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Political Leadership: What is it and how do we find it?

What makes a strong political leader? Where do you find them? Can they be trained to maximise their potential? How can they best connect with the voters and issues of their time?

These are the questions that Christina Dykes and Jo Silvester have attempted to answer in one of the first structured investigations to be conducted in this area. Their studies have employed concepts, techniques and approaches that have long been applied in business contexts to help identify and nurture commercial talent. Here they have begun to apply them to questions of political leadership and the results are enlightening, stimulating and, occasionally, surprising.

The conclusions that the authors reach are broad in scope and supported by compelling evidence. They discuss the attributes that modern political leaders need to have to prove successful and how these can be identified in prospective candidates and nurtured during their formative years.

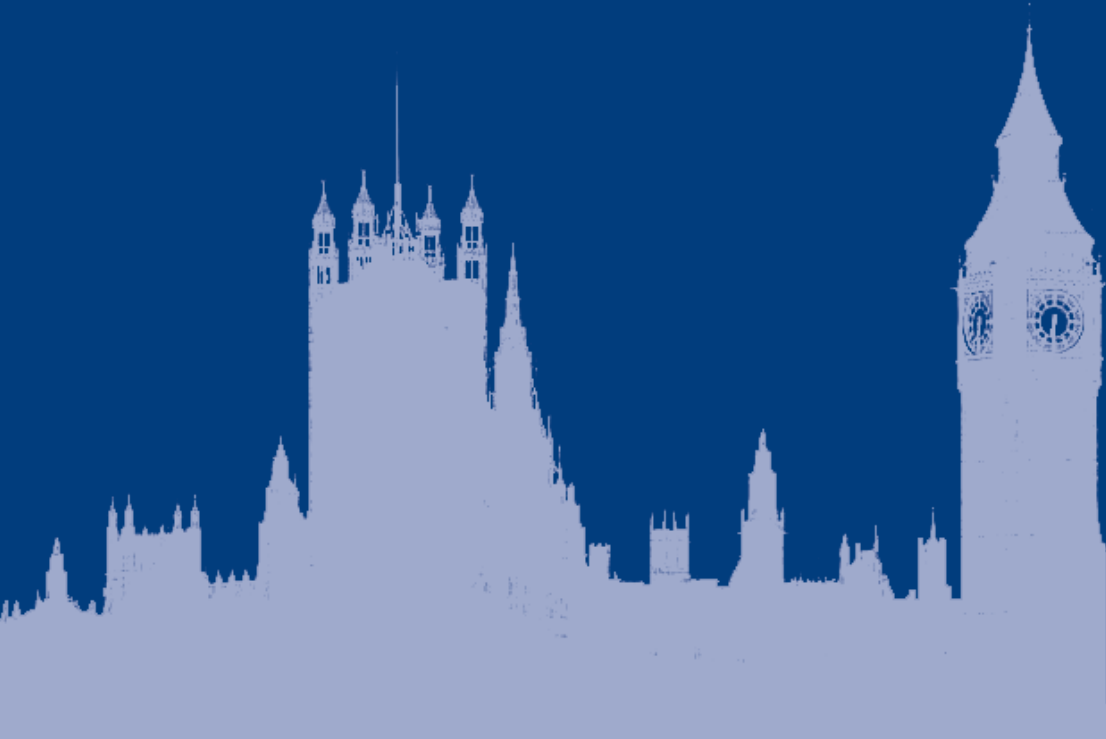
This work explores the next step in the progress of parties as they adapt to function in modern democracies and highlights that once again the Conservative Party is in the vanguard of political progress.

£5.00

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By Christina Dykes and Jo Silvester



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The Tory Reform Group



The Tory Reform Group seeks to promote the One Nation values of social justice, political progress and prosperity for all, through open minded debate.

The TRG advocates the benefits of a society founded on freedom, individual responsibility and community. We see a mutually beneficial relationship between market efficiency and a better society.

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Foreword

As the Tory Reform Group, we see reform of the Conservative Party as a key issue of long-term importance. In particular, investigating how we should seek out strong, professional individuals who have the skills and potential to make great politicians and who can cope with the demands of the modern democratic system, appears to have lagged similar investigations in the business world.

We believe it is high-time that the issue be subjected to rigorous and impartial scrutiny, and that is exactly what Christina Dykes and Jo Silvester have provided in their thought-provoking and stimulating work, presented here.

On behalf of the TRG, I am pleased to welcome this publication to the debate on such an important, and timely, issue.

Tim Barnes

Christina Dykes

Christina has worked for the Conservative Party in many different capacities. Originally a member of the Conservative Research Department she moved on to be appointed special adviser at the then Department of Health and Social Security. A maternity break from Central Office was combined with establishing her own political consultancy. Christina worked for a number of clients, including public affairs consultancies, specialising in health issues and private individuals. She was head hunted back to Central Office in 1998 to manage the Listening to Britain process and then stayed on to establish the first Department of Development within Central Office. As Director for Development her responsibilities included candidates' selection and maintenance of the candidates' list, minority communities, and Conservative Future (the youth branch of the Party). Whilst being Director of Development she, along with Professor Jo Silvester, established the first assessment centre for politicians.

Christina is presently Special Adviser to the Shadow Home Affairs Team reporting to Dominic Grieve MP on community cohesion. She is also special adviser to the Conservative Parliamentary Friends of India and to the Conservative Muslim Forum. Recently she became as advisor to the Local Government Leadership Centre.

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Jo is Professor of Occupational Psychology at Goldsmiths College, University of London and a founding partner of the Work Psychology Partnership. She researches and consults in the assessment and development of individuals in public, private and government organisations. Recent work has focused on political leadership. She developed the first competency model for MPs and redesigned the selection process for Prospective Parliamentary Candidates for the Conservative Party in 2002. Jo developed a national political skills framework for councillors as part of the 'Attracting Members of Talent' project sponsored by the IDeA and the ODPM (2004). She has recently worked with the Local Government Leadership Centre to develop the first development centre for political executives, piloted with Westminster City Council, Bracknell Forest and Hampshire County Council (2005).

Jo has published widely in the field of organisational psychology. She is an Associate Editor for the International Journal of Assessment & Selection and the Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology. Jo's work has been featured in The Sunday Times, Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Financial Times, The Guardian, People Management, Personnel Today, the Daily Mirror, and The Independent on Sunday. In March 2004, the latter described her as one of the ten leading occupational psychologists in the UK. In January 2006, Jo is moving to City University in London to establish the first UK centre for Political Leadership.

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Selecting political leaders: Who are they and how do we find them?

Ever since Michael Howard's hasty signal for a postponed retreat much has been written about the Conservative leadership context. Contenders are offering their prescriptions to cure the ills of the Party and country. Little is new. Each contender proposes recipes for improved health, education, judicial and tax systems. Of greater importance to this paper they also promise a more connected Conservative Party which will promote political candidates who are recognisable, "normal" and believable.

Full time political commentators are finding it hard to distinguish between such offerings, so for the armchair observer the task is nigh impossible. This is especially so when comments concentrate on simple labels (e.g., compassionate Tory , one nation Tory old school Tory), age, or observations about clothing preferences (think shoes and ties verses jackets), their marital status and even more bewildering the married status of their parents. Such descriptions are subjective and increasingly meaningless when the subject we really need advice on is whether the contenders have the vision and the capability to perform the job to which they aspire. In other words do they have the skills required of a modern leader?

In fact, surprisingly little is known about the skills needed to be a leader of a modern political party, let alone a Prime Minister. There has been remarkably little commentary on the requisite skills and abilities for a political leader — and even less about how to select political leaders of the future. The concept of 'political competence' is only now beginning to receive attention: but it has profound implications for selecting excellent political candidates and persuading the electorate why they should vote for them.

Hitherto the electorate may have been willing to tolerate ineptitude (albeit grudgingly) on the part of politicians. In the dim and distant past there might even have been some gratitude that people were willing to do a job that most people would find tiresome and pointless. Not anymore. There are growing signs that voters, contemptuous of respecting politicians simply because of the role they occupy, are looking for evidence of competence. Discounting the 1918 election (which was held under the shadow of the First World War), 2005 witnessed the second lowest turn out ever in a general election. Only 61.3% of the electorate voted and turn out fell below 50% in 32 constituencies. More worryingly was the decision to elect a monkey (H'Angus the town's football team mascot) as the Hartlepool mayor in 2002. His memorable winning slogan was "more bananas for school children".

Moreover there are signs of a new attitude being exhibited by the electorate. With their canny realism and sturdy sense of fairness, the British people are beginning to turn their backs on political manipulation for no apparent gain. In Blaenau Gwent at the last election the Labour vote rejected its official candidate, who had been imposed by an all women short list, in favour of an unofficial Labour candidate

What the public deserves is a political class who can win their respect, who can inspire, relate and respond, in short who can lead with such assurance that the public has the confidence to follow. Not everyone can do it, as the last ten years of the Conservative party has shown.

Yet this need not be so. Beyond politics in the world of work much has changed: private and public sector organisations utilise modern selection and development systems to ensure that their people are equipped to deliver excellence in their roles. In stark contrast, the emergence of political leaders relies largely on Darwinian processes and patronage rather than any systematic consideration of ability. But consider how we might feel if our solicitor, doctor or plumber relied simply on being 'a good person', rather than being able to give the advice we need? For too long, political parties have relied upon ramshackle systems to decide who will be the politicians of the future - with no real idea about who is likely to be good and why. Moreover, quotas, twinning, zipping, all-women short-lists and other

artificial means are being used to forward political parties' chosen candidates. Such strategies feature strongly in public perceptions of how individuals become politicians. What the public are less aware of are the methods used by political parties to decide who will be offered to political associations: that is, how individuals are accepted into the pool of approved candidates from which associations select their own prospective candidate.

For although the foundations of our democracy rest on the belief that it is government of the people by the people for the people, in reality it is the political parties who control who the people are able to choose from. Moreover, the lack of transparency about how political parties make use of this enormous advantage may be accounted for in part by the fact that their methods would not stand up to public scrutiny. Indeed, many may not be democratic. Historically a tap on the shoulder or a congenial conversation has been all that was necessary to put someone on the Conservative Party's approved list. Similar processes operate in all the political parties. Catching the eye of those who do the choosing has certainly featured and promising to deliver a certain brand of politics has also helped.

This paper is an attempt to set out the issues surrounding the selection and development of political leadership, with a particular focus on the achievements of the Conservative Party in relation to candidate selection, and the opportunities and threats it now faces. Specifically, we investigate the concept of political leadership and whether it is a competence that can be measured, developed and selected for (Section 1), the development of a new selection process for political candidates (Section 2), and why it is important that political parties invest in choosing candidates who have the necessary skills (Section 3). Our conclusion will focus on what is at stake if we do not seek to improve the quality and the quantity of those seeking to rule the nation

Section 1 - What is Political Leadership?

In many ways 'leadership' has become the Holy Grail of the 21st Century. Whole libraries of books and articles have been written about what it takes to be a 'leader'. A multi-million pound industry now exists dedicated to identifying leadership potential, providing

leadership development, and recruiting leaders who (it is hoped) will transform organisations into world leaders. But, whilst much is known about what effective business leaders do and what they need to be effective, very little is understood about political leadership. Most people have a personal view about who would make a good political leader, but these views are often little more than subjective judgments about personality or whether a candidate is likely to meet their needs. Little is based on systematic research or evidence, and none is forward looking. As such few have considered how political roles have changed, or what political leaders of the future will need to be effective. So, what is known about successful leaders in other contexts?

Extensive leadership research over the past 50 years has shown that there is no single 'leader personality', however, most effective leaders share certain qualities (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2002). They are usually intelligent, very socially skilled, good communicators, highly motivated, and able to inspire and persuade others to follow. Some of these characteristics are innate, but all are developed and fine-tuned through experience. As such leaders are not born, but their potential has been transformed into actual 'knowledge' and 'skills'. Thus potential leaders need opportunities to learn and develop the necessary skills, and to test themselves. It is this experience that enables successful leaders to understand new challenges, identify solutions and navigate their leadership role effectively. We also know that successful leaders:

- Inspire and motivate others
- Create vision and shape others' understanding
- Set goals and mobilise support to achieve them
- Articulate what is, and is not, required from others
- Challenge the status quo and forge new strategic directions
- Continually reflect on their own skills & seek to learn & develop
- Create learning organisations & support development of others
- Monitor environments to identify opportunities and threats
- Disseminate information clearly and effectively
- Innovate

However, political leaders must do all of these and more. Political environments are more complex than business environments: there are no simple hierarchies, no clearly specified roles and

responsibilities, and few regulated lines of communication. Politicians are leaders by virtue of their position – be they local councillors, MPs or party leaders. Yet their roles are often nebulous, changing and, for the most part, self-driven. A key difference between political and other leaders is that politicians must follow as well as lead. Whereas leaders in other contexts can often rely on others to follow by virtue of their position, politicians are elected to represent the needs of others. They must therefore listen to and take account of views, and act on behalf of others to influence government. Perhaps most importantly, politicians must navigate an acceptable path between conflicting demands, priorities and views. Political leaders are required to demonstrate all the actions expected of other leaders, but the political environment in which they operate demands additional unique qualities, experience and skill.

Interestingly interest appears to be growing in how political leadership might be developed. At local government level, the Improvement & Development Agency has operated a Leadership Academy for senior councillors for several years (www.idea.gov.uk). A Local Government Leadership Centre was created in July 2004 (www.localleadership.gov.uk), and the first Development Centre for political executives was piloted in 2005 (Silvester, 2005). More long standing interest in supporting the development needs of politicians and aspiring politicians can be found internationally, for example the widely respected JF Kennedy School of Government. Yet, for the most part political candidates in this country are expected to present themselves already fully equipped for the role. What ad hoc development opportunities currently exist (the odd training session on campaigning or public speaking skills) also lack any base in detailed individual or organisational needs analysis. A one-day induction course for new politicians amounts to little more than a description of basic responsibilities and how to find various offices and rooms in the House of Commons. These are simply missed opportunities to equip aspiring or new politicians with skills that can make them even more effective. Such lack of interest in the development needs of politicians compares starkly with universal acceptance of the need for training and development in other occupational fields as diverse as medicine, law, business, education, and service: so why not politicians? Effective political leaders need to develop these skills and experience. Political parties, on the other hand, must develop effective systems for attracting, identifying and

nurturing individuals with the best potential for developing into excellent political leaders.

The first step in the process of ensuring effective political leaders is therefore to select individuals with the potential to become political leaders. In 2002, the Conservative Party became the first political party to embark upon the radical and innovative path of determining the qualities needed by political leaders, and developing a new systematic process for identifying and selecting individuals likely to become successful political leaders of the future. The authors acknowledge the support of David Davis MP (the then Party Chairman), the two Vice Chairmen Baroness Shephard and Baroness Morris, and the Chairman of the Candidates' Committee John Taylor. They would also like to acknowledge Lesley Taylor who did so much of the all important background work.

The next sections describe what was done, what was found and implications for future practices.

Section 2 - A Modern Selection Process

Shortly after the 2001 general election, a decision was taken to review and redevelop the first stage of the selection process for Parliamentary candidates. This is the Party assessment process to determine who can be included on the approved list of candidates, from which Associations are free to select candidates. A redesign was deemed necessary for two reasons: 1) a desire to create a modern rigorous and objective selection process, based on best practice from industry, and; 2) to make the process more transparent and fair, both to women and ethnic minority candidates. By removing important sources of bias from the system, and by training decision-makers to use a set of criteria relating to effective political performance, the aim was to create a selection system based on merit rather than patronage.

However, there are also other more subtle but significant advantages to implementing a systematic system for assessing potential candidates. Used properly it provides an organisation with the information necessary for identifying future high performers.

Such a system can also provide information for measuring the impact of selection decisions upon other organisational criteria such as productivity, innovation, and market share. Therefore in a political context it means that political parties can begin to identify individual factors that contribute to electoral success.

The authors worked with the Conservative Party to design, implement and validate the new selection process. The Conservative Party therefore became the first political party, either nationally or internationally, to adopt a systematic selection processes for prospective politicians based on agreed success criteria. The fact that it was the Conservative Party that took this initiative is perhaps not so surprising given that many party members may be very familiar with similar processes in other organisations. Moreover there was a resemblance to a structured process in place for assessing candidates. Based on the selection process once used at Sandhurst military college, this had been warped over the years by good intentions but little rigour.

Development of the new selection process followed established guidelines from occupational psychology. It began with an analysis of the MP role and the formulation of a competency framework that identified indicators of good and poor performance in each of six key areas. Next, a new selection process was designed. This process was subsequently validated to make sure it was robust and fair by looking at how the first 415 participants performed. A final validation involved comparing performance on the assessment centre and performance in the 2005 general election for the 106 of this group who were selected to fight seats. More detail about how these steps were undertaken is provided next.

1. Developing a Competency Framework: The first step in designing any selection process is to decide what is required. Identifying the specific qualities required by successful candidates means that people making the selection decisions can be more focused, objective and consistent. As we have already said, most people have their own idea of what makes a good politician (or even doctor, teacher or manager), but these views differ because people are influenced by subjective likes and dislikes. Moreover, few see all parts of the role. The general public is certainly not always aware of the different components of an MP's work – they may see their MP

in a surgery or in the media, but they are less likely to be aware of committee work within the House of Commons. Similarly, stereotypes of what a politician does are rife. The most pervasive view people have is of MPs debating on the floor of the House of Commons. As such they may consider public speaking skills to be important. In reality, however, MPs also need listening and negotiating skills, the ability to write fluently and the ability to field questions in a challenging live media interview. It is important to identify and articulate the many different qualities that Conservative MPs are likely to need so that selection decisions can be objective and reflect all aspects of the role.

In addition, roles do not stay the same. Organisations evolve to meet the challenges of a changing environment. As such roles must also change to meet shifting objectives and needs. This requires a strategic or visionary approach: senior managers look ahead and anticipate the changes that are likely to be required and structure their operations accordingly. The same also holds for political roles: identifying the capabilities required by future leaders requires foresight and vision. The experience of being an MP in the 21st Century is very different to the experience of being an MP twenty or even ten years ago. Moreover an individual faces related but different challenges as he/she progress up the political ladder. When Estelle Morris resigned from being Secretary of State for Education she confessed in a radio interview that no one had prepared her for the challenges of running a Department of State. Candidly she said in her resignation letter “I’ve learned what I’m good at and also what I’m less good at. I’m good at dealing with the issues and in communicating with the teaching profession. I am less good at strategic management of a huge department and I am not good at dealing with the modern media” (22 October 2002).

Politicians, like other professionals, have not been inured to the tremendous technological changes that have impacted so fundamentally on the way people work. Like others, politicians, are now required to cope with larger volumes of information at faster speeds and at all times of the day, with greater levels of visibility. 24/7 is a concept that hits home as much, if not more so, in politics as it does for other work roles. Selection processes must therefore take account of future as well traditional needs in capturing the important qualities for future political leaders.

A common mechanism for doing this is to conduct a role analysis and create a competency framework. Such frameworks are common in industry and the public sector. They are used to define effectiveness (and ineffectiveness) in roles as diverse as general practitioners, surgeons, chief executives, military officers, police, and teachers. However, the Conservative Party was the first political party, either nationally or internationally, to create a competency model for a political role. To do this a wide range of individuals from different parts of the Party were involved in interviews and focus groups. They included members of the shadow cabinet, MPs and prospective Parliamentary Candidates, Party Agents, and representatives from the voluntary side of the Party, including local associations and special groups. Scientific methods were used to capture the behaviours associated with good and poor performance as an MP now as well as how this might change over the next ten years (Silvester & Dykes, 2002). The six competencies that emerged are listed in Box 1.

Box 1: Competency Model for Conservative MP

- **Communication Skills:** Capacity to communicate clearly and persuasively across different audiences and media contexts – listens to and responds creatively by generating opportunities for communication both for self and others.
- **Intellectual Skills:** Understands, learns and prioritises complex information quickly – presents ideas in a transparent and persuasive manner, verbally and in writing.
- **Relating to People:** Ability to relate easily to people from all backgrounds – demonstrates tolerance, approachability and a capacity to inspire trust in others.
- **Leading & Motivating:** Capacity for leading and motivating people through recognition of their contribution, involving them, and providing support when required - accepts responsibility for outcomes.
- **Resilience & Drive:** Ability to cope effectively and positively with pressure (e.g., high work volume, long hours, work-home balance) – remains persistent in the face of challenge, set-backs and criticism.

- **Political Conviction:** A commitment to Conservative principles and public service: including the need for integrity and courage in securing opportunities to disseminate and defend beliefs.

2. A Modern Selection Process: These competencies capture the ‘essence’ of what it takes to be a Conservative MP – the behavioural indicators further shape what would be considered evidence of good and poor performance for each of these. Next the competency model was used as the basis for a new selection process (an ‘assessment centre’) where participants take part in a day of exercises and are assessed by trained assessors according to pre-defined criteria (Patterson et al., 2002). Assessment centres are one of the most popular and effective ways used by organisations to select individuals for senior roles. Moreover, provided certain key conditions are followed, they are also one of the most reliable and fair means of identifying the best candidates. These conditions are listed in Box 2.

Box 2: Conditions for effective and fair assessment centres:

1. Assessors must have no prior information about participants (this means that they are not influenced by expectations – or assumptions based on information that may not be relevant to performing effectively as a politician).
2. Different assessors must observe participants in each of the role-related exercises (this means that judgements are based on the views of several independent assessors, each observing a different aspect of the individual’s capability).
3. Assessors must use the same performance criteria when rating each candidate. To do this all assessors must be trained to apply selection criteria consistently and reliably.
4. Assessors should not discuss the performance of individual candidates with other assessors during the assessment centre. The final ‘approve’ decision is based on the outcome of each candidate’s performance on each of the exercises.

The main differences between this selection process and the ‘old’ selection process hitherto used at Central Office are that a)

performance criteria are made explicit, which means that assessors judge participants consistently and focus on important information rather than subjective individualised assumptions, b) decisions are based on the independent judgements of different assessors and the judgement of no one assessor is deemed to be more important than the judgement of another, and c) information about the performance of individual candidates in different competency areas can be used to identify development needs and provide individualised feedback.

The new assessment centre was designed to comprise of the following: a group exercise designed to evaluate how individuals interact in order to solve a problem relating to constituency work; a timed in-tray exercise which presents candidates with a series of dilemmas that they might encounter as an MP, and asks them to provide written responses; a public speaking exercise and; a structured competency interview which asks individuals to provide evidence relating to each of the competencies. Finally a psychometric questionnaire assessing critical thinking skills was also administered to assess whether individuals can sort quickly and effectively through large amounts of information and contradictory arguments. For each assessment centre, two MPs and two members of the voluntary side of the Party participate as assessors. All assessors are fully trained in the use of the competency model, fair assessment practices and awareness of bias. Importantly, assessors should also have no prior knowledge of the applicants before observing them at the assessment centre (i.e., they do not get to see CVs). This ensures that any prior expectations regarding applicants on the basis of profession or other contacts does not influence ratings.

The assessment centre was used to approve prospective Parliamentary candidates for the run up to the 2005 general election. It was not used to select Parliamentary candidates: individual associations are able to select freely from the approved list. However, it did mean that the Party could ensure that everyone accepted onto the approved list using the assessment centre possessed the requisite skills and abilities for political leadership. Of course, an important matter for any selection system is to determine whether or not it works. That is, is the system fair and reliable, and are the people who perform well in the selection process also the ones who perform well as political candidates?

3. Validation of the Selection Process: The success of the new assessment centre was assessed statistically in two ways. As the first objective was to ensure fairness – we compared the performance of men and women on each of the exercises and each of the competencies. Second, we looked at whether performance in the assessment centre predicted performance as a political candidate.

In relation to the first of these, we found no differences: women performed as well as men in all competency areas of the assessment centre, they also performed equally well in the 2005 general election. Moreover there was no evidence of different styles. For example, women and men demonstrated equivalent levels of competence in ‘relating to people’ as well as ‘leading and motivating’. This contradicts historical stereotypes that have led to women being assumed to be better at the former and men better at the latter.

This constitutes the first systematic evidence that when assessed for political roles using an objective, rigorous and transparent selection system women perform as well as men.

The creation of this assessment centre also provided the first chance to investigate the importance of different political skills and qualities in relation to performance in a general election. Of course many different factors influence the success of individual candidates in an election - the nature of a seat, the performance of the political party, local issues etc – but it is still possible to investigate statistically whether individual qualities contribute to success beyond these factors. In fact, preliminary analyses, undertaken by the authors, suggest that certain qualities, such as critical thinking skills and performance on certain exercises are significantly associated with electoral performance as measured against success rates at the last General Election.

This provides the first evidence that the skills, abilities and qualities that individuals need to become politicians (and be successful in elections) can be identified and developed.

Section 3 - Implications and Next Steps

The development of the first professional process for selecting political candidates leaves the Conservative Party with a range of exciting possibilities. It also has implications that require serious consideration – particularly given the urgent drive to begin selection of political candidates ahead of the next general election. The Conservative Party is better placed than any other political party to build on the professionalism of its selection processes and implement innovative strategies for improving the quality and standing of its members.

The current Leadership challenge brings many of these issues into focus. For example, whether the Conservative Party continues along this path depends on more than the attitudes of a few at the centre. It is wrapped up in the larger debate of who holds, and what are, the power bases within the Party.

The final selection of a political candidate rests with the local associations and, as such, the voluntary side of the party. This noble army of Party members are the foot soldiers of the Conservative Party. It is they who stalwartly deliver party communications, raise money for local and central campaigns, and wave the banner for their MP whilst he/she is away in Westminster. They are, in short, the backbone of the Party. Who their leaders are, in the shape of the Parliamentary Party, is obviously of immense importance to them. Moreover, that choice, along with the ability to call their MP and councillors to account, are the only practical levers of power that Party Associations have. Infringement of their right to choose an MP is therefore a serious subject - especially when Association executives often find that the Parliamentary Party in general has not always followed the instincts of ordinary Association members.

Importantly, the involvement of Party Associations has been integral to every stage of the development and implementation of this new selection process. Members of the voluntary side of the party were involved in creating the competency framework. The assessment centre is also designed such that equal numbers of MPs and Association members act as assessors. However, it is now important to share the knowledge and expertise gained from the development of this new selection process.

As yet there has been no systematic effort to marry the findings of the assessment centre to the selection process of the wider Party. In the last Parliament Baroness Morris, Vice Chairman of Candidates, did sterling and exhaustive work actively promoting women candidates amongst associations by individually visiting them or their Chairman. By doing so she also could share information on the relative skills of individual candidates. But there is a limit to how many associations one person can reach - what is more, personal exhortations only appeal to the willing. For effective change local associations need to be convinced that any proposed changes to their selection process are based on sound evidence. Baroness Morris's efforts aside, there has been little effort to disseminate the initial findings of the assessment centre or knowledge about what has proven successful.

In a situation when the relationship between the Parliamentary Party and the voluntary party is already fragile the lack of understanding breeds further hostility and resentment. The result is a tug of war between power bases with progress at a standstill in the middle. We feel that there should be more effort made by the centre of the Party to explain what is at stake if the Party does not offer to the electorate candidates who are able to connect with them as well as representing Conservative values.

There are, inevitably, arguments against employing such a systematised selection process. One example of this is the claim that any centrally created system will produce what Boris Johnson has described as 'a series of poodles' (Spectator, 28 May 2005). By this we take he means a litany of colourless, if worthy, political anoraks – or clones. But such an argument confuses the concept of personality with skill. As we know effective leaders have many different personalities (thankfully), yet they all share similar attributes: the knowledge, skills, motivation and experience that enable them to lead effectively. Psychologically 'personality' is very different from 'skill'. Indeed, charisma and intelligence can be very dangerous if they are not balanced with values, experience and integrity. The aim of the assessment centre is to establish if an individual has (or has the potential to develop) the skills necessary to be an MP. The selection process certainly does not produce 'clones' – as witnessed by the refreshingly diverse nature of the new MPs.

Conclusion

So, what are the opportunities and threats for the future process of approving prospective parliamentary candidates? We know that the 'new' selection system introduced in 2002 has proved to be effective. We also know which aspects of the system work better than others. This gives the opportunity for any political party to decide what skill mix provides the basis for a winning formula; it follows that the current processes of approving prospective candidates should be modified accordingly.

For the Conservative Party there is an urgency to begin the process of approving individuals for 'the list' – but to begin the process too quickly risks losing the advantage gained so far. For example, the decision to drop a key element of the assessment process in favour of an invalidated new test impacts upon the validity and effectiveness of the process. Changes or failure to uphold the integrity and professionalism of the system means that confidence in assessment decisions is eroded. Constant vigilance, through effective assessor training and ongoing validation, is needed to ensure that the system continues to be consistent, rigorous and fair. To maintain its lead the Conservative Party must show that it understands the strengths of its own system and can act to reduce any weaknesses. Not only is this being fair to potential candidates, it is essential to gain the confidence, of those who are obliged to pick from the approved list.

However, even if all of this is done there are still problems relating to democracy and diversity that need addressing. The assessment centre has proved that political skills are without gender. However, a selection process based on merit means that women can only be selected in proportion to the numbers that come through the system. Therefore, unless the number of women and black and minority ethnic (BME) individuals applying to become Conservative MPs increases, there will still be too few to make a substantial difference in Parliament. The Fawcett Society notes that since 1945 the proportion of Conservative women MPs has crept up by only half a per cent at each election. It reckons that unless drastic changes occur it will take another three hundred years before the Party achieves equal representation of men and women at Westminster. (Conservative Candidates where are the women? The Fawcett Society, 2005)

There is therefore an important need to attract and retain more women and BME members to become Conservative candidates. This is akin to the challenges faced by many organisations who are competing for the best candidates and who desire to increase their talent pool. A commonly used phrase to describe the strategies they use to attract individuals is 'the war for talent'. This is not simply a diversity issue. All the political parties are finding that too few people of calibre are attracted to political roles. This is especially true in local government when the search for candidates to stand at elections can be distressingly obvious. Consequently, for a party determined to become more representative and field candidates that are believable, competent and inspiring, the need to engage fully in the war for talent is of paramount importance.

Diversity based on merit means levelling the playing field. It means that people are selected because they are good not because their face fits – it therefore addresses the issue of raising the standard of politicians in the House of Commons. As Andrew Marr commented when discussing his observations as political commentator for the BBC:

“Another thing is a real and growing fear about the quality of people coming into politics. All the main parties have a sprinkling of clever, physically strong and fundamentally decent people at the top. None of them has nearly enough such people under that sprinkling”.
(Sunday Telegraph, 31st July 2005)

If associations are to be asked to look for candidates who have the skills of modern politicians, it is incumbent on those putting themselves forward for selection that they can display these skills. Political parties are established, in the main, to win elections on behalf of their political creed: they are not, nor can they be, training establishments for which they do not have the expertise, the time or for that matter the money.

It cannot be stressed enough that the assessment centre demonstrates whether people have the potential to be a good MP. It alone does not produce finished articles. Whether candidates become an MP or not depends on the manner in which they gain experience and whether they develop their political skills and antennae (as well as having a fair measure of political good fortune on the wider scale). Having an assessment centre without

establishing any individual guidance on appropriate skill or knowledge development has meant that some candidates have gone into election unprepared and under developed. This has merely increase the suspicion of Associations that the centre is not fulfilling it obligation of providing candidates fit to stand, and it has not been very pleasant for the ill equipped candidate. More than that, it has meant that sometimes the electorate is being offered candidates who simply are not yet ready to represent them.

There has been much written on the problems of the election system with varying suggestions, as to how the system can be improved to make the results more representative of the popular vote. There are arguments for and against pure proportional representation, regional lists, additional members systems, the alternative vote top-up or a single transferable vote. Others have argued that the selection process itself should be changed with greater use of primaries such as the Americans use. But little has been written on improving the quality of the people at the centre of the system. The analogy is simple – a car, no matter the size or strength of the engine, can only be driven to the ability of the driver. A good system cannot produce results unless the driver is competent and vice a versa. This is a particularly important point considering the constitutional changes already introduced by the present Government. The closed list used in elections of MEPs which counts the number voting for a Party rather than anyone individual, means that the voter has to take it on faith that those put up for election by members of a political party are competent. The Government has also extended the principles of the ballot for the elections of mayors, and there is talk of making membership of the House of Lords elected. In this paper we have concentrated on improving the ability of the drivers while other authorities may concentrate on improving the engine.

What political parties can do is give more encouragement and guidance to their candidates. After all, every good company executive knows that it is the work force that produces and sells the goods. Political parties may instruct on their particular systems for canvassing or in making sure candidates abide by election law but, as we have argued, they cannot provide the personal development for aspiring politicians. However they can and should advise. This is where the hidden value of properly constructed assessment centres

becomes apparent. Using the results of the assessment centre, individualised training programmes could be produced and given to the candidates so that they understand what their strengths and weaknesses are. The advantage to the applicant is that he/she then knows on what to concentrate their precious resources and time; the advantage to the political party is that candidates are ultimately better prepared.

If political parties do not put up better candidates then there is real danger that voters will feel uninspired by, and further detached from, the politicians being offered to them. This strikes at the very basis of our democratic system. Democracy offers several advantages. It allows for the marriage of community interests – in this respect, it is an important instrument of community cohesion. It acts as the lightning conductor rooting political expression in that true representative democracy should be capable of reflecting the needs, aspirations and interests of our diverse community. If various communities feel they have no voice in Parliament they might look to express their opinion through other means such as campaigning organisations, lobby groups and other extra Parliamentary activities such a mass rallies and, in the extreme, civic disobedience.

Democracy also provides access to power for any citizen who is capable of clearing the hurdles to get into Westminster, or a town hall. It is a ladder of opportunity. Contrary to popular fiction, within British society there has always been a healthy degree of social mobility. Any study of the social background of the Prime Ministers over the last century will testify to the fact that politics is a well-trodden avenue of social advancement. As Julian Amery, once an MP, cynically said “When I was young, a man (sic) would go into parliament because he was someone. Now a man would go into parliament to become someone” (cited in Geoffrey Wheatcroft: *The Strange Death of Tory England*). While clearly benefiting the individual who enjoys the advantage of a heightened social position, the real importance of democracy expressed in a Parliamentary system, is that such social advancement refreshes the talent pool of the opinion formers. But this is only acceptable if the whole electoral system is fair and transparent. Shoe-horning people in by artificial means is not good enough.

Although some commentators find it tedious, the emphasis being put on making sure that the House of Commons does truly reflect the population is very important. It is well established that black and

other ethnic minorities do not bother to vote because of the feeling that there is nothing in it for them. Our system, by allowing diversity on merit, means creating a level playing field – the only qualification being ability. But this cannot be realised unless there are individually crafted development plans. Not only do these advantage the individual by flagging up areas in need of development such as public speaking or knowledge of media handling, they help focus aspiring politicians on the need for continual development and learning. Moreover for aspiring candidates who may come from outside the clubby atmosphere that every political party builds around itself this is fundamentally important. People, whether they are members of ethnic minorities, women or anyone who has not had the time to develop a party profile may have excellent potential. But they are not necessarily familiar with the nuances and language, or the simple know how needed to navigate a path around the political landscape. This puts them at a significant disadvantage to those whose careers might have been more firmly embedded in politics and therefore have easy access to patronage and mentoring. Development plans and a fair and objective assessment system should give greater confidence amongst political aspirants that they will be judged fairly and objectively.

If the range of people coming forward for assessment increase, and if the all-important individual development is in place, the arguments diminish for the use of positive discrimination. Although the intention of using this and other artificial means is good their use has led to resentment by those not included in the schemes, they have offended the British sense of fairness and they have done little to raise the stock or independence of MPs.

Instead the concentration should be on winning the confidence of the Party selectors and the most important selectors of all, the whole of the electorate, by encouraging more diversity in candidates putting themselves forward, by assessing them in a fair and transparent way and by guiding them as to how they could equip themselves to be competent politicians and leaders of the future. As Alexander Pope wrote

*“For forms of government let fools contest
Whats’er is best administered is best”*

(Cited in Geoffrey Wheatcroft: “The Strange Death of Tory England”)

Footnotes.

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