

Faced with the premium on technical expertise, politics can look woefully out of touch. So the cry regularly goes up: bring in the experts! Let them help make the rules. The name for rule by experts is ‘technocracy’. It sounds like a word from ancient Greece (*techne* meaning ‘craft’ and *kratos* meaning ‘power’). In fact, it’s an early twentieth-century invention, coined to describe the growing power of a new breed of industrial managers. The ancient Greeks did have a clear idea of expert rule, but it was not technocracy. The skill set they were looking for was expertise in politics, which was the summit of life. Ancient politics was meant to be an exercise in wisdom, something far above mere technical knowledge. It was a job for philosophers, not mechanics. *Techne* meant an understanding of how to make things work. Politics for the ancient Greeks was much more important than that: it was about how to live.

In the modern world, with its proliferation of scientific advances and its growing reliance on gadgets and gizmos, how we live is hopelessly dependent on someone understanding how to make things work. When we contemplate the worst that could happen, we don’t usually envisage an outbreak of political un-wisdom. We think of technological breakdown: rogue machines, failed systems, corrupted networks, shuttered cashpoints, phones with no signal, planes that fall out of the sky. The people we rely on to prevent all this from happening needn’t be especially wise; they just have to be clued up. The pull of modern technocracy comes in response to the fear that many professional politicians are clueless (and so are the

people who elect them). Better to put the experts in charge, however deficient they may be in life knowledge or moral virtue. It’s not as if the professional politicians are much good at those things either.

But experts in what? During the first half of the twentieth century, and particularly during the Great Depression, when politicians were doing their best to make a mess of everything, ‘technocracy’ meant rule by industrial engineers. Mass politics was assumed to be unsustainable without a steady supply of mass products: clothes, food, housing, communications, medicine, transport. The supply of these products depended on the control of complex and sophisticated systems. James Burnham, in his book *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), envisaged a future in which ultimate power lies not with the people who own the means of production (as Karl Marx thought) but with the people who manage it. Whether you had shares in a factory or worked in one, you were dependent on the experts who knew how to make a factory work. This knowledge was power. The politics of the future would belong to a class of bloodless technocrats who kept the industrial machinery working. Everyone else – elected politicians, financiers, trade unionists – would be answerable to them.

This was either an attractive vision or a horrific one, depending on your point of view. George Orwell’s *1984* (written in 1948) was in part a miserably bleak satire of Burnham’s technocratic society. Orwell thought Burnham had got it wrong: he had failed to account either for the vicious unpredictability of politics or for the restless