

A CENTURY OF LABOUR

By Jon Cruddas

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A Response by an Outsider to a book by an Insider.

At the start of one chapter Cruddas mentions W.H. Auden's comment on the Thirties: "a low, dishonest decade." In his *A Commonplace Book*, 1971, Auden also provides advice for reviewers of books. He tells us that grown up reviews should combine taste and judgement: "This is a good book but I don't like it" and "This is a bad book but I like it" and a range between.

For me this book from Cruddas is often a very good and comprehensive book, but its failings are so outstanding that the best that I can say is that it is a Curate's Egg.

His description of the administrations of Blair, not only his education policies, is very much askew. I shall provide detail later, but a government that turned on its head the concept of 'accountability' was one that set to one side the notion that politics is supposed to involve an inclusive discussion of social values. Blair's social values came in the form of instructions to hit targets or else!

And is his misuse of the word Semitic based upon ignorance or is it chosen? The choice by the University of Göttingen in the late seventeenth hundreds of Shem as the basis for the name of a large Arabic related family of languages was neither wise nor accurate, but, especially in this case, language does not define race, certainly not a so-called Jewish race. I very clearly recall my visit to the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv which made it abundantly obvious that to be a Jew is to be a follower of a religion and not to be a member of a race.

In what I take to be his dislike of Corbyn Cruddas unquestioningly goes along with accusations by groups such as the Board of Deputies that Corbyn supports racism by failing sufficiently to oppose what they refer to as Antisemitism. There are seventy Semitic languages.

Why does he do that, this Labour MP with a PhD and a considerable list of academic items in his curriculum vitae? Why?

I can only think it is because he is a member of the Labour Friends of Israel, a group financially supported by and devoted to promoting a Zionist state. Yes the Friends do suggest a two-state solution. But how different is that to putting Sitting Bull on a reservation while stealing his land? Incidentally, Sitting Bull was murdered on his reservation.

A CENTURY OF LABOUR tells us a story that begins more than one hundred years ago. We are reminded of people such as HM Hyndman and others who gave us ideas and concepts to help the thinking about the shape and the values of a society devoted not merely to a redistribution of wealth but also of social equality.

Cruddas provides lots of detail, lots of references, lots of citations and we are given a trip through history with lots of signposts. He also provides us with prisms through which to look

and make sense of history.

There were times reading the book when I felt I was back in the sixth form discovering people such as Raymond Williams and having in my head last night's Monitor presented by Huw Wheldon. Cruddas reminds me of reading the Economist, the Spectator and the New Statesman in those days hoping to learn from what we called 'current affairs'. I even read in the Economist Walt Whitman Rostow's Non Communist Manifesto. Today it remains a good starting point for making sense of 'modernisation', 'neo-liberalism' and so much that goes between. We might see Rostow as a rationaliser of small government and greed. It is what the UK suffers from today.

Yes, so often I think that what as a teenager I thought was philosophy is now the invention of labels to stick on people you like and people you don't like. Having worked and suffered under Militant Tendency there is no way that I would describe these autocrats as anywhere near the left of the political spectrum. They are given the wrong label.

And, an even louder 'yes', the misuse by politicians of those words we were taught in school history lessons: 'reform' is a favourite. We were taught that it was a 'good' word, end of slavery, extension of the franchise, the Factory Acts. Now when politicians set about deforming, for example, the education system they make sure to call it 'reform'.

And so we come to Blair. I simply do not 'get' Cruddas on Blair.

Cruddas provides us with very many references to books and articles. I am, however, surprised at what he leaves out, not just about Blair.

In 2016 Crines and Hickson published, HAROLD WILSON-the unprincipled prime minister?-REAPPRAISING HAROLD WILSON.

There were twenty four contributors to the book and I believe that the overall judgment of him was positive. I believe that Wilson himself was very proud of the establishment of the Open University. He saw it as completing the work of Gladstone when in 1870 school education was made both compulsory and free up to the age of 14. Cruddas does not mention the fact that not only was Beveridge a Liberal MP but that the researcher behind his famous Report, the foundation of the Welfare State and the NHS, was also a member of that Party. Wilson joined Labour to get things done, but I believe his values always connected with Gladstone. The Welfare State and the NHS were not exclusively a Labour achievement.

On Blair Cruddas does mention his autobiography, though he refrains from mentioning what Blair tells us about his lavatorial preferences and having sex with Cherie. What surprises me is that he makes no reference at all to the following two books.

How New Labour Changed British Politics Forever, second edition, 2011, by Philip Gould and THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK, 2015, by Beckett, Hencke and Kochan.

Gould's book has an enthusiastic foreword by Blair himself. We read a story of Focus Groups. I see them as ersatz politics. Think of the Blair administrations as a series of advertising agents. At focus groups different policies were tried out on people all over the country. Gould would report back to Blair and the Delivery Unit, led by Michael Barber, would make sure that planned consultation events were limited to asking professional groups how they planned to do as they were told. Gould's job was to see what would sell. Attending Blair's consultation events was extremely frustrating. If you wanted to question a new initiative that so often contradicted a previous initiative you were silenced by being told that the policy was a 'government given'. It was unquestionable.

I once managed to have a meeting with a Secretary of State to discuss a briefing paper I had written on educational policy. He gave in on every point and then uttered what back then I regarded as immortal words, my paraphrase, "I am learning so much from losing arguments that I need more meetings like this. They were arranged. Blair then moved him and every scheduled meeting was cancelled.

The MASK book is about a moral chameleon. That is Blair. What do we know about his tax affairs? And all those nasty dictators who pay him to show them how to cover up their sins? Readers of that book could not feel good about Blair at all. Cruddas does not mention it.

The title of the book makes clear his subject matter, but, given his relative mastery of a history beginning more than one hundred years ago, in addition I would wish to read something that recognised the role that the Party has played in the making of a dysfunctional political system.

Cameron, Gove and their mates referred to Blair as The Master. They devoured his and Gould's books as a model. Who can forget the ecstatic feeling when learning that the Tories had been defeated in 1997? The end of Thatcherism we thought. And who became so proud of Blair, her favourite son?

We are really looking at the history of a Party that, with the exception of a few people, has let us down. Under Corbyn Labour was the largest political party in Europe. Today? Today it is getting cosy with the pornographically rich. It has to because its membership has shrunk under Starmer.

Yes, this is not a review, it is a personal response. Maybe you think it is unfair of me to say what I would have preferred to read, but I do feel the need to see at least one insider recognise the political depths to which we have sunk.

Cliff Jones, February 2024.

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