

Chapter 8: Parliament

Problem scenario

At the 2024 General Election, Amy Sanderson was re-elected as the Conservative MP for Nanchester. She was first elected to represent the constituency in 2010 and is pleased to be continuing as their MP.

Consider the implications of and how Amy Sanderson MP should react to the following events:

- In December 2024, one of the major employers in Nanchester, Sliver Chips plc has announced that it is closing its factory located in your constituency. Sliver Chips produces components for the leading manufacturers of mobile phones and blame the closure on the lack of labour with the relevant skills and education. On hearing the news, some of your constituents went to Sanderson, their local MP, for advice.
- In the last Queen's Speech, Her Majesty announced that the government intends to introduce a bill into Parliament that will require businesses to register all foreign workers onto a central database held by the Home Office. The government's intention is that any new foreign employee must be registered within three working days of starting employment. Several backbench MPs, including Sanderson profoundly disagree with this proposal, believing that it serves no useful purpose, is very illiberal and is contrary their political beliefs as Conservatives.

From this scenario there are two issues: first, how Sanderson can respond as the MP for Nanchester to Silver Chips plc's announcement that it is closing its factory in her constituency. The other issue is how she can respond to the proposals from the government to require all foreign workers to register onto a database. Each is considered in turn.

(1) Closure of Sliver Chips plc

As the MP for Nanchester, Amy Sanderson is responsible for representing the interests of that constituency so she should listen to their concerns and make the government aware of them. This reflects the link between an MP and their constituency that the first-past-the-post system can achieve, and how MPs can raise the concerns of their constituency in Parliament.¹ Although as a backbench MP there is very little that an MP can do directly for those likely to lose their jobs as that is a matter for the government. Her role is to pressurise the government to act for her constituents.

When the announcement was made, this could be a major news story. As it is not a matter of legislation, an MP's primary method of getting the government's response would be through asking questions of ministers. This could include Prime Minister's Questions or request an urgent question in the House of Commons. However, whether to grant the urgent question is a decision for The Speaker, who has discretion whether or not to grant the request.

It may also be that a Select Committee, may consider the matter considering that Sliver Chips is leaving due to a lack of available skills. This suggests that there could be a policy problem which lies behind Sliver Chip's decision. A Select Committee could gather the facts, make recommendations in a report to which the government must respond.

(2) The Proposal to Require Foreign Workers to Register

If Sanderson believes that she has the support of other MPs, she could raise her concerns informally with government ministers. Particularly, as Sanderson has no intentions of becoming a government minister, as a backbench MP, if she wished, she could strongly criticise this policy in the media. Whether it would have any effect would depend on how many other MPs agree with her, the size of the government's majority and how strongly it felt about the issue.

If the government went and introduced a Bill, the Foreign Workers Bill into Parliament containing

¹ It must be stated that other electoral systems that deliver one MP per constituency, such as the alternative vote, or the supplementary vote are just as able to deliver this MP-constituency link.

this proposal, Sanderson could vote against it at second reading. However, whether she actually would do so, would depend on a range of factors. It is possible that the bill could be amended, making the legislation more palatable. However, if an MP may feels so strongly about an issue, then it could be that no amount of amendments can satisfy them. This may lead to Sanderson rebelling against the government. Whether you choose to do so may depend on the size of the government's majority. If it's large, then an MP can rebel safe in the knowledge that the bill will pass anyway, but satisfied that they have raised their concerns. This is more difficult if the government has a very small majority as it could raise questions about whether the government still has the confidence of the House of Commons.

If the Bill is granted a second reading, then MPs such as Sanderson, opposed to it could look to move amendments to the legislation. The requirement that all new foreign workers are registered within three working days appears particularly onerous. Sanderson could attempt to pass an amendment that extends this period, to make the requirements less demanding on business.

It is unlikely that Sanderson's amendment without government support, will succeed in the House of Commons. However, it is possible that the issue could be raised by peer in the House of Lords. It may have a far greater chance of success because the government lacks a majority in the Lords. If the proposal has been extensively criticised, the government may move an amendment in the House of Lords itself.

Overall, this scenario shows two different aspects of being an MP: first, the role of an MP as a representative, giving voice to the concerns of her constituents, and secondly, the legislative role of MPs. In their respective ways, both of these roles involve scrutinising the government.