

What manner of man is the new UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson? On the next page is an edited version of a profile by Andrew Gimson, published in Conservative Home just over a year ago when Williamson was appointed Conservative Chief Whip, a few days after his fortieth birthday, and after only six years as an MP.

Such rapid promotion to this post is not unprecedented, and can lead to even greater things. In 1955, Edward Heath was made Chief Whip, a key event in his ascent to the prime ministership. In the words of one of his biographers, John Campbell:

*“He was not a member of the Cabinet, and was totally unknown to the country; but after less than six years in the House he now occupied a position of greater potential influence than most ministers. He was not yet forty.”*

Williamson had spent three years at the centre of power, as Parliamentary Private Secretary to David Cameron, and in this role gained the confidence of backbenchers who by no means agreed with everything Cameron was doing.

Jacob Rees-Mogg, like Williamson a member of the 2010 intake, said of him:

*“He was the ideal PPS for Cameron – he managed to keep the PM connected to the views of the backbenchers. He actually got things sorted out. He’s a thoroughly good egg.”*

Another backbencher, who had been in the House for 13 years when Williamson arrived as one of the 147 new Tory MPs elected in 2010, saw other members of that intake deferring to the new boy, and wondered why:

*“He looked a bit goofy. He wasn’t a good speaker. I looked him up, and he’d had an undistinguished North Country career. But I gathered he was really big in the candidates’ network. He was also a founder member of the Curry Club of 2010 backbenchers. He’s assiduous, helpful, honest and friendly. He’s empathetic.”*

While working for Cameron, Williamson was also “omnipresent”, chatting to backbenchers, acting as “a very good listener”, always remembering his job had nothing to do with formulating policy, but was to find out what everyone was thinking and give the Prime Minister an accurate picture.

A member of the 2015 intake said Williamson is “nice and cuddly on the outside, but actually a bit of a bully”, and claimed some MPs were “a bit afraid” of him because in their experience he always spoke with the authority of the Prime Minister.

But how did Williamson make the leap from Cameron’s PPS to May’s Chief Whip? For the new Prime Minister immediately hurled most of her predecessor’s supporters into outer darkness.

Part of the answer to this question has been given by Williamson himself, to his local paper, the Express and Star, in which he described what happened immediately after the referendum result, and the resignation on the morning of Friday 24th June of Cameron:

*“At the time everyone’s favourite was Boris Johnson. I just couldn’t see it. I knew Theresa was by far the best person for prime minister. She had the right tools for the job. Everyone told me I was wrong and that she couldn’t possibly win, but I sensed the mood of the country. People were looking for someone who is a serious politician who can make tough decisions in challenging times. I just knew instinctively that she was the one.”*

So Williamson phoned May and told her he wanted to help her with her campaign. He is said, however, to have checked first whether Cameron would have any objections to such a step, and to have been assured that the outgoing Prime Minister did not.

For although Williamson says Johnson was at this stage “everyone’s favourite”, that was by no means the case inside Number Ten, where it was becoming clear that May was the candidate best placed to stop Johnson, in alliance with Michael Gove, romping to victory.

Within 24 hours of Williamson joining her, May offered him the post of parliamentary campaign manager. In his words:

*"I was absolutely flabbergasted, but I accepted immediately. I was ready to get to work. I had a big advantage because the years I spent working with David [Cameron] had allowed me to experience a side of Parliament that very few people get to see. I've also worked with the other candidates. I had a good idea of what makes people tick."*

The inside knowledge of the parliamentary party Williamson had amassed while working for Cameron was now placed at May's disposal, and within days there were claims he was helping to run a "stop Boris" campaign. But on the morning of Thursday 30th June, Gove denounced Johnson and decided to run for the leadership himself.

Johnson withdrew from the race, Gove failed to capture the momentum his former ally had enjoyed, and Andrea Leadsom became for a brief period the last, best hope of the stern, unbending Eurosceptics.

Meanwhile the May campaign continued on its quietly professional way, with Williamson embedded within it. As one observer says:

*"He did the numbers on Theresa's campaign, and she was quite captivated by him. She engaged with him more than she did with most people. She was extremely impressed."*

Williamson had seized the chance to show her how well he knows the parliamentary party, about two-thirds of which was first elected in 2010 or 2015. And he is the kind of provincial Conservative she wanted to promote as she turned away from the metropolitan types associated with Cameron.

Williamson was born in Scarborough on 25th June 1976, and educated at Raincliffe School, a comprehensive, followed by Scarborough Sixth Form College and the University of Bradford, where he read social sciences. He is married to Joanne, who was a primary school teacher, and they have two daughters.

Rejecting his parents' socialism, Williamson served from 2001-05 as a Conservative county councillor in North Yorkshire, before moving to Derbyshire, where he held various party offices, including Chairman of Stoke on Trent Conservative Association. He also stood at the 2005 general election as the Conservative candidate in Blackpool North and Fleetwood.

While working in the pottery industry, Williamson became known as "the baby-faced assassin", because of his willingness to take the harsh decisions needed to help his firm survive. In 2010, he succeeded Sir Patrick Cormack as the Member for South Staffordshire, and in his maiden speech praised manufacturers, declaring that "we often have a lot more common sense than bankers".

Before working for Cameron, he had been PPS to Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin.

A former senior Minister said of Williamson: "He does have a pretty cynical and serpentine view of human nature, and that cannot be anything but helpful in his new role (as Chief Whip)."

Another said: *"His easy smile, Yorkshire accent and genial quality don't quite mask a first-class political brain. He might be thought a callow youngster from the sticks. That would be a very, very grave mistake. He makes Francis Urquhart look like Eddie the Eagle."*

As Chief Whip he was able to reward two of his mates, Simon Kirby, who is a loyalist and became Economic Secretary to the Treasury, and Andrew Percy, who was a rebel but then an Under-Secretary of State in the DCLG, where he was responsible for the Northern Powerhouse. Williamson is said to value teamwork, loyalty and tribalism, rather than brains.