

**Extracts from a life  
by David Butler**

Author's note

What follows is a series of episodes rather than a coherent biography.  
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## I. IF YOU DON'T WANT NO SUGAR...



Ethel and me circa 1939

I grew up in Crouch End, a suburb of North London. Long after my time Crouch End developed a patina of radical chic. Shop windows displayed portraits of Guevara. In my day the culture of Crouch End was very different, a culture of working class respectability. During a university vacation I visited a shop where I was well known. 'What are you doing now?' asked the lady of the shop. 'I'm at Oxford University,' I replied, with a measure of self-satisfaction. 'You're a big boy to be still at school,' she commented. The residents of the dozen or so houses in our little cul-de-sac showed a certain interest in the affairs of my brother and myself, but a closely veiled interest. My brother Jack called our street the land of the twitching lace curtain.

When I was about four Auntie Eve, my mother's sister, came to visit us. Some topic of current interest cropped up in the conversation between the sisters, maybe something about how Mr Churchill was running the war. I ventured an opinion. 'How do you know about that?' asked Auntie Eve. I told her I had read about it in the paper. 'But you can't read. You haven't even started school.' My mother said nothing. She passed me the *Daily Mirror*. I read the lead article word for word to Auntie Eve. I had taught myself to read. It was the first time it occurred to me that I might be clever.

My father Jim was an upholsterer. These days upholsterers earn serious money restoring chaises longues for the bourgeoisie. Jim knocked out cheap and cheerful settees and chairs ('three piece suits') for working class customers. Dad ran his own small business, employing just two or three people. In school holidays I worked with him. I didn't do anything useful but he didn't like me idling at home. I never saw Jim write anything down. He had no cheque book, no receipt book, no accounts. Everything was cash. Of course he paid no tax. How he avoided prison I'll never know. Jim's working day started early. I remember as the winter sun came up drinking scalding tea from a pint mug by a refreshment van in the Balls Pond Road. The woman in charge offered practical advice: 'If you don't want no sugar don't stir it.'

In 1945 the Attlee government decreed that only large manufacturers were allowed to make new furniture. Small firms would have to survive on repairs. The move seems Draconian. But if Britain was to recover from the war it was probably essential to make the most productive use of scarce raw materials. My father couldn't survive on repairs. He had little choice but to violate the rule. Board of Trade inspectors toured workshops to check compliance. But their hearts weren't in it. As long as the new furniture was covered with sackcloth they were happy to turn a blind eye. But how would Jim know when an inspector was near? One day I saw a uniformed police officer stick his head in the door of my father's workshop. 'Inspector coming Jim,' he said. My father thanked him and money changed hands. My Dad had the Old Bill on wages.

In 1939 Jim had volunteered for the RAF. He was afraid that the new war might be like the old war, involving the infantry in trench combat. He wanted none of that. Hence the RAF. He was sent to Ruislip where a team of airmen were looking after a barrage balloon. They made him the cook. Familiar with his culinary skills, my mother termed him 'Hitler's secret weapon'. My mother Ethel

was an intelligent woman deprived of any opportunity to use her intelligence. Before she married she worked for the diamond merchant De Beers. They must have valued her. She was offered a job with the head office in South Africa. Her parents made her turn it down on the grounds that they needed her weekly contribution to the family budget. Imagine the life she might have led as a young white woman in apartheid South Africa. Class distinction mattered less there, as long as you were white. She could have sent home more money than she would ever earn in London. Instead Ethel faced a life of financial insecurity, six unplanned pregnancies plus I believe some illegal terminations, poor health (there was no NHS) and domestic violence. I would lie in bed listening to the mice scurrying around in the ceiling and the raised voices from below. For some reason the thud of the first punch was always preceded by a moment's deadly silence. I remember, before I was old enough to go to school, while she was doing the ironing my mother told me she was planning to take her own life, though she never did. Life in our north London suburb was just a struggle to survive. Affection was an unknown quantity, save only between me and my brother Jack. By the time she was fifty Ethel was an old woman, crippled by arthritis. She died of a stroke in her middle sixties.

My Aunt Flo, Ethel's sister, worked for Jim. She used a sewing machine to make the Rexine covers that went on the settees and chairs. When Jim joined the RAF, Flo was left to run the business. It was agreed that she would pay Ethel a fixed sum every week, no matter how well or badly the business had done. Everyone agreed that Flo would have a tricky time keeping the business afloat in wartime. With their menfolk away at the war, few families would have the money to buy furniture. How wrong that proved to be. When the bombing of London started, people whose homes were destroyed or damaged were entitled to compensation. Many rival upholstery firms had closed down as the men went off to war. Before long Flo was coping with a tidal wave of orders. She employed a couple of upholsterers who were too old to be called up. They worked weekends to cope with the demand. Much to Ethel's irritation, Flo turned up to pay Ethel her weekly stipend wearing an expensive fur coat.

During the blitz Jack and I were evacuated to Morecambe Bay. Enrolled at a local school we were found to be miles behind our age groups. How abysmal the London education system must be to produce such dullards. We were both left to vegetate at the back of the class. Within a few weeks we were both ahead of our class. The Lancashire education system had worked a miracle, turning two dunces into star pupils. We forbore to mention that our problem had been understanding the teachers' accents. We had our own ways of being. As know-all London kids we had no hesitation in playing on beaches where signs said land mines were buried. When Ethel and Flo came up from London to fetch us home I opened the door to them. I asked them to wait, then told the woman of the house that there were two ladies asking for her. Our season in the north cemented the bond between my brother and me.

My Aunt Flo was a woman of mystery. She called herself Mrs Gray, though there was no Mr Gray. She had two daughters. One day Jack and I were in the Lyons Corner House near our home in Crouch End when one of these daughters entered the tearoom. 'There's our half-sister,' said Jack. His theory was that Aunt Flo and Jim had been overcome by the erotogenic odour of the woodwool. Either that, or the family resemblance between Ethel and Flo meant this was just a case of mistaken identity. Jack also considered the possibility that he might not be Jim's son. In the aftermath of the Jim-Flo concurrence, Ethel may have found herself an admirer. It was certainly true that Jack didn't much resemble the other male members of our family, being shorter but much better looking. Was Jack right? Who knows?

When my father died my sister Daphne and I arranged his funeral. The vicar who conducted the ceremony was odious. He asked all manner of questions. Jim was an upholsterer, he was in the RAF, he was an Arsenal supporter, he was a widower and a father of six... The vicar was writing all this down, intent on giving the false impression that he knew Jim. 'Is there anything else?' he asked. 'Yes,' I said. 'My father had a brain transplant with an Alsatian dog.' He had started writing this down when Daphne burst out laughing.

## II. THE LAND OF ICE AND SNOW



Mill Hill School

My four oldest siblings had all failed that iniquitous test the Eleven Plus and ended up in secondary modern schools. Jack passed the test and joined a local grammar school. But he was not there for long. After the war local authorities offered grants to boys whose parents could not afford the fees of a private school. The local paper reported the scheme. Ethel entered Jack's name for the scheme and he was awarded a place. So in 1945 my brother Jack was off to a posh boarding school. In those days Mill Hill was a middle ranking boys' public school with a decent academic standard and an outstanding sports record. Most years the school would produce three or four scholars to Oxbridge colleges. Mill Hill would produce two England rugby players in Johnny Williams and Jim Roberts and an Oxford captain in Alec Ramsay. Jack claimed that scrumhalf Johnny Williams was the only man who could change direction with both feet off the ground. Jack loved life at Mill Hill. He came home for school holidays with the latest house photographs and talked me through the gossip. 'He's just been made a House Prefect, heaven knows why.'

In 1948 it was my turn to apply. The initial situation was not promising. We got a letter from Middlesex County Council stating that I could not apply for a grant. My brother was already receiving a grant and it would not be fair to give two grants to the same family. Before the war working class women like Ethel were inclined to accept unquestioningly the rulings of the powers that be. But the war changed all that. With the men away, women had shouldered the responsibility for all aspects of family life. They were no longer inclined just to bow down to authority. They had learned to be sharp-elbowed. Ethel took me to see the local MP, Mr David Gammans. When she had explained the situation, Gammans phoned the County Council and demanded to be put through immediately to the Chief Education Officer. 'Are you going to penalise this boy because he has a clever brother?' he asked. The next day a letter arrived. My candidacy was approved.

In the summer of 1948, with the Olympic Games taking place in London and Bradman's Aussies rampaging round the land, I found myself seated in a Mill Hill classroom. Candidates had been invited to write out any poem we knew by heart. Several boys handed in their poem and departed. Soon I was the only one still writing. I went to the master in charge and asked for more paper. 'Which poem are you writing?' 'The Ancient Mariner.' 'Why have you picked such a long poem?' 'It's the only one I know by heart.' 'That's enough. Hand in your paper.' I was disappointed. I'd only got as far as the land of ice and snow. In due course I was accepted. I would join Jack at Mill Hill.

My early days at Mill Hill were disastrous. Coming from that dismal London suburb my table manners were atrocious and my accent ghastly. What's more I was unaccustomed to the detailed regulations that governed life at a boarding school. I was constantly missing roll calls, talking after lights out, whistling in the corridor and walking with my blazer unbuttoned – all punishable offences. The senior boys were allowed to beat miscreants on the arse with a house shoe. In our case the house shoe was bound with copper wire and had a torch battery in the heel. It was known as the machine. Any prefect who couldn't draw blood with the machine was regarded as a wet and a weed. My brother Jack was always on hand for support. But he offered neither a diagnosis of my problems nor advice how to address them. He knew I had to earn remission on my own. Perhaps he himself had suffered a similar initiation. It would take some time before I learned my lesson and managed to make myself

indistinguishable from the other boys, before I spoke, ate, drank and behaved like a true little Millhillian.

Each housemaster appointed his own House Prefects, who had authority only in their own house. The headmaster appointed School Prefects, who had some authority in the whole school. He also appointed Monitors, the dozen or so boys who were so powerful that they did not wear school uniform. During my first term Jack became a House Prefect, walking up to be appointed with that cool dignity he always manifested. But then came a shock.

‘I’ll be leaving you in July,’ said Jack. ‘Why?’ Boys normally stayed at the school for five years. Jack had been there less than four. ‘Our parents say it’s too expensive having both of us here.’ Despite the grant, some expense for extras like books and stationery fell on the parents. I just accepted the fait accompli, trusting that the grown-ups knew best. My compliance planted a seed of guilt that flourishes to this day. I know now what I should have said then. ‘You can’t miss your final year. You’ll get in the second XV. You’ll be made a School Prefect. You’ll get your A levels and qualify for university. How much do they need? We can get jobs in every school holiday and hand the money over to Mum. If you leave, I leave.’ But I stayed silent and he departed.

Jack never showed the slightest sign of resentment at having his school career truncated, not even when I stayed on at Mill Hill for an extra sixth year in pursuit of an Oxford scholarship. That year we spent together at the school created between us a bond which was as Horace says more lasting than bronze.

### III. UNIVERSITAS OXONIENSIS



Keble College, Oxford

In the end I did OK at Mill Hill. I became a Monitor, one of the dozen or so boys who ran the school, saving the dignity of the masters by pretending to need their help. I played cricket for the first XI (bowling innocuous off breaks) and was captain of the Eton Fives team. My finest moment at school came at the start of an autumn term. Our senior classics master announced that one of us had scored the highest mark for A Level Greek prose composition that any candidate in the whole of the UK had ever scored. But who was it? 'It was Butler.' He sounded as surprised as I was. I won an open scholarship in classics to Keble College, Oxford. Keble was not a highly regarded college, a Victorian institution with a distinctly plebeian intake, the target of mockery for scions of the ancient colleges. I opted for Keble as a result of an interview with Basil Mitchell, then one of the world's foremost Platonists. It would be a privilege to study philosophy under Basil. At that time the biggest joke about Keble was its architecture. It was said that the Keble chapel made a fine sight on a moonless night. Today in contrast Victorian Gothic is all the go. If visitors have time to see only two colleges, the tourist board send them to Christ Church and Keble.

Leaving school in 1954 I expected to do my two years National Service before Oxford. But the Army didn't want me. At school I had suffered from severe acne. The school doctor ruled that I should not wear the Combined Cadet Force army uniform because it chafed my skin. For this reason I was rejected for National Service. My father was disappointed. I asked why. He explained that they 'would have learned me to drive.' This was ironic, since no one, it seemed, had ever properly learned Jim to drive. He was a jittery and risky driver. How, you may ask, had he ever passed his driving test? The answer is that he sent his brother Harry to impersonate him. Harry was a skilled driver, having driven getaway cars for criminals. He abandoned that career when a judge informed him that another conviction would earn him a seven year stretch.

Jack however was accepted for National Service. Because he had been to a posh school he was mistaken for a rich kid and commissioned in an elite regiment, Hussars no less. But he was soon twigged. 'Butler,' said his commanding officer, 'do you own a car? Do you own a horse?' Jack admitted that both these possessions were beyond his means. 'All my subalterns own a horse and a car,' said the CO. Jack was transferred to the Royal Army Service Corps and spent his days whizzing up and down the autobahn on a motor bike, accompanying armed convoys. It seemed Army life suited him. He was promoted to acting captain, a rarity for a man on National Service. When he came out of the Army he took a job with a tobacco company, selling cigarettes in Nigeria. But life out in the country didn't suit him. He had some kind of breakdown and left the company. His next job took him to Antwerp. A wealthy Englishman living there wanted to see his son admitted to an English public school. The boy had to pass a common entrance exam. Jack was hired as a resident tutor to steer the

boy through this task. The boy suffered from being trilingual in English, French and Flemish, speaking all three but spelling none. Jack wangled me an invitation to visit the family in Antwerp. We spent a week hobnobbing with the wealthiest families in Belgium. I don't suppose they guessed our humble origins. The boy would pass his exam. When Jack was near the end of his stint in Antwerp he came to visit me in Oxford. We had a pleasant few days. But then in the Keble quad he passed a remark that struck me as utterly absurd. 'I think I'll apply to come to this place.' He must have taken leave of his senses. He didn't even have A levels, which were the minimum qualification for any university. He went through the application process, as far as I could see wasting time and money. All the same, when one day I spotted the admissions tutor walking across the quad, curiosity drove me to ask the question. 'Your brother's Latin was very weak,' he said. 'But we decided to admit him.' I sent Jack a telegram that said simply 'Joy'.

We found digs at a house in the Iffley Road, just opposite the running track where Bannister had broken the four minute mile. We shared the digs with a group of extraordinary sports stars. Peter Robbins, John Curry and Mike Smith were all there. All three would soon play rugby for England. Mike would also become captain of the England cricket team, almost certainly the last man to win caps at both rugby and cricket. Though Jack and I were sporting nonentities, the stars made us very welcome. Peter Robbins invited us to a barbecue. A game of rugby sevens followed. I found myself marking Peter. When I tackled him I discovered what distinguishes England rugby players from the rest of us: they have legs of concrete.

Jack and I had the privilege of being in the audience at the Sheldonian when Wystan Hugh Auden was inaugurated as Professor of Poetry. Auden delivered his acceptance speech in that extraordinary blend of upper class English and American. Despite his fame, Auden seemed oddly nervous. On a lectern he had a number of books from which to read quotations. The relevant passages were bookmarked with slips of paper. As he spoke Auden tore these paper slips into pieces and dumped the scraps in the nearest handy receptacle, which happened to be his mortar board, discarded at the start of his oration and deposited upside down on the lectern. At the end of his remarks Auden put on his mortar board and went to meet the Vice Chancellor. By convention the two of them met mid-stage, bowed and removed their headgear. A confetti-like cloud of paper fragments exploded from Auden's hat. I doubt if a Sheldonian audience has ever collapsed in helpless laughter before or since. 'For my next trick...' murmured my brother.

Jack and I both left Oxford without taking our degrees, though for very different reasons. I had met Kate Harry, a tall and elegant art school graduate studying at the Royal College of Art. We had fallen in love and planned to marry. It was against the statutes of the college for scholars to marry. So I would leave Oxford. The marriage of course was just an excuse. I had totally messed up being at Oxford. I played cricket, I acted in plays, I got drunk with my friends – I did everything but work. I had the attention span of a gnat. I would read Latin or Greek for a few minutes and then find myself totally unable to go on. I could excuse myself on grounds of age and immaturity. Because I was rejected for National Service I was only eighteen when I went up. But that excuse is feeble. Other people my age managed it. Why couldn't I? As for Jack, he just ran out of money. I found out many years later that he had been refused a grant. He never told me at the time. He relied on savings from his wage-earning days for as long as he could. It didn't help that together we launched a literary magazine that ended up costing us serious money. He was refused a grant because they said he was too old. He was twenty four. He had spent two years in the armed forces and two years earning a living and paying taxes. If I had known, would I have done for Jack what Ethel did for me? Appeal to a higher power such as an MP and get the injustice remedied? Much as the two of us loved and trusted each other, Jack still had secrets.



#### IV. REDUX



The Examination Schools, Oxford

I found a job in London working as a booking clerk for an airline. It was a lowly calling but it did require unwavering concentration. We had to get every booking right, the right passenger name, the right date and time of departure, the right flight, the right class of travel, the right destination. Mistakes could be costly. Meanwhile Kate and I, now man and wife, were living at one of the classiest addresses in London. Kate was studying at the Royal College of Art. At that time the college was housed in an unconnected series of buildings scattered all over the South Kensington area. The college was buying up a row of stately mansions opposite the Albert Memorial. When all the houses had been acquired, they would knock them down and erect a single massive building to contain all the departments of the college. The building stands there now, a dusky beauty. While they were waiting for all the houses to be bought, the college rented them out in flats to students. So there we were, Kate on a student grant and me on a paltry wage, living at 14 Kensington Gore. At night we could hear the music from the Albert Hall. We were living there when Kate gave birth to our son Gideon.



Meanwhile Jack had married Carole Bell, an occupational therapist he'd met in Oxford, and fathered Stephen and Giles. They were living in Devon. Jack was working as a teacher in a private school. At about the same time Jack and I began to harbour thoughts of rescuing our university careers. I started reading some Greek and Latin texts and I found that my work at the airline had given me something I lacked when I was at Keble, namely a span of attention. I could concentrate for hours at a time on whatever I was studying. After working for hours on airline bookings, even Cicero seemed quite interesting. With more hope than expectation I wrote to Basil Mitchell at Keble asking whether there was any chance I could be readmitted. I got a reply inviting me to visit the Warden. I travelled to Oxford with mixed feelings. I knew I wouldn't be summoned just to be given a blank refusal. But I had no idea what conditions might be imposed. Had they forgotten I was married?

The Warden of Keble was the Reverend Eric Abbott. As I walked into his lodging on that bright summer Sunday he didn't even make me ask, let alone beg. 'We always hoped you would come back,' he said. Once I had checked that my grant would be renewed, I was set for my return. At more or less the same time Jack left his teaching job and joined the University of Exeter to read psychology. By circuitous routes we would both eventually become graduates.

I had a stroke of luck. The university lodgings bureau found a place for me, Kate and Gideon to live. It was a house in Saint Cross Road, north of Magdalen Bridge. But there was a complication. The Royal College of Art had now completed the purchase of the houses in Kensington Gore. The work of demolition could start. So the student occupants were given notice to vacate. We had to leave by a

certain date, which as it happened was a couple of weeks before the Oxford house would be available. There was only one solution. We packed up everything we owned and crammed it all into one room in Jim and Ethel's house in Crouch End. We would squat there for a fortnight before we moved to Oxford. Then I went to Oxford to sign the rental agreement and collect the keys. When I got there, I was told that the lodgings bureau had decided after all that the Saint Cross house was not to be let. I explained my situation: I had a wife and son squatting in London and was due to resume my studies in Oxford. The bureau explained patiently that this was my problem not theirs. I went back to London in a state of deep anxiety, not eased when I sat on the bed and explained to Kate what had happened. 'I'm pregnant,' she said.

Jim and Ethel were clearly anxious. They might be saddled with long-term squatters. And an expanding number thereof. They asked what I planned to do. I was going to put an advertisement in the Oxford Mail looking for unfurnished accommodation. Jim thought this was a waste of time and money. But against the odds it paid off. A builder in Oxford had invested in a house near the city centre. He was planning to renovate it and sell it. But for the moment he hadn't got the necessary money. Letting the house out for a year or so would suit him. So within a couple of weeks Kate, Gideon and I were out of London and headed for Oxford.

Walking from the railway station towards the Oxford city centre, you take Hythe Bridge Street across the Castle Mill Stream. On your left you may well fail to notice a very minor turning called Upper Fisher Row. There is a line of modest houses on the left side of the road, on the right the railings skirting the stream. You would not believe such a tranquil haven could exist within half a mile of Carfax. In this peaceful retreat Kate, Gideon and I would live and Alison Jane would see the light of day. The only discordant note was struck when the year's clutch of cygnets appeared. Swans are fiercely territorial. They would drown each other's young, while we humans lined the bank screaming in vain. Our house was only a few minutes' walk from the Ashmolean Museum, in whose library I would pass my days. I carried forward nothing by way of learning from my earlier period at Oxford. I had only two terms before Finals. I would test my new-found span of concentration to the limit, working fourteen hours a day seven days a week. I pasted Greek historical inscriptions on the walls of the loo so as not to waste a moment. I kidded myself that in later life if I was ever constipated, a glance at Tod's selection of Greek inscriptions would do the trick.

Basil Mitchell was hugely helpful. He lent me his handwritten lecture notes on Plato's *Republic*. These were the days before Xerox. It was his only copy. I made sure I returned it. My course was entitled Literae Humaniores, known as Greats. It has unique prestige at Oxford. It includes philosophy, Greek history and Roman history. The philosophy ranges from Plato to the modern day. I was intellectually well suited to this part of the course, a skilled nit-picker. I also took to the Greek history, as I'll later explain. My weak point was Roman history. I had no taste for figures like Augustus and Tiberius, even though I had the benefit of lectures from one of the greatest Roman historians Oxford has ever known, Sir Ronald Syme. After all these years I still occasionally dream of walking into the Examination Schools unable to remember how many times Augustus was consul.

I encountered a document entitled the Spartan Rhetra. The Rhetra is an enactment dating from the seventh or eighth century BC. It specifies a constitutional arrangement allocating responsibilities to the Spartan kings, the leaders of the assembly and the *damos*, the common people. Any textbook will tell you that Athens was the birthplace of democracy. But this primitive form of democracy emerged in Sparta while tyrants still ruled Athens. Famous scholars such as Wade-Gery and Tsopanakis had written on the Rhetra. I read all I could find. Then an idea struck me. I found a passage in Thucydides that shed a novel light on how Greek assemblies might work. Maybe I had hit on a way to interpret the Rhetra that had eluded my celebrated predecessors. I wrote a one page note and took it to my Greek history tutor. I fully expected him to say, 'Concentrate on getting your degree and leave the research to the grown-ups'. Instead he suggested I take my idea to Mr Forrest at Wadham, the most celebrated Spartanist of his generation. I did so. Mr Forrest took my suggestion seriously and gave me a list of references to follow up. I ended up with a full length article, which I sent to the learned

journal *Historia* in Germany. To my astonishment it was immediately accepted. Very few undergraduates get an article in a learned journal. My heart missed a beat when I turned over the Greek history paper for Finals. One of the questions read: 'What is the significance of the Spartan Rhethra?'

There was a rule at Oxford that limited the time that could pass between entering the university and getting a classified degree. It was presumably designed to stop rich people spending five or ten years earning an undeserved First. I had exceeded that period so my degree would be unclassified. Basil Mitchell however got hold of my marks. I would have got a viva for a First. I had never failed a face to face interview in my life. I would have made sure the examiners and I talked about the Spartan Rhethra. So I regard myself as having got a First in all but name. At about the same time Jack graduated from Exeter and got a research job with the Encyclopaedia Britannica. So at last both Butler brothers had letters after their names.

## V. THINK LIKE A MAN



County Hall, Hertford

Keble College had an arrangement very helpful to its recent graduates. Every year the students who had graduated the year before were invited back to the college to describe what they were doing, for the benefit of this year's graduands. I learned a lot from this arrangement. Many of those returning were working for big companies on management training programmes. I learned that this was a complete misnomer. There was no training. They were treated just as cheap intelligent labour. One of my friends who'd got a decent upper second was working as a bra salesman. I decided to avoid that dismal fate. Instead I took a job with Hertfordshire County Council, working in the finance department. The council found a place for Kate, Gideon, Ali and me to rent, a bungalow within walking distance of the office. My salary was £600 a year, equivalent to about £14,000 in today's money. Despite my lowly salary the council would soon offer me a 100 percent mortgage to buy a house.

Work in the finance department was both arduous and tedious. We would work flat out preparing the annual budget. Then collapse in a heap. A couple of weeks later we would start working flat out on the annual accounts. Then collapse in a heap. It was tedious because most of us never met anyone outside our own little team. We never had the experience of helping people, only wrestling with numbers. I was seriously considering handing in my resignation. But where would we live? Then one day an intriguing announcement appeared on the notice board. The council was buying a computer. There were vacancies for two trainee computer programmers. This was 1962. I hadn't the faintest idea what a computer programmer did. But it sounded space-age and exciting so I decided to apply.

So did about a hundred other people. Most of the applicants rushed over to the county library and took out books on Boolean algebra and binary arithmetic. I took a different route. I got hold of the report the County Treasurer had submitted to the Finance Committee seeking authorisation to buy the computer. I practically learned it by heart. I got on the short list. The County Treasurer was one of the interview panel, the Chairman of Finance presiding. The first question was probably standard for all candidates: why did I want to join the computer team? I answered that I believed the computer would be important for the future of the council. In what respect would it be important? 'Well, as the Treasurer put it in his report...' Maybe I was the only candidate who showed an interest in why we were buying a computer as opposed to how it would work. As I opened the envelope of the letter offering me one of the two jobs, I had no idea that a completely different future was unfolding for me.

I would grow to love programming, the most satisfying work I ever did. But it didn't begin well. I was sent on a training course with NCR, the company who built the computer we were buying. The entire course was devoted to the programming language we would use. There was nothing on how to construct a program. When I got back to Hertford I was given my first task. It involved reading characters from punched paper tape. I was baffled. Suppose I wrote an instruction to read the first character from the tape. What then? The tape would include thousands of characters. How could I write thousands of instructions? I hadn't grasped the principle of iteration. You read a character, check its validity, store it and then loop around to read the next character. You can go round this loop

a million times in a few seconds. Once I got this notion in my head, programming became a pleasure. A good program is like a poem. It has structure, balance, texture and above all it ends in the only way it possibly could. John Donne and Thomas Stearns Eliot knew about that. The most telling praise you can bestow on a computer program is that it is lucid.

I dreamed that John Innes, the computer manager, sent for me. 'We're not really working for the council,' he said. 'We're working for NASA, preparing for a moon landing. But I'm dropping you from the team.' 'Why, John?' 'Because you don't think like a man.' John Innes had an uncanny instinct. He was a punched card veteran. He had never been trained as a programmer. Yet if your program had a fault he could stand by your desk, look down at your program and point to an instruction. 'That looks a bit weird.' And you would find that's where the error lay.

Before our computer was delivered we tested our programs on a rented machine near London Wall. The time on the machine was cheapest at night so I got used to working in the City of London in the wee small hours, driving home in the dawn light. There was an unofficial competition. Who could get his program running correctly with the minimum number of tests? I aimed to get my programs running on the very first test. Our own computer was delivered to County Hall on a Saturday, to avoid traffic congestion. The central processor was so big that it wouldn't pass through the doors of County Hall. They had to take out one of the huge picture windows in the specially designed computer room and lift the processor up on a crane. OK I know, I know. The phone in your pocket has more capacity than that giant processor had. But this was 1962. The past is a foreign country. About a hundred people turned up that Saturday to see the computer arrive. 'You know why they're here?' said John Innes as the processor was hoisted into the sky. 'They're all hoping we drop the fucker.'

Council staff walking down that corridor could look through a huge plate glass window and see us working at the machine. We felt like stars, flicking our fingers casually over the keyboard of the console. I got to understand the language and its compiler well enough to write a couple of macros, so that other programmers could invoke whole subroutines with just a single command.

In two years I graduated from writing programs specified by others to designing and implementing my own programs. I was ready to move on. At that time hospitals were clustered into regional groups. Each group was administered by a regional hospital board. I was appointed computer manager for the board that looked after hospitals in North West London. I practically doubled my salary. On the strength of a princely £1500 a year I went out and bought a brand new car, a Ford Cortina estate. When I sat in it for the first time it was so quiet I asked the salesman if the engine was really running. I would drive in my new car from Hertford to my office in Southgate. By now Justine Louise had joined Gideon David Harry and Alison Jane. There was room for all three kids in the back of the Cortina.

My time at the hospital board was a disaster. But a highly educational disaster. You can learn a lot from your mistakes. I made my biggest mistake right at the start. My predecessor had selected the computer, another NCR machine like the Hertford one, devised his plan and then departed. I was stupid enough to take on his plan sight unseen. I should have accepted the job but insisted on having a couple of weeks to examine the plan before I committed to it. Of course the plan turned out to be completely impossible. I spent a year working flat out. Driving home in the early hours I fell asleep at the wheel from sheer exhaustion and ended up in a ditch. A hundred yards further on I would have hit a concrete stanchion. A policeman who came and helped rescue me checked that I hadn't been drinking then advised me to get another job. So I handed in my resignation. I am sure my boss was pleased to see the back of me. As the French say, the absent are always wrong.

## VI. THE VALE OF TEARS

In 1963 my brother Jack fell ill. He had an operation of some sort. As far as we knew he had recovered. When Kate, the kids and I visited Jack and his family in Devon we went to the beach to swim. I noticed that Jack had lost a lot of weight. In November 1964 I received a letter from Carole. Jack's earlier illness had been colonic cancer, late diagnosed. The doctors had warned Carole that secondaries were almost certain. When the cancer returned it attacked his brain. He started talking nonsense. The letter told me there was nothing to be done. Kate and I arranged for Gideon, Ali and Justine to stay with friends. We headed west. But by the time we reached Devon Jack had already died. We went to the mortuary. I went in alone to see his body. On my brother's face was an expression of total incomprehension, as if something had struck him that was beyond understanding. Maybe it had. I kissed his forehead. On the way out of the mortuary my legs collapsed and I found myself kneeling on the wet flagstones.

Back at Jack's house I remember seeing his sons Stephen and Giles in the bath, expressions of baffled grief on their faces. Many years later Stephen told me that he too remembered that moment. That evening the grown-ups drank whisky. Jack's friend and colleague Colin Fraser was there, a genial and gifted scholar soon to become a Cambridge Don. Later he and Carole would marry. I was pleased that she found someone who shared her memories of Jack. We decided not to have a funeral, which distressed some other members of my family. Next day was a Sunday. I knew my parents would be at my sister Joan's flat in Walthamstow. We drove there to put them in the picture. When I told Ethel that Jack was dead, it was the first time I had seen anyone quite literally tear her hair.

A thousand times since he died, I have had an imagined conversation with Jack. 'Let's try to make real money,' I say. 'Not just a decent salary working for someone else but real money from building our own business. We'll own an aircraft and a huge mansion. The most beautiful girls will be lining up to date us.' 'What are we doing?' asks Jack. 'OK,' I say. 'It's 1957. What will be the big businesses of the 1960s? Housing. Loads of people want to own their own house. We borrow money, buy land and build houses. We get a councillor on our board of directors to make sure our planning applications go through. Computers. Big firms like IBM will sell thousands of computers but no one knows how to use them. Popular music. Elvis and Tommy Steele are just starters. We'd need a musical director and four likely looking lads. Maybe four young Liverpudlians. Let's do an economic forecast. We have a huge advantage, a base in London that doesn't cost us much.'

November 28 was the date of his death, Thanksgiving in the USA. He comes to me still in dreams, as young and handsome as he was. But is he not dead? His widow Carole explains to me that there are different ways of being dead. Some dead people still exist in the land of the living. But they are not allowed to communicate much with those they knew. So I don't hear much from Jack. We meet occasionally by chance. Do we have such negligible contact because the rules dictate that we should? Or has he now not much interest in me and my affairs? He's just a guy I used to know.

## VII. STAGING MY OWN EXECUTION



Conference room, Royal Lancaster Hotel

After I left the hospital board I applied for a job in the north of England and was lucky enough to miss out. The move would have been a nightmare for me, Kate and the kids. A consultant had sat in on the interview for that job. He'd given me his card. I rang him to ask where I had slipped up at the interview. To my surprise he invited me to come and see him at his office near Saint James's Park. When I arrived I was irritated to find he was not there. It turned out his manager was the one to see me. In those days people didn't bother with psychometric tests or references. After an hour's chat the boss offered me a job. I accepted without hesitation. My salary was a massive £2500, worth nearly £50,000 in today's money.

The company was Urwick Diebold, known as UD. The Urwick Group was a traditional British management consultancy founded in the 1930s. John Diebold was an American who became famous at the age of 26 for coining the word 'automation'. UD was an improbable collaboration of the two. Diebold was a skilful self-publicist who established himself as a great expert on computers. Unfortunately he was also the worst manager of people I've ever encountered. Talented people would join the Diebold Group, attracted by the pizzazz. John treated them abysmally and they soon left. But Diebold had had one very good idea. He founded the Diebold Research Program or DRP. In theory the DRP was supposed to conduct research designed to keep computer managers abreast of developments in their field. In practice the DRP did no research whatsoever. Its value to subscribing computer managers lay elsewhere. Computer managers were lonely souls. They couldn't mix too freely with their own staff for fear of diminishing their status. Nor could they mingle freely with managers at the same level in other parts of their company. Those managers regarded computer managers as technical freaks, scarcely human. The DRP gave computer managers the chance to get together with kindred souls at conferences and seminars, to have a communal moan about the cross they bore. It was a lonely hearts club. Computer managers were happy to pay the subscription just for the company and the comfort.

In Britain and Ireland the DRP was managed by UD. I was initially assigned to work on the DRP. It was an informative experience, travelling round mixing with the computer bosses of blue chip companies, passing their wisdom from one to another. I felt as if I quickly became a member of the upper echelon of the computer community. But then came a change of pace. The boss of UD sent for me. Frank Warner was a genuine eccentric, small and moustachioed. He appeared to be only spasmodically in touch with reality. He once told me that we had a problem with discipline in the office. 'The girls are typing when they should be doing their knitting. Have I got that right?' But on his watch UD was making money. When I went into his office Frank was standing with a collection of newspapers and magazines spread out on his desk. They were all open at articles describing the work of our competitors. 'I'm sure the work we do is just as interesting as theirs,' he said. 'Why don't we get any attention?' He answered his own question. 'Because we have no one doing PR. I want to remedy that and I want you to do the PR.' I was far from keen to accept his proposal. In a consulting company the only valued activity is fee-earning work with clients. Everything else is marginal. In the end I accepted, but with some conditions. I would do the PR job for two years. I would recruit an assistant to be trained to replace me. The assistant I hired was an Australian woman named Frances McMahon. She had been a TV newsreader in Australia who came to England for a brief visit but

decided to stay. I had no idea that she would also become my second wife and the mother of Rebecca Butler. At about the same time the partnership between Urwick and Diebold came unstuck. UD became Urwick Dynamics. Diebold would start its own operation in the UK, competing with UD. I would be doing PR for the new company.

The first thing I learned about the PR job was how easy it would be to spend all my time on a host of minor projects – press releases and articles for example - that added nothing to the reputation of UD. We needed one big project that would transform the company's public standing. After some thought I had it. In 1969 there were only two kinds of conference in Britain for computer people. Big conferences were held by professional bodies such as the British Computer Society. These were for all levels of staff. There were conferences run by computer manufacturers like IBM for their customers, but these tended to be glorified sales sessions. I proposed to UD that we should run the first big conference in London for the people who managed and directed computer developments in business and government. And since this was 1969 and Haight-Ashbury was the centre of the universe our event would be named Computer Impact Teach-In 1969 or CITI69. Frank Warner signed my project off. My budget was £20,000, around £300,000 in today's money. We'd have to sell a shedload of tickets.

Initially of course the launch of CITI69 provoked scepticism and downright hostility. This was just another way of spending the money our hard-working consultants earned from clients. But I had a plan to deal with that. The event would last three days, a day each on management issues, professional issues and technical issues. I appointed a manager for each day. The day managers were all women, young, determined and presentable. One of them was Frances McMahan, who would become my wife and mother to my daughter Rebecca. Consultants (nearly all male) were to be appointed as managers of individual sessions. The women won over any reluctant men. Soon more than half the company were involved in the project and those who weren't felt neglected. I hired an entire floor of the Royal Lancaster Hotel. We sent out thousands of brochures. The bookings started as a trickle then became a flood. I took pleasure in sending dozens of cheques every day to the finance office. Despite the huge costs of the project, we would break even. It would cost us nothing to construct this transformational shop window. As a result of my political contacts (of which more later) I got the Minister of Technology, Tony Benn, to open the show. When guests arrived they saw the big CCTV screens announcing THE MINISTER OF TECHNOLOGY OPENS THE TEACH-IN. Tony gave a talk that was wise, compelling and inspiring. He wrote it himself rather than delegate it to an official. I invited the board of Urwick, our parent company, to attend. They all turned up. Frank Warner, the boss of UD, drew me aside. 'You have done something today that I have failed to do for five years,' he said. 'You have made Urwick take UD seriously.' Alas he was right.

A week or two later I was informed that the UD PR effort was to be closed down. I would return to the consultant pool. Frances would be made redundant. All branches of Urwick would 'speak with one voice'. I worked out what had happened. The head of PR in Urwick had told her boss that if we went on as we were, the Urwick name would be publicly associated only with computers. UD was too visible. Clients would come to see Urwick through a distorting lens. The head of Urwick PR was a woman whose only ambition was to wangle a knighthood for the Urwick boss, an aim she would never pull off. In fact the Urwick style of management consultancy was hopelessly outdated, swept away by powerful innovatory brands like McKinsey and Boston Consulting. Within a few years Urwick would fail to pay its annual partnership bonus, on which its senior people counted. The boss who had dismantled my little empire got the bullet. Then Urwick went bust, taking UD with it. I look back now on CITI69 with a mixture of pride and bafflement. The affection, zest and drive that motivated my team remain as stirring today as they ever were. I had arranged a lavish scene for my own defenestration.



## VIII. HOW TO GET RID OF TALENTED PEOPLE



John Diebold 1926 - 2005

When Urwick and Diebold split up, they agreed not to poach staff from each other for two years. It was a few days more than two years later when I got a phone call from Henry Sherwood, the boss of the European Diebold Research Programme. He had an unsatisfactory incumbent running the DRP in the UK and wanted me to take it over. We quickly agreed terms. I was put on a modest basic salary with a lavish bonus for every new member I recruited. They didn't expect me to recruit many. But I had an undervalued asset. The secretary I inherited at Diebold UK, Lorraine, had a priceless gift, an incredibly seductive voice. When we located a potential new client she would spend hours chatting him up on the phone. By the time I went to seal the deal, the punter was willing to sign up just to have a chance of meeting the owner of that voice. I started expanding the UK membership of the DRP by three or four companies a month, with a substantial impact on my bonus. I bought my first Jaguar. Lorraine came with us on a DRP conference expedition to Hamburg. She persuaded the UK members to visit a live sex show. She said everyone secretly wanted to attend such a show but no one wanted to admit it. The young couple appeared naked on the stage and without preliminaries the action began. 'Good God,' I said. 'It's my sister.'

At UD I worked with a consultant named George Cox. There was a precise moment when I concluded that working with George would suit me down to the ground. We were working together on a huge implementation project for a reprographic company. Among our other tasks was the supervision of a big team of contract programmers. The work of that team fell behind schedule. Our client was a testy individual who enjoyed any opportunity to rub someone's nose in the dirt. He reminded us that he had enough lousy project managers on his own team. He'd hired us because he believed we were better. Was he wrong? To my surprise George offered very little by way of defence. I knew there had been some illness among the programmers and a couple of unexpected resignations. But George offered none of these excuses. 'Well,' said the client, 'the manual for system users is due in two weeks. Is that going to be late too?' George said nothing. He opened his briefcase and took out a copy of the manual, ready to be published two weeks ahead of schedule. It was an impressive document too. George's timing was perfect. A meeting that had been for the most part ill-tempered ended with congratulations. The atmosphere as we left was positively genial. I already felt that a combination of George's tactical adroitness and my creativity might be a potent mix. Now that the growth in DRP revenue was assured, I recruited George to run my Diebold consultancy operation. We hired some strong new team members. George and I sold a strategy review to a huge telecommunications company. The project was code named Rubber Duck. We reported to the company main board. Rubber Duck paid high fees for month after month. John Diebold sent across an industry expert to help us. He distinguished himself by constantly proposing solutions we had already evaluated with the client and ruled out. But he remitted parasitic fees to New York, which was his only genuine function.

In contrast we hired a freelance American consultant Karl Kozarsky whose knowledge of the global telecoms business was an invaluable aid.

Henry Sherwood, the DRP boss, was an interesting character. He was not specially intelligent. After he died someone wrote a book claiming fatuously that Henry was an agent of American intelligence. Henry was not socially aware. I played golf with him once and at every hole he complained of the headache that was undermining his customary brilliance. 'Have you got a headache, Henry?' I said as we left the course. 'I didn't want to mention it for fear of spoiling your day,' said Henry. He had his own special gift. He excelled at schmoozing the clients, to an extent you'd have thought was repellent. But they loved it. I saw Henry one day consulting a diary with names under the dates. 'Are those your clients' birthdays?' I said. 'No,' said Henry. 'They're the birthdays of the clients' wives.' Henry sent these women flowers every year. Anyone who wanted his company to leave the DRP might face conjugal ire. I heard one of these wives refer to Henry as 'an old-style gentleman'. Like plenty of other people Henry was getting pissed off with John Diebold. New York ordered Henry to reduce the number of research reports the European DRP delivered 'to reduce the clients' reading load.' Maybe the clients could benefit most if there were no reports at all.

I faced a dilemma. Henry was obviously planning to leave Diebold, presumably to compete with Diebold. One of his senior lieutenants asked me if I was up to join them. Henry was a friend. He commanded my loyalty. But if he damaged the Diebold business, it would pose a threat to my career and the careers of those I'd persuaded to join me, such as George Cox. I went to New York and shared my concerns with John Diebold. When Henry departed I inherited his job as head of the European DRP and moved into its headquarters in Frankfurt. George referred to 'that time when Butler went to New York to grease the step for Henry.' Henry's departure was expected to have a major impact on the DRP. He had been enormously popular with the members. At a European management meeting John Diebold asked everyone to forecast how many members DRP would lose in the wake of Henry's departure. The consensus was that we would lose about twenty of the 120 members.

As Henry's successor I planned my campaign with care. I told the members I was no second Henry Sherwood. I couldn't do what Henry did. The birthdays of their wives would pass unmarked by me. (That probably came as a relief.) But maybe I could do some things better than Henry could. I asked for time to prove myself. The DRP managers in all the various countries of Europe held local meetings for members. I made a point of attending all of them. Whenever I got a message from a client I was in his office next day. Sometimes I visited three countries in one day, breakfast in Paris, lunch in Stockholm, dinner in Rome. I confirmed everything in writing. I followed up meetings with actions, I got things done. Diligence was my watchword. It was a zero defect programme. Gradually members began to realise that Henry had coasted on his reputation. I was delivering real service. The members not only decided to stay. They suggested to friends in other companies that they should join. Instead of minus twenty in a year I scored plus twenty. I celebrated by moving the headquarters of my operation from Frankfurt to London which cut my costs by twenty percent.

George and I came within an ace of assured destruction. At a European management meeting John Diebold announced that to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the launch of his company, gold medals were to be struck. On one side would be an image of Harvard, John's *alma mater*. 'And on the other side?' someone asks. 'My head,' says John with a modest smile. 'So how many medals do you want to order?' He turns first to the head of Diebold Deutschland, Europe's most successful operation. Hans Jurgen is already squirming with rich Teutonic embarrassment. 'Three.' This response earns an icy glare from John. George says five. An almost equally glacial glance. 'David?' 'A hundred and forty.' 'But David these are only for special clients.' 'John, all my clients are special.' Diebold beams. He loves this. At this point I can feel the table at which we are seated quivering. A high pitched squeak escapes from George, barely recognisable as human laughter. I sit staring at John, not daring to glance at Cox. 'Are you mad? How much are they going to cost you?' asks George after the

meeting. 'Nothing. Do you really think New York can order the medals, remember who ordered what, get them delivered and bill the recipient? It will never happen.' And it didn't.

Once again Diebold found a way to chuck in a winning hand. The president of Diebold Europe was a preternaturally diminutive Frenchman who had apparently led a distinguished career in the French army. Behind his back we called him the hero of Dien Bien Phu (the battle at which the French finally lost control of Indochina). His stature was always good for a laugh. The French conference secretary was a friend of mine. She complained that he always put critical comments on the conference evaluation forms even though he never attended the sessions. She said that was unfair. 'No Christine,' I said. 'You are the one who's unfair. He's always there but we don't see him above the back of the chair.' She wept with laughter. This Frenchman gave me a task. I had to tell George that a new man had been appointed over George's head to run the UK business. It was my responsibility to persuade George to accept the new situation. I told him my chances of success with this mission were slim to zero. The newcomer was to be my boss too, though considerately they gave me time to persuade George before they told me that. The new guy was called Thornley. He seemed a pleasant enough fellow, though with no special talent. He came to see me. 'I want to make sure I understand the thinking of the senior staff,' he said. There followed what stage directions call a significant pause. 'I am not senior staff,' I said at length. 'I am the director of the Diebold Research Programme. So why don't you fuck off and come back when you have absorbed that fact.' To his credit he left without a word. George and I organised a meeting of the people we had recruited. We had two options. We could either depart one by one. There were plenty of jobs for people like us. Or we could stick together and start our own business. And that's how we decided to launch Butler Cox. George and I arranged to meet Thornley. For some forgotten reason we met on a road off the M4. George handed him a list of the people who were leaving. He blanched. Most of the fee earning talent was walking. His P&L would be murder. No doubt John Diebold would blame him for that.

## IX: THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IN ACTION



12 Bloomsbury Square

I became chairman of the new firm, George its managing director. We called the new company Butler Cox because we believed our personal reputations were our best hope of persuading clients to trust us. Only one prospective colleague objected and he joined anyway. As soon as Butler Cox was established George immediately went to work on a programme that would become fundamental to the company, a programme of standards. We developed a standard for everything – proposals, reports, letters, memoranda. There were two ways of doing anything, the Butler Cox way and the wrong way. We hired experts on written style and presentation skills to make sure the standards were reinforced. We commissioned a cover design that was unmistakably Butler Cox. Our first office comprised two small rooms in the London Press Centre off Fleet Street. Thence we migrated to a huge if slightly ramshackle building in Holborn Viaduct and finally to Bloomsbury Square. Our large and elegant dwelling there became Butler Cox House, a place where we could invite government ministers and champions of industry without embarrassment. Dante Gabriel Rossetti had once lived here. ‘Do you realise?’ I said to George. ‘This is the window the blessed damozel leaned out of.’

There was little doubt that our consultancy practice would succeed, especially as the directors of Rubber Duck decided to stay with us. (John Diebold accused us of stealing his clients. Adhering to strict legal terminology, our lawyer said we must tell him to fuck off.) But I was also determined to launch a Butler Cox membership programme. My colleagues were less sure. Consultancy would pay its way from day one. But with a membership programme you have to provide a service even when you only have a tiny handful of members. It’s bound to lose money for maybe two years. I had a plan to deal with the money. The DRP charged subscriptions quarterly. I proposed to charge annually, so even if our P&L looked bad, our cash position would be strong. My colleagues thought companies would object to this, but no one ever queried it. My colleagues also pointed out that I had devoted a great deal of energy and imagination to improving the Diebold Research Programme. Now it would be our deadly competitor. In the end my sheer obstinacy won the day. My colleagues got fed up with opposing me. We would launch a membership programme and (despite doubts on the part of the rest of the team) it would be called the Butler Cox Foundation, the BCF.

Two things happened that changed the situation. First Frances and I took a two week holiday on the Island of Ponza, in the Tyrrhenian Sea. For thirteen days I lay in the sun pondering an issue. I knew the BCF had to differentiate itself from the Diebold Research Programme. But how? A stroke of genius has been described as a recognition of the blindingly obvious. Mine came on day fourteen. Unlike the DRP we would actually do research. Second I recruited a secretary. Her name was Brenda Lacey. Brenda was preternaturally quiet and shy. She always peered out from behind a veil of hair. She had worked for a pharmaceutical company. As well as the usual secretarial skills, she was an expert at marketing. So research and marketing would be key. After her Butler Cox days Brenda would become best friends with my daughter Rebecca. But that friendship ended in 2003 when Brenda died of breast cancer.

If the BCF was to be a success we needed to excite potential members. We decided to hold an inaugural meeting. We rented a livery hall, the Painter-Stainers' Hall in Little Trinity Lane. We charged no fee for attendance but the guests had to pay for lunch. The invitation was personal, no one was allowed to send a deputy. Our work on the Rubber Duck project had given us some penetrating insights into the future of the IT world. Alongside Butler Cox speakers we fielded Karl Kozarsky, the American consultant who was working with us on Rubber Duck, and Dennis Holloway, a knowledgeable Rubber Duck executive. We provided a tour d'horizon of the key issues IT teams would face in the years ahead. The audience responded energetically to our prompting. Right at the end of the session we told them that we were planning to launch a membership programme focused on these key issues. They would be hearing from us. The overall feeling attached to the day at the Painter-Stainers' Hall was that the company organising it was already a significant player.

But even with this promising scene-setting it took me some time to find my first member. All my main contacts were members of the DRP. They all said the same thing. They liked what we proposed but couldn't justify paying two subscriptions at the same time. John Playfer of Rank Hovis McDougall gave me the familiar sad story about two subscriptions. But then he added, 'Still we've decided to give you a trial for a year. So we'll be joining.' My first member was in the bag. In the next week I netted Shell, BP, ICI and Unilever. Confidence made all the difference. It looked as though the BCF would be a success.

The Butler Cox/Unilever relationship was fascinating. It seemed to me that Unilever employed two kinds of managers, those who would otherwise have been university professors and those who would otherwise have been running a stall in a dodgy marketplace – nothing in between. When I approached my friend Brian Maudsley (undoubtedly a professor *manqué*) about joining the BCF he said he couldn't justify paying Diebold and us at the same time. 'Look Brian,' I said, 'I want Unilever to be a member. Pay what you like. Pay ten pence. Pay a penny.' They joined and of course paid the full subscription.

I led a consultancy project for Unilever. When I went for the kick-off meeting, the client said, 'Look I've got cancer. So I haven't got time to fuck about. Here are your terms of reference.' My colleagues and I examined the terms of reference. I went back and told the client they were unsatisfactory. 'Just get on with it or withdraw,' he said. A mixed Butler Cox/Unilever team undertook the first stage of the project and submitted their report. 'This is shit,' said the client. 'I'm not paying for this.' I invited him to Butler Cox House to talk it over. To my surprise he brought his boss with him. I explained that the work had been undertaken in strict conformity with his terms of reference, as witnessed by the Unilever staff working on the project. I had warned him that the terms of reference were at fault. 'OK I will pay the bill,' he said. 'But if I do, Butler Cox will never work for Unilever again.' 'If you don't pay the bill,' I said, 'Butler Cox would never wish to work for Unilever again.' His boss burst out laughing.

Butler Cox established important political contacts. Kenneth Baker was the first Minister of Information Technology. He came to lunch at Butler Cox House and was the guest of honour at one of our annual dinners. Kenneth was always marked for higher things, becoming Education Secretary and then Home Secretary. The Thatcher government was determined to end the monopoly on telephony held by BT. When the first Telecoms Bill was published the members of the BCF expressed views about some of its provisions, practical rather than ideological views. Through my contacts at the Department of Trade and Industry I was invited to take a group of those members to present their views to the Secretary of State. Few politicians could have been more distant from my own views than Keith Joseph. But I found him courteous and attentive. The official who showed us into the presence of his boss glanced significantly at me when he addressed Keith Joseph as 'Secretary of State'. Don't call him minister. It took no more than twenty minutes for the members to run through their list of points, the official taking notes. When the meeting ended Keith Joseph left his seat to escort me to the door. He took my arm and smiled. 'You have no idea,' he said, 'what a pleasure it is

in this office to hear rational views calmly presented.’ We had achieved an important success, the clients of our research programme communicating directly with the man leading the policy.

We took research deadly seriously. Every year the BCF published a document that came to be known as the grey book. It contained summaries of about twenty research projects that were candidates for inclusion in the next year’s schedule. Some of them would be ideas put forward by members. Six or eight projects would be chosen. Every member was invited to vote for the projects considered most beneficial and also to indicate if that member’s organisation had case material to offer. Most of the projects we undertook were selected by the vote. Occasionally we picked a topic that got few votes, if we thought it was a torpedo no one had seen coming. The grey book gave our work a relevance to the concerns of the members that the DRP never had. It provided a powerful incentive for members to renew, so that our turnover rate was minimal. We never had a quarter in which membership declined. I told Brenda that I wanted a sales meeting with at least three prospective BCF joiners every fortnight. She would disappear for days at a time to the business library, digging out the details of prospects. Two years into the campaign, Brenda would appear in my office with a sheaf of papers in her hand. ‘I thought you’d like to know,’ she said, ‘that we’ve never had to cancel a sales meeting because there weren’t enough takers and we’ve never held a meeting without recruiting at least one member.’ It was an astonishing record.

The IT Director of the BBC attended one such sales meeting. He brought his deputy with him. Our custom, if a prospective member was serious about joining, was to hand over a couple of our reports as a *dégustation gratuite*. I asked him what he made of the reports he’d read. ‘They are superficial and trite,’ he said. ‘The kind of thing my staff could knock off over a weekend.’ I turned to his deputy. ‘If I were you,’ I said, ‘I’d start looking for another job.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because this man’s arrogance and complacency are as big a threat to your career as to his.’ The boss smiled. ‘We’ll join,’ he said. He had been testing to see how much genuine belief and pride we had in the quality of our work. My anger met his test.

I went to sell BCF membership to the Ford Motor Company. As it happened my visit coincided with a visit from Ford’s global IT boss from Dearborn, Michigan, to the local team a godlike figure. He decided to sit in on my presentation. There were two rows of chairs and maybe twenty people seated on them. The global boss sat in the centre of the front row. It looked more like a sports team photo than a business meeting. As I spoke the boss would sometimes nod agreement, sometimes tilt his head to indicate scepticism. His whole team did the same, like nodding donkeys. Halfway through my presentation the boss stood up and walked to the door. What had I said? Some inadvertent slight on the USA? At the door he turned round. ‘Good pitch,’ he said. ‘We’ll buy.’ I started packing up my slides. ‘Aren’t you going to finish your presentation?’ they said. ‘Of course not. Your boss has finished my presentation.’

The annual service the BCF provided included six research reports chosen via the grey book, a national conference in each territory, an international conference and a series of professional and technical seminars for people reporting to the IT director. It was important to provide value to the IT boss’s direct reports since otherwise they might not support continued membership. We always started our international conferences with a Sunday evening cocktail party, work sessions beginning on Monday. This allowed members and their partners to arrive on Friday if they wished and have a weekend at leisure. I was working in my office late on a Friday afternoon before a conference in Venice when I had a phone call from the Foreign Office. ‘We are taking over your hotel for a meeting of European foreign ministers,’ said the official. I explained that I had booked the hotel and paid a deposit months before, that my clients were already in transit and couldn’t be diverted. ‘Yours is just a commercial interest,’ he said. ‘We are planning the future of Europe. Find another hotel.’

I rang off, desperate. I imagined my clients turning up to be greeted by armed carabinieri. What could I do? The company that owned the hotel was based in Geneva. Having no better idea I telephoned the company and by sheer good fortune got through to the managing director. He listened in silence to my

tale of woe. ‘I’m sorry that I can’t really offer you any help,’ he said. ‘Governments can do anything they like. The only thing I would suggest, whatever you say don’t mention *force majeure*.’ I thanked him and rang off. What did he mean? *Force majeure* is a way of explaining why someone can’t fulfil a contract, due for example to an earthquake or a hurricane. I rang the Foreign Office and spoke to the same official. ‘My legal advisor mentioned *force majeure*,’ I said. There was a deafening silence. Then the official said he would call me back. In half an hour he rang back to say the hotel could accommodate both meetings, his and mine. When we arrived in Venice I found his ministerial meeting had been cancelled anyway. We had the whole hotel. The British Foreign Secretary had probably realised that his football team were on telly. I still have no idea why the *force majeure* argument worked. But I was immensely grateful to the Swiss gentleman for urging me not to mention it.

In the end we had BCF members in Britain, Ireland, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, South Africa, the Middle East, Singapore, Hong Kong and over fifty members in Australia. We established Butler Cox businesses in Germany, France and the Netherlands. In some territories we worked with agents. We never attempted to penetrate North America or Japan. For some reason we never got started in Spain or Switzerland. In each territory where we had a group of members we established a steering group, a committee of five or six members who would orchestrate membership feedback. The initial chairman of the British group was Donald Fearnley, finance director of Rowntree Mackintosh. A point arose at a meeting. ‘What we should be doing...’ said Donald. I caught George’s eye. What *we* should be doing. It was a significant moment. The BCF belonged to its members. We were just its custodians. It’s a perfect commercial formula. People are unlikely to be disloyal to themselves.

When we had enough members in Italy to justify having a steering group I went to Milan and took a few of the members out to dinner. As the discussion of the steering group progressed, I felt that my guests were ill at ease. Something was concerning them. But what? In the end I spotted it. It was something very Italian. ‘In order for a steering group to perform well,’ I said, ‘it is not necessary for its members to understand its function.’ Immediately the atmosphere eased and we reached solid conclusions.

At the heart of the BCF’s work lay the concept of thought leadership. But what did we mean by that? Sometimes it was just a matter of choosing a telling angle of attack. For example when we launched the BCF a key idea floating around was the convergence of technologies. At that time there was a computer business (e.g. IBM), a telecommunications business (e.g. AT&T) and a fledgling office systems business (e.g. Wang). All three businesses were merging into a single IT industry, all driven by the same technology. Everyone was talking about convergence. IBM launched a PABX. People got tired of hearing about convergence. But the Butler Cox angle was to get the computer manager, the telecoms manager and the office manager together and innocently to ask ‘Which of you three is going to get the big IT job? Or will they bring in someone more strategic over all your heads?’ That got them interested. A more general definition of thought leadership is not to tell people things they don’t know. People hate admitting ignorance and detest anyone who knows better. Tell them things they know and draw from that knowledge conclusions that hadn’t occurred to them. That they don’t mind. From then on the conclusions belong to them. But with any luck they remember where the conclusions came from.

## X. WHICH WAY TO THE WHITE HOUSE?



Talk about straws in the wind. I heard someone mention Sam Fedida's Viewdata and started investigating what on earth it might be. In those days if you wanted to transmit data along a wire you needed a special and expensive data link. An ordinary phone line was too limited in bandwidth to take a data signal. Fedida worked at the BT research centre at Martlesham. He had devised a protocol that allowed numbers and letters to be transmitted along an ordinary voice-grade line. You could send very primitive graphics too, just Lego shapes, nothing curvy. My mind went back to our cumbersome way of working in the airline reservations office. The passenger phoned us. We wrote the details of the booking down by hand. The forms were collected and handed to a telex operator, who typed them into her machine. At the distant end the telex would be printed out, torn off the printer and with any luck delivered to its intended recipient. The process was prone to errors and delays. All this passenger information was just letters and numbers. Suppose it could be sent direct from one computer to another. How much cheaper, faster and more reliable that would be.

It occurred to me that plenty of businesses would be interested in the potential of Viewdata but unsure how to assess that potential. They might benefit from an authoritative introductory seminar. I realised however that mounting such a seminar would depend on collaboration from BT. They alone could demonstrate the system. I made an appointment with Roy Bright, one of the BT managers in charge of the Viewdata project. Would they like to run some joint BT/Butler Cox seminars on Viewdata? Of course I expected to be rebuffed. If BT were interested in such a programme they would probably prefer to run it with one of the biggest consultancy firms. Imagine my surprise when BT accepted my proposal and we got the go ahead to plan the first seminar. I booked the Mayfair Hotel conference room, which had a capacity of 250. We fixed the sessions and speakers, Sam Fedida himself being one. We mailed out hundreds of publicity brochures. My wife Frances was handling the PR for Butler Cox. She spent days trekking round the media trying to get them interested in Viewdata, without success. And then a couple of weeks before the seminar there was a two-page spread in the Sunday Times on the potential of Viewdata. After that the applications for places flooded in. We had enough bookings to fill the hall twice over. We fixed the dates for overflow meetings. The one-off seminar would become a series. We had a dinner for all concerned the night before the first seminar. 'What a bit of luck it was,' said Sam Fedida, 'that we got that coverage in the Sunday Times just when we needed it.' Frances said nothing.

On the day of the first seminar a guy from Istanbul turned up without a booking and asked to be admitted. 'Tell him the event is fully booked,' I said. He smiled and advanced towards me, holding out the price of admission in folding notes. 'Show this gentleman to his seat,' I said. Cash is magic. Someone with a booking was bound to have missed his train, got flu or been summoned by his boss. In the last resort one of my team would have to spend the day standing up. Although the conference room at the Mayfair held 250 people the dining room was slightly smaller. I heard one of my team explaining to a delegate that he wouldn't be lunching in the hotel. 'Oh really?' he said. 'So where



does the second eleven lunch?’ ‘Quaglino’s,’ was the answer. ‘Our chairman David Butler will be going with you.’

There were two main application areas for Viewdata. The protocol could be used as a link to effect bookings or purchases. We were witnessing the birth of online transactions, the harbinger of the future Amazon and eBay. But it might also be used to provide public information services, as Wikipedia would do. BT launched its own information service branded as Prestel. The generic name used to cover such systems was Videotex. Our seminars had served to alert those who attended to the possibilities of Viewdata. But they still had a host of questions to ask. Which applications would prosper? What was the favoured mode of transition from old to new? Should superseded systems be gracefully retired or just shut down? How would the technology develop? What standards would be required for international traffic? What scale of investment would be required for carriers, equipment suppliers and users? What terminal devices would be saleable? Some systems proposed using a standard TV as the receptor. But would kids allow Blue Peter to be interrupted so Dad could get the winner of the 4.30? We decided to address these questions in more detail through the medium of a series of research reports, available at a price to all and sundry. We had the details of everyone who had applied to attend a seminar, a first class mailing list. The reports were a big success in the UK and abroad, save in one territory. We appointed an agent to sell the reports in the USA, but he met a wall of sales resistance. Americans couldn’t believe any technological innovation coming from Europe had relevance for them. I once heard an American ask do they have computers in Europe?

One day we got a visit from a guy who worked for the White House, Washington DC. He was interested in one of our reports. It looked as if we had our first US sale. But I had a better idea. ‘We will give you a free copy of the report,’ I said. I saw George blink. ‘Provided you invite us to present it at the White House.’ He went off to consider this proposition. We didn’t expect the suggestion to be accepted. Surely access to the White House was worth more than the price of a report? But accepted it was. Now all we had to do was put the project together. The first two or three firms I invited to participate turned me down. Maybe they thought Butler Cox was too small to lead such an intercontinental mission. But then I phoned my friend Alex d’Agapeyeff, a co-founder of CAP. Alex interrupted me halfway through my first sentence. ‘Count us in,’ he said. We soon had a complete team, including BT. To transport our equipment to the White House we had competing offers. The RAF wanted to land a helicopter on the White House lawn. The Royal Navy wanted to sail our equipment up the Potomac. I seem to remember we used them both.

George instructed our American agent to tell his prospects that anyone who bought a copy of the report would also get an invite to the White House. Twenty or so of them signed up. ‘The last time there were this many Brits here,’ said Alex during his talk, ‘we burned the place down.’ We later learned what lay behind the interest of the White House in our project. The then President Jimmy Carter thought a Videotex system might be used to broadcast White House inspired ‘impartial’ news bulletins to drown out the biased reports put out by newspapers and TV channels. Privately we thought this a far-fetched notion. But forty years later we would see a President issuing his own news bulletins over the network in conflict with the established media. We had done the research. It would take developments in fibre optic cable and packet switching protocols to make this feasible. But Jimmy Carter had the political nous to see that in time it would indeed happen.

The kinds of work Butler Cox was doing changed the lives of our team. A consultant who might otherwise have been tackling a mundane consulting project in England might instead be addressing a roomful of American executives, armed to the teeth with research findings that had a direct impact on their P&L. Or investigating the claim put forward by the managers of a Californian telecom operator that they were using the world’s most powerful switch.

## XI. THE PEOPLE'S FLAG



At this point a warning to potential readers. What follows is not an objective analysis. It is a prejudiced outpouring of leftish political bias. Readers of a nervous disposition may wish to skip this section.

I remember the exact moment when I became a supporter of the Labour Party. It was 1956. Britain, France and Israel had invaded Egypt on the same day. They all swore blind that this was by chance, not a coordinated plan. Good heavens, fancy seeing you here. A government that asked us to swallow such blatant lies had to be opposed. So I joined Labour and have remained faithful all these years, witnessing high points like 1997 and low points like 2019.

In the 1960s Hertford Labour Party was a minority party, holding just one seat on the council. The other elected members were either Tories or independents who were crypto-Tories, no Liberals. Hertford Labour Party asked me to run a council election campaign. My judgment was that after years of unchallenged majorities, the Tories had become complacent and vulnerable. I ran off a leaflet on an ancient and foul-smelling chemical copying machine. It was headed 'Are you satisfied with crocus councillors? They come out in the spring when they need your votes. Then they disappear.' The members of Hertford Labour Party responded to my lead. On polling day we had more people than ever before knocking on doors. We had kids on bikes whizzing round the committee rooms with messages. I was a candidate myself. The council kitchen staff mounted a street march chanting 'Vote vote vote for David Butler'. My ward contained some streets of big expensive houses unlikely to belong to Labour voters. In those days party affiliations such as Labour or Conservative weren't shown on the ballot paper. If I was asked at a posh house what party I belonged to, I said I favoured keeping politics out of local government. I gave them a card instead of an election address. A lot of Tories must have voted for me, a nicely spoken Oxford graduate. We won six seats. I knew the defeated Tories would brand us as Marxist renegades. So when I made my speech at the count I proposed a gracious vote of thanks to the outgoing councillors, which must have shaken them rigid.

I found myself for some unknown reason a member of the planning committee. They had to post me somewhere. Nearly all the other members of the committee were connected in some way to the construction industry. Every time a proposal was tabled one of the members would leave the room on the grounds that he had an interest in this proposal. The others would vote it through. The process was repeated with different absentees for nearly every project. The only time all the members remained present was when a citizen appealed against one of the committee's decisions. Then they all stayed to tell the complainant to fuck off.

Our hold on the seats we'd won would be temporary. Hertford was not a natural Labour domain. If the Tories got their act together and showed even a modicum of diligence they would regain all we had won. But in the meantime we could do some good. The council had built some flats with only electric bar heaters. In cold weather this was totally inadequate. On my way to visit one of the tenants I met my GP. He had come to visit a sick baby. 'Could the baby's illness have anything to do with the inadequate heating?' I asked. 'Possibly,' he replied. Within minutes I was on the phone to the local newspaper. A banner headline about inadequate heating and sick babies got proper heating installed in record time.

I spent a week of my annual holiday working with a Trade Union official. Ron was the district secretary of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU). He was a card-carrying member of the Communist

Party and known to the local press as Red Ron or Ron the Wrecker. We would be quietly drinking coffee and reading the post in his Hatfield office when the phone rang. 'Come on, we've got a dispute,' he would say. Everything stopped for a dispute., even if there were no ETU members involved. We'd leap in his car and drive at breakneck speed to the factory where the workers were on strike. First we would sit down with the trade union reps and shop stewards and go through their list of disputed points. Ron would slow down the flood of complaints, making sure he understood the detail and the history of each disagreement. He allowed me to make notes, which was hardly necessary since he remembered every detail. Then he would sit down with the management and go through the points raised by the workers. Managers were surprisingly willing to walk Ron through the finances of the business, the accounts, the order book, the inventories, to demonstrate what they could afford and what was beyond their means. Nowadays I suppose we would have been compelled to sign a non-disclosure agreement. But in those innocent days they simply trusted us. Then Ron would sit down with the workers again and divide their claims into three categories. 'I can get you this and this. I can get the management to consider and discuss this and this. But you can forget this and this, it would mean redundancies if they agreed that.' During that week I spent there we must have covered a dozen disputes. Every dispute was settled within a couple of hours of Ron's battered car driving up to the plant, the strikers back at work by the time we drove away. The man termed Ron the Wrecker was doing more to keep the wheels of industry turning than any industrial relations consultant.

Of course as a member of the Labour Party it behoved me to join a Trade Union. I opted for the Transport and General Workers' Union, largely because of my admiration for its General Secretary Jack Jones. While I was working for Urwick Diebold my workplace was near St James's Park. So my local branch met at Transport House in Smith Square, then the headquarters of the TGWU and the Labour Party. When I turned up for my first branch meeting the room was full of Labour MPs, trade union leaders and eminences of the Fabian Society. I met Jack Jones and Tony Benn at branch meetings. As it happened, at this time Urwick industrial relations consultants were working on a restructuring project at the Ford Motor Company. I met the Urwick consultant leading the work and asked him how it was going. 'First rate,' he said. 'We've found the unions surprisingly cooperative.' I asked Jack Jones the same question. 'We'll have the consultants for breakfast,' he said with a wicked grin. And he did. Through the TGWU branch and the Fabian Society I got to work closely with Tony Benn and his deputy Jeremy Bray formulating Harold's white hot technology policy. That's how I got Tony to open CITI69.

I loved going to the Labour Party annual conference. In those days nearly every constituency Labour Party had a professional agent. It was a privilege to be invited to the room shared by all the agents when they were off duty. The agents would be sitting round, drinking coffee and chatting. No one was paying the slightest attention to the TV displaying the conference proceedings. Then suddenly twenty hands would go up and twenty voices utter 'Point of order...' The agents had a supernatural ability to detect a procedural irregularity without needing to hear a single word of the debate.



One year there was a huge wave of conference motions about the Vietnam war, urging the UK government to dissociate itself from America. The next step is called a composition meeting. All the organisations submitting similar resolutions are brought together. They try to hammer out a single resolution they can all support and decide who will propose and who will second the motion. The world had just seen the famous – or notorious – photos of Vietnamese children being attacked with napalm. This was indeed shocking. Some delegates wanted us to display copies of the photos at the

entrance of the conference room. But at the composition meeting I argued that we should not rely on revulsion to gain support. The government would say we had only just learned that war was hell. They had known it for a long time. We should first stress our duty as a faithful ally of the USA. When your friend is making a dreadful mistake, your duty is to try to dissuade him. And second we should rely on our role as a co-sponsor of the Geneva accord that was supposed to promote peace. You can't be a referee and wear the colours of one side. The Fire Brigades Union got to propose the motion. I got to second it. There was a ripple of disquiet in the hall when I began by saying that I loved America. But I could sense the relief when I explained that was why I felt so determined to point out to the USA the error of her ways. We won the resolution without relying on those heart-breaking photos. The government ignored it. But at least we might have sustained Harold Wilson in his determination not to send British troops to Vietnam.

I was briefly a parliamentary candidate but I resigned without fighting an election. Why did I resign? I could explain at length but I'll keep it short. There were some policies of the Wilson government that I deplored, especially on Rhodesia. I was a card-carrying member of ZANU-PF, maybe its only white English member. Wilson offered the illegal racist regime a dream deal. Fortunately they were too dim-witted to accept it. Kate and I were breaking up. My constituency party in north London was a nightmare, every meeting marked by sectarian squabbles. But in the end it was simple. I just decided I wasn't cut out for front line politics. If someone disagrees with me, my instant reaction is to wonder whether he or she is right. That's a hopeless reflex for a politician, who must always be right.

The election of 2019 was a disaster for Labour, yielding a majority of 80 to a Tory Prime Minister who lied to the Queen. My friends asked me what went wrong. So here goes. When Jeremy Corbyn became Leader of the Labour Party, it was not a close run thing. He got 60 percent of the popular vote. Then 172 Labour MPs voted no confidence in him. The Parliamentary Labour Party had declared war on the mass membership. The civil war had two effects. It broadcast to voters that Labour was a house fatally divided against itself. No party wins elections like that. And understandably it bred a paranoid bunker mentality in the Corbyn camp. Everyone's trying to get our boss. The anti-Corbyn resolution had been moved by Margaret Hodge. She and her supporters then decided to try a different tack to get rid of Corbyn. The support given by Corbynistas to the cause of Palestinian liberation could easily be misrepresented as antisemitism. Uncritical supporters of Israel and their organisations lined up to join in the campaign, including otherwise reputable journalists who should have known better. The two most widely publicised cases, against Marc Wadsworth and Ken Livingstone, were frankly absurd. If they had come to trial they would have been laughed out of court. But the antisemitism accusations rolled on. Labour MPs like Margaret Hodge, Ruth Smeeth, Luciana Berger and John Mann did more to help Boris Johnson gain his majority than any Conservative. I hope they are proud of what they've done.

Then there is the question of veracity. During the financial crisis Gordon Brown's government borrowed £500 billion to save the banks. To have let banks collapse would have wiped out the savings of millions of families and destroyed the credit lines of thousands of businesses. Osborne supported the Labour rescue plan. Then the Tories claimed Britain's indebtedness was due to Labour's reckless overspending. Infuriatingly, the Miliband front bench did nothing to counter this untruth. It became a universally accepted fact. Next the Tories claimed their austerity measures were the only way of addressing the aching void Labour had left. Austerity (they said) was essential but it worked. But national indebtedness as a percentage of GDP was higher in 2019 than it had been in 2010. Tory austerity had made things worse not better, as most of the world's leading economists predicted it would. Finally the Tories told the voters in December 2019 that they could 'get Brexit done'. Get it done? Getting out is the easy part. Negotiations on the future relationship with the EU hadn't even started and will probably be fraught. The Tories are better at telling lies than Labour is at telling the truth.

Finally Corbyn was trying to achieve something that has been achieved only once since the end of World War II. Two quiz questions. How many people have been Prime Minister since 1945? The

answer is fifteen. How many of the fifteen have won a General Election without having been educated at Harrow, Eton, Oxford or Cambridge? The answer is just one, John Major. Look it up if you don't believe me. Why does the educational elite have an almost complete stranglehold on political power? It's certainly not the case that voters examine the curriculum vitae of every candidate for the job of PM and vote accordingly. I don't pretend that to be the case. Maybe the members of that elite club (of whom I am one) ease the greasy pole for kindred souls. I just don't know. But please don't tell me it's not happening just because I can't explain it. Just look at the facts as stated above. Breaking that stranglehold was too big a challenge for Corbyn. Keir Starmer went to Teddy Hall. Maybe that will work.

Here is my forecast for the future. Brexit will be a disaster. People will die for lack of medications, businesses will shrink after the disruption of just in time deliveries, without EU funds university research will wither. Every major business that goes downhill will take countless peripherals. The EU will insist on the kind of trading relationship with the UK that makes leaving unthinkable for other member nations. Those are just the foreseeable conclusions. There will be others. A consortium of anti-Conservative political parties will unite, in 2024 or later, gain power and bring about three constitutional changes, namely (1) proportional representation for all elections, (2) substitution of an elected Senate for the House of Lords and (3) independent governments with tax and spend powers in England, Scotland and Wales with a federal parliament taking responsibility for defence, foreign affairs and the constitution. Ireland will be united, Ulster will disappear. By the time all this happens or doesn't happen I shall have shuffled off this mortal coil, depriving you of the opportunity to congratulate me or ridicule me.

## XII MEANWHILE...

During the Butler Cox era I had some other interesting activities. I was on the board of a company called Istel. The firm began life as a wholly owned subsidiary of the British Leyland motor company, doing almost all its work for the parent company. A management buyout made it a separate business. Then that business became a take-over target. I had been a director all through these processes. I had played a part in the development of the company. On a Butler Cox study tour I introduced Istel to an American company pioneering a system called Comet, which became the UK's first electronic mail system. I introduced Istel to Viewdata, which enabled them to launch new online services.

At the time of the MBO two finance companies helped fund the move and appointed directors to the board to protect their interests. The Istel board decreed that non-executive directors like them and me were not allowed to become shareholders. I thought this a rather mean-minded ruling but since the other two non-execs had accepted it I decided also to toe the line. That would turn out to be a costly mistake. When the campaign to sell Istel got under way a merchant bank based in the Isle of Man was front runner to handle the deal. I knew nothing about that firm but it struck me that they might not have the range of international contacts that would deliver the best deal for Istel. I had a better idea. A few months earlier a speaker had addressed a Butler Cox Foundation conference. His name was Bernie Goldstein, his company was Broadview and his reputation was as the savviest IT investment adviser in the USA. Bernie and I had become friends. I asked the Istel board whether they would like me to approach Bernie. They would. When I invited him to pitch he instantly agreed.

Bernie gave a stunning presentation to the Istel board, emphasising his unparalleled range of contacts in the American IT world. Somehow it seemed impossible to ditch the Isle of Man firm so it was agreed that they and Broadview would share the job. The rest is history. Bernie got AT&T interested in buying Istel. Of course the giant AT&T were willing and able to pay a much higher price than any other bidder. The deal went through. I then learned that although the two other non-execs were, like me, barred from being shareholders, they both shared the profit their firms made on the deal. Each of them probably benefited well into six figures.

By bringing Broadview to the table I had made it possible to bring AT&T to the deal, thus securing the highest possible price for the other directors. I had done more than any other director to leverage the price of the share. And I alone of the directors got precisely nothing out of the deal. I now realise that I should have asked Istel to make my case to AT&T for an *ex gratia* payment, compensation for my unfair treatment. AT&T would probably have agreed. An extra million or two to them would be pin money. But I never thought about it at the time. And my fellow directors were too busy counting their own rewards to worry about me. Does it still rankle? You bet. More than ever, actually.

I got myself elected a Vice President of the British Computer Society (BCS). Plenty of people told me it was a waste of time and effort to be engaged with a fuddy-duddy bureaucratic organisation like the BCS. There were times when I agreed with them, more often than not actually. But a few other people who were as well-known as I in the IT world also played a part in the life of the society. There were high points. I gave the annual BCS lecture in the House of Lords. And the society offered me at least one memorable episode. The BCS extended an invitation to lunch to the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. For some inexplicable reason the invitation was accepted. On the day of the lunch I was waiting for a train when I encountered a neighbour on the platform. He was a hot shot commercial lawyer and one who enjoyed underlining the supreme importance of his own activities. 'I'm pretty tired,' he said. 'My clients keep insisting that I fly back and forth to New York on Concorde. They don't seem able to take the simplest decision without me there to guide them through it.' Then he remembered that it was incumbent on the high and mighty at least to pretend to some interest in the trivial pursuits of lesser mortals. 'And what are you doing today, David?' 'I'm having lunch with the Prime Minister.' He froze. He walked away without another word. Whether he was

affronted or simply refused to believe me was unclear. My memory of my close encounter with Thatcher is much clearer.

Two impressions struck me as Thatcher entered the room. The first was her astonishing sexual magnetism. Her complexion, her hair and particularly the aura of raw power that she radiated combined to an effect that was frankly knee-trembling. The second impression was generated by her companions, two or three young male officials who resembled ducklings quacking around their stately mother. When she ate her lunch, Thatcher didn't pick bits and pieces delicately from different sides of the plate. She worked her way methodically from one side of the plate to the other, not so much ingesting the food as destroying it. Three BCS council members had been deputed to speak at the lunch. I would speak on education. Alex d'Agapeyeff, my companion on the White House adventure, would speak on the IT industry and Steve Shirley (now Dame Stephanie Shirley) would speak on IT for disabled people. I had designed my remarks to appeal to Thatcher. I emphasised the need to get schoolchildren using computers. I volunteered BCS members to act as unpaid IT tutors in schools. This proposal was of course completely unrealistic. Who would organise such a scheme? Who would persuade head teachers to let unqualified outsiders loose in their schools? Who would monitor their performance? But it sounded good and would cost the government nothing so I felt sure Thatcher would like it. Before the lunch I submitted my draft to the BCS Education Committee for clearance and they rejected it out of hand. So I knew I was on the right track. Thatcher did like it, nodding her approval. Then Alex stood up to talk about the IT industry. He compared the situation in the UK unfavourably with that in the USA, where billions of Uncle Sam's dollars went via defence budgets to support companies like IBM and AT&T, and in Japan, where there was a national plan to develop IT. Talk about red rags to a bull. Thatcher nearly exploded. The inefficient British IT industry couldn't cut the mustard in competition with the Americans and the Japanese so they wanted the UK government to subsidise them. They should get their act together and learn how to compete in international markets, not look to the taxpayer to remedy their deficiencies. Alex was left stunned. This was not what he expected. Thatcher's harangue on the workings of the free competitive market went on for some time. Eventually one of Thatcher's acolytes tapped his watch and whispered in her ear. In seconds she was gone. Steve never got to speak about IT for disabled people. Naturally my fatuous educational suggestion was allowed quietly to lapse, unwept, unhonoured and unsung.

During my tenure as Chairman of Butler Cox there were a number of extremely contentious fraud trials. Men (it never seemed to be women) who were accused of serious frauds would get their defence lawyers to spin out the trial for weeks or months. A labyrinthine mass of evidence would be laid before the jury. Very often it was obvious that the jurors could not follow the complex trail of evidence. Sometimes the judge couldn't either. At the beginning of a trial the prosecution and the defence have a right to a certain number of peremptory challenges. That means they can veto a candidate to be on the jury without having to give a reason. It was said that if you were summoned to be a juror on what threatened to be a lengthy fraud trial, and if you wished not to be selected as a juror, you only had to appear with a copy of the *Financial Times* under your arm. The defence would challenge you off for fear that you might be the one juror in a million who could understand the evidence. Then when the jurors retired to consider their verdict the last words ringing in their ears were those of the judge reminding them that they must be totally convinced of the guilt of the accused before they could return a guilty verdict. No wonder villains got off. I termed the defence in such cases as an organised retreat from the truth.

Anyway the government got fed up with all this. They set up a committee to look at fraud trials and see if there were better ways of conducting them. The chairman was Lord Eustace Roskill. I was appointed a member of the inquiry. Why was I there? The initial idea was that computers might be used to present evidence to the jurors so an IT expert (me) should be on the committee. But after a few inconclusive experiments that idea was largely ditched. The most important change that came about as a result of Roskill was the establishment of the Serious Fraud Office. It brought detection, investigation and prosecution of serious frauds under one roof. We also recommended that a handful

of the most complex cases should be tried not by a jury but by a judge and two expert assessors. But this was a step too far for the government.

The current Attorney General came to give evidence. He believed that trials became excessively long only because of the prolixity of counsel. At the next meeting Eustace Roskill asked us for our reactions. 'The Attorney General believes the problem is prolixity,' I said. 'He went on about it at some length.' Eustace liked that. By the time we came to report Lord Roskill had lost interest in giving jurors computers. But he had discovered that I could write. He asked me to write the introduction to the Roskill report. I felt honoured – and slightly daunted. My text began as follows: 'The public no longer believes that the legal system in England and Wales is capable of bringing the perpetrators of serious frauds expeditiously and effectively to book. The overwhelming weight of the evidence laid before us suggests that the public is right.' One of the judges on the committee was sitting next to me when they all read my draft. He just said 'Wow'. My draft was published pretty much unchanged. It was described as the most powerful introduction to a public report for many years. I had grown to be very fond of Eustace, a man of enormous charm and wit, though not all members of the committee admired his style of chairmanship, discursive in the extreme.



## XIII: EHEU FUGACES



The author circa 1990

At heart, as Eustace Roskill twigged, I have always been a writer. I wrote some of the most significant reports for the members of the Butler Cox Foundation. We kept a record of how many extra copies of reports members ordered. My reports always came near the top of the league. My writing skill got a friend of mine into trouble. IBM decided to introduce separate pricing for some services that had previously been part of an integrated package. They called it ‘unbundling’. They introduced it in the USA first, planning to follow up in Europe later. On a flight back from the USA I mapped out a magazine article. If I were unbundling in Europe, how would my scheme differ from its American model? When the article was published a friend of mine who worked for IBM rang me. He was being investigated by the IBM Thought Police. My guesses were so close to the mark that IBM was investigating any of their team who knew me. They thought someone must have leaked their secret plans.

During my tenure at Butler Cox two magazines for IT readers, *Computing* and *Computer Weekly*, both decided to run essay competitions. I won them both. My first novel, *The Men Who Mastered Time*, was published by Heinemann. It won terrific reviews though the sales were disappointing. I published my second book *Lord of the Lightning* myself. It is a gravely flawed book. I’m sorry that it saw the light of day.

I was also more inclined to take risks than some of my colleagues. Or maybe I just didn’t spot the risks. I led a team on a project for a division of a major oil company. I was presenting the findings of our study when the CEO stopped me dead. ‘Have you read the mission statement of this company?’ he asked. I indicated that I had. ‘Then why are you ignoring it? This is a company run on devolved power, decision making delegated to the business units. So why have you ignored that?’ ‘Because this is a company paying lip-service to devolved power,’ I said. ‘In reality the power remains centralised.’ There was a tense silence. Then the CEO turned to the colleagues flanking him on either side. ‘Is that true?’ he said. They all muttered that it was. ‘Will you please take your team out of the room for a moment, Mr Butler. I need a word with my colleagues.’ One of the colleagues stood up to open the door for us. ‘You have lanced the boil,’ he murmured.

Somehow the board of Butler Cox decided to go for a full Stock Exchange listing, to become a PLC, rather than to join the AIM market for smaller companies. Quite why we took that decision wasn’t entirely clear even at the time. It certainly cost more. Maybe it looked over ambitious. All I can say is that we had a marked dislike for doing anything by half. It was all or nothing. Not long after we became a PLC, it very nearly turned out to be nothing. I met a young American woman with the memorable name of Randy Goldfield. Randy was young, slim, elegant and articulate, a consummate conference speaker. She called herself a JAP, a Jewish American Princess. The first time I saw Randy was the first time I truly understood the meaning of the word *svelte*. She had become the youngest ever female partner in a big American consulting company, then set up her own company Omni. Omni specialised in market research for IT products. These were huge expanding markets, since

money was flooding into these area from massive corporate budgets. All the main players from IBM down bought Omni's annual research report to see how they were doing in the competitive race.

She always had a fund of wonderful stories. She was trying to sell a huge consulting job to a man who came to New York only once in a while. He expressed a desire to dine at a certain restaurant. But the place was popular, booked up for weeks ahead. By incessant pleading Randy persuaded the maître de to find her a table. When she got ready to leave home she put a fifty dollar bill in one pocket for the maître de and a one dollar bill in the other pocket for the car valet. The evening passed off well. But when she reached for the dollar bill for the car valet she found instead the fifty dollars. For his monumental kindness in finding her a table she had rewarded the maître de with one dollar. And he never turned a hair.

Randy came to London to speak at a conference. George and I took her out to dinner. What we called dinner – Randy took something like a lettuce leaf and half a glass of water. A private American investor had funded Omni. For reasons of his own he was now keen to redeploy his capital. So Omni was for sale. Randy had an offer from a British consultancy. Out of loyalty to her original investor she would find it hard to turn the offer down. But the firm making the offer was a lacklustre outfit. The prospect of working with them depressed Randy.

'Maybe Butler Cox should buy Omni,' I said. I fully expected George Cox to veto this wildly overambitious idea. But he seemed intrigued. A feasibility study was launched. It soon developed a momentum that became unstoppable. Part of the impetus came from the thrilling prospect of mentioning to clients and prospects our New York office. And if I'm honest from having a glamorous young woman attending our board meetings in London. Meantime Randy enjoyed driving from her apartment in Manhattan to her house in the Hamptons in the brand new Jaguar we had bought her as part of the deal. Randy's husband John Reid was an Irish American as striking in appearance as herself. To us they seemed the ideal young American couple, dashing and wealthy. But soon after we acquired Omni Randy's marriage fell apart. She claimed that John somehow took everything she owned, including the Jaguar and the Hamptons house.

The market for IT products became complex and confused, with mainframes, minicomputers and desktop devices competing for market share. IBM argued for as long as possible (maybe longer) that a terminal hitched to a big computer was more productive than any stand-alone device. You might think that this confusion would increase the demand for studies like Omni's. But the reverse was the case. Customers decided to defer expenditure until the situation was clearer. So the research budgets of IT businesses shrank too. Randy kept telling us that the sales of the annual Omni report were just delayed, they would come through. But we worried. Randy was transformed, not for the better. She came to board meetings with mascara smudged. She was putting on weight. Her former self-confidence evaporated. 'This is going down to the wire.' The truth came out. No sales were made. Omni was bust. The expense of closing a business down in the USA is horrendous. It came within an ace of taking Butler Cox down with it. In the south of France on a speaking engagement I met a computer journalist. 'It was a disastrous decision to take over the American business,' he said. 'But once it had happened the way you handled it was deft.' 'Did he say deft or daft?' asked Kenneth Bishop, one of our external directors.

Kenneth was a highly experienced and shrewd operator, a former finance director of Debenham's. He believed that Randy already knew the writing was on the wall for Omni and had come looking for a Patsy to take the blow. Was he right? Who knows? I still don't. A few years later George Cox rang me. Had I read a book entitled *The First Wives Club* written by Olivia Goldsmith? No I hadn't. I should buy a copy, said George, and look at the photo of Olivia Goldsmith on the back cover. I did. Olivia Goldsmith was Randy Goldfield. She had become a huge literary success. Her book, the first of several, was filmed starring Goldie Hawn, Diane Keaton and Bette Midler, three bankable movie stars. A few years later I read that Olivia was dead. She had gone into surgery for a minor cosmetic operation and died under the anaesthetic, a conclusion as dramatic as one of her own tales. I saw the

movie but I still prefer to remember that slim and elegant figure holding a hall full of conference-goers utterly spellbound.



Randy Goldfield aka Olivia Goldsmith

One reason we survived the Omni catastrophe was the dependability of the revenue stream from members of the Butler Cox Foundation, stemming from its dominant market position. Every year we added new members. And hardly any members left. What market researchers call our thresh rate was minimal. In Britain we had reached the point where if one of our members met an IT director from a big company that wasn't a member of the BCF, he would say 'Not a member of Butler Cox? That's a bit weird, isn't it?' One of the members once said to me that he couldn't decide whether the BCF was a noble enterprise or a wizard wheeze. 'Maybe it's both,' I said.

The same phenomena, the status of the BCF and its steadily burgeoning income stream, made Butler Cox a take-over target. We had of course a strong and profitable consultancy practice. But consultancy is a feast or famine business. One minute your human resources can be stretched to the limit. A few phone calls can leave you with unassigned staff. The valuation of any company is heavily dependent on the reliability or otherwise of its future income stream. So the reliable BCF income made Butler Cox a more valued stock. Eventually a bid came from Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC) of California. A share price was negotiated. For several years we had run a share purchase scheme allowing most people in the company to become shareholders. So nearly everyone would profit from any deal. Kenneth Bishop remarked that the time had come for the classic manoeuvre of biting their bloody hand off.

But a snag emerged. When a potential deal is lodged with the London Stock Exchange, there is a period when the proposed transaction is conditional. The pause gives buyer and seller a chance to decide whether they truly wish to proceed. As part of the due diligence we had of course prepared our financial statements with enormous care. But we suddenly discovered that our statements were fatally flawed. One of our consultants had been leading a project for a major bank. Several months fees from this project remained unpaid. When our credit controller rang the bank she was told that the bank had never received any of the relevant invoices. There was no project, it was a pure invention. Just what the erring consultant had in mind was impossible to guess. He must have known that the truth would out. We had no choice but to tell CSC that our income figure had been fraudulently inflated. How would they respond? They might withdraw their bid. Or they might reduce their offer. Sharp Californian lawyers were unlikely to let an opportunity like this go by. If CSC withdrew their bid the rules of the game said we had to explain why to the London Stock Exchange. The revelation of an attempted fraud would drive our share price to the floor. I rang the senior CSC officer in charge of the bid to convey the bad news. We would email the new figures. He listened in silence and promised to get back to me. For George Cox and me the next few days were excruciating. If the deal fell through our reputations would head south with the Butler Cox share price. My hand was trembling when the CSC guy called back.

‘These things happen,’ he said. ‘We ourselves had something similar a year or so ago. We still think your company is value for money. The bid stands.’ George and I were both faced with a choice. We were both offered contracts to stay on after Butler Cox had become part of CSC. George decided to stay. But not for long. He reached a disagreement with the CSC executive put in charge of integration and soon departed. I left at once. The former Butler Cox staff wouldn’t like the changes CSC would want to make. If I was there I would be a natural focus for their discontent. And the sale of my shares meant I had a sound financial position. So I would prefer to make my own way. Was it the right decision? Possibly not. Later on CSC would hire me as a freelance consultant. They charged me with, among other things, writing the one hundredth report of the BCF, a kind of memorial edition, which I greatly enjoyed. All in all I had a good time as a CSC stringer. Maybe I should have stayed. There is a danger in old age that one becomes more aware of opportunities missed than opportunities seized and exploited.

What opportunities did Butler Cox miss? My friend Derek Martin ran a successful market research company. In the BCF membership we had a perfect panel for research into the IT market. Most of the IT companies that would be clients for such a service were also members of the BCF. We were in regular touch with them. Could we have set up a successful market research business in collaboration with Derek? I considered it. Derek was good at selling market research projects. We would have been good at structuring and delivering them, brilliant at writing them up. I was deterred by the thought that the BCF members, paying us a subscription, might resent being used to feed another business. But we probably could have dealt with that.

Another question: should we have got into systems implementation? Butler Cox ended up worth tens of millions. Friends of mine like Steve Shirley and Philip Hughes built businesses that employed thousands of people, took on huge implementation projects and were worth billions. We might have done the same. But implementation is a risky business. One bad deal can sink you. CSC’s failed NHS projects would have sunk a smaller company like ours. For every implementation company that succeeds there are probably a dozen who struggle or fail. Steve once told me that but for the benevolent intervention of a friend, her business would have been in the red when it had hardly got started. People like Philip Hughes learned the implementation trade working for other companies before starting on their own. We had no such prior experience. On the only occasion when Butler Cox stepped outside our comfort zone, the US deal, it nearly sank us. We were probably right to stick to our original business model, a boutique not a superstore.

As might have been predicted the consultancy practice of Butler Cox quickly disappeared inside CSC. CSC had its own style of consulting and ours didn’t fit. But the Butler Cox Foundation survives to this day, though of course under a different name.

In Ireland I had an experience that darkened my life. I was staying alone in a rented house in Dublin working on a project of my own when my grip on reality weakened. At the time I had a good many problems, financial, professional and marital. They seemed to crowd in on me. When the symptoms of my difficulty manifested themselves they were alarming. One day I was preparing to leave the house to go shopping. I always left the house keys on a table in the kitchen so that I could easily find them. But on this occasion when I looked for the keys the table top was bare, there were no keys there. I went upstairs and went through the pockets of all my clothes twice. No keys. Had I lost them? Would I be imprisoned in the house until I could get a duplicate set from the landlord? I went downstairs to think it over. My keys were on the table in the kitchen. They were not hidden under a tea cloth. They were there in plain sight. But they had not been there ten minutes earlier. Similar experiences began to crowd in. I went to see a GP I had contacted about some other more trivial matter. He listened carefully to my account. ‘You should by rights be in hospital,’ he said. ‘But I’m going to trust you. Here’s my phone number. Ring me about three times a week just to let me know you’re OK.’ A little later my daughter Justine visited me in Dublin, bringing with her a healthy mix of optimism and affection. She got me over the hump. But the memory of those unstable times remains with me and is, to be candid, never that far distant.

I had better relations with my first three children than I deserved. They were very young when their mother and I split up. But they never treated me as a deserter. Gideon David Harry Butler studied physics at Warwick University. When he graduated he took a manual job in a tarmac factory just to give himself time to work out what he really wanted to do. He was demonstrating a marked degree of common sense. Where that gene came from is anyone's guess. He made his career as a designer of electronic circuitry. He emigrated to the USA and now lives in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He is the chief circuit designer for a firm that makes the cardiac equipment that goes in ambulances. Thousands of Americans owe their lives to my son and his colleagues.

Alison Jane Butler won a scholarship to a Cambridge college. There is a story to her success. When I won my Oxford scholarship the Headmaster of Mill Hill asked if I would like to go and tell my parents. I took the tube from Mill Hill East to Archway and then the bus to Crouch End. By sheer chance as I alighted from the bus my father was about to board it. He let the bus go without him. I could tell from his face that he was alarmed to see me. He must have thought I was in trouble. 'I've won a scholarship to Oxford,' I said. 'Come home,' he said. 'I'll make you a bacon sandwich.' Twenty odd years later Alison sent me an email to announce her own scholarship. 'You owe me a bacon sandwich.' After Cambridge Alison did a master's at East Anglia. She then went on to become a university don, an assistant professor in film studies at Reading.

Justine Louise Butler went from school to a college of art but quickly dropped out. She became a punk, dressing in macabre black gear with lots of pins and chains, living in squats. She rang me with some news. She was pregnant. How would I respond? I found myself saying 'If that's what you want, I think it's wonderful.' Justine got interested in the subject of diet. That led her to do a foundation course in science at the University of the West of England. She did well enough to enrol for a bachelor's course. She got a First and went on to take a doctorate at Bristol University. She works for a Vegan charity in Bristol. She acts as the charity's parliamentary spokesperson, visiting both houses to brief the high and mighty. So two of my daughters are doctors and one is a professor. They make me feel like an ignoramus.

Rebecca Butler, known as Becky, is my daughter with Frances Butler. Becky was born prematurely. She has cerebral palsy and is a full time wheelchair user. Despite her physical impairment however she is very intelligent. She has taken three degrees at the University of Roehampton, just up the road from where we live in Barnes. Her bachelor's is in English literature, her master's in children's literature and her doctorate in education. Her metier is in children's literature. She works as a volunteer in two primary schools, tutoring the children in literacy. Most children can work their way through a text understanding the meaning of each individual word. They have to learn to put all the words together into a semantic framework and grasp the meaning the author is seeking to convey, the thoughts and feelings being invoked. Becky has become an expert in helping young readers cross that existential border. She introduced one group of primary school children to the concept of intertextuality! Since the lockdown began Becky has been conducting her tutorials via Zoom. It's not the real thing but it's better than nothing.

Becky writes articles for the leading learned journals in her field and speaks at its conferences. She reviews books for three journals. One of the most pleasing moments of her tutorial career came when she met the mother of one of her pupils. 'He loves the sessions with you, Dr Butler,' said the mother. 'He never thought to mention that you're in a wheelchair.' She published a small volume of poems when she was a teenager and is now hard at work on her first novel.

Becky's professional career has led her to befriend some of the most significant characters in her field. When one of the Potter books was about to be published, the editor of a journal had the nerve to write to Jo Rowling and ask for a review copy. Jo replied that the book was subject to a strict embargo. But if a writer came to Edinburgh she would grant an interview. Becky and I flew to Edinburgh and had lunch with Jo in the very restaurant where she had sat writing the first Potter book.

Jo Rowling is a woman of breath-taking personal appeal. A couple of weeks after we returned from Scotland there was a Potter book signing at a bookshop in Dulwich. I drove Becky down to attend. A young man on the door told us that this was a strictly ticket only event and that the room was unsuitable for a wheelchair. 'Look,' I said. 'Just tell Jo that Becky Butler is here.' The young man disappeared. He returned seconds later, parting the crowd like Moses at the Red Sea to allow a passage through for the wheelchair. Jo, doubtless for security reasons, was behind a barricade of tables. She vaulted the tables to reach Becky and give her a massive hug. This woman sat down to write a book and founded a global business empire. Yet she was still all heart. She wrote to Becky apologising for the behaviour of 'that Muggle on the door'.

When Becky got her doctorate the Chancellor of Roehampton University conducting the investiture at the Festival Hall was Jacqueline Wilson. Becky had already encountered Dame Jacqueline at a review conference, politely correcting something the great woman had written about a disabled character, a correction Dame Jacqueline accepted with becoming grace. Before the investiture started Dame Jacqueline announced that while most of the graduates would get a handshake, one or two friends might get a hug. When Becky rolled on to the stage the warm embrace Dame Jacqueline bestowed on her marked her out as a friend.

For about twenty years now my health has been dodgy, shortness of breath being my main symptom. I have two faulty valves in my heart. I have intermittent atrial fibrillation which gives me an irregular pulse, I had pneumonia when I was working in Paris which left me with a badly scarred lung and I have type II diabetes. This seems a depressing catalogue of frailties. But when I consider how much I used to smoke and drink when I was young, it is nearly miraculous that I have survived to my current age of 84. As long as I remember to begin every day gobbling down a panoply of pills, it seems I can go on even a little bit further.

I have taken up a new career, that of the playwright. I wrote a play jointly with Jack when we were at Oxford. It was awful. So I left it sixty years before trying again. I wrote a play entitled *They're All At It: the Così Fan Tutte* play. Two couples go to see the Mozart opera. They discuss what they've seen and, with the aid of an American scholar, the roles of Mozart and his librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte in creating the opera. At the start of the second Act Mozart and Da Ponte appear in person to help the show along. Then the opera reaches out and grabs the four protagonists, turning them professionally and romantically upside down. My play was staged as a rehearsed reading by the Creaction Theatre Company at the Electric Theatre in Guildford. The director was Keith McDonald, whom I had known since we were thirteen year olds at Mill Hill. The performance took place on Tuesday March 10 2020. We got a good audience. Was it a success? No one walked out. No one asked for money back. In my opinion that is as far as any writer can go in claiming success for a first night. It's more than Sam Beckett could claim for *Godot*. My next play is a short one act effort entitled *OMG*. It takes place in heaven and features God and the archangel Gabriel. Gabriel explains how he devised the physics underlying the famous two slit experiment just to baffle humanity and to suggest the workings of a mysterious divine hand. The play is currently being recorded for online distribution. See how we get on.

My next full length play will be about Luigi Pirandello. In the first Act the president of an Oxford theatre company, two of his actors, the resident director and a character known as the Sound Guy are discussing the possibility of staging a revival of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. It's a very costly play to mount with a huge cast. And will a modern audience respond well to Pirandello's mysterious style? The second Act takes place in a world where deceased playwrights exist. Pirandello is there. He has to defend his concept of dramaturgy against criticism from Sam Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Lotte Lenya (representing the absent Brecht) and Euripides.

The lockdown necessitated by the corona virus began a few days after my play was presented in Guildford. A week later and the show would have been cancelled. I am on the list of the shielded. Frances, Becky and I have stayed at home since the middle of March. As I write it is early August.

Twenty one weeks in Limbo and no end in sight. What is to become of us? Who knows? We live in hope of a vaccine.



Sir George Cox

Let me close this patchwork quilt of a memorandum by talking about my friend and colleague Sir George Cox. After George left CSC he was appointed boss of another consulting company. But he had been misled about the financial stability of the company and didn't stay long. Next he was appointed CEO of the UK division of the computer supplier Unisys, a serious leadership role. Two significant phenomena marked his time with Unisys. In the USA on business George had a nearly fatal cardiac episode. He was told that he was technically dead for a period. After surgery he recovered. Then Unisys reorganised itself. The regional structure was abolished in favour of lines of business. George was appointed to head the European services sector, the non-hardware business. Unisys services were actually making huge losses masked only by other revenue coming to the same business units. The new structure showed these losses in sharp relief. George was always at his best when challenged. His action was painful but essential. He cut costs across the board and turned a loss making enterprise into a profitable one, transforming the Unisys share price in the process.

George became Director General of the Institute of Directors. I remember being invited to his Pall Mall headquarters for lunch. As we walked through the building his team were practically tugging their forelocks as the new DG processed past them. 'If your Mum could see you now...' I murmured. His time at the IoD was eventful. George set out to work constructively with the government of the day, whatever its political colour. But some members of the IoD Council saw their duty as unswerving loyalty to the Conservative Party, whoever was in power. And that meant relentless opposition to the government of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Some of the Tory activists on the council, seeing him as a traitor to the true blue cause, were preparing to launch a vote of no confidence in George at the next council meeting. George knew how to defeat that move. 'I have received an invitation,' he said when the council met. 'Council members are invited to tea with the Prime Minister at Ten Downing Street on Thursday.' No one moved the motion of no confidence. The Labour government found another way of ensuring that the IoD did not become a puppet of the Tory opposition. In 2007 George received a knighthood in recognition of his determination to keep the IoD focused on national goals rather than yielding to narrow party political interests. That silenced his critics. George later went on to become chairman of the Design Council and to produce a report on the importance of design for the Brown government.

Gordon Brown's wife Sarah wrote a book in which she asked a range of successful people who had most influenced their development. She asked that question of George. His answer was that David Butler had influenced him more than anyone else. I cannot say how touched I was.

Like me, George has also had his share of health problems. Just recently he had a tumour on his pituitary gland and blood on his lungs. While he was in hospital one of the nurses called him Mr Cox. His wife Lorna mentioned that in fact it was Sir George. He was moved to a private room. George was taken for specialised treatment to the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford. Later the doctors told him they thought he was there to die. When the pandemic struck we were both on the shielded list. Like me he is obliged to take a panoply of medications to keep going. But like me, keeping going seems to be what he's good at.

In recent years I have sometimes met some old geezer who used to work in an IT department in those distant days. 'You're the Butler of Butler Cox?' he'll say. 'We ran our whole department on your reports.' Before the lockdown George and I would meet about once a quarter for a fish and chip lunch and, in his words, set the world to rights - two old geezers remembering the days when together they built a business.