



## Decline Fall: Diaries 2005-2010

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## **Decline Fall: Diaries 2005-2010** Chris Mullin

Chris Mullin's bestselling *A View From the Foothills* provided a riveting insider's account of life as a junior minister. Laying bare the personalities, pyrotechnics and political intrigues of the Blair years, it was described as *Yes Minister* meets *Alan Clark*. Funny and self-deprecating, the new diaries run from his sacking by Blair as a minister after the 2005 elections to Election Day 2010 as he prepares to step down after 23 years as an MP wryly observing 'they say failed politicians make the best diarists, in which case I am in with a chance.' Praise for *A View from the Foothills*... '...gems sprinkled across every page...' Peter Hain

## **Decline Fall: Diaries 2005-2010 Details**

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Author : Chris Mullin

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## From Reader Review Decline Fall: Diaries 2005-2010 for online ebook

### Jon Curnow says

The second volume of Chris Mullin's diaries that I have read and, as an inside account of the British Parliament at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, it's both reassuring to see that many representatives in The House are not in it purely for self gain, having loftier aims that benefit us all, and disappointing to discover that Honourable Members, just like any group anywhere, can be back-stabbing and self-serving. Mullin clearly falls into the former but his ringside seat for the end of the Blair era, the expenses debacle, the arrival of Gordon Brown and the self-destruction of New Labour is fascinating. I don't know if the diaries are well edited, or well written in the first place, but you are drawn in by the stories the diaries reveal and gripped as the details of parliamentary life are unveiled. His belief in a parliamentary democracy and MPs who work on behalf of their constituents is clear and often put him at odds with senior party colleagues. The fact that he does not follow the party line all the time is what makes his account all the more memorable. The book's easy to follow as Mullin does not fall into the trap of reducing most people to nicknames or initials and, therefore, can be read without constant reference to a 'cast of characters'. This volume ends as Gordon Brown leaves number 10 and Mullin retires from The House (he did not contest the 2010 election) but before that point some of the most interesting events of recent times are recorded with a charm and wit that's compelling.

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### Sally says

I read and enjoyed the first volume of Chris Mullin's diaries, *A View from the Foothills*, and so, when I saw the second volume in the library, I snapped it up. Like the first volume, they're brilliant reading. The period covered is 2005-2010, from the point the first volume ended to the general election, and so it describes the 'long goodbye' of Tony Blair and the takeover by Gordon Brown (what one backbencher quoted in the diaries described as 'replacing a psychotic with a neurotic'). The long drawn-out death throes of New Labour are often painful to read – largely because so much of the misery is entirely self-inflicted and that has a particular sort of pathos. I have no real fondness for Gordon Brown but in this he appears an almost tragic figure – ambitious and able but hamstrung by his hubris after years of plotting and scheming for the job. Chris Mullin is a witty man, and isn't shy about letting it be known if someone annoys him. (He has next to no patience with George Osborne, and Nick Clegg, the Lib Dem leader, is variously described as unctuous, self-righteous, ludicrous and 'the biggest charlatan of the lot'.) Although it's clear that Mullin was depressed by what he saw as his 'uselessness' I actually found the diaries of Mullin the backbencher even more satisfying than those of Mullin the minister. Not least because other backbenchers were more forthcoming with their opinions so there's a wealth of gossip which wouldn't make it into a ministerial memoir. (Although a good ministerial memoir from this period would be pretty fascinating too.) Mixed with the political is the personal – the sadness and guilt at the decline and death of Mullin's mother, his obvious pride in his two daughters ('bright as well as beautiful'), the worry over the disappearances of his cat, the visits to his wife's family in Vietnam – and they make a very satisfying whole. Recommended.

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### Simon says

A very fine book indeed. A book that has gone a long way towards restoring my interest in politics that has been slowly strangled during the Blair and Brown years. I'd blamed them, but Chris Mullin makes me think again. He is no apologist for their wrong-headed decisions, but he makes it clear that they also did much good. The Britain of 2010 had moved forward from the Britain of 1997. What was wrong with Britain in 2010 was what was still the same not what had changed. The allowing of a bunch of rich, slick and arrogant bankers and businessmen to be allowed carte blanche on the mantra that "the market knows best" and a cynical and sneering tabloid dominated media. Blair and Brown made three huge mistakes; first they got into bed with these city types, and second they got into bed with George W Bush and third they got into bed with the tabloid media.

On Blair, Mullin gives his opinion "What do I think? That at his best he was courageous, far-sighted, brilliant, idealistic, personally attractive, but that his undoubted achievements are eclipsed by one massive folly: that he tied us umbilically to the worst American president of my lifetime with consequences that were not merely disastrous, but catastrophic."

In my early years when disillusioned by the current crop I'd encounter a Labour man of principle from a previous age; I remember a very old Manny Shinwell being interviewed in the sixties and having my faith restored; Chris Mullin is just such another restorer of faith. A man of principle, intelligence and integrity. I remember his involvement with The Birmingham Six and am glad he is able to take some non-bitter revenge on the tabloids (The Sun) for its attempted vilification of him over his belief that innocent people should not be in prison no matter how terrible the crime they are supposed to have committed.

I bought this almost as an afterthought at Christmas, read a few pages and left the book lying unread for many months. Once I picked it up again I've devoured it. I will most certainly be reading the other volumes and hope that, one day, I will have the chance to hear him speak.

He's helped me to take bearings on where I stand politically in 2012, and it's not very far from him; "To those who ask where am I coming from, I reply that I am a socialist with a small 's', a liberal with a small 'l', a green with a small 'g' and a Democrat with a capital 'D'."

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### **Jim says**

This volume of diaries about British political life are the best I've read, and I'd include Mullen's previous volumes in that. This collection covers the decline of the Blair years, the inevitable, but dreaded, rise of Gordon Brown to the top job and the utter shambles that surrounded the final days of New Labour. One of the things that strikes me about the diaries of Chris Mullen is how acutely aware he was of how much MPs were despised and thought of as useless by the public as the first decade of the new century drew to a close. Which is good, but doesn't seem to have changed anything. Secondly, Gordon Brown is portrayed as a raging maniac. I can't understand why the media haven't focused more on some of the material here. The way Brown is pictured is frightening, like a combination of the worst bosses you've ever worked for. Even I find it hard to believe he was as unstable and friendless as Mullen characterises him, an utter weirdo who managed to get the top job despite being incredibly unfit for it. And every Labour MP knew it too, perhaps Blair most of all. You get the feeling that Blair, like Thatcher, secretly wanted to be succeeded by a complete failure in order to highlight the fact that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone.

The diaries aren't all political drama (or banality). Mullen throws in a good few personal ruminations on ageing, familial love, society and globalism. He's trying to come to terms with the fact that over twenty years of a political career have left him wondering "Is that it?" There is a tone of regret, of dreams not realised and ambitions perhaps not fulfilled, but the diaries are never morose or too self-pitying. It's more an acknowledgement that growing old is tough, to be sure, but that there are upsides to be reflected on too. It's just that you have to seek them out more thoroughly!

Still, it is the gossip about the great and good that liven up proceedings no end. Blair, Brown, and Bush are

painted in sharp, bitter relief in the comments made by people who worked closely with them and often, Mullen thinks, because the people telling the tales know he keeps a diary and they want their recollection recorded. Some tell him as much. His own observations are pithy and acute too, especially about a lot of the Blair poodles who all sold their souls, if they had any in the first place, for a place close to The Man. The expenses scandal was the least a lot of them deserved.

I've read quite a few political diaries in my time. Sad, I know, but I find they trigger my own personal memories of times and places too. Chris Mullen's diaries might inspire you to keep your own or, if you already do so, enhance and improve your own jottings. As Mae West said, keep a diary and one day it will keep you. I am sure that, in the end, Mullen will be glad he did because the quality of his writing and recollections shine through in comparison to many others.

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### **Harry Rutherford says**

*Decline & Fall* is the second volume of Mullin's diaries, which I bought on a whim to read on my phone without having read the first volume. The first volume was about life as a junior minister in Tony Blair's government; this one starts with him being sacked after the 2005 election, and so is about being a backbench MP in the last five years of the Blair/Brown government.

It probably would have made more sense to read the first volume first, but I enjoyed this anyway; because he never had a senior job in government, he's just enough of an outsider to provide a clear-eyed account of life in the Westminster bubble. I might have to read the first volume, now.

And, incidentally, the fact it's a diary made it well suited to reading on a small screen. Short entries mean you can easily dip in and out of it.

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### **Patrick says**

The third (chronologically) or second (by date of publication) of Chris Mullin's diaries is to my mind the most melancholy of the three. And while I haven't actually read any other political diaries (as distinct from memoirs) to compare them with, they all have a somewhat downbeat air, perhaps because they are written by a man who realises early on that he will always be on the sidelines, a spectator to the main events, and that his personal vision of where the country should go is not one that he will see (entirely) realised.

At the beginning of this volume, Mullin has just been shuffled out of his junior Ministerial post and is coming to terms with the fact that, as he is heading towards his sixtieth birthday, he is somewhat yesterday's man and as someone who admits to having no great enthusiasm for being a highly paid social worker to the people of his constituency, he seems unsure what to do with himself.

Where the last book I read referred events I dimly remember happening in the background when I was at school, the dog days of the Labour government, and the Blair-Brown psychodrama, all feels like very recent history to me. How utterly unimportant the two year will/he, won't he, Blair/Brown handover drama seems now, and how strange it seems to think it really mattered. Reading Mullin's diaries, I'm left wondering if Blair hung on as long as he did because he, like many others, knew Brown was not up to the job. There is something of a tragic quality to the way it seemed (assuming it's not simply the result of judicious post-hoc

editing) that so many of the leading lights of the party seemed so sure he would be a disaster and yet they were quite utterly unable to agree between them on a strategy to stop him. Though all of this does rather hinge on the notion that there were other, better candidates who could have saved them from electoral oblivion. Events subsequent to the end of Mullin's diaries perhaps suggest no such person existed.

The book is also a reminder that, for all that history has largely overlooked that for a brief period, Brown was actually quite popular. Had he called a snap election in 2007, when he came to power, might he have won? After all, even three years later, after the economic crash, Cameron couldn't quite win a majority. And if Brown had won in 2007, would that have finished off Cameron before he'd really even started? The history of the last ten years or so might have played out rather differently.

Away from political office, the diaries give the impression of a man trying to figure out what on earth to do with himself. Of his 60th birthday, not long after his mother's death (one of several deaths which I think had an impact on him in the course of his final term in Parliament) he remarks "hard to believe my life is two thirds gone." And it is perhaps this sense of time ticking which eventually leads him to call time on his political career. In terms of being a view into the wheels of government, it's maybe the least insightful of the three volumes, though that might only be because it's describing what feels to me more like yesterday's news than history, but it is still very much the diary of a man who, to steal a phrase from the dust jacket, speaks fluent human. And it's a diverting enough first-hand account of the fall of New Labour.

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### **Pinko Palest says**

this is not the author of *A Very British Coup*, alas. Also, it is mainly about his dealings with the powerful, from ministers upwards. Surprisingly, there is nothing about his assistants, and very little about the local party. Thus, it is a very skewed view of politics. Nor is it particularly informative

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### **Gerald Sinstadt says**

Throughout this volume of *Diaries*, as with its predecessor, Chris Mullin emerges as a politician with a genuine conscience. At times he is aware that he must compromise but never does so for simple expedience or personal aggrandisement. He fails to convince himself that he has chosen the right course after standing down from Parliament after 23 years, though there is just one indication that the time had come to prioritise family rather than constituency. He can do so with head held high. One would like to have had Chris Mullin as one's own Member.

As for the *Diaries*, they entertain and inform once again. The division of colleagues into sheep and goats has little changed, likewise with opponents. The ambivalent portrait of Gordon Brown does credit to the author's sense of fairness but surely leaves the reader feeling that, for all his qualities, Brown was too flawed to be a convincing leader of his own circle, never mind the country. To be sure a Prime Minister is not there to win a popularity contest but there are limits.

Much of the interest in these daily records of more recent times lies in their prescience. Mullin has no illusions about the abyss towards which New Labour was marching, but he is even-handed, and to this reader correct, in apportioning blame. The media get their share, the *Telegraph* and *Mail* unsurprisingly to the fore. Mullin seems to have frequent recourse to the pages of the *Guardian* which is understandable; more

surprising is the absence of any reference to The Independent, a newspaper whose considered judgments might have been thought to accord with his own.

If Mullin will be missed in the corridors, the Diaries will remain a testimony to the fact that he could leave while still very much in credit.

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### **Jo Weston says**

R4X rerun of Book of the Week. Very good.

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### **Davidg says**

This is such a depressing read.

It charts the decline of the New Labour dream for (almost) the inside. Mullin very honestly shows the decline in the Government as splits develop, as events do not go the way they were planned. You just want to get people to stop scheming, stop leaking against each other and get on with doing the job. You understand how remote Tony Blair is from the rest of his party, let alone the electorate- Mullin refers to him as "the man" throughout, never by name. Gordon Brown does not come across well, until the economic collapse, when although he gets the blame afterwards, his decisiveness saves much of the British financial system.

For those who remember the hope of 1997, it is very sad to witness the feeble end.

Now, with the EU debate, we see the same divisions and badmouthing, only this time it is the Tories tearing each other apart.

Like, Mullin's first set of diaries, it is a good read just not one that will increase your faith in how the UK is governed.

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### **John says**

Not quite as fascinating as his View from the Foothills, because in this volume of diaries he is even more on the fringes of power, looking in. But of course he has such a highly readable and engaging style, full of little humorous or sad asides, that it is a difficult book to put down. Given that it is the volume that ends his political career (at least as a Westminster MP), there is more than a little sadness that a very decent but also very wise man should be leaving Parliament. We need more like him, not fewer, and prospects aren't good.

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### **Laura says**

*From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the Week:*

*The second volume of Chris Mullin's diaries reflect irreverently and humorously on New Labour's last term in office. Today, dismissed from government Mullin contemplates a future at the lower foothills of political*

life.

*Chris Mullin is the former MP for Sunderland South, a journalist and author. His books include the first volume of his acclaimed diaries, "A View From the Foothills." He also wrote the thriller, "A Very British Coup", with the television version winning BAFTA and Emmy awards. He was a minister in three departments, Environment, Transport and Regions, International Development and The Foreign Office.*

*The reader is Sam Dale.*

*The abridger is Penny Leicester.*

*The producer is Elizabeth Allard.*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00thw3j>

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## **Andrew Garvey says**

This second (hefty) volume of Labour MP and, by 2005, former Minister Mullin's diaries are a little sadder and angrier than the previous ones. Understandable, really, given their detailing the doom of New Labour and the end of his own political career after 23 years in the Commons.

Again, they're a fascinating read, even if he gets it badly wrong sometimes. The toe-curling entry where he talks about how compelling and thought-provoking Nigel Lawson's swivel-eyed, anti-scientific gibberings about climate change was bad enough but when he pesters Ed Miliband (then-Environment Minister) to read Lawson's book I wanted to scream. He's also, for some inane reason, an admirer of woolly-minded homeopathic shill Prince Charles.

At times, he's pompous and unlikable, when, for instance, making this comparison in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. "Unlike the passive Third World refugees who normally fill our screens, many of the American poor are aggressive and seriously overweight." But, if you can't write nastily honest things in your diary, where can you write them?

Assuming you're not on Twitter, that is.

Generally though, Mullin is an astute, fair-minded man. He maintains his links with Africa and writes admiringly of new Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who remains, in 2017, one of vanishingly few effective, admirable African leaders. Visiting the Congo to monitor elections, he vividly describes the abject chaos and corruption on show. He writes passionately about foreigners (usually Africans) trapped in the Kafka-esque nightmare of Britain's asylum system, and his own, usually unsuccessful, attempts to help them.

Friendly with a fair few Tories and suspicious of more than a few Labour MPs, he seems extremely perceptive when describing Nick Clegg (and remember, this was written before the dreaded Con-Dem coalition) as "unctuous" and "shallow", "always quick to spot a bandwagon" and "easily the biggest charlatan of the lot."

Mullin covers the sad, drawn out, divisive the fall of Blair and the sad, drawn out, grumpily divisive rise (and fall) of Brown, the expenses scandal, Labour in-fighting, the global financial crisis and the 2010 election campaign with compassion, wit, humanity and (particularly when discussing Britain's media) genuine anger.

His portrayal of Gordon Brown is an intriguing one. By turns despairing, hostile, admiring and hopeful, he sees Brown as an unfortunate, unfairly-maligned, fundamentally decent man who also happens to be obsessed with plotting, conspiracy-mongering and shooting himself in the foot.

Generally, there's less gossip about Mullin's peers, colleagues and 'bettters' this time around but he still has some cracking lines:

Glenda Jackson - "miserable and angry as always (goodness knows what she won her Oscar for; certainly not charm."

Tony Blair - "[has a] tendency to scatter vague promises like confetti" and according to Jack Straw (Mullin reports) "Tony's like a man who says 'I love you' to seven, eight, nine, ten women and they all go away happy until they start to compare notes."

George Osborne - "looks permanently pink and facetious, as though life is one big public school prank."

Piers Morgan - "tabloid lowlife."

Damian McBride - "one of Gordon's shadowy henchpersons."

And finally, to close this review, one of the best descriptions I've ever read of Peter Mandelson (and I quite like Mandy):

"Peter Mandelson was up in the gallery, grim-faced, feverishly taking notes. Peter is always making notes. What does he do with them?"

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### **Jeff Howells says**

The third volume of Chris Mullin's diaries, and the wheels have well & truly come off New Labour. At the start of the book, it's difficult not to detect a hint of resentment as Mullin loses his ministerial job in a reshuffle. A hint of rebellion returns but I believe he remains a pragmatist and not 'pickled in dogma' like some of his colleagues from an earlier time. The end of a New Labour government also marks the end of Mullin as an MP. Parliament is worse off as a result of both things happening. These may not be the most insightful diaries around but they are the most self aware & entertaining of the ones I have read.

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### **David Cheshire says**

Diaries can be amazingly useful short-cuts into the past. Mullin offers a peculiar and unusual view of the zone between insignificant back-bencher and almost equally insignificant very junior minister. What elevates him as a diarist is his own intelligence, decency and political niceness (usually an oxymoron) and the wry, self-deprecating (it would be hard to be too arrogant from this CV) humour of his style. My favourite quote is the American diplomat, on Africa: our policy he says is free trade, open markets and democracy; but if you get the first two right, we give you a discount on the third.

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