

As its power expands, the government bureaucracy increasingly resembles an aristocracy. How else to explain the enormous power invested in Brian Deese, the unknown, unelected, 31-year-old White House aide in command of General Motors?

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"Brian Deese isn't picking out Chevy Malibu's colors for next year."

That's what President Obama's press secretary said to assure Americans that the administration has no interest in micromanaging the newly nationalized General Motors. Anyhow, Deese, a junior member of the White House economic policy staff, has bigger things to worry about—like "dismantling General Motors and rewriting the rules of American capitalism," as *The New York Times* put it.

Deese isn't getting near the color samples. He's just revising the rules that shape our futures as he oversees the reorganization of one of the world's largest corporations.

A fresh-faced 31-year-old, Deese dropped out of Yale Law School last year to work for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. When Clinton sank, Deese skipped over to the winning ship, impressed everybody who counts, and landed a desk in the White House. The big guns like Larry Summers and Christina Romer are busy cooking up hilariously sunny budget projections while trying to look like they're keeping the economy from collapsing. So Deese, armed with an undergrad degree in political science, finds the GM portfolio and the fate of millions in his hands.

Some are grumbling about Deese's lack of relevant experience. (He has driven a car and once slept in the parking lot of a GM plant!) But the real issue isn't Deese's résumé. The real issue is why anyone should have the power to "rewrite the rules of American capitalism." Unlike Deese, treasury secretaries Paulson and Geithner are men of experience. But what kind of experience could justify the immense, arbitrary power they've exercised in the wake of the financial meltdown? Experience centrally planning the global economy?

Deese's embarrassing rawness is actually welcome, for it draws our attention to the invidious inequalities inherent in a government with unconstrained discretion. Deese isn't going to pick the colors for the Chevy Malibu. But he could. And Obama can tell us that Congress won't dictate which factories GM should close. But it will.

Liberals used to care about inequalities in power—and they were right to. Because equality of power ensures freedom. Being equal in our basic rights, no one has a natural right to rule over another. This kind of liberal egalitarianism is the root of the prohibition on titles of nobility found in the American Articles of Confederation. It is also the root of the very idea of limited government—the idea that a government's power is legitimate only if it is carefully parceled out, well-checked, and limited in scope to tasks only a government can perform.

We don't worry these days about the rule of hereditary monarchs. But as the modern nation-state has expanded, taking on ever more functions, the powers of the state bureaucracy have come to resemble the powers of an unaccountable aristocracy. Periodic elections merely deliver a somewhat different batch of aristocrats to the throne.

American liberals talk a good game about equality, but their rhetoric, like conservative talk about liberty, is mostly empty. There's a respectable liberal argument that individuals can be truly free and equal only if they command resources sufficient to develop their capacities and enjoy the exercise of their basic rights. But this is an argument for a government-provided social safety net—for making sure everyone starts on a decent footing. It is not an argument for putting a ceiling on income and wealth.

The best liberal argument for limiting inequalities in wealth through redistribution is that otherwise it will be impossible to limit unequal concentrations of political power. Redistribution is required to keep liberal democracy from devolving into plutocracy. However, this argument assumes that the wealthy have relatively uniform political aims, and will coordinate their resources to achieve their aims. Yet, as political scientists have shown, the wealthier voters get, the more likely they are to vote their consciences rather than their wallets. Wealthy voters have become more supportive of reducing income inequality through redistribution, not less—even as levels of income inequality have increased.

In a democracy, the real power is the ability to shape public opinion and public policy. The media—the main source of our common narrative—tend to fall to the left of the American public. As does academia—a main source of both policy ideas and political policy advisors. Paul Krugman is powerful not because he is rich, but because he is a celebrated academic who has been given a pulpit in one of the world's most influential publications. If our democracy is skewed toward the preferences of a few, it's skewed toward the preferences of the media and academe. But opinion leaders like Krugman, unsurprisingly, tend to be untroubled by inequalities of this kind of influence. And they tend not to worry that Brian Deese, who was elected by no one, has acquired more political power than a billionaire could hope to buy.

The Times isn't concerned that Brian Deese has enormous power over the lives of others simply because he showed up at the right place at the right time. Sure, he's unseasoned, but he's the *Times*' kind of guy. The story of an energetic, whip-smart, young Democratic presidential aide rising suddenly to a challenging position of enormous influence is catnip to the politics-as-romance set, and that's the story the *Times* tells—over and over again. The reader is left in a la-la land of Sorkinesque West-Wingery. "President Bartlett's counting on you, Brian. And so is America!"

It shouldn't come as news, but the rhetoric of American politics is gushing with hypocrisy. Just as Republican "libertarian" arguments for decentralized government often aim to protect the tyranny of local prejudice, Democratic "egalitarian" arguments about inequalities in wealth and income too often aim at concentrating political power in the hands of people like Brian Deese. In an America of free and equal people, no one would need to assure us that the president's men won't be issuing commands about the colors of cars.

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