

'The best political diarist of our time'
MALCOLM RUTHERFORD, *FINANCIAL TIMES*

The Last Diaries

TONY BENN

A Blaze of Autumn
Sunshine

Edited by Ruth Winstone

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About the Book

In this, his final volume of diaries, Tony Benn reflects on the compensations and the disadvantages of old age.

With the support of a small circle of friends and his extended family, he continues his activities on behalf of social justice, peace and accountability in public life, against the background of political change and the international crisis of capitalism.

Following an illness in July 2009, the diaries, kept for over sixty years, cease. Published here alongside these final years of entries are Tony Benn's personal insights into the challenges of growing older, the loneliness of widowhood, the upheaval of moving from the family home of sixty years to a nearby flat, and the problems of failing health.

Finally, we share in Tony's hope for a better future based on his experience and optimism.

About the Author

Radical statesman and Member of Parliament for over fifty years Tony Benn is the pre-eminent diarist of his generation. His political activity has continued after 'retirement' through mass meetings, broadcasts and in more recent years through social media. A widower since 2000, Tony Benn lives and works in London and has four children and ten grandchildren.

The Regeneration of Britain
Speeches
Arguments for Socialism
Arguments for Democracy
Parliament, People and Power
The Sizewell Syndrome
Fighting Back: Speaking Out for Socialism in the Eighties
A Future for Socialism
Common Sense (*with Andrew Hood*)
Free Radical

Years of Hope: Diaries 1940–1962
Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963–1967
Office Without Power: Diaries 1968–1972
Against the Tide: Diaries 1973–1976
Conflicts of Interest: Diaries 1977–1980
The End of an Era: Diaries 1980–1990
The Benn Diaries: Single Volume Edition 1940–1990
Free at Last! Diaries 1991–2001
Dare to be a Daniel
Letters to my Grandchildren

TONY BENN

A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine

The Last Diaries

Selected and edited by Ruth Winstone



HUTCHINSON
LONDON

Editor's note

This, the last volume of Tony Benn's *Diaries*, opens in May 2007 with Kofi Annan inviting him to join Jimmy Carter, Richard Branson, Desmond Tutu, Peter Gabriel, Mary Robinson and other international 'Elders' at a gathering in South Africa. In July 2009 the dictated diary ceases, as Tony Benn having just had an operation muses on an uncertain future with the words 'That's all there is, for my diary, unless something sensational happens tonight.'

Because these years are so full of personal reflections by Tony in his eighties – on ageing, on failing health, on widowerhood – as well as a record of dramatic and unexpected political and social developments, I have kept the editing to a minimum, retaining, I hope, the personality of the diarist as he dictated, sometimes falteringly. I have also left uncut a greater proportion than usual of the original text, to give the reader a fuller picture of Tony Benn's life as he approaches the 'autumn sunshine'.

The latter part of the book is a reconstruction by him of the period July 2009 to the present, with his insights of a personal and political nature on these extraordinary times.

As ever the book could not have been completed without the work of Alison McPherson, who has transcribed millions of words with great empathy, the copy-editing of Mandy Greenfield on whom I relied so much this time, and the editorial advice of Emma Mitchell of Hutchinson. Georgina Manley stepped in to assist at the early stages of the editing during my mother's illness and death in 2012, and Lucy Quinn and Laura Rohde helped to research, correct and edit the account of the latter years 2009-2013 which Tony Benn had to reconstruct from memory.

It has been a great privilege to be associated with the *Diaries* over the course of twenty-seven years and to count myself one of Tony's closest friends.

Ruth Winston
June 2013

Illustrations

- 1 On the set of *Will and Testament* at Ealing Studios
- 2 Filming at the House of Commons
- 3 Tony through the lens at Ealing Studios
- 4 On the set of a recreation of Tony's office
- 5 Headlines on set for the film *Will and Testament*
- 6 On location for *Will and Testament* with Michael Miles and Mervyn Gerrard
- 7 Tolpuddle Martyrs plate
- 8 Make Tea Not War mug
- 9 40th anniversary of the Welfare State plate
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- 2 With Ruth Winstone and Tony Whittome
- 3 Tony handling a racing pigeon
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- 5 At University of Lincoln
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- 7 With his brother David
- 8 With family and friends in the empty family home
- 9 With his children Joshua, Melissa, Hilary and Stephen
- 0 With his only daughter Melissa

Who's who

Caroline Wedgwood Benn (Pixie) (wife of Tony Benn) d. 2000

Children

Stephen Benn (m. Nita Clarke)

Hilary Benn (m. Sally Clark)

Melissa Benn (Lissie) (m. Paul Gordon)

Joshua Benn (Josh)

Grandchildren

Michael (m. Penny Brough)

James (m. Dr Blake Pritchard)

William

Jonathan (m. Zohreh Khairoidin)

Caroline

Emily

Daniel

Hannah

Sarah

Other Family

BENN, David Brother, b. 1928

BENN, Piers Son of David and June Benn

NESTOR,
Frances Daughter of David and June Benn

NESTOR,
Michael Husband of Frances Nestor

NESTOR,
Michael (Little Michael) Son of Frances and Michael Nestor

Friends and colleagues

BAILEY, Roy Retired professor, folk singer

BICKERSTAFFE,
Rodney Former General Secretary of UNISON, President of War on Want

BRAGG, Billy Musician and political activist

BURROWS,
Saffron Actress, political activist

BUTLER, David Political historian

BYRNE, Tony Builder

CAMPBELL,
Barbara Helped care for Caroline during her illness and continued to help TB

CARTER, Peter Architect, close friend of Caroline and the family (known as PC)

CORSTON, (Jean Corston) Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party; former MP for Bristol

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Baroness East | |
| GABRIEL, Peter | Musician and activist |
| GERMAN, Lindsey | Leading campaigner of the Stop the War Movement and coalition of Resistance |
| GRICE, John | TB's driver |
| HERBERT, Grahame | Architect, designer of the 'Seat Case' |
| KAPLINSKY, Natasha | Television presenter |
| McDONNELL, John | Labour MP for Hayes and Harlington |
| MILIBAND, David | Labour Minister for Education and Skills; Secretary of State for the Environment and Rural Affairs; Foreign Secretary |
| MILIBAND, Edward | Leader of the Labour Party |
| MILIBAND, Marion | Socialist writer, mother of David and Edward, widow of Ralph Miliband |
| MITCHELL, Emma | Publicity director and associate editorial director, Hutchinson, Random House |
| MULLIN, Chris | MP for Sunderland South 1987–2010; Minister in Departments of Environment, International Development and Foreign Office |
| REES, John | Leading campaigner of the Stop the War Movement and Coalition of Resistance |
| SHALLICE, Jane | Former deputy head, Holland Park School |
| SILVERTON, Kate | Journalist and presenter |
| SIMPSON, Alan | Labour MP for Nottingham South 1992–2010 |
| WHITTOME, Tony | Editorial director, Hutchinson, Random House |
| WILLSMER, Basil | Long-time family friend; Essex builder. Died 2009 |
| WINSTONE, Ruth | Editor of the Benn Diaries since 1985; senior clerk, House of Commons; close friend |
| <i>Political figures</i> | |
| ANNAN, Kofi | Secretary General of the UN |
| BLAIR, Tony | Prime Minister 1997–2007, Labour MP for Sedgefield |
| BROWN, Gordon | Prime Minister 2007–2010, Chancellor of the Exchequer 1997–2007 |
| CAMERON, David | Conservative Prime Minister 2010– |
| CAMPBELL, Alastair | Prime Minister's Official Spokesman 1997–2003 |
| CLEGG, Nick | Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister, 2010 – |
| HAYES, Billy | General Secretary, Communication Workers' Union |

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| MAJOR, John | Conservative Prime Minister 1990–1997 |
| MANDELSON, Lord | (Peter Mandelson) Former Labour MP, Cabinet Minister and EU Commissioner |
| REID, John | Secretary of State for Scotland, Northern Ireland, Health, Defence, Home Secretary |
| SHORT, Clare | Secretary of State for International Development |
| STRAW, Jack | Home Secretary; Foreign Secretary; Leader of the House of Lords 1997–2007; Lord Chancellor |
| THATCHER, Baroness | Conservative Prime Minister 1979–1990 |
| WOODLEY, Tony | General Secretary, TGWU (part of UNITE) |

Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|--|
| AIPAC | American–Israeli Public Affairs Committee |
| ARP | Air Raid Precautions |
| BNP | British National Party |
| CAP | Common Agricultural Policy |
| CBI | Confederation of British Industry |
| CIA | Central Intelligence Agency |
| CND | Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament |
| CWU | Communication Workers’ Union |
| Defra | Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs |
| DFID | Department for International Development |
| FBU | Fire Brigades’ Union |
| GMB | General Municipal and Boilermakers (Union) |
| LAP | Labour Action for Peace |
| LSE | London School of Economics |
| NEC | National Executive Committee |
| NFU | National Farmers’ Union |
| NUM | National Union of Mineworkers |
| PCS | Public and Commercial Services Union |
| PKK | Kurdish Workers’ Party |
| SWP | Socialist Workers’ Party |
| TGWU | Transport and General Workers’ Union (now part of UNITE the Union) |
| TUC | Trades Union Congress |
| UKIP | United Kingdom Independence Party |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNISON | The public service union |
| UNRRA | United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration |
| WBAI | American listener-supported radio station based in New York |

Foreword

Concluding his penultimate diaries, Tony Benn wrote in July 2007:

When my dad was my age, in 1958, just before he died, I took my eldest two boys to parliament to be with their grandfather. In a broadcast describing his political and family life for the BBC, my dad ended with these words, 'So you will understand that I live in a blaze of autumn sunshine.' I too am enjoying that autumn sunshine now with my grandchildren, and although I may never publish another volume of diaries, if I ever did, I think the best possible title would be just that: *A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine*.

Tony has had the good fortune to see *A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine* in print, but it is a book of two halves which needs some explanation. From June 2007, when the previous volume ended as the premiership moved from Blair to Brown, until July 2009, Benn continued his life-long habit of recording events in his own life, in parliament, in Britain and on the international stage. These included his participation in the early formation of the 'Elders', his presidency of the Stop the War movement and his patronage of a number of campaigning groups at home. He also maintained a busy schedule of meetings and lectures. The two years were dominated by the banking collapses which precipitated a wider international debt crisis affecting the Western world.

In July 2009, Tony Benn suffered a health collapse and, at the age of eighty-four, after sixty-nine years of writing, typing or dictating almost every day, he stopped keeping his diary altogether although, once recovered, he continued to maintain a formidable programme of public engagements. Further highly significant changes and dramatic events occurred both in Tony Benn's own life and in the world at large between July 2009 and the present year, 2013, and these are recalled in the latter part of the book.

Chapter One

May–October 2007: Brown’s honeymoon

Friday 11 May 2007

While I was snoozing, Kofi Annan rang. He said he very much hoped I would be able to come to Africa at the end of May. I had previously had a phone call from Richard Branson about a meeting of the ‘Elders’ in South Africa, but with no other details. Mandela’s going, Carter’s going, Mary Robinson’s going, and also somebody called Hernando de Soto Polar, a right-wing economist. Oh, Desmond Tutu is also going to be there, so it is very tempting.

To the Victoria and Albert Museum, where I gave lecture on slavery. Huge attendance! It’s a maze going round all the stuff that had been stolen from our colonies!

Three young women drove me home, in a tiny little French car.

So, there we are – that’s the first day of my new diary: *A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine*.

Monday 14 May

Up at six, after a good eight hours in bed.

Ruth Winstone suggested that Josh should come to South Africa with me.

I decided to write to Gordon Brown enclosing a draft legislation, which I introduced twenty years ago, that would transfer all the royal prerogatives to the House of Commons. Among the sponsors in 1987 was Dawn Primarolo, who is of course Brown’s Financial Secretary to the Treasury. I also sent copy to Ed Miliband, and referred in my letter to Gordon to the fact that Ed had worked in *my* office as a young student twenty years ago.

Josh is very happy to come to South Africa.

Tuesday 15 May

I did receive, in the course of the day, a formal invitation from Richard Branson and Peter Gabriel to go the founding meeting of the Elders’ conference. I must say, it’s a wonderful opportunity to meet Carter and Mandela, Tutu and Mary Robinson, and King Hussein of Jordan. I’m getting quite excited about it.

In the evening, I went by taxi to the Soho Hotel to see a film called *Taking Liberties*. Michael Mansfield and Shami Chakrabarti were there. It was a wonderful film, amusing in the way it was presented, but terrifying – it was the Blair legacy. It made my blood run cold watching how all our civil liberties have been eroded.

Wednesday 16 May

There was a rattle on the basement door, and I opened it up and there was Saffron Burrows! So I gave her a huge hug, and then another hug, and then a kiss and another hug, and she gave me a hug. She said she was going to the Cannes Film Festival and would be back next week, and hoped to see me before I went to South Africa, so I hope that will be done. She’s so sweet, I must say!

Thursday 17 May

A mass of papers were emailed through about the Elders – I thought my printer was going to run out. This organisation has been planned for years, so the idea that I thought of it first is an illusion. I’m only an adviser, I’m not one of the Elders themselves, but I wouldn’t be sorry if they let me in on the

discussions.

Of course what I also realise is that it's a very high-level group and it has a top-down perspective of the world, whereas my contribution – in so far as it's of any value – will be more historical, philosophical, religious and visionary, and I don't know how easily it's going to fit in. They've sent briefings on Darfur, on Zimbabwe and all sorts of other things.

In the evening, I finished picking twelve items for *With Great Pleasure*, which is going to be broadcast on 13 June on Radio 4.

My God, I have a heavy programme! Whoo! I just hope my health stands up. I've got to go and have my pacemaker checked next week, and if the hospital veto the trip, then it's off.

Saturday 19 May

Jimmy Carter, in a BBC broadcast today, described Blair as 'abominable'. Of course, yesterday or the day before Blair was in Washington, receiving a warm tribute from Bush – so humiliating for everybody! I think he's overdone it. I think he's turning people off, and now he has no patronage, no authority; I think it's the beginning of the end of Blairites – he won't find many of them soon.

Up at 5.45, was collected at 7.30 and taken to Burford. I arrived there early, talked to a few people, and then there was the interment of Alan Hicks's ashes in the churchyard. Alan Hicks was a factory worker, went into the army, was captured, was used as slave labour (working in Germany for IG Farben, who made the equipment used in the Holocaust), then came back, became active in the Workers' Educational Association. He is a keen member of CND; at the heart of the Levellers' movement when it started again in 1975; he ended up with a BA from Oxford Brookes. His wife, Hazel, was at the church. It was a lovely family event – I said a word or two.

I was freezing cold. There were rain showers in Burford and I hadn't taken a coat, or hat. I was also very hungry, so when I got back I had a huge meal, turned on all the heaters and tried to have a bit of sleep for half an hour.

Oh, Kofi Annan rang this afternoon and said, 'Is everything all right for Africa?' so I had a lovely talk to him.

Sunday 20 May

Not a word in *The Sunday Times* about the fact that Jimmy Carter said yesterday that Blair's support for Bush was abominable.

Monday 21 May

Bad, troubled night.

It's a nightmarish time for the next few days: hospital, a lecture, then a broadcast tomorrow; on Wednesday up to Southport to speak to the prison officers, plus a lecture (on 'Living after seventy' – want to make it thoughtful, but I haven't had time to think about it yet). On Friday I'm off to South Africa ...

Josh and I are planning the trip. He rang round a number of insurance companies to see if he could get me insurance, but when he told them I had chronic leukaemia and that I had a pacemaker, they said 'uninsurable'. Age Concern wouldn't insure me! In the end he found an insurance company that would give me year-long insurance for £1,800 or something, but wouldn't cover me if I had a heart attack or died of cancer. So I am now uninsurable! It was what you might call a reminder, by means of market forces, that I am legally almost dead.

Tuesday 22 May

Took a 148 bus to the House of Commons and was so early that I had time to have a cup of tea on the

Terrace, before going over to St Thomas's for my pacemaker check. They adjusted it a little bit. The registrar said there was a bit of a risk, with high blood pressure and high cholesterol, of a stroke. We discussed medicines like warfarin, but they didn't want to give it to me before I went to Africa.

Friday 25 May, visit to the 'Elders', South Africa

We were greeted at Heathrow airport by a young Virgin official called Nyree, who took Josh and me to the Clubhouse in Terminal 3. The cabin was called Upper Class: it had beds, and Josh and I were next to each other. He was immensely helpful, sorting me out, and then the air hostesses starting coming round with everything you could want. One young woman, absolutely immaculate, said, 'I'm your therapist', so I said, 'Thank you very much, but I'm fine.' By eleven o'clock I was sound asleep. The fact that I had a proper bed meant there was no strain from the travelling at all.

Saturday 26 May

Arrived at Johannesburg, and met again by someone from Virgin. Taken to a little, federal airport, and caught a flight, in a twin-engined jet, which landed at an airstrip where we had to get out and wait. Then another little plane came in, this time with a single engine, and flew us to the airstrip at the game reserve – Richard Branson's land – which is called Ulusaba.

Discovered, when we arrived there, that Nelson Mandela had left that morning and that I'd only missed him by a matter of hours – that's a pity.

First we sat in a round-table arrangement, and Archbishop Tutu led a discussion about the Elders' project: whether they should go to Darfur, intervene in Zimbabwe, and so on – all sorts of issues. I said something about nuclear power – I forget what it was now. Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland, was there; and Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States.

Then we were driven to Rocky Lodge, up a huge hill, and had dinner (with an African woman singing in the background). I sat with Richard Branson and Peter Gabriel (who lives round the corner from me in London), and with Carter and Tutu. After dinner we just talked about things generally. It really was a fantastic day, and to think it started about midnight in London and ended here, in Africa!

Sunday 27 May

Up at about quarter-past five and went on a game drive, in a little open-topped jeep. We saw lots of animals: impalas (look like little deer), antelopes, hippos submerged in water, a beautiful lioness – would be about five years old – sitting watching wildebeest, which looked so thin. The lion began approaching them and they began to scatter. Spectacular!

Then we got back, and at eight o'clock there was a service led by Desmond Tutu in the hotel. He conducted it in a very informal way, with lots of jokes, and took the Bible round for people to read from. Carter read one bit. Then we had bread and wine, and an African woman sang a song, (the same woman who had sung at the dinner last night). Afterwards, everybody hugged – it was quite happy-clappy (except Desmond Tutu is much more serious than that).

At breakfast I sat next to a Professor Kiang from Beijing University. It was very interesting, talking about China and capitalism. He himself is a Buddhist. Seventy per cent of the wealth in China is now owned by 4 per cent of the people – it's a real capitalist country. But, he said, socialism is coming back, through young people. They are now beginning to complain about the inequalities.

At 10 a.m., we had Kofi Annan address us on a video link. He said the Elders may be attacked for what they do, and that we've got to contact the real players, who are not necessarily the most important people; that we've got to make the case for the Elders, and to choose members very carefully. I intervened a few times and said that we're looking for self-government for the world. I talked a little bit about the history of Zimbabwe, and said we must be prepared to speak to everybody

We had a report by Ray Chambers, who is one of the (very wealthy) founders. He was talking about the need for a strategic plan. A woman told us that McKinsey were advising us.

We had a long presentation on Darfur by Gayle Smith, who had worked in Africa for twenty years and was an adviser to Clinton. She said it's partly a tribal conflict, partly a conflict between central power and local power, partly a conflict between the farmers who find their farms being eroded by the nomads, and partly because the central government is so awful.

The question of China and its interest in oil came up. Then Zimbabwe. Obviously the Elders want to get rid of Mugabe. That came out quite clearly in the video we saw yesterday.

We then came to Burma, and Desmond Tutu raised the question of Aung San Suu Kyi, and burst into tears. He obviously knew her very well. We came on to the Nigerian elections, and a young Nigerian man spoke. He stressed the importance of African leadership, that African institutions should be taking the lead, which I agree with of course.

The Middle East: Carter, who has played an active part there, intervening all the time, said that we must talk to Hamas. It is a scandal that since Hamas was freely elected in Gaza in 2006 (his own Carter Centre verifying that the elections were free and fair) the Middle East Quartet – the UN, the US, the EU and Russia – had refused to recognise the elections. The Elders must intervene.

Then we had lunch, and I was put at the Elders' table. Actually, it wasn't just Elders. I sat opposite Richard Branson.

About six o'clock we went over, in the Land Rovers, to have dinner in the bush. We drove for ages and then came to an area where all the trees had lights in them and there were masses of tables with heaters over them. There were African drummers and dancers – a tremendous noise – and it was a sort of glorified global barbecue!

I had a word with Scilla Elworthy, whom I have met before, a very nice woman, and she discussed with me the appointment of new Elders and gave me a little handbook of all the potential Elders and, to my delight, I was listed there. I was pleased about that.

After dinner, Josh and I came back and went to bed.

Monday 28 May

Josh went off on the game drive this morning, and he saw leopards and rhinos. I stayed back because I had to pack, and I wanted to prepare my final points.

Had breakfast at 8.45 with Jimmy Carter and Mary Robinson. I mentioned to Carter how my officials at the Energy Department had been very suspicious of his strict attitude to proliferation, and that I was very much on his side. I told him about materials supplied to Israel without my knowledge and about the way in which our plutonium had gone to the Pentagon for their nuclear-weapons programme, and so on.

Just before the session began at 9.30 I said to Desmond Tutu, 'If there's a chance of allowing me to say something, I'd like to.' He said my request was registered.

Then, at 9.35, Jean Oelwang (Branson's organiser) and Richard described the project's plans. I'm not an Elder, though I'm on the list of possible Elders; among the other names was Oprah Winfrey, the American interviewer, who has a worldwide reputation now; and possibly Bill Clinton and Al Gore.

A discussion took place as to when the Elders could be officially announced – should it be on Human Rights Day on 10 December, or earlier, on Nelson Mandela's birthday, 18 July? If the latter, it could be in Johannesburg.

Then Carter made his contribution about the importance of the Middle East and healthcare.

Before that, Graça Machel (Nelson Mandela's wife) said, 'Whatever you do, don't oversell it', and I agree strongly with that. I said the Elders are about hope and that's enough. It will arouse great excitement, but don't be too detailed to begin with.

We went back to issues again: Israel, Zimbabwe, Darfur, Burma, Nigeria, Iran, and so on.

I took my opportunity. ‘If I may say something about the things that have moved me over the year in Rhodesia, during the war, an eighteen-year-old pilot said to an African who was sweeping the path “Voetsek!”, which is a very rude word for *Get out of the way!* The African stood up and quoted Rousseau: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” Tom Paine said, “My country is the world; my religion is to do good.” And Reinhold Niebuhr – I know President Carter is interested in Niebuhr – said: “Man’s capacity for evil makes democracy necessary, and man’s capacity for good makes democracy possible.”’

Shortly afterwards Desmond Tutu said, ‘Tony, you wanted to say something?’ I replied, ‘Archbishop, I’ve said it already.’ He said, ‘You are restored!’ Such a lovely guy.

Mary Robinson said that whatever we do, we mustn’t mention that we’re going to intervene in Zimbabwe because it would make it worse.

‘Leave Zimbabwe entirely to Kofi Annan,’ said Tutu.

Then a brief discussion of Darfur again, and Burma, and it was decided to invite Aung San Suu Kyi.

I said I thought we should consider including Mordechai Vanunu, and Tutu said, ‘We can’t take up every civil-liberties case.’ I said, ‘It’s not quite that – it is a question of his campaign on Israel’s nuclear weapons.’ Anyway it was brushed to one side.

Professor Kiang, whom I’ve got to like very much indeed, suggested that the Elders might meet in China.

Carter said that we’ve been working with Sam Nunn and Henry Kissinger on nuclear proliferation (I thought: God, is the old American Establishment being brought in!). And then, believe it or not, Richard Branson said, ‘I think I’ll have a word with Gordon Brown – I think I can persuade him to abandon Trident.’ Whoof!

Tutu called on me again, and I said, ‘Well, it is really the old question of war and peace. During the war we realised we could rebuild society by planning for peace, instead of killing Germans, and that’s how the Welfare State came about.’ Tutu said, ‘Tony, it is for that contribution that you were asked’, which was very nice of him. He said, ‘You bring such passion to it.’

There was a brief discussion about members. There are three vacancies and it was agreed that two of them should be women. It was finally agreed that the Elders would meet on 17 July in Johannesburg, on the eve of Nelson Mandela’s eighty-ninth birthday.

We had a collection for the staff, said our goodbyes and headed home.

Tuesday 29 May

We landed at Heathrow airport just after seven. Met by someone from Virgin, cleared customs and everything, and were given a limousine home.

It was really a very remarkable event. My impressions (I’ll put them down now) were, first of all, about Josh – I mean, he was fantastic! I couldn’t have done it without him, and I now realise my limitations. Virgin helped, but even so, I couldn’t have done it on my own.

But what I felt, on balance, was that it was as if I had been invited to attend a drafting committee for the Sermon on the Mount, under Archbishop Tutu, and another drafting committee on the Declaration of Independence, with Jimmy Carter.

There were a couple of funny things. I did feel that a lot of rich white men, living in a very wealthy game reserve, discussing poverty, was a bit odd – but there you are. They have the resources and, as Josh says, ‘He who pays the piper calls the tune.’ I think what will emerge from the Elders is really a sort of global House of Lords, with all their political feelings. I was almost certainly the only socialist there, although I suppose Mandela had been a socialist. But they let me take part, and of course I would be very honoured if I was made an Elder, but the main thing is actually having been there.

So, that's it – that's my Africa diary.

Wednesday 30 May

Taxi with Ruth to Paddington, and caught the 1.52 to Malvern. I left my anorak on the train and it had the lovely woolly cap Ruth gave me, in one pocket, and the red neck-scarf that Stephen gave me in the other, and I was really sorry about that, but I'll try and get it back.

Malvern was just like the railway station in *Brief Encounter* – fantastic! Anyway, from there we changed trains for Hereford and went to the Swan Hotel.

Thursday 31 May

Hay-on-Wye. Up at 5.45, had tea, breakfast and then went to give my lecture to 1,254 people.

A few photographs were taken by *The Guardian*, and then I gave a *Guardian* podcast. In the afternoon, to the live Sky TV feed: Mariella Frostrup was interviewing someone called David Crystal (who is a great expert on language) and Harry Hill (who was a doctor and is now a comedian). I was asked to pick two books that I hadn't read and would like to, so I chose *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel and *Small Island* by Andrea Levy. Ruth had briefed me on them, of course.

Then we were driven to Hereford, caught the train to Newport, and from there missed the London train by two minutes. As we waited in Newport, lots of people came up – for example, a lawyer who'd written to me years ago about Chomsky and Niebuhr. Then an older man, who said his wife had been to some of my lectures ... quite a few encounters like that.

Tomorrow Hilary and I are doing a joint interview with *The Observer*, and I've agreed to do an interview with Chomsky over a satellite link, at Loughborough University.

Friday 1 June

The Observer interview was at 9.30, and Hilary and I talked about our family influences and then moved on to how politics really worked. At the end we discussed Iraq.

Took the train to Loughborough and was met by Will Learmonth, a very imaginative twenty-six-year-old who had arranged this link-up with Noam Chomsky. I sat in a chair in Loughborough and Chomsky sat in a chair in New York, and we could hear each other quite clearly. In the course of the hour I had about one-third of the time, because he spoke at great length. I didn't disagree with him, but I added dimensions that he'd left out and made points that I wanted to make. As we approached the hour, I had to chip in to thank him very much and call it off. He treated me as a distinguished professor might treat an intelligent student who keeps interrupting. But I think it was worthwhile. I think it was a great success actually. I think either Al Jazeera or Channel 4 will take it.

It's been a killing programme for eight days really – an incredible week. I'm absolutely whacked!

Sunday 3 June

I had nine or ten hours' sleep.

Thursday 7 June

I prepared for *Question Time*, which I'm doing in Truro tonight. I hate doing it at short notice, because I don't have time to do all my research. They pay £150, and since it takes about twenty-four hours' preparation and travel, it's only just about the rate of the minimum wage! So I might mention that to David Dimbleby.

Well, I worked at home, and then was picked up and taken to the station to catch the 2.05 train to Truro, which arrived at 6.44 – that's four and three-quarter hours, but it was a lovely journey through the West Country. A beautiful day, through Taunton, Exeter, St Austell and Plymouth. On the train I

met Julia Goldsworthy, the Liberal Democrat MP for Falmouth and Camborne, a bright, young, not particularly radical Liberal.

On the panel: Melanie Phillips (journalist and author), Francis Maude (Chairman of the Conservative Party) and Boris Berezovsky (one of the Russian oligarchs; he was allowed by Yeltsin to buy state assets for a song, became a multi-multimillionaire and used the money to fund Yeltsin's election victory, then Putin's election victory; he fell out with Putin, successfully applied for asylum in the UK, and has recently called for a coup to oust Putin.)^{fn1} So that was the panel!

I had rightly guessed all the questions: on the new Cold War, on the Olympic logo, on terror laws, on Britishness and on the environment, and I did quite well.

Came back on the 10.44 sleeper.

Friday 8 June

Arrived at Paddington about 5.30 a.m. There was to have been a BBC car, but it didn't turn up, and so I caught a cab home and went to bed for two hours, I was so tired.

Saturday 9 June

I have bad backache and I'm exhausted. I wonder whether it's psychological?

I caught the bus to Central Hall Westminster, for the Compass conference. Compass is a sort of left-wing, soft-left Fabian Society group that has attracted the attention of a lot of people in the centre of the Party, though not the so-called hard-left or the Stop the War Coalition. It indicates that there is, within the Party, an unease about New Labour.

So I went along, wondering what it was about. There were 1,000 people there, and I attended two fringes.

I went first to the Demos fringe meeting, in a little room in Central Hall. Demos is made up of the old *Marxism Today* ex-communists, who were very right-wing and opened the way for Blair and all that. It was an absolutely packed meeting. The other speaker was Salma Yaqoob, who is a psychotherapist in Birmingham, a councillor for the Respect Party. I like Salma very much indeed, and we had a bit of a talk. There were the two of us, and one other guy from, I think, Demos speaking and it was just an open discussion. I argued that you had to make the UN democratic.

It was very good, and from there I went to the *Labour Left Briefing* fringe; John McDonnell was there and made a fine speech; he was ready to listen, and not hard-left at all.

I had taken a little stool with me, because I simply can't stand any more. I found, at the very first meeting, that there weren't enough chairs, so I sat on my stool, fell over and banged my arm on the radiator. I used my stool again later when I had to wait for the 148 bus on Victoria Street to Notting Hill Gate.

I've had some stuff from the Labour Party – no mention of 'New Labour' now, just the Labour Party. I think that phrase will sink with Blair. You never know. Parliament is the buckle between the people and the law, and the Labour Party is the buckle between progressive people and their representatives in Parliament. Both those buckles seem to be strengthening a bit. I mean, with the Tories calling for a written constitution, which I've already provided, and with the Tories and the Labour Party wanting to deal with the royal prerogatives, which I had also dealt with in a draft bill, I feel that those little acorns that I planted years ago are beginning to appear as ... as oak trees.

Monday 11 June

I'm not sleeping, but I relaxed a bit yesterday.

Went to see Dr Pettifer for blood tests, and she said my blood pressure was now normal, which is good news. Later on I did a radio interview on ageing.

Tuesday 12 June

Jonathan was here from ten till two in the afternoon – we had a lovely talk! He has had very good results from university. He just wanted to talk about his work, how he's getting on. He told me that someone had asked him, 'What class are you?' And he said, 'I'm a member of the thinking class', which I thought was a smashing answer!

Friday 15 June

Blow me down, an email came through today saying that, in Johannesburg, the Elders were launched by Mandela, Carter, Tutu and Kofi Annan. I had no notification of it at all, and Josh's instinct was correct – I wasn't the right person for it. I'm glad I had a view of it. They are very, very rich ... Richard Branson, a billionaire, and Peter Gabriel, a great pop star. They've apparently raised £18 million to keep it going for three years.

I went through the legal report on *The Diaries*. The lawyer, Roger Field, had removed a lot of abuse that I'd put in, and I realised – reading it all – that I'm an angry old man. I have been very abusive, and despite all I say about not making personal attacks, my diary is full of them: 'he's an awful man', 'I loathe him', 'he's pompous', 'he's arrogant'. So the libel lawyer has done me a good turn in making the diary ... well, much kinder.

Sunday 17 June

Baddish back, took some ibuprofen. Felt a bit gloomy and depressed all day.

Cleared my emails and spoke to Lissie, Josh and Steve.

Today is the fifty-eighth anniversary of my wedding ... fifty-eighth anniversary – I can't believe I married Caroline nearly sixty years ago. As I've put in my diary before, what is so strange is that my life was divided: divided first between the time before I was married and the time after I married. Now, it's divided between the time before I was married, the time after I married, and the time since Caroline died. It's strange ... very strange.

Anyway, it's a boring entry, this Sunday, but that's what life's sometimes like.

Monday 18 June

At about twenty to eight I took a cab to the Serpentine Gallery, because I'd been asked to Tina Brown's party. (Tina had come to see me, last year, I think, when she was writing a book on Diana. I don't know why she wanted my contribution, but anyway.) I had read that the party was going to be a big celebrity affair, so I had some doubts about going ... When I arrived there was a battery of photographers outside. At the moment I turned up there was a model parading as she went in, so I managed to jump in without turning to face the cameras.

It was crammed with just the sort of people I don't like. Three gossip columnists came up and asked why I was there. Who else was there? William Rees-Mogg, the former Editor of *The Times*, and Melvyn Bragg ... just tons of celebrities. I hope there aren't any photographs of me in the papers tomorrow – it's the last thing I want to be seen doing!

Wednesday 20 June

Up at 5.25 and caught the Oxford Tube at 7.15 for Jimmy Carter's honorary doctorate ceremony. Michael Carmichael was in Oxford. I'd only met him once before, an American, very active in Democrats Abroad. He's campaigned for ... ooh, every Democratic candidate since the Sixties, I would think. He's working with Dennis Kucinich.

Just before eleven we went to All Souls and were met by Fraser Campbell, who had invited me, then to the Sheldonian Theatre for the Encaenia (the annual awarding of honorary degrees). Outside were

lot of animal-rights protesters shouting.

I hadn't been in the Sheldonian for about sixty-five years – I think the last time was when I got an MA that my mum bought me!

Chris Patten is the Chancellor, now that Roy Jenkins is dead. There was a huge ceremony, and Carter came in, in a red robe, looking very distinguished. The tribute to him was read in Latin, and Patten awarded him the degree in Latin (although all the English was printed alongside). I found it a bit boring actually. It reminded me of the House of Commons, although at least we do speak in English ... institutions love all that ceremonial stuff.

Outside, when it was all over, I thought I'd go and have a word with the animal-rights protesters. I walked up and down and shook hands with quite a few of them, and asked if they knew about Safer Medicines, and of course they did, and I think some of them remembered the fact that, a couple of years ago, I chaired a meeting on animal experimentation in Oxford.

Then we went over to All Souls for lunch. By this time it was quite sunny (there were a few drips of rain earlier) – all of the academics and honorary graduates standing in the Quadrangle in their bright robes in the sunshine.

Anyway, I saw William Waldegrave, John Redwood and Lord Butler. At lunch, to my amazement, had been put on Carter's right. He remembered being together at the Elders' conference in South Africa. He said that there's no doubt whatsoever that the 2000 election had been fixed in Florida, and Bush didn't win. He talked about his relations with Jim Callaghan, and how he liked him, but didn't get on so well with Thatcher.

I asked him whether he would be prepared to endorse any Democratic candidate this time, and he said: no, except for Al Gore, who I don't think is going to stand. I wondered whether he might agree to endorse Dennis Kucinich, but he said: no, though he knows him and talks to him from time to time.

I then asked him about Michael Moore, who is making the film *Sicko*. I think he'd met Moore. He certainly said he'd met Hugo Chávez. And then we talked about how authoritarian tendencies develop even in progressive groups.

I asked about the Elders. I said I thought that perhaps their main function was to open up channels of communication. They couldn't be an alternative government. But 'What have they achieved?' he asked. I agreed that's the problem, and we've got to try to lubricate the process of diplomacy. I put to him the idea that people who have held high office and were free had 'graduated' to becoming citizens of the world.

I asked about Gorbachev, and he said that Mandela thinks he let his country down.

We're only six months apart in age. I entered politics in 1950, and he didn't get in till '63; but Carter went to the top of the most powerful country in the world. As we left, Rosalynn Carter, his wife, made a special point of leaning over to shake me by the hand across the table. 'How very nice to see you again,' I said (we had met in South Africa).

If it weren't for Carter, I wouldn't have dreamed of going to Oxford for the Encaenia. I am glad I did – it was such an enjoyable day.

Thursday 21 June

Gordon Brown has offered Paddy Ashdown the job of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in his government. Well, first of all, there already is a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Hain, and to hear your job being offered to somebody else is a bit much. Secondly, Paddy Ashdown is a Liberal. It's all very well Brown saying he wants a government of all the talents, but for heaven's sake, if you vote Labour, you expect a Labour government, and Brown has a huge majority! I mean, if we had lost the election and it was a hung parliament, it would be a different matter, but what sort of sense does it make of democracy if you vote for one party and are governed by somebody from

another party? It's a complete mockery! Of course, what it's done is to infuriate the Liberals. Menzies Campbell, the Liberal Leader – who had been talking to Brown (which I think was a funny thing to do anyway), then said he wouldn't cooperate – discovers that Brown has offered a Cabinet job to one of his leading figures. So I think if that's Gordon Brown, then he has no political sense at all – he's in deep, deep trouble.

I think that's pretty well the end of ... oh no, it isn't quite the end!

The last EU Summit that Blair will attend is taking place. They're trying desperately to get through this European constitution (which was defeated in France and Holland, at the last referenda), by calling it treaty *amendments*. The Poles are hostile to it, and said today that one of their objections was that Poland had fewer votes than Germany – Germany having killed so many Poles during the War. Well, that has infuriated the Germans and everybody else!

Saturday 23 June

In the early hours Blair, predictably, agreed to the modified European constitution, on the grounds that all his points had been met – *his* points, I might add! – about a charter of rights, voting, foreign policy and so on. And then Gordon Brown said, 'Oh, we're not having a referendum – all our points have been met.' All of *his* points have been met! So all this talk about consulting people is ridiculous, and the Tory Party has, quite properly, come out in favour of a referendum. I shall give full support for that campaign. If Brown wants, and Blair wants, the European treaty, well, they should vote for the bloody thing, not tell us that because they're satisfied we can't have a view. Fundamentally undemocratic! It makes me really angry.

So anyway, that's the next stage ... a decision on our relations with Europe. I shall throw myself into that, because democracy is being snuffed out. The idea that we'll have a President of Europe we haven't elected, a Foreign Minister for Europe we haven't elected ... Britain's been reduced to a local authority!

So, that's the end of Saturday 23 June, which of course is the anniversary of my brother Mike's death in 1944 – sixty-three years ago. He'd have been eighty-five, bless his heart, nearly eighty-six, probably a retired bishop, and if he'd lived, of course, he would have inherited the peerage, so my life would have been wholly different. What a wonderful guy he was ... I spoke to Dave, as I always do on these matters.

Sunday 24 June

Up at half-past six, took a cab to Paddington and got the train to Castle Cary, where I was met by the trade unionist Geoff Martin, who drove me to Glastonbury. He told me that a hundred-year-old Spanish Civil War veteran had come to the festival and been carried in on a stretcher. Whether he'd made a speech or not, I don't know.

Glastonbury's always fantastic. It had been pelting with rain, and the mud was up to my ankles. I'm so glad I took my wellington boots.

The thing about Glastonbury is that 175,000 people turn up and they're all themselves ... it's really the re-creation of the old folk-festival atmosphere, so I love going, and I had three meetings to do.

The first one was 'Another World is Possible', and it was Frances O'Grady, Deputy General Secretary of the TUC, who took the chair. I hadn't prepared any notes, but I'd been thinking about it, and I must say it went down extremely well.

In the second speech at the Left Field I was alone on the platform, talking about weapons of mass destruction. After that I wandered around a bit, and met Kate Silverton of the BBC. She also conducted a little interview with me, which Dave told me he saw on BBC News 24. She asked me, 'What do you think Brown will do?' and I said, 'Well, the important thing is: what are we going to

do?’ The whole atmosphere there is exciting. It’s a sort of permanent rallying cry of the people.

I was picked up and driven halfway across the muddy fields to the Green Tent – a little tent, only about eighty people there, including Michael Eavis, who owns Glastonbury. I had a brief word with him, and I spoke there and had questions and answers. One woman shrieked that Blair should be put on trial for war crimes, and I said, ‘I’m not in favour of war-crimes tribunals – I’m in favour of truth and reconciliation.’ So she shrieked at me and stamped out. Anyway, that was the only nasty thing in the whole day, and it wasn’t particularly nasty.

Old friends from Appledore Shipyard were there, and tons of people came up and said: I met you here, I met you there, years ago, did this and that; and it was very agreeable. I loved it!

Then I was driven from the Green Field to Castle Cary. A pack of people was there, including two girls with hoses and brooms wiping mud off people’s wellington boots before they boarded the train, which was nice.

Back to Paddington, taxi home.

Josh rang. He thought that this deal over Europe would almost certainly mean that Blair would become the first President of Europe, in which case he’d be the unelected President of Europe, still senior to Brown, who would be the unelected Prime Minister of a country where there was no referendum on the proposal. Josh is very shrewd, politically.

Wednesday 27 June

Tony Blair’s last Prime Minister’s Questions: I found it a bit revolting. He’s as competent as ever – the lawyer with his brief – but it was less controversial because everybody paid tribute to him; and at the end, as he left the House, everybody stood and clapped and gave him a standing ovation, which I’ve never seen before in Parliament. But still, that’s that.

Just as that finished, Lissie turned up, bless her heart. We went out to Marks & Spencer, bought lunch and came back and watched the TV. You saw Blair going to Buckingham Palace and resigning, with a scene outside Number 10 Downing Street as he left. You saw Brown thanking the Treasury and going to Buckingham Palace, staying for a long time and coming back. Then Brown went back to Downing Street – no cheering crowds, just himself and Sarah, his wife. He said that he’d do his utmost and he would be resolute, and then he went in.

Brown talks about a government of all the talents. He tried of course to get Paddy Ashdown, the former Liberal Leader, to be Northern Ireland Secretary, and later today he apparently had a talk with Shirley Williams.

Then I thought I ought to go to the House of Commons for the Campaign Group, of which I am still a member. The first item was a report from Pete Firmin of the Communication Workers’ Union, on the industrial action at Royal Mail. I was told that TNT and these other private contractors, who are only interested of course in central areas, are still requiring the Royal Mail to deliver their stuff, even though they’re their competitors, and of course they pay lower wages, so they’re trying to cut the wages of the Royal Mail staff in order to bring them down to the level of these private contractors, who don’t have to meet requirements to deliver in Orkney and Shetland and down in Cornwall. It’s an absolute outrage!

I said I thought the Government had decided to destroy the Royal Mail, and that I feel very strongly they should get their case across to the public as far as possible, using leaflets and publicity.

There was quite a bit of speculation about Brown calling an early election.

Then the question came up as to what will happen to the left. Somebody said, and I think they may well be right, that Gordon Brown may discipline left MPs who vote against the Government.

If the economy goes wrong in a big way, I can imagine a screaming British National Party, which is anti-Europe and has a certain appeal with the anti-immigration lot; and a left that is as divided as the

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