

# Linking Pre-Parliamentary Political Experience and the Career Trajectories of the 1997 General Election Cohort<sup>1</sup>

Peter Allen\*

Department of Politics, Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK

\*Correspondence: [pallen03@mail.bbk.ac.uk](mailto:pallen03@mail.bbk.ac.uk)

This article uses empirical data to establish and analyse the links between pre-parliamentary political experience and career trajectory once elected to the House of Commons. It suggests a move away from the existing occupation focused frameworks towards a broader 'political experience' approach which distinguishes between traditional and non-traditional routes into Parliament. The framework is validated using data focusing on the 1997 cohort of newly elected Members of Parliament. It tracks the political careers of these individuals, asking who reaches the top positions, at what speed and whether there is a relationship between career trajectory and pre-parliamentary political experience.

Classifying, analysing and discussing the pre-parliamentary lives of Members of Parliament (MPs) has been a sustained focus of scholars in recent decades (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Cairney, 2007). Patterns of pre-parliamentary political experience amongst MPs are changing, with traditional backgrounds in elected service giving way to professionalised, full-time paid and unelected roles, often within political party structures (Cowley, 2012). Following the 2010 general election, this has led to heightened interest in the educational, professional, social and financial backgrounds of British political elites (*Daily Mail*, 2010), as well as continued discussion of the low numbers of MPs who are women or from an ethnic minority background (*The Guardian*, 2010a,b). These discussions have taken place within the context of broader disillusionment with a politics that is seen to be bereft of 'real people' (*The Telegraph*, 2008).

<sup>1</sup>The author would like to thank Michael Rush for generously sharing his data on UK parliamentary candidates. The author would also like to thank Philip Cowley for discussing the scale of hierarchy used in this article. His thoughts are much appreciated. Finally, thank you to Rosie Campbell for reading earlier drafts of this article and offering both welcome support and essential feedback.

This article questions whether these changing patterns of what MPs do before they are elected to the Commons is correlated with what they tend to do once they are there. Utilising data focusing on 242<sup>2</sup> MPs elected for the first time at the 1997 general election, it analyses the effect of pre-parliamentary experience on political career trajectory, tracking the movements of these MPs throughout the 13 years and 3 electoral cycles prior to the 2010 election that followed their initial election. Many remained firmly sat on the backbenches, some lay largely dormant at the ‘foothills’ of government (Mullin, 2009), whilst others moved through the ministerial ranks at pace and found themselves at the top of the pile before too long. Of interest here are patterns in these movements—are MPs with certain backgrounds more likely to end up in the cabinet, whilst those with a different pre-parliamentary experience spend their days trying desperately to catch the eye of the Speaker at question time?

## 1. Shifts in pre-parliamentary experience

Studies of routes into parliament are numerous in the existing literature, ranging from general accounts focusing on notions of personal ambition and driven by individual exemplars (Riddell, 1993) to feminist accounts which look at the candidate selection process in a more systematic and institutionalist way (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Norris, 1997a). The framing of this issue as one of (in)equality is common (Durose *et al.*, 2011).

In the British context, studies have highlighted a shift in these patterns over the past two decades, with recent work recognising the emergence of newer, non-traditional pathways to parliament which stand in contrast to the retrospectively titled traditional pathways. The key fascination has been with ‘professional’ or ‘career’ politicians. Across accounts of the ‘professionalisation’ phenomena within British political life, there is a large degree of variation. Some accounts are keen to look at a broad ‘political class’ (Jun, 2003) and to foreground what the author sees as an elite group of individuals who have come to dominate British politics over the past decades but with a focus on the financial incentives made available to do this. In other accounts, such as King (1981), the focus is on the cabinet, with a tendency to prioritise the influence of education and political machinations as catalysts behind a political career. Other accounts take a broader view at parliament as a whole (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995) and ask why a

---

<sup>2</sup>This article does not include the single Sinn Fein MP elected for the first time at the 1997 General Election as Sinn Fein MPs do not attend parliament once elected owing to their refusal to take an oath of allegiance. Given the focus of the article on parliamentary career trajectories and the lack of any opportunity for such trajectories available to Sinn Fein MPs, it was decided to exclude this single case from the data analysis. As such, there are 242 MPs in the analysis, one less than the full 243 who were elected for the first time at the 1997 General Election.

diversity of class, race and sex is not represented at Westminster in proportion to the population as a whole, highlighting how a number of social and economic factors combine to systematically hinder certain groups of people whilst at the same time aid others in their attempt to become an MP. Of interest to Cairney (2007) are the occupations held by MPs prior to their election (looking comparatively across the accounts discussed above) and similarly, Riddell is interested in those who are ‘fully committed to the political life’ before their election and uses anecdotal evidence to flesh out such accounts (1993, p. 289). A clear theme binding all of these accounts is the notion that parliament is becoming more and more of a closed shop, creating a group of MPs who are increasingly similar to each other and increasingly dissimilar to the population at large.

Existing accounts of this ‘professionalisation’ have tended to use the paid employment of MPs before their election to measure its growth.<sup>3</sup> Classifications of pre-parliamentary employment have previously distinguished only between jobs that are considered useful for or conducive to someone running for parliament, and those that are not. Paul Cairney argues that this all-encompassing ‘politics-facilitating’ classification of pre-parliamentary occupations that are broadly favourable to an individual considering a run for parliament are no longer of great use (2007). He posits a distinction between ‘brokerage’ and ‘instrumental’ occupations (shown below in Figure 1) with the former being a job that is conducive to running for political office, whereas the latter is perceived to ‘be of value as an aid to election’, building on the ‘politics-facilitating’ label by distinguishing between occupations conducive to office and those chosen for the purpose of reaching office (2007, p. 6). These earlier distinctions are rooted in assumptions relating to what occupational conditions are most favourable to a run for parliament, with ‘flexibility over time, generous vacations, interrupted career path (and) financial security’ being included, and the roles minimising ‘the costs and risks of horizontal mobility from the economic to the political marketplace’ (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995, p. 110). Under this schema, parliamentarian’s backgrounds can be seen to shift from brokerage to instrumental in the post-war period, with this trend intensifying since the 1970s, coinciding with an almost total elimination of nobility from the Conservative benches and of ex-manual workers and primary industry workers from the Labour benches (Best *et al.*, 2001, p. 73; Cairney, 2007, pp. 2–3). Earlier studies of the Commons by authors such as Colin Mellors add weight to this thesis (1978). Norris and Lovenduski describe the rise of the ‘talking professions’ such as law, journalism, teaching and so on (in Norris, 1997, p. 165; Best *et al.*, 2001, p. 77), and existing work looking at both the Labour and Conservative Parties

---

<sup>3</sup>Within the literature, this is measured in different ways, with some research focusing on ‘formative’ occupations and others focusing on occupation directly prior to the election.

<b>BROKERAGE</b> <i>Conducive to politics</i>	<b>INSTRUMENTAL</b> <i>Direct link to politics</i>
Law (Barrister, Solicitor)	Journalism
Teaching	Public Relations
Academic	Trade Union official
'Professional' more broadly	Interest Group representative
	Full-time Councillor
	MEP/MSP/AM
	Party worker
	Parliamentary staff
	QUANGO staff
	Think-tank staff

**Figure 1.** Brokerage and instrumental occupations defined in [Cairney, 2007](#).

suggests that local party members may hold bias against candidates who are manual workers ([Bochel and Denver, 1983](#); [Greenwood, 1988](#)). Despite this convergence of sorts, there are still party differences, however, with Labour’s professionals more likely to be drawn from the public sector than their Conservative counterparts who are more likely to be drawn from the private sector ([Keating and Cairney, 2006](#), p. 44). These existing accounts provide a springboard from which to update classifications of pre-parliamentary political experience.

Within the instrumental category, Cairney includes journalism, ‘occupations that provide an apprenticeship for higher elected office’, or those that entail working closely with existing politicians, as well as mentioning individuals who pursue their duties as elected local councillors on a full-time basis ([2007](#), pp. 3–5). These individuals are broadly considered to be the archetypal professional politicians. This is typical of the way that a number of separate lines of enquiry are often conflated under the label of ‘professionalisation’. For example:

... reflected in, and strongly reinforced by, the increasing number of MPs who had previously been local councillors and/or worked for their party or a campaigning group – in short, career politicians ([Rush and Giddings, 2011](#), p. 235).

This account, characteristic of many in this area, conflates a number of significantly different factors into a homogenous and all-encompassing ‘career politician’ label. This clouds the differences that may exist between these different types of pre-parliamentary political experience, particularly in an era when political experience is both paid and unpaid, can be both a full-time job and experiential, or in some cases is pursued in addition to a non-political full-time job. Some of the roles listed are available only to those who have successfully competed in an election of some sort, others see individuals in the employ of an actual political party (and therefore presumably working in a partisan capacity), whereas others are

instead more generalised, remaining political in a broader non-partisan sense. The professionalisation thesis is arguably mainly interested in how politicians are increasingly already heavily involved in political life, and closer to the existing system, by the time of their election but these accounts conflate a number of activities together when assembling evidence to support or refute whether this is occurring or not. For example, Cairney includes ‘full-time councillor’ as an instrumental occupation, whereas it is unrealistic to compare a full-time councillor on a district authority in the North East to a Special Adviser to the Chancellor of the Exchequer who is based in Westminster, in close proximity to political elites, and who is arguably already a member of the stereotypical ‘political class’. In a 2011 interview with Women’s Parliamentary Radio, newly elected MP Luciana Berger said:

The job that I did most recently in the three years running up to standing for parliament, I was working in and around Westminster in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords and . . . I think it definitely helps to understand Parliament’s processes, to understand the physical layout of the building . . . I think, because I had that experience, it’s been incredibly helpful.<sup>4</sup>

Working for the central party, or an affiliated organisation, in the bubble of the Westminster village is likely to give aspirant MPs unprecedented knowledge of the way that politics in the British parliament is carried out—the geography, the personalities, the language and the formal and informal methods of getting things done. It also gives individuals an opportunity to forge relationships that may benefit their careers at a future stage. Former MP Oona King writes:

Any aspiring MP who wants to be a Government Minister needs to find a power broker. If you haven’t got a senior politician, ideally a Cabinet Minister, going to bat for you, you’re nowhere (King, 2007, p. 210).

Such benefits are largely intangible, and thus hard to operationalise in research terms, but distinguishing between the different routes taken into parliament will allow for delineation between traditional and non-traditional paths. In order for the professionalisation thesis to advance, and for it to effectively answer the questions it itself asks, attention needs to focus on this distinction, bypassing debates surrounding complex nomenclature and allowing for a broader assessment of these key two main types of political experience which best exemplify the broader changes that appear to be in motion.

---

<sup>4</sup>The full interview can be heard at [www.wpradio.co.uk](http://www.wpradio.co.uk). Thanks to Boni Sones for her permission to reproduce this transcript.

### *1.1 Traditional: the local route*

The main traditional pathway to parliament over the past 60 years has been the local council (Durose *et al.*, 2011, p. 30). Throughout the post-war period, roughly a third of all MPs elected to the Commons have been local councillors at some stage in their political lives (Local Government Association, 2008, p. 26). Looking at the 2010 parliamentary intake, 41.6% of new MPs have local elected experience, compared with 62% in the 1997 intake. It would seem to be a pathway to parliament in decline from a peak.

Michael Rush notes how this growth was cross-party phenomenon; the proportion of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs with local government experience rose throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and the same happened within the Conservative Party, albeit at a lower rate (1994, p. 573; Rush, 2001, p. 18). It is possible to speculate that this could be a way for individuals to show their loyalty to the party (Rush, 1994, p. 573), and in cases where the local service is in the same area of the constituency, a way of showing their closeness to the local area, even as a badge of 'localism' (Rush, 1969, p. 79; Childs and Cowley, 2011). It is not necessarily the case, however, that being a local councillor is considered the gold standard of pre-parliamentary experience. When recruiting for the Scottish parliament, the Labour Party actively discouraged a 'councillor takeover' of the new body (Keating and Cairney, 2006, p. 50). There appeared to be a perception at the top of the party that the candidates who would no doubt be keen to make the step up from local to national politics may not be of the standards that they desired (Shaw, 2001, p. 38), echoing previous worries in the party at the 1992 election that selecting local councillors as parliamentary candidates in areas that they already represented at a local level would result in their outlook being too parochial and constituency focused. The question of loyalty is also pertinent here—aspirant MPs who are embedded firmly in the community as opposed to the political party itself might be more willing to dissent in future, with existing research finding that those members of the 1997 cohort with council experience were indeed more likely to rebel against the government when voting in parliament (Cowley and Childs, 2003, p. 355). Speaking about her first weeks in parliament following the 1997 election, Christine McCafferty noted that amongst the new intake 'you quickly saw who had been on a local authority. You knew all the councillors of all the parties, knew all the chief execs of all the local organisations, knew absolutely everybody' (Total Politics, 2010). Clearly, this level of local engagement will simply not be there for MPs without that local experience.

### *1.2 Non-traditional: via Westminster*

The broader professionalisation of political life has led many aspirant MPs to work full-time in politics prior to becoming an MP, either as a ministerial aide,

parliamentary researcher, party staffer or in the broader political arena, for example for an advocacy group or think tank. Additionally, the increase in number of special advisers, as well as the provision for MPs of research assistants and staffs, has provided aspirant politicians with more opportunities to gain political experience of a non-traditional type (Gay, 2010, pp. 12–13; Rush and Giddings, 2011, p. 235). Cowley writes, ‘for sure, this leaves a majority of MPs who enter the Commons without such experience, but it creates the potential for a two-track career path, with accelerated promotion for those with significant pre-Westminster experience and perhaps a slower route for those without’ (Cowley, 2012, p. 36).

This increase has resulted in a blurring of the distinction between pre-political experience in the traditional ‘extra-curricular’ sense as a local councillor or party activist, and seen a move towards people obtaining political experience in their main employment. Indeed, it is common to see aspirant candidates holding a combination of all of these things. Fisher and Webb (Fisher and Webb, 2003; Webb and Fisher, 2003) studied Labour Party employees based both at Millbank (the party headquarters in London) and around the country. Regarding political ambition, they find that 20% of employees plan to seek adoption as prospective parliamentary candidates in future, and a further 11% plan to mount a candidacy for a seat in the European parliament (Webb and Fisher, 2003, p. 16). It is possible to speculate that party employment offers experience related to both the formal and informal workings and contacts of political life from a partisan perspective and as part of party networks, networks formalised in the Labour Staff Network, the Conservative Staff Group and Liberal Democrat Staff Group.<sup>5</sup> To what extent does working in such an environment affect the political beliefs or outlook of an aspirant MP? In his diaries, discussing such political insiders, Chris Mullin writes, ‘most have never, nor will they ever (in public at least), ask a question that betrays even a hint of scepticism about the official version of events’ (2010, p. 13). There would appear to be a perception that such individuals, once elected, are likely to be party loyalists.

Peter Riddell (1993) offers a qualitative account of increasing numbers of MPs who have harboured parliamentary ambitions since their student days and have known ‘nothing else than politics’ (1993, p. 186). Uwe Jun acknowledges the declining proportion of MPs coming into parliament from non-political backgrounds, and it should be noted that although this figure is in decline, it is in no way the case that prospective MPs are leaving school or university and simply strolling into a parliamentary seat as would have been the case in the eighteenth century (Rush, 1994, p. 573). Indeed, the large proportion of MPs being elected for the first time in their 30s would suggest that some sort of occupation prior to seeking

---

<sup>5</sup><http://www.w4mp.org/html/personnel/represent.asp>.

election is still the norm, albeit increasingly a political one (Rush, 1994, p. 576). Anthony King supports with evidence a view that most MPs falling into the bracket of 'career politician' will be first elected between the ages of 30 and 45, contrasting this with the small numbers of MPs first elected after the age of 50 (1981, p. 263). More generally, Westminster has become a younger legislature since the 1970s, indeed perhaps due to changing expectations relating to pre-parliamentary experience as part of the spread of careerism (Best *et al.*, 2001, p. 86).

Rush identifies three overarching trends. First, early engagement, both occupational and financial, with politics as a precondition to pursuing a political career; secondly, a decline in individuals who become MPs following a successful non-political career, and thirdly, the 'professionalisation' of politics, marked by an increase in MPs salaries and the providing of the resources necessary to do their jobs effectively (1994, p. 576). In addition, it is possible to add other trends, such as serving in parliament for longer, with most MPs serving for at least 15 years (Rush, 1994, p. 571) and being initially elected at a younger age. King identifies an intensification of the Westminster village atmosphere and posits that the influx of career politicians into the Commons means it is harder than ever before for political outsiders to rise to the very top of British political life. Finally, he argues that there has been an overall increase in the ambition of those individuals elected to parliament, but is keen to note however, that there never was a 'golden age' as mooted by some (King, 1981, pp. 276–285).

## 2. Does where you come from affect where you can go?

I notice the former special advisers tend to stick together in the Tea Room; some have already developed the short attention spans one associates with the upwardly mobile. Before the year is out they'll all be in government (Mullin, 2010, p. 187).

The question driving this analysis is that of whether the route of entry of an MP to parliament affects their career trajectory once elected to the Commons? A key issue that needs to be addressed is whether or not there exists a roadmap of sorts for individuals who wish to reach the top of British politics, namely a frontbench position in either government or opposition, identified by Cowley as a potential 'two-track career path' (2012, p. 36). The broader trends seen in the Commons have tended towards a 'professionalisation', with many MPs working in politics prior to their election. Are these trends reflected in those individuals who reach the top offices, and if so, are they felt even more strongly?

Existing literature from the 1970s suggests that MPs who have a political background as local councillors are more likely to end up being long-term backbenchers than those MPs who do not share this experience, and that transfer from local



to national leadership is rare (Judge, 1973; Mellors, 1978, p. 98). Is it the case in the cohort being studied here that having been a local councillor is not a catalyst to frontbench careers? Are local councillors destined to continue their locally focused work, only now from an office in Westminster?

### **3. Methods**

The 1997 general election saw the highest number of newly elected MPs since the Second World War, with new MPs making up 36.9% of the total and a turnover rate of 41.9% (Rush and Giddings, 2011, p. 33). The election saw a landslide victory for the Labour Party, led by Tony Blair, as well as a doubling of the number of women MPs, most of them from the Labour benches. The Labour Party won the subsequent two elections, in 2001 and 2005, giving them an unprecedented three consecutive terms in government. This provides a self-enclosed period of time which can be studied as a cohort and used as a 'political generation' in the sense that anyone first elected in 1997 would most likely have reached the highest office they will reach in that 13 year period. Clearly, there will be exceptions to this, but the high turnover of MPs at the 2010 election, as well as the electoral shift away from Labour, compounds this notion of a generation that has arrived and left again; the beginning and the end of a political era.

In addition to the benefits provided by focusing on this cohort, its constraints should also be noted. It is a cohort dominated heavily by the Labour Party, and as such, the trends identified here are not necessarily applicable to the other parties. A similar study that focused on a comparable Conservative-heavy cohort (such as the most recent 2010 intake) would provide context for the findings presented here and allow for an assessment of how generalisable they are, as well as accounting for career paths amongst the more business and less politically rooted 2010 intake.

#### *3.1 The structure of British Government*

British governmental roles are structured in a hierarchical way, with Secretaries of State at the top and junior ministers at the bottom. Beneath the level of junior minister comes the role of Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS). Within the category of junior ministers, there are two tiers—the junior minister and the more junior under-secretary of state (James, 1999, p. 19). In terms of accountability, ministers are accountable to parliament in areas entailed by their brief. Each cabinet minister will have their own PPS, with junior ministers sharing theirs (James, 1999, p. 21). The number of PPSs has risen over time at a rate unmatched by the overall rise in number of paid government posts. In 1999 the numbers of

<p><b>5</b> – Cabinet Minister / Shadow Cabinet / Lib Dem Shadow Cabinet / Chief Whips / Party Leaders</p> <p><b>4</b> – Ministers of State / Shadow Ministers / Lib Dem Shadow Ministers / Whips</p> <p><b>3</b> – Under-Secretaries of State / Opposition Spokespeople / Lib Dem Spokespeople / Junior Whips / Advocate General</p> <p><b>2</b> – PPS</p> <p><b>1</b> – Backbenchers</p>
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Figure 2.** Harmonised scale detailing hierarchy of highest potential frontbench offices in UK Parliament.

PPSs and MPs in paid government roles stood at 47 and 106, respectively (Butler and Butler, 2000, p. 71). Clearly this growth of lower level unpaid roles offers governments the option of using such positions to assuage the ambition of potentially restless backbenchers.

The opposition has a member of their frontbench shadowing each of these Secretaries of State and junior ministers. For example, Andy Burnham, currently the shadow health secretary, is the shadow of Andrew Lansley, the incumbent secretary of state for health. Membership of the shadow cabinet is considered to be a ‘certain guarantee of high office if your party wins the next election’ (Kaufman, 1997, p. 7). This senior group of MPs are part of the wider shadow frontbench in the same way that cabinet ministers are senior to more junior members of the government and collectively make up the shadow cabinet. Liberal Democrat positions have been incorporated here too, helped by the adoption of similar ‘shadow cabinet’ terminology by the party in the mid-noughties.

In order to allow for analysis of the data that included the largest possible number of individuals, a scale has been constructed which harmonises the various positions into five equivalent categories. Such a scale is, by necessity, imprecise and will inevitably gloss over the jagged edges of reality and is also open for perennial discussion. It focuses solely on frontbench positions—to include select committee positions and other similarly un-hierarchical backbench roles was considered outside the scope of the paper. The scale is detailed above (Figure 2).

#### 4. Hypotheses

The tentative hypotheses guiding the research and analysis are as follows.

- (i) That MPs taking the Westminster/instrumental route to parliament will be promoted earlier, more often, and ultimately into higher positions than those taking the more traditional elected route.

- (ii) MPs with local council experience are more likely to remain as long-term backbenchers (repeating existing findings, Mellors, 1978, pp. 98–99).

## 5. Analysis and discussion

The following section will outline and discuss the data collected about the 1997 intake. It should first be noted that the large majority (over 95%) of both Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs elected for the first time in 1997 progressed to a non-backbench role compared with only 55% of newly elected Labour MPs. This is due to the much larger Labour intake at the 1997 election and is therefore to be expected. It should also be noted that Labour (including Labour and Co-operative Party) and Liberal Democrat MPs were significantly more likely to have been local councillors than their Conservative counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

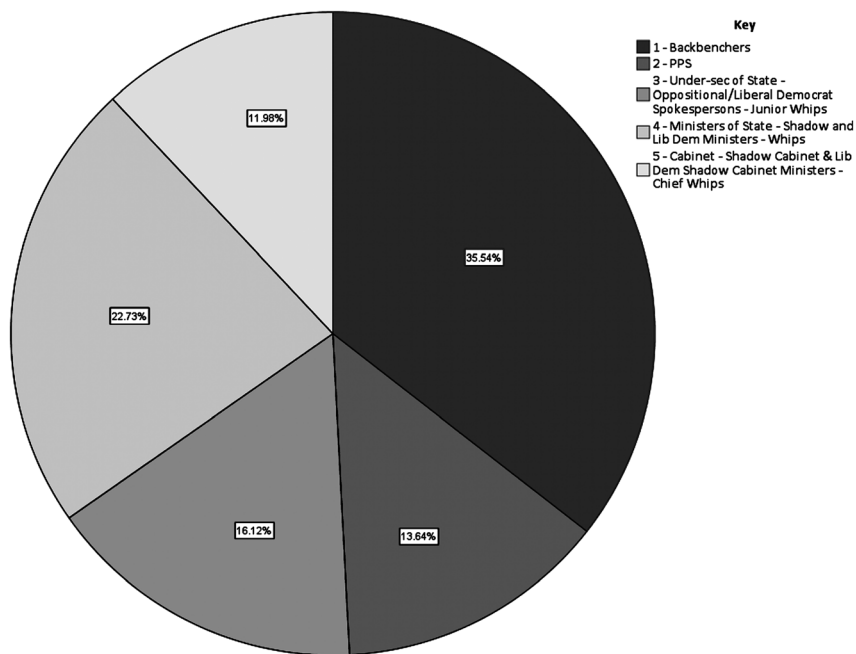
Figure 3 shows the highest offices reached between 1997 and 2010 by all 242 MPs included in the analysis. The largest group is backbenchers and other non-frontbench roles, with 36.33% of MPs remaining in these positions for either their entire tenure in the Commons, or at least up until the dissolution of parliament prior to the 2010 election. For 13.64%, the highest office they climbed to was that of PPS, 16.12% made it to the level of under-secretary of state or its' opposition equivalent, and 22.73% scaled the heights to reach the position of minister of state or equivalent. Only 11.98% made it to the very top cabinet or shadow cabinet positions. Perhaps the most striking thing about these data is the fact that a significant majority (64.46%) of MPs first elected in 1997 made it beyond the backbenches.

Looking again at highest office reached between 1997 and 2010, but this time distinguishing between those MPs who had local council experience before their election to Westminster and those who did not, it is clear that the distribution seen in Figure 3 is not uniform. Table 1 shows a clear difference in the parliamentary careers of MPs based on their pre-parliamentary political experience.

As mentioned previously, research from the 1970s showed that MPs who had been local councillors prior to their election to Westminster were more likely to end up long-term backbenchers than those who had no such experience (Mellors, 1978, pp. 98–9). These findings are replicated here; it is clear that the top roles (levels four and five on the harmonised scale) are dominated by those MPs without local council experience, whereas the inverse is apparent for the lower end roles (levels one and two on the scale). These differences were all highly statistically significant. Of additional interest is the fact that MPs with neither local

---

<sup>6</sup>About 71% of 169 Labour MPs, 88.9% of nine Labour & Co-op MPs and 76.9% of 26 Lib Dem MPs had council experience compared with 21.2% of 33 Conservative MPs (difference statistically significant at the 0.001 level, Pearson chi-square, 40.954).



**Figure 3.** Highest office reached by all MPs (%) elected for the first time in 1997 between 1997 and 2010 general elections,  $n = 242$ .

nor instrumental experience were still more likely to reach the top two sets of roles than those MPs who had both, suggesting that local council experience not only does not enhance an MPs' prospects of reaching the top as much as instrumental experience does, but also that it actually reduces them.

Conversely, the opposite would seem to be true for those MPs who had the backgrounds of stereotypical 'professional' or 'career' politicians. MPs in possession of such experience are more likely to reach higher office than those who are not. Also shown in Table 1, 44.8% of those MPs with only local council experience remained backbenchers for the entire 13-year period between 1997 and 2010, or their entire parliamentary careers if they left the Commons before then. This is compared to only 24% of those MPs with only instrumental occupational experience. MPs with both lie somewhere between these two groups, with 30.8% of this group remaining backbenchers for the duration of their time in office, suggesting that local council experience cancels out the benefits of instrumental experience, to some extent, although it is hard to assess this with much precision.

Looking at the higher echelons, a significant majority (64%) of MPs with only instrumental experience made it to the top two levels (the cabinet and ministerial level, or equivalent) in comparison to 22.9% of those MPs with only local council

**Table 1.** Cross-tabulation of highest office achieved and pre-parliamentary political experience ( $n = 242$ )

Highest office on scale	Pre-parliamentary political experience				Total
	Neither ( $n = 35$ ) (%)	Local councillor ( $n = 105$ ) (%)	Instrumental occupation ( $n = 50$ ) (%)	Both ( $n = 52$ ) (%)	
1: Backbencher ( $n = 86$ )	31.4***	44.8***	24.0***	30.8***	35.5
2: PPS ( $n = 33$ )	2.9***	18.1***	8.0***	17.3***	13.6
3: Under-secretary of state\opposition spokesperson\Lib Dem spokesperson\junior whip ( $n = 39$ )	28.6***	14.3***	4.0***	23.1***	16.1
4: Minister of state\shadow minister\Lib Dem shadow minister\whip ( $n = 55$ )	22.9***	20.0***	34.0***	17.3***	22.7
5: Cabinet minister\shadow cabinet\Lib Dem shadow cabinet\chief whip ( $n = 29$ )	14.3***	2.9***	30.0***	11.5***	12.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

\*\*\*Difference significant at the 0.001 level (Pearson chi-square, 45.600).

experience doing the same. Again, MPs with both types of experience lie between these two figures, with just under 29% of them reaching either levels four or five. Overall, these figures show that having local council experience makes you more likely to remain a backbencher (compared with the overall percentages shown in Figure 3), whereas having taken the Westminster route to parliament as a political insider leaves you less likely to remain in that position. The opposite applies to the highest positions in the hierarchy, suggesting the possibility that there is a pattern here worth investigating. To put the figures in a wider context, of all 86 MPs who did not move beyond the backbenches, 54.7% had local council experience and only 14% had instrumental experience, whereas of the 29 MPs who reached cabinet-level offices, 51.7% had instrumental experience and 10.3% local experience. 20.7% of those MPs who reached cabinet level had both instrumental and local council experience and 17.2% had neither. To some extent, it is accurate to say that the very top positions are dominated by those MPs with instrumental experience of some sort.

Prior to turning to look in more detail at career patterns, it is important to note that of the 242 MPs included in this analysis, 28.1% had left the Commons before the 2010 general election. Clearly, the length of an MP's stay in the Commons will affect their career path and their likelihood of reaching the highest offices. Of the 17 MPs, first elected four years previously, who left in 2001, 64.7% had remained backbenchers. Of the same cohort, the 86 who left nine years later in 2010 were far more likely to have progressed beyond the backbenches, with only 33.4% remaining there after 13 years. In some ways, it is possible to interpret this as part of a career path—MPs in marginal seats could have sought selection in safer seats, for example. Of the 17 MPs who left parliament in 2001, 35.3% had safe seats (with majorities of over 10%), and exactly the same percentage were in marginal seats. Electoral defeat accounts for the loss of all MPs in marginal seats (majorities under 5%), 80% of those MPs with majorities between 5 and 10% and only 16.7% of those MPs with safe seats. Retirement accounts for 50% of the losses suffered by MPs in safe seats. 41.2% of these MPs had local council experience compared with only 17.6% who had instrumental occupational experience. There is a possible explanation for this in the sheer size of the majority won by Labour in 1997, which led to many candidates winning who were not expected to do so by commentators, and indeed, who did not expect to win themselves (Norris, 1997b, p. 512). It is probable that for some of these unexpected MPs, many who were local councillors and local party activists, being an MP was not something they had aspired to particularly so they stood down at the earliest opportunity. In terms of the analysis presented here, it is not possible to guess at the potential careers of those MPs who left parliament, for whatever reason, shortly after their arrival, but it should be borne in mind that those who reach the top will often require the time in parliament to do so.

### 6. Speed of promotion: how far and how fast?

As speculated by Cowley (2012, p. 36), it is feasible that those MPs elected to parliament with extensive Westminster village experience in the form of full-time instrumental occupations will be promoted more quickly than those who have not. Overall, 62.8% of all MPs who were promoted beyond the backbenches were promoted to their first office during their first term in the Commons. There is a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level between whether an MP was promoted to their first office in their first term based on their pre-parliamentary political experience, with 51.7% of those with local council experience making this leap in their first term compared with 60.5% of those MPs taking the Westminster route to parliament. Turning to the question of initial promotion and the first positions that backbenchers were promoted to, the data suggests a link between early initial promotion and ultimate career prospects.

Table 2 shows that there is also a significant relationship between a first-term office and the highest office reached by an MP, with 93.1% of those MPs reaching cabinet positions (or equivalent, level five on the scale) were promoted for the first time in their first term. The percentage of MPs at each point on the scale who were first promoted in their first term increases with each jump in office. For example, only 24.2% of those MPs whose highest office was PPS were promoted in their first term, perhaps supporting the previous speculation that the office of PPS could be used by government as a backbench pacifier. These patterns hold true for the offices making up the middle of the scale, with only 35.9% of those MPs making it as high as under-secretary of state (or equivalent) remaining without promotion throughout their first term, with this figure falling to 30.9% for the fully fledged minister of state office. It would seem to be the case that in terms of reaching the very top, it is best to start your journey upwards at the earliest possible point.

Of additional interest is the impact of which position MPs are first promoted to—are those who are promoted to higher positions early on more likely to stay in them or are they destined to never repeat their initial ascent?

**Table 2.** Cross-tabulation of highest office on scale and first office in the first term, *n* = 156

First office in first term?	Highest office on scale				Total (%)
	2 ( <i>n</i> = 33) (%)	3 ( <i>n</i> = 39) (%)	4 ( <i>n</i> = 55) (%)	5 ( <i>n</i> = 29) (%)	
Yes	24.2***	64.1***	69.1***	93.1***	62.8
No	75.8***	35.9***	30.9***	6.9***	37.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

\*\*\*Difference significant at the 0.001 level (Pearson chi-square, 33.367).

Table 3 suggests that for many MPs, their first position is the highest they will reach. For example, 97% of MPs whose highest office is as a PPS had a PPS role as their first position and 56% of MPs who first stepped onto the ladder at under-secretary of state level never moving higher. The percentage of MPs making the leap from a first entry at the PPS level to the cabinet (or equivalent) stands at 17.9%, with the majority of MPs reaching those highest offices entering at either under-secretary of state or minister of state level. Over half of MPs whose highest office is at the under-secretary of state level began there, although it would also seem to be the case that this office is a good springboard to higher ones, with 36.4 and 46.4% beginning their frontbench lives at this level and then moving to minister of state or cabinet level, respectively. As such, the higher you enter, the better your prospects of moving even higher.

In terms of linking these first office allocations back to pre-parliamentary experience, the findings are mixed as shown in Table 4.

There is a significant relationship between pre-parliamentary political experience and the first position that MPs were promoted to if they moved beyond the backbenches. For the majority of MPs with either exclusively local council experience or local and instrumental experience, the first office they are promoted to is PPS, with this being the case for 62.1 and 55.6% of these groups, respectively. Conversely, this only occurs for 36.8% of those MPs with only instrumental experience and 30.4% of MPs with neither. The highest level of offices that MPs were placed in as part of a first promotion is minister of state (or equivalent, level four on the scale). Over a quarter of MPs with solely instrumental experience were first promoted to these offices compared with only 6.9% of MPs with local council experience. The figure for MPs with both again lies between these two figures at 8.3%, and the figure for neither is higher at 17.4%. Understanding these differences is complex, with certain intangible elements such as political factionalism no doubt playing a significant role. Such an assertion is supported by the findings of [Keating and Cairney \(2006, p. 50\)](#), as outlined above, who found

**Table 3.** Cross-tabulation of highest office on scale and first office on scale, *n* = 155

First position on scale	Highest office on scale				Total (%)
	2 ( <i>n</i> = 33) (%)	3 ( <i>n</i> = 39) (%)	4 ( <i>n</i> = 55) (%)	5 ( <i>n</i> = 28) (%)	
2 ( <i>n</i> = 78)	100***	38.5***	45.5***	17.9***	49.7
3 ( <i>n</i> = 56)	0***	56.4***	36.4***	46.4***	36.1
4 ( <i>n</i> = 23)	0***	5.1***	18.2***	35.7***	14.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

\*\*\*Difference significant at the 0.001 level (Pearson chi-square, 53.714).



**Table 4.** Cross-tabulation of first office on scale and pre-parliamentary political experience (n = 155)

First position on scale	Pre-parliamentary political experience				Total
	Neither (n = 23) (%)	Local councillor (n = 58) (%)	Instrumental occupation (n = 38) (%)	Both (n = 36) (%)	
2: PPS (n = 77)	30.4*	62.1*	36.8*	55.6*	49.7
3: Under-secretary of state\opposition spokesperson\Lib Dem spokesperson\junior whip (n = 56)	52.2*	31.0*	34.2*	36.1*	36.1
4: Minister of state\shadow minister\Lib Dem shadow minister\whip (n = 22)	17.4*	6.9*	28.9*	8.3*	14.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

\*Difference significant at the 0.05 level (Pearson chi-square, 16.152).

that the (new) Labour Party was keen for the new Scottish parliament to not be an arena dominated by ex-councillors. It is possible that Blair, as Prime Minister, and his colleagues at the very top, had a similar mindset when appointing ministers. The evidence suggests that this could be a case of discriminating against those MPs with local experience in order to favour Westminster insiders, with these MPs being placed into higher office, and office which Table 3 suggests will in turn act as a more effective springboard to even higher office again than lower rungs on the career ladder would.

### 7. ‘Youth is (almost) everything’

Writing in his diaries, veteran former Labour MP Chris Mullin notes that

Youth is (almost) everything. Jack Straw . . . is the only Cabinet minister on the wrong side of 60; several of the new boys and girls are in their thirties and have only been in Parliament for five minutes (2010, p. 187).

Mullin’s observation raises the question of how age interacts with pre-parliamentary experience; are political insiders, those individuals who have worked in instrumental occupations prior to their election, more likely to be elected at a younger age?

**Table 5.** Cross-tabulation of age at election and pre-parliamentary political experience,  $n = 242$ 

Age at election by decade	Pre-parliamentary political experience				Total
	Neither ( $n = 35$ ) (%)	Local councillor ( $n = 105$ ) (%)	Instrumental occupation ( $n = 50$ ) (%)	Both ( $n = 52$ ) (%)	
Under-30 ( $n = 5$ )	2.9***	1.0***	4.0***	1.9***	2.1
30–39 ( $n = 74$ )	20.0***	24.8***	56.0***	25.0***	30.6
40–49 ( $n = 111$ )	65.7***	44.8***	32.0***	48.1***	45.9
50–59 ( $n = 50$ )	11.4***	29.5***	6.0***	23.1***	20.7
Over 60 ( $n = 2$ )	0***	0***	2.0***	1.9***	0.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100

\*\*\*Difference significant at the 0.001 level (Pearson chi-square, 33.902).

The obvious conclusion from Table 5 is that the 1997 parliamentary intake is dominated by individuals of middling age, with nearly half of all MPs being elected whilst in their 40s. It is more interesting that 56% of those MPs with instrumental experience were elected whilst in their 30s compared with 24.8% of those MPs with local council experience, which, although not quite an invasion of youth, is a significant difference. A quarter and a fifth of MPs with either both or neither of these types of experience were also elected in this age cohort. Another point of interest is the high concentration of MPs with neither of these types of political experience elected in their 40s, with 65.7% making their first entry at that age, perhaps a reminder that a large percentage of MPs do still pursue careers outside of politics before changing course in the middle age. The overall youngest group is those MPs with instrumental experience only.

Age also seems to be a useful predictor, at least at the two extremes, of likely office achievement. Those MPs elected for the first time under the age of 40 were more likely to end up in non-backbench positions than not, and the opposite holds true for those MPs elected for the first time once over 50 years of age. Table 6 shows that no MPs elected under the age of 30 (admittedly a small group of five) failed to reach a ministerial office of some sort (or equivalent).<sup>7</sup>

Detailing the percentage of individuals in these positions by their age group when first elected, it is made clear that the top positions (4–5 on scale) are dominated by those MPs elected for the first time between the ages of 30 and 50, with MPs from this age group making up nearly, and over, 90% of cabinet and ministerial positions, respectively. Under-30s make up a higher percentage of those

<sup>7</sup>It was also found that over 50% of those MPs elected whilst in their 30s reached either cabinet or ministerial-level positions.

**Table 6.** Cross-tabulation of age at election (by decade) and highest office on scale, *n* = 242

Age at election by decade	Highest office on scale					Total (%)
	1 ( <i>n</i> = 86) (%)	2 ( <i>n</i> = 33) (%)	3 ( <i>n</i> = 39) (%)	4 ( <i>n</i> = 55) (%)	5 ( <i>n</i> = 29) (%)	
Under-30 ( <i>n</i> = 5)	0***	0***	5.1***	1.8***	6.9***	2.1
30–39 ( <i>n</i> = 74)	17.4***	18.2***	33.3***	52.7***	37.9***	30.6
40–49 ( <i>n</i> = 111)	43.0***	63.6***	43.6***	40.0***	48.3***	45.9
50–59 ( <i>n</i> = 50)	37.2***	18.2***	17.9***	5.5***	6.9***	20.7
Over 60 ( <i>n</i> = 2)	2.3***	0***	0***	0***	0***	0.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

\*\*\*Difference significant at the 0.001 level (Pearson chi-square, 50.460).

MPs who reach cabinet-level positions than they do of the entire sample, suggesting that youth is beneficial to chances of high office. Almost half of all MPs reaching cabinet-level positions were elected for the first time in their 40s, a figure which almost matches the percentage of this age group as a proportion of the overall sample. The story here is similar to the one painted above—like parliament overall, the highest frontbench offices are dominated by the middle aged, although there does appear to be significant utility in entering at a younger age if in pursuit of the very highest offices. Without descending too far into speculation, this could be a case of younger MPs simply having more time in the Commons to pursue a career on the frontbenches, or it may well be the case that a combination of good contacts at the top, a safe seat and relative youth are a catalyst to successfully navigating the way to high office.<sup>8</sup>

## 8. Conclusions

The pre-parliamentary political experience of an MP and their career trajectory once elected to the House of Commons are linked. This paper has utilised a newly updated classification of traditional and non-traditional routes to parliament to analyse data drawn from the cohort of MPs elected for the first time

<sup>8</sup>The effect of the majorities that MPs gained at each election (1997, 2001 and 2005) on the highest offices they reached were analysed and there were no effects that achieved statistical significance. Another area of interest not included in this analysis is that of geography, namely proximity of the seat (and of the site of local council experience, where applicable) to London. Based on anecdotal evidence, it would seem to be the case that the process of selection, and the formal and informal networking and ‘politicking’ that this involves, differs depending on access to London, specifically Westminster. This is something that will be considered in the qualitative section of the work, and possibly incorporated into future statistical analyses.

in 1997. It finds MPs who have taken a non-traditional route to parliament are more likely to be elected at a younger age than those who have not, reach high office and do it at a faster pace, whereas those MPs using the traditional route more likely to end up in lower offices at the beginning of their careers and then be less likely to move on from them. This raises the possibility that the political experience you obtain prior to becoming an MP can affect what you do once elected. The paper provides support for, if not quite the idea of a twin-track career path, at least a preferential one for political insiders who have pre-parliamentary Westminster experience prior to their election, allowing them to become anointed and in some way more destined for higher office than those who have not, namely those with local council experience.

The implications of these findings are manifest, particularly when considering the effect of such distinct career trajectories on the workings of the House of Commons as a legislative body. For example, does it impact the extent to which newly elected MPs will challenge existing institutional norms or indeed ideological or political norms? These questions become particularly pertinent if there is awareness (tacit or otherwise) amongst new and aspiring MPs that these path dependencies exist.

Looking further afield, comparative studies in the European context posit that multi-level political careers (i.e. moving between, and holding simultaneously, multiple mandates) often allows for secure and successful political careers to develop (Borchert, 2011, p. 119). The data here suggest that utilising local political arenas in the British context does the opposite, in some ways hindering advancement to the very top positions, and indeed often leading to a shorter tenure in parliament. Future studies that incorporate the Westminster parliament should consider that more offices, and more elected experience, do not necessarily equal a more advanced career.

Normatively, is such a divide between the 'high'-flyers' and the rest desirable? Developing this research to look at voting patterns could help address questions of what such a professionalisation of politics means for democracy more broadly—to what extent is the presence of dissenting voices conditioned by a career structure that perhaps rewards conformity and punishes, or at least impedes, those individuals who do not fit the mould. It is also important to link this to wider discussions of class representation, particularly at times of social change. If political leaders can be streamlined by various political forces prior even to their presentation to the electorate, to what extent does the current system guarantee a plurality of opinion from which the electorate can elect their representatives? The next step for this work is to develop and explain these findings qualitatively. More broadly, scholars should consider how best to measure social and political phenomena in a way that allows them to answer the questions that they themselves pose.

## Funding

This paper develops data which was collected as part of Economic and Social Research Council Award No. R000238382.

## References

- Best, H., Cromwell, V., Hausmann, C. and Rush, M. (2001) 'The Transformation of Legislative Elites: The Cases of Britain and Germany Since the 1860s', *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, **7**, 65–91.
- Bochel, J. and Denver, D. (1983) 'Candidate Selection in the Labour Party: What the Selectors Seek', *British Journal of Political Science*, **13**, 45–69.
- Borchert, J. (2011) 'Individual Ambition and Institutional Opportunity: A Conceptual Approach to Political Careers in Multi-Level Systems', *Regional and Federal Studies*, **21**, 117–140.
- Butler, D. and Butler, G. (2000) *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts, 1900–2000*, 8th edn, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cairney, P. (2007) 'The Professionalisation of MPs: Refining the 'Politics-Facilitating' Explanation', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **60**, 212–233.
- Childs, S. and Cowley, P. (2011) 'The Politics of Local Presence: Is There a Case for Descriptive Representation?', *Political Studies*, **59**, 1–19.
- Cowley, P. (2012) 'Arise, Novice Leader! The Continuing Rise of the Career Politician in Britain', *Politics*, **30**, 31–38.
- Cowley, P. and Childs, S. (2003) 'Too Spineless to Rebel? New Labour's Women MPs', *British Journal of Political Science*, **33**, 345–365.
- Daily Mail* (2010) 'The Coalition of Millionaires: 23 of the 29 Member of the New Cabinet are Worth More Than £1m... and the Lib Dems are Just as Wealthy as the Tories', accessed at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/election/article-1280554/The-coalition-millionaires-23-29-member-new-cabinet-worth-1m-Lib-Dems-just-wealthy-Tories.html> on 11 March 2012.
- Durose, C., Gains, F., Richardson, L., Combs, R., Broome, K. and Eason, C. (2011) 'Pathways to Politics', Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report 65, London, EHRC.
- Fisher, J. and Webb, P. (2003) 'Political Participation: The Vocational Motivations of Labour Party Employees', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, **5**, 166–187.
- Gay, O. (2010) 'Special Advisers', House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/PC/03813, London, House of Commons Library.
- Greenwood, J. (1988) 'Promoting Working Class Candidature in the Conservative Party: The Limits of Central Office Power', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **41**, 456–468.
- James, S. (1999) *British Cabinet Government*, London, Routledge.

- Jun, U. (2003) 'Great Britain: From the Prevalence of the Amateur to the Dominance of the Professional Politician'. In Borchert, J. and Zeiss, J. (eds) *The Political Class in Advanced Democracies*, Oxford, OUP.
- Judge, D. (1973) 'Backbench Specialization—A Study in Parliamentary Questions', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 27, 171–186.
- Kaufman, G. (1997) *How to be a Minister*, London, Faber and Faber.
- Keating, M. and Cairney, P. (2006) 'A New Elite? Politicians and Civil Servants in Scotland after Devolution', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59, 43–59.
- King, A. (1981) 'The Rise of the Career Politician in Britain—And Its Consequences', *British Journal of Political Science*, 11, 249–285.
- King, O. (2007) *House Music*, London, Bloomsbury.
- Local Government Association (2008). *One country, two systems?* (Report) London, Local Government Association.
- Mellors, C. (1978) *The British MP: A Socio-economic Study of the House of Commons*, Dartmouth, Dartmouth Publishing Co.
- Mullin, C. (2009) *A View From the Foothills: The Diaries of Chris Mullin*, London, Profile.
- Mullin, C. (2010) *Decline & Fall: Diaries 2005–2010*, London, Profile.
- Norris, P. (ed.) (1997a) *Passages to Power: Legislative Recruitment in Advanced Democracies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, P. (1997b) 'Anatomy of a Labour Landslide', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 50, 509–532.
- Norris, P. and Lovenduski, J. (1995) *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Riddell, P. (1993) *Honest Opportunism*, London, Phoenix.
- Rush, M. (1969) *The Selection of Parliamentary Candidates*, London, Nelson.
- Rush, M. (1994) 'Career Patterns in British Politics: First Choose Your Party... ', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 47, 566–582.
- Rush, M. (2001) 'Parallel but Separate: Political Recruitment at Three Levels in the UK', ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Grenoble.
- Rush, M. and Giddings, P. (2011) *Parliamentary Socialisation: Learning the Ropes or Determining Behaviour?* Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shaw, E. (2001) 'New Labour: New Pathways to Parliament', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 54, 18.
- The Guardian* (2010a) 'UK Lags Behind on Women in Cabinet', accessed at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/13/cabinet-women-diversity> on 11 March, 2012.
- The Guardian* (2010b) 'UK Election Results: Number of Minority Ethnic MPs Almost Doubles', accessed at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/07/black-minority-ethnic-mps-2010> on 11 March, 2012.
- The Telegraph* (2008) 'Politics Needs Real People', accessed at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/telegraph-view/3561871/Politics-needs-real-people.html> on 11 March, 2012.

*Total Politics* (2010) 'Missing You Already', accessed at <http://www.totalpolitics.com/articles/3853/missing-you-already.shtml> on 10 February, 2012.

Webb, P. and Fisher, J. (2003) 'Professionalism and the Millbank Tendency: The Political Sociology of New Labour's Employees', *Politics*, **23**, 10–20.