

The Rise of Political Lying by Peter Osborne. Free Press 2005.

Peter Osborne is the political editor of The Spectator and was given a sabbatical from that august weekly to write this meticulously researched and powerfully persuasive analysis.

From his provenance – he also writes columns for the Evening Standard – it might be tempting for some on the political Left to dismiss this book as the critique of a right wing journalist, but that would be a mistake.

Osborne starts his study with the Thatcher and Major years, a period when the standards of previous decades began seriously to slip and it became a given in political life to be ‘economical with the actualité’. Comments on the Belgrano affair and Westland remind the reader that it was not New Labour that invented spin or saw lying as an important adjunct of modern politics.

But it is when he turns his attention to New Labour that Osborne is at his most coruscating; Osborne sets the habit of political and personal falsehood in New Labour politics against the background of an old Labour party that believed – with good reason – that the media never gave it an even break and was always willing to trash its policies and politicians regardless of the truth. As a result a programme of news management was created designed not only to try to dictate the news agenda but to create stories based on the flimsiest of details, and sometimes without any truth underpinning them at all. From this grew the willingness of key figures to lie shamelessly in public and when the lie was uncovered to fight on rather than admitting to deception.

Few politicians emerge from Osborne’s book with any credit, and he savages – with some relish – Peter Mandelson, Alistair Campbell and Tony Blair. Lest he be accused of bias Osborne states that he has restricted himself only to facts which are independently documented rather than those which are anecdotal, and the reader might be relieved, for the former are copious enough to prove his point.

Anyone who cares about the politics of this country should read this book, and it should be required reading for politicians of every hue who seek to discover why the electorate is at once so cynical and apathetic about the modern British political process.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh