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Parliament and Welfare Policy:

The 2010 Intake in the House of Commons

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This brief report provides a summary of research undertaken during the 2010 Parliament drawing upon interviews with 29 MPs elected at the 2010 general election. It begins with a brief discussion of the characteristics of the intake, before moving on to consider their attitudes to a variety of social policy topics, including some comparison with previous research on that area.

The 2010 intake

The 2010 general election saw 227 new MPs enter the House of Commons, 35 per cent of the total membership. In addition to providing the largest turnover of MPs since the Second World War, the influx of MPs in 2010 changed the complexion of the House in a number of other respects. The 2010 intake saw 142 women elected, the highest number ever, with a significant increase on the Conservative benches, from 17 in 2005 to 48 in 2010, although Labour still accounted for more than half of the total number of women in the House of Commons. There was also a further increase in the number of ethnic minority MPs, to 26 (4 per cent of the House), with 15 from Labour and 11 from the Conservatives. While it is therefore the case that the House of Commons since 2010 may in some respects have been more reflective of the general population than before, it nevertheless remains the case that nearly two-thirds of MPs (62 per cent) were white men aged over 40, while 90 per cent were university graduates and more than one-third of MPs had attended fee-paying schools; 2010 also saw a further decline in the proportion of MPs who have been manual workers (see, for example, Coleman, 2013; McGuinness, 2010; Sutton Trust, 2010).

There has been some research on the views of the 2010 intake, and particularly the new Conservative MPs. Heppell (2013), for example, has argued that, based upon data collected from division lists, early day motions and public comment, the 2010 intake of Conservative MPs added significantly to the strength of social liberalism within the Parliamentary Conservative Party (as typified by divisions over social, sexual and moral issues, such as gay marriage). He also argues that while the new Conservative MPs were not necessarily more Eurosceptic than their predecessors (even noting something of a shift towards agnosticism on the subject of Europe), there was a significant group (around one-third of the new intake) who were hard Eurosceptics and willing to show that, including by rebelling in votes.

Indeed, while an increase in rebelliousness (or 'independence') amongst backbenchers MPs has been noted for some time, the willingness of the Conservative 2010 intake to rebel has been highlighted. Cowley and Stuart (2014) for example, note that 62 per cent of the new intake have rebelled at least once. Some have attributed this to the Coalition, which has prevented the government from putting forward sufficient Conservative measures (for example, Redwood, 2013), while others have linked it to the lack of opportunities for ministerial office, again due to the nature of Coalition government and the constraints it has placed on David Cameron in terms of ministerial reshuffles. Liberal Democrat MPs have, of course, proportionately, been even more willing to rebel, with 72 per cent of the parliamentary party having rebelled during this parliament.

The 2010 intake and social policy

The research reported here reflects three related pieces of work: a study of MPs' attitudes undertaken in 1986-7, drawing on interviews with 96 MPs (for example, Bochel, 1992), a subsequent study in the 2005 parliament based upon interviews with 76 MPs (Bochel and Defty, 2007), and the most recent study based upon interviews with 29 MPs first elected in 2010 (see also

Bochel and Defty, 2012). Although the numbers are relatively small, the 2010 sample did include more than 10 per cent of new MPs, with 16 Conservatives, 10 Labour, 2 Liberal Democrats and one MP from another party. The tables below include all of those interviewed for completeness. Given the propensity for rebellion amongst the 2010 intake, it is perhaps worth noting that at the time of Cowley and Stuart's work noted above, among the Conservatives in our sample the average number of rebellions was 9, and for the two Liberal Democrats it was just over 20.

Attitudes to the role of the state

Although the questions are not entirely comparable across the three studies, when asked about the appropriate role of the state in social policy (Table 1) the kind of responses from the 2010 intake bear broad similarities to those MPs interviewed in 1986-7 and in 2004-6. However, while we found some evidence for a broad cross-party consensus on approaches to social policy in the 2005 parliament (Bochel and Defty, 2007), particularly when compared to attitudes in the 1980s, there is evidence of greater polarisation amongst the 2010 intake of MPs, with attitudes closer to those expressed in the 1980s than in the previous parliament. For example, only one in three Conservative MPs interviewed in the 2005 parliament expressed the view that the government should provide a safety-net only for those in most need, compared with seventy per cent of Conservative MPs who expressed this view in the 1980s, and more than half of Conservative MPs interviewed from the 2010 intake. Similarly, Labour respondents were more supportive of redistribution than in 2004-6 (20 per cent) and more in line with those in 1986-7 (29 per cent). A much smaller proportion of MPs elected in 2010 supported the idea of the welfare state as an enabling mechanism designed to allow people to lift themselves out of poverty and into work, than in the 2004-6 research, when MPs from all parties were drawn to such an approach.

Table 1: MPs' views on the role of the state in welfare (% of responses by party)

	Con	Lab	LibDem	Other
Safety net only for those in the most need	56	0	0	0
Beyond a safety net to work with individuals and the private sector to improve lives	31	0	0	0
Beyond a safety net to provide a mechanism to enable others to lift themselves out of poverty/into work	6	20	0	0
Provide a national floor, above the minimum, for a range of services	6	50	2	1
Redistribution of wealth/provide social justice	0	30	0	0
N	16	10	2	1

There were also some marked differences in the language used to describe those in receipt of state support particularly when compared to the 2005 parliament. In addition to a decline in descriptions of the state as an enabling mechanism there was a re-emergence of ideas about those who are 'deserving' and 'undeserving' of state support. This had featured strongly in the responses of some Conservative MPs in the 1980s, but was less evident in the 2005 parliament. While MPs from all parties referred to the need to avoid encouraging dependency, some

Conservative MPs used particularly strong language in relation to those claiming benefits, referring to some of those on benefits as ‘workshy’, while Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs referred to the need to target support as the ‘genuinely disabled’.

Paying for welfare

There are sharp distinctions between the parties in terms of how they feel that social policy provision should be financed (Table 2). Conservative MPs from the 2010 intake strongly favour provision by individuals or using the tax system to encourage individuals to provide for themselves, while Labour MPs are much more supportive of the use of general taxation. Although not asked about this directly, unprompted eight out of ten Labour MPs advocated increases in tax and public spending, with several noting that governments needed to do more to make the case for tax and national insurance. In contrast half of Conservative MPs stressed the need to make further cuts in public spending.

Table 2: MPs’ views on how welfare provision should be financed (% of responses by party)

	Con	Lab	LibDem	Other
By the state through general taxation	0	70	50	100
Mainly by the state, but individuals to take the burden in some areas	31	30	50	0
Beyond safety net use tax system to create incentives	44	0	0	0
By the state, but only as safety net	25	0	0	0
N	16	10	2	1

Policy issues

In addition to these relatively general and to some extent philosophically based questions, MPs were also asked about a number of more specific issues. For the most part these were unprompted, and MPs identified a range of responses.

Despite the differences between MPs of different parties on the role of the state and private sectors described above, there was some agreement among those elected in 2010 on the challenges facing social policy, with 69 per cent of Conservatives and 50 per cent of Labour MPs (as well as both of the Liberal Democrats interviewed) seeing the ageing population and pensions as a major challenge; perhaps unsurprisingly, 44 per cent of Conservatives and 70 per cent of Labour respondents also saw the cost, or how to pay for provision, as a significant issue. There were, however, also significant differences, with half of the Conservative MPs (but only one Labour MP) identifying the risks of dependency as a major challenge, while forty per cent of Labour MPs argued that public expenditure cuts were a significant problem. Smaller numbers from all parties identified a wider range of issues, from global pressures to affordable housing and personalisation, as well as specific problems such as those that were associated with fitness for work tests.

Given the broader beliefs outlined above, and the Coalition government’s decision to safeguard spending on health care, few MPs mentioned the NHS as a priority for additional spending (in contrast to the two earlier studies), although interestingly, given the Coalition’s approach to the

state pension, a large proportion of MPs from all parties including 30 per cent of Conservatives and 40 per cent of Labour respondents still felt that pensions/older people were a priority for additional expenditure. It is perhaps unsurprising that some MPs from all parties (25 per cent of Conservatives, 40 per cent of Labour, one of the two Liberal Democrats and the 'other' MP) identified support for unemployed people, including getting them into work, as a priority.

Significant proportions from all parties felt that the benefits system did not work well in terms of getting money to people who need it, with Conservative MPs the most likely to identify the complexity of the system (50 per cent), over-generous benefits (50 per cent) and fraud (38 per cent) as the reasons, while Labour MPs were more likely to say that benefits were not generous enough (50 per cent), and that the system lacked public support (30 per cent). There was significant support amongst Labour MPs for the National Minimum Wage (70 per cent) as a key means of reducing poverty, although some felt that there was some danger of it becoming problematic, in the sense that it might be seen as setting a relatively low level of acceptable wage. There was also strong support among Labour MPs for the use of tax credits (50 per cent) and a move to a living wage (40 per cent). The views of Conservative MPs were much less clustered, with 27 per cent supporting the National Minimum Wage, 27 per cent the new Universal Credit, 20 per cent removing lower earners from the tax system, and 13 per cent the use of tax credits.

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