

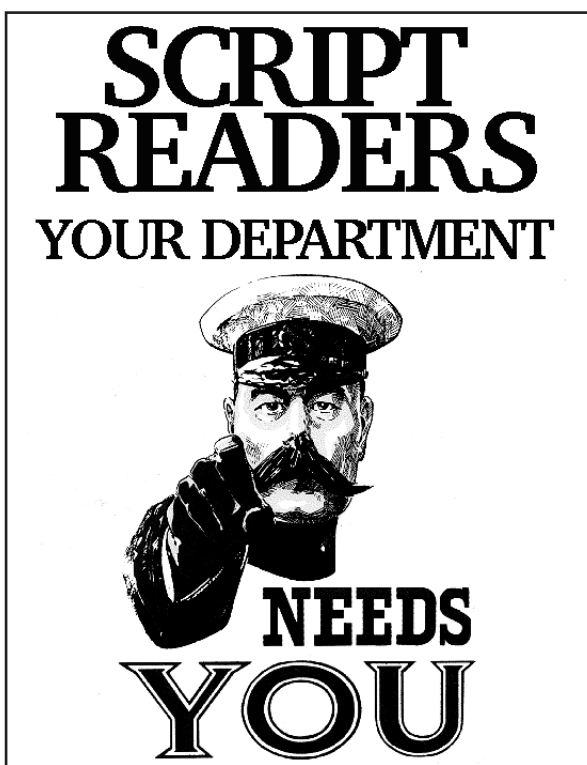
This is my last Editorial for *The Script*. The next issue will be compiled and lovingly annotated by Sarah Davies who has kindly consented to help me into the straight-jacket and lead me away to the parked ambulance.

I have edited the Clerk's Department newsletter (which quickly became *The Script*) since the beginning of 2002, a near Parliament's worth of travail now under my belt. It has taught me a lot about the Department, something about colleagues (and their often bland unwillingness to produce copy) and nothing at all about myself. Having already missed Michelle Owen's input for a number of issues (thanks for you past help, Michelle! *The Script* wouldn't look the same without it) what I will now miss most are the surreal and often scandalous conversations I have with Charlotte Every, who has been the greatest ADC an Editor-in-Chief could ever want.

This issue contains a lengthy piece on what to expect after dissolution (of the Parliamentary sort: veterans of the Overseas Office (European Section) may wish to submit an article on dissolution in general for the next issue); information on training; a piece on FOI and its impact on committee minutes (and civilisation as we know it); &c.,

Thanks to all those who have proffered copy over the years (especially the indefatigable Frank Cranmer), and to Print Services for their sterling work; all the best to Sarah!

Mike, and Charlotte



REMINDER - NEW MEMBERS' RECEPTION AREA

Just a little reminder that I am actively seeking volunteers to help man the New Members' Reception Area, post election. Although I cannot give firm dates until the announcement of the election date, the New Members' Reception Area will open on the Friday after the General Election. As Committees will not have been set up then, we should all have some spare time on our hands which could usefully be spent helping new Members.

Volunteers are asked to give two hours of their time to welcome and speak to new Members about the work of the Clerk's Department and the services which we provide. This may sound a little gruelling for new members of staff, but a PowerPoint presentation (on a continuous loop) outlining the main functions of the Clerk's Department will be giving information on a large screen. There will also be a selection of leaflets to hand out to Members giving information about the work of the different offices within the Department.

It is planned that two people will each do a two hour shift; a more experienced person will be teamed up with a relatively new person. So please do volunteer even if you are new to the House or to the Department. This is a good opportunity to familiarise yourselves with new Members, colleagues and staff from other departments, and will be fun!

Lis Partridge



COMINGS & GOINGS

Welcome to:

Justine Matthews who joined the **Scrutiny Unit** on 22 November.

Paul Fawcett who has joined the **Scrutiny Unit**

Clare Armstrong who joined **POST** as secretary to David Cope on 7 February

Phil Smith who is working in the **PRU** until the General Election.

Tom McColl who started in the Parliamentary Book Shop on 14 March.

Welcome back to:

Andy Boyd who has rejoined EFRA

Sarah Davies who has returned from her maternity leave and is acting as Clerk to the Quadripartite Committee and to **James** who is back at **Welsh Affairs**

Melanie Barklem who returns from her maternity leave to take up a post with the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments.

Farewell to:

Anne Browning who retired on 23 December but has not gone away as she has taken up a temporary appointment on Domestic Committees

Dianne Few who has returned to the NAO

Haidee Brockway who has returned to Medway Council

Dawn Summers who has left Domestic Committees.

Leslie Young who has left PAC.

Jackie Ahrens who has left Euro Scrutiny for a post in IASU

Tule Moyse, Office Support Assistant

Vanessa Hallinan who has left the Parliamentary Book Shop and joined the Office of the Clerk.

Pam Fisher who retires on 11 March

Au revoir to...

Carolyn Bowes who started a 3 year career break on 18 February.

STAFF NEWS

Jane Lauder has moved to **Domestic Committees**

Julia Kalogerides has moved to the **Northern Ireland Affairs Committee**

Louise Combs has moved to the **Environmental Audit Committee**.

Francene Graham has returned to the **Scrutiny Unit**.

Emma Sawyer has moved to **Public Accounts** until the Easter Recess.

Jim Lawford has returned to the Welsh Affairs and Northern Ireland Committees.

Stewart McIlvenna has returned to the Office Support Assistants.

Becky Crew will substitute for Jackie Ahrens on European Scrutiny until a permanent replacement has been appointed.

CONGRATULATIONS TO...

Kate Trumper on her engagement to **Ben Tarlow**

John Gearson and his wife **Vanessa** who had a baby girl, Olivia Aurora (8lbs 6 oz), on December 22nd.

Melanie Barklem and **Rick** who were married in Bath on Saturday 5 March.



FREEDOM AND INFORMATION

The Science and Technology Committee has done a terrible thing. It has taken Freedom of Information seriously. Far worse, it has strayed from the path of the Red Book in order to do so.

Yes, enthused by the brave new FOI world, and encouraged by vague murmurings from on high about being more informative and even innovative in minuting style, we are committing sins that border on heresy: we are putting in the formal minutes what the Committee is actually doing!! Nearly every agenda item is dutifully minuted; “considered” and “agreed” have replaced “Ordered” and “Resolved”. “The Committee deliberated”, full stop, has been banned on the grounds that it is utterly uninformative not to mention a gross exaggeration.

We have now discovered that not every Committee has embraced FOI so enthusiastically. Or at all. We are the happy skinny-dippers who have rushed out to sea, only to turn round to see everyone else wrapped snugly in towels on the shore. But we’re staying in, at least until it gets too cold.

If our pro-active response to FOI is to publish our formal minutes on the Web, we are changing their primary purpose. And they are not well suited to their new job. In their traditional form, the minutes are fine for keeping a belated and unread record of important decisions, but as a means of informing our, er, stakeholders about what is going on, they merely invite ridicule. It might just about be reasonable to expect your average greying Clerk to spot a Resolved in a division desk of Ordereds, but the difference might just escape and bemuse the casual reader (if there are such things of formal minutes). If the purpose and audience of the formal minutes changes, should their content remain the same?

Like other Committees no doubt, we are always producing reports criticising agencies for lack of engagement with user communities, unnecessary secrecy and defensiveness. Most of these bodies already publish very full minutes of their governing Committees on their websites. We are just trying to add the odd modest brick to our rather splendid glass house.



Look what I've found! It's Emily!

Our effort to be FOI-friendly has led us to stray into even deeper waters of procedural incorrectness. If the formal minutes are to be a fuller, and therefore more subjective, record of what the Committee is doing and deciding, it seemed reasonable to seek the Committee's assent, explicitly but in practice fairly tacitly, for what it agreed the previous week. (Did they agree to inquire into

asteroids or just to visit one?) With weekly publication on the Web, we no longer have the luxury of fiddling these little niceties months after the event. Maybe some Committees reach shinningly clear decisions on everything and remember that they have done so. Some don't.

To ask a Committee to agree and take responsibility for its own decisions might be a terrible idea but every other Committee in the western world seems to work like this so we thought we'd try it.



Clerk of Minutes marks Shaw's card

This does of course go against centuries of practice and is probably punishable by a couple of weeks in the Tower. Erskine Mays have been sent spinning in their dust jackets. Consequently, Committee approval is now only being sought very quietly and certainly not minuted.

The advantages of a consistent approach across Committees are undisputed, but is it the primary objective? Committees already adopt different practices regarding reports, meetings, websites etc, seemingly without any fatal blows to the corporate ethos. If Committees cannot agree on a strict corporate style, how damaging is it in practice for them to

adopt their own styles and policies? Will different Committee minuting styles be played against one another by keen journalists? Maybe. Maybe they have bigger stories to pursue. If change requires unanimity, progress will be slow.

Maybe I've been on too many management seminars [*one is too many -Ed*], but in most thriving organisations, the argument “but that's the way it has always been” does not carry much weight. Maybe existing practice should be tested against a changing environment every now and then. Maybe procedural correctness and being user-friendly are not incompatible aims. In recent years, the pervading spirit of public engagement and openness has given the visitor to the House an Order Paper that is intelligible, lovely green covers and even pictures in select committee reports, a cup of tea in Westminster Hall and, soon I gather, a name other than Stranger. The new Commander Shaw minuting style is scarcely half a step in a similar direction and may not even register in the consciousness of anyone but the most eagle-eyed colleagues. And then we shall no doubt be thrown a towel by a sympathetic working group.

Chris Shaw

[minuting pioneer and heterodoctor]



MY EUROPEAN ADVENTURE!

During the last prorogation (22-25 November 2004), I was lucky enough to secure a last-minute place on the Industry and Parliament Trust European Study Programme. I heard about this opportunity through a senior colleague, who will remain nameless, but described it to me as “an interesting course with very good food”! This recommendation spurred me on to find out more, which I am glad I did. Having moved from Culture, Media and Sport to become second clerk on the European Scrutiny Committee on 1 November, I found myself rather lacking in knowledge about “Brussels” - as the British press have affectionately termed anything relating to European matters! This course, based 90% in Brussels, gave me ample opportunity to learn more about the European Union and its institutions (the Commission, the Parliament and the Council) and I returned to London much better informed on many aspects of Brussels life (and very well fed!).

The course began in London with a “fool’s guide to Europe” - a general introduction and an overview of the relationship between Whitehall, Westminster and the EU institutions. We then travelled to Brussels where the immersion began. We spent a day studying, in detail, each of the three Brussels-based institutions. We covered topics including: the role of the Commissioners; the impact of enlargement; the Lisbon Agenda; European Parliament Committees; lobbying; the role of the Council of Ministers; the UK Permanent Representative and much more.

The programme was intensive (beginning, on one morning, with a breakfast meeting at 7.30am and ending after dinner with guest speakers often past 11pm) but fascinating. The course is designed, primarily, to inform “industrialists” (mainly government or public relations managers of multi-national companies) on how to lobby effectively in Europe. This meant that the speakers were high-level and so the learning environment was stimulating [*this meant in turn that the food was good Ed*]. It also meant that there was the opportunity for me to get to know more about how the private sector works and some of the tactics they use to lobby the public sector. One of the delegates, representing a confectioner, appeared to carry a number of chocolate bars with him wherever he went!



I would highly recommend this course to anyone who wants or needs to know more about the European Union and its institutions (don’t we all these days?) - please get in touch if you would like to know more.

Libby Davidson, Second Clerk, European Scrutiny Committee

Begging the question?

Whenever I hear someone - usually on the Today programme - utter the dread words “but that begs the question” my automatic response is to wait patiently for the speaker to get the usage completely wrong. And nine times out of ten, he (and it’s usually a he) obliges by continuing with something like “whether we can... afford to fund free eye-tests/increase the overseas development budget/find a replacement for Andrew Flintoff” - and I duly wince.

Correctly described, an assertion that “begs the question” is one that relies on an unproven or unprovable assumption - that God exists, that Bacon wrote Shakespeare’s plays, that the average American has a sense of humour - and to which the rejoinder should be, “so what’s the evi-

dence for the unsubstantiated claim you’ve just slipped in to that last sentence?” But it is much more likely that what the speaker really means is either that the previous statement ducks the issue under consideration or that it raises an obvious further question. Not only is “begging the question” very hackneyed, but it’s dead easy to misuse it, so much so that I’m not entirely sure that I’ve got all this entirely right myself. One to avoid, I reckon - especially in select committee reports.

Frank Cranmer

PS: For the second time this week, I’ve heard someone tell an interviewer that a particular policy was not “a panacea for all ills”. Best kind of panacea to have, I always say. But enough of this pedantic drivel: I’m off to do some decimating.



Toto...I have a feeling we're not at Gilbert and Sullivan any more...

Not even the most seasoned reader of the Votes and Proceedings - with its terse phrasing and unrelenting staccato rhythm - could be fully prepared for David Mamet's Oleanna, as reprised by the South London-based drama group Illuminated Productions and the Journal Office's own leading lady, Libby Preston.

Oleanna explores the relationship between John (John Gargrave), a university lecturer, and Carol (Miss Preston), a student who is failing John's course, through three encounters of escalating verbal (and ultimately physical) violence. In the opening Act the audience first watches Carol demand from John an explanation for her grade and for the opacity of his lectures; and then John struggle to see and in turn make concessions to, her point of view. In Acts Two and Three the audience is forced to question what it has just seen as Carol's interpretation of the first meeting puts John's professional and personal life in jeopardy.

Hailed as an instant classic when it was first produced in 1992, Mamet's explication of sexual politics, political correctness and post-modern academic theory was found wanting when it was revived, with two young Hollywood stars in the lead roles, at the Garrick Theatre last year. Some of its themes may have dated but this production, with thoughtful direction from Carl Whiteside and committed performances from John Gargrave and Libby Preston, restores the play's power to provoke and shock.

Mamet's script does not show either character in a sympathetic light and his intention seems to be to draw the audience in to the conflict between them but Libby Preston's Carol has such arresting vitality that the audience is drawn to her even as it is confused and then is repelled by her manipulation of the callow, vain college professor.

Carl Whiteside's risky production, a two hander in a tiny space staged in the round, is unforgiving in that it exposes his actors to what (to mere mortals anyway) must be almost unbearable scrutiny. Whiteside's faith in the talents of his leads is repaid by both actors as Libby Preston in particular gives a finely detailed performance which she sustains from the opening moments of the play to its violent close.

With an able partner in John Gargrave, Libby's mastery of Mamet's dialogue is perhaps the most impressive aspect of her performance. Her timing and control are evident but seem effortless. They are essential, not only to the credibility of Carol's confrontation with John, but also to the audience's understanding of Mamet's elliptical quickfire script [*lessons learned clerking the ODPM committee, one expects Ed*].

The physical drama of the production is convincing too, thanks in no small part to Libby Preston's assured movement within the confined space marked out by Carol's chair and John's desk - at first apparently cowed and later in command - and her absolute commitment to conveying the appalling impact of Carol's final, physical confrontation with John.

David Mamet's play is not for the faint-hearted (there are words you wouldn't even see on the 'Unparliamentary Expressions' page of The Table) and its power far outweighs its appeal. In such an accomplished production and with such a bright star, however, it is compelling. The Department's gain may be the National's loss but for the sake of the Journal Office let's hope that Miss Preston doesn't give up the day job.



Jenny McCullough
Frank Cranmer is away [notionally at least]

MORE STAFF NEWS...

Anwen Rees, Training Support Assistant, has been published in the Wales Journal of Law and Policy (Volume 3, Issue 3, 2004). Her article, 'Modern Reproduction and Parentage' examines how the development of artificial reproductive



New baby Clerk goes gaga

techniques has led to many familiar ideas of family being challenged.

The article reviews the development of case and statute law in this field, drawing comparisons between the case law of England and Wales and some key decisions of the US courts. In particular it highlights the Pandora's Box opened by the success of IVF and examines the necessity of re-addressing what makes a 'mother' and a 'father'. It also discusses the issue of the 'fatherless child', posthumous paternity and surrogacy.

As the article demonstrates, while legislation has sought to address some of the many moral and practical issues thrown up by rapid advances in reproductive technology, it has yet to provide any answer to others.



Training and Development Update

What is coming up in the next few months on the training front?

We have expanded the range of training and development opportunities which will be available during 2005, and this article provides a taster of what to expect over the coming months. Throughout the year, there is an ongoing programme of training opportunities available for all staff, but the current priority is planning various events for the period immediately after an expected election in May. These include:

- seminars on the law: machinery of justice, legal reasoning, drafting Bills etc
- attachments to the House of Commons Library - for committee specialists and others
- handling evidence, visits and finance - coaching sessions on some of these tricky committee problems
- Scrutiny Unit seminars on pre-legislative scrutiny, performance measures, economics etc
- half-day sessions on the work of :
 - (i) the EU and the European Parliament and
 - (ii) the National Audit Office
- IT coaching sessions. These will be held 1-1 or in small groups. The training team will be undertaking a needs analysis with staff after the recess to ensure we meet everyone's requirements for IT skills updates.
- some outside speakers on how other bodies work from the Civil Service, the Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society.

If you have any suggestions for further training events not covered above - or if you would like to share your experience with staff on a topic of interest - please contact Clerks Training via e-mail or on ext. 5740/0741. Details of post election courses will be published on the Intranet training pages just before Easter.

Who organises training these days?

Julia Fogden is the Training Support Officer (ext 5740) and she is assisted by Anwen Rees (ext 0741). They are both based in room 604 in 7 Millbank and work with Andrew Kennon who took over from David Natzler as Departmental Training Officer in October 2004. If you would like some training but are not sure what you need and what is available, just ask Julia or Anwen.

How do I find out about what training opportunities are available?

The wide range of courses - provided either within the Department, by the Library or across the House service - can be found on the Intranet at: <http://hocclerks3.parliament.uk/training>. When new courses are arranged, details are usually sent out by email and the websites are updated. Did you know that courses are regularly run on topics such as:

- Effective Writing
- Recruitment and Selection
- Annual Report Writing
- Health and Safety awareness- for staff and managers
- Introduction to management skills

How do I apply for a training course?

Discuss the course with your line manager and fill in an application form, which can be downloaded from the departmental Intranet at: <http://hocclerks3.parliament.uk/training>. When completing the application form give some thought to: "How will this make me more

effective in my job or develop my potential?" Send your completed and signed application form to Julia or Anwen. Some internal courses do not need an application form and can be booked directly via the Intranet training pages. These courses will also be advertised by e-mail from Clerks Training.

What should I do after I have been on a course?

Fill out an evaluation form, which will be sent to you automatically, shortly after you have attended the course. We have developed new e-versions of these forms which are easier to complete. Please return the completed form to Clerks Training. It really helps us to organise more successful and better targeted training events if we get frank feedback from evaluations. An even more important point is to discuss with your line manager how you can put what you have learnt into practice.



Role-play during a Clerk's Department leadership course: the invisible weight-lifting module

How should I plan my training needs?

The annual staff report already contains a page on the "Personal Development Plan" (PDP). Your PDP should look forward to what development you could do in the coming year and should be discussed as part of the annual reporting process. Forward looking PDPs will be given a higher priority in the coming process for the end of the 2004-05 reporting year.

In March the department will be running short update seminars for managers on the annual reporting process and the role of the PDP in the reporting process.

What else is happening on the training front?

This year the House of Commons will be organising events for Learning at Work Day on Thursday 26 May. Staff are encouraged to pop into the Attlee Suite in Portcullis House and find out more about the learning opportunities available at the House of Commons and also externally. Learning at Work Day aims to encourage take up of all forms of learning, not just that which is directly work related.

More training opportunities will be advertised in forthcoming months via the Intranet training pages, so keep an eye out for new courses in the coming months.

Julia Fogden
Training Support Officer
Anwen Rees
Training Support Assistant



WHAT HAPPENS DURING AN ELECTION?

We all know what happens at an election...or do we? Before and after this as yet unspecified date most of us have unusual patterns of work. Some will be involved in events which occur only once every four or five years such as dissolution, election of the Speaker, swearing in of Members and briefing new Members.

There is an interesting note on dissolution arrangements for Members on the PDVN Intranet home page. <http://pdvnsc.parliament.uk/BB/offclerk/Dissolution2005.pdf> The key point is that once Parliament is dissolved, there are no MPs, only candidates. Additional pay for select committee chairmen ends on dissolution. There will also be a page on the Intranet about arrangements for new Members after the election.

Before the election

In the last few weeks before an expected election the Public Bill Office is hectic with a legislative programme - theoretically prepared for a full parliamentary session - much of which the Government wants to get through before the election. (Anyone who wants to help ease the burden slightly can do so by volunteering to help out on a delegated legislation standing committee).

In the Committee Office there is the rush to produce reports before Easter, but with some fall off in Members' attendance at meetings - partly on account of closer votes in the House. The work of the Table and Journal Offices may be less directly affected by an impending dissolution, but all those working closely with Members will be conscious of a sense of anticipation.

Perhaps the Overseas Office (European Section) is the one least affected by an impending election - delegations can still travel to meetings of international assemblies, and for some Members it may be their last chance to do so. Depleted delegations, composed mostly of Members of the House of Lords and retiring Members of the House of Commons, will have to be accompanied to various international meetings over the election period and the work must carry on for the seven international meetings which will be held in the UK in the second half of the year as part of the UK presidency of the EU. The European Section will be open throughout the dissolution period, operating a reduced hours service.

The Overseas Office continues to receive a large number of visitors who want to come while the House and Committees are still in operation. Jacqy Sharpe says "The Office is very grateful to colleagues who, despite pressures on their time, agree to talk to the visitors and give them such a positive impression of Westminster. Visits are only briefly interrupted by an Election - the Office is already engaged in trying to identify the most appropriate dates for post-Election visits to resume!"

Election timetable

The timetable for an election is set by legislation and the Library has a very useful note setting out how when the key events occur: <http://hcl1.hclibrary.parliament.uk/rp2004/rp04-038.pdf> The date of a parliamentary election is governed by the date on which the timetable starts, with the proclamation summoning the new Parliament/dissolving the old Parliament and issue of writ occurring on Day 0 and polling day being Day 17.

For an election on Thursday 5 May, the assumption is that the election will be announced soon after Easter and possibly about Monday 4 April. If this happens, the House will sit for much of that week, passing a minimal Finance Bill (which at least renews annual taxes) and an Appropriation Bill, and completing such other Bills as the Government and the Opposition parties (especially in the House of Lords) can agree upon. Parliament would actually be dissolved by Monday 11 April. All parliamentary activity ceases and committees no longer exist.

The period of dissolution - like a parliamentary recess - is a time when staff can take leave. George Cubie says: "After several especially hectic weeks, I hope staff will take the opportunity of a well-earned rest. As usual staff should discuss their plans with their line manager". (The prospect of such a break must still seem far away to those working over weekends to get reports drafted). Some Committee staffs may already have decided to spend part of this time (between dissolution and election) tackling the filing and sorting out the records. Some individuals have already arranged to start outside secondments then.

One important task to be completed before people go on leave will be writing annual staff reports - all of us have to fill in at least some sections of our reports. Briefing meetings for reporting officers and counter-signing offices will be held shortly so that the whole process can be completed by the deadline of 25 May.

For the Journal Office the period just before and after the election is when they prepare for the return of the House and the swearing in of new Members. Across the Department, others will be spending some time getting ready welcome and introduction plans for new Members. While colleagues in the Vote Office, Legal Services Office, Broadcasting Unit, POST and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards should also benefit from the break in parliamentary activity, each will find some tasks which need to be done of this period.

After the election

After an election on Thursday 5 May, the House would probably meet again on or about Tuesday 10 May to elect a Speaker and start the process of swearing in Members - this will take several days and keep the Journal Office very busy. The Table Office will also be busy on swearing-in days collecting Members' signatures and preferred forms of address from its stall immediately behind the Speaker's Chair. (Anyone who would like to assist with this very important task should contact Huw Yardley.) Meanwhile, as the most obvious first point of contact, the Table Office will be giving basic procedural advice to new Members. Both offices will be working with the Library and Hansard in the preparation of various lists of Members, including the seniority lists which will be needed by the Committee Office after the election.

All staff will be expected to be back at work this week, unless other specific arrangements have been made. The programme of post election training mentioned elsewhere in this edition will be starting then.

Likely dates for the Queen's Speech opening the new session would be Tuesday 17 or Wednesday 18 May. In all respects but one the work of the Department will be fully resumed then as it would after the Queen's Speech at the start of any session.



Waiting for committees

The exception - and an important one for the two thirds of the Department who work in the Committee Office - is that we will have to wait for committees to be nominated. Although most committees exist in standing orders, they will have no Members until the House nominates them. This process, starting with internal discussions within each party, takes several weeks. It may be necessary to adjust the remit and names of some committees if there are changes to the structure of departments in Whitehall. There will also be discussion between the parties about which committees should have Opposition and minor party chairmen. Disagreements about a small number of cases may delay the whole package which has to be put through the Committee of Selection to the House. In 2001 the House rejected the names for two committees because they did not include Gwyneth Dunwoody and Donald Anderson, who had been chairmen of those committees in the previous Parliament.

The period immediately after the General Election is a very busy one for the office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. The

staff of this office are involved in the general programme of induction for new Members, and specifically in the compilation of the first Register of Members' Interests of the new Parliament and the three other Registers. The first part of this large task is to write to every MP as soon as possible after the election, and so the Commissioner's office may welcome offers of assistance at this time.

The post-election period through to the autumn provides a good opportunity for circulating staff at various levels and George is always happy to consider individual cases and staff will have an opportunity to make proposals. In the occasional brief moment between attending training courses, spending time on attachment to the Library, filing the papers for the last four years and completing the annual report cycle, committee staff will speculate idly about when committees will be appointed, who will be the chairman and which Members will be nominated. Then there will be a sudden burst of activity as committees are set up and meet for the first time - perhaps in the week beginning 11 July?

Andrew Kennon



Voters clude to spice up election day

Liam Laurence Smyth adds:

The Clerk of the House Floor in the Palace (home to the procedural offices and the Standards & Privileges Committee) has to be completely cleared out for the summer recess and the quiet election period may offer an opportunity to prepare for this major upheaval.

Also in the summer of 2005 we will have a major decant of all the 2nd floor of 7 Millbank to mainly open plan areas in 4 Millbank for a period of about 12 weeks. Space for shelves and filing cabinets in 4 Millbank will be very limited and so Committees must be ruthless in throwing out what they don't need and separating the rest into material essential for day-to-day work in 4 Millbank and other material that can go into storage till the return to 7 Millbank.

The Parliamentary Archives have issued formal disposal practice guidelines which govern how to prepare material for the archives as well as rules for discarding papers which are no longer of any use. We could all benefit from spending time clearing out our Outlook "in" and "sent" boxes, as well as weeding our shared and personal drives. Freedom of Information has shown up the need to keep only what we really have to, in an orderly fashion. Challenges over the next few years such as introducing electronic records and document management will be easier to handle if we seize the opportunity to sweep away useless clutter. Far too much space is given over at the moment to warehousing spare copies of printed reports. Given that all reports since 1997 are available online, and that Print Services can rustle up multiple facsimile copies if ever needed, we ought to use this chance to make drastic cuts in the amount of shelving occupied by dead paper.

Karl Marx described revolutions as the festivals of the oppressed. We might describe general elections as vacations for the impartial. We should use this time wisely to build up our capacity for renewing our efforts as soon as required in the next Parliament. A final word of caution - the excuse "I haven't had time" just will not wash in the post-election period.