



Film

Lord in the wings

Peter Mandelson divides opinion like no other, but is the irrepresible politician really the dark 'evil genius' he's been branded? Documentary-maker *HANNAH ROTHSCILD* got unprecedented access to capture the unseen side of the spin-doctor-turned-peer

A freezing January morning on a scaffolding over the mud flats of Essex: Peter Mandelson, Gordon Brown and a ragbag of press are here to publicise the London Gateway's new 'super-port'. Most noses are purple as ripe grapes. Only Mandelson, swathed in cashmere and leather, looks soigné and normal. 'How is the dear Sultana?' he asks a representative from Dubai Port World. As the (then) Prime Minister pats his unruly hair, Mandelson looks on reprovingly. 'I've given up on the hair,' he admits later.

I'd never considered making a film about Mandelson, until I saw his extraordinary performance at the Labour Party Conference in 2009. There he was: coy, flirty, steely and utterly compelling, silhouetted against a neon-pink background. 'Let me say, after these years away it's good to be back home,' he said. Where did he get the courage to be knocked down so spectacularly, to get up and come back? I wrote to him the same afternoon, asking if he would be interested in a filmed profile, but never expected a reply. He rang back within days. 'Darling, there's so much going on, why don't you start now?' Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

Former party leader Neil Kinnock said: 'Those who say Peter Mandelson is Labour's evil genius are only half right.' Few politicians provoke opinion so vehemently. But evil? Calculating and ruthless in pursuit of winning for a cause he believes in, yes. A genius? He has exceptional talents: the ability to dissect, manipulate and disseminate information; the knack of mobilising a talented team; the art of remaining coolly decisive and dispassionate. He's a fire-fighter, a man to have in a crisis. 'Does anything frighten you?' I once asked. He looked astonished: 'I'm a fairly fearless sort of chap.' Little wonder Brown needed him back.

Following the publication of his memoir *The Third Man*, the Labour Party seems, once again, to be distancing itself from him. But don't expect that to be the end of the story. 'Who knows, [my political life] may come back again,' he told me recently. 'I hope it does, because I don't feel washed up.' Love him or loathe him, politics is a far less interesting place without Peter Mandelson. □ *'Mandelson: The Real PM?' premieres at the London Film Festival (13–28 October; www.bfi.org.uk/lff), and will be shown in the BBC's 'Storyville' series later this year.*

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