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Book Review

# The Politics of Integrity versus the Politics of Celebrity

- Reviews section -

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**In the elections to the Scottish Parliament in May 2003, the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) polled just under a quarter of a million votes and won 6 seats. By any stretch of the imagination this was a remarkable achievement for a party well to the left of the left wing of Labour, and a beacon of hope and inspiration for socialists the world over. By 2011, the SSP's vote had slumped to below 9000, and the party failed to regain any of the 6 seats it had lost in 2007. The single biggest factor in the SSP's electoral demise was almost certainly the civil war and split that followed the scandal surrounding the SSP's former convenor, Tommy Sheridan. In this well-written and often gripping book, Alan McCombes – the SSP's former Press and Policy Co-ordinator – gives the inside story of the events surrounding the Sheridan scandal and the split in the party.**

McCombes tells how in October 2004 the infamous Sunday tabloid *The News of the World* (NTW) printed a story suggesting that a married MSP (Member of the Scottish Parliament) had had an affair with a columnist at the paper, and had visited a seedy sex club in the back streets of Manchester. Aspects of the story tallied with admissions that Sheridan had made to McCombes two years previously, and McCombes was incredulous that Sheridan had not heeded his earlier warnings: "Here was Tommy Sheridan, the figurehead of a rapidly rising left-wing party, whose aim was to break up the British state and move towards a Scottish socialist republic, delivering a gift-wrapped weapon to our enemies". McCombes and another leading figure in the SSP – Keith Baldassara, who was at that time councillor for Pollok in Glasgow – suggested to Sheridan that he had two options: he could handle the allegations "with suitable remorse and honesty", or he could ignore them and refuse to respond. McCombes and Baldassara offered Sheridan full support, but either way, warned him against lying in the face of the allegations: this would be politically disastrous given that Sheridan's popularity with Scottish voters was largely based on his reputation for honesty and integrity and that the SSP had mercilessly attacked the Blair government for its lies and duplicity in aiding and abetting George W. Bush's invasion and occupation in Iraq.

Sheridan, however, refused to take the advice, and the scene was repeated days later at the November 9th 2004 meeting of the SSP's national executive: he admitted that the NTW story was substantially true, but announced his intention to deny the allegations and take the newspaper to court. The executive decided that if Sheridan stuck to this plan, he would have to stand down as national convenor of the party. McCombes gives a detailed, blow-by-blow account of what happened in the months and years that followed, and outlines how one lie after another eventually led Sheridan to accuse the leadership of SSP of falsifying the minutes of the November 9 meeting and colluding with Rupert Murdoch, MI5, and the British State in subjecting him to a political witchhunt and frame-up. Unbelievably, Sheridan won his defamation case against the NTW in August 2006, and was awarded £200,000 in damages, and perhaps the most depressing aspect of this depressing tale was how the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Committee for a Worker's International (CWI) – then platforms in the SSP – used the events to split and undermine the party, with Sheridan establishing a breakaway organisation, Solidarity, aided and abetted by his former political enemies in the SWP and CWI: "a rampaging egomaniac astride two wooden horses", as McCombes aptly puts it. At the same time, Sheridan used the pages of the *Daily Record* tabloid newspaper to smear his former associates in the SSP as liars, perjurers, and scabs. Subsequently, though, a perjury investigation was launched that was to see Sheridan finally return to court: and in December 2010 he was found guilty and sentenced to 3 years in prison.

McCombes argues powerfully and effectively in defence of the stance taken by the SSP and its leadership. It's clear that McCombes and the other leading SSP figures involved bent over backwards to give Sheridan the opportunity to back off from his disastrous course of action. Had Sheridan followed the SSP's advice in 2004, in all probability the NTW story would be long-forgotten, and the SSP may well have held the balance of power following the 2011 elections to the Scottish Parliament. And although sections of the left have heaped derision on the members of the SSP who refused to indulge Sheridan's fantasies, McCombes explains how the SSP had little choice in the matter

once they were summoned to court as a result of Sheridan's decisions: the options were to tell the truth under protest, or to lie and risk imprisonment, not for a matter of high political principle, but to preserve one man's illusory public image and cover up his squalid sexual indiscretions.

He also argues persuasively against the suggestion that the SSP executive should not have been discussing Sheridan's personal life: "It was absurd and naïve to imagine that the SSP executive should refuse to discuss the impact on the party of a potentially sensational story which would have the whole of Scotland agog". McCombes also dispatches the suggestion that the minutes of the November 9th 2004 meeting should not have included details of the discussion of Sheridan's behaviour: "The decision to take minutes at the November 9th 2004 meeting had been agreed by everyone present. It was normal practice in line with the party's constitution, which requires that minutes are taken at all executive meetings. In a party like the SSP, there can be no question that key decisions have to be recorded along with an explanation for these decisions. The November 9th minutes avoided salacious detail but they did provide an accurate and authoritative explanation for an extraordinary decision with historic significance".

Although many of the details of the Sheridan case will be familiar to anyone who followed the events through the media, the book nonetheless contains some new and interesting revelations. One such concerns the videotape that George McNeilage, a former close friend of Sheridan's, had secretly made of a meeting he had had with Sheridan following the November 9th 2004 executive meeting: in the recording, Sheridan confirms that he told the meeting that the NTW story was substantially true (a claim that he was later to retract, accusing the SSP of doctoring the minutes of the executive meeting). McCombes reveals that although the tape was played to the jury in the 2010 perjury trial, a legal ruling meant that they were not told that a plethora of voice and imaging experts had confirmed – unanimously – that the voice on the tape was indeed Sheridan's. (Sheridan had initially suggested that the tape had been made by splicing together other recordings of his voice, and then subsequently suggested that McCombes had hired an actor to impersonate him).

McCombes' ultimate verdict on Sheridan is understandably damning: without principles, without scruples and without decency, he "had inflicted more damage on the Left in Scotland than Margaret Thatcher and Rupert Murdoch combined". In the face of the facts, it would be difficult to disagree. But is it a case of a good guy gone bad, or a bad guy all along being revealed as such? At the end of the book, McCombes leaves the matter open: "Had he been corrupted by fame and power? Or had he just used the cause of socialism to achieve fame and power? Probably a bit of both".

Elsewhere, though, McCombes seems closer to advocating the latter of the two possibilities: Sheridan wasn't merely "a flawed individual who had succumbed to temptation from time to time, as people do" but an "abusive, exploitative, self-centred personality" – "what we used to laugh off as excessive vanity masked something more malignant: an extreme form of grandiosity and a narcissistic sense of entitlement that meant he was able to use, abuse and discard people for his own ends without a glimmer of remorse". McCombes hints that this malignancy might even have been present in Sheridan's childhood. Perhaps McCombes is right – but there are at least some facts about Sheridan that suggest otherwise. Ironically, one such fact is one denied by Sheridan himself: that he \*did\* tell the November 9th 2004 executive meeting that he had been to the Manchester sex-club. Although it quickly evaporated, there was at least a degree of honesty in Sheridan's initial admissions to the executive.

Possibly in a small way the comment made by Isaac Deutscher about Trotsky's biography of Stalin could also be applied to Downfall: "Trotsky's Stalin is implausible to the extent to which he presents the character as being essentially the same in 1936-8 as in 1924, and even in 1904. The monster does not form, grow, and emerge – he is there almost fully fledged from the outset". Even so, this is at most a minor (and understandable) shortcoming in Downfall. For anyone seeking to understand the tragic events that beset the SSP in 2004-2010, Downfall is essential – if sometimes painful – reading.