

The problem of the political class is easy to exaggerate, but difficult to define

By The Author

*It is frequently said that Britain's quality of democracy is effected by a paucity of good quality politicians, with the "political class" existing as little but an impenetrable, self-interested elite, disconnected from the preferences of the masses. Here, **Paul Cairney** lifts the lid on the realities of the political class, and argues that the 'political class' problem is difficult to truly define, but is certainly exaggerated.*



David Cameron is often described as a career politician (Credit: Thierry Ehrmann, CC BY 2.0)

It is now commonplace in Britain to bemoan the failings of the 'political class'. A wide selection of broadcast, print and social media commentators argue that elected politicians in the UK are not representative of their constituents. Instead, they are part of a self-referential 'political class' which is increasingly distant from the real world and mistrusted by the public. Examples include:

[Peter Osborne's](#) (2007) description of a 'narrow, self-serving governing elite'.

[Guido Fawkes](#) (2009) allegation that 'Disenchantment with politicians has never been higher, most think they are overpaid and dishonest'.

[Andrew Neil's](#) 2011 documentary 'Posh and Posher: Why Public School Boys Run Britain' and assertion (in [BBC2's Daily Politics 19.6.14](#) from 39 minutes) that 'all MPs will end up looking and sounding the same' if 'hand picked by the party high command'. (For more information see [Stephen Crone's](#) piece for the [LSE Politics and Policy blog](#).)

[Leo McKinstry's](#) (2014) assertion that 'the political class inhabits its own bubble, utterly divorced from the lives of voters ... too many professional politicians ... have no experience of the real world. Precious few have backgrounds in the working class, the private sector or business. A vast number of MPs, particularly on the Labour and Liberal Democrat benches, are nothing more than ambitious careerists who worked in politics, pressure groups, think tanks, local government and the civil service before winning their seats' (see also [Martin](#), 2014).

[Mason and Gani](#) (2014): 'About half of Labour's candidates selected to fight in marginal seats at the next election have links to Westminster as former special advisers, party workers, researchers, lobbyists or MPs'.

[Gimson](#) (2014) reports on the attempts by the UK Independence Party (UKIP) to exploit this perception and appeal to voters with an image of UKIP as part of 'a huge popular uprising' based partly on the backgrounds of its candidates (as 'not career politicians' – [Kirkup](#), 2014) and its attitude to immigration ([Lamont](#), 2014).

UKIP's 2014 European Parliament election material, in particular, stressed its ability to represent an alternative to the 'political class', criticising other parties for having too many candidates with jobs related directly to politics, and having gone to similar schools and Oxford University – a commonly-used proxy to describe a political or ruling class drawn from the same narrow pool of recruitment.

[Nigel Farage](#), UKIP leader, 2nd May 2014: We've just about had enough of a career class of politician ... Look at the three so-called 'big parties' and look at their front benches. They are made up of people who go to the same handful of schools, they all go to Oxford, they all get a degree in PPE ... then they all get a job as a researcher in a political office, they become Members of Parliament at 27 or 28, Cabinet ministers in their early 40s, and I put it to you that this country *is now run by a bunch of college kids who have never done a proper day's work in their lives.*

The problem with trying to find some general conclusion, from these assertions, is that they could be conflating four different problems about MPs:

1. their *flawed characters*
2. their *limited roots in local constituencies*
3. their *inexperience of the real world* because they don't have 'proper jobs' before seeking election
4. they *do not reflect the social background of the voting population.*

It is difficult to reconcile these four arguments to produce one strategy for political reform. Indeed, they can produce debates on important trade-offs, such as when all women short lists coordinated by a national party are criticised or rejected by local constituency offices and candidates. Instead, a legislature might produce plans to address corruption and MP behaviour ([see Judge, 2013](#)), leaving most issues regarding local and social background to political parties. Further, political parties differ markedly in their attitude, with Labour the most likely to seek ways to improve its representation of women, and the Conservatives more focused on avoiding 'professional politicians' and finding candidates who have 'proved themselves' outside politics ([perhaps](#) at the expense of local candidates.)

With Michael Keating and Alex Wilson, I am writing a paper that compares their experiences in different arenas – Westminster, the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly – and in relation to three main indicators of representation (sex, occupation, education). Yet, this focus seems limited because it tends to consider each category separately. In this post, I briefly explore two examples of issues that could be addressed if we cross-reference these categories – bearing in mind that quantitative analysis is limited by the small numbers involved and the lack of detailed or comparable data in many cases (in fact, I am hoping that this sort of discussion piques enough colleague interest to prompt us, as a group, to get better data).

1. A narrower pool of recruitment?

The popular media argument, summed up in Nigel Farage's speech, is that a political class contains a cadre of people with a *set* of characteristics: they attend private school, Oxbridge *and* their formative career is in an 'instrumental' occupation (defined below).

Consider two kinds of 'politics facilitating' posts. In the past, *brokerage* occupations were relatively conducive to political life. These are the jobs – including lawyers, teachers, and lecturers – providing general skills, such as articulacy, or advantages, such as a link to the local community, flexible hours or close proximity to Westminster. There has been a long-term rise in recruitment from *instrumental* occupations, which have a clearer link to politics and may be used as a stepping stone towards elected office. In this category, we would include these posts: political worker (such as someone who has worked for a party or MP); full-time trade union official; journalist, author, television or media worker; public relations; quango director or senior official; legislator in a different level of government (MEP, MSP, AM, etc.); full-time councillor or mayor; interest or professional group or think tank.

Such arguments largely conflate two different party experiences: the Conservatives who are more likely to have attended private schools and Oxbridge, and Labour MPs, more likely to have a formative career in an instrumental post. In the 2010-15 term, 29 (4.5%) of 650 MSPs meet the three criteria, including 18 Conservatives (4 women) and 8 Labour (2 women). The appearance of a trend is perhaps explained by the fact that many are (or were) senior members of the UK Government – David Cameron (PM), Nick Clegg (Deputy PM), George Osborne (Chancellor), Michael Gove (Education Secretary) and Chris Huhne (former Energy Secretary).

2. Trade-offs between All Women Shortlists (AWS), localism and class?

A second argument is that an attempt to redress the balance in one indicator of social background has unintended consequences on another. For example, Labour's use of AWS has become connected to arguments about national control of local selection, with the potential to undermine the selection of local candidates, or to select party worthies, in instrumental occupations, at the expense of working class candidates or, at least, people with non-instrumental formative occupations. From the limited information we have, there appears to be little evidence to support concerns about localism. Labour's MPs consistently have more 'direct local constituency connections' than the Westminster average – and far more than the Conservatives – and its record has improved since AWS. [For example](#), in 1997, the beginning of the Blair era, Labour's 57% marked a rise from 1945 (30.7%) and compared to 45% in Westminster and 9% of the Conservatives.

If we look at social background measures, for Labour's new entrants in 2010, education suggests that women are less representative – private school 12.1%/ 2.9%; Oxbridge 24.2%/ 11.8%; any University 96.9%/ 76.5% – but instrumental occupation does not – 45.5%/ 61.8%. Within occupations, the proportion of women in the 'political worker' category is higher (27.3%/ 17.6%), but the absolute numbers are in single figures (note that I include all Labour 32 women MPs because [28 were selected using AWS](#) and the remainder do not have markedly different backgrounds).

This compares with the Conservatives, in which women are far less likely than men to have attended private school (25.0%/ 47.8%), more likely to have attended Oxbridge (30.6%/ 25.7%) and more likely to have an instrumental occupation (27.8%/ 21.2%). In Westminster overall, 6 women MPs (4.2%) and 23 men (4.5%) achieve the political class trifecta. Overall, there is no clear picture, and minimal evidence to suggest that the representation of women comes at the expense of other measures of social representativeness, even when AWS is used.

The 'take home message' is that you shouldn't believe everything you hear about the political class: as a problem, it is easy to exaggerate but difficult to define; there are many solutions, each party has its own solutions and priorities; and, many solutions have the potential to undermine another. My impression is that parties are mostly worried, perhaps needlessly, about the effects of AWS on other kinds of background. Yet, Conservative recruitment, which favours business success, seems to come at the expense of local candidates and women, while UKIP's recent success in the European Parliament (combined with the Conservative showing) scuppered the otherwise remarkable progress towards a 50/50 women/ men split among UK MEPs. The 'political class' problem is not a general problem; it is an opportunity to pursue specific priorities.

Note: this post originally appeared on the [Political Studies Association blog](#) and is re-posted with permission from the author. Please read our comments policy before posting. The shortened URL for this post is: <http://buff.ly/1pUrFS>

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