TAM DALYELL

The maverick Labour politician on the eve of his retirement

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You do not have to spend long in Tam Dalyell's company to discover why he drives Government ministers demented, and has the rare distinction of being anathema to both Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher. Casting around for a place to be photographed with his three-year-old grandson, he seizes delightedly on the spot he thinks most likely to needle *Daily Telegraph* readers: a staircase in the House of Commons with a bust of Nye Bevan at its foot. His entourage hesitates, wondering whether permission is needed from the Commons authorities, but the Father of the House will have none of it. 'Take the pictures first and worry about permission afterwards,' he demands. 'There's too much red tape around here.'

At the next general election, Dalyell will step down after 43 years in Parliament; and since this may be his last opportunity, he has invited his only grandchild to tour the building where he has spent most of his working life. It seems a good moment to ask him for his reflections on a maverick career, and about what lies in store for Matthew's generation.

Unfortunately, Matthew is tired and in a bit of a grump. Whatever his parents were doing to entertain him while Grandpa Tam attended Scottish Questions (speaking up yet again for Abdel Bassett Al Maghari, the Libyan he believes was falsely convicted of the Lockerbie bombing), it has clearly failed to do the trick. Passing the door of the empty debating chamber, he does what many a grown man must have felt tempted to do – lets out a wail of frustration and rage.

Dalyell Senior does not have the cheeriest of aspects either, though he does relax visibly in his grandson's presence. His habitual manner is intensely serious, and his sentences are often prefaced with an admonitory 'Look – '. His physique, too, is imposing, even if at 72 he walks with a lumbering gait, exacerbated by a recent injury to his foot. Nevertheless, as he progresses through the House, it is plain that he is held in regard and affection by his non-ministerial colleagues. One of them waylays him and asks him to adjudicate in a dispute about the date of Lloyd George's birth. 'Eighteen sixty-three,' he replies without hesitation. 'Definitely sixty-three.'

Strangely, given his longevity, Dalyell claims to have become a politician more or less by chance. 'I had been chairman of the [Cambridge] university Conservative club, I was interested in politics, but I didn't imagine becoming a member of the House of Commons; and furthermore, I didn't think that any Labour constituency would have me.' But when in 1962 the Member for West Lothian died unexpectedly of a tropical disease, Dalyell found himself in the right place at the right time, and the local Labour Party chose to overlook his Tory beginnings, his Eton education, and the magnificent house at Linlithgow that is still his family home.

It did not take him long to earn a reputation as a man who was obstinate to the point of eccentricity. His first epic campaign – which he still considers his greatest achievement – was to prevent Aldabra atoll in the Indian Ocean from becoming an RAF base. 'A pristine ecological jewel would have been destroyed,' he explains: 'the home of the pink-footed booby, of the flightless rail, of the giant tortoise.' Having asked 70 parliamentary questions on the subject, he managed to persuade a leading American scientist to lobby President Johnson, who prevailed on Harold Wilson to intervene.

Among his lost causes, one that still rankles is his bill to make organ-donation the norm rather than something requiring the permission of the

donor's family. The then Prime Minister, Ted Heath, supported it, but was overruled by his Health Minister, Keith Joseph. Despite this defeat, Dalyell regrets that such ministerial power is unthinkable in the age of the presidential PM.

'The undermining of the Cabinet has taken place,' he observes, 'partly because with open questions the Prime Minister can go to any department and say, "That frightful Dalyell is going to ask so-and-so about your departmental business: what's the answer?" And that means that the Downing Street machine can intervene in anything. Its fingerprints were all over the Home Office's attitude to the Prevention of Terrorism Bill – and some of us were jolly angry about it.'

He also deplores the way parliamentary questions have been trivialised by MPs trying to curry favour in their constituencies: 'Now people will simply ask the Prime Minister whether he will agree with them that some local authority has done very well – and there is no time for scrutiny of the Government.'

Of all the MPs he has known, he holds 'issue politicians' such as Alf Morris, the campaigner for the disabled, in particular regard. High on his list, too, are those with 'good parliamentary manners combined with authority: Jim Callaghan had that in abundance'. Bill Deedes is also singled out – 'not because I'm talking to the *Telegraph*, but because he had wide experience and a certain sardonic scepticism.'

With Matthew growing restless, it is decided to progress to the cafeteria in the basement of the House. One thing that has not improved in 40 years, his grandfather says, is the food served to Honourable Members; the younger Dalyell toys for a while with his chips, and then disappears to explore under the table.

What advice would his grandfather offer if Matthew ever decided to follow a parliamentary career? ‘I would tell him that for five years at least he must take a job which has nothing to do with politics. If I’d ever come in the top twenty for private members’ bills – and I’ve tried on 43 occasions – I’d have introduced a measure along those lines.’

However Westminster may change before Matthew reaches voting age, Dalyell does not expect to see a satisfactory reform of the House of the Lords. Watching senior colleagues wrestle with the issue in his days as Richard Crossman’s private secretary, he came to the conclusion that it was ‘an insoluble problem. I personally am quite content with the House of Lords as it is at the moment. Time and again they’ve put forward resolutions, both in Thatcher times and Blair times, of which I’ve thoroughly approved. I’ll predict one thing: in twenty years’ time, it’ll still be messy.’

Working for four decades in such venerable surroundings, he has come to appreciate the importance of a sense of history. But, he adds, ‘There’s one of my senior colleagues whose sense of history is non-existent – and I think you can guess who that is: the Prime Minister. If he had had one, he wouldn’t have indulged in the war against Iraq, and he would have been much more careful about the war in Afghanistan, where the bones of some of my ancestors lie. I’m extremely sad that I wasn’t more persuasive; I sometimes wonder if I could have been.’

What no one could ever accuse him of is not trying hard enough. If Matthew has inherited a fraction of his grandfather’s persistence – and a brief acquaintance suggest that he has – Leo Blair may already have found his nemesis.