Among my childhood ambitions, besides wanting to play cricket for Scotland, win a Nobel prize and make a hit record, was a vague plan to become a member of Parliament. I took the initial steps towards the first three – bowling at stumps in the garden, reading the Children’s Encyclopaedia and doing five-finger exercises – but soon the excuses began. The grass was too wet. The piano was in the coldest room in the house. And, really, Nobel laureates had to be ridiculously brainy. I had realised that as well as putting in hard work, you need some natural talent.

But not for everything, I hear you say. Surely you could have managed to be an MP? Well … I’ve always been a bit of a show-off, and like everyone else, I want to change the world. But political ambition means more that. You have to like the nitty-gritty of politics. To take a firm position on every issue, however complex or trivial. To look at a three-page agenda and think, gosh, I wish it was longer. The political game, like cricket, is enjoyed for its own sake, whether you are batting or fielding.

Yes, politics has to be in the genes, and the Drifes are not a dynasty of power-brokers. My father, a country bank manager, never revealed how he voted, saying it might alienate the customers. He did give the occasional unguarded grunt while listening to the wireless, but his scorn showed no party bias. My mother was different. She came from South Wales, a hotbed of socialism, but her father ran a small business and she was a fervent Conservative. She detested the entire Labour Party, especially Aneurin Bevan, the Welsh MP now revered as the father of Britain’s National Health Service. She liked the NHS, of course, but the words ‘snake’ and ‘grass’ featured frequently in her analyses of Bevan’s character.

I don’t think they knew each other personally, but Bevan reciprocated, in a way, by loathing all Conservatives. He came from South Wales, a hotbed of socialism, but her father ran a small business and she was a fervent Conservative. She detested the entire Labour Party, especially Aneurin Bevan, the Welsh MP now revered as the father of Britain’s National Health Service. She liked the NHS, of course, but the words ‘snake’ and ‘grass’ featured frequently in her analyses of Bevan’s character.

Being on the receiving end of reform for several decades until I retired was debilitating. Doctors had no voice in the process and I asked myself whether I should have worked harder at politics, despite lacking the gene. But I couldn’t have made any difference. The cycle of NHS reorganisations is a primeval force of nature, ill-understood by science, with its own internal momentum. The politician ostensibly in charge is now called ‘Secretary of State for Health’, and there have been eleven since the title was created in 1988. Each moved on after about two years, no doubt to his or her intense relief. Only one was a doctor, but his doctorate was actually a PhD in African history. Which, as my mum would have been quick to point out, is something Aneurin Bevan never achieved.

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