

# We'll always have Parris

**S**OME people would be content with one successful career. Matthew Parris has been a rising star among back-bench Tory MPs. That was the extent of his ascension in the firmament, as Margaret Thatcher had reservations about him (which some might contend was greatly in his favour), even though – or perhaps because – he once worked in her office when she was leader of the Opposition.

He was headhunted by London Weekend Television to replace Brian Walden as presenter of the seminal current affairs programme *Weekend World*, which he did far better than he gives himself credit.

It was next that he found his true metier as a funny, insightful, wonderful writer and astute political observer. He did a long stint as an acclaimed parliamentary sketchwriter on *The Times*. His self-effacing, softly-spoken tones are among the ideal accoutrements that make him an accomplished broadcaster, if an occasionally controversial one. He caused an almighty rumpus when he outed Peter Mandelson on *Newsnight*.

Now he has published his autobiography, *Chance Witness*, by turns hilarious, perceptive, painfully candid, and always sublimely written. It's a memoir that's an in-depth chronicle of the British politics Parris both observes and is steeped in, and the personalities he has encountered along the way.

He can claim to have been among the first commentators to express scepticism about Tony Blair and "New" Labour, raising the reservation that they were less than they appeared to be. Parris demurs. "It's like financial predictions. It's not enough to foresee a downturn. In order to be a good prophet, you need to say when. I got my timing about Blair completely wrong. I thought people would see through it all pretty fast. Only now is there a glimmering of how shallow it all is."

"At the beginning, I thought Blair was a confidence trickster who had no fixed beliefs of his own. But I've come to the conclusion that he does have a horribly thought-out but intense desire to make the world a better place. He's a woolly-minded Christian."

Could it be that politics is something that odd people are drawn to? "Politicians aren't all odd, but an unrepresentatively large sample of them are. Being odd doesn't mean you might not be a great Prime Minister. Perhaps most great Prime Ministers have been a bit odd."

"I think Gordon Brown is particularly odd. But Conservatives like me, who are basically anti-socialist and in favour of a small state, are going to be torn if there is a struggle for the soul of the governing party between the Blairites and the Brownites. Most of us are more drawn to Brown,

**George Osgerby talks to a gamekeeper turned poacher – Matthew Parris the former MP who became an admired journalist, broadcaster and now autobiographer**

because there seems to be something anchored about him. He is deeply serious and unspun. Blair is everything that irritates us about a certain kind of social democrat.

"However, as a Conservative, I have to admit that I'm on Blair's side ideologically. If Labour were to split along 'New' and 'Old' lines – I think there's a 1 in 10 chance that might happen – there would no longer be a need for the Conservative Party. A split would free 'New' Labour to move further away from even the rhetoric of socialism and equality and leave the Left to oppose in a more full-blooded way. I can imagine Tony Blair as leader of Britain's Centre-Right party and that would leave no space for the Tories."

So where would they go? "Most of them would join Blair. A lot of Tories in front of the Prime Minister are like rabbits confronted with snakes. Most Tories admire him more than I do. But I'm sure that some of my intense irritation with Tony Blair is because he reminds me of myself in some way."

And those would be? He laughs. "Preachiness, a certain ingratiating manner, short attention span."

A strong supporter of Kenneth Clarke, Parris remains committed to the Conservative cause, even with all the tribulations that have engulfed it. "It's more painful than I can say", he smiles ruefully. "But it's like travails in one's own family. One doesn't cease to be related to them just because they're in trouble."

"The Conservatives have never been a very nice party, but they used to be competently nasty and they've been shambolically nasty recently. I have softened towards Iain Duncan Smith. The biggest charge against him is that he's been dull and uninspiring. He hasn't turned out to be the fascist euro-obsessive some thought he was. He may be underneath, but he's certainly keeping a lid on it."

And Parris thinks the Tories can come back. "I don't think the knocking of Labour from its pedestal will be done by the Conservatives. It

will be achieved by the public and the press. The Tories should hold together, keep the faith, maintain a reasonably low profile and wait for the present lot to stumble. It would have to be a spectacular stumble for Labour to lose the next general election, but anything is possible. Even under the present leadership, the Tories could claim back ground if things go their way. They would then be poised to win or close to winning the election after that."

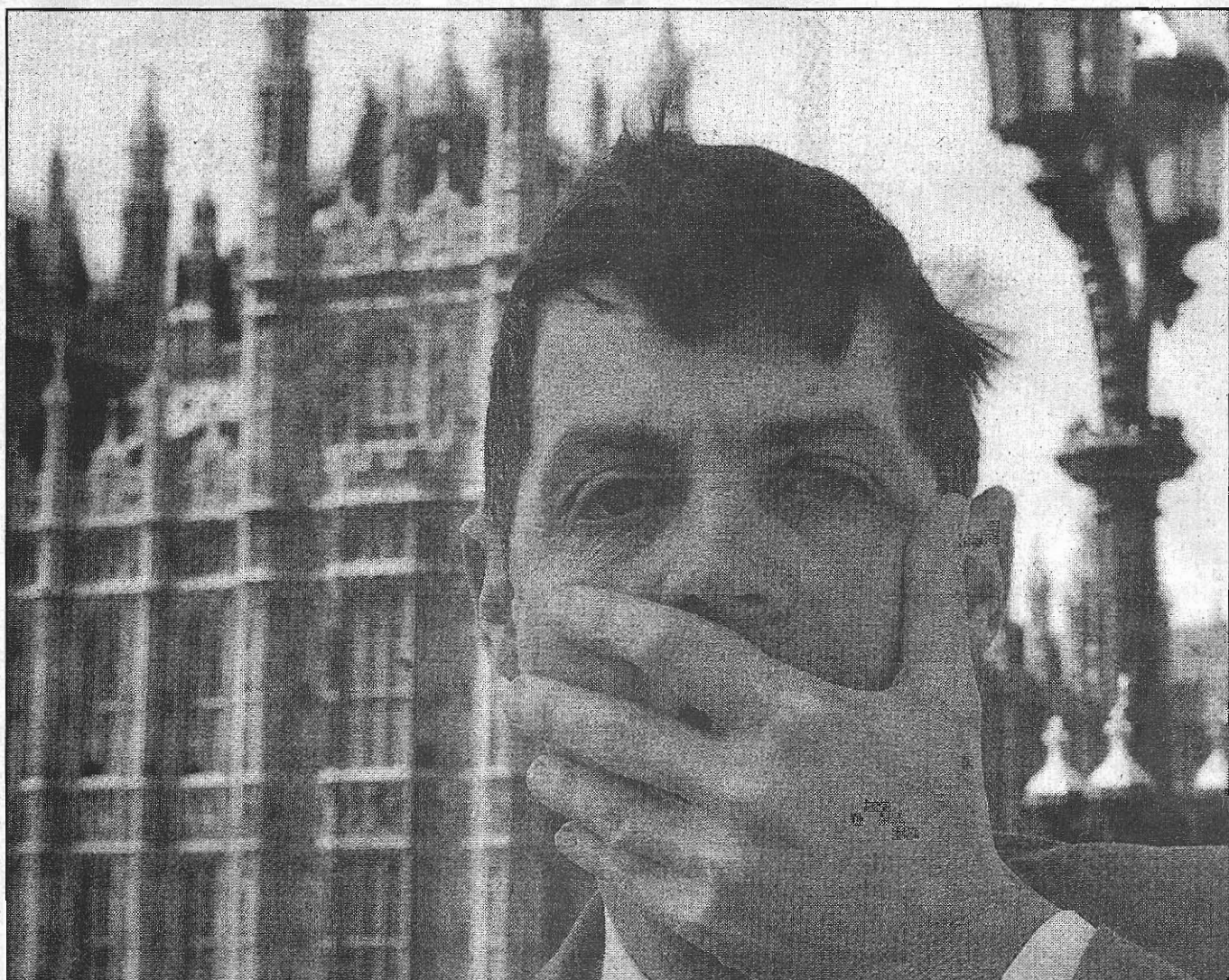
Parris has never let personal opinions stand in the way of poking fun at all-comers. He incurred the wrath of Alan Clark – who called him "an absolute shit" after he intimated that the flamboyant maverick had fallen asleep in the House of Commons. "His eyes were shut, his head had dropped forward and one hand spread across his famously chiselled jaw, covering his mouth. Mr Clark looked profoundly at peace. Even the mention of Clark's constituency's name failed to jolt him from his meditations."

"I've accused many backbenchers of going to sleep and written sketches about it. Some were slightly miffed, others thought it was a huge joke. Nobody made a fuss."

However, Clark went on the warpath. "You'd have thought as his whole public image was of a devil-may-care character, he'd have been almost proud to be caught dozing in the Chamber. But no. However, he did know that he was ill then, and it may have been he was desperately sensitive to any suggestion that he wasn't up to the job. I wasn't aware of that."

"Politics seems to evolve an extremely thin-skinned species and throw them into an environment where they're going to be constantly hurt. You would think that only the thick-skinned would go into politics or that the thin-skinned would develop thicker skins."

John Prescott is another delicate flower to have taken umbrage at a ribbing from Parris. Has he ever been concerned that an international statesman might thump him? "No. Alastair Campbell does occasionally lash out verbally, but except for a recent incident I've been rather



beneath his notice. He did try to put the frighteners on the publishers about a passage he objected to in the book. But like all bullies he backed down."

The Mandelson incident and his remarks about the Hartlepool MP's homosexuality is a source of remorse. Parris genuinely thought everyone knew already. "It had been in the *News of the World* some years previously. But I must have made a mistake about the impact of something appearing on *Newsnight*. Jeremy Paxman's dropped jaw didn't help."

Certainly, that's not a sight one often sees. Parris was astonished by the ensuing furore. "I toughed it out, but privately I was dismayed because I appeared to have caused Mandelson a lot of personal distress. It's so hard to know when one is or isn't causing Peter distress, but I imagine that I did and I really didn't mean to. I also caused some people who liked me to think ill of my motives and I wasn't totally sanguine about that."

About his own homosexuality, Parris is simultaneously diffident, proud and spirited. His accounts of long-ago cruising on Clapham Common – he was beaten up after one encounter – are descriptions of lonely and clinical events, but of his autobiography in general he says: "Dr Johnson observed that if a man writes about his own embarrassment he takes some secret pleasure, but I've proved to myself that Dr Johnson was wrong. However, I didn't want a

book that was evasive, so I made myself write about things I hadn't ever spoken of.

"Now it's almost embarrassing how tolerant and sensitive people feel on the issue of homosexuality. I sometimes feel like shouting: 'Come on, say 'queer', say 'pouf', admit that not all gay men behave well any more than all straight men do. It's probably too late in my life to open a new phase in my career, rather as Germaine Greer did, and start to be a bit of a gay basher. But I'm getting bored with gay men going on about how miserable they are because, with the possible exception of a period under the ancient Greeks, this is the best time in human history to be a gay man. I'm amazed at the speed of change. We tend to have a legislature which lags behind changes in social attitudes. That's probably because it's among the milder that change in attitude first takes place. Reactionaries who refuse to change are often the shrillest and noisiest.

"Public opinion was always more relaxed about homosexuality than the state of our ancient law suggested. But now politicians and the media are running ahead of public opinion and there's probably a substantive reserve of hostility towards homosexuality that is not expressed because people feel it's against the spirit of the times."

With his love of solitary travel to far-flung places, Parris is a brave man and an impetuous one. It was this combination that once led him to dive into the River Thames to save a dog from

drowning. He wouldn't do it again. "Not because I've ceased to be impetuous, but because I didn't realise that ice-cold water can kill you very quickly. I thought I would feel myself getting tired and have time to get back to the shore. I felt full of strength for 20 seconds and then suddenly as if my muscles had been cut. I was lucky, but I don't recommend it."

**T**HESE heroics earned Parris a medal from the RSPCA that Margaret Thatcher agreed to pin on him. His description of the presentation ceremony where the rescued hound was overcome with a profound appreciation of the Iron Lady's legs is one of the funniest passages in his book. "She gave every appearance of not noticing what was happening. But I would have noticed, had it been me."

Parris is able to refute suggestions that his former boss has no sense of humour. "When her staff made jokes about it taking Norman St John Stevas longer to get dressed than it took her, she thought that was terrifically funny. Also, she's turned herself into a bit of a joke and I think she's party to it. She's camped it up and made herself a pantomime figure, not only because we find it amusing, but because she enjoys herself. She could have been a drag artist."

*Chance Witness: An Outsider's Life in Politics* by Matthew Parris is published by Viking, price £18.99