

Avoiding the Psychopaths in 2024

How we could choose better MPs

December 2023

Avoiding the Psychopaths in 2024

Foreword

We first started thinking about what made a good MP in Autumn 2019, just a few weeks as it later turned out, prior to the General Election.

The version of these proposals we published then was prompted by what we saw as a decline in public standards and the competence of MPs to hold the Government to account. Parliament was in a state of paralysis. The minority Government, led by a Prime Minister without his own democratic mandate, was both incapable of agreeing a way forward on Brexit and was increasingly adopting autocratic tendencies to force MPs to submit to its will. Those that did not were expelled or resigned.

Meanwhile, the Opposition was in rebellion and many of the most experienced MPs in both parties simply gave up. An unparalleled 74 (11%) did not re-stand, with seven of them having had the whip withdrawn in the previous two years for disreputable reasons.

And over the past four years things have got even worse. There are eighteen independent MPs in the current Parliament in what one MP described to me as “the party of Fraudsters, Sexters and anti-Semites”, making the group (were there such a thing), considerably larger than the Liberal Democrats.

Clearly something needs to be done and it is not enough to rely on the parties to put their own houses in order. For this reason, we are re-publishing an updated version of our 2019 recommendations. Furthermore we are doing this earlier in the electoral cycle, in the hope that not only the parties themselves may give them serious consideration, but that local campaigners will adopt them – or their own versions of them – and press candidates at the 2024 general election to test how they match up to the Radix Person Specification to be an MP.

While we think it unlikely that any potential candidate will have the self-awareness to then decide not to stand, we hope that the test will at least inform the thinking of the electorate and maybe even help them to avoid the odd unsuitable candidate.

Ben Rich

Chief Executive, Radix Big Tent



Introduction

Jon Ronson, in his book *The Psychopath Test*, suggests that a significant number of our leaders – in business, industry and politics are psychopathic. To support his argument he reproduces the Hare-PCL-R checklist of the common features of psychopathy. It is worth considering that list in full:

1. Glibness/superficial charm
2. Grandiose sense of self-worth
3. Need for stimulation/prone to boredom
4. Pathological lying
5. Cunning/manipulative
6. Lack of remorse or guilt
7. Shallow affect
8. Callous/lack of sympathy
9. Parasitic lifestyle
10. Poor behavioural controls
11. Promiscuous sexual behaviour
12. Early behaviour problems
13. Lack of realistic long-term goals
14. Impulsivity
15. Irresponsibility
16. Failure to accept responsibility for own actions
17. Many short-term marital relationships
18. Juvenile delinquency
19. Revocation of conditional release
20. Criminal versatility.

Why we get the wrong politicians

Assuming that we do not wish to be led by psychopaths, in the run up to the 2019 General Election Radix asked, in contrast, what alternative traits we would like to see in our politicians. These are, after all, amongst the most important jobs in our country and almost all employers publish a person specification and job description when looking to recruit for a new post, if only to discourage unsuitable candidates from wasting everyone's time by putting themselves forward.



Unfortunately, this is not the way we appoint MPs. The vetting procedures which political parties use to select candidates are - as Isabel Hardman points out in her book, *Why we get the Wrong Politicians* - geared towards winning elections, which is not necessarily anything to do with being an effective MP. For example, as Hardman points out, parties expect candidates to invest tens of thousands of pounds of their own money in fighting elections. In some circumstances, they may want a candidate who will be particularly acquiescent to the local or national party, which may not be what one is looking for in an effective MP; in other seats celebrity, gender, social-economic background, or any number of other factors entirely irrelevant to the performance of the role may be prioritised in selection.

Yet despite this, in many constituencies the selection as the candidate by the leading political party locally is the real test and the election a mere formality. Historically, upwards of 500 of the 650 seats might be considered 'safe' although as voting patterns have become more volatile over the past decade this may be changing. Despite this, with the current electoral system, the majority of seats will almost certainly remain 'safe' for either the Conservative or Labour parties' representatives.

Nevertheless, one can at least attempt to equip the public at large with the tools they need to identify a rotten apple when they see one. We might even encourage candidates to judge themselves against the type of skills and experiences needed to be effective MPs and – in a world of heightened self-awareness – encourage those that fall short to withdraw.

What our MPs should be doing

MPs do not have job descriptions or person specifications. They are elected as representatives of their constituencies to form part of the legislature that determines our laws, although they have plenty of other things to do besides.

Selected members of the majority party or parties will also form the executive (Government) although this is an additional role, with candidates for ministerial office appointed and removed at the discretion of the Prime Minister based as often as not on loyalty or political outlook as much as ability.

In addition, of course, since the Second World War, MPs have increasingly become what might be best described as 'local champions', taking up issues on behalf of individual and collective constituents, and advocating for their real or perceived needs. But this is a wholly informal role, in the spirit of public service and of course intended to help them win reelection. MPs with safe Parliamentary seats may feel less of a need to play the role of social worker and the amount of case work undertaken typically reflects this, varying enormously from seat to seat.



And, of course, there is no way to compel MPs to perform even their most fundamental of duties: turning up to vote. Most do or face the wrath of their party whips offices, but independents are left to their own consciences, so that, for example, Jared o'Mara (MP for Sheffield Hallam 2017-19) - who was suspended from the Labour party - did not vote once from 3rd April – 19th October 2019. And of course Sinn Fein's seven MPs stand on a platform of refusing to take their seats in Westminster and have, therefore, never voted.

Can't we just sack them?

MPs are subject to the verdict of their electorate at General Elections and they can easily be cast aside. But the link between how hard MPs work and the outcome of those ballots can be tenuous to say the least. While various studies find that incumbent Liberal Democrats candidates may benefit by between 3-5%, the benefit to Conservative and Labour candidates is only in the region of 1-2% and, of course, incumbency does not necessarily equate to effectiveness!

MPs can be disqualified under the Representation of the People Act 1981 if they are “detained anywhere in the British Islands or the Republic of Ireland ... for more than a year for any offence”, but this is a pretty high bar. Only one MP has successfully been disqualified on this basis since the war and she subsequently overturned the conviction (and disqualification) on appeal.

In March 2015, the Recall of MPs Act gave constituents the opportunity to force MPs from office in other circumstances, but only for corrupt behaviour rather than for incompetence. MPs can be recalled under three circumstances:

- Conviction in the UK of any offence resulting in a prison sentence, regardless of the length of the sentence;
- Suspension from the House of Commons for at least 10 sitting days;
- Being found guilty of making false or misleading Parliamentary allowance claims.

Since becoming law, the Act has been used on just four occasions, three times successfully triggering by-elections: Peterborough, Rutherglen and Hamilton West, and Brecon and Radnorshire. In North Antrim - where the MP had been suspended from Parliament – the 10% threshold was not reached. At time of writing two further MPs are facing recall petitions.

Nevertheless, the public still cannot initiate proceedings against MPs so that they may only be subject to a recall vote once they had already been found guilty of some serious wrongdoing.



Ways Forward

Given the difficulties of removing an MP once elected, and the lack of formal requirements as to what is expected of them in office, we want to make a number of simple recommendations to provide the public with more independent information about their suitability for the role:

1. In advance of each election a clear statement of the requirements of the role should be published, i.e **an MP's job description and person specification**, against which the electorate can then assess each candidate.
2. **Candidates should be required to write a formal 300-word application**, as they would for any other role, detailing their experience and expertise set against this job description and person specification.
3. **Each candidate's application should then be distributed together** to constituents in advance, displayed at polling stations, mailed to postal voters, and made available online. (Candidates would continue to benefit from one freepost mailing in their own words.)

(A possible job description and person specification is attached for information.)



Sample Job Description and Person Specification

Job Title: Member of Parliament

Job Summary

We are looking for a hardworking, selfless, honest, objective, accountable and open¹ individual to serve as a Member of Parliament for xxx Constituency. The ideal candidate will have demonstrated integrity, the ability to think strategically, logically and critically, be able to understand and scrutinise complex proposals, and know how to exercise influence to achieve meaningful outcomes.

This is an outstanding opportunity to shape the future of our country by promoting and influencing legislation to best reflect the interests of your constituents and the country as a whole.

Responsibilities

As the successful candidate, your core responsibilities (which should be exercised in accordance with your own judgment as a representative of your constituents, ignoring attempts to delegate you to act in particular ways) will include:

Helping to shape the law

- You will examine new laws and regulations proposed by the Government and others, and participate in debates and votes on them and other public policy matters
- You will meet with policy advisers, campaigners, voluntary organisations and representatives from within your constituency to better understand and develop public policy.

Holding the Government to account

- You will scrutinise the work of the Government and its departments, working through Parliamentary committees.
- You will be responsible for overseeing and voting on all decisions related to tax and spending by the Government.
- You will seek to hold to account the Prime Minister and his/her Government by asking questions and challenging their reports.

¹ Based on the Seven Principles of Public Life

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2>)



- In the case of a balanced or hung Parliament you may be responsible for endorsing a particular candidate for Prime Minister from within or beyond your political party.

Representing your political party

- MPs are typically elected with the support of a particular party, which will set out plans in a manifesto prior to any election. You will be seen as a representative of this party within your constituency and Parliament and may therefore choose to take account of its position and that of its leaders in your actions in office.
- You will help to choose the leader of your party in accordance with its internal procedures.
- Nevertheless, you will be an independent agent and we particularly welcome applications from independent thinkers.

Serving your constituents

- You are strongly encouraged to help your constituents by advising on problems, representing their particular concerns in Parliament and acting as a figurehead for the local area. In particular, you should:
 - Champion issues of particular interest and concern to those living in and around your constituency
 - Hold open surgeries and events both in your constituency and Westminster to enable constituents to raise with you matters of policy or local or national issues of concern
 - Respond promptly to their written and verbal enquiries
 - Undertake casework on their behalf with public officers and others, acting as their advocate; and
 - Report back on the work of Parliament and your work on behalf to your constituents through participation in public meetings, traditional and social media, and writing and distributing public information leaflets.

Other tasks as necessary



Person Specification: Qualifications and Skills

Essential

- Hardworking, selfless, honest, objective, accountable and open
- A wide breadth of knowledge and experiences including an ability to analyse complex issues and think strategically
- Practical with an ability to 'get things done'
- Committed to public service as demonstrated through engagement in statutory or voluntary organisations
- Demonstrable leadership, verbal and written communication skills
- Demonstrable financial and economic literacy
- Ability to work independently without direction and as part of a team
- Ability to build alliances inside and outside of Parliament in order to promote common causes
- Ability to communicate with people from all walks of life
- Ability to appoint and manage staff and budgets in accordance with the highest standards of integrity and effective
- Attuned to holding difficult conversations tactfully
- Ability to juggle multiple tasks
- Experience of crisis management
- A thick skin

Desirable

- Direct experience of the law/legal procedures and/or of how complex systems work
- Direct experience of social work and/or of similar advocacy organisations
- A demonstrable understanding of the issues and contributions made by wealth-creators in society
- Ability to work with the media and confident in communicating in front of a camera
- Holding a role as a public representative such as a local councillor or union official
- A demonstrable and enduring relationship with the constituency and its broader geography

By law, all candidates must be a British citizen, a citizen of a Commonwealth country or the Republic of Ireland and at least eighteen years of age



Location

The successful candidate will be expected to split their time between Westminster and the Parliamentary constituency for which they are elected.

Hours

Around 90 per week (This role is highly unlikely to be compatible with other significant paid or voluntary positions)

Remuneration and Support

£ 86,584 per annum with pension and additional related expenses (equivalent to an estimated £18.50 per hour²)

² *Assumes 90 hours a week, 52 weeks per year

