

How relevant is UK political science? A riposte to Matthew Flinders and Peter Riddell

by Blog Admin

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Criticisms of academics, particularly of political scientists, have dominated recent academic and media debates amid claims that the professionalization of the discipline has led to the subject becoming detached from public life. However, [Peter John](#) challenges the notion of a long-lost golden era and argues that in fact engagement is improving and has benefited from new digital tools.



At its 62nd annual conference in Belfast on 3-5 April 2012, the UK Political Studies Association (PSA) held a plenary session called 'Defending Politics, Politicians and Political Science'. One would have thought this panel would have celebrated both politics and the study of it. To be fair, David Blunkett MP gave a robust defence of politics drawing from his experience, which contained some criticisms of contemporary politicians and political parties. But the other two speakers took a narrower approach and used the occasion to launch an attack on the practice of studying politics in United Kingdom. Both Matthew Flinders and Peter Riddell argued that the professionalisation of the study of politics had detached the subject from the practice of politics and public life, creating a profession that is more interested in talking to each other than to the outside world.

Anyone who teaches and researches politics should take such a criticism seriously. It is a powerful argument that has gained much currency in recent years. It has now been made by important and well-respected people: Flinders has attracted considerable attention from his programme for BBC Radio 4, *In Defence of Politics*, and from the publication of his book of the same name; Riddell is director of the prestigious Institute for Government and is a member of the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (Hefce) Research Excellence Framework (REF) Politics and International Studies sub-panel, which will judge the impact of UK political science.

The problem is that this attack on the study of politics has been presented with no empirical support other than anecdotes. Although it is plausible to argue that professionalisation might drive out more policy-relevant and public work, such a claim – if it were ever true – is probably now dated and does not capture the current wave of work in political science now being carried out. In fact, with the greater opportunity for real-time exchanges on the internet, political scientists as conveyers of knowledge, have a unique role to play. The current role that is emerging today does not depend on the 'grand old man' public figure, which Flinders invoked by his reference to Bernard Crick, but draws on a more open relationship between academia and the public realm, one that is more inclusive of the wide range of expertise and backgrounds of those working in UK universities. Moreover, the current wave of blogging and tweeting may produce an impact that is more dynamic and timely than that occurring in the broadcast media, conveying recent evidence and research directly into the public realm, which in turn is picked up by the older forms of media.

Though sharing a common perspective, Flinders and Riddell say different things. Flinders is more concerned with the practices of those who work in higher education today. In his view the incentive structure within universities is guided wholly by the desire to secure publications in a high-prestige outlets, such as papers published in high-ranking journals and books with university publishers, which are likely to carry favour in the REF. The goal of achieving more highly-regarded publications guides the activities of those who seek employment in higher education from postgraduate study onwards; it also influences the criteria exercised by appointment panels for posts in university departments; and it affects promotion prospects. There is no reward for the public-regarding academic who wants to engage in a wider debate; rather the incentive is not to do this kind of work but to concentrate on the 'gold standard' publications that nobody other than a few experts read. The result is that research in politics is not designed to impact on the public agenda; nor do political scientists make much effort to advance their work even if it does. As

evidence for these propositions, Flinders cites the respondents to his interviews with politicians and civil servants who cannot remember a work in current political science that has influenced them. Flinders recommends that political scientists adopt a multi-pronged approach to their work that delivers the top-level publications but also creates outputs for public consumption.

Riddell shares many of these views, but focuses more on the language used in political science publications, which he thinks are badly-written and too heavily laden with jargon. With the obscure style of writing, Riddell is not surprised that UK politicians and civil servants do not take much notice of political science.

By drawing attention to the incentive structures with higher education and the readability of political science outputs, Flinders and Riddell make plausible arguments that could be tested (using the techniques of modern political science perhaps?). The problem is that they do not present any firm evidence themselves, relying on anecdote and appeals to the apparently obvious. However, it is equally plausible that there is no detachment between the study of politics and its practice, and that the relationship between the academic and the public realms has grown stronger not weaker in recent years.

The first point is that there may never have been a golden age of British academia before the predecessor for the REF, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), apparently drove out more publicly-orientated research. It is certainly an implication of Flinders' argument that the period before should have been more relevant, but it may have been the case that the study of politics only generated a few public figures but in general most work in politics was not noticed.

The second point is that the reasons for the reluctance for practitioners not to use work in political science – if that is true – may owe more to the culture of British public life itself than what academics do or do not do. Britain's elite has always been hostile to intellectuals, a tradition going back to the eighteenth century, and contrasts with other countries, such as France for example, where the recent death of the director of leading political science body, *Sciences Po*, was headline news. The point is that irrelevance may occur whether the output of political science is guided by the REF or not. In fact, the record of the study of politics has been very good, with long-term impacts of political science in subjects such as the study of elections, the reform of electoral systems, party funding, decentralisation, devolution, constitutional reform, public management reform, the work of the House of Commons and Lords, and in the conduct of foreign policy. Many political scientists have become practising politicians themselves, such as Andrew Adonis, Philip Norton and Tony Wright.

The third point is that the critique – if it were ever true – is dated, reflecting the short-term culture of the 1990s and early 2000s rather than now. Higher education is still very focused on the REF but it also expects academics to carry out effectively their other roles, such as being excellent in teaching. Appointment committees still focus mainly on the publication record of applicants, but they value other characteristics too among the well-qualified candidates that come before them. Such changes reflect a realisation from universities of where most of their income originates and how their reputation will be sustained. External bodies have been influential too, such as the research councils. Since the 1980s the Economic and Social Research Council has required applicants and grant holders to show how they deliver practitioner-relevant outputs, and other funding bodies such as the Nuffield Foundation, The Leverhulme Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have always had similar requirements, which include producing short bullet-point findings for public consumption. And of course Hefce itself has been important. It has rewarded work in the public realm in previous research exercises, such as through measures of esteem, and impact is now much more prominent in REF2014 through the aim of 'enhancing contribution higher education (HE) makes to the economy and society'. Finally, the PSA has played a role, such as through its well-reported Annual Awards Ceremony, which directly involves many practising politicians, as well as its successful press briefings (held in the Institute for Government). All these factors have altered the incentive structure.

The main change in recent years, however, has come from academics themselves. There is a revolution in information afoot, where anyone can produce output that can feed easily into public debate. This comes

from the internet and in particular from new social media, such as Twitter. Posts on Twitter do not just deliver short comments, but also give links to longer pieces of work using research (often done with state of the art methods that political scientists are now well trained in), so are a way in which academics plug research straight in the public debate and policy in a way that immediate and timely, and does not rely on others reading a book, locating a static website and attending a press launch. It is an environment in which academics can flourish because it is quite similar to the way in which they anyway work because, as even the most REF-focused academics know, it is as important to get noticed and cited as much it is to get published. And it is no surprise to see an explosion of content from academics, such as blogs and tweets from the Universities of Nottingham, Surrey and Manchester, and the [LSE Impact of Social Sciences Project](#) to name a few centres that have emerged in recent years as well as many lone bloggers and tweeters. It is possible that the public role of academics has increased in recent years across all media outlets and in advice to government. Of course such a claim is conjecture, but is no different from the one officially sponsored by the PSA (with no opposing point of view represented on its panel). In short, it needs testing.

The fourth point concerns the clarity of political science publications themselves. Here again is an evidence-free zone. The counterclaim is that the output of political science is actually very clear and pays good attention to the standard of English. Editors of academic journals and the tireless (and rarely publicly recognised) editorial assistants pay a large amount of attention to this issue. Every person who submits an article to a good journal knows that one certain route to rejection is poor expression. It sends a signal to the reviewer that the work is not good and had not been produced with a sufficient amount of care. In fact, political scientists are also good communications for a simple reason: they have to present their ideas to a very critical audience that have the power to bite back – students. Every lecturer knows that the current cohort of students will not put up with too much theory and terms that are poorly explained.

Technical terms do appear in journals and they need to be there to explain work where common language would itself obscure, such as about methodology and statistics for example. Without some training they would be hard (but not impossible) to understand. But technical terms appear in journals from other disciplines, such as in science or psychology, but no one complains about them. Science and psychology have deployed some great communicators who appear with great authority on the TV and the radio, but most journalists (even science specialists) and civil servants probably do understand the content of the professional papers in specialist journals that have generated the publicity. In fact, UK political science has a large number of good communicators. Every BBC Radio 4 Today programme I hear has an academic being interviewed, and often these are political scientists (today, the 16th April, in the background whilst writing this piece, I can hear the voice of Stuart Wilks-Heeg talking with Peter Riddell about party funding).

So, in defence of politics, I contend that the attack on politics presented by Flinders and Riddell has no foundation, and there is an equally plausible argument that engagement from political scientists has always been strong and has increased in recent years. Of course, we need some smart methods, which might need the odd technical term to explain them, to find whether Flinders/Riddell or John is right.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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