

BroganBlog



Today it's Biking Dave

Have just got round to watching the new day-in-the-life [video](#) on WebCameron. It looks like they are testing a new format, with soaring theme music to accompany him as he cycles through Parliament Square (I like that they include the footage of him self-consciously removing his helmet and waiting patiently - ahem - at the lights by Churchill's statue). Someone will have to explain to me the legal bit about not being allowed to show Mr Brown's responses, but the result is you get Mr Cameron's answers run together, which is effective.

I ran into him that evening outside his office as he headed off in his cycling gear. He took me to task for describing him as "snippy", making the points he made in the film: that he was surprised at how unprepared Mr Brown was for an obvious set of questions. Watching this video, I stick by the point I'm (as ever) struggling to make: Mr Cameron is jaw-droppingly good at this PMQs thing and has got Mr Brown pinned to the ropes every week. And each week my bones tell me there's a danger that he can appear too good, too much the Flashman he so admires. Yet I put this to one of the inner circle's sharpest minds who argued that the option is letting Gordon off the hook, and that the Tory leader's duty is to seize every opportunity to go for the kill.

Is Labor ahead again?

There's an Ipsos MORI poll out tonight which puts Labor ahead again, by one point, and it was taken before either the Hain resignation or the Conway disaster. The numbers are CON 37%(-5), LAB 38%(+3), LDEM 16%(+1). I defer to [Anthony Wells](#) on the initial analysis. But this means I'm even more reassured by the view in the Tory top circle that this is going to be a long year of trench warfare. If this doesn't clear the final wisps of complacency, nothing will.

PS There's a story around tonight about George Osborne deciding to send his children to a private school. What's interesting is the gossip about how it came out. I'm told the Telegraph had the story, and approached Mr Osborne's office about it. Imagine their annoyance a few hours later to find the tale in the later editions of the Evening Standard, written in a way that was not particularly unhelpful to the Shadow Chancellor. I mention this merely as an example of the wallpaper boy's admirable knack for playing hardball

Rejoice! Carla is coming



At least I do hope so. Nicolas Sarkozy comes to Britain for a state visit, next month from memory. Buckingham Palace has been scratching its perruqued head at the prospect of accommodating his maneating girlfriend Carla Bruni. Word in Paris was that the model turned chanteuse was pressing for an early wedding to ensure she could join him in London as Madame Sarkozy, and get the full treatment as Premiere Dame de France. Turns out the two [got married](#) this afternoon, which means we can look forward to the jollity of having a woman described by a rival as "a praying mantis with a Terminator smile" in town. I wonder what Gordon and Sarah Brown will offer as a wedding present? Perhaps a copy of [Courage](#), though I hardly think they need it.

Well done Wallace

Is this the moment the dam bursts? Congratulations to Ben Wallace, the Conservative MP for Lancaster and Wyre, who has today released a comprehensive breakdown of his expenses, including details and receipts for claims *below* the £250 minimum (the Sunday Times has them [here](#) and [here](#)). His unilateral action will not endear him to some of his colleagues (not just Tories) who would rather we didn't know precisely how they spend the money we give them. It pre-empts any further steps David Cameron might choose to take. It is also way ahead of Gordon Brown who, beyond encouraging transparency, has yet to propose anything concrete. Mr Wallace has done the taxpayer a favour by coming clean and showing other MPs how it should be done. A small step in restoring his party's reputation.



What's the public verdict?

I'm struck that today's papers have no specific polling on the fall-out from the Conway scandal. We still don't know what damage it's done. ICM in the Sunday Tel didn't ask any Conway questions, and [Anthony Wells](#) isn't sure it properly reflects reality. We know there's a lot of backroom anguish at CCHQ about the impact such an old-fashioned case of "Tory sleaze" will have on the Cameron modernisation project. It's bad for all MPs but it is the Tories who have particular cause to worry. Matthew d'Ancona [argues compellingly](#) why the case has "a very specific toxicity for the Tory party" (although I reckon he's wrong about banning spouses). Derek Conway pointing the finger at his colleagues, and the Winterton case, should dispel any doubt about that. But how bad is it? Gordon Brown hopes very. Surely an opportunity here for him to launch a unilateral strike by releasing all Labour expenses and inviting Dave to follow suit? Surely all those jolly rumours of Scottish Labour MPs and their mileage scams aren't putting him off?

Barack music to political ears

Thank you to [Iain](#) in DC for pointing me to this new Barack [music video](#), which was released on Friday and seems to be doing a roaring trade on the Interweb thing. The song, by Black Eyed Peas frontman Will.I.Am and directed by Jesse (son of Bob) Dylan, is Barack Obama's Yes We Can speech in New Hampshire set to music, with a string of mega famous celebs lending their voices (that said the only ones I recognised were Scarlett Johansson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar).

To my mind, anyone remotely interested in what Mr Obama describes as "the unlikely story that is America" will find this helpful. It illuminates not just Obamania, but why his candidacy is important to the future of politics on both sides of the pond. Consider the grim shopworn headlines of today's papers, and then watch this. Forget that he might make a lousy president, I defy you not to find it a useful antidote to the despair of Conwayite-Hainism.

So what happened to DD's letter?

There's a nasty anti-democratic whiff to the revelation that the cops have bugged an MP. Naturally, I'm curious about a parliamentarian who has "ordinary, routine meetings" with someone suspected of Talibano-beardism, but that doesn't excuse what looks like a blatant example of contempt of Parliament by the Met. I'm told that it's not a case of mistaken bugging, and that the Yard are being quite bullish about eavesdropping on Sadiq Khan. Sir Ian Blair will have to explain why he's free to ignore Parliamentary convention.

Here in the village what's generating more interest is the disappearance of David Davis's letter to Gordon Brown alerting him to the issue. He sent it on Dec 11, but No10 says it has no record of it. Now, the Tories wonder if this isn't an example of the PM's reluctance to answer awkward letters from Tories (especially from David Cameron). Brown Central on the other hand say they are baffled: why didn't DD call to alert them as is usual in serious cases? Or to find out if they had got it? And why didn't he raise the issue with the Speaker for example, or the Home Secretary, or even Mr Khan?

Labour folk watching Sky and News 24 tonight think they see a Tory rescue operation underway, with lots of stories being thrown over the side of the gently sinking Cameron balloon. What better to get a bit of momentum back - and draw attention away from the Conway affair - than a bugging row story in the Sunday Times, maternity nurses in the Observer and cops n' tax in the Sunday Tel. What a suspicious lot they are.

Bugging Khan

This bugging business is getting murkier. In his statement Jack Straw has absolved ministers, identified a legal loophole for breaching the Wilson Doctrine, and dropped it all in Sir Ian Blair's lap by describing bug-under-the-table operations as "intrusive" and therefore requiring the say-so of a senior copper. The BBC is running hard [Nick Robinson's report](#) on the role of Thames Valley Police, but nevertheless I'm told the directing force was the Met. And who directed them? Tory MPs asked Mr Straw about the role of foreign intelligence*. That said, I hear the Security Services did not have a stake in this particular operation.

Mr Straw reminded MPs of a little-noticed Written Answer from Gordon Brown last September, when he clarified the Wilson Doctrine by saying that it "applies to all forms of interception that are subject to authorisation by Secretary of State warrant." We asked Mr Brown's chief spokesman if this could be read to exempt operations such as the one that eavesdropped on Mr Khan. The PM, we are told, "supports the general principle underlying the Wilson Doctrine."

*I need to find out more.

PM's letter to the Speaker

This is the text of the letter sent today by Gordon Brown to Michael Martin. Note that he talks about publishing past spending details, and not just future ones, and that he is asking all Labour MPs, and not just frontbenchers to comply. That's his answer to David Cameron. The bidding war continues.

Dear Michael

I welcome your announcement yesterday that the Members Estimates Committee will now look into the whole area of Members' office staff, expenses and other allowances.

I believe it is essential that we use this opportunity to achieve a root-and-branch overhaul of the current system and deliver new mechanisms and procedures which can meet the public's expectation for greater transparency and for propriety.

The public need to be reassured that all taxpayers' money used to support Members in their work both in Parliament and in their constituencies has been properly spent and accounted for - not just in the future but in the past, and not just for Ministers and Shadow Ministers but for all Members.

As a result, I have made clear to all Labour MPs that they must be fully transparent in their declarations and must abide, not by April but as soon as possible, with the Committee on Standards and Privileges' opinion that the employment of family members should be declared.

Labour MPs want to cooperate fully with your review, with its findings, and with any further requirements it may make upon them and we will insist that this happens.

To deliver the kind of root-and-branch overhaul of the current system we need, I believe your review will need to be a deliberative and orderly process which delivers genuine and lasting reform.

I like all Members would not favour a quick fix which would fail to solve the problem in the long term.

In particular, I do not believe it will be sufficient simply to require Members to provide more information in the future than they do at present concerning their staff, expenses and allowances.

We must also put in place the most robust systems that can advise on, monitor, identify and investigate any abuse of the rules.

Secondly, we need to be clear that where there have been serious allegations and reported abuses of the current rules, these will be thoroughly investigated, whatever future system for transparency is agreed.

I look forward to working with you on this important work.

Yours sincerely

GORDON BROWN

Poll PS

Been meaning to do this all day, honest, but have just been prodded gently by one of Dave's top hares (thank you, George) about [this post](#) yesterday in which I bemoaned the lack of polling on the Conway effect, and my reference [here](#) to the "gently sinking Cameron balloon". The prodding of course is about this morning's Times poll which shows all is fine and dandy in Tory land and the voters don't in fact blame Dave for Derek. The numbers are L31 (-2) C40(+3), LD17(-2).

The key point is that this is only the second time the Conservatives have had a 40pc vote share in a Populus poll, 31pc is the lowest Labour share in a Populus poll since Gordon Brown became Prime Minister, and 9pc is the largest ever lead in a Populus poll. It also puts George and Dave ahead of Alistair and Gordon in economic competence.

What did Straw know?

Things could get sweaty for Jack Straw tomorrow. It's emerged that he knew about media interest in Sadiq Khan's meetings with Babar Ahmad at HMP Woodhill back in December. The version of events we are being presented with goes something like this: Sunday newspaper contacts Ministry of Justice press office to ask about Mr Khan's meetings with Ahmad and the possibility that they were bugged (interesting that the inquiry coincides with DD's missing letter to No10 - are the two events related?). On December 14, news of the approach is passed to Mr Straw's private office and, specifically, his special adviser Mark Davies. Mr Davies tells his boss about the newspaper's interest in Mr Khan and Ahmad but - this is the crucial bit - "forgets" to tell him about the bugging angle. Hence the Justice Secretary telling MPs yesterday that the first he heard about the bugging was last Saturday.

Is this believable? I don't know. Mr Davies is a straight-dealing guy; Mr Straw is a canny operator and astute parliamentarian who has been around too long to be caught telling porkies on the floor of the House; and anyway what harm would there be in saying he did know about it? The difficulty is that "I forgot" is a tricky excuse to sell in these shark-infested waters, even if it is true. Before we all whip ourselves into a lather of indignation, let's remember this all started with cops legitimately monitoring a terror suspect and his mate in the Government.

David Davis - One man wrecking crew



Is David Davis the most dangerous man in Westminster? Contemplating the headlines of the past week is like following the trail of a crack demolition squad wrecking havoc behind Government lines. All bets are that he was behind the well-played briefing operation on the Flanagan report that has exposed its criticisms of Government policy before tomorrow's announcement. He also engineered last week's Tory announcement on sus laws which forced Downing Street to try a late night spoiling operation. And he was instrumental in getting the MP bugging story up in lights, niftily distracting attention away from the Conway affair. I do hope Gordon Brown isn't fooled by the easy smile, the reasonable manner and the self-satisfied chuckle.

Degrees of separatism

This is some of what we have learned this week:

- The Archbishop of Canterbury says it is "unavoidable" that parts of Britain should be surrendered to Sharia law.
- But Sharia law isn't in line with "British values", according to Gordon Brown's spokesman.
- One of Mr Brown's Whips is Sadiq Khan MP, who was bugged by the police on a prison visit to his friend Babar Ahmad.
- Babar Ahmad is fighting extradition to the US on charges that he is an al-Qa'eda militant who has used the internet to promote terrorism and the Taliban in Afghanistan.
- Al Qa'eda has taken to using women with Down's Syndrome as suicide bombers and training 11 year olds in terror tactics, all to bring about the global rule of Sharia.
- Sharia law is not big on gay rights or women imams.
- Rowan Williams supports gay rights, women priests, and Sharia law.

Brown defeated in Commons

The Tories are allowing themselves a little victory jig this evening. They claim to have caught the Government napping during the deliberations on the Lisbon Treaty. A Tory amendment to require the European Scrutiny Committee to sit in public should have been defeated. But it being Thursday afternoon, there weren't enough Labour MPs around to secure a victory, so the Whips ran up the white flag and allowed the amendment through without a vote. Coincidentally, just yesterday a Government person was bemoaning to me the reluctance of some Labour MPs to put in the hours.

Sir Gus O'Donnell rules out tax rises

This is intriguing. The Cabinet Secretary has ruled out tax rises.

He was addressing a Guardian public services conference today (report [here](#)). Discussing the growing demands on public services, he said: *"We are going to have real problems, because of the competitive nature of globalisation, it is going to be hard to put tax rates up. The increasing demand for spending more which falls on the state ... means that we are going to have to do more with less. We have to be more innovative. The idea that we will solve some of that demand by telling care workers to be five or 10% more efficient - absolutely not."*

Given that Whitehall is preparing for some tough times on the public spending front, this will make waves.

Will others follow the Wallace example?

On Sunday I drew attention to Tory MP Ben Wallace and his [unilateral decision](#) to put all his expenses online, for all to see. What to you and me seems an obvious and praiseworthy step for a parliamentarian was actually a risky one for Mr Wallace. David Cameron may be striking the right poses on transparency, but behind him the Tory ranks are seething with anger at the mess they find themselves in.

Mr Wallace has not had an easy time of it. He was criticised for jumping before the others at the emergency meeting of MPs called by Mr Cameron at the beginning of the week, and has had to endure low-level grief from colleagues and Whips who believe he has made life difficult for everyone else. It might be worth ringing Dave's office to ask if the leader supports Mr Wallace's action,

which was not in line with Mr Cameron's "not now but later" approach to transparency.

In the meantime, I'm curious to know of other MPs who have adopted a similar approach. Nadine Dorries, for one, posts details of expenses on her [website](#). I've heard a few other names but haven't found their websites yet.

If you need reminding about why it is now vital that MPs publish the detail of their expenditure, have a read of my colleague Ian Drury's [report](#) on the evidence put before the Information Tribunal yesterday by a Commons official trying to block the publication of all expenses. Fish tanks and iPods!

Will Gordon speak up for his Chancellor?



This is a dangerous week for Alistair Darling. It's half term at Westminster, not much is going on, and when things are quiet there's mischief about. Put together the dire headlines for the Chancellor yesterday and today (Not just ["Knives out as Darling loses trust of City"](#) - Sunday Times; ["Why Darling is a menace to Britain"](#) - William Rees-Mogg; ["Darling's confidence seems misplaced"](#) - Anatole Kaletsky; but more importantly the FT/Telegraph pincer movement on non-doms) and you get a picture of trouble.

Brown Central is annoyed, and want it shut down. But how? Tonight the buzz is that non-doms is the next u-turn, after the one on CGT last month. The FT is rumoured to be about to put the knife into Mr Darling. The City is still agog at the mayhem at last week's Engineering Employers' Federation dinner when rowdy City types heckled him after being harangued on the iniquities of the Government's by various business big names. There were profuse apologies the next day, but it seems the Tory business world no longer feels a need to pretend politeness for a Labour Chancellor, a bad sign.

So how does Gordon Brown play it? He can hardly declare he has "full confidence" in his Chancellor. We get whispers tonight that Ed Balls, previously a successful Minister for the City who now has his sights on the Treasury, is being bombarded with complaints from denizens of his old stomping ground, shares their unhappiness about the new treatment of non-doms, and is passing their moans on to the PM. Can this be true though?

You see, what should make Mr Brown and Mr Balls pause, and even consider putting some energy into shoring up Mr Darling, is that he knows an awful lot. His loyalty is a laudable thing, but I'm sure it has a limit. He is having to sell a package of reforms that were cooked up by in No10 in a political panic, then imposed on the Treasury. You could legitimately say it serves Mr Darling right for

putting his trust in Mr Brown. But I'm certain that if he goes down, he's taking the PM with him.

Clarifying Darling's "clarification"

Trace the origins of the latest "skids under Darling" rumours and you can go back to last week's Digby Jones interview in the FT, when he voiced unease over the plan to slap a £30,000 levy on non-doms after seven years of residence. That got the City going with more complaints, culminating in Irwin Stelzer on Newsnight last night saying it was now too late for a u-turn as the message has already gone out: Brown's Britain no longer welcomes wealthy foreigners, and they are leaving.

But the real trouble comes from two anonymous quotes in Jonathan Oliver's Sunday Times [story](#), one from "a Labour MP close to No10" and the other from "a senior Treasury civil servant". The former said it was time to get rid of Alistair Darling, the latter said Ed Balls would do a better job as Chancellor. Critically the "Labour MP" quote was reproduced by the FT today.

Brown Central has made discreet inquiries of the 20-odd MPs who could remotely be the source for the first quote, but has drawn a blank. I confess I've had no luck either. There's no shortage of folk who think it was Ed Balls, who wants to be Chancellor (I've lost count of the number of people who have told me in recent months that the early election idea was being championed by the golden boy because, so as night follows day, a reshuffle follows an election). I have my doubts: not that he wants the Treasury job, but that he would be so mad as to encourage this story. Cui bono, as the detectives have it: Brown Central's view is a resounding "not us".

As for the civil servant, there's surprise that anyone would voice such thoughts in public, even if some do believe that the past few months might have been handled better under Mr Balls.

For what it's worth, this is the view tonight from inside the bunker.

- The non-doms plan as set out in the PBR never said anything about forcing disclosure of foreign holdings. "Ambiguity" in the draft legislation published a few days ago suggested HMRC might be giving itself powers to launch fishing expeditions on foreign jurisdictions to snoop around non-doms. "Clarification" today from HMRC boss Dave Hartnett has ruled that out. It's a complicated area, these things happen.
- Alistair Darling was put in the Treasury because he was precisely the kind of sanguine, grizzled veteran who could withstand inevitable knocks at this

point in the political and economic cycles, provide leadership, stay calm and weather the storm.

- As for his future? "Whoever got this job would be tested and he has the strength of personality and leadership to see the Treasury through". Spring reshuffle? Sacking? "Madness. No way".

Naturally, they would say this etc, but I believe it. I may be alone. George Osborne, who possibly wants to be Chancellor even more than Ed Balls, scents blood. Even though non doms have cause to fear his reforms more, he says bluntly "in times of economic uncertainty, people need a Chancellor who can demonstrate strength of leadership and consistency of judgement. With Alistair Darling we have neither."

Why isn't Michael Fallon in the Shadow Cabinet?



Has anyone - apart from [ConservativeHome](#) - noticed that the Member for Sevenoaks is pound for pound one of the most effective operators on the Tory benches? He offers a consistently robust Thatcherite critique of Labour's economic failings. As vice-chairman of the Treasury Select Committee, where he plays a nifty bad cop to John McFall's good cop, he has repeatedly skewered Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling, most recently on Northern Rock. Mr Fallon is a canny media operator who manages to generate more coverage than half the Shadow Cabinet. He must rank alongside David Davis and Chris Grayling as one of the biggest sources of Tory trouble for Labour. And he's not afraid to speak his mind. In the Telegraph today he puts forward an [elegant argument](#) for tax cuts and a break with Labour's spending plans. Significantly, he uses it to advance the criticisms of George Osborne's "sharing the proceeds of growth" strategy by declaring: "*Matching Labour's plans until 2011 may have been politically astute; sharing the proceeds of growth thereafter now looks fiscally nebulous.*" (No doubt he's aware that the Shadow Chancellor's pledge runs out in 2011). Dissing the leadership in public may undermine his case, but isn't it time to bring Mr Fallon in from the cold? Mr Cameron believes barely a half-dozen of those in his top team are any good, so there is scope for vacancies. And Mr Fallon has the added advantage of being a former minister, whose presence would help draw the contrast between the Tory frontbench and a Brown Cabinet that is looking a bit juvenile.

PS I'm away for the next few days. Normal service resumes Monday.

Cold War summit brilliance



I'm kicking myself tonight for having missed the first two in BBC4's series *Summits* after seeing the last one this evening on the 1985 Geneva meeting between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. Full marks to BBC4 for commissioning Cambridge historian David Reynolds to present this gripping study of personalities and negotiations, but the corporation should be ashamed of itself for not screening it on BBC1 or BBC2. The last time I heard Reynolds was as a graduate student, but I don't remember the comic verve and acting skills he showed here to tell this crucial episode of the Cold War. His impersonation of a Brezhnev gaffe was hilarious, as was his blow by blow account of the showdown between "No 1 Communist and No 1 Imperialist", including the Gipper's masterstroke of taking off his coat for their first handshake, making the younger Gorby look frail.

It was not just a nostalgia-inducing reminder of a titanic struggle that seems to have been erased from the collective consciousness that made it so compelling (hell, for the past 10 years we've been governed by folk many of whom the Gipper would say were honorary members of the Evil Empire, but let that pass). Prof Reynolds wraps it up deftly by comparing the negotiating skills of Reagan with the "inept summitry between self-confident leaders" Tony Blair and George Bush that saw Blair "marginalise his diplomats" and fail to "pin down Bush", so much so that his assurances of British influence in Washington were "about as valuable as Neville Chamberlain's notorious piece of paper". Do catch it if you can.

Rock: Over to Gordon

What are the danger areas for Gordon Brown? We are relishing the nostalgia of "Labour PM nationalises bank" headlines, but I'm not convinced the event in itself is as calamitous for Mr Brown as the Tories would like it to be. It's not just that the collective memory of nationalisation has dimmed somewhat. Looking around this morning, there's a broad enough consensus that this was the least worst option to draw the sting from the idea of public ownership. Experts point to a failure of regulation, which has long term implications for the tri-partite system devised by Mr Brown and Ed Balls.

What is more difficult is the way we got to yesterday's decision. The Government was right to explore all options, but need it have taken quite this long? In political terms, this is the point where Mr Brown is most exposed. He has to persuade us that Labour's greatest free-marketeer (sic) has not suspended the laws of *caveat emptor* for political considerations. How does he dispel suspicions

that the "dithering" was political, motivated by planning for a snap election to begin with, then fear of what nationalisation might do to Labour's prospects? Just look at the energy being put into propping up the bank's charitable foundation, which does a lot of work in the northeast. Mr Brown has a difficult task ahead convincing some people that he was not putting tribal Labour considerations in one of its heartlands ahead of the national interest.

But the immediate question for the PM is the position of his Chancellor. Will Mr Darling appear alongside him at his monthly press conference, as he has done on the past couple of occasions, and if not, why not? Brown Central is dismissive of speculation about Mr Darling's prospects, blaming it on outside mischief-makers outside. The Chancellor in turn sees no difficulty in his close relations with Mr Brown, but wants to reassert the Treasury's - his Treasury's - independence. It may be too late. When they met in the Cabinet room yesterday for Mr Brown to order the Rock's nationalisation, their fates became irretrievably intertwined.

Rock: Calm at Westminster

Odd that Gordon Brown's press conference attracted such a low turn-out. I somehow expected the place to be heaving with journalists eager to unpick the detail of the ~~nationalisation~~ temporary public ownership of Northern Rock. But two thirds of the room was empty. Alistair Darling was there (phew!), and had a nice poke at the PM for ducking his phone calls on Saturday by attending a football match. The hour-long session shed little light on the matter - the duo effectively threw a damp blanket over the whole business. It's worth noting that Mr Darling was unable to answer clearly why the Bill gives the Government general powers to seize financial institutions; that they avoided the word nationalisation; and that Mr Brown sounded a bit too defensive when he asked if he should have spent the first half of last year studying the American sub-prime crisis to be better prepared. But the story seems to be losing its drama. David Cameron and George Osborne are holding a press conference at the moment, and it's not on Sky*.

For what it's worth, Northern Rock branches and call centres report no surge of customer interest this morning. By 1030 there had been 31 withdrawals (normal numbers for a Monday), while 13 people had taken out a fixed rate bond. Business as usual for the Rock then, even if there's nothing usual about today for Mr Darling and Mr Brown.

**Technical reasons, apparently*

Rock: bad news for Cameron and Osborne



So where are we left tonight? Gordon Brown has nationalised a bank. However you package it, that's a political stinker that will hang around his neck until the general election and beyond, if Ron Sandler's suggestion that it could take "years" to flog the Rock is right. That the Government managed to announce the decision without triggering another panic (did you notice that bank shares were up today?) is the smallest of comforts.

And yet... for all the excitement elsewhere on the blogosphere, today has not brought the meltdown many had expected. I noted earlier the strange way this story has deflated since this morning. That may be because no one is challenging the actual decision to nationalise. In fact, the only thing that's getting folk along the Burma Road excited is the poor judgement of the Tories. The consensus is that Dave's call for Brown to sack Darling was misjudged, and that George Osborne over-egged things by claiming we've gone back to the 70s. In reply the dynamic duo argue that the Chancellor is Mr Brown's Achilles' heel. Hammering him has a destabilising effect that will eventually pay off. That may be, but my sense is they won't get any credit for it in tomorrow's papers. Which is why Mr Brown has got away with it today.

Rock: board's "Labour connections"

The Tories have been poring over the CVs of the people appointed to the People's Rock board of directors, and claim to have found evidence of a relationship with Labour and the Government that is slightly cosier than the "arm's length" model proclaimed by Gordon Brown.

- Ron Sandler was appointed by then Chancellor Brown to run a review into Medium and Long-Term Savings in 2002.
- Philip Remnant was made non-executive chairman of the Shareholder Executive by Alistair Darling in June, just before he was appointed Chancellor.
- Stephen Hester is chief exec of British Land Company Ltd, of which a subsidiary donated £1500 to the Scottish Labour Party last April.
- Tom Scholar was until recently Mr Brown's chief of staff and principal private secretary and is now managing director, international and finance, at HM Treasury.

You will have spotted that there is much to argue about here.

UPDATE: Sure enough, friends of the People's Bank have been in touch to point out, in the nicest way, that Mr Hester is also a member of the Tory Reform Group,

and that Messrs Scholar and Remnant were appointed to the board on the advice of the Permanent Secretary (although, come to think of it, he works for Mr Darling and so he's hardly arm's length either).

Tom Kelly faces the Lobby



Allow me to record praise for Tom Kelly, late of this parish, for accepting an invitation from Anthony Browne to lead a Policy Exchange discussion of the state of political reporting today. The prospect of having Mr Tony's main mouthpiece for lunch drew a capacity crowd of Lobby folk, a couple of ex-editors, a prominent bearded blogger, various representatives of CCHQ, and one refreshingly candid former special adviser. Sadly, no one from Brown Central was there to benefit from Tom's advice or temper the right-ward tilt of the gathering.

Chatham House rules applied, but given the professional leakers, gossips and reporters packed around the table, I'm sure Tom won't mind if I report the gist. Unlike his one-time boss Alastair Campbell, Tom accepts the Lobby as the least-worst system for reporting what Government gets up to; unlike Campbell - or Mr Blair - he does not damn the process or the people. Instead he argues that government by press release is dead because - as Mr Blair complained in his 'feral beasts' speech - the media is hungry for 'impact' (something that is sorely lacking in most of what Whitehall pumps out every day). Instead he argued for politicians to set out big themes and lines of argument, using news announcements to illustrate the wider points. His most telling conclusion applied to both parties - not just the current Government: a news grid is fine, but what's it all adding up to?

In case you ask, one determined colleague tried doggedly to get him going on the dodgy dossier matter, but Tom wasn't about to start giving a running commentary. Sadly, there was no time to ask why his current employers BAA are bent on treating every traveller as a) stupid b) a potential terrorist.

Blair plotting EU job at Claridges

You may have seen a fascinating [report](#) in the Guardian this morning 'exposing' the German backlash against Tony Blair's euro-ambitions. Its gist was that there's a "Stop Blair" coalition building, and it has the backing of Angela Merkel. Which may be true, though we knew it already and it's far too early to rule out a Brussels comeback for the ex-PM.

I hear for example that Hans-Gert Poettering, the [president](#) of the European parliament, has requested a meeting with Mr Blair and will be joining him - and Cherie - for breakfast at Claridge's next Wednesday. Mr Poettering is in London on an official visit and will meet the Queen and Gordon Brown. While the meeting is ostensibly about Mr Blair's work in the Middle East, Mr Poettering is a big player and their talk will form part of the slow courtship being engineered by Mr Blair. The betting in Whitehall is still that the anti-British, anti-Iraq forces in Europe will put paid to Mr Blair's dreams eventually, but my Brussels specialist tells me there is a "structural dynamic" developing. It involves a return for Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, the centre-right wining in Spain, and an EU-wide desire to avoid giving the job to the ghastly Jean-Claud Juncker, and could at a pinch come together for Mr Blair during the French presidency in the autumn.

Rendition transparency

Something about the political doldrums this week has sapped my will to blog. But I was cheered by David Miliband's elegant statement of apology on rendition earlier. His public performances have been criticised, often justifiably, as too glib or juvenile, but he hit the right note, and it was refreshing to have humility rather than swagger at the Despatch Box. The Government relied on American information, it turned out to be dud, the Foreign Office will now go back to the Americans with lists of flights and ask for details on each one. Interestingly, they will also ask Amnesty International for advice. Surely farming out difficult policy to outside interests is overdoing it a touch?

By the way, if you are interested in transparency American-style, it's worth looking at the [statement](#) by CIA boss Gen Mike Hayden, which says they examined their rendition files in late 2007, yet only told the Brits on February 15. Is that gap interesting? He concludes: "*We found this mistake ourselves, and that we brought it to the attention of the British Government, in no way changes or excuses the reality that we were in the wrong. An important part of intelligence work, inherently urgent, complex, and uncertain, is to take responsibility for errors and to learn from them. In this case, the result of a flawed records search, we have done so.*"

Rock: where do the Tories go from here?

At the beginning of the week, if you took time to read across the Westminster blogosphere, you might have thought that Armageddon was upon us. The ~~nationalisation~~ temporary public ownership of Northern Rock was a calamity that would destroy the Government and leave the economy in tatters (or was it the other way round?). Dave called on the Prime Minister to sack his Chancellor. George Osborne turned up in the Commons to describe Mr Darling as a "dead man walking". The Interweb frothed with predictions of an imminent Labour implosion. It was - briefly - desperately exciting.

And now it's Friday, and in front of me is the Economist's [latest poll](#) which finds that just five per cent of people believe the Government was responsible for Northern Rock's troubles. That's not all: it shows that a majority of those asked by YouGov think a Tory government would have done no better, while 60pc believe the Tories oppose ~~nationalisation~~ temporary public ownership because they are "playing politics". And it suggests that the public's perception of the Government's economic performance is improving (though a narrow majority still think it's poor or awful). Populus in the Times comes to [similar conclusions](#), leading [Peter Riddell](#) to conclude that the public is calmer than "some excitable opposition politicians, commentators and bloggers". Quite.

The Tory strategy, as explained to me, is to hammer away at Alistair Darling until the public start to see him as a liability and Gordon Brown as weak for not dumping him. Yet today's polls suggest the public is not persuaded by the Cameron/Osborne pitch. Which is why some in Brown Central are beginning to hope that the Tory strategy will turn out to be as successful - and accurate - as Francis Maude's "downturn made in Downing Street". Dave and George have some thinking to do.

But before Brown Central gets carried away, they should take time to read Martin Wolf. The sage of the FT makes a [telling point](#) about Gordon Brown's greatest weakness: his addiction to "putting political advantage ahead of principles". Mr Brown still has a lot of work to do to persuade us that Labour's tribal interests don't always come first. As Wolf puts it, "those who live by the wheeze, die by the wheeze".

Cameron: Brown is Stalin

David Cameron finishes his week with a speech today attacking Gordon Brown's "Government by gimmick". He singles out 26 announcements since June 27 which he says amounted to nothing. I'm struck that he adopts the language of both Private Eye and Vince Cable. He says: *"Just take the last few months and consider life as the 'Supreme Leader' wants us to live it. Think of the announcements that you've heard and almost certainly forgotten. It's not a question of Brown moving from Stalin to Mr Bean – it is Stalin and Mr Bean. We've had a gimmick for every week that Gordon Brown has been Prime Minister. It would be funny if it wasn't so serious."*

You can compare these to what Labour claims are its ["top 50 achievements"](#).

I'm having trouble pasting the Tory list of 'gimmicks' so will add link as soon as.

Is Cameron right to suggest a trip to Auschwitz is a 'gimmick'?

I only ask because I've cast my eye over the list of 'gimmicks' Mr Cameron has highlighted in his speech today, which I mentioned in my previous posts, and there at No4, between "Honours for sportsmen" and "New border police" is "Trips to Auschwitz". I need to find out more, but I wonder if some might not find it uncomfortable to hear the Tory leader suggest that sending kids to learn about the Holocaust is a gimmick?

Auschwitz 'gimmick': Tories dig in

Let's be clear: David Cameron does not believe that a trip to Auschwitz is a gimmick. If he did, he would not have so many of his MPs taking part in the visits organised each year by the Holocaust Education Trust. In fact I'm told he was recently asked to encourage schools in his constituency to take part in the programme, and was happy to oblige. His speech in the northwest today argues, with some justification, that Gordon Brown's first months in office have been marked by a fondness for announcements that don't live up to the original billing.

Mr Cameron's speech was sent to us preceded by a list of "Gordon Brown's gimmicks" and no4 on the list is "Trips to Auschwitz". The Tory MPs I have spoken to about this have winced and said things like "I'm staggered" and "gawd how did that get through?" Labour is having a field day. Ed Balls has called on the Tory leader to apologise. Representatives of the Jewish community are unhappy. Mr Cameron's office - for the moment - is holding firm, arguing that he was merely

pointing out that Mr Brown supported the trips but is not providing financial backing for them. The criticisms, they say, are unfair and out of context.

UPDATE: Labour might want to think again about the Ed Balls press release, which says: "In trying to make this issue into a matter of party politics, David Cameron has shown once again that he not only lacks judgement but also a basic sense of decency." It's just that it seems a bit odd to complain about making it a party political issue in a bright red Labour press release with quotes from two ministers.

Silence and the Speaker



There's something of the Blair saga about the predicament Michael Martin finds himself in. When the former Prime Minister was under fire and facing calls to quit in favour of Gordon Brown, there were always those who cautioned a period of silence. Only when things were quiet and he was not under pressure, we were told, would Mr Blair agree to go. What he wanted was to be able to leave at a time of his own choosing, without appearing to be frog-marched to the exit by his enemies in the Commons and the media. Lay off and he'll do the right thing, that was the idea.

Mr Martin is in the same boat. There is no shortage of MPs, including Labour ones, who don't think much of him as a Speaker, and rather wish he would do Parliament a favour by taking his peerage and shuffling off the stage. As long as he remains in place, the argument goes, the Commons has no credibility as a self-regulating body. He is, to copy a phrase, a roadblock to reform, and one with an admirable stubborn streak at that.

But no one wants to say it aloud. The PLP is full of intelligent people who collectively are stupid. It will protect one of its own before it protects Parliament, especially if the enemy is a bunch of Tory toffs and their chums in the media.

Which brings us to the "silence of the Cams". David Cameron and his lot will not get involved in calls for Mr Martin's head. David Davis went as far as he dared earlier by pointing out the obvious: "he's got a problem". But that's it. The Tory leader [swims with sharks](#): he can spot the danger for his party if it is seen to be hounding Mr Martin out before the next election. He knows the PLP will return the favour by electing the third Labour Speaker in a row, and it will be another eight years at least before a Conservative gets to wear the tights.

Which is wh MPs hope Mr Martin will soon find a period of calm in which to announce that he will retire at the next election.

Now that the [TaxPayers' Alliance](#) has referred Mrs Martin's taxi expenses to the Parliamentary Commissioner, this may be difficult. In his [statement](#) Mike Granatt came close to accusing the Speaker's wife, or someone on her behalf, of lying to him. This feels a bit more serious, even if our MPs are not prepared to say so.

Thank you Harriet

Today's [Independent's Q&A](#) with Harriet Harman turns out to be just the tonic I need to clear my addled brain.

- Q: As a feminist, are you proud of Margaret Thatcher? A: *No, because she was out to prove she was every bit as nasty as all the men in her Cabinet. Feminism is about progressive politics and solidarity with other women. Thatcher was neither.*
- Q: Fidel Castro: hero of the left, or dangerous authoritarian dictator? A: *Hero of the left - but it's time for Cuba to move on.*

St Paul's Girls' School - worth very penny.

Brown backs Speaker

Gordon Brown has just praised Michael Martin as a "very, very good Speaker". Some might say that he had little choice: he was bound to be asked, and he was hardly going to attack him. Others might look at the Labour/Scotland connection and think otherwise. Or he might just be telling it like it is: the Speaker has indeed been "very good" at ignoring the Prime Minister's annoying habit of turning PMQs into Leader of the Opposition's Questions (then again he ignores Dave's tick of addressing Mr Brown directly rather than through the Chair). Whatever, Mr Brown's brief statement proves that there will be no coup attempt. It's up to Mr Martin.

France's Prescott

Should we be envious that politics seems to be far jollier abroad at the moment? The Americans have Obama and Hillary, Berlusconi is making a comeback in Italy, and Nicolas Sarkozy is happily smashing every French political convention he can find. If you long to bring back Prezzy, then take a look at [this clip](#) of the French president dealing with a heckler. The heckler says "don't touch me, you dirty me", to which the president replies "then sod off, you sad ****". There's lots of hand-wringing going on across the Channel by those who worry that Mr Sarkozy is lowering the tone of the presidency. Just 30 days til Mr Sarkozy pitches up at Buckingham Palace with Carla!



So why the fuss, Speaker Martin?

The Speaker stomped on David Winnick yesterday when the Labour MP dared to point out from the floor that Mr Martin's foot-dragging on cleaning up the expenses regime was "causing damage to the reputation of the House". The MP for Walsall specifically asked if the review could report sooner than the autumn, as planned. Mr Martin reproved Mr Winnick for going against the "unanimous" decision to support a review by the Estimates Committee. Yet this morning the same committee has announced that it will now report this summer. Mr Martin must have known the change was about to be announced when he slapped down Mr Winnick. So why the bluster?

Clegg throws a hissy

Entertaining spot of pandemonium in the Commons chamber just now. The Lib Dems staged a protest over the Speaker's refusal to choose their amendment on an in-out EU referendum. Ed Davey protested and was expelled for his pains. After much rhubarb in defiance of the Chair, Nick Clegg led his troops from the Chamber, to laughter and jeers. Dep Speaker Michael Lord handled the stunt with a light touch. I sympathise with the Speaker: is the Lib Dem leader's internal difficulties on his referendum commitment really a matter for the Commons?

Has the Information Commissioner joined the anti-Iraq brigade?



Richard Thomas is proving to be an admirably robust defender of Freedom of Information. But he has issued a most extraordinary statement to explain why he has ordered the Government to release the minutes of two Cabinet meetings held on the eve of the Iraq war. The Information Commissioner, it seems, has ruled on a matter of opinion, rather than on a point of law. He appears to be saying that because there's a clamour for the minutes to be released, they should be. Excuse me?

Rather than saying whether the minutes in question are or are not exempt from disclosure under the terms of the Fol Act, he has concluded that he "considers that a decision on whether to take military action against another country is so important that accountability for such decision-making is paramount."

He goes on to say: "It is also the case that there is a widespread view that the justification for the decision on military action in Iraq is either not fully understood or that the public were not given the full or genuine reasons for that decision. In coupling this context with his analysis of the information itself, the commissioner

believes that its release would assist in addressing uncertainties and controversies in this respect."

You can read the full statement [here](#), but I wonder if Mr Thomas hasn't just stretched his brief to breaking point. You could say there is "a widespread view" that Princess Diana was murdered by MI6: if I put in an FoI request for the relevant files, will Mr Thomas call for their release? Perhaps someone better versed in the intricacies of FoI can help me, but I'm not sure his job is helping address - or fuel - controversies.

The essentially essential [Sam Coates](#) has raised a similar question.

MPs forced to tell all about their expenses

Bad news for Mr Martin this evening. The [Information Tribunal](#) has ruled that MPs should publish the details of their claims under the Additional Costs Allowance. The judgement, released tonight, describes what is commonly known as the second homes allowance, as "a recipe for confusion, inconsistency and the risk of misuse". It's a victory for Heather Brooke, the campaigning journalist who runs the excellent [Your Right To Know](#) campaign.

Now, once we've had a great time picking over the immediate implications of this case, I wonder if we'll give a thought to the principle of Parliamentary sovereignty and the rising power (see [previous post](#)) of unelected "watchdogs" who are increasingly dictating how the elected lot should behave?

Loons back, still the Met does nothing



It's been months since I've had cause to [mention](#) the [odious](#) rabble of [loons](#) and misfits who have turned Parliament Square into a shanty town. If you are not a Parliament Square regular, ignore the 'doughty campaigners for truth' stuff: they are a disgusting bunch. Tonight one of the worst is in full flow on her megaphone, so much so that a number of us have contacted the police via the Charing Cross switchboard to file a formal complaint. Why? Good question, given that our previous complaints have made no difference and the Met is perfectly happy to let her and the dreadful Brian Haw carry on.

What's prompted me tonight is the profanity pouring from her semi-articulate mouth. I particularly like this one: "Tell the bloody Metropolitan Police Commissioner I'll bloody well arrest that f*****g bastard" (spoken at 6.56pm, m'lud). She's currently at the gates barracking MPs who emerge. Alan Duncan has just been given the hairdryer treatment (they should watch out - he chased

the last protestors foolish enough to take him on down the street). We reported them an hour ago and they are still going.

PS Swearing in public is an offence under the Public Order Act and the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003.

Commons paper planes protest

I've just been in New Palace Yard watching the protestors on the roof above the Press Gallery throwing paper planes at the police below. There are three of them, two men and a woman, sporting visitors' passes. They've unfurled two banners, one saying "BAA HQ", the other "No third runway". I picked up one of their 'planes': it's a photocopy of an email from someone at BA to a Dept of Transport official about something complicated that I can't be bothered to read. As this security breach* will doubtless trigger another clampdown that will make access to the Palace of Westminster even more difficult for the law-abiding, I will now devote the rest of my days to campaigning FOR a third runway at Heathrow, and preferably a fourth - through the gardens of these idiots.

*Is it really a security breach though? Naturally, I pity those who must now face the wrath of Madam Serjeant, who was looking suitably steely downstairs. The protestors managed to get somewhere they shouldn't be, and as with the fox hunting bunch a few years ago, they will have had inside help to know how to get up on the roof. But they went through the security screening, and they don't pose a threat to anyone's safety. Why not just lock the door and leave them up there a few days to see how they like it?

UPDATE: What a shame! Someone seems to have reached out a window and sliced one of the banners in two...

Browns slaps down Harriet

Did I detect a blush of embarrassment on Harriet Harman's cheeks as the PM dealt swiftly with a Tory question about Fidel Castro just now? Mr Brown was asked towards the tail-end of PMQs what he made of his deputy's praise for the Cuban dictator, given his policy of persecuting homosexuals, harrasing journalists, and tapping the telephones of opponents. Ms Harman, you will recall, praised Comrade Fidel as a [hero of the left](#) earlier this week. Mr Brown was not so starry-eyed: "There can be no defence against abuse of democratic rights in any country." At that she tried a nervous laugh and shifted visibly away from him.

In praise of Peter Bottomley

What has Nigel Evans got to hide? I only ask because he's one of the names I didn't expect to find on the [provocative EDM](#) tabled by the excellent Peter Kilfoyle who accuses Nick Robinson of traducing the Speaker. Nick has replied in kind on his [blog](#). Before anyone gets too excited however, they should read [this](#) EDM tabled by Peter Bottomley, who urges his fellow politicians to "have the sense, strength and humour to live with robust coverage". Hear hear (shame it's only got one signature).

Daniel Finkelstein at Comment Central has risen to Nick's defence [here](#).

Tebbitt: Cameron is a "Blair worshipper"

Difficult reading for Dave in tomorrow's [Spectator](#), which carries a letter from Norman Tebbit castigating the Cameron Conservatives for allowing the "poisonous tree of Blairism to (be) planted in the Shadow Cabinet". He says it is "worrying to find that Blair worship is now the doctrine of modern compassionate Conservatism". The sage of Chingford was replying to Michael Gove's Blairite love-in last week.

Dave appeals for £1 Tories

REDUCE THE PRESSURE
PROPER CONTROLS
ON IMMIGRATION SO
OUR PUBLIC SERVICES
CAN COPE

YOU CAN GET IT IF YOU REALLY WANT

JOIN US AT
CONSERVATIVES.COM



Dave tonight launches his latest campaign, with 10 new posters based on an iPod groovy silhouette motif (see? sunshine! clouds!), and a video showing him at his desk telling us all about the need for new politics (is it unfair of me to point out that the video going live on [Facebook](#) shortly shows a lot of bottled water in Mr C's office?).

If you wondered what Dave's line of attack at PMQs was all about, this explains it. He reckons he's captured the public mood by asking why politicians aren't doing more to clean-out the Commons mess. Naturally, he couldn't see the

thunderstruck look on the faces of his backbenchers as he called for an end to their pension scheme. In the Chamber I must say I scored Gordon Brown the winner but those who saw it on telly swear Dave came out tops.

Tonight he's announcing that you can now sign up to be a Friend of the Conservatives for as little as £1. He's taking his inspiration from the Interweb trick of inviting your audience to set the price. He hopes it will draw in a new army of supporters to offset the steady loss of actual £25-a-time members. The other innovation is the poster above. Notice that it uses the "i" word - immigration. As far as I can make out it's the first time that the term has been used in Tory advertising under Mr Cameron, further proof that he believes he has earned the right to speak on previously tricky subjects.

Weak points? It looks good, and so does Dave in his film. There's a whiff of the Obama lightness about the easy style of this ad campaign. If I have a reservation, it's only that in my experience politicians who have run out of things to say advertise their advertising campaigns, and challenge their opponents to a TV debate.

Is Lansley really Untouchable?

The Conservatives have gone into overdrive this morning to calm things in the wake of Andrew Lansley's [interview](#) in the Times, in which he said "any rational politician" can see that health spending will have to rise substantially in real terms, from the current 9pc of GDP to 11pc. That's an extra £28bn a year.

If you look at the transcript posted by [Sam Coates](#) this morning, Mr Lansley is speaking in the context of the Wanless recommendations. He argues rising health spending is inevitable: as a society grows richer, it demands better health care and therefore more spending.

Which is not how some of his colleagues see it. His comments have tested Shadow Cabinet harmony because he makes the consequential point that other areas will have to suffer cuts, but doesn't say which ones. They feel that Mr Lansley is abusing his position as one of the Untouchables - George Osborne is another - who have been guaranteed their jobs by Mr Cameron until the next election and beyond. And to judge by the telephone calls I've had so far, they wonder why the Conservative party is trumpeting calls for yet more cash to be lavished on the NHS on the day we see that the GP contract cost £1.76bn more than expected. "He is validating Labour's waste," is how one influential MP put it to me.

Expect Gordon Brown to ask if Michael Gove will be making a similar pledge for education spending, and if not why not?

UPDATE Mr Lansley has just popped up on the World at One. I'll have to re-read my notes, slowly, because I didn't quite get his gist. But I did hear him say the party has not made any commitments beyond the Government's own spending plans to 2011.

The politics of Prince Harry



The story of the Warrior Prince unfolding tonight is [packed full](#) of compelling elements, from the secrecy* that surrounded his deployment, to his revelation that it was the Queen who told him he was off to Afghanistan. Students of the monarchy will have endless fun interpreting the Empire significance of posting him with the Gurkhas, while others will want to know how this undoubtedly life-changing experience will affect his playboy lifestyle.

We are expecting comments from Gordon Brown shortly, and you can bet that inside Downing Street there is relief that the operation has been carried off so successfully and without harm. Because however you slice it this is a remarkable fillip for the British cause in Afghanistan. At a time when public and political support for the war against the Taliban is wavering, the sight and sound of a member of the Royal Family joining the fray will draw the remarkable achievements of British forces to wider public attention. This could not have come at a better time for the Government's efforts to shore up support for the war.

*rumours that CCHQ tipped off [Matt Drudge](#) in order to get Andrew Lansley out of the headlines are, I'm assured, quite untrue.

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It's Boris bashing day



I'm heading to Birmingham for Labour's spring conference and a spot of class warfare. Today's main event focuses on the London election campaign, which may not be big in the West Midlands but is certainly preying on the minds of Labour folk. The polls are starting to swing in Boris's favour, so today he's in the firing line. Ken Livingstone will be given a foreign potentate's welcome (no mention of his cosy deals with Hugo Chavez or his mate Lee Jasper). Hazel Blears will get stuck in to Boris (*"He's no joke. He's a nasty, right-wing elitist, with odious views and criminal friends like Conrad Black"*).

I'm also expecting Ed Balls to follow suit when he speaks. He's never taken seriously last summer's guff about an "end to dividing lines", and is itching to get stuck in to Tory toffery. As [Joey Jones](#) points out at [Boulton & Co](#), Boris will take comfort from all the attention: he's got them worried.

With Brown in Birmingham

Gordon Brown is wearing a red tie (gasp!) for his visit to the West Midlands, which started this morning with local interviews over a bacon sandwich on the train up from Euston. He was asked at one point if the job was turning out as he'd expected after years of yearning for it, and for once got the answer right: "This is the best job in the world. Because I wake in the morning with new challenges" (no kidding). His good humour may be partly to do with David Cameron's spot of difficulty over an undeclared donation from his step-father-in-law (have I got that right?) Viscount Astor. Something about a helicopter trip. It may prove to be small beer in the grand scheme of things, but Brown Central is allowing itself a chortle at seeing Mr Cameron on the spot just days after making a song and dance about new politics in the Commons.

Labour doesn't pass



A spot of comfort for Tories who still recall the pass office fiasco of the 2006 conference in Bournemouth. I've just spent an hour and half at the Labour pass department, based in the B'ham Rep, where things are getting a bit sticky.

Mine took a while, but the delay was self inflicted. I got into the conference courtesy of the PM's transport, but then found I had left my pass behind, and was promptly marched off the premises by the (very kind) deputy steward. The contretemps allowed me to observe the increasingly unhappy international delegates from the Caribbean, the EU and the US being told that their barcodes needed 'rescanning and backloading'. Others were having arguments about incomplete police checks.

I left as things started hotting up to walk over to the ICC, through crowds of police constables in flak jackets, combat boots and dayglo jackets, 'tooled up' for civil unrest. Individually charming but collectively? Slightly intimidating.

Beware the Red Terror

Turns out the red tie wasn't a coincidence. The hall is decked in red, the fonts are red, the backdrop is red, the chair of the NEC is in a vivid red dress with a spangly necklace, and Hazel Blears has red hair, red cheeks and a hunting pink jacket. The message? **Death to the racist, right-wing Tory toffs**. Of course, I'm paraphrasing her speech a bit, but if you ever start believing this new politics nonsense, have a read of what she had to say just now. It's not just the stuff about Boris being a "nasty right-wing elitist" with "criminal friends", it's her riff about a string of Tories - Howe, Pickles, IDS, Hague - which turns into a rant against Gordon's new friend Margaret Thatcher and her achievements. "The Tories haven't changed, they're the same tax-cutting, service-slashing, anti-European right-wingers they always were".

It wasn't just about promiscuous nurses

Lord Mancroft's [speech](#) on nurses in the Lords has caused waves all day because he accused them of being promiscuous, as well as grubby and slipshod. But [Andrew Sparrow](#) over at the Guardian points out the really shocking bit of what the hereditary peer had to report about his recent hospital stay:

"The man opposite me was dying. I imagine he died two or three days after I left. I do not know what he was dying of because he was not doing a lot of talking. But I do know that he virtually died alone.

"The nurses thought that he was a nuisance. They changed his bottle, gave him his pills, occasionally fed him and propped him up.

"But basically this man died alone in a British hospital in the 21st century, and I had to watch him do it, which was pretty unpleasant."

Reduced Brown



Lucky for Gordo that Harry's flight was late. The Prince had been due to land at 10.10, more or less when the PM was due to speak. But the momentary lack of competition didn't help make Mr Brown's speech any more newsworthy. Actually, a big story wasn't really the plan here. It felt more like an experiment, the first outing of the new stripped-down Gordon, with some new gimmicks (oops - sorry!) thrown in. The Stephen Carter effect is being felt.

Compared to his dire autumn outing, which was designed to achieve a short-term tactical goal of outflanking the Tories ahead of a possible election, this was an attempt to map out what Gordon Brown is about. He reckons the best way of seeing off the Conservatives is by focusing on "deliverables", the current Labour buzz phrase. That means rebuilding more than 300 schools, forcing half of GP surgeries to open for at least one evening or weekend a week, building three million more homes, and - the biggest one - avoiding a significant economic downturn. All this by 2010, the latest date for a general election.

The speech was easier on the ear, sparser, with a bit more humour added, though the "age of ambition" - yawn - has gotta go. The idea was to articulate how economic and social turbulence in the wider world can be coped with at home. And the gimmick helped: at the end of an interminably dull Q&A session that saw at least one person stretchered out of the hall, Mr Brown shot to his feet and tried a Cameron. For five minutes he spoke without notes, podium or autocue about the Tories. And it wasn't bad - *by his standards*. It may be that without an overworked text to mangle, he was forced to keep it simple.

Is Dave modelling himself on Jimmy Carter?

I've been trying all morning to work out who David Cameron is reminding me of. Where does he get this new-found zeal for challenging the Westminster orthodoxy, for questioning the state of politics, for talking about a break with the past and a new way of doing things? And then it came to me: Jimmy Carter. The Tory leader is sounding more and more like the Man from Plains, who built his 1976 campaign for the White House by presenting himself as a Washington novice untainted by the corrupt ways of the capital. His stock line in



the fight against Gerald Ford was "I am not a lawyer, I am not a member of Congress, and I've never served in Washington."

Consider the Tory leader's priorities in the last few days. On Wednesday he made 'new politics' his theme for PMQs, berating Gordon Brown for being sluggish on the Commons clean-up. He also duffed up his own MPs by drawing attention to their cosy pension scheme and calling for it to be closed to new entrants (a good thing he couldn't see the faces behind him). He then launched an Interweb scheme for bringing politics to the people. Yesterday in a speech to Welsh Tories he proposed American-style direct democracy by giving voters who can find a million friends the power to introduce Bills in Parliament and decide subjects for debate in the Commons. Then today, in a most extraordinary departure that has got ConservativeHome [fizzing](#) already, he's proposing quotas for women ministers.

The overall effect is of a man who wants to be the people's champion against the murk of Westminster. He presumably calculates that he can tap into voter disgust with the state of politics in Parliament. But can he paraphrase the "malaise" president by saying "I was not a special adviser, I am not an MP, I have never served in Westminster"?

Brown calls in the Baby-Faced Scot with a Big Brain

This is the face of the latest brain-box to be hired by Gordon Brown to pep up the No10 operation. David Muir, 37, runs something called The Channel for advertising powerhouse WPP, which is described variously as a dating agency or a "focal point for improving our shared knowledge of the fast-changing world of media and communications". His appointment may prove to be more interesting than that of Jennifer Moses, the investment banker who made waves at the weekend because her husband's hedge fund collapsed last week and she was a 'victim' in the Joyti De-Laurey case.



Mr Muir, who I'm told will work across the board on political strategy, seems a natural fit for Brown Central. He's a Scot and a made man of the Labour McMafia (he lists Douglas Alexander as his favorite politician). His interests include sport, American history, the Labour party and economics. The "baby face" description is [his](#). I'm assured his blog, [Just off the Roman](#), is a treasure trove of information about No10's new guy. No doubt it will shortly be cleared out by CCHQ for amusing attack facts.

UPDATE at 4.10pm: Boy, [Baby Brains](#) moves fast. His blog has vanished behind a password protected firewall thingy. Except, as the irritatingly clever [Sam Coates](#)

points out, you can still see it [here](#) (keep clicking cancel on the annoying dialogue boxes).

Euro charade

MPs will vote Wednesday evening on whether to allow us a say on the Lisbon treaty. Even the most optimistic scenario (Lib Dems snapping out of their current silliness, all smaller parties turning up, lots of Labour rebels) makes it difficult to see how the Government could lose. The likelihood is that the Treaty will be ratified by the Commons next week after 13 days of "scrutiny". Consider this fact unearthed by William Hague when you assess David Miliband's promise of "line by line" scrutiny last summer: the 520 lines of the treaty covering justice and home affairs issues received just 390 minutes of scrutiny - 45 seconds a line.

By the way the Tories haven't decided what they will do if the Speaker selects the Ian Davidson "doubleheader" amendment which would allow two questions: one on the Treaty, one on in-or-out. For the record Mr Hague said the Tories would campaign for Britain to stay IN the EU: "Oh, absolutely."

When Hague, Redwood & Co voted against a referendum

Thank you to Philip Cowley for drawing my attention his [latest note](#) at [Revolts](#), this one comparing the voting on the referendum question in 1993 to the likely voting on Wednesday. Division number 248 in the debates on the Maastricht Bill took place on 21 April 1993 on an amendment moved by Bryan Gould. He proposed putting the treaty to a referendum. His amendment fell by 363 votes to 124, with Labour and Government frontbenches opposing. Nearly 15 years later, quite a few of the players are still around, and it's worth recalling how they voted.

These are the 22 Labour MPs who voted for a referendum in 1993, and who are still in the House: *Diane Abbott, Harry Cohen, Michael Connarty, Jeremy Corbyn, Ian Davidson, Brian Donohoe, Gwyneth Dunwoody, Frank Field, Mike Hall, Jimmy Hood, George Howarth, Lynne Jones, Jane Kennedy, Austin Mitchell, Chris Mullin, Gordon Prentice, Terry Rooney, Alan Simpson, Dennis Skinner, Alan Williams, David Winnick. Dr Tony Wright.*

And these are the 72 Tories: *Peter Ainsworth, David Amess, Michael Ancram, James Arbuthnot, Peter Atkinson, Tony Baldry, Henry Bellingham, Sir Paul Beresford, Tim Boswell, Peter Bottomley, Julian Brazier, Angela Browning, Simon Burns, Alistair Burt, Sir John Butterfill, James Clappison, Kenneth Clarke, Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Sir Patrick Cormack, David Curry, David Davis, Stephen Dorrell, Alan Duncan, Nigel Evans, David Evennett, Michael Fabricant, Liam Fox, Roger Gale, Edward Garnier, Cheryl Gillan, John Greenway, John Gummer, William*

Hague, Oliver Heald, David Heathcoat-Amory, Charles Hendry, Douglas Hogg, John Horam, Michael Howard, Michael Jack, Robert Key, Greg Knight, Jacqui Lait, Edward Leigh, David Liddington, Peter Lilley, Peter Luff, Andrew MacKay, David Maclean, Patrick McLoughlin, Michael Mates, Andrew Mitchell, Malcolm Moss, Richard Ottaway, Jim Paice, Eric Pickles, John Redwood, Andrew Robathan, Nicholas Soames, Bob Spink, Richard Spring, Sir John Stanley, Anthony Steen, Gary Streeter, Ian Taylor, David Tredinnick, Peter Viggers, Nigel Waterson, Ann Widdecombe, David Willetts, Tim Yeo, Sir George Young.

You will notice that based on this particular cast list, most of the Labour MPs who voted for a referendum then will vote for one now, while most of the Tories who opposed one then will demand one now. Isn't politics fascinating?

Will defence be Cameron's No1 priority?

There was plenty of talk of courage at the launch of David Cameron's military covenant commission earlier. Simon Weston, one of its members, spoke eloquently of the unmet needs of so many former servicemen and their families. "They should not have to grovel and lose their dignity to get the rightful sums of money they deserve," he said. Frederick Forsyth - or Freddie as Dave referred to him - was on hand as chairman and something tells me he's going to be great for trade.

I was particularly struck by Mr Cameron's political courage in raising the issue, despite being unable to tell us whether the Conservatives would spend more or less on defence in future. It's a risky area for him, and he is under pressure from Liam Fox to say more. At the press conference he was repeatedly pressed about Andrew Lansley's loose talk on health last week, and its implications for defence. Mr Cameron says defending the realm is the first priority of any government, but he has not offered Dr Fox the same commitment enjoyed - and some now say abused - by Mr Lansley, of matching Labour's spending plans. As he pointed out, "it's going to be incredibly tough. There's not a giant pot to dip into."

Clegg pleads with Tories

Nick Clegg has just sent the following to all Conservative MPs. It sounds desperate.

Dear Conservative MP

Tomorrow Parliament will vote on whether there should be a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. But this question is a smokescreen to avoid answering the real questions facing the Conservative Party on Europe. It was, after all, the Conservative Party in government that ratified without referenda the Single

European Act of 1986 and the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 that put together the structure of the European Union as we know it today. Maastricht was the critical treaty in constitutional terms - every treaty since has been in effect a minor reform of this Maastricht base.

Will you seek to renegotiate the Lisbon Treaty? If so, how far back do you wish to go? Is it simply the specific changes proposed in the Lisbon Treaty that you object to, or would you demand a much wider renegotiation? Who are your allies in Europe in seeking this objective? Without allies, how will you achieve this renegotiation? Given that the Conservative Party has rejected every reform to the European Union since the Maastricht Treaty over 15 years ago, will you try to reopen all the treaty changes that have taken place since then?

I believe that the right way to resolve these issues is for a referendum on Britain's continued membership of the European Union. This is the best way to resolve this issue because nobody in Britain under the age of 51 has ever been asked directly whether they agree with Britain's role in the European Union.

I believe strongly that Britain should be a full, active member of the EU. Many Conservatives disagree with this. Surely it is right that this is the debate that engages the British people through a referendum, not the technicalities of a minor revising Treaty.

Six of your colleagues actively supported our position by voting with us on our amendment to the Queen's speech which sought to set up a referendum on Britain's EU membership, 38 others abstained. I hope that, on reflection, you will join with us in seeking the referendum on Europe that really matters to the British people.

Yours sincerely

Nick Clegg MP

Where are Bradford's missing girls?

This is striking. Kevin Brennan, the Children's Minister, told MPs on the Home Affairs Select Committee today that Bradford City Council has lost 33 girls from its schools in the past year. The suspicion is that they have been taken abroad for forced marriages. The council lost track of 205 girls, but after inquiries traced 172 of them, leaving 33 unaccounted for.

The Minister you can lick

He may not be a household name here, but in Taiwan Tom Harris is being licked by millions. His face has been put on the country's \$5 stamp (worth about 10p) after his counterpart as Railway Minister liked the Government's transport White Paper so much he adopted it. A commemorative set of stamps marking "UK Expertise in Railway Asset Management", including one with the smiling mug of our boy from Cathcart, is on sale now. Hurry while supplies last. Next time the question "which living British minister has appeared on a stamp?" comes up in the pub quiz, you know the answer.

Susan Kramer "walks out" of Shadow Cabinet

UPDATE Weds: Yesterday I posted the following:

Nick Clegg must be really regretting his Commons [walk out](#) last week: it's given his lot ideas. My colleague Jane Merrick has learned that Susan Kramer walked out of a "shadow cabinet" meeting this morning in a symbolic show of frustration over the leader's confused position on an EU referendum. She was followed by David Heath. Bizarrely, Ms Kramer will abstain with Mr Clegg tomorrow, while Mr Heath will defy the Whip by voting for a referendum. For the record, Mr Clegg has been leader for 2 months, 15 days, and has yet to get through his first conference, which opens on Friday. What was going to be a non-event in Liverpool is starting to look serious.

I've since had representations from the Lib Dems, the gist of which is that Ms Kramer left the meeting early to attend a meeting with the Speaker. They say her early departure had nothing to do with her views on the EU referendum business. I'm happy to report this important correction, and have put quotes in the headline to reflect the fact that several of her colleagues think she walked out in some kind of huff.

Does Jon Cruddas owe Labour money?

Someone has helpfully sent me a copy of a House of Commons Library research note on the obligations faced by candidates for the Labour leadership and deputy leadership. It points out that "rules governing the Leadership and Deputy Leadership elections were put in place by the National Executive Committee prior to the contest. It was decided that all candidates should donate 15% of the money raised for their campaign to the Party centrally." According to accounts held by the Electoral Commission, Jon Cruddas has yet to pay a bean to Labour coffers of the roughly £22,500 he owes his party. Is this significant?

UPDATE: The Member for Dagenham has been on. He's in characteristic good form but wants the record put straight which I'm naturally happy to do: he says he's already paid the party roughly £10k, but the payment hasn't been published yet by the Commission; because he put a £1000 cap on donations to his campaign, he's finding it a challenge to find a big donor to help him out with this particular bill; the rest will be paid, and the party is aware of and happy with the arrangements.

And with a whimper, the Lisbon treaty gets through

A tray laden with what looked like about 40 champagne glasses was brought into the Opposition Chief Whip's office off Members' Lobby a few minutes ago, as MPs voted on the Tory amendment to force a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. I'm not sure what there was to celebrate. Inside the Chamber, most of the Lib Dems packed into their three benches and looked sheepish. ~~About 25~~ 29 Labour MPs rebelled. The Government saw off the amendment with a comfortable enough majority of 63. Nick Clegg as I type is telling Channel Four News that he'll have words with the junior frontbenchers among the 13 who defied his Abstention Whip. "This happens in politics sometimes," he says (only to you matey).

The mood downstairs - and up here along the Burma Road - is a surprising amount of indifference: was that it? David Cameron made a big thing out of it, asking Gordon Brown earlier why he couldn't see the damage he is doing to public trust in politicians. William Hague tonight has urged the Lords to get stuck in, but despite his commendable efforts, it's over. The great Parliamentary confrontation never happened. The Tories point rightly to the disgraceful way the Government rigged the line-by-line scrutiny by devoting much of it to procedural motions and themed debates. But even if it hadn't, few MPs had the appetite for the trench warfare.

In Brown Central there's quiet satisfaction that low-key tactics kept the heat out of it and rebel numbers at manageable levels. They also think Mr Cameron's "hyperbole has him over a barrel". Mr Brown believes - with some justification - that on Europe there are quite a few Tory MPs who want out of the EU, and they will keep Mr Cameron under pressure. That may be so, but tonight the Government has got away with a con and it would be dangerous to assume the voters haven't noticed.

Boris: Ken plays the Darius card



Ken Livingstone has put out a press release tonight in reply to David Cameron, who asked Gordon Brown about the various police investigations crowding in on Hizzoner. What's striking is that he's played the Darius Guppy card by raising the well-rehearsed story about Boris, his fraudster chum and a taped conversation.

This is the key quote:

"David Cameron's "moral compass" ignores the fact that, as he knows full well, there exists a tape recording of the Conservative candidate for Mayor Boris Johnson agreeing to supply to the fraudster Darius Guppy the address of a journalist so that Guppy can have him beaten up. Boris Johnson also recently agreed to supply a character reference for the convicted fraudster Conrad Black to help him obtain a lighter prison sentence."

He goes on:

"The issue David Cameron must address is how he can endorse as candidate for Mayor of London, who wishes to chair of the Metropolitan Policy Authority, someone - Boris Johnson - who agreed to supply an address to a fraudster so a journalist could be beaten up. As this concerns not an aide but the candidate himself David Cameron must make a statement on this."

Ken really is getting desperate.

Cameron hit by massive rebellion

No, I didn't notice either, but according to researchers at Nottingham University (aka Phil Cowley) it's the worst revolt against the Tory leader's authority since he took office. It happened last night in the divisions on the EU Treaty. While all eyes were on the tragi-comic silliness of the Lib Dems, few spotted the vote on New Clause 9, proposed by Bill Cash, which would prevent changes in the Treaty being used in British courts to challenge the supremacy of Parliament. Mr Cameron asked his troops to abstain, but 40 ignored him and voted in favour, including 12 from the new intake. Proportionately that's as big a revolt as the one suffered by Nick Clegg. It's also the largest revolt in numerical terms of the Treaty's parliamentary passage so far. More useful analysis of last night's results at [Revolts](#).

UPDATE: A robustly euro-sceptic MP has just shown me the text messages he received from the Chief Whip's office yesterday evening. The first, at 19.17, gave Tory MPs a green-light to go home by telling them there would be "no further

official votes". The division on Mr Cash's clause was called seven minutes later, at 19.24.

What will the Budget tell us about governance?

Alistair Darling went to a good school so he may recall La Fontaine's fable of the [Cricket and the Ant](#). The cricket, having sung all summer, is caught out when the North wind comes and begs his neighbour the ant for a loan of food, promising to repay "interest and principal". The ant is not a lender, and rebuffs the cricket, saying "well, dance now!"

We've had the first indications tonight of what the Budget will bring on Wednesday, and there won't be much dancing. It won't, for example, include a windfall levy on the energy companies. Instead they will be forced to cut the differential between pay-as-you-go customers and those on direct debit deals. Mr Darling wants to help poor folk cope with rising energy costs, or more specifically the premium they have to pay E.On, British Gas and others for the privilege of being poor. He will offer to use regulation to force energy companies to lower the tariff they impose on customers who rely on pre-pay meters for their power.

We also know the Chancellor will offer a number of concessions on the non-doms business: children, the art market and Americans will get exemptions. And instead of counting arrival and departure days, as the Treasury initially suggested, the proposal will now be to count midnights (if you have to ask, you're not a non-dom, so relax).

The Budget will be green in tinge, with a "showroom tax" putting about £1500 on the cost of top-end guzzlers. Air passenger duty will be dumped in favour of an airplane tax. My impression is that those hoping for next month's 2p hike in fuel duty to be deferred can go whistle.

Then there's excise duties: the only way is up it seems. We'll pay more for alcohol, and there's a hint - unconfirmed - that Mr Darling is minded to let booze taxes rip in coming years on health and anti-social behaviour grounds. A Scottish Chancellor making us pay more for the lunchtime sauvignon is a hard one to swallow, and politically tricky surely?

Mr Darling will still be able to forecast (reduced) growth rather than recession, but will get rather less credit for his prognosis than he believes fair. One suggestion is that he's got a £5bn package of tax rises ready to go as soon as we get out the impending doldrums, conveniently after the next election, all in the name of restoring the public finances.

If that is so, then Wednesday's low-key message of stability and "steady as she goes" will confirm that this Government has some serious questions to answer about the quality of its stewardship. A Chancellor who must put up taxes to correct his predecessor's profligacy cannot be a happy man. Nothing, I suspect, will have worried No10 and the Treasury more in recent days than a sentence buried in Martin Wolf's [elegant defence](#) of the tax on non-doms last Thursday. He wrote: "The way these proposals were introduced was surely appalling. The details still seem to be a mess. Certainly, the plans should have been better thought through. *This is just a special example of a broader failure, to which I hope to return: the UK is being depressingly badly governed.*" The Budget will tell us how well the country has been governed for the past 10 years. Would it be surprising if voters decided that, rather than another five years of tax rises, they preferred to tell Mr Brown to go dance?

Who's the dummy?

There's a funny story running this evening that Madame Tussaud's has decided not to commission a waxwork of Gordon Brown. Public relations manager Ben Lovett is quoted as saying: "We are going to wait for a general election to see what will happen because that's the ultimate test of public opinion. We are always continuing to monitor public opinion so if there's a surge of support then we will reconsider."

Now, I'm sure there's a simple explanation, but has Mr Lovett checked with his colleagues? You see, No10 received a letter from Madame Tussaud's last week informing the Prime Minister that he has been "selected to be honoured by the Tussaud's team to be among a very select group of people made into wax figures." The letter adds: "We choose our figures from detailed public surveys and he has been a hugely popular choice amongst local Londoners and tourists from around the world."

Waxgate latest

I'm ever more confused by this confusion over Gordon Brown's waxwork. This is the letter received by No10 offering the PM a shot at the big time, and does appear to contradict the company's spokesman:

Madame Tussauds
Marylebone Road
London
NW1 5LR
03/03/08

Dear Mr Francis,

I am writing to you on behalf of the world famous Madame Tussauds, as you may know we create wax figures of the worlds leading names. Madame Tussauds is present in London, New York, Las Vegas, Washington DC, Amsterdam, Shanghai, Hong Kong and will soon be opening in Berlin.

Madame Tussauds has a very rich history and has been creating wax figures for 200 years, allowing our visitors to come up close and personal with icons, heroes, celebrities, and the great figures from history. We have worked with luminaries such as Hollywood A listers, great sports stars, TV celebrities, singers, musicians, politicians, and scientists to create a space that is home to the worlds most renowned faces.

Each figure is made from a detailed sitting where hundreds of measurements are taken. Our figures are world famous as being simply the best, and take at least twelve weeks to complete as they are first modelled in clay by skilled sculptors, a mould is then taken and used to create the wax figure. Once this is complete the figure is coloured, clothed and hair is inserted. The whole process creates a work of art that is worth £150,000.

I am honoured to tell you that The Prime Minister, Mr Gordon Brown, has been selected to be honoured by the Tussauds team and be amongst the very select group of people that are made into wax figures. We choose our figures from detailed public surveys, and he has been a hugely popular choice amongst local Londoners and tourists from around the world.

On behalf of our creative team I would like to ask for a sitting to obtain detailed measurements, a sitting takes up to two hours. I would send a team to a location of Mr Brown's choice and to suit his schedule if he is happy to sit. We realise Mr Brown is of course incredibly busy, and we would hope to agree on a sitting date that falls within the next six months.

When the figure is unveiled within the attraction it would be within the World Leaders area, representing Britain. We would of course love to invite Mr Brown to unveil the figure to the public himself.

I look forward to working with you to create a fantastic figure that will capture our visitors' hearts and minds.

Best regards,

Nicky Hobbs
Global Head of External Relations
Madame Tussauds
++44 (0)207 487 xxxx/ 07702 xxx xxx
Nicky.Hobbs@madame-tussauds.com

Echoes of Norman Lamont



If, as some expect, Alistair Darling announces substantial future tax increases to get the public finances back on track, David Cameron might be tempted to tell MPs that it is "a shameful budget from a cynical government that has broken its election promises". Except that those words were how John Smith described Norman Lamont's last Budget in 1993.

Sure, historical parallels are always tricky, and the scale of the political and economic crisis facing the Tories in 1993 was off the scale compared to now. But Mr Lamont was a Chancellor in difficulty who had to announce big tax rises in future years to cope with runaway borrowing. He introduced phased VAT on fuel, plus above-inflation rises on alcohol, tobacco and petrol, all of them deferred until, as Mr Lamont explained, the economy had emerged from recession. Black Wednesday was bad enough, but for some it was the March 1993 Budget (there were two) that did for the Tories.

Fifteen years later and another Chancellor in difficulty has to take some painful but necessary decisions to tidy up a mess created by his boss. Unlike Mr Lamont, there is no prospect at all of Mr Darling being dumped weeks later. But the Tories hope that tomorrow's corrective exercise could have similar consequences: Labour turfed out in 2009 or 2010 by voters fed with having to pay more, allowing a new Tory government to stroll in and claim all the credit.

Commons Visitors' Center 'can't cope with people'

It emerges today that we are no nearer to an opening date for the new Houses of Parliament Visitors' Centre. You may recall that the single storey building alongside Westminster Hall has suffered a succession of delays and cost overruns. It was supposed to start processing visitors in 2006. Nick Harvey, speaking for the Commission, says "the date for full opening of the building will be fixed after trials to test the technical equipment and the handling of visitors have been completed. Some trials have already occurred, and more are taking place at present." From what I've heard today, those trials may take some time: it appears the ramp leading from St Stephen's Entrance down to the centre is not strong enough to take more than 30 people at a time, which means it cannot be used for queuing.

Tories get the goat

Gordon Brown isn't the only fan of goats. I've been leafing through the handbook of the party's Spring Forum, which kicks off on Friday in Gateshead. In addition to an exhortation to representatives to offset the carbon costs of their visit to the northeast by contributing to a local energy saving project called the Warm Zone, they are also asked to volunteer their time at a social action project. The idea is to build a shelter for a new herd of rare breed Bagot goats (small, large rear-sweeping horns with a slight lateral twist, very few left). I see in the useful "Spotter's Guide to CCHQ Staff" that Blaine Robins has been appointed goat guy for the weekend.



Turbulence hits Downing Street

Is this an omen? Just before 9 o'clock the gales blowing in from the Atlantic knocked the scaffolding loose above the entrance to No12, sending photographers scrambling for cover in the middle of a live by Sky's [Niall Paterson](#). One of Alistair Darling's running themes is that we are being battered by economic turbulence from America. But as the Tories have said repeatedly, if you don't fix the roof while the sun is shining....

It's a "Responsibility" Budget

Alistair Darling took 45 minutes to brief the Cabinet earlier on the broad lines of his Budget. As expected, he believes that despite turmoil abroad and particularly in America, Britain remains "well placed to deal with these difficult economic circumstances". The Prime Minister's spokesman summarised him thus: "The priorities for the Budget are to act responsibly to maintain economic stability, to address the challenge of climate change and help hard-working families."

Green realities

A colleague points out the irony of a Green Budget covered by a Sky helicopter hovering over Whitehall recording the Chancellor's car stuck in traffic for the 300 yard run to the House...

The escalators are back, and they only go up



The "Responsibility Budget" has a nostalgic feel, in that it marks the return of the escalator. Mr Darling has brought back the Tory device for jacking up taxes year on year, under the cover of "catastrophic" consequences for the planet if he didn't. Unless I've missed a footnote, those who drink or drive or do both (but not at the same time) are going to see their costs rise by more than inflation every year from next year until 2013 at least. depending on how you total up the numbers, it looks like Mr Darling will be taking £3.2 billion more in taxes to help plug the hole and bring back the stability he mentioned six times in the first minute of his statement.

Is this an election Budget?

One of the curiosities of the "Responsibility" Budget is the timing of the mega tax rises programmed in by Messrs Darling and Brown (in the new, collegiate Budget making process, we can give credit where credit is due). The big tax increases on fuel duty, VED and booze kick in next year and the year after, when the PM will once again be grappling with whether to call an election. The Chancellor's prediction of continuing steady growth will be used by Labour as the cornerstone of its case for a fourth term. Surely Mr Brown can't be setting things up for a pre-election tax cutting Budget that would reverse some of these rises?

Cameron makes family the battleground against Gordon

Arresting footage of the Cameron Family on ITV just now. The Tory leader has taken a gamble by allowing cameras into his house to film him, his wife Samantha and his three children Ivan, Nancy and Elwen having breakfast (Shreddies and Cheerios). The organised chaos common to millions of families every morning is not what's unusual here. It's that Mr Cameron is happy to be filmed playing with his children, including Ivan, who is disabled. The Cameron children, as well as the sofas, the fuzzy white rug, the beechwood floor, the paintings leaning against the walls, and what looked like the Daily Mail on the sofa, are now part of the Cameron brand.

Contrast this with Gordon Brown who is making great efforts to keep his children firmly away from the public eye. From the outset the Chancellor has ruled his kids off limits for the media. He does not want to imitate Tony Blair by invading his own privacy.

Mr Cameron, by contrast, has decided to ignore inevitable criticisms in the interests of satisfying public curiosity: "People want to know who you are, what you are like, what makes you tick. That's modern politics. You have to do what you feel comfortable with. People want to know about your life. Because otherwise politicians can look like a breed apart." Or, if I may translate, "Gordon Brown looks odd, but I'm not."

Family, in fact, was due to be the big theme in Gateshead tomorrow and Friday. But Mr Cameron has just made it much more personal.

Sunshine for Dave



I'm sure Tim Montgomerie of [ConservativeHome](#) won't mind me using his photo of Gateshead and Newcastle, if only to illustrate the main news of conference (or forum) so far: glorious weather. The sun is shining, the sky is bright blue, and there are no metal detectors to go through at the entrance to the Sage. Most of us got here without difficulty this morning, unlike Jon Craig of Sky News who is still muttering about an unfortunate incident involving a fox and an airplane.

The local Metro Radio is leading on grumpy business reaction to David Cameron's proposals for extending flexible working rights, and folk are still digesting his decision to put deploy his family as a political weapon against Gordon Brown.

As CH's [latest survey](#) shows, his activists want him to go faster and further against Labour. The "hares" are pressing for a more combative style, and they want to see some meaty policies to take on Gordon Brown. Well, they may be disappointed. I've interviewed Mr Cameron and he's got some tough messages for his party as they gather in Gateshead. Read more [here](#) later.

Dave's family credibility



Buried in the Telegraph's online-only [story](#) about Tories imitating Barack Obama is the intriguing suggestion that the party's thinkers believe Dave has a credibility problem with families. If true this is embarrassing. The story reports the content of a strategy paper presented to Tory councillors last year by James O'Shaughnessy, the director of research and policy. He reportedly said one of the party's "key objectives for 2008" was to "improve the party's credibility amongst families as polling has shown that people move away from the Conservatives when they have children."

Never mind that the Conservatives are denying the story's premise, Labour folk are disappointed that it has not had more play. They desperately want to stoke the idea that The Camerons, the new family drama screened on ITV, is a cynical, exploitative move that will have terrible consequences. Some Tories I have spoken to today about it certainly have reservations. But here at the Spring Forum one journalist surveyed local women for their views - admittedly across the river in Newcastle - and found universal approval for Dave's initiative.

From Untouchable to Unmentionable

Dave's speech contained some difficult messages for the party woven in among the positive messages on the family. As Mr Cameron told me when I interviewed him for today's paper, there is still a lot to do. There's a year of trench warfare ahead. But there are small signs of progress: a Labour member called David Cameron emailed him recently to demand that he change his name as "you are making my life hell".

Other names came up as well - and one, intriguingly, didn't. To begin with Dave created two new Untouchables: David Davis and Michael Gove, both of whom he confirmed in their future jobs as Home Secretary and Schools Secretary. He also reinforced George Osborne as Chancellor to be, praising him as a man who "gets the modern world more than anyone". But odd that in a speech in part devoted to a major announcement on health visitors there was no mention of Andrew Lansley. Is his status as an [Untouchable](#) under review? It was certainly discussed by colleagues afterwards, one pointing out with a melodramatic sigh: "the value of shares can go down as well as up". I'm told that in the days following Mr Lansley's reckless assertion about health spending, Mr Osborne hit the roof and one Shad Cab heavyweight even put Mr Lansley against a wall and pummelled him verbally into admitting his crime.

UPDATE: Here's the curious thing: Mr Lansley's name appears in the pre-issued copy of the speech. His colleagues are clearly being a bit unfair.

Actually, Thatcher cut taxes straightaway

Great anxiety at CCHQ, I'm told, following Philip Hammond's interview with the Sunday Telegraph. He appears to have put another roadblock on the road to tax cuts by saying they are unlikely to happen until a second Conservative term in office. As Iain Martin points out, we may have to wait longer than it took to win World War Two. I was particularly intrigued by Mr Hammond's memories of Margaret Thatcher. He said: "We often hear talk about getting back to Thatcher-style cuts. Thatcher waited until she could see that she had stabilised the situation before she started to reduce taxes."

Not exactly. Lady T's first Budget cut the basic rate from 33p to 30p, the higher rate on earned income from 83p to 60p, and set 25p as the target for the basic rate. It also cut public spending, with Geoffrey Howe announcing "we cannot go on avoiding difficult choices". Mr Hammond might reply that it also raised VAT to 15pc, put interest rates up 2pts to 14pc, and sent public spending soaring as a proportion of GDP.

That may be so, but the point surely is that it acted as a declaration of intent and a clear break with the failed policies of the previous government.

UPDATE: It is vital that you now go on and read what Danny Finkelstein has to say about this, [here](#). Somehow, being accused of wishful thinking, historical revisionism and immaturity is not too painful when it's done elegantly.

Vince Cable's formula

"I try to be clear in argument, fair to opponents, and good humoured."

His answers to the Independent's [Q&A](#) are offer a timely antidote to politics as normal, albeit with a jarring note: for some inexplicable reason he lists Clare Short as a "genuinely impressive" Labour minister.

Will Brown follow Sarko's lead?

Fascinating to read about the Elysee's attempts to [tone down](#) Nicolas Sarkozy's image ahead of his arrival in London next week. They are particularly keen to avoid a repeat of his recent appearance in the Vatican, when he kept the Holy Father waiting while he texted his then girlfriend. Le President has his mobile glued to his ear most times, something the French find a bit vulgar. If he wants he can always borrow Gordon Brown's phone when they meet for talks at the Emirates Stadium (by the way, whose dire, faux-populist idea was that?). Folk in Brown Central still rue the day they allowed the PM to escape their control by getting his hands on a mobile phone.



Bad blood in Brown Central



It's been announced today that Spencer Livermore is leaving Number 10 to take up a job with Saatchi & Saatchi and Fallon. His name may not be known to you, but "Get me Spencer" has long been a familiar cry inside Brown Central, where the bright young thing has been a significant figure in the Prime Minister's inner circle. He was forced out by new man Stephen Carter, who is busily recasting the Downing Street political machine and now finds himself the target of recriminations from the old guard who resent seeing one of their own cast out. Compared to turmoil in the global markets and the rants of Heather McCartney, this event hardly qualifies as news. But it has the potential to prove significant.

Mr Livermore has powerful friends, not least Gordon Brown and Ed Balls who tried hard to persuade him to stay. They point out that he has never been short of private sector offers, and had a standing invitation to join Saatchis. Ironically, I'm told Mr Carter asked Mr Livermore to become his number two when he ran Brunswick. But Mr Livermore, once said to have burst into tears after a particularly rough dressing down by the Prime Minister, had apparently had enough of being briefed against by what were described to me as "sources close to Stephen Carter".

You can see where this is going. The arrival of new faces in No10 is causing stress. Old Guard is rubbing up against New Guard. It was noticed that Mr Carter moved into Mr Livermore's office. And when he presented his political plans to Labour party staff last week, Mr Livermore was omitted. There was clearly no room for him in the Carter structure. To keep Mr Livermore, Mr Brown would have had to overrule Mr Carter, the man he has only just appointed to prove that he can take advice from outsiders.

There have been rumours around for several weeks of a shake up in No10. I've been assured that Mr Brown's media operation is to be overhauled with a new, Andy Coulson-like figure brought in. Yet Mr Brown is a creature of habit, who even now, despite the changes, still relies on his closest allies, led by Mr Balls. He could pay a high price if he allows new man Carter to purge the old cronies. "Sometimes you need your old friends around you and not just the new guys who aren't prepared to join the party," is how it was put to me. But Mr Brown gave Mr Carter the job of restoring his political health, and must accept the prescription.

I well remember a conversation in the Red Lion with Mr Livermore a decade ago, when he assured me the best thing Labour could do was to "get the rich toffs" by banning hunting. Mr Spencer, named last year the most powerful gay man in Britain, is today slightly less powerful, though probably richer.

Is this poll a trend?

The Guardian tonight reports the findings of an ICM poll that gives the Tories a 13 point lead over Labour. The numbers are: Lab 29 (-5); Con 42 (+5); LD 21 (+/-0). This is awkward to say the least, as it echoes the YouGov poll in yesterday's Sunday Times, which put Labour on 27 and the Tories 16 points up. Yesterday's rogue poll suddenly looks like the start of a trend. Last night Brown Central was dismissing YouGov's methodology in favour of the more reliable ICM in the News of the World, which gave the Tories "just" 9pts. Will they be saying that now I wonder? It's worth recalling that Lord Ashcroft's internal polling - at least the stuff he's prepared to talk about - gives the Tories about a 7pt lead.

Carter on top

A big merci to Sam Coates over at [Red Box](#) for spotting this fascinating organigram in PR Week which puts Stephen Carter above everyone in Downing Street (except for Sue Nye - he's not that crazy). It shows how No10 staffers must now go through him to get to Gordon. This may help to explain why things are a bit tense behind the black door.



For a more readable version, Sam has reproduced it better [here](#).

Damn statistics

The FT reports today on a "[stinging](#)" [valedictory report](#) from the Statistics Commission, the body which will shortly be replaced by the UK Statistics Authority. Its last word on the political handling of official figures is embarrassing for Ed Balls' DCSF, as well as the Home Office and DWP. The key point is that ministers are failing to ensure that the release of data is kept separate from policy comment. You can read the full report [here](#). It underscores an irony: Labour overhauled national statistics to make them more independent, but its ministers still ignore the rules. Still, things were hardly better under the Conservatives. The report opens with the following from Winston Churchill:

"I gather, young man, that you wish to be a Member of Parliament. The first lesson that you must learn is, when I call for statistics about the rate of infant mortality, what I want is proof that fewer babies died when I was Prime Minister than when anyone else was Prime Minister. That is a political statistic."

Obama's defining moment

Well done to Sky for carrying uninterrupted Barack Obama's jaw-dropping speech on race in America earlier. If you missed it ~~head for YouTube or the Obama'08 website where no doubt it will appear shortly~~ it's below. As always with Mr Obama it is possible to be swept away by the rhetoric, but this one I am certain will go down as a turning point in the way race relations - or as he put it "the racial stalemate we have been stuck in for years" - are addressed in America.

Faced with the furore over Rev Jeremiah Wright's "God damn America" sermons, Mr Obama could, as he said, have joined in the condemnations and moved on. That he chose instead to embrace the man while condemning his views is risky. The "angry black man" has long frightened white America. So it's a bold move for a black presidential candidate to tell white voters that "the anger is real, it's powerful and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots only serves to widen the chasm that exists between the races."

The question hovering over the Union this year is "can America elect a black president?" Mr Obama put the problem directly when he talked about the country's sorry habit of tackling "race as spectacle", whether it be the OJ trial or speculation that "white men will flock to John McCain". Rather than let this contest be turned into an eight month debate about his own race, he has acted decisively to turn the tables. It's time, he says, for Americans of all colours to discuss why their country remains so racially divided.

David Davis writes again

David Davis has written to Sir Gus O'Donnell today to complain about an ad for the Border and Immigration Agency that's appeared in the Daily Mail and elsewhere. He complains that it's "thinly-disguised political marketing for the Labour party, at taxpayer's expense". He says the ad, about the new points system introduced by the Government, is inaccurate and designed for a political objective rather than to inform the business community. He says it breaches the Ministerial Code, the Civil Service Code, and Government advertising rules, and is demanding action.

His point is presumably that a ban on inter-election advertising would be unfair on Opposition parties because they would be unable to compete with the lavish budgets available to Government departments.

What I find more curious is that the letter got to its intended recipient (to judge by the Cabinet Office stamp I've seen) and that it has at the top "By fax to 0207 27X XXXX and delivered by hand". If that's what the Shadow Cabinet's [Mr Danger](#) usually puts at the top of his letters, then the [mystery of his missing letter](#) to Gordon Brown about Sadiq Khan has just got a little bit deeper.

Reid: "I told you so"

We haven't heard much from John Reid lately. The charming former Cabinet minister who left a trail of successes behind him in a long and distinguished career at the top of Labour (sorry, my keyboard seems stuck in 7pt Ironic this morning) is now doing God's work as chairman or something of Celtic FC.

But he still turns up occasionally in the tea-rooms, where, self-effacing as ever, he likes to share his wisdom with the many MPs who lack his intellectual breadth and keen understanding of politics (sorry, still jammed). Anyway, now that Gordon's share price is in freefall, my man by the cake-stand tells me the "Doctor" has of late been telling anyone who will listen, and those who won't: "I told you so." What can he mean?

Smile Gordon, it's all going terribly well

Back in the autumn a Brown Centralite told me that one of Gordon's - how can one put this? - areas of difficulty was his thin skin. He does not take ribbing easily. Self-deprecation is not his bag. He bristles when he is poked. A man who in private tells a great joke doesn't like it when the joke's on him. And it showed today at PMQs, when Dave did his usual trick of skipping lightly about, flicking deft little digs at El Gordo and his mates. Where Tony Blair would have laughed along good naturedly, albeit with that "what a plonker" shake of his head, the PM kept his eyes down and pretended to be studying his scribbles, much in the way a cross four-year-old ignores teasing.

Ed Balls and Ian Austin by contrast gave as good as they got and seem to be enjoying the attention Mr Cameron lavishes on them. Knowing them, I suspect they may be competing with each other to provoke the Tory leader. Overall, I thought Mr Brown did a trifle better, if you overlook his high-wire act with the spoken language ("Dyli" Lama? "life saving diseases"?) his point remains that seriousness is all, and that the longer Mr Cameron engages in "playing politics", he'll focus on the substance of governing. The Tories in turn say all their polling tells them the election will be about Brown the unsmiling man, which is why they are happy to keep teasing him.

Cameron didn't vote to save Post Offices

Earlier a few of us sat down with the division lists to study the detail of tonight's vote on post office closures. It was, after all, a highly successful Tory wheeze. Full marks to Alan Duncan for getting plenty of headlines out of an otherwise pointless Opposition Day Debate. (And it's worth studying Charles Hendry's well-judged wind-up speech in the debate, to my mind a textbook example of charm, wit and a well-delivered political sting.)

No surprises that I spotted among the 19 rebels, all drawn from the ranks of the usual suspects. Nearly 100 MPs didn't vote at all, which gives you an idea of how seriously this vote was taken. More interesting was that the seven Cabinet ministers who are said to have campaigned against post office closures in their constituencies all voted against the Tory motion. This was an Opposition Day Debate, after all. Nothing was at stake, save Government pride. To call this a rebellion is to give it more credence than it deserves.

After all, if it had *really* mattered, David Cameron would have turned up to vote along with - by my count - 10 other Tories who were somehow absent from their own show. If they had, the PM's majority would have been down to single figures. Pointless, yes, but worth having on the score sheet. Mr Duncan said tonight: "The hunt will now be on for all those Labour MPs who have pretended

to support their local post office and then done a runner when they had a chance to make a real difference." But what about the Tories who missed "a chance to make a real difference"? As I say, a jolly wheeze, but that's all it was.

Time for silence

In the years BD - Before Dave - we had great sport chronicling the internal feuding of the Tory party. For the best part of a decade, you only had to pick up the phone to find a member of the Conservative machine willing to stick a knife or three into a colleague, all in the name of "helping" the party find its way. Destabilisation was the order of the day, with desperate consequences. One of Mr Cameron's greatest achievements is to have restored internal discipline.

Gordon Brown ran a tight ship when he was at the Treasury. His operation was disciplined, sharp, discreet and adept at causing trouble elsewhere. Unlike Tony Blair's Downing Street, the number of people who could reliably be described as "friends of GB" - and therefore authoritative - could be counted on one hand. They never attacked each other.

You will have noticed my use of the past tense. For a week or so we have had daily headlines of trouble inside the bunker as people most folk have never heard of squabble about who gets to hold hands with teacher. Just when you might think discipline matters most, the talented folk in Brown Central appear to be at each other's throats. I say appear because the versions circulating are contradictory and not wholly reliable. Of course, it matters that there are tensions inside No10. But it matters far more that we know about it. Peter Riddell [writes ominously](#) today to suggest Labour is reaching a "point of no return". When water is coming over the side, it's no time to be arguing about the seating arrangement.

Clarke: Speaker "seriously damages politics"

Charles Clarke has an endearing habit of being candid and then regretting it (he's [at it again](#) in the Independent this morning). Today he ventures where no Labour MP has so far dared to tread by criticising the Speaker over his increasingly desperate efforts to keep MPs' expenses secret: "The delaying on this matter by the Speaker seriously damages politics in this country and needs to end." A former Home Secretary accusing Mr Martin of damaging politics is serious.

Davis: Government paying for Labour propaganda again

Flicking through your newspaper you may have spotted a full page advert from the Home Office promoting neighbourhood policing. It shows two coppers doing what they always do: strolling past a middle-class mum on a pleasant, sunny suburban street rather than through a gang of knife-wielding hoodies on a hard-as-nails council estate late at night. Its appearance just happens to coincide with the launch of Labour's local election campaign, which featured Gordon Brown and Jacqui Smith talking about...policing!

David Davis smells a rat and has written ([again](#)) to Sir Gus O'Donnell to demand assurances that our tax money isn't being used for party political purposes. He says it's a "thinly disguised piece of political marketing". He also points out the possible breach of election purdah, which begins formally for the locals on Thursday but started a fortnight ago in London, where policing is a major issue.

Harman in danger



Let's hope Harriet Harman keeps up the cracking form she displayed on the Today programme when she squares up to William Hague (or [Boris Johnson?](#)) at PMQs tomorrow. It's hard to imagine a more comically disastrous media appearance by a minister than her exchanges with John Humphrys. That is, if you hadn't already seen [this picture](#). It would be tempting to conclude that she was the victim of a rather jolly police stitch-up, except that it was her assistant who took the picture, put it on the Harman website, and sent it to the local press for good measure. Ms Harman tried to compare her faux-pas to wearing a hair-net in a food factory or a hard-hat on a building site, but collapsed when Humph pointed out that building sites are dangerous. Bizarrely, she also compared it to wearing "some sort of Indian outfit for going to meet Indian

constituents", a patronising aside that should be recorded by Peckham Asian voters next time they spot their MP in a sari.

Tony Blair always refused to wear silly hats and safety kits, even when flying into Baghdad. Gordon Brown was once caught wearing a Biggles helmet and fumed for ages about it. Ms Harman doesn't see the problem, and so has helped reinforce the idea that it's not safe to walk the streets of Peckham. There's a wealth of other nonsense from her in the 7.20 interview [here](#). Book your tickets for tomorrow now.

More on Harman

Gordon Brown did his best to keep out of the Harriet Harman comedy at his press conference. But behind the scenes they're weeping with laughter. "It's hideous," a source told me, cackling away. One special adviser saw the picture and thought it was a cunning April Fool spoof that outdid the flying penguins, Sarko's height-enhancing surgery, and our own [evidence](#) of Alistair Darling's lottery addiction. Another dozed through the Harriet interview on Today, convinced it was all a dream.

As for explanations, no one seems to believe the deputy leader's suggestion that she was just wearing her stab-vest out of courtesy. Crucially, it appears that her canny and experienced special adviser Anna Healey was on holiday. She's been barred from leaving the country in future. Also, I'm told rumours that Jack Straw might be asked to step in for Harriet tomorrow are wide of the mark.

Harman offensive

In the end she didn't need that flak jacket. They say the best defence is a good offence, which is the strategy Harriet Harman deployed against William Hague just now. And it worked. It wasn't an unmitigated triumph, and she flagged badly at the end of her allotted half hour, but she got off to a roaring start that did enough to get her through the danger zone and emerge in one piece. She whacked Mr Hague in the solar plexus with her first answer after he rashly congratulated her on being the first Labour woman to take PMQs. Why, she wondered, was he asking the questions and not Theresa May? Was it because in the "modern tory party women should be seen but not heard"? The Shadow Leader of the House sitting alongside blushed deep red. Mr Hague tried to get back into the game with a jibe at her dress sense, but she predictably hit him back with the baseball cap. And that was it for the main event.

The rest was less promising. She went downhill fast after mentioning her "Harriet in the High Street" listening tour, which only served to remind the pained faces behind her of her knack for PR disasters. And her relish for attacking the Tories

could not disguise her shaky grasp on detail. She is fearless at the depatch box, in an oblivious sort of way, and a darn site more nimble than Gordon Brown. But she has zero authority. Still, the friends of Gordon who took pleasure in predicting a disaster might want to show their boss the video when he gets back from Bucharest. He might learn a thing or two.

Labour is revolting

Bad news for Gordon. At last count 26 of his MPs have [signed an EDM](#) calling on Alistair Darling to review the scrapping of the 10p rate of tax. This follows the grumbles of protest at Monday night's PLP. The motion barely tries to excuse the Government. Worse, it's signed by a number of former ministers and ultra Blairites which will encourage those in Brown Central who claim they are the victims of a plot by the ex-guy's chums to destabilise the PM. And if that wasn't bad enough, minister Gerry Sutcliffe has ~~written an article~~ been interviewed by the [Morning Advertiser](#) in which he backs the drinks trade complaint that alcohol duty is too high. He says: "I think the industry's right to be upset. We, and I speak as a champion of the pub trade, want the Chancellor to change his mind." When Mr Brown was Chancellor the idea of a revolt by Labour MPs on tax was nigh unthinkable. Times have changed.

Drama in Parliament Square

For the last two hours or so there's been turmoil outside Carriage Gates in Parliament Square, with ambulances and police cars blocking the traffic in the road, until eventually an air ambulance landed on the green outside to pick up an accident victim. Reports reaching the Press Gallery suggest a Tory MP driving a 4x4 has knocked somebody down. It's a holiday week and the scrum of tourists crowding the entrance have been worse than usual.

UPDATE 4 April: I'm happy to record that the cyclist who was knocked down by Tory Whip Simon Burns was not seriously injured. The MP was cleared by a breathalyser and not detained by the police, so good news all around. Apparently, it was the BBC that first reported to the Tories and other journalists that the cyclist had died.

Tax rebellion latest

The Inquisition has been out in force today in pursuit of Labour tax rebels. Gerry Sutcliffe has recanted by applauding Government policy on drink, with the now immortal line "my comments do not accurately reflect my views." Better yet, there's the Greg Pope u-turn. Mr Pope is the thoughtful former Foreign Office minister and whip who tabled the EDM. He is far from a usual suspect so to have

him take such a step must have been a kick in the teeth to the Treasury. By late afternoon the message was that Mr Pope had withdrawn his EDM after having the policy "explained to him". If you see him limping, with his hands in splints, don't ask.

Whatever, it's open season for Labour MPs to discuss what's wrong with Gordon Brown's tax policies. That, as they say in the movies, is not good.

Brown's progressive posing



Somewhere in Whitehall someone approved this logo for the weekend lefty gab-fest hosted by Gordon Brown. It looks the sort of thing so-called designers are paid a big wedge to come up with. Quite why the event need a logo is beyond me, but in any event there was presumably a meeting somewhere, various options were studied and this one was chosen. Shame that no one spotted the swastika in the middle of it. I was shown this last night and put it in front a several friends to see what they thought. It must be an optical thing, because if you don't mention the swastika the eye doesn't seem to notice it, but once you do, it's all you see. Is it serious? By itself, not really. But as part of a pattern of misfirings in Brown Central, it's not helpful.

It shouldn't draw attention away from a more interesting question. Why is Mr Brown apeing one of the features of the Blair era, the Third Way chatathon with leaders of various pinkish hues with questionable records? The cast-list includes Thabo Mbeki, Bill Clinton, Dominique Strauss-Khan, Peter Mandelson, Romano Prodi, none of them a particularly inspiring model of political success. I'm not sure this is the right time for the PM to be indulging in the kind of "progressive" back slapping these characters specialise in.

Expenses murk

Was it worth the wait? It took the Commons ages to send out the information promised, making it all too easy to suspect that there's something deliberate about waiting for a Friday afternoon in the recess to issue the figures. Having studied the spread sheets, what stands out?

- David Cameron and George Osborne claim close to the maximum allowable on the ACA, and devote the bulk of that to servicing their mortgages (£21k in Mr Cameron's case, £18k for Mr Osborne). It's perfectly legal, they are newish MPs and young property owners who have expensive Tory seats (unlike John Prescott or Gordon Brown), and they aren't ministers. But they are also well off relative to the rest of us, and so they may find it difficult to explain away in the pub.

- John Prescott claimed £4000 for food in one year, which suggests he's done what the Green Book specifically says is naughty: automatically claiming the receipt-free maximum of £400/mo (for comparison, the average household spends £2444 a year on food).
- Gordon Brown claimed £2300 on food in 05/06 after claiming nothing in 03/04. His colleagues say that along with about £15,000 spent on refurbishing, maintaining, upgrading and cleaning the flat represents the switch from bachelor hovel to family home for children. People will still wonder why the taxpayer has to provide him with a flat a few hundred yards from his grace and favour home, let alone pay for his meals.
- You and me have also paid for Ming Campbell's laundry, Tony Blair's dishwasher, Mr Brown's sky subscription, and £2300 in food for Mr Osborne.
- Mr Brown claimed £0 to cover the cost of his wife Sarah travelling to Scotland, Mr Blair claimed £1400 for his family travel, and Charles Kennedy claimed more than £6000 for his wife.

Remember, it's all legal. As Sam Coates rightly [points out](#) the story remains the manic efforts of Michael Martin to prevent this stuff coming out.

This must be Ken sabotage

I had an angry phone call from one of Red Ken's officials this afternoon taking me to task for suggesting a few days ago in the Mail that Mr Livingstone had deliberately leaked news of his love-brood to pre-empt revelations about his private life in a forthcoming biography. It seemed odd to get a complaint on a Saturday, especially about what looked like a piece of crafty politicking to be proud of.

Since then a "keen Boris Johnson fan" has kindly emailed me this video clip, which baffled me at first. It's obviously a rip-off of "I've got a crush on Obama". But surely a dire tune by an annoying toff can't be a pro-Boris video? Watch it and see if it doesn't make you want to subscribe to Socialist Worker, hum the *Internationale*, and sharpen your guillotine. And then it clicked: it must be a cunning ploy from Ken's black propaganda division to remind us of the berkish toffs who give Boris a bad name. It certainly doesn't do Boris any favours.

Olympic Chinese comedy

It's still snowing in Parliament Square and Whitehall and from where I'm sitting there's little sign of crowds waiting to boo or cheer the Olympic flame when it reaches Downing Street. The footage on Sky is both comical and depressing. I wonder who decided it would be a good idea to have a detachment of PLA heavies in sky-blue tracksuits providing the inner ring of security? That said, the contrast with British bobbies in slightly camp bicycle helmets couldn't be starker. It's probably too much to hope that a Free Tibet campaigner will handcuff himself to Gordon Brown outside No10 and douse him in fake blood before running off with the torch ("Brown loses Olympic torch"), but I'm told at ITV there has been great nervousness that Sir Trevor Macdonald might be chased down Whitehall. As I say, funny - if it wasn't so serious.

PS If you don't know it already, I recommend Richard Spencer's always [excellent blog](#). He's the Telegraph's Beijing correspondent and writes with wit and insight. His recent post on how China was the first to [politicise the Olympics](#) is fascinating.

Boris complains of "dirty tricks"

Boris (or if I don't want to pay Tessa Jowell £5, Mr Johnson) has told the Sunday Telegraph that he is the victim of [dirty tricks](#) by ~~Ken's~~ Mr Livingstone's mob. He doesn't offer much evidence to back the idea bar a claim that his computer systems were hacked into. The "dirty tricks" story is one of the established rituals of any campaign, so this was bound to crop up.

He can point to the "I love Boris" video I mentioned [earlier](#). Sam Coates has also [spotted the problem](#) and is doubtless digging away. If you watch it, notice the high production values, the Governor incident that just happens to be in Andrew Rawnsley's Ken-friendly column this morning, and the lyrics about "incompetent candidate". The video was picked up by [PlayPolitical](#) yesterday, without comment. Iain Dale was the [first to spot it](#) (belated hat tip), though he seems to think it helps. Now there's a suggestion it's been removed from YouTube.

Where's Ken?

UPDATE: at the O2 watching the flame arrive. Which makes the rest of this post, as so often, rather pointless..

It's been a London-themed day. Boris complains of dirty tricks. The Olympic torch relay turns into a sinister farce (those rolling images of the torch at the centre of concentric circles of Chinese goons, Met cycle corps and Met paramilitary snatch squads were something else. They reminded me of that BA add of the smiling face with the winking eye moving down a beach). Gordon Brown posed nervously with torch and jumpy Chinese guys who looked like they were about to jump him. And the mayor of the next city to host the Olympics...was nowhere to be seen. Crafty.

Dangers of death by blogging, or working for clicks

A colleague helpfully sends me the link to this New York Times article on the dangers of [blogging til you drop](#). Something tells me he was making an ironic point about my work rate rather than expressing concern for my well-being.

"Two weeks ago in North Lauderdale, Fla., funeral services were held for Russell Shaw, a prolific blogger on technology subjects who died at 60 of a heart attack. In December, another tech blogger, Marc Orchant, died at 50 of a massive coronary. A third, Om Malik, 41, survived a heart attack in December.

Other bloggers complain of weight loss or gain, sleep disorders, exhaustion and other maladies born of the nonstop strain of producing for a news and information cycle that is as always-on as the Internet.

To be sure, there is no official diagnosis of death by blogging, and the premature demise of two people obviously does not qualify as an epidemic. There is also no certainty that the stress of the work contributed to their deaths. But friends and family of the deceased, and fellow information workers, say those deaths have them thinking about the dangers of their work style."

Welcome Politics Home

A new website launches today which has the potential to be a big hit in the village. [PoliticsHome](#) offers breaking news, transcripts of interviews, video clips, reproductions of the day's front pages, various tracking graphs that claim to measure what stories are hot at any given moment, and lots more. It's inspired by the folk at ConservativeHome. One of its USPs is the PH100, a sort of focus group made up of politicians, spinners, journalists and other denizens of Westminster, of all political persuasions and none. Andrew Rawnsley is the (paid for) editor in chief. Every morning panel members will be asked their views on issues of the day, the results will then be posted on the site to provide what PH hopes will be a reliable "insiders' view". I have agreed to join the panel.

100 years of Tory posters: some things never change



IT IS
**NO "PEOPLE'S
BUDGET"**

WHICH
DOES NOT
RELIEVE
THE PEOPLE
FROM
TAXATION

PRINTED BY THE BODLEY-CLAYTON PRINTING WORKS, GERRARD STREET, LONDON, W.1. AND PRINTED BY THE BODLEY-CLAYTON PRINTING WORKS, GERRARD STREET, LONDON, W.1.

You may have already seen the spread in today's [Daily Mail](#) of historical Conservative campaign posters. They are stored in the Bodleian Library and to mark the 30th anniversary of the Conservative Party Archive CCHQ has put 100 years of Tory propaganda online. You can find it [here](#). It's free, and fascinating. I've put two up at random which show how little changes: snoopers were a threat in 1929, long before HIPs, and tax-raising "People's Budgets" are nothing new. And if David Cameron thinks his discovery of general well being and the benefits of sunshine is a great idea, he should put this one up on his wall...

PEACE ABROAD
REDUCED COST OF LIVING
WIDOWS PENSIONS
IMPROVED EDUCATION
EQUAL FRANCHISE
OLD AGE PENSIONS
ORPHANS PENSIONS
RATING REFORM
800,000 HOUSES
PURE FOOD & MILK



The CONSERVATIVE SUN-RAY TREATMENT

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From Nazis to Chinese "thugs" to...Morris dancers?

On Sunday morning I asked about the "[PLA heavies](#)" surrounding the Olympic flame as it flickered through London. Turns out Seb Coe had [similar reservations](#) about the hatchet faced security detail "guarding" the torch. He was overheard suggesting they should be got rid of: "They are horrible. They did not speak English. They were thugs." Konnie Huq thought likewise after her close encounter with the "robotic" boys in light blue. Their jog through Paris yesterday turned out to be even more embarrassing, so no wonder the impressive new Australian PM Kevin Rudd said they wouldn't be needed when the torch goes down under, thanks very much.

To cap it all, just when the future of the torch relay is in doubt, the Sun points out today the unfortunate origins of the ritual: "[Relay was started by the Nazis](#)". You couldn't etc. But should we dump the relay in 2012? The goons in blue were just following orders, having no doubt been told their organs will be harvested if they let protestors run off with the torch. This debate should be about the wisdom of giving the Olympics to humourless dictatorships, not about the torch relay itself. Let the Olympic flame be paraded around Britain in 2012, I say, protected by a troupe of Morris dancers.

More Boris merchandise...

Camp Boris is distributing this morning some new merchandise that shows his knack for eye-catching gimmicks. It's the "Back Boris" Oyster card holder, with his unmistakable silhouette on the front and his campaign details ont the back. Very clever. The "Back Boris" taxi receipts have been a huge success: 50,000 pads - each with 150 receipts - were distributed around London. It all helps push the Boris brand (oops! do I owe Tessa Miss Jowell £5?). The campaign needs to keep up this pace. Camp Boris worries about reports of a thumping poll lead. Their private polling is not so positive, and they don't want potential supporters to think it's in the bag. The race is much tighter than people realise.

Brown slips further into the mire

Once you've clocked the Times poll showing the PM's personal standing has slipped even further into the Tory death-zone of the 1990s, you should read* Rachel Sylvester's fascinating account of the [bad blood](#) behind the scenes. Jack Straw threatening to punch Ed Balls and race rows in the Lords. Amazing. People are talking about the May elections as the "point of no return." But what if it's already been reached?

UPDATE at 12.55pm:** ZZzzzeeeeTHWACK! That's the sound of a high-speed, blistering denial from Brown Central that has just zinged into my in-box. The denial addresses the threatened punch-up between Jack and Ed. Both offices deny it and No10 says it's "total b**". Specifically, the issue of youth crime was resolved last year and hasn't been discussed in Cabinet since September, so whatever it was, it wasn't that "recent". I'm told that "at no stage" did Mr Straw threaten to thump Mr Balls. The two involved are hardly going to confirm the story, but by Westminster standards it's a fairly comprehensive denial.

Has Blair endorsed McCain?

Daniel Finkelstein interviewed Tony Blair about his faith. There's not much there to surprise, but as ever with the maestro it's the tangential stuff that's arresting. He seems to have persuaded the ex-guy to endorse John McCain, who of course is backed by David Cameron, who is opposing Gordon Brown who... Anyway, see what you think [here](#). He also offers a [lucid analysis](#) of the Downing Street punch-up denial.

But we knew he wasn't going to attend the opening ceremonies

Talk about a story out of left field. "Gordon Brown won't attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics," says Channel Four News, to which my initial reaction was "And? We knew that." Except that apparently we didn't, or rather neither the PM nor Downing Street had ever said it publicly. So this story has provoked a mini stampede. At the risk of reinforcing Guido Paul's theories about Westminster journalism, there's a degree of bafflement about how something that was widely known has been turned into a news story. Number 10 had always been clear to me that the PM would attend the closing ceremonies to witness the handover from Beijing to London, and so was never going to attend the opening. That's what he meant by what - with hindsight - was an ambiguous answer at his press conference last week. So before the anti-China brigade start rejoicing, it's not a snub or a Sarko-style boycott or a u-turn. But it is one of those self-inflicted blunder stories that hits Governments in trouble. Last week I

suggested to one Brown Centralite that the PM should start listening to the questions he's asked, and answering them.

UPDATE Thursday 10am: You can read Nick Robinson's take [here](#). The story seems to have petered out after the great excitement on the 10 o'clock news. Guido Paul [complains](#) that "we were never told" that Mr Brown planned to attend the closing ceremonies, and he has a point, as this episode demonstrates. Which just goes to show that the blindingly obvious sometimes isn't.

Brown does deal with Labour general secretary

I spent a good part of today trying to unravel a suggestion that Labour's new general secretary resigned yesterday during a meeting with Gordon Brown in Number 10 which, I was assured, was so heated that "you could hear them through the walls". You may have spotted accounts elsewhere, notably by Patrick Wintour in the Guardian, about the mysterious circumstances surrounding David Pitt-Watson's recruitment. I haven't got the energy to set out in full the detail, but I'm assured that he did not resign and he will as reported take on his full-time duties in the autumn. It is true that he had a "tricky" conversation with Mr Brown (apparently you can often hear Mr Brown through the walls). The PM championed his appointment earlier this year, and is now frustrated by Mr Pitt-Watson's hesitance. The new general secretary is said to be worried about the state of the party's finances and the rules that say his personal assets could be forfeit if the party goes into liquidation. Mr Brown counters that it would never happen so the problem doesn't arise, but has reluctantly given Mr P-W time to sort his personal finances in order and put his wealth (described to me as "low millions") beyond reach. It's a bit beltway, but gives you an idea of just how fraught things are inside the party at the moment.

Ken wants Chavez cash for failed asylum seekers



I'm away from Westminster today, but someone has pointed out something Ken Livingstone apparently said last night* about his friend Hugo Chavez. It sounds so outrageous that I'm almost wondering if it isn't a spot of naughtiness planted by ~~Ben~~ Mr Johnson's friends. Or maybe it's a spot of Ken far-leftery designed to galvanise his vote among Labour dictator lovers. The Venezuelan buffoon has offered London cut-price fuel, and Ken now says: "(Chavez)

has already given us £14m that allows people on benefits to get half-price travel on the bus. I would ask him to amend the scheme to cover failed asylum seekers." Imagine that: one of the richest cities on earth asking people living in South American slums to underwrite half-price travel for lawbreaking foreigners. Maybe it's another example of Ken "humour" that has to be explained.

**At the London Citizen's hustings at Methodist Central Hall Westminster.*

Polly's pain

Bit late in the day this, but make time if you haven't yet for Polly Toynbee's latest [cri de coeur](#) for an insight into the pain being felt by those who believed Gordon Brown was the answer to the world's problems. She says:

"His bookishness may account for his worst failings. He has studied every aspect of every dilemma, met every global expert, perused every research paper, communed with every contrary opinion. He knows there is rarely one simple answer and the world is made of nuanced grey areas. But prime ministers have to make black and white choices every day. When he doesn't, he increasingly ends up with the worst of all worlds, pleasing no one.

"Maybe he hasn't the character, the toughness, the fibre, the daring. He was always the Macbeth who failed to wield the knife. In those waiting, plotting years of half-cocked conspiracies, a Lady Macbeth would often have shouted: "Infirm of purpose!" Odd to want the crown so much and yet to lack the one essential qualification - not charisma, charm, gift of the gab or great oratory - but decisiveness and direction."

Crisis of confidence

A few weeks ago the consensus was that any trouble for Gordon Brown would kick off after May 1 if Labour did badly. But that's changed, and as I've [reported](#) in today's Daily Mail, planning for a challenge is already underway. The time to plot and panic has been brought forward. If Labour bombs, then expect a number of senior names to step forward publicly in short order to call for change. But what change? Even the ministers who mouth off about the PM in private scratch their heads when you ask them to suggest an alternative. Alan Johnson is the only name that comes up with any frequency. Why? Forget that he's ruled himself out, because what MPs want above all is some of that easygoing swagger the charismatic former postman displays, and Mr Brown doesn't. This is turning into a crisis of confidence. The balance of probabilities is still for Mr Brown to remain in place in the hope that the economy comes good. But things are moving fast.

Matthew Parris in his irresistibly elegant way has returned to the Wizard of Oz theme he has pursued before to [write devastatingly](#) that he expects Mr Brown to go before the election. He raises some important "emperor's new clothes" questions about the "myth of the Wizard of Kirkaldy". Over in the Guardian Martin Kettle, one of the few columnists with a track record of questioning Mr Brown's suitability to succeed his Tony Blair, [resurrects](#) the question of Mr Brown's psychological state and echoes views I've heard from some MPs that they fear the PM is depressed. It's one thing to say someone is no good at the job, it's another to say he needs Prozac. The Guardian main leader caps it all for Labour by raising the prospect of a Cameron government. One of Tony Blair's greatest strengths was his ability to take blow after blow yet bounce back and attack. Gordon Brown doesn't strike me as a quitter, so the party better decide if it wants two more years of this.

Oh but it is fair George

George Osborne has just had a bit of fun kicking Gordon Brown when he's down on WATO, but the interesting bit was his answer to the intriguing question about the future of the 10p tax rate. Cameron and Co plan to vote against scrapping the starting band when that bit of the Finance Bill comes up in a few weeks, and are inviting Labour MPs to join them. What they aren't saying is how they would pay to keep the 10p rate (Treasury estimates have varied up to about £8bn).

George says: "It's not fair to ask the Shadow Chancellor to set out income tax rates in 2010." His point is that the Tories won't know until they see the books how best to restore the 10p rate. He tells Martha Kearney: "I can't give a commitment now on tax when I don't know when the general election will be." But hang on a

minute: the Tories *have* just made a commitment, to restore the 10p rate. What they are being asked is how they are going to pay for it. If, as we are told, this week is about showing the Shadow Cabinet as a Government in waiting, then we are entitled to ask these questions. It's only fair.

Bureaucratic triumph

I spent much of today trapped in the US embassy in Grosvenor Square waiting for a visa for tomorrow's trip to Washington with Brown Airtours. Anyone familiar with the now worldwide phenomenon of heavy security, intrusive immigration controls and faceless officialdom directed by post-9/11 paranoia might expect to hear a horror story, but I don't have one. For starters, the waiting room has floor to ceiling windows overlooking the square, so nice light. Then there's a snack bar selling Reese's Peanut Butter Cups (can't go wrong there). Also the folk behind the counter were unfailingly courteous and helpful. And there's a video loop showing lots of smiling Americans of foreign origin, in between instructions for all men between 16-45 to fill in a RS157 (or something). The place was packed, as however difficult they make it, folk still want to go there, even those I saw sporting headscarves and beards. Of course, we are flying into Pope Week in the US, so things could be a damn bit less cheery by the end of the week, but I'm feeling strangely optimistic.

Forsyth: Tory tax policy is "mad"

How I miss Michael Forsyth. As a young Thatcherite thruster in the jolly days before 1997 he was always good for copy and sharp politics. He's now focusing his efforts on the City, but occasionally dabbles in Westminster affairs. He chaired David Cameron's tax overhaul commission, producing some clever ideas that provided useful ammunition for George Osborne.

But what's this? Jonathan Isaby, that most plugged-in of Tory watchers, has spoken to him about Mr Cameron's pledge to help Labour MPs reverse the abolition of the 10p rate. Lord Forsyth does not like the idea at all, unsurprising as his commission recommended scrapping the 10p rate and raising the personal allowance to £7185 to take 2.5m low-paid workers out of tax altogether.

He says: "It would be mad to reinstate the 10p tax band. To retain something which adds complexity to the system would be daft. Rather than backing a Labour amendment to reinstate the 10p rate, the Conservatives ought to be tabling an amendment to raise the personal allowance."

A plane, any plane, please

Gordon Brown we learn has quietly dumped Tony Blair's plan to buy an official plane for Government use. "Blairforce One" would have been able to take the PM, or the Queen, plus accompanying delegation and journo types like me on long haul flights around the world. The idea would be, over time to save the taxpayer the cost of chartering a BA jet every time the Premier or Brenda have to go away on business.

Was that the right decision? Not from where we are standing here at the Royal Suite. Turns out BA hasn't got a spare plane this week. The one that crashed while we waited to go to China in January has left a hole in capacity. Neither have Virgin or BMI, both of which were approached apparently (another worry for Willie Walsh). So the British PM has to go visit the most powerful man in the world on a no-brand rental. How the mighty etc. On the way in we passed a parked Concorde. I remember flying to Washington on one with Tony Blair. (Cue nostalgic violins).

A VERY special relationship

We're off, albeit under unusual arrangements, of which more later. The theme as we head for NYC is a new chapter in the GB-GB relationship. The PM has done a long interview with Katie Couric - someone who knows about coming in to a gush of publicity only to be written off months later - in which he sounded just like Tony Blair. Highlights include a gushing statement of his americanophilia, repeated critical references to "European leadership who did not support President Bush in Iraq", a defiant "yes" when asked if the war was justified and if he would have done as Tony Blair did and go along with the invasion, and even the Blair bridge thing: "I feel I can bring Europe and America closer together for the future." Contrast that to the "full and frank discussions" of Camp David last summer, in a suit, and the tone is startlingly different. Still, it won't be all work: he's finding time to drop in to the Harvard Coop Bookshop in Harvard Square.

The flying tangerine



That plane thing I mentioned? It's...interesting. We are flying on a Boeing 757 hired from Titan airways, of Stansted. It has a black stripe up the back with stars on it and what looks like a giant tangerine on the side but is in fact Saturn's moon. Apparently it's been used in the past by the Rolling Stones, Inter Milan and Glasgow Rangers (nice anti-Pope touch, with the orange on the side, no?) . If that's the case, there's no trace of damage, although I can't get the rotating bed to work. Does any this matter? Not hugely, save that, well, he's the Prime Minister and... Oh, forget it.

Fiddling while Zimbabwe burns?

Gordon Brown has just told the UN Security Council that a "stolen election cannot be a democratic election". It's hardly a shocker of a statement, but in the context of this event it had an impact. Why? Because Thabo "Crisis? What crisis?" Mbeki was sitting two padded armchairs along from him, and had failed to mention Zimbabwe in his opening statement to a special UN meeting on Africa. The South African president is chairing the session, and every speaker that followed him (the president of Tanzania and the UN Secretary General, as well as Mr Brown) found time to mention Zimbabwe. He didn't. Instead he talked about "modalities" and other UN-babble issues. Once again, he failed to step up to the plate, as they say in the Big Apple. Of course, the British PM pointing out

the blindingly obvious is hardly going to change things, but he's backed the idea of getting the UN involved, all couched in language about supporting the AU and "African solutions". Downing Street may say it didn't come here to force a confrontation with South Africa, but it was useful step for Zimbabwe, and a welcome rebuke to Comrade Mbeki. Time to stop worrying about saving face for Mugabe apologists.

Thanks Darling

In an interview in China Alistair Darling says: "We have got to make sure that in other areas we sharpen up, that we have a clear message of what we are about."

In reply George Osborne says: "This is an unprecedented attack on the Prime Minister by his most senior cabinet colleague, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Even Gordon Brown never criticised Tony Blair in public.

"What started as anonymous briefings from backbenchers has now burst into the open with a public attack on Gordon Brown from the second most important person in the government. If the government is fighting itself, how can it fight for Britain."

Me? I reckon Chancellor makes an unhelpful statement of blindingly obvious, Shadow Chancellor overstates his case just a little bit (cf Lawson/Thatcher for "unprecedented").

Brown doesn't compete with the Pope



"It's like seeing Jesus on earth," a little girl told CNN a moment ago, which isn't far off what they used to say about Tony Blair in Washington. Unfortunately for the PM, it's another Popetastic morning here in the Nation's Capital. The weather is heavenly. The papers are full of coverage focused on the mass at Nationals Stadium that starts in less than an hour. So Mr Brown is struggling to be noticed. There is no mention of him in today's print version of the Washington Post, or USA Today. He appears in the NY Times, but under the headline "British leader visits US in Pope's shadow" (it goes on to claim that "Mr Brown appears to be looking to the US for a way to redress his sinking political fortunes at home...".) Even BBC America's main news bulletin last night relegated him: Mr Brown came after the Pope, the Supreme Court ruling on the death penalty, the Indian rail crash, the Congo air crash, President Bush on climate change, and the economy.

It's unfair to suggest that Mr Brown could hope to compete with the Holy Father. But it must be said that Mr Brown is doing little to give the American media something to report. In every interview they have two questions: "Why did you order British troops to hide at Basra airport while the Iraqi army got caned trying to tackle the militias last month?" and "We know Tony Blair - Who the hell are you?" To each Mr Brown offers turgid answers that don't invite quotation. On NPR's [Morning Edition](#) earlier the questions were zippy - "do you fear you might be a better No2 than No1?" - but the answers weren't.

In Brown Central there's frustration over the Pope comparison. "It's ridiculous. We are not here to compete with the Pope. We are here to promote the British national interest." The good news is that Barack Obama turned up 10mins early, so we've avoided the snub story.

Brown, Obama and Churchill's special relationship



All three meetings with the presidential candidates, we have been told, went well and were carefully choreographed to ensure similar timings to avoid appearances of favouritism.

But it was the first encounter with Barack Obama that attracted the attention. The Illinois Senator came to Washington specifically to meet Mr Brown, flying in from Philadelphia late last night, before heading for North Carolina today. He arrived 10 minutes early and they spent about 50 minutes in private. They met in the ambassador's study before walking to the drawing room for their talks to give the cameras something to record.

They broke the ice by comparing notes on the challenges of being in the public eye while raising small children. Mr Brown was also able to use the portraits of Churchill and Montgomery (the latter by Eisenhower) in the study to raise the special relationship (or as we must now refer to it, the very, very, very special relationship). Mr Obama in turn told Mr Brown about his excitement back in 2005

when he visited Downing Street as part of a Congressional delegation at being allowed to sit in Churchill's leather reading chair.

There were no notetakers allowed, so anything we glean has come from Mr Brown or Mr Obama via third parties. "Obviously, it was about generalities," I'm told - Iraq, Middle East, Afghanistan, trade. While the principals spoke, their advisers gathered in the dining room for their own get-to-know-you session. Less than a year from now, they may be spending more time together.

A tale of two trips



We got back at 5.30 this morning, and in the jet lag blur I've been mulling this odd, at times frustrating trip to the US on ~~Orange~~ Titan Airways*. Actually, it feels as if I've been on two trips, not one. The first was the foreign bit, specifically the programme of the visit. On every leg - wait for it - Gordon Brown clocked up a success. At the UN he was strong on Zimbabwe, and made a valuable impact where Thabo Mbeki was his usual appeasing self. In Washington he did some useful business with George Bush on trade (there could be a deal in time for G8 in July) that got the special relationship back to where it should be. He also pulled off tricky meetings with the three presidential frontrunners in an elegantly choreographed set of encounters that avoided any sign of favouritism. In fact Clinton and Obama interrupted their campaigns to come to Washington just to see him. In Boston he delivered a detailed speech on foreign affairs that may have sacrificed novelty in favour of a checklist of the Western literary canon, but made a useful case for institutional reform. Better yet, his delivery was noticeably easier to listen to.

But then there was the domestic side of the trip, that is the aspects that told us something about Brown the politician. That bit was less successful. By that I don't mean the embarrassment about the odd-looking jet. The PM has ruled out buying a purpose built official plane, and is a notorious last-minute traveller. I bet this won't be the last time he has to settle for what's available at lastminuterentals.com. If he wants to look silly, that's his problem.

What was more troublesome was the surprising tetchiness Mr Brown displayed about the 10p business. He is dug in and refusing to budge on the question of losers, effectively dismissing the IFS, many of his MPs and the media as little short of idiots and liars. Aides remind me that Mr Brown adopted a similar approach as Chancellor each time the Treasury Select Committee tried to make him

admit that the tax burden had gone up. Mr Brown has no intention of giving us the "Brown concedes he has made the poor worse off" headline. Which is why the past 24hrs of talk of concessions strikes me as way off the mark.

Then there was his bizarre telephone exchange with Angela Smith. Whatever possessed him to give this nonentity the time of day? Unlike [Peter Osborne](#), I can't bring myself to see something admirable in interrupting a White House visit to plead with her to stay. There is growing unease at Westminster at the tolerance Mr Brown is showing to those who defy him on a fundamental matter of policy. For my money the conversation should have gone something like this:

Brrriing brrrrring

Smith: *Hello?*

Switch: *This is the Downing Street switchboard. I have the Prime Minister for you. Connecting you now.*

Smith: *Hi Gordon, I just*

PM: *How ya doin. I hear you're resigning. I accept. Best of luck for the future.*

Smith: *But Gordon I....*

Click brrrrrrrrr.

*In fairness to Titan, the interior is sleek and comfortable and the staff a pleasure to travel with. I'll pass on the food.

Harder, Darling

When Alistair Darling said last week that the Government needed to "sharpen up", did he have himself in mind? Some interpreted this as an "unprecedented attack" on Gordon Brown, but after watching the Chancellor on Marr this morning, I wonder if this was in fact an act of candid self-criticism. As the guy in charge of economic policy, Mr Darling is the one who has to defend this Government's tax policies, his and the one he inherited from Mr Tetchy next door. Yet for days now there's been a surprising degree of confusion from the Treasury about what happens next. The Chancellor rightly ruled out tinkering with the Finance Bill, but suggested he would return to the issue in future PBRs and Budgets. He also took a risk by doing what Mr Brown flat out refuses to do: concede that some people will be worse off by the changes.

But what strikes me about Mr Darling - and I sense is being noticed by Brown Central - is that we haven't had a clearer message from him on party discipline. That Gerry Sutcliffe was allowed to get away with his "duty is too high" statement was bad enough; for a Treasury PPS to mouth off and live is baffling. Mr Darling holds the Government's biggest bully pulpit. Speaking softly is fine, but he should wield that big stick.

Brown on the loose

Sky is ignoring it, but News 24 has been carrying the Prime Minister's speech to the Scottish TUC in Inverness. The content is a bit rough - those disjointed subordinate clauses! those recycled jokes! - but the technique is new. He's having another go at the no-notes, away-from-the-podium trick developed to such effect by David Cameron. The prowling back and forth across the stage is suitably threatening, the message is tribal Labour. In Mr Brown's terms, it's an improvement. We're going to hear a lot more of this in coming days I suspect, as Mr Brown and his ministers try to remind MPs who the enemy really is.

Forget the credit crunch, what's Gordon doing about this?

In the Philippines they are hoarding rice. Japan has run out of butter. But only now do we realise how serious the global food crisis really is. Britain has run out of [fig rolls](#).

Candid Brown pleads for his job

I seem to recall that when things weren't looking good for Dave last summer, he vowed to ["ride the dip"](#) by forcing the pace of confrontation with his party. Gordon Brown did the same tonight at the PLP, and there are initial signs that it has paid off. The key phrase was when he begged his MPs not to bring down his Government. Specifically, he said "please don't vote down a Labour finance bill", which translates as "don't vote down my last Budget and therefore my Government".

Next week's vote on 10p, assuming it happens, will be a confidence issue. If Mr Brown loses, he's toast. By reminding his MPs that throwing away the party's admittedly shopworn record of discipline would be The End, he confronted them with a painful reality. Coming from the Big Clunking Fist, that's a startling degree of humility. The man who until yesterday was stubbornly refusing to admit there were losers from last year's Budget not only conceded that he now "gets it", that there are indeed folk worse off, but he pointed out to Frank Field there had been losers in previous Budgets as well.

It's still a mess, the economic situation is dire, the party's in turmoil, and his decision-making (or lack of it) is at times comical, but his best chance may now be confronting his party and forcing that "back me or sack me" moment. Last summer Brown Central talked about the [rope-a-dope trick](#), though I don't think they quite had this slow-motion disaster in mind. What they must now hope for is that Mr Brown can continue to absorb the daily blows, many self-inflicted, without the Tories closing the deal.

Boris on board the Sun

Was that Boris on the open top red double-decker that has just gone round Parliament Square? It was! He was leaning off the front end, like an oddly-carved ship's figurehead, arms reaching out to pedestrians while a video camera zoomed in on his head and placard waving supporters danced at the back. All that was missing was music or a megaphone, to fill the dead silence when it got stuck at the traffic lights.

Nothing unusual in all that you might say, except that the bus has "The Sun - 20p" emblazoned on all sides - no mention of Boris or his party. The paper [endorsed Boris](#) in a big way this morning, but this is new. No doubt he'll declare the value of this donation in kind.

PS a colleague bumped into Boris on the Tube this morning, and I could have sworn I saw him in a Citroen 2CV covered in Boris posters on Westminster bridge a few hours ago, so he gets full marks for multi-modal transport initiatives...

Prescott: Blair the "little s****"

Kevin Maguire has gathered some snippets from John Prescott's imminent memoirs which sound far more promising than the off-putting revelations about his food problem. Apparently the croquet enthusiast and noted pugilist thinks Tony Blair "betrayed" Gordon Brown and was "most to blame" for their rows. Prezza once told the ex-guy "look you little s****" during a row. He's also uncomplimentary about Cherie. You can read more [here](#).

Mad rush for a deal before PMQs

The Prime Minister's spokesman just now declined to comment on reports that the Treasury is about to issue a statement to clarify what it might do to rescue Gordon Brown from the hole he's got himself in on 10p. We hear there's a scramble behind the scenes to get something out before Mr Brown stands up at PMQs. Which leaves me a tad confused, as last night I was under the impression that a lot more work needed to be done by the Treasury before it would be in a position to provide details.

Mr Darling has been working for months on this, he at least having the political smarts to realise there was a problem. Until his "I get it" forehead slapping "doh!" moment, Mr Brown was the toddler with his eyes closed and hands clapped to his ears shouting "I can't hear you! I can't hear you!". Now he wants a solution and I just hope he's not pressing the Treasury to cobble something together this morning to head off a tricky situation in the Commons in 30mins. That said, he is under pressure. More names have gone on to Frank Field's amendment (just as others have peeled off), and enough Labour MPs seem to have a death-wish* to make this an all-hands-to-the-pumps moment.

*You can read my take on the situation in today's Daily Mail [here](#).

So now we wait

A bad business. Mr Brown would have won the vote, but only after days of more debilitating will he/won't he and haggling with his own MPs. Better to get it over with now. Sometimes politics requires a u-turn. Margaret Thatcher used to do it; Tony Blair was a master of the "concede and move on" technique; pity Gordon Brown wasn't listening in Politics 101 when they taught the necessity of knowing when to admit you got it wrong.

Screeching was hardly the word for this u-turn. Brown Central won't thank me, but there's no-one else to blame. Frank Field alerted Mr Brown to the problem a year ago. Alistair Darling has known about it for months, and has done useful work talking to MPs and officials to find a solution. He was the one who came out of a meeting with rebels and concluded more was needed to win them round, hence his letter to John McFall, agreed with Mr Brown last night.

Interestingly Mr Brown has decided to press on with the confrontation. Not content with this episode, he's neatly teed up the next showdown by saying he won't budge on 42 days. Rebels say they have 40 ready to vote against, enough to bring it down. Mr Brown says he would rather be defeated than change his mind. Brown Central says today is "not a green light" for more rebellions. Having conceded defeat, he's discounted it, but will he hold his nerve?

David Cameron put in another of his Triple AAA performances. Rehearsed or not - who cares - the "loser not a leader" line hit home. Good thing Mr Brown couldn't see the faces behind him.

Is there a crumb of comfort for Mr Brown? Not really. He now has a period of grace to concentrate on next Thursday's elections and try to turn things round. At least he won't have his MPs poking him in the ribs about an issue which, however much it matters to them, doesn't quite compete with diesel at £1.45 a litre, food prices climbing steadily, and teachers on strike. There will be lots grim headlines tonight, but the decisive judgement will come in 10 days, when we study the results. If Labour does even worse in the locals, and especially if Boris wins, today will look like a picnic.

Will the Boris donut gobble Ken's red heart?

Iain Martin has an intriguing [revelation](#) on his blog: the Shadow Cabinet recently discussed how to protect David Cameron and themselves from the menace of Boris Johnson if he becomes mayor. There will be jubilation in CCHQ if Boris Mr Johnson turfs out Ken Livingstone, but Team Cameron believes it will need a "degree of distance" to insulate itself from any calamities. I suppose we should be impressed that the high command believes it worth discussing the 'what if he wins' question. Those who have been out canvassing report that the Lynton Crosby strategy of targeting the blue donut of outer boroughs is working a treat, and that it will gobble up Ken's red heart of London.

Prime Minister Field makes his mark

Tuning in to the Today programme this morning, I half imagined there had been a coup overnight and Frank Field was heading a new provisional administration of national salvation. With his talk of the PLP taking ownership of tax policy, and his assurance that a statement from the Treasury was imminent to clarify the backdating business, he sounded like the over-eager colonel who has taken over the radio station while the deposed tyrant hides in his palace/heads for the airport.

Or maybe Prime Minister Field is in fact Chancellor Field, handed the seals of office in a discreet meeting with Gordon Brown on Tuesday night when he presented his demands and forced the PM to surrender. George Osborne certainly seemed to think so just now when he suggested Mr Field spoke for the Government rather than Yvette Cooper. Alistair Darling won back ground lost - somewhat bizarrely I thought - overnight by pledging that the "problem" would be sorted with payments for average losses over the year. Which was useful, but when he got back to the Treasury was Mr Field sitting in his chair?

Brown isn't the only minister who needs a better plane

It was bad enough pulling up in the [Flying Tangerine](#) next to the Pope's deluxe Alitalia number at Andrews AFB last week. Now David Miliband has been (mildly) embarrassed by HM Government's reliance on anyoldplane.com to ferry the PM and his Cabinet around. His blog [records](#) the bafflement of his Gulf hosts when he turned up late for a meeting because the loo on his charter jet exploded at Islamabad airport. "The concept of a charter plane took some explaining for the Gulf Ministers," he notes, in what we might describe as an ~~astonishing attack on his tight-fisted rival for the Labour leadership~~ interesting comment.

Sarko shows Gordon how it should be done



I tuned in by chance to Nicolas Sarkozy's [interview](#) with French telly this evening. It went on for more than an hour, live, and he was questioned at length by a succession of specialist journalists who were allowed (pay attention Mr Brown) follow-up questions. France's equivalent of Huw Edwards and Trevor Macdonald co-chaired the programme, and it was gripping. Maybe it's because I have had just about all I can stand of longtermdecisionsforthelongterm, but Sarko's style is like water in a desert for those of us currently drowning in the awfulness of Mr Brown's leaden language.

He was refreshingly robust about the Taliban - "Talk to that lot? Who stone women, stop girls from going to school, destroy ancient Buddhas? I don't think so" - and Hamas, as well as the Iranian president. The closest he came to Brownism was describing how his job was to take decisions nobody else wanted to, specifically extending from 40 to 41 years the years necessary for a pension, very unpopular in France. He defended Mr Brown over the Olympics, pointing out that he was always going to the closing ceremony, and reminded his interviewers that Tony Blair "lost all his local elections" but won three terms (worth keeping in mind next week).

But it was when he was asked about the things that have gone wrong in his first year that his answer was worth printing out and shoving in front of the PM: "I'm trying to do my job in the best way possible. I devote a lot of time to it. I take seriously the trust that has been placed in me. I try to acknowledge my mistakes. Of course I have made them. I take decisions all the time so I can't make the right ones all the time." If only Mr Brown had said something like that months ago, he wouldn't be fast disappearing down a hole of his own digging.

Klepto Cameron

Much spluttering into coffees this morning over at Treasury towers I suspect, assuming they were watching Dave flirting with the ladies on GMTV's sofa. He's proposed setting up a debt helpline with money from the banks to assist those hit by the credit crunch. Spluttering, because this looks like yet another case of crafty Cameron - or should that be Klepto Cameron? - borrowing a Labour idea.

Only last month, a review commissioned by the Treasury suggested the creation of an independent National Money Guidance Service that would use a mix of phone, internet and face-to-face to dole out advice to people coping with debt. Small pilots were run last year. On May 9 a £12m major pilot will be launched, with national roll-out due in 2010. The Government's version is a £50m scheme, the cost shared equally between HMG and a levy on all institutions

licensed by the FSA. The only difference, it seems, is that Dave wants the banks to pay for the whole thing.

UPDATE: Dave's lot naturally reject the suggestion that they have nicked a Labour idea. Mr Cameron addressed the charge in his speech on poverty, saying:

"In September last year, the Government commissioned an independent review that recommended such a national financial advice service. Since then, they've dithered and delayed. Why has the Government taken so long to do anything? The local pilot scheme has not even begun yet, and it is only since our announcement this morning that they have started to provide any kind of clarity about the timetable for the national roll out and how it might be paid for.

"Today, we've made those decisions for them. We've shown how it can be done – and why it should be done. We're the ones that are taking the fight to personal debt – and taking the fight to poverty."

May is tax refund month (in the US)

My favourite numbers today are in the FT, which provides a [helpful refresher](#) on the US tax rebate and what it means for American households. The federal government is returning \$110 billion this year to its taxpayers, to help soup-up its flagging economy. That's £55.3 billion. Of that, \$50bn - £25.2bn - will be handed out in May alone. That means actual cash-in-hand, in the form of cheques from Uncle Sam, landing on the doormats of every US household. A single individual gets \$600 - £301 - while a couple receives \$1200 - £602. And each child gets about £300. So an American couple with two children can look forward to receiving a cheque for around £1200. Keep these numbers in mind next time you hear Dave and El Gordo arguing over tax.

Time to bring back Campbell? Or even Tony Blair?

Gordon Brown needs a political henchman, and fast. Thanks to a recruiting spree No10 is now heaving with alleged experts in the derivatives of spin. No doubt over time these talented people will make a useful contribution to the work of Government. You wouldn't credit it, but the Downing Street machine itself is working more smoothly, in particular on the civil service side where Jeremy Heywood has brought is trade-mark sharpness and rigour to bear.

But neither he, nor Stephen Carter on the political side, can fill the most important vacancy of all, the one left by the departure of Ed Balls for a Cabinet job and a new career as wannabe leader-in-waiting. Without Mr Balls around, Mr Brown has no one at his side that he trusts sufficiently to fulfill the role of

trusted consigliere. And boy does he need it. The most glaring example of the "advice gap", which I've mentioned before, was his decision to call Angela Smith from the White House. At that moment he needed someone with the clout to rip the phone from his ear, call him a t***, and tell him not to keep the President of the United States waiting.

Jonathan Powell and Alastair Campbell did it for Tony Blair. Gordon Brown is notoriously think-skinned, so finding someone he will tolerate is tricky. But it's vital. I hear junior staff are now relied on to break bad news and face the storm that results. Senior figures in Whitehall are aware of this problem and turning their minds to it. One suggested to me that Alastair Campbell would jump at the chance to help (and my source wasn't being ironic). Another view is that Mr Brown misses Tony Blair, who had the nerve to argue with Mr Brown and even shout at him. All Prime Ministers need a trusted figure who is not afraid to speak the truth - in private. The tightly-knit circle of advisers around Mr Brown is talented, but none of them can grab him by the lapels on occasion and save him from himself.

UPDATE: Apologies to Tim Hames, who [touched](#) on this issue this morning. I promise to read his column before lunch in future, though I'm not sure about the Michael White suggestion.

Brace yourselves

A veteran told me over lunch that one of the first rules of byelections was to get them out of the way as soon as possible. The longer you wait, the more votes you lose before polling day. Someone was obviously listening: the writ for the Crewe and Nantwich will be moved tomorrow and it will be held on May 22. I'm cheered that the party machine thought to get an endorsement from Gwynneth Dunwoody's family, as the Tories have lost no time pointing out that this is the first time in memory that a writ has been moved before the deceased Member has been buried.

That particular hurdle (maj 7078) can wait however. At Westminster the vibe is moving the way of ~~Boris~~ Mr Johnson. A sense that Ken Livingstone would just shave it a few days ago has been replaced by quiet - and slightly disbelieving - confidence among Tories that their man is about to pull it off. Last July I asked if selecting Boris would be good for Dave and his Conservatives. If the mutterings of terror coming from the Labour ranks are anything to go by, the answer is certainly. If he wins on Friday, it will be vindication for Mr Cameron and a rebuke to the doubters (I confess [I was one](#)). It will also start the mother of spin wars.

Already there is talk of a fightback or a relaunch or both, though not from Brown Central. The traditional weapon is the snap reshuffle to draw attention away

from the results, but I've been told not to expect one. Mr Brown apparently expressed disbelief when it was put to him that the idea was already being canvassed in some newspapers. Instead there is talk of policy announcements to show the Government is "on your side". Mr Brown will repeat last year's innovation of a producing a draft Queen's Speech, and Downing Street confirmed this afternoon that it will happen "earlier". Could it be next week? I hope not. The challenge for Mr Brown in the days ahead is to do nothing that smacks of panic.

Brown ditches caution

Sunder Katwala is a naughty one. The head of the [Fabian Society](#) has beat the Bank Holiday rush by bringing out tonight a report on "what's wrong with Labour". Gordon Brown won't thank him for it, namely because Mr Katwala believes the PM and his party suffer from "neurotic under-confidence", a phrase that comes painfully close to suggesting Mr Brown is "psychologically flawed". The report also suggests cancelling No10's subscription to PR Week, which is cute but not quite the problem. That said, Mr Brown appears to be undergoing a remarkable transformation. Did he really say "I'll be honest about it, we made two mistakes"? If he's discovering the confidence needed to admit mistakes, it must be serious.

UPDATE: Now I realise why Mr Brown's interview jarred something in the back of my mind. He didn't just admit mistakes; he also pointed out that as PM "hundreds of things pass across your desk every week". Now why did that sound familiar? Of course, it's straight out of the Nicolas Sarkozy [playbook](#) I commended to Mr Brown last week. *Vive l'Entente Cordiale! Vive Carla Bruni!*

Local intelligence

Two useful shortcuts to handy facts and spin about the local elections. Sam Coates has helpfully distilled what each of the three main parties are predicting [here](#). And the Electoral Reform Society, always a great source of facts and analysis, has produced a [guide](#) with everything from battlegrounds to timings.

Gordon embraces defeat on terror

David Cameron tried to get the ball rolling on the next Labour rebellion by asking Gordon Brown if the vote on 42 days will be treated as a confidence matter (answer: no). He wanted to rile the Labour benches by reminding them of another issue that gets their goat. But of course on this one Mr Brown has the public on his side: all polls show that voters out there would quite happily lock up suspicious beardies for 442 days. Mr Brown can rightly claim - as he did just now - that the Tories are at odds with popular sentiment. Today he burned his bridges:

there can be no last minute u-turn before the Commons votes. If he goes down to defeat, he will blame Mr Cameron from then until polling day.

Brown Central was particularly comforted by an outbreak of Labour unity when Mr Cameron accused Mr Brown of "putting political calculation and self interest ahead of the right decisions on the national interest". This provoked a roar of derision from the Labour side, as if they had suddenly woken up to who the real enemy is. The PM had a go at a bit of Cameron-style knockabout, describing the Tory leader as a "shallow salesman" - cue "fightback" headlines.

Are Labour Whips losing their nerve?

An MP calls to tell me about a curious incident he witnessed in the Commons chamber last night. He says Tommy McAvoy, stalwart of the Whips' Office, gave Diane Abbott a public dressing-down about her "disloyalty to the Government". Now, it is true that the MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington is a serial rebel who will vote against lunch it serves to annoy the leader of the day. But a hairdryer treatment is normally delivered in private, not at the Bar of the House. An astonished Ms Abbott had to sit down afterwards to recover her composure. I have not checked this with either Ms Abbott or Mr McAvoy, who is widely respected on both sides of the House, but I trust my source. The incident chimes with Mary Ann Sieghart's [account](#) of tensions behind the scenes in the Labour Whips department.

Tory MP gives a lead on financial transparency

This is new. Richard Spring, the Conservative MP for West Suffolk, has used his [blog](#) to set out details of his salary and pension, down to the last pence. Ben Wallace started the trend of Web openness a few months ago during the Derek Conway frenzy. The figures for Mr Spring's pension arrangement suggest that his 10pc contribution has earned him the equivalent of a pension pot of £322,000 after 17 years of service. He leaves it to readers to judge whether "my own contributory pension is generous enough to be described as 'platinum plated' or a 'goldmine'." Brave.

A bad night for Labour - but how bad?

In the minutes before the off, here are the latest rumours, reports and predictions.

- Labour expect their share will struggle to hit 25pc, and seem to think the Tories will get anywhere from 44pc to 47pc. The Tories are unsurprisingly more cautious. Whatever, we are still talking a 20pt spread or thereabouts, so blue landslide territory.
- On seats, the Tories were saying about 160 gains, Labour thinks it could go as low as 200 losses.
- The Tories concede Coventry, while Labour say Reading is lost. Sheffield has gone to the Lib Dems. Bury was thought by Labour to have fallen to the Tories, but now they are less sure.
- London: everyone thinks Boris. Turnout in Labour areas has been better than expected according to the party, but outstripped by turnout in the blue donut. ConservativeHome has just [called it for Boris](#).
- Blame game: if this is about angry voters kicking Gordon Brown over petrol rises, house price falls, 10p tax and general economic mess, then Labour is experiencing for the first time what it is to have the public vote its pocketbook. Of course Mr Brown wants this to be about the economy because otherwise it's about him. Expect the finger of blame to be pointed at the MPs who got the 10p issue up in lights for voters a fortnight before polling day.
- The expectation is that the BNP will take a seat in London.

Expectation management latest

- So Labour say the best they can do is 25pc, while the Tories could hit 44-47pc. Team Dave, in between guffaws, says that's "totally mad". Their "expectation grid" goes from 39 to 42pc. So Conservative share will doubtless end up at 43. Which, in case you had forgotten, is just a point off the 44pc Tony Blair achieved in 1997, and a point better than the 42pc he produced in 2001.

It must be serious - Ed Miliband is on TV!

- A frequent complaint in recent days has been the absence of Mr Brown's closest allies from the fray. With the Government and the PM in trouble it's been left to David Miliband, Jack Straw, John Hutton and others to do the heavy lifting. MPs complain that Ed Balls, Ed Miliband and Douglas Alexander, the Three Musketeers of Cardinal Brown, have been suspiciously silent. The doubters can relax: Ed Miliband has just done a turn on Newsnight. He says it's all down to the 10p mistakes*.
- **There's been a fascinating if slightly esoteric debate about Mr Brown's use of the word "mistake". Since the Treasury readily admits that it was known there would be losers, how is that a mistake?*

Tory Tongue

Worth recording that the Tories recorded a swing of 10pc in the Bolton ward of Tongue-with-the-Haulgh.

That 47pc thing

My colleague James Chapman has made some sense of the "Tories 47 Labour 25" vote share prediction from Labour's pollsters this evening. It is of course the mirror image of the 1995 locals, when the dying John Major Tories fell to 25pc and new boy Tony Blair got his party to 47pc, two years from a general election landslide. The message being, if Dave doesn't get 47 tonight then he's not doing enough. A bit too clever perhaps.

Black Friday for Gordon Brown as Labour drops below 25pc

Smoke is pouring out of the Labour machine. They now expect to score less than 25pc, which suggests we might be heading for that "worst ever" territory. Tories say they will win more than 200 seats, Labour thinks it will lose 200plus (Wales is particularly dire apparently). Labour fears for Bury, Oldham, Bolton (goodbye Ruth Kelly!), Nuneaton (we know), Sheffield, Barnsley. They still expect the Tories to do better than 43pc.

David Cameron's Northern progress

It's the first glimmers of a trend, but have you noticed how Dave's lot are picking up seats in the North? Bury, a couple in Wigan, a handful in Sunderland, one in Pendle, one in Wirrall.

Now what for Gordon Brown?

It's been a terrible night, and there's a bad day to come. I can't find anyone who seriously thinks Ken will hold on, so it's a Torytastic result for David Cameron and a big headache for Gordon Brown. He will take to the airwaves - look for him on Marr and elsewhere on Sunday - to face the music. What will the tune be?

In recent days I've been struck by the sense of resigned calm among MPs who might normally expect to be causing trouble. Some have suggested to me that last week's 10p upheaval served as a pre-emptive spasm, effectively the post-election row brought forward. Their expectation was that the weekend could perversely be calmer than one might expect. The likely ringleaders of a move against the PM have told me they have nothing planned.

But tonight has changed things to judge by a few brief conversations I've had. The scale of the losses is, well, off the scale. For a Labour MP with a majority of Crewe proportions or less, a 24pc share is a scary number. I fear it may be too much to ask some of the more nervous backbenchers to keep quiet in the days and weeks ahead. I'm told by those who believe a change of leader is necessary that there are up to 50 MPs who would back the idea. It's just gone 2am and already John McDonnell says this is a "potentially irretrievable tipping point", while Charles Clarke says Labour can win under Gordon "but it would require changes". Mr Brown plans to carry on, hoping that he can survive until next year when the economy will come good. Contemplating this outcome, his MPs may find it difficult to wait that long.

Bedtime thoughts

We're done here at Mail towers, but two final thoughts before I adjourn:

- great night for the Tory spin operation, which put out a steady stream of helpful facts and figures, and for its operators on telly - Osborne, Spelman, Grayling all remained calm and avoided the gloating pitfalls.
- final cute word to Fraser Nelson on the Beeb just now who pointed out that Gordon Brown lives in a Lib Dem constituency in a country run by the SNP and works in a town about to be run by a Tory.

Eric Pickles is the new Tory pin-up boy

He sounded almost delirious, doubtless due to lack of sleep, but Eric Pickles was masterly on Today this morning. Of course there are times when seriousness and detail matter, but after the speak-your-weight awfulness of Harriet Harman, it was cheer-making to hear a spot of no-nonsense Yorkshire candour about the work his party still has to do on policy. Internally he is getting a big chunk of the credit for the successes the Tories are contemplating today, and rightly so. If you ever start to worry that Dave's Conservatives are all soft-cheeked trendy toffs, take a moment to admire the girth, the stout cloth, dammit, even the tie-clip of this briny, plain-speaking, subtle, human politician. Great things ahead I reckon.

PS In 1995 apparently, when the Tories were wiped out in the locals, Mr Pickles spent the weekend telephoning every defeated council leader to apologise.

Expectation management latest (cont)

Last night there was a lot of mockery from CCHQ when Brown Central suggested the Tory share would be between 44 and 47pc. "Utter madness". "I hope you're not swallowing that spin". "Bonkers". Even in the small hours, several Very Senior Tories were assuring me that 41pc would be a good result, maybe 42pc. So where are we now? The BBC called it at 44pc at 1am, and Tory sources now say it could be more - possibly 45pc. So when it comes to assessing the spin wars, it's worth acknowledging that Labour was able to call the eventual Tory share more accurately than the Tories themselves. Put another way, Labour spin was more reliable than Tory spin...

Labour general secretary resigns

David Pitt-Watson has resigned as Labour general secretary, or rather he told NEC officers this morning that he won't be taking up his appointment. It will be announced shortly. Last month I [raised this possibility](#) when I reported an account of a torrid meeting between him and Mr Brown. The timing is awkward as it looks like it's linked to last night's results, but in fact his departure is more due to a dispute over financial issues and specifically how to protect his wealth from the risk of Labour insolvency.

Midnight? What is this - Zimbabwe?

There's a dreadful rumour going round that the London result won't be in much before midnight. Isn't this supposed to be the wealthiest, most sophisticated city on earth? Suddenly it's all looking a bit Zimbabwean.

Ken spares Gordon Brown

Two striking speeches that will bear dissection in the days to come. Both gracious, both pointed, both convincingly warm about London, one funny, one emotional - a suitable finish to this ordeal.

The most significant statement was Ken's praise and thanks for the Prime Minister and his assurance that "the fault is entirely mine". Brown Central feared he might lash out at the Labour leader; instead Mr Livingstone said he would carry the can. "You can't be mayor for eight years and say it was somebody else's fault." There was no mistaking the emotion in the voice of a man who patently loved his job and can't bear to give it up. He told Boris: "The next few years will be the most amazing years of your life."

I don't know if Mayor Johnson's acceptance was Periclean but what struck me was his gesture to Ken Livingstone and the "sheer exuberant nerve with which you stuck it to your enemies, especially New Labour has earned you the thanks of millions of Lononers". He hoped he could find a way for his administration to "benefit from your transparent love for London." Ken, it seemed, accepted. Boris niftily accepted that his win does not mean London is suddenly a Tory city, and acknowledged the doubts of those whose "pencils wavered". He then wrapped up with an echo of Margaret Thatcher - "where there have been achievements we will build on them".

Miliband sips while North burns

David Miliband has just booted John Denham off the World this Weekend to answer charges that he is showing a bit of leadership ankle. "Complete rubbish," he says. "Like most normal people I'm here with family and friends enjoying a cup of tea." Here, just to be clear, is [Chevening](#), the grace and favour estate at the disposal of the Foreign Secretary. "Most normal people" aren't spending the Bank Holiday weekend in a 115 room house designed by Inigo Jones. I mention this because earlier on the programme Ronnie Campbell was blunt about just how bad things are for Gordon Brown: "If he can't handle it, he should get out and let somebody else handle it. The heartlands of the Northeast are not Labour any more." Mr Miliband was a tad patronising I thought when he pointed out that like Mr Campbell, he too is a Northeast MP. Which is true, except that on the weekend after Labour got a kicking in its northern heartlands, the South Shields MP is on his estate in Kent.

Inside the court of King Dave

I've only just got round to watching this webcamera video, which is far more than just a record of a victory moment for Team Dave. It's also a canny spot of psychological warfare. It gives us a choreographed glimpse behind the scenes, an insight into where power lies. An Old Master could not have done better to capture the tieless court of King Dave around the top table: the brooding presence of George Osborne over Dave's right shoulder, hands in prayer; Ed Llewellyn, still in a jacket, not quite seen around the corner; Andy Coulson, eternally fidgeting with his mobile, one leg confidently perched on the table; a lopsided Alistair Darling mask taped to the wall by a (very) blue political map of the UK; Dave standing over them, talking easily about nail-biting moments (when we know that's what Gordon does). Then behind him, caught only fleetingly, Nick Boles, the man in black who now runs London for Boris, whooping with delight and reminding us that Boris London is also Cameron London; peeking around the corner, as if she had been briefly allowed to bask in the Sun King's aura, Caroline Spelman; and no sign of Svengali Steve, as ever out of sight but handling the camera. All them surrounded by a mix of young, multi-racial, casually dressed staff. Contrast all this to the accounts of Mr Brown retreating to watch the results alone in No10.

All change at Crewe



Mrs Pickles was promised a lavish holiday after the local elections campaign, and I'm delighted to report that she's loving Crewe and Nantwich. Eric has been there since Saturday overseeing the Tory campaign, and is encouraged by evidence that his side has scored an advance: there is little sign so far of a Labour campaign, whereas the Tories are on their third leaflet drop already, and helpers are pouring in from all over to boost the strength of what is already a strong Conservative association. It's worth noting the personal link between Mr Pickles and the late Gwyneth Dunwoody. He served on the select committee with her, helped run her campaign for the Speakership, and grieves her loss. "But Labour's called a by-election and she would have thought we were soft if we hadn't run a full-blown campaign," he tells me. He is too smart to predict the outcome, but points to a Lib Dem collapse in the area last Thursday, the potency of Post Office closures and the 10p tax fiasco on the doorstep, and the impeccable local credentials of the Tory candidate. David Cameron will visit tomorrow, when campaigning proper kicks off.

'Prime Minister' Cameron is ready

It takes some gumption to lecture current and former Prime Ministers on where they have gone wrong and how they should do their jobs. But a brass neck is one of Dave's endearing qualities because he carries it off so well (and Labour provides him with so much material to work with). His press conference just now was the usual free-wheeling thing that allowed him to display yet again those Blairite tricks - he's even beginning to sound like him - that make him such an effective performer.

His opening statement included a clever announcement of a policy partnership with Rolls Royce that will see CCHQ staffers "embedded" in the company to learn about manufacturing. But its main thrust was that he is now ready to take power. His troops are on a permanent election footing and he has a three point plan of school, welfare and family reform (notice the environment has been dropped from the top of the list).

His best empathy moment was the petrol point: "Yes I'm wealthy, I have a well paid job, and so does my wife, but I drive my own car, I fill it up myself and last week in Chipping Something I really noticed the increase."

But he has taken a risk by calling on Gordon Brown to re-open the "disastrous" 2007 Budget to fix the 10p tax problem. If he gets into Government there may come a time when he will regret having that precedent set for him. And his refusal to say what he would do to help those hurt by the tax change doesn't sit easily alongside his boast that he is ready to rule. Specifically, he seems confident in claiming that helping all 5.3m would cost a mere £700m which suggests he must have some idea of how that would work.

Alastair Campbell on "unelected" Brown

Alastair Campbell has appeared on the Daily Politics to offer the Prime Minister and his party some advice: "The Labour party have had one unelected Prime Minister come in and I think to start playing around with two is not a very clever way to go," he says. I know he is trying to be helpful - he says there is still time sort out the 10p mess - but is reminding us that Gordon Brown has no mandate the right way to go?

Fuel costs in Kirkcaldy

After David Cameron made a thing about the cost of filling his family car in the Cotswolds yesterday, it was hardly surprising that a Tory MP asked Mr Brown the modern-day version of the pint of milk question: how much is a litre of petrol in Kirkcaldy, and when was the last time he filled his own tank? After hurried consultations with Alistair Darling beside him, Mr Brown said petrol was a \$110 a barrel, and a litre of petrol was at £1.10. I've called the BP station in downtown Kirkcaldy to check, and it turns out he was roughly right: unleaded was at £1.06/lr yesterday, while diesel was selling at £1.14lr. That sounds on the cheap side to me - my Kennington Texaco had diesel at £1.23 this morning. What was more striking was how Mr Brown did not engage with the personal nature of the question. He made no reference to his constituency, or himself, when for starters he could have pointed out that with his dickie eyesight he's not actually allowed to drive a car.

McMayhem: just who is the Labour leader in Scotland?

About 10 years ago a friend and I were discussing Scotland with Tony Blair. We asked him who was the leader of the Scottish Labour party. He looked puzzled and said "Donald Dewar?" Alastair Campbell, who was there, shot back "No, you are". My friend reminded me of the exchange earlier today as we tried to make sense of the row over the Wendyendum. Ms Alexander leads the Labour group in the Scottish parliament, but Gordon Brown is the leader of the Labour party, and that includes Scotland. And constitutional affairs are reserved to Westminster and the Prime Minister, as Ms Alexander well knows given that she wrote the White Paper that set up the "wee pretendy" parliament a decade ago. Objectively, she has no authority to set policy on this either politically or legally.

So why the confusion? I take the [Nick Robinson view](#): whichever way Gordon Brown jumps he lands in deep trouble. Scottish politics is now so inward-looking that Ms Alexander probably hasn't noticed that her patron was in enough trouble already without her ill-timed suggestion. In Westminster terms, who runs Scotland is of little interest since that lovely country disappeared over the horizon many years ago. Today's story is therefore about Mr Brown's authority. And it throws up an intriguing question: are we seeing the first cracks in the Prime Minister's core of allies?

Will Gordon call Boris?

The Prime Minister acknowledged the presence of Boris Johnson on the Tory benches at PMQs. But I'm told Mr Brown still hasn't picked up the telephone to congratulate formally the new Mayor of London. Hizzoner says: "It was all very exciting. Saturday night a call came in: 'It's the Downing Street switchboard here..... I've got Hazel Blears for you'. Oh." There's no rule that says the PM has to be polite to the holder of one of the biggest directly elected jobs in Europe. Who knows, Tony Blair may still be waiting for a "well done" call himself. But given the economic

Dave, Boris and the man from Brown Central



They are crafty, those colleagues of mine at the Evening Standard. Their [excellent account](#) of last night's Spectator thrash in honour of ~~the magazine's 180th birthday~~ Boris shows Hizzoner posing confidently next to ~~a buffed, slicked-back aryan sun god~~ David Cameron. It's a telling image of the future, surely. Except what's this? There, in the background? Who is that man with his ear cocked for any Tory indiscretions? Can it be? It is! Well done to Damian McBride for reminding us that Brown Central is still at the party - just.

Is Wendy on her own?

I doubt Gordon is a student of the Sound of Music, and the idea of Wendy Alexander in a wimple is too much to contemplate. But how does he solve the Wendy problem, especially after watching her performance at First Minister's Questions? "Many a thing you know you'd like tell her/Many a thing she ought to understand...When I'm with her/I'm confused/Out of focus/And bemused/And I never know exactly where I am", which must be how the PM is feeling at the moment, in addition to just plain furious at the way she has landed him in a mess. She told Alex Salmond to bring forward a bill for an independence referendum next week. "I have offered him Labour support on an early referendum," she said. On Gordon Brown's behalf? Or has Mr Brown done what few would credit: cut Labour loose in Scotland and let it go its own way?

New poll: there's good news, and bad news

[YouGov](#), fresh from its Boris triumph, has a new poll out tonight in the [Sun](#). When they get it in No10, the conversation will go something like this: "There's another poll, Prime Minister. The good news is that all your so-called rivals, including Tony Blair, are more unpopular than you. The bad news is that Ed Balls is the most unpopular. Oh, and Labour is at its worst low since the 1930s and ~~23~~ 26* points behind the Tories. Drink?"

The numbers are: Tories 49pc, Labour 23pc, LibDems 17pc.

YouGov also asked if voters they would be more or less likely to back Labour if someone else was in charge. Tony Blair was the least unpopular, on -3. Jack Straw, David Miliband, Alan Johnson and Andy Burnham scored -4. Harriet Harman and Ed Balls came bottom, on -10.

**write in haste, repent in public etc. doh.*

Johnson leads the fightback

Delight inside No10 this morning at the way Alan Johnson smacked down those leading the "character assassination" of Gordon Brown. The charismatic former postman admits he is not a founder member of the Brown fan club, so to have him rally to the cause must have been doubly welcome by Brown Central. He was still fizzing when I ran into him downstairs this morning about the way the BBC and Frank Field had conspired to distract attention from the more pressing subject of sorting long-term care. Another Cabinet minister was more blunt about the Today programme's "stitch up". It may be that Mr Field's latest outburst will help Mr Brown's standing in the PLP: MPs don't like Mr Field much, and won't want to have him call the tune. But the Birkenhead MP has said what was until now unsayable: that Mr Brown won't be leader by the time of the next election. How many of his colleagues think that as well?

Cameron: Embarrassment of Brown the relaunch "junkie"

It's difficult to be downcast when the people you meet press bags of free cheese into your hand and insist on introducing you to their daughters. David Cameron was unmistakably chipper this afternoon on his second visit to Crewe and Nantwich. His walkabout was in Nantwich, which looked and sounded Tory anyway, but anyone familiar with the early days of the Blair magic will have noticed the similarities: smiling people queuing up to meet an easygoing young guy in shirtsleeves.

But the other reason for Dave's springy step must be the havoc in London. News of the Ed Balls briefing fiasco filtered north and had Team Cameron shaking their heads at this Government's capacity for self harm. Speaking to Mr Cameron on the train, his disbelief was evident: "It's descending into farce to see everyone settling scores and fighting it out. It's reached a position where it's embarrassing to have a government that's so dysfunctional. People are beginning to think 'just get your act together a bit'.

It's all a bit humiliating.

"These relaunches are becoming like a junkie's fixes. They have to happen more and more regularly to have an effect. It's the wrong approach. Gordon Brown should knuckle down, make the right decisions, concentrate on the basics. People are so tired of endless reannouncements. It's politics as calculation, it's what he's always about."

Crewe: The Pickles Love Bomb

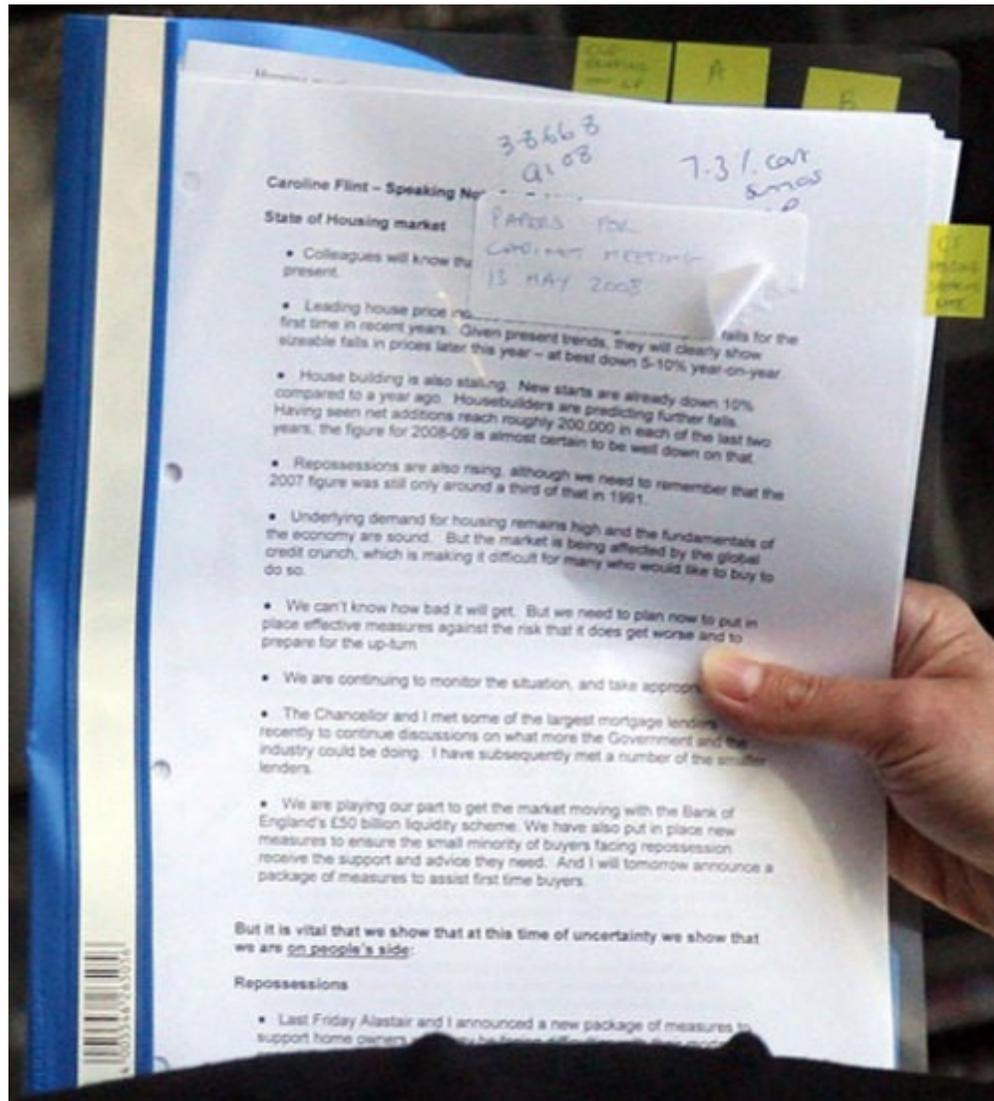
More briefing from the great Pickles, who turned up outside Tory HQ sporting what looked to be a panama short of a white slaver's outfit, all cream safari cotton and a glint of danger in the eye. He had 25 Tory MPs to deploy around the seat. The entire Shadow Cabinet has been up, more than once. I saw Alan Duncan there, and Stephen O'Brien, another by-election victor, joined the walkabout. Frontbenchers have been ordered to visit at least three times by David Cameron "or they will be fired".

Mr Pickles, who may be in a canvas sailing jacket with piping and brown elbow patches but still sports a vivid pocket kerchief, seems to know every CnN voter personally. A surprisingly strong association means canvas returns are useful. There are no signs of anyone switching to the Lib Dems, he says. The LibDem vote is being squeezed relentlessly and now he is turning his attentions "to something we've never really tried: love bombing Labour voters". They will be told it's ok to vote Tory this time, as Labour will still be in Government if they do. The truth is, if they do vote Tory the chances of Labour surviving in Government will fall to near zero. But the Tory Love Bomber may not mention that.

10p action tomorrow?

I missed what sounds like an epic Ed Balls briefing this afternoon. Nick Robinson has done a [great summary](#) on his blog, but the interesting bit now appears to be what the Schools Secretary said about "what can be done quickly" to solve the 10p tax row. That appears to have been a hint ahead of what we now expect to be a statement from Alistair Darling tomorrow. The Treasury has been robust in refusing to be driven by the Crewe and Nantwich timetable, and has consistently said that any solution should be built to last. They don't want the package to collapse at the first poke from a Tory or Frank Field.

Seatbelts on, it could get worse



Full marks to Caroline Flint for her contribution to the daily disaster that is this Government. It's happened before - minister wanders up street with secret document on display - but this occasion just adds to the slapstick. "We can't know how bad it will get," the Housing Minister's brief says, before predicting falls of "at best" 5-10pc. Mr Brown's spokesman said he wouldn't comment on leaks (Does that mean there will be a leak inquiry - and charges?) He also described the mood around the Cabinet table during an hour long discussion on the economy as "focused businesslike and determined", which translated means "grim".

As we reported last night, the Chancellor will make a statement to MPs on the 10p business. Until yesterday the impression was that Alistair Darling had no intention of being hectored into saying something just to placate the voters of Crewe and Nantwich. The Treasury gave every impression of needing a lot more time to sort out the mess. And indeed we are cautioned that full details won't come until the PBR. So what will we get today that can possibly be seen as anything other than a spot of emergency politics?

Gordon Brown's four-step programme for recovery

Talk this morning in the corridors of the four-step programme for recovery being run by Brown Central.

- Step One was sorting the 10p business. You have to admire the PM's gumption for trying to compare the emergency Budget to the George Bush tax giveaway I mentioned [here](#) a few weeks ago, given that he was forced at gunpoint to offer what is a small-scale tax break that still leaves 1m people shortchanged. Whips say the rebels have been bought off however, if only until the PBR when Alistair Darling will provide more detail.
- Step Two is getting through the crop of memoirs that have shed a bad light on the awfulness of the key players of the New Labour project. There's relief that most of the opprobrium is falling on the authors. John Precott, I'm told, would be well advised to stay away from PLP meetings in future.
- Step Three is doing better than expected in Crewe and Nantwich next week. Labour is matching Tory efforts by ordering all MPs to go North and pound the streets. The aim is to avoid matching the result of the local elections and a massive swing to the Tories. We are told that the seat is more marginal than people realise; a narrow defeat, in current circumstances, would be a relief (now *that's* expectation management...)
- Step Four is winning the 42-day vote in mid June. Mr Brown has discounted a defeat by saying he'd rather lose than compromise. There will be no backing down on the number of days, but other concessions might be found to secure a win.

At one level, it all makes sense. These are the fronts that Mr Brown has been fighting on and he needs to start winning. Notice, however, that it is an inward-looking plan, focused on the imperative of keeping the PLP onside and avoiding the crisis moment that some say could come in the days after the Crewe vote if the result is a wipeout. MPs do not rule out the possibility of a sudden deterioration of Mr Brown's position that could see a delegation marching into No10 to tell him the game is up. There are enough 'ifs' before we get to that point to make it remote - still - but only just.

Is he boring us into submission?

Chancellor Brown was much-mocked as a Macavity figure who went missing whenever there was trouble. He mastered the trick of the tactical withdrawal, sometimes going for weeks if not months without a major interview. His appearances on the Today programme were a relative rarity. When he spoke, we listened, because it happened infrequently.

Prime Minister Brown is a different character. We can't get rid of him. Turn on your telly or your radio and there he is, being questioned by Nick Robinson or Adam Boulton or that curvy breakfast telly lady. The Today programme must be charging him rent for the space he's occupying, not least following this morning's absolute shocker of an interview with John Humphrys (surely now confirmed as the world worst, rudest and most self-regarding interviewer...dire dire dire...25 minutes and not a story).

As I tap Mr Brown is ploughing through the questions at his press conference, which seems to be mainly about football and the Middle East (he doesn't have much to say on either). Closest he's got to a zinger so far is his answer to the 'will you keep your job' question: "I'm not going to indulge in the kind gossip you are indulging in today". I wish he would.

What would Labour MPs ask the PM? Will you go if we lose Crewe?

Gordon Brown has launched his new [Ask the PM](#) YouTube thingy with a short video clip inviting us to post questions that he'll answer at the end of June (so it's not the No10 rapid response unit). His presentation is strangely deferential and hesitant, as if he now realises the voters are on a short fuse. His suggests questions are about globalisation, climate change, public services, none of which sound like entries in the current Top 10 of Political Preoccupations. I was also struck by his use 'we' rather than 'I', which doesn't quite chime with the "Ask the PM" idea.

The questions Labour MPs want to put to Mr Brown are all to do with survival: what will you do to get us out of this hole? How bad does it have to get for you to quit? Why does everything you touch turn to lead? The word from Crewe this morning is that the Tories will win by a couple of thousand votes, the Lib Dems will do better than expected (second place some suggest) and Labour voters will stay home. If the outcome is already discounted, then a Labour loss loses its shock value and what might have been a weekend crisis turns instead into more muttering. But if the result is worse than the markets currently suggest - a Tory majority of 10,000, say - then the questions will come thick and fast.

Yes, this is the Brogan blog

Apologies for the weird new look, the disappearance of the blogroll and archives to the bottom of this page, and the lack of anything to tell you that this is indeed my blog. We are switching over to our exciting new website and there seems to be a snag with the blogs which no doubt is being worked on.

Churchill's warning for Brown

Gordon Brown's speech to the Google "zeitgeist" conference offers a laudable and timely defence of free trade that should be required reading for his best mates Obama, Clinton and McCain. Elsewhere though he cites Winston Churchill's strictures against indecisive politicians, "people who were facing change, resolved to be irresolute, he said, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, and all powerful for impotence - and that is a warning to all of us." Indeed.

Which Scot will get blamed if it goes wrong?

Gordon Brown or Steven McCabe? With things looking bleak in Crewe for Labour, we are already getting the first rumblings of score-settling. It might seem natural to pin the blame on the party leader, but I detect mutterings about the other Scot in the story, Government Whip Stephen McCabe, who is running the Labour by-election effort. He was responsible on the ground for the discredited "Tory toffs" campaign. Some of Mr Brown's friends in the PLP are already talking about a student prank that went on too long under his leadership. Mr McCabe holds a Birmingham seat, but he is one of the numerous Scots who have a berth in English constituencies. He is also the partner of Fiona Gordon, the No10 political secretary, who is on her way out.

The PLP's morale crisis

The latest prognostication is a Tory majority of about 2000 in Crewe, but that's just guessing. I know one brave Tory who has bet on a narrow Labour win (fewer switchers than the party claims); equally I know Labour folk who are braced for a Newbury-style cataclysm, with a five-figure Conservative majority. I'd love to know the identity of the Labour minister who told a Tory chum that the best scenario would be a landslide big enough to "force the bastard out". My astonished informant told me: "Even in the direst days of IDS we didn't beg the voters to do our dirty work for us."

His point, one echoed to me by Cabinet ministers, special advisers, MPs and others in the past 24 hours, is that morale in the PLP has now sunk to absurd levels. Perhaps it's a feature common among those who have never known

political adversity, but to judge some of the backbench comments doing the rounds, you would think the next two general elections are lost and they might as well curl up and die. This isn't whistling in the wind: current polls support the doomsday scenario, and those I've spoken to accept that defeat is now likely. But what should worry No10 is the apathy gripping the PLP. "If we are going to go down, let's at least go down fighting," is how one minister put it. It isn't just Gordon Brown who needs to fight back; he has to inspire his MPs to show a bit more of that "death or glory" spirit.

Disaster at Crewe

The Crewe numbers being bandied about inside the Labour party are beyond grim: Tories on 50pc or more, Labour south of 30pc, Lib Dems on 15pc plus; swing to the Tories of up to 20pc; majority reversed - 7078 for Labour turned into 7000 plus for the Conservatives; turnout of 50pc, but who knows. The Lib Dems claim this afternoon that they can push Labour into third place. Tories say 5000 majority, which is plate-shifting in itself. That said, one source told me the biggest winner would have been "Labour but not this time".*

For comparison, the number crunchers will look to Eastbourne in Oct '90, where a 20.05pc swing turned a Tory majority of 16,923 into a Lib Dem majority of 4550; Wirral S in Feb '97, with a 17.24pc swing turned a 8183 Tory majority into 7,888 for the Labour; SE Staffs in Apr '96 where a 22pc swing turned a Tory maj of 7192 into a Labour maj of 13,762; Dudley West in Dec '94, with a swing of near 29.12pc turned a 5789 Tory maj into one for Labour of nearly 20,694; Eastleigh in June '94, with a 21.5pc swing turned a 17,702 Tory majority into a Lib Dem maj of 9239. Labour folk will cling to the Eastbourne precedent if the swing matches, as the Tories recovered to win the 1992 election and regained the seat.

***UPDATE @ 18.20:** A top Tory chum cautions that predicting figures is a dangerous game. A 50pc share is impossible because of the minor candidates, he says, but he still expects his party to hit the high 40s - distinctly better than the 44pc of the locals. Another chum has done the maths - a 7000 majority is an 18pc swing which, if reproduced in a general election, would give the Tories a majority of 362 ~~seats~~ and Labour just 76 seats. David Cameron is having an early night but will be awoken for the result, before heading for Crewe in the morning on his way to the Scottish conference.

Labour's excellent numbers (no, really)

There's no silver lining in sight on what is a grim day for Brown Central, aside perhaps from the absence of any credible calls for change. Usual malcontents do not a coup make etc. I won't try to compete with acreage of post-mortems available out there, save to say it's serious and I'm struggling to find anyone who thinks Mr Brown will survive as leader until the next election, let alone conference. All the conversations are about 'when' and 'how', with 'who' no longer being an obstacle. Most MPs seem to think anyone would be better. We'll see. John Major was a limpet, and look how bad things were for him.

But here's a thing. A party that is broke, battered, short of staff, demoralised *and* now defeated still managed to produce some accurate numbers. Looking through my notes, this is what I was told on Wednesday afternoon, before a single vote had been cast: "Tories will get around 50pc, Labour will be lucky to get 30pc, LD will get around 15pc. That will represent a swing of between 17pc-20pc, and the majority will be reversed from 7000 for us to 7000 for them." Similarly on the night of the local elections, Labour folk warned us to expect the Tories to get 44-47pc of the vote, with Labour south of 25pc and with more than 200 losses. On each occasion we were accused of falling prey to expectations spin. Turned out not.

It's Whitsun...

...so everyone has skipped town. The consensus is Gordon Brown is lucky the House isn't sitting next week. He's spending the weekend in Scotland and his ministers have scattered to the four winds. The "ultras" so loathed by Downing Street are lying low. Charles Clarke is off to Damascus. But there's always mobile phones, and they've worked overtime today. The Cabinet has been holding what amounts to an informal meeting - without the PM, natch - today. The minutes, if they existed, would show a desire to help him, no evidence of plots and a hardening realisation that with the best will in the world they aren't sure he can make it. The danger for Mr Brown is that at some point this ongoing conversation will become a vote of confidence. Next stage in this saga I suspect is the PLP a week Monday. Until then I'm away. I hope I don't miss anything.

Back to where we were



Reading the obituaries of the great Harvey Korman and his Blazing Saddles glory as Hedley Lamarr, I keep thinking of Gordon Brown, another politician on the make who spent his time scheming to get rid of his dim-witted boss. Like Hedley, the Prime Minister is a man whose mind "is a raging torrent, flooded with rivulets of thought cascading into a waterfall of creative alternatives". Like Hedley, he believes in all the talents, and may be ordering his aides to draw up a reshuffle list by telling them "Take this down. I want rustlers, cut throats, murderers, bounty hunters, desperados, mugs, pugs, thugs, nitwits, halfwits, dimwits, vipers, snipers, con men, Indian agents, Mexican bandits, muggers, buggerers, bushwhackers, hornswogglers, horse thieves, bull dykes, train robbers, bank robbers, ass-kickers, shit-kickers and Methodists." And if that doesn't work, he may have to follow Hedley's example: "Taxi! Take me off this picture."

Henley by-election regatta

It looks increasingly like the Tories will move the writ for the Henley by-election this week, with the election on June 26 or July 3. The latter is in the middle of this year's Henley Royal Regatta, but the Conservatives as we know from Crewe are not ashamed to be posh, so it might be a fitting moment. Add to that the rumour that Mark Oaten might call it a day in Winchester soon and suddenly you have the prospect of a fascinating summer of electoral tests for Dave.

Cameron the Technician

It's a quiet day at Westminster, so quiet in fact that a chum found time to Google "Cameron Direct", the new Dave roadshow that kicks off tonight in Harlow. He's found [this](#), an American chap called Cameron who makes money out of property deals. He describes himself as the "Transaction Technician" and offers: "Would you benefit from having me as your mentor? Do you think that if you could tap directly into my brain on a regular basis it would benefit your business and make you more money? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, Cameron Direct's Inner Circle is for you!"

Scotland, a small country of which ministers know little

Liam Byrne must have thought he was on to a winner when he tipped off a couple of newspapers about his wheeze to make the August bank holiday the UK's "national day". His idea was to give us all a chance to celebrate "what we like and love about living in this country". Fast forward to this afternoon's Lobby briefing, when my colleague from the Herald asks the PM's spokesman what

"Britishness" Brown thinks of the suggestion, given that, erm, Scotland doesn't observe the August bank holiday*. As is his trademark, Mr Brown's man kept a straight face: "Mr Byrne is making a contribution to a debate that is ongoing".

*Scotland has a Bank Holiday on August 4 this year in Scotland, whereas it's August 25 in England. If it's any comfort to Mr Byrne, my Tory diary has got it wrong too and claims the one on Aug 25 is UK-wide.

UPDATE: I'm told Mr Byrne has had a torrid time of it today from both Number 10 and his own department. Much unhappiness about the way he sold his story.

BBC's 'liberal elite' put on the spot

You could almost hear the Beeb's news execs spluttering over their Guardian 'n croissant breakfasts when the tallest MP in the Commons laid in to John Humphrys on the Today programme. Daniel Kawczynski (Con, Shrewsbury and Atcham) said the BBC concentrates on Poles when it talks about immigration, even though 9/10 immigrants come from outside the EU. The Corporation was to blame for the rise in attacks on Poles living in the UK.

"The liberal elite of the BBC are using the Poles as a cat's paw in a politically correct world to talk about immigration. You won't do stories about more controversial immigrants - you always pick on Poles, and as a result of that there are increased attacks on Poles in this country.

"The liberal elite of the BBC, as I call them, they know that they have to talk about immigration now but rather than focus on all immigrants from all over the world they go for the soft touch, the white Christians from Poland, and I am sick a tired of it."

Mr Kawczynski is introducing a 10 min rule bill today proposing recognition for the many contributions Poles have made to the country.

Gordon Brown's misery is showing

At times - and I can think of no other way to put this - it sounded as if the Prime Minister was gabbling. He was trying to answer David Cameron's questions about changes in Vehicle Excise Duty but what he was saying made no sense. It was as if John Prescott was providing the script. There was the usual Brownian mis-speaking - repeat references to VAD rather than VED - but the problem this time was worse than that. For a moment I thought he was suffering one of those crises that can hit anyone speaking in public, a sudden blind panic when brain and mouth fail to connect and what emerges is gibberish.

A fluent performance from David Cameron made things worse. The Tory leader wants planned tax rises on family cars to be the next battleground. The broad thrust of his attack - that taxes that can't change behaviour aren't green taxes, they're just taxes - speaks to an underlying truth about Government policy. In its desperation to raise cash it is testing to destruction the willingness of the middle classes to foot the bill. By singling out the Ford Focus, just as in previous weeks he mentioned his weekly visit to the Chipping Norton petrol station, Dave is also making a stealth point about Mr Brown's lack of empathy with the car-driving public (he does not think it unfair to pick on someone who cannot see well enough to drive).

But what really showed up Mr Brown's misery were the questions from Tory backbenchers about his telephone calls to members of the public (something he's been doing quietly and without notice for more than a decade) and his future. The plain truth is Mr Brown cannot act. When he is cut he bleeds. Where Tony Blair would have made a joke, Mr Brown could neither disguise his rage at the triviality of the questions, nor his hurt. But as Peter Luff pointed out on the World at One, "Gordon Brown is the issue now. Questions about him aren't trivial. They go to the heart of what's wrong with this Government." For all that the situation has calmed since the by-election, the looks on the faces behind the PM suggest Labour MPs agree with Mr Luff

Art meets politics

"I detest the cultural vandalism that contaminates New Labour. I hope they go - and soon." (David Hockney, [letter](#) to the Guardian today).

"You can see why democracy and individualism got going in western Europe rather than in East Asia." (Boris Johnson, self-styled Don King of the arts debate, praising the Elgin Marbles over the "uniform stooges" of the Terracotta Army, before going on to say he was ready for "the odium of the entire liberal funkapolitan art world".)

Not pen-knives, surely

Simon Jenkins poured cold water on the whole business of knife crime on the Today programme. His gist was that we are going through one of those periodical "something must be done" spasms, when in fact knife crime is no worse than it has been historically. I don't know about the stats, nor whether the nihilism that seems to grip a small number of teenagers is particularly remarkable. But I share Simon's doubts about the police, especially on hearing Ken Jones of ACPO declare "what good reason would young people have to carry even a penknife?"

This latest bit of plod nonsense slipped past amid the blur of guff about guidelines and crackdowns. But shouldn't youngsters have penknives? The ease with which the police are willing to criminalise the majority to make up for their inability to tackle a minority should have every proud owner of a Swiss Army knife up in arms (non lethal, elf 'n safety approved, highvisibility jacket wearing, customer focused, diversity certified arms, naturally).

Those hurdles ahead

The assumption this week has been that Mr Brown has got through the Crewe crisis and can now get on with his job, safe-ish in the knowledge that there are no further hurdles on the summer horizon to trigger a fresh round of PLP vapours that could vapourise his premiership. The main reason for this goes back to Monday night, when Jacqui Smith's performance prompted ministers to suggest a victory for the PM on 42 days was now certain. The issue of terrorist detention was the next test, and failure might have turned into another one of those leadership brouhahas.

I wonder if those sighs of relief weren't a bit premature? There's been little sign this week of rebel MPs stepping forward to throw their arms at Mr Brown's feet. Some say 18 of the 50-odd lined up against 42 days have caved in already, but there's no evidence of it. The departure of Boris has temporarily given Mr Brown a working majority of 65, which will fall back to 64 once the Conservatives of Henley return John Howell in the early hours of his first anniversary as Prime Minister. MPs are now away from Westminster, which makes persuading them all the more difficult. Wednesday's vote looks difficult.

Then there's the by-election. No, not Henley. It's the by-election that hasn't been called and that people refuse to talk about in public because the Labour MP concerned is alive but unwell. I can tell you that two opposition parties have already held planning meetings at senior levels, and one - the SNP - is effectively campaigning, boosted by the knowledge that it captured the parallel Holyrood seat last year. If this sounds shocking, remember that the manoeuvring to replace John Smith began before it was confirmed that he'd died, and Labour called the Crewe by-election before Gwynneth Dunwoody was buried. Politicians are an unsentimental lot, which is why they are keeping a close eye on a seat in Fife, none more so than Mr Brown. The next hurdle could be in his own backyard.

David Miliband: "A sombre moment"

BEIRUT: I'm travelling with David Miliband on a brief tour of a bit of the Middle East. He's had to interrupt his consideration of the intricacies of Lebanese politics to deal with the three deaths in Helmand that have pushed the British death toll in Afghanistan to 100. He said: "This is obviously a sombre moment. As the Chief of the Defence Staff said yesterday each death is a tragedy which can never be made up for the families of those concerned." His claims of British success in the region are noticeably - and wisely - more modest than Des Browne's, who seems to think Afghanistan is some sort of Athens of the East. Mr Miliband says only that the "successful work of British troops is making a difference." On the flight out the Foreign Secretary mentioned that Afghanistan and Pakistan is the issue that dominates his in-tray. Today reminds us why.

Lebanon by numbers

BEIRUT: This isn't our neighbourhood. Beirut is noticeably French and the tricolor flies on the lamp posts outside the patisseries to welcome Sarko, who was in town before us. Mr Miliband is here to support the new president and government and give HMG's blessing to the Doha deal (not the one the PM keeps promising) which got Lebanon out of its latest mess. He's only the second Labour Foreign Secretary to visit in 30 years (Madge Beckett was the last, which suggests we are keen).



As a country Lebanon thrives in the face of adversity thanks in part to its diaspora, which remits \$6 billion a year - a whopping 25 per cent on top of a GDP of \$24bn (Half of the country's MPs have dual nationality in fact, mainly American). They offset the burden of a public debt of \$50bn and the pressure of a disenfranchised Palestinian refugee population of 500,000 - against a pop of 4m. There's a Monoprix in the hills, La Perla on the Corniche and gleaming Porsche and Audi dealerships to tempt those whose superyachts complete with

helicopter on the back are berthed by the front. All of which sits incongruously alongside the shell of the building outside my hotel window, riddled with rocket holes, a monument to the civil war.

David Miliband ordered home

NABLUS, West Bank: The Chief Whip has ordered the Foreign Secretary to cut short his Middle East trip and come home for a vote tomorrow that's looking sticky. While all eyes have been on 42 days on Wednesday, another section of the Counter Terrorism Bill has got the Government in a flap. Something to do with coroners. Geoff Hoon has told the payroll vote to lay on a show strength. "We have been told to come home so we are coming home," one of Mr Miliband's aides said. There's a flap on it seems.

More talent joins No10

A piece of good news for Gordon Brown and those who toil in the Downing Street bunker. Tom Hoskin, currently the head of news at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, is joining as deputy press secretary at the end of the month. He's been brought in by Michael Ellam as a stand-in for Emily Hands, who is heading for maternity leave. Tom is unflappable, assured and clear, qualities No 10 sorely needs.

So why did David Miliband have to come home?

Turns out there is no flap on, contrary to what I mentioned yesterday. The Foreign Secretary was to have spent today in meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, before going by helicopter to visit the border towns of Ashkelon and Sderot where he was going to show solidarity with Israelis facing daily Hamas rocket strikes from nearby Gaza. He was then going to fly back to London, arriving tonight, in plenty of time for tomorrow's 42-day vote. Instead Geoff Hoon told him to come back early, ostensibly because of difficult votes today. Mr Miliband and the rest of us duly got on a dawn flight in Jerusalem. Yet there is no sign of trouble at Westminster this afternoon, prompting some jolly speculation about the reason for the rushed return.



Given that Mr Miliband spent a gruelling day haring around the West Bank on Monday, it seems inconceivable that HMG would risk unbalancing a carefully thought-out trip in a sensitive region by needlessly snubbing the Israelis. They traditionally resent visitors who see the Palestinians first, and the Foreign Secretary did that in spades. He walked across most of the Allenby Bridge, drove into Palestinian territory, visited Jenin and its nearby university, held talks with all the key players including Prime Minister Fayyad, had a late night dinner with Palestinian businessmen in Nablus, before heading for Jerusalem. Today was to have been as intense. Instead he's in Westminster voting on the role of coroners.

Will it be defeat on 42 days for Gordon Brown?

Brown Central says yes, but the Westminster vibe this evening says he will pull it off. Rumours persist that the DUP will back 42 in exchange for money. Rebels say they have about 35 votes, not enough to get past the DUP 9. The Government is understandably talking up the likelihood of defeat: "It's going down to the wire, it's not obvious where we are going to get the votes." The script for a defeat is already being rehearsed, at least to people like me: "We did our best, at least Gordon didn't do a Blair and haggle until he found the right number, he stood on principle, etc".

If Mr Brown wins he will be able to claim that he persisted in the face of adversity by arguing an unpopular position, sticking to 42 days while offering compromises in other areas to those willing to negotiate with him, and leading from the front. All true, but will it be enough to stop this apparently unstoppable downwards spiral in his reputation?

The consequences of victory

The DUP are on board, Diane Abbott has been spoken to by Gordon Brown for the first time in 20 years, cash for sick miners and help for Cuba has been whistled out of nowhere, and so the vote is won. I spoke to David Davis earlier, who knows a thing or two about whipping and numbers. The 54 Labour rebels he knew about on Friday were down to 44 last night, and the DUP will support Mr Brown. At that rate the game is up.

So what happens next? The Lords will overturn it, the Government in turn will use the Parliament Act to get 42 days through. The fear among opponents is that this will turn out to be the high-water mark of the resistance. If there is another terrorist outrage between now and the next election, and Gordon Brown decides to go for 56 days, Labour MPs might be less likely to rebel and Tory MPs will be reluctant to oppose. If they win the next election, the Tories will study the situation but expect to bring it back to 28 days sharpish. Oh, and the DUP can go whistle. Mr Davis is a man with a long memory and a taste for vengeance.

UPDATE: The Government side have used various pithy anglo-saxon terms to dismiss my suggestion that it's in the bag for Gordon. They say we're not there yet and "it's very very tight". The DUP are looking grim (what's new). Brown Central makes the point that the Tories are waving a white flag in order to fool rebels into thinking it's safe to vote against the Government. So anything could happen. But the markets still say Mr Brown will shave it.

Brace yourselves?

Mr Brown's spokesman a short while ago said if the vote were held now "the Government would not have enough votes to win". We are also told there is no deal with the DUP. And someone else on the Government side has just told me the advice is "brace yourselves". Certainly, the DUP are taking this to the wire.

They were ready for defeat. Now what?

Downing Street prepared a defeat statement and had it ready in the Commons when the vote was announced (I got a glimpse - it was long). For all the predictions of a win, no one was sufficiently sure that the DUP 9 and enough rebels would swing behind the Government. When the result came there was uproar, in part because the majority - 9 - matched the number of sheepish faces on the back row below the gangway. Ian Paisley managed to chuckle as MPs shouted "you were bought", presumably because the wiley old bird will have got what he wanted. Speaker Martin was right though when he rebuked MPs: "Every honourable member of this House has his own vote with his own conscience. No one will ever censor a member of Parliament on how they vote, especially one of their own."

Brown Central is obviously relieved, not to say furious that another security blunder has distracted the headlines. "A win's a win" they say, in answer to those who want to qualify the result by pointing out that a day of horse-trading and a majority dependent on Opposition MPs raises questions about Mr Brown's authority. He will say that he set out a principled case, he did not dump the idea months ago when he could have done so, he did not budge on the number (unlike Tony Blair), he offered concessions well in advance (what about the cash for innocents offer today one might ask?), and he led from the front in trying to win over his rebels. Tomorrow he will hold a press conference and try to switch the subject to the economy and a string of meetings he's got coming up with other leaders - George Bush on Monday, possible Nicolas Sarkozy - before the EU summit and G8. Today in between arm-twisting sessions he found time to telephone Barack Obama to congratulate him on winning the Democratic nomination, and Sarko to talk about the EU. This win was vital, in whatever form it came. It reflects in part that Labour MPs are coming round to the idea that they

need to save Mr Brown. But boy did they made him work for it. He still has a long way to go.

A high-risk stunt

When i walked over to Millbank with David Davis at 10 o'clock last night, he was full of the excitement of the vote and took great pleasure in rehearsing the lines he used against Gordon Brown on 42 days. As we parted he told me: "I might be in touch tomorrow. I have an idea." His smile - the trademark DD kitten-strangler twinkle - suggested more mischief aimed at the PM.

And now we know. Listening to his statement it was impossible not to be swept along by his talk of Parliament, ancient liberties, authoritarian state, ID cards, CCTV cameras for every 14 citizens and the relentless slide towards a grim dictatorship of the bureaucracy.

But I gather David Cameron was not in one this one and there is unease on high. The Shadow Cabinet doesn't appear to like it. A leadership that wants to escape the 'all spin, no substance' accusation might find it difficult to justify a stunt - and that's what it is - that reeks of gesture politics. The Lib Dems won't put up a candidate, and if Labour has any sense it won't either. Whatever, Mr Davis is hardly going to lose. And so he will be back with us in time for the summer holidays, having won re-election by, er, opposing the Government. Which is what Tories do. You see the difficulty? My hunch is most people will heartily endorse the sentiment that motivated this maverick move. But if restoring the respectability of Parliament matters, then playing fast-and-loose with the electorate just to make Mr Brown's life difficult is not the way to do it. Mr Davis is a fearless loner with a high opinion of himself who has been a thumping success as Shadow Home Secretary. But this is a high-risk stunt that somehow sits uneasily with the serious ideals of the Cameron project.

Grieve is permanent - and DD is out

For the avoidance of doubt, DD will not return to the Shadow Cabinet if he is returned as MP for Haltemprice and Howden. Dominic Grieve, one of the greatest talents on the Tory frontbench, is the new Shadow Home Secretary, and that's it. My impression in fact is that despite talk of "doors being open", DD has just kissed goodbye to being Home Secretary in a Cameron government.

He sprung the idea on the leader late last night by telephone. The Shadow Cabinet wasn't consulted. Team Dave is being polite, but notice the references to "personal choice" (trans: reckless maverick) and the importance of Parliament (trans: Parliament is where the debate about 42 days should continue, not H&H).

DD has been scrupulously loyal but is letting it be known that he has reservations about the Cameron strategy. He feels Dave is too risk averse and not bold enough. So he has taken unilateral action. But being bold is one thing; being reckless is another. Those around Dave who have never trusted DD will be tempted to say "I told you so", and they will start to look more closely at some of the DD lieutenants who were allowed into the Dave tent back in 2005. It would be ironic if a row about splits at the top of the Tory party ended up drowning out the point of principle that behind Mr Davis' gesture.

When's the by-election?

I'm told Mr Davis hasn't actually resigned yet. Or rather, he hasn't applied to be [Steward and Bailiff of the Three Hundreds of Chiltern](#) (the Northstead job is occupied by Boris Johnson). Alistair Darling, who is on his way to Japan for the G7 finance ministers meeting, has left a signed letter waiting for a name to be entered (relax, it's standard procedure). However the Treasury doesn't expect anything to happen now before Monday - if at all. Labour is going to wait until they see Mr Davis' signature on the letter before saying whether they will contest the seat. They don't want to get Mr Davis off his hook by letting him know there won't be a contest worth fighting if he goes. "We're not going to do him a favour by showing our cards just yet, thanks," is how it was put to me when I asked. In addition the Tories won't say when they will move the writ: Dave may choose to make DD wait a while, until after the summer.

PS Someone has kindly pointed out a precedent: George Lansbury resigned his Bow and Bromley seat in 1912 to force a by-election on the issue of voting rights for women. He lost, and was out of Parliament for 10 years.

DD: Beware the Ken precedent

| Someone's pointed out that when Ken Livingstone resigned as ~~an MP~~ a London councillor in order to provoke a by-election on the Tory decision to abolish the GLC, the Conservatives refused to contest the seat. They argued that it was a silly stunt...

DD still has friends

I've had no shortage of Tory MPs telling me they think David Davis is mad, an egotist, a "f***** liability", a stunt merchant out to steal the limelight from David Cameron. The leadership is just about managing to keep its true opinion private, and the view is widely held by the frontbench. But I'm intrigued to hear that one member of the Shadow Cabinet is not joining the hue and cry against DD. That member says DD is brilliant, and even suggests that he should keep his job as Shadow Home Secretary. I'm trying to find out who this stalwart is.

David Davis: a July quickie

As of 10 minutes ago, DD is still an MP. He hasn't applied for the Chiltern Hundreds, although I'm told that is in hand. On a technical point, he'll have to remember to resign his Crown appointment sharpish, otherwise he'll be returned and promptly disqualified from taking his seat. Team Cameron has toyed with the idea of letting him sweat it out over the summer by waiting until the autumn to move the writ. But in reality they will go for a quick one on the date DD chooses. July 10 is now looking the favourite. In private, they damn him; in public they are doing their best to get this one over with.

David Davis: Cameron cool under fire

It's worth noting that one of the features of the DD moment of madness/noble endeavour* is how well Team Cameron responded. The Conservative leader is in the middle of a life or death struggle with Gordon Brown and suddenly has to contend with a madcap plan by one of his most trusted lieutenants.

Political leaders are tested when the terms of trade flip in an instant, as they did at lunchtime yesterday. Mr Cameron's response hit all the right notes: support, but not too much, for the Davis principle; enough coded references to a 'personal decision' to distance him from DD; swift action on a replacement to make the break final; effective counter spin on the suggestion of a policy split.

Team Cameron doesn't have to say anything negative about DD, as the rest of the party is doing that for them. But I hear one of the things that has got them really riled is the suggestion attributed to DD that he has been cut out of the inner circle. "This idea that he was a marginal figure is just not true. He had complete support, he attended the 9.15 strategy meeting, and even chaired it if David and William were away. He was completely involved. It's a great shame," is how it was explained to me.

"Last rites" for Lisbon

David Miliband has set the tone for what will be the Prime Minister's position when he goes to Brussels on Thursday. Interviewed on Marr, he made [the crucial point](#) that the Lisbon Treaty must be ratified by all 27 members to take effect. He also said it would be up to the Irish to "apply the last rites". Downing Street told us on Friday it would oppose any attempt to renegotiate the treaty. So: no renegotiation, no implementation without an Ireland 'Yes', and the Irish get to decide. If Brian Cowen concludes there's no point in putting it to another vote, then Lisbon falls.

Mr Brown is being circumspect. By concluding British ratification on Wednesday as planned and holding back from declaring the treaty dead, he avoids playing up to the Brussels caricature of Britain as an EU recalcitrant. Diplomatically smart, but politically tricky: his domestic position is weak enough without him appearing to be going along with the EU herd. But when an edifice is crumbling, there's no point in giving it a shove. Expect a holding statement from EU leaders on Friday that will be all about 'time for reflection' or somesuch. Word is the French and Germans know not to try the two-speed Europe argument. They know the Ireland "No" cannot be undone by technical tinkering with the treaty. The reality is the Lisbon Treaty will now not come into force on January 1 as planned, and looks doomed.

Noise and cannabis greet the "War Criminal"

I'm writing this from the middle of Parliament Square where about 1000 people are milling around for the anti-Bush protest. It's the usual eclectic mix: anti-war, pro-Palestinian, Socialist Worker, the odd monk, British Muslim Initiative, save the planet, CP, and a chap at the back with a hand-printed sign saying cryptically "Stop the War are rubbish".

Brian Haw has done his spittle flecked rage thing, George Galloway, slick as ever, went off on a tangent about Ethiopia, and Moazzem Begg, for understandable reasons, is talking about Guantanamo. All the protest stereotypes are here, but it's also very English - lots of genteel looking women of certain age in sensible skirts clutching a thermos.

Across the road Whitehall is blocked off by anti suicide bomber barriers and rows of police officers in the usual yellow safety vests.

There are stalls selling stickers and children running about. The only thing here you won't find at a fair is the "step on the US flag" exhibit, which is popular. That and the reek of cannabis smothering the fragrance of the lavender in the flowerbeds littered with discarded pamphlets.

What's DD waiting for?

I pointed out last week that David Davis was still an MP. Expectation this morning was that he would take the Chiltern Hundreds about now to allow the Tories to move the writ this afternoon. But I hear from his friends that he's vetoed the idea, and told the Treasury not to expect a letter from him today. Mr Davis, I am assured, will now wait until after PMQs on Wednesday before quitting the Commons. Presumably he wants a final hurrah from the backbenches, with some sort of staged attack on Gordon Brown. Tactically, quite canny. But I suspect the Labour lot will have a field day. Here's a guy who boasts of the nobility of his cause yet puts off his departure to extract maximum publicity.

Friends to the end, sort of

It seemed at times as if Gordon Brown was trying to make up for last summer's snub-fest by hammering again and again what good friends that two men have



become. Friendship came up often in what was to my ear an over-long, somewhat plodding opening statement from the PM. Or at least George Bush seemed to think so, to judge by the smirks - sorry, there's no other word for that thing he does with his lips - that cropped up every other second on his face. At one point I caught his eye and half expected him to wink at me as if to say "isn't this a hoot?". He opened his remarks by saying "thank you Mr Prime minister for your friendship", which is odd. I agree with [Nick Robinson](#) that as journalists we will be sorry to see Mr Bush go: he gives great quote. Who else would use the phrase "white guy methodists" or "we expect you to be cheque writers"? Mr Brown should try the President's trick of just using speaking notes - no text. This visit seemed easier and friendlier, even if Mr Brown's attempt at a soul shake (left) went horribly wrong and turned into some kind of 12th degree Mason thing. They did

plenty of business on Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and the economy, but some will find it difficult not to view this as the final paddle of two lame ducks.

Osborne targets Brown's "imperial power base"

It's worth noting an [interview](#) Boy George has given to the FT in which he sketches his plans to revamp the Treasury. In Government terms he wants to revert the department to what it was before Gordon Brown got his mitts on it: an instrument for holding other departments to account. Specifically, he wants to hive off tax credits (as well as child benefit and child trust funds) to DWP. Mr Brown, he argues, turned the Treasury into one of the biggest spending departments in Whitehall, a move which ruined its credibility as a spending watchdog.

But what's more intriguing is what he has to say about the political role of the Treasury. Mr Osborne argues that Mr Brown did untold damage to the Treasury by using it for his own political ends, namely as an "imperial power base" from which to do in Tony Blair. Former civil servants have been more than happy to tell him about life in the Brown regime. Intriguingly though, serving officials have also held discreet conversations with Mr Osborne ahead of the formal talks between the Opposition and the Civil Service which begin in January.

Will Blears have her collar felt?

Hazel Blears has had her computer stolen from her constituency office in Manchester. In itself not exciting, except that classified Government documents were stored on it. She has put out a statement saying the computer did not contain any secret or top secret documents, which is true but desperately disingenuous. The computer contained documents marked restricted and confidential, which were sent to her by her private office seemingly in breach of established procedure. They are now in criminal hands.

The Official Secrets Act says plainly it is an offence if a person "fails to take such care to prevent the unauthorised disclosure of the document or article as a person in his position may reasonably be expected to take". On that basis, Ms Blears faces the risk of a police investigation. If she ordered her officials to send her the documents, then she may be in some difficulty. There's certainly unease in Whitehall, where senior people say a breach *has* taken place. They worry in particular if any of the documents set out highly sensitive details of the so-called "prevent strand" of the Government's counter-terrorism strategy, which she is responsible for.

Politically, this is bad for Gordon Brown because it implicates a Cabinet minister in the kind of lackadaisical approach to information handling that ministers have until now been able to blame on civil servants (other breaches were more egregious, especially the one last week, but at least there's no evidence the

material ended in criminal hands). It's also three in a week, which must drive Mr Brown mad.

When the dust has settled this latest incident does raise a wider issue: the amount of information swilling around Whitehall grows exponentially each year, putting increasing pressures on officials and ministers who must wade through it. In addition, the 'if in doubt, classify it' culture is alive and well. Reams of stuff are marked restricted or more that either don't deserve to be or could easily be found on the internet. The 1989 OSA was designed - even then - to deal with the Commies. Perhaps it's time for a review of the whole thing?

Poll: Gordon Brown is big in Azerbaijan and more popular than Sarko

Alex Barker on the FT Westminster [blog](#) reports an intriguing poll of 20,000 people in 20 countries who were asked to rate world leaders. It finds that George Bush is even less popular than Mahmood Ahmedinejad. But what Gordon Brown will notice is that he's the second most popular leader, after Ban Ki-Moon. And he's more popular than Nicolas Sarkozy in the United States, which is odd given that Sarko is supposed to be America's NBF in Europe. Brown Central will be particularly cheered to find that support for the PM is particularly high in Azerbaijan.

Europe is the battleground

The yelp of fury from the Tory backbenches every time Europe is mentioned seems to have persuaded Gordon Brown that this is an issue worth pursuing with David Cameron. The Tory leader used the bulk of his question to rough up the PM on his equivocal response to the Irish result. Mr Brown in reply talked up his enthusiasm for Europe while painting Tory MPs as "viscerally anti-EU" and intent on pulling Britain out (a lot of them are). Maybe he read Daniel Finkelstein's fascinating piece today about the [dangers of being distinctive](#). The key exchange went like this:

DC: *Now the constitution is half dead on the floor, they haven't got the courage to kill it. Frankly, I've seen more spine and leadership from a bunch of jellyfish. Why don't you give some leadership, tell us what you think and kill this treaty today?*

GB: *If you want to show the Conservative Party has really changed, why don't you change the position to support the EU? If you want to lead your party, why are you being led by the backbencher anti-Europeans, who are dictating the tune every time? We are in favour of Europe ... and we will work for an EU that helps Britain.*

That last sentence will be studied closely by his colleagues around the EU table in Brussels tomorrow, with a degree of disbelief I suspect. As PMQs go, it was a better one for Mr Brown than usual. Maybe the worse things get, the better he does. Everyone here mulling the Jonathan Freedland piece in the Guardian, in which he has [pulled the plug](#) on the Brown project in brutal fashion: "he is simply not up to the job".

Spicer wins Zinger of the Day

Sir Michael Spicer is standing down at the next election. The chairman of the '22 is not heard often these days, but his zinger to the PM should be a lesson to all new MPs:

"Why are there always so many strikes at the end of a Labour government?"

Notice the absence of needless padding - no pointless thanking of the Speaker - and the brevity that gives the PM little time to start drafting an answer. To his credit Mr Brown deflected it well, but the question touched a nerve.

Burnham "smear" backfires

I hate to disappoint those peers who have gone down in flames just now on the ~~European constitution~~ Lisbon Treaty, but the only thing we've been talking about along the Burma Road for the past few hours is Andy Burnham's extraordinary comment about Shami Chakrabarti and David Davis. In an interview in the latest issue of [Progress](#), the Culture Secretary says he is surprised by those who have been "seduced" by the hero of Haltemprice & Howden's liberal credentials, adding that he finds something:

"very curious in the man who was, and still is I believe, an exponent of capital punishment, having late-night, hand-wringing, heart-melting phone calls with Shami Chakrabarti."

Mr Burnham is said to be "aghast" at the way his words are being interpreted, but no one seems to believe it was accidental. Perhaps it was an attempt at a joke that backfired. Others say it was a smear that went wong as Labour realises the Davis freedom campaign is winning support, although Mr Burnham has never struck me as the smearing sort. Either way, it has allowed Mr Davis to issue the following statement:

"Labour has lost the argument over the erosion of British freedoms. While Gordon Brown cowers in Downing Street, his henchmen are out and about to attack me personally rather than engage in rational debate. Labour has now resorted to

personal smears and lies rather than make its case for 42-day detention and for the other illiberal measures it has taken."

Brussels on hold

This comes to you from the basement of the press centre in Brussels, where we have been relegated following an unfortunate towel incident involving our Greek, German and Dutch colleagues. They snaffled the posh seats in the atrium, where there is daylight and oxygen, leaving us consigned to the stygian depths. Which, you might say, is what's happened to the UK since that noted europhile Gordon Brown took over.

He doesn't turn up until later, as he's just landed in Paris to meet Nicolas Sarkozy. The French want to tighten the screw on the Irish by setting a deadline for an answer from Biffo Cowen to the "what do you do now?" question. Jose Manuel Barroso has just said a decision will be taken at the October summit. This gig isn't even underway yet and we are already being told that nothing will happen tonight. They will agree to give the Irish time to think. But with the Irish saying a second referendum is impossible, the British view seems to be that the Nice Treaty will have to do.

The Boris threat to Cameron

I've just read Andrew Gimson's fascinating [update](#) on Boris in the Telegraph while tucking into my free, taxpayer-funded EU gravy train meal in the downstairs cafeteria (thank you, yes, it was delicious, and the army of EU hangers-on troughing around me also seemed to enjoy it - lots of it). Gimson is Boris' biographer. An updated version of his excellent *Boris: The Rise of Boris Johnson* is about to hit the shelves. This extract is full of insight into their awkward relationship. "Boris is bound to regard Cameron as a bit limited," he suggests, before concluding: "the emerging rivalry between Cameron and Boris will mark the next period of our politics as deeply as the Blair-Brown rivalry marked Labour's years of prosperity." Hurrah.



Apologise for "smear" or I'll sue, Shami tells Burnham

Andy Burnham is about to get a belter of a letter from Shami Chakrabarti. She says he has "debased a great office of state" by referring to her "heart-melting" conversations with David Davis. "I look forward to your written apology, as does

also Mrs Davis," she says. If she doesn't get it, she'll sue. She's sent similar letters to Gordon Brown and the Attorney General for good measure.

UPDATE: This is the text in full:

I am writing in relation to your recent article in the ironically titled "Progress" magazine. In that article you set out to smear my dealings with the former Shadow Home Secretary. I must say that I find this behaviour curious, coming as it does from a Cabinet Minister; let alone someone with a partner and family of his own.

By your comments you debase not only a great office of State but the vital debate about fundamental rights and freedoms in this country. Indeed you seem reluctant to engage in that debate except in this tawdry fashion.

I look forward to your written apology as I'm sure does Mrs Davis. If on the other hand you choose to continue down the path of innuendo and attempted character assassination, you will find that the privileged legal protection of the parliament chamber does not extend to slurs made in the wider public domain. The fruits of any legal action will of course go to Liberty(the National Council for Civil Liberties).

Mandy tells Sarko: "It's not all my fault"

Nicolas Sarkozy was his usual Mr Perky self despite the hour - near 1am - and the sweltering heat in the French briefing room. Full marks to the chap from the Elysee Palace who spotted that it was past midnight, raced to the podium, ripped off the sign saying "June 19" and slapped on a "June 20" just as the president sauntered onto the stage. There followed the joy that is a press conference with the French leader. He said enlargement was on hold as long as Ireland said 'no' (Sorry Croatia) and left little doubt that he expected the Irish to vote again. His language on this occasion was fluent and diplomatic, but if you want an idea of the real thinking on Ireland in the Elysee, the French press reports that he said this to his aides: "They are bloody fools. They have been stuffing their faces at Europe's expense for years and now they dump us in the s***." Which is what the Irish and others said about France in 2005, but let that pass.

Far jollier was the zest with which he stuck a knife into Peter Mandelson, in effect blaming the trade commissioner for the Irish 'no'. Among the factors cited to explain the result was the prospect of a new trade deal harming Ireland. Sarko is not a Mandy fan, and the Labour spindevil is a legendary hate figure in France. But that hasn't stopped him from hitting back, saying "no, it's not all my fault". He

told Sky: "My shoulders are broad enough and my skin is thick enough to take this." Over to Sarko.

Saudi cash for British nukes

Gordon Brown is back in London by now, having high-tailed it out of Brussels as soon as he finished his press conference. He's enjoyed the unusual sensation of being praised for the way he stuck with Lisbon when he could have pulled the plug on it by suspending ratification. It's striking that a politician who used to look for ways of annoying the EU johnnies has made an effort to appease them, even if he gets bad headlines at home.

But his attention is already on something else, namely his trip tomorrow to Jeddah for the oil summit. He's told us he wants the Saudis and other oil producing states to "recycle" some of the \$3 TRILLION windfall from the petrol price shock into alternative energies in oil consuming states like ours. Specifically he's said he'd be happy to see Saudi Arabia invest in British nuclear power. That's quite a bold statement given the sensitivity of the industry in the post 9/11 world, but it shows Mr Brown is serious about speeding up the shift to nuclear.

Gordon Brown goes for character



[Total Politics](#), Iain Dales's latest project, launches formally tomorrow. For its opener the new magazine secured an interview with Gordon Brown in which he offers a timely answer to the dissection of his leadership that will mark this anniversary week. To those who wonder why he can't show a bit more personality, he offers character instead: "A 'personality' is someone who can walk in a room, look around and say: 'What do people want to hear, and how can I express it?' That's personality. Someone who walks in the room and says:

'This is where I stand', that's character." I reckon that rather tallies with the [Mail on Sunday BPIX poll](#) which has Mr Brown as a St Bernard to Dave Cameron's Labrador, as I've yet to meet a Labrador with character. The killer finding though is that only 13pc say Mr Brown is the kind of man who would iron his own shirt...

Total Politics also has a rare interview with Lynton Crosby which leaves open the tantalising possibility - much rumoured - that he might come back to work for the Conservative party following his triumph in London. Gordon Brown might like to read what he has to say about the importance of a clear message and strategy. Separately, the poll of MPs and their dream cars made me laugh: Tories fantasise about German models, while the Labour lot prefer traditional British marques. The magazine's website looks to be useful, with speech and quotation databases (although when I checked the former it seemed to be a work in progress rather than exhaustive - 19 Tory leader conference speeches, just two from Tony Blair). I'm not sure about the magazine's design though: when I looked at it last week it looked a bit clunky. No doubt it will improve, and add to life in the village.

Does David Davis want to be Speaker?

DD was readopted last night as the Conservative party candidate for the Haltemprice and Howden by-election on July 10. His campaign against Mad Cow Lady, Big Breast Girl and Fresh Fruit Man* is now well and truly underway. But why is he doing it? The question continues to preoccupy the denizens of the Westminster village he so affects to despise (and wishes to rejoin). No one believes for a minute that he's done it on a point of principle. Suggest that and there is a knowing chortle around the bar, certainly among those Commons Conservatives who have known DD since the days when he helped ram the Maastricht Treaty down the party's throat.

So what is it that drives him? Last night I heard a theory that is so far-fetched, so Metternichian, so Baldrick-like that I hope it's true. DD, the theory goes, is not a spur-of-the-moment man. Everything he does is planned and war-gamed to destruction. DD, this idea continues, had become bored of his beat and doesn't actually want to be Home Secretary (kicking is fun, being kicked less so). DD, says this mad proposition, still doesn't get the Cameron magic, thinks the leader is risk averse and lacking in boldness. DD, in other words, is in search of something new. And what could that be? Obvious: the Speakership.

Westminster expects Michael Martin to step down at the election. On current betting the next Speaker will be a Tory elected by a Tory dominated House. And who better than a maverick who has sacrificed a ministerial red box in the cause of freedom, parliamentary and otherwise, and done it by tweaking David Cameron? "He strikes a pose as an independent-minded Parliamentarian, and

sends a signal that he is willing to defy his own leader. He reckons this will appeal to Labour MPs looking for an acceptable Tory to back for Speaker," is how it was put to me. I'm sure you've already spotted the holes, not least that his fellow MPs might not see things his way. But that's never stopped him before.

**Apologies if I've missed someone.*

UPDATE @ 18.45: According to [Iain Dale](#), who has spoken to his ex-boss, the answer is a certain "No".

When did it go wrong?

Rachel Sylvester in her [Times column](#) today makes the point that the election that never was remains an endlessly fascinating first course topic for those lunching in the Village's trattorias. All of Gordon Brown's subsequent troubles are traced back to that autumn fortnight, a period that will be rehearsed at length this anniversary week. But what was the precise moment when the tide turned? What event marked the tipping point? When did the market shout 'Sell!?' I've been collecting suggestions in recent days, some of which I reproduce here:

"Ten more years": Someone in Team Dave says it was David Miliband's Observer interview on the Sunday of Labour conference, and the accompanying "We want ten more years in power" headline, that started the rot.

It's class war: A few days later it was Ed Balls' turn. A Labour veteran singles out his speech to conference, on the Wednesday, when Mr Brown's friend attacked the Tories as a "privileged elite" and said Dave Cameron's "back to basics is back to privilege".

George Osborne and IHT, or the Titanic and iceberg moment: By the Monday of Tory conference, the Labour election plan was steaming ahead. In No10 copies of the manifesto were being waved around. Then the Shadow Chancellor dropped his death duties bombshell. The reaction in the hall stunned Boy George, but it was as nothing compared to the impact in London. To many that was when the election plan was holed below the waterline. A Treasury minister told me recently; "I heard it on my car radio and knew then we were in deep trouble."

Sir John Major speaks: Gordon Brown turned up in Basra on the Tuesday of Tory conference to announce a troop withdrawal. A few hours later John Major turned up on News 24 and laid into the Prime Minister for using British forces to score a political point. Mr Major's dig that the PM was using "nods, winks and cynicism" to stoke election fever struck a nerve in the Blackpool press room

among journalists who had been told the PM would visit Iraq *after* the conferences, and announce troop movements to Parliament first.

Saturday collapse: even the announcement of the u-turn went wrong. It was supposed to come out in an interview on Marr, but it leaked out the day before, and was official by teatime. I still have a Saturday morning text from a Tory Quartet member: "they should pay a heavy price. All their autumn ammo fired off, reputation for strong leadership undermined and best of all ed balls in the

PMQs Zimbabwe protest

It's a shame Fiona Mactaggart didn't manage to catch the Speaker's eye during PMQs, but that may have been because his eye was distracted by her T-shirt. Commons rules regarding appropriate dress scarcely apply these days, but in these desperate times for Zimbabwe we can forgive the former minister for choosing to display a prominent MDC UK logo on her chest.

Has anyone seen the Great Wafer Seal?

| The ratification of the ~~European constitution~~ Lisbon Treaty depends upon it. Downing Street says Britain's final acceptance of the document, now that Stuart Wheeler's case has crashed in flames, will take place in days or weeks: "It depends on the availability of the Great Wafer Seal". The Great Wafer Seal is the [junior version](#) of the Great Seal, a new model of which was issued in 2001. Quite why it may be unavailable to the Government to emboss a treaty is not clear. It lives somewhere in the House of Lords but either it's been lost, or is being used as a door stopper, or maybe it's on a job share with Belgium or some other country in need of flummery. I thought it worth reproducing the procedure for ratification, if only to show that the EU does not have a monopoly on pointless silliness:

1. FCO draw up the instrument of ratification;
2. The instrument, together with a warrant for its signature then goes to the Palace for the Queen to sign. The Queen signs both the warrant and the instrument;
3. Once the Queen has signed, FCO send the warrant to the Foreign Secretary for counter-signature;
4. The signed warrant is sealed together with the Lesser Seal to an unsigned copy of the instrument. Those documents (together with the signed copy of the instrument) are sent to the Crown Office at the House of Lords;

5. The Crown Office attach the Great Wafer Seal to the signed instrument of ratification, and return it to FCO for ribboning and binding;

6. The signed and sealed instrument of ratification would then, normally, be sent by diplomatic bag to Rome, where the Embassy formally deposit it. It could be delivered more quickly by being physically taken to Rome.

David Davis gets a one line Whip

An update on the David Davis freedom by-election. I gather that Conservative MPs will be asked to do what they can to support the party candidate in H&H, but he will not be the beneficiary of the kind of operation put together in Crewe and Nantwich or currently in Henley. Whereas in those contests MPs were ordered to make at least three appearances, this time they will be asked to go once, and it will be a one-line Whip, so they don't have to. It's hardly surprising of course, as he is effectively unopposed (no, David Icke does not count). One Tory just now told me he'd only go if he could campaign for one of the other candidates.

Brown Central planning for the future

In the bunker gains are measured in inches. Every day that passes without another calamity is a day for quiet rejoicing. Gordon Brown had - by his standards - a good day today. He beat David Cameron in PMQs, and won the vote on planning. They would never admit to it, but I detected a look of relief on the faces of the hard pressed band around the PM.

PMQs was the theatre, as always. There was an unaccustomed steadiness to Mr Brown's voice. He marshalled his facts a bit better, quashed Nick Clegg effectively, and got through David Cameron's attempt at a birthday bashing surprising easily. In fact I was surprised that the Tory leader did not go harder on the anniversary thing. The PM knocked back a final joke question about whether his first year had been Casino Royale or Temple of Doom by assuring us that "every day difficult decisions have got to be taken" (for some reason he didn't add "or not taken"). His finishing flourish - "I'm proud of our achievements" - had Labour MPs shouting "more". But throughout support still sounded muted. Perhaps they had read that poll in the Guardian.

The planning vote - by a useful majority of 43 - is the achievement he most had in mind, along with 42 days. On both he reckons the Tories have got themselves into the wrong place by opposing measures he argues are in the national interest. Here is the shape of the campaign to come: to attacks on his personality, he will reply that what matters is protecting us against terrorists, speeding up the fight against climate change by building more nuclear power

plants, and getting on with the grind of government. Tomorrow he and John Hutton will announce a major push on renewables that the Business Secretary believes will change the British landscape and will have an impact on all our lives. No doubt true, but he'll have to get through tomorrow first.

John Major and the Mugabe knighthood

As a postscript to the Mugabe knighthood saga, it is worth reporting that David Cameron's office contacted Sir John Major recently to discuss the part he played in awarding the honour in the first place. This is a sensitive issue for the former PM and his then foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd (so sensitive in fact that when he was asked about it on Question Time recently Lord Hurd looked blank and claimed he couldn't remember).

The suggestion is that Mr Cameron hoped Sir John might go public and call for the honour to be revoked, allowing the Tory leader to do the same without risking the immediate riposte "it was you lot wot gave it to him". Mr Cameron's aides confirm the conversation took place between officials, but that Sir John was firmly of the view that it was entirely a matter for the Queen at the time and therefore not a matter for him now. That is the version as I understand it; it may be more nuanced than how I have reported it. But surely Her Majesty would only have offered the bauble after consulting the FCO?

David Cameron's Sarko love-in

It may have escaped your notice, but David Cameron hopped over to Paris this week for a gab-fest with fellow centre-right leaders from around the world (the IDU? IDC? something like that, must check). I'm told it all went swimmingly if you like listening to endless speeches. There was a reception hosted by Nicolas Sarkozy at the Elysee followed by dinner at the Senat. Mr Cameron and his team, including Mark Francois and Pauline Neville-Jones developed the links already in place with the UMP and the CDU in Germany. There's a lot of good work being done that will be helpful if Dave gets into No10.

I can also reveal however, that contrary to reports this morning, Mr Cameron *did* meet Mr Sarkozy. In fact Super Sarko blew off the reception he was supposed to be hosting to have a half hour chin-wag with Dave in his private office. Within five minutes of turning up at his own party the French president seized on Mr Cameron, embraced him in a bear hug (somehow I imagine the diminutive Sarko's arms around Dave's waist), and dragged him away for a one-to-one. They got on famously, and agreed to consider a more formal meeting in Paris later this year, which would be quite a coup. Sarko had such a good time with Dave in fact that afterwards he went out for a run and didn't bother going back to the reception. Politics is a fickle business; no doubt Mr Sarkozy would have

reacted differently if Dave had been behind in the polls. But his willingness to consort with the coming man has a certain irresistible éclat to it.

Will Scotland be the end of Gordon Brown?

On paper the Glasgow East by-election looks straightforward enough. David Marshall secured 60.7pc of the vote, to 17pc for the SNP, 11.8pc for the Lib Dems, 6.9pc for the Tories and 3.5pc for the Scottish Socialists. With just over three weeks to go to polling day on July 24, it should by rights be near impossible for the SNP to produce a swing on that scale. Certainly the Labour folk I've spoken to this morning think they will squeeze through on a collapsed turnout, but only if they get the right campaign in place (on that point, did east of Scotland Gordon Brown spot that July 24 is smack in the middle of Glasgow Fair fortnight, when quite a few folk are away? Or maybe it's deliberate).

Their cautious optimism is understandable. Defeat is inconceivable. Labour losing Glasgow East when a Scot leads the party would be David Cameron losing Huntingdon. By itself Gordon Brown could just about talk himself out of the resulting uproar. He could say it was a rogue result, a moment of madness, etc. But coming after local elections, Crewe, Henley, and Wendy Alexander, his party will ask him if he doesn't detect a pattern. "Losing Glasgow East means it's not just the New Labour coalition vote we've lost: the core vote has gone too," is how it was put to me.

For the moment the vitriol is being reserved for Wendy Alexander, who knew there was a by-election in the offing, but quit anyway. Labour folk wish she had held on until after the poll, pointing out that with the Scottish parliament in recess she could have gone to ground easily between now and then. I suggested last summer that her appointment was [a joke](#). Having been strong-armed by Gordon Brown into a job for which she was ill-suited, she's had the last laugh.

Gordon Brown asks David Davis why Cameron stays quiet

Turns out the hero of H&H wrote to the Prime Minister last week, as well as every Cabinet minister and even Keith Vaz, to challenge them to a debate on 42 days and the state of freedom in Britain. He suggested Labour MPs have been gagged on the PM's orders, to stop them engaging with DD. Somewhat surprisingly, Mr Brown has written back with his own challenge to David Cameron:

Dear David

As you know, Prime Ministers are available once a week at Question Time to debate all the issues of the day, and I was disappointed that you chose to step down as a Member of Parliament in advance of Question Time on Wednesday, 11 June rather than coming to the House to debate with me the issues around the use of CCTV and DNA evidence, and the measures we have taken to protect our national security.

Nevertheless, the leader of your party has the opportunity each week to ask six questions on those issues that caused you to leave his Shadow Cabinet. He has had two such opportunities to date, but he has yet to ask any such question. He has two further opportunities to raise these issues before the 'by-election' on July 10th, and I am sure that if he shares your strong feelings about them, he will not duck those opportunities.

Gordon Brown

Keith Vaz has also replied. He tells DD ministers would love to debate, but those darned equal-time rules get in the way: "Your suggestion that Ministers and other Labour MPs have been 'gagged' from participating in TV debates on these issues is not correct. Indeed, I understand that Tony McNulty last week agreed to a request from Sky News to debate you and others on these issues, but was told by the channel that they had to cancel the proposed debate as it would have breached the broadcasting rules governing by-elections. Apparently, they would have been required to give an equal voice to your main opponents. Should these broadcasting rules be relaxed, I'm sure one of my Ministerial colleagues would relish the chance to debate these issues with you."

The GB-DD letters: Davis replies

Further to my earlier item David Davis has hit back, robustly. I particularly like the offer to "adjust my schedule" to make room for the PM:

Dear Gordon

Thank you for your letter of 26 June. This is the second time you have responded to me directly, since my resignation from the House of Commons in protest at your relentless assault on British liberty.

First, you gave a speech on 17 June at the IPPR, a favoured Labour think-tank, hardly an environment that allows for the vigorous and open debate we so sorely need. Now, you insist that any questions I wish to ask on this vital national issue be raised within the narrow confines of Prime Ministers Questions, where

you have developed the novel practice of asking - rather than answering- the questions.

I note from your speech on 17 June that you genuinely believe in the positions you have taken and stand behind the sustained erosion on British liberty, which regrettably means that the country must expect more to come in the future. Equally, it is deeply disturbing how ill-informed you are about the basic effectiveness of your security policies - from 42 days, ID cards and the DNA database, through to the ineffectual deployment of CCTV at immense cost to the taxpayer.

We need a proper national debate on these important matters - not just set piece speeches to carefully choreographed audiences or the weekly one-liners you deploy at PMQs. If you were serious about debating these important issues, you should have put up a candidate or at the very least allowed your Ministers to debate publicly with me. Having cowered from both options, it is a bit rich to snipe from the sidelines in a serious debate that will proceed with or without you. Even at this late stage, I would be only too willing to adjust my schedule to debate you or any Cabinet Minister in public, if you feel able to relax the restrictions currently in place.

Yours sincerely

David Davis

Model for success

"A dour Scotsman with slept-in hair and a reputation for regular towering rages overcomes a massive points deficit by dint of plain grit and relentless application, gradually securing the affections of an English audience along the way, and in the twilight of the day wins through to victory over his flashier opponent. But enough about Andy Murray." So said a Labour person to me somewhat wistfully earlier, as we discussed the future for Gordon Brown.

Downing Street departure

Not great news for Gordon Brown this. Martin Sheehan, Downing Street's head of strategic communications, is off to join Tim Allan's Portland PR. Martin is one of the class acts of Whitehall who has worked in No10 in different roles for the best part of a decade. He was recruited by Michael Ellam last year to bring some continuity experience to the transition operation, having worked closely with Alastair Campbell under Tony Blair. There was never an expectation that his was a long-term appointment, as he had already clocked up enough front-line duty to last a lifetime (I remember a particularly tough visit to South Africa ten years or

so ago). His departure may be another feather in the increasingly stylish Portland cap, but it also draws attention to the beginnings of exodus, as more and more people from the centre look for life rafts.

Mandy slaps Sarko

This is turning into a cat-fight. Peter Mandelson has just been on Newsnight to accuse Nicolas Sarkozy of sabotaging the EU's negotiating position in the world trade talks. The man he praised slightly for his "energy and dynamism" is undoing his work. "Yes, I'm being undermined. Europe's negotiating position is being weakened. I regret this undermining of my own position at what is a very crucial time in these talks." Got that? Mandy is still fizzing over the way Sarko [knifed him](#) in his late press conference in Brussels 10 days ago. But for a European commissioner to slag of the current president of the EU in such explicit terms? He better stay away from any future [public display](#) by the French military.

Keith Vaz and the mystery '!'

How did the Tories get hold of Geoff Hoon's letter? On the Labour side there's mutterings of someone rifling through drawers in the Whips' office (though as it was handwritten, the only copy was in Mr Vaz's office). Whatever the answer, it allowed David Cameron to stage an obvious ambush in the Commons. There was no subtlety to it: he pointed to the bear trap and asked Mr Brown to step this way. Did he remember saying there had been no deal on 42 days? Mr Brown's brief 'yes' sounded like 'yes can we get this over with please'. When it came the Chief Whip blushed deep red, and everyone looked for Mr Vaz. The Tories believe the key to all this is the exclamation mark at the end of Mr Hoon's pay-off line to the chairman of the Home Affairs Select: "I wanted you to know how much I appreciated all your help. I trust that it will be appropriately rewarded!" This, I was told, was one of the most significant exclamation marks in political history (no, really).

My initial inquiries have failed so far to substantiate that claim. Mr Hoon swears it was just a joke aside to someone who had been instrumental in winning over Labour waverers. Less generous Labour folk prefer to describe it as stupid. Mr Vaz is likely to put out a statement denying any deal was offered or accepted, although we should record that he has a reputation for driving a hard bargain every time. Others point out that the exclamation mark makes it more likely to have been a joke, and that if a deal had been done Mr Hoon would hardly have recorded it in writing - would he? Whatever the truth behind this somewhat farcical episode, it distracts attention away from the serious business Mr Brown says he wants to talk about and back to the allegation that his Government survives by wheeling and dealing.

Will someone please tell Brown football is trivial?

~~The Prime Minister has taken to berating Tory MPs for their *manque de serieux* when they presume to ask him a cheeky question. Stephen Crabb (C- Preseli Pembrokeshire) wondered if he planned to campaign for Labour in Glasgow East (Answer: No, ~~he's from Edinburgh~~ PMs don't do by-elections). In reply he got this: "Once again they've resorted to trivia when they could ask serious and sensible questions".~~

Fast forward a few minutes and a Labour guy stands up to ask a groaner about some chap called Gordon Banks and his significance to the world of football. Does the PM reproach him for resorting to trivia at the taxpayers' expense, when he could ask something serious and sensible? Sadly not. Yet which of the two questions is more trivial?

If America is The Godfather, what film best captures Britain?

The Today programme carried an [intriguing item](#) this morning about the latest academic analogy in the US for describing the current state of American politics and foreign policy. It holds that we should study The Godfather films to understand the agonies of a fading power, with the fruitmarket hit on Don Corleone as 9/11, Sonny as the whack 'em neo-cons, Tom Hagen as the multilateralists and Michael Corleone as the new realist who grips the situation. In this world John McCain is the impetuous Sonny and Barack Obama is the negotiator *consigliere* for his willingness to talk to Iran without pre-conditions. Which begs the question: what film captures British politics today? Groundhog Day, with Gordon Brown trapped in a daily hell? Carry On Up the Khyber?

Gordon Brown: others want my job

Gordon Brown has gone for the Tony Blair shirtsleeves look in front of the Liaison Committee. Sir Patrick Cormack got things off to a zippy start by going straight



for the [serious and sensible](#) questions Mr Brown wants: is he having a good time, is he getting enough sleep, and will he *please* take a holiday? To the latter questions he told us he gets "plenty of sleep" and is looking forward to a holiday, "I hope everybody else is." Sir Patrick spoke for the nation in reply: "I do hope you will take one." But it was his answer to the opener on how he's enjoying himself that was interesting. It went like this: "Heh heh heh! This is the best job in the world because plenty of other people are wanting this job." Who could he mean?

Boris in Chelmsford car crash

The surprise press conference called by Hizzoner to face down questions about his deputy Ray Lewis will have left them wincing in Dave Cameron's office. The Tory leader was informed of the problem more or less as it happened, I'm assured. He won't have liked what he saw. The event left the impression that Boris was staking his reputation on Mr Lewis without knowing enough about the charges against him. Not a smart move. Conservatives will be forgiven for seeing here a nasty bit of Labour black ops, presumably put together by Friends of Ken. I hear Mr Johnson - or at least those around him - had sought top-notch legal advice when they heard broadcasters were putting together a programme on his star signing. But I'm also told the involvement of Channel Four, the BBC and the Guardian was coincidental.

Much of what is being alleged centres on the Bishop of Chelmsford and his decision to put Mr Lewis, then an Anglican priest, on the "Lambeth list" - effectively barring him from practising his ministry. Why he did that is in dispute. Channel Four will say more later, but the allegations include borrowing money from vulnerable parishioners, sexual harrassment and physical abuse of pupils at his leadership academy. Although a lot of this could be smoke, it puts Boris Johnson, and by implication David Cameron, in an uncomfortable position.

Baffling, and disastrous

Let it be recorded that five members of Gordon Brown's Cabinet and both his Parliamentary Private Secretaries voted to save the John Lewis list and carry on claiming. They are - and I can't quite believe I'm writing this - Jacqui Smith, Andy Burnham, Caroline Flint, Paul Murphy, Shaun Woodward, Ian Austin and Angela Smith. In all a staggering 33 ministers voted against reform and for the status quo. I say staggering because Gordon Brown, we are told, would have voted for the Estimates Committee reforms, and wanted his colleagues to do the same. But he didn't vote, having been told the division was lost and there was no need to interrupt his meeting. Not, I would suggest, a particularly convincing example of leadership. "Where was the government?" David Cameron asked. Good question. Have they given up? What possessed the seven I've named to land their boss in it? One minute he's winning on pay, the next his own side has landed him with another disaster. Baffling, and disastrous.

I'm intrigued by the accounts of a ding dong between Mr Austin and George Osborne. Boy George says the Dudley bruiser told him to "f*** off you toff". Mr Austin denies it: he merely pointed out to the wallpaper heir that Labour MPs don't have trust funds to fall back on.

Time to get the guy a plane



A couple of hours ago Gordon Brown and the travelling menagerie accompanying him set off for Japan and the G8, which starts tomorrow. Attending summits in far flung corners is one of the big items on the Prime Ministerial job description. He may not have much time for the flummery of foreign visits, but Britain's seat at a number of top tables - G8, Nato, UN P5, EU, Commonwealth - depends on putting in the airmiles. For this trip, Mr Brown is using the Boeing 767 that usually carries the Dallas Mavericks basketball team. The plane is operated by a company called [MLW](#) in Dallas. The journey will be longer than you might expect, because they have to stop in Novosibirsk to refuel for an hour and a half. There are no beds, and the seats barely recline. Which matters if, as Mr Brown has decreed, the delegation must fly all day, to arrive in time for breakfast in Japan. Just when they would be going to bed back home, they will be launching on a long day of meetings. Grim.

When Mr Brown took over last year one of the first things he did was scrap the plan agreed by Tony Blair to acquire a long-range jet capable of carrying future PMs and their entourage, or Her Majesty and her bunch. The argument was that it would be cheaper and more secure in the long run than relying on British Airways rentals. Mr Brown thought otherwise and junked the idea, one of those gestures which seemed clever at the time (no 'Blair Force One' for me thank you very much) but now seems ill judged. The BA jet that crashed at Heathrow earlier this year left the airline with no spare capacity to rent out a plane to Downing Street. Finding transport is now one of the biggest headaches for No10 staff, made worse by Mr Brown's pathological refusal to commit himself in advance to travel plans. Last minute means last resort, hence the [Flying Tangerine](#) he used to get to Washington, and today's cheerleader express. The biggest favour Mr Brown could do his successors is reinstate the plan for a new plane. Without it UK plc is beginning to look ridiculous.

Curious welcome for Brown-San

My colleague James Chapman is battling sleep deprivation and dodgy communications in Hokkaido to bring us news of the the PM's foreign progress. Contact is patchy, as for some reason the telecoms in the land of electronic wizardry are not compatible with the outside world. That hasn't stopped the Japanese from extending a warm welcome to most of its G8 visitors. Except, it seems, Mr Brown. The official summit newspaper, produced by the Japan Times, has this to say about the PM: 'On the domestic front, Brown's popularity has slumped amid Britain's economic slowdown.' Harsh, but fair. It also notes that he has a 'circle of friends that extends beyond the Scottish Labour mafia, of whom he is undisputed chief after eight years at the Treasury.' (Actually, not any more).

PM's Hooters



Thank you to Jonathan Levy at Sky News for spotting this about the PM's plane. It belongs to the guy who used to run Hooters Air, the transport wing of the adult restaurant chain. He's got the full story [here](#). (I think we've taken this story as far

Actually, Glasgow East will make little difference

Like most folk who write about politics from London, I haven't the first idea whether Labour will hold Glasgow East. On paper it looks easy. The numbers are stacked in Labour's favour, the SNP haven't got much of a presence in that part of Glasgow, there's only two weeks for them to get organised, despair rather than anger is the prevailing mood, etc, etc: you've read the various bits of reasoning on offer. I suspect the folk of Glasgow's East End may decide to confound the prognostications of either side to make a point about remote politicians and pundits daring to presume about their concerns and opinions.

But even if Labour do lose - and I don't think they will (gulp) - I'm not so sure it will trigger the kind of armageddon folk are predicting. For why? Because things are bad enough already. A wild result in a Scottish seat is unlikely to tell us something we don't already know: Gordon Brown is in trouble everywhere, even at home. But Scottish politics is different and the SNP are not the Tories. Labour MPs, those that haven't already disappeared on holiday, may just shrug. No, as much as it would be nice to imagine a summer meltdown at the national policy forum that weekend, I reckon the tough time will be those dead weeks of September before the conferences. Folk will be back from holidays, galvanised by sun and sancerre. They may be tempted to stir things up (remember how September 2006 did for Tony Blair). Then there are the conferences, and the crucial weekend after the Tory bash. Will the polls show the Tory lead pulled back to manageable levels - say 10pts - after a Brown barnstormer? Or will the Tories cap an extraordinary year by emerging from their gig 35pts ahead? That's when the phones will hum, regardless of whether Mr Brown wins or loses Glasgow East.

Harriet Harman on her bid for PM: "Men will flee"

When I [suggested](#) earlier this week that Harriet Harman fancies herself as a future Labour leader, I didn't expect her campaign to crash in flames on the runway just two days later. But that's what's just happened, and very funny it was too. As has been observed before, Harriet is oblivious to danger, and fearless. Buoyed by the success of her last outing as stand-in, she came equipped with more lines to deploy against William Hague and Theresa May.

But this time she overreached herself: telling Mrs May to quit the Tories and go to Lambeth Palace to apply for a bishop's mitre was a groaner; suggesting that one of the Government's objectives was that "unemployment remain high" produced nervous looks behind her; suggesting the state of the housing market was "a grave cause for concern" was perhaps too candid; praising Mr Brown for his "true grit" had Ed Balls looking alarmed. Her dig at William Hague about his appetite for 18 pints of lager was ok, but she got the number wrong - it was *only* 14.

The crash n' burn moment though came when Mr Hague wished her well in her campaign to be PM. She thanked the Tory deputy leader but added it "wouldn't be possible because there aren't enough airports for all the men who would want to flee the country." Silence. Tumbleweeds. Sound of male MPs ringing travel agents to book a flight to Terra del Fuego for Harriet.

Alastair Campbell struggles to fill the hall

If you are among those Labour MPs who were reluctant to buy a £1000 seat or a £10,000 table for ten for Labour's fundraising gig at Wembley tomorrow night, will the new knockdown price of £250 change your mind? I hear an email has gone round offering heavily discounted tickets to the event, which has struggled to pull in the punters. It seems the prospect of bidding for a spot of tennis with Tony Blair or the latest prize in the catalogue - a posh dinner with John Prescott as waiter* - was not enough to attract enough high-rollers. Word is Alastair Campbell, who is overseeing the event, sent a plaintive message to Cabinet ministers a week or so ago wondering why they haven't each taken a table (that would be because they are not wongaful Tories). I imagine Mr Campbell outside Wembley tube station flogging tickets for a tenner.

**No, that's not a joke*

How does he do it?

Word reaches me from Siberia, where the flying charabanc returning the PM and his entourage from Japan is currently refuelling. Mr Brown is clearly on an endurance marathon. They will land at Heathrow at 4am, from where he will go to No10 for a few hours' sleep before chairing Cabinet at 9am then preparing a statement on the G8 which he will deliver to the House at 12.30. All this after a gruelling and interrupted flight from a summit eight time zones away. Now, we make a lot about his workrate, but it would be only fair to point out that Mr Brown has the constitution and stamina of an ox. I also hear that he and Sarah were remarkably relaxed on the plane. There is a lot of joking to come, I hear, from a New Statesman interview out tomorrow in which he acknowledges the oft-repeated comparison with a brooding Heathcliff.

Does Gordon Brown trust Geoff Hoon?

For some days now I've been hearing intriguing reports about the state of affairs in and around the Whips' Office. I am assured that Gordon Brown's chums have set up a parallel Whips' operation that answers to the Prime Minister rather than Mr Hoon. It is being organised by Nick Brown, the Deputy Chief Whip, and includes both Whips and non-Whips who have in common their unquestioning loyalty to the PM. Key figures in this operation include the former whip and minister George Mudie, Mr Brown's PPS Ian Austin, as well as Kevan Jones and Helen Jones, both members of the six-strong parliamentary committee who act as shop stewards for the PLP. Others in this group include Mark Tami and Wayne David, Whips who were among the coup plotters who helped do in Tony Blair and were rewarded with Government jobs, and Tom Watson, seen by many MPs

as the 2006 coup's enforcer who is now the [blogging minister](#) in the Cabinet Office.

It is claimed the group meets separately, that it oversaw the Labour vote against expenses reform, and played such an important role in securing the win on 42 days that Mr Brown held a separate thank you drinks for them in his office. Such is the mystery surrounding this shadowy operation, in the eyes of some MPs at least, that the Commons corridor where several key members have their offices is seen as a rival Whips Office to the one off Members' Lobby.

Had I heard this from just one grumpy Blairite I might have set it aside. Certainly, when I inquired formally I was assured that there was nothing unusual about the Deputy Chief Whip operating slightly separately from the Chief. Yet I have since had a Cabinet minister, several junior ministers, former ministers and backbenchers all tell me about it. One says he avoids talking to Geoff Hoon in his office in case his visit is noted by the Brown lot.

So what's it all about? I'm not sure. There is a lot of traffic to suggest Mr Brown has lost confidence in Mr Hoon. The PM is said to be unhappy with the way the Chief Whip was too quick to write off the Embryology Bill, and with the near-run win on 42 days. Both sides deny this, and my impression has been that Mr Hoon has run a far more successful operation than his recent predecessors. Some suggest it is a symptom of the bunker mentality gripping Mr Brown: faced with adversity, he retreats to a core circle of loyalists who enforce his 'you are either with me or against me' view.

As I say, I find this all mysterious. But the roots of this of course lie in Tony Blair's failure to realise the the importance of the Chief Whip and his office. Instead of someone on whose loyalty he could count to the death, he put Nick Brown in. He then allowed Alastair Campbell to kick the Whips out of Downing Street to make way for spin. Gordon Brown restored the Whips to their prominence but made what some say has turned out to be a slow-burn mistake: he appointed as Whips individuals who put their names to attempts to oust Mr Blair. As Iain Duncan Smith discovered, it is difficult for traitors to command loyalty.

DD DOA

What does David Davis do when he gets back later tonight? If turnout is as low as many expect, his first problem will be a lack of a credible "freedom mandate". He will win by a landslide, but with the support of only a fraction of the 70,000-odd voters of H&H. Hardly resounding. Then there's David Cameron. The Tory leader will not do the usual dash to the constituency to hail the by-election victor tomorrow morning. A few words on a Notting Hill doorstep will have to do. Team Dave will go along with whatever DD wants to do to mark his

return, but there's a sense that the ritual welcome on the steps of St Stephen's might be a bit odd.

As for a job, the requisite "you can never say never" is offered but I don't get the impression Mr Cameron is going to rush to have DD back. In fact, I gather that the idea of giving him a policy commission to play with has been shelved. DD took a stand on an important point of principle. But in political terms, in the Westminster Village he affects to despise, I fear he is dead on arrival.

Don't let knives disguise

Gordon Brown's press conference was mainly about knives. His gist was that crime and violent crime are down but knives, guns and gangs remain a problem in certain areas. As long as teenagers and parents feel unsafe, the Government has a duty to act. Quite how it acts is another matter, as the reaction to Jacqui Smith's proposal for bedside visits from machete wielding hoodies testifies. Mr Brown singled out 110,000 families as the minority behind most of the trouble, and in particular 20,000 of them who require direct intervention. He didn't say quite what that meant, except that it would involve a contract, though why a dysfunctional parent wired on crack would be considered fit to sign anything remains a mystery.

I should also record that Mr Brown showed no sign of particular fatigue or incoherence. In fact, he sounded fairly chipper and on top of things. I know that contradicts the current "he's a disaster, Dave's the Messiah" narrative, but there you go. He'll no doubt mess something up before tea.

But what was particularly striking I thought was the way knives dominated proceedings despite evidence all around us that the economy - ours and the wider world's - is going down the Swanee, and fast. He batted away a few questions about boom and bust and whether he felt it necessary to revise the Government's rosy forecasts. He went on about the rise in the oil price this year as the single biggest shock to the system. Had it happened in the 1970s or 1980s, we would have had a recession, he said. Which suggests he still doesn't think it will happen. But I bet he was glad to have to talk about knives rather than the economy.

Cameron opens the door for Tory tax rises

It's a necessary piece of business, but not an easy one. With the economy looking distinctly shaky and the public finances in the red, the Conservatives are contemplating the prospects of taking over a rickety Treasury and an empty Exchequer. George Osborne has manfully held the line against tax cuts, with a consistent message about discipline and the need to avoid promises that can't be delivered. But if things are as bad as many fear, the Shadow Chancellor may find he has to do something Tories dread: put up taxes.

Which is why David Cameron began the work of getting us used to this idea on the Today programme earlier. Asked if tax rises might be necessary, he said: "I hope that won't be the case, because I think we do have more responsible spending plans. Government always has to do what is right to safeguard the public finances. The tragic thing now is that at this point in the economic cycle what the Government ought to be doing is cutting taxes and giving a fiscal stimulus to the economy. They can't do that because the cupboard is bare and borrowing is so high."

The key phrase is "Government always has to do what is right to safeguard the public finances". The golden economic prospect Gordon Brown inherited in 1997 was built in large measure on the fearsome tax rises brought in under John Major to restore health to the Exchequer. Necessary, but politically terminal. Mr Brown is unlikely to return the favour, which is why Mr Cameron and Mr Osborne must be viewing the prospect of power with some trepidation.

Who are the secretive Tories?

The Conservatives will publish the results of their "Right to Know" exercise at 4.30pm. You will be able to check whether your MP filled in the form issued by David Cameron [here](#). The Tory leader ordered all frontbenchers to comply but left it up to backbenchers to decide if they would take part in the transparency exercise. Deadline for compliance was July 7, but forms are still coming into Dave's office so the final number of refuseniks is not clear. Team Dave expect about 10 out of 193 Tories not to comply. It will be interesting to see who are the brave few.

James Purnell holds court, Gordon Brown holds firm

I was intrigued by a snippet buried in John Rentoul's [assessment](#) of the Cameron-Brown personality v substance debate. He says James Purnell is "the only Cabinet minister to hold a regular surgery for MPs at the Commons to discuss welfare issues from their constituencies". The sideburned Work and Pensions Secretary is one of those with an eye on the main chance if the Prime Minister falls, so his sessions with colleagues may have a more calculated motive. "Some day, and that day may never come, I may call upon you to do a service for me...."

John thinks Mr Brown will be out by Christmas, the victim of a Cabinet putsch, to be replaced by David Miliband. It's certainly a view that's around, and there exists a committed band of Labour MPs who are looking for ways to precipitate such an event. But I wouldn't put money on it. For starters, anyone who thinks Mr Brown will go quietly (or even more laughably that his formidable wife Sarah would urge him to quit) has missed the point: this guy is not a quitter. Then there's the absence of a clear alternative, in itself a major obstacle to his ejection. But the greatest challenge to the putschists is the lack of volunteers. Like schoolkids egging each other on to do something naughty, the "Dump Brown" lot are nudging each other and saying "you do it", "no, you do it".

All that could change, of course. The Tories could emerge from the conference season with a 25pt lead and ratings in the 50s. If that happens the obstacles become less daunting and some kind of panic-driven spasm in the PLP becomes more likely. As I said a while back, Glasgow East won't be a big part of this, even if Labour do lose (and I still think they won't). Mr Brown has the summer to build some sandcastles and have another go in the autumn.

Is this a Tory fiddle?

The Labour MP John Mann believes he has spotted a wheeze used by Conservative MPs to claim taxpayer cash for their political work. He has written today to John Lyon, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, to have it checked out. Mr Mann has gone through the ["Right to Know"](#) forms published yesterday detailing the expense claims submitted by nearly all Tory MPs, and spotted that 78 of them use their expenses to pay for a subscription to something called the Parliamentary Resources Unit. Cost to you and me? £270,000 in the last quarter alone. Those who claim include David Cameron and a clutch of Shad Cab members (Hague, Fox, Gove, Maude, Willetts, Grayling, Mitchell, Paterson, Pickles, Hunt). The PRU produces material to be used for everything from answering constituency queries, to asking questions in the Commons.

His point is that Labour MPs pay for their PRU (there's one for each party) through a £2000-a-year salary deduction; they don't land the cost on the taxpayer. If the "Green Book" says Commons expenses should not be used for party political purposes, then what assurances do we have that the Tory PRU is not providing MPs and frontbenchers with ammunition to attack the Government? Mr Mann wants Mr Lyon to "assess whether any of the material produced and distributed by the PRU is party political in nature".

Now, Mr Cameron made sure that the information published yesterday was bomb-proofed by Chief Whip Patrick McLoughlin. Given the number of Conservatives who charge their PRU "subscription" to the taxpayer, they must be fairly certain the Commons authorities believe it's within the rules. It may be that the Tory PRU is a different beast to the Labour one, or that Labour MPs have just failed to spot a way of saving themselves a couple of grand. I haven't inquired, but no doubt "Transparency" Dave will release his PRU material to spike this particular bit of Labour mischief. Mr Mann's hopes that the Tories will have to refund millions seem optimistic.

Poll: Labour ahead in Glasgow East

A spot of comfort for Gordon Brown tonight. A poll for the [Scottish Daily Mail](#) gives Labour a 17 point lead over the SNP in Glasgow East. The numbers are: Lab 52, SNP 35, T 7 LD 3. Progressive Scottish Opinion questioned 509 voters in the constituency between July 14 and July 17. With a week to go it would suggest Labour will hold the seat, although I hear from Scotland that Labour folk are uneasy.

Darling: Don't push it Gordon

Alistair Darling took a break from the economic mayhem this week to attend the Leonard Cohen concert at the O2 with his son Calum. The Chancellor went by Tube from Westminster. There was no abuse from those who recognised him. Mr Darling describes himself as a roundhead in his Times interview this morning, so it may be that Cohen's world-weary lugubriousness cheered him up.

Several things jump out from Mr Darling's interview, the most important being his doubts about the acceptability of more tax rises. "People will pay their fair share but you can't push that," he says, before adding intriguingly about VED: "it is very important that there is a clear environmental signal, but we also have to be mindful that we are all taxpayers, we are all motorists." I suspect Gordon Brown has worked that one out as well. Mr Darling also reveals that he is cutting back on personal spending, although you don't get the impression that he's a guy who goes wild in Selfridges. He hasn't bought a new tie for ages and tracks the price of bread at Tesco. All very prudent. Oh, and he'll tell us about the rows with Gordon in his memoirs.

Gordon Brown heads for the Holy Land





I missed Gordon Brown's day in Iraq but from the look of the troops as they staggered into the King David in Jerusalem tonight after a marathon tour of Baghdad and Basra via Kuwait and Amman (three commercial flights, three Hercules flights, and several jumps on helicopters), it wasn't a laugh. The temperature was 50C, so they particularly appreciated being dropped on the wrong side of Baghdad airport and having to walk across with their gear in the sunshine. The Prime Minister showed no sign of noticing the temperature apparently, which is perhaps why he looked so jolly in his body armour and suit. Mad dogs and Scotsmen, and an image that isn't quite Maggie on a tank (is it fair to point out that Tony Blair always refused to wear the kit?) For some reason Mr Brown doesn't feel the heat, which is useful. Packed day tomorrow: Yad Vashem, Bethlehem, talks with leaders on both sides and a meeting with Palestinians in East Jerusalem apparently, which is a small but significant gesture.

Brown: the truth everyone should know



The pilgrimage to Yad Vashem, always a requirement for a politician on a first formal visit to Israel, is made easier these days by the stunning new museum that tells the story of the Holocaust. Imagine a concrete Toblerone bar shoved through a hill, its open end projecting into the void above the valleys below Jerusalem. The Prime Minister and his wife were escorted through by Avner Shalev, the driving force behind the project. He told us afterwards that Mr Brown was well versed in the history and knew a lot of the stories. There is much here that is awkward for a British politician, not least the account of how Palestine was closed to Jews fleeing the Nazi terror. When Margaret Thatcher was here they thought of missing out that bit but she insisted on hearing it. After laying a wreath in the Hall of Remembrance, Mr Brown wrote in the guest book: "Nothing prepares one for the story that is told here of the atrocities that should never have happened, and the truth that everyone who loves humanity should know. We must always remember so that prejudice, discrimination, racism and anti-semitism is banished from our world." As the PM explained how he would look for ways of expanding government support for schoolchildren to visit Auschwitz to learn about the Holocaust, I remembered David Cameron explaining to us how he hadn't meant to describe the scheme as a "gimmick".

Roadblocks to economic reform



There's a delegation of business big-wigs tagging along with the Prime Minister to promote economic regeneration. It's led by the larger than life Lord Jones, Digby to his mates, who is the driving force behind the drive for more British investments overseas. There's some intriguing names on the list, including Sir Ronald Cohen of the Portland Trust, who is of course a Labour bankroller and close chum of Mr Brown; David Freud, also of the Portland Trust and more interestingly of the Government's welfare privatisation announcement tomorrow; Lord Bilimoria, the man behind Cobra Beer; Sir Gulam Noon, entrepreneur and philanthropist who was caught up in cash for peerages; and Sir Martin Gilbert, who since his dinner with George Bush in No10 introduces himself as "the Prime Minister's historian".

They did some useful business in Bethlehem where their Palestinian counterparts showed a keenness to come up with joint partnerships. The problem though is movement of goods and people. The Palestinians record 600 movement obstacles in the West Bank, most in the form of road blocks, that make it impossible for them to do business. They can only move supplies around or exports out with great difficulty. All this was explained not far from the containment/security/segregation* wall which cuts Bethlehem off from Jerusalem (and one Palestinian shopkeeper from his shop: he can reach it with a special pass, but his customers can't). The business delegation was given an impromptu taste of the hassle factor when their coach took a wrong turn and they were stopped by an IDF roadblock, which kept them neatly tied up for a while.

National anthems and the BBC



We are in the Knesset, waiting for Gordon Brown to make the first address here by a British Prime Minister. It is evidently a sacred spot, what Ehud Olmert has just called the heart of Israeli democracy. The introductory speeches include raw references to Balfour, to terrorism, to the return of the bodies of two kidnapped IDF soldiers last week, in exchange for a terrorist who clubbed a four year old Israeli girl to death. References too to the British role in creating the Jewish state and shamefully in closing it to refugees from the Nazis. Emotion fills this place, and when the Israeli national anthem was played on the plaza outside, the Israelis standing alongside me, both the diplomats and the technician overseeing the sound system cables, sang it loudly and easily.

Odd then that two BBC correspondents, Paul Wood and Wyre Davis, found it appropriate to try - repeatedly in one case - to record loud pieces to camera during both the British and Israeli anthems. A few years ago Tony Blair complained formally when a journalist did a piece to camera during a visit to a war memorial. On this occasion No10 officials didn't seem impressed by the BBC's behaviour. The Israelis even less so. From where I was standing it certainly jarred with the solemnity of the moment. No doubt it will encourage those who want to drop the 'British' from BBC

Gordon Brown shows two faces



Last night the trail of Gordon Brown's speech focused on his pledge to use every means to defend Israel's existence against its enemies. Today's preview headlines focused on his tough language about the "totally abhorrent" Mahmoud Ahmedinejad and his campaign to wipe Israel off the map. The scene-setter was supposed to get the idea that the PM is a friend of Israel up in lights. And he hammered home the theme in his speech to the Knesset, with a knowledgeable and passionate exposition of Israel's history and centrality to the human experience as the embodiment of hope over suffering and freedom over tyranny. But the longer he went on about his passion for Israel, the more you waited for the other shoe to drop. And it did when he offered the "honest analysis" of a "constant friend". By the time he had finished Israeli diplomats had their eyebrows up. One I spoke to seemed genuinely puzzled and disappointed. At the heart of the complaint was what many in Israel will say is Mr Brown's easy acceptance of key Palestinian positions: that Jerusalem must be shared, that settlements are wrong, and that the "right to return" is acceptable. In a prominent leader the [Jerusalem Post](#) accused Mr Brown of "parrotting" European views about Israel, said Britain "would also do well to reject the moral equivalence many in the West have drawn between settlements and terrorism". For good measure it concluded: "He could do even more: Let him speak out against the Orwellian predilection of many in the British media and intelligentsia to deny the inalienable right of the Jewish people to a secure national homeland." I suspect it is precisely Mr Brown's claim to be a friend of such long standing that will generate searching questions about British policy.

That said, the visit has been somewhat overlooked. Not only is all attention rivetted on the political crisis threatening to destroy Ehud Olmert, but everyone is waiting for ~~the Messiah~~ Barack Obama, who arrives tomorrow. Unlike his trip to Washington in the middle of Pope week, this time Mr Brown managed to get in and out before the star turned up. The PM is on his way back to London. Those of us who have remained behind are trying to work out the increasing mystery of Mr Brown's relationship with foreign languages: today we had Ouchwish, Menahem Bevin, and Jewsalem, to add to Changery, and Alky Ada*.

**Auschwitz, Menachem Begin, Jerusalem, Tsvangirai, Al-Qa'eda.*

From my deckchair...



...I can just about hear the diminishing rumblings of the Glasgow East fall out. I'm intrigued by the Sunday Telegraph's poll showing meltdown in Labour marginals. Not because it's findings are surprising - after Glasgow East what is? - but because it was commissioned by Flying Matters. Why is an airline pressure group getting involved in this particular debate? Could it be because it's fronted by Brian Wilson, one of Labour's most astute political minds, who was sidelined by Mr Brown years ago? One of the

PM's many problems is that he has few friends and many enemies. What's that line about watching who you trample on your way up, in case you meet them on your way down?

Events conspired against me last week so I never got round to posting my annual 'gone fishin' notice, let alone saying anything about the latest disaster. Apologies. For the next few weeks treat any declarations of loyalty, appeals for calm, strictures against plotting, etc with the scepticism they deserve. The game's afoot, September will be messy, and all tongues are forked. In the meantime, I've got my plotters' reading stack by my side: Norman Fowler's *A Political Suicide* on the downfall of Lady T; Michael Shaara's civil war epic *The Killer Angels*; John Preston's *The Dig*; *Blood Money*, the next thriller from my chum Tom Bradby, set in the economic collapse of 1929; and Ferdinand Mount's *Cold Cream*. I may even read some of them.

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What did I miss?

I return to find

- Gordon Brown is still Prime Minister, although [some complain](#) no one has seen him for ages (I thought we wanted him to do us a favour and disappear for a while?) Expect to hear from him later this week as he heads for Beijing.
- David Cameron is Foreign Secretary and doing his bit to annoy the Russians. I confess I nearly choked on my glass of rose when I saw the headlines - was this a well-judged, if slightly retro piece of Cold War Murdoch-pleasing? Or an inept bit of kiddie-diplomacy? Must find out more.
- David Miliband is now Leader of the Opposition, and quite pleased about it. He reckons he's defined himself as the alternative with a bold stroke, and has energised the debate inside the party.
- Chances of a September coup are receding. "Let's hear what he has to say at conference," is how it's put to me. Ditto chances of a September reshuffle. I'm beginning to wonder whether there will be one at all. Ditto chances of a September Glenrothes by-election, though that's far from decided.

In praise of Alan Duncan

- No, not sunstroke. The perfectly formed Tory MP has cheered up my first day back with a press release announcing that his testimony helped secure a harrassment conviction in the recent court action against the ghastly Barbara Tucker. The name may not be familiar, but if you are a regular in Parliament Square then you will no doubt have heard her, unless you are deaf. She's the demented harpie with the megaphone who shrieks outside Carriage Gates.
- Recalling the events of February 29, Mr Duncan's statement described how he was "subjected to a torrent of foul-mouthed abuse, including being called a 'murderer, terrorist, child murderer, bomber, disgusting, horrible and totally corrupt'. Mrs Tucker conducted this through a loud hailer and even crossed the road to get closer to Mr Duncan whilst he waited for a taxi."

- Mrs Tucker is one of the loonies gathered around Brian Haw who have turned a section of Parliament Square into ~~a passionate statement for liberty and individual rights~~ an eyesore. Her daily rallying cry of "Genocide is a war crime, Tony Blair is a war criminal" is wearisomely familiar to those along the Burma Road, and many of us have filed complaints to the police about her. Final word to Mr Duncan: "The whole encampment has become a vulgar and pointless display which is utterly demeaning for the Westminster Parliament. It is nothing to do with freedom of speech or the right to protest. It no longer has any justifiable democratic purpose. It is time to stop it." Dunky has always been a bit of a have-a-go chap; I remember watching him try to arrest the protestors who covered Brian Mawhinney's suit in paint years ago. Full marks to him for standing up to this nonsense.

Lessons of the Tory "media Jeeves"

A bit late this, but I urge anyone on the Labour side who is finding it difficult to lift the August gloom to read Norman Fowler's *A Political Suicide: The Conservatives' Voyage Into the Wilderness*. His account of the horror show that was the Tory party from 1992 to 1997 is a useful reminder that however bad things seem for Gordon Brown, they were so much worse for John Major (There was no hint of those years of pain in the ex-PM's voice when he turned up on the Today programme this morning, but that's because time heals all wounds - or something.) Read Lord Fowler however, and you are taken immediately back to the days of Tony Marlow's lurid sports jacket, David Evans calling for half the Cabinet to be sacked just days before the local elections, and John Redwood telling the '22 "my colleagues, let me be your leader!". The former Tory chairman had some useful advice for Labour last month - [don't dump Gordon](#) - a point quite a few seem to be taking to heart this summer for some reason. "Ditch him now and you lose your seats next spring," I was told last night by a wisebeard who points out that a coup means a general election and a wipeout. We're off to Beijing with Mr Brown tomorrow. Might ask him if he's read Fowler too.

Family outing, with champagne



We're on our way to Beijing, though at this rate we'll miss all the medals. Trust Tony Blair to get there first. This trip is an unusual one already: Gordon Brown has cast aside his normal caution with anything to do with his private life and brought the whole family along. Not only Sarah but John and Fraser as well. The two boys - four and two respectively - were running up and down the aisles of the chartered 767*, which has livened things up no end. Their costs, and those of the accompanying nanny, are being borne by the Browns. They are due to

attend a few events with their parents, though my hunch is Mr Brown will do his best to avoid Dave-style family photos. Both men, it seems, are trapped by the conventions they have established: Mr Cameron has surrendered his right to privacy and must accept the cameras following him and his kids everywhere; Mr Brown by contrast, has to accept that he may not be able to watch the diving with his boys on his knee. A pity both ways.

The obvious thing to report is that he's lost weight. Sarah says he spent his time in Suffolk "running and running" (from who?) He also seems fairly cheerful and bouncy. His aides report him to show every sign of a man who has had, oh, at least three days off, bless 'im. What he told us was at one level predictable: asked about the Pickles 'Labour's Doomed' prediction, he said "we are going to go on to win"; asked about Miliband he said they get on "fine" and that his Guardian article could have been written by any member of the Cabinet "or I could have written it"; and so on.

He confirmed there's going to be September announcements on what is being described (to the Treasury's annoyance) as an "economic plan", presumably ideas for helping people cope with rising food, fuel and housing costs. He'd be wise not to build that one up too much, as reality so often disappoints. And he effectively killed off a September reshuffle. And we haven't even got to Beijing yet.

*It has become traditional on this blog to report on the aircraft used by the PM. I'll pass on the ludicrous behaviour by BAA at departure. Needless to say, it wasn't a good day for the company to annoy No10, but they did. This time we are on a 767 run by a Swiss outfit called PrivatAir, and very nice it is too. I leave you to imagine the smile of delight on the face of my *bon viveur* Sky colleague Jon Craig when the stewardess answered his request for champagne with the immortal words "Will Dom Perignon do? It's only the 1999 I'm afraid."

Heat and plots in Afghanistan

We got here eventually, after a brief hop by Hercules into Afghanistan, where I discovered for myself the joys - and pitfalls - of wearing body armour in the heat. I'll spare you the details, save to say my silence yesterday was involuntary (an embarrassed thank you to Whitehall legend Allan Percival and his team at the impressive new coalition media centre in Kabul, and Chris and Jimmy and the other gentlemen with guns and earpieces for their tips on keeping cool).

So after a rejuvenating sleep on the overnight to Beijing, add my name to the long list of desk-jockeys who stroll into Camp Bastion, and then Kabul, and fly out somewhat sheepishly a few



hours later after meeting some of the impressive young men and women doing a grim but necessary job out there with flair, grace and great humour. I struggled after just a brief while wearing the kit in what the old hands told me was now the 'cool down'. What it must be like spending a day on patrol in 50degC, with beardies shooting at you, I cannot imagine. Chatting to various members of Task Force Helmand - currently 16 Air Assault Brigade, so 2 and 3 Para, 5 Scots, 1 Royal Irish and others - after they were addressed by Gordon Brown, my impression was that the kit was getting better (they're not keen on the helmets and prefer the American ones, though) and when they get a chance they are spanking the Taliban. But that's not the same as winning in a way that suggests there's an end in sight. They're happy to do it but not sure there is a point to all this. Lt Col David Reynolds, the engaging spokesman who accompanied us, made the point that what British soldiers are doing out there at great cost is what keeps us safe back home from the threat of Islamic terrorism.

In Kabul the visit had a routine flavour for Gordon Brown, livened up only by Hamid Karzai, who was evidently bemused by the way British broadcasters all asked questions about the PM's troubles without even a mention of Afghanistan or the British effort there. "Cabinet ministers plotting is nothing new. We have that in Afghanistan too. But not my foreign minister," he told us. Ouch.

Has the curse of Brown been lifted?

Hu? Wen? What? The old jokes are the best, so we're getting lots of gags about Gordon Brown's meetings today with President Hu and Premier Wen. The PM likes to say "if not Hu, then Wen". You have to be here. But they are certainly rolling out the red carpet. Mr Brown made the top of the evening news on Chinese state telly. It didn't take a degree in mandarin to work out that the folk at CCTV didn't cover his stiff language on Tibet, press freedoms and human rights, which didn't go down well. The Chinese pleaded with Mr Brown not to raise "difficult" issues, but he did anyway. Tonight he gets a state banquet.

Here's a spot of good news for Team Gordon Brown. When Shanaze Read crashed off her BMX bike after trying to turn a dead cert for silver into gold, the PM was nowhere to be seen. But when Tim Brabants thundered his way to gold in the men's canoe, the PM was in the stands. Maybe the curse only applied to England/Scotland matches, which must make the case (again) for merging the national sides. When you are 24pts down and the night is closing in, you cling to the most unlikely of straws...



The Olympics 'Disaster'



While you watch the no doubt spectacular closing ceremonies tonight, spare a thought for what they are saying about the Olympics at the highest level here in Beijing. It's cost them £27 billion, at least that's the (relatively) public figure, in any case way above the already colossal £9bn spent in Athens. The real number is no doubt higher, transparency being an underdeveloped concept here. So it's no surprise that the Chinese politburo privately refers to this past fortnight as the "Olympic disaster", according to the Beijing gossip circuit.

There's already the environmental and social costs. The clean, green, modern city visitors have seen these weeks is in fact a Potemkin village, made up mostly of empty buildings, streets cleared of migrant workers and beggars, hedges and mature tree brought in by the tens of thousands and planted in a rush in the past month (most will be left to die within months as Beijing has a chronic water shortage). Millions of people have been forcibly evicted to make way for Olympic-related construction.

For all the "One World One Dream" boasting that hits you everywhere you turn, China's leadership can see the downside. Staging the games has cost them a crippling amount of cash and risked social upheaval. Fear that a western concept - the Olympics - might spawn demands for further liberalisation explains the tightly controlled access to the games. Aside from the carefully edited view broadcast by Chinese state television, ordinary folk have seen very little. This has not been a People's Olympics. There have been no giant screens in parks, and access to tickets has been tightly restricted. I was in the Bird's Nest earlier today for the finish of the men's marathon and could see vast tiers of empty seats.

At the ambassador's residence last night Kelly Holmes told me that for all the technical and infrastructure excellence of these games, the biggest challenge facing the London organisers is how to ensure that everyone in London and across the UK has a chance to engage with the Olympics and participate in some way in the occasion. The joke doing the rounds in Beijing is that the five [Fuwa](#) cartoon figure Olympic mascots represent four of five disasters to hit China - bird flu, floods, etc - and no one knows what the fifth one is yet. Do China's leaders fear that the Olympics they invested so much in will have untold consequences?

Grace under pressure is vital



Everyone is entitled to a bad day now and then: John Major had his rages; Tony Blair was known to raise his voice. But the tricky bit is to keep the irritation private. And this is where Gordon Brown has a problem. I don't just mean that he lacks the poker face so vital to a successful politician. The Prime Minister - like David Miliband, in fact, who would get eaten for breakfast in Vegas - finds it impossible to disguise when boredom/frustration/anger/suspicion strikes, whether it's before the cameras, making a speech or in private conversation.

But as the Mail on Sunday [reports today](#), he can also get - how to put it? - a bit snippy. Whitehall abounds with stories of Mr Brown's temper tantrums, but those have so far been kept away from the public ear. On this trip however he has had to endure fairly persistent hostile questioning about his relations with his Foreign Secretary and his problems back home. He got it in Afghanistan and in a round of interviews yesterday, culminating in an awkward session with Sunday newspaper correspondents. The key exchange was reported like this:

The growing pressure on him appeared to show during an interview with The Mail on Sunday, in which he refused to answer questions about his hopes of survival.

'I'm happy to talk to you because you are here,' he snapped. 'I have given you special time. That is very good of me. You are very fortunate. I am not going to do an all-round interview about everything that is happening in politics. People are less interested in personalities and more interested in policies.'

Mr Brown insisted that he would steer Britain through the economic downturn. Asked if he was confident he would still be in a job by Christmas, he replied: 'Of course. I am totally focused on only one thing and that is taking this country through these difficult economic circumstances.'

But his irritation grew when it was suggested he was 'feeling the pressure'. He observed sharply to an aide: 'I was told this would be five minutes.'



When news of this seeped out last night, it caused a minor effect, but only because Mr Brown has appeared to be so remarkably good humoured throughout this jaunt. We spoke to him a few hours ago and he enthused about the events he has seen with his sons and the remarkable spirit in the British camp. I know his aides long to find ways of letting the rest of the country see the bright side of his personality, but it's up to him. He needs to learn the art of grace under pressure to disguise those moments when the black mood strikes.

Boris kicks it off



A huge cheer went up here in London House when Boris Johnson appeared on the huge screens. Especially after Huw Edwards said "billions are watching". What must Dave have been thinking? Given what Boris has been up to in recent weeks, could it be that the Boris for PM started here in Beijing?

London House is the venue run by Freud Communications where athletes politicians, 2012 folk, sponsors, and media types have been finishing off the day in style. Boris is due here later and will introduce Gordon Brown. A mad night ahead.

How long will the euphoria last?



Gordon Brown got back earlier on a cloud of Olympic euphoria. He stayed on at the Royal Suite at Heathrow to join the official welcome committee for Team GB when it arrived an hour after us, and was there as they came down the steps from their gold-nosed BA, blinking against the glare of the nation's Olympic fervour. The 10 hour trip from Beijing must have been one of the happiest on record for the Prime Minister. Even before Sarah Brown agreed to play the tie-break in a closely fought game of charades, it was certainly one of the most relaxed. How, he must be asking himself, can I make this last? He's off to Scotland for the rest of the week, where he will spend some time working out when to hold the Glenrothes by-election (early October is likely, I'm told, before the SNP party conference). But his biggest preoccupation will be keeping intact the political truce that has held over the past few weeks.

One idea being talked about, more in hope than in expectation, is that the Olympics and the weeks without headlines proclaiming party splits and feuds might persuade Labour folk to give the issue a rest and let Mr Brown have another go. That I suspect might take care of September and the idea - promoted by some plotters - that all hell could break loose as early as this week. My hunch is that his party will agree to wait until their conference in Manchester to hear what he has to say before taking a view. So the first week back after the

recess, and his first report to the PLP since Glasgow East, will be a significant moment.

There were some positive signs over the past few days, beyond the usual disconnect from domestic reality that marks such visits. The most significant came last night at London House when Mr Brown had to follow Boris Johnson. Listening to BoJo go on about ping pong, wiff waff, and the goat-slaughtering skills of Milo of Croton would ordinarily be Mr Brown's idea of political hell. Maybe he read this blog, but he managed to laugh through it, applaud the mayor, and then follow him up with a passionate statement of faith in British sports and London's ability to outdo Beijing. He even slipped in a joke at Boris' expense by recommending him for a gold in flag waving. It was a tough act to follow, but the moment he stepped forward, you knew which of the two was the Prime Minister (if anyone knows the identity of the Tory at the back who shouted 'Gordon, we love you', do let me know).



Other signs too. I include here remarkable evidence of a rare lion-sitting-down-with-lamb moment to illustrate just what that Olympic spirit can do. It's a snatched picture, a bit fuzzy, smuggled out of China at great risk. It shows Damian McBride holding secret talks with Tony Blair's former spokesman Godric Smith over a mouthfuls of Peking duck. It would be reckless to speculate what they might have agreed but I'd like to think that at this critical juncture in the nation's fortunes, anything is possible.

David Cameron gets the big one

In between counting the tumbledweeds rolling through the deserted corridors of Westminster this week, I hear that the Tories have had to find a bigger hall for Dave's conference speech in Birmingham on October 1. The Conservatives will be at the ICC, and such has been the demand for accreditation (9300 so far, compared to 6500 by this time last year) that the organisers have decided to give Dave his own venue. He will speak in the Symphony Hall (cap 2000), while all other speakers will be accommodated in the smaller Hall One (cap 1376). When a leader gets too big for his party...

While some will be counting audience size, others will be monitoring the number and duration of standing ovations. None more so than members of the rival BoJo and Dave camps. Forget Cameron/Osborne, the Tory version of Blair/Brown is Cameron/Johnson. Whiff, whaff.

Has Gordon told Darling his job is safe?

Whatever the headlines say this morning, I gather relations between Alistair Darling and Gordon Brown remain remarkably good. They've been together too long to do anything more than shrug their way out of this latest disaster. Talk of rows and explosions since the Guardian hit the streets on Friday night are wide of the mark. The same can't be said of "friends of...", who have spent the last two days making free with their criticisms of the Chancellor, culminating in the suggestion in the Times that he may now be for the chop. I'm told the black spot was tipped unprompted, which is ominous. Since everything hangs on "will he stay? will he go?", we should study carefully the contrast between Mr Darling's apparent confidence that his position is secure - he asserts there will be no reshuffle - and the [Times claim](#) that it has been "told authoritatively" that Mr Darling has been given no such assurance. So our starter for No10, on this first day back, is: has Mr Brown told Mr Darling he is safe in his job? Or not?

Like a favourite novel, the [Darling/Guardian interview](#) gets better with each re-reading. It's full of startling asides which would have made more waves if it wasn't for the enormity of his "we're all going to die" assessment of the nation's economic prospects. Except he didn't quite say that. Infuriatingly for the Treasury, the interview is made up of quotettes, snippets of sentences that miss the context bit that came before or after. It's useless as a defence of course, which is why there has been no attempt to suggest the interview was anything but accurately reported. Of course Mr Darling does not think that current conditions are worse than what Labour did to the country in the 1970s (funnily enough, when he and his mate Gordon joined the party). But his "12 months of turmoil" is far from the "six months from now things'll be better" view held by the PM.

So it's time to snap out of the August lull and realise that nothing has changed and things are dire for Mr Brown. He will get his chance to make things better in Manchester, but if he doesn't, all bets are off. Don't take it from me, take it from Alistair Darling, who appears to have slapped a sell-by date on his boss. Asked if Mr Brown will pull it off, he says: "But Gordon, in September, *up to party conference*, has got the opportunity to do that." (It's those asides, you see...)

Less Gordon

The serious business was what to do about those pesky Russians, but I'm told the talk among French diplomats in Brussels yesterday was of far weightier matters. Nicolas Sarkozy, perhaps in order to distract from his cozying up to Vlad the Invader, spent a lot of time making sure everyone at the EU summit admired Gordon Brown's new slim-line look. "Sarko kept telling other leaders how much weight Gordon Brown has lost," says my *homme* on the Quai d'Orsay.

Miliband predicts 'coup'

Thank you to the real Sam Coates at [Red Box](#) for spotting that David Miliband has raised the prospect of coups on his Foreign Office blog. Given his summer lunge at the top job, it's more than a little bit cheeky. He says:

*It must be a western conceit to think that just because we are on holiday in August there should be fewer crises in foreign policy. **Sure enough, August is usually full of crises: coups, scares etc.** We go on holiday; we jet back from holiday. Why do we even think that two weeks could go by without a problem?*

Carter cast aside?

Downing Street put a lot of energy yesterday into denying weekend reports that Stephen Carter is for the chop. The Prime Minister's official spokesman made a point of telling us that he checked the story with both Gordon Brown and Mr Carter himself before dismissing it. Suggestions that the former NTL/Ofcom/Brunswick high flier is about to be shuffled to another corner of Whitehall are officially inaccurate. Sort of.

In fact it's hard to find anyone in the machine who thinks Mr Carter will still be there in a year's time. For all his undoubted cleverness and refreshing calm, he has not been allowed into the Brown inner circle of advisers. It didn't help that he knew little about politics when he joined, or that others around the PM knifed him at every opportunity. He has arguably brought order and organisation to a machine that by the end of last year was a mess, though sceptics suggest the credit should go to the No10 permanent secretary Jeremy Heywood. Andrew Grice in the Independent today tells the story dispassionately [here](#). One person who has observed Mr Carter at close quarters told me recently: "Gordon treated him like a new toy: he played with him for a bit, and then cast him aside."

Bunker views

Those involved deny any personal rift between Alistair Darling and Gordon Brown, yet rumours continue to circulate of a stand-off, with the Prime Minister trying to dictate policy to a reluctant Chancellor. Those who took part in summer-long discussions between the two men over what measures could help the economy report intense discussions and frequent differences, but no terminal bust-ups of the Thatcher/Lawson variety.

That may be true, but the machine does not appear to be working. Or rather, as one No10 veteran put it to me, 'we are at that stage in politics when the Government struggles to be heard over the roar of bad news'. Sue Cameron in today's FT provides some [useful insight](#) from various Whitehall-watchers into the problems facing Team Brown. Professor Peter Hennessy, who knows a thing or two about how Governments work, says: "If you think this lot have a Baldrick-style cunning plan you are flattering them." And Martin Weale of the National Institute of Social and Economic Research points to Mr Brown's reluctance to let go of his old Treasury domain: "It's not the PM's job to make economic announcements but whether we'll ever get back to constitutional government again. I'm not sure." Intriguingly, she believes Mr Brown wants to bring in state-backed mortgages.

Clarke kicks it off

It was bound to happen. The summer truce wasn't built to last. Charles Clarke has livened things up with another of his rapier thrusts from behind a large chunk of philosophising. His piece in tomorrow's New Statesman is significant not because he predicts "utter destruction" for Labour on its present course - as is currently fashionable to observe, a statement of the bleedin' obvious - but because he predicts a coup. Evoking the prospect of certain defeat, he concludes ominously: "we will not allow that to happen". This is the first time someone of his seniority has suggested a concerted attempt will be made to oust Mr Brown. Of course, like a well-known volcano, Mr Clarke erupts frequently without any damage done to the PM. He may say what others believe or hope, but it is not clear who "we" is. But we should accept that the coming weeks are going to be extremely difficult for Mr Brown.

Clarke: Brown is safe

No sign yet of a Labour stampede behind Charles Clarke. I've had a brief exchange with a key figure among those considered to be "plotters", to check whether we could expect others to weigh in behind the Norwich bruiser today or anytime soon. "Unlikely" was the cryptic reply. The expectation had been for

some weeks that around now we would get an intervention from Mr Clarke, but it does not follow that others will, well, follow. He says so himself. In fact, if you study the interviews he has given this morning, he says no one in the Cabinet is ready to strike against Gordon Brown. "Many in the Cabinet share the view we are in great difficulty and are doubtful about our capacity of how to get out of it. There isn't a view ... that they should go and speak to Gordon in the way I have been describing," he says. Mr Clarke's message seems to be: against all the available evidence, Mr Brown remains safe.

An American Thatcher?

Trent Lott turned up on Channel Four News and told Jon Snow that his party may have found its very own Margaret Thatcher in Sarah Palin: "I've always said that the first woman Vice President or President would not be a liberal Democrat but a conservative Republican, like Margaret Thatcher for heaven's sake. We may have found her in a place we did not expect."

After watching the speech this morning, I understood why one delegate described it as "kick ass, take names" (which is what some Labour folk wish Gordon Brown would do). Everything about her, including her praise for the values of small town America, is a refreshing antidote to the European idea of America that is being projected onto Barack Obama. I have no idea whether it will work, but it makes a striking break from the dreariness of British politics. If you haven't seen it you can watch it here:

Michael Fabricant caught smuggling cocaine



At least, that's what the Colombian soldiers thought it was when they stopped him and found a quantity of white powder in his backback. The Lichfield Tory with the stick-on mane was on a trekking holiday. According to a report on the Press Association he was held at gunpoint and made to eat his stash. "It took some explanation, as I don't speak more than two or three words in Spanish, for them to accept it was Coffee Mate. They didn't want to taste it as pure cocaine is fairly poisonous so I had to eat several mouthfuls in front of them, with guns aimed at me, until they could see that it had no ill effect. Except afterwards I felt as sick as a dog."

Where are we?

Charles Clarke's bandwagon has duly trundled off, empty. No one has come forward to endorse his call for action, perhaps because he was a bit vague about quite what action he proposes. Yet a lot of MPs and ministers share Mr Clarke's analysis, even if they won't say so publicly. The difficulty is that conversations have become circular: "Things are dire, I can't bear it any longer, he's got to go, but when and who and how? Things are dire, I can't bear (repeat endlessly)." Every day though brings new nuances:

- At the moment for example there's a debate about whether a new leader means a snap election. Brown Central says yes, to frighten MPs against voting for certain death in six months versus a miracle in 2010. Mr Clarke and others say no, because this Parliament is already well past the halfway stage.
- Then there's the role of the Labour left and the trade unions. Until recently they were arguing against toppling Mr Brown for fear of making things worse at the council and European elections next spring. They now think the electoral prospects are so dire that the reverse may be true.
- Another source of speculation is the view of the Cabinet. Mr Clarke thought in July he had identified eight or so senior ministers willing to tell Mr Brown to go, chief among them Jack Straw, who did little to correct the speculation. But he seems to have backed off, though that may just be a tactical retreat by a canny operator. Others have faded from view, and now it's junior ministers who are being talked of as catalysts.
- And as Labour conference approaches, there's more and more speculation about Mr Brown's speech and what he needs to do. Some are resigned to little more than a competent performance. But among those who have seen or even helped with the early drafts, there's noticeable optimism.

You can read my take on Cassandra Clarke in today's Mail [here](#).

Fightin' Ed Balls



Along with "that was a fascinating football match" and "I'm sure the house wine will do", I never dreamed I'd say this: Ed Balls did rather well on telly this morning. You can watch him [here](#). He was on Marr to talk about education and defend his mate Gordon. He was lucid, he got his points across, he didn't blink too much, he stayed calm and - this is the key bit - he showed hunger for the fight (unlike those of his colleagues, as Matthew D'Ancona [argues](#) today, who have given up all hope). It wasn't perfect: he might have avoided saying "it is not steady as

she sinks", and it was a bit rich to cite the Tory recessions of 1973-4 and 1980-81 without mentioning the Labour-made shambles of 1979. But his "no surrender" approach will have given ministers a useful script for countering the encroaching gloom.

Brown to Clarke: Drop Dead

His message is not quite that blunt, but then Gerry Ford [didn't quite say that either](#). The point thought is the same: Charles Clarke can go whistle, Gordon Brown is not about to go, with honour or any other way. If Labour MPs want rid of him, they're going to have to go in there and drag him out. Along with others tonight, I've seen extracts from Gordon Brown's draft foreword to Labour's conference document. It's a taster of the kind of themes he'll develop in his conference speech (though Brown Central might like to ease up on that idea, given how expectation management is the new spin).

The phrase that matters is: "My own response to the great challenges in my own life has been to confront them, resolute in the belief that there would always be something that could be done to overcome them. And there always has been."

So there you have it. Those who know him have been pointing out for a while that talk of him going voluntarily at this point is wishful thinking. He's now confirmed it, with words like "confront", "challenges" and "resolute". He couples it with a vigorous riposte to the central Clarke allegation that this is a Government that lacks vision or direction by setting out in more detail why the world in 2008 is darn sight more complicated than 1997 (got that, Tony?) and he is the man to help us get used to it. The question now is: will it galvanise the waverers, or will it put them off? Interesting also that it's been released now, at least a week before publication, which suggests Mr Brown is either desperate, or just itchin' for a fight.

What does Dave need to do to close the deal?

As they cower in their shellholes, surrounded by the scorched rubble of what used to be a confident government, those willing to give Gordon Brown the benefit of the doubt dust down their focus group results and tell themselves that however bad things may be, at least David Cameron hasn't "closed the deal" with the British voters. By this they mean that the public has not yet made up its collective mind about the Conservatives and their leader.

Inside Team Dave this view is not entirely rejected. He is suspicious of the 20pt poll lead and would like to be further ahead. No one in his inner circle believes Labour is really on 24-25pc; they think it's more like 32-33pc. And they reckon the real level of Tory support is about 40pc, when they would rather see it - at this

stage in the Parliament - at 43pc or higher. A lot of thought is being devoted in the coming weeks to how to crack this problem.

The other day one Minister told me Dave reminded him of Barack Obama: "He's impressed the pundits and the Establishment with his fluency and presentational tricks, yet despite an open goal and numerous opportunities, he still hasn't nailed it." This may be the result of shellshock, but I'm interested that the Tories accept the outline of the problem.

Ed eats while David flannels

Thank you to Paul Waugh for giving us an opportunity to review David Miliband's performance in Birmingham yesterday. Paul thinks there was something shifty about the Miliband eyes while he was interviewed by Gary Gibbon on Channel Four News. You can watch for yourself below, from about 1min40. I had a look, and I confess my eyes were drawn instead to what was going on behind the Foreign Secretary. I'm sure that's James Purnell and his pre-Raphaelite locks casting nervous glances in David's direction as the interview drags on. And surely that's his brother Ed Miliband doing his best to clear out the free buffet?

Either way, it's a clanger



When Gordon Brown met the candidates for the White House in Washington earlier this year, Downing Street sweated buckets to avoid any hint of John Major-style favouritism. All three were treated equally, down to the length of the "impromptu" overrun. So it is hard to explain how they could have allowed an article to appear in the Prime Minister's name that praised Barack Obama but made no mention of John McCain. At one level, it's hardly surprising. It was a

party political article, Mr Brown is of the left like Mr Obama, and David Cameron paraded Mr McCain at his conference not too long ago.

Word is it was written by a junior aide for the Parliamentary Monitor's annual conference issue (not a publication to make waves usually), but was not cleared by the PM's office. Or perhaps it was. Either way, it's a clanger. No10 sensibly says this morning that Mr Brown "takes responsibility for everything that goes out under his name", and drops a broad hint that the PM - or someone acting for him - has been in touch with John McCain overnight to apologise. Too late, to judge by the sarcastic dig on the McCain campaign blog [here](#).

Maybe if Brown Central had been smarter, he would have praised Sen McCain to encourage the idea that, like him, he is a grizzled fighter who has known adversity and come back from the political grave. Instead, like his premature endorsement of that annoying Scots tennis chap, he appears to have backed the guy who is about to crash and burn.

What the next Tory intake believe

You may have admired the Guardian's [in-depth look](#) at the Tories this week, in particular its useful survey of 66 Conservative candidates standing in winnable seats. As you might imagine, the transcript has been trawled over by the Labour lot, and they have found what they believe are some useful nuggets. For those of you who don't have the energy to read the full thing, here are their selected - and selective - excerpts:

Today's Conservatives still applying 1980s solutions

The problem with the party is that it is still trying to apply 80s solutions to modern-day problems, and that doesn't work. But I think there is a new group of Conservatives, and I think I am among them, that are coming up with new solutions, and things are changing. *Antony Little, Norwich South*

Marriage tax breaks

Marriage needs strengthening. That's, to a degree, judgmental Toryism of 25 years ago, but it's true. *John Perry, Dudley North*

Raise VAT on flights and fuel tax

Some of the individual taxes that could increase, for example, are VAT levies on flights and fuel tax. *Fabian Richter, Bath*

Oppose Section 28's abolition

With sex education and Section 28 we undermine the rights of those [Muslim] parents who don't want their kids to learn about this. *Zahid Iqbal, Bradford West*

Taxes won't be substantially lower under the Tories

Certainly not higher, unless the economic situation of the current government worsens but I don't think that will happen under the Conservative party. Tax certainly won't be substantially lower. *Neil Carmichael, Stroud*

35% GDP target on public spending

We'd want to cut taxes, but that will take a long period of time, if we're looking at two parliaments. We should set our sights on 35%, but I do not advocate achieving that by trimming the funds of national security and services etc. *Mark Garnier, Wyre Forest*

"In an ideal world we would want it to be substantially lower, but being realistic with the current situation I would just say it needs to be lower. We need to protect public services and kick-start the economy – that is our main concern. If we are reelected in 2014 then I would want it to be substantially lower than that." *Antony Little, Norwich South*

"I would like to see it substantially lower, but George Osborne has made it clear that he has a long-term vision and is not after a short-term fix. But I think we want to be seeing things like, for example, scrapping stamp duty and HIP packs to get the housing market moving." *Paul Uppal, Wolverhampton Southeast*

"All being well I'd like to see it around 2 per cent lower." *Susan Williams, Bolton West*

Cut spending

"We're still paying off debts from the Napoleonic times, so decreasing public spending has got to be a priority". *Mark Clarke, Tooting*

"We need to cut the extra management and bureaucracy of Labour's time. But, yeah, cutting spending is likely – I think John Redwood's review was very helpful". *Flick Drummond, Portsmouth South*

"In the end, I'd like to see cuts in public spending". *Stephen Mold, Derby North*

Leaving the EU

"I asked my constituency: 76% wanted a referendum, of which a further 68% said 'leave the EU'. I'd be hesitant to leave, but I'd hold it as an option if were the best thing for this country. I'm not a Eurosceptic, I'm a Euro-realist." *Shaun Bailey, Hammersmith and Fulham*

"It is well-known that I am not comfortable with our membership of the EU in its current form. We should renegotiate our terms of membership, reclaim powers over fisheries, agriculture, legislation, fiscal policy, self-government, and reassert our status as a sovereign, self-governing nation state." *Mark Formosa, Taunton Deane*

"At the moment, we need to withdraw from certain areas of the EU. And if we don't get what we want from the EU, total withdrawal must be considered." *Andrew Percy, Brigg and Goole*

Gordon Brown has a good hour

We must now measure his performance by the hour. And between 10 and 11 today, the Prime Minister did well. They've lowered the lectern, and he's learned to slow down. The result was an improved performance (do I need to mention my caveat about the low base etc?) Less staccato, easier, none of the fetchiness. It helped having as human bookends John Hutton and Hilary Helpline (looking like a man who would prefer to wear a yellow safety jacket). Gordon Brown sounded like a guy who had stopped worrying. He even took responsibility for the state of the economy. As I listened to him, I occasionally glanced down at the cover of the new Time magazine and the grinning mug of Dave on the cover. And I wondered whether this might be the moment to call the turn after a year of Doomed Gordo v Statesman Dave. Maybe, I thought, this is the moment the flip the story round and make it more lively, Sarah Palin style. And then I read the [latest polling](#) for the Times, and Peter Riddell's gloomy [analysis](#).

Dave goes international, almost



American readers of the weekly [Time](#) magazine may yet get a chance to see the latest edition's cover story on the Tory leader by its well-connected London correspondent Catherine Mayer. But for the moment it's only appeared in the UK, Europe and the Middle East editions (the Americas and Asia will have to wait to find out more about Dave). In it he's described as "very posh" and "a tall sleek figure". The article also tries to pin him down by talking to those who have known him a while, all of whom - funnily enough - are impressed by his ruthlessness, drive, intellect and normality. My colleague Francis Elliot, who has written a vital biography of Mr Cameron, puts it this way: "I've come to think that the word that best describes Cameron's personality is glassy. Smooth, cold, so flawless and polished you forget it's a barrier - until you try to cross it." It's not quite Man of the Year, but we should get used to the idea that the world is preparing for the coming of the next PM.

Actually, it's Miliband who has to make the speech of his life

Cast your mind back to last year's Labour conference. It's easy to forget, given all the excitement about on-off elections, that David Miliband bombed. His strangely mannered first conference speech as Foreign Secretary had the sketch-writers in stitches, in particular his theory that "the world can be a scary place". It was not a good start. Since then, the campaign to make him the heir apparent has been hard at work behind the scenes, egged on from the First Class lounge by Tony Blair. This summer he had a tilt at Gordon Brown, from which he retired hurt, but with deserved points for gumption.

We will naturally devote efforts in Manchester to assessing the Prime Minister's performance. But we should also keep an eye on Mr Miliband. He too has to

make the "speech of his life". He too faces a "make or break moment". This is his big chance to persuade his party and the public that he is indeed, as his former boss and all the others egging him so desperately hope, the Messiah. He speaks on the Monday, and by tea-time the *tricotouses* will have decided whether this guy has got what it takes. Labour conference can be a scary place. So no pressure then.

Lady Thatcher returns to Chequers



She's back! When the Iron Lady visited Downing Street last year, the idea was hatched to invite her down to Chequers. She was keen to know how the estate was faring 12 years after her last visit. On Saturday she gets her chance when she joins the Browns there for lunch. It's being described as a private occasion, so we may not get the kind of live coverage that her appearance outside No10 generated. But it will be talked about. Mr Brown will have to tread carefully to avoid accusations that he is trying to repeat last year's coup for political puposes.

What's that noise?

Just when we were starting to think that things have gone quiet (Nick Robinson argued this morning that the threat to Gordon Brown has diminished), my Sky colleague Joey Jones reports [here](#) that some Labour MPs have requested leadership nomination papers ahead of conference. What could that mean? Maybe Polly Toynbee's turn on Channel Four last night has put lead in their pencils. Watch for yourself.

There IS a plot

Battle stations. I've argued before that if Gordon Brown goes, it will be because a string of apparently random events produces a sudden spasm of panic and fury in the PLP that ends with him at Buck House thanking the Queen for all her support. A fortnight ago we had Charles Clarke's outburst, which fizzled out. Today's event is vastly more significant. A dozen MPs, including a former Cabinet minister, have signed an article in Progress magazine calling for change, which will be published later this evening. Several have also asked the party to send them nomination papers for a leadership contest, a symbolic way of saying they are withholding their support from the annual acclamation of the leader at Labour conference.

One of them is Siobhain McDonagh, who is not only an arch-Blairite, but more significantly a junior Whip. She has popped up on Sky to call for a leadership

contest to "clear the air". And as far as I can work out she hasn't resigned, which means part of her plan is to make Mr Brown look impotent. So on this dull Friday afternoon Mr Brown is suddenly faced with a deadly serious threat to his authority. He must sack her and face down the plotters. And he needs to do it before the Tories start asking why he hasn't. I've spoken to several plotters today and while they don't claim that this is *it*, they want the Cabinet to act, and this is a way of forcing the pace.

They mean for this to be the start of something big

It's official. The plot that isn't supposed to exist has kicked off tonight, admittedly in a slightly shambolic fashion (Friday teatime is not the best of times to strike). I'm told these events are the first in what will be a series between now and when the Commons returns on Oct 6 designed to put pressure not on Mr Brown - that is a secondary objective - but on the Cabinet. It's worth keeping an eye on the Sunday papers and programmes, and Labour conference should be lively. Quite what we can expect I don't know. The plotters had been hoping to kick off with a bigger, more decisive bang, like a letter to the leader signed by at least 71 MPs (the minimum required to trigger a contest) calling on him to go. There is no shortage of MPs who would sign such a thing if a painless way could be found to get rid of Mr Brown and replace him with someone who would do better, but pain-free methods and winners are in short supply in the Labour party, so volunteers are proving difficult to find.

Two final points: first, for all the quiet of the past few weeks, don't underestimate the despair among Labour MPs. Their opinion of Mr Brown is at rock bottom, and it is all they talk about: not the global economy, not the oil price, not the made-in-America credit crunch but *him*. Second, this is the Labour party, not the Tories. Even the keenest conspirators will admit that they are new to this plotting lark. "If we were Tories, he would be dead by now. We may just shoot each other," is how one put it to me just now. Mr Brown still holds a lot of party cards.

Cameron: Labour's right, we haven't 'sealed the deal'

I mentioned some days ago the argument being advanced by some on the Labour side, that the Tories and David Cameron himself have yet to ["close the deal"](#) with the voters (I also pointed out that Team Dave suspects the polls are considerably overstating the Conservative lead). The Tory leader popped up at CCHQ this morning to address the point, and his words have been posted on WebCameron. You can watch them below:

Cabinet support is drifting away

At Elizabeth Murdoch's 40th birthday bash 10 days ago, Tony Blair and David Miliband provided the vignette of the evening when they were spotted nose to nose in a discreet corner, talking intently and animatedly about... well, we can only guess. There's no doubt that the former PM is the moving force in the campaign to secure the Labour succession for the Foreign Secretary. Mr Miliband was careful not to diss the plotters yesterday, but not because No10 told him to be. He is trying to keep his options open, all the while giving the impression that his heart isn't quite in it. Which may be why there are those who compare him to Michael Portillo, a reluctant champion for the ambitions of others. For my part I'm not sure that's accurate. Even if it did go a bit awry, I thought his summer bombshell showed a degree of courage and independent-mindedness.

The most significant development in the past 24 hours though is the shift in the Cabinet's position. It is now clear it seems to me, that senior ministers, either by their silence (is Alan Johnson still on holiday?) or by their equivocal statements yesterday, are losing patience with this soap opera. They want Gordon Brown to shape up fast and are setting some pretty steep hurdles: good conference, coherent speech that deals with the vision thing, a better operation in No10 and a win in Glenrothes. That's why I would stay clear of those who say this rebellion is a passing fancy by a few disgruntled Blairites. This is serious.

Ministers want Brown to sort out No10

The rumour mill is in overdrive this morning. Latest speculation is that Caroline Flint is ready to come out as a stalking horse against Gordon Brown, providing that elusive Cabinet resignation the rebels need to kick things off. But is she? She's doesn't strike me as a kamikaze, and I can think of other big name ministers who would be ahead of her in the queue of those fed up with Gordon. Now, I have no idea who is putting this out. Remember that the rebels accuse Brown Central of leaking their plans on Friday, and there is much curiosity about how David Cairns' name emerged late last night. He is not by any measure a household name at Westminster, and I'm assured by his friends, to use the accepted euphemism, that he has not intention of resigning. The rebels suspect No10 is running a "flushing out" operation designed to get wavering ministers to deny they are on the verge of quitting.

Which brings me to a theme that is emerging from my conversations with Cabinet ministers. The growing view is that the present situation of slow-motion rebellion is unsustainable. They want Mr Brown to sort out the mess and most, like Jack Straw and Geoff Hoon, want to help him do it. But in exchange they want to overhaul the No10 operation. They are vague on the specifics, but they complain that there is no clarity of message and nobody knows who is running the show.

Jim Murphy "is not resigning"

Somebody close to Jim Murphy called me a short while ago to assure me that the Minister for Europe is not about to resign. Now, I suppose you could say the same about quite a few members of the Government. What's curious is that nobody had suggested to me that he was about to quit. But No10, last night at least, briefly convinced itself that he was the minister in the departure lounge.

But David Cairns has

Well there you go. David Cairns resigns, and yet there isn't quite the frisson of excitement down here you might expect. The bloodbath in the City and Wall Street is a dreadful backdrop for a coup, which is why Mr Brown's position is strengthened, if only briefly. We'll have to see whether the exchange of letters makes things worse, or whether the other ministers considering their position (I can think of two) follow him out the door. I'm told they won't, at least not now. Mr Cairns hadn't intended to go today, but was fronted up and forced to confess. If he and his mates had hoped to trigger an immediate reaction, then it's a wasted shot. But this rebellion is like Hurricane Ike, slow moving and therefore all the more devastating. The mood of the Cabinet remains bleak. None of this will come as a surprise to Brown Central, where there is an almost perverse relief that conference is just days away and their guy will get his chance to say his bit.

But who are they?

Some final thoughts on this messy, odd day as I head for where the real action is - Bournemouth. Like most folk I've been trying to understand this strange conspiracy of accidents. One person suggested to me that it's the Catholics getting their own back at 'Son of the Manse' Brown, with 'Father' David Cairns ("I'm not sectarian"), Siobhain McDonagh and other Labour left footers being led by John 'Green Cardinal' Reid. Or you could see in all this final proof that the road to Mr Brown's downfall runs through Scotland (Dunfermline, Wendy, Salmond, Glasgow East, Cairns, Glenrothes... Prime Minister Reid).

An MP with a keen understanding of the wider party however points out something else. If you haven't yet, have a look at the [list of MPs](#) who seconded Hazel Blears' nomination for deputy last year. Coincidence? Some may not think so. For what it's worth Brown Central is not convinced that the Blairite ultras, in particular Alan Milburn and John Reid, are the puppet masters of this operation.

UPDATE: Thanks to all the kind hearted and patient folk posting comments and helpful tips about the lack of a link to the list. I wrote this on the train last night but my BlackBerry refused to load the relevant page. I've added it now.

Brown steps in

Robert Peston reports on his [blog](#) that Gordon Brown spoke personally to Sir Victor Blank of Lloyds TSB ~~yesterday~~* and urged him to take on HBOS. Given that the papers are full this morning of calls for him to show more Paulson style leadership, will he get praise for steering HBOS to a private sector solution?

UPDATE: *Actually it was Monday in the margins of a reception to mark CitiBank's London board meeting.

Nick Clegg goes for the Labour vote. Or is it the Tory vote?

Even if he did have three enormous plasma screens to read from, it was refreshing to watch a Lib Dem leader at ease with the idea of making a conference speech. One of the reasons we see a bit of Cameron in Clegg is that they share that unshakeable self confidence that is the first requirement of a successful political leader. Mr Clegg showed no trace of nerves for his first formal outing, except perhaps for the funny way he turned his back on the audience to sip his water.

There was plenty to poke fun at: all that talk of how things have changed in a year, with no mention of Ming; that line about "simply changing things at the top won't work" (you don't say); the digs at obscure Labour ministers (name me a famous Lib Dem). But he also had some good laugh lines that worked in the hall (I liked the one about the cost to the taxpayer of his standing ovation).

But I emerged no less clear about whether the Lib Dems - or Liberals as Mr Clegg calls his party; he seldom mentions the 'Democrats' bit - are looking for Tory or Labour votes. For all the talk of tacking right, the speech was packed with the usual anti-Tory rhetoric the activists expect. So plenty of abuse aimed at David Cameron's "arrogant, born to rule conceit, the sense that he has already picked the curtains for No10".

On policy the offer of tax cuts and a reduced state was striking, as was his suggestion that ministers should learn to spend money carefully, as though they had "borrowed it from a friend". He allocated his passionate moment effectively to the dire treatment of children in this country. But the glib talk of no nuclear, no runways and more renewables was less impressive.

What will dominate the headlines tonight though was his version of Steel - "we're heading for Government" - and his resonating attack on Labour: "Labour is finished, Labour has had it, it's over," only he can deliver social justice. His peroration pitch was to those who were attracted to the fresh-faced Labour of Tony Blair a decade ago and are now dismayed by the battle-weary Labour of Gordon Brown. Two messages then, right and left, as always.

National interest or Labour interest?

Martin Wolf makes a telling point in his [column](#) today. He says:

Gordon Brown may not be prime minister after the next election. Let him vow to himself now to be in a position to claim that he dealt with this crisis in as calm and decisive a manner as possible, while also leaving as good a legacy as he

could behind him. That may not be the success he once hoped for. It would be an achievement, all the same.

This raises a theme that is emerging from the mayhem engulfing the markets and the Labour party: will the Prime Minister put his or the national interest first? He presents himself as a statesman committed to the good of the country, but his record is that of a sectarian politician whose actions are usually always coloured by selfish considerations. The public finances are getting worse by the minute as borrowing soars and tax revenues dry up, and someone will have to take some unpopular decisions to sort out the mess. In 1997 Mr Brown took over the Treasury *after* Norman Lamont had done the dirty work of putting up taxes. Will the Prime Minister be as helpful to George Osborne?

Chancellor of the Exchequer or MP for Edinburgh South West?

Downing Street denies categorically that the Government lobbied Lloyds TSB to protect the Edinburgh bits of HBOS from swingeing job cuts. "These are decisions that are taken by Lloyds," a spokesman says. Yet Alistair Darling makes it sound as if Scottish concerns are very much on his mind, telling the Today programme: *"I have spoken to Lloyds TSB as well as HBOS because I am extremely concerned about jobs. There are many of my constituents in Edinburgh who will be affected by this and it will be very worrying for them. But I know that the new organisation will be very keen to make its position as clear as it possibly can. And I very much want a very significant presence to remain there."* Mr Darling is Her Majesty's Chancellor of the Exchequer. Something tells me now is not the time to behave like the MP for Edinburgh SW, maj 7242, however much Alex Salmond tries to needle you.

Conference could be a show trial

There's a growing sense that Labour conference will be less exciting than some might hope. Plotters don't want to waste their ammunition against a leader who is busy saving the world from financial armageddon. There are quite a few ministers considering their position, but no suggestion that they will act on their doubts this weekend. So expect lots of guff about unity in the next few days.

Some around the PM would also like to see the rebels get a bit of stick. There's been talk of persuading tame CLPs to table motions critical of the conspiracy. Some would like to see Siobhain McDonagh booed when she enters the hall. A minister told me she expected a Chinese-style re-education programme. For my part, I'm thinking of that grainy footage of Saddam Hussein in 1979 reading out the names of 'traitors' who are ushered out of the hall one by one, never to be seen again while the audience chants "long live Saddam" (if I could find the clip, I'd put it up). It's when we get back to the Commons on Oct 6 that the trouble will start.

Tony Blair says he won't get involved

There's little doubt that Tony Blair is promoting David Miliband's interest [at every opportunity](#), although he may not quite be urging his former adviser to challenge Gordon Brown. But in public he plays a different game. Given the troubles facing his successor and "good friend" - that's certainly how Gordon Brown describes him in the Sky News interview broadcast tonight - you might expect Mr Tony to say something nice about the guy. Not a bit.

On top of his appearance on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart, he's been interviewed by the BBC about his teaching role at Yale, faith and politics, and the economy. And about Mr Brown's troubles, of which he says only that he supports Gordon and the Government but "I really don't want to get involved. It's tough enough without me making it more difficult for the person involved." So what's he saying? If he did get involved he'd make it difficult for Gordon by pointing out how rubbish he's been? Some friendship. By the way, is it my telly or does Mr Tony look a lot older?

UPDATE at 8.30 A Blair reply reaches me from a First Class lounge somewhere on the international plutocrats circuit: I shouldn't get excited, Mr Tony explicitly said he supported Gordon (what I pointed out) and I should ask the BBC to play the whole thing. Typical BBC selective journalism... I thought he didn't want to get involved.

What has Miliband offered Johnson?

On my way to Manchester I've been appreciating Alan Johnson's gentle character assassination of Gordon Brown, who must love being teased about the cost of his dental work by the charismatic former postman. The Health Secretary also allows that Mr Brown's tetchy personality may have something to do with his problems, and backs the suggestion in the Telegraph a while back that the PM will fight just one general election. Everyone will focus on his "I don't aspire to that job" line, and his praise for David Miliband, as a sign that he has done a deal with the Foreign Secretary. Note the stiff words against the No10 attack dogs and the point that Mr Miliband is "part of our solution to these problems, not part of the problems themselves." Maybe he watched Frank Luntz's focus group for Newsnight last night that found the two of them were the most popular candidates to take over Labour. I still reckon that Mr Johnson remains a contender for the main job. After all, you've got to appreciate his gag about David Cameron leading a party that used to be full of closet gays and proud Etonians, and now wants to be seen as full of proud gays and closet Etonians.

Sun shines on "Premier Kim II Brown"

Gordon Brown had a good night's sleep, which may help explain why he sounded almost conversational in his session with Marr. He's also evidently relishing the financial crisis. Friends say it plays to his strengths; others might suggest that he's chipper because for once it's a disaster he understands. His claim that his plan for saving the global economy was turned down by other countries sounded a tad delusional, though. And he seems to have left the door open to future tax rises by defending the need to borrow more to get through the crisis. His offer to do better, and his promise to follow Conrad by "Facing it, always facing it, that's the way to get through" will help turn this week into a unity fest. It's not quite the "Brown bounce" some are suggesting, more a truce. Think football in no man's land for a few hours before they get back in the trenches. Even the ~~Nuremberg~~ Manchester weather is lifting the mood. The Tories are watching in bemusement. Someone from Team Dave texted me: "How is Premier Kim II Brown?"

Madonna Boy: "He's an effing awful PM"

Find time for the Mail on Sunday [interview](#) with George Osborne. He's rehearsed his contempt for Gordon Brown, and told us more than we need about his tastes in music. If a Shadow Chancellor who is down wid da kids seems far-fetched, relish this: "I was always very much a Madonna boy". Oh, and we learn that he wears "tight Brown Levi's".

Pose with the leader - whoever it might be

A friend tells me that Labour is offering its Prospective Parliamentary Candidates the chance to pose for campaign photos with the leader, whoever it might be at the next election. The wooden snap of grinning PPC shaking hands with the Prime Minister is a conference ritual, with candidates queing up for their 30 seconds of proximity to the leader. The picture then goes on the website and is used on campaign materials. But someone's had a smart idea, and is offering PPCs a chance to pose with other prominent types. Apparently there's a rush to have their pictures taken with David Miliband and Alan Johnson, as well as Gordon Brown. Just in case, you understand...



Note to plotters: it's Reid the Tories fear

In case you were starting to fall for this Manchester truce idea, I thought I should report what a senior member of Team Dave told me the other day. The Labour guy the Tories worry about is not Alan Johnson, but John Reid. The [Green Cardinal](#) scores highly with the voters in focus groups run by CCHQ. There are some in Team Dave who are convinced he is plotting a saviour's comeback. One even put a sum on him to replace Gordon Brown, at 50-1. My chum has theory: if you check the records, Mr Reid never actually said he was standing down...



Miliband flubs his Messiah moment



Gordon Brown will rest easy tonight. David Miliband had his chance to secure his position as a leader in waiting, and he failed. His speech was miles better than his "scary place" performance last year. But that's not saying much. It was a Foreign Secretary's speech, but it wasn't a contender's speech. His delivery was too mono, confined to one, steady dum-di-dum-di-dum register. He messed up what should have been a gripping opening story about his father and grandfather trying to get into Britain. And he didn't connect with his audience. The funny hand yoga gestures were a distraction. Now all that may sound harsh. This is a bright, talented guy. If you look at the video, no doubt Tony Blair's speeches to conference as Shadow employment secretary were nothing to get excited about. But this is high level politics. At any point in the next few weeks the whole game could be up for grabs. Mr Miliband needed to show his supporters that he is ready. I'm not sure he is.

The new Cherie



The story of David Miliband's [Heseltine moment](#) will deservedly be analysed for what it tells us about his stealth leadership campaign. Some Labour members may think it a bit sly of the Foreign Secretary to show such a calculating face. They might ask why he didn't just come out and do it, if that's what he really thinks. Also, anyone who has ever witnessed a Hezza speech will doubt whether Mr Miliband has it in him (can you imagine him hopping on one foot behind the podium, shouting "right, right, right!" as Tarzan did in Blackpool, 1995?) Then there's the amateurishness of speaking so candidly in front of unidentified witnesses.

Either way it's a verbal gaffe, and at conference to boot. Remind you of anyone? No? Who was heard saying "that's a lie" as Gordon Brown spoke in this very building two years ago? And who had a knack for producing pictures like this one? Mr Miliband couldn't match the grasping ghastliness of Cherie if he tried, but he is straying dangerously into her territory. His supporters understandably point out that we can't have it both ways: either he's David Davis or he's Michael Heseltine. He has talent and passion and it may be that he has revealed more steel than we realised he had. He's just told us that he doesn't want to bring down Mr Brown; he just wants to be leader.

We've got to get out of here

What a lovely city Manchester is, I thought last night, as I ate my Japanese "themed" food in a brothel masquerading as a "concept" restaurant. It was quite late and the minister beside me had just finished explaining how the Cabinet was ready to help Gordon Brown get out of his mess, but would demand a say in the strategy for saving Labour's bacon. At that point I knew it was time for us to get back to Westminster and away from the weirdness of this conference.

Just when you think you have a handle on what's going on, it shifts. You only have to look at the papers this morning to see how messy it is. The leadership has not managed to convey a single unifying theme. In the old days, Gordon Brown would give his barnstormer on the Monday, forcing Tony Blair to rewrite his speech for the Tuesday. Downing Street would then brief out some good lines from the Blair speech to sabotage the next day's coverage of Brown's effort. Yesterday Brown Central did very little briefing - a bit on an internet announcement - and saw no need to adjust the PM's speech to respond to David Miliband's unHezza moment.

So we wait for the speech, with rumours telling us that even at this late hour it is not fixed. Some say there are two versions - a good, unexpected, personal one,

and a standard Gordon speech. He is said to be favouring the latter, on the basis that the pressure is off. Just as with the reshuffle rumours, we don't know what's true. But I do know that the past few days have told us little about Mr Brown's chances of survival. Which is why we have to get back to Westminster, where MPs can grapple with the only conclusion possible from Manchester: the party wants him to succeed, but doubts he can, and the Cabinet knows it will have to decide.

Here we go again

Mad night. No one is quite sure how news that Ruth Kelly was about to resign seeped out. The problem for Gordon Brown is that the truth is neither here nor there: Cabinet ministers are convinced it was the result of Downing Street "black ops" designed to flush out traitors on the front bench. There is a remarkable degree of anger among senior ministers that could flare up at any moment. "This is a declaration of war. Downing Street must be stopped," one told me in the small hours. Just because Ms Kelly did not make a clean breast of her contempt for the Prime Minister when she stood up in front of conference 30mins ago ("Towering figure"? Yeah, right.) does not mean all is well. Far from it. This has the potential for disaster for Mr Brown.

Gordon Brown backs Paulson, but who's listening?

New York: I'm in the Big Apple with the PM. He flew here yesterday from Manchester and will spend next 48 hours in meetings with other men in suits. So we've gone from one grim press hall to another. They say it's raining outside but I have no idea. Mr Brown has just finished a breakfast with about 20 fund managers, including BSDs* from Goldman Sachs, Blackstone, Black Rock, Cantillon, and George Soros himself. He's endorsed the Paulson plan, saying "It's necessary that we keep these bad assets out of the system as fast as possible, let us make sure we stabilise the financial systems immediately." So that's that then. Mr Brown held informal talks with various world leaders last night - Zapatero, Rudd, Lula, Rasmussen, Baroso etc - and let us know afterwards that he was therefore in on the action. He says he has been warning of problems with the global financial system for some time.

But the action is 250 miles away in Washington, where George Bush has used the P-word - panic. Hank Paulson was too busy to come see Mr Brown in NY, which wasn't meant as a snub but a simple statement of reality. The fate of capitalism is being decided in Washington, and Mr Brown isn't there. If he had turned up in NY 24 hours earlier he could have seen George Bush. But he was in Manchester attending to his own existential crisis.

Bush invites Brown to White House

If Mohammed won't come to the mountain... Gordon Brown will go to the White House tomorrow to discuss the global financial crisis with George Bush. So he'll have something to show for this trip, which was hit by awkward claims that Hank Paulson had snubbed the PM by refusing to fly to NY to see him. He's also meeting Tom Geithner of the New York Fed this afternoon. There will be relief in No10 that Mr Brown gets a chance to join the party in DC, even if it's got that feel of a last minute invite for someone on a wedding B-list.

Sarah Palin's foreign policy nerves

New York: The state of negotiations between the White House and Congress dominates all here. "We've got a big problem," George Bush has just said. "The legislative process is sometimes not very pretty." We are waiting for Gordon Brown to address the UN before we head to DC for a meeting with Mr Bush that will go ahead even though the Bush administration is deeply preoccupied. In the meantime the political world here is also gripped by Sarah Palin's interview with Katie Couric. Commentators here are struggling to say something nice about this car crash. It makes unpleasant viewing for those who say the plain-speaking gal from Wasilla is the future. Judge for yourself.

Brown's "Age of Irresponsibility"

New York: George Osborne, pay attention. I think Gordon Brown has just given you a conference present. In his speech to the UN General Assembly, in which he repeats his call for better regulation of the international markets, he says: "This has been an era of global prosperity. It has been an era also of global turbulence. And where there has been irresponsibility we must now say clearly that the Age of Irresponsibility must be ended."

But who was Chancellor during the Age of Irresponsibility? Asked if Mr Brown is referring to the past decade, Downing Street says he is not making that connection. But I fear he has just branded his time at the Treasury.

UPDATE. George Osborne writes: "He's writing my speech for me."

Tory hubris watch starts HERE

A delight to get to Birmingham after landing at Heathrow this morning from Washington: yesterday talks on the fate of capitalism, today the Opposition's navel-fest - joy. Still, the atmosphere is terrific, in particular as no one seems to be following Maestro Finkelstein's [alcohol ban idea](#) (isn't there some law against journalists urging their sources to stay sober?)

With Dave stressing that he has yet to seal the deal, we are all on hubris alert, our noses twitching for the slightest whiff of cocky complacency. And what have we here? On the pillow of my room in the Hyatt? Our first exhibit in this week's Hubris Collection. It's a canvas bag with a cartoon of a grumpy Gordon Brown flying a plane trailing a banner that reads: "suffering from Brown lag?" Inside is a tin of Red Bull, a tube of Berocca, some Trebor extra strong mints, eye drops and a note that says: "*Our cure for Brown lag - We know that on the back of Labour party conference and a trip to New York with the Prime Minister, there's a strong chance you're suffering from Brown lag. But don't worry - the Conservatives have the cure. We've put together a bunch of stuff to help clear your head, revive your sprits and leave you refreshed and ready to enjoy what should be a great conference. With our compliments. Conservatives.*"

Cute. The Tories have found out which journalists were on the PM's trip and given them a present. Not sure it will do me any good though: I'm suffering from clever dick press officer lag, my head is clear and nothing revives my spirits like a political party over-reaching itself. And as for whether this will be a great conference - we'll be the judge of that.

Dave is fired up

Strong performance by David Cameron on Marr this morning. That might just be me enjoying a politician who gives straight answers and doesn't drown his answers in "um, you know, I means". But he sounded calm, stern, in control, which is all to the good. His "of course, you can't rule that out" when asked about likely Tory tax rises is the top line, as he sidles up to the painful realities that will face him if he wins power. Gordon Brown may bleat on about tough decisions in the national interest, but he only takes those that coincide with the Labour interest. So George and Dave can't count on him to do the dirty work.

Elsewhere, I was struck by his reference to a "responsible" Opposition ("I am a responsible leader", he says). And his offer of American-style bipartisanship to help speed consensus on finance reform. George Osborne said on Sky that Mr Brown has "never bothered to pick up the phone to the Opposition in this country."

CCHQ told them to do it

The Sunday Times Magazine has buried on p56 a Tatler-esque [spread](#) on six members of the Shadow Cabinet, complete with coy poses. Unlike the exercise involving a dozen buffed-up Tory candidates who were presented as Cabinet ministers in waiting, this one has a certain legitimacy to it. After all, these guys could be running the show by this time next year. Still, hubris, hubris. David Cameron [sounded off](#) against the Tatler exercise in his interview with the Mail yesterday: "Am I completely happy with all that? No." I mention this only because several of the candidates who appeared in Tatler have told me that they were telephoned by CCHQ and urged to take part in the project. Which would suggest that David was happy with it.

Miliband's bananas

It had to happen. Someone in CCHQ has produced a number of life-size cut outs of a grinning David Miliband clutching a banana, slapped a "Bananas!" speech bubble by his head, and put a crate of the fruit at his feet for representatives to help themselves. We've also been given another goodie-bag containing Nurofen, a 2009 diary, and one of those USB memory stick things with "Warning: to avoid data loss keep out of reach of Labour" stamped on the side. So lots of seriousness leavened with wheezes.

Osborne and the "game changer" theory

The idea is beginning to percolate through the village that the economic crisis is a "game changer". It goes like this: the turmoil wrecking Wall Street and the City plays to Gordon Brown's "strengths" by allowing him to look and sound like a grizzled veteran steering the country through choppy waters yaddayadda. The Tories in contrast, as the traditional party of rampant free markets, deregulation and fill yer boots capitalism, are stranded on the wrong side of the argument. Certainly, I've spoken to quite a few Tories who worry that George Osborne has left himself exposed. Labour certainly hopes so: they are desperate to change the narrative (forgive the jargon) and want us to believe that Mr Brown's hour has come at last. Before they get carried away they should read this [grim survey](#) on Robert Peston's blog.

All this may explain why the Shadow Chancellor put so much into what was a mature, impressive performance this morning, in particular his rant at bankers (never mind that the Tories get a lot of cash from that quarter). His aim was three-fold: to hammer home Gordon Brown's role as the architect of the Age of Irresponsibility*, to put the City on the spot and to offer Conservatives a glimmer of hope by springing his council tax surprise. Brown Central has devoted energy

to knocking holes in it but Mr Osborne says his figures have been bomb-proofed by the IFS. He's assumed 100pc take up, but as its a voluntary scheme how many will step forward?

*sorted the typo

Dave tries to muscle in

Dave has just addressed his conference as part of a hasty overnight re-write of today's schedule. He missed the parties last night and instead telephoned Gordon Brown to offer bi-partisan support. My impression is that the PM's response didn't go much beyond "what the hell do you want?" As in so many things the Tories think the American model is the one to follow, but unlike the Democrats, they don't have the whip hand.

"There will be a day of reckoning," he says, "but today is a day for security, safety and protection." He's offered Tory support to help "marsall public support behind some big decisions. What happened in America cannot be allowed to happen here...democracies are being tested." As are the Tories, who have got themselves onto the lunchtime news but have had to give Gordon Brown a blank cheque just to get noticed.

Where is Brown?

David Cameron has set the tone for the day. He's shown initiative and leadership with a well-judged assessment of both the scale of the crisis and the immediate challenge to politicians, while offering a timely reminder that we should not let panic turn into hostility either to the financial services industry or free enterprise. It may be that few will have heard it, but it was a significant moment for him nevertheless.

So now it's over to Gordon. Can we expect him to emerge today? With the world on the brink of meltdown, surely now is the time for the Prime Minister to tell the nation whether to sell up, buy tins of Spam and find a cave? There must be a lot of frightened people out there who do not want to panic but fear for their savings and investments.

Mr Cameron spoke to Mr Brown for about 10 minutes shortly before 11 last night, after a call was arranged by their respective offices. "They were keen to speak so obviously we had to take the call," I'm told. "It was actually quite friendly, and not antagonistic. The PM wished him well for his conference." They agreed that the Chancellor would brief George Osborne in detail today on the situation. But no suggestion - so far - that Mr Brown himself will make a statement.

UPDATE: Here's a surprise. Mr Brown will be doing a round of broadcast interviews this afternoon.

The right stuff to be PM

Dave has substantially recast his speech in light of the past 48 hours. The attacks on Gordon Brown have been toned down. He will focus instead on trying to persuade us that he has the character and judgement necessary to be Prime Minister. Calm under fire, decisiveness, these are the traits we want in a leader. The implication will be that he has these qualities, and Mr Brown doesn't. When he does criticise Mr Brown directly, it will be to point out that even when he gets something right, problems follow (independence for the Bank of England great, removing its oversight of financial institutions bad). He stands a chance of getting a fair hearing today; the chaos elsewhere has abated temporarily. This year's outing is not an 11th hour rescue operation for a party staring into the abyss. But it is his chance to recast his image and show us the leader in waiting.

A man with a Thatcherite plan

HE'S the "man with a plan" who had a lot to say about himself, but not much to tell us about what he intends to do. Yet David Cameron's speech marked a striking change of tone for the Tory leader. He has cast aside his soft, green image in favour of a steely, Thatcherite blue. His hour long speech was marked by a palpable anger at the miseries of the NHS, the craziness of the welfare system, the neglect of our troops, and the arrogance of a state infected by a health and safety, human rights culture. Mr Cameron showed his party unexpected flashes of the ruthlessness behind the charm.

But his chief objective was to answer Gordon Brown's charge that he is a "novice" unfit for the responsibility of the top job, and to establish himself as a leader in waiting with the character needed to show discipline, judgement and decisiveness under pressure. His reference "Gentleman" Jim Callaghan was well played and killed the novice thing with one deft stroke. His focus on those qualities of leadership was a direct dig at the Prime Minister, and an attempt to counter claims that the public is ready to overlook his mishandling of the economy and give Mr Brown a second chance.

Mr Cameron has concluded that economic uncertainty has given the voters an appetite for a harder message of tough choices and traditional Tory values. He has never disguised his Conservative instincts. He is the heir to Thatcher, not Blair. And those around him, specifically Steve Hilton, are intent on keeping him on the Conservative true path. That declaration of war on the educational establishment, and his attack on the yellow tabard looniness of 'elf and safetyism, were in deadly earnest. It's not quite Jekyll and Hyde, but this is a new, fierce David Cameron, and he means business.

Mandelson in, McBride out

Striking moves afoot I hear. Peter Mandelson is returning to Cabinet as a beefed up Business Secretary. And Damian McBride is standing aside. Oh and Nick Brown is returning as Chief Whip.

The story so far

You may have seen this elsewhere, but this is what I know:

Peter Mandelson returns to head a souped up Business department from the Lords (shades of Lord Young). Shriti 'Lady' Vadera works alongside him; they could sell tickets for that one.

John Hutton goes to Defence, replacing Des 'Two Jobs' Browne, ~~who now only has one - Scotland~~. **UPDATE:** Actually he's now Des 'No Jobs' - he's lost both and is out.

Hilary 'Helpline' Benn loses the environment and reverts to Min of Ag with just Food and Rural Affairs to worry about.

Ed Miliband takes over a new environment department, and is replaced by Cabinet new boy Liam Byrne.

Geoff Hoon gets the spending department he wanted by replacing Ruth Kelly at Transport.

He in turn is replaced as Chief Whip by Nick Brown, who makes a return to Cabinet. That will delight and depress MPs in equal measure.

Patricia Scotland is best bet to be parachuted into Brussels as interim Commissioner for the rest of the current Commission.

Inside No10 Damian McBride moves to long term strategic planning; his briefing responsibilities likely to be taken over by the excellent Justin Forsyth. More on this particular change later.

Some updates

As ever, there's a bit of confusion about who's doing what. Margaret Beckett is returning, but to take on the Housing brief. And Liam Byrne does get a seat at the top table, but as a Minister of State attending Cabinet.

David Yelland, ex-editor of the Sun, is NOT taking over as No10 communications supremo.

One day the truth about McBride will out

When the Day of Reckoning comes and those of us who know are free to say *what we know*, Damian McBride will emerge with great credit from the madness of the past few years. His departure was a necessity forced on Gordon Brown, part of the price a weakened Prime Minister has had to pay to buy off his enemies. It became inevitable following the events in Manchester and that bizarre night when Ruth Kelly confirmed she was quitting (two little known facts from those small hours: it was Ms Kelly herself who did most of the significant briefing; and McBride was sober). When the cry went up that there had to be changes in No10, what they meant was McBride had to go. By the time we left Manchester he was being blamed for everything, including the credit crunch

and the disappearance of Shergar. Such was his influence that like Macavity his prints were seen on every bit of damaging briefing. It became easy to blame him for every transgression, real or imagined. In fact, he was a victim of his own success. Damian is many things, but not an innocent. His role, by its nature, involved bad business at the crossroads.

But the McPoison of caricature is just that. There is far more to him than most realise. Few can match him for political insight, mischief making exuberance, stamina or that see-round-a-corner skill that few in politics possess. His intelligence was always Grade A, whether it was on election outcomes or how power was flowing. The Tories certainly have nothing like him, save perhaps George Osborne.

What does his departure mean for Gordon Brown? McBride remains in No10 as an adviser on long-term strategy. The PM will continue to have him to hand. But his enemies will be on the look-out for signs that he is still speaking to the likes of me, so I don't expect him to return phone calls for a while. Which means the PM will be without the best media handler he's had. We'll miss the service, not to mention the in-flight quizzes, and perhaps that's no bad thing. He may wonder whether it was wise to give up a high-flier's career in the Civil Service to run away with this circus. Of course, I'm an unreliable witness. But I'm certain of this: you will read a lot in the coming days about Damian McBride, and you shouldn't believe more than a fraction of it. The true story is far better.

He's so desperate to win, he's embraced his greatest enemy

"This is high risk. His rehabilitation is up to him. If he behaves as he has done in the past then people will say 'I told you so'." Thus the uncertain reaction of a Cabinet minister I can fairly describe as senior to Peter Mandelson's arrival. Others said broadly the same. It would take some doing to find another appointment that has left so many gobs smacked. Even those who are friends of Mandy and who had an inkling of his return admit it's a risk.

Without us realising, the Commissioner has been in the loop for some time. He and Mr Brown have been speaking regularly, sometimes daily. He may be amoral, unscrupulous, arrogant and vain (and that's just what his friends said about him today) but he's also determined to do what he can to make sure his New Labour project survives. He more than Tony Blair or Gordon Brown has an interest in this creation, which is why he has thrown his lot in with the PM.

His return brings Mr Brown and his party straight back to the worst days of Labour sleaze. In image terms it's a shocker. But Mr Brown is weak: he is stuck with ministers who threaten him behind his back; he has no heavyweights to count on; and he is presiding over an economy that is tanking. Far from turning in on

himself, he has done that which no one considered him capable of: he has turned to his greatest enemy for help. In this one gesture we should recognise a ruthless pragmatism, and a desperate desire to win. Tories please note.

As for the rest, it doesn't matter much. Earlier I watched some of the 1964 election night coverage broadcast on BBC Parliament. Robin Day interviewed Clement Atlee: "Mr Wilson is planning a Cabinet of 22 or 23. Is that the right size?" "*Much too big.*" "How many should there be?" "*Sixteen or seventeen.*"

By my count Mr Brown will need 33 chairs around that coffin shaped table to fit all those entitled to attend his Cabinet meetings. Ministerial inflation on a Zimbabwean scale.

But who picked up the taverna bill?

Rupert Murdoch apparently. He and his clan were the hosts of that jolly night in the Taverna Agni, and it was his question about the state of Gordon Brown that prompted an "Oooh me first!" response from the PoD. No wonder the Tories found the story too good to hold back and are letting everyone know what Mandy *really* thinks about the PM. And who can blame them? Of course Mr Mandelson has been critical about his ~~deadly rival~~ best friend's performance. Who hasn't? Ignore the Labour party's assurances to the contrary: he was up to mischief as recently as last week when he used an interview in the New Statesman to stir things up.

But he's back onside now, and even if the betting must be that the tensions in that relationship cannot be muted for long, the Conservatives should still consider their own exposure to Mandy. For months they've been buttering him up. Dave has made a feature of his occasional chats with the man in the plum cardigan. But how much have the Tories let slip about their own strategic thinking during those flirtatious assignations? What useful information has the master of the double cross passed back to his ~~deadly rival~~ best friend?

Plotters run up the white flag

Tom Watson has emerged from the PLP meeting downstairs to tell us what a success it was for Gordon Brown. According to his version, the most significant statement came from George Howarth, a top plotter, who told Mr Brown and his MPs: "It's time we got behind the Prime Minister. Hostilities are now over". None of the resigners demurred. Instead they appear to have thrown their weapons at Mr Brown's feet. Hard to mount a coup when the world is ending and Mandy is back on the scene. So for the moment it's a government of national unity. But how long will it last?

Are the banks making it worse for themselves?

There's astonishment in the Treasury this morning that the big banks thought it a good idea to tell [Robert Peston](#) and others about their meeting with Alistair Darling last night. The suggestion is that there is a direct relationship between reports that they begged for help and the slump in their share prices this morning. The Chancellor is being attacked for [saying nothing](#). Now the banks - or more specifically Lloyds TSB, RBS, and Barclays - are being blamed for saying too much. The danger is that the Government might start to wonder why it should help out institutions that are contributing to the mayhem.

'We are ready to go'

We'll know the detail tomorrow morning when it is announced ahead of markets opening. As I tap it's still being hammered out in No10 between the Chancellor, the PM, the Bank and the banks. But it's going to be a big one. "We are ready to go," I'm told. Let's hope the Government is screwing the banks for as much as they can. All those customers who, like me and you, are about to become £50bn (give or take, billion here, billion there, etc) shareholders in these High Street institutions will want something more than just a free pen and mousemat set. If our money is on the line, then let's have assurances about executive remuneration for example.

There's still a lot of bad blood around about the Robert Peston/banks briefing I mentioned earlier. Others are blaming No10 and the Treasury. Some point the finger at the City's eminence grise, Roland Rudd, who they claim is close to Mr Peston. The process of this story is quite naturally a subject of great curiosity. But when the Chancellor tells us what he's cooked up tomorrow, he will be hard-pressed to convince us that he hasn't just been bounced. Politicians held to ransom by the panicked bleatings of banks that want to be left alone in the good times, only to run for nurse when things get choppy, is not a pretty sight. Which is why we should hope that this No10 meeting has seen some noses rubbed into the French polish.

UPDATE: The markets will be told about what the PM will describe as the "Stability and Restructuring Plan" at 7 tomorrow. The NEC (that's the new economic 'war' committee, though given its size its about as useful as a Belgian division) will meet at 8. There will then be a press conference. And Mr Brown will hope that the screens don't go red while he speaks.

Who's got Carter's chair?



Somone has stolen Stephen Carter's luxury executive chair, and he wants it back. He has sent a plaintive email around Downing Street to ask if anyone has seen his prized seat of power.

Apparently he brought it with him from Brunswick when he joined the No10 operation earlier this year, and would like to take it with him to the Lords, where he will henceforth operate as Minister for Communications. Not much is known about this piece of high-end office equipment. Rumours that it cost £2500 and is made of sacrificial lamb leather, or that it was last seen re-upholstered in Arsenal colours, can't be right.

So about those two leaks

Michael Howard has [complained to the FSA](#) and submitted a question to the Chancellor about the mystery of who briefed Robert Peston following the Monday night meeting between banks and the Chancellor. The issue is still making waves in Whitehall, and the No10 spokesman suggested today that it might be a matter the authorities will want to return to once the dust has settled. I'm told by someone who was there that contrary to what Peston reported, the banks did not explicitly ask for money. The speculation is that one of the banks that did not need extra cash briefed against those that did, with spectacular consequences.

But the leak allegation that has taken up real energy inside the machine concerns how word of the recapitalisation plans got out in the first place. The PM is said to be seething at what he is convinced was a deliberate attempt by George Osborne to bounce the Government and get in on the act. The Shadow Chancellor confirmed on [Marr](#) on Sunday that he met with Treasury officials and with Mervyn King last Friday. And he said this:

"The answer is around recapitalisation. These banks are incredibly weak, their balance sheets are weak. You can deal with the symptoms, which is the liquidity problems - and I spoke to Mervyn King last week about that and I know the Governor of the Bank is doing everything he can - but I think there will be a role for creditors, for existing shareholders in recapitalising these banks but also potentially for the government. And that is not... You know a Conservative government in Sweden did that fifteen years ago and it may well be the case that the Labour government here will need Conservative support and involvement in some very big steps."

You can see why Brown Central are suspicious. But circumstantial evidence is not enough. Did the Bank Governor brief Mr Osborne and David Cameron on

the Government's plans on Privy Council terms*? If so has Mr King complained? There's no suggestion from the Treasury that he has. Actually, was the Bank even authorised to brief the Tory leadership? So adept has Mr Osborne been at winking out what the Government is doing that at one point months ago Brown Central ran a molehunt. But I can't imagine that a future Chancellor would play fast and loose with the markets in the way Mr Brown is trying to suggest.

**Unless I've missed it Boy George is not a PC.*

Memento mori, Gordon

Up until this morning you might have expected to find the Sunday papers full of pieces about Gordon Brown's 'great week'. His friends have a new script for us after months of misery. They are full of talk about his new-found confidence, about the relish with which he is handling the end of the world, about the turnaround in his fortunes thanks to a crisis that plays to his strengths. He's smiling a lot, and on Wednesday night even managed a joke when someone's mobile interrupted his speech, saying: "I don't know if another bank has fallen..." How they laughed.

After today one of his mates might like to start whispering "memento mori" in his ear whenever he starts looking like he's enjoying himself. The Tories certainly hope the voters will notice that the architect of the "Age of Irresponsibility" is rubbing his hands with a bit too much relish. Two things now threaten Mr Brown: recession and reshuffle. Economic pain will shape the views of voters in ways we cannot yet fully know. And there is still much to play out from the changes of last week, which seem a lifetime ago. The economic crisis has masked the fact that this Government now looks like the Sopranos. Bad blood is inevitable.

UPDATE: Thank you to all those who have gently pointed out the glaring Latin gaffe, since corrected.

Brown: We should have mended the roof

A few thoughts from the latest Brown/Darling End of Our World Show. I was struck for one by how more confident Alistair Darling seems, compared to a year ago when he tended to look like a bank manager whose family was being held hostage while Mr Big hogged the stage. Then there was Mr Brown agreeing that if there are grounds for criminal investigations into the behaviour of those who used to run what is now the People's Bank, they should go ahead. Note also the lengths the PM and the Chancellor went to stress that the Government is not interested in running the banks (message to ONS: please please don't put their liabilities on our books).

But if I was George Osborne, I'd look a this bit, when Mr Brown talked about the need for a global system of regulation. "In future regulatory systems there will be both greater attention to issues of solvency and liquidity and probably a pro-cyclical attitude where in a period of growth you have got to lay aside more for the possibility that there will be contractions," he said. Is that the same as mending the roof while the sun is shining?

Brown moves out of No10

Worth noting my colleague George Pascoe-Watson's [revelation](#) in today's Sun that Gordon Brown is swapping bunkers. He is moving his desk and those of his top officials from No10 to No12, where they will henceforth all sit together in a big open-plan room currently occupied by the press office.

The PM demanded the change after visiting Michael Bloomberg's office in New York. He wants to reproduce the buzz and efficiency of a New York command centre in the gilded rooms of Sir George Downing's terrace. As the buildings are Grade 1 listed, he can't knock down walls in No10. The only suitable space was in No12. And there he will be within weeks, surrounded by his top civil servants and political advisers, including campaigns duo Liam Byrne and Tom Watson, who have taken over Stephen Carter, er, stopped.

Some may quail at the prospect of sharing an office with Mr Angry. Others will see in this change a manifestation of the 'all hands to the pumps', Dunkirk motif that is emerging. Officials will no longer have to trudge up and down stairs and along corridors to speak to Mr Brown. In future they will merely have to look up before shouting "NO! That's a terrible idea!"

Vive Gordon!

It must be a rule for British Prime Ministers that when the French start to lavish you with praise, you aren't doing your job properly. Not satisfied with basking in the gush of the latest Nobel prize winner for economics, the PM is now being love-bombed by [Le Monde](#), France's most influential and self-satisfied newspaper. Tonight's edition takes Gordonmania to new heights, declaring in an editorial that Mr Brown has had his revenge on his critics with his proposals for saving the world economy: "Faced with the earthquake, he knew how to react, as a European and as one who has freed himself from what he used to believe". The news story is no less gushing: "An English triumph: it's Gordon Brown, he who prevented Tony Blair from joining the euro, who briefed the eurogroup. It's he, the magician of anglosaxon social-liberalism, who gave a lesson on interventionism to the continentals."

Tories: the real economy will do in Brown

So what do the Tories do to stop the beatification of St Gord? [ConservativeHome](#) has been briefed on the beginnings of a strategy which might be summarised as "well done on the banks, shame you've wrecked the real economy". David Cameron and George Osborne have to get through a tricky patch as the world rejoices and the PM is feted as the Saviour. They reckon the voters will soon lose patience with the festivities when they start to feel the pain of recession, spending cuts and tax rises. Yet just as Mr Brown has to avoid looking like he's enjoying himself, so the Tories don't want to be caught wishing for things to get worse.

Brown 'begged to join euro'

The Luxembourg Legend that is Jean-Claude Juncker has offered an intriguing analysis of the financial bail-out in an interview with the Rheinischer Merkur, which we might have missed had it not been for the eagle eyes of Bloomberg:

Oct. 15 (Bloomberg) -- Luxembourg Finance Minister Jean-Claude Juncker told German newspaper Rheinischer Merkur the U.K. will consider adopting the euro once the credit crisis abates. **"The British prime minister had to beg to be let into the room in which the euro group was meeting,"** Juncker told the newspaper in an interview published today. **"I'm sure that when the storm is over, the British will think about whether they shouldn't become an equal in all decision-making bodies."**

Digby Lord Jones prepares to come out

I'm grateful to the friend who pointed me in the direction of digbylordjones.com, the "temporary holding page" for the recently liberated Birmingham bruiser. Now that he's free of the constraints of Government, the former business minister is obviously keen to develop the brand. Which must explain the black and white Hollywood portrait. Has anyone told him I wonder that Digby, Lord Jones, is a style usually reserved for a dowager duchess? No matter, Digby is an adornment to public life and it's reassuring to know he has no intention of leaving the stage.



Brown "rules out snap election"

There's been some fun to be had this week speculating that Gordon Brown might be tempted to bank some profits by calling a sudden election on the back of his economy-saving Messiah moment. Labour united, polls narrowing, plaudits all around... and just enough time to go to the polls before the bill for the Age of Irresponsibility comes due. My colleagues in Brussels rightly thought to ask the PM the election question earlier, knowing full well that whatever answer he gave it would be a story. He hedged by talking about getting on with the job and the economy having his undivided attention, and so by convention that means he hasn't ruled it out.

But I've spoken to a number of Brown Central folk about this in recent days, and I'd be cautious about putting money on the idea of a sudden election. Why? First, impossible to find anyone who believes that the situation has changed that much. "Breathing room" rather than "turnaround" is how current conditions are being described, and as today's latest market bloodbath shows, the only certainty is extreme volatility. Second, don't underestimate how much the horror of last year's on-off election remains seared on the Brown Central consciousness. The fact is, they just can't face it.

Mandelson: The Wasted Years

The return of Mandy is such a heart-lifter for political journalists. I certainly felt cheered watching his inaugural appearance (as Version 3.0) on Marr this morning. In the space of about 20 minutes he provided useful material on three significant fronts, and reminded us why this remarkable, flawed character remains one of the great operators of British politics. It may end in tears yet again, but it's going to be great theatre.

He lashed the banks for the way they are treating small and medium businesses at a time of what he amusingly calls "contraction". He reveals he met with SME representatives last week, and after discussions with Alistair Darling plans to take on the banks and their practices. One problem he highlighted is banks that unilaterally change their terms, and charge firms an administrative cost for the privilege. He's rightly identified that preventing the Age of Irresponsibility (Copyright G Brown) from contracting the life out of SMEs is his top priority.

He repeated his 'public politicians are allowed a private life' line (an intriguing new variation of the Cameron defence) to refuse questions about his links with Russian oligarchs and other ocean-going plutocrats. It's all "muck raking" and "innuendo" by the Tories and their friends in the Conservative press (that would be us). "I've signed the Ministerial Code and I will be governed by the Ministerial Code," he says. Let's hold him to it, shall we?

But it's his assessment of relations with Gordon Brown which is so striking. "Both of us looking back would say we wasted a lot of energy and time that we could have otherwise devoted to the success of the Government by not repairing our relationship sooner. ... I wish we could have avoided that, that we could have pulled together as one family, as one band," he says. Like a marriage, only the two in the relationship really understand what's going on. It must be a cause of Tory dread to see this particular couple back together. David Cameron will be hoping his Lordship's words are about as reliable as a pledge of love from Madonna and Guy.

Pause

I'm away this week testing ice creams with my focus group. Back next Monday. Please, don't get rid of Mandy without me.

What price for that "mistake"?

One of George Osborne's many endearing qualities is the irrespressible enthusiasm he brings to the political fray. So it was striking to hear him quite so downcast in his [interview](#) on the World at One earlier. The usual ebullience was gone, replaced by the tone of a man who knows he has suffered a significant setback. "In politics it's not just what you say or do, it's how things look. If I'm honest, this didn't look very good," he said. But what exactly didn't look good? That he ended up in some sort of conversation about a donation from a Russian billionaire? Or that nearly 20 years after posing with the Bullingdon club, he is still pursuing the lifestyle of the plutocrat?

Talking to people around the Village today as I tried to catch up with the story, Tories seemed just as concerned about the holiday with the rich mate as they were about the flirtation with the Deripaska dosh. Not that they want to begrudge Mr Osborne his summer fun. But should he still be cavorting with wealth on such a scale? Think Prince Hal and Falstaff. In fairness they made the same point about David Cameron.

The good news for Mr Osborne is that he has rock solid support in the parliamentary party, which wasn't always the case. He has also earned the credit that comes from publicly conceding a mistake, even if he may wish he had done so last week. He must now hope that Nat Rothschild hasn't got any more ammunition to deploy from his rich bloke's hideaway.

Digby consigns the north to darkness

That recently released goat Digby Lord Jones of Birmingham has wasted no time in his new role as a freelance business mover and shaker. I [predicted](#) recently that he would be good value, and he has not disappointed. He has called for the nation's clocks to be pushed forward an hour. He wants Britain to join Central European Time, even if it means annoying those he describes as "some farmers in northern parts of Britain". He's backing an amendment to the Energy Bill in the Lords today to make us continental. He says:

"It is high time that the interests of the British economy as a whole came ahead of some farmers in northern parts of Britain. We need, in these difficult times, every help we can get if the British economy is to come out of recession as quickly as possible. Moving to Central European Time is one way in which the interests of the United Kingdom as a whole can be served."

Why does it take a junior minister to speak plainly on BrandGate?

I gather Gordon Brown is likely to say something about BrandRossGate later in Paris. We are told he would have answered questions about it when he spoke earlier in Downing Street, had he been asked. That's the No10 line to explain the PM's silence so far. What he would have said, they aren't prepared to tell us. David Cameron got in on the act earlier, but his tuppenceworth on the affair ("it's a matter for the BBC, questions to answer, yadda yadda") was hardly fulmination.

Andy Burnham has now emerged to say it's up to the BBC and Ofcom "to look at how and why such a serious breach of broadcasting standards happened. I, and I think the public, expect these enquiries to be carried out thoroughly and as a matter of urgency." Again, not quite the fire and brimstone you might expect from politicians who are supposed to have the interests of the ~~tax~~ licence fee paying public at heart.

So full marks to David Hanson, the Justice Minister, who wins the plain speaking award of the day for at least saying the two "jokers" should apologise: "I do feel that both Mr Ross and Mr Brand do have to make an apology with regard to the broadcast that was made. I don't think it was appropriate. I don't think it was in keeping with broadcasting. I'm not sure it will result in prosecutions. But I do feel an apology is called for."

About that "low" debt, Gordon

A phrase from Gordon Brown's lunchtime press 'availability' yesterday has been ringing in my ear. He said: "Britain is in fact better positioned to deal with these problems because we have low national debt." You may have heard it before. It's a now well-worn part of his justification for letting borrowing absorb the shock of the recession.

George Osborne, if he is ever seen in public again, might like to make this debt thing a theme. His colleagues certainly think so. One of his MP chums has been in touch to suggest the Tories should be doing more to tell the public quite how bad the nation's overdraft has become, to prepare them for the inevitable tax/spend tightening that George may have to introduce.

To recap: Mr Brown says debt is 37.3pc of GDP. The ONS says national debt is actually 43.4 per cent of GDP because you have to take Northern Rock into account. Then there's PFI debt, which the PAC estimates is a further 6.8pc of GDP. If you fancy, you can add public sector pension liabilities (73.3pc of GDP, according to the IEA). And then there's Bradford and Bingley and the £50bn recapitalisation of British banks. As the saying goes, you're starting to talk about serious money.

Mr Brown argues that even at 43.4pc we are in significantly better shape than other G7 countries: US 60.8pc, Germany 63.2pc, France 64pc, Canada 68.5pc, Italy 104pc, Japan 195.5pc. But debt, its cost, and what we will have to pay to reduce it, is the issue that keeps Whitehall awake at night, whatever Mr Brown says.

No tax rises before the election

Alistair Darling has said tonight the UK "is moving into recession", and that tax revenues are under "extraordinary pressure" (trans: *falling off a cliff*). So what next? "Governments everywhere must live within their means and I will ensure that we do this in the medium term" and "people should be in no doubt that Government will take the decisions necessary to ensure sustainability in the medium term". The Treasury says the medium term is three to five years from now, so after the next election. The message is clear: taxes will have to go up and spending will have to be reined in, but not until after polling day. And then it could be a Tory problem. You can read the full Mais lecture [here](#). So: does Gordon Brown try to squeeze the Conservatives by concocting a pre-election tax cut?

English MPs prop up Scottish Labour

An MP just popped in to report lots of tea-room muttering among the English Labour lot downstairs about the Gordon Brown request for volunteers to help in Glenrothes (Guido revealed it [here](#) a while back). The Labour operation is said to be short of footsoldiers so there is a big push on to get MPs and folk from CLPs up north this weekend. "Normally we rely on Scots MPs to save our bacon in England-only votes at Westminster. Now we are being asked to rescue Gordon's bacon* in his own backyard," is how it was put to me.

**The Prime Minister during PMQs today: "Everybody knows that British bacon is best".*

McCain's concession speech

Christopher Buckley has imagined what John McCain [might say](#) if he loses on election night. It's barely a parody. I particularly enjoyed the Senator recalling the moment his advisers told him Sarah Palin would "appeal to the base":

The base (sighs heavily). In other words, the same people who were credulous enough to believe Karl Rove's [expletive deleted] robo-callers in South Carolina back in 2000 that my adopted Bangladeshi daughter, Bridget, was my love child. The base. Well named, aren't they? You've got to appeal to them, they told me. Well, my friends, I guess this time around I was the credulous one. Because I bought into their brilliant genius idea that my running mate should be a . . . (sighs) . . . Oh, well, what's the use. As she would say, go tell it to the fruit flies. (Returning to script.) So let me thank Governor Palin for . . . all that she did to me. For me, I mean. Little Freudian thing, there.