

Book Review: The House of Commons: An Anthropology of MPs at Work by Emma Crewe

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A new book by Emma Crewe explores the day to day lives of Members of Parliament as they cycle through the House of Commons. MPs are pushed and pulled by various interests and allegiances. **Marion Koob** finds *The House of Commons: An Anthropology of MPs at Work* insightful, and is a strong case for anthropologists to be more widely involved in political analysis. The book also gives an excellent overview of the 2010-2015 Parliament, through which the author charts more recent changes, such as the impact of social media and the 24 hours news cycle, the weakening of whips, and more diversified representation.

The House of Commons: An Anthropology of MPs at Work. Emma Crewe. Bloomsbury. 2015.

MPs don't ever shake hands with each other. The only exception takes place when a Member of Parliament is retiring, or has lost her seat. To do so otherwise would imply that you wish your colleague prematurely gone.

Many odd quirks of the world of MPs feature in Emma Crewe's new book *The House of Commons: An Anthropology of MPs at Work*. Crewe is an anthropologist based at the School of Oriental and African Studies, and the author of *Lords of Parliament: manners, rituals and politics*, a similar book on the House of Lords.

Through participant observation, the author brilliantly fleshes out the day to day lives of Members as they cycle through the House of Commons. She also succinctly captures the key dilemmas of their professional lives. The book investigates the process of selection, election and introduction into the House; MPs' relationship to their constituencies; the friendships and enmities cultivated within parliament; and the work of Members in government, in parallel to the graft of those who scrutinise bills.

The author ultimately argues that MPs are not the caricatures often portrayed by the media. She finds that, on average, MPs take their work beyond the remit of personal gain and influence. In 2010, half of incomers took a pay cut, while even MPs with safe majorities in their constituencies spend considerable time attending surgeries, and helping many, such as immigrants, who do not have a vote in general elections. As individuals, they are less tribal, and more willing to work with colleagues in rival parties than the public might expect. MPs are pushed and pulled by various interests and allegiances: to their parties, constituents, identity as individuals, and conscience, all of which must be condensed into a coherent political stance. As such, Crewe argues that the public's frustration is rooted in unrealistic expectations placed on Members, and that the current system of democracy in fact works reasonably well.

The House of Commons is a timely book. The country has little confidence in its parliamentarians – a poll by Ipsos Mori indicated that in January 2015, [only 16% trusted politicians to tell the truth](#). Their overall image still remains tarnished by the 2009 expenses scandal. The book also gives an excellent overview of the 2010-2015 Parliament, through which the author charts more recent changes, such as the impact of social media and the 24 hours news cycle, the weakening of whips, and more diversified representation.

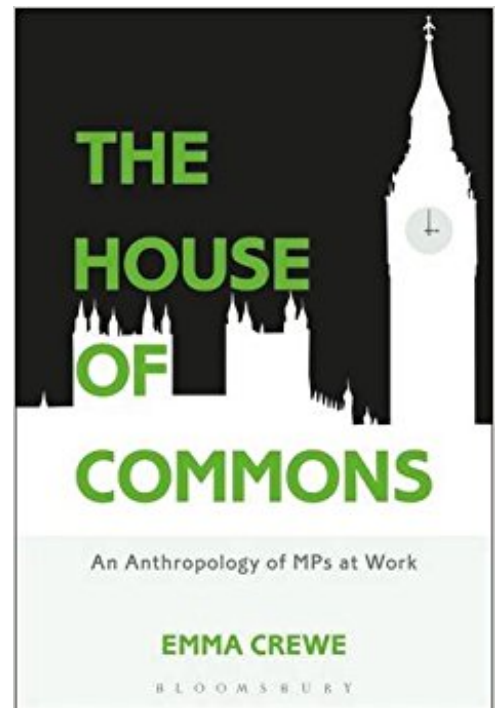




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The principal factor attracting prospective MPs is neither solely power, nor the salary, Crewe argues in *Chapter 1: Joining the House*. Rather, it comes down to excitement – the combination of drama, influence and unpredictability which makes the political arena entertaining, even addictive. Attending a local Labour party event, the author confesses being caught up in an akin emotion.

The road to selection as a party candidate, however, is not easy and its process excludes many types of people. Crewe notes that local party members, responsible for selection, reward those who already have an established network among them. The successful candidate typically will have spent years canvassing on behalf of the local party, and align with their interests. At this level, having a demanding work life or family commitments is not seen as a valid excuse for the inability to commit extra time. In addition, patronage of known figures in the party helps. Current MPs build support by lending a hand to aspiring candidates, and also take the opportunity to encourage those who are under-represented.

Local party members, on the other hand, are less preoccupied with equality, the author comments, and focus instead on getting what they see as the best representative for their constituency. According to a Liberal Democrat MP, the issue for getting women into parliament is not so much ‘the electorate but the selectorate.’

Regarding the experience of first days in Westminster, the author analyses the relationship between MPs and Clerks, commenting on the latter’s crucial role in running parliament. Many MPs don’t understand that Clerks are an invaluable resource for advice on tactics. Incoming MPs also discover that various spaces in Westminster are organised along specific social conventions. For instance, in the Tea Room Members sit according to party – there are Lib Dem, Labour and Conservative tables – but also a Welsh table “which doubles up as a haven for Labour miscreants.” Crewe thus introduces the work of MPs as a series of endless social encounters and performance in a variety of rituals.

Politicians are loathed, as the author underlines in *Chapter 2: Allies and Adversaries*. Angela Eagle, shadow leader of the House of Commons at the time, summarises the prevailing view of MPs as such: “1. You’re all the same. 2. Nothing ever changes 3. You’re all in it for yourselves.” Only 24% of the public thinks that the current system of government is working well. Crewe, however, finds that these perceptions are unfounded. She warns that she will portray MPs as “plucky individuals and almost like the rest of us”.

MPs are not homogenous – in fact, it is essential to their success that they make a unique impression. They are individuated, the author argues, by their constituency, date of entering Westminster, and the experience they bring with them, whether in another profession or in the field of politics. Social identity very much matters and alters their perception to the nature of their role. For instance, Crewe notes that some women report feeling uncomfortable in the Chamber, while some men struggle to listen to constituents speak about difficult issues in their surgeries.

Neither are MPs particularly greedy. With expenses now under the purview of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, most under-claim in order to avoid being lambasted by the press. With their level of commitment and their network, most MPs could be doing better paid jobs, Crewe comments. Accruing power is not necessarily a motivator either. Many undertake extensive constituency work even when they have a wide margin in elections; others rebel against whips on issues on which their constituents are indifferent, thus risking their chances of promotion.

Allegiances and enmities within the House can be surprising. While whips encourage animosity between parties, with the belief that it is essential for governing or opposing well, behaviour is rather different in practice. A loyalty exists among those who enter Westminster at the same time, friendships are formed across parties through common constituency interests, and MPs who make allies in opposing parties know that if they ever face a scandal, the other side might hold back somewhat. In addition, debates on moral conscience are frequently un-whipped, and throw up wholly different combinations of supporters.

While many MPs work across parties, there are ideological splits and in-fighting within them, which social media has contributed to making starker. Government struggles to consult backbenchers on party plans: if they are disapproved of, they get leaked. This has resulted in reduced internal discussion, frustrating backbenchers and increasing the risk of rebellion. Big players in Cabinet and their followers strive to up their position by undermining each other in private, in Cabinet meetings, or in the media, while attempting to maintain the appearance that they are not. With MPs under pressure to follow their electorate's demands, their faction, or conscience, each Parliament has seen an increase in rebellions against whips.

The public's antagonism is founded in a mix of misperceptions regarding the role of MPs and the nature of politics, Crewe argues. When the public says 'you are all the same' what they mean, rather, is that MPs are all mistrusted equally. Blame for broken promises ignores the nature of good politics: making compromises is essential to reaching an agreement, and no one would sensibly want politicians to remain unchanging in the face of new evidence or circumstances.

Crewe's work is insightful, and her example makes a strong case for anthropologists to be more widely involved in political analysis. Her perspective is in many respects more clear-eyed and accessible than many works of political science. She provides a wholly reasonable case as to why the public is perpetually dissatisfied with MPs, and why this shouldn't be the case. The book also demonstrates why much of reporting on parliament forms part of its political tactics rather than a serious examination of its work.

The House of Commons tackles questions often raised by political scientists from fresh angles: what does representation mean? What makes a democracy successful and healthy? Crewe's answers are rooted within anthropological theory and previous studies, but these references are always illustrative and comprehensible. The book's only weakness is its chapter on Ministers in Government, which, compared to the rest of its content, comes across as a bit dry. This is perhaps because sources in this area were likely less accessible and with less leisure to speak freely.

The House of Commons: An Anthropology of MPs at Work is highly recommended to anyone with any interest in British politics. In fact, all voters should read it in order to gather a clearer understanding of what the MP they 'hire' does, day to day, on their behalf. While the book is marketed as academic, it has the potential to attract a broad range of readers. There is nothing like it in the current literature, and I very much hope it will inspire similar anthropological studies on various spheres of political life.

Marion Koob has a BSc in Government and Economics at the LSE and and MPhil in International Relations at the University of Cambridge. She has worked in Polis, the LSE's journalism think-tank, and is now at the British Film Institute.

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