

Mandelson taking money for old rope

Books

Elaine Jones reviews "The Blair Revolution" by Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle.

IS Peter Mandelson a "spin doctor", the author of a new theory of the Labour Party that will deliver desirable change? Or is Mandelson's game a case of getting money for old rope — for Tory ideology, dressed up this time without a pale-pink tinge. Old rope, I think, after reading this book.

If you manage to get past all the meaningless patter and guff — "building on Britain's strength, not harking back to the past," "rights and responsibilities", "wealth comes from personal effort and entrepreneurial flair" — yeah?! — "co-operation not confrontation: for fellowship not fear", "one nation socialism" etc., etc. — without being ill or chucking the book in the bin, then eventually you'll find out what Mandelson and Liddle's right-wing Labour vision of a

future Labour-run society is.

It is pure fantasy — puerile stuff recycled for the hundredth time. What should be done about the divisions in our society? The employer and employee living in harmony. In other words, the lamb should lie down with the hyena? Yes. And live happily together? Yes. But how is this harmony going to be achieved? By encouraging personal incentives and reward. That's new!

They say they are committed to the rigour of a dynamic market while at the same time they talk of effectively regulating the market. They seem to think they can regulate booms and slumps without interfering with the 'free' market!

They ignore all historical experience of how capitalism operates, the reality of class society, who owns the vast bulk of the wealth, how the working class is exploited. You think that the working class needs to organise together and develop solidarity to defend jobs and living standards? These 'new thinkers' of New Labour don't. According to Mandelson and Liddle, we are all equal individuals. The rich man and the poor man, the beggar man sleeping rough

and the thief lauding it in the boardroom or the Stock Exchange — all are equal, in the eyes of New Labour.

So much for the "vision". How will it be won, how will it be implemented?

Don't expect renationalisation because "privatisation has brought about improvements in operating efficiently and facilitated new investment." Really? On the railway, to take one example?

Don't expect free education. We are all going to get individual learning accounts and a one-off grant to spend on approved courses. However, "the individual would gain new freedoms of career choice and development but would need to make his or her own contribution through committed contractual saving". This, I presume, means students will have to pay back the grant.

The long-term unemployed should not despair. In the Mandelson/Liddle brave New Labour world you'll go on a training scheme. Choice is to be preserved even here. Your other choice? Having your benefit severed.

Mandelson and Liddle's plans for the Labour Party are in the same vein. They want to cut the link between the unions and the Party: "The unions' entrenched constitutional position [in the Labour Party] is largely an accident of history". So, they must think, privately, was the Labour Party itself.

What we need, they say, is "the involvement of individual trade unionists as happens on the continent". "One member, one vote should be extended to include elections such as constituency delegate to annual conference, ballots on all major policy issues, the slimming down of the GC to a management committee." They want to see an organisation in which members don't have to think or discuss anything, where the National Policy Forum decides policy. They want a Party which has severed links with the organised working class and whose members will be expected to be foot soldiers (or, rather, telesales workers) for the leadership at election time.

If you are one of those people in the Labour Party who thinks Blair and his chums will rebuild the Welfare State — once they get winning the general election out of the way — think again.

Not the least important aspect of what these authors advocate and Blair is doing to the Labour Party is that it implies a great narrowing down of democracy in our society. It means pushing the working class out of effective politics.

However, the "full returns" on the Blairite project is not in yet. Despite what Mandelson and Co. want to believe, the working class is not dead: in government the leadership of the Labour Party will not have everything its own way. People who will vote for Labour will expect more: a minimum wage, proper funding for the health service, free trade unions. And as expectations rise, workers will feel more confident about demanding rights, jobs, services. Blair's "revolution" is not yet secure. ■

Revolutionary first

Pablo Velasco reviews "The Collected Works of John Reed" (Modern Library, US 1995).

AMONG THOSE revolutionary journalists who have reported on the great events of this century whilst retaining their sympathy and support for the downtrodden and oppressed, John Reed stands in the first rank. And, despite a comparatively short career, from 1910 until October 1920, when he died, aged 32, Reed left an invaluable literary and political treasure chest for today's revolutionaries.

John Reed's father was a businessman who fought corruption and supported the 'Progressive' wing of the Republican Party. These activities brought him the respect and friendship of Lincoln Steffens, a journalist and fiction writer who became young Jack Reed's mentor. After graduating from Harvard University in 1910, Reed moved to New York and began writing for *Metropolitan Magazine* and *Masses*, edited by Max Eastman.

Alas, this collection of Reed's writings does not do justice to its title. It merely reproduces Reed's three largest works, *Insurgent Mexico*, *The War in Eastern Europe* and the great *Ten Days that Shook the World*.

The first two were partial compilations from feature articles, whereas *Ten Days*, the best known eyewitness accounts of the October Revolution of 1917, was completed during Reed's brief return to the US in 1919.

However, the three long articles do repay re-reading. *Insurgent Mexico* was written between 1913-14 and established Reed's swashbuckling style which brought hitherto obscure and unknown personalities and events to life. Speaking little Spanish, Reed journeyed with Pancho Villa at the height of the peasant war in Northern Mexico, and punctuates his accounts with references to ballads, heroic events (sometimes in the wrong order!) and personal reminiscences.

The War in Eastern Europe is much more of a mishmash, since Reed faced difficulties reaching the front in the Balkans.

It was *Ten Days* which established Reed in the imagination of socialists as a great journalist. Arriving in September 1917, Reed immediately plunged into the world of Smolny and the Petrograd soviet. He regularly saw Lenin and Trotsky, and was present at the storming of the Winter Palace on 7 November. While it is easy to criticise the book as history — it lacks the sources, cross referencing and chronology to satisfy academics — it conveys the tremendous atmosphere of uncertainty and opportunity that existed in the revolution, and which it is difficult to get across writing after the event.

Reed himself was changed by the Bolshevik revolution. Despite his bourgeois background, he put his considerable talent at the service of the working class, crowned with the founding of the Communist Party in the US and his involvement in the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920.

John Reed died a communist first and journalist second. His life and works continue to inspire revolutionary socialists.

More than bourgeois gold-digging

Film

Helen Rate reviews Emma Thompson's film of "Sense and Sensibility".

THE fervent enthusiasm for Jane Austen now gripping film and TV producers is probably due to a perception that Austen's work is highly-marketable, bodice-ripping, costume drama. Of course they are right. *Sense and Sensibility* is doing great at the box office in the States and Emma Thompson has won an Oscar for the screenplay.

Some socialists, sober and unsentimental souls that we are, will understandably enough, perhaps, therefore be deterred from reading Jane Austen, or going to see the "film version." They may expect tales of silly upper class women in big skirts trying to cop off with the bloke with the fattest wallet. Actually that's what you do get... but you get *something else* too. Austen's work is, in fact, satire — and it is pretty good satire — on bourgeois society and women's position in that society.

Emma Thompson's adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* is very good and for the most part faithful to the book. However, her screenplay deliberately draws out some of the more "feminist" themes of the book. Thompson's interpretation is perfectly permissible and interesting to see, but it does distort Austen's point of view.

Austen's portraits of female oppression often show what she regarded as *universal* truths about human beings. Austen seems to have been aware of the politics and popular philosophies of her time but she was *not* a radical. I don't think she would have been impressed by such a contemporary feminist as Mary Wollstonecraft.

The sad truth of Jane Austen's life was that, unlike Wollstonecraft, she was not able to find a way to live her life to the full: maybe living in sin, or bearing illegitimate children, not even writing books in her own name, and certainly not advocating subversive things. But Austen was, quietly, a bit of a subversive too and this is portrayed magnificently in this film.

There are two underlying themes in *Sense and Sensibility*. The first is Austen's habitual starting point for her construction of plot: the inequities and follies of bourgeois marriage. This always generates a lot of acid wit.

Other authors have created comedy out of bourgeois life and ridiculed their own class. Few have done this from the point of view of the working-class (although that other magnificent wit, Oscar Wilde, was a socialist). Austen's class standpoint — if



Sense and Sensibility

she has one at all — is to laud the values of a mythical age, when aristocrats, yeoman and landless labourers all "ate at the same table" (metaphorically of course). Despite these limitations, Austen must rank as one of the best and most incisive satirists of the ruling class. Her saving grace is that — unlike Trollope who shares similar preoccupations — she is categorically *not* a snob. In any case her writing is sublime.

The second theme of the book — and the film — is how human beings are forced to repress their feelings, instincts and desires. In the film, we see how the character of Eleanor (played by Emma Thompson) is forced by the twin circumstances of being a dutiful elder daughter and relatively poor, to forgo a chance of happiness and resigns herself to spinsterhood.

There are some moving scenes in the film. At one point Eleanor's sister, Marianne, upbraids Eleanor for not showing her feelings. Perhaps Eleanor does not have any feelings... Eleanor loses her composure and in these seconds, when Thompson portrays Eleanor's irritation with her sister, she manages to show the overwhelming oppression of Eleanor's life condemned as she is to be forever untrue to herself.

In contrast, Marianne — the sister with all the sensibilities — tries very hard to be true to herself. Without a mind for societal decorum or her reputation she flings herself at her "heart's desires" — a cad called Willoughby. Not only does Marianne get hurt, she nearly loses her life. For Austen this is a *universal* theme, one which applies equally to men and women. And it is still relevant today — not alone for women who live in purdah, or for gay people living in the closet, but actually for anyone who is the victim of the petty, hypocritical seriousness of bourgeois culture.

Sense and Sensibility is not just an excuse to eat chocolate and reach for the Kleenex — go and see it! 🍫

"The poor middle class"

Paul McAnaney reviews "Parsons on Class", BBC1.

NO, the title is not a joke, just *Parsons on Class*. The programme revolved around the Jones family of Maghull, Liverpool, a 'typical middle class family'. The evidence for this seemed to be that they hold dinner parties and buy Chardonnay at Tesco's!

Tony Parsons dealt with education — not with problems such as lack of books and of funding but with the value of private schools. With banal opinions such as "the comprehensive system fails in inner cities, the only way out for bright inner city children is to have selection", this was far from a sharp incisive look at education in Britain today.

Middle class people were afraid of having to give up domestic help and foreign holidays in order to send their kids to private school. "Increasingly there is no money at all in Maghull, fears are as real as on any sprawling estate." Fear! Real fear means not having a home, not having a job and not being able to receive a decent education because there are no books and no money.

Ken Jones Snr. owns a 'small' construction company, and the old idea of the caring boss was wheeled out: "Whatever happens to us [the bosses], has an equal effect on them [the workers]." Equal? Well, I'm sorry but unemployment for workers often means repossession, homelessness, serious illness, sometimes death, whereas the bosses still own a profitable business or if it fails usually manage to salvage something. Insult was added to injury with the idea that "you have to make the most of the recession." I'd love to! Tell me how to "make the most of" £37 Income Support.

This programme was riddled with inaccurate research, and complacent middle class lies. Its conclusion, that the working class is dead, that the middle class rise is relentless, is ridiculous. Tell that to the four million unemployed workers throughout Britain and I'm sure they'd agree that it is a sick joke.

The whole programme is based on the idea that class is defined by habits of consumption. This is idiotic. As a sociologist Tony Parsons is in a class of his own. At root, the class distinction that matters in Britain is that between wage workers who must sell their labour power in order to live and those who exploit them.