

Books

Reviews



The Establishment: and how they get away with it

By Owen Jones

Allen Lane, 325pp, £16.99



Don't be put off by the bowler hat on the cover of Owen Jones's *The Establishment*. Top civil servants are barely mentioned. There's little about aristocrats, only passing references to Oxbridge, and

nothing at all about fagging.

For Jones, author of the bestselling *Chavs*, it's not the old school tie but ideas that bind the "new Establishment" together: free markets, a minimal state, hyper-individualism and a sense of limitless entitlement. This amounts to a "common mentality which holds that those at the top deserve their power". If the Establishment had a motto, says Jones, it would be L'Oréal's slogan: "Because I'm worth it."

The right-wing blogger Guido Fawkes (AKA Paul Staines) calls this what it

is: plutocracy. In a slightly creepy, moustache-twirling contribution, he tells Jones that undermining politicians is about undermining democracy itself. "It suits my ideological game plan," he says. "Democracy always leads to... those who don't have [taking] from those who do have."

Fawkes, says Jones, is one of the Establishment 'outriders' – people who pose as dissidents while working to shift mainstream thinking towards Establishment ideology. Jones traces their origins back to Switzerland in 1947, where a group of right-wing thinkers and economists (my distinction is deliberate) met to plot the ideological fightback against post-war social democracy.

Jones's assault on this ideology is clear, well-argued and passionate, but it's not clear why he needs to shoehorn it into an awkward, institutional concept like "the Establishment" – especially as trying to pin down who's in and who's out causes him so much trouble.

The book abounds with people from Establishment institutions – economists, senior police officers, journalists, even some Tory MPs

and bankers – who are critical of this dominant ideology. Often the evidence Jones uses to expose how it has corrupted British public life comes from the same institutions supposedly in its merciless grip. And he can't decide whether the "libertarian" ideas espoused by many working-class Tories and UKIP supporters constitutes Establishment thinking or not.

For example, Jones says that allegations of left-wing bias are "a way of controlling the BBC". But that would be unnecessary if the corporation was the "consistent platform for Establishment perspectives" that he describes. In fact, there is plenty on the BBC – comedy, drama and current affairs – which challenges free-market ideology, as well as plenty that doesn't. Jones's claims about a uniform BBC political ideology are simply wrong.

Jones is excellent on how corporate interests have manipulated the state for their own ends, sucking up lucrative Government contracts while simultaneously avoiding tax. His account, for example, of how A4e milked taxpayers for hundreds of millions of pounds, hugely enriching its founder Emma Harrison in the process (staff even nicknamed the firm "All for Emma"), while providing an abysmal service to jobseekers, is devastating even if not exactly news.

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Ferocious attacks from Amazon users and some right-wing hacks ludicrously cite Jones's left-wing politics – and Oxford education – as reasons not to read a left-wing book. But few put up much defence against the facts as he lays them out. More balanced critics point out that what Jones describes is not an establishment but a consensus. But that doesn't mean it isn't a rotten one. Or that it cannot be changed.

Reviewed by Craig Ryan