

CHRIS MULLIN DCL

Mr Chancellor,

‘I hope you aren’t writing a diary’ said the stern young Jessica in the Department for the Environment on spotting the newly elevated Mullin scribbling in a red book. Between the red books and the red boxes that he refused to have in his family home at weekends, one feels a little sympathy for Jessica as she tried to manage her new minister. But she was no match for the independent-minded Mullin, who scribbled on.

Why not! He’s always been a writer – of fiction (*A Very British Coup*) and of fact. Before Chris Mullin became an MP, he was a journalist – and a tenacious and fearless one at that. However, Liz Forgan, his boss during his early stint on the *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, says he was pretty hopeless as a local news reporter – because while he was supposed to be down at the local planning department digging up reports on matters parochial, he kept sloping off to write copy about the Vietnam War.

It was not that issues had to be international to grab his attention and harness his passion – some of his most significant impacts have been national ones, where he has been a campaigner for justice for vulnerable individuals. This pervaded his work as a Member of Parliament. His heartfelt attempts to prevent the deportation of asylum seekers in Sunderland are some of the most moving passages of his diaries. But he was a truth-and-justice-seeker

as a journalist too, most notably in the case of the Birmingham Six, where Mullin's campaign eventually led to the successful appeal and release of those initially convicted of the Birmingham bombings.

Chris's journalistic visits to Vietnam had one very happy outcome. In the early 1980s, Chris was helping a friend who was organising some of the first post-war tourist ventures into the country. Chris acted as a tour 'courier' because he knew the country first hand from his journalist days. In this capacity, he met Ngoc, who was acting as the courier in Vietnam. They married just before Chris became an MP, and tales of his home life with their two young daughters enrich his diaries.

Chris has adopted the North East of England, living in Sunderland since 1987 when he was first elected as MP for Sunderland South, and dreaming of eventual retirement to a walled garden somewhere in our beautiful countryside. Due to incredible efforts by the city of Sunderland, Chris's Sunderland seat declared first in every election, and for a few brief moments every four years or so Chris Mullin found himself as the sole voice of government, musing on the legislation he could enact. I'm pretty sure most of it would resonate with today's theme of sustainability. Some of Chris's own, very British, coups, fall plumb into this territory.

Poverty is an enormous barrier to sustainability, and while he was Africa Minister in the Foreign Office from 2003-2005 he worked tirelessly for the benefit of the poorest of the poor overseas.

Long before that he had played a leading role in preventing an enormous environmental catastrophe up here in the North East. The Tory government proposed to stop all mine dewatering in 1992, and this could have caused major damage to the local eco-system. It is in no small measure due to Chris Mullin's swift and effective advocacy in Parliament that the pumps were kept running. Our scientific work in this area led to the award of a Queen's Anniversary Prize so it is appropriate that we can give some public thanks to Chris Mullin on this issue today.

But as well as these weighty matters, Chris has pursued, with characteristic tenacity, other local environmental irritations. In his first ministerial position, from 1999-2001 in the Department for the Environment, Transport and Regions, his responsibilities included aviation, recycling and countryside issues. From this position he was appalled to discover the perverse financial incentives that encouraged ministers to be ferried around - often very short distances in London - in individual government cars. While Chris himself eschewed the use of the allocated car, and then fought against the astonishingly high charge made for not using it, his amusing exposure of the system, well-documented in the diaries (poor Jessica!), eventually resulted in an overhaul of the system by the current government.

Next was the matter of the speedboats on Lake Windermere. As Liz Forgan puts it, 'once Chris has sunk his teeth into the ankle of a good cause he doesn't let go very easily'. As Environment Minister, Chris Mullin took up this cause, after many previous attempts had

been thwarted, and Parliament in 2000 confirmed new bye-laws that now limit speeds on the lake to 10mph, effectively banishing the speedboats that had become such a menace in that peaceful place.

In his valedictory speech in the House of Commons in 2010, Chris spoke passionately about lifestyle and sustainability issues ‘that may well require changes to our way of life that most people have only dimly begun to contemplate.’ But Chris himself has always practised what other people sometimes only preach. Everything in the Mullin household is recycled. He aims to leave the smallest possible footprint on our planet. But hopefully he leaves other kinds of tracks for the rest of us to follow.

When Chris Mullin was asked ‘where is he coming from’, he replied that he is a socialist with a small ‘s’, a liberal with a small ‘l’, a green with a small ‘g’ and a Democrat with a capital ‘D’. But what about where he is going to? As he contemplated life beyond his parliamentary career in 2010, he mused that leaving then was either the best thing he had ever done or the biggest mistake of his life. Well, by his own admission, life beyond parliament is working out well. The diaries he wrote in his little red book covered 11 years from the death of John Smith to the day Gordon Brown left Downing Street – the rise and fall of New Labour. The diaries are not just selling well, they are reaching even wider audiences through theatre – Michael Chaplin’s drama *A Walk On Part* was premiered at Live Theatre here in Tyneside to huge critical acclaim and has now transferred to London.

Chris himself is much in demand as a speaker, and he's also teaching students here in our Politics department. He chairs the North East Heritage Lottery Board, and was one of the judges in this year's Man Booker prize, a panel that showed extreme good sense this year in shortlisting outstanding novels with the additional virtue, like his own writing, of being extremely readable.

Today it is Chris Mullin's birthday. Next year – the 12th of the 12th, 2012, he will be 65. But not much nearer retirement to the garden it seems. Chancellor, in recognition of his campaigns for justice and for the environment, and to help celebrate what we hope will be an enduring relationship with us here in Newcastle, as well as a very happy birthday, I now present for the award of Doctor of Civil Law, *Honoris Causa*, Chris Mullin.

Citation by Professor Vicki Bruce