

*The Blair Supremacy*  
*A study in the politics of Labour's party management*

Lewis Minkin

Manchester University Press, 2014, 798 pp.

## **Colin Challen**

**P**ublished seven years ago, Minkin's book has taken on a new relevance and I have been prompted to review it by two events. The first was the death of its author earlier this year; the second has been the recurrence of the 'doom' narrative of the Labour Party. This fatalistic style of thinking has reappeared following Labour's fairly dismal election results in May 2021, and its previous drubbing in the 2019 general election. Minkin must rank as one of the most important writers on Labour politics in recent times. He was not merely a student of the subject, however. In part because of a previous book, *The Contentious Alliance*, he became a participant in some of the events he describes. This, and his exhaustive research, makes *The Blair Supremacy* an authoritative account of the inner workings of the Labour Party under Blair, which will stand the test of time as a major work of reference.

Another aspect to reviewing this book at some remove from its publication is that one can read what other people have said about it. In this case, a rudimentary Google search reveals that it doesn't seem to have been much reviewed at all. One review which did appear was written for *Red Pepper* by Alan Simpson, a former Labour MP and member of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs.<sup>1</sup> That review is important for what it says about Minkin's alleged lack of attention to the bigger political picture, what Simpson calls 'a meta-narrative.' I will return to this. Suffice to say, if Jeremy Corbyn had read this book before being elected party leader, he may have learnt some lessons which would have stood him in better stead for the job he took on. It may have assisted him greatly in developing a 'meta-analysis' of party organisation, as opposed to leaving party management to chance and his internal sabotaging opponents.

The view that Blair was contemptuous of the Labour Party was commonplace, despite his public denials. *The Blair Supremacy* interrogates this story, and it's not just about whether the party might not

---

<sup>1</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/7xsvea4u>> or <<https://www.redpepper.org.uk/inside-new-labours-rolling-coup-the-blair-supremacy/>>

be totally beholden to him. It's about what a political party is for; that is, should it be little more than a necessary inconvenience? As things turned out, Blair's wished-for 'New Labour' was hardly a political party, but merely a passing fad. In overwhelming detail Minkin explains how, despite appearances to the contrary, in the end Blair was no match for a Labour Party of entrenched traditions. Let's reflect on the fact that a mere five years after the departure of Blair, Brown, Mandelson and Gould, the four apostles of New Labour, Jeremy Corbyn was elected as party leader. Today even the Blairite new leader, Keir Starmer, has had to distance himself from New Labour, at least if you believed his campaign pledges in his fight for the party leadership.

Blair wanted to reshape the party in his own image and, to a certain extent, that seemed possible as his popularity in the country soared. You might think that his first crushing landslide in 1997 would grant him Messiah status, sweeping all before his feet. Not so in the Labour Party, often proudly described as a 'broad church', aka a bureaucratic bear-pit of competing interests. The first chapters of Minkin's book explore the complex relationship between reformist elements during John Smith's leadership, particularly in the run-up to the 1993 vote on introducing OMOV – One Member, One Vote. The manoeuvres about how to give ordinary members a greater say in the party's affairs took on epic proportions even under the laidback Smith, who didn't really want to upset anybody and had no messianic 'modernising' zeal. This episode, in which the place of unions in the party was a critical issue, set the tone for much of what was to follow. Blair and Brown, according to Minkin, were somewhat exasperated with Smith's seeming *insouciance* and acceptance of the historic mores of party culture.

In the three years between his election as leader and the general election of 1997, Blair's focus on party management took several forms, all designed to demonstrate his reforming power and break with the past. Here lies an immediate lesson Corbyn might have learned, were he not so shy of confrontation. First, get rid of your predecessor's General Secretary. Blair shifted Larry Whitty as soon as practicable, even though Whitty's only possible crime was that he was too close to the unions. He eventually made it to the Lords and ministerial posts. Even though Whitty's replacement, Tom Sawyer, was a senior union official, he owed his promotion to the new leader. I still don't really understand why Corbyn didn't get rid of his own inherited general secretary, Ian McNichol asap. As a later leaked report (allegedly) demonstrated, with many senior party officers, McNichol actively worked against Corbyn. That Corbyn didn't

seek to embed his own staff in the party's 'civil service' suggests he didn't expect to be around for long.

It can't be that Corbyn had any illusions about the right-wing passions of the party's 'civil service'. His friend Liz Davies – a deselected parliamentary candidate (in which process, I confess, I was involved) and disgruntled member of the National Executive Committee (NEC) – wrote a book about the fixing that went on to defenestrate the left.<sup>2</sup> As a serial rebel against the parliamentary Labour whip, who was left alone as a kind of mascot of an irrelevant, unimportant left, perhaps Corbyn did not properly understand the powers exercised by the party's officials. Is it possible that on becoming leader he imagined they would work for *him*? I confess that, at the time of his leadership victory, I could almost hear the sound of anguished jaws dropping at Labour's head office and up and down the country in regional offices.

As we have seen in many commentaries on Corbyn's relationship with party management, he had failed to grasp how it had changed since he was first elected an MP. Before Blair's arrival, it could be argued that the sense of an impartial, civil service style of party staffing still existed. Many officers had been in post for years, and perhaps felt that they were the party, rather than elected politicians who came and went. But as Blair and his circle saw things, the party machine was not somehow an autonomous being, but a delivery tool for the leader's agenda. This approach quickly led to a sense that control freakery had gotten out of hand and was responsible for a growing distrust of Blair's management style. Increasingly, party management under Blair was perceived to be all about stage management.

This was exemplified by the organisation of the annual party conference, which was to be framed as a showpiece of unity and hero worship, not an occasion for robust debate. To facilitate this, it was felt that constituency delegates had to be tutored (although that wasn't the word used) by their regional organisers in pre-conference sessions. The staff would helpfully explain how conference worked – or at least how the leadership thought it should work, including how to approach tricky policy issues. At the conference itself, staff would be deployed like floor managers on a TV game show to lead the applause. Then, when a vote was due which might be unhelpful to the leadership, these same staff would invite targeted delegates to special briefings with ministers, in a ploy designed to keep those delegates out of the way during the ballot.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Through the Looking Glass: a dissenter inside New Labour* (London: Verso, 2001)

But there were increasing pushbacks amongst the membership against this control freakery, and every so often senior figures sought ways to defuse criticism. One was to respond to complaints about the management of candidate selection procedures. As Minkin writes:

'A new code of conduct laid down that, "Party staff will not use or abuse their position, party resources or time in the process of an internal selection or election so as to further the interests of themselves or their personal preferred candidate(s)". Nonetheless, in a move which transformed the thrust of the document, under pressure from in-house unions which once again under "New Labour" had become the protective voice of the management, it recognised that party staff had various rights as party members. They were declared to be "entitled to have a political life as party members" and "to have an opinion and to express it".' (p. 538)

Staff members could also stand for election to most lay party positions, giving them an even greater influence. They could also stand for public office, and many, including myself, did. It might be assumed that staff members who became candidates would be more likely to toe the line if elected. Speaking from personal experience I'm not sure that was always the case.

How quickly people came to distrust Blair's leadership is a matter of debate over different triggers and, despite concerns over control freakery and trustworthiness, he did win three general elections. Minkin:

'The case made here is that to understand Blair's eviction we have to refocus on to the problem and consequences of his party management and that Blair's eventual downfall had deeper roots and broader interlinked causes in what was a more integrated party. The causes were specific to his leadership, including his long-term lack of respect, and the acute failure to involve the party in consultation on early policy-formulation. The management he had encouraged had tarnished Blair with the reputation for manipulation and duplicity, and that continued to generate distrust. Even the very perceptive admirer Rentoul described him in March 2006 as "a politician of a ruthlessness and procedural amorality that is sometimes breathtaking".' (p. 696)

The current Labour Party's management seeks to hark back to the 'glory' days of Blair's control freakery. This has led to a haemorrhaging of its membership by as much as 150,000 (official figures are hard to come by since 'lapsed' members may still be included) and the eradication of a

£13,000,000 balance bequeathed from the Corbyn years. The threat of the loss of a quarter of the party's workforce's led to a majority of staff voting to strike and there is a determined effort to purge remaining Corbyn supporters. One could be forgiven for thinking that a too large party is undesirable, since internal democracy presents too many opportunities to challenge the leadership. In an age where social media provides an alternative to old-fashioned door-knocking, the idea of having no membership at all would easily suit those who find the word 'member' too heavily laden with the concept of rights.

To examine the management of a political party is therefore highly political and reveals much of its leader's judgement, personality and ideology. In examining in such great depth the Labour Party's management under Blair, Minkin has penetrated what many party leaders prefer to keep private – i.e. how often they cock things up by overestimating their own powers. If Corbyn had read this book and absorbed its lessons, he may have stayed in power a bit longer. That in a roundabout way is perhaps a riposte to Alan Simpson's criticism. It's not just the policies that matter, it's also the management of them that makes or breaks them.

*Colin Challen was the MP for Morley and Rothwell  
from 2001 to 2010.*