

Why Political Science?

In an interview with Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Ian MacAllister, we attempt to make sense of political science and its importance in society. Professor MacAllister is an authority in Political Science, having held Directorship of ANU's Research School of Social Science, Chairmanship positions in University of New South Wales and of Manchester and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project, as well as an editor of *Australian Journal of Political Science* since 2004.

"Political Science is the master science because politics is the one thing that affects everything in a person's life. ... [I]t is quite fascinating to travel and talk to people, find out what they think about things and about their country."

According to Professor MacAllister, politics attempts to answer the fundamental question of "who gets what, when and how?" In this field, the answer lies in the sentiments of the general public, thus it is a discipline with a 'mainstream' orientation. Political science seeks to understand the political attitude of the public such as their views on governments, foreign affairs, their lives and society in general. The field then attempts to understand how social factors like political institutions, the internet, the media etc, influence political attitude.

Professor MacAllister believes that there is no value system that can judge between political system. "It is not about which system is better. It is about what you want."

This I gather is what makes political science very interesting. How society organise itself through the political institutions they built is mainly a reflection of their political attitude as they try to answer "who gets what, when and how." Hence, understanding what influences their political attitude and its consequences is very important because it will give us a clearer understanding of why society is organised in a certain way. With such knowledge, we will be able to better assess the way we do things and whether it needs to be changed or re-examined with time.

These I believe are the motivations behind Professor MacAllister's research and his interest in the field generally.

Furthermore, Professor MacAllister believes that "everything must be evidence driven."

Political science is a discipline that seeks to understand the current reality before attempting to theorise about causes and effects. Tools of evidence gathering like opinion polls and public opinion surveys are used to gather data on the current public as evidenced in a lot of his research. He believes that if a sufficient amount of questions are being asked, the researcher can learn a lot about the respondents and the public's political attitude.

I agree with him that this is very important. Often times, people always overlook things that are at face value or make general assumptions about society without acknowledging empirical proofs. Economists, especially capitalist proponents, would approach data assuming that the people they are looking at are rational, self-interested and optimizing. Political scientist on the other hand, would create knowledge by looking at things objectively at face value without any underlying assumptions.

From there, explanations are attempted but it nonetheless remains open-ended as subsequent data either confirms or modifies their hypothesis.

From all this, it becomes clear to me that political science is an important discipline because it seeks to establish and understand the realities of public opinion. It does not try to eschew this reality in the prism of any assumptions. Hence, in an age when public discontent towards politics and its institutions is prevalent, nothing is more important than to invite the academics and decision makers to attempt to understand the underlying reasons for such sentiments by looking at the realities objectively without bias and in due course, provide remedies to this ailment and make the world a better place.