

Things that never happened

Duncan Brack and Iain Dale Book (eds.): *Prime Minister Portillo and other things that never happened: A collection of political counterfactuals* (Politico's, 2003)

Reviewed by **Mark Pack**

‘What if’ histories are often disdained by those who see themselves as serious historians, but this intriguing collection – edited by the eclectic combination of the Liberal Democrats’ former Director of Policy and the Conservatives’ prospective candidate for North Norfolk¹ – does much to give counterfactuals a good name.

The range of contributions covers most of the main events of British high politics in the twentieth century, with a couple of foreign episodes – Lenin and JFK – thrown in. This plays to the editors’ strengths, as the list of contributors is impressive, with nearly every chapter being either from a recognised academic expert in the field or from a practitioner with inside experience of the events.²

Economic and social events generally feature only as a background to the political stories. There is, for example, no ‘what if’ on OPEC’s decision to hike oil prices in the 1970s, despite the oil price increase being one of the defining features of British politics in the 1970s. The range is also firmly twentieth century – there is no speculation over close nineteenth-century political events, such as the one-vote majority in the Commons for the Great Reform Bill in 1831.

Indeed, the book is a collection of political histories in the traditional story-telling sense. Most chapters include a clear exposition of the actual events leading up to the historical twist. Richard Grayson’s counterfactual, ‘What if the Liberal Party had emerged united from the First World War?’ and Helen Szamuely’s on ‘What if Lenin’s

“sealed” train had not reached Petrograd in 1917?’ in particular highlight the benefits of this approach – which makes the book a useful primer on many major events, in addition to the stimulating plots of the counterfactuals themselves.

As Szamuely suggests, without Lenin’s arrival it is difficult to see Russian history taking a course anything nearly as bloody as it did in the 1930s, yet it is also difficult to see how anything other than some alternative form of authoritarian government would have taken power. Whilst changing the names amongst the dictators may be a relatively minor matter of detail in the larger picture, even a tiny change in policy over agriculture or purges could have resulted in a huge difference to the lives of millions.

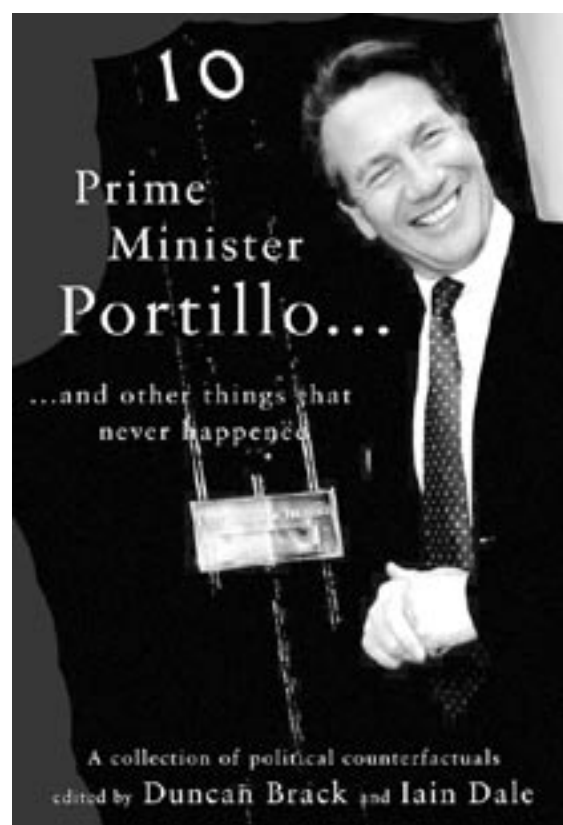
Similarly, in Britain, Grayson’s alternative history results in much the same overall outcome by 1939 – how much difference would it really have made if Churchill had been in a different party for some years in the inter-war period? But, again, even a small change in economic policy after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 could have made a big difference to the day-to-day lives of millions.

The underlying question of the extent to which big personalities can shape history is a constant one for historians. Although it is implicitly touched on by many of the chapters in the book, it is slightly disappointing that the issue is rarely covered explicitly.

Nevertheless, the clarity of the contributions provides many other interesting morsels to ponder. Michael McManus,

whilst considering the possible outcomes of the Liberal Party disappearing totally in the 1950s, throws out one of the best. He points out how thirty-four Liberal candidates missed by only 6,000 votes or less in 1945 before moving on to the grim tale of the Liberal Party’s history over the next decade. But it leaves hanging the thought of how close the Liberals came to coming out of the 1945 election with a vote share of 19 per cent in the seats it contested and with around fifty MPs, including Grimond, Sinclair and Beveridge. Would the Liberals have ended up with the balance of power in 1950? Given the ideological and personal tensions within the party, this alternative history is unlikely to have ended happily. But it would have been rather more spectacular than the dismal march to near-death that actually followed for the Liberals.

One of the other most intriguing morsels is that produced by Dianne Hayter in her chapter, ‘What if Benn had defeated Healey in 1981?’



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She points out that had there been a subtle difference in the way in which abstentions were counted, Benn would indeed have won the contest for Labour's deputy leader.

As to be expected in a collection of twenty-one alternative histories, there are varying degrees of plausibility. Anne Perkin's account of Gaitskell rather than Bevan dying in 1960 results in a remarkably harmonious outcome for the Labour Party overall, which, given the many vituperative personalities of the time, is a little difficult to believe. Probably the most disappointing chapter is Bernard Ingham's on Westland, which is more a justification of himself and of Mrs Thatcher than a counterfactual. An entertaining read, but not really the right chapter for this book.

Several other chapters highlight one of the conundrums of 1980s British politics. In many different ways Labour might have done better in the short term (e.g. if Scargill had called and won a strike ballot amongst the NUM) or have done worse (e.g. if the Alliance had squeaked past it in terms of vote share in 1983). But doing worse in the short run was arguably better for Labour in the long run, by providing the necessary shock behind Kinnock's modernisation programme. The counter-factuals that have Labour doing better in the short run largely also paint a worse longer-term picture for the party.

This fundamental pessimism about Labour in the 1980s contrasts with the optimism about British politics in the counter-factuals of the 1960s and 1970s, where the twists usually results in events turning out for the better rather than for the worse, from the perspective of the chapter's author. For this period, the counterfactuals are extremely positive – imagining that a few changes in events could have heralded a happy moderate government without serious economic crises. That several different authors

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– with the exception of Greg Rosen – believe their own twists could wipe away the long-term economic problems facing the country, and in particular the poisonous hostility of much of industrial relations, is as striking as it is surprising.

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Some of the contributors occasionally fall prey to this lure of tweeness, as with John Charmley's reworking of the succession to Chamberlain. His account of Halifax as Prime Minister takes some of Churchill's most famous quotes and puts

them in the mouths of others with their opposite meaning in a rather groan-inducing sequence of too-clever plays on words.

But it is an all the more enjoyable read for that.

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- 1 To complete the set, one of the contributors is the chair of the Labour History Group.
- 2 Though the insiders are just occasionally not as knowledgeable as perhaps they should be – as with Iain Dale's implausible account of Michael Portillo not knowing his election result until the public announcement from the Returning Officer. In reality, candidates and agents are told the figures before being put on public parade for the formal announcement.

The paperback edition of *Prime Minister Portillo* will be available from late September 2004.

LETTERS

Sir Clement Freud

As someone who was considerably involved in Sir Clement Freud's successful by-election campaign, I would like to comment on Daniel Crewe's observation that 'although he was knighted in 1987, Freud did not get a peerage' ('One of nature's Liberals', biography of Freud, *Journal of Liberal History* 43).

I regard this as a shameful blot on the party's record. Cle well deserved a peerage, having held his seat for eighteen years and having displayed conspicuous loyalty to the leaders of the party. He would have been an asset to the party and to the House if he had joined us.

As I understand it, Cle was top of the list to be nominated for a

peerage when Stephen Ross, MP for the Isle of Wight until 1987, lobbied to be given priority and was given it by the powers that be. Subsequently he slipped off the list completely as others were given more priority.

It might be suggested that Cle was a little lightweight in national policy matters, but he was considerably less lightweight, and a great deal more reliable, than Stephen who, I remember when I was Director of Policy Promotion, for his infuriating indecisiveness and futile attacks of conscience. Cle has also lived considerably longer!

Lord Beaumont of Whitley