

In Search of better MPs

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The most vehement criticism of politicians I have heard recently was that of a Sydney taxi driver who, in the context of recent events in WA and Queensland, told me that politicians were '***** overpaid crooks'. What is more, his cynicism was not confined to politicians in WA and Queensland. I did not tell him that his passenger was a parliamentary pensioner, but instead encouraged him to tell me what he would do to enlist a better class of politician. He had no idea whatsoever, but when he calmed down he did volunteer that he knew an MP who was quite decent----though overpaid. If his view of politicians is typical then it is but a small step to questioning the processes by which they are chosen----the processes of democracy itself.

It is plain that our politicians are not up to the tasks they undertake. In terms of the Peter Principle: they have been promoted to the point of their incompetence and this is particularly so of the ablest of them----those on the front benches. Because they promise the nearly impossible, politicians often fail; then they dissemble. Failure and want of frankness cause them to be held in low regard, even by those who fawn upon them in search of favours. Finally, the problem becomes self-reinforcing because lack of respect for the job stops good citizens from entering parliament.

All politicians err and some of them are corrupt but, as a class, they do not merit contempt. Many are trying hard to do things that are necessarily beyond their ken.

That some of them do try hard is clear. The self-education that some of the most conscientious undertake would, if concentrated on one topic, easily earn them baccalaureates. Yet they are characterised as ignorant----and rightly so----because they inevitably remain very ignorant of most of the thousands of issues in which they meddle.

The voters' range of potential politicians is further limited by the lifestyle which politicians and their families must adopt. It is worst for Federal politicians who spend less time with their families than do merchant seamen. When they do get home they are dog-tired and, don't be surprised, often worried. Most of the politicians, whom editorial writers

characterise as lazy, in fact work many more hours than their critics.

The most important reason, however, that voters are denied the cream of the population is that most people don't like politics. One needs a thick skin to shrug off its character assassination and the back-biting, and most decent, humble people do not want to hold power over other people. Ordinary people find the exercise of power abhorrent and, being humble, they fear that power may corrupt them, as it has plainly corrupted others.

What then attracts the politicians we have? Most obviously the job is paid---nearly \$50,000 for a back bencher. This is small beside what some could earn out of the parliament, but more than some others would earn. Tenure is unsure and turnover is high, but the job is exceptionally well-superannuated.

\$50,000 is relatively little money beside a politician's other direct costs---staff, electorate allowance, travel, office, telephone etc. And a politician's salary is piddling beside the cost of one bad decision. For instance, the interest bill on the \$1.1 billion Parliament House alone is \$500,000 per Federal MP per year---that much for a structure that symbolises power when it ought to symbolise liberal democracy.

Money may not be significant: some of the greatest English-speaking parliamentarians were not only not paid but had to purchase their seats. However, if more money were to buy a better class of politician, then even \$500,000 each would be well spent. Most of even that large salary could be recovered by requiring the politicians to employ their own staff, rent their own offices etc. Then they would schedule meetings to minimise travelling costs, travel tourist class, choose more appropriate staff, arrange their own superannuation and become more technically efficient.

We might also get better candidates if taxi drivers and others did not denigrate them and if parliament were not a rubber stamp for the executive. The best and the worst MPs are not driven by greed but by something more noble and more dangerous---by the quest for distinction and the wish to create a better world. The restoration of Parliament's proper authority would improve the quality of parliamentarians.

Yet for all that, they would remain inadequate---the job specifications are simply too tough. The modern MP presumes to legislate not just to preserve equitable and impersonal processes, but to produce income distributions that are deemed just. To do that tolerably well he would need to know that which he cannot know about everybody. What is more, he must favour some citizens over others. When he becomes accustomed to using his power to favour some people over others he asks 'Why not to favour friends and supporters?' 'Why not myself?' Then, although he set out with the best of intentions, he is corrupted.

There is no blueprint for a better world, and even if there were, there is no MP who could comprehend it. If parliamentarians were less ambitious---legislating only the general conditions which would allow people to make their own personal better worlds---then MPs would not so often fail instrumentally and morally. Then taxi drivers might not call them 'overpaid crooks'. And only then, when politicians would not need to be saints, would we actually get a better class of MP.

Party pre-selection procedures are relatively unimportant. The problem lies less with the men and women who undertake politics, than with the tasks that politicians undertake.

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