

# Constituency Performances: the “heart” of democratic politics

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## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

The representation of a constituency is at the heart of most democracies. In many countries an elected representative acts as a bridge between a Parliament and a locality, while members of Parliament as a collective mediate between the centre and the whole of that nation. In this chapter we explain why a methodological approach that relies on collaborative ethnography and multi-disciplinary theorising is a powerful way to probe the performances, identities and emotions underlying the work of elected politicians. Taking a relational and performative approach, we consider how these relationships in politics are not merely about interests, roles or viewpoints; politicians have the power of evocation and so are important to people's imagination and feeling of belonging. Politicians who ignore the sacred – the ritual, symbolism and drama of politics – and merely try and impress voters with their ideological standpoints, will find it harder to secure support.

## Introduction – a relational approach

At the core of any democracy is the relationship between elected representatives and those they represent. This relationship between representative and represented is often analysed as one of MPs' functional roles. Searing classifies UK MPs' work as 'Welfare Officers', or 'Local Promoters' (1985), while Norton's taxonomy offers seven types: safety value, information provider, local dignity, advocate benefactor, powerful friend and promoter of constituency interests (1994). But conceiving this work in terms of 'roles' glosses over critical ingredients – identities, relationships, power and emotions. As Goffman pointed out in his study of how individuals present themselves in social encounters, the idea of roles can miss the point that people are responding to different audiences through performance and power struggles (1959). The 'claim' to represent tens of thousands of diverse constituents, as Saward puts it (2007), creates endlessly different expectations and meanings in the relationships between Parliaments, parliamentarians and groups within any democratic society. Saward's approach challenges assumptions about how representation can be reduced to outcomes – such as, the satisfying interests or winning elections – and opens up the possibilities for taking seriously rhetoric and performance as an important part of political work. When you consider their encounters in everyday politics, you can't avoid questions about how MPs deal with conflicting demands of diverse constituents, or even the contradictions and conflicts created by the ambivalent and changing views in individuals and groups? What accounts for the variation in the way they respond? What do the endless demands do to MPs' well-being or sense of self?

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To address these questions, we will develop a relational approach to the study of constituency work, dwelling on the themes of performance, identity and emotions, leaning most heavily on a mix of political anthropology, pragmatic philosophy and emotion theory. We rely not on the mathematical modelling, taxonomies and formal frameworks of some political science, which tend to strip the everyday drama out of politics, but point to common and varying patterns and processes. We argue that affect is never absent from human interaction and constitutes an essential and ever-present quality in political life where it becomes recognisable as emotion. Emotion in this sense, is an embodied response to the world as opposed to a private intra personal experience. Our empirical material is drawn in part from Crewe's ethnography of UK MPs (2015)<sup>2</sup>, but also a piece of in-depth collaborative participant-observation that the two authors undertook in October 2018. This involved fieldwork in the constituency of Dundee West, Scotland, the UK, where they participated in as many events, conversations and functions as they could over two days with the MP and his staff.<sup>3</sup> In the typically participatory and immersive way that anthropologists do research, we refined precisely what we should study in depth with the people we encountered during research. The themes of performance, identity and emotions emerged out of our own backgrounds but also the interests of the MP and his staff. This collaborative ethnographic approach developed as an interdisciplinary method involving ongoing explorations and sense making between the researchers as to how they were constructing meaning with informants.

### A political anthropology of constituency work

It is in the field of anthropology that the relationships between MPs and their constituents have been framed as both performative and symbolic. Anthropology has been described as 'philosophy with the people still in'; a discipline that focuses on how individuals and groups relate to each other and create meaning for themselves (Ingold 2018: 4). Relationships between politicians and citizens were a focus for the work of the first anthropologist to study a European Parliament, Marc Abélès. French politicians stress their local roots; a politician is above all the representative of a territory with all its traditions, even a living symbol of a locality (1991: 268, 174). In the UK too, our relationship with our MP is not so much about the representation of our *views*, as the shared belonging to a locality and their championing of our area (Crewe 2014). MPs are not just women or men of actions, ideas and policies, they are symbols with the power to evoke. This power of evocation is essentially the capacity to evoke an emotional response and in particular, a response which affirms a mutual or collective identity. These identificatory processes are experienced as 'feelings' of belonging and 'we-ness'. To identify with an MP's gestures is to affirm their authority to represent.

Being seen as 'local' is the most important identity marker when people elect their MP in the UK (the evidence is summarised by Judge and Partos 2018: 207). All MPs symbolise the link between local and national government, and even political locality and nation, as succinctly illustrated when one MP presided over the celebrations for the Queen's

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<sup>2</sup> For an explanation about ethnographic methods, see Crewe 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The MP and his staff have read an earlier draft, made corrections and consented to the use of their names. We would like to convey our gratitude and appreciation to them, as well as others we interacted with, for their warm welcome, patience and fascinating insights during our visit.

birthday in England in 2012 (Crewe 2015: 104-5). This event involved residents in a constituency assembled to watch a parade by cadets (the military), vicars speaking about the importance of community (the church) and the MP (Parliament) concluding the speeches by encouraging us to drink a toast to the Monarch. The MP symbolised the embodied link between community, Parliament and the Monarch reigning over the nation,<sup>4</sup> an example of how identities are constructed through performance and ritual at a local level.

MPs tend to be loathed as a collective in most countries but in their constituencies they are still VIPs; sometimes even loved. UK MP Paul Flynn's constituents knew everything about him, he told me, and they think: 'He is a mad bastard, but he is *our* mad bastard.'<sup>5</sup> He described the relationship between MP and constituent as: 'that of a priest and parishioners, solicitor and clients, shepherd and flock, shop steward and workers and friend of many friends. The MP should be the living embodiment of the constituency,



tirelessly promoting and defending the territory with the ferocity of a mother protecting her offspring' (Flynn 2012: 138). MPs extol the virtues of their constituency – its beauty, variety or warmth – and develop an affinity with the place they represent. MPs can champion their locality, at least in general terms, without incurring anyone's displeasure, so this process has a performative quality achieved through their interactions with their constituents. This fosters the sense of an expanded 'we' identity of which he or she is the embodied representative.

Anthropologist Ahmed has complexified representation by arguing that Bangladeshi MPs are involved in endless shape-shifting and gift-giving to build up their reputation and win support from different groups of people (2019). Corbett also found that the expectation of largesse from MPs in the Pacific Islands is ubiquitous (2015: 74-75). There is also a rich seam of ethnographic work on constituencies about Uganda (Tamale 2000), and India (Ruud 2001, Michelutti 2008), all demonstrating that to understand politics you have to appreciate specific cultural practices in their historical context. Comparison across Global South and North constitutes a serious gap in the literature. Corbett writes about women's experience of representation in a way that echoes across contexts; politicians in the Pacific Islands reflect that once elected, your constituents own you and for women it is a form of dual ownership. They represent their constituents but also all women because their total number in Parliament is so low (2015: 72-73).

Some politics scholars have recently adopted an ethnographic approach. Shirin Rai's work on ritual and performance is an especially innovative body of (often ethnographic) work on parliamentarians, including her latest book with Carole Spray on Indian women MPs performing representation (Rai and Spray 2018). However, this approach is far from accepted by all political scientists across the world. For example, Martin, Saalfeld and

<sup>4</sup> Interview held by Emma Crewe, June 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Interviewed by Emma Crewe, November 2013.

Strøm critique such ‘micro-political’ or in-depth studies of Parliaments for their lack of potential for generalising and making causal links and claim that it is US political science that offers the most useful research innovations (2014: 9-11), despite the many questions – including about performance and emotions – that their methods struggle to address. They misunderstand the contrasting ways that positivist science and ethnographic approaches establish rigour. As Geertz explains, the rigour of thick ethnographic descriptions of culture are based on interpretation whereby “...the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (1973: 5). Anthropologists don’t so much study people as learn from them; Ingold explains, ‘we observe not by objectifying others but by paying attention to them, watching what they do and listening to what they say. We study *with* people, rather than making studies *of* them’ (2018: 11).

Given that to survey MPs in one political system is hard enough, but to do *comprehensively* across cultural contexts would be impossible, we will consider MP-constituent relationships thematically. We will consider two aspects: (a) political performance and (b) emotional responses, with a particular emphasis on UK constituencies.

### Political performance in constituencies

Political work is about far more than being constrained set by rules, norms or roles. It involves people struggling for power, making meaning and (re)forming alliances and divisions. In these struggles, the *performance* of politics involves putting on a show (Goffman 1959), both as individuals and in groups, because getting things done in democratic politics means endlessly winning support and outsmarting your opponents. The ‘putting on of a show’ is also a ‘show’ of affect or a performance of emotion. Paradoxically, the ‘show’ has to be perceived as authentic, i.e., as non performative, in order to appear plausible but this authenticity is also performative. The inevitable competition and enmity involved in democratic politics creates a magnification of normal human experience, making it a rich and complex domain for the study of power, identity and emotions. In the last few decades this has intensified with politicians being even more exposed by the 24-hour digital revolution, transforming the way that politics is performed, observed and participated in.

The political performance of representation by MPs takes place in many sites – in Parliament’s debating chambers, committee rooms or meeting rooms, television studios, Twitter, local party offices and in offices, streets and meeting venues within constituencies. UK MPs are well-known for name checking their constituents in Westminster (Crewe 2015: 84-86). Eric Pickles MP mimicked other MPs by saying that Stockport was close to his heart, a gem and a magnificent town, Formby a wonderful place to invest, and Rochdale was the apple of his eye, all within the space of an hour.<sup>6</sup> Even the lesser-known parliamentary rituals provide opportunities for constituency name checking: ‘Points of Order’, when an MP can ask the Speaker to take action regarding rules being broken, can be harnessed to the constituency cause. As Speaker Bercow pointed out, they can even act like a press release: ‘It is part of the choreography of Parliament that this is tolerated to some extent’.<sup>7</sup> MPs try to represent constituency interests during the various

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Pickles MP, *HC Debates*, 12 March 2013, col. 12, 15, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Interviewed by Emma Crewe, January 2012.



processes entailed in making law. For example, Stephen Lloyd MP explains that he voted against his own party's introduction of tuition fees because 'for me, the promises I made to my constituents will always come first.'<sup>8</sup>



Interwoven with the representation of their constituents, the MP is in the business of self-presentation to constituents and others. These days no MP ignores her/his image or appearance. Photos and reports on how MPs have raised constituency issues bloom all over MPs' websites, their campaign literature, in the local press and on twitter. As soon as MPs ask a question in Parliament, they then rush back to their office and instruct their staff to put out a press release or call the local paper. Paul Flynn advises other MPs: 'Be ubiquitous and ever present in the constituency. The drip feed of blog, tweets, early morning radio interviews that are repeated throughout the day, widely advertised surgeries, and attendance in the Chamber in a camera-exposed position, all propagate the message "Busy MP"' (2012: 142). If you

follow MPs around to meetings in public places – churches, community centres, a university, a business park, a housing association – they take photographs and email them to their staff or put them on Twitter themselves.

The increasing importance of face-to-face contact is found elsewhere as well. The US political scientist Richard Fenno writes of US representatives that trust is the magic ingredient. 'If people like you and trust you as an individual, they will vote for you', members told him (1978: 56). So, conversations between politicians and their constituents is not so much about policy or political ideology but about whether the member can be trusted. It takes time to win the moral approval contained within trust and it means getting close to people or giving the illusion of closeness. One US representative told Fenno that no one will vote against you if you are on first names basis and if you chew their tobacco, then they will even fight for you. Another representative put it, 'the best way to win a vote is to shake hands with someone. You don't win votes by the thousands with a speech.' Very rarely will anyone ask you about how you stand on anything' (ibid: 64, 85).

Communication involves a subtler process whereby US politicians spend time in their districts to measure and enhance their voting *leeway*. Representatives know that they will be required sometimes to vote against the wishes of their constituents. To do this without losing too many votes they have to be trusted; the more a politician is trusted, therefore, the more leeway she has (ibid: 140-151). Again, this quality of trust is not abstract but an embodied



<sup>8</sup> Stephen Lloyd MP website, <http://stephenlloyd.org.uk/en/article/2010/453897/lloyd-votes-against-rise-in-university-tuition-fees> [accessed 28 June 2013].

experience of emotion requiring mutual affirmations of identity. So, it is not policy agreement that voters demand, according to US Members of Congress, it is a feeling of belonging to one another. They continually talk about the shared streets, the characters, and the churches, stressing their commonality, understanding and affectual resonance. They vary their presentation to different groups within the constituency. When voters do see the Member as the same as them, perhaps if their identity overlaps, then he or she becomes a symbolic representative; for example: 'Almost anything I do makes them feel proud. They know I'm a black man standing up for the black man.' (ibid: 120).

While in a few countries constituents rarely see their elected representatives (e.g., Ethiopia [Ayenew 2019]), in most parts of the world, including the UK, MPs' interaction within their constituencies has intensified hugely with rising expectations and cuts to the welfare state. Constituency work doubled between the 1970s and the end of the 1990s and over half of MPs claimed that they spent more than 40 per cent of their time in their constituency by 2012 (Judge and Partos 2018: 268). Emma Crewe observed surgery



meetings in six constituencies and found almost half were 'urgent' (2015: 92). MPs and their staff develop an in-depth knowledge of the characters, rules, resources and latest changes; a socio-political, institutional and economic ethnography of the local welfare state. MPs and staff aim to treat all constituents, irrespective of whether they are supporters or even voters, as equally deserving

of attention and take care to avoid assessing the merits of the case explicitly in their conversation with the constituent. Refusing to take any action is extremely rare. But when the MP writes on behalf of a constituent an experienced MP will give hints about the severity of the case; writing "we ask that this be looked at in a timely manner" all the way to "this is extremely urgent", as appropriate. They would destroy the goodwill of government and voluntary agency contacts if they give the impression that fast and time-consuming responses had to be made in all cases. This mediation by MPs between constituents and the state inevitably privileges some above others – and there is no avoidance of this – so representation is uneven however much politicians strive to act otherwise.

Unevenness and inequality are found between constituencies too. More established ones have a huge 'bible' of useful services, contacts and resources while newer MPs may not. The political position of the MP will make a difference. An MP whose party is in government can't blame government for their problems and, if their party controls the council then they have to defend their record. On the other hand, if their party governs either locally or nationally then you have the advantage of better access to decision-makers who can make something happen. MPs' own identities influence whom they listen to most closely but also how people react to them. British women MPs seem more comfortable than male counterparts with 'glorified social work', as some observers call the process of listening to constituents relate tales of suffering in 'surgery' meetings (Crewe 2015). In a familiar gendered pattern of women's work receiving less public recognition, this invisible political work counts for nothing when trying to get promotion onto the frontbench. One British Asian MP was particularly articulate about how his identity affected his work: although some Asians trust him, others disapprove of him because he speaks out against caste and domestic violence, infuriating traditionalists who think he

has been too influenced by Western thinking. Former MP Dame Anne Begg, who uses a wheelchair, did not want to be pigeonholed as a disability activist so rather than working on disability as a separate issue isolated from context, she considered the interests of disabled people in the course of all her work as an MP, e.g. as former Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee, seeing how it is related to pay, pensions, benefits or whatever comes up.<sup>9</sup> So demands for proportional representation of different groups in society is complicated by the multiple identities of MPs. The question of whether or not people are best represented by those with a shared identity becomes problematic when you consider that there can only be overlapping identities, rarely identical ones. Identity is always provisional. While a parliamentary chamber should be representative of the wider population, because they are then more likely to consider a range of interests and the electorate will have more faith in them, an overlapping identity between specific MPs and constituents is no guarantee of truer representation.

### The performance of emotions in politics

Identity is also performative. We continually gesture to both ourselves and others about who we are, where our allegiances lie and to which groups we feel affiliated. These gestures are complex in that they may belie multiple and possibly conflictual or concealed senses of who one is behind a cohesive presentation which may shift according to whom one is with. For this reason to explain how emotion enters into political work, we will reflect on specific interaction, rather than think abstractly as if divorced from everyday experience, drawing in particular on a visit we made to a specific constituency in Scotland. Over a two-day period of collaborative ethnography we engaged with the Scottish National Party (SNP) MP Chris Law and his four constituency staff – Hannah, Jerry, Mike and Lesley – shadowing, observing, interviewing and participating in their activities. Mike and Lesley are caseworkers, while Hannah is normally his researcher in Westminster and Jerry is the media officer. The physical constituency office in Dundee West is highly visible, positioned at a key intersection in the heart of the constituency. The glass fronted presentation communicates a transparency and an accessibility which felt exposing to the workers within at certain times, symbolic of the visceral and totemic contact between the world outside and one of its political representatives, mediated by the MPs' staff. One can look in at the bodies inside and they in turn can act as an audience to events outside.



The over-riding impression was that the work of the constituency office is always suffused with affect and emotion. By affect we mean the totality of feeling states experienced by participants and by emotion we mean affect that has come to make sense to the participants and which can potentially be communicated as sense (Wetherell 2012). However, affect, if conceived of as physiological resonance between interdependent bodies, also patterns human relationships. The meanings we ascribe to these patterns of physiological resonances are communicated

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<sup>9</sup> Interviewed by Emma Crewe, May 2012.

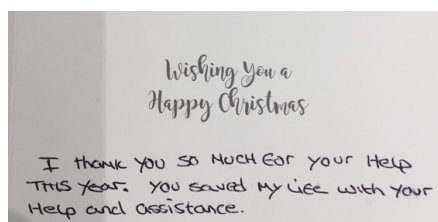


through the vehicle of emotion. Thus, conscious experience is patterned unconsciously through emotionally saturated themes, in this case of constituency work and how identities are constructed, and it is these which we will try to briefly explore below.

The question of identity is central here because so much political life is constructed around issues of belonging. Constituents present their cases with the hope that the staff responding to them will understand i.e., identify with their concerns and difficulties. The MP and his staff in this particular office, work hard to convey this understanding and identification. To 'identify with' is to feel a sense of alliance with and to find one's own experience in the experience of another. It is the sense of I am like you and you are like me. The implicit contract involves the mutual protection of self-interests for the public good. If you vote for me then your interests will be recognised and taken care of. However what stands for the public good is highly contestable and a matter for ongoing negotiation. Issues of identity reveal the dynamic of control involved in the formation of selves. An adequate sense of control is necessary for a feeling of security and safety. Identities are often fought over when issues of security and safety and thus control, are at stake (Marris 1969).

These ongoing processes of identification appeared psychologically demanding on constituency staff required as they are to engage with disturbances and challenges in the community which may also come to represent a failure of the state. For example, we heard that 50% of presentations to the constituency offices were mental health related. When we visited the caseworkers reported that they were dealing with 125 live constituency cases. In effect this means that wider individual, family and sociological disturbances, embodied in the constituents and their individual histories and concerns, express themselves through the conduit of the constituency offices. As mentioned previously, issues of control link with issues of identity. To belong securely is to feel potentially safer and in possession of a greater degree of control over the vicissitudes of life. Turning to the MP and his staff during a time of crisis, is an attempt to negotiate a further degree of control and thus safety. This expression of sociological disturbance is experienced through the feeling states of the office staff.

Consider the emotional work involved in the following three cases. A man pointedly stands just outside the constituency office looking up at a neighbouring tower block through binoculars. This man is suicidal and communicating his disturbance in a directly emotional way to the constituency staff within. From behind the window the staff find themselves interpreting the meaning of this spectacle as a communication of suicidal intent. There is a strong invitation here for the watching staff to resonate with the



performed anxiety and emotional complexes (Burkitt 1969). These might involve emotions such as guilt and anger since these are often dominant themes in situations involving suicide both completed and threatened. The staff here are being 'invited' by the man with the binoculars, to feel disturbed as an attempt to force action or recognition.

Here we see the politics of emotion at its most raw and played out as a complex power relation with the constituency office. The performance of his distress before the audience behind the office window evokes an emotional response and potential political leverage.



An elderly constituent frequently wanders into the office to complain of seemingly minor issues, such as displaced paving slabs. He takes time and attention, but the staff find a way of coming alongside him and see him as lonely; more emotional work which requires tactful handling. Wider social difficulties around bereavement, loneliness and alienation are played out through the office, not necessarily as open communications but in indirect and complex ways which require understanding and sense making. The paving slab issue here is a symbolic communication of lack of control and insecurity that masks loneliness and alienation. The paving slab, a piece of broken community artefact, acts as a means of forming a relationship with the MP's office. Similarly, a constituent with a psychosis presenting with a case which revolves around accusatory and bizarre delusional beliefs, requires 70 emails involving 12 different organisations. The presenting problem again masks underlying needs to belong and to be held in mind. The above three narratives indicate again the function of the office as a conduit for the disturbances of the wider community. These disturbances are processed emotionally by the office staff who are continually affected and having to make sense of the presenting situations.

The volume of cases necessitates triaging and it seems that the construction of urgency in this situation is formed in relation to the quality of anxiety presented. Emotionally challenging situations in which constituents present their concerns aggressively or disturbingly need much time to process. There is more work involved in maintaining an identification with the concerns of a hostile or disturbed constituent. Attitudes towards a case can shift remarkably as cases develop unforeseen nuances and these attitudes are communicated with emotional meaning. This work is not just about dealing with the turbulence of others, but navigating the emotions summoned up for the MP's constituency staff. So, the 'mood' in the office corresponds with the 'mood' presented. Cases presented come charged with affect and this affect communicates directly to the bodies of the MP and staff through processes of physiological resonance, identification and arousal. Since they work to form a collective identity, the mood of the office arises through affectual resonance. The making of practical judgments is necessarily imbued with emotion. So, the office can feel sad, angry, anxious, grateful, happy, or disturbed according to who walks through the door or what comes through the screen or phone.

Emotion is at work here and has to be made sense of in order to represent the constituents. The constituents' cases arrive with an affectual tone which is translated into emotion as the process becomes imbued with meaning. Political representation is thus a politics of affect (Sarraf 2019, Massumi 2015). The making of practical judgments and the taking of positions is necessarily imbued with emotion. Emotion here is essentially relational and political in that the feeling states of the staff and their MP emerge through their interaction with themselves and the world around them (Burkitt 1969). These feeling states are richly communicative and form a key quality in how decisions and attitudes are taken.

### The politics of affect

Like Sara Ahmed we view emotions as relational; neither just individually felt nor just socially and politically constructed: 'So emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.' (2014: 10). This is clearly expressed in the relationships between an MP and their staff. Any correspondence sent out by these staff goes in the

name of the MP. The staff of this MP, Chris Law explained how they all act and perform as Chris but in slightly different ways. Their backgrounds – whether as civil servants, in business or as political party members – gave them each a unique way of communicating. In a complex twist of modern politics in the UK, MPs' staff represent MPs representing their constituents. All staff working in this constituency office of Dundee West recognised the construction of a collective MP through their own collaboration in representing the latter. Thus, the voluminous email traffic needs responding to as if it were the MP themselves responding. The MP themselves will come to represent a social object (Mead 1934) in the sense that they come to stand in the public's eye for something larger than their own individuality (e.g., representation) although that individuality may well express both party and personal political ideology and its branding. An ongoing process of imaginary anticipations and identifications takes place and is embodied affectually in which the constituency staff are able to form a collective in which 'We' and 'I' become fused both through the persona of the MP and the personae of their staff. The MP evokes the social object of representation and by extension his staff do the same by their active work in performing the collective 'We'. Representation is therefore linked with identification, the latter of which is an essentially emotional process involving as it does an acute sensitivity to issues of belonging or the processes of inclusion and exclusion which concern their constituents. The more the MP can extend this sense of We identification, the more successful he or she will be.

The work of forming a we collective through the vehicle of the MP's and party's identity may exert pressures on the sense of self. Not everything is possible to say and so private concerns may build without expression. The collective identity has to be maintained and fosters cohesiveness, but this cohesiveness may conceal the ongoing work of negotiating different perspectives which can lead to feeling overwhelmed and the need for a confidante. Loneliness in this type of work may arise when the capacity to lead a private life is difficult, as implied by Snyder: "The choice to be in public, depends on the ability to retain a private sphere of life. We are free only when it is we ourselves who draw the line between when we are seen and when we are not seen" (2017: 86).

The anger towards the MP expressed when he/she fails to transform constituents' lives is felt by the staff as well. So, gratitude from those who have been helped takes on significance for staff. The emotional tenor of the office is further understood by the appearance of the front window where a range of colourful and positive Thankyou cards form a partial screen for those within. Being thanked is an important experience for the constituency office and again an indication of the continual emotional work they are obliged to perform through their contact with the powerless, despairing and challenging amongst their constituents. The Thankyou process also supports the process of representation through identification. Thankyous foster the alliances necessary for mutual identification and collectivity remarked upon in the first section. The Thankyou affirms the mutual recognition and support required for the electability of the MP. It is a vote of confidence in the MP and emotion is the vehicle of this gesture. The message is 'I am grateful for what you have done for me' and when received has the sense of an invitation to mutual identification and alliance building with the sense of 'you're one of us'. It is essential that MP's and their staff are able to identify with their constituents in order to



understand them. This identificatory process is not a passive process but also has to be performed as emotional communication. The MP and his staff have to work at the performance of mutual understanding and identification by pressing the flesh and chewing the proverbial tobacco.

As if to provide a counterpoint, the washroom provides an image of evacuation and detoxification with a formidable array of air fresheners, insecticide, antibacterial agents and a fly swot. It is as if the disturbing emotion which reaches the office from the wider community might unconsciously seek to be expurgated if not adequately assimilated through the Thankyou processes. We are not suggesting this observation as a generalisable truth for all MPs' offices but rather as a way of drawing attention to the possibility that intense affect may seek release or expression through displacement or catharsis.



As the feeling tone becomes recognisable as emotion, humour comes to serve as a mitigation of everyday anxieties and concerns. Humour is a condensed style of communication. It speaks of the taboo and of underlying power related themes which may betray themselves beyond the speaker's conscious intention. Thus, on a visit to attend an opening of a leisure facility, a rival politician (over a foot shorter in size to his rival) made two jokes in relation to his 'standing', an ostensible reference to the difference in height.. This is accompanied by a cameo act of ducking under the ceremonial opening ribbon. The joke here communicates a political rivalry within the constraints of a specific public space where allegiances may be divided and sought after. The humour acts as a catharsis for the affectual political tension but is double-edged and ambiguous.

A repeated theme was of speaking from "the heart". This suggested an apolitical position (in the sense of individualised without interdependency) which was nonetheless intensely politicised. The use of the heart organ here has here come to be understood as a form of self-evident authenticity. It speaks of a correspondence between values and action but may be unconscious of any social formation. The claim in speaking from the heart is for an authenticity that can be communicated emotionally. The effective performance of emotional authenticity is a compelling tool in political life and a direct invitation to identify with that which is being expressed through an emotional resonance with the speaker as in the following comment made about a fellow MP: "I didn't know what he was talking about but he sounded brilliant." This remark from an MP suggests that performance of emotion counts for much. In this sense emotion is seen as potentially political for the heart is seen as an authentic position. This sense of emotion is therefore indivisible from that of felt values. If felt values are expressed through the vehicle of emotion, then an idea of authenticity arises. This 'authenticity' however masks the attitudinal dispositions and interdependencies formed through social identifications and power relations through which it is formed (Taylor 1991).

## Multi-disciplinary conclusions

We began with the premise that democracy takes shape in different ways according to its historical and socio-cultural setting. Even within one country you can find contrasting views on politicians: in West Bengal, India, they are seen as dirty, unprincipled and corrupt (Ruud 2001: 117), but Michelutti found in North India that Yadav leaders are a martial race, with a historical link to Krishna fighting for social justice (2008: 178-83). That doesn't mean that generalisations are rendered impossible by local specificity. What can we conclude about the performance of MPs representing their constituencies across the world? It is clear that much more is going on than the common reductionist explanations of MPs as representatives merely furthering their electoral interest or fulfilling a role. Of course, MPs try and win elections in their constituency, so everything they do must be contributing to that, but since they spend huge amounts of time on small number of constituents with chronic problems, and even on non-voters (children, asylum seekers), there must be more to constituency work than narrow political self-interest. Political representatives are themselves symbols; they are a *substitute* for voters, they are part of the symbolic construction of politics without which we could have no conception of political reality. They connect localities with the nation which partly explains why MPs having a 'local' identity has become so important. In this view representation is about organising the world rather than just reflecting it and 'the politician must possess the essentially aesthetic talent of being able to represent political reality in new and original ways' (Street 2004: 444-5).

What they are expected to do in their constituency depends on context. In Bangladesh they give gifts, in Ethiopia they give speeches, but in the UK they give social and emotional labour. The UK has experienced a long period of austerity, leaving all but those in affluent households feeling neglected and the failures of the state show up in the constituency office where MPs' caseworkers act as the collective representative and attempt to heal or reverse these failures. However, the social and emotional labour apparent in the work of UK MPs may also be generalisable cross culturally; although expressed and performed idiosyncratically through different contexts. In other words, emotion may be seen as a relational feature of all constituency work. Emotion communicates the qualities inherent in the processes of identity formation ubiquitous in political work.

The question of emotion has often been neglected or overlooked in political science literature on politicians. Perhaps this is because it is often essentialised and seen as a quality of individual behaviour as opposed to performative, communicative and arising through the relational. A fuller understanding of the work of representation can be developed if an multi-disciplinary approach is taken – and here we have tried to interweave the perspectives of political anthropology, pragmatic philosophy and group analytic theory. Our view is that emotion and its performance are fundamental to political life and that we miss something important if we fail to recognise this and the connection with how identities are constructed through political processes. The presence of emotion is not only discernible in exceptional circumstances or when 'feelings run high' but an omnipresent quality in all human relating and thus through all political work. Therefore, we argue that it is erroneous to separate rational from emotional process and more helpful and pragmatic to view them as mutually constitutive and arising at the same time in political life.



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