CHURCHILL REMEMBERED

Recollections by Tony Benn MP, Lord Carrington, Lord Deedes and Mary Soames

[The following is a transcription of a panel discussion chaired by Professor David Cannadine in the Chancellor's Hall, Senate House, University of London, on Thursday 11 January 2001].

TONY BENN: Time does funny things to your memory. For the whole of my childhood Winston Churchill was a political giant, but my grandfathers always referred to him as 'young Winston', because one of them was born in 1850 (I never knew him) and the other in 1863, eleven years before Winston was born. All three of them, both my grandfathers and my father, sat with Winston when he was a Liberal before the First World War, and although it may sound impertinent, in our family we always referred to him as Winston, never Churchill, it was just Winston: 'What did Winston say', 'Young Winston' and so on. I had the honour of sitting with him for fourteen years in the House of Commons and have recollections of that time.

Churchill's early politics, the politics of before the First World War, were of course quite radical Liberal politics. The historians will correct me if I am wrong, but I think he set up the labour exchanges, and therefore had an idea that labour had rights. Was he involved in the troops going to the Rhondda? In Wales there is still a recollection of that. But I quoted him regularly in the House of Commons, because in 1914, as first lord of the admiralty, at the time the navy was shifting from having coal-fired ships to oil-fired, he nationalised British Petroleum, and when I did the same with the British National Oil Corporation I used to entertain the House of Commons with the exact words that Winston used in 1914. He bought the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company for £2 million (BP) and he used the most powerful language about how multi-national trusts were squeezing the government of the day and so on. He was well to the left of New Labour, but that covers a very wide range of opinion!

My mother in 1914, it must have been just after the outbreak of the First World War (her father was a member of course at the time) was in the gallery of the House of Commons when Churchill, as first lord of the admiralty, made a statement about some naval engagement. I have never checked it in Hansard and many stories are not true, but I

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think this one must be. She used to repeat as best she could the phrase he used. He said, 'And I hope the whole Housh will be glad to hear that the German shubmarine wash purshued and shunk' – and that was her recollection of young Winston.

Of course in the 1920s Churchill, as chancellor of the exchequer, followed a policy now being followed by the present chancellor: then it was called the gold standard, now it is called prudence. But he followed a policy which undoubtedly did him an enormous amount of damage among his contemporaries, because it was thought that that absolute purity of economic policy contributed to the difficulties that came in 1929, and I have often thought that if Winston had died in 1931 the recollection of him would have been probably as a failure, even though it would have been quite untrue, whereas of course he lived to achieve far greater things.

Winston was of course a Liberal Imperialist. My father, who was secretary for India 1929–31, had a number of clashes with Winston in the House of Commons. I was introduced to Mr Gandhi in 1931, when I was six years old, I was taken by my father to see him – I have no recollection of what he said or anything I said, which would not have mattered – but I was much impressed by the way in which he took an interest in children. I think I am right that Churchill described him as 'the naked fakir loping up the steps of the viceregal lodge to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor'. And I have a video of Winston from the 1930s, in which he talks about 600 million poor benighted Indians, who depended on the empire to preserve their society. That was his position and although it is easy now to dismiss imperialism, it was part of the whole philosophy that illuminated the thinking not just of Conservatives but of many Liberals as well.

The first time I ever heard him speak was in 1937, when my father, who had been defeated in 1931, was re-elected and he took me to the House of Commons as a twelve-year-old boy, introduced me to Lloyd George, and I sat in the gallery and I heard Winston warn about the Nazis. In our household the hostility to Neville Chamberlain and appeasement was enormous and the admiration for Winston was very, very great. When he went back to the admiralty in 1939, before he became prime minister, a message was sent out 'Winston is back', so the navy knew he was there, and then, of course, when he took over after the famous Norway debate, he provided absolute inspiration to everybody. I lived in London during the blitz and I remember it very well indeed. The speeches that he made really did inspire us. On his eightieth birthday when he made a speech, which I attended, at Westminster Hall, you were probably there Mary Soames (was that when the picture was given to him which subsequently came to an unfortunate end?), he dismissed his role. He said: 'People say I was the

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lion. The British people were the lion and I was privileged to give the roar.' I remember that very modest account of his interpretation of his role as a political leader.

There is a family story here you will allow me perhaps to tell. In the summer of 1940, when the war was really going very, very badly, there was a big discussion in the press as to whether children should be sent to America. My brother David, who was then twelve, wrote a letter to my mother saying 'I would rather be bombed to fragments than leave this country'. My mother wrote to *The Times* about it. Brendan Bracken drew this to Winston's attention and in the middle of this period of war Winston, in his own hand, wrote a letter to my mother about it. My brother has this letter, the copy is in the Churchill Library in Churchill College, Cambridge, and he sent my brother a copy of *My Early Life*. Now you think of a prime minister having time to write a manuscript letter at that period in history! It is just an indication of the extraordinary qualities of the man.

About a year later, when Winston and Clem [Attlee] were in coalition, Winston said to Clem 'We need a few more Labour peers' and so Clem said to my dad 'Would you like a peerage?' My dad was then sixty-four or something, he had rejoined the air force because he felt during the war you had to fight and not be a parliamentarian – he ended up as an air gunner before they caught up with him, because he had been a pilot in the First World War. He took the peerage, he didn't consult me, which made me very angry, but he asked my elder brother, because of course in those days there were no life peerages, and my elder brother didn't care one way or the other. Then my brother was killed in 1944, so by the time I got into Parliament in 1950 as a member of the House of Commons my father was already seventy-three, but the local Labour constituency association very sweetly never raised the matter of the peerage at the selection conference, though I did tell them.

Dingle Foot once told me a marvellous story about the difference between a cabinet that Winston presided over and a cabinet presided over by Clem. Dingle was parliamentary secretary at the ministry of economic warfare, a very junior job, and he was occasionally brought into the cabinet with some issue that had to be clarified. He said when Winston was in the chair, which was most of the time, he had the opportunity of hearing the most brilliant historical summary of the whole history of the human race, culminating in the period they had reached, and he said 'I left the Cabinet without knowing what I had to do.' When Clem was in the chair he would say 'Right minister, what is it', 'Right, agreed, right', and he said 'I left the Cabinet about two minutes later, knowing exactly what I had to do.' Churchill's quality of historical analysis is difficult if you want a quick decision,

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but it is the only thing which makes politics tolerable.

The other thing I remember about the war was Winston's attitude to the alliance with the Soviet Union, because he had been a bitter critic of the Russian Revolution. But as soon as Hitler attacked Stalin in 1941 Winston came out one hundred per cent for the Anglo-Soviet alliance. I have copies of the magazine *British Ally*, which was published in English here and in Russian in the Soviet Union, and his support for the Soviet Union when they were bearing the brunt of the war was one of the factors that interested me.

Now we come to the end of the war. I was on a troopship coming back in 1945 and I heard his broadcast saying 'If Labour was elected a Gestapo would be introduced.' Clem, whatever his weaknesses, wouldn't harm a fly, but it was an indication that Winston in campaigning mode was capable of using fairly strong language. Actually he and Clem got on very well together. I think they had the same nanny at one time or another.

When I was elected an MP Clem was prime minister, but a year later Winston became prime minister again. In those days you could actually ask the prime minister a question and get an answer, a thing that is inconceivable nowadays, and I remember asking him a question about atomic weapons and I got a perfectly straightforward answer about the nature of our relationship with the United States. Clem Attlee came up to me afterwards and said 'You had *no* right to ask that question without consulting me. I am the only one who knows what the arrangements were', which was probably true. I think almost a couple of days after I was elected was the famous occasion when Winston pursued Clem over the question of an American admiral. Under the arrangements, before NATO I suppose, an American admiral was put in charge of the Atlantic fleet and Winston absolutely tore Clem into shreds at prime minister's question time. That was the day Mrs Attlee had asked the new MPs to tea, so I went to Number 10, very excited as a new MP, and Vi Attlee turned on Clem with absolute brutality and said 'You made a fool of yourself, why didn't you know the answer to the question that Winston was putting', and Clem scuttled out like a mouse, because he was so frightened of Vi!

In 1951, when Winston got back into power, he appointed Walter Monckton as Minister of Labour. Now Walter was a member of parliament for Bristol and I travelled down on the train with him at one stage and he gave a marvellous account of the occasion when Winston appointed him. 'All he said to me was "Walter, I want you to look after the home front" ', and that phrase, to deal with the whole of labour in terms of 'the home front' during a war, seemed to me very characteristic. Lady Violet [Bonham Carter], who I knew of course, adored Winston. I think he went to speak for her in the 1951 election

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and she said at the meeting 'A cat may look at a king.' She was a Liberal and he was a Conservative, but those were the early days of 'the third way'.

When it was clear I was going to be thrown out of the Commons when my dad died, I wrote to Winston: 'Dear Prime Minister, you refused a peerage, can you help me with my problem' and so on. And he wrote me a lovely letter back, saying 'I think yours is a very hard case, I think people *should* be able to give up their peerages.' He did add 'and resume them later', because coming from aristocratic stock the idea of giving them up forever would be a bit much! So I wrote to him and thanked him and said 'Can I publish your letter' and he said 'I can't, because it has to be confidential because I am Prime Minister.' But the day he resigned I wrote to him again and I said, 'Dear Sir Winston, now you are not in office, could I publish your letter' and do you know, within twenty-four hours of retiring, when he must have had ten million letters, he arranged to send me the same letter for publication. And when I was thrown out of the Commons and I fought a by-election, I must have been the only Labour candidate, I circulated 25,000 copies of a photocopy of Winston's letter, which played some part in getting me re-elected – and then of course thrown out again. The only time I ever spoke to him personally, I went up to thank him at the end of a vote at 10 o'clock and he said to me 'You must carry on' and I owe a lot of the victory that ultimately came to that.

I am very proud that my sons Stephen and Hilary, who is now a member of parliament, saw him from the gallery in the House of Commons. And of course I remember the 1945 election, which I forgot to mention, when we canvassed Number 10, before the Thatcher gates were up, and Jeremy Hutchinson, the Labour candidate, with me driving the loudspeaker van (which is much harder than flying a plane) went to Number 10, to the front door. Jeremy Hutchinson said 'I am the Labour candidate and I have got the electoral register here and there is a Mr Churchill I want to canvass', and the whole domestic staff were brought out, it was like *Upstairs, Downstairs*. The butler in the front said 'We are all Conservative in this house' and a maid at the back with a little bonnet, I give her full marks, said 'And we would lose our jobs if we weren't!'

I am very, very proud to have been a contemporary of Winston and to have known him. His memory will remain as an example of someone who believed what he said, said what he believed, did what he said he would do if he got there, even if you didn't agree with any of it.

LORD CARRINGTON: I think it was a very great pity that Tony Benn was encouraged by Winston Churchill to leave the House of Lords: we could have done with him, after that splendid speech he had made. I

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think that Bill Deedes and I are the only surviving members of the last Churchill administration. I must tell you that I was there in a very humble capacity, as parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and I can't say that I spent much time at that time in the cabinet room seeing the prime minister. In fact I think I only went into the cabinet room twice during that particular time and so you must forgive the inadequacy of what I have to say.

I would just like to say one or two things about what Winston Churchill meant to my generation, those of us who were growing up in the 1930s. Of course he was a very controversial figure. He was a hero in my home, partly because of his policy against appeasement, partly because my family were also Liberal Imperialists and they agreed with him about India. But of course in a way what he was saying at that time was against the mainstream feeling in the Conservative Party and in the Labour party, generally speaking, and I think that there were great doubts amongst ordinary people about his judgement, which I suppose in a way was reinforced when he supported the duke of Windsor at the time of the abdication crisis. He was I think to some extent mistrusted in the country, and even when he became prime minister, though most of us were rather pleased that a real leader was going to be prime minister rather than Neville Chamberlain.

My first cousin, Jock Colville, who was private secretary to Neville Chamberlain and so to speak inherited Winston Churchill at Number 10, in his diaries (which he should never have written) really made it quite clear what trepidation those at Number 10 felt when Winston Churchill arrived as prime minister. The diaries are very frank and I know they are true, because he used to talk to me about it. It didn't take him very long to realise what a mistake he had made.

For me and my generation, my fellow officers, it was a very great relief that we felt that we then had (I was in the army at the time) a man who was a leader, a fighter, with a soldier's reputation and with the power to inspire our partners. Those of us who were alive at that particular time will never forget the debt that we owe him. I mean, his voice on the radio, his unmistakable figure, that wonderful billycock hat that he wore, the boiler suit, the formidable face, the personification of resistance – it was impossible to believe in defeat when he was there.

At the time, in 1940, I was commanding a very great military outfit, the demonstration platoon at the Small Arms School in Hythe, and when we were not doing demonstrations and teaching people how to fire weapons we spent every night on the beaches at Hythe, which was a place where the Germans might have landed. In my platoon I had forty-eight men, three bren guns, forty-five rifles and my pistol, and we had three-and-a-half miles of beach. You won't believe this, but it

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simply never occurred to me that we were going to be defeated. I was really in a way rather sorry for the Germans if they arrived on my beach! I am quite sure that that spirit was very largely due to Winston Churchill: the feeling that we had a leader who inspired us and was determined that we weren't going to be beaten. Of course we didn't understand the problem, but it seemed to me then and it seems to me now that we were in good hands and that those now who are very critical about what happened simply weren't alive at the time and don't know what we who were there felt about him.

After the war I took my seat in the House of Lords, rather against my wishes, but I didn't have the guts of Tony Benn. I remember that when I first took my seat I decided to go and look down at the House of Commons from the peers' gallery at all these extraordinary figures whom one had known about during the war, who seemed larger than life, because there they had been headlines in the paper. I was quite convinced that they were going to look quite different from ordinary human beings, that they had bigger heads and haloes and were grander in every respect than ordinary people. I was deeply disappointed when I looked down from the Peers' Gallery to find that they were very ordinary people – with two exceptions. One (sitting on the opposition benches) was Winston Churchill, who looked quite different from everybody else in his bow tie and his black short coat and the pinstripe trousers and that extraordinary head and the sort of bulldog expression. He looked quite different from anybody else on the Conservative benches. And on the Labour government benches, there was Ernest Bevin, who also looked quite different from anybody else. He looked like some gigantic benign frog, but he looked a big man. Those were the two who, in my judgement, stood out.

Looking back on that, what a very difficult time that must have been for Winston Churchill. He must have felt how ungrateful the British public were to him when, after five or six years of war, he was defeated at the [1945] election. Whatever the reasons were, he behaved with remarkable generosity at that time.

About a year later, I became a whip in the House of Lords and there was a custom that the leader of the Conservative party came and had lunch once a year with the chief whip and the whips. Winston Churchill came along and we sat in the dining room of the House of Lords, and of course we looked at him with great awe because of his reputation. He was obviously either bored or in a very bad temper, or both, and for the first course and the meat course he never really spoke at all, he just sat there looking thoroughly bored and disagreeable. We were getting more and more uncomfortable and shifting about in our seats, when in through the door of the House of Lords dining room came Bessie Braddock, who, as some of you may remember, was rather

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large and had a considerable reputation. Winston Churchill looked at her as she went by and then she disappeared. He said 'Ah, there goes that constipated Britannia', and he was so pleased with this comment that he then became absolutely a different person and we saw something of the magic and the fascination of his personality.

Then when he became prime minister again in 1951, I must say it never occurred to me that anybody was going to offer me a job. So on the day after the election I was not waiting at the end of a telephone for Randolph Churchill to pretend that he was the prime minister and offer me a job. But I was, if one can be so politically incorrect, out shooting partridges at home. About 3 o'clock in the afternoon somebody came running up from the house and said to me 'Number 10 wants you on the telephone.' I was a bit surprised, so I hurried back and rang up Number 10 and I was put through and waited, and there was the prime minister on the end of the telephone. He said 'I hear you have been shooting partridges' and I said 'Yes, prime minister'. He said 'Would you like to join my shoot?' And there I was, appointed as parliamentary secretary to the ministry of agriculture and food. Now can you imagine the prime minister today ringing up the most humble parliamentary secretary to ask him if he would take a job in his government? I thought it was the most extraordinary thing to do, and something which I shall never forget.

About a couple of years later, there was a terrible scene, a terrible crisis, in Critchell Down. This was a situation in which the lines of the graph had crossed between the rights of the private owners of property and the need to produce maximum production of food. The ministry of agriculture, and I indeed, had taken the view that maximum production of food, because we still had rationing, was more important than the rights of the owners. But now the rights of the owners became more important than the production of food. There was a terrible scandal and everybody was blamed and Tom Dugdale, my boss, resigned. I thought since I had been wrong too I had better resign as well, so I put in my resignation. I was sent for by the prime minister to the cabinet room and he said to me 'You put in your resignation.' I said 'Yes prime minister'. 'Do you want to resign from my government?', he said. I said 'Well no, of course I don't.' He said 'Well, then you'd better not.' So that was that! And when he said that to you you certainly didn't contradict him.

Parliamentary secretaries didn't very often go to the cabinet, but when Tommy Dugdale or someone was away, I remember going to a cabinet meeting in which there was a discussion about whether or not we were going to take rationing off sweets or off meat, I can't remember which it was. Gwyl Lloyd George, who was the minister of food, said that he felt that it was not possible to remove rationing, because we

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didn't have enough supplies and it was impossible to do it. But I remember the prime minister saying 'We said we were going to do it and we *will* do it, so that's that.' Of course it was done and it was perfectly alright, but it was an example of the conviction and the courage that he had. He was determined to get rid of the bureaucracy and constraints and regulations and all those things that were inevitable in a time of war and which hung on after the war.

I suppose you could say that he stayed on too long as prime minister, but then, who doesn't? I mean, they all do. I suppose the only one who didn't really was Harold Wilson, I think probably he was the only one. I don't know whether he regretted it, but certainly in my Australian days, when I was in Australia, Bob Menzies resigned and he regretted it forever afterwards, because he disliked all his successors so much. I think there is a compulsion on people in high places not to like their possible successors and to stay as long as they can. So I think that that was probably true, and anyway, my party has a great history of disloyalty to its leaders. Everyone, from Winston Churchill downward, has been stuck in the back by a knife. Eden, Alec Home, Ted Heath, Margaret Thatcher, John Major, they have all been, so I suppose to some extent the prime minister of the day has to ignore that.

Just one final thought. There is a fashion now to judge people of a different generation by the standards and customs and thoughts of the present generation. Now I think that is a very difficult and wrong thing to do. How can you really judge what people felt like when they were born 130 or 140 years ago and were brought up in totally different circumstances and totally different customs than those which you find today. I think those critics of Winston Churchill sometimes seem to ignore that. That is certainly so about his feelings about Liberal imperialism and all the rest of it, people now don't understand. One example of this relates to Churchill's views on Europe. When I was at NATO I had to go to Zürich and make a speech and I thought it would be quite a good idea to read that famous speech Churchill made in Zürich, in which most people now think that he was advocating British membership of the European Union. If you read the speech, of course, he wasn't doing anything of the kind. What he was saying was that people should be magnanimous in Europe, Europe must get together and forget what happened. But Britain was quite removed from that: we were not part of Europe, we were part of an alliance which had won the war with the Americans, the Europeans had not really been enormously successful in the war, we defeated the Germans, the French had been defeated, the Italians had been rather ambivalent one way or the other, and there wasn't a particular reason why he felt that we should join Europe. We had an empire; Churchill was brought up in the days when a quarter of the land surface of the

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world was coloured red and was British. That is the sort of thing that people nowadays seem to me not to understand about people of his generation.

What an extraordinary man Churchill must have been. of all the people that I have ever met in my life I think that I admire him most of all, and I think he did more than anybody I know to enable all of us to live the sort of lives that we live now. For me it was a privilege to have known him as distantly as I did and I am very happy I did.

LORD DEEDES: I did have a certain amount to do with Winston in the 1930s, mainly over India, because *The Morning Post*, the newspaper I was on, worked together with Winston against self-government for India. But I don't want to dwell on that so much, what I want go dwell on is a quality in Winston, one single quality which I have come greatly to admire and which I think is very much underrated. It came into my mind very forcibly the other day when I was looking through a volume which has just appeared, Martin Gilbert's volume *1941, The Churchill Papers*. It is an enormously thick book and it carries all the papers connected with Winston in 1941. It put in my mind, reading through these papers in 1941, something that Field Marshal Wavell once said. Wavell said he thought that the prime requirement for any general was mental robustness. Now in my view that was a quality which Winston had abundantly and in my belief that mental robustness was an enormous factor in his getting through the war and getting us through as well. I want to dwell on this, because I think it is a much rarer quality in politics now than most people believe.

I want to dwell on the year 1941, not at all a cheerful year. In fact if you think about it, between Winston taking over in 1940 and the Battle of Alamein in October 1942, which is roughly twenty-eight months, there weren't really many happy days in the course of those two-and-a-half years. And throughout that period, Winston had to run the war and govern the country, with a stream of bad news, much of which we knew nothing about. I can remember (I was a soldier at the time like Peter Carrington) getting pretty depressed at various times during that period. But for Churchill, who was privy to countless setbacks, difficulties, disasters of which the rest of the world knew nothing, it must have been a supreme test of mental robustness.

Let's just go through some of the factors that weighed on his mind. First of all, I think hardest to bear of all, was the bombing that began almost as soon as he took office, the lives lost and the destruction it created. There is a passage in the 1941 papers of a visit by Winston to Plymouth after it had been bombed four nights out of five. Winston was appalled by what he saw and at the same time got a warning from

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various people that the country would not be able to put up with much more of it. Imagine that weight of thought on the mind. When he left Plymouth he kept saying to Jock Colville and others with him 'I never saw the like', he really was profoundly upset.

After the bombing, factor two, the sinking at sea by U-boats, with which Churchill was amply familiar because he knew all about it from the First World War. He knew quite well that the U-boat campaign against the ships bringing supplies to this country could ditch us. There was the position in France, this is the third factor. How to deal with Vichy; what to do about the French navy; what, above all, to do with General De Gaulle who, for all his great patriotism, was extremely tiresome through a great part of the war to Winston. Then there loomed, this is the fourth factor, over much of this period the threat of invasion, which was acute in 1940, slightly relieved in 1941 and when Russia was attacked by Germany probably faded into the background. But that was a factor constantly to be borne in mind. There was the need to rebuild our army after the defeat at Dunkirk, not simply for war in the desert, which was to take place, but ultimately for a return to Europe. Then after Russia was attacked by Germany in 1942, constant pressure from Stalin for more support and eventually a call for a second front long before we were ready for it. Churchill was under constant pressure from Stalin to open up the second front.

There was also a critical House of Common, with many of the loyalists, remember, in those days absent in uniform. Those loyal to Churchill, many of them were away from the House, they were in uniform and they were involved in the war. There is this passage, I think in June 1941, from Chips Channon's diary: 'On all sides one hears increasing criticism of Churchill, he is undergoing a noticeable slump in popularity and many of his enemies, long silenced by his personal popularity, are once more vocal.' Crete had been a great blow there. That is another factor to weigh on the mind and keep somebody from sleep. There was the ever urgent problem of keeping American on our side, until Pearl Harbor, and giving us as much neutral aid, pseudo-neutral aid, as they could be persuaded to do.

Now my list is not complete, but there are nine constant anxieties, any one of which really would be enough to absorb the human mind, constantly nagging, constantly nagging at Churchill's mind. And from this flood of anxiety, if you think about it, really no relief at all. I can't think of any time in our history when a prime minister was subjected to such an unrelieved burden. In the First World War, you may remember, the duty in a sense was shared – Asquith in a sense did the first half of the war, Lloyd George did the latter part. In the Second World War Winston bore responsibility from 1940 until the finish. Although he had the wit to devise recreation of his own sort, it wasn't

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much to live on. What he really enjoyed at Chequers was a good film and probably his favourite film was a film about Nelson and Lady Hamilton made by Alexander Korda, whom he knighted in 1942. Churchill really enjoyed a thoroughly sentimental film, but that was about the only recreation he got. He enjoyed his meals, he enjoyed good company, his sleeping hours were eccentric but then they were what he needed.

George VI found the burden of the war very heavy indeed and got very depressed. Churchill and the king used to have lunch once a week at Buckingham Palace – rather a frugal lunch I may say. But anyway, that weekly talk, in the presence of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, was mutually supporting.

Winston's life before 1940 was very much a preparation for what really amounted to a tremendous threat to his sanity. He began his career as a subaltern, he fought in a number of wars, he was at Omdurman (I have been there at that battlefield, I know exactly how he was involved in the Lancers charge), he had big setbacks at the Dardanelles when he was first lord of the admiralty, he left the government to go into the front line. There is a very good story about why Winston went into the front line. He was with the Grenadier Guards, who were dry at battalion headquarters. They very much liked tea and condensed milk, which had no great appeal to Winston, but alcohol was permitted in the front line, in the trenches. So he suggested to the colonel that he really ought to see more of the war and get into the front line. This was highly commended by the colonel, who thought it was a very good thing to do.

Churchill's mental robustness was also much tested during what is called his wilderness years: he was out of office 1929 to 1939, quite a long time for a man with his abilities. There was the battle over India, which I was faintly involved in, and the battle over rearmament just before the war. Now some will argue that when I talk about mental robustness I am talking about courage, which of course is not in question. But not quite, because few men, no matter how courageous, could have sustained the constant adversity of the first twenty-eight months of that war and emerge from it as triumphantly as he did. There were men in history who showed the same quality, but most of them were altogether more roughly hewn than Winston. There were plenty of men who were less sensitive, they didn't have a cat sleeping on their bed, they didn't keep a pet canary like Winston. There was a very gentle side to Winston, which is rarely matched with people of such resolution. And the men who were in a sense as mentally robust as Winston, they weren't given as readily to tears as Winston, who cried very easily, showing a side of his nature which many people didn't suspect was there. That seems to me the amazing feature of this mental

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robustness: the fact that it was a nature which had an altogether softer side, an altogether kindlier, more thoughtful side than anyone might suppose. It was not a ruthless temperament, it was not a brutal temperament, it was a sensitive temperament mixed with mental robustness. And in my judgement, no one has ever really assessed sufficiently what that mental robustment meant for this country at the most critical time in its life. That fact alone has led me, the more I think about it, very close to believing in destiny.

LADY SOAMES: I have to say it has been a great thrill for me and very moving to sit here with former colleagues and friends of my father and to hear their different approaches to him. Given the distinguished audience we have got here I feel rather nervous, but I would like just to pick out two aspects of my father's life – one about his character and the other which is a slight sort of fancy on my part about him.

I want to talk about my father's quality of naturalness, which as a matter of fact has been brought out very much, both by Tony Benn and by Peter Carrington. This quality was apparent principally of course to his family, colleagues and friends. He was extremely natural and almost, I would say, entirely lacking in hypocrisy. I can truthfully say that he was the least pompous person I have ever met in my life. Even as his standing and fame grew, his public and private persona remained very much the same and many of those who knew him, both in private and public, have testified to what I can only call the sort of oneness of his character. His engaging, almost uninhibited frankness of expression and candour often I think quite surprised people, who were accustomed to more guarded and more circumspect public figures.

I remember an occasion when this was strongly demonstrated. I was accompanying my father after the war, during his second prime ministership. He was going somewhere tremendously important to be received, I am not sure it wasn't to have a freedom or perhaps a degree or something. I think my mother must have been away and I was in charge, and I was appalled to realise that we were going to be extremely late, so I was much embarrassed, and my father even seemed a little bit fussed, the way he kept looking at the turnip (which he called his watch) – 'we are going to be very late'. So when we got there I thought 'oh dear, glum faces'. Not at all. Charming people on the doorstep, mayors in robes and gold chains, and everybody saying 'Oh prime minister of course we quite understand'. My father got out and said 'I am so sorry I am late', 'Oh no prime minister, we quite understand, we quite understand last minute matters of state held you.' So I thought how wonderful, how divine they are, they have held him out this excuse without him having to say anything, feeling much relieved. To my horror I saw papa going rather pink, which was always a sort of sign

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that he was going to say something very truthful. He went very pink and he said 'Well, that is most kind of you, but I have to say I started late.' It was so unnecessary, I was quite cross with him!

But it was this very characteristic of an often unguarded spontaneity which he was aware of himself, and I think in his later life, when, particularly at mealtimes, he liked to feel that he could talk in an unguarded way, it caused him very much to prefer small groups of what came to be known as the golden circle, which was the group of his family and closest colleagues and friends. He was always wary, until he got to know them, of strangers. He preferred a small company, which did not include strangers with ears avidly pricked up for quotes, watchful eyes and wagging tongues.

He was blessed in that for him the boundary line between work and recreation was smudged. His life's main work was a natural expression of his gifts for heroic action, oratory and writing. And his naturalness and zest for life were among his most attractive characteristics, of which those of us who were fortunate enough to be close to him were the lucky beneficiaries. As a child at Chartwell I was one of these, although of course for a long time I took my luck for granted. But he was such fun to be with and Chartwell was his playground: landscaping, creating waterfalls and lakes, bricklaying, though I have to say that the charms of being a bricklayer's mate palled fairly soon for me, because moments of boredom caused inattention, which caused dropping of heavy bricks on small toes. So I used to retreat howling to the house quite often.

My father's love and concern for animals, whether farm, wild or domestic, was particularly appealing to a child. My vivid and happy memories are of a man whose zest for life made quite ordinary things exciting, and who despite all other preoccupations and heavy burdens never quite gave up his toys. Among my fondest adult memories of my father in extreme old age is of him on high summer days at Chartwell, sitting for long periods in front of the buddleia bushes, which he had caused to be planted for their delectation, watching the butterflies quivering and hovering, and keeping delighted tally of the red admirals, the tortoiseshells and the painted ladies, which he recognised and knew quite clearly.

The other thing I want to talk about is of how most of us probably envisage my father. For none of us here, or indeed anywhere, can recall Winston Churchill other than as a middle-aged or very old man. Our instant image of him is of a formidable and now legendary war leader, a venerable statesman crowned with honours, the hero of our finest hour. But I like sometimes to try to imagine my father as he must have been as a young man and to try to recapture the sheer dash and dare and determination of the young Winston. Although at Harrow he had not distinguished himself at games, or indeed at anything else

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very much, he won the public schools' fencing competition – no mean feat. And he must have been superbly fit after his training at Sandhurst as a cavalry officer. He was a brilliant polo player; long days in the saddle on the North-West Frontier; several brushes with death, and in the Sudan the cavalry charge at Omdurman. Then in South Africa the Boer War, the armoured train, his imprisonment and escape, which rang throughout the world, putting him on the front pages where he would remain for the rest of his life. All these adventures were also grist to his emerging skill as writer: pen and sword. Of course to a number of people, particularly senior officers in the field, young Churchill was insufferably bumptious, a medal hunter with an overplus of vitamin I.

But I want to end my contribution by just reminding myself and, if I may, you, of the effect the younger Winston Churchill could have on people. His army days over, the emerging politician soon to be controversial, jumping ship from Tory to Liberal, but already the star quality shone in him obviously, and was recognised by for instance at least one sophisticated observer: Lady Violet Asquith, who met him for the first time at a party in 1906. She was 19, a young woman quite accustomed to the company of brilliant people. He was 32, in his first ministerial office in her father's government. She would write: 'Until the end of dinner I listened to him spellbound. I can remember thinking this is what people mean when they talk about seeing stars. I was transfixed, transported, into a new element. I knew only that I had seen a great light. I recognised it as the light of genius.'

At the time of Winston and Clementine's engagement, his prospective mother-in-law, Lady Blanche Hozier, wrote to an old friend, the poet Wilfred Scawen Blunt: 'He is so like Lord Randolph, he has some of his faults and all of his qualities. He is gentle and tender and affectionate to those he loves, much hated by those who have not come under his personal charm.' And Sir Edward Grey took a charitable view of Winston after colleagues in 1908 had complained that he talked too loudly and too much at cabinets. Similar complaints, I may say, would emerge and are recorded on other occasions down the years. But Sir Edward took the long view and amicably ironic wrote: 'Winston very soon will become incapable from sheer activity of mind of being anything in a Cabinet but Prime Minister.' He also thought young Churchill was a genius, and forecast that his faults and mistakes would be forgotten in his achievements. I think that that long-ago prophecy has largely come true.

CHAIRMAN (DAVID CANNADINE) I thank all our speakers for such a marvellously varied and yet consistent set of memoirs of Churchill.

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Question: I was very interested by Lord Carrington's remarks about the disloyalty of Conservatives to their leaders. I don't know whether the story is true, of Churchill sitting on the government benches after the war when a young Conservative MP came up and sat next to him and said 'Mr Churchill, isn't it wonderful to be here amongst all our friends, and across the floor are the enemy', and Churchill growled back 'No my boy, across the floor are the opposition, the enemy is all around you.' My question is to Tony Benn: would that apply today to Tony Blair?

TONY BENN: I think the difference between the Labour and Conservative parties is that the Labour party elects a leader, argues with them from the day they are elected and keeps them until they want to go. The Tory party worship their leader and put a knife between their shoulderblades just as soon as they fail. Now that is the difference. Tony Blair could go on until he is 95, we have never got rid of a leader, but we make life very difficult for them while they are there. But the Conservative party's loyalty, I mean six minutes' standing ovations for Mrs Thatcher, and then we knew that Michael Heseltine was sharpening his penknife. We have never got rid of a leader to the best of my knowledge. Ramsay went, thank God, but that was a different consideration. I met him in 1930 at Number 10 and he offered me a chocolate biscuit, and since then I have looked at Labour leaders with chocolate biscuits very suspiciously and I am getting a lot of them at the moment!

Question: Can I tempt Bill Deedes into saying something about Churchill, *The Morning Post* and India in the mid-1930s?

LORD DEEDES: What happened was, the government determined upon self-government for India quite early on and this came to fruition in the early 1930s. Winston was convinced that it was a false step, not only provincial autonomy would go wrong, but the centre would go wrong, and with I suppose about twenty-five Conservative members on his side and the backing of *The Morning Post* and occasionally *The Daily Mail*, we had this campaign that ran for a couple of years whether or not India should be granted self-government. In fact the Government of India Bill, 356 clauses, was seen through by Sam Hoare and Rab Butler as his number two while all this was going on. In defiance of Winston's wishes, self-government for India was postponed because of the war but was in a sense statutorially arranged before the war broke out.

I of course had sympathy with Winston. I was at the Wavertree by-election where Randolph fought and worked with the Churchill family

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up there, and I had developed sympathy with the whole thing. But I have since come to see that it was probably a mistake to think that India should not have self-government. It was a misjudgement, you can't alter that fact. Baldwin in a sense was right about it. I think it came out of Winston's great affection for India, his early days on the North-West Frontier, it was from the best motives. But I have to say in all honesty, although I supported the campaign – I was India correspondent for *The Morning Post* for a while – I do think it was a misjudgement.

LORD CARRINGTON: This has got not much to do with Churchill, but I think it is quite interesting about India. In 1947, when the India Independence Bill was going through parliament, it arrived in the House of Lords. The House of Lords was then opposed to independence for India, very largely I think because so many of them had been influenced by Winston Churchill, and this rather derided character Halifax got up to speak and it is almost the only occasion in all the time that I have been sitting in the House of Lords when one speech turned the whole debate. Because of that speech the House of Lords passed the second reading of the India Bill, and it was really rather a notable occasion. He did make the most magnificent speech.

TONY BENN: Halifax, as Lord Irwin, was viceroy of India from 1929–31 when my father was secretary of state. I got from the India Office library the full correspondence between Halifax, this very High-Church Conservative, and my dad, who was a radical man, and the account of India at the time is absolutely fascinating. Irwin was respected in India, because when he arrived it was Good Friday and he wouldn't meet anybody for religious reasons, and the Indians said 'here must be an Englishman who believes in his religion', which surprised them very much indeed. Irwin arranged for Gandhi to come to London for the round-table conference, which is when I met him. I was in the House of Lord when the royal assent was given to the India Independence Act, at the moment when the title emperor of India jumped into the dustbin of history, because after that of course no king of England was emperor of India. As for what Peter Carrington says about Halifax, I must go and read it because sometimes one speech *does* make a difference and if he says that influenced such a reactionary body as the House of Lords it must have been quite a speech.

Question: Mr Benn, you were in the House when the Conservatives came back in 1951. One of the first acts of Churchill was to get rid of everything that was on the Festival of Britain site. Can you comment on what you felt about that at the time?

TONY BENN: I remember the Festival of Britain very well. It was an

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attempt of course to boost our morale after the war. I think the first exhibition we had was 1946, called Britain Can Make It, and then there was the Festival of Britain, which was as controversial as the Dome. It was actually very successful. I went to the opening and I enjoyed it very much – the skylon, the dome and so on. But Churchill had it cleared. I daresay he wanted the South Bank free of memories. What he would have done with the wheel (the London Eye) now I do not know. But can I just add one thing that came out of Mary Soames's account: what a tremendous sense of fun he had. At Chequers, when I stayed there, a Dutch painting was pointed out to me, in the corner of which Winston had painted a mouse. Another occasion I remember was when he got up at a very critical moment of a debate, it must have been as leader of the opposition, and Attlee was very worried that Winston rose. And Winston said 'If the Right Honourable gentleman wonders about me, I am looking for my zuzubes', he had lost them, and he took one and dragged it down towards him. An enormous sense of fun he had. On one occasion a Labour member had one of these enormously elaborate question – 'Does the Right Honourable gentleman, recognising and remembering and take into account' and so on and so on – it went on about two minutes, and Winston said 'Yes sir' and sat down and he completely deflated the questioner. I think his sense of fun was something that did make him enormously attractive and free of pomposity, and these are the things you remember about people after you have forgotten the political arguments.

Question: One of the greatest blows that Churchill suffered from was of course the defeat in the 1945 election. Lord Deedes, Lord Carrington and Mr Benn had served in the forces during the war, and Churchill believed that the forces voted largely against him. Do you believe that was so, and if so, why was it so?

LORD DEEDES: I would very much like to answer that question. In my view in 1945 Winston was a victim of the between-the-wars government, the National Government that came into office in 1931 on the resignation of a Labour government, a government in which he had no part at all. What the country remembered in 1945 was the best part of three million unemployed during the 1930s – I am not blaming the government, but it happened – that was a major, major factor; laxity over rearmament; Munich, all of which Winston opposed. And I have always believed that the verdict in 1945 had more to do with the record of the government in the 1930s of which Winston was not part, than any kind of comment upon Winston himself.

TONY BENN: Can I confirm that. I was coming back in a troopship in

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the summer of 1945 and we had a political debate on board the troopship and I was the Labour candidate. There is no doubt whatever that all the troops on board that ship, including people who had served with General Slim in Burma and so on, were undoubtedly in favour of a change. But they weren't anti-Winston, and I think what Bill Deedes says is absolutely right: people said 'never again, we are never going back to the means test, we are never going back to unemployment, we are never going back to fascism, we are never going back to that, we want a new Britain'. And remember this, war does funny things. I think somebody said it is 99 per cent boredom and 1 per cent moments of real danger, so you had masses of time to talk. I learned much more as an aircraftsman second class in Rhodesia and in Egypt than ever I learned at university, because you met people, you talked and talked, and a lot of the discussion during the war was political – what is the war about, what are we going to do afterwards, what is the postwar world going to be like.

I remember on the troopship going out, this was earlier, going to the officer commanding troops and I said 'We want to have a discussion on War Alms.' The colonel said to me, I was the most junior, an aircraftman second class was probably known as a private, 'Well Benn, if you have a discussion on War Alms, I hope there will be no politics'. I said 'Oh no sir, certainly not!'

I have a funny feeling, and this is the difference between the left and the right. I think the right in Britain was fighting the Germans and the left was fighting fascism. That is quite an important difference. We were fighting to see that the ideas of fascism never came, whereas for some people this was teaching the Hun another lesson because they wouldn't learn from the defeat of 1918. I don't know that others will agree, but that was certainly the way that I saw it and my family saw it, and I would be interested to know whether Bill Deedes would go along with that second part.

LORD DEEDES: Good point.

LORD CARRINGTON: If I may just say, in my squadron in France in 1945 there was not one single man who would vote for the Conservative party, not one. This was partly due, as Bill Deedes and Tony Benn have said, to the fact that quite a large number of them were unemployed before the war and had had a pretty awful time, and they remembered it. It was also a fact, which perhaps is not particularly creditable, that quite a number of them thought that if they voted Labour they would still get Winston Churchill as the prime minister. Thirdly, there was an appalling publication called *ABCA*, which was edited by Dick Crossman and which was pure Labour party propa-

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ganda, and which we had to go and tell our squadron was the be-all and end-all and the absolute truth in the future. It was the most wonderful Labour party propaganda there has ever been.

LORD DEEDES: As we are reminiscing, they offered me the editorship of *ABCA*, but I turned it down.

TONY BENN: Mind you, we never thought we'd win the election. During the whole campaign in 1945, when I was driving a loudspeaker van in Westminster when I got back from Egypt, not one of us thought we'd win. There were no opinion polls to mislead us, there were no spin doctors to confuse us, and we all thought we had lost. I was at Transport House when the results came out, it was two weeks if you remember after polling day, and I was sitting there in the dark watching the results on an epidiascope, and we couldn't believe it. And out of the bright light into the room came Clem, who had flown back from the meeting at Potsdam, and I saw his face when he heard he was prime minister. The BBC man came up to me and said 'Will you say "three cheers to the prime minister" ', for which I was too shy, but Clem was astonished that he had won. So in a sense that confirmed that it wasn't an anti-Winston vote in any way at all.

Question: I want to put a trivial question and a very serious one. I was inspired by Mary Soames' account of the young Winston to ask a question about the very young Winston. Perhaps you can only answer by checking backwards from what you know. If I recall rightly one of the great stories of his early life is that when he was a very young officer the London County Council had put up screens in the music hall to try to cut down the competition and make them somewhat more respectable places, and as a very young officer Churchill was said to have led a gang of young officers and men to knock down these screens. I wonder if this was just a sign of pluck and dash, that he'd like to be at the head of an exciting escapade, or whether there was a more or less conscious and principled gesture against sexual puritanism going on.

LADY SOAMES: No, I am sure you are reading too much into it. I think it was just unseemly larkiness on the part of a lot of perhaps young officers out for an evening. I really refuse to have political correctness cast on my father as long ago as that! I can't throw any light on it, it was before even my time.

D.C. WATT: Coming back to the 1945 general election, if there hadn't been a party truce during the war the results of the 1945 election would

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be much clearer. The whole country's revulsion was not against Winston Churchill at all, but against the Tory party, the Tory party organisation and the kind of candidates they preferred in the 1930s and during the war.

Question: Churchill believed in a Liberal and Conservative axis, now we have a Labour and Liberal axis. Do you think the Conservative party should try and get back to the Churchillian position and ally more with the Liberals?

LORD DEEDES: This relates to something that Lord Carrington said. One cannot compare the mood, the attitude, the thinking of the Liberal party of Winston's day with the party of today, it is simply not comparing like with like. The Liberal party of Winston's time and the Liberal party of today are two totally different handkerchiefs. People stick to their names and change their views. That is why Winston Churchill changed his own view and joined the Conservative party. The past is no guide whatsoever as to what might happen now, that is the point I want to make.

LORD CARRINGTON: Without being party political, if I were a member of the Liberal party I would be very anxious about what their leadership is doing, because it seems to me that they lay themselves open really to 'what is the point of voting Liberal, you might as well vote Labour'.

TONY BENN: Well, that raises a very big question. If I were a Conservative I would say that, of course, I fully understand that. But I think of Churchill and Macmillan, and to some extent Ted Heath, as One Nation Tories, who would have a lot in common with the Liberal party. Even Clem Attlee, it used to be said he was a typical major from the First World War: it was the horses first, the men second and the officers last. That was the way he saw it, a very responsible view. Macmillan's view was much influenced by the fact that he fought in the First World War and then saw the people with whom he had fought being thrown into unemployment in the interwar years. Harold Macmillan's book *The Middle Way* would lead to expulsion from the Labour party of today, because he said we have to plan our economy. So the politics are very complicated. Of course there always were Simonite Liberals. You know what they said about John Simon – he sat on the fence so long, the iron had entered into his soul. But he was a man who was really a natural Conservative, and ended up of course as Conservative lord chancellor, but he had been a Liberal in the old days and then the Simonites moved over with MacDonald in 1931. It is very complex. Normally, the more progressive of the two parties is

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destroyed by any coalition, which is why Lloyd George destroyed the Liberal party by going into coalition after the First World War and why my dad would never touch a coalition with a bargepole. He didn't believe in that type of politics, designed to get power and not to do anything.

LORD CARRINGTON: You are coming round to my point of view!

TONY BENN: We might agree about the rapid reaction force as a force undermining NATO, but I won't go into that either.

CHAIRMAN: I think there is a danger that agreement is going to break out and we should probably stop at that point. But before we do so, let me ask each member of our panel if they have a final brief thought.

TONY BENN: The wonderful use of language. It came home to me very much, because of the famous speech he made about the RAF – 'Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few.' Shortly after that, the BBC had the week's good cause and a Labour MP called Geoff Muff, who later became Lord Calverly, gave the broadcast, and I have never forgotten the words with which he finished. He said 'I cannot put our debt to the Royal Air Force better than the words used by our own Prime Minister. Never since wars began have such a relatively large number of people been indebted to such a relatively small number!'

LORD DEEDES: I will end up by offering you a bit of advice that Winston once gave a very timid Conservative candidate. I was not at the lunch, but the candidate took a sip of Winston's claret and said 'A very nice wine, sir'. And Winston turned to him and said 'Sip burgundy, swill claret.' Keep it in mind!

CHAIRMAN: It has been a great pleasure for me to find myself, wholly by association, sitting in such an illustrious and anecdotally memorable company this evening. We have all been informed, moved, amused and entertained in spectacular style. I ask you to join with me in thanking Tony Benn, Lord Carrington, Lord Deedes and Mary Soames for their marvellous memories of Winston Churchill.

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