



THE COMPLETE
**YES
MINISTER**

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The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister

by

the Right Hon. James Hacker MP

Edited by Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay



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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, unixed 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.

YES MINISTER

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 Dymphna'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

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's¹ 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.

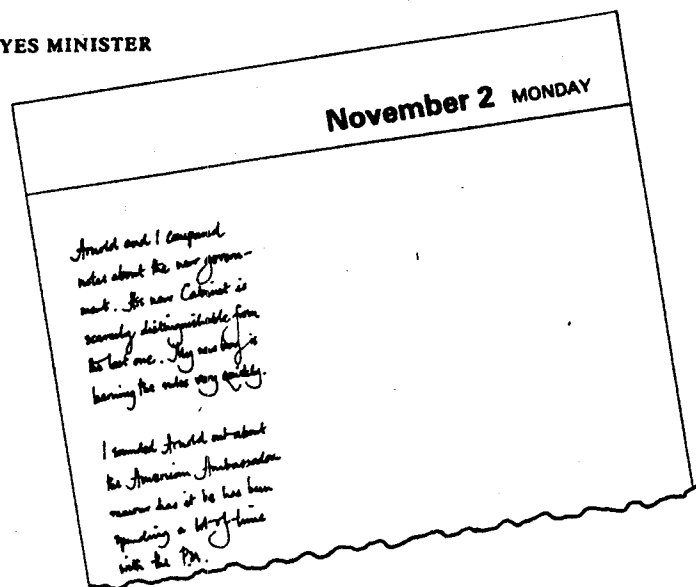
October 28th

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 Weasel¹ 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. He 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

YES MINISTER

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.

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 trole.

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

Civil Service
bureaucracy
Frank
YES, GO GO!
J.H.

Unemployment
benefit?
B.W.
DOLE!
J.H.

November 9th

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

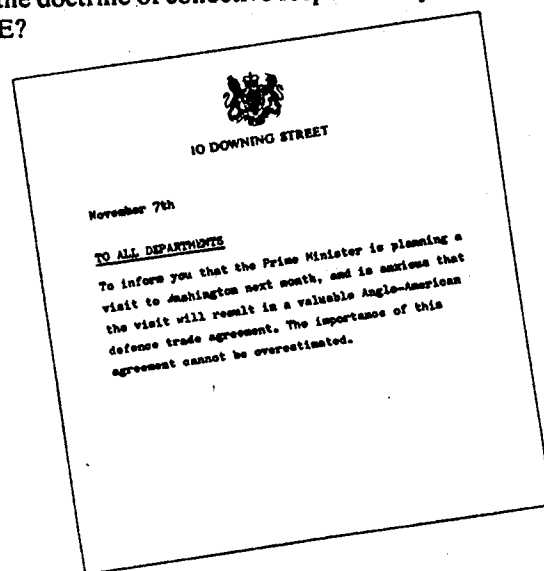
My speech was completed. I was sitting in the office reading the press release when Bernard burst in with a minute from the PM's private office.

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?



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.'

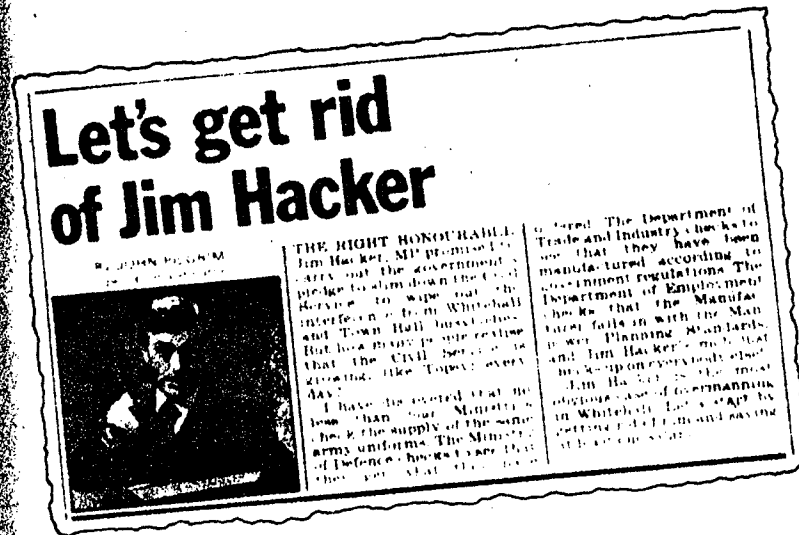
'Yes Minister,' said Sir Humphrey.

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*.



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. 'Humph-

rey,' 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.'

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

YES MINISTER

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 Humphrey 10/xii
Am concerned that
your minister is still trying
to economise pointlessly.
Stewart

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 manors, then a crisis in the Middle East, and back to normal again.

J.

10. xii

A reply from Sir Frederick:



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

11/xii

Dear Humphrey,

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

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

Jumbo.



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.

J.

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, OF 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 them-

selves 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.]



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?

- 1 -



BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

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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BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

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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BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

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, home 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 ?

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BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

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

YES MINISTER

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, 'tishn't, 'tis, 'tishn'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.*]



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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.

YES MINISTER

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 - 1 A. 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.'

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.

