

Diversity: the same old faces are deciding the world's future and it affects us all

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Just 160,000 Tory party members chose Britain's new prime minister, Boris Johnson. It's the first time in history that the UK prime minister has been determined by voters from only one party. Research by Queen Mary University London and the University of Sussex shows Tory party membership is much less diverse than the general population. A typical Tory member is white, male, middle-class and over 50 years old. This has implications beyond the top level of political leadership. There is a widespread lack of diversity among the politicians and civil servants whose decisions affect the futures of all those in the UK.

The traditions of Oxford University, for example, have significantly shaped the values and approaches of British politicians, for better or worse. This is seen clearly in recent wranglings over Brexit. Many influential politicians – including the secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs, Michael Gove, and Johnson himself – were members of the Oxford Union, where they cut their political teeth through student debate.

How has that culture and tradition shaped the way the UK is ruled? And what is lost when those who determine government policy come from similar educational backgrounds? We suggest that it drives “group-think”, which limits openness to new approaches, and minimises attention on the broader needs of society.

A global issue

It is important to think about these questions. They help us to understand why and how policy leaders prioritise and make decisions. This isn't just a British challenge; it applies across the world. Research on emerging economies shows that finance ministers who have studied at universities that favour free-market capitalism often implement policies that reflect those values. In particular, students at institutions with strongly neoliberal economics departments, such as the University of Chicago, may bring those approaches back to their home countries and apply them in government.

Innovation agencies are government bodies responsible for supporting the development of new ideas, products and services. Their leaders may also be influenced by their educational background, according to a recent study. This reveals itself in the policy direction taken by different countries.

In China, the focus is on developing homegrown technologies through the “Made in China” initiative. Chinese policymakers tend to have advanced degrees in subjects like technology and physics. In Singapore, leaders tend to have business degrees. Their innovation policy is more focused on creating favourable conditions for entrepreneurs. In Japan and Korea, social science degrees are more common. These backgrounds bring a different set of values to the field, leading them to prioritise social purpose. The research shows that East Asian innovation policy leaders tend to study in their home country for undergraduate degrees, but overseas for graduate studies. The US is a favoured destination. Could innovation policy in the region be shaped by American academic concerns, just as Chicago-trained economists tend towards free-market economic solutions? We believe that the national educational patterns of elite policy leaders have an influence on the way they make policy and the issues they focus on.

Nesta recently conducted a survey of 24 European innovation agencies – and the findings highlighted that their staff tend to have studied social sciences. Fewer than a quarter hold MBAs, engineering degrees, or other qualifications. This shapes the assumptions and values they bring to innovation policy. So how can we expand the perspectives involved?

One idea is for innovation agencies to actively recruit board members and staff that come from a wide range of educational, professional and social backgrounds. Some agencies already have programmes to support innovators from diverse backgrounds. They should think about how they can apply this to their own workforce.

Another option is to open up policymaking so that priorities are not just set by a small group of similar people. Nesta has been experimenting with new ways to involve the public in decisions

about innovation policy. For example, how more people could shape the decisions we make about driverless cars and lowcarbon technologies.

More diversity needed

The lack of diversity in political leadership is worrying. A small proportion of Britain's population have selected the country's new prime minister from two candidates with similar educational backgrounds. Our research shows that around the world, we need to look at the backgrounds of decision-makers at all levels. From debates played out in the House of Commons, to policies that shape the future of technology and innovation, we should aim for a more diverse mix of voices among our leaders. Particularly when it comes to innovation – the most future-facing of policy areas – new perspectives and a wider range of backgrounds could spur a more creative, vital approach to leadership, and deliver better outcomes for everyone.