politics – we all would like laws made to suit us – but fewer and fewer people seem interested in being politicians. It's simply not a very attractive job. In a world of myriad possibilities, especially for those who have the technical abilities that bring lavish rewards in the private sector, politics looks like a real grind. Politicians have to work very hard, under intense scrutiny, for little reward. They sometimes suffer public contempt and media abuse; more often their hard work is greeted with indifference. Their lives are scrutinised for evidence of personal moral failings that can be used as a stick to beat them with. Their families and friends occasionally get dragged into a crucible of media cynicism and censoriousness that engulfs them all. True, successful politicians get to exercise real power now and then, which must be a thrill. But most politicians are not successful: they labour away, scrabbling for votes, striving for influence, only to find that someone has beaten them to it. While politicians are busy doing politics, the power to make a real difference often seems to pass them by.

The result is that contemporary politics doesn't just require a particular skill set. It also demands an appetite for that gruelling way of life. I don't have it. Do you? The class of people interested in doing politics is shrinking. This is good news if you do happen to have an appetite for it. The competition is not what it was, so that a desire to get into politics is often all it takes to be given that chance. In Britain the current crop of leading politicians is drawn from a remarkably narrow set of political careerists, most of whom have been doing politics since they were at university. Many of them were at university together.

The present British prime minister, foreign secretary, chancellor of the exchequer, education secretary, leader of the opposition, shadow chancellor and shadow home secretary were all part of the same generation of Oxford politics students. I didn't go to Oxford, but I did go to the same school as David Cameron – Eton – at the same time he did. When we were there, he was pointed out to me as someone who wanted to be prime minister. We were sixteen. Eton is an absurdly privileged school full of well-connected and ambitious boys, but few had an interest in politics: most wanted to be bankers or film stars. I only heard of one other who wanted to be prime minister. His name was Boris Johnson. Watching these two rise effortlessly to the top of British politics makes it hard to believe that the greasy pole is as greasy as it used to be.

Eton and Oxford: it sounds more like a reversion to aristocracy than a form of technocracy. In France there has long been a tradition of grooming leading politicians and bureaucrats from within a narrowly selective educational system. Many of those who reach the top of French public life have known each other ever since they were students together at the École Normale Supérieure. Nonetheless, the French version is avowedly technocratic, in a classical as well as a modern sense. The aim is to promote academic excellence geared towards high-minded public service, even if the invariable result is to produce a cosy club of well-connected individuals. The system dates