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The Under-Appreciated Loss of Political Office

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Abstract

The experience of politicians leaving elected office is under-researched (Keane, 2011). This paper examines the experience of leaving political office drawing on empirical research in the UK with 30 elected politicians, including 20 who had left office, either having been defeated in election or having chosen not to stand for election, and where possible their partners. The sample also included 10 interviews with current politicians about their expectations of transition from elected office. The paper considers the findings from a psychological and a sociological perspective and suggests features that predict a problematic adjustment to the loss of political office.

Introduction

Representative democracies depend on politicians being elected to office and, crucially, later leaving it. Despite the inevitability of politicians losing office, scholars have shown relatively little interest, with political exit described as '*under-theorized, under-researched and under-appreciated*' (Keane, 2011: 282-3).

This paper argues that there are additional factors pertaining to political office and its loss that are different from other occupational roles and thus warrant specific investigation. Few jobs have the all-consuming combination of personal demands and challenges that face politicians, not least from a hostile media and sceptical (at best) electorate (Roberts, 2017). Politicians do however share with professional athletes (and to some extent, the clergy and the military) a relentlessly demanding role where cherished values, beliefs and identity are deeply entwined and which may suddenly come to an end. Furthermore, the loss of political office is not an entirely private matter. Citizens elect politicians to represent them: they have a relationship with politicians, like it or not. Indeed, many supporters of Hillary Clinton in her US Presidential bid in 2016 describe *their* experience of her defeat in terms of trauma (Carmack and DeGroot, 2018).

While the general public may not be sympathetic to politicians' losing office, this paper attempts to illustrate the similarities and the differences with job loss elsewhere and to highlight the issue on a human level. Given the paucity of research on losing political office, the comparison with other forms of job loss are limited. The extensive academic literature on retirement and redundancy can nevertheless usefully inform consideration of political exit. This literature demonstrates that each transition is a process over time influenced by different variables, with multiple meanings and impact beyond the financial and practical for individuals and families (Archer & Rhodes, 1987; Ashforth, 2012; Gabriel et al, 2013; Vickers, 2009; Vough, Bataille, Chul Noh & Dean Lee, 2015; Wang, 2013). In contrast to the loss of political office, there is a burgeoning literature on athlete retirement, whether planned or forced by injury, (e.g. Cecic Erpic, Wylleman & Zupancic, 2004; Lally, 2007; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) that suggests that the degree of voluntariness in retiring, the degree to which identity is wholly consumed by sport, and subjective perception of athletic achievement all influence adjustment to retirement.

Both retirement and redundancy may be experienced as a significant loss: of not just work itself but of a structured day, status, social engagement and identity (e.g. Beehr, 1986; Kets de Vries, 2003; Wang, 2013). The social and psychological consequences of job loss have increasingly been highlighted (e.g. Fineman, 1987; Gabriel, Gray & Goregaokar, 2010; Strangleman, 2012) with recognition that a grief reaction may occur (Murray Parkes, 1971; Vickers, 2009) and that its intensity is related to the degree of attachment to that which has been lost (Archer & Rhodes, 1993). A lack of acknowledgement that job loss can precipitate a grieving process may make the experience of grief even more painful (Vickers, 2009).

The rich psychological literature on loss deepens understanding of grief and job loss suggesting grief is better understood as a loss not just of the other but of part of the self that disrupts an individual's 'assumptive world' (Freud, 1917; Murray Parkes, 1971; Marris, 1993). Drawing on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), Marris proposes that after a major loss, voluntary or involuntary, certain conditions influence the necessary process of reintegration of the individual including the degree to which the meaning of that which has been lost is conflicted, time to prepare for the loss, and events that occur after the loss that either support or frustrate the process (Marris, 1993).

From a sociological perspective, the work of Ebaugh (1988), based on interviews with people making transitions from a range of occupational and personal roles (but not politicians), is relevant to political exit. She makes clear that the process of role exit involves tension between an individual's past, present and future and the importance of distinguishing between someone who is '*an ex*' rather than '*a never*' (Ebaugh, 1988: 149), that is re-establishing a new role that takes into account the ex-role.

Scholarly work specifically on former politicians emerged in the last century exploring what former US Presidents did after leaving the White House (e.g. Norton Smith & Walch, 1990; Schenker, 1982; Skidmore, 2004). Although Kearns Goodwin (1991 p.359) describes Lyndon Johnson's dependence on '*the vestiges of the presidential armor without which the feelings of dislocation might have been more stunning than they already were*', there is little that explores the *experience* of the transition and even less about the experience of, or impact on, a partner or family. Willy Brandt is put forward as a rare example of a 'mournful ager' who could relinquish top office without fuss (McIntyre, 1988: p.295). The literature mostly focuses on heads of government, party leaders and ministers (e.g. Bynander & 't Hart, 2008; Just, 2004; Theakston, 2010; Theakston & De Vries, J., 2012). But Hillary Clinton recalls Bill Clinton as '*so depressed he practically couldn't get off the floor*' (Clinton, 2017, p.20) when he failed to be re-elected as Arkansas governor in 1980 and, she, having failed to be elected as President in 2016, as '*fighting back a wave of sadness that threatened to swallow me whole*' (Clinton, 2017, p. 18).

While there is relatively little research on the transition from office of parliamentarians, there is a richer literature from Canada (e.g. Doherty, 2001; Shaffir & Kleinknecht, 2005) that uses survey and interview data (but not with partners). Leaving Parliament is described as a '*different death ... a death that no-one grieves with you.*' (Shaffir & Kleinknecht, 2005: 715).

In the UK, Theakston has led work on Westminster MPs leaving office using mostly survey data (Theakston, Gouge & Honeyman, 2007; Byrne & Theakston, 2016) with an unspecified number of interviews. This work, and Kwiatowski's (2015) interviews with MPs, demonstrates the difficulties experienced by many in adjusting to life outside

the House of Commons. However, there is little systematic of the experience of losing parliamentary office using interview data, very little on the impact of leaving office on politicians' partners and family and, to the author's knowledge, no literature about the exit of leading politicians from local government.

Given gaps identified in the literature, this paper makes a contribution to the field by drawing on a qualitative empirical research study in which in-depth interviews were conducted with former Westminster MPs and council leaders and, where possible, their partners, about their experience of transition from office, and with a sample of current politicians about how they envisaged a future exit from office. The study sought to understand the experience of holding political office, of losing it, the consequences of the loss of political office on individuals and partners, and what factors might influence the adjustment to the transition. Drawing on a psychological and sociological perspective, the paper contributes theoretically to existing literature on job loss and political office. The wider implications for representative democracy are explored elsewhere (Roberts, 2018).

The research study

This was a qualitative study based on interviews with a diverse mix of former MPs and local authority leaders. Former council leaders had to have lost their leadership position and seat for inclusion into the study.

The sample was drawn from former MPs who had left Parliament at the 2010 UK General Election and leaders of councils who had left between 2008 and 2012. Of the 41 interviews conducted, 10 were with MPs and council leaders who had stood down (and with four of the six partners). 10 were with those who had been defeated (and seven of the nine partners), and 10 were with current politicians.

Of the 30 former and current politicians interviewed, seven were female (a reasonable number given the relatively low percentage of women in political office) and the sample ranged in age from their thirties to their seventies. They came from all three (at the time) main political parties and from very different areas of England. Some MPs had been nationally known Cabinet members, while others had solely held backbench

positions. Participants had been in office for varying lengths of time ranging from under one year to over 30 years.

All 20 former MPs were interviewed about two years after they had left office in 2010. Council leaders, half of whom had left office in 2011, were interviewed mostly between 12 to 18 months later.

Interviews

The duration of the semi-structured interviews with former office holders was mostly around two hours. Interviews with partners and with current politicians were shorter (about one hour). Consent was sought to audiotape the interviews and to quote from them unattributably. Transcripts of the interviews were thematically analyzed.

Findings

This analysis begins with a summary of how the former politicians had regarded their role while in office given that the experience of loss depends on the value and meanings attached to that which has been lost.

Holding political office

All but four of the interviewees described holding political office in highly positive terms. Some explicitly described it in vocational terms with notably, a very few having contemplated a religious calling. For many MPs, entering Parliament had been longed for from an early age, a goal that they had been relentlessly focused on. A number of partners conveyed how for their spouses the role of an MP was more than simply a job but a role to which they had long aspired.

Council leaders, current and former, in the study were all unequivocally positive in about the experience of council leadership. They talked in similar terms about how demanding, fascinating and extraordinarily varied it was, a role that they deeply valued.

For council leaders and most MPs alike, it was an all-consuming role but the ability to have influence, to be at the centre of things, to be courted for their opinions, simply to matter on a wider stage were highly compelling, often described '*a massive buzz*'.

There were however four former MPs who felt very differently having come to find their parliamentary role uncongenial - '*horrendous*' - with sharply increasing pressures on them and their family not least from media scrutiny that had escalated significantly after the 2009 Parliamentary expenses scandal.

Many partners talked of their pride in the politician spouse for the work that they had done. Many partners had organized their lives around the demands, emotional and practical, of political office. For some, the political office of their spouse had been a positive boon, with new opportunities to learn and widen social networks. Others had been more distant and struggled hard to bring up a family with little help.

The experience of losing office

In this study, manner of exit was an element in the experience of transition from political office but there was not a simple division between those who had stood down and those who had been defeated.

Most, whether they had chosen to go or not, had grieved the loss of political office acknowledging that the emotional impact was a lot less simple than anticipated. One former senior MP had chosen to go entirely voluntarily but recognised that it '*was still a huge loss because it's what I loved doing and had always wanted to do, and there as also a sense of I will never again have such a big job.*' This was a loss not only of what had been but the loss of a future, of what might have been. Very few, even if they had stood down, had made plans, either for the future or for the immediate transition.

Most former politicians had experienced at the very least a sense of dislocation: how to structure the vast amount of time that had opened up; coming to terms to no longer mattering to others in the same way; finding a new narrative about who they were and what they did, and a number had struggled hard to find employment despite an

impressive range of skills. Many were unfamiliar with newer methods of job recruitment, compiling a curriculum vitae or being interviewed.

All the partners interviewed had been closely involved either with the decision to go or with the defeat. Many described how they had anticipated defeat while their politician spouse had remained (possibly unrealistically) optimistic. Partners had held both the anxiety about potential defeat and the intense emotions in the aftermath of actual defeat. They spoke in raw and often angrier terms than their politician spouse.

The paper turns now to explore how the different routes from office affected the experience of the transition.

The experience of standing down

Those who had stood down began the journey of losing political office much earlier than those who had been defeated and many had agonised over the decision.

Although the four MPs who had come to dislike their time in Parliament described leaving office as a relief with more time, much welcomed, with partners and families, one could still acknowledge that the transition had needed some getting used to given the major changes to identity.

Other MPs had chosen to go for varying reasons and despite having had many months at least to plan their transition from office and the future, few had done so. One partner had described how the politician spouse had refused to engage in thinking about what was beckoning, having only reluctantly stood down post that under pressure to avoid personal embarrassment – and struggled hard subsequently. Only one MP had thought through with considerable care and detail, that later paid dividends, both about the future and the process of the transition from office.

Council leaders were less subject than MPs to media intrusion and they had stood down having unequivocally relished their role but having come to realise that they should go after many years. One nevertheless came to have misgivings, realising that the process had been more complicated than envisaged, as nearly all these participants

acknowledged. In standing down, a politician will have brought about her/ his own demise: the electorate cannot be held responsible.

The experience of being defeated

For those who had been defeated, the journey of transition started later and the exit from office more sudden. For many it had been a severe shock despite a predicted unfavourable national swing but they had clung to the belief that they would buck the trend. There were powerful, often moving stories: of hurt, humiliation, betrayal, shame, and being avoided by those still in office for fear of the contagion of failure, affecting not just the individuals leaving office but their partners and families.

Many exhausted candidates had only realised defeat was imminent at the count, in full view of the media, and felt a powerful sense of failure. There was anger and resentment, expressed more frankly by partners, at the perceived ingratitude of the electorate or towards the national party for the defeat, after the sacrifices made by the politicians over the years, and often their family too. The struggle by many between the rational recognition that defeat is an integral and desirable part of the electoral process, and the lived experience of being crushed emotionally was vividly portrayed.

Partners were deeply affected by their partners' defeat even if they had allowed of the possibility, often describing the count as exquisitely painful. Partners were more likely to express anger and bitterness towards the political party of which they also mostly had been members (but often no longer). Their lives might well have been turned upside down as well particularly if they had been part of what had felt like a joint effort.

Life immediately profoundly changed. MPs had distressed staff to make redundant while some council leaders, immediately cut off from municipal email, did not get the opportunity to say goodbye to former colleagues. Council leaders' income immediately disappeared without even the statutory minimum redundancy pay (or access to the Local Government Pension Scheme). Their job, role, social networks and status had all disappeared overnight with little sense of what the future might hold.

The sense of rejection and hurt felt by many of the defeated MPs led a number to seek to get away from their constituency as soon as possible, feeling almost an aversion to staying. Doubts about who amongst their neighbours may have voted for them – or not – were troubling, as too was simply knowing what to say about themselves to others. For those whose main home was in the constituency, moving away was a major upheaval, uprooting what might have been long established patterns of working and social life for the family. For former council leaders, it is more difficult to move having been based in one place.

Being acknowledged

Few former politicians, especially if defeated, had received any meaningful communication from their political party, as if they had been cast out from the tribe. Said one, *'Ex-MPs are like rotting fish. Failed politicians are the worst of the worst.'* One council leader described it, *'Like a bereavement – and it was - but there was no funeral.'* Many felt deeply hurt at the lack of acknowledgement from the political party that they had served so loyally for so long. Many heard nothing or, if they had, it was too little, too late and too impersonal. Partners expressed anger about what was felt to be a betrayal with some having left the party in fury as a result. Where there had been an acknowledgement, especially a rite of passage of some sort, it was deeply appreciated and long remembered.

The longer term

Exploring the transition over the next two years or so, there was a mixed picture amongst former politicians. There were both commonalities but inevitably, given the widely different personalities and experiences, many differences. The manner of exit – voluntary or involuntary or varying shades in between – accounted for some of the differences but other influences were evident. Two former council leaders (both women) who had been very narrowly and unexpectedly defeated had come to flourish, finding new avenues. They had strong family and social support and welcomed less pressured time with family albeit still missing the camaraderie of their erstwhile political group and other colleagues. On the other hand, another who had stood down was said to have become depressed, lamenting his lack of purpose.

Unsurprisingly, the four MPs who had come to dislike their parliamentary role thrived, two returning to a previous career (not straightforward given the time away) and two finding new more fulfilling career paths. One had been appointed to the House of Lords - described as '*the big after-care treatment*' – and welcomed still having a platform from which to speak but with no constituency pressures.

Most of the other former politicians had more ambivalent experiences: a rational and ready acceptance of what the electorate or they had dealt but still a yearning for elements of what had been and a sense of dislocation. Even if the decision to go had been right, they missed the intoxicating brew of being in the middle of the fray and the camaraderie of their political group or close colleagues. Most acknowledged that the transition from political office had been a major life transition, less straightforward than anticipated, and a profound loss of both what had been and what might have been. Finding a new narrative about who they were and what they did was the key issue for nearly all. One refused to contemplate anything other than gaining a parliamentary seat and struggled particularly hard.

Over time, many but not all of those who had stood down had accommodated well: more time for themselves, family and friends, and not constantly being at the beck and call of others. There was a more mixed picture of the longer term among those who had been defeated. Two had flourished finding structure and purpose in their life after political office while a few remained in the slough of despair deeply affecting their relationships with others. Most were somewhere in between, having adjusted reasonably to their changed circumstances after a period of turbulence. Many had little to do with the political party that had previously consumed so much of their time.

The former politicians had followed very different paths. A considerable number of former (full-time) council leaders and MPs struggled hard to find employment whereas MPs who had previously been in the Cabinet found other roles more easily, their skills more immediately recognised by employers. For those who were less successful in finding other roles, feelings of dejection, lack of confidence and low self-esteem persisted over considerable time, still evident at the time of interview around two years later. A small minority were said to have been depressed. In one case, it was a partner who had later suffered from depression in part arising from severe financial difficulties

consequent to the loss of office. Coming together with others who had had similar experiences was helpful for many but some could only do so when they had begun to feel more stable.

From the perspective of both the former politicians who had chosen to go and their partners, the changes in the couple relationship, with two exceptions, were very positive, perhaps to an unanticipated degree. Repairing of marital strains and closer companionship were greeted with delight. The positive effects spread widely into the extended family with time, less pressure and less press intrusion cited as key factors. Two couples struggled, one of them later separating.

Where the politician had been defeated, the picture was more mixed. The loss for many had been deeply perturbing over an extended time. One partner remained bitter 18 months on from defeat and vengeful towards the political party that had treated them badly. On the other hand, having more time and not having to conform to public expectations was welcome. The separation of one couple was attributed to the defeat.

Despite an impressive array of skills, knowledge and experience that had been gained in political office, very few former politicians had been asked to contribute subsequently either to their political party or to wider civic society. In spite of the formidable responsibilities of the role, council leaders' skills appeared barely recognised. Both they and especially their partners were deeply frustrated at what seemed to be such a profligate waste of a valuable resource that could have been of benefit to both party and civic society.

Thinking about leaving political office: the current politicians

The current politicians were notably reluctant to give much thought to how long they might seek to remain in office, the transition from office or to think about planning for succession, even if they represented a marginal seat. Many had seen how difficult life had been for some of their former colleagues. It was an unappealing prospect and best not thought about except by one: an MP who had been very scarred previously by the loss of a parliamentary seat. Many years later, s/he had not been able until the interview to have a frank conversation about it with anyone.

Discussion

For the majority of those leaving political office, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, the experience was one of significant loss.

Kets de Vries suggests that leaders in any sector may find job loss particularly difficult having to relinquish the ‘*essential nutrients*’ of power (Kets de Vries, 2003: 708), influence and constant affirmation, and potentially instead face ‘*the experience of nothingness*’ (Kets de Vries, 2003: 711). With the intoxicating nature of elected office for many, leaving may be even more unappealing for political leaders particularly those in high-profile national positions. Non-human primates are little different in this respect, as the evolutionary underpinning of attachment theory suggests. De Waal graphically describes the powerful reaction of one chimpanzee after losing his top spot in his social group who “*Would often sit staring into the distance after a fight, an empty expression on his face. He was oblivious to the social activity around him and refused food for weeks ... a mere ghost of the impressive big shot he had been.*” (de Waal, 2006: 50). De Waal explains how humans and apes are ‘obligatorily gregarious’, constantly fearing being cast out and ostracised, “*Evolution has instilled a need to belong and to feel accepted*” (de Waal, 2006: 220).

In losing political office, former politicians may, however, be very publicly cast out (if not formally ostracized as in Ancient Greece, (Keane, 2011)). The ‘Portillo moment’¹ is long remembered. Yet at a time when former politicians most need social support, they may be deprived of it. Those whose social lives have centred on their political role with little ‘hinterland’ outside politics (Healey, 1989) are likely to be particularly vulnerable, as in this study. But many will experience a period of dislocation at least, struggling to create new meaning about the self and its relation to the world whether the loss of office arises voluntarily or involuntarily. Apart from the loss of income, status, influence, networks, media attention – and simply mattering - politicians’ values

¹ Michael Portillo, a former Cabinet member lost his parliamentary seat in 1997 to loud cheers from many nation-wide

and identity may well be deeply bound up with holding elected office. Few other roles can offer the same allure.

In such changed circumstances, the psychological task is to re-organise, re-integrate and find a new narrative that incorporates the past in order to give meaning to the future (Marris, 1993). Or, from Ebaugh's (1988) sociological perspective, '*to create an ex-role.*' This paper now explores elements that may make the task of re-integration more difficult.

Predicting the impact of the loss of office

From this study's findings, it may be possible to predict the individuals who will find the transition from political office particularly problematic whether they had stood down or had been defeated. Those for whom meaning, purpose and identity are exclusively tied up with the political role appear to be at particular risk (chiming with Ebaugh, 1988 and Ashforth, 2012), especially where there is little available family and social support. Families may have been inadvertently neglected owing to the pressures of work or the family of most meaning may be the political party by whom they may have been abandoned. Both ambivalence about standing down and unexpected defeat make more complicated the process of adjustment but this may be mitigated to some extent by explicit acknowledgment of the contribution made by the politician - whether in the form of a letter, dinner, honorary degree, an honour etc. – and/ or banding together with others in a similar position. While not quite a funeral, such markers are certainly a 'transition bridge' (Ashforth, 2012) allowing some continuity from one role to another.

Although planning is inevitably difficult - psychologically and practically - during an electoral campaign, making plans for the immediate transition and for the future appears to be important. That partners can instead hold the pessimism may be helpful. But a rigid insistence on one route forward only (regaining elected office, for example) rather than a more open-minded approach, is unhelpful.

Those who struggled to find employment, paid or voluntary and/ or where little use made of the skills and experience gained in office had a more difficult adjustment,

resonating with Theakston et al, (2007). Contrary to public perception, there is no revolving door in the UK between political office and the corporate boardroom for most (Byrne and Theakston, 2016). Skills could be far better used, both to bolster the evolving new identity of former politicians and to benefit employers, political parties and wider civic society. Instead, they are often carelessly wasted.

This study did not attempt to explore emotional resilience in any depth but there were hints of earlier difficulties that might have influenced how individuals managed the loss of office, echoing Marris (1993). Length of tenure and age did not seem to influence the impact. There was a hint that women adjusted less problematically but the numbers are too small to be confident. Attribution of blame for having been defeated (for example, personal failure or an unfavourable national swing) was not a significant factor but again numbers are small. In the 2015 election when there was a large national swing, there is a suggestion (Roberts, 2017) that the cohort of Liberal Democrat MPs who lost their seats were protected from a sense of individual failure, as in Ebaugh's (1988) notion of group exit.

It should be recognised however that the nature of political office, its visibility and for most, the magnitude of relinquishing it means that even the most resilient, secure and well-supported former politicians might struggle. With increasing pressure on MPs and now council leaders (and directly elected mayors) to do no other paid work, and thus not to be able to maintain professional skills, the personal risks of leaving political office increase. Yet, with just some thought and very little resource, steps could be taken to ameliorate the steep cliff-edge facing politicians as they leave office, to the benefit of the individuals concerned, their families, political parties, employers and citizens more widely (Roberts, 2017). The Norwegian Parliament offers a structured package of support to departing parliamentarians (Martinsen, 2019, personal communication). Such steps are now routine from many other occupational roles and have been taken up to smooth the path from professional sport for example, by the Professional Cricketers' Association².

² <http://www.thepca.co.uk/top-ten-tips.html>

As one former MP wisely reflected, ‘*The power to really decisively change things goes with political power and that is what you cannot replace by some other thing.*’ Seen in this light, losing political office may well be experienced as a profound loss whether chosen or not.

Concluding thoughts

This study illustrates the challenges facing those leaving political office, in addition to those arising from job loss more generally, arising from the nature of political office itself and what happens during and subsequent to the loss. In contrast to the loss of other occupational roles, there is little recognition of the difficulties or sympathy for those making the transition from political office - quite the reverse, journalists and the public may well crow at a politician’s demise. While politicians may be in no doubt about the strength of their values and determination, the public has a more jaundiced, cynical view of their motivations. Once out of office, the social support that is known to be helpful following redundancy and retirement often melts away. A politician may instead be cast out from those with whom s/he had been so closely bound with little recognition of potential difficulty in adjusting to life out of political office, thereby compounding the grief. There may even be a punitive, salacious edge directed towards those who have served the public in political office, isolating a former politician further. That there may be a considerable dissonance between the political inevitability and ordinariness of politicians leaving office and the personal impact on the individual that may feel anything but ordinary, is likely to compound the perturbing nature for many of the transition from work in political office – and as citizens, we are all complicit.

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