

Geoff Mulgan meets the new Briton

# Outside Establishment



Andrew Neil has been the editor of *The Sunday Times* since 1983

**When you talk about the new Britain, you sound like a US Democrat: criticising the stuffy old Britain. Is America important to you?**

Yes, because I think America is more meritocratic. The key thing there is the plural. There's no single Establishment in America, so you haven't got that dominant, all-pervasive elite that this country still has, which has dragged us down for most of this century.

**Throughout the 80s, Mrs Thatcher seemed to have a modernising vision for Britain: she at last was going to sweep away the old Establishment. That project appears to have run into the sand. Has something gone wrong with the Right?**

The domestic agenda is as valid as ever; in fact she has a got a lot more to do on that to really bring competition and an enterprise spirit to this country. Where the agenda has gone off the rails is on the international scene: the West has won the cold war, thanks largely to Reagan and Thatcher. You need a new kind of foreign policy and defence structure to deal with what is going on now, and she shows very little sign of knowing what that should be.

**Part of your philosophy, probably more than Mrs Thatcher, is the idea of encouraging permanent innovation, permanent change. To what extent is there an end point, a moral sense of where we should be going?**

I don't have a strongly moral view. Coming from a Scottish Presbyterian background has given me a strong cultural way of looking at things.

**Is religion one of the traditions of the old Britain which needs to be swept away?**

Yes. I think the Church of England is of no relevance at all. It's always been to some extent the old Tory Party at prayer and now it is the chattering-class party at prayer. At the end of day religion has to stand for something, and I don't think the Church of England stands for anything.

**You could say that the cultural transformation of the Tory Party hasn't been completed: it remains so locked into the British Establishment that the post-Thatcher generation of leaders will revert back.**

That's why I'm not a Tory. I was, at university, but I am not active in Tory politics in any way. There are many things I do not like about the Tory Party. There are many things I do not like about Mrs Thatcher. I don't think editors should be party-political active.



As long as the Tories say they are going to develop a competitive market-based economy and are the party that believe in the defence of the country, then that is the party I would have *The Sunday Times* support.

**Do you see another party in Britain fulfilling that role?**

No. Although a lot of the younger members of the Labour front bench have got more in common with what I regard as the new Britain than most of the Tory Cabinet; people like Gordon Brown, Tony Blair and John Smith - although intellectually John Smith is still locked in the 70s. But I think they are more classless than, say, Kenneth Baker or Nigel Lawson.

**Can I ask about the 'chattering classes'? Why are they so important a part of your demonology?**

Well, they are important only in the sense that what they believe has a disproportionate influence in the country. They are still dominant in the media and among opinion-formers, and their values are still dominant. I think they have a baleful effect on Britain - partly because they are intellectually bankrupt now.

**What should the role of the intellectual be?**

The role of the intellectual should be constantly to come up with challenging ideas, questioning our society, but doing it within an intellectually coherent framework. What the British intellectual Left detest most of all is that they lost the arguments, domestically and internationally.

**But you criticised them in *The Sunday Times*, not for losing the argument, but actually just for being critical.**

Why I am very critical of the chattering class is firstly, they have had endless shots at me, so I don't see why I shouldn't be allowed to fire a blunderbuss back. At a more intellectual level, they have done no work in the 1980s at all to try to rebuild a credible left-wing analysis of a modern society. They are intellectually lazy.

**Can I ask about the overlap between your values and those of *The Sun*? In many ways they seem quite parallel: populist, anti-Establishment, a strong ideological tone. And yet *The Sun* goes somewhere which you don't, it is jingoistic, sexist, racist, militarist and all that. How would you describe that difference?**

I never really think of comparing my paper with *The Sun* because they've got different jobs to do. In terms of building a relatively classless enterprise society then *The Sun* and *The Sunday Times*

wouldn't have too many differences. But I think that is just about it. I mean, *The Sun* called for me to be put in the Tower of London after I published *Spycatcher*, so I don't think there was any common ground there!

Recently, *The Sunday Times* has come out in favour of living up to our obligations to the people of Hong Kong and essentially for Britain to have an open-borders policy for anybody who wants to come here. Now, that's not exactly *The Sun's* policy.

**After 10 years of Thatcherism why have the British people resisted a large part of the Thatcherite agenda?**

Because it involves making life tougher for people and this is a country of complacent paralysis. When I was writing in *The Economist* in the 1970s, the most sophisticated debate among the elite of this country was about how best to manage decline.

There is still a huge constituency for social spending in this country, but that doesn't necessarily conflict with what has to be done.

**Is that your own philosophy - a rigorous economic policy combined with a relatively generous social policy?**

Yes. You have a safety net below which nobody should be allowed to fall and a ladder on which anybody and everybody should be allowed to climb.

**And has the US failed in that respect?** Yes, partly because their social spending programmes, which are massive, are even more inefficiently handled than ours; and secondly, because America lets anybody in. You're always going to have poor people if you let anybody in.

**But that's what you're proposing for Britain.**

Yes, because I think that's why America will remain the dominant economic superpower in the next century. A heterogeneous, racially-mixed, ethnically-mixed country will be far superior, both culturally and economically, to a homogeneous country like Japan or Germany.

**It's a real irony that the Right's arguments about the market have prevailed just at the very point when the environmental movement has come along and called them all into question. There's now an assumption that capitalism is as much the problem as the solution, and it has to be constrained and controlled - by the state.**

**The state's done a very good job of controlling pollution in Eastern Europe...**

**Who else then?**

When Adam Smith wrote his *Wealth Of Nations* he envisaged a major govern-

ment role in trustbusting and anti-monopoly measures. The modern equivalent is a role for government in the environment. The question is, how do you do it? By physical controls, or do you try as much as possible to use the market mechanism?

If you look at nearly all the major problems that still face Britain domestically, a dose of market competition would change things enormously. Take education. I don't believe we need more funds to be poured into state schools, we need a system of state schools which allows parents to have a choice within it, so schools compete against each other for excellence.

The Left made a great breakthrough when they realised the benefit of educational vouchers as a way of giving power to parents, and then said, 'we would do what the Right would never do - we would give poorer parents bigger vouchers, worth more'.

**And what do you think of that?**

Great! Because it would help to compensate for the fact that these poorer parents will have other difficulties. Of course give them bigger vouchers. I think this is where I would join forces with the Left.

**Do you see yourself as the equivalent of a politician when it comes to press standards of treatment of people in public life? Are you fair game?**

Yes. Public figures have very few rights to privacy. There seems to me a clear difference with someone who's never attempted to be a public figure. I don't think the press have got a right to walk around and start to duff up ordinary people - they have far greater rights to privacy.

**But if there isn't legal aid for libel...**

I don't think there should be legal aid. There should be an arbitration court for libel cases, with binding powers. Because most people, when they go for libel, are not after money; they are out to restore their integrity, or even just set the record straight. If we had an arbitration court of, say, three judges - in this country, maybe not! - but of three people whose judgment was widely respected, there could be a simple presentation on both sides. The court would have the power to force apologies and corrections and could make a token fine of maybe £10-£15,000, if the paper had behaved particularly badly. I think that would be a decent system.

**Backed by statute?**

Backed by statute.