

Three Qualifications for the New Politician by James O'dea

□ There are plenty of politicians who genuinely desire to serve their communities and nations with humility and integrity, dedicating their lives to the cultivation of a wisdom that will benefit society at large; sadly, they are a minority.

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□ Mostly, the perception of those who crowd public office is that they are divisive, immature, and generally egotistical and opinionated. On the less destructive side of the scale, our politicians tend to be caught in corrosive partisan games and dedicated to exaggerating the failings of others: caught in a web of narrowly designed agendas they are seen to be graphically ineffective in responding to the complex needs of evolving societies. They often wear their ideological rigidity as a badge of honor and increasingly it is deemed a necessary pre-qualification for party selection.

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□ On the more destructive side of the scale they are demeaning of anything that isn't aligned with their own interests, proudly intolerant or shamelessly bigoted, prone to media-grabbing rants and unapologetic about the fact that they treat those who do not hold their ideological views as enemies of the good. And as we know they pursue, collaborate and conspire with money as the decisive instrument to gain power and wield power. This does not cover the small number of politicians who are either pathological liars, deeply corrupt, instigate hatred or who will stop at nothing to remain in power.

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□ It is evident that politics has become a degraded profession.

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□ It is time we require our politicians to qualify for public service in ways that effectively serve the cause of safe, healthy, equitable and diverse societies existing in an interdependent world and shared ecosphere. The following are qualifications that I deem essential. I encourage you to add to this list and send to your political representatives for discussion. Let us post these qualifications wherever young people with ideals and integrity might see them and recognize what is needed now in these times of complexity and challenge -- times that call for a new breed of public servants and inspired political leadership.

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□Empathy

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□Without empathy there is no way forward for civilization. Individuals who lack empathy are trapped in selfish motivations and ego fixations: they have not learned how to see themselves in the predicament of others. Politicians who lack empathy relate to others through a primitive in-group inclusion or out-group exclusion. This degree of psychological development cannot negotiate any form of middle ground. Conviction is reduced to simplistic binary codes such as "You are either with us or against us."

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□In the absence of empathy the politics of adult tantrum dominates public life and presenting yourself as exclusively right is thought to be the only safe political strategy. No corporation or institution would hire people with this kind of cognitive and affective diminishment but we give them power. Yet politicians who lack emotional intelligence feed societal division and breed intolerance.

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□Empathy can be acquired by those who do not have it. It requires learning how to be open and respectful to other viewpoints: it asks us to learn how to open both our hearts and our minds so that we can experience others truthfully and accurately. Empathy is thus the basis of respectful and compassionate listening, dialogue and nonviolence. As such it is one of the foundation stones of democracy. Politicians need to listen to others not so they can be divided into those who are right and those who are wrong but so that people and their concerns can be accurately understood. Why is something so basic as representing a diversity of interests and concerns apparently out the window in contemporary politics?

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□Empathy is not about feeling sorry for others; it is about understanding them by being able to vividly imagine yourself in their shoes. If someone wants to serve in public office, a minimum qualification should be this ability to put yourself in the shoes of others and by so doing become a larger person. Tone deaf ideologues with subpar relational skills cannot serve the public good.

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□Dialogue

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□Dialogue requires mature communication skills that are not evidenced by those who only have the skills to talk at people, preach, cajole, rant or engage in any number of types of verbose and patronizing monologue. Some claim this is the way we debate in a free society but that is not so. There is most definitely a place in political life for debate but even debate has been reduced to a toxic form of mutual accusation and mudslinging rather than skillful exchange of ideas. Debate should serve to clarify the merit of ideas and not be used to camouflage positions or create endless diversions from the questions at hand.

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□ Dialogue is founded on respect and there can be no democracy without respect. When we engage in dialogue we listen to understand and learn how to appreciate both differences and common ground. Dialogue seeks to build bridges so that shared meaning can have space to grow. Without that dialogic space democracy is vulnerable to the projection of the shallowest ideas by those who can afford to pay for the most successful media distortion and propaganda. Dialogue is increasingly denigrated because it requires a measure of flexibility which is portrayed as betrayal of hard-line ideological positions. When dialogue is sacrificed extremism wins. And when extremism wins only the politicians benefit.

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□ Dialogue is a practice. Those who wish to enter political life should demonstrate a significant degree of proficiency in this practice as a basic qualification for entry into this field.

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□ Allegiance to the Whole

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□ Narrow partisanship has gained such a foothold because a falsehood has been propagated whose credo claims that believing in your own righteousness to the exclusion of other viewpoints is the only way to serve the highest good for all. This is plainly false: it presumes that divergent perspectives are a corruption of the highest good for society as a whole rather than an essential expression of its founding ideals. Narrow partisanship relies on enforcement and the victory of its particular ideology so as to prevent contrary ideas from having any legal basis in society. It sees politics as a way to enforce partisan views on others and on society as a whole. But democracy is only protected from this form of extremism when it fosters a political culture which serves the whole. Democracy is a complex interactive system of interdependent elements: those who seek the right to guide it must prove they understand how systems work.

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□ Systems thinking is based on understanding how parts function effectively together to serve the whole. In modern societies this means understanding how economic systems can support not destroy ecological systems, how financial systems can thrive but not at the expense of sustainable communities, how people can live their lifestyles and values in freedom and not impose them on others and how nations can cooperate optimally and protect universal rights in the face of exploitation, repression and terrorism. Simply parroting self-interest produces a failing grade. No one who gets a failing grade on systems thinking deserves a foothold in politics.

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□ Conclusion

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□ There are more qualifications for public service and political than these three. Naturally we should be able to demand that our public servants and politicians have honesty, integrity and humility. But these elements are difficult to immediately assess because they are the foundation of character and not acquired skills. The three I have chosen as essential qualifications are the basic and necessary foundation of the skills needed for effective service. All three can be developed.

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□ If all politicians were required to demonstrate their track record in empathic behaviors, dialoguing with difference and proving their skillful allegiance to the whole, we would change politics forever. No profession that offers as much power asks as little in entry qualifications as politics. Anyone with a big ego and a narrow agenda can run. Let's change the game and call in those with real skillfulness to be the instruments of social transformation our times so desperately need.

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