

Book reviews

AGAINST LEVIATHAN: GOVERNMENT POWER AND A FREE SOCIETY

Robert Higgs

Oakland, CA: The Independent Institute, 408pp., ISBN: 0 945999 96 8, \$18.95 (pb), 2004

George Orwell wrote in 1984 that 'he who controls the past controls the future'. This is just one of several profound statements made in Orwell's masterpiece of modern literature. The way we view our economic past dictates the policy steps we take to deal with the future. In the first half of the twentieth century, Barbara Wooten had gotten control of the general history core at University College London and for a generation she taught college students about the inhumanity of the industrial revolution, the working conditions of factories, and the indignity of urban dwelling. She failed to mention the problems of poverty, disease and onerous labour that existed in rural life that produced a miserable and short life for its inhabitants. Hayek, in fact, in 1954 edited a collection of essays *Capitalism and the Historians* which sought to overturn each of the myths that were being promulgated in the core at the University College.

Robert Higgs has devoted his career to providing a correct understanding of our economic history in the US. He is an effective and persuasive writer, and his scholarship is thorough and rigorous. Higgs does not pull punches and he communicates to his readers the destructive nature of government power over the economy and their lives. The state is not merely meddlesome, it is also a war machine that brings with it not just irksome interference but mass murder. And sometimes the maliciousness of Leviathan is not limited to its efforts at war making, but is a consequence of sheer incompetence as is the case of the Food and Drug Administration.

What exactly is Leviathan? It is the welfare/warfare state that has emerged in the twentieth century and threatens our liberties while

pretending to uphold them. And there simply is no better historian of this phenomenon in all its complexities and manifestations than Robert Higgs, whose *Crisis and Leviathan* explained how this monstrosity emerged not in one fell swoop but through an evolutionary process where the constraints on the growth of government were eroded one court decision at a time and replaced by regulation after regulation. In addition, changes in the discipline of economics transpired that aided this evolutionary process and failed to give an accurate portrayal to the empirical reality. In fact, Higgs argues that 'Economists' passive acceptance of economic statistics designed and constructed by government bureaucrats ranks among the more shameful aspects of their professional conduct in the past century' (p. 120).

Against Leviathan collects Higgs's effort to communicate the truth to his readers about the shocking state of affairs with regard to the growth and acceptance of statism in the US. This is a set of wonderful essays that all will benefit from. How could you not?! Higgs writes clearly, and his argument is grounded in logic and evidence discovered in deep scholarly investigation. Most scholars have a difficult time switching from the conversations they have with their colleagues – where model and measure rhetoric dominates – or with their undergraduate students – where assertion and an air of superiority dominates – to the conversation with the interested laymen. Higgs doesn't have this problem of transition between audiences. He does write with great conviction about what he has uncovered, but what he has uncovered warrants such strong reaction by both author and reader.

My favourite essay in this collection (and this was not easy to choose because there are so many) is 'The Myth of War Prosperity'. This is a popular rendition of a series of papers that he wrote in the 1990s that were published in a variety of professional journals, including *The Journal of Economic History*, that if heeded should serve as a guide for a reassessment of American political and economic history. When you take the government out of GNP accounting and look closely at the historical record on economic performance prior to, during, and then after the Second World War,

Higgs argues, you learn that the entire literature in economics and history on how the war lifted the US economy out of the Great Depression is based on misconceptions. 'Despite its nearly universal acceptance', Higgs writes, 'the standard interpretation is wrong. It rests on evidence that will not bear scrutiny. It exemplifies bad economics and bad history' (p. 219). Once Higgs's alternative interpretation is accepted, the entire intellectual justification of Keynesianism collapses. Standard accounts see the war years as producing 'more guns and more butter', but this view misses four important points: (1) inflation during this period is understated; (2) there was a deterioration of quality or disappearance of many consumer goods during this period; (3) there are undesirable and unintended consequences that result when rationing goods and services by non-price means; and (4) there was an increase in the transactions costs and other sacrifices that consumers needed to make in order to acquire goods and services that they would not need make in the context of a functioning market economy. A subtle but important point in Higgs's analysis is that most economists misunderstand the war economy because they try to model it as if it was a period where a functioning market economy was in operation, when in fact, what existed in the US was a command-administered economy. Under such a system the economic costs of policies are often hidden, but once exposed they lead us to re-examine the choices made because the costs are quite high. The US economy did not get out of the Great Depression by transforming to the command economy of war-time. The US recovery, instead, can only be dated to much later after the war and the transformation back (not all the way) to a market economy.

What makes Higgs such a persuasive writer to me is that he blends an analytical framework that employs a combination of insights from Austrian economics, public choice economics, and a form of neoclassical economics that was best represented in the research traditions at UCLA and the University of Washington, and he combines that with an historian's penchant for thoroughness in research and uncovering 'the fact of the matter'. Add to this mix, Higgs's ability to write in plain language without losing analytical rigour, and a normative passion

about the real costs of statism and you can get a sense of the power of *Against Leviathan*. The book is not optimistic about the ultimate victory of liberty over statism. I remain more optimistic than Higgs, but perhaps only because of self-delusion. Still, Higgs's message is so clear and well-argued that I cannot believe if read widely it wouldn't give pause to those championing the necessity of, and growth of, government. In a wonderful final salvo for this book, Higgs states in as plain a form as possible that: 'whatever the role of government is currently in any developed nation, its optimal role there is a much smaller one' (p. 375).

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THE BUSINESS OF VIRTUE

Clive Wright

London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 160pp., ISBN: 0 281 054 266, £19.99 (pb), 2004

Can a Christian be a businessman? Is business an inherently corrupt and corrupting activity, or is there an ethical way to conduct business? Can Christian morality, with its traditional rejection of material goods, sit comfortably with the capitalist system? Clive Wright's *The Business of Virtue* addresses these questions, and while it leaves much unanswered, it is an important step towards bridging the gap that many perceive between business and religion.

Wright's case is simple and straightforward. Business is a morally acceptable activity, if conducted properly. What is needed is a code of business ethics to ensure that business is pursued in a just, honest way. Christian moral teaching, says Wright, not only can, but should, aid in the formation of such a code. Instead, Christianity has allowed its discomfort with business to prevent it from making a contribution to the field of business ethics. This has led to a gap between the realms of religion and business, which Wright believes has been damaging to both sides.

Wright suggests that to many Christian theologians, business and ethics are viewed as separate subjects, which do not, and should not, have anything to do with each other. This, he believes, is a distressing state of affairs. Business has been an important factor in every developed society. As such, Christianity must come to terms with business. Until it does, it will deprive the business world of a wealth of

moral teaching. To make a contribution to the field of business ethics, however, Christianity must first develop a 'theology of wealth creation'.

Wealth creation, specifically capitalism, is not inherently evil, and should not be seen as being in conflict with Christianity. Indeed, wealth creation can be a deeply Christian activity. If one understands the purpose of business as to provide goods and services to satisfy the needs and wants of one's fellow man, then the motivation becomes not selfish profit, but service to others, a concept at the core of Christian morality. It is only through wealth creation, too, that we can alleviate the plight of the poor, another core precept of Christianity. Capitalism, while not perfect, has proven the most effective economic system for providing for the material needs of the largest number of people.

Although the capitalist system and the businesses operating within it can be good, they are open to abuse. Wright identifies several objections to free-market business, including its stimulation of appetites and desires, often to an unhealthy degree, and the inequality that is inherent to the system. It is here that the subject of business ethics becomes important. Business is an activity central to society, therefore it should be conducted in a manner acceptable to society, through a code of ethics. As capitalism emerged and prospered in a civilisation shaped largely by Christian thought, it is fitting that Christianity should contribute to the formation of this code.

Christian morality has much to contribute to business ethics. The philosophy of Christian virtues, in particular the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, can be used to form a theory of 'just business'. Here Wright truly solidifies his case by suggesting concrete ways in which Christianity can add to a code of business morality.

Wright's theory of just business includes five central precepts. First, the primary purpose of business shall be meeting man's wants and needs. Part of that involves a responsibility on the part of the business not to inordinately create or stimulate human desires, particularly those that are less admirable. Second, businesses shall obey the laws of legitimate authority where they operate. Third, businesses shall ensure that they provide benefits proportional to the costs, for example, by working to create a balance between providing fuel for human consumption, and preventing damage to the environment in the process. Fourth, businesses shall work to establish trust among those with whom they are engaged. Finally, transactions shall be based upon mutual benefits to the parties involved.

Wright is aware of the limitations of his theory. He does not intend it to be the last word, but merely a first step in integrating Christianity and business. Wright illustrates how these precepts can be used to form a code of ethics, beginning with a mission statement. Once a clear statement of the mission of the business developed, it can be used to guide company policies. These policies, strictly adhered to and incorporated into every aspect of the company, result in a working and effective code of ethics. When this code is absorbed by the company, it can then be easily and reliably utilised when serious ethical dilemmas arise. Wright illustrates the formation and incorporation of a moral code, as well as the use of it during an ethical emergency, with experiences drawn from his years in business in the chemical industry.

This is the strongest part of the book. Not only does Wright give practical suggestions as to how Christian ethics may be made applicable to business codes, he gives examples of how these codes can help businesses deal successfully with moral dilemmas. Wright also demonstrates that companies that rigorously follow a code of ethics generally fare better financially than those that do not, thus brushing aside the myth that businesses profit only through dishonesty.

Wright makes his case admirably, demonstrating that Christianity can be applied to business in such a way as to form a working, reliable code of ethics. *The Business of Virtue* is written so as to be of interest not only to businessmen, but also to students of both ethics and economics, and, perhaps most importantly, to laypersons concerned about the morality of the ever-present world of business.

Eleanor Smith

Winner of 2003 Hayek Essay Prize

HUMAN WELL-BEING AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Partha Dasgupta

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 376pp., ISBN: 0 199 267 197, £15.99 (pb), 2004

The concept of 'human well-being' is something which anyone can intuitively understand, but at the same time it is very difficult to define. Economist Partha Dasgupta deals with it in *Human Well-being and the Natural Environment*,

which was originally published in 2001. Professor Dasgupta's goal is not only to give a framework in order to value human well-being, especially in poor countries, but also to evaluate it. 'We *value*', Dasgupta writes, 'when comparing objects and we *evaluate* when comparing the relative merit of actions' (p. 1). So, we *value* in order to *evaluate*, and we *evaluate* in order to *make decisions* – to choose the best, or the second best, or the lesser evil.

Dasgupta aims to include environmental values (as well as a number of other features, such as welfare, personal income, human rights, etc.) in the definition of well-being. He also focuses on *personal* well-being, as well as on *social* well-being, which is necessary in order to compare one society with another, and a society's performance across time. Well-being may be described by its *constituents* (including 'happiness, freedom to be and to do, and, more broadly, basic liberties', p. 33) or by its *determinants* ('which are commodity inputs in the production of well-being, such as food, clothing, potable water, shelter, access to knowledge and information, and resources devoted to national security', p. 33). An unbiased, and often meaningful, estimate of something's value is given by a commodity's market price. When one comes to the environment, however, problems may arise. As Dasgupta notes, 'for many environmental resources markets simply do not exist' (p. 108). The use of environmental resources may result in externalities, that is, negative side effects whose costs are paid by somebody else. For example, when an industry discharges pollution into a river, the industry may enjoy all of the benefits of its productive processes, while the costs of pollution are paid by all of the water users downstream. The same is true for what has been called 'the tragedy of the commons': commonly owned resources (such as a pasture) tend to be over-used because it is in every individual's interest to consume the resource before someone else does.

To Dasgupta, '[m]arkets can't be expected to function well in such environments . . . [M]arkets need to be supplemented in such a way as to ensure there are additional public signals to accompany prices' (p. 109). Dasgupta understands that institutions do matter; he doesn't seem to realise that most environmental problems are not a market failure, rather an institutional failure. Both in the polluted river and the over-used pasture, we are facing a problem of ill-defined and ill-enforced property rights, and unsound regulation.

In fact, when property rights are well defined and enforced, the incentive structure is such that over-use is not convenient – so the

rational market actor may maximise her profits only as long as the resource is used in a sustainable way. Incidentally, this is the only meaningful sense of 'sustainability'.

On the other hand, too often a regulation which is supposed to protect the environment shifts the incentive structure and results in environmental degradation (as is the case of many polluted rivers, where regulation defined a maximum level of legal pollution, and removed the protection of water users' rights downstream). Thus, the value of environmental goods would be included in market prices not only in a Utopian world (as Dasgupta says), but also in a genuinely capitalist world.

The final question that Dasgupta addresses is a big one: how can we value future and potential lives? This has to do not only with economics, but especially with ethics. That is *the* question when you have to decide what is to be spent to assure a better life for our descendants, *rather than*, say, for the protection of biodiversity. In a world where resources are scarce, it may be impossible to do both. This is the case, for example, of 'population policies', i.e. the population size of next generations. The decision, whatever it is to be, cannot rely on particular ideological positions: it 'must base itself . . . on how *we* see ourselves, on what kind of people we ought to try to be, on what our rational desires are . . . The mistake is to see procreation and ecological preservation as matters of personal and political morality. It is at least as much a matter of personal and political ethics' (p. 230).

Dasgupta is right on this, even though he doesn't go on and make explicit the logic deduction you might expect: any decision concerning environment and procreation should be taken at the lowest possible level, that is, at the level of individuals. Individual problems should not be addressed globally.

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THE WOMAN AND THE DYNAMO: ISABEL PATERSON AND THE IDEA OF AMERICA

Stephen Cox

New York: Transaction Publishers, 458pp., ISBN:
0 7658 0241 4, \$39.95 (hb), 2004

If I had to go back in time to a different country and era then living in New York City between, say, 1920 and 1960 would be high on my list, possibly number one. To be there as an active participant with America's 'Old Right' fighting the New Deal would be awesome. Then imagine working with just these four women and four men: Isabel Paterson (*The God of the Machine*), Rose Wilder Lane (*Little House on the Prairie* 'ghost-writer'), Ayn Rand (*The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*), Suzanne La Follette (*Concerning Women*), Garett Garrett (*Saturday Evening Post* contributor and chief editorial writer), Albert Jay Nock (*The Freeman, Our Enemy The State* and *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*), H. L. Mencken (*Man versus the State*, political commentator and essayist) and Frank Chodorov (*The Income Tax: Root of all Evil*).

But would it be worth missing China going capitalist, the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the break up of the Evil Empire, worldwide privatisation, the end of apartheid, the taming of inflation, the defeat of the unions and the ingenious Right to Buy?

After reading *The Woman and the Dynamo*, Stephen Cox's wonderful biography of Isabel Paterson, I am sorely tempted to shout out 'Yes'. Cox, a professor of literature at UC San Diego, has produced a book that is exhaustive and scholarly while simultaneously a clear labour of love and a real page turner.

Paterson was born 22 January 1886 on an island in Lake Huron and so was originally a Canadian. She was raised in Montana which she wrote was rather dull and not at all like the Wild West of later popular culture. Indeed, this self-taught little girl who could speak whole sentences at thirteen months and read at three years wished she were in Australia where she had read the action really was. Sorry Hollywood!

From such a start she rose to become a popular novelist, author for 25 years of a highly influential 1,800-word weekly column on books for the *Herald Tribune*, mentor to Ayn Rand, occasional friend of all of those listed above and finally author of *The God of the Machine*, one of the great tsunami of free-market books to emerge in 1943/44.

However, it was during her 25 years as author of the above-mentioned column, *Turns With a Bookworm* (1924–49), that this heroine possibly deserves at least some credit for the eventful success of *The Fountainhead*. Sales were at first slow but Paterson plugged the book eight times in 12 months and the numbers improved, particularly in the mid-west where Paterson was highly rated.

Much as one admires Paterson and her colleagues one has to agree that they were a

difficult bunch. Put Paterson in a room with a businessman and she would soon be hectoring him on the failure of capitalists to put up a proper intellectual defence of . . . well, capitalism. And when chums asked those same businessmen for funds to support a magazine that would popularise capitalism she railed against both sides for their hypocrisy: practise what you preach, she demanded. 'Ends cannot be divorced from means', she told John Chamberlain. What about sales and advertising, she asked? Nobody listened, the money ran out, the editors all resigned and in January 1953 *The Freeman* 'was taken over by [Leonard] Read's Foundation for Economic Education and became literally free – outreach literature sent to anyone who wanted it'.

It was Bill Buckley who in the mid-1950s brought Isabel out of retirement to write for his newly launched *National Review* although it took even the charming Buckley a year of letters. The new partnership soon floundered on the racks of a blistering review of Cranford Greenwalt's platitudinous *The Uncommon Man*. Isabel used this particular platform to return to her favourite theme of the lack of understanding by businessmen of the role of business, lashing not only Greenwalt but also Jasper Crane. It was too much.

She died in January 1960. Since then *The God of the Machine* has been reissued many times, a market signal of which one knows she would have been proud.

In the pantheon of individualist heroes and heroines where does she rank? Such questions are impossible to answer but they sure generate good conversation. If Cox is right when he hints that Isabel's eight plugs turned around Rand's sales figures how do we measure the writing of a bestseller against the words that saved it from obscurity?

It is purely subjective. In reaching my own answer I am struck by the anti-capitalist mentality of America in the 1940s. Reading Cox one is constantly reminded that the intellectual classes of that era were in a deep love affair with communism. Their arguments now seem bafflingly trite and free of serious content, even laughable. For example, one prominent commentator called for rationing of food to continue indefinitely in the USA post-Second World War so its citizens and the rest of the world could empathise. Let's all suffer together.

Indeed the actions and the arguments of the anti-market protagonists make Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* look like reportage not fiction. Ellsworth Toohey is not an absurd caricature: he was alive and living in NYC in the 1940s.

So Paterson is up there, a real heroine in the war of ideas. She not only preached liberty, she lived liberty. No claiming of social security in retirement for Isabel – her card is kept in an envelope marked Social Security Swindle. You just know that her children, if she'd had any, would never spend a day in a tax-funded school.

She was not a Friedman, Hayek or Rand but she was very important and Cox has done her proud, very proud. This volume will make a great gift for the woman you know who thinks economics and the war of ideas is a male pursuit.

John Blundell

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF NOTABLE BLACK ECONOMISTS

Kojo A. Quartey

Aldershot: Ashgate, 144pp., ISBN: 1 840 141 476, £37.50 (hb), 2000

Little is known about the contribution of black scholars in the development of economic thought. Although Africans have made a significant contribution all over the world this has often gone unrecognised. Quartey aims to provide the first deep critical analysis of the contributions of African economists. He examines a variety of perspectives, most notably the political contexts, both nationally and internationally, in which these economists worked. Quartey also tackles the schools of thought, backgrounds, influences and even philosophical beliefs of the scholars. Finally, Quartey offers a critical analysis and appraisal of the individual contributions of the economists studied.

Chapter 1 provides definitions of economics and what economists do. The second chapter gives a lucid review of ancient Greek scholarship and Africa's contributions in the area of philosophy and economic thought, with reference to St Augustine of Algeria and Erathosthenes of Alexandria. In Chapter 3, Quartey examines multidisciplinary scholar W. E. Du Bois, a socialist 'who saw the Soviet model as one that could eliminate poverty and unemployment' (p. 32). Chapter 4 scrutinises

the work of the development economist and Nobel laureate Sir W. Arthur Lewis. His major contribution was the realisation that economic development analysis was multidisciplinary and pragmatic, and his two-sector theory model propelled him to fame. Chapter 5 examines the contribution of Kwame Nkrumah, another socialist. Though the author argues that Nkrumah was the greatest African leader of the twentieth century, he did little to change the lives of the poorest people in his own domicile.

In Chapters 6 and 7 the author examines two neoclassical black conservative economists and it is here that the author's analysis shines. Quartey firstly examines Thomas Sowell, the Chicago-trained positivist, and then Walter Williams, the free enterprise guru. Both are often misunderstood and vilified by other black intellectuals, perhaps because black conservatism owes its renaissance to these two economists.

Sowell's views are controversial amongst African-Americans. Quartey does him justice and by critically analysing Sowell's works, he discredits Sowell's critics. Sowell's contributions are numerous. He is concerned with 'not how fair policies are, but simply whether they are effective' (p. 35). He is a positivist economist in its true sense. Quartey notes that he does not favour affirmative action because it has not led to the higher incomes for most blacks (in ghettos) but it has assisted the middle-class blacks (those opposed to Sowell). Sowell's conclusion makes sense (p. 56). He raises a question that Sowell's critics must ask, was affirmative action designed for poor blacks or more affluent blacks? In his writing on the human capital theory Sowell stresses the value of human capital for social mobility. Quartey agrees with Sowell and notes, 'African-Americans must acquire and sustain the necessary human capital to ensure further progress in the economy' (p. 59). Finally, in examining and critiquing the self-sufficiency or 'bootstrap' theory which Sowell is famous for, Quartey quotes Sowell's acceptance of receiving assistance. However, Sowell's argument is that 'once afforded an opportunity, it is up to the individual to muster the personal effort to sustain his/her progress' (p. 61). In that case welfare hurts blacks as it creates a dependency syndrome. Quartey concludes: 'Sowell's views are always often misrepresented as too extremist. His views when placed in perspective and analysed on a non-emotional basis appear cogent'.

Walter Williams, the noted classical economist and columnist, is currently based at George Mason University. Quartey considers

his views on government and public education. Williams is a major critic of government intervention; he believes societal problems are exacerbated and perpetuated by ineffective government social intervention. For Williams government intervention creates a dependency syndrome and contributes to corrosion of the black family, creating 'couch potatoes'. Williams 'champions the free enterprise system, noting that government regulation in many instances prohibits blacks from access to the same opportunities as others' (p. 66).

Quartey censures Williams for his rigid adherence to the single causal factor; the government as the cause of all black problems. He acknowledges, however, Williams's argument that public schools create 'perverse incentives', though arguing that parents and families also have a role in the success or failure of black children at school (p. 67). On Williams's argument that wage laws create unemployment, Quartey agrees, though argues that in some cases minimum wage legislation may prevent the exploitation of the unskilled workers.

Chapter 8 examines the work of Glenn Loury, a 'conservative' advocate of self-help, family values and dignity. In Chapter 9, William Darity Jr., a contemporary ethnic researcher, and north-south theories of development and trade are examined. The final three chapters appraise the work of three less controversial black economists: Andrew F. Brimmer, Phyllis Ann Wallace and Clifton R. Whaton Jr.

As noted above, Quartey's most useful analysis is of the work of Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams. The obvious criticism of this book is of the approach, which is to give a very general overview rather than an exhaustive analysis. Although addressing notable black contributions, he does not fully state to his readers the impacts of the ideas of the 'notable blacks', especially the socialist and Marxist economists. He is quick to point the criticism levelled at both Sowell and Walter Williams, but fails to critically analyse the negative impacts on Africa of the Marxists and socialist ideas of Dubois and Nkrumah.

Overall, Quartey does an admirable job of providing insight into the contributions of black economists. He reaches beyond the traditional economists, examining both controversial and less controversial individuals. Until now no work has been written on black economists that would serve as a single reference work but if one has to recommend an assorted text Quartey's book should be mentioned. Despite the enormously

deficient criticism of socialist views the book is still worth reading.

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BLAIR

Anthony Seldon

London: The Free Press, 755pp., ISBN: 0 743 232 119, £20.00 (hb), 2004

Anthony Seldon's new biography of Tony Blair provides an insightful and thorough account of the Prime Minister's early life and rise to power, but its judgement of Blair's Premiership (which is broadly positive) must be considered interim at best given that it now seems likely that the scholarly and popular judgement of Blair the Prime Minister will turn on events in Iraq after the book's publication.

Seldon (son of IEA founder Editorial Director Arthur Seldon) has devised an innovative structure for this biography that rejects a traditional linear approach in favour of the division of his subject into 20 chapters dealing with the key people in Blair's life (including his father and mother, Cherie Blair, Neil Kinnock, Derry Irvine, John Prescott and God) and 20 alternate chapters dealing with the key events (including his father's stroke, his selection as Labour candidate to fight Sedgefield, the rewriting of Clause IV, the death of Princess Diana and 9/11).

Like a more traditional structure this approach has strengths and weaknesses. It allows the author to focus on one person or event and to trace their or its long-term influence on Blair's life. But inevitably the inclusion and exclusion of particular events and people must be open to question. It is hard to agree, for example, that Blair's Sedgefield agent John Burton or former schoolteacher Eric Anderson (who are included) are really more important figures in this story than Paddy Ashdown or John Smith (who are not included), or that they merit equal prominence with Derry Irvine and Gordon Brown. Indeed, at times one feels Seldon tries too hard to justify the prominence he has given to a particular person or event and by so doing attributes undue importance to them.

The story of Tony Blair's early life and rise to power that Seldon pieces together through the people and events that shaped him is indeed

a remarkable one. Blair was fortunate to attend Fettes College where he resented the conservatism of a traditional public school, but nevertheless benefited from the excellent tuition he received that enabled him to win a place at Oxford. Whereas many past senior politicians have shone at Oxbridge, at Oxford Blair was 'almost invisible' on the social and political scene (p. 29) and graduated with a second-class degree in law. He went on to take an even less impressive third-class degree in his Bar finals (by contrast, future wife Cherie took a first-class degree in law from the London School of Economics and topped the country in the Bar finals of the same year).

Even after his initial election to Parliament, Blair hardly seemed cabinet let alone Prime Ministerial material. He made a 'banal' maiden speech in the House of Commons and had a proposal for a paper on 'community' rejected by the Fabian Society. His contribution to a 1987 election broadcast explaining why he joined the Labour Party was so rambling that it had to be edited out of the final film.

If Blair lacked intellectual ability, he did possess charm, charisma, good looks, self-belief and an uncanny knack of being in the right place at the right time. It was these qualities that gave Blair his two crucial career breaks. First, when he persuaded the leading socialist barrister Derry Irvine to grant him a highly sought-after pupillage at his law firm in 1976 after a chance meeting at a wedding, and, second, when he won selection for the safe Labour seat of Sedgefield shortly before the 1983 election.

Blair's meteoric rise after the initially inauspicious start to his Parliamentary career equally owes much to these qualities and to the vision that he and his small coterie of friends possessed to see the changes that the party had to make to become electable again. It is apparent from Seldon's book that Blair has never questioned the equation of the democratic socialism he espouses and improving the conditions of the poorest. Blair discovered religion and developed a social conscience at Oxford and joined the Labour Party as a consequence. In Blair's mind-set those who have taken a different political route must be either ignorant or motivated by a self-interested desire to protect their own privileges rather than be committed to an alternative conception of what will make things better for the poorest.

Seldon has produced an impressive piece of scholarship that sheds much light on the formative years and early career of Tony Blair. Unfortunately, recent events seem certain to make a second edition necessary

before anything close to a definitive judgement of the Blair Premiership can be made.

Nevertheless, the conclusion that this reader drew from this book is one that would

not have surprised Seldon's father: in the political marketplace it is clearly not always the best – in terms of intellectual ability at least – who get on top, but frequently those who are the

most charming, charismatic and good looking.

John Meadowcroft

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