

## Another View

### *Broken Vows*

*Tony Blair: the tragedy of power*

Tom Bower

London: Faber, 2016, £20, h/b

**T**his is a disappointing book. Eagerly awaited, upon delivery it has turned out to be compromised, undone by a failure to put the New Labour governments into their broader social and political context. What made New Labour possible was the massive defeats inflicted on the labour movement during the Thatcher years, in particular the defeat of the miners and then the print workers. These historic victories for the British capitalist class shifted the balance of class forces decisively in their direction, making it possible for the Conservatives to begin the pillage of the state, the dismantling of welfare provision and the aggrandisement of the rich and super rich, both British and foreign oligarchs, in a way that had not been seen since the 1930s. The ascendancy of neo-liberalism was predicated on working-class defeat.

Moreover, part of this Thatcherite counterrevolution was what I have described elsewhere as the 'New Corruption', a modern version of the 'Old Corruption' that had characterised politics in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Under the new dispensation, 'sleaze' became routine, the essential lubricant of the British political system. This has produced a breed of politicians in all the major parties whose objective in life is to enrich themselves personally, not so much by taking bribes while in government, but by entering into lucrative employment with the banks and businesses to which they had had been of service while in government. In Britain we have a system of corruption by 'IOU', post-dated bribes to be redeemed once the recipient has left office. All perfectly legal, of course, but this practice has helped thoroughly corrupt British politics. It was under New Labour, Thatcher's heirs, that this 'New Corruption' became successfully entrenched. British

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion in my *The Blood Never Dried: A People's History of the British Empire*, (London: Bookmarks, 2013, pp. 239-240).

politicians from all parties see themselves as being there to look after the interests of big business and the rich; and they hope to prosper in the process. Tony Blair has come to personify this development.

It is worth remembering that Tony Blair was elected to office back in 1997 in a great electoral rejection of Thatcherism, in the confident expectation that measures would be taken to actually roll back at least some of the Thatcherite counterrevolution. Not socialism – few people other than the remnants of *Marxism Today* expected that – but after the ‘sleaze’ associated with Thatcher’s successor, John Major, some sort of shift in the balance of class forces that strengthened the labour movement, would allow recovery from the defeats of the 1980s and that would go some way to curtail the power and privileges of the rich and super rich. This was never the intention of New Labour. In his memoir Blair makes absolutely clear, for example, that he wholeheartedly supported Thatcher in her confrontation with the unions. There was going to be no trade union recovery under New Labour, not when Rupert Murdoch’s lawyers were given a veto over any industrial relations legislation.<sup>2</sup> New Labour set out from the very beginning to consolidate and extend the Thatcherite counterrevolution, something they were explicitly elected not to do.

One necessary consequence of this was that New Labour became a byword for dishonesty, for the brazen lie and the sincere deception. This was necessary because New Labour was itself a lie, a party that was at the service of the rich and super rich, that had been elected on the promise that it wasn’t. Most politicians lie, of course, but under Tony Blair, Alastair Campbell and co. dishonesty became positively pathological, routine, a way of life. Their lies cost thousands of people their lives.

The first great demonstration of Blair’s subservience to wealth and privilege was his historic 1995 journey to the News Corp annual conference at Hayman Island in Australia, to pledge allegiance to the Rupert Murdoch. Neil Kinnock, at  
<sup>2</sup> Greg Palast, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*, (London: Pluto Press, 2002, p. 41)

least, appreciated the significance of this when he accused Blair of having 'sold out before he's even got there'. Kinnock himself soon came to embrace the central tenets of New Labourism but at that time he grasped the enormity of the leader of the Labour Party kissing the ring of a right-wing union buster, the proprietor of the *Sun*, a foul reactionary stain on British journalism (and this is in competition with the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*). Murdoch is the most pernicious influence on British politics over the last forty odd years. No Labour leader before Blair, not even Ramsay MacDonald, with whom he has some interesting similarities to which we will return, had ever consorted with, deferred to and positively courted the likes of Murdoch before. Interestingly, Murdoch, a profound influence on New Labour, hardly features in Bower's book before Blair's retirement and his affair with Murdoch's wife, Wendi Deng. Even Murdoch found out in the end that you just can't trust Tony Blair!

Rather than New Labour's subservience to the rich and powerful and embrace of neo-liberalism being the centrepiece of his critique of New Labour, Bower makes the notion of 'deliverability' crucial. New Labour failed to deliver the 'modernisation' it had promised because of a mixture of incompetence, infighting and personality defects. I suspect that historians looking back on Blair's health and education policies will see his government beginning the privatisation of these services as part of his subservience to a neo-liberal agenda. This was expressed in the government's use of the McKinsey consultancy whose people were bought in to advise across the board. Bower seems oblivious to this. This is very disappointing and, at least for this reviewer, those looking for a good journalistic dissection of New Labour on the home front, will be better served by Simon Jenkin's *Thatcher and Sons* (Penguin, 2006).

Bower is somewhat better on the war front, chronicling the road to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, a grim, dispiriting tale of incompetence, expediency, self-delusion, lies and duplicity. The government's commitment of too few troops with inadequate equipment in southern Iraq and the British high

command's acquiescence in this still manage to shock. Even as the British position in Basra deteriorated, Blair was pushing for an expanded commitment in Afghanistan. Bower also brings home the complicity of the generals, admirals and spooks in these bloody fiascos that have cost hundreds of thousands of lives and have left much of the Middle East in ruins.

One way that Blair tried to repair the damage his wars did to his reputation was by manufacturing a foreign policy success in Libya. In 2003 Gaddafi was persuaded 'by MI6 to accept Western aid in exchange for surrendering his WMDs'. (p. 405) Blair flew out to Libya to glory in the deal. As Bower writes: 'The TV pictures for what was called "the deal in the desert" gave Blair much-needed credibility.' (p. 405) There was a dark side to all this, of course:

'As a show of goodwill, just before Blair arrived in Libya MI6 and the CIA organised the kidnap of a Libyan jihadi and his wife, who were living in Thailand, and arranged their transportation to Libya for interrogation. The couple's evidence was to be used in British courts to obtain the deportation to Tripoli of other Libyan dissidents.... Letters sent by Mark Allen, the head of MI6's counter-terrorism unit, to Moussa Koussa, the head of Gaddafi's intelligence, included the warning that their agreement needed to be kept secret and not be "discovered by lawyers or human rights organisations and the media". Despite Jack Straw's later denials, the operations would have required his approval and, by implication, Blair's too, although he would deny "any recollection at all."' (p. 405)

Once he left office Blair exploited his relationship with Gaddafi for profit. In the two years after his resignation he visited his good friend no less than six times, touting for business for JP Morgan and the like. One thing worth remembering about Gaddafi is that the London School of Economics gave his son, Saif, a PhD in return for a £1.5 million donation; and, in a particularly obscene flourish to this wholly disreputable episode, actually invited him to deliver the annual Ralph Miliband memorial lecture in 2010. All very New Labour.

How to sum up the Blair years in terms of the history of the Labour Party? The similarities with Ramsay MacDonald are striking. But whereas when MacDonald defected to the Tories only a handful of Labour MPs accompanied him, when Blair embraced Thatcherism he took the whole Labour Party with him. In MacDonald's defence, unlike Blair he was not a war criminal, he was not drenched in blood, and had actually risked his political career by refusing to support the First World War. What we have seen with the election of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader is a revolt by rank and file Labour Party members and sympathisers against this embrace of Thatcherism; but both the Labour Party machine and the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party remain absolutely committed to neo-liberalism and all it involves.

What of Blair since his resignation? One useful way to regard this is that he did not so much resign as privatise himself, setting himself free from the state to maximise his personal profitability; and his obsession with making money has been positively obscene. Blair gives the impression that he will take money off anyone no matter how unsavoury. Such promiscuous greed would be an embarrassment to the Conservative Party, let alone the Labour Party, but most Labour MPs seem to find his conduct since his privatisation unexceptionable. Indeed, Blair is likely to be allowed to remain a Labour Party member for as long as he chooses. Here are a few of the distasteful stories that Bower recounts: his £41,000 a month plus 2% commission arrangement with PetroSaudi who hired him to broker deals with China; his advising Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan, on how to spin the fatal shooting of fourteen striking oil workers; his providing strategic and political advice to an Abu Dhabi investment fund, Mubadala, controlled by the crown prince.... the list goes on and on. And as Bower points out, Blair was taken on as a consultant by the Albanian government no less. With his help:

'Albania was also given candidate status in Brussels to join the EU. Blair shared the income from this with Alastair Campbell, appointed as an adviser to Albania

and with his wife Cherie, who arrived in Tirana on a private plane provided by Rezart Taci, an Albanian oil tycoon'. (p. 585)

These people are completely without shame. Without any doubt there is worse to come as Blair continues to rake in the millions by servicing the world's super rich.

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A new edition of his *British Counterinsurgency*  
has just been published by Palgrave Macmillan.