

Leaving the House: the challenges former MPs face after leaving Parliament

blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-political-afterlife-the-challenges-former-mps-face-after-leaving-the-house-of-commons/

12/4/2015

Every election sees a number of parliamentarians leave the House of Commons. Through outlining the experiences of members who left in 2010, [Christopher Byrne](#) and [Kevin Theakston](#) explain that the transition into a 'political afterlife' is not as straightforward as some might think. Many former members struggled to find a job, especially following the expenses scandal, while women were more likely to have been [selected for marginal or unwinnable seats](#), and so their shorter tenures created additional problems.



The 2015 general election created 182 new MPs after 92 were defeated and a further 90 decided that the election was a good time to stand down. In 2010 there had been an even higher turnover, with 76 defeats and the voluntary exit from Parliament of a further 149 MPs. Our research, which builds on a [report](#) commissioned by the Association of Former MPs in 2007, aims to shed light on the challenges former parliamentarians can face in navigating the world of work in a post-MPs' expenses scandal world, and to learn about how to transition into a successful 'political afterlife'.



Re-entering the labour market

Our first finding is that the widely held perception that MPs easily and quickly walk into lucrative private sector employment after leaving Parliament is largely mistaken. Among those departing MPs under the age of 65, 70 per cent took up paid work after having left Parliament. But many of these former MPs struggled in the labour market, with almost half of them taking at least three months to find a new job and one in ten taking a full year. While half said they ended up earning more than they had done as MPs, 40 per cent earned less and 10 per cent the same as their MPs' salary. Some former MPs fared very well in the labour market, landing high-profile and well-paid directorships of large companies. However, these were a minority with certain notable shared characteristics: they were relatively young, had held a senior ministerial position in the recent past, and had often done a considerable amount of advanced planning for their post-parliamentary careers.

The impact of the expenses scandal

The second key finding of our research, which might explain some of the difficulties former MPs face in the labour market, relates to the MPs' expenses scandal. It is clear from our research that the expenses scandal has not only made the job of an MP considerably more difficult, but it has also made it more difficult for MPs to re-enter the labour market after exiting political office. Many of the former MPs we interviewed — including several who were entirely uninvolved in the expenses scandal — felt as though there had developed an unproductive 'no holds barred' approach to political reporting in recent years. We heard stories of harassment of MPs at the hands of disgruntled constituents, many of whom seemed to believe that all MPs are self-serving careerists despite the fact that many of the former MPs that took part in our study had given up more lucrative and less demanding careers to go into politics. Worse still, some of those who tried to return to paid employment after leaving politics felt that some employers saw former MPs as 'soiled goods', in the words of one former MP we interviewed.

Added difficulties for women

Third, our research shows that the job of an MP continues to be particularly fraught with difficulties for women. We found that the women who left the House of Commons in 2010 tended to have had much shorter parliamentary tenures than their male counterparts. One key reason for this seemed to be that women MPs were less willing to accept the detrimental effect the job can have on family life due to the long hours worked and the inordinate amount

of travelling involved. Another factor relates to the role of party ‘selectorates’ in picking candidates: we found a marked tendency for safe seats (defined as seats which a party already holds by a margin greater than 10 per cent) to have been contested by men rather than women. If party selectorates filter male candidates into safe seats and female candidates into marginal or unwinnable seats then that helps explain why they were more likely to either suffer electoral defeat or decide to stand down, because of the added strain of having to constantly worry about shoring up a small majority.

In search of a new sense of identity

Fourth, as in the earlier 2007 report, we found that MPs continue to be highly active in political and public life after leaving Parliament. In a testament to the selfless nature of most political office holders in Britain, over 80 per cent of the MPs who left Parliament in 2010 are currently involved in some kind of local or national charitable, voluntary or community endeavour. Nearly the same number were still active in their party and half of the former MPs in our survey reported that they had developed new political interests since leaving Parliament. Being an MP is really a way of life and not just a job, so it’s not surprising that many who leave the Commons report going through a sort of grieving process or struggle (for a while) with a loss of identity. But looking back after 5 years, our research helps put things in perspective. ‘A democracy needs to be refreshed and have different ideas brought in’, as one former MP in our study mused. ‘There are other things to do.’

Overall our findings shed light on some serious problems with the current and potential future make-up of Parliament. If the MPs’ expenses scandal has had such a profound impact on the image and job of an MP as our research would suggest, and if women in Parliament continue to face distinctive challenges, then how can Parliament hope to attract the best, brightest and those with the most valuable real world experience — of both sexes?

Note: the above draws on the authors’ previously [published research](#). The article represents the views of the authors and not those of British Politics and Policy or the LSE.

About the Authors

Christopher Byrne is a Research Assistant at the University of Leeds



Kevin Theakston is Professor of British Government and Head of School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds



Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [UK Parliament](#) CC BY-NC 2.0