

Parliamentary Experience in Australian Ministerial Careers 1996-2007

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The study contributes the first detailed exploration of parliamentary experience in Australian ministerial careers. It examines how a dimension of parliamentary experience — holding the office of parliamentary committee chair — features in the careers of a single cohort of ministers and parliamentary secretaries appointed during the Coalition government 1996-2007. The study maps parliamentary experience on two dimensions and finds a typology of five different career paths, depending on positions held and the speed of movement between positions. Taking the analysis further, the second part of the study tracks the appointment of the five subgroups of ministers over time. This reveals patterns in the Prime Minister's ministry-making over the life of the government. At different times particular types of ministers were selected, in response to varying political needs and the demands of career management that John Howard faced over the government's lifecycle. The study considers the argument that elite grooming processes, where aspiring leaders are tested and trained, are weakening in Australia. It does not find evidence for this proposition based on the patterns of parliamentary experience of ministers at this time.

Research on the careers of Australian politicians tends to focus on demographic backgrounds prior to the start of their parliamentary careers,¹ or on the characteristics of large datasets of ministers, their length of tenure and hiring and firing rates.² International research, analysing large datasets on ministerial selection across time periods, suggests that significant parliamentary experience is one of the key attributes of those selected as ministers.³ Yet few studies explore the nature of this parliamentary experience, apart from simply calculating the average number of years in parliament before gaining an executive post. Studies in Westminster systems suggest the relationship between parliamentary experience and ministerial appointment is not simple: while significant parliamentary experience is important in gaining selection as a minister, some claim that

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¹ For example: Narelle Miragliotta and Wayne Errington, "From the Gallery to the Parliament: Journalists as Politicians", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 55, 4, (2009), pp.475-643; Narelle Miragliotta and Wayne Errington, "Legislative Recruitment and models of party organisation: evidence from Australia", *Journal of Legislative Studies*, Vol. 18, 1 (2012), pp.21-40; Martin Lumb, *The 43rd Parliament: Traits and Trends*, Parliamentary Library Research Paper 2013-2014 (Canberra, 2013); Jan Pakulski and Bruce Tranter, *The Decline of Political Leadership in Australia? Changing Recruitment and Careers of Federal Politicians* (New York, 2015).

² Keith Dowding and Patrick Dumont, eds, *The Selection of Ministers in Europe* (London, 2009); Keith Dowding and Patrick Dumont, eds, *The Selection of Ministers around the World* (London, 2015); Keith Dowding and Chris Lewis, eds, *Ministerial Careers and Accountability in the Australian Commonwealth Government* (Canberra, 2012).

³ Dowding and Dumont, *The Selection of Ministers in Europe*; Dowding and Dumont, *The Selection of Ministers around the World*.

it is those with least parliamentary experience when appointed who are most likely to ultimately win a higher cabinet post.⁴

Parliamentary experience is significant in several ways in pre-ministerial careers. Short parliamentary apprenticeships can be seen positively as a sign of openness to talent and elite mobility or, alternatively, as a sign of inadequate processes for the selection and grooming of political leaders, since periods in parliament are important in training and testing aspiring leaders.⁵ It has been a common view that, in Australia, ministerial positions are hard to achieve and require serving “long and arduous” parliamentary apprenticeships.⁶ Yet a study by Jan Pakulski and Bruce Tranter suggests that the length of these apprenticeships is reducing. Referring to a cohort of ministers and shadow ministers in 2013, they state: “Most of the top Australian politicians today [...] have been ‘catapulted’ to the top through ‘fast track’ promotion channels” which means that “they are less experienced, less tested in their political talents and skills and less groomed in their preparation for elite roles”.⁷ They argue shorter parliamentary apprenticeships are linked to a qualitative decline of political leadership in Australia and a consequent loss of trust and confidence in leaders by citizens. Yet these arguments are based on comparing *average* periods spent on the backbench before reaching the ministry, which mask important differences between subgroups of ministers. They also do not reveal much about what parliamentarians do while on the backbench which may be relevant to their future leadership roles. Their activities at this time comprise, and are a marker for, their parliamentary experience.

This study addresses a gap in the literature on political careers and ministerial selection by exploring the nature of parliamentary experience in the pre-ministerial careers of a single cohort of Australian ministers and parliamentary secretaries. Tracing their movement between legislative and executive offices reveals important variations in ministers’ parliamentary experience. There are few formal leadership positions in the Australian parliament, but one of the most significant in terms of influence, investment of time, status and salary is the chair of a parliamentary committee. The study maps career paths by tracing movement in and out of the office of parliamentary committee chair while on the government backbench, prior to being appointed to the ministry. Aggregate data reveals little about career trajectories and masks distinctions between cohorts. By disaggregating the career data and analysing it on two dimensions — time spent on the government backbench and holding the office of parliamentary committee chair — the study reveals five distinct parliamentary paths leading to the ministry, distinguished by the sequence of positions and the speed of movement between positions.

Focusing on career movements in one government — the Coalition government led by John Howard from 1996 to 2007 — the study controls for some of the factors that confound large aggregate studies which combine data from different parties, time periods and Prime Ministers. Methods of ministerial selection are different in the ALP and the Coalition, yet data for different party governments is often combined in quantitative

⁴ E.g. Christopher Kam, William Bianco, Itai Sened and Regina Smyth, “Ministerial selection and intraparty organisation in the contemporary British parliament”, *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, 2 (2010), pp.289-306.

⁵ Pakulski and Tranter, *The Decline of Political Leadership in Australia?*

⁶ Anne Tiernan and Patrick Weller, *Learning to be a Minister* (Carlton, 2010), p.23; Campbell Sharman, Owen Hughes and Kevin Tuffin, “State Premiers”, in Brian Galligan, ed., *Australian State Politics* (Melbourne, 1986).

⁷ Pakulski and Tranter, *The Decline of Political Leadership in Australia?*, pp.76, 86.

analysis. The study controls for these factors by focusing on selection to the ministry in one long-term government under one PM (the Howard Coalition government). This allows fine-grained insights into career patterns within a specific political context.

The second part of the paper takes a focus often lacking in ministerial selection studies by analysing selection patterns from the perspective of the decision-maker — the PM. Using the different cohorts identified in the first part of the study and tracking their appointments over time, it reveals patterns of ministry-making by the PM over the life of the government. The study is also distinctive in focusing not only on cabinet ministers, but also junior ministers and parliamentary secretaries.⁸ The empirical basis for the study is data from Parliamentary Handbooks and Work of Committees reports. It also draws on memoirs, biographies, news reports and correspondence with John Howard and a Coalition Senator who was a committee chair in the period.

Career Opportunities in the Australian Parliament

The office of parliamentary committee chair is one of a constellation of posts distributed within Australian parliamentary parties. Committee chair positions attract a higher salary, ranging from 3-16 per cent above the basic parliamentary salary.⁹ In the Howard Coalition government, chairs were chosen through informal processes. Party Whips managed the placement of MPs and Senators into committee positions and had influence over who was chosen as chair, though technically chairs were elected by committee members. While there were no formal rules about seniority, informal understandings of seniority on particular committees played a role in nominations for chair positions.¹⁰ While not the decision-maker, Howard could let his preferences or objections be informally known; he commented that “any views I might have had were borne in mind by Coalition members of those committees”.¹¹

Compared with other nations, Australia has a small parliament from which to draw its leaders, and opportunities for winning executive and legislative leadership positions are high. Because the number of government backbenchers and committees varies over time, a snapshot of the year 2002 (the mid-point of the government’s eleven-year term) is instructive. In 2002, 35 per cent of the Coalition parliamentary party held a position of minister or parliamentary secretary (forty-one out of 117 Coalition parliamentarians). Drawn from the available pool of seventy-three remaining Coalition backbenchers were holders of sixty parliamentary and party offices. These offices were: eight party Whips and Deputy Whips; five Coalition Members of the Speakers Panel and six Coalition Temporary Chairs of Committees;¹² and forty-one chairs of parliamentary committees.¹³ Not only did more than one in three of the Coalition party room hold a ministerial position in 2002, but more than one in two of the Coalition backbenchers were committee chairs (41/73 or 56 per cent). Opportunities to chair committees were particularly numerous in the Senate. In 2002 there were sixteen committee chair positions available

⁸ Since 1990 Australia has operated a three-tier ministry. This features senior (or cabinet) ministers, junior (or non-cabinet) ministers and parliamentary secretaries (who since September 2015 have been titled Assistant Ministers).

⁹ Remuneration Tribunal Determination 2016/16: Members of Parliament – Base Salary, Additional Salary for Parliamentary Office Holders and Related Matters.

¹⁰ Coalition Senator, personal communication 2015.

¹¹ John Howard, personal communication 2015.

¹² These positions deputise for either the Speaker of the House or the Senate President.

¹³ Coalition Members and Senators chaired forty-one of the sixty parliamentary committees at this time. No one chaired more than one committee.

to the twenty-one government Senators (1:1.3); and twenty-five committee chair positions available for the fifty-two government MPs (1:2.1).

Length of Parliamentary “Apprenticeships”

Pakulski and Tranter analysed the careers of several generations of Australian federal parliamentarians from 1901 to 2013 and found a change in career patterns since 1972, particularly in the most recent cohort (Rudd-Gillard governments 2007-2013). They argue the major change is a reduction in backbench apprenticeships, or “elite grooming”, before reaching executive positions:

The new generation of MPs seldom undergo the [...] prolonged apprenticeships that were typical of previous generations of the most successful federal politicians. [...] [F]ast-tracked politicians have a very short backbench apprenticeship and minimal elite grooming. [...] While the earlier cohorts of the ‘political class’ entered politics early and underwent a long climb to the top (*cursus honorum*) the recent crop tends to be catapulted to the top.¹⁴

The evidence they cite is that in the 1970s ministers and shadow ministers spent on average twelve years on the backbench before appointment, while in 2013 backbench apprenticeships were on average five years.¹⁵ Yet evidence of declining parliamentary experience is mixed. In 2010, Anne Tiernan and Patrick Weller argued that “a growing proportion of ministers have extensive political experience by the time they reach the ministry and a majority of ministers also have substantial parliamentary experience”.¹⁶ The cohort in this study predates the Rudd/Gillard sample. By analysing their career paths qualitatively it is possible to move beyond averages to identify different types of backbench apprenticeship.

Rather than seeing holding a committee chair position as a *reason for* ministerial appointment, the study explores its presence and timing in a ministerial career path. Leading the work of a parliamentary committee can be onerous, involving high workloads and time pressures,¹⁷ yet it also gives backbenchers higher salary (and therefore higher superannuation), status, profile, travel opportunities, and the chance to build a reputation and to engage with the media. Chairs have responsibility for setting agendas for the committee, deciding what kinds of inquiries the committee will undertake and for settling the committee’s reports. It involves negotiating with other parties, working with opponents and managing political conflict.¹⁸ For some ministers in this study, a chair position was a recognition of their status and their right to the plums of office, a consolation prize for not winning a position in the ministry or a way of soothing bruised egos; it could be a staging post from which they quickly moved into the ministry. For others, it took years to achieve; it provided activity and opportunities for ambitious politicians during long periods spent in the parliamentary “waiting room”.

Excluding the First Ministry

In 1996 the Coalition won government after thirteen years in Opposition and its first ministry was appointed on 11 March 1996. Most were shadow ministers at the time of

¹⁴ Pakulski and Tranter, *The Decline of Political Leadership in Australia?*, pp.69-71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.76-77.

¹⁶ Tiernan and Weller, *Learning to be a Minister*, p.47. The average of five years in 2013 may be affected by the inclusion of shadow ministers in Pakulski and Tranter’s calculation.

¹⁷ John Egan, *The Attributes, Role and Reward of a Backbencher in the Federal Parliament*, Report prepared for the Commonwealth Remuneration Tribunal (Canberra, 2011)

¹⁸ Bruce Childs, *The Truth About Parliamentary Committees*, Papers on Parliament No. 18 (Canberra, December 1992).

the election and were a long-serving and experienced group; more than half had served in the shadow ministry for longer than five years.¹⁹ This meant they had already reached an executive-style position within the parliamentary party. Very few of those appointed in March 1996 had the opportunity to chair a parliamentary committee, as most had spent no time as government backbenchers. The Coalition was in Opposition for thirteen years, and committee chair positions are virtually all held by government members and Senators.²⁰ Because the study focuses on holding the office of committee chair while on the government backbench, this group was excluded from the career path mapping. This was necessary to create a single cohort whose experiences and opportunities are comparable: the fifty-six ministers and parliamentary secretaries appointed from the government backbench from 1996 to 2007.

Characteristics of the Sample Group

The sample examined in the study therefore represents a particular group of ministers and parliamentary secretaries: those who were not initially successful at gaining a ministerial post when the Coalition came to power in March 1996 and those elected later in the life of the government. This meant they had to wait for ministerial reshuffles to gain their position. There was a relatively high turnover of ministers in the Howard government, with many leaving the ministry because they retired, were not reappointed, lost their seats or were forced out because of scandals.²¹ In each term between ten and nineteen new ministers and parliamentary secretaries were appointed.

While the average period of time in parliament before the cohort gained their executive post was 6.4 years, there was a sizeable group who did not have to serve a “long and arduous” parliamentary apprenticeship. Almost 30 per cent of the group were in parliament for three years or less before being appointed as a minister or parliamentary secretary, indicating it was not necessary to serve lengthy waiting times in parliament. However over 70 per cent of the group served more than five years on the backbench, in two cases as long as twenty-three years.

Being a committee chair was a common, but not necessary, step on the path to becoming a minister. The majority of ministers and parliamentary secretaries appointed in this period had been committee chairs (59 per cent). Indeed, half of the ministers and parliamentary secretaries moved directly from the position of committee chair to the ministry. However, it was rare for them to move to a ministry position in the same subject area; being a committee chair was not a form of specialist training. A very high proportion of those in the Senate had been committee chairs (80 per cent) while only 51 per cent of ministers from the House of Representatives had been committee chairs. This reflects the far greater opportunities, and need, for government backbenchers in the Senate to chair a parliamentary committee.

Most MPs and Senators were initially appointed to the executive as parliamentary secretaries, but those who had been committee chairs were more likely to enter the ministry at a higher level. Of those who had been committee chairs, 36 per cent were appointed straight to the position of junior minister or senior minister. Of those who had

¹⁹ The average period in the shadow ministry was 5.7 years. The Coalition appointed thirty-eight members of the executive: fifteen senior ministers, thirteen junior ministers and ten parliamentary secretaries. All except three were, or had recently been, shadow ministers. These exceptions were relatively new recruits to parliament (John Fahey, Tony Abbott and Andrew Thomson).

²⁰ Only six had chaired Senate committees in Opposition, all in the last term (1993-1996).

²¹ Keith Dowding and Chris Lewis, “Australia”, in Dowding and Dumont, eds, *The Selection of Ministers around the World*, p.56.

not been committee chairs, only 26 per cent were appointed initially above the level of parliamentary secretary.

Mapping Career Paths on Two Dimensions

Five different career paths

It is possible to detect patterns in career paths by mapping on two dimensions: holding the office of committee chair; and time on the government backbench prior to ministerial appointment. Career pathways can be labelled *direct* or *indirect*, indicating whether the parliamentarian held the position of committee chair before appointment to the ministry.

These two groups can then be distinguished by the length of time spent on the government backbench before reaching the ministry. A career path is considered to be *fast* if a ministerial post is attained in three years or less; more than three years is labelled *slow*. Three years is considered significant as House of Representative, and therefore executive, terms are generally three years. This leads to a typology with four quadrants: Fast Direct, Slow Direct, Fast Indirect and Slow Indirect (Table 1). There are two career paths classified as “Slow Indirect”: they are distinguished by how quickly the parliamentarian achieved a committee chair position and how long they spent as chair before gaining a ministerial post. There are thus five different career paths amongst this group of ministers and parliamentary secretaries, depending on positions held and the speed of movement between positions.

Table 1. Five Ministerial Career Paths: Speed of Movement and Committee Chair Experience.

	Fast 0-3 yrs on the Government backbench	Slow >3yrs on the Government backbench
Direct Never a committee chair	Career path 1: ‘Rockets’ 30%	Career path 2: ‘A backbench apprenticeship’ 11%
Indirect Held a committee chair	Career path 3: ‘Chairs with experience and seniority’ 25%	Career path 4: ‘Long term chairs’ 14% ----- Career path 5 : ‘Slow climbers’ 20%

The data from which these career paths are drawn can be found in the Appendix. Table 2 shows the average time spent by each group on the government backbench, in

parliament, and in moving between the position of committee chair and minister or parliamentary secretary. It captures the different speed of movement for each parliamentary pathway to the ministry.

Table 2. Speed of Movement for Different Parliamentary Pathways to the Executive.

	Time from Govt Backbencher To Committee Chair (average years)	Time spent as Committee Chair (average years)	Time from Govt Backbencher to Minister (average years)	Total time in parlt before appointment to ministry (average years)	N	%
Career path						
Path 1	NA	NA	2.4	3.4	17	30%
Fast Direct: Rockets						
Path 2	NA	NA	5.7	5.7	6	11%
Slow Direct: A backbench apprenticeship						
Path 3	0.3	1	1.3	8.9	14	25%
Fast Indirect: Chairs with experience and seniority						
Path 4	0.3	5.95	6.25	8.8	8	14%
Slow Indirect: Long term chairs						
Path 5	3.6	3.2	6.8	7	11	20%
Slow Indirect: Slow climbers						

Direct Career Paths

Career Path 1: Fast Direct movement to the executive: "Rockets"

Parliamentarians with Career Path 1 spent three years or less as a government backbencher (on average 2.4 years) and did not hold the position of committee chair on the path to the ministry. They represent 30 per cent of the sample (see Table 4). Their short period as government backbenchers suggests they came to parliament with enough political capital, connections or reputation for a quick elevation to the ministry, without needing to prove themselves in parliament. Very few had spent time in Opposition. None held a parliamentary leadership position in the relatively short time they spent on the government backbench, though four held significant *party* leadership positions (e.g. Party Whip). Four were appointed straight to the position of junior minister (Joe Hockey, Jackie Kelly, Ian Macfarlane and Peter Dutton) despite their limited parliamentary

experience. The rigidities of long-term government — the need to wait for reshuffles or resignations for an opportunity to gain a ministerial post — did not impede this group: half were elected in the third and fourth terms of government, and they leapfrogged parliamentarians of longer standing to reach the executive.

Most “rockets” can be characterised as having strong connections to powerful people, prominent careers before entering parliament, or being seen as having achievements that should be rewarded. Bill Heffernan was a long-time friend and close confidant of John Howard and represented him on the New South Wales and federal Liberal Party executive.²² Ron Boswell was also close to Howard.²³ Before entering parliament, Andrew Robb spent seven years as federal Director of the Liberal Party; he was a key strategist in the electoral victory of 1996. Greg Hunt was a former staffer to Alexander Downer, a minister close to Howard and one of the most powerful cabinet ministers in the period.²⁴

Others had prominent careers before being elected. Malcolm Turnbull was a high-profile lawyer and merchant banker. Macfarlane was one of the country’s most prominent agripoliticians. He was considered a “catch” for the Liberals.²⁵

Several MPs were rewarded for electoral successes considered of great value to the party. Kelly unexpectedly won the seat of Lindsay in western Sydney in 1996, overcoming a margin of 11 per cent to oust a Labor minister, and in a subsequent by-election increased her margin, apparently causing the Prime Minister to exclaim “Jackie, we love you”.²⁶ Christopher Pearce was a businessman who won a by-election that, according to Howard, Labor should have won. Howard saw this as “a huge tonic for the Liberal party. It restored my colleagues’ self-belief.”²⁷

Most of this group achieved an executive post at the beginning of their second term in parliament, but three were appointed *within* their first term — Robb, Turnbull and Macfarlane. These three MPs also quickly gained promotions. Macfarlane was promoted to cabinet within one year of entering the ministry and Turnbull reached cabinet after a few days over one year. Robb moved from parliamentary secretary to junior minister after just over one year. The speed of appointment and promotion of these three MPs is remarkable; their quick rise indicates they were truly “rockets”.

Career Path 2: Slow Direct Pathway to the Executive: “A back bench apprenticeship”

A group of six MPs spent four to eight years as government backbenchers before gaining an executive post, yet never held the office of committee chair in that period (see Table 5). While their path to the executive was direct, they waited an average of 5.7 years before being appointed. They represented 11 per cent of those appointed to the ministry in the period. Their activities on the backbench did not involve taking on the role of a committee chair nor generally of holding other parliamentary leadership positions.²⁸

It is notable that they were all MPs elected in 1996. Yet almost all of them had to wait until the government’s third term to gain an executive position. It is likely that being first

²² Wayne Errington and Peter van Onselen, *John Winston Howard* (Carlton, 2007), pp.319, 346; John Howard, *Lazarus Rising* (Pymble, 2010), p.221.

²³ Coalition Senator, personal communication.

²⁴ Howard, *Lazarus Rising*.

²⁵ Coalition Senator, personal communication.

²⁶ Errington and van Onselen, *John Winston Howard*, p.252.

²⁷ Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p.373.

²⁸ De-Anne Kelly was the exception who was a Member of the Speakers Panel.

elected in 1996 was a factor in the shape and speed of this career path in two ways. In 1996 the backbench was large and populated with people who had waited through the long Opposition years for posts. Those newly-elected in 1996 (known as the “Class of 96”) had to wait for parliamentary leadership opportunities and ministerial opportunities. It was rare for the “Class of 96” to be appointed as committee chairs in the government’s first term; this cohort spent its first and often second parliamentary term as backbenchers. Yet being from the “Class of 96” was also an advantage. According to one Coalition Senator, there was a general understanding in the party room that the “Class of 96” (who had contributed to Howard winning government) would be rewarded with positions and “would get something” eventually.²⁹

Indirect Career Paths

Career Path 3: Fast Indirect: “Chairs with experience and seniority”

A group of fourteen parliamentarians, representing 25 per cent of the cohort, held a committee chair post prior to gaining an executive position and moved quickly. They were appointed as committee chairs immediately after the government came to power in 1996 or within one year. They were then appointed to the ministry after only one or two years as a committee chair (see Table 6).³⁰ Their appointment as committee chair could be a staging post or consolation prize for not winning a ministerial position when the government first gained office. Six of them (43 per cent) were in the shadow ministry at the time of the election but did not win a place in the first ministry. Their career path is classified as fast because they moved quickly between positions and reached the executive after the shortest period on the government backbench (on average 1.3 years). However all except one of them had spent time on the Opposition backbench, meaning they were experienced parliamentarians when the Coalition came to power, with an average of 7.6 years in parliament before 1996. They were appointed immediately as committee chairs, and were prominent candidates for the ministry when vacancies arose.

Their seniority in the party is evident. Several held more than one parliamentary leadership position when appointed to the executive: three were both committee chairs and members of the Speakers Panel (Mark Vaile, Warren Truss and Kathy Sullivan) and one was a chair and Temporary Chair of Committees (Kay Patterson). Some also held important party leadership positions. It was to this experienced group that Howard turned when scandals rocked the Coalition in the first term, leading to a loss of seven ministers and parliamentary secretaries. Nine of this group were appointed in the first term, two within nine months of the 1996 election (Michael Ronaldson and Ian Macdonald). They represented senior, experienced and arguably low-risk replacements at a time when stability was needed.

Despite their quick movement between positions after 1996, this group were not rockets but hardy veterans. Alan Cadman and Kathy Sullivan are the most extreme examples, arriving in parliament in 1974, the same year as Howard himself. Kay Patterson was elected to the Senate in 1987, and despite six years as a shadow minister (1990-96) was not part of Howard’s first ministry. She was appointed as committee chair and Temporary Chair of Committees in 1996, but as the government’s first term drew to

²⁹ Personal communication. There was a mutual loyalty with Howard. Peter Costello saw the “Class of 96” as Howard loyalists, solidly against leadership change. Peter Costello, *The Costello Memoirs* (Carlton, 2008).

³⁰ Alan Cadman was the exception. He was committee chair in 1976.

a close “her frustration grew”.³¹ At the beginning of 1998 she asked Howard whether it was worth staying in parliament, seeking feedback about her chances of advancement to the ministry. Patterson said: “Everyone who has come into the Senate after me has had an appointment and I haven’t. [...] Maybe I have got a wrong view of what I’m going to achieve and what I can’t achieve”. Howard offered “reassurance but no promises”, telling Patterson to “go back and get on with what you need to do [...] get on and work hard”.³² Later that year she was finally appointed as parliamentary secretary, after eleven years in parliament.³³

Slow Indirect Paths to the Ministry

The remaining nineteen MPs and Senators moved slowly and indirectly to executive posts; they all spent considerable periods of time working as committee chairs on their path to the ministry, but their speed of movement differed. Those with Career Path 4 quickly gained a chair position, but spent on average almost six years as chairs before reaching the executive. Those with Career Path 5 moved the slowest, taking more than three years to gain a chair position and serving on average more than three years as a chair before finally winning an executive post.

Career Path 4: Slow Indirect: “Long term chairs”

Similar to those with Career Path 3, this subgroup were appointed as committee chairs almost immediately on government being formed in 1996 or on being elected to parliament (see Table 7). However, unlike those with Career Path 3, they did not quickly move to the ministry. They remained committee chairs for long periods, from four to eight years, with an average of almost six years. Only two of them (Chris Gallus and Brendan Nelson) reached the ministry in the first two terms of the Coalition government, both at the end of the second term. A committee chairship was not a short staging post; these parliamentarians invested considerable periods of time serving as committee chairs before they went to the ministry. They represent 14 per cent of the sample.

Half of this group were veterans who had three to six years’ parliamentary experience in Opposition and three had served in the shadow ministry. Yet they were not appointed to the ministry until the government’s last two terms. Both Kevin Andrews and Brendan Nelson, who later held prominent cabinet roles, rose slowly within the party, spending five years as committee chairs before being appointed to an executive post.

Career Path 5: Slow Indirect: “Slow climbers”

A sub-group of eleven parliamentarians, 20 per cent of the sample, served both a backbench and committee chair apprenticeship on the slowest climb to the executive. For this group, a committee chair position was part of a “long and arduous” quest for a ministry in a long-term government. Unlike committee chairs with other career paths it took them some time to be appointed as a committee chair (two to six years); they then served on average more than three years as a committee chair before reaching the ministry (see Table 8). They spent the longest period of all groups on the government backbench (on average almost seven years). Despite more than half being elected in 1996 or before, they were not appointed to the ministry until the third or fourth terms of the government. During this much slower track to executive office, 64 per cent of them also

³¹ Margaret Fitzherbert, *So Many Firsts: Liberal Women from Enid Lyons to the Turnbull era* (Annandale, 2009), p.179.

³² In *ibid.*, pp.179-180.

³³ She went on to become a cabinet minister.

held parliamentary and party leadership positions such as Whips, Members of the Speakers Panel and Temporary Chairs of Committees. When they finally reached the ministry, they were significantly more likely than other groups to skip over the parliamentary secretary position and be appointed as junior minister. More than half (55 per cent) were appointed above the rank of parliamentary secretary, compared to a quarter to a third of the other groups.

For some, their faction may have played a role in their slow progress. There were a number of prominent moderates and Peter Costello supporters in this group: Christopher Pyne, George Brandis, Helen Coonan, Julie Bishop and Tony Smith (Costello's former staffer of ten years). Two members who later reached cabinet rank — Coonan and Bishop — demonstrate the impact on a career trajectory of factional politics and a problematic relationship with the Prime Minister. Both came to parliament after successful legal careers but did not progress quickly, languishing on the backbench for five years. Despite her impressive career, Coonan reported that she “got the very clear message that I more or less had to start at the bottom and climb in there and show what I could do”.³⁴ She was not close to Howard and felt that because of her faction she had to work to gain his trust: “I think I had to earn his confidence and trust as we went along because [...] I don't think he ever saw me as a 100 per cent reliable conservative.”³⁵ When Bishop stood for parliament she defied Howard's wishes in standing for the seat of Curtin. Supported by Costello, she won the seat and “incurred Howard's disfavour”.³⁶ After three years on the backbench she flirted with switching to state politics; it was another year before she won a committee chair position and a further year before she was appointed as junior minister.

Speed and Secondary Movement between Executive Offices

Interestingly, the two groups with the slowest movement between positions had greatest success in reaching cabinet. Fifty per cent of “Long term chairs” (CP4) appointed in terms 1-3 reached cabinet, as did 40 per cent of “Slow climbers” (CP5), compared to 16-25 per cent of other groups appointed in the first three terms. Fast-moving “Rockets” did not necessarily progress. Slow-moving careers and long periods of “working hard” (as Howard exhorted Patterson) were often rewarded with high advancement. This may indicate the effects of the “testing, training and grooming” Pakulski and Tranter suggest is ideally undertaken prior to ministerial appointment.

Those destined for cabinet tended to be promoted quickly once in the ministry: 72 per cent reached cabinet within three years of their first executive appointment. This applied to “Rockets” and those with slow movement into the ministry. Thus the speed of career movement could change. Slow climbers and veterans with long parliamentary apprenticeships could accelerate once they reached the ministry. It suggests Howard quickly identified those he saw as suitable for promotion from junior positions to cabinet.

The Decision-Maker: John Howard's Ministry-Making

Taking the analysis further, the second part of the study tracks the appointment of the five subgroups over time. This reveals patterns in the Prime Minister's ministry-making over the life of the government. Over its four terms the Government had one leader who was the sole decision-maker when it came to selecting ministers and parliamentary

³⁴ In Fitzherbert, *So Many Firsts*, p.178.

³⁵ In *ibid.*, p.188.

³⁶ Costello, *The Costello Memoirs*, p.334.

secretaries in the Liberal Party.³⁷ Within the Liberal party room, Howard had enormous power and discretion in making appointments, which were considered to be “the gift of the Prime Minister”.³⁸ However, his choices were not without limitations. There was an expectation that states would be represented in the ministry according to their number in the party room. At times journalists argued that the need for regional balance kept worthy people out of positions.³⁹ A balance between ministers from the Senate and the House was also required.

The longstanding rivalry between the moderate and the conservative factions in the Liberal Party played a role in Howard’s choices. Howard lost the party leadership in 1989 reportedly because of his mismanagement of factional politics. Some claim he ruthlessly rewarded his own conservative supporters at the expense of the moderates and “in the process he fuelled the barely suppressed factional warfare in the party and contributed to his own demise”.⁴⁰ Howard said he learned from the experience that he needed to be inclusive of the moderates.⁴¹ Moderates held important positions in the ministry at times but there were suggestions Howard favoured certain moderates in an attempt to split the faction, avoiding appointing “the people moderates regard as the best talent in their faction”.⁴² Whether Howard fairly included the moderates in his ministerial team is debatable, but he certainly managed factional dynamics within the party room successfully. At any time Howard could have been removed by a vote of his parliamentary party. Yet his leadership was never formally challenged and even in the fourth term, Costello could muster support from no more than one-third of the party room for a change of leadership.⁴³

In selecting ministers, Howard had to manage the ambitions of a large backbench, to avoid building resentment over lack of career advancement, and allow for career movement over eleven years of long-term government. Backbenchers needed to feel opportunities existed for ministerial appointment. There were challenges in providing opportunities for the talented and ambitious, while maintaining stability in the cabinet.

Appointment Patterns in the Government’s Lifecycle

At different times, particular types of candidates were selected for appointment, indicating the varying political needs and the demands of career management Howard faced over the lifecycle of the government (see Table 3).

³⁷ The National party selected its own candidates for the ministry and, under the “Coalition agreement”, secured the position of Deputy PM, the three cabinet portfolios of Transport, Agriculture and Trade and a number of ministerial positions (in relation to their numbers in parliament).

³⁸ Judy Moylan in Fitzherbert, *So Many Firsts*, p.171.

³⁹ Glenn Milne, “Let the reshuffle begin”, *The Australian*, 14 August 2000.

⁴⁰ Glenn Milne, “Purpose Driven”, in Nick Cater, ed., *The Howard Factor* (Carlton, 2006), pp.48-49.

⁴¹ Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p.633.

⁴² Glenn Milne, “Moderates left on the shelf”, *The Australian*, 26 November 2001.

⁴³ Costello, *The Costello Memoirs*, p.245.

Table 3. Appointment patterns across different terms in the Coalition Government.

	<i>Rockets CP1</i>	<i>Backbench apprentices CP2</i>	<i>Chairs with Experience and Seniority CP3</i>	<i>Long term chairs CP4</i>	<i>Slow climbers CP5</i>	<i>Total no of ministers and parltary secretaries appointed in the term*</i>	<i>Appointment pattern</i>
Term 1 1996-1998	1	0	9	0	0	10	Experienced veterans
Term 2 1998-2001	7	1	5	2	0	15	Rockets and veterans
Term 3 2001-2004	0	5	0	2	5	12	Class of 96 and frustrated moderates
Term 4 2004-2007	9	0	0	4	6	19	Rockets and long term backbenchers

*does not include those appointed in March 1996

In the first term, the high proportion of committee chairs appointed to the ministry (90 per cent) can be explained by the fact that the government lost seven ministers quickly due to breaches of the ministerial code of conduct. Almost all new appointments were drawn from the ranks of committee chairs and were parliamentarians with seniority and parliamentary leadership experience, many of whom had been in the shadow ministry prior to the election (CP4). The dynamics at this time were instability and the long years out of government, providing a group of parliamentary veterans with strong claims to appointment. No one in their first term of parliament was appointed at this time.

In the government's second term, after a close election result, Howard again drew from the ranks of committee chairs, often parliamentarians of long standing, but they represented only half the group appointed to the ministry (CP3, CP4). Around half were "Rockets" with three years or less experience on the government backbench, who had not served in parliamentary leadership positions (CP1). Howard's appointments were a careful mix of experienced parliamentarians and people with little experience but dynamism, often rewarded for electoral successes. Gallus (CP4) and Kelly (CP1), for example, were two of Howard's "Golden Girls", a group of women who held their marginal seats and helped the government survive in 1998.⁴⁴ In the final year of the term, there was a significant restructuring which, it was said, gave the government "a new look team with an emphasis on youth [...] to lead into next year's election".⁴⁵ One of those appointed to the ministry at this reshuffle was the "Rocket" Macfarlane, still in his first term of parliament.

In the government's third term, after a record election win, Howard turned to parliamentarians who had served on the backbench for some time (CP2, CP4, CP5). Two-thirds were from the "Class of 96", who had been in parliament for five years or more. Three had waited even longer for an executive post, having entered parliament in

⁴⁴ Howard, *Lazarus Rising*, p.311.

⁴⁵ Ian Henderson, "PM brings in young guns", *The Australian*, 20 December 2000.

the early 1990s (Andrews, Bailey, Pyne). No one in their first term of parliament was appointed at this time. These appointments can be seen as part of the process of managing career movement within a long-term government. However there was considerable resentment expressed by moderates at the choice of new ministers at the start of the term, with reports that moderates close to Costello were sidelined.⁴⁶ It was in this term that pressure began mounting for Howard to cede the leadership to his moderate rival Costello. It was only in a reshuffle in 2003, late in the term, that key Costello supporters Pyne and Bishop (CP5) finally attained ministerial posts.

In the government's fourth term, Howard appointed a mix of experienced committee chairs and inexperienced backbenchers to the ministry. While ten appointments were committee chairs of long standing (CP4 and CP5), nine were "Rockets": people with three years or less in parliament and no experience of parliamentary leadership positions (CP1). This may have been an attempt to make an ageing government appear fresh, while managing the ambitions of long-term members, to ensure resentment did not result in support for rival Costello.

The cohort data shows that there were different patterns of selection to the ministry depending on context and political need, which varied over the four terms of government. Howard can be seen balancing different considerations at different times: the need for experience and proven talent; the need to reward those with long service and leadership roles in parliament; the need to appoint "new blood" to refresh the government over time; the need to manage factional politics and frustrated ambition; and the need to manage career development over several terms.

Conclusion

The study contributes the first detailed exploration of parliamentary experience in Australian pre-ministerial careers and provides a new way of understanding the role of parliamentary committee positions in political career paths. Holding a committee chair position was not determinative; these positions could be important stepping stones to the ministry but were not necessary.⁴⁷ This shows Australia's ministerial career paths are shaped by patronage rather than structured through seniority. By disaggregating career data and analysing it on two dimensions, the study reveals five distinct parliamentary paths to the ministry, distinguished by the sequence of positions and the speed of movement between positions. Career paths could be Fast Direct for "rockets"; Slow Direct "backbench apprenticeships"; Fast Indirect for "chairs with seniority"; and Slow Indirect for "long-term chairs" and "slow climbers". The study uses timing and speed of movement as factors in analysing pre-ministerial careers and argues that temporal dynamics are important in understanding ministerial selection. Speed was also a factor seen in secondary career movement once in the executive. The initial speed of "rockets" was not always a sign of further promise and favour; in fact, slow movement to the ministry was more often associated with ultimate promotion to cabinet. Slow climbers and veterans with long parliamentary apprenticeships could suddenly accelerate once they reached the ministry. The study provides a dynamic rather than static understanding of how parliamentary experience features in a ministerial career.

Political careers are shaped by their institutional context: the study reveals much about the structure of opportunities and the intertwining of executive and legislative career paths in Australian politics. While the Australian parliament presents a narrow range of

⁴⁶ Milne, "Moderates left on the shelf".

⁴⁷ John Howard, personal communication.

career opportunities, positions are relatively numerous. That 59 per cent of those appointed to the ministry in this period had previously chaired a parliamentary committee indicates that the positions are linked; it also points positively to the experience and skills they might bring to the job of minister. Committee chair positions are important for developing skills and demonstrating talent and loyalty. They also provide opportunities for activity and influence for professional politicians while on the backbench. The quality of political leadership is reliant on parliamentarians remaining in the job and not leaving to pursue outside careers. The opportunities and increased salary available through committee chair positions must also be seen as important in this respect.

For Pakulski and Tranter, the federal parliament is “the important site for political elite recruitment, formation and grooming” and committee systems are “places of apprenticeship” where aspiring political leaders are “tried, tested and trained for the top positions”.⁴⁸ Seen through this lens, the Coalition period (1996-2007) was a time when these methods of selecting and grooming political leaders *were* functioning: most ministers served apprenticeships of more than five years in parliament and had worked as committee chairs. At the same time there was also a positive degree of openness in the elite: periodically Howard brought relatively recent recruits into the ministry, though they were a subset of less than 30 per cent of those appointed to the ministry at the time. Pakulski and Tranter express concern about a weakening of “elite grooming” processes in the Rudd/Gillard governments and a consequent decline in quality of political leadership and governing competence.⁴⁹ This may be true, but this study shows it was not true of the preceding cohort, under Howard (1996-2007). Most underwent periods of elite grooming and a minority were “fast-tracked” into the ministry.

In an important second stage of the study, the appointments of the different cohorts of ministers were tracked across time to reveal patterns in the Prime Minister’s ministry-making. In selecting ministers, Howard faced the challenge of managing the aspirations, resentments and factional alliances of the parliamentary party, as well as enabling career progression and serving the government’s political fortunes over four terms. His choices demonstrate his style and values, his skilful management of his party room and his response to political needs in different phases of the government’s lifecycle. These ministry-making patterns are specific to this government, this party and this leader; Howard achieved a leadership stability not seen in subsequent governments.

The study argues that focusing closely on a single cohort of ministers — controlling for party, leader and political context — enables a deeper exploration of the complexities of political careers than is possible in large quantitative studies. This fine-grained investigation of the career paths of a cohort of ministers expands our understanding of the role of parliamentary experience and of the complex process of “elite grooming”, where politicians are tested and trained for top positions. The study argues for the relevance of sequencing and temporal dynamics in understanding ministerial careers. There is still a long way to go in exploring the role of parliamentary experience in ministerial careers and in understanding the dynamics of ministry-making. Qualitative contextual approaches are likely to provide new and useful insights.

⁴⁸ Pakulski and Tranter, *The Decline of Political Leadership in Australia?*, pp.10-11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.95.

Appendix

Table 4. Career Path 1: Fast Direct. Rockets: Did not serve as committee chairs and moved to the ministry within 3 years

Name	Year entered Parl	Year made Minister or Parltary Secretary	Period as government backbencher (years)	Other parliamentary or party positions
Trish Worth	1993	1997	1	Government Whip 1996-97
Larry Anthony (N)	1996	1998	2	National party Whip 1997-98
Bill Heffernan	1996	1998	2	Deputy Government Whip Senate 1997-98
Joe Hockey	1996	1998	2	
Jackie Kelly	1996	1998	2	
Sharman Stone	1996	1998	2	
Richard Colbeck	2002	2004	2	
Andrew Robb	2004	2006	2	
Malcolm Turnbull	2004	2006	2	
Ron Boswell (N)	1983	1999	3	Leader National party in Senate 1990-2007 <i>Shadow minister 1988-90; 1993-94</i>
Ian Macfarlane	1998	2001	3	
John Cobb (N)	2001	2004	3	
Peter Dutton	2001	2004	3	
Pat Farmer	2001	2004	3	
Greg Hunt	2001	2004	3	
Sussan Ley	2001	2004	3	
Christopher Pearce	2001	2004	3	

Source: Parliamentary Handbook; Work of Committees Reports n= 17

(N) indicates a National party member; otherwise all are Liberal party MPs and Senators

Table 5. Career Path 2: Slow Direct. A Backbench Apprenticeship: did not serve as committee chairs

Name	Year entered Parl	Year made Minister or Parltary Secretary	Period as government backbencher (years)	Other parliamentary or party positions
Mal Brough	1996	2000	4	
Ross Cameron	1996	2001	5	
Gary Hardgrave	1996	2001	5	
Danna Vale	1996	2001	5	
De-Anne Kelly (N)	1996	2003	7	Member of Speakers Panel 1997-2001
Bruce Billson	1996	2004	8	

Source: Parliamentary Handbook; Work of Committees Reports n= 6

(N) indicates a National party member; otherwise all are Liberal party MPs and Senators

Table 6. Career Path 3: Fast Indirect. Chairs with Experience and Seniority: moved quickly between positions

Name	Year entered Parl	Year made Minister or Parltry Secretary	Period as government backbencher (years)	Period between 1996 and committee chair appt	Other parliamentary or party positions
Michael Ronaldson	1990	1996 (Oct)	<1	0	<i>Shadow ministry 1996</i>
Ian Macdonald	1990	1996 (Nov)	<1	0	<i>Shadow ministry 1996</i>
Chris Ellison	1993	1997	1	0	
Judith Troeth	1993	1997	1	0	<i>Shadow ministry 1996</i>
Mark Vaile (N)	1993	1997	1	0	Member of Speakers Panel; National Party whip 1996-97
Alex Somlyay	1990	1997	1	0	<i>Shadow ministry 1992-94</i>
Warren Truss (N)	1990	1997	1	0	Member of Speakers Panel 1996-97; <i>Shadow ministry 1996</i>
Kathy Sullivan ^a	1974	1997	1	0	Member of Speakers Panel 1996-97; <i>Shadow ministry 1992-94</i>
Eric Abetz	1994	1998	2	0	
Peter Slipper ^b	1993	1998	2	0	Government whip 1997-98
Kay Patterson	1987	1998	2	1	Temporary Chair of Committees 1996-98; <i>Shadow ministry 1996</i>
Wilson Tuckey ^c	1980	1998	2	1	<i>Shadow ministry 1996</i>
Warren Entsch	1996	1998	2	1	
Alan Cadman ^d	1974	1997	1	N/A	Chief Government whip 1996-97; <i>Shadow ministry 1985-89</i>

Source: Parliamentary Handbook; Work of Committees Reports n = 14

(N) indicates a National party member; otherwise all are Liberal party MPs and Senators

a was a Senator 1974-1984, then MP 1984-2001. Does not count period as a government backbencher 1974-1983. Was also a committee chair 1976-1983.

b previously an MP 1984-1987

c Does not count period as a government backbencher 1980-1983.

d Does not count period as a government backbencher 1974-1983. He was a committee chair in 1976.

Table 7. Career Path 4: Slow Indirect. Long Term Chairs: moved slowly to the ministry

Name	Year entered Parlt	Year made Minister or Parltr Secretary	Period as government backbencher (years)	Period between 1996 or election to parlt and committee chair appt	Other parliamentary or party positions
Chris Gallus	1990	2001	5	0	<i>Shadow ministry 1996</i>
Fran Bailey ^a	1990	2001	5	0	<i>Shadow ministry 1992-94</i>
Kevin Andrews	1991	2001	5	0	Member of Speakers Panel 1998-2001; <i>Shadow ministry 1996</i>
Sandy MacDonald ^b (N)	1993	2005	9	0	Temporary Chair of Committees 2002-05
David Johnston	2002	2007	5	0	
Brendan Nelson	1996	2001	5	1	
Gary Nairn	1996	2004	8	1	
Brett Mason	1999	2007	8	1	

Source: Parliamentary Handbook; Work of Committees Reports n=8

(N) indicates a National party member; otherwise all are Liberal party MPs and Senators

a An MP 1990-1993. Re-elected in 1996.

b A break in his time in the Senate: 1993-99; 2000-2008

Table 8. Career Path 5: Slow Indirect. Slow Climbers: a backbench and committee chair apprenticeship

Name	Year entered Parlt	Year made Minister or Parltr Secretary	Period as government backbencher (years)	Period between 1996 or election to parlt and committee chair appt	Other parliamentary or party positions
Christopher Pyne	1993	2003	7	2	<i>Shadow ministry 1996</i>
George Brandis	2000	2007	7	2	Temporary Chair of Committees 2002-07
Santo Santoro	2002	2006	4	2	
Helen Coonan	1996	2001	5	3	Deputy Government whip Senate 1998-01
Jim Lloyd	1996	2004	8	3	Chief Government whip 2001-04
Tony Smith	2001	2007	6	3	
Julie Bishop	1998	2003	5	4	
Nigel Scullion ^a	2001	2007	6	4	National Party whip 2006-07
Bob Baldwin ^b	1996	2006	8	5	Member of Speakers Panel 2004-06
Teresa Gambaro	1996	2004	8	6	Member of Speakers Panel 2002-04
Peter Lindsay	1996	2007	11	6	Member of Speakers Panel 2002-07

Source: Parliamentary Handbook; Work of Committees Reports n= 11

a A member of the Country Liberal Party, and sits with the Nationals in parliament

b An MP 1996-1998. Re-elected in 2001.