

## Interview with lay members

### Q: Could you briefly tell us what your role entails?

**Walter Rader:** As a lay member I participate in all the work undertaken by the House of Commons Committee on Standards. That involves attending Westminster for Committee meetings.

I have to read quite a lot of Committee papers and reports in preparation for each meeting.

I need to have a working understanding of how the House of Commons functions and the many roles undertaken by MPs.

I hear, and have the opportunity to question, witnesses who appear before the Committee. I contribute to discussions on a wide range of issues relating to –

- i. The standards required of MPs;
- ii. The requirements placed on All Party Parliamentary Groups;
- iii. Changes to be recommended in the Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules, which sets out the standards required of MPs;
- iv. The findings of investigations undertaken by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, which result from a complaint being made against an MP, and contribute to determining the outcome of the case, including any sanction to be recommended.

**Sharon Darcy:** Lay members play a full part in the work of the Committee.

Our role is therefore very similar to that of elected members. However, we also bring an independent and external perspective to the Committee's deliberations, sharing examples of what may happen on standards or ethical issues outside of Westminster.

**Arun Midha:** At its heart, the role is about ensuring that all MPs adhere to the Code of Conduct and by doing so are maintaining the standards that the public expects and rightly deserves of its representatives.

### Q: What was your main motivation for becoming a lay member?

**Sharon Darcy:** I believe very strongly that Parliament should be as open as possible. In my experience, having external challenge and increased diversity normally leads to better decisions.

I also hope that over time, having lay members on the Committee will help increase public confidence in the very valuable work that MPs and Parliament carry out.

**Charmaine Burton:** I have a passion for politics and encouraging citizens to get involved. As a member of the committee, I hope to contribute to building trust in our democratic process and encourage citizens to get involved. I also hope citizens will regain faith in politics or start

to have faith/ hope in the individuals and processes that represent them whether they voted or not.

**Arun Midha:** I had two motivations, one perhaps more personal and the other from a professional perspective.

Firstly, my father, one of the first Indian doctors to come to this country in the 1950s, instilled in me a keen sense of public duty. The UK provided him with many opportunities and as a doctor I feel he was able to make a significant contribution back to society. I have always tried to adopt the same attitude and approach to life.

The lay member role is one such opportunity that enables me to do this.

Secondly, over a number of years, I have developed some experience of regulatory and disciplinary matters involving a wide variety of professions. This was a great opportunity to use the skills and competence gained from these areas in the Parliamentary context.

**Q: Some people aren't aware of the role or existence of lay members, what benefit do they provide?**

**Jane Burgess:** Lay members bring a different and independent perspective to matters, drawing on different experiences and capabilities which I believe leads to better decision making.

**Peter Rubin:** In any system of regulation, lay members bring a vital outside view which helps to avoid the criticism that, in this case, MPs are "marking their own homework".

Lay members bring an external perspective and can sometimes see things that need changing which those immersed in the day to day workings of Parliament might miss or take for granted.

**Peter Jinman:** A fresh experienced outsider knowledge and an unbiased challenge function.

**Charmaine Burton:** Lay members are independent and from a variety of background and bring a different, fresh perspective to the committee and any inquiries. We are free of the political boundaries or pressures of the houses and can relate more to the general public because we are selected from the general public.

**Q: Do you feel that your contribution influences decisions made by the committee?**

**Sharon Darcy:** Lay members are treated in just the same way as the elected members of the Committee. What we say is listened to with equal respect and given full weight in Committee deliberations.

The only difference is that we don't have a vote. However, our right to append a 'minority report' to Committee publications is perhaps a stronger power. To date we haven't felt the need to do this. I suspect that if we did, it may well attract significant attention.

**Jane Burgess:** I have only been on the Committee for a short time and my contributions have been welcomed and have added a different perspective.

**Peter Jinman:** Yes and this can be evidenced by the work that was done by the subcommittee, chaired by a lay member, and its adoption by the House.

### **Q: What would you say is the most demanding aspect of your role?**

**Walter Rader:** Let me highlight 3!

First – As an outsider (lay member) beginning to understand the workings of Parliament and the many roles and responsibilities which are required of MPs. I felt that if I did not develop a basic working knowledge of these matters I would not be in a position to make a contribution to the work of Committee.

Second – The volume and time required to read Committee papers, reports and prepare for meetings. In particular keeping up to date with general matters relating to the working of Parliament. Preparing for oral evidence sessions (which were streamed live) where people were appearing before committee to offer opinion and provide expert advice and comment on a topic. I wanted to ensure that I had read widely and was well prepared on the subject, in order to get the best from those who appeared before us.

Third -Reading and understanding the context of the cases involving an MP brought to Committee for adjudication and recommendation of sanction. The Memorandum (report) from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, which sets out the nature of the complaint made against an MP, the conduct of the inquiry and the evidence, is a detailed and lengthy document which I found required detailed consideration. I was very conscious that the decision of the Committee (of which I was a part) could have significant implications for the individual MP concerned. I needed to ensure that I understood the complaint; considered in detail the evidence and formed a view about the sanction.

**Sharon Darcy:** It's always a good idea to 'fix the roof when the sun shines.' In Parliament there are always competing demands on Members' time. Standards issues are rarely at the top of an MP's priority list. Getting sufficient focus on conduct issues by both MPs and the wider governance systems in the House – before problems emerge - can be a challenge.

### **Q: Until decisions are published your work is kept under wraps, do you find it difficult to manage this element of your job?**

**Sharon Darcy:** When the press is rife with speculation about a particular case, it can be frustrating to keep quiet. Particularly if you are door stepped. However, it's important that 'natural justice' is observed. Just as if you were involved in a disciplinary case in your own job, you would want to see due process followed and wouldn't want to be pre-judged.

**Jane Burgess:** Because I have only been on the Committee for a short time, this has not yet been challenged, but integrity and confidentiality are the backbone of the Committee's work and therefore I will do all I can to ensure I achieve this.

**Q: Your role was created to add an impartial voice on the committee, would you say the main role of lay members is represent the public in the committee's proceedings?**

**Walter Rader:** The role of the lay member, in my view, is to bring an impartial, non-party political, external set of views, skills, knowledge and experience to the work of the Committee on Standards.

I see the role as including – being a critical friend; constructively challenging existing systems and procedures; raising questions and making points based on your (the lay member's) lived and career experience; presenting another way to consider the issue; encouraging discussion on issues; considering learning points from past work undertaken; being independent.

**Jane Burgess:** The roles are part of the Committee in the public interest but not to be representative. It is about taking your own experiences, considering your own understanding of public sentiment and then coming to your own views and judgement on the circumstances being considered.

**Peter Rubin:** I think I would put it slightly differently. The role is to uphold the public interest in ensuring that MPs can command the respect and confidence of the electorate.

**Charmaine Burton:** As a lay member I would say it would be difficult to represent all the public as a committee member; however, I think public mood can be monitored and presented.

Also as a political broadcaster on a community radio station I have my ears to the ground and watch public reaction and responses to things. So some may say this support the notion of representing the public on the committee to some extent.

**Q: To anyone thinking of applying, what advice would you give?**

**Sharon Darcy:** This may be one of the most rewarding – but also frustrating – things that you ever do. However, unless people are willing to step forward and share their wider experiences we can't expect our democracy to be representative, healthy and vibrant.

**Peter Rubin:** This is a fascinating and important role that involves working with interesting people – lay members, MPs and Officials - from a wide range of backgrounds. It doesn't matter if this area is something quite different to what you've done before. New ideas are welcome.

**Charmaine Burton:** It's a great honour to be a part of this very important committee and holding our elected members to account. Be prepared for the meeting and remember you are a lay member so if you don't understand something don't be afraid to ask questions.

**Arun Midha:** I think it is important to understand what the role is and what it is not. What it is not is a political role. This is very much a regulatory role that, if delivered correctly, can enhance the trust and confidence the public has in its democratically elected representatives.

As with any role one is considering applying for, it is important to look at the person specification and competencies required and reflect on whether your skills, background and life experience meets these. Rightly, the Commons does not set these too specifically. This is important as it is imperative that people from all backgrounds should feel that they can apply. That said, there is an expectation that you should be of independent mind but also recognise the need to come to an agreed approach.