

junior's duties at the meeting seem to be to ensure that the 'Do Not Disturb' notice is in position and to hand out any paperwork – distributing it strictly according to hierarchical ranking.

The Deputy chairs the first half of the meeting, 'the housekeeping':

1. Bench changes. At all times when the House is sitting there has to be a whip on the government front bench. There's a rota, but you can swap if you need to.
2. Business of the day. Each whip looks after the business of one or more departments (mine is to be Environment) so if it's your department's 'business' that day you're supposed to know all about it and tell the team what to expect.
3. Committees. There are a dozen (and more) backbench committees every day. One of us is supposed to be in attendance at each of them. (Most of these committees are a disgrace – attended by the chairman, secretary and a couple of loners with nowhere else to go. A distinguished visitor turns up expecting to address a House of Commons committee and finds himself exchanging pleasantries with half a dozen nonentities. The system is dying on its feet. When I first attended the Backbench Treasury Committee there were twenty or so in regular attendance. I went last week and three turned up. Simon Coombs had some bigwig from British Airways or the BTA on parade at the Tourism Committee and, apart from Simon and the whip, nobody showed.)
4. Voting lists. The pairing whip tells us who failed to vote in yesterday's divisions without being slipped or registering a pair and if it's one of ours we have to seek them out and find out what happened. (Each whip has a card listing his charges. It's done on a regional basis. I'm looking after the north-west.)

About twenty minutes into the meeting, the Chief arrives. He clambors over the outstretched legs of the junior whips and makes his way to his 'chair', facing the Deputy. In his hand he has the 'whips' notes' which he proceeds to read out loud. This, I understand, is as close as we get to the fabled Black Book. There's a huge old-fashioned safe in the corner of the office. Inside the safe are a couple of notebooks. Whips are expected to use them to record any 'intelligence' that may be of interest as concisely as possible. There's a top copy which is torn out for the Chief to read out. The carbon remains in the notebook. I get the impression (early days) that the notes are to gauge general mood (tittle-tattle from the Tea Room): any *significant* information should be taken to the Deputy in the first instance. He will then decide whither it goes...

BREAKING THE CODE

the Social Market Foundation – to the heart of government inside a year. He has walked right into Downing Street – and been welcomed with open arms – not just because he is so good (and has the knack of making bright ideas accessible to politicians), but also because there was no one else there. You would have thought that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom would be surrounded by the brightest and best minds in the land. He isn't. There is an intellectual vacuum at the heart of government – so we have to be thankful there are the likes of David and Danny on hand, ready, willing and able to fill it. And I have to be thankful that these chaps are my chums.

LATER

Fall-out from David's resignation:

1. A new policy on whips' notes. David only ended up in this mess because his note to the Chief was kept on file. There seems to be a dispute as to who has legitimate claim on messages sent to the Chief Whip. Are they his personal property to be kept by him and disposed of as he sees fit? Or are they, as whips are all government ministers, government property, to be treated accordingly? Some blame R. Ryder for not destroying the evidence... The question is: what to do in the future? The Chief's conclusion is: keep writing the notes – he needs the information, so does the PM. But, sleep easy, boys, from now on the notes will be shredded on a regular basis.

2. Michael Bates becomes the new Paymaster-General (he has been sulky since the summer: now he is a *very* happy bunny) and I move from the Lower Office to the Upper Office and become a Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury⁶¹⁵ and – better still – assume the mantle of the whip responsible for the First Secretary (aka Deputy Prime Minister), for the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and for HM Treasury. (And, yes, I have noticed. My advancement is due entirely to someone else's misfortune. And the someone else is a proper friend at that.)

MONDAY 16 DECEMBER 1996

10.40 p.m.: We have survived the Fisheries vote. This is the one we lost last year and, had the UUs been against us, feared we might lose again. We summoned the lame and the halt (I was on the ambulance run), we brought ministers back from hither and yon

⁶¹⁵ Constitutionally, the Treasury is governed by a Board of seven Lords Commissioners. The First Lord is the Prime Minister, the Second Lord is the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the remaining five are government whips.

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so, I know that I upset colleagues who felt I had betrayed them. I broke the whips' code of silence – something no whip had ever done before. Whips *never* talk about what they do or how they set about it. That's the rule. As the Chief Whip pointed out to me at the time, 'Our mystery is part of our potency.'

But mystery makes for mischief. Do we want government run like an episode of *House of Cards*? The trouble with operating in secret is that it encourages those not-in-the-know to believe that dark deeds are being done in the murky corridors of power. Occasionally perhaps they are, but mostly they are not. On Monday of this week I went to the party for Sandra Howard's new novel. It was Michael Howard's birthday and a lot of the old gang were there – Ken Clarke, Norman Lamont, John Gummer, Peter Lilley, Norman Fowler, several of them, of course, whips in their day and all of them, in my estimation, good people. In my experience, most politicians are.