

Bringing in the best

Why we should not limit our choice of ministers

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It is a tough life being a minister. You are summoned to Downing Street, and next thing you know you are being asked to make key decisions in a department and policy area you often know little or nothing about.

At least that is how it works in the UK. But actually the UK is one of the few countries where ministers are regularly put in this position. In what follows, I shall argue that we could benefit greatly by dispensing with the outdated and unnecessary convention that we should restrict our choice of ministers to members of Parliament.

Scraping the barrel

Whenever a prime minister in the UK announces the make-up of their cabinet, it is taken as a given that they will choose from a highly restricted pool of applicants, known as the Houses of Parliament. The selection is often further constrained, by eliminating any occupants who are not members of the governing party or parties. Further, remove any barmy backbenchers, semi-retired has-beens or those recently turfed-out of ministerial positions, and you are left with a mere puddle of candidates to spread over a dizzying array of posts (currently 147, by my count¹).

On the few occasions the PM looks beyond the four walls of Westminster, he or she feels compelled to crowbar the outsiders into the House of Lords. Gordon Brown did so 11 times between July 2007 and June 2009, when constructing his "Government of all the talents", drawing concern from the Justice Select Committee and the Public Accounts Committee about inflation of the Lords.²

Why this obsession with parliamentarians? I shall argue that casting the net beyond Westminster would bring greater expertise, less short-termism and better government. Moreover, I shall argue that concerns about accountability are misplaced.

¹ Parliament.uk website: <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/government-and-opposition/1/her-majestys-government/>

² *Ministers in the House of Lords*, House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/PC/05226, 2012, available from <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05226/ministers-in-the-house-of-lords>

Expertise is not everything, but it helps

The rise of the career politician has been widely bemoaned.³ I think the aversion to this trend is overdone. There is something to be said for having politicians who have devoted their lives to the cause, and who have a deep understanding of the system.

The downside, though, is that ministers rarely have direct experience of the policy areas of which they are in charge. Having studied history, George Osborne worked as a freelance journalist, then a Conservative Party researcher, special advisor and speechwriter. Whence then, can he have garnered the mastery of finance and economics one would wish of a Chancellor of the Exchequer? Contrast this with Timothy Geithner, United States Treasury Secretary for four years under Barack Obama. His credentials include an MA in International Economics, and stints at the International Monetary Fund and Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

Secretary of State for Justice, Chris Grayling, also studied history, and went on to work in television and management consultancy before entering politics. His counterpart in the US, Eric Holder, on the other hand, studied law, and was a lawyer and judge before entering cabinet as Attorney General.

None of this is to say that people who have not spent their careers in a particular sector cannot be excellent ministers in that area. Nor is it to say that "experts" always make excellent ministers. Timothy Geithner and Eric Holder have not been unbridled successes. However, they clearly have an advantage over those appointees with no background in their portfolio.

It would not be such a problem were ministers to stick around for longer than they do. They would be able to build their expertise while in post, and so be able to make better-informed decisions later down the line. As it is, by the time they start to get a handle on the intricacies of their department's remit, they are moved on or moved out. A paper by Demos found that between 2005 and 2009, the average tenure of a government minister was 1.3 years.⁴ Under the coalition government, that has crept up only marginally, to just under two years.⁵ As technology, society and the economy continue to become more complex, it makes little sense to maintain a revolving door of ignorance.

Sir Humphreys on the march

Those short tenures of ministers run the risk of putting them at the mercy of the senior civil servants in their department. If ministers always have little grounding in the area, then they must be excessively reliant on officials to guide their key decisions.

³ For example, in a 2014 YouGov poll, 55% of respondents said that never having "a 'real' job outside the worlds of national politics/think tanks/journalism/local government before becoming an MP" "was unsuitable in a leading politician". More information available at

<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/03/10/sex-drugs-money-and-old-school-ties-which-bits-mps/>

⁴ Cleary, Hugh and Reeves, Richard, *The 'culture of churn' for UK Ministers and the price we all pay*, 2009, Demos. Available at http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Ministerial_Churn.pdf

⁵ Author's calculation

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that being a minister is a full-time job that is not treated as such. As a minister, your diary is split between your constituency, Parliament, cabinet, your department, and the media. Even the most assiduous minister cannot help but leave some of these short-changed.

Given that ministers are not afforded much time to build expertise, it would be wise to appoint someone with a good base-level of knowledge in the area. If we continue to fling ministers repeatedly into new domains, we risk an unwelcome rebalancing power between politicians and civil servants.

Tempering the political storm

A second problem of short tenures is that they create two opposing, but both negative, incentives, promoting two possible approaches:

Approach one: If you have only got a short time in the job, you need to show results quickly. Rush through some reforms as fast as possible, in the hope that by the time of the next reshuffle, you will have some good news to show the PM.

Alternatively, keep your head down. If you make the difficult changes needed, it will only draw abuse in the short-run. Those tough decisions can wait for your successor.

Either way, the conditions do not encourage the most desirable approach: a sober evaluation of the problems and evidence, and the progressive implementation of reforms for the long-run benefit of society.

Outsiders would not be immune to the lures of short-termism, but they would have two key advantages. First, they would not need to be constantly popular. MPs cannot allow a moment's slip in popularity, lest they lose ground in their constituency, in the party, and in the PM's thoughts. Making big decisions carries big risks, made all the larger by the fickleness of those who determine the path of the only career you have ever known.

Second, outsiders are more likely to truly care about the policy area, having been more familiar with it, rather than see it as a stepping-stone to the next ministerial appointment. A passion for improving the sector leads to a greater willingness to make tough decisions, when the countervailing force is short-term career-progression.

It also acts against the other temptation faced by career politicians – populism. Political winds make it very difficult to do what is good, when the alternative is doing what is liked. In a democracy, we should not often contradict popular opinion, but nor should it be slavishly adhered to. As long as ministers' careers are entirely guided by the gusts of popular opinion, populism will remain tempting. It would take a brave outsider to do something good, but disliked; it would take an even braver insider.

The accountability problem

One of the reasons why Gordon Brown felt the need to thrust his new appointees into the House of Lords is so that they could be accountable to Parliament. Nevertheless, there was debate as to whether the likes of Lord Mandelson and Lord Adonis would be allowed to appear in the Commons for questioning (in the end, a temporary solution was reached⁶). If non-parliamentarians were to become ministers, this question would inevitably arise again.

The solution is simple, of course. Ministers should be allowed (and required) to appear at the Despatch Box for questioning, regardless of whether they are members of the Commons, the Lords, or neither. While this may be unpopular among some of the more traditionalist occupants of Westminster, we must always evaluate whether tradition still serves a relevant purpose, rather than mindlessly bow to it. In this case, it should be dispensed with.

Perhaps a more pertinent objection is that of ministers' accountability to the public, should they not be elected. Of course, this objection applies equally to ministers from the Lords, but is nevertheless worthy of address. In a democracy, would having unelected heads of department not be problematic?

The answer is categorically no. Whether ministers are MPs or not, they are not elected to be ministers. Few people vote for a candidate on the basis that they would make a good defence secretary. They vote for a candidate because they think that person will make a good MP for their constituency or, more likely, because that person belongs to the party which the voter would like to see in government.

Since, because of this, even ministers from the Commons are themselves not really directly accountable to the public, having outsiders as ministers would not see any deterioration in accountability. Rather such outsiders would be accountable in the same way as all ministers are: via the prime minister and the governing party. If a minister is sub-standard, the prime minister will need to dispense with him or her, lest the PM's reputation be tarnished by the errant minister, and the party's chances of re-election be harmed. This mechanism would remain undiminished.

On making omelettes

Needless to say, not everybody would be happy with this suggested change. The main losers would be MPs, who would find themselves suddenly facing much greater competition for high-profile posts in government. This is no bad thing though. By breaking up the cosy cartel parliamentarians hold over ministerial positions, the UK can endow itself with a more well-rounded government, and do so without the ridiculous contrivance of padding people into the Lords.

⁶ *Ministers in the House of Lords*, House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/PC/05226, 2012, available from <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05226/ministers-in-the-house-of-lords>

Other countries lead the way in this respect. The United States is an obvious example, where the likes of Larry Summers in Bill Clinton's administration were very successful. It is not the only one though. Narendra Modi has earned acclaim in India for the range of expertise he has brought into his government. It is too early to say how successful his administration will be, but the early signs are arguably positive. Ministers are regularly drawn from outside parliament in, among others, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden (France even had two outsider prime ministers – Pompidou and Barre).⁷

In fact, the UK itself has not always been so restrictive in its choices of minister. David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill both called non-parliamentarians into their war cabinets. Sometimes conventions that appear to have been around since the dawn of time are actually relatively recent phenomena.

Conclusion

I have not argued that the government should be chock-full of outsiders. However, it is rarely sensible to be overly restrictive in who you will consider for an important job, whether it be in a business or in government. It is particularly unwise to limit yourself to a group with a very narrow range of experience.

The prime minister might, of course, choose not to take advantage of the greater depth of talent at their disposal. The power of patronage is very important for a PM. It allows him or her to keep MPs in line, by waving the carrot of promotion. They would have to balance this with the potential electoral benefits of looking beyond their MPs. The electorate may look kindly, in the short-term, on appointing respected individuals to key positions and, in the long-term, having a better-functioning government.

Different prime ministers would use this new freedom to differing extents. Some might not use it at all. But all should have the option.

⁷ Yong, Ben and Hazell, Robert, *Putting Goats amongst the Wolves; Appointing Ministers from Outside Parliament*, 2011, University College London, available from www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/publications/tabs/unit-publications/151-cover.pdf