Right-wing journalist warns of Britain's collapse into chaos

The Abolition of Britain—from Lady Chatterley to Tony Blair, by Peter Hitchens

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Peter Hitchens is a journalist for the *Daily Express* and a talk radio presenter. Outside of a brief flirtation with radical politics during his student days, he has spent his political life on the Conservative Party's extreme right.

Unsurprisingly then, reading his recently published book *The Abolition of Britain—from Lady Chatterley to Tony Blair* (Quartet Books, ISBN 0 7043 8117 6) is akin to wading through a foul smelling sewer. It is packed with prejudice, puerile amalgams and gaping inconsistencies. Yet Hitchens' outpourings have been greeted in certain liberal circles as a cogent contribution to political debate. Andrew Marr, former editor of the pro-Labour *Independent* newspaper and columnist in the *Observer*, described the book as the "most sustained, internally logical and powerful attack on Tony Blair and all his works".

Hitchens occasionally hops back several centuries in an effort to give his book some historic authenticity. But his basic thesis is that in the course of the twentieth century, and in the post-war period in particular, the British nation state has been the victim of a creeping coup d'etat by the liberal intelligentsia. This has apparently now reached its apogee in the Blair Labour government.

He writes that two world wars and the loss of empire placed Britain's ruling classes in an unenviable situation. Although nominally one of the principal victors at the end of the Second World War, "the unspeakable truth was that by 1941 we were a defeated nation, whose conquerors had neglected to invade us".

Britain's foremost conqueror was the United States. Its GIs, stationed throughout the country towards the end of the war, were in reality a "reasonably well-disciplined army of occupation", he complains.

To salvage some international standing, the British ruling class was forced to conclude an unequal alliance with its American occupiers. Throughout the period of the Cold War, this had certain benefits, but its price was enormous.

Economically, politically and morally Britain succumbed to its powerful ally. "The old power of British traditions, the magic of British uniforms and the authority of British upper-class voices, the power of British ceremony, began to crumble from within at this point". Its strength and spirit sapped, Britain's ruling elite proved unable to withstand the tide of alien cosmopolitanism, transmitted through "a new type of middle class, mainly state educated and state employed".

Pride in Britain's traditions, the empire, the English language—even the family—buckled before this "Americanisation". In its place came the welfare state, sexual promiscuity, comprehensive education, urban sprawl and rock and roll. All played their part in an insidious "social engineering" project aimed at creating a more egalitarian society. Even the English countryside "from which British people of all classes have drawn much of their national identity" was virtually eradicated in the face of this undeclared civil war.

The Lady Chatterley of the title refers to the obscenity trial taken against D.H. Lawrence's novel in October 1960. Prior to this case, the state could censor material with virtual impunity. Hitchens describes the trial as symbolising the struggle between the old establishment—seeking to rebuild Britain along "traditional" lines—and the new liberals. For him, the ramifications of the latter's victory in the case went beyond literary standards. It represented the final nail in the coffin of the nuclear family.

This is a theme constantly returned to throughout the book. Anti-communism and misogyny combine in his railings against liberal divorce laws and female employment. This combination is summed up in his comparison of Gregory Pincus, inventor of the contraceptive pill, with Russian revolutionary Lenin in the "dubious pantheon of men who changed the world for better or worse this century". Even microwave ovens are held partially responsible for Britain's moral breakdown.

Hitchens' concern for the family is that it is the primary unit through which tradition and "prejudice" (his word) are passed on. It is therefore integral to the stability of the nation state. A consequence of family break-up is that no political party, but

especially the Conservative Party, can rely on an "inherited" constituency of support, passed on from generation to generation.

The triumvirate that Hitchens holds politically responsible for this state of affairs is made up of Roy Jenkins, (a right-wing social democrat in the 1960s Labour government), Margaret Thatcher and Blair. Hitchens attributes Jenkins, now Lord Hillhead, with having led the campaign to change Britain's censorship laws and to abolish the death penalty. He was also one of the earliest supporters of the European Union within the Labour Party.

Thatcher's "triumphs" during her years as prime minister concealed "deeper failures", he writes. Many of these were only revealed with the collapse of the USSR. Suddenly Britain was thrown back 50 years, "alone in the world, unexpectedly insignificant, and lacking in confidence".

On the one side it faced "a new battle against German domination of Europe, advancing behind the smokescreen of European Union". On the other, the end of the Cold War freed America's own national instincts—the most objectionable of which, to Hitchens, is the US' professed sympathy for Irish republicanism. Sensing the exhaustion and poverty of its junior partner, the US, he writes, has seized the chance to strike at one of Britain's last colonial possessions, Northern Ireland, through the Anglo-Irish peace agreement.

Although Hitchens is still respectful to Thatcher, he finds that she shares with Jenkins and Blair a blind disrespect for traditions. Thatcher's encouragement of individualism and the pursuit of wealth irrespective of all other considerations weakened national unity and meant that those within the establishment formerly charged with upholding the institutions of rule became "indolent and slack", he writes.

Although Hitchens makes no mention of globalisation and its impact on all aspects of international economic, political and social life, it is an ever-present spectre. He complains that secure wealth is now the province of a new super-class, which has "no true stake in society as a whole". He identifies this "new nobility" with the Blair government.

He has no complaints at Labour's targeting of the welfare state for demolition, nor the further pauperisation of working people that this engenders. It is the government's proposals for reform of the House of Lords, devolution of power in Scotland and Wales, and cautious support for Britain's entry into the European single currency that angers Hitchens.

Blair's constitutional proposals will only exacerbate the crisis facing the nation state, Hitchens warns. He holds that Blair is meddling with strategic mechanisms through which social and political stability was maintained, without having anything substantive to put in their place. At the same time, Blair is alienating and sidelining sections of the old, experienced elite. "Year Zero" has arrived, he writes, and Britain has entered the sort of "demoralised period that often ends in revolution or collapse".

Significantly, Hitchens' call for a stand to be taken against an "indifferent public and a complaisant Fourth Estate" is not only directed to the Tory right. Referring to the anti-Americanism long associated with the Labour left, Hitchens points out that they had been the first to recognise the dangers of US cultural encroachment on the British Isles and their warnings have proven correct. These layers, whom he correctly associates with the trade union bureaucracy, have also been marginalised by Blair.

Such “responsible” trade unionists have historically played an important role in defending capitalist rule, Hitchens points out, and they too should be incorporated into the defence of Britain's national interests. The first task of this coalition must be to defeat the threat of European domination, posed by Blair's plan to adopt the euro. "Here at last is a full-scale battle against a recognisable threat to our entire way of life", he writes.

Hitchens' ramblings echo those on the right wing of the Republican Party in the US—his nationalism and xenophobia, his paean to the family and traditional values and horror at the impact of the radical 1960s. Even his portrayal of Blair as a pseudo-revolutionary mirrors the demonisation of Clinton by the Republican right. In essence Hitchens is testing the waters for the formation of a fascist movement in Britain.

Observer columnist Marr is nervous because he knows that Hitchens is not alone. Behind Blair's invocation of a "united Britain at peace with itself” the most reactionary forces are gathering.

Marr writes, "There is forming in the country the beginnings of a broad anti-Labour coalition which may be ragged but looks angry and determined. It stretches from pro-sterling campaigners in business to farmers and fox-hunters, grammar school enthusiasts and supporters of the Lords."

There is little comfort in the fact that these forces presently do not have a political vehicle equivalent to the Republicans in the US, given the collapse of the British Conservative (Tory) Party. Despite the media's portrayal of New Labour as unassailable and monolithic, Hitchens' diatribe points to the unquestionable fact that social tensions are becoming sharper and threaten to explode whatever fragile political consensus remains in Britain today.