

TOP 10 TIPS FOR NEW PARLIAMENTARIANS



TIP 1. DON'T PANIC!

Although this comes straight out of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, the advice is still sound for newly elected or appointed Members of Parliament. Remember, many people have walked in the same shoes as you, and most, if not all, have come away unscathed. Stay calm and follow the advice below. A good tip, get your bearings. Go to Parliament on day one and take a look around. Get comfortable with your surroundings. Take a seat in the Chamber and congratulate yourself for getting this far. People want you to succeed. Especially all the people that just elected you. It's in their interest that you do well.

TIP 2. REMEMBER WHO YOU WORK FOR

As a parliamentarian you may have to answer to your local political party, your whip, a senior minister, the Speaker, a committee chair and perhaps lobbyists. But your boss is the people that elected you. You are answerable and accountable to them. It can be easy to forget as you only have to go through the process of being elected every four to five years. But you are a democratically elected representative and although decisions are delegated to you to make in Parliament, it is essential that you remember whatever decision you make, they are the ones you have to justify your decisions to. However, you cannot please everyone all of the time, perhaps some of the people some of the time. If you try to make everyone happy, you will probably make nobody happy.



TIP 3. SEEK ADVICE

No one expects a new Member of Parliament to know all the answers. Don't be embarrassed to ask for help! Seek out clerks and parliamentary officials, your whips, former or current experienced parliamentarians to give you advice and support. Befriend a clerk and treat them well, they are worth their weight in gold. You never know they may offer advice you didn't even know to ask. Look outside of Parliament. Use academics, NGOs, CSOs and most importantly remember the CPA is here to help too. Go on induction trainings, use online courses. What you learn early on will be invaluable for years to come.

TIP 4. HAVE A PLAN

As the saying goes "fail to plan, plan to fail". Sit and write down what you want to achieve whilst you are a parliamentarian. This might be a one year goal, or for your whole term of office. Be realistic! Identify how you want to do it, what steps are needed, who can help you achieve this goal. Identify easy wins, but also the more challenging reforms. You might want to change the law or get the Government to change a policy. Pin your plan to your office wall as a reminder. A set of goals are important to keep you on the right track and stop you from getting distracted. You will also have something to measure your performance against. Remember there are no job descriptions for parliamentarians, so it's up to you!



TIP 5. SPECIALISE

A good piece of advice for new parliamentarians is to develop a speciality or an expertise in one or more thematic areas. It could be something you did in a previous career or something very important to your constituency. It might be on education, sustainable development, cybersecurity or even parliamentary procedure. Whatever you decide, take steps to keep abreast of developments and work with other leading experts. Why is this important? Parliamentarians who become known as an expert tend to get recognition from all Members and the Government. You will get asked for your input and will often be the first to get called upon in a debate. You might also get on a relevant committee or if you are lucky, a ministerial post.

TIP 6. DRAW YOUR RED LINES

From the very beginning it is essential that you take the time to determine what you will, but more importantly, what you won't do. It is helpful to remember you are human and not just a parliamentary-robot. You will have a family, friends, hobbies, maybe even an additional career outside of Parliament. To ensure you have a healthy work-life balance, determine how much time you want to dedicate to being a parliamentarian so that other things don't get pushed to the side. There is often a pressure early on to commit to everything, to attend every reception, every meeting and work very late. But keep a tight grip on your diary, and be willing to say NO.



TIP 7. KEEP IT CLEAN

When you are standing at an election you often have to come across as a saint. Whiter than white and pure as the driven snow. But as a parliamentarian you are also a human-being that can be flawed. Therefore it is important to remember to manage expectations and to try as best as possible to keep your moral compass pointing in the right direction. Follow your codes of conduct, be thorough in complying with Member's interests and ensure what you are transparent and not corrupt in actuality or perception. As a parliamentarian, you are a rolemodel and so ensure you uphold the highest of standards. But be warned, "there is no such thing as a free lunch!"

TIP 8. KEEP POSITIVE

Mental health and wellbeing is often overlooked by parliamentarians who feel they should be impervious to all pressures and problems. At times you will have setbacks. You won't always achieve your goals the first-time around. You will inevitably face bad press, abuse on social media, criticism from colleagues, your constituents and others. You'll be told to have a thick-skin and to ignore it, but that isn't always easy to do. Keep sane, remember it's just a job. Remember you have family, friends and others who can support you, and if you need to seek professional support there is no stigma in doing so. Focus on the positives and the small victories. But always put your health first.



TIP 9. READ YOUR STANDING ORDERS!

It might surprise you to note that many Members of Parliament never read their Parliament's rules for procedure. If you want to know the rules of the game then you must take the time to read the Standing Orders. Ask a clerk or colleague for a copy. Read it thoroughly. It will tell you what you can and cannot do, what powers you have, how to conduct yourself in the Chamber, what privileges and immunities you have. They are rules approved by your predecessors. But remember you can change these rules, you own them not the Speaker. Use these for Points of Order which can give you an advantage over your opponents across the floor of the Chamber.

TIP 10. WHAT'S NEXT?

This is probably a strange tip to give someone who has just been elected as a parliamentarian but it's important to consider throughout your term of office what you should do next. Many parliamentarians struggle to adapt to life outside of parliament. How to get another job, what sort of career should you do next, if any, and how to cope in a role that comes with less public attention. This can be very hard for some, so it is useful to always keep in mind that being a parliamentarian is just one job. If you are unfortunate enough to lose an election, or if you want to change careers you should always take the time in advance to focus on professional development. Keep in mind that nothing is forever.

