

Bilderberg People: elite power and consensus in world affairs

Ian N. Richardson, Andrew P. Kakabadse, Nada K. Kakabadse
London: Routledge, 2011; 218 pages, notes, index; p/b,
£20.99

Twenty-two years after Denis Healey wrote about Bilderberg in his memoir *The Time of My Life*, the English-speaking academic world has finally produced something on the group. And with three authors, it does look a bit like safety in numbers.

This paperback version comes covered in praise received by the hardback edition. Ten years ago I doubt the book would have been published by any mainstream academic publisher; five years ago it would not have been so extravagantly overpraised.

This isn't a history of the organisation or even – directly, anyway – an attempt to evaluate its significance, although indirectly this is unavoidable. Using quotes from thirteen anonymous interviewees (and a few who have made on-the-record comments) the authors try to show what happens at Bilderberg meetings. Their account is similar to what we have learned from Healey, Paddy Ashdown and Will Hutton: politicians whom the multinational business community are likely to meet are given the once over; occasionally experts are brought in to elucidate particular subjects; and – mostly – the business community reaffirms its central beliefs; group think (we are clever, we are right) is reinforced. The authors note that people likely to disturb the group think are not invited.

As I read it I noted only the following sections:

'This is not a book about conspiracies. It is a book about efforts to organize the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century.' (p. 1)

'But the absence of a global regulatory framework, and the inability of global leaders to agree on anything resembling one during this period, has meant that individual governments have once again been left with

the prospect of regulating transnational corporations at their own economic expense – something they have consistently demonstrated is beyond them’. (p. 3)

‘This book suggests that elite networks, and the consensuses that are formed and disseminated by them, are a critical mechanism for resisting or facilitating change in world politics.’ (p. 7)

‘Recognizing the personal dimensions of elite membership enables us to move beyond a crude and inappropriate reading of power with such communities and, instead, allows us to understand better how bias is perpetrated and disseminated within, and beyond, the transnational elite network.’ (p. 13)

I also noted a retelling of the story, originally recounted by Jon Ronson in the *Guardian* in 1999, of how Mrs Thatcher was invited to the 1975 meeting and wowed a number of Americans who were there, which led to her being taken seriously and promoted in the US. That her simple-minded views made a good impression on the gathering may tell us a lot about those present; but she had already been spotted by the US embassy in London and had been given an extensive American tour in 1967 at US expense.¹

If the book’s contents are unexceptional, the interesting question is: why has it taken the academic world so long to get here? Two reasons come immediately to mind. The most obvious is that the interest taken by conspiracy theorists (mostly on the American right) in Bilderberg contaminated the subject for academics chiefly concerned with careers and

¹ Jon Ronson, ‘Who pulls the strings?’ <www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/mar/10/features.weekend>. Giles Scott-Smith’s account of the Thatcher trip, ‘“Her Rather Ambitious Washington Program”: Margaret Thatcher’s International Visitor Program Visit to the United States in 1967’, in *Contemporary British History*, Volume 17, Issue 4, 2003, is now behind a paywall at the publisher Taylor and Francis; but some of the correspondence with the State Department about the trip is available at <www.margareththatcher.org/document/84ED54F3F69E43E3A08F93D58D5F1904.pdf>.

professional status, and it has taken 20 years of dribs and drabs of information to persuade the academy to tiptoe into this territory. Second, I would guess that the economic crisis generated by the globalists' consensus, created and reinforced by forums like Bilderberg, has undermined the sense that these people know what they are doing and deserve to be left in peace.

I don't mean to sound too churlish about this book. It may tell us nothing we didn't know before – and little that wasn't in Peter Thompson's essay 'Bilderberg and the West' in Holly Sklar's *Trilateralism* in 1980 – but it is nonetheless welcome; as, to judge by the reviews of the hardback, is a growing interest among the academic community in the role of these elite management groups in this catastrophic globalised world.

A short article, stating the book's central claims, by one of its co-authors, Ian Richardson, is at <www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/ian-richardson/bilderberg-elite-membersh_b_894025.html?ir=UK>.

Robin Ramsay