

REVIEWS

'A sign of arrival ...'

Alan Mumford: *Stabbed in the Front: Post-War General Elections Through Political Cartoons*

(University of Kent, Canterbury, 2001, 164 pp)

Reviewed by **Tim Benson**

Politicians and political cartoonists have always had a strange symbiotic relationship. As Lord Baker says in his foreword to this book, for a rising politician to be featured in a cartoon 'is a sign he has arrived'.

Drawing cartoons of politicians during elections is a tradition that goes back a long way in Britain. One has only to think of William Dent's 'filthy prints' of the Duchess of Devonshire bestowing her favours during the famous 1784 Westminster election, or of the work of the first-ever staff political cartoonist on a daily paper, Francis Carruthers Gould (described by former Prime Minister Lord Rosebery as 'one of the most remarkable assets of the Liberal Party'), who was knighted immediately after the Liberal election victory in 1906.

In *Stabbed in the Front*, Alan Mumford has made a good start on a potentially vast subject by looking at British general elections following the Second World War. Produced as a large-format (A4) paperback, it contains nearly 200 black-and-white cartoons from the pens of more than forty artists working for the best-known national newspapers over the last half-century. Dr Mumford, who is also a collector of political cartoons, admits to a special liking for Vicky, who was the first cartoonist really to attract his attention when he began to get interested in politics.

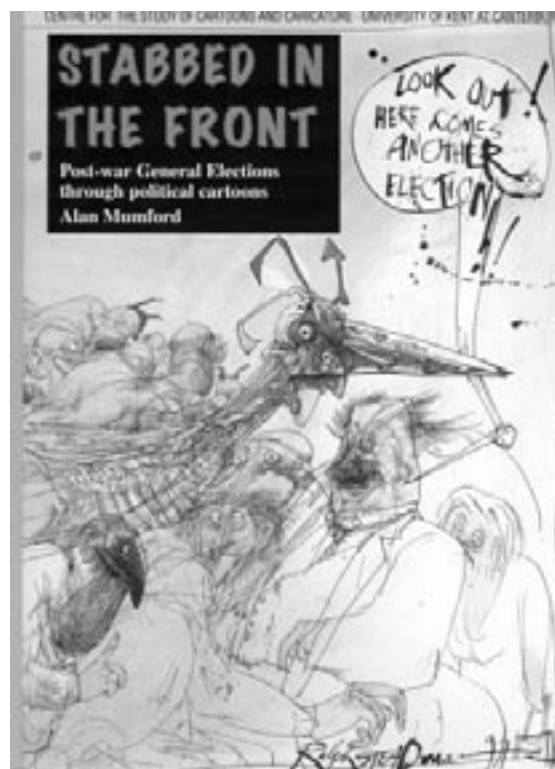
Indeed, the title of the book is partly a homage to Vicky, who published a post-war anthology entitled *Stabs in the Back*. But in Mumford's view 'although they may seem to be unfair, political cartoons are an obvious assault from the front, not a covert attack from the rear', and hence the change.

The book is divided into fifteen chapters, one for each of the general elections since the war, and each chapter has separate sections on the background to the election in question, election issues, personalities, results and the cartoonist of the election. The latter section is a curiosity. Though it is, of course, interesting and important to know who the cartoonists were, it is difficult to assess who was the most prominent in any particular election, and two odd choices feature amongst the usual suspects of Vicky, Cummings, Low, Illingworth, Bell, Gibbard, and Garland. These are Norman Mansbridge (1966 election) and Willie Rushton (1992 election), neither of whom are particularly renowned for their political work.

The introduction examines the content of cartoons, looking especially at the element of savagery and the use of symbols, metaphors and references, and following on from Lord Baker's comments, discusses their impact. In this regard, Mumford quotes Ralph Steadman (whose grotesque *New Statesman* cartoon from the 1997 election

forms the cover illustration to the book). Acutely aware of the relationship between politicians and cartoonists, Steadman deliberately stopped drawing cartoons altogether in 1988 and urged others to follow his lead, claiming that if all the world's cartoonists shunned them for a year politicians 'would suffer withdrawal symptoms of such withering magnitude that the effect on their egos could only be guessed at. Not even a tyrant can survive the whiplash of indifference.'

Many of the cartoons in this well-researched and well-produced book come from the Cartoon Study Centre at the University of Kent, one of Britain's hidden treasures and a true Aladdin's Cave of visual satire. Now more than two decades old, it is effectively the national archive of twentieth-century British political cartoons, with more than 80,000 original drawings, 70,000 cuttings, 60,000 photographic images and an award-winning computer database. Others have been gathered from a variety of sources and, together with Dr Mumford's informative text,



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the result is a refreshing mix that makes fascinating reading for anyone interested in current affairs, one which will also be appreciated by students of politics, history, journalism and cartoon art.

Dr Tim Benson is Director of the Political Cartoon Society, an organisation for those interested in history and politics through the medium of cartoons.

Visit www.politicalcartoon.co.uk

When personal ambitions collide, mutual co-operation is precluded

Giles Radice: *Friends and Rivals: Crosland, Jenkins and Healey*

(Little, Brown & Co., 2002), 382 pp.

Reviewed by **Tom McNally**

Let us start with the conclusion. Giles Radice has written an important book, a very readable book and one that entirely justifies the many favourable reviews it has received since its publication in September 2002. By the device of interweaving the careers and ambitions of Anthony Crosland, Roy Jenkins and Denis Healey, Radice is able to tell the tale of the rise and fall of social democracy within the Labour Party in a way that is both readable and understandable to those coming fresh to this period of recent contemporary history, while being positively unputdownable for those of us who lived through it as active participants.

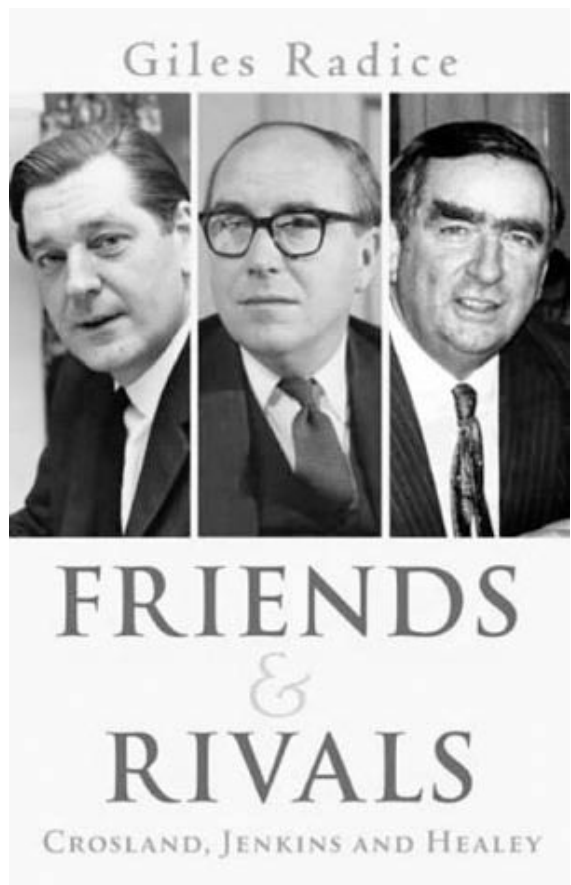
The Wilson Government of the 1960s had probably the cleverest cabinet of the twentieth century. Radice's three heroes were among the cleverest of the clever. I disagree with Giles Radice that they were the Blairites of the 1960s. Both singly and collectively they had an intellectual depth to their politics and their convictions, the absence of which is the most disturbing aspect of the post-1997 New Labour government. Yet this trio of heavyweights, whose basic political philosophies were remarkably close, lost the battle for the soul of Old Labour. In a way, Radice's

narrative parallels Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England* in seeking to explain how both a political establishment and a political philosophy lost its way.

I watched this story unfold first of all as a Labour Party researcher in the mid- and late sixties, then as International Secretary of the Labour Party from 1969–74 (the youngest since Denis Healey, who served in the post from 1945–52), followed by the position of Political Secretary to Jim Callaghan from 1974–79, and finally as a Member of Parliament from 1979–83. As Denis Healey once memorably told me, it was a vantage point from which you could peep under the table and see the true colour of the political knickers people were wearing.

Although the book is the story of the rivalry of a triumvirate, my old boss, Jim Callaghan, is a kind of Iago figure, a brooding presence in the narrative whose influence on the unfolding tragedy is a malign one for our three noble failures.

Radice's central thesis is probably true: if mutual jealousies and ambitions had not prevented it, an alliance between Crosland, Jenkins and Healey at almost any time between the late sixties and the mid-seventies could have delivered the premiership to one of



them. In that respect Tony Blair and Gordon Brown did learn the lessons of history by cementing their own non-aggression pact, and reaped their full reward for so doing.

We will never know whether the battles which Neil Kinnock began in the mid-eighties and Tony Blair completed in the nineties could have been achieved a decade earlier by a more resolute and united centre-right. I have my doubts. Those who remained deny it, but the analysis presented to me by Bill Rodgers, when in 1981 I left the Labour Party to join the newly formed SDP, is, I believe, valid: 'Tom, what we are doing will force the Labour Party to either reform or die. If it refuses to reform then the SDP will replace it.' Faced with that stark choice, Labour chose to reform, but there was not much stomach for it before the arrival of the SDP, as a close examination of the careers of some Cabinet members would testify. Although the key reforms lay a decade ahead, the defining moment came, as