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### Western democracies have a talent problem

Able people of sensible views don't go into politics. The results are all around us

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Conservative leadership candidates Rishi Sunak, Liz Truss, Kemi Badenoch, Tom Tugendhat and Penny Mordaunt with presenter Julie Etchingham during filming of 'Britain's Next Prime Minister: The ITV Debate' in London © Jonathan Hordle/ITV

**Janan Ganesh** 4 HOURS AGO

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Rishi Sunak does politics as though he is just back from a residential course called How to Do Politics. There is something rote-learned about the gestures of hand and speech. There is something formulaic about the tactics: now woo the right, [now pivot](#). In a thriving democracy, he would be a good Downing Street chief of staff with a hawk's eye for a vacant parliamentary seat.

As it is, the former UK chancellor is plainly the best candidate for prime minister in a dire Conservative field. By all means, deplore the lack of competition in Westminster as he rose in recent years. But don't assume that it would have been much stiffer elsewhere. In the US, the two most senior Democrats are a [pensioner](#) and his maladroit vice-president. The last German election pitted Olaf Scholz against Armin Laschet in a pageant of nondescriptness. None of the last six Australian premiers have impressed enough to log four years in office. For the second time in a decade, Italy has a globocrat called [Mario](#) corralling a domestic political class that [lacks stature](#).

Western democracy has a personnel problem. It has been in the works all century. With a good brain and a plausible manner, it was absurdly easy for David Cameron to become Tory leader within five years of entering parliament in 2001. When Dominique Strauss-Kahn combusted through scandal a decade later, the French Socialists' recourse was the plodding time-server François Hollande. Look around the major democracies now. Emmanuel Macron, it is true, would have sparked in any

major democracies from Emmanuel Macron, to the east, from the Spaniards in my white-collar profession. But who else?

If voters were turning down world-historical figures to choose third-raters, we could diagnose all this as a demand-side problem. But supply is the larger issue. Able people of a liberal or moderate bent don't go into politics in adequate numbers. The reasons are intuitive enough. The pay gap with finance, [corporate law](#) and other graduate careers has grown over the past generation. (Consider the haste with which Cameron, not a pauper by birth, made up for lost earnings once he left power.) So has the personal exposure of elected office. The press kept John F Kennedy's secrets, and François Mitterrand's. Even if they were so inclined now, a citizen with a camera phone and a Twitter account need not be.

The turbulence of the past decade makes more sense in this context. Intellectually, it is *de rigueur* to pin the crisis of democracy on structural forces: on the loss of manufacturing jobs, on the rise of new media. In our view of history, if not economics, my trade has become Marxian to the bone. For all its outward philistinism, though, the Great Man theory, the stress on individual agency, has something to it. Perhaps liberalism is just running out of great men and women. Or even very good ones.

It is hard to emphasise the individual without seeming a snob. To stipulate, then, there is no automatic equation between a person's academic-professional bona fides and their usefulness in public life. Harry Truman was a failed haberdasher. He was also, through Nato and the Marshall Plan, the architect of the second half of the 20th century. [Robert McNamara](#) at one point had maybe the best résumé in America. He could hardly have been a more ruinous defence secretary.

The question is whether, over a large enough sample size, a country can survive the sending of its ablest people to the private sector. In a sense, democratic capitalism is self-eroding. In allowing for private careers of such lavish pay and privacy, it makes politics into a mug's game. The resulting decline in laws and institutions in turn threatens the economy. If the Tory circus distresses you, consider that, in Labour's shadow team, the experience comes from someone who has spent a quarter of a century in parliament without leaving much mark (Yvette Cooper) and a failed ex-leader (Ed Miliband). Autocracies at least allow officials enough scope for graft and the indulgence of peccadillos to keep the talent coming.

The newly published diaries of Chris Patten, the last governor of Hong Kong, are meant to be an elegy for that place. They end up leaving the reader wistful, yes, but for a certain genre of politician. Smart, administratively able, undoctinaire: Patten wasn't even the outstanding member of a Tory cohort that included a lawyer who took

silk at 40 ([Ken Clarke](#)) and the builder of a commercial fortune (Michael Heseltine). By way of comparison, Britain might soon be run by someone who tried to get the word “cock” into a [parliamentary speech](#) as often as she could. The crisis of democracy is the crisis of the restaurant trade and of Heathrow airport. You just can’t get the staff.

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