

MESSAGE FROM TONY LLOYD, PLP CHAIR, TO LABOUR MPs, RE PROPOSAL OF A POOLED, PARLIAMENTARY RESEARCH UNIT FOR LABOUR MPs

Dear Colleague

At Monday's PLP meeting I set out a proposal to establish a pooled, parliamentary research unit for Labour MPs. I wanted to write to you to set this out in more detail, so we can discuss this further when we return and, if we decide this is the right approach, take steps to establish such a unit.

As I mentioned at the PLP meeting, there is increasing interest in the establishment of Labour MPs pooling their *parliamentary* resources to fund a pooled parliamentary research unit, along the lines of the Conservative MPs' establishment of the Parliamentary Resources Unit ('PRU') <https://www.parliamentaryresources.com/>, but tailored to meet the needs of Labour MPs and fit within our parliamentary resources and practices.

What is the PRU?

Any proposal would need to learn the lessons from the Conservatives' establishment of the PRU, which a couple of dozen Tory MPs came together to establish in the late 1990s as a response to losing the correspondence capacity of the civil service, but which has now flourished to a pooled research unit of 20+ staff which services the majority of their parliamentary party. The PRU website www.parliamentaryresources.com acts as the hub for all services. I understand the PRU model is now also being incorporated by the Liberal Democrats.

By pooling resources the PRU enables MPs to dispense with the necessity of writing to government departments to ascertain policy positions. Frankly, when the Conservatives set up a similar unit, Tory MPs wanted an appropriate response to correspondence from their perspective – they did not want their constituents bombarded with ministerial correspondence that reflected the position of the Labour government.

According to its website *'the Parliamentary Resources Unit is a non-profit making, shared service based in the Houses of Parliament, and provides briefing, research, correspondence and related support to 150 Conservative MPs and front bench peers wholly, exclusively and necessarily in support of their Parliamentary duties.'*

What would this unit do?

With the PRU MPs subscribe to one level of service costing them £3,300 + VAT per year from parliamentary resources (from the staffing budget or office costs). This buys them the following services, which are accessed through a secure website:

- Standard letters (this is the key service: policy letters, all approved by the front bench, on everything from postcard campaigns to a more tailored reply to specialist requests. PRU estimate they have up to 500 'live' letters at any one time). These

letters are written by staff with policy expertise and working links to the pressure groups that generate many of these campaign-based materials.

- Ready to use briefings in chamber for all orals, topical debates and legislation
- Questions – both support in disseminating questions and suggesting sound and consistent supplementaries
- Legislative commentaries and briefings
- Briefings ahead of lobbies of parliament
- Debate packs – including the positions of stakeholders and opinion formers
- Policy guidance on EDMs (whether or not the issue enjoys front bench support)
- Speeches – with MPs working with policy specialists
- MPs may also draw on a range of bespoke services, albeit within practical limits, by contacting policy specialists to assist them with specific issues.

All Conservative Peers were also given access to the service through payment through Cranborne money. This is something I will investigate with the Labour Peers Group if we decide this is the right approach for Labour MPs.

Essentially this means the PRU covers the *parliamentary* briefing aspect of the PLP's work but frankly takes them to a whole new level of thoroughness, meticulousness, and quality.

What would it NOT do?

The proposed unit would offer a parliamentary resource, its staff would be MPs' staff, but on a pooled basis. This would not be a party political, election-based resource. Political briefings, campaign support and other key political / campaign functions would continue to be delivered by the PLP Office. The PLP Office must retain its role as a political resource for Labour MPs, as well as fulfilling its historic role in the administration of the PLP and the Parliamentary Committee.

IPSA/Kelly-approved

The Committee on Standards in Public Life conducted a review of MPs' expenses and allowances, under the chairmanship of Sir Christopher Kelly, and their report of November 2009 endorsed the work of the Unit, subject to the same audit regime being introduced for other activities in support of MPs.

IPSA also approved 'payments for bought-in services and pooled staffing resources':
8.12 Staffing assistance may alternatively be obtained through bought-in services or from pooled staffing resources.

The PRU model is therefore sanctioned by IPSA and avoids political work, focussing entirely on parliamentary work. It ensures that it remains within the scope of the IPSA rules by not providing press releases, campaign packs or working on policy development.

PRU Staff are treated as MPs' staff – they are given full grey passes attached to the PRU, access to the parliamentary pension scheme and IT is provided by PICT as if for a Member.

Proposal

It is proposed we establish a similar, pooled service to provide parliamentary briefings for Labour MPs, paid out of parliamentary expenses (from the staffing budget or office costs). A crucial point is that this service is for Labour MPs to maximise the capacity of their parliamentary budgets to improve the service provided by their parliamentary offices. It is

not a matter for the Labour Party as such, but naturally the Parliamentary Labour Party office will want to ensure it does not duplicate a parliamentary service provided elsewhere.

A new service would work with the new team of political advisers to the Shadow Cabinet and the Party/Leader's Policy Unit on getting the most up to date information ahead of parliamentary debates and events and could provide greater support in writing responses to postcard campaigns and writing briefings for debates in Westminster Hall, etc.

The staff of the new unit would be keyed into the Shadow Cabinet's political team, but explicitly relating to parliamentary matters.

All in all I believe there is great merit in us moving to this model, but this will only work if there is a demand for this service from Labour MPs.

If you are interested in this idea, can you please email me on plpresourcecentre@parliament.uk and express an interest. Indeed, I would also be grateful if you could email me if you are not interested.

In September I will be organising a seminar to discuss this proposal so that we can decide collectively whether this is a good approach for Labour MPs.

I look forward to speaking to you then but in the meantime I hope you get a decent break.

Best wishes

Tony Lloyd MP
PLP Chair