

can breed contempt both ways. If we think that professional politics is only for people who happen to have a peculiar interest in politics, we will start to look down on them as weirdos. Meanwhile, the politicians will start to look down on us as fools, because we don't understand the business they are in. The disdain many voters feel for professional politicians is matched by the disdain many professional politicians feel for the voters. Each thinks the other lot don't get it. As the gap grows, it becomes easier for politicians to gravitate towards their fellow elites, who at least have a respect for insider knowledge. The political network interlocks with networks of financial, technological and military expertise, which locks the public out. A narrow class of politicians is bound to have a skewed view of the world it inhabits, because its members rarely get to see how their world looks from the outside. The failure of the political elite to anticipate the financial crisis of 2008 is evidence of how easily closed-off groups can lose sight of what they are doing. Aristocracies, old and new, always have massive blind spots.

Ordinary citizens haven't given up on politics entirely. In some respects there has been a proliferation of political activity beyond the traditional outlets. As the membership of mainstream political parties has fallen away and voter turnout has declined across the Western world, irregular political campaigning has expanded. Concerned individuals often coalesce around issues that reflect their own particular interests. The new information technology has been an enormous help in this regard, enabling ad hoc pressure groups to

form and allowing like-minded individuals to find each other and share their concerns. But this too creates an imbalance between the political class and the rest. Professional politics is becoming more concentrated at the same time that citizen politics is becoming more fragmented. The new technology brings people together, but it also separates them out by hiving them off into online silos of political concern. The connections that are made through the new technology can be speedy, but for that reason they may also be superficial. Malcolm Gladwell wrote in 2010 that 'the revolution will not be tweeted'. He is probably right. Politics change requires more lasting and durable connections. There is a danger that a proliferation of unconventional political campaigns leaves the political class to sew up the lasting connections among themselves.

Above all, there is the danger that Benjamin Constant warned against. If we leave routine politics in the hands of a narrow group of specialists, we won't know how to take it back from them when we need it. The multiple scandals of the last few years – the banking scandal, the MPs' expenses scandal, the phone-hacking scandal, the GCHQ/NSA scandal – have tended to generate a widespread sense of powerlessness alongside the occasional spasms of fury. The political elite have been exploiting our inattention to shore up their own position. We would like to hold them to account for their temerity, but we lack the tools to do it: their superior knowledge of how politics works leaves us feeling impotent. People who think they can pick up politics when they need it often find that when they really