

New Statesman, Old Problem

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Good luck to [Jason Cowley](#) the new editor of Britain's premier left magazine [The New Statesman](#). He has been promised a bigger budget. There will be no shortage of good stories at a time when the left in the UK and globally is going through a fascinating phase. Take just one example. By the end of the year, America may have a black President.



But the Statesman is in trouble. I was a great admirer of the previous editor John Kampfner who is one of our most intelligent and tenacious political journalists. And yet I had stopped reading the magazine. Despite the excellent Martin Bright it just felt too optional to other political media.

The magazine was too predictable and unimaginative and the website is largely the magazine online. In an age of instant and often in-depth coverage online and in the newspapers the Statesman struggles to say anything extra.

The [London Review of Books](#) beats it for length (albeit cliquy and knee-jerk posh-left), [Prospect](#) is cleverer (although painfully austere and a tad smug) while the [Spectator](#) is more fun, better-written and occasionally surprising (although obviously right-wing). The nationals have more analysis and wider and deeper coverage of everything from International politics to the arts. The independent political [bloggers](#) are more passionate, knowing, original and critical.

So what can Jason do? It's not just about sales, it is about purpose. Better writing and bigger stories will help. Let some bullish young investigative hacks loose on some difficult subjects. Fresh voices rather than recycled national journalists would also make a change. Cowley's literary background will help if means he takes a different approach to politics in the widest sense. But it will hinder if he ends up hiring 'lovvies' to preach.

The challenge is partly about fitting in to the new media environment where readers can access so much comment and data themselves that they don't 'need' the Statesman anymore. And so they won't pay for it. Media commentators and journalists who talk about the Statesman have to remember that the magazine ultimately relies on people who pay the cover price or subscription rather than those who get it delivered to their newsrooms or libraries. So it either has to be wonderful treat or a vital voice – or both.

Recently the Statesman has relied on those very dull sponsored pull-out supplements on "Local Democracy and the Gas Board" or "A Roundtable On Chemical Engineering and Foreign Aid" to make money. Now it has to find a better reason to live.

Its fate is of interest to anyone interested in healthy political debate, but also anyone who wants to know whether glossy national political magazines have a future in the Internet age. As I said, good luck Jason.

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