

# POLITICS HAS STOPPED BEING DEMOCRATIC

John Milbank, Adrian Pabst

GLOBAL TREND



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Over the past 35 years, the dominant economic model has not just exacerbated asset and income inequality but has also put pressure on the real wages of both the middle and the working classes — making them dependent either on state welfare or on credit lines. A consensus centered on both social and economic liberalism has sidelined and dissolved organic cultures governed by social bonds based on reciprocity and solidarity.

All this has contributed to a growing sense that the elites are self-serving. Across much of the Western world, there is a decline in

voter turnout, political party membership, and associative activity. It reflects an increasing sense of popular alienation from the governing classes — of which the Tea Party is just one expression. But it is important to acknowledge that there are many activists within the Tea Party movement who are equally opposed to big government and big business — multinational corporations that have crowded out independent family businesses as well as small- and medium-sized enterprise with the connivance and approval of federal government since the presidency of Richard Nixon. As such, some of the concerns expressed by sections of the Tea Party movement cannot be dismissed as reactionary or bigoted even if the movement as a whole conveys an almost anarchist dislike of government and tends to favour still more removal of restrictions from the operations of finance and business. The diagnosis begins with a correct instinct, but is in the main thoroughly distorted by the legacy of the American frontier myth with its celebration of freedom from the state.

There is no single form that applies to relations between the masses and the elites. Arguably, **the dominant sense on the part of the masses is one of betrayal, alienation, and profound disillusionment with the existing political and economic settlement.** The attitude of elites towards the masses is increasingly one of contempt and total separation. They do not appear to need partners because they are so thoroughly in charge and possible opposition so far has mostly been segmented, sporadic, and without coherent direction. Nevertheless, the Arab revolutions now under way may be a harbinger of a wider discontent. **In the West,**

**the likeliest source of serious disruption in the future is likely to be the middle classes.**

Clearly some members of the ruling elites in Western countries despise the life of ordinary citizens. In large part this is the result of 'professionalizing' politics and transforming it away from a vocation and towards a lucrative career option. For example, in 1994 the US House of Representatives contained for the first time in its history more members with degrees in business and finance than an education in law or politics or non-corporate work experience. That has contributed to creating a new class of politicians who are devoid of a sense of integrity or professional ethos. Notions of virtue and character formation have given way to notions of technocracy and managerialism.

In the UK the situation is not dissimilar. Most members of the House of Commons — the lower house of parliament — have never exercised any profession other than working for political parties. The typical career path is to join a political party at university and then to work as a researcher at the party's headquarters in Westminster. This is followed by the job of special adviser to a minister before being parachuted into a 'safe seat' and joining the House of Commons — precisely the trajectory of both Prime Minister David Cameron and the leader of the opposition Labour Party Ed Miliband.

Politics can no longer be considered either properly representative or genuinely democratic. Little wonder then that the growing gulf between elites and masses is producing populist movements. ■

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