

It's time to end elite entitlement

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At the weekend, [The Guardian reported](#) an interview in which Kamala Harris said:

I am not done. ... I have lived my entire career as a life of service, and it's in my bones.

Staggeringly, despite having lost the presidency in 2024, Harris is still framing the presidency as her inevitable reward for her public service credentials.

This instinct, best described as the belief that high office is a prize for the accomplished, a rightful place for the initiated elite, is deeply embedded in the political culture of the USA, and to some degree the UK. What it reveals is a critical aspect of how political elites conceive of power. A number of issues seem worth noting.

First, there is a very obvious sense of entitlement in elite political circles. In the case of Harris, her quote implies (and it seems clear that she believes) that her career of "service" qualifies her for the top job. She speaks as though the presidency awaits her because of her résumé, rather than being a role she would accept if she won a popular mandate and accepted public accountability.

Saying so, Harris is not alone in this framing: it is echoed across the elite spectrum. For example, Donald Trump (despite ideological differences) also maintains the language of "I deserve to lead" and of elevation rather than service. There is a pattern: power is seen as the endpoint of a career, rather than the beginning of a duty.

Second, entitlement in this sense is underpinned by a neoliberal mindset: the individual elite, by virtue of credentials, networks, history, and positions previously held, claims a right to ascend. The policy content they have to offer (if any) becomes secondary to the claim of entitlement. The presidency is the prize for the supposedly accomplished rather than the necessary tool of structural transformation that the USA might require.

In Harris' case, the argument is that she has served and therefore should lead. But the question must be asked: who has she served, and to what end? If the policies she offers remain within the confines of existing neoliberal frameworks of markets, deregulation, and incrementalism, as is the standard offering of what might be called the Corporate

Democrats, then the entitlement she believes she enjoys becomes a self-referential loop: the elite serves the elite and then gains elite status, after which it claims leadership as the reward without ever disrupting the underlying power relations that are in many cases the cause of the malaise the US has faced for so long.

Third, the political economy of entitlement is corrosive. When those in elite circles believe they are owed power, the link to democratic legitimacy is weakened. The risk is that governance becomes less about changing the structural conditions of inequality or about shifting the economic foundations of the state, more about the rotation of elites. Instead of breaking the rule that global capital dictates, as a President who might address the needs of the USA should, the elite politician holding that role instead becomes the de facto gatekeeper of continuity. Their entitled leadership simply reinforces the status quo.

Fourth, we should examine the consequences of this for justice and democracy. One consequence is that the dispossessed remain observers of, and not participants in, the political process. When leadership is framed as a reward for service rather than a responsibility to the disadvantaged, the voices of those without credentials or networks are implicitly marginalised. The result of that is seen in policy stagnation. Entitled elites rarely challenge the economic model that produces inequality; they restore confidence rather than re-imagine structures. So we get modest reforms rather than transformation, and as a result of that, institutional trust erodes. If people believe the game of politics is “who has the right CV” rather than “who answers to us”, then cynicism grows and political engagement declines.

In that case, we must reject the notion that high public office is a prize for the deserving, as Kamala Harris appears to view it. Instead, power must be seen as grounded in an acceptance of responsibility to the many. That means transforming our conception of leadership:

- * Leaders must emerge from purpose, and not from privilege. Leaders must show a willingness to disrupt rather than preserve when the status quo clearly does not work.
- * The state must reclaim its role, not as facilitator of elite ambition but as guarantor of collective well-being. Belief in progressive tax reform, redistribution of wealth, and public investment in the common good must become the criteria for leadership, and not just status.
- * Democratic accountability must be stronger: those whose careers suggest they “deserve” power must prove that that power will not sustain the elite order but challenge it.

In short, the elite entitlement culture that says “I have served, therefore I deserve to lead” must be supplanted by a culture that says “I seek leadership because I accept responsibility for systemic change”. The presidency, or any high office, must not be the

trophy for service but the tool for transformation.

In that case, Kamala Harris (and the language she uses) offers a useful lens on elite entitlement. It has to be understood that when she says “I am not done”, the message is: “I am owed this opportunity.” But democracy demands a different message. It requires that a candidate say, “I am ready for the obligation.” If progressive reform is to mean anything, then we must shift the narrative of power from reward to responsibility. That shift matters because the alternative is the continuation of neoliberal governance dressed in new faces, but with the same old logic.

In that case, we need a new generation of leaders who are not simply those who believe they are entitled but are those who can demonstrate that they understand that power is a responsibility, and not a prize. And that is why Zohran Mamdani might be such a shock to the likes of Kamala Harris, because that would seem to be his understanding, and it is miles apart from where Harris appears to be.

This post was drafted by James Murphy and edited by Richard Murphy.

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