Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to see Sarah Live

Does my hon. Friend agree that that leads to a form of creeping patronage? Mechanisms such as negative briefings are also used, and I was subject to a hostile Culture, Media and Sport briefing that was sent around. That goes to the heart of a culture in the House that undermines the integrity of individual hon. Members.

Peter Bone (Wellingborough, Conservative)

My hon. Friend has been elected to the House to be a Member of Parliament and to use her own judgment. She hits on a good point, and if I get time, I shall deal with the problem of the black art of misinformation that the Whips operate so successfully.

For a new Member of Parliament, the Whips’ threat that their career will be over if they do not vote in a certain way is enormously powerful. However, history suggests that completely the reverse is the case. Many people who have voted against the Whips on the most controversial matters are now Ministers—some are actually in the Cabinet.

................

Peter Bone (Wellingborough, Conservative)

My hon. Friend is not quite correct. The Question on the motion was put, but because nobody expressed dissent, it was carried by the collection of voices. Many of us who returned especially to vote on that were delighted that there was no opposition.

My argument about that day is that the Whips should not have attempted to influence support for the actions of my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin, as the debate was Back-Bench business. The Whips should simply have butted out. The Bill would make it impossible for such pressure to be applied in the future because

Members of Parliament could not be Whips. Instances of such behaviour abound and we all know several Members whose careers have been significantly affected by the actions of the Whips Office. It is, sadly, a simple fact of parliamentary life that even the size of the room a Member gets depends on how much they have pleased the Whips. My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering is still in a shoebox.

As for disinformation, let me give the House an example, particularly in response to my hon. Friend Dr Wollaston. I know that Whips deliberately misinformed hon. Members about the facts relating to the new Backbench Business Committee by sending out an e-mail out that claimed the Committee always held its business on a Thursday and decided the topic under discussion only a few days before. That was sent out by the Whips as authoritative fact, although it was completely and utterly untrue. It was intended to rubbish the new Committee because that Committee put business before the House that the Whips did not want to see debated.
It is astonishing to think that in an age where employees have more rights than ever before and workplace bullying has, thankfully, become increasingly unacceptable, Members are still treated in such a manner. If I were to treat my staff in this way for even an instant I would, quite rightly, be taken to an employment tribunal, yet it is through these often underhand methods that Whips ensure that the Executive line is strictly obeyed, and that the public are therefore denied the independent-minded Members of Parliament and, indeed, the Parliament that they deserve.

The situation is worse in coalition Governments, as Whips often force Members to vote in totally the opposite way to what their party manifesto stated on issues that they stood on at the last election. Although Liberal Members signed a pledge before the last election not to increase tuition fees, they were forced by their Whips to do completely the opposite when they were in government. Equally, Conservative Members who stood on a platform opposing the alternative vote were forced by the Whips to vote for a Bill on a referendum for the alternative vote system.

Let me give a personal example of Whips’ tactics. In the last parliamentary term, on 30 March 2011, a Whip sent out an e-mail, which I will read out:

"I regret to have to inform colleagues that we are all required tonight after 7pm on a strict 3-line whip with respect to a Motion by the Leader of the House to which an amendment has been tabled by Mr Peter Bone and others so it is now votable. Unless you have previously been slipped by me, your presence is required."

The e-mail was sent out to every Conservative Member of Parliament. Not only did it cause great embarrassment, but it was factually incorrect and misleading—another example of misinformation. The e-mail received an understandably negative response from my colleagues, including a Minister who had to return from an important meeting because of the Whip’s action. After I contacted many of my colleagues and explained the true situation, they were appalled that the Whips had ever sent out such an e-mail. What was so outrageous was that the Whip was trying to influence Members of Parliament about a matter relating to House of Commons business which was of no concern to the Executive and entirely the responsibility of Parliament. Of course, though, that is insignificant compared with some of the other episodes in which the Whips have involved themselves.

That is not to say that all Whips behave in such a manner, and nor is it to say this is a response to an earlier intervention that the Whips do not perform useful functions, but it is the Whips Office that performs those useful functions. We do not need Members of Parliament to be Whips. We can get civil servants, who are currently employed in the Whips Office anyway, to carry out the administrative necessities. There is nothing that the Whips do that could not be done by civil servants, if there was a business of the House committee. The only thing left for them to do would be the strong-arming tactics of trying to tell people how to vote.

I thank my hon. Friend. In these challenging financial times, has he estimated how much this would cost the taxpayer, and does he think that it would deliver value for money?

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

Peter Bone (Wellingborough, Conservative)
My hon. Friend hits on a good point that I am going to deal with a little later. Clearly, though, the system does not provide value for money at the moment.

Â

They Work For You

Hansard