

Study of key characteristics of UK politicians reveals 'ambition, narcissism, genuine idealism' among common traits

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In a new study of politicians' personalities, humor, charm and raw courage are listed among the most important character traits for

successful leaders.

Bill Jones, Honorary Professor of Political Studies at Liverpool Hope University, has combed through biographies and interviewed key political figures to understand the kind of people who enter politics, and strengths and frailties of those who occupy positions of power.

Jones explains, "Why do aspiring politicians embark on such a perilous journey, involving hugely long hours, no real job security and, on occasions, high degrees of self-abasement, just to have the chance of making it to the first rung of the ladder? What kind of person, then, wants to become a professional politician?"

The appeal of politics

In ['Just Like Us'?: The Politics of Ministerial Promotion in UK Government](#), Jones argues that choosing a career in politics is unlike choosing another profession.

He explains, "Political activity is essentially about the winning and retaining of power to change the way other people live their lives. Some would say—and this is the dangerous bit given the vagaries of human nature—it is also about the acquisition of power for its own sake."

Jones describes politicians as a "strange, special people" among which many of whom "appear to be a near narcissistic interest in themselves." But he also explains that most politicians he has studied do not enter politics "because they are venal, egotistical or ruthlessly selfish" but instead because "they genuinely believe they can 'make a difference' and fulfill an idealistic sense of service to the local or national community.

"So success in politics seems to be an admixture of driving ambition, narcissism, genuine idealism with, perhaps, a dash of daring and

necessary ruthlessness," he remarks.

Characteristics of a politician

Jones studied biographies of former Prime Ministers, MPs and Speakers, including Harold Wilson, Norman Tebbit, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, to analyze consistent traits.

Despite their different motivations, there are some "inherent skills" which Jones suggests are important for political success.

Among these he lists charm, optimism, academic ability, memory skills and good decision-making skills.

He also stresses the importance of humor, "We forgive people who make us laugh a great deal and it might be argued that Boris Johnson based his political style to a large extent on his ability to amuse voters: in amusing them he avoided making politics as deadly boring as a majority seem to think it is."

He suggests a strong constitution is an "oft- forgotten requisite key quality" for those looking for leadership positions in government, as you need "an extremely robust constitution and willingness to work long days stretching into the night.'

"I leave until last the most important quality of all—mastery of the spoken word—because without a high level of verbal skills, politics in the UK can never provide any kind of career for its ambitious participants," he explains. "Since 1945, all our PMs have owned a selection of the requisite key skills but the major one still has to be speaking skills. Some ministers have proved lackluster verbally, their periods in power proving short."

Jones also credits particularly women and working-class MPs with having courage:

"It also has to be said that female MPs have to survive and try to prosper in a Commons culture that is more male based than receptive to females. Finally, MPs recruited from working-class backgrounds also find the Commons intimidating given the large percentage of privately educated MPs on the Conservative side plus the domination of those educated at Oxbridge and other universities."

Ultimately, Jones points out that although politicians "might resemble 'us' in many ways (...) in certain important ways they are very different."

"They often seem to be addicted to or infected by a 'politics bug,' which drives them to compete against fellow addicts for the limited places available at the very top of the nation's political elite," he explains.

Limited selection pool

As well as determining the type of person who may become a politician, Jones also unpicks the various paths to becoming a minister—and how this can lead to a limited talent pool at the top.

With various paths to becoming a minister, the process can appear mysterious, but Jones maps the elements: the operation of the whips offices which inform the PM on which MPs are promotable; regular reshuffles which sift out poorly performing ministers, promote the good ones, and bring in fresh blood from the backbenches; and the role of the media which is the means whereby MPs communicate with voters and catch the eye of the party leadership.

Because of this varied path to the top, Jones points out that British ministers are often ill-informed on the areas for which they are

responsible. UK ministers are not promoted on their technical expertise, and also spend an average of 18 months to two years in post before being moved to another role.

"It seems weird to those of us outside looking in on the political world to discover there is no real preparation for the job of minister in a department, despite it possibly handling a budget of billions of taxpayers' money and affecting the daily lives of everyone," he explains.

"In business, a new recruit spends years at lower grades acquiring knowledge of the company before being promoted to a level of substantial responsibility," he continues.

"By comparison, a junior minister is often thrown into the deep end, with huge responsibilities, with no knowledge or relevant skills within an organization employing hundreds and serving millions."

Jones remarks that any leaders looking to promote colleagues into a ministerial role are faced with "distinctly finite" resources, explaining that depending on the size of its majority a government might have a couple of hundred MPs to put in charge of Whitehall departments and fill the 20 or more Cabinet posts.

"In fact, there is a good case for saying our constitution has a serious flaw—something reformers have tended to neglect perhaps—and that thought ought to be given to removing the (quixotically British) restraint upon recruitment imposed by the requirement that ministers also be members of the legislature," he explains.

"Given the widely accepted critique of our ministerial recruitment pool as too shallow and lacking in specialized expertise, something radical is required to attract those people of real ability into the insecure and relatively poorly paid profession."

At the conclusion of the book, Jones offers some measures to improve ministerial quality, including removing the need for parliamentary membership qualification for ministerial office and ending leadership elections by party members, as well as longer periods of office.

More information: Bill Jones, 'Just Like Us'?: The Politics of Ministerial Promotion in UK Government, (2024). [DOI: 10.4324/9781003405085](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003405085)

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