

# Politics and postbags

In January **Harry Mann** was selected as one of 23 participants in an Operation Black Vote/Commission for Racial Equality MP shadowing scheme. This is designed to give people from ethnic minorities a taste of political life and provide support and encouragement as they take their first step on the political ladder. He writes about his experiences in Westminster's corridors of power and on the rainy streets of Islington.

**J**anuary 2003 – my first time in the Houses of Parliament and my first day on the Operation Black Vote (OBV) programme. I had been chosen to shadow the ex-secretary of state for culture, media and sport, Chris Smith MP, whose constituency is Islington South and Finsbury. As I walked into the office at around 9.30am, the phones were ringing away and Chris was busy so, being the wannabe who wanted to know it all, I was given the task of opening the post. Easy, or so I thought till I looked at the mailbag.

I finally finished three hours later. It was apparent that the next few days were going to be an eye-opening experience. Apart from the usual letters of invitations and political circulars were the weekend's constituency letters. Having been in London a swanky, hip place where everyone was an up-and-coming city person, or maybe an LSE student. Lesson number one – don't assume anything. Islington is, in fact, one of the most deprived areas in the UK. The postbag just touched on a host of problems facing its residents, for example poor housing conditions and overcrowding. And each response requires individual attention. On average, a quiet year in the constituency is when the office receives around 8,000 letters. Given that the case-work is handled by a staff of just three people, with Chris reading and signing each reply, I was realising that the life of an MP is not a glamorous one.

In the afternoon, Chris was due to give a series of press interviews. The prime minister had just spoken on the Iraq crisis. Chris had been asked by Channel 4 news and the BBC to give back-to-back interviews directly afterwards. As part of the whole shadowing process I'm supposed to be learning what it's like to be an MP and what skills I would need for the job. On the first day I mainly learnt there is not much time for a break.

After more interviews and a meeting on the new communications bill, it was after 6.30pm and I was shattered. Chris was back in his office and I was recovering, awaiting day two.

Next day I was prepared: mailbag until lunch-time, and then out again. Chris was in the House of Commons debating chamber, and again giving interviews to the press but this time it wasn't Iraq, it was about the Olympic games, and the possibility of London hosting the games in the near future. In two days I had heard Chris talk on such a wide range of subjects. For him to comment in such detail on each subject highlighted again the diversity of the job, and that sheer hard work is an essential element of being able to do it well, be that in Westminster or the constituency.

Sunday morning, cold and wintry, and I was going up and down 20 floors of an Islington council block of flats, listening to people's problems about everything from leaking taps to housing benefit payments. I finally realised something of what it means to be a constituency MP. It's about acting as a voice for those people, and making sure that they get what they're entitled to in the way of services.

Corridors of power at Westminster are only a small part of life as an MP. Coming on the scheme, I had been a little sceptical. I had the idea that an MP's life would be about power lunches, chauffeur-driven cars and the trimmings. On a Friday night, tired out after sitting in an MP's surgery advice session of nearly four hours, it became clear to me that glamour and fame isn't the big picture. Helping those on the ground. MPs can make a difference, to the elderly, to the young, to all nationalities and backgrounds.

There is currently a total of 12 black and Asian MPs and 24 black and Asian peers out of the 659 MPs and 691 peers in the UK's Houses of Parliament. The OBV scheme aims to encourage

more participation and tries to increase the number of those going into politics from black and Asian communities. The most important lesson I learnt from the experience is that being an MP is so much more than Westminster. For anyone considering a career in politics, the motivating factor is going to be the needs of the community and the constituency you represent.

And the implication for LSE? I believe the School can help to be a grooming ground for the next generation of black and Asian politicians. We've certainly made it happen internationally. Equally, LSE graduates from black and Asian backgrounds are excelling in banking, law and IT. Hopefully we can make it much more in UK politics as well. ■



## Harinder Mann

(MSc ADMIS 2000) is studying in the School's Information Systems Department for an MPhil/PhD on the digital divide in the UK. Originally from Yorkshire, he came to London in 1994, is on the national executive of the Young Fabians and hopes to enter politics in the near future.



## Parliamentary people

Another LSE alumnus is participating in the Operation Black Vote scheme. Andrew Dismore (LLM 1977), MP for Hendon, is being shadowed by Maxine Quintyne. For more on the OBV scheme, see [www.obv.org.uk](http://www.obv.org.uk)



OBV's initial launch

LSE runs its own Parliamentary intern scheme, set up six years ago by the LSE Public Policy Group. This is coordinated by Professor Patrick Dunleavy, together with LSE alumnus and governor Barry Sheerman MP. It provides a means of offering master's students across all the social science disciplines valuable work experience in Parliament. Each year around 60 graduate students are successfully placed with Members of Parliament, peers and related political organisations. See [www.lse.ac.uk/depts/ppg](http://www.lse.ac.uk/depts/ppg)