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The Rise of the Novice Cabinet Minister?

The Career Trajectories of Cabinet Ministers in British Government from

Attlee to Cameron

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Abstract

Some commentators have observed that today's Cabinet ministers are younger and less experienced than their predecessors. To test this claim, we analyse the data for Labour and Conservative appointments to Cabinet since 1945. Although we find some evidence of a decline in average age and prior experience, it is less pronounced than for the party leaders. We then examine the data for junior ministerial appointments, which reveals that there is no trend towards youth and inexperience present lower down the hierarchy. Taking these findings together, we propose that public profile is correlated with 'noviceness'; that is, the more prominent the role, the younger and less experienced its incumbent is likely to be. If this is correct, then the claim that we are witnessing the rise of the novice Cabinet minister is more a consequence of the personalisation of politics than evidence of an emerging 'cult of youth'.

Keywords: Cabinet ministers; junior ministers; party leaders; ministerial selection; personalisation; symbolic leadership

In a recent article, Philip Cowley identified the rise of the novice political leader as a ‘major development’ in British politics. Noting the youth and parliamentary inexperience of David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg at the point at which they acquired the leadership of their parties, Cowley concluded that: ‘the British now prefer their leaders younger than they used to [and] that this is evidence of some developing cult of youth in British politics’, with the desire for younger candidates inevitably meaning that they are less experienced. Cowley dismissed the idea that this could be by ‘chance’ or a ‘fluke’, before identifying the difference between Cameron, Miliband and Clegg, and their post-war predecessors. Whereas the average age and parliamentary experience of post-war Conservative party leaders at the point when they acquired the party leadership was 54 years old and with 22 years’ parliamentary experience, Cameron was 39 and had four years’ parliamentary experience. For Labour leaders there was a similar pattern: Miliband was 41 with five years’ parliamentary experience, whereas his post-war predecessors were on average 52 years old and had 19 years’ parliamentary experience. The picture for the Liberal Democrats (and Liberals and SDP) was more complicated, but nonetheless a similar pattern could be identified. Clegg, at the age of 40 and with only two years in Parliament, differed from the post-war average of 49 years old and 16 years’ parliamentary experience.¹

Cowley is not alone in identifying a trend towards youth and a reduced emphasis on parliamentary experience. In a recent study on leaders of the opposition, it was noted that there was a considerable decline in age and parliamentary experience since the early 1980s. The willingness of former Prime Ministers to continue in office after electoral rejection had meant that between 1945 and 1983 the average age of leaders of the opposition, at the point of acquiring the position, was 58 years old, and their average parliamentary experience was 24 years. The reduced tolerance of electoral failure within parties has meant that leadership

changes have occurred more often since 1983, and the average age and parliamentary experience has fallen to 45 and 12 years respectively ²

In contrast, the impact of age and parliamentary experience on the selection of Cabinet ministers has not resulted in that much academic appraisal. The influence of Rose's 1971 paper on the making of Cabinet ministers may have fuelled this neglect. Rose identified how in the period from 1868 to 1958 the median minister spent about 14 years in Parliament before entering Cabinet. Furthermore when considering post war ministers, and the experiences of the Wilson and Heath governments, Rose concluded that 'the recruitment and career backgrounds of its most senior political members' had 'not only remained overwhelmingly similar to that established over the last hundred years' but had 'if anything moved slightly towards more orthodoxy in terms of parliamentary and administrative experience'.³ So while there is a considerable literature on ministerial selection in British Government, these works make passing references to the importance of age when assessing ministerial preferment. The focus of these studies varies, but have included the balances and constraints regarding Cabinet and ministerial formation; the power of Prime Ministerial dismissal; length of ministerial tenure and resignations; ministerial turnover and reshuffles; and junior ministerial office and career trajectories for Cabinet ministers.⁴

However, Cowley has stimulated an academic debate that feeds off the diaries of Chris Mullin and his references to New Labour's obsession with youth. For example, when commenting upon Gordon Brown's first Cabinet, Mullin complained that Jack Straw 'is the only Cabinet minister on the wrong side of 60; several of the new boys and girls are in their thirties and have only been in Parliament for five minutes'. Condemning this perceived emphasis on youth, Mullin argued that 'there should be a limit to the number of clever young men and women on the inside track', as 'there is merit in hanging on to a few fifty-somethings who can remember what happened last time around'.⁵ These insights feed into a

wider argument that Cowley appears to be engaging in – i.e. that the value of Parliament as a ‘place where would be leaders are tested and tried out appears to be on the wane’, and that it is hard to see how leading frontbenchers have gone through ‘much of a parliamentary apprenticeship en route to the top’ They also appear to reaffirm the arguments about the rise of the career politician and its consequences, so eloquently analysed for an academic audience by King, and later for a wider readership by Riddell.⁶

Are Mullin’s observations anecdotal or is there a clear trend towards youth and inexperience amongst those who reach Cabinet level? To address this question, we analyse the data for Labour and Conservative appointments to Cabinet since 1945. Here, we find some evidence of a decline in average age and prior experience, but it is less pronounced than for the party leaders. To ascertain whether the same pattern is present lower down the ministerial hierarchy, we then assess the extent to which junior ministers are becoming younger and less experienced on first appointment. Finally, we reflect on what the debate over ‘noviceness’ can tell us about contemporary British politics.

Comparisons from Attlee to Cameron

Not since the publication of Alderman and Cross’s article on ‘rejuvenating the Cabinet’ in 1986 has there been a systematic evaluation of the age profiles of Cabinet ministers in British government. Alderman and Cross identified the average age of the Cabinet at the beginning and the end of Prime Ministerial terms of office. Across the ten Prime Ministerial tenures that they assessed (from Clement Attlee to the end of Margaret Thatcher’s first Cabinet), they calculated that five Prime Ministers saw the average age decrease at the end of their tenure: Attlee 1945-51 (61 y 8 m to 58y 11m); Churchill 1951-55 (58y 6m to 58y, 0m); Anthony Eden 1955-57 (56y, 6m to 55y 3m); Harold Macmillan 1957-63 (53y 1m to 52y 2m) and the

first Harold Wilson government 1964-1970 (57y 3m to 56y 0m). The other five Prime Ministers had an older Cabinet at the end of their tenure than at the beginning: Alec Douglas-Home 1963-64 (50y 9m to 51y 9m); Edward Heath 1970-74 (51y 8m to 53 2m); the second Wilson era 1974-76 (54y 8m to 57y 1 m); James Callaghan 1976-79 (54y 5 m to 54y 9m) and the first Thatcher government (53y 8 m to 55y 0m).⁷

Rather than replicate Alderman and Cross's study and update the data from 1983 onwards, we take a slightly different approach. Instead of calculating the average age of the Cabinet at the beginning and end of the prime ministerial tenure, we seek to identify the average age and experience at which ministers are *promoted* to the Cabinet. This reflects our objective of assessing the novice leader theory that Cowley is advancing. That means that we have identified all of those who reached Cabinet level since 1945, and then noted both their age and their parliamentary experience at the point when they first reached Cabinet.

Table One demonstrates that a trend towards youth and inexperience is evident when considering Cabinet appointments by Labour Prime Ministers. Under each respective Labour Prime Minister the average age was declining, with a sharper decline evident when considering the appointments made by Gordon Brown. This trend was replicated when considering parliamentary experience. It is also worth noting that the data for Tony Blair's appointments is distorted by the impact of his first Cabinet in 1997. The composition of this was shaped by his need to accept the results of the shadow Cabinet elections of late 1996, and the fact that many Labour parliamentarians were older and had more parliamentary experience than would normally be the case as they had been in opposition for so long. The first Blair Cabinet (21 members from the House of Commons) had an average age just over 51 years old and with 16 years' parliamentary experience. Between 1998 and 2006 the remaining 27 Cabinet appointments that Blair made had a lower average age (47 years old) and significantly less parliamentary experience (just over 9 years). Therefore, the

appointments that Brown made were following the trend established by Blair. Blair and Brown thus used their appointments to fast track favoured insiders who were supportive of their faction. In the case of Blair there was Stephen Byers (45 years old, 6 years' experience); Alan Milburn (40 years old, 6 years' experience) and David Miliband (41 years old, 5 years' experience). The fast track was even swifter under Brown in the case of Ed Balls (40 years old, 2 years' experience) and Ed Miliband (38 years old, 2 years' experience).

Table One: New Cabinet Appointees by Labour Prime Ministers: Average Age and Experience

Prime Minister	Number of New Appointments	Average Age of New Appointments	Average Experience of New Appointments	Average Age of All Cabinet Ministers
Clement Attlee (1945-51)	22	55.5	15.6	55.0
Harold Wilson (1964-1970)	30	52.7	15.4	52.7
Harold Wilson (1974-1976)	8	49.5	15.5	54.6
James Callaghan (1976-1979)	9	49.2	11.3	52.5
Tony Blair (1997-2007)	48	48.3	11.8	49.7
Gordon Brown (2007-2010)	6	42.5	7.8	49.0
All	123	49.6	12.9	52.0

Table Two: New Cabinet Appointees by Conservative Prime Ministers: Average Age and Experience

Prime Minister	Number of New Appointments	Average Age of New Appointments	Average Experience of New	Average Age of All Cabinet Ministers
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			Appointmnts	
Winston Churchill (1951-55)	11	54.9	18.3	55.6
Anthony Eden (1955-57)	3	52.3	17.6	55.3
Harold Macmillan (1957-63)	20	47.7	11.9	49.4
Alec Douglas-Home (1963-64)	3	43.6	10.6	50.6
Edward Heath (1970-1974)	15	48.5	10.8	49.9
Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990)	37	49.4	13.6	50.6
John Major (1990-1997)	18	47.6	12.5	49.5
David Cameron (2010-)	Con 23	51.1	13.8	52.1
	Lib Dem 7	48.7	10.7	48.7
All (Conservative only)	130	49.3	13.6	51.1

Within the Brown era it is interesting to note that he made no new female Cabinet level appointments, which was also the case with James Callaghan. In contrast, Wilson used his powers of patronage to advance Judith Hart (44 years old, 9 years' experience) and Shirley Williams (42 years old, 10 years' experience) considerably more quickly than the averages for his Prime Ministerial tenure. Similarly, Blair appointed by far the highest number of female Cabinet ministers of all of the post war Prime Ministers (13 out of his 48 appointments were female). However, his reputation on gender equality and female representation suffers slightly from the realisation that the female average age was higher at 49.4 years than his overall average (48.4), and that their parliamentary experience was higher than his overall average (13 years for women but 11.8 overall). Thus it can be said that the fast track under New Labour did appear to have a slight male bias within it. David Cameron has been criticised on gender and ministerial representation due to his limited progress towards one third of ministers being female.⁸ However, he has shown a greater willingness to

fast track female ministers to Cabinet level, with Justine Greening (42 years old, 7 years' experience); Theresa Villiers (44 years old, 7 years' experience) and Maria Miller (48 years old, 7 years' experience) all progressing to Cabinet at an age lower than the Conservative average, and with considerably less parliamentary experience than their male counterparts.

Table Two shows fluctuations in the overall data for the Conservatives. A downward trajectory occurs in the 1957 to 1964 period under Harold Macmillan and Alec Douglas-Home. For example, in the late 1950s Macmillan fast tracked into Cabinet three people who would become heavyweight names of 1960s Conservative politics – Iain Macleod (44 years old, seven years' experience), Reginald Maudling (40 years old, seven years' experience), Edward Heath (43 years old, nine years' experience). Moreover, the impact of the infamous Night of the Long Knives reshuffle of 1962 helped to ensure that the average age on reaching Cabinet was significantly lower in the Conservatives' third term (1959-64) than during their first term (1951-55). That trend was sustained by Edward Heath but fluctuates thereafter, going upwards under Thatcher and then downwards again under Major. However, the coalition data suffers from an upward spike caused due to the long period of opposition that the Conservatives endured prior to returning to office in May 2010. The impact of the Liberal Democrats within the Cabinet makes only a small difference. Their age and experience averages are 48.7 years old and 10.7 years in terms of experience. Within their profile it is worth noting that the impact of Vince Cable (67 years old and 23 years' parliamentary experience) is offset by the rapid elevations of the likes of Nick Clegg (43 years old and five years' parliamentary experience) and Danny Alexander (38 years old, five years' parliamentary experience).

Overall, the average age and parliamentary experience of new Cabinet ministers in Conservative governments shows a small decline when comparing Churchill to Cameron, but with fluctuations in between not evident in the Labour data. In contrast, there is a clear

downward trajectory from 55.5 years of age under Attlee to 42.5 under Brown, and from 15.6 to 7.8 years of experience. Although the tendency is less pronounced in the Conservative data, it should be noted that the highest averages for both were recorded by Churchill. Moreover, we can assume that if Cameron were to form a second administration, then there would be an influx of younger and less experienced Conservatives to the Cabinet. This is because of two clear trends that emerge from our data. First, it is clear that long periods in opposition will increase the averages when re-entering power – see, for example, Labour in 1964 and notably 1997, and the Conservatives in 2010. Second, it is also clear that age and parliamentary experience decrease over consecutive terms of office. Therefore, it can be argued that the novice leader argument does carry some validity when applied to Cabinet appointments, but that there are party differences and that the length of time that a party has been in power need to be factored in before we fully embrace the novice Cabinet minister thesis. In the next section, we move down the ministerial hierarchy to assess the extent to which junior ministers are becoming younger and less experienced on first appointment.

The Novice Junior Minister?

Putting the contemporary debate in a broader historical context, there is evidence to suggest that high-fliers in British politics have always started climbing the political and ministerial ladder relatively young. In the 19th century, Gladstone argued that ‘as a rule, it would be as rational to begin training for the ballet at forty-five or fifty, as for the real testing work of the Cabinet.’ Thus in the period 1830-1914, those politicians who reached the Cabinet had on average got their first step on the ladder as junior ministers three years younger (37 compared to 40 years old) and after a shorter period in parliament (six rather than eight years) compared to those who rose no higher in the ministerial hierarchy. This pattern persisted into the 20th

century and beyond. In the period 1945-83, the average age on first appointment of all junior ministers was 46, with an average of seven years on the backbenches in the Commons. Of these, 50 per cent were aged between 30 and 45 years on appointment while only 12 per cent were over 55. However, the average age on first appointment of those who eventually reached the Cabinet was five to six years younger: 41 for Labour and just over 40 for Conservatives. Similarly, data from 1979-97 shows that those Conservative junior ministers under Thatcher and Major who eventually made it to the Cabinet received their first junior job at the average age of 42, compared to 47 for those who never got above the Parliamentary Secretary level. One in three of those later promoted to the Cabinet were first made junior ministers under the age of 40.⁹

Equally, there was a strong sense in the New Labour years 1997-2010 of a favoured group of younger 'golden circle' politicians with a fast track route to preferment and senior jobs. The average age on first junior minister appointment of those who went on to become Cabinet ministers in the New Labour era was 45, compared with 49 for those who did not get that far. As many as 26 per cent of those later promoted to the Cabinet were first made junior ministers under the age of 40, compared with just 15 per cent being over 50 at the time of their first appointment. The Blair and Brown years were thus part of an established pattern whereby anyone coming into politics at 50 years old is a virtual non-starter in the promotion stakes on age grounds alone, so far behind that they cannot catch up.¹⁰

Furthermore, 12 Labour Cabinet ministers in the 1997-2010 period had at some time in their earlier careers before entering Parliament served as ministerial special advisers and/or as researchers/aides/advisers to Opposition frontbenchers (for an average of 4.7 years). This experience of top-level politics and policymaking was in some cases longer than their service as MPs prior to entering the Cabinet. Ed Balls, for instance, worked as economic adviser to Gordon Brown for 10 years 1994-2004, reaching the Cabinet after only two years as an MP;

David and Ed Miliband similarly spent longer as policy researchers and special advisers while Labour was in Opposition and then in government than they did as MPs before they were promoted to Cabinet posts. Some contemporary ministers may therefore appear relatively ‘inexperienced’ in terms of parliamentary experience but may nevertheless have accumulated important ‘insider’ experience directly relevant to their ministerial roles.

In sum, junior ministers who reach the Cabinet are on average younger and less experienced than those who progress no further, and this pattern persists across the post-war period. However, there is no evidence of a broader trend towards youth, as junior ministers in the Thatcher/Major period were appointed at a slightly younger age than those in the Blair/Brown era. Furthermore, the average age of today’s junior ministers on first appointment is in fact higher than it was in the 19th century. We also find that contemporary Cabinet ministers are not necessarily less experienced than their predecessors, simply that the type of experience they have acquired may be different.

The ‘Noviceness’ Debate in Context

From the discussion so far, it is clear that whilst Cowley identifies a downward trend in the age and parliamentary experience of party leaders, this tendency is less pronounced for members of the Cabinet. It is even less evident for junior ministers, whose average age on appointment has varied relatively little throughout the post-war period. One possible interpretation of these findings is that public profile is correlated with ‘noviceness’; that is, the more prominent the role, the younger and less experienced its incumbent is likely to be. This in turn may be linked to the rise of the mass media, which has led to an intensification of political marketing and a greater focus on the party leaders – a phenomenon termed the ‘personalisation’ of politics.

Some scholars claim that the process of personalisation began in the mid-1960s, when dramatic changes took place in the field of political communication.¹¹ Thus, the 1970 general election campaign saw the first biographical advertisement, entitled *A Man to Trust*, which drew on Edward Heath's background and experience to demonstrate that he possessed the requisite qualities to be prime minister. Subsequent examples include the *Kinnock Biopic* (1987), John Major's film *The Journey* (1992) and Molly Dineen's ten-minute portrait of Tony Blair (1997). It is important to note, however, that the extent of the leader's role in election broadcasts is dependent on whether he or she is perceived to be an asset to their party. This was made starkly clear in 2010, when Gordon Brown's unpopularity ensured his complete absence from Labour's broadcasts, whereas David Cameron and Nick Clegg both featured heavily in their parties' adverts.

The 2010 general election saw the first televised debates between the leaders of the three main parties. These events focused attention on the party leaders to an unprecedented degree and stimulated public interest in the campaign, though they ultimately had little effect on voters' choices. Indeed, an Ipsos Mori analysis of voting intention polls found that, on average, support for the Conservatives fell from 38 per cent before the election was called to 37 per cent on polling day, while Labour polled 30 per cent in both surveys and the Liberal Democrats increased their support from 19 to 24 per cent.¹² Nevertheless, politicians and party strategists now believe that the debates have the potential to alter the outcome of the election, given that 'a good performance can boost a leader's authority, while a poor performance can greatly undermine it'. On this basis, it seems likely that an ability to perform well in televised debates will be a consideration in choosing future party leaders. If he had stood for the Labour leadership, write Nicholas Allen, Judith Bara and John Bartle, Alistair Darling might one day have made 'a good prime minister in the Clement Attlee mould.' However, they continue, 'it was Ed Miliband, a more confident television performer, who

was chosen as Brown's successor in September 2010'.¹³ Miliband was also the closest in age to Clegg and Cameron, and the fear that he would suffer by comparison with his opponents may have been a factor in Darling's decision not to run. Such apprehension would have been well-founded, due to the ageism that Menzies Campbell experienced after he became Liberal Democrat leader in 2006 at the age of 64.

The televised debates have reinforced the notion that the leader is the public face of their party. Perhaps more than ever, he or she is expected to 'embody the aspirations or beliefs of [the] movement' they represent.¹⁴ Given the imperative of modernisation in British politics, from Wilson's pledge to harness the 'white heat' of technological revolution to Blair's 'New Labour, New Britain' slogan and, more recently, Cameron's vision of a 'modern, compassionate Conservatism', it is hardly surprising that today's party leaders are younger than their predecessors. After all, youth is inextricably associated with the spirit of change and renewal, and an older, more experienced statesman might struggle to represent these qualities convincingly. This in turn would risk damaging the credibility – and ultimately the popularity – of their party.

Cabinet appointments can also contribute to a party's public image. For instance, Wilson and Cameron demonstrated their modernising credentials by advancing younger women more rapidly than their overall average, while Blair promoted a larger number of women to his Cabinet than any other post-war Prime Minister. Similarly, Brown sought to renew his government by appointing the youngest and the least experienced Cabinet ministers of the post-war era. However, the Brown ministry is an exception, and youth is not normally a major factor when making Cabinet appointments. This is partly due to political considerations such as the need to reward party stalwarts after a long spell in opposition, but it is also attributable to the fact that the role of the Cabinet minister is not 'personalised' to the same extent as the party leadership and does not carry the same symbolic weight.

Although still a focus of media attention, Cabinet ministers are not expected to embody the values of their party, to create a rapport with the electorate, or even to be particularly likeable. Instead, they are required to be effective in their role and to ‘behave in a way that upholds the highest standards of propriety’;¹⁵ their age and public image are therefore of secondary importance.

Junior ministers, meanwhile, have a lower public profile than their senior colleagues. There are some notable exceptions, such as Frank Field and Grant Shapps, but media engagement is generally a minor part of the job.¹⁶ After all, dozens of junior ministers cannot provide a focal point for public attention equivalent to that of the prime minister, given that they would soon generate mixed messages and thus damage party unity. In consequence, it is unsurprising that junior ministers have remained almost untouched by the growing personalisation of politics. With this in mind, it is worth noting that the average age on appointment to a junior ministerial post has varied little across the post-war period. While it is true that younger junior ministers are more likely to reach Cabinet than their older counterparts, this is part of a long-established pattern rather than a response to a changed political environment. Thus, there is no discernible trend towards the ‘novice junior minister’ in contemporary British politics.

Conclusion

In this paper we have assessed the extent to which the average age and parliamentary experience of new Cabinet ministers has declined over the post-war period. Although we find some evidence to support this, particularly in relation to the most recent Labour governments, we need to take into account other factors before we can fully accept the novice Cabinet minister thesis. We also find that the trend towards ‘noviceness’ is considerably less

pronounced among Cabinet ministers than it is for party leaders. This, we argue, is due to the growing personalisation of politics, which has meant that ‘prime ministers are increasingly monitored and assessed according to criteria that are quite different to those experienced by senior colleagues.’¹⁷

The experience of William Hague is a case in point. As leader of the Conservative Party, Hague failed to win over the public due to his aloof, ‘nerdy’ image. Indeed, the efforts of his advisers to overturn this perception by setting up photo opportunities of him participating in ‘normal’ activities, such as visiting a theme park, were widely ridiculed. His lack of authority contributed to the Conservatives’ second landslide defeat in 2001, after which he resigned the party leadership. Since his return to the front benches as (Shadow) Foreign Secretary in 2005, however, Hague’s inability to connect with the public has ceased to matter and he is now judged by whether he performs his duties effectively. His comment to the *London Evening Standard* in 2012 makes clear the contrast between the two roles: ‘I’ve always been clear I came back into frontline politics to do foreign policy and that’s what I’m here doing. When I was leader of the party there were always polls showing I was the least popular. Since I took no notice of these things I’ve become more popular. So I propose to go on taking no notice whatsoever’.¹⁸

Some commentators have observed that today’s Cabinet ministers are younger and less experienced than their predecessors. They support this claim with examples from the Brown government, notably Ruth Kelly, David Miliband and James Purnell, who left politics at the age of 40, 47 and 38 respectively.¹⁹ Our analysis challenges this argument by showing that the Brown ministry was an exception and that there is in fact no significant downward trend in the age and experience of Cabinet ministers since 1945. It may be the case that the intense focus on novice party leaders has shone a spotlight on the select group of younger Cabinet ministers, leaving the older majority in the shadows. If so,

the claim that we are witnessing the rise of the novice Cabinet minister is more a consequence of the personalisation of politics than evidence of an emerging ‘cult of youth’.

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