

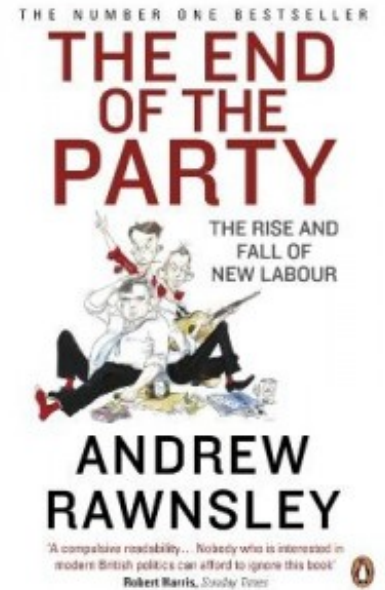
Book Review: The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour

Nov 21 2010

Matthew Whiting reviews Andrew Rawnsley's much anticipated account of New Labour's tumultuous time in power. The account weaves a compelling narrative, but suffers from a lack of policy analysis and the anonymity of many of its sources.

The End of the Party. The Rise and Fall of New Labour. By Andrew Rawnsley (2010). London: Penguin.

That Gordon Brown was a paranoid bully is perhaps the best known and most quoted revelation to emerge from Andrew Rawnsley's high profile and much promoted book *'The End of the Party'*. This headline grabbing detail should not overshadow the breadth of Rawnsley's account of the rise and fall of New Labour, beginning with Tony Blair winning his second term in office in 2001 and ending with Gordon Brown's seemingly unavoidable rejection at the hands of the electorate earlier this year. Extensive discussions are given to finalising peace in Northern Ireland, the impact of 9/11 and the decisions to invade Afghanistan and Iraq, the London bombings of the 7th July, the cash for peerages scandal, the onset of the financial crisis, the MPs expenses scandal, and the 2005 and 2010 general elections. A further prominent and recurring theme is the power struggle between Blair and Brown for control of the government. Of special interest is the intensity of the vitriol between the two biggest hitters in New Labour and the range of underhand tactics and broken promises adopted by both men, but especially Brown, to further their personal interest in power. The focus throughout is on presenting these events through the perceptions and understandings of a core band of elites at the top of the Labour Party.



There can be little doubt that this book is a thrilling read and gives ample coverage to all the main events experienced by the New Labour government, and for this it should be highly commended. However, this book is essentially a descriptive account and it should certainly not be mistaken for analysis. Of course, Rawnsley is a journalist, not an academic, but he sets himself the lofty ambition of 'bridg[ing] the gap between instantaneous journalism...and the future historian'. He presents his account as if he, and only he, has the power to see inside the minds of the leading characters, consistently reducing major political developments solely to the predilections and psychological traits of a small coterie of elites. As such, this book can be seen as one further contribution to the rise of the 'cult of personality' within popular politics. Discussions of policy are marginal, except for some brief mention of failed public sector reform which is explained in terms of the personality conflict between Blair and Brown. Scant mention is made of the socio-economic or cultural conditions in which events played out, and no exploration is undertaken of the changing institutional environment within which Blair and others were operating. For example, Rawnsley reports that Blair was one of the strongest prime ministers ever due to the general castration of the power of cabinet, he states that New Labour generally treated parliament as an irrelevance, and he briefly discusses attempts at civil service reform. Yet all of these assertions are explained in terms of Blair's vain personality and Brown's ever-growing megalomania.

The range of sources drawn upon to present the elite perspective of events – a veritable who's who of contemporary British politics – is very impressive. Disappointingly, most events are referenced anonymously to protect sources. This was probably the only way to elicit the information but nonetheless, as Richard Bourke noted about confidential sources in a different context, we need to be sceptical about taking this information at face value, especially given the impression that Rawnsley is more sympathetic to the Blairites than the Brownites. An overreliance on confidential sources to provide a history of a movement will always leave a book open to the criticism that it is a potentially selective account.

Overall, the most worthy aspect of this book is the way it maps out the complex web of events that comprised New Labour's time in government into a compelling narrative. In fact, it is only when you see all the events mapped out side-by-side that you realise what a tumultuous time this was. This book will provide quotes and soundbites from leading political figures and it will provide a wonderful roadmap through the New Labour

journey from perennial opposition party to one of the most successful centre-left governments in Europe and back to opposition again. Having said that, the book is unlikely to shape or frame future historical analysis of Labour's longest serving time in office and leaves us with few tools to assess important questions about the lasting political legacy of New Labour.

[Matthew Whiting](#) is a *PhD Candidate and LSE Fellow in Government*.