

PRIVILEGE AND PARLIAMENT

Much ink has been spilled on the wealth and privilege of the Coalition Government since 2010: a Cabinet of millionaires, a strong Etonian heritage, and a general inability to relate to ordinary people. This is certainly the argument of Ian Bell in his review of 2012 in the Sunday Herald, and he's not wrong. Notwithstanding the recent reshuffle, the Daily Telegraph in May last year estimated that the current cabinet was worth £70 million, with two third millionaires. Unsurprisingly, much of this is inherited wealth, not least Lord Strathclyde, the richest member at an estimated £9.5 million.

We imagine that Scotland is different, but how does the composition of the Scottish Parliament and Cabinet really differ from their Westminster counterparts?

The first point is the easiest. While landowners are still organised north of the border, the fact that they are no longer represented by an unelected house – the House of Lords – has had serious consequences. The ambiguous relationship is summed up well here by Andy Wightman (2013: 2):

“A centralised United Kingdom government and an unelected House of Lords allowed for almost unfettered political advantage for the landed and propertied class for centuries. The advent of the Scottish Parliament posed a challenge but these vested interests have adapted and are creating a narrative of their inevitability, their centrality and their role in communities.”

Nonetheless, this “challenge” is important: since the advent of the Scottish Parliament, more land reform – the right to buy and the right to roam, to name two notable change – has occurred than could have previously. While this has temporarily halted, the biggest obstacle has arguably been removed.

Undoubtedly, the discussions of the ‘poshness’ in the current cabinet partially reflect the privileged

educational background of it's members. In educational terms, Scotland can boast greater representation of the general population than the UK as a whole, where 35 per cent of the current MP intake are from Private Schools, with 20 old Etonians all told. While Higher Education is found among most members of the Scottish Parliament, the number of individuals who have also been privately schooled is remarkably lower in Scotland. At present, 86 per cent of MSPs were state sector educated, as compared with two-thirds of non-Scottish MPs at Westminster (Keating 2010).

In terms of the professional background however, the Parliament itself has been found to have a similar composition to Westminster. Writing in 2001, Shephard et. al. demonstrated that the Scottish Parliament actually had an overrepresentation of individuals from the Financial Sector and business (26.4 per cent of MSPs, compared to under 20 per cent in Westminster) and less representation of traditional working class jobs and trade union involvement although gender representation is, in general, higher. (Shephard et. al. 2001). One of the study's authors, Neil McGarvey, revisited the question in 2012, maintaining that “Much of the evidence points towards similar characteristics in terms of class, ethnicity, education and age in the Scottish Parliament as the House of Commons.” (2012: 18)

MSPs also appear to more routinely come from ‘professional political’ background, which is to say, careers that have facilitated politics, as opposed to more traditional jobs outside of politics (Keating and Carney 2006). This is consistent with a more general trend toward a ‘political class’, as discussed by Peter Obourne. While his book on the subject – *The Triumph of the Political Class* – is not the most empirically complete on the subject, the notion of a distinct political class who approach the job in a self-serving manner is both convincing and cause for concern. On the subject of the SNP, it's also worth noting that the membership is, to quote one study “...quite similar

to that of most other parties, both in Britain and beyond ; they are older, more male, better educated and more middle class than the adult population as a whole.” (Mitchell et. al. 2012: 68).

This general summary accords with much of the current cabinet, who were principally state educated and have political backgrounds. Exceptions are Fergus Ewing – Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism – who was educated at Loretto, Scotland’s oldest boarding school. Paul Wheelhouse also attended private school (interestingly, Wheelhouse is a former member of the conservative party) and Keith Brown – Minister for Housing and Transport – had a career in the Royal Marines before becoming involved in politics. By and large, most are long-term SNP members and activists, some having been active in party’s youth wing. Figures for their combined net worth aren’t immediately available, but the lack of research on this question suggests it pales in comparison with their Southern counterparts.

With differing educational backgrounds and similar professional ones, how much of a distinction can we draw between the House of Commons and Holyrood? Certainly, it might be the case that the apparent distance at present has as much to do with the current Conservative Party – the party in general are from more privileged backgrounds (Sutton Trust 2005) and the current crop particularly so – as it does with overall trends.

Beyond these biographical approaches, there are the broader questions of *how* power operates in the different locales. In recent years, the House of Commons and the Conservative Party in particular have been marred by scandals (that don’t need repeating here) which have suggested that, in addition to their privilege, they are part of wider networks of undemocratic power and influence. Certainly, power in the UK cannot be limited to a discussion of parliamentary politics but, as John Scott (1994: 139) captured:

“..trades unions and the Labour party have ... been able to secure parliamentary majorities and to form governments which introduce people from a wider social background. The remainder of the state elite, however, has remained firmly dominated by the power bloc...The Labour party has *governed*, but it has not *ruled*”

Against a network of ingrained special interests in the UK at large, no one would dispute that the Scottish Parliament offers the *potential* of a fresh start. Nonetheless, while we have seen the less than encouraging evidence from discussing the members, it would be best to close with a more general statement about political power. Not only does it hail from a more varied source than parliament alone but, if Scotland is to experience greater political representation in a substantive way, not only do we have to be alert to various routes power can take. Put another way, the Scottish Parliament creates a temporary vacuum.

In short, a Scotland which relies on a notion of being more egalitarian than the rest of the UK – which is itself, a product of how far to the right the discourse has shifted but also a sign of complacency. While devolution undoubtedly raised a firewall against the most reactionary excesses of the last Westminster Parliaments, the notion that Scotland is not amenable or subject to the same pressure is complacent. The more appropriate strategy would be to speak in specifics and keep an active eye on emerging forms of undemocratic power.

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