THE COMPLETE YES MINISTER

The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister
by
the Right Hon. James Hacker MP

Edited by Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay

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The BBC TV series *Yes Minister* was written by Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay and produced by Sydney Lotterby and Peter Whitmore. The part of James Hacker was played by Paul Eddington, the part of Sir Humphrey Appleby by Nigel Hawthorne, and the part of Bernard Woolley by Derek Fowlds.

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Editors' Note

Some note of explanation is needed on the methods and guidelines that we have used in reducing these collected diaries of many millions of words to one relatively short volume.

James Hacker kept his diaries from the day on which he first entered the Cabinet. He dictated them into his cassette recorder, sometimes on a daily basis, more often at weekends when he was at his constituency home. His original plan had been simply to make notes for his memory, but he soon realised that there would be intrinsic interest in a diary which gave a daily picture of the struggles of a Cabinet Minister.

Before going into politics full time, Hacker had been first a polytechnic lecturer and, later, Editor of *Reform*. When the diaries were first transcribed they were hardly readable, having been dictated very much *ad lib*, rather like his polytechnic lectures. Furthermore, there were a number of discrepancies in his account of events, both within the book itself and when objectively compared with outside events. Being a journalist, Hacker had no particular talent for reporting facts.

Apart from the discrepancies, there was also a certain amount of boring repetition, inevitable in the diaries of a politician. Years of political training and experience had taught Hacker to use twenty words where one would do, to dictate millions of words where mere thousands would suffice, and to use language to blur and fudge issues and events so that they became incomprehensible to others. Incomprehensibility can be a haven for some politicians, for therein lies temporary safety.

But his natural gift for the misuse of language, though invaluable to an active politician, was not an asset to a would-be author. He had apparently intended to rewrite the diaries with a view to improving the clarity, accuracy and relevance of his publication. Towards

the end of his life, however, he abandoned that plan because – according to his widow, Lady Hacker (as she now is) – he saw no reason why he should be the only politician publishing memoirs which adhered to those criteria.

The editors have therefore had to undertake that task, and in doing so found one further obstacle to clear understanding of the Hacker tapes. The early chapters of this volume had been transcribed from the cassette recordings during the great statesman's own lifetime, and he had glanced at them himself and made a few preliminary suggestions of his own as to selection and arrangement. But later chapters had yet to be transcribed when the bell rang for the Last Division and – curiously – it seemed that Hacker's speech became more and more indistinct, slurred and emotional as each recording session progressed. This may have been due to a fault in the recording machine, but it did not make our task any easier.

Nevertheless, these diaries constitute a unique contribution to our understanding of the way that Britain was governed in the 1980s and because Hacker wrote them in the hope that the public would understand more rather than less of the political process, we have edited the diaries ruthlessly. We encountered three principal problem areas in the editing process: chronological, technical, and interpretation.

First, chronology. Broadly, we tried to preserve the narrative element of the original diary, and thus we have tended to pursue particular stories and trains of events to their conclusion. At all times we have striven to maintain a chronological day-by-day account, even though the original tapes are much more confused. There is a slight risk of historical inaccuracy in this approach, because Hacker himself was deeply confused for most of his time in office and it could be argued that the diaries ought to reflect this confusion. But if we had allowed the diaries to reflect his confusion in full, the events that they relate would have become as incomprehensible to the reader as they were to him.

Technically, we have completed and punctuated sentences, unmixed the metaphors and corrected the grammar, unless by leaving the original we were able to give an insight into Hacker's state of mind.

Finally, interpretation. Where the book is ambiguous we have assumed that this is a deliberate exercise of his political skills. Although it is true that he was often unclear about the meaning of events, it is also the case that sometimes he was deliberately vague.

We believe that these diaries accurately reflect the mind of one of our outstanding national leaders; if the reflection seems clouded it may not be the fault of the mirror. Hacker himself processed events in a variety of ways, and the readers will have to make their own judgement as to whether any given statement represents

(a) what happened
(b) what he believed happened
(c) what he would like to have happened
(d) what he wanted others to believe happened
(e) what he wanted others to believe that he believed happened.

As a general rule, politicians' memories are less reliable about failures than successes, and about distant events than recent ones. Since Hacker's career, like all politicians', inevitably consisted mostly of failures, these diaries ran the risk of having only small historical value. But the fact that the great man had no time to make any alterations or excisions in the light of subsequent events has enabled us to select from the morass a document of unique value to students of that period of British history.

This book covers Hacker's entire career as the Minister for Administrative Affairs. This was his first experience in government. The Ministry had been created some years earlier as an umbrella ministry, along the lines of George Brown's Department of Economic Affairs in the Wilson government of the 1960s, to co-ordinate government administration. Theoretically it gave Hacker a roving brief, to investigate and control administrative inefficiency and overspending throughout the system, wherever it was to be found. Unfortunately the Department of Administrative Affairs was not only created to control the Civil Service, it also had to be staffed by the Civil Service. Readers will therefore be well aware of the inevitable result of Hacker's labours.

Nonetheless, it remains a slight puzzle to the editors of this volume that Hacker, who was such a master of blurring and obfuscation in his own political dealings, should have found such difficulty in dealing with a group of civil servants whose techniques were essentially similar. Hacker's innocence, as revealed in these diaries, is quite touching.

Later volumes under the title *Yes Prime Minister* will deal with Hacker's career as he failed upwards to Number Ten Downing Street, and thence to his final demise on his elevation to the House of Lords (as it then was).

We have, of course, had the benefit of other sources. Hacker was.

inevitably, in ignorance of certain conversations and events which, had he known of them, would doubtless have altered his perceptions and his views. We are fortunate that under the Thirty-Year Rule all of Sir Humphrey Appleby's memos and minutes have become available to us. We are also fortunate that because Appleby was a first-class civil servant he had a total belief in the value of committing everything to paper. Thus we have also had the benefit of Sir Humphrey's own private diaries, and we would like to record our debt of gratitude to the Public Record Office and the Trustees of the voluminous Appleby Papers.

A final word of thanks. We were most grateful to have had a few conversations with Sir Humphrey himself before the advancing years, without in any way impairing his verbal fluency, disengaged the operation of his mind from the content of his speech. And we should like to express our thanks to the staff of St Dympna's Hospital for the Elderly Deranged, where he resided for his last days.

Above all, we are grateful to Sir Bernard Woolley, GCB, former Head of the Civil Service, who was Hacker's private secretary for the period covered by this volume. He has given generously of his time and checked our selection against his own memory and records. Nevertheless, any responsibility for errors and omissions is, of course, entirely our own.

Jonathan Lynn
Antony Jay

Hacker College, Oxford
September 2019 AD

THE COMPLETE YES MINISTER

1
Open Government

October 22nd

Well, perhaps it's the early hours of Friday, the 23rd now. I am most excited. I have just been returned to Parliament by Birmingham East. And after years in opposition, the party has finally won a general election and we're back in office.

After the result was announced I went to the celebration do at Alderman Spotteswoode's[1] and saw Robert McKenzie on the telly say: 'And so Jim Hacker's back, with an increased majority in his marginal constituency. After many years as a Shadow Minister he seems almost certain to get a Cabinet post in the new government.'

Robin Day seemed doubtful, though. I do hope Bob McKenzie's right.

October 23rd

I'm still hoping but I wonder if Robin Day knows something that I don't.

I've been sitting by the telephone ever since breakfast. No potential Cabinet Minister ever moves more than twenty feet from the telephone in the twenty-four hours following the appointment of a new Prime Minister. If you haven't heard within twenty-four hours, you're not going to be in the Cabinet.

Annie kept me supplied with constant cups of coffee all morning, and when I returned to the armchair next to the phone after lunch she asked me to help do the Brussels sprouts for dinner if I didn't have anything else to do. I explained to her that I couldn't because I was waiting for the call.

'Who from?' Sometimes Annie really is a bit dense.

The phone rang. I grabbed it. It was Frank Weisel, my special

[1] Hacker's constituency party Chairman.

political adviser, saying that he was on his way over. I told Annie, who wasn't pleased.

'Why doesn't he just move in?' she asked bitterly.

Sometimes I just don't understand her. I patiently explained to her that, as my political adviser, I depend on Frank more than anyone. 'Then why don't you marry *him*?' she asked. 'I now pronounce you man and political adviser. Whom politics has joined let no wife put asunder.'

It is awfully difficult for Annie, I know. Being an MP's wife is a pretty thankless task. But now that I may be a Minister, she'll at last reap the rewards!

The phone rang all day. Alderman Spotteswoode, the Gas Board, Frank, all sorts of useless people ringing up to congratulate me. 'On what?' I said to Annie: 'Don't they realise I'm waiting for the call?'

She said, 'You sound as if you're about to enter the ministry.'

'Yes,' I said, 'but which ministry, that's the whole point.'

Suddenly Annie screamed. I couldn't believe my ears. 'It was a *joke*!' she shouted, and started to pull her hair out. I decided that she must be a bit tense.

'Are you a bit tense?' I asked. She screamed again, and threw herself onto the floor. I thought of calling an ambulance, but was worried about the adverse publicity affecting my career at this crucial juncture – NEW MINISTER'S WIFE TAKEN AWAY IN STRAIT-JACKET.

'Are you a bit tense?' I asked again. Carefully.

'No,' she shouted – 'No, no, no, I'm not tense. I'm just a politician's wife. I'm not allowed to have feelings. I'm just a happy carefree politician's wife.'

So I asked her why she was lying face downwards on the floor. 'I'm looking for a cigarette. I can't find any.'

'Try the cigarette box,' I advised, trying to keep calm.

'It's empty.'

'Take a Valium.'

'I can't find the Valium, that's why I'm looking for a cigarette. Jim, pop out and get me some.'

I explained to Annie that I simply didn't dare leave the phone. Annie betrayed her usual total lack of understanding. 'Look, if the PM wants you to be in the bloody Cabinet, the PM will phone back if you're out. Or you can phone back.'

Annie will never understand the finer points of politics.

[*Hacker was very insecure about his cabinet prospects because he had previously run Martin Walker's campaign against the new PM for*

the leadership of the party. The question was whether the PM would be strong enough to ignore Jim Hacker or whether, in the interests of party unity, the PM would be obliged to give him a good job – Ed.]

By the end of today I've heard on the grapevine that Bill's got Europe. Poor old Europe. Bill can't speak French or German. He hardly even speaks English, as a matter of fact. Martin's got the Foreign Office, as expected, Jack's got Health and Fred's got Energy.

I told Annie of these appointments, and she asked me if anyone had got Brains. I suppose she means Education.

October 24th

At last I'm a Cabinet Minister.

And today I had my first encounter with the Civil Service, and I must say I am very impressed.

I got the call from Number Ten at about 9 a.m., after a sleepless night, and immediately Frank Weisel and I caught the London train. I got a taxi to Number Ten, where I was asked by the PM to take over the Department of Administrative Affairs.

This is an important post. In the Cabinet ranking, about eighth or ninth I should think. On the other hand, Martin reminded me (when he phoned to congratulate me) that the DAA is a political graveyard, a bit like the Home Office, and the PM may have over-promoted me – a vengeful move. I am determined to get a grip on the DAA and prove to the PM that I'm not so easily taken care of.

I was expecting to be Minister of Agriculture, as I've shadowed Agriculture for seven years, and have many good ideas about it, but for some inexplicable reason the PM decided against this.

[*We found a memo from Sir Andrew Donnelly, Permanent Secretary of Agriculture, to Sir Arnold Robinson, Secretary to the Cabinet, imploring Sir Arnold to make sure that Hacker did not get Agriculture as he was too 'genned up' on it. Cabinet Papers show that Sir Arnold managed to convey to the PM that it would be better for Hacker not to go to Agriculture because 'he's been thinking about it rather too long and is perhaps in a bit of a rut' – Ed.*]

An official car met me as I came out of Number Ten, and I was driven straight to the DAA. I was met on the front steps by Bernard Woolley, who is to be my Private Secretary, and his assistant. He seems a likeable enough chap.

To my surprise he instantly knew who Frank Weisel was, as we got out of the car, though he pronounced his name 'Weasel', which always infuriates Frank.

We walked down miles of corridors. When we got to my office Frank had disappeared with the Assistant Private Secretary. Bernard assured me that Frank was being taken care of. They really are awfully nice and helpful.

My office is large, with a big desk, a conference table with lots of chairs around it, and a few armchairs arranged around a coffee table to form a conversation area. Otherwise, rather characterless. Bernard immediately went to the drinks cupboard.

'A drink, Minister?'

I nodded. 'Jim,' I said, as I want us to be on first-name terms.

'Gin?' he said, mishearing me.

'No,' I said, 'Jim. Call me Jim.'

Bernard said: 'If it's all the same to you, I'd rather call you Minister, Minister.'

'Minister, Minister?' It reminded me of Major Major in *Catch-22*. Then I realised what he meant. I asked him, 'Does that mean I have to call you Private Secretary, Private Secretary?'

Bernard said I was to call him Bernard. I'm sure that in the course of time I'll persuade him to call me Jim.

A moment later Sir Humphrey Appleby arrived. He is the Permanent Secretary of the DAA, the Civil Service Head of the Department. He is in his early fifties I should think, but – somehow – ageless. He is charming and intelligent, a typical mandarin. He welcomed me to the Department.

'I believe you've met before,' Bernard remarked. I was struck for the second time how well-informed this young man is.

Sir Humphrey said, 'Yes, we did cross swords when the Minister gave me a grilling over the Estimates in the Public Accounts Committee last year. He asked me all the questions I hoped nobody would ask.'

This is splendid. Sir Humphrey clearly admires me. I tried to brush it off. 'Well,' I said, 'Opposition's about asking awkward questions.'

'Yes,' said Sir Humphrey, 'and government is about not answering them.'

I was surprised. 'But you answered all my questions, didn't you,' I commented.

'I'm glad you thought so, Minister,' said Sir Humphrey. I didn't quite know what he meant by that. I decided to ask him who else was in the Department.

'Briefly, sir, I am the Permanent Under-Secretary of State, known as the Permanent Secretary. Woolley here is your Principal Private

Secretary. I, too, have a Principal Private Secretary, and he is the Principal Private Secretary to the Permanent Secretary. Directly responsible to me are ten Deputy Secretaries, eighty-seven Under-Secretaries and two hundred and nineteen Assistant Secretaries. Directly responsible to the Principal Private Secretaries are plain Private Secretaries. The Prime Minister will be appointing two Parliamentary Under-Secretaries and you will be appointing your own Parliamentary Private Secretary.'

'Can they all type?' I joked.

'None of us can type, Minister,' replied Sir Humphrey smoothly. 'Mrs McKay types – she is your secretary.'

I couldn't tell whether or not he was joking. 'What a pity,' I said. 'We could have opened an agency.'

Sir Humphrey and Bernard laughed. 'Very droll, sir,' said Sir Humphrey. 'Most amusing, sir,' said Bernard. Were they genuinely amused at my wit, or just being rather patronising? 'I suppose they all say that, do they?' I ventured.

Sir Humphrey reassured me on that. 'Certainly not, Minister,' he replied. 'Not quite all.'

I decided to take charge at once. I sat behind my desk and to my dismay I found it had a swivel chair. I don't like swivel chairs. But Bernard immediately assured me that everything in the office can be changed at my command – furniture, décor, paintings, office routine. I am unquestionably the boss!

Bernard then told me that they have two types of chair in stock, to go with two kinds of Minister – 'One sort folds up instantly and the other sort goes round and round in circles.' On second thoughts, perhaps that was another of Bernard's little jokes.

I decided that the time had come to be blunt and to tell them what's what. 'Frankly,' I said, 'this Department has got to cut a great swathe through the whole of the stuffy Whitehall bureaucracy. We need a new broom. We are going to throw open the windows and let in a bit of fresh air. We are going to cut through the red tape and streamline this creaking old bureaucratic machine. We are going to have a clean sweep. There are far too many useless people just sitting behind desks.'

I became aware that *I* was actually sitting behind a desk, but I'm sure that they realised that I was not referring to myself.

I explained that we had to start by getting rid of people who just make work for each other. Sir Humphrey was very helpful, and suggested that I mean redeploy them – which, I suppose, is what I *do*

mean. I certainly want to reduce overmanning, but I don't actually want to be responsible for putting people out of work.

But, by the clean sweep and the new broom, I mean that we must have more Open Government. We made election pledges about this, and I intend to keep them. We must take the nation into our confidence. I said all this to Humphrey and Bernard who, to my surprise, were wholeheartedly in favour of these ideas.

Humphrey referred to my speeches on this subject in the House last year. And he referred to my *Observer* article, *Daily Mail* interview, and the manifesto.

I am most impressed that he knows so much about me.

Humphrey then produced draft proposals, to implement my policy in a White Paper. I was flabbergasted. The efficiency of the Civil Service is quite astounding. They even plan, Sir Humphrey tells me, to call the White Paper 'Open Government'.

All of these draft proposals are available to me within thirty-six hours of the new government being elected and within minutes of my arrival at my office. And on a weekend! Remarkable chaps. I asked Humphrey who had done all this.

'The creaking old bureaucratic machine,' he replied with a smile. 'No seriously, Minister, we are fully seized of the need for reform and we have taken it on board.'

I told him I was slightly surprised.

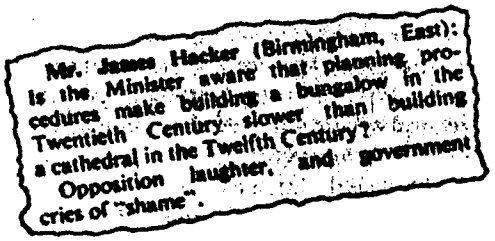
'I thought I'd have to fight you all the way,' I said.

Sir Humphrey remarked that people have funny ideas about the Civil Service.

'We are just here to help you formulate and implement your policies,' he explained.

He seems most sincere.

The draft proposals, which I have brought home tonight to my London flat in a red box, include 'Proposals for Shortening Approval Procedures in Planning Appeals'. Excellent. Sir Humphrey was able to quote from Hansard the rather amusing question which I'd asked earlier this year in the House:


Mr. James Hacker (Birmingham, East): Is the Minister aware that planning procedures make building a bungalow in the Twentieth Century slower than building a cathedral in the Twelfth Century? Opposition laughter, and government cries of "shame".

[*Actually they cried 'Bollocks' – Ed.*]

As it's Saturday, we have arranged to start things properly on Monday morning. But they've given me six red boxes for the weekend, four to be completed by tonight and two more tomorrow. Bernard tells me that the previous Minister got a bit slack about the paperwork, especially during the election campaign.

I'm certainly not going to be slack! I shall be a good Minister. I shall read everything they give me to read.

October 26th

I read all my boxes over the weekend. It took about nine hours. I caught the 7.15 a.m. train to Euston, the official car met me, and I was in the office by 9.20.

All the draft proposals for Open Government are superficially pretty impressive, but I happen to know that the Civil Service is pretty good at delaying tactics. I mentioned this to Humphrey at a meeting today. I think he's getting to know who's boss around here.

But first things first. The day started with the diary. I found to my surprise that there were numerous appointments in it already. I asked how this was possible, since they didn't even know who would win the election.

Bernard said: 'We knew there'd be a Minister, Minister.' I told him not to start *that* again.

Sir Humphrey explained, 'Her Majesty likes the business of government to continue, even when there are no politicians around.'

'Isn't that very difficult?' I asked.

'Yes . . . and no,' said Humphrey. I must say, I can't see how it's possible to govern without the politicians. I'm afraid that Humphrey might have delusions of grandeur . . .

My diary was pretty frightening. Cabinet at 10 on Thursday. Nine Cabinet committees this week. A speech to the Law Institute tomorrow night, a deputation from the British Computer Association

at 10.30 tomorrow morning, University Vice-Chancellors lunch on Wednesday (another speech), opening the National Conference of Public Employers on Thursday morning (another speech), and so on.

I noticed that everything in the diary is in pencil, so presumably much of it can be and will be changed. I pointed out to Bernard that I have various other commitments.

Bernard looked puzzled. 'Such as?' he asked.

'Well . . . I'm on four policy committees of the party, for a start.'

'I'm sure you won't be wanting to put party before country,' said Sir Humphrey. I had never looked at it in that light. Of course, he's absolutely right.

They were going to give me three more red boxes for tonight, by the way. When I jibbed at this a bit, Sir Humphrey explained that there are a lot of decisions to take and announcements to approve. He then tried something on, by saying: 'But we could, in fact, minimise the work so that you need only take the major policy decisions.'

I saw through that ploy at once. I insisted that *I* would take *all* the decisions and read *all* the relevant documents.

They've given me five boxes for tonight.

October 27th

Today I found that we have a problem with Frank Weisel. It's Tuesday today, and I realised that I hadn't seen him since I arrived at the DAA last Saturday morning.

To be quite truthful, I didn't actually realise it till he barged into my office, shouting and carrying on, demanding to be let in.

It appears that he's been in the waiting room since Saturday. (I presume he went home on Sunday.) Bernard tried to tell him that he, Humphrey and I were in private conference, but I quickly sorted that out. I demanded that Frank, as my adviser, be given an office in the Department.

Sir Humphrey attempted to fudge the issue, saying that I had a whole Department to advise me now. Nonetheless I insisted.

'Well,' said Sir Humphrey, 'I believe we have some spare office space in Walthamstow, don't we Bernard?'

Frank was appalled. 'Walthamstow?'

'Yes, it's surprising isn't it?' said Sir Humphrey agreeably. 'The government owns property all over London.'

'But I don't want to be in Walthamstow,' explained Frank at the top of his voice.

'It's in a very nice part of Walthamstow,' put in Bernard.

'And Walthamstow's a very nice place. So I gather,' added Sir Humphrey.

Frank and I looked at each other. If they were not so charming and, well, gentlemanly, you might have thought they were trying to squeeze Frank right out.

'I need an office *here*, in this building,' said Frank, firmly and extremely loudly.

I added my agreement. Sir Humphrey capitulated at once, and told Bernard to find a suitable office right away. I then said, to make assurance doubly sure, that I expected Frank to have copies of all the papers that are given to me.

Bernard seemed surprised. 'All?'

'All,' I said.

Sir Humphrey agreed immediately. 'It shall be done – all the appropriate papers.'

In my opinion, these civil servants are not nearly so hard to deal with as people say. They are mostly very co-operative, and, even if not initially, always jump to it when spoken to firmly. I think I'm getting somewhere at last.

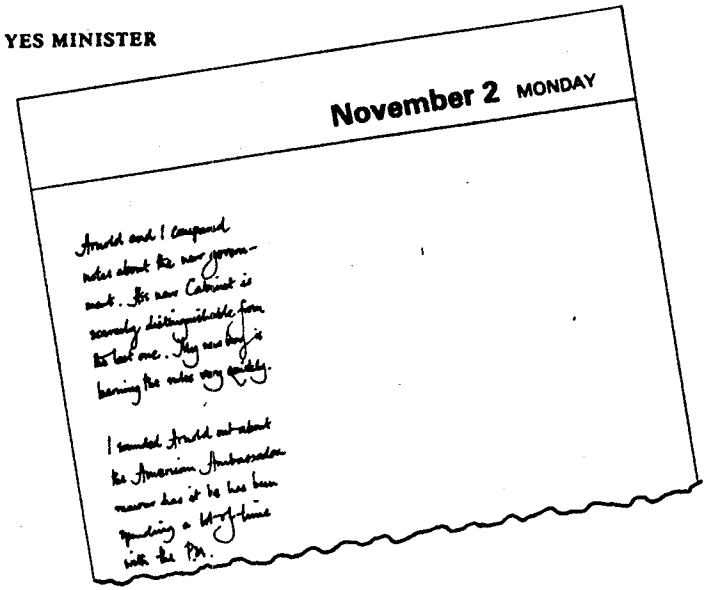
October 28th

After the last hectic four days, I have a little time to reflect – for posterity – on my first days in office.

First, I am impressed by the thorough grasp the officials at the DAA have of every situation. Second, how they are willing to co-operate fully, albeit under pressure, with Frank Weisel.

Thirdly, I am most struck by my dependence on these civil servants. I, like virtually all our new administration, knew nothing of the workings of Whitehall except what I'd learned second-hand. Because we have been so long in opposition, only three members of the government, including the PM, have ever held office before. I had never seen the inside of a red box, never met a Permanent Secretary, and had no idea how things were really done. [*This situation is similar to the one in which the Labour Government of 1964 found itself – Harold Wilson, the PM, was the only member of Cabinet who had previously been a Cabinet Minister – Ed.*] This makes us more dependent on our officials than most new governments. Thank goodness they are behaving honourably.

[*The following Monday, Sir Humphrey Appleby met Sir Arnold Robinson, Secretary to the Cabinet, at The Reform Club in Pall Mall. Sir Humphrey made a note about the meeting in his private diary.*]



[It is interesting to observe that senior civil servants, perhaps because they have spent thirty years writing notes in the margin of a memo or minute, only write in the margin even if there is nothing else on the page – Ed.]

Arnold and I compared notes [on 2 November] about the new government. His new Cabinet is scarcely distinguishable from the last one. My new boy is learning the rules very quickly.

I sounded Arnold out about the American Ambassador – rumour has it he has been spending a lot of time with the PM.

Arnold confirmed this. But was unwilling to say whether it was about defence or trade. He is anxious about a leak – therefore it is imperative that the Cabinet doesn't hear about it yet.

I concluded, correctly, that it is defence *and* trade, i.e. the new aerospace systems contract.

The aerospace contract would be a considerable coup for the PM, less than two weeks after the election. Of course, it's been in the pipeline for months, but the new PM will obviously take the credit.

It will mean four and a half billion dollars, and many new jobs in the Midlands and North-West. All in marginal seats, too – what a coincidence!

This is valuable information. I gathered from Arnold that it would, therefore, be a grave embarrassment to the PM if a hypothetical Minister were to rock the Anglo-American boat. Man overboard. The end of a promising new Ministerial career, in fact.

Therefore, I have ensured that the Weasel[1] receives a copy of the invoice

[1] Frank Weisel.

for the new American addressing machines. Naturally he has not received it, because it is sensitive. But I think that this is the right moment.

I instructed my secretary to ensure that the Weasel find the invoice near the bottom of a pile. Let the man feel he has achieved something.

[Bernard Woolley joined Sir Humphrey and Sir Arnold at the club, for an after-dinner coffee while they drank their after-dinner brandy – Ed.]

I asked young Bernard what he makes of our new Minister. Bernard is happy. So am I. Hacker swallowed the whole diary in one gulp and apparently did his boxes like a lamb last Saturday and Sunday. He'll be house-trained in no time.

All we have to do is head him off this Open Government nonsense, I remarked to Bernard. Bernard said that he thought that we were in favour of Open Government. I hope I have not over-promoted young Bernard. He still has an awful lot to learn.

I explained that we are calling the White Paper *Open Government* because you always dispose of the difficult bit in the title. It does less harm there than on the statute books.

It is the law of Inverse Relevance: the less you intend to do about something, the more you have to keep talking about it.

Bernard asked us, 'What's wrong with Open Government?' I could hardly believe my ears. Arnold thought he was joking. Sometimes I wonder if Bernard really is a flyer, or whether we shouldn't just send him off to a career at the War Graves Commission.

Arnold pointed out, with great clarity, that Open Government is a contradiction in terms. You can be open – or you can have government.

Bernard claims that the citizens of a democracy have a right to know. We explained that, in fact, they have a right to be ignorant. Knowledge only means complicity and guilt. Ignorance has a certain dignity.

Bernard then said: 'The Minister wants Open Government.' Years of training seem to have had no effect on Bernard sometimes.

I remarked that one does not just give people what they want, if it's not good for them. One does not, for instance, give whisky to an alcoholic.

Arnold rightly added that if people do not know what you're doing, they don't know what you're doing *wrong*.

This is not just a defence mechanism for officials, of course. Bernard must understand that he would not be serving his Minister by helping him to make a fool of himself. Every Minister we have would have been a laughing-stock within his first three weeks in office if it had not been for the most rigid and impenetrable secrecy about what he was up to.

Bernard is a Private Secretary. I am a Permanent Under-Secretary of State. The very word Secretary means one who can keep a secret.

Bernard asked me what I proposed to do. Naturally I did not inform him of my plans for the Weasel to make a great discovery. This would be putting too great a strain on Bernard's loyalty to Hacker.

I asked Bernard if he could keep a secret. He said he could. I replied that *I* could, too. [*Appleby Papers 14/QL1/9a*]

[*Hacker was, of course, in complete ignorance of the meeting described above – Ed.*]

November 5th

Guy Fawkes Day. Fireworks inside the office too. A fitting day on which to enforce the supremacy of parliament and HMG.

Frank Weisel came bursting into my office, waving a document, 'Have you seen this?' he enquired at four thousand decibels.

I was delighted that the civil servants were giving him all the papers now. I said so.

'They're not,' he said derisively. 'Not the *real* papers.'

'Which real papers aren't you getting?' I wanted to know.

'How do I know, if I'm not getting them?'

This is, of course, absolutely true. And I don't know what he can do about it. [*This, of course, is an example of what management consultants call the Light-in-the-Refrigerator Syndrome, i.e. is the light on when the door is shut? The only way to find out is to open the door – in which case the door is not shut any more – Ed.*]

But Frank did not want to discuss his problems in getting necessary information out of the officials.

'They think they're sending me the rubbish. But look what I've found – oho, we've got them, we've got them by the short and curlies.'

I still didn't know what he was talking about. Frank explained further.

'We've got Sir Humphrey-Bloody-Appleby and Mr Toffee-Nose-Private-Secretary-Snooty-Woolley just where we want them.'

He brandished a sheaf of papers under my nose. I *still* didn't know what he was talking about, but I do think he has a wonderful line in invective – perhaps I should let him write the draft of my conference speech next year.

I made Frank sit down, and explain calmly. He has found some ordinary office invoices that have tremendous political significance. The DAA has apparently bought one thousand computer video display terminals, at ten thousand pounds each. Ten million pounds of the taxpayers' money. And they are made in Pittsburgh!

This is shocking. Humphrey's been keeping very quiet about this. And I'm not surprised. We make computer peripherals in my constituency, Birmingham East. And we have rising unemployment. It is a

scandal that the Civil Service is not buying British.

I sent for Humphrey. He was in meetings all day, but Frank and I will confront him with this tomorrow. I am deeply grateful to Frank. Sir Humphrey is going to be very surprised indeed that we have found out about this so fast.

November 6th

The meeting with Humphrey was a total success.

I showed him the invoices for the computer display terminals. He admitted that the DAA has purchased this brand for the whole of Whitehall.

'But they're not British,' I pointed out.

'That is unfortunately true,' he agreed, somewhat shamefaced.

'We make these machines in Birmingham East.'

'Not of the same quality,' he said.

This is very probably true, but naturally I can't admit it even if it is.

'They are better quality,' I said firmly. 'They come from my constituency.' I told Humphrey to cancel the contract.

He responded that it was beyond his power to do so, and that it could only be cancelled by the Treasury. He said it would be a major change of policy for the Civil Service to cancel contracts freely entered into. Especially with overseas suppliers.

He suggested (a trifle impertinently, I thought) that I should take it up in Cabinet. 'Perhaps they would postpone the discussion on the Middle East, or nuclear disarmament, to talk about office equipment.'

I could see that this was out of the question. I was faced with a dilemma. If it couldn't be cancelled, how was I to face my constituency party?

'Why need they know?' asked Sir Humphrey. 'Why need *anybody* know? We can see that it never gets out.'

I was staggered. Couldn't Humphrey see that to keep it quiet was directly contrary to our new policy of Open Government, to which he was as firmly committed as I?

Frank spelled out the only alternative. 'If the order can't be cancelled, it must be published.'

Humphrey asked why. For a moment I couldn't quite think of the answer. But Frank saw it at once. 'Two reasons,' he explained. 'First, it's a manifesto commitment. Second, it'll make the last Minister look like a traitor.'

Two unanswerable reasons. I really am very grateful to Frank. And he is running rings around Sir Humphrey. Perhaps Sir Humphrey is

not as clever as I first thought.

Humphrey seemed very anxious about the idea of publication. 'But surely,' he said to Frank, 'you're not suggesting that the Minister should make a positive reference to this confidential transaction in a speech?'

'A speech!' said Frank. 'Of course! That's the answer.'

This is a superb idea of Frank's. My speech to the Union of Office Employees will deal with this scandalous contract. And we will release it to the press in advance.

I said as much to Humphrey. Frank said, 'There. Who's running the country now?' I felt his glee was a little juvenile, but quite understandable..

Sir Humphrey seemed even more worried. I asked him for his advice, which was totally predictable. 'I think it might be regrettable if we upset the Americans.'

Predictable, and laughable. I pointed out to Humphrey, in no uncertain terms, that it is high time that someone jolted the Americans out of their commercial complacency. We should be thinking about the British poor, not the American rich!

Humphrey said, 'Minister, if that is your express wish the Department will back you. Up to the hilt.' This was very loyal. One must give credit where it's due.

I said that indeed it was my express wish. Bernard then said he would circulate the speech, as soon as it was written, for clearance.

This is new to me. I've never heard of 'clearance'. More bureaucracy and pointless paperwork. This matter has nothing to do with any other department. And if another department disagrees, they can say so publicly. That's what Open Government is all about.

Humphrey pleaded with me to circulate the speech, if only for information. At first I opposed this, but he argued – quite convincingly, I thought – that Open Government demands that we should inform our colleagues in government as well as our friends in Fleet Street.

My final word to Humphrey, as the meeting concluded, was to see that the speech went straight to the press.

'Minister,' he said, 'we shall obviously serve your best interests.'

A notable victory by Frank and me, in the cause of Open Government.

[*A typescript of Hacker's speech has been found in the files of the DAA. It is annotated with suggestions by Frank Weisel and Bernard Woolley, with comments from Hacker – Ed.*]

DEPARTMENT OF
ADMINISTRATIVE AFFAIRS

SPEECH TO THE UNION OF OFFICE EMPLOYEES

As you know, we have made a pledge to the people about Open Government. So let's begin as we mean to go on. The people have a right to know what I know. And I have discovered that only last month the previous government signed a contract to import ten million pounds worth of office equipment from America for use by the Service.

Civil Service bureaucracy? Frank

YES. GOOD! J.H

And yet an identical product – a better product – is made in Britain. By British workers. In British factories. So we are being fobbed off with second-rate American junk by high-pressure smart-alec salesmen from Pittsburgh while British factories stand idle and British workers queue up for the dole.

Unemployment benefit? B.W.

DOLE! J.H

Well, if the Americans are going to take us for a ride, at least the British people have a right to know about it. And we will fight them on the beaches, we will fight them

/over

November 9th

Today was disastrous. There have been some quite astounding turns of events.

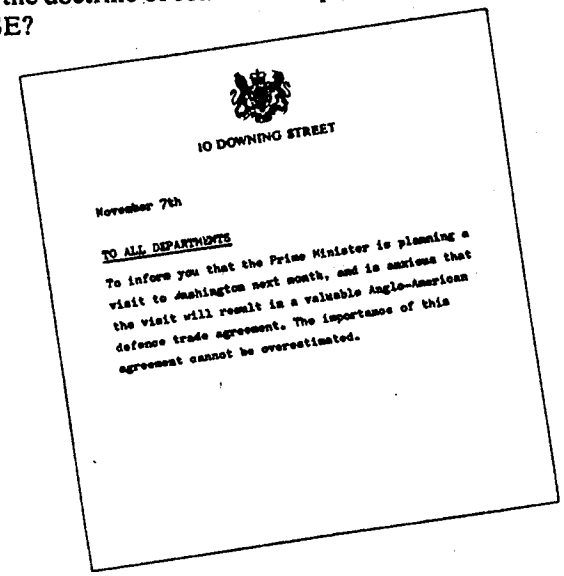
My speech was completed. I was sitting in the office reading the press release when Bernard burst in with a minute from the PM's private office.

I have learned, by the way, that *minutes*, *memos* and *submissions* are all the same thing. Except that ministers send *minutes* to civil servants and to each other, whereas civil servants send *memos* and *minutes* to each other but *submissions* to ministers.

[*This is because a minute takes or orders action whereas a memo presents the background arguments, the pros and cons. Therefore, civil servants may send either to each other, as may politicians – but as a civil servant may not tell a Minister what to do he sends a submission, the very word designed to express an attitude of humility and respect. Minutes may, of course, also be notes about official meetings, and this meaning gives rise to the well-known Civil Service axiom that meetings are where civil servants take minutes but politicians take hours – Ed.*]

Anyway, the minute made it clear that we were all to be very nice to the Yanks for the next few weeks. I realised that my speech, which had gone out to the press, could not have been timed worse.

I was appalled. Not only by my bad luck. But I find it incredible that I, as a member of the Cabinet, should have no knowledge of forthcoming defence agreements with the Americans. Whatever has happened to the doctrine of collective responsibility that I learned about at the LSE?



10 DOWNING STREET

November 7th

TO ALL DEPARTMENTS

To inform you that the Prime Minister is planning a visit to Washington next month, and is anxious that the visit will result in a valuable Anglo-American defence trade agreement. The importance of this agreement cannot be overestimated.

Sir Humphrey then hurried in to my office, looking slightly panicky.

'Sorry to burst in, Minister, but all hell's broken loose at Number Ten – apparently they've just seen your speech. They are asking why we didn't obtain clearance.'

'What did you say?' I asked.

'I said that we believe in Open Government. But it seemed to make things worse. The PM wants to see you in the House, right away.'

I realised that this could be the end for me. I asked Humphrey what was likely to happen. Sir Humphrey shrugged.

'The Prime Minister giveth – and the Prime Minister taketh away.'

I left the room feeling sick. As I started down the corridor I thought I heard Sir Humphrey add: 'Blessed be the name of the Prime Minister.' But I think I must have imagined that.

Humphrey, Frank and I hurried down Whitehall past the Cenotaph (how very appropriate that seemed!). There was an icy wind blowing. We went straight to the House. I was to meet the PM behind the Speaker's chair.

[*This does not mean, literally, behind the chair. It is the area of the House where the PM and the Leader of the Opposition, the two Chief Whips, the Leader of the House and others, meet on neutral ground to arrange the business of the House. The PM's office is to be found there too – Ed.*]

We were kept waiting for some minutes outside the PM's room. Then Vic Gould, our Chief Whip, emerged. He came straight over to me.

'You're a real pain in the arse, aren't you?' Vic really does pride himself on his dreadful manners. 'The PM's going up the wall. Hitting the roof. You can't go around making speeches like that.'

'It's Open Government,' said Frank.

'Shut up, Weasel, who asked you?' retorted Vic. Rude bugger. Typical Chief Whip.

'Weisel,' said Frank with dignity.

I sprang to Frank's defence. 'He's right, Vic. It's Open Government. It's in our manifesto. One of our main planks. The PM believes in Open Government too.'

'Open, yes,' said Vic. 'But not gaping.' Very witty, I don't think! 'In politics,' Vic went on relentlessly, 'you've got to learn to say things with tact and finesse – you berk!'

I suppose he's got a point. I felt very sheepish, but partly because I

didn't exactly enjoy being ignominiously ticked off in front of Humphrey and Frank.

'How long have you been a Minister?' Vic asked me. Bloody silly question. He knows perfectly well. He was just asking for effect.

'A week and a half,' I told him.

'Then I think you may have earned yourself a place in the *Guinness Book of Records*,' he replied. 'I can see the headlines already – CABINET SPLIT ON U.S. TRADE. HACKER LEADS REVOLT AGAINST PRIME MINISTER! That's what you wanted, is it?'

And he walked away.

Then Sir Arnold Robinson, the Cabinet Secretary, came out of the PM's office. Sir Humphrey asked him what news there was.

Sir Arnold said the same things, only in Whitehall language. 'That speech is causing the Prime Minister some distress. Has it definitely been released to the press?'

I explained that I gave express instructions for it to go out at twelve noon. Sir Arnold seemed angry with Sir Humphrey. 'I'm appalled at you,' he said. I've never heard one civil servant express himself so strongly to another. 'How could you allow your Minister to put himself in this position without going through the proper channels?'

Humphrey turned to me for help. 'The Minister and I,' he began, 'believe in Open Government. We want to throw open the windows and let in a bit of fresh air. Isn't that right, Minister?'

I nodded, but couldn't speak. For the first time, Sir Arnold addressed me directly.

'Well, Minister, it's good party stuff but it places the PM in a very difficult position, personally.' That, in Sir Arnold's language, is about the most threatening thing that has ever been said to me.

'But . . . what about our commitment to Open Government?' I finally managed to ask.

'This,' replied Sir Arnold drily, 'seems to be the closed season for Open Government.'

Then Sir Humphrey voiced my worst fears by murmuring quietly: 'Do you want to give thought to a draft letter of resignation? Just in case, of course.'

I know that Humphrey was just trying to be helpful, but he really doesn't give much moral support in a crisis.

I could see that there was only one possibility left. 'Can't we hush it up?' I said suddenly.

Humphrey, to his credit, was completely baffled by this suggestion. He didn't even seem to understand what I meant. These civil servants

really are rather naïve.

'Hush it up?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'Hush it up.'

'You mean,' Humphrey was apparently getting the idea at last, 'suppress it?'

I didn't exactly care for the word 'suppress', but I had to agree that that was exactly what I did mean.

Humphrey then said something like: 'I see. What you're suggesting is that, within the framework of the guidelines about Open Government which you have laid down, we should adopt a more flexible posture.' Civil servants have an extraordinary genius for wrapping up a simple idea to make it sound extremely complicated.

On second thoughts, this is a real talent which I should learn to cultivate. His phrasing might help me look as though I am not changing my posture at all.

However, we were saved by the bell as the US Cavalry galloped over the horizon in the shape of Bernard Woolley hurrying into the ante-room.

'About the press release,' he began breathlessly. 'There appears to have been a development which could precipitate a reappraisal of our position.'

At first I didn't quite grasp what that meant. But he then went on to say that the Department had failed to rescind the interdepartmental clearance procedure, which meant that the supplementary stop-order came into effect, which meant that it was all *all right*!

In other words, my speech didn't go out to the press after all. By an amazing stroke of good luck, it had *only* been sent to the Prime Minister's Private Office. The Duty Office at the DDA had never received instructions to send it out *before* it was cleared with the PM and the FCO. Because of the American reference.

This wonderfully fortunate oversight seems to have saved my bacon. Of course, I didn't let Humphrey see my great sense of relief. In fact, he apologised.

'The fault is entirely mine, Minister,' he said. 'This procedure for holding up press releases dates back to before the era of Open Government. I unaccountably omitted to rescind it. I do hope you will forgive this lapse.'

In the circumstances, I felt that the less said the better. I decided to be magnanimous. 'That's quite all right Humphrey,' I said, 'after all, we all make mistakes.'

'Yes Minister,' said Sir Humphrey.

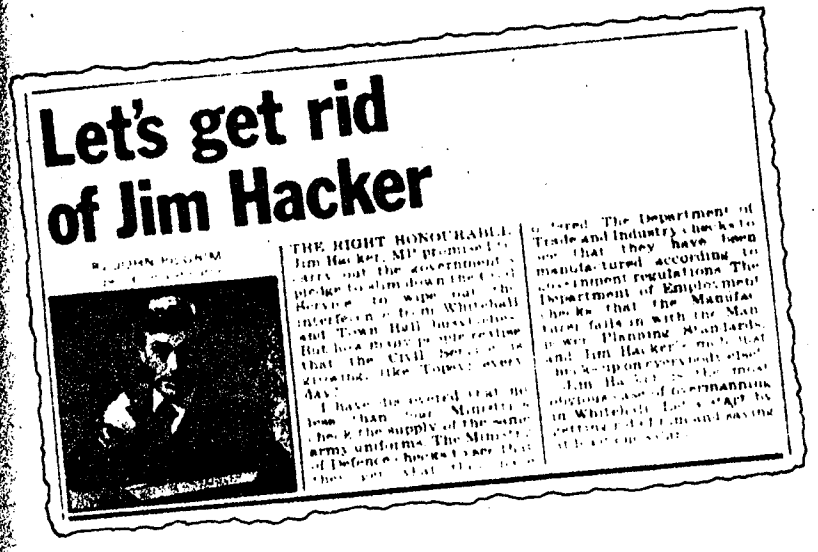
3

The Economy Drive

December 7th

On the train going up to town after a most unrestful weekend in the constituency, I opened up the *Daily Mail*. There was a huge article making a personal attack on me.

I looked around the train. Normally the first-class compartment is full of people reading *The Times*, the *Telegraph*, or the *Financial Times*. Today they all seemed to be reading the *Daily Mail*.



Let's get rid of Jim Hacker

When I got to the office Bernard offered me the paper and asked me if I'd read it. I told him I'd read it. Bernard told me that Frank had read it, and wanted to see me. Then Frank came in and asked me if I'd

read it. I told him I'd read it.

Frank then read it to me. I don't know why he read it to me. I told him I'd read it. It seemed to make him feel better to read it aloud. It made me feel worse.

I wondered how many copies they sell every day. 'Two million, three million?' I asked Bernard.

'Oh *no*, Minister,' he answered as if my suggested figures were an utterly outrageous overestimate.

I pressed him for an answer. 'Well, how many?'

'Um . . . four million,' he said with some reluctance. 'So only . . . twelve million people have read it. Twelve or fifteen. And lots of their readers can't read, you know.'

Frank was meanwhile being thoroughly irritating. He kept saying, 'Have you read this?' and reading another appalling bit out of it. For instance: 'Do *you* realise that more people serve in the Inland Revenue than the Royal Navy?' This came as news to me, but Bernard nodded to confirm the truth of it when I looked at him.

'"Perhaps,"' said Frank, *still* reading aloud from that bloody paper, '"Perhaps the government thinks that a tax is the best form of defence."'

Bernard sniggered, till he saw that I was not amused. He tried to change his snigger into a cough.

Frank then informed me, as if I didn't already know, that this article is politically very damaging, and that I had to make slimming down the Civil Service a priority. There's no doubt that he's right, but it's just not that easy.

I pointed this out to Frank. 'You know what?' he said angrily. 'You're house-trained already.'

I didn't deign to reply. Besides, I couldn't think of an answer.

[*The Civil Service phrase for making a new Minister see things their way is 'house-training'. When a Minister is so house-trained that he automatically sees everything from the Civil Service point of view, this is known in Westminster as the Minister having 'gone native' – Ed.*]

Sir Humphrey came in, brandishing a copy of the *Daily Mail*. 'Have you read this?' he began.

This was too much. I exploded. 'Yes. Yes! Yes!!! I have read that sodding newspaper. *I* have read it, *you* have read it, *we have all bloody read it.* DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?'

'Abundantly, Minister,' said Sir Humphrey coldly, after a brief pained silence.

I recovered my temper, and invited them all to sit down. 'Humphrey,' I said, 'we simply *have* to slim down the Civil Service. How many people are there in this Department?'

'This Department?' He seemed evasive. 'Oh well, we're very small.'

'How small?' I asked, and receiving no reply, I decided to hazard a guess. 'Two thousand? . . . three thousand?' I suggested, fearing the worst.

'About twenty-three thousand I think, Minister?'

I was staggered. Twenty-three thousand people? In the Department of Administrative Affairs? Twenty-three thousand administrators, all to administer other administrators?

'We'll have to do an O & M,' I said. [*Organisation and Method Study – Ed.*] 'See how many we can do without.'

'We did one of those last year,' said Sir Humphrey blandly. 'And we discovered we needed another five hundred people. However, Minister, we could always close your Bureaucratic Watchdog Department.'[1]

I'd been expecting this. I know Humphrey doesn't like it. How could he? But we are not cutting it. Firstly, it's a very popular measure with the voters. And secondly, it's the only thing I've achieved since I've been here.

'It is a chance for the ordinary citizen to help us find ways to stop wasting government money,' I reiterated.

'The public,' said Sir Humphrey, 'do not know anything about wasting public money. We are the experts.'

I grinned. 'Can I have that in writing?'

Humphrey got very tetchy. 'You know that's not what I meant,' he snapped. 'The Watchdog Office is merely a troublemaker's letter box.'

'It stays,' I replied.

We gazed at each other, icily. Finally Sir Humphrey said: 'Well, offhand, I don't know what other economies to suggest.'

This was ludicrous. 'Are you seriously trying to tell me,' I asked, 'that there's nothing we can cut down on?'

He shrugged. 'Well . . . I suppose we could lose one or two of the tea ladies.'

I exploded again. I told him not to be ridiculous. I told him I wanted facts, answers. I listed them:

[1] The Bureaucratic Watchdog was an innovation of Hacker's, to which members of the public were invited to report any instances of excessive government bureaucracy which they encountered personally. It was disbanded after four months.

1 How many people work here?
2 What do they all do?
3 How many buildings do we have?
4 Who and what is in these buildings?

I spelt it out. I demanded a complete study. First of all we'll put our own house in order. Then we'll deal with the rest of Whitehall. With a complete study, we'll be able to see where to cut costs, cut staff, and cut procedures.

Sir Humphrey listened with some impatience. 'The Civil Service, Minister,' he responded when I paused for breath, 'merely exists to implement legislation that is enacted by Parliament. So long as Parliament continues to legislate for more and more control over people's lives, the Civil Service must grow.'

'Ha!' Frank made a derisive noise.

Sir Humphrey turned towards him with a glassy stare. 'Am I to infer that Mr Weisel disagrees with me?'

'Ha!' repeated Frank.

Frank was getting on *my* nerves too. 'Frank, either laugh thoroughly, or not at all,' I instructed.

'Minister.' Humphrey stood up. 'I am fully seized of your requirements, so if you'll excuse me I think I'd better set the wheels in motion.'

After Sir H. left Frank told me that there was a cover-up going on. Apparently a North-West Regional controller has achieved cuts of £32 million in his region alone. And the Civil Service has suppressed news of it. I asked why. 'They don't want cuts,' said Frank impatiently. 'Asking Sir Humphrey to slim down the Civil Service is like asking an alcoholic to blow up a distillery.'

I asked Bernard if this story were true. Bernard said that he didn't know, but, if so, he would be aghast. I asked them both to check up on it. Bernard said he'd find out through the grapevine, and I arranged with Frank to do some more ferreting.

[*Sometime in the next few days Bernard Woolley had an interview with Sir Humphrey Appleby. Sir Humphrey wrote a memo following the meeting, which we found in the DAA Personnel Files at Walthamstow – Ed.*]

Woolley came at 5.15 p.m. to discuss the £32 million saved by the NW controller. I remarked that I was aghast.

Woolley said he also was aghast, and that it was incredible that we knew nothing of this.

He sometimes reveals himself as worryingly naïf. I, of course, know all about it. I am merely aghast that it has got out. It might result in our getting less money from the Treasury in next year's PESC review. [*PESC is the Public Expenditure Scrutiny Committee – Ed.*]

I felt I would learn more about Bernard Woolley if I made the conversation informal. [*To do so, Sir Humphrey would have moved from behind his desk to the conversation area, remarking that it was after 5.30 p.m. and offering Woolley a sherry – Ed.*] Then I asked him why he was looking worried. He revealed that he genuinely wanted the DAA to save money.

This was shocking. Clearly he has not yet grasped the fundamentals of our work.

There has to be some way to measure success in the Service. British Leyland can measure success by the size of its profits. [*British Leyland was the name of the car manufacturer into which billions of pounds of taxpayers' money was paid in the 1980s in an attempt to produce full employment in the West Midlands. To be more accurate, BL measured its failure by the size of its losses – Ed.*] However, the Civil Service does not make profits or losses. *Ergo*, we measure success by the size of our staff and our budget. By definition a big department is more successful than a small one. It seems extraordinary that Woolley could have passed through the Civil Service College without having understood that this simple proposition is the basis of our whole system.

Nobody had asked the NW controller to save £32 million. Suppose everybody did it? Suppose everybody started saving money irresponsibly all over the place?

Woolley then revealed another curious blind-spot when he advanced the argument that the Minister wanted cuts. I was obliged to explain the facts of life:

1 Ministers come, and Ministers go. The average Minister lasts less than eleven months in any Department.
[*In his ten years as Chairman of British Steel, Sir Monty Finniston dealt with no less than nineteen Ministers at the Department of Industry – Ed.*]
2 It is our duty to assist the Minister to fight for the Department's money despite his own panic reactions.
3 However, the Minister must be allowed to panic. Politicians like to panic. They need activity – it is their substitute for achievement.
4 The argument that we must do everything a Minister demands because he has been 'democratically chosen' does not stand up to close inspection. MPs are not chosen by 'the people' – they are chosen by their local constituency party, *i.e.* thirty-five men in grubby raincoats or thirty-five women in silly hats. The further 'selection' process is equally a nonsense: there are only 630 MPs and a party with just over 300 MPs forms a government – and of these 300, 100 are too old and too silly to be ministers, and 100 too young and too callow. Therefore there are

about 100 MPs to fill 100 government posts. Effectively no choice at all.

5 It follows that as Ministers have had no proper selection or training, it is our patriotic duty to arrange for them to make the right decision as often as possible.

I concluded by teaching Woolley how to explain the saving of £32 million to the Minister. I offered the following possibilities. Say that:

(a) they have changed their accounting system in the North-West.
or (b) redrawn the boundaries, so that this year's figures are not comparable.
or (c) the money was compensation for special extra expenditure of £16 million a year over the last two years, which has now stopped.
or (d) it is only a paper saving, so it will all have to be spent next year.
or (e) a major expenditure is late in completion, and therefore the region will be correspondingly over budget next year. [*Known technically as phasing – Ed.*]
or (f) there has been an unforeseen but important shift of personnel and industries to other regions whose expenditure rose accordingly.
or (g) some large projects were cancelled for reasons of economy early in the accounting period with the result that the expenditure was not incurred but the budget had already been allocated.

Woolley seemed to understand. I am concerned that he has not had adequate training so far. I intend to keep a close watch on him because, in spite of all this, I still think he shows promise.

He volunteered information that Frank Weisel was ferreting. Naturally, I arranged a government car to assist him. [*It was standard Civil Service practice to provide government cars for troublesome outsiders. The driver would, at the very least, be relied on to report where he had been, if only to account for the mileage.*

Drivers are one of the most useful sources of information in Whitehall. Their passengers are frequently indiscreet, forgetting that everything they say in the back seat can be overheard in the front. Furthermore, Ministers tend to forget confidential documents, and leave them behind in the car.

Information is Whitehall's most valuable currency. Drivers barter information – Ed.]

[*The following series of memos between Sir Humphrey Appleby and Sir Frederick Stewart were found in a Ministry file – Ed.*]

A note from Sir Frederick Stewart, Permanent Secretary to the FCO:

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
From the Permanent Under-Secretary of State

Dear Humpy 10/xii

Am concerned that your minister is still trying to economise pointlessly.

Fumbo

A reply from Sir Humphrey to Sir Frederick Stewart:

DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE AFFAIRS

From the Permanent Under-Secretary of State

Dear Jumbo —

Am hoping it will be like all the other government economy drives — three days of press releases, three weeks of ministerial memos, then a crisis in the Middle East, and back to normal again.

JH. 10. xii

A reply from Sir Frederick:

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

From the Permanent Under-Secretary of State

11/xii

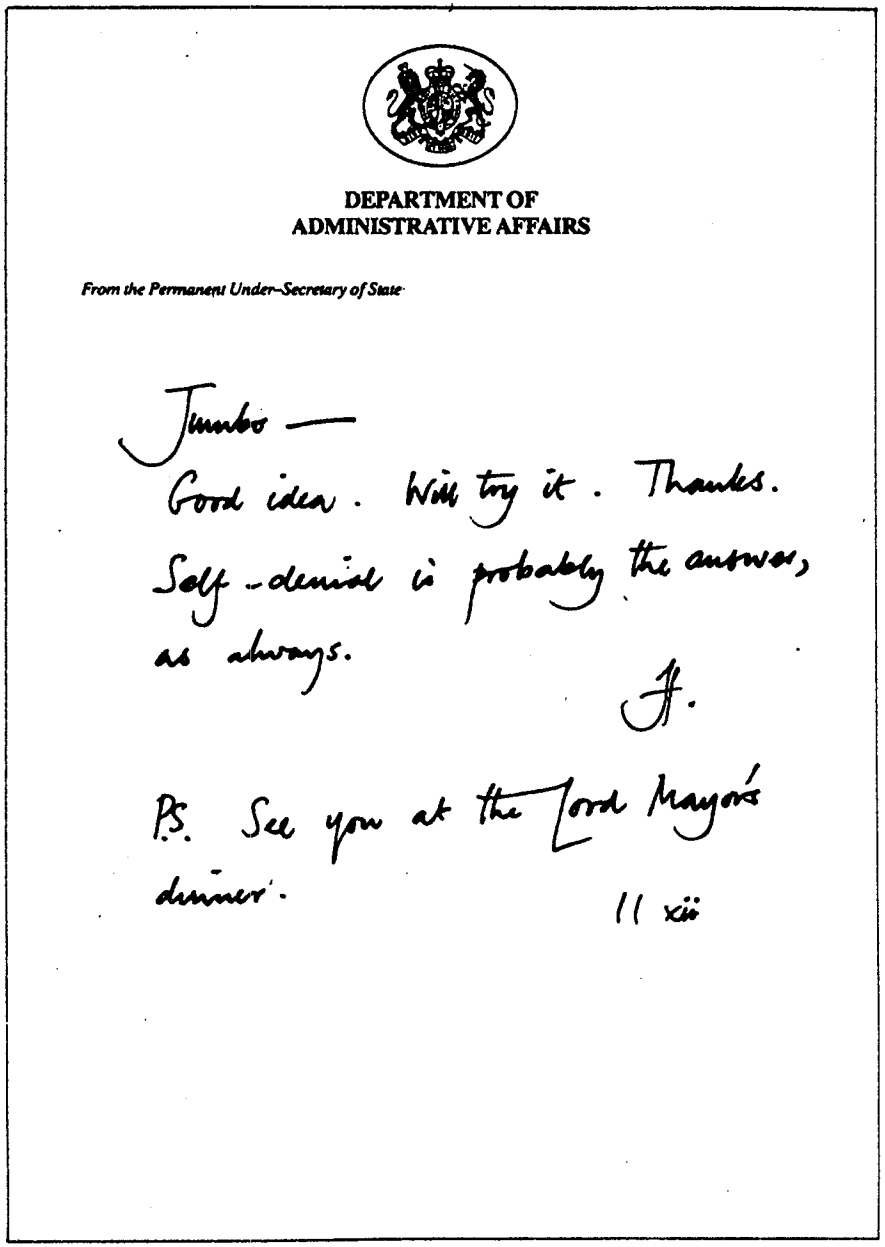
Dear Humpy,

Hope you're right, but why take chances? I suggest another 'Operation Hairshirt'

"Economy begins at home: Set a personal example can't expect others to do what we don't do ourselves." etc.

Jumbo.

A reply from Sir Humphrey:



DEPARTMENT OF
ADMINISTRATIVE AFFAIRS

From the Permanent Under-Secretary of State

Jumbo —
Good idea. Will try it. Thanks.
Self-denial is probably the answer, as always.

H.

P.S. See you at the Lord Mayor's dinner.

11 xii

[*Hacker's diary continues – Ed.*]

December 15th

Today we had the big meeting on expenditure cuts. Frank has been ferreting for a couple of weeks. The meeting didn't actually end the way I thought it would, but we do now have a real programme of action, though not the one I expected.

At the meeting were Sir Humphrey, Bernard, and Frank who had come up with what seemed to be some astounding revelations about wastage in our midst. I told Sir Humphrey that he would be pretty surprised by it all, and that the new facts seemed to be a frightening indictment of bureaucratic sloppiness and self-indulgence.

Sir Humphrey seemed very concerned and intrigued, and was eager to learn where there might be scope for dramatic economies.

Frank had prepared two files, one on Manpower and one on Buildings. I decided to look at Buildings first.

'Chadwick House,' I began. 'West Audley Street.'

'A huge building,' said Frank, 'with only a handful of people working there.'

Sir Humphrey said he happened to know about Chadwick House. 'It is certainly underused at the moment, but it is the designated office for the new Commission on the Environment. We're actually wondering if it'll be big enough when all the staff move in.'

This seemed fair enough. So I went on to Ladysmith Buildings, Walthamstow. It is totally empty.

'Of course,' said Sir Humphrey.

I asked him what he meant.

'Security, Minister, I can say no more.'

'Do you mean MI6?' I asked.

Sir Humphrey shook his head, and said nothing. So I asked him what he *did* mean.

'We do not admit that MI6 exists,' he replied.

I've never heard anything so daft. I pointed out that absolutely everyone knows that it exists.

'Nevertheless, we do not admit it. Not everyone around this table has been vetted.'

Vetted is such a silly expression. I remarked that it sounds like something you do to cats.

'Yes, but not ferrets, Minister,' said Sir Humphrey sharply, eyeing Frank. 'Ladysmith Buildings is top secret.'

'How,' I asked sarcastically, 'can a seven-storey building in Walthamstow be a secret?'

'Where there's a will there's a way,' replied Humphrey, with (I think) a twinkle in his eye. It was all quite amicable, but I could see that he had no intention of discussing anything that was remotely to do with security while Frank was present. I had no intention of asking Frank to leave, so, reluctantly, I was forced to move on to the next two white elephants.

'Wellington House, Hyde Park Road. Estimated value, seven and a half million pounds. Westminster Old Hall, Sackville Square, estimated value, eleven million pounds. Both buildings with a tiny staff, and entirely full of filing cabinets.'

'May I ask the source of these valuations?' Sir Humphrey enquired.

'Going rate for office property in the area,' said Frank.

'Ah. *Unfortunately*,' said Sir Humphrey in his most helpful tone, 'neither building would actually fetch the going rate.'

I asked why not.

'Wellington House has no fire escape or fire doors and the fabric of the building would not stand the alteration, so it can't be sold as offices.'

'Then how can *we* use it?' enquired Frank aggressively.

'Government buildings do not need fire safety clearance.'

'Why?' demanded Frank.

'Perhaps,' Humphrey offered, 'because Her Majesty's Civil Servants are not easily inflamed.' This time he chuckled. Another of his little jokes. He seemed to be increasingly pleased with himself. I don't care for this.

[*In fact, government buildings have to comply with most statutory fire requirements, but not with regard to means of escape! – Ed.*]

We were not getting very far with our economies, so I asked why Westminster Old Hall couldn't be sold as offices.

'It's a Class One listed building. Can't change current user designation. The Environment, you know.'

We were getting nowhere fast. Frank moved on, and suggested we sold 3 to 17 Beaconsfield Street.

'That,' said Sir Humphrey, 'has a three-level reinforced-concrete basement.'

'So?' I said.

'It is there in case,' said Sir Humphrey. I waited for him to complete his sentence, but after a while it became apparent that he thought he had already done so.

'In case?' I asked eventually.

'You know, Minister,' he said, his voice pregnant with hidden

meaning. 'Emergency Government Headquarters, if and when.'

I was baffled. 'If and when what?'

Humphrey was now at his most enigmatic. 'If and when . . . you know what,' he replied so quietly that I could hardly hear him.

'What?' I wasn't sure I'd heard correctly.

'If and when you know what?'

'I *don't* know what,' I said confused. 'What?'

'What?' Now Sir Humphrey seemed confused.

'What do you mean, if and when you know what? If and when, I know what – *what*?'

At last Humphrey decided to make his meaning clear. 'When the chips are down, Minister, and the balloon goes up and the lights go out . . . there has to be somewhere to carry on government, even if everything else stops.'

I considered this carefully for a few moments. 'Why?' I asked.

Humphrey appeared to be absolutely staggered by this question. He explained to me, as if I were a backward five-year-old, 'Government doesn't stop merely because the country's been destroyed. Annihilation is bad enough, without anarchy to make it even worse.'

Obviously Humphrey was concerned about the danger of a lot of rebellious cinders.

However, this is clearly an MoD matter [*Ministry of Defence matter– Ed.*] and I can see it is beyond *my* power to do anything about 3 to 17 Beaconsfield Street.

There was one more virtually unused building on Frank's list. It was my last shot. 'What about the Central Registry?' I enquired, without any real hope.

'No planning permission,' said Sir Humphrey, with a bland smile of a man who knows he's won five rounds and is way ahead on points.

Frank suddenly intervened. 'How does he know all this?' he enquired belligerently, and turned accusingly to Sir Humphrey. 'You *knew* where I'd been.'

This hadn't occurred to me, but Frank was obviously right. I was about to lay into Humphrey on that score, when Humphrey said to me, most disarmingly: 'Of course we knew where he'd been. Why, was he supposed to be spying?'

I wasn't ready for that particular googly. I realised at once that I was on a very sticky wicket.

Humphrey pressed home his advantage. 'I mean, we *do* believe in open enquiries, don't we?'

There was no answer to this, so, in my most businesslike fashion, I

closed the Buildings file. [*In any case, it would have been impossible to sell all these government buildings simultaneously. If you put government property in London on the market all at once, you would destroy the market – like diamonds – Ed.*]

I turned to Manpower. Here, I felt I was on rock-solid ground.

'Apparently,' I began, 'there are ninety civil servants in Sunderland exactly duplicating the work of ninety others here in Whitehall.'

Humphrey nodded. 'That stems from a cabinet decision. Job Creation in the North-East.'

At last we were in agreement about something. 'Let's get rid of them,' I proposed.

Frank chimed in eagerly, 'Yes, that would get rid of ninety civil servants at a stroke.' Somehow, the way Frank spits out the words 'civil servants' makes them sound more contemptible than petty thieves. If I were a civil servant I think Frank's style would offend me, though Sir Humphrey doesn't seem too bothered, I must say.

But he picked up Frank's phrase 'at a stroke'. [*Actually, Edward Heath's phrase, originally applied to price reductions which, needless to say, never occurred – Ed.*] 'Or indeed,' said Sir Humphrey, 'at a strike.'

'What?' I said.

'Personally, Minister, I should be wholeheartedly in favour of such a move. A considerable economy. But . . . I should remind you that it is a depressed area. Hence the original job creation scheme. It would show great political courage for the government to sack staff in a depressed marginal constituency.'

We sat for a while in silence. I must say, I think it was rather sporting of Humphrey to remind me that a marginal constituency was at stake. Normally civil servants take no interest in those vital political calculations.

Clearly, I couldn't possibly risk a strike up there. But I was feeling really hopeless about these economies by now. I decided to put the ball back into Humphrey's court.

'Look, Humphrey,' I said, 'this is all very well . . . but . . . well, I just don't believe that there are no savings to be made in the Civil Service. I see waste everywhere.'

'I agree with you, Minister,' came the reply, much to my surprise. 'There is indeed scope for economy . . .'

'Then . . .' I interrupted, '. . . *where*, for God's sake?'

And to my surprise, Sir Humphrey suddenly became very positive. 'I sometimes feel that the whole way we do things is on too lavish a

scale. You know, cars, furnishings, private office staff, entertainment, duplicating machines. . . .'

This was marvellous. I couldn't agree more. I nodded enthusiastically.

'There is a difficulty, however,' he added. My heart sank again, but I waited to hear what it was. 'It does cause profound resentment if those at the top continue to enjoy the convenience and comforts they have withdrawn from those below them, not to mention the deeply damaging publicity. . . .'

He broke off, and waited to see how I reacted. I wasn't awfully keen, I must admit. It became clear that Humphrey's scheme was that he and I should set a personal example. Economy begins at home, and we can't expect others to do what we don't do ourselves, and so forth.

I challenged Humphrey. 'Would it really save that much?'

'Directly, no,' he said. 'But as an example to the whole public service . . . incalculable!'

Then Frank came up with the decisive argument in favour of Humphrey's plan. He pointed out that there would be lots of great publicity in it. He suggested the sort of newspaper headlines we'd be getting: THE MINISTER SHOWS THE WAY, or SLIMLINE GOVERNMENT, HACKER SETS EXAMPLE. We might even get a first-name headline: SAVE IT, SAYS JIM.

I gave Humphrey the okay to put the scheme into practice as soon as possible. I shall be interested to see how it works. At this moment, I have high hopes.

December 20th

Sunday morning. I'm writing this at home, in the constituency.

Haven't had time to make any entries in the diary for some days because this economy drive is creating a lot of extra work for me. However, I'm sure it's all going to be worth it.

It was a dreadful journey home on Friday night. I got home in the middle of the night. Annie had gone to bed. Apparently she'd made supper for us, and it had spoiled.

I'd tried to get a taxi to get me from Whitehall to Euston, but there was a thunderstorm and no taxis were available. So I'd gone by tube, carrying three red boxes which are immensely heavy when filled, and I'd missed the train at Euston. So I got home very tired and wet.

I apologised for waking Annie, and told her about my troublesome journey.

'What happened to the chauffeur-driven car?' she asked anxiously.

'I've got rid of it,' I explained proudly. 'I've also got rid of the chauffeur, all the grand office furniture, and the drinks cabinet, and half my private office staff.'

'You've been sacked!' she said. Annie often jumps to the most ridiculous alarmist conclusions. I explained that it was an economy drive and that I was setting an example of no frills, no luxuries and no privileges.

Annie couldn't seem to understand. 'You're bloody mad!' she exploded. 'For twenty years as a backbencher you have complained that you had no facilities and no help. Now you've been given them, and you're throwing them away.'

I tried to explain it, but she wouldn't let me get a word in edgeways. 'For twenty years you've wanted to be a success – why did you want it if it brings no greater comfort than failure?'

I explained that this move would give me much greater power in the end.

Annie was unimpressed. 'And how will you travel when you're Prime Minister? Hitch-hike?'

Why can't she understand?

December 21st

Great progress today with the economy drive.

The office work is getting a bit behind, with twelve fewer people in my Private Office. Bernard is working overtime, and so am I, but clearly we didn't need all those people out there, reading my letters and writing my letters, and making appointments and answering phones, and drafting replies to questions and – basically – protecting me from the outside world. I don't need all those people to shield me. I am the people's representative, I should be available to one and all, shouldn't I?

However, we have to avoid screw-ups like this morning, when I arrived an hour and a half late to open a conference. What made it even more unfortunate was that it was the Business Efficiency Conference!

And, because we've abolished the night shift for cleaners (a really useful economy, in my view), I had a cleaning lady in my office vacuuming. Bernard and I had to shout at the tops of our voices as we discussed the week's diary. But I'm sure these little wrinkles can be ironed out.

Tomorrow I have a vital meeting with Mr Brough, Director of Manpower Planning for the North-East Region, on the subject of staff

reductions. I've never met him, but Bernard tells me he's eager to make cuts.

The biggest progress is in the media coverage I'm getting. A front-page story in the *Express*. Couldn't be better.

SIR BERNARD WOOLLEY RECALLS:[1]

I remember Jim Hacker's first economy drive only too well. I suspected, green though I still was, that Sir Humphrey Appleby had created a potentially disastrous situation.

It was impossible for me to run the Private Office single-handed, with just a couple of typists to help. Errors were bound to occur, and sooner or later there would be a calamity.

The calamity occurred sooner than even I expected. On 21 December, the day after Hacker had received some favourable publicity, Ron Watson arrived at the Department without an appointment. Watson was the General Secretary of the Civil Service Transport and Associated Government Workers.

He demanded to see the Minister at once, because of what he described as 'disturbing' rumours about cut-backs and redundancies affecting his members. The rumours were clearly generated by the numerous press stories of which Jim Hacker was so ludicrously proud.

I told Watson that nobody could see the Minister without an appointment,

[1] In conversation with the Editors.

and left the Private Office to go to the Whips' Office. I was even having to run errands myself, as we were so short-staffed. Had we been fully staffed, Watson would never even have got as far as Hacker's Private Office without an appointment. I left a typist to arrange an appointment for Watson to see Hacker.

Apparently, after I left the room, Brough of Manpower Planning telephoned to say he had missed his train from Newcastle, and could not keep his appointment. Watson overheard, realised that Hacker was free at that moment, and walked straight into his office.

And because there were no other Private Secretaries, due to the economy drive, no one stopped him. And no one warned the Minister that he was meeting Watson instead of Brough.

No greater mishap could have occurred.

December 22nd

Today, everything collapsed in ruins. Total disaster.

I was expecting Mr Brough of Manpower Planning (NE Region) at 3 p.m. A man walked into my office and naturally I assumed he was Brough.

'Mr Brough?' I said.

'No,' he said, 'my name's Ron Watson. Mr Brough has had to cancel the meeting.'

Naturally, I assumed that Watson had been sent by Brough, and had come instead. So I interrupted, thanked him for coming and asked him to sit down and said, 'Look, Mr Watson, before we start there's one point I have to emphasise. This simply must not get out. If the unions were to hear of this all hell would break loose.'

'I see,' he said.

'Of *course* there are going to be redundancies,' I continued. 'You can't slim down a giant bureaucracy without getting rid of people. Ultimately, lots of people.'

He asked me if I wouldn't be holding discussions with the unions first.

I continued to dig my own grave. 'We'll go through the usual charade of consultation first,' I said, blithely unaware of the impending catastrophe, 'but you know what trades unionists are like. Just bloody-minded, and as thick as two short planks.' How could I have spoken like this to a total stranger?

'All of them?' he asked politely.

I was surprised by this question. I thought he should know, after all, he had to negotiate with them. 'Pretty well,' I said. 'All they're interested in is poaching members from each other or getting themselves on the telly – and they can never keep their big mouths shut.'

I remember quite clearly every word that I spoke. Each one is branded on my heart. Furthermore, it's all written down in front of me – in an interview that Watson gave to the *Standard* as soon as he left my office.

Then the man asked me about drivers and transport service staff, specifically. 'They'll be the first to go,' I said. 'We're wasting a fortune on cars and drivers. And they're all on the fiddle anyway.'

It was at this moment that Watson revealed that he was not Mr Brough's deputy, but was in fact the General Secretary of the Civil Service Transport and Associated Government Workers. And he had come to my office to check that there was no truth in the rumours about redundancies for his members!

Oh my God! . . .

December 24th

Yesterday and today there has been an acute shortage of Christmas cheer.

All the Civil Service drivers are on strike. I arrived yesterday morning, having read all about the strike in the press. All the papers quoted Ron Watson quoting me: 'Of course there's going to be redundancies. Lots.'

I asked Bernard how he could have let this happen.

'CBE, Minister,' he replied, unhappily.

I wasn't sure what he meant. Could I have been awarded the CBE? – or could *he*?

He explained. 'Can't Be Everywhere'. Another idiotic Civil Service abbreviation. 'In normal circumstances . . .' he petered out. After all, we both knew how this tragedy had occurred.

Bernard reminded me of all my appointments for today. An office Christmas party, some meetings – nothing of any consequence. I spent the day dodging the press. I wanted to discuss the situation with Sir Humphrey, but apparently he was unavailable all day.

Annie and I were invited to the French Embassy's Christmas party, at 8 p.m. I asked Bernard to get me my car – and then realised, as I spoke, that there were no drivers. I told him to call Annie, to get her to bring our car in to collect me.

Bernard had already thought of that, but apparently our car had been giving trouble all day and Annie wanted to take it to the garage. I got hold of her and told her the garage would wait – the car would get us from Whitehall to Kensington okay.

Annie came for me, we set off in our evening clothes.

Yet again I was wrong and the bloody car broke down in Knightsbridge. In the rush hour. In the pouring rain. I tried to fix it. I was wearing my dinner jacket. I asked Annie for the umbrella, she said I had it. I knew she had it. We shouted at each other, she got out and slammed her door and walked away, and I was left with the car blocking all of Harrods' Christmas rush hour traffic with horns blaring and drivers yelling abuse at me.

I got to the French Embassy an hour and a half late, soaked to the skin and covered in oil. I had three or four glasses of champagne right away – well, who wouldn't in the circumstances? I needed them!

When I left, not drunk exactly, but a bit the worse for wear, I must admit, I dropped my keys in the gutter beside the car. Then they fell down a grating, so I had to lie down to try and reach them, and some bastard from the press was there.

This morning I had a frightful hangover. I felt tired and sick. The press had really gone to town over my alleged drunkenness. They really are unbelievably irresponsible nowadays.

Mr Economy falls down in gutter after champagne party

Another paper's headline was HACKER TIRED AND EMOTIONAL AFTER EMBASSY RECEPTION.

Sir Humphrey read it aloud, and remarked that it was slightly better, perhaps, than the first.

'Better?' I asked.

'Well . . . different, anyway,' said Sir Humphrey.

I asked if anyone had said anything beyond 'tired and emotional'. Bernard informed me that William Hickey said I was 'overwrought'. I didn't mind that quite so much, until Sir Humphrey added – for clarification – 'overwrought as a newt, actually'.

By now I felt that it could not get any worse. But I was wrong. Bernard produced today's lead story from the *Daily Telegraph*, which, astonishingly and horrifyingly, claimed that *I* was recruiting extra staff to the DAA.

I demanded an explanation from Sir Humphrey. And he had one ready, of course.

'Minister, you *asked* for these extra people. You demanded a complete study, a survey, facts and figures. These measures cannot be taken by non-people. If you create more work, more people have to be employed to do it. It's common sense.'

While I was taking this on the chin, he came in with another right

hook to the head. 'And if you persist with your Bureaucratic Watchdog Office, there'll be at least another four hundred new jobs there as well.'

I was shattered. My head was aching, I felt sick, my career seemed to be in ruins, I was being pilloried in the press and the only idea of mine that I've managed to push through since I've been here had now to be abandoned.

Yet, throughout, from my first day here, all the permanent officials appear to have been doing their best to help me in every possible way. So are they completely inept? Or am I? Are they pretending to help while secretly obstructing my every move? Or are they incapable of understanding a new approach to the Department's work? Do they try to help me by pushing me towards the Ministry's policy? Is there a difference between the Minister's policy and the Ministry's policy? Why am I asking so many questions to which there is no known answer? How deep is the ocean, how high is the sky? [*Irving Berlin – Ed.*]

There was silence in the office. I didn't know what we were going to do about the four hundred new people supervising our economy drive or the four hundred new people for the Bureaucratic Watchdog Office, or anything! I simply sat and waited and hoped that my head would stop thumping and that some idea would be suggested by someone sometime soon.

Sir Humphrey obliged. 'Minister . . . if we were to end the economy drive and close the Bureaucratic Watchdog Office we could issue an immediate press announcement that you had axed eight hundred jobs.' He had obviously thought this out carefully in advance, for at this moment he produced a slim folder from under his arm. 'If you'd like to approve this draft. . . .'

I couldn't believe the impertinence of the suggestion. Axed eight hundred jobs? 'But no one was ever doing these jobs,' I pointed out incredulously. 'No one's been appointed yet.'

'Even greater economy,' he replied instantly. 'We've saved eight hundred redundancy payments as well.'

'But . . .' I attempted to explain '. . . that's just phony. It's dishonest, it's juggling with figures, it's pulling the wool over people's eyes.'

'A government press release, in fact,' said Humphrey. I've met some cynical politicians in my time, but this remark from my Permanent Secretary was a real eye-opener.

I nodded weakly. Clearly if I was to avoid the calamity of four hundred new people employed to make economies, I had to give up

the four hundred new people in my cherished Watchdog Office. An inevitable *quid pro quo*. After all, politics is the art of the possible. [*A saying generally attributed to R. A. Butler, but actually said by Bismarck (1815–98) in 1867, in conversation with Meyer von Waldeck: 'Die Politik ist die Lehre von Möglichen' – Ed.*]

However, one vital central question, the question that was at the root of this whole débâcle, remained completely unanswered. 'But Humphrey,' I said, 'How are we actually going to slim down the Civil Service?'

There was a pause. Then he said: 'Well . . . I suppose we could lose one or two of the tea ladies.'

4
Big Brother

January 4th

Nothing of interest happened over Christmas. I spent the week in the constituency. I went to the usual Christmas parties for the constituency party, the old people's home, the general hospital, and assorted other gatherings and it all went off quite well – I got my photo in the local rag four or five times, and avoided saying anything that committed me to anything.

I sensed a sort of resentment, though, and have become aware that I'm in a double-bind situation. The local party, the constituency, my family, *all* of them are proud of me for getting into the Cabinet – yet they are all resentful that I have less time to spend on them and are keen to remind me that I'm nothing special, just their local MP, and that I mustn't get 'too big for my boots'. They manage both to grovel and patronise me simultaneously. It's hard to know how to handle it.

If only I could tell them what life is really like in Whitehall, they would know that there's absolutely no danger of my getting too big for my boots. Sir Humphrey Appleby will see to that.

Back to London today for a TV interview on *Topic*, with Robert McKenzie. He asked me lots of awkward questions about the National Data Base.

We met in the Hospitality Room before the programme was recorded, and I tried to find out what angle he was taking. We were a little tense with each other, of course. [*McKenzie used to call the Hospitality Room the Hostility Room – Ed.*]

'We are going to talk about cutting government extravagance and that sort of thing, aren't we?' I asked, and immediately realised that I had phrased that rather badly.

Bob McKenzie was amused. 'You want to talk about the government's extravagance?' he said with a twinkle in his eye.

'About the ways in which I'm cutting it down, I mean,' I said firmly.

'We'll get to that if we have time after the National Data Base,' he said.

I tried to persuade him that people weren't interested in the Data Base, that it was too trivial. He said he thought people were *very* interested in it, and were worried about Big Brother. This annoyed me, and I told him he couldn't trivialise the National Data Base with that sort of sensationalistic approach. Bob replied that as I'd just said it was trivial already, why not?

We left the Hospitality Room. In the studio, waiting for the programme to begin, a girl with a powder-puff kept flitting about and dabbing at my face and preventing me from thinking straight. She said I was getting a bit pink. 'We can't have that,' said Bob jovially, 'what would the *Daily Telegraph* say?'

Just before we started recording I remarked that I could well do without all those old chestnut questions like, 'Are we creating a Police State?'

In retrospect, perhaps this was a mistake.

[*We have found, in the BBC Archives, a complete transcript of Robert McKenzie's interview with James Hacker. It is printed overleaf – Ed.*]

BBC tv

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

THIS SCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

TOPIC: JANUARY 4th INTERVIEW BETWEEN ROBERT MCKENZIE AND THE RT HON. JAMES HACKER MP

MCKENZIE: Good evening. Is Big Brother watching you ? To be more precise, did you know that the Government is building up a dossier on you ?
It's called by the harmless sounding name of "National Integrated Data Base". What it means is that at the press of a button any Civil Servant can inspect just about every detail of your life - your tax, your medical record, the car you drive, the house you live in, motoring offences, periods of unemployment, children's school records, the lot - and that Civil Servant may happen to be your next door neighbour.
Recently there has been mounting concern over this powerful totalitarian weapon that the computer revolution has put in the Government's hands.
And the man who wields that weapon is the Minister for Administrative Affairs, the Rt Hon James Hacker MP.
Minister, are you laying the foundations of a police state in this country ?

HACKER: You know, I'm glad you asked me that question.
PAUSE

MCKENZIE: In that case, Minister, could we have an answer ?

BBC tv

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HACKER: (CONT) Yes, of course. I'm about to give you one, if I may. As I was saying, I'm glad you asked me that question. Because ... well, because it's a question that a lot of people are asking. And why ? Because ... well, because a lot of people want to know the answer to it. And let's be quite clear about this - without beating about the bush - the plain fact of the matter is that it is a very important question indeed and people have a right to know.

PAUSE

MCKENZIE: But Minister, you haven't given me an answer yet.

PAUSE

HACKER: I'm sorry, what was the question ?

MCKENZIE: How can I know that if I annoy you in this interview, you won't go back to your office, press a button and examine my tax returns, my hospital records, my police record ...

HACKER: Oh, come on Bob, you know as well as I do that's not the way we do things in this country. Impossible to organise, anyway.

MCKENZIE: Are you saying, Minister, you would like to do those things, but you are too incompetent as yet ?

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HACKER: (CONT) We're not incompetent. We could certainly check up on you if we wanted, that is, er, check up on people. Not you, of course, I don't mean you. But we're not interested in people. Er, that is, when I say we're not interested in people, I don't mean we're not interested in people, of course we are, I mean we're not interested in people in that way, if you know what I mean, in that we would never want to check up on ... people.

MCKENZIE: So what's the Data Base for, if it's not for checking up on people ?

HACKER: You know, that's a very interesting question. (PAUSE) Look, the point is, people have just been alarmed by one or two silly press articles. It's a computer, that's all, it's for storing up information and speeding up government business thus avoiding a massive expansion of clerical staff. Computers are good news.

MCKENZIE: But if you put information into it, you're going to want information out !

HACKER: Not necessarily.

MCKENZIE: So you're spending £25 million to store information you're never going to use ?

HACKER: No - yes - no, well - yes, no, there will be safeguards.

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MCKENZIE: (CONT) Such as ?

HACKER: Well, we'll be looking at a whole range of possibilities. But it's a complex and highly technical business, you know.

MCKENZIE: Well, perhaps I can help you. Let me read you an extract from an article written two years ago by the Editor of Reform. I think his name was Jim Hacker. The article was called: "Big Brother and the Not-So-Civil-Service". I quote: "if we are to protect the citizen from Government spying, three measures are urgent. One, no Civil Servant must have access to another department's files without specific signed authorisation from a Minister. Two, unauthorised snooping must be made a criminal offence. And three, every citizen should have the right to inspect his own personal file and get errors corrected." What do you think of those proposals, Mr Hacker ? Alarmist ?

HACKER: No, well, I stand by that, I mean, all these things must happen. Er, in due course.

MCKENZIE: Why not now ?

HACKER: Well, Rome wasn't built in a day. It's under review. But ... well, these things take time you know.

MCKENZIE: Mr Hacker, am I talking to the former Editor of Reform or a Civil Service Spokesman ?

BBC TV

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HACKER: (CONT) Well, we haven't talked yet about the safeguards. My new Bureaucratic Watch Dog Office, for instance, and ...

MCKENZIE: Mr Hacker it sounds as if we'll be needing a whole pack of watchdogs before very long. Thank you very much.

- 5 -

I thought I'd waffled a bit, but Bob told me I'd stonewalled beautifully. We went back to Hospitality for another New Year's drink. I congratulated him on finding that old article of mine – a crafty move. He said that one of his research girls had found it, and asked if I wanted to meet her. I declined – and said I'd just go back to my office and have a look at her dossier!

I watched the programme in the evening. I think it was okay. I hope Sir Humphrey is pleased, anyway.

January 7th

There was divided opinion in the office this afternoon about my TV appearance three days ago. The matter came up at a 4 p.m. meeting with Sir Humphrey, Bernard and Frank Weisel.

Humphrey and Bernard thought I'd been splendid. Dignified and suitable. But Frank's voice was particularly notable by its silence, during this chorus of praise. When I asked him what he thought, he just snorted like a horse. I asked him to translate.

He didn't answer me, but turned to Sir Humphrey. 'I congratulate you,' he began, his manner even a little less charming than usual. 'Jim is now perfectly house-trained.' Humphrey attempted to excuse himself and leave the room.

'If you'll excuse me, Mr Weasel . . .'

'Weisel!' snapped Frank. He turned on me. 'Do you realise you just say everything the Civil Service programmes you to say. What are you, a man or a mouth?'

Nobody laughed at his little pun.

'It may be very hard for a political adviser to understand,' said Sir Humphrey, in his most patronising manner, 'but I am merely a civil servant and I just do as I am instructed by my master.'

Frank fumed away, muttering, 'your master, typical stupid bloody phrase, public school nonsense,' and so forth. I must say, the phrase interested me too.

'What happens,' I asked, 'if the Minister is a woman? What do you call her?'

Humphrey was immediately in his element. He loves answering questions about good form and protocol. 'Yes, that's most interesting. We sought an answer to the point when I was a Principal Private Secretary and Dr Edith Summerskill was appointed Minister in 1947. I didn't quite like to refer to her as my mistress.'

He paused. For effect, I thought at first, but then he appeared to have more to say on the subject.

'What was the answer?' I asked.

'We're still waiting for it,' he explained.

Frank chipped in with a little of his heavy-duty irony. 'It's under review is it? Rome wasn't built in a day, eh Sir Humphrey? These things take time, do they?'

Frank is actually beginning to get on my nerves. The chip on his shoulder about the Civil Service is getting larger every day. I don't know why, because they have given him an office, he has free access to me, and they tell me that they give him all possible papers that would be of use to him. Now he's started to take out his aggressions on me. He's like a bear with a sore head. Perhaps he's still getting over his New Year's hangover.

Humphrey wanted to leave, so did I, but Bernard started to give me my diary appointments – and that started another wrangle. Bernard told me I was to meet him at Paddington at 8 a.m. tomorrow, because I was to speak at the Luncheon of the Conference of Municipal Treasurers at the Vehicle Licensing Centre in Swansea. Frank then reminded me that I was due in Newcastle tomorrow night to address the by-election meeting. Bernard pointed out to me that I couldn't do both and I explained this to Frank. Frank pointed out that the by-election was important to us, whereas the Swansea trip was just a Civil Service junket, and I explained this to Bernard. Bernard then reminded me that the Conference had been in my diary for some time and that they all expected me to go to Swansea, and I explained this to Frank and then Frank reminded me that Central House [*the party headquarters – Ed.*] expected me to go to Newcastle, but I didn't explain this to Bernard because by this time I was tired of explaining and I said so. So Frank asked Bernard to explain why I was double booked, Bernard said no one had told him about Newcastle, I asked Frank why he hadn't told Bernard, Frank asked me why *I* hadn't told Bernard, and I pointed out that I couldn't remember everything.

'I shall go to Swansea,' I said.

'Is that a decision, Minister?' asked Bernard.

'That's final,' I said.

Frank then played his trump card. 'The PM expects you to go to Newcastle,' he said. Why hadn't he said this till now, stupid man? I asked if he was sure. He nodded.

'Bernard, I think I'd better go to Newcastle,' I said.

'Is that a decision?' asked Frank.

'Yes, that's final,' I said. 'And now I'm going home.'

'Is *that* a decision?' asked Sir Humphrey. I wasn't sure whether or not he was asking for clarification or sending me up. I still find him completely baffling. Anyway, he continued: 'Minister, I think you've made the wrong decision, if I may say so. Your visit to Swansea is in the programme, it's been announced, you can't really get out of it.'

This was becoming impossible. They all seem to expect me to be in two places at once. I told them to find some way of getting me from Swansea to Newcastle – train, car, helicopter, I didn't care how – and I would fulfil both engagements. 'And now,' I announced, 'I'm going home – that's final!'

'Finally final?' asked Bernard.

His intentions are equally obscure.

As I left, Bernard gave Roy, my driver, four red boxes and asked me to be sure to do them tonight because of all the Committee papers for tomorrow and letters that have to go off before the weekend.

'And if you're a good boy,' said Frank in a rather poor imitation of Bernard's accent, 'your nanny will give you a sweetie.'

I really don't have to put up with all this aggravation from Frank. I'm stuck with these damn permanent officials, but Frank is only there at my express invitation. I may have to remind him of this, very soon.

When I got home Annie was packing. 'Leaving me at last?' I enquired jovially. She reminded me that it is our anniversary tomorrow and we have arranged to go to Paris.

I was appalled!

I tried to explain to her about the trips to Swansea and Newcastle. She feels that she doesn't want to spend her anniversary in Swansea and Newcastle, particularly not at a lunch for Municipal Treasurers at the Vehicle Licensing Centre. I can see her point. She told me to cancel my meetings, I said I couldn't, so she said she'd go to Paris without me.

So I phoned Bernard. I told him it was my wife's wedding anniversary – Annie said, 'yours too' – and mine too. Bernard made some silly joke about a coincidence. I told him I was going to Paris tomorrow, instead, and that it was final and that I knew I'd said it was final before but now this was really final – I told him he'd have to sort everything out. Then *he* talked for three minutes and when I rang off I was still going to Swansea and Newcastle tomorrow.

Those civil servants can talk you in or out of anything. I just don't seem to know my own mind any more.

Annie and I fumed in silence for a while, and finally I asked her the

really important question of the day: had she seen me on my TV interview – (I'd been in London, she'd been down in the constituency).

'I saw someone who looked like you.'

I asked her what that was supposed to mean. She didn't answer.

'Frank said that I'm just a Civil Service mouthpiece,' I muttered resentfully.

Annie said, 'Yes.'

I was shocked. 'You mean . . . you agree?'

'Of course,' she said. 'You could have hired an actor to say it all for you. He'd have said it better. And while you're at it, why not just sign your letters with a rubber stamp or get an Assistant Secretary to sign them – they write them anyway.'

I tried to remain dignified. 'Assistant Secretaries do not write my letters,' I said. 'Under-Secretaries write them.'

'I rest my case, m'lud,' she said.

'You think I've become a puppet too?'

'I do. Maybe they should get Miss Piggy to do your job. At least she's prettier.'

I must say I was feeling pretty hurt and defeated. I sighed and sat on the bed. I honestly felt near to tears. Is this how a Cabinet Minister usually feels, I wondered, or am I just an abysmal failure? I couldn't see what was wrong, but something certainly was.

'I don't know what to do about it,' I said quietly. 'I'm just swamped by the volume of work. I'm so depressed.'

Annie suggested that, as we weren't going to Paris after all, we might at least go for a quiet little candlelit dinner on the corner. I told her that I couldn't, because Bernard had told me to work through three red boxes tonight.

Annie said something which changed my whole perception of my situation. She said, 'What do you mean, "Bernard's told me!"? When you edited *Reform* you were quite different – you went in, you told people what to do, demanded what you wanted, and you got it! What's changed? You're the same man – you're just allowing them to walk all over you.'

And, suddenly, I saw that it was true. She's right. That's why Frank has been getting at me too. Either I get them by the throat or they'll get me by the throat! It's the law of the jungle, just like in the Cabinet.

'How many articles did you blue-pencil and tear up in those days?' she asked.

'Dozens,' I remembered.

'And how many official papers have you torn up?'

'None,' I told her. 'I'm not allowed to.'

She smiled reproachfully at me, and I realised that I still hadn't broken out of this destructive pattern of behaviour.

'Not allowed to?' She held my hand. 'Darling, you're the Minister. You can do anything you like.'

She's right. I am. I can. And, somehow, all my officials have house-trained me. I see it now. Honestly, I'm so grateful to Annie, she has such remarkable common sense. Well, they're going to get quite a surprise. Suddenly, I can't wait to get to the office. My New Year Resolution is: Take Charge.

January 11th

Today was better.

But only a little better. *My* attitude was fine, but unfortunately *his* didn't seem to change all that much.

I summoned Humphrey to my office. I don't think he liked being summoned. Then I told him that Frank was absolutely correct, and Bob McKenzie too – the National Data Base has to be organised differently.

To my surprise, he agreed meekly. 'Yes Minister,' he murmured.

'We are going to have all possible built-in safeguards,' I went on.

'Yes Minister,' he murmured again.

'Right away,' I added. This took him by surprise.

'Er . . . what precisely do you mean, right away?'

'I mean right away,' I said.

'Oh I see, you mean *right away*, Minister.'

'Got it in one, Humphrey.'

So far, so good. But, having totally accepted at the start of the conversation that it was all to be different, he now started to chip away at my resolve.

'The only thing is,' he began, 'perhaps I should remind you that we are still in the early months of this government and there's an awful lot to get on with, Minister . . .'

I interrupted. 'Humphrey,' I reiterated firmly, 'we are changing the rules of the Data Base. Now!'

'But you can't, Minister,' he said, coming out into the open.

'I can,' I said, remembering my stern talk from Annie last night, 'I'm the Minister.'

He changed tactics again. 'Indeed you are, Minister,' he said, rapidly switching from bullying to grovelling, 'and quite an excellent

Minister at that, if I may say so.'

I brushed all the flannel aside. 'Never mind the soft soap, Humphrey,' I replied. 'I want all citizens to have the right to check their own file, and I want legislation to make unauthorised access to personal files illegal.'

'Very well,' said Sir Humphrey. 'It shall be done.'

This rather took the wind out of my sails. 'Right,' I said. 'Good,' I said. 'Then we go ahead,' I said, wondering what the catch was.

I was right. There was a catch. Sir Humphrey took this opportunity to explain to me that we can go ahead, if the Cabinet agrees, and take the matter to the Ministerial Committee, and then we can go ahead to the Official Committee. After that, of course, it's all plain sailing – straight to the Cabinet Committee! And then back to Cabinet itself. I interrupted to point out that we'd *started* with Cabinet.

'Only the policy, Minister,' explained Sir Humphrey. 'At this juncture Cabinet will have to consider the specific proposals.'

I conceded the point, but remarked that after going back to Cabinet we could then go ahead. Sir Humphrey agreed – but with the proviso that if Cabinet raises any questions, which it almost certainly would, the proposals would then have to go back to the Ministerial Committee, the Official Committee, the Cabinet Committee and the Cabinet again.

'I know all this,' I said brusquely. 'I'm assuming that Cabinet will raise no objections.' Sir Humphrey raised his eyebrows and visibly refrained from comment.

I didn't know all this at all, actually – the complex mechanics of passing legislation don't ever really become clear to you in Opposition or on the back benches.

'So after Cabinet, we go ahead. Right?'

'Yes,' he said, 'to the Leader of the House Committee. And then to Parliament – where there's the Committee stage of course.'

But suddenly the penny dropped. Suddenly I realised he was blurring the whole issue. A blindfold dropped away from my eyes, as if by magic. 'Humphrey,' I said, 'you're talking about legislation – but *I'm* talking about administrative and procedural changes.'

Sir Humphrey smiled complacently. 'If members of the public are to have the right to take legal action, then legislation is necessary and it will be very complicated.'

I had the answer to that. 'Legislation is not necessary in order for the citizen to be able to see his own file, is it?'

Sir Humphrey thought carefully about this. 'No-o-o-o,' he finally

said, with great reluctance.

'Then we'll go ahead with that.' Round one to me, I thought.

But Sir Humphrey had not yet conceded even that much. 'Minister,' he began, 'we could manage that *slightly* quicker, but there are an awful lot of administrative problems as well.'

'Look,' I said, 'this must have come up before. This Data Base has been in preparation for years, it hasn't just materialised overnight – these problems must have been discussed.'

'Yes indeed,' he agreed.

'So what conclusions have been reached?' I asked.

Sir Humphrey didn't reply. At first I thought he was thinking. Then I thought he hadn't heard me, for some curious reason. So I asked him again: 'What conclusions have been reached?' a little louder, just in case. Again there was no visible reaction. I thought he'd become ill.

'Humphrey,' I asked, becoming a little concerned for his health and sanity, 'can you hear me?'

'My lips are sealed,' he replied, through unsealed lips.

I asked him what exactly he meant.

'I am not at liberty to discuss the previous government's plans,' he said. I was baffled.

'Why not?' I asked.

'Minister – would you like everything that you have said and done in the privacy of this office to be revealed subsequently to one of your opponents?'

I'd never thought of that. Of course, I'd be absolutely horrified. It would be a constant threat. I would never be able to speak freely in my own office.

Sir Humphrey knew that he'd scored a bull's-eye. He pressed home his advantage. 'We cannot give your political opponents ammunition against you – nor vice versa.'

Of course, I can see his point but there is one essential difference in this instance. I pointed out to Sir Humphrey that Tom Sargent was my predecessor, and he wouldn't mind. He's a very decent chap. After all, the Data Base is not a party political matter, politicians of all parties are united on this.

But Sir Humphrey wouldn't budge. 'It's the principle, Minister,' he said, and added that it just wouldn't be cricket.

This was a powerful argument. Naturally I don't want to do anything that's not cricket. So I suppose I'll never know what went on before I came here. I can't see a way round that.

So where have we got to? We've established that we don't need

legislation to enable the citizen to see his own file, but that there are numerous unspecified admin. problems that have to be solved first.

One other thing occurred today. Bernard said that because of the adverse (Bernard called it 'not entirely favourable') press reaction to my appearance on *Topic*, the other network wants me to appear on their programme *World in Focus*. Funny how television is never interested when you've got an important announcement to make, but the moment some trivial thing goes wrong the phone never stops ringing. At first I told him to decline, but he said that if I don't appear they'll do the item anyway, and no one will be there to state my case.

I asked Humphrey what I was to say about safeguards for the Data Base, in view of our very limited progress today. 'Perhaps you could remind them, Minister, that Rome wasn't built in a day.'

Big help!

As I review the meeting, writing it all down for this diary, I now feel that I got absolutely nowhere today. But there must be *some* way to get Sir Humphrey and the DAA to do what I tell them.

[*In the light of Hacker's experience and frustrations, it is as well to remember that if a Whitehall committee is not positively stopped, it will continue. There could be a Crimea committee, for all we know. There is very probably a ration-book committee and an identity-card committee – Ed.*]

January 12th

Today, by a lucky chance, I learned a bit more about dealing with Sir Humphrey.

I bumped into Tom Sargent, in the House of Commons smoking room. I asked if I could join him, and he was only too pleased.

'How are you enjoying being in Opposition?' I asked him jocularly.

Like the good politician he is, he didn't exactly answer my question. 'How are you enjoying being in government?' he replied.

I could see no reason to beat about the bush, and I told him that, quite honestly, I'm not enjoying it as much as I'd expected to.

'Humphrey got you under control?' he smiled.

I dodged that one, but said that it's so very hard to get anything done. He nodded, so I asked him, 'Did *you* get anything done?'

'Almost nothing,' he replied cheerfully. 'But I didn't cotton on to his technique till I'd been there over a year – and then of course there was the election.'

It emerged from the conversation that the technique in question was Humphrey's system for stalling.

According to Tom, it's in five stages. I made a note during our conversation, for future reference.

Stage One: Humphrey will say that the administration is in its early months and there's an awful lot of other things to get on with. (Tom clearly knows his stuff. That is just what Humphrey said to me the day before yesterday.)

Stage Two: If I persist past Stage One, he'll say that he quite appreciates the intention, something certainly ought to be done – but is this the right way to achieve it?

Stage Three: If I'm still undeterred he will shift his ground from how I do it to *when* I do it, i.e. 'Minister, this is not the time, for all sorts of reasons.'

Stage Four: Lots of Ministers settle for Stage Three according to Tom. But if not, he will then say that the policy has run into difficulties – technical, political and/or legal. (Legal difficulties are best because they can be made totally incomprehensible and can go on for ever.)

Stage Five: Finally, because the first four stages have taken up to three years, the last stage is to say that 'we're getting rather near to the run-up to the next general election – so we can't be sure of getting the policy through'.

The stages can be made to last three years because at each stage Sir Humphrey will do absolutely nothing until the Minister chases him. And he assumes, rightly, that the Minister has too much else to do. [*The whole process is called Creative Inertia – Ed.*]

Tom asked me what the policy was that I'm trying to push through. When I told him that I'm trying to make the National Integrated Data Base less of a Big Brother, he roared with laughter.

'I suppose he's pretending it's all new?'

I nodded.

'Clever old sod,' said Tom, 'we spent years on that. We almost had a White Paper ready to bring out, but the election was called. I've done it all.'

I could hardly believe my ears. I asked about the administrative problems. Tom said there were none – all solved. And Tom guessed that my enquiries about the past were met with silence – 'clever bugger, he's wiped the slate clean'.

Anyway, now I know the five stages, I should be able to deal with Humphrey quite differently. Tom advised me not to let on that we'd had this conversation, because it would spoil the fun. He also warned me of the 'Three Varieties of Civil Service Silence', which would be Humphrey's last resort if completely cornered:

1 The silence when they do not want to tell you the facts: *Discreet Silence.*
2 The silence when they do not intend to take any action: *Stubborn Silence.*
3 The silence when you catch them out and they haven't a leg to stand on. They imply that they could vindicate themselves completely if only they were free to tell all, but they are too honourable to do so: *Courageous Silence.*

Finally Tom told me what Humphrey's next move would be. He asked how many boxes they'd given me for tonight: 'Three? Four?'

'Five,' I admitted, somewhat shamefaced.

'Five?' He couldn't hide his astonishment at how badly I was doing. 'Have they told you that you needn't worry too much about the fifth?' I nodded. 'Right. Well, I'll bet you that at the bottom of the fifth box will be a submission explaining why any new moves on the Data Base must be delayed – and if you never find it or read it they'll do nothing further, and in six months' time they'll say they told you all about it.'

There was one more thing I wanted to ask Tom, who really had been extremely kind and helpful. He's been in office for years, in various government posts. So I said to him: 'Look Tom, you know all the Civil Service tricks.'

'Not all,' he grinned, 'just a few hundred.'

'Right,' I said. 'Now how do you defeat them? How do you make them do something they do not want to do?'

Tom smiled ruefully, and shook his head. 'My dear fellow,' he replied, 'if I knew that I wouldn't be in Opposition.'

January 13th

I did my boxes so late last night that I'm writing up yesterday's discoveries a day late.

Tom had been most helpful to me. When I got home I told Annie all about it over dinner. She couldn't understand why Tom, as a member of the Opposition, would have been so helpful.

I explained to her that the Opposition aren't really the opposition. They're just called the Opposition. But, in fact, they are the opposition in exile. The Civil Service are the opposition in residence.

Then after dinner I did the boxes and sure enough, at the bottom of the fifth box, I found a submission on the Data Base. Not merely at the bottom of the fifth box – to be doubly certain the submission had somehow slipped into the middle of an eighty-page report on Welfare Procedures.

By the way, Tom has also lent me all his private papers on the Data Base, which he kept when he left office. Very useful!

The submission contained the expected delaying phrases: 'Subject still under discussion . . . programme not finalised . . . nothing precipitate . . . failing instructions to the contrary propose await developments.'

Annie suggested I ring Humphrey and tell him that I disagree. I was reluctant – it was 2 a.m., and he'd be fast asleep.

'Why should he sleep while you're working?' Annie asked me. 'After all, he's had you on the run for three months. Now it's your turn.'

'I couldn't possibly do that,' I said.

Annie looked at me. 'What's his number?' I asked, as I reached for our address book.

Annie added reasonably: 'After all, if it was in the fifth box you couldn't have found it any earlier, could you?'

Humphrey answered the phone with a curious sort of grunting noise. I had obviously woken him up. 'Sorry to ring you so late, you weren't in the middle of dinner, were you?'

'No,' he said, sounding somewhat confused, 'we had dinner some while ago. What's the time?'

I told him it was 2 a.m.

'Good God!' He sounded as though he'd really woken up now. 'What's the crisis?'

'No crisis. I'm still going through my red boxes and I knew you'd still be hard at it.'

'Oh yes,' he said, stifling a yawn. 'Nose to the grindstone.'

I told him I'd just got to the paper on the Data Base.

'Oh, you've found . . .' he corrected himself without pausing, 'you've read it.'

I told him that I thought he needed to know, straight away, that I wasn't happy with it, that I knew he'd be grateful to have a little extra time to work on something else, and that I hoped he didn't mind my calling him.

'Always a pleasure to hear from you, Minister,' he said, and I think he slammed down the phone.

After I rang off I realised I'd forgotten to tell him to come and talk about it before Cabinet tomorrow. I was about to pick up the phone when Annie said: 'Don't ring him now.'

I was surprised by this sudden show of kindness and consideration for Sir Humphrey, but I agreed. 'No, perhaps it is a bit late.'

She smiled. 'Yes. Just give him another ten minutes.'

January 14th

This morning I made a little more progress in my battle for control over Humphrey and my Department, though the battle is not yet won.

But I had with me my notes from the meeting with Tom Sargent, and – exactly as Tom had predicted – Sir Humphrey put his stalling technique into bat.

'Humphrey,' I began, 'have you drafted the proposed safeguards for the Data Base?'

'Minister,' he replied plausibly, 'I quite appreciate your intention and I fully agree that there is a need for safeguards but I'm wondering if this is the right way to achieve it.'

'It's my way,' I said decisively, and I ticked off the first objection in my little notebook. 'And that's my decision.'

Humphrey was surprised that his objection had been brushed aside so early, without protracted discussion – so surprised that he went straight on to his second stage.

'Even so Minister,' he said, 'this is not really the time, for all sorts of reasons.'

I ticked off number two in my notebook, and replied: 'It is the perfect time – safeguards have to develop parallel with systems, not after them – that's common sense.'

Humphrey was forced to move on to his third objection. Tom really has analysed his technique well.

'Unfortunately, Minister,' said Humphrey doggedly, 'we have tried this before, but, well . . . we have run into all sorts of difficulties.'

I ticked off number three in my little book. Humphrey had noticed this by now, and tried to look over my shoulder to see what was written there. I held the book away from him.

'What sort of difficulties?' I enquired.

'Technical, for example,' said Humphrey.

Thanks to a careful study of Tom's private papers, I had the answer ready. 'No problem at all,' I said airily. 'I've been doing some research. We can use the same basic file interrogation programme as the US State Department and the Swedish Ministry of the Interior. No technical problems.'

Sir Humphrey was getting visibly rattled, but he persisted. 'There are also formidable administrative problems. All departments are affected. An interdepartmental committee will have to be set up . . .'

I interrupted him in mid-sentence. 'No,' I said firmly. 'I think you'll find, if you look into it, that the existing security procedures are adequate. This can just be an extension. Anything else?'

Humphrey was gazing at me with astonishment. He just couldn't work out how I was so thoroughly in command of the situation. Was I just making a series of inspired guesses, he wondered. As he didn't speak for a moment, I decided to help him out.

'Legal problems?' I suggested helpfully.

'Yes Minister,' he agreed at once, hoping that he had me cornered at last. Legal problems were always his best bet.

'Good, good,' I said, and ticked off the last but one stage on my little list. Again he tried to see what I had written down.

'There is a question,' he began carefully, 'of whether we have the legal power . . .'

'I'll answer it,' I announced grandly. 'We have.' He was looking at me in wonderment. 'All personnel affected are bound by their service agreement anyway.'

He couldn't argue because, of course, I was right. Grasping at straws he said: 'But Minister, there will have to be extra staffing – are you sure you will get it through Cabinet and the Parliamentary Party?'

'Quite sure,' I said. 'Anything else?' I looked at my list. 'No, nothing else. Right, so we go ahead?'

Humphrey was silent. I wondered whether he was being discreet, stubborn or courageous. Stubborn, I think.

Eventually, *I* spoke. 'You're very silent,' I remarked. There was more silence. 'Why are you so silent, by the way?'

He realised that he had to speak, or the jig was up. 'Minister, you do not seem to realise how much work is involved.'

Casually, I enquired if he'd never investigated safeguards before, under another government perhaps, as I thought I remembered written answers to Parliamentary questions in the past.

His reply went rather as follows: 'Minister, in the first place, we've agreed that the question is not cricket. In the second place, if there had been investigations, which there haven't or not necessarily, or I am not at liberty to say if there have, there would have been a project team which, had it existed, on which I cannot comment, would now be disbanded if it had existed and the members returned to their original departments, had there indeed been any such members.' Or words to that effect.

I waited till the torrent of useless language came to a halt, and then

I delivered my ultimatum. I told him that I wanted safeguards on the use of the Data Base made available immediately. He told me it isn't possible. I told him it is. He told me it isn't. I told him it is. We went on like that ('tis, 'tisn't, 'tis, 'tisn't) like a couple of three-year-olds, glowering at each other, till Bernard popped in.

I didn't want to reveal that Tom had told me of the safeguards that were ready and waiting, because then I'd have no more aces up my sleeve.

While I contemplated this knotty problem, Bernard reminded me of my engagements: Cabinet at 10, a speech to the Anglo-American Society lunch, and the *World in Focus* interview this evening. I asked him if he could get me out of the lunch. 'Not really, Minister,' he answered, 'it's been announced. It's in the programme.'

And suddenly the penny dropped. The most wonderful plan formed in my mind, the idea of the century!

I told Humphrey and Bernard to be sure to watch me on TV tonight.

[*The transcript of Hacker's appearance that night on* World in Focus *follows. It contains his first truly memorable victory over his officials–Ed.*]

THAMES

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WORLD IN FOCUS - JANUARY 14th - HACKER INTERVIEW

PRESENTER And our man on the spot tonight is the Right Honourable Jim Hacker, Minister for Administrative Affairs, and the man at the heart of the Big Brother computer controversy. He's talking to Godfrey Finch.

FINCH Minister, as you know, there's been an outcry this week about the dossier that the Civil Service Bureaucracy is apparently starting to build up on every citizen in the country. It is rumoured that this is not your own policy, that you wish to have safeguards for the individual citizen, but that you are being totally frustrated every step of the way by the Civil Service machine.

HACKER You know Godfrey, there's a lot of nonsense talked about the Civil Service. It is actually a marvellous, efficient, professional organisation capable of tremendous effort and speed. It is full of talented, dedicated people who do all they can to help Government policies become law.

FINCH Thank you for the commercial, Minister. If we could start the programme now ?

HACKER The fact is, the Civil Service and I are in complete accord on this whole matter, and our proposals are now ready for publication.

I am happy to announce tonight that, from March 1st, every citizen of the UK will have the absolute right to inspect his personal file and to check any information that he or she has ever supplied to the Government.

Secondly, no Civil Servant will be allowed to examine personal files from another department without written authority from a Minister. And I shall be announcing, in the House next week, legislation enabling the citizens to take legal action against any Civil Servant who gains unauthorised access to his file.

FINCH Well ... that's, er ... well, that's very interesting and encouraging, Minister. Why did you not say so earlier and put people's minds at rest ?

HACKER Frankly, Godfrey, I didn't believe the Civil Service could meet those deadlines. But they've convinced me that they can. Indeed my Permanent Secretary is staking his reputation on it.

And, if not, heads will roll.

SIR BERNARD WOOLLEY RECALLS:[1]

Jim Hacker always gave me the credit for this brilliant ploy, because of the unintentional double meaning of my remark, 'it's been announced, it's in the programme'.

However, I personally believe that Hacker was inspired by Edward Heath's famous manoeuvre when he was Prime Minister and wanted – in the teeth of Civil Service opposition – to announce a new £10 Christmas bonus for the Old Age Pensioners. After many weeks of obstruction within Number Ten he simply appeared on *Panorama* and announced it as a *fait accompli*. It happened. It happened late, but it happened.

I well remember that Humphrey Appleby's face was a picture when Jim made his statement – especially at the moment when he said that his Permanent Secretary had staked his reputation on it.

He turned to me and said: 'It can't be done.' I made no reply.

Then he said to me: 'Well Bernard, what do you make of the Minister's performance?'

I was obliged to say that, in my opinion, it was checkmate.

January 15th

Today was my happiest day since I became a Minister.

'Did you see me on the box last night?' I asked Humphrey cheerfully as he gloomed into the office looking like Mr Sowerberry at a funeral.

'Of course,' he replied, tight-lipped.

Actually, it didn't matter whether he'd seen me or not, because my TV appearance was completely reported in this morning's press.

'How was I?' I asked innocently. 'Good?'

'A most remarkable performance, Minister, if I may say so,' he answered with studied ambiguity.

'You may, you may,' I said, affecting not to notice it.

'Minister, we have been working very hard all night, and I'm happy to be able to inform you that we have come up with some draft proposals that would enable you to achieve your desired objectives by the stated dates.'

In other words, he spent five minutes digging out from the files the proposals agreed last year when Tom was Minister.

'Well done, Humphrey,' I said ingenuously. 'You see, I told the nation how splendid you are and I was right. I had every confidence in you.'

'Quite so, Minister,' he said through clenched teeth.

[1] In conversation with the Editors.

He got out a folder containing his proposals.

'Are those your proposals?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'Here are mine,' I said, and produced a folder too.

'You have proposals too?' He was surprised.

I told Humphrey to read his proposed safeguards. Then I would read mine. And we would see how they compared.

Humphrey started reading. 'One – Personal Data – 1A. Safeguards must be applied with reference to . . .'

I could resist it no longer. Reading from my folder, I joined in, and together, in unison, we read: '. . . two criteria – the need to know and the right to know. 1.A(i) the need to know. Only those officials for whom the information was submitted may be deemed, prima facie, to have a need to know.'

We looked at each other.

'We seem to be of the same mind,' I remarked.

'Where did those proposals come from?' he demanded. I said nothing. After a few moments he repeated, 'Where did those proposals come from?'

'Humphrey,' I replied in a tone of slight reproof, 'my lips are sealed.'

5
The Writing on the Wall

January 18th

The help that I received from Tom Sargent in the matter of the National Data Base might seem unusual to those who are outside the extraordinary world of politics. Strange though it may seem to those members of the public who read numerous abusive speeches in which members of the two main political parties revile each other as incompetent, dishonest, criminally stupid and negligent, cross-party friendships are extremely common. In fact, it is much easier to be friends with a member of the opposite party than a member of one's own party – for one is not in direct personal competition for office with members of the Opposition in the way that one is with one's colleagues.

All my Cabinet colleagues and I were naturally in bitter competition with each other during our years in Opposition. In the last three months we've all been so busy trying to deal with the *real* opposition – the Civil Service – that we've not had any real time to do-down each other. But I have a hunch, from the recent atmosphere in Cabinet, that some political manoeuvring is in the air again.

There are still numerous other matters concerning me, about which I have also had a little time to reflect this weekend. I realised early on (in my first week as a Minister, in fact) that Open Government presents real problems. It was made clear to me that if people stop having secrets they stop having power.

In fact, paradoxically, government is more open when it is less open. Open Government is rather like the live theatre: the audience gets a performance. And it gives a response. But, like the theatre, in order to have something to show openly there must first be much hidden activity. And all sorts of things have to be cut or altered in rehearsals, and not shown to the public until you have got them right.

The drawback with all this is that it begs the question – which is that

the Civil Service keeps secrets from Ministers. They say they don't, but I'm sure they do. I'm now all in favour of keeping secrets from the public of course, for the reasons I've just given, but it should be *my* privilege, as the people's elected representative, to decide when to keep the people in ignorance. It should not be up to the Civil Service to keep *me* in ignorance.

Unfortunately, it is pretty hard to get this across to them.

I have also learned a few general lessons. I must never show my hopes or fears to Humphrey, if I can avoid it – especially party fears. If you give away your political weaknesses, they'll destroy you. You have to keep them guessing.

I now realise that I should always get civil servants to commit themselves first. Never say, 'I think . . .', but always say, 'What do *you* think . . .?'

I've also learned about 'yes' and 'no'. You can always turn a 'no' into a 'yes' – but not vice versa. Furthermore, when you say 'no', let the Private Office say it for you – but when you say 'yes', pre-empt the Private Office and phone up yourself. That way, *they* get the blame and *I* get the credit.

In fact, the point about making your own phone calls is crucial. The whole system is designed to prevent you from doing anything yourself. As far as the Civil Service is concerned, you must never make a phone call, or sort out a problem. Woe betide any Minister who lifts the phone to try to sort out a foreign trade deal, for instance. Civil servants will come at you from all sides mouthing phrases like, 'it's an FCO matter . . . correct channels . . . policy hangs by a thread . . . you *do* realise, don't you? . . . what if something were to go wrong? . . . on your head be it, Minister!' and many others.

This is all very squashing to the morale of an important public figure such as myself. If you're not careful they'll eventually have you in such a state that you'll be frightened to phone Potters Bar.

Furthermore, everything that one does is carefully watched and supervised. Bernard listens in to all my phone calls, except the ones that I make on the private line. The theory is that he can make useful notes on my behalf, and is fully informed about my views and activities – true! But, as we know, information is a double-edged sword. [*It's no accident that most of the really powerful offices in the world are called 'Secretary' – Secretary of State, Permanent Secretary, General Secretary, Party Secretary, etc. 'Secretary' means the person who is entrusted with the secrets, the information no one else knows – the élite – Ed.*]

I must say, though, that I find it an invaluable way to pass on criticism of my permanent officials, knowing that Bernard is listening in to my every word!

Tonight, in one of my red boxes, there is a third redraft of a report to the Think-Tank on Civil Service overmanning. [*'Think-Tank' was the colloquial name of the Central Policy Review Staff – Ed.*] I'm still not pleased with it. I shall have a lot of questions to ask about it tomorrow morning.

January 19th

We had a meeting about the Think-Tank report. I told Humphrey that I still wasn't happy with it, and he obligingly offered to redraft it.

This hardly seems to be the answer. I pointed out that he had redrafted it three times already.

Bernard argued about this. 'That's not quite correct, Minister.'

I told him I could count. And that this was the third draft. 'Quite so,' he said. 'It has been drafted once and redrafted twice.' A typical piece of boring pedantic quibbling. Bernard has an idiotic obsession about using language with accuracy – it's fortunate he's not in politics.

I told him not to quibble, and Humphrey said placatingly he would be happy to redraft the report a third time. Of course he would. And a fourth time, and a fifth no doubt. 'And a sixth,' I went on. 'But it still won't say what *I* want it to say, it will say what *you* want it to say. And I want it to say what *I* want it to say.'

'What do you want it to say?' asked Bernard.

'We want it to say what you want it to say,' murmured Humphrey soothingly.

'I'm sure,' wittered Bernard, 'that the Department doesn't want you to say something that you don't want to say.'

I tried again. For the fourth time in as many weeks I explained the position. 'Six weeks ago the Think-Tank asked for our evidence on Civil Service overmanning. Three times I have briefed a group of civil servants in words of one syllable – and each time I get back a totally unintelligible draft which says the exact opposite of what I have told them to say.'

'With respect, Minister,' countered Sir Humphrey (untruthfully), 'how do you know it says the opposite if it is totally unintelligible?' He really is the master of the irrelevant question-begging answer.

'All I want to say,' I explained plaintively, 'is that the Civil Service is grossly overmanned and must be slimmed down.'

'I'm sure we all want to say that,' lied my Permanent Secretary.

'And that is what the report says.'

'No it doesn't.'

'Yes it does.'

Then we said, 'Oh no, it doesn't,' 'Oh yes, it does,' 'Oh no, it doesn't,' at each other for a while. Then I quoted phrases from the draft report at him. It says, for instance, that a phased reduction of about a hundred thousand people is 'not in the public interest'. Translation: it *is* in the public interest but it is not in the interest of the Civil Service. 'Public opinion is not yet ready for such a step,' it says. Translation: Public opinion is ready but the Civil Service is not! Then it goes on: 'However, this is an urgent problem and we therefore propose setting up a Royal Commission.' Translation: This problem is a bloody nuisance, but we hope that by the time a Royal Commission reports, four years from now, everyone will have forgotten about it or we can find someone else to blame.

[*Hacker was beginning to understand Civil Service code language. Other examples are:*

'I think we have to be very careful.' Translation: We are not going to do this.

'Have you thought through all the implications?' Translation: You are not going to do this.

'It is a slightly puzzling decision.' Translation: Idiotic!

'Not entirely straightforward.' Translation: Criminal.

'With the greatest possible respect, Minister . . .' Translation: Minister, that is the silliest idea I've ever heard – Ed.]

Humphrey could see no way out of this impasse. 'Minister, I can only suggest that we redraft it.' Brilliant!

'Humphrey,' I said, 'will you give me a straight answer to a straight question?'

This question took him completely by surprise, and he stopped to think for a brief moment.

'So long as you are not asking me to resort to crude generalisations or vulgar over-simplifications, such as a simple yes or no,' he said, in a manner that contrived to be both openly ingenuous and deeply evasive, 'I shall do my utmost to oblige.'

'Do you mean yes?' I asked.

A fierce internal struggle appeared to be raging within. 'Yes,' he said finally.

'Right,' I said. 'Here is the straight question.'

Sir Humphrey's face fell. 'Oh,' he said, 'I thought that was it.'

I persevered. 'Humphrey, in your evidence to the Think-Tank, are

you going to support my view that the Civil Service is overmanned and feather-bedded or not? Yes or no! Straight answer!'

Could I have put this question any more plainly? I don't think so. This was the reply: 'Minister, if I am pressed for a straight answer I shall say that, as far as we can see, looking at it by and large, taking one thing with another, in terms of the average of departments, then in the last analysis it is probably true to say that, at the end of the day, you would find, in general terms that, not to put too fine a point on it, there really was not very much in it one way or the other.'

While I was still reeling from this, he added, no doubt for further clarification, 'As far as one can see, at this stage.'

I made one last attempt. 'Does that mean yes or no?' I asked, without much hope.

'Yes and no,' he replied helpfully.

'Suppose,' I said, 'suppose you *weren't* asked for a straight answer?'

'Ah,' he said happily, 'then I should play for time, Minister.'

Humphrey's never going to change. I certainly will never change him. Today I got nowhere fast. No, not even fast – I got nowhere, slowly and painfully! The conversation finished with Humphrey suggesting that I take the draft home and study it for the next couple of days, because I might then find that it does indeed say what I want it to say. An idiotic time-wasting suggestion, of course. He's just trying to wear me down.

'And if it doesn't say what I want it to say?' I asked testily.

Sir Humphrey smiled. 'Then we shall be happy to redraft it for you, Minister,' he said.

Back to square one.

January 20th

I have thought about yesterday's events very carefully. I do not propose to give this draft back to the Department for any more redrafting. I shall write it myself, and not return it until it is too late for them to change it.

I mentioned this to Bernard, and he thought it was a good idea. I told him in the strictest confidence, and I hope I can trust him. I'm sure I can.

[*Hacker reckoned without the pressures that the Civil Service can apply to its own people. Sir Humphrey enquired about the fourth draft report several times over the next two weeks, and observed that Bernard Woolley was giving evasive answers. Finally, Bernard was invited for a disciplinary drink at Sir Humphrey's Club in Pall Mall. We have*

found a memo about the meeting among Sir Humphrey's private papers – Ed.]

B. W. came for a drink at the Club.

I questioned him about the Department's Report to the Think-Tank.

He said, 'You mean, the Minister's report?', a not-insignificant remark.

In answer to my questions as to why we had not yet had it returned to us, he suggested that I ask the Minister. A most unsatisfactory reply.

I explained that I had chosen to ask *him*. As he remained stubbornly silent, I observed that he did not seem to be replying.

'Yes and no,' he said. He knows full well that this is one of my favourite replies, and I felt obliged to tick him off for impertinence.

In answer to other questions, B.W. insisted that the Minister is doing his boxes conscientiously, but repeatedly refused to explain the delay over the draft report, merely advising me to enquire of the Minister as he (B.W.) was the Minister's *Private* Secretary.

He appeared to be anxious about his situation, and clearly had been put under some obligation by the Minister to treat some piece of information in strict confidence. I therefore decided to increase his anxiety considerably, to the extent that he would be obliged to find a way of either satisfying both myself and his Minister, and therefore showing that he is worthy to be a flyer [*'High Flyer' means young man destined for the very top of the Service – Ed.*] or of taking one side or the other, thereby revealing an inability to walk a tightrope in a high wind.

I therefore reminded him that he was an employee of the DAA. And, admirable though it is to be loyal to his Minister, an average Minister's tenure is a mere eleven months whereas Bernard's career will, he hopes, last until the age of sixty.

B.W. handled the situation with skill. He opted for asking me a hypothetical question, always a good idea.

He asked me: *If* a purely hypothetical Minister were to be unhappy with a departmental draft of evidence to a committee, and *if* the hypothetical Minister were to be planning to replace it with his own hypothetical draft worked out with his own political advisers at his party HQ, and *if* this Minister was planning to bring in his own draft so close to the final date for evidence that there would be no time to redraft it, and *if* the hypothetical Private Secretary were to be aware of this hypothetical draft – in confidence – should the hypothetical Private Secretary pass on the information to the Perm. Sec. of the hypothetical Department?

A good question. Naturally, I answered B.W. by saying that no Private Secretary should pass on such information, if given in confidence.

B. W. shows more promise than I thought. [*Appleby Papers 23/RPY/13c*]

February 1st

It is now two weeks since I decided to take over the Think-Tank

report. My final redraft is going well. Frank and his chaps have been hard at work on it, and I've been burning the midnight oil as well. The situation seems to be infuriating Humphrey, which gives me some considerable pleasure.

Today he again asked me about my redraft of the redraft of the draft. 'What about the evidence to the Central Policy Review Staff?' he said.

'You mean the Think-Tank?' I said playing for time.

'Yes Minister.'

'Why do you want it?' I asked.

'So that we can redraft it.'

'That won't be necessary.'

'I think it will, Minister.'

'Humphrey,' I said firmly, 'drafting is not a Civil Service monopoly.'

'It is a highly specialised skill,' he replied, 'which few people outside the Service can master.'

'Nonsense,' I said. 'Drafts are easy. It's a game anyone can play.'

'Not without getting huffed,' he answered. Actually, he's quite witty, really.

I chuckled at his joke, and changed the subject. But he didn't let me get away with it. 'So can I have the draft back, please?' he persisted.

'Of course,' I said, with a smile. He waited. In vain.

'When, Minister?' he asked, trying to smile back, but definitely through clenched teeth.

'Later,' I said airily.

'But *when*?' he snarled through his smile.

'You always say we mustn't rush things,' I said irritatingly.

He then asked me for a straight answer! The nerve of it! However, as he had started to use my terminology, I answered him in his.

'In due course, Humphrey.' I was really enjoying myself. 'In the fullness of time. At the appropriate juncture. When the moment is ripe. When the requisite procedures have been completed. Nothing precipitate, you understand.'

'Minister,' he said, losing all traces of good humour. 'It is getting urgent.'

He was getting rattled. Great. My tactics were a triumph. 'Urgent?' I said blandly. 'You *are* learning a lot of new words.' I don't think I've ever been quite so rude to anyone in my life. I was having a wonderful time. I must try it more often.

'I hope you will forgive me for saying this,' began Sir Humphrey in

his iciest manner, 'but I am beginning to suspect that you are concealing something from me.'

I feigned shock; surprise, puzzlement, ignorance – a whole mass of false emotions. 'Humphrey!' I said in my most deeply shocked voice, 'surely we don't have any secrets from each other?'

'I'm sorry, Minister, but sometimes one is forced to consider the possibility that affairs are being conducted in a way which, all things being considered, and making all possible allowances, is, not to put too fine a point on it, perhaps not entirely straightforward.' Sir Humphrey was insulting me in the plainest language he could manage in a crisis. Not entirely straightforward, indeed! Clearly, just as it's against the rules of the House to call anyone a liar, it's against the Whitehall code of conduct too.

So I decided to come clean at last. I told him that I have redrafted the redraft myself, that I'm perfectly happy with it, and that I don't want him to redraft it again.

'But . . .' began Sir Humphrey.

'No buts,' I snapped. 'All I get from the Civil Service is delaying tactics.'

'I wouldn't call Civil Service delays "tactics", Minister,' he replied smoothly. 'That would be to mistake lethargy for strategy.'

I asked him if we hadn't already set up a committee to investigate delays in the Civil Service. He concurred.

'What happened to it?' I asked.

'Oh,' he said, brushing the matter aside, 'it hasn't met yet.'

'Why not?' I wanted to know.

'There . . . seems to have been a delay,' he admitted.

It is vital that I make Humphrey realise that there is a real desire for radical reform in the air. I reminded him that the All-Party Select Committee on Administrative Affairs, which I founded, has been a great success.

This was probably an error, because he immediately asked me what it has achieved. I was forced to admit that it hasn't actually achieved anything *yet*, but I pointed out that the party is very pleased by it.

'Really?' he asked. 'Why?'

'Ten column inches in the *Daily Mail* last Monday, for a start,' I replied proudly.

'I see,' he said coldly, 'the government is to measure its success in column inches, is it?'

'Yes . . . and no,' I said with a smile.

But he was deeply concerned about my redraft of the draft report.

'Minister,' he said firmly, 'the evidence that you are proposing to submit is not only untrue, it is – which is much more serious – unwise.' One of Humphrey's most telling remarks so far, I think. 'We have been through this before: *the expanding Civil Service is the result of parliamentary legislation, not bureaucratic empire building.*'

I begin to think that Sir Humphrey really believes this.

'So,' I said, 'when this comes up at Question Time you want me to tell Parliament it's their fault that the Civil Service is so big?'

'It's the truth, Minister,' he insisted.

He can't seem to grasp that I don't want the truth, I want something I can tell Parliament.

I spelled it out to him. 'Humphrey, you are my Permanent Secretary. Are you going to support me?'

'We shall always support you as your standard-bearer, Minister – but not as your pall-bearer.'

There seemed to be a vaguely threatening air about these remarks. I demanded to know what he was actually *saying*. As I was becoming more and more heated, he was becoming icier and icier.

'I should have thought,' he pronounced, in his most brittle voice with excessive clarity of enunciation, somewhat reminiscent of Dame Edith Evans as Lady Bracknell, 'that my meaning was crystal-clear. Do not give such a report to a body whose recommendations are to be published.'

As always, he has completely missed the point. I explained that it is *because* the report is to be published that I am submitting the evidence. *I*, the Minister, am to be the judge of when to keep secrets, *not* the permanent officials.

I appeared to have silenced him completely. Then, after a rather long pause for thought, he enquired if he might make one more suggestion.

'Only if it's in plain English,' I replied.

'If you must do this damn silly thing,' he said, 'don't do it in this damn silly way.'

February 2nd

On the way to Number Ten this morning Bernard showed me the agenda for Cabinet. To my horror, I was informed that Cabinet was due to discuss my proposal to close down the Land Registry – or what was *described* as my proposal! I'd never heard of it till that moment. It is a scheme to transfer residual functions to the Property Services Agency. The idea is to reduce the number of autonomous govern-

ment departments, in which there has been a 9¾% rise. Bernard told me I'd initialled it. God knows when – I suppose it must have been in a red box sometime over the last few weeks but I don't recall it. I've been working on the Think-Tank report and nothing else for the last week or more. Anyway, I can't remember every paper I struggle through at one or two a.m. – in fact, I can hardly remember any of them. There has to be a better system than this.

Bernard assured me that I didn't really need to know much about the proposal because his information on the grapevine, through the Private Office network, was that the proposal would go through on the nod.

[*Regrettably, this situation was not as uncommon as the reader might suppose. Because of both the pressure of time and the complexity of much legislation, Ministers frequently had to propose measures to Cabinet that they themselves either had not read or did not fully understand. Hence the distinction sometimes drawn between Ministerial policy, i.e. policies about which the Minister has strong personal views or commitments, and Ministry policy, i.e. most policy – Ed.*]

February 3rd

Today was the blackest day so far. Perhaps not only the blackest day since I became a Minister, but the blackest day since I went into politics.

I am deeply depressed.

However, I feel I must record the events of the day, and I'll do so in the order in which they occurred.

It appears that Sir Humphrey went to the usual weekly Permanent Secretaries' meeting this morning. It seems that he was ticked off by a couple of his colleagues when he revealed that I had written the draft report for the Think-Tank.

Humphrey complained to Bernard about my behaviour, it seems, and Bernard – who seems to be the only one I can totally trust – told me. Apparently Sir Frederick Stewart (Perm. Sec. of the FCO) actually said to Humphrey that once you allow a Minister to write a draft report, the next thing you know they'll be dictating policy.

Incredible!

It is true, of course. I have learned that he who drafts the document wins the day.

[*This is the reason why it was common Civil Service practice at this time to write the minutes of a meeting* BEFORE *the meeting took place. This achieves two things. First, it helps the chairman or secretary to*

ensure that the discussion follows the lines agreed beforehand and that the right points are made by somebody. And second, as busy men generally cannot quite remember what was agreed at meetings, it is extremely useful and convenient to lay it down in advance. Only if the conclusions reached at a meeting are radically different or diametrically opposed to what has been previously written in the minutes will the officials have to rewrite them. Thus it is that pre-written minutes can dictate the results of many meetings, regardless of what may be said or agreed by those actually present – Ed.]

Sir Humphrey and Sir Frederick were discussing Humphrey's plan (*not* mine, I may add!) for reducing the number of autonomous government departments, when they encountered Dr Donald Hughes,[1] who overheard their conversation.

Hughes revealed that the Think-Tank recommendation accepted the idea of reducing the number of autonomous government departments. This news came as a profound shock to Sir Humphrey, because not all the Ministerial evidence has been taken – ours, for instance, has not!

However, it seems that they have reported unofficially, and clearly the report is not going to change now, no matter what we say. Dr Hughes explained to Sir Humphrey that the Central Policy Review Staff do not sully their elevated minds with anything as squalid as evidence from Ministers!

Sir Humphrey, at first, was not unhappy with Donald Hughes's news. Naturally, as an experienced civil servant, a proposal to reduce and simplify the administration of government conjured up in Humphrey's mind a picture of a large intake of new staff specifically to deal with the reductions.

However, this is not the plan at all. Humphrey informed me, at an urgently convened meeting at nine a.m. this morning [*Tautology – Ed.*] that Dr Donald Hughes had made these points:

1 That Jim Hacker is always seeking to reduce overmanning in the Civil Service.
2 That he is going to succeed, at last.
3 And that to facilitate this matter, the Treasury, the Home Office and the Civil Service Department have all proposed abolishing the Department of Administrative Affairs.
4 And that 'the PM is smiling on the plan' (his very words).

[1] Dr Donald Hughes was the Prime Minister's Senior Policy Adviser, brought into government from outside. Tough, intelligent, hard-bitten and with no love for senior civil servants.

Appalling! My job's at stake.

It seems that the PM is entranced by the idea, on the grounds that it is neat, clean, dramatic, and will be politically popular.

The plan is that all the DAA's functions will be subsumed by other departments.

And my fate? Apparently it is to be presented to the press and public that I have won through with a public-spirited self-sacrificing policy, and I'm to be kicked upstairs to the Lords.

Donald Hughes, rubbing salt in the wound, apparently described it as 'approbation, elevation and castration, all in one stroke'. It seems he suggested that I should take the title Lord Hacker of Kamikaze.

Apparently Hughes was very pleased with himself, and with this plan, presumably because of his own crusade against Civil Service extravagance, bureaucracy and waste. Ironically, I agree with him on all that – but not at the expense of *my* job, thank you very much.

This certainly confirms my instincts, that some political Cabinet in-fighting was due to start up again, and clearly we have a huge fight on our hands. Everyone's against us. The Perm. Secs of the Treasury, Home Office and Civil Service Department all stand to gain more power and influence. So do my Cabinet colleagues running those departments. And, of course, I always knew that the DAA was a political graveyard and that the PM might have been handing me a poisoned chalice – after all, I did run Martin's leadership campaign against the PM – whose motto, incidentally, is 'In Defeat, Malice – in Victory, Revenge!'

It seems that Donald Hughes, to do him justice, also pointed out that Humphrey would also be on the way out. 'There's a Job Centre in the Horseferry Road,' he had said maliciously. 'The number 19 stops right outside.'

This is the only remotely amusing thing I've heard in the last twenty-four hours. I shouldn't think Humphrey's been on a bus since he left Oxford.

So when Humphrey brought me up-to-date this morning, I was appalled. I could hardly believe it at first. I told Humphrey I was appalled.

'You're appalled?' he said. 'I'm appalled.'

Bernard said he was appalled, too.

And, there's no doubt about it, the situation is appalling.

I have no doubt that the situation is as described by Sir Humphrey as described by Donald Hughes. It rings true. And Humphrey, yesterday, saw the joint Departmental proposal made by the Treasury,

Home Office and Civil Service Department. And Hughes is very close to the PM too, so he must know what's going on.

I asked Humphrey if I'd get another job, whether or not I was sent to the Lords. And, incidentally, I shall definitely refuse a peerage if it is offered.

'There is a rumour,' replied Sir Humphrey gravely, 'of a new post. Minister with general responsibility for Industrial Harmony.'

This was the worst news yet. Industrial Harmony. That means strikes.[1]

From now on, every strike in Britain will be my fault. Marvellous!

I pondered this for some moments. My reverie was interrupted by Sir Humphrey enquiring in a sepulchral tone: 'Have you considered what might happen to *me*, Minister? I'll probably be sent to Ag. and Fish. The rest of my career dedicated to arguing about the cod quota.'

Bernard dared to smile a little smile, and Humphrey turned on him. 'And as for you, young man, if your Minister bites the dust your reputation as a flyer – such as it is – will be hit for six. You'll probably spend the rest of your career in the Vehicle Licensing Centre in Swansea.'

'My God,' said Bernard quietly.

We sat in silence, lost in our own tragic thoughts, for some considerable time. I heaved a sigh. So did Humphrey. Then Bernard.

Of course, the whole thing is Sir Humphrey's fault. Reducing the number of autonomous government departments was an idiotic proposal, playing right into the hands of our enemies. I said so. He replied that it was all my fault, because of my proposal to the Think-Tank to carry out the phased reduction of the Civil Service.

I pooh-poohed this as a ridiculous suggestion because the Think-Tank hasn't even *seen* our report yet. But Humphrey revealed that the Party sent an advance copy to the PM from Central House.

So perhaps we've both dropped ourselves in it. Anyway, there was no point in arguing about it, and I asked Humphrey for suggestions.

There was another gloomy silence.

'We could put a paper up,' he said finally.

'Up what?' I asked. Brilliant!

Humphrey asked me if *I* had any suggestions. I hadn't. We turned to Bernard.

'What do you think, Bernard?'

[1] Hacker was clearly right about this. On the same euphemistic principle, the Ministry of War was renamed the Ministry of Defence, and the Department responsible for unemployment was called the Department of Employment.

'I think it's appalling,' he repeated. A lot of use he is.

Then Humphrey proposed that we work together on this. This was a novel suggestion, to say the least. I thought his job was to work with me on all occasions. This seemed like an admission. Furthermore, his idea of our working together is generally that he tells me what to do, and I then do it. And look where it's got us!

However, I asked him what he had to suggest.

'With respect, Minister,' he began. This was too much. I told him not to use that insulting language to me ever again! Clearly he was about to imply that anything I had to say on the subject would be beneath contempt.

But Humphrey reiterated that he *really* meant that we should work together. 'I need you,' he said.

I must admit I was rather touched.

Then, to my utter astonishment, he suggested that we sent for Frank Weisel.

Humphrey is clearly a reformed character. Even though it's probably too late to matter!

'You see, Minister, if the Prime Minister is behind a scheme, Whitehall on its own cannot block it. Cabinet Ministers' schemes are easily blocked . . .' he corrected himself at once, '. . . redrafted, but the PM is another matter.'

In a nutshell, his scheme is to fight this plan in Westminster as well as Whitehall. Therefore he believes that Frank can help to mobilise the backbenchers on my behalf.

I suggested that Fleet Street might be of use, if Frank can get the press on our side. Humphrey blanched and swallowed, but to his credit agreed. 'If there is no other way, even Fleet Street . . .' he murmured.

February 4th

Frank was away yesterday. So we had the meeting with him today.

He'd just heard the news. We asked for his reaction. For the first time that I can remember, he was speechless. He just sat and shook his head sadly. I asked him what suggestions he had.

'I can't think of anything . . . I'm appalled,' he replied.

We all agreed that it was appalling.

So I took charge. 'We've got to stop flapping about like wet hens. We've got to do something to save the Department from closure. Frank, get through to the Whips' office to mobilise the backbenchers and Central House, to stop this before it starts.'

'I'm awfully sorry to quibble again, Minister, but you can't actually stop things before they start,' intervened Bernard, the wet-hen-in-chief. He's really useless in a crisis.

Frank pointed out that this idea of mine wasn't much good, as the scheme to abolish the DAA would probably be popular with backbenchers. So I pointed out that it was Humphrey's idea, anyway.

Bernard's overnight deliberations led him to propose a publicity campaign in the press, full-page ads praising the Department. He offered us some slogans: ADMINISTRATION SAVES THE NATION and RED TAPE IS FUN.

We just boggled at these ideas. So he then suggested RED TAPE HOLDS THE NATION TOGETHER.

Sometimes I really despair of Bernard.

There was a long pause, after which Humphrey remarked bleakly, 'There's no doubt about it, the writing's on the wall.'

None of us can see any real hope of averting catastrophe.

It's appalling!

February 5th

Life must go on, even while the Sword of Damocles hangs over us.

Today we had a meeting about the Europass. This was a completely new development. I've never even heard of it. Apparently there's been information about it in my boxes for the last couple of nights, but I've been too depressed and preoccupied to grasp anything I've read.

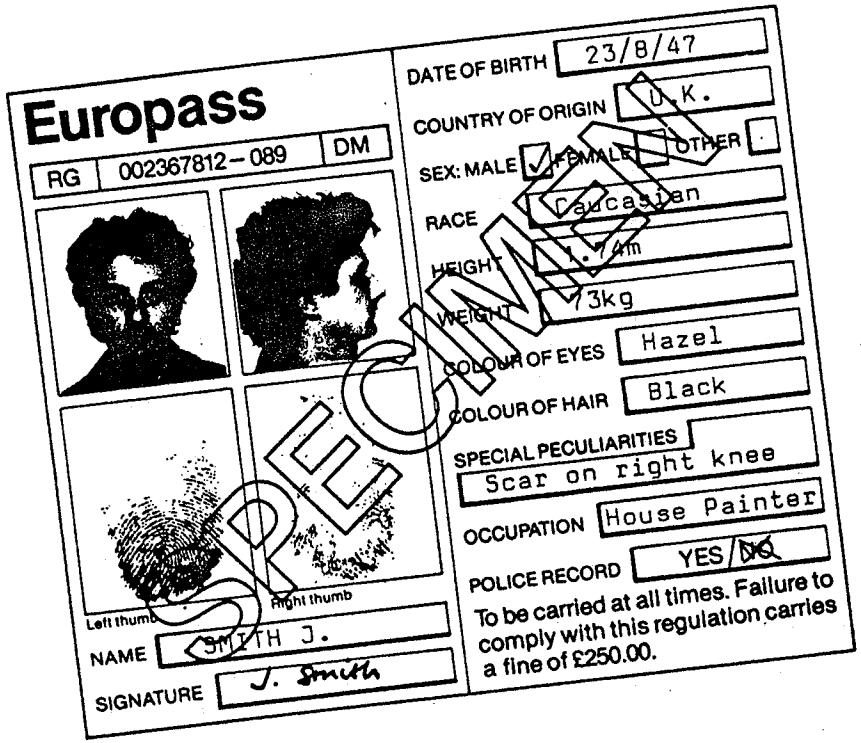
It seems that the Europass is a new European Identity Card, to be carried by all citizens of the EEC. The FCO, according to Humphrey, is willing to go along with the idea as a *quid pro quo* for a settlement over the butter mountain, the wine lake, the milk ocean, the lamb war, and the cod stink.

Apparently the PM wants me to introduce the necessary legislation.

I'm *horrified* by this.

Sir Humphrey was surprised at my reaction. He'd thought it was a good idea as I'm known to be pro-Europe, and he thinks that a Europass will simplify administration in the long run.

Frank and I tried to explain to the officials that for me to introduce such a scheme would be political suicide. The British people do not want to carry compulsory identification papers. I'll be accused of trying to bring in a police state, when I'm still not fully recovered from the fuss about the Data Base. 'Is this what we fought two world wars



for?' I can hear the backbenchers cry.

'But it's nothing more than a sort of driving licence,' said Humphrey.

'It's the last nail in my coffin,' said I.

'You might get away with calling it the Euroclub Express,' said Bernard. I told him to shut up or get out.

Frank asked why we had to introduce it, not the FCO? A good question.

'I understand,' explained Humphrey, 'that the PM did originally suggest that the FCO introduce the measure, but the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs suggested that it was a Home Office measure, and then the Home Office took the view that it is essentially an administrative matter. The PM agreed.'

Frank said, 'They're all playing pass the parcel.'

Can you blame them, when they can hear it ticking?

Humphrey then observed mournfully that the identity card bill would probably be the last action of our Department.

Frank and I, unlike the civil servants, were still puzzled that such a

proposal as the Europass could even be seriously under consideration by the FCO. We can both see clearly that it is wonderful ammunition for the anti-Europeans. I asked Humphrey if the Foreign Office doesn't realise how damaging this would be to the European ideal?

'I'm sure they do, Minister,' he said. 'That's why they support it.'

This was even more puzzling, since I'd always been under the impression that the FO is pro-Europe. 'Is it or isn't it?' I asked Humphrey.

'Yes and no,' he replied of course, 'if you'll pardon the expression. The Foreign Office is pro-Europe because it is really anti-Europe. In fact the Civil Service was united in its desire to make sure the Common Market didn't work. That's why we went into it.'

This sounded like a riddle to me. I asked him to explain further. And basically, his argument was as follows: Britain has had the same foreign policy objective for at least the last five hundred years – to create a disunited Europe. In that cause we have fought with the Dutch against the Spanish, with the Germans against the French, with the French and Italians against the Germans, and with the French against the Italians and Germans. [*The Dutch rebellion against Philip II of Spain, the Napoleonic Wars, the First World War, and the Second World War – Ed.*]

In other words, divide and rule. And the Foreign Office can see no reason to change when it has worked so well until now.

I was aware of all this, naturally, but I regarded it as ancient history. Humphrey thinks that it is, in fact, current policy. It was necessary for us to break up the EEC, he explained, so we had to get inside. We had previously tried to break it up from the outside, but that didn't work. [*A reference to our futile and short-lived involvement in EFTA, the European Free Trade Association, founded in 1960 and which the UK left in 1972 – Ed.*] Now that we're in, we are able to make a complete pig's breakfast out of it. We have now set the Germans against the French, the French against the Italians, the Italians against the Dutch. . .and the Foreign Office is terribly happy. It's just like old times.

I was staggered by all of this. I thought that all of us who are publicly pro-Europe believed in the European ideal. I said this to Sir Humphrey, and he simply chuckled.

So I asked him: if we don't believe in the European ideal, why are we pushing to increase the membership?

'Same reason,' came the reply. 'It's just like the United Nations. The more members it has, the more arguments you can stir up, and

the more futile and impotent it becomes.'

This all strikes me as the most appalling cynicism, and I said so.

Sir Humphrey agreed complacently. 'Yes Minister. We call it diplomacy. It's what made Britain great, you know.'

Frank, like the terrier that he is, wanted to continue worrying away at the problem of the Europass. 'How will the other EEC countries feel about having to carry identity papers? Won't they resist too?'

Sir Humphrey felt not. 'The Germans will love it, the French will ignore it, and the Italians and Irish will be too chaotic to enforce it. Only the British will resent it.' He's right, of course.

I must say that, to me, it's all beginning to look suspiciously like a plot to get rid of me. Frank doesn't subscribe to a conspiracy theory on this occasion, on the grounds that I'm to be got rid of *anyway* as my department is to be abolished.

But I've got a sneaking suspicion that the PM just wants to make absolutely sure. Frank told me not to be paranoid, but I think *he*'d be paranoid if everyone were plotting against him.

'We're on your side, Minister.' Sir Humphrey was trying to be comforting. Life is full of surprises!

Then I had an idea. I suddenly realised that Martin will be on my side. I can't imagine why I didn't think of it before. He's Foreign Secretary – and, to my certain knowledge, Martin is genuinely pro-Europe. (Humphrey calls him 'naïf'). Also I ran his campaign against the PM, and he only stands to lose if I'm squeezed out.

We've arranged a meeting with him on Monday, at the House. I can't think *how* he can help, exactly, but between us we may find some lever.

February 8th

All is well. The battle is won. My career, Humphrey's career, and the DAA have all been saved by a brilliant piece of political opportunism, of which I am extremely proud. Plus a little bit of luck, of course. But it's been a very satisfactory day.

We all gathered conspiratorially at Martin's office. He was full of his usual second-rate witticisms.

'You've done a Samson act, Jim.'

I, presumably, looked blank.

'You see, you wanted to reduce the Civil Service, and you've done it. You've pulled the whole superstructure down – and buried yourself.'

I didn't know whether I was supposed to smile, or congratulate him

on his wit, or what.

Sir Humphrey, of course, couldn't wait to join the analogy game. 'A Pyrrhic victory,' he intoned mournfully, presumably to remind us all that he is a classicist.

'Any ideas?' I asked Martin.

He had none. So we all had another of our tremendous gloomy silences.

Frank, fortuitously as it turned out, continued worrying away at the puzzle of why the PM wanted to introduce a Europass. 'I don't understand it. It doesn't make sense. Why can't the PM see the damage it's going to do to the government?'

I agreed, and remarked that this Europass thing is the worst disaster to befall the government since I was made a member of the Cabinet. [*We don't think that Hacker actually meant what he seems to be saying here – Ed.*]

Martin was quite calm about the Europass. 'Everyone knows it won't happen,' he said.

Who does he mean by 'everyone'? I certainly didn't know it wouldn't happen – but then, I didn't even know it *would* happen till yesterday.

'The PM,' continued Martin, 'has to play along with it till after the Napoleon Prize is awarded.'

Apparently the Napoleon Prize is a NATO award, given once every five years. A gold medal, big ceremony in Brussels, and £100,000. The PM is the front runner. It's awarded to the statesman who has made the biggest contribution to European unity since Napoleon. [*That's if you don't count Hitler – Ed.*]

'The award committee meets in six weeks,' said Martin, 'and so obviously the PM doesn't want to rock the boat until it's in the bag.'

I think I caught Bernard mumbling to himself that you don't put boats in bags, but it was very quiet, I might have misheard, and he refused to repeat what he'd said which makes me think I didn't mishear at all.

'And,' said Martin, reaching the point at last, 'once the prize is won, the PM will obviously dump the Europass.'

I had this wonderful idea. I couldn't quite articulate it. It was slowly forming in the back of my mind. But first I needed some answers.

'Martin,' I asked. 'How many people know about the winner of the Napoleon Prize?'

'It's top secret,' he said. Naturally, I was disappointed. Top secret means that everyone knows.

But not this time, apparently. '*Top secret*, top secret,' said Martin.

I was now so excited that I was becoming incoherent. 'Don't you see?' I said. 'Backbenchers . . . leaks . . .'

A puzzled Humphrey asked me if I were referring to the Welsh Nationalist Party.

And at that moment God was on my side. The door opened, and in stepped Dr Donald Hughes. He apologised, and said he'd return later, but I stopped him. I told him that he was the very man I wanted to see, that I wanted his advice, and invited him to take a pew.

He pretended that he was eager to help me. But he warned that if it were a case of shutting stable doors after horses have bolted, even he would be powerless to help. I said, flatteringly, that I'm sure that he would not be powerless. I put it to him that I was in a serious moral dilemma – which, of course, I invented at that very moment.

My dilemma was this, I said. I told Hughes that I knew that a backbencher was planning to table a question to the PM about whether or not the Europass is to be adopted by Britain.

Hughes was immediately jumpy. 'Which backbencher? The Europass is top secret.'

'Like the winner of the Napoleon Prize?' I asked.

We eyed each other carefully – I wasn't entirely sure of my next move, but thankfully Bernard stepped in with an inspirational reply. 'I think the Minister means a hypothetical backbencher,' he said. Good old Bernard.

Hughes said that it was highly improbable that such a question would be asked.

I ignored that, and explained that if the question were to be asked, there were only two possible replies: if the PM says *yes* it would be damaging to the government in the country – but if the PM says *no* it would be even more damaging to the government in Europe. And to the PM personally – in view of the Napoleon Prize.

Hughes nodded, and waited. So I continued. 'Suppose a hypothetical Minister got wind of this hypothetical backbencher's question, in advance, what should he do?'

'The only responsible course for a loyal minister,' he said caretully, 'would be to see that the question was not tabled. That must be obvious.'

'It's a serious business trying to suppress an MP's question,' I said. Of course, he and I both knew that, as yet, there was no question and no such backbencher – but that there could be, if I chose to set it up.

'The only way to stop him,' I offered, 'might be to let the back-

bencher table a question asking the PM to squash rumours about the closure of the Department of Administrative Affairs.'

There it was. My offer of a deal. Out in the open. Hughes paused to consider, just for a few moments, in case he could see a way out. But there was none.

And, to his credit, he handled it superbly. At once out came all the appropriate phrases: 'But I'm sure . . . whatever made you think? . . . no question of anything but the fullest support . . .' etc.

Then Humphrey, who'd got the idea at last, moved in for the kill. 'But you said only a few days ago that the plan to abolish the Department had been put up and the PM was smiling on it.'

'Smiling *at* it,' said Donald Hughes smoothly. 'Smiling *at* it, not *on* it. The idea was ridiculous, laughable, out of the question. A joke.' Beautifully done – I take my hat off to him.

So I asked him for a minute from the PM's office, to be circulated to all departments within twenty-four hours, scotching the rumour. So that we could all share the joke.

'Do you really think it's necessary?' he asked.

'Yes,' replied Humphrey, Bernard, Frank, Martin and I. In unison.

Hughes said that in that case, he was sure it could be arranged, that it would be a pleasure, how much he'd enjoyed chatting to us all, excused himself and left. Presumably he hurried straight to Number Ten.

Game, set and match. One of my most brilliant performances. I am exceedingly pleased with myself.

Bernard asked, after Donald Hughes had gone, if Hughes can *really* fix it for us. 'Don't Prime Ministers have a mind of their own?' he asked.

'Certainly,' I said to Bernard. 'But in the words of Chuck Colson, President Nixon's henchman, when you've got them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow.'

10
Doing the Honours

April 23rd

I had a very unsatisfactory meeting today, with assorted secretaries – Deputy Secretaries, Under-Secretaries, and Assistant Secretaries.

I asked about economies in accommodation, in stationery acquisition, in parks and forestry commission administration, in data processing equipment, in the further education budget.

As always I was met with the usual vague and regretful murmurs of 'No Minister,' 'Afraid not Minister,' 'Doesn't seem possible, Minister,' 'Sadly it cannot be, Minister,' 'We have done the utmost possible, Minister,' 'Pared to the bone, Minister, alas!' and so forth.

I reflected aloud that at least the Universities are not going to cost us quite so much, now that overseas students are to pay fees that cover the full cost of their education here.

'Unless,' someone said, 'you make the exceptions which have been proposed to you.'

Nobody else at the meeting had been prepared to make exceptions. I couldn't see why I should. I remarked that as it seemed the only available saving at the moment we had no choice but to hang on to it.

As the meeting broke up Bernard reminded me again that the Honours Secretary at Number Ten had been asking if I had approved our Department's recommendations for the Honours List.

Curiously this was about the eighth time Bernard had asked me. I enquired sarcastically if honours were really the most important subject in the whole of the DAA.

Bernard replied, without any apparent awareness of my sarcasm, that they were indeed the most important subject for the people on the list. 'They're never off the phone,' he said pathetically. 'Some of them don't seem to have slept for about three nights.'

I was mildly surprised. I thought it was all a formality. 'Ministers

never veto Civil Service honours, do they?' I asked.

'Hardly ever. But it's theoretically possible. And they're all getting worried by the delay.'

I suddenly realised that Bernard had just told me that people *knew* they were on the list. How? The file is marked *strictly confidential.*

He shook his head sadly at me when I mentioned it. 'Oh Minister,' he replied, and smiled at me in a kindly fashion.

I was amused and embarrassed at my naïveté. But all that energy that goes into worrying about honours . . . If only they'd put a quarter of it into cutting expenditure. I asked Bernard how I could get this Department to want economies in the way they wanted OBEs and KCBs and so on.

A gleam came into Bernard's eye. 'Well,' he said, with a slightly mischievous air that I'd never noticed before. 'I've been thinking . . .' Then he hesitated.

'Go on.'

'No, no, no.'

'What was it?'

'No. Nothing, Minister.'

I was on tenterhooks. I knew he had something up his sleeve. 'Come on Bernard,' I ordered, 'spit it out.' Bernard did not spit it out. Instead, he tentatively explained that it was not his place, and he wouldn't suggest this, and he couldn't *possibly* recommend it, but '. . . well . . . suppose you were to refuse to recommend any honours for Civil Servants who haven't cut their budgets by five per cent per annum?'

'Bernard!'

He retreated immediately.

'Oh, I'm so sorry, do forgive me, Minister, I knew I shouldn't have . . .'

'No, no,' I said, hastily reassuring him. Bernard has great ideas but he needs much more confidence. 'It's brilliant!'

And indeed it is a brilliant idea. I was cock-a-hoop. It's our only hold over the civil servants. Ministers can't stop their pay rises, or their promotion. Ministers don't write their reports. Ministers have no real disciplinary authority. But Bernard is right – I can withhold honours! It's brilliant!

I congratulated him and thanked him profusely.

'You thought of it, Minister!'

I didn't get the point at first. 'No, you did,' I told him generously.

'No, *you* did,' he said meaningfully. '*Please*!'

I understood. I nodded, and smiled reassuringly.

He looked even more anxious.

[Some days later Sir Humphrey Appleby was invited to dine at the High Table of his alma mater, Baillie College, Oxford. He refers to the dinner and subsequent discussion in his private diary – Ed.]

Had an excellent high table dinner at Baillie, followed by a private chat over the port and walnuts, with the Master and the Bursar. Clearly they were worried about the cuts. Sir William [*Sir William Guthrie, the Master – Ed.*] was looking somewhat the worse for wear – and the worse for port. His face was red, his hair is now quite white but his eyes were still the same clear penetrating blue. Rather patriotic, really. Christopher [*Christopher Venables, the Bursar – Ed.*] still looked like the precise ex-RAF officer that he had been in the days before he became a don – tall, neat, and meticulous in manner and speech.

I asked the Master how he was feeling. He replied that he was feeling very old. But he smiled. 'I'm already an anomaly, I shall soon be an anachronism, and I have every intention of dying an abuse.' Very droll!

Guthrie and Venables started out by telling me that they intended to sell the rest of the rather delicious 1927 Fonseca[1] which we were drinking. Baillie has a couple of pipes left and the Bursar told me they'd fetch quite a bit. I couldn't think what they were talking about. I was astounded. Excellent shock tactics, of course. Then they told me that if they sold all the paintings and the silver, they could possibly pay off the entire mortgage on the new buildings.

They think – or want me to think – that Baillie College is going to the wall.

It transpired that the trouble is the government's new policy of charging overseas students the full economic rate for their tuition. Baillie has always had an exceptional number of overseas students.

The Bursar tells me that they cannot charge the full economic fee of £4000 per annum. Hardly anyone will pay it.

He says he has been everywhere! All over the USA, raising funds, trying to sell the idea of an Oxford education to the inhabitants of Podunk, Indiana, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

But the competition is cut-throat. Apparently Africa is simply crawling with British Professors frantically trying to flog sociology courses to the natives. And India. And the Middle East.

I suggested that they do the obvious thing – fill up the vacancies with British students.

This idea met with a very cold response. 'I don't think that's awfully funny, Humphrey, the Master said.

He explained that home students were to be avoided at all costs! *Anything* but home students!

[1] Vintage port.

The reason is simple economics. Baillie only gets £500 per head for the UK students. Therefore, it would have to take four hundred home students to replace a mere fifty foreigners. The number of students at a tutorial would quadruple. The staff/student ratio would go from one in ten to one in thirty-four.

I see their point. This could be the end of civilisation as we know it. It would certainly be the end of Baillie College as we know it. There would be dormitories. Classrooms. It would be indistinguishable from Wormwood Scrubs or the University of Sussex.

And Hacker is the Minister who has the authority to change it. I had not realised the implications of all this, it being a DES [*Department of Education and Science – Ed.*] decision. Ours not to reason why, ours just to put the administrative wheels in motion.[1]

[*Although Sir Humphrey, and Jim Hacker, were responsible for the implementation of these cuts, characteristically the Department of Education and Science had made them without consulting any of the other interested departments – the Foreign Office, or the Department of Health and Social Security or the Department of Administrative Affairs – Ed.*]

I suggested that we must persuade Hacker of the special and unique importance of Baillie College. He should be invited to dinner at High Table and the case explained to him.

The Master was noticeably worried about Hacker – he was concerned whether he was of the intellectual calibre to understand the case.

I pointed out that the case is intelligible to anyone of the intellectual calibre of Winnie-the-Pooh.

They asked me if Hacker *is* of the intellectual calibre of Winnie-the-Pooh. Clearly they've had dealings with politicians before.

I was able to reassure them on that point. I'm *fairly* sure that he is of the intellectual calibre of Winnie-the-Pooh. On his day.

I left Oxford convinced that I must find a way to get Baillie recognised as a special institution (like Imperial College) for the extraordinary work that they do. [*A well-chosen adjective! As this episode in Hacker's life is fundamentally concerned with honours – deserved or undeserved, earned or unearned – we felt that at this point it might be of interest to the reader to know the principal honours conferred on the antagonists:*

Sir William Guthrie, OM, FRS, FBA, Ph.D, MC, MA (Oxon)
Group Captain Christopher Venables, DSC, MA
Sir Humphrey Appleby, KCB, MVO, MA (Oxon)
Bernard Woolley, MA (Cantab)
The Rt Hon. James Hacker, PC, MP, BSc. (Econ)
Sir Arnold Robinson, GCMG, CVO, MA (Oxon) – Ed.]

[1] In fact, the size of Oxford University is limited by the University Grants Committee. Baillie might not even have been allowed to take more home students, except by taking them from other colleges. The other colleges would be unlikely to agree to this, because it would put them in jeopardy.

April 28th

This morning Humphrey badgered me again.

'Two things,' he said. 'First, there is the matter of the Departmental recommendations for the Honours List.'

I told him we'd leave that on one side for a bit.

He became very tense and twitchy. I tried not to show amusement. He told me we can't leave it as we are getting dangerously close to the five weeks.

[*All recipients of honours are notified at least five weeks before promulgation. Theoretically it gives them time to refuse. This is rare. In fact, the only time a civil servant is known to have refused a knighthood was in 1496. This was because he already had one – Ed.*]

I decided that I would not yet give my approval to the Department's Honours List, because I've been doing some research. [*Hacker almost certainly meant that a party research assistant had been doing some research and he had read the report – Ed.*] I have found that twenty per cent of all honours go to civil servants. The rest of the population of this country have to do something extra to get an honour. Over and above their ordinary work, for which they get paid. You or I have to do something special, like work with mentally-handicapped children for twenty-seven years, six nights a week – then we might get an MBE. But Civil Service knighthoods just come up with the rations.

These honours are, in any case, intrinsically ridiculous – MBE, for instance, according to *Whitaker's Almanack*, stands for Member of the Most Honourable Order of the British Empire. Hasn't anyone in Whitehall noticed that we've lost the Empire?

The civil servants have been having it both ways for years. When Attlee was PM he got £5000 a year and the Cabinet Secretary got £2500. Now the Cabinet Secretary gets more than the PM. Why? Because civil servants used to receive honours as a compensation for long years of loyal public service, for which they got poor salaries, poor pensions and few perks.

Now they have salaries comparable to executives in the most successful private enterprise companies (guess who's in charge of the comparability studies), inflation-proof pensions, chauffeur-driven cars – and they *still* get automatic honours.

[*Hacker was right. The civil servants were undoubtedly manipulating the honours system to their own advantage. Just as incomes policies have always been manipulated by those that control them: for instance, the 1975 Pay Policy provided exemptions for Civil Service*

increments and lawyers' fees. Needless to say, the policy was drafted by civil servants and parliamentary draftsmen, i.e. lawyers.

The problem is, quis custodiet ipsos custodes?[1] – *Ed.*]

So how can civil servants possibly understand the way the rest of us live, if they are immune to the basic threats to economic well-being faced by the rest of us: inflation and unemployment?

And how did the civil servants get away with creating these remarkably favourable terms of service for themselves? Simply by keeping a low profile. They have somehow managed to make people feel that discussing the matter at all is in rather poor taste.

But that cuts no ice with me. I believe in action now!

I asked Humphrey how he accounted for twenty per cent of honours going to the Civil Service.

'A fitting tribute to their devotion to duty,' he said.

It's a pretty nice duty to be devoted to, I thought.

Humphrey continued: 'Her Majesty's civil servants spend their lives working for a modest wage and at the end they retire into obscurity. Honours are a small recompense for a lifetime of loyal, self-effacing discretion and devoted service to Her Majesty and to the nation.'

A pretty speech. But quite ridiculous. 'A modest wage?' I queried.

'Alas, yes.'

I explained to Humphrey, since he appeared to have forgotten, that he earned well over thirty thousand a year. Seven and a half thousand more than me.

He agreed, but insisted that it was still a relatively modest wage.

'Relative to whom?' I asked.

He was stuck for a moment. 'Well . . . Elizabeth Taylor for instance,' he suggested.

I felt obliged to explain to Sir Humphrey that he was in no way relative to Elizabeth Taylor. There are important differences.

'Indeed,' he agreed. 'She did not get a First in Greats.'[2]

Then, undaunted and ever persistent, he again asked me if I had approved the list. I made my move.

'No Humphrey,' I replied pleasantly, 'I am not approving any honour for anyone in this Department who hasn't earned it.'

[1] Translation: who guards the guards? A quotation from Juvenal's *Satires* and not, as is commonly supposed in political circles, from juvenile satires.
[2] The Oxford term for the second part of the classics degree course.

Humphrey's face was a wonderful study in blankness.

'What do you mean, earned it?'

I explained that I meant earned it. In other words, having done something to deserve it.

The penny dropped. He exploded. 'But that's *unheard* of,' he exclaimed.

I smiled serenely. 'Maybe so. But my new policy is to stop all honours for all civil servants who fail to cut their department's budgets by five per cent a year.'

Humphrey was speechless.

So after a few moments I said: 'May I take it that your silence indicates approval?'

He found his voice fast. 'You may *not*, Minister.' He was deeply indignant. 'Where did you get this preposterous idea?'

I glanced at Bernard, who studied his right shoe-lace intently. 'It came to me,' I said.

Humphrey was spluttering incoherently. 'It's ridiculous. It's out of the question. It's unthinkable.' Now that Humphrey had found his voice there was no stopping him. 'The whole idea . . . strikes at the whole root of . . . this is the beginning of the end . . . the thin end of the wedge . . . Bennite solution. [*Perhaps it was the word 'wedge' that reminded him of Benn – Ed.*] Where will it end? The abolition of the monarchy?'

I told him not to be silly. This infuriated him even more.

'There is *no reason*,' he said, stabbing the air with his finger, 'to change a system which has worked well in the past.'

'But it hasn't,' I said.

'We have to give the present system a fair trial,' he stated. This seemed quite reasonable on the face of it. But I reminded him that the Most Noble Order of the Garter was founded in 1348 by King Edward III. 'Surely it must be getting towards the end of its trial period?' I said.

So Humphrey tried a new tack. He said that to block honours pending economies might create a dangerous precedent.

What he means by 'dangerous precedent' is that if we do the right thing now, then we might be forced to do the right thing again next time. And on that reasoning nothing should ever be done at all. [*To be precise: many things may be done, but nothing must ever be done for the first time – Ed.*]

I told him I wasn't going to budge on my proposal. He resorted to barefaced lies, telling me that he was fully seized of my aims and

had taken them on board and would do his best to put them into practice.

So I asked him point blank if he would put my policy into practice. He made me his usual offer. I know it off by heart now. A recommendation that we set up an interdepartmental committee with fairly broad terms of reference so that at the end of the day we would be in a position to think through all the implications and take a decision based on long-term considerations rather than rush prematurely into precipitate and possibly ill-conceived action that might well have unforeseen repercussions. [*In other words: No! – Ed.*]

I wasn't prepared to be fobbed off with this nonsense any longer. I told him I wanted *action now*. He went pale. I pointed out that, in my case, honours are fundamentally unhealthy. Nobody in their right mind can want them, they encourage sycophancy, snobbery and jealousy. 'And,' I added firmly, 'it is not fair that civil servants get them all.'

Humphrey argued again. 'We *have* done something to deserve them. We are *civil servants*,' he said.

'You just like having letters to put after your name to impress people,' I sneered. 'You wouldn't impress people if they knew what they stood for: KCB? Knight Commander of the Most Noble Order of the Bath? Bloody daft. They'd think you were a plumber. I think they should shove the whole lot down the Most Noble Order of the Plughole.'

Humphrey wasn't at all amused. 'Very droll,' he said condescendingly. 'You like having letters after your name too,' he continued. 'PC,[1] MP. And your degree – BSc.Econ., I think,' he sneered and slightly wrinkled up his elegant nose as if there were a nasty smell underneath it.

'At least I earned my degree,' I told him, 'not like your MA. At Oxford they give it to you for nothing, when you've got a BA.'

'Not for nothing. For four guineas,' he snapped spitefully.

I was tired of this juvenile bickering. And I had him on the run. I told him that I had made my policy decision and that was the end of it. 'And what was your other point?' I enquired.

Humphrey was in such a state of shock about the Honours List that he had forgotten his other point. But after a few moments it came back to him.

It seems that Baillie College, Oxford, will be in serious trouble over the new ruling on grants for overseas students.

[1] Privy Counsellor.

Humphrey said that nothing would please Baillie more than to take British students. Obviously that's true. But he explained that Baillie has easily the highest proportion of foreign students and that the repercussions will be serious at the schools of Tropical Medicine and International Law. And the Arabic Department may have to close down completely.

I'm sympathetic to all this, but hard cases make bad law. I just don't see how it's possible for us to go on educating foreigners at the expense of the British taxpayer.

'It's not just foreigners, Minister,' explained Humphrey. 'If, for instance, our Diplomatic Service has nowhere to immerse its recruits in Arab culture, the results could be catastrophic – we might even end up with a pro-Israeli Foreign Office. And what would happen to our oil policy then?'

I said that they could send their diplomatic recruits elsewhere.

'Where else,' he demanded, 'can they learn Arabic?'

'Arabia?' I suggested.

He was stumped. Then Bernard chipped in. 'Actually, Minister, Baillie College has an outstanding record. It has filled the jails of the British Empire for many years.'

This didn't sound like much of a recommendation to me. I invited Bernard to explain further.

'As you know,' he said, 'the letters JB are the highest honour in the Commonwealth.'

I didn't know.

Humphrey eagerly explained. 'Jailed by the British. Gandhi, Nkrumah, Makarios, Ben-Gurion, Kenyatta, Nehru, Mugabe – the list of world leaders is endless and contains several of our students.'

Our students? He had said *our* students. It all became clear.

I smiled benignly. 'Which college did you go to, Humphrey?'

'Er . . . that is quite beside the point, Minister.'

He wasn't having a very good day. 'I like being beside the point, Humphrey,' I said. 'Humour me. Which college did you go to? Was it Baillie, by any strange coincidence?'

'It so happens,' he admitted with defiance, 'that I am a Baillie man, but that has nothing to do with this.'

I don't know how he has the face to make such a remark. Does he really think I'm a complete idiot? At that moment the buzzer went and saved Humphrey from further humiliation. It was the Division Bell. So I had to hurry off to the House.

On my way out I realised that I had to ask Bernard whether I was

to vote 'aye' or 'no'.

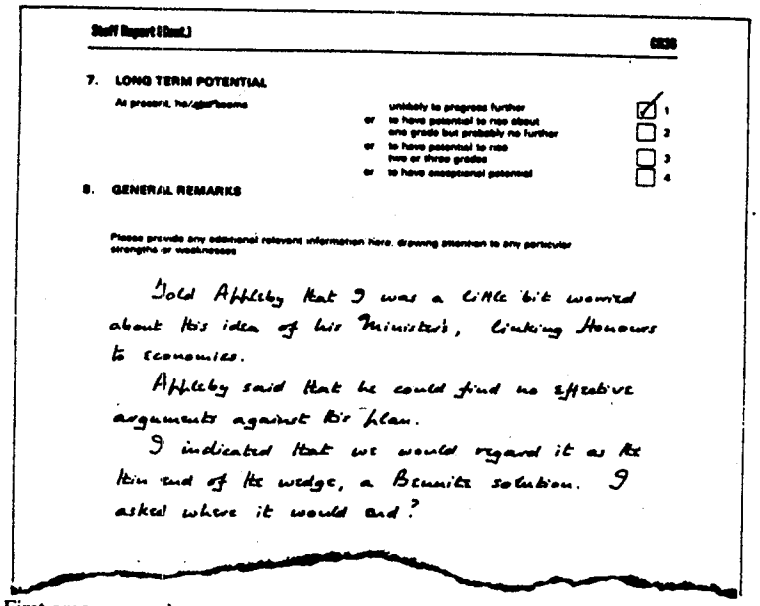
'No,' he replied and began to explain. 'It's an Opposition Amendment, the second reading of . . .'

But I had left by then. The man's a fool. It doesn't matter what the debate *is*, I just don't want to go through the wrong door.

[*Meanwhile, rumours about Hacker's plan to link economies with honours had travelled fast along the two major Whitehall grapevines – the private secretaries' and the drivers'. It was only a matter of hours before news reached Sir Arnold Robinson, the Secretary to the Cabinet. Sir Humphrey was asked to drop in for a chat with Sir Arnold, and an illuminating interview followed – illuminating not only for Sir Humphrey, but also for historians who learn that although the Cabinet Secretary is theoretically* primus inter pares[1] *he is in reality very much* primus. *It seems that all Permanent Secretaries are equal, but some are more equal than others.*

The notes that Sir Arnold made on Sir Humphrey's report have been found among the Civil Service files at Walthamstow and were of course released some years ago under the Thirty-Year Rule.

Sir Humphrey never saw these notes, because no civil servant is shown his own report, except in wholly unusual circumstances – Ed.]



7. LONG TERM POTENTIAL

8. GENERAL REMARKS

Told Appleby that I was a little bit worried about this idea of his Minister's, linking Honours to economies.

Appleby said that he could find no effective arguments against this plan.

I indicated that we would regard it as the thin end of the wedge, a Bennite solution. I asked where it would end?

First among equals.

Appleby replied that he shared my views and had emphasised them to the Minister. He added, somewhat strangely, that the scheme was 'intolerable but yet irresistible'.

I took a dim view. I informed Appleby that, while I was not in any sense reprimanding him, I wanted his assurance that this plan would not be put into practice.

He looked very shaken at the mention of no reprimand. [*Civil Service Code: the mere mention of a reprimand so high up the ladder is severe and deeply wounding criticism. It suggests that the Cabinet Secretary was flying in the face of the 'Good Chap Theory' – the theory that states that 'A Good Chap Does Not Tell A Good Chap What A Good Chap Ought To Know.' Sir Arnold was implying that Sir Humphrey was not a sufficiently good chap – Ed.*]

Appleby was unable to give me the assurance I required. He merely voiced a hope that Hacker would not be acting on this plan.

I was obliged to point out that hopes are not good enough. If honours were linked to economies in the DAA, the contagion could spread throughout government. To every department.

Again I invited him to say that we could count on him to scotch the scheme. He said he would try. Feeble! I was left with no alternative but to warn him most seriously that, although I was quite sure he knew what he was doing, this matter could cause others to reflect upon whether or not he was sound.

The poor chap seemed to take that very hard, as well he might!

Before I terminated the interview I mentioned that the Master of Baillie, our old college, had been on the phone, and that I was sure Appleby would make sure Hacker treated Baillie as a Special Case.

Appleby seemed no more confident on this matter either, although he said he had arranged for Hacker to be invited to a Benefactor's Dinner.

I congratulated him on his soundness in this matter, which didn't seem to cheer him up a great deal. I begin to think that Appleby is losing his grip – on Hacker at least.

Perhaps Appleby is not an absolutely first-rank candidate to succeed one as Cabinet Secretary. Not really able in every department. Might do better in a less arduous job, such as chairman of a clearing bank or as an EEC official.

A.R.

[*It is interesting to compare Sir Arnold's report with Sir Humphrey's own account of this interview – Ed.*]

Went over to see Arnold at the Cabinet Office. We got on very well, as usual. He was very concerned about Hacker's idea of linking honours to

economies, and almost as concerned about the future of Baillie College. I was on a sticky wicket, but on the whole I think I was able to reassure him that I'm handling these difficult problems as well as anybody could reasonably expect. [*Appleby Papers 31/RJC/638*]

[*Hacker's diary resumes – Ed.*]

May 4th

Today was the Benefactor's Dinner at Baillie College, Oxford, which was, I think, an unqualified success.

For a start, on the way up to Oxford I learned a whole pile of useful gossip from young Bernard.

Apparently Sir Humphrey was summoned by the Cabinet Secretary yesterday and, according to Bernard, got the most frightful wigging. The Cabinet Secretary really tore him off a strip, because of Bernard's brilliant scheme linking economies to honours.

Interestingly, Bernard continues to refer to it as *my* scheme – on this occasion, because we were in the official car and of course Roy [*the driver – Ed.*] was quietly memorising every word we said, for future buying and selling. No doubt he can sell news of Sir Humphrey's wigging for quite a price in the drivers' pool, though, it should be worth several small leaks in exchange, I should think. So Roy should have some useful snippets in two or three days, which I must remember to extract from him.

I asked Bernard how the Cabinet Secretary actually goes about giving a wigging to someone as high up as Humphrey.

'Normally,' Bernard informed me, 'it's pretty civilised. But this time, apparently, it was no holds barred. Sir Arnold told Sir Humphrey that he wasn't actually reprimanding him!'

'*That* bad?'

'He actually suggested,' Bernard continued, 'that some people might not think Sir Humphrey was sound.'

Roy's ears were out on stalks.

'I see,' I said, with some satisfaction. 'A real punch-up.'

Sir Arnold was so bothered by this whole thing that I wondered if he had a personal stake in it. But I couldn't see why. I presumed he must have his full quota of honours.

I asked Bernard if Arnold already had his G. Bernard nodded. [*You get your G after your K. G is short for Grand Cross. K is a Knighthood. Each department has its own honours. The DAA gets the Bath – Sir Humphrey was, at this time, a KCB, and would have been hoping for his G – thus becoming a Knight Grand Cross of the Bath.*

In the FCO the Honours are the Cross of St Michael and St George – CMG, KCMG, and GCMG. The Foreign Office is not popular throughout the rest of the Civil Service, and it is widely held that the CMG stands for 'Call Me God', the KCMG for 'Kindly Call Me God' and the GCMG for 'God Calls Me God' – Ed.]

However, Bernard revealed that although Sir Arnold has indeed got his G, there are numerous honours to which he could still aspire: a peerage, for instance, an OM [*Order of Merit – Ed.*] or a CH [*Companion of Honour – Ed.*], the Order of the Garter, the Knight of the Thistle, etc.

I asked him about the Knight of the Thistle. 'Who do they award the Thistle to, Scotsmen and donkeys?' I enquired wittily.

'There is a distinction,' said Bernard, ever the diplomat.

'You can't have met the Scottish nationalists,' I replied, quick as a flash. I wasn't bothered by Roy's flapping lugs. 'How do they award the Thistle?' I asked.

'A committee sits on it,' said Bernard.

I asked Bernard to brief me about this High Table dinner. 'Does Humphrey *really* think that I will change government policy on University Finance as a result?'

Bernard smiled and said he'd heard Baillie College gives a very good dinner.

We got to Oxford in little over an hour. The M40 is a very good road. So is the M4, come to think of it. I found myself wondering why we've got two really good roads to Oxford before we got any to Southampton, or Dover or Felixstowe or any of the ports.

Bernard explained that nearly all of our Permanent Secretaries were at Oxford. And most Oxford Colleges give you a good dinner.

This seemed incredible – and yet it has the ring of truth about it. 'But did the Cabinet let them get away with this?' I asked.

'Oh no,' Bernard explained. 'They put their foot down. They said there'd be no motorway to take civil servants to dinners in Oxford unless there was a motorway to take Cabinet Ministers hunting in the Shires. That's why when the M1 was built in the fifties it stopped in the middle of Leicestershire.'

There seemed one flaw in this argument. I pointed out that the M11 has only just been completed. 'Don't Cambridge colleges give you a good dinner?'

'Of course,' said Bernard, 'but it's years and years since the Department of Transport had a Permanent Secretary from Cambridge.'

[*It is most interesting to compare Hacker's account of the dinner with Sir Bernard Woolley's recollections of the same event. First, Hacker's version - Ed.*]

The dinner itself went off perfectly.

I knew they wanted to discuss their financial problems, so when we reached the port and walnuts I decided to open up Pandora's box, let the cat out of the bag and get the ball rolling. [*Hacker never really learned to conquer his mixed metaphor problem – Ed.*] So I remarked that, for a college on the edge of bankruptcy we had not had a bad little dinner. In truth, of course, we'd had a wildly extravagant banquet with four courses and three excellent wines.

The Master countered by informing me that the Fitzwalter Dinner is paid for by a specific endowment – Fitzwalter was a great sixteenth-century benefactor.

The Bursar added that most nights I'd find them eating Mother's Pride[1] and processed cheese.

I remarked that what they need is a twentieth-century benefactor and this innocent remark produced a long lecture on the different types of University benefactors. Isaac Wolfson, apparently, is only the third man in history to have a college named after him at Oxford and Cambridge. Jesus and St John being the first two.

'Benefactors achieve some sort of immortality,' said the Bursar. 'Their names are kept alive and honoured for centuries. Sir William de Vere, whose name was inscribed on a sconce, directed a Baronial army away from Baillie in the fifteenth century – he had the soldiers quartered at St George's College instead.'

I didn't want to appear ignorant, but I ventured a comment that I didn't actually know there was a St George's College. 'There isn't,' said the Bursar, 'not any more.'

We all chuckled.

Then the Bursar told me about Henry Monkton.

'The Monkton Quad is named after him. He stopped Cromwell from melting down the college silver to pay for the New Model Army.'

Humphrey added:

'Told them that the silver was much better quality at Trinity, Cambridge.'

More chuckles all round. Then the Master pointedly remarked that it now looked as if there'd be no college left to remember these

[1] Brand name of popular packaged sliced loaf, not of the kind customarily consumed at High Table.

benefactors. Unless the problem of the overseas students can be solved.

They all looked at me and waited. I'm used to this kind of pressure, but naturally I wanted to help if I could. So I explained that one *always* tries to help and that politicians only go into politics out of a desire to help others. I explained that I'm an idealist. And, in case they were under the impression that all this talk of honouring benefactors might persuade me to help Baillie in some way, I pointed out that any honour is irrelevant to me – after all, there's not much point in having your name on a silver sconce when you're six feet under.

Humphrey changed the conversation abruptly at that moment, and started asking when the University awards its honorary doctorates. The Master said that the ceremony isn't for a few months but the Senate makes its final selection in a matter of weeks.

I don't think that it was entirely coincidental that Humphrey mentioned this matter at this juncture.

[*The ceremony in question takes place each June. A large luncheon is given in the Codrington Library of All Souls, followed by an afternoon reception. The degrees are given in a Latin ceremony, in the Sheldonian. All the speeches are in Latin. The Chancellor of the University was, at this period, that arch-manipulator of politicians and, with Sir Harold Wilson, Joint Life President of the Society of Electoral Engineers: Mr Harold Macmillan, as he then was (later Earl of Stockton) – Ed.*]

Humphrey, the Master, and the Bursar were – I realised – hinting at an offer. Not an unattractive one. I've always secretly regretted not being an Oxbridge man, as I am undoubtedly of sufficient intellectual calibre. And there must be very few LSE men who've ever had an honorary degree from Oxford.

The Master dropped another hint. Very decorously. He said that there was still one honorary doctorate of Law to decide, and that he and his colleagues were wondering whether it should go to a judge or to someone in government!

I suggested that someone in government might be more appropriate. Perhaps as a tribute to the Chancellor of the University. I know that I argued it rather brilliantly, because they were so enthusiastic and warm in response to me – but I can't actually remember precisely how I put it.

Exhausted by the intellectual cut and thrust of the evening, I fell asleep in the car going home.

SIR BERNARD WOOLLEY RECALLS:[1]

Having seen Hacker's account of this dinner, and his behaviour at it, I'm afraid to say that it is rather inaccurate and self-serving.

By the time we had reached the port Hacker was, not to put too fine a point on it, embarrassingly drunk.

The Master, Sir Humphrey and several of the dons set about persuading him that he would acquire a certain immortality if he became a college benefactor – in other words, if he made Baillie a special case in the matter of overseas students. A typical Oxford 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' offer.

Hacker's reference to the conversation about Wolfson and Jesus Colleges is less than complete. When told that Wolfson is the only man, other than Jesus and St John, to have a college named after him at both Oxford and Cambridge, he looked glassy-eyed and blank. 'Jesus?' he asked. The Bursar actually felt called upon to clarify it. 'Jesus *Christ*, that is,' he explained.

When Hacker remarked that he wanted to help he was pouring himself a glass of port. His actual words, I clearly recall, were 'Yes, well, one would certainly like to help oneself . . . I mean, help one's friends, that is, help the college . . . not for the honours of course . . .'. He was completely transparent.

The Master and Bursar chimed in with suitable bromides like 'Perish the thought,' 'Ignoble suggestion,' and so forth.

Hacker then gave us all that guff about how he was in politics to help others, and how he wasn't interested in honours – but when the honorary doctorates were mentioned he got so excited he cracked a walnut so hard that pieces of shell were flying across High Table like shrapnel.

Then came his final humiliation.

By the time the matter was raised as to whether the last remaining honorary doctorate (if indeed it were so) should go to a judge or a politician, it was clear that the academics were playing games with Hacker.

He was too drunk to see that they were merely amusing themselves. I well remember the appalling drunken speech he launched into. It is forever etched on my memory.

He began by saying 'Judge? You don't want to make a judge a doctor of law. Politicians,' he said, 'are the ones who make the laws. And pass the laws,' he added, apparently unaware of the tautology. 'If it wasn't for politicians, judges wouldn't be able to do any judging, they wouldn't have any laws to judge, know what I mean? They'd all be out of work. Queues of unemployed judges. In silly wigs.'

I remember that argument well because the idea of unemployed judges in silly wigs richly appealed to me, as it would to anyone who has had contact with the higher and more self-satisfied reaches of the legal profession. In fact, I have always been struck by the absurdity of judges ticking people off in court about their unsuitable appearance – women in trousers, for instance – while the judges themselves are in fancy dress.

[1] In conversation with the Editors.

Be that as it may, Hacker continued in the cringing self-pitying lachrymose manner that he only exhibited when completely sloshed.

'Anyway, it's easy for the judges,' he whined, 'they don't have to suck up to television producers. Don't have to lie to journalists. Don't have to pretend to like their Cabinet colleagues. Do you know something?' he cracked another walnut and a piece of deadly flying shell struck the Bursar just below the left eye. 'If judges had to put up with some of my Cabinet colleagues we'd have the death penalty back tomorrow. Good job too.'

By this time old Sir Humphrey was trying to stem the flow – but to no avail.

For Hacker pointed accusingly at Sir Humphrey. 'And I'll tell you another thing,' he said, sublimely unaware that nobody at the table wanted to hear another thing, 'I can't send you to prison.'

Humphrey was flummoxed by this remark.

Hacker looked around the table. 'I can't send him to prison,' he said, as if he had revealed a new extraordinary anomaly in the law. 'But if I were a judge, I could whiz old Humphrey off to the Scrubs, no trouble, feet wouldn't touch the ground, clang bang, see you in three years' time, one-third remission for good conduct.'

Everyone was now staring at Hacker, open-mouthed, as he paused for breath, slurped at his glass and some Fonseca 1927 dribbled slowly down his chin. Being academics, they had hardly ever seen a politician in action late at night. [*Hacker's behaviour, of course, would have passed unnoticed at the House of Commons, where it would have been accepted as quite normal – possibly, even better than average – Ed.*]

Hacker was still talking. Now he was unstoppable. 'But I can't do that to old Humphrey,' he raved incoherently. 'I have to listen to him – Oh God!' He looked at the ceiling, and seemed to be on the verge of tears. 'He goes *on* and *on*. Do you know, his sentences are longer than Judge Jeffreys'?' He guffawed. We stared at him. 'No, no, to sum up, politicians are much more deserving, you don't want to give your donorary hoctorates to judges . . . definitely not.'

Finally he ground to a halt. The Master hastily pulled himself together and tried to rearrange his features so that they expressed friendliness rather than disgust. He was only partially successful.

Nevertheless he managed to tell Hacker that he had argued the proposition beautifully, and that he now realised that the honour couldn't possibly go to a judge.

There were mutters of agreement all round, as the dons continued their embarrassing flattery of Hacker. No one really understands the true nature of fawning servility until he has seen an academic who has glimpsed the prospect of money. Or personal publicity.

They went on to say how wonderful it would be to see Hacker standing there, in the Sheldonian, wearing magnificent crimson robes, receiving the doctorate in front of a packed assembly of eminent scholars such as himself. Hacker belched, alcoholic fumes emanated from his mouth, his eyes went glassy, he clutched his chair so that he wouldn't fall on to the floor, and he smiled beatifically.

I have always remembered that night. I took one more step towards maturity as I realised that even the most rigorous academics have their price – and it's not as high as you'd think.

[*Hacker's diary continues – Ed.*]

May 5th

Had rather a headache this morning. I don't know why, it can't be a hangover as I didn't drink all that much last night. I couldn't have done or I wouldn't have been such a success.

We were due to have yet another meeting to examine the possibility of administrative cuts. But the outcome was sure to be the same as last time.

Humphrey popped into my office five minutes early, for a private word. Very good news. Apparently the Master of Baillie took Humphrey aside last night and asked him to sound me out, to see if I'd be interested in accepting an honorary doctorate of Law from the University.

I feigned surprise. In fact I wasn't at all surprised, as I knew what an impression I'd made on them last night.

Humphrey was at pains to point out that it was not an actual offer. Apparently, according to Humphrey, the Council of the Senate or somebody or other is now trying to square the honorary doctorate with my well-known hostility to honours.

This was a bit of a blow. I had to squash this nonsense at once. 'Don't be silly, Humphrey, that's quite different,' I explained.

'Not entirely, Minister,' he replied. 'It is a matter of accepting a doctorate without having done anything to earn it, as you yourself might put it in your refreshingly blunt fashion.'

'I'm a Cabinet Minister,' I responded with some indignation.

'Isn't that what you're paid for?' Smooth treacherous bugger.

'The point is,' I told him, 'one can't really refuse an honorary doctorate. I should have thought anyone could see that I would be insulting the DAA if I refused – because clearly I've been offered it as a sort of vote of confidence in the Department because I am, in fact, the titular head.'

Humphrey fell silent, having indicated again that it was not yet an offer. Clearly he had some sort of deal in mind. I waited. And waited.

Then the penny dropped. 'By the way, Humphrey,' I said breezily. 'Changing the subject *entirely*, I would like to do what I can to help Baillie College over this overseas student problem.'

Now it was Humphrey's turn to feign surprise. 'Oh, good,' he said, and smiled.

I explained quietly, however, that we need a reason. By which I meant a pretext. He was ready with one, as I knew he would be.

'No problem. I understand that the Palace has been under pressure from a number of Commonwealth leaders. We can't embarrass the Palace, so we'll have to redesignate Baillie as a Commonwealth Education Centre.'

Immediately I saw a chance for the deal that *I* wanted to do.

'But how will I find the money?' I asked, wide-eyed. 'You know how set I am on making five per cent cuts across the board. If we could achieve that . . . well, anything's possible.'

I reckoned that this was an offer he couldn't refuse. I was right. 'We *might* be able to achieve these cuts – ' this was a big step forward – 'and I can only speak for this Department, of course, as long as this absurd idea of linking cuts to honours were to be shelved.'

So there it was. A double *quid pro quo*. Out in the open.

The expenditure Survey Committee gathered around my conference table.

The minutes of the last meeting went through on the nod. Then we came to Matters Arising. The first was *Accommodation*. Sir Humphrey pre-empted the Assistant Secretary who usually spoke on this matter. As the young man opened his mouth to reply, I heard Humphrey's voice: 'I'm happy to say that we have found a five per cent cut by selling an old office block in High Wycombe.'

The Assistant Secretary looked mightily surprised. Clearly Humphrey had not forewarned him of the New Deal.

I was delighted. I said so, We moved straight on to number two: *Stationery Acquisition*.

A Deputy Secretary spoke up, after getting an unmistakeable eye signal and slight nod of the head from Humphrey. 'Yes, we'd discovered that a new stock control system will reduce expenditure this year.'

'By how much?' I asked.

The Deputy Secretary hesitated uncertainly. 'About five per cent, wasn't it?' said Humphrey smoothly.

The Dep. Sec. muttered his agreement.

'Good, good,' I said. 'Three: *Parks and Forestry Administration*?'

An Under-Secretary spoke, having caught on with the civil servant's customary speed to a change in the party line.

'If we delay the planned new computer installation, we can make

a saving there.'

'Can we?' I said, pretending surprise. 'How much?'

They all pretended that they couldn't remember. Much consultation of paper and files.

A bright Principal spoke up: 'About five per cent?' he said, hopefully. We all nodded our approval, and assorted civil servants muttered 'Of that order.'

Humphrey pointed out that the saving in the computer installation would lead inevitably to a cut in *Data Processing*. I looked at him expectantly. 'By about five per cent,' he said.

'This is all very encouraging, Humphrey,' I said benevolently.

And after the meeting, at which everyone had somehow managed to come up with cuts of about five per cent, Humphrey took me aside for a quiet word.

'Minister, while I think of it, have you finished with the list of departmental recommendations to the Honours Secretary?'

'Certainly.' I was at my most obliging. 'There was no problem with any of them. Bernard will give it to you. All right, Humphrey?'

'Yes, Doctor,' he replied.

A fitting tribute. I look forward to the ceremony next June.

11
The Greasy Pole

[*There are times in a politician's life when he is obliged to take the wrong decision. Wrong economically, wrong industrially, wrong by any standards – except one. It is a curious fact that something which is wrong from every other point of view can be right politically. And something which is right politically does not simply mean that it's the way to get the votes – which it is – but also, if a policy gets the votes, then it can be argued that that policy is what the people want. And, in a democracy, how can a thing be wrong if it is what the people will vote for?*

The incident in question only came to light slowly. The first reference that we can find to it is not in Jim Hacker's diary, but in Steel Yourself, *the memoirs of that uniquely outspoken Chairman of the British Chemical Corporation, the diminutive Glaswegian industrialist and scientist, Sir Wally McFarland.*

McFarland was known for his plain language and his unwillingness to bow to government interference in his nationalised industry. He was an expert both on chemicals and on business management – and he believed (rightly) that Hacker knew little or nothing about either. His low regard for Hacker was matched only by his contempt for Sir Humphrey's skill in business. Like many businessmen, he believed that in commerce the Civil Service was not safe with a whelk stall – Ed.]

From Steel Yourself:

On 16 April I had a meeting with Sir Humphrey Appleby at the Department of Administrative Affairs. It was the umpteenth meeting on the subject of the manufacture of Propanol on Merseyside under licence from the Italian Government.

To my astonishment Sir Humphrey seemed to indicate that there might be a problem with the Minister, but his language was as opaque as usual and I could not be sure of this.

I asked him if he was havering [*Scottish word, meaning to be indecisive – Ed.*]. He denied it, but said that we cannot take the Minister's approval for granted.

This was and still is incomprehensible to me. The Italian government was offering us a massive contract to manufacture Propanol at our Merseyside plant. This contract meant saving a plant which we would otherwise have to close down. It meant taking people on, instead of laying them off. And it meant big export royalties. We'd been fighting for two years to win it against tough German and US competition. It seemed completely obvious that it *had* to go ahead.

Appleby raised some footling idiotic question about what the Minister might think. In my experience Ministers *don't* think. In my ten years as Chairman of the BCC I dealt with nineteen different Ministers. They never stopped to think, even if they possessed the basic intelligence necessary for thought – which several of them did not. As a matter of fact, they were usually too lazy to talk to me because they were usually talking to the trade union leaders and bribing them not to strike.

I told Appleby my views. He denied that trade union leaders were bribed. Naturally. It may not be technically bribery, but what else do you call conversations that amount to 'Have a quango, Tom. Have a knighthood, Dick. Have a peerage, Harry'?

Appleby said that the Minister was worried about the Propanol scheme. If so, why hadn't anything been said till now?

At this stage I – unwisely, perhaps – brushed aside suggestions that the Minister was worried. He'd never shown any real interest in the scheme, so he could know nothing about it. Naïvely, I assumed that his ignorance would prevent him interfering. And, in any case, all Ministers are worried. I never met a Minister who wasn't worried.

Ministers worry whenever you do anything that is bold. Anything that makes business sense. Anything that is *necessary*, in fact. If I had never done anything to worry any of those lily-livered, vote-grubbing, baby-kissing jellies the BCC would have gone down the tube ten years earlier than it did.

Appleby said that the Minister's worries centred on the fact that Propanol contained *Meta*dioxin. [*Dioxin was the chemical released in the accident at Seveso, Italy, some years earlier. It was believed to cause damage to the foetus – Ed.*] This was typical. *Meta*dioxin is completely different, an inert compound. It had a clean bill of health from the FDA [*Food and Drugs Administration – Ed.*] in Washington. And the Henderson Committee was about to approve it.

Nonetheless, I could see that Appleby, in all his ignorance of chemistry, was still a little worried. Or else he was reflecting Hacker's worries.

I added that the name metadioxin was now not in the proposal. The chemical was simply called Propanol, making it politically safe.

Our meeting concluded with Appleby offering assurances that the Minister was unlikely to raise any objections, as long as the matter was handled with tact. I offered to go along myself, and have a tactful word with Hacker, and persuade that egotistical blancmange that there could be no argument on the matter.

Appleby declined my offer, and answered that he would be able to manage without what he generously called my unique and refreshing brand of tact.

I was not so sure. And, again, I was locked out of the crucial meeting.

Why do governments continually hire experts to run nationalised industries on business lines, and then interfere every time you try to make a business decision?

[*Hacker's diary continues – Ed.*]

June 4th

This morning Humphrey gave me some wonderful news. Or what appeared to be wonderful news.

He handed me a paper which summarised a new industrial scheme for Merseyside. In a nutshell, the plan is to turn a run-down chemical plant into one of the most profitable units in the British Chemical Corporation. Overnight it will make the BCC into the largest manufacturer of Propanol in Europe.

The benefits would be immense: capital equipment to be made in British factories, additional rateable income for the Local Authority, new jobs on Merseyside, foreign exchange from the exports, it all seemed too good to be true.

I said so.

'But it *is* true, Minister,' said Sir Humphrey, beaming.

How could it be, I asked myself. *Then* I asked myself, what's the point of asking myself? So I asked Humphrey.

'How could it be?' I asked. 'What's the snag?'

'The snag?' repeated Humphrey.

'Yes,' I repeated. 'The snag. What is the snag?'

I knew there must be some snag.

'I don't think I quite follow what you mean, precisely?' Humphrey was playing for time, I could tell.

I formulated my worries even as I voiced them. 'Well . . . what I mean is, this Propanol stuff is an Italian product. So why don't they produce it in Italy?' Humphrey was silent. This was indeed suspicious. 'Why are they making us such a generous present?'

'There's no snag about this, Minister,' said Sir Humphrey. 'It's wonderful news.'

I could see that if it *were* wonderful news, it would indeed be wonderful news.

'Yes,' I agreed cautiously. 'It *is* wonderful news. Wonderful news, isn't it?' I said to Bernard, who was taking the minutes on my right.

He flashed a glance at Humphrey, then replied warily, 'Yes, wonderful news,' but he didn't sound at all carefree.

I knew I'd find out nothing more, just by asking in a generalised fashion about snags. So I thought hard, I tried to find the right question. Humphrey would never actually lie to me [*Well, hardly ever – Ed.*] and will give me the right answers if I can only think of the right questions.

'Good old Propanol,' I said playing for time. Then, quite suddenly, it came to me. 'What *is* Propanol?' I asked.

'It's rather interesting,' said Humphrey promptly. 'It used to be made with dioxin, until the Seveso explosion in Northern Italy. Then they had to stop making it. Now they've developed a safe compound called metadioxin, but of course the Italian factory is still sealed off. So they've asked the BCC to make it for them.'

'Ah,' the fog was beginning to lift. 'An ill wind, eh?'

'Quite so, he agreed contentedly.

'But is this new stuff perfectly safe?'

'Perfectly,' he replied.

'Good,' I said. So I was no nearer. Or was I?

'Humphrey, are you givng me a categorical and absolute assurance that this stuff is not only safe, but one hundred per cent safe?'

'Yes, Minister.'

Okay, so what's up? Why do I smell danger somewhere in all this unequivocally good news? 'Have you anything else to add, Humphrey, which you might regret later if you don't say it now?'

'Well Minister, I suppose I should point out that some weak Ministers might have doubts, in view of the similarity of the names, but no one with any backbone would be deflected from such a beneficial project on such a flimsy pretext.'

So that's all that it was. The similarity of the names. Humphrey was right. I told him so in the most forthright terms. 'Absolutely! I know the sort of Minister you mean. Political jellyfish. Frightened of taking any decision that might upset someone. After all, every decision upsets *someone*. Government is about doing what's right, not doing what's popular. Eh, Humphrey?'

Humphrey was full of approval. 'I couldn't have expressed it better myself, Minister.' Conceited bugger. 'I'll tell Sir Wally to go ahead.'

This sounded a touch more hurried than usual. I stopped Humphrey as he walked to the door, and sought further reassurance.

'Um . . . this decision *will* be popular, though, won't it?'

'Very popular,' Humphrey replied firmly.

I *still* felt a certain nagging worry, somewhere in my bones. 'Humphrey, I just want to be clear on this. You're not asking me to take a courageous decision, are you?'

Humphrey was visibly shocked. 'Of *course* not, Minister,' he insisted. 'Not even a controversial one. What a suggestion!'

[*Readers of these diaries will doubtless recall that whereas a controversial decision will merely lose you votes, a courageous decision will lose you the election – Ed.*]

Nonetheless, if I let it go at this, if anything went wrong I knew I should have to carry the can. So I suggested that perhaps we might take this matter to Cabinet.

'In my opinion,' Humphrey answered revealingly, 'the less said about this the better.'

'Why?'

'Because,' he said patiently, 'although metadioxin is totally harmless, the name might cause anxiety in ignorant and prejudiced minds.'

I was about to tick him off for referring to my Cabinet colleagues in this way (right though he was!) when I realised that he was referring to Friends of the Earth and other crank pressure groups.

June 7th

The matter of the Propanol plant is still not fully agreed. Joan Littler, MP for Liverpool South-West, came to see me today.

I didn't even know she was coming. I checked with Bernard, who reminded me that not only is she the PM's PPS [*Parliamentary Private Secretary, the first – and unpaid – rung on the government ladder – Ed.*] but also that the new Propanol plant would be in her constituency.

I told Bernard to bring her in. To my surprise (well, not *quite* to my surprise) Humphrey appeared at the door and asked if he could join us.

She came in, and I introduced her to Humphrey. She's in her late thirties, quite attractive in a pulled-through-a-hedge-backwards Shirley Williams' sort of way, and her slightly soft feminine manner disguises a hard-nosed opportunist. And she has the PM's ear, of course.

There was something rather aggressive about her opening gambit.

'Look here, Jim, what's the British Chemical Corporation up to in my constituency?'

'Well . . .' I began.

Sir Humphrey interrupted. 'They will shortly be announcing a very exciting project involving new jobs and new investment.'

She nodded, and turned to me. 'Yes, but there are some very worrying rumours about this project.'

'Such as?' I enquired in my most helpful tone.

She eyed me carefully. 'Rumours about dangerous chemicals.'

I nodded. 'Yes, well,' I began, 'obviously all chemicals have some element of danger . . .'

Humphrey interrupted again. 'The Minister means that the rumours are completely unfounded and there is no cause for alarm.'

I nodded. It was a good reply.

She didn't seem to think so. 'All the same,' she persisted, 'can I have your assurance, Jim, that first of all there'll be a full public enquiry?'

This seemed, I must say, a perfectly reasonable request. 'Actually,' I began, 'there'd be no harm in having a public enquiry, it might be . . .'

Humphrey interjected. 'The Minister was about to say that there is absolutely no need for a public enquiry. The whole matter has been fully investigated already and a report will be published shortly.'

Humphrey, it seemed to me, was being a little high-handed. Clearly Joan thought so too.

'Listen,' she said forcefully, 'I came here to talk to Jim.'

And Humphrey, as charming as ever, replied, 'And indeed you are talking to him.'

'But he's not answering! You are!'

I could quite see her point. Humphrey's helpfulness will sometimes achieve the opposite effect from what it is designed to achieve. Unfortunately, he is insensitive to this.

'The Minister and I,' continued Sir Humphrey complacently, 'are of one mind.'

She was incensed. 'Whose mind? Your mind?' She turned on me. 'Listen, I've heard on the grapevine that this factory will be making the chemical that poisoned Seveso and the whole of Northern Italy.'

'That's not true,' I replied, before Humphrey could screw things up further. I explained that the chemical in Seveso was dioxin, whereas this is metadioxin.

'But,' she asserted, 'that must be virtually the same thing.'

I assured her that it was merely a similar name.

'But,' she insisted, 'it's the same name, with "meta" stuck on the front.'

'Ah yes,' I agreed, 'but that makes all the difference.'

'Why?' she asked. 'What does meta mean?'

Of course, I hadn't the slightest idea. So I was forced to ask Humphrey.

'Simple, Minister,' he explained. 'It means "with" or "after", or sometimes "beyond" – it's from the Greek, you know.'

[*Like all Permanent Secretaries, Sir Humphrey Appleby was a generalist. Most of them studied classics, history, PPE or modern languages. Of course you might expect the Permanent Secretary at the Department of Administrative Affairs to have a degree in business administration, but of course you would be wrong – Ed.*]

Then he went on to explain that metadioxin means 'with' or 'after' dioxin, depending on whether it's with the accusative or the genitive: with the accusative it's 'beyond' or 'after', with the genitive it's 'with' – as in Latin, where the ablative is used for words needing a sense of with to precede them.

Bernard added – speaking for the first time in the whole meeting – that of course there is no ablative in Greek, as I would doubtless recall.

I told him I recalled no such thing, and later today he wrote me a little memo, explaining all the above Greek and Latin grammar.

However, I hoped these explanations would satisfy Joan Littler. And that, like me, she would be unwilling to reveal the limits of her education. No such luck.

'I still don't understand,' she said disarmingly.

Humphrey tried snobbery. 'Oh dear,' he sighed, 'I should have thought that was perfectly clear.' It never works.

Her eyes flashed. 'What I insist on knowing,' she stated, 'is what is the actual difference between dioxin and metadioxin.'

I didn't know, of course. Humphrey sailed into the rescue. 'It's very simple,' he replied grandly. 'Metadioxin is an inert compound of dioxin.'

I hoped that that would be that. But no.

She looked at me for help. I, of course, was unable to give her any. So I looked at Humphrey.

'Um, Humphrey,' I said, bluffing madly, 'I *think* I follow that but, er, could you, er, just explain that a little more clearly?'

He stared at me, coldly. 'In what sense, Minister?'

I didn't know where to start. I was going to have to think of the

right question again. But Joan said: 'What does inert mean?'

Sir Humphrey stared at her, silently. And in that glorious moment I suddenly realised that he had no idea what he was talking about either.

'Well,' he said eventually, 'inert means that . . . it's not . . . ert.'

We all stared at each other in silence.

'Ah,' said Joan Littler.

'Ah,' I said.

'Wouldn't 'ert a fly,' muttered Bernard. At least, I think that's what he said, but when I asked him to repeat it he refused and fell silent.

And again, Joan Littler persisted.

'But,' she pressed me, 'what does that mean in practical terms?'

'You mean, chemically?' I asked her. My degree is in economics.

'Yes, chemically,' she said.

Again, I turned to Humphrey. 'Yes,' I said, beginning to enjoy myself, 'what does it mean chemically, Humphrey?'

His eyes spun. Bluffing magnificently, he said in his most patronising voice, 'Well, I'm not sure that I can explain in layman's language, Minister.'

I called the bluff. 'Do you know *any* chemistry, Humphrey?' I enquired.

'Of course not, Minister. I was in the Scholarship form.'

[*At any English public school – 'public' meaning 'private', of course – the scholarship form would have meant the classics form. Indeed, if you went to a very good school indeed you might avoid learning any science at all – Ed.*]

'And while we're at it,' continued Joan Littler, 'what's a compound?'

'You don't know any chemistry either?'

'No,' she replied. 'Do you?'

Suddenly, this all seemed awfully funny. None of us knew *anything* about the matter we were discussing. Joan, Humphrey, Bernard and I, all charged with a vital decision on a matter of government policy – and you couldn't have found four people anywhere in the UK who understood less about it.

[*It is significant that none of those present thought of telephoning Sir Wally McFarland. But then, he was merely the expert, and the chairman of the Nationalised Industry in question – Ed.*]

I grinned, embarrassed, like a naughty schoolboy. 'We *ought* to know something about inert compounds, oughtn't we?'

Humphrey had no sense of humour about this, and he made a brave attempt at bluffing us again.

'A compound is . . . well, you know what compound interest is, surely?' he complained. Joan and I nodded. 'Compound interest is a jolly good thing to enjoy. Well, that's the sort of thing a compound is.'

I stared at him. Did he really think that would do? I looked at Joan. She was staring at him too. But reduced to silence for the first time. So I plunged in hopefully.

'Well,' I said, trying it on in the hope of bringing the discussion to a close, 'that's about it, then. To sum up, I think we're all of the same mind, basically in agreement, broadly speaking, about this. And we are happy to continue with its development.'

Littler spoke up. 'I've said no such thing.'

We were getting nowhere. So I tried to sum it up again. I pointed out that we had established that the only similarity between dioxin and metadioxin was in the name. She didn't seem to see it.

I searched desperately for an analogy, 'It's like Littler and Hitler,' I explained. 'We're not saying that you're like Hitler because your name sounds similar.'

I realised that I'd been less than tactful, but the words were out. She flared up. 'That's hardly the point,' she said angrily.

'Then what *is* the point?' But I knew already.

'The point is, this factory is in my constituency.'

Of course I could see why she was worried, but if Humphrey was telling me the truth she was worried unnecessarily. 'It's good for the constituency.' I said. 'More jobs. More money. The only people who could possibly be upset by this are a few cranky environmentalists. It can't cost us more than, on balance, a couple of hundred votes.'

'My majority,' she replied quietly, 'is ninety-one.'

I hadn't realised. She certainly had a point. I don't want to be responsible for jeopardising a government-held marginal, especially if the sitting MP is PPS to the PM.

She pressed home her argument. 'And don't forget that there are three government constituencies bordering onto mine – all marginal, all with majorities of well under two thousand.'

I didn't know what to say. While I considered the position, Sir Humphrey spoke up again. 'Miss Littler,' he began, 'may I intervene once more?' She nodded. 'The case for the BCC manufacturing Propanol is overwhelming – am I right, Minister?'

'Overwhelming,' I agreed.

'It will create jobs,' continued Humphrey fluently, 'it will increase income for the Local Authority, and it will secure profitable export orders.'.

'Export orders,' I agreed.

'Furthermore,' he continued, 'the chemical has been declared safe by the FDA in Washington.'

'Washington,' I agreed.

'We are having,' he went on, 'a report prepared here *as well*. The Minister regards this scheme as being wholly to the advantage of your constituency and the country.'

I chimed in. 'And if the stuff is dangerous, I *promise* you I'll stop it being made here. But if the report shows it's harmless, that would be absurd, wouldn't it?'

She sat still for a moment, staring at me, then at Humphrey. Then she stood up. She said she wasn't satisfied. (I can't blame her. If it were my constituency, I'm not sure I'd be satisfied either.) She advised me to remember that the party made me an MP – and that I certainly can't go on being a Minister if our party loses the next election.

She's got a point there too.

Also, I have a nasty feeling that the PM will hear her point of view before the end of the week.

Humphrey looked at me after she left, obviously asking for a go-ahead. I told him that I would consider the matter further, and told Bernard to put all the relevant papers in my box to take home and study. Then the decision should become clear.

June 8th

I've studied all the Propanol papers and I still don't know what to do.

So I called a meeting with Humphrey to discuss the report on Propanol that we have commissioned. I've been wondering if it really will be conclusively in favour of Propanol, as Sir Humphrey and Sir Wally predict.

I asked if I should meet Professor Henderson, who is chairing the report, or writing it himself or something.

Humphrey said that there was no need for such a meeting. He is apparently a brilliant biochemist and was chosen with some care.

Naturally he was chosen with care. But to what end: to produce a report that backs Sir Wally and Sir Humphrey? Naturally he was.

But surely none of them would be foolish enough to cook up a report saying that metadioxin were safe if, in fact, it were dangerous. Naturally not. I think I'm going round in circles.

There was another possibility that I could raise though. 'Suppose he produces one of those cautious wait-and-see reports?'

'In that case,' said Sir Humphrey cheerfully, 'we don't publish it, we use the American report instead.'

I was completely torn. On the one hand, the scheme is a wonderful one – the jobs, the income etc. – if it works out safely! And I'm assured it will. But if there's an accident after I have given the go-ahead . . . The consequences would be too awful to contemplate.

'Is there any chance he'll produce a report saying the stuff's dangerous?' I wanted to know.

Humphrey was plainly baffled. 'No. No chance. It isn't dangerous,' he said.

He clearly is totally sincere on this issue. And yet he's suggesting we don't publish a cautious wait-and-see type report if that's what Henderson writes.

'Why would you consider suppressing the Henderson report?'

He was outraged. 'I would never suppress it, Minister. I merely might not publish it.'

'What's the difference?'

'All the difference in the world. Suppression is the instrument of totalitarian dictatorships. You can't do that in a free country. We would merely take a democratic decision not to publish it.'

That makes sense. But what would I say to the press and to Parliament, I wondered? That we had hoped the Henderson Committee would show we'd made the right decision but instead they've said we cocked it up, so we're pretending the report doesn't exist? I offered this suggestion to Humphrey.

He was not amused. 'Very droll, Minister,' he remarked.

So I asked Humphrey, 'What *would* I say, if I decided not to publish it?'

'There is a well-established government procedure for suppressing – that is, not publishing – unwanted reports.'

This was news to me. I asked how it was done.

'You discredit them,' he explained simply.

How? I made notes as he spoke. It occurred to me, that his technique could be useful for discrediting some of the party's more idiotic research papers.

Stage one: The public interest
1) You hint at security considerations.

2) You point out that the report could be used to put unwelcome pressure on government because it might be misinterpreted. [*Of course, anything might be misinterpreted. The Sermon on the Mount might be misinterpreted. Indeed, Sir Humphrey Appleby would almost certainly have argued that, had the Sermon on the Mount been a government report, it should certainly not have been published on the grounds that it was a thoroughly irresponsible document: the sub-paragraph suggesting that the meek will inherit the earth could, for instance, do irreparable damage to the defence budget – Ed.*]

3) You then say that it is better to wait for the results of a wider and more detailed survey over a longer time-scale.

4) If there is no such survey being carried out, so much the better. You commission one, which gives you even more time to play with. .

Stage two: Discredit the evidence that you are not publishing
This is, of course, much easier than discrediting evidence that you *do* publish. You do it indirectly, by press leaks. You say:
(a) that it leaves important questions unanswered
(b) that much of the evidence is inconclusive
(c) that the figures are open to other interpretations
(d) that certain findings are contradictory
(e) that some of the main conclusions have been questioned
Points (a) to (d) are bound to be true. In fact, all of these criticisms can be made of a report without even reading it. There are, for instance, always *some* questions unanswered – such as the ones they haven't asked. As regards (e), if some of the main conclusions have not been questioned, question them! Then they have.

Stage three: Undermine the recommendations
This is easily done, with an assortment of governmental phrases:
(a) 'not really a basis for long-term decisions . . .'
(b) 'not sufficient information on which to base a valid assessment . . .'
(c) 'no reason for any fundamental rethink of existing policy . . .'
(d) 'broadly speaking, it endorses current practice . . .'
These phrases give comfort to people who have not read the report and who don't want change – i.e. almost everybody.

Stage four: If stage three still leaves doubts, then Discredit The Man Who Produced the Report
This must be done OFF THE RECORD. You explain that:
(a) he is harbouring a grudge against the government
(b) he is a publicity seeker
(c) he's trying to get his knighthood
(d) he is trying to get his chair
(e) he is trying to get his Vice-Chancellorship
(f) he used to be a consultant to a multinational company *or*
(g) he wants to be a consultant to a multinational company

June 9th
Today the Propanol plan reached the television news, damn it. Somehow some environmental group got wind of the scheme and a row blew up on Merseyside.

The TV newsreader – or whoever writes what the newsreader reads – didn't help much either. Though he didn't say that Propanol was dangerous, he somehow managed to imply it – using loaded words like 'claim'.

[*We have found the transcript of the BBC Nine O'Clock News for 9 June. The relevant item is shown overleaf. Hacker seems to have a reasonable point – Ed.*]

BBC tv

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

NEWSREADER: Apparently Propanol contains metadioxin, which the BCC claims is completely harmless. It is, however, a compound of dioxin, which was the chemical released

CUE NEWS FILM OF SEVESO INCIDENT

after a factory explosion at Seveso in Northern Italy in July 1976, spreading a cloud of poisonous dust over a four mile radius. Because dioxin can cause irreversible damage to the human foetus as well as other serious diseases the entire village was evacuated and the villagers were not allowed to return home for nearly a year.

CUE FILM OF MERSEYSIDE PROTEST. Group of women with placards: "NO TO THE POISON FACTORY", "BABYKILLERS KEEP OUT", "LIVES BEFORE PROFITS".

Today a Merseyside group of protesters voice their opposition to the BCC scheme outside the factory gates.

LIVERPOOL WOMAN: I'll tell you what we're going to do. As far as I'm concerned, Sir Wally can take his poisonous chemicals somewhere else. My daughter's expecting a baby in three months and I'm not having my grandchild deformed for the sake of bloody Eyties[1] I can tell you that.

REPORTER: But they say metadioxin is harmless.

LIVERPOOL WOMAN: Oh yes. They said Thalidomide was harmless too, didn't they? Well if it's all that harmless, why aren't they Eyties making it in Italy, eh? Tell me that! If we had a government that cared about ordinary people, they'd never allow it.

END OF FILM

NEWSREADER: The BCC said tonight that a Government Report on the safety of Propanol was due to be published shortly by the Department of Administrative Affairs. Today, in Prague, the Government announced that due to .....

- 1 -

[1] Italians.

[We asked an old BBC current affairs man how the News would have treated the item if they had been in favour of the scheme, and we reproduce his 'favourable' version to compare with the actual one – Ed.]

NEWSREADER: Propanol contains metadioxin, a compound of the chemical dioxin which was released in the Seveso explosion in Italy in 1976. It is however an inert compound and chemical analysis has shown it to be completely harmless.

CUT TO FILM OF FACTORY SHOWING PLANT AND OFFICES

The news was welcomed today at the factory where Propanol will be manufactured. It had been scheduled for closure at the end of the year, but now it will be taking on more staff. The contract is for a minimum of five years.

CUE FILM OF FACTORY WORKER

FACTORY WORKER: This is great news. At last we've got some work we can get our teeth into. It's really put heart in the lads.

CUT TO SIR WALLY

SIR WALLY: Everyone's worked like mad for this contract. It will mean a lot of exports as well as a lot of jobs. We were up against the Germans and the Americans, so it's a real vote of confidence in the British chemical industry.

REPORTER: Isn't metadioxin potentially dangerous?

SIR WALLY: No, that's dioxin; metadioxin is about as dangerous as self-raising flour.

END OF FILM

NEWSREADER: A government report is to be published shortly which, it is understood, will confirm an earlier American enquiry which gives metadioxin a clean bill of health.

June 10th

I summoned Humphrey first thing this morning. I pointed out that metadioxin is dynamite.

He answered me that it's harmless.

I disagreed. 'It may be harmless chemically,' I said, 'but it's lethal politically.'

'It can't hurt anyone,' he insisted.

I pointed out that it could finish me off.

No sooner had we begun talking than Number Ten was on the phone. The political office. Joan Littler had obviously made sure that Number Ten watched the Nine O'Clock News last night.

I tried to explain that this was merely a little local difficulty, and there were exports and jobs prospects. They asked how many jobs: I had to admit that it was only about ninety – but well-paid jobs, and in an area of high unemployment.

None of this cut any ice with Number Ten – I was talking to the Chief Political Adviser, but doubtless he was acting under orders. There was no point in fighting this particular losing battle with the PM, so I muttered (as Humphrey was listening, and Bernard was probably listening-in) that I was coming round to their point of view, *i.e.* that there was a risk to three or four marginals.

I rang off. Humphrey was eyeing me with a quizzical air.

'Humphrey,' I began carefully, 'something has just struck me.'

'I noticed,' he replied dryly.

I ignored the wisecrack. I pointed out that there were perfectly legitimate arguments against this scheme. A loss of public confidence, for instance.

'You mean votes,' he interjected.

I denied it, of course. I explained that I didn't exactly mean votes. Votes in themselves are not a consideration. But *the public will* is a valid consideration. We are a democracy. And it looks as if the public are against this scheme.

'The public,' said Sir Humphrey, 'are ignorant and misguided.'

'What do you mean?' I demanded. 'It was the public who elected me.'

There was a pointed silence.

Then Sir Humphrey continued: 'Minister, in a week it will all have blown over, and in a year's time there will be a safe and successful factory on Merseyside.'

'A week is a long time in politics,' I answered.[1]

[1] Originally said by Mr Harold Wilson as he then was.

'A year is a short time in government,' responded Sir Humphrey.

I began to get cross. *He* may be in government. But I'm in politics. And the PM is not pleased.

Humphrey then tried to tell me that I was putting party before country. That hoary old cliché again. I told him to find a new one.

Bernard said that a new cliché could perhaps be said to be a contradiction in terms. Thank you, Bernard, for all your help!

I made one more attempt to make Humphrey understand. 'Humphrey,' I said, 'you understand nothing because you lead a sheltered life. I want to survive. I'm not crossing the PM.'

He was very bitter. And very insulting. 'Must you always be so concerned with climbing the greasy pole?'

I faced the question head on. 'Humphrey,' I explained, 'the greasy pole is important. I have to climb it.'

'Why?'

'Because,' I said, 'it's there.'

June 11th

Today there was an astonishing piece in *The Times*. A leak.

HENDERSON REPORT CLEARS PROPANOL

I was furious.

I asked Bernard how *The Times* knows the wording of the Henderson Report before I do.

'There's been a leak, Minister,' he explained.

The boy's a fool. Obviously there's been a leak. The question is, who's been leaking?

On second thoughts, perhaps he's not a fool. Perhaps he knows. And can't or won't tell.

'It's labelled "Confidential",' I pointed out.

'At least it wasn't labelled "Restricted",' he said.

[*RESTRICTED means it was in the papers yesterday. CONFIDENTIAL means it won't be in the papers till today – Ed.*]

I decided to put Bernard on the spot. 'Who leaked this? Humphrey?'

'Oh,' he said. 'I'm sure he didn't.'

'Are you?' I asked penetratingly.

'Well . . . he probably didn't.'

'No?' I was at my most penetrating.

'Well,' said Bernard with a sheepish smile, 'it *might* have been someone else.'

'These leaks are a disgrace,' I told him. 'And people think that it's politicians that leak.'

'It has been known, though, hasn't it?' said Bernard carefully.

'In my opinion,' I said reproachfully, 'we are much more leaked against than leaking.'

I then read *The Times* story carefully through. It contained a number of phrases that I could almost hear Humphrey dictating: 'Political cowardice to reject the BCC proposal' . . . 'Hacker has no choice', etc.

It was clear that, by means of this leak, Humphrey thinks that he has now committed me to this scheme.

Well, we shall see!

June 14th

I got my copy of the Henderson Report on Saturday, only a day after *The Times* got theirs. Not bad.

The Report gives me no way out of the Propanol scheme. At least, none that I can see at the moment. It says it's a completely safe chemical.

On the other hand, *The Times* commits me to nothing. It is, after all, merely an unofficial leak of a draft report.

Sir Wally McFarlane was my first appointment of the day. Humphrey came too – surprise, surprise!

And they were both looking excessively cheerful.

I asked them to sit down. Then Sir Wally opened the batting.

'I see from the press,' he said, 'that the Henderson Report comes down clearly on our side.'

I think perhaps he still thinks that I'm on his side. No, surely Humphrey must have briefed him. So he's pretending that he thinks that I'm still on his side.

I was non-committal. 'Yes, I saw that too.'

And I stared penetratingly at Humphrey.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. 'Yes, that committee is leaking like a sieve,' he said. I continued staring at him, but made no reply. There's no doubt that he's the guilty man. He continued, brazenly: 'So Minister, there's no real case for refusing permission

for the new Plant now, is there?'

I remained non-committal. 'I don't know.'

Sir Wally spoke up. 'Look, Jim. We've been working away at this contract for two years. It's very important to us. I'm chairman and I'm responsible – and I tell you, as a chemist myself, that metadioxin is utterly safe.'

'Why do you experts always think you are right?' I enquired coldly.

'Why do you think,' countered Sir Wally emotionally, 'that the more *in*expert you are, the more likely *you* are to be right?'

I'm not an expert. I've never claimed to be an expert. I said so. 'Ministers are not experts. Ministers are put in charge precisely because they know nothing . . .'

'You admit that?' interrupted Sir Wally with glee. I suppose I walked right into that.

I persevered. 'Ministers know nothing *about technical problems*. A Minister's job is to consider the wider interests of the nation and, for that reason, I cannot commit myself yet.'

Sir Wally stood up, and lost his temper. (In the reverse order, I think.) 'Come off it, Hacker,' he exploded, 'this is the wrong decision and you know it. It is weak, craven and cowardly.'

Then I got angry. I stood up too. 'I am not a coward.'

'Sit down!' he whispered murderously. His eyes were flashing, and he looked quite ready for a physical punch-up. I decided that discretion was the better part of valour and sat down.

He was beside himself with rage. He was spitting all over my desk as he spoke. 'You think you'll lose a miserable few hundred votes from a few foolish ill-informed people in those constituencies? It's pathetic!'

'It's politics,' I explained.

'Exactly,' he agreed contemptuously, and walked to the door. Then he turned. 'I shall be telephoning the Secretary of State for Industry. I'm prepared to resign if you block this one.'

He stalked out.

We gazed at each other.

After a few moments Sir Humphrey spoke. 'How did you feel that went, Minister?' he enquired politely.

I refused to show my concern. As breezily as I could, I replied, 'We'll just have to get another chairman, that's all.'

Humphrey was incredulous. 'Get another? Get *another*? No one else on earth would take that job. *Nobody* wants to be chairman of a

nationalised industry. It's instant ruin. They might as well accept the golden handshake on the day they start. It's only a matter of time.'

I still refused to show any concern. 'We'll find someone,' I said, with a confidence that I did not feel.

'Yes,' agreed Humphrey. 'Some useless nonentity or some American geriatric.'

'Not necessarily,' I replied.

'Oh no?' enquired Sir Humphrey. 'So how do you expect the DOI[1] to find a decent replacement when we've forced his predecessor to resign for taking a sound commercial decision which we blocked for political reasons?'

I could see no point in going through all that again. 'I have no choice,' I said simply.

Sir Humphrey tried flattery. 'Minister,' he wheedled. 'A Minister can do what he likes.'

'No,' I explained. 'It's the people's will. I am their leader. I must follow them. I have no guilty conscience. My hands are clean.'

Sir Humphrey stood up, coldly. 'I should have thought,' he remarked, 'that it was frightfully difficult to keep one's hands clean while climbing the greasy pole.'

Then *he* stalked out.

I really was winning friends and influencing people this morning.

I was left with good old faithful Bernard.

We sat and contemplated the various possibilities that could arise from the morning's débâcle. Clearly we had to avoid Wally making a public fuss. We had to stop him giving interviews on *Panorama* or making press statements accusing me of political interference.

I am really on the horns of a dilemma. If I stop the scheme, *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* will say that I'm a contemptible political coward. But if I let it go ahead the *Daily Mirror* and the *Sun* will say I'm murdering unborn babies. I can't win!

The only way out is if the Henderson Report had *any* doubt about the safety of metadioxin. But it hasn't. I've read it very carefully.

On the other hand – I've suddenly realised – no one else has read it. Because it's not quite finished. It's still only a *draft* report.

Tomorrow I'll talk to Bernard about this matter. Perhaps the answer is to meet Professor Henderson while there's still time.

[1] Department of Industry.

June 15th

This morning, at our daily diary session, I asked Bernard if Professor Henderson is a Cambridge man.

Bernard nodded.

'Which college is he at?' I asked casually.

'King's,' said Bernard. 'Why?'

I brushed it aside. 'Just curious – wondered if it was my old college.'

Mistake! 'Weren't you at LSE?' he asked.

'Oh yes, so I was,' I found myself saying. Feeble! I really must do better than that!

I asked Bernard to give me his file, and I asked for a Cambridge telephone directory.

Bernard spoke up bravely. 'Minister . . .' he began nervously, '. . . you do realise that . . . not that you have any such intention, of course . . . but, well, it would be most improper to try to influence an independent report of this nature.'

I agreed wholeheartedly that it would be most improper. Unthinkable, in fact. 'But I just thought that we might go and have tea with my old friend R. A. Crichton, Provost of King's.' I told Bernard to get him on the phone.

Bernard did so.

'And,' I added, 'who knows? Professor Henderson might easily drop in for tea with his Provost. That would be a happy coincidence, wouldn't it?'

Bernard thought for a split second, and agreed that it would be perfectly natural, if they were both at the same college.

'There's nothing improper about a coincidence, is there, Bernard?'

Deadpan, he replied: 'How can a coincidence be improper, Minister? Impropriety postulates intention, which coincidence precludes.'

Memo: I must learn to use longer words.

June 18th

I had a most satisfactory day up in Cambridge.

Tea with Crichton, my old friend at King's. Now a peer, and very relaxed in academic life.

I asked him how it felt, going from the Commons to the Lords.

'It's like being moved from the animals to the vegetables,' he replied.

By a strange coincidence Professor Henderson had been invited for tea. Crichton introduced us.

Henderson seemed slightly taken aback. 'I must say, I didn't expect to see the Minister,' he said. We both agreed that it was a remarkable coincidence.

Crichton looked astonished and asked if we knew each other. I explained that we'd never met, but that Henderson was writing a report for my Department.

Crichton said that this was quite a coincidence, and Henderson and I both agreed that it was an *amazing* coincidence.

After that we all settled down a bit and, over the Earl Grey, Henderson remarked that I must have been very happy with the draft of his report.

I assured him that I was delighted, absolutely delighted, and I complimented him on his hard work. He, with modesty – and truth – admitted that most of the hard work had been done by the FDA in Washington.

I asked him if he'd ever done a government report before. He said he hadn't. So I explained that his name will be attached to it forever. THE HENDERSON REPORT.

'A kind of immortality, really,' I added.

He seemed pleased. He smiled, and said he'd never thought of it like that before.

Then I went straight for the jugular. 'But,' I said casually, 'if anything were to go wrong . . .' And I paused.

He was instantly perturbed. 'Go wrong?' His little academic eyes blinked behind his big academic hornrims.

'I mean,' I said gravely, 'if metadioxin is not quite as safe as you say it is. It's your career – this is very courageous of you.'

Professor Henderson was now very concerned. Courageous was manifestly the last thing he ever wanted to be. He was also puzzled, and not quite getting my drift. 'I don't understand,' he said. 'None of the standard tests on metadioxin show any evidence of toxicity.'

I paused for effect. Then: 'None of the *standard* tests. Quite.'

I paused again, while he panicked silently.

'What do you mean?' he said in a high strangled voice that didn't quite seem to belong to this tall fellow with a high forehead and big feet.

I got out my little notebook to refresh my memory. 'Funnily enough,' I explained, 'I was just making a few notes in the train on the way up here. Of course, I'm not a biochemist, you understand,

but I'm told that the FDA report leaves some important questions unanswered.'

He thought about this. 'Well . . .' he said finally, and stopped.

I went on: 'And that some of the evidence is inconclusive, that some of the findings have been questioned, and the figures are open to other interpretations.'

Henderson tried to make sense of all this. Then he said: 'But *all* figures are open to . . .'

I interrupted him. 'Absolutely! And that different results might come from a wider and more detailed study over a longer time scale.'

'Well, obviously . . .' he began.

'Yes,' I said firmly. 'You see. If something did go wrong – even in ten years' time, a delayed effect – well, the press would go straight to your report. And if it turned out you'd done laboratory trials for a multinational drug company . . .'

He was appalled. 'But that was fifteen years ago.'

'Fourteen,' I corrected him. (This immensely useful piece of information had been revealed by his file.) 'And you know what the press are like – "No smoke without fire." Even if there's no real basis. Could be a millstone round your neck.'

I could see that Henderson was wavering, so I piled on the pressure.

'The popular press would be merciless if anything *did* go wrong: DEATH AGONY OF HENDERSON REPORT VICTIMS'.

Henderson was quaking in his shoes. He was in a frightful state. 'Yes, yes, well, I, er, I don't know what to do. I mean. I can't change the evidence. Metadioxin is a safe drug. The report has to say so.'

He looked at me, desperately. I carefully did not fall into the trap. I was not going to make the elementary mistake of telling him what to put in his independent report.

'Quite,' I agreed. 'Quite. I can see you have no choice.'

And I left him.

As I strolled across the room to refill my cup of tea, I saw dear old Crichton slide into my chair and offer Henderson a buttered crumpet.

I knew what he was going to say. He was going to tell Henderson that it's only the phrasing of the Conclusion that you have to worry about. That's the only part the press ever reads.

At the moment it reads: 'On existing evidence, the Committee

can see no reason not to proceed.'

I'm sure Crichton will suggest some excellent alternative. And I'm equally sure that Henderson will take his advice.

June 22nd

Victory.

I got the final version of the Henderson Report today. It's all exactly the same, but for the end paragraph, which has undergone the teeniest bit of redrafting.

> While the committee can see no reason not to proceed on the existing evidence, it should be emphasised that Metadioxin is a comparatively recent compound, and it would be irresponsible to deny that after further research its manufacture might be found to be associated with health risks.

I called Bernard at once, and told him to release the report to the press.

Then I cancelled all appointments for today, took a train to Liverpool where another protest meeting was due to take place, the press office notified the press, radio and television – and, in a glorious triumphant moment, I announced at the meeting, on television, to an enthusiastic cheering crowd that I would not be giving my approval for the BCC to manufacture Propanol.

I reckon that's four marginals won in the next general election.

When I got home tonight I saw Sir Wally on *Newsnight*. He made no mention of resignation – he couldn't, of course, he'd been completely outmanoeuvred.

He simply issued a statement in which he said that if the Henderson Report was correct to cast doubt on the safety of metadioxin it was obviously impossible to consider manufacturing it on Merseyside.

June 23rd

Sir Humphrey was angrier with me today than I've ever seen him.

'Do you feel like a hero?' he asked.

'Yes,' I replied. 'Number Ten will be delighted.'

'Probably one of the worst governmental decisions I have ever witnessed,' he snarled. I wasn't bothered by this open rudeness.

'Probably one of the best political decisions I've ever made,' I replied confidently.

Bernard was silent.

'What do *you* think, Bernard?' I asked cruelly.

Bernard looked desperate. 'I think . . . that, bearing everything in mind . . . and, ah . . . after due consideration and, well . . . um . . . considering all the implications and, ah, points of view, um, that, well, in other words, I am in fact, *bound* to say that . . . you looked awfully good on television, Minister.'

Having enjoyed watching Bernard wriggle, I turned back to Humphrey. 'Oh by the way,' I asked, 'can we manage a CBE for Henderson? Or a Vice-Chancellorship or something?'

Humphrey was appalled. 'Certainly not! He's completely unreliable and totally lacking in judgement. I still can't think why he suddenly cast doubt on his whole report in that final paragraph.'

'Because,' I replied without thinking, 'he has excellent judgement, enormous stature and great charm.' Then I realised what I'd said.

So did Humphrey. 'I thought you said you'd never met him.' Quick as a flash I replied, 'Intellectual stature.'

Humphrey was not fooled. 'And charm?' he enquired scathingly.

I was almost stumped. 'He . . . er . . . he writes with charm,' I explained unconvincingly. 'Doesn't he, Bernard?'

'Yes Minister,' replied Bernard dutifully.

Sir Humphrey's face was a picture.

15
Equal Opportunities

October 23rd

Today was a fairly quiet Saturday afternoon in the constituency. The end of our first year and I was feeling that I've done pretty well, one way or another: no great cock-ups after my first-ever year in office (or at least, none which we haven't survived somehow) and I have a sense that I am beginning to understand the administrative machine at last.

You may think that a year is rather too long a period in which to achieve an understanding of the one department of which I am the titular head. In political terms, of course, that's true. Nonetheless if, had I become Chairman of ICI after a lifetime as a journalist and polytechnic lecturer and with no previous experience of running a major industry, I had a thorough understanding of how it all worked after only one year, I would be considered a great success.

We politicians blunder into Whitehall like babes in the wood. So few of us have ever run *anything* before, other than a medical practice, a law firm, or a political journal – and suddenly we find ourselves the head of a ministry with between twenty thousand and a hundred thousand employees.

All in all, I think we do pretty well! [*It was in this bullish mood that Hacker had agreed that day to give an interview to Cathy Webb, a fourth-former in one of the comprehensive schools in Hacker's constituency*[1] *– Ed.*]

However, my enthusiastic feelings about my first year in office were, I must admit, a little shaken after I was interviewed at teatime by a precocious schoolgirl for the school magazine.

She began by asking me how I had reached my present eminent position. I summarised my political career so far, culminating, I said, with carefully calculated modesty, 'with the moment when the

[1] Birmingham East.

Prime Minister saw fit, for whatever reason, to invite one to join the Cabinet and, well, here one is.' I didn't want to seem conceited. In my experience the young have a nose for that sort of thing.

She asked me if it isn't a terrific responsibility. I explained to her that if one chooses, as I have chosen, to dedicate one's life to public service, the service of others, then responsibility is one of those things one has to accept.

Cathy was full of admiration, I could see it in her eyes. 'But all that power . . .' she murmured.

'I know, I know,' I replied, attempting the casual air of a man who is used to it. 'Frightening, in a way. But actually, Cathy . . .' (I was careful to use her name, of course, because it showed I did not consider myself above my constituents, even schoolchildren – future voters, after all) '. . . this power actually makes one rather humble!'

Annie hurried in and interrupted me. The phone had been ringing elsewhere in the house.

'Bernard just rang, oh Humble One,' she said. I *wish* she wouldn't send me up like that in front of other people. I mean, I've got a pretty good sense of humour, but there is a limit.

She went on to tell me that Central House[1] wanted me to see some programme on television. On BBC2.

I had already remembered the wretched programme, and made a note *not* to watch.

'Oh Lord,' I said. 'Maureen Watkins MP. One of our backbenchers – not my favourite lady, a rampaging feminist, I don't think I'll bother.'

In the nick of time I noticed Cathy making a note. I had to explain that my remark was 'off the record', a concept that she seemed to have some difficulty with. It reminded me how lucky we are to have those well-trained lobby correspondents to deal with most of the time.

Anyway, she crossed it out. But to my surprise she spoke up in defence of Maureen Watkins.

'I like her,' she said. 'Don't you think that women are still exploited? All of my friends in 4B think that they are exploited at work and at home and that it's still a world designed by men and run by men for the convenience of men.'

I was slightly surprised by this little speech. It didn't sound entirely . . . home-grown, if you know what I mean. Cathy must

[1] Hacker's Party HQ.

have realised, because she had the grace to add: 'You know – like she says.'

I must say, I'm getting a bit fed up with all this feminist crap. Nowadays, if you so much as compliment a woman on her appearance, you're told you're a sexist. This dreadful lesbian lobby is getting everywhere.

So I decided to argue the point with young Cathy. 'Surely it's not like that any longer,' I said with a warm smile. 'Anyway, she doesn't carry any weight in the House, thank goodness.'

'Not in the House, perhaps,' interjected Annie. 'It's full of men.'

I thanked my dear wife for her helpful comment, renewed my smile in Cathy's direction, and asked her if there was anything else she wanted to know.

'Just one last question,' she said. 'As a Cabinet Minister with all this power, what have you actually achieved?'

I was pleased to answer that question. It seemed an easy one. 'Achieved?' I repeated reflectively. 'Well, all sorts of things. Membership of the Privy Council, membership of the party policy committee . . .'

She interrupted. It seemed that she wanted to make the question more specific. What, she wanted to know, had I actually done that makes life better for other people.

Well, of course, I was completely nonplussed. Children ask the oddest questions. Right out of left field, as our American allies would say. Certainly no one had ever asked me such a question before.

'Makes life *better*?' I repeated.

'Yes,' she said.

'For *other people*?' I thought hard, but absolutely nothing sprang to mind. I tried to think as I spoke. 'There must be a number of things. I mean, that's what one's whole job is about, eighteen hours a day, seven days a week . . .'

Cathy interrupted me as I made the mistake of momentarily drawing breath. She has a future with the BBC, that kid! 'Could you just give me one or two examples, though? Otherwise my article might be a bit boring.'

'Examples. Yes, of course I can,' I said, and found that I couldn't.

Her pencil was poised expectantly above her lined exercise book. I realised that some explanation was called for.

'Well,' I began, 'you see, it's difficult to know where to start. So much of government is collective decisions, all of us together, the

best minds in the country hammering it out.'

She seemed dissatisfied with my explanation.

'Yes,' she said doubtfully, 'but what is it you'll look back on afterwards and say "I did that"? You know, like a writer can look at his books.'

Persistent little blighter.

I started to explain the facts of political life. 'Yes, well, politics is a complex business, Cathy.' I was careful to use her name again. 'Lots of people have to have their say. Things take time. Rome wasn't built in a day.'

As I looked at her face, I could see an air of disappointment written across it. [*In view of the insight that Hacker's frequently mixed metaphors give us into the clouded state of his mind, we have retained them unless clarity is threatened – Ed.*] I began to feel slightly disappointed with myself. I realised that I could not give a proper answer to her question. I also began to feel more than a little irritated that this wretched child should have produced these feelings of inadequacy in me. Enough was enough. It was time to bring the interview to an end.

I pointed out that time was flying, and that I still had to do my boxes. I hustled her out, emphasising how much I'd enjoyed our little talk, and reminding her that she had agreed to let me approve the article before it was printed.

I returned and sat down heavily in my favourite fireside armchair. I was feeling very brought down.

'Bright kid,' commented Annie.

'That's the last time I ever give an interview to a school magazine,' I responded. 'She asked me some very difficult questions.'

'They weren't difficult,' said Annie firmly. 'Just innocent. She was assuming that there is some moral basis to your activities.'

I was puzzled. 'But there is,' I replied.

Annie laughed. 'Oh Jim, don't be silly.'

I wasn't amused. I gazed gloomily into the carefully arranged embers of the artificial gas log fire.

'What are you sighing for?' Annie asked.

I tried to explain.

'What *have* I achieved?' I asked. 'Cathy was right.'

Annie suggested that, since Cathy and I had agreed I had all that power, I should go and achieve something forthwith. She *will* persist in making these silly suggestions.

'You know I'm only a Cabinet Minister,' I snapped.

Annie smiled. 'It really does make you humble.'

My humility is not in question, and never has been. The point is that I can't change anything in the foreseeable future. Changing things means getting bills through Parliament, and all the time's been taken up for the next two years.

Annie was unimpressed.

'Why don't you reform the Civil Service?' she suggested.

She makes it sound like one simple little task instead of a lifetime of dedicated carnage. Which reforms in particular did she have in mind, I wondered? Anyway, any real reform of the Civil Service is impossible, as I explained to her.

'Suppose I thought up fifty terrific reforms. Who will have to implement them?'

She saw the point at once. 'The Civil Service,' we said in unison, and she nodded sympathetically. But Annie doesn't give up easily.

'All right,' she suggested, 'not fifty reforms. Just one.'

'One?'

'If you achieve *one* important reform of the Civil Service – that would be something.'

Something? It would get into the *Guinness Book of Records*. I asked her what she was proposing.

'Make them put more women in top civil servants' jobs. Women are half the population. Why shouldn't they be half the Permanent Secretaries? How many women are there at the top?'

I tried to think. Certainly not many. I'd hardly come across any.

'Equal opportunities,' I said. I liked the sound it made. It has a good ring to it, that phrase. 'I'll have a go,' I said. 'Why not? There's a principle at stake.'

Annie was delighted. 'You mean you're going to do something out of pure principle?'

I nodded.

'Oh Jim,' she said, with real love and admiration in her voice.

'Principles,' I added, 'are excellent vote-winners.'

Shortly afterwards, Annie developed a headache and went to bed unusually early. I wanted to pursue the conversation with her but she seemed to have lost interest. Odd, that!

October 25th

Today I learned a thing or two about equal opportunities, or the lack of them, in the Civil Service.

Quite coincidentally I had a meeting with Sarah Harrison, who is the only woman Under-Secretary in the DAA.

Sarah really is a splendid person. Very attractive, intelligent, and about thirty-nine or forty years old, which is pretty young for an Under-Sec. She has a brisk and – I suppose – slightly masculine approach to meetings and so forth, but seems to be jolly attractive and feminine in spite of all that.

She has brought me a very difficult letter of complaint from one of the opposition front bench on a constituency matter; something to do with special powers for local authorities for land development in special development areas. I had no idea what it all meant or what I was supposed to do about it.

It turned out that I didn't have to do *anything* about it. She explained that some of the facts were wrong, and other points were covered by statutory requirements so that I didn't have any alternatives anyway.

This is the kind of Civil Service advice that makes a Minister's life easy. No decision needed, not even an apology required. Nothing to do at all, in fact. Great.

I asked her to draft a reply, and she'd already done it. She handed it across my desk for me to sign. It was impeccable. I found myself wondering why they don't make more Under-Secretaries like her – and realised that this was the moment to actually *find out*. So I asked her how many women are there at the top of the Civil Service.

She had an immediate answer to that question. 'None of the Permanent Secretaries. Four out of one hundred and fifty odd Deputy Secretaries.'

I wondered silently if there are any that aren't odd. Presumably not, not by the time they become Deputy Secretaries.

I asked her about her grade – Under-Secretary. As I expected, she knew the precise figure.

'Oh, there's twenty-seven of us.'

That seemed not so bad. 'Out of how many?' I asked.

'Five hundred and seventy-eight.'

I was shocked. Appalled. I wonder why *she* wasn't. At least, she didn't seem to be, she was answering these questions in her usual bright, cheerful, matter-of-fact sort of way.

'Doesn't this appal you?' I asked.

'Not really,' she smiled. 'I think it's comic. But then I think the whole Civil Service is comic. It's run by men, after all.'

As a man who was about to devote himself to the cause of

women's rights, I felt able to rise above that one. I was on her side.

'What can you do about it?' I asked. She looked blank. I rephrased it. 'What can *I* do about it?' I said.

She looked me straight in the eye, with a cool clear gaze. Her eyes were a beautiful deep blue. And she wears an awfully nice perfume.

'Are you serious, Minister?'

I nodded.

'It's easy,' she said. 'Bring top women from the professions and commerce and industry, straight into the top grades. The pay is quite good for women. There's long holidays, index-linked pensions. You'd get a lot of very high-quality applicants.'

'And they could do this job?' I asked.

'Of course.' She seemed surprised at the question.' I mean, with all due respect,[1] if you can make a journalist MP into an instant Minister, why can't you make a senior partner of a top legal firm into an Under-Secretary?' [*Hacker, of course, before he became a Minister, had been a journalist, editing the journal* Reform – *Ed.*]

'Most of the work here only needs about two O-Levels anyway,' she added.

Bernard came in to remind me of my next appointment. He escorted Sarah out. 'Bernard,' I said.

'Yes Minister?' he replied as always. I've been trying to establish a closer personal relationship with him for nearly a year now, why does he persist in such formality?

'I wish you'd call me Jim,' I complained. 'At least when we're alone.'

He nodded earnestly. 'I'll try to remember that, Minister,' he replied. Hopeless!

I waved the papers from my meeting with Sarah. 'Sarah says this complaint is complete nonsense,' I informed him. 'And she's done a reply.'

Bernard was pleased. 'Fine, we can CGSM it.'

'CGSM?' I asked.

'Civil Service code,' he explained. 'It stands for Consignment of Geriatric Shoe Manufacturers.' I waited for the explanation. 'A load of old cobblers,' he added helpfully.[2]

[1] That ominous phrase from a civil servant.

[2] Bernard Wolley was, for once in his life, inaccurate in his pedantry. A cobbler is one who mends footwear, and therefore it is widely held by modern scholars who have researched this part of the Hacker diaries that CGSM stood for a

I took the paper from him.

'I am not a civil servant,' I remarked loftily.' I shall write my own code on it.'

I wrote 'Round Objects' in the margin.

October 27th

Today I had a meeting with Sir Humphrey about equal opportunities. But I had taken care not to let on in advance – in his diary Bernard had written 'Staffing'.

He came in, smiling, confident, benign, patrician, apparently without a care in the world. So I decided to shake him up a bit, then and there.

'Humphrey,' I began, 'I have made a policy decision.'

He froze, half-way down into his chair, in a sort of Groucho Marx position, eyeing me warily with pursed lips.

[*Presumably Hacker intended to say that Sir Humphrey eyed him warily, and that simultaneously he had pursed his lips – Ed.*]

'A policy decision, Minister?' He recovered himself rapidly and pretended to be pleased with this piece of news.

'Yes,' I replied cheerfully. 'I am going to do something about the number of women in the Civil Service.'

'Surely there aren't all that many?' He looked puzzled.

Bernard hastened to explain.

'The Minister thinks we need *more*.'

'Many more,' I added firmly.

Now Sir Humphrey really *was* taken aback. His mind was racing. He just couldn't see what I was driving at. 'But we're actually quite well up to Establishment on typists, cleaners, tea-ladies . . .' He petered out, then sought advice. 'Any ideas, Bernard?'

'Well,' said Bernard helpfully, 'we are a bit short of temporary secretaries.'

Clearly Bernard had not got the point either.

'I'm talking about Permanent Secretaries,' I said.

Sir Humphrey was stunned. He seemed unable to formulate a sentence in reply. So I went on.

'We need some female mandarins.' Sir Humphrey was still mentally pole-axed. He didn't respond at all. Bernard also seemed completely baffled. He sought clarification.

(continued from previous page)

Consignment of Geriatric Shoe Menders. An alternative possibility is that Woolley was merely being facetious, although this possibility has not found favour with the academic community.

'Sort of . . satsumas, Minister?' he enquired desperately.

I'm never quite sure if Bernard has a highly-intelligent deadpan wit, or is faintly moronic. So I merely told him to sit down.

'How many Permanent Secretaries,' I asked Sir Humphrey, 'are there at the moment?'

'Forty-one, I believe.'

A precise answer.

'Forty-one,' I agreed pleasantly. 'And how many are women?'

Suddenly Sir Humphrey's memory seemed to fail him. 'Well, broadly speaking, not having the exact figures to hand, I'm not exactly sure.'

'Well, approximately?' I encouraged him to reply.

'Well,' he said cautiously, '*approximately* none.'

Close but no cigar, as our American allies would say. *Precisely* none was the correct answer. And Sir Humphrey knew that only too well. [*Hacker was right. The Permanent Secretaries form an exclusive little club in all but name, so exclusive that a newly-nominated Permanent Secretary could, in effect, be blackballed. This would be an 'informal' process not fully clear to their political 'Lords and Masters', but nonetheless effective for all that – Ed.*]

I was beginning to enjoy myself. 'And I believe there are one hundred and fifty Deputy Secretaries,' I continued gleefully. 'Do you know how many of them are women?'

Sir Humphrey hedged. Either he genuinely didn't know the answer to this one, or wasn't going to say if he did. 'It's difficult to say,' was the best reply he could manage.

This surprised me. 'Why is it difficult?' I wanted to know.

Bernard tried to be helpful again. 'Well, there's a lot of old women among the men.'

I ignored him. 'Four,' I said to Humphrey. 'Four women Dep. Secs out of one hundred and fifty-three, to be precise.'

Sir Humphrey seemed impressed that there were so many. 'Are there indeed,' he said, slightly wide-eyed.

I had enjoyed my little bit of fun. Now I came bluntly to the point. I had a proposal to make. I've been thinking about it since my first conversation with Sarah.

'I am going to announce,' I announced, 'a quota of twenty-five per cent women Deputy Secretaries and Permanent Secretaries to be achieved within the next four years.'

I think Sir Humphrey was rattled, but it was hard to tell because

he's such a smooth operator.

'Minister, I am obviously in total sympathy with your objectives,' he said. This remark naturally increased my suspicions.

'Good,' I said.

'Of course there should be more women at the top. Of *course*. And all of us are deeply concerned by the apparent imbalance.' I noted the skilful use of the word 'apparent'. 'But these things take time.'

I was ready for that one. 'I want to make a start right away,' I replied.

'I agree wholeheartedly,' responded Sir Humphrey enthusiastically. 'And I propose that we make an immediate start by setting up an interdepartmental committee . . .'

This was not what I meant, and he knew it. I told him firmly that I didn't want the usual delaying tactics.

'This needs a sledgehammer,' I declared. 'We must cut through the red tape.'

Bloody Bernard piped up again. 'You can't cut tape with a sledgehammer, it would just . . .' and then he made a sort of squashing gesture. I squashed *him* with a look.

Humphrey seemed upset that I'd accused him of delaying tactics. 'Minister, you do me an injustice,' he complained. 'I was not about to suggest delaying tactics.'

Perhaps I had done him an injustice. I apologised, and waited to see what he *was* about to suggest.

'I was merely going to suggest,' he murmured in a slightly hurt tone, 'that if we are to have a twenty-five per cent quota of women we must have a much larger intake at the recruitment stage. So that eventually we'll have twenty-five per cent in the top jobs.'

'When?' I asked.

I knew the answer before he said it. 'In twenty-five years.'

'No, Humphrey,' I said, still smiling and patient. 'I don't think you've quite got my drift. I'm talking about *now*.'

At last Sir Humphrey got the point. 'Oh,' he said, staggered. 'You mean – *now*!'

'Got it in one, Humphrey,' I replied with my most patronising smile.

'But Minister,' he smiled smoothly, 'it takes time to do things now.' And he smiled patronisingly back at me. It's amazing how quickly he recovers his poise.

I've been hearing that kind of stuff for nearly a year now. It no

longer cuts any ice with me. 'Ah yes,' I said, 'the three articles of Civil Service faith: it takes longer to do things quickly, it's more expensive to do things cheaply, and it's more democratic to do things secretly. No Humphrey, I've suggested four years. That's masses of time.'

He shook his head sadly. 'Dear me no, Minister, I don't mean political time, I mean *real* time.' He sat comfortably back in his chair, gazed at the ceiling, and then continued in a leisurely sort of way. 'Civil servants are grown like oak trees, not mustard and cress. They bloom and ripen with the seasons.' I'd never heard such pretentious crap. But he was in full flow. 'They mature like . . .'

'Like you?' I interrupted facetiously.

'I was going to say,' he replied tartly, 'that they mature like an old port.'

'Grimsby, perhaps?'

He smiled a tiny humourless smile. 'I *am* being serious, Minister.'

He certainly was. Apart from being entirely serious about his own importance, he was seriously trying to use all this flimflam to get me to lose track of my new proposal – or, as I think of it, my new policy decision. I decided to go straight for the jugular.

'I foresaw this problem,' I said firmly. 'So I propose that we solve it by bringing in top women from outside the Service to fill vacancies in the top grades.'

Humphrey's face was a picture. He was absolutely aghast. The colour drained out of his face.

'Minister . . . I don't think I quite . . .' His voice petered out as he reached the word 'understood'.

I was enjoying myself hugely.

'Watch my lips move,' I said helpfully, and pointed to my mouth with my forefinger. 'We . . . will . . . bring . . . women . . . in . . . from . . . out- . . . side!' I said it very slowly and carefully, like a deranged speech therapist. He just sat there and stared at me, transfixed, a rabbit with a snake.

Finally he pulled himself together.

'But,' he began, 'the whole strength of our system is that it is incorruptible, pure, unsullied by outside influences.'

I just can't see the sense in that old chestnut and I said so. 'People move from one job to another throughout industry, Humphrey – why should the Civil Service be different?'

'It *is* different. The Civil Service demands subtlety . . .'

'Discretion,' said Bernard.

'Devotion to duty,' said Humphrey.

'Soundness!' said Bernard.

'*Soundness*!' repeated Sir Humphrey emphatically. 'Well said, Bernard. *Soundness*.' Bernard had clearly hit upon one of the key compliments in the Civil Service vocabulary.

[*Bernard Woolley, of course, had an important vested interest in this conversation. If Hacker's policy of bringing women in from outside were implemented, this might well have an adverse effect on the promotion prospects of more junior civil servants such as Woolley. And if women could be brought in to fill top jobs from outside, so could men. What, then, would Bernard Woolley's prospects have been? – Ed.*]

Sir Humphrey went on to explain that civil servants require endless patience and boundless understanding, they need to be able to change horses midstream, constantly, as the politicians change their minds. Perhaps it was my imagination, but it seemed to me that he was putting the word 'minds' in quotes – as if to imply, 'as politicians change what they are pleased to call their minds'.

I asked him if he had all these talents. With a modest shrug he replied: 'Well, it's just that one has been properly . . .'

'Matured,' I interjected. 'Like Grimsby.'

'Trained.' He corrected me with a tight-lipped smile.

'Humphrey,' I said, 'ask yourself honestly if the system is not at fault. *Why* are there so few women Deputy Secretaries?'

'They keep leaving,' he explained, with an air of sweet reason, 'to have babies. And things.'

This struck me as a particularly preposterous explanation, 'Leaving to have babies? At the age of nearly fifty? Surely not!'

But Sir Humphrey appeared to believe it. Desperately he absolved himself of all responsibility or knowledge. 'Really Minister, I don't know. Really I don't. I'm on your side. We do indeed need more women at the top.'

'Good,' I replied decisively, 'because I'm not waiting twenty-five years. We've got a vacancy for a Deputy Secretary here, haven't we?'

He was instantly on his guard. He even thought cautiously for a moment before replying.

'Yes.'

'Very well. We shall appoint a woman. Sarah Harrison.'

Again he was astounded, or aghast, or appalled. Something like that. Definitely not pleased, anyway. But he contented himself with

merely repeating her name, in a quiet controlled voice.

'Sarah Harrison?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I think she's very able. Don't you?'

'Very able, for a woman. For a person.' He had corrected himself with scarcely a hesitation.

'And,' I added, 'she has ideas. She's an original thinker.'

'I'm afraid that's true,' agreed Sir Humphrey, 'but she doesn't let it interfere with her work.'

So I asked him what he had against her. He insisted that he had *nothing* against her, that he was totally *pro* her. He confirmed that she is an excellent worker, and he pointed out that he is a great supporter of hers and had in fact advocated her promotion to Under-Secretary only last year at a very early age.

'Would you say she is an outstanding Under-Secretary?' I asked him.

'Yes,' he replied, without equivocation.

'So,' I said, 'on balance it's a good idea, isn't it?'

'On balance? Yes . . . and no.'

I told him that that was not a clear answer. He said it was a balanced answer. Touché. Then he went on to explain that the point is, in his opinion, that she's too young and it's not her turn yet.

I leaped upon that argument. I'd been expecting it. 'That is precisely what's *wrong* with the Civil Service – Buggins' Turn! Whereas the best people should be promoted, as soon as possible.'

'Exactly,' agreed Sir Humphrey, 'as soon as it's their turn.'

'Rubbish. Napoleon ruled Europe in his thirties. Alexander the Great conquered the world in his twenties.'

'They would have made *very* poor Deputy Secretaries,' remarked Sir Humphrey contemptuously.

'At least they didn't wait their turn,' I pointed out.

'And look what happened to them.' Sir Humphrey clearly thought he'd won our little debate. So I decided to make the argument rather more personal.

'Look what's happened to *us*,' I said calmly. 'Instead of this country being run by bright energetic youthful brains it is being run by tired routine-bound fifty-five-year-olds who just want a quiet life.'

Humphrey stared at me coldly. 'Had you anyone specific in mind, Minister?'

I smiled. 'Yes . . . and no, Humphrey.' Game, set and match to yours truly, I felt.

Sir Humphrey decided to move the debate back to the specific

problem. He informed me, in his most matter-of-fact fashion, that Sarah Harrison is an excellent civil servant and a bright hope for the future. But he also reiterated that she is our most junior Under-Secretary and that he cannot and will not recommend her for promotion.

There was a clear implication in that final comment that it was ultimately up to him, and that I should mind my own business.

I told him he was a sexist.

I'm surprised he didn't laugh at me. Surprisingly, this trendy insult seemed to cut him to the quick. He was outraged.

'Minister,' he complained bitterly, 'how can you say such a thing? I'm very pro-women. Wonderful people, women. And Sarah Harrison is a dear lady. I'm one of her most ardent admirers. But the fact is that if the cause of women is to be advanced it must be done with tact and care and discretion. She is our only woman contender for a top job. We mustn't push her too fast. Women find top jobs very difficult, you know.'

He *is* a sexist.

'Can you hear yourself?' I asked incredulously.

Unabashed, he continued in the same vein. 'If women were able to be good Permanent Secretaries, there would be more of them, wouldn't there? Stands to reason.'

I've never before heard a reply that so totally begs the question.

'No Humphrey!' I began, wondering where to begin.

But on he went. 'I'm no anti-feminist. I love women. Some of my best friends are women. My wife, indeed.' Methinks Sir Humphrey doth protest too much. And on and on he went. 'Sarah Harrison is not very experienced, Minister, and her two children are still of school age, they might get mumps.'

Another daft argument. Anybody can be temporarily off work through their own ill-health, not just their children's. 'You might get shingles, Humphrey, if it comes to that,' I said.

He missed my point. 'I might indeed, Minister, if you continue in this vein,' he muttered balefully. 'But what if her children caused her to miss work all the time?'

I asked him frankly if this were likely. I asked if she were likely to have reached the rank of Under-Secretary if her children kept having mumps. I pointed out that she was the best person for the job.

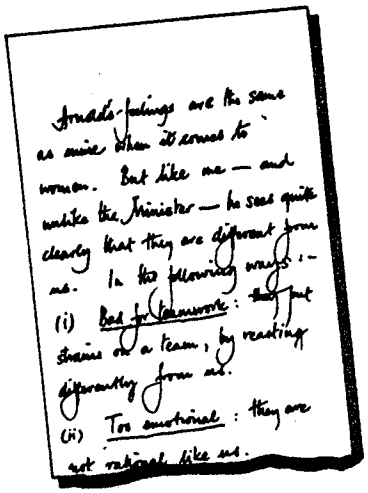
He didn't disagree about that. But he gave me an indignant warning: 'Minister, if you go around promoting women just because they're the best person for the job, you could create a lot of resentment throughout the whole Civil Service.'

'But not from the women in it,' I pointed out.

'Ah,' said Sir Humphrey complacently, 'but there are so few of them that it wouldn't matter so much.'

A completely circular argument. Perhaps this is what is meant by moving in Civil Service circles.

[*Later in the week Sir Humphrey Appleby had lunch with Sir Arnold Robinson, the Cabinet Secretary, at the Athenaeum Club. Sir Humphrey, as always, made a note on one of his pieces of memo paper – Ed.*]


Arnold's feelings are the same as mine when it comes to women. But like me – and unlike the Minister – he sees quite clearly that they are different from us. In the following ways:–

1. *Bad for teamwork:* they put strains on a team, by reacting differently from us.
2. *Too emotional:* they are not rational like us.
3. *Can't be Reprimanded:* they either get into a frightful bate or start blubbing.
4. *Can be Reprimanded:* some of them can be, but are frightfully hard and butch and not in the least bit attractive.
5. *Prejudices:* they are full of them.
6. *Silly Generalisations:* they make them.
7. *Stereotypes:* they think in them.

I asked Arnold for his advice. Arnold suggested that I lecture the Minister at such length on the matter that he becomes bored and loses interest in the whole idea.

There is a remote chance of success for such a plan. But Hacker does not

get bored easily. He even finds *himself* interesting. They all do in fact. All the ones who listen to what they're saying of course. On second thoughts, that is by no means all of them.

But the fact remains that Hacker's boredom threshold is high. He even reads most of the stuff that we put into his red boxes, with apparent interest!

Arnold also suggested that standard second ploy: to tell the Minister that the Unions won't wear it. [*'It' being the importation of women into the Service to fill some top jobs – Ed.*] We agreed that this was a line of action worth pursuing.

We also discussed the feminine angle. His wife [*the Minister's, that is – Ed.*] is in favour of promoting the Harrison female, and may well – from what I know of Mrs Hacker – be behind all this. However, she may not know that Harrison is extremely attractive. I'm sure Mrs H. and Mrs H. have never met. This could well be fruitful.

I pointed out that the Cabinet will be in favour of Hacker's proposal. But we agreed that we could doubtless get the Cabinet to change their minds. They change their minds fairly easily. Just like a lot of women. Thank God they don't blub.

[*Appleby Papers 37/6PJ/457*]

[*It is interesting to compare Sir Humphrey's self-confident account of this luncheon with the notes made by Sir Arnold Robinson on Sir Humphrey's report, which were found among the Civil Service files at Walthamstow – Ed.*]

Told Appleby that I wasn't impressed with his Minister's plan to bring in women from outside, novel though the idea may be.

[*'Wasn't impressed' would be an example of Civil Service understatement. Readers may imagine the depth of feeling behind such a phrase. The use of the Civil Service killer word 'novel' is a further indication of Sir Arnold's hostility – Ed.*]

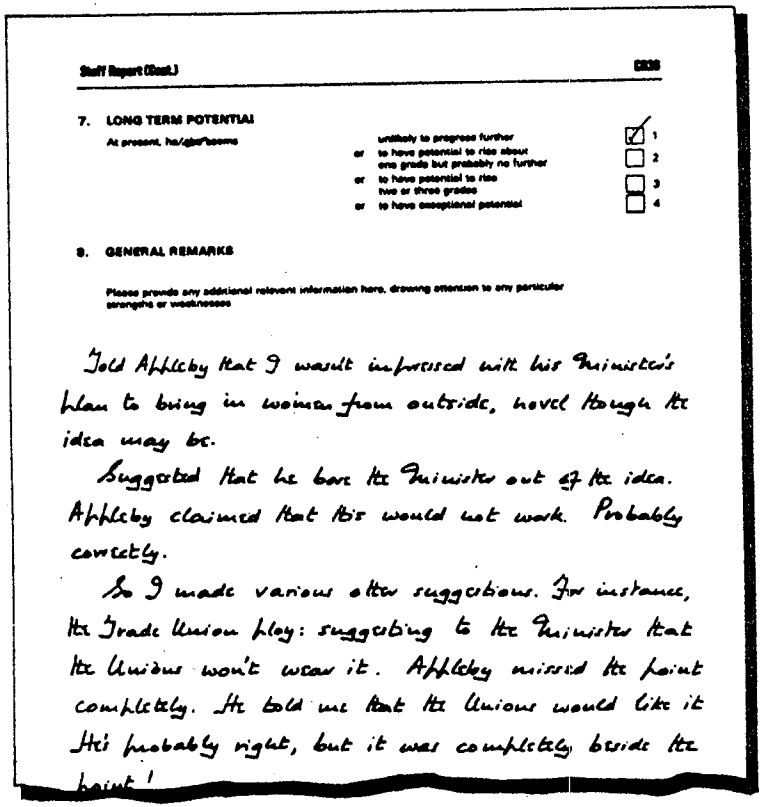
Suggested that he bore the Minister out of the idea. Appleby claimed that this would not work. Probably correctly.

So I made various other suggestions. For instance, the Trade Union ploy: suggesting to the Minister that the Unions won't wear it. Appleby missed the point completely. He told me that the Unions would like it. He's probably right, but it was completely beside the point!

I also suggested pointing the Minister's wife in the right direction. And suggested that we try to ensure that the Cabinet throws it out. Appleby agreed to try all these plans. But I am disturbed that he had thought of none of them himself.

Must keep a careful eye on H.A. Is early retirement a possibility to be discussed with the PM?

A.R.



Staff Report (Cont.) CR36

7. LONG TERM POTENTIAL

At present, he/she/[illegible]

- unlikely to progress further — ☑ 1
- or to have potential to rise about one grade but probably no further — ☐ 2
- or to have potential to rise two or three grades — ☐ 3
- or to have exceptional potential — ☐ 4

8. GENERAL REMARKS

Please provide any additional relevant information here, drawing attention to any particular strengths or weaknesses

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So I made various other suggestions. For instance, the Trade Union ploy: suggesting to the Minister that the Unions won't wear it. Appleby missed the point completely. He told me that the Unions would like it. He's probably right, but it was completely beside the point!

[*Naturally, Sir Humphrey never saw these notes, because no civil servant is ever shown his report except in wholly exceptional circumstances.*

And equally naturally, Hacker never knew of the conversation between Sir Arnold and Sir Humphrey over luncheon at the Athenaeum.

It was in this climate of secrecy that our democracy used to operate. Civil servants' word for secrecy was 'discretion'. They argued that discretion was the better part of valour – Ed.]

[*Hacker's diary continues – Ed.*]

November 1st

Sir Humphrey walked into my office today, sat down and made the most startling remark that I have yet heard from him.

'Minister,' he said, 'I have come to the conclusion that you were right.'

I've been nothing but right ever since I took on this job, and finally, after nearly a year, it seemed that he was beginning to take me seriously.

However, I was immediately suspicious, and I asked him to amplify his remark. I had not the least idea to which matter he was referring. Of course, asking Humphrey to amplify his remarks is often a big mistake.

'I am fully-seized of your ideas and have taken them on board and I am now positively against discrimination against women and positively in favour of positive discrimination in their favour – discriminating discrimination of course.'

I think it was something like that. I got the gist of it anyway.

Then he went on, to my surprise: 'I understand a view is forming at the very highest level that this should happen.' I think he must have been referring to the PM. Good news.

Then, to my surprise he asked why the matter of equal opportunities for women should not apply to politics as well as the Civil Service. I was momentarily confused. But he explained that there are only twenty-three women MPs out of a total of six hundred and fifty. I agreed that this too is deplorable, but, alas, there is nothing at all that we can do about that.

He remarked that these figures were an indication of discrimination against women by the political parties. Clearly, he argued, the way they select candidates is fundamentally discriminatory.

I found myself arguing in defence of the parties. It was a sort of reflex action. 'Yes and no,' I agreed. 'You know, it's awfully difficult for women to be MPs – long hours, debates late at night, being away from home a lot. Most women have a problem with that and with homes, and husbands.'

'And mumps,' he added helpfully.

I realised that he was sending me up. And simultaneously trying to suggest that I too am a sexist. An absurd idea, of course, and I told him so in no uncertain terms.

I steered the discussion towards specific goals and targets. I asked what we would do to start implementing our plan.

Humphrey said that the first problem would be that the unions won't agree to this quota.

I was surprised to hear this, and immediately suggested that we get them in to talk about it.

This suggestion made him very anxious. 'No, no, no,' he said. 'No. That would stir up a hornet's nest.'

I couldn't see why. Either Humphrey was paranoid about the unions – or it was just a ploy to frighten me. I suspect the latter. [*Hacker was now learning fast – Ed.*]

The reason I suspect a trick is that he offered no explanation as to why we shouldn't talk to the union leaders. Instead he went off on an entirely different tack.

'If I might suggest we be realistic about this . . .' he began.

I interrupted. 'By realistic, do you mean drop the whole scheme?'

'No!' he replied vehemently. 'Certainly not! But perhaps a pause to regroup, a lull in which we reassess the position and discuss alternative strategies, a space of time for mature reflection and deliberation . . .'

I interrupted again. 'Yes, you mean drop the whole scheme.' This time I wasn't asking a question. And I dealt with the matter with what I consider to be exemplary firmness. I told him that I had set my hand to the plough and made my decision. 'We shall have a twenty-five per cent quota of women in the open structure in four years from now. And to start with I shall promote Sarah Harrison to Dep. Sec.'

He was frightfully upset. 'No Minister!' he cried in vain. 'I'm sure that's the wrong decision.'

This was quite a remarkable reaction from the man who had begun the meeting by telling me that I was absolutely right.

I emphasised that I could not be moved on this matter because it is a matter of principle. I added that I shall have a word with my Cabinet colleagues, who are bound to support me as there are a lot of votes in women's rights.

'I thought you said it was a matter of principle, Minister, not of votes.'

He was being too clever by half. I was able to explain, loftily, that I was referring to my Cabinet colleagues. For me it *is* a matter of principle.

A very satisfactory meeting. I don't think he can frustrate me on this one.

November 2nd

Had a strange evening out with Annie. She collected me from the office at 5.30, because we had to go to a party drinks 'do' at Central House.

I had to keep her waiting a while because my last meeting of the day ran late, and I had a lot of letters to sign.

Signing letters, by the way, is an extraordinary business because there are so many of them. Bernard lays them out in three or four long rows, all running the full length of my conference table – which seats twelve a side. Then I whiz along the table, signing the letters as I go. It's quicker to move me than them. As I go Bernard collects the signed letters up behind me, and moves a letter from the second row to replace the signed and collected one in the first row. Then I whiz back along the table, signing the next row.

I don't actually read them all that carefully. It shows the extent of my trust for Bernard. Sometimes I think that I might sign absolutely anything if I were in a big enough hurry.

Bernard had an amusing bit of news for me today.

'You remember that letter you wrote "Round objects" on?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Well,' he said with a slight smile, 'it's come back from Sir Humphrey's office. He commented on it.'

And he showed me the letter. In the margin Humphrey had written: 'Who is Round and to what does he object?'

Anyway, I digress. While all this signing was going on, Annie was given a sherry by Humphrey in his office. I thought it was jolly nice of him to take the trouble to be sociable when he could have been on the 5.59 for Haslemere. Mind you, I think he likes Annie and anyway perhaps he thinks it's politic to chat up the Minister's wife.

But, as I say, Annie and I had a strange evening. She seemed rather cool and remote. I asked her if anything was wrong, but she wouldn't say what. Perhaps she resented my keeping her waiting so long, because I know she finds Humphrey incredibly boring. Still, that's the penalty you have to pay if you're married to a successful man.

[A note in Sir Humphrey's diary reveals the true cause of Mrs Hacker's disquiet – Ed.]

Had a sherry with Mrs Hacker this evening. The Minister was delayed signing letters, which was not entirely coincidental. Naturally I had taken care to ensure that his previous meeting overran somewhat.

I brought the conversation around to the matter of changing and reforming the Civil Service. As expected, she was pretty keen on the whole idea.

Immediately she asked me about the promotion of the Harrison female.

Tuesday 2 NOVEMBER

Had a sherry with Mrs Hacker this evening. The Minister was delayed signing letters, which was not entirely coincidental. Naturally I had taken care to ensure that his previous meeting overran somewhat.

I brought the conversation around to the matter of changing and reforming the Civil Service. As expected, she was pretty keen on the whole idea.

'What about promoting this woman that Jim was talking about?'

I talked about it all with great enthusiasm. I said that the Minister certainly has an eye for talent. I said that Sarah was undoubtedly very talented. And thoroughly delightful. A real charmer.

I continued for many minutes in the same vein. I said how much I admired this new generation of women civil servants compared with the old battle-axes of yesteryear. I said that naturally most of the new generation aren't as beautiful as Sarah, but they all are thoroughly feminine.

Mrs Hacker was becoming visibly less enthusiastic about Sarah Harrison's promotion, minute by minute. She remarked that Hacker had never discussed what Sarah looked like.

I laughed knowingly. I said that perhaps he hadn't noticed, though that would be pretty hard to believe. I laid it on pretty thick – made her sound like a sort of administrative Elizabeth Taylor. I said that no man could fail to notice how attractive she was, *especially* the Minister, as he spends such a considerable amount of time with her. And will spend even more if she's promoted.

My feeling is that the Minister will get no further encouragement from home on this matter.

[Appleby Papers 36/RJC/471]

[Sir Arnold Robinson and Sir Humphrey Appleby were plainly quite confident, as we have already seen, that they could sway a sufficient number of Hacker's Cabinet colleagues to vote against this proposal when it came before them.

The source of their confidence was the practice, current in the 1970s

and 1980s, of holding an informal meeting of Permanent Secretaries on Wednesday mornings. This meeting took place in the office of the Cabinet Secretary, had no agenda and was – almost uniquely among Civil Service meetings – unminuted.

Permanent Secretaries would 'drop in' and raise any question of mutual interest. This enabled them all to be fully-briefed about any matters that were liable to confront their Ministers in Cabinet, which took place every Thursday morning, i.e. the next day. And it gave them time to give their Ministers encouragement or discouragement as they saw fit on particular issues.

Fortunately Sir Humphrey's diary reveals what occurred at the Permanent Secretaries' meeting that fateful Wednesday morning – Ed.]

I informed my colleagues that my Minister is intent on creating a quota of twenty-five per cent women in the open structure, leading to an eventual fifty per cent. Parity, in other words.

Initially, my colleagues' response was that it was an interesting suggestion.

[*'Interesting' was another Civil Service form of abuse, like 'novel' or, worse still, 'imaginative' – Ed.*]

Arnold set the tone for the proper response. His view was that it is right and proper that men and women be treated fairly and equally. In principle we should all agree, he said, that such targets should be set and goals achieved.

Everyone agreed immediately that we should agree in principle to such an excellent idea, that it was right and proper to set such targets and achieve such goals.

Arnold then canvassed several of my colleagues in turn, to see if they could implement this excellent proposal in their departments.

Bill [*Sir William Carter, Permanent Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – Ed.*] said that he was in full agreement, naturally. He believes that the Civil Service must institute some positive discrimination in favour of women. But regretfully he felt obliged to point out that it cannot happen in the FCO for obvious reasons. Clearly we cannot post women ambassadors to Iran, or any of the Muslim countries, for instance. Generally speaking most of the Third World countries are not as advanced as we are in connection with women's rights – and as we have to send our diplomats to new postings every three years, and entertain many Islamic VIPs in this country, the proposal would definitely not work for the FCO. Nonetheless he wished to make it clear that he applauded the principle.

Ian [*Sir Ian Simpson, Permanent Secretary of the Home Office – Ed.*] said that he was enthusiastically in favour of the principle. He believes we all could benefit from the feminine touch. Furthermore, women are actually *better* at handling some problems than men. He had no doubt about this. Regretfully, however, an exception would have to be made in

the case of the Home Office: women are not the right people to run prisons, or the police. And quite probably, they wouldn't want to do it anyway.

We all agreed that this was probably so.

Peter [*Sir Peter Wainwright, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Defence – Ed.*] said that, alas! the same applies to Defence. Women are hardly the people to control all those admirals and generals. Nor is it a practical possibility to place a woman at the Head of Security.

I observed that M. would have to become F. This provoked a gratifying degree of merriment around the table.

Arnold, speaking for us all, agreed that Defence must clearly be a man's world. Like Industry. And Employment, with all those trade union barons to cope with.

John [*Sir John McKendrick, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health and Social Security – Ed.*] took an even more positive line. He was happy to inform us that women are already well represented near the top of the DHSS, which has two of the four women Dep. Secs. currently in Whitehall. Neither of them is in line for Permanent Secretary, obviously, as they are Deputy Chief Medical Officers (and in any case they may not be suitable for other reasons). Furthermore, women constitute eighty per cent of the typing grades, so he was delighted to be able to tell us that his Department is not doing too badly by them. He added that, in principle, he was in favour of them going to the very top.

Arnold summed up all the views expressed: the feeling of the meeting was – unquestionably – that in principle we were all thoroughly in favour of equal rights for the ladies. It is just that there are special problems in individual departments.

I raised again the question of the quota and stated that I was against it.

Everyone immediately supported me. There was a feeling that it was not on and a bad idea – in fact a typical politician's idea.

I gave my view: namely, that we must always have the right to promote the best man for the job, regardless of sex.

Furthermore – and I made it clear that I was speaking as an ardent feminist myself – I pointed out that the problem lay in recruiting the right sort of women. Married women with families tend to drop out because, in all honesty, they cannot give their work their full single-minded attention. And unmarried women with no children are not fully-rounded people with a thorough understanding of life.

There was general agreement that family life was essential and that it was hard for spinsters to be fully-rounded individuals.

I summed up my remarks by saying that, in practice, it is rarely possible to find a fully-rounded married woman with a happy home and three children who is prepared to devote virtually her whole life, day and night, to a Government Department. It's Catch-22 – or, rather, Catch-22, sub-paragraph (a). This remark produced more gratifying merriment from my colleagues.

Arnold had allowed considerable time for this discussion, which indicates the importance that he attached to the problem. He concluded the

matter by asking everyone present to ensure that all of their respective Ministers oppose the quota idea in Cabinet by seeing that each Minister's attention is drawn to each Department's own special circumstances. But he also asked all present to be sure to recommend the *principle* of equal opportunities at every level.

Through the chair, I made one final point. My Minister sees the promotion of women as one means of achieving greater diversity at the top of the Service. I asked all my colleagues to stress, when briefing their Ministers, that quite frankly one could not find a more diverse collection of people than us.

It was unanimously agreed that we constitute a real cross-section of the nation. [*Appleby Papers – 41/AAG/583*]

[*Hacker's diary continues – Ed.*]

November 4th

Cabinet today. And with a very odd outcome. I put forward my proposal for a quota for women for top Civil Service jobs.

All my Cabinet colleagues agreed *in principle* but then they all went on to say that it wouldn't work in their particular Departments. So in the end they didn't really support me at all.

Curiously enough, I'm no longer getting the support from Annie that I was. Not about the quota, specifically, but about promoting Sarah. I had expected her to be *at least* one hundred per cent behind it. But she goes all distant when I talk about it. In fact, she seems to be dead against it now. Extraordinary.

However, as the quota policy is now in ruins it seems that Sarah's promotion is the only thing left that I can immediately achieve in this area. I have arranged that Humphrey and I speak to her tomorrow. I am determined to push it through.

November 5th

My whole equal opportunities policy is destroyed, and quite frankly I feel pretty bitter about the whole thing in general and women in particular. Or at least one particular woman in particular.

Before I saw Sarah today I told Humphrey that we at least could make one tiny positive step today. Lighting a spark. [*It was Guy Fawkes Day – Ed.*]

'Carrying a torch, even,' he replied. What was that supposed to mean?

Anyway, Sarah came in. I explained the background to her: that we have a vacancy for a Deputy Secretary in the Department and that, in spite of her being the most junior of our Under-Secs but because she is the outstanding person in her grade, we were happy to be able

to tell her that Humphrey and I were recommending her for promotion to the rank of Deputy Secretary.

Her reaction was a little surprising.

'Oh,' she said. 'I don't know what to say.' And then she laughed.

I couldn't imagine what she was laughing at.

'You don't have to say anything,' I said.

'A simple thank you should suffice,' said Humphrey.

She was still smiling. Then she dropped the bombshell. 'No – I mean – oh gosh! Look, this is awfully embarrassing – I mean, well, I was going to tell you next week – the fact is I'm resigning from the Civil Service.'

You could have knocked me down with a feather. And Humphrey too, by the look of him.

I said something brilliantly witty and apposite, like 'What?', and Humphrey gasped 'resigning?'

'Yes,' she said. 'So thank you, but no thank you.'

Humphrey asked if there was some problem with her children at home.

Bernard suggested mumps.

I suggested that Bernard shut up.

Sarah said she was joining a merchant bank. As a Director.

She'll earn more than me. Perhaps even more than Humphrey!

I tried to explain to her that this news was a frightful blow. 'You see, Sarah, the reason that I'm telling you of your promotion – or rather, Humphrey and I together – is that I have been fighting a losing battle to improve the promotion prospects of women at the top of the Service. And, well, you were to be my Trojan Horse.'

She then explained the reason for her move. 'Quite honestly, Minister, I want a job where I don't spend endless hours circulating information that isn't relevant about subjects that don't matter to people who aren't interested. I want a job where there is achievement rather than merely activity. I'm tired of pushing paper. I would like to be able to point at something and say "I did that."'

The irony of what she was saying was extraordinary. I understand her feeling only too well.

Sir Humphrey didn't. He looked blank. 'I don't understand,' he said.

She smiled. 'I know. That's why I'm leaving.'

I explained that I *did* understand. But I asked her if she was saying that governing Britain is unimportant.

'No,' she said, 'it's very important. It's just that I haven't met any-

one who's doing it.'

She added that she'd had enough of the pointless intrigue. I asked what she had in mind. 'Your using me as a Trojan Horse, for instance. And they probably told you that the unions wouldn't wear it if you promoted me.'

I was staggered. Had there been a leak? I asked her how she knew.

She was delighted. She grinned from ear to ear. 'Oh, I *didn't* know. I just know how things are done here.'

We both stared at Humphrey, who had the grace to look slightly embarrassed.

I made one last effort to persuade her to change her mind. 'Look here, Sarah,' I said sternly, 'you don't seem to appreciate that I've fought quite a battle for you.'

Suddenly her eyes blazed. For the first time I recognised the toughness that had brought her to near the top. And the sense of style and dignity. I realised that I'd said something awfully wrong.

'Oh, have you?' she asked. 'Well, I didn't ask you to fight a battle for me. I'm not pleased at the idea of being part of a twenty-five per cent quota. Women are not inferior beings, and I don't enjoy being patronised. I'm afraid you're as paternalist and chauvinist as the rest of them. I'm going somewhere where I shall be accepted as an equal, on my own merits, as a person.'

I was speechless. Clearly I'd offended her. And I suddenly realised that you can't win.

'May I go now?'

There was, of course, no reason to keep her sitting there. I apologised for offending her, though I couldn't see how I'd done it.

'No,' she said, in a kindly way. 'And thank you – I know you both *mean* well.' And off she went, leaving two very puzzled and deflated chaps.

'Women!' I said.

'Yes Minister,' murmured Humphrey, nodding sadly as if to say 'I told you so!'

[*This was not quite the end of the matter. Recently published papers revealed that Hacker fought on for his twenty-five per cent quota for some considerable time – some weeks, anyway. And, as Sir Harold Wilson once said, a week is a long time in politics.*

Sir Humphrey's ingenuity rose to the occasion. He warned Hacker that the Race Relations Board had heard on the grapevine of his proposed quota for women. He told Hacker that if there was to be

any affirmative action within the Civil Service, there must also be a quota of blacks within the Civil Service. Sir Humphrey explained that there was a principle at stake.

Hacker was less than enthusiastic about this new principle. He was certainly not a racist, but he could see clearly that whereas a quota for women was a vote-winner, a quota for blacks was in all probability a vote-loser.

Some days later Hacker raised what he called 'this whole business of minority groups – women, blacks, trades unionists and so forth'.

Sir Humphrey explained to Hacker that women and trades unionists were not minority groups, even though they share the same paranoia which is the hallmark of any minority group.

So finally Hacker proposed what Appleby had always proposed: namely, that they start by creating equal opportunities for both women and blacks. In the recruitment grades.

And they drew up terms of reference for an interdepartmental committee to report on methods of choosing the right individuals to be civil servants, to report four years hence. By which time Hacker would certainly no longer be the Minister – Ed.]

[*In early November Jim Hacker apparently bought a microcomputer. An ex-journalist, he was a competent typist and for the next three months all of his diary was committed to the memory of his computer by means of the word-processing software.*

Unfortunately, in early March of the year following he accidentally erased everything on his floppy disc. Abandoning word-processing for ever, he resumed dictation into the cassette recorder on 10 March – Ed.]

18

The Bed of Nails

[In politics, August is known as the 'silly season'. This is a time when voters are away on holiday, and trivial issues are pushed in the forefront of the press in order to sell newspapers to holidaymakers. It is also the time when the House of Commons has risen for the summer recess and is thus an excellent time for the government to announce new or controversial measures about which the House of Commons cannot protest until they reconvene in October – by which time most political events that took place in August would be regarded as dead ducks by the media.

It follows that August is also the time when Cabinet Ministers are most off their guard. Members of Parliament are not at hand to question them or harass them, and the Ministers themselves – secure from the unlikely event of an August reshuffle and secure from serious press coverage of their activities – relax more than they should.

Perhaps this is the explanation of the transport policy crisis, which very nearly led to Hacker taking on one of the most unpopular jobs in Whitehall. How he evaded it is a tribute to the shrewd guiding hand of Sir Humphrey, coupled with Hacker's own growing political skills.

Early in the month a meeting took place at Ten Downing Street between Sir Mark Spencer, the Prime Minister's Chief Special Adviser, and Sir Arnold Robinson, the Secretary of the Cabinet. Sir Mark's files contain no reference to this meeting, but as he was not a career civil servant this is not surprising. But Sir Arnold Robinson's diary, recently found in the Civil Service archives Walthamstow, reveal a conspiracy in the making – Ed.]

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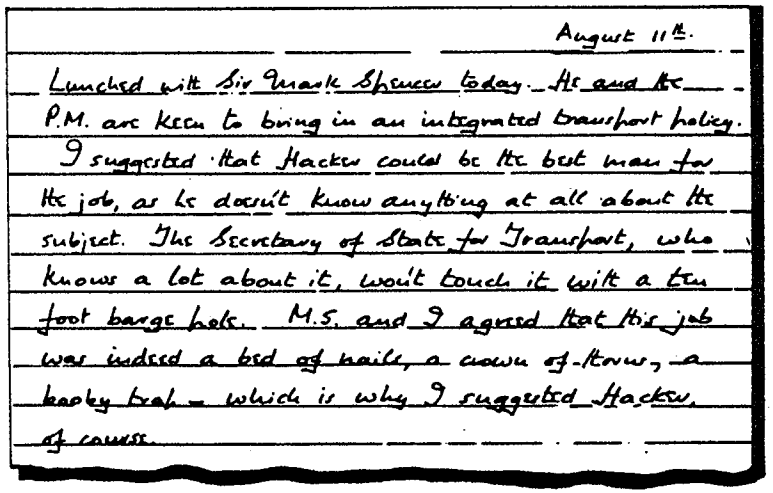
August 11th.

Lunched with Sir Mark Spencer today. He and the P.M. are keen to bring in an integrated transport policy. I suggested that Hacker could be the best man for the job, as he doesn't know anything at all about the subject. The Secretary of State for Transport, who knows a lot about it, won't touch it with a ten foot barge pole. M.S. and I agreed that this job was indeed a bed of nails, a crown of thorns, a booby trap – which is why I suggested Hacker, of course.

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He is ideally qualified, as I explained to M.S., because the job needs a particular talent – lots of activity, but no actual achievement.

At first M.S. couldn't see how to swing it on Hacker. The answer was obvious: we had to make it seem like a special honour.

The big problem was to get Hacker to take it on before Humphrey Appleby hears of it, because there's no doubt that Old Humpy would instantly smell a rat. '*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*'[1] he would be sure to say, though he'd probably have to say it in English for Hacker's benefit as Hacker went to the LSE.[2]

It seemed clear that we had to get a commitment today, especially as my departure for the Florida Conference on 'Government and Participation' is both imminent and urgent, tomorrow at the latest. [*During the 1970s and 1980s it was the custom for senior government officials to send themselves off on futile conferences to agreeable resorts at public expense during the month of August – Ed.*]

Hacker came to meet us at tea-time. I had resolved to flatter him, which almost invariably leads to success with politicians. M.S. and I agreed therefore that we would give the job the title of Transport Supremo, which was a lot more attractive than Transport Muggins.

[1] 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts' is the usual rough translation.
[2] London School of Economics.

I was also careful not to inform him in advance of the purpose of the meeting, partly because I did not want him to have the opportunity to discuss it with Humpy, and partly because I knew he would be anxious about being summoned to Number Ten. This would surely make him more pliable.

Events turned out precisely as I anticipated. He knew nothing whatever about transport, floundered hopelessly, was flattered to be asked and accepted the job.

It is fortunate that I shall be leaving for the country tonight, before Humpy gets to hear about all this.

[*It is interesting to compare the above recollections with Hacker's account of the same day's events in his diary – Ed.*]

August 11th

An absolutely splendid day today, with a big boost for my morale.

I was summoned to meet Mark Spencer at Number Ten. Naturally I was a bit wary, especially as I knew the PM hadn't been awfully pleased to hear about that business with the rosewater jar, even though no harm came of it all in the end. I thought I might be in for a bit of a wigging, for when I got there I was met by Arnold Robinson, the Cabinet Secretary.

However, the meeting was for quite a different purpose – I've been promoted.

Arnold kicked off by saying they wanted to offer me something that was rather an honour. For a split second I was horrified – I thought they were telling me I was to be kicked upstairs. It was a nasty moment. But, in fact, they want to put me in charge of a new integrated national transport policy.

They asked me for my views on transport. I had none, but I don't think they realised because I carefully invited them to explain themselves further. I'm sure they thought that I was merely playing my cards close to my chest.

'We've been discussing a national integrated transport policy,' they said.

'Well, why not?' I replied casually.

'You're in favour?' enquired Sir Arnold quickly.

I thought the answer required was 'yes' but I wasn't yet sure so I contented myself by looking enigmatic. I'm sure that they were by now convinced that I was sound, because Sir Mark continued: 'Unfortunately, public dissatisfaction with the nationalised transport industries is now at a high enough level to worry the government, as you know.'

Again he waited. 'Can you go on?' I enquired.

He went on. 'We need a policy.' I nodded sagely. 'It's no good just blaming the management when there's an R in the month and blaming the unions the rest of the time.'

Sir Arnold chipped in. 'And unfortunately now they've all got together. They all say that it's all the government's fault – everything that goes wrong is the result of not having a national transport policy.'

This was all news to me. I thought we had a policy. As a matter of fact, I specifically recall that in our discussions prior to the writing of our manifesto we decided that our policy was not to have a policy. I said so.

Sir Mark nodded. 'Be that as it may,' he grunted, 'the PM now wants a *positive* policy.'

I wished Sir Mark had said so earlier. But I can take a hint, and it was not too late. 'Ah, the PM, I see.' I nodded again. 'Well, I couldn't agree more, I've always thought so myself.'

Sir Arnold and Sir Mark looked pleased, but I still couldn't see what it had to do with me. I assumed that it was a Department of Transport matter. Sir Arnold disabused me.

'Obviously the Transport Secretary would love to get his teeth into the job, but he's a bit too close to it all.'

'Can't see the wood for the trees,' said Sir Mark.

'Needs an open mind. Uncluttered,' added Sir Arnold.

'So,' said Sir Mark, 'the PM has decided to appoint a Supremo to develop and implement a national transport policy.'

A *Supremo*. I asked if I were the PM's choice. The knights nodded. I must admit I felt excited and proud and really rather overwhelmed by this extraordinary good piece of news. And there were more compliments to come.

'It was decided,' said Sir Mark, 'that you had the most open mind of all.'

'And the most uncluttered,' added Sir Arnold. They really were grovelling.

I naturally responded cautiously. Firstly because I simply couldn't imagine what the job entailed, and secondly it's always good to play hard to get when you're in demand. So I thanked them for the honour, agreed that it was a pretty vital and responsible job, and asked what it entailed.

'It's to help the consumer,' said Sir Mark. Though when Sir Arnold laboriously pointed out that helping the consumer was always a vote-winner, I reminded him firmly that I was interested

purely because I saw it as my duty to help. My sense of public duty.

During the conversation it gradually became clear what they had in mind. All kinds of idiocies have occurred in the past, due to a lack of a natural integrated policy. Roughly summarising now, Sir Mark and Sir Arnold were concerned about:

1 *Motorway planning:* Our motorways were planned without reference to railways, so that now there are great stretches of motorway running alongside already existing railways.
   As a result, some parts of the country are not properly served at all.
2 *The through-ticket problem:* If, for instance, you want to commute from Henley to the City, you have to buy a British Rail ticket to Paddington and then buy an underground ticket to the Bank.
3 *Timetables:* The complete absence of combined bus and railway timetables.
4 *Airport Links:* Very few. For instance, there's a British Rail Western Region line that runs less than a mile north of Heathrow – but no link line.
5 *Connections:* Bus and train services don't connect up, all over London.

Sir A. and Sir M. outlined these problems briefly. They added that there are probably problems outside London too, although understandably they didn't know about them.

The possibilities are obviously great, and it's all very exciting. I suggested having a word with Humphrey before I accepted responsibility, but they made it plain that they wanted *my* opinion and approval. Not his. Rather flattering, really. Also, it shows that they have finally realised that I'm not a straw man – I really run my Department, not like *some* Ministers.

Furthermore it transpired that the PM was due to leave for the airport in thirty minutes on the long trip involving the Ottawa Conference, and the opening of the UN General Assembly in New York, and then on to the meeting in Washington.

Jokingly I asked, 'Who's going to run the country for the next week?' but Sir Arnold didn't seem awfully amused.

Sir Mark asked if he could give the PM the good news that I had taken on the job on the way to the airport.

Graciously, I agreed.

Hacker leaving Downing Street after the meeting (London Press Association)

August 12th

At an early morning meeting with Sir Humphrey, I told him I had good news. 'I've got a new job,' I began.

'Oh dear, the Department will be awfully sorry to lose you,' he responded pleasantly. A bit *too* pleasantly, perhaps.

But I explained that it was merely an extra job, developing and implementing an integrated national transport policy. At the special request of the PM. My Permanent Secretary did not seem pleased. In fact, he seemed to flinch.

'I see,' he replied. 'And what was the *good* news?'

I thought he must have misheard, so I told him again.

'So how,' he enquired drily, '*if* I may be so bold as to enquire, would you define *bad* news?'

I asked him to explain himself.

'Minister,' he said with a heavy sigh, 'are you aware what this job would mean if you accepted it?'

'I have accepted it.'

His mouth dropped open. 'You've *what*?' he gasped.

'I have accepted it.' I went on to explain that it is an honour, and also that we need a transport policy.

'If by "we" you mean Britain, that's perfectly true,' he acknowledged. 'But if by "we" you mean you and me and this Department, we need a transport policy like an aperture in the cranial cavity.'[1]

He went on to describe the job as a bed of nails, a crown of thorns, and a booby trap.

At first I thought he was just being silly or lazy or something. I could see that it would cause him some extra administrative problems, but on the other hand it usually gave Humphrey pleasure to add to his empire – bigger budget, more staff, all that sort of thing.

'No Minister, the point is that *you* are the one who is at risk. My job, as always, is merely to protect the seat of your trousers. The reason that there has never been an integrated transport policy is that such a policy is in everybody's interest *except* the Minister who creates it.'

I couldn't see why.

Humphrey paused for a minute, and gazed at the ceiling contemplatively. 'How can I put it in a manner that is close to your heart?' he asked himself. I waited. So did Bernard. 'Ah, I have it,' he murmured, turning to look at me straight in the eye. 'It is the ultimate vote-loser.'

I was stunned. Vote-*loser*?

Sir Humphrey explained, 'Why do you think the Transport Secretary isn't doing this?'

I was just about to reply that the Transport Secretary is apparently too close to it and can't see the wood for the trees, when Sir Humphrey said: 'He's too close to it, I suppose? Can't see the wood for the trees? Is that what they told you?'

'You tell me another reason then,' I challenged him.

'Why do you think the Transport Secretary suggested the Lord Privy Seal? Why do you think the Lord Privy Seal suggested the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster? Why do you think *he* suggested the Lord President of the Council?'

I had to confess I knew nothing of all this.

Sir Humphrey continued relentlessly. 'And why do you think they invited you to Number Ten behind my back?' I must admit that this explanation never occurred to me. 'Minister, this hideous appointment has been hurtling round Whitehall for the last three weeks like a grenade with the pin taken out.'

He may be right, of course. He's usually pretty well up on all the

[1] A hole in the head.

gossip. But I was not about to concede the point. I felt that Humphrey's attitude was coloured by sour grapes – sour grapes that I had been honoured in this way, and sour grapes that he hadn't been consulted, either by them or by me.

'If I can pull it off,' I said carefully, 'it will be a feather in my cap.'

'If you pull it off,' said Bernard, 'it won't be in your cap any more.' I scowled at him, and he went pink and studied his shoes.

Sir Humphrey wasn't impressed with my argument. He believes that if I do pull it off, no one will feel the benefits for ten years and long before that we will both have moved on. Or up. Or out.

'In the meantime,' he continued, 'formulating policy means making choices. Once you make a choice you please the people you favour but you infuriate everyone else. This is liable to end up as one vote gained, ten lost. If you give a job to the road services, the Rail Board and unions will scream. If you give it to the railways, the road lobby will massacre you. If you cut British Airways' investment plans they'll hold a devastating press conference the same afternoon. And you can't expand, because an overall saving is the Treasury's fundamental requirement.'

I voiced the small hope that, as I am to be the Transport Supremo, my views might carry some weight.

Humphrey could not disguise the sneer on his face. 'Transport Muggins is the Civil Service vernacular, I'm afraid. All the enemies you will make are experts in manipulating the media. PROs, trades unionists, MPs in affected constituencies. There'll be someone on television every night vilifying Hacker's Law, saying that you are a national disaster.'

His attitude angered me. I reminded him that the PM has asked me to perform this task, this necessary duty for my country. I always do my duty. Furthermore, Sir Mark believes that there are votes in it and, if so, I certainly do not intend to look a gift horse in the mouth.

'I put it to you,' replied Sir Humphrey, 'that you are looking a *Trojan* Horse in the mouth.'

I wasn't quite sure what he meant by this. 'Do you mean,' I asked, 'that if we look closely at this gift horse we'll find it's full of Trojans?'

Bernard tried to interrupt, but I silenced him with a look. Sir Humphrey insisted that he be given a chance to prove his point, and offered to arrange a meeting, a preliminary discussion, with Under-Secretaries from the Department of Transport – the Road Division,

the Rail Division and the Air Transport Division. 'I think it may illustrate the extent of some of the problems you will encounter.'

'You can arrange it if you like,' I told him. 'But I intend to take this on. If I succeed this could be my Falkland Islands.'

'Yes,' agreed Sir Humphrey, 'and you could be General Galtieri.'

August 15th

When I arrived in my office today I found the most curious memo from Bernard sitting on my desk.

Memorandum
From: The Private Secretary
To: The Minister

Aug 12th

CONFIDENTIAL, FOR THE MINISTER'S EYES ONLY

With reference to your comment at today's meeting with the Permanent Secretary at which you enquired, in connection with looking the Integrated Transport Policy gift horse in the mouth, whether, if the gift horse were a Trojan Horse (as suggested by the Permanent Secretary that so it might prove to be)

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May I respectfully draw the Minister's attention to the fact that, if he had looked the Trojan Horse in the mouth, he would have found Greeks inside.

The reason, of course, is that it was the Greeks who gave the Trojan Horse to the Trojans. Therefore, technically it was not a Trojan Horse at all. In fact, it was a Greek Horse. Hence the tag 'Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes', which, as the Minister will recall, is usually and somewhat inaccurately translated as Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts, or doubtless the Minister would recall had he not attended the LSE.

B.W.

I dictated a reply to Bernard, in which I said that Greek tags are all very interesting in their way, especially to classicists no doubt, but that they were not exactly central to government business.

I added that presumably the modern EEC version of that tag would be Beware of Greeks Bearing An Olive Oil Surplus.

(Rather good that. I must remember to use it next time I have to make an anti-EEC speech.)

To my astonishment, I found yet another memo from Bernard in my red boxes tonight, shortly before writing this entry in my diary. He really is tireless in his pursuit of pointless pedantry.

Memorandum
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To: The Minister

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With reference to your memorandum in reply to my memorandum on the subject of classical tags, your description of the tag Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts as a Greek tag is, of course, erroneous.

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With reference to your memorandum in reply to my memorandum on the subject of classical tags, your description of the tag Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts as a Greek tag is, of course, erroneous.

Just as the Trojan Horse was Greek, the tag which you described as Greek was, in fact, Latin. In fact, this is obvious if you consider that the Greeks would hardly suggest bewaring of themselves – if one can use such a participle: bewaring, that is – and the tag can clearly be seen to be Latin rather than Greek not because 'timeo' ends in 'o' (because the Greek first person also ends in 'o') – actually, if I may digress, there is a Greek word 'timao' meaning 'I honour' – but because the 'os' ending is a nominative singular termination of the second declension in Greek and an accusative plural in Latin.

Incidentally, as a fine point of interest, Danaos is not only the Greek for Greek but also the Latin for Greek.

B.W.

I shall preserve Bernard's memos for posterity. They give a clear indication of how academic brilliance can mislead those who recruit administrative trainees into the Civil Service.

[*A few days later Hacker, Appleby and Bernard Woolley were present at the promised meeting with three Department of Transport Under-Secretaries – Ed.*]

August 17th

We have had a most extraordinary meeting today, the one that Humphrey had promised to arrange with the Under-Secretaries from the Department of Transport.

I can't remember all their names, but each one was from a different division – one from Air, one from Road and one from Rail. It was extraordinarily acrimonious. The one thing that they were all agreed on was that, somehow, my proposals were deeply misguided.

The man from Road Transport, Graham something or other, suggested that it should be government policy to designate road haulage as its own principal means of freight transport. He was promptly interrupted by Richard somebody with a rather irritable thin tired-looking creased face – not surprising when you consider he's been trying to modernise the railways and battle with BR, the NUR and ASLEF for most of his career.

'With the greatest possible respect, Minister, I think that such a policy would be, not to put too fine a point on it, unacceptably short-sighted. It is rail transport that must surely be the favoured carrier under any sane national policy.'

Piers, a smooth fellow from Air, interrupted so fast that he scarcely gave himself time to utter his usual courteous but meaningless preamble. 'If-I-might-crave-your-indulgence-for-a-moment-Minister, I have to say that *both* those proposals are formulae for disaster. Long-term considerations absolutely mandate the expansion of air freight to meet rising demand.'

Graham (Roads) put down his pencil, with a sharp click as it hit my mahogany reproduction conference table. 'Of course,' he snapped, 'if the Minister is prepared for a massive budget increase . . .'

'If the Minister will accept a long and unbelievably bitter rail strike . . .' interrupted Richard (Rail).

And Piers butted in: 'If the public can tolerate a massive rise in public discontent . . .'

I interrupted *them* by holding up my hand. They then confined themselves to staring at each other with intense mutual hostility.

'Hold on, hold on,' I said. 'We're the government, aren't we?'

'Indeed you are, Minister,' Sir Humphrey corrected me.

'So,' I continued, searching for agreement, 'we're all on the same side, aren't we?'

'Indeed we are/quite so/absolutely no question,' replied Richard, Piers and Graham roughly in concert.

'And,' I went on patiently, 'we are trying to find out what's best for Britain.'

Piers put up his hand. I nodded at him. 'Through the chair,' he said, 'I hardly think the end of the national air freight business is best for Britain?'

Our truce had lasted a mere twenty seconds. The war was on again. 'I find it hard to see how Britain is saved by the destruction of the railways,' Richard remarked bitterly.

And Graham, not to be outdone, added with heavy sarcasm that it was not immediately apparent to him how Britain would benefit from a rapid deterioration of the road network.

Again I took a lead. I explained that I was merely trying to examine a few policy options for the government's own freight transport needs. And that therefore I had thought that a preliminary chat with a few friends, advisers, around the table, could lead to some *positive, constructive* suggestions.

I should not have wasted my breath. The positive constructive suggestions were somewhat predictable. Richard promptly suggested a firm commitment to rail transport, Graham a significant investment in motorway construction, and Piers a meaningful expansion of air freight capacity!

So at this point I explained that my overall brief is, among other things, to achieve an overall cut in expenditure.

'In that case,' said Richard grimly, 'there is only one possible course.'

'Indeed there is,' snapped Graham.

'And there can be no doubt what it is,' Piers added in an icy tone.

They all eyed each other, and me. I was stuck. Sir Humphrey came to the rescue.

'Good,' he said with a cheerful smile, 'I always like to end a meeting on a note of agreement. Thank you, gentlemen.'

And they filed out.

The meeting is the sort that would be described in a communiqué as 'frank'. Or even 'frank, bordering on direct', which means that the cleaners have to mop up the blood in the morning.

SIR BERNARD WOOLLEY RECALLS:[1]

The Minister found his meeting with the three Under-Secretaries confusing. This was because of his failure to understand the role of the Civil Service in making policy.

The three Under-Secretaries whom we met that morning were, in effect, counsel briefed by the various transport interests to resist any aspects of government policy that might have been unfavourable to their clients.

This is how the Civil Service in the 1980s actually worked in practice. In fact, all government departments – which in theory collectively represented the government to the outside world – in fact lobbied the government on behalf of their own client pressure group. In other words, each Department of State was actually controlled by the people whom it was supposed to be controlling.

Why – for instance – had we got comprehensive education throughout the UK? Who wanted it? The pupils? The parents? Not particularly.

The actual pressure came from the National Union of Teachers, who were the chief client of the DES.[2] So the DES went comprehensive.

Every Department acted for the powerful sectional interest with whom it had a permanent relationship. The Department of Employment lobbied for the TUC, whereas the Department of Industry lobbied for the employers. It was actually rather a nice balance: Energy lobbied for the oil companies, Defence lobbied for the armed forces, the Home Office for the police, and so on.

In effect, the system was designed to prevent the Cabinet from carrying out its policy. Well, somebody had to.

Thus a national transport policy meant fighting the *whole* of the Civil Service, as well as the other vested interests.

If I may just digress for a moment or two, this system of 'checks and balances', as the Americans would call it, makes nonsense of the oft-repeated criticism that the Civil Service was right wing. Or left wing. Or any other wing. The Department of Defence, whose clients were military, was – as you would expect – right wing. The DHSS, on the other hand, whose clients were the needy, the underprivileged and the social workers, was (predictably) left wing. Industry, looking after the Employers, was right wing – and Employment (looking after the *un*employed, of course) was left wing. The Home Office was right wing, as its clients were the Police, the Prison Service and the Immigration chaps. And Education, as I've already remarked, was left wing.

You may ask: What were we at the DAA? In fact, we were neither right nor left. Our main client was the Civil Service itself, and therefore our real interest was in defending the Civil Service against the Government.

Strict constitutional theory holds that the Civil Service should be committed to carrying out the Government's wishes. And so it was, as long as the Government's wishes were practicable. By which we meant, as long as *we* thought they were practicable. After all, how else can you judge?

[1] In conversation with the Editors.
[2] Department of Education and Science.

[*Hacker's diary continues – Ed.*]

August 19th

Today Humphrey and I discussed Wednesday's meeting.

And it was now clear to me that I had to get out of the commitment that I had made. Quite clearly, Transport Supremo is a title that's not worth having.

I said to Humphrey that we had to find a way to force the PM's hand.

'Do you mean "we" plural – or do Supremos now use the royal pronoun?'

He was gloating. So I put the issue to him fair and square. I explained that I meant both of us, unless he wanted the DAA to be stuck with this problem.

As Humphrey clearly had no idea at all how to force the PM's hand, I told him how it's done. If you have to go for a politician's jugular, go for his constituency.

I told Bernard to get me a map and the local municipal directory of the PM's constituency.

Humphrey was looking puzzled. He couldn't see what I was proposing to do. But I had to put it to him in acceptably euphemistic language. 'Humphrey,' I said, 'I need your advice. Is it possible that implementing a national transport policy could have unfortunate local repercussions? Necessary, of course, in the wider national interest but painful to the borough affected!'

He caught on at once. 'Ah. Yes indeed, Minister,' he replied. 'Inevitable, in fact.' And he brightened up considerably.

'And if the affected borough was represented in the House by a senior member of the government – a very senior member of the government – the *most* senior member of the government . . .?'

Humphrey nodded gravely. 'Embarrassing,' he murmured. 'Deeply embarrasing.' But his eyes were gleaming.

In due course Bernard obtained the street map of the PM's constituency, and a street directory, and he found a relevant section in the business guide too. Once we studied the map, it was all plain sailing!

First we found a park. Humphrey noticed that it was near the railway station, and reminded me that one requirement of a national transport policy is to bring bus stations nearer to railway stations.

So, with deep regret, I made my first recommendation: *Build a bus station on Queen Charlotte's Park.* Someone has to suffer in the national interest, alas!

Second, we found a reference to a big bus repair shop, in the street directory. It seemed to us that it would be more economical to integrate bus and train repairs. There would undoubtedly be a great saving. So our second recommendation was *Close the bus repair shop.*

Then it struck me that the PM's constituency is in commuter country. And we know, of course, that commuter trains run at a loss. They are only really used at rush hours. This means that commuters are, in effect, subsidised.

'Is this fair?' I asked Humphrey. He agreed that this was indeed an injustice to non-commuters. So we made our third recommendation: *Commuters to pay full economic fares.*

Sadly this will double the price of commuter tickets, but you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.[1]

Humphrey noted that the PM's constituency contained several railway stations – British Rail as well as the Underground. He reminded me that some people take the view that areas with reasonable rail services don't need an evening bus service as well. I regard this as an extremely persuasive view. Accordingly, we made our fourth recommendation. *Stop all bus services after 6.30 p.m.*

We then moved on to consider what to do with all the remaining land after the removal of the bus station into the park.

We had to rack our brains on this matter for a while, but eventually we realised that the whole area seemed very short of parking space for container lorries. Especially at night. So fifth we recommended: *Container lorry park on bus station site.*

Regretfully, on closer study, the map revealed that building a new container lorry park would mean widening the access road. Indeed, it appears that the western half of the swimming baths might have to be filled in. But we could see no alternative: *Widen the access road to the bus station site* was our sixth and last recommendation.

We sat back and considered our list of recommendations. These had nothing whatever to do with the PM personally, of course. They were simply the local consequences of the broad national strategy.

However, I decided to write a paper which would be sent to Number Ten for the PM's personal attention. The PM would undoubtedly wish to be informed of the constituency implications and as a loyal Minister and dutiful colleague I owe this to the PM. Among other things!

[1] Originally said by Frederick the Great, King Frederick II of Prussia.

Humphrey raised one other area of concern. 'It would be awful, Minister, if the press got hold of all this. After all, lots of other boroughs are likely to be affected. There'd be a national outcry.'

I asked if he thought there was any danger of the press getting hold of the story.

'Well,' he said, 'they're very clever at getting hold of things like this. Especially if there's lots of copies.'

A good point. Humphrey's a bloody nuisance most of the time, but I must say that he's a good man to have on your side in a fight.

'Oh dear,' I replied. 'This *is* a problem, because I'll have to copy all my Cabinet colleagues with this note. Their constituencies are bound to be affected as well, of course.'

Humphrey reassured me on this point. He said that we must hope for the best. If it *were* leaked, with all those copies, no one could *ever* discover who leaked it. And as it happened, he was lunching today with Peter Martell of *The Times*.

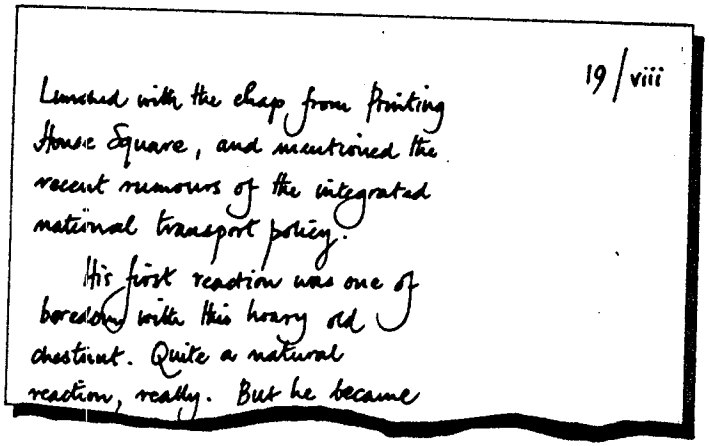
I found this very reassuring.

I told him not to do anything that I wouldn't do. He told me that I could rely on him.

I'm sure I can.

I wonder how he got on.

[*Sir Humphrey's account of lunch with Peter Martell has been found in his private diary – Ed.*]



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Lunched with the chap from Printing House Square, and mentioned the recent rumours of the integrated national transport policy.

His first reaction was one of boredom with this hoary old chestnut. Quite a natural reaction, really. But he became

interested when I hinted of the rumours that the policy may have several unwelcome side-effects.

1 Job loss from integration of the railway terminals.
2 Job loss from joint repair shops.
3 Job loss from streamlining of services.
4 Reduction of bus and train services – causing job loss.

Peter realised that this could be rather a large story, especially in view of the rumours that one of the areas to suffer most will be the PM's own constituency. I can't imagine how these rumours got around.

He asked for hard facts, and I admonished him. He persisted, explaining to me that newspapers are not like the Government – if they make statements they have to be able to prove that they are true.

He pressed me for news of a White Paper or a Green Paper. I gave no help. But I did have to confirm that there is in existence a confidential note from Hacker to the PM with similar notes to all twenty-one of his Cabinet colleagues.

'Oh that's all right then,' he said cheerfully. 'Are *you* going to show it to me or shall I get it from one of your colleagues?'

I reproved him. I explained that it was a confidential document. It would be grossly improper to betray it to anyone, let alone a journalist.

The only way he could possibly obtain a copy of such a document would be if somebody left it lying around by mistake. The chances of that happening are remote, of course.

[*It seems, from Sir Humphrey's account, that he even wrote his private diary in such a way as to prevent it being used as evidence against him. But Peter Martell's subsequent publication of the full details of the confidential note, only one day later, suggests that Sir Humphrey had carelessly left his own copy lying around – Ed.*]

August 22nd

Humphrey did his job well. The full disclosure of my seven-point plan for the Prime Minister's constituency appeared in *The Times* on Saturday. I must say I had a jolly good laugh about it. By 10.30 a.m. I'd received the expected summons for a chat with Sir Mark Spencer at Number Ten. (The PM's still abroad.)

I went this morning, and M.S. came straight to the point.

'I thought I ought to tell you that the PM isn't very pleased.' He waved Saturday's *Times* at me. 'This story.'

I agreed with him heartily. 'Yes, absolutely shocking. I wasn't pleased either.'

'There's obviously been a leak,' he murmured, eyeing me.

'Terrible. Can't trust any of my Cabinet colleagues nowadays.'

This wholehearted agreement threw him momentarily off guard, I think. 'Who are you saying it was?' he asked.

I lowered my voice and explained that I wouldn't want to name names, but as for one or two of my Cabinet colleagues . . . well! I left it at that. Looks speak louder than words sometimes.

He didn't want to leave it there. 'But what are you suggesting?'

I immediately backtracked. I was enjoying myself hugely. 'Well,' I said, 'it may *not* have been one of them, of course. I did send the paper here to Number Ten – could there be a leak *here* somewhere, do you think?'

Sir M. was not amused. 'The PM's office does not leak.'

'Of course not,' I said quickly. 'Perish the thought.'

We all leak of course. That's what the lobby correspondents are there for. However, we all prefer to call it 'flying a kite.'

Sir Mark continued. 'It wasn't only the fact of the leak that was disturbing. It was the implications of the proposals.'

I agreed that the implications were indeed disturbing, which was why I had written a special paper for the PM. National transport policies are bound to have disturbing implications. He disagreed. He insisted that the Transport Policy will not have such implications.

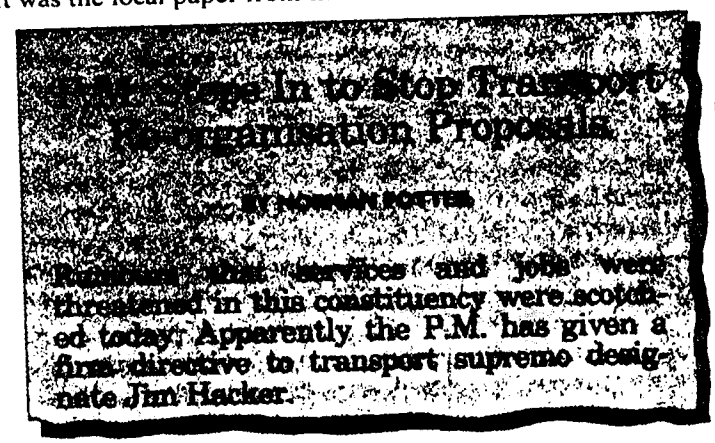
'It will,' I said.

'It won't,' he said. Such is the intellectual cut and thrust to be found at the centre of government.

'Didn't you read what it said?' I asked.

'What it *said* is not what it will *be*,' he replied very firmly. 'I thought perhaps you'd like to see this.' And he handed me a newspaper, one of the London suburban weeklies.

It was the local paper from the PM's constituency.


[illegible] In to Stop Transport Reorganisation Proposals

BY NORMAN POTTER

[illegible] services and jobs were threatened in this constituency were scotched today. Apparently the P.M. has given a firm directive to transport supremo designate Jim Hacker.

This was certainly news to me.

'I've had no directive from the PM,' I said.

'You have now.' What a curious way to get a directive from the PM. 'I'm afraid this leak, whoever it comes from, is a verbatim report of a confidential minute dictated by the Prime Minister in Ottawa. So it looks as though the national transport policy will need some rethinking, doesn't it?'

This leak was a skilful counter-move by the PM. I started to explain to Sir Mark that rethinking the policy would be difficult, but he interrupted me unceremoniously.

'I think the PM's view is that Ministers are there to do difficult jobs. Assuming that they wish to remain as Ministers.'

Tough talk. I got the message.

I hastened to assure him that if the policy needed rethinking then I would rethink it until it was well and truly rethought.

Before I left I asked him how the leak had got into the paper. The PM's own local paper. He assured me that he had no idea, but that the PM's office does not leak.

'Shocking, though, isn't it?' he added. 'You can't trust anyone nowadays.'

August 23rd

Another meeting with Humphrey. We appeared to be back to square one.

I was somewhat downcast, as I still appeared to be landed with this ghastly job. To my surprise Humphrey was in good spirits.

'It's all going excellently, Minister,' he explained. 'We shall now produce the other kind of non-proposal.'

I asked him what he had in mind.

'The high-cost high-staff kind of proposal. We now suggest a British National Transport Authority, with a full structure of Regional Boards, Area Councils, local offices, liaison committees – the lot. Eighty thousand staff, and a billion pounds a year budget.'

'The Treasury will have a fit,' I said.

'Precisely. And the whole matter will certainly be handed back to the Department of Transport.'

I was entranced. I asked him to do me a paper with full staff and costing details and a specimen annual budget.

He was way ahead of me. He immediately produced the very document from his folder. 'And there's a one-page summary on the front,' he smiled smugly. Well, he was entitled to be smug!

I told him he was wonderful. He told me it was nothing.

I sat back and glanced through the proposal. It was splendid stuff.

'My goodness,' I reflected, 'if the press were to get hold of *this* . . . eh?'

Humphrey smiled. 'They'll soon be setting up another leak enquiry.'

Bernard was immediately anxious. 'Not really?'

'Bound to.'

'But . . . wouldn't that be embarrassing?'

I was surprised to see that Bernard didn't know the rules of the leak enquiry game. Leak enquiries are never embarrassing because they never actually happen. Leak enquiries are for setting up, not for actually conducting. Members may be appointed, but they hardly ever meet more than once. They certainly never report.

I asked Bernard, 'How many leak enquiries can you recall that named the culprit?'

'In round figures,' added Humphrey.

Bernard thought for a moment. 'Well, if you want it in round figures . . .' He thought again. 'None.'

The right answer. They *can't* report. For two reasons:

1 If the leak came from a civil servant it's not *fair* to publish it. The politicians are supposed to take the rap, that's what they're there for.
2 If the leak came from a politician it's not *safe* to publish it, because he will then promptly disclose all the other leaks he knows of that came from his Cabinet colleagues.

I explained all this to Bernard.

Then Humphrey chimed in. 'There's a third reason. The most important of all. The main reason why it's too dangerous to publish the results of an enquiry is because most leaks come from Number Ten. The ship of state is the only ship that leaks from the top.'

Humphrey was quite right, of course. Since the problem, more often than not, is a leaky PM – as in this case – it's not easy to get the evidence and impossible to publish it if you do.

And by a curious coincidence, a journalist arrived to see me this very morning, shortly after our meeting. Humphrey, most considerately, left a spare copy of our latest high-cost proposal lying around on my desk. I'm awfully absent-minded, I'm always leaving bits of paper lying around, forgetting where I put them – the upshot was that after the journalist had left my office I couldn't find my spare copy anywhere. Extraordinary!

August 25th

It all came to a head today.

Humphrey and I were summoned – together this time – to a meeting at Number Ten. We were ushered into the Cabinet Secretary's office, where Sir Arnold and Sir Mark sat at the far end of a very long room. I think they were trying to intimidate us. But Humphrey and I are made of sterner stuff.

We greeted them cheerfully, and I sat in one of the armchairs in the conversation area. As a Minister of the Crown they were all my servants (nominally, at least) so they could not insist on a desk-bound interview. At my suggestion they joined me in Sir Arnold's armchairs. But he opened the batting. 'Another leak,' he said. 'This is extremely serious.'

'There has indeed been another leak,' I agreed. 'I can't think how it occurred! Our high-cost proposal was all over this morning's papers.'

Humphrey and I agreed earnestly that this new leak was indeed extremely serious.

'It is almost approaching a disciplinary level,' said Sir Arnold.

'I do agree,' I said, 'don't you, Humphrey?'

He nodded emphatically. 'Indeed, if only one could find the culprits it would be a most serious matter for them.'

Sir Mark piped up. He said he could help with that. He thought that if he were to use his influence he could achieve a disclosure from *The Times* of how they got hold of our original transport plans.

I shook Humphrey up a bit by offering to help further.

'Are you sure, Minister?' He sounded a warning note.

'Oh yes,' I said. 'In fact I'm confident that I could find out how the press got hold of the leak about the Prime Minister's opposition to our original plans. Of course, if it transpires that the PM's own office leaks, then that would be even more serious than a leak in a cabinet minister's private office, wouldn't it? The security implications alone . . .'

I let that threat hang in the air, and sat back.

'Ah,' said Sir Mark.

There was a pause while everyone thought and rethought their positions. I felt I had the initiative, so I continued: 'In fact, perhaps we ought to bring in the police or MI5 – after all, the implications of a leak at Number Ten are really very serious indeed.'

Arnold fought back. 'Nevertheless, our first priority must be to investigate the original leak.' He tried to insist.

I contradicted him flatly. 'No. Our first priority must be to track down the leak involving the PM.'

He really couldn't argue with that. And he didn't. He just sat in silence and looked at me. So after a moment, having won the Battle of the Leak Enquiries, I turned to the matter of the Transport Policy.

'At all events,' I said, summing up the situation, 'you will appreciate that the public outcry in response to all these leaks makes it very difficult for me to develop a national transport policy within the DAA.'

Sir Humphrey agreed vigorously. 'The time is unripe. The climate is unpropitious. The atmosphere is unfavourable.'

'And,' I nodded, 'the only two lines of approach are now blocked.'

Again there was a silence. Again Arnold and Mark stared at me. Then they stared at each other. Defeat stared at them both. Finally Sir Arnold resigned himself to the inevitable.

But he tried to put as good a face on it as he could. He raised the oldest idea as if it were the latest inspiration. 'I wonder,' he addressed himself to Sir Mark, 'if it might not be wiser to take the whole matter back to the Department of Transport?'

I seized on the suggestion. 'Now that, Arnold,' I said, flattering him fulsomely, 'is a brilliant idea.'

'I wish I'd thought of that,' said Humphrey wistfully.

So we were all agreed.

But Sir Mark was still worried. 'There remains the question of the leaks,' he remarked.

'Indeed there does,' I agreed. 'And in my view we should treat this as a matter of utmost gravity. So I have a proposal.'

'Indeed?' enquired Sir Arnold.

'Will you recommend to the PM,' I said, in my most judicial voice, 'that we set up an immediate leak enquiry?'

Sir Arnold, Sir Mark and Sir Humphrey responded in grateful unison. 'Yes Minister,' replied the three knights.