

Politics as a Vocation in a Post-Democratic Age

Warwick University Distinguished Lecture

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Introduction

Thank you for the kind invitation to give this lecture this evening.

I am a huge admirer of Warwick University. It has achieved great things since it first opened its doors in 1964, particularly in its pioneering interdisciplinary studies and strong industrial partnerships. So I am honoured to be asked to speak here this evening.

I want to begin my remarks by taking us back ninety five years ago to the day: to the 28th January 1919. On that day, in the city of Munich, the great German sociologist Max Weber gave what became one of the most famous lectures in the history of political theory: *Politik als Beruf* – Politics as Vocation.

Munich was then in the midst of revolutionary upheaval. The previous November, as strikes and militant demonstrations spread across Germany at the end of the First World War, the Marxist journalist Kurt Eisner led a revolution which toppled the Bavarian monarchy and put a socialist republic in its place. The following day the Kaiser abdicated in Berlin, heralding the end of the German Empire and precipitating a wave of violence as revolutionary forces battled for control of the destiny of the new state. Indeed, just days before Weber stood up to give his lecture in Munich, the Spartacist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were abducted and killed in Berlin; thousands more deaths followed. Eisner himself was assassinated by a German ultra-nationalist in February. By the summer, the Munich socialist republic had collapsed. The Weimar era had begun.

Weber had a particular loathing for Kurt Eisner. Indeed, it is said that he agreed to give the Munich lecture only because the university students had threatened to invite Eisner instead, should he decline. Weber thought Eisner was a “literati” – an irresponsible demagogue who had betrayed Germany in his first act as the new leader of Bavaria’s revolutionary republic when he had published the official reports of the Bavarian representative in Berlin from the crisis of July 1914 in order to show that Prussian militarists bore responsibility for the war. It was foolish and unrealistic to believe that this would secure better peace terms for Germany, Weber thought. Pacifists and revolutionaries – all of these he attacked in his lecture as politicians dominated by their passions and convictions, romantics and purists who believed only good could follow from good deeds.

In contrast to these “conviction politicians” Weber upheld an “ethic of responsibility” – the sober realism of pragmatic judgement, or sense of proportion. “Politics”, he said, “means slow, strong drilling through hard boards.” Politicians had to exercise a critical distance from their goals, to accept the ambiguities and messy contradictions of the world and be prepared

to compromise. In darkly prophetic terms he told his audience, “Not summer’s bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness, no matter which group may triumph externally now.”

This was an unyielding political realism. But it was not quite Machiavellian, as we might understand it today. While Weber stressed the distinction between the ethics of conviction and responsibility, he acknowledged that politicians combine passion, responsibility and judgement; indeed the true human being who is capable of having a vocation for politics embodies both conviction and a sense of proportion: “an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts”, he said, “but supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man – a man who can have the calling for politics.”

Politics is not then simply the base calculation of self-interest. It serves higher goals, not least those of the stewardship of the nation. Weber was both a German nationalist and a pessimistic liberal - concerned at one and the same time with the leadership of his nation and with the exercise of political agency in an increasingly rationalised, disenchanted world.

Why does any of this matter today? Is it any more than mere historical interest? In what follows, it will be my contention that Weber’s lecture remains of critical relevance to contemporary political discourse, and that Weber’s insights into political leadership – and the relationship between politicians and the societies of which they are part – can help illuminate the challenges faced by democratic theory in what some have called our “post-democratic” age. In particular, I shall examine three central questions: first, the decline of participation in formal representative democracy, and what Weber would have called the role of the “masses” in politics; second, the link between economic and political power in contemporary advanced economies; and third, the question of the reform of the state, which in Weber’s sociology was principally a matter of the rise of the bureaucracy and the “iron cage” of rationalisation. Finally, I will turn to what all this means for contemporary political leadership; its formation, tasks, methods and modalities.

The Rise and Fall of Mass Democracy

The revolutionary events in Germany at the end of the First World War were part of a wider change in the political landscape of Europe. The organised working class had arrived on the political scene. In the first decades of the twentieth century, universal suffrage spread across the advanced economies and mass political parties were formed. Parties representing the labour interest began to assume leadership of progressive movements.

Weber thought that this process of universalising the suffrage and replacing the political elites of the 19th century with new cadres drawn from mass political parties was inevitable and irreversible. In his terms, the legitimating bases of political action were now legal-rational and charismatic; the appeal to tradition was no longer effective, as the collapse of the Kaiser’s authority had shown. But in common with many of his bourgeois contemporaries, he also saw threats in this new order. Working class party leaders could use charisma to appeal to irrational sentiments among the masses or advance their own sectional interests against those of the nation as a whole. His concern with responsible leadership – the *Sachlichkeit* of

realism or “matter of factness” – was motivated in part by a desire to see the organised working class responsibly led and brought into the fold of the emerging European democratic order.

Weber never thought that democracy meant the rule of the mass of the population, however. Elites would still govern. Political leaders needed to be selected by routes that would guarantee their leadership capabilities, but once they had assumed their leadership roles, they – and not the people – would be in charge. The “law of the small number” would always obtain. It was simply that party bosses had become more important than local worthies in political organisation, and party leaders had become more important than individual members of parliament. The leadership of a party meant above all command over a following and control over a machine.

It is not difficult to see how such thinking could pave the way to a plebiscitary politics of charismatic leadership, and Weber’s later critics would accuse him of just that, particularly because of his support for an emergency Presidential override of parliamentary majorities in the new Weimar Constitution. After World War Two, the architects of the Federal Republic of Germany would go to great lengths to tie down their new democracy in the constitutional checks and balances of the *Rechtsstaat*.

But from the vantage point of the 21st century, it is not Weber’s insistence on the inevitability of elite leadership that is most striking; rather it is the *disappearance of the masses*. If he were writing today, Weber would be dwelling on the collapse of popular participation in representative democracy, not on how to constrain it. The facts are stark. In the UK, 84% of the electorate voted in the 1950 General Election. By 2010, that had fallen to 65%. Voting rates across most industrialised countries are in decline. Within the OECD, the average turnout for national elections fell by 11 percentage points between 1980 and 2011. At the same time, political inequality has risen sharply. Turnout at the last British General Election was 57% for social classes D and E, compared to 76% for A and Bs.

Meanwhile, mass political parties have largely passed from the scene. Where once parties could count on many hundreds of thousands of members, now they depend on dwindling bands of local activists, with scarce resources. And politicians are held in contempt, not awe. At the start of the twentieth century, the “popular” signified mass, democratic engagement in politics, today it has been reduced to a term of abuse: “populism”. Weber’s demagogues have reappeared on the scene, not as leaders of mass popular movements, but as spokespeople for apparently irrational irruptions of anti-politics. All that is left in the mainstream are the elites: “ruling the void”, as the late Peter Mair put it in a felicitous phrase.

Let us sharpen this point a little, with Mair’s help. In one of his last essays, Mair argued that two critical roles assigned to political parties in the 20th century understanding of democratic government had broken down: parties are no longer able to *represent* the interests of the people, nor able to *respond* effectively, through governing on their behalf, to their demands. Instead of making representations on behalf of citizens to the state, they have moved to “making representations on behalf of the state to the citizen”. The representative function has

become more difficult as parties have lost their moorings in civil society, and became more professionalised and narrow, while at the same time the decline of social class as an organising principle of politics has fractured voters' interests, making them harder to represent.

Conversely, parties in office find it increasingly difficult to be responsive to their electorates. Fiscal constraints, accumulated obligations to direct resources to particular public services and welfare entitlements, and increased accountability to supranational bodies like the European Union, have constrained their ability to respond to the demands of their citizens – demands which they anyway have difficulty deciphering or aggregating, let alone meeting. Meanwhile, politicians' ability to persuade – and thence to demonstrate their responsiveness to their voters – has waned as trust in them had fallen.

Into this gap have stepped populist parties, political actors who are prepared to offer an apparently unmediated representation of voters' demands without any pretence that they will try to respond to them in office. Populists buy an "authenticity" precisely by eschewing the "slow, strong drilling through hard boards" of which Weber spoke. They are not serious contenders for power. Yet their mainstream counterparts face the dilemma that they are unable to hold together the demands of representation and responsibility. They have cleaved to an "ethic of responsibility" but at a price of denuding themselves of a claims to democratic representation.

Even that commitment to responsible government is under pressure in contemporary political culture. Our hollowed out, elite driven party politics, besieged by populist forces and an insatiable media, finds itself responding ever more frenetically and tactically to the fickle electorate, so that politicians are increasingly unable to take hold of the major long-term structural challenges, like climate change and ageing, that advanced societies face. Responsible governance becomes harder to exercise, falling victim to the structural contradiction between politicking and governing well.

Economic and Political Power

As popular democratic representation has declined, and access to political careers has become professionalised, so the spaces of political governance have become increasingly inhabited by interlocking networks of elites, with an extensive role for lobbyists and others who provide channels between economic and political power (in which one can certainly include think-tanks, particularly those who make no pretence of openness over their funding sources).

This intermeshing of political and economic power was a particular concern of Weber's. His political theory was informed by his understanding of social class. He did not believe that political leaders or the state bureaucracy floated entirely free of economic class interests, and he was particularly exercised by the possibility that the owners of large corporations and the banks would dominate the state, unless boundaries were maintained between the spheres of market exchange and politics. Thus he resisted proposals for state direction of economic activity, on the grounds that superior knowledge of business would enable cartels to usurp state powers and privileges, rather than vice versa. And as a supporter of liberal capitalism,

he also raised these objections against the claims of socialists: the fusing of economic and political power would mean greater bureaucratisation, not the withering away of the state. In this, the course of events in the 20th century proved him right.

For theorists of “post-democracy”, however, the situation facing democracies at the beginning of the 21st century can no longer give us confidence to assert, on the one hand, that a liberal market will maintain a balance between social interests, or on the other, that the state will not become dominated by economically powerful interests. The rise in inequality in the 1980s across most advanced economies – accompanying the processes of financialisation, deindustrialisation and the breaking of trade union power in the US and UK – led to concentrations of power being formed in the state and the economy. When the global financial crisis struck in 2008, these nodal points of power were exposed and crises spread through the institutions - Parliament, the media, the big banks and more - locked into them. As David Runciman has written:

What these institutional failings have in common is that they arose from a growing sense of impunity among small networks of elites. As British society has become more unequal it has created pockets of privilege whose inhabitants are tempted to think that the normal rules don't apply to them. In any democracy, people with power will abuse it. All public institutions follow the path of least resistance over time. The usual democratic remedy is for other public institutions to rein them in: it is the job of the press and the police to keep an eye on the politicians, just as it is the job of the politicians to keep an eye on the press and police. In Britain, it looks like the opposite was happening. A managerial political class, with extensive links to other elites in media and business, colluded in the sort of lax scrutiny that served their joint interests. Much of this behaviour coincided with a period of unparalleled political stability and economic prosperity: the long boom that lasted from the early 1990s until 2007. But when boom turned to bust, the cosy world of the elites became a joint liability.

Here then, is a Madisonian task for contemporary politics: to rebuild the institutional frameworks of British political economy the better to insulate political power from colonisation by economic forces. But this institutional reform is not the only factor to weigh in the discussion of the relationship of contemporary democracies to their market economies – as Mair indicates, fiscal issues have become more salient too.

In Weber's time, the fiscal reach of the state was limited. Despite the marshalling of state resources behind the war effort, the European powers were only in the foothills of the growth of the welfare state and the public sector at the beginning of the 20th century. In time, demographic change and distributional claims over the proceeds of economic growth, would all drive up public spending and expand the fiscal role of the state.

In recent decades, this process has pushed up against limits. The tax base needed to sustain public services has become more precarious, as capital has become more mobile and states have engaged in tax competition. Stagnant median wages have sapped voters' appetite for more tax-funded services, even as they defend the services for which they already pay. And

fiscal room for manoeuvre has become ever more constrained by cumulative obligations to fund services and entitlements, particularly pensions.

Seen through this lens, austerity is simply a further tightening of the screw on democratic politicians – albeit with unprecedented severity in the periphery of the Eurozone, where tax revenues from housing bubbles and bloated banks disguised the underlying fragility of the public finances. “Fiscal democracy”, as academics term it, is on the decline. Politicians have no room for manoeuvre over the public finances – the core business of governments – and must account as much to the financial markets as to their electorates. For countries that have given up their currencies and central banks, without any corresponding extension of democratic decision-making at the supranational European level, this democratic deprivation is experienced as a double loss. In Weberian terms, they are locked in a new iron cage.

Should we then yield, in the spirit of realism, to this account, and agree with contemporary German political economists and democratic theorists like Wolfgang Streeck and Claus Offe, who argue that democracy and welfare capitalism are no longer compatible, and that working people have stopped voting for good reason – there is nothing politicians can do for them anymore? Or is this simply an academic version of the Russell Brand thesis – there’s nothing to choose between the parties, so I won’t bother?

There is of course a structural logic to this case - one that Weber’s twentieth century followers would probably have admired. But not only does it deprive us of any space for political agency, or rub out the differences that plainly exist between the tax and spend profiles of advanced democracies, it ends up asserting a functional equivalence between democracy and public spending. All other areas of deep and powerful public contestation – climate change, immigration and identity politics, the future geo-political structure of the world, even the particular configurations of taxation and spending choices – are erased from the arena of democracy. And from a social democratic perspective – the political tradition from which I speak – it commits the Croslandite error of leaving the realm of the market economy untouched, while equating the possibility of progress with how much public expenditure there is to distribute. It invites centre-left political forces to defend the ramparts of the existing structure of the state, while their conservative opponents reconstruct the market economy – a replay of the political story of the last thirty years.

Bureaucracy and the State

There is indeed an aphorism of the New Labour government that it was “too hands off with the market, too hands on with the state”. To caricature Labour’s approach to statecraft, you might argue that it thought of the state as a giant delivery machine, over which political leaders sat pulling levers to deliver better services. This is too crude, to be sure. But it speaks to a certain truth about bureaucracy and public administration to which a Weberian political leadership would have been more alert.

Weber’s analysis of the rise of bureaucracy and the accompanying processes of instrumental rationalisation in capitalist modernity is one of the most celebrated and influential parts of his sociology. As a political theorist and commentator, Weber articulated a deep suspicion of

public bureaucracies, and the weight he placed on political leadership flowed from his concern to rein in and exert control over officialdom. He did not seek – as neo-liberal public choice theorists would later do – to denude society of effective public administration. But he provided twentieth century thought with a fuller, more extensive historical and theoretical treatment of the state than it could hope to obtain from any other intellectual tradition.

There were currents of socialist thought in Great Britain that nurtured pluralist ambitions for participatory self-government in the economy and society, pre-eminent amongst them, the guild socialism of GDH Cole. The British social liberal tradition had similar concerns. More ambitious still were the Catholic social theorists clustered around French Personalism, whose objective of creating a political theory and strategy that would challenge both free market liberalism and communist statism, and root politics in a conception of the common good, would bear remarkable fruit in the political success of Christian Democracy. Yet in the mainstream of both Marxian and social democratic political traditions, state theory – giving the state both the empirical and normative attention it deserved – would remain remarkably undeveloped.

There are obvious reasons for addressing that lacuna today. For one, the new public management paradigm that has dominated public service reform for the last thirty years now appears to have run its course: relational approaches, complexity theory and other new intellectual movements are challenging its position. But more substantively, the state is also the site of major contemporary political struggles – whether in the challenge to its powers of surveillance, the battles over cuts to services, resistance to centralised decision-making, or the growth of what we might call the “Serco State”, according to which services are commissioned and paid for by results in such a way that only large corporates with working capital can win the government contracts. Each of these issues requires a political and democratic response.

Political Leadership Today

Let me then draw together the threads of my remarks and say something about what they might entail for a contemporary understanding of political leadership.

I have stressed throughout the importance of Weber’s realist sensibility. But I have sought to detach it at critical points – as he did in his political writings – from a necessitarian political logic that dooms us to acquiescence to the status quo. Taking my cue from some contemporary realist thinkers, I believe instead that realism can help broaden the canvas of politics and the potential scope of political action, and point us towards more pluralist, democratic and institutionally creative forms of political leadership.

Like Weber, we should begin by paying greater attention to the formation and selection of political leaders. The professionalization of politics has led to a narrowing of routes into politics, particularly for people of working class backgrounds who are no longer socialised into political activism through trade unions. It is imperative to work on opening up politics to different entry and selection points, and to consciously create space for social class considerations to factor in that reform. But we should be mindful of two things. First, as

Andrew Sabl has shown in his work, political leadership takes different forms, and has different tasks, modes of engagement and discursive expressions in each of these. In his typology, leaders can be legislators, moral activists and community organisers. All three contribute crucial things to democratic politics—but very different things, normally best performed by very different kinds of people. This is one reason why President Obama has disappointed many of those who thought he could continue to be a community organiser or moral activist, like Martin Luther King, once in the White House. They fail to appreciate that one and the same person cannot play these very different roles. Hence we need modes of selection of political leaders which differ accordingly.

Second, learning from Weber about the durability of elites and the need in complex societies for some hierarchies of office, we should be more attentive to the education of those who obtain leadership positions. In a democratic society, elites must be educated for the common good, which means that they must understand, empathise and engage with others from different backgrounds. Those who are brought up, educated and professionally trained in segregated groups will not be equipped to serve the interests of the wider society. Instead, they are likely to stigmatise and denigrate those with whom they have no contact. This demands education for integration: comprehensive schooling, the “crafting of classes” or diverse intakes in higher education, and the expansion of Teach First style programmes that enable graduates from leading universities to undertake public service in disadvantaged communities. It effectively reverses the logic of current social mobility strategies.

What then of the tasks of political leadership? Here I return to the triad of issues I have discussed in my remarks. The hollowing out of representational politics, and the decline of organised labour at the helm of progressive movements, forces us to rethink party leadership. Parties must embrace new alliances with civil society movements where democratic and political energy and momentum can be found – such as contemporary feminism and environmentalism, citizens’ initiatives for improving wages, local organisations mobilising for community goals, and so on. Political parties cannot abdicate the terrain of formal democracy, but nor can they remain encamped on it. They have to broaden out, in a self-consciously pluralist way. They need to create more and richer mediations between civil society and the state, with a stronger role for intermediary layers of leadership, such as city mayors. Their leaders will have to learn the skills of negotiation with non-political actors, embrace democratic respect for different organisational forms and objectives, and understand where their leadership role ends and passes to organisers and activists, to use Sabl’s typology. In the sphere of formal politics, the decline of class voting blocs means they have to get used to coalition government. It will become the norm in Britain, even in the absence of a proportional voting system for Westminster.

Political leaders must also become institutional reformers, paying particular attention to systematic concentrations of power. Here the agenda for democratic reform must focus on the funding of political parties, which currently offers a direct route into public power for wealthy elites, and privileges office holders in unions and parties over ordinary members. Similarly, concentrations of power can be more readily broken up if sites of power are dispersed: we should accordingly seek a significant devolution of resources and responsibility

to England's cities and counties. But the market economy must come within reach too. The deregulated free market has not spread power amongst many thousands of market actors, but increasingly concentrated it in large corporations. Strategies for shaping markets, reining back financialisation, institutionalising employee power, and sharing profits all come into play here. How the state currently commissions public services from the private sector exacerbates the concentration of powers, and so we need procurement and commissioning models that prioritise innovative companies, social enterprises and charities instead.

The future of Europe's democracy is perhaps the most difficult and intractable issue. Without deeper fiscal integration and a central bank that can act as a lender of last resort to each of its countries, the Eurozone will remain plagued by imbalances and structural weaknesses. But these reforms cannot be carried out over the heads of the peoples' of Europe, in the kind of elite coordination of policy implied by the current architecture, without a further loss of democratic legitimacy and popular support. Democratisation and political integration must advance together. Yet there is little sign that the citizens of the Eurozone's constituent countries are prepared to walk the path that leads decisively beyond the nation state. For those of us outside the Eurozone, the prospect is close to vanishing. Our best hope – if we remain committed to the European project – is to win a referendum on our continued membership of the union and to use that platform to change our relationship with our partners.

Finally, what of the state bureaucracy itself? Political leadership of the state apparatus can no longer consist of heroic transformation from the centre. In the long run, this depletes society's democratic resources and denudes people of their capabilities. They look upwards to power, not outwards to each other. Institutions of the state and civil society are restructured to comply with the logic of bureaucratic compliance, as Weber might have expected.

Political leaders must therefore forge new institutional structures that devolve powers downwards to citizens and local state institutions, governed less by transactional imperatives than by democratic negotiation. This isn't simply about "letting go" – the nation state will still be decisive for setting strategic goals, legislating and distributing public spending. But it must become more localist and relational in how it works, with a preference for building institutions rather than transacting with individuals and public service providers via targets, incentives and cash transfers. In so doing, it must seek to liberate individuals from arbitrary dependence on the decisions of government bureaucracies and their powers of surveillance. Of all the main political traditions in the UK, this is a perhaps of greatest challenge to the political culture of social democracy, particularly its late 20th century variant.

Endnote

Let me finish with a word about Weber and democracy. Those amongst you who are in expert in his work will have noted that I sought to use his famous lecture on political leadership as a means of exploring contemporary challenges to democracy, when Weber himself had comparatively little concern for democratic values themselves. The value free social scientist in him sought to understand political reality, not to transform it. Lenin

accordingly called him that “cowardly bourgeois professor.” But Weber was drawn into politics, particularly in the last years of his life and his sociology retains a place for political agency. His insights into political leadership help us illuminate important aspects of how we can begin the “slow, strong drilling” of democratic reform. It may be that we have entered a post-democratic age, and that the cumulative effect of the changes we have seen in recent years will spell the end of democracy as we know it. But it may also be that we are setting out on a journey of reform from which our democracy will be reinvigorated – if not devoid of conflict and contest. There are grounds for optimism and hope, despite all the major challenges. At key points in our history, we have proved capable of democratic renewal, bringing new energy and dynamism to our politics. It must be our ambition to do so again.

Thank you.

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