Where do MPs come from? Refining definitions of pre-parliamentary experience

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Introduction
Classifying, analysing, and discussing the pre-parliamentary lives of MPs is something that has occupied scholars in recent decades (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Cairney, 2007). Understanding what MPs did before they were elected to the Commons allows political scientists to assess a number of important trends relating to the levels of representation afforded different sections of the electorate and other concerns relating to this concept of representativeness. Following the 2010 general election, there have been different examples of ‘moral panic’ (a term used to describe a similar process seen in Australia by Jones, 2008) relating to the educational, professional, social and financial backgrounds of British political elites 1 2, as well as continued discussion of the low numbers of MPs who are women or from an ethnic minority background 3 4. These discussions have taken place within the context of broader debates focusing on the professionalization of politics, and a general disillusionment with a politics that is seen to be bereft of ‘real people’ 5.

These debates, however, suffer from a lack of clarity in what it is exactly that they are trying to explain and the way in which they are trying to explain it. This paper will propose that an overhaul of existing classificatory schemata is necessary in order to facilitate research that can be both deeper in detail and broader in understanding than that which has gone before. This paper will build on the most recent intervention in this debate (Cairney, 2007) by elaborating on the ‘instrumental’ category included within this. Building from this, it will be argued that a sole focus on occupation has hindered a richer understanding of pre-parliamentary experience more broadly by sidelining the role of elected experience as well as not acknowledging the influence of political party organisations. As part of an ongoing research project, this author will make the case for looking instead at ‘political apprenticeships’ in a broader sense, with a focus here on party employment and local council service. These new ideas will be presented with the aim of elucidating common political career paths in the British parliament.

More broadly, a good classificatory schema should, inter alia, allow us to both represent existing knowledge as well as assist in the creation and understanding of new knowledge (Kwasnik, 1999:22). As such, it should have an inherent role in the collection and interpretation of any new knowledge in a given field, aiding both of these processes and resulting in an overall better understanding of the phenomena being classified.

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3 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/13/cabinet-women-diversity
4 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/07/black-minority-ethnic-mps-2010
5 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/telegraph-view/3561871/Politics-needs-real-people.html
“One of my criticisms of a lot of politicians of all parties is that they’re career politicians. Since they were 11 years old they dreamed of being an MP, being the prime minister, and so they’ll do A-Level politics, politics degree, get a job with an MP, work for a thinktank, become an MP, prime minister. And my criticism is what life experiences do you have? The reason most MPs aren’t popular is that people can see through that.”

Sadiq Khan MP (in GQ Magazine, 2011)

Defining ‘professional politicians’

The wider research of which this paper is a part is concerned primarily with the question of who is most likely to successfully make a career out of politics in the British system, who they are, and why this is the case.

The focus of the paper will be on how to best classify the pre-parliamentary political background of MPs in order to facilitate an analysis of the trajectory of the career paths of different MPs. This is a different purpose to the existing schemata which are interested solely in where MPs come from without considering how this will affect where they go in future. It will be argued that the existing literature places too much emphasis on occupation as an indicator of pre-parliamentary life and that a more holistic approach would be preferable. As such, the idea of political apprenticeships will be mooted as an alternative way of viewing the approach and ascendency of individuals to the Commons.

Across the main accounts of the ‘professionalisation’ phenomena within British political life, there is in the first instance a lack of clarity as regards what exactly is being discussed. Some accounts, for example, 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 (drawing on Mair’s cartel party system theory). In other accounts, such of that of King (1981), the focus is very much on the political elite as seen in 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 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.

There are a number of separate lines of enquiry that are conflated under the label of ‘professionalization’. As seen in Norris and Lovenduski’s work (1995), there are questions regarding the general homogeneity of MPs in terms of their sex, their race and their class backgrounds. 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 (1993:289). 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.
From ‘brokerage occupations’ to two-category definition

Paul Cairney argues in his 2007 paper that the ‘politics-facilitating’ classification of pre-parliamentary occupations that are broadly favourable to an individual considering a run for parliament are outdated and no longer of great use (2007). He elaborates on a distinction between ‘brokerage’ and ‘instrumental’ occupations as outlined in the previous chapter, 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’, and building on the ‘politics-facilitating’ label by distinguishing between occupations conducive to office and those chosen for the purpose of reaching office (2007:3,6). Comparing the varying uses of the ‘politics-facilitating’ terminology across the literature, Cairney finds extensive evidence of varying definitional usage resulting in different results depending on the framework of definitions in use (2007:8-14). Trends in parliamentarian’s backgrounds can be seen as a general shift from brokerage to instrumental in the post-war period, with this trend intensifying since the 1970s, and there has been an almost total elimination of nobility from the Conservative benches and of ex-manual workers and primary industry workers from Labour’s (Cairney, 2007:2-3; Best et al, 2001:73). Earlier studies of the Commons by authors such as Colin Mellors add weight to this thesis. Norris and Lovenduski describe the rise of the ‘talking professions’ such as law, journalism, teaching and so on (in Norris ed, 1997:165; Best et al, 2001:77), and existing work looking at both the Labour and Conservative parties suggests that local party members may indeed be part of the cause of this, with studies suggesting that they are biased against candidates who are manual workers (Bochel & Denver, 1981; 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 & Cairney, 2006:44).

**Figure One** Examples of Brokerage and Instrumental occupations used in Cairney, 2007

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 (2007:3-5). It is possible to argue here that this definition of instrumental
occupations fails to make two key distinctions, that of elected and unelected roles, and that of party and non-party roles.

**Party and non-party**

Perhaps an even more important distinction lost in the classification of ‘instrumental occupations’ is that of individuals directly employed by a political party and those who simply work in the Westminster political bubble in a non-partisan capacity. Cairney himself notes that different political parties will have varying preferences regarding pre-parliamentary experience of all types based on their overall ethos (2007:7-8). Alan Ware highlights how in British politics, the power of central party organisations has always been limited when trying to control candidate selection processes, resulting in powerful local organizations which may value specific local attributes or linkages more than a centrally-imposed framework would account for (1996:262, 282).

Much of the evidence of an increasing dominance of ‘party insiders’ is either anecdotal in nature or is simply not interrogated effectively (see Riddell, 1993, for example). Therefore, when justifying it as worthy of classification in its own right, there is little to draw on in support. There is, however, some precedent for looking at party staff in their own right, albeit not in a way that looks explicitly at candidate selection or political careers. Justin Fisher and Paul Webb (2003a; 2003b) conducted both quantitative and qualitative studies of Labour party employees based both at Millbank (the party HQ in London) and other employees based around the country. The research focused on the role, attitudes and degree of professionalization seen amongst the party staff in the context of their increasing prominence and importance (2003a:10). In terms of general characteristics, the authors find that Labour employees are well balanced in terms of sex, are generally middle-class (56%), are very well-educated with only 9% of respondents lacking a degree or vocational qualification, are mostly white and overwhelmingly likely to have union membership (Webb and Fisher, 2003:14-5). Utilising existing work to provide comparator groups for the data, Webb and Fisher find that party employees are substantially different to both party members more broadly and the electorate, whilst at the same time being similar to Labour MPs (except in regard to sex) (2003:14-5).

Addressing the question of political ambition amongst party employees, Webb and Fisher find that 20% of employees plan to seek adoption as PPCs in future, and a further 11% plan to mount a candidacy for a seat in the European Parliament (2003:16). As noted in studies of the new parliament of 2010, this is an increasingly represented demographic at Westminster, and a follow-up study of employees in both the Labour and other parties would be of great interest eight years on.

This research helps provide both precedent and justification for the inclusion of party employment as a distinct category within any classificatory schema of pre-parliamentary experience, both political and occupational. Ideally, it would also provide a comparison of attitudes between political staff who work for parties and those who do not. In terms of the benefits of working within a political party as opposed to simply working in politics in a non-partisan way, it is possible to speculate that the same framework of understanding outlined above (for elected versus unelected experience) can be applied again, with party employment offering experience related to both the formal and informal workings and contacts of political life from a partisan perspective, and anecdotal evidence suggests that party employees network amongst themselves on a regular basis both in and outside of work hours, networks formalised
in the Labour Staff Network, the Conservative Staff Group and Liberal Democrat Staff Group (W4MP, 2009).

**Elected and Unelected**

When discussing political experience in the context of a political career, it is possible to assume that such experience will be valued for reasons of knowledge and skills gained, or as a demonstration of loyalty to the party in question. Existing classifications of these instrumental careers fail to interrogate the basis and specifics of the roles included in the category.

The distinction between elected instrumental roles, such as the full-time councillors mentioned by Cairney (2007:5), and unelected roles such as senior positions in think-tanks or working in an MP’s office is missed by existing classificatory schema. Although dealing with somewhat abstract concepts such as ‘loyalty’ and ‘skills’, it is still a distinction worth making, as the process of considering and then pursuing a candidacy at any level of politics (with the local level being primarily discussed here) is a cementing of commitment to a party perhaps stronger than those seen in non-elected roles. Riddell quotes Douglas Hurd, who says of elected politicians that ‘by being elected they feel something has touched them’ and goes on to compare this to the attitude of members of the clergy upon joining the priesthood (1993:3).

More concrete benefits of elected experience could include elements of both formal political experience, such as dealing with constituents, as well as informal benefits including political contacts and understanding of informal political practice.

**What to do with local council experience?**

Local council service is not strictly an occupation, although in recent years there has been a growth in the numbers of councillors who pursue their council duties in lieu of a traditional job. Despite this, however, it would be a misnomer to include local council service in a classification of pre-parliamentary occupations. This is a key issue with the existing classificatory schema, and highlights the problem with looking at pre-parliamentary occupations without acknowledging the political aspect of both occupation and other activities which may assist an aspirant candidate when attempting to run for a parliamentary seat.

Part of the aim of this paper is to put forward the case for a more holistic look at pre-parliamentary experience, perhaps looking at ‘political apprenticeships’ broadly defined rather than focusing on the restrictive and potentially misleading idea of occupation or formative occupation.

**The convergence of employment and political experience**

As noted above, there has been an increase in the numbers staff employed by political parties, resulting in a blurring of the distinction between pre-political experience in the traditional ‘extra-curricular’ sense as a local councillor or party helper, and a move towards people obtaining political experience as part of their main employment. Indeed, it is common to see aspirant candidates holding a combination of all of these things.

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7 This author has outlined this framework elsewhere in a paper presented at the 2011 PSA Conference, link: [http://bit.ly/mLWetv](http://bit.ly/mLWetv)
Political Class? Does where you come from affect where you can go?

Many of the existing analyses of the trends examined here have centred on the notion of a political class or career politicians (King, 1981; Riddell, 1993; Jun, 2003). The political class thesis can be broadly defined as the idea that many new MPs are ‘career politicians who [have] spent their whole occupational lives in politics’ (Jun, 2003:169). The political class is deemed to include members of devolved legislatures, political staff and advisors, members of the European Parliament and their staffs and Jun also includes in this category the ‘growing number of professional councillors and members of local government’, stating that ‘the last of these groups increasingly constitutes the pool of recruitment for the lower House of Commons’ (2003:169).

These descriptions are not inaccurate, however the exponents of the political class thesis tend to attach motive to such developments, for example suggesting that ‘the different spheres of the political class are bound up with each other, and members share an interest in preserving their political careers’ (Jun, 2003:169). Attaching motives such as these seems pre-emptive, particularly without qualification, or only with qualification based on retrospective biography (King, 1981:253-4). Accounts such as that offered by Peter Riddell (1993) offer qualitative accounts of increasing numbers of MPs who have harboured parliamentary ambitions since their student days and have known ‘nothing else than politics’, as does the account provided by Labour MP Sadiq Khan, above (1993:186; Khan in GQ, 2011). Jun describes some of the conclusions here as ‘overdrawn’, but 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, 1994:573). Indeed, the large proportion of MPs being elected for the first time in their thirties would suggest that some sort of occupation prior to seeking election is the norm (Rush, 1994:576). In his analysis of career politicians at Westminster, Anthony King supports with evidence a view that most MPs falling into this bracket will be first elected between the age of thirty and forty-five, contrasting this with the small numbers of MPs first elected after the age of fifty (1981:263). More generally, Westminster has become a younger legislature since the 1970s, perhaps due to changing expectations relating to pre-parliamentary experience as part of the spread of careerism (Best et al, 2001:86).

Rush identifies three overarching trends. First, early engagement, both occupational and financial, with politics as a precondition to pursuing a political career; second, a decline in individuals who become MPs following a successful non-political career, and thirdly, the ‘professionalization’ of politics, marked by an increase in MPs salaries and the providing of the resources necessary to do their jobs effectively (1994:576). In addition, it is possible to add other trends, such as serving in parliament for longer, with most MPs serving for at least fifteen years (Rush, 1994:571) and being initially elected at a younger age.

All trends such as those listed above have consequences, and King identifies a few of these positing 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, and linked to this he identifies an intensification of the Westminster village atmosphere. Finally, he argues that there has been an overall increase in the ambition of those individuals elected to parliament, and in
turn this has affected previous situations relating to collegial decision-making, for one (1981:276-281). He is keen to note however, that there never was a ‘golden age’ (1981:285).

A key questions that needs to be addressed is whether or not the trends identified by Rush act as a roadmap of sorts for individuals who wish to reach the top of British politics, namely a frontbench position in either government or opposition. Are the broader trends seen in the Commons as a whole reflected in this parliamentary elite? If so, are they felt even more strongly?

**British Political Careers**

Pre-parl routes are established to some degree, although in varying detail. Some established stuff, LG for example, instrumental and brokerage, etc, etc.

Once in parl, trajectories common, but is there a link between the two (i.e. pre-parl and intra-parl)? Key question which requires these alterations to framework to understand fully.

**Levels of jobs – ministers, junior ministers, etc**

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 less prestigious under-secretary of state (James, 1999:19). In terms of accountability, the Secretary of State is accountable to parliament, whereas the junior ministers are accountable to the Secretary of State. Each Cabinet minister will have their own PPS, with junior ministers sharing theirs (James, 1999:21).

The Shadow Opposition will have a member of the official opposition frontbench shadowing each of these Secretaries of State and junior ministers. For example, Andy Burnham, the Shadow Health Secretary, is the Shadow of Andrew Lansley, the 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, 1997:7). It should be noted that the shadow cabinet is the senior group of MPs who are part of the wider shadow frontbench in the same way that Cabinet ministers are senior to more junior members of the government.

**Hypotheses**

This research is interested in whether or not MPs from certain pre-parliamentary political backgrounds are more likely to achieve the highest office than those who have different backgrounds.

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, 1978:98). Aside from the obvious question of why this is the case, such evidence also raises a number of questions relating to both issues of representation as well as the role of parliamentary culture in streamlining individuals following their election the Commons. Conversely, a quick look at the three current main party leaders raises the possibility that their
shared political backgrounds have aided their rapid ascent to the highest offices within their parties.

Building on the alterations to the existing classificatory schema laid out earlier in the paper as well as the findings of the recent EHRC report, the two ‘political apprenticeships’ will be used as comparative examples of both the new ‘party insider’ route into parliament as well as the more established local councillor route. Moving on from looking at simply how many MPs have used which, the paper will ask how this affects them once they are in the Commons, and speculate as to why this is the case.

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

› That political insiders will be promoted earlier, more often, and ultimately into higher positions than those taking the more traditional elected route
› MPs with local council experience are more likely to remain as long-term backbenchers (repeating existing findings – Mellors, 1978:98-9)

**Why these hypotheses?**

As noted above, existing evidence suggests that MPs who were local councillors are more likely to end up as backbenchers in the longer-term than those MPs who were not (Mellors, 1978:96). In the same vein, Vernon Bogdanor has noted how very few British prime ministers have local experience (2009). When combined with anecdotal evidence, for example the fact that the three current main party leaders are all from similar ‘political insider’ backgrounds, it raises questions as to whether or not there are path dependencies set in place by the pre-parliamentary experience of individuals elected to parliament.

Having established such a line of enquiry, the next step is to test the hypotheses above statistically, something which is an ongoing part of this research and also something that will be discussed in the context of some very preliminary data in the final section of the paper. A further question to ask is why and how this could be the case. As noted above, this author suggests utilising a distinction of formal and informal benefits in order to best understand the link between parliamentary and pre-parliamentary life, something that was previously tested on original data collected from local councillors in 2010.

**Formal Benefits**

Formal benefits of either a party insider-type role or of being a local councillor would be those benefits that are borne out of the visible and official aspects of the job. These could include the skills gained in the course of the job, such as dealing with issues seen by, and understanding the day-to-day lives of, MPs and the notion of learning to ‘do politics’ more generally through experiencing first-hand the ceremony, ritual and activities of political spaces.

**Informal Benefits**

Informal benefits could be considered as the usually unseen flipside of their formal counterparts. These include the internal political party contacts made whilst in a role, any tricks of the trade that may be learnt as part of the proximity to decision-making provided by a role, and any unofficial kudos that the role may provide an individual with when seeking selection for a parliamentary seat.
Limited Data Analysis
The chosen method for this study is a cohort approach, looking at those MPs who were newly-elected for the first time at the 1997 General Election (and also a small number of MPs who were elected for the first time in by-elections of the same year). The cohort study allows the parliamentary careers of individuals elected at the same time, in the same general circumstances, to be tracked to either their completion or up until the present day. The 1997 election saw a Labour landslide, something that will obviously impact on the findings of the study – as such, it would be ideal to perform a similar study on a comparable ‘Conservative’ intake, perhaps the 1979 election. Whether or not this will be done as part of this project is unclear at present, although it is worth noting that the 2010 intake could act as a potential comparator if such a study were to be carried out in future. As it stands, 1997 is an ideal choice for a number of reasons, particularly the large influx of brand new MPs as well as the fact that many of those same MPs left the Commons at the General Election last year, either voluntarily or for reasons of electoral loss.

Using a very limited preliminary $n$ of 50 MPs first elected in 1997, some early testing of the hypotheses outlined above is possible.

$H1$ – Those with experience in party employment will be promoted earlier than those who do not

Based on the preliminary data, there is no evidence to support this hypothesis, with the already small $n$ becoming even more limited when looking solely at those MPs who had been promoted to senior roles. It is possible that the picture will become clearer in relation to this hypothesis when using a larger $n$.

$H2$ – Those with experience in local councils are less likely to be promoted into higher positions overall

There is some support in the preliminary data for this hypothesis. MPs with local council experience were found to be more likely to hold no senior positions at all (61.5% -v- 38.5%), the position of u/sec of state (71.4%) as opposed to Minister of State (42.9%) and the position of PPS (60% -v- 40%). Again, this is based on a small $n$ of fifty MPs, but suggests that it is worth pursuing this line of inquiry.

$H3$ – Those with experience in local councils are more likely to be long-term backbenchers

Although the ‘long-term’ aspect of this is neither fully defined nor accounted for, preliminary findings suggest support for this hypothesis, with MPs who have local council experience being more likely to not be promoted to senior positions than all other MPs.

Conclusions
Again, it should first be noted that this research, as is, is incomplete and as such, findings are extremely tentative. The paper has outlined the theoretical and empirical arguments relating to the validity of undertaking such research and has engaged with the existing literature and suggested a number of improvements that would lead to a more holistic understanding of the phenomena of political careers. It has been shown that the existing classificatory framework perhaps misses out on the intricacies of the phenomena it actually seeks to explain, thereby making this exercise overly-reliant on anecdote as opposed to more generalizable quantitative data. The author intends to continue data collection and analysis in the manner outlined above, whilst developing ideas surrounding the data in preparation for more qualitative research to follow.
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