**WHIPS AND THEIR WORK**

Whips have long had a reputation, whether deserved or not, which shrouds them and their work in mystery.  They blend into the crowd and appear to the outsider unobtrusive, the convention being that Government whips do not sign EDMs or table questions to Ministers.  Nor do they give media interviews in their capacity as whip; in fact, most of the general public remain blissfully unaware of their existence.  It all builds up to a shadowy reputation of concern with only the most lofty and secretive goings on of the House.  This Guide is designed for new Researchers and constituency staff to be able to confidently use the word ‘whip’ in everyday conversation – which is, after all, one of the benefits of a job in politics.

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**1.  Who are the Whips?**

***‘Keepers of parliament’s dark secrets and custodians of the baubles of public life’ – Jeremy Paxman***

Any parliamentary textbook will tell you that the term ‘whip’ is derived from hunting speak; a ‘whipper-in’ whips the hounds to keep them from straying from the pack.  It is thought that the use of the term in Parliament goes back to the 18th Century, describing a small group of MPs whose responsibility it is to keep their colleagues toeing the line.

Whips are generally appointed, rather than elected, within their parties; after all, they are charged with promoting the agenda of the leadership, not the backbenchers.  Each party leader chooses their Chief Whip, each Chief Whip then chooses his or her deputies.

The job of Government whips is to get the government’s business through the Parliament by making sure that the necessary votes are won.  The Opposition doesn’t have any legislation to get through but their job is to make sure that the Leader’s agenda is effectively supported.  Whips often describe themselves as a channel of communication between the leadership and the backbenchers, because it is their job to know in advance if anyone is going to vote the ‘wrong’ way –  they need to have their feelers out and develop good relations with their flocks, and put them in touch with the relevant minister to discuss concerns before they turn into rebellions.

There is also a strong organisational and procedural element to whip-hood: whips manage Bill Committees and some private business like ten minute rule bills as well as party campaigning.

A who’s who of current whips can be found on the [parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk/) site under MPs, Lords and Offices, [Government are here](http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/government-and-opposition1/her-majestys-government/) under the list of Treasury ministers, which is technically their department, [Opposition here](http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/government-and-opposition1/opposition-holding/) under Opposition Whips.

The Opposition Chief Whip receives a stipend in addition to his normal salary.  The Government Chief Whip (and all junior government whips), of course, receive an extra ministerial salary as do all government ministers.

**2.  But really, who *are*they?**

In their article on [the recruitment of whips in the House of Commons](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/horses-for-courses-the-recruitment-of-whips-in-the-british-house-of-commons/D8C0EB102EACC7852042BD52F1CB25E5), Donald Searing and Chris Game seek to identify some common psychological characteristics of those appointed to the post of whip.  By asking those who’ve held the post, they conclude that whips must be approachable and good listeners and, where possible, should be able to ‘exercise some authority without getting into too much of a row’.  They must also of course be staunch party loyalists, and – perhaps surprisingly – need to know how to remain calm; ‘good whips rarely lose their tempers,’ one of their interviewees told Searing and Game.  Tim Renton, Government Chief Whip during Thatcher’s final year, echoes this sentiment: ‘a good whip is not just a sergeant major.  He is also a counsellor and a nanny.  Giving tea to some and gin and tonic to others, the Chief Whip has an overall responsibility for the health and sanity of his flock.’

**3.  The Role of the Whips**

The ‘usual channels’ is a phrase you’ll hear now and again.  Put simply, it means the ways in which Whips of all parties decide between them how to organise the Business of the House.  Although regular meetings take place to discuss Business, the usual channels are mostly a huge spider-web of communication on which the day-to-day bread and butter of the parliamentary timetable rests.  Ongoing matters will be discussed and on particular issues, such as a piece of legislation, consultation between whips from all sides will end with deals being struck in an attempt to please all.  Until 2010, select committee makeup was discussed and decided via the usual channels but, in the pursuit of transparency, chairs of select committees are now elected by ballot of the whole House. Members are then elected by their parties.

Besides deciding how the Business of the House will run, the other important job of the Whip is to act as go-between for the party’s leadership and its backbenchers.  In order to get government Business through, the Government Whips must ensure that the wishes of the leadership are carried out.  Practically, they have to make sure their MPs attend important votes and, crucially, get them into the right lobby.  At the same time, they must report back to the party leader whether or not new proposals are likely to go down well with the main body of their Members, and if and where pockets of dissent might be brewing.  On top of all this, the Whips must maintain links between Government and opposition (via the usual channels).  It’s no wonder that Whips have a reputation for quiet omniscience.

**4.  Party discipline**

***‘For the average backbencher, the whip is the street-corner thug they need to get past on their way home from school.  Treat him with respect, and life will be fine.  If you cross him, watch out’ – Jeremy Paxman***

It’s the role of the whip as disciplinarian which tends to attract the most attention, as Rogers and Walter note, ‘much is written and more speculated about the black arts of the whips – their techniques for bringing recalcitrant MPs into line – and of their intelligence gathering’.  There are numerous stories bouncing around the Palace of Westminster of the tactics whips will use to influence backbenchers to vote duly.  Philip Cowley writes how rumour has it that in past years there existed a Conservative whips’ ‘Black Book’, detailing the financial and sexual misdemeanours of the party’s MPs, used for arm twisting purposes as and when necessary.  Speaking in a 1997 debate on the modernisation of the House of Commons, the then MP for Bassetlaw, Joe Ashton, recalled an extreme example of the lengths whips will go to to get their MPs through the lobbies when it really matters:

“I remember the famous case of Leslie Spriggs, the then member for St Helens.  We had a tied vote and he was brought to the House in an ambulance having suffered a severe heart attack.  The two whips went out to look in the ambulance and there was Leslie Spriggs laid there as though he was dead.  I believe that John Stradling Thomas said to Joe Harper, “how do we know that he is alive?” So he leaned forward, turned the knob on the heart machine, the green light went around and he said, “there – you’ve lost, it’s 311.”  That is an absolutely true story.  It is the sort of nonsense that used to happen.  No one believes it, but it is true.” – Joe Ashton, former MP for Bassetlaw.

Whips may of course use the carrot approach, as well as wielding the stick, offering time off, trips abroad and promises of promotion.  The Whips are also responsible for deciding who gets which office on the parliamentary estate.  The accommodation whips have an arcane negotiation to divvy up the rooms between Labour, Tories, Lib Dems, etc and then each party has its own internal way of allocating.  It’s not unknown for the whips to use accommodation and the threat of being moved from a reasonable office to a window-less demountable to encourage party discipline.  Says Tim Renton, ‘the ability of the whips to change the minds of their colleagues lies in the fact that they wheel and cajole quietly and behind the scenes.’  However, Philip Cowley reports that there was once, among the Labour whips, what one whip described as a ‘tradition of brutalism’, to the extent that one new whip, on being told to use cerebral powers of persuasion instead had complained, ‘does that mean we can’t beat people up any more?’  Yet most methods of persuasion will be of the subtle type and stories like those above have thankfully become few and far between.

**5.  Withdrawal and resignation of the whip**

Most MPs, most of the time, pose no trouble for their party’s whips.  However, issues of discipline arise from time to time, on a scale from an individual MP’s doubts over a prickly issue to a large scale revolt among backbenchers.  At the extreme end of the scale, when an MP disagrees with the action of his or her party, he or she may ‘resign’ the whip – in other words, leave the parliamentary party and be no longer subject to its rules.  Similarly, if an MP elicits extreme disapproval of their party’s leadership, the party leader may ‘withdraw’ the whip, expelling the MP.  In both cases, the MPs remain in post but become effectively independent, no longer expected to follow the whip.  Aside from rebellion, personal actions or comment may cause an MP to resign the whip or have it withdrawn.  The decision to go to war in Iraq generated a number of such political casualties, with Clare Short and Robin Cook both resigning the whip in protest and with George Galloway having the whip withdrawn after making comments to the press deemed to have brought the party into disrepute.  More recently, former minister Denis McShane had the Labour whip withdrawn following a referral from the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to the police.  Another punishment the party leadership might use is to temporarily suspend a disobedient MP, possibly in advance of a full expulsion.  Yes, it’s just like being back in school.

**6.  Free votes**

In some instances, the whip is removed from all of a party’s MPs before a vote and MPs are allowed to vote as they see fit.  Such votes are called ‘free votes’ and a party’s whips will usually decide to grant a free vote if the issue at hand is one of a matter of conscience – abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment and so on.  In 2008, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill eventually generated a series of free votes for all parties, with the Government backing down from a whipped vote at Second Reading to allow a free vote, then insisting on the whip at Third Reading.

**7.  The Whip**

An essential tool of communication between each Whips Office and its MPs, the Whip will drop into your inbox every Thursday, once the Business of the House is announced.

The Whip is the essential (and confidential) document your MP needs to be in the voting lobbies at the right time, in order to avoid incurring the wrath of your party’s whips.  The Whip tells MPs how important their presence at a particular vote is, by using a three line system.  All votes are listed on The Whip and underlined with either one, two or three lines.

One line means that attendance is requested at the vote, but not required.  In practical terms, a one-liner means don’t worry about it.

Two lines is used quite rarely – it means you should be there but it’s not quite a three liner.  In practical terms, it might be used when a free vote is being held – meaning, we don’t mind how you vote, but please turn up.

A three-line Whip is essential and an MP frankly has no choice but to attend unless he or she has cleared their absence with their whip in advance by handing in an absence request slip with a full explanation and a pleading manner.

It’s keeping the weekly Whip to hand.  If your boss is so inclined, you might want to enter the expected timing and details of votes in his or her diary, though this is subject to change with votes occasionally being upgraded or downgraded at short notice.  Knowing what’s on the weekly whip is also helpful in that it allows you to organise the diary around expected votes and if your boss is attending an event on the Estate, you can warn the organisers that he or she may suddenly dash off when a loud, rather excruciating bell starts ringing.

It is common practice, if an MP needs to miss a vote, that the Whips will organise between themselves to ‘pair’ that MP with an MP of another party voting the opposite way, thus cancelling each other out.  This system means that MPs, especially Ministers who may be busy or outside of London, can miss votes without upsetting the outcome.  This allows, for example, MPs to be absent for important family or constituency events, or a minister to take an overseas trip.  Of course, for votes expected to be very close or contentious, the gloves come off.

**8.  Whips in the House of Lords**

Whips are used in the House of Lords but their role differs slightly, party discipline being a more complex issue due to a lack of elections and a substantial number of non-aligned cross-benchers.

They have their own website – [www.lordswhips.org.uk](http://www.lordswhips.org.uk/) – which Peers can use to remotely-access information, and sign up to speak in debates, without actually having to visit the House.

**9. References and suggested further reading**

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