

*Hope & Despair:  
Lifting the lid on the murky world of Scottish politics*

Neil Findlay  
Edinburgh: Lulath Press, £14.99

*But What Can I Do?:  
Why politics has gone so wrong, and how you can help fix it*

Alastair Campbell  
London: Hutchinson Heinemann, £22.00

### **John Booth**

**H**ere we have two approaches to politics and public life which are also partly the story of two Neils. Neil Findlay is a former Labour member of the Scottish Parliament and a long-time grass-roots activist. Neil Kinnock was the Labour leader who helped Alastair Campbell insert himself into the upper reaches of the party. Both Findlay and Campbell lay claim in these books to being effective campaigners. Readers will judge for themselves who to believe and which approach they prefer.

Findlay started life in a West Lothian former mining community as a bricklayer and then worked for a housing association before becoming a teacher. Already a local councillor, he was elected to the Scottish Parliament in 2011 where he held several elective positions until standing down in 2021.

In that time he fought successfully for Scottish miners convicted in the 1984/85 strike to be pardoned. Findlay chaired the Scottish Parliament health committee and pioneered there the cause of women who had been fitted with transvaginal mesh implants and exposed the scandal in which many were left with chronic pain, disability and ill health. In this he pays tribute in the book to the efforts of many others, particularly to investigative journalist Marion Scott.<sup>1</sup>

Findlay was Scottish campaign chief for Jeremy Corbyn in the 2015 Labour leadership election. He now jointly runs non-profit Unity Consulting, aiming 'to

---

<sup>1</sup> On Marion Scott see <<https://tinyurl.com/9cr32cfu>> or <<https://www.sundaypost.com/fp/the-sunday-posts-marion-scott-wins-campaign-of-the-year-award-for-mesh-scandal-coverage/>>.

help trade unions, progressive organisations and campaign groups, third sector and community organisations’.

After Cambridge University, Campbell became a trainee journalist with the *Daily Mirror* group in the West Country before moving to London. As a political reporter he moved close to Kinnock and *Mirror* proprietor Robert Maxwell who promoted him first to be political editor of the *Sunday Mirror* and then the *Daily Mirror*.

After Kinnock resigned the Labour leadership following his second general election defeat in 1992, Campbell heavily criticised his successor, John Smith. Campbell’s biographers, Peter Osborne and Simon Walters, write:

Campbell banged away at Smith’s leadership right up to Smith’s death in May 1994. Less than a fortnight before the Labour leader died, he was at it again in the *Spectator*: ‘Labour are so used to enjoying the Tories’ troubles that they have stopped thinking about their own. If the current line is held to the election, the ducking and diving of Labour will become as big a turn-off as the deceit and dissembling of Conservative ministers.’<sup>2</sup>

He promptly backed the election of Tony Blair as Labour leader and left journalism to work for him as spokesman on a salary we now know was largely funded by wealthy supporters of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

In 1997 Prime Minister Blair first made him his official spokesman and then the powerful Downing Street Director of Communications and Strategy, enjoying an unprecedented influence over civil servants, Cabinet ministers and Labour MPs. He stood down after the Iraq invasion in 2003 but became Labour’s communication director for the 2005 general election.

In the 2019 one Campbell canvassed for former Liverpool Labour MP and director of Labour Friends of Israel, Luciana Berger, when she stood in London as a Liberal Democrat.<sup>4</sup> He has worked for Rupert Murdoch as well as in commercial public relations. He is a well-paid conference speaker,<sup>5</sup> a regular studio guest and podcaster. *But What Can I Do?* is his eighteenth book.

Findlay’s *Hope & Despair* is a diary detailing his final years at Holyrood.

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Osborne and Simon Walters, *Alastair Campbell* (London: Aurum Press, 2004) p. 94

<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/86/friends-of-israel/>>

<sup>4</sup> <<https://www.markpack.org.uk/160462/alastair-campbell-out-canvassing-for-luciana-berger/>>

<sup>5</sup> <<https://www.speakerscorner.co.uk/keynote-speakers/alastair-campbell>>  
<<https://www.jla.co.uk/conference-speakers/alastair-campbell>>  
<<https://www.wsb.com/speakers/alastair-campbell/>>

This involved campaigning not only against the Conservatives and the Scottish National Party (SNP) but seeking to stem the declining fortunes of Labour north of the border. In the 2019 election Labour's Scottish representation in Westminster was reduced to one MP.

For him, campaigning was seeking practical solutions for constituents suffering unemployment, poverty, and poor social and health provision, as one ineffective Labour leader in Scotland was rapidly replaced by another,<sup>6</sup> with media leaks by his right-wing party 'comrades' constantly undermining coherent opposition in Holyrood.

He records on March 23 2019:

The 'People's Vote' campaign organised a march and rally in London with Nicola Sturgeon sharing a platform with, among others, Alastair Campbell, Tom Watson and Michael Heseltine. It was Better Together on steroids! Jonathon Shafi <sup>7</sup> and others are rightly calling Nicola Sturgeon out for posing for photos with Alastair Campbell, a key player in the Iraq war debacle that left millions dead, but, hey, what's a few dead Iraqis when there's a selfie at stake!

What keeps him going?

It was watching Thatcher's class war against communities like mine that that sparked my political interest and awakening. Today, in those very same communities, working-class lives are ending unnecessarily because of a failed drugs policy. Think of all the families who have lost a child or partner, lying in a manky alleyway with a needle in their arm or a fake benzo in their belly – and then think of the footballer, the nurse or the tradesperson that they could have been.

Think of that waste of talent – of deaths of people like me, my family, my pals and my community. That is what drives my campaigning on this. I have said it many times, but if this carnage was happening in leafy suburbs or commuter villages, it would have been sorted a long time ago.

Campbell, who is credited with calling the late Princess Diana the 'People's Princess', comes up with more 'P's in his latest book. We are assailed, he says, by polarisation, populism and post-truth politics as the 'slow death of democracy' threatens us with fascism.

During his rapid career promotion first through Maxwell and then Blair,

---

<sup>6</sup> Labour in Scotland has had 10 leaders this century with five others taking the acting position. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leader\\_of\\_the\\_Scottish\\_Labour\\_Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leader_of_the_Scottish_Labour_Party)>

<sup>7</sup> <<https://www.conter.scot/writer/jonathon-shafi/>>

Campbell has earned a good living as a professional anti-Tory. Along with Donald Trump, it is Conservatives who are largely his target in this book as he seeks to inspire his readers to move on from 'tweeting, blaming and bemoaning the uselessness of others' and become active agents of change.

To combat this cynicism he offers do-it-yourself advice on how to be a leader, a team player and a strategist through developing confidence and acquiring 'perseverance' – the marriage of perseverance and resilience. This trite recital of self-help tips comes strangely from a man who, to my knowledge, has never stood for elective office in his union, party or local council.

In advising young readers with parliamentary ambition to seek nomination from their local party, he fails to mention that his two fellow New Labour creators, Blair and Peter Mandelson, became MPs in places with which they had no previous connection – and who then parachuted their friends and allies into many others.

Campbell, in his criticism of polarisation, is the man who accepted charity sponsorship from President George W Bush,<sup>8</sup> who famously declared after the events of September 11 2001: 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists'.<sup>9</sup> The tragic and continuing consequences of this polarising drive to war, in which Campbell was much involved, led to the deaths of Dr David Kelly, many British soldiers, many thousands of Iraqis and many continuing conflicts around the world.<sup>10</sup>

He warns against populism, but Campbell's biographers conclude that he had himself invented 'a form of manipulative populism, bypassing parliament and Cabinet in an attempt to communicate directly with the voters'.<sup>11</sup>

As for the third 'P' – post-truth politics – I wondered whether Campbell included this hoping no one recalled his role in the promotion of the Iraq War, the mysterious death of Dr Kelly or his venomous attack on the BBC that led to the resignation of its chair, Gavyn Davies, and its director general Greg Dyke. Dyke initially helped fund Blair. He later regretted it 'because I don't like what he has allowed to happen to our political system'. He views Campbell as 'a deranged vindictive bastard . . . a complete maverick who had been given

---

<sup>8</sup> *But What Can I Do?* p. 166

<sup>9</sup> See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qdv6h8WKg>>.

<sup>10</sup> This ground has been widely covered. Some of it is summarised in my *Lobster 76* review of Miles Goslett's *An Inconvenient Death: How the Establishment Covered Up the David Kelly Affair* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018) at <<https://tinyurl.com/39snxw39>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/76/an-inconvenient-death-how-the-establishment-covered-up-the-david-kelly-affair-by-miles-goslett/>>.

<sup>11</sup> Osborne and Walters (see note 2) p. 359

unprecedented power by Tony Blair'.<sup>12</sup>

Campbell chooses to quote former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the daughter of a Jewish family that fled the Nazis, on the threat of fascism.<sup>13</sup> But Albright will always be remembered by the millions who opposed the US policy in Iraq for her reply when confronted with the fact that US policies had killed perhaps half a million Iraqi children: 'We think the price is worth it.'<sup>14</sup>

*Hope & Fear* records the vigorous way Findlay repeatedly challenges the orthodoxies of the powerful at home and abroad. In 2017, for example, the year of the General Election and Grenfell Tower tragedy,<sup>15</sup> Findlay asks First Minister Nicola Sturgeon: 'Does the First Minister believe that cutting yet more firefighter posts and closing fire stations will a) make our communities safe or b) put more lives at risk? If she does not know the answer, she can have a guess.'

In the same year Campbell says that he 'caved in to GQ [magazine] pressure' to interview Tony Blair, 'one of my closest friends . . . because what with the triple-boxset Trump/Brexit/Corbyn horror story of our times, the Blair voice needs to be heard again'.<sup>16</sup> He conducts that year a similarly soft-soap interview with Prince William, as he had for *The Times* with cycling drug cheat Lance Armstrong. An admiring Campbell promoted the cyclist's lies when probing journalist David Walsh was doing his best to expose him.<sup>17</sup>

Where Findlay fights established powers, Campbell has no such record. In his career he has sought out and benefitted from the patronage of powerful men like Maxwell and Murdoch<sup>18</sup> or those like Kinnock and Blair occupying influential positions.

---

<sup>12</sup> Greg Dyke, *Inside Story* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005) p. 327. Dyke's account of Campbell's attack on the BBC is one of several referred to in my review of Gosslet. See note 10.

<sup>13</sup> Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (London: Harper Collins, 2018)

<sup>14</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1T5JRVR53Eo>>

<sup>15</sup> On which see <<https://tinyurl.com/2p9df4w3>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/85/show-me-the-bodies-by-peter-apps/>>.

<sup>16</sup> <<https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/tony-blair-interview-alastair-campbell>>

<sup>17</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/2v6tawt3>> or <<https://alastaircampbell.org/2013/01/lance-armstrong-liked-to-play-the-long-game-david-walsh-has-played-even-longer-and-won/>>

<sup>18</sup> The role of Maxwell and Murdoch in the miners' strike is well described in the Fourth Edition of Seumas Milne's *The Enemy Within: The Secret War Against the Miners* (London: Verso, 2014). For the role of the Maxwell-owned *Daily Mirror* in that dispute and afterwards, former editor and friend of Campbell, Roy Greenslade, apologised. See <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2002/may/27mondaymediasection.politicsandthemedi>>.

Peter Osborne recounts in *The Rise of Political Lying*:

Campbell was often ready to carry out favours for his proprietor Robert Maxwell. He vigorously took the tycoon's side in his feud against the Tory MP Rupert Allason.

The conflict led to a court case.

The judge, Sir Maurice Drake, was scathing about Campbell in his summing-up. He said: 'I did not find Mr Campbell by any means a wholly satisfactory or convincing witness', adding that 'Mr Campbell was less than completely open and frank, he did not impress me as a witness in whom I could feel 100 per cent confident.'<sup>19</sup>

A British Prime Minister, nonetheless, was happy to commit by deception to the Iraq war – one strongly supported by Murdoch and other supporters of the policies of the United States and Israel – on the basis of 'dodgy dossiers' and propaganda in whose creation Campbell had played a major part.

Is this a man whose warnings about polarisation, populism and post-truth politics can be taken remotely seriously? A phrase from my youth came back to me on reading *But What I Can Do?*: 'How can we hear what you're saying when what you have done is deafening me?'

Findlay's book and record show a man with self-admitted weaknesses clearly driven by the conscientious endeavour for a better world. Campbell offers us little more here than the platitudinous advocacy of the back-garden virtues he did little to observe himself in serving the powers that drive us repeatedly to war.

*John Booth is a freelance writer and former Labour Party chief press officer.*

*He tweets at @JohnBooth2017 and blogs at Forthzando.com*

---

<sup>19</sup> Osborne, *The Rise of Political Lying* (London: The Free Press, 2005) p. 159

