

Would you work for these men?

Or would you be any happier with their real-life counterparts? **Zenab Short** looks at the ups and downs of life with the politicians



Democracy in action... the holy trinity of Yes, Prime Minister

PHOTOGRAPH: BBC

Trendy city dwellers recently voted Tory MP Boris Johnson the epitome of cool, alongside Hollywood star Brad Pitt, fashion label Diesel and upmarket lingerie brand Agent Provocateur. Admittedly this was before his magazine's Scousal abuse, but it still shows that politics is changing. Could it be better to be a party political animal than just a party animal?

"I've got the best job in the world, for the best boss in the world", says Johnson's secretary, Melissa Crawshaw-Williams. "He's an incredibly busy person, and I keep the show going for him. I open the 100 letters and 50 emails that he receives daily, and I'm webmaster of his blog site. People fall over themselves to work here, because it looks good on their CV. But they soon find out working for an MP is not glamorous - it's extremely hard work".

Diane Davidson, secretary to Liberal Democrat MP, Alastair Carmichael, agrees. "You have to be motivated to work on your own, as your boss is always out and about," she says. "I draft letters for his approval, answer the phone, and manage his diary. There is a huge volume of work and you can't leave it to pile up, because you need to

ensure your MP is always seen in a good light."

Technology has changed the nature of the job perhaps more for politicians' staff than for anyone else. Previously, their employers could only be contacted by the laborious process of letter-writing. Email has made them far more accessible. "People are very interested in health and the environment, for example," says Caroline Balcon, secretary to Conservative MP David Cameron. "They contact their MPs in much greater numbers than before - which has a knock-on effect on me because, as my MP's gatekeeper, I'm the one who deals with constituents' letters, emails and phone calls."

All 659 MPs employ their own staff - whose fates depend on their MP's success, or otherwise, at

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election time. If they lose their seats, their employees lose their jobs. "MPs' staff fly by the seat of their pants", says Alex Hilton, researcher to Labour MP Linda Perham and assistant editor at www.W4MP.org. There are other problems too. "Along with the high staff turnover, there isn't great career progression," says Hilton. "MPs have a budget of £70,000 for three staff, and they can only promote you so far. After that you have to move on and out, if you are ambitious."

Secretarial duties can range from the usual typing and shorthand tasks to undertaking parliamentary research, to being case workers, tackling complicated issues for constituents. There are also positions as senior researchers, senior secretaries, executive PAs, parliamentary assistants and office managers, although according to Hilton, these titles all mean much the same thing. "It's unusual to have a sharp demarcation of roles for support staff," he says. "Because there is only a small team, you are usually expected to pitch in and do everything."

Sandra Lloyd, office manager to Lib Dem MP Dr Evan Harris, is based in Dr Harris's constituency rather than Westminster and likens her job to that of a social worker. "It

is very stressful, dealing with constituents' problems," she says. "People think I am rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous all day long, but this place is more like a Citizen's Advice Bureau. Interns come here thinking it's going to be a bed of roses, but you need to be mature and resilient to deal with all the problems people walk through the door with."

Many support jobs in the Westminster village are not advertised, because the place still operates to some extent on a "who you know, not what you know" basis. Peter Vines, office manager to Tory MP John Gummer, advises hopefuls to read House magazine, the in-house magazine of the Palace of Westminster. He also suggests looking in political weeklies like *New Statesman* and the *Spectator*. The three main parties also advertise vacancies on www.W4MP.org. Other ways in are to send your CV to the Whips' office of your preferred party or to keep an eye on jobs advertised in newspapers like the *Evening Standard* and the *Guardian*. But if you want to work in the constituency rather than in Westminster, those jobs will be advertised in the local press.

Alternatively, target your application intelligently to your own

MP, MEP or local council. You stand more chance if you are a member of the party you want to work for. You could also get your foot in the door by offering to work as a volunteer for your local MP. There are also other secretarial and administrative jobs in Parliament, besides working for an MP, details of which can be found at www.parliament.uk.

It's even possible to climb from a supporting position to the very top of the political heap. Foreign secretary Jack Straw began his parliamentary career as researcher to MP Barbara Castle, and ex-speaker of the House Betty Boothroyd started her political career as a secretary. Researcher Alex Hilton plans to stand at the next election as a prospective MP. But he advises caution. "The Westminster village is a very small world, so don't alienate people on your way up. You need to demonstrate discretion and loyalty." And he confirms that you don't have to be push to get into politics.

"You don't even have to wear a suit," he says. "Working in Westminster is fun, there's a buzz about the place. You can just get your job done and go home, or you can really get involved - and that will get you noticed. You can go places here if you want to; you can really make a splash."