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# Letts Rip!

Written by Quentin Letts

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# LETTS RIP!





## INSIDE THE PARLIAMENT OF FOOLS





QUENTIN LETTS

# LETTS Rip!

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To my children Claud, Eveleen and Honor – this is what I was up to all those months away from home.

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# Introduction

AT the gates of Downing Street one day in early 2007, shortly before some prime ministerial photo opportunity, a Whitehall special adviser refused to admit us sketchwriters. She declared that the event was open only to 'real journalists'. Cheeky sod.

Qualms about sketchwriting are not uncommon at Westminster. Politicians and their grunts dislike the rude, unbiddable sketchers. Some of the lobby journalists regard us with suspicion, too. I can see their point. Sketchwriters do not have to be balanced or break exclusive stories. We must sometimes seem lazy lizards, licensed to editorialise.

I started writing sketches for the *Daily Telegraph* in the autumn of 1990. Simon Heffer, the incumbent, was on a sabbatical in Australia and I was asked to fill the gap. Simon was – is – a tremendous Thatcherite and while he was Down Under his heroine was toppled. Had he only been in London perhaps he could have saved her.

This book covers a later period, after I joined the *Daily Mail*. It starts at the height of Blairism and charts its slow, grotty demise. This has been a bad decade for Parliament and at times I felt my soul being corroded by anger. Occasional fury is allowable but

sketches are better when they aim for understated bafflement or, now that we have a Cameron/Clegg coalition, undiluted joy at the Almighty's provision of comic plunder.

Re-reading my efforts while making these selections, I realised that over the past ten years I sometimes became swivel-eyed in my vexation at the way Blair and Co. were mistreating our legislature. You will find a few non-political articles to lighten the stew. Sketches have been edited to remove (some of) the boring bits. A few nuggets have been hurled into the mix to help create a flavour of the era.

The parliamentary sketch is open to accusations of frivolity and ephemerality. The only response is to raise a paw and say 'fair cop, guvnor'. Sketches describe the sights and sounds and smells of political debate. They take the view that politicians' policies are covered adequately elsewhere. Sketches succumb to the occasional feud. They are subjective. They do not tell the whole story. They are *sketches*, not oil paintings.

Yet sketchwriters, like canaries down the mine, can be the first to detect fatal gases. As early as June 2000 it was clear that Gordon Brown was opposed to defence spending (this became deadly, for him and our forces, nine years later). That same year, the sketch pointed out that the Tories needed to modernise to regain power. The point was grasped by the party only five years later. If the City had in October 2003 read a sketch which mentioned a man called Goodwin, investors might not have lost so many billions on bank stocks. Sketchwriters were also writing about MPs' abuse of expenses long before disaster hit in 2009.

Fainthearts sometimes accuse me of being snobbish, right-wing and unkind to female politicians. I would certainly like a smaller state, if only because it would give ministers less chance to meddle with our lives.

And I hope I am every ounce as unkind to female politicians as

I am to male politicians. To be otherwise would be sexist. Would it not?

This mangy, splenetic old sketch is a journalistic rear gunner and seeks no greater station in life. It deals in the rackety theatre of manners and comportment and if that is snobbery, so be it. Politicians spend much time and money on such things because they know that voters are influenced by them. The newspaper writer who describes it is no more of a snob than the Leftist Prime Minister who glottal-stops his public school accent. Do I mean you, Tony Blair? I do believe I do!

## And with a swerve and the squeal of burning rubber, Mr Byers was free

JAMMY devil, Stephen Byers. For weeks it has all been going horribly wrong for the Trade Secretary, to the point that people said he would be zapped in a reshuffle. But yesterday, with a last-minute swerve and the squeal of burning rubber, Mr Byers avoided disaster – for a few months, at least.

Life was surely never meant to be so interesting for this metallic-voiced former polytechnic lecturer, a fellow of such greyness that he would be hard to locate on a foggy morning. In the world of Byers, things are supposed to run to timetables. Careers are mapped. Promotion and success are plotted on graphs. Political crises are not meant to explode in one's face, catching you in the eye like the radiator cap of an overheated Wolseley Hornet.

But that is what happened with Rover this spring and Mr Byers handled the matter inexpertly, a sign possibly of inexperience, more probably of incompetence. He has not deserved much luck but yesterday a great dollop of it came his way and he was able to stand up in the Commons, announce that Rover had been bought and peacock himself as the saviour of West Midlands engineering.

Government backbenchers were ecstatic. They knew it had been a close thing not only for Rover but also for Labour's vote in the Black Country. Midlands MPs almost wept with gratitude. Our seats, our seats. Thank you! The likes of Ian Pearson (Lab, Dudley S), Lynne Jones (Lab, Birmingham Selly Oak) and Tony Wright (Lab, Cannock Chase) said hallelujah. Ken Purchase (Lab, Wolverhampton NE) came over all dewy-eyed and praised the trade unions for the part they had played in the Rover deal.

A Brylcreemed Leftie called Dennis Turner (Lab, Wolverhampton SE), chairman of Westminster's catering committee, said it was

high time for 'a lovely party'. 'We should rejoice!' cried Mr Turner, becoming way over-excited. 'It is a lovely day!'

Some of the Labour lot spat fury at the Tories for, as they saw it, failing to show adequate delight at the Rover sale. 'Miserable sods!' snarled Peter Snape (Lab, West Bromwich E) under his breath. He pointed at the Tory front bench and called them 'cynics'.

There was more of this bitter fare from Mr Byers when he launched a nasty little attack on his shadow, Angela Browning. She, incidentally, boosted her matronly airs by wearing a blue and white outfit resembling a ward sister's uniform circa 1965.

Mr Byers claimed that 'while some of us were rolling up our sleeves' the Conservatives had done 'nuffing'. He noted that John Redwood, the former Tory frontbencher who made much of the anti-Byers running recently, was not present in the chamber. Mr Byers shook his fist in a rage of self-justification. He accused the Tories of trying to play 'party politics' with the Rover crisis. Er, so what was this, then?

It was left to the veteran Martin O'Neill (Lab, Ochil) to introduce chill, financial reality to proceedings. Almost apologetically, he noted that the backing for Rover's new owners is, at present, 'comparatively small' for an enterprise with such ambitions. Mr O'Neill is chairman of the Trade and Industry Select Committee and one fears he may have a point.

If that was the gloomiest moment, then the prettiest sight of the day was a glorious orange rose in the buttonhole of Tony Baldry (Con, Banbury). Mr Baldry could have picked better, mind you, for orange is the party colour of the Liberal Democrats, and at teatime Sandra Gidley, victor of the Romsey by-election, took her seat for the first time. Nearly the entire Lib Dem parliamentary force (if that is not too satirical a term) turned out to cheer Mrs Gidley. 'Tory loss!' crowed Bob Russell (Lib Dem, Colchester). Given that the by-election was caused by the death of the Tories'

Michael Colvin in a fire, this was a crass thing to say. It reinforced one's view of the Lib Dems as the vultures of British politics.

10th May 2000

*How right Martin O'Neill was about Rover. Its 'saviours' were to prove anything but, extracting millions for themselves before the company crashed. Stephen Byers left the Cabinet in 2002.*

## With a hunted glance at the Tories, Miss Drown sat down

DRIPPY by name, drippy by nature. That is the initial impression given by Julia Drown (South Swindon), the Labour MP who has been at the forefront of requests that breastfeeding be allowed in Parliament.

Miss Drown, 37, product of Hampstead Comprehensive and Oxford University, daughter of a picture restorer and a nurse, was yesterday on her feet in the chamber. This was a rare sight, for she is not the most assiduous of attenders. So how did she do? How did she sound? In a word: wet.

She wanted the Government to solve the problems of the world's poor and starving. Shoulders hunched, she brushed her long, straight fringe off her forehead and clutched an Order Paper close to her front, as though for strength. In tremulous, tinny voice she disclosed that lots of people in India are having a rotten time of things. The West should, well, do something about it. Yes. And with a sniffle and a fearful bite on lower lip, and a reproachful, hunted glance at the Tory benches opposite, she sat down.

It was more like a fourth-form essay than adult parliamentary

debate. But perhaps it is too easy to be beastly to Miss Drown and her sisters on the Labour benches.

Perhaps there are some occasions when William Hague and his crack troops could do with a Julia Drown or two.

Looking across at the Opposition side of the House, one found only men. The old stereotype of a Tory MP was of an elderly military man, pinstriped, waistcoated, perhaps mustachioed, probably double gusseted. That no longer applies, but the modern counterpart, though sleeker and clean shaven, is barely any less clubby and male.

Their ringleader is Eric Forth (Bromley & Chislehurst), and there he duly was yesterday, second row back, screwing up his eyes in disbelief at the feebleness of Miss Drown's little speech. Around him sat the small knot of Tory parliamentarians who, with little recognition or thanks, keep the business of Opposition politics going at Westminster.

John Bercow (Buckingham), Graham Brady (Altrincham), James Gray (N Wilts), Nick St Aubyn (Guildford), Owen Paterson (N Shropshire), Julian Lewis (New Forest E), Desmond Swayne (New Forest W) and Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury) are all in their first parliament.

Unlike Blair's Babes they have quickly picked up the complex rules of Commons debate. Forth's Furies, you could call them, though a Labour supporter might prefer Forth's Frothers. They have become highly competent debaters, acute scrutineers. They speak without notes, manage to cast their voices over the din, and are fearless in attacking Government obfuscation. Yet the contrast yesterday between them and droning Miss Drown was not entirely a happy one.

In their regulation dark-blue suits and with their intelligent airs Forth's Furies undoubtedly cut a striking dash, but one felt a twinge of sympathy for the lone woman. Down there on the floor of the House it must be nerve-racking to stand in front of such a

squad. Some Labour women do better than our brittle heroine from South Swindon. A few minutes after Miss Drown's oration Shona McIsaac (Lab, Cleethorpes) jumped to her feet and made a tough, short speech in favour of distant water trawlermen.

Miss McIsaac, who is only a couple of years older than Miss Drown, said her piece with a grand twinkle in the eye and she was immediately rewarded with a ministerial promise that the matter would be given proper consideration.

Miss Drown, therefore, cannot blame it all on some institutional sexism in Parliament.

In the chamber there is a real need for rigorous, robust analysis. So thank goodness Forth's Furies are there to defend our interests. But in the outside world the Tories need to realise that dark suits and intellectual toughness are not enough to win over an electorate. A little more sympathy would not go amiss. They could do with a woman's touch.

12th May 2000

*When Gordon Brown lost power in 2010 he was felt, by many voters, to have neglected defence spending. This problem was noted by the sketch a decade earlier – not that anyone took much notice.*

## The Minister hurled everything overboard and paddled like mad

WHEN a member of Labour's leftwing 'awkward squad' complains about cuts in defence budgets, it may be time to reach for the tin helmet and ask your builder's merchant to deliver sandbags. Gordon Prentice (Lab, Pendle) is about as pink as they come. He disapproves of the Monarchy, thinks the honours

system stinks, and resigned a low position in the Blair Government on (extraordinary, I know) a matter of principle. He felt Labour was not doing its duty towards single mothers. Yet this was the man who in the Commons yesterday asked what the blazes was going on with the Royal Navy budget.

Could it really be true – 'I cannot for the life of me believe it is,' he said – that the Government had 'failed to order a single warship' since it took office? Not one. Nul points. Or 'zero', as Tory hecklers kept saying, forming noughts with their fingers and thumbs.

John Spellar, a bearded creature who occupies one of the ministerial berths at Defence, tapped out a nervous rhythm on the despatch box. 'Er, well,' he began, and cleared his throat. Mr Prentice peered magisterially at the Minister, head cocked, as he awaited a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Mr Spellar bit on that hairy lower lip and blinked, as tentative as the ward room orderly who has to tell a portly admiral that all the rissoles have been eaten.

'Er,' he said, 'er …' And then out it came. Naval requirements, Mr Spellar claimed, had 'altered'. As a result, only half the number of ships is now required to do the same job. Conservative MPs cackled and Mr Prentice looked disappointed. It was true, after all. Oh dear.

Defence spending is in tatters. At one point yesterday MPs talked about the high number of unexploded bombs littering the Yugoslav landscape, but there is arguably no bigger ticking UXB than the one in Whitehall marked 'Labour's military neglect'.

The Armed Forces do not hold much of a grasp on the affections of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. After Oxford University, the military is probably Establishment bogey number two in the anguished subconscious of G. Brown. So when Defence Ministers have lobbied him for tax money in the past three years he has not given them much satisfaction.

As Menzies Campbell, for the Lib Dems, put it, there is little

chance of the defence budget recovering while 'the shadow of the Chancellor' hangs over the MoD.

*Jane's Fighting Ships*, a military publication little given to hyperbole, has pointed out that we currently have the biggest gap in naval spending 'since the days of Henry VIII'. This coincides with the possibility that our new RAF fighters will not have guns (too dear) and with the fact that our soldiers in Sierra Leone are having to make do without significant armour. Iain Duncan Smith, improving as Shadow Defence Secretary, speculated that at this rate Royal Navy sailors will soon 'have to say bang instead of firing real bullets'.

Did he overstate his case? Well, it is reported that the frigate *Sheffield* has dismantled its Exocet loaders because there aren't enough rockets. Geoff Hoon, Defence Secretary, left the job of defending Government policy largely to our shaggy friend. Like many commanding officers, Mr Hoon knows when to duck.

Mr Spellar hurled everything overboard, paddled like mad, and was soon throwing up as much froth as the propellers of a dreadnought which is being parked by a trainee bosun. Eventually he lost his temper and wailed that the Opposition 'couldn't give a damn'. But the chap who couldn't give a damn may be rather closer to home for New Labour.

6th June 2000

*Days later, an early sighting of the 'bottler Brown'.*

## She squawked like an oil-stricken guillemot

GORDON Brown performed one of the biggest bottle-outs since Peter O'Toole gave up strong drink. The Chancellor refused

to take a Commons question about himself, Peter Mandelson and the euro. 'Frit! Frit!' yelled Conservative MPs, using Margaret Thatcher's old Lincolnshire word for 'frightened'.

Mr Brown ordered the Treasury's number five minister, Economic Secretary Melanie Johnson, to answer instead. Miss Johnson may speak like 'Woy' Jenkins but she is an inexperienced parliamentarian. She fluffed it.

Question 12 on the agenda for Treasury Questions was tabled by Julian Lewis (Con, New Forest E). 'What discussions has the Chancellor had with a) the Minister for Europe or b) the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the timing of any move to replace the pound with the euro?' Crafty. Both the Europe Minister, Keith Vaz, and the Ulster Secretary, Mr Mandelson, are dead keen for us to join the euro soonest, whereas Mr Brown wants to suck it and see. The Cabinet is said to be riven on the issue.

Labour MPs tried to slow things down during the first forty minutes of the hour's session in the hope that Mr Lewis's question would not be reached. We had had lengthy analysis of fiscal arrangements for voluntary sector bodies, of employment policies for the North-East and of Third World debt (Mr Brown shared with us some stuff about pupil/teacher ratios in Uganda). It was starting to look as though question 12 was doomed, especially when Keith Darvill (Lab, Upminster) stuck out his little pinkie and expressed undying fascination with capital gains tax policy regarding long-term investments. The minutes were ticking by. But Speaker Boothroyd is a sharp old bird. She hurried things along and refused Labour any more supplementary queries. 'Question 12!' she barked. 'Hooray!' said the Opposition. Seven minutes left.

Ministers are supposed to give an answer to the question listed on the Order Paper but Miss Johnson had this to say to Mr Lewis: 'The Government's policy on membership of the single cuwwency

wemains as set out by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in October 1997 and westated by the Pwime Minister in Febwuawy 1999.' There wasn't a word about Mr Brown's discussions with Messrs Vaz and Mandelson.

Tory and Lib Dem MPs slapped their knees. When Mr Lewis rose for a follow-up he was given a hard time. Labour regard him as something of a bulbous-eyed loony. 'Time for medication!' said one Brownite. Mr Lewis ignored it. With five minutes still left, the misery was not over for Miss Johnson. Nor could she even count on her own side. Burly Bill Rammell (Lab, Harlow) did his best to help her, claiming, loyally, that 'there is absolute unity of purpose in this Government'. Laughter. But the veteran Dale Campbell-Savours (Lab, Workington) gave the fire a poke by inviting Miss Johnson to discuss the possibility that we will have a euro referendum in the year 2002. Three minutes left, and the good ship Johnson was sinking.

Shadow Chancellor Michael Portillo now had a go. He was amazed that Mr Brown had dodged 'the central economic issue of the day'. Miss Johnson, squawking and flapping her arms like an oil-stricken guillemot: 'That's complete wubbish!' Matthew Taylor, for the Lib Dems, also weighed in. There was now little trace of Miss Johnson, save for a few last bubbles on the surface.

In rugby they talk of a 'hospital pass'. That is what a crafty player does when, seeing the approach of the opposing team's eighteen-stone fullback, he passes the ball to some unsuspecting innocent – who is duly flattened. Mr Brown looked at the expendable Miss Johnson and gave a dry chuckle. Some boss he makes.

23rd June 2000