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British MPs in Their Constituencies

This paper examines the relationships between British MPs and local officials and councillors for evidence of accommodation or resistance to the representational activities and styles of MPs. It is based on structured interviews in eight constituencies, including interviews with the MPs, local councillors, CEOs, and other officials. The activities of MPs in their constituencies can be categorized into four nonexclusive groupings: casework, projects, gaining visibility, and party maintenance. Each of these activities may create tensions in a constituency, with casework (mostly housing cases) and gaining visibility the most frequently mentioned sources of tension. Divided partisan representation and electoral competitiveness at both the council and parliamentary levels resulted in a great deal of tension. Where the same party controlled both the local council and the parliamentary seat, tensions were largely kept within the party.

Introduction

In recent years, political scientists have called attention to the wide range of constituency activities undertaken by MPs (Dowse 1963; Barker and Rush 1967; King and Sloman 1973; Munroe 1977; Cain and Ritchie 1982; Searing 1985; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987). If there was previously a preoccupation with the legislators' policy-making role, there is now a greater awareness of their nonpolicy functions. Some of these functions are symbolic in nature, intended to demonstrate the representatives' solidarity with and concern for those they represent. Other activities, such as casework and the defense of community causes, provide tangible benefits to constituents.

Fenno's study (1978) of congressional homestyles emphasized the interaction between the personality of the representative and the make-up of the district. Other studies have shown that electoral and strategic considerations also affect how representatives decide to allocate their time and resources, even in the United Kingdom (Cain et al. 1987). What has not been discussed in any detail is how the involvement of the member of Congress or the MP in constituency affairs may

affect their relations with other elected and nonelected officials in their districts.

The way that representatives allocate their time and resources is prescribed only to a very small extent by laws or by informal expectations and sanctions that party leaders, activists, and fellow legislators control. Hence, while there is formally a substantial degree of freedom in how they decide to represent their districts—for example, the personal component that Fenno emphasizes—there is in reality a significant amount of constraint. Given the overlap of jurisdictions, governmental actors cannot define their roles without affecting and even coming into conflict with other governmental actors. If, for example, MPs have increased their ombudsmen interventions in district affairs over time, then it is likely that local officials and bureaucrats are affected, and these changes may create tensions.

This paper looks at the ways that national legislators and local officials work together in Great Britain, to see whether there is any evidence of resistance or accommodation to the representational styles of MPs. To examine these tensions and the situations in which they occur, we interviewed 87 individuals in eight constituencies in Great Britain. The interviews sought to ascertain the types of activities that occupied MPs in their constituencies, the interactions they had with local officials and councillors as a result of these activities, the feelings and attitudes that resulted from these interactions, and the evidence of resistance or accommodation to the MPs' representational roles. The constituencies studied were chosen from the sample used by Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina in their crossnational study (1987) and were selected to emphasize diversity. Four MPs were Conservative, three Labour, and one from a minor party. In the Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina study, four of these MPs were found to be very active in casework and four less active. Four MPs represented constituencies in which the district councils were controlled by their party, and two represented constituencies in which the district councils were controlled by the opposition. Of the remaining two, one represented a constituency in which the district council considered itself independent and the other a constituency with two district councils, one controlled by his party and the other controlled by the other major party. Six constituencies were in England, one in Scotland, and one in Wales. One MP was a minister and three were, or had been, private parliamentary secretaries (PPS).

The interviews, conducted during the fall of 1982 and the summer of 1983, were structured to last an average of 75 minutes. The MP was interviewed in all cases, generally before we talked to anyone else in the constituency. The MP's party agent was also interviewed in all con-

stituencies. Our sample also covers a number of local bureaucrats, including district CEOs, county CEOs, aides to local CEOs, housing officers, a finance officer, and the head of a local Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) office. The bulk of the respondents, however, were local councillors, most often chairs or shadow spokesmen on the most important committees. Members of parties other than the MP's party were interviewed in all constituencies.

Activities in the District

The activities of MPs in their constituencies fall into four non-exclusive categories: casework, projects, gaining visibility, and party maintenance. Each of these activities brings members of Parliament into contact with officials, party activists, and other locally elected representatives, but in varying ways, because each leads to a different kind of constituency interaction. At the heart of much of the conflict we observed between elected and unelected officials at the local level is credit claiming. Political actors with overlapping jurisdictions may compete for or share the credit for activities. Whether they do the former or the latter is at least partly determined by the type of activity in question.

In theory, for example, we can imagine constituency-related actions which members undertake on their own and for which they claim primary responsibility in the expectation of electoral gain. These we can call indivisible credit-claiming actions. In such instances, a member often competes with other elected and unelected officials to perform an action; once the action is taken, however, the electoral credit is attributed to the member alone. Whether any activity is ever purely indivisible in this sense is a question we shall come to shortly. By contrast, activities that require cooperative action by a number of elected and unelected officials are what we call potentially divisible credit-claiming actions. We say "potentially" because it is possible, and common, for one individual to claim credit for actions that were collectively produced. Finally, we should take note that many actions that are part of an MP's job have little or no credit-claiming value. Of course, the enterprising elected official attempts to reduce this number to a minimum.

From this very simple threefold distinction, we can make a couple of observations. Some activities will have greater potential for conflict than others (although human nature is such that conflict is theoretically possible over any action). Thus, we would expect constituency actions that have little or no credit-claiming value to provoke less conflict than those that do. In divisible and indivisible credit-claiming activities, different kinds of conflict can arise. In the divisible case, a

member who claims credit for actions that were cooperatively produced runs the serious risk of annoying the other officials. To use an analogy from game theory, a member who claims inappropriate credit may not suffer any adverse consequences if the game is only played once, but he or she can run into serious difficulties with other elected and unelected officials if the play is repeated. The short-term gain of electoral credit must be weighed against the long-term problem of future cooperation.

In the indivisible case, tensions can arise over the "right" to undertake an action rather than (as in the divisible credit-claiming case) the responsibility for the action once it has been taken. The right to take an action can derive from custom, expectations, law, or the logic of territorial jurisdiction. The right may change with time, and the incentive to compete for this right may vary with circumstances. The MP, for instance, may have a marginal district in which every constituency act matters electorally, whereas the local councillors for the various parts of the MP's district may have much safer seats and thus be less motivated to work for their constituents' favor.

Casework

Returning to the four activities we identified at the beginning, we can try to locate them within the scheme we have developed. Casework involves helping individuals with specific governmental problems (Fenno 1978, 101; Cain et al. 1987, 57). While MPs usually help their own constituents, they may occasionally take on the problems of individuals outside their constituencies. For instance, one MP we spoke with had close ties to a local mosque and helped Asians from far outside his constituency with their immigration problems. Then too, there are some MPs who will help individuals with nongovernmental problems, such as getting an insurance claim settled.¹ However, the vast majority of cases which an MP deals with are constituent's problems with the central government.

Members of Parliament are asked to intervene with the national government on behalf of their constituents in numerous circumstances concerning such diverse matters as immigration, health care, armed services, and pensions. The normal procedure in national casework is to make a direct inquiry to the appropriate central government department or civil servant or, in matters of particular urgency, to approach the relevant minister. There is a broad consensus in Great Britain that the MP, as the constituency's representative in London, is the natural conduit for cases involving the national bureaucracy.

However, MPs also deal with cases concerning the local government. The most common example is the allocation of council housing, which is handled by the local housing authorities. Even though these matters are strictly regulated by well-specified formulas, grievances nonetheless arise between constituents and local bureaucrats, and constituents take a large number of these kinds of complaints to their members. Since local housing officers have their own appeal procedures, and since local councillors may themselves choose to intervene on behalf of their constituents, the MP who inquires into local cases provides a third and potentially competitive route of appeal for the citizen.

The approach an MP takes in handling local cases varies with the MP's personal style, knowledge of local government, and commitment to resolving problems, as well as the partisan situation in the constituency and district. Most often in local casework, the MP approaches the chief executive officer (CEO), lower level administrators, political leaders, or a local party councillor. The politically astute MP who is concerned with solving the constituent's problem and who knows local government well begins his or her work inquiry with lower level administrators and then proceeds to higher levels (such as the CEO) if the matter cannot be resolved initially. As one political leader of a district council observed, "T . . . tends to deal with officers. He knows the procedures. He will come to me with a serious case. He brought one to me about a woman with a medical disability who was turned down for priority housing. I can win cases like that." In a similar vein, an MP commented that, "If it is strictly administrative I send it to administrators. If not, I send it to the council. If a shoe has a hole in it you take it to a shoe repairman. If it is falling apart you send it back to the manufacturer."

Some MPs, however, go directly to the CEO, feeling either that this is the appropriate level on which to work or that they do not have the time to give detailed attention to a problem. One CEO who had two ministers and a backbencher representing parts of his district commented that he got "more requests from the ministers than from W . . . who has more time." An MP is most likely to deal directly with local officials and bypass local councillors when the local council is controlled by the other party, but in all cases respondents agreed that local bureaucrats, in the spirit of neutral competency, were generally fair to MPs regardless of party. As one CEO noted, requests from an MP usually receive more attention: "A request from an MP would get special attention in that I would know about it and would probably personally deal with it. Inevitably it would get special attention. I would never say that

publicly, but you are bound to react to a member of Parliament. It does not affect the outcome, but things happen more quickly.”

Not all MPs compete with councillors to handle local cases. Some MPs let the councillor from the relevant ward handle the issue alone, referring the case by letter or phone or just sending the complainant to the appropriate councillor. Others hold joint surgeries with local councillors in order to make sure that local problems go directly to local councillors, while still getting some credit for listening.

Casework on matters involving the central government is unlikely to create tension between MPs and local authorities. It is part of the MPs’ job, and they are expected to do it. In any case, it is more difficult for local persons to judge whether the MP is actively and competently pursuing a case or merely going through the motions. However, local casework is another matter. Local problems bring MPs into close contact with local officials and councillors in an arena where it is obvious to many constituents what sort of person the MP is: passive, aggressive, publicity seeking, cooperative, or disruptive. There are those who feel that an MP should not be involved with local council matters. A Conservative MP made the following comment about his approach: “Labour MPs try to do council work and councillors hate them. I do not attempt to do a councillor’s job.” And a Conservative councillor made this comment about a Conservative MP: “Labour does not like B . . . since he brings so many problems to the council. They call him councillor B . . .” Still others are cynical about the MPs’ real level of interest in local problems, suggesting that much casework is just a matter of going through the motions. A housing officer put it bluntly: “I have the feeling with all MPs that they are trying to seem active. They are asking for information but they are not taking up the cudgels.”

Another problem that MPs have in any council, regardless of the majority, is maintaining liaison with councillors concerning cases in their individual wards or under their committees’ jurisdictions. All politicians like to take credit for favorable results or to be viewed as effective. MPs who try to take credit for themselves risk stepping on several sets of toes. This problem can be lessened by keeping interested councillors informed of the progress of the case and by spreading credit around. Some MPs avoid this problem altogether by referring local cases to ward councillors or to committee chairs. Of course, the MP can also avoid a lot of work by referring cases, but the trade-off is that nothing much may get done to resolve a particular case. The surest way for an MP to avoid controversy over local casework is to put in the minimal amount of effort on local cases, but no respondent complained that an MP did too little on local cases.

Interestingly, the conflict that often is present with district councils rarely occurs with county councils. We can only speculate as to why this may be the case. Perhaps the county councils do not deal with as many matters that affect individuals directly, or perhaps the counties are a less visible level of government, or that they are less often governed in a partisan manner.

In sum, casework is primarily an example of indivisible credit claiming, especially with regard to MPs and local councillors. MPs who aggressively pursue matters of local government compete with local councillors, and tensions can result. A particularly insensitive MP who embarrasses local bureaucrats can run into some problems normally associated with divisible credit claiming. On the whole, however, we found generally good working relationships between MPs and local bureaucrats.

Projects

Unlike casework, which deals with problems of individuals, projects involve the concerns of groups and the broader interests of the constituency (Cain et al. 1987, 71). Most requests for aid on projects are filtered through local councils. Typically, the MP is first approached by the council or by a coalition of councillors and affected groups. The type of projects that MPs were involved in ranged from keeping a postal substation open to trying to bring new industry into an area. A number were economic in nature, such as gaining development area status for a district, getting a military contract for a local plant, delaying the closure of a steel mill, and changing laws or regulations so that manufacture of certain products were more feasible in the district.

Rarely did MPs take the initiative with respect to projects, as their counterparts in the U.S. Congress so often do. Generally members were reactive, responding to requests.² Some MPs were more active in responding than others. At one extreme, there was an MP who did just what he was told. A leading political figure in his constituency commented that "he has no [electoral] problems. He does not need to do a lot of work. We will tell him what to do." At the other extreme, some MPs would, without prodding, handle all of the London work: setting up meetings with ministers, leading delegations, asking questions in parliament, introducing bills, and keeping the local councillors and officials informed of the project's status and what needs to be done. In addition, two MPs reported that they used their own contacts, quite apart from their governmental role, to bring outside industry into a district. Few local officials or councillors were willing to give any MP much

credit for helping the economic situation in their district (none of the MPs in our sample got rave reviews for successful work in this area), but they were quite willing to point out those who did little or nothing. Typical of the comments about the effectiveness of MPs in project work is one by a leader of the majority Labour party about a Conservative MP: "He did support conversion of the rail crossing gates. He did support it and he used it as part of his reelection campaign, but his impact was small. Local councillors did more in organizing the campaign. He did speak to the minister, but I have doubts about his impact." Another councillor was even less generous. "He says that he got [an industrial facility], but he did nothing. It was certain to go through if the council approved it, and we did." Those MPs who were obviously less active in promoting local projects were roundly criticized for not doing more, and on the rare occasions they choose not to get involved (such as in the closing of a post office substation), they were extensively criticized by everyone, including members of their own party. It seems that it is at least necessary for an MP to go through the motions of project work and to be on the right side.

The presence of several MPs representing the same town or county can complicate the picture. In the first place, they all must be contacted, or they may feel slighted and oppose this or future projects. (In one of the counties in our sample, eight MPs were involved.) Then it must be determined who is to take the lead: the senior MP, the most effective MP, one in the majority party in Parliament, one representing the majority party in the district, etc. Members of the government (majority party leaders) are often thought to be ineffective here, since their need to support the government ultimately outweighs their desire to get something for the local constituency.

Local government officials in our sample seemed to value MPs more for their assistance on projects than for their individual casework. As one respondent said, "The job of the MP is to intervene with government. It is not to initiate, but if there is a problem with Whitehall, the man with the key is the MP. I do not expect the MP to be involved with local council matters." In another constituency a respondent said, "The MP should represent local authorities' view against central government. . . , should be the window through which he sees the constituency." It would seem that, if local officials and councillors had their way, MPs would primarily be lobbyists for locally determined policy, not advocates for citizens against the local authorities.

Projects are the clearest examples of divisible credit claiming. By definition, they involve benefits that are more collective and less particularized than casework, and they usually require the cooperation

of a number of elected officials in the same geographic area. As we might expect, tensions associated with projects had less to do with the right to undertake project-related actions (quite the contrary, the expectations of assistance from the MP were quite high) and more to do with claiming undue credit for what was thought to be a collective effort.

Maintaining Visibility

Maintaining visibility, the third constituency action we identified, involves those activities that make local constituents aware of MPs' existence. Members must not only be seen in the constituency but must also keep themselves in the minds of their constituents when they are not there. Ideally these activities will convey the MP's concern for and effectiveness in looking after the interests of constituents. The most common methods for maintaining visibility with the entire constituency are of four types: establishing one's presence, attending functions and meetings, taking positions on local issues, and building relations with the press. Establishing a presence means first and foremost living in the constituency, since it has become important in recent years to convince local activists that a member has a feel for the constituency and its problems. In addition to returning to the constituency often, establishing presence usually requires traveling widely within the constituency and touring schools, factories, pensioners' homes, etc., especially during the recess.

A second component of visibility is attending constituency meetings. Some of these are governmental in nature, including council meetings or hearings, strategy sessions on projects, and ceremonial functions. Members of Parliament rarely attend council meetings unless invited, and they are more likely to be invited when their party is in control of the local council than when it is not. A third source of local visibility comes from involvement in local issues. In fact, local issues may well be more important than national issues to an MP's standing in the constituency.³ A common practice, for instance, is to make an issue out of the management—or mismanagement—of the opposition-controlled council. Since local government most directly affects people's lives, the potential for local causes to champion abounds. Most of these involve the safety and maintenance of housing, but others include roads, transportation, parking, trash, and sewage.

The MP who would be visible must manage his/her relations with the press well. A member's relationship with the local press can range from incestuous to oblivious. Some MPs have a virtual pipeline to the local press. A reporter in a Labour constituency stated that he had

a “special relationship” with the MP and his agent and that he “would not write anything detrimental, since they are friends and it is a useful relationship.” He went on to say that he would not want to see the MP lose his seat because he, as a reporter, would “lose a good contact.” Other MPs, usually in safe seats, did not actively seek additional press coverage. For instance, one CEO commented that the local constituency “is a safe Labour seat so publicity is not played up. . . . The MP does not need to do more. He was the union man. This is a moderate Labour area and that is reflected by the MP.” Most members are selective in how they use the media to publicize themselves, although it does not always seem that way to local officials. One housing officer complained that “W . . . has a good publicity machine. It is in the paper before I get it. We must work in the full glare of publicity. When I write something to him I expect the public to see it.” But in the same city, the national Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) officer said that nothing involving his department ever was put in the press by the MP. Apparently, the MP had more to gain by attacking the local government, which was controlled by his principal opponents, than he did by attacking the DHSS and undermining his good working relationship with that office.

Generally speaking, visibility-enhancing activities can fall into the no credit-claiming category; that is to say, most of these actions do not result in a particular outcome per se, but simply cause the MP to be noticed. They are, in effect, symbolic gestures. However, a few—such as handling local issues—can result in either divisible or indivisible credit claiming, depending on the circumstances.

Party Maintenance

Finally, what we have called maintenance activity involves bolstering the membership, funds, and activity in local party clubs. Maintaining support within the local party is crucial for all MPs, and they devote a good deal of their constituency activity toward this end. Members can, of course, get into trouble with their party supporters over their national policy stands on such issues as abortion, capital punishment, EEC membership, or defense, but they can also encounter resistance if they seem to be uninterested or ineffective in supporting the constituency party. MPs are in real danger if they are weak in both dimensions. On the other hand, MPs can bolster their reselection prospects by being regularly available to the local party.⁴ Consequently, the prudent MP is careful to attend to party ties by keeping in constant contact with the party agent and the party leaders and making regular ap-

pearances at party meetings and functions. Party maintenance work is not an electoral credit-claiming activity, and we found no instances of tension between the member and the constituency in this area except when it was felt the member did not do enough.

Looking over all the constituency activities, we find that the main sources of tension are individual casework involving local government matters. The credit-claiming benefits of casework are indivisible; hence, enterprising MPs sometimes compete with local councillors for the right to this electoral benefit. In most other instances, tensions are easily avoided by sharing the divisible credit of collectively produced actions.

Variations in MP-Constituency Relations

The relations between members and local officials vary greatly, from amicable and cooperative to hostile and competitive. Believing that constituency activity can have an impact on electoral results, members generally take an active role in local issues and problems. In recent years, there has been much research into why MPs have adopted an active constituency orientation (Cain et al. 1987, chap. 3; Searing 1985, 376–77), but this study reflects a different emphasis. It does not focus on the MPs' orientation nor ask whether they are more interested in Westminster or in the constituency. Rather, it examines constituency service from the viewpoints of both the MP and local actors, asking what factors determine the nature of their interactions. Our analysis is necessarily qualitative and speculative, but some plausible factors include the partisan control of the councils in the constituencies, territorial heterogeneity, the number of MPs that represent the district(s) in which the constituency lies and their parliamentary position, and electoral competition in the district.

Partisan Control of Council

A critical factor influencing the MPs' interactions with local officials in the constituency is whether or not the member's party controls the local council. If it does, then the MP can count on more assistance and cooperation in helping to resolve local problems that are brought to his or her attention. If the local council is instead dominated by the opposition, then cooperation is likely to give way to competition. As an example of a cooperative arrangement, one Labour MP described his relationship with a Labour district as follows: "On the level that I work

there is close identity and shared ideology. All have a vested interest in each other's survival. There is a close identity of views."

When an MP of an opposition party raises questions about a local council or tries to resolve local cases, there are unavoidable tensions. It is not possible to carry out these activities without at least implicit criticism of the local council, and local councillors are not inclined to quietly accept such criticism from an influential member of the opposite party, especially if this member seems to be motivated by the desire for publicity. A Labour councillor described an activist MP of another party as follows: "He is a total opportunist. He claims responsibility for things over which he could not have any influence." This MP reported that the local council prohibited the housing officer from taking cases referred by parliamentary candidates during an election period, but that his opponent, who was a councillor, had colleagues to help him with his cases. Several of the local councillors we spoke to said that if the MP were of another party they would try to put him on the spot. One councillor indicated that if the MP were of another party he would "try to trip him up" and would "write letters to cause him embarrassment" and that when he got replies he would "release part of it to the press." Another said that he would "try and bypass him unless I had a real stinko of a case and could embarrass him."

To resolve cases under an opposition council, an MP must work through local bureaucrats primarily. While the bureaucracy will treat his requests fairly, the MP will tend to be less effective for not having assistance from local councillors. Since his party is in the minority, more constituents may turn to him rather than to his party councillors, because he is more visible and he may be thought to be more effective. He may in fact still be effective in getting things resolved by the local council since, as one party worker noted, the other party "will go out of the way to solve problems to keep our party from picking up votes based on those problems."⁵ The issue of local partisanship is particularly acute in seats in which there is a great deal of electoral competition. MPs in competitive areas are expected to help discredit the council majority when it is controlled by the opposition.

Territorial Heterogeneity

Where there are different interests within a constituency, an MP may have to focus his activities on one group or one part of the constituency more than another. There is always the danger that some part of the district will then feel slighted. Sometimes, territorial concerns coincide with partisanship. For instance, a Labour MP in our sample represented

an area with two local councils, one dominated by his party and the other by the Conservatives. His attention and activity was directed almost entirely toward the Labour area. He openly told the Conservative council that a Conservative MP would be of more help to them.

In a constituency where there were major town-gown cleavages, the Conservative MP, who appreciated the prestige that association with the university brought, favored—and was seen to favor—university interests over those of the rest of the city. This favoritism did not increase his popularity with his party but seemed to provide him with enough Liberal votes to continue winning his marginal seat. In yet another constituency, the smaller of two districts felt slighted. Finally, in a variation on the territorial theme, a minor party MP represented a working-class city. His party had four councillors on the county council, but they all represented areas that were more rural and conservative. In spite of belonging to the same party, they were unable to work together smoothly, because they represented different types of constituencies.

Number of MPs in a District

Where there are territorial differences, one MP formally represents several distinct areas or interests within a constituency. In the cases now to be considered, two or more MPs represent the same area. Several of the local councils and all of the counties in our sample were represented by more than one MP. One local council was represented by four MPs and one county by eight. When these MPs were from different parties, members of the dominant party developed a favored relationship with the district. One influential councillor commented on the difference between an MP in his city who belonged to his party and another who did not: “W . . . is not a truthful person. He tells individuals that these are district council problems and that they should go see the district councillors. He lays problems at my door. . . . With R . . . it is a close relationship. He phones me for information and I can tell him the answer from the top of my head and he can get right back to his client. He has fortnightly surgeries and I often attend.” Nonetheless, MPs from different parties will tend to collaborate on constituency-wide projects, since no one can afford to be viewed as opposing the broader interests of the constituency.

Electoral Competitiveness

The marginality of a seat was a major factor in increasing the member activity in the constituency and hence the potential for tension

with local officials. While scholars may debate how large an effect constituency service has on elections (Cain et al. 1987, 80–84, chap. 7; Searing 1985, 372–77), all of the MPs in our sample felt that constituency activity did make a difference, with estimates in our sample ranging from 500 to 3,000 votes. A Conservative MP credited his reelection, in spite of an unfavorable redistricting, to his constituency activities. The three most active members in our sample occupied seats that either had been recently occupied by another party or demographically should have been. The fourth most active MP was being redistricted out of his seat; a new district had absorbed much of his constituency, and he had to compete for selection with another MP for the new seat. In spite of his opponent's more favorably perceived ideological stance, the more active MP won the selection largely because of his constituency work. A CEO commented on one of the least active MPs: "There is a joint development committee that determines the industrial future of this town. It spends £20 million. H . . . belongs there, but he never shows up. It is a major focal point. In a marginal seat, this could never take place." Constituency work, then, is seen as important for both selection and election. In addition, members of minor parties see it as an important tool for establishing and differentiating their parties from Conservative and Labour. The electoral incentive is the engine that drives the local concerns of MPs and local competition with county and district councillors.

However, electoral competitiveness is important in a second sense; namely, the competition below the parliamentary level for control of the local council also has an important impact on MP-constituency relations. A highly competitive electoral situation at the district level can lead to greater interparty hostility. In that case, the MP may be drawn into the fray—especially, as we observed earlier, if the opposite party controls the council. Even if the constituency seat is safe, the MP may be expected to help party colleagues discredit the opposition party's council. The politically astute MP cannot afford to alienate fellow party members (including councillors) by trying to stay above the fray, especially when many party members feel that control of the local council is more important than control of the constituency seat. In short, there may be more than one electoral incentive governing MP-constituency relations.

Summary and Conclusion

MPs have a rich and varied schedule of activities in their constituencies. Many of these activities bring them into contact with local

authorities and, for that reason, can create tensions as well. For the most active MPs in this study, local casework made up a large part of their constituency activity. Casework, we argued, is an indivisible credit-claiming activity over which members and local councillors sometimes fight. Other kinds of constituency service—projects, especially—are potentially divisible credit-claiming activities and less frequently cause conflicts. Still other activities ensure the member's visibility in the district or maintain the member's party ties and have nothing to do with credit claiming at all. While a number of factors affect variations in member-constituency relations, the most notable were the electoral competitiveness of both the local council and the parliamentary seat and partisan control of the local council.

MPs' local contacts are more likely to be with councillors and officials than are those of their counterparts in the U.S. Congress. The local councils provide many services that affect the MPs' constituents, and MPs are looked to as ombudsmen when problems in the provisions of these services arise. Moreover, in Great Britain, elected officials at both the local and the parliamentary level are more closely tied to the local party and therefore to each other. These party ties, more than anything else, mean that MPs' relations with local authorities are not likely to be neutral: they will be either accommodating or acrimonious. Inter-party cooperation is less common than in the United States.

Tensions between an MP and local councillors and officials most often surfaced on the issue of local casework and were most likely to occur in constituencies where the MP was highly active and where at least one local council was controlled by the opposition party. These were also the districts and constituencies that were electorally most competitive. Other factors may contribute to tensions as well. The MP who is not active or who does not live in the constituency will generate some ill feeling, as will an MP who concentrates his activity on one part of the constituency to the detriment of another. Claiming credit that rightfully belongs to some other local politician can also create animosity, as will failing to maintain adequate liaison on cases with councillors.

Tensions with local bureaucrats were never as great as with local councillors and rarely were they played out in public. Officials paid at least lip service to the concept of neutral competence and tried to appear to be fair to all MPs. There was no doubt, however, that they well knew where political power lay. MPs for their part recognized the limits to bureaucratic power. While they were not above taking cheap shots, their targets were the political, not the bureaucratic, powers.

Consequently, animosities between MPs and local bureaucrats were restrained.

The presence of tension did not rule out cooperation. When it came to supporting local councils' request for aid on projects, there were few instances reported of MPs refusing to cooperate. And MPs of different parties seemed to be able to work together on projects. Tensions will inevitably exist in competitive situations, where there is likely to be electoral payoff in challenging the opposition, but tension of this sort may nonetheless cause a higher level of responsiveness to the concerns and problems of constituents.

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NOTES

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1. Cain and his colleagues found one MP who had apparently assisted a constituent with getting a toaster fixed (1987, 57).

2. While Cain et al. (1987, 38) found that MPs were more likely to say that protecting the district was a more important role than helping people, in fact they were far more restricted in that role than their American counterparts. Cain et al. feel that the traditional pork barrel function of congressmen is virtually nonexistent for MPs (1987, 39) and that MPs are far less likely to be involved in helping local interests and governments find out about available grants and services (1987, 72ff). Searing (1985, 355) finds that only 15% of his constituency-oriented backbenchers are predominately "local promoters" in contrast with 75% who are oriented toward solving individuals' problems.

3. Searing (1985, 370) argues that MPs are not expected to reflect the national policy views of their constituents. While this may to some extent be true there is more pressure to be in line on issues of local significance and there is also pressure to reflect the dominant views of the local party.

4. On re-selection see Cain et al. (1987, 86-88); Criddle (1984, 219-26); Bochel and Denver (1983).

5. Cain and Ritchie (1982, 75-76) found a similar situation with the Conservative council in Hemel Hempstead.

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