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LEAVING THE HOUSE: THE EXPERIENCE OF FORMER MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT WHO LEFT THE HOUSE OF COMMONS IN 2010

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of a large-scale survey investigating the experiences of the large number of MPs who left parliament following the 2010 general election. We have found that: the widely-held perception that MPs make a smooth transition into lucrative private sector employment after leaving Parliament is largely mistaken; the MPs' expenses scandal has seriously undermined the status of MPs and, as such, may also have made a career in Parliament less enticing for good prospective parliamentary candidates; and the job of an MP remains fraught with difficulties for women due to the strain it places on family life.

Shortly after losing his marginal seat of Broxtowe in Nottinghamshire by just 389 votes in the May 2010 general election, former Labour MP Nick Palmer signed on at his local Jobcentre and applied for unemployment benefits. He was offered a specialist CV review with a recruitment expert and enrolled with several recruitment agencies. After securing some freelance work as a translator, he became Director of International and Corporate Affairs for the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection and Director of Policy for Cruelty Free International, an animal protection campaign. In 2013 he was re-selected to fight his old seat in the 2015 election, but lost again as the Conservative majority increased to over 4000 votes.

After his 2010 election defeat, former Liberal Democrat MP Lembit Öpik tried his hand at various forms of popular entertainment, including stand-up comedy, TV comedy shows, appearing in a pop video and in a professional wrestling match (prompting the newspaper headline 'Can this man sink any lower?'). That this profile may have damaged his future political prospects is suggested by his failure to secure a seat on his party's federal executive committee, its nomination for the 2012 London mayoral elections, or its nomination for the position of police and crime commissioner in Northumbria. He has admitted to feeling 'crushed' by his defeat, saying the 'trauma of rejection' triggered depression lasting three years and left him facing 'a long period of virtual insolvency' (Öpik, 2015). However, he did eventually secure a number of non-executive director roles that built on career experience he gained before he became an MP as an international training manager with Procter & Gamble.

Planning for her retirement, former Conservative MP and minister Ann Widdecombe was clear that she did not want to take on non-executive directorships when she stepped down in 2010. 'I did not want any more piles of paper to crunch, any more bulging briefcases'. She would happily have gone to the House of Lords but believes that David Cameron vetoed that, and though she was offered the post of British ambassador to the Vatican health problems led her to turn it down. She was sounded out as a possible Tory candidate for police and crime commissioner in both Kent and Devon, but refused because of the lack of powers in the role. Continuing with the media work she had undertaken while still an MP, she has a column for the *Daily Express*, wrote another novel and her autobiography (Widdecombe, 2013), and built up a 'showbiz' profile with appearances on 'Strictly Come Dancing', in pantomime, in her own short-lived TV quiz show and a with a non-singing cameo appearance in an opera.

‘You’ll lose your gravitas’, friends warned her. ‘Yes, I will but what do I want it for?’ she replied. ‘I’m retired. The hour I ceased to be an MP, I ceased to be an MP.’

These are just three of the almost record number of Members of Parliament, 225 in total, who left the House of Commons following the 2010 general election, with 149 MPs (66 per cent) standing down and a further 76 (34 per cent) being defeated. This represents a turnover rate of some 35 per cent of the seats in Parliament. By way of comparison, the 2005 general election led to a turnover of 21 per cent of MPs, and the 2001 general election a turnover of just 15 per cent of MPs. Meanwhile, at the most recent general election in 2015 the turnover rate remained high at 28 per cent. These recent high turnover rates of parliamentarians provide one reason why it is important to study parliamentary ‘exits’ and the experiences and activities of former MPs, but it is not the only one. (**Table 1.**)

We know a great deal about the changing social and economic backgrounds of Members of Parliament (trends and patterns relating to class, education, occupation, age, gender and ethnicity), usually linked to discussions of the representativeness of Parliament and the professionalisation of political careers. In contrast to this focus on legislative recruitment and parliamentary ‘entrances’ (Rush, 2001; Childs, 2004), relatively little is known about legislative turnover in Britain and about exits from the House of Commons, nor about political ‘afterlives’ — that is, what former MPs do after they leave Parliament following election defeat or having made the decision to stand down. However, these issues are important for a number of reasons. Differential exit patterns may affect the composition and representativeness of a parliament as much as initial recruitment patterns, and analysis of the experiences of former MPs is useful in understanding the relationship between politics, Parliament and the wider society, including business, as well as the skills developed over the course of a political career and the ‘returns to office’ involved in political life (Hibbing, 1999).

Given that a majority of MPs now exit Parliament through retirement, the decisions of politicians can be said to change the composition of Parliament at least as much as, if not more than, the decisions of voters. Turnover rates can have a policy impact as MPs with different ideas or experiences enter and leave Parliament. Low turnover might block new talent coming through and increase the remoteness of politicians from those they represent. Conversely, high turnover at an election can remove experienced MPs who might otherwise have a lot to contribute in terms of expertise and ideas, weakening the effectiveness of Parliament as an institution. Moreover variations in defeat or retirement rates among different sorts of MPs (for instance female compared to male MPs) may raise wider issues about the representativeness and working of Parliament and the opportunities and constraints faced by different social groups (Hjelmar et al, 2010; Roberts, 2011; Heinsohn and Freitag, 2012). The sort of post-parliamentary political afterlives former MPs make for themselves can open up questions about political actors (their motivations, their skills, their adaptability) and how our political system works including the links between Parliament, parties, civil society and business — in particular those seeking to lobby political office holders, thereby raising issues about the regulation of possible conflicts of interest and ‘revolving doors’.

These sentiments are echoed by Roberts (2015: 18), who argues that the loss of political office matters on several levels. First, she argues, politicians themselves lose out under current arrangements: ‘they may be fearful of stepping down, seeing colleagues struggle, or they may be uncertain about possible choices ahead. They may end up staying too long as a result,’ which limits their options in terms of a career after Parliament. Second, political parties may lose out through ‘dismissive and thoughtless treatment of those who have been defeated,’ jeopardizing ‘the goodwill, membership and activism of committed and knowledgeable people’. Third, employers lose out ‘by

failing to recognise and value the skills that former parliamentarians may bring.’ Lastly, the wider society loses out by ‘failing to harness and make use of the knowledge, skills and experience of people who have been elected representatives’, people moreover who ‘by virtue of no longer being in office can see the system from both sides: as an elected representative and back again as an ordinary citizen,’ which ‘gives them an insight into the perspective of both, and an unparalleled ability to speak the language of both.’

Of the handful of studies on the experiences and activities of former parliamentarians, the most detailed in the British context is the report by Theakston, Gouge and Honeyman (2007), commissioned by the Association of Former Members of Parliament. Their survey-based study focused on a wide range of topics relevant to the activities and experiences of former MPs, including their reasons for leaving Parliament, the effect on MPs and MPs’ families of leaving Parliament, the post-parliamentary employment of MPs, and their post-parliamentary political activities. Their key findings can be summarised as follows. In relation to what MPs did and did not miss about Parliament, the ‘buzz’ of the Commons, the feeling of being at the political epicentre of the country and the cachet associated with being an MP were the items most often mentioned in relation to the former, and the long hours of work, lack of family time and inadequate financial rewards were common grievances in relation to the latter. Meanwhile, with regards to the effect of leaving Parliament on individual parliamentarians and their families, this experience was associated with a range of ills, including declining personal health and emotional trauma (especially in the case of an unexpected election loss) on the part of the former MPs, but relief on the part of their family members, who were almost without exception glad to be able to spend more time with them. In relation to the work and employment of MPs after leaving Parliament, Theakston, Gouge and Honeyman (2007: 20) found that the widely-held perception that MPs make a smooth transition into lucrative private sector employment is mistaken, and that in actual fact many former MPs encounter great difficulties in resuming a career outside of politics or finding new work, with a significant number citing the problems caused by being ‘out of the loop’ for an extended period of time in relation to their previous careers as a major factor in this. Furthermore, the general consensus among the former MPs surveyed was that there was a dearth of organised support for departing MPs from their political party, with most receiving only a simple message of good will from the party hierarchy, and some not even receiving that.

There are a number of studies of former legislators in other national contexts. Vanlangenakker and Maddens (2011) studied electoral turnover at the regional level in a selection of EU member states, finding that the most common reason for exiting Parliament is retirement (and that, as is to be expected, older parliamentarians are the most likely to retire of all age groups), with over 50 per cent of the parliamentarians they studied having left office voluntarily. They found also that female parliamentarians left Parliament involuntarily at a much higher rate than their male counterparts in part, they hypothesised, because of the role played by ‘predominantly male’ party selectorates (Vanlangenakker and Maddens, 2011: 12).

Docherty (2001) surveyed the members of the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians and found evidence that despite their significant pride in being able to help their constituents, parliamentarians often pay a high price for their service, working extraordinarily long hours and missing out on time spent with their family. He even found that 16 per cent of the former parliamentarians he surveyed ‘blamed the stress of elected life for the breakup of their marriage’ (Docherty, 2001: 18). In an echo of the findings of Theakston, Gouge and Honeyman’s (2007) British study, he also found that the transition out of politics can be a traumatic experience for individuals, with struggles to find work and carve out a new role in life being common, especially among defeated

Canadian parliamentarians. Shaffir and Kleinknecht's (2005) study of former parliamentarians, also in Canada, had a keener focus on the subjective experience of political defeat. Their qualitative interviews showed that politicians thrown out by the voters were most often shocked to be confronted with their election defeat and as a way of dealing with this unexpected tragedy they chose to 'deploy deflection rhetoric to claim that circumstances beyond their control' led to their electoral defeat and exit from political life (Shaffir and Kleinknecht, 2005: 708).

Herrick and Nixon (1996), meanwhile, studied former political office holders in the United States, focusing on the types of careers they went into after leaving politics and found that the perception that, upon leaving office, most Members of Congress move through a 'revolving door' into lucrative jobs with either government bureaucracies or interest groups or as lobbyists is largely mistaken and there is a wide variety of occupations that former members move into, with the most common ones being private legal practice and private business, which account for the subsequent career destinations of nearly half of all former political office holders. Herrick and Nixon (1996: 492) also found that former Congressmen and women typically remained highly active politically after leaving Congress, with half remaining politically active as volunteers and around 20 per cent each as interest group employees and government employees.

I. Characteristics of MPs leaving Parliament in 2010

This study is primarily based on a postal survey of all 225 former MPs who left Parliament in 2010, backed up with a number of personal interviews with former parliamentarians. In terms of the salient features of this cohort of departing MPs, 159 were Labour (71 per cent), 38 Conservative (17 per cent), 16 Liberal Democrat (7 per cent) and 12 'other' (5 per cent). Labour MPs made up over three-quarters of the total of those defeated (58 of the 76 in this category, or 76 per cent), and around two-thirds (68 per cent) of all those who chose not to contest the election (101 of the 149 in this category). In contrast, Conservatives who left the Commons in 2010 did so overwhelmingly through standing down rather than electoral defeat (36 out of 38, or 95 per cent). (**Figure 1.**)

The mean age at which these former MPs left Parliament was 59.7 years ($s = 8.65$). In total, only 11 per cent were aged under 50, and 10 per cent 70 or over. On the Conservative side, only six exiting MPs (16 per cent) were aged under 60, compared to half of the exiting Labour MPs. A total of 170 (76 per cent) of the departing MPs were men, while 55 (24 per cent) were women. Forty-seven of the 55 women MPs (85.5 per cent) who left Parliament in 2010 were Labour, and they accounted for three in every ten departing Labour MPs. In contrast, only 5 out of 38 departing Conservatives (13 per cent) were women, and 3 out of 16 (19 per cent) departing Liberal Democrats. (**Figure 2.**)

We received 67 responses to our survey questionnaire which made for a response rate of 34 per cent, and while this is a reasonable response rate for a study of this kind (Maestas *et al*, 2003: 93), it is lower than the response rate to Theakston, Gouge and Honeyman's (2007) study, which was 54 per cent. The most important factor in producing this lower response rate, we contend, is an unwillingness on the part of many MPs who left Parliament in 2010 specifically to do anything that would involve them having to relive their time spent as an MP, due to the lasting effects of the MPs' expenses scandal. In other words, the experience of being an MP during the MPs' expenses scandal was so deeply unpleasant for many former MPs, including a large number who were not implicated directly in the MPs' expenses scandal at all, that it does not bear thinking about for them. Evidence in support of this contention is discussed

below, but another reason for the lower response rate may be that this study surveyed both former MPs who are a member of the Association of Former Members of Parliament (AFMP) and those who are not, whereas the Theakston, Gouge and Honeyman (2007) study only surveyed the former. Former MPs who are a member of the AFMP may be more likely to participate in this kind of study for a number of reasons, including being more easily contactable (the AFMP keeps an up-to-date list of contact addresses of all of its members) and self-identifying as a 'former MP', which implies a positive regard for their former occupation (even if, as our survey results bear out, they also have a number of grievances with it). More importantly, using a series of chi-square goodness-of-fit tests we were able to determine that there were no significant differences between the group of MPs that responded to our survey and the 225 MPs who left Parliament in 2010 in terms of party affiliation ($X^2_2 = .509, p = 0.775$), age ($X^2_4 = 4.469, p = 0.346$), mode of leaving Parliament ($X^2_1 = .887, p = 0.346$) or gender ($X^2_1 = 1.079, p = 0.299$), which indicates that our sample is a broadly representative one.

II. Reasons for leaving Parliament

As mentioned above, of the 225 MPs who left Parliament in 2010, 149 left voluntarily or stood down before the general election and did not contest a seat while 76 stood for reelection but were defeated. Our survey questionnaire investigated the reasons for the former having stood down, but also asked the latter for their thoughts as to why they were defeated. The most commonly-cited factor for standing down from Parliament was age, with 60 per cent of our respondents citing this factor, followed by a desire to spend more time with family at 25 per cent, and a desire to start a new career and disillusionment with politics, at 17 per cent and 12.5 per cent respectively. 'Personal reasons' were cited by 10 per cent of these former MPs and the declining status of MPs by 6 per cent. Thirty-five per cent of them cited 'other' reasons in response to this question, such as the likelihood of losing and an unwillingness on the part of some Labour MPs, sensing defeat for Gordon Brown's government, to carry on in opposition — a not at all surprising finding given, as is discussed in greater detail below, many MPs cite as a reason for entering politics in the first place the ability to 'make a difference', which is much harder to do while sitting on the opposition benches.* (**Figure 3.**)

In relation to responses which fell into the 'declining status of MPs' category — and throughout the entire survey — the legacy of the MPs' expenses scandal featured prominently, with one long-standing MP who was not found guilty of any wrongdoing whatsoever in relation to it citing as a reason for her standing down the fact that she was 'spat at in the street' by an angry constituent and subjected to casual harassment in her spare time. As she explained in one of our qualitative interviews: 'You'd go shopping in your constituency and have people looking into your shopping bags and saying, "Are we paying for this?"' Worse still, for more than one of the MPs we interviewed, family members were also harassed because of their connection to the MPs in question. In one instance, which was not atypical, a former MP's 11-year-old son was invited to stand up by their head teacher during school assembly and was told, "You look really smart today. Did your mother buy you those clothes on her expenses?" It was also clear that another deleterious effect of the MPs' expenses scandal was the climate of fear produced by

* For this and for other similar questions in which it was important to avoid 'leading' the former MPs and potentially also overlooking unanticipated responses, the former MPs were given complete freedom of response and their responses were coded later on using a four-stage coding process in order to furnish usable quantitative data. This involved collating the responses from the write-in boxes on the survey questionnaire, identifying broad similarities, formulating exhaustive and mutually-exclusive categories and, finally, refining the categories after discussions between the authors.

associated media reports. One former MP described it as ‘mental torture’ and another explained to us, ‘you were just waiting for the phone call [from a newspaper] to say, “It’s my turn!”’

Meanwhile, 72 per cent of the former MPs in our sample cited the unpopularity of the government or Prime Minister as a factor in their loss, with boundary changes being cited in 28 per cent and constituency factors (such as the local effects of national policies like HS2) in 22 per cent of cases respectively. The state of the economy was cited in 17 per cent of cases, and the MPs’ expenses scandal in 11 per cent. Candidate factors (for example, an MP’s voting record) and opposition party spending figured in 6 per cent of cases each. However, somewhat surprisingly given the findings of Shaffir and Kleinknecht’s (2005) study, the experience of losing an election did not come as a surprise to most of the defeated former MPs that took part in our study. This contradiction in our respective findings may be due simply to differences in the experiences of Canadian and British Parliamentarians, the small sample size used in each of our studies, or problems stemming from our reliance on the self-reporting of MPs (that is, MPs claiming retrospectively to have been less shocked than they actually were in the event, as a way of coping with the loss). **(Figure 4.)**

In terms of how satisfied the former MPs were with their Parliamentary careers in hindsight, the mean satisfaction rating on our 7-point scale was 5.62 ($s = 1.24$), sitting squarely between ‘somewhat satisfied’ and ‘mostly satisfied’. In terms of explaining this result, when asked about what they missed the most about being in the House of Commons the former MPs in our survey most often answered ‘the ability to make a difference’, or some variation thereof, such as ‘the ability to help constituents’. This answer was given in 59 per cent of cases, but the second most frequent response after the ‘other’ category (which was a factor in 20 per cent of cases) was that former MPs missed their fellow parliamentarians and the social aspects of life as an MP, at 18 per cent. Other answers given to this question included Parliament itself — with respondents referring to such things as the grandeur of the Parliamentary buildings or the ‘theatre of the Commons’ — at 12 per cent, the status associated with being a serving MP and insider knowledge at 6 per cent each, and the rate of pay at just 3 per cent. Answers that fell into the ‘other’ category included such things as being at the ‘political epicentre’ of the country and ‘politics’ in general. Meanwhile, 14 per cent of our former MPs said that they missed nothing at all about the job.

When asked about the things they did not miss about being in the House of Commons many of the responses overlapped with the responses given to the question on retirement. Clearly the main drawbacks of life as a Parliamentarian from the perspective of our former MPs are the very long hours worked and the inordinate amount of time spent travelling, with a significant number of MPs being forced to regularly travel between Parliament, their constituency home and (in cases where this is separate) their family home. These items appeared in 58 and 27 per cent of the answers given to this question, respectively. ‘Impossible levels of stress [and] working hours’ was how one MP described it, while another stated that he ‘did not miss the sense of being public property.’ Illustrating the toll the travelling involved in the life of an MP can take, yet another former MP in our survey recounted ‘feeling geographically constrained — either voting or in [the] constituency, never anywhere else.’ Other answers given in response to this question included undue media intrusion at 30 per cent, the large burden of constituency work at 28 per cent and laborious Parliamentary procedures, including late night voting, at 23 per cent.

Another noteworthy bone of contention for our former MPs was changes to MPs’ housing arrangements. Whereas previously MPs had been given a Personal Additional Accommodation Allowance which they could use to claim up to £15,000 (or £17,458 adjusted for inflation) per year to cover the cost of either their rent or mortgage interest,

following the MPs' expenses scandal and publication of the Committee on Standards in Public Life's report on MPs' expenses in 2009, responsibility for overseeing MPs' expenses was passed over to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) and the system was made that much more stringent or, as a number of our former MPs saw it, unduly onerous. Under the new system MPs are no longer allowed to claim for mortgage interest on their second home and are expected to rent a one bedroom flat and, if necessary, apply for a loan for a rental deposit. In addition, they are no longer allowed to claim for the cost of furnishing their second home, and the overall amount they can claim towards their rent is capped at between £10,400 and £15,650, depending on where their constituency is located (IPSA, 2014).

Fully 85.5 per cent of the MPs who left Parliament in 2010 and who participated in our survey indicated that they were unhappy with the new housing arrangements. A large number of them drew attention to the detrimental impact of the new arrangements on the family life of an MP. One former MP in a non-London constituency commented: 'People need to stop treating MPs like students. Their work is extremely difficult and stressful. Their days are very long. They cannot do their jobs properly if they are not housed comfortably and securely with some consideration about visiting spouses or children. They must have some access to 'normal' life!' The increased costs of the new arrangements were also mentioned by several ex-MPs. As one noted, 'the ban on claiming mortgage interest is a bad deal for the taxpayer — mine was £230 a month for a property that would have cost £1400 a month to rent.' However, it should be noted that there were some dissenting voices, with a number of former MPs suggesting that, under the old system, some 'MPs saw gaining from property as making up for poor salaries.'

In terms of differentiating between groups in our sample, it was notable that female former MPs tended to have had much shorter Parliamentary tenures than their male counterparts. Whereas the mean number of days spent as an MP by the males in our sample was 6626.61 ($s = 3020.30$), our female former MPs only spent 4681.16 days in Parliament ($s = 1696.39$), which an independent t-test confirmed was a significant difference ($t_{223} = 4.546$, $p < 0.001$). The meaningfulness of this finding would be questionable if the female former MPs in our sample had simply tended to join Parliament at a later age, but this was not the case. The mean age at which the male MPs entered Parliament was 42.51 ($s = 8.30$), but the mean age at which the female MPs entered Parliament was barely any higher at 44.29 ($s = 7.22$) — a difference that was not statistically significant ($t_{223} = -1.429$, $p = 0.154$). Meanwhile, the mean ages at which our male and female MPs left Parliament were 60.48 ($s = 8.60$) and 57.20 ($s = 8.41$), respectively — a difference that was statistically significant ($t_{223} = 2.474$, $p = 0.014$).

These findings would seem to indicate that female MPs are choosing to leave Parliament sooner than their male colleagues, perhaps because, as Campbell and Childs (2014) have argued, too many aspects of life as a parliamentarian are antithetical to raising a family or perhaps because, as Shaw (2006) insists, in its current form Parliament is an arena which is still dominated by the male norms of shouting and point-scoring. The former explanation was supported by our investigation into the differences between male and female MPs in relation to the reasons they gave for having stood down from Parliament and the things they cited when asked what they did not miss about Parliament: 43 per cent of the female former MPs in our sample cited as a reason for having stood down their desire to spend more time with family, whereas the relevant statistic for the male former MPs in our sample was just 15 per cent, which a chi-square test of association confirmed was a significant difference ($X^2_{1} = 4.209$, $p = 0.040$). Meanwhile, female and male former MPs cited the long hours worked as things they did not miss in 89 per cent and 44 per cent of cases each ($X^2_{1} = 10.367$, $p = 0.001$). Certainly there was evidence from our qualitative interviews to back up this line of thinking as well and one anecdote in particular, told by a female former Labour MP, was

highly instructive: she was pregnant when she entered parliament in 1997 and found her party so unwilling to accommodate her pregnancy that she was required to undertake a long train journey near her due date in order to vote on an important Bill that the government was attempting to get through Parliament at the time, only to find that she went into labour on the way home. 'I was back at work the following morning at eight o'clock, and I was still required to go down to London to vote.' She also added, in reference to her eventual decision to leave politics, 'I calculated how many days I'd spent with my son since he was born. It was when I'd done that calculation that I'd decided to hand in my notice because when he was 12 years of age I'd worked out I'd only spent three years with him . . . I didn't have my children as an accessory; I had them to love and care for, but the job was so demanding that I couldn't actually do that.'

Alternatively, drawing on Vanlangenakker and Maddens' (2011), these findings could indicate that female MPs are discriminated against by party selectorates, in the sense that they are more often forced to contest seats which are harder to win and keep hold of than their male counterparts. This explanation was supported by our investigation into the differences between male and female MPs in relation to their mode of leaving Parliament: the female former MPs in our sample were, at 47 per cent, significantly more likely to lose their Parliamentary seat than their male counterparts, for whom the relevant statistic was 29 per cent ($X^2_1 = 5.927$, $p = 0.015$). This prompted us to investigate the relationship between the sex of prospective parliamentary candidates and the way that 'safe' seats (defined as seats which a party already holds by an electoral majority of more than 10 per cent) are allocated and we found that, among the 225 MPs who left Parliament in 2010 that we studied, 84 per cent of these seats were contested by male MPs and just 16 per cent by female MPs ($X^2_1 = 4.112$, $p = 0.043$). Our qualitative interviews also uncovered evidence in support of this contention, in that several of the female former MPs we interviewed perceived widespread discrimination against female prospective parliamentary candidates, which was a lingering source of frustration for many. 'Look at the Bootle seat now,' one female former Labour MP said to us in interview. 'It's the safest seat in the country and it's just been handed on a plate to a bloke who fought tooth and nail to say, "That shouldn't be a women's only shortlist." That was the attitude then and it's still the attitude now.'

III. The effect of leaving Parliament

We also asked our former MPs about their feelings towards their departure from Parliament. It has rightly been said that 'politicians have to accept the risks associated with their calling' (Richards, 1972: 33), but defeated MPs can take it very personally – it felt like being one of the 'undead' or like being 'cut off at the knees' was how two defeated MPs surveyed by Theakston, Gouge and Honeyman (2007: 3) described it. Overwhelmingly, however, the former MPs we surveyed reported that they felt relieved about leaving Parliament in 2010, most likely due to the exhausting nature of work as an MP and the lingering effects of the MPs' expenses scandal, with 55 per cent of them giving this answer, and with there being relatively little difference in this respect between those who were defeated and those who retired from Parliament (with the relevant figures being 44 and 59 per cent respectively, $X^2_1 = 1.106$, $p = 0.293$). However, there were some interesting differences between former MPs who took the decision to leave Parliament and those who were defeated in other areas. Most notably, whereas just 14 per cent of the former reported feeling depressed after the election, half of the latter felt this way ($X^2_1 = 9.210$, $p = 0.002$). Similarly, whereas almost none of the former group reported feeling angry, 11 per cent of the latter group did, although this finding requires further investigation due to the fact that the chi-square test of association we carried out

found that it fell just short of statistical significance ($X^2_1 = 2.167$, $p = 0.141$). Numerous MPs commented that they felt ‘a sense of grieving’ or a ‘loss of identity’ upon leaving political office. ‘I think a lot of people struggled – still struggle’, said one former MP in interview. ‘Some MPs I know still haven’t really recovered. I’m sure some of them had, if not breakdowns, pretty close to breakdowns.’ The prevalence of these negative emotions is perhaps to be expected given that, for many of these MPs, their work in Parliament was closely bound up with their sense of personal identity — indeed, when asked in a separate question, 47 per cent of the former MPs stated that they felt a loss of status upon leaving Parliament. Being an MP had been ‘an entire way of living’ or ‘a way of life, not a job’, as some former MPs put it (Öpik, 2015; Cacciottolo, 2015). Nevertheless, a small but still significant minority of former MPs recounted feeling happy, at 13 per cent, or excited, at 8 per cent, to be leaving political office.

An aspect of the transition from Parliament into the ‘political afterlife’ that can shed light on the unique stresses and strains of the job is how the people around the departing MPs react. This is because holding political office can have a detrimental effect on family life due to the long hours many MPs spend away from the family home. Furthermore, although this is not often acknowledged, MPs are also employers (80 per cent of the former MPs in our survey reported employing at least three full-time members of staff) and this can amplify the stresses and strains that an MP feels as a consequence of the precarious nature of their work because they are aware that if they do lose their seat at the next election it is not only they who will suffer, but also the people who work for and with them. In terms of how the family and friends of the former MPs in our survey reacted to the latter’s exit from Parliament, our respondents most often noted that they were very happy to witness the change. Comments such as the following were typical: ‘While disappointed that I was not re-elected they were relieved to have me back as a functioning member of the family [and] a friend. They felt I was happier and had more time for them.’ Meanwhile, the former MPs in our survey predominantly noted that office staff and local party members were anxious (because of the implications for their own jobs, in the case of the former) but supportive nonetheless. A number of former MPs went out of their way to note a lack of support from the national party, however, with several defeated MPs reporting that the national party seemed to feel ‘let down’ by their loss and several retirees reporting that the party was upset that they were ‘walking away’ and thereby jeopardising their party’s control of the seat.

We also asked the former MPs in our survey about the reactions to their departure from office by their former constituents. Most of them noted that they had little contact with former constituents after leaving office but, to the extent that some of them did, they reported that their former constituents were, by and large, very sympathetic. In fact, a number of former MPs reported that some former constituents even continued to seek their help and advice well after they had left office. As one former MP noted, ‘Most of [my former constituents] think I’m still the MP. Eventually I had to move away because I had no peace. I couldn’t go for a coffee without people asking for help (which I always gave).’ Interestingly, in light of Shaffir and Kleinknecht’s (2005) findings on the prevalence of ‘deflection rhetoric’ among defeated political office holders, a number of our defeated MPs recounted interactions with ‘apologetic’ former constituents — apologetic because they were supporters but had not voted in what turned out to be a very narrow defeat for the former MP.

In terms of the financial arrangements put in place for departing MPs, there was near unanimity among the former MPs in our survey that the winding-up allowances, resettlement grants and pensions were satisfactory. Fully 94 per cent, 95 per cent and 92 per cent of our former MPs respectively agreed that these payments were of an appropriate size. It is, however, striking that so many departing MPs neglect, or do not have the opportunity, to meet with their successors. This was the case for almost half

(48.5 per cent) of the MPs in our survey. This is significant because of the importance of constituency casework for MPs in the British Parliamentary system: the lack of meetings between departing and incoming MPs implies that much of this casework is started afresh, or even dropped altogether, after every election in which the seat changes hands.

IV. Paid employment after Parliament

Fifty-seven per cent of our respondents stated that they took up paid work after leaving Parliament. Among those under the age of 65 at the time of the 2010 general election this figure was significantly higher, at 70 per cent. In terms of the types of careers our former parliamentarians moved into, we distinguished between occupation and industry sector, basing our categories on the Standard Occupational Classification 2010 (ONS, 2010). We found that a large majority — 70 per cent — of our former MPs who took up paid work were employed as managers, directors or senior officials, while a smaller but still significant percentage — 19 per cent — were employed in professional occupations. Surprisingly few MPs — just 5 per cent — had become managers or directors of their own businesses. **(Figure 5.)**

Meanwhile, in terms of industry sectors, the vast majority of our former MPs were in either ‘business and other services’ or ‘non-marketed services’, which accounted for 45.5 per cent and 42 per cent of our former MPs in employment, respectively. This is significant because, although there was clearly little enthusiasm among our former MPs for a return to the House of Commons (just 26 per cent of those aged under 65, as of the 2010 general election, indicated that this was an ambition of theirs) it does show that very many of them continued to work in closely-related fields such as public administration. There were no significant differences between the parties in terms of the types of occupation taken up after leaving Parliament ($X^2_{12} = 3.508, p = 0.991$), nor were there any in relation to industry sector: Labour MPs were just as likely to enter non-marketed services as their Conservative counterparts ($X^2_{12} = 5.308, p = 0.947$).

Meanwhile, in terms of the levels of pay associated with MPs’ post-parliamentary careers relative to the pay they received as Members of Parliament, exactly half of our sample received a higher rate of pay, while 39.5 per cent were earning less (and the remainder, 10.5 per cent the same). And in terms of overall satisfaction with their post-parliamentary careers the mean rating on our 7-point scale was 5.72 ($s = 1.38$), placing them between ‘somewhat’ and ‘mostly’ satisfied, but closer to the latter, and significantly above the mean satisfaction rating of 5.60 in relation to their parliamentary careers. This meant that the overwhelming majority — 79 per cent — found their post-parliamentary career more satisfying than their parliamentary one, with the reverse being true for just 11 per cent, and the remaining 10 per cent stating that they were neither more nor less satisfied after leaving Parliament. A one-way analysis of variance determined that there were no significant differences between political parties in relation to post-parliamentary pay ($F_{3, 34} = .527, p = 0.667$) nor post-parliamentary career satisfaction ($F_{3, 49} = .740, p = 0.533$). However, there were some clear dividing lines relating to gender: the female former MPs in our sample, with a mean satisfaction rating of 6.19, had a significantly higher postparliamentary career satisfaction rating than their male counterparts at 5.51 ($t_{47.885} = -2.070, p = .044$).

In line with Theakston, Gouge and Honeyman’s (2007) study, we found that former MPs often took some time to find paid employment after leaving Parliament. ‘It’s a myth that the foot soldier MP just walks into these swank jobs afterwards’, one former MP said in interview. Close to a majority (42 per cent) of the former MPs who took part in our study and who sought paid employment were still out of work 3 months after leaving

Parliament, and 27 per cent of these (or 11 per cent of the total) were still out of work a full year after leaving Parliament. 'It wasn't as easy as I expected to find another job at age 60,' recounted one former MP, 'and I was relieved to find a good one a few months after leaving Parliament . . . Returning to my previous IT career after 13 years out of IT would have been impossible, and that's a common snag for ex-MPs . . . Taking a chunk of a decade or so out of a different career may well leave the MP adrift when he or she loses (perhaps abruptly). In some cases, the loss may be great enough or in sufficiently publicly embarrassing circumstances to make a new career very difficult.' The more senior former MPs (that is, MPs who occupied a cabinet or shadow cabinet post at some point throughout the 2005 parliament) in our sample fared much better in this respect though, as they all found work within 6 months of leaving Parliament, which supports Gonzalez-Bailon *et al's* (2013: 851) contention that the labour market still values former government ministers highly for their knowledge of the policy process and government procurement, their political connections and the prestige attached to their name.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the above, a large number of our former MPs indicated that they felt their status as a former MP had hampered their search for work. One former MP noted in his response to the survey questionnaire that 'I have become increasingly aware that ex-MPs are soiled goods' and another stated that he felt as though the entire 2005 Parliament was 'contaminated' by the expenses scandal in the view of potential employers. Eighteen per cent of our former MPs suggested that their status as a former MP hindered it 'significantly', and a further 6 per cent that it hindered it 'somewhat', while on the other hand 30 per cent felt that it 'neither helped nor hindered' and 47 per cent that it had a beneficial effect. 'It is a real challenge for MPs when they leave here [Westminster]', said one former MP in interview. 'And you don't get career support in here. You don't get exit counseling. You don't get anything that helps you back into the workforce.' The experience of former Labour MP Derek Wyatt illustrates these issues. Prior to standing down in 2010, he invested some of his own money in training for interview techniques, having his CV rewritten and undergoing psychometric tests, all designed to help him back into the executive job market. In March 2010 he admitted: 'I have had three job interviews. The headhunters say I should expect 20 before I get a job. The hardest thing is I am shortlisted and I am the only non-chief exec. They say: "What has been your experience for the past 12 years?" You realize that nobody understands what an MP does' (Elliott 2010: 20). Similarly, a large number of the former MPs we surveyed believed the skills and experiences of former MPs were going to waste in the labour market and public life in general. When asked if they agreed with the statement 'not enough use is currently being made of the skills and experiences of former MPs', just 6 per cent disagreed, while 54 per cent agreed. The types of skills and experiences that MPs noted their time in Parliament had given them included the ability to negotiate effectively, the ability to handle the media, and an understanding of the regulatory and political context that businesses operate in.

V. Moving from the Commons to the Lords

A small number — five — of our survey respondents moved from the Commons to the House of Lords in 2010 or shortly thereafter. These former MPs had a distinctive experience relative to the others due to the fact that they were not forced to navigate what can clearly be a labour market fraught with difficulties for many former MPs, and because they tended to have held a Cabinet-level post at some point in their political career. In terms of how satisfied these former MPs were with their career in Parliament's Upper House, the mean satisfaction rating was 4.80 ($s = 1.79$) on our 7-point scale, which places them between 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' and 'somewhat satisfied',

but closer to the latter. When compared to how satisfied our group of former MPs as a whole were in relation to their time spent in the Lower House, what stands out is the latter's much higher satisfaction rating (5.62, $s = 1.24$). Furthermore, this gap becomes even more pronounced if we look at only those satisfaction ratings given by the group of five former MPs who became peers: their satisfaction rating in relation to their time spent in the Lower House was 6.00, which indicates that they were significantly more satisfied as an MP than as a peer. No doubt there are a number of important reasons as to why these former MPs have been less satisfied in the Upper House than they were in the Lower House, but our survey picked up on at least one possible explanation: we also asked this group of former MPs about how active they were as peers in relation to their time spent as MPs and they reported back with a mean 'activity' rating of 2.00 ($s = 1.00$) on our 5-point scale, which indicated that they were 'slightly less active' in their new career than in their old one.

VI. Voluntary work and political activities after Parliament

It should be noted that not all of the post-parliamentary work taken up by our former MPs involved paid employment. Many of them — including many of the retirees in our sample — took on significant amounts of charitable and voluntary work. This was the case for 83 per cent of the former MPs in our sample. The types of charitable, voluntary or local community work taken on by our former MPs most often involved them as board members or chairs, trustees or members of advisory boards for these sort of organisations, often leveraging their access to and familiarity with decision-makers in the public sector. There were no statistically significant differences in the tendency of former MPs from different parties to engage in charitable, community and voluntary work ($X^2_3 = 1.520$, $p = 0.678$). The former parliamentarians that took part in our survey have also taken part in a wide array of post-parliamentary political activities. Large majorities in our sample remained active both within their party and their old constituency. The relevant statistic in relation to the former is 79 per cent and 57 per cent in relation to the latter. Interestingly, we did find that former Labour MPs, at 88 per cent, were significantly more likely to remain active within their party than their Conservative counterparts, at 44 per cent ($X^2_3 = 10.700$, $p = 0.013$). A range of explanations were put forward when we presented the former MPs we interviewed with this finding. Former Labour MPs tended to point to differing ideological outlooks as an explanatory factor, with one noting, 'It's fundamental ideologies. The Tory party's ideology is, "I look after myself, and by looking after myself I get to look after you." The Labour ideology is, "I look after others, and through looking after others I look after myself." So, if you continue with that mindset, of course it means that even after you've left parliament it means that you want to look after others.' Unsurprisingly, Conservative former MPs tended to take a different view, ascribing it to the fact that the Labour party is bound up with a range of 'social organisations' in a way that serves to entrench a Labourist identity in party members, and that Conservative MPs tend to have a 'more complex hinterland', often relating to a business concern, which is a greater claim on their time after having left parliament. The differing age profiles of Labour and Conservative MPs was also brought up, given that the Labour ex-MPs in our sample were younger on average than their Conservative counterparts and therefore perhaps more hopeful of a second bite at the parliamentary cherry. As was noted above, the mean age the Conservative former MPs was 65, whereas the mean age of Labour former MPs was significantly lower at just 59 ($t_{195} = 4.030$, $p < 0.001$).

Furthermore, half of the former MPs in our survey indicated that they have developed new political interests since leaving Parliament, ranging from becoming a

member of the appointments panel that was selecting directors of IPSA to becoming involved in direct action political campaigns on issues they felt they were unable to tackle effectively within Parliament. Sixteen former MPs who lost their seats in 2010 (thirteen Labour, two Liberal Democrat and one independent) and one who stepped down (the SNP's Alex Salmond) were re-selected by their parties to contest seats in the 2015 general election, and four of these were successful in their bid to return to Parliament (the aforementioned Alex Salmond and Labour's Dawn Butler, Rob Marris and Joan Ryan) (Hawkins *et al*, 2015: 10).

VII. Conclusions

One thing that is clear from our research is that MPs who are exiting Parliament do not all react in the same way. Some are reflective and take the knocks of holding and then leaving political office in their stride. As one retired former MP told us, 'MPs should not view themselves as something special. It's an honour to be elected and to serve. It should not be viewed as a job for life.' 'A democracy needs to be refreshed and have different ideas [brought in]', said another interviewee. 'There are other things to do.' And yet for very many MPs — especially those who left political office after being defeated at the polls — the job is a difficult one, and the 'afterlife' even more so. Numerous former MPs that participated in our study spoke about the toll the long-working hours and unique pressures of the job can take, and almost as many spoke about the perils of navigating a labour market which often looks upon MPs as lacking any valuable skills or experience and, in the worst cases, as self-serving pariahs or, as one former MP put it, 'the unwanted people.' According to former Conservative MP Gyles Brandeth, 'it's not a job that equips you for anything. They [ex-MPs] have no skill set, they're the wrong age and they're by definition unfashionable,' and the situation is even worse for departing MPs with no preparliamentary career to return to. 'The pressure is to be the ever-more professional politician', another former MP has said. 'And if you're a professional politician, the moment you leave office, you don't have a profession' (Sieghart, 2009). Furthermore, these difficulties have only been compounded in recent years by the effects of the MP's expenses scandal.

As was noted above, evidence we gathered seemed to indicate that the MPs' expenses scandal led a significant number of former MPs who might otherwise have participated in our study to decline the opportunity, with some even speculating that the research would be misrepresented in the media. One former MP told us that a factor in his decision to stand down was that he felt that 'the job of an MP was demeaned' and another who declined to participate expressed a similar sentiment in a private communication:

Whilst I have every confidence that you and your team will treat the responses carefully and sensibly I have no confidence that the media will do likewise with the anonymised results. I suspect that many [former MPs] will tell you that they have faced difficulties and a loss of esteem (not that MPs are held in any esteem any more) but the media will write that up as greedy former MPs whinging about money, status, privileges, etc. Nor will IPSA pay the slightest bit of attention to any conclusions you may reach.

Expressing a similar sentiment, another anonymous former MP who declined to take part in our survey stated that, 'Until 2009 Parliament had respect and dignity. The expenses furore changed all that and many MPs will, I suspect, feel so angry and upset by the whole business that they will not wish to revisit their distress.' Worse still, these

feelings seem to have spread even to those MPs who were entirely uninvolved in the MPs' expenses scandal. 'We were all pariahs from there on in', said one former MP in interview who believed that it pushed some MPs into deciding to stand down (a view echoed by several other of our interviewees).

All of this begs the question, what do we want the make-up of Parliament to be and what can be done to ensure we get the Parliament we want? The inevitable corollary of our findings is that if we want to be able to attract the brightest and the best regardless of party, and not just an ever-growing cadre of career politicians, but a more diverse group of people with valuable real-world experience, then more needs to be done: the job of an MP needs to be modernised, in particular to take into account the extra-parliamentary demands on the time of female MPs; the transition out of political office needs to be made less problematic, perhaps through the efforts of the parliamentary authorities and political parties to help departing MPs navigate the labour market; and, in light of the frenzied reporting of the MPs' expenses scandal and the spread of a broader anti-political populism, more needs to be done — even if this is perhaps wishful thinking — to recognise that most MPs are hardworking people motivated by a genuine desire to serve the public interest, and who pursue that interest in uniquely challenging circumstances.

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Table 1 Turnover rates of parliamentarians 1979–2015

	Defeated	Retired	Combined	Seats in Parliament	Turnover (%)
1979	65	61	126	635	20
1983	64	77	141	650	22
1987	40	88	128	650	20
1992	59	79	138	651	21
1997	132	117	249	659	38
2001	22	78	100	659	15
2005	50	86	136	646	21
2010	76	149	225	650	35
2015	92	90	182	650	28

Sources: [Hawkins et al. \(2015\)](#), *General Election 2015* (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper CBP7186); [House of Commons Library \(2015\)](#), 'General Election 2015: Candidates in Numbers'.

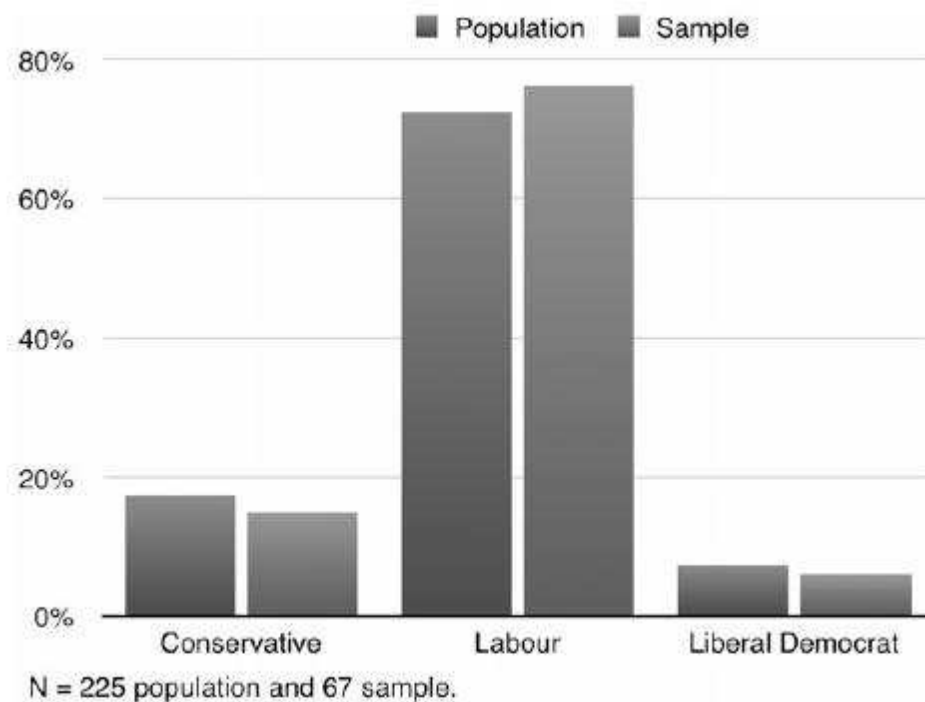


Figure 1 Representativeness of sample by party

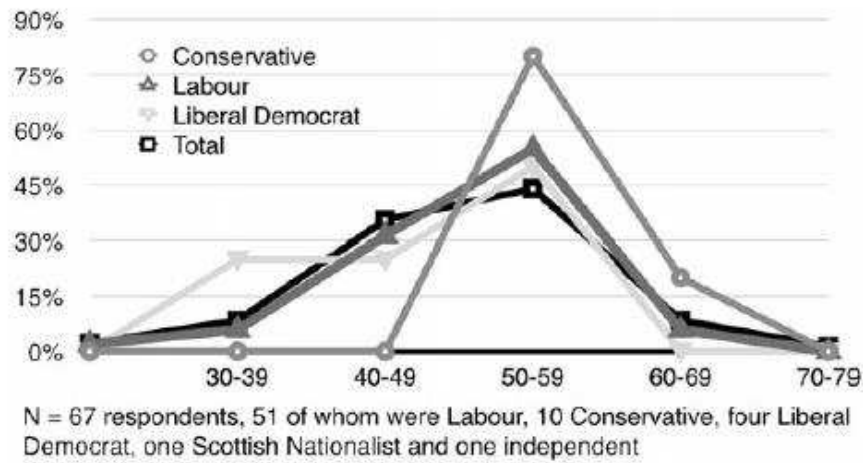


Figure 2 Age group of sample by party

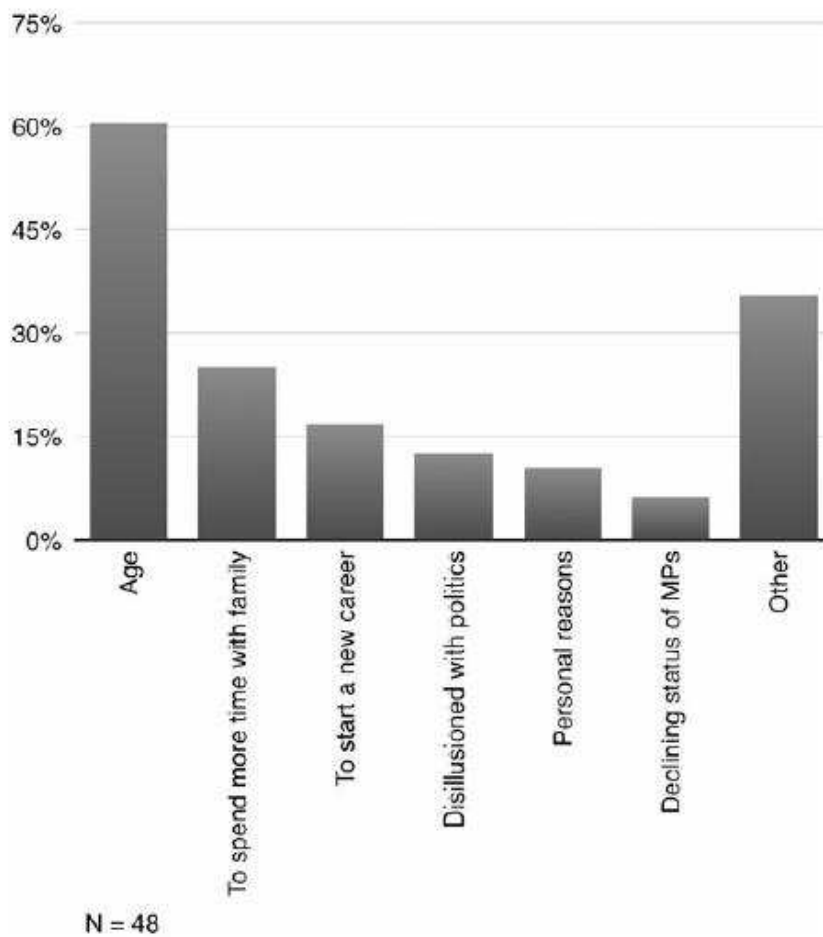


Figure 3 Factors behind MPs' decision to not contest

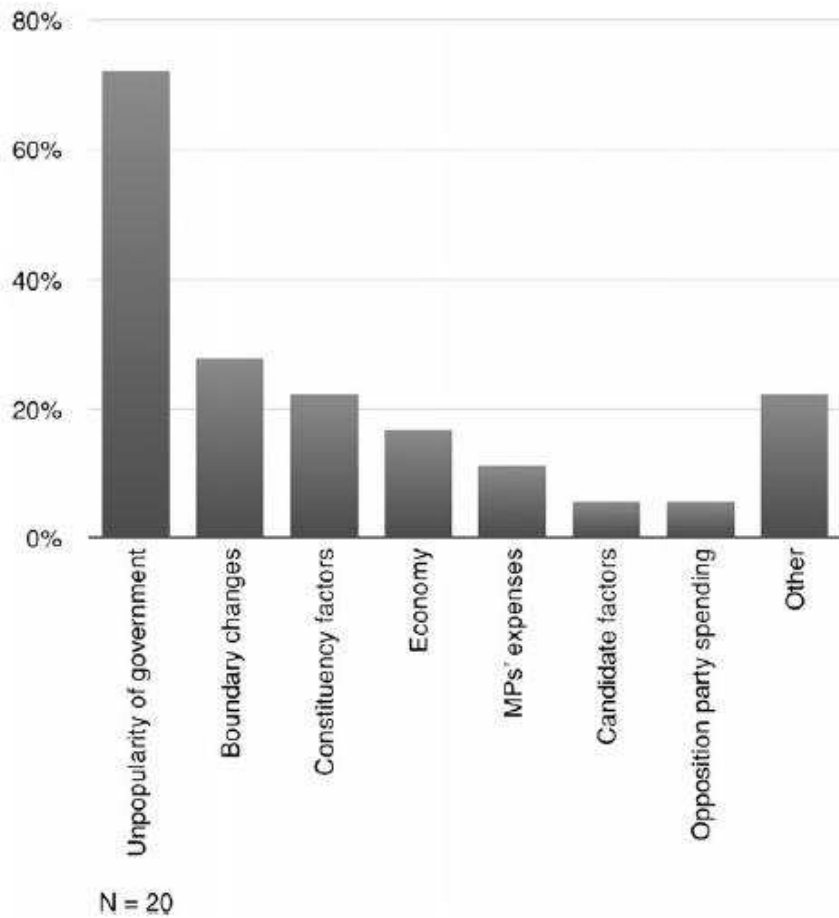


Figure 4 Factors MPs cited as reasons for defeat

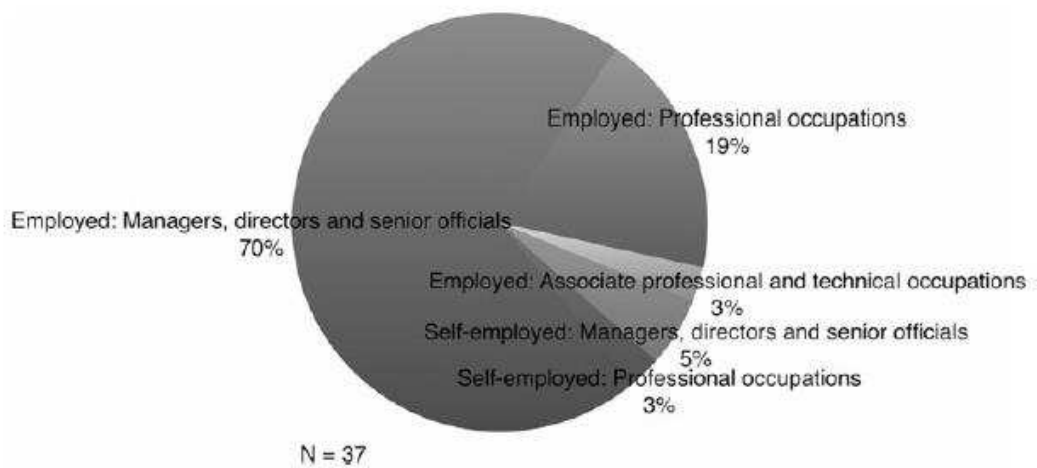


Figure 5 Post-parliamentary occupations of MPs