



Daniel A. Bell

The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy

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In a speech delivered before the House of Commons on 11 November 1947, Winston Churchill famously declared, “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” Arguably, the political and electoral dynamics in many established democracies in the 21st century thus far— in many instances giving rise to populist leanings and/or the electoral victories of populist-minded political leaders—justify a renewed, critical reflection of Churchill’s dictum. If for no other reason, then certainly for the entertaining albeit disturbingly naïve gauging of popular opinion of candidates both in the run-up to and during election cycles. At times, one can hardly be faulted for viewing political elections increasingly as a personality contest with candidates embracing the role of political performance artists rather than a serious popular opportunity to evaluate candidates on the soundness of their policy perspectives and their inherent qualifications for high office. Political meritocracy, in other words, appears to be running the risk of being largely eclipsed—and possibly irreversibly so—by political entertainment and governing incompetence/ignorance. With *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Daniel Bell has succeeded in drawing much-needed attention to the importance of political meritocracy.

There will undeniably be people who will take issue with Bell’s choice of China’s political system as an illustrative model when comparing and contrasting the limits of democracy with the concept of political meritocracy. Be that as it may, such controversy does not detract from the inherent value of this comparison. In fact, the need for a critical assessment of the limits of democracy in the 21st century—especially in the United States given the quality (or rather lack thereof) of political debate, and political competence of elected and aspiring politicians—is evidenced by number of recent publications, including *Just How Stupid Are We?: Facing the Truth About the American Voter* (Shenkman, 2008), *The Age of American Unreason* (Jacoby, 2009), and *Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free* (Pierce, 2009).

At a fundamental level, Bell hopes to “promote better understanding of political meritocracy as an ideal” and possibly even “inspire meritocratic reform in democratic countries” (p. 12). He proceeds to outline his thoughts on democracy and political meritocracy over the course of four substantive chapters. In Chapter 1, Bell sets out to debunk the perceived sanctity of electoral democracy embraced by what he calls “democratic fundamentalists” (p. 61). Specifically, he discusses four key fundamental flaws of electoral democracy—tyranny of the majority; tyranny of the minority; tyranny of the voting community; and tyranny of competitive individualists. If the author’s assertion that modern-day electoral democracies are weakened by uninformed and/or irrational voters is uncomfortable, the assertion that “the only way to reduce the political influence of ignorant voters is to deprive them of the vote” (p. 30) is bound to elicit a visceral reaction. Yet, one may well argue that if voting is a civic right, voters should, in the spirit of responsible citizenship, exhibit a commitment to properly inform themselves, lest the tyranny of the minority prevail due to a pervasive excuse that people just do not have the “time or energy to devote to politics” (p. 37). Meanwhile, the tyranny of the voting community is exemplified by an all-too-frequent inclination of voters and politicians to kick the proverbial can down the road for the sake of political and electoral expediency. The effect of such short-term perspectives has an unfortunate tendency to unfairly saddle future generations with social, economic, environmental or other burdens that could be proactively addressed in the short-term.

Having previously advanced the view that “the need for training of leaders over several electoral cycles means that meritocracy is incompatible with multiparty rule” (p. 34), Bell



focuses on the leader selection process in a political meritocracy in Chapter 2. In particular, he takes issue with the argument that business success is a credible barometer for competent political leadership. In his view, a more reliable acid test of suitability for high office takes into account accumulated abilities over time and at various levels of government. These include the ability to implement, to “comprehensively analyze”, and to “raise and resolve problems” (p. 78). More than that, he goes on to say, good leaders complement these leadership qualities with intellectual abilities and a global outlook, social skills and virtue.

Political meritocracy, however, is not without flaws, as Bell acknowledges in Chapter 3. Among its most pronounced problems are endemic and structural corruption, institutional ossification and political elitism, and political legitimacy. While certainly not exclusive to political meritocracies, these problems have a distinct tendency to be much more debilitating in meritocratic systems than in electoral democracies. For proponents of electoral democracies, the apparent compatibility of political legitimacy and non-democratic rule, must surely rank as one of the most controversial arguments put forward by the author. Yet, it also underscores the pitfalls of Western-centric perceptions of democracy, for in China “there is a widely shared view that democracy means government for the people (by elites) rather than government by the people” (p. 139). And whereas political meritocracy presently lies at the heart of non-democratic legitimacy in China, its sustainability over time is hardly a foregone conclusion because a “pure form of political meritocracy...is hard to justify to ambitious and public-spirited people outside the system” (p. 149). It is this acknowledgment that paves the way for Bell’s overall argument; namely that China could be serving as a model for how to bridge the gulf between political meritocracy and democracy and arrive at a model of democratic meritocracy.

Acting on the proposition that we are all simultaneously democrats and meritocrats today, and acknowledging a growing lack of voter competence and ambition which effectively repudiates reconciliation of democracy and meritocracy at the level of the voting public, Bell outlines two alternative models of democratic meritocracy in Chapter 4. These include a *horizontal model* (i.e. reconciling democracy and meritocracy at the top) and a *vertical model* (i.e. emphasizing democracy at the bottom and meritocracy at the top). Whereas China’s developmental path provides clear evidence that the Chinese Communist Party has embraced a vertical model, the author also makes clear that sustainability of political legitimacy remains a challenge in light of a persisting gap between *ideal* political meritocracy and its *real* manifestations in contemporary China. And while, despite the implied meaning of the term ‘model’, China’s model of political meritocracy does not lend itself to an unqualified, whole-scale transfer to another country on account of historical and cultural peculiarities, Beijing may yet derive a certain degree of ‘soft power’ appeal if it remains committed to closing “the gap between the ideal and the reality of political meritocracy” (p. 197).

Through his efforts to “desacralize” democracy, Bell challenges us to go beyond a Western-centric perspective of political governance and to approach the wisdom of the deterministic notion that the world will experience an inevitable convergence to Western-style political models with a healthy skepticism. The fundamental aim of the book is neither to mount a devastating critique of Western liberal democracy, nor to present the Chinese model as a ready alternative to liberal democracy. Rather, the primary objective is to foster a more nuanced understanding and evaluation of democracy and political meritocracy, in the hope that each model may present valuable insights that may facilitate a convergence towards a model of democratic meritocracy that effectively mitigates both the weakness of democracy and the potential pitfalls of political meritocracy.

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