

The Illusion of Democracy: Power and Secrecy

Part 18 of 'Elephants in the room' series

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Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#),
[USA](#)

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In 2003, millions of people protested against the invasion of Iraq. If Britain and the US had genuine democracies, where the views of ordinary people matter, the invasion, slaughter and torture in Iraq would not have happened. Our governments ignored the protests.(1) The decision-makers tend only to take notice of what ordinary people want if it does not interfere with their plans.

Too Much Power Concentrated In The Hands Of A Few Sociopaths

It has been widely recognised for many years that people can be corrupted by power. For this reason, genuine democracy requires a system of checks and balances so that no person or group has too much power. In theory, both the US and Britain have such a system. Law-makers in the US Congress and the British Parliament, together with the judges in the law courts, are supposed to be independent of top decision-makers (known as the executive). In practice these systems do not work very well. The executive appoints senior people in the judiciary, the police and the prosecution service, so these people are not really independent. The party system in both countries also makes it very difficult for politicians to operate independently from the executive.

Leaders in both countries surround themselves with a small group of advisers, leaving them isolated from the views of the mainstream population. In the UK this is sometimes called the Westminster bubble. Only a small number of people get direct access to information about what are called 'security' issues. In both the US and Britain we have small groups of people, such as presidents, prime ministers, their inner circles, together with senior bureaucrats in various government departments, with too much power and only limited ways of reining in that power. The US Congress is now little more than a rubber-stamp, and Parliament in Britain has been described as "God's Gift To Dictatorship".(2)

In the US, former President Bush introduced the Patriot and Homeland Security Acts. These created new laws that gave the President almost unlimited powers should he declare an emergency.(3) Presidents Obama and Trump have been no better. Obama's early record was summarised in 2009 as follows:

"Obama continued with war in Afghanistan, built military bases there, and increased the scale of attacks in Pakistan...He excused torture... and demanded more secret government. He has kept at least 17,000 prisoners beyond the reach of justice. His lawyers won an appeal that ruled Guantanamo Bay prisoners were not 'persons', and therefore had no right not to be tortured...The nation's economy is still being run by the same fraudsters who

destroyed it.”(4)

Gradual changes in the UK have given more power to ministers (among the most senior decision-makers) whilst by-passing Parliament, with new laws in 2004(5) and 2006, one of which was nicknamed the ‘abolition of parliament’ bill.(6) When he was Prime Minister, Tony Blair made decisions on invading Iraq, buying more nuclear weapons (Trident), and stealthily privatising parts of the health service without taking any account of public opinion. The recent coronavirus pandemic has given the British and US governments an excuse to introduce even more extreme laws, with the human rights organization Liberty describing them as “the biggest restriction on our freedom in a generation.”(7)

The Political System Rewards the Most Insane People

Tony Blair, Boris Johnson, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton have all been described as pathological liars or confidence tricksters. They have also been described by psychologists as showing signs of extreme personality disorders, such as psychopathy and narcissism.(8) If a psychologist were to examine our foreign policies, they would conclude that the people who make key foreign policy decisions in the Britain and the US are, literally, insane. Not in the sense of being illogical, but in the sense of being sociopaths – making decisions that lead to the deaths of huge numbers of people overseas, so they can control resources and trade. This is not an exaggeration. If our leaders worked in any other job and they wanted to destroy multiple countries and kill people, they would be sent to a psychiatrist. If the psychiatrist believed they might act upon their beliefs, they would be locked up in order to protect others. We have psychological screening for some jobs, such as the police, but there is no screening of that type for world leaders.

Lack of Accountability

Governments pretend to take accountability seriously by holding occasional inquiries into government conduct, but the important inquiries in both Britain and the US in recent years have been smokescreens to protect important people. The US commission report into the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, and the Hutton inquiry in Britain regarding topics related to the Iraq war both deliberately ignored some of the key issues that should have been investigated.(9) A 2019 inquiry into the counter-terrorism strategy known as ‘Prevent’ was labeled a whitewash after the man appointed to lead it described it as “completely unnecessary”.(10) When the UK Serious Fraud Office tried to investigate corruption during weapons sales from British Aerospace (BAe) to Saudi Arabia, the British government stopped the investigation as it did not want its former crimes to come to light.(11) It also turned out that the Labour party held shares in BAe, which is a clear conflict of interest, as their wealth would be affected by an enquiry into BAe.(12)

Advanced societies have created complex systems for dealing with the most trivial crimes, yet if governments commit mass murder in other countries, they are currently able to evade the law. The top decision-makers are almost unaccountable. It is widely accepted that President Bush and Prime Minister Blair carried out an illegal war that destroyed Iraq, but they have never been charged with those crimes. President Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron destroyed Libya,(13) but the media do not even discuss that as a crime. The police, the judiciary, and the prosecutors have made no effort to hold these people to account.

The Deep State

In 2014, a former US government insider named Mike Lofgren wrote an article entitled 'Anatomy of the Deep State'.(14) He explained that a great deal of political decision-making does not take place within the visible political system (by visible I mean Congress in the US and Parliament in the UK). A network of senior bureaucrats in the most important government departments, together with lobbyists, intelligence agencies, think tanks, the military, and big companies (particularly banking, IT, energy, food, and Private Military Contractors) is actively influencing political decisions behind the scenes, with no scrutiny or oversight. We have discussed some aspects of this in previous posts, but the combined effects of these activities creates what some people describe as 'a state within a state'. Politicians come and go, but the senior bureaucrats who run departments are there for much of their careers. Various people who have experience within the British government have commented about the existing bureaucracy blocking attempts at reform.(15)

Lofgren summarises the two main purposes of the deep state as national security and corporate dominance. Politicians inevitably know less about many issues (such as the oil industry or foreign wars) than the specialists in government departments, or their corporate advisors. As Lofgren points out, if you say the word 'terrorism', most politicians quickly fall in line to support whatever policy the intelligence agencies or police are demanding. This appears to be just as true in Britain as it is in the US.(16)

Secrets and Lies

The US and British Governments have a long history of being very secretive. Both governments have Freedom of Information laws (known as FOIA) that should enable ordinary people to find out what governments are doing. In practice, exemptions allow senior politicians and other decision-makers to continue to act in secret.(17) In the US, the Bush government (2001–2009) introduced new categories of 'sensitive' information, which do not have to be disclosed; it had a \$50 billion 'black' budget that was not discussed by Congress; and it undertook a huge amount of spying under supposed anti-terrorism laws known as the Patriot Act.(18)

Until recently, Britain had laws that allowed the government to keep things secret for 30 years. This is gradually decreasing to 20 years. However, the British government has always tried to keep some things secret for much longer. A good example of this was 'Operation Legacy',(19) where the government tried to hide the documentation describing their worst crimes during the colonial era. An immense collection of files from various colonies was flown back to the UK to be hidden indefinitely. Even when information was legally required during court cases, the authorities illegally tried to claim the data did not exist. Eventually when some documents were discovered, the government was forced to admit the existence of the rest.

We have seen many examples recently where later evidence has shown that senior politicians deliberately lied about war and torture. There are countless examples of US Presidents saying "We want peace" as they ordered their bombers to drop thousands of tons of bombs on other countries.(20) Clearly these are not people who believe in ideas such as truth, honesty or transparency in government.

Official Secrets and National Security are (mostly) propaganda

The quantity of secret information published by Wikileaks shows that far too much

government activity is still kept hidden from scrutiny. This information, revealing widespread crimes by our governments, would still be secret if it had not been exposed by whistleblowers. Edward Snowden revealed that the US NSA (National Security Agency) was carrying out an illegal global spying program, where they are able to store all electronic communication from most computers and phones, even when the phone is turned off. This was done in collaboration with the British spy agency GCHQ. It is now accepted that GCHQ's activities are illegal, but they are continuing to spy on everyone anyway.(21)

The idea that governments should be able to keep lots of information secret almost indefinitely is not supportable in a genuine democracy. Examinations of the declassified files relating to wars and other foreign policies have shown that 'official secrets' and 'national security' are often used to hide the crimes and unethical activities of officials.(22) In the US, one senior insider admitted that:

“there is massive over-classification... the principal concern of the classifiers is not with national security, but with governmental embarrassment of one sort or another...There may be some basis for short-term classification while plans are being made, or negotiations are going on, but apart from details of weapons systems, there is very rarely any real risk to current national security from the publication of facts relating to transactions in the past, even the fairly recent past.”(23)

In a genuine democracy, the default position should be for complete transparency and accountability. Governments should not keep secrets from the public, and should not have any reason to want to.(24) Governments should exist solely as tools for the people. Everything should be available to the public so that it can be scrutinised, questioned and challenged. Only in very limited circumstances should anything be kept secret.

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Rod Driver is a part-time academic who is particularly interested in de-bunking modern-day US and British propaganda. This is the eighteenth in a series entitled *Elephants In The Room*, which attempts to provide a beginners guide to understanding what's really going on in relation to war, terrorism, economics and poverty, without the nonsense in the mainstream media.

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