

**FROM REPRESENTATION TO MERITOCRACY: UNDERSTANDING
PROFESSIONALISATION OF THE POLITICAL CLASS THROUGH UK
PARLIAMENTARY PAY DEBATES, 1911-2011**

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ABSTRACT: Observers frequently point to the rise of ‘professional politicians’ as a source of distrust with political elites. This attitude is rooted, in part, in a longstanding public reticence about a salaried political class. However, few studies have provided systematic evidence of how politicians themselves negotiated this process. To explore how the self-presentation of the political class in a key democracy shifted over time to facilitate the emergence of full-time, professionally remunerated legislators, a thematic content analysis (TCA) was conducted of the 23 major debates on legislators’ salaries in the United Kingdom House of Commons between 1911 and 2011. Using a previously developed coding scheme, the analysis identified 1360 individual statements covering seven major themes and 22 arguments. Results show that while payment was originally framed as an allowance to facilitate democratic representation, over time rhetoric used by politicians in relation to their own pay became increasingly meritocratic, emphasising the recruitment of highly qualified people as legislators. Qualitative insights from these debates also throw light on how and why the language which the British political class used to describe its role changed over time.

Keywords: British Politics, Parliament, Political Class, Professionalisation, Content Analysis

1. Introduction

Observers frequently point to the rise of ‘professional politicians’ as a source of distrust with political elites in advanced democracies. This attitude is rooted in part in a deep and longstanding reticence about the creation of a salaried political class. Over the course of the twentieth century, legislative

politics in particular transitioned from a part-time activity primarily conducted by those with independent incomes to a full-time profession conducted by career politicians (King, 1981, Cairney, 2007). Consequently, while in the past legislators were often financially supported by aristocratic connections (Wasson, 1991) or funds from organised labour (Rush, 2001), modern legislative bodies compensate their members with salary, expenses and pensions (Mause, 2014, Maer and Kelly, 2009).

However, few studies have assessed systematically how politicians themselves negotiated this transition and presented it to (often sceptical) publics. Literature on the political class has mainly focused on documenting the changing social, educational and occupational profile of the political elite (Borchert and Zeiss, 2003, Cotta and Best, 2007, Bovens and Wille, 2017). Conversely, other studies have tackled the issue of the political class from the perspective of critical public views, focusing on the gap between the twenty-first century professional political class and the idealised ‘good politician’ (Clarke et al., 2018) or analysing the ‘moral panics’ which have occurred as a result of professionalising trends (Jones, 2008, Flinders, 2012). Recent work has also increasingly drawn attention to the connections between professionalisation of the political class and broader electoral realignment (Martínez-Toledano and Piketty, 2021, Evans and Tilley, 2017).

In terms of understanding how these changes have been explained to the public, however, surprisingly little has been written, though Allen (2018), in the most comprehensive recent treatment of the concept of the political class, provides a reconstruction of arguments for and against the political class from the perspective of democratic theory. Likewise, few studies have investigated how the presentation of issues by professional politicians differs from traditional legislators (O’Grady, 2019).

This study bridges this gap by analysing political rhetoric specifically focused on the development of the political class, as deployed by politicians themselves. It does so by conducting a thematic content analysis (TCA) of 23 major debates on legislators’ salaries in the UK between the institution of pay for legislators in 1911 and the creation of an autonomous process in 2011. Because of the close connection between payment, professionalisation, and the composition of the political class, debates on pay provide a unique source of insight into how politicians understood and presented their role to

the public. The study also contributes to the growing literature on legislative speech (Proksch and Slapin, 2012, Casiraghi, 2021).

Implementing a coding scheme for arguments about the pay of high officials in the public sector previously developed by Dekker (2013), the analysis identified 1360 individual argumentative statements covering Dekker's seven major themes and 22 sub-themes. Results show that while payment of MPs in the UK was originally framed as an allowance to facilitate democratic representation, over time rhetoric used by politicians in relation to their own pay became increasingly meritocratic emphasising the recruitment of highly qualified people as legislators. Drawing further qualitative insights from these debates, we can also start to understand how and why the language which the British political class used to describe itself changed over time.

2. From Amateur to Professional Politics

The 'professionalization' (Rush, 2001) of politics describes a number of related shifts across advanced democracies. It is strongly related to the rise of the 'political class' (Von Beyme, 1996), or the group of politicians who conduct politics as a main occupation. While political elites exist in all systems, the political class has been seen as a distinctively modern phenomenon consisting of a self-selected group of skilled professionals (Allen, 2018). Modern political careers start earlier and last longer than in the past, creating a larger number 'career politicians' who spend most of their working lives in politics (King, 1981, Riddell, 1993) As a result, politics is now an intensive full-time profession for many more people than in the past (Borchert and Zeiss, 2003).

The political class has also changed in composition. While traditional political elites were coextensive with social elites, democratisation and the rise of working-class parties resulted in routes to political careers for members of the industrial working class (Rush, 2001). As politics professionalised, however, the social background of politicians changed once again to reflect that of the broader professional class in society. Members of national parliaments, for example, now have higher levels of education, and fewer MPs with working class backgrounds (Bovens and Wille, 2017). As one study

puts it ‘politicians are now drawn from a similar pool of highly educated, upper middle-class people’ (Evans and Tilley, 2017).¹

The importance of official salaries to sustain a professional political class has long been recognised by political theorists. As Max Weber argued in his classic essay *Politics as a Vocation*, ‘There are two ways of making politics one’s vocation: Either one lives ‘for’ politics or one lives ‘off’ politics... [Only] he who strives to make politics a permanent source of income lives ‘off’ politics as a vocation.’ (Weber et al., 1994). In this way, salaries are an essential element of professionalisation. Firstly, the level of pay has clear instrumental effects on the composition of the political class. In its most basic terms, pay for political work prevents the collapse of democratic systems into oligarchy. As Weber further outlined, ‘politics can either be conducted on an ‘honorary’ basis... that is, [by] wealthy people, above all those with unearned income. Or access to political leadership can be given to people without private means, in which case it has to be remunerated.’ (Weber et al., 1994).

Secondly, decisions on legislators’ compensation are not merely technocratic adjustments but rather reflect value judgements about politics. The public nature of political compensation creates a need to explain and justify decisions. Scandals around politicians’ salaries and other perquisites have thus become a consistent flashpoint for populist backlashes against the professional political class. Debates on the pay of politicians are thus a unique window onto deeper questions of how politics is conducted in democratic societies.

3. From Representation to Meritocracy

How have politicians presented the need for remuneration to the public? And how has the professionalisation of politics changed the discourses they have used? As already suggested,

¹ In the UK, for example, 82% of MPs elected at the 2017 General Election were graduates compared to just 57% in 1979. This trend was particularly marked among members of the Labour Party, with more graduates among Labour MPs than the (traditionally more highly educated) Conservative parliamentary party for the first time in 2017. See House of Commons Library, *Social background of Members of Parliament 1979-2019*. Briefing Paper Number CBP 7483, 12 November 2018.

politicians can be expected to lean heavily on the basic democratic argument that an unpaid political class would rapidly lead to a form of oligarchic politics in which the capacity to stand as a candidate or serve in office would be limited to those with a substantial outside income. A core argument for political salaries will thus be the *representation* of all sections of the political community in the personnel in office. Beyond the need to prevent oligarchy, in the context of legislative politics this can be seen as rooted in the need for ‘descriptive representation’ (Pitkin, 1967). Descriptive Representation refers to the extent to which a representative resembles those being represented in terms of common demographic features and sharing certain experiences with the represented group.

Yet a representational argument also places some limits on political pay. If pay is too high, politicians may be thought to become de-classed when they enter paid political office, with their new status and salary leading to a disconnect from those they represent. High pay may also be thought to attract those with the wrong motivations, who whatever their background will have little interest in supplying the kind of ‘substantive representation’ (Pitkin, 1967) for which descriptive representation is thought to be a necessary but insufficient condition. This, for example, was the fear expressed by John Stuart Mill in opposing pay for British MPs.² In order for pay to rise above a minimum level, therefore, justificatory discourses deployed by politicians will need to expand beyond the basic Weberian representational framework.

The clearest candidate for such an expanded discursive strategy is the idea of *meritocracy*.

Meritocracy is the belief that the legitimate and most effective way to structure power and material rewards in society is by the principle of ‘merit’. In other words, individuals should be allowed to rise to the level of their talents within social and political systems and be rewarded for using those talents in the service of the high level of responsibility in roles they take on. As distinct from other stratified

² In opposing pay for MPs in the UK, Mill wrote that it might attract ‘adventurers of a low class... incessantly bidding to attract or retain the suffrages of the electors, by promising all things, honest or dishonest, possible or impossible’ see Mill, John Stuart. *Considerations on representative government*. Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation., 1859.

social systems, therefore, in a meritocracy ‘...the eminent know that success is a just reward for their own capacity, their own efforts’ (Young, 2017), while those further down the hierarchy know that this is nonetheless the result of the just operation of a system which ultimately benefits everybody by increasing performance.

Meritocracy is thus strongly linked to an educational version of the class structure, centred on the middle-class professional ideal (Perkin, 2003). In psychological studies, meritocratic beliefs have been found to affect how individuals justify status inequalities, even when those inequalities are disadvantageous to that individual (McCoy and Major, 2007, Jost et al., 2003, Ledgerwood et al., 2011). Likewise, countries with a strong and widespread belief in meritocracy have been found to be more accepting of socioeconomic inequalities (Hadler, 2005). As such, meritocracy acts as a ‘system-justifying ideology’ (Jost and Hunyady, 2005) in support of high rewards ‘at the top’. In a meritocracy, as Marris (2006) puts it, ‘the fairer the opportunity structure of society becomes, the more it seems to legitimate a hierarchy of privilege’.

Politicians can thus be expected to shift to a proportionately more meritocratic and less representational set of arguments to justify rises in their pay. This is also likely to be increasingly the case as broader societal shifts made meritocratic discourses increasingly available.

H1: arguments deployed for higher legislator salaries will shift proportionately from those emphasising democratic representation to those emphasising meritocratic recruitment of highly qualified individuals.

As noted, meritocratic discourses are strongly related to notions of professionalism and the rising educated middle class. As such, it can also be expected that politicians will make more explicit comparisons between themselves and skilled professionals in the public and private sectors.

H2: arguments deployed for higher legislator salaries will shift proportionately from those emphasising uniqueness of the role to those emphasising comparability to other well remunerated professions.

4. Data and Case Selection: UK Parliamentary Pay Debates 1911-2011

In order to test these hypotheses, debates on the salaries of UK Parliamentarians between 1911 and 2011 were analysed. The British political class has historically been the subject of extensive study (Riddell, 1993, Rush, 2001), and has been the subject of seminal work on political recruitment in relation to gender in particular (Norris, 1997, Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). While legislative salaries have been seen as a peripheral issue in some of this work, the outcome of decisions on pay has also been recognised as an important aspect of the professionalisation of British politics (Rush, 2001). A study of the British political class covering a longer period also provides a useful counterpart to the ‘historical comparative analysis’ provided by Clarke et al. (2018) of public attitudes to the political class in the UK covering the period from 1945.

The first debate in 1911 corresponds to the introduction of payment for Members of the House of Commons (MPs) by the Asquith government as part of its programme of constitutional reform. The last, in 2011, corresponds to the final debate on legislators’ salaries in the UK before responsibility for setting MPs salaries was handed over to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA), an independent statutory body set up to regulate the parliamentary expenses system in the wake of the 2009 expenses scandal.

In the century in between the institution of payment and removing MPs direct involvement in salary setting, there were 23 major debates on pay; in 1921, 1937, 1946, twice in 1954, 1956, 1964, 1971, in every year between 1975 and 1983 (except 1981), in 1987, 1996, 2001, and twice in 2008, in addition to the 1911 and 2011 debates.³ While these were not evenly spaced, therefore, they did occur at least once in every decade and thus provide a good sample for assessing how arguments changed over time.

5. Method: Thematic Content Analysis

Debates were coded in line with the procedure for a thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis is a qualitative technique which requires ‘the generation of categories which can be reliably

³ Debates were located using a combination of references in secondary literature and in other debates and by searching for keywords using the Hansard online search tool. Minor debates consisting of questions or short exchanges were excluded, as was any debate not on a pay motion. Debates were coded using Nvivo 1.5.1.

coded and imposed on data for the purposes of hypothesis testing' (Holsti, 1969). These should be developed through engagement with both theory and categories identified in previous studies, alongside an initial examination of the source texts in a heuristic manner (Wilbraham, 1995).

Initial codes were generated by drawing on the study conducted by Dekker (2013) reconstructing argumentative justifications for the payment (or not) of high wages in the broader public sector, including for top civil servants and other public officials. Starting from Dekker's categorisation, and based on an initial survey of the debates, the typology proved flexible enough to incorporate almost all systematically occurring arguments in the data with minimal adaptation to the specific problem of politicians in legislative office – including for the particular themes of interest around democratic representation, meritocracy, and professionalism.

Dekker (2013) identified seven major themes with three-to-four constitutive arguments which occur most frequently in debates over top officials pay (See Table1). While all arguments in the typology were coded in order to give a comprehensive picture of the nature of debates, three specific arguments and one theme capture the concepts of interest as defined by the hypotheses.

For the argument from *representation*, the argument 'Better Democracy' was used to guide coding. The argument runs that if MPs are to be 'of the people', and make decisions deemed legitimate, they are to live under socio-economic circumstances similar to those experienced by individuals with an average income, and thus be paid moderately. For the argument from *meritocracy*, the argument 'Recruiting the Most Qualified Individuals' was used to guide coding. The argument asserts that if legislators are to provide the best possible performance, the most qualified people are to become legislators. Thus, they are to be paid as well as they might be in the private sector.

For the argument from *professionalism*, the argument 'Fairness and Broad Comparability' was used to guide coding. The argument asserts that if the jobs of MPs and those of their private sector colleagues are equal in terms of know-how, problem solving and accountability, thus their rewards should be equal too. Conversely, coding for the argument for *role uniqueness* was guided by the three constitutive arguments under the 'Motivation Selection' theme, which all support lower pay on

grounds that legislators actions are to be publicly motivated requiring them to take the job out of conviction rather than for the material rewards.

[Table 1. around here]

6. Analysis and Results

The analysis identified 1360 individual argumentative statements covering all seven major themes and twenty-two sub-themes corresponding to specific arguments. The most common arguments (sub-themes), each constituting over 5% of coded arguments and cumulatively making up 71.68%, were Disciplining Workers (13.82%), Better Democracy (12.06%), Demonstrating Necessity (12.06%), Fairness and Broad Comparability (10.07%), Recruiting the Most Qualified Individuals (6.91%), Making Sure Officials Have Enough (5.88%), Treating High Public Officials Fairly (5.88%) and Better Motivation (5%). Of these, four are included among the arguments of interest as outlined.

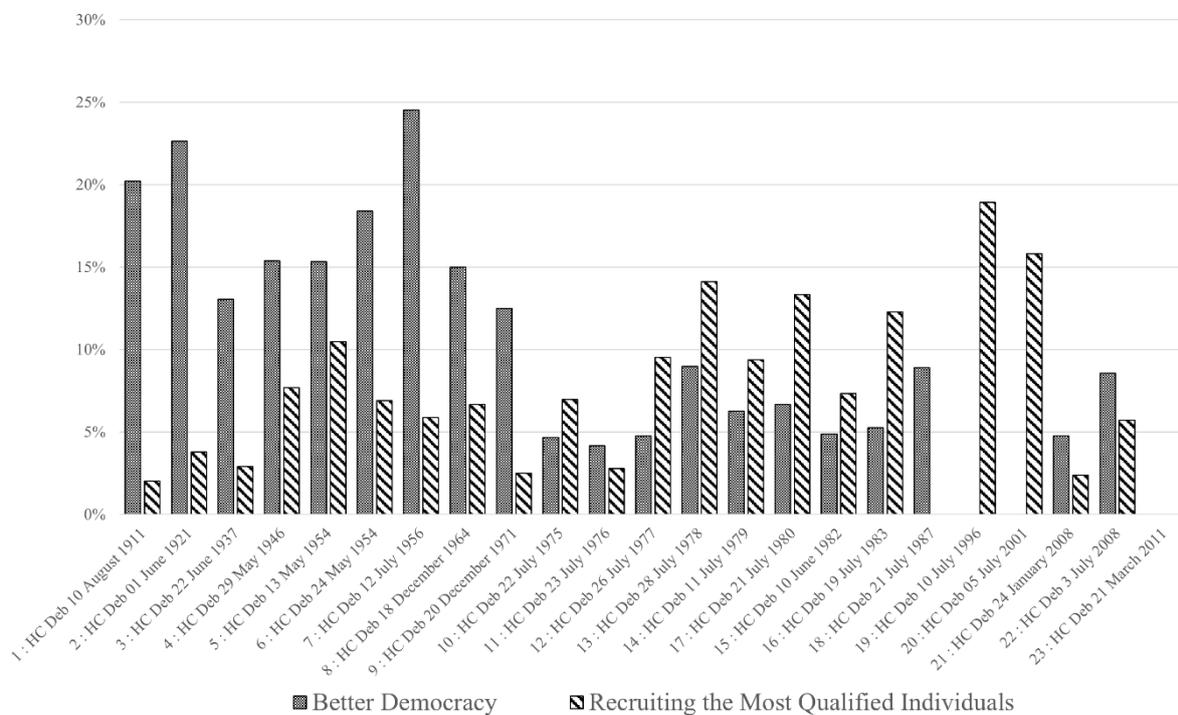
In terms of the other well-represented sub-themes, the Disciplining Workers argument holds that if politicians are to be motivated to work to the best of their ability, rather than shirk, high public officials are to be paid well. This was used to code instances where MPs referenced higher workloads as a justification for higher pay. This was consistently referred to in every debate, making up a high and constant percentage of arguments. Likewise, Demonstrating Necessity, which holds that if others are to accept moderate pay, politicians are to set an example by being paid moderately, was a consistent theme among those arguing for restraint in all debates in the dataset.

Making Sure Officials Have Enough and Treating High Public Officials Fairly are both variations on anti-corruption arguments that low pay, or pay which is felt to be unfair, will lead to politicians being tempted by corruption. These arguments occurred most frequently in earlier debates, though were also consistently used throughout. The latter argument was also used to code instances where MPs expressed the feeling that MPs salaries should be equal to each other, which was a commonly expressed sentiment throughout the debates.

6.1 Better Democracy versus Recruiting the Most Qualified Individuals

As shown in Figure 1, arguments for increased remuneration on the grounds of Better Democracy were most prominent in early debates on MPs salaries, making up between 15% and 25.51% of arguments in debates up to 1971. By contrast, in this period did the argument from Recruiting the Most Qualified Individuals made up on average only 5.79% of arguments. In line with the prediction in H1, however, the period after 1971 saw a marked decline in use of the Better Democracy and a corresponding rise in use of Recruiting the Most Qualified Individuals. In the majority of debates from the mid- 1970s, therefore, the meritocratic case for pay made up a proportionately larger share of arguments than the representation case - with Better Democracy averaging just 5.36% of arguments to 8.07% on average for Recruiting the Most Qualified Individuals.

Figure 1. Better Democracy versus Recruiting the Most Qualified Individuals, as a percentage of all arguments made, 1911-2011



Looking in more detail at the discourse deployed by MPs under these two arguments, some further insights into how and why this shift occurred emerges from the qualitative evidence. In the first coded debate on MPs pay in 1911, then Chancellor of the Exchequer (Finance Minister) and David Lloyd George made the case clearly on grounds of Better Democracy. In a widely quoted passage in subsequent debates on pay (see HC Deb 01 June 1921 vol 142 c1090; HC Deb 18 December 1964 vol 704 c745; HC Deb 20 December 1971 vol 828 c1149), he stated:

When we offer £400 a year as payment of Members of Parliament it is not a recognition of the magnitude of the service, it is not a remuneration, it is not a recompense, it is not even a salary. It is just an allowance, and I think the minimum allowance, to enable men to come here, men who would render incalculable service to the State, and whom it is an incalculable loss to the State not to have here, but who cannot be here because their means do not allow it (HC Deb 10 August 1911 vol 29 c1383).

Others in the debate made even more explicit connections to democracy and democratic values. As one member argued in relation to opponents of pay for MPs, ‘I put it that the great objection to the payment of Members made by many hon. Members is this, that they have got, it may be unconsciously, a distrust in the democracy of this country’ (HC Deb 10 August 1911 vol 29 c1456). While another concluded ‘...payment of Members is the logical outcome and the climax or natural cap of forty years free education and a democratic system of government’ (HC Deb 10 August 1911 vol 29 c1432). This emphasis continued in subsequent debates, though in each case reflecting the specific concerns of the time period. In the 1921 debate, one member lamented that the low pay of members meant that ‘Between the representation which the aristocracy and the plutocracy to-day have in this House and their complete control of another place’, it was thus the case that ‘Parliament is still subservient to class interests, and is not an assembly which represents the people in any real sense of the term’ (HC Deb 01 June 1921 vol 142 c1137).

In other cases, MPs avoided this more divisive rhetoric by linking pay and representation to the survival of democratic institutions in the context of war and democratic breakdown on the European continent. As one Member put it in 1946:

This Parliamentary system... has survived so many storms. Hitler tried to pull us down, and so did many others. But there is only one thing that could smash the British House of Commons and that is for us to bang, bolt and bar our doors against men of ability, just because they are without financial resources (HC Deb 29 May 1946 vol 423 c1296).

A concern for representation also features prominently in the external commentary on Parliament and of MPs' pay in this period. Richards (1959: 239), for example, argued that low pay meant that 'the Commons is not formed from a reasonable cross-section of the community... [Rather] it is increasingly restricted to those who, through inheritance or because of a particular type of occupation, can supplement their official allowance'.

More explicitly meritocratic arguments began to emerge from the 1950s. However, looking in detail at the debates, they appear in phases and with contrasting partisan emphases. In the 1950s, the first spike in meritocratic rhetoric (see Figure 1) was driven by Labour MPs advancing a form of socialist meritocracy.⁴ In a representative contribution, a Labour MP argued that:

I am one of the Socialist Members of the House... There are many on these benches who come from the trade union movement... I want to tell the House, in no uncertain terms... that if the House wants the services of the best type of people from that great movement it has to make the conditions and remuneration of such a character that it will recommend itself to the best and not to the mediocre or the worst (HC Deb 24 May 1954 vol 528 c46).

⁴ While deployment of meritocratic arguments by the left may be counterintuitive, this parallels the development of the idea as predicted by Michael Young in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), the text which popularised the term in the Britain. Young argued that meritocracy would be embraced initially by the left as a route for working class advancement, with the drawbacks in terms of entrenching new forms of privilege only becoming apparent later once social structures became fully meritocratic.

After this first peak, meritocratic rhetoric in fact declined in subsequent debates in favour of professional comparisons under Fairness and Broad Comparability (see below). When it returned as a key theme in the late 1970s and 1980s, however, a marked partisan shift had occurred. In this later period, meritocratic themes over pay were driven by Conservative MPs advancing what could be described as the rhetoric of parliamentary Thatcherism.⁵

As well as some more generic meritocratic statements, as in the assertion that ‘we all recognise that those top positions in society should be filled by people with the highest ability’ (HC Deb 28 July 1978 vol 954 c2091), others made explicit reference to quasi-market-based justifications of higher pay. As one MP put it in a 1979 debate: ‘As Adam Smith reminded us long ago, in the real world we must appeal to the strongest of motives as well as the highest if we are to improve human affairs’ (HC Deb 11 July 1979 vol 970 cc561-562). Others also reflected the declinist themes of Thatcherite rhetoric, with another MP in the same debate lamenting that ‘[o]ne of the great problems in this country today is that people who have energy, initiative and ability are underpaid’, concluding that ‘If we want a good House of Commons... we must be prepared to pay ourselves properly’ (HC Deb 11 July 1979 vol 970 c587).

By the mid-1980s, this changing discursive framework for political salaries was explicitly recognised by some members as meritocratic in nature and contrasted to the way in which the political class conceived of itself when they entered parliament. As one Conservative member put it:

When I was elected in 1945, I was an island in a wave of Socialism: “*Apparent rari nantes in gurgite vasto* [rare swimmers in the vast vortex]” We spoke Latin in those days... The world has changed since 1945, as have the principles for which we fought then. There are new principles - essentially those of meritocracy. Rightly or wrongly, the people believe in that (HC Deb 19 July 1983 vol 46 cc284).

⁵ Ironically, these Thatcherite discursive themes were often deployed against the Thatcher government’s own position on parliamentary pay, which tended to rest heavily on Demonstrating Necessity to argue that pay should be held at moderate levels.

The final period after Labour's return to power in 1997 saw a partial return of representational arguments over pay. However, even representative arguments could now be expressed in meritocratic terms which equated legislator quality with representativeness. As one MP put it:

If people want good representation... and if they want their Parliament to be more effective, we have to pay for it. Democracy does not come cheap and if we want good-quality democracy and good-quality Members of Parliament who are well resourced, we are taking a big step in the right direction. (HC Deb 05 July 2001 vol 371 c444).

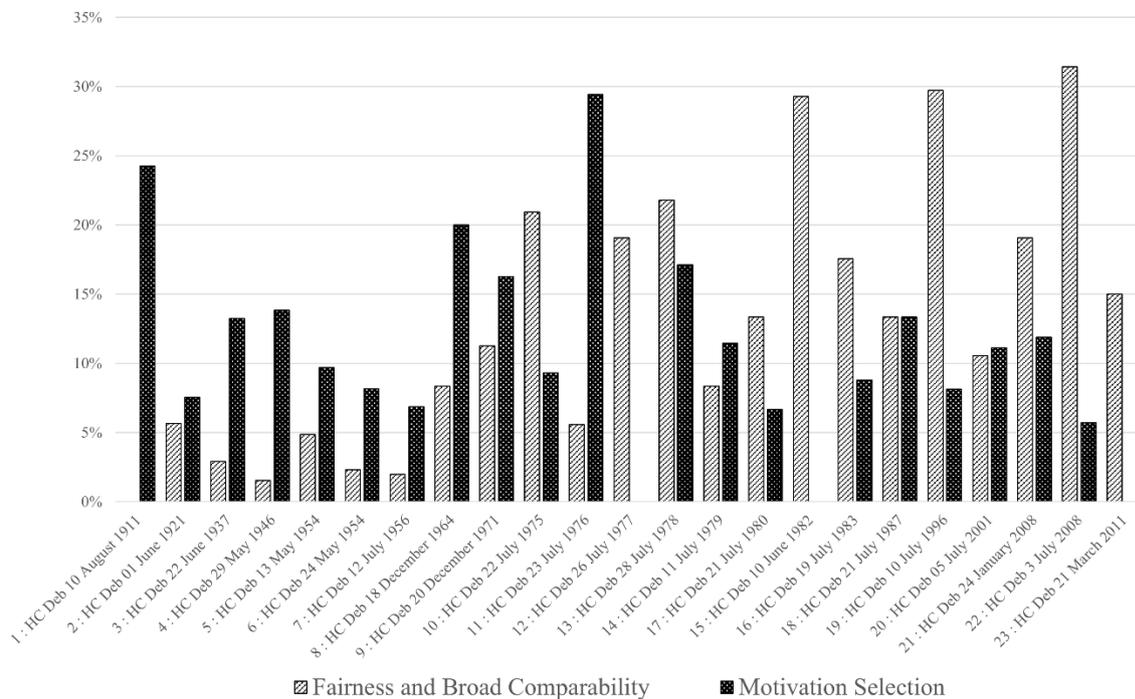
Thus, by the 2000s meritocratic rhetoric had reshaped the discourse with which the British political class, as represented by MPs, defined themselves for the purposes of explaining and justifying their claim to be paid as political professionals engaged in a full-time career in politics. At the same time, this was not a simple linear process. Rather it reflected the input of several ideological perspectives on meritocracy over different time periods.

6.2 Motivation Selection versus Fairness and Broad Comparability

While an increase in meritocratic rhetoric thus marked the transition between traditional and modern role-conceptions for the political class, it is not the only important shift in discursive framework evident in the data. As predicted in H2, arguments emphasising the uniqueness of the MPs role (coded under Motivation Selection) also declined proportionately in relation to arguments which explicitly analogise the job of an MP to other professions (coded under Fairness and Broad Comparability).

Arguments against increasing remuneration on the grounds of Better Motivation were relatively prominent across the whole period, though declined somewhat over time, making up 12.95% of arguments on average in debates up to 1971 and 9.94% thereafter. As noted below, the uptick in the 1970s was largely related to use of A Deep Understanding of Society to defend second jobs by Conservative MPs, and to the contributions of Enoch Powell (see below). By contrast, use of Fairness and Broad Comparability was quite rare in early debates but its use exploded after 1971, from 3.44% to 17.74%, becoming the dominant argument used by MPs from all parties.

Figure 2. Fairness and Broad Comparability versus Motivation Selection, as a percentage of all arguments made, 1911-2011



In the early debates, in which advocates of higher pay relied strongly on democratic and representational arguments, a common response was to instead defend voluntary public service as the best way to ensure that the right sort of publicly motivated person became an MP. As one opponent of the original £400 payment in the 1911 debate put it:

I believe that, on the whole, this system of gratuitous public service has worked well, and has produced men of character, ability, knowledge, and experience that it is a dangerous thing to alter it, and that by altering it the country is not likely to be better, but would be worse served by the new plan of getting men to enter this House under the inducement of paying a salary (HC Deb 10 August 1911 vol 29 c1415).

This sentiment continued to be expressed throughout the first half of the twentieth century. One MP in 1937, for example, did not ‘think it desirable that we should cease to suffer some considerable inconvenience as a return for the privilege of being Members of this House.’ (HC Deb 22 June 1937 vol 325 cc1082). Others made explicit attacks on ‘professional politicians’, a terminology in use from

the earliest debates on salaries. As one MP put it, 'Membership of the House is not a profession, and nothing could be worse than to do anything which would make membership of this House a profession' (HC Deb 01 June 1921 vol 142 c1109).

A frequently expressed concern over professionalisation related specifically to the relationship between parliamentarians and civil servants. In some cases, MPs feared that pay rises might undermine their special authority over professional civil servants (HC Deb 11 July 1979 vol 970 cc515-516). In others, parliamentarians expressed the fear that they would themselves become a branch of the civil service, losing their autonomy and special status. As one MP put it in 1964:

I strongly take the view that service in this House should not be a career. If the salary reaches such a level that the job becomes one in which people start too early in life... we will produce a sort of oral civil servant. A civil servant passes files of papers, but a Member of Parliament passes words. The country would lose much if this were to happen (HC Deb 18 December 1964 vol 704 c804).

Arguments for professionalisation also occur in early debates, with the first positive reference being the assertion by one member that 'the true way to deal with this difficulty of Members' payments is to make politics... a profession' (HC Deb 01 June 1921 vol 142 c1135), and another that 'I am a professional politician' (HC Deb 22 June 1937 vol 325 cc1107). However, a more common early variation on Fairness and Broad Comparability was the call for the appropriate 'rate for the job', as deployed by former Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition Clement Attlee:

I have never found my constituents and my friends, however poor, fail to realise that we have to give the man or the woman the rate for the job. Frankly speaking, what we do for our people in this House of Commons... does not really come up to the rate for the job as exemplified in Parliaments of less antiquity and less authority than our own (HC Deb 13 May 1954 vol 527 cc1484).

Even this modest suggestion was explicitly opposed by other members in the 1950s. In the 1940s and 1950s, it was still common to suggest that MPs pay might be variable, in order to compensate for the

cost of being a member while maintaining members in their original social classes. Ross (1948: 136-37), for example, argued that ‘a working-class member, used to making ends meet on a few pounds a week’ could manage on less than ‘a professional or business man used to some degree of comfort and obliged to maintain a fairly high standard of appearances.’

As shown in Figure 2, arguments for Fairness and Broad Comparability thus did not break through until the 1970s. This development can be strongly linked to the influence of independent reviews. The Heath government established the Top Salaries Review Body (TSRB) to regularly review the pay of senior posts in the civil service, the judiciary and parliament. The report the TSRB produced on MPs’ pay, released in 1971, provided what Rush and Shaw (1974: 169) at the time called a ‘change in the philosophy’ on MPs’ pay and expenses. Unlike previous reviews, the TSRB sought to establish the principle that MPs were professionals engaged in parliamentary work as part of a career in politics (Rush and Shaw, 1974: 189-197). It later employed management consultants to study the role of MPs and compare what they did to professionals in the public and private sectors.

Arguments made in subsequent debates thus often related to specific comparisons to other professions, but also include generalised support for the professional ideal as a model for the political class. As one MP put it in 1975, ‘I should like to see a far more professional – in the best sense of that word – approach to the way we run this place. I do not believe that we shall get that approach while we continue to reduce the pay of Members’ (HC Deb 22 July 1975 vol 896 c494). Like the rise of meritocratic rhetoric, broader intellectual influences also contributed to this discursive shift. Referring to James Burnham’s *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), one MP noted:

My right hon. Friend, I think, has not noticed the social change which has been taking place and which might be called the managerial revolution. People who are active in administration and prominent in national affairs are mostly salaried men today, and that goes for Parliament as well as for industry and the professions. (HC Deb 20 December 1971 vol 828 c1234).

In sum, in debates on their pay in the last quarter of the twentieth century, MPs transformed the way they presented their identity as a group. The rise of both meritocratic rhetoric and comparisons to other professional groups, in addition to the relative decline of discourses emphasising democratic representation and the unique role of MPs, represents a fundamental shift not only in the justificatory framework for salaries but also the broader self-presentation of the political class.

6.3 Opposing the Professionalisation of Politics

While the overall trend in debates on parliamentary pay was towards meritocratic and professionalising rhetoric, some MPs opposed these developments. Like proponents, they also developed distinctive discourses to oppose career politics in the context of discussions of pay. These arguments against the professionalisation of politics can be divided into two categories.

Firstly, Conservative MPs continued to forward the argument that MPs should be encouraged to pursue work outside of the Commons (coded under ‘A Deep Understanding of Society’). Most significant in this respect are the contributions of Enoch Powell in debates between 1971 and 1983. Powell is an infamous figure in British politics, the result of a 1968 speech in which he opposed non-white immigration to the UK using racist language.⁶ However, the range of his influence on political thought on the populist right in the UK has only recently been fully recognised (Schofield, 2013).

Powell contributed to more debates on parliamentary pay in the twentieth century than any other MP, consistently using them as an opportunity to attack career politics and the political class. Powell contended that full time MPs would necessarily become cut off from the nation at large, unable to organically represent public feelings. As he put it in a 1976 debate, ‘[w]hat is really meant by those who talk about full-time service is exclusive service... what they really mean... [is] that those who

⁶ Usually referred to as the ‘Rivers of blood speech’. This is referenced in the 1971 debate on pay by Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe, who argued in answer to Powell’s point, that ‘if, for example, the right hon. Gentleman [Powell] were to be appointed to public office - if he were to be appointed Chairman of the Race Relations Board - he would be provided with a secretary, with an office, with an entertainment allowance, and very probably with a car.’ (HC Deb 20 December 1971, vol 828 c1166).

are Members of Parliament should be Members of Parliament and nothing else.’ (HC Deb 23 July 1976 vol 915 cc2284). The result, he argued, would be that the public would increasingly view Parliamentarians as a self-interested elite.

Our honour and the honour of this House is derived from the view that is held of our motives. It is upon that, and that only, that our honour rests... on our motivation. If we pay ourselves in this House a salary such as a person of reasonable talents and education might aspire to... we shall be valued at the valuation we put upon ourselves - as hacks, as people who have come into the job which offered us the best return for our limited talents and who wish to make a career of it (HC Deb 28 July 1978 vol 954 cc2047).

As in other areas of his political thought, Powell’s arguments were self-consciously anachronistic, often appearing to call into question even the value of mass democracy (HC Deb 20 December 1971 vol 828 cc1156) and lamenting the weakened grip of the aristocracy on politics (HC Deb 11 July 1979 vol 970 cc517). However, as with Powell’s broader rhetoric on immigration and European integration, it also anticipated aspects of later populist arguments. Powell can thus be seen in these debates developing ideas about the political class which became increasingly salient in the aftermath of the expenses scandal and in the arguments deployed during the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum (Schofield, 2013, Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

An oppositional response to professionalisation also emerged from the left. A number of left-wing Labour MPs in used debates on pay to draw a dividing line between themselves and the Labour right in the factional battles which divided the party in the late 1970s and 1980s. These arguments reflected critiques of ‘parliamentary socialism’ advanced by left wing intellectuals like Ralph Miliband. As left-wing Labour MP Bob Cryer put it: ‘[w]ith a so-called top salary, a person may find that his style and values are weaned away from the movement. It does not happen in many cases but the process can happen in reverse, with the rank and file starting to say of such people “They do not quite belong to us.”’ (HC Deb 23 July 1976 vol 915 cc2277).

In developing counter-discourses against career and professional politics, therefore, MPs on both the right and the left laid aspects of the groundwork for the backlash against the political class evident in the 2016 EU Referendum and the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour Party leader in 2015. These counter-discourses further emphasise that these debates are of more than merely historical interest, rather they help to historicise and explain themes which continue to affect both British politics and those of other democracies facing populist challenges to the political class.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of parliamentary pay debates in the UK between 1911 and 2011 provides evidence in support of both hypotheses about the evolving self-presentation of the political class in advanced democracies. In response to the need to justify their own pay, and in the context of the changing size and composition of the political class, legislators switched from arguments which emphasised the democratic and representative benefits of a paid legislature to arguments which emphasised the recruitment of highly qualified individuals to be legislators. In addition, legislators adopted arguments which compared their role to other professional groups and comparatively deemphasised their unique functions and motivations as democratic representatives.

In the UK the critical juncture for both shifts occurred in the 1970s, coinciding with the development of a machinery for independent review of parliamentary pay. As the qualitative evidence shows, the reports of independent bodies aided legislators in developing a new language with which to frame their pay claims. In addition to providing insights into the evolving self-presentation of the political class in a longstanding democracy, therefore, analysis of parliamentary pay debates also demonstrates how external technocratic bodies can affect the way that legislatures discuss even topics which are central to their own interests and identity.

For both of these reasons, the analysis of parliamentary pay debates in the UK is of more than simply historical interest. The nature and development of the professional political class has become a key topic of study across a number of systems. Changes in favour of higher levels of education among politicians also interact with electoral shifts which have seen party systems realign around educational

and value cleavages. While broader trends have now received extensive attention, comparatively few studies have attempted to understand the way in which politicians have negotiated, explained, or resisted this change over the longer term.

Ultimately, results reinforce the historical comparative analysis by Clarke et al. (2018) which points to the dysfunction in British politics induced by voters demand for more 'normal' politicians precisely as they increasingly became a class apart (Clarke et al., 2018: 213-219). Crucially, as shown here, politicians also became willing, at least under some circumstances, to talk about themselves as a distinct professional group with special qualities. Understanding the construction of the political class through parliamentary pay debates thus throws light on central drivers of distrust with politics.

Word Count: 6819

Table 1. Typology of Arguments about Pay for High Public Officials from Dekker (2013)

Theme	Argument	Content
It's Taxpayers Money	Minimising the Tax Burden	If taxation is to be minimised, then if officials are to be paid from public funds, they are to be paid moderately.
	Value for Money	If the ratio between costs and benefits of employing them is to be maximised, society is to reduce the costs of employment of officials when doing so does not result in a reduction of benefits that is greater than the cost saving.
	Governmental Monopoly	If public officials are paid by an organisation with a monopoly over its services, and thus not subject to competitive pressure, they are to be paid moderately.
	The Service Argument	If officials are on the lower end of a hierarchal relationship with the people (i.e., the taxpayer), they are not to be paid much more than the people.
Compensating Benefits and Broad Comparability	Pareto Superiority	If officials receive more valuable non-cash rewards for their work than the non-cash rewards received by their peers in the private sector, they are to be paid less than they might be paid in the private sector.
	The Labour Market Argument	If both the public and private sectors are to recruit effectively, the sums of wages and non-cash rewards for high public officials and their private peers are to be equal.
	Fairness and Broad Comparability	The jobs of officials and those of their private sector colleagues are equal in terms of know-how, problem solving and accountability, thus their rewards should be equal.
Motivation Selection	Better Motivation	If officials are to do their work to the best of their ability, they are to be publicly motivated. Thus, they are to be paid substantially less than they might be paid in the private sector.
	A Deep Understanding of Society	If officials are to have a deep understanding of social issues, they are to be publicly motivated. Thus, they are to be paid substantially less than they might be paid in the private sector.
	Moral Authority	If the people are to have a character-based reason to think that officials' instructions are issued for public benefit, they are to be publicly motivated. Thus, they are to be paid substantially less than they might be paid in the private sector.
Live Like the Common People	Better Motivation	If officials are to run the public sector as well as possible, they are to have a personal stake in doing so. Thus they must live under socio-economic circumstances similar to those experienced by individuals with an average income, and thus be paid moderately.

	Better Information	If officials are to run the public sector as well as possible, they are to have a first-hand understanding of problems. Thus they must live under socio-economic circumstances similar to those experienced by individuals with an average income, and thus be paid moderately.
	Better Democracy	If officials are to be of the people, and make decisions deemed legitimate, they are to live under socio-economic circumstances similar to those experienced by individuals with an average income, and thus be paid moderately.
The Example Argument	Demonstrating Feasibility	If other public sector employees are to accept moderate pay for the sake of budgetary solvability, they are to understand that sacrifices are feasible. High public officials are thus to set an example and be paid moderately.
	Demonstrating Necessity	If other public sector employees are to accept moderate pay for the sake of budgetary solvability, they are to be convinced of the necessity of the proposed sacrifices. High public officials are thus to set an example and be paid moderately.
	Demonstrating General Compliance	If other public sector employees are to accept moderate pay for the sake of budgetary solvability, they are to have reason to believe there will be general compliance with the policy. Public officials thus set an example and are paid moderately.
Optimal Performance	Sticks: Disciplining Workers	If high public officials are to be motivated to work to the best of their ability, rather than shirk, high public officials are to be paid as well as they might be in the private sector.
	Carrots: Gift Exchange and Reciprocity	If high public officials are to be motivated to work to the best of their ability, they are to be made to feel appreciated through being given the 'gift' of payment at the level of the private sector.
	Recruiting the Most Qualified Individuals	If high public officials are to provide the best possible performance, the most qualified people are to become high public officials. Thus, they are to be paid as well as they might be in the private sector.
Preventing Corruption	Making Sure Officials Have Enough	If corruption is to be avoided, society is to ensure that high public officials have no need for additional income. Thus, they are to be paid as well as they might be in the private sector.
	Reducing the Expected Utility of Corruption	If society is to ensure that the expected utility of corruption is negative, high public officials are to be paid as well as they might be in the private sector.
	Treating High Public Officials Fairly	If corruption is to be avoided, society is to ensure that high public officials feel they have been treated fairly and equally. Thus, they are to be paid as well as they might be in the private sector.

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