

# Ideas and advice to accelerate the transition for new MPs entering New Zealand's House of Representatives



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Our sincere thanks to all those who gave their time to be interviewed. It was a privilege to listen to your views, experiences and thoughts on the process of adjusting to the role of Member of Parliament.

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## The context of the research

Dr. Helena Cooper Thomas (The University of Auckland, NZ) and Professor Jo Silvester (Cass Business School, UK) have been working together for several years to better understand how new MPs learn their role and adjust to working in Parliament, initially focusing on the UK and now New Zealand. Helena has expertise in the area of organisational socialisation, investigating how people adjust to new work roles. Her research has included new employee induction and socialisation processes in the UK Defence Force and several professional services firms and, more recently in NZ, several District Health Boards as well as a range of private companies. Jo has worked for over a decade on the selection and performance of MPs, initially working with the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties in the UK, and more recently working with political parties in Iceland, Northern Ireland and Botswana as well as academic colleagues in the US. Their combined expertise in the fields of new employee adjustment and political leadership and performance underpins their international research programme.

## The purpose of this project

The purpose of this project was to better understand how new MPs learn their role. The focus was on how MPs learned (e.g., who they learned from, what they learned), and any particular issues they faced (e.g., pressures to be aware of) or advice they could offer (e.g., suggestions for future new MPs). The data analysis aims to produce two types of output: one is academic, including conference papers and academic journal publications; the second output is practical and comprises this summary report as well as possible further advice.

## Aims and basis of this report

This report is based on interviews conducted with 23 MPs who entered the New Zealand Parliament from 2011 to 2014 and 2 senior public service employees. The interviews were conducted from December 2013 to February 2014.

The Parliamentary Service and The Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives provide formal induction for new MPs, and party whips provide support to new MPs also. This report aims to complement existing support by focusing on the informal learning of new MPs. Specifically, this report may act as an informal guide to help future new MPs by highlighting key themes that were identified as being issues MPs had not considered, learnings acquired, and useful advice. The intended result is to accelerate the adjustment of all new MPs.

Please note that this research was approved by the University of Auckland's Human Participants Ethics Committee (ref. 010893), and as part of the research protocol, interviewees gave written consent to the use of their data. All personal names have been replaced with pseudonyms taken from a list of common names.

## Structure of the report

The report comprises nine sections. The first six sections describe the experiences noted by MPs during interviews. Each section starts with an overview and a brief commentary on central themes that came up in the interviews, followed by selected quotes to illustrate these themes. The following two sections cover respectively how our findings based on New Zealand MPs compares with our research on politicians in other countries and an overview of research recommendations from the new employee adjustment research. We end with a ninth, concluding section. Please see the Table of Contents for an overview of the sections.

## 1. In at the deep end

Becoming an MP is a sudden and intense process. When we asked about their experience, MPs commented on the rapid transition from their previous roles. The election results were followed swiftly by a congratulatory 'phone call from the Parliamentary Service, details of flights and accommodation that had been booked, and then an immediate transition into the role. MPs acknowledged the initial detailed induction provided by the Parliamentary Service and the Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives. However, MPs often felt that they were plunged in at the deep end; an instant switch from candidate to MP, with an immediate huge volume of work and expectations of being effective straightaway.

Within this overall theme of "in at the deep end", we identified four central ideas. The first three are about the early days, which we have named *information overload*, *immediate demands to be up to speed*, and *lack of knowledge*. Information overload concerns the sheer volume of information that confronts new MPs from a variety of sources. *Immediate demands to be up to speed* refers to the need to get your executive assistant and support staff hired and in place and your office functioning rapidly in order to support your performance. *Lack of knowledge* relates to the need to function effectively, yet not knowing a lot of the background on issues or legislation that you are expected to have a view on. *Never-ending scrutiny* is the fourth idea and refers to the fact that you are always being watched and your behaviour scrutinised and commented on by the media, peers within your own party, other MPs, the public and so on.

### 1.1 Information overload

"it's an entire whirlwind, the first weeks and months, I'd say probably the first five months were just absolute ... organised chaos .... Just an enormous amount of materials being thrown at you .... you've got the political party is giving you advice. Your colleagues are giving you advice, particularly through the whips ... you've got the Parliamentary Service ... providing you advice as well, everything from the constitution through to how to book your taxis ... You're being told how to set up your offices, who to hire for staff, so all the HR concerns ... It's a quirky system, but you have to know all of it. So that's just everything compounding on you immediately" Daniel

### 1.2 Immediate demands to be up to speed

"It was just being expected to be an MP, to be making press releases, public statements and on top of your portfolios without even having the mechanics of how you operate sorted" Margaret

### 1.3 Lack of knowledge

"Because you'll then be thrown into the deep end of discussing issues that you may have had no experience, no knowledge, and no understanding" Edward

"you made your maiden speech, the next day you could be put in the House and speaking on a bill you know absolutely nothing about, that you've no experience of, and don't know why it's there" Robert

### 1.4 Never-ending scrutiny

"I was startled by the level of media scrutiny ... which is good for accountability but it was also a bit startling to get feedback from all sorts of random people saying 'I don't like what you're wearing', 'I don't like what you're saying' " Sandra

"you're being judged the whole time, it comes back to that you're always on. And it's not just your constituents, not just your team, it's not just the party, your colleagues are as well" Daniel

## 2. Unique environments

MPs work in a variety of environments. Moreover these environments are very different, requiring different skills and knowledge as well as the ability to adjust from one environment to the next throughout the working day. We highlight three aspects of these environments that came through from the interviews. Two of these relate to the Debating Chamber, colloquially called “the House”, and the third relates to the media. Firstly then, MPs noted the need to learn about the House, including learning the unique language required in order to debate effectively (*the uniqueness of the Debating Chamber*). Secondly MPs identified the negative behaviour that can be evident in the House as something that they needed to adjust to even if they did not agree with such behaviour (*harsh words in the House*). Finally, MPs noted mostly negative learnings from their interactions with the media, and more broadly how the media could influence their personal agendas at short notice (*the power and risks of the media*).

### 2.1 *The uniqueness of the Debating Chamber*

“seeing how the House works and realising there’s no other place like it actually, inside the Debating Chamber. I mean I had no illusions that real business was done in there, I had no illusions about that at all, but it was ... figuring out the quirky bits of it” Patricia

“in the House, I’ve used the word archaic a bit earlier, there are some phrases which must be uttered in very particular ways ... You get it wrong then the debate continues, when you ... want to shut things down” Daniel

“Some of it is high theatre and is very partisan ... it’s sort of traditional ... almost ceremonial .... The ceremonial aspect allows the individual contribution ... the set piece debates actually open up a wider opportunity for new members like me to have an input that we may not otherwise have .... There are times when motions do need to be gone through, but there are also times when, in a place where passionate strong views should be held and expressed, they are and that’s great” Joseph

### 2.2 *Harsh words in the House*

“I was somewhat surprised at how, at times, it can be quite vicious ... at times it is quite nasty and personal ... there are a lot of personal vendettas, a lot of personal grievances going back many, many years ... it comes out quite regularly” James

“people being so nasty in the House and being horrible to each other ... It’s a theatre ... it’s not a place where you see people saying things that are real” Susan

### 2.3 *The power and risks of the media*

“a surprise is how much the focus of politics is on what happens in the media, and how that very much determines a lot of our work and our agendas” Margaret

“I was a little bit surprised at how the media operate in Wellington ... they tend to be very focused on sensationalism ... and they don’t give much attention to actually a lot of the hard work that is going on” James

“You don’t have control of the production ... of a news item. You can be quoted in it, and you could have said certain things ... how it’s placed and what was insinuated” Kenneth

“[the media are] every bit as hostile as any other party except yours ... it’s their job to hold people to account but I think, and I think anybody you ask in Parliament will say they do go above and beyond the call of duty ... anyone who trips, they’ll pounce on them” Charles

### 3. Tensions and Pressures

The MPs we interviewed commented on a number of aspects of their role that created tensions or pressures that they had to learn to deal with. One of these was the *intense environment of Parliament*, in that while the House is sitting, MPs have to be present in the parliamentary precinct (apart from the dinner break) and this contributes to a pressurised environment. A second theme was the level of tribalism which was observed both within and across caucuses – *sticking with your tribe*. It was noted that MPs have to fit in with their party's views and both argue and act accordingly, with interviewees noting both their own colleagues and opposition colleagues having to do this, regardless of their previous public views. A third theme was *shifting to be effective in different environments* that MPs have to work in, transitioning between the often adversarial context of the House, to more collegial relations in select committee work, through to community or electorate work. These necessitate instant shifts by MPs to be effective in each environment.

Three final themes under tensions and pressures were *the volume of work*, meaning just the amount of work there was to get through and the hours required; *rapidly changing demands*, in that requirements change as events unfold which often require re-prioritisation and re-scheduling; and *loneliness and difficulties*, in that being an MP can include many difficult periods. In all cases, MPs mentioned being warned of these issues by colleagues. However, being told this in the abstract was different from living it. They had a number of suggestions for coping with these pressures, which are detailed in the subsequent section. It is worth noting here also that, to cope with media pressures and the volume of reading in particular, MPs mentioned two courses that they had found useful, namely speed reading and working with the media.

#### 3.1 Intense environment of Parliament

“but in this environment it's like your boarding at school and you're locked in the precinct during the sitting hours, 2 'til 10, very insular, very intense” Frank

“early on I just said, ‘I've got to pop out and get something that I need from the shop down the road’, and I walked out and left and the next minute I got a frantic text, “You can't leave the building, come back!” and that was a new reality” Jennifer

“this place has an energy ... and a kind of a pulse and a life of its own that's really hard to explain to anyone that's not in it” Elizabeth

#### 3.2 Sticking with your tribe

“I suppose what also surprised me was ... the whole form of Westminster governance in New Zealand that becomes very adversarial, and it's sometimes quite tribal. The demarcation lines are drawn and ... it's your policy versus their policy” Edward

“you have to change somewhat to fit in with ... the majority of your caucus and how your party's views are and then also watching colleagues on the other side of the House similarly having to do likewise.” James

#### 3.3 Shifting to be effective in different environments

“one minute you might be in a primary school handing out Duffy books to five year olds and then the next minute you'll be in the House having ... a vigorous debate against the spokesperson for whatever committee you are on, and completely different environments” Frank

“I've found anyway that the pace is just so, so fast, ... some days I'd be moving between one minute meeting with the minister around one issue, the next minute receiving a petition and speaking on another issue, then putting a motion to the House on a different issue, and then meeting with personnel relating to another issue” Maria

### 3.4 The volume of work

“the volume of the work and working out how to prioritise is the hard ... one of the harder challenges. And you get endless invitations to do things” Margaret

“the number of hours required, and the amount of reading required came as a bit of a surprise.... you can do 100 hours a week. And it’s never less than 80” Charles

“It’s a very testing business. It’s virtually 24 hours a day and 7 days a week if you want to succeed ... So I think that’s a real challenge for politicians everywhere” Robert

### 3.5 Rapidly changing demands

“sometimes you could arrive at the beginning of the day and discover that a bill that you thought was ... a couple of weeks away is going to be debated that day and you’re expected then to speak that afternoon on it and in between all of your other meetings you’ve then got to prepare 10 minutes of speaking notes ... it’s the pressure under which you find yourself preparing for what can be quite important legislation” Brian

“You get up in the morning and you’ve got things in the diary and that’s what you’re likely to be doing but it can change without notice ... headlines can pop up ... and the whole direction ... can change” Charles

“we don’t always get told about changes of times that the House is sitting ... often we will be told late in the piece “Oh Parliament is now going to be sitting on Friday” and then suddenly your whole diary ... that’s all got to be scrapped” James

### 3.6 Loneliness and difficulties

“MPs tell us that at the start ... it can be quite a lonely existence as well .... So you can be going home [well after 10pm], and I hear this from other MPs, and it’s almost too late to ring your other half or whoever” Kenneth

“sometimes I think ‘Yeah ... this is what I’m supposed to be doing, it’s working”, and then the next week I may be feeling like an abject failure” Maria

## 4. The importance of finding ways to cope with the tensions

The intense and continual pressures of being an MP were mentioned in many interviews, with Parliament likened to a pressure cooker where you had to find ways to let steam off. A range of strategies were mentioned by MPs.

One strategy that interviewees identified was being authentic and therefore able to withstand all sorts of pressures and influences (*maintain your authenticity*). However it was notable that alongside this, MPs remarked on the need to be flexible and adaptable – so values should guide but not constrain your actions.

A second strategy for coping with pressures was *prioritise your work*. Since much work was reactive when other people wanted your input or time – MP colleagues, constituents, the public, the media – MPs recognised that it was important to be clear on their own priorities and then to plan and use their time accordingly. Importantly, this also included deciding what not to do with regard to invitations to speak or attend functions, and having good work processes worked out with support staff.

A third strategy for coping with the tensions of being an MP was having trusted supportive relationships outside of Parliament, and often outside of politics, for confidential chats and encouragement (*supportive*



*relationships outside Parliament*). MPs noted the difficulty of making time for these relationships, and the enjoyment and support they experienced when they did make time.

Finally, *invest time in your own well-being* was mentioned by some as a strategy that they employed well, making time for their own physical and mental health, including exercising and getting enough sleep. However equally often, this came through as an area where MPs felt they needed to improve.

#### 4.1 *Maintain your authenticity*

“you have to really have a clear sense of who you are. What you stand for. Because it will be challenged every single day. And if you don’t have a firm foundation ... then you will sway and be swayed... But at the same time too I think you need to be open and flexible to be able to learn. Because I think if you go in here and all you’ve got is this one sense, this is who I am... then you become inflexible, then I think ... that you’ll find yourself struggling.” Edward

“I think maintaining sincerity and authenticity with who you are, not trying to reinvent yourself to try and fit in, in a given environment. So it’s the ability to stay sincere and authentic while meshing yourself into the different worlds that you have to operate in politically and socially” Frank

#### 4.2 *Prioritise your work*

“Time management in this place is very important ... we only have a finite period of time that we’re here each week when the House is sitting and so that can sometimes be quite a juggling thing and so we learnt very quickly, or I learnt very quickly, that keeping a careful eye on time was a key factor to being successful or not here” Joseph

“make sure that you don’t lose sight of those things and don’t ... get so caught up in the hustle and bustle that you lose context and focus .... I run the ruler over everything I do around ‘Does this add value to what I’m here to achieve?’, ‘cause ... down here you get invited to every function known to man. Everyone wants to give you drinks and feed you” Frank

“really prioritise and plan ... because otherwise you’re always responding reactively and never getting any proactive work done” Jennifer

#### 4.3 *Supportive relationships outside Parliament*

“the most important thing is to maintain my relationships outside of Parliament with my friends and my family and that this time is actually where you go and recharge and that it’s really important to ensure that ... this place is so all consuming and so engulfing and that it is really important to maintain that” Elizabeth

“You’ve got to have your family logistics very well sorted, otherwise it all falls over. So that’s the other area that you need to learn how to do, and learn how to do quickly. It’s all well and good to say you’ll manage it, but when the push comes to shove it can be bloody hard .... So I diary time when I’m going to see them ... if you don’t diary your family, all of a sudden you look around and they’re not there” Frank

#### 4.4 *Invest time in your own well-being*

“I seriously would have been a lot better off if I had got a flat a lot earlier than I did ... I didn’t appreciate the benefit of that ... there was significant advantage ... have a solid base in Wellington as quickly as possible” Kenneth

“I try to minimise my travel, I try to prioritise sleep, but I’ve been hopeless at it the last few months, sleeping less and less ‘cause I keep staying up late and having to get up early, so I am getting really tired” Nancy

“I try and get to the gym every day ... for dinner ... I try and get home – which is just across the road – but even if it’s 15-20 minutes just to check out and just clear your head of the zone that you’re in at the time because it is very consuming” Frank

## 5. Strategies for learning

During interviews, MPs mentioned a variety of ways that they learned to be an MP. These included unobtrusive methods such as *observe and absorb* in which they sit, watch and reflect on events. They also included more active strategies such as *asking questions but with care*, *choosing good role models* and *taking action but warily*. MPs mentioned the importance of developing good networks both inside and outside of Parliament to be kept informed of developments both of a political nature but also in their portfolios where stakeholders often had greater expertise (*develop networks inside Parliament* and *develop networks outside of Parliament*). A final theme was around the *surprising collegiality* among MPs across parties, especially at select committee where, in most instances, MPs tried to work together to achieve the best legislation possible. Across these various strategies, MPs were very aware of timing and the impression they would make and chose their actions accordingly.

### 5.1 Observe and absorb

“We were given some advice at the start, ‘to breathe through your nose’ is the way they phrased it ... and I have to say it’s worked well I think. And what it means is just that, to watch and listen, not to be speaking too often or too frequently or go running around like a bit of a hoon. Just sit back, watch and listen, what colleagues are doing, and sort of almost an osmosis you begin to take things on board. So I think that’s been my most valuable learning because I’ve seen some other colleagues attempting to make a very quick big impression by doing the opposite and getting themselves into trouble or just the sort of behaviour which causes people to roll their eyes, so yeah that’s probably my biggest learning I think” Daniel

“I’d take my work down and work in the House just to kind of absorb how it is that the House works. I mean there’s obviously standing orders and all those kind of things, just there’s nothing like sitting in it and getting the feel of it” Elizabeth

### 5.2 Use advice and feedback

“you get a lot of advice on how to approach things in caucus and how hard to push, how hard not to push, and when to talk, and when not to talk. So it’s all a question of slowly getting a sense of the first year or two in particular of how to conduct yourself in a way that’s more likely to be successful than not” Anthony

“occasionally they’ve fed back to me, as in they said ... “Oh look, you did this and this today. It’s all fine but you might want to consider x, y and z next time” Daniel

“the willingness of some of my more experienced colleagues to give ... advice and to be really supportive ... the extent that some colleagues would go to to help you and to mentor you is a nice aspect and that’s potentially a little bit more than I thought it would be” Elizabeth

### 5.3 Ask questions but with care

“ask somebody ‘Can you be my person that I come to [with questions]?’ ... That would be my advice, just find somebody – go off your gut that this person is ... I’m not saying that you trust them with your secrets, I’m just saying that they are a person that you can go to to bounce ideas off. Because at the end of the day this is not an environment of trust” Patricia

“ask questions, not too many and not necessarily always the same people, but you know try to find someone that you can trust as much as you can in politics, to be able to have conversations with. Because there is that tension, you don’t want to look stupid by being ignorant but equally you can show great ignorance by having not actually engaged with people, and you can put your foot right in it” Daniel

#### *5.4 Choose good role models*

“the way he asked questions really impressed on me ... And I thought to myself, that’s actually a really effective way of operating ... and I’ve tried to do that” Charles

“I definitely have tried to look at the people who I think are effective and observe what it is they do and try to model myself after them. Although everybody approaches it really differently” Nancy

#### *5.5 Take action, but warily*

“I’m a great believer that your actions define you, not your words, and this place is full of people with words ... building credibility is about rolling your sleeves up and knowing how to be effective and doing” Frank

“I only expect to get anyone’s confidence by my own actions” Robert

#### *5.6 Surprising collegiality*

“the collegiality behind the scenes was surprising from the point of view of somebody who hadn’t seen that from the inside before. You know and coming to realise that people are not like that, not like the public face that’s presented through Question Time” Charles

“you can’t come into a place like this and be an island .... you actually have to interact with members of opposing parties in order to achieve pretty much anything and that’s particularly so in select committees where the atmosphere is less theatrical but more collegial” Joseph

“each MP decides for themselves whether they’re going to come into this place and be collegial, or whether they’re going to come into this place and be a belligerent person .... We go to select committee, we’re there to try and make the best law possible. There are things we disagree on. We don’t ... have screaming matches. You recognise there are places that aren’t going to work out and that is what it is.” Patricia

#### *5.7 Develop networks inside Parliament*

“I think that’s the key is to have a strong group of connections that mind you or guide you or whatever” Robert

“getting back to this whole intent around networking, I think that a network has to be genuine and authentic ... because the reality is one of us can go so far but all of us can go a long way” Edward

“I went overseas last year with a mixture of [MPs from various parties]. We talked so that was helpful as well ... hearing about their experience and comparing notes and that was really helpful” Daniel

“[because you have cross-party networks ] you know where the points of collaboration are ... aspects that you can negotiate your way through to get minor concessions, and you want ... to forge the best possible relationships to take advantage of those opportunities when they arise ...” Brian

#### *5.8 Develop networks outside Parliament*

“if you only associate with your friends then there’s not enough diversity there of experience .... I wouldn’t be connected enough” Patricia

“I’m doing my apprenticeship. I’m a firm believer that you’ve got to learn your craft ... in the first two years I said almost “no” to nobody ... I travelled up and down the country all around the place for meetings, as far down as Invercargill and the Bluff, right up to the Far North, and everything in between. And to me it’s about learning the craft and ... engaging with communities” Edward

## 6. Practical issues to help you be effective sooner and stay effective longer

New MPs described having a range of resources at their disposal. These include their executive assistant (EA) and other direct staff who were considered critical to functioning effectively. While many MPs gave glowing accounts of their support staff, it was notable that some MPs had hired support staff who had not filled the role well. This was usually because MPs had not themselves known beforehand the full range of skills, knowledge and traits they needed in their staff, whether keeping diaries, planning, responding to enquiries, speech writing, communications, etcetera; also whether they wanted someone who would unequivocally support them or instead, someone who would challenge them or put different ideas forward. These ideas are captured in the theme *benefiting from your own support staff*.

MPs also mentioned the high calibre of parliamentary staff and the resources they supplied, in particular the Library. These ideas are contained in *using parliamentary resources well*.

The final theme under practical issues is *have realistic expectations*. MPs noted that being an MP is a complex role and that it takes time to achieve competence. Moreover, even those who felt effective in the role noted that they would continue to learn as new challenges arose.

### 6.1 Benefiting from your own support staff

“my EA ... had worked in the parliamentary environment before ... so it was really, really fantastic having somebody who was already familiar with many of the processes and procedures, and knowing who the right person to contact was when you needed a particular thing done ... who really hit the ground running and helped to get our office set up and our processes set up, rather than me having to tell someone new to the system how to do that when I didn’t really know it myself. ” Linda

“my EA ... does all that. She’s brilliant. You are dependent a lot and [your EA] is the one who liaises with the Clerk’s Office for select committee issues and material and things like that. So you end up doing a lot through your EA and [my EA’s] been around long enough to know how the place works. So that’s actually been incredibly helpful” Brian

“I’d seen a number of MPs in the past who ... get too entwined in their own position ... and no-one would ever question their judgement ‘cause they’re an MP. I wanted someone who would continually give me a reality check and go, ‘No Daniel that’s a stupid idea’ ” Daniel

### 6.2 Using parliamentary resources well

“the helpfulness of the staff, the parliamentary staff. The respect and real commitment to what is the traditions, to keeping the Parliament standard. They’re the backbone of the place. Politicians come and go and we bring it into disrepute probably, but they honour those traditions” Patricia

“the Office of the Clerk is another valuable resource. They are able to give you sound guidance and advice on Member’s Bills, the drafting of Member’s Bills, the stepping through all that process, the ballot system” Joseph

### 6.3 Have realistic expectations

“[my advice is] not to have too high expectations ... Some people come in with just enormous, enormous expectations of what they can achieve for their constituency or in themselves, that a couple of stunning speeches in the House and all of a sudden the Prime Minister will make them a minister ... doesn’t happen. And that can be really disappointing to some ... they’re not so much slumped over physically, but you can see that they’re not happy, it hasn’t quite fitted as they expected” Daniel

“it probably took me 18 months to get to a place where I was comfortable with what I was doing ... everything that was there when you came is gone, and all the stuff you’ve grown with is now what’s going through the House ... in the form of legislation” Robert

“Just being an MP having been elected and having a seat in the House does not ... give you that magic key to find out what the secret ingredients are. So I’m still on the journey of learning” Frank

“the funny thing is you occasionally ... go to an MP who’s been around a while, say ‘I’m having a problem, what about this, how do I go about doing this?’ and discover that they don’t know, or they don’t have a great deal of confidence about it ... The number of MPs, I guess in any party, who absolutely master the procedure of the House are pretty few and far between” Brian

## 7. How New Zealand compares with other legislatures

New Zealand MPs’ experiences have a range of similarities and differences to our research in the UK. In both New Zealand and the UK, party whips play a role in helping new MPs to understand their role and navigate the new environment. However our interviews with UK MPs reveal a more hostile side to relationships with whips, as revealed in this quote: “The lack of awareness among new MPs provides the whips with a source of power – they can find out information, because new MPs are more forthcoming, honest and transparent”. Moreover in general we found that UK MPs reported experiencing more manipulative behaviours such as being used as conduits for information, as shown in this quote: “It took me twelve months learning who I could trust, learning that you’re being told things that are useful to others – not you – that you’re being used”.

In contrast, having asked every New Zealand MP during their interview about this, none thought this kind of personal manipulation occurred. New Zealand MPs did note that they had learned to be careful about who to trust and were regularly witnesses or targets of negative conduct from other MPs. However we found that the New Zealand Parliament is generally less hostile. We have two suppositions that may individually or jointly explain this difference, and both relate to the smaller size of New Zealand’s Parliament. Firstly this smaller size means that, in general, MPs need to maintain more cordial relationships within and across parties because they are likely to be working with each other on select committees, both in government and in opposition, over a number of years and may need to collaborate during this time. In a larger parliament you have a greater chance of avoiding other MPs directly or avoiding their machinations if you have crossed swords with them. A second reason also relates to having a smaller parliament in New Zealand as well as more political parties present, which means that MPs can gain positions of power relatively quickly compared to larger parliaments. Even in the first term some MPs are becoming spokespeople on specific issues. In the UK Parliament, many MPs are likely to spend their whole political career on the backbenches with no responsibilities at a more senior level. Such a lack of access to formal positions of power may lead to more petty politicking and subterfuge by UK MPs.

## 8. Recommendations to facilitate new employee transitions based on research in various contexts

Applied research such as this has the aim of improving outcomes. It is worthwhile, therefore, to draw on past research findings and briefly outline recommendations for those responsible for helping new MPs be effective and for new MPs themselves. These are akin to *employers* and *employees* in other settings where research has been conducted. While New Zealand MPs do not have employers as such, their party organisations via their whips (or musterers) as well as The Parliamentary Service and The Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives are responsible for helping MPs get up to speed and our advice may be useful to them. Moreover, MPs are not employees but rather elected representatives. Nevertheless their situation is akin to that of new employees and the research on such newcomers is likely to be relevant.

### 8.1 “Employer” Recommendations

There are various social events that are hosted within Parliament and these can be important events for MPs to attend in order to develop useful relationships with each other. New MPs should be advised by whips or other senior colleagues regarding which of these are worthwhile attending, so that new MPs may use their time wisely and be clear that such events can be valuable, if chosen well. Whips may help MPs by identifying high performing role models for specific tasks that are part of being an MP. This could be different experienced MPs across different tasks, for example those who are particularly good with the media, such as radio or television interviews; those who are good at managing stakeholder relationships and increasing community engagement and support; those who are effective in the Debating Chamber; those who perform well in select committees; and so forth. In this way, whips can help new MPs to learn from high performers, and increase the performance of new MPs. Finally, whips can reduce the costs to new MPs of asking questions of them, both by initially making themselves available to new MPs and subsequently, in response to questions, through providing helpful responses or a pathway to other resources.

For The Parliamentary Service and The Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, MPs were mostly positive about the role played by these organisations in helping them adjust. Information was readily available early on through the induction process, and on an ongoing basis through individual queries being responded to. Given that MPs receive so much information early on post-entry, it may be useful to regularly remind MPs about the resources available to help them be effective. This may make it easier for busy MPs to judge when it is worthwhile stopping and asking an expert on a specific topic to achieve a solution more quickly overall rather than spending time figuring it out for themselves.

### 8.2 “Employee” Recommendations

Research on the proactive behaviour of new employees shows a general pattern supporting the value of investing time and energy interacting with colleagues. This means taking the time to understand senior colleagues and build strong working relationships with them and also with a variety of other colleagues through accepting or extending invitations to talk informally over coffee, lunch or drinks. Newcomers who engage more in relationship-building behaviour show higher levels of learning, job satisfaction, work engagement, well-being, performance, commitment to the organisation and intention to stay with their current organisation. Other proactive behaviours that are also linked to such benefits include role modelling – that is choosing a senior colleague and emulating their behaviour – as well as observing colleagues and the working environment in order to understand how things work, and asking questions. Translating these findings into a political context, new MPs are likely to find it worthwhile building good relationships with other MPs, including both those at a similar level to themselves for comparing learnings, but also more senior MPs to learn the history and meanings of events, as well as effective ways to carry out the role. Choosing effective senior role models to observe and mimic is a useful strategy, especially given that –

relative to much knowledge work – a lot of MPs’ work is visible and therefore open to observation, for example public debates, press interviews and select committee meetings. In terms of asking questions, our research in other contexts has revealed that there is a certain time frame within which newcomers are able to reveal some lack of knowledge without negative repercussions. However, as newcomers get further on time-wise, they should be more cautious about who and what they ask, and this applies equally to MPs.

## 9. Conclusions

The focus of our research was on new MPs learning and adjusting to the role. The six key areas we identified and which are outlined in the main part of this report were the early struggles where MPs sometimes felt under-prepared or overwhelmed; the unique environments MPs have to learn to work across; the tensions and pressures of the MP role; ways of coping with those tensions and pressures; strategies for learning; and finally fairly practical issues to help MPs function sustainably in the MP role. Our comparison of New Zealand’s Parliament against the UK in Section Seven suggests that a smaller parliament may have the benefit of insulating New Zealand MPs from some of the more negative behaviours found elsewhere. Our recommendations in Section Eight suggest that there are additional actions that can be taken to help new MPs adjust.

Our focus on learning and adjustment enables the focus of this report to be on identifying potential problems and providing some solutions. However it only gives one side of the story, focusing on change and difficulty. There were positive aspects to the MP role that came through also such as policy successes, collaborations with other MPs, and learning to be effective in the role. As noted by one MP, “It’s a great life though, I should put that as a veneer across the whole thing, it’s a strange life, but it’s a good one” Daniel.

## Biographies

### **Dr Helena Cooper Thomas BSc (Hons) MA PhD Psychol. (NZ) C. Psychol. (UK)**

Helena Cooper-Thomas is a Senior Lecturer and Director of Postgraduate Studies in Industrial Work and Organisational Psychology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Helena's research interests focus primarily on new employees and employee-employer relations. She publishes in the areas of newcomer adjustment and organizational socialization, and both positive effects of employment (work engagement, person-organisation fit) and well as negative effects (stress and bullying, misfit). Helena has published her research in a number of respected applied psychology, organizational behaviour and human resources journals including *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, and *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*. She is an Associate Editor for the *Journal of Managerial Psychology* and on the Consulting Editorial Board of the *Journal of Business and Psychology*.

In 2013 Helena co-edited the book "Relationships in organizations: A work psychology perspective" (with Dr Rachel Morrison at AUT University). Recent awards include the William A. Owens Scholarly Achievement Award in 2011 for a paper first authored by Gilad Chen from the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology; the Best Paper award in the Research Methods stream of the British Academy of Management in 2013; and the Outstanding Paper 2013 award from the *Journal of Managerial Psychology* for a paper published on organisational misfit with Dr. Sarah Wright. Helena has also provided consulting to a range of private and public sector organizations in various countries. Companies include Shell, Hilton Hotels, and Lloyds TSB. Countries include the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Nigeria, Oman, Venezuela, and the USA.

### **Professor Jo Silvester**

Jo Silvester is Professor of Organisational Psychology at Cass Business School. Her research explores psychological and behavioural predictors of leader emergence and effectiveness in political roles. Before joining Cass, Jo was a Professor of Occupational Psychology at Goldsmiths College, University of London and held lectureships previously at the University of Leeds, University of Wales Swansea, and City University London (in Psychology).

Over the past decade Jo has applied theory and practice from organisational psychology in political contexts; the dual aims being to improve our understanding of what political work entails, and how politicians and candidates can be better supported. She is also interested in ways to improve diversity in politics. In 2001 she worked with the Conservative Party to develop the first competency-based process for selecting prospective Parliamentary candidates. She also redesigned the Liberal Democrat Party's selection process in 2009, implementing 360-degree review for parliamentary candidates fighting in the 2010 general election. Jo has provided consultancy for organisations (e.g., the Home Office, Department for Communities and Local Government, JPMorgan, IDEA, RBS and Royal College of Surgeons). Her research has been published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *Human Relations and Political Behavior*, and she has been Associate Editor for the *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* and the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*.



## Publications

- Cooper-Thomas, H. D., & Silvester, J. (2013, October). *Preserving the pecking order: Politicians' political tactics during organizational socialization*. Invited presentation to the Louvain School of Management, Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain La Neuve, Belgium.
- Cooper-Thomas, H. D., & Silvester, J. (2013, September). *The organisational socialisation of new politicians: Frying pan or fire?* Invited presentation to the Faculty of Psychology, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, Spain.
- Cooper-Thomas, H. D., Silvester, J., & Lees-Marshment, J. (2013, September). The socialisation of MPs into New Zealand's Parliament. Paper in G. Plimmer (Chair), *Does workplace aggression in the public sector indicate low organisational capability?* symposium at the British Academy of Management Conference, Liverpool, UK.
- Silvester, J., & Cooper-Thomas, H. D. (2012, June). *Organizational socialization and transition into Parliament: The case of new M.P.s*. In H. D. Cooper-Thomas (Chair), *Organizational socialization: The roles of newcomers, insiders, and the organization*. Symposium conducted at the 3rd Biennial Institute of Work Psychology International Conference, Sheffield, UK.
- Silvester J. (2012), 'Recruiting politicians: Introducing competency-based approval processes for prospective Parliamentary candidates', *Chapter 2 in A. Weinberg (Ed.) Political Leadership*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Silvester J. (2012), '*The Political Skills Framework: A Councillor's Toolkit*' (by invitation). London: Local Government Association.
- Silvester J. (2008), 'The good, the bad, and the ugly: Politics and politicians at work', *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (by invitation), 23, pp. 107–148.
- Silvester J., & Dykes, C. (2007), 'Selecting political candidates: A longitudinal study of assessment centre performance and electoral success in the 2005 UK General Election', *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 80, pp. 11-25.
- Silvester J., & Menges, C. (2011), '*The Political Mentoring Toolkit*'. London: ESRC & City University London.