

The Parliamentary Party

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Draft 3.

Forthcoming in: Political Quarterly

For much of the last decade the behaviour of Conservative MPs has been of interest to the sadder legislative anoraks, but to almost no one else.¹ Yet as the prospect of the Conservatives entering government becomes a real one, so it becomes more important to understand what is going on within the parliamentary party. A political party's parliamentarians constitute one of the leadership's key resources and constraints, and the Conservative parliamentary party will fulfill three important functions for any incoming Conservative government.

In political terms, it will be the focus of attention for the national media. The costs of a divided parliamentary party were made painfully clear during the 1992 Parliament, when the Conservative party, once commonly portrayed as united was instead seen as deeply divided. In legislative terms, the parliamentary party will be the bulk vote that will deliver the programme of any incoming Conservative government. If the bulk vote splits, then promised (or hoped for) legislation may not be delivered – a particular problem if the Government only enjoys a small majority. Loose cannons, therefore, are dangerous, whether they are in the House of Commons lobbies or the Millbank Television Centre, broadcasting their opinions to the nation. And third, parliamentarians form the talent pool from which members of any incoming government must be recruited. Ministers come from, and remain in, Parliament. Those handful of exceptions – such as peerages being created for the purpose of bringing individuals into government – merely go to prove the centrality of the institution in the formation of governments at Westminster.

A different parliamentary party?

Should the Conservatives manage to win the next general election – or even if they manage to become the largest single party in a hung parliament – then the most striking thing about the new parliamentary party in the Commons will be how different it will be. Even without any more retirements than the dozen or so MPs who have already (as of end-2008) announced their intention to stand down at the next election, there will be at most 80 Conservative MPs who will fight the next election and who were MPs before 1997. To be the largest single party in a hung parliament, the Conservatives need at least 260 MPs, of whom that 80 would constitute just 31%. To be a majority party, the Conservatives need at least 326 seats. Should they manage that, those with experience on the government benches would amount to just 25%.

Similarly, assuming no more retirements, there will be around 180 incumbent Conservative MPs fighting the next election. To reach the 260 MPs required for minority status as the largest party, the Conservatives therefore need at least 80 brand new MPs. Under such circumstances, some 31% of the Parliamentary Party would be new. If the Conservatives achieve the bare minimum for a majority, some 48% of the parliamentary party will be newly elected.

These figures are all a) rough estimates, and b) minima. There will be more retirements in the run-up to the election, which will diminish yet further the pool

of experienced MPs from which the Conservatives can draw. Moreover, in the event of the Conservatives achieving more than the bare minimum required for an overall majority, then the percentage with experience will be smaller still. It is, for example, entirely plausible that a majority Conservative government will see over half its MPs freshly minted.

Of course, all occasions when a party enters government from opposition sees a number of new MPs elected; but if the Conservatives should enter Government this time, they will have done so starting from a lower base in terms of the parliamentary party than any other party entering Government since 1945. In terms of experience of government, they will not be quite as inexperienced as the mass of Labour MPs elected in 1997 (when just 10% had experience of a Labour government), but not far off.

Many of the new MPs will be visibly different from the incumbents. As a result of the Conservatives' changes to their selection procedures, there will be more women MPs and MPs from ethnic minorities on the Conservative benches. Should the Conservatives achieve a majority government, there will (under most realistic scenarios) be between 50 and 60 Conservative women MPs, significantly up from the 17 in 2005. There will also be around half-a-dozen new Conservative MPs from ethnic minorities, to join the two currently in the Commons. The majority of the parliamentary party, though, will remain white and male, and this will be especially true at the higher levels of the government. Despite David Cameron's aspiration that by the end of his first term a third of his government will be female, it will almost certainly take more than one term before a sufficient number of women MPs have worked enough of a parliamentary and ministerial apprenticeship for the senior – and most visible – positions to look noticeably different.

Less visibly, many of the new cohort will enter parliament with stronger local connections than did many of the incumbents. In the nineteenth century it was common for Conservative MPs to have roots in the area they represented (in 1868, for example, 67% of Conservative MPs had some direct local connection prior to their election), but this declined dramatically throughout the twentieth century, and by 1997 just 9% of Conservative MPs had prior local connections.² However, the post-2005 reforms to candidate selection permitted the consideration of local candidates in 'exceptional circumstances', alongside the sex-balanced 'priority list', from which vacant Conservative-held and target seats were initially expected to select. It turned out that there were rather more 'exceptional' local men than had been expected; when it became an alternative to having a woman candidate, choosing a local candidate suddenly became quite an attractive option. Whereas more than half of the candidates selected from the priority list were women, nearly all of the local 'exceptional' candidates were men.³

In one respect, however, the parliamentary party will remain very similar to previous groups of Conservative parliamentarians. For all the talk of trying to create a parliamentary party in the image of those represented, the absence of working class MPs on the Conservative side of the House will continue. In 2005, the Conservatives gained 25% of the DE vote and 33% of the C2 vote. Almost no efforts have been made to ensure that this segment of the population – and of the Conservatives' own supporters – receives representation on the Conservative benches.

Problems and opportunities

This huge influx of MPs constitutes a distinctly unknown quantity. In both the run-up to the next election and in its immediate aftermath there will be the inevitable exercises in identifying potential high flyers from amongst the new intake and in trying to calculate their political preferences. Both the *Guardian* and the ConservativeHome website have already done so, finding candidates who were described as 'socially conservative' (in that they favoured tax breaks for marriage and supported a lowering of the time limit for abortion, although they were also against the death penalty, reflecting a more nuanced position than the headline) but being progressive on taxation (what ConservativeHome described as 'pro-poor Conservatives'). Whilst fun for all the family, such exercises should be treated with some caution. For one thing, much of the media focus will be on the most media-friendly candidates – especially, because of their novelty value, the newly-elected women and ethnic minority candidates – and not necessarily on those who are most likely to go on to achieve high office or be significant players within the party in the future. It is, for example, noticeable that many of the Labour MPs who attracted considerable media coverage in the aftermath of the 1997 result (such as Lorna Fitzsimons and Oona King) did not then go on to achieve high office, whereas those who went largely unnoticed by the national media (such as Jacqui Smith) did rather better. And some of the coverage will not be especially accurate. There is bound to be a contemporary equivalent of the *Independent* journalist who, in 1997, wrote a piece on 'left-wingers [who] slipp[ed] through Blair's net', naming as an example the new MP for Salford, Hazel Blears. Moreover, although it will be possible to identify some broad trends amongst the candidates – such as the Countryside Alliance survey which discovered that almost all Conservative candidates in winnable seats favoured the abolition of the hunting ban – it is (for reasons that will be discussed below) much harder to use a candidate's political attitudes to predict how he or she will behave if and when they become an MP.

Any large influx of new MPs will present an obvious problem in terms of party management. It is hard enough for Prime Ministers to fill all the positions in government under normal circumstances. Doing so with such an unbalanced parliamentary party will be especially difficult. Trying to reconcile the demands of the newly-elected for advancement with fair treatment for the longer-serving, especially those who have worked hard for the party in opposition, will be no easy task. Any Conservative MP who has worked his or her socks off in some unrewarding shadow role will be pretty miffed to see MPs from the new intake replacing them or shooting past them in the pecking order. One senior figure in the Parliamentary Labour Party, when discussing the problem of dealing with a large intake of new MPs in 1997, simply shrugged his shoulders and said: 'What the fuck do you do?'. Conservative whips after the next election may find themselves thinking similar thoughts.

As of end-2008, 'the Government' comprises 141 positions in the Commons, including 47 Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPS). The Conservative frontbench comprises 95 positions – roughly the same size as the number of ministers but excluding PPSs on the government side. Thus almost half the parliamentary party is already in a shadow post and perhaps expecting a similar position in government. This provides some room for the new MPs – they can be appointed to PPS positions if nothing else – but leaves relatively little flexibility after that. Cameron's stated aspiration that a third of his government will be female by the end of his first term will make this process even trickier. Assuming the government remains the same size, this will require around 47 women to be in government by the end of the first term if 'government' is taken to include PPSs, or around 31 if the term encompasses just ministers. Yet the former would mean that almost all of the women elected would be required in government, and the latter will mean promoting a lot of the newly elected women up to ministerial

rank very quickly. To manage this, whilst also ensuring that resentment does not build up amongst the male majority of the parliamentary party, will be very difficult. Of course, it becomes easier to achieve this particular target if the size of the government is reduced (something the party has pledged in the past), but to do that reduces the overall number of positions available, storing up problems elsewhere. It might not be a surprise if this particular aspiration – and it was noticeable that it was only an aspiration and not a commitment – is quietly dropped once the Conservatives reach office and reality begins to bite.

The second consequence of the mass of new MPs is, however, more positive for the Conservative party managers. Faced with the uncertainties of a new job, and the potential for future promotion up the ministerial ladder, new MPs are noticeably less likely to defy the party whip. In the 1997 parliament, for example, Labour's newly-elected MPs were less than half as likely to rebel as were the longer-serving MPs.⁴ The impact of this was clearly demonstrated the last time the Conservatives were in government, when the party was split over the passage of the Maastricht treaty. Even though the newer cohorts of Conservative MPs were then the most Eurosceptic in their attitudes, they were also the least likely to vote against the whip, and oppose the Bill. The realities of parliamentary life prevented any neat translation of their attitudes into behaviour – and the same will be true in 2009 or 2010. Such new MPs will begin to rebel in time, as did most of the 1997 intake, but by the end of the 1997 parliament, after a full four years, only 28% of the newly-elected Labour MPs had voted against their whips.

What of those already there?

Are there signs of discontent amongst the existing members of the parliamentary party which should give David Cameron cause for concern? There have been some rebellions from within his own ranks, but Conservative MPs are currently rebelling less often than Labour MPs (in around 11% of divisions in the first three sessions of the 2005 parliament, less than half the rate on the government benches) and they are doing so in smaller numbers; although a slightly larger proportion of Conservative parliamentarians has rebelled compared to Labour, few have cast more than a handful of dissenting votes, and even the most rebellious would not find themselves high up the PLP's league-table of troublemakers. That said, when it comes to backbench rebellion, past behaviour is a usually an excellent predictor of future action, and those individuals currently rebelling will almost certainly go on to be the most troublesome for the whips in the next parliament.

Table 1 shows the most rebellious 20 Conservative MPs in the first three sessions of the 2005 parliament, from the point at which David Cameron was elected leader until the end of the 2007-2008 session. The table is headed by the former Chancellor, Ken Clarke (although his rebelliousness is somewhat inflated by very regular rebellion during the passage of the Lisbon Treaty through the Commons); Bob Spink comes second, his 23 dissenting votes all being cast before he left the party and then joined UKIP. But of the remaining MPs, none have yet announced they will be resigning at the next election, and they could therefore be around to cause the Conservative whips trouble in government.

One thing that might cause some concern amongst Conservative party managers is the apparent rebelliousness of some of the more recently-elected Conservative intake, those who came in to the Commons in 2005. They currently constitute more than a quarter of the parliamentary party, and by the end of the third session of the 2005 parliament almost two-thirds had voted against the party whip. Indeed, five of the most rebellious Conservative MPs in the first three

sessions – Brian Binley, Peter Bone, Philip Davies, Philip Hollobone, and Charles Walker – are drawn from the 2005 intake. At the end of the 2005-06 session, Philip Davies, the most rebellious of the 2005 intake, remarked, 'David [Cameron] is relaxed about us having different views on certain issues.'⁵ Such a relaxed attitude may not last long in government.

1. Twenty most rebellious Conservative MPs, 2005-2008

Name of MP	Votes cast against Conservative whip under Cameron leadership, 2005-08
Clarke, Kenneth	33
Spink, Bob	23
Davies, Philip	18
Chope, Christopher	16
Hollobone, Philip	14
Shepherd, Richard	14
Widdecombe, Ann	14
Bone, Peter	13
Lilley, Peter	12
Cash, William	11
Evans, Nigel	11
Winterton, Ann	11
Winterton, Sir Nicholas	11
Gummer, John	10
Hogg, Douglas	10
Tyrie, Andrew	10
Wilshire, David	9
Binley, Brian	7
Bottomley, Peter	7
Walker, Charles	6

Predicting which issues will cause difficulties for the Conservative whips in government is a bit of a mug's game: too much depends on the circumstances in which legislation is introduced, how it is handled by ministers, and so on. But there are several areas where at least the potential for trouble is clear. The most obvious is Europe. The old split – between 'pro-Europeans' and 'Eurosceptics' – is now over. There are fewer than half a dozen of the old pro-European Conservatives remaining in the parliamentary party in the Commons. The new battle lines are between hard and soft varieties of sceptics. For example, during the passage through the Commons of the Lisbon Bill, 40 Conservative MPs – more than 20% of the parliamentary party – supported a Bill Cash amendment which claimed that nothing in the Lisbon Treaty affected the supremacy of the UK Parliament. The vote took place towards the end of proceedings on the Bill, and the Conservative whips made it a free vote. The free vote did not, however, extend to the frontbench (which abstained); the figure of 40 thus constitutes the minimum number of Conservative MPs who might agree with Cash's amendment. These divisions are relatively easy to mask in Opposition, as the party demonstrated in this case, but will be much harder to deal with in Government. And whereas some issues can be safely 'parked', the problem with Europe is that its external momentum means that it cannot be ignored for long.

There have also already been intriguing splits between some in the leadership and their backbenchers on issues such as abortion, Lords reform, and homosexuality. In March 2007, for example, Conservative MPs divided 29/85 against the draft Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007, which brought into force provisions allowing adoption by gay couples. The problem was not the size of the split – numerically, the Conservatives had been more divided in the past – but that David Cameron was one of the 29 Tory MPs voting in favour of gay adoption. Just 15% of Conservative MPs joined their leader in the aye lobby in favour of the measure. Not a single member of the Shadow Cabinet voted against the order (13 of the MPs voted with their leader in favour of the regulations; ten, including William Hague and Dr Liam Fox, did not vote), suggesting that they were bound by collective Shadow Cabinet responsibility not to vote against it. These rules were relaxed for frontbench spokesmen outside the Shadow Cabinet and Whips (most of whom either abstained or voted against), but amongst the 108 backbenchers, only seven voted for the regulations (6%), 62 voted against (57%), while 39 did not vote. Issues like this may not be traditionally high politics, and they can be reasonably easily defused by granting free votes and allowing backbenchers to vote as they please – but as the example of fox-hunting showed after 1997, such issues can matter to backbenchers more than some traditionally important ones. David Cameron (and especially George Osborne) are much more socially liberal than much of their parliamentary party, and that split will need to be handled carefully.

Lessons from the past

None of this is to assume that there will be much trouble early on. New MPs or old, the Conservatives will be returning to the Treasury benches after a gap of more than a decade. This will bring with it all the discipline that a first term government usually enjoys. David Cameron's authority will be high. Many MPs – especially the new ones – will fancy a career on the ministerial ladder, and believe it awaits them if they behave. And many – new and old – will have a burning desire to avoid doing anything that might send them back into opposition, thus placing a premium on unity.

There is nothing new about this: it has been a common pattern in post-war governments. For example, the propensity of Labour MPs to defy the party whip, as time has gone on, has been clear. It has not been as neat as a session-on-session increase, but since 1997 there has been a parliament-on-parliament increase in the rebelliousness of Labour MPs: by the end of the 1997 Parliament, Labour MPs had rebelled in 8% of divisions; the figure for the 2001 Parliament was 21%. After its first three sessions, the figure for the 2005 Parliament stands at 27%, on course to be the most rebellious parliament in the post-war era. Such is the increase over time that Gordon Brown's first full session as Prime Minister saw more rebellions than Tony Blair's first entire Parliament. Brown's 2007-8 session saw Labour MPs defy the whips 103 times; the days of Tony Blair's 1997-8 session, when Labour MPs defied the whips just 16 times, are long gone.

Similar trends are observable in most other post-war parliaments. Of the seven occasions since the war, when the party in power has changed (that is, 1945, 1951, 1964, 1970, 1974, 1979, and 1997), the first session has been the least rebellious of all that follow on four occasions. Because of the change of behaviour that came over MPs in the late-1960s and early-1970s, when they began to rebel more often, data from the 1940s and 1950s are less relevant; of the five changes since 1964, the first session has been the least rebellious of all subsequent sessions in all but one case, namely 1979. Moreover, whether the first session has been *the* least rebellious or not, it has always been *one of the least* rebellious: the rate of rebellion in every first session since a change in

government has never been greater than a rebellion in 7% of divisions in any post-war parliament. David Cameron and his whips is therefore all but guaranteed a post-victory honeymoon with his backbenchers.

Discontent can, however, surface soon afterwards. Edward Heath's problems, for example, began in his second session (1971-1972) and Mrs Thatcher's whips faced high levels of dissent – indeed the highest of her premierships – in her third session (1981-2). There may be a honeymoon, therefore, but there is no guarantee that it will last very long.

The Lords

One final difference in the parliamentary terrain is worth noting. Any incoming Conservative government will find that things are very different in the upper House from when they were last in power.

The 1999 House of Lords Act brought about changes in composition and, as a consequence, behaviour in the Lords. The abolition of (most of) the hereditary peers removed the inbuilt Conservative majority and created a hung chamber, in which no one party or grouping has a majority. In itself, this would have been a significant change, but it has also resulted in a change in behaviour. The pre-reform House of Lords, conscious that its legitimacy was limited by the presence of so many hereditary peers, frequently practised a self-denying ordinance, pulling back from many confrontations with the government. But with the hereditaries largely gone, those peers that remain have seen themselves as more legitimate and have become more assertive than before. The belief that the 1999 Act would create a poodle of an Upper Chamber has proved to be much mistaken. Instead, it created a more representative second chamber, one which is permanently hung, and one which is willing to stand up to, and regularly defeat, the government of the day.

The same problems will face Conservative ministers and whips, as they try to get legislation through the Lords. No future Conservative government will inherit the overwhelmingly Conservative Upper Chamber of the past. Whatever its majority in the Commons, in order to win votes in the Lords, the government need to persuade at least one of the other party groupings to support them. One fear from some Labour peers is that the crossbench peers will back the Conservatives, thus creating a Conservative-supporting majority in the Lords. The combined crossbench and Conservative strength comes to over half the House, and enough – in theory – to deliver victory on most votes. However, detailed analysis of the voting shows that the crossbenchers rarely exert much of an influence on the outcome of votes. This is both because their turnout is relatively lower than that of members of the party groups, and because the group does not vote as a bloc, but splits its votes. As a result, in terms of their voting, the crossbenchers punch below their weight. (If they have any impact, it is by voice – as a result of their members' expertise on particular subjects – rather than vote). Rather, the key voting group is the Liberal Democrats, who are the swing voters of the second chamber.⁶ The Conservatives will need to reach agreement with the Liberal Democrats if they are to get their legislation through.

Of the two Houses of Parliament it has been the Lords that has been more of a block on the government in recent years. Government ministers preparing legislation for its passage through Parliament knew that they faced a more serious test in the Lords than they did in the Commons, and ministers routinely resisted giving too many compromises whilst a Bill was passing through the Commons in order to be able to offer placatory gestures to their Lordships. This can often cause resentment amongst their own supporters in the Commons:

government backbench MPs resent seeing the opposition parties gaining concessions from the government, often when those same concessions have been denied to them. Labour ministers have at times struggled to adapt to this reality, and it has caused them embarrassment, as well as difficulties with their own troops. Conservative ministers will need to face up to it quickly if they are not to suffer a similar fate.

Conclusion

In 1993, in a (supposedly) off-the-record description, an exasperated John Major referred to some of his backbench rebels as 'bastards'. Three years later, along with colleagues, this author published a research paper entitled *Blair's Bastards: Discontent within the Parliamentary Labour Party*, which set out to examine the voting behaviour of members of the Parliamentary Labour Party to see whether it was possible that any incoming Prime Minister Blair would have his own 'bastards'. It noted that 'Labour MPs dissent more often than Conservatives; they dissent in great numbers than Conservatives; and they dissent on more issues than Conservatives' – and concluded that 'judging from their current voting behaviour, there is the real possibility that any future Labour Government will face significant backbench dissent'. It ended: 'While many Labour MPs are clearly ministers-in-waiting, there are also some who are rebels-in-waiting'.⁷ The paper was dismissed as 'academic nonsense' by the Labour Party (a phrase which was taken up and worn by its authors as a badge of pride), but it proved remarkably accurate at predicting which MPs would cause trouble for the leadership once Labour entered Government. Of the 32 most rebellious MPs in the 1992 Parliament, 30 had rebelled within the first year of the 1997 Parliament; those 30 MPs constituted just seven percent of the PLP, but they made up 40 percent of those who rebelled. The Blair era then went on to see record-breaking levels of backbench dissent. Rather than being nonsense – academic or otherwise – the paper was a very good predictor of MPs' behaviour.

The good news for the Conservative whips is that one would not be able to make similarly strong claims about the current behaviour of Conservative MPs. For although there are some signs of discontent on specific issues, overall Conservative MPs are currently less rebellious than their government colleagues, not more. Moreover, any incoming Conservative government will find itself backed by a very large number of new, untested and probably ambitious MPs. These MPs will bring with them problems, but they will – at least initially – be less troublesome. There is therefore a fairly high degree of probability that a future Cameron Government will enjoy a decent honeymoon from his MPs, and that the prospects of dissent will be limited early on. However, that honeymoon, whether in the Lords or the Commons, is unlikely to last long.

¹ Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart, 'Still Causing Trouble: The Conservative Parliamentary Party', *Political Quarterly*, 75 (2004), pp.356-361.

² Michael Rush, *The Role of the Member of Parliament since 1868*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p.204.

³ I am grateful to Rob McIlveen for these data.

⁴ Philip Cowley, *Revolts and Rebellions*, London, Politico's, 2002, p. 110.

⁵ Henry Deedes, 'Pandora', *The Independent*, 14 November 2006.

⁶ Meg Russell and Meg Sciara, 'Why does the Government get defeated in the House of Lords?', *British Politics*, 2 (2007), pp. 299-322.

⁷ Philip Cowley and Philip Norton with Mark Stuart and Matthew Bailey, *Blair's Bastards: Discontent within the Parliamentary Labour Party*, Research Papers in Legislative Studies, 1/96 (University of Hull, 1996).