

Anthony Seldon & Dennis Kavanagh, *The Blair Effect 2001-5* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 483 pp., \$27.99 USD/£17.99 pbk., \$70.00 USD/£40.00 hbk.).

The 'hand of history' has been a weight upon Tony Blair's shoulders since the early days of his premiership. Landslide victory in 1997 and the disintegration of the Conservative opposition presented New Labour with a fortuitous opportunity to forge a new political settlement in Britain, an opportunity that it has largely missed. The advantageous circumstances that Blair enjoyed raised the level of expectation, and consequently the level of disillusion and disappointment with what followed. As Seldon notes in his 'Verdict' chapter in this volume, whilst the government has successfully met many of its manifesto commitments, 'against historical parallels and the aspirations aired repeatedly by the Prime Minister himself, the cracks show' (p. 427). Blair's desire for a lasting legacy comparable to that of Attlee or Thatcher has been stymied by his government's timidity in its first term and the long shadow of Iraq over its second. The historic third election victory 'earned a reprieve' (p. 410) for the reputation of the second Blair government, but this may yet prove temporary. Ultimately political actions (however worthy their motives) are judged by their consequences, and in some areas the full effect of decisions taken in the 2001-5 period will not be known for many years to come. Assessments such as those contained in this volume necessarily reflect their historical perspective, but are no less valuable for that.

This book is an indispensable early assessment of the 'Blair Effect' between 2001 and 2005. Readers familiar with the previous volumes in this series (on the Thatcher, Major, and first Blair governments) will be unsurprised to find that the editors, armed with a winning formula, have stuck to it. A range of leading academics and policy

experts assess the impact of Blair and his government across a number of areas. As one would expect, a consistently high standard is maintained throughout. Thoughtful chapters provide informative considerations of the net Blair effect on politics and government (for example on Parliament, the Conservative and Labour parties, and on media management); and on most major policy areas, such as education, health, transport and economic policy. Further chapters discuss the broader issues of the devolution settlement, Europe, and foreign policy. These can all stand alone, or be read as part of a broader appraisal of the period. Dennis Kavanagh provides the introductory overview, and Anthony Seldon the concluding verdict. The volume ends with short but stimulating commentaries by Andrew Gamble, Robert Skidelsky, and Vernon Bogdanor, considering the Third Way, Blair the politician, and foreign policy respectively.

A wide-ranging collection such as this, written by a diversity of authors, does not lend itself to over-arching conclusions. However, a number of key themes emerge. As Pippa Norris demonstrates, whatever his other failings, Blair's three election victories ensure that his place in history 'as the most successful Labour prime minister we have ever known' is secure (p. 43). Despite (or perhaps because of) this electoral success, the overall Blair effect has failed to live up to either public expectations or the Prime Minister's own rhetoric. This may be necessarily so. Norris argues that 'Blair's unprecedented electoral success, and the lack of radical policy achievements during his first and second administrations are, in fact, perhaps intimately related', linked by the cautious 'centrist strategy' adopted by New Labour (p. 65). Gamble argues that this Third Way strategy 'still indicates the policies, the electoral stance and the political style that are most likely to be successful in present circumstances for a party of the left' (p.

437). But for all its electoral utility, the Third Way has demonstrably lacked ideological fibre, and has failed to provide a steer for government policy beyond the demands of the focus group. This may itself prove to be electorally damaging, and add still further to public cynicism about politics.

The general impression that emerges from this book is one of an overly circumspect administration that failed to capitalise on the propitious conditions presented to it. This failure is all the more damning for a government in its second term, and one assisted, as Seldon and Snowdon describe it, by a Conservative opposition apparently unable or unwilling to learn the lessons of defeat (pp. 136-156). Labour can perhaps be forgiven for being caught unawares in 1997, but no such excuse applies in 2001. In his concluding chapter, Seldon suggests that 'Blair was always driven more by the desire to win power than to use power' and that 'he failed to work out until too late exactly what he wanted to do with power' (p. 423). Only in the area of foreign policy has Blair used his power with zeal, expending much of his political capital in the process. He may wish that it were not so, but it is this field, particularly Iraq, that defines his legacy.

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Å Cite this chapter as: Smith G. (2009) *Exploiting the Resources of Power: The Blair Era, 1997-2007*. In: Ganghof S., Hännige C., Stecker C. (eds) *Parlamente, Agendasetzung und Vetospieler*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. *The Blair Effect 2001-2005* by A Seldon and D Kavanagh eds (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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About the author. Dennis Kavanagh is emeritus professor of politics at Liverpool University. Before joining Liverpool in 1996 he was professor of politics at Nottingham University. He has written or edited more than 30 books, most recently 'The British General Election of 2005' with David Butler. Top.

Å More Making of Modern Britain. Reviewed by simon jenkins. September 25 2005, 1:00am, *The Sunday Times*.

THE UNFULFILLED PRIME MINISTER: Tony Blair and the Quest for a Legacy by Peter Riddell Politico's £15.99 pp256. So how has the lad done? Has Tony Blair met with triumph and disaster, and treated both imposters just the same? Has he steered the Third Way or has it all been, as Jack Straw said of the Iraq dossiers, 'a bit of a Horlicks'? Both Anthony Seldon and Peter Riddell are seasoned political observers, but both are vulnerable to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. They! Want to read more? Subscribe now and get unlimited digital access on web and our smartphone and tablet apps, free for your first month. Start your free trial. You are currently logged out.