

Book Review: Parliamentary Socialisation: Learning the Ropes or Determining Behaviour? by Michael Rush and Philip Giddings

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*How and from whom do MPs learn about their role in the Commons? In **Parliamentary Socialisation**, Michael Rush and Philip Giddings consider the range of sources that provide socialisation for MPs as they enter the House of Commons. Dave O'Brien finds limitations in the book's theoretical analysis, but gives much credit to the authors for providing a readable and engaging account of how the House shapes its members.*

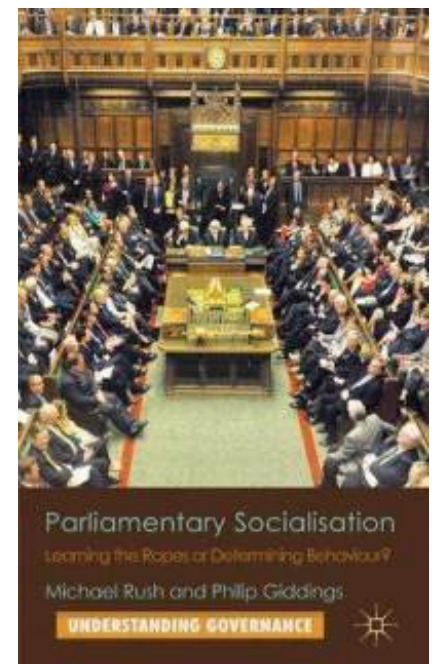


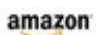
Parliamentary Socialisation: Learning the Ropes or Determining Behaviour? Michael Rush and Philip Giddings. Palgrave MacMillan. 288 pages. July 2011.

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One of the great issues for social science concerns the relationship between individuals and the social structures that surround them. This issue is especially important in discussions of politics, where writing about contemporary political issues often presents the reader with analysis that focuses on either personal narratives, or accounts of structures which leave little room for the individual.

Parliamentary Socialisation, a new book by [Michael Rush](#) and [Philip Giddings](#), is an admirable attempt to cross this divide. The book explores the impact of the House of Commons on Members of Parliament, offering a nuanced and subtle analysis of the way MPs are 'socialised' into the House. MPs are shown to both learn their roles as MPs and, in learning, contribute to the construction of traditions that make up the practice of the House along with Britain's unwritten constitution. Learning comes from a range of sources, most strongly the infrastructure offered by the main political parties in the Commons. As a result of the book's clear style and perceptive analysis, these core themes will be of interest to a variety of readers wishing to understand the reality of being an MP, from members of the public and journalists to academics.



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The central argument of the book is that MPs are socialised into Parliament by a range of factors, which the authors identify as legislative, functional, attitudinal and behavioural. These factors structure the book, following two introductory chapters outlining socialisation and a general overview of the role of the MP. The book shows the great continuity between MPs' ideas before entering the Commons and after the period of socialisation, accentuated by their respective parties. Behaviours change as newly elected members 'become' MPs and get used to the House and actively construct a role that cuts across accountability, representation and party function. Thus the House of Commons is a product of the MPs and the MPs are a product of the House, particularly as a result of the lack of general formal guidance on the specific role of an MP. As Rush and Giddings assert,

despite significant differences, a backbencher from the turn of the twentieth century would no doubt see much to recognise in the Commons of the twenty-first.

Chapter two, which offers the introduction to the role of the MP, is especially excellent and the subsequent four chapters covering the socialisation of MPs present a strong and coherent argument as to the importance, but also the limits, of socialisation into the House of Commons. Some of the findings of the research are unsurprising, such as the importance of political parties in inducting MPs into the functions of the House and the role of an MP in their respective party. Other aspects of the research present findings which challenge assumptions about the modern MP. The workload of the MP has increased massively since the 1950s, particularly in relation to parliamentary questions and parliamentary committees. In contrast to much of the media coverage concerning the role of MPs since the expenses scandal, the book presents the issues facing newly elected MPs, of finding accommodation, staffing and getting to grips with the often opaque layers of tradition governing the Commons, in a way that presents MPs as decent individuals who often struggle with the practicalities of learning to be an MP.

There are limitations to the book's analysis, but they are mostly theoretical and are the result of academic questions. In the first instance, the book's definitional discussion of 'socialisation' is the weakest area of the text, which doesn't really engage with contemporary sociological theory on the structure /agency debate (although this criticism reflects the disciplinary boundaries of political science and sociology). This links to the second issue for the book, whereby the analysis would have been greatly deepened by an anthropological perspective on the material practices of socialisation. This type of research may be an important area for future research into Parliament. Third, the idea of socialisation is hugely important, but the book does not critically unpack this idea, presenting a rather benign version of the longstanding institution of parliament.

What is most valuable about the book, and there is much to value within the text, is that it shows the importance of academic analysis of subjects where individual narratives predominate. We can learn much about the House of Commons from the memoirs and diaries of politicians, from across all of the House's political parties, but *Parliamentary Socialisation's* unpacking of the subtle forces shaping MPs as they enter the House illustrates the importance of a detached and, dare I suggest, objective view of the individual's experience in Parliament. The book also illustrates the importance of partnerships for academics and other sources of research. The bulk of Rush and Giddings' research was conducted between the 1992-1997 and 1997-2001 parliaments, and their analysis, which runs up to shortly after the 2010 election was assisted by the Hansard Society and received significant co-operation from the political parties in the House.

Grand descriptions of political institutions or the particular views of a ministerial memoir leave the informed reader searching for a discussion that moves beyond the boundaries of structural or individual explanations. It is to the immense credit of Rush and Giddings that they have written a readable and engaging attempt to bring these two sides of social scientific explanation together, to make *Parliamentary Socialisation* an important and timely contribution to our understanding of British politics, a contribution which shows the inimitable value of the academic's analysis.

Dave O'Brien is a Lecturer in Cultural Industries at [City University London](#). His work on cultural value includes a recent secondment and [report](#) to the UK's Department for Culture Media and Sport. His work on urban cultural policy can be found in his PhD from the University of Liverpool, which explored the governance of the European Capital of Culture programme and cultural policy in Liverpool and Newcastle Gateshead. He has published several papers on this topic and is currently developing a book on the subject. [Read more reviews by Dave](#).

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