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The “Big Six” Problem



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Introduction

Household awareness of political personalities isn't necessarily a pre-requisite for success in politics. But if the aim is to communicate a vision clearly – which will be particularly necessary in next year's 'change' election – you do need recognisable faces delivering it. More specifically, recognisable faces who have authority and are seen in a favourable light by the public.

On the back of last month's Suella Braverman-sparked reshuffle, we conducted testing of the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet to get a better understanding of public familiarity and perceptions. We looked at how aware the public were of a range of top-tier politicians, whether they had seen them in the news recently and how favourable they were to them.

Here, we are going to focus on those occupying the positions roughly considered the 15 most senior, and their shadows:

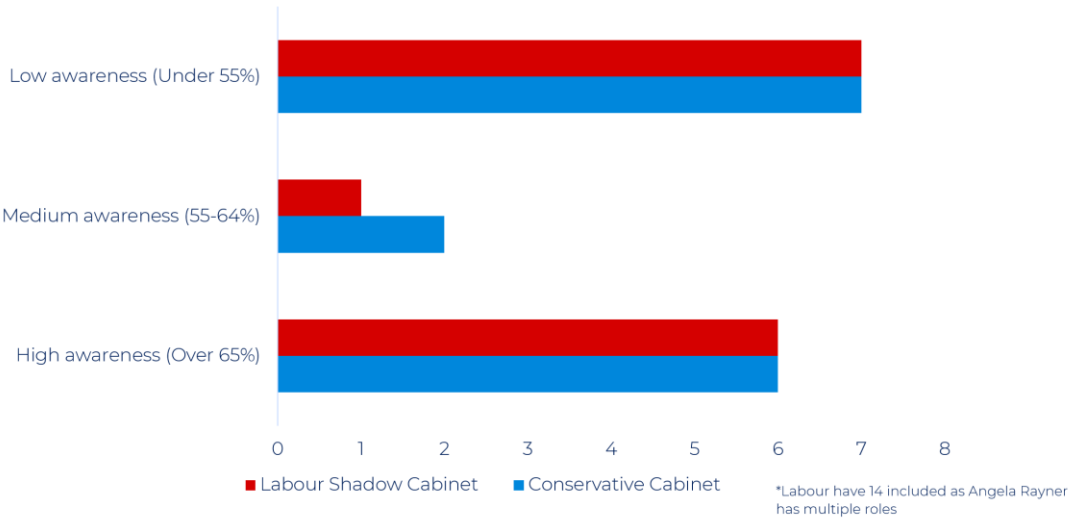
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|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Prime Minister | 8. Energy Security & Net Zero Secretary | 12. Business & Trade Secretary |
| 2. Deputy Prime Minister | 9. Science, Innovation & Technology Secretary | 13. Environment, Food & Rural Affairs Secretary |
| 3. Chancellor of the Exchequer | 10. Levelling Up, Housing & Communities Secretary | 14. Education Secretary |
| 4. Foreign Secretary | 11. Health & Social Care Secretary | 15. Culture, Media & Sport Secretary |
| 5. Home Secretary | | |
| 6. Defence Secretary | | |
| 7. Justice Secretary | | |

As the Government, you are in control of the direction and tone of the country's political agenda. As such, you have the power to dominate the airwaves with interviews and announcements. Therefore, the party in power naturally should have higher awareness scores than the opposition. However, our findings do not naturally fit that narrative.

We define awareness as the percentage of the public who say they have heard of a politician before taking the survey. We have qualitatively grouped awareness into three brackets: high (over 65% public awareness); medium (55-64%); and low (under 55%).

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Top 15 Cabinet members split by public awareness band

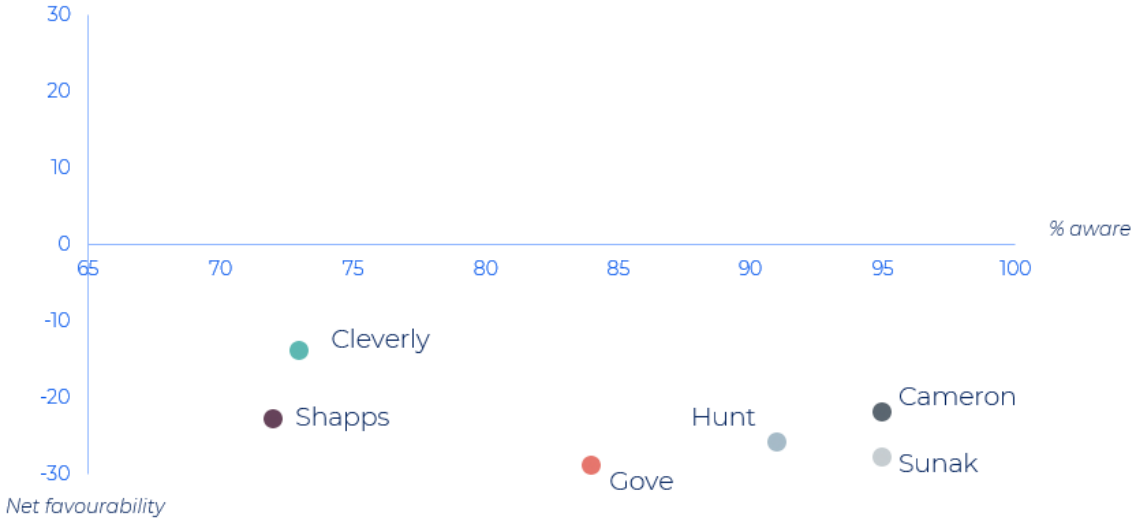


The Conservative Cabinet

The Conservative Cabinet (i.e., the Government) has an average awareness of 65.6%. This low awareness is further highlighted by the fact that only six of the 15 most senior Cabinet members have an awareness over 65%:

1. Prime Minister – Rishi Sunak (95%)
2. Foreign Secretary – David Cameron (95%)
3. Chancellor of the Exchequer – Jeremy Hunt (91%)
4. Levelling Up, Housing & Communities Secretary – Michael Gove (84%)
5. Home Secretary – James Cleverly (73%)
6. Defence Secretary – Grant Shapps (72%)

The 'Big Six' in Cabinet: Awareness x Favourability Rating



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Below these 'Big Six', there is only moderate awareness. Just 59% of the public say they are aware of the Deputy Prime Minister, Oliver Dowden. Kemi Badenoch, Business & Trade Secretary who has had her fair share of headlines, has an awareness of 58%.

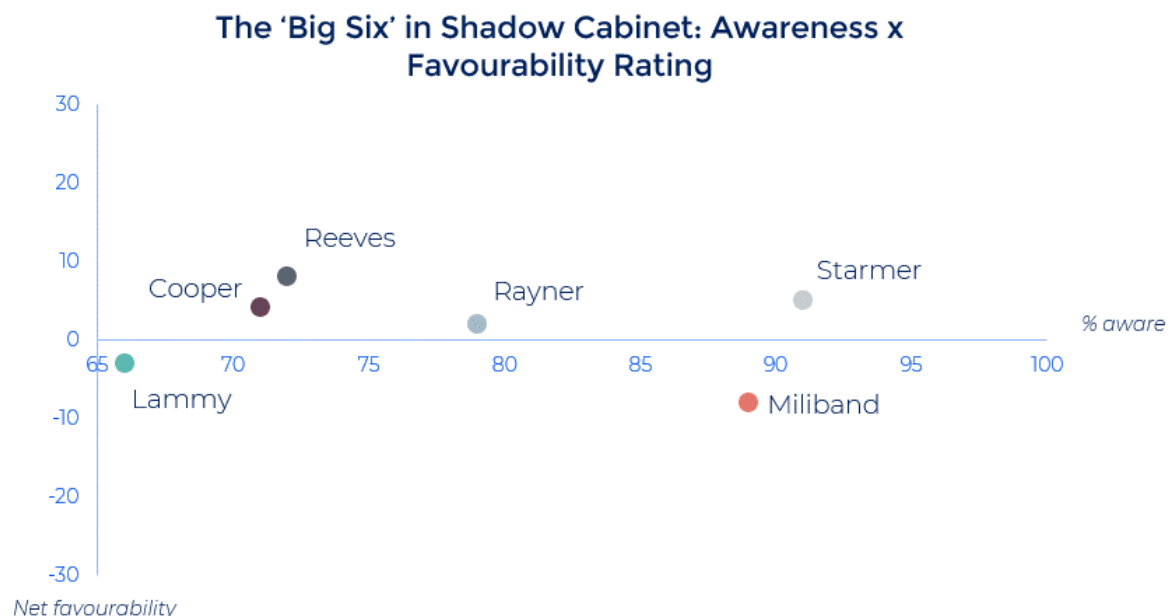
Looking at net favourability ratings for the 'Big Six' ministers highlights a big problem for the Government. All are incredibly unpopular. James Cleverly is the only minister who stands out of the crowd as marginally more popular than his colleagues, though, even then, his favourability score is still -14.

The Labour Shadow Cabinet

In contrast, the Labour Shadow Cabinet (i.e., the Opposition) has an average awareness of 62.4%: just 3.2pts lower than the Government.

Similarly, there are just six Shadow Cabinet members who have awareness over 65%:

1. Leader of the Opposition – Keir Starmer (92%)
2. Shadow Energy Security & Net Zero Secretary – Ed Miliband (89%)
3. Shadow Deputy Prime Minister and Shadow Levelling Up, Housing & Communities Secretary – Angela Rayner (79%)
4. Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer – Rachel Reeves (72%)
5. Shadow Home Secretary – Yvette Cooper (71%)
6. Shadow Foreign Secretary – David Lammy (66%)



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Again, below the 'Big Six', there is moderate awareness of the Shadow Cabinet. Wes Streeting – Shadow Health Secretary – has awareness of 57%, whilst Bridget Philipson – Shadow Education Secretary – has awareness of 47%.

Considering their national lead over the Conservatives in the polls, Labour's 'Big Six' favourability scores do not read as overwhelmingly positive news for Labour. However, if the next election will be fought on the economy, Labour will be happy to see Rachel Reeves' favourability rating out ahead.

Key takeaways

So, we have a load of data points, but what does it mean for the two parties, their election chances, and their policy platforms?

Roughly, we can take away three key points:

1. Current political apathy means only politicians with longevity are breaking through into the mainstream.

As Portland identified in a piece earlier in Autumn – – roughly 13% of the UK public can be identified as 'apathetic' about politics. On the other end of the scale, only 3% can be classed as 'believers' in politics. These categories emerged from a questionnaire we designed to measure the public's engagement with, and their cynicism towards, politics. After aggregating 0-10 scores across 13 different statements, we segmented the population into: apathetic (0-3); carers (4-6); believers (7-10). That 3% who are "believers" are accounted by the sort of person who joins a political party – plus the sort of person works in SW1.

It is within this 2023 context that these Cabinet ratings should be viewed: the public is tuned out of politics and want problems fixed – not to be witnesses to (more) Westminster psychodramas.

In the Cabinet 'Big Six', Michael Gove and Grant Shapps occupy positions four and six. Gove has never held a Great Office of State, and Shapps was only Home Secretary for seven days. They owe their awareness to longevity, having both largely been in Cabinet since 2010. And while Gove might be widely acknowledged by the SW1 cognoscenti as one of the most effective departmental ministers since 1945, he has never been top of many public popularity lists – to put it mildly.

Meanwhile those who have been portrayed in recent years as 'rising stars' by the political lobby, such as Kemi Badenoch and Claire Coutinho, have limited public awareness (58% and 47% respectively).

The same is true for Labour. Those who occupy the Opposition 'Big Six' positions have been at the forefront of their party over a considerable period. Those who have

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only sprung to prominence more recently, such as Wes Streeting (57%), have poor awareness despite, in Streeting's case, a major media presence

2. Labour's vital shadow briefs don't have big hitters running the show.

While we have not yet seen the manifesto, it is likely that a future Labour Government's domestic agenda will focus on education and health: two vital briefs for any Labour administration.

It will be unnerving therefore for some in Labour that important spokespeople – Bridget Phillipson for education and Wes Streeting for health – are not more present in the public's mind. Considering the press Streeting has courted over his tenure as Shadow Health Secretary, he will have expected a much higher degree of public awareness.

Even more worrying perhaps that when we inserted a fake – red herring – Shadow Secretary of State into the mix: 'Fiona Wilson'. Phillipson's awareness score is a point lower than Wilson's, who scored 48%.

Both Streeting and Phillipson have been in position for over two years, but their awareness figures are at 47% and 57% respectively. If the Party's mission of 'Opportunity' is to be successful with the electorate, their public profiles will need to be elevated.

3. The Conservative 'Big Six' are all men – that's a problem.

With Suella Braverman's sacking, and David Cameron's return to Government as Foreign Secretary, currently there are no women who break the 65%+ awareness threshold in Cabinet. Conversely, Labour has an equal gender ratio – three men and three women.

Cameron, as leader of the opposition, pledged in 2008 that by the end of the next parliament, one third of his government would consist of women. Ahead of a pivotal general election, he saw that he could demarcate his new party from the old party, by presenting a more diverse and representative face. In the wake of this shift, we have seen two female Prime Ministers, four female Home Secretaries and a female Foreign Secretary.

Looking to, arguably, a more pivotal general election for the Conservatives, none of the Great Offices of State are occupied by women. None of the publicly recognisable 'Big Six' are women. All the while, women are now less likely to vote Conservative than men – a role reversal from 2010. By lacking gender diversity in top positions, the Conservatives risk increasingly alienating women – the largest demographic grouping in the UK – to vote for them.

On the other hand, Labour has a female Shadow Chancellor, Shadow Home Secretary and Shadow Deputy Prime Minister. Moreover, two of Starmer's top

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advisers are women: Sue Gray (Chief of Staff) and Deborah Mattinson (Director of Strategy).

Conclusion

Although it is leaders who set their party's policy direction and public tone, their successes are fundamentally dependent on a strong team around them. In a frenetic and politically apathetic world, however, it is becoming increasingly difficult to assemble a cabinet that can break into the mainstream and speak directly to voters. In part, this is the reason why parties are increasingly leaning on experience and competence. David Cameron's re-emergence symbolises this only too well.

In the face of these communication complexities, parties must still ensure they stick to an overall strategy and hold their nerve. Worse than having a team with limited public awareness, is having a team that chops, changes and does not represent the party's vision and values.

A methodological note

We inserted two fake politicians into our testing: Conservative minister, Henry Thorpe, and Labour shadow minister, Fiona Wilson. Over two fifths of the population said they had heard of these two. This is a prime example of why surveys on issues where a large proportion of the sample are "low information" should be treated with caution. And why the best political communication research uses tools like focus groups alongside straight polling.

Portland Communications surveyed 1,015 members of the UK public online, between 17th and 20th November 2023. All data was weighted to nationally and politically representative standards. Portland is a member of the British Polling Council.