

Generation 2010:

A thorn in the side or democracy's watchmen?



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Jenny White reflects on the new generation of Westminster MPs

In May 2010, a new generation of MPs swept into Parliament and have set about casting Parliamentarians in a new light: as watchmen of democracy on behalf of their constituents. To many in Government, however, they are a thorn that cannot be pruned.

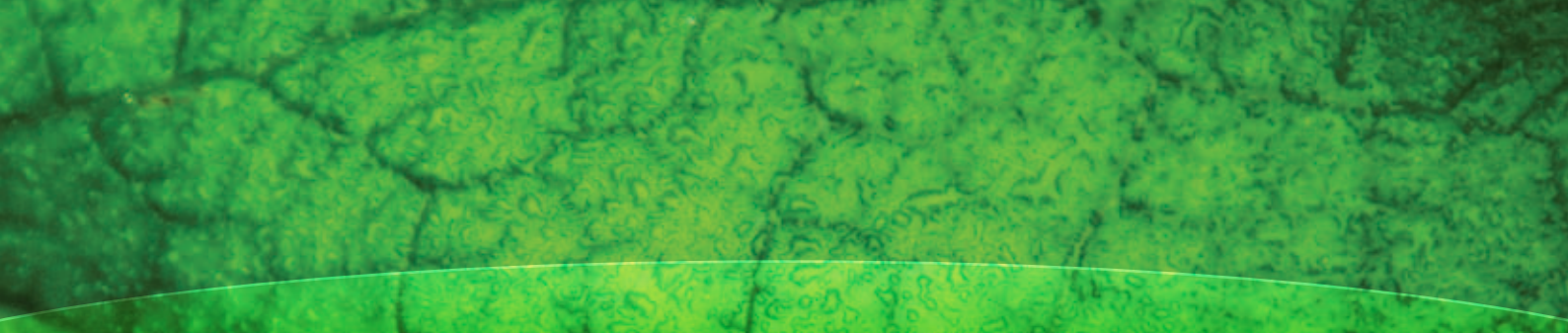
Most of these successful candidates, such as Charlotte Leslie and Rushanara Ali, stood on a promise of cleaning up Parliament after the shocking and destructive stories of expenses abuses the year before. They would be different, they claimed; they would represent the constituents' interests and not pursue personal ambitions to be "career politicians".

Many of this new intake are now settled comfortably on the backbenches, although some, such as Paul Blomfield and Charlie Elphicke, were elected straight onto Select Committees. Conservatives and Liberal Democrat MPs must be acutely aware of the competition they face in securing any sort of promotion up the career ladder now that both parties are in power. The "post-expenses" environment has led to a shift in the balance of power not seen since before the landslide of New Labour. This increasingly strained coalition needs its backbenchers to help steady it. But it seems some are uncomfortable with what they see as requests for inappropriate compromise, such as Simon Wright MP, Liberal Democrat for Norwich South, who voted against Government plans on tuition fees. It is becoming apparent that what backbenchers see as keeping watch over democracy is also a thorn in the side of the Coalition Government's programme.

Dr Sarah Wollaston MP is the most high profile and timely example of the spirit of Generation 2010. Dr Wollaston MP was selected by the Conservatives to stand for Totnes and Devon through an open primary in August 2009, having worked as a GP for 18 years. The Times reported that the Conservatives had turned "political disaster over the extravagant expense claims of Anthony Steen into triumph by asking every voter in the constituency to help to decide who should replace him as the Tory candidate at next year's election." She has a comfortable majority - in the current climate - of 4,927, but can by no means rest of her political laurels. Her activity in the last nine months has been indicative of an MP keen to make her mark and stand up for her beliefs. Her maiden speech in the House, which backed minimum alcohol pricing, a policy rejected that morning by the Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley MP, was perhaps a warning of things to come.

The Health and Social Care Bill; widely regarded as the biggest shake up of the NHS since its inception, was greeted cautiously by Dr Wollaston. She warned the Government, through articles in The Guardian, Pulse and the South Devon Herald Express, that the Bill risked alienating GPs and claimed she had been "gagged" from making amendments to the Bill at Committee stage. Dr Wollaston's comments shone light on the role Government Whips play in pushing a Bill through the House. What many seasoned politicians know all too well seems to have come as a shock to both her and much of the public. Her articles spoke directly to the public from the point of view of being "one of them", not a politician selling a key message. She was reporting what she saw, while outright refusing to take part. This was a defining moment for Generation 2010.

Dr Julian Huppert, Liberal Democrat MP for Cambridge, is another example of this generation's determination to engage directly with, and be accountable to, the public. Dr Huppert makes use of the social networking site, Twitter, to keep his followers up to date and often tweets from inside the chamber. In a similar feel to Dr Wollaston's press articles, Dr Huppert is able to create a sense of informality and accessibility with his followers.



Wollaston knows that she has potentially scuppered any chance of being promoted to a ministerial post in the near future; however, this is not her primary concern. Her selection through open primary after a successful career as a GP marks her out from the “career politicians” of the previous Blair/Brown era and generation. She was chosen by the constituency to stand for election and chosen by the constituency to represent them in Parliament. She owes her position to her constituents, more than to the Conservative Party.

It is the same for many of the new MPs who were not selected through open primaries, like Guto Bebb (MP for Aberconwy) and Dominic Raab (MP for Esher and Walton). A fragile coalition, combined with a Parliament still struggling to re-establish a sense of trust with the electorate, means that Generation 2010 members are in a perfect position to be the thorn in the side of Government while demonstrating to voters that they are the guardians of their democratic rights. With the TUC’s sensationalist report claiming 50,000 frontline jobs losses in the NHS, it may only be a matter of time before more of Generation 2010 put constituency before party. The next few months will determine whether their activities have the power to destabilise the coalition or if that’s even what Generation 2010 really want.

Jenny White, March 2011

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