

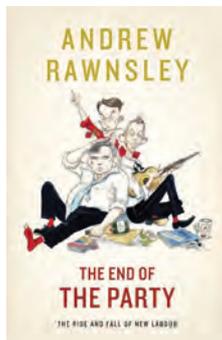


Only Blair, David Cameron, and Gordon Brown during the Remembrance Day ceremony, 2002 | Art Photo | Jochen Conrath

How New Labour lost its mojo

Richard Allsop reviews
*The End of the Party:
The rise and fall of
New Labour*

by Andrew Rawnsley
(Penguin Viking, 2010, 802 pages)



The New Labour project has ended. Its 13 years in power has disappointed many people, whether they hoped for an emphasis on the ‘new’ or the ‘labour’. The ‘third way’ may have taken the British Labour Party away from the hard left, but its achievements are otherwise modest.

In *The End of the Party*, leading British political journalist, Andrew Rawnsley, provides a coherent narrative of what went wrong, writing in a lively and fluent style and making use of an astonishing array of sources. Rawnsley has previously told the first half of the New Labour story in a 2001 book, *Servant of the People*, which detailed how three men—Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Peter Mandelson—gave birth to New Labour and saw their creation swept into government in an unprecedented landslide in 1997. This success ushered in the longest period of non-Tory government since the eighteenth century.

The End of the Party takes the New Labour story from their second landslide election success in 2001 through to the end of 2009. There is no doubt the book would have been more complete if Rawnsley had waited to include the recent election, but his publishers no doubt counselled that it would make

more of a splash before polling day. And it certainly did make a splash. A month prior to publication, newspaper reports began appearing with revelations that not only did Prime Minister Brown bully his staff, he physically assaulted them.

This is one of numerous ways the book paints Brown in a very poor light, and not surprisingly his supporters leapt to his defence. Former Deputy Labour Leader, Roy Hattersley, charged Rawnsley with the offence of saving up juicy information to sell books (a similar charge was made in the US against the authors of *Game Change*, the most prominent account of Obama’s election success):

Had truth and justice been Rawnsley’s only aim, he would have exposed the Prime Minister’s alleged faults in his weekly newspaper column, rather than storing them up to use as the bait which caught a publisher’s advance—assuming that the serious newspaper for which he works was prepared to publish tittle-tattle.

Interestingly, the book did not seem to do Brown much political harm, with his polling numbers gradually improving during the period when excerpts from the book were appearing in the press.

While the majority of the media coverage naturally focused on the current political player, Brown, the book is as much about Blair, who after all was the Prime Minister for more than two-thirds of the period covered by the book. Unlike Brown, the alleged sociopath, Blair comes across as a normal human being with more forgivable faults, such as being too trusting, failing to back his supporters in internal party conflicts, or lacking attention to detail.

However, his chief fault according to this book was that he never took action against the increasingly recalcitrant Brown. Chancellor Brown would sometimes refuse to tell his Prime Minister anything about the contents of budgets until the last minute and would also regularly run underhanded campaigns against government policies purely to erode Blair’s authority. Through their actions Brown and his acolytes regularly managed to achieve the worst possible outcome for the government. They would constantly create trouble, but then always draw back at the last minute from formally challenging Blair. Having developed the habit of attack and retreat, Brown continues it when he becomes PM, going to the brink of calling an early election in 2007, before getting cold feet, a manoeuvre that killed his honeymoon period stone dead.

Some failings were shared by Brown and Blair. New Labour was addicted to spin, in Blair’s time largely conducted by Alastair Campbell. The book describes how Campbell even went as far as chairing meetings of intelligence chiefs which was ‘hugely revealing about the hierarchy of power within Downing Street ... (and) was the quintessential example of how pre-eminent propagandists had become in New Labour and

Richard Allsop is a Research Fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs.

Many felt that Brown was a man of more substance than Blair. Yet, when he became PM, he had no idea what he actually wanted to do.

how willingly many senior officials deferred to them'. However, perhaps the most striking example of the obsession with spin is more personal than political. It comes when Cherie Blair suffered a miscarriage and 'before he had even seen his distraught wife, Blair phoned up with Campbell also on the line for a conference call so they could discuss how they would handle the media'.

And yet, at the same time that his spinners were spinning more furiously than ever, Blair was transforming himself into a conviction politician. One almost feels that he did the reverse of Paul Keating's memorable line about 'flicking the switch to vaudeville'. Rawnsley describes how the man who was 'once the master of the politics of persuasion ... was retreating into the politics of assertion'.

Iraq became 'the defining issue of Blair's premiership' to the extent that 'Europe, public services, everything that once seemed so important were subordinated by war and terror in both his own mind and the view of his shrinking band of friends and growing army of enemies.'

However, it was not just on Iraq that Blair became a conviction politician. While in its second term, his government ditched the spending restraint of its first term and began throwing massive sums at the NHS and education, Blair appreciated that money alone was not the answer and that things like consumer choice were vital to improved quality. Rawnsley argues, however, that Blair's 'tragedy was that by the time he finally arrived at clarity on what needed to be done in education and other public services he was drained of the political capital to achieve them.'

As well as his gradual loss of

authority, Blair had other longer-standing problems when it came to public sector reform. He liked to act informally, which often meant there was a lack of clarity about what had actually been decided. Further, while 'unmatched at the theatre of politics,' Blair 'was much less accomplished when it came to the grinding prose of day to day administration.' Indeed, bungling became a feature of New Labour. As Rawnsley observes, the government under Blair 'was mad for writing new laws, but bad at ensuring that existing legislation was applied effectively.'

Blair suffered from the common fallacy of believers in the role of government as a force for good that all that needed to be done was to wish for an improvement. Rawnsley is smart enough to observe that 'there was a disjunction between his admission that they couldn't get the trains to run on time and his vaulting claim that they could heal the world of conflict, poverty and disease.'

Not everything Blair touched was a failure. There were some significant achievements, in particular in bringing peace to Northern Ireland. One can quibble about the detail of the peace process, but there is no doubt that ending the killing was a huge step forward. Rawnsley describes how the messianic aspects of Blair's character, which could be a danger in other contexts, were a huge advantage as 'self-belief and natural optimism drove him on long after more pessimistic types would have given up'.

Many felt that Brown was a man of more substance than Blair and he had clearly tried to cultivate a serious image. Yet, when he became PM, he had no idea what he actually wanted to do

in any area outside his home ground of Treasury. His policy pronouncements tended to be either short-term and trivial, or so long-term as to be meaningless, as he 'swung between announcing five-year plans that were too grandiose to be credible and mayfly initiatives that were here today and forgotten tomorrow'.

In this, he continued the worst aspects of Blairite New Labour, but on a personal level there was a huge discontinuity between Blair and Brown. Rawnsley comments:

Modern politics demands from leaders the ability to make—or at least fake—an emotional connection with voters. Tony Blair had that capacity to excess, which made it even more obvious that Gordon Brown could not do it.

In the end, Brown's desperation for a touch of Blair's presentational magic sees him affect a rapprochement with the third party to the original New Labour pact, Peter Mandelson, whom Brown had hated for many years. This, and the many other personal machinations of the leading characters, sometimes gives *The End of the Party* a touch of soap opera. Several critics objected to Rawnsley's gossipy style, but in a way this helps to capture the essence of the personality politics and spin of New Labour.

The End of the Party is not a profound analysis of policy issues, nor does it really try to link the politics to broader economic, social or cultural trends, but as a highly readable narrative of a fascinating period of British politics it is hard to beat.

R