

What went wrong, Gordon Brown?

How the dream job turned sour

Edited by Colin Hughes

London: The Guardian, 2010, £8.99

The End of the Party:

The Rise and Fall of New Labour

Andrew Rawnsley

London: Penguin/Viking, 2010, £25.00

Ghost Dancers

David John Douglass

Hastings: Christie Books, 2010, £12.95

The Silent State:

Secrets, Surveillance and the Myth of British Democracy

Heather Brooke

London: William Heinemann, 2010, £12.99

Broonland:

The Last Days of Gordon Brown

Christopher Harvie

London/New York: Verso, 2010, £8.99 (UK)

Tom Easton

It's too early to say much about the Lib-Con government, but this collection tells us a lot about the regime that preceded it and, thus, partly why Nick Clegg and David Cameron are now sitting in No 10. Between them they also indicate why *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, home to the authors of two of the books under review, are now in similar dire straits to the New Labour project they adopted so enthusiastically long before it received its baptismal name under Tony Blair's leadership in 1994.

Guardian associate editor Colin Hughes not only fell for New Labour – in 1990 he jointly authored with Patrick Wintour *Labour Rebuilt: The New Model Party* – but for one of its leading lights, Marjorie Mowlam. He left his wife and family for the sainted Mo who duly dumped him, but left him still admiring her political mates. Gordon Brown was not one of them, apparently, and the collection of *Guardian* and *Observer* pieces Hughes has assembled on his premiership records a fall from grace summed up by its title.

That descent is spectacular – from the ‘new dawn’ greeted by Lord Hattersley in June 2007 to ‘the clunking fist thumps its last tub’ by Martin Kettle just over two years later. In between we get Polly Toynbee earnestly frothing about her hero turned horror-show and then back again, and something similar from Jackie Ashley – ‘he may be disappointing but Brown isn’t a disaster’. Michael Whitie and Simon Hoggart offer their usual sketch-writer smart-ass vacuity. Wintour conscientiously harvests the Lord Mandelson line that has so well rewarded him for a quarter of a century, and there are articles of disappointment and disillusion from the *Guardian* leader-writers’ office populated by ex-Communists like Kettle and Tories like Julian Glover.

Is there anything of substance in the Hughes collection? Two names lay claim to some thoughtful analysis: Larry Elliott and Andy Beckett. Elliott has been a consistent critic of neo-liberal orthodoxy on the business pages for the lifetime of New Labour. Beckett, who caught up with the British American Project in *The Guardian* seven years after *Lobster* revealed its existence, has at least some historical perspective. That pair apart, this volume is only worth having as a reminder of how silly scribblers can be while remaining the cosseted gatekeepers of received political wisdom.

Rawnsley – he of Rugby, Cambridge and the bright red socks – lays claim to being a bit better than that. But when he describes Wintour as ‘Prince among Political Editors’ (his capitals) in his 800 pages on the last nine years of New Labour, he really gives the game away. While he sources more in this book than in his weekly *Observer* column, there’s still too much referenced as ‘Blair inner circle’ and ‘interviews, senior officers’ to accept this as anything like a historical record. What it does manage to do is confirm the New Labour clique as a poisonous, lying and untrustworthy gang of political pygmies. One smear is revealed, the source finally admits to it and promises never to repeat it – and then does just that, reports Rawnsley on the following page. This is the story of Mandelson, Alastair Campbell, Charlie Whelan, Ed Balls and their acolytes throughout the New Labour years. And then they wonder why they are disliked and distrusted, even by members of their own party?

There are details here, if true, to fill in the broader picture of smearing

by New Labour. Rawnsley, for example, tells us this about Sarah Brown and the spin doctors, Damian McBride and Charlie Whelan:

'The demure public image was the front of a woman with a steely mind who was fiercely protective of her husband and family. She formed a strong, and to some at No 10 surprising, alliance with Damian McBride and Charlie Whelan based on their mutual interest in defending her husband. Sarah took charge of who came to lunches and dinners at Chequers. She rewarded McBride by telling him he could throw a Chequers lunch with guests of his choice – which he did.'

How did the obnoxious McBride last as a senior adviser as long as he did? 'He survived,' Rawnsley now tells us, 'because he was protected by powerful allies. One of them was the Prime Minister's wife.' Not as nice as she looks, apparently, that sweet PR professional who married Gordon Brown.

The End of the Party benefits from an index and that may prove its main value: checking names, connections and events against other sources. What it doesn't offer is any serious appraisal of what New Labour was about, of what this mixture of recorded interview, newspaper clipping and hearsay point to beyond the project's tacky track record. The leisurely pace of weekly political column writing should grant the reader more perspective and understanding than this. But Rawnsley's grand-sounding pronouncements from the Whitehall confessional amount to little more than White and Hoggart writ large – extended *Guardian* sketch writing – exactly the kind of easy, open-goal journalism in which Rawnsley made his name.

While Oxbridge's best were swapping varsity verbiage, Dave Douglass was digging coal in Durham and then Doncaster where in 1979 he was elected National Union of Mineworkers' delegate for Hatfield Colliery. His latest account of work, life and politics (*Ghost Dancers* is the final part of a trilogy) is a fine antidote to the dispiriting tales by Westminster village scribes.

While New Labour types were cultivating their careers, he was trying to keep the pits open. As the political neophytes were busy using media megaphones to vilify old Balliol rivals, Douglass was seeking to build solidarity in the tough world of NUM politics, largely keeping from public view his disagreements with Mick McGahey and Arthur Scargill and others while facing the venom of Margaret Thatcher and the power of the state. This is an insider's view of the 1984/85 miners' strike, the subsequent closures and the working of the NUM. But it is also the story of a full life, one not only dedicated to union politics and then providing practical advice and support to struggling ex-miners, their families and their destroyed communities, but also to wider issues of Ireland, Palestine and human rights, all combined with a love of literature, travel, arts and music. Here's a short sample:

'End of October. The madness of Big George (Brown) continues. Ancient rights to freely gather fallen wood and dead trees from forests are abolished; from now on, it will be yet another offence. The relentless war on all forms of free, unregulated behaviour continues. Soon nothing will remain which is truly free and doesn't require the consent and approval of the government and law. One predicts gathering nuts, berries and conkers must be next.'

Many of Douglass's concerns are shared by Heather Brooke, the freedom of information campaigner whose efforts led to last year's revelations of parliamentary expense abuse. The one-time US crime reporter has been a key figure in helping clear some of the secrecy in which the British state surrounds itself and her latest book points to how much more needs to be done. An inspiration to all who seek light thrown upon murky places, neither is she easy on journalists who uncritically, and usually unattributably and irresponsibly, regurgitate the PR line.

This is full circle back to Wintour, White and Rawnsley and the way they endorsed the New Labour approach for two decades and consigned alternative voices to oblivion. But those other views exist if you look a little wider than Parliament Square, and Christopher Harvie is one of the best. His *Broonland* is a tour de force, looking at the Britain the former prime minister left as his New Labour monument.

Harvie, an academic who is now the Scottish Nationalist MSP for Mid-Scotland and Fife, brings insight most full-time political commentators lack. He knew Brown in student days, he knows Scotland, he understands economics, and he has lived and taught abroad. He also writes well:

'What ended in the slump of 2008-9 was a decade of increasingly frenzied profit-taking in a metropolitan financial sector run out of control. The Conservative political elite had migrated to it as dealers, executives and corporate lawyers, and no longer supported the elite plus middle-class "public servant" consensus Schumpeter had praised in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942). It could expand the numbers involved, square its own interests, and exit into relative security.

'Mastering the system involved privileging the already privileged, as the Farepak episode showed, confirming its inegalitarianism and long-term untenability. In 2008 as much as during the stagflation of 1975 the financial oligarchs were hated, and Chancellor Darling would get some praise from the old Left for trying to make them pay. But rescue forces were no longer apparent in British politics, where Brown's party was morally discredited. Financial concentration continued,

skulking from the anomic forces of militarisation and ethnic hatred which appealed to the dispossessed.'

Harvie gets nearest of these Brown writers to serious perception. He well understands the US dimension to New Labour, with both Brown and Balls apparently learning their light-touch regulation from Larry Summers, one of those in the Clinton years keenest to abolish Glass-Steagall. He pays less attention to Israel among the offshore lobbies, but explains well the general vulnerability of these largely post-manufacturing islands to pressures and influences – some of them extending beyond his well-considered 'illegalism' to the plainly criminal.

His is an important piece of work and thus should be read by those on the Left who seek solid ground on which to build for the future. With the misery and distress to come – from which *The Guardian* and *Observer* will not be exempt – the need for such practical hope will be urgent indeed.