

**Commonwealth and Parliaments Module Self-Test**  
**Unit 7: The Role of the Opposition**  
**Unit 8: The Role of MPs and Parliamentary Staff**

**1. Would you expect government Members in parliament to cooperate with the opposition when it chooses to exercise its right of scrutiny over the executive?**

Government as well as opposition members have to be committed to the efficient and effective running of the country and in particular, the use of financial resources for this purpose. While this could mean criticism, open or implied, of the way in which government departments (and therefore their ministers) have done their work, government members have a responsibility to cooperate with the opposition to this end. Sometimes the decision will not be too difficult, for instance, in an obvious case of abuse of funds by an official and the possible accompanying charge of corruption. In other cases, there could be heavy pressure on government members to support the department and the minister or face consequences from the party administration.

In their decision, government members must not forget their role as a representative of the people. They have a duty to society at large apart from that to their party, as we note in our study of Unit 8.

Fortunately for all sides, many of these scrutiny questions are handled not in the open glare of a plenary session of parliament but in the much less formal work of a committee (which often gets less reporting space in the press too). There are as a result opportunities for cooperation with the opposition that make the position of government members much easier. Of course a committee report finally goes to the full parliament but the shared responsibility makes the whole situation easier for all sides.

**2. What assistance can the Clerk or Secretary General and the staff of parliament extend to the opposition to help it in its work?**

In a democracy, the staff of parliament have to be totally impartial in carrying out their functions. It follows that all assistance they would give to government members must be equally extended to the opposition.

First of all, there must be ready access to the staff and to the services they could provide. Of course the senior members of staff are required to spend much of their time at the disposal of the speaker especially on sitting days but in general, access should be as open as possible.

It follows that the services provided must be similarly available. These could be advice on matters of procedure or on problems experienced with some administrative ruling relating to the establishment. The key point is that the advice must be sound. Care has to be exercised and if, say, a parliament provides to members a service such as assistance with drafting a parliamentary question in a suitable and acceptable form, staff must not find themselves venturing opinions on the suitability of the position being taken by the member – this would be straying into the area of political advice.

Parliamentary committees in many Commonwealth countries have suffered from inadequate resources for carrying out research to help members in their work. Some improvement has been seen in recent years but this remains a field in which opposition members feel themselves at a disadvantage as the

government has the resources of ministries and departments to help them. Staff have to be sensitive to this.

Sometimes an opposition member may require help with drafting a bill. The bill itself may have no chance of success in the legislature but that is not the concern of staff. If such assistance is provided by parliamentary counsel or by reference to a specialised drafting agency, it must be supplied efficiently but again without taking political stances.

The Clerk or Secretary General will also play a determining or advisory role in allocation of space for the opposition's needs and similar administrative matters.

### **3. Describe the responsibilities that devolve on an MP and summarize the roles he or she plays in discharging these responsibilities.**

The responsibilities that devolve on MPs arise from the various roles that they accept when they are elected to office.

The usual listing of these roles is threefold: representative, legislator and scrutinizer. One can add to these, for instance, being a critic of proposals coming before parliament whether from one's own party or not, but for purposes of discussion it is not difficult to see these additional 'roles' as subsets of the other three.

In fulfilling any of these roles, the MP will need to keep in mind the country, the constituency he or she represents, the party to which the MP is affiliated and the MP's own views and feelings or 'conscience'.

The Unit discusses the roles in some detail but it may be worthwhile putting the representational role to sharper analysis as that will throw more light on the consideration of the others too.

If elected by a constituency (and this can have different implications especially in a system which uses proportional representation to a greater or lesser degree), the concept of constituency service is of special importance. Many MPs relish this role because it is one in which they can see the results of the work they have done. This is as well because if it were ignored, it would make it unlikely that the MP would be returned to parliament the next time around. Rousseau showed himself scathing about 'representation' in England (the Westminster model) when he said, 'The English nation ... imagines itself free. It is so in fact only during an election ... as soon as a new one (parliament) is elected, it is again in chains and counts for nothing'.

Are MPs delegates of their constituencies? This would mean that an MP reflects the judgments of their constituents, not necessarily their own. Is this a feasible proposition? How would this constituency judgement be made or measured? Is it the judgement of those who elected the MP and not of those with opposing views who voted against the MP's election?

Or are MPs elected by their constituents to exercise their own judgement after hearing all sides of an argument in parliament? This is what most parliamentarians would like the situation to be – it allows them to maintain their independence and exercise their best judgement.

That is not of course the general position. Most MPs belong to a party and their whips will ensure that they vote according to party loyalty – thus responsibility to the party comes first. Occasionally a conscience vote will be allowed but the fact is that most parliamentarians have to be representatives of

their party as a priority. This situation may not be as bad as it sounds for voters too tend to vote for a party than for a person.

**4. Could there be a difference in the way an independent (non-party) Member of Parliament may approach these responsibilities?**

An independent member of parliament is much freer than a member affiliated to a party in that he or she is unfettered by considerations of party discipline. The representational role as a constituency MP could thereby become the more predominant but the responsibilities attached to the scrutiny and legislative functions still remain.

Many independent members, like those of parties with miniscule representation in parliament, have done important work as scrutinizers of the work of the executive. They do not need to get involved in political trade-offs in which the main parties may engage and can exercise their freedom to good purpose. They are sometimes criticized as being irritants rather than doers and as being theoretical problem solvers who know that they do not have the responsibility for putting their solutions into operation.

Independent members will approach their legislative responsibilities in much the same way as members of the opposition. They will have no hope of getting a bill passed in parliament unless it is a non-controversial private bill, eg to confer some legal benefit or position on an organization. They can however make sound and useful contributions to the debate on any bill or motion and its progress through parliament.