

# The Long Story: The British Establishment

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*There have been stages in British history when the Establishment, a term popularised by Henry Fairlie in the 1950s, has come in for some rough treatment, if only in cranky press columns. Structurally speaking, the Establishment – that group of individuals whose role is merely to influence others by means of the Oxbridge common room deal – remains relevant, even if it remains an unhealthy sore of British tradition.*

Recently, the establishment, if it passes for that, has come in for another round of punishment given the resignation of London's Lord Mayor Fiona Woolf as head of the Government's child sex abuse inquiry. It is said that she had links to Lord Leon Brittan, who, as Tory Home Secretary in the 1980s, failed to act on a dossier of paedophilia allegations.[1] In her words, such "negative comment and innuendo" based on mere "perceptions" were the reasons cited for the resignation.

This brings the number of resignations for a perceived conflict of interest in the same position to two, with Baroness Butler-Sloss quitting because her late brother Sir Michael Havers was attorney-general during the Thatcher years. The Establishment face-off with efforts to unmask paedophilia continues.

Such conflicts are the stuff of tired institutions, notably those seemingly beyond reform. When Prime Minister John Major implemented his disastrous "Back to Basics" campaign, one which emphasised traditional values which were promptly ignored in both bedroom and home, Martin Jacques would write in the *Sunday Times* (Jan 16, 1994) that it was a "parable about the state of our nation." British society was "embarrassed by its own radicalism", having "no language in which to express it properly." Institutions had been left stranded, and the past a poor substitute to articulate matters relevant to the present.

All that, however, hardly matters. The establishment continues to prove infuriating with rituals, which possess an almost byzantine quality. They are protected by the media, which is very much attuned to the protocols of establishment discretion. Sources are often anonymous, with the information cycle and resulting decisions, being controlled by "credible" links. These remain hidden. People are shrouded, tracks covered. It was this point that Fairlie noted in writing about the defection of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean to the Soviet Union, both of the Cambridge Five set who, ironically, worked within the establishment against itself. But old boys always remain old boys, even if they piddle in the ponds of their upbringing.

Fairlie's own description of the establishment was one featuring both "the centres of official power" and "the whole matrix of official and social relations within which such power is exercised." Notably here, the exercise of that power is based on those "subtle social relationships" with links, connections, engagement.

Owen Jones, in the latest book on the same subject, prefers to see the establishment as a network of “powerful groups that need to protect their position in a democracy in which almost the entire adult population has the right to vote.”[2] Establishment thinking is corrupted by its own assumptions – it rejects the state but thrives on its complicity and assistance, be it rights and protections of private property, vast subsidies, bailouts, a form of “socialism for the rich”.

But the new establishment wealth is what bothers such individuals as Martin Amis, unhappy that money has gotten the better of Britain, creeping along the class lines and then liquidating them like an asphyxiating fig tree. “Money has won.”[3] The host has been strangled – class Britain has become moneyed Britain. This is not merely some grumpy snipe – Britain has changed. The Thatcherite misfits have become the tenured Blairites, who have become the drunk Cameroonians dealing in disingenuous notions of shrinking the state. This is a crude Britain, but it hardly suggests a more egalitarian one. The new billionaires are stalking the land, modern oligoi who have taken all and sundry under the direction of the law. Some of the Tory toffs are struggling to keep up.

All societies tend towards elites of some sort, even as they deny they are doing so. “The idea of the establishment survives more in the aspiration to show defiance than the craving to belong,” argues Rafael Behr in *The New Statesman* (8-14 Feb, 2013). This is not necessarily a healthy thing, but it need not be an unhealthy one. As Jacques himself noted, such an elite needs to work according to forms of “openness and porousness”. Those in power should be accountable. It should be wielded with a degree of transparency. Breaches of that trust should be punished.

Such visions remain impaired, more by structural features such as the continued dominance of elite universities that feed Whitehall and City, and the sideways movement of state privatisation. The establishment has become outsourced and very much a creature of market principles. The People’s Army of UKIP, for that reason, are a bubbling menace for it, dragging away support with its truculent populism. UKIP’s victory at Clacton-on-Sea, and close calls at Heywood and Middleton, are giving the Tories blushes and headaches. In some parts of the country, they also risk doing the same to Labour.

The pub, rather than Parliament, has tended to be the great leveller. It is something UKIP’s leader, Nigel Farage knows all too well. The pint at the bar with the ‘common folk’ implies precisely that, an undermining of the threads of hierarchical relations with chummy familiarity and engagement. Common is not establishment, a sort of nervous rejection about the same people who just might vote for the same party. That is the exercise of power by social relations of a different sort, with people Prime Minister David Cameron all too prematurely termed “fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists”.

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## Notes

[1] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/11202624/Questions-for-Theresa-May-as--Fiona-Woolf-resigns.html>

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/26/the-establishment-uncovered-how--power-works-in-britain-elites-stranglehold>

[3]<http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9163651/a-buyers-guide-to-the-british-establishment/>

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