

The Rotten State of Britain

By Eamonn Butler

Gibson Square, 2009

£11.99, 314 pp

ISBN 9781906142346

When Gordon Brown became British Prime Minister in June 2007, plans were leaked that he wanted to hold a competition for a Great British Motto. The French have their famous *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, the Americans proclaim *In God We Trust*, and even a country like Burundi comes together under the words *Unité, Travail, Progrès* (which is all that the Burundians can hope for).

And Britain? The only thing that gets close to a national slogan is the royal family's *Dieu et mon droit*, but after all the British royals are half-German and their motto is the French, *mon Dieu!*

Before Brown could even officially start the search for some inspirational four or five words for his country (and his premiership), British newspapers were already flooded with suggestions from their readers. In all likelihood, they were not what Downing Street had in mind: *Pride comes before a fall* was one, *Past my sell by date* another. Some readers summed up the joys of living in Britain in the phrases *Third World nation, First World prices*, and *World's largest industrial heritage park*. At least a trace of British humour shone through in *We apologise for the inconvenience*, but the general mood was probably best expressed in *Someone get me outta here!*

There must be something rotten about Britain if its people only reveal their contempt when asked about it. Eamonn Butler, Director of London's Adam Smith Institute, clearly thinks so. He has called his tour-de-force through the political, social and economic affairs of his country *The Rotten State of Britain*.

This smacks a little of *Hamlet*, and just like Denmark in Shakespeare's great tragedy, Butler's Britain seems to be a place inhabited by madmen. Indeed, after reading Butler's book you will conclude that 'though this be madness, yet there is method in't.'

Butler is by no means the first author to mourn the decline of Britain. Where once there were poets praising the 'green and pleasant land,' 'this sceptred isle,' or 'the land of hope and glory,' Britons writing about their country these days choose titles like *England: An Elegy*, *Fantasy Island*, or *Time to emigrate?*

In a way, Butler has only added yet another title to this genre of British *fin de siècle* literature. But it is another book you should read. It is extremely well written with wit, irony and, at times, a touch of sarcasm, which makes reading it a pleasure (although you are bound to sigh with despair after almost every single page). From an Australian point of view, it should be read as a warning from a country that has experimented with policies that fortunately have not yet made it to these shores.

'When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions,' we are told in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the same is true for Britain. The country's sorrows are not confined to just one single area. It is not just the economy or the loss of civil liberties. It is not limited to the sorry state of its education system, its political culture (or lack thereof), or its failing National Health Service. Butler deals with all these different crisis areas one by one, starting with the economy but going well beyond it.

Butler's language is clear, his method is straightforward. He has collected telling examples and figures of the faults and cracks in today's Britain. For example, he goes behind

official debt figures and adds up all those neatly hidden liabilities for public sector pensions, bank guarantees, and off-balance sheet vehicles to reach a shocking figure of roughly £275,000 (approximately \$550,000) per household. 'Britain's reckless taxing, spending, borrowing, and inflation have left us far less well equipped than many other countries,' is his harsh verdict on Britain's economic situation.

In many of the areas Butler describes in his book, he traces the root of the problem back to a political class that has run amok. Having freed itself from nuisances like cabinet government, parliamentary scrutiny, and a neutral public service under the rule of law, British politicians have replaced these traditional ways to govern their country by unaccountable 'quangos' (for non-Brits: quasi non-government organisations), spin doctors, and an endless production of reviews, white papers, green papers, targets, and bureaucracies.

Butler excels at recounting the sleaze that the Westminster Village has produced in recent years. From the Home Secretary who tried to get a visa for his mistress's nanny, to the sale of honours and peerages to the donors of political parties, the scandals have been so severe and so numerous that it is hard to understand why the British have not yet gone to the barricades. Quite the reverse is true. Fewer Britons these days take any interest in politics or even bother to vote anymore, leaving the politicians to continue their dirty games and tricks almost unchallenged. Just think of the former Minister who recently attempted to claim her husband's pay-per-view porn movies on Parliamentary expenses—a story Butler should include in future editions of his book. She is still in



Parliament. Good for her, so she can continue to claim her second-home allowance for her family home while claiming to live with her sister in a small flat in London.

After reading through the first 286 pages of *'The Rotten State of Britain,'* there are no doubts that Britain is indeed in a sorry state, no matter from which angle you look at it. In the final chapter, Butler sketches his plans for 'stopping the rot.' Reducing bureaucracy, strengthening both Parliament and local government, curbing executive power, reducing regulation, reforming welfare—all sound like the right things that should be done. But does the author really believe anything remotely like this is going to happen anytime soon?

The last time that Britain was in a perilous state such as today was in the famous Winter of Discontent of 1978/79 when the crippled country almost literally ground to a halt. Even the dead could no longer be buried as the gravediggers had gone on strike. The difference between then and now is that on the political stage of the 1970s, there appeared an Iron Lady who had the courage to pull her country from the abyss. The current British opposition leader, on the other hand, only seems prepared to make Britain's downfall carbon-neutral and compassionate.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the play ends with the death of all the main characters, upon which Denmark is taken over by a foreign force. For Britain, there may soon only be the International Monetary Fund to turn to.

Hamlet's last words were 'the rest is silence.' Maybe that would be the best national motto for Britain as well.

Reviewed by Oliver Marc Hartwich

This reviewer was Chief Economist at the London-based think tank Policy Exchange.