

Politics as a Vocation

In an edited extract from his chapter in The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century, Professor Brian Barry FBA considers how the study of politics in Britain became professionalized over the course of the last century. In contrast to other contributors to the volume who provide a wealth of information about the work done by British political scientists in the twentieth century, Professor Barry inspects not the product, but the producers.

Numbers make a difference. The number of university teachers grew two and a half times between the turn of the century and the outbreak of the Second World War. It then increased fourteen-fold between 1939 and 1991. Since then, numbers have continued to increase in response to a rapid growth in student numbers, despite declining funding per student. As far as the study of politics in particular is concerned, in 1950, a 'rather relaxed community of about a hundred scholars formed the membership of the Political Studies Association'. This figure can be compared with the current PSA membership of around 1,100 (to which must be added a proportion of the 900 members of the British International Studies Association). A discipline with a hundred or so members must behave in a different way from one with over a thousand, and the study of politics in the first half of the century, before the founding of the PSA, is markedly different from the second half.

The most striking feature of the study of politics in Britain in the first half of the century is its very weak tendency to disciplinary boundary-maintenance. Jack Hayward reminds us that not only had British academics managed until 1950 without a professional association, but even then they thought only that an annual meeting 'ought to be possible' and the 'publication ... perhaps even of a journal' might be considered. There were journals for academics to publish in before the founding of *Political Studies* in 1953, but they catered for a readership that was quite largely outside academia; indeed, in 1923, the first year in which *Public Administration* was published, only ten per cent of the articles were written by academics. I surmise that the hesitation about starting a journal arose not so much from financial worries as from doubts about the possibility – or perhaps even the desirability – of encouraging academics to publish articles addressed primarily to their peers.

I have no way of showing the pervasiveness of the early hostility to the article as a mode of academic communication. However, I can offer some anecdotal evidence from the LSE. Reginald Bassett, one of the senior founders of the PSA,

took the view that the only appropriate form of scholarly discourse was the book. And as late as 1987, Elie Kedourie rejected a case for promotion based (in addition to a book) on a number of articles in leading journals such as the *American Political Science Review* with an expressive shrug and the single word 'Articles!'

The peculiarity of politics is highlighted by a comparison with sister disciplines of economics and philosophy. The *Economic Journal* and *Mind* both began publication around 1890, and provided a forum for technically demanding work. Yet the number of British academics in these subjects was comparable to the number in politics. We may reasonably ask how those other disciplines would have progressed if articles had had to be accessible to anyone with a professed interest in the subject, regardless of their background. The crucial difference appears to be that economics and philosophy both had a core of technique, and, even though postgraduate qualifications were a rarity, teachers had at least normally studied those subjects as undergraduates. This enabled the content of the curriculum to become over time more arcane, accessible only to those with an increasingly specialized background. Teachers of politics failed in the first half of the century to make even an undergraduate qualification in the subject a requirement.

One index of the professionalization of the subject, since the foundation of the PSA, is the way in which the PhD has ceased to be an option, regarded in some quarters with deep suspicion, and become a virtual necessity for the acquisition of a permanent appointment. This change did not occur until a long way into the second half of the century. When I proposed to do a doctorate in 1958 it was explained to me that doctorates were only for people with something to hide – the words used by Sir Isaiah Berlin that have stuck in my memory – such as a second-class degree from a first-rate institution or any sort of degree from a second-rate institution. If control over recruitment is critical to the maintenance of any guild, we can say that in this respect professionalization has now been achieved. Admittedly, politics is still more hospitable to those with doctorates outside the

subject than its sister disciplines (a phenomenon that is also observable in the United States and elsewhere), but to a great extent academics are now reproducing themselves within the discipline.

Another aspect of professionalization is the tendency to address fellow academics rather than interested outsiders. The explosion of journals in all branches of the discipline in Britain since the 1970s means that publication – and for the most part publication addressed in the first instance to other academics – has become the professional norm.

Here again, the change occurs mostly in the second half of our period, as a new (and larger) cohort moved in to the system and progressed through the ranks. Thus, when the *British Journal of Political Science* (founded in 1971) had been running for a couple of years, Tony King and I, its first two editors, were struck by the absence of contributions from senior academics in Britain. To find out what was going on, we commissioned a count of articles in all journals by British academics of the rank of senior lecturer and above, which showed that very few were publishing articles anywhere: we were not being singled out for neglect. Of course, this finding still requires interpretation. Were we looking at a cohort whose members eschewed journal publications throughout their careers, or was it that promotion led to putting away childish things such as articles? I can only offer the guess that it was some of both.

What have been the incentives facing academics who have chosen to pursue a career in the study of politics, and how have they changed in the past half-century? Universities have maintained a uniform hierarchy of positions, but this stability conceals something approaching a revolution in the way in which promotions are made. In the 1950s and 1960s, a handful of powerful figures dominated appointments to chairs. Outsiders were especially well placed to manipulate appointments to chairs in those universities (the vast majority) in which each department had a single professorial head. Since only professors took part in the appointment of professors, and by convention a professor could not play a part in his own replacement, the committee making the decision necessarily contained no internal members with any competence in the subject to be filled. In these circumstances, the criteria that formed the basis of recommendation had a profound effect on the pattern of appointments. Moreover, beliefs about these criteria, even if unfounded, will have had effects on the calculations of aspiring academics. It was widely held that one eminent professor wrote

rave references for all his protégés, regardless of their merits: he was accused by those aware of this foible of ‘crying swan’. A solid appreciation of Association Football made up for a lot, with another powerful personage, in the way of lack of academic talent. A third was thought to place little weight – if anything perhaps a negative weight – on publication, and his own record and that of his protégés seemed to support this.

As late as the end of the 1970s I was interviewed for a chair at a quite well-regarded provincial university by a committee consisting of several local councillors and businessmen, plus an assortment of professors from around the university. I shall say of the occasion only that the pen of a Tom Sharpe would be required to do it justice.

Entertaining as the study of what F.M. Cornford called the ‘peculiarities of powerful persons’ may be, it should not conceal the more important systematic point that such persons existed. Over a period around five years either side of 1980 – no doubt at an uneven pace across the whole of the higher education system – the old ways fell into disrepute. It came to be felt that appointments and promotions must be made on grounds that could stand up to public scrutiny. Numbers themselves surely made a difference here. As the number of universities grew, the number of jobs and the number of candidates increased, and the candidates came from an increasingly large and heterogeneous set of institutions. It is scarcely to be wondered at if the previous cosy arrangements broke down. A committee charged with appointments or promotions wishing to act in a way that is publicly defensible is virtually driven to giving a dominant role to publication. Once under way, the tendency to weight publications is virtually self-reinforcing. For if all serious candidates have publications, this puts appointing committees in a good position to form a judgement of their relative merits, based on their actual achievement, which leaves correspondingly less room for sponsors’ speculation about the potential of candidates to determine decisions.

The implication is that the transformation in the role of publication was already essentially complete by the time the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) was introduced in 1986. Nonetheless, it must certainly have concentrated the minds of any remaining laggards. For while the RAE ratings of departments did not affect their position directly, because any money earned on the basis of them was paid to their universities, the universities themselves

normally reacted by rewarding and punishing departments within them for doing well or badly in the RAE. This in turn gave those in departments responsible for making or recommending appointments and promotions strong incentives to pay a lot of attention to publication.

The editor of *Political Studies* has recently remarked on the steadily rising number of submissions to the journal and suggested as one explanation 'a different, more "publication focused" culture among the more recent members of the profession'. Setting aside appointments and promotions, highly visible publication is the key to rewards that lie outside an academic's own department or institution. These include invitations to present papers at conferences in (sometimes) interesting places, membership in international networks, and successful competition for externally-awarded research funding. It may be said, with some justice, that playing this particular game is not everybody's idea of a good time. However, the conjecture offered here is that the choice of playing it or refraining is less and less a matter of personal taste. Conformity to this model is increasingly regarded as what makes for a successful academic career – almost as much among those who are not successful on this criterion as among those who are.

What all this has left out, of course, are the intrinsic awards of research – *Rerum Cognoscere Causas*, as the motto of the LSE has it – as an end in itself. Max Weber wrote of those who respond to the academic calling most intensely as feeling that they are in the grip of 'a demon who holds the fibres of their very lives'. Some who are driven by the desire to know will be satisfied to get things straight in their own heads. Others will wish to get it straight in some written form, but be reluctant to go through the additional efforts required to get it into publishable form. Even those who have publication in mind may prefer to wait until an entire large-scale project is completed before letting it see the light of day. But for better or worse (in many ways worse, no doubt), this is incompatible with the emergent professional norm, not to mention the exigencies of the RAE. Among the reasons (a list of which is circulating on the Internet) explaining why God would not obtain tenure at a major American university is one that runs: 'Sure, He created the world, but what has He done lately?'. The academic anxious to be in the swim had better have done something lately.

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