

Anthony Sampson surveys a transformed Britain 40 years on

Part one

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

The following is the first of a two-part review.

British journalist and author Anthony Sampson's new book, *Who Runs This Place? The Anatomy of Britain in the 21st Century*, is a revisit to territory he first surveyed more than 40 years ago.

In 1962, Sampson published a best-selling work entitled *The Anatomy of Britain* in which he depicted the various elements of the British "establishment"—a term first popularised in the book—and institutions as a set of intersecting circles. He listed some 30 such circles, including the monarchy, prime minister, Whitehall, industry and the civil service, and concluded that there was "no single dominating centre." He has periodically updated his *Anatomy*. In 1973 he wrote *The New Anatomy of Britain*, in 1982 the *Changing Anatomy of Britain* and in 1993 he updated his work with the book *The Essential Anatomy of Britain: Democracy in Crisis*.

Among Sampson's other works is his authorised biography of Nelson Mandela and other works on the oil industry, the banking system, the arms trade, the European Community and its impact on Britain, and a work on inequality between nations.

Sampson is a lifelong liberal. Beginning his career as a journalist in South Africa, he became editor of the magazine *Drum* in Johannesburg in 1951. The magazine became the leading black literary and political periodical in South Africa, and he established close ties with prominent black political figures such as Mandela and Walter Sisulu. Following his spell in Africa, he returned to Britain and joined the *Observer* newspaper as assistant editor. He later became chairman of the Society of Authors and a member of the Scott Trust, which owns the *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers. He was a founder member of the Social Democratic Party, a right-wing breakaway from the Labour Party formed in 1980.

In the preface of *Who Runs This Place?* he describes himself as an "independent and inquisitive journalist" who wishes to "offer some clues and insights into the workings of Britain at a time of still greater flux and potential danger and that it may be helpful to those who feel themselves baffled by or excluded from the citadels of power" (p. xi).

Sampson makes clear that he considers Britain to be in an unprecedented and dangerous political situation, in which the population at large is disenfranchised from the old British institutions and the ruling elite.

This extreme social and political polarisation is a running theme in the pages of *Who Runs this Place?* as he laments the loss or weakening of virtually all the "checks and balances" that had existed

previously. He writes, almost in bewilderment, "Revisiting some of the seats of power after 40 years, I have felt like a Rip Van Winkle waking up after a revolution. No one now talks about the ruling class. The dukes and earls have been sent packing from the House of Lords. The royals are presented as a soap opera about dysfunctional divorcees and the garden of Buckingham Palace is a venue for pop groups" (p. 343).

While in his initial 1962 treatment of the subject, he was more or less simply documenting the various institutions and workings of the British ruling class, 40 years on he is acutely aware that the political landscape has changed fundamentally, requiring a somewhat more critical standpoint on his part.

In this light, Sampson is keen to point out that the election of the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair, the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, and the Iraq war and its aftermath, were turning points in the atrophying of democratic rights in Britain.

He writes, "Within the financial and industrial world, too, the power was becoming more concentrated, as shareholders or pension-holders proved unable to control the people who looked after their money. The twin peaks of power—political and financial—seemed still more cut off from the rest of the population. And the limitations of British democracy appeared more starkly after 11 September 2001, when British foreign policy and defence became more closely dependent on Washington, and the fear of terrorism strengthened the hands of all governments" (p. x).

In each of the chapters in his book, Sampson describes the "interlocking central circles of power," in an attempt to "pursue the will-o'-the-wisp through contemporary Britain, to try to locate the sources of real power and see if it can be controlled" (p. 1).

Each of the chapters includes a who's who of the various institutions, their make-up and their chairmen/CEOs/cabinet secretaries/director generals, etc. While Sampson is able to describe—in often monotonous detail—some of the inner workings of institutions and gives a potted history of their background, his judgments and conclusions are clouded by his fondness for what he regards as a bygone era.

In his outlook towards parliament, the media and the armed forces in particular, one feels that he yearns more than anything for a return to the "values" and order of the earlier decades of the twentieth century. On one occasion, he asks wistfully, "What has happened to the archetypal English hero of my childhood, the strong, silent man with the stiff upper lip?" (p. 345).

Sampson is rightly concerned with the diminution of democratic rights and is scathing towards the low political and intellectual calibre of many MPs, of which he regards Blair as the epitome.

“When Tony Blair achieved power in 1997 he had risen largely outside Parliament, appealing directly to voters with the help of focus groups, opinion polls and the mass media.”

He continues, “When Blair postponed the General Election by a month in 2001, he told the *Sun* and the BBC before he told MPs. And in 2002 he even leaked the Queen’s Speech to the *Observer*” (p. 5).

We are meant to believe, however, that parliament itself is largely undamaged.

Parliament, Sampson writes, “Despite the distrust of the public, the contempt of the media and the disdain of the government is still indispensable at a time of national crisis.... And its members, for all their failings, can still represent the people more effectively than anyone else” (p. 14).

Sampson attempts to bolster his argument by referring to the parliamentary “rebellion” during the run-up to the war in Iraq, which he describes as “passionate” and more gripping than that he had witnessed more than 40 years ago during debates on the Suez crisis.

Though a minority of MPs did cast votes against the government, the Blair government was still able to force through its pro-war agenda, winning the support of much of his own party and the opposition Conservatives. Still, Sampson claims that “however much Tony Blair might ignore and humiliate Parliament, he could not in the end govern without its approval” (p. 18).

Given that parliament overwhelmingly backed Blair despite widespread popular opposition, this hardly proves Sampson’s position that it is the guarantor of democratic rights. Moreover, parliament did so despite the fact that the war, as a pre-emptive war of aggression, was illegal under international law.

A central theme of the book is the increasing concentration of power into the hands of a few individuals and the growing unaccountability and authoritarianism of all aspects of the state over the past four decades. In analysing these changes, Sampson points to the role played by the previous Conservative governments following the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Thatcher pioneered co-opting businessmen directly into government positions and led a regime whose stated aim was to roll back the “frontiers of the state”.

Sampson explains that this process has continued apace under New Labour with every aspect of government now business-oriented. In the chapter entitled “Security V. accountability—the privatised spies,” Sampson reveals that “[t]he most upmarket private agency is Hakluyt, set up by Christopher James from MI6 to advise corporations and secure contracts and make deals in the developing world. Other private agencies are much shadier, including mysterious companies which constantly change their names and personnel, and which employ expatriate mercenary armies and individual thugs in lawless African countries to protect or smuggle minerals and diamonds” (p. 147).

Alongside the government’s pro-business agenda has been the accumulation of previously unheard-of levels of wealth in Britain by a small minority of super-rich. Sampson highlights the total economic and political separation of the ruling elite from the mass of the population. The author quotes Blair’s former leading adviser Peter Mandelson who famously said that New Labour is “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich.”

Sampson sums up this process of enrichment and the creation of a new stratum of financial oligarchs and their impact on society very

succinctly. Describing the new rich of the twenty-first century, he writes, is more akin to “the plutocrats of the Edwardian era a century earlier (p. 337).

Referring to the social reformist consensus that had dominated British politics throughout much of the twentieth century (Sampson himself dates this as the 76 years from 1914 to 1990), he writes that this now appears to be a “temporary aberration in Britain’s social history.” For an entire period, the rich were pushed somewhat onto the back foot, he writes, through a combination of higher taxes, “constant fears about socialism and communism,” and policies of national economic regulation.

In contrast, the “sudden expansion of the global market-place allowed investors to benefit from the world’s resources, on a scale which the Edwardians could only dream of....

“Today’s rich can detach themselves more thoroughly from the problems of their home country than the plutocrats of a century ago. Through air travel they can be much more mobile and disconnected from communities, as they fly between houses and hotels across the world, between gated estates or protected enclaves in Switzerland, the Caribbean or the Mediterranean. When they stay in England they can enjoy the comforts of English country houses in privacy, without long-term commitments to the large staffs or indoor servants or local communities.... They can separate themselves from the lives of ordinary people, while the gap between them widens. The new poor in Britain, the immigrants from Asia and Africa, can remain out of sight and out of mind” (p. 338).

Government has also been reshaped, with ministers and parties more dependent than ever on corporate backing, with the result that the centre of power has shifted away from parliament and towards the City of London.

Summing up the changes that have taken place in society’s physiognomy since the “old boys’ network” of his younger days, Sampson points out, “Today the elite looks much more unified, as a small number of familiar names keep reappearing in different disguises—whether as tycoons, trustees or patrons of public funds. Visiting Americans are surprised that most people they want to see can be found at a few clubs, dinner parties or gatherings in a few central London postal districts” (p. 355).

To be continued



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