

## **Poor Innocent Fools**

*Off Message*

Bob Marshall-Andrews  
London: Profile Books, 2011  
£16.99 h/b

*Standing for Something*

Mark Seddon  
London: Biteback Publishing, 2011  
£16.99 h/b

'Forty per cent of the British people believe that Blair should be tried as a war criminal. I am one of that number'. Obviously the memoirs of any Labour MP with such admirable views are worth a look and Bob Marshall-Andrews' extremely witty, indeed laugh-out-loud volume, *Off Message*, does not disappoint. He recalls the heady days when he first entered the Commons in 1997, looking forward to a long period of Labour government that would 'buttress parliamentary power, entrench historic civil liberties which had been threatened by the Thatcher administration and address the twin problems of poverty and inequality'. He was, in his own words, a 'poor innocent fool'.

What went wrong? He fixes most of the blame on Blair's 'irresistible addiction to money and those who possessed it' and Mandelson's 'arriviste vanity.....which demanded intimate association with celebrity and wealth'. These character flaws led to New Labour being 'drawn without protest into the bed of market capital'. While his comments on Blair and Mandelson are undoubtedly true, he is focussing on symptoms rather than causes. The origin of New Labour is to be found in the historic defeats that the Thatcher government inflicted on the labour movement in the 1980s. Without these defeats, Brown would have remained on the left and Blair would never have become party leader.

Marshall-Andrews' own particular concerns are with New Labour's colonial wars and its assault on civil liberties. Blair

told barefaced lies to secure British participation in the Iraq War. Marshall-Andrews makes the interesting point that if he had told the truth then he would never have got a Commons majority in favour of war. As for civil liberties, New Labour from the beginning set about cultivating a climate of fear, with the enthusiastic assistance of the tabloid press, in particular that 'creeping stain', the *Sun*. One of the principal villains was David Blunkett, 'the most morbidly reactionary Home Secretary of modern times'. After his resignation, Blunkett, of course, went on to become a columnist for the *Sun*. Marshall-Andrews was one of the most determined opponents of the New Labour assault on civil liberties and certainly deserves our thanks.

There is, however, a glaring gap in his concern for civil liberties that indicates the great weakness of his political stance. When New Labour came to power Britain had the most repressive anti-trade union laws in Western Europe. Solidarity, the bedrock of a strong trade union movement, was illegal. When New Labour lost office nothing was changed. This was one of the conditions that Murdoch imposed on the government in return for the support of the *Sun*. It does not seem to concern Marshall-Andrews at all. And yet it was precisely Thatcher's defeat of the trade unions in the 1980s that made Blair possible. New Labour was the product of a historic shift in the balance of class forces in Britain. Marshall-Andrews is oblivious to this. And, of course, the corollary is that the tide of neo-liberalism will only be rolled back by a revival of trade union militancy.

All this is a foreign country to Marshall-Andrews. Indeed, he actually considers the politics of class as a thing of the past, that the working class is no more relevant in Britain today than the landed aristocracy. Instead, he advocates 'the politics of conscience'. Clearly he is mistaken and while we cannot go into the whys and wherefores here, it is interesting to see where his politics of conscience lead him. The book has a Postscript where he actually argues that some good might come from the LibDems being in coalition with the Tories. Still a 'poor innocent fool' I'm afraid, Bob! Quite how someone of

Marshall-Andrews' experience could be taken in by Nick Clegg, Vince Cable and the rest of them is anyone's guess. What does he think now, one wonders?

Much less interesting is Mark Seddon's *Standing for Something*. This is a bit of a surprise as one would have expected a much better book from the former editor of *Tribune*. Instead, the book does not really know where it is going. Is it Mrs Seddon's little boy's personal account of his encounters with celebrity, of his career in the Labour Party, a critique of New Labour, or what? Do we really want to know about how Arnie Schwarzenegger nearly pushed him off the sidewalk, or how while having a drink with Andrew Neil, he noticed Yoko Ono on another table? And when it comes to New Labour, while he is ferocious about the brand, there is really no rancour against those responsible. Not even the likes of Alistair Campbell can excite animosity. Indeed, he tells how he presented Blair's mouthpiece with one of the *Tribune* staplers that George Orwell had (probably) used, 'a journalist equivalent of the True Cross', as he puts it. This is positively obscene.

Seddon claims to have written an account of how it was that once in power Blair and Brown 'essentially maintained the old Thatcherite consensus' and transformed the Labour Party from 'being a force for liberal social democracy to one of illiberal neo-conservatism'. While there are some telling anecdotes, he is not really successful in explaining the zombification of the Labour Party. Once again, like Marshall-Andrews, he identifies symptoms rather than causes. Nevertheless, some of his evidence is of considerable interest. He tells, for example, of his shock when he stumbled across the Speechwriting Unit at the party conference. Those delegates selected to speak by the chair were given the speeches they were to make! This was part of the process that reduced party conferences 'to a hideously stage-managed charade, infested by lobbyists, PR companies and the rest of the flotsam that attaches itself to politics and power'. The conference hall is routinely packed out with these people 'because there simply aren't enough members to fill

the space'. As for his own ambitions to become an MP, well, he thought he had a chance of the nomination in Stoke-on-Trent, but Peter Mandelson arranged for the seat to be bestowed on a friend of his, Tristram Hunt. At this point, 'a number of the remaining activists walked out for good' and Stoke became 'the quintessential New Labour "rotten borough."' Seddon comes across as sad and disappointed rather than angry, however, and this is the disabling tone of the whole book.

One last point, he does go some way towards explain one of the mysteries of the Blair years: the silence of Dennis Skinner. Skinner, we are told, 'actually had a good relationship with Tony Blair, who would have him round to Downing Street on a regular basis'. Why? Seddon believes that Blair needed someone prepared to 'speak truth to power'. What rubbish! Indeed, he rather undermines this generous assessment when he reveals how surprised he was to find out that Skinner 'regularly reported back from the NEC to Alistair Campbell'. Dennis Skinner as a closet Blairite fink? Surely not! And Skinner voted for David Miliband in the leadership elections, for the Blairite who thought the dole was around £100 a week and last year earned £21,000 a week. How depressing!

Seddon ends up asking whether Labour has 'so far lost touch with what it is supposed to be for that it will not be able to rediscover what it is supposed to do' in opposition? The party's abysmal failure to mount any sort of campaign against Cameron's privatisation of the NHS, a process the New Labour government began when they were in power, provides the answer to that question.

*John Newsinger*

John Newsinger is Senior Lecturer in History in the School of Humanities and Cultural Industries at Bath Spa University.