

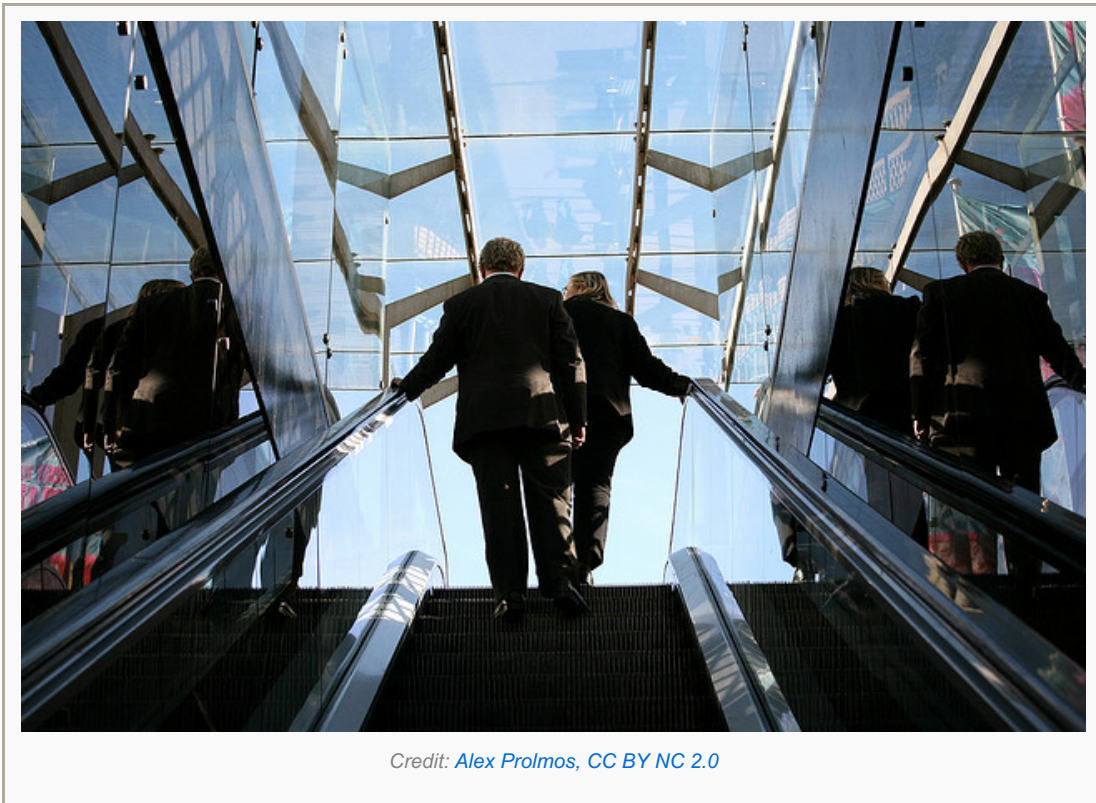
Allowing MPs to job share would bring benefit constituents, democracy, and the MPs themselves

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Job-sharing has been a reality for some years now, with it being seen as a useful method to allow flexibility – particularly for disabled people, women, and other under-represented groups. However the prospect of it being introduced for Westminster elections seems remote. **Emma Rome** argues that the powers that be should reconsider, and that there are numerous benefits to allowing it, including higher voting rate and greater diversity.*



History of Job-Sharing in the Workplace

Job-sharing, or “twinning” as it was originally known, has been in existence in the UK since the 1940s. Job-sharing first reached high levels of public awareness in 1987, when Kenneth Baker, then [Secretary of State for Education and Science](#), promoted job-sharing as a way to increase the number of teachers (especially female teachers) [in schools](#). As long as job-sharing has existed, it has been an option for an employer to offer job-sharing. The next major milestone was in 1997, when the right for parents to request “flexible working arrangements” was introduced in law. In June 2014, [this was expanded to cover all workers](#).

As well as classroom education, job-sharing is also seen in banking, insurance, and [library work](#). According to [The Job Share Project](#), Job-sharing is even seen in senior management positions (including multiple directors, partnerships, and one CEO role, according to a 2011 study), and recognised as an asset by both the organisations and the employees involved. Job-sharing demonstrably works not just on the “shop floor”, but also in very senior management positions. So what about extending this to Parliament?

History of Job-Sharing MPs

So far, there have been no MPs elected on a job-share basis; the Electoral Commission claims that there is no legal basis for it.

A number of politicians and political parties have, however, spoken out in favour of it. In September 2010, Caroline Lucas (Green) presented the case for job-sharing MPs to the [Green Party conference in Birmingham](#). In November 2012, the BBC [reported that](#) John McDonnell (Labour) wanted to enable job-sharing MPs. He had cross-party support from four different parties. In 2013, [the Telegraph](#) reported that the [Liberal Democrats](#) had plans to consider job-sharing for MPs, although at that time they decided not to actually stand any job-sharing candidates. Most of the criticism revolved around other electoral reforms being more important, or suggestions that it would create part-time or slacker MPs ([something disputed by The Job Share Project](#).)

These proposals highlighted that job-sharing would enable more women and more disabled people to serve as MPs. However, job-sharing is much more powerful than simply enabling sectors of society who might otherwise not be able to take on a job with long hours. It effectively allows the “role-holder” to be in two places at once — a very useful ability in a role where the person is often needed both in Westminster and in their constituency. It also means there will often be two heads thinking on the same issue and able to bounce ideas off each other, coming up with better solutions than either may have come up with individually.

In June 2014, [the Telegraph reported](#) that Nicky Morgan (Conservative) was in favour of the idea of having MPs share their jobs.

In December 2014, [Rosie Campbell and Philip Cowley](#) shared research which found no great level of support or opposition for job-shares for MPs. Significantly, “when confronted with job-sharing candidates most of the public appear to make judgements on the basis of the candidates offered, rather than automatically rejecting job-share set-ups out of hand”. This suggests that job-sharing MPs will potentially be considered on their own merits over those of the party they may nominally represent. Because they would be judged on their own merits, the quality of candidate could potentially be expected to improve, instead of allowing poor-quality candidates to hide behind their party’s national media profile.

Would-Be Candidates in the 2015 General Election and Earlier

In 1999, [Lorraine Mann and Eddie Stiven](#) attempted to stand, together, for election in the Scottish Parliament. The Guardian reported that this application [was accepted](#), although the returning officer indicated that only one candidate’s name would have been announced [had they won](#).

In March 2015, Rachel Ling advertised for people to stand alongside her as candidates for parliament on [a job-share basis](#). Many people responded, and in the end, two teams of two people attempted to stand for election on a job-sharing basis. Rachel Ling and myself attempted to stand in the [Weston-Super-Mare constituency](#) and Adam Lotun and Zion Zakari attempted to stand in the [Hackney North & Stoke Newington constituency](#) (though the report regarding this story gets some basic facts – [such as the constituency, and the size of the deposit](#) – wrong).

Also in the May 2015 general election, the Green Party also attempted to stand two candidates in the Basingstoke constituency on a job-share basis. [Their application was also rejected](#). In all three cases, the returning officers gave a negative response after consultation with the Electoral Commission.

Issues Surrounding Job-Sharing MPs

Critics of the job-sharing principle have noted that two white men with second jobs at the same law firm could in [principle job-share](#). This demonstrates that a share won’t always result in increased diversity. However, this criticism presupposes that increased diversity is the primary purpose. While increased diversity (through making it a viable role for more women and disabled people) is expected, it is not the primary benefit.

It has been noted that both partners would need to be from the same party (or both be independent). It’s difficult to

see how this could be otherwise and still expect them to respond sensibly to the demands of the party whip system.

Another criticism is about what happens if the partners disagree. This would be resolved in a similar manner to how conflicts in successful job-shares are resolved in other high-level roles that are shared. Successful job-shares necessarily involve lots of communication between the partners. This would logically include how to act in cases of disagreements. This risk should be compared with the 65% [voting rate for MPs generally](#). Having two people available to use that vote means less chance of failing to turn up due to external commitments. In any case, the risk of a job-sharing pair (who were pre-selected to agree on a broad range of issues) actually disagreeing sufficiently that their constituents get unrepresented on an issue seems remote.

A question was also raised about what happens if one MP switches party allegiance and the other doesn't. This should result in a by-election. In fact, even if there is only a single person for that seat, it should still result in a by-election, which only seldom happens. Similarly, if one of the sharers is for some reason unable to continue in their role, a by-election should be held. The electors did, after all, elect a partnership, not a single individual.

The Case for Job-Sharing MPs

It has been noted many times that job-sharing would allow for women and disabled people to be better-represented in parliament by their own peers. While from an equality and diversity perspective this is undoubtedly a good thing, it isn't the only reason. Job-sharing MPs would be of benefit not just for diversity, but also in practical terms for the constituents too.

Because they would not have any reason to keep information from each other, they would be able to share many of the expenses, such as office facilities and staff. It is true that two sets of travel expenses may need budgeting for, along with two sets of meal expenses. However, if the job is shared such that one partner spends most of their time in the constituency while the other is mostly at Westminster, total travel would actually be reduced, potentially even saving money.

As noted earlier, having a back-up means they can be present to vote in parliament much more often while still covering their other duties, ensuring their constituents receive better representation.

A common misapprehension is that job-sharers enter into the role half-heartedly. However, many corporations take advantage of job-sharing in order to gain two talented people doing the same role. Sharing provides an opportunity for two hard-workers to do the job instead of one hard-worker, who may end up either doing the job half-heartedly, or [being overworked and burning out](#).

It is possible that the partners could decide to have more public surgeries to consult with constituents, increasing the amount of formal access. Even if not, having two people available means a better level of informal access. In an age when the public expects both that their MP be active in Westminster and be accessible in their constituency, this is a vital benefit to the constituents.

Overall, while there are certain issues that need to be covered, and the MP team will need to set aside time to ensure there is good communication, there are many benefits, for both the MPs themselves, their party (if not independent), and especially for their constituents.

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