

Approaching the reading of books

If asked to state briefly what I believe **politics** to be about I almost always respond that it is about the **consensual arrival at values**. If asked to state briefly the **central social value** at which I would prefer us to arrive I almost always say **fairness**. If asked to state briefly the **central educational value** at which I would prefer us to arrive I almost always say **fulfilment**.

Is that it then? Is there nothing more to be said? I have, after all, clearly stated that the values at which I wish the consensual process of politics to arrive when thinking about society and education are fairness and fulfilment; for me a very pleasing combination of beliefs. Surely, all I now need are the means of identifying and measuring them. If only. Each of my beliefs calls for explanation, exemplification, contextualisation, challenge and testing. I want to explore how I attempt this by the reading of particular books.

When I pick up a book that touches on politics, society or education these three beliefs usually provide my initial, loose conceptual framework or reference points for making critical sense of what I am reading; and, it is important to say, I try to use the books to make critical sense of my own beliefs. I propose, therefore, to use them to review some of the books I have read. That may help to provide some explanation, exemplification, contextualisation, challenge and testing. I hope that the results will be interesting. Exploration ought to be.

There are, of course, other factors that affect my approach to a book. While some books, even if written badly, are almost unputdownable others, no matter how hard I try or how worthy the subject, are, to me, almost unpickupable. So, in addition to my very sketchy conceptual framework I shall also bear in mind the categories of judgment provided by WH Auden. In his *A Certain World, A Commonplace Book* (1971) he said

As readers, we remain in the nursery stage so long as we cannot distinguish between taste and judgment, so long, that is, as the only possible verdicts that we can pass on a book are two: this I like; this I don't like.

For an adult reader, the possible verdicts are five: I can see that this is good and I like it; I can see that this is good but I don't like it; I can see that this is good and, though at present I don't like it, I believe that with perseverance I shall come to like it; I can see that this is trash but I like it; I can see that this is trash and I don't like it.

Just one more point to add to this preamble: if you are musical you may be familiar with the metronome, usually placed on top of a piano. This dispassionate mechanism can be set to tick to the tempo as set by the composer of a piece or part of a piece of music. Designed to help musicians keep to the beat it will not deviate. As a conceptual framework it is rigid. It does not change. Musicians, however, cannot suppress their humanity. The beats of their hearts vary. They have emotions and can relate what they are

performing to other cultural references. By the time that they reach the end of a piece of music they may be well off the beat of the metronome and yet have pleased their listeners, satisfied themselves and fulfilled the intentions of the composer. I am sure that this applies even to people playing their own compositions. So, to adapt the famous quotation of a great hero of Welsh rugby, Carwyn James, I intend to get my excuses in first and hope to convince you that where and whenever I deviate from anything that I have written so far it will have emerged from creative human nature. In other words, conceptual frameworks must sometimes be stretched in different places; even, at times, pulled almost out of shape or departed from when used to make critical sense of what people have written.

Book Number One

Ersatz politics and deviant governance

The Unfinished Revolution: How New Labour Changed British Politics For Ever by Philip Gould (2011)

The first edition of this book was published in 1998 as *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party*. The 2011 edition, published by Abacus shortly before the author's death, has a foreword by Tony Blair and additional chapters bringing the story up-to-date. The publishers present Gould as a World leading political strategist and a key advisor to Tony Blair during his time as leader of the Labour Party and as prime minister. They are right on both counts.

I am surprised that I did not read this book until the second edition came out. I wonder what difference reading it earlier would have made to my review on these pages of Blair's own book; very little I suspect. But the significance attributed to the earlier edition by so many commentators on New Labour forces me to ask if the sense that I made of government and politics at the time lacked perspective because instead of reading Gould's book I only read about it. It may be natural to want to defend the shortcomings of your own research but I feel that reading the first edition when it was published would have done no more than provide me with a deeper and even more depressing understanding of the sheer intensity of New Labour's high powered drive to attain power without principles or, at best, poor ones. (Please note that, without altering my opinion on New Labour, I say something about the usefulness of an earlier reading of the book later on in this review).

Gould and Blair went together. The one was devoted to his task of preparing the way for the other to assume the mantle of the Messiah that he knew he was. To a far greater extent than any other leading member of the Labour Party at the time, Blair had what it took to cast off the restraints and commitments of old values and become the superhero who was able to transcend normal party beliefs and ascend to his sofa from which he could lead us to a future in which activity would be defined as progress, greed and privilege approved of and lots of people in far away lands hurt, dispossessed, tortured and killed.

Rafael Behr, reviewing Gould's book recently in *The Observer's New Review* asserted that it provides an antidote to the lazy assumption that the Blair Project was a cynical stealing of Conservative clothes. I agree with him. Reading *The Unfinished Revolution* has reinforced my belief that what some people, including me for quite a while, perceived to be cynicism was only ever sincerity. This is one of the tragedies revealed by the book. They really did believe in what they were doing. The clear water between them and the Conservative Party was not ideology: it was technical proficiency. New Labour was a brilliantly effective vote-winning machine driving hard and fast towards

the creation of a society in which reaching for the top would be rewarded and celebrated. Yes, there was a sufficient residual socialist soul left in the party to offer scraps to those at the bottom. There was, however, no intention to challenge the right of the rich to become filthily so while lengthening their distance from the poor.

I see the book as the story of a would-be genuinely good person who felt that politicians should support people when they, in order to be fulfilled, aspire to have what more privileged people have. That, of course, meant becoming more privileged and moving further from those remaining in the places and positions they once occupied. Gould led a life of focus groups. He listened to people. He used what they were saying to bring politicians to an understanding of what they had to do to obtain their votes. This, he believed, would not only get Labour back into power but it would also be justified on the grounds that the Party was engaging with the concerns, anxieties, interests and wishes for fulfilment of ordinary people.

Right words, wrong values

You may think that this ought to satisfy my belief that politics is about the consensual arrival at values and the book does abound with all the right words, such as 'fairness' and 'values'. Can I complain if the policy-feeding values consensually arrived at by all of Gould's questioning, discussion and listening were not to my taste? I think I can because, notwithstanding the change of nomenclature, he purported to work on behalf of the Labour Party. Despite all of the differences within and shortcomings of that party over the years since its beginning and the rows, back stabbings and stitchings up celebrated and condemned in diaries and memoirs, it was never committed to: making the rich richer and the poor poorer; illegal invasion of other countries; the use of torture; the falsification of evidence; the diminishing of local democracy; and the perversion of the educational system so that it helped to fracture society. All of this was done in the name of 'modernisation': a word used constantly by both Blair and Gould who disparages Harold Wilson for failing to transform the Labour Party into the natural party of government. The Open University, the Girobank and the successful resistance to pressure from the USA to join them in the disgraceful Vietnamese war stand as achievements against which the actions of Blair can be seen as pathetic and pandering to the rich and powerful, including right-wing press barons making money by reducing political discourse to the peddling of prejudice.

The book is sprinkled with Hegel (not Marx) and stopping points for reflection on, for example, how the dialectic is progressing. I guess we all like to do a bit of intellectual flashing now and again; no real harm in it you might think. But after each pause like this the book quickly resumes its usual high pace and we are back into the minutiae of party politics, microscopically examining the flowering and the withering of personal political relationships. I have no doubt that this is one reason why Conservative politicians and political journalists have devoured this book. As well as revealing the low down on how Labour managed the change to New Labour Gould also provides textbook guidance

on how to win elections (although I would argue that it was the Liberal Party of Liverpool that first showed the way from the late 60s onwards). It reads like a remarkable book by a remarkable, well-liked and well-intentioned good bloke.

Good intentions are not enough

But when the earnest energies of the good and well intentioned work to support delusional people such as Blair, even to the extent of supporting the invasion of Iraq at the time and, later, treating it as a mere mistake that can still be justified it makes me ask at what point would Gould have baulked. When would he have told Tony that he could no longer stomach the job of keeping him in power? The holidays with Berlusconi perhaps? Maybe the destruction of 'bog standard comprehensives' in favour of specialist schools, academies and proliferating faith schools? Extraordinary rendition? Guantanamo Bay? Bank deregulation and bankers' bonuses? Sucking up to The Sun? The list of baulking points is much longer than this. None of them caused him to quit or to question his purpose. I conclude that, for him, either votes were prioritised over values or the meanings of his values could be stretched to accommodate some appalling policies.

In my review of Blair's book I used the word *gadarene* to describe his style of leadership. I sense it in this book because I am sure that if at the outset of his work helping to create New Labour Gould had known to what it would all lead he might very well have walked away. He was caught up in a stampede of his own making and seemed not to notice the price being paid when socialist values were discarded in favour of some very nasty capitalist values, all, as ever, in the name of modernisation which seems to have become a sort of value in itself.

Gould also lived in a World of targets and delivery and focussed consultation. I never took part in one of his focus groups or knowingly met anyone who did. If his focus groups were anything remotely like the New Labour consultations in which colleagues and I took part then the target and delivery culture will not have allowed much space for difference and dissent (he claims it did). Certainly it is clear that Gould's work meshed with policy formation and implementation as perceived and practised by New Labour. He distilled what he heard from 'the people' and reported it to the select group of policy makers who formulated a target and expected delivery. Consultation with professionals was usually limited to how best to implement policy and reach the associated targets.

New ways of formulating policy and doing government

I wish he had carried out focus group sessions with schoolteachers in England who were participating in Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD). Every year for, if we include the predecessor programme, more than the entire life of New Labour in government teachers wrote between 180 million and 220 million words at masters and doctoral levels critically examining their professional experience in order to improve the learning of children. I am sure that not one minister taking part in the formation of

education policy ever read any of those words. I am now kicking myself because as chair of the CPD Committee of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) at a crucial time, with a degree in politics under my belt, I made the huge mistake of believing that government might still, just about, sort of, function as it used to and that if we could gain the ear of a key civil servant, a minister or a Secretary of State we would open a channel for the voices of teachers engaged in accredited programmes. For a few favoured gurus, telling government what it wanted to hear, it remained true that access to those ears worked. What, however, we should have done was to arrange focus group sessions with Philip Gould. Instead we worked hard to establish a proper, formal means of reporting to government and so carried out required annual impact evaluation reporting that fed into the publicly established and known political system. We also spoke to civil servants, ministers and, once, a Secretary of State. But we had little effect on policy. I did not realise that Gould's focus groups were the preferred new starting points for the formation of policy and the results went straight to Blair's sofa. Even Secretaries of State became mere implementers with this approach to government. So, yes, maybe I ought to have read the book much earlier in its first edition.

Gould and New Labour made wholesale changes to the way that we did government without any formal announcement that they had done so. In the process they made many school and university textbooks on government and politics appear to be quaintly naïve and old-fashioned about matters such as the accountability of central government and the role and democratically derived powers of local government. It took me far too long to realise the anti democratic intent of New Labour. The words of those schoolteachers never registered because the Gould/Blair way of working bypassed the system that outsiders believed still operated. Gould was the self-appointed gatekeeper who took upon himself the task of distilling, summarising and presenting for consideration by policy makers the views of the people. I suppose you can get away with a lot if you call it modernisation.

He asserts that New Labour changed British politics forever. Rather than changing politics, which is a natural human activity difficult to prevent happening, I believe New Labour tried to pass off focus groups as politics. It gave us counterfeit politics. It certainly did change the way that we do government and so diminished representative democracy. Its effect upon society was to embed the anti social individualistic values of Thatcherism and prepare the way for a government dedicated to further stratifying the country. I can only hope that a few of Thomas Gray's 'Village Hampdens' will emerge to show us how to do better than this. Unfortunately, the modernisation card has been played and now anyone attempting much needed democratic restoration and a return to real politics is in danger of being labelled backward leaning. We know that the books of both Blair and Gould have become compulsory reading for Tories whose leadership of a coalition government began work at a pace that even Thatcher and Blair took some years to work up to. If you diminish real political activity, substitute an imitation such as focus groups, introduce new meanings for old words such as fairness, fulfilment and progress and control the discourse you can carry out the business of

governing at a much faster pace. This is what many of today's politicians want. Maybe it is what we expect. I don't believe it is what we need.

Blair chips in

In his foreword to Gould's book Tony Blair gives readers fifteen pages of his governance credo, thereby making explicit the links between the work of Gould and the New Labour approach to government, politics and society. Blair believes that politics is about choice.

'That', he says, 'is the true story behind *The Unfinished Revolution*. We made the choices to obtain power, we made the choices in power. In doing so we contributed, in ways large and small, to progress.'

I am afraid that right now I lack the energy and the will to engage in much more discussion of Blair's approach to government, politics and, that forgotten word, socialism; or with his strange notion of 'progress'. I find the entire New Labour project to have been dispiriting, depressing and enervating. To employ one of Auden's classifications, what Gould and Blair have written is trash and I do not like it; but enough from me on this for now. If you wish to explore further you might find it useful to look at and engage with the views of Geoff Mulgan, former Director of Policy at 10, Downing Street and also Director of the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit and Michael Barber, former Director of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit and now Chief Education Officer of Pearson, the World's largest education business. They both continue to flog the New Labour model to the gullible around the World. In fact they are more New Labour than Blair who, despite his assertion to the contrary in his own book, was not really a detail person, became impatient very easily and relied upon his silver tongue and charisma to win arguments. He also felt uncomfortable with people who failed to fall for the rhetoric. Blair was the leader, Mulgan and Barber the managers and Gould the strategist. Perhaps we should also find places for Andrew Adonis as the visionary and Peter Mandelson as the fixer. I guess that taken together their writings, pronouncements and actions form the New Labour intellectual cannon: a very destructive instrument.

A judgment

Auden needed another category for this book. Something like,

'It may look good but it is really bad and I cannot like it because it promoted and celebrated the substitution of counterfeit government and politics for genuine government and politics and propelled us down the road to a life in which fulfilment comes to a few by means that are unfair to others.'

Cliff Jones December 31, 2011