

## FIASCOS AND DIVERSIONS – AT WORK

*This is a brief extract from Stephen Burbridge's book "The Days of Our Age- a Travel Memoir". It is largely made up of accounts of the author's journeys after his retirement from the civil service in 1993. They include journeys in the Antarctic, the northern hills of Pakistan, the approaches to Everest, Bhutan, Morocco (mountains and desert) etc. The first edition is not for sale but a second edition might be printed if there is sufficient demand. If you might be interested in buying a copy, please write to Stephen at Chesil Cottage, Brede Hill, Brede, Rye, TN31 6HH.*

*The following extract deals with Stephen's varied career in the Senior Civil Service.*

Anonymity is not the essential quality to get to the top as a civil servant. Aplomb and braggadocio suit some, and are useful for obscuring the collective memory of one's mistakes. For example, there was a lawyer in the 70's, called Basil Hall, who reached the unique eminence of Treasury Solicitor and Procurator General, forever smiling and with a healthy florid complexion to match his outgoing personality. He would proudly and cheerfully refer to the series of mistakes he had made on his way to the top as 'Hall's Balls'.

My own series of mistakes were steps on the ladder to much lesser eminence. One early fiasco of mine concerned the Tracked Hovercraft Project and Michael Heseltine, less of a shrinking violet. Professor Gilbert Laithwaite had discovered the 'Linear Induction Motor' which could propel objects across magnetic fields, and it was proposed by the National Research and Development Corporation (NRDC) that this discovery should be applied to propel wheel-less trains. A large sum was invested in a concrete track in Cambridgeshire and Government approval was needed for the go-ahead with the next, more costly still, phase. The Department of Transport was dead against the concept, seeing no market for the tracked hovercraft, and their opposition made my job of securing wider approval from Whitehall difficult. Apart from that obstacle, I had no idea what to do. Since my seniors, in the jargon my Under Secretary and my Deputy Secretary, were scientists they had no idea either. The Minister, Heseltine, contributed by dynamically arranging a meeting with the Transport Minister, John Peyton, at which there was some desultory talk but nothing decided. My own embarrassing contribution to the discussion was to bemoan the absence of any Government transport policy, and I recall Heseltine looking daggers at me down the row of his supporting officials.

Finally however, after prevaricating month after month, the inevitable decision was made in Whitehall to scrap the project. Just before the decision was conveyed to the NRDC for its imminent monthly meeting a Written Parliamentary Question happened to appear asking whether the Government had yet made a decision on the tracked hovercraft project. My junior colleague drafted the conventional reply 'The matter is still under consideration.' I initialled it as did Heseltine, and the Answer duly appeared. A few days later I conveyed the news about cancellation to the NRDC Board meeting and we put out a Press Notice to that effect later in the day.

At that time I worked in Millbank Tower on the Thames Embankment and the day after our Press Notice there was a bomb scare and the building evacuated whilst it was searched. To kill time, I went for a walk towards Pimlico, with nothing in mind. But, turning a corner by the Tate Gallery, I was shaken out of my reverie by the squeal of braking rubber tyres as a black limousine screeched to a halt beside me.

I was in the car in a flash which then sped towards Westminster. The driver told me that a fleet of Government cars had been mobilised to scour the streets for me. On the way I caught sight of an Evening Standard billboard 'Heseltine lies to Commons' and I had a presentiment; soon I was face to face with the subsequently great man. My protestation that the Parliamentary Answer had not strictly been a lie was to no avail. Heseltine was called over to see the Chief Whip, Francis Pym, who advised him to make a formal apology next day to the House of Commons. Which he did. Heseltine, who had aspirations to be Prime Minister, later only said to me sadly and, let it be said generously, that he could have done without this unnecessary incident.

In mid-career I was put in charge of disasters at sea – that is, preventing or mitigating them. In particular the 'Amoco Cadiz' oil pollution disaster off the Brittany coast came my way in 1978. My last act before play ended around midnight was to send a personal situation report to the Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, who at that time was visiting the United States. My efforts for the three weeks of the disaster were conducted wholly without reference to superiors. At the start of the disaster, I attended a meeting of the Government's emergencies committee. Afterwards its chairman, Sir Clive Rose, took me on one side and told me to telephone him if any part of the Government machine put an obstacle in whatever path I chose. He would immediately clear that obstacle. I came close to invoking his help one evening when the rear admiral in charge at Plymouth took exception to my inviting him to move five frigates to where I wanted them. His ADC that night told me strictly privately that the admiral just wanted to keep me swinging in the wind for a bit but would comply in the morning. He did comply. Sir Clive was thus not involved but his helpful support shows how the Whitehall decks could be cleared when needed. I also had freedom to authorize on the instant any expenditure I judged to be needed – I think the direct cost turned out to be somewhere between £3 and £5 million – quite a large sum then. In the event, I was moved to another job before the wash-up and before the cost had to be justified. The Coastguard Commander Hammond, who acted as my liaison, wrote me a farewell note quoting an old naval maxim re ships leaving port: 'The first turn of the screw pays all debts.'

This was my biggest foray into publicity and, with characteristic exaggeration, I would like to boast to my friends that urchins used to come up to me in the street to tell me that they had seen me on the telly last night. Peter Hennessey, the political journalist came to visit our command centre during the crisis, and wrote a 4-column centre page article, with a photograph of me, in 'The Times' on 4 April 1978.

My most intimate contact with Ministers was between 1978 and 1980 when I was responsible for briefing Department of Industry Ministers on virtually all Whitehall matters which were the responsibility of other Departments but which had an impact on industry, such as pay, prices, labour relations, education and training. The civil servant two ranks above me, and one below the top, was a late entrant from the colonial service, and no respecter of persons or Ministers. He invented something called The Industrial Strategy and we all wondered what that was.

My job was to attend interdepartmental committees and write briefs for my Ministers attending the corresponding Ministerial committees. I wrote these briefs, sometimes six or seven in a day and occasionally with minutes only to spare, completely off the top of my head and straight onto the typewriter. My guiding light was the advice I had received from this aggressive superior. When I joined his team he just growled at me through clenched teeth: 'Go out and win'.

With that fair wind behind me, there was not much difference between the briefing I provided Eric Varley and his Labour Ministers and that for Keith Joseph and his Tory Ministers after the 1979 Election. In both cases the guiding light was to 'go out and win'.

I can claim some part in the downfall of the Labour Government in 1979. Those were the days of Pay Policy when a statutory 'norm' for subsequent annual pay rises was set. Ever on the side of aggression without much thought for the consequences, I helped to persuade Department of Industry Ministers to press for a 5% norm. This was lower than the norm proposed by the Department responsible for pay policy, the Department for Prices and Consumer Protection under Shirley Williams, and supported by the Minister for Employment, Albert Booth. But the 5% norm received the crucial support of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Dennis Healey, who of course had been briefed by his officials with whom we were in cahoots. The unions did not like 5% and the Winter of Discontent set in. Jim Callaghan was replaced by Margaret Thatcher.

With the change of government, I was fortunate to be near the fulcrum of power, continuing to write my briefs, though of course personally insignificant. Like other officials, I was given Keith Joseph's list of required reading, starting with Adam Smith's 'Wealth of Nations' of which I read a few pages. With Keith Joseph's name and reputation behind us, our stock in Whitehall together with that of Treasury officials, rose and we trod the corridors with a certain sprightliness of tread. We were now 'winning'.

My promotion from this job to the giddy heights of Under Secretary was a happy accident. The Permanent Secretary, Peter Carey (who had served with the Yugoslav partisans during the war), gave me special praise, which I blushinglly accepted, for a brief prepared for Keith Joseph, known as the Mad Monk and the undisputed intellect in the Government. I can say without immodesty that the brief was of a high standard, even up to the intellectual demands of its illustrious recipient. It had however not been written by me but by my clever assistant, though by some secretarial subterfuge my signature at the bottom had suggested my authorship.

I was given Commercial Relations and Export Promotion in three swathes of the world: Australasia, Latin America and Western Europe. I was not at home with these heady responsibilities. For example, being terrified at the prospect, I ruthlessly engineered some other poor soul to accompany Margaret Thatcher to Greece, one of her first overseas visits as Prime Minister. High on her agenda was trade promotion, in particular helping to land a major power station project there. She gave her accompanying officials a hard time.

On the other hand I felt no inhibition in accompanying my Minister, John Biffen, a milder character than Thatcher, on his visit to Scandinavia and here I did score a minor diplomatic success. Our ambassador in Oslo put on a grand dinner in Biffen's honour, inviting the highest in the land and

their consorts. A bright sunlit evening with the Fjord beyond the gardens below, chandeliers, sparkling glass, fresh-cut flowers, flunkeys. One such flunkey bearing before him a silver bowl of small new potatoes was about to serve me when his foot slipped and a nice serving of precisely four potatoes shot into the air. In mid-conversation to my right and with fantastic dexterity I caught all four potatoes in one deft movement of my left hand and calmly placed them on my plate. Sadly, only one or two Norwegians noticed this extraordinary feat. Plans went ahead to relieve me of the exotic lands of Australasia and Latin America. In their place I was given the nuts and bolts of export promotion schemes, with responsibility for many hundreds of staff.

The downward spiral of my reputation was symbolised by a subsequent, new, responsibility for an Under Secretary: that of overseeing security in the vast DTI building then at the corner of Victoria Street. In practice this meant organising the efficient evacuation of the building in cases of bomb threats, fire and, in the less likely event no doubt, of rape and pillage as well. We made detailed plans for an early exercise, for example appointing Floor Wardens on each level to direct people to exits. The date of the drill was kept a closely-guarded secret. However since it was not thought appropriate to bother Ministers in such a matter of simulated life and death, we asked the Principal Private Secretary to warn the offices of all the Ministers so that their busy, and no doubt useful, schedules would not be disturbed.

With hindsight it had to be tempting Fate, but on the appointed day I took it upon myself to announce, in ringing tones through the Tannoy, that there was an Emergency requiring immediate evacuation. I went into the street to watch the effect.

When I judged from the heaving crowds blocking Victoria Street that the building must be empty, I boomed through Tannoy again that it had been a successful exercise and everybody could return to their rooms, as I did to mine, content with a job well done.

Complacency was short-lived. A few minutes later I had a telephone call from my Permanent Secretary Sir Anthony Rawlinson. Sir Anthony asked for an immediate explanation. The Minister for Trade, Paul Channon, (son of 'Chips' Channon the diarist) 'was in a rage', he said. It transpired that the message about the dummy exercise had not been relayed by the Principal Private Secretary (with my public school training, it would have been unethical to 'sneak' on him so I got all the blame) to the other Ministerial private secretaries, nor to that of Paul Channon, at the time the only Minister in the building. When my 'emergency' was declared he was conducting a meeting on the 8th floor with a largeish delegation of Thai businessmen. The story, as later related to me, was that Channon, a man of culture if not action, Took Charge. He shepherded his gaggle of Thais in a brave effort to exit the building. Channon, being unversed in evacuating buildings was unaware of exits other than the highly privileged Ministers' lift on the 8th floor, which of course could not be used in an emergency. Wherever Channon led his scampering group of Thais there he would be confronted by one of my Floor Wardens and ordered to go off in another direction. The Channon-led gaggle would then swoop round like a comet followed by its tail and encounter fresh obstacles. Paul Channon, in normal times of a somewhat rubicund complexion, found the situation frustrating, not least because the Thais were beginning to see the funny side of The British Way of Life. Eventually he did succeed in making the exit into Victoria Street, though it has to be said that after his somewhat complex manoeuvres Channon and his Thais were conspicuous to the crowd waiting outside as the last to emerge from the building. And then without a pause he, like everyone else,

was ordered to go back in again. It is assumed that this time he contrived to squash most of his giggling Thais into the Ministerial lift, for it did not take him long to get to the 8th floor and telephone the Permanent Secretary in his aforementioned rage.

The years in office that followed brought some resurrection of fortune, so fewer fiascos occurred and none worth recording, not even the lesser delights of 'diversions'. So I turn to ... Play ....