

# Book Review: Diaries: Volume 5: Outside, Inside, 2003-2005 by Alastair Campbell

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*In the fifth volume of his published diaries, **Outside, Inside, 2003-2005**, Alastair Campbell steps down as Tony Blair's Director of Communications in 2003 but is drawn back into politics amidst the continued chaos of the Iraq War, the breakdown of the Blair-Brown relationship and the impending election campaign. With the pace of a thriller, this book offers fascinating insights into Campbell's struggle to forge a path outside of Westminster and a nuanced depiction of Brown, finds Peter Carroll.*

**Diaries: Volume 5: Outside, Inside, 2003-2005.** Alastair Campbell. Biteback Publishing. 2016.

**Campbell's thrilling, insightful diaries are his best yet**

Find this book: 

The first volume of Alastair Campbell's political diaries was one of the most commercially successful and influential books to emerge from the New Labour era. Released at the close of Tony Blair's premiership in 2007 and the beginning of Gordon Brown's, they documented Campbell's role as a close advisor to Blair at the 1994 birth of New Labour through to the party's landslide victories at the 1997 and 2001 elections, and closed with Campbell's acrimonious departure as the government became embroiled in a bitter dispute with the BBC over its reporting of the Iraq war in 2003.

This latest volume, which spans August 2003 to May 2005, picks up from the earlier volume as Campbell leaves his official role in government but, as the title suggests, fails to ever fully extricate himself from politics. As well as contributing evidence to the Hutton enquiry, Campbell is still acting as an informal advisor to Blair, who is heavily dependent on Campbell and is apparently in denial that he no longer works for him.

Campbell remains torn between his political loyalties to Labour and his responsibilities to his family, to whom he expresses regret at having not spent enough time with them due to the demands of nine years closely working with Blair. While he recognises that leaving the role was necessary for the sake of his family, he realises that there is also a personal cost to exiting a position at the heart of government. Campbell recounts the severe emotional crash when he leaves, the regular depressive episodes that follow while he is outside of government and the guilt towards his former colleagues when they plead with him to return to repair a government machine that has 'collapsed' without him.



"HUGELY GRIPPING"  
SUNDAY TIMES

DIARIES: VOLUME 5  
**ALASTAIR  
CAMPBELL**

OUTSIDE, INSIDE, 2003-2005



**Image Credit: An Audience with Alastair Campbell, Salford University, 2015 (University of Salford Press CC BY 2.0)**

One of the many joys of this volume is Campbell's detailed descriptions of the exulted circles in which he moves: dinners with novelist Ian McEwan, regular chats with the former Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson and lunches with Democrat-voting James Murdoch (heir apparent to News Corporation). A picture of Rupert Murdoch also emerges, with his support for withdrawal from the EU at the 2016 referendum understood as revenge for EU competition laws that hampered the expansion of his media empire into Europe, and a doctrinaire commitment to US power, which major European countries had obstructed during the build-up to the Iraq war.

But the key relationship in the book is with the axis of power of Blair and his Chancellor, Brown. Campbell discloses that a battle-weary Blair was close to quitting as prime minister in mid-2004 to run for President of the European Commission as Iraq began to deteriorate. When discussing alternative career choices for after his premiership, Blair states that private sector work would be required to pay for a huge mortgage he had taken out on a multi-million-pound property in London. Campbell suggests that this should be combined with a high-profile public sector job; [Blair's reputation for pursuing and amassing vast wealth](#) since he left office suggests that this advice went unheeded.

The main cause of Blair's mid-term malaise is his highly dysfunctional working relationship with Brown. It is astonishing how much of Blair's time and energy appears to be spent dealing with his Chancellor, as he continuously vacillates between sacking and attempting to manage him. The pair seem to go for months without actually speaking directly, with Brown effectively on strike and running a parallel operation within the government.

Blair's view, shared by his team, is that Brown is temperamentally ill-suited for the job of prime minister, which they describe as 'the flaw'. Blair adds that Brown's intellectualism makes him unable to understand the public's concerns, while Brown's treasury colleagues' attempts to undermine the prime minister and his office, usually through hostile briefings and leaks to the media, lead him to describe him as 'a wild animal'.

Readers who do not read Campbell's memoirs beyond the halfway stage would probably be left with the impression that Brown is a self-indulgent, ruthlessly ambitious monster: a public persona that has been reinforced in a number of other New Labour political memoirs. But when Blair comes to realise that he has become a liability with sections of the electorate and is in a weakened position due to the unravelling situation in Iraq, he decides that Brown needs

to be at the heart of the 2005 election campaign to emphasise Britain's economic strength. This led to a rapprochement between the two men, brokered by Campbell, and Brown himself becomes a major figure in the diaries, allowing a more rounded portrayal to emerge as he makes his case directly to Campbell.

The pivotal scene in the book is Campbell's long talk at Brown's Fife house over the Easter weekend, a mere month before the election, where Brown's support for the campaign is finally secured. In the meeting, Brown defies the Blairite caricature and presents his differences with Blair as solely ideological rather than personal. He argues that New Labour adopted too many neoliberal ideas to gain power, and therefore wasted the opportunity to fundamentally shift Britain's political centre of gravity to the left from 1997 when the party had a huge majority and a mandate for change. The fact that the New Labour project crumbled as soon as a major recession hit in 2008, and that Britain has subsequently reverted to its default centre-right government, suggests that Brown's analysis over a decade ago has merit.

From his portrayal of Brown, it is clear that Campbell is sympathetic with his views. These accounts of Brown will be of great interest to readers who wish to understand the personal motivations of a man who, presumably out of loyalty to Labour, has never gone on record with these views on Blair and New Labour and who shows no current indication of writing his own memoir. Readers may have been anticipating a dramatic encounter with the 'wild animal', only to discover that the beast is much misunderstood and his motivations are far more complex than his opponents suggest.

What also lifts this volume above Campbell's earlier diaries is the personal journey undertaken by the narrator. Before Campbell returns to the New Labour team full-time, his sense of a lack of purpose is reflected in each diary entry. As he tries to assemble a new life, he takes on a range of highly lucrative public speaking gigs, which leave him feeling 'lethargic, depressed' about a life that lacks 'meaning' and is 'meandering', and short-term consultancy work for the British Lions in the relatively low-key and amateurish world of rugby.

These digressions merely heighten the tension before the moment Campbell finally makes a full-time return to politics as Labour's re-election campaign falters in early 2005. The narrative during the campaign's daily entries maintains the pace of a thriller, with Campbell managing Labour's presentation, slogans, key speeches, events and personnel from the party's headquarters, assuming a colossal workload and burden of responsibility. Campbell's dedication to the party clearly runs deep — his working days often begin at dawn and end in the small hours of the morning; even before the campaign, when he is semi-detached from the party, Campbell appears to be working mostly unpaid. In the final days of the campaign, Campbell emerges partly as an idealist but primarily a pragmatist: one who puts his doubts about the party to one side, guided by the belief that a Labour government, even one tainted by war and eight years in power, is always better than the Tories.

Labour went on to win a third successive election win for the first time in the party's history, taking the prize of a further five years in power. But, as the ballots close, the campaign truce between Brown and Blair has already collapsed, with Blair's team attributing Labour's reduced majority to Brown's obstructionism, while Brown claiming that it reflects voters' decline in trust post-Iraq. At the book's conclusion, after a brief appearance at Labour's victory party, Campbell returns to the party headquarters as dawn breaks to collect his belongings and depart for the second time. As he leaves the building, Labour party staffers unite for a spontaneous standing ovation: a moved and exhausted Campbell retreats to the bathroom and breaks down in tears. In victory, Campbell confirms what he had probably known all along: that he would find his purpose exactly where he had left it two years earlier.

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**Peter Carrol** is a Media Relations Officer at LSE and MSc graduate in Politics and Communication. [Read more by Peter Carrol.](#)

*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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