

# Westminster Diary



Dr *Nick Walker* from the School of Chemistry was chosen to participate in the Royal Society's MP–Scientist pairing scheme. Nick was matched with the MP for Bristol West, Valerie Davey. As part of the scheme, he had to 'shadow' Valerie for four days in the House of Commons during early November. He also had to keep a diary of his adventure.

Here are some extracts ...

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## Day 1

*So, here it is, day one of my adventure into the heart of British government. This is my opportunity to see how parliamentary democracy works (or doesn't). A chance to better understand the decision-making that governs my life.*

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## Day 3

I wake, exhausted. I skip breakfast and head towards parliament, accompanied by one of my scientist colleagues. We intercept another colleague just before arriving – he is heading in the wrong direction. He has forgotten his security pass and was returning to the hotel to collect it. We have had a bewildering and exhausting few days and I'm not surprised that we are all feeling the strain.

We file into the room for the House of Commons Select Committee session on reproductive technologies. For an hour, two scientists are quizzed over the state of reproductive technologies. They are asked about current systems

of regulation and whether new ethical issues are arising. Like yesterday's Select Committee meeting, it is breathtakingly tedious. The panellists are incredible, however, staying interested for two hours without being overtaken by ambivalence.

Afterwards I have some time to explore the Palace of Westminster a little more. The interior stonework is sensational, both intricate and elegant. But it is not really in keeping with the wallpaper in the committee rooms and I doubt that the same person was responsible for both. I find my way to a small display where there is a live video feed from the Commons. It is Prime Minister's questions (PMQ) time and Tony Blair is fielding questions from Michael Howard. I stop and observe carefully. Watching the posturing of the debate I am grateful that two sword lengths divide the opposing benches, even to this day. It looks like they might otherwise come to blows, such is the row. It's in marked contrast to the sessions I've seen in the Chamber so far, which have all been so civilised. Howard and Blair are shouting at each other with sweat pouring off their brows. They can barely mask their contempt for each other. →

→ At the end of PMQs I am due to meet my MP – Valerie Davey, the Honourable Member for Bristol West – at the Vote Office in Portcullis House. She will have come straight from the Chamber and given the heat of the debate, I am a little worried about what kind of mood she will be in. She arrives in the company of Simon, her office assistant. We are to have lunch together, which is a curiously interrupted affair. Forty-five seconds after we have introduced ourselves the Division Bell rings and Valerie has to go and vote. She rejoins us as we sit down and we begin to discuss the daily routine of an MP. Claire Short is eating at the next table. At this point, the Division Bell rings again. Valerie has to vote once more. I begin to talk to Simon about his work in the office but Valerie proves able to go between the cafeteria and the Commons with unexpected speed. She is back within a few minutes. It must be very difficult to digest your food as an MP! I wonder how she retains both composure and good spirits. She is enthusiastic about this afternoon's activities.

We start by attending the launch of a Dignity at Work initiative. This project involves the collaboration of employers (including BT, Legal and General and British Aerospace), unions (Amicus) and government and seeks to permanently establish a culture of respect in the British workplace. Mandy Telford, former president of the National Union of Students, makes a presentation on behalf of Amicus. She is a powerful and authoritative speaker. The launch goes well. Next we are to meet six civil servants from Tanzania who have come to Britain on a fact-finding mission, by

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## Day 2 (House of Lords)

*A Lady goes to walk between the woolsack and the table. There are shouts of 'Order, Order!' from the benches and the Speaker yells 'Don't walk between the table and the woolsack!'. The attendant tells us that the Spiritual Lords (bishops) are on the left of the house while the Temporal Lords are on the right. You are not allowed to cross between them.*

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which they hope to improve communications within their own parliamentary system. Meeting them is a particular thrill for me. I completed three months of voluntary work in Tanzania during 1999. Valerie also undertook voluntary work there while a teacher and is a member of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Tanzania, so we share a common interest. Unfortunately, we have only just progressed beyond introductions when the Division Bell rings (again) and the meeting has to be cut short.

Valerie later takes me to an RSPB event. We talk about science, policy and the recent difficulties of both politicians and scientists in maintaining the public trust. Valerie would like my help in presenting questions and understanding policy on science issues. I reply I would be delighted to assist in more constructive decision-making within parliament.

I say goodbye to Valerie and head over to the House of Commons to see a bill on domestic violence debated. The few MPs in attendance are arguing over incredibly technical points – I don't understand what is going on. Around 6 o'clock the debate takes a new turn. The 'big guns' walk in. Harriet Harman and David Blunkett (Home Secretary) have assumed the front bench on the government side of the House. The opposition benches fill up and they kick things off with a Point of Order. It turns out that a new policy

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## Day 4

*I watch the Speaker make his entrance to the House of Commons. The Serjeant at Arms requests that all 'Strangers' (that's me) remove their hats. I have no hat to remove, but I come away with some memorable experiences.*

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motion has been released to the press that morning – in advance of having been presented to parliament. David Blunkett had said he was going to announce the motion to the House during the third reading of the Domestic Violence Bill. The opposition is mad because he hasn't and now there won't be time. Blunkett comes back aggressively. He says the opposition have been filibustering – slowing down a debate with technical objections in order to drag events toward some other tactically favourable outcome. Things seem to get unpleasant with remarkable speed.

No conclusion is reached quickly. The Division Bell rings and everybody is summoned all over again, this time to debate whether the House should meet in private. I don't know or understand any of the technicalities behind this latest motion. I'm tired, and I've had enough. I've had a good day, but I think now is a good time to go back to my hotel. ■

