

The Twentieth Century symposium
WHO GOVERNS BRITAIN ?
appeared in the same month as
THE INSIDERS. It is reviewed
here by RALPH MILLIBAND.

Who Governs Britain?

THE question itself has a faintly subversive ring. There lurks a disturbing assumption behind it that things aren't what they seem, that the obvious answers—everybody, the people, the Queen-in-Parliament, the Cabinet—will not do; as indeed they won't. That *The Twentieth Century*¹ should have devoted a special number to the question at all may well be another sign that, after a long spell of social and political myth-making, the search for reality is on again.

To ask *Who Governs Britain* is to ask who has power, who runs the show, who makes the really important decisions, who determines the course of national affairs, who decides how the rest of us are going to live, and whether some or all of us are going to die.

Three of *The Twentieth Century* essayists, Alan Taylor, Philip Toynbee and L. P. Hartley agree that there is a Power Elite in Britain, which they respectively describe as THE THING, "the governing class" (by which Mr. Toynbee means "a hereditary but an absorbent upper class"), and the "inevitable oligarchy". I think Mr. Toynbee's emphasis is wrong but his essay, which is the best of the lot, does at least address itself to the problem. Both Mr. Taylor and Hr. Hartley dwell in the realm of unlocated generalities.

The rest of the essayists are concrete enough, but they are not writing about the power elite at all, which is a serious drawback. What they are writing about is all the people, groups and organisations who do wield some kind of power in our society, which obscures the issue and defeats the purpose of the inquiry. For we all do wield *some* power, we all have *some* influence as electors, teachers, journalists, technicians, lobbyists, preachers, trade unions officials or chess club secretaries. The point is that this isn't the kind of power which, is wielded by the power elite. (That, incidentally, was one of the main themes of C. Wright Mills' *magnum opus* on the American Power Elite. It might have saved a lot of confusion if the Editors of *The Twentieth Century* had circulated a copy of Mills' book to the contributors, with strict instructions to study it, instead of including an absurd review of the book by Miss Mariorie Bremner at the tail-end of this special number.)

The question who wields real power in Britain cannot be answered unless we first try to locate the *sources* of power in our society. Without some idea of what these are, we are lost in a fog of confusing and conflicting impressions.

Now the sources of power in our society are economic, social and political. Let's look at each in turn.

Economic power has always rested with those people who owned and controlled property, and ownership and control used to be pretty well synonymous. Over the last decade or so, we have been told until we are sick of hearing it that ownership and control are now DIVORCED, and that economic decisions now rest with the controllers, and not with the owners of property. The question is one which badly requires detailed research before anything like a full picture emerges. Yet, on the basis of the evidence available, it seems that even the decree *nisi* is still a fair way off. The chairman and directors of the 500 odd largest concerns in the country certainly don't own the major part of the shares of those concerns; but most of them own a certain amount. A small number of large shareholders must be distinguished from a vast number of small shareholders. Many of the chairmen and directors of the major concerns will be found among the former.

In any case, whatever obscurity there may be about the precise relationship of ownership to control, none would deny the fact of concentration in British economic life, nor that a relatively small number of people (say under ten thousand) do effectively control, if they do not own, the largest and most important part of Britain's economic resources. These are the people who sit on the boards of the industrial giants, the joint stock and private banks, the insurance and investment trusts and who hold scores of directorships in a variety of companies. Many of them, as is shown in another article in this issue, hold positions of power on the boards of the nationalised industries. And it is also among them that are to be found many of the members of a multitude of State agencies concerned with economic affairs, whether the Government is Conservative or Labour. (See e.g., Rogow and Shore, *The Labour Government and British Industry*, 1945-51, Appendices I and II, pp. 189-190.)

This is Britain's economic power elite. Its members may be devoted husbands and kind fathers, patrons of the arts, regular churchgoers and generous donors to charity. But what is important about them is that they hold power of a kind which no technician or scientist employed by them holds. And it is enough to set their power alongside the power of those whom Miss Jenny Nasmyth calls dons and gadflies (professors and

publicists) to realise that the comparison is just silly. As a Professor of Moral Philosophy, Sir Oliver Franks may have been a man of some influence; as the Chairman of Lloyd's Bank, he is a man of power. As the leading barrister of the day, Sir Hartley Shawcross may have been on the fringe of the power elite; as a member of the board of Shell and Ford's, he is right in it. And comparison of the power of the economic power elite and the influence of trade union leaders on economic life suggests that those leaders are scarcely less outsiders than the rest of us, all hysterical affirmations to the contrary notwithstanding.

We know far too little of the social origin and educational background of the economic power elite. What we do know suggests that its members are mainly drawn from the traditional middle and upper classes, with a sprinkling of representatives from the professional classes and some who started lower down the scale. Not, in other words, an hereditary elite; only semi-hereditary.

Which brings me to the social elite. It would be odd indeed if economic power, with the wealth and prestige it provides, was not also the source of a great deal of social power. And of course it is. Though not exclusively. Unlike the United States, this country has retained and nurtured an aristocratic, patrician tradition which has powerfully contributed to the image of what a ruling class ought to be like and how it ought to behave. The aristocrats have educated their masters. Until a hundred or so years ago the aristocracy was a distinctive and exclusive social elite alternative to and competing with the *nouveaux riches* of the world of industry and commerce. By a slow process of mutual absorption, the two elites have come to be one. Plutocrats have been absorbed into the aristocracy; and the aristocracy has gone into business. The former have supplied the cash; the latter the *cachet*. Together, united, intertwined, highly class-conscious, they constitute Britain's social and economic power elite. Its members belong to the same exclusive clubs, meet at the same country houses, take their holidays in the same exclusive resorts, meet at the same banquets, and send their children to the same exclusive schools. And it is also from their ranks that are recruited the Queen's courtiers and the Palace entourage. The men around the Throne are not only tweedy, decadent backwoods aristocrats. They are men of affairs, at home in the City,

in the world of industry and money-lending.

What about political power? The centre of political power in Britain is the Cabinet. But who is the Cabinet? When a Conservative Government is in office, even the most superficial analysis will immediately show that the Cabinet is dominated by members of the pluto-aristocracy. Outsiders no doubt do from time to time worm their way into the charmed circle. They do not alter the pattern. Economic and social power naturally spills over into political power.

And not only in the Cabinet. It is from the same social class that the majority of Tories in the House of Commons is drawn; its members have an overwhelming majority in the House of Lords. Nor, as a class, are they exactly under-represented in the top echelons of the Civil Service, the Judiciary, the Army or the Church. Who can doubt that the tone of these institutions is set by the common assumptions their leading members share with the pluto-aristocracy at large? And it is surely worth remembering that the power they do hold is undisturbed by the vagaries of universal suffrage. Which ever party is returned in a general election, they stay where they are.

That is why I think that Mr. Toynbee exaggerates somewhat when he suggests that the political power of the governing class was genuinely suspended between 1945 and 1951. The pluto-aristocracy was expelled from the centre of political power; what it retained was not unsubstantial.

Mr. Toynbee also suggests that, whatever happened to its political power in those years, its social (and for that matter its economic) power was almost untouched. And this is obviously true. For, despite the prodigious amount of bitching which filled the air during the Attlee Terror, the social and economic elite was not dislodged from the commanding height it occupied, nor were the sources

of its power seriously tampered with. No Labour Government has tried even to embark on *that* enterprise. It would be interesting to see what would happen if one did.

What the Labour Government of 1945-51 did try and do was to humanise the consequences of Britain's economic and social system; and, within well defined limits, it achieved a good deal in that direction. That, and not the achievement of a socialist society, has been the traditional role of the Labour movement even since the fifties of last century. It has forced the governing class to make concessions, even important concessions to the democracy; in the process, it has certainly reduced the yawning abyss that separates the great US from the few THEM. Only our new Socialist thinkers mistake that measure of success for the genuine article. In fact, there is a real sense in which that measure of success has been the condition for the perpetuation of the traditional power elite. It is still the old ransom of which Jo. Chamberlain spoke, only the price is now higher.

The truth is that both Conservative and Labour Governments have made it their prime task to administer the system which gives the pluto-aristocracy its power. That is the basis upon which our internal affairs are run. And our external affairs too. Neither party wishes to go outside the framework of that system. The Conservatives have no reason to, since they believe in it and its values; Labour has no heart to, because it is either frightened by or does not believe in or is not aware of, the alternative.

It is within that framework that the democratic dialogue, of which William Pickles writes in a brilliant essay, is conducted. It is within it that Professor Finer's lobbyists, Professor Miller's local councillors, Mr. Beavan's press, and even Mr. Allen's trade unionists, carry on

their diverse activities. And it is within it too that the House of Commons goes about its business of ventilating grievances and pulling at the sleeve of the Government.

Not that the issues involved are unimportant. On the contrary they do affect the lives of masses of people. But they do not affect, to any serious degree, either the existence or the real power of the pluto-aristocracy. When the smoke of battle has cleared, that elite is still there, unscathed and supremely confident. As indeed, why shouldn't it be? At least, so long as Mr. Dulles behaves.

That is why so much of the talk about greater opportunities for more people is so irrelevant to the issue of power. For what it means in this context is that a wider selection of people are now able to enter the power elite, or at least to gravitate on its fringes. That is only admirable and desirable if one believes in the legitimacy of this particular kind of power elite, or in a power elite at all.

And that is also why so much of the fire and thunder against "The Establishment" seems so synthetic. To misquote Tom Paine, it is too often a case of remembering the plumage, and forgetting the living bird. Eton and Harrow, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Royal Courtiers, the Royal Academy Banquet and Sir Ian Jacob are the plumage of the Establishment. Pluck some of its feathers, democratise the monarchy, have the Third Programme on twelve hours a day, abolish ITV and boil Sir Harold Nicholson in oil. The difference will be negligible. It will not dislodge the power elite. That is a task which demands more, much more than angry cries born of a self imposed isolation, and fated, sooner or later, more likely than not, to be muffled in the pluto-aristocratic embrace. It demands a special kind of commitment, the kind that will help to emancipate the Labour movement into a Socialist movement.

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