Anthony Sampson surveys a transformed Britain 40 years on

Part two

Robert Stevens
4 August 2004

Who Runs This Place? The Anatomy of Britain in the 21st Century by Anthony Sampson, published by John Murray

This is the last of a two-part review

It is in his appraisal of why the changes he has described have occurred that Sampson is his weakest. Whilst there has undoubtedly been a growing together of the state and business interests, particularly over the past 20 years, there never existed in an earlier era such a pronounced separation of the capitalist class and the state machinery that is implied by the author.

Historically the state and its institutions, in order to better defend the long-term interests of the bourgeoisie, by necessity maintained a certain independence from the demands and interests of individual capitalists. On this basis governments in Britain, such as the post war Labour administration of Clement Attlee, carried out economic and social policies that were unpopular with large numbers of capitalists or even a majority of the ruling class, but which were designed to safeguard the profit system from the development of a revolutionary movement in the working class. This has always been an essential function of the state—to preserve a social consensus upon which to maintain the capitalist system, or to impose the will of the capitalists by force when consensus breaks down and the class struggle erupts.

In the introduction to his book Sampson informs us, "As in my first *Anatomy*, I do not try to fit my facts into political or economic theories or to follow the dogma of political parties".

In reality, Sampson's starting point is one that accepts the capitalist profit system and views the state apparatus—and its legislative, executive and judicial wings—as a relatively autonomous entity to be studied only from the standpoint of their interaction between each other. On this basis he has developed a model of the establishment as a series of interacting and competing concentric circles that, by its very nature, cannot rise above the purely descriptive.

In reality the elements of the political and social superstructure he seeks to depict can only be properly understood through an analysis of the economic basis of society and the way this dictates social relations.

An examination of the "establishment" is an examination of the ruling class and its institutions within a capitalist society based on private ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of the working class by the owners of capital. Alterations in the balance of power within the "establishment", and between and within the complex apparatus of the state, must reflect profound changes that have occurred within the capitalist economic system over the past 30 years.

First among these is the globalisation of all aspects of production, which has its origins in the decline in the rate of profit in the 1970s and the application of computer technology. This has had the impact of undermining the nation state and all those institutions based upon it, and tearing apart the previous social reformist consensus.

Despite his reference to the global expansion of capital and markets, Sampson makes no real appraisal of this development. This suits his own political conclusions, which are essentially a call for the reinvigoration of the nation state, especially its political apparatus.

Sampson is most concerned that the prevailing social consensus is being undermined by the open and blatant display of corporate power and wealth that now exists. The latter sections of the book are a cautionary note to the ruling elite that the present course of economic and social policy threatens the continued survival of the establishment.

Bemoaning the increased political weight of such international oligarchs as media magnate Rupert Murdoch, Sampson writes that the "English seem to have been defeated in their own country, and imperialism has gone into reverse as former colonials have returned in triumph to the home country. Australians, South Africans and Canadians invade London to scale the citadels of power, ignoring the hierarchies of the natives and racing to the top. Successive English strongholds have fallen to outsiders. Harrods was bought by an Egyptian, Mohamed al-Fayed. The Jamaican-born Bill Morris led the huge Transport and General Workers' Union until he retired last year. Jewish immigrants win most of the Nobel prizes for science. Half of the biggest British companies are run by foreigners. The English banking families have lost control to the North Americans, Scots or Chinese." (p. 344)

He adds, "All this would have been unthinkable to the imperial Englishmen of 40 years ago—it would have represented the defeat of all they stood for. Was it a defeat or a victory?" (p. 346-7)

Sampson concludes that it "represents a triumph of adaptability and survival, a reversion to the much older English qualities of pragmatism and tolerance... It's not so much a retreat from empire

© World Socialist Web Site

as a return to Britain's pre-imperial past, recreating its role as an international trading country competing with the world." (Ibid.)

Here Sampson defines imperialism purely as the ownership of colonies, but it more properly denotes the domination of finance capital over the globe, of which colonialism is one particular expression. Even here, Sampson is writing as British capitalism, together with its US counterpart, is openly renewing its imperialist ambitions in the Middle East, rather than settling down into a "pre-imperial" past, as he claims.

But Sampson wants to portray the state, or certain elements of it at least, as somehow separate from, or above the process of social polarisation. He admires the armed forces, for example, which he praises for having "a much clearer sense of identity and purpose than most institutions". And he defends the monarchy against the encroaching powers of the prime minister. (p. 172)

Another "national institution" that Sampson recommends is the trade unions. His praise for the unions is integral to his political standpoint. Referring to a recent meeting of the Trade Union Congress which he attended, Sampson described the proceedings as more like "an assembly of managers than a rally of revolutionaries". (p. 61)

On this basis, he adds that, "the TUC conference still retains its crucial function as the only national forum to represent ordinary people's interests in the workplace." (p. 68) Such fulsome praise is doled out by Sampson on the basis that sees the trade unions as a critical mechanism for controlling growing discontent and upholding the social order—and not in even a limited sense as organisations that promote class struggle.

While the author wishes to present his analysis under the guise of "impartiality", he is in reality one of the pioneers of the development of Blair's New Labour project that he now finds so potentially dangerous for social cohesion.

His membership of the SDP would suggest that his own political evolution is neither accidental nor "impartial". The SDP's split from Labour in 1980 was an attempt to create a party that was explicitly not based on the working class, and advocated the supposed common interest of capital and labour. It was formed by right-wing Labour members known as the "Gang of Four"—Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams, Bill Rodgers and David Owen—and rejected what it saw as a leftward shift in the Labour Party following the downfall of the Labour government of James Callaghan, and the coming to power of the Conservatives under Thatcher. Such were the similarities between the SDP and Blair's refashioning of Labour as an aggressive champion of British capital, that critics of the New Labour project even referred to it as a SPD Mark 2.

An article in the *Guardian* newspaper on July 18, 1995, following the election of Blair as Labour leader the previous year stated, "The constitution of the now defunct Social Democratic Party—'broadly based and free from special interests'—provides a suitable model for New Labour to adopt, according to an analysis of Labour's past errors and future prospects being written by key advisers to Tony Blair". Among those advisers were Peter Mandelson MP and ex-SDP activist Roger Liddle.

In the last section of his book, Sampson offers several "counter-forces" through which to safeguard the social order. His solutions, which are essentially a call to defend national sovereignty, are worthless. He criticises a situation whereby the "British" face a future under which "their agriculture and trade is determined in Brussels ... the uses of their investments and savings are decided by global boardrooms, their jobs are dependent on the inflow of immigrants from Africa and the Middle East, and by the rising completion from factories or call centres in East Asia".

He adds that "all the time Britain is becoming more interdependent with other countries and with international institutions, which have their own binding treaties that imply loss of sovereignty". (p. 362-363)

He concludes his book by calling for the creation of several "counter-forces" to be created on an international scale, so as to curb the power of these international financiers and jet setters. These could be "a genuine European Parliament, a common European Foreign Policy or international trade unions and regulatory to cut back the powers of bankers, corporations and accountants". (p. 363)

The problem with this, he continues, is that his hoped for "counter-forces are still in their infancy". Sampson therefore falls back on his earlier argument that it is "only parliament and the electoral system that can represent the real interests of ordinary people against the bastions of privilege and call the ruling powers to account". (p. 364) This after having identified the alienation of the vast majority of the population from parliament, as a result of growing social divisions!

The whiff of nostalgia permeates Sampson's book. He complains that in the Britain he surveys at the turn of the twenty-first century that," I find it hard to recognize it as belonging to the British democratic tradition, with its small clusters of self enclosed, self-serving groups on the peaks and the populace on the plains below". (p. 366)

All in all, whilst Sampson's book is interesting in parts, it is a largely ineffectual work, that does little to really expose the real relations of power in Britain, and even less to indicate a way forward for those seeking to challenge the undermining of democratic rights. He appeals for a return to some type of class compromise. But such a perspective is as futile as it is reactionary. Today in the face of a ruling elite "who run this place" solely on the basis of the accumulation of vast wealth, of unprecedented social inequality and the continued eradication of the social consensus that has existed for decades, what is required is that the working class pursues the class struggle with the same determination and vigour as the bourgeoisie—on the basis of a socialist perspective and the construction of a genuine socialist party.

Concluded

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site