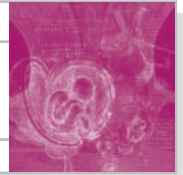


My political memoirs



James Drife

Among my childhood ambitions, besides wanting to play cricket for Scotland, win a Nobel prize and make a hit record, was a vague plan to become a member of Parliament. I took the initial steps towards the first three – bowling at stumps in the garden, reading the *Children's Encyclopaedia* and doing five-finger exercises – but soon the excuses began. The grass was too wet. The piano was in the coldest room in the house. And, really, Nobel laureates had to be ridiculously brainy. I had realised that as well as putting in hard work, you need some natural talent.

But not for everything, I hear you say. Surely you could have managed to be an MP? Well ... I've always been a bit of a show-off, and like everyone else, I want to change the world. But political ambition means more than that. You have to like the nitty-gritty of politics. To take a firm position on every issue, however complex or trivial. To look at a three-page agenda and think, gosh, I wish it was longer. The political game, like cricket, is enjoyed for its own sake, whether you are batting or fielding.

Yes, politics has to be in the genes, and the Drifes are not a dynasty of power-brokers. My father, a country bank manager, never revealed how he voted, saying it might alienate the customers. He did give the occasional unguarded grunt while listening to the wireless, but his scorn showed no party bias. My mother was different. She came from South Wales, a hotbed of socialism, but her father ran a small business and she was a fervent Conservative. She detested the entire Labour Party, especially Aneurin Bevan, the Welsh MP now revered as the father of Britain's National Health Service. She liked the NHS, of course, but the words 'snake' and 'grass' featured frequently in her analyses of Bevan's character.

I don't think they knew each other personally, but Bevan reciprocated, in a way, by loathing all Conservatives. Famously, he once called them 'lower than vermin', which was regarded as a bit much even in those days. He said it in July 1948, the very month the NHS started, when he was Minister of Health and Housing. It fascinates me, looking back (through others' eyes – I was only ten months old), that despite being such a firebrand he won over doctors' leaders by personal charm as well as financial inducements. (His legendary self-justification, 'I stuffed their mouths with gold', came years later.) Like his contemporary, King George VI, Bevan had overcome

a stammer, although unlike His Majesty's, Bevan's has not yet been made into a movie. He went on to become a flamboyant orator, and he revelled in having extreme views. 'We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road,' he said. 'They get knocked down.'

In deference to my late mother, I'll stop quoting him. His era is long gone in any case. By the time I went to university, Britain's politicians were flocking towards the middle of the road. The 1960s were a decade of student sit-ins, but undergraduate political awareness was hazy and psychedelic, and largely confined to faculties of arts and social sciences. Medics, in Edinburgh at least, continued to wear tweed jackets and regarded long-haired student politicians (Gordon Brown among them) with lofty amusement.

Since then, Britain's political homogenisation has continued apace and today we cannot tell our leaders apart. The gene pool must be quite small, and they all went to Oxford or Cambridge and studied politics. I suppose Britain's enthusiasm for the centre ground is preferable to the USA's violent polarisation, or bloody revolutions elsewhere, but I can't help feeling nostalgic for the passion that set up the NHS. Our politicians must share this emotion, because they won't leave health care alone. All they can do now is reorganise it, and they do this endlessly, using the word 'reform' to make it sound as if it involves high principles.

Being on the receiving end of reform for several decades until I retired was debilitating. Doctors had no voice in the process and I asked myself whether I should have worked harder at politics, despite lacking the gene. But I couldn't have made any difference. The cycle of NHS reorganisations is a primeval force of nature, ill-understood by science, with its own internal momentum. The politician ostensibly in charge is now called 'Secretary of State for Health', and there have been eleven since the title was created in 1988. Each moved on after about two years, no doubt to his or her intense relief. Only one was a doctor, but his doctorate was actually a PhD in African history. Which, as my mum would have been quick to point out, is something Aneurin Bevan never achieved.

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