

**SUBMISSION TO THE COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE –
FROM MRS SUZY GALE:**

When my husband, Roger Gale, was elected to Parliament in June, 1983, for the constituency of North Thanet in Kent, I gave up my job as the qualified political agent for the Hammersmith constituency, in London, to go and work for him. In addition to my political qualifications I was, and remain, a fully qualified and executive P.A./Secretary with a considerable degree of previous, varied office management experience. I had worked all my life, since I left college at the age of 17.

At the time of Roger's election to Parliament we had three children - the youngest of whom was two years old. We both felt that for me to give up my job as a political agent and for me to work for Roger was, if we were to see each other at all, the best way forward.

Parliamentary life meant a huge cut in real income: Roger, as a Television Producer & Director saw his salary reduced by two thirds and my own employment package was cut in half. We accepted this as the price that we had to pay to take on the way of life that we had both chosen.

Having given an undertaking that we would live in the constituency we immediately sold our home in London and moved to Kent. At that time (1983) it was not permissible to use the "London Living Allowance" to pay interest on our mortgage and we had to sell our newly-refurbished home in Fulham to meet the costs of keeping our promise and buying a house in East Kent. (The valuation in housing price rises as between Fulham and E. Kent has, over 26 years, cost us in the region of about £500,000 at a conservative estimate).

I worked for the first two or three years in London for about four days a week, in the Norman Shaw North building and we lodged at my mother's house, also in Fulham.

I arrived in London, from the constituency some 79 miles away, normally late morning on a Monday, and from that time on, in the Winter months, I did not, in fact, see the light of day at all until I woke up in Kent on the Friday morning. My office looked out on a well with no natural daylight at all. I got to work each day about 6.45 a.m. when it was still dark, remained at work as Roger's only employee, and went home – usually fairly late – in the dark.

We had good child-care organised – our young family lived with a "mother's help" in Kent - but I missed our children greatly, and did find the absences from home very difficult.

On Fridays and at weekends I worked at our home in Kent – in a converted (very small) boiler room.

I did all this very willingly as we both very firmly believed in Roger's commitment to his constituents. That commitment has continued to this day.

It became apparent both that our children needed at least one of us at home full-time and that as communications improved it would be more sensible for me to work from our Kent home. I therefore moved the office work to Kent and worked a full day, (and, as the only employee Roger could afford, I mean a full day, often getting up at 4.00 a.m. in those days just to keep up with the work!)

I also worked at weekends, dealing with the correspondence that resulted from the post and Roger's advice surgeries. During Recess periods I also worked from home.

Things have moved on over the years and I am now fortunate to work with two more employees. One full-time, one part-time. A small point, but neither myself nor my two colleagues take a lunch hour – we always work straight through.

The workload has grown tremendously over the years and I believe that the team Roger has behind him, of whom I am one part, works extremely well for the benefit of his constituents. Over 1/3 of Roger's constituents are elderly and retired. We also, now, have a high proportion of immigrants living in North Thanet, a number of whom require assistance.

We are now located in an office in the constituency and separate from our home. This is Roger's only parliamentary office (he does not keep any staff at Westminster) and the rental, rates and other costs are paid directly by the Department of Finance & Administration.

For at least ten of the first fifteen years in Parliament Roger charged the taxpayer no office rental for the office at our home and subsidised his Office Costs Allowance to a value of around £10,000 a year out of very modest, declared consultancy income. We estimate that this subsidy was worth, in round terms, not less than £200,000 over the period before we moved the office out of our home.

I still get to work about 6.45 a.m., (sometimes earlier than that) and work a seven hour day Mondays-Fridays in the constituency office. I also work every Saturday, most bank holidays, and some Sundays.

For the rest of the working day, as my computer at home is linked into my office computer (at our offices in Birchington) I can – and do - continue working and making telephone calls from home.

I sit as a magistrate in the Medway area of Kent about twice a month, and make that time up at weekends.

I deal with all telephone calls coming into the office, all constituency-related emails, handle Roger's diary and arrange all his advice surgery appointments. I also do a great deal of back-up work in terms of constituency casework. I also take it upon myself to personally visit constituents who are in distress.

I have always believed that Roger's constituents feel secure in talking to "the Member's wife" – and do to this day.

It is not appropriate – at any time – to discuss any individual constituency casework, however I have been able over the years to assist Roger with many cases, some of which have been of a particularly sensitive nature that it would not have been appropriate to expect other members of his office staff to handle.

Members of Parliament generally are often accused of being "out of touch with the general public". I can assure you that with the local Member's wife working in an office in the constituency, you will not find that in North Thanet. The views of Roger's constituents who call in and telephone the office are passed on faithfully to him immediately.

I only make these points to stress just how important I feel it is for spouses of Members to continue to be permitted to work both for and with them. I have now worked for Roger for some 26 years, and trust it will be possible to continue to do so?

It does not concern me whether or not I am Roger's employee, or an employee of the House of Commons. In fact I have always considered I was employed by the House rather than my husband. The House has always held a copy of my Contract of Employment and has paid my salary directly into my personal bank account.

I am paid at, although not at the top of, the managerial scale. Although I very occasionally, as an employee, use the rail passes to which I am entitled to travel between the constituency and Westminster I have never claimed any business mileage for the very considerable distances that I travel within a geographically large constituency and neither have I, as a Manager, claimed the overtime and bonuses paid to other office staff.

I very much hope the Commission will deal sympathetically with the situation of Members of Parliament employing family members – particularly spouses/partners.

If it is felt that Members should only employ one family member that seems to me to be a sensible compromise. I believe, as a "working wife" that we offer a value that no amount of money can buy and in a way that even the most dedicated of secretarial staff (and we are fortunate to have two) simply cannot offer.

Roger and I man the office operation, and provide full cover during, for example, the whole of the Christmas holiday from the day before Christmas Eve through to the day after New Year's Day in order to give my two other colleagues a well-earned break.

I would like to add only one other observation in terms of my work for Roger. Three years ago I was involved in a fairly serious car accident when the brakes failed on my car and the car was written off.

At that time I injured my left hand and wrist fairly seriously. A few weeks after that I slipped on an uneven pavement and broke my right ankle!

Apart from a couple of days in hospital for an operation on my hand/wrist which involved taking a piece of bone out of my hip to put into my wrist, I continued to work.

I was not able to use crutches at all during this period and as a result I was forced to remain in a wheelchair for 6-8 weeks living in one room on the ground floor of our home.

I was, however, with help from friends and family, able to get to the constituency office each day to continue my job as the office and services are all located on one floor.

I only make this point because at no time was it necessary to call upon any additional House allowances to pay temporary staff. I do, however, think it does stress the resilience of the “working wife”!

I have never had any problem alternating my roles as both a “working wife” and as the wife of a Member of Parliament. With my second “hat” on I attend events with Roger, entertain parties of constituents at our home (mainly elderly and disabled) and maintain a family life.

I am the Patron of several local charities and I formed and run a small, Kent-based animal welfare charity in my spare time.

I also, from time to time, give talks both on my role as “The Member’s Wife” and animal welfare matters – again, in my own time.

I shall be pleased to give evidence in person.

Suzy Gale

May, 2009