

The Professors on Public Life

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IN HIS recent defence of politics in this journal,¹ Mathew Flinders argued that ‘people ‘hate politics’ because they simply do not understand it; and they are generally not helped to understand it by the media (or university professors of politics for that matter)’. Here, I want to explore academic misconceptions of politics, with a special though not exclusive focus on the discipline of political theory/ political science. I then want to outline, in counterpoint, three features of public life whose consequences, I suggest, vitiate the practical implications of much well-intentioned analysis and advocacy from the university world. I do not claim originality; much of what I argue is synthesised from a diversity of academic dissidents, who have in common an interest in the theory of politics (in contrast to a good deal of political science and most of political theory).

Politics: the view from the academy

Large portions of research and scholarship ground their enterprise at least in part on its potential to contribute directly or indirectly to the making of public policy. Yet to the extent that this work does not come to terms with the role of elected officials in policy making, any pragmatic justification will be heavily mortgaged, and the enterprise will proceed in the shadow of that liability. This section examines three important traditions which purport in part to address the improvement of policy making. Each of them constitutes a large school of thought, with journals, associations and

meetings, earmarked professorial appointments, dozens of books and papers published per year, and the rest of the apparatus which marks scholarly *lettres de noblesse*. Manifestly, they constitute stimulating and rewarding forms of intellectual activity. Furthermore, they have, to varying degrees, attracted the interest and support of officials. The argument is not that these traditions are somehow unworthy of the recognition they have achieved; rather it is that they carry with them a partial, shallow and etiolated vision of politics, and that this compromises their potential contribution to the improvement of public life.

The first tradition in question assumes that important improvements in policy making would ensue if only policy makers would attend to the knowledge which researchers of all sorts produce and possess. The latest formal version of this large, variegated and irrepressible school of thought is the evidence-based policy movement, but it is so well-entrenched in the socialisation associated with doctoral education that it exists in varying forms in every empirically oriented discipline and research laboratory. The idea is that policy addresses states of the world and that empirical research identifies causal relationships which can alter states of the world. The former should obviously benefit from the latter, but fails more often than not to do so. The reason for this failure is ‘politics’. I shall call this tradition, in lieu of some more recondite term, ‘*policy science*’ because it assumes that what meets the epistemological standards of the various empirical disciplines merits privileged status in policy making.

A second tradition assumes that policy makers need guidance as to the ethical status of various policies, typically as measured against some single overriding value such as justice, virtue or liberty. The substance of policy can be weighed against the standards established by a series of deductions from that ethical guidepost, and this chain of logic should define a regulative ideal for policy makers: politics is applied ethics, or 'the priority of the moral over the political' as Bernard Williams put it.² This tradition constitutes the mainstream of Anglo-American political theory, known variously as 'normative political theory', 'deontological political theory', 'meta-ethical foundationalism', 'political moralism', 'transcendental justice', 'liberal idealism', 'liberal moralism' or 'deontological absolutism'. I shall call this tradition '*ethical primacy*' because it assumes that explicit ethical reasoning must play a central role in policy making. A problem is that this form of political theory lacks a theory of politics—that is, it is silent as to how its conclusions might conceivably be enacted in a democratic polity.

A third tradition grew from critiques of the previous two. The mini-public school of deliberative democracy seeks to derive legitimate policy through the assembly and education of representative samples of the citizenry. The resulting recommendations are claimed to be compelling for their fellows because of this representative feature. Summarising the claims in the literature, Rosenberg reports that 'participation in deliberation leads individuals to reflect and interact in a way that is more logical, rational, just, considerate of others, self-critical and oriented to the common good'³ leading to decisions which Warren affirms 'are likely to be more legitimate, more reasonable, more informed, more effective, and more politically viable.'⁴ *Contra* its advocates, I shall call this tradition '*deliberative discipline*' because its key feature is not—as claimed—the

representativeness of citizens recruited to deliberate on policy, but rather the discipline provided by the 'neutral expert' (normally an academic) who animates the deliberation. Here I claim only that the restrictions on the nature of the debate—insistence upon public reasons, sanctions on emotion and rhetoric, the banning of party, prohibition of arguments based on interest, religious faith or illiberal ideology—admit but a fraction of democratic political discussion as commonly understood.

All of these traditions slight policy making in electoral democracies—that is to say, in the only democracies we know about. Contemporary politics, they claim, is uninformed, unreflective, impulsive, personality-driven and myopic, leaving citizens vulnerable to demagoguery and deception. This can obviously be so, but as Steinberger notes, 'political judgment is, at one and the same time . . . the ineluctable source of pathological politics' and 'the unique solution to' such politics.⁵

To the extent that politics in every democracy involves a continuous struggle for power among competing politicians and parties, these traditions are *anti-political*. They *deny the autonomy of politics, and the agency inherent in representative democracy, by trying to discipline citizens and politicians*.

To the extent that they want to base politics on public reason, in which policies are to be judged against an explicitly logical, transparent version of some public interest, they *reconstruct politics as a quest for truth and substitute academic for civic judgment*.

To the extent that they want to ground policy making exclusively in evidence and/or values, they *misconceive policy making as a search for means to achieve predetermined ends*, when in fact it is a dialectical process of identifying and reconciling ends in light of the means which may turn out to be available and acceptable.

To the extent that they wish to purge politics of passion, power, ideology and interest, and imagine policy making as an idealised set-piece reflection on facts and values, they *indulge in an heroic and utopian denial of human character and motivation, and wish away the contingency, complexity and contention inherent in public life.*

To the extent that they treat citizens and politicians as so many anonymous students whose logic and knowledge is to be graded, or as interchangeable bearers of no more than those characteristics tractable by demography, they *abrogate the critical role of personality and particularistic ties in the multifold local milieu of electoral democracy.*

To the extent that they imagine policy making in terms of a single mind tackling a single problem in its entirety, they *fail to understand the collective, disjointed and sequential nature of most policy making.*

To the extent that they prioritise the justification of substantive policy in terms of transparent impersonal standards and ignore the persuasion of citizens and politicians by one another, they *are anti-rhetorical, severing logos from ethos and pathos.*⁶

There is, of course, nothing objectionable about wishing to reform government and politics. We need ideals to inspire us, knowledge to guide us and venues to express ourselves and listen to our fellow citizens. The traditions in question begin by grading our performance in these regards as a substantial failure against their standards. Policy scientists are puzzled at their sustained inability to have a greater influence and deplore continuing poor performance by policy makers. Ethical theorists have little to say about how we might get from here to there, preferring to further refine their standards. Advocates of deliberative discipline, for their part, want to stop the music insofar as feasible, and rewrite the tune themselves, far from the maddening crowds of politics and the media.

With respect to these sorts of theory, Galston expresses doubts:

The difficulty arises, I believe, in determining when the deviation from the world as we know it becomes so significant—quantitatively or qualitatively—that it becomes the political theory equivalent of science fiction—an act of imagination that may illuminate what is distinctive about the world we actually inhabit but that offers no guidance about how we should function in that world. A theory of justice for a parallel world has no necessary application to our world.⁷

Not the immaculate conception of policy

The cardinal facts of public life are extreme degrees of *competition, publicity and uncertainty.* The imprint of these on the elected makes their life and work radically different from those of the vast majority of citizens. Perhaps only professional athletes and show business celebrities, and possibly a handful of corporate executives, can potentially empathise with the life of the politician. Yet even they function within a substantially more explicit and predictable set of expectations than do politicians.

Stepping forward to represent one's fellow citizens constitutes a claim to understand and serve their best interests—the good of society. This claim must be vindicated and re-vindicated under the eyes and subject to the changing interpretations of all, as filtered by the vagaries of media coverage, until such time as representation ceases. It must be sustained, especially and above all, in the face of a stream of events which are entirely unpredictable and intractable, and which press the 'good of society' into unceasing metamorphosis. Finally, it must be tested against the claims of others who indefatigably seek one's place. The existential reality of politics is not power, it is the ever-present prospect, under the vicissitudes of competition, publicity and uncertainty, of its loss.

There is no manual, there are no rules, as to political performance. Success in non-political life turns out to be at best an indifferent predictor of success in politics. The opening of possibility constituted by a political career can engender enormous creativity or tremendous disappointment, and often, both. The skills which serve a politician well in one circumstance may not necessarily serve them as well in another. Political judgement—political life—is entirely context-dependent. One size does not fit all. *Pace* the rationalist academy, the key differentiator among politicians is not respect for knowledge, or ethical lucidity, or a commitment to disciplined dialogue—although all can be valuable. It is the capacity to adapt more rapidly than one's peers.

Competition is built into the very essence of representative democracy. Even Athenian democracy, built upon random selection rather than election, was rife with competition. Politics is about people before it is about ideas, or policy, or constitutional framework. The reality of public life is that others want your part in it, and that you perform before an endlessly critical audience. This engenders continuing insecurity about the protection of one's intangible asset: political capital. As R. A. B. Butler once said of Parliamentary Question Time: 'It's like the jungle. If they see you limping, they are after you.'⁸

As a consequence of competition, politicians are continuously coping with the dilemma of treating people as means or as ends, or of being treated as one or the other. Alliances, feuds, threats, compacts and settlements big and small are the daily bread of politics. In this world, the currency of information is far more important than its epistemic status, and gossip is an essential part of the working day. According to another British minister: 'You develop a certain sort of intuition about things, about people's relationships and so on... this gives you the subtleties... the autumn tints rather than the blacks and

whites. And this is really what the life here's largely about.'⁹

Publicity

The first reflex of the politician is to imagine the media treatment of and public reaction to any act, expression or policy announcement, not because he or she is necessarily a craven publicity seeker or feckless demagogue, but because the genius of democracy is precisely to induce a consciousness of public opinion, an attempt to think representatively. That this exercise seems too often unsatisfactory to many of those who have never borne the onus in question in their own working lives does not make it dispensable for those who do. Neither the events of the day salient to political judgement, nor the media construction thereof, are likely to be consistently influenced by the initiatives of politicians, who struggle constantly and mostly in vain to control much of what matters to civic judgements about them.

Richard Crossman expressed it this way when he was Minister of Housing and Local Government:

I am riding high—too high for comfort. It's an alarming thing how public opinion suddenly switches from saying, 'That Crossman! He's an impossible, erratic fellow. He won't last long' to calling me a brilliant success. . . . There are a tremendous number of unpredictable factors which could knock me right off my horse as rapidly as I have been elevated to it by Fleet Street, Westminster and Whitehall.¹⁰

Or take Churchill on his political prospects in 1942: 'I am like a bomber pilot. . . . I go out night after night, and I know that one night I shall not return.'¹¹

The daily preoccupation of public life, then, is the accumulation and husbanding of a fugitive political capital.¹² To the extent it is a search for substantive solutions to public problems, or fair terms of

cooperation, or justice, or disciplined dialogue, it is usually, though not inevitably, insofar as these contribute to the intangible capital of the political actor. This is not a cynical verdict on the moral or intellectual qualities of politicians; this is an observation about the foundational incentives of electoral democracy. Without political capital, political agents cannot implement solutions to public problems, cannot effectively advocate fair terms of cooperation, cannot pursue justice, cannot be worthwhile interlocutors in public dialogue.

Policy scientists, ethical theorists and deliberative disciplinarians want public debate to consist of arguments based—at a minimum—on evidence and principle. Politicians instinctively understand that control of the public agenda depends not on achieving the kinds of standards which reign in classrooms, tenure committees and the editorial boards of learned journals, but rather in being seen and heard, ideally in the construction of meaning and the incarnation of authenticity rather than in a claim to truth. For them, it is more important to induce trust and belief than to try to educate citizens on the facts and principles. The intervention of the media between the politician and the citizen, and the political diversity of citizens, will always leave the politician's project more or less unfulfilled, to be endlessly renewed.

In this kind of public arena, it is not principally precision (*logos*), but conviction (*pathos* and *ethos*, emotion and character) that are being sought. In contrast to the expository style taught to generations of undergraduates, analogy, narrative, ambiguity, ridicule and obloquy, and a measure of hypocrisy, are likely to dominate political discourse. In a complex, rapidly evolving and demanding world, it is instrumentally rational for politicians to seek commitment rather than consensus, and it is prudentially rational for citizens to assess character and per-

sonality as well as, and often rather than, policy.

Uncertainty

Politicians would be delighted if research or ethics or citizen deliberation could stem the uncertainty of policy making. Sometimes they can. No one would like to jettison science in the service of regulation of pharmaceutical products or pesticides, for example, or principled analysis of human rights or legal doctrines. But even in these cases, what the average politician will retain is the high level of controversy that remains after the academics and researchers have done their jobs, controversy often arising from the work of other academics and researchers.

Politicians know that problems as construed by researchers will look very different when and if they become issues on the public agenda. The primary clients for research—granting bodies, foundations, editorial boards, corporate interests—each have distinctive standards of evaluation which cannot anticipate history. The advancement of the discipline, the promotion of a certain type of reform, the domination of a market segment by innovation, often have no common measure with the construction of a political challenge eventually thrust before ministers.

Politicians know that policy and politics are the domain par excellence of unintended and unanticipated consequences. They grasp implicitly what researchers tend to ignore: that the rigorously demonstrated cause and effect relationships are usually far distant from the messy problems on the public agenda, and that today's knowledge may well be discarded tomorrow. They know that, in any case, implementation takes so long and is so uncertain that the downstream substantive consequences of policy may most often be considered by the proximate policy maker as a matter for credit or blame for successors, not for him or her. For him or her, what matters is the

reception of the intention rather than the evaluation of the execution. (Here lies a good part of the tension between elected and permanent officials.)

Despite the impression that opinion surveys solve politicians' information problem with respect to constituent preferences, leaving only the matter of how best to indulge them, the more common experience for politicians is to be unsure exactly what constituent preferences on a given issue really are—mostly because citizens themselves are disinterested, uninformed or uncertain. As Ehrenhalt put it after a lengthy examination of American political folkways: '[I]n the end there is only so much that the electorate can tell us. Most of the time it is not trying to send any message.'¹³

The traditions examined earlier want a politics of clarity and logic, in which persuasion, to the extent it is tolerated, should serve the creation of consensus and abjure 'mixed message politics'; they imagine that ensuing democratic mandates would induce deference to a victorious party of principle. Politicians know that if all the supporters of a measure had to agree on one and the same rationale for that measure, politics would stop dead in its tracks and policy making would prove impossible. The fabrication of coalitions is at the very heart of democratic politics and it is not a matter for policy scientists, far less for the advocates of ethical primacy. Politicians recount the moments when a measure A appealed to constituency Φ because $A \rightarrow x$ and to constituency Ψ because $A \rightarrow y$, where x and y are incompatible outcomes.

We would like to imagine that public policy decisions are consequent upon a well-prepared meeting of the political executive: men and women seated around a conference table, informed by a careful reading of the briefing documents, benefitting from the advice of experts speaking truth to power in muted tones, with the Prime Minister or President managing a fair and open discussion

in which each cabinet member present has his or her say. After the appropriate discussion, a decision which reflects the balance of reasons evoked is specified, and the might of constitutional authority is conferred upon a set of measures to address the public interest. This, at least, is the ideal. Alas, it bears little relationship to reality. We know, for example, that there was no such meeting before the George W. Bush administration decided to invade Iraq.

Life for senior politicians is a stimulating, enervating and exhausting blur of appointments, questions, airplanes, meetings, negotiations, limousines, briefings, hotel rooms, debates in the legislature, church basements, phone calls, decisions, community centres, speeches, boardrooms, interviews, more questions, appearances and controversies. A senior politician wakes up in the morning like a rugby or American football player waiting under a long high kick; eventually he catches the ball (or drops it), the stadium roars, and the bodies start to fly. He or she is at once the focus of attention and the object of the actions of many others seen and unseen. (It was to do this that all the canvassing, fundraising, committee service, civic and political activism, networking, plotting and planning were devoted.) It is extraordinarily exhilarating; former politicians say there is nothing to compare with it. It also absorbs the totality of the energy and imagination of any typical human being for as long as it lasts. When it ends, there is relief, but there is often also enormous chagrin, a sense of loss and of inconsequence, a burning desire to return to the centre of things.

The challenge is to organise such persons regularly to undertake collective decisions having important consequences for large numbers of their fellow citizens. The aforementioned ideal description of a cabinet meeting fails to include the general lack of preparation of members, their constant arriving and leaving, the short-

age of time, the phone calls, the reading and writing of messages, the fatigue and drowsiness, the effects of alcohol and food, the diversions onto the terrain of current crises and tactics, the political preferences of the chairman and her secretariat which drafts the minutes and the decisions, the relative political capital of the various protagonists—in short, the fact that policy making is deeply embedded in the ongoing drama of political life. Notwithstanding the efforts of central officials over the last century, it can rarely claim any separate or privileged status.

And this is only in matter of the formal machinery for policy making. Much more policy than often appreciated is in fact made not under the express mandates of specific cabinet members or within the formal machinery, but on the run by those whose political capital means they *can* make policy and whose public *dicta* and actions condemn the formal machinery to approval after the fact, or as in the case of the invasion of Iraq—not at all. This may be intentional or inadvertent, but it is common.

Furthermore, the structure of power in the post-industrial democracies, the role of the courts, and the impact of globalisation and of multilevel governance mean that any given government will more often than not inherit only a fragment of a policy problem at a stage in its lengthy ‘resolution’; the degrees of freedom imagined by a second-order reconstruction of the issue are usually a vast overestimation of those open to any given political actor at any given time and place. Outcomes are often determined by a series of decisions over a period of years by any number of authorities (and by contemporaneous events), and end up representing the preferences of none of them.

Conclusion

Academics want politicians to think as (they would like to think) they and their

colleagues do. Deliberative disciplinarians in particular want politicians to encourage citizens to think for themselves . . . under the discipline of academic norms, informed by ‘impartial’ experts. Professors do not want to concede their distinctive disciplinary standards in favour of any expertise which political aptitude and experience might confer.

The demands of politics are unpredictably diverse and protean and thus political reason is unusually resistant to generalisation and codification; it remains tacit and only obtusely articulable even for those who possess it. To some significant extent, the ability to deploy it effectively must be the product of nature and of the accidents and vicissitudes of life, rather than of any more intentional preparation.

Limitations of time, information, and analytical capacity require fast and frugal forms of rationality which sacrifice any pretence to optimisation. The ability to use these forms of rationality in a given domain distinguishes neophytes and journeymen from experts. Experts perceive and select information from the environment more efficiently and faster than others; they recognise patterns or similarities from situation to situation; they resort to conscious analysis only rarely; they perceive problems and courses of action as parts of a single intuition. It takes unique gifts to adapt this form of expertise successfully over time to the inexhaustible variety of ‘wicked’ ‘messy’ problems which public life unfailingly presents to politicians, under the constant pressure of publicity and competition.

Politics is a never-ending theatre—as Ronald Reagan said: ‘Politics is just like show business’¹⁴—in which the character, authenticity, creativity, integrity and consistency, self-possession and rhetoric of the politician are continuously tested. Gross errors of fact may be penalised, but—outside the Treasury/Finance portfolio—failures to master professional or

disciplinary knowledge generally are not. Politics must be staged rather than lectured.

The flaw in these academic traditions is the failure to understand the 'presentational' part of representation and the consequential devaluation of the 'rhetorical moment' as the essence of democratic politics.¹⁵ The rhetorical moment has the potential to create meaning and trust, whereas official committees or citizens' assemblies merely make impersonal recommendations, and find themselves inevitably at the disposal of the political executive. Rhetoric *can* amount to mere manipulation, but to leave it at that is a mistake. If democratic leadership exists, it also passes through the rhetorical moment.

For Rosanvallon, 'political will . . . has always needed to be staged. . . . Decisions have to be made theatrical in order for them to be converted into meaningful and effective acts.'¹⁶ Lyndon Johnson 'figured . . . that a new piece of legislation had to be "performed" for the mass media so as to give that piece of legislation a fair chance of being successful'.¹⁷ These performances have a dual character. They constitute an attempt to set the terms of partisan engagement by controlling the vocabulary and conceptual framework of debate. They also constitute an attempt to make the collective efforts of citizens meaningful, to maintain a semblance of political community, to inspire a sense of mutual support, if not obligation, among citizens, and crucially, in doing so their protagonists assume the ever-present risk of very public failure.

It is idle to wish away these constitutive features of political life, particularly since they are not simply reflections of the personal flaws of the political class but characteristics inherent in democratic life for both good and ill. Academics who are uncomfortable with the idea that a small fraction of the population temporarily rules the great majority may wish to construct alternatives; to the extent the effort

depends on public reason—the apolitical ideal in which reason trumps interests, elides comprehensive doctrines, prohibits partisanship and suppresses emotions—it asks too much, not only of politicians, but of all of us, certainly including the professoriate.

However unattractive at times, politics does not select for the intellectually and ethically handicapped; politicians reflect as they represent the citizens from which they issue and among whom they return. In the interim, it is their particular charge to embody the collective aspirations and to respond to the needs of their fellows. It is a tragic challenge, guaranteed to disappoint, but in its absence we would face no more than the choice of a Hobbesian struggle or a rationalist utopia with science or philosophy as singular qualification for the role of Platonic guardianship.

Notes

- 1 M. Flinders, 'In defence of politics', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 3, 2010, pp. 309–26.
- 2 B. Williams, *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 2.
- 3 S. W. Rosenberg, 'An introduction: theoretical perspectives and empirical research on deliberative democracy', in *Deliberation, Participation and Democracy: Can the People Govern?*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 7.
- 4 M. Warren, 'Institutionalizing deliberative democracy', in Rosenberg, ed., *Deliberation, Participation and Democracy*, p. 272.
- 5 P. J. Steinberger, *The Concept of Political Judgment*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 303.
- 6 H. Gottweis, 'Rhetoric in policy making: between logos, ethos and pathos', in F. Fischer, G. Miller and M. S. Sidney, eds, *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis: Theory, Politics and Methods*, Boca Raton, FL, CRC Press, 2007, pp. 237–50.
- 7 W. A. Galston, 'Realism in political

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- 8 H. Evans, *Downing Street Diary: The Macmillan Years, 1957–1963*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1981, p. 35.
 - 9 D. Searing, *Westminster's World: Understanding Political Roles*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 325.
 - 10 R. Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Minister of Housing, 1964–66*, London, Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1975, p. 367.
 - 11 Quoted in N. Nicolson, *The Harold Nicolson Diaries, 1907–1964*, London, Phoenix, 2004, at p. 292.
 - 12 R. D. French, 'Political capital', *Representation*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2011, pp. 215–30.
 - 13 A. Ehrenhalt, *The United States of Ambition: Politicians, Power and the Pursuit of Office*, New York, Times Books, 1991, p. 6.
 - 14 J. Street, 'Celebrity politicians: popular culture and political representation', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2004, p. 435.
 - 15 B. Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2006.
 - 16 P. Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 192.
 - 17 Quoted in R. P. Hart, *The Sound of Leadership: Presidential Leadership in the Modern Age*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 52.