

THE ROLES OF MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

By: Thomas Didimu Kashililah

This Fact sheet looks at the roles of the private or backbench Member of the National Assembly, not of Minister or opposition shadow ministers.

INTRODUCTION

A Member is a jack-of-trades, developing his or her own role in the Parliament and the electorate, Ministers and shadow ministers have electorates and constituents too and they perform these functions as well as their ministerial duties or shadow responsibilities.

Tasks and skills - What does a Member of Parliament do?

There is no `job description` that sets out the work of a member and no specific daily routine is required, but it is possible to identify some common tasks and goals, which all members share. A Member is expected to be a spokesperson for his or her local interests, a law maker, an examiner of the work of the government and how it spends the money it raises from taxpayers, and a contributor to debates on national issues. In order to carry out all these functions and others a Member needs to have a wide range of abilities and talents.

Working hours

Members work long hours in the House, on parliamentary committee work and in their electorates attending to the demands and problems of their constituents. They attend a constant round of engagements to which they are invited because of their position in the community as parliamentarians. The ear of the parliamentarian is constantly sought at these functions. Attendance is necessary to keep in touch with community developments and attitudes.

When the House is in session it meets for 9 hours a day and sometimes even longer. Although a Member will not sit in the Chamber all the time, he or she will keep in touch with proceedings of the House be ready to attend at any time to vote, to make a speech or to lend support to a colleague.

In addition a Member may spend several hours each day a member attending meetings of parliamentary committees, party committees and other groups. Then a Member is not in the House or attending a formal meeting he or she deals with the wide variety of tasks which face a Member including preparing speeches, doing research, meeting constituents, raising matters of concern with Ministers of liaising with colleagues, public servants, lobbyists or foreign diplomats.

Information and communication.

One of a Member's most important skills is communicating - receiving, understanding and evaluating information from any sources, and passing on information and opinions in Parliament and elsewhere - to the Government and to individuals and groups.

Being well informed and up to date is vital if an MP is to come to grip with the great range of legislation and other issues dealt with by the House and provide an effective link between the public and the Parliament.

Members spend a great deal of time reading, although no member can expect to read all the material sent to Office of Parliament. Major national and regional, and sometimes overseas, newspapers and journals are priority reading in order to keep up with day to day news and views. In addition hundreds of reports are presented to the House each year and an MP with an interest in just a few major policy areas may read hundreds of pages of reports annually, jut to keep in touch with developments.

The MP may also read articles and listen to television and radio programs in his or her area of interest, He or she may ask for detailed research on specific topics to be done by personal or parliamentary staff. Parliamentary or party committee work requires more reading and research in relatively specialized areas.

Another major parliamentary occupation is talking. Making speeches in the Chamber is the role with which the general observer is most familiar and which probably attracts the most publicity, although in fact other tasks such as office work or committee work may take much more time, Nevertheless most Members are regularly called upon to speak in the Chamber of the House and in the Committee, usually in support of, or opposition to, a piece of legislation.

There are a number of other opportunities for Members to raise issues of particular interest to them or their constituents especially during the daily adjournment debates and the private Members' to raise matters of concern.

The MP also spends time each day talking with colleagues and members from other parties, and exchanging views with journalists and others. The other important aspect of communication for the MP is keeping constituents informed of developments in government or party policy and the implications of government decisions and activity. Members must write many letters and talk to many people both privately and in public forums.

Parliamentary committees

The National Assembly has set up a system of committees to perform functions the House itself cannot do well, such as carrying out investigations, hearing witnesses, sifting evidence, discussing matters in detail and making reasoned conclusions.

The committees set up by the House to investigate matters of public policy and make recommendations for change and examine the activities of government. Parliamentary committees consist of Members of all political parties.

Committee's work is an important part of the duties of a Member of Parliament and generally makes considerable demands on a Member's time. Committee meetings are held during both sitting and non-sitting periods, and in many instances, committees may hold their hearings, public meetings or informal discussions in a number of places throughout the country.

Committees are given wide powers of investigation. They are valuable vehicles for getting and giving out information and supplement the normal parliamentary role of a private Member considerably. They also provide a direct link between Members and the many sources of information and opinion across the people in general.

In order to make a contribution to the work of a committee, a Member must spend time studying the subject matter of the inquiry.

Political Parties

All Members belong to a political party. They are expected to contribute to the development and amendment of the policies of the party to which they

belong. Each party has its own ways of doing this but in all parties Members are given opportunities to put forward the interests of their constituents and their own personal views. All parties hold meetings of their parliamentary members, usually when the Parliament is sitting, at which proposals are put before them and attitudes are decided.

Constituents and the MP

Each Member maintains an electorate office, which serves as his or her electorate base. Members and their staff spend much energy on solving the problems of constituents. Sometimes these require the personal intervention of the MP who may write to a Minister, phone a public servant, or call into a Minister's office to enlist his or her personal involvement in setting the matter.

Many of the complaints or call for assistance fall within the areas of social welfare, immigration and taxation. A Member also deals with problems concerning family law, postal and telephone services, employment, housing, health and education - even assisting with the task of filling in forms.

A Member has an important influence and standing outside Parliament and typically has a wide range of contacts with government bodies, political parties, community groups and individuals. Personal intervention in a constituent's problem by a Member traditionally gets priority attention by government departments. If the problem is purely an administrative one, the Member may contact the department or authority concerned, where the relevant section will deal with the case. If the problem is urgent, the Member may approach the Minister direct or, if the Member feels the case requires public discussion or a change of policy, he or she may bring the matter before the House, for instance, by addressing a question to the responsible Minister or by raising it in debate.

Members frequently meet constituents who are visiting Parliament House. Some constituents seek out the politician to lobby him or her on a particular problem. Mostly however, the constituents are simply visitors to the national capital who want the chance to meet their MP. Members also find time to meet groups of school children from their electorates and conduct them around the Parliament. Parliament House has a room set aside for visiting school groups to meet their Members, receive refreshments and learn about Parliament.

It is constituents who Members of Parliament must satisfy as to their fitness for the task of being their parliament representative and who pass judgment on their performance at each election.