

Citizens' Parliamentary Groups - Summary

While the study explores the feasibility of the scheme from a wider political perspective, this summary deals primarily with its main structures, procedures, powers and objectives.

Aims, Objectives and the Three Main Tasks

The research is a feasibility study for a scheme for using randomly-selected Citizen's Parliamentary Groups (CPGs) at constituency level to work closely with their Member of Parliament or Assembly Member. Each CPG would hold office for one year only. The study is based on the Westminster systems of government in Australia and the UK. The main role of the CPGs is to defend the integrity of the political process. This involves three main tasks:

- 1) To ensure that the MP adheres to an agreed code of parliamentary conduct.
- 2) To strengthen the links between the MP and the wider constituency.
- 3) To ensure that issues of grave public concern that threaten the integrity of the political system receive parliamentary attention and remedial action.

The research explores the powers and procedures that might be needed to undertake these tasks and how those powers should be focused and limited.

Task One and the Special Duty Provisions

For each month or similar period two members of the CPG would be on "special duty". This means that they would be in closer contact with their MP. This could include attending meetings, visiting the constituency office or attending debates. Their involvement would amount to about two days per week. Not all of that time would be spent with the MP. They would also have access to the MP's official correspondence. This provision is envisaged as both a preventative and an educational measure.

In the event of an allegation of a breach of the code, two members of the CPG would have oversight of the investigative process undertaken by the commissioner or similar agency. They would have the power to demand further investigation where they thought necessary. The CPG as a whole could also demand further investigation at the conclusion of any investigation. The CPG could not challenge the findings, but could comment on the results and the process in the public domain.

Task Two and the "Monthly Meeting"

The main structural feature for dealing with this task is the "monthly meeting" between the CPG and the MP. This would involve a question and answer session and reports from the MP and those completing special duty. A report of this would be presented on a special website. The CPG would have the power to make public criticisms of the MP but only on certain ground such as misleading the public or the abuse of public time and money. The CPGs would also act as a link between the MP and the wider constituency: receiving petitions, making visits and other similar activities.

Task Three

Should the CPG become aware of an important issue that might directly threaten the integrity of the political process, then, if agreed by a 75% majority, they could demand specified parliamentary action from their MP. To do this they would have to have approval from the Independent Regulatory Body (see below) and endorsement by two other CPG

groups (75% majority in all cases.) If the demand was not met, then, subject to similar endorsement, recall proceeding could be instigated and a by-election ordered.

Further aspects of the scheme

The Status and Size of CPGs

CPGs should be Parliamentary Office Holders, i.e. neither employees of the Parliament nor separate autonomous organisations. They would need to be independent of partisan interests and pressures. The size of the CPG would be determined by the number of members needed for special duty during the year plus the officers. This would suggest a figure of between 18 and 22 for most administrations.

The Independent Regulatory Body

The system would need to be administered by a separate body. In the UK this might take the form of an Independent Regulatory Body (IRB). This would be a Parliamentary body made up of independent appointees and former members of CPGs. It would be charged with overseeing the selection, training and general conduct of CPG members and the efficient running of the system as a whole.

Reviewing and improving operation of the CPGs

An annual conference of CPG delegates would be held to discuss the effectiveness of the scheme and make recommendations. Working groups from conference could then be formed to take issues forwards.

CPG officers and selection

Once training has been conducted, each CPG should elect a secretary and a chairperson. All correspondence to and from the group would then be addressed through the secretary. Random selection should be made from equal divisions of the constituency and equally from male and female pools. Members of political parties would have to renounce their membership whilst in office.

Behaviour of CPG members

To prevent corruption and misconduct, a code of behavior (including sanctions) should be established. Strict guidelines would need to be established about what current or past members could disclose about their work.

Remuneration

CPG members should be paid for their services, with those on special duty paid for two day's work per week. A fixed fee should also be available for monthly meetings, and for CPG conference attendance. All travel and accommodation expenses should be met. The scheme should be financed so that it is as independent as possible from executive or parliamentary control.

Voluntary or compulsory participation?

This is a difficult question. Voluntary participation would leave sectors of the population under-represented, whilst compulsion might produce unwilling conscripts. Understood (on a

par with jury service) as a responsibility or duty undertaken on behalf of society, however, compulsory participation for those chosen would seem to be the best option.

Feasibility

The study suggests that the scheme would be feasible if sufficient members of the public recognised its potential value. It is a scheme that sets out to bridge the gap between professional politicians and the citizenry in a positive way and to establish what the study calls the common ownership of the political system. It is also a scheme designed to support and enhance the electoral process by creating new forums for political discourse and a new partnership between elected members and the citizenry.

The study also suggests how the scheme might work in multi member constituencies (such as those of the Australian Senate, Tasmania, the ACT and the devolved national assemblies of the UK). There is also discussion of the problems of distance and of timetabling CPG activities to coincide with different parliamentary arrangements.

The full text of the feasibility study can be viewed at:

<https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/research/research-papers/396-citizens-parliamentary-groups>

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