

TRAMP D4 : The Political Animal
di Jeremy Paxman (2003)

7. Power at Last

And so our hero becomes a minister. At last, all the years of gladhanding, the endless meetings agreeing strategy and making alliances, the tedious speechifying, the even more tedious listening to other people's speeches, the hours and hours spent on the whips' instruction in the House of Commons, the ridiculing of enemy ideas which privately seemed rather sensible, the keeping silent when conscience demanded voice, the steady reconciliation of idealism to reality, the empty applause for policies not believed in, can bear fruit. Now, finally, the politician can get on with what attracted him or her to politics. There is power to be wielded. After nineteen years of what he called 'apprenticeship' in opposition, Denis Healey became Defence Secretary. As he put it later, 'I felt like a man who, after driving his Jaguar for hours behind a tractor on narrow country lanes, finally reaches the motorway.'¹

But before getting the chance to make something happen the politician has to receive the call from the Prime Minister. To be offered a job in cabinet, the MP usually has served in the shadow cabinet, or as a junior minister in a previous government. But the final decision is the Prime Minister's alone. It is a moment when Prime Ministers have supreme power in their party and they can exercise it almost cruelly. When Anthony Eden was called in by Stanley Baldwin in 1935, Baldwin asked him who he would recommend for the job of Foreign Secretary. The 38-year-old Eden suggested recalling Austen Chamberlain, whose achievements at the Locarno Conference, which set the boundaries of western Europe after the First World War, had been rewarded with the Order of the Garter and a share of the Nobel Peace Prize. But the Prime Minister dismissed the idea, saying that Chamberlain was 'ga-ga'. Eden then proposed Lord Halifax, but Baldwin would not contemplate a Foreign Secretary who sat in the House of Lords. The Prime Minister then wearily turned to him and said, 'It looks as if it will have to be you.'² Not

surprisingly, Eden left the interview with less than a spring in his step.

Sometimes, Prime Ministers have little choice: after the 1997 election Tony Blair was obliged to make Gordon Brown Chancellor of the Exchequer, because the entire party understood that that was the deal on which they had carved up the leadership. Very occasionally, people get appointed to one of the very big jobs in government because they cannot be denied it. Ernest Bevin, the dominant trades union leader of the twentieth century, was co-opted into Churchill's wartime government as Minister of Labour and then went straight into Attlee's government as Foreign Secretary because, as Roy Jenkins put it, 'There was no other position in the Foreign Office, unless it was that of a rather truculent lifeman on the verge of retirement, which it would have been possible to imagine his filling... It was Secretary of State or nothing.'³

At other times, brilliance in the House of Commons can ensure promotion. Seven years after Bevin bundled into the Foreign Office, Iain Macleod was summoned to Downing Street by Churchill. Macleod half believed he was to be ticked off for refusing to represent the party at some boring meeting of the Council of Europe. He emerged, ashen-faced, fifteen minutes later. Churchill had heard him pull off the remarkable feat of demolishing Nye Bevan in a House of Commons debate a few weeks earlier and thereupon decided to make him Minister of Health. Macleod's wife was waiting outside in the family car. 'Please drive me to the nearest telephone box,' he said. When she asked why, he told her about the appointment and added, 'I have to take over the department and I've got no idea where it is, so I think I'd better look up the address in the telephone book.'