

# The Establishment - and how they get away with it.

Owen Jones (2014) Penguin

This book is already a bestseller, so how is it relevant to the NHS and why read it?

**The NHS features throughout the book, which more broadly describes the rise of the neoliberal agenda or “markets as the answer to everything” and how this works in the interests of a corporate and individual elite.**

As a set of crazy ideas from extremists on the right, it has moved to its current broad acceptance across the political spectrum, resulting, as Jones tells us, in Mrs Thatcher's triumphant statement in 2002 that “Our greatest achievement was Tony Blair.”

The book explores specific groups eg politicians, the media, the police, involved in this transition and the symbiosis between key players for example, as Jones points out, the passage of the Health and Social Care Bill

*“When it finally passed into law, news bulletins declared ‘Bill Which Gives Powers to GPs Passes’ – a government spin on the legislation strongly disputed by organisations representing NHS workers, including the British Medical Association that represents GPs themselves ... As the government transformed a popularly loved national institution without seeking consent first, the BBC acted like its press office”*

and resulted in the retiring head of the NHS Sir David Nicholson complaining to MPs that, as a consequence, “we are bogged down in a morass of competition laws”.

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But do not think this book is just a series of such assertions.

As its power lies in the continual production of evidence to support its argument, what he also shows is why and how this has been allowed to happen, so if you are bemused and bewildered by

recent events, be it the election in May or the Labour leadership contest, this book will provide insights to startle you.

While much of the book's content confirms what we know already (especially if like me you have been reading [nhsManagers.net](http://nhsManagers.net) regularly), it does so with cogent and insightful evidence and analysis, and insights from interviews he has undertaken with big players courtesy of his insider/outsider status as a left wing graduate from Oxford University.

Its reach into recent history shines a light on the centres of power and how the

neoliberal agenda has been formed and reformed, to devastating effect, for example the role of management consultants in shaping policy to their clients advantages, during their civil service exchange programmes.

But perhaps most disturbing is the relentless ideology that has been enacted from what Jones calls the “outriders” or extremists.

In politics of left and right, the media, the police we see how the mood has been built to accept the unhealthy relationships that now exist with business to ensure what he describes as the profit of the few at the expense of the many.

This is distressingly exemplified by his description of how public funds are servicing the rich at the expense of the taxpayer in every conceivable way, whether through PFI, which led to a £1.5 billion bail-out of hospitals by government in 2012 while the profits were retained by privateers, or the earlier development of private diagnostic and treatment centres at an 11% increased cost per operation than the NHS receives, not to mention more recent events such as the bailout of contracts at Hinchingsbrooke and elsewhere *BMJ* 2014;349:g5726.

Privatization as Owen tells us has become a form of corporate welfare, while public services and the NHS are stripped, and blamed for the recession, when all the evidence of malfeasance lies within the banking industry, the corporate sector and their friends in politics and the media.

So what of the NHS; well all we can say is that, in spite of all the national and international evidence, as the most successful nationalised health system, we are still told the market can better provide, but his question is for whom?

Trust in government to retain the NHS is lost, except for the cynical use of that word to describe our health institutions being prepared for sale. But maybe the changes in politics, the worst immigration crisis since 1945 and predictions of a far worse recession to come, will restore faith in public provision like the NHS as more appropriate than the market mantra, that is at least what Jones hopes communities will realise, and his polemic is a great start and a wakeup call to all those who think nothing can be done.

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