

Career politicians are elected young, promoted quickly and dominate the highest offices of state

Peter Allen argues that the activities of political parties is now focused heavily on the national political scene as opposed to being rooted in local communities. This may help explain why politicians are increasingly perceived as out of touch.



Writing about Jeremy Hunt for *The Guardian* the other week, John Harris lamented that Hunt, like many of colleagues in our political elite 'style themselves as expert players of the game, but know far too little about the political fundamentals'. It is widely accepted that this political class, comprised of young and fiercely partisan political operatives who are entrenched in the ways of Westminster, has 'triumphed', with career politicians dominating the House of Commons, resulting in claims that parliament is desperately out of touch. The emergence of the 'professional' route into politics stands in contrast to the longer-established traditional route via local councils, whereby prospective MPs would rack up experience at the local level before turning their hand to national politics.

What do these changes mean for how politics works? Parliamentary scholar Philip Cowley has noted that these same patterns of 'career politicians' reaching the top appear to be present in our current three main party leaders, and has also suggested that we may be looking at a twin-track career path within the Commons, with preferential promotional routes for those MPs with pre-election Westminster experience, something that would seem to be the case. At the same time, the lack of local council experience in the coalition cabinet is also clear, with only Theresa May, Eric Pickles and Vince Cable having been local councillors.

For MPs who want to get anywhere fast, it would seem that being close to your party, and being part of the Westminster village, is everything. MPs who worked in politics and around Westminster prior to their election to the Commons also dominate the most important governing roles in the country (those frontbench positions in all parties). Of the 242 MPs elected for the very first time in 1997, 51.7 per cent of those MPs who made it to Cabinet-level positions had this sort of insider experience compared to only 10.3 per cent who had experience on local councils. 44.8 per cent of those MPs whose only political experience was having served on local councils remained backbenchers for the thirteen years following their initial election or until they left the Commons, whichever came first. This was the case for less than a quarter of MPs whose sole political experience was having worked in or around politics at Westminster prior to their election.

MPs with insider backgrounds were also more likely to be promoted in their first term, with 60.5 per cent of these MPs making into frontbench roles before 2001 compared to only 51.7 per cent of those MPs with local council experience. In terms of which offices these first promotions landed them in, 28.9 per cent of insider MPs bagged jobs at the Minister of State level compared to only 6.9 per cent of MPs with local experience whilst the opposite was true of the lower level role of Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) which was the first office destination of 62.1 per cent of MPs with local experience and only 36.8 per cent of those with insider experience.

These insiders are also more likely to enter parliament at a younger age, with 56 per cent of these MPs entering parliament in their thirties compared to only 24.8 per cent of those MPs with local council experience. In turn, age seems to be a useful predictor of reaching very high office, with over 90 per cent of MPs reaching cabinet-level positions being elected between the ages of thirty and fifty. It appears that being close to Westminster and your party prior to election in the form of working for a party or in other political Westminster-based jobs is a catalyst to being elected at a younger age, being promoted faster and higher than other MPs, and ultimately to a high-flying Commons career and a seat at the top table. Is this phenomenon adding to the dislocation that many see as occurring between our

politicians and the electorate?

The tone and content of criticisms regarding the 'political class' that focus on the character of our politicians, not just the system they are a part of or the outcomes provided by it, suggest that there is a wider problem facing our political elites with many people seeing them as being unrepresentative of the wider population and lacking in legitimacy. It is less clear that there is an obvious culprit for this. Despite the fact that the Commons is dominated by [white, middle-class men](#), and the current cabinet [dominated by millionaires](#), the criticisms of our political elite are focused on more abstract notions of not being 'real people' as opposed to more specific, and ultimately more repairable, claims by traditionally underrepresented groups such as women or ethnic minorities (both of whom are still underrepresented in the Commons in proportion to their numbers in the population overall). Clearly, parties cannot implement all 'real person' shortlists when selecting candidates.

The role of parties has changed in the past fifty years, what political scientist Peter Mair called the 'withdrawal into the institutions', with the activities of parties now focused heavily on the national political scene as opposed to being rooted in local communities. Getting involved in politics has become a marginal activity, with [one estimate](#) placing the number of people seriously involved in political activism in the UK at only 100,000. When a broader decline in participation is combined with this withdrawal, it is inevitable that activism will professionalize for that small minority who start early and stay involved in politics. My research suggests that early, intense and professional engagement will pay dividends in the longer run, with this uniquely highly-involved group putting themselves in prime position to end up running the country.

Career politicians are elected young, are promoted quickly, and dominate the highest frontbench offices. These patterns reflect broader processes at work in British political life. Politics is of minor interest to many people, something [peripheral](#) to their daily lives – to paraphrase Mair once more, the public have withdrawn from political life and the parties have withdrawn into the institutions. [My research](#) highlights that they have also withdrawn into themselves, picking only their favoured sons (and occasionally daughters) for the very top jobs. Should we be concerned about this? Most probably, as a smaller gene pool from which our elites are selected is likely to result in a smaller scope for original political thought, something [we all want](#). But there is no silver bullet or quick fix. A reappraisal of what we want from our politicians, and what they can realistically provide us with, is required.

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