

Review

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT?

Guardian Angel: My journey from leftism to sanity by Melanie Phillips

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I recently heard Melanie Phillips being interviewed about her political biography on the radio. Because I'm in lockdown mode, this led me to Amazon and with remarkable speed to receiving a copy of her short memoir, *Guardian Angel*, published a couple of years ago. It's an exercise in self-defence, and oddly, when I started reading it, the text reminded of the relentless vilification of Priti Patel. Patel, the current home secretary, responsible for Tory immigration policy, is known as a modern-day Norman Tebbit, a right-wing Tory, a Brexiteer, a former lobbyist for

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big tobacco and alcohol interests, and a friend of Zionists who wants to restrict British aid to Palestine, to the Palestinian Authority's health and education budgets. Priti is evidently a bad lot from any leftist point of view.

However, none of this quite accounts for the degree of venom expressed towards her by liberals and leftists alike. Indeed, we are supposed to believe that she has even gone so far as to "bully" Sir Philip Rutnam, Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath, out of his job as the leading civil servant in the Home Office. It is suggested that this man educated at Dulwich College, and at Cambridge and Harvard universities, who formerly worked for investment bankers, Morgan Stanley, was "bullied" by a small Asian woman, doyenne of a chain of corner shops, educated at Watford Grammar, and at Keele and Essex universities.

Now, for a left that bleated loudly in defence of the spectacularly incompetent Diane Abbot, alleging that her critics were racists and sexists of the worst sort, their treatment of Priti Patel, is astonishing. That is, until one looks at the left's tradition of scurrilous *ad hominem* attacks on political opponents, rather than sticking with objective criticism of an enemy's positions or policies.

The case of Melanie Phillips is, however, a more complicated example of this leftist tradition of mobilising vilification over argument and engagement. This is because the "Routinely insane Melanie Phillips", "One of the *Mail's* routine monsters" made a habit of exposing the left's prejudices and shibboleths to careful interrogation. Consequently, she was "The *Daily Mail's* queen of mean", "the simplistic authoritarian commentator" who regularly plumbs the "depths of ignorance and bigotry that can scarcely have been matched, even in the *Mail*."

All this mention of Melanie Phillips at the *Daily Mail* is interesting because apart from starting out as a junior reporter at Hemel Hempstead's *Evening Echo*, and her stint at *New Society*, Melanie Phillips spent 21 years, 1977-1998, working for Guardian Newspapers at the *Guardian* and the *Observer*. That is more than two decades at the heart of the left-liberal commentariat.

Her book *Guardian Angel*, is an explanation and a defence of her work at ‘progressive central’. Her perseverance in the face of mounting hostility from colleagues, and vicious personal attacks from the liberal intelligentsia, and from a broad left more interested in silencing and ostracising critics than engaging.

The book is composed of an introduction and seventeen short chapters. She opens by describing her family life, which was far from the model often idealised in the nineteen fifties. She writes movingly about her parents, their relationship with each other, and of her direct experience of her mum and dad. Consequently, it is clear that her views concerning the importance of family life do not spring from a blissful or sanitised memory drawn from her own life. Indeed, her insights concerning her life as a child, teenager, and young adult, are produced by subtle and sustained reflection on parents and the needs of children.

This is an important aspect of *Guardian Angel* because it is on the questions of the family and education that Melanie Phillips’ relationship with the liberal-left gradually came apart at the seams. Her belief that families functioned better when fathers were present and active members of the household, and her view that educational standards were declining, set her firmly against left-wing orthodoxy in the eighties and nineties.

In 1996 Melanie published her book, *All Must Have Prizes*, which analysed what she thought was happening to British education. She argued that not only had standards plummeted, but education itself had been redefined:

It was no longer the transmission of knowledge and culture, but a process of self-discovery by “autonomous meaning-makers” – once known as pupils. This self-destructive process could only be understood in the context of a country and a society which had become radically demoralised. The ideological dogmas behind the unravelling of education were also eroding family life and the moral

codes that kept civilized society together, replacing these by the “no blame, no shame, no pain society.”

Respect for authority both in and outside the classroom had collapsed. Knowledge had given way to creativity and spontaneity. Literacy had been redefined as un-reading. The essay had been supplanted by the imaginative story, replacing teaching children to think by allowing them to imagine.

Melanie Phillips seems to have been particularly worried by the positive and widespread view that the absence of fathers did no harm to children, and the concomitant effects of changes in education policy upon poorer children and teenagers. Her view was that those Tony Blair described as “socially excluded”, and others called the “underclass”, were being abandoned by a left-wing intelligentsia more concerned with unravelling traditional forms of authority; more interested in the promotion of their own theoretical world views, than the welfare and futures of millions of disadvantaged kids and young people.

Clearly, Melanie Phillips has never viewed herself as “right-wing” and evidently believes that her views on authority, family life, and the negative effects of fatherless households, were unexceptional traditional values, common throughout the lower middle class and amongst the mass of workers in trade unions, the Labour Party, and the cooperative movement. As a result, she thinks of herself as having remained true to her Labour roots, while what now counts as “left-wing” has moved further and further away from representing the interests and outlook of the great majority of working people.

She defended the national curriculum introduced by the Margaret Thatcher’s government in 1988:

I wrote that, while the better-off could buy their way out of the system through living in leafy suburbs or sending their children to private schools, the poor were trapped by lousy local schools to which there was no alternative for their children.

Amongst her colleagues at Guardian Newspapers:

There was only one permitted explanation for the crisis in Britain's schools, and that was the spending cuts imposed by the heartless Thatcher government. To suggest that it might actually have had a point about the breakdown of teaching was simply unthinkable. Literally overnight, I became "right-wing". My *Guardian* colleagues gazed at me in perplexity and dismay. The fact that I had written with passion about the plight of poor people was totally disregarded.

Being disregarded, and the 'left's' refusal to engage with her arguments about the family, education, feminism, Israel, and Islam, are the central tropes of this book. Melanie clearly likes to view herself as a fighter for truth and objectivity against a decadent and self-serving left-liberal intelligentsia:

On and on I marched, straight into the guns. What else could I do. One explosive issue led to another.

The most striking thing about her approach to social policy and the broader issues associated with it is the absence of any regard for what might be called 'political economy'. She seems to view all her struggles from a purely moral standpoint, so that ideology, and attitudinising, play a much larger role than consideration of profound changes in the nature of the workplace, the labour market, and housing, in the eighties and nineties. In this respect Phillips has much in common with her opponents who often disregard changes in the structure of the economy while pontificating upon cultural matters.

Consequently, it seems to me that Melanie Phillips has walked straight into a web of ostracism, lies, and half-truths, in which she has allowed the hostility of her opponents to shape her responses and often to undermine her capacity to grasp fully the nature of the problems which she confronts so boldly. Her enemies, as

determined to occupy the 'moral high-ground' as Melanie, have lined her up with other caricatures on the right, and she has fully embraced the role awarded to her by the left-liberal intelligentsia she so abhors.

Melanie Phillips's exaggeration and the extension of her assertions beyond what can be rationally supported by the evidence is perhaps best expressed by her 2006 book, *Londonistan: How Britain is Creating a Terror State Within*. In his perceptive review of *Londonistan* Kenan Malik had this to say:

Phillips's criticisms of multiculturalism and of victim culture, her exposition of the spinelessness of policy-makers and her excoriation of the decadence of the left, deserve a hearing. But so immoderate is her assault on British culture that it is difficult to take it seriously. Britain, she believes, is locked into "a spiral of decadence, self-loathing and sentimentality", incapable of seeing that it is "setting itself up for immolation".

Here Malik has put his finger on the thing that is also wrong with *Guardian Angel*. Melanie Phillips has a penchant for exaggeration that has not served her well. On the contrary, it has undermined the legitimacy of her criticism of the shibboleths and prejudices so beloved by the contemporary left. Her sweeping intemperance has also given a free pass to her opponents on the left to exercise their preference for *ad hominem* attacks.

Having said this, Melanie Phillips, and *Guardian Angel*, is well worth reading, because this short defensive memoir does provide a lively insight into the *modus vivendi* of the left-liberal intelligentsia, which continues to allow its fore-conceptions to wreck and undermine much serious debate and discussion on the critical issues which continue to beset us.