

# 'Heirs apparent' in No. 10 and beyond – why career ascendancy patterns matter, and how

*In Westminster-style democracies, it is not uncommon for prime ministers to assume office by inheriting the post outside of a general election. **Ludger Helms** assesses the performance of prime ministers who were previously 'heirs apparent' and finds that their prior experience does not tend to lead to success.*



Gordon Brown, Tony Blair, John Major, Nick Clegg and David Cameron. Picture: The White House, [Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons](#)

Textbook accounts on political succession in parliamentary regimes usually centre on challengers from the opposition who assume the office of prime minister after winning a parliamentary election. The close combination of party alternation in power and a change in the top leadership offices is widely seen as a defining feature in particular of Westminster democracies. That said, prime ministers 'inheriting' the office from their predecessor in the absence of parliamentary elections and a party alternation in government are a remarkably widespread occurrence in many parliamentary democracies, including the UK. Of the fourteen British post-war prime ministers from Attlee to May, no less than seven succeeded an incumbent from their own party between two elections.

'Takeover prime ministers', who follow a departing prime minister from the same party between two elections, may be insiders or outsiders. The most advanced type of an insider is the 'heir apparent'. While an explicit anointment by the sitting prime minister is conventionally taken as a key indicator of that particular status, two other indicators – holding ministerial office in the previous government, and the perception of that candidate as the most likely successor within the party, the media and the wider public – seem to be more important. Candidates fulfilling these two criteria may enjoy the support of the incumbent, but prime ministerial anointment is not a necessary factor. For example, Gordon Brown certainly was an heir apparent, even though Blair voiced serious reservations about his fitness for the office of prime minister. If one takes terminology seriously, another criterion is to be added: those who follow a prime minister from the same party after having ousted the former by an active party leadership challenge, are much better described as 'usurpers' than as 'heirs apparent'.

In a recent [article](#), published in *Government and Opposition*, I use this set of criteria to identify heir apparent prime ministers in four Westminster democracies: Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK (1945 to 2016). On that count, there were two heir apparent prime ministers in the UK, four in Canada, two in Australia and five in New Zealand. As to the various possible reasons precluding a takeover prime minister from being also an heir apparent prime minister, not having publicly conceived as the 'natural successor' for at least several weeks or months ahead of the succession and having formally challenged the incumbent prime minister stand out as by far the most important factors empirically. The intra-party toppling of an incumbent party leader and prime minister is a main disqualifier particularly in Australia (which accounts for five out of six cases overall) – a pattern that seems to reflect major differences at the level of party rules and cultures.

The key focus of the featured article is, however, on prime ministerial performance – in light of expert rankings of prime ministers from these four countries (see Paul 't Hart et al, eds, [Understanding Prime Ministerial Performance](#)). While heir apparent prime ministers seem to possess special resources – in terms of experience, expertise and public recognition – from which they could possibly benefit, this is not what the ratings and rankings recorded suggest. Indeed, with very few exceptions, the great majority of heir apparent prime ministers (including former British prime ministers Anthony Eden and Gordon Brown) stand out as perceived under-performers. One of the lessons clearly is that winning an electoral mandate is a major resource in its own right, that heirs apparent lack and which can rarely, if ever, be fully compensated for. But the story is more complex.

If one divides the field into more and less successful performers, more specific patterns stand out. Generally, having to follow a long-term incumbent tends to give successors a particularly hard time. Long-term premierships cast long shadows and leave heavy legacies that constrain new leaders. A more spectacular finding relates to candidates' experience in parliament and government: there is in particular no correlation between being an 'old sweat' as a minister and eventually becoming a successful prime minister. Curiously, the best-ranked heir apparent prime ministers from our four countries had significantly less-extended parliamentary and ministerial careers and held fewer different ministerial offices before becoming prime minister than their less successful counterparts.

As to previous experience in government (if not parliament), the surprising pattern revealed is confirmed by a comparative analysis of the top-ranked prime ministers assuming office after 1945 from the countries under consideration (Clement Attlee, UK; Lester Pearson, Canada; Bob Hawke, Australia; and Helen Clark, New Zealand). Overall, the profiles of these top performers are much more similar to those of the more successful heir apparent prime ministers than to those of the most striking underperformers among heirs apparent in the office of prime minister. Three of the four top performers had previous ministerial experience in either just one department (Pearson and Clark) or, indeed, had no ministerial experience at all (Hawke), which contrasts starkly with the score for the worst ranked heir apparent prime ministers (slightly more than 3.5 departments on average). Also, with just five and a half years, their average experience as government minister before advancing to the premiership was less than half as long as that of the worst ranked heir apparent prime ministers.

These findings come as a direct challenge to the established elite recruitment philosophy in the UK and other Westminster democracies, which holds that an extended track record of a career politician forms an indispensable element for a successful premiership. To the extent that these findings are confirmed by future research, they should not be ignored outside academia. If exceptionally extended premierships are further proven to undermine the performance of newly incoming leaders (apart from the many instances of bad leadership usually to be observed during the final years of long-term power-holders), it would seem well worth thinking about a maximum term limit for prime ministers. Further, if exceptionally extended ministerial 'apprenticeships' actually breed candidates that are not only tired of waiting, but also from waiting, with a major potential to disappoint, this should also be kept in mind when revisiting the written and unwritten rules of political recruitment to top leadership positions.

What follows from this, however, is obviously not that experience, even extended experience, is the mother of all problems relating to poor prime ministerial performance. Indeed, for all the fundamental differences between Washington, DC and Westminster that complicate cross-regime comparisons and assessments, the Trump presidency comes as a powerful reminder that *some* experience is indeed helpful and desirable when it comes to providing effective and responsible leadership.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It draws on the author's article '[Heir Apparent Prime Ministers in Westminster Democracies: Promise and Performance](#)', published in *Government and Opposition*.*

---

## About the author

**Ludger Helms** is a Professor of Political Science and Chair of Comparative Politics at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. He is a longstanding contributor to major UK-based journals, such as *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *Parliamentary Affairs*, *The Political Quarterly*, or *Politics*, and a co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Political Executives* (forthcoming).

---

## Similar Posts

- [The art of political survival: three lessons from Theresa May](#)
- [Book Review | No. 10: The Geography of Power at Downing Street by Jack Brown](#)
- [Theresa May and Boris Johnson: secrecy as statecraft?](#)
- [A tale of two failures: poor choices and bad judgements on the road to Brexit](#)
- [How and when constitutional conventions change in Westminster democracies](#)