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Rising to the top

Social mobility is rarely out of the news these days. Alan Milburn wrote a report on it. Andrew Neil recently made a documentary about it. But it is the quick fire resignations of Alan Johnson and Andy Coulson – working-class school leavers both – that have triggered a fresh round of soul searching on this difficult issue, focusing on the political elite itself.

Elites can be joined together in a number of ways, whether by blood and marriage or by having followed a similar path to power – similar enough to make them appear, to outsiders, to be cut from the same cloth, whatever the ideological divisions between them.

In fact, blood and marriage are a striking feature of our political elite, nowhere more so than in the upper ranks of the party most committed to the cause of social mobility itself – Labour. Having beaten off the challenge of his brother, Ed Miliband presides over a shadow cabinet containing a husband and wife team, twin sisters, the brother of the one-time leader of the Scottish Labour party, and the son of a former Cabinet minister. In a country of sixty million people, that's a lot of spouses, sons, and siblings to find gathered around the top table of a mass movement.

Then again, perhaps certain families simply produce politicians, just as others produce footballers. No one, at the time, found anything surprising or sinister in the fact that two brothers featured in England's 1966 World Cup winning team. There's nothing new in the idea of a family business.

What else might be affecting the social mix of our political elite? Until recently it was common to hear academics describing British political careers as entrepreneurial in character. On this view, there were any number of routes to becoming an MP and, once elected, it was for each to make his or her own reputation in full public and parliamentary view. Politics was a bit

like the X-Factor: it rewarded raw talent and ambition and cared not for conventional entry requirements.

If ever it was true, this picture of political entrepreneurs competing against one another in the public gaze no longer holds good. More and more, would-be holders of high office are building their careers in the shadows of power, away from the legislature altogether. Indeed, those careers have started to assume some of the ordered privacy found in ordinary professional and corporate life. There is an established point of entry (as a special adviser), at a relatively tender age (in your 20s or early 30s), on the back of an expected level of educational attainment (a first degree, at the minimum, preferably from Oxbridge). Four out of the five contenders for the Labour leadership had followed just this trajectory.

The issue here is not that this career path attracts, and then selects, incompetents. Educationally and otherwise, the credentials of our emerging political elite are impressive indeed. But the same is true of the emerging generation of lawyers and doctors, both of which professions remain (according to Milburn and others) unacceptably narrow in their social mix. The moral seems to be this: you cannot pick and choose which parts of the professional career path to mimic. The more the route to high political office comes to resemble that to high professional office, the more it will replicate the social profile of the professions themselves – an uncomfortable thought for politicians of an egalitarian persuasion.

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