

Whips Reflect Hilary Armstrong



4 July 2023

Biographical details

Parliamentary history

1987 – 2010: MP for North West Durham

2010 – present: Member of the House of Lords

Whips' Office career

2001—2006: Chief whip

Hilary Armstrong was interviewed by Tim Durrant and Beatrice Barr on 4 July 2023 for the Institute for Government's Whips Reflect series.

Baroness Armstrong discusses [\[.....\]handling contentious legislation, the welfare of MPs and influencing reshuffles.](#)

Beatrice Barr (BB): Let's start with your experience going into the Whips' Office. Am I right in thinking that you hadn't been a whip before you became chief whip?

Hilary Armstrong (HA): No, never been a whip. My father [Ernest Armstrong, MP for North West Durham 1964–87] was. My father was my predecessor in the constituency, and I used to come down here [to Westminster] a lot. Well, I used to come in here a lot, because he was elected the year I started college down here, so I would come in every week and see him. He wasn't a whip while I was coming in to see him in those first three years, but he did become a whip after that. So I used to hear a little bit about whipping.

But no, I'd never been a whip. What happened was, when I was appointed, the prime minister [Tony Blair] said, "I want to change the perception of whips, from being always bullying, intimidating, etc. For me it is essentially a political job, and I know you're political to your fingertips." He was my [constituency] neighbour. I'd gone for the seat when he went for it in Sedgefield, so we knew each other very well, and he knew that I would be into political argument and debate, and that's what he wanted. That is, therefore, why he always had women, once he started to think about it. He always had women chief whips. Because he was trying to make a different argument.

For me, when I first went in, the best thing about it was I was running a team. Because in politics you don't get the chance to do that. And that was what I'd got used to doing. I always worked in that way, where you spot talent and you work out what's the best way of growing that within your team. There were people who'd been in the Whips' Office for quite a long time, so there were always people around who knew the detail, who knew the turgid way in which the procedure works, and all that sort of stuff. And that was fine. I never felt that I needed to understand that in any great depth. I needed to have a handle on it obviously, but then the other thing was that the people who run the Whips' Office from the civil service are amazing. My PPS [principal private secretary] used to say to me, "I work for you 51% of the time, and for everybody else, 49%." And he would make sure that the conventions around relationships between the main parties – not just the two parties – and we would discuss how I should be handling them, in terms of making sure that the constitutional things were attended to. Stuff like opposition days. And in those days, of course, whips appointed [select] committee members and all that sort of stuff in consultation with, for us, the Parliamentary Labour Party. So we did a lot more than just what people outside would see as the whips' job.

But there was the balance between the backbenchers, knowing and understanding what they're up to; and the government, what the government wants to get through, where government ministers are, where they are with their legislation, and what the prime minister is looking to do. So I had the responsibility to actually make sure the manifesto was being fulfilled. I had to go in and say to the prime minister, "there are these items left in the manifesto that we haven't touched yet, and you've only got two years to go."

That was the chief whip's job too. I had been on the national executive committee (NEC) for quite a long time beforehand in other roles, in other ways. I'd been elected when we were in opposition, in the women's section, when we had that. And then when we reformed that after we got into parliament, I was still on [the NEC], but then I got on there as an *ex officio* because I was chief whip. Again, all of that was important about seeing the breadth of the role.

So I hadn't been a whip, but as I say, you are surrounded by people who know what the job is about. And the essence of it is, in terms of your own backbenchers, how do you make sure you know them well enough – the team knows them well enough – to know who influences them, who is likely to be able to persuade them if they're upset about something, and so on and so forth.

The other big thing when we came in was that we had a huge majority, and they coped with that by sending people away for a week or so, so they could spend a week or two weeks in their constituency. And the problem that had back here was that, it was when local radio was more important than local telly, believe it or not, but they would go on local radio and make commitments on things which then they found quite difficult to unravel. I think Ann Taylor [chief whip 1998–2001] had stopped that too eventually, but I certainly was not going to have that. Half of their job was here, half was in the constituency, and it was about moving to that balance. Before then it had been very much more that 70% of the job was here and 30% in the constituency. I used to say to the backbenchers when we had them all together, "the important thing that you need to do is give yourself wriggle room, because if you make a definitive statement before you've heard any of the arguments about a piece of legislation that is coming down the track, you then have to find how you unravel that, or you're constantly in trouble." So it was a political job. Politics is all about compromise, all about what is the best you can get, rather than what's the perfect solution. One of the things I saw very early on was, how did I help people to actually manage that they were now spending a lot more time on local media than we ever had when I had come in, and that they needed not to be getting themselves in trouble over that.

BB: The breadth of it is astounding. I wonder, how much time did each of those things take up within your overall capacity?

HA: It varied with what else was going on here. I mean obviously, pre the Iraq War, to put it mildly, we were sort of busy. But the chief [whip] gets two special advisers who are very important because, certainly in those days, they were the link with the civil service around committees, around the size of committees, around how many you needed, around making sure you got a balanced regional split, and all of that. It took me a couple of weeks to appoint my SpAds [special advisers], just because I thought I had to have a fairly open process on that. I had No. 10, I had my civil service PPS [principal private secretary], saying, "we just need the SpAds, we need them," because they are so important in the process. And I didn't quite understand that until I got well into the job. But they were very important in the process in a way most SpAds aren't.

But in terms of time spent, for me, that was why the team was so important. There was a meeting of the whips before business every day, and that was always run by the deputy, but the deputy and I would have five minutes beforehand just to agree what we needed

to get on the table that day. He – I always had a male deputy [Keith Hill, 2001–03; Robert Ainsworth, 2003–07] – would go through what was going on and what he needed from people that day. But I would always be there. Then we would have a Wednesday morning meeting, which was the long meeting. That was the one that famously, in the old days, the Tories would have champagne and orange juice. And bacon sarnies I think.

We didn't do any of that, but that was when I used to say to the team, "I will tell you as much as I know as long as it doesn't end up in the papers. If it ends up in the papers, I will find out how, and somebody will be gone, but I will also stop being open." So I would tell them what was going on at cabinet. I would tell them what the anxieties were about stuff coming down the track at cabinet level. Then that became for them something that they had to begin to sound people out on, very early on. So if we thought it was going to be really contentious legislation, we would get the secretary of state in to the Wednesday morning meeting and they would go through what they wanted. We then, as whips, would work out what we thought were the pinch points, and each whip would have a group. They weren't necessarily their own region, but they would have a regional group, and they would also have a departmental group. They then needed to work out who were going to be problematic, how problematic, and whether we needed some bits shifted. The standing orders of the Parliamentary Labour Party said something like if there was three-line whip you were expected to vote with the whip. If you had any concerns, you had to speak to the minister involved, and you had to do everything possible to understand where that's coming from. So it didn't mean that you were going to be kicked out of the party, but you were meant to do all of that. There was a process that you were meant to follow.

So we would send people to see the relevant minister, whether it was on foundation hospitals or on tuition fees – those were two of the big ideological things that party members found difficult. Without naming names, I had a very good friend who was a cabinet minister doing one particular thing, and he would say, "oh, I had a really good conversation with so and so, and I'm sure they're going to be okay." But after they'd seen the secretary of state, or the minister of state, whichever we'd sent them to, the whip would then go and check them out. And every time they would say, "we had a lovely conversation, but no, I haven't changed my mind!" So that all used to go on, and I used to say that you've got to get to know your group really well, so have lunch with them, find out who it is that really makes a difference to them. Whoever their friends were in high places, they would then get a list from us and say, "right, Gordon, John – you need to see this group of people and we need them to be persuaded." And sometimes that worked, and sometimes it didn't.

BB: I'm so interested in how you go about building a team of whips that you can trust to do that, especially with the amount of confidence you place in them. Did you have much control over who your whips were? Were you able to handpick them at all?

HA: Well I didn't when I first went in, obviously, because they'd all been appointed. Or at least I don't think I was there when they were appointed. But in subsequent reshuffles, I would be expected, because there was a whips' book where they were expected to note how people performed in the chamber, whether they turned up for committees in time, whether they briefed backbenchers effectively. We would know all of that. The cabinet secretary would always pop into reshuffles to give a view on how they performed in the

ministry, but it was my job to say how they performed in the chamber and in committees. I was amazed at some people not doing a political chat as part of their team meeting, and that sort of thing. And if people didn't, I wanted to know why. I expected the whips to be involved in the team meetings, and I was pretty upset if cabinet ministers hadn't clocked that. So I would go and talk to them.

But I always had the view that the prime minister should see the whips as a training ground for ministerial work. So I insisted that at every reshuffle there was movement.

BB: Even if you really liked the whips?

HA: Yeah, even if they were very good I wanted them to be able to be moved. I only had a couple that didn't want to be moved. Actually, certainly with one of them, it was because he was a very good procedural whip and understood the procedure really well, so when he used to say, "I want to stay," I was okay with that. But mainly they wanted promotion. If you saw the whips that way and they knew that you were moving them on after a reshuffle, then they were going to be more likely to live within the rules. But if they thought you saw it as dumping ground where you just wanted to keep people quiet, that would not have been their response. That's my view anyway. I was militant about that being how you've got to treat whips.

And it was my job to train them up. I used to see all of them one to one on a very regular basis, and we would talk about where they were in terms of how they were developing. That sounds stupid but, you know, what they were getting from things, what they weren't getting from things. I remember one who was so desperately fed up that, although he was with a senior cabinet minister, they just never got involved politically and they didn't engage the team in political discourse. So I moved him to a job where I knew the cabinet minister had regular team meetings followed by a quick political team meeting when the civil servants weren't there. You had to think about those things and you had to work with them, about what it was that really moved them and motivated them and what they were interested in. Then you could suggest them when the prime minister was looking for particular people; the prime minister always used to come into reshuffle meetings with a list of the jobs that he felt were going to be important in the next period, and would say "I want good people to be in those places". So that was part of my job.

BB: Beyond reshuffles, what was your relationship like with No. 10?

HA: Oh, I had a good relationship. And that was used a bit against me afterwards, or at least it was when there was briefing going on about, "I want to be chief whip, I can do a better job." They used to say I was too close to No. 10, but for me it was always a balance. I had to know the backbenchers. Every morning I would pop into No. 10, because we moved – one of the demands of Tony when he appointed me was that we would move out of official No. 10 because he wanted the big room that had been the whips' room, the L-shaped room, he wanted that for the press. Once we had 24-hour telly you had to have a system that was able to respond. That was what used to make me fed up about people talking about sofa government, you didn't have the opportunity to do what previous prime ministers had done. If there was a crisis, yes you could call a cabinet committee meeting for tomorrow morning, or two days' time, and they could sort it out. When there was a news item, there had to be a government response to it. So, all of that

is going on as well, and so we moved. We actually moved just next door, and we called it No. 9. It was into where the Commonwealth Court had been, where they tried people from the Commonwealth. Anyway, we moved in there and one of my SpAds had the brilliant idea of calling it No. 9.

But I had a pass to get into No. 10, and I would pop into the political office every morning really, at some stage, and I would sometimes bump into the PM, sometimes not, and he would always say, “how are they all? How are the little darlings?” And then he would say, if there was anything coming up, “what are the numbers?” So we always had to be on top of the numbers, that was what he was interested in. And he always wanted to know where the arguments were around policies. Then he would go away and think about it and come back to me and say, “I’m talking to (whoever was the secretary of state) about how we deal with this particular issue.”

BB: What was your relationship with the leader of the House of Commons like?

HA: I had a very good relationship with some leaders, but then Robin Cook [2001–03] was a bit more tricky. Robin made my life quite difficult, but I never, ever would let him fall out with me. He wanted PR [proportional representation] and all of that sort of stuff and I always knew it was a row between where he wanted to be and what was going on, and all the rest of it. I saw when I was John Smith’s PPS [parliamentary private secretary] that Robin and a colleague were real rivals, and that came in between finding a way forward for a particularly difficult problem John wanted ideas to sort. Both had great brains, but that did not overcome their rivalry. I learned so much from this. So that helped me when I was working with Robin, that you don’t get intimidated by this brain that’s the size of the planet, you actually just get on with working things through and doing it.

I let him have things which were actually very awkward for the whips, like the change in [Commons sitting] hours [in 2005], and he felt he was getting one over on me then. I couldn’t care less really, except that I was worried about the welfare of some of the MPs, because I knew what happened. And I can tell you, having late nights where you knew you could find them was very useful! It was a welfare thing, never mind anything else, because you could find them when they were getting into trouble. The parliamentary estate has changed so much as well, but you always knew where you could find people. You would find them in the bar, in the tea room, in the library.

Once we had Portcullis [House] that changed, and once everybody had an office that changed. When we first changed the hours I had someone, a decent lad, but he came to see me. We’d only had this new system for about a month, and he said, “I’ve just got to tell you, I got drunk last night in Trafalgar Square, I fell over, I’ve lost my wallet and had to be put in a taxi home, and I’ve no idea if anybody saw it, or who’s found my wallet.” I don’t think the police had been involved, but whatever. It was that sort of thing that the whips worried about because it was people who weren’t going home at seven, they were having to find life for themselves at seven. And if they lost the structure, for some of them, that was a bit risky.

We had women who had moved their families to the constituency in order to be with them, because by the time I was being elected that was seen as an important thing, that you lived in the constituency. But then they were down here and their kids were up there.

I used to go into the ladies' room and they'd be in tears, because here they were finished at seven, but it was still too far to get home, and the kids didn't understand why they weren't there anymore. So there were all sorts of different things going on around things like that which you have to deal with.

Tim Durrant (TD): How do you think the question of the welfare of MPs has changed since that time?

HA: I think that there have been a fair number of quite young MPs come in who only had one issue beforehand, and they come in and you've got to – not be an expert on everything – but you've got to be able to develop a view on everything. The essence of being a national politician is that you've got to have a very broad perspective, and you've got to be able to pick things up. Yes, you'll have the things that really matter to you and you'll pursue them. I've always said when I've mentored and looked after younger women who want to become MPs, "get a life first, so that you've got things that you can pick on when you're telling stories about policy issues, because that's how policy issues develop." People's stories, people knowledge and understanding, not just because they've seen it on the telly. For me, too many young people think it's the only thing in life and they've not had much experience in life. For them, the challenges, particularly during Covid, became huge, because there's nobody around to talk to, there was nobody around to help them into it.

I also think that all of the things like much more identity politics mean that you're not able to step back and say, "it's not about me, it's about this, this and this." Much more difficult to do these days. Now I'm not saying people don't have the right to know; however, they need to define you by more than what's happened that's difficult in your life. And I think all of those things have meant – and particularly the whole thing around sexual exploitation – that the different tolerance levels have got to be very, very different for people who come from very different cultural heritage. Parliament has got to do much more to ensure all members and others working there treat others with respect and decency. Old habits will simply not do anymore.

I mean, in the North East, if you grew up as a woman in the North East, you would not expect her to do what I've done in my life. And you therefore develop a resilience and an ability to just make sure nobody thinks of you in particular ways. A lot of young women now, for reasons I totally understand, think, 'that isn't right. I shouldn't have to have those limits. I shouldn't have to have those barriers that I put up myself. Men should simply behave better and behave differently.' And if you've got an insecure, unsure male around a young woman who is militantly, 'I'm not going to put up with any crap,' you get a whole load of things. And the mental health issues that are related to all of this are much bigger than I remember. I think that that's an issue in society more generally, but if it is in society more generally, in this place – which is not a normal workplace. I get a bit upset with women who say, "well in a normal workplace, there'd be an HR department and it would all be dealt with fine." My experience is, (a), even in corporates, HR departments don't necessarily deal with these issues in a way that I find acceptable. And, (b), this is not a normal workplace. So I just think it is extremely complex.

I think one of the things I moved in the Domestic Abuse Bill here was that all public facing public servants, charities, etc., should be given trauma-informed training. So that they

can recognise when somebody is going through trauma, even if they're saying nothing or they're shouting. Because it's normally one of the two. When I was chairing an organisation called Changing Lives, which mainly works with people with complex needs and now works with more women than anybody else in the country, believe it or not, I insisted that every frontline worker got some of this work. The woman who's done the training, she calls it 'reflective practice', and it's so that you recognise what workers are going through who are dealing with these complex problems. We have people who have had traumatic childhoods and that's had an effect on them, and nobody recognises that when they need to. But it shouldn't be the whips' job. The whip should simply be able to think, "oh, there's something up here, I need to get this person somebody who professionally knows what to do." But I never had to do that, or I never did it. Whether I should have, because there were people who drank too much, and I did try with a couple of them to intervene, totally unsuccessfully.

BB: Is there anything else you feel that we haven't managed to talk about that you would like to mention?

HA: I don't think so. It is becoming a different job, and it is partly about making sure your own side do well. But also you have a responsibility to make sure parliament works, and it's both parliament and government.

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Published 15 November 2023

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