



stratified electioneering'. Wring quotes Rita Hinden's warning from the 1950s, that if the Party 'reduces itself now to an imitation of its rivals, its emotional strength will be disastrously undermined'. He also cites Aneurin Bevan's fear that the systematic polling of electorates ahead of policy changes takes 'the poetry out of politics'. He is right to do so.

This is a superb book. It whets the appetite — at least it did mine — leaving me wanting to know more about the Labour Party in the past. I would particularly have liked to learn more about how and why the Labour Party surrendered its own left-wing press — Dominic Wring mentions this briefly, and then moves on. However, all good books leave you hungry. This one certainly does. It deserves to be read by anyone keen to see the Labour Party revisit its more radical purposes again.

David Coates  
Wake Forest University, USA

### **Prolonged Labour**

David Coates

*Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005, 272pp., £17.99*

*ISBN: 1-4039-9360-2*

*British Politics* (2006) **1**, 162–164. doi:10.1057/palgrave.bp.4200011

This book has been written with an unusually clear purpose in mind, and one that is rigorously executed. It is a 'stocktaking' exercise, an attempt to produce a scrupulously researched and comprehensive record of the policies of the Blair Government during its first two terms. The form followed is to make a clear separation between 'the telling of the record' and 'the assessment of its adequacy'. Coates opines that 'readers will be able to come to a judgement on the adequacy of New Labour as a government that is independent of that of its author. ... What is important is that an accurate record of New Labour's achievements be established fully and quickly for all of us' (p viii).

To produce such a record so speedily would indeed be an accomplishment, of inestimable benefit to scholars of both the Labour party and of British government. So does the book realise its aim? The answer is a firm yes. Coates understands that before seeking to explain the New Labour phenomena one has to establish precisely what one is explaining: the what comes before the why. The material is methodically presented, the tone is dispassionate, indeed a mite dry, and the style terse and incisive, although compression is sometimes achieved at the expense of accessibility. For those familiar with Coates' work, the emphasis on matters of economic, industrial and labour relations policy is not surprising but there is also coverage of social policy and the public services.



So what of the assessment? Coates firmly rejects the oft-reiterated criticism that New Labour is all spin and no substance, rootless and driven by the winds of electoral expediency. He sees no evidence either of 'core policy on the hoof' or a relapse into 'easy conventional wisdoms' (p 186). Coates recognises that all governments suffer from internal divisions and are buffeted by circumstance. That said, he is struck by the degree to which there is within New Labour 'an underlying unity to the way in which its key architects understand the world and their role within it' (p lx). Indeed, he is impressed by the Government's 'high intellectual capacity and moral purpose', and by analysis 'of unprecedented quality and range'. Far from being government by soundbite, he contends that policy has been rooted in rigorous diagnoses of problems with New Labour evincing 'an unusually sustained capacity' to adhere to its policies and 'to maintain their coherence over time' (p 185).

What then does New Labour actually stand for? Is it modernising or forsaking social democracy? Coates is perhaps less successful in delineating the essentials of the New Labour creed than in exploring their manifestations in policy. Determined (and quite laudably so) to keep to the facts as much as possible, Coates sometimes appears reluctant to draw general conclusions. There is at times an (admirable) note of indeterminacy. This is reflected in his treatment of Gordon Brown (towards whom he is surprisingly sympathetic). He correctly describes him as much an architect of New Labour as Tony Blair, yet with 'shades of Old Labour' about him. He is at once a powerful advocate of business deregulation and of public-private partnerships while remaining an ardent proponent of equality and poverty alleviation. Coates finds him a 'fascinating and elusive figure' but 'hard to place' (p 59), and this reflects a central puzzlement about New Labour. How can we categorise it? Where does it stand on the left-right spectrum? Or does it transcend that spectrum? These questions are easy to pose, difficult to answer.

Any study, however objective, even 'scientific' it aspires to be, requires interpretation: how else can we make sense of a confusing mass of facts? So assessing the effectiveness of the Blair Government's policy, as Coates reminds us, is 'not a simple empirical matter'. It requires 'the application of theory [and] the mobilisation of explanation' (p 163). Perhaps the key problem facing all contributors to the debate over New Labour is the familiar one of agency and structure. How much was choice, how much compulsion? The majority of scholars lean towards the latter — it is the combination of globalisation, alterations in electoral topography and demographic and fiscal pressures that explains the emergence of New Labour. Coates adopts (again sensibly) a cautious posture here. It is hard, he notes, to decide whether policy changes are the product of government initiatives or of 'tidal forces', which politicians can at best ride (p 163). However, this caution may also reflect an inner tension, between the seasoned Marxist long accustomed to explaining political



phenomena in terms of underlying social and economic forces, and the political analyst reluctant to suspend his critical faculties in deference to the impersonal forces of history. Perhaps ultimately for this reason, while the book more than fulfils its objective of ‘the telling of the record’, we are left with some puzzlement about what New Labour is *really* all about.

Eric Shaw  
University of Stirling, UK

**Recovering Power: The Conservatives in Opposition since 1867**

Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (eds.)

*Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005, 287pp., £18.99*

*ISBN: 1-4039-3242-5*

*British Politics* (2006) **1**, 164–165. doi:10.1057/palgrave.bp.4200009

This is an impressive and potentially important book. The individual chapters are scholarly, very well written and, crucially, clearly illuminate the role that the Conservative party’s periods in opposition have played in reshaping and relaunching the party at key moments in its history. The book’s potential importance depends on its impact on Conservative tactics. It should be required reading for Tory strategists, who may thereby gain some understanding of the serious errors and omissions of recent years in time to refocus before the next general election. As David Willetts contributes a chapter on the early post-war years, one would expect the book’s arguments to receive a hearing.

Given that most of the party’s significant changes in leadership, organization and policy have followed electoral defeat, the incoherent policy agendas, ‘ill considered’ organizational reforms and lack of authoritative leadership since 1997 identified by the book’s authors suggest a failure to study and learn from Conservative history. As Stuart Ball notes, where is the defining statement of principles along the lines of 1976’s *The Right Approach?* Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon’s concluding chapter rightly argues that the party has failed to find an ‘overarching narrative’ to express what 21st century Conservatism means. Tony Blair has not only stolen Conservative clothes, he has also stolen the party’s historical hunger for office and their adaptability.

Following a fine opening chapter by Ball, which assesses key factors since 1867 to the present, the book’s chapters explore each Conservative period in opposition since Disraeli. I suspect that for most general readers the events prior to Baldwin’s leadership will be the least familiar, but the clarity of the writing helps the reader navigate through the detail. In particular, two superb chapters by David Steele covering the years 1880–1895 clarify many issues. His championing of the ‘underrated’ Salisbury (although Michael Bentley has