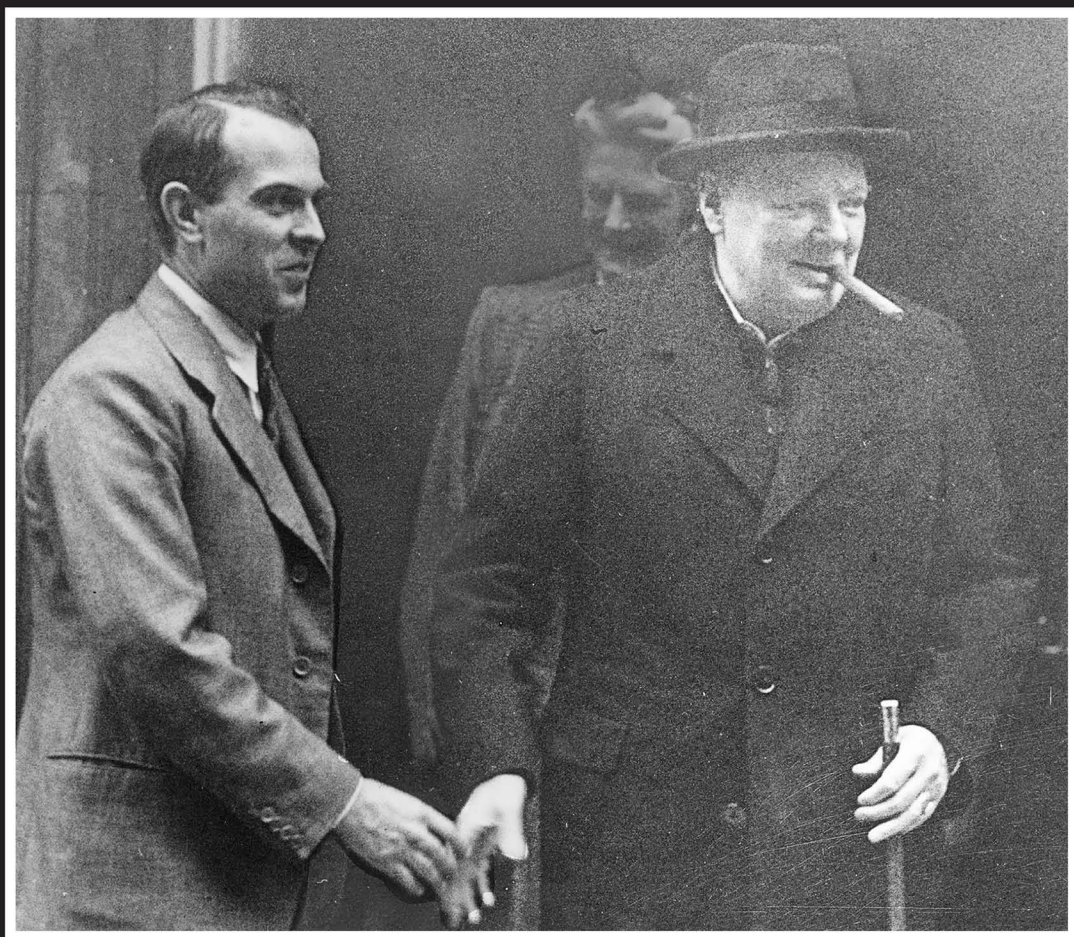


EDITED BY ANDREW HOLT
AND WARREN DOCKTER



PRIVATE SECRETARIES TO THE PRIME MINISTER

FOREIGN AFFAIRS FROM CHURCHILL TO THATCHER



Private Secretaries to the Prime Minister

The importance of the Prime Minister in British foreign policy decision-making has long been noted by historians. However, while much attention has been given to high-level contacts between leaders and to the roles played by the premiers themselves, much less is known about the people advising and influencing them. In providing day-to-day assistance to the Prime Minister, a Private Secretary could wield significant influence on policy outcomes. This book examines the activities of those who advised prime ministers from Winston Churchill (1951–55) to Margaret Thatcher during her first administration (1979–83). Each chapter considers British foreign policy and assesses the influence of the specific advisers. For each office holder, particular attention is paid to a number of key themes. Firstly, their relationship with the Prime Minister is considered. A strong personal relationship of trust and respect could lead to an official wielding much greater influence. This could be especially relevant when an adviser served under two different leaders, often from different political parties. It also helps to shed light on the conduct of foreign policy by each premier. Secondly, the attitudes towards the adviser from the Foreign Office are examined. The Foreign Office traditionally enjoyed great autonomy in the making of British foreign policy and was sensitive to encroachments by Downing Street. Finally, each chapter explores the role of the adviser in the key foreign policy events and discussions of the day. Covering a fascinating 30-year period in post-war British political history, this collection broadens our understanding of the subject, and underlines the different ways influence could be brought to bear on government policy.

Andrew Holt taught at the University of Nottingham, King's College London and the University of Exeter, and held a visiting fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge, before joining the Civil Service. He is the author of *The Foreign Policy of the Douglas-Home Government: Britain, the United States and the End of Empire* (2014).

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Foreword

I served three very different Prime Ministers – Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron. I do not possess the wisdom, distance or career certainty to be as candid as the eminent historians and former practitioners whose recollections form this fascinating account of life behind the black door. The ‘Private’ remains more important than the ‘Secretary’.

The role of ‘Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister’ did not involve, as once translated to bewilderment, being the ‘Intimate Typist for the Prime Minister’s Affairs overseas’. It was a combination of policy adviser, journalist, negotiator, bag carrier and relationship manager. Occasionally therapist, translator, recruitment consultant and even bodyguard, as when President of Zimbabwe Robert Mugabe emerged from a corner of a UN Summit to seek a handshake with Gordon Brown. I wrote speeches, dreamt up policies and procured ProPlus from President Obama. Sometimes I had to tell white lies, as when a Middle Eastern monarch asked what was written on all the ‘nice placards’ being waved at him in London by ‘friendly crowds’. The first voice I heard each morning, and the last each night, was the relentlessly cheerful Number 10 switchboard.

Many things about the Private Secretary’s role are unchanged. We no longer cut the dash of the impresarios of Nico Henderson’s memoirs, but we do have more influence than our age or rank would normally permit. We work in an atmosphere of creative tension with the departments from which we come. Output matters more than process. We succeed if we master the art of using leverage. We inhabit the grey but productive area between communications, policy and diary. We don’t need to know everything about everything, but we do need to know something about everything. We cannot be control freaks, but we do have to create the illusion of freakish control. We rely as ever on the extraordinary good grace and professionalism of the duty clerks, switchboard operators and garden room staff who really run Number 10. The 30 seconds walking to the front door with the PM are more important than the two hours rewriting his brief. We have to think fast, but never bluff. When the door is closed, we can be a licensed heretic, impertinent irritation, devil’s advocate. But not all the time, not in front of others, and never once the PM has reached a decision. If you appear too close to ‘The Boss’, you’ll be seen as a threat. If

not close enough, as irrelevant. As ever, the PS must navigate between civil servants and special advisers, drawing the best from both while sidestepping unnecessary scraps. You need a thick skin – I still wake at night to recall one prime ministerial ticking off accompanied by the strains of ‘Don’t Stop Me Now, I’m Having Such a Good Time’ on a nearby loudspeaker. Just as the Private Secretaries of the past had to read Stalin or Kennedy, we have to know our Prime Ministers’ interlocutors inside out. Some were easier than others – the success of meetings with one leader could be judged by how often he tapped his crotch. We have to understand how to get the most out of our leaders, including by building in moments to watch the football or beat us at tennis.

Yet many aspects of our roles have changed dramatically. I worked for the last paper and pen PM, the first email PM, and the first iPad PM. When I started, we had to consider how policy would look on the Sky ticker. By the time I left, by how it would look on Twitter. We have had to become more media-savvy than our predecessors, always with a good story in the back pocket. Preparations for PMQs or press conferences have become the sweet spot in which to debate and hone policy. We have become more focused on ‘deliverables’ – announcements designed, more in hope than expectation in my experience, to prevent the media from writing negative alternatives. We have to think more about the visuals, as demonstrated by our often grim experiences over bilaterals with successive US Presidents – there were few I can recall where the media judged us on the substance of the exchange rather than the length of the press conference.

Even the physical nature of the job has changed. Traditionally, the smaller the desk and the closer to the throne, the better. But under Gordon Brown, we had a period in open-plan, a u-shape of desks around the Prime Minister. We now have blackberries attached to our wrists – leading to a painful version of repetitive strain injury (or No10donitis). The pace of international diplomacy has quickened. Often at a ‘three-shirter’ EU budget discussion or climate change summit, I would long for the days when Churchill’s PS, Jock Colville, could write in his diary: ‘war declared, rode on Hampstead Heath for three hours’. We are probably more paranoid about leaks and inquiries – the minute to the PM that looks brilliant and witty in the PM’s red box will seem reckless to a parliamentary committee armed with hindsight and media outrage. Recent inquiries have shown that no one comes out with much credit when their real-time communications are put under an intense spotlight. We’re more ‘The Thick of It’ than ‘Yes Prime Minister’.

In my experience, leaders are more decent and more human than their reputations suggest. They arrive planning to delegate, but end up centralising. On issues of core national interest, they tend to make similar calls. The stereotypes are flawed: those seen as gunslingers were smarter; those seen as steely were more subtle; those seen as gloomy could be hilarious; and those seen as too relaxed were driven. Someone said that JFK inspired America, RFK challenged America, and Ted Kennedy changed America. The best leader has to do all three: set the vision, engage people to believe in it, and put systems in place to

deliver it. Most leaders master two out of three. Tactics often get in the way of strategy, but most calls are 51/49 and lonely. So all value judgement over intellect.

Few jobs in government are more gruelling than PS – during one demanding period, my wife interrupted a conference call between the Prime Minister and a head of state to inform us all of how fed up she was. But few can be as exciting, and such a privilege. They give you an extraordinary insight into moments of history, and the characters that shape them. I woke the Prime Minister to tell him of President Obama's election. I was in the car with Gordon Brown as he left Chequers for the last time, and with David Cameron as he arrived there for the first time.

All of this makes this book more interesting and relevant than ever. It is interesting that the Private Secretaries who are now best remembered are those who wrote most down. The code of *omerta* remains strong among most of us, but as government evolves it is right to shine a light into the corridors in which we operate.

Tom Fletcher

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Introduction

Charles Powell

This collection of pen-portraits of those who have served as the Prime Minister's Private Secretary for foreign affairs in the decades from 1950 to 1983 when I took up the post also examines and explains the role itself: its scope, its influence and its position in the Whitehall power structure.

That is not a straightforward task. The first problem is the paucity of raw material. Members of ministerial private offices have long been prohibited from keeping diaries so there is nothing to be gleaned from the horse's mouth. Ministerial memoirs have generally observed the principle that they should not comment on individual civil servants beyond the occasional bouquet. Interviews given by former Number 10 foreign affairs Private Secretaries provide some material but not a great deal. Moreover the secrets of success in a Number 10 Private Secretary's role are anonymity and discretion so as to avoid any public perception of supplanting Cabinet ministers as the Prime Minister's principal source of advice. As with much British constitutional practice appearances deceive: indeed the very title Private Secretary is a classic bit of British under-statement. A Private Secretary's daily proximity to his or her minister inevitably confers greater influence than a bald job-description implies. But for heaven's sake don't tell anyone!

This all presents the historian with quite a problem in trying to assess the real role of successive foreign affairs Private Secretaries in Number 10. To a degree it can only be done by re-capitulating the diplomatic history of the time and making assumptions about the Private Secretary's contribution to it, drawing on whatever can be found in the Number 10 archives. They perforce omit the daily, sometimes hourly, face-to-face discussions between the Private Secretaries and the Prime Minister which is actually the key to the extent of that influence. Within these considerable constraints the book nonetheless provides many fascinating insights.

In career terms, the Number 10 foreign affairs Private Secretaries have been pretty much stereotypes: male, invariably public school, Oxbridge, middle-ranking officials in the FCO for whom the Number 10 assignment was a brief – generally two to three years – way-station on the road to top ambassadorial or Permanent Under-Secretary appointments. But as characters they emerge as very different, and consequently their relationships with Prime

Ministers of the day no less so. Anthony Eden and Edward Heath regarded their Private Secretaries as members of an extended family with whom to gossip and exchange personal letters, supreme examples being Guy Millard under Eden and Freddie Bishop under Macmillan. Others maintained a more formal, almost arm's length relationship.

Interestingly the recruitment process seems always to have been haphazard. Oliver Wright defined the only necessary qualifications for the job as an iron constitution and an understanding wife. Generally the Foreign Office simply served up a candidate or candidates whom it believed appropriate – and no doubt guaranteed to be loyal to their alma mater, a point to which I will return. Michael Palliser appears to have been the only candidate put forward for interview by Harold Wilson. In my own case I had been tipped off by a friend in Number 10 that Margaret Thatcher tended to talk incessantly during such interviews and then conclude that the candidate was useless because he never said anything. I went on the offensive and gabbled away myself, whereupon she is reported to have said 'he won't do, he never stops talking'. I got the job all the same, from which I can only conclude there were no other candidates.

Several factors govern the Number 10 foreign affairs Private Secretary's role once appointed. The most obvious is the continuously growing involvement of Prime Ministers in foreign affairs. There is nothing new in this: all Prime Ministers for several decades now have found themselves steadily more drawn in. What is new is the continuity and the scale of their involvement. It is in particular a function of the multiplication of international summits of every description – UN, EU, NATO, environmental and so on – in which heads of government are expected to play the lead role. Successive British Prime Ministers complain the process is out of control but are powerless to stop it.

The growing involvement is also a subject of permanent discord in the Number 10 Private Office with the Private Secretaries dealing with domestic affairs raging against the demands of foreign affairs on the Prime Minister's time, not to speak of the Government Whips who want Prime Ministers to spend more time coddling their back-benchers. Yet the attractions are hard for a Prime Minister to resist whatever their private lamentations: the perpetual television coverage, the press conferences, the scope for logging national triumphs such as the Falklands victory or the British rebate in Europe, and the opportunities to put one over Johnny Foreigner in the eyes of the *Sun* or the *Daily Mail*.

The result has been that the foreign affairs Private Secretary has over the years had a growing share of the Prime Minister's time and attention span, and an expanding volume of work. That was further enhanced as the portfolio grew to embrace defence, Northern Ireland, development aid, trade and intelligence – in other words a substantial slice of government business. Despite this, the do-it-yourself staffing persisted. Until the Blair years, which lie beyond the scope of this book, these matters were handled by a single Private Secretary in Number 10 with no deputy or assistant, let alone support staff. This puzzled the more profligately staffed White House, Élysée Palace and Bundeskanzleramt,

but personally I never felt it a disadvantage. The perceived imbalance was addressed in Tony Blair's time by moving the Leader of the Cabinet Office's defence and foreign affairs and European secretariats into Number 10 to serve as prime ministerial advisers. In David Cameron's time the answer has been the creation of a national security adviser and staff. Both have involved inflating the number of bodies dealing with the Prime Minister's involvement in foreign affairs, let alone inflating the grade of the civil servants concerned. Some would doubtless claim it works better. My own observation is that large numbers in other heads of governments' offices did not improve the speed or clarity of their decisions, and that Number 10's previous unprecedentedly short chain of command – in effect the foreign affairs Private Secretary sticking his head round the PM's door to get an answer – had many advantages.

What did the foreign affairs Private Secretary actually do? In graphic terms, you sit at what is the very heart of government in an office adjoining the Cabinet Room, shared with the Principal Private Secretary. At least that was the case for decades until Tony Blair took the office for himself and David Cameron has kept it. Looking back 20 years later on my own time in Number 10 I am posthumously impressed both by the volume of work and the pace at which we had to do it. The flow of paper was immense and Margaret Thatcher's appetite for it legendary. Every paper sent on to her needed to have a clear question written on the front, sometimes with a summary of the main arguments. It might simply be 'agree?', or ask her to choose between alternatives, or recommend she contest the advice provided. These annotations could produce spectacularly explosive comments.

There was preparation for Prime Minister's Questions, at that time twice a week, which involved early morning and lunch-time briefing sessions predicting questions, suggesting smart answers and generally psyching her up to crush the current Leader of the Opposition with some withering put-down. There was attendance at her meetings of relevant Cabinet Committees and Cabinet itself as well as her weekly bilateral with the Foreign Secretary, never an easy occasion as he struggled to get a word in edgeways.

There was making sure she was fully briefed for meetings with visiting foreign leaders, more and more of whom flocked to Number 10 as her fame or notoriety spread. These could often take an unpredictable course: a Japanese trade minister who burst into floods of tears on receiving condolences for the death of his mother and had to be mopped up: a visiting President from the (then) French Congo, a communist whom I had unsuccessfully advised the Foreign Office not to insist on her seeing and whom she greeted with the words 'I hate Communists', astutely rendered into French by a very alarmed Congolese interpreter as 'Madam the Prime Minister says that on the whole she has not always found herself in agreement with the doctrines of Karl Marx': and a disconcerting habit of climbing on to a window seat during a meeting to test whether the windows had been dusted.

There was speech-writing, both for parliamentary occasions, for the annual Lord Mayor's banquet which traditionally concentrated on foreign affairs, and

for other public events, most notoriously the Bruges speech. There was preparing for and accompanying her on all her foreign visits and sitting in to take a note of her discussions with foreign leaders, almost invariably as the only other person in the room as she had a rooted dislike of delegations and refused to be accompanied by Whitehall panjandrums. These had to be followed by late-night dictation sessions with relays of incomparable Garden Room girls – the Number 10 secretaries – to ensure an accurate account of what had been said. This was crucial given that Margaret Thatcher characteristically remembered everything she said herself but very little of what the other party had said. There was accompanying her to European Councils and other summits where I took to walking into the head of government sessions to refuel her with a whisky despite protestations from other leaders that I was making her more difficult. (That was the whole point.) There were the seminars which she wanted organised so as to tap the wisdom on foreign affairs of a wider circle than just the Foreign Office itself, inviting academic experts, businessmen and others. Above all there was constant and boisterous argument with Britain's surely most argumentative Prime Minister. Weekends brought little respite: we simply adjourned to Chequers rather than Number 10. I marvel in retrospect at what she got through, bearing in mind all this was just on foreign affairs.

But that is only part of the story, as the various accounts in this volume illustrate. There are many other aspects of the job which lead Private Secretaries into zones of controversy.

The first is whom you are actually working for. Bernard Donoughue, working in Number 10 in Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan's time, recorded that foreign affairs Private Secretaries somehow never ceased to be the Foreign Office representatives to the Prime Minister. That was probably what the Foreign Office hoped and indeed the temporary nature of the Number 10 assignment served to remind the occupants of the post that their longer-term future lay with the FCO, and they had better remember that in the way they conducted themselves in Number 10. I recall being summoned by an FCO Permanent Secretary and being told: 'Remember I am your boss', not a claim which I thought sustainable. You cannot sustain divided loyalties: you serve the Prime Minister and no two ways about it. Michael Palliser also recognised the problem of being 'totally loyal to the Prime Minister who is your boss and who you are there to serve while at the same time preserving a relationship with the Foreign Secretary which is actually crucial to the national interest'. In my experience that is a counsel of perfection and in practice hard to fulfil, particularly when a Prime Minister is at odds with his or her Foreign Secretary, as was Harold Wilson with George Brown or Margaret Thatcher with Geoffrey Howe. The best you can do is attempt to play a marriage counsellor role.

What is most important is to keep the FCO and the rest of Whitehall meticulously informed, sometimes under strict security caveats of what the Prime Minister is up to in foreign affairs and what he or she says to leaders. Failure to do that can lead to the pitfalls of separate foreign policies, with Suez the classic example where, as the chapter on Eden's Private Secretaries recount,

only one of the three (let alone the Foreign Office itself) was made aware of his collusion with the French and the Israelis. Better to expose differences than conceal them.

Another sensitive border-line is how far the foreign affairs Private Secretary acts as an adviser to the Prime Minister not just as a transmitter of the advice of others. Different views of this emerge in these essays. Guy Millard, one of Eden's Private Secretaries, defined their role as 'intermediaries not advisers' and some of his successors tried to abide strictly by that definition. But by no means all of them did so. Michael Palliser in particular saw his role to advise and was clearly an important influence on policy particularly on Europe. In practice it is impossible not to act as an adviser if you are in constant contact with the Prime Minister, discussing the issues, attending the meetings with other heads of government and understanding what the Prime Minister wants. The advice should never be a substitute for the advice of the Foreign Secretary or other Cabinet ministers of which the Prime Minister should always be aware, but it can point out difficulties with following their advice or wider considerations which are not fully taken into account.

Closely allied to this is how far you speak on the Prime Minister's behalf. Number 10 is not the White House where presidential advisers easily trump Cabinet Secretaries, and nothing gives an unelected civil servant the right to take decisions in the Prime Minister's place. Yet even the most workaholic of Prime Minister's cannot decide everything. Especially in fast-moving situations, a Private Secretary who knows the Prime Minister's mind has to be able to act on their behalf. During the first Gulf War I frequently slipped notes under John Major's bedroom door seeking retrospective endorsement of decisions reached with President Bush's national security adviser during the night hours – and always received it. But the perception that Private Secretaries exercise too much influence causes resentment in the Foreign Office. Freddie Bishop was accused of exercising influence out of all proportion to his formal responsibilities in Harold Macmillan's time and of 'government by private secretary' – a charge which he rashly dismissed by suggesting that was better than government by politicians.

Yet another area of controversy is the degree to which the Number 10 foreign affairs Private Secretary establishes his own foreign affairs network, independent of the Foreign Office itself. There are several examples in these accounts of foreign affairs Private Secretaries being used as prime ministerial envoys. There has long been a direct relationship with the US President's national security adviser, though the latter holds a much more powerful position. In my time that was supplemented by a direct secure telephone line to his desk. Similar relationships have developed over the years with those managing foreign policy issues in the offices of the French President and the German Chancellor and in my time we sometimes met as a threesome, the differences in our status reflected in Jacques Attali's penchant for arriving in a presidential jet while I would trudge over to Paris or Bonn in BA economy class, a good way to keep a sense of proportion about one's relative importance in what could be heady

circumstances. The meetings were useful as a means of coordinating policy on major issues, though they did not always succeed as in the case of German reunification. But they were not welcome to foreign ministries in any of the capitals. Once again the key was to ensure that foreign ministries were kept fully informed. I am confident that was more the case in Britain than in our partners.

A temptation to be resisted is being drawn – overtly or identifiably at least – into political activity. As with most temptations it's hard not to succumb sometimes. I found it impossible to resist tinkering with foreign policy and defence passages in party conference speeches or Conservative manifestoes where it seemed to me either that they departed from what the Prime Minister wanted or – more often – strayed into the realm of fantasy foreign policy-making. I do not regard that as becoming politicised. Nor was there ever any pressure in Margaret Thatcher's time to become so. Indeed she seemed to regard civil servants as political eunuchs.

I have been spared dissection in this collection of essays, as the papers for the period I was foreign affairs Private Secretary at Number 10 are not fully open. My own experience was different to most of my predecessors: I was younger on appointment to the role, stayed longer (around seven years) and decided at the end to leave the foreign service altogether. I thought I had enjoyed the best job which government service offered, to which an embassy would never match up – in other words quit while you are ahead – but also because of the perception of others that I had become politically 'tainted' or 'gone native' after such a long stint in Number 10. (It was far from the longest. The record was, I believe, held by Sir Philip de Zulueta.) Above all I wanted to see if I could make it in life outside the Civil Service cocoon. So I was ready to move on and the powers that be in Whitehall could not wait for me to do so.

Yet like others I found the Number 10 experience exhilarating. I was more fortunate than others: for much of the period covered by this volume Britain was on the defensive, fighting seemingly remorseless decline in its world standing and influence and rejection by Europe. My own experience was of a resurgent Britain with the country's self-confidence restored, the special relationship with the US as close as it has ever been, our money back in Europe and the Single Market launched, the Falklands conflict won, Hong Kong's future assured, Rhodesia brought belatedly to independence, apartheid in South Africa defeated and Mandela freed, Germany united and the Cold War laid to rest. 'Twas bliss to be alive, though it did not always feel like that at the time.

Looking back do I have any claim to responsibility for any of that? No, of course not. It was the result of strong forceful leadership from a remarkable Prime Minister supported by able ministers who first knocked the country back into shape and then used its economic recovery to rebuild Britain's role in the world. But it was invigorating to be along for the ride: to have a hand in prime ministerial speeches, to engage in daily argument with Britain's most tempestuous Prime Minister, to sit in on meetings with President Reagan, President Gorbachev, Deng Xiaoping, President Mandela and many many others, while

feeding Margaret Thatcher's ammunition belt for battles in Europe and (too often) in Whitehall. It was the ultimate trainspotter's dream.

Just as the Civil Service itself has changed and is probably about to change much more, the classic foreign affairs Private Secretary will probably become extinct, to be replaced by the full-fledged and more politicised Prime Minister's Department in Whitehall which has been looming on the horizon for some time, with a large foreign affairs and defence component. It would be pointless to mourn the passing of the Private Secretary role. But there is everything to be said for celebrating those who performed it as recorded in this book.

1 Managing a giant

Jock Colville and Winston Churchill

Warren Dockter

After just arriving home on a holiday from the British Embassy in Lisbon where he had been working as Head of the Chancery, Jock Colville and his wife Margaret Egerton were invited to a dinner party on 25 October 1951, the day of the general election. While he was in London he was pleased to run into some familiar faces from his days at Downing Street where he served as Churchill's Assistant Private Secretary during the Second World War. Among those he saw was Sir Norman Brook, who inquired if Colville was home on leave or for a more extended period. The next day Colville, his wife and his mother-in-law stopped at the Cesarewitch horse races en route to Scotland, where they planned to continue their holiday. As Colville watched the races and partook of some much needed relaxation, an official from the Jockey Club informed him that he had a phone call from the Prime Minister. Aware that this might condemn the holiday, Margaret told him that, 'Whatever he asks you to do, say no'.

On the phone, the familiar voice of Winston Churchill reported to Jock that Sir Norman Brook had told him that he was home on leave and asked him 'Would you, if it is not inconvenient (but pray say if it is), take a train to London to come see me?' Eager to fulfil his duty and happy to see his old friend, Colville happily replied in the affirmative and perhaps hoping to impress Churchill with his immediate availability proposed a meeting for 'tomorrow morning'. Churchill said, 'No, this afternoon'.¹ Though it prematurely finished his holiday with Margret and her mother, the meeting proved fruitful as Churchill invited Colville back into the Private Office as his Principal Private Secretary, where Jock would serve Churchill until the end of his government in 1955.

Sir John 'Jock' Colville is a figure who is well known to any historian of British politics and the Second World War. Born into an affluent and well-connected family, Colville, like Churchill, was educated at Harrow and, unlike Churchill, went on to senior scholarship at Trinity College, Cambridge. Though Colville initially joined the Foreign Office in 1937, in just two years he was appointed to Assistant Private Secretary to Neville Chamberlain. After Chamberlain's resignation, Colville decided to stay on at the Private Office and work for Churchill. Thus an enduring friendship was born. Lady Jane Williams (one of Churchill's secretaries and Rab Butler's niece) remarked that Colville really became a part of Churchill's family as 'a surrogate son'.²