

# Reviews

## Media Myth

**David Edwards & David Cromwell, *The Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media*, Pluto Press, 256 pages, hardback ISBN 0745324835 £45, paperback ISBN 0745324827 £14.99**

Was that really 30 years ago? Reading the first chapter of *Guardians of Power* by David Edwards and David Cromwell of the monitoring group Media Lens ([www.medialens.org](http://www.medialens.org)), I recalled a similar exercise in media analysis by the Glasgow University Media Group. It was an attempt to measure and explain the manufacture of news by television companies and had the title *Bad News* – they also conducted the follow-up called *Really Bad News*, published six years later, which depressingly showed that little had changed.

At the time of the publication of *Bad News* I worked as a film and video cameraman, and I can reveal that its appearance caused no small anguish amongst the editorial staff of the day. Personally I had been aware that the pictures I recorded did not necessarily relate to the commentary or context in which they were transmitted. By this time I had already read James Halloran's case study on *Demonstrations and Communication*, which had alerted me to cultural and other powers that affected the selection of topics and the news angle taken for these topics, as well as the need for a differentiated audience to decode the mixture of pictures, sounds, language, and authoritative sources dependent on their level of empathy with the actors. When *Bad News* was published it gave me the momentum to study the topic more because I was part of the events that were being studied – in particular, the dustcart drivers' strike in Glasgow, where the Labour Council, supported by a Labour Government, used troops to break the strike.

The authors of *Bad News* had great difficulties to overcome. Quantifying news coverage is an extraordinarily difficult task. You can be accused of a simplistic approach if you quantify television output by aggregating the transmission times of individual items under specific headings, or you can expend a great deal of effort in a more contextual and qualitative analysis. A further difficulty for the team was that they would have to wait for a year before their work was published in book form, so that it had no direct effect on the subject under examination. I mention this because in *Guardians of Power* similar tasks have been undertaken with respect to the written word. But, spooling forward 30 years, personal computers, search engines and the internet have provided its authors with a tool of immense power for such a task.

Media Lens' great strength is the way in which it pools the breadth of its subscribers to scan the news in print and on the web so that when someone notices a significant piece of news, or a blatant distortion in a report, they can raise the alert which draws the attention of everyone accessing the service. The brain-

power, computing power and sheer weight of activists such a system can call upon is huge. Instead of analysis being passed serial fashion along the line, it proceeds in a cascade, multiplying contacts in seconds. Importantly this system requires the active engagement of some, but not necessarily all, of those who read the alert.

One pertinent example from *Guardians of Power* is the alert that Blair and Straw were lying about the withdrawal of the UN arms inspectors from Iraq. Both said that Saddam Hussein had thrown them out, yet there are many official sources that flatly contradict this. Further, when war was about to start, several newspapers carried the same disinformation in a compilation of justifications for war. Within minutes, earlier reports, filed by the same correspondents, that withdrawal of the arms inspectors came after a warning from the United States that its bombing operation, Desert Fox, was about to start and that the inspectors' safety could not be guaranteed, had been retrieved from various archives, and brought to the attention of these forgetful journalists in particular, and the media in general.

The power of this informal network is the message from this little book. Each alert that goes out informs but also, as a subtext, it asks is this true, can this be contradicted, and better still, can it be contradicted by its own author? Within its network Media Lens has a broad range of active visitors who all bring something to the party. Thus an article on Kosovo may be read by only a handful of visitors to the site, but it will more than likely be read by those with an interest in the topic, thus providing a bank of knowledge of its history and the history of reports on Kosovo as a news topic. This could mean that waiting in the inbox for the journalist before he or she arrives at the desk on the day following publication of the erroneous article, they will find polite e-mails asking if they remember that article which they filed three years ago in which the migration of refugees from Kosovo happened after NATO started bombing and not prior, as is now reported.

A lesson that can be drawn from this is that news organisations do allow breaking news to be reported as it happens. It is when the significance of this news becomes apparent, and questions arise as to how it fits in to the corporate editorial line of an organisation, that bias is mobilized and the gatekeepers on the flow of information swing into operation. It is at this time that the gate guarding the original source is closed, and that from official and approved sources is held wide-open. When challenged on omissions in their coverage, news organizations can invariably draw attention to the fact that their previous reports did carry the alleged omission and therefore they have covered it. This neatly sidesteps the fact that, without the original information as a prefix, the story is now set in a different context. What is invidious about this process is that from now on the story is invariably set in its new and distorted context, thus masking the history of the events in question.

Bias can enter the news gathering system at many junctions. Edwards and Cromwell rightly point to the capitalist structures of the corporations that now own the satellites and instruct and direct the crews to various locations which interest them as corporations, and also as competitors, where being first to break

the news or, say, report an exclusive story, really matters to them. The development of Media Lens may permit it soon to have the power to act as an alternative source and a correcting influence on the gross distortions in the news we receive at present. The authors do give a lead in their references to 'The Corporation' because, through Media Lens, they have hit upon a weapon to use against those who wish to distort and control the flow of information and knowledge. Some time spent on their thoughts on the development of this tool would have given extra bite to their text. It is this that I believe is the best contribution they can make to the debate. Their call at the end of the book for 'full human dissent' is welcome, but I feel somewhat blunted by their fascination for Erich Fromm, who takes a far less conflictual view of the world than many others who have provided a critique of the 'Myth of the Liberal Media', which was well dissected up to the 1980s when the Left lost its way.

Perhaps it is time to dust down Wright Mills' and Dahl's analyses of power with élites versus pluralism, which lead to the more interesting work of Bachrach and Baratz in the United States and Steven Lukes in the United Kingdom. The latter's radical view explains the phenomena so well exposed in *Guardians of Power*. He did receive criticism at the time for his concept of 'latent conflict', which some equated to the Marxist concept of 'false consciousness'. But that was where I came into this debate. How could it be, I thought, that a family watching the news in a council estate I had been filming can accept as incontestable a report providing an ideologically loaded solution to social and economic problems which would not benefit them? It wasn't that 'there is no alternative'; it was that the solution on offer was the preferred solution of the owners of the technical and financial apparatus that controlled the media system. The financial threshold to enter this club and provide an alternative was set so high that the alternative can, to all intents and purposes, be excluded.

Could Media Lens have found the practical answer to the above dilemmas through the internet? I believe a solution is to be found in there somewhere.

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## Sage with Clay Feet

**Andrew Brown, J. D. Bernal – *The Sage of Science*, Oxford University Press, 576 pages, hardback ISBN 0198515448 £25.00**

Desmond Bernal earned a reputation as a Titan among British scientists, and a distinguished boffin for the British armed forces in the Second World War. Together with Solly Zuckerman and others, he pioneered the study of the effects of bombing on cities.

His biographer tells us that Bernal's '*pièce de résistance* was the planning of D-Day: a contribution that has given rise to some controversy'. He earned the

nickname ‘Sage’ because he was believed to know everything. But this belief was an exaggeration, even if he did know a great many things. Among Communist scientists, Joseph Needham knew a great deal more, and carried his knowledge with a great deal less dogmatic assurance.

This is a fine biography, and it is not averse to painting at least some of the warts as well as the achievements of its subject. Desmond Bernal was a pioneer of X-ray crystallography, and laid the foundation of molecular biology. He was a generalist, and wrote stimulating analyses of the social functions of science.

He was also an Irish rebel brought up under the shadow of the Easter Uprising, and became a committed Communist with a strong tendency to piety.

Bernal was one of the core group of British scientists who attended the Second International Congress of the History of Science and Technology in London. This was ‘galvanised by the unexpected arrival of a delegation from the Soviet Union’. Eight contributors were led by Nikolai Bukharin, and his team included the distinguished geneticist, Vavilov. At the time the most powerful contribution of the group was esteemed to be a lecture by Boris Hessen, on the social and economic roots of Newton’s *Principia*.

The unique flavour of the Russian contribution was described in *The Spectator* by Bernal, who had a female connection with the journal. (Bernal had several female connections, so much so that his archive of six boxes of his love letters is sealed, we are informed, until 2021, by which time, we may anticipate, at least some of the passion contained in them may be spent.)

We might wish that the archive could have included the Sage’s thoughts about Bukharin and Vavilov, both of whom perished in Stalin’s witch-hunts. In fact, Bernal gave his support to the charlatan academician Lysenko, who wrote perhaps the most dismal page in the history of Soviet Science.

Of course, by this time, Bernal was a luminary of the World Peace Committee, and one of the most distinguished sycophants of Stalin. There is a revealing description of a visit to China, which shows how the affection for Stalin carried over into support for Khrushchev. During a firework display at the Gate of Heavenly Peace, Bernal was approached by a tall Russian who said ‘Nikita Sergeevich wants to speak to you’. Bernal also met Zhou Enlai, who promised him an interview. But after the meeting with Khrushchev, Zhou sent ‘an undiplomatic message ... saying that he did not see any value in seeing him’.

Here was a man celebrated by Francis Crick as ‘a genius’ and by Linus Pauling as ‘one of the greatest intellectuals of the twentieth century’ and variously described as ‘one of the best, if not the best, scientific minds in the world’, and ‘the pioneer who pushed the frontier forward’, who could nonetheless embrace with all the fervour of a Moonie, a political creed of remarkable vacuity.

How could it all happen? Andrew Brown gives us an honest portrait, and shows us how very clever ‘Sage’ really was. But he does not hide the grosser lapses of the political man.

For this reason, although this is a very good book, it will not be the last. Quite aside from any indiscretions which may await us in the six sealed boxes of love

letters, the circle of Sage's brilliance and incomprehension remains to be squared.

Ken Coates

## Taking Mao Seriously

**John Gittings, *The Changing Face of China: From Mao to Market*, Oxford University Press, 372 pages, hardback ISBN 0192806122 £18.99**

In a footnote to the Introduction to this important new book on China, John Gittings, who was for many years *The Guardian* Asia correspondent and China staffer, writes *inter alia* as follows;

'In writing this general account of modern Chinese history since the Communist revolution, I have sought to give full value to the ideas and goals of the period when Mao was in power as well as charting the huge changes which have taken place since his death and particularly since the early 1990s ... There is no question that we know now much more about Mao's despotic behaviour and that it reflects very badly on him, even if there is room for argument over the reliability and veracity of some memoirs and recollections. However, I continue to believe that Mao was an original thinker whose arguments should be taken seriously and that the history of post-1949 China cannot be understood if he is regarded simply as a "monster" or as a despot only interested in the exercise of supreme power. Similarly I do not think that it is helpful to dismiss the "Cultural Revolution" simply as "ten years of chaos", attributable to power-hungry opportunists who exploited Mao's cult ... My own view remains that even in the area of ideology circumstances can alter cases – as indeed was shown by the speed with which Mao responded when the US eventually sought détente with China in the 1970s. Beijing's earlier efforts to open a diplomatic dialogue with the US in the mid-1950s also need to be accounted for. I remain convinced that "Western" (effectively American) hostility to a Communist-led China was an important contributory factor in the growth of Maoist extremism in the late 1950s and 1960s.'

How far then does the history, as Gittings tells it, of this momentous half century in which China emerged from a semi-colonial state into a great industrial world power support his general conclusion? There can be no question that Mao sought unsuccessfully to win US neutrality in the civil war of 1946-9 and that Mao dismissed Beijing's anti-US propaganda in the early 1970s as 'firing off empty cannons' and immediately welcomed Nixon's offer of détente. The decision up till then of the United States not even to recognize the Government of mainland China, and to deal with the government of Taiwan as if it represented China, could not fail to generate extreme nationalism and a sense of isolation, in which the concept emerged of a 'gradual road' of development without outside help even, after the late 1960s, from the Soviet Union. Mao's thinking about the 'gradual road' did no more than reflect the actual facts of the world which China faced.

While the exaggerated expectations of the Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s undoubtedly led to near starvation and possibly millions of deaths, the

twenty years of the People's Communes cannot be written off as a total disaster. Gittings supplies evidence to support the view that 'the specialised farming and rural industry of the 1980s derived some benefit from the earlier collective efforts of the rural work force when it was organized into communes, brigades and teams ... that current achievements were based upon labour-intensive "capital construction" investment in land improvement of the 1960s and 1970s, but under the previous system could never have been realised.' William Hinton, author of *Fanshen*, the classic account of earlier land reform, is quoted by Gittings as arguing 'It is unlikely that if the collectives had been given the same autonomy in production and freedom to develop markets that private producers now enjoy, they would have lagged behind'. My own visit to China in 1978 with an invited medical mission left me impressed rather than otherwise with the several communes we visited, and I was not surprised to read that in a UNICEF publication of 2000 'the Mother and Child Health network was greatly weakened after the Peoples Communes were abolished'.

Mao's promotion of the 'Cultural Revolution' raises more complex issues, in which Mao's age and health must be taken into account. A sense of frustration at slow progress and bureaucratic delays was widespread in the mid-1960s, especially among the increasingly large number of students. The 1981 Resolution on Mao's mistakes passed at the Eleventh Plenum of the Communist Party – five years after Mao's death – identified three causes behind the Cultural Revolution – first, Mao's failure to accept criticism and to realize what was being done behind his back by Lin Biao and the Gang of Four; second, the Chinese tradition of 'feudal autocracy' to which the Communist Party largely succumbed; third, the Party's birth and maturation during decades of war and 'fierce class struggle' had made it ill equipped to deal with the more subtle contradictions of a peaceful society, this weakness being exacerbated by the split with the Soviet Union.

This leaves untreated the crucial question of democracy in the Party and the ultimate division of the Party on this issue leading to the tragedy of Tiananmen Square in June of 1989 when, according to what Gittings calls the most reliable estimates, around a thousand protesters were killed and many more injured and brutally treated thereafter. Gittings makes it clear that the divisions in the Party were real and witnesses the presence of Zhao Ziyang among the students and workers in the Square and his replacement as Premier by Li Peng; the hesitancy, moreover, of the army at first to move, and the several days before the decision was reached to suppress the protests. The old guard of the Party saw a student victory as foreshadowing the end of the Party's rule, and was prepared to sacrifice many hundreds of lives to save their dominant position, but this was not the position of a possible majority of the Party members who supported Zhao Ziyang. Many references are made by Gittings to the strength of not only worker and student opposition but that of journalists and intellectuals, and particularly to the role of Professor Su Shaozhi, the path-breaking intellectual who had been head of the Institute of Marx, Lenin and Mao Tse Tung Thought in Beijing. Su Shaozhi spoke out at the time of the occupation of the Square against bureaucratisation and

sectarianism. The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation had made contact with him in the 1980s, and seen to it that his book on *Democratisation and Reform* was published by the Spokesman Press in 1988. Professor Su believed that democratisation was necessary and possible in China, and suffered exile for his beliefs.

Deng Xiaoping's subsequent return to power, in Gittings' view, 'demonstrates yet again how the Chinese system still required a great leader to make it function'. The gap that had opened up between the people and the Party was closed by accelerated economic growth, which was providing employment for the millions who were pouring into the cities from the countryside. Deng could then argue that 'there was nothing inherently capitalistic about encouraging market forces, nothing wrong with allowing the rich to get richer, eventually (but not too soon) paying more taxes to help the poor'. 'The "non-public ownership sector" had become "an important component part" of China's socialist economy.'

The emergence of China as a major industrial power with massive international investment, and the domination of world markets for manufactures as a result of China's combination of advanced technology and cheap labour leaves, as Gittings clearly demonstrates, many problems unsolved apart from the lack of democracy. There is the widening gap between town and country and of living standards between rich and poor – millionaires at one extreme, slave labour at the other. There is a huge environmental problem of pollution, increasing dependence on imported oil, the threat of the Three Gorges dam to the surrounding countryside, and the rapid growth of the AIDS epidemic; and this is not to mention a possible collapse of the American market, to which so much of China's production is directed. Gittings starts his Introduction by looking forward to the 2008 Olympics which are to be held in China, and which some doomsters believe will be an environmental disaster. Gittings, as always throughout this book, takes a moderate view, not over-optimistic but not alarmist.

*Michael Barratt Brown*

## Foot on Paine

**Trevor Griffiths, *These Are The Times – A Life of Thomas Paine*, Spokesman Books, 208 pages, paperback ISBN 0851246958 £15.00**

**Bernard Vincent, *The Transatlantic Republican – Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolutions*, Amsterdam Monographs in American Studies, Editions Rodopi B.V, 186 pages, paperback ISBN 9042016140 £28.40**

**Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, Penguin Books Great Ideas Series, 112 pages, paperback ISBN 0141018909 £4.99**

Just about 20 years ago, with Jill Craigie at the top of her intellectual form, when she thought the cinema could raise all the arts to a higher degree of excellence, we got the news from a good source that at last a proper film was to be made on a subject which cried out for it: Thomas Paine.

He had been my number one revolutionary hero and, instructed perhaps by her love of revolutions, Rebecca West, he was high up on Jill's list too. It so happens that we had been together with several Indian friends who knew what we were seeing at the first-night showing of Richard Attenborough's *Ghandi* was the truly epic subject properly displayed. The actors contributed to the film's success but it was the vision of the great director testing his new instruments to the limit which would achieve the great results. Not so long after that night of triumph we were told that Attenborough was turning his imaginative mind to Thomas Paine as his next great subject. It could still happen, but meantime I must give readers an update on Thomas Paine matters. Some may recall that I have, on occasion, such is his important role in history, suggested changing the name of Trafalgar Square to Thomas Paine Square. It would be a nice compliment to the Americans and the French, since he played such an important part in achieving their freedom as well as ours.

However, I now report not the great film but three new books, which should remind us afresh how essential were the causes we honour today.

The first and the most significant is *These Are The Times: A Life of Thomas Paine* by Trevor Griffiths, who makes his dedication: 'For Richard Attenborough, comrade and conductor on this long march'. Such words might suggest that the march is ended, but not necessarily so. Here is the brilliant and truly original screenplay written by Griffiths for the film, and I hope that its publication may revive the idea of making it. Most of the scenes take place in America, but they speak again to the whole world. Griffiths is a true Paineite, and I was sent this copy by an old friend who also qualifies for that title, Ken Coates, of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in Nottingham.

The second book, Bernard Vincent's *The Transatlantic Republican: Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolutions*, offers a series of fresh lectures and reviews. Vincent has already played a leading role in restoring Paine's proper reputation in France. Paine himself never forgot his debt to the people of France and Paris in particular. But only with Vincent's scholarship and political insight has that association been properly restored. The other truly great contribution to this period was John Keane's book, *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, published by Bloomsbury on May 1, 1995. Never was there a better date to remind us of the even greater glory of July 14<sup>th</sup> which all those truly entitled to call themselves revolutionaries, the women even more than the men, must still celebrate. Keane then told the story better than ever before, and he would have been happy to acclaim those who are just catching up.

Third, Penguin has just published in its Great Ideas series, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, which first made him infamous. On December 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Thomas Paine Society held its annual meeting in London's Conway Hall, which is our regular meeting place. Without Conway Hall, without Moncure Conway, true revolutionaries of the modern age would have no such appropriate place to meet. Without his truly liberal ideas, embracing women as well as men, which he brought from America, we would still be living in the intellectual dark ages.



The more we look today on the persistent topicality of Paine's political ideas, the more we see for ourselves that it is the potency of his writing which prevails, and we may be all the more amazed to recall that Richard Carlile was imprisoned in 1823 for selling Paine's *Rights of Man*. Carlile concluded that matter thus: 'His pen continued an overmatch for the whole brood.'

*Michael Foot*

## Where is Tom Paine?

**Bruce Kuklick (Ed), *Thomas Paine*, Ashgate International Library of Essays in the History of Social and Political Thought, 514 pages, hardback ISBN 0 7546 2490 0 £125.00/\$250**

**Paul Collins, *The Trouble with Tom*, Bloomsbury, 279 pages, hardback ISBN 0747577684 £12.99**

Bruce Kuklick has assembled an extensive collection of essays on Thomas Paine, beginning with two significant overviews of the literature, which is clearly growing at a phenomenal speed. There are as many people who pray Tom Paine in aid as we can count, and the literature of his detractors, from Edmund Burke on down, would fill a sizeable library. The two bibliographical essays, by A. Owen Aldridge and Caroline Robbins, offer an adequate taster of this.

Aldridge points out that we still lack anything approaching a complete edition of Tom Paine's works, in spite of the fact that his writing resonates with sharp clarity. Paine used a number of pseudonyms, one of which echoes the Miltonic influence which helped to shape his outlook. Comus made his debut in the *Pennsylvania Packet* in March 1779, and brought its fire to bear on Governor Morris who was to become a perennial target.

Caroline Robbins begins with Paine's Quaker tradition: 'Everyone, he wrote, is finally his own teacher'. He seldom, she says, 'allowed five minutes to pass without seeking some improvement'.

Kuklick's book treats on six main subject areas: in addition to its survey of the literature, it includes a section on Paine's influence on the history of political thought, and another on Paine and the ideology of Republicanism. There is a fourth part on the social history of ideas, and a fifth on the literary quality of Paine's writings. The book concludes with two stirring treatments of Paine's influence on radical history, by Ian Dyck and Harvey J. Kaye. Kaye endorses the belief that the study of American radicals should be essential homework for this generation, because it will give heart to the victims of the erosion of democracy over the recent past.

Amen to that: but the really essential homework involves the story of where they failed, and why ...

Kuklick finishes his anthology with a reference to William Cobbett, who began by sharing an intense dislike, not to say phobia about the revolutionary Paine, but

became a dedicated acolyte, going so far as to dig up Paine's bones in the United States and bring them to England, where he hoped they might receive a more reverent welcome, possibly interment in a mausoleum.

This story is taken up by Paul Collins, in *The Trouble with Tom*, which records 'the strange afterlife and times of Thomas Paine'. The story of the loss of Paine's bones is a complicated one, and it has given rise to a macabre book, which does not know the answer. But it finishes with a good question: '*Where is Tom Paine? Reader, where is he not?*'

*James Jones*

## Secret Manipulation

**Dianne Hayter, *Fightback! Labour's traditional right in the 1970s and 1980s*, Manchester University Press, hardback ISBN 0719072700 £60.00, paperback ISBN 0719072719 £14.99**

This claims to be an insiders' account of how the right wing in the Labour Party regained the traditional pre-eminence it appeared to have lost following the fall of the Callaghan Government in 1979, thus preparing the way for its triumphant return in the form of New Labour.

In 1960 the left-right battle had swung towards the left with the adoption of a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament at the Scarborough Conference – thanks to dedicated organisation by the Party's rank and file. This victory was ignored by the leadership – particularly in the Parliamentary Labour Party, who refused to acknowledge that the Party's official position had changed – and was subsequently reversed.

The rank and file took the position that there was little point in working to gain support for policies within the Party if, once carried, these were ignored by the leadership. They argued that the Party belonged to its members (which was certainly true at law) and not to a handful of Members of Parliament who had always assumed they had the right to appoint the Leader and determine the Party's policy. Although the Party was set up by trade unionists, they had always deferred to their parliamentary colleagues.

This approach led to the formation in the 1970s of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD), dedicated to securing constitutional changes that would make the Party more democratic, and more accountable to its members. It is generally accepted that it was CLPD's success in securing the mandatory re-selection of MPs by their constituencies before each general election that was the final straw that led to the breakaway of a right faction to form the SDP in 1981. They were so out of sympathy with their constituency parties and the National Executive that they were afraid they would not be re-adopted by their constituencies and therefore had nothing to lose by going it alone.

Hayter describes the limited efforts of the right in Parliament to organize

against the left-controlled National Executive Committee, but she sees them as more concerned to safeguard their own jobs rather than to take up positions of principle which might leave them vulnerable to attack.

Much more effective, in Hayter's view, were the trade unionists in the secret St Ermine's Group whose aims were:

'taking control of the NEC and then to fashion the party outside the House into an election-winning entity. This would mean expelling Militant, changing head-office personnel and concentrating on winning back public support. Their first service to the party was not to defect in the aftermath of Wembley (1981); their second was to take control of the NEC by 1982: their third was to deliver the leadership to Kinnock, in whom they saw someone equally committed to the task of returning to government'.

By 1987, the right had gained control. Kinnock was leader and felt strong enough to start reshaping policy. With trade union backing he launched a Policy Review at the '87 Conference which, by '91, resulted in four reports which formed the basis of the 1992 manifesto. The Party dropped its opposition to the Common Market and returned to its traditional positions on defence and the mixed economy.

With the death of John Smith, in 1994, and the election of Tony Blair as leader, the ground was prepared for the further reforms of New Labour – restructuring the National Executive Committee to bring it under the control of Downing Street, together with the Party apparatus, with a so-called Chairman appointed by the Prime Minister. 'Spin' and 'control', the result of secret machinations of groups such as St Ermine's, became apparent for all to see, so that the Party became a laughing-stock to the general public and repugnant to its membership, which fell from 400,000 to less than 200,000 over the period of the Labour Government.

Opportunist to the end, the self-styled modernizers are now seeking to turn to their advantage the scandal of undeclared loans to the Labour Party in exchange for hoped-for peerages. They are arguing that such abuses would not occur if political parties were funded by the state. They would thus achieve their dream of doing away with members altogether; the political parties would thus become self-perpetuating oligarchies, answerable to no one but themselves.

At present we have an electoral system that has not produced majority rule since 1931 – the year of Labour's great *débâcle*. It could perhaps be defended on the grounds that single-member constituencies can, in theory, select their own Members of Parliament. There doesn't seem to be much other justification for a system which never manages to achieve democracy – that is, rule by the majority. With selection of MPs controlled by party officials with subventions from the state, ties with local constituencies will become meaningless, as with many of the continental party list systems, and our present electoral system will lose all legitimacy.

The trend towards secret manipulation, started by the St Ermine's Group, must be countered by moves towards openness and transparency at all levels in the Labour Party. The work of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy is more important than ever.

*Richard Fletcher*