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'By far the most revealing and entertaining [diary] to have emerged from the now-dying era of new Labour ... a diary that tells us as much about British politics as that great television series *Yes Minister*.' *Economist*

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'The best first-hand account of the Blair years so far'
Andy McSmith, *Independent*

'Because Chris Mullin is a writer who became an MP rather than an MP trying to write, there are real gems sprinkled across every page.'
Peter Hain, *Observer*

'Every once in a while, political diaries emerge that are so irreverent and insightful that they are destined to be handed out as leaving presents in offices across Whitehall for years to come. Chris Mullin's *A View from the Foothills* is one such book. Its humour and self-deprecation more than make up for the nagging feeling it leaves behind that *The Thick of It* may not always be all that far from the truth.' David Cameron, *Observer Books of the Year*

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'As engaging as you would expect from a man with a writer's gift and a reputation for fearless honesty' *Newcastle Journal*

'A real landmark ... the first no-holds-barred account of life inside the Blair administration ... I read it in a weekend and couldn't put it down' Paul Anderson, *Tribune*

'The most valuable set of diaries to emanate from the now interred corpse of New Labour; the most revelatory and also, from time to time, the most entertaining' Rod Liddle, *Sunday Times*

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‘His quiet humour and intense personal integrity make this book compulsively readable ... an important service to democracy’
Peter Osborne, *Daily Mail*

‘The most entertaining and perceptive account of the New Labour era ... It will also stand the test of time long after other more trumpeted accounts have faded from view’ Sean Flynn, *Irish Times*

‘Deserves a warm welcome from those of us who believe that it is not a bad thing for politicians also to be fully-paid up members of the human race’ Anthony Howard, *Sunday Telegraph*

‘An account, both deeply hilarious and deeply depressing, of the futility of ministerial life’ Andrew Rawnsley, *Observer*

‘A minister answering parliamentary questions learns which backbenchers to fear ... real danger comes from the quiet questioner who knows his subject. Such a one was Chris Mullin. I learned to respect him when he was on his feet ... interesting and credible because, unlike [the diaries] of Alan Clark, they are not designed as a puff for himself.’ Douglas Hurd, *Total Politics*

‘Probably the most candid view of New Labour from the inside that we will ever get’ *Yorkshire Post*

‘It is hard to imagine any better account of the Blair years than this.’
Scotsman

CHRIS MULLIN has been the Labour MP for Sunderland South since 1987. He chaired the Home Affairs Select Committee and was a minister in three departments. He is the author of the bestselling novel *A Very British Coup*, soon to be re-published by Serpent’s Tail, which was turned into an award-winning television series.

A VIEW FROM THE FOOTHILLS

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

ALSO BY CHRIS MULLIN

Novels

A Very British Coup
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The Year of the Fire Monkey

Non-fiction

Error of Judgement: the truth about the Birmingham bombings

A VIEW FROM THE FOOTHILLS

The Diaries of Chris Mullin

edited by Ruth Winstone

P

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Preface

As the New Labour era draws to a close there will be no shortage of memoirs from those who have occupied the Olympian heights. This is a view from the foothills.

I have occupied three vantage points: as chairman of one of the main select committees, as a junior minister in three departments and (when not in government) as a member of the parliamentary committee. This obscure body, which rarely leaked, was the means by which the backbenches and the government kept in touch; serving as a safety valve when times were hard. When Parliament was in session it met each Wednesday, usually in the Prime Minister's room at the House of Commons and occasionally in the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street. Membership consisted of the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Leader of the House, Chief Whip, two other members of the Cabinet (appointed by the Prime Minister) and six backbenchers elected at the beginning of each parliamentary session, of whom I was one. Membership of the parliamentary committee gave one a privilege denied to all but the most senior members of the government – regular access to the Prime Minister and a mandate to pursue with him whatever was exercising the minds of our colleagues, ourselves or our constituents.

I began keeping a diary in May 1994, on the day that John Smith died. I cannot now recall what prompted me. Probably a vague feeling that I was well placed to chart the rise – and perhaps the fall – of New Labour. The notes on which this diary are based are more or less contemporaneous, recorded in one of the red notebooks that I always carry in an inside pocket. Usually, I typed them up at home at the end

of each week. I kept two manuscript copies. An uncorrected version stored in London and a master copy at home in Sunderland. For the first ten years or so no one but my wife, Ngoc, was aware of its existence. Later, I confided in my agent, the late Pat Kavanagh, and my friend of more than 30 years Ruth Winstone, who was in due course persuaded to edit them. Occasionally, I was on the receiving end of odd looks from colleagues who saw me furtively scribbling. My standard answer to frequent queries about whether or not I found time to write these days was, 'I keep the occasional note.'

This volume covers the period from July 1999 to May 2005. It includes both my visits to government and the period in between when I chaired the Home Affairs Select Committee for the second time. It begins and ends with a call from the Prime Minister – the first saying hello, the last saying goodbye – and amounts to nearly 200,000 words ruthlessly distilled from an original manuscript three times that length. Inevitably a great deal of worthwhile material has fallen on the cutting room floor. I hope one day to place a fuller version in the public domain for those with a more detailed interest. I also hope one day to publish an earlier volume, from 1994 to 1999, provisionally entitled *A Walk-On Part*, and perhaps a later one.

Inevitably a work of this sort entails the breaching of confidences. In my defence I can only say that, where they are political rather than personal, I have taken the view that any duty of confidentiality has been nullified by the elapse of time. To those who feel let down, I can only apologise. I apologise, too, to those who feel they have been unfairly treated by some of the snap judgements recorded here. I am well aware that first impressions are frequently wrong and it may be that some of the views expressed here are more a reflection of my own shortcomings rather than those of anyone else.

I cannot claim to have led a life as colourful as Alan Clark (how many of us can claim to have seduced three women from the same family?) or to be as well-connected as Chips Channon, Jock Colville or Alastair Campbell. Nor were the events to which I bore witness as momentous as the Abdication or the Second World War. My only claim is to have provided a snapshot of political life in the last part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first as the grim certainties of the Cold War have given way to the mayhem of

the failed state. And as we struggle to come to terms with the inexorable rise of the global market and a growing realisation that we cannot go on using up the resources of the planet as if there were no tomorrow.

I have tried, too, to provide a flavour of life as a representative of a northern working-class city in the aftermath of the Thatcher decade which gave rise to the growth of a huge underclass of alienated people trapped in a benefit culture – ironically one of Mrs Thatcher’s most enduring legacies.

Many colourful visitors flit across these pages. The great Mandela, the Dalai Lama of Tibet (whom I have known for more than 30 years), a clutch of African presidents, HM the Queen, George W. Bush. And some – successive heads of M15, for example – who rarely see the light of day. Not everyone is a politician or an apparatchik. True, there is a Sir Humphrey, or rather a Sir Humphry and he is no mandarin, but my friend Sir Humphry Wakefield, who rescued the magnificent castle at Chillingham from dereliction. Chillingham, in the north of Northumberland, is the most magical place in England. I had dreamed of spending my declining years there, presiding over the restoration of the walled garden, but alas it was not to be.

I have wasted no time on feuds or vendettas, never having been angry with anyone for more than about half an hour. I have always known there is a life outside politics and tried to reflect it in the good times my family and I have enjoyed in the wonderful countryside of Northumberland and the Borders. One of the great advantages of living in the north-east is that it is rarely necessary to go on holiday more than about two hours’ drive from home.

Above all, I have never lost sight of my enormous good fortune, a sentiment reinforced with every visit to Africa. The Aids orphans encountered at a sugar plantation near Beira in Mozambique; the tiny blind beggar glimpsed in the centre of Addis from the comfort of the British Ambassador’s land cruiser as we sped between engagements; Kathleen, a refugee girl about the same age as the older of my daughters, who lived with her family in the darkness of the derelict starch factory in Lira, northern Uganda – for all I know she is there still: these are the images that will live with me long after the encounters with the big men have faded.

What kind of politician am I? Had I been asked when I first went into Parliament, I might glibly have replied that I saw it as my mission 'to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable'. But over the years I have learned that there is more to politics than that. If you are to stand a chance of changing very much for the better, you have to be capable of forming a government and to do that you have to take with you a swathe of the comfortable. It follows, therefore, that in an age of majority affluence, any serious politician has to spend a fair amount of time attending to the needs of the comfortable. Today, if I were asked to define my politics, I would reply that I am 'a socialist with a small "s", a liberal with a small "l", a green with a small "g" and a Democrat with a capital "D"'. I hope that is apparent from these pages.

As Enoch Powell once said, all political lives end in failure. Mine is no exception. In May 2005, after 18 years in Parliament, I suddenly found myself ejected from all the little vantage points that made political life worthwhile. I can only hope that I did something useful along the way.

Anyway, here it is: my life and times as seen from the foothills. Whether it is of any lasting interest is for others to judge.

Chris Mullin
Spring 2009

Acknowledgements

My time in Parliament is drawing to a close. I would like to thank the many good friends I have made along the way – colleagues of all parties, officials great and small in the three government departments in which I have served, officers of the House (particularly those who serviced the Home Affairs Committee during my two periods as chairman), not forgetting Noeleen Delaney and her staff in the House of Commons Tea Room – the setting for many of the exchanges recorded here.

My thanks to the people of the Sunderland South constituency who have allowed me to represent them in Parliament these past 22 years. Sunderland, which took quite a battering during the Thatcher decade, has, I am pleased to record, undergone something of a renaissance in recent years. While I would not want to make any too large claims, I firmly believe that the fact that this revival was accompanied by a sustained period of Labour government is not entirely a coincidence. There are others in Sunderland to whom I owe particular thanks, notably Kevin Marquis, my agent in each of the five general elections between 1987 and 2005, and those who staffed my constituency office: Sharon Spurling, the late Jacky Breach, Pat Aston, Graham March, Michael Mordey and Karen Timlin.

My thanks, too, to Andrew Franklin and his colleagues at Profile for the faith they have placed in me, and to my literary agent Pat Kavanagh, who sadly did not live to see the finished work, for sticking with me through the long years of drought. Also, and above all, to my friend Ruth Winstone for her sensitive and skilful editing.

Last but not least, I pay tribute to my wife, Ngoc, who over these many years has laboured unsung to bring up our two children and minister to the needs of an all-too-often absent husband without always receiving the appreciation she deserves.

Cast

(In approximate order of appearance)

Listed according to responsibilities for the period of the diary, July 1999–May 2005

Number 10

Tony Blair MP, aka The Man, Prime Minister 1997–2007

Parliamentary Private Secretaries to the Prime Minister

Bruce Grocott MP

David Hanson MP

Officials and Advisers

Alastair Campbell

Kate Garvey

Brian Hackland

Robert Hill

Anji Hunter

Sally Morgan

Jonathan Powell

Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, July 1999–2001

John Prescott MP, aka JP, Secretary of State and Deputy Prime Minister

Joe Irvin, Special Adviser

Ministers of State

Hilary Armstrong MP
Gus Macdonald (Lords)
Michael Meacher MP
Nick Raynsford MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretaries

Beverley Hughes MP
Keith Hill MP
Chris Mullin MP
Larry Whitty (Lords)

Officials

Richard Mottram, Permanent Secretary
Jessica Matthew and Chris Brain, Private Secretaries to CM;
Shayne Coulson, Assistant Private Secretary

Department of International Development, February–May 2001

Clare Short MP, Secretary of State
Chris Mullin MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary

Officials

Sir John Vereker, Permanent Secretary
Christine Atkinson, Private Secretary to CM
Sanjib Baisya, Assistant Private Secretary
David Mephan, Special Adviser to the Secretary of State

Parliamentary Committee, July 2001–June 2003

Backbench Members of Parliament

Ann Clwyd, Jean Corston (chairman), Helen Jackson, Tony Lloyd,
Andrew Mackinlay, Chris Mullin, Bridget Prentice, Gordon Prentice,
Doug Hoyle (representing the Lords)

Home Affairs Select Committee, 2001–3

David Cameron, Janet Dean, Humfrey Malins, Chris Mullin (chairman), Bridget Prentice, Gwyn Prosser, Bob Russell, Marsha Singh, Tom Watson, Angela Watkinson, David Winnick

Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2003–5

Jack Straw MP, Secretary of State

Ministers

Denis MacShane MP (Europe)

Chris Mullin MP (Africa)

Mike O'Brien MP/Douglas Alexander MP (Trade)

Bill Rammell MP (United Nations/Latin America)

Liz Symons (Middle East) (Lords)

Officials

Sir Michael Jay, Permanent Secretary

Tom Fletcher, Bharat Joshi, Private Secretaries to CM; Kay Stokoe,

Caron Rohsler, Assistant Private Secretaries

John Williams, Chief Press Officer

Sunderland Office

Pat Aston and Graham March

Significant others

Hilary Armstrong MP, Chief Whip

Tony Banks MP

David Blunkett MP, Home Secretary 2001–04

Tony Benn MP (retired 2001)

Hilary Benn MP, Secretary of State for International Development
2003–07

John Gilbert, a former defence minister, now in the Lords

Geoff Hoon MP, Secretary of State for Defence 1999–2005

Alan Haworth, Secretary of the Parliamentary Labour Party, now in the Lords (not to be confused with MP of the same name)

Gil Loescher, UK-based American academic seriously injured in the bombing of the UN HQ in Baghdad, August 2003

Clive Soley, Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, 1997–2001, now in the Lords

Family

Nguyen Thi Ngoc, wife of CM

Nguyen Thi Hanh, sister-in-law of CM

Sarah (b. 1989) and Emma (b. 1995) Mullin, children of CM

Liz and Patricia Mullin, sisters

David Mullin, brother

Leslie and Teresa Mullin, parents

CHAPTER ONE

1999

Wednesday, 28 July 1999

St Bede's Terrace, Sunderland

A message from Kate Garvey at Number 10. I am to expect a call from The Man within the next 15 minutes. In the event it was more than an hour before the phone rang. 'I want you to go to Environment,' he said. My heart sank. Of all the possibilities, I never anticipated being on John Prescott's team.* I asked what my responsibilities would be and he replied that he didn't yet know, but would be talking to JP tomorrow. I asked what the options were and he replied vaguely that it might involve 'something in the housing area'. Perhaps sensing my lack of enthusiasm he said this was only a starting job. 'If you make a success of it, you can work your way up.' He didn't ask whether or not I wanted it and rang off saying, 'We may want you to come through the door of Downing Street tomorrow.'

I rang Alan Meale in the hope of finding out what the job might entail. His wife, Diana, answered the phone and said, 'He's been bumped.'

'Who's got his job?'

'You have.'

Even so, she was friendly and gave me Alan's mobile number, saying he was in a pub in Millbank. I decided to wait until tomorrow before ringing. I then called Michael Meacher who was as upbeat and cheerful as ever. He said that JP, contrary to what I had supposed, was

*The Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR).

a good man to work for and that there was a good spirit in the Department.

To bed, feeling miserable at the thought of the avalanche of tedium to come.

Thursday, 29 July

Awoke early wondering if I could pluck up the courage to say No. At 8.30 I rang Kate Garvey and asked to speak to The Man. She replied that he was in a meeting, but advised me to get on the earliest train 'since he will want to see you'.

She was burbling about how wonderful it was that I was to be a minister. I said very slowly, 'My – instinct – is – to – decline.'

It took a second or two for the penny to drop and then she sort of skidded to a halt. 'In that case he will want to talk to you in the next few minutes.'

Sixty seconds later the phone rang, an operator asked me to stand by ... I waited ... The operator said stand down. 'He will ring later this morning.' That's that, I thought.

A tremendous sense of relief. Ngoc came down. 'I'm no longer a minister,' I said cheerfully. Ngoc looked a bit dismayed. Secretly I suspect she likes the idea, although she has no concept of what it entails. I went upstairs to have a bath feeling relaxed. Life had returned to normal. I would continue to occupy the little niche I had carved for myself in Parliament. The holidays were safe. Weekends with the family would be uninterrupted.

The Man rang at 9.30. 'Why?' he asked.

'Because I will disappear without trace. Besides, I don't get on well enough with John to make a success of it.'

'I promise I won't lose sight of you. You are the one person on the backbenches who most obviously should be a minister.' He went on to explain that being a minister was very different from being a backbench MP. 'You can't be a minister of state at once, but I have you in mind for something in home affairs, the Foreign Office or international development.' It might only be a matter of months, he added.

I thought he wouldn't much care, but he obviously did. 'We get on well, don't we?'

I assured him that we did.

'You have drive, energy. It would be a waste to stay on the backbenches being a wise man.'

'Are you saying that the job is still open?'

'I am.'

'Well since you put it like that...'

Suddenly I was a minister again.

To Number 10 to be anointed, walking as nonchalantly as possible past a battery of cameras.

The Man was on the terrace deep in discussion with JP so I sat outside the Cabinet Room chatting to Bruce Grocott, who quoted advice which Cabinet Secretary Richard Wilson had given recently in a symposium for junior ministers: First, be sure to demonstrate to the civil servants that you have a good relationship with the Secretary of State [difficult in my case], then they will be less inclined to go over your head. Second, remember, you are not going to be there for long so don't try to put the world to rights – have just two or three modest aims.

To which Bruce added a third which might come in handy in my case, 'If you have the ear of the Prime Minister, play it up.'

Bruce remarked that the present system of annual reshuffles was crazy. 'There is massive inbuilt insecurity. Ministers, who may not be there in a year, are on top of a civil service which is permanent and who have nothing more to worry about than who gets what gong. The chances of moving anything more than 0.1 per cent are slim.'

We were joined by Gisela Stuart and Beverley Hughes, who are also joining the government. They, needless to say, were overjoyed. While we were sitting there JP came out. He was about to walk past when, by way of an afterthought, it occurred to him that he ought to go through the motions of welcoming us, not least since two of us – Bev and I – are in his department.

I was then ushered in. The Man was in the small sitting room adjacent to the Cabinet Room. My audience lasted about ten minutes. He said how glad he was to have me on board, adding that Dennis

Skinner would have been a good minister, if only he'd been willing to take responsibility. I said I was apprehensive. 'People have been known to disappear without trace into Environment.'

'At the moment,' he said cheerfully, 'they are coming out rather fast.' (Four of the eight ministers have been sacked or reshuffled.) I said that I would miss the parliamentary committee. He asked who was likely to replace me and said it was important to get someone suitable. This is probably the last time our paths will cross until I'm sacked or reshuffled – most junior ministers do not have access to the Prime Minister. He shook my hand warmly. 'Don't forget me,' I said. He promised not to, but we shall see.

I stood around in the hall outside the Cabinet Room chatting to Bruce and Alastair Campbell, who said that yesterday, despite the fact that the hacks had been watching all exits, The Man had managed to slip out of Downing Street and over to his room at the House in order to spare The Dismissed the ordeal of having to walk past the cameras. Alastair said how unpleasant it was. A 'nightmare' was the word The Man used when he rang last night. Alastair told the story, which I heard before, of how after the election the Downing Street switchboard had confused Brian Donohoe with Bernard Donoughue and as a result Brian had been a minister for about four seconds. By now there were three other new ministers assembled: Gisela, Bev and David Hanson. We formed up into a line and went out and stood before the cameras and then walked out of Downing Street, chased by a young woman from the Press Association, who kept asking how happy we were. I couldn't bring myself to respond.

Bev and I shared a taxi up Victoria to Eland House. All the while her mobile phone kept ringing with people offering congratulations. For her this was a big moment. For me it is something of a humiliation. I have done what I always said I would never do, traded the little niche I had built for myself on the backbenches for the Department of Folding Deckchairs.

Our private secretaries were waiting for us at the Department. Mine is a pleasant young woman called Jessica, who exudes competence and good sense. She took me upstairs to my office on the sixth floor, previously occupied by Nick Raynsford, who has been

promoted. The walls are hung with old prints of Woolwich and large photos of the Millennium Dome. I have a staff of four, all bright young people. David, the diary secretary, Shayne and Nicola, assistant private secretaries. They all refer to me as 'Minister'.

I am also entitled to a car and a driver. Entirely pointless since, as I pointed out, the 159 and 3 buses will continue to run past my door, even though I am a minister. Jessica, who cycles in from Brixton, was sympathetic, but explained that the situation is a little more complicated than I might suppose. For a start, red boxes cannot be transported by public transport. Secondly, there will be times when a vote is called without warning and we will need to get to the House quickly. Thirdly, I might be glad of a lift home at 3 a.m. after an adjournment debate.

She also explained that the funding of the government car pool is geared to encourage maximum use of the car. The drivers are on a low basic wage and are heavily dependent on overtime. So, if I accept a driver, he will be hanging around all day doing nothing and hating me for not giving him enough to do. A trap I must avoid at all costs. (Later, I discussed this crazy situation with Keith Hill, who has the office next door. He is in charge of making sure the Department lives up to its green rhetoric. We agree that use of official cars is the obvious place to start. For the time being I intend to do without, although I shall make no public statements for fear of being accused by my colleagues of showing them up. And also because I may, eventually, be forced to retreat.)

Jessica explained that ministers must always be contactable. I will, therefore, need a mobile phone, a pager and a fax at home. I offered mild resistance, but I fear I shall have to give way on this before long. The first of what will no doubt be many little defeats at official hands.

While we were talking the door opened and in strolled JP. He made a little show of being pleased to see me. The word 'delighted' even escaped his lips, although his demeanour suggested otherwise.

'Thank you for having me,' I said as he walked towards the door.

'Glad you decided to join us,' he said dryly. The sarcasm remained in the air long after he had departed. Of course, he must know that I turned down the wretched job.

My induction over, I walked down Victoria Street to the House.

Outside Westminster Abbey I ran into Frank Field, who wished me well but said what a shambles the reshuffle had been. He claimed that seven members of the Cabinet had been to see The Man and said they would not be moved and that, faced with this display of solidarity, he had simply backed down. Frank also confirmed that the government car service was a job creation scheme. He said that, when he was a minister, he had even been collected by car from Birkenhead, just to give the driver something to do.

Home on the 20.00, feeling very depressed. The hardest part of the next few days will be keeping a straight face as the congratulations come in.

Friday, 30 July

Sunderland

Jessica faxed through a draft list of my proposed responsibilities – aviation, housing, science, planning ... to crown all they include air traffic control. A few days ago I was sitting listening to Helen Liddell being pounded from all sides and thanking heavens that it was her rather than me. Now it is. It's like a bad dream.

Saturday, 31 July

Everyone, except me, seems happy about my appointment. Lily at the paper shop says it will be good for Sunderland. A man called out from a car, as I went to get the papers this morning. I notice that most of the congratulations seem to come from people who know nothing about politics. Those who do – including one or two of the more perceptive commentators (Michael White, Paul Linford) – are more cautious. They know I had a better job in my last incarnation.*

Glorious weather. We lunched in the garden and then our neighbour, Peter, and I picked up the litter in the street.

*As chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

Sunday, 1 August

Awoke at 3 a.m., still worrying that I have traded my self-respect and the respect of others for the lowliest rung on the political ladder – and one which has not the slightest influence over anything that matters. If I was to get out now, I could still retain my place on the select committee and on the parliamentary committee. I lay awake until six compiling a resignation letter.

Monday, 2 August

London is bathed in a Bangkok-style haze of exhaust fumes, temperature approaching 30 degrees centigrade. Our first meeting of ministers. JP in benign mode, wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt, slumped in an armchair, one leg over the side. He did most of the talking, much of it stream of consciousness but there were occasional moments of lucidity. We had a problem with transport and, he said, everyone was under an obligation to help out. 'When Tony decided to make transport a priority, he didn't bring resources with it.' He added, 'And the one thing that might have raised some cash – a congestion tax – Tony isn't happy about.'

Michael Meacher remarked, 'We are challenging deeply held attitudes, but we have to stick to our guns.'

JP said modestly that he himself had to change. 'I just get angry.'

Keith Hill, an ex-whip, said the rebellion over air traffic control was building up steam. We had to head it off.

The unions were playing the 'safety card', but we were doing what everyone wanted us to do by separating safety from operations, said JP. Tony Benn, who made a hostile intervention the other day, had done something similar when he was in charge of North Sea oil. 'Benn's a hypocrite,' he added, pointing for some reason at me.

A stream of visitors. Among them Richard Mottram, the Permanent Secretary. A genial, easy-going grammar school boy in his mid-fifties. He assured me that, contrary to rumour, JP is a good man to work for and, if anything, too soft. I told him I'd turned the job down at first and he seemed surprised.

I also raised the car pool. Needless to say he has his own driver and car in which he travels in most days from Blackheath. I put it to him that we couldn't credibly hope to persuade the Great British Public to abandon the motor car if ministers and senior civil servants were being driven everywhere. He was decent enough to concede there is an issue, but I sensed he was in no hurry to resolve it.

We discussed my rag bag portfolio. 'What would make you happy?' he asked.

'How about giving me countryside?' In exchange, I offered to surrender anything. He suggested giving planning to Bev. I cheered up at once. Afterwards Jessica congratulated me on my first victory.

Back to Sunderland on the 20.00 from King's Cross.

Wednesday, 4 August

We packed up the car and set off for London, stopping on the way for a picnic at Chatsworth, where the children played in the maze. Emma fell in the pond. We drove to London in torrential rain, arriving in Brixton at the flat just before midnight only to discover that the living room was in an inch of water (caused by a blocked drain) which had been lying for four days, giving off a foul odour.

Thursday, 5 August

Brixton Road

An hour pressing newspaper onto the living room carpet. At 9.30 Jessica rang to ask when I was coming in. There was a definite tone of disapproval in her voice. I explained about the flood, but her tone suggested it was no excuse.

Much of the day was taken up with official briefings by groups on my various responsibilities – aviation, water, science. On the first two I surprised myself by managing to ask some reasonably intelligent questions, but by the time we got to the third my eyes glazed over. The news that I am in charge of science at Environment would be the cause of much hilarity among any surviving witnesses from my

schooldays to my failure to come to grips with even the simplest scientific concept. Someone up there is playing a cruel joke.

Graham Allen, the Department's whip, came in to discuss how we are going to handle the proposed part-privatisation of air traffic control. He suggested an early meeting with Gwyneth Dunwoody and some of the other dissidents. He also suggested getting a Labour Party pager, which I am not so keen on. Perhaps, if it makes him happy, I could get one and leave it switched off in a drawer.

Graham offered one other piece of advice: 'Don't make jokes about air traffic control. Above all do nothing to imply to dissidents that you are sympathetic to their case.' Helen Liddell, he said, had kept her head down and ploughed on regardless. That was exactly the right approach. Which only goes to show how much I have to learn about being a minister. I thought her performance was perfectly disastrous and that a smile or two would have gone a long way to lighten her load. I discussed this afterwards with Nick Raynsford and was relieved to find that he agreed with me.

Today I took my first decisions. All very simple. Jessica places a pile of files in my in-tray. Each one comes with a summary sheet prepared by the relevant experts setting out the issue, any relevant considerations and any 'presentational' problems that might arise (i.e. will I get a bad press?). This is followed by a recommendation. All I have to do is signify agreement or disagreement by making my mark on the top of the page.

The first file concerned a proposal that KLM/UK Air be permitted landing rights for its service to Poland. Next, an application by Thames Water to discharge a small quantity of treated sewage into the Thames near Henley. The attached brief explained why the alternatives were impractical and assured me that no solids would be discharged. A small number of representations had been received, including an objection from the town council, but none from the local Member of Parliament (Michael Heseltine). I hesitated. This is exactly the issue that has caused so much trouble in Sunderland (although our sewage was untreated). Upon inquiry I was told that the Thames would dry up if it wasn't for the treated sewage discharged into it. What's more, too rigorous screening (ultra-violet, for example)

would kill the bacteria upon which fish thrive. After due consideration, I signed.

Next, I was asked to approve pay increases for the staff of the Housing Corporation. That was easy. I signed. Then I was asked to approve a Millennium fly-past across central London along the Thames by Concorde at a height of a thousand feet. I asked for assurances about safety on that one. And so it went on. Jessica loaded the files into one tray, usually with a little handwritten note attached, boiling the issue down to a single sentence. I read, reflected and usually signed, always remembering David Heathcoat-Amory's remark: 'Government is about hundreds of little decisions about which no one ever hears, unless something goes wrong.' Concorde crashing into the Thames, for example?

Finally, there were letters. Hundreds. Almost all in response to colleagues writing with queries from constituents. Each came in an orange folder with the MP's letter plus supporting documents. One foolish Tory had sent ten letters from constituents making the same point about water meters and received ten identical replies. I left the letters neatly piled on my desk for Jessica to take away in the morning. I trust she will be impressed by my diligence.

Friday, 6 August

More briefings. The first, from officials of the Countryside division. I asked about leylandii hedges (it is two years since I first took part in a delegation to Angela Eagle on the matter) only to be told that progress had been blocked by Downing Street. The boys and girls in the policy unit have apparently persuaded The Man that to legislate on so trivial a matter would spoil our image as deregulators. In my previous incarnation, I would have bent The Man's ear on the subject at the parliamentary committee, but now (having been 'promoted') I am powerless. (Jessica says that JP gets very upset if he finds junior ministers going to Number 10 behind his back.) This ought to be one of life's more easily resolvable problems. I intend to persist.

Then a briefing on waste disposal. Not very sexy, but of vital