



About Chris Mullin

Chris Mullin represented Sunderland South as Labour MP for 23 years; he decided not to seek re-election in 2010. During his Westminster career, he served as Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions; the Department for International Development; and the Foreign Office. Yet it is for other activities that he may be more widely known. In the 1980s he challenged the conviction of the Birmingham Six following the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings in which 21 people were killed; the Court of Appeal subsequently quashed the convictions. This, and other high profile cases on which he campaigned, led to reviews and changes in the UK criminal justice system. He has also gained wide recognition as an author, publishing *A Very British Coup* in 1982, which was subsequently adapted for TV, and through his political diaries - *A View From the Foothills*, *Decline and Fall*, and *A Walk on Part* - which provide a human, but candid insight into the life of a Labour politician in the Blair and Brown Labour governments.

Here, Chris Mullin reflects on his time before, during, and after Westminster.

How will I describe you? - Journalist, Broadcaster, Author, Politician? Activist? Civil libertarian?

“Certainly not as an activist – but author, journalist and politician. A slightly ex-politician, though I do dabble from time to time. I prefer to be called a campaigner rather than an activist. Activists are usually people with strident opinions but who are not elected. So they don’t have the responsibility to take people with them. As a campaigner you need a big enough coalition to take people with you who may not be of your persuasion on other matters. With something like the Birmingham pub bombing’s case, it was essential I took with me people who were interested in justice, rather than interested in Ireland. So, for example, I formed an alliance with a very right wing politician, Sir John Farr, and very valuable it was too.

And with the Birmingham Six, you started by reporting the issue – did you imagine that you would end up campaigning on the subject?

I convinced a publisher to commission a book [*Error of Judgment: The Truth About the Birmingham Pub Bombings*, 1986], then persuaded Granada TV’s *World in Action* programme to take me on for a few months. This gave me access to resources which I did not have. It was quite difficult at first to make a programme for broadcast. It’s one thing to write a book. It’s quite another thing to persuade people to appear in front of the camera.

And which of these roles has given you the greatest personal satisfaction?

I think being an author, probably because it has worked out reasonably well. My first venture into writing books was *A Very British Coup* in 1982 and that took off into a TV series. And with my diaries, a small industry has evolved around them. When I retired from parliament, I wasn't at all sure that there would be a worthwhile life outside, but mainly thanks to the diaries, I have not been short of things to do.

When I retired from parliament, I wasn't at all sure that there would be a worthwhile life outside

What have been your key areas as a social campaigner?

Undoubtedly the Birmingham Six, Guildford Four, Judith Ward, and Carl Bridgewater cases. The overall impact was on the criminal justice system. Some had thought we had the best system in the world. Well, we had some of the greediest and most arrogant lawyers in the world, but whether it was the best...I beg leave to differ. And now, an air of humility exists in most – not all – areas of the judiciary.

Life at Westminster: *How would you most wish to be remembered, and why?*

As a politician or as a journalist, one wants to make a difference. And actually unless you are very high up the tree, you don't make much difference as a politician – except as part of the collective.

At local level I could draw up a little list I suppose. At national level, I had some impact on the criminal justice system with the Birmingham Six case, which led to the setting up of the Royal Commission, and subsequently to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. In turn, this has led to the correction, albeit slowly, of a lot of other cases. I think that is a process I can claim I kick started, though a lot of other people contributed along the way.

I was part of a Labour Government that brought in the National Minimum Wage: that made a major difference for my poorest constituents. I cannot claim to have initiated it, but there was a spring in my step when I walked through the Lobbies. The Tories fought it with a passion – as they do whenever there is a little bit of social justice on the table.

So if you were doing it again, would it be a National Minimum Wage – or a Living Wage?

I am sure it would be something like the Living Wage, or defending the gains which have been made – most of which are under attack.

You have had a lot of career interest in international affairs and overseas aid. It is estimated that we spend about 2.6% of GDP on defence, and 0.7% on international aid. Is this balance appropriate?

It depends how wisely it is spent. It is the first duty of the government to defend the realm, and you cannot have a democracy unless it is properly defended. I certainly think there are some things we can do to save money on defence, with some of the spending put into conventional forces. It is surely barmy that we still have nuclear weapons, but the problem is that the 'Great British Public' seem rather attached to them. There are actually quite a lot of people in the military who would like them to go. You only have to look at the history of how we got them – they weren't to defend us against the Russians, they were there so that the Americans would take us more seriously. But the Americans are opposed to us having them, and the weapons aren't independent of the Americans. So it's all bonkers and the only remaining excuse for having them surely disappeared with the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

So do we get value for money from the 0.7% of GDP spent on international aid?

On balance I feel that yes we do. People are right to expect that our aid is spent wisely. We have mechanisms in place to ensure this. We signed up to this, we persuaded other countries to sign up, so we are honour bound - it is a relatively small sum – 70p in every £100 – and I am glad that the Coalition Government has adhered to the Labour Government commitment on this – even if it was an attempt to show that they were no longer the nasty party – though they are beginning to revert back to that. In a way it has been quite courageous of David Cameron, because there are no votes in his party in overseas aid.

You have had some remarkable successes in your career. But I am sure you have had frustrations too, some of that particularly comes out in Decline and Fall. What conclusion have you come to about how good ideas, or passions, - the things that do 'put a spring in your step' - bring about successful policy implementation, or policy failure?

A good policy initiative needs a head of steam behind it. And the simpler the arguments are, the better. I mentioned earlier the National Minimum wage and that is a good example. Most people of decency would say, yes, a line needs to be drawn to help the least well off. But many measures which seem extremely simple from the outside have unintended consequences

A good policy initiative needs a head of steam behind it. And the simpler the arguments are, the better. I mentioned earlier the National Minimum wage and that is a good example. Most people of decency would say, yes, a line needs to be drawn to help the least well off. But many measures which seem extremely simple from the outside have unintended consequences. If you are in Government, you have to think about what those consequences

might be in order to avoid bad surprises later. For example, when the National Minimum Wage was first mooted, the Managing Director of Dewhurst [a firm making men's shirts and suits for Marks and Spencer] and employing 1,000 people in my constituency came to see me. He was a decent man, but he opposed the minimum wage as he thought it would put him out of business, with most other suppliers having already gone off-shore to countries where the wages were a fraction of ours. The thousand people in three factories in my constituency would not have been all that grateful to me if the result had not been a minimum wage, but to get them out of a job. Despite that, all those jobs have indeed now disappeared. You can employ people in North Africa for a fifth of the cost of the UK, and once Marks and Spencer deflected from its 'Made in the UK' policy, the factories closed.

During your time in Parliament, what changes did you notice in how new legislation was reviewed, for example, at Committee stage?

When I first came into Parliament, one of the problems was that proposed legislation was not looked at in sufficient detail – that is still the case, but things have improved a lot. The first major Bill in which I was involved at Committee stage was to denationalise the water industry. It had about 180 clauses. The strategy of the opposition – of which I was part – was to delay as much as possible and to mess about keeping the Committee sitting up all night if necessary. In the first hundred hours of Committee stage review, we only got through seven or eight clauses! – an absolute waste of everybody's time; nobody in the outside world was interested, and then the Government moved the guillotine. Michael Howard was the Minister and we were all instructed to get up and express our indignation at this negation of democracy - but personally, I could have kissed him! And then the

Michael Howard was the Minister and we were all instructed to get up and express our indignation at this negation of democracy - but personally, I could have kissed him!

remaining one hundred and seventy or so clauses whizzed through in no time at all – and of all that is really nonsense. Very often, you actually had a far better level of scrutiny in the House of Lords than in the Commons. But these days, most bills are time-tabled and there is negotiation between the two sides about what are the key issues and what points the Opposition want to debate. In return for that, the Government gets its bill passed, provided that it has a sufficient majority.

And what about the role and impact of Select Committees?

Over the last thirty or so years, the role and impact of departmental select committees has greatly increased. Anyone who is on a major select committee – such as Treasury or Home Affairs – may find they have more influence from being on that committee than being a junior minister – that was certainly my experience. For many years, the problem with Select Committees was that they were still effectively controlled by the Whips – not totally, but the Government had a big say in determining membership. It's totally wrong that the Government should decide to whom it will be accountable.

In the final months of my time in Parliament, I was on a Committee chaired by Tony Wright, which recommended that in future the whole House [of Commons] should elect membership of the Select Committees. That has happened, and it has led to a step change in the rigor with which Select Committees perform their role. For example, without the Treasury Committee under Andrew Tyrie, – we would never have seen the bankers called to account in public in this committee. Similarly, Margaret Hodge on the Public Accounts committee has a very influential role.

Life after Westminster: In Decline and Fall, you talked about leaving Westminster as being either the biggest mistake in your life, or the best thing? Which has it been and why?

Well it has turned out pretty well. I think that I would have been pretty miserable if I had stayed here for another Parliament where I would have been a total dinosaur. The caravan has moved on and a much younger generation is now in charge in the Commons.

Is it about youth?

There is a bit of a cult of youth in politics these days

There is a bit of a cult of youth in politics these days. To some extent it is desirable, but it has gone too far. The leaders of all three parties, all brilliant in their own way, became leaders within five years of being elected to Parliament – and that's unprecedented. If you go back to the 1940s, and the Attlee government, you will find that the top people were mainly old men who had led the country through the war, and they were exhausted. Some died in office. That was the other extreme.

So, had I stayed, I don't think I would have been of very much relevance. I couldn't bear the thought of hanging around the Tea Rooms regaling younger colleagues with tales of triumphs passed. So I took the plunge and left. And as you will see in *Decline and Fall*, there was a great deal of agonising about whether there would be anything useful to do after Westminster. But thus far, after three years, it has worked out extremely well.

Perhaps you have had even more influence through the three political diaries?

I think the diaries have been well read by the chattering classes. How far it extends beyond that, I don't know. But I am very heartened by their success. At literary festivals, audiences of hundreds of people pay to come and hear me talk about the diaries – well that didn't often happen when I

was in Parliament! I do some teaching at Newcastle University, and chair the *Heritage Lottery Fund* in the North East - one of the few institutions which still has money to give away.

Overall, I think we are fortunate to live in a country where the rulers are susceptible to public opinion and where if you have an election, the politicians are not trying to kill each other. You only have to look at people fleeing here from Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, and many other countries to see what a privilege that is. There is a danger that we take that for granted – it isn't like that in much of the world so we should always be aware of our great fortune and to share it with others. That has always been my outlook on life. ”