

Interview: Ken Clarke on Western democracy, the press, and the longevity of our political leaders

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*In advance of a talk to the LSE Alumni Society, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and current Minister without Portfolio **Ken Clarke** spoke to Democratic Audit's **Sean Kippin** about where democracy, the press, and our public discourse have gone wrong.*



Ken Clarke, the former Chancellor who is now Minister without Portfolio (Credit: Conservatives, CC BY SA ND 2.0)

Your talk is on the subject ‘how can democracy deliver good Government?’ could you give us a flavour of what the answer to the question might be?

Yes, it all follows on from Churchill’s famous observation that democracy is a pretty dreadful way to run a country, but its very much better than all the others: hereditary monarchy, oligarchy and dictatorship, which all have disastrous effects. But, democracy does have its shortcomings. I think that is particularly obvious now, because all of the developed Western democracies have governed their way into the most terrible financial crisis, due to some very irresponsible Governments in various countries, and the political classes in democracies generally are not very adequate.

We have had riots on the streets, where the liberal middle classes are rioting against elected governments of which they disapprove because they claim they are being misgoverning the countries in which they live. And in quite a few Western democracies – particularly the Western European democracies – including the UK, we’ve had a rise of political cynicism and a contempt for traditional politics, and the emergence of nihilist, normally right wing, populist and protesting movements, which make it very difficult to form Governments and create stability, particularly in the Countries struggling with big problems.

So it’s quite easy to analyse the problem. [Democracy] isn’t what it was, though I always have to remind myself as a

veteran politician that the moment you say you remember that it was never perfect, indeed, the history of populist politics goes back to the origins of democracy and you have to be realistic about the inevitable conflicts, turmoil and difficulties in gaining a consensus.

The two remedies I propose are firstly that politicians have to find a new way of advertising their message. We're driven by a 24 hour, 7-day a week agenda of an extremely populist media into just reacting to instant events, and a media agenda, which if you aren't careful can drive you away from actually getting across a comprehensive picture of principles, purpose, overall plan, overall strategy, competence, [and] what it is you're trying to make the country look like in four or five years time. It would be a good thing if all parties in Western democracies had the courage to actually do that, and attempt to argue it.

We've also got to find some way of developing a sensible platform for such a politics. And the reason politicians don't do that is because their lives are completely dominated by the need to respond to the day's nonsense news story, and the need to make an impact next week. The techniques of politics are based in very bland PR stuff, which is failing to inspire people in very many Western democracies and is in fact turning everybody off. So that's roughly my thinking. How do you get the emergence [of a new style of political discourse]? From public sector broadcasting? More serious press, or some sensible vehicles, the Twittersphere? Or [by] actually redefining what the issues are in politics. Because in most countries, educated and intelligent members of the public are not entirely clear what the competing agendas are of their would-be political parties and leaders. In quite a lot of Western countries (not, of course the UK) the political leaders do not appear to have a political agenda.

There's a debate raging at the moment in this country on the composition of what you refer to as the political class. Do you think there's a problem in the way that political parties are cut off in the way that they choose candidates that makes it inevitable that they'll find it difficult to communicate with the public?

Well, this is not confined to Britain at all. It applies to every Western democracy, including the United States, I think. We have declining active participation by serious people in politics and a tendency for the activist followers of parties to be not totally representative of the voters they're seeking. So, you get core enthusiasts tending to dominate the machinery of the party, and tend, through choice of candidates or whatever, to take the parties further away from the public they're trying to impress. It's one of the things – another is the nature of the media – that is happening in every western party, its leading to the end of the two big parties, and an end to the polarised vote, and a fragmentation of voting, a decline in participation and so on.

The old political machines [...] are losing public confidence, which has the effect of declining participation. The most extreme example is the Tea Party effect on the Republican Party in the United States. Most people of moderate views in the United States have very few members of the political class who actually represent their views on either side, and we have to make sure that doesn't happen in Europe. Again, trying to articulate an overarching set of principles and strategy for the parties to stand for, and find the right people to stand and to inspire and enthuse the people, as briefly Clinton and briefly Blair did, but nobody has since in the States or in this country.

Is there something about the nature of contemporary political leadership which makes popularity impossible?

I think it's the nature of the political debate. All western democracies have become presidential, which means that all activity seem to be concentrated in the one party leading figure in Government or Opposition dominates media attention day, by day, by day. The nature of the media is campaigning, there's very little of the media interested in objective reporting of any of the issues. Inevitable in the middle of that, the leadership and politicians get a very very bruising time, and its very difficult for anybody to sustain their reputation for any considerable amount of time. Angela Merkel is just about the only one who has. 8 to 10 years seems to be the maximum.

Clinton survived – he started adulated and thought to be a hero. Eight years later and he would have been re-elected had he been available. He had quite the most appalling treatment from the media for most of the time he

was in office. Blair was the last 'Kennedy equivalent' we had here, he started walking on water and could have done anything he'd wanted, but he didn't last 10 years partly because of internal troubles, but he's now one of the most unpopular figures with the British public. Margaret Thatcher was never adulated in the same way, but had a huge following of about 50-52% of the public. It took ten years before she'd exhausted it. The more the present atmosphere continues, the more the pace of crises, the more complicated the problems get. If we're not careful we will continue to see the life expectations of our political leadership shorten more.

I remember Gordon Brown saying that he had a seven year rule, in which politicians have seven years of constant attention in them before the public begins to tire of them.

He thinks seven years, I say ten years. But Gordon may be right, perhaps its getting shorter. The pace is getting faster, and the intensity and hysteria of the popular debate is getting worse. I don't think its just my age! It is getting constantly worse. I always tell myself that back in the 19th Century there were these bizarre debates in which the number of personal insults was very high, and [the] problems [of] a campaigning media go way back into the 20th Century. It's now become so instant. It really is 24 hours of the day, all the time. It's speeding up the life-cycle of Governments and certainly the individual life-spans of Governments, and accentuating this public revulsion and protest, which if you are not careful you arouse.

Public expectations have been led to be unreal. They have a very long list of things that they expect to be sorted out in a way that doesn't involve any unnecessary change, expense or anything else as far as they're concerned, as long as you solve the problems.

A final question: could you tell us something about your role as a Minister without Portfolio in the Cabinet Office

Yes, I'm actually the 'elder statesman' of the Government – is a polite way of putting it, at least it's always how I like to describe myself!

My most important activity probably remains attending the Cabinet, and also the Security Council, and countless Cabinet Committee. But I have a portfolio of things that the Prime Minister has asked me to do, and give a Cabinet Minister lead to. Some of things are to do with the Security Services and the the so-called Secrets Court, handling the Gibbs Inquiry. I'm the lead on European reform and trade matters, so on the EU/US Trade Agreement and other EU trade agreements, the single market, European de-regulation, various aspects of business policy, such as business support and finance for Small and Medium sized Business, structural things in the economy.

My background is such that I also [work on] export finance, which is one of the most important things I do that I have tried to impress my colleagues to reform and strengthen in the last few years. I also have responsibility for the business bank, as well as a lot of trade envoy work and travelling abroad. I also work on health care and life sciences.

I travel to Brazil and China which are emerging markets, but spend tens of millions of dollars on improving our health services, and ours is very well placed to export to them. I also have oil and gas in Brazil and anti-corruption, which is what I've been doing today as the Government's anti-corruption champion.

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Rt Hon Kenneth Clarke MP is a Minister without Portfolio in the Cabinet Office. He has also been Secretary of State for Justice, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary, and Secretary of State for Health. He has been the Conservative MP for Rushcliffe since 1970.

Sean Kippin is Managing Editor of [Democratic Audit](#). He received a First Class (Hons) Degree in Politics from the University of Northumbria in 2008, and an MSc in Political Theory from the London School of Economics in 2011. From 2008 to 2012 he worked for the Rt Hon Nick Brown MP in Newcastle and in the House of Commons, and for Alex Cunningham MP. He has also worked at the Smith Institute think tank, and as an intern for the Co-operative Party. He has been at Democratic Audit since June 2013, and can be found on twitter at [@se_kip](#)

