

Why Parliaments Should Train Opposition Parliamentarians

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Abstract

This paper presents a case for the leading role a Parliament should take in training Opposition parliamentarians. In doing so, we draw on both classical and contemporary interpretations of parliamentary practice in order to: (1) legitimise the responsibility held by Parliament in developing the appropriate **knowledge, skills and abilities** (KSAs) required for parliamentarians to perform effectively in their roles; and (2) propose three professional development approaches that Parliaments could adopt, namely identifying KSAs free of partisan content, emphasising the universal cultural role of traditional parliamentary practices, and harmoniously integrating democratic representation with parliamentary professionalism.

INTRODUCTION

Parliamentary opposition provides a unique insight into the development of organisational human resource management strategies of building competent human resources. This is because unlike traditional organisations that go out of business due to changing environmental conditions, when political parties are forced into opposition they are required to set in motion a process for regenerating their often depleted human resource stocks. This paper focuses on this issue by combining an examination of the classical model of parliamentary practice with a theoretical approach of the economic and human resource theory of the resource based view (RBV) of organisations.

PARLIAMENTARY PRACTICE

THE CLASSICAL ATHENIAN MODEL

Arguments in favour of parliaments themselves (as part of the state) providing training in the relevant knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) to all parliamentarians are not new. In fact such strategies can be found in ancient Greek democracy. Athenian democracy itself

developed from the very beginning a collective awareness of the necessity that the state (the City of Athens) should organise free public training, at its own expense, for all young entrants from the demes¹ to the ekklesia², at the statutory age of 18, when they were able to exercise the right to vote. This full-time training, under the name of Ephebia (or Ephebeia), lasted for one or two years and was delivered by experienced members of the City. It included mainly military, religious and community service (which involved very specific KSAs), but also emphasis on rhetoric and the ability to advocate for a political position in front of a large audience. Later on, during the Hellenistic period (3rd Century BC), while the training became voluntary and could be privately funded, the traditional set of KSAs was expanded to include philosophy, logic and the arts (e.g. poetry and music)³.

The effectiveness of the adversarial setting promoted by the Athenian parliamentarian debating was conditional upon a key contextual factor: the universal training received by all representatives of the demes provided a strongly unifying context, based on the principle of identity of interests. In the early days of Athenian struggle for survival as an independent City, under the constant menace of the Persians, the appropriateness of this principle never seemed to be subjected to debate by any Athenian citizen or community. The foundations of this implicit assumption were initially strengthened by the tangible prospect of Athens and its people being conquered and annihilated by the Persians (Waterfield 2004: 73-84). Later on⁴, this strength was maintained through the public education of Ephebia: all young Ephebes would swear an oath of unconditional allegiance to Athens and its interests, against all threats,

¹ Demes = wards or parishes. After the popular uprising against the tyrant Hippias in 6th Century BC, the Athenian leader Kleisthenes divided Attica into 139 subregions, thus creating the first known 'electorates' in Western history.

² Ekklesia = the Assembly of the Athenian Parliament.

³ Specialist opinions regarding the actual content of the Ephebia are divergent, but it is widely agreed that this content varied over time, under different rule. Waterfield (2004: 259-260) states that in this 'two-year period of acculturation for young men aged between eighteen and twenty... following their enrolment into a deme...they were free from all other obligations...and were educated in everything from geography and politics to philosophy.'

⁴ 'Athens used the continuing threat of Persia to remain on a war footing...' (Waterfield 2004: 89).

and including the promise that they would leave their homeland to their successors 'larger and better' than they found it⁵.

The training would then proceed, under the guidance of the best practitioners and trainers the City had at the time. In addition, the young Ephebes would undertake a tour of all City temples, learning about all their history, and be taught to serve their community by assisting people in need and learning to understand the interests of those they represented, to make decisions accordingly and to argue a case in public.

Importantly, the Ephebia 'teachers' and 'trainers' were recruited on the basis of their personal skills and public reputation. All involvement with Ephebia ('teachers'/'trainers' and ephebes alike) was regarded as the hallmark of citizenship and community service: 'the mark of a Greek city, and the chief distinction between citizen and non-citizen' (Boardman, Griffin & Murray 1995: 229). Indeed, on analysis we can note that the KSAs involved were specifically defining of Athenian identity and instrumental to maintaining this identity, irrespective of factional disputes.

We can infer from this account that the main significance of this educational practice was twofold: (a) to develop professional standards in politics (especially in matters of security and defence); and (b) to transmit among both civil and military leaders, across generations, those traditional values that had led to the rise of Athens to greatness.

⁵ 'I shall not bring shame upon these sacred weapons nor shall I abandon my comrades-in-arms wherever I stand in the ranks. I shall defend both the sacred and the profane aspects of life. I shall hand on the fatherland not smaller than I received it, but larger and better, so far as it lies in my power, with the assistance of all my fellow citizens. I shall obey the officials who govern wisely and the laws, both those which are already established and those which are wisely established in the future. If anyone attempts to destroy them, I shall not allow it, so far as it lies in my power with the assistance of all my fellow citizens.' (*Greek Historical Inscriptions* II, 204 as cited in Waterfield 2004: 260).

The Athenian ‘model’ of democracy supports the idea that there is a place for professionalism, the traditional values of a parliament and community values in the education and development of parliamentarians.

THE CONTEMPORARY MODEL

Drawing on the contemporary economic and business literature, the focus of organisational effectiveness and competence is the on-going attraction, retention and development of key human resource assets. Underlying this approach is the resource based view of the firm (RBV) (Barney 1991). A key feature of this view is the continuous development of core human resources to the extent that they become increasingly valuable, rare and non-substitutable. A weakness that is often cited in this approach is the assumption that organisations take this linear approach until a ‘Schumpeterian shock’ or creative ‘gales of destruction’ take place, which radically redefine the environment in that particular sector (Schumpeter 1950; Evans and Wurster 2000). These ‘Schumpeterian shocks’ (such as the global financial crises) are generally seen in the context of causing the destruction of the organisation (e.g. Lehman Brothers Bank) or requiring the organisation to be protected and rebuilt through a form of nationalisation (e.g. General Motors). However, for a political party to remain a viable organisation after their version of a ‘Schumpeterian shock’ - election defeat and going into opposition - the party (the organisation) has to rebuild its human resources stocks, depleted in the electoral defeat. It has to rebuild, into a viable alternative government, and it is constrained in doing so because of the little support it has available to it. The often overlooked issue, of how ‘Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition’ can rebuild can be informed by, examining how a ‘traditional’ organisation goes about rebuilding its human resource base and moves forward toward regaining power and forming government.

JUSTIFYING THE NEED FOR TRAINING OPPOSITION PARLIAMENTARIANS: CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY EXPLANATIONS

Both classical and contemporary models provide an explanation and justification for the need to train Opposition parliamentarians. If we take the view that governing skills are an essential focus of the identity of interests principle applied to all parliamentarians, irrespective of their partisanship (the classical model), then the Parliament itself is arguably the most appropriate initiator of the relevant training, as a traditional upholder of this principle. On the other hand, if we take the view that effective Opposition is a vital element of a healthy political life and a strong parliament and take into account the Schumpeterian shock suffered by parties losing elections (the contemporary model), the conclusion is very similar and recommends the same action: Opposition parliamentarians require training, and as the party itself is unlikely to have the necessary resources to provide it, the Parliament in the interest of the effectiveness of the institution, is the most appropriate institution to undertake to take on the responsibility.

Furthermore, considering the weakening of governing skills that appears to occur within a party after an extended period of time in Opposition, it may be argued that parliaments should practise a form of ‘positive discrimination’ by offering special support for professional development to opposition members parliament, particularly if they have experienced long periods in Opposition. This would help to prepare them for the arduous role of government.

Support for this type of ‘positive discrimination’ can be found in the literature on justice and fairness. For example, distributive justice can be assessed on two bases. The first is the equality basis, which holds that all opportunities and/or benefits should be uniformly and equally distributed to all individuals. The second is the needs basis, which argues that certain groups have greater needs than others: some are advantaged (e.g. the government), while others are disadvantaged (e.g. the opposition and minor political parties) in terms of their access to opportunities and/or benefits needed to enhance the knowledge, skills and abilities of their parliamentary members. Providing equal opportunities and/or benefits to all, irrespective of differences in levels of need, results in an unequal outcome. As a consequence

the needs basis for distributive justice holds that the allocation of opportunities and/or benefits should be asymmetrical and biased towards the groups with the greatest needs, as this will lead to a more equitable outcome (Folger, Sheppard & Buttram 1995).

THE TASK OF TRAINING PARLIAMENTARIANS: KEY QUESTIONS

Having established that Parliament itself is the most appropriate institution to deliver training for its members, including Opposition parliamentarians, we raise a series of questions that parliaments need to explore in order to fulfil their responsibilities to all members effectively:

1. Is there a generic core of KSAs that should constitute the focus of training for all parliamentarians, irrespective of their partisanship or parliamentary role? If so, what is the content of this generic KSA set and how is it identified?
2. Are there specific KSA required for effective Opposition (respectively, for effective performance as a parliamentarian from the governing party)? If so, what is the content of each of these two different KSA sets and how can they be identified?

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES

A possible way of encouraging parliaments to participate in the professional development of their Opposition members is to deliver training on relevant KSAs that are free of partisan content. This suggestion is based on the premise that a core set of KSAs essential to effective parliamentary activity but independent of partisan values and interests is needed in any parliament. The content of these KSAs may be historically and culturally relative, but this does not contradict the premise that a specific skills set with these requirements can be identified, and is indispensable to parliamentary effectiveness.

A second approach is for Parliament to emphasise the significance of centralised training and to identify how it is profoundly different from the training provided by political parties to their own parliamentary representatives. For example, while political parties can define the public interest in different ways that may be contradictory a parliament defines itself and its role as a social and political institution in terms of a privileged position on public interest, based on the principle of identity of interests. This relies on the cultural history of the institution itself as a repository of ancestral wisdom, with the aim of preserving in perpetuity the identity and consciousness of the *polis* it serves. It is not a particular partisan perspective that provides the content of this identity, but the experience of legislative activity acquired over centuries of parliamentary practice. This also ensures the independence of parliament from the government of the day, for it is from the floor of the parliament as a sovereign institution that the government can be removed.

A third approach is for Parliament to ensure that no contradictory situations appear between democratic representation and parliamentary professionalism. Against the commonly raised objection that parliaments should not seek to ‘professionalise’ the role of parliamentarian into some sort of elitist guild, subject to special licences based on other criteria than election results, The classical model (for example) illustrates how parliamentary activity can successfully be undertaken, simultaneously and without contradiction both as a public-serving

privilege supported by a willing electorate (which establishes how the role is filled by a particular individual), and as a profession (in recognition that, once democratic representation has followed due process, certain ‘technical’, partisan-neutral skills are required).

We will now proceed with several considerations regarding the second and third approaches described above.

THE UNIVERSAL CULTURAL ROLE OF TRADITIONAL PARLIAMENTARY PRACTICES

As noted in the first part of this paper, it appears that the classical model common in Ancient Greece adopted this role without much controversy and in conditions of having to safeguard the City against common threats. The principle of identity of interests is crucial in this paradigm.

On the other hand, in modern European culture, for example, the principle of identity of interests may appear outdated, due to the radical criticism it received from philosophers of the Enlightenment after the French Revolution. Condorcet (1955 [1793-1794]), for example, argues that the principle of identity of interests is a perpetrator of social inequalities and should be replaced by the principle of natural right, which ensures a humanistic perspective promoting social and political equality (Condorcet 1955: 145)⁶.

Interestingly, however, Condorcet did not criticise the principle of identity of interests itself, but the use of it as a foundational principle of political action. In his conception, the principle of natural right is the correct foundational principle not in the sense of excluding the principle of identity of interests but rather in the sense of incorporating it (Neesham 2005: 51). This

⁶ ‘We shall demonstrate not only that this principle of the identity of interests, once made the basis for political rights, is a violation of the rights of those who are thereby debarred from a complete exercise of them, but also that this identity ceases to exist once it gives rise to genuine inequality.’

misinterpretation of the doctrine of natural right is still to be explained and rectified in European political consciousness.

For now, it is suffice to note that the radical modern criticism of identity of interests, together with a weakening of security priorities and ‘common threat’ perspectives, has led at times to the relaxation and/or even abandonment of political traditions or practices associated with the principle of identity of interests. Having said that, we should also note that, historically, the Enlightenment argument for natural rights has been constructed in the context of society at large, when it comes to principles governing the social relations among members of a community (status, entitlement, etc.). It may be thought that the principle of natural right and its claim to replacing identity of interests has little meaning in the very different context of parliament as a political institution with a specific role. Furthermore, one could contend that, if there is one single institution in society where the principle of identity of interests should prevail and be adopted as foundational, this must be the main legislative body. It is within this unifying framework that competition and negotiation for political power may effectively be associated with delivery of public good.

In support of the above, there is also a good indication that the principle of identity of interests naturally re-emerges, in both political and social discourse, at times when society is challenged by security threats (eg fear of terrorism) triggers almost immediate and similar approaches to a problem from Government and Opposition. The ‘unified front’ formed through their discourse leads to a speedy agreement on significant laws that have the capacity to impinge on citizens civil liberties (Lewis & Hocking 2007: p 138-152).

DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION VS PARLIAMENTARY PROFESSIONALISM

It can be demonstrated that parliamentary professionalism is not (and hence should not be interpreted as) a form of elitism. Parliamentary professional standards should be acquired after election, according to criteria that should not affect the election process in any way. In this context, parliamentary professionalism has a ‘technical’ meaning, which refers to relevant

institutional practices unlikely to have been acquired during the exercise of unrelated professions. These technical KSAs are needed by all parties with a parliamentary presence, and as previously argued, by the Opposition parties. Furthermore, it may be argued that some of those KSAs should be developed by political parties as well, as part of their political strategy.

From a contemporary perspective, the argument can be made that training parliamentarians is a form of quality assurance (i.e. assuring that constituents are properly represented), and not elitism. Hence, it would be unethical not to train parliamentarians (especially Opposition parliamentarians, who may be experiencing ‘Schumpeterian shock’) and therefore not performing optimally. In addition, the professionalisation of careers (through training, formal education, development of standards/codes of conduct/practice, etc.) have been demonstrated to improve ethical behaviour (Gundersen, Capozzoli & Rajamma, 2008; Janssen, 1996).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the explanations provided in this paper to support the need for parliament itself to train Opposition parliamentarians, we argue in support of the following action.

1. Identify the core KSAs required of Opposition parliamentarians; and
2. Identify the competencies that parties are most likely to lose when spending longer periods in Opposition and when suffering Schumpeterian shock.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have referred to both the classical and the contemporary model of parliamentary practice in order to illustrate the legitimacy of the role of Parliament in training Opposition parliamentarians. We have also emphasised two key questions that need to be addressed in relation to this issue, outlined three professional development approaches that could be applied in this case, and made two recommendations for further research and action by Parliaments.

The evidence discussed in this paper highlights that fact that we are bound to ignore the educational training of the Opposition at the peril of diminished performance by the parliamentary institution as a whole.

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