

Reviews

Sketch for a Portrait

John Pilger, *Freedom Next Time*, Bantam Press, 352 pages, hardback ISBN-13 978-0593055526 £17.99

On the cover of John Pilger's new book, *Freedom Next Time*, there's a quotation from Noam Chomsky: 'Pilger's work has truly been a beacon of light in dark times'. I'd like to talk about the energy of that light.

Throughout the book Pilger's firsthand experiences in the killing fields lead the reader to confront the world as it has become during the last twenty years.

The fields visited are Afghanistan after the US invasion; South Africa since the end of Apartheid and the continuing exclusion of the (black) poor; Bombay under the impact of globalisation; Palestine and its sixty-year old resistance to its dismemberment as planned by Israel; and the Chagos Islands, in the Indian Ocean, whose indigenous population were uprooted and dispossessed by the British government under Harold Wilson, so that Britain could hand the islands over to the US as an uninhabited military base!

In his Introduction, Pilger quotes Harold Pinter's Nobel Prize acceptance speech when Pinter scandalously declared that whereas the crimes of the USSR are continually being referred to the comparable crimes of the USA are systematically passed over by the media and their commentators *as if nothing had happened*. (Significantly the BBC ignored this speech by Britain's Nobel Prize winner.)

The ensuing silence has contributed massively to the said darkness of the times, and Pilger has been speaking out, loud and clear, in this silence for forty years.

Along with the silence goes the highjacking of language by so-called 'communication-experts'. Every word used today to justify what the powerful are trying to impose on the world is false.

The powerful here refers to the rich armed to the teeth with weapons of mass destruction. There is no historical precedent for such power – though this is not to say it's invincible.

The highjacking of language, apart from its tactical opportunisms, has a well thought-out strategic aim: namely, to render us (the extensive majority) wordless. When wordless, people become passive, because purposeful disobedience usually begins with words.

The key-terms employed to justify the new global domination by the rich are: Order, Democracy, Progress, Justice, Freedom. And what they refer to are precisely their opposite (in the same order): Chaos, Manipulation, Regression, Vested Interest and Buying Power!

The recent obscene execution of the foul tyrant Saddam Hussein is a telling illustration of how this strategy works. After the arranged spectacle of that execution, the principle of justice across the world was made incoherent and confused.

By contrast Pilger tirelessly insists upon the age-long meaning of words. Listen to him on the Chagos Islands:

‘It is difficult to describe the determination of the islanders to win justice and freedom. This, and their refusal to be cast as perennial victims, are firm in my memory. I need think only of the tragedy carved in Charlesia’s face and her pledge that “we fight, and fight”; and of Oliver standing over the graves of his brothers and sisters, whispering, “No more!”’

* * *

The world situation is more desperate today than when Pilger began writing, yet he is not discouraged, for he recognises that he is engaged in an historic and therefore continuous struggle. Anger and pride send discouragement packing. Or, to put it another way, his long perspective has given him a particular type of endurance.

He is Australian and when I consider his endurance, something clicks in my mind with that national, Australian and popular legend of *The Diggers* – those ANZAC troops of the First World War, who would never say Die, who were nobody’s fool, who hated authority and mistrusted all rhetoric, who were self-reliant, who were loyal and ever ready to give a hand to a mate, and who were unsurprised to find that they were on their own. Somewhere there’s something of a Digger in Pilger.

* * *

Pilger is more than an indefatigable reporter and witness; he wants justice done and until it is, he’ll remain implacable and intransigent. He’s aware that men like Dick Cheney, Milton Friedman, Pinochet, Blair, or Sarkozy were and are as pitiless as the injustices for which the World Bank, IMF, GATT and the corporate capitalist network are responsible across the globe every hour of the day and night.

For example Pilger conducts a long interview with Nelson Mandela whom he loves, and during it he repeatedly berates him for collaborating with the World Bank and the multinationals. He doesn’t really ask how much space for manoeuvre Mandela had in 1994 when, a few years after his release from jail, he became the first black President of South Africa. Yet the whole practice of politics is, for good or bad, about manoeuvring in a given limited space. Instead Pilger cross-examines a fallen idol. A fallen idol he loves. This is how Pilger’s account of their meeting ends:

‘I said, “You must at times be stuck by the irony of your situation!” He gripped my forearm. “*All* the time,” he said. As he climbed into his silver Mercedes, he had still not tied his shoelaces, and his small grey head was barely visible in a bevy of white men with paunches and huge arms and wires in their ears. One of them gave an order in Afrikaans and the Mercedes and Mandela were gone.’

Pilger is pitiless not because he has a small heart but because he never stops reckoning with the pitilessness of the world’s new rulers. He is the unremitting Council for the Prosecution in a courtroom that doesn’t exist – except in the vast

unforgiving memory of the forsaken poor. This is why his intransigence, which like all intransigence can be narrow-minded, nevertheless has something vast about it; it passes over horizon after horizon.

Hegel points out somewhere that Justice by its very nature is bound to be tempered and modulated because its task is to adjudicate between conflicting claims. This in practice is deeply true, and, in a sense, it puts Pilger in his place. Yet I have such a respect for that place!

* * *

On a couple of occasions he and I have spoken on the same political platforms, but I have never sat down alone with him – except when reading one of his books. I'd give a lot to sit opposite him because I would like to try to draw his portrait. With a pencil and without words.

I suspect that the lines on his face, the wear-and-tear around his eye sockets caused by all he has observed and refuses to lay aside, the humour in his eyes, the determined set of his mouth, his rough travelling neck, his lopsided shoulders – I suspect that all these traces from his life would reveal an integrity that transcends any contradiction and is the silent source of the energy which makes him a beacon.

PS. One must try to write in such a way that what's written, even if one believes it will be read by only a few, would speak out loud if read anywhere or everywhere.

John Berger

What They Wouldn't Tell You

Neil Mackay, *The War on Truth*, Sunday Herald Books, 480 pages, paperback ISBN13 978-1904684152 £7.99

Neil Mackay is widely known and much admired north of the border where his fearless writing is part of the regular diet of readers of the *Sunday Herald*. Certainly his articles have had a habit of getting around, but it is a splendid thing to have them packaged here, in an accessible and highly lethal single volume, *The War on Truth*. This carries the subtitle: *Everything you always wanted to know about the invasion of Iraq but your Government wouldn't tell you.*

In a way this is a summary of what you have to expect: the news is dire, deeply depressing, scandalous. But it is all presented in a direct, conversational manner, so easy to understand that you are apt to miss the gravity of the story, which will sneak up on you later, when it all sinks in.

Two splendid chapters in this book are called *How the Lies were Told*. The first of these chapters deals with Operation Rockingham, with which David Kelly, the former UN Weapons Inspector, had co-operated. Rockingham was a sustained effort to cherry pick a mountain of intelligence about the wickedness of Saddam

Hussein, filtering out everything that might encourage agnosticism about his possession of weapons of mass destruction and actually existing war making capacities. Rockingham was able to penetrate the United Nations operations in Iraq and provide 'a seamless flow of data from Iraq'. But Rockingham was working for the British Government, and skewing its reports towards the justification of the coming war. Hence we got no record of the vulnerability of the Iraqi forces, but all that taradiddle about the forty-five minute warning.

Mountains of actual intelligence sustained the view that the Iraqis were fully compliant with their international obligations to disarm. A handful of single sources did not. These were 'inevitably linked to someone like Iyad Allawi' of the exiled Iraqi National Accord. Allawi, of course, later became the leader of the new post-invasion Iraqi Interim Government. Such a single source furnished the forty-five minute allegation, subsequently exposed as being totally absurd. The Iraqi Lieutenant Colonel al-Dabbagh launched this 'intelligence', 'although he had never seen inside the chemical weapons crates upon which the forty-five minute claim was based'. The invention was passed by the Colonel to his brother-in-law, General Muhie, 'who helped get the claim to the London HQ of the Iraqi National Accord'. Thus arose a string of horrific headlines, aimed at persuading the British people that they were in imminent danger. All this was a lie, crafted to engineer a war for the benefit of Mr. Allawi and Mr. Chalabi, who wanted more than anything to get rid of Saddam Hussein. WMD were the key to this objective, so WMD had to be invented, come what may.

Scott Ritter, who provided Mackay with importance evidence about this scam, insists that intelligence officers involved in cherry picking selective intelligence 'were acting directly on political orders'. So the lies may have been secreted in Operation Rockingham, but the master liars were among the high political powers.

All of this, in the fullness of time, passed into folklore as the dodgy dossier. The Prime Minister claimed that this 'intelligence' all came from the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) assessments. 'What he does not say is that it was British Government policies which corrupted the JIC in the first place, making it a tool of British Government deception. Now the JIC is disgraced. MI6 is saddled with a wounded leader in the name of John Scarlett, a man who everyone takes as a Government lapdog who sold his soul, and British intelligence is humiliated once again around the world.'

Neil Mackay pays tribute to Michael Meacher, who attacked the Government over Operation Rockingham, after he had concluded that his vote for the Government in going to war was insupportable. He had done it because he believed the Prime Minister at the time.

I must confess to a very great difficulty in believing the Prime Minister, even if he announced that it would soon be teatime. A careful study of Mr. Blair's lies would forever displace Baron Munchausen from his place at the head of the legendary league tables.

The dirtiest part of this machinery of lies expressed itself in the manipulation of the press. Mackay devotes a whole chapter to this kind of manipulation. The art

was to feed whatever implausible story one wished to project to an unsuspecting newspaper, possibly abroad, and then to bounce the story back into more widely accessible newspapers, attracting plausibility every time it was repeated.

These black arts were used to destroy the leadership of the BBC, and to bring British politics into profound contempt. The dependence on lies is fiercely corrosive of all other areas of good behaviour. There are no established frontiers to the lie. Once it is unmasked, it can fan out to generate ever newer, ever more implausible, ever more comprehensive untruths. This book has mapped some of this territory. It gives us some important pointers to the impeachment of Tony Blair. It identifies some of the most significant malefactors, and gives a well-earned tribute in this respect to Mr. Rupert Murdoch. (Thank you for a lovely war.)

We appear to be drawing to the close of the Blair epoch, and no doubt, when he falls, one lot of liars will be cleared out of high office. But the well has been poisoned, and it will be difficult to reshape the rule of decency. However, Neil Mackay's book deserves a place in the minds of all those who will be trying.

Ken Coates

The Possibilities of Nanotechnology

Toby Shelley, *Nanotechnology: New Promises, New Dangers*, Zed Books, 170 pages, hardback ISBN 1 84277 686 X £45.00, paperback ISBN 1 84277 687 8 £9.99

Circumstantially, at least, every period of capitalist expansion has been intimately connected with new products and processes: coal, cotton, the internal combustion engine, the computer chip. Could nanotechnology presage a similar future expansion, whilst solving one or two little problems (such as global warming, water shortages and the depletion of oil resources) on the way? Certainly many governments and their militaries, plus business corporations and many in the scientific community, think it is possible and they are devoting enormous amounts of money in research and development. Much of this work is well out of public view and it is therefore hardly surprising that according to The Royal Society 'public awareness of nanotechnologies is low in Great Britain'. From a radical perspective Toby Shelley has made a stimulating and comprehensive attempt to redress this deficit. This is thankfully not a scientific textbook, but he does give us a brief grounding in the basics and the world of buckyballs, nanotubes, enhanced chemical catalysts and quantum dots. It is perhaps, however, a timely reflection on our situation that given the present distribution of power the first fruits of nanotechnology should be anti-wrinkle cream and improved body armour.

Nanotechnology is based on the ability to manipulate atoms and molecules at the nano level (a nano is one billionth of a metre, the size of 10 hydrogen atoms). Anything 100 nanometres or below is nanotechnology. At this size matter can behave differently from what it would do at larger concentrations and it is the

ability to control these features that leads to new materials and novel processes. To give a flavour of the possibilities in just a few areas here is a brief list: diagnosing for several medical conditions from one sample with the so-called 'lab-on-a-chip'; extremely strong but lightweight materials; minute sophisticated sensors and computers to make robotics practical; water filters and desalination plants driven by sunlight; the hydrogen economy made a reality by improved hydrogen production and storage; carbon dioxide rendered harmless in coal-fired smokestacks by nanocrystal catalysers and that is without the self-replicating nanobots, or 'grey goo' of Prince Charles' nightmares. Shelley takes us through some of the discussions about 'a new age dawning' but returns us with a bump to planet Earth with two chapters covering nanotechnology's enhancement of military might, conjuring up a vision of an ever-spiralling nano-weapons arms race giving a new stimulus to the 'Star Wars' initiative. In addition, worryingly, is the potential of nanotechnology for 'creative mass murder' in the hands of possible terrorists, it not requiring the infrastructure of other 'weapons of mass destruction'.

It therefore comes as no surprise that two institutions particularly interested in developing nanotechnology are the American Defence Department and the Israeli Defence Force. The Israelis are major players in nanotechnology research and development, so much so that Shimon Peres in a recent statement refers to the need for 'new surveillance tools' and 'remote control robots ... grounded in revolutionary nanotechnology' (*Guardian* 04/09/06). There is now accumulating evidence, provided by RAI News 24, the Italian state television satellite channel, of the Israelis using so-called DIME (Dense Inert Metal Explosive) weapons in Gaza (*Guardian* 17/10/06). These are highly lethal weapons capable of causing small but deadly internal burn injuries not easily detected by x-ray because of the total lack of shrapnel. According to the website of Air Force Research Laboratory (a commercial company based in the USA), whose mission statement is, 'we defend America by unleashing the power of innovative science and technology', DIME weapons are LCD munitions (Low Collateral Damage) particularly suitable for the 'warfighter during urban conflicts' – a miniaturised Neutron Bomb. The casing of the weapon, a 'carbon fibre/epoxy matrix', was developed through nanotechnology and can penetrate a 'one foot hardened concrete wall' but 'disintegrates into small non-lethal fibres' on detonation, hence no shrapnel or 'collateral damage', just terrible fatalities and burn injuries, which are difficult to diagnose and treat by the usual medical practices.

The US government's programme for a 'Future Force Warrior' soldier will inhabit this new war-fighting world dressed in a nano-fibred lightweight but super strength, Gortex style bullet-proof jumpsuit capable of sensing injury and turning into blood-halting bandaging. One of the technological benefits of nanotechnology is the miniaturising, with greatly enhanced capacity, of many aspects of computer and sensor technology and the military has not been slow to appreciate its uses. Millions of 'insect-sized' sensors would be dropped over a target area to monitor movements of an adversary, and Peres was obviously

thinking of such devices for deployment in Southern Lebanon in his statement. All the equipment used by armies would eventually be fundamentally altered by new nano-materials and its electronic applications in communication and surveillance on the battlefield where increased use of drones and robotics would lead to a different kind of warfare. Shelley sees this as an attempt, by the United States in particular, to find the 'silver bullet' technology to overawe its potential adversaries, to restore the world to the state approaching that of the late 1940s and 50s, a time of American hegemonic atomic might. This could be difficult, when at least 23 other nations are busily researching nanotechnology, but possible in terms of counter-insurgency warfare against hostile civilian communities. The counter-insurgency element of much of the research should not be overlooked: a technological fix for future Vietnam and Iraq-type conflicts is definitely being pursued by the United States.

There are, however, three major snags to nanotechnology that the book mentions, namely that of industrialising the processes involved, the health and safety dangers of the technology itself, and the way research and development are filtered through a market capitalist environment. Shelley largely eschews the former, probably because of its highly technical nature and perhaps that is as well, but it is an important point. Much of the equipment that has made nanotechnology possible is recently invented, requires great skill to use, is highly expensive and is designed largely for laboratory use. What can be achieved in the laboratory needs to be replicated at factory production level and this poses difficulties that are often not easily solved. Many of them will be solved and some have been solved: the manufacture of 'buckyballs' in industrial quantities, an intrinsic element of the new nano-materials, for example. There are particular problems with medical nano use in terms of sensory selectivity that will certainly take years to perfect, and there is a complete chapter in the book on timescales that is illuminating in this context. As to the wider practicality of some nano proclivities at the laboratory level, they are way beyond the knowledge of this reviewer to assess. Certainly environmentalists have not made much noise about the nanotechnologies capable of mitigating global warming but have been more concerned with the potential dangers of nanoparticle release into the biosphere.

Shelley makes clear that information and concern about the environmental and health consequences of nanotechnology are only now beginning to surface with any force. Previously information has been submerged by a fog of sensationalist stories about 'grey goo' and self-replicating 'nanobots', and this has often been compounded by the reticence of many engaged in research to describe specific processes until actually patented. The present situation is analogous to asbestos, where introduction was rushed ahead in a wide range of products and applications, with commercial priorities strictly in control, before the effects of exposure were fully understood. The asbestos analogy also fits neatly with nanoparticles, asbestos danger being caused by its fineness and ability to penetrate deep into human tissue. Nanoparticles are often smaller still, and their ability to penetrate human tissue is the very feature that provides their usefulness in terms of targeted

medical intervention, a veritable ‘double-edged nature’. In true New Labour style the government has called on the Health and Safety Executive to investigate the health consequences of nanotechnology, after prompting by the Royal Society, but has provided no extra money for such research. The trade union movement is waking up to the dangers and has a vital role to play in monitoring the effects on workers involved in the research and manufacture of nanoparticles as well as the implications for the wider community. As for the use and disposal of nano materials and nano waste in the environment – again it is the minuteness of the particles that allows their easy transference into earth, air and water. Another demonstration of the double-edged nature of nanotechnology is the fact that nanoparticles can be useful in actually cleaning up chemically polluted sites.

The distortion of priorities for research and development does not only encompasses the world of armaments and the ephemera of the western consumer economies, but also reflects the vast international disparities of power and wealth. Research is largely centred within the 23 or so leading nations including China, Russia, Brazil and India and the general emphasis of research is usually determined by the priorities of their respective power élites. These priorities are frequently in conflict with the needs and desires of the majority of the world’s population whose problems are merely addressed as after-thoughts. It is, however, within this very area that some of the most important potentialities of nanotechnology are to be found: cheap efficient water purification in a world where 2.2 million people per year die of the lack of it; new methods of low-energy desalination in drought-prone areas of the Third World already bearing the costs of global warming; mass quick and simple diagnostic methods for the common fatal diseases of the developing world where hospitals and medical laboratories are few; mitigating the ‘digital divide’ by bringing information technology to every community with access to nano-based large screen technology and access to a digital library out of matchbox-sized computers; nutritional help to impoverished soils by new nano chemicals; improved animal husbandry through sensor and diagnostic technology. Encouraging developments such as that released by the US based Rice University Centre for Biological and Environmental Nanotechnology of a cheap filter to deal with metal polluted rural wells in Bangladesh point the right trajectory for research and development (*Guardian* 10/11/06). The commercial imperative, however, more often distorts the use of nanotechnology in the developing world: the Monsanto Corporation who combined GM seed biotechnology with the specific nano-herbicide glyphosate within a stringent patent regime are the sort of initiatives that have caused difficulties for small peasant farmers throughout the Third World.

There is also another concern for the developing nations that are often economically dependent on the exports of their extractive industries: the new materials and processes of nanotechnology may well not need the inputs that were previously required or not in the same volume. Cars made of nano-materials will be lighter and the engines may be more efficient with the help of improved nano lubricants and fuel additives, meaning less oil and mineral usage. The nano-

improved mobile phone will not require coltan mined from the Congo; the nano-enhanced catalytic converter will need a lot less expensive platinum or even none at all; and synthetic nano-fibres will replicate the attributes of cotton with none of the disadvantages. The terms of trade could over the years swing disastrously to the disadvantage of Third World producers.

The implications of nanotechnology are potentially seminal for many of the physical sciences and related technologies – it is as fundamental as that. The new materials and processes are bound to have a profound effect on us all. It is not possible within one small book to acquaint us with all the dangers and opportunities of nanotechnology but Toby Shelley and Zed are to be applauded for bringing the importance of the subject to the attention of a radical audience. The book is both thoughtful and timely and demonstrates that no adequate appreciation of the future course of international and national societies is complete without some consideration of nanotechnology. The Left needs to add nanotechnology to all its other concerns and particularly its relationship with questions of peace and war, structural global inequalities and generalised environmental hazards. This book is a contribution to that broadening debate and seeks the wider involvement of an informed and active civil society, of which the labour and environmental movements are a vital part. We all need to press for rigorous enquiry and control for the research, manufacturing and safe disposal of nano materials and harmful related processes; the use of the ‘precautionary principle’ to guard against a repeat of the asbestos disaster; plus an acceptance that this may delay or even halt the utilisation of some elements of nanotechnology, and of course make sure that its direction is firmly based on a life – enhancing rather than a life-destroying path.

John Daniels

Corporate Donations – A Reminder of Better Days

Norman Atkinson, *Old Merry Pebbles – Politics with the lid off*, Amherst Publishing, 192 pages, hardback ISBN 1903637473 £12.99

The author of this unusual book will be remembered by many readers of *The Spokesman* as a very good former Labour Member of Parliament. He served as an MP between the years 1964 and 1987. He was also for a period the Labour Party’s national treasurer. He pointedly reminds readers that during his time as Party treasurer ‘corporate donations to the Labour Party were banned by Executive decision’. He recalls, nevertheless, that some Labour Ministers did receive cheques personally from private companies. Most of the cheques were handed over to him as Party treasurer and were then returned to the sender. Things have changed since the day when Norman was Party treasurer!

Nowadays there is a grotesque situation where the elected national treasurer of the Party has acknowledged that he was not aware of donations/loans made to the Party by wealthy businessmen. In the background there is a peer who has been

described as ‘the Party’s fund-raiser’. Who elected him? He is known to be an associate of the Prime Minister.

Norman Atkinson was not only a first-rate Labour MP. He is also a gifted writer. He wrote a widely admired biography of the celebrated engineer, Joseph Whitworth, who, like Norman, was associated with Manchester. Norman Atkinson served an engineering apprenticeship at Metropolitan-Vickers and then became a draughtsman. He was an active member of the Amalgamated Engineering Union and was elected to the Manchester City Council in 1945. He quickly made his mark by his ability and consistently progressive views.

The centrepiece of this book is a play set in the stately home of Joseph Whitworth in Manchester in the closing week of 1870. It has no more than a handful of characters – Whitworth himself, who was a Liberal with a radical turn of mind, two Liberal Members of Parliament and an attractive woman – a widow – who is not only a Liberal Radical but also a pacifist and a campaigner for the emancipation of women. The other main character is a housemaid with rationalist views.

The plot – if that is the right word for a delicately drawn sequence of events and exchanges of views – concerns the rival efforts of Joseph Whitworth and one of the Liberal MPs to woo the attractive and politically alert widow. In a short biographical list of characters at the beginning of the play Norman Atkinson describes the widow as ‘fashionable’ and with a ‘very youthful appearance for her age’. More importantly for the purpose of the story she has a sharp political sense and displays a readiness to expose double standards and some of the oddities of parliamentary behaviour.

All this by itself would make for a good story; a mixture of politics, sharp commentary and romance. But it has much more. Without ever being heavy-handed Norman Atkinson succeeds in giving the dialogue a clear relevance to current political events. It’s all there; rewards for political donations, intrigue for the control of resources in the Middle East, influence with the owners of the press, moral hypocrisy, and the often corrupting influence of the business interests of MPs.

The play has a happy ending. It would be wrong in a review to spoil the pleasure of would-be readers by revealing the ‘happy ending’, but it relates to the romance and not to the politics.

The unseen characters in this play are Gladstone and Disraeli, respectively the leaders of the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party. According to Norman Atkinson both Gladstone and Disraeli were natural oligarchs, but this was in a period before the universal franchise. Norman pays tribute to Disraeli for his 1868 Reform Bill which extended the franchise. He suspected that it would deliver more votes to the Liberals than to the Tories – which it did – but he nevertheless went ahead with it. Gladstone became Prime Minister at the head of a Liberal administration. Norman Atkinson writes of these events: ‘It was political cruelty. For Dizzy himself, it was a beautifully majestic thing to do. A wholly selfless act; a principled belief in reform.’

Tony Blair, according to reports, governs with an oligarchical inner cabinet. He has appointed not a few but many members of the House of Lords. Gladstone conferred a hundred peerages, mostly for political and money reasons. According to Norman Atkinson, Tony Blair has overtaken that record ‘for somewhat similar reasons’. How indeed can this be reconciled with a commitment to democracy?

Norman Atkinson also pays a warm tribute to James Callaghan who was Labour Prime Minister when Norman was the Party treasurer. Callaghan, he says, ‘was straight’. He discussed with Norman some of the possible pitfalls for the Party. When the Party was looking for a new property after leaving Transport House, a property developer offered a substantial donation to the Party and a low rent for office space if Callaghan could persuade the appropriate planning authority to grant planning permission for a new office block. Callaghan would have nothing to do with it.

Approximately one half of this book is occupied by an introductory essay to the play. This essay is also written by Norman Atkinson. He is clearly influenced by George Bernard Shaw. Comedy and satire can be effective in influencing an audience. Norman described his play as a satirical political comedy. ‘My theme’ he says, ‘is directed against hypocrisy and all its variations’. In another passage he says that his play ‘blows the lid off political scandal’ and that ‘it doubles as an incisive commentary on Blair’s New Labour oligarchy’.

How did the New Labour oligarchy take over the Labour Party? Norman Atkinson’s verdict is the death of John Smith created the opportunity for Blair to stand for the leadership, even though if John Smith had lived, Tony Blair’s Islington ‘cheese and wine circuit’ had long discussed the necessity to oppose him. There was an ideological gap between John Smith and the Blairites. In addition, the group around Tony Blair were buttressed in their views by the failure of Roy Jenkins and his supporters who had formed the SDP. The conclusion they drew was that the only way to reinvent the Labour Party was to take it over from the inside.

In addition to the introductory essay and the play, the book also contains numerous sketches drawn by Norman Atkinson, an extremely good caricature of Norman Atkinson himself drawn by Ken Gill, the former general secretary of the draughtsmen’s union – now part of AMICUS – and a persuasive foreword by Tony Benn. This is an enjoyable book, and it carries with it a sharp political message.

J. E. Mortimer

Political Parties for Sale

Darren G. Lilleker, Nigel A. Jackson and Richard Scullion (editors), *The Marketing of Political Parties*, Manchester University Press, paperback ISBN 07190 73014 £14.99

In the 2005 General Election the three main political parties spent tens of millions

of pounds provided by a handful of super-rich individuals on their campaigns which were conducted on marketing principles. Manchester University Press has now published a book edited by Darren G. Lilleker and others, which investigates the manner in which this was done.

It considers the voters as customers and the politicians as businessmen who are seeking to sell a branded product with a unique selling point. It finds, however, that political marketing, unlike consumer marketing, does not fully engage with the life of the voter consumer. The techniques employed did not succeed in reaching all voters. Although the politicians picked up one or two methods of getting at core voters and attracting the floating vote, they were unable to reach the bulk of voters by this means.

‘Marketing’s function is to satisfy consumers; politics, as it currently operates, consistently fails to do so’, the study concludes (p.263). It suggests that political marketing in the UK is one key cause of the widening gap between politicians and the people (p.264).

Few committed conscience politicians will need to wade through every page of this far from riveting treatise to be convinced. It is already apparent to most informed observers that more and more electors are being alienated by current methods employed by the political parties, particularly when they are not attracted by the policies themselves. One aspect of campaigning has been to shape party propaganda to win over marginal voters, whose views are identified in focus groups, etc., while traditional voters are taken for granted, on the assumption that they have nowhere else to go. All the main parties are now contending for the middle ground, while trivial issues and superficial image projections are used to try to keep longstanding supporters on board.

The aim of democratic socialists is to create a caring sharing society, whose members are encouraged to participate in decision-making for the common good. The Labour Party was intended to be a democratic organisation whose members and affiliates participated in the formulation of policies to be implemented in due course by a Labour Government. It was accepted that it was their responsibility to generate the bulk of the funds required to run campaigns and get their candidates elected.

In effect, the Party has been hijacked by a small clique who have sought to cut the links binding it to the membership and the affiliates and to raise the funds required for electioneering from unattached sympathisers and a select small group of wealthy individuals. Now that this has been brought into disrepute by the peerages for loans scandal, an attempt is being made to secure legislation for state financing of political parties.

If this is introduced, the need for party members and affiliates will be greatly reduced and there will be no alternative to mass marketing campaigns to get the message across. Fewer and fewer voters, in normal circumstances, will then bother to vote.

This book provides a detailed insight into the application of marketing techniques in the 2005 General Election. A chapter on young people’s response to

political issues reveals little conception of citizenship and little understanding of politics or the political system. Many young people were, furthermore, totally bored and lacking in interest. Unfortunately, the attitude of older generations was not much better. The book does, however, show that single issue campaigns like 'Make Poverty History' have made a certain impact.

This is a book for those who wish to study the negative response and disillusionment of the bulk of voters in the face of recent political campaigning. Whatever the intention, it underlines the case for a totally different form of politics on the left, based on much greater popular involvement, which will only develop in support of a campaign pledged to work for genuine democratic socialist aims.

Stan Newens

Consultants' Paradise

David Craig with Richard Brooks, *Plundering the Public Sector*, Constable & Robinson, 272 pages, ISBN-13: 978-1-84529-374-1, ISBN-10: 1-84529-374-6, £9.99

Just as New Labour's 'reform' of the Labour Party required the specialist services of the 'spin doctor', the equally demanding 'reforms' of what was left of the public sector, after the Thatcherite privatisation of industrial utilities, required suitable assistance from a further breed of specialists, the management consultant, and in particular its very latest incarnation, the IT (information technology) consultant. The book charts the phenomenon of the seemingly intimate relationship between the New Labour government, top civil servants, consultants and IT consultants in particular – and a torrid tale of 'cronyism, profiteering, spin and outright lies' it makes, all at the expense of the public purse. As the ex-research director of Arthur Andersen Consulting, Patricia Hewitt has herself remarked, 'waste and inefficiency in the NHS is intolerable. A penny wasted is a penny stolen from a patient'. Arthur Andersen Consulting, (presumably because of their questionable accounting involvement with the ENRON collapse) has now transmogrified into Accenture, a name the reader will come across throughout the book, not least regarding the development of the world's largest-ever civilian IT project, the NHS's National Programme for IT (NPFIT) and Connecting for Health (CfH).

On entering office in 1997, the New Labour government (determined to continue within Tory public spending limits) acquiesced in the continuing general decline of welfare services. Later, in a White Paper of 1999 entitled *Modernising Government*, the new administration set out a vision 'for the renewal and reform of public services' which 'placed IT at the centre of its programme'. The Conservative Government had previously pioneered both the private finance initiative (PFI) and the employment of management and IT consultants within the public sector to the tune of approximately £500 million a year; and having

criticised both wheezes in public prior to office, New Labour had little compunction in utilising them to a degree probably undreamt of by the consultancy industry. No wonder writers in leading consultancy magazines advised their readers to vote New Labour given the ‘feast of work from Whitehall’. In fact, the author has spent much of his working life as a management IT consultant and while his conscience was perhaps not unduly troubled about excessive profits when made out of private industry, his scruples did not allow for such brazen behaviour at the public expense, and that expense is in *billions* of pounds.

Throughout the book the same old names keep popping up when it comes to the firms who give the advice and supply the IT systems, and a not-very-extensive ‘information super highway’ it appears to be. Higher civil servants, over-awed by technical wizardry and unwilling to liaise or even consult the people who are expected to actually work the systems, seem to have imagined that going for the big companies was a safe bet. The guiding philosophy could be summed up in the maxim ‘if it’s IBM it must work’ – the question is at what cost? And will it do the job originally intended? In many cases the answers seems to be ‘too much’ and ‘not always’. All this is courtesy of the consultancy ‘Big Five’ – Arthur Andersen (Accenture), PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Ernst & Young, KPMG and Deloitte, with a major supporting role for – yes, you guessed it – Capita and McKinsey. Another factor in this chummy world is the oft-mentioned phenomenon of the ‘revolving door’ culture where roles are swapped, encompassing civil servants, consultants, political advisors, and politicians, with all this often centring on the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit at Downing Street, run by Ian Watmore, ex-chief executive officer of Accenture: excellence in joined-up career advancement, perhaps?

The various disasters the book surveys are extensive, but to give a flavour: it covers the doubling of costs on the electronic VAT return; the ever-deteriorating situation at the Child Support Agency; the Siemens installation at the Passport Office; and trouble at the Inland Revenue with tax credits. A particularly ironic source of consultancy-determined folly has to be at the Ministry of Defence with its unfortunately named *Smart Acquisition* procurement program introduced by McKinsey, and ASI (accounting system integrator) from PwC. Armed with all their clever programs, the Chief of Defence Procurement was not at all sure whether the cost overruns for the 2003/4 period were £4bn or £6bn; this is when he appeared before the Commons Public Accounts Committee. The book naturally enough contains a lot of figures that have been gleaned from one source or another, but there is considerable reluctance by all involved (consultants, software and hardware suppliers, accountants, civil servants and government ministers) to come clean. As with the PFI initiative, the blanket of ‘commercial confidentiality’ is lowered on any searching enquiries. The front cover of the book claims £70bn in total for consultancies and, as one reads through the book, this figure looks depressingly possible, particularly if fears about the looming ‘Mother of all Programs’ (NPfIT and CfH) are realised.

The book also raises the matter of who is checking and controlling this consultancy bonanza. Of course, it is the Government's responsibility, but they are the very people who have least to gain by revealing exactly what is going on. Firstly, we have to overcome, as mentioned, the smokescreen of 'commercial confidentiality' and penetrate the usual thicket of New Labour sound bites of 'consumer empowerment', 'extra investment', 'radical reform', and 'choice agenda' to discover that independent assessments are often limited in scope and remedial action sparse. Basically, it is the job of the Comptroller and Auditor General, through the work of the National Audit Office (NAO) plus the oversight of Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC). The problem is that the National Audit Office investigatory procedures are, as the authors make clear, 'quite civilised and gentlemanly' and are 'designed not to ruffle any important feathers'. We have had a recent demonstration of such civilised behaviour with regard to Connecting for Health where the report was delayed several times from its intended publication date of August 2005 until an agreed text was negotiated with the Ministry of Health. The BBC revealed that earlier drafts had been more critical of the scheme and in the general furore the National Audit Office is to re-examine the matter again. The NAO, however, made clear that it is quite usual for it to submit draft reports to government departments and to discuss findings and agree texts before publication. According to the authors, the Public Accounts Committee, whilst more hard-hitting in its findings than the National Audit Office, suffers from two drawbacks: firstly, it cannot instruct the NAO to investigate a particular area, and secondly it does not have the power to *demand* action, it can only recommend. Where subsequent audits have been carried out by the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee's recommendations have been largely ignored. On top of these handicaps there is the time factor, where the findings of the Public Accounts Committee do the familiar 'gentlemanly' discursive rounds of relevant ministerial officialdom once again, meaning gaps of years before matters are looked at again.

The NHS Connecting for Health scheme is appraised over several chapters, and the authors fear the worst. The government, as yet, has not gone on the record with a final total cost for the scheme. Expenditure starts from a floor of £6.5bn, comprising already awarded contracts, but the authors calculate that the cost of implementing functionality of the system for individual health authorities could range between a further £25bn to £30bn, with consultants hoping to obtain £10bn of this for 'successful implementation'. This is a very ambitious scheme with undoubted benefits, but do the advantages outweigh the cost, which will have to be taken largely from frontline services? It is a convincing case that the authors make for thinking the scheme is inherently structurally flawed in a number of ways. Briefly, the arguments are: in some ways it is unnecessarily grandiose for some functions; the supply of the system by four massive companies (Accenture, BT, Fujitsu, CSC) has all the financial and technical disadvantages of commercial monopoly; it is designed as one big system with little interoperability; it seeks largely to automate current practice rather than innovate; it is 'big bang'

development not organic growth; it re-invents the wheel and fails to look at existing systems; and finally it fails to involve clinical staff sufficiently with software development. By the time you have finished reading the detail about this scheme the only thing you are convinced about is that the consultancy industry has produced the perfect money-making machine, but the implications for the NHS in terms of cost and consequent curtailment for frontline services look decidedly bleak. The book was already printed by the time the sorry tale of iSoft and the Lorenzo program became public knowledge and the investigation of the Financial Services Authority into fraudulent accounting was announced (*Observer* 3.9.06). The story so far with its illustration of incompetence and personal directorial aggrandisement on a dubiously mega scale (some £81m in share sales - *Guardian* 15.09.06) bears out the characterisation in the book of the venal nature of the IT consultancy industry. The scheduling secretiveness of both the industry and the government is also highlighted by the iSoft débâcle; equally apparent is the shadowy world of government payments for IT projects. The timely payment of some £83m (consisting of two upfront payments for work in progress) providing a last minute lifeline to iSoft and preventing financial collapse, can only lead to further questions. This is in the light of previous government assurances of no payments until IT systems were completed and up and running (*Guardian* 15.09.06).

As you would expect from an expert in the black arts of consultancy, there is plenty of detail on how to get the maximum possible out of the unfortunate client. This includes the travel rebate scam, the staff relocation dodge, partner billing, flat-rate expenses and, finally, plain common or garden overcharging. In fact the timing of New Labour's accession to power was really quite fortuitous for the consultancy industry, beset with the dot-com failure of the late 1990s, and the 1970s and 80s boom in the US state sector well and truly over. All these factors meant less work for the industry globally. The opportune love affair between New Labour and the consultancy and IT industries was speedily consummated. New Labour, before leaping into its new romance, could actually have examined the experience of their intellectual and militarist mentors in the United States. After a similar experience with IT consultancies, the US government introduced compensating legislation, supported by the Republicans, in the 1996 IT Reform Act (Clinger-Cohen), which specified the responsibilities suppliers had, and made overcharging illegal while financially encouraging whistle blowing. New Labour could even have asked PwC about the Act, as they apparently had to pay \$41.9m for travel rebate fraud, or even Ernst & Young who also had dealings with the Act.

Plundering the Public Sector also has an engaging chapter aptly named 'PFI Paradise' which, although it covers ground which may be familiar to many, gives much detail on the centrality of the consultancy 'big five' in conflating this new nirvana. Gordon Brown's accounting sleight of hand was stamped (with the Conservative imprimatur) from its creation by David 'two brains' Willetts, and was consequently decried in opposition, but embraced in office with little or no compunction. The consultancy industry was indispensable to New Labour, always

providing the right figures to demonstrate the efficacy of the private finance initiative in comparison with old-fashioned state procurement, though at times it obviously stretched their abilities of ‘creative accounting’ and verbal acrobatics. Prior to New Labour, Tory Chancellor Ken Clarke had placed the conditions of risk on the private contractors and as a result private companies were wary of PFI. However, with Gordon Brown newly ensconced at the Treasury and buccaneering Geoffrey Robinson at the head of the PFI Taskforce, complete with an enthusiastic crew of consultants, lawyers and bankers, all inhibiting conditions received short shrift, and it was full steam ahead for the public finance initiative and public-private partnerships (PPP) across a broad spectrum of public services.

The introduction of all these schemes is part of a New Labour policy, along with privatisation in its many guises (as itemised in Dexter Whitfield’s crucial text *New Labour’s Attack on Public Services*), to drastically reduce overall employment in a supposed unresponsive, bloated, cosseted and disorganised remaining public sector. The commercial model is being driven through, wholly inappropriately, whatever the costs, to bring about a fundamental change in work patterns. They envisage a new world of cost regulated operatives (with often casualised flexible contracts and conditions), at the sharp end, controlled by a centralised IT system of management direction at the other. The present system, particularly with regard to the caring services, which relies on the personal commitment of staff at numerous skill levels, will be destroyed. The escalating costs must also, by now, be a prime consideration, together with making us all pay for their grandiose IT initiatives. The payment of which must be a factor in the present round of hasty, ill-thought-out cuts to front-line NHS services. And this is without Identity Cards - God help us! The attempt to ‘finesse’ this technological depletion of the workforce is going to cost us dear as taxpayers, consumers of services, and, lastly, as workers.

Plundering the Public Sector is an important book crammed with facts and information that should arm all those of us who wish to defend public services and public service workers and carry the fight to New Labour’s fiefdoms. Only two things mar it: the lack of an index, and the naïve quote from Nick Cohen on the cover. Somebody ought to have the heart to tell him that those lead actors, Blair and Brown, know what’s going on - they wrote the script.

John Daniels

Hardy’s Peasantry

Claire Tomalin, *Thomas Hardy, The Time-torn Man*, Viking Penguin, 512 pages, hardback ISBN 9780670915125 £25

Claire Tomalin has added another biography to her long list of earlier lives – of Mary Wollstonecraft, Shelley, Dickens’ *Invisible Woman*, Jane Austen, Katherine Mansfield, Samuel Pepys. This time a full life story of Hardy, published at the

same time as a newly edited edition of Hardy's *Poems of 1912-13*. Claire Tomalin starts her book with the story of these poems, written after the death of his first wife Emma, from whom he had long been estranged, but who after death he remembered poignantly and with deeply loving regret. Emma once said that Hardy loved the heroines of his books more than he loved her. It was a truly insightful comment, but the poems must be among the most beautiful love poems in the English language. They are well worth reading again.

Hardy is best known for his picture of these heroines – Elfrida in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, based on Emma, Eustacia in *The Return of the Native*, above all Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Bathsheeba in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*. Hardy was a bit of a womaniser, and offended both Emma and his second wife Frances by his attentions to other women. But the position of women in the Nineteenth Century was so different from that today, and Hardy can be credited with pioneering some of the change. In nearly all his novels there is a clash of class – young women are goods to be disposed of by their parents for the highest possible price. Hardy suffered all his life from the contempt that Emma's family (gentry) had for him (the son of a stonemason). The result emerges not only in his novels but in his own pretensions and pleasures – in the London 'season' he always attended, in his gentleman's club, and his delight at the visit late in his life from the Prince of Wales. Claire Tomalin tells all this with a charity and understanding that is delightful.

What Claire Tomalin makes clear, and I at least had not understood, is the extent to which Hardy's words were the subject of the censorship of the editors of *Blackwood's* and the other magazines for which Hardy contributed his novels. As the books were published after bowdlerising, it is not clear whether Tess was raped nor what the lovemaking was like which led the critics of *Jude*, including Edmund Gosse, to describe that book as 'indecent'. It was Hardy's great achievement to get the heroines of Nineteenth Century novels out of their corsets. You can no more imagine one of Thackeray's heroines out of a corset than one of Hardy's in one. But it was a heroic struggle against the censors that did it. Hardy should stand high among the feminists' heroes. His character is revealed by Claire Tomalin as a strange mixture of atheism and catholicism, socialism and conservatism, simplicity and complexity – a 'time-torn man'.

At the centre of Hardy's novels, however, is the condition of the English peasantry in the Nineteenth Century. Hardy mainly describes the life of craftsmen like his own father, who owned their own house but had no land, having therefore to work for those who owned land or other property like the gentry. These craftsmen were not by any means the poorest in the countryside, nor did they go hungry as many farm workers did in a bad season, but climbing out of that condition became Hardy's personal ambition. Hardy tells the story of a man who was actually sold at an auction, but he has little or nothing to say about the agricultural trade unions or the Tolpuddle Martyrs who came from the very part of England that Hardy makes his 'Wessex'. He thought the striking miners misled, and showed no interest in the Soviet revolution. But he struck an enormous blow,

which still resounds, for the decency and capacity of ordinary workingmen and women in a world that is often both corrupt and uncaring.

Michael Barratt Brown

Palestine's Catastrophe

Geoff Simons, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Palestinian Return Centre (www.prc.org.uk), hardback ISBN9781901924657 £15

I have read so many books, articles and pamphlets about Israel and Palestine in the last few years since I outraged the Board of Deputies of British Jews by a remark empathising totally with suicide bombers. I was attracted to this book by the title, which that august body is no doubt already fuming about.

Israel may have tried to ethnically cleanse Palestine but thanks to the courage and resilience of the Palestinians they have still not succeeded, even though the near civil war in Gaza recently must have had them cheering.

This is an important book. It should be on the shelves of anyone who hopes to understand that region, and will be frequently referred to by me over coming years. It is amazingly well researched and the references are invaluable for anyone challenged to reveal sources of information. It is a bit daunting to read because it seems at times that every event and every atrocity is documented by the author who seems determined to pack it all in. The form of the book, however, makes it easy to refer to and dip in and out of, if one has little time to read.

The introductory chapter alone stands as a brilliant overview of the *Naqba* (the 'catastrophe' – the term used by Palestinians to describe the expulsions of 1948). It also makes a firm statement about what is and is not anti-Semitism, which is routinely used by the Board of Deputies and some members of the Jewish community to silence their critics

Part One is a novel presentation of the background to the Second *Intifada* and the methods used by Israel to achieve its purpose, which, to anyone who has followed events closely, is to create Greater Israel with as few Arabs as possible inside its borders.

The extraordinary disdain Israel has always shown the United Nations has a whole chapter and leaves one reeling with the effrontery of it all.

The second chapter is a brilliant account of Zionist terror. It discusses in a very honest way the difference, if there is any, between state terrorism and individual terrorist acts. How hypocritical are politicians when comparing the two.

Part Two is a comprehensive account of the Second *Intifada* and misses nothing. It also has clear divisions of topics and events, which are included in the Contents. This makes for an invaluable reference book.

The great weapon of humiliation, I think, creates more terrorists than arrests and even torture and pain. Humiliation of the Palestinians is Israel's greatest weapon. *B'Tselem* and the Public Committee against Torture constantly rail

against this 'degrading and humiliating treatment', as quoted by Geoff Simons.

The ruthless killing and maiming of young children is also well documented. This happens in all situations of conflict, of course, but has been particularly evident in the Occupied Territories. The perpetrators do not usually blame the parents for their carelessness either, which is a particularly sickening feature of the Israeli response when challenged by human rights workers and others.

This book simply leaves one gasping at the breadth and depth of the research that must have gone on during its creation, and the sheer courage of the man who wrote it.

There is only one feature missing. Despite references to the 'Israeli Threat to Peace' and a brief reference to President Truman's Election Campaign in 1948, there is no chapter dealing with why, despite all the criticism and UN resolutions, Israel gets away with it time after time, to the point of almost no return, for the Palestinians or their country. This needs a new book, which I hope Geoff Simons will write!

The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine should be on the bookshelves of anyone with an interest in the great catastrophe. If it were the only book, they would be well served.

Dr Jenny Tonge, Baroness, House of Lords, Westminster

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