

## Rehabilitating the jailbird?

*Labour Takes Power: The Denis MacShane Diaries 1997-2001*

Denis MacShane

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**I**n his Preface to this volume, MacShane hopes that 'it may be of interest to anyone who wants to know how politics works and to Labour MPs who have the honour of being asked to serve in government'. (p. ix) Obviously the hope is that, with a Starmer government pretty much a certainty, this will attract readers. The trouble is that some of those seeing the book will immediately think to themselves: 'Isn't that the MacShane who was sent down for fiddling his expenses?' And even those who buy it unwittingly may be told of MacShane's prison time when they are seen with the book or mention it to anyone.<sup>1</sup> MacShane did try to turn his jail time to his advantage with the publication, also by Biteback, of his *Prison Diaries* in 2014. I can still remember working on a review but not getting any further than 'He never got long enough'!

What of the Diaries themselves? His full diaries run from 1996 up until 2012 and amount to over 2 million words. So what we have here is an edited version running from 1997 until 2001, when he was a Parliamentary Private Secretary. There seem to be four dimensions to his writing and thinking during these years. First of all there is a bit of an obsession with Blair, with whether or not his hair is receding and with his hand movements while speaking. Second, MacShane is a committed name-dropper, mentioning everyone important he meets. Third, he is put out by the lack of recognition he receives and the failure to promote him to the position he obviously thinks he deserves. (MacShane's desire for promotion runs through his diary.) And lastly, he chronicles how right-wing the Blair government was. Even though he sees himself as coming from the left, he goes along with it all. That is just the way it is! One other point: the fact that he was MP for Rotherham during the period covered by these diaries barely gets a mention; although, to be fair, his constituents

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<sup>1</sup> 'Fraudster MP Denis MacShane freed from jail after only six weeks', *Daily Express* 8 February 2014. <<https://shorturl.at/isKMX>> or <<https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/458655/Fraudster-MP-Denis-MacShane-freed-from-jail-after-only-six-weeks>>. MacShane blamed his prosecution on the then Director of Public Prosecutions, a certain Keir Starmer, and his enthusiasm for 'celebrity prosecutions'.

might figure more in the unedited version.

Let us get his Blair obsession out of the way first. One example will do: writing of Blair's charisma, he waxes lyrical about the way '[h]e uses his hands and fingers, which are very handsome, extremely expressively, splaying them out and working his hands into a little fist in front of him to make a point'. (p 43) On to the name-dropping: 'Lunch with the *Mail's* Simon Walters at the Tate Gallery. I made him buy two decent half-bottles of wine, the claret being a Chateau La Tour'. (p. 28) Obviously there is not going to be even a whiff of the class struggle in this volume. On another occasion, who should he bump into but 'George Weidenfeld – yes, the George Weidenfeld'. (p. 65)

Then there is him having a drink with Christopher Hitchens at Groucho's: 'Christopher is in good cheer, overweight and as impish and delightful as ever.' He cheers MacShane up by making light of an article by Polly Toynbee attacking him for a piece he wrote for the *Daily Mail* on family values. As MacShane observes, she is very much 'the chief priestess of the metropolitan elite sisterhood'. He also records a conversation he had with Peter Mandelson regarding Toynbee's attack. Mandelson cheered him up when he told him that being attacked in the *Guardian* by Polly Toynbee was a real coup: 'I can think of nothing that would more highly commend you to the Prime Minister.' (pp. 65, 66, 69). As MacShane observes elsewhere, as far as Blair was concerned, the *Guardian* was 'an enemy paper', while presumably the *Daily Mail* was very much on board for the New Labour embrace of Thatcherism. The name-dropping goes on relentlessly: a swim with Adair Turner of the Confederation of British Industry: evening dinner with 'Ralph Dahrendorf . . . . (t)he German professor and lord and sociologist' in Davos; and even a glass of champagne with the veteran Trotskyist journalist John Palmer, who spends his time abusing Blair and Brown and praising Ken Livingstone. (pp. 163, 223, 233)

Of particular interest are his mentions of a certain Jeremy Corbyn, 'for whom I have a lot of respect'. On another occasion, he actually writes that he admires Corbyn's 'inflexibility and wish at times I might take up unpopular causes the way he does'. Indeed, there are times when Corbyn 'deserves great honour'. (pp 145, 245) And then there are all the *Private Eye* lunches . . . .

But what of the politics of the New Labour government? As early as September 1997, he writes of Blair's speech at the TUC conference where he 'gave no concessions and told unions to shape up or ship out . . . . The

core message remained business, business, business. Inasmuch as unions can help business, then they would be allowed through the doors of No 10'. (p. 13) New Labour started as it meant to continue. On many occasions MacShane reflects on New Labour's trajectory to the right. For example, at one time when he was defending the government, he could not but 'feel split down the middle'. He was delighted that Labour is 'definitively in power and is behaving as if it wants to stay in power'. But where is its radicalism? '[I]ts radicalism is that of a snail's approach to making a journey' and 'I have never known a snail to get from A to B'. (p. 223).

Elsewhere, he concludes that New Labour is a transactional rather than a transformative government, performing brilliantly on some issues such as Northern Ireland and House of Lords reform, 'but on the core issues' that matter to working class people, 'jobs, public services, health . . . not much is really moving'. (pp. 325-236) He eventually gets to the heart of the matter when he records his feeling regarding Gordon Brown's comprehensive spending review, on 18 July 2000. Brown boasted about how much he had reduced debt, but what he was in effect boasting about was how 'he had raised lots more tax than he was giving out in public spending. I don't think many of our backbenchers realise the implications of that. We are now a government that looks after the rentiers more than the voters who elected us'. (p. 280) That is New Labour's domestic and economic policies summed up – and we can expect more of the same from the forthcoming Starmer government.

Elsewhere, he complains that the 'Treasury maggots who hate workers' have got to Brown so that '[a]ll that is left is just managing things to please the City and the M25 region which is powering ahead as a kind of a mini Luxembourg within the whole of the UK while the rest of the nation rots'. (p. 240) We are left wondering whether he raised any of these concerns in government and even what on earth he was doing supporting such a government.

The following year (28 March 2001), he attended the launch of Adair Turner's new book, *Just Capitalism*, at the LSE where 'all the liberal New Labour crowd who like capitalism just fine and believe it will deliver social justice with just minor tweaks' are present. He writes that there was more than 'a whiff of complacency' and is worried that 'the rise in poverty and the ever-increasing differences between the wealthy . . . and the rest of humanity will create at some stage a counter-reaction and an explosion of anger that may produce a new right-wing politics as workers will be told to

blame their lost job and poor wages on immigrants'. He is quite disturbed and ends this entry: 'dammit, I don't accept that socialism is completely off the agenda'. (p. 386)

Now, did he really write this about the rise of the right in March 2001? If he did, then his prescience was remarkable, but we will have to wait for the second volume of his diaries to see what if anything he did to counter this danger.

Before we move on to look at what he has to say about foreign policy, it is worth noticing a few more revelatory entries. As early as November 1999, he records a conversation with a union media fixer who told him that 'The asking rate for a peerage is about £300,000' and that he knew that an unnamed union official had 'handed over £250,000 for Tony's blind trust'. Cash for peerages, he writes, 'leaves one with a rather sick taste'. (pp. 212-213) And then there is 'Lord Levy, Tony's super-rich crony and money raiser'. This man, who 'is worth millions and zillions' only paid £5,000 in tax the previous year and just thinking about it makes MacShane feel sick. 'Why', he asks, 'are the greedy always let off from their social responsibility [. . .] it is just humiliating to think of the Labour Party being in hock to these people. God, it's disgusting'. (p. 266) And yet at the same time he desperately craved promotion, which presumably meant keeping his disgust confined to his diary!

As far as New Labour's foreign policy was concerned, MacShane discusses the situation in the Middle East, the demonization of Saddam Hussein by the 'propaganda machine', and 'the plain fact . . . that overthrowing a tyrant in the Middle East just opens Pandora's Box and we have no politics of democratic change or change of any sort in the region'. He does not mind bombing Saddam, but he cannot see any 'strategic analysis of what to do in the region as a whole. We live from hand to mouth.' He acknowledges that 'Saddam is the most monstrous dictator' and yet we 'turn a blind eye to the absolutely filthy and inhuman despots that rule in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states'. As for Britain, we are 'a pimple that simply doesn't want to be squeezed from Uncle Sam's backside'. (pp. 55-57)

In the end, Iraq was bombed in December 1998 and MacShane records that according to No 10 special adviser Roger Liddle – later Baron Liddle – 'Blair was far more gung ho than Clinton about bombing Iraq'. What surprised MacShane was that the targets 'included the very centre of Baghdad'. He cannot have been that worried, however, because this entry

also includes Liddle's gossip about Blair and Mandelson which he actually seems to find more interesting. (p 72)

One interesting point about these diaries is how little there is regarding Israel, which is not even listed in the index. This is somewhat surprising as MacShane was a committed member of the Labour Friends of Israel cabal. There is one entry, however, when MacShane records Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, talking about the Middle East peace process and complaining that 'the Arabs know perfectly well who finances Tony'. As far as the Arabs are concerned, MacShane writes, 'the Labour government is in the pockets of Israel'. His own contribution to the discussion is that 'Labour's swing to Israel was simply a reaction against the excessive pro-Palestinian and at times openly anti-Israel borderline anti-Jewish politics of the left, including the left in the early 1980s'. (pp. 31-32) This last point was to become one of MacShane's major concerns in later years.

What became of MacShane? He was eventually made a junior minister in April 2002, loyally supported both the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and in March 2005 was one of the sponsors of the newly founded hard-right Henry Jackson Society. He lost his government post after the May 2005 general election. He went on to chair the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry against Anti-Semitism which published its report in early September 2006. In 2008, he published his own account of anti-Semitism, *Globalising Hatred: The New Antisemitism*, which condemned anti-Zionism as 'Jew-hatred by other linguistic means'. He goes on to compare the far left with the neo-fascist British National Party (BNP) as far as their 'hatred of Israel' is concerned and for their use of Zionism and Zionist as 'preferred code for Jews and Jewishness'.<sup>2</sup> MacShane was one of the first public initiators in this country of the slander that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitic.

And, of course, he was later implicated in the expenses scandal. Amongst the things he claimed was £125,000 for renting a constituency office, when he was actually using his garage. Initially, he very much played down the significance of the expenses scandal, actually suggesting that it would come to be seen as nothing more than 'a wonderful moment of British fiddling'.<sup>3</sup> He was eventually suspended from the Labour Party and prosecuted for submitting false receipts for £12,900, pleaded guilty

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<sup>2</sup> Denis MacShane, *Globalising Hatred: The New Antisemitism* (London: Phoenix 2009) pp. 83-84.

<sup>3</sup> *Guardian* 12 May 2009

and was sentenced to six months in prison on 23 December 2013. Interestingly, the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that this fraud was not perpetrated for his personal benefit, but was 'to fund trips to Europe which were connected with his work on antisemitism'<sup>4</sup>

What to make of these diaries? Obviously we will all have to decide for ourselves how far we trust MacShane, but as far as this reader is concerned it is somewhere between not a lot and not at all.

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His latest book is *Chosen by God:*

*Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism,*  
published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>

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<sup>4</sup> <<https://shorturl.at/iJ259>> or <<https://www.thejc.com/news/former-mp-denis-macshane-admits-false-expenses-claims-g9a7c4tf>>