

Diversifying the Curriculum Blog

MPs in their own words: building a better picture of MP representation at Westminster

Louise Thompson



New MPs elected in 2024 standing in the House of Commons chamber, 9 July 2024 (UK Parliament CC BY)

I've taught parliamentary studies to final year undergraduate students in the Politics Department for the last seven years. This is an exciting module, sponsored by the UK Parliament, who provide expert speakers to visit campus and who organise a field trip to Parliament every year for students on the course. In the 2024-25 academic year I wanted to develop the way that I taught representation, which tended to be focused on political party organisation and on the constituency work carried out by MPs. Students have always been really interested in talking about descriptive and substantive representation and in understanding the experiences of different MPs who may face different challenges and who may conceive their representative role very differently. There is a great deal of literature on issues of descriptive and substantive representation, but it is very difficult to find any material from MPs themselves.

With the help of Diversifying The Curriculum funding, my project aimed to create a set of resources of MPs talking about representation 'in their own words'. Students from my 2024-25 parliamentary studies class came together to curate a set of briefings on MPs of their choice who had emphasised particular types of representation in the House of Commons. They researched their MP's parliamentary contributions, media appearances and social media and wrote a set of

concise two-page briefings bringing together everything that they could to better conceptualise their MP's view of representation and their representative role. In total we produced six briefings focusing on issues of age, disability, geography, race and family/caring responsibilities, drawing on the experiences, parliamentary contributions and media comment from six MPs (Sam Carling, Andrew George, Jess Philips, Sarah Smith, Marie Tidball and Zarah Sultana).

The students went on to contact the MP in question to ask them to participate in a short, recorded interview to discuss representation further. MPs are very busy people and rarely have the time to participate in student research, so we were delighted that two MPs (Andrew George and Sarah Smith) agreed to take part. These short, ten-minute interviews took place online in Spring 2025. Although I was present throughout, it was the students who developed the questions that they wanted to ask and who ultimately led the interview. They did an absolutely incredible job, and the conversations revealed some fascinating insights into geographical representation at Westminster and into the challenges of being an MP when you have caring responsibilities; both issues of real importance.

The students' briefings and the recorded interviews will be posted on the module's Canvas site and will be a key resource for students taking parliamentary studies in the coming years, providing a window into the experiences of this group of MPs. The project also brought real benefits to the students themselves and, as their own testimony documents, provided a new way of engaging with the course content, as well as helping them build their confidence in communicating with elected representatives:

"As a neurodivergent student I often find it quite difficult to navigate topics that are taught all on paper and are highly theoretical. Getting the chance to conduct an interview with a sitting MP was an invaluable learning experience for me, along with the great in person talks Louise organised throughout the module. This sort of hands-on experience is not only incredibly exciting but (in my opinion) is a great, creative way of engaging students with the course content, and in doing so making it much more accessible." (Joe Taylor, BASS student 24-25)

"I signed up for the parliamentary studies module simply wanting to learn more about the UK parliament- but I walked away with so much more. With inspiring guest talks and our learning brought to life through a visit to the Houses of Parliament, this module stood out as a highlight of my degree. Representation is vital to our democracy, and I was incredibly proud and excited to have the opportunity to interview an MP as part of project that aims to diversify and enhance our understanding of it." (Aaminah Azoor, Politics & Sociology student 24-25)

I'm really grateful to the University for providing the funding to carry out this research and I hope that we can build on this next year, integrating some further practical research opportunities into my parliamentary studies curriculum.

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