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Decline and Fall

Diaries 2005-2010

Written by Chris Mullin

Edited by Ruth Winstone

Published by Profile Books

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DECLINE AND FALL

Diaries 2005–2010

Chris Mullin

edited by Ruth Winstone

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

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chris Mullin
July 2010

CHAPTER ONE

May–December 2005

Tuesday, 10 May
Sunderland

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

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

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

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

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

'Can I speak to Bharat?'

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

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

Wednesday, 11 May

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

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

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

Thursday, 12 May

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

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

Sunday, 15 May

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

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

Monday, 16 May

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

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

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

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

Tuesday, 17 May

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

Wednesday, 18 May

Wilton Park

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

Thursday, 19 May

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

Monday, 23 May

Sunderland

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tuesday, 24 May

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

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

Wednesday, 25 May

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

Thursday, 26 May

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

Friday, 27 May

Sunderland

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Saturday, 28 May

The Holmes, Roxburghshire

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

Monday, 30 May

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

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

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

Wednesday, 1 June

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

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

Saturday, 4 June
Sunderland

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

Monday, 6 June

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

Tuesday, 7 June

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

In the evening to a party at the Department for International

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

Wednesday, 8 June

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

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

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

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

Tuesday, 14 June

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

Wednesday, 15 June

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

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

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

Thursday, 16 June

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

Sunday, 19 June

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