

Where will we find the next generation of public intellectuals now that intelligence is seen as a weakness?

by Blog Admin

January 16, 2012

In previous eras, our public sphere was traditionally dominated by intelligent people, in politics, academia and society at large, who became well-known by speaking about a range of subjects. Now that knowledge is viewed with suspicion, [Aidan Byrne](#) wonders where the new public intellectuals are going to come from.



Will we ever be have public intellectuals again? In the Victorian period, there were people like John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, essayists who were genuinely popular in the sense that a seriously large proportion of the population would have heard of them. I'd include Parnell in Ireland, and Newman across the Isles. [Carpenter](#) and [the Webbs](#) were probably too obscure, though I think George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells would have counted. But who fills these roles today?

The intellectual culture of the political parties has changed too. It's hard to believe now our politicians are ex-PR men and little more than ugly celebrities, but from the 1940s to the 1960s, UK political parties were stuffed with actual intellectuals, particularly the Labour Party. Harold Wilson was a former Oxford don, and he surrounded himself with similar people: Crosland, Crossman, Gaitskell and [Taverne](#) were all serious thinkers. Not that this made them pleasant or politically right, of course (largely too right wing for my tastes), but there was a sense that public culture was and should be directed by philosophy and ideology.

Intelligence as a weakness

Now, intelligence is seen as a weakness: witness Cameron's witless bullying in the House of Commons and the general tactical opportunism of our politics and media's 'gotcha' obsession, or the unappetising sight of John Kerry being attacked during his Presidential campaign for '[looking French](#)' (because he speaks it), let alone the Republican Party's absolute rejection of any candidate who thinks listening to scientists might be a good idea at the expense of judgement, intelligence and moral authority. These people are 'pointy-heads' and Poindexters now.

What's striking about many of these people is how odd, spiky and complicated they were. Virtually none of them would get through the selection process of a major political party in the modern period. They often held contradictory or ambiguous views. They were independently-minded in a way that's entirely unacceptable in the 'managed democracy' of current parties. They led 'complicated' private lives (H. G. Wells reputedly had the biggest generative organ in literature, and was keen to exercise it). These people would have been horrified at the notion of being 'on-message'.

They were also polymathic: the politicians weren't simply policy wonks: they knew about science, art, literature, abroad and there were outlets for it. Scholars, literary critics, artists and others were frequent guests on shows such as [The Brains Trust](#). On that show, intelligent people were asked to spontaneously answer wide-ranging questions from members of the public. It wasn't always clear in advance what the answer would be. In contrast, if you gave me a list of the guests on *Question Time* and a list of the questions, I could write down what their responses would be, in advance. Every politician comes armed with a list of put-downs and soundbites from which they won't be deflected. The businessman will talk about 'flexible employment' and 'market efficiency'. The union leader will promise a weak radicalism. Melanie Philips will connect environmentalism with antisemitism. They all go through the motions.

Then, intelligent people were expected to know about a range of subjects and became well-known by speaking about them. Now, unintelligent celebrities' opinions on subjects of which they know nothing are lauded for the dullest clanger. Knowing things is now *suspicious* and *patronising* - desperately sad if, like me, you mourn the passing of independent working-class auto didacticism, the [Plebs League](#), the [Central](#)

[Labour College](#), the [WEA](#) and the various other institutes dedicated to refuting the association of culture with a narrow bourgeoisie.

Witness this [magnificent encounter between Will Self](#), someone I would class as a public intellectual because a) he's an intellectual and b) he's an excellent and enthusiastic communicator, and one of the weakest Labour politicians we've ever had.

Intellectualism in a multichannel era

Who else counts as a modern public intellectual? It's hard in the multichannel era: people became well-known earlier because there were 1-2 TV channels, 3-4 radio stations, whereas now we have greater opportunities to watch what we're familiar with rather than share limited media outlets with the whole population.

My suggestions, include Will Self, Jonathan Meades, Al Gore, Richard Dawkins, Naomi Klein and Fintan O'Toole, and can be found [here](#).

I notice this is an overwhelmingly white/heterosexual/anglocentric list, which certainly displays my ignorance and my cultural position (white, straight, Irish, lefty, humanities academic), but also the structural bias of our public cultures. Other people are marginalised. I'd love to add [Angela Davis](#) to this list, for instance: the militant, intelligent voice of the 60s, but as a teacher, now marginalised. Perhaps Vidal shouldn't be on the list either: the sarcastic court jester of Kennedy's Camelot is far too spiky and unpredictable to attract much media attention because he doesn't fit into a simple oppositional talking-heads frame.

In fact lots of these people fill the newspapers I read and appear frequently on the radio stations I listen to, but make little or no impact on the wider public. There are lots more people I'd add because they're intellectuals, but can't because the public space isn't available to them: virtually none of those I've listed would be identified in a police line-up by the great British public, whereas Vernon Kay, Jordan and Stephen Fry are instantly recognisable.

On the other hand: my overly-nostalgic list of former public intellectuals is also deeply heterogenous. The intellectuals virtually all attended the same universities, were all male and what we would call Establishment, even the radical ones. In an age when universities were open to 1-2% of the population, who populated the airwaves, newspapers and political sphere, only the arts were available to truly dangerous voice.

Where will we find the next generation of public intellectuals?

Where are the new public intellectuals going to come from? They're on the net. They're on Twitter. The question is whether it's still possible to move from the narrowcast structure of these media to serious public attention: getting quoted on Radio 1, papped on the streets, declining a judge's chair on *X-Factor* and hacked by the *Sun*.

However, maybe I'm displaying my reactionary qualities by even asking the question. Aren't we in the era of the aggregate Cloud, where the intellectual is content to contribute to a Wikipedia page without attribution or credit? Who needs leaders? We've got [Sub-commandante Marcos](#), [Anonymous](#) and [LULZSEC](#).

This is an edited version of a piece published on Aidan Byrne's personal blog, which can be read [here](#).

Related posts:

1. [Generation Think: the role that precise criteria plays in judging the allocation of research funding and in choosing our 'bright young things'](#)
2. [Britain needs a more proactive academic culture in which we reach out to the next generation of scholars.](#)
3. [Don't swap the "Ivory Tower" for a cyber one: public engagement and the internet](#)
4. [Five minutes with Andrew Miller MP: "It's important that people handle information in an intelligent way, and social science has a huge role in this."](#)

5. Public engagement and virtual learning: top 5 Open Course Ware sites