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Philosophers in power

HARRY HOARE TALKS TO SOME PHILOSOPHER KINGS

Plato thought that “until philosophers are kings or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy ... cities will never have rest from their evils.” Whatever you think of Plato, maybe you should hope he was right about this one.

People who have studied philosophy at university have more political power than you might think. PPEists – those who took degrees in philosophy, politics and economics – are at the very top of British politics. The Prime Minister David Cameron, the Foreign Secretary William Hague, and the Minister for Universities and Science David Willets hold key government posts.

The Labour Party Leader Ed Miliband, the Shadow Foreign Minister Yvette Cooper,

and the Shadow Home Secretary Ed Balls front the opposition party. They all studied philosophy at university.

Is philosophy good preparation for political life? What role does philosophy actually play in shaping the thoughts of politicians? What do those with experience of both philosophy and political power think?

Former minister James Purnell, another PPEist, has called for greater attention to political theory in practical politics. I met him at a conference in Oxford and asked him how philosophy figured into his own political life.

“Philosophy teaches you to question the assumptions behind what you think,” he said. “It

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teaches you how to organise things into systems of thought and to be a sceptic. People who haven't studied philosophy can find that quite irritating." Purnell is happy to risk irritating such people. In speeches to the House of Commons, he's cited the ideas of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum as well as the work of Joseph Raz.

Oliver Letwin, Cabinet office chief, top policy advisor to the Prime Minister, and once a philosophy don at Cambridge, is actually a bit sceptical of the role of philosophy in public life. "It's useful to have some people that are engaged in abstract thinking and theorising, but I wouldn't say that everyone should be engaged in it. In fact, I think it's necessary that not everyone is engaged in it." Letwin thinks that some people deal best with facts, figures and practicalities, while others are good with theories, concepts and arguments – and, as Plato might have put it, each should do what each does best. Perhaps government would grind to a halt if everyone theorised and nobody acted, but does philosophical training really get in the way of practical thinking?

Rupert Read, reader in philosophy at the University of East Anglia and a Green Party politician, thinks it might. "Philosophy does get in the way sometimes, if for instance you find yourself using jargon. When I first got seriously involved in electoral politics I had to wean myself off sounding overly 'ivory tower'. But on balance I think it really helps me understand the real intellectual basis for one policy or another better than many politicians do."

Labour MP Barry Gardiner, who had a Kennedy Memorial Trust Scholarship to study philosophy at Harvard, laughs off the thought that too much philosophy in Whitehall could

lead to excessive navel-gazing at the expense of real action. "I think Oliver is talking romantic nonsense. Being adept at philosophy doesn't mean that you can't be practical, doesn't mean you can't have hands-on experience of the world, doesn't mean that you are in any way isolated and theoretical. If that were the case then we'd be very poor human beings, as we'd only be able to engage in one sort of activity at a time."

Gardiner studied under Rawls, and he quit academia because he wanted to take action for social justice rather than just think about it. His philosophical training was crucial in working out his values, he says, and it was the desire to make society more just that drew him into politics in the first place. It's sometimes said that philosophy can cause students to question everything they stand for, but apparently it can work in the other direction too. A background in philosophy can give someone the intellectual strength to take a stand for what they believe in.

Gardiner isn't the only one affected by philosophy in this way. Former US Senator and presidential contender Gary Hart studied philosophy and religion at Yale. He thinks philosophical and religious values ought to be tied to political action. For him, "It is impossible to separate political convictions from religious and philosophical ones."

"Modern day politics suffers from a considerable deficit in the area of philosophy," Hart says. He saw "too many political figures operate on instinct, either their own or those of the noisy herd." These politicians "have read and thought much too little about the roots of their convictions. If those roots, both intellectual and spiritual, are not deep, if convictions are not well-founded, then careerism, special interest

influence, shallow party loyalty, all replace conviction and courage. Too many political figures do not really know what they stand for – in the literal sense of the word – and therefore are too easily blown about by the political winds of the moment.”

When Hart talks about the connection between religious and political values, he certainly doesn't speak for all politicians – in fact he might hold a peculiarly American view. James Purnell says that “in the UK we're very worried about the influence of a politician's religious values on things that they might do. It's interesting to contrast that with America where you can't end a speech without saying, 'God Bless America!' whereas here you couldn't get elected if you said, 'God Bless the UK!' You can't avoid value discussions, but you have to work out which ones are just discussions – where politicians have a role in articulating and being part of value discussion without legislating – and those where there is a thick enough conception of the good that politicians can go out and make legislation.”

For Roger Scruton philosophical training delivered “clarity, a sense that most people are wrong about everything they think that they think, and a desire to defend what they really think instead.” Scruton writes a great deal, in Burke's tradition, carrying the conservative torch in academic circles as well as the mainstream media. He is a vocal activist for many causes, among other things supporting anti-communist dissidents in Eastern Europe and environmental concerns in England. He believes philosophy is “simply a way of defending people's real thoughts from their ideologically inspired deceptions.”

Philosophy influences politics when those with philosophical training take power, >>>



Philosopher politicians (from top): Sir Derek Morris, Cllr. Rupert Read, and Oliver Letwin MP

Without philosophy, careerism replaces conviction

operating on assumptions that really 30 to 40 years ago were not commonly held. It becomes part of the intellectual climate.”

Oliver Letwin agrees that how “we *think* about politics has been influenced by all sorts of philosophical influences. That’s one of the reasons why I think it’s important that *some* people who are involved in politics are interested in theorising, partly in order to avoid being unconsciously influenced by bad philosophising.” Philosopher politicians might be able to insulate themselves from bad philosophising, he thinks, as well as shaping politics with good philosophising.

According to Gary Hart, America is greatly indebted to Locke, Montesquieu and the Scottish Enlightenment. “Our guiding principles had serious philosophical roots. The fact they followed Locke and not Hobbes, for example, had profound consequences.”

Sir Derek Morris spent a career in public service as head of the Competition Commission before becoming Provost of Oriel College, Oxford. He believes “the main way philosophy influences society is via its impact, and it’s a very

considerable impact, on other related subjects – most obviously politics and sociology but in particular economics.” While philosophy might not be viewed as a practical subject, its insights can transform the landscape in more practical disciplines. “I think philosophy has had a powerful effect on how economists think and analyse and that in turn, perhaps with a delay and through various osmotic processes, it does influence policy and people’s welfare in general.”

But not all philosophers go along with this. Roger Scruton, for one, doesn’t think philosophy has much osmotic influence at all. “I wish the world of politics were influenced by philosophy,” he says, “but it isn’t, except at the margins. There is a tendency on the left to give scope to people with ideas, but they tend to be sociologists like Anthony Giddens, or amateur windbags like Richard Layard. On the right people who think tend to be regarded with suspicion, as possible boat-rockers, who might go off the rails on account of some idea that they have.”

Perhaps political conservatives are naturally more suspicious of grand philosophical ideas in politics; such ideas often mean change and disruption to tradition. However one thinks about the influence the great philosophers have had on politicians, it’s worth taking care not to conceive of politics too narrowly. Every voter has some measure of power in a democracy, and if philosophical ideas ought to figure into politics, perhaps the citizen should read a bit more Locke too.

As Purnell puts it, “If democracy is properly conceived then it’s not just about what politicians do, but it’s about all the political ways people act, and basing that on philosophy is something that is up to everybody involved.”