before 1997. For Roger Berry:

It was overwhelmingly male, pretty chauvinist, overwhelmingly public school (or it seemed to be), overwhelmingly white, of course, not entirely but. One of the interesting things that always struck me about it though was that you were in a job where despite all of that, there was a diversity of people there. You had people who were landed gentry and you had people who'd just stopped being coal miners, or just stopped being steelworkers.²⁹

Bryan Magee (Labour) described being told that the Conservatives were all businessmen or professionals, whereas his own party, more colourfully, was divided into 'the Tonys' who were 'all six feet tall and handsome, and former presidents of the Oxford Union,' and 'the Freds' former miners and union officials who were, according to the joke, 'a foot shorter'. Although meant as humorous he felt there was 'a grain of truth in it'.³⁰ MPs could have quite different experiences at Westminster depending on which club, or clubs, they joined – and those who did not join one had a much less happy and professionally successful experience.

These 'clubs', and how they worked, were hard for MPs on first arrival to navigate and their existence can get a little overlooked or lost in some more official sources such as *Hansard* debates or committee memoranda. Yet they clearly had an impact on how Parliament operated and how individuals reacted to being there. Many described the early experience as feeling akin to being 'a small fish in a very big pond' having moved from important local positions, or feeling very lonely.³¹ With no official induction new MPs were forced to rely on personal friendships and contacts – 'all

²⁹ Roger Berry (Labour, 1992–2010) C1503/102 [00:33:45–00:35:45]

³⁰ Bryan Magee (Labour/SDP Feb 1974-83) C1503/49 3 [01:13:45-01:14:45]

³¹ James Couchman (Conservative 1983-97) C1503/79 [00:35:55-00:37:00]; David Trippier (Conservative, 1979-92) C1503/69 [00:34:00-00:35:30]; Graham Tope (Liberal 1972-Feb 1974) C1503/166 [1, 00:50:10-00:54:20]

done by Chinese whispers', in Ann Widdecombe's words³² – which only reinforced the informal rules of the club. Ian Twinn perhaps describes this best:

You are not given any bit of paper to say that you've won. I assumed somehow you would get a writ or something from the town clerk, you know, that you'd take away with you. So you are sort of sitting at home, you're a Member of Parliament, you won the election, Parliament is going to sit – I don't know whether it was next week or whenever we were meant to go in – and no one contacts you. It is bizarre, isn't it? Until, I think, the whips eventually sent something round saying it would be jolly good if you came in on a certain day, I think to hear more about, you know, what was going to happen.³³

Joyce Quin admitted:

People, including the staff, were always willing to tell you. But, particularly when you have been there for a little while, you are a bit reticent to look ignorant about something that perhaps you ought to have known about before. So there is a slight pressure there on you to almost pretend you know what is going on when you don't. [...] You are running before you can walk in many cases. I don't think I ever fully mastered the procedures that could have been useful.³⁴

This was the case for the admittedly confusing and sometimes arcane procedures and conventions within the chamber that had developed over many centuries. Ian Wrigglesworth admitted that he was 'ignorant' about 'how Parliament really worked' when he first arrived.³⁵ More importantly than procedure, MPs were not even shown around by anyone official. As Rosie Barnes remembered:

There was no manual, no guide that I could find. Nobody told me what the procedures were, so I just wandered about. I don't think I had very much to eat the first day or two because I couldn't find where to go. Then I found this Member's dining room or canteen and it was quite early and I thought 'I'll go in here and have something to eat'. And I did, and then started to fill up and people were sitting together and I was in a little table on my own and then this looming figure with his tray came over to me and boomed at me could he sit down. And it was [...] Ian Paisley. And I thought nothing in my upbringing or my training has given me the answer to this question: Is it alright for him to sit down? [laughs].³⁶

Conservative John Hannam remembered 'you had no idea where you were half the time. You were told there was a meeting taking place up in a committee room; where the hell is that? And so you

³² Ann Widdecombe (Conservative, 1987–2010) C1503/176 [3, 00:15:05–00:16:30]

³³ Ian Twinn (Conservative, 1983–97) C1503/165 [4, 00:20:30–00:21:15]

³⁴ Joyce Quin (Labour 1987-97) C1503/61 [00:26:20-00:27:10]

³⁵ Ian Wrigglesworth (Labour/SDP/LD, Feb 1974-87) C1503/152 [01:18:05-01:20:00]

³⁶ Rosie Barnes (SDP, Feb 1987-92) C1503/132 [01:36:35-1:37:25]

relied very much on colleagues.³⁷ This reliance on friends and contacts was crucial to many MPs.

Robert Hicks described how he coped:

There is not even a map, a block diagram of the Palace of Westminster. What a group of us did, we used to meet each evening at about 6.15 in the Strangers' bar for a pint of beer and we used to put together the knowledge we had collected. No one told you even how to put down a parliamentary question, where the Table Office was, that you tabled that parliamentary question. [...] It was a very, very steep learning curve. You also had to know the people to ask.³⁸

Old hands were pumped for information. Labour's Sylvia Heal described the tea room as 'helpful' as it gave access to more senior members.³⁹

The social spaces of the Palace were also full of pitfalls and traps for new members. The Conservative Teddy Taylor remembered sitting in the tea room with the only people he knew – Scottish Labour MPs – before Harold Wilson approached him and gently told him that 'we have segregation [in] here' and he should be sitting on his own party's table.⁴⁰ David Nicholson learned that 'you don't go in mob-handed and form a table with your friends' in the dining room, but instead take the next available seat on your party table.' This he found 'extremely valuable' as he met so many different MPs.⁴¹ Ann Widdecombe explained the differences between the bars: the Conservatives in the Pugin and smoking rooms; the Labour party in the 'Kremlin' bar downstairs.⁴² It also did not do to bend any of these conventions. Chris Butler (Conservative) told a story of himself and fellow new MP Hugo Summerson asking for an office with a window: 'Window? New boys do not have windows.'⁴³

4. Deference and hierarchies, insiders and outsiders

This helps to demonstrate a more general point: Westminster was a hierarchical place. This was the case to some degree within parties, but more so in the sense that MPs and Peers held a special status. The estate staff – the police, the clerks, those in the library and others – were overwhelmingly praised for their professionalism and their kindness. Several interviewees were

³⁷ John Hannam (Conservative, 1970-97) C1503/109 [1, 00:48:25-00:48:40]

³⁸ Robert Hicks (Conservative, 1970-February 1974; October 1974-97) C1503/34 [2, 00:47:20-00:48:55]

³⁹ Sylvia Heal (Labour, 1990-92; 1997-2010) C1503/172 [10, 00:30:05-00:31:00]

⁴⁰ Teddy Taylor (Conservative, 1964-79; 1980-2005) C1503/3 [3, 00:02:30-00:05:30]

⁴¹ David Nicholson (Conservative, 1987-97) C1503/53 [3, 00:03:15-00:03:40]

⁴² Ann Widdecombe (Conservative, 1987-2010) C1503/176 [4, 01:36:30-01:37:05]

⁴³ Chris Butler (Conservative, 1987-92) C1503/142 [01:34:20-01:35:45]

pleased that after giving out election leaflets the staff soon learned their names.⁴⁴ The privileged treatment was often not expected and in general many found that it helped them to feel like they ‘belonged’ and to settle in quickly. Roger Sims remembered showing family members around and asking if he could take them out to the terrace: ‘Of course you can, sir. It is your house.’⁴⁵ Timothy Kirkhope, who came from perhaps a less traditional Conservative background, told us:

What impressed me about it, coming from my background was that it was a levelling process from day one. There were one or two very pompous people who arrived, they’d obviously never fought a dodgy seat, they’d been friends of friends, gone to the right school, got themselves very nice seats in a very nice part of the country that they would be able to hold for a hundred years if they lived that long. They’d arrived assuming that because they were so important they could have anything they wanted. What I loved about it was the fact that the levelling process meant they were treated by the whips and everybody else as being no more important than any of the rest of us.⁴⁶

This was not the case for everyone. Alice Mahon remembered feeling that there was a ‘snobbish’ attitude towards her because of her accent,⁴⁷ but mostly the attitude of the estate’s staff helped people settle in. Some, however, pointed out that some MPs did not show the same respect back to parliamentary staff. Rosie Barnes described some MPs as being ‘imperious’ and Eileen Gordon told us ‘some MPs didn’t talk to them as people.’⁴⁸ For Helen Jackson, this attitude could be problematic: ‘It doesn’t help, really, the constant feeling that you are somebody, that people are very deferential to you, because if you’re [not] careful you start to think you deserve it somehow.’⁴⁹ By and large MPs bought into the idea that this was ‘their’ club or ‘their’ space, which went on to reinforce the culture.

For those who found their ‘club’, whether quickly or after a little while, Parliament soon became a productive working environment. The social spaces allowed new friendships and networks to be built, and for individuals to progress their careers and interests in part through patronage. Many described a feeling of camaraderie within their parties or, at times, across them. Several became members of political dining clubs to share ideas with MPs of similar viewpoints, or debate ideas with others. Jenny Tonge described the tea room as a place to ‘escape [...] you didn’t have meetings in

⁴⁴ Ian Twinn (Conservative, 1983–97) C1503/44 [00:57:35–00:57:55]; Chris Butler (Conservative, 1987–92) C1503/142 [01:07:00–01:07:20]

⁴⁵ Roger Sims (Conservative Feb 1974–97) – C1503/101 [5, 00:25:00–00:28:10]

⁴⁶ Timothy Kirkhope (Conservative, 1987–97) C1503/84 [2, 00:39:15–00:40:00]

⁴⁷ Alice Mahon (Labour, 1987–2005) C1503/30 [00:40:55–00:41:40]

⁴⁸ Rosie Barnes (SDP, Feb 1987–92) C1503/132 [01:17:15–01:17:45]; Eileen Gordon (Labour, 1997–2001) C1503/167 [1, 00:34:50–00:35:45]

⁴⁹ Helen Jackson (Labour, 1992–2005) C1503/124 [2, 00:07:55–00:08:45]

the tea room, you had gossip sessions.⁵⁰ David Price described all-night sittings as a way to bond with fellow MPs: ‘You got to know colleagues whose interests didn’t cross [yours] at all [...] if you were having breakfast on the terrace at five o’clock in the morning you develop a friendship.’⁵¹ Even those who avoided the bars or smoking room could find this camaraderie. Jackie Ballard described playing in a cross-party bridge group whilst waiting for votes.⁵²

However, for those who didn’t quickly or easily find a ‘club’, Westminster could remain daunting and lonely. Labour MP Win Griffiths told us that because of his alcohol allergy he was unable to spend much time in the bars. Although he would participate in tea room gossip, he was excluded from other groups:

If you are involved in that culture you can perhaps pick a wider circle of colleagues and friends, and perhaps become part of the team of one of the sort of leading lights so to speak. So because I wasn’t in there I never became someone who was part of a team with a leading light, so I was never attached, you know, as a Blairite or a Brownite or whatever.⁵³

Others, such as Chris Pond, did not take part in this social culture at first because he had a young family to go home too, and was ‘anxious about making sure I could get on top of the job.’⁵⁴ This, again, was often more of a problem for women, particularly in the 1970s or 1980s. Several women told us that they felt uncomfortable going into the bars, or had to pluck up the courage to go into the smoking room. Marion Roe, Conservative MP from 1983-2005, found her male colleagues ‘supportive’, but at the same time:

I learnt throughout my political life that men operate in gangs and girls tend to have a best friend. [...] It is very difficult for a woman to break into a gang, [...] particularly if you don’t know people already there. [...] We didn’t have a group at all. Even within our own party, we didn’t have a girls’ gang, a girls’ group, at all.⁵⁵

Other women told us, however, that they did try to both ‘drink with the boys as well as chat in the women’s room’ in the words of Helen Jackson.⁵⁶ Both the Conservative and Labour women had their own social spaces – Lady Members’ rooms – that were informally divided between party and were especially important to those who sat before 1997. For Eileen Gordon this was a ‘sanctuary’,

⁵⁰ Jenny Tonge (LD, 1997–2005) C1503/148 [1, 01:56:18–01:57:00]

⁵¹ David Price (Conservative, 1955–92) C1503/19 [1, 00:54:55–00:56:10]

⁵² Jackie Ballard (LD, 1997–2001) C1503/85 [2, 00:49:20–00:50:15]

⁵³ Win Griffiths (Labour, 1987–2005) C1503/125 [01:02:40–01:06:25]

⁵⁴ Chris Pond (Labour 1997-2005) C1503/126 [1, 01:17:10-01:17:25; 2, [00:14:30-15:05]

⁵⁵ Marion Roe (Conservative, 1983–2005) C1503/71 [1, 00:26:25–00:28:40]

⁵⁶ Helen Jackson (Labour, 1992–2005) C1503/124 [2, 00:35:25–00:36:00]

especially for those with young children.⁵⁷ Labour's Helene Hayman and Conservative Janet Fookes both discussed the friendships made in these spaces and the camaraderie between the women of their own party.⁵⁸ Again, however, these spaces did not accommodate everyone. SPD member Rosie Barnes described having to choose which set of facilities she would use: 'I had to choose which to go into and it was who hates me the least! I felt very uncomfortable in either.' Again, not finding her 'club' made the experience difficult to her: 'I felt very isolated, quite out of my depth because I didn't know where to turn for advice and practical help.'⁵⁹

At least before 1997, those who tried in an overt manner to change Westminster's culture, or were felt not to 'play the game' felt a significant backlash. Edwina Currie seems to have been singled out for some criticism in our interviews by her fellow Conservatives, both male and female. Criticised as someone who wanted to change the culture overnight, it seems that she rubbed people up the wrong way.⁶⁰ In her own interview, however, Currie reflected that it was not possible to change how Parliament operated and instead she found ways to work within the existing culture and 'show that you are better than they are [...] and you can do the job'; so it is likely that her own attitude changed considerably.⁶¹ Currie was not alone in coming under criticism. Bill Rodgers compared Shirley Williams unfavourably to Barbara Castle, for example, as Castle participated in the masculine smoking room culture and Williams did not: 'You've chosen to go. Don't complain, just fight your corner. And Barbara did that very well, but Shirley Williams never had a collegiate feeling.'⁶² Although women might find things harder they were not alone in facing criticism. David Price told us how important an individual's reputation within Westminster was: 'If you were a thruster you weren't very popular [...] and certainly you shouldn't make such ambitions you had public.'⁶³ It wasn't until 1997, when a large group of new MPs entered the House and the New Labour government put their weight behind a significant change in the culture, working hours and practices, that things began, slowly, to change. Even then, these had a mixed response in our archive.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Eileen Gordon (Labour, 1997–2001) C1503/167 2 [2, 00:46:10–00:47:00]

⁵⁸ Helene Hayman (Labour Oct 1974–79) C1503/115 [2, 00:45:30–00:45:55]; Janet Fookes (Conservative 1970–97) C1503/66 [00:58:35–00:59:40]

⁵⁹ Rosie Barnes (SDP, Feb 1987–92) C1503/132 [01:07:40–1:08:10]

⁶⁰ For example, Conservative Elizabeth Peacock explicitly criticised her for thinking she would 'change everything in the first two weeks' (C1503/29 [2, 01:12:50–13:45]) and Anthony Grant shared an anecdote about a colleague's plot to avoid sharing an office with her (C1503/2 [2, 00:49:00–00:50:05]).

⁶¹ Edwina Currie (Conservative, 1983–97) C1503/163 [2, 00:29:10–00:30:55]

⁶² William Rodgers (Labour/Social Democrat/Liberal Democrat) C1503/18 [02:04:15–02:04:50]

⁶³ David Price (Conservative, 1955–92) C1503/19 1 [1, 00:44:10–45:00]

⁶⁴ Peplow & Pivatto, *The Political Lives of Postwar British MPs, 197–98*

In conclusion, this exploration of first impressions of Westminster from the Trust's sound archive has, we hope, demonstrated some of the rich information available from our archive; both in terms of how Parliament operated, but also the informal cultural norms that shaped how MPs acted and cannot always be explained by the official procedures in *Erskine May*. We learn how it felt to arrive at Westminster as a new MP – daunting, exciting, or horrifying – which helps to remind us that politicians are human beings with relatable reactions. Further, by understanding how MPs found their way around through small cliques and groups, whilst at the same time being treated with special status from all around them, helps us explain why this culture was so resistant to change. Much of it was unofficial, unwritten, at times even unspoken, and confronting it meant consequences for personal and professional lives at Westminster. Such insight can be invaluable for understanding the motivations of individual politicians and wider political priorities in the late 20th century.