

# Jeremy Browne's MP experience

STARTING as an MP is like going to a new university or college.

Parliament is a large institution with a timetable day, a variety of regulations and lots of bars.

The equivalent of the freshers' week question "Where do you come from?" is "What constituency do you represent?"

Instead of being asked "What A-level grades did you get?" the routine enquiry is "What majority did you get?"

New MPs are all very keen to find an office. This sounds rather self-serving but it is difficult to function without a base.

The process of office allocation is painfully slow. There is a strict hierarchy of seniority and new MPs from all parties wander the corridors for weeks, or even months, waiting their turn.

The first real participatory event is the swearing of the oath. The speaker of the House of Commons goes first, followed by the Father of the House, then the Prime Minister, then the rest of the cabinet, then the shadow cabinet, then Privy Councillors (those with 'Rt Hon' before their name), then MPs elected in 1974 or before, then the 1979 intake, then the 1983 starters, then 1987, then 1992, then 1997, then 2001.

Many hours after the beginning, the new MPs - 120 in total from all parties - have their chance.

The Queen's Speech was on my 35th birthday. The legislative programme is full of Home Office bills.

Some of the measures are sensible but proposals to restrict the incitement to religious hatred and introduce ID cards will, in my view, do more to curtail individual liberties than they will to cut crime.

When we progressed from the Commons chamber to the Lords chamber to

hear the Queen I found myself walking alongside Sir Malcolm Rifkind.

He is sort-of a new MP too, having been out of parliament for eight years, but I thought it would be more interesting to ask him about his time as the most recent Conservative Foreign Secretary. I resisted the temptation to ask about his leadership ambitions.

Making a maiden speech is a great rite of passage. The audience for maiden speeches is not huge. In fact, many of the people listening are other new MPs waiting to make their own maiden speeches, although the public galleries are quite full.

But, like sinking a three foot putt to win the Open, it is the occasion that presents the greatest difficulty, not the technical task.

I spoke mainly about the nature of Taunton constituency and the political challenges in our area. I included a passage on schools in Somerset and a section on the need to make sure our policing requirements were not subjugated to those of Bristol.

I also confidently predicted that Somerset would beat Australia in the match at Taunton!

Most of the work has been in the constituency. One of the immediate tasks is to get an organisational structure in place. That means a lot of time in the first few months is spent on interviewing and employing new staff, ordering extra computers and finding a more suitable office.

Although this might sound somewhat mundane it is essential in order to ensure the service received by constituents is efficient and effective.

I also threw myself into a heavy schedule of constituency surgeries. These give people an opportunity to come and see me for

assistance.

In addition to the regular Taunton surgeries and frequent Wellington surgeries I am also holding sessions in other places across the constituency.

Otherwise I have been visiting lots of the important institutions in the constituency like SCAT, the Hydrographic Office and Musgrove Park.

I have been to all of these organisations before but it is helpful to revisit as the new MP and discuss with the leading managers how we can work most effectively together.

Back in parliament I have been designated two roles which promise to be interesting.

The first is the appointment by Charles Kennedy to be a Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs spokesman. This is an ideal opportunity to be a part of the team lead by Sir Menzies Campbell, the Liberal Democrat Deputy Leader and a widely respected figure in the House of Commons.

The other position I have been awarded is membership of the cross-party Home Affairs Select Committee.

Home Affairs issues are dominating the political agenda - from terrorism at the national level to binge drinking at the community level - and it is exciting to be on such a high profile committee.

We will be examining many of the key issues of the day and taking evidence from leading figures in the police, intelligence services and government.

With the parliamentary day running through to around 11pm on some nights there are opportunities to meet other MPs over dinner or drinks.

I was delighted to secure a guest beer slot for Wiveliscombe's Tawny Ale in the main House of Com-



mons MPs' bar so I have been able to impress new acquaintances with the excellence of Somerset's beers.

People sometimes ask me "Would you like to be an effective constituency MP or a national political figure?"

I genuinely believe that an MP not only can be both but should be both, and that is how I have aimed to start out in parliament.

I often talk to people in the constituency who have concerns on many different levels. Perhaps they are keen to maintain their village shop but are also worried about the situation in Iraq. They might want a better local bus service and still be alarmed by the growth in gun crime.

My intention is to put the people of Taunton constituency first. I will always

be an accessible figure and champion the causes of this area.

That means being out and about listening to people locally and also using that knowledge to put Taunton constituency on the map nationally.

Being an MP is one of the most varied and fascinating jobs in the world. It is exciting, challenging, rewarding, stimulating and a great honour.

And it's only been going a few months!

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## £100,000 raised in two years

THE congregation of St Michael's Church, Milverton, is celebrating a remarkable achievement as the end of its Church Heating and Organ Fund was announced at the end of August.

September 2003 saw the launch of a £50,000 fund-raising project to renovate and refurbish the historic Speechley Organ at St. Michael's.

It had been over 40 years since it had been thoroughly cleaned and it was decided that, whilst the organ was dismantled, the opportunity to add a couple of new organ stops would be taken.

So began an incredible programme with imaginative and entertaining fund-raising events, ranging from concert evenings through to race nights and a Call My Bluff panel game.

The Organ Fund-Raising Committee, headed by Jenny Hoyle, set itself a target of two years in which to raise the money. The deadline was beaten by over one month.

What makes this achievement all the more remarkable is that St Michael's Church was then unexpectedly faced with the challenge of replacing the church heating system when the old one was condemned in May of last year.

After extensive consultation and seeking of expert advice, it was decided that a completely new heating system would have to be installed, requiring an additional £50,000 to be raised.

This time, rather than expecting even more fund-raising efforts to be organised, the Vicar sent a direct appeal letter to every person in Milverton Village.

The response was fantastic and, aided by one or two particularly generous donations and a grant from the Esme Fairbairn Trust, Milverton showed its appreciation of the place of the church in the life of the village by raising the necessary money in just seven months.

Commenting on the successful completion of the two fund-raising projects, the Rev Andrew Norris, vicar of Milverton, said: "The people of Milverton have been remarkably generous in both their support of the fund-raising events and their wonderful donations."

"We have been truly blessed and now it is the responsibility of the church to ensure that we are good stewards of the improvements that will now be possible and that the church building can regain its full use to the glory of God."

### Ceilidh for St Andrews

St Andrew's Church national day is on 24th November and to celebrate there will be a Ceilidh on 26th November in the Wiveliscombe Primary School Hall.

Wear tartan or country and western clothes and enjoy music with a caller, buffet supper and bar. Tickets are available from Thornes Butchers or Wiveliscombe House.