

# Reviews

## Whose Challenge?

**Roland McIntosh, *Challenge to Democracy – Politics, Trade Union Power and Economic Failure in the 1970s*, Politico's Publishing, 400 pages, ISBN 1842751573 £25**

Roland McIntosh was appointed Director General of the National Economic Development Council in 1973. He resigned towards the end of 1977. During the whole of this period he kept a diary in which he recorded his impressions of events, policies and personalities. It was a turbulent period in which the Conservatives lost power following a dispute in the mining industry, to be succeeded by a Labour Government, first under Harold Wilson and then under James Callaghan.

For more than twenty years the diary remained in Ronald McIntosh's possession. In 2003 he showed it to Roy Jenkins, who encouraged him to get it published. Publication took place this year, 2006. The book is a shorter version than the original diary.

Neddy, as it was generally known, was a tripartite organisation, first established in 1962 by the then Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan. Its purpose, as seen by its founder, was to seek cooperation wherever possible on agreed strategies between the government of the day, the employers and unions. It survived not only the Conservative and Labour Governments of the 1960s and 1970s but also the entire period of the Thatcher Government. It was finally abolished by John Major in 1992.

Originally, it was the intention of the Conservative Government to involve employers and unions in joint decisions to curb inflation and promote productivity. There were differences of view within the unions as to whether they should cooperate. The majority were in favour, mainly, to seek, wherever possible, to influence government policies towards economic growth and the improvement of living standards. The opportunity of tripartite consultation, it was felt, should not be refused.

Before his appointment as Director-General of the Council, Ronald McIntosh had held senior positions in the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. He was a top-drawer civil servant with a public school (Charterhouse) and Oxford (Balliol) background. He came with a reputation of competence, liberal views, including support for collective bargaining, and a helpful personality.

The 1970s were difficult years for the British economy. Commodity prices rose sharply, many raw materials more than doubled in price, oil prices rose fourfold and the British balance-of-payments deteriorated. British manufacturing industry had already started on its long-term decline.

The British trade union movement was moving leftwards towards more radical policies. A number of unions, notably the TGWU and the AUEW, had elected left-wing leaders and the miners were in a militant mood to improve their wages and conditions.

At a very early stage in Ronald McIntosh's period at Neddy the Government and the miners came into confrontation. The miners were determined on a much overdue improvement in their pay and conditions. At the height of the crisis the Government rejected an offer by the TUC that the miners should be treated as a special case and that a settlement with them outside the terms of the prevailing incomes policy would not be regarded as a precedent for others. Instead the Government dissolved Parliament and called a General Election on the issue of 'Who Governs Britain?'

The Labour Party won a narrow victory and, with Michael Foot as Secretary of State, the new Government immediately negotiated a settlement with the miners. Ronald McIntosh, to his credit, saw that the Conservative Government had mismanaged the dispute with the miners, but this did not imply that he was in sympathy with the left in the unions or the Labour Party.

His point of view appears to have been that Britain was in deep trouble brought about by the economic losses endured during the Second World War, the loss of the Empire, the low level of investment in British industry, the low level of productivity and growing trade union militancy. Hence, as he saw it, the purpose of the Neddy organisation was to help bring the unions on board for higher productivity and for higher industrial investment. If capitalism and parliamentary democracy were to be saved, cooperation, including necessary concessions, were preferable to confrontation!

Unfortunately, as the book makes clear, he never appears to have shown much appreciation that any active trade unionists and socialists within the Labour Party saw the answers to these problems in different terms but without in any way mounting a 'challenge to democracy'. Indeed, their challenge to mistaken policies was seen by the activists as democracy in action.

Industrial investment was low because those who owned private wealth – industrial tycoons, financiers and bankers – kept it that way. Many of them preferred investment overseas or in property. All the warning signs had been given, for example, in the reports of the industrial working parties set up by Sir Stafford Cripps in the years of the 1945 Labour Government.

Moreover, when Ronald McIntosh quite rightly called for increased investment in industry, he also urged that 'non-productive public expenditure' should be cut. What did he mean by this? Was it the social services and pensions? Why no mention of the high cost of the rearmament programme in post-war Britain, the development of nuclear weapons and the cost of the foreign wars in which Britain has been engaged since 1945?

Ronald McIntosh favoured what he describes as 'consensus policies'. This was to include not only increased investment in industry and a reduction in 'non-productive public expenditure' but also tighter control of the money supply. He thought that taxation and income policies had diminished incentives. Within the area of this 'consensus thinking' he sought to work with the unions and to encourage employers to extend the area of joint regulation of employment conditions. Nevertheless his 'consensus thinking' did not include a commitment

to full employment. In May 1977 he wrote, 'that with high unemployment and responsible trade union leadership a return to free collective bargaining need not produce a wage explosion ...'

McIntosh appears to have shared the fear of a number of his contemporaries in power positions that the left in the trade union and labour movement posed a lasting threat. By the left he included not only the familiar names from the unions but also Tony Benn, Michael Foot and Judith Hart. Tony Benn was the member of the Government most actively associated with the effort to promote planning agreements with big firms to ensure that their policies for investments and exports were co-ordinated with the Government's drive for productivity and an improvement in the balance-of-payments. With regard to the election of Labour leader in 1976, McIntosh reveals that if Michael Foot had won he would probably have resigned from the National Economic Development Office.

Ronald McIntosh's favoured union leader during this period was probably Sid Green of the NUR. He speaks of him in very warm terms. He acknowledged a personal liking for some of the more left-wing leaders including Hugh Scanlon and Danny McGarvey. Of Frank Chapple he says that he saw 'everything in terms of the struggle against communism'.

Two of the union leaders who, in my view, emerge with special credit from this book are Jack Jones and Len Murray. Jack Jones never lost his bearings during all the ups and downs of this period. He was always prepared to participate in consultation about economic policy but he never mistook consultation for real economic planning. Effective planning implies that the government of the day has a substantial influence on the control of resources. Economic 'planning' within the NEDDO machinery was little more than indicative speculation about the objectives of many different private firms, interested primarily in private profit.

The strength of Len Murray was in his persistence in pointing out that the rigid incomes policy, particularly when enforced by statute, creates more problems than it claims to resolve. In the first place there is the ever-present question about the share of wages in the national income. What of the other constituent elements: profits, interests, rents, pensions, social services and military expenditure? Even within the framework of incomes policy there are never-ending problems about rewards for higher productivity, special payments to attract labour into undermanned occupations, comparability both within an enterprise and with employment elsewhere, equal pay for work of equal value, job evaluation, differentials and problems of very low pay.

McIntosh offers frank observations – not always complimentary – about a number of top civil servants, Conservative politicians and other leading figures. He records that one prominent industrialist said that he would rather go to prison than conform with the provisions in Tony Benn's Industrial Bill about disclosing information to the government and unions. In another passage he describes John Donaldson, the judge at the National Industrial Relations Court, as 'wrongheaded' and whose judgments showed 'little understanding of the contemporary trade union movement'.

The title of this book, *Challenge to Democracy*, invites the question: if there was a challenge from whom and whence did it come? It was not from the labour movement and, in particular, it was not from the unions.

Labour was elected in the 1970s on a programme of economic planning. It was not the unions who resisted effective economic planning: it was the employers. Under Jim Callaghan the Labour Government followed the mistaken policy of imposing a rigid incomes policy on lowly-paid public sector workers.

When, in 1977, Ronald McIntosh indicated that he was going to leave the National Economic Development Office to join the board of a merchant bank, Harry Urwin of the TGWU described it as ‘the social security system for top people’.

There are lessons to be learnt from these experiences.

*J. E. Mortimer*

## ‘24 hours to save the NHS’

**Michael Mandelstam, *Betraying the NHS: Health Abandoned*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 320 pages, ISBN 1843104822, £14.99**

This is an extraordinary book, written by an extraordinary person. The energy and commitment required to research and record this micro-history of health and social care in Suffolk is truly astonishing, and stems from an entirely justifiable sense of outrage. This is communicated in a measured and well-reasoned way, with every assertion supported by documented fact. There is a vast, and easily accessible, reference base. The tragedy, to my mind, is that, in a democracy, and with a Government that, in 1997, famously gave its electorate ‘24 hours to save the NHS’, there should ever have been a need for a book like this.

One of the most depressing aspects of current NHS politics is the mismatch between the glossy guidance documents and the ‘corporate tyranny’ of the new market in health. ‘Listening to local voices’ paints a rosy picture of a government that respects the views of its electorate, and yet Primary Care Trusts and Government ministers ignore petitions signed by thousands upon thousands of citizens, and dismiss their concerns as merely ‘emotional’ or uninformed, insisting that ‘less is more’. The genuine despair of patients and clinicians, in the face of attempts to close down service after service, is ignored, because cuts are for their ‘own good’. This new NHS recession, which comes at a time of unprecedented investment, seems inexplicable to most people; it is becoming increasingly difficult not to be a conspiracy theorist.

Mandelstam makes the argument that care closer to home, or in patients’ homes, should be properly resourced before community hospitals close. Care at home sounds good, as long as it doesn’t degenerate into denying hospital care when it is needed. We will still need hospitals, rehabilitation beds, and long-term

nursing care for elderly, ill people. The burden of caring for elderly people, with complex medical needs, can be unremitting and exhausting. Weary relatives already witness unseemly battles between social services and primary care trusts over whether care is the financial responsibility of social services or health. The cheapest care, always, is no care at all.

This book stands as a fascinating, if deeply depressing, statement. It also sounds a warning; ‘choice’, ‘modernisation’ and ‘reform’ conceal a privatisation agenda which is being carried out with haste and deceit. By the next election, the NHS will have ceased to exist, as large private companies roll in to take over primary care and the lucrative NHS commissioning budgets. This is going unnoticed for the same reason that Shipman went unnoticed; people simply don’t believe it is possible. The implications are not just in the realms of health; whole communities feel disenfranchised and apathetic about the political process and this is dangerous for democracy. People in power do not like democracy, and apathy is a strong tool for those who would abuse it. I wish that every MP (not just New Labour) would read this book and reflect on its message.

Asked how long he thought the NHS would last, Bevan replied: ‘as long as there are people left to defend it’. Mandelstam recognises that health care is complex, and he cannot offer solutions. However, his whole book is an impassioned defence of an NHS that could be honest, transparent, participative, and equitable.

*Elizabeth Barrett*

## Washington Dysfunctional

**Christopher Meyer, *DC Confidential: The Controversial Memoirs of Britain’s Ambassador at the Time of 9/11 and the Run-up to the Iraq War*, Phoenix, 344 pages, paperback ISBN 0753821303 £8.99**

Christopher Meyer’s reminiscences of his time as ambassador to Washington, long considered the top posting in the diplomatic service, do provide an insight for outsiders to this strange world of stiff protocol, friendships that are only such due to their utility, and spooks. His book is also revealing of the dreadfully dysfunctional state administration that was Britain under Blair. Certainly, if the other departments of state in Whitehall were operating as the Foreign Office was then, it goes a long way to helping us understand why the Home Office is ‘unfit for purpose’, and delivery of policies has been so difficult for New Labour.

*DC Confidential* does give us a behind-the-doors glimpse of diplomacy at its most pedantic. Who should sit beside whom at the grand dinners? Should the Ambassador’s wife accompany him to certain functions, and should he be so annoyed when an invitation for his spouse is not forthcoming? Why should he be worrying his little head about redecorating of the British Embassy, ‘The Great House’, when there’s a bloody war going on in Kosovo?

Ah, Kosovo! A topic of substance, and what is to be the first substantial test for Blair's doctrine of the international community. This is the militarist doctrine espoused by him at a meeting of the Economic Club in Chicago. Meyer's account of the behind the scenes action is to some degree revealing. External affairs in the United Kingdom appear to have been the subject of a by-pass operation. The years of experience accumulated by our Foreign Office were no longer needed. Downing Street was in control. It was as though Tony Blair, sidelined from economic and budgetary policy by Gordon Brown, had to find something to make him famous, so leapt on foreign affairs like a little boy getting a cowboy outfit.

The arrogance of the upstarts was revealed during the period of Blair's visit to the United States in April 1999. He took it upon himself to preach to the Americans on the need to have a credible ground force threat to Milosovic for the bombing of Yugoslavia to be successful. But, worse than that, Clinton went ballistic as he suspected Alastair Campbell of briefing against him. Also annoying to Clinton was the assumption of some sort of equality between a British prime minister and an American president. Remember the question, 'how many battalions does the Pope have?' Then ask the question 'what was Britain's contribution to the Kosovo bombing?', and the answer is 48 aircraft to the American's 1,152.

Lesson one, therefore, is if you're going to crawl to an American president, don't annoy him first. But another lesson was learned from that conflagration. It is that you can lie in your propaganda regarding far-off foreign parts in a way that you cannot at home. Wagging the dog thus became a mainstream policy tool, but it only succeeds if the objective is reached quickly. The interventions in Afghanistan and then Iraq should all have been over by now but they're not. Indeed, the mission is still not accomplished in Kosovo.

The revelation of the fabrication of the case for war from the ambassador's point of view is interesting to a student of this period; unfortunately for Christopher Meyer, we now have evidence that refutes most of the arguments that led him to conclude that these wars were in some way justified. His reference to the Iraqi's weapons of mass destruction report being 'defective and mendacious' ignores the fact the United States removed 8,000 pages from the 11,000 page report before the United Nations had full view of it (see *Spokesman* 77, 78 & 81). His memory of the Kosovo bombing omits the contemporary accounts that report mass evacuation as happening after the bombing started, and therefore it could not have been the reason to start bombing.

Meyer's account is still valuable as it exposes some possible reasons for the failure of foreign policy which will surely become the Blair Legacy. A powerful press officer recruited from the British tabloids, whose motto is never to let the facts get in the way of a good story, may have been able to provide mendacious jingoism to accompany the drums of war. But, as is now revealed, he can contribute nothing to the complexity of rebuilding the broken lives and ruined homes that are always the result of choosing war as a foreign policy option.

I mused by the way at an autobiographical passage where Meyer made reference to a post-graduate year he spent at the School of Advanced International

Studies in Bologna, later to be called the Paul H. Nitze School. For any student of international politics, Nitze's name should be enough to tell you what territory you are in, but not, it appears, our future ambassador to the US of A. In his own words, he later discovered from a Soviet diplomat that the school was funded by the CIA. What do they teach them at Cambridge? Nitze was the arch cold warrior of the United States, a friend and promoter of the views of Edward Teller. He could almost be described as Dr Strangelove's apprentice.

*Henry McCubbin*

## Mao

**Yves Chevrier, *Mao and the Chinese Revolution*, Interlink Books, 158 pages, Northampton, Mass. ISBN 1566565146 \$15**

**Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 814 pages, Vintage Books, ISBN 0099461552 £15**

**Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 693 pages, ISBN 0674023323 £22.95**

Jung Chang is the best selling author of *Wild Swans*, who began her education as a Red Guard when she was fourteen years old, and took up a variety of occupations ('barefoot doctor', steelworker, electrician) before becoming a student of English at Sichuan University. She came to Britain in 1978, and subsequently gained a PhD in Linguistics at York.

Jon Halliday was an established author before he met his colleague.

Evidently the tribulations undergone by Jung Chang, so harrowingly described in *Wild Swans*, have not disposed her to seek to prettify the biography of Mao. He is presented as having direct responsibility for the deaths of seventy million Chinese, and his strenuous politicking throughout a tumultuous life is invariably seen through the eyes of his factional opponents. Evidently these people must have sometimes been right, perhaps even often right. But it would be contrary to everything we know to assume that this was always so. When the first edition was published, it received extraordinary acclaim, and was celebrated all the way across the press, giving rise to the characterisation of Mao as 'the greatest monster of them all'. But this is unlikely to be the last word, not least because of its free approach to the evidence.

Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals embarked upon their history of the Cultural Revolution with no greater enthusiasm for the merits of its progenitor. But their very large book is more compelling, not because it plays down atrocities committed by Mao or on his instructions, but because it is unwilling to speculate about his motives or to enter into imaginative

reconstructions of the events it chronicles.

Yves Chevrier has given us a little book on Mao's Revolutions, which characterises their architect as 'both tyrant and perpetual rebel', 'the father of the tragic utopia that was Maoism'.

'Mao's unique position', he says, 'comes from combining three exceptional qualities as revolutionary, empire builder and totalitarian dictator'. But the strength of this little book lies in its readiness to follow the arguments of Mao's adversaries, from Chen Duxiu to Liu Shaoqi or Wang Ming. This gives his work some real credibility.

James Holt

## The Vegetarians' Case Book

**Tristram Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India*, HarperCollins, 628 pages, hardback ISBN0007128924 £25**

I was brought up in a Quaker family, where many of my parents' Quaker friends were vegetarians. As a child it seemed to me that they were a bit odd, with their beards, open neck collars, sandals and their luggage in a rucksack. I realised later that their vegetarianism was part of their pacifism and general repugnance to all forms of violence, feelings which I certainly shared with my parents. Edward Carpenter was at one time my democratic socialist hero, but I never became a vegetarian. Although I could not eat rabbit, once having kept rabbits, and have never liked red meat, I just hoped that there were more humane ways of killing. The only logical case for protecting animals from killing seemed to me to be that of the vegans, because I did not see what was to happen to the male offspring of the cows or ewes if only the females were to be kept for their milk, and I liked all dairy products too much to give them up. I am also very fond of fish and have taught myself not to mind catching them and boiling crabs and lobsters.

What I had no idea of until I read Tristram Stuart's monumental and beautiful book was the roll of honour of the vegetarians running from Pythagoras, Socrates and Diogenes to Bernard Shaw and including Voltaire and Rousseau, Bacon, Descartes and Newton, Franklin, Shelley and Thoreau, Gandhi and – heaven forbid! – Hitler. Nor had I any idea of the controversies about meat eating and animal and human rights inside Christian orthodoxy and among the French revolutionaries, nor of the widespread influence of Indian thought on the diets of early British imperialists. Christians went back to the Bible and saw in the story of the Garden of Eden and the lamb lying down with the lion the justification for a prelapsarian heritage, which human population increase had rendered extinct. For non-Christians the association of meat eating and human violence is one of the continuing themes uniting all vegetarians, with the Brahmins and Buddhists providing the best evidence for vegetarian pacifism. Vegetarians in the past, according to Tristram Stuart, had varied reasons for their conviction, but the sub-

title to his book indicates that what most of them seem to have had in common was their admiration for the longevity of Indian vegetarians as compared with Europeans. Medical science seems to have narrowed the difference, so that I am not so impressed with this argument.

A central part of the argument against vegetarianism in the past was concerned with the Darwinian theory of evolution. If survival of the fittest in changing climatic conditions on the planet is how the great variety of species is explained and how the human species has evolved, this must have meant the killing off of the less fit. We are all what we are, whether we like it or not, the result of an immensely long process of elimination. The population of any species, moreover, would grow far beyond its capacity to survive if it were not for the action of predators. The culling of human beings in wars may have been necessary for human survival, and may, as some believe, still be necessary as population growth exceeds the resources available. This was the argument of Thomas Malthus, based on Buffon's principle that death was the mother of life, which challenged all those like Shelley and Godwin who believed that a more egalitarian society based on vegetarian principles would survive.

By far the most impressive case for a mainly vegetable human diet was and still is today the ecological one, that grazing animals use many times (some have claimed ten times) the amount of land for a given quantity of human food. Adam Smith among others recognised this. Enclosures and the Highland Clearances for sheep grazing not only destroyed the poor man's commons, but reduced the productivity of the land for increasing populations. Today, moreover, the demand for beef production is leading to the destruction of millions of acres of tropical forest cover which is essential for the self-regulation of the planet's climate. Few people are likely to become vegetarians, let alone vegans, as a result of such considerations, but more and more are likely to reduce the amount of meat in their diet. It is an important lesson of this book that most of those in the past who advocated a vegetarian diet allowed for a small proportion of animal products in their meals. Jamie Oliver's war on beef burgers in school meals does not imply, as the cartoonists suggest, a regime of 'rabbit food' in their place. Human teeth and digestive systems are quite capable of dealing with both vegetables and meat in moderation to ensure a healthy diet. *Carpe diem!*

*Michael Barratt Brown*