

Professorial Voice

Philip John Davies

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aspeers: Professor Davies, you are Director of the Eccles Centre for American Studies in London and currently President of the European Association for American Studies. Thank you for making time in what must be an immensely busy schedule. The current issue of *aspeers* features a topical section on American health. In what ways have you engaged in this particular subject?

Philip John Davies: As a social scientist my main intellectual engagement with the topic of US health has recently been through observation of the battle over the Affordable Care Act. My primary research area is US election campaigns and party politics, and it has been interesting to see the development of this topic in that context. As with earlier legislation such as Medicare and Medicaid, one detects that the apparent benefits of the changes are beginning to create a popular acceptance of and investment in the new forms. Simultaneously, for some Americans—even beneficiaries of the changes—the ideological issues of ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ dispose them to be deeply suspicious of, or even committedly antagonistic towards, the reforms. These conflicts within the electorate—even within individual members of the electorate—make it difficult to predict the course of the Affordable Care Act either as a programme or as a continuing influence on voting in the country. Since the US is likely to continue as a nation with divided party government, an issue like health care feeds well into the confrontational and combative form that politics has taken in this era of divided government. To the advocates involved it seems that this issue provides debates that lead to ‘obvious’ answers, but which in each case are based on such

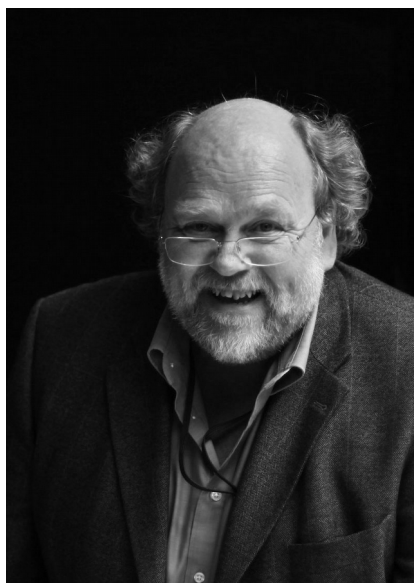


Foto by Alexander McIntyre

different assumptions that no effective or co-operative engagement is created between the combatants in the debate. As a prime example of intellectual as well as practical political gridlock in the US, health care is a disturbing harbinger of the possible road of future political competition.

aspeers: You seem to be using the debate over health care reform almost as a focalizer to talk about past and future developments in the US. To what extent would you say this reform has impacted American society and politics so far?

Davies: It has impacted society substantially in that about seven or eight million US residents have health insurance who would not have it without the Affordable Care Act. For some political groups in the US this does not overcome their fears that more fundamental individual rights are potentially breached by the legislation—in many ways it sharpens the division between a more service-oriented European model of social support, and a more personalised insurance-based US model. The nature of the debate is typified by highly dubious and poorly defined articulations of such concepts as ‘freedom’—which are used as though they are obvious and absolute, when in fact they have to be clearly defined to be of any use at all in a discussion that might potentially lead to compromise and co-operation. The Republicans have opened the new Congress with further draft legislation to curtail the Affordable Care Act. They are unlikely to gain enough Democrat votes in the Senate to pass these over the veto of President Obama, but even if they are stymied at this point one might expect the Republicans to use the failure of the president to co-operate in the dismemberment of his main legislative achievement as a weapon with which to berate the Democrats in the run up to the next election.

aspeers: Keeping in mind your expertise in US election campaigns, how do you expect the Affordable Care Act to impact the political dynamics around the 2016 presidential election?

Davies: The likelihood is that the Republican candidate in 2016 will not come from the most conservative section of the GOP, and if even more voters are feeling the benefit of the Act by 2016, it may be unwise to campaign on its demolition. Any likely Democratic candidate is going to have to deal with the Act as an election issue. Hillary Clinton is seen as a main architect of the failed Clinton Health reform package, so surely the Republicans will attack her as potentially even more of a threat to medical freedom of choice than Obama. I doubt that Elizabeth Warren will be the nominee, but as a Massachusetts liberal she would probably be even more suspect to the Republican right. In many ways, however, it is not the Republican right that any Democrat needs to be concerned about in an election—they are never going to switch votes anyway—it is the centrist voter, whether affiliated or ‘independent,’ who will decide the election, and all candidates of every political stripe will be polling these

groups with great care, especially in the Electoral College's swing states. It will be a tough campaign on every level. There is an enormous amount to play for.

aspeers: What exactly do you think is at stake?

Davies: Both parties have a chance of winning the presidency, though the Democrats currently seem to have a polling advantage (twenty-two months before election day). They equally have a chance of taking the Senate—despite the fact that the Republicans have done well in 2014, they present a large target in 2016 when two thirds of the senate seats, which will be up for election, are held by Republicans. The Republicans should hold the House—there is currently a built-in advantage for them coming out of the concentration of very large numbers of Democrats in a relatively small number of constituencies that cannot easily be overcome in a first-past-the-post voting system—but the Democrats could erode the Republican advantage. So, as I see it, in 2016 the Republicans could potentially make a clean sweep; or the Democrats could end up with everything but the House. If no Supreme Court Justices leave before January 2017, it is very likely that the next president will have the opportunity, with the advice and consent of the Senate, to appoint some new Supreme Court Justices as age takes its toll on even the most energetic and intellectually engaged people. With all this at stake, recent alterations in campaign finance rules, and given that no incumbent will be running for office (so both parties will need to run a full primary season), the national election can be expected to be the most expensive one in US history. The issues will be many and various, but health care will be in there somewhere as candidates, political parties, and, perhaps most crucially, virtually unfettered interest group campaigning get under way.

aspeers: Coming back to our topic American Health, the theme of the 2012 EAAS biennial conference was *The Health of the Nation*. Could you briefly outline for our readers how such a large body as the EAAS finds one common topic for their conferences? What were the criteria for choosing this topic for 2012?

Davies: The EAAS and similar, very broad-based organisations have difficulty in establishing a conference theme that fairly allows the engagement of their broad membership at the same time as establishing a coherent theme around which conference participants can congregate. What happens often is that we search for a theme which is porous enough to allow the maximum participation. In a multinational, multidisciplinary field such as American studies this may be a particularly substantial problem of pseudo-definition. At a time of strongly contested argument within the US over the Affordable Care Act, *The Health of the Nation* appealed to the EAAS Board as giving a tangible and well-referenced coherence to the call for proposals, at the same time as allowing for multifaceted interpretations. I think the final programme of the conference evidenced this. Nevertheless, the demands of the large biennial conference

structure indicates that however much care is put into identifying a theme, some of the membership will feel excluded by its parameters, while others will feel that generalities have taken precedence over definition. In order to avoid exclusion, the EAAS Board decided that its next conference (in Constanta, Romania 2016) should not have an overarching theme, and should instead be driven by the interests of the international population of participants from the American studies community.

aspeers: Since you are an experienced editor, we are interested to know what it is that you find most rewarding about editorial work. In what ways do you think the process of editing other people's scholarly work is important? What is its particular value concerning the development of academia?

Davies: I very much enjoy the process of getting a team together, identifying themes and authors that together create a structure that is convincing to colleagues, commercial publishers, and the audience. Confrontation with the scholarship of colleagues is valuably humbling; discussion with authors about their contribution can be enlightening to editor and author; and the necessity to read with care hopefully encourages the clarity of one's own writing. It is exciting to present opportunities for collaboration between colleagues from diverse backgrounds. Providing space to showcase new writers and early-career scholars is especially good fun.

aspeers: Scholars of American studies are frequently asked what relevance the field has and why it is important. In your opinion, what is the relevance of American studies for the academic community, and why does American studies matter in wider terms?

Davies: American studies is a hugely varied field, with approaches differing regionally and between and within the multiple associations in the world. It encourages its community to think without preconceptions about disciplinary approaches or borders. Intellectual tools of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences can all be applicable and valuable in American studies, and no scholar can expect to be relevant without mastering a set of tools suitable for investigation and a body of evidence to be investigated. There are few fields where so many distinct approaches can be used to test each other, co-operate with each other, as well as provide constantly invigorating and relevant responses to shifting debates. Other areas are increasingly seeing the value of cross-disciplinary intellectual endeavour. American studies has provided a context for that kind of challenge for many decades and still provides a remarkably rich foundation for any life devoted to enquiry and the tackling of problems. Our field provides a powerful model for intellectual endeavour across the board.

aspeers: Professor Davies, thank you very much for your time and for sharing your thoughts with our readers.