

COMING TO TERMS WITH 21ST CENTURY BRITISH POLITICS: AN INTERVIEW WITH TOBY LITT

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ABSTRACT. *English novelist and short story writer, Toby Litt is the author of the novels *Beatniks: An English Road Movie* (1997), *Corpsing* (2000), *Deadkidsongs* (2001), *Finding Myself* (2003), *Ghost Story* (2004), *Hospital* (2007), *I Play the Drums in a Band Called Okay* (2008), *Journey into Space* (2009), and *King Death* (2010). He is also known for his collections of short stories *Adventures in Capitalism* (1996) and *Exhibitionism* (2002). Toby Litt was nominated by *Granta* magazine as one of the 20 “Best of Young British Novelists” in 2003. He is an authorised voice among young writers deconstructing contemporary consumer society. In this interview, held at the University of Almería during the 34th AEDEAN Conference (11-13 November 2010), he provides an assessment of modern politics, shares his ideas concerning the recent political affairs in the UK, such as the ideological modernisation during the previous New Labour years or the latest social changes in Britain, and he finally examines the position of writers and intellectuals as regards to power and their political commitment.*

Key words: Toby Litt, contemporary society, intellectuals, Blairism, British politics.

APROXIMACIÓN A LA POLÍTICA BRITÁNICA DEL SIGLO XXI: ENTREVISTA CON TOBY LITT

RESUMEN. *El novelista y escritor de relatos, Toby Litt, es autor de las novelas *Beatniks: An English Road Movie* (1997), *Corpsing* (2000), *Deadkidsongs* (2001), *Finding Myself* (2003), *Ghost Story* (2004), *Hospital* (2007), *I Play de Drums in a Band Called Okay* (2008), *Journey into Space* (2009) y *King Dead* (2010). También se le conoce por sus colecciones de relatos *Adventures in Capitalism**

(1996) y *Exhibitionism* (2002). Toby Litt fue nombrado por la Revista *Granta* como uno de los 20 "Mejores Jóvenes Novelistas Británicos" en 2003. Se ha convertido en una referencia entre los escritores jóvenes al intentar deconstruir la sociedad contemporánea consumista. En la siguiente entrevista, que tuvo lugar en la Universidad de Almería durante el Congreso de AEDEAN (11-13 Noviembre 2010), el autor contribuye al debate con una evaluación sobre la política contemporánea en Reino Unido, como es la reciente modernización ideológica durante el gobierno *New Labour*; o los cambios sociales en Gran Bretaña, para acabar examinando la posición de los intelectuales y escritores con respecto al poder y su compromiso político.

Palabras Clave: Toby Litt, sociedad contemporánea, intelectuales, Blairismo, política Británica.

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I sit with novelist and short story writer Toby Litt during the course of the 34th AEDEAN Conference in Almería in November 2010. I take the opportunity to converse with him about social and political mores in the UK, about the social changes that have contributed to an evolved national structure after the New Labour era, together with the political position of the intelligentsia in the UK and the rationale for their writing.

After the recent elections (May 2010) and with the Tories back in power, it is unavoidable an assessment of the "New Labour" years. How do you think this period will be remembered? How has the country changed?

The main thing for me is that Blairism was not an ideological riposte to Thatcherism. In its essence, it was a continuation. For example, we can talk about cities and countryside, but let's talk about cities first. The way they have continued to change, to become homogenized, to become Americanised in their structures, and their centres; they are first decimated by being emptied out, then revived by museums, galleries, and chain restaurants, Starbucks... things like that. The remaking of the countryside, a sort of bland corporate place which began in 1979, or at least in my memory, has brought pluses and minuses. You can probably go to civic spaces that are not the sort of concrete bunkers of the 1970s. In the country, I think the rural areas were seen by Labour as being not-where-the-voters-were; there was certainly a neglect of the people living there; for example, there was a continuing erosion of communities and what held them together, closing post-offices and village pubs. So in a way, it was far less significant than what there was set in train by Margaret Thatcher, where the ideological argument about how

the British economy should function was basically won. There was an attempt by New Labour to mitigate the worst effects of Thatcherism, but there wasn't really any attempt to provide an alternative, and what we have now is a return to a sort of accelerated version of those things. The way I see it now is that Blair managed to sell back to the British people what they already bought once, and do it under a different heading. But New Labour did certainly have a stronger social justice agenda which did make a difference to lots of people, as a genuine attempt to bring people on the lowest levels to a better level of living. There was also a turning away from some of the vindictive kind of legislation that you got under the Thatcher government which seemed to be motivated by hate of different parts of society, for homosexuals or the unemployed, and a desire to socially punish those people. It used to be very difficult for people who were out of work and had no address to get back into society. I think nowadays it's not quite the same catch-22 where you can't get a job, if you have no job, you can't get an address... It seems nonsensical to put people in a position where they can't help themselves.

Margaret Thatcher's government was characterised by a strong ideological content whereas with Blairism, it has been said that it was not really an ideological project, but a compound of different and contradictory policies. However, taking a broad balance of these ten/thirteen years and comparing them with the past conservative era, has it been positive as far as living standards, especially for the poorest, are concerned? Would you agree with that?

Yes, I think that's true if you compare what another ten years of Conservative government would have done, and what the family housing service would have been, what the state of schools, in terms of infrastructure would have been. A huge amount of money did go into education, but to me the root of it is very simple. The question was whether there was any possibility of market capitalism being resisted by the state, and in this sense there wasn't an ideological switch. There have been numerous iconic failures of partnership between public and private funding such as the Millennium Dome, or such as the Channel tunnel, where essentially it gets messed up and the state has to bring the project through. It turns out to be a completely botched kind of job that continues to be issued to everyone as the model by which "things can only get better", which is also the way Blair thought that they can get better. The New Labour rebranding project, early on, had to do with wooing the right-wing press, and getting things like *Financial Times* on their side. They had done that at least one election prior to winning, and in the end they won. It was a way of not scaring the City. I can remember my father talking about how, basically, if a Labour government got in, the next day there would be almost a stock market collapse, there would run on the pound, investor confidence would be depleted around the world, and no one would want to invest

in the UK anymore, because they'd seen him as a Communist. It was ludicrous, although New Labour was palliative in terms of social justice, it wasn't a Socialist party in any way. Could a socialist party have got into power? Probably not. I don't know. Perhaps I am deluded about the kind of party the British people are likely to vote for. They are probably more likely to vote for a Social Democratic party than a Socialist party. And a lot of them have benefited by being brought into capitalism or brought into the market economy by the sale of council homes or share issues, and quick injections of money into the economy, in some of Nigel Lawson's budgets, lowering the rates of tax. I think there would not have been a missed opportunity if there had been a greater sense of what could have been done, with more strategic kind of thinking, what kind of country we wanted to be. I don't think we do, except if it's to be a provider of financial services with lower standards of regulation, for the world to use as a kind of economic junction box, where we skim up a little bit of money because it passes through, and a tourist site and some kind of begrudged art venue, some kind of out of town barn where you put up some Damien Hirst and some Tracey Emin. You allow some of these scruffy people, who seem to have interested people all over the world, to earn you lots of money by putting them in huge refurbished buildings, or brand new buildings, without actually looking at where those people came from. By being able to go to Art schools, you know, state Education, they allowed them to turn out the way they did and the way things are now. They negate the possibility of people doing that again. I think giving creative people the license to doss around, to do very little for three years, but then the good ones come out with something, that's much more questioning in some ways. Then if you go through an education system like they have in Japan or they have in America, we don't seem to be able to acknowledge that everything is bureaucratized, and I work in the university, the language of the administration of the university is completely divorced from any hypocritical thought.

So you think that artists like Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin had an important role in the New Labour modernization project, in order to transform the UK into a kind of marketable nation and be exported.

I think that Damien Hirst is entirely a subset of Andy Warhol. His little circle doesn't really poke outside. Having an auction of a diamond-incrusted skull and cutting out the dealer – those things are what Warhol didn't do, but they are entirely within his logic. If Damien Hirst has extended Warhol it's in a straight line, and I think he fits entirely within the New Labour agenda.

Would you classify these artists within the central term of 'intellectuals'?

No, artists and musicians are not intellectuals, most of the time. They don't articulate their thought in that way. They think *through* their work, and their words about their work are usually appalling – in terms of what they cobble together as artist statements. They come out with things that make you not want to look at the art. I mean, Damien Hirst doesn't particularly do that. But if you go to an art school and read the artists' statements... they are usually two very damp paragraphs that don't really make sense. And the wise artists will probably just quote someone and leave it at that. There isn't, to my mind, a coherent artistic community that talks within itself. Some of my writing was very much influenced by some of the artists called YBAs, Jack & Dinos Chapman, for example, their 'Hell'. I think I have been affected by the kind of extremity that those artists were prepared to use. And I felt fairly isolated in being influenced by them. I couldn't really look around and see many other writers who were letting that in. A lot of contemporary British writing is quite hermetically sealed within a scene that doesn't engage with other art forms, except as subject matter. I think it would be rare to find many novelists or poets who would be happy to say 'Yes, I am an intellectual'. Certainly there are places where they might be encouraged to say it, on a British Council funded trip to Spain, but in a pub in their home town, no. Intellectuals don't have very much value...

The concept of intellectuals in Britain is a very controversial one. For instance, in Spain or France the concept of intellectual is understood as a conglomeration of writers, journalists or academics... how is this interpreted in the UK? Who are the British intellectuals today?

A lot of very intelligent people work for tabloid newspapers, for example, and their job is to think of what the million people or whatever who buy that paper want to hear and then give it to them, in a language these people want to hear, too. I would say the people who do that, who have a lot of power, are intellectuals but they would hate it if that word came anything near them – they would disown it and they would speak in a different kind of voice and a different kind of language. The idea of speaking something to people they don't want to hear in a complicated way means that anyone branded an intellectual will end up being ridiculed and destroyed by the tabloid press, assisted by politicians. Take Harold Pinter as an example. He was, by any European standard, an engaged intellectual. He was politically active. He was involved in English and International PEN. But he was also famously involved in the Palestinian cause, and used his Nobel acceptance speech to make an immensely coherent attack on what he saw as the state of the world because of American foreign policy. But prior to this, he had been so caricatured in the press as a man of intemperate anger, as a bizarrely knee-jerk

anti American, as his comments were not thought through in any way. And so what he said on this occasion passed almost without a comma, without debate, despite the fact that he was an English writer winning the Nobel prize – which doesn't happen very often – and taking that opportunity to say, 'No, I am not just an East End playwright who happens to have written some stuff about boarding houses in the south of England, or gangsters in strange hotels or whatever. I am a political writer, an engaged political writer'. If a writer as considerable as Pinter says something like that, and you see it disappear, you realize that that position – of intellectual – is, for lots of reasons, not wanted within British society. Not wanted by the tabloids, not wanted by the politicians and therefore not really getting through to people. I don't know exactly how *The Sun*, *The Mirror* would have reported him winning the Nobel prize, but I doubt it would have merited more than 80 or 100 words. I don't know if they would have reported anything he said. Pinter was trying to present a linked up view of things, of the state of the Middle East, and saying you can see there are specific geopolitical reason for this. On the plus side, at least, is that English intellectuals can't make a great living out of occupying that position – while you sometimes get the feeling that French intellectuals can. They seem to be a protected species, and the government will allow them their little space to say paradoxical things. Each English intellectual has to invent a position for themselves, one that they occupy in a fairly isolated way and take the ridicule that follows. In a sense, they are a minority, like any other. Whatever background the person who is an intellectual comes from, it could be compared to being disabled or from a racial minority in that if you are overt about it and proud about it, you would draw aggressive negative comments, I think.

Don't you think being an intellectual requires having a sort of status?

There is a status, within the academy. If you take philosophers, for example, there are a lot of sub-groupings within philosophy, and a moral philosopher would want to have status within the moral philosophy sub-group. If you seem to be speaking directly to the general public and publishing for them, however, that's not good for your academic profile. If you publish your PhD thesis and a serious book once every couple of years on your subject, books which are only aimed at the people that study and teach that subject, that's fine. If you do a popular book and you appear on TV, then you become a media don and, again, an object of contempt.

What would you say of the specific case of Will Self, he is a 'pop intellectual', he is an intellectual but at the same time forms part of popular culture.

But he doesn't hold an academic position. You have to look at someone like Lisa Jardine or Marina Warner or John Carey or someone like that; Germaine

Greer is probably the best known intellectual – although she is Australian, she is not British – with an academic position, but she also appeared on Big Brother. So therefore, within academia, within her part of the academy, that would be very much seen as not the done thing. How do you relate all those things – appearing on Big Brother and being a kind of media figure – to being an intellectual? It is interesting; it seems to be stretching some of the boundaries. I don't think that the situation, until now, has brought intellectuals together. But the threat to the funding of university Humanities Departments is such that this may now happen. There has to be an attempt towards a coherent response, and a defense of why these places keeping going. But that has to make the ideological case. A utilitarian view of the economy is actually nonsensical. The truth is that you have parts of the economy that function through what would blandly be called 'creativity'. In other words, making things up for the fun of them. But these may, in the end, turn out to have a social value. Most people would have looked at what Bill Gates was getting up to in the mid-seventies, fiddling around on computers, and they would have said that he was wasting his time. The people who kick around on the periphery, seemingly doing something that isn't going to pay off, can become very quickly the central pillars of the economy. And likewise big companies, like Enron, disappear in a matter of months.

What do you think is the role of the intellectual today? Do you think they should have any political commitment?

I can't generalize about them, because I don't think there is a 'them' in that simple way. I spend a lot of time analyzing what my position is or should be, and it doesn't necessarily make it easy to turn it into political action. I have always had a problem connecting the two things, thinking and political action – thinking whether or not what I was doing was the best thing, politically. If people started to think about why they think things, or the ways in which they make arguments to themselves, and gained a sense of how to think about thinking – that could only be useful because a great deal of cultural investment has gone into the idea of authenticity through victimhood. Being the victim of your life-experience. Certainly within American society if you haven't lived it you can't really speak about it. There's a real worship of the idea of the street, where any knowledge comes from having suffered in some way. That is the great message of Winfrey Oprah – knowledge as life-experience is suffering – and the second message is that You Can Change Your Life, meaning, of course, You Can Change Your Life During The Course Of This TV Programme – if you love who you are, because what you are is enough. And I do think that that is a lesser way of engaging with being a person than the old Socratic 'Know Thyself', which involves analyzing what the person you are is, analyzing how you can hold the opinions you do,

and thinking outside your own experience. Because if you think beyond that, you can only be a product of it. In other words, you will be a victim of your victimhood, as well. You won't own it. You won't be able to do anything with it. You will just continue in the position that other people have put you in. And one of the strongest gestures a person could make now, publicly, would be to be the victim of something but to say, 'I don't want to engage with being a victim. I am going to let it go. I am going to step away from this.' This is how it works in the media now – if someone has had, say, a relative that is dying in hospital, and the treatment has been inadequate, what will happen is that that person will be put up against the government Minister or the person who nominally is an intellectual on a TV news programme, to debate whatever the issue is, say, hospital funding, and you will have the bureaucrat saying very coldly 'We don't have the money to afford this kind of treatment. We can't give this kind of cancer treatment,' and then you have the relative, the victim, someone who the producer hopes is going to cry, or get very emotional, and their role is to make the point 'Yes, but my father died' or 'Yes, but my child died because of this'. And that's really the level that debate takes place on – each figure just carrying out their assigned role, with the victim having to get upset in a particular way. If you could try to get through to people in an intellectual way, so they could read this moment in a more critical way – and see how an agenda of emotion and victimhood, individual victimhood as opposed to a kind of structural engagement with the whole thing, negates any real thinking about it, and not just having a little micro debate about something that actually is not the real issue in any way – that would be socially useful. The counter-argument is, 'Surely you are going to lose people as soon as you start using these words. You are not really going to be able to make a TV programme that takes apart the structures of these things, and if you do it won't be seen by many people.' But it would be a useful thing to do. If people are always told that their personal experience is the best way for them to judge things then they're incredibly easy to con. If you tell them to go beyond their own experience, beyond their own current opinions, and they start to investigate this idea, they immediately become less easy to con.

Why do you think there is a shortage of political writers nowadays?

What I feel defines my generation is that we have learned the lessons of other generations without having made the mistakes of those generations. For example, the 1930s generation of writers and intellectuals who made 'the mistake' – and I am using that word in inverted commas – of Marxist commitment, and a deep belief of the Soviet Union as the future. W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender spent the rest of their lives dealing with having politically been like that, and moving to a sound Anglican position in Auden's case, and to a more socialist position in

Spender's case. The lesson my generation takes from this isn't good: if you commit yourself to the moment, to polemic, then you write disposable trash. Look at the writers and artists who committed themselves so wholeheartedly, and then it all turned out to be a let down. I think there are two things to take into account here. One: there is the embarrassment of commitment, particularly commitment to a particular political moment, and two: there is a kind of aestheticised version of that. If you do become an engaged writer you will write disposable writing. You look at someone like Arundhati Roy who seems to all extent of purposes have made the decision to write disposable writing on the service of political causes of the moment rather than to write the great Indian novel – there is a general aversion to that kind of thing. But there are strong arguments against this. For example, George Orwell. He did write specific responses to specific political situations and moments which have lasted as writing. But critics often sneer about him. He is someone who is clearly a classic but can be, at the same time, sneered at as a novelist – in terms of a writer who isn't great at writing scenes in novels, dialogue in novels, etc.

George Orwell lived at a time when politics was characterised by ideological definition. Today, we can, in all likelihood, say that things have changed. Some writers have defined the New Labour government as the first post-modern government, could that be because of this lack of ideological definition within a historical perspective?

I think that is taking them among their own terms too much and allowing them to say what ideology is. This is not very subtle. When I went to live in Prague in 1990 they had taken down most of the posters and banners, there were a very few red stars around, 'Workers of the World Unite' had disappeared from the shop windows. But in the same places there slowly appeared brand advertisements for Kronenberg beer and for Coca Cola. Nike's ads slogan 'Just Do It' is as ideological as 'Workers of the World Unite'. There is no difference in the level of ideological radioactivity between those things. This is despite the fact that Nike, as a company, would deny they are engaged in the business of ideology in the same way that the Marxist-Leninist government of Czechoslovakia was. What are the messages that people are getting from these non-ideological companies and corporate structures, or from them in alliance with governments? Particularly throughout Thatcherism and Blairism, 'choice' was a very key word: choose the hospital you go to for your treatment because you will be able to read a rating for that hospital which will reduce that hospital down to how many stars it gets. Choose your electricity supply, your water supply – even if you only have one set of pipes, one set of wires coming into your house. There is no longer a monopoly on this. Therefore, you sell off state industry, you privatise them, you create shareholders within those

industries, you take those structures away from public ownership and they become market-driven institutions, entities, which shifts them entirely. If that is not ideological, if that is not deeply political, I fail to see what it is. I think those things, which have been taken out of public ownership and control, and will never be able to be retrieved, are some of the more tragic instances of how ideology has played out – and Blairism continued this trend rather than reversed it.