

## **Is there a 'political class'?**

**Scott Newton**

**I**t has become fashionable to argue that Britain is in the grip of its own 'political class'. Most recently the idea has been promulgated by Peter Osborne, in his 2007 book, *The Triumph of the Political Class*. I have been sceptical about this, remembering the dominance of Oxbridge-educated elites in British politics during the 1960s and 1970s when I was a young man. Recently, however, I changed my mind. The key moment for me was an MA dissertation by a student of mine, on the impact of the 1979 Brandt Report (*North-South: a programme for survival*) on politics in the UK.

I thought I remembered this quite well; but had forgotten what my student's research showed, which was the public reception of this document – it was massively favourable and stimulated real interest and activity throughout 'Big Society'. Yet it was shelved, indeed marginalised by Mrs Thatcher, who, along with President Reagan, successfully pushed the advanced industrial states to take the free market rather than the Keynesian approach to global development advocated by Brandt. The new line, the foundation of what later became known as the Washington Consensus, was announced at the 1981 Cancun summit.

Reading this and noting the very considerable support shown for Brandt in the opinion polls at the time (well in excess of 50%) it occurred to me that this may have been the first, but certainly not the last time, when politicians ignored popular sentiment and went their own way. The Thatcher government's commitment to a free market political economy, it is true, was modified in practice on a number of occasions in the 1980s – but never when a move away from it would have represented a fundamental shift of philosophy. And as far as

the question of international development was concerned the adoption of Brandt would have reflected just such a shift. For several years prior to 1979 the neo-liberals who clustered around Hayek and the Mont Pelerin group had been promoting the idea that foreign aid involved a waste of resources and that trade and the free market were the motors of economic development for the developing world. Moreover, overseas aid (they said) too often put money in the pockets of socialist politicians who were (by definition) corrupt and incompetent. Brandt's recommendations, if implemented, would mean a continuation of this process but now was the time to walk away from that kind of interventionism, not retreat back into it. So the Brandt report gathered dust.

Since then we have seen a significant range of issues emerge where very large and organised numbers of private citizens and voluntary groups have taken one line, while governments have just ignored them and followed a different agenda entirely. There was the refusal to take Keynesian measures as the economy tanked in 1981-2; the repudiation of any compromise with the miners in 1984-5 (though I accept that Scargill made this much easier for the government); the determination not to build council houses which has marked every administration since Mrs Thatcher's; the poll tax (only repealed because Mrs Thatcher had been ejected); railway privatisation; the Iraq war; the constant 'reforms' to the NHS and education; the privatisation of the utilities and of the defence research industry; the PPP system for the London Tube; the introduction and now trebling of tuition fees – in complete contradiction of pledges made by the political parties responsible for implementing these decisions when they were fighting their corners at very recent General Elections.

I am sure we could all think of more examples. The point is that there was no consensus for any of these policies, which have together worked to transform the nature of British society in the last 30 years. More: just about every single one of these has been heavily opposed and not just by the people who worked in the industries and sectors affected but by a

broad coalition of citizens, unions, voluntary organisations and (at various times) political parties. These groups have been ignored, even when their warnings about likely disasters (as, for example with railway privatisation, the PPP for the Tube, the absence of affordable housing or the Iraq war) were timely and prescient. Their alternatives, often serious and costed, have been disregarded or marginalised, the proponents treated as subversive, deluded, unrealistic, etc etc.

This process does not strike me as part of the normal give and take of politics. It looks like the onward march of a particular agenda (neo-liberalism), promoted (and this is the point) by the inner core of all the major political parties, leaving no settled institutional outlet for opposition or the construction of alternative policies and strategies. The most telling example of this was the Liberal performance last year: having gone into the General Election on a Keynesian politico-economic platform some way to the left of the other two major parties, they appeared just a week after polling day in a Conservative-dominated coalition committed to an economic strategy which could have come from the 1920s; and which committed them to policies they had been deriding only a few days, let alone weeks, earlier. In a way their experience was a more vivid, concentrated and dramatic version of what happened to Labour after Neil Kinnock embraced the liberal rather than the social-democratic path to 'modernisation' after 1987.

Maybe the result of the 1979 election was the watershed here – a common observation – but not just in the sense that it brought about a shift in the British political economy. It also seems to have had some of the qualities of a *coup d'état*, in that since that time we have been unable to alter the trajectory of the state, economy and society, whose journey to the market order continues, frequently in the teeth of public opinion: the forms of democratic politics exist, but the reality of this has long gone because the ability of the people to affect genuine change in any direction except one (towards

*laissez-faire* capitalism) has been removed.

Who is conducting this operation? The modern state, like any before it, has its own set of administrators, politicians, bankers, police, journalists and broadcast media, and its own thinkers. These people seem to circulate within a particular kind of socio-political milieu which embraces think tanks, TV and radio, fashionable columnists, MPs and City types (there are not many from industry unless it is the big corporate and multinational such as BP; Lord Browne is a good example) .

They live in a world of centre-right politics, where the 'correct' positions are usually some compound of social and economic liberalism, and they reproduce themselves across the generations, with the children moving seamlessly from (usually) private school to university, to political intern/private office/journalism/BBC, to think tanks like Reform, Policy Exchange or the Centre for Policy Studies, or to polling organisations like YouGov, and thence to Parliament.

If they want to discuss a new policy or 'test' the effectiveness or popularity of another one, they just talk to each other, and so it goes on, round and round while the rest of us are ignored or reduced to the kind of mayhem we saw in London recently if we want to gain any kind of hearing. And the response of the authorities? Not to listen, not to compromise, not (to go back to my earlier phrase) to indulge in the give and take of politics, but instead to start talking about whether or not to use water cannon.

It seems to me that the state of British democracy now is as low as it has ever been, and that there is a case to be made for the existence of a self-referential and self-perpetuating political class at the heart of the state itself (look at the casual fiddling of expense claims as a surface indicator of this).

Where can one go from here? Onto the street, or into silence, exile and cunning?

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