

Role Conceptualisations and the Purple Zone: Parliamentary Staff Through the Eyes of Former MPs

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Abstract

We analyse how former MPs describe and assess the various staff groups when talking about the daily work of the Finnish parliament. Our theoretical framework draws on the politics/administration divide and the concept of a “purple zone” blending the “blue” of politics and the “red” of administration (Bellò & Spano, 2015), as well as on role conceptualisations produced by elected politicians as a source of administrative legitimacy (Stout, 2013). The analysis is based on textual material comprising 49 semi-structured interviews from the Oral History Archive of the Finnish parliament. The general picture of the MP-staff relations in the material is one of respect and gratitude, but also differentiation, emanating from both the parliamentary hierarchy and the politics/administration divide. The institutional staff, particularly the porters, receive exceptionally positive appraisals. The committee staff, formally neutral but directly involved in the legislative preparation, are admired for their status and expertise, but sometimes criticised for entering too deeply into the “blue” area. Parliamentary assistants are more likely to receive mixed accounts related to their proximity to the MPs’ political work and their “low” position in the parliamentary hierarchy when compared to the committee staff. Parliamentary party group staff and parliamentary assistants also come up in system-oriented accounts regarding the reorganisation of the parliamentary work. Although many in the parliamentary staff can be situated in the purple zone, the former MPs conceptualise their roles rather traditionally. The study broadens the concept of the purple zone beyond previous research dominated by policy implementation.

Keywords

committees; Finland; parliamentary assistants; parliamentary party groups; parliamentary staff; parliaments; purple zone; role conceptualisations

1. Introduction

Parliamentary work involves continuous encounters between MPs and staff members (Kontula, 2018; Niemi, 2010; White, 2024). These contacts, both personal and systemic (Crewe, 2018), simultaneously construct and are shaped by the parliamentary institution and workplace (Busby, 2013), roles perceived as legitimate for the various staff groups (Stout, 2013), and the relationship between politics and administration (Bellò & Spano, 2015; Overeem, 2005; Svara, 1999). Yet, the role of the staff has been subjected to relatively little analysis in studies on parliaments, political science, and public administration overall.

In this study, we understand the staff-MP relations as a source of administrative legitimacy and thus linked to the quality of democracy (Stout, 2013). While the traditional model of the politics/administration divide is based on the separateness of the two (Overeem, 2005; Rutgers, 2000; Weber, 1922/1978), later studies have acknowledged their complementarity (Svara, 1999) and the existence of a “purple zone” (Bellò & Spano, 2015) that challenges the idea of entirely mutually exclusive and distinguishable spheres of administration (“red”) and politics (“blue”). These views on politics and administration are partly reflected in the research on parliamentary staff, who see the bureaucratic influence of the staff on politics in a less positive light (Becker & Bauer, 2021) or emphasise the role of the personnel as allies of the MPs (Peters, 2021). The perceptions are further included in the roles perceived as legitimate for politicians and administrators when undertaking their work (Stout, 2013).

We concentrate on the roles that the political and administrative actors have in the parliamentary context and approach the staff through the eyes of the MPs, inspired by the idea of role conceptualisations by elected politicians as a source of administrative legitimacy (Stout, 2013). Our research questions are thus: How do former MPs describe and normatively assess the roles of the parliamentary staff of the Finnish parliament? How do these role conceptualisations vary between staff groups (if at all), and which institutional and social features may the potential differences relate to? What do these findings tell us about the separation or complementarity between politics and administration and the potential tensions involved?

The analysis is based on a textual material comprising 49 semi-structured interviews from the Oral History Archive of the Finnish parliament. Because of the extensive length of the interviews, the relevant passages for the analysis were located by keyword searches, covering the parliamentary personnel as a whole and the various staff categories (the search terms are provided in the Supplementary File).

We first introduce the state-of-the-art of the research on parliamentary staff and the literature on the relationship between politics and administration relevant for our analysis, before describing the features of the Finnish case. In the next section, we present the empirical material and the methods applied in the study. We then turn to our findings, presenting the role conceptualisations of the MPs regarding the main staff groups. Finally, we conclude by discussing our findings in the light of the theoretical framework and posing questions for further work.

2. Parliamentary Staff, Their Zones, and Roles

Parliaments, the core of legislative power, are crucial for studying the relationship between politics and administration, but parliamentary administration remains understudied. This section starts with a description

of the state-of-the-art in the research on parliamentary staff. We then introduce the theoretical framework of the study, building on the literature on the relationship between politics and administration (including the notion of “purple zone” blending the two) and on the concept of role conceptualisation (Stout, 2013).

2.1. Parliamentary Staff in the Scholarly Literature

Research on parliamentary staff belongs to the research tradition of parliamentary studies. Recently, interpretive parliamentary studies have gained ground alongside the conventional institutionalist and rational choice perspectives (see Busby, 2013; Crewe, 2018; Geddes & Rhodes, 2018; Mannevuo et al., 2021). In parallel and sometimes overlapping with the former, parliamentary studies have widened their reach, including the social, emotional, and material contexts in which parliamentarians conduct their work and the various roles of the staff in the parliamentary institution.

Parliamentary staff have traditionally been studied more in the United States than in Europe (DeGregorio, 1988; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Romzek & Utter, 1997), where the focus has primarily been on the European Parliament (Busby, 2013; Egeberg et al., 2013; Pegan, 2017). However, recent European studies include research on national parliamentary administrations (e.g., Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Geddes, 2021; Jágr, 2022; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2018), including multi-country anthologies, special issues (Christiansen et al., 2021, 2023), or explicitly comparative studies (Griglio & Lupo, 2021; Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015; Otjes, 2022).

The proliferation and professionalisation of the staff have contributed to parliaments becoming more independent of the executive and thus strengthened parliamentary democracy (Christiansen et al., 2021; Egeberg et al., 2013; Otjes, 2022; Peters, 2021). The parliamentary staff play a crucial role in helping MPs with various tasks (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2023; Pegan, 2017). The parliamentary staff play a crucial role in helping MPs with various tasks (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2023; Pegan, 2017). However, despite the importance of their support to the MPs' work, the staff tends to remain invisible to the general public (Christiansen et al., 2021; Meakin, 2024).

Brandsma and Otjes (2024) distinguish between institutional staff working for the parliament, committee staff, parliamentary party group (PPG) personnel, and staff employed by individual MPs—a classification that we also follow in this study. Other studies have focused on specific staff groups such as parliamentary assistants (PAs; Pegan, 2017), political staff in parliamentary and ministerial offices (Moens, 2023), research and library staff (Jágr, 2022), and committee personnel (DeGregorio, 1988; Geddes, 2021). The staff have also been classified according to their informal roles vis-à-vis the MPs, such as those of advisors, ghostwriters, information brokers, and alike (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Otjes, 2022). Moreover, the literature distinguishes between the parliamentary staff whom the MPs meet in their everyday work and the upper-level leadership of the parliamentary institution (White, 2024; Yong, 2024). Although the research on the views of the MPs on the staff—the topic of this study—is scarce, Peplow and Pivatto (2020) have summarised extensive oral history material from former British MPs, like the one used in our research. While the role of the staff in the study remains marginal, the authors report that former MPs praised the professionalism and helpfulness of the staff.

2.2. The Relationship Between Politics and Administration Impacting the Role Conceptualisations for the Staff

In contrast to the earlier research, which has largely been descriptive of the parliamentary administration (Christiansen et al., 2021, 2023) or its specific tasks (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; see also Otjes, 2022), we position our study in the broader literature on the relationship between politics and administration, at the core of democratic political systems (Rosenbloom, 1983; Rutgers, 2000). Furthermore, our research represents interpretive parliamentary studies (Busby, 2013; Crewe, 2018; Geddes, 2021; Geddes & Rhodes, 2018), and we maintain a relational perspective on public administration (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020), seeing that relations between politicians and public administrators both construct political institutions and are shaped by them. We focus on the specific staff roles perceived as legitimate, analysed through the concept of role conceptualisation, which emphasises the expectations attached to legitimate roles (also) set by people other than those performing the roles, such as politicians in the case of public administrators (Stout, 2013).

In the study of politics and administration, particularly the Weberian model (Weber, 1922/1978) builds on a separation between the legislative power and administration, emphasising the administration's expertise, neutrality, and subordination to politics as a source of legitimacy in a legal-rational sense (Overeem, 2005; Rutgers, 2000). However, a strict politics/administration dichotomy has been perceived as being a theoretical construct (Demir & Nyhan, 2008; Rosenbloom, 1983), and scholars, such as Svara (1999), have highlighted complementarity rather than dichotomy in the relation between politics and administration. Recent studies have also focused on the border area between politics and administration, conceptualised as the "purple zone," blending the blue of politics and the red of administration (Alford et al., 2017; Bellò & Spano, 2015).

Most studies on the relation between politics and administration (including those on the purple zone; see Alford et al., 2017; Bellò & Spano, 2015) have scrutinised policy implementation on the output side of the political process, paying less attention to the input side and the supporting role of the administration in political decision-making (see Easton, 1957). Some studies on parliamentary staff nevertheless acknowledge the role of staff between politics and administration (Becker & Bauer, 2021; Egeberg et al., 2013; Peters, 2021; Romzek & Utter, 1997; White, 2024). In general, the parliament is characterised by a hierarchical relationship between the elected MPs and non-elected personnel, and a further divide between the political/partisan and non-political/non-partisan staff (Niemi, 2010; White, 2024). While the parliamentary hierarchy can produce gendered work roles (Snagovsky & Kerby, 2018) and allow for discrimination and improper behaviour (Niemi, 2010; White, 2024), it does not render the staff powerless. The power wielded by the parliamentary staff relates to facilitating political processes in the dynamic and heterogeneous environment of the legislature, including support for reaching compromises (Becker & Bauer, 2021; see also Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Egeberg et al., 2013). While some scholars hold a critical view on bureaucratic influence on politics (Becker & Bauer, 2021), others see the staff as allies of the MPs (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; DeGregorio, 1988; Peters, 2021) or note the ambivalent role of party-political staff working in parliaments (Moens, 2023). This echoes the division between a Weberian politics/administration dichotomy and a model based on complementarity, or a shared sphere between politics and administration.

The relationship between politics and administration is not only built on institutional arrangements or formal hierarchies, but it is also reproduced in more subtle relations between politicians and administrators (Bartels

& Turnbull, 2020), including the roles they are expected to play in their everyday work (Stout, 2013). Here, a role refers to a social position and both internal and external expectations regarding appropriate behaviour in it (Biddle, 1986). In her study of public administration, Stout (2013) distinguishes between these internal and external views by referring to “role conceptions” and “role conceptualisations”: the former denotes the descriptions and assessments by the administrators themselves about their own roles, while the latter refers to the beliefs and ideas about a specific role’s place and purpose by external actors, particularly elected politicians, citizens, and other administrators.

In this study, we examine the role conceptualisations of former MPs about the various parliamentary staff groups. Such conceptualisations include a normative assessment regarding appropriate roles and the ways in which they are performed in practice (Stout, 2013). In this way, role conceptualisations of public administration relate to its legitimacy, and more specifically, the positions which public administrators can legitimately occupy in relation to politics. The conceptualisations vary depending on the ideal model of the politics/administration relation in the background and whether it leans towards the classical Weberian model or more blended models between politics and administration (Stout, 2013). This is also a dimension we consider in our analysis.

3. The Context of the Study: The Finnish Parliament and Its Staff

Constitutional principles regarding the separation of powers impact the role and number of parliamentary staff (Egeberg et al., 2013). Finland, a former semi-presidential system, can now be described as a parliamentary one (Raunio, 2023). The Finnish parliament comprises 200 members representing often as many as nine parties, an effect of the proportional electoral system (see Heidar & Rasch, 2017). It is a continental and, more specifically, a Nordic parliament, characterised by unicameralism, professionalism, simple majority rules, strong PPGs, and the significant status of standing committees (Arter, 2008; Esaiasson & Heidar, 2000; Heidar & Rasch, 2017). It is also a “working parliament” (in contrast to “debating parliaments” such as Westminster), in which a notable part of the work is conducted in the 17 standing committees and the PPGs instead of the plenary (Arter, 2008; Mannevuo et al., 2021). The number of staff working for the Finnish parliament at the end of 2024 was 487 (Eduskunta, 2025). These figures do not cover the PPG staff, PAs employed by the PPGs (Raunio, 2023), nor the café staff (Kontula, 2018).

Finnish studies have reiterated the findings of international research about the workload of the MPs, resulting in a need for assistance (Aula & Konttinen, 2020; Mannevuo et al., 2021), and the observations about the hierarchical nature of the parliamentary institution in which politics reigns over administration (Niemi, 2010). Studies on the Finnish parliament as a work environment are ambivalent. On the one hand, they underline the hierarchy and rigidity of the organisation and instances of improper behaviour and harassment towards the staff (with staff groups such as the PAs and cleaners being in a particularly vulnerable position; Björk et al., 2018; Niemi, 2010). On the other hand, they report about the collegiality and friendly atmosphere of the institution (Kontula, 2018; Rinne, 2020) and the prestige, stability, resources, and inspiring content of the work (Niemi, 2010).

The most significant change in the staff structure at the Finnish parliament took place in the 1990s with the introduction of PAs as a new staff category. The first part-time assistants started in 1997 and the full-time ones in 2000 (Ollila, 2007). The PAs were originally recruited by individual MPs, although they were formally working for parliament. In the early 2010s, the social democratic PPG introduced a group office model in

which the PPG recruits the PAs and allocates their work among the group's MPs (Aula & Konttinen, 2020). Currently, most PPGs organise PA work according to the group office model, which illustrates a strengthening of the PPGs both within parliament and in relation to party offices (Aula & Koskimaa, 2023; Raunio, 2023). The staff group most often addressed in the Finnish research is, nevertheless, the personnel of the standing committees, who embody significant authority and expertise, playing a central role in the legislative process (Helander et al., 2007; Pekonen, 2011; Raunio, 2023; Rinne, 2020).

In addition to the changes implied by the introduction and restructuring of the assistant system, a more general institutional feature to note is that the institutional administration led by the parliamentary office and the political work conducted in PPGs remain separate (Raunio, 2023). This divide is amplified by the recent strengthening of PPGs and the transfer of most PAs under their direction (Aula & Konttinen, 2020). Aula and Koskimaa (2023) nevertheless see this development as a welcome one, as it helps to consolidate the power of politicians vis-à-vis external actors, such as experts, consultants, and lobbyists.

4. Methods and Materials

The study is based on a selection of texts from the Oral History Archive of Finnish parliament, which comprises, in total, almost 500 extensive semi-structured interviews with former MPs, collected by the Library of Parliament since the late 1980s. With counterparts in countries such as the United Kingdom (Peplow & Pivatto, 2020), the material combines traits of oral history (Krekola, 2022) and elite interviews (Mykkänen, 2001). For this analysis, the selection was restricted to recent interviews, with the interviewees having been elected at the 2011, 2015, or 2019 parliamentary elections. Those with the longest careers had started as MPs in the 1970s, and the more junior ones in the 2010s. Out of the 49 interviewees in the selection, 16 were identified as women and 33 as men.

The distribution of the interviewees by political party is given in Table 1. It does not follow the power relations in the Finnish parliament. This is likely to be partly incidental and partly to reflect the 2017 split of the Finns Party (so that also the Blue Reform splinter group was covered). Generally, the aim of the collection of interviews is to cover the parliamentary parties, electoral districts, and genders in a balanced manner (Krekola, 2022). The slight party bias is unlikely to affect the results due to the character of the research approach and the method of close reading.

Table 1. Number of interviewees by party.

| | |
|---|-----------|
| The Finnish Social Democratic Party (SDP) | 10 |
| The Finns Party (FP; including Blue Reform) | 10 |
| The Greens (G) | 7 |
| The National Coalition Party (NCP) | 6 |
| The Centre Party of Finland (CPF) | 6 |
| Swedish People's Party of Finland (SPP) | 5 |
| The Left Alliance (LA) | 3 |
| Christian Democrats of Finland (CD) | 2 |
| Total | 49 |

Note: If the MP had represented more than one party during their career, they were here categorised according to their party when elected.

The thematic interview guide used by the Library of Parliament includes a question pertaining to the parliamentary staff and the PAs, but references to the staff were also found in other parts of the material. Due to the extensive length of the interviews, we identified the relevant passages by text searches in the ATLAS.ti software programme, using approximately 30 terms in Finnish or Swedish (the other official language of Finland; these are available in the Supplementary File). An overview of the Finnish scholarly and grey literature on the topic helped to confirm that all staff groups were included in the searches. A Finnish-Scottish comparison of specific features of the relationship between the MPs and PAs, also drawing on this material, will be published separately (see Ludwicki-Ziegler et al., 2024).

We applied a qualitative and interpretive approach (Busby, 2013; Crewe, 2018; Geddes, 2021; Geddes & Rhodes, 2018) and an abductive logic of inference, as the precise research questions and their theoretical underpinnings were sharpened after an initial reading of the rich and multifaceted research material. At the beginning of the analysis, we distinguished between non-political institutional staff supporting the parliamentary institution, committee personnel, and staff connected to PPGs or individual MPs (Arter, 2008; Brandsma & Otjes, 2024); we addressed the last category jointly, as they largely overlap in the Finnish case (Aula & Konttinen, 2020). As our first reading of the material showed differences in the ways in which the former MPs talked about the various staff groups, our research assistants classified the passages in terms of whether they included an evaluative assessment of the specific staff group, and if so, whether this evaluation was positive, negative, or ambivalent. Later in the analysis, this rough coding helped us to identify the normative underpinnings of the role conceptualisations of the various staff groups (Stout, 2013).

The initial analysis was followed by a close reading and an analysis by the authors, during which the various normative expectations and assessments of the staff and how they reflected the politics/administration divide were in focus. We used the theoretical concepts introduced in the previous sections as an interpretive lens (Stout, 2013) guiding the empirical analysis. We assessed the role conceptualisations produced by the former MPs for the various staff groups regarding roles perceived as legitimate for each of them. Furthermore, we reflected on how these conceptualisations were related to the relationship between politics and administration broadly understood, including whether the model of a clear-cut politics/administration dichotomy or the more fluidly defined concept of the purple zone is better suited to describe the work of the different parliamentary staff groups and what tensions emanate from this relationship. We categorised our findings along the axes of political–non-political positions and expert/high social status–support/low social status jobs (while nevertheless acknowledging a certain fluidity in the categories).

The research followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, according to which studies such as the current one do not require a separate ethical review (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019). We did not seek access to interviews requiring special permission from the interviewee and used only those for which we had received permission from the Library of Parliament, out of which two required notifying the interviewee about the use of their interview. As our study focused on a cross-cutting theme in the material rather than delving into specific MPs' careers, we deemed it in line with general research ethics that it was unnecessary to disclose the names of the interviewees, even though the consent given by the interviewees allows for it. To keep the interviews distinguishable from each other when quoting the material in the following section, an interview number and the abbreviation of the interviewee's party are given.

5. Empirical Analysis

The following section reports on the role conceptualisations which the former MPs provide for each staff group found in the material. We begin with the institutional administrative staff. After that, we focus on the committee staff (committee counsels), who play a crucial role in the Finnish legislative system, and finally, jointly address the staff employed by the PPGs and directly working with individual MPs, particularly the PAs. The final section summarises and elaborates on our central findings.

5.1. *Institutional Staff in a Non-Political but Symbolically Prestigious Role*

The institutional staff of the Finnish parliament comprises employees in administrative, expert, and support functions. When evaluating them, the interviewees tended to praise the employees. Their assessments remain astonishingly positive, even after taking into consideration moderating factors such as the fact that the interviews were commissioned by the Library of Parliament (Krekola & Latvala, 2014). Wordings related to friendliness or kindness, commitment, and professionalism are recurrent in the material (see the quotation I16 below). So is a language of helpfulness and service, indirectly referring to the assisting role of the staff in the parliamentary work. The special status of legislative work and the prestige of the parliamentary institution often set the scene for the positive accounts: with the MPs always relying on a fixed-term mandate for their position, the staff represent the long-term perspective of the parliamentary institution. This is particularly apparent for new MPs:

I would like to mention many really exceptionally nice people with whom I have worked. There has been such a huge number of them in Parliament, starting from the porters, really amazing staff. They know how to take care of things for you there. (I16, CPF)

The positive accounts cover a variety of staff groups and functions, for instance, the information and library services (see also Jágr, 2022). Yet it is clearly the figure of the porter that crystallises the positive side of the symbolic and social character of the MP-staff relationship. The porters stand out as a group, with special meaning attached to their role. Although they did appear in accounts of exceptional events, such as removing someone or reminding an MP about the dress code, it was mostly their sheer familiarity and presence that was noted in the interviews. The porters would advise the new MPs on a variety of practical matters, contributing to their introduction to the institution. Compared to the (mostly male) porters, the interview material contains next to nothing about the (mostly female) staff groups such as cleaners or café workers. While both the café and the sauna of the parliament are recognised in many interviews as traditionally significant parts of the institution with specific social codes attached, the mostly female employees running them are mentioned only a few times (see quotation I46 below). Although this material does not allow for strong conclusions about the gendered character of the staff roles, it does imply that gender matters for the role conceptualisations of the parliamentary staff (see Niemi, 2010; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2018):

[T]he sense of community throughout the house. This is perhaps the greatest thing. Of course, there was this [being addressed as] "Honourable Representative [last name]," but we were still somehow friends with the civil servants, especially with the porters. You could always get help when you needed it, as you should of course. I don't know how the cleaners and office assistants experienced it. (I46, LA)

In addition to the overwhelmingly positive accounts about the institutional staff, the material included some, often rather vaguely formulated, criticisms towards the general management of the institution as hierarchical and old-fashioned (see the quotation I17 below). These findings constitute an interesting tension, as part of the old-fashioned-ness seems to be necessary for the positive experience of prestige and respect in the institution. However, the fact that individual MPs rely much on the personalised help and support is not contradictory with and may even indicate more systemic issues, as Aula and Konttinen (2020; see also Aula & Koskimaa, 2023) have noted. Interestingly, the quotation below also includes the MP's assessment of the staff's potential self-conception of their role ("noble task"):

I doubt that the exceptional service-mindedness is due to the leadership here, but it may have to do with a noble task or something like this, perhaps. In any case, it [the leadership] is not modern and there are many problems, and things are too cumbersome. (I17, SDP)

As the institutional service staff are non-partisan and the tasks of many have little overlap with the MPs' work, the role conceptualisations regarding them do not seem to challenge the Weberian model of politics/administration relationship. While the staff and the politicians continuously interact, the interviewees do not express any merging of their roles or spheres. Moreover, members of this staff group are presented as allies rather than as competitors (Becker & Bauer, 2021; Peters, 2021). Metaphorically speaking, the red and blue form unique marble-like patterns rather than blending into purple.

5.2. Committee Staff in the Purple Zone

The committee personnel have an eminent position in "working parliaments" such as the Finnish one, as they facilitate the work of the committees, organise expert hearings, and draft reports of the committee work (see Helander et al., 2007; Pekonen, 2011; Raunio, 2023; Rinne, 2020). The committee counsels, being the head administrators of the committee work, were described as important educators for the newly elected MPs learning the craft of law-making. They were also quoted as a resource to rely on when in opposition and lacking the benefits of one's party being in executive power. Importantly, the counsels were praised and admired for their professionalism that often combined a legal education, long experience in parliament, expertise in the subject matters, and extensive networks, including civil servants in ministries. Their ability to synthesise the substance of the preparation in a reliable and balanced manner was assessed as a source of added value, easing the workload of the MPs (see the quotation I32 below). One interviewee would have preferred the recruitment criteria for the committee counsels to include economic expertise, a comment that stood out amongst the highly positive assessments of the committee staff's expertise:

[The committee counsels are] extremely important experts who are involved in this process. In my opinion, their role is central not only so that they are...extremely skilled in [formulating in] writing the understanding that comes from...the representatives, so that we can reach a consensus, unanimity, and make the general will visible....But also, they play an important role in a way that if they lacked the know-how...it would employ the representatives much more. (I32, SDP)

The committee counsels' role was defined as one of a non-political expert (see the quote I4 below) or a "background actor." However, the interviewees acknowledged that the committee counsels' style and preferences (see also DeGregorio, 1988) and their collaboration with the chair of the committee had a

crucial impact on their respective committees' political work. The committees have distinct traditions regarding how specifically they process bills, hear experts, and produce reports, and the lack of a uniform procedure was sometimes noted negatively. Some interviewees perceived certain counsels critically as strong-headed and keen on the power accessible to them (see the quotation I6 below), although one description of a counsel as a "tough woman" was admiring in tone. What the interviewees understood as the counsels' ideological leanings, membership, or sympathies with any specific party were sometimes noted. These extracts included an interviewee criticising a committee counsel for backing a party's position on a policy issue, and positively perceived cases of committee counsels demonstrating impartiality despite a commonly known party affiliation:

It is an extremely important role, and we must be able to make good use of the expertise of committee counsels. The committee counsel must not be made into a political instrument. We must always remember what the role of a committee counsel is. It is the chairperson's job to make sure that we don't put the committee counsel in charge of resolving a matter that is political. It must be decided by the committee itself. (I4, CPF)

Some committee counsels use their power tremendously, or try to use it, and thus the committee and the chair struggle to hold on to their power. In contrast we also have highly skilled committee counsels who always primarily recognise the will of the committee and who use their expertise in writing that down. (I6, G)

Providing substantial service to the MPs in their legislative work, the committee staff clearly has an expert role. The interview accounts vividly illustrate the dynamic and delicate character that the merging of administrative and political work entails, crystallising in the intimate collaboration between the political chair and the expert administrator conducting the committee work. The counsels could be characterised as the purple elite (see also Becker & Bauer, 2021; Geddes, 2021), conceptualised as a particularly prominent role in "working parliaments" such as the Finnish one. If the institutional staff above evoke a sentiment of gratitude and fondness among the MPs, the counsels enjoy admiration and respect related to their knowledge and skill. Compared to other staff groups, the counsels seem to be allowed more room for crafting their (internal) role conceptions in their everyday work (see also DeGregorio, 1988). Yet the (external) expectations about their role were also high and specific. The sharp comments regarding the perceived use of political power in a partisan manner marked the limits of the purple zone and the clearly blue zone of politics, and of the role understood as legitimate for the committee personnel by the MPs. Although the accounts on the committee staff mainly describe collaboration, they also indicated a slightly more conflictual position for the committee staff when compared to the institutional one (see Becker & Bauer, 2021; Peters, 2021).

5.3. The Strengthening of Political Staff—With a Complex Role for PAs

The directly political staff working in parliament includes personnel working in the PPG offices and the PAs, who are either employed by the PPGs or work for an individual MP (formally employed by parliament). The interview accounts regarding the PPG offices and their personnel were mainly neutral or positive, accompanied by a negative testimony of a general secretary of a PPG defrauding the group. The interviewees also addressed the strengthening of the PPGs as political actors, illustrated by the following quote:

[Before], the power came from [the party office], the definition of the political line came from them...[t]he system has changed, and group subsidies and alike have also helped to make it possible to build a political preparation resource around the [parliamentary party] group. The assistants and the parliamentary party group offices all indicate this. (I19, NCP)

The most significant part of the interview accounts for the political staff focused on the PAs, both the individual assistants and the assistant system. Not everybody among the MPs nor in the parliamentary administration had given unreserved support to the introduction of the PAs in the mid-1990s (see the quotation I37 below), partly because of their more clearly (party-)political role compared to the rest of the parliamentary administration. A more recent source of disagreement was the group office model in which the PAs are recruited and employed by the PPGs instead of individual MPs recruiting their personal assistants and the parliamentary office employing them (see also Ludwicki-Ziegler et al., 2024). While providing a broader structure for the assistants' work, the model also strengthened the PPGs' role as an organiser of staff resources, and consequently, the political character of parliamentary staff:

The old administration could not endure that the assistants came. They thought it was really wrong...It [the active resistance] was stupid, because I have had excellent assistants...Within our party group, the assistants have from the start collaborated well. (I37, G)

Most interviewees shared positive accounts about the assistants helping them in their daily work. Some highlighted the assistants' support for the parliamentarians as a system-level feature. The role conceptualisations vary between the interviews: some MPs understood the PAs' role as a more administrative one, while others had given their PAs more political tasks, such as speech writing. The interviewees mostly described their former PAs as professional and reliable, or expressed collegiality with them (see the quotation I25 below). Nonetheless, the appraisals were more mixed than in the case of the other staff groups. Some negative evaluations of the PAs were related to the interviewee's feeling that the assistant failed to perform as expected. The limits of the legitimate role also had to do with stepping out of the purple zone and challenging the MP in the blue sphere of politics (see the quotation I19 below). However, there were also interviewees who had supported the PAs' political careers or were nonchalant about their potential party membership:

The word "assistant" is a bit incorrect, because for me they have been colleagues and a natural part of the working community...I haven't probably been able to think of them in the hierarchy, whether they are above or under. (I25, LA)

[The recruitment] was a bad choice in the sense that they gradually became a competitor for the latest parliamentary elections...They were such an assistant that if a topic interested them, they did the work better, but if the topic didn't interest them, hardly anything came out of it. (I9, FP)

At the introduction of the assistant system, PAs were recruited by the MPs (although formally employed by the Finnish parliament), supporting the parliamentarians' individual political work. This represented a break with the Weberian ideal of the separation of administration and politics, a blending of spheres. The PAs are thus more clearly situated in the purple zone than the institutional staff, as they are close to the MP's political work. Yet they do not possess the status, expertise, and experience of the committee staff. The role

conceptualisations of both the PPG staff and PAs were also related to more structural accounts of the organisation of the parliamentary work, highlighting a system-level tension between the institutional and the more politically oriented staff. With the strengthening of the PPGs both more generally and in recruiting, employing, and organising the PA work specifically since the early 2010s, the pendulum has shifted towards a stronger role of the political staff in parliament (see also Aula & Koskimaa, 2023; Raunio, 2023). In the work of the PAs, this political nature of the work also caused tensions with the MP in cases where they were perceived as competitors (Becker & Bauer, 2021; Peters, 2021).

5.4. Summary of the Results

The role conceptualisations are conditioned both by the position of the staff with respect to the political work and by their position in the parliamentary hierarchy (see Table 2). The institutional staff, the furthest away from actual politics and low in the formal hierarchy, are praised for their kindness and helpfulness. At the heart of the legislative work and high in the parliamentary hierarchy, the committee staff earn respect because of their expertise, experience, skills, and networks. They enjoy more freedom in their work (see also DeGregorio, 1988; Geddes, 2021) and were only occasionally criticised in the material in cases where the MPs felt that the counsels moved from the purple zone into the blue sphere of politics.

Table 2. Evaluations of the parliamentary staff in relation to the parliamentary hierarchy and proximity to politics.

| Status in the parliamentary hierarchy | Proximity to politics | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| | Low | High |
| Status in the parliamentary hierarchy | Low | Institutional support staff: positive evaluations |
| | High | Committee personnel: mixed but mainly positive evaluations |

The unequivocally political staff of parliament consists of the PPG personnel, the position of which has recently strengthened in Finland (Aula & Koskimaa, 2023; Raunio, 2023), and the PAs, situated in the purple zone between politics and administration but not enjoying the status of the institutional legislative staff. While PAs in general are appreciated by the MPs and support them in various tasks (see also Brandsma & Otjes, 2024), they remain the most precarious staff group of the institution. The position of the assistants, many of whom have political ambitions but are not allowed to politick in their work, is somewhat complex in terms of the politics/administration divide, which at times creates tensions between them and the MPs. Although the MPs mainly see the staff as their allies, particularly the positions in the purple zone that come close to the political work of the MPs cause tensions (see also Becker & Bauer, 2021; Peters, 2021), which can nevertheless be partly attenuated by expertise and high status, as in the case of the committee staff.

We did not find significant differences between political parties nor differences based on the gender of the former MPs, although parties with many new MPs (such as the Finns Party in 2011) seemed to need more support from the staff than the more established ones. The length of the parliamentary career was mostly visible in the accounts of very experienced MPs with memories from a time when the administrative resources were scarcer, PPGs were weaker, or the PA system was introduced (see also Ollila, 2007).

6. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In the study, we applied a broader and more normative perspective on the roles of the parliamentary staff than the one focusing on task-based roles (cf. Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Otjes, 2022), drawing on an interpretive and relational perspective (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Busby, 2013; Crewe, 2018; Geddes, 2021; Geddes & Rhodes, 2018). The concept of role conceptualisation (Stout, 2013) allowed us to see how MPs' perceptions of the roles of the various parliamentary staff contributed to the construction of these roles, their normative underpinnings and legitimacy, and their limits in a prestigious and highly political environment. The MP–staff relations in the Finnish parliament were mostly presented in a positive light (cf. Niemi, 2010; White, 2024), in line with the international research using similar material (Peplow & Pivatto, 2020). A central finding regarding the role conceptualisations was their conditioning by the position of the staff, both with respect to the political work and the parliamentary hierarchy, with the personnel most distant from the political core and lowest in the parliamentary hierarchy receiving the most praise.

The concept of the purple zone, highlighting the mixing and complementarity of politics and administration (Alford et al., 2017; Bellò & Spano, 2015; see also Svara, 1999), described the roles of the parliamentary staff better than a clear-cut politics/administration dichotomy would have done. While interaction between the institutional support staff and the MPs was not described in terms that indicate a blending of spheres, the role conceptualisations of the committee counsels place them clearly in the purple zone. In the case of the PAs, the role conceptualisations varied in terms of "purpleness," with some of them clearly having a more political role, and others a predominantly administrative role. However, a distinction between a "legitimate" purple zone and actual, "blue" politics was emphasised in the material regarding the work of the committee counsels and PAs, establishing that it was not legitimate for the staff to meddle in the latter. Consequently, our findings on both role conceptualisations and the purple zone also give a nuanced picture of whether the parliamentary staff are perceived as allies or competitors of the MPs (Becker & Bauer, 2021; Peters, 2021).

Other studies on the purple zone, mainly addressing the local implementation of public policies (Alford et al., 2017; Bellò & Spano, 2015), have highlighted the new, dynamic roles adopted by public administrators. Such alternatives to the classical Weberian model have also been taken up in the literature on role conceptualisations (Stout, 2013). In our material, the role conceptualisations of the parliamentary staff by the MPs can be described as traditional rather than innovative, with the staff incorporating and reproducing the legacy of the parliamentary institution through their everyday work. However, the strengthening of explicitly party-political staff has clearly had an impact on the relationship between politics and administration (Aula & Konttinen, 2020; Aula & Koskimaa, 2023; Raunio, 2023), a trend which is likely to continue.

In future research, alternative frameworks, such as that of representative bureaucracy, could provide more insights on the political staff in parliaments (see Egeberg et al., 2013). The views of the incumbent rather than former MPs could provide more up-to-date conceptualisations of the roles of the parliamentary staff, although these MPs might not speak as freely as the retired ones. Also, a comparison between the self-conceptions and externally produced role conceptualisations of the staff could provide further insights on the topic, as would an international study that could distinguish between the contextual and more generic findings. The invisibility of some staff groups (such as cleaners or café workers) could be addressed in further research, as it potentially overlaps with a gendered division of labour (see Niemi, 2010; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2018). The concept of the

purple zone could be examined in subsequent studies in relation to political positions in parliaments that have an administrative dimension, such as the speaker or the chancellery commission (the highest organ of the parliamentary administration, consisting of MPs) in the Finnish case. Methodologically, our study can provide inspiration for further research using oral history archive material in other countries (see, e.g., Peplow & Pivatto, 2020), broadening the scope of studies in which such materials can be employed.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The original Finnish/Swedish language data used for the study is available at the Oral History Archive of Finnish Parliament, subject to permission (see https://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/naineduskuntatoimii/kirjasto/palvelut/Arkiston_palvelut/Pages/Veteraanikansanedustajien-muistitietoarkiston-palvelut.aspx).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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