

The real Tebbit?

In his forthcoming autobiography, *Upwardly Mobile*, (Weidenfeld, £12.95) Norman Tebbit writes that he was "an excessively shy child". He tells us also that he "cannot remember" saying goodbye to his parents, as he left London, a Wales-bound evacuee. "We were," he continues, "an unemotional family and I doubt if there were any tears. . . Anyway, what was there to blub about?"

Most people would say that little has changed since that War-time departure from Edmonton. Certainly, it's hard to imagine 'On-ye-bike' Tebbit blubbing about anything. The very word carries with it all the scorn and derision that characterise so many of the man's public utterances.

But in private? Surely it's impossible for any man, however hard, to emerge emotionally unscathed from the carnage of Brighton. Didn't the IRA tear away more than a side of flesh, lay bare more than his pelvic bone? And even before that October night four years ago, Tebbit's life had not been without its traumas. One longs to know more of the family man. The vignettes offered here reveal a decent enough husband who stood by his wife during her recurrent bouts of illness, combining household chores with Parliamentary duties. Surely, therefore, that lugubrious and abrasive manner must be a cover for a deeper, more humane individual?

Sitting eyeball-to-eyeball across a table in what must be one of the Palace of Westminster's nicest offices, the thought continues to tantalize. Tebbit in the flesh differs little from the screen version, though like most public figures he is shorter than you imagine. His manner is polite and businesslike, faintly awkward. He listens to questions and arguments, agreeing or disagreeing afterwards rather than interrupting in the way the Prime Minister would. He betrays little emotion and though his eyes meet mine, his gaze seems distant and unfocused. It's rather as though he were preoccupied and functioning on auto-pilot. When he talks of his wife, that gaze is averted floorwards.

Characteristically, he minces few words when writing about Brighton. He felt he would die there, amid the rubble of the Grand Hotel, though he and Margaret Tebbit held hands and reassured each other as they awaited rescue. The force of the impact was, he writes, "indescribable. . . Something tore into my abdomen with a terrible blow and I heard my very guts sloshing inside me. There was a colossal impact, tearing a great hole in my side. . . My head was trapped. . . As I reached down my hand encountered a great sticky bleeding mess, in the gaping hole in my side."

Despite all the operations and grafts, he was at work within the month, making decisions from his hospital bed in Stoke Mandeville, where he was taken to be with his wife. "The work therapy was so I wouldn't brood about Margaret's injuries, and how we were going to cope," he admits now. Tebbit himself reckons he's "in pretty good shape, physically. I intend to spend next month in the garden clearing overgrown woodland and replanting it. Margaret is still improving slightly. The problem is finding suitable staff to look after her - we have to have someone available 24 hours a day."

She has, he continues, withstood the trauma with "extraordinary resilience, though obviously it would be entirely unnatural if she didn't sometimes have a black day, particularly when faced with the frustration of the things we wanted to do and now no longer can. It varies from the big things to the comparatively trivial. . . One's lost spontaneity. You can't decide 'we'll go to the cinema tonight,' because you can't get a wheelchair in. . . My eldest son is a civil engineer and he tends to move around a lot. He can't every time look for a house which is suitable for my wife to come to. My daughter's married to a schoolteacher and he doesn't run to a house that is convenient for wheelchairs, which means



Tebbit: An act of venality not vanity.



Liz Thomson searches for the man behind the book

lots of space, downstairs bathrooms, lifts. . . Our youngest, William, is just in the process of leaving home, buying a flat of his own - which we won't be able to visit him in. Those are things which we can't quantify."

After eight years as a Minister, Norman Tebbit returned to the backbenches last year, so honouring a promise to his wife to spend more time at home. The other Margaret in his life tried hard, he says, to dissuade him from so doing. He held the reins at Central Office until the autumn and has spent the ensuing months "cementing myself into other things - mostly to earn money. Staff to look after my wife costs a Cabinet Minister's net salary," he explains, adding that Jonathan Aitken's trust fund was an enormous help, especially during the time he was still in the Government.

It's no surprise, therefore, that money is much on his mind. As he is the first to admit, the book was seen as a financial rather than a literary endeavour. "I hadn't intended to write, but a couple of publishers approached me and mentioned sums of money which I thought it would be against the interests of my family to refuse," Tebbit remarks, with disarming honesty. "I regard the writing as an act of venality rather than vanity."

A dispassionate discourse, *Upwardly Mobile* is, in its own curious way, a compelling read; revealing precisely because it reveals so little. What you see is what you get and most of that was in place by the time 15-year-old Norman joined the Enfield Young Conservatives. His firmly working class background, with its short supply of money, might have been the making of a Labourite but the teenage Tebbit already had "a distrust of socialism and a sympathy with the liberal free-market views".

At 16, he was already considering a political career and saw journalism as a possible route to Westminster. Heart set on Fleet Street, he joined the Prices Room at the *FT* where he was "a reluctant and hostile conscript" to NATSOPA, resolving even then to "break the power of the closed shop."

National Service intervened and Tebbit became a pilot cadet with a posting that clearly provided a welcome break from a home life that seemed to provide neither comfort nor happiness. "Flying was one of my first loves. Going through the Air Force, being commissioned was like going to university. I learned a great deal about

life, a great deal about myself. . . I don't suppose anyone would ever accuse me of being polished, but it took off some of the rough edges!"

His flying career provides the most passionate part of the book and Tebbit clearly enjoyed the service life, with all its slightly drunken camaraderie. Turned down as a prospective Falkland Islands air ambulance pilot and dissuaded from becoming a tea planter in Assam, Pilot Officer Tebbit instead joined 604 Squadron to train with fighters and, finally, in late 1953, was accepted by BOAC where he was even a spokesman for BALPA.

At a party in late '55, he met a young nurse from the Westminster Hospital. Within a year, he and Margaret were married. After a miscarriage, a son, John, was born, with father in proud attendance. A second miscarriage followed before the family could be completed. Tebbit spent much time away from home, flying long-haul routes on the new 707 and the whole family once joined him for a three-month posting to Honolulu.

For a while, politics took a back seat to flying but, by the early Sixties, we find Tebbit railing against the "myths" of Macmillan and Kennedy, accusing them of having no purpose or direction, "except that purpose of staying in office." In '63, alarmed by the "awful spectre" of Socialism, he rejoined the Conservative Association where he met Cecil Parkinson. Ironically, it was Peter Walker who helped him up the political ladder, suggesting work at local level as a prelude to finding a suitable seat.

In 1969, Tebbit was selected as Tory candidate for Epping and took the seat from Labour in the 1970 election with a majority of 2,575. Right from the start - from his first speeches to the Epping Selection Committee - the now familiar Tebbit trademarks were much in evidence and he was even accused of dirty tricks in his first campaign. Speaking on housing and aviation matters, he was soon in the headlines and in no time at all he was criticizing Prime Minister Heath.

Though Tebbit had "only ever exchanged a dozen words" with Margaret Thatcher before her 1974-5 leadership bid, he was soon a staunch supporter of her against the Tory Establishment. "I don't think anybody realized the extraordinary talent that was there. . . but for the failure

of the Heath Government nobody would have done. I think she'd have continued as a Cabinet Minister, might even have become Treasury Minister, perhaps even Chancellor. But I doubt that the complete quality of her would ever have been realized," says her former right hand man, seemingly incapable of speaking about Thatcher in anything but superlatives. "She was a very great surprise," he adds. "In fun, I often used to call it the Corporals' Coup."

His apparently uncritical support was reciprocated once the Tories were returned to power in 1979. He looks back on his Ministerial career with pride and pleasure and cites his trades union legislation, the establishment of the Youth Training Scheme and the British Telecom privatization, "which people in the City didn't think was possible", as his three greatest achievements.

There's also, of course, the '87 victory, though he didn't single it out. And if Thatcher is concerned as to what skeletons might fall out of which closet when *Upwardly Mobile* is published just prior to the Tory Conference she need have no fears. The book is all kiss and no tell as far as she's concerned. The now-famous "wobbly Thursday" is put down to nothing more than a Prime Ministerial tooth abcess. "Elections are emotional times. I was more relaxed than she was. . . If she'd got it wrong, she'd never have forgiven herself and the Party wouldn't have forgiven her."

What about Norman Tebbit for leader? "I would be very reluctant. . . It would be better if I were to invite anyone to consider the role of a Prime Minister and the spouse of a Prime Minister and see how they would fit in with our circumstances." As to his future as an MP, "That's something one decides talking to one's Association. I never assume that they will want me to stay. . . And we've got quite a long time before we get to a general election."

So, little is given away. At times, *Upwardly Mobile* does suggest a softer side to the man called variously the Prince of Darkness and the Chingford Polecat. We find him, in 1971, appealing on behalf of Pauline Jones, sentenced to three years for abducting a baby. Tebbit, understanding that she'd acted in a fit of depression after suffering a miscarriage, visited her in Holloway. He was an early supporter of flight deck equality, and believes firmly that women be allowed the same opportunities as men. And he cooked and cleaned during the times when his wife was hospitalized following periods of breakdown. Though one respects his wish for privacy, it would have made better reading had he put more flesh on the cadaver of his non-political life.

"I assume," he answers, perhaps wrongly, "that the public is more likely to be interested in what happens in politics than they are in whether I'm good at wiping up or whether I cook a decent *coq au vin*."

And does he? "Oh yes. I'm a good cook. All our family is. To a man and a woman."