

Mark Harper's resignation may ultimately represent his best route back to ministerial office

By Democratic Audit

*The Conservative MP for the Forest of Dean, Mark Harper, recently resigned as Immigration Minister over paperwork irregularities with his cleaner. However, this need not necessarily mean the end of his ministerial career. Indeed, given the Conservatives' pressing need to win constituencies like his at the 2015 General Election, the extra time he now has to focus on retaining his seat may prove invaluable in ultimately providing him with a route back to office, says **Alun Wyburn-Powell**.*

Does a ministerial resignation spell the end of office for an aspiring politician? History says that the answer is no. Gladstone, Lloyd George and Churchill all resigned ministerial posts, but went on to become prime minister. Many others have relinquished ministerial office, but later returned. The reasons for, and manner of, the resignation do have a bearing on future prospects though. Lloyd George resigned as Secretary of State for War in December 1916 and within two days was prime minister, replacing Asquith as head of a new coalition government. Churchill resigned from his post as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster one year into the First World War, only to return to office July 1917. He became prime minister one year after the start of the Second World War.

Well before the first of his four terms as prime minister, [Gladstone](#) resigned as President of the Board of Trade in 1845. His resignation still puzzles historians, as it did his colleagues at the time. His resignation was ostensibly over his objection to a government grant to the Catholic seminary at Maynooth in Ireland. He explained the reasons in an hour-long speech to the House of Commons, but 'no one was much the wiser at the end'. The most puzzling aspect was that, having resigned, Gladstone then went on to vote in favour of the policy. His biographer, Roy Jenkins, recorded elegantly, but unilluminatingly, that the 'danger of bitterness was drowned in incomprehension'.

Almost as unilluminating was Ron Davies's explanation of his resignation as Welsh Secretary in Tony Blair's government after a '[moment of madness](#)' on Clapham Common in 1998. His explanation raised more questions than answers, especially as to how the moment of madness had led to his car being stolen. Davies did not return to office. Mark Harper, in contrast, has provided enough detail to finish the story off. His resignation was swift and well-explained.

The closest modern parallel to Mark Harper's [situation](#) was that of Beverley Hughes, who [resigned](#) from the same post of Immigration Minister, in Tony Blair's government in 2004, but returned to office the following year in an equivalent position. Mark Harper will now have more time to spend with his constituents. He has been generally praised for his ministerial work, but criticised for neglecting his constituency.

The Forest of Dean is something of a [bellwether seat](#), which was held by Labour until the 1990s, but went to the Conservatives in 2005. In 2001, Labour held the seat with a majority of 2,049 votes. Mark Harper exactly reversed the result in 2005, winning the seat by 2,049 votes and built on this majority in 2010. The danger of ministers neglecting their constituency was famously shown by the defeat of Liberal Party leader, [Archie Sinclair](#) in the 1945 general election. After distinguished service as Secretary of State for Air in the wartime coalition, Sinclair lost his seat of Caithness and Sutherland in the far north of Scotland, coming third, but only 61 votes behind the successful candidate. Good performance as a minister is no guarantee of saving a seat and having no seat correlates with little chance of ministerial office.

A defeated minister could go to the House of Lords or even remain in office without a Parliamentary seat. There are few recent examples of this happening, although Conservative MP, [Peter Fraser](#) continued as Solicitor General for Scotland after he lost his seat in 1987, eventually going to the Lords in 1989 as Baron Fraser of Carmyllie. The Conservatives were running out of Scottish MPs, on the way to their nadir of exactly none in 1997.

Alternatively, another seat can be found where a defeated minister can stand in a by-election. This has some

inauspicious precedents though. [Charles Masterman](#), dubbed the 'unluckiest man in British politics', was appointed to the cabinet as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1914 at a time when ministers had to seek re-election on appointment. He lost the by-election and went on to lose another in a different constituency, before resigning from the cabinet. More recently, [Patrick Gordon Walker](#) suffered a similar fate. He was appointed Foreign Secretary by Harold Wilson in 1964, despite losing his seat at Smethwick in the general election. He stayed in office until he had also fought and lost a [by-election](#) at Leyton at the beginning of 1965.

Given the choice, most constituents would probably prefer a back-bencher as their MP, who can spend more time in the constituency and is readily available to deal with local issues. Relinquishing the immigration brief will allow Mark Harper to focus on other local problems in the [Forest of Dean](#), where immigration is not a significant issue, but where UKIP is trying to establish a base with their three seats on the county council and one on the district council. In 2010 Harper's UKIP challenger was the economist, [Tim Congdon](#), who received just over 5% of the vote. The party will be looking to better this result next time.

Holding seats such as the Forest of Dean will be necessary for the Conservatives to form another government, so Mark Harper's resignation may well be his best route to ministerial office after 2015.

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