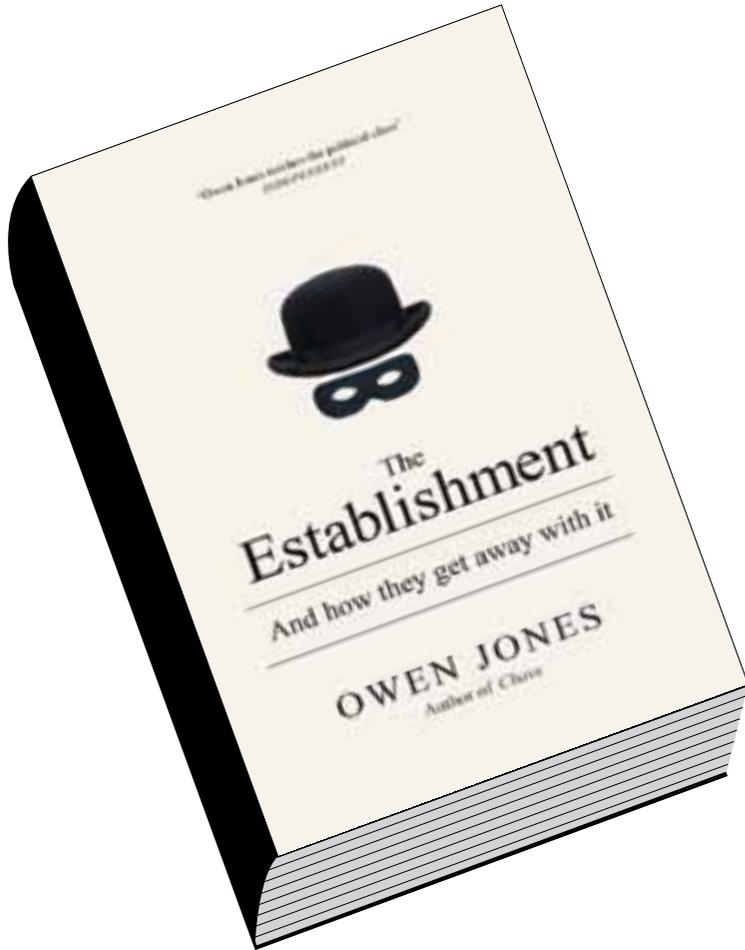


# Something rotten in the state

Corruption is rife and legal among those who hold the power in the UK, says Danny Dorling



**The Establishment:  
And How They Get Away With It**  
By Owen Jones  
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**B**e afraid. The message of Owen Jones' whistle-stop tour of the British Establishment is that they are out to get you; or, at the very least, to get your money. Your future is to be manipulated, and Jones says he knows how. Almost everyone with power is in the game. Most of them, and now most of us, think that there is no alternative. In poll after poll, a majority of the public expresses the wish not to be exploited, but when it comes to the ballot box there is little choice on offer. Almost all the UK's politicians have been

co-opted to collude with corporations. The free market ideologues have won.

The state provides socialism for the rich. It bails out their banks and saves the jobs of high-paid financiers. It subsidises low pay and high rents through tax credits and housing benefits, and the beneficiaries of these policies, the real scroungers, are the bosses and landlords. It is the rest who increasingly have to experience the repercussions of capitalism "red in tooth and claw", and especially the young. The Establishment have stitched it up – stitched *you* up – and they know it.

At the heart of the Establishment are many of the "largely despicable, venal, greedy" (in the words of a former trader interviewed here) inhabitants of the

City of London. Jones pulls few punches: "The City of London is surely the Establishment in its purest, undistilled form". Financiers work in a "bubble flooded with greed" and have "gained a stranglehold over the rest of the Establishment". He names the hedge fund bosses, property magnates and businessmen's wives who bankroll political parties and thinktanks (among them Anthony Bamford, Adrian Beecroft, Michael Farmer, Stanley Fink, May Makhzoumi and Stuart Wheeler) and the private health corporations that funded the public relations campaigns that ushered in the privatisation of the health services. Jones goes on to consider the behaviour of the Blair family; Cherie apparently "co-founded a private-equity firm to invest in – yes, again – private healthcare". The book is name-check heavy to demonstrate that it is not individual villains who are at fault. It is now normal to be a villain.

A new mentality has been forged, but the groupthink is "not all about conviction and belief"; it is also about the direct and indirect bribery of MPs to act against their constituents' interests. Jones places a curse on all the houses of today's Establishment, and the book's chapters turn a spotlight on them one by one. From politicians to the police and security services, the media and the mega-rich, he has damning tales to tell across the board. These are stories that leave the reader with the impression that we have reached new heights of self-interest and selfishness-driven politics, that Britain is among the most corrupt of states in the world, so warped that its defining feature is corruption made legal.

Corporations buy the loyalty of MPs who in turn, if they become rich enough, can found corporations. Jones' evidence comes most often from obscure reports that he thrusts into the public eye. However, more revealing are the interviews, his main alternative source of information and the backbone of this book. In one, the vice-president of a British bank tells him that the £1.2 trillion state backing of the banks represented "corporate fraud on an industrial scale, sanctioned by the government". Unfortunately, some of the most sensational claims are presented anonymously, reducing their power. Although this is a work

of journalism and Jones respects his subjects' requests for anonymity, the rest he is more ruthless with, often revealing in asides what he thinks of them by describing where they agreed to meet him.

Jones' more down-to-earth contacts are met in South, North or central London pubs. Paul Staines, who blogs as Guido Fawkes, is wined and dined in a posh Islington gastropub. David Aaronovitch, columnist for *The Times*, engages in Establishment discussion in a Hampstead cafe, while Lord Butler (a former Cabinet Secretary) and Martha Lane Fox (now a Baroness) both have their maids serve him tea. Jones is sufficiently non-Establishment to be shocked – but then he is still young. He is also happy to flout the rules, stepping into the personal lives of those at the top. He is more damning of what looks to him like Labour betrayal than of "normal" Tory behaviour. He details how Gordon Brown is a godfather to the child of a top PR man with whom Sarah Brown worked, and that Sarah arranged a "sleepover party" attended by Wendi Deng and Rebekah Brooks. Everyone in the Establishment appears to be in bed with those from other parts of it, be it media, judiciary, politics, business or finance.

*The Establishment* does what it says on the cover. It explains how "they get away with it". But there it stops. It ends by advocating a democratic revolution that "would have the redistribution of wealth at its very heart", but it suggests only old routes to such a goal. The last time the British Establishment was so intertwined, so arrogant and so powerful was a century ago, and the last democratic revolution that redistributed wealth took a lifetime to play out. Jones takes his cues from history, the subject he studied at university. This is a book of revelations, and revelation was a necessary part of the process the last time we became more equal, even as revolution in Russia helped to focus minds, too. Revelations alone are unlikely to be enough, but they are still essential.

Danny Dorling is Halford Mackinder professor of geography, University of Oxford, and author, most recently, of *Inequality and the 1%* (published this month).