

# What will life be like in the Commons for the Independent Group?

*On 18 February, seven Labour MPs resigned from the Party to sit as an independent group. Operating without the formal support of a parliamentary party, they will face several institutional barriers to working effectively in the House of Commons, writes Louise Thompson.*



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The press conference with the seven breakaway Labour MPs focused overwhelmingly on their [reasons for leaving the Party](#) – Luciana Berger citing institutional anti-Semitism and Chris Leslie citing its hijacking by the hard left. The former Labour MPs are calling themselves the Independent Group, but have stopped short (for now) of creating a formal political party. There are still questions to be answered about how this band of very different Labour MPs will seek to work and function together (where will they sit in the chamber? Will they coordinate their voting behaviour?), but with no formal party affiliation, what we can be sure about is that their position in the House of Commons has substantially changed. Two key challenges facing these MPs are the reduced rights they will now have as independent MPs and the reduction in crucial parliamentary resources.

## Rights in the Commons chamber

The House of Commons functions through its political parties. Everything from speaking rights to committee positions are allocated on the basis of party size, with the Official Opposition party holding a privileged position among other non-government parties. Labour MPs dominate the opposition contributions made in debates. As I wrote on this blog just a few months ago, smaller opposition parties and independents often find themselves in a [much weaker position](#). Their size entitles them to fewer contributions and – perhaps most importantly – these contributions often come several hours into debates, where the clock is running down and very short time limits are introduced. Whereas a Labour Party backbencher may be able to speak for eight minutes or more, a small party MP or independent may find this time reduced to two. Not only does this minimise the contribution possible, but it becomes difficult to set the tone of a debate or to influence its direction.

The same applies to things like committee memberships. Select committees and legislative bill committee memberships are also allocated in proportion to party size, so scrutinising forthcoming Brexit legislation in committees will fall largely to those who are members of political parties. Other *former* Labour MPs (John Woodcock and Frank Field) have retained select committee positions so there is precedent for the seven to hold their existing committee places, but it is notably harder for small party and independent MPs to battle for places on legislative committees. Without a whip sitting on the Committee of Selection, they have often relied on the SNP forfeiting a committee place of their own for them. Some of the MPs in the Independent Group (Chris Leslie in particular), have been very active during parliamentary debates on Brexit – and there are reports that they have [already met with the Speaker](#) to ensure that they will still be able to move amendments in the chamber. But it could be incredibly frustrating to find that they have less of a voice in the chamber and in the legislative process.

## Reduced parliamentary resources

All opposition parties are entitled to Short Money funding, designed to assist opposition parties in carrying out their parliamentary business. It's available to all parties who have received either two House of Commons seats, or one seat plus 150,000 votes. In practice this money is used to support party staff – people who work for the party group as a whole rather than for individual MPs, providing vital policy research and information. Labour were entitled to £7.8 million of short money funding in 2018/19. The breakaway MPs will no longer be able to take advantage of this, and will be unable to receive Short Money funding themselves until they create a formal political party. The donations they are seeking may overcome some of this, though it's not clear as yet how the donations sought will be used.

Being part of the Labour Party also brought additional parliamentary resources – in the form of weekly PLP meetings and the weekly Whip, informing MPs of forthcoming parliamentary business and showing how MPs should vote. Without it, MPs may struggle to be certain what they were voting on each day. Single party MPs like Caroline Lucas, or Douglas Carswell (in the previous Parliament) are forced to prioritise business, focusing only on the business or votes which really matter to their constituency or to their party. Ministerial statements and other important documents will be distributed in advance to the main opposition parties, but small parties and independents often lose out. Access to this information is now likely to disappear unless the Independent Group forges relationships with MPs from other parties. This is common practice already for the smaller opposition parties in the chamber. Caroline Lucas, for example, as the only Green MP, has previously relied on Plaid Cymru and the SNP group for information about parliamentary business. It will be interesting to see if the group forges alliances with other small parties – the Liberal Democrats for instance – to overcome this.

These are not the only parliamentary challenges facing the group as they seek to put distance between themselves and Corbyn's Labour Party. But as they take their seats in the Commons as independent MPs, these are two of the most pressing. How they respond to their new position and overcome the parliamentary obstacles in front of them will be the key to their success.

*The post gives the views of its author, not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on [LSE British Politics and Policy blog](#).*

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