

Talking to a Brick Wall

How New Labour stopped listening to the voter and why we need a new politics

Deborah Mattinson

London: Biteback, 2010, £17.99

People, Politics and Pressure Groups:

Memoirs of a lobbyist

Arthur Butler

Hove: Picnic Publishing, £12.99, 2010

Tom Easton

Deborah Mattinson is just one of the many early enthusiasts for what became New Labour to have been enriched during its 13 years in government. She keeps company with the Kinnocks, Alastair Campbell and partner Fiona Millar, Lords Mandelson, Liddle, Reid and Gould, YouGov's multimillionaire Peter Kellner and his wife, EU foreign minister Kathy Ashton, and a very long list of New Labour's single-minded student politicians who turned their address books into lucrative consultancies and careers of one kind or another.

In Mattinson's case, her early membership of Mandelson's 1980s Shadow Communications Agency alongside peer-to-be Philip Gould led her after 1997 into winning lots of lucrative government contracts. Her own Opinion Leader Research company became part of the Chime Communications conglomerate owned by Margaret Thatcher's PR adviser Tim (now Lord) Bell.

Her book travels from her early focus group 'discovery' that Labour grassroots members 'were all a bit weird.....all slightly strange people.....strange personally I mean', to her late disappointment with 'Team GB', the Brownite faction within New Labour she came to favour. In between she describes her efforts – initially very successful, she claims – to make Labour saleable despite its 'weird members'.

But at no point does she ask how 'normal' were the New Labour hierarchy who sought to benefit from her 'qualitative' polling. All the memoirs, diaries and accounts since the general election seem to confirm what many members – weird or not – long suspected: that their 'leaders' were very

strange people indeed, and that their governments were scarred by petty personality feuding that probably damaged 'Labour' – New, Old or ageless – as a focus of political organisation, action and loyalty for ever.

As someone who once took part in a Mattinson company focus group, I must admit to scepticism about the rigour of its methods. The event conducted on behalf of what is now Age UK was wholly bogus. The dominant figure in the group pretending to have voted Lib Dem in a marginal constituency in the 2005 election was, in fact, the Labour leader on a local council miles away making a bit of cash-in-hand, focus group money. He told me afterwards, contrary to his expressed views on the Iraq war at the group, that he'd met Tony Blair at a Labour Friends of Israel bash and wouldn't have a word said against him.

But setting my experience aside, I find Mattinson's reasoning – 'how New Labour stopped listening to the voter' – weak, and her prescriptions for a 'new politics' unconvincing. Like many New Labour leading lights she dismisses the catastrophic collapse of the Tories under John Major. And what was New Labour, after all, other than a 'new politics'?

It's sad, but not surprising, that a party's fate was in the hands of the likes of those so insubstantial as Mattinson, and that *The Sunday Times* serialisation of this book generated more media heat than light on the dead body politic that is New Labour.

No such razzmatazz attended the appearance of Arthur Butler's wry, wise and well-drawn memoirs of post-war political Britain. And more's the pity, for these tales from the Westminster journalist turned successful lobbyist fill in parts of our history necessary to grasp and digest if we are ever to have genuinely 'new politics' in this scepter'd isle.

He offers insight into the media world of Lord Beaverbrook – the Rupert Murdoch of his day in this country – and the political world of Hugh Gaitskell and his SDP followers 20 years after his death. As the founding brain behind lobbies for tobacco and the motor industry, and a pioneer of the development of expert parliamentary committees, Butler tells us much about the real world of business, science and politics.

Butler also took on local government reform and offered what aid he could to communities devastated by the loss of traditional employment, and to others at home and abroad needing support and encouragement. Along the way he has fascinating stories to tell about John Addey, James Sherwood, Joseph Godson, the Gang of Four and many more. He also had experiences of the intelligence services worth reading.

This is not an academic work, though academics could learn much from it. Nor is it just a collection of anecdotes from a long and fascinating working life. It is well-written British political life intelligently observed and reflectively considered. It is everything the Mattinson book isn't – and that's probably one of the reasons it wasn't serialised by Uncle Rupert.