

THE austerity COHORT



After the dust had settled on the closest election in a generation, nine LSE graduates found themselves MPs for the first time. **Danny O'Connor** caught up with some of them over the summer, and heard of the 'rollercoaster' first term in the UK Parliament and recollections of LSE.



Steve Gilbert MP

St Austell and Newquay (Lib Dem)
(MSc International Relations 2000)

The only Lib Dem LSE alumnus among the 2010 intake, the coalition government puts Stephen Gilbert in a more awkward position than many of his colleagues. A few weeks prior to the Lib-Con pact he was in the midst of an intense election battle, narrowly beating his Conservative rival by just over 1,000 votes. How does he find the transition from rivalry to partnership? 'We've all fallen through the looking glass,' he says. 'Never in our wildest dreams, or nightmares, did we think it would happen.'

But he seems relatively comfortable with the situation now: 'Old prejudices need to be put aside in order to govern in the national interest. I always said, throughout the election campaign, that I'd work in the interest of the wider community, rather than party politics.' The coalition, he says, is an extension of this.

Stephen fell into politics by 'accident rather than design'. At 21 he became the youngest councillor in Cornwall, successfully standing in a by-election on a platform of bringing a cash machine to his local village in Restormel – a promise he fulfilled. He went on to work in Westminster (in Lembit Opik's office), work for an MEP and become a councillor again, this time in London.

But, a Cornish lad through and through, he was delighted to be selected for (and elected to) the newly created seat of St Austell & Newquay. As with many other Cornish MPs, housing and employment are high up on his agenda. 'I am probably one of the only MPs who was elected while still living with their parents,' he says.

He was already on his way to a political career when he arrived at LSE, but was pleased to say his time at the School had had a lasting influence: 'The chance for a working class boy from Cornwall, the first in his family to go university, to come to London and interact with such a diverse group of peers was extraordinary.'

Tom Greatrex

Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Labour)
(BSc Government and Law 1996)



A contender for the most exhausted of our new MPs, Tom Greatrex's election took place shortly after becoming the father of twins. As a former researcher and special adviser in government, he was at a slight advantage, but says: 'there's a huge amount to learn and I hadn't appreciated how self reliant MPs are.'

Like all new MPs, Tom was inundated with post-election invitations, but had one appointment he was never going to miss. Almost immediately after being elected he travelled to Hamburg to watch his beloved Fulham FC in the Europa Cup final. Not only did he miss the MPs' inductions and the wrangling over the coalition but he was the only new MP, as far as he is aware, not to be in the 'class photo'. He remains unrepentant.

Never directly involved in student politics – although he did do a stint as *The Beaver's* anonymous Union Jack columnist – Tom still took advantage of LSE's proximity to Westminster, volunteering for parliamentary offices and campaigns, including Margaret Beckett's 1994 leadership campaign. He admits that most of his memories of 'working' at LSE come from this, or his time spent in alumni relations and the Students' Union shop.



It was in the latter job that he would first meet his future Labour colleague Ed Miliband. Ed stood out thanks to his daily routine of buying the *Financial Times* (then 15p) and his inexhaustible need for pens. Despite his potentially reckless attitude to stationery, Tom still holds enough respect for his colleague to have backed him in the Labour leadership contest.

Jobs, the economy and energy policy are high on Tom's agenda for the next term. The latter, he argues, should be a central concern of the coalition government, both in terms of battling climate change and revitalising the economy, a point he intends to make in his role on the Energy and Climate Change Committee. Tom has recently been appointed shadow minister for Scotland.



Margot James
Stourbridge (Conservative)
(BSc Economics and Government 1979)

'A regular William Hague' as a teenager, Margot James's political leanings were formed long before she arrived as an undergraduate in Houghton Street. She joined the Conservatives at 17: 'People forget what it was like. Trade Unions were destroying British business, all our major industries were nationalised, some people still defending the USSR and, when Thatcher took over, a 98 per cent top rate of tax.'

At LSE, Margot was an active member of the student council and chair of the Conservative Association. She was selected as one of LSE's first ever student governors, a decision which has come full circle after she was appointed, once again, to the Court of Governors in 2008. In a pre-cursor to the LSE parliamentary internship scheme, she also took advantage of LSE's central London location to work in the office of former Conservative MP Anthony Durant.

A successful entrepreneur who set up and ran her own health consultancy, Margot is now on the coalition's Business Innovation and Skills Select Committee. But in addition to her professional expertise she has a lifetime of volunteering and public service. Building on her involvement with the African initiative while at LSE, Margot also spent ten years as a trustee of an African women's charity, helping to train women from across Africa in communications and advocacy skills.

Since 2005 Margot has been vice chair of the Conservative Party with responsibility for women's issues. Well aware of the numerous difficulties facing women in politics, she still has no time for criticism that the current Cabinet is 'too male', arguing: 'There are excellent women in the Conservative Party, four are in the Cabinet and others will be promoted in due course.'

Christopher Pincher

Tamworth (Conservative)
(BSc Government and History 1991)



Christopher Pincher's election must have produced mixed feelings for the LSE alumni relations team. Delight as one more LSE graduate makes it into Parliament, but sorrow, perhaps, that it was at the expense of another alumnus, former MP Brian Jenkins.

Like most of his colleagues, the Staffordshire born MP found his fair share of challenges upon arrival in Parliament. First, there was the over-spilling postbag: 'I'd been elected on a Friday and had over 100 letters waiting for me on the following Monday morning.' Second, there was the common problem of getting lost in the 'labyrinth of turrets and tunnels' at Westminster. Even with these minor setbacks, Christopher gives the impression that he has got the hang of things now: 'There's no handbook on how to be an MP. You have to learn to become a detective – find out what the concern is, both for constituents and in policy.'

Although interested in politics from a young age, initially joining the Conservatives as a reaction against the miners' strikes, it was while studying at LSE that Christopher's political convictions were cemented. Recalling lectures by the likes of Brian Abel Smith, David Starkey and Robert Pinker, and reading Hayek and A J P Taylor on the influence of the state, he says: 'Although they came from very different political persuasions, the arguments and points stuck. It was great to be there at the time with all these big figures saying interesting things.'

Looking at the big issues facing the current Parliament, Christopher points to energy security as a top priority. 'Tackling fuel poverty means a reasonable supply of cheap energy. Oil and gas are heavily subject to price. We need to invest in nuclear power for the future, as well as having greater gas storage.'

On the coalition he seems a touch ambivalent, comparing it to 'saving up for years to go on holiday, but getting there to find it raining – so you have to make the best of things. So far it seems to be working.'

Rachel Reeves

Leeds West (Labour)
(MSc Economics 2004)



It was while working for the Bank of England as an economist that Rachel Reeves studied at LSE, as part of her training. And it was while studying at LSE that she was selected to run as the Labour candidate in Bromley and Chislehurst in the 2005 election: 'I really enjoyed

this experience, getting out knocking on doors and discussing policy issues with local residents.'

Shortly after moving to Leeds, the longstanding Labour seat of Leeds West was opened up for selection. As a safe seat, in a city that hadn't seen a woman MP for 40 years, it drew attention from many potential candidates. In the end the local party opted for an all-women shortlist. Rachel was quick to defend this as a decision taken by the local party, not centrally – indeed, she previously criticised David Cameron for seeking to impose all women shortlists on Conservative associations. Although the Labour selection was an incredibly close race, Rachel went on to win the seat by a healthy majority of over 7,000, and has recently been appointed shadow pensions minister.

Rachel is under no illusions about what will be taking centre stage in Parliament: the economy and spending cuts. 'If you look at my constituency in Leeds, there is a strong reliance on financial services, higher than average unemployment, and high levels of deprivation. The government's cuts are going to hit places like Leeds West harder, particularly the VAT increase and cuts to benefits which constituents rely on.'



David Rutley
Macclesfield (Conservative)
(BSc International Relations 1985)

Following the retirement of parliamentary veteran Sir Nicholas Winterton, David became the first new MP Macclesfield has seen for 39 years (although you would have to look back over 100 years to find a non-Conservative MP). As another former special adviser turned MP, David was familiar with Parliament's official business – bills, debates and motions – but was surprised by some of its more obscure features.

A bit like in primary school, each MP has his or her own peg in a cloakroom. Less like in primary school, each peg comes with its own sword-holder. Rather than being put off, David launched a competition for school children in his constituency to design and make a sword so he can use his peg to its full potential.

Coming from a political family of a different hue (his father was a Liberal Mayor), it was at LSE that David's Conservatism crystallised: 'LSE was a pivotal time for me. I learnt a huge amount from spending time there – stimulated by talented students and a stretching faculty.' Some of the most memorable figures for him included Chris Hill, Fred Halliday and former director Ralf Dahrendorf. 'Even if I disagreed with what they said, they were exceptional.'

David was keen to point out that four members of the Conservative Association during his time at

LSE are now MPs: himself, Richard Bacon and two government ministers – Mark Hoban and Maria Miller. Also present was the now *Times* chief leader writer and Tory supporter Daniel Finkelstein, although at the time he was championing the SDP.

David is full of praise for the 'electrifying' pace set by David Cameron. He is also 'delighted' to be part of the new Treasury Select Committee where his business background – he was a senior executive at Asda and PepsiCo – will, he says, be put to full use. ■



Danny O'Connor is a press officer at LSE.

The following LSE graduates were also elected to Parliament for the first time.

Rebecca Harris – Castle Point (Conservative)
(BSc Government 1989)



A former marketing director at a publishing firm, Rebecca won the Castle Point seat from controversial former MP Bob Spink, who left the Conservative Party to stand as an independent candidate in 2010. Prior to being elected, Rebecca was a political adviser to Tim Yeo MP.

Eric Ollerenshaw – Lancaster and Fleetwood (Conservative), BSc Economics 1971



The most senior MP of the LSE alumni, the former history teacher was selected through an open primary to represent the Conservatives in the new seat of Lancaster and Fleetwood in 2010, which he won by just 333 votes. Despite being a born and bred Lancastrian, Eric Ollerenshaw spent 10 years as a councillor in Hackney and then four more as a member of the London Assembly, where he became leader of the Conservative Group.

Stella Creasy – Walthamstow (Labour)
MSc Social Psychology 2001, PhD Social Policy 2006



The most recent alumnus from the 2010 intake, Stella won LSE's 2005 Richard Titmuss Prize for her PhD paper. Previously a Labour researcher, speechwriter and mayor of Waltham Forest, she won the relatively safe Labour seat of Walthamstow after its MP of 18 years stood down.

Do you work in the Civil Service, government or public policy? Join our new alumni group – see page 36 for details.