

# NO STRANGER TO CONTROVERSY



During the Thatcher era, Cumbrian MP Dale Campbell-Savours earned a reputation for challenging Government secrecy. However, this highly-respected former Guardian Backbencher of the Year, described as ‘one of the finest Parliamentarians of his generation’ by Tony Blair, has a few secrets of his own. Now that health grounds have forced him to decide not to stand as an MP at the next election he speaks openly about his life and times in politics. *Alan Air* went to Westminster to interview the MP for this report, the first in a series of major Cumbria Life magazine interviews. Photography by Johnny Becker

**D**ALE Campbell-Savours greets me in the ornate Central Lobby at Westminster, fixes my eye, smiles quizzically, extends an arm and shakes my hand firmly.

“Oh, your tickets!” he exclaims, thrusting his other hand to his forehead. He swivels around, heads off jerkily down a narrow corridor and returns waving two passes for the Strangers’ Gallery - for photographer Johnny Becker and I.

“Like gold dust, these,” he asserts in that impressive, educated, rich voice of his, looking down at me over rimless spectacles that lend him an air of spectral authority. I feel sure I’ve met him before, not in real life, but between the pages of a Dickens’ novel, pouring over heavy ledgers in a dusty solicitor’s office, probably related to Miss Havisham - a proper gentleman, like.

Throughout our interview he insists he is New Labour through and through, a supporter of Tony, a man of the moment. I don’t doubt him for one minute. But in his pin stripe suit and grey cardigan that crumples up around his midriff when he sits down, the Member for Workington exudes past polite society, exquisite manners and tea drunk carefally from best china cups. As Members of Her Majesty’s Opposition have discovered to their cost, the genteel image belies a steely and stubborn determination to root out corruption and unnecessary secrecy.

My reason for travelling to the Houses of Parliament to interview Dale, 55, (he looks older) is because his full and worthy Parliamentary career is being cut short by ill-health. Plagued by a variety of illnesses and complaints - one, spondylitis of the spine has reduced his height by two inches to 6 ft 2 ins - he no longer feels he can carry on and he is standing down at the next election. Representing and battling for his constituents in West Cumbria is now too onerous a task for someone who prides himself on going that one step further in championing their various causes. Indeed, when he walks away, leaving Johnny and I to head the queue for Prime Minister’s Question Time, it’s impossible not to notice his lolling gait, the stooped back. I feel a

pang of sympathy but he is out of sight in an instant.

Up in the Strangers’ Gallery - the not very polite term given to the seating area where 150 or so members of the public are allowed to squeeze in to view democracy in action - the chatter is excitable as the Commons’ well-known faces drift into the Chamber. New Labour MPs generally suck up to the Prime Minister, Tory MPs berate him. Yes, it’s usually that black and white. Tony Benn positions himself on the end of a row near the back. Dale sits in front of him - not a reserved seat but a favoured one - and they don’t exchange so much as a pleasantry. Don’t read too much into this. They could be the best of friends for all I know.

It’s remiss of me but I completely forget to ask Dale his opinions of, and his relationship with, that greying standard bearer of the left, the man so often accused of making Old Labour unelectable during the 80s. As the clock ticks towards three o’clock, lots of grey-suited men fill the benches on both sides of the House but there is a smattering of ‘Blair’s Babes’ in brightly coloured skirts and jackets on the Government side.

I hear myself muttering the names of Dennis

Skinner, Theresa Gorman, Jack Straw, Peter Lilley, John Prescott, Ann Widdecombe, William Hague and then, the undoubted star of the current show, Tony Blair. The PM looks thinner in real life, his hair looks thicker. Everyone’s voices sound tinier over the sound system, installed for the benefit of the media. The growing cacophony of sound - occasionally checked by Speaker Betty Boothroyd - reaches a crescendo when the Leader of the Opposition executes a clearly well-rehearsed pun - something along the lines of jailed Labour councillors having more ‘convictions’ than the Prime Minister. It’s quite funny, actually.

The half-hour ordeal over, Blair sinks back into his chair, takes a deep intake of breath, motions to someone behind the Speaker’s chair and then slips away to his proper job. On the emptying backbenches, Dale listens intently to a statement about Kosovo before gathering his papers and heading off to our agreed rendezvous point.

“Enjoy that?” he asks me outside the Commons, as Johnny Becker points to the darkening sky and reminds him of his urgent need to get photographs with the Houses of Parliament in the background. I nod when what I really want to say is: “Well, it’s just theatre isn’t it?” but I am too busy nervously shadowing Dale as he throws himself in front of hurtling taxis, buses and lorries to cross the road to St Stephen’s Green.

“I’m a terrible jaywalker,” he laughs, as a black cab screeches to a halt to avoid a collision. You don’t say. I can see the headlines now. MP KILLED IN ROAD SMASH. Then at the bottom of the article in the smallest print: A reporter, and a photographer who got this exclusive picture, also died in the accident.

Dale, self-conscious when held in the cold stare of a camera lens, poses awkwardly. Johnny positions him so that St Stephen’s Tower housing Big Ben - the architectural symbol of British democracy - is over his right-hand shoulder. I turn away so as not to distract Dale. After a short flurry of clicks from the camera he moves off and it takes all of Johnny’s gentle powers of persuasion to get him to ▶

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▶ stay and pose for new angles until he is satisfied he has the right shot. Ten minutes later, outside photographs done and dusted, Dale leads us through a myriad of twisting corridors in Westminster to his fairly roomy office that is located directly above the Chamber. He settles into a comfy dark green-coloured settee and our proper conversation finally begins.

After a few minutes background chat I switch on my tape recorder and ask the question that I've been dying to put to him: "Your parents were Tories weren't they? Was there any adverse reaction to your political conversion to socialism in the mid-60s?"

He looks down and answers quickly and with regret: "Yes, a lot. It's lasted a lifetime. I don't want to go into all the details but it's been very difficult over many years."

Oh. "Is there still love there?" I press him.

"I'm not going into any of it all," he snaps, and for a split-second I glimpse Dale not as the grown-up, successful politician with a wife and family of his own, but as Dale the fledgling son - tearfully trying to justify his own sense of destiny, grappling with the political prejudices of parents who raised him in Chelsea, sent him to boarding school in Keswick and then onto the Sorbonne in Paris. I pause for a moment, toying with pushing him further but a mental flip of a coin tells me to play safe and move on.

"What about the hyphenated surname?" I enquire.

"It's from my mother's side. I only started using it when I turned 17. It's Scottish and that's another very interesting story which one day I will talk about," he says.

"Why won't you tell me now?" I ask, irritated by his blatant biographical editing and frustrated that my questions are taking me down a one-way road into a cul-de-sac.

"Well, because it's all tied up with the politics of it all. I will talk freely about it but I have to wait for something to happen," he says. The irony of being stonewalled by a man who built his Commons' reputation battling the absurdities of Section 2 of the Official Secrets Act, makes me smile and I feel myself loosening up and deliberately posing a question falsely loaded with suspicion, conspiracy theories and cynicism.

"So why are you really standing down at the next election," I press him, perfectly aware of his ill-health.

"I physically can't do the job anymore," he says, sounding slightly puzzled at the innuendo. And his roll-call of complaints is terrible. He must be strong-willed to have endured them. They include ulcerative colitis - first diagnosed after he was elected to Parliament in 1979 - a painful inflammatory condition that necessitated an emergency operation in 1983. Surgeons at the West Cumberland Hospital, Whitehaven, performed an ileostomy that entailed the removal of his large bowel and part of his small intestine. He lost four stone in weight but he insists that the life-and-death operation didn't dampen his enthusiasm for the day job in Parliament.

"At that age I was still extremely determined to get on in here and the next five years or so were the best years of my career in politics. It was a new lease of life and I quickly got back into full flow," he explains. Only to be cut down in the early 90s, when he was shadow agriculture minister, by emphysema, thyroid problems and then, more recently, a cancerous growth on his lung. Curiously, it was a hernia operation that saved him. "The tumour was diagnosed up in West Cumbria. Because I had emphysema they had to X-ray my lungs to see if they were capable of taking the anaesthetic and they found the tumour. They had to take out 55 per cent of my left lung. If it wasn't for the hernia I would have died." Subsequent check-ups have confirmed the tumour has remained dormant.

Dale insists that he isn't bitter, but he admits to being very unhappy at the health hand fate dealt him and which prevented him becoming a Government minister. Having made it to the Front Bench as shadow overseas development minister

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under Neil Kinnock - where his incisive questioning, eye for details and obsession with justice earned him many more admirers than detractors - he had to resign under John Smith because of emphysema and an emergency operation on his thyroid which involved it being cut out completely. Of course he was disappointed. How could he not be? "I'd spent years putting the boot into the Tories and I thought there was going to be a Labour Government soon," he says.

Strangely, Dale's frequent brushes with death on the operating table never focused his mind on what might come next if it all went wrong. "I don't think about life after death really. I think about infinity. I think infinity is a fascinating subject. I look out and I wonder where it all ends," he says wistfully, before touching on a subject that put an end to Glenn Hoddle's career as England Coach. "It wouldn't surprise me at all if we are all punished in an afterlife for what we do in this one. It wouldn't surprise me at all. And that might mean coming back in many forms which we would not find particularly appetising."

If God is on the side of decent values in public life and not, as *Guardian* cartoonist Steve Bell portrays him, a corrupt, cigar-smoking free marketeer wheeler-dealer, then Dale should be okay. His office shelves are heaving with documents that preceded the recommendations of the Nolan Report. It is a repository of information that national journalists still dip into, undeniable and lasting proof of the damage Dale did to a small group of shiny-suited crooks whose noses were deep in the trough of Parliamentary sleaze.

"I was responsible for kicking the Tories in the teeth. I was uncovering it all in here and exposing it," he says proudly. Quite rightly, he now sits on the committee responsible for policing the Nolan recommendations. However, he reminds me that cleaning up sleaze was not just a Labour agenda item.

"There were people on all sides of the House in favour of that. The problem for the Tories was that most of the offenders were on their side. But we don't have a monopoly on right and wrong." And that is why it has always been difficult placing Dale in the traditional left-right arena. His views cut

through the political spectrum and he dishes out praise and condemnation across party lines. He is a mixed economy man, a regulator not an instinctive nationaliser, out of principle never bought a share where public utilities were sold off - "they were the property of the state and the state was ripped off" - but he acknowledges and welcomes the innovation that accompanied some privatisations like British Telecom (but not British Rail which he describes as a disaster).

He supported the Falklands' campaign, not to crudely wave the flag but to stand up against a South American dictatorship, urged greater use of force in Kosovo to destroy the Milosevic regime and is a vigorous supporter of the much-trumpeted Third Way and the 90's re-positioning of the Labour Party in British political life.

When Tony Blair was elected Party



RIGHT: Dale and his Icelandic-born wife Gudrun at Greta Bridge, Keswick.



# NO STRANGER TO CONTROVERSY ...Continued

► Leader and a party was held in his Sedgefield constituency for Labour MPs and supporters, Dale shook his hand warmly and told the future PM: "You don't realise but this is one of the happiest days of my life. I've dreamt about this, it's a wind of change and a lot of these people don't even know what you are going to do. But I know." Mr Blair just smiled and moved on.

Dale's views about Mrs Thatcher, whom he heckled in the Commons so many times, will cheer her dwindling band of die-hard supporters. "I believe history will treat her relatively kindly. And on reflection my only argument with Thatcher - and I'm not talking about individual policies here - was that her analysis of the British economy and the need to restructure, which in principle I supported and which was supported by most right-thinking Labour people, did not take account of the emotional, physical and economic damage caused to people," he says. "In some ways she was brutal. She was not guilty of betraying the British people during a time of economic restructuring but of being insensitive to them.

"I was confronted by people crying in my surgeries and they need not have been put through particular difficulties. There were factories in my patch which could have been subjected to a restructuring exercise without using macro-economic policy which was simply deny the cash and let the market decide. There were other ways of bringing about change using micro-economic policy. It would have meant that we entered into far more agreements with the trade unions but I think in the end we would have got there."

And when it comes to detail, Dale always understands the need to read the small print - so often his favoured tool for cutting down those involved in sharp practice. His passion for justice - "I am utterly obsessed with a need to root out unfairness" - means that he gets involved in many affairs, the vast majority of which never see the light of day.

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Surprisingly, his conversion to the Labour Party in 1965, having previously heckled socialist candidates in the 1964 General Election, was not prompted by first-hand experiences of injustice and unfairness across the globe. Having hitchhiked extensively throughout Asia, Pakistan, India, Iran, Europe and the Middle East as a young man, Dale witnessed heart-breaking deprivation and poverty. "But because I had been brought up in a Tory household these experiences never registered politically," he says, by way of explanation. It was only after he moved to unglamorous Ramsbottom, in Lancashire, to set up his own clock design

and manufacturing company, and he started mixing with and talking to 'ordinary' people, that something switched in his brain, although emotion played a part.

"After about 18 months of getting involved in lots of debate I found that I couldn't reconcile my experiences with my politics and I went to Transport House in Smith Square in London to join the Labour Party."

Soon after he was a local councillor and after fighting two hopeless campaigns in the safe Conservative bastion of Darwen in February and October 1974, he won the Workington seat in 1979 for Labour, the year Mrs Thatcher won office and heralded 18 years of Conservative rule. He has held the seat ever since and remains committed to his constituents.

"Apart from holidays, illness or when I've joined foreign delegations, I've been back to my constituency every single weekend for the last 20 years," he says.

When I put it to him that people often say he has never got above himself, he nods and whispers: "No, I would never do that," sounding almost hurt that anyone would ever think it.

So how would he like to be remembered in Workington and Cumbria? He cites the Enterprise Zone that he secured after doing a deal with Michael Heseltine - "other people have claimed the credit for that but it's irrelevant, I know what happened" - which changed the skyline of the West Cumbrian town and brought vital new jobs. Also, getting public ownership of Maryport Harbour and then attracting the private sector, his bitter and ultimately futile scrap to save Campbell Soup's Homepride factory and the establishment of the North Cumbria Health Action Zone. The establishment of the cattle movement centre in Workington arose from his arguments, when shadow agriculture minister, that the only way to solve the BSE crisis was to have all cattle recorded on a national register. Finally, and it's a dream yet to be realised - "but make no mistake, we are moving on with it" - is his ambitious, critics call it 'fantastic', University

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of the Lakes scheme based on long distance learning and multi-campus linked by the Information Superhighway.

"It's been slow to get off the ground because of the entrenched positions taken by people and organisations in the county," he says, pointing the finger at, but not actually naming enemies of his dream. "They spiked it three years ago because they wanted the territory for themselves," he asserts. Certainly, universities from outside the county are currently carving up the business, but Dale prophetically insists that it will not last.

"Cumbria cannot go on importing Higher Education. It needs a single institution with its own identity and a respected name that is known world-wide. The University of the Lakes would provide that. The others will gradually recede because they will not be able to provide in those circumstances. People in a Cumbrian Higher Education environment do not want to be associated with so many different institutions."

For all that, Dale may be best remembered in Workington for his famous soap box speeches - an idea famously employed by John Major during his successful 1992 General Election campaign. Throughout the 80s, two or three times a year, Dale would jump up on his soap box in the town centre and deliver speeches on a variety of topics. "It was a very interesting time politically and I was one of the last people to do this. It was jackets off stuff and we would get lots of people coming along," he says affectionately.

Having made the difficult decision to retire at the next election - "once you have made the announcement the process is irreversible" - Dale anticipates his time being taken up with fishing on the River Greta, extended summer holidays in Tuscany, Italy, "something else to engage my time in Keswick" and spending more time with his Icelandic-born wife, Gudrun. He insists that he will always keep a home in the Lakeland town where he was educated as a boy, and near to the constituency that has supported his distinctive political career and probably guaranteed him a respectable paragraph or two in the book that must eventually be written about 20th Century British political life. **Life**



RIGHT: Dale and 'soapbox' out on the streets of Workington during an early election campaign.