

BOOK OF THE MONTH

How new is New Labour?

What's Wrong with Labour?
Paul Allender (Merlin Press, £12.95)

What's wrong with the Labour party? It is an old question, which was first asked and answered from the left by Ralph Miliband 40 years ago in his classic, *Parliamentary Socialism*. Paul Allender readily acknowledges his debt to Miliband, David Coates and others in a distinguished tradition of socialist and Marxist analysis of the British Labour Party. What does he have to offer that's new?

Three things. First, he gives us a definition of 'Labourism' – something that not all who use the term bother to do. Then he offers an interpretation of the 100-year history of the party. And finally he takes a close look at Labour in the city of Sheffield over the past 30 years, with a view to seeing how Labourism works out in practice at the local level.

This last aspect of the book is particularly valuable. Much study of the Labour Party concentrates on its leaders and on the national picture. Much less attention has been paid to Labour locally, although Labour has been far more successful electorally in the town halls than at Westminster. Sheffield was under Labour control almost continuously from 1926 until 1999, when they were displaced by the Liberal Democrats.

Paul Allender's focus on Sheffield since 1973 covers a period that is dramatic, but ultimately depressing. In the late 1970s there was talk of the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire. And some genuinely radical policies were pursued. The most famous of these was the cheap fares policy for public transport. The county's buses were the cheapest in Britain, and there was talk of eventually abolishing fares altogether.

All this was destroyed by the Thatcherite attack on local government, by rate-capping and the deregulation (in effect, privatisation) of public road transport. But Allender is more concerned with the impact of de-industrialisation, and in particular the drastic shrinking of the steel industry. Between

1978 and 1998 177,000 jobs were lost in South Yorkshire. How did Labour respond to this catastrophic decline?

The most striking step taken in Sheffield was the council's creation of a Department of Employment, with the aim of creating jobs to replace those that were being lost. But the early 1980s were hardly an auspicious time for such a venture, and before long the council decided that it would have to work with, rather than in defiance of, the private sector. Through interviews with some of the leading participants, Allender gives a clear account of this

sad tale of defeated ambition. I am less persuaded by Allender's general argument: that 'New' Labour is not really new at all. To say, for example, that the ideas of Keynes and Beveridge, taken up by Labour in the 1940s, were 'no more intrinsically social-democratic than those of monetarism', is simply

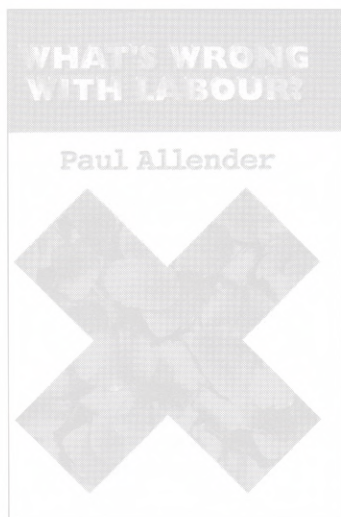
In the 1970s the Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire was discussed

not true. Keynes and Beveridge belonged to the interventionist tradition of New Liberalism. Monetarism is a throw-back to pure laissez-faire.

And some of the evidence he provides contradicts this thesis. It is clear that the socialisation of the means of production was a major concern within the Labour Party from its beginning. And this was reflected in the 1945 government's programme of nationalisation. It is only after 1950 that this is challenged, first by Gaitskell and his revisionist colleagues, and finally abandoned, along with Clause 4, by the Blairites.

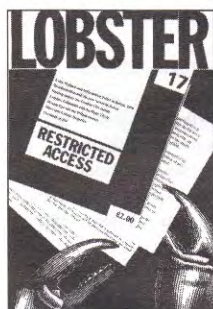
Overall, though, this is an insightful study of what is still called 'the Labour Party', however bitterly Blair may regret it.

Anthony Arblaster



multimedia

CD ROM



Lobster is an idiosyncratic, irregular magazine that has been with us for almost two decades, providing often controversial investigations into the covert operations of the state and, to a lesser extent, the far right. The first 40 issues of the magazine have now been republished as a CD ROM, which is an excellent way to explore the magazine. It's not going to win prizes for presentation, but the minimal use of graphics ensures that pages load quickly, and the search facility is quick and effective. *Lobster* succeeds on the quality of its writing, and with the CD ROM you have easy access to a wealth of provocative pieces. The articles are well-researched and footnoted so a clear

case is made for their claims, such as the state's infiltration of groups on the radical left and covert operations by the army in Northern Ireland.

The magazine is written in a down-to-earth, and often personal style. It feels very amateur, but in the best sense of the word: human, passionate and honest – qualities often lost in the polished professionalism of other publications. The magazine could be perceived as inward-looking, in that many articles over the years dwell in depth on attacks made on *Lobster* (in particular, by *Searchlight*, which *Lobster* has consistently criticised as working closely with MI5). However, the magazine's autobiographical asides are very absorbing, and there are plenty of other things to read if you want to steer clear of this.

The one big problem with the CD ROM is the price – it costs £50. This means the magazine is only £1.20 per issue, but it will still price out most of the potential readership. ■ You can buy the CD ROM from www.lobster-magazine.co.uk