

A critical look at Britain under New Labour

Cruel Britannia: Reports on the Sinister and the Preposterous, by Nick Cohen

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Cruel Britannia: Reports on the Sinister and the Preposterous is the new book by investigative journalist Nick Cohen (Verso, 1999, £16, ISBN 1-85984-720-X). The title sends up the contrived campaign of “Cool Britannia” mounted by the Blair Labour government. The book sleeve uses a photograph of Prime Minister Tony Blair in Thatcher-like pose, peering down his nose in the manner of a modern-day Nero.

Cohen is best known for his column “Without Prejudice” and its predecessor “Hold on a minute” in the *Observer* newspaper. This book contains a collection of articles, some revised, others updated and pieces with useful rejoinders, first published in the *New Statesman* magazine, *Jewish Quarterly* journal, *London Review of Books* and the aforementioned newspaper column. The pieces represent an anthology of his past five years' work.

The first chapter focuses unflatteringly upon members of the political classes and their associates. The second concentrates on New Labour's malignant politics. The third and sixth draw attention to the pernicious assaults upon civil liberties and the reactionary politics of “law and order” espoused by the Labour government. Chapter four discusses the machinations and self-censorship amongst the British press, whilst the fifth chapter looks at the infusion of market values into all facets of life, and their corollary of public squalor and private affluence.

Cohen has previously described himself using the Yiddish slang term “schmuk,” for his naïve belief that a New Labour government was going to reverse the attacks made by the previous Conservative administrations. In the introduction to the book, he explains how he awoke to this fact. He recounts a conversation with the now Home Secretary Jack Straw before the 1997 general election. Upon asking Straw his attitude towards “zero tolerance” of crime and child curfews, the author was aghast to find out that he enthusiastically agreed with such measures.

Before this incident, Cohen had thought that New Labour's rightward lurch was simply pre-election subterfuge designed to hoodwink “Middle England” into voting for Labour. The shattering of these illusions helps explain the invective with which he now assaults the Blair government. His disenchantment, verging frequently upon despair, is laced with the dismay of someone who feels betrayed. He considered Straw and himself as comrades in arms, ridding the land of the Conservative Party, before it hit home that Blair's party would actually accelerate the policies of the Tories.

This collection of essays deserves to be read as an exposé of the Labour government's hypocrisy, greed and utter venality. *Cruel Britannia* contains some barbed attacks upon the present administration. One of the articles satirises the inanities of the Blairite think-tank *Demos*, its gurus Geoff Mulgan and Charles Leadbetter, and their shallow intellectual pretensions.

“Demos pronounces death sentences like Judge Jeffreys with a migraine. In just four years, it has declared ‘the end of politics’, ‘the end of unemployment’, ‘the end of social democracy’, ‘the end of 200 years of industrial society’, the end of ‘traditional definitions of what it means to be a man or a women’ and the end of ‘class based left-right politics’. As Angela Carter put it: ‘the fin is coming a little early this siècle.’ The typical *Demos* pamphlet begins: ‘The old, tired struggle between left and right is dead, destroyed by the internet / fall of the Berlin Wall / global market / Sainsbury's ready-to-eat green Thai curries (delete where applicable) and in its place a new tough yet tender / firm yet fair / smart yet casual / tasty yet low on carbohydrates (ditto) consensus is emerging that will set the debate for the new century’”(p. 33).

Some of the more effective articles tackle a broad array of concerns. One debunks the pernicious revisionism concerning the British fascist leader Oswald Mosley in a

television series about his life. The Channel Four TV programmes portrayed the founder of the British Union of Fascists as simply an arch opportunist, who never really believed in anti-Semitism and was dismayed by the Third Reich's treatment of Jews; a man whose heart was in the right place, even if his brain was not and who only really subscribed to a benign form of English nationalism. Cohen systematically breaks down these lies in his article. In conclusion, he reveals alarming symmetries between the trajectory that led Mosley from the Labour Party, to his New Party and thence to the creation of the Blackshirts, and that of Blair and New Labour.

Another article, entitled "Diana's Mourners," lampoons the saga surrounding the death of Princess Diana and the vulgarities of the monarchists like Prime Minister Blair. He quotes from ex-Stalinist Beatrix Campbell's hysterical eulogy to Diana:

"To the chagrin of the establishment, the recovery of her self-respect was to be witnessed by millions. By telling her story, Diana joined the constituency of the rejected—the survivors of harm and horror, from the holocaust, from the world war and pogroms, from Vietnam and the civil wars of South America and South Africa, from torture and child abuse."

To which Cohen replies, "Let me see if I can get this right. Marrying into the admittedly unpleasant Windsor family is the equivalent of being napalmed in Vietnam. Having affairs with rich young men is the equivalent of being beaten in a Cape Town jail. Bulimia is torture. Diana and the survivors of Nazi death camps are identical, and those who write otherwise must have their books pulped" (pp. 51-52).

Other issues put to the sword are Robin Cook's "ethical foreign policy", the banalities of today's media, and the inhumane treatment of immigrants and asylum-seekers. The scope and depth of the essays are often impressive and they are eminently readable. Since the advent of postmodernism, it has become accepted for journalists to write articles containing all kinds of bunkum. Every day of the week the so-called "quality press" contains columns that concern themselves with nothing more than what happened to the author on the way to their local supermarket, and other such guff. For this reason alone Cohen's campaign to expose the shallow pretensions of the "Third Way" is admirable. He is one of only a small number of journalists who dissent from the Blairite world view.

The war waged upon Yugoslavia by NATO served to illustrate the almost complete absence of a critically

minded journalistic, intellectual and academic community in the UK. On June 13, after the declaration of victory by NATO, the liberal *Observer* newspaper overflowed with "Kosovo Liberation" triumphalism. The only dissenting voice was Cohen's. In a column entitled, "Give us your wallet", he drew attention to the demand made by the government on refugees who arrive in the UK to sell all their worldly possessions and even their jewellery while their asylum cases are pending. An accompanying photograph shows Blair sitting cross-legged in a tent while he emotes his concern for the Kosovar refugees. The caption underneath mischievously reads, "Tony Blair eyes up the watch on the wrist of a Kosovan refugee."

Blair and his courtiers present an easy target for satire, although Cohen carries off his assaults with a certain panache. While welcoming his stand against the "sinister and the preposterous", however, it is necessary to draw attention to his weaknesses. The missionary zeal with which he scolds New Labour seems framed around the unspoken question, "Do Blair and New Labour really need to go so far?" His is a faint hope that criticism will lead Labour back in a more traditionally reformist direction. He repeatedly seeks to uncover some kind, any kind, of vaguely left current inside the Labour Party to shore up these hopes of a return to social reformism.

When the former Deputy Leader of the Labour Party Roy Hattersley reviewed *Cruel Britannia* for the *Guardian* newspaper, he described the difference between the previous Conservative administration and the present Labour one as merely an inch, but an inch worth living in all the same. Hattersley hoped that Cohen would be able to live there too. The evidence suggests that Cohen's world view is confined to this same imaginary inch.



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