Constituency Casework and Sri Lankan Legislators

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A major justification for the adoption of proportional representation in Sri Lanka has been the impact it will have on the workload of the Members of Parliament. It has been argued that the change from single-member electoral constituencies to proportional representation will remove the heavy constituency case load that the MPs presently endure.[1] It is believed that with several MPs representing a district rather than one and the voters going to an ombudsman or other sources for help rather than inundating the MP, the MPs will have more time for other work. As things currently stand, most Members spend a great deal of time dealing with the personal problems of their constituents rather than with law-making and national issues. This paper will examine this justification by exploring the extent to which the Members of Parliament were burdened by constituency casework before the changes in the new Constitution.

The data for this study come from an open ended series of 102 interviews with current and former MPs taken in 1978, 1979 and 1980. The interviews averaged about one hour and asked the MPs about the number of constituents coming to see them, the reasons they came and the MPs' attitudes about their constituency casework.

The types of demands that constituents make on their legislators may be divided into two categories—generalized and particularized. Particularized demands are those whose primary consequences will affect an individual, small group of people or a single organization. Generalized demands are those which may affect the country's population in general. Generalized demands may be divided into sub-categories: (1) national demands which affect the nation as a whole or a significant region of it: and (2) local demands which are confined to the petitioner's district, municipality or electorate.

Demands may be made by individuals or groups. Groups may be local, based in a legislator's constituency, or they may be national with interests which are not limited to one constituency. The demand makers are capable of making any of the three types of demands. In addition, as Michael Mazey has pointed out, these demands may be directed at many structures in the political system, "such as the bureaucracy, interest groups, political parties, local govermental institutions and local elites."[2] The ability of other institutions to act on demands will affect the volume of demands that are directed toward the legislators.

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1. Personal interview with President J. R. Jayewardene on February 23, 1979.
2. Michael Mezey (1979) "Constituency Demands and Legislative Support: An Experiment" **Legislative Studies Quarterly** 1 (February): 104.

As can be seen in Table I, individuals coming to their legilsators in Sri Lanka come overwhelmingly with particularized demands. Only two Members who met with their constituents did not cite particularized demands as the main reason people came to them. The interesting point is that an overwhelming majority of the Members cited jobs or job related demands[3] as the main reason their constituents came to them. When the secondary reasons cited by the MPs are examined, the dominating influence of particularized benefits becomes even clearer. (see Table II)

TABLE I

MAIN REASONS WHY CONSTITUENTS COME TO MPS, AS CITED BY MPS

	Number	Percent
Particularized benefits	97	95.1
To Talk Politics or National Generalized Demands	2	2.0
Did Not Meet With Constituents	2	2.0
No Response	1	1.0
	102	100.1

Note: Totals in the percent column do not add up to one hundred percent due to rounding.

TABLE II

SECONDARY REASONS CITED BY MPS FOR CONSTITUENTS COMING TO THEM

	Number	Percent
Particularized	67	67.6
Generalized Local	19	19.2
National	1	1.0
No Second Reason Cited	35	35.4

Note: Totals exceed number in sample due to several Members providing more than one response.

3 Job related requests include requests for transfers and promotions Unless otherwise noted, reference to Job seekers includes those seeking transfers and promotions.

Most of the secondary reasons cited by the MPs dealt with such requests as land needs, disputes over boundaries, water or other problems connected with cultivation. The local generalized demands included requests for roads, electricity and transportation facilities. Surprisingly only one Member cited national problems. However, many of the local generalized demands involved requests that would result in community improvement but were primarily intended to benefit the petitioner such as a road to one's house or electrification of an area surrounding one's house.

The Members interviewed clearly believed that their constituents came to them for personal reasons. National and community oriented demands were not felt to be a serious part of the individual demands made on them. To further examine the types of individual demands that were made on the Members, meetings with two Ministers and two backbenchers were observed and the reasons that constituents came were noted. Of the petitioners whose reasons for coming could be ascertained,[4] over 79 percent came looking for help to find a job, transfer, or promotion. (see Table III) Only 2.8 percent came looking for something that could be described as community oriented and in each of these cases it involved a "community" development project that would directly benefit them. None came over national issues or legislation. Individual demands on the Members were overwhelmingly personal in nature.

TABLE III

CONSTITUENT REASONS FOR COMING TO MEET WITH MEMBERS IN OBSERVED MEETINGS

	Number	Percen
Jobs, Promotions, and Transfers	141	79.2
Government Benefits	8	4.5
Local Development	5	2.8
Other Reasons	24	13.5
Total	178	100.0

The number of constituents coming to meet with their MPs in Sri Lanka or particularized benefits is extremely high. The average number of constituents seen per week for those Members interviewed from the Eighth Parliament was just under 561 while in the Seventh Parliament it was over 448. Both of these figures are extremely high. In the Eighth Parliament this

4. The meetings tend to be unruly with the petitioners crowding around the "member's table with several making their requests at the same time, while the MP or his staff are trying to process an earlier petitioner's request. As a result, it was not possible to ascertain the demands made by some petitioners.

represents an average of about 29, 214 constituents coming each year to meet with their Members of Parliament. At the time of the 1977 general elections, the average constituency had 37, 164 voters. Thus, the average Member of Parliament meets with close to the total number of voters in his or her electorate in one year. Several MPs from the Seventh Parliament estimated that they had met personally with over 99 percent of their constituents at some time during their term of office.

The general impression of the MPs who had served in earlier Parliaments was that the number of people coming to meet with them had increased sharply since they first entered Parliament. Evidence of this is found in the responses by the MPs to the question asking them how many people came in an average week. The number of MPs giving responses for Parliaments before the Seventh and Eighth Parliaments is somewhat limited, but even the scanty figures available give some impression of the increase. Table IV reports the average number of constiuents seen by each MP for several time periods. It indicates a very sharp increase in the numbsr of people coming to meet with the Members.

TABLE IV

AVERAGE NUMBER OF CONSTITUENTS MEETING WITH MPs PER WEEK

	PARLIAMENTS			
	Second & Third	Fifth & Sixth	Seventh	Eighth
Average	186.2	274.7	448.4	561.8
Number of Respondents	4	10	52	44

This increase in the number of constituents coming to meet with their Members is the result of three trends converging in the 1960s and acting to increase the number of damands made on the Members. The first of these trends has been the growth of government. As the size and scope of government grew, so did the number of benefits that it had at its disposal. The election of 1956 led to a more active role by the government in the economy of the country.

From 1958 to 1975 the number of state business enterprises nearly quadrupled in number, rising form twenty eight to 107.[5] The value of capital invested in the enterprises increased from 72 million rupees to over 1,300 millon rupees between 1956 and 1975. This increase in government

5. D. W. Subasinghe (1979) "The State Sector in the Economy of Sri Lanka," In No Author. **The Role of State Sector in Developing Countries** (New Delhi: Pepole's Publishing House) p. 52.

corporations and expanded role of the government led to an increased number of government jobs. At the same time, government welfare schemes were expanding. Expenditures on transfer payments increased from 621 million rupees in 1960 to almost 2,800 million rupees in 1975. As a percentage of total government expenditure, this was an increase from about 38 percent in 1960 to 51 percent in 1975.[6] Most of these increases have been in the area of education, health and food subsidies. In the area of education alone, the number of school teachers increased from just over thirty five thousand in 1949 [7] to more than one hundred and ten thousand in 1976 [8]. This growth in government not only increased the number of government jobs, but in addition, government intervention in the society increased the number of difficulties with bureaucratic red tape, and thus the populace had a greater need for help dealing with these problems.

The second factor was the growth of a competitive party system. The MPs felt that they must cater to the needs of the people in order to remain in office. Thus, after 1956 and the emergence of the SLFP as a competitive force in Sri Lanka politics, both parties felt an electoral need to cater to the demands of the people. Patronage became an important part of Sri Lankan politics.

The third factor was a general increase in the needs of the people. This was especially the case regarding employment. The educational system had grown and had been quite successful educating large numbers of young people while at the same time lifting their aspirations for white collar jobs. School enrollment rose from under one million in 1946 [9] to over two and one-half million in 1976 [10]. After 1946, the introduction of DDT in the fight against Malaria resulted in a very sudden and sharp decrease in the death rate on the

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6. Gratien Jayamaha (1976) "The Growth of Public Expenditures in Sri Lanka. 1960-1975" Staff Studies (Central Bank of Sri Lanka) 6 (Stember) '79, Another source, H. N. S. Karunatileke (1975) "The Impact of Welfare Services in Sri Lanka on the Economy, "Staff Studies (Central Bank of Sri Lanka) 5 April 201 - 232 lists total welfare expenditure in 1960/61 as 651 million rupees and the 1974, expenditures as 1, 644 million rupees. In 1949/50 he lists the total expenditures as 174 million, In either case the increase has been quite large,

7. Government of Ceylon, Ministry of Finance (1951) Economic and Social Development of Ceylon 1926-50 (Colombo: Ministry of Finance) p. xxxi,

8. Government of Sri Lanka, Department of Census and Statistics (1979) Statistical Abstract of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka -1977 (Colombo : Government Publication Bureau) p. 423,

9. International Labour Office (1979) "Matching Employment Opportunities and Expectations : a Programme of Action for Ceylon (Geneva: International Labour Office) p. 9.

10. Government of Sri Lanka, Statistical Abstract p. 2 6.

island[11]. This drop in the death rate resulted in a rapid surge in population growth as the infant death rate declined and life expectancy increased. The drop in the infant death rate resulted in a baby boom which, coupled with the growth of the educational system, resulted in a sudden increase of educated young people entering the labour market beginning in the late 1960s. Between 1946 and 1971 the labour force increased by over 72 percent.[12]. Forty (40) percent of this increase occurred between 1963 and 1971 when the labour force grew by just over one million workers.

The economy was unable to increase the number of new jobs to match the number of youths joining the job market and very strong competition developed for the few jobs available. The consequences of this were soon felt by the MPs who were inundated by the seekers of particularized benefits. This increase in constituent demands has been, in large part, the result of this convergence of the shift of power from the colonial centers of authority in the society to the MPs and the growth of government coupled with a large surge in the number of youths entering the job market.

It was expected that the ability of a Member of Parliament to respond to particularized demands would affect the number of demands that are made on him[13]. Thus, the more able the Member is to satisfy demands the more likely people will come to him. In Sri Lanka, law making power resides in the hands of the Ministers. In addition, all government jobs originate in some ministry. The Minister in charge of that ministry is more likely to have jobs at his disposal than would a backbencher or opposition Member. Table V reports that Ministers averaged considerably more people coming to them than did other Members of Parliament. In the Eighth Parliament, the Ministers averaged almost 1,200 constituents a week coming to them or over twice as many as the backbenchers averaged. In the Seventh Parliament the differential between Ministers and backbenchers was less, but was still substantial. The difference between backbenchers and Deputy Ministers was small in the Eighth Parliament, however in the Seventh Parliament, the backbenchers averaged a few more people coming to see them each week. This may be a reflection of the equality of power between the Deputy Ministers and backbenchers. The Deputy Ministers may have status but they have few patronage jobs. Opposition Members saw considerably fewer people than did any of the government Members. Once again this may reflect the inability of the opposition Members to provide their constituents with patronage.

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11. A. N. A. Abesundere(1976) "Recent Trends in" malaria "morbidity and "mortality in Sri Lanka "In Demographic Training and Researeh Unit of the University of Sri Lanka, **Population Problems of Sri Lanka** (Colombo: University of Sri Lanka) p. 51 – 52.

12. Government of Ceylon **Economic and Social Development o f Ceylon**. p xlii and Government of Sri Lanka, Department of Statistics (1974) **The Population of Sri Lanka** (Colombo: Department of Census and Statistics) p. 128.

13. Michail Mezey (1979) **Comparative Legislature** (Durham, North Caroline: Duke Univercity Press) pp, 150–151,

TABLE V

AVERAGE NUMBER OF CONSTITUENTS SEEN PER WEEK BY MPS

	PARLIAMENTS					
	Prior to Seventh		Seventh		Eighth	
	Average	no	Average	no	Average	no
Ministers	500.0	1	586.7	9	1192.9	7
Deputy Ministers	105.0	1	442·7	9	655.0	10
Backbenchers	233.0	5	463.8	26	539.6	13
Opposition	253.1	7	270.0	8	216.5	13
Average	253.0	14	448.4	52	561.8	43

Those Ministers who presented a large number of bills to Parliament or presided over ministries which had large numbers of patronage jobs at their disposal tended to have more people coming to them.[14] (see Tables VI and VII) In the Seventh Parliament, those Ministers who presided over ministries with few patronage jobs averaged about the same number of people coming to them as did the Deputy Ministers or backbenchers. In the Eighth Parliament, both categories of Ministers averaged considerable more meetings with constituents than did the backbenchers and Deputy Ministers.

TABLE VI

POLICY INFLUENCE OF MINISTRIES AND NUMBER OF CONSTITUENTS COMING

	Seventh Parliament		Eighth Parliament	
	Number	Average	Number	Average
High	5	652.0	2	1600
Low	4	512.5	5	1030

14. The ministers which presented the most bills to Parliament, and thus are the most influential in policy making are Finance, Public Administration, Defence, Planning, Employment and External Affairs.

TABLE VII

PATRONAGE POWER OF MINISTRY AND NUMBER OF CONSTITUENTS COMING

	Seventh Parliament		Eighth Parliament	
	Number	Average	Number	Average
Large Number of Patronage Jobs	4	767.5	2	1600
Few Jobs	5	442.0	5	1030

NOTE: The high patronage ministries are Food and Co-operatives, Power, Highways, Local Government, Industries and Buildings,

Those Members with the greatest amount of power in the government claimed the highest number of constituents coming to them with requests. Even among the Ministers there appeared to be a hierarchy of more and less powerful Members with the Ministers of the more important Ministries, both in policy making and in the number of patronage jobs available to them, receiving more constituents.

Although the evidence is based on limited data, the growth of the number of people coming to see the MPs can be seen in each of the three government Member categories. What is significant is the failure of the number of people coming to the opposition Members to increase. This again is a reflection of the linkage between power and demands. The ability of the opposition Members to assist their constituents is determined by the help they get from the government party, and thus they are not able to respond to an increased number of demands. The populace realizes this and does not come to them. Many Members who had left their parties for another party stated that as soon as they left the government party, the number of people coming to see them had declined while those who joined the government party stated that the number increased. One stated that "the people think that we can't help them and so they do not come to us"

Thus the number of constituents coming to see the MP's is related to their patronage power. In any case most members met with large numbers of constituents. The next section of this paper will examine the attitudes of the legislators toward this part of their job. Each member was asked whether they felt that meeting with their constituents was a burden. Almost one-half expressed varying degrees of dislike of the job. Only five members stated that they enjoyed or liked meeting with their constituents. (see Table VIII) Forty stated that they disliked it or expressed their negative feelings in more colourful terms such as "disgusting" "useless" or "you become a glorified peon" In between these two extremes were a large number of MP's who either expressed neutral opinions or mixed emotions about the state of affairs. This latter group of sixteen members stated that it was a burden, hard and wasteful but that "it is the duty of the job. We must help."

TABLE VIII

LEGISLATORS ATTITUDES ABOUT MEETINGS WITH CONSTITUENTS

	Seventh		Eighth		Total	
Responses	no	percent	no	percent	no	percent
Positive	1	2.2	4	10.0	5	5.8
Neutral or Mixed	13	28.3	27	67.5	40	46.5
Negative	32	69.6	9	13.5	41	47.7

TABLE IX

LEGISLATORS ATTITUDES ABOUT MEETINGS WITH CONSTITUENTS AND FORMAL AUTHORITY

	SEVENTH PARLIAMENT			EIGHTH PARLIAMENT		
	Positive	Neutral or Mixed	Negative	Positive	Neutral or Mixed	Negative
Backbenchers	0	4	22	2	7	2
Deputy Ministers	1	2	5	2	3	3
Ministers	0	3	4	0	7	2
Opposition	0	4	1	0	10	1
Total	1	13	32	4	27	9

Note; The Chi square value for the Seventh Parliament is equal to 13.8 with 4 degrees of freedom, significant at the .01 level while for the Eighth Parliament it is equal to 8.7, significant at the .10 level.

Further analysis indicates that there are distinct differences between the levels of authority and legislator attitudes toward the job. (see Table IX) The opposition Members expressed very few negative feelings about their role in dispensing particularized benefits. What is surprising is that when the results for the two Parliaments are combined, the Ministers expressed the most positive and the backbenchers the most negative attitudes among the government party members. It had been expected that the Ministers would be the most negative bacause they have the most people coming to them. However when the number of constituents coming to the Members is examined, there appears to be no relationship between the number of constituents coming to the members and their attitudes about their role in answering their demands (see Table X) Even when the formal authority of the members was held constant, no relationship was found.

TABLE X

AVERAGE NUMBER OF CONSTITUENTS COMING TO MEET WITH MPs PER WEEK AND ATTITUDES ABOUT THEIR ROLE IN MEETING WITH THEM

	Numbers of MPs	Average
Positive	5	638.0
Neutral or Mixed	40	421.5
Negative	40	522.9

It does not appear that the number of constituents coming to meet with an MP affects his or her attitudes about the job. The Ministers meet with the most people and yet have the most positive attitudes of the government Members. The small percentage of negative attitudes expressed by the opposition Members, however, appears to be the result of the number of people coming to meet with them. They receive so few demands that they do not feel burdened by them. The government Members are so inundated by demands and the pressure that accompanies them, that the actual numbers coming does not necessarily affect their attitudes. Whether they are Ministers or backbencher, they receive too many demands for particularized benefits

The Ministers may find dealing with their constituents easier than the backbenchers do, because of the power and status attached to most of the Ministers. All Ministers have extensive staff help so that much of the paper work involved in particularized benefits is taken care of by staff members. Most of the backbenchers have to do part of the paper work themselves. In addition, most of the Ministers live outside of their electorates and only travel to their electorates on the weekends. Since most of the Ministers refuse to meet with constituents while in Colombo, it means that they only have to deal with particularized benefits two days a week. The backbenchers, on the other hand, find their constituents gathering at their house as soon as the sun begins to rise. Thus, the numbers of constituents coming s not e crucial fact but perhaps the environment that one has to work in and the conditions that one finds in that work, shapes the attitudes of the legislators. In the case of the Ministers, the conditions and environment are much more conducive to doing the job.

Another factor affecting the attitudes of the legislators toward their role in the granting of particularized benefits may have been the timing of the interviews. Most of the Members of the Seventh Parliament had suffered defeat in the general elections of 1977. This defeat, coming after seven years of trying to help their constituents in their personal needs, may have embittered them, Table IX reports a distinct difference between the two Parliaments in the attitudes of the members toward their role in granting particularized

benefits. The Seventh Parliament members are much more negative about their role. They had spent seven years finding jobs for the long lines of constituents coming to them and then had been rejected by the same constituents at the next general elections. A general attitude of bitterness pervaded their interviews. Most said that giving jobs was useless and damaging. " If you give one member of a family and fail to give the rest a job, they all vote against you " Another stated:

> " A man from a poor fishing family came to me looking for a job. I got him one as a cooperative rural bank clerk. Then he came to me and wanted to join the government clerical service. I fouud him a job. Later he came and wanted a transfer to Colombo. Then he wants a job for his wife. Then he hears there are six bank jobs. He wants one because it has higher pay. In the end he supported my opponent. "

The members of the Eighth Parliament had more positive or neutral feelings about their constituents. "They are so grateful for what we do" "There is no greater satisfaction than making them happy."

Some of this difference may be explained by the relative newness of the Eighth Parliament Members. At the time they were interviewed, most of the Eighth Parliament Members had been in power for less then two years and did not have the memories of seven years of drudgery endured by the Members of the Seventh Parliament· Most appeared to believe that their government would take care of the job problem and thus the numbers of youths coming to them for jobs would soon be declining.

The evidence presented in this study indicates that Sri Lankan MPs endure large numbers of constituents coming to them and that they tend to look at the constituency casework aspect of their job in very negative terms When one considers the numbers of constituents coming to see their MPs, proportional representation may alleviate the burden. However, the question of where these people will go for help still remains unanswered. It is unlikely that an ombudsman will be able to respond to such large numbers nor will an ombudsman have the patronage power necessary to satisfy the citizens coming to them.

Another consideration is the fewer negative feelings about case work expressed by the Ministers. It was argued that this is the result of their access to staff to assist them in their meetings with constituents. If this is the case, it may indicate a need for greater staff help for Sri Lankan Members of Parliament rather than a change in the structure of government.