The Truth About Westminster

'The Secretary of State was obsessed with secrecy. In a dictatorship I would have been bumped off - I knew too much.' Former Minister, 1995

'Many Ministers only have a clear conscience because they have a poor memory.' Anonymous MP

'By the way, you ought to know that my public pronouncements bear no relation to my private views.' Sir John Foster, former MP, casual comment after TV interview

'If I had to say which was telling the truth about society, a speech by a Minister of Housing, or the buildings put up in his time, I should believe the buildings.' Kenneth Clarke, Minister

A government Minister told me, 'Corruption is not the problem, it's incompetence,' but what is the evidence for that? The truth is that there is plenty of evidence of both, but both are well protected by secrecy so the truth is always hard to establish.

For obvious reasons secrecy is likely to invite abuse when it covers the actions of a large

number of people with great collective power. Yet in Britain the Official Secrets Act means that it is almost impossible for an ordinary citizen to get hold of basic information, and even harder if you are a member of the press. I have many examples from my own experience where I know exactly which official has a particular piece of information, but I cannot get hold of it.

An example for me as a doctor has been the figures showing numbers of adverse reactions to measles vaccination - important in giving accurate health advice. I knew whom to ask and had spoken to the person on the phone. However, I found that the only way to get this information was by asking an MP to file a Written Question to the Minister of Health. The disadvantage of this method is that it is slow (a response can be expected in a week or two), and often gives only the exact barest minimum needed to answer the precise question. There is no prospect of discussion and no way to be certain from whose desk the answer has been prepared, unless as I had done, some preliminary work has been carried out. The Press Offices are staffed by people who know little more than the content of recent press releases by Ministers. Such secrecy is oppressive, threatens democracy and is condescending.

One expression of official secrecy is 'collective Cabinet responsibility' which means simply that Cabinet members are sworn to absolute secrecy and loyalty to the agreed 'party I line' from the moment they are appointed. This makes sound sense from a management point of view but can be fraught with ethical difficulties. It means that the only way you can expose something you believe to be wrong is by resigning, which may well remove any real influence you have in doing anything about it. So you either remain and continue the deception or cast yourself out into the political wilderness. There is hardly a middle way without being forced to resign.

I went to see a former Minister for whom I had great respect. He talked very freely about what life was really like in government and then dropped a bombshell concerning a major scandal he had discovered relatively recently. It has never been exposed although several other Ministers and senior civil servants know about it, including the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary (the most senior civil servant in the Department).

Even now that he is out of office, he is worried about the repercussions to himself and his family should the documents he has deposited in a bank vault ever see the light of day, which at the moment is unlikely to happen until after his death. He was not involved in the scandal directly but realises he could now be open to criticism for not resigning the moment he found out and exposing the situation from the back benches.

He told me under the strictest promise of complete anonymity: 'As a member of the government I came to the point of seriously considering resigning because I realised that I was being lied to and so was everyone else on major issues of national importance - a whole series of issues. Civil servants knew it too and were prepared to go along with it. Other Ministers were aware as well and we discussed it together but we all decided to keep quiet.'

When did the alarm bells begin to ring?' I asked.

I was always wary when I found a tricky issue buried deep in a mountain of several hundred letters waiting for signature.' He was working steadily through the pile on his desk at the

Department when his suspicions were aroused over trends in answers about a particular subject.

'The standard paragraphs finally got to me. I summoned the civil servants responsible to explain this policy - the Grade Threes (intermediate level) or indeed Fives - and gradually my hair started to curl. Many of them are incompetent. That is the problem with the British civil service. On technical issues the people doing the work are the Grade Sevens, but they are rarely allowed into the presence of a Minister so as not to show up the Grade Fives and Grade Threes. Grade Threes appear with a brief they have read only half an hour before.

'I just felt in my bones that what I was being asked to sign up to was morally wrong. And then I realised it was also unsustainable, but it was still being sustained after very many years, and everybody knew it.'

'And these answers that were going out were untrue?' I asked.

'No. They weren't lies. They were just not the truth. They could have been and should have being saying almost the opposite.' (Laughter.)

'So they were a long way from the truth?'

'No, no. They weren't lies but they were not the truth. Not the whole truth. And this was the dilemma. One gradually realised one was living in a very shadowy world. But the implications of allowing a change in policy would have been dramatic.'

'So what did you do?'

'I sought to change a number of policies.'

He told me of his conversations with other Ministers after which it became clear that they too were aware of the problem but did not, want to do anything about it. The Secretary of State was unmovable.

'What scale of shaking of government do you think there might have been if it had been exposed?'

'I don't think it would have resulted in ministerial resignation - after all, the Permanent Secretary was supporting the state of affairs. I just think there would have been a major row in Parliament. One of the problems was that the opposition was so pathetically weak that they would have been too stupid to have done anything about it. And that has been a problem in recent years.'

'How many Secretaries of State have been involved in this?'

'I have no idea. Many - but they may not have all known. And this is another worry. Because civil servants outlive politicians, they are the guardians of continuity of policies and they are the guardians of the secrets. And their game is to let the politicians know as little as necessary.' He

described how papers of a previous administration are locked away as soon as there is a change of government so that Ministers have to start again with a blank piece of paper in any investigation of their own. 'The most powerful meeting of the week is arguably not the Cabinet, but the meeting of the Permanent Secretaries with the Cabinet Secretary on Wednesday mornings. This is the establishment. They are the guardians of the traditions of the civil service.'

'So how did you decide whether to stay or to expose the situation and resign?'

'I knew I should stay in, but it was rationalising it that was difficult. I knew there must be a lot of other Ministers in a similar situation to me over a range of issues, who were finding the going quite tough. But I felt that if I left, it really would be a rat leaving the ship - not that the ship was sinking which sometimes surprised me. It really did get to my conscience though. It is quite wrong to suppose that politicians don't have consciences. They do.'

'So have you ever talked to anyone about it?'

'To be perfectly honest I have never burdened my wife with political issues - we've got better things to talk about. But I was clearly very worried. I was not behaving normally and she realised something was seriously wrong. And so I told her what had been going on. I said I really thought the time had come to depart, but her reaction was very swift:

"Don't be so daft," she said. "If people like you go, it is only going to get much worse." And so I stayed.'

'But it sounds as though it was a real dilemma.'

'Yes, but I didn't have any hesitation in carrying on after I had thought it through - and shared it. Of course the difficulty is that it is very difficult to share these sorts of things with anyone.'

'It must be a very lonely place.'

'Except, you see, you put these things to the back of your mind because you are so ridiculously busy as a Minister. There are always a thousand other things waiting to be done. However it did shake my faith in all sorts of people and institutions.' He told me of a number of situations both inside and outside politics which have combined to make him far more cynical about trusting other people today. He also felt strongly that his experience was important for people to understand.

'So who else have you told about these events you describe apart from your wife?'

'I told no one else although I kept an account of significant events as they happened which is now in a safe place - but what do I do with it? Bum it? I can't show it to anyone. I always believed that history was bunk and now I knew it was true. The most important facts were never recorded anywhere. Even minutes of Cabinet meetings record neither who said what nor what was said. They record the wishes of Number 10. It was a standing joke to see how the Cabinet Office had concocted the minutes of the last meeting.'

'What would have happened if you had "gone public"?'

He replied that although no crime had been committed under British law, 'the consequences of telling the truth after all these years would have been profound. Citizens might expect millions of pounds in compensation, and successive governments and parties would have had to admit they had been wrong for years. It was not a cover up because it was never uncovered in the first place. It was always secret. The problem was compounded by the fact that the Secretary of State was obsessed with secrecy. He trusted no one - neither fellow Ministers nor civil servants.'

The former Minister described to me how the standard response on many issues was, 'Why do they need to know?' or, 'We'll just keep that to ourselves.' The Secretary of State was powerful and intimidating, and knew he had the means to utterly destroy the career of any junior Minister who crossed him. The effect on the former Minister was profound and disturbing: 'He sapped all my confidence as a politician. After six months I wanted to go.' He described to me how other Ministers had also suffered at various times.

He felt he was being gradually squeezed out of office, got rid of as a dangerous man. 'I was a delver. Some people just take things as they are, they accept uncritically what they are told, but I tend to ask questions. I would ask for a set of background papers behind a decision or a policy, and if I felt I still wasn't being told the whole story, I would ask for more papers, delving down layer after layer to get at the truth. In a dictatorship I would have been bumped off - I knew too much. Instead I was sacked - suddenly.'

I asked him if he was tempted to seek redress. 'If you could, would you like to see the Secretary of State named over what has happened, particularly in view of other reservations you have about his general conduct in a number 'of different situations?'

'No. I am not a vindictive person at all. I have no desire to expose him. I don't want him identified. I hope it won't come to that.'

Since then he has tried to get on with normal life, but the memory of what is in the vault continues to occupy his thoughts.

'Every ministerial and political career ends in tears. After being sacked, what was my reaction? To get on with life, represent my constituency and involve myself in special interests. Ironically, after I left, - nearly stumbled on the truth and the Department is now shit-scared and reviewing its position. In general civil servants outlive Ministers and they like nothing better than a quick turnover, and in this case there was a high degree of civil servant continuity through a number of changes at the top. I can't understand why the Permanent Secretary didn't say anything.'

He then described the freedom- he felt on leaving government, and how it was only then that the issues became clearer. 'It is an extraordinary sensation leaving office because the burdens of state really do fall from your shoulders. One becomes objective in one's judgements again to a very large extent. The Whips really hold no fear over You because they don't any longer control your destiny, whereas they did before you got into office. You become more dangerous

to the Whips and one of the problems of the Conservative government is that there are so many ex-Ministers on the back benches. It means that your politics become far moreclearly orientated towards your own beliefs and the needs of your own constituents, in a very healthy way.'

Perhaps the former Minister was wise to keep quiet, having not immediately resigned on discovering the scandal. David Amess has strong views as a back-bencher on what a Minister should do in such circumstances, which I suspect are typical of many other MPs, and nothing compared to the severity of the opinions of the nation as a whole. 'I think if you are a Minister and you are unhappy with a policy, or you think you've uncovered something that is either dubious or criminal, then you should make a statement in the House of Commons. If they say, "Look, you're going to be chucked out if you open your mouth about that," then you must state your case in Parliament.'

However, he agreed that it could be very difficult when in the situation to know what to do. 'Everyone must make his own judgement. I do not believe in resigning lightly. I much prefer to fight from within and it's up to each individual how much they can tolerate. It is a dilemma but if you feel passionately that you have uncovered something you believe is disgraceful and cannot persuade anyone to listen to you, then I support that person in resigning and then making it known publicly.' *174*

Another (nameless) Tory MP added that he thought there were now so many leaks that a serious cover up would be impossible to maintain for long. 'I've noticed increasingly that it's pretty impossible for the government to get away with anything really. You've got letters being leaked, minutes being leaked - it's just hopeless.' However, this MP had never been a Minister: as we have seen, the truth can be hidden successfully for years, if revelation would be embarrassing to many of the individuals who know the information.

A second former Cabinet Minister told me that he too had a deeply troubled conscience. This time the issue was over arms sales, weapons which had been used against the country's own people, a situation not covered by any of the recent inquiries. After some discussion on a broad range of topics, with the tape still running we moved to some of the dilemmas Ministers faced.

Without more than a second or two of hesitation he began to unload his heavy burden. His confession is reproduced here unedited as he originally intended it to appear in his lifetime. He knew he was a sick man and that his time was short and that he was faced with a great personal dilemma. I sought to let him tell the story at his own pace and in his own words. He knew the story had to be told, and he wanted it to be told, but agonised over how and when the country, place and time should be revealed. He was comforted at the thought that the truth might one day be made known, together with other broader matters, in the context of a book which addressed some of the common dilemmas of ministerial life.

'I now know that an answer that I gave as a junior Foreign Office Minister about the supplying of arms to X which were subsequently used in Y was an incorrect answer. And I know that the answer that I gave then has been repeated time and time again by subsequent Ministers years ago (albeit in good faith).

'If I really decided to go to town on this and explore it, and I am under pressure, bearing in mind what my knowledge now is, what my views now are on the question of arms to X. I know that what I said then was not only incorrect but very damaging. And so I have been pressed to write to Douglas
Hurd [then Foreign Secretary] to [warn him not to use] the words which I used x years ago because (as he obviously does not realise) they weren't true then, as I have now established, and they are not true now. I haven't done this. I'm considering it. I'm afraid I'm just taking my time over this. There must be others [in the same situation]. From the moment I accepted [the Written Answer] I held responsibility for it.'

He agreed that similar incorrect answers could have been given out by him in good faith a hundred times a year, more than half of which he might never have known anything about. He agreed that Ministers could sometimes be in danger of building in their answers a fantasy land created by their civil servants.

'. . . which is the great advantage of having political advisers. They ought to be checking to be making sure that advice given to Ministers is actually correct. I had a political adviser who was a party man, a very smart fellow. He was a ****. He was paid to be a **** ... to ask, "'Are you sure what you are being given to say is true because I happen to think that it isn't. Have you thought of the consequences. Because if it isn't true, what you're saying will give it credence, and will give rise to the sort of situation I've just described to you."

'These people thought that I gave them an assurance that I would write to Douglas Hurd and ask him to stop using my words [that he has been repeating in good faith]. Well, I didn't say anything like that. Well, they're now getting very angry with me, because ... but I said I didn't say that. I said I would consider all this and I am considering.'

I asked him if he was under pressure that they would go to the press. Had they threatened him in any way?

' There is an element of risk [that they will go to the press]. They haven't said that or I would be more worried than I am. But I am worried to do the right thing. As you have pointed out this is a very serious, very serious problem. If foreign policy is going to be made by statements made x ago, by civil servants

. . how would you ever find out who they were? Civil servants could become so frightened of saying anything that you would create frightened civil servants going around cowering because they were frightened that what they were saying ... they would be more inclined to say nothing. It would get even more boring. You would get answers that weren't answers. It's bad enough as it is. It would get even worse.'

This then was the interview as it might have appeared, but for one important fact: shortly after our interview, just over sixteen weeks later, I received the sad news that Lord Ennals had died. I therefore, in accordance with his wishes, have felt able to tell more of the story for the sake of a terrorised people in a far-off place that few have heard of, a people who have been savagely oppressed by an appalling regime using British arms, a people who much occupied. Lord

Ennal's thoughts in his last days. The place is East Timor, the aggressor is Indonesia, and the arming of this regime by Britain continues to this day.

I have known David Ennals for many years, long before my own work in the AIDS field which he warmly supported as a Peer. He is well regarded for his involvement in health issues, and his pioneering work with the charity MIND, but he had many other interests, particularly in foreign policy. He was a veteran of the Normandy landings - he arrived on French soil before the main assault, and was badly wounded by a sniper shortly afterwards. As a result he had a lifelong interest in the armed forces.

From 1966 to 1967, he was Labour's Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Army, and Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office from 1974 to 1976. I remember him staying in our home in Washington DC in 1975, when my father was part of the British Embassy there. It was around this time that the troubles started with Indonesia.

So what was it that caused the former Minister to be so deeply troubled in conscience when I saw him? What was it that he had become aware of? After our interview he had promised to 'look up the details' if I wanted, and we had agreed to meet again, but that was not to be. As a doctor I had been in no doubt as to his frailty as I sat there listening to him, and as we got up to say goodbye I realised it was very likely that I would never see him again.

As I returned home I decided not to rush back for a second interview, because I felt that he had already taken a large step in saying what he did, and I did not want him to feel that he was under pressure to give more details then than he wanted. He knew that if he were to die, he had already told me more than enough to make sure the plight of the East Timorese would be acknowledged.

However, after he died I began to trawl back over years of parliamentary business, reading and re-reading every Parliamentary Written Answer he gave throughout 1974 to 1976 relating to Indonesia or Timor. I have also examined similar answers from Ministers in the 1980s and 1990s. There is no trace of a written answer given by him that appears obviously wrong unless, as with other situations we have seen, the problem was just that the answer was appallingly incomplete. But if so, what was missing? What fact was omitted? What were those immensely damaging words that were first used innocently by David Ennals and then repeated innocently over the years, and were still used in good faith by Douglas Hurd in 1995?

The first two answers recorded are unpromising: 22 May 1974: On relations with Indonesia:

'It is the policy . . . to strengthen relations with Indonesia . . .'

The background is important. On 30 September 1965, General Suharto overthrew the democratically elected government and then over the next few months put to death many hundreds of thousands of his political opponents, communists in Java and Bali.

1 November 1974: How many warships will be sold to Indonesia? 'Negotiations are still in train [for four corvettes] ... it is the intention ... to let this order go ahead.'

However, there were already growing concerns about the continued oppressive nature of the regime. On the same day David Ennals was asked to ban further goodwill visits by the British Navy until the fate of 70,000 political prisoners had been determined. He refused for reasons he did not state. Civil war then broke out in neighbouring Timor, which was still a Portuguese colony, but moving towards independence. In 1975 the British government was well aware that tensions were growing with Indonesia and some say that there was advanced warning that Indonesia was poised to invade, a process which began that autumn.

On 22 December 1975, the Security Council of the United Nations passed a unanimous resolution condemning Indonesia's aggression. Just a month later David Ennals said relations with Indonesia were 'satisfactory', but there was a storm ahead. There were reports that two British members of a film crew had been executed by an Indonesian firing squad after being arrested by them in East Timor where they were reporting on the conflict. David Ennals said he had seen contradicting accounts and could not verify what had happened.

5 April 1976: On the future of East Timor: 'Our prime concern, of which the Indonesian government are fully aware, is that the people of East Timor should be able to decide their own future.'

This is hardly controversial.

On 17 July 1976, the country was formally annexed by Indonesia, and Portugal promptly recognised the action. Some 200,000 people, or a third of the population, were massacred. To this day the oppression of the East Timorese continues. Farmers have been moved to areas where soil erosion has been so great that they have starved, teenage girls have been rounded up and sterilised against their will, and there have been many summary executions.

I am unable to find any Written Answer that explains David Ennal's personal concerns about arms. However I have detected one common element, which could possibly have had, immense military significance starting in 1975 and continuing twenty years later: sales of Hawk aircraft to Indonesia. Hawk aircraft were top of the range state of the art. The Labour government set up the first of many rolling contracts which are still running, to supply these lethal fighting machines 'for training purposes'. This means that they were supplied without range-finding and weapon-release systems but were otherwise identical in every way. However it is not difficult to convert such an aircraft back to an offensive role, even if the weaponry and aiming devices are a little crude.

But what was the purpose of trainer aircraft? Was it just, as the Indonesian airforce persuaded Ministers over twenty years, merely to train pilots? Why should so many trainer aircraft have been needed? British export policy covering defence sales to Indonesia is quite clear. Take for example Alan Clark's replies on 16 January 1992:

'As regards defence sales [to Indonesia], all applications to export military equipment are carefully scrutinised on a case by case basis. We do not allow the export of arms and equipment likely to be used for repressive purposes against civilians. In the case of Indonesia, this covers the possible repression of the population of East Timor.'

When asked to detail licences approved for export of arms to Indonesia since 1979 (under the Conservatives), he gave the standard reply: 'It is not our normal practice to disclose details of United Kingdom defence sales to particular countries ... All discussions between my Department and United Kingdom defence suppliers are conducted on a confidential basis.' This has been a consistent position of all recent governments. Lack of detail is the accepted rule.

On 25 June 1991, Alan Clark was asked about yet more sales to Indonesia of Hawk aircraft, this time an upgraded version. He replied: 'It is not our practice to comment on defence exports to specific countries.' On the same day, the Prime Minister was asked if he had raised the plight of East Timor with Indonesia's Minister for Research at their meeting. He replied that he had not.

On 2 March 1992 Peter Lilley gave a Written Answer in Parliament that no information was available on the proportion of UK annual exports to Indonesia each year from 1975 that were arms deals requiring export licences. Again these replies are standard practice.

Shortly before I saw Lord Ennals, the following question and statement was made in the Commons. I have no doubt that it was this matter that so troubled him.

22 November 1994: Mr Mullin (Labour): 'It is common knowledge that a huge arms deal is being negotiated with Indonesia . . . one of the most odious tyrannies in the world ... it came to power on the back of a bloodbath that has been matched only by Pol Pot in Asia in recent years. Has not much of the hardware that we previously sold to Indonesia been used for internal repression and will not some of the hardware that we are about to sell also be used for internal repression?'

Mr Freeman (Conservative Minister) made it clear that the government had received firm assurances from the Indonesian government that the aircraft would not be used against civilians, and that the government had received no evidence that such an assurance had been broken.

Mr Mullin continued:

'Since the illegal occupation of East Timor, more than 200,000 East Timorese people have been killed by Indonesian forces. Further information has now been published by the Timorese people showing that Hawk aircraft are used to bomb them and their positions. Is that not evidence enough to stop any further arms sales to an appalling regime which has perpetrated such a bloodbath against the Timorese people?'

Of course, anecdotal accounts by one side or another in armed conflicts can be very unreliable, as experience in Bosnia has shown, and are no substitute for 'hard' intelligence, which, as Mr Freeman's statement indicated, was lacking. Nevertheless, such anecdotal reports coming direct to Lord Ennals may have troubled him greatly.

A week after this exchange came further questions about the proposed sale of Scorpion light tanks to Indonesia. *175* There were unconfirmed rumours that Indonesia had signed or was about to sign a $2 billion arms deal with Britain. *176*

We can therefore begin to understand why Lord Ennals was so appalled. It is more than likely that he became aware that these aircraft were easily converted into an offensive role and were being used as such. The East Timorese may have been supplying both him and Christopher Mullin with eye-witness accounts of Hawk attacks.

The Scott Inquiry into arms-for-Iraq (see next chapter) discovered that Conservative Ministers were themselves aware by the late 1980s that supplying Hawk trainer aircraft to an aggressor nation was providing them with 'defensive capability', but that is not the same as saying such aircraft are likely to be used in this way or that they have been. An important distinction.

Iraq wanted to buy Hawk aircraft or manufacture them under licence. As Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher received a briefing in July 1989 warning her that 'we could not guarantee that it would not be used at some point for internal repression or even for chemical warfare attacks'. Another briefing paper said: 'Although Hawk is designed as a trainer aircraft, it has defensive capability.' *177*

On his first day as Foreign Secretary (19 June 1989), John Major also received a memo about Hawk for Iraq. He argued at the time that Hawk should not be sold to them: 'It was a big order. It was technically worth a great deal of money ... but although technically Hawk itself could be used for peaceful purposes, Hawk amended could have been used for more war-like purposes'. (my italics). *178*

Therefore by July 1989, at least, one Conservative Minister and the Prime Minister herself knew that the same Hawk trainer aircraft supplied to other countries such as Indonesia could just as easily have been the primary motivation behind purchase of these aircraft.

The question is, why did they continue to sell Hawk aircraft to Indonesia? The reason for continued sales is presumably that Ministers felt, on balance, that the risks of the aircraft being misused were very small and worth taking to win a major order and help keep our arms industry alive. This is consistent with Alan Clark's reply on 16 January 1992: 'We do not allow export of arms and equipment likely to be used for repressive purposes against civilians.'

While the above may be considered speculation, there is no other military deal which has linked Indonesia with Britain over nearly twenty years, where there has been so much controversy over arms being misused for internal repression. It weighed heavily on Lord Ennals and it is possible that the implied or perceived threat of exposure by a group representing the East Timorese people, may have hastened his death. He felt a great empathy for that part of the world, even adopting a child from Vietnam who tragically died in early adult life.

We may never know the full truth, but Lord Ennals' own account is a vivid illustration of the pressures of office, and of how signing just one piece of paper 'in innocence' can set in train a long trail of events affecting thousands of other people. I am sure that similar stories can be found every year in every Department.

One of the key issues is 'collective responsibility'. We all stand or fall together. We all own every decision and defend every decision.

Cabinet member Peter Lilley told me: 'Collective responsibility is primarily about confidentiality - keeping the nation's secrets. Normally the issues classed as issues of morality and conscience are free votes. Two questions: [first] can you go along with collective responsibility? Every detail I may not have done quite like that, nevertheless in principle I support it or [secondly] do you think it's wrong in principle? In which case you can always leave. But what wouldn't in my mind be honourable would be to go along with something in public and then leak in private.' *179*

Another Minister told me: 'You've got to have a clear personal line beyond which you cannot go. Without it, matters of conscience get pushed to one side. There must be room for private disagreement and if necessary for public resignation.'

Lord Weatherill says it is vital that Cabinet discussions are not reported to others, but decisions should not be concealed once made. 'While policy is being formulated you can't have public debate. The one crime, please let me underline this with all the force at my command, there is only one absolute crime and that is to lie to the House. If you get found out doing that, you have absolutely had it.'

But what exactly is the definition of a lie? Lord Weatherill admits that in many cases civil servants may feel it is more important to protect the Department and their Ministers than to serve the public. 'I don't mind a partial answer [in Parliament]. Very frequently you can't give a full answer. That is not a deliberate lie. I don't think there are deliberate lies. If the public gains that impression then it's all up. . . .'

But surely that is the impression the public has today. That is the problem. Lord Weatherill is disturbed by this. 'I would be passionately against dishonesty in answers. It's a crime to mislead the House. I believe in honour. But I've never been in a Department so I don't know. You will have to consult others about this.' *180*

So I did. On another occasion I went- to Number 10 Downing Street. I explained that. former Ministers had already told me that they had sometimes faced dilemmas of conscience, about whether to keep something secret and deceive people or whether to 'come clean'. What was the official policy on lying? Were there any circumstances when telling a complete falsehood was acceptable?

I was informed by someone close to the Prime Minister that as far as the government was concerned, there were two circumstances where it was both necessary and morally right to lie to the public and to Parliament. One example was to quell market speculation about an imminent change in interest rates. Another was over issues relating to national security.

National security can however become a convenient blind behind which to hide a great number of embarrassments. And it is rather unfortunate that the only way to steady the markets is to tell them the exact opposite of what you have decided, because next time they will believe even less. It does the image of politicians no good at all.

Surely it would be better to have an agreed understanding in Parliament, the media, the public and the markets that 'no comment' is always the standard response on market- sensitive matters, and that this is a completely neutral statement rather than a sign of an imminent change. At present 'no comment' is seen as a warning, while denials are met with deep cynicism.

On 31 October 1995 new details were given to Ministers of public interest 'escape clauses' under which they could continue to withhold information. In new additions to 'Questions of Procedure for Ministers' it was made clear that defence, security, international relations, information about internal discussions (eg Cabinet meetings), communication with the Royal Household, Budget advice, prejudicial information about legal proceedings and assessments of recommendations for Honours, would all be used in future as defences against openness. *181*

These criteria clearly cover a vast amount of government activity. One thing is abundantly clear therefore: partial answers and suppression of the truth will continue to be a way of life in government. Few would argue for total openness. The issue is over abuse of power to strangle the release of information which might be embarrassing or damaging to those who have that power.

Returning to the issue of secrecy and collective responsibility, Alistair Burt, then Under Secretary for Social Security, believes you can have perfect integrity as a Minister without agreeing with everything that happens.

'I do not believe that government would be possible if everyone had to agree with every decision and no one was prepared to take hard decisions. If you are not prepared to make hard decisions, then you have no business to be in government. But there will be points beyond which you cannot go. If you have no stopping points whatsoever, then I think you are thoroughly dangerous and with any. luck you will never be elected to a position of any seriousness.'

I asked him what his advice would be to someone who inherited a terrible decision.

'If you find yourself landed with decisions that other people took then your responsibility is clear. If the government has a line, then defend it publicly. But you should be moving heaven and earth to say to colleagues, "This ain't going to work. I don't know what so and so was thinking of, but I'm not content to leave this be." You may then find after you go through a re-evaluation process that there's no escape route; that really every other option is worse than the one you've got. But if you are concerned about a policy, you should follow this process. You may find there's a chance of a change.'

But what about the possibility of being fed wrong information by civil servants and then having to take the blame?

'Although your information comes largely from the civil service you have to use your own political antennae, your own advisers. And if you are serious that you are being given a "bum steer" and you can prove it, then your officials are in serious trouble. If work is badly done then somebody is moved. We are all aware of civil servants who have been moved because they are

not up to the job.'

However, Alistair Burt says that in his own experience 'we all make mistakes' which need to be faced up to honestly and admitted to. He gave as an example his own involvement in the notorious Child Support Agency (CSA), set up to extract payments from absent fathers, which largely went to offset the costs of benefits for single-parent mothers.

'Ministers had not been warned in the period 1991 to 1992 [when I took over] that the administration of the CSA was not robust enough to withstand a certain amount of pressure. If they had I would not have been able to go before the [Select] Committee and say, "Look, we genuinely didn't know. We believed we had set it up right.' *182*

However, the whole system is very intolerant of mistakes, and this intolerance is seen every day in aggressive debates as well as in the media. The result of this intolerance is not that fewer mistakes are made, but just that most of them remain well hidden. This is the case even when the mistake is one that is not human error or incompetence so much as a poor decision based on inadequate information, or shortcomings due to lack of resources.

Honesty, humility and openness about poor decisions would make a refreshing change from half-truths, arrogance and guardedness. Such a culture would require consensus among all parties but would lead to greater respect, because it would be based on integrity.

The alternative is yet more absurd theatricals every time something goes wrong in a Department - for example, calls for a Minister to resign because a prisoner escapes. This is hypocrisy at its worst since opposition leaders know full well that they will face similar embarrassing moments when in power, not least because the entire civil service and public bodies will continue with existing staff under a new government.

Anyway, what is truth and what is a right decision? These things are often so subjective. A former Minister told me: 'Truth is a matter of judgement in so many issues. If people resigned every time a truth was discovered, there would be no Ministers left. I have been quite shocked by senior civil servants who have made serious errors. One Permanent Secretary said he spent the whole time making excuses for Ministers. I thought that was a bit rich! I thought I spent all my time making excuses for civil servants.

'Every now and then a civil servant martyr emerges who blows the whistle on a Minister - but the other nine out of ten will always be prepared to give the wrong advice to a Minister and when the Minister changes, rapid shuffles add to civil servant power.'

As a Secretary of State, Peter Lilley is upset at accusations of government dishonesty, which he feels are wrongly founded: 'I think there's a presumption that British standards in public life are low and getting worse. I don't agree with either assumption. I think standards are very high. Of the opposition generally I have found them to be of great integrity. They don't tell lies. They may say things I don't agree with or things I know to be wrong. They don't deliberately set out to tell a lie and I rather suspect that they would say the same about me and most of my colleagues.

'The process at Westminster is designed to make it very difficult for you to get away with telling lies. If you say something, your words will be reported the next day in Hansard. You will be torn apart if they are untrue. There is much more rigorous quality control than many people say. The reason the public out there think we're lying all the time, is that we often are seen to promise a better world, and they themselves hope we will be able to fulfil things governments can't achieve." *183*

Another MP with ministerial experience told me: 'I think I can say that I have never been party to anything I would regard as unethical. Things may have been suggested but actually they've not been pursued.'

I asked Lord Whitelaw whether he had ever been in the situation described above of feeling he had to endorse decisions or situations which he knew were unethical.

He said: 'You have to take the rough with the smooth. You can make changes. You can admit it. Of course these are the things that happen and you just have to go along with them and try to work out the best way forward.'
But had there been any great dilemmas of conscience?
'No. Great anguish as to wisdom of what I was going to do, yes.'
'Not anguish about the wisdom or otherwise of what someone else had done?'
'Well, if they did it or had done it, you just had to get on with it in the best way you could.'
'But isn't it hard?'
'I suppose it is but I never found it really quite like that. Some things happen that you don't like - you either have to resign or go on with them.'
'What about when it's not a question of policy but a question of ethics?'
'I don't think it is. Most of the things that I've dealt with have been things of policy not of ethics. There are some great issues. But if you've been in government and changed your job from one job to another you probably know about them anyway.'

Sir George Young was fortunate to find that he was not a Minister when faced with his greatest dilemmas, which were over the Poll Tax. 'Happily I was not in government. It wasn't just wrong politically. It was morally wrong - moving taxation away from the better off towards the worst off. I felt very unhappy. I voted against the party, defied how many Whips, I don't know. If it had happened when I was in government I don't know what I would have done.' *184*

I asked him about partially truthful parliamentary written answers.

'Answering a parliamentary question in a misleading way, there's a code, rules and you try to stick to it. And civil servants are the ones who will warn you if what is proposed is likely to be misleading to Parliament. Misleading Parliament is actually quite serious. If you do mislead Parliament it is a resignation matter. At the end of the day all a politician has got is his integrity. And if that goes, that is your goodwill, that is all you have. The extent to which you get anywhere in Parliament, in government, is because of your "reputation".'

I asked at what point a Minister needed to resign.

'If he hasn't got the confidence of the party.'

Another Minister agreed: 'If you've got the Party with you [you can survive]. The Whips are the arbiters of that. If the message comes back that the Party in the House is behind you on this one, then even if the media are against you, the Labour Party is against you and to some extent the country is against you, you're probably OK. If you've got the Party in the House with you then you've probably got a big chunk of the public with you.

'At the end of the day [the Whips] will let the Prime Minister know if a member of the government no longer commands the support of MPs in the House. And that is the black spot, and then you've probably had it.'

A secret civil service

While secrecy by Ministers is one thing, secrecy by civil servants is another. My father was a civil servant for years. My family has been steeped in the tradition of political neutrality. To this day I have no idea which way my father has voted in any election. In the same way, there are very few people indeed who know which way I have voted over the last twenty years. For him, the idea of allowing strong political views to affect civil service conduct would be totally wrong.

However, such civil service neutrality can only work if there is agreement that advice to Ministers remains confidential. Otherwise it could be hard to work with an incoming administration after a change of government. So then, the argument for secrecy in the case of civil servants is that it prevents their politicisation, although it also helps protect Ministers from sabotage by selective leaks.

Teresa Gorman thinks that the civil service is far too powerful: people with jobs which will outlive perhaps a dozen Ministers and several governments. 'This country,' she says, 'is run very largely by civil servants, not hereditary or elected members nor appointees. As a Minister you are very dependent on their advice, because if you make a mistake your career can be over in a very short time. Unless you have very strong views, their ideas will prevail. Every civil servant has a drawer full of them.

'They can fill your every waking and sleeping hour, so inevitably you will sign some papers without knowing what is in them. Sitting there until the small hours with several red boxes and piles of documents. A system that requires an individual to work from six in the morning until midnight as a Minister and then expects him to take home two boxes containing many hundreds of letters is absurd. The vested interests in the system will remain long after you have gone and can finish you Off.' *185*

One feature of the last seventy years has been the dramatic growth in the number of civil servants and in the scope of government responsibilities. In 1913 a mere 12.1 per cent of the gross domestic product was spent by government Departments, but by the 1987-8 financial year the total budget had already exceeded 40 per cent. This expansion of government power is one reason why pressures on Ministers have grown to the point where proper supervision and control of their Departments has become almost impossible.

While civil servants are supposed to be kept out of the limelight, - providing confidential advice to Ministers who then take responsibility for decisions, sometimes these boundaries have been confusing. Some civil servants have been asked to play a very public and political role, which has worried not only civil service unions, but also senior politicians. Lord Weatherill explained his concerns over a recent controversy in Australia. 'I can't understand it. Sir Robert Armstrong sent to represent the government on a highly controversial matter in order to explain a ministerial decision in Australia. I can't believe it. It is a question of personal integrity and personal honour. If you put yourself up for public office, then the public has an absolute right to expect very high standards.' Lord Weatherill's worry was that civil servants were increasingly being asked to defend policies for which they had no executive responsibility.

A former British Ambassador with many years' experience in the Foreign Office told me that on the whole he thought he had never been placed in a position he could not accept ethically. 'If I had, I would have told them where to go. The ultimate threat is to go straight to the press.' *186*

However, another senior civil servant agreed that integrity was often hard to maintain. Civil servants were often in a real dilemma: do they bury their consciences and just go through the motions of churning out papers providing a hundred, arguments in favour of things they believe are morally wrong, or do they risk declaring their own positions in private discussions and arguing the case? 'Ministers are supposed to ask officials to prepare a case, information on which a decision can be made. But all too often they ask for arguments to back up a decision which has already been taken.' *187*

I remember a very curious episode, many years ago, when I was being advised on how to draft the most effective lobbying letters for MPs to send to a Minister about an issue which concerned me. The most remarkable thing was that this unpaid help was coming not from an MP, nor a lobbying consultant, nor from a political activist, but from the very same civil servants who would later be drafting the replies to these MPs for Ministers to sign.

Thus the whole exercise changed gradually from a simple campaign to something of a civil service game, beginning and ending in a junior official's office, and designed to impress upon the Minister that a particular change in policy was needed. The process gave the civil service some extra ammunition with which to load their arguments.

Ken Livingstone says: 'You expect civil servants to conspire against you ... in that case you replace them. You sack them.'

I asked whether it was possible after winning an election to see the papers of the previous administration, for reasons of continuity and audit, to help prevent corruption.

'You don't see previous decisions. You have no access to any previous administration. You have to appoint a barrister which is what I did at the Greater London Council. My own view is that if there is any evidence of corruption then it should immediately be exposed.' *188*

Lord Ennals pointed out, from his own experience in a Labour Cabinet and subsequently, that sometimes the decision to answer in a certain way comes from a Minister, not a civil servant,

but then all are compromised. 'Sometimes a Minister has required of civil servants that they give an answer which is basically not true.' *189*

A conspiracy between Ministers and civil servants

Edwina Currie has particular concerns about how Ministers and civil servants may operate together to protect. departmental interests or the interests of those they represent.

'One of the key things about government is to protect people from threat. Health Service regulations are all part of that. If a government knows of a threat to health and safety and is involved in a denial, then there is tension.'

Her own experience was as a junior Minister in the Department of Health where she was provoked into action over the growing numbers of people made ill every month by salmonella food poisoning related to poultry and eggs.

'My concern was that the government knew of 500 confirmed cases a week of people sick enough to need samples taken. Most were of the new strain, the main cause of the increase. Rapid spread, virulent, people hospitalised for weeks, one death on average every week. I was particularly upset about a nine-year-old boy who died in September 1988. The problem was how to handle the situation. The first step was to warn the public, and also to encourage people to take care over the preparation of food.

'Sir Donald Acheson, the government's Chief Medical Officer at the time, issued five different warnings about under-cooked or raw eggs from summer 1988. The Health Authorities issued three public warnings. One Health Authority stopped using eggs altogether - I felt that was excessive.'

Her greatest worry was that there would be a long hot summer in 1989 with rapidly spreading infection, leading to a major epidemic. She was asked by the media if there was a problem and she said, 'Yes.' She was asked the way to tackle it: 'Handle with care,' she replied. 'But the following week 6 million families stopped buying eggs.'

Edwina Currie's one-liners have often caught the public eye. Everyone remembers the campaign comment on the risk of HIV on holiday: 'Take the wife.' She described how events spiralled to the point where she was forced out of her job. 'My personal sense of alarm was reserved for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). My officials and MAFF officials were in frequent contact. MAFF officials denied the problem existed at all.'

I asked Edwina Currie about government ethics generally. She feels the system works erratically and very largely depends on ethical views of Ministers and civil servants and a view of what damage is done by a particular course of action, in comparison with another.

'You only have to look at how different countries have handled the issue of liability over

HIV-contaminated blood and blood products [causing AIDS]. In medical terms the information was available around the world simultaneously. We took the view that we must not use such blood. If anything went wrong we [Ministers] would get blamed. [But] when it came to salmonella I felt we were compensating the wrong people - compensating farmers instead of sick people. Farmers should have sued MAFF for failing to do its duty, failing to test contaminated animal feed. MAFF officials were not doing their job properly. BSE has also been handled by the same officials.

In order to reduce the cost of animal husbandry, experiments had been going on for some time over diverse animal feeds and cheaper forms of protein. For years it was known that there were risks in feeding animal protein to herbivores and infected animal products to herbivores even more so - for example the ground up remains of sheep [with scrapie, fed] to cattle which probably caused BSE. The last thing you should do is feed. animals with products from the same species. Yet, ground up dead chickens with salmonella were fed to chickens - which probably accelerated spread. When I asked awkward questions I wondered why the MAFF was being so defensive.

'Their defensiveness seemed [in part] connected with the way the bugs had entered the system. There was inadequate mass testing of animal feedstuffs, commercially produced. It should have been apparent that such feedstuffs were a biological disaster waiting to happen.'

So what happens when two Ministries are in conflict? Presumably someone has to resign - in this case it would either have been Edwina Currie or her opposite number Richard Ryder (later to become Chief Whip).

' There is a long standing tradition that Ministers defend Ministries. You are a bit stuck when the Ministry is indefensible. You can't go against your civil servants. If you are part of a team and there is a weak link in the team, then everyone is compromised. If the situation has been there a long time it can take a major upheaval to change it.'

Edwina Currie fears that history may now be repeating itself over BSE, which has already done enormous damage to the industry - pointing out that even as long ago as in the Gulf War, British beef sent to the troops in Saudi Arabia was banned because of the disease. 'When people say they are resigning on principle it is sometimes only a part of the story. It is six years since I left government. declined to rejoin it. You can come to your own conclusions.' *190*

A Minister's role is changing rapidly. Although government spending is still huge, power over decision making is being progressively lost to Brussels. As EC control increases, more and more decisions depend on European policy, while as we have seen, quangos have grown and so has the role of civil servants. This feeling of powerlessness has led to a different attitude when things go wrong. In the past a Minister would have taken responsibility and resigned. Now the reaction often is 'Why should I resign? I'm not responsible.'

So Ministers and civil servants alike can face enormous moral dilemmas where the answers are very unclear. It is possible to become a government Minister with great hopes of being able to maintain the highest standards of integrity, but sometimes it can be difficult to do so without

resigning.

From the day they are appointed, Ministers can become locked into the history and culture of the Department they are supposed to be leading. The volume of routine work generated by civil servants, together with Cabinet meetings, Parliament, European delegations, constituency matters, party campaigning and media interviews, all combine to erode time and energy for proper scrutiny. The pressure of having to maintain a Cabinet line in every media interview can be hard for a free thinker with strong views.

However, if there is one area more than any other which has consistently raised most difficult questions of secrecy and integrity it must be arms deals in a world complicated by embargoes, ethics and clashes of opinion on both. This is the subject of the next chapter.

The Truth About Westminster