

DECLINE AND FALL

ALSO BY CHRIS MULLIN

Novels

A Very British Coup
The Last Man Out of Saigon
The Year of the Fire Monkey

Non-fiction

A View from the Foothills: The Diaries of Chris Mullin
Error of Judgement: The Truth about the Birmingham Bombings

DECLINE AND FALL

Diaries 2005–2010

Chris Mullin

edited by Ruth Winstone

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PROFILE BOOKS



First published in Great Britain in 2010 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3a Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
www.profilebooks.com

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Text design by Sue Lamble
Typeset in Stone Serif by MacGuru Ltd
info@macguru.org.uk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays, Bungay, Suffolk



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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84668 399 2
eISBN 978 1 84765 290 4

The paper this book is printed on is certified by the © 1996 Forest Stewardship Council A.C. (FSC). It is ancient-forest friendly. The printer holds FSC chain of custody SGS-COC-2061



With love to Ngoc, Sarah and Emma;
in memory of Leslie and Teresa Mullin
and with gratitude to the people of Sunderland



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Acknowledgements

There are many people to whom I owe thanks. My constituents in Sunderland South for having allowed me the honour of representing them these past twenty-three years. The Sunderland South Labour Party for having allowed me to be their candidate through five general elections. My friends and erstwhile colleagues in Parliament, especially those I have unfairly traduced, for their unfailing good humour and for continuing to confide in me even though – indeed perhaps because – I am a diarist.

Above all, I owe thanks to Andrew Franklin and his team at Profile – Sarah Caro, Penny Daniel and Ruth Killick – for their energy, enthusiasm and professionalism. Finally, I must once again thank Ruth Winstone for cutting the manuscript down to size and for offering much useful advice.



Introduction

This is the second of what I hope will be a three-volume history of the rise and fall of New Labour. Like Alan Clark, I am publishing my diaries out of sequence. The first volume, *A View from the Foothills*, covered the period from July 1999, from the moment I was assumed into government, to 9 May 2005, when I was unceremoniously dismissed.

This volume describes the five years that followed. These years also marked a decline in my own political fortunes and the growing realisation that my useful life in politics was over. By now I no longer occupied any of the little vantage points from which I had observed – and from time to time played a part in – the political process. The only committee of any significance on which I sat was Standards and Privileges and since the deliberations of that committee, interesting though they were, are necessarily confidential the reader will not find them documented here.

Three main themes dominate the final years. First, the fall, for that is what it was, of the most successful leader in Labour history, paying the price for having linked us umbilically to the worst American president of my lifetime, with consequences that we all know about. Second, a largely but not entirely self-inflicted crisis of confidence in the entire political class, triggered by the Great Expenses Meltdown. Finally, the long, slow wobble to death of an exhausted government under a leader whose shortcomings were known, and indeed widely remarked upon, from the outset. The final act was played out against the background of a crisis of capitalism of such magnitude that for a while the entire global economy teetered on the

edge of ruin. In between these great events, many small dramas and intrigues, public and personal, receive a passing mention in these pages.

In fairness, let it be said that it is doubtful that any leader could have won a fourth term, given the intensity of the storms that raged and the fact that after 13 years any government was vulnerable to the argument that it is time for a change. Let it also be recorded that it was decisive action by Gordon Brown and his Chancellor, Alistair Darling, in the autumn of 2008, by taking a controlling interest in several major banks, that prevented not merely a national but a global financial meltdown – a fact widely acknowledged abroad, but for some reason almost a secret in this country. That was the biggest political challenge of the twenty-first century, bar none, and he got it right. It may be that historians will be kinder to Gordon Brown than contemporary commentators – and indeed diarists.

Almost without exception, the most successful political diarists are people who have occupied the lower foothills. Perhaps because they have had time to look around and observe details that those who dwell in the stratosphere often fail to notice. And also because, not being significant players, we the humble inhabitants of the foothills do not have to waste time on self-justification. I like to think that I am in this category, though that is for others to judge.

Some who read my first volume have chosen to interpret it as evidence that all ministerial life is pointless. I do not accept this. There is a huge variation in the junior ministerial jobs. Much depends on whether you have a Secretary of State who is willing to delegate. My two years at the Foreign Office, under the management of Jack Straw, were among the happiest of my political life.

There is also a danger that readers of this volume may conclude that, because it charts the last days of an administration in decline, the New Labour era was an unmitigated failure. I do not accept this either. I have only to look at the lives of my least prosperous constituents to see that most have benefited significantly from 13 years of Labour government. It is all too easy to forget that, by the end of the Thatcher decade, male unemployment in Sunderland stood at well over 20 per cent; today it is less than half that. Contrary to what is sometimes alleged, we did redistribute some wealth, although perhaps

we kept rather too quiet about it for fear of upsetting the meaner elements of the middle classes. We invested significantly in health, education and other public services, with results that are plain for anyone with eyes to see. In 1997 you could wait up to two years for a hip operation at City Hospital Sunderland; at the time of writing the waiting time is 18 weeks and falling. At Sandhill View, a secondary school in my constituency, in the early nineties fewer than 10 per cent of pupils were achieving the standard five GCSEs at grades A to C; today that figure is nearly 80 per cent. There are many other examples I could cite. No one can tell me that Labour governments don't make a difference.

This, then, is the sequel to *A View from the Foothills*. It starts exactly where the earlier volume left off – on the day after my dismissal from government.

Chris Mullin
July 2010

CHAPTER ONE

May–December
2005

Tuesday, 10 May
Sunderland

Up before six, unable to sleep. Veering between disappointment and anger. A hammer blow to my fragile self-esteem. For two years I have been kidding myself that I'd been doing something useful ... Just before nine, the Number 10 switchboard rang with message to ring Jack Straw, but I was in no hurry to return his call and anyway Emma was in the middle of one of her massive nose bleeds.

To the office, where Pat and I sorted through boxes of redundant election literature for recycling. At about eleven Jack rang again. This time coming straight through. I didn't attempt to hide my feelings. 'Don't be bitter,' he said. No, indeed. Forward not back, as they say in New Labour. 'We are still mates, aren't we?' I assured him that we were, but try as I may I cannot suppress the feeling that he had a hand in this, if only by not offering sufficient resistance. My successor is Dave Triesman (who a few years back was eased out of the General Secretaryship of the Labour Party and into the Lords) thereby becoming the *sixth* Africa minister in eight years. Pure madness. We say we take Africa seriously, but we don't.

'Eccentric to say the least,' said Jack. 'Not the reshuffle I would have done.'

In the afternoon I caught the train to London. On the station at Sunderland a man from South Shields shook my hand warmly, saying he had just re-read *Error of Judgement*. He added, 'I voted for Labour, but not for Blair. That man is detested.' He repeated the word several times. 'The sooner he goes, the better.'



How quickly the waters close. This morning I rang the FCO to discuss the return of my personal effects. 'Lord Triesman's office,' answered a cheery voice.

'Can I speak to Bharat?'

'He's gone to collect the Minister, in the car.'

Car, eh? That's going to cost them an extra £60,000.

Wednesday, 11 May

To a jam-packed meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party in Committee Room 14. A large press pack hovering in the corridor outside. The Man gave another of his bravura performances, which, with notable exceptions, was received with rapture. The trouble is we are in new territory now. Bravura performances are not enough any more. The euphoria was quickly punctured. Peter Kilfoyle was first up, talking of the need for sober reflection in the light of the fact that four million votes had gone missing since 1997. He won a few brave hear-hears. Then Geraldine Smith said that the leadership question needed to be resolved sooner rather than later. Michael Meacher called for 'a more collegiate, less presidential style'. Bob Marshall-Andrews talked of 'a rising tide of disaffection' and 'gross abuse of powers of patronage'. Then Glenda Jackson, looking miserable and angry as always (goodness knows what she won her Oscar for; certainly not charm), said, 'I didn't fight the Lib Dems and the Tories during the election. I had to fight you.' This provoked cries of 'disgraceful' and was followed by an unhelpful contribution from Claire Curtis-Thomas, who told the dissidents 'to go and find another party' (the last thing we need). There was no shortage of people to speak up for The Man or at least to warn against a war of attrition (not quite the same thing). Frank Field, who has suddenly come over all loyal, warned against an immediate change of leadership, talking of the election result being a contract with the electorate. Frank Dobson harked back to the vanished four million. Many people, he said, were telling him they would not vote Labour again while Tony Blair remained leader. 'We are standing on a very shallow beach. If we regard the recent election result as an endorsement of our policies on health and education etc., we are in danger of remaining on nine and a half million votes while



the Tories don't.' Robin Cook, who was waving his arm furiously, failed to catch Ann Clwyd's eye.

The Man responded robustly. He stressed the need to remain on the centre ground, pointing out, fairly, that some – but not all – of his critics had been agin him for years. He conceded, however, that the end was in sight. 'I know you need to have a stable and orderly transition. Please allow us to bring that about so that we win a fourth election.' His best line: a glancing reference to Roy Hattersley, in whose Treasury team he had served in the eighties and who is now calling for his head; and then: 'I was loyal throughout three defeats. All I ask is a bit of loyalty throughout three victories.' Huge cheering. He departed to a standing ovation in which a small, but significant, minority, seated around Frank Dobson and Robin Cook, did not participate.

Thursday, 12 May

Hilary Benn was the first person I ran into this morning. The reshuffle, he said, was a shambles. No one even bothered to tell Gareth Thomas, his Under-Secretary, that he was still in the job. Hilary had to ring Number 10 to find out. Later I heard that someone ran their eye down the list of new ministers at the crassly re-christened Department of Industry, Productivity and Energy and noticed there were no women, so out of the blue it was decided to add Meg Munn (to do goodness knows what), but since the ministerial allocation was used up, there is no money to pay her. The same happened with Michael Wills at the Home Office a while ago. Whatever else he's good at, personnel management isn't The Man's strong suit.

Lunch in the cafeteria with my erstwhile Assistant Private Secretary, Caron Rohsler, who came in with some of my personal effects and a card inside which everyone in the office had inscribed friendly messages.

Sunday, 15 May

To Chillingham for lunch with Humphry and Katherine Wakefield. About 20 guests, including Sir Richard Storey, the Baker-Cresswells, a delicate young Percy, a cousin of the Duke (who looked and sounded as though he had stepped straight from the set of *Brideshead Revisited*), and Nancy Lambton, a relative of the notorious Tony. She was formerly Professor of Persian at the School of Oriental and African Studies, 93 years old and bright as a button. Afterwards I peeped into the walled garden, silent and derelict as always, and reflected briefly on what might have been.

Back to Alnwick along the back road. The Till valley stunning in the evening sunshine.

Monday, 16 May

At the Members' Entrance this morning I was talking to Mike O'Brien, now Solicitor General, when a small, bald man who I didn't recognise from Adam tumbled out of a taxi and began chatting. Suddenly it dawned on me that he was not just a Member, but a newly appointed minister. I racked my brain, but try as I may I couldn't put a name to him.

'Who was that?' I asked after he had gone.

'Liam Byrne, he won the Hodge Hill by-election. He's just been appointed to the Department of Health.' One of the infinite supply of special advisers who have been shoe-horned into safe seats and who, before you can say 'New Labour', are wafted into government over the heads of we poor inadequates who have laboured for years in the salt mines. Is it just me or is there something not quite right about this?

At the meeting of the parliamentary party this evening I asked Geoff Hoon for an assurance that Parliament would have an opportunity to discuss plans for a new generation of nuclear weapons before any irrevocable decisions were made. Needless to say I didn't get one. Unless I am mistaken he looked a bit uncomfortable. I sense I have hit upon a rich furrow. I will plough further.

Tuesday, 17 May

The State Opening. A record 45 new bills. Ludicrous. A lot of vague talk about 'respect' and other concepts that can't easily be legislated for. I stayed for the opening speeches in the debate and then set off to a conference on Africa at Wilton Park in Sussex.

Wednesday, 18 May

Wilton Park

Up before six, I followed a path through the garden and (in glorious sunshine) out onto a footpath which led up through ancient woodland and onto the South Downs Way. A lone deer leapt out of a hedge and stood staring for a full minute before going into reverse gear. From the top, fine views across unspoiled countryside to the sea. I walked up to and around the Chanctonbury Ring and was back at the house in time for breakfast. There is much to be said for this conference lark.

Thursday, 19 May

Slept well for the first time in ten days and awoke feeling refreshed. To the House. I was wondering what I would do all day but in the event there wasn't a minute to spare. I went in for Geoff Hoon's first business statement as Leader of the House, at which he announced an outrageous 81-day summer recess. Why should we let the government award itself a three-month holiday from scrutiny? I protested vigorously, receiving the usual bland reply. Mine was the only intervention on our side, a point much remarked upon by the Tories. If MPs are not interested in Parliament, why should anyone else be? I went to the library and looked up the Modernisation Committee report which introduced September sittings. Sure enough, the deal was that sittings were to be aligned with school holidays 'in return for' (to quote Robin Cook) a two-week sitting in September. Well, it hasn't take long for the powers-that-be to renege on their part of the bargain.

Monday, 23 May
Sunderland

Awoke at 4.30am; unable to get back to sleep so I went downstairs and took a sleeping pill; something I have never done before, except on long-haul flights. After that I slept soundly until just after eight and awoke feeling groggy.

I notice the former special advisers tend to stick together in the Tea Room; some have already developed the short attention spans one associates with the upwardly mobile. Before the year is out they'll all be in government. There's a sort of first- and standard-class developing. Not for those in the first-class carriage the disappointments of opposition; most have never, nor will they ever (in public at least), ask a question that betrays even a hint of scepticism about the official version of events. All bright and personable, I'm sure, but oughtn't they be required to remain on the backbenches long enough to make a ripple or two before zooming away into the stratosphere?

Alternatively, perhaps we should adopt the American system, where the government consists of Friends of The Man and where scrutiny is an entirely separate function. That at least would spare us the inconvenience, resentment and inevitable abuse of patronage occasioned by the need to find seats in either the Lords or Commons for those on the inside track.

At six I went across to Number 10 for my farewell audience with The Man. A mite apprehensive. He was, as ever, all sweetness and light, but I emerged 15 minutes later none the wiser as to why I had been got rid of. He asked what I wanted to do. I mentioned a place on either the International Development or Foreign Affairs select committee and he looked meaningfully at his PPS, Keith Hill, as if to say, 'See what you can do' (not that the composition of select committees should be any of his business). Then, to my amazement, he said, 'Would you like to be my Africa envoy?' He went on, 'There will be a lot of running around to do after the G8 summit. All sorts of people want to see me and I don't have time to see all of them. An envoy carries more weight than a junior minister.' He mentioned Lord Levy and Brian Wilson.

‘What about Dave Triesman? Surely that’s his job.’

He then said something amazing. ‘There’s no longer an Africa minister as such. Dave has to do everything in the Lords. He won’t be able to travel as much as you did.’

‘You jammy bugger,’ said Keith, putting his arm over my shoulder when we were outside in the corridor. Later, he told me that he had reported the conversation to Sally Morgan and she had responded, ‘Whaaat?’ Meaning presumably that The Man consulted no one before making his offer – if indeed that is what it was. I very much doubt whether anything will come of it. I am not holding my breath.

Tuesday, 24 May

Ran into Alan Howarth (former MP for Newport, now a Noble Lord) on Millbank, who offered sympathy at my untimely demise. ‘The caprice of autocrats in our democratic system ... how very African.’

In the evening to a reception at Marlborough House, where I was showered with commiserations by a number of old Africa hands. Then to a BBC party in the atrium at 4 Millbank, where I had a long talk about Iraq with John Simpson. He visits every two months or so and says it’s getting worse (‘A civil war between the Sunni and the Shia has begun’). He thinks the Americans will retreat into seven or eight huge fortified compounds and that we will be stuck there for years. Like me, he was against the war at the outset, but thought they’d get away with it. I bent his ear about America’s secret gulag and he expressed interest, leaving me his email address. I will follow this up.

Wednesday, 25 May

A coffee with one of the special advisers who is just back from visiting Washington with Jack, who had meetings with Condi, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Bush. He says Rumsfeld and Cheney are ‘delusional’ re Iraq. Condi, contrary to rumour, is not a cipher and does appear to have a mind of her own. The Americans are not interested in Africa. There is no way they are going to sign up to our G8 agenda on aid, finance or climate change.

Thursday, 26 May

To Heybridge to see Mum. She has another damn infection; only a question of time before there is another fall. We chatted cheerfully for almost four hours, during the course of which she remarked, very matter of factly (no trace of self-pity), 'It won't be for much longer.'

Friday, 27 May

Sunderland

A pile of *Echos* awaited. This week's lead headlines:

Saturday: 'BALLY: MAN IN COURT (stabbing accused charged with murder)'

Monday: 'TUNNEL OF FEAR – jobs turn subway into tunnel of fear'

Tuesday: '200 STITCHES – woman's eye repaired after glassing attack'

Wednesday: 'BULLDOZED – treasured piece of heritage reduced to rubble'

Thursday: 'ENOUGH: police pledge on drunken louts who bring terror to City's streets'

Friday: 'THE FACE OF PUB VIOLENCE (the shocking picture that shows why it's time to get tough)'

Saturday, 28 May

The Holmes, Roxburghshire

Loaded up the car and headed for The Holmes. A world apart. Everything in its place. Peacocks, geese, a dozen varieties of chicken, numerous donkeys, horses and a couple of llamas who had a three-day-old baby, already skipping unsteadily around the big field in the wake of her mother. And of course, presiding over the entire menagerie, white-haired Mrs Dale, vigorous as ever.

Monday, 30 May

To the House of the Binns, home (since 1612) of the Dalryells, only to find that it isn't due to open for another couple of days. Disappointed, we climbed up to the folly behind the house and spent an hour enjoying the spectacular views over the Firth of Forth and were just about to leave when a woman, who from a distance I at first took to be Kathleen, emerged from The Big Hoose. In the event she was a cleaning lady who was with difficulty persuaded to concede that Tam might be in residence and showed me round to the back, where I rang the doorbell, which was answered by Kathleen. She had just returned from collecting Tam from the airport and they were about to set out again for Stirling. Much to my embarrassment she invited us in, sat us down at the kitchen table, gave us tea and cherry cake, roused Tam from his afternoon snooze and then insisted on giving us a tour of the house, which is a gem. Tam, who isn't in the best of health, didn't look well and I worried throughout that we might be responsible for his premature demise. Next time, I will give plenty of notice.

*Tuesday, 31 May**The Holmes, Roxburghshire*

Raining lightly. I walked along the river and up through the woods to Bemersyde for my annual general meeting with Dawyck Haig. Alert and sprightly as ever, he insisted on the usual glass of sherry and we sat in his magnificent drawing room discussing the state of the Tory party and the future of the EU Constitution (the French having just delivered a resounding 'Non') and the doings of his neighbours. Then he showed me out across the garden, to a back gate leading into a field and connecting with the footpath that leads back to Dryburgh, via the Wallace monument.

Wednesday, 1 June

Rain all day. The Eildons invisible. We took the girls for a riding lesson near Selkirk and then drove to see Robert Owen's mills at New Lanark, beautifully restored and displayed and so moving to think what that

great man inspired. How would he wish to be remembered? As a socialist, an enlightened capitalist or a mixture of both? Whatever, his message is as relevant today as it was 200 years ago. Namely, that it is possible to make a healthy profit without grinding the noses of your workers into the dirt. Globalisers, please note.

Saturday, 4 June
Sunderland

We meandered home via Scott's View, Dundock Wood, the Hirsell and tea at Bamburgh with Charles and Barbara Baker-Cresswell. The weather held until just after three, when we were caught in torrential rain. So heavy that we had to pull over at Paxton until the worst had passed. Among the letters awaiting my return, a handwritten note from the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi: 'I am deeply saddened to learn that you have been replaced as Africa minister. I had stayed up late at night to listen to your victory speech ... and I had hoped and assumed that your tenure ... would be much longer.'

Monday, 6 June

Janet Anderson remarked to me in passing today that The Man attaches no importance to the junior jobs. 'He regards them as sweeties to be handed out to keep the children happy.'

Tuesday, 7 June

Huge relief at the decision to dispense with the EU referendum, although Jack made the announcement with an entirely straight face. With one leap we are freed from the prospect of months of trench warfare trying to ram through an enabling Bill, followed by inevitable humiliation at the ballot box. At the meeting of the parliamentary party last night someone remarked, 'Whoever persuaded the Prime Minister to opt for a referendum was either a far-sighted genius or a complete fool.'

In the evening to a party at the Department for International

Development for the launch of their annual report. Hilary Benn presided, but disappeared upstairs to make an urgent call to Meles Zenawi about the election crisis in Ethiopia (the opposition won an unexpectedly large share of the vote, sparking angry demonstrations and a violent over-reaction from the police). Suma Chakrabati, the permanent secretary, remarked that it wasn't sensible to dispense with the Africa minister: 'Hilary is having to make the call because there is no one at the Foreign Office available to do so.'

Wednesday, 8 June

Norine MacDonald and her colleagues, Emmanuel Reinert and Fabrice Pothier, came to tell me about a programme they are running in Afghanistan. Norine is more or less based there now. The plan is to wean the Americans and the UN agencies off poppy eradication and instead persuade them to license opium and use it as a source of heroin for medical use. At present the American Drug Enforcement Agency is in charge and, as usual, they are only able think in terms of 'a drug war'. So far, according to Norine, they have eradicated about 50 hectares at a cost of eight lives and 150 million dollars. She says that, if they carry on with forced eradication, there will be serious instability. The reality is there are no alternative livelihoods available for most people. She wants me to try and interest HMG in her scheme to grow opium for medicinal purposes.

Lunch with Dave Triesman, the lucky man who now occupies 'my' grand office overlooking the Durbar Court. A delightful, warm, decent fellow; almost apologetic about what happened, even though he isn't in any way implicated. He and Jack have been friends since their student days, which is why, I suppose, Jack offered no resistance.

Later, Hilary Benn recounted last night's half-hour phone call with my friend Meles Zenawi, who was talking ominously of arresting the opposition leaders for 'treason'. It seems that the ruling party has lost control of all the cities, including Addis. The results still haven't been officially announced even though it is nearly a month since the election and there are the inevitable opposition claims of fraud.

Hilary, needless to say, urged restraint and is going to Addis next week to underline the message. Oh dear, it looks as if another of our favourite Africans is on the wobble.

Tuesday, 14 June

To Sunderland and back to give evidence at our appeal against the decision of the Boundary Commission to dismantle Sunderland South. My appearance before the inquiry took all of 15 minutes. A five-minute statement, followed by ten minutes of questioning by the barrister representing the Tories. On paper we ought to have a strong case. The Commission's terms of reference stipulate minimum disruption and their proposals will cause maximum disruption. They are also supposed to pay heed to existing communities and what they are proposing is to weld together two entirely different communities, separated by the huge canyon of the A19. However, the Commission also has an over-riding duty to even out the numbers and, as Greg Cook (who led for our side) pointed out afterwards, our alternative proposal would create the second largest constituency in the country (after the Isle of Wight). So, my guess is that we will lose and I will be saddled with a seat that the Tories could win next time. An inglorious end to my 23 years in Parliament. I sense I am on a downward trajectory.

Wednesday, 15 June

Another little reshuffle story: Charlotte Atkins, who was aviation minister for a mere seven months, didn't even receive a call to tell her that she was out. The Number 10 apparatchiks simply forgot that she existed. She was remarkably relaxed when I ran into her in the library and said that in any case she has since received a profuse apology from The Man, but doesn't that say it all? What is the point of making someone a minister for only seven months, unless they make a disastrous hash of it, which Charlotte didn't. She said, 'I was just beginning to ask questions about night flights.' Exactly the point I got to. No wonder the mighty vested interests at the heart of the aviation

industry don't take us seriously; what have they to fear?

An amusing exchange with Jim Murphy, formerly PPS in the Foreign Office, now an odd-job man at the bottom end of JP's empire. Among other things, he is in charge of addressing 'the perception gap' (another phrase for my New Labour lexicon) i.e. the fact that many of our constituents don't believe a word we say. I suggested a couple of simple measures which might make a difference: (1) no 81-day summer recess, (2) junior ministers should stop riding around in official cars at £60,000 a time (Jim is also in charge of the government car service). To which I might have added: no more dodgy dossiers and no more swearing blind in your election manifesto that you will not introduce top-up fees ... and then promptly doing just that. It's not rocket science.

Thursday, 16 June

To Heybridge to see Mum. Frail as ever, but remarkably cheerful considering her plight. We talked mainly about the old days. Her first day at work in 1935, aged 15. Uncle Cyril delivered her to the front entrance of Electra House on the Thames Embankment in his gleaming new car, the only one in Ripley Road. The doorman, assuming she must be important, ushered her upstairs in the executive lift, tea was offered ... Only to be withdrawn when it was discovered that she was starting work as a messenger in the typing pool, at which point she was curtly informed that, in future, she should enter by the staff entrance, round the corner in Arundel Street.

Sunday, 19 June

Father's Day. The girls presented me with home-made cards. Emma's consists of a picture of a flashy car ('hint, hint'), interspersed with symbols of the things I care about (a spade, a bluebell, a sign pointing to a walled garden). Sarah's depicts me reclining in a swimming pool while she is dangling before me grapes on a fishing rod and Emma is offering a tray with a cool drink. Ngoc, meanwhile, is in the corner chatting on her mobile. Truly, I am a lucky man.

Tuesday, 21 June

A pleasant lunch with Bruce Grocott at which we reflected on the excesses of New Labour and the folly of Iraq. ('What made him do it when no one, but no one, was pressing?') According to Bruce, The Man is conditioned by his experience in Hackney in the eighties to believe that the Labour Party is always wrong when, on this occasion at least, the instincts of the dear old Labour Party happened to be spot on.

The Aye Lobby, 10.15pm

A brief exchange with Alan Milburn, who says The Man is in excellent spirits and will hang on for three years 'at least'. If so, how will Gordon and his playmates react? Actually, it is probably in Gordon's interests to take over a year or so before an election is due, as Major did in '92, so that he can be represented as a new broom. 'That's the rational response,' says Alan, 'but with Gordon the rational always vies with the irrational. One thing is certain: history will not look kindly on anyone who wields the assassin's knife.' He added, 'There is a lot of complacency about. If David Davis becomes leader – as looks likely – the Tories could get their act together and give us a run for our money.' Does Alan still hanker after the top job? I suspect he may. After all – as I pointed out and as Alan readily agreed – his upbringing is remarkably similar to that of David Davis.

Wednesday, 22 June

To the Athenaeum for lunch with Jonathan Steele of the *Guardian*. Like just about everyone else I talk to who has first-hand experience of Iraq, Jonathan says the violence is getting worse; in his view the only hope of restoring stability is a phased withdrawal of US troops. Later, on the terrace at the House, I had a long talk with Ann Clwyd, who has spent the day with Jack in Brussels, at an Iraq donor conference. To my surprise, she agreed with Jonathan that a phased withdrawal may help to reduce the violence and says one is already being planned. However, she says it can't even be hinted at until the

December elections are out of the way and the trials of Saddam and his cronies are over. On the latter, she says the Iraqis are determined to execute at least the top ten Ba'athists, but she is worried at the lack of protection being offered to witnesses and even to the judges and prosecutors and their families, all of whom are at risk

Thursday, 23 June

Temperature in the nineties for the third day running.

Clive Stafford Smith, a lawyer representing some of those interned at Guantanamo, came in, together with Stephen Grey, a journalist who used to work for the *Sunday Times*. They want me to press the government to take back those who were British residents, but not citizens, before their arrest; otherwise they are likely to be sent back to their countries of origin, which could result in death or torture. We also talked about the secret gulag into which alleged terrorists, some kidnapped in broad daylight from the streets of Europe, are disappearing. Apparently, they are being franchised out to torturers in Syria, Libya, Morocco, Egypt. I am keen to be helpful, but nervous about being too upfront given (a) that some of these people undoubtedly are terrorists and (b) the hysteria that was organised against me when I took up similar cases in the past.

Monday, 27 June

Charles Clarke made a statement about the continuing deportations of failed asylum seekers to Zimbabwe. A spectacular bout of hypocrisy from the Tories, and their leader-in-waiting David Davis, demanding that all removals to Zimbabwe cease forthwith. Who, watching this extraordinary display, would guess that this is a party that has just fought an election campaign in which the return of every last failed asylum seeker was a major plank? Davis was particularly shameless. Later, I came across him at the BBC and said that from now on I was proposing to refer to him as Shameless of Haltemprice.

The front page headline in today's *Daily Mail* is headed, apropos Zimbabwe asylum seekers, 'FOR PITY'S SAKE LET THEM STAY'. It makes one's stomach turn.

Tuesday, 28 June

Lunch with John Simpson. I like him. A mega-star making an effort to be modest. He asked about my days at the BBC and seemed genuinely interested in my opinions. John says the Americans cannot win in Iraq and that the only question is the manner of their exit. He thinks they should hand over to the UN – but who is to say that the UN won't come under attack, too? Then to the chamber to hear Charles Clarke introduce the ID cards Bill. Never have I seen a minister more intervened upon, but to everyone he responded calmly and courteously. Deep unease about ID cards. Not so much the civil liberties implications as about whether or not the technology will work and what it will cost. A whiff of doom about the whole enterprise. No way will it go through the Lords, except by force. If there were a free vote, it wouldn't get through the Commons either.

This evening, my long-awaited, much rearranged audience with Jack. A glass of wine in his room at the House while a spectacular electric thunderstorm raged outside. 'There was no animus, Chris. You just fell off the end. I know you think I could have saved you, but I couldn't.'

I recounted my 'Africa envoy' conversation, making clear that I didn't believe that anything would come of it. Jack wanted to know The Man's exact words. He seemed to take it more seriously than I, but is well aware of The Main Person's tendency to scatter vague promises like confetti. 'Tony's like a man who says, "I love you" to seven, eight, nine, ten women and they all go away feeling happy until they start to compare notes.' That nicely sums up The Man. For the record, Jack thinks he won't go until '07 at the earliest.

Wednesday, 29 June

My first caller this morning was Andrew Gilligan, a man with whom one must sup with a very long spoon. He's making a follow-up to his earlier programme on extraordinary rendition for Channel Four and is looking for evidence of British government complicity ('We haven't got any yet, but we're hopeful of finding some by the time the programme goes out').

Dinner in the Strangers' Dining Room with John Gilbert. He expressed disappointment that I have no interest in coming to the Lords. 'Whatever happens you must find something to do. Otherwise slowly, inexorably, imperceptibly you will go into terminal decline.'

I asked why we needed a new generation of nuclear weapons (a subject about which I pressed The Man at Questions today). John, needless to say, is strongly in favour.

'Why?'

'One word, dear boy: France. There's not the slightest chance of our getting rid of nuclear weapons while France has them.'

I hadn't realised our case was so weak.

Thursday, 30 June

Sat through most of the Africa debate. Hilary made a brilliant opening and Andrew Mitchell for the Tories was good, too. I had intended to speak, but when Hilary left after three hours I lost the will to go on and asked the Deputy Speaker to take my name off the list. Result: most of the day wasted. I should have gone to see Mum instead.

My meteoric downfall continues apace. According to Ann Cryer, who sits on the parliamentary committee, my name doesn't even feature on the list of proposed members for either the foreign affairs or international development committees. All that now remains is for the Boundary Commission to take away my seat and my humiliation will be complete. If I didn't have a family to support, I would get out ...

Friday, 1 July *Sunderland*

To Penshaw, where, along with a thousand or so others, I helped to form a circle around the monument – Sunderland's contribution to making poverty history. A light aeroplane came over and photographed us. To my surprise and mild irritation George Galloway was there, trailed by a BBC television crew. A set-up? Are we about to become extras in a broadcast on behalf of the Respect party?

'What's George doing here?' I inquired of one of the organisers.

'Oh, we wanted a fair spread across the political spectrum,' he replied shiftily.

'Why, in that case, didn't you invite the Ulster Unionists and the Welsh Nationalists as well?'

No reply, beyond a smirk.

Sure enough, come the speeches, George launched into a scathing attack on the G8 and all its works. Classic, rabble-rousing, easy politics. The sort of stuff George does brilliantly, although it didn't go down quite as well as I expected. A number of people walked away.

Monday, 4 July

Some fun at Defence questions. I teamed up with several Tory Friends of the Bomb in an attempt to persuade John Reid to come clean about plans for a new generation of nuclear weapons. Michael Gove, a recently elected young Tory fogey, started the ball rolling and I came in from our side, after which the exchange acquired a life of its own and Reid became slightly ratty. I have raised the subject half a dozen times so far and I'm determined to keep at it until the powers-that-be come clean. One doesn't have to be a CNDer to entertain the possibility that there are better things to do with £10 billion or whatever they are proposing to spend on a successor to Trident. I bet a fair swathe of the military top brass take that view, too.

Wednesday, 6 July

To the Gay Hussar for lunch. I boarded a 24 bus, but before it had gone far it became ensnared in traffic so I got off and walked. As I reached Trafalgar Square a great cheer went up, strips of coloured paper began to shower down from the sky and the bells of St Martin-in-the-Fields began to toll: London has been chosen for the 2012 Olympics.

Later, I ran into The Man's Man, Keith Hill, who was in even better humour than usual. 'This will do wonders for The Man's street cred,' I said.

'Indeed. You know what they're saying?'

'Tell me'

'Four more years.' He held up the fingers of his right hand and disappeared down the corridor, cackling.

Thursday, 7 July

Olympic euphoria was short-lived. Bombs have gone off all over London, on Underground trains at Aldgate, King's Cross and Edgware Road and on the top deck of a bus at Tavistock Square.

I arrived at Hampstead Underground just after nine to find a jam-packed train, doors open, sitting in the station. At this stage there was no inkling of what had happened. Then a London Underground employee in a blue blazer came and announced that the station was being evacuated due to 'a power surge'. Several people ranted. In particular a well-dressed man who said he was from Greece (as if the Greeks have anything to teach us about the smooth-running of public services) and a red-headed yob who demanded to know how he was going to get to work in Knightsbridge. The Underground man, an Asian, kept his cool admirably.

Outside, still no clue as to what was happening, I walked down the hill and boarded a 24 bus which meandered for about a mile before being turned back at the far end of Camden High Street. Someone said something about a bomb. I got off and started walking. Gradually the traffic dried up. Euston Road was sealed. Police were letting through only ambulances and other emergency vehicles in the direction of King's Cross. Wailing sirens everywhere. I crossed into Tottenham Court Road. People were clustered round shop windows displaying television sets which were showing scenes of chaos just a few hundred yards away. Looking left into Bloomsbury, the side streets were taped off. At Trafalgar Square I came across Sir George Young on his bicycle. 'My visit to the Cheadle by-election has been called off,' he said, feigning disappointment.

By the time I reached the House it was clear that we had a catastrophe on our hands. For a while, proceedings carried on as usual. The whips put the word around that we should string out Business

questions for as long as possible in order to give Charles Clarke a chance to put his statement together, but eventually the Speaker suspended the sitting. In due course Charles appeared and delivered a short, sombre statement, thin on detail since the full facts were not yet known. No one pressed him and there was no grand-standing. It was announced that The Man was on his way back from the G8 at Gleneagles to chair COBRA (the Cabinet committee in charge of emergencies). Then back to normal business – a debate on defence. I had intended to harass John Reid on nuclear weapons, but in the circumstances decided not to. The highlight was a coruscating speech from George Galloway, the gist of which was that we had brought all the bombings on ourselves as a result of our association with the American adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Vintage George, delivered unflinching, without a piece of paper in sight. And to avoid giving ammunition to his many enemies he went out of his way repeatedly to condemn the bombings. He was heard in uncomfortable silence by all save one foolish new Tory who was contemptuously brushed aside. The problem with George's thesis, of course, is that 9/11 preceded the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Even so, it would take a brave man to assert that we would have been attacked today had we not gone into Iraq. Later, George Bush was on television, prattling about evil men who kill innocent people and I couldn't help thinking of that picture of a distraught father grieving over the half-dozen – or was it eight – little bodies of his children after one of Bush's bombs went astray over Kabul.

All day long we went about our business accompanied by the distant wail of sirens. By evening St Pancras, but not King's Cross, was reported open. There was no Underground and only a handful of buses so I set out on foot, towing my little bag behind me, through Embankment Gardens and up through the Inns of Court. At the top of Chancery Lane, a loud bang. Everyone froze – the silence audible – and then we relaxed as it became clear that it was a controlled explosion. A policeman waved us quickly across Holborn, which was sealed to traffic; so was the Euston Road. I reached St Pancras at about a quarter to seven to find it, too, was closed, but I hung around with a crowd of other pedestrians and after a while we were allowed through. From St Pancras I caught a (nearly empty) train to Doncaster by way

of Sheffield, arriving at about eleven. Only half a dozen people waiting. The digital signboard indicated no more trains, but the station staff assured us they were expecting one about midnight and in due course a train appeared. Reached Durham at 1.30am and took a taxi home. The taxi driver was reporting 50 dead and hundreds of casualties. 'The chin-wag is that it was the French,' he said with apparent sincerity. 'I wouldn't put anything past that Chirac.'

Sunday, 10 July

Helions Bumpstead, Essex

Mum's 85th birthday. Probably her last. Liz laid on a magnificent spread. All four of us children and all but one grandchild showed up. As usual the girls produced their own cards. Emma's showing Granny as Queen, a flag flying at full mast over her palace; Sarah's showed Mum on top of Ben Nevis, which in a moment of madness she walked up 30 years ago, despite her crippled feet. Mum frail, but generally competent, although as the afternoon wore on she did lapse into occasional nonsense; by evening she was looking tired, but happy. Great heat – temperature in the thirties; it wasn't until the shadow passed over Liz's garden in the early evening that we were able to sit outside.

Monday, 11 July

To London – with trepidation since the organisers of last week's outrages are still thought to be at large. At King's Cross the entrance to the Underground was sealed; a sign directed passengers to Euston. On road signs and railings around the station home-made posters of the 'missing' put up by desperate relatives. One a picture of a bright-faced, dark-haired young woman called Miriam, no doubt the apple of her parents' eye, 'last heard of being evacuated from King's Cross ...'

At four The Man made a statement which was greeted by a huge bout of me-too-ism from all sides. Even Michael Howard was lavish in his praise. After an hour one almost longed for a George Galloway to get up and puncture the complacency.

At the meeting of the parliamentary party the names of the new select committee members were read out by Hilary. As expected, mine was not among them. Despite the improvements prompted by last year's uprising, the selection process remains deeply unsatisfactory; the executive still has the biggest say as to who will scrutinise it.

This evening in the Tea Room, John Prescott remarked that our Olympic bid is seriously underfunded. 'I warned them that if we got it, we'd have to find a lot more money.' He said that the sports minister, Richard Caborn, had asked ministers in several countries that had recently hosted the Olympics what they would have done differently and they all said they should have got the budget right to start with.

Tuesday, 12 July

A young man called Abdul came to help resolve a glitch in my printer. He said that all the IT on the parliamentary estate is soon to be upgraded. I asked what will happen to the old stuff. His reply was shocking: 'It will be thrown away.'

'Recycled, surely?'

'No. It's not worth sending to the Third World and the parts aren't worth re-using. It will go into landfill. The same happens with old mobile phones. There are two for every adult in Europe.'

In-fucking-sanity. We will be cursed by future generations.

The police appear to have identified three of the four perpetrators of last week's bombings. All British citizens, born and bred in Leeds; two of them young. The implications are not hard to grasp – the virus of Islamist terror has taken root in British soil.

Wednesday, 13 July

Another blazing-hot day.

With Sheila Williams to Hampstead to see dear old Michael Foot. We found him seated at the table in his basement, French doors

opened onto a secluded, sunny garden. One-eyed, lopsided, wild-haired, but absolutely sound of mind. Books, old and new (letters and cuttings protruding), piled on tables, sideboard, floor, everywhere. No effort to disguise his disenchantment with the regime – a half-page newspaper photograph of Gordon Brown was taped to the mantelpiece behind him. He greets me like a long lost friend. Odd that he should take such a shine to me after the battles of the eighties. I owe Sheila for putting him right. He commiserates over my loss of office. 'You were just about the only member of the government who I haven't heard say something stupid.' Half an hour is spent bemoaning the *Daily Mail* ('the forger's gazette'), which recently serialised a salacious biography of Jill. Sheila urges him not to respond, but he is clearly tempted. Later Ian Aitken rings with the same advice, but Michael keeps returning to the subject, clearly upset. He also complains about a book on H. G. Wells which makes the great man out to be bitter and curmudgeonly in his final years. 'Nonsense. I knew him very well. He wasn't like that at all.'

What a wonderful arrangement this is. Michael, 92 next week, is determined to die in his own home, surrounded by his books, papers and mementoes. A succession of carers look after him, working ten-day shifts. Molly, who once worked in the Cabinet Office, is on duty today. Sheila showed me his library upstairs, full of rare first editions. And Jill's study, also piled high (even the fireplace is book-lined). Incredibly, Michael still sleeps on the third floor and climbs up and down by himself every day; no sign of a stairlift.

If only we could have done this for Mum. I curse myself for not trying harder.

Monday, 18 July

Ted Heath has died. In later years at least he was a sad, grumpy old bugger, but unlike many of his contemporaries right about some big issues – fascism in the thirties and in the seventies British membership of the EU. In later life he had a blind spot about China though, prompted perhaps by large amounts of dosh from his Chinese business interests. Latterly, according to one of the Special Branch men

who accompanied me to Pakistan, he whiled away the evenings drinking alone in country pubs around Salisbury, with only his minder for company.

Tuesday, 19 July

A call from Number 10 to discuss how I might be useful in Africa. Well, well. What prompted this? A word from Jack perhaps. I remain sceptical, but you never know.

A minister whispered in the Tea Room that 11 soldiers, one a colonel, are to be court-martialled in connection with the abuse – and in two cases killing – of prisoners in Iraq. Several have been charged with ‘war crimes’, which seems a bit over the top. Needless to say the military top brass are mightily upset and John Reid is not best pleased either. The *Mail* and the *Telegraph* are already gearing up for a big offensive. ‘It’s going to be horrendous,’ he said. He added that the courts martial process was deeply flawed. Apparently the three soldiers convicted of abusing prisoners last year have quietly had their sentences reduced by their commanding officer and upon release they are to be taken back into the army. All this without any announcement, despite the enormous publicity that attended the original sentencing.

Wednesday, 20 July

A robust exchange of emails with the Deputy Serjeant at Arms over the treatment of the House of Commons cleaners who are on strike over their disgraceful terms and conditions – they are paid little more than the minimum wage and receive only 12 days’ holiday a year. They are almost all contract cleaners. There is also the little point that, in this age of jihad, it may not make sense to outsource the cleaning of Parliament to demoralised, alienated workers of mainly Third World origin. This is the one argument that might just cut some ice with the foolish gentry who run this place.

This morning, in Committee Room 8, I presided over a conference on drug policy in Afghanistan, sponsored by the Senlis Council.

It attracted very few Members, but a lot of interested officials and think-tankers. Their basic argument is that crop eradication and substitution isn't working and that we ought instead to switch to allowing limited, licensed opium growing for medical purposes. As several people pointed out, there are serious practical difficulties with this approach. Not least the problem of diversion – how do you prevent legally grown opium finding its way onto the black market? Before long you are back to the old arguments about legalisation and regulation versus prohibition. Sir Keith Morris, a former ambassador in Colombia, said afterwards that a former Cabinet Secretary had told him that he was now a legaliser and that half the 1997 Cabinet were, too.

John Biffen was in front of me in the queue at the cafeteria at lunchtime. 'For how long,' he inquired, 'are they going to go on pretending that the recent bombings had nothing to do with Iraq?'

Thursday, 21 July

M called in. He says he has it on good authority that three of the four London bombers – and not the one so far conceded – were known to the police in advance of the bombings. Their names apparently surfaced in something called 'Operation Crevice'.

More bombs – at Oval, Warren Street and Shepherd's Bush Underground and one on a bus in Hackney. Mercifully, they all failed to detonate, leaving the police with a wealth of clues, but travel in London is becoming scary.

Friday, 22 July

This morning the police chased a man into Stockwell tube station and shot him dead in front of terrified commuters. According to eyewitnesses he was more or less executed. Five bullets in the head. It turns out he was unarmed and is not suspected of having been one of yesterday's bombers.

Saturday, 23 July

Sarah appeared in our room at 3am, having been woken by screaming and smoke from the top of the street. It turned out that a car belonging to a young German woman staying at Number 1 had been torched by a passing barbarian. The fire brigade arrived quickly and doused the blaze before it could spread to the nearby house. By the time we got up the car had been removed, leaving only burnt vegetation, a patch of blackened tarmac and a pool of glass which I later cleared.

Prompted by yesterday's bloodletting, the nastier tabloids are demanding more summary executions. 'SHOOT ALL BOMBERS', screams this morning's *Express*. The trouble is that yesterday's victim was not a bomber and it is beginning to look as if he may have been wholly innocent. Not that such namby-pamby considerations will be of any interest to most *Express* readers, let alone their odious proprietor. In fairness, it must be said the Great British Public are remaining remarkably calm, despite attempts by our unscrupulous tabloids to organise hysteria.

Sarah has gone to France with the school. Having waved her off, I went with Emma to pick strawberries and raspberries at Plawsworth, in preparation for tomorrow's party. Our exchanges included the following (apropos her long-running campaign to replace our M reg Volvo with a vehicle with air conditioning and a CD player):

'Dad, you're like Jesus.'

'Oh?'

'Everyone expected Jesus to come on a chariot. And they expect their MP to drive a new car. Instead you've got an old one.'

A crisis. Bruce our cat has disappeared. She was last seen on Friday and by this evening had been absent for an unprecedented 24 hours. We are haunted by visions that she may be trapped and starving in a neighbour's outhouse. Or kidnapped and tortured by a gang of feral youths. Or perhaps she just felt unloved having been on the receiving end of one telling-off too many for leaving a trail of fluff around the house. Ngoc, the author of most of the tellings-off, is feeling particularly remorseful. Come back, Bruce, all is forgiven.

Sunday, 24 July

The man executed at Stockwell turns out to have been a wholly innocent Brazilian electrician, which only goes to show you can't be too careful when it comes to hunting terrorists.

Still no sign of Bruce. Emma printed out a poster which she and her friend Patricia pinned to trees in the terrace. Later we distributed copies through all the front doors in the vicinity. By evening there were several reported sightings, but still no Bruce. Then, just as we were retiring for the night, a slightly bedraggled cat appeared at the back door and with much purring and miaowing resumed her seat on the chair in the upstairs living room. Great relief all round. I was dreading having to break the news to Sarah, on her return from France, that Bruce had gone.

Tuesday, 26 July

Sunderland

En route from my office to home, the following exchange with one of the new breed of privatised traffic wardens, a big bone-headed man in a bright yellow safety jacket, bristling with technology.

'Afternoon, Councillor Mullin.'

'I'm an MP, not a councillor.'

'So you're an MP now? Well done.'

'I have never been a councillor. I have been in Parliament for nearly 20 years ...'

'So what do I call you now you're an MP?'

'Chris.'

A huge famine in Niger. A third of the country is dying. It's been going on for some time, but of course no one – not least the government of Niger – noticed until the television cameras arrived. On the BBC news this evening, heart-rending interviews with an extended family of nomads who hadn't eaten for a fortnight. Three children and three adults already dead; emaciated grandma lying under a tree, close to death; livestock dead around them. One of the surviving children was

stuffing handfuls of the rotting carcass into his mouth. We have the technology to beam these people instantly into our living rooms, but not to feed them ... And after all this talk of saving Africa.

Thursday, 28 July

Sunderland

Rain all day. By evening my beautiful purple phlox is bent double, a little pile of spent blossom on the lawn underneath.

Among today's visitors a delegation of Unison officials warning of a looming – and entirely self-inflicted – crisis over something called 'single status'. In a nutshell, having used the Equal Pay Act to bludgeon the local authority into regrading its entire workforce and paying out the best part of £10 million by way of compensation to female employees for many years' loss of earnings and 'hurt feelings', Unison now discover they have an uprising on their hands from their male members, bin-men and the like, who are facing cuts in salary of up to one-third. It seems only just to have dawned on Unison's finest that there would be losers as well as winners in the course of creating a workers' paradise. Their proposed solution? Four years' 'protection'. In other words the down-graded should continue to be paid at their old rate in the hope that their losses will gradually be eroded by inflation and increments. The cost? Another £8 million and since, by common consent, the local authority doesn't have £8 million they propose that I and other MPs ask Gordon Brown to write out a cheque. Oh, and this must all be sorted by 1 October if the council is to avoid another round of litigation. I explained, as gently as I could, that this was cuckoo land. There is no way Gordon is going to write out a cheque. In which case, they said, they would have 'no choice' but to pursue industrial action. I asked if they remembered what happened last time they organised a strike by bin-men. They looked blank.

'Eighteen years of Tory government.'

Ah yes, that did ring a vague bell.

Needless to say, this seems to be a northern problem. Unison has never been very brave when it comes to taking on Tory councils further south. 'Is this an issue in Surrey or Sussex?' I inquired.

'No,' they chorused.
'How come?'
'They outsourced most of their services years ago.'
Quite so.

Friday, 29 July

The evening news reported the arrest of the three remaining perpetrators of last week's failed outrages – two in west London, one in Rome. Huge relief, but who knows what comes next?

Sunday, 31 July

Sarah is back from the Ardeche, unfazed by the 27-hour coach journey, full of stories about camping, caving, canoeing and 'gorgeous' instructors. Dear Lord, please allow us to get through GCSE year without boys ...

Wednesday, 3 August

Gamekeeper's Cottage, Northchapel, West Sussex

Today's *Sun* is nastier than usual: 'LAWLESS BRITAIN', screams the splash headline over a catalogue of the country's alleged ills – bombers, gypsies, illegal immigrants, paedophiles ... you name it. And then the sly punchline: 'meanwhile our MPs are on holiday'. When it comes to preaching hatred our odious tabloids could teach the mullahs a trick or two.

Thursday, 4 August

Gamekeeper's Cottage

Today's tabloid headlines (glimpsed in the local supermarket) include: 'Fury over BBC's bias towards Muslims' (*Express*); Joan Collins: 'Why I despair as I watch my country destroying itself from within' (*Mail*). The *Sun*, meanwhile, is 'putting the Great back in Britain' (one can almost hear the clip of jackboots). Only the *Star* has its feet firmly on the ground: 'Sienna pregnant by "love cheat" Jude.'

We went plum picking.

Friday, 5 August

Gamekeeper's Cottage

'What a useless creature I have become,' remarked Granny as I helped her down the step into the living room. 'To think, I used to work for Help the Aged.' But she's not at all useless. She has perfect hearing and eyesight and she's good company, especially when talking of the past. And the longer she's with us the more alert she is becoming. This evening she read the *Guardian* from cover to cover. I would have trouble remembering what day it was if I was condemned to sit staring at the wall all day in the company of people most of whom are more infirm than she is. What's remarkable is that she has held up so well. Over and over, I have tried to persuade her to come to Sunderland. If not to live with us, then to a nursing home nearby, but she will have none of it, not wanting to be a 'burden'.

We spent the afternoon in the beautiful gardens at Parham.

Sunday, 7 August

Gamekeeper's Cottage

Robin Cook is dead. Yesterday afternoon, at the top of a Scottish mountain. Lucky man to go in a blinding flash like that. And at the peak of his reputation. The tributes all speak of his brilliance, but to be brilliant is not enough. There are plenty of brilliant people screwing up the world. Sound judgement and integrity are also required and, as he demonstrated so spectacularly, he had both. His weakness was that he relied too heavily on his razor-sharp wit and made little effort to cultivate a following. He wasn't much liked at the Foreign Office. Someone (I can't recall who) said he was hopeless at taking decisions and should have been an academic, but I don't buy that. Frank Dobson is quoted as saying that he added lustre to the trade of politics. And so he did.

Tuesday, 9 August

Gamekeeper's Cottage

'How old is Robin Cook's wife,' asked Ngoc on our way back from a walk in Petworth Park this afternoon.

'Forty-eight,' I replied, 'and he was 59.'

'Eleven years – a big gap.'

'The same as between me and Orlando Bloom,' said Sarah wistfully.

Wednesday, 10 August

Gamekeeper's Cottage

Ngoc drew my attention to the following passage in Andrew Marr's introduction to his book *My Trade*: 'Despite having a first class degree and reading an unfeasibly large number of books, it began to dawn on me that I couldn't actually do anything. I can't sing, act, tell jokes, play any musical instrument, hit, kick or catch a ball, run for more than a few yards without panting, speak another language or assemble things without them falling apart immediately ... journalism seemed the only option.'

'That's you,' she said.

And so it is, minus the first class degree.

Tuesday, 16 August

Montréal du Gers

We are enjoying the hospitality of Ray and Luise Fitzwalter in this land of sunflowers, vines and medieval hill-top villages.

After dark, a huge storm over the Pyrenees. Ray and I stood in the garden for over an hour watching the yellow flashes and occasional but massive forks of lightning. At first it was too far away for the thunder to be audible, but as the storm grew nearer there was a distant rumble, reminiscent of the guns at Sala Pak Oum. It went on late into the night, our bedroom illuminated by the lightning flashes.

Friday, 19 August

Awoke to grey skies, à la Sunderland. In the afternoon, drizzle. This is not how it is supposed to be in the south of France.

Mo Mowlam is dead. A bright star who flashed across the firmament and was gone.

Wednesday, 24 August

In a back-copy of the *Guardian*, a warts and all obituary of Mo Mowlam by Julia Langdon, concluding that Mo was her own worst enemy. Not quite fair. Her achievements in Ireland were real enough and she brought a touch of colour to the otherwise bland world of New Labour.

Friday, 26 August

We drove to Clermont-Ferrand where we caught a train to Paris and from there to Waterloo on Eurostar. Emma extracted a promise from Sarah that she would give up eating meat, except free-range chicken, as soon as we reached British soil. She kept reminding Sarah throughout the journey and as the train emerged from the tunnel in Kent she remarked triumphantly, 'Sarah's a vegetarian now.'

Thursday, 1 September

A huge catastrophe in America in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. New Orleans and much of the surrounding coastline is under water, thousands dead and tens of thousands (mainly poor blacks) trapped in 90-degree heat without food or water. The fault-lines in American society exposed as never before. When the order was given to evacuate, the middle classes loaded up their SUVs and drove away, leaving the urban poor to bear the brunt. Unlike the passive Third World refugees who normally fill our screens many of the American poor are aggressive and seriously overweight. It may just be me, but I find it harder to sympathise with a 20-stone woman bawling that she hasn't eaten for five days than I do with a family of starving peasants in

Niger. As for Bush, he's completely impotent. All those crapulous slogans about waging war on terrorism and fighting for freedom aren't much use to him now.

Wednesday, 7 September

I am reading a fascinating book, *Against All Enemies*, by Richard Clarke, a former national security adviser to three presidents. This is his account of life in the Bush White House on the morning after 9/11: 'I had expected to go back to a round of meetings examining what the next attacks could be, what our vulnerabilities were, what we could do about them. Instead I walked into a series of discussions about Iraq. At first I was incredulous that we were talking about something other than getting al-Qaeda. Then I realized with almost a sharp physical pain that Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz were going to try to take advantage of this national tragedy to promote their agenda about Iraq. Since the beginning of the administration, indeed well before, they had been pressing for a war with Iraq ...'

A few days after 9/11 he quotes Rumsfeld as 'complaining that there were no decent targets for bombing in Afghanistan and that we should consider bombing Iraq, which, he said, had better targets. At first I thought Rumsfeld was joking. But he was serious ...'

Nowhere is there any suggestion that we exercised the slightest influence in Washington. Indeed, The Man is only mentioned by name on page 273. It reads: 'When prime ministers wonder in future if they should risk domestic opposition to support us they will reflect on Tony Blair in the UK and how he lost popularity and credibility by allying himself so closely with the US administration and its claims.' Amen to that.

Thursday, 8 September

To my surprise, and slightly to my disgust, I still find myself moping over the loss of office. Not office *per se*, but the particular job that I had. Every time I hear Dave Triesman on the radio I find myself thinking, 'That should have been me.' I must have caught the bug that

Kenneth Baker referred to when I was first anointed, but which passed me by first time around. Pathetic really, after only two years. What must it be like after ten years – and at the top? Presumably, it all depends on the manner of your exit. If your tenure comes to a natural conclusion – courtesy of the electorate or by your own hand – you feel you’ve done your best and move on. But when it comes out of the blue and with the inevitable implication that you weren’t quite up to it, that’s what hurts. The feeling is compounded by the absence of any useful alternative and the resulting loss of self-confidence. It’s the lack of anything useful to do and the prospect that it might be like this for the rest of my days – the beckoning void – that is unsettling. In the past, I always knew where I was going. There was always something to aim for – an issue, a cause – but now I am lost.

Friday, 16 September

To Front Street, Sowerby, where I unveiled a plaque to Joan Maynard. On the way there I stopped at Thornton le Street and left a couple of pink roses, cut from our garden, on her grave.

Wednesday, 21 September

To Victoria Tower Gardens to be interviewed for a *Newsnight* profile of David Cameron, one of the Tory leadership contenders. The questions were all about his role in the select committee drugs inquiry supporting the very modest proposals for focusing on harm reduction rather than simply prohibition. I declined to play, insisting that Cameron was a useful, sensible, constructive member of the team (which he was) and pointing out that, in any case, the Tories on the committee split three ways. In the end, having asked the same question in about five different ways, Michael Crick gave up.

Monday, 26 September

Labour Party Conference, Brighton

The usual mixture of seediness and Regency elegance. *Big Issue* sellers on every second corner. The media, having nothing better to do, are trying to organise a leadership crisis. Gordon's speech is being pored over for evidence of treason. Tomorrow it will be The Man's turn. It was the same last year and by my reckoning we've got at least another two years of this. It may be my imagination, but attendance this year seems thinner. In the public gallery curtains have been drawn to hide banks of empty seats. And no wonder. For much of the time there is not even a pretence of debate, just a succession of ministers bragging about New Labour triumphs. This afternoon Tessa Jowell presided over a great Olympic love-in. Apparently we are all to be provided with 'a multi-media tool kit' to help us enter into the spirit of the occasion. Ugh.

Tuesday, 27 September

Brighton

Didn't go in for The Man's speech. Instead I high-tailed back to my lodging, intending to watch the big event on TV. Unfortunately I nodded off, missing most of it. Judging by what I did hear, it was full of the usual guff – onward and upwards, modernise, be bold etc. If we were going to be really bold, we could dispense with Trident, but I suspect that's one piece of modernisation we won't be contemplating.

Earlier I came across Tony Benn holding court in the cafeteria. On fine form, denouncing New Labour and all its works at five fringe meetings a day. We had our picture taken together with Jack Jones, who is in his nineties. Later it was reported that Tony had collapsed and been rushed to hospital. His son Stephen, who I came across outside the Grand Hotel later this evening, said he seems completely recovered, although the hospital was keeping him in overnight for observation.

Wednesday, 28 September

The Lycee, Kennington (my London flat)

A PR catastrophe at Brighton. Walter Wolfgang, an old nuclear disarmament who has haunted Labour conferences for as long as I can remember, was forcibly evicted from the public gallery for heckling mildly during Jack's big speech. Clips of two burly stewards frogmarching a frail 82-year-old out of the hall dominate tonight's news bulletins. To cap it all, he turns out to be a refugee from Nazism. What greater gift for New Labour's many enemies?

Thursday, 29 September

House of Commons

The papers are full of Walter Wolfgang. Pictures on just about every front page of a steward hoisting him from his seat by the scruff of the neck. 'This is how Labour deals with dissent' is the theme. Nonsense, of course, but the symbolism is irresistible. Everyone's at it – from the Campaign Group to the *Daily Mail*. The top brass, including The Man himself, have been apologising all day, but too late. The damage is done.

Lunch on the terrace, where I came across David Davis, fresh from his leadership campaign launch. We chatted for about ten minutes. He's utterly confident of victory, saying he had more support among MPs than all the other candidates combined.

The *Evening Standard* has been swabbing toilets in the Grand and the Metropole Hotels at Brighton and claims to have found widespread evidence of cocaine use, the implication being that this is yet another sign of New Labour decadence. Maybe, but given that those places are swarming with journalists and lobbyists – outnumbering politicians by about five to one – there are other possibilities. As for swabbing toilets, are there no depths that the Rothermere press will not plumb?

Friday, 30 September

Sunderland

All hell has broken lose. The *Sun* ('after months of painstaking detective work') has discovered the whereabouts of the so-called Lotto Rapist who, having served 18 years in prison, has been living in my constituency under police protection and an assumed name. The Home Office minister, Paul Goggins, tipped me off about him months ago, but until now the hacks couldn't find him. Mass hysteria is being organised on the grounds that (a) the likes of him shouldn't be allowed to win the lottery and (b) the neighbours have a 'right to know' his identity, presumably so his house could be torched and he lynched by a mob of shaven-headed *Sun* readers. Fiona Mactaggart, the prisons minister, rang this evening to say that she was looking at changing the law to allow victims of rapists who come into sudden riches to sue out of time. Officials are advising against, needless to say.

Sunday, 9 October

Silly David Blunkett has been set up again. This time by a posh estate agent whom he met in Annabel's. Annabel's for heaven's sake. What on earth was he doing there in the first place? According to today's papers, it has been a scam from the start. Someone in a position to know remarked to me two weeks ago that David's detectives suspected it was a set-up, but that it wasn't their job to save him from himself.

Monday, 10 October

Our first day back. Geoff Hoon paid tribute in the House to Robin Cook's 'far-reaching reforms'. I used that as my cue to query our disgraceful 80-day summer recess. People shuffled uncomfortably and there was bit of mumbling and I can see it's not doing me any good with the Speaker (he looked around desperately for someone else to call, but there was no one so he had no choice). I am almost on my own on this – in Parliament. Outside, it's a different story. The whole thing's a disgrace. I intend to go on rubbing their noses in it.

Then to Committee Room 14 to hear The Man address the

parliamentary party. Better than his conference speech. Brimming with energy and self-confidence; not a note in sight; still less any suggestion that he is contemplating retirement. His main point: the Tories are being forced to fight on our territory, we must pin them down on the inconsistency of their new position, i.e. wanting to invest in public services, but not wanting to pay for them. He also promised to get tough with the Lib Dems: 'We must force them to decide what kind of a party they are. I intend to do that.' A change of line here. Thus far his position has been that the Tories, not the Lib Dems, are our real enemy. 'I know I've got back time to make up,' he said, to some amusement.

Dave Clelland asked why the government was encouraging private medicine: 'I'm all for choice, but we said we were going to make the NHS so efficient that the private sector will be irrelevant. Now we are encouraging it. Why?' The Man gave no quarter: 'It's the only basis on which we are going to expand.' He added, 'We have expanded the public sector by 600,000 people, so when I hear some of our trade union colleagues say, "You are destroying the public sector", I go, "Huh?"'

Tuesday, 11 October

A chat with Angela Eagle in the Tea Room. She says the apparatchiks are up to their old tricks again. She caught them opening the NEC ballot papers – or at least the outer envelope – two weeks before polls closed so they could be 'verified'. The purpose, according to Angela, is to see who hasn't voted and then to gently remind those who can be relied upon to toe the official line. It used to happen with Shadow Cabinet elections in the bad old days, until Alice Mahon became a teller and put a stop to it. Angela says she had to have a stand-up row with the General Secretary to put an end to this latest jiggery pokery. In the event she was elected by only a single vote and says she's sure she wouldn't have been had the ballots been 'verified'.

Wednesday, 12 October

I had Question Nine to the PM today but only eight were reached. I was proposing to inquire why, if it is now so essential that the police be given three months to interrogate terrorist suspects, they only asked for 14 days last time around? The subject was raised, however, and The Man insisted that he found the case 'absolutely compelling'. Just as he did with WMD, I thought.

Monday, 17 October

To Church House to hear the Archbishop of Cape Town propose that a group of 'wise men' be set up to monitor progress on the G8's commitment to Africa. My heart sank. Yet another lot of African big-wigs having to be ferried Club Class back and forth across the continent courtesy of the G8 taxpayer, and met at airports by fleets of top of the range BMWs, all the while denouncing us for our shortcomings while remaining resolutely silent on their own.

Then to the meeting of the parliamentary party in Committee Room 14 to hear Patricia Hewitt being given a going-over for her department's plans for shaking up Primary Care Trusts only three years after the last great upheaval. Needless to say, no one seems to have been consulted. Her plans were variously described as 'Maoist', 'hugely destabilising' and 'drawn up on the back of an envelope'. No one had a good word to say. Patricia, in reply, was soothing and apologetic, but conceded little, insisting that there were far too many chief executives, finance officers etc. and scope for considerable savings. I dare say she's right, but why is this necessary after only three years?

Tuesday, 18 October

Walked in from Kennington via Courtney Street. A gaggle of photographers outside Ken Clarke's house, waiting for him to show his face. Later we heard that he had been eliminated in the first round of the Tory leadership election. From our point of view, a pity. From theirs, sensible. He would have split the party from top to bottom. It's

beginning to look as though David Cameron is going to come out on top, which could give us a problem in due course.

Wednesday, 19 October

The Library

Jean Corston remarked, 'Cameron is going to make Gordon look old and wooden. We could lose.'

'Who would you prefer?'

'Hilary Benn.'

'So would I. Spread the word.'

Dinner with Ruth Runciman, who wants me to join the board of the Prison Reform Trust. I am not sure I am liberal enough, given what goes on in Sunderland. After Ruth had gone, I rang Ngoc, who reported that last night criminal youths slashed every tyre on every car in the street.

Thursday, 20 October

The second round of the Tories' leadership election. Cameron is now comfortably ahead. Have they recovered the will to win at last? Bruce Grocott, who I came across in the otherwise empty Tea Room this evening, was sanguine. 'Being leader of the Opposition is the toughest job in politics. John Smith, who had been Shadow Chancellor for years before becoming leader, told me he was totally unprepared for the unrelenting demands of leadership. Cameron is completely untested. He'll have to weather all sorts of little crises between now and the election. Such as whether or not to send his children to public school' Bruce added ruefully, 'It's about time the tide turned against this cult of youth. If it's possible to become leader of the Opposition after about three weeks on the front bench, then the rest of us have wasted the whole of our professional lives.'

Three wee problems with Bruce's analysis: (1) leading the Tory party in opposition, with half the press on-side, is a mite less stressful than being Labour leader; (2) I see every sign that Cameron is up to it; (3) the Cameron offspring are very young and no decision will

need to be taken about their schooling between now and the election.

Monday, 24 October

The *Independent* has published my piece saying that I shan't be supporting the Terrorism Bill as long as it contains the 90-days-without-trial clause. It won't do me any good but I am beyond caring.

Hilary Armstrong remarked, apropos my campaign to shorten the summer recess, 'We all think you are mad.' Never mind, I take comfort from the fact that outside the Westminster village an entirely different view prevails. Nick Soames said of the rise of Cameron, 'It means, of course, that you won't be able to have Brown. That'll cause a huge row in the Labour Party. Can't wait. Ho ho.'

This evening, dinner in a private room at Shepherds with President Museveni of Uganda. I had been due to sit next to him, but some unseen hand rearranged the place names so I ended up between Bob Blizzard and Bill Cash's wife, Biddy. Museveni was in benign mode, performing his usual party tricks about the height of Ben Nevis, asserting that Uganda was a net donor to the West and that the war in the north would have been over long ago, if only the donors hadn't tied his hand over military spending. There was no opportunity to challenge him about his proposed life presidency or the fact that a large part of his army appears to be made up of ghosts.

Tuesday, 25 October

To the PM's room for a meeting with Home Secretary Charles Clarke about the Terrorism Bill. About 35 people attended. Charles was anxious to persuade us to support the Bill on second reading tomorrow and argue about the details later. Happily, I shall be en route to Tanzania by the time the vote is called so I shall be spared the dilemma. It seems clear Charles is up for a compromise over the 90 days, but his problem is that The Main Person is not. We'd probably be doing Charles a favour if we organised a nice big protest vote. He had read my article and inquired when I was coming back. 'In time for report stage,' I said with a big smile.

My literary agent, Pat Kavanagh, came in for dinner.

Wednesday, 26 October

A big turnout for the debate on the Terrorism Bill. A huge number of interventions, ranging from the sceptical to the downright hostile. No one except Bill Cash spoke in favour. Charles took it all in his stride, responding calmly and considerately. My, how he has changed from the thuggish Kinnock-minder of the 1980s. I was called at about five and made clear I wouldn't be going along with 90 days under any circumstances. Then I made a dash for the airport and was airborne by 8pm.

As I was leaving, a call from my assistant, Graham March, to say that the Angolan family we have been trying to help have been taken away pending removal. They have two small children and face destitution unless I can find someone to help them. I instructed Graham to ring Tony McNulty's office and ask him to hold fire until I get back next week, but I am not holding my breath.

Thursday, 3 November

Touched down from Dar es Salaam at about 5.30am feeling surprisingly chipper, having managed to sleep most of the way, courtesy of a couple of beers and a sleeping tablet. Yesterday, it seems, was eventful. Not only was Blunkett sacked (again), but the Terrorism Bill has imploded. Bob Marshall-Andrews's attempt to amend the 'glorification' clause failed by just one vote (had I been there, it would have been a draw); better still, faced with an amendment by David Winnick (which also bears my name), Charles Clarke has had to withdraw the 90-days-detention clause and is to come back with a compromise next week. On top of all that, there has been an unseemly wrangle over the proposed ban on smoking in public places which John Reid has managed to water down even though he represents a Scottish constituency where a total ban on smoking in public buildings is about to be introduced. The general view seems to be that The Man is in trouble. His friends are melting away and his critics are growing bolder by the hour. 'Blair's power drains away' is the headline across

the front page of the *Telegraph*. For once it may not be wishful thinking.

Some extraordinary stories around the Blunkett departure. It seems he was called to Number 10 twice. After the first visit he emerged thumbs up and smiling, but within a few minutes he was called back and told he would have to go. What had in fact happened was that, after David's first visit, The Man was presented with yet more evidence of David's misdemeanours and realised that he couldn't sustain the position when he faced Michael Howard at Questions later in the morning.

Home on the 19.00 with Alan Milburn. While we were on the train The Man rang Alan on his mobile, twice. He disappeared to the other end of the carriage and they talked for about 20 minutes. Fragments drifted back. 'Don't get too exasperated,' I heard Alan say. During the second call there was a lot of laughter. The Man, according to Alan, is in defiant mode. 'If anyone thinks he's going to let everything we've achieved unravel, they'd better think again. Monday's parliamentary party meeting will be interesting.'

'Tell him not to overdo it.'

'I did.'

Ngoc met me at Durham. 'Do you understand the government's education plans? They must be mad. That Ruth Kelly talks in slogans.'

Also a note from Pat Kavanagh: 'The next time I am in your company I will ask you to explain the government's new education policy. If I understand them right, they seem to me utterly wrong-headed.'

Friday, 4 November

Sunderland

At tonight's meeting of the management committee, much complaining about The Man's plans for an education free-for-all. Councillor Pat Smith, who chairs the education committee, said, 'Ten years ago I went to a conference in Newcastle where Theresa May told us to do all the things we are now about to do. I don't know whether I'm Labour or Tory any more.'

Monday, 7 November

To a crowded meeting of the parliamentary party, to hear The Man tell us why it is absolutely vital that we all get behind his plan to detain suspected terrorists for up to 90 days. Far from seeking compromise, he seems to be raising the stakes, turning it into a mini vote of confidence. Yesterday he was on the telly accusing his critics of 'woeful complacency', even as Charles Clarke was talking compromise. It is beginning to look as if Charles has been leapt upon from a great height. A minister, who shall remain nameless, recounted how this morning his officials rang the Home Office to find out what the line was, only to be told, 'We don't know.' Anyway, the situation soon clarified. It's 90 days or bust. The Man was on sparkling, amazing form. I haven't seen him so good since he talked us (or most of us) into invading Iraq. The mood was revivalist. Billy Graham couldn't have done better. One after another people spoke up to say they had seen the light and were now more than ever convinced of the One True Path. Of the critics there was no sign. Apart from Paul Flynn, who said to loyalist groans that he thought The Man should go sooner rather than later. Paul apart, the mood was adulatory, the applause thunderous. Can it be that this man is so articulate, and we so gullible, that he can talk us into anything, however foolish? Oddly, his argument was almost entirely about wrong-footing the Tories. Silly me, I thought all this was to do with fighting terrorism.

Well, it's had the opposite effect on me. I am not voting for this nonsense under any circumstances, even though it means jettisoning any thoughts of a comeback.

*Tuesday, 8 November**6pm, Committee Room 12*

Gareth Peirce came to urge us to stand firm on the Terrorism Bill. The meeting was sparsely attended but he offered two nuggets. First, that two of the 7 July bombers were under surveillance – photographic and audio – well before the bombings. Which confirms what M told me soon after the event and contradicts the original police version. Second, that the suspect who did a runner in the so-called ricin plot,

one of the cases highlighted by Assistant Commissioner Hayman, had been released after only two days in custody, thereby making nonsense of the claim that had the police been able to hold him longer, they might have snared a major terrorist. This detail is omitted from Hayman's letter, one of the key documents in the police case for greater powers. I shall look for an opportunity to get that on the record.

Wednesday, 9 November

11.30am: the big day. A huge lobbying operation underway. Gordon is on his way back from Israel, after only an hour on the ground. Jack is coming back from Moscow. Several messages for me to ring Hilary Armstrong and one to 'call Number 10'. I ignored the Number 10 message, but called in to see Hilary, who was at her most emollient. 'Chris, I need your help.' I politely explained that I was unable to oblige. That I wasn't revelling in being a rebel. That, on the contrary, I was deeply depressed by the prospect. In any case my name is on the Winnick amendment and there is no way I can leave him swinging in the wind. 'In that case, I think The Boss will want to talk to you.' Yes, I am sure he will. It's an exact repeat of the Iraq vote. There is a pecking order of pressure. First, the junior whip. Then Hilary. Then The Man. Or JP or Gordon, as appropriate. In vain I protest to Hilary that I ought not to waste The Man's time. After all, he's entertaining the Chinese president, the Polish prime minister and goodness knows who else, on top of which he has to answer Questions in 20 minutes. I am just getting up to leave, when Hilary's factotum puts his head round the door and says, 'The Prime Minister is on the line for Mr Mullin *now* ...' Oh Lord. I have been set up. Hilary suddenly vanishes and I find myself alone at her desk, clutching her telephone, talking to Himself.

His tone is, as ever, friendly; not at all assertive; unhurried despite having to face Michael Howard across the dispatch box just 18 minutes from now. 'Chris, I need you to vote with the government.'

'I'd love to Tony, believe me, but I spent much of the eighties and early nineties rescuing people who had fallen foul of the so-called terrorism experts and I don't want to go through all that again.'

'There are safeguards. A High Court judge.'

'Some High Court judges are very gullible.'

'That's not my experience.'

For once it is I who bring the conversation to a close, pointing out (as if he doesn't know) that he has Questions in a few minutes.

'We must talk again,' he said.

Not if I can help it, I said to myself.

Two other points from the conversation with Hilary: (1) she had the audacity to assert that the reason we are sticking to 90 days was because our backbenches are demanding it; (2) that, contrary to reports, Gordon had not been summoned back from Israel. He (and Jack) had been paired so their absence would have made no difference. Gordon was coming back of his own accord, presumably because he wants the world to know that The Man's survival depends on him. Indeed, there is evidence that his unseen hand is already at work. I ran into Joan Ruddock, who is strongly opposed to 90 days, but who has now come over all wobbly. Why? 'Because Gordon has come back.' Obviously she still has hopes of preferment.

Unfortunately for Gordon, the situation is too far gone for him to make any difference to the outcome.

12 noon, the Chamber

Michael Howard on superb form, relentlessly exposing the chasm between Charles Clarke and The Man. Our side, subdued (so much for Hilary's assertion that they are gung-ho for 90 days). From the other side cries of 'Why don't you publish a dossier, Tony?'

Until now I assumed the regime would triumph, especially after The Man's bravura performance on Monday. The signs are, however, that, far from caving in to pressure, most people are holding firm and The Man's strategy of dividing the Tories isn't working either. Also, it appears that Ian Paisley and his merry men will be voting against the government, too. Not least because the master strategists have chosen this day to publish a Bill granting immunity from prosecution to IRA 'on-the-runs'. Nice one, lads.

1.30pm–4.30pm, the Chamber

Charles doing his best, but clearly damaged. Unable to explain why until Monday he was talking compromise and why suddenly the shutters came down. Everyone knows why, of course, but he can't say. He's also hobbled by the presence at his side of Hazel Blears, a shiny-faced New Labour automaton, who is gung-ho for everything Number 10 comes out with. God forbid that she ends up in his job, but it can't be ruled out.

A veritable blizzard of interventions, some from loyalists, but mainly hostile. Charles deals courteously with everyone, friend and foe alike, apparently unruffled. Until he starts praying in aid the ricin case. At which point, egged on by Clare Short and Kate Hoey, I get up and point out the inconvenient detail that the police forgot to mention – namely that they released the suspect after only two days and, therefore, this example is of no relevance to the case for 90 days. It may be my imagination, but things went a bit quiet at that point. Charles replied almost under his breath.

David Davis was lacklustre although he did make one good point – how dare New Labour accuse the Tories of being soft on terrorism when they had lost Airey Neave, Ian Gow and Tony Berry to terrorist bombs? David Winnick, on the other hand, was brilliant. Truly, his finest hour. I forgive him all his many sins.

4.56pm

Ayes to the right, 291. Noes to the left, 322. New Labour's first ever defeat. The Rubicon has been crossed.

Later, the Tea Room

'Your intervention was devastating,' said Mike O'Brien, our Solicitor General, who was sitting next to Charles on the front bench throughout. He reported the following, *sotto voce*, exchange between himself and the Home Secretary while I was on my feet:

'Is that true?'

'Yes, it is.'

'Does it damage our case?'

'It does.'

'Oh fuck.'

Thursday, 10 November

'TRAITORS,' screams this morning's *Sun* in letters two inches high. 'MPs betray public,' says the strap-line. On an inside page pictures of Osama Bin Laden, Al Zaraqawi and Clare Short. Mercifully, I seem to have escaped a monsterring, although a full list of 'traitors' is to be found on the *Sun* website. One amusing snippet: the 7 July victim whose bloodied image was plastered across the *Sun's* front page on Tuesday turns out to be a Cardiff professor who is wholly opposed to 90-day detention and outraged by having his picture so shamelessly misused. No chance of *Sun* readers being told about that.

To the Education Department, where Ruth Kelly spent 40 minutes taking me through her – or rather Number 10's – plans for the latest shake-up of secondary education. The meeting was at her request. The opening round of a big push to ensure that it doesn't all end in tears. As she explains them, the proposed reforms don't sound so wicked. No school will be compelled to opt out of local authority control; the Bill will be merely an enabling measure. It's about giving working class parents the same 'choice' that the middle classes already enjoy by virtue of their social mobility and their sharp elbows. Maybe, but I still worry about a free-for-all leading to more, rather than fewer, sink schools. For the time being I am keeping an open mind. I don't want to be part of another uprising, but at this distance I won't rule it out, otherwise no one will listen.

Geoff Hoon announced the recess dates for the next year and, sure enough, he has dropped September sittings, thereby renegeing on Robin Cook's much vaunted 'deal'. A few of us protested, but I have no doubt we are a minority. Odd, we fight hard enough to get into this place, but having clawed our way in we can't wait to go home.

Friday, 11 November

To the Immigration Detention Centre at Yarlswood near Bedford in an attempt to rescue the Angolan family from Hendon who face destitution if they are sent back.

I hired a young Angolan woman to interpret and we interviewed the family for a couple of hours. The woman seemed deeply depressed and just stared ahead blankly. The man, though fairly buoyant, is still in denial. He doesn't believe it's going to happen. I think it will. When I said that to him he began to shake. Meanwhile the little boys played happily in the background, oblivious to the fate that awaits them.

I was about to depart when a woman security officer wandered in and said casually to the husband, 'Go to your room and pack. You've been released.' Only temporarily, as it turned out. But of course they had no home to go to. Their house in Cairo Street is boarded up and a call to the Chief Immigration Officer at North Shields quickly established that there wasn't a chance in hell of getting it unboarded by this evening. Instead they were expected to make their way into and across London and report to a hostel at Heathrow, where they were to wait until Monday and then find their way back to Sunderland. Never mind that they hardly speak English, that they are utterly unfamiliar with the terrain, that it is rush hour on Friday and that they are carrying all their worldly goods and two small boys.

'This is madness,' I protest.

'It happens all the time,' replies my relentlessly cheerful minder.

After some discussion we agree that I will take the family to King's Cross and put them on a train to Newcastle, where they will be picked up by friends who will accommodate them for the weekend.

Only when I see their baggage do I realise what I have let myself in for. It is 8pm by the time we reach London and even then there is the difficult task of transporting the family and their bags the 600 yards from the Thameslink to the mainline station. I buy them all a sandwich, load them onto the 21.00 train to Newcastle and wave them goodbye. Then I race back to Parliament, collect my bags and get back to King's Cross just in time to catch the last train to the north. Home at 2am.

Monday, 14 November

Unless I am mistaken the mood is turning ugly. At the parliamentary party meeting this evening there were calls for retribution against some of last week's rebels. Clare Short in particular, for referring to last week's meeting as 'a Nuremberg rally' and Bob Marshall-Andrews for allegedly colluding with the Tory whips. Last night I caught a glimpse of Tessa Jowell on television talking of 'betrayal'. And this evening someone drew my attention to an article on the *Guardian* website by Kitty Ussher, a young upwardly mobile New Labour zealot elected a mere five months ago, saying that those of us who voted against 90 days will have blood on our hands in the event of another atrocity. How dare she? What does she know of Guildford, Woolwich, Birmingham, Judith Ward, the Maguires? The trouble with these shiny New Labour types is that they think history started in May 1997.

A call from a Ugandan of my acquaintance to say that Museveni has arrested the opposition leader and charged him with treason; the man had recently returned home after several years in exile and there is an election pending. Another of our favourite Africans sets off down the slippery slope. We have the same problem in Ethiopia, where my friend Meles Zenawi has locked up the opposition and is charging them with treason. If this goes on we will have no choice but to withdraw support. What's the use of increasing aid, if there is nowhere to spend it?

A chat with Alan Milburn in the Tea Room. He says it is vital that The Man is allowed to see through his programme. 'If there is a long lingering death, it won't just be Tony who is damaged; it will destroy the Labour Party.'

In that case, I say, The Man is going to have take us all into his confidence. No more proclamations from on high. No repeat of last week's folly.

On that last point, Alan doesn't accept that 90 days was folly. On the contrary, he says, the issue may have to be revisited in the next year or two. As regards proclamations from on high, he agrees and says he's told The Man so. 'I told him not to oversell the education

reforms. Apart from the fact that the education white paper is unreadable, the proposals aren't all that Tony claims.'

Wednesday, 16 November

A new horror from Iraq. American troops have discovered 170 starving, terrified prisoners in cells underneath an Interior Ministry building; some have been hideously tortured. And that's not all. After weeks of denials – the latest only yesterday – the Pentagon has been forced to own up to using napalm in Falluja. Where will all this end?

Thursday, 17 November

The Garden Room, Clarence House

Gwyneth Dunwoody regal, radiant, dressed entirely in red save for a long string of pearls, occupies a chair by the mantelpiece. A dozen of us lesser Members are arranged tightly on a pair of luxurious sofas. HRH immaculate, pin-striped, double-breasted, a maroon white-spotted handkerchief protruding from his breast pocket, a large gold signet ring, his only jewellery, on the small finger of his left hand. We are about the same age, he slightly younger, but his brow is furrowed, his face deeply lined, his complexion a teeny bit florid. The burden of office? The frustration of being forever in waiting? Or is it angst about the state of the country, the planet? Let no one doubt, he cares about these matters and has thought more deeply about them than most of us.

Alongside HRH, slumped (that is the right word) the Hon. Nicholas Soames, normally the life and soul of any party, except that today he is on his best behaviour, expertly chairing our little gathering, introducing each of us, referring to HRH as 'Sir' even though they have been friends for 20 years or more.

We have stepped back in time. We are in the cluttered Edwardian sitting room of a great house. The date is any time in the last 100 years. A huge tapestry depicting a turbaned Arab potentate dominates the rear wall. Opposite, to the right of the mantelpiece, an exquisite Chinese cabinet full of tiny drawers. A grand piano, covered with

framed family photographs, mainly black-and-white; one depicting Princess Margaret as a young woman to the fore. Autumn sunshine, filtered by the plane trees, streams in through the long windows. A servant dispenses refreshment. The room, indeed the entire lower floor, is exactly as it was when the Queen Mother was in residence. One half expects to see the old lady come hobbling in on her sticks or perhaps just to catch a glimpse of her disappearing around a corner.

HRH addresses us. He speaks without notes, with passion and self-deprecating humour, holding our attention for a full 20 minutes. His theme, the work of his various charities. Their range is vast, but always he comes back to the same point. How to widen the horizons of the young, especially the disaffected, the unlucky and even the malign. I confess I am impressed. This is a man who, if he chose, could fritter away his life on idleness and self-indulgence, as others who have borne the title Prince of Wales have done, and yet he has chosen to take an interest, a detailed interest, in the human condition. What influence he has he uses, sometimes to great effect, even at the risk of treading on official toes. It isn't just talk. His mentality is can-do – and he has a track record of achievement clearly visible for anyone who cares to look. To be sure he has faults. Don't we all? But let he who has done more cast the first stone.

A discussion ensues. Everyone contributes. HRH making the odd note with a thin gold pen. Some of our number use the occasion to invite him to their constituencies, which is not really the point of the exercise. Dari Taylor describes her childhood in the Rhondda. Others address the bigger picture. Alan Simpson turns the discussion to sustainable living, another of HRH's passions. It is apparent that the Prince has taken a shine to Alan. There is talk of a Great Exhibition. Alan says to him, 'Don't take this wrongly, but there is a role for someone to be the Jamie Oliver of the environment.' Adding sadly, 'I don't think the lead will come from Parliament.'

The meeting lasts nearly two hours. When it ends HRH presses an ornate button on the table beside him and the door opens, but he doesn't disappear. On the contrary, he lingers. On the way out I persuade the butler to give me a tour of the dining room. The walls are crammed. A veritable art gallery. A Sickert of George V at the races; an unusual Monet depicting a stark granite mountainside; various

portraits of the Queen Mother, a large one of her as a young woman hangs over the fireplace; a series of bleak paintings of Windsor, commissioned at the outbreak of war because the King and Queen feared that the castle would be destroyed and wanted to preserve the memory.

Out into the garden and away across the park. A crisp, clear autumn day. Sunshine on golden leaves. A homeless woman sits scribbling on a park bench, her possessions piled around her. What is she writing? A letter to the Prince of Wales perhaps?

Friday, 18 November

Sunderland

To the Women's Centre in Green Terrace. An excellent enterprise which for 20 years has been enticing otherwise excluded women back into the world of education and work. Single mothers, asylum seekers, women who, without the lifeline of education, face a life ensnared in benefit culture. Fernanda, the Angolan woman who I helped to rescue from Yarlswood last week, is there learning English. Exactly in line with government policy one might think. It was. Until recently. But now the line from On High has changed. The focus is now relentlessly on the young. As a result the City of Sunderland College has slashed its funding. An application to the lottery has been rejected, on the grounds that it is not the business of the lottery to make up a shortfall in government funding. Result: the centre faces annihilation. It's the same all over town. All traditional sources of finance – Single Regeneration Budget, European Social Fund – are drying up simultaneously. If nothing changes, we face a wholesale collapse of the voluntary sector. The women who run the centre want my help, but what can I do? I will write a stern letter to the lottery and provide a 'To Whom It May Concern' letter to enclose with future funding applications, but we all know it's not enough.

Monday, 21 November

The Strangers' Cafeteria, House of Commons

Joined at lunch by a Yorkshire MP, a mild-mannered fellow, incensed by The Man's latest foray into education. 'We're opening the door for selection. Whatever safeguards we put in place, whatever assurances we give will be absolutely worthless once the Tories are in power.' And then: 'I think we will lose the next election. The Tories will come to some sort of understanding with the Lib Dems and we'll find that we've opened the door to the market in health and education. And when we protest they will reply, "But this is your policy; you started it." We'll be vulnerable for years. Our benches will be full of ex-ministers who won't have the stomach for the fight.' As he talked his anger mounted and most of it was directed at The Man. A straw in the wind.

Tuesday, 22 November

The Adjournment Restaurant, Portcullis House.

Lunch with Bruce Grocott, who shares the general dismay at The Man's latest education wheeze. We talked of reshuffles. Bruce, who has attended many, says that when it comes to the lower ranks they are totally arbitrary. Who is in, who is out depends less on ability than on the way the dice fall. Very few Cabinet ministers put themselves out to save junior colleagues who are at risk of the chop, although Jack is one who does. Which makes my downfall all the more mysterious.

A summons to see Deputy Chief Whip, Bob Ainsworth. Ostensibly to receive a bollocking for voting against the government last week, but in practice to sound me out about the future. The whips are terrified that the impending uprising over education will prove fatal both to The Man and to our prospects. Bob is a good man. Decent, down to earth, no bluster. He said, 'Your standing in this place has gone right down. It used to be that high' – he raised his hand – 'and now it's down here' – he lowered his hand. 'Why? Because no sooner are you out of government than you start voting against the whip.'

'I prefer to look at it another way,' I replied. 'I've never devoted much time to sucking up to my superiors in the hope of preferment, and the fact that I have been preferred anyway is a source of resentment among those who *have* sucked up.' That, plus the fact that many of my friends have retired or been dispatched to The Other Place.

'Where do you stand on the education reforms?'

I was non-committal. 'I've no desire to become a serial rebel, but I shall listen carefully to what my local authority has to say. Anyway, I'm not your problem.' I cited yesterday's conversation with the anonymous Yorkshireman.

'If Tony's defeated he will have to go. There will be chaos and we'll lose the election,' said Bob.

'Then he'd better start listening.'

I may be wrong, but I had the impression that was Bob's opinion, too.

Monday, 28 November

Victoria Line Tube, between King's Cross and Green Park

I am sitting opposite a moon-faced Arab woman dressed exactly as the failed suicide bomber arrested in Jordan the other day – in a headscarf and a long gown that reaches to her ankles. She is fiddling interminably with the contents of a British Home Stores plastic bag under which is concealed some sort of thin strap. Am I the only one who has noticed? She sees me watching. She stops, throwing occasional anxious glances in my direction. After a while I notice that the thin strap leads to her handbag, but I am not entirely reassured. A relief to disembark at Green Park and watch the train disappear into the tunnel, one ear half-cocked for the explosion which, mercifully, never comes.

Committee Room 14

Gordon Brown addressed the parliamentary party; attendance surprisingly thin. He spoke well, with passion and occasional flashes of humour but, as ever, something is lacking. There is no light in those

eyes and he looks dreadfully out of condition – exhausted, flabby, stomach starting to spill over his belt. Oddly enough, his faithful acolyte, Ed Balls, is developing the same haunted, driven look as his master. Is there something in the water at the Treasury?

Tuesday, 29 November

This evening, an appearance on *Newsnight* to discuss ‘extraordinary rendition’, the American habit of kidnapping terrorists and franchising them out to foreign torturers. People are beginning to ask how much HMG knows about all this. Not a lot is my guess, but there is such a thing as wilful ignorance.

Wednesday, 30 November

The Lycee, Kennington

A BBC television crew came to interview me about Tony Benn. They are preparing an hour-long obituary programme, prompted by his recent collapse and the discovery that they have nothing substantial on the stocks. They focused mainly on the battles of the late seventies and early eighties, having already interviewed Denis Healey, Neil Kinnock and Shirley Williams. My role, therefore, was to be a witness for the defence. I steered clear of Tony’s later retreat into impossibilism. With any luck it will be many years before it sees the light of day. When I looked up my notes from that era I did find one lovely line. His description of Kinnock: ‘A vacuum surrounded by charisma.’

Friday, 2 December

Sunderland

At this evening’s meeting of the management committee, an ear-bashing re my vote on the Terrorism Bill. The Silksworth women are on the warpath and a councillor, who I have long suspected of treason, muttered, ‘If you can vote with your conscience, I’ll vote with mine when the time comes.’ Even Dave Allen started up, asking why MPs weren’t subject to the same discipline as councillors, until I reminded

him that he had been one of those insisting that I vote against the government on Iraq, at which point he went quiet. A couple of people whispered 'Well done' as they went out, but they had kept their mouths shut throughout.

Monday, 5 December

To the chamber for Gordon's pre-Budget statement. A note of humility might have been in order, given that his growth forecast was way out of line with reality, but Gordon doesn't do humility. Instead, cheered on by the troops, he unleashed a blizzard of facts and figures (all conveniently in billions rather than percentages) with a view to overwhelming anyone who dared question his stewardship. Young George Osborne, who, as Gordon was at pains to remind us, is the seventh Shadow Chancellor to face him across the dispatch box, was almost swept away in the torrent. I can't believe that Osborne will last any longer than his predecessors. He looks permanently pink and facetious, as though life is one big public school prank.

Then to an upper committee room for the first meeting of the all-party group on extraordinary rendition, which, for a committee that has never met and has no formal status, is attracting an enormous amount of attention. Andrew Tyrie, whose brainchild it is, was in the chair and Menzies Campbell and I are his deputies. Happily our meeting coincided with a carefully worded statement by Condoleezza Rice which, at first glance, appeared to be an indignant denial of the suggestion that the US was handing prisoners over to foreign torturers. We took evidence from Stephen Grey, a journalist who has been tracking the movements of the mysterious CIA planes which have been using UK airports, and James Crawford, a professor of international law. The key question, which keeps coming up, is the extent to which the UK is implicated. There is no evidence that we are involved but we do seem to have been displaying a disappointing lack of curiosity. When asked to comment, Jack looks distinctly sheepish.

Tuesday, 6 December

Most of this morning's papers suggest that Gordon was trounced by Osborne yesterday. Only goes to show how wrong one can be. Or perhaps I was attending a different event.

At three o'clock I turned on the television to witness the anointing of David Cameron. I must say the Tories have conducted themselves well during their ballot. Little or no unpleasantness, a civilised exchange of views involving a wide audience. It can only be good for them and for British politics as a whole. All the signs are that they have recovered the will to win. Cameron comes across as fluent, fresh, open-minded. We underestimate him at our peril.

Wednesday, 7 December

A big turn-out for David Cameron's first PMQs. The galleries were packed as well as the chamber. He was all right, but not brilliant. At one point he departed from his script to have a go at Hilary Armstrong, who was behaving badly on the front bench. The Man was very gentle with him, which was sensible in the circumstances.

Thursday, 8 December

A hilarious moment at Treasury questions (which I unfortunately did not witness). George Osborne was complaining about Gordon's overestimate of the growth rate, whereupon Dennis Skinner rose and said, 'Is my Right Honourable friend aware that in the seventies and eighties we'd have thanked our lucky stars in the coalfield areas for growth of 1.75 per cent?' Then, after a suitable pause, he added, 'The only things growing then were the lines of coke in front of Boy George and the rest of them.' Uproar. The Speaker called on Dennis to withdraw, which he declined ('It must be true, it was in the *News of the World*'), scurrying out of the chamber before the Speaker could evict him. I came across Dennis holding court in the Tea Room. 'I warned him, I warned those public school boys that I'd do them.' Apparently Osborne and his mates had been taunting Dennis about his age.

Monday, 12 December

To London. From the train, fine views of Lumley Castle and Burn Hall, illuminated by winter sunshine. Nearer London a distant glimpse of the vast black cloud arising from the huge fire at an oil depot at Hemel Hempstead. Across the aisle, a woman with a small blond boy. It wasn't until we were past Doncaster that I realised she was Sarah Brown. She looked exhausted and preoccupied so I made no attempt to strike up a conversation until we were pulling into King's Cross. I'm glad I did because she had recognised me and was friendly once we established contact.

Wednesday, 14 December

A call from Nick Raynsford. Would I like to take part in the uprising over the Education White Paper? Ever so respectable. Estelle Morris is leading the charge and David Blunkett is lurking somewhere in the background, acting the honest broker. Nick emailed a ten-page paper, intended as a constructive alternative to the White Paper, and I agreed to sign up, but steered clear of the press conference. I hope the government has the sense to listen, otherwise another crisis looms.

Tuesday, 20 December

An opinion poll in the *Guardian* puts the Tories ahead of us for only the second time in 12 years. If asked to choose between David Cameron and Gordon Brown the gap widens. Might just be a blip, but I somehow doubt it. I think we're in trouble.

On the train home I finished reading *A Spin Doctor's Diary* by Lance Price, a surprisingly readable first-hand account of New Labour's total obsession with news management. Price speaks highly of The Man but of Gordon he says, 'He does come across as a pretty ghastly human being sometimes, but his friends seem to like him.' One can't help wondering if Gordon is really the man to see off Cameron. I guess it is too late. We're going to end up with Gordon come what may.

Thursday, 22 December

Sunderland

To Sandhill View School, a New Labour success if ever there was. Twelve years ago it was a sink school with falling rolls and less than 10 per cent of pupils graduating with five or more GCSEs at grades A to C. Today on precisely the same catchment, more than half the children are achieving those grades. To what do we attribute this miracle? First, a brand-new school with state of the art facilities (a Private Finance Initiative, by the way). Second, a switch to vocational training for less academic students. Third, some first-rate dedicated teachers. One veteran teacher spoke of the difficulty of motivating boys. 'Mothers around here have low expectations of their sons. It is assumed that daughters will be responsible for everything – earning, bringing up children, housekeeping.'

Saturday, 24 December

I called at Hill's Bookshop, which is closing after 140 years. The manager says it's hopeless trying to compete with the chains. Some of the big supermarkets are demanding discounts of over 70 per cent and 'three for two' deals on new books are destroying the independent sector. A new hardback in some of the big chains has a shelf-life of just two weeks, after which if they fail to sell, they go back to the publishers to be pulped. Madness.

Tuesday, 27 December–Friday, 30 December

Helions Bumpstead, Essex

Three days with Liz and Mum. Weather for the most part icy. Despite snow and sleet long walks each day with Liz's dog, Rosie. Mum bright, but frail and increasingly bent. Up and down to the toilet every half-hour. 'I never thought I'd end up like this,' she said as I helped her to the bathroom for the umpteenth time. Of Brewster House she remarked, 'I thought it was only temporary. I never expected it to be a life sentence.' And when, just before Liz took her back to Brewster House, we took a photograph she said quietly, 'The last picture of

Granny.' Despite all, no real sign of self-pity. Mostly she was chatty and cheerful, playing cards and Scrabble with the children. Underneath, however, I detect a deep melancholy. Especially as regards the sale of Manor Drive. Had she been willing to cooperate and had we tried harder to persuade her, there is no reason why she shouldn't still be there today.

Saturday, 31 December

The Lycee, Kennington

The end of 2005. Not a good year.