

REVIEW: LABOUR AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Alistair Clark

Bob Middleton (2001), **Whatever Happened to Labour?**, Elgin: Gopher Publishers, 2001, ISBN 9076953104, £12.25.

Bob Middleton was an 'old Labour' figure from Aberdeen who sadly died in January 2002 after a lengthy fight with cancer. Before he passed away, he celebrated the end of his political career by publishing this book on his experiences within the party in a period where it went from electoral success, to near-oblivion and back again.

The book is meant to work on three levels. First, it is intended as a personal memoir of a political career which saw the author unsuccessfully contest four General Elections for Labour and culminated in his nomination as Convener of Grampian Regional Council between 1990-94. Aside from the usual criticism of memoirs that the author places too much emphasis on their own role, Middleton has succeeded in this aim. Accounts of his Convenership of GRC and of his sometimes stormy relations with party and council colleagues are clearly documented, and certain episodes, such as Council delegations to Russia and the USA, are recounted with pride. Second, it is intended to offer a critique of what he calls the 'Blairite faction' within the Labour Party. He is less successful in this endeavour. Instead of offering a sustained analysis of the flaws of Blairism, he is content to attach his criticisms to the end of numerous paragraphs throughout the book in an unsystematic manner. He also has an idealised view of the pre-Blair Labour Party, describing it as a place where local parties can have an influence on the decision-makers at the top of the party. While this may formally have been the case, in practice few will recognise this perspective; accounts of haggling over composite motions

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Scottish Affairs

and Union influence are legion. Moreover, Middleton undermines himself by describing an episode when he came face-to-face with Neil Kinnock at conference and felt the need, when shaking hands, to hold onto Kinnock until he had given a commitment that Middleton felt necessary.

This however suggests that Middleton is more successful at the third level - that of providing an insight into the workings of the Labour Party at local and national level. The infighting between rival candidates for nomination as candidates by their constituency parties is documented, as are Middleton's experiences of campaigning for the party. In one such account, he describes how, in his first parliamentary contest in Banffshire, he participated in three public meetings per night in a large rural constituency. This offers some evidence to support Denver and Hands' claim that there may be a specifically Scottish model of campaigning in rural constituencies. Moreover, through his membership, and eventual chairmanship, of Labour's Scottish Executive, Middleton describes the divisions that plagued that body throughout the 1980s. The area in which the book is perhaps most successful, however, is the insight that it provides into the workings of local government. Problems of departmentalisation, implementation and budget allocation that public policy authors such as Jordan and Richardson write about at the national level are all replicated here at the crucial local level. Unfortunately, however, Middleton has largely missed the opportunity to describe the workings of relations between local and central government.

Although sharing a genre with John O'Farrell's **Things Can Only Get Better**, Middleton's style occasionally gets in the way of the reader's understanding of events, while in other places he hints at events but fails to explain their significance. Nevertheless, it is a faithful account of one man's four decades of dedication to local politics that also provides a useful insight into the workings of the Labour Party and local government.

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