

The professionalisation of politics makes our democracy less representative and less accessible

By Democratic Audit

*The rise of the professional politician has been a noted trend in recent years. The leaders of our major parties reflect this – David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg were all political advisers before becoming MPs. **Peter Allen** has researched this phenomenon and argues that, although careerism is not quite as widespread as some claim, the prominence of professional politicians among party frontbenchers may lead to reduced public engagement with democracy.*

In a recent [interview with The Guardian](#), current shadow health secretary Andy Burnham reflected that “*all the current generation of politicians, myself included, typically came up through the back offices. We’re the professional politician generation, aren’t we?*”

This mirrors

broader academic and popular concern with the professionalisation of politics – the idea that politicians are increasingly drawn from a small group of individuals, a lot of whom have worked in politics in other capacities prior to running for elected office.

But is Burnham right? Are *all* of the current generation of politicians a product of the backrooms of political parties? Unremarkably, he is not; the percentage of politicians who hold such occupations before becoming MPs hovers around the 15% mark according to [recent research](#). But the fact that Burnham and others *feel* that the number of politicians with such backgrounds is much higher is significant. Arguably, this is indicative of the prominence that these individuals achieve relative to their colleagues from different occupational backgrounds. For example, [my research](#) finds that MPs who worked full-time in politics before being elected dominate the top frontbench positions, whilst colleagues whose political experience consisted of being a local councillor tended to remain backbenchers. Thus, if you see a politician in the media, chances are they are from the frontbenches, and more likely than not have this type of back-office experience.



Does the rise of the professional politician lead to public disengagement? Credit: House of Lords 2013/Roger Harris

Is this fair, healthy, or productive? What does it mean for our parliamentary democracy to have such influential roles dominated by such a small group of individuals? There are three main reasons why it could be a problem.

The first reason is that it seems to compound the distance between politics and the general public. People dislike politicians [more](#) than they dislike every other professional group. It has been argued by [some](#) that this is an inevitable by-product of democracy; that people get angry because they don't get what they want. However, part of the malaise surrounding contemporary British politics lies in [a sense of disconnect](#) between these professional politicians and the electorate at large – because these politicians have little experience of anything other than politics. Their domination of politics matters, to quote [Anne Philips](#), “because of what it symbolizes to us in terms of citizenship and inclusion – what it conveys to us about who does and does not count as a full member of society.” If you are a plumber, a teacher, a civil servant, or an accountant, and you see the top of politics dominated by those drawn primarily from political backgrounds, not only do you feel disconnected from them, think that they would know little of your lived experience, but also that politics isn't for people like you.

The second reason is that it makes democracy less representative and less fair. It isn't right that any sole group dominates any aspect of political representation, although in this case, the argument is not that another group are *under*-represented, it is rather that this group is *over*-represented in top political positions. What inherently makes this group better at holding high political office than others? It is unlikely that this small group of people are going to do a better job of representing the electorate than anyone else.

Finally, think of all that we are missing out on when our politicians are drawn from such a small section of society. The realm of government has become increasingly technical in recent decades, focused on economic management amongst other highly complex areas. If our leading politicians, those in charge of the management of such things, have no direct experience of them or expertise in them, should we be surprised when they don't do a particularly good job? With an increasing proportion of political leaders having occupational experience solely of politics, do they collectively possess enough functional expertise to effectively fulfil this management role? In 1965, Samuel Beer [wrote](#):

“...as control [of government] extends into the complex and technical affairs of the economy, governments must win the cooperation of crucial sectors and show sensitivity to their values and purposes. Not least it must elicit their expert advice...the knowledge of those performing this function may well be necessary for the good governing of the wider community. They have special skills, experience, expertise which government must have at hand if it is to understand and control the complex and interdependent social whole.”

Arguments like this are rarely seen now and discussions of representation tend to focus on characteristics such as class, sex, or ethnicity. Revisiting these arguments now, there is a clear vision of government as something that has to make the country function, to make it work. There is also a perception that a good way to do this is to gather a variety of occupational and professional expertise under the roof of the Commons. MPs, especially those who enter government, no longer possess the same breadth of experience. However, this argument seems to have gained little traction in political debate, despite this logic being used to justify the House of Lords appointments system.

Of course, it is possible to argue the opposite of the above. For example, we have professional lawyers and teachers, professional footballers and professional doctors. Why not have professional politicians, who know how politics works, and can get things done more quickly and efficiently? To some extent, this is true – we do need politicians who do not have outside jobs, primarily because of how much time being an MP takes up. Similarly, we need politicians with competence in the skills required of a modern politician – the ability to process vast amounts of information and to speak well in public, amongst others. But it is hard not to acknowledge that there is something unsettling about a professionalised political class. Is a little more efficiency and knowledge worth the loss of interest and belief in politics that seems to be its cost? Does this not seem an unfair trade-off? Once trends such as these become embedded and more people think, as does Andy Burnham, that they are the norm, the perception is more difficult to reverse. The professionalisation of politics does not necessarily present a fundamental threat to democracy. Regardless, engaging with the question of who holds political power offers a chance to think about how politics could work in a way that includes the many rather than the few.

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