

# The Rivals



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As James Naughtie reminds us in *The Rivals*, it's seven years since the fabled Islington dinner at which Tony Blair and Gordon Brown decided who was to succeed the late John Smith as Labour leader, and while it's a political union that has profitably endured, there are many, such as Naughtie, happy to ponder any marital itch. Though

unauthorised, Naughtie, a presenter of Radio 4's flagship Today programme, has known both men for many years, and neatly summarises how the two young guns forged an early relationship years before power came to Labour. Familiar hotspots of the last government are entertainingly described, if lacking new revelation: the Brown/Cook feuds, Blair's near-adultery with the Liberal Democrats, Geoffrey Robinson's home loan to Peter Mandelson, his subsequent resignation, the Ecclestone affair, Blair's relationship with Clinton, Kosovo and, of course, the question of succession. Naughtie asserts that Blair has two goals: to win a referendum on the European single currency, and to secure a third term--as Prime Minister. Whether this will push Brown into a career outside politics is open to speculation, as his supporters are still of the opinion that Blair strongly intimated that he would hand over power mid-second-term.

Of the duopoly, Naughtie ultimately does rather better with Brown, as the Chancellor presents the tangible qualities of a durable political heavyweight bruiser, whereas getting a handle on Blair can be tantamount to swiping mist. Blair, with his mongrel ideology, charismatic deputies and ability to shrug and move on, sees new horizons where Brown sees yet another bend in a road leading from a very proud, rooted past. The Iron Chancellor is portrayed as a deep, committed thinker, doggedly stubborn and as wedded to the past as the future. Hardly Flash Gordon, he's been digesting that Granita meal for years.

Servants of the People, Andrew Rawnsley's more jaunty, hugely enjoyable volume, now out in an updated paperback edition, perhaps stole Naughtie's thunder somewhat, but The Rivals still delivers a cogent and enjoyable version on the political karaoke, whether you're a Blair Witch or a Brown Noser. And it certainly keeps matters bubbling until Alastair Campbell writes his book. --David Vincent --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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