



# Climbing the Greasy Pole: Ministerial Promotion in UK Politics\*

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## Politicians: the nature of the beast

**'Politicians exist because we disagree'** <sup>2</sup>

Jeremy Paxman

Promotion, many of us think, is the dominating concern of politicians once they make it into parliament. Arriving in the House of Commons is merely the beginning for most MPs, though it has to be recognised that not all MPs share the visceral ambition of a Harold Wilson or a Jeffrey Archer. They all maintain they want to change things for the better, according to their own prism of beliefs, but it is hard to do anything without being able to control some of the levers of power. And to place their eager hands on those politicians have to be put in charge of something: they have to be given some real power in the form of ministerial office. It might seem peculiar that a topic of such all-consuming importance to politicians everywhere, has been so little studied. I had no difficulties eliciting their views in a series of interviews with mostly retired Cabinet members, as well as a selection of (mostly former) junior ministers, journalists, civil servants and, of course, other academics.<sup>3</sup>

Why do they embark on such a perilous journey, involving hugely long hours and a degree of self abasement, just to have the chance of making it to the first rung of the ladder? What kind of person wants to become a professional politician? The answer is as old and as opaque as human nature itself, a topic from which any author would shrink from offering definitive answers, whether a political scientist or, indeed, a psychologist. But we have to make some attempt to comment on the nature of politicians, if only to set the scene for this examination of ministerial promotion. One of the better attempts to elucidate the topic was by Jeremy Paxman, in his entertaining and perceptive book, *The Political Animal: an Anatomy*. Paxman- and who would know more about the 'nature of the beast' than their chief

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1 \*I would like to thanks colleagues (professors) Philip Norton and Peter Hennessy for their encouragement and advice with this project. Enoch Powell(1977), *Joseph Chamberlain*, Thames and Hudson, p317.

2 Jeremy Paxman, 'Paxman's Politics' *Sunday Times*, 13th October 2002.

3 They include: Lords Garel-Jones, Sir Peter Kemp, Lords Carrington, (Charles) Powell,(Bruce) Grocott, (Kenneth) Baker, (Andrew) Adonis, (Philip) Norton, (Roy) Hattersley, Lord (Keith) Bradley, plus Anthony Howard, Gyles Brandreth, Baroness (Shirley) Williams, Peter Riddell, Peter Hennessy, Andrew Gamble, Sir Gerald Kaufman. Sir Peter Kemp. Sir David Omand.

public matador? - finds it very hard to penetrate the mindset but adduces seven irreducible characteristics.

1. The first requirement he identifies obviously, is self confidence. Party politicians- and ours are almost exclusively that- come to believe they have identified the single best way to run public services, set taxation levels, govern the army or whatever and that this path is the one indicated by the party to which they belong.

2. The second is sheer 'manic persistence' . Paxman quotes the case of Caroline Spelman<sup>4</sup>, who endured 27 selection interviews before landing a winnable constituency. Betty Boothroyd<sup>5</sup> spent 17 years trawling around constituency selections before she was taken on by West Bromich.

3. The third is immense energy and good health. Leading politicians seem to thrive on hours of sleep which would leave the rest of us exhausted- Hitler, Napoleon and don't forget Margaret Thatcher, got by on only three hours a night. In addition, it has to be added, they put in tremendously long days. Edwina Currie's diaries chart 18 hours a day, day after day and this might be even more for a Cabinet member or the prime minister. And still they have time and energy to appear on television, arrange photo-shoots and, in Currie's case, have a series of affairs and even write the occasional novel.<sup>6</sup>

4. The fourth is unflinching optimism: to win that hopeless seat, to see one's party win from a 20 point deficit in the polls; to hear that phone from Number 10 with the offer of office. Michael Barber, one time head of the Delivery Unit in Blair's office, stood, in 1987, for Labour in rock solid Tory Henley on Thames and recalled that: 'Incredibly, I remember convincing myself that I could win in the last few days.'<sup>7</sup>

5. The fifth is the ability to distil huge amounts of evidence into the one element which supports one's own position. (He might have added the ability to perform a volte face without the screeching of brakes being too audible.)

6. The sixth is loyalty, sometimes to the point of humiliation and the ability to focus on an end goal.

7. The seventh a biddable, long-suffering and endlessly supportive family to accept

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4 Caroline Spelman has represented Meriden for the Conservatives since 1997 and in January 2009 was made shadow for Communities and Local Government.

5 Betty Boothroyd, famously a former 'Tiller' girl, served a Labour member for West Bromwich 1973-2000 and as the first woman Speaker 1992-2000.

6 Edwina Currie was Conservative MP for South Derbyshire 1983-97 and served as a junior health minister 1986-88. Her self publicising talents and abilities meant she was one of the most recognisable politicians in the country.

7 Michael Barber(2007), *Instruction to Deliver: Fighting to Transform Britain's Public Services*, Methuen, p9.

the long separations and their secondary status to an unquenchable, overwhelming obsession.<sup>8</sup>

8. Paxman also identifies an eighth quality: that of a 'gambler' or 'adventurer', someone who will literally gamble the whole of their lives on a particular kind of success ('It's the biggest game on the biggest table in town' David Ruffley MP told Paxman)<sup>9</sup>.

Additionally, I would add my own gloss to Paxman of at least four more characteristics. Firstly politicians can be just a little odd. Churchill wrote to Clemmie, before the outbreak of the First World War: 'Everything tends towards catastrophe. I am interested, geared up and happy. Is it not horrible to be built like that?'<sup>10</sup> Even odder regarding Churchill is this snippet of his early vision: 'The country will be subjected somehow to a tremendous invasion... but I tell you that I shall be in command of the defences of London and I shall save London and the Empire from disaster.'<sup>11</sup>

Secondly politics is obsessive- almost like a disease. Michael Heseltine once commented to *The Guardian*:

"Politics is a life sentence. It's an obsessive, all demanding, totally committing profession-stimulating satisfying, stretching."<sup>12</sup>

A third ever-present quality in many, but not all, politicians would appear to be a near narcissistic interest in themselves. Edwina Currie captures some of this in her honest but revealing comment to her diary:

'This evening I went out to dinner at a flat in Smith Square. As ever with dinner parties, which were not part of my upbringing, I found it very hard work, just trying to be sparkling and interested in my companions. I'd much rather be the centre of attention!'<sup>13</sup>

An even better example is Benjamin Disraeli, addressing the electors of Shrewsbury:

"There is no doubt, gentlemen, that all men who offer themselves as candidates for

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8 For a fuller rendition of these points see Jeremy Paxman (2002), *The Political Animal- an Anatomy*, Michael Joseph, pp8-11.

9 Paxman, *ibid*, p11. Ruffley is Conservative MP for Bury St Edmunds since 1997,

10 Quoted in Nancy Banks-Smith's review of Andrew Marr's *The Making of Modern Britain*, *The Guardian*, 5th November 2009.

11 Quoted in Niall Ferguson(2003), *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane., p.292.

12 Michael Heseltine, *The Guardian*, 4th April, 2004.

13 Edwina Currie (2001) *Diaries 1987-1992*, p235.

public favour have motives of some sort. I candidly acknowledge that I have and will tell you what they are: I love fame; I love public attention; I love public reputation; I love to live in the eye of the nation.”<sup>14</sup>

Fourthly, politicians are also distinguished by their capacity for self persuasion, or if you will, self delusion. They convince themselves their elevation to power is necessary for the good of the community or the nation. They are sure they can make that crucial difference on behalf of us all and that they are motivated purely by concern for others and by principle. Examples of this mode of thinking are legion- Thatcher, Blair spring instantly to mind. Indeed David Owen, former medical doctor, Labour Foreign Secretary and founder member of the SDP, has diagnosed both aforementioned as politicians suffering from an excess, indeed an ‘intoxication’ of power, or, to quote the title of his book, The Hubris Syndrome<sup>15</sup>

But all these conditions for succeeding only scratch the surface of the type of person who tends to fill the shoes of a politician. Churchill, for example, spent much of his life being an outcast in his own party and to some extent, until destiny arrived in 1940, had seriously underachieved. Hundreds of others-even though winning the roulette wheel of a general election-have had to accept the bleak reality of such a fate. Lost to history are those thousands, possibly with both ambition and ability, who fell at the first fence and never even made it past the candidate stage.

Politicians usually enter politics, not because they are venal, egotistical or ruthlessly selfish- though there are many who might deserve such labels- but because they genuinely believe they can ‘make a difference’ and fulfil an idealistic sense of service to the local or national community. Some might be like the fictional Hamer Shawcross in Howard Spring’s *Fame is the Spur*, someone whose poverty based idealism has progressively leaked away leaving him open to the seductions of the baubles of power, the comfortable life furniture of the ruling class.<sup>16</sup> Most think of Ramsay MacDonald as the possible model for this fictional character but there are many other possibilities (maybe even former Prime Minister Tony Blair who compromised substantially and maybe even opted for the life of the super rich?).

So it seems to be a mixture of driven ambition, narcissism, genuine idealism and, perhaps a dash of daring and necessary ruthlessness. Charles Powell, foreign affairs aide to Margaret Thatcher marvelled at their perseverance:

“I think there is a quality that separates politicians from the rest of us. It is the scale, the depth of the ambition and what they have to go through to realise it. For a politician you have to be prepared to spend anything up to twenty years of forlorn existence on the back benches, being whipped through the lobbies on subjects you

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14 Peter Riddell (1993) *Honest Opportunism*, Hamish Hamilton, p14.

15 David Owen, (2007) *The Hubris Syndrome: Bush, Blair and the Intoxication of Power*, Politico's

16 Howard Spring, (1940) *Fame is the Spur*, Collins

know little about and care less about... in order even to aspire to the dizzy heights of being a parliamentary secretary or minister of state."<sup>17</sup>

These then are strange, special people about whom we wonder and criticise and bitch, often because they have agreed to give them power over us and we are not sure about our own wisdom in doing so. But they are quintessentially still, human beings. I recall something Estelle Morris said, shortly after she resigned because she felt she was not up to the job of being a Cabinet minister. When outside the cabinet she asked a colleague who was in it what fellow members were like. The reply was disarmingly simple but focused on their essential ordinariness:

"The good news is, 'they are just like us'; but the bad news is 'they are just like us'.

## The Process

**Who gets to be promoted?** The 'recruitment' or 'talent' pool for appointment or promotion comprises those who sit either in the Commons or the Lords. In addition to this, ministers outside parliamentary politics can be appointed to junior or even high office via the device of ennoblement to the Lords- though usually these are not many in number for fear of offending eager aspirants in the ruling Commons party. Some 20-25 Cabinet positions come up for grabs plus around 70 junior posts comprising ministers of state (MoS), parliamentary undersecretaries (PUS). In addition, the lowest rung of the promotion ladder and, strictly speaking 'trainee' ministers, is an unpaid gaggle of Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPS).

### 'The Talent Pool'

A central question regarding promotion is 'who can the prime minister potentially promote?' My interview on ministerial promotion with Lord (Tristan) Garel-Jones, former Deputy Chief Whip, left me in no doubt that such resources are always distinctly finite. These figures are approximations but it is usually assumed that a third of a governing parliamentary party are not available by virtue of their total unsuitability: excessive drinking, inability to run anything, let alone a ministry; too old and enfeebled, too young and inexperienced; too ideologically extreme; or too much of a risk to any government because of bizarre attitudes or personal habits. There could be other reasons.

Depending on the size of its majority a government might therefore have a couple of hundred MPs who can realistically be put in charge of Whitehall departments and fill the 90-100 posts any prime minister has at his or her disposal. As Garel-Jones told Paxman on the subject of ministerial selection:

'Once you've eliminated the bad, mad, drunk and over the hill, you've got rid of a hundred. You then have to pick ninety people out of a pool of 250. Is it any wonder

the calibre is so low?’<sup>18</sup>

The number depends on the size of a government’s majority but this is a smaller group, for sure, than most voters would assume were available. Given that ministers need time to prove themselves in the job and display signs they are suitable to go on to higher things at cabinet level, even this number has to be qualified. In addition a prime minister has to be mindful of other considerations, representing: Welsh and Scottish interests, especially in their respective ministries; a fair number of women, given their under-representation generally in parliament; a few racial minority MPs; maybe one or two gay MPs; as well as the major ideological or ‘tribal’ interests in the parliamentary party. Put like this, Sir John Hoskyns’ jibe that governments are formed from a talent pool that could not sustain a single multi-national company seems less a spiteful swipe than a bleakly accurate analysis.<sup>19</sup>

Despite New Labour’s huge majority of 179 and 419 seats, Blair did not find it easy to discover much talent within their number. Astute columnists often attested to this fact. Peter Riddell commented on a recent reshuffle, that it revealed:

‘the sheer mediocrity of much of the Government... which has ‘few potential stars. On a generous estimate there are at most ten possible Cabinet ministers among middle ranking and junior ministers, mostly competent managerial types like Beverley Hughes, Hazel Blears and Nick Raynsford.’<sup>20</sup>

Andrew Rawnsley, whose *Servants of the People*, chronicled Labour’s early years, recalls a conversation with a senior official from Number 10 about

‘...the shallowness of the junior ministerial gene pool and how few really good people there were available to the Prime Minister for promotion to the top table’<sup>21</sup>.

More recently Bagehot in *The Economist* addressed this topic, concluding that: ‘the basic cause of the dearth is structural’. He suggested prime ministers should be allowed to ‘reach beyond Westminster for more of their hires’. There can be no doubt that this is a serious problem, caused by our constitutional rule about membership of the legislature.

**The Unambitious:** finally, on the talent pool Bruce Grocott corrected any idea I might have had that all politicians are driven to climb that greasy pole. He argued such ‘ministerialists’, who wish to serve in the government, are in the minority.<sup>22</sup> There are MPs who are happy merely to serve their constituents, others who focus

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18 Paxman, *ibid*, p209.

19 Sir John Hoskyns, ‘Whitehall and Westminster, an Outsider’s View’ *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol 36, number 1, pp 137-147.

20 Peter Riddell, *The Times*, 19th June 2003

21 Andrew Rawnsley, *Observer*, 4th April 2004

22 Interview with Lord Grocott.

on select committees, like Tony Wright, and still others who choose to be gadfly ideologues, like Dennis Skinner: the rebels written about so eloquently by Philip Cowley.<sup>23</sup>

**Case for Change:** Seen this way, it might seem a little surprising that prime ministers ever succeed adequately in fully staffing their governments. Not so much a 'talent pool', more a talent puddle. In fact there is a good case for saying our constitution has a serious flaw- something reformers have tended to neglect perhaps-and that thought ought to be given to removing the restraint upon recruitment imposed by the requirement that ministers be also members of the legislature.

**Who decides?** Obviously it is the prime minister who ultimately decides but this does not mean he wants for advice: whips, other ministers, close aides or maybe even his close civil servants. One permanent secretary interviewed for this study was emphatic that civil servants would not presume to encroach upon such a prized personal political function as appointment, though closer inspection of the process in the national archives reveals this to be by no means the case.

**When are Appointments Made?** Prime Ministers can hire or fire whenever they wish but usually they occur when: in the immediate wake of a party winning a majority in a general election and forming a government; in reshuffles- usually every one to two years to 'freshen' up an administration's appearance and reward supporters; and following resignations or deaths(for example Robin Cook's in 2005). It should not be thought either that a single resignation or death can be easily dealt with. The government is a delicate calibration of appointments, the whole membrane of which is affected by even one member falling by the wayside. A single Cabinet member lost has to be replaced so the repercussions reverberate deep into the junior ranks. It follows of course that very similar appointments are made by the Opposition party in shadow form on all these occasions. Shadow appointments provide a vital anticipation of future ministerial teams as they provide training in specialised areas and indicate how party leaders are assessing their own talent.

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23 See Philip Cowley, (2005) *The Rebels: How Blair Misled his Majority*, Politico.

**The Qualities Required for Promotion:** these vary importantly depending on the level of appointment. Perhaps the most important leap is from the backbenches to the first or lower rungs of the ministerial ladder, whether in government or opposition.

**First Rung Promotion Requires Commons Expertise:** Some would argue –as Lords Carrington and Baker did to me- that the Commons was devalued by Blair’s apparent indifference to it.<sup>24</sup> But whatever its status, diminished no doubt by MPs’ preference for speaking to cameras on the green outside Parliament, rather to colleagues inside, it remains the stage on which the nation’s business is acted out. Anyone who has served in government or has studied the process with care will tend to argue that performance in the House is the sine qua non of future ministerial success [in this case ‘performance’ means the floor of the House, though assiduous work on select committees can also win attention and preferment.] So Kenneth Baker told me:

‘If a minister... doesn’t take his brief through the House of Commons competently and gets into trouble, he is a casualty, because the system will itself say so.’<sup>25</sup>

That wise old commentator Peter Riddell of The Times reinforced the point:

‘In public terms you have to have the ability to perform well in the House. If you haven’t mastered that and come unstuck you’re in trouble. You have to keep a bill rolling on. Ministers have been got rid of because of this.’<sup>26</sup>

Former PPS to Tony Blair and Chief Labour Whip in the Lords, Bruce Grocott puts it more emphatically:

‘If someone clearly, could not command the Commons from the dispatch box I mean if you can’t operate in the House of Commons in a Parliamentary system to the admiration or at least the respect of your colleagues then you would not get far past first base and neither should you.’<sup>27</sup>

But perhaps the most revealing comments were by Charles Powell on the appropriateness of such Commons related expertise.:

‘Given how political careers are made in this country, i.e. by performance in the House of Commons, self advertisement, self confidence and so on are the great qualities. Other countries’ ... are very different. France is through bureaucracy; Germany through provincial politics. For us, the only way is through performance in

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24 Author interviews with Lords Carrington and Baker.

25 Interview Lord Baker

26 Interview Peter Riddell

27 Interview |Lord |Grocott.

the House of Commons. That to me doesn't seem to nourish the best qualities for being a good minister.'

He elaborated the point in the following fashion:

'In all my years of experience, I have never heard anyone recommended for appointment to be a minister on the grounds he would be a good minister. Nobody ever said that he would be jolly good at running a department, that he had the qualities of management and so forth. The qualities, quite frankly are loyalty and brilliance at performing in the House. I think these two qualities are frankly the only two I recall being advanced as serious reasons for promoting someone. ...General loyalty, plus the ability to speak well in the Commons, to do well on the hoof- those are the qualities I recall as most frequently mentioned.'<sup>28</sup>

Andrew Adonis, on the other hand, thought such 'training' by no means inappropriate:

"It is fashionable to say the House of Commons as a training ground is largely irrelevant to the job of being a minister, but I don't think that is the case at all. To be an effective minister you have to be effective at explaining- a large part of the job is acting as a spokesman for the government. The single most important forum of explanation of government policy... is the Commons.... The capacity to explain and develop a winning argument...are well cultivated by the House and the wider processes of politics- local politics and activities that an MP has to engage in."<sup>29</sup>

**Gaining Promotion as a Minister:** moving up the ministerial ladder, requires a politician to show he or she can do the job. A large part of this will still be in the House as junior ministers are often given the task of piloting new legislation through to completion. Completely different skills however, are required to: take advice but not merely be led by civil servants; chair inter-departmental meetings- often involving outside experts- and negotiate with other colleagues, particularly in the Treasury; absorb a huge amount of information and keep it in perspective; to work very long hours; and to show skill and aplomb with the media.

**Comparison with Business:** Many people will think of promotion in business terms but politics offers a totally different environment in which to operate:

John Hoskyns' jibe about the House not containing enough talent to staff a medium sized multinational company is certainly debatable, but there are many differences between the requirements of politics and business. Peter Riddell, though thinks Hoskyns was basically right:

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<sup>28</sup> Interview Lord Powell.

<sup>29</sup> Interview Lord Adonis.

'It is certainly true that ministers are promoted using criteria not prevalent in any other organisation and the processes which other organisations use are totally absent in Whitehall.'

Bernard Ingham, (Mrs Thatcher's former Press Secretary) for his part, did not think the comparison was relevant:

'I think business experience is rather overstated. It takes guts to stand on the floor of the House of Commons. It takes a certain ability to perform well there. We aren't comparing apples with apples. This is the point that Hoskyns never got. Politicians have to secure elections. Senior business men do not. All they have to do is keep the shareholders happy.'<sup>30</sup>

Politics is certainly an unusual environment in which to make one's way, if only because of the existence of the public audience as a constant presence, a critical chorus attached to the drama of political events to be invoked, wooed and appealed to. But the business of promotion is not dissimilar in other ways, essentially because the aspirant has to ensure the key decision-maker is aware of their talents burning bright.

## Promotion Information Flows:

**1. Whips Office:** Lord (Geoffrey) Howe, told me promotion decisions were purely subjective, residing as they did, in the exclusive gift of the prime minister. However, Lord Garel-Jones, insisted there was a promotion system and it was called The Whip's Office.<sup>31</sup> He allowed the Tory Whip's Office was more active in such matters than Labour's; Tories sometimes refer to it as 'The Nursery' as it is held to nurture future talent. Tory whips are given sections of the parliamentary party to monitor and look after, and to ensure they vote according to the leadership's desires.

They also acquire much information about each MP-personal, financial, even sexual-which allegedly was kept in a 'Black Book'.<sup>32</sup> When new appointments come to be made the Chief Whip as the custodian of so much personal intelligence is a key player, feeding in views on the person being considered: speeches made in the House and their quality, attitude to authority and, of course, aptitude for higher things. Once an MP is chosen as a Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) he or she is monitored closely by whips in morning ministerial meetings, contributions made (whether in meetings, the House, debate or on the media), and judgements made as to degree of knowledge and energy shown. All this is fed into the appointments process, whether it be a general reshuffle, or for a more limited replacement slot. But this is not the only source of intelligence feeding into Number 10.

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30 Interview Sir Bernard Ingham.

31 Interviews with Lords Howe and Garel-Jones

32 Interview Gyles Brandreth

**2. Civil Service:** once in office ministers work closely with civil servants who naturally, given the emphasis on personal qualities in that profession, develop views as to the efficacy of ministers- Do they read and master their briefs? Do they provide leadership? Do they put in the hours required? Are they easy to work with? Such judgements, both good and bad, will be communicated, with infinite subtlety, either via the permanent secretary or leak out via that amorphous but hugely influential vehicle called 'gossip'.

**3, Gossip:** Westminster is a hive of gossip which, as in the days of medieval royal courts often revolves around the question of 'who is up and who is down?' Gossip can be fuelled by leaks, briefings, (official as well as the deliberately misleading variety), indiscreet conversations over lunch, chats with journalists or the other one hundred and one means by which people entertain each other with chit-chat about their fellow humans. This is not unlike any workplace- a university or a big company for example- but in politics it is much more part of the process and malevolent rumours as Damien McBride, proved so unwholesomely, is the stock in trade of certain politicians and their assistants.<sup>33</sup> Gossip can throw up a name as someone 'on the up', blacken someone to arrest their rise or create the atmosphere which can advantage the ambitions of certain people; for example a rumour that a rebellion is in the offing against the party leader might create the mood in which an alternative leader might be able to make his or her pitch.

**4. Media:** MPs are very keen to appear on the media as it provides access to so many people and provides a means to make an impact. So MPs tend to prefer talking to cameras on the green outside the House than waiting to be called by the Speaker within it. They will queue up to contribute their thoughts and views on just about anything whether on chat shows, local radio, especially in their constituencies, or, the prize slot, Radio Four's Today programme.

**5. Cabinet and Beyond:** Once in the Cabinet, clearly, prime ministers do not need the intelligence system of the whips: they will see at first had those qualities which will be weighed in the balance during reshuffles. Becoming leader is a different and infinitely complex process which, in the British system, depends on party perceptions-both within and without parliament- of the major candidates. That has to be the subject of another article.

**Self Promotion:** Politicians are natural self promoters so they do this all the time- as suggested above via the many media outlets available. Here are a few more ways in which they seek to do it:

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<sup>33</sup> Damien McBride was a former trusted aide of Gordon Brown who resigned in April 2009 after it emerged he had planned to launch a political blog in collaboration with another Labour activist to disseminate what amounted to untrue smears about Conservative politicians.

1. **Letter or other communication to the prime minister:** pointing out how good they would be as ministers. The national archives reveal every PM receives a clutch of such missives which, it would seem are seldom taken seriously but always politely answered. Attlee scribbled on one such letter the dry comment that it be filed under 'job applications'
2. **Establishing good contacts with Number 10 aides:** Alan Clark, in his diaries fills up some entries with notes of conversations with the likes of Charles Powell and others where he urged his promotion to higher things. A number of my interviewees assured me that Clark's chances of promotion to the Cabinet existed only in the realms of his own fantasy.
3. **PM Aides:** More straightforwardly, MPs sometimes merely indicate to the prime minister's PPS that they would be interested in doing a ministerial job. Chris Mullin, in his hugely entertaining and insightful diaries tells how Blair's PPS, Bruce Grocott was a regular and, given his role in relation to the parliamentary party perfectly proper conduit for such messages.  
<sup>34</sup>Mullin is an interesting case as he was initially disillusioned with junior office after his first two appointments but after a while let Tony Blair know he was ready for another go and was rewarded by a post in the Foreign Office, which he very much enjoyed.<sup>35</sup>

## Unorthodox Means

1. **Crossing the Floor:** it seems New Labour, in its eagerness to form its 'Big Tent' was happy to reward those prepared to leave the Conservatives for Labour, with ministerial office. So Alan Haworth, Shaun Woodward and Quentin Davies all received office, not without controversy, in front of competition from the governing party. Probably the idea was to lure even more to defect by signifying the rewards which might follow.
2. **Nepotism and Cronyism:** Whilst it is not as rife as during more formative periods of the British political system, more recent examples of it can be found. Lord Salisbury appointed his nephew Arthur Balfour as Secretary of State for Ireland in 1887 thus giving rise to the saying 'bob's yer uncle'. Macmillan appointed his nephew, Andrew Cavendish (the 11<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire) as a junior minister in the Commonwealth Office in 1960, promoting him to minister of state in 1962, something which Cavendish described(probably exaggeratedly) as 'the greatest act of nepotism ever'.<sup>36</sup>

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34 See Chris Mullin(2009), A View from the Foothills, Profile Books and interview with Lord Grocott.

35 Investigations of the 'Prem 5' files in the National Archives at Kew will reveal any number of 'job applications', as Attlee referred to one such letter.

36 Graham Stewart Nepotism on a majestic scale, The Times, 2 February 2008.

Then, moving to 'cronyism' there was Tony Blair appointing his former flatmate, Charles Falconer,<sup>37</sup> to a succession of legal posts in his government.

- 3. Casting Couch?** There is little evidence this has proved an effective route to ministerial office. Edwina Currie famously had an extended affair with John Major before he became prime minister. After much breathless anticipation as her former lover ascended the greasy pole and became a candidate for the leadership in 1990 ('If John wins, oh whoopee')<sup>38</sup> she confides to her diary after chatting to Major in the wake of Thatcher's demise: 'And if God is listening, I would like a place in the Cabinet please, asap.'<sup>39</sup> Poor Edwina had an anguished time waiting for the call but it never came. Despite some vague promises Major never elevated her in the manner she imagined and for which she had hoped. He let it be known subsequently-cruelly perhaps- that he was deeply ashamed of their affair. Nor did she receive a single mention in his extensive, but clearly not wholly comprehensive, memoirs published in 1999.

### **Concluding comments: the Primacy of the Media, Luck and Courage**

This paper has sought to establish: the extraordinarily insecure and risky nature of politics as a profession and consequently the unusual nature of its practitioners; the eligibility for selection to office and the limited talent pool available to premiers; the debate over the qualities deemed necessary for such elevations; the peculiar ways in which information flows from Westminster into Downing St; and the ways in which politicians seek to promote their own causes.

**Media:** An important concluding point to make about promotion is very much a modern one and relates to the changing process. One important criterion is in a state of flux: performing on the media is as important as performing in the Commons. Any aspirant politician these days has to be a competent media performer. We know that viewers make up their minds about people they see on television very quickly and it's often an emotional reaction to the image perceived. So David Cameron made his name, in his party and the country by delivering a speech to his 2005 conference which he had learnt by heart and performed, apparently spontaneously, without notes.

Gordon Brown, by comparison has never shone on television and seemed to get worse rather than better with time as his ill-advised outing on You-Tube illustrated. New talent now is as likely to be established (though seldom discovered) on News-night or Channel Four News. So there is a buzz around Rory Stewart, Conservative candidate for Penrith and the Border as he comes over so powerfully on the

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37 Made Lord Thoroton in 1997 by Tony Blair.

38 Edwina Currie(2002), Diaries 1987-1992 Little Brown, p214p214

39 Currie, *ibid*, pp216-7

television. Media technology is slowly bending our constitution in all kinds of ways- the selection and advancement of ministerial talent is only one of them. . The 24-7 media has become a vast alternative stage on which real politics occurs- holding to account, scrutiny, interrogation, mediation, consensus building. In many ways it has come to be more important than any of our democratic institutions.

**Key Qualities:** Despite the machinery of democracy which supposedly facilitates the process, any study of the topic reveals the primacy of two factors: luck and courage. All the other qualities mentioned they are as nothing compared with these two prerequisites.

**Luck:** To illustrate this requirement, Jim Prior tells the story in his memoirs of how he was driving his tractor along the road in 1955 when someone stopped him and said:

'You're a young man; you're just the type of person we want' ....Almost immediately I found myself the prospective candidate for Lowestoft'.<sup>40</sup>

Another big slice of luck enabled Tony Blair to stand for the safe seat of Sedgefield in May 1983. When the Executive committee of the local Labour Party recommended its short list to the bigger General Committee Blair's name was not on it. Usually such recommendations go through on the nod, but John Burton, secretary of the Trimdon branch, stood up and waved a letter of recommendation he claimed, (deliberately misleadingly), had been sent by then party leader Michael Foot urging Blair's selection. The dubious truth of his ploy, luckily was not discovered and a famous career was initiated.<sup>41</sup> Jim Callaghan's slice of luck came in 1973 when French hostility to Anglo-America, caused President Pompidou to veto the soon to retire MP's nomination as Secretary General of the International Monetary Fund. Instead Callaghan had to continue on the backbenches when, against all the odds, he won the party leadership three years later in 1976.

As James Margach commented, 'Like Napoleon's generals to be lucky is a precondition to getting there... the accident prone never make it.'<sup>42</sup> Sometimes luck and courage combine to make or break careers. For example, had Willie Whitelaw stood against Ted Heath in the first round of voting in 1975, he might well have won but he loyally held back. Margaret Thatcher, not especially liked and a woman in a patriarchal party bravely stood against Ted Heath. The party, desperate to rid itself of their aloof and unsuccessful leader, voted heavily for the MP for Finchley and her momentum carried her to victory, despite Whitelaw's entry for the second ballot. As Margach commented:

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40 Quoted from Jim Prior(1986) *A Balance of Power*, Hamilton, in Riddell, p84.

41 Anthony Seldon(2004), *Blair*, Free Press, pp77-80.

42 James Margach, (1981) *The Anatomy of Power*, Star, p2.

'She proved ruthless in her conviction that Heath had to be replaced. Whitelaw, by comparison, lacked her courage and ruthlessness'.<sup>43</sup>

## Reading

Michael Barber, (2007) *Instruction to Deliver*, Methuen

Gyles Brandreth (1999) *Breaking the Code: Westminster Diaries*, Phoenix

Alastair Campbell (2007), *The Blair Years*, Hutchinson

Alan Clark (1993), *Diaries*, Phoenix

Edwina Currie (2002), *Diaries 1987-1992* Little Brown

James Margach(1981) *The Anatomy of Power*, Star Books.

John Major, (1999) *John Major: the Autobiography*, Harper Collins.

Chris Mullin (2009) *View from the Foothills*, Profile Books

Jeremy Paxman (2000), *The Political Animal*

Tim Renton (2004) *Chief Whip: People, Power and Patronage in Westminster*,



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