

# The Most Influential Person You Never Heard Of

By Tim Worstall

**A**rthur Seldon died on October 11 at the age of 89. Few outside policy wonk circles will have heard of him. He may thus merit the title of the most influential person most people have never heard of, for he was behind the intellectual sea change that led to both Thatcherism and Reaganism. As such he merited obituaries in the *New York Times*, *The Times* of London, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Guardian* as well as appreciations from think tanks like the Adam Smith Institute, and it's the latter that gives a clue as to why he was indeed so influential.

Sir Anthony Fisher, having made his fortune in introducing broiler chickens to the UK (sort of a Frank Perdue for his times) got to know Friedrich Hayek and expressed an interest in going into politics in order to contribute to the ongoing debate as to how and where the country was going. Hayek convinced him that influencing the debate, providing the ideas, was a better way of wielding such influence—and so the Institute for Economic Affairs was formed. Seldon was the editorial director, and Ralph Harris (now Lord Harris), the general one. Seldon had been educated by both Hayek and Lionel Robbins at the London School of Economics in the 1930s and had also taught there after the war.

What followed was a flood of books, articles and pamphlets by Seldon, Harris and any number of eminent economists (Hayek, Milton Friedman and other Nobel Laureates amongst them) which, in time, raised the precepts of classical liberalism from their lowest point, that reached at the end of the 1950s.

*The New York Times* described Seldon as a libertarian and, while this may be true in an American sense, he was a liberal of the old school—he had indeed been prominent in the Liberal Party. As the *Times* pointed out:

For years the State had been seen as the preeminent force in managing the economy and providing social security. Seldon was a tireless advocate of replacing the welfare state and of allowing natural economic laws of supply and demand to increase national wealth more effectively than the man in Whitehall could ever do.

Not that he had ever been an enthusiast for the Conservative Party. Fundamentally Seldon was an old-fashioned Liberal who believed in the liberty—and responsibility—of the individual.

This was in fundamental opposition to both Labour and Conservative thinking at the time which was that the Man in Whitehall really did know best. It was simply the duty of those parties to manage that Man as best they could rather than any ideal of getting the State off the backs of the people. He wasn't at all a proponent of what are thought of as the more extreme shores of libertarianism but rather thought that the State crowded out those examples of voluntary cooperation and communalism which had existed before the welfare system overcame them—the Friendly Societies for example, from which his adoptive mother had benefited at the time of her husband's death.



As the *Telegraph* wrote:

For Seldon, the profit motive governed by consumers in an open competitive economy was more truly democratic—and wholesome—than the vote motive operating in a regime of so-called representative government dominated by pressure groups.

A sentiment which should have some resonance for those in the Porkbusters campaign going on at the moment. Wouldn't it be a better place, a fairer society, if we were indeed left alone to make our own decisions, were actually empowered in our dealings by being consumers, customers, rather than supplicants to the bureaucracy? It was towards this end that he was an untiring champion of educational vouchers, something he lived to see enter the mainstream political debate in the UK but alas, not to see implemented.

To give a true measure of his influence, consider this from the writer Mark Steyn in the *Spectator*:

[S]uccessful conservatives don't move towards the "political centre." They move the political centre towards them. That's what Thatcher and Reagan both did.... If Labour is at 1 on the scale and the Tories are at 9, and their focus groups tell them to move to 5, they have ensured that henceforth the centre will be 3, and they'll be fighting entirely on the Left's terms and the Left's issues. . . .

Conservatives win when they champion ideas. They win in two ways: sometimes they get elected; but, even if they don't, their sheer creative energy forces an ever more intellectually bankrupt Left to grab whatever right-wing ideas they figure they can slip past their own base.

Replace conservatives with liberals (as that

is what Seldon was—far too radical to be conservative in the English sense and very much a liberal in that same language) and that's exactly what he did.

Remember, when he and Harris started out in the '50s, both the Conservatives and Labour thought that the Health Service should be exclusively provided by the State, with what private provision was left a mere hangover from an earlier time. The school system was just beginning to be made comprehensive, with parental choice being removed. The "commanding heights" of the economy were nationalized or about to be (steel, coal, shipbuilding, car manufacturing and so on) and it was thought by all that this should continue to be so. Government should micromanage the economy, to the extent of deciding how much money each individual could take out of the country when on holiday. In everything, a bureaucrat in his office knew better than individuals.

I might also point out that the Liberal Party of the day was so sidelined that at one point its entire number of MPs could fit in one London taxi...each with his own seat.

The Thatcher Revolution, of course, made a difference, but it is the ideas themselves that have lasted much longer. It is the current Labour Government that is bringing academic selection and parental choice back into schools, insisting that private companies be allowed to bid for work from the National Health Service and privatizing the Air Traffic Control system.

To have, as the phrase goes, not so much won the game as to have pulled the board—the place of conflict—over to your ground is a grand and great achievement in politics, one showing how much more influential one can be when proposing ideas rather than a specific electoral program.

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