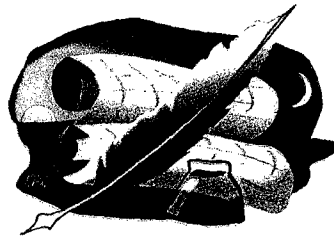


## DIARY

**D**iaries and I don't get on well together. I have an aversion to writing things down, so my husband impounds my diary and inscribes my engagements. I retaliate by refusing to read them. I just don't like the feeling that I *have* to do things. Nor could I ever keep a diary as a record of my thoughts, feelings and doings. I would inevitably disagree with it the next day because I do that very un-English thing: I change my mind.

**I** have a lot of sympathy with John Prescott's difficulties with English syntax. Indeed, compared to me he is Demosthenes. My friends claim that my fractured English is simply a trademark, like Henry Kissinger's German accent. Actually it's the result of trying to be Italian while speaking English. My words just come tumbling out in the excitement of communicating, while the English hoard their thoughts and measure out the words as though rationing were still in place. I am also a bottomless source of malapropisms. A friend who has been compiling an anthology notes the following examples. Of Eurofanatics: 'They are crawling out of the woodworm in their dozens.' Of the propriety of a Scotsman's kilt: 'It was all right . . . he was wearing his jackpot.' Of a bore next to one at dinner: 'He was terrible, but I just had to bear and green it.' Of an amorous diplomat: 'He has a rowing eye.' My worst effort was when I was studying the techniques of *faux marbre* and *faux bois* at an atelier in Brussels and proudly wrote telling my son in prep school that in future his mother would be making the family's living from 'faking' — except the spelling was a near miss. That went down big in the Lower Fourth! I should talk less and read more, then maybe I would get the hang of English idiom. In other words, the time has come for me to turn over a new twig!

**I** gave a small dinner party last week for Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's Senior Minister and a man of unrivalled clarity of mind. Listening to him and Margaret Thatcher is like being a spectator at a geopolitical Wimbledon singles final, all volleys, smashes and power-serves. There is no better advertisement for strong leadership and sense of purpose than hearing the two of them dissect the modern world and its so-called leaders. It's a pity that you cannot transfer political leaders like football managers. Lee Kuan Yew could sort out China or Japan, and Margaret Thatcher would cure America's post-Clintonian tristesse. Another old friend in London last week was the under-appreciated Brian Mulroney, Canada's long-serving prime minister in the Eighties, who engineered the biggest step forward in freeing world trade this cen-



### CARLA POWELL

tury, the North American Free Trade Area. While the euro goes on sinking, Nafta has been a huge success. Surely there is a message for us in that.

**H**as there ever been a war fought against a background of so much dissension? There is far more destructive criticism of the Kosovo campaign than ever there was during either the Falklands or the Gulf war. The notion of closing ranks in a crisis seems to be a thing of the past among Britain's elite, and especially among some former military chiefs. Fortunately British public opinion is solidly warlike as usual, but Nato is coming apart at the hems (to use another of my malapropisms). Greeks, Italians and Germans are all lining up to abandon ship and the Americans look increasingly wobbly. I reckon Nato has got a couple of weeks of bombing left to achieve an acceptable outcome before the desertion rate among European governments exceeds that among Serbian conscripts. Of course, the whole concept of fighting a war without using ground forces and without suffering casualties on one's own side is a daft one. Technology can be relied on to go wrong — anyone who owns even an electric toaster knows that — so Albanian refugees, Chinese diplomats and Serbian hospital patients will continue to pay the price for saving the lives of Nato servicemen. We have seen nothing on our television



'Smack me on the bottom and you're finished.'

screens to match the absolute self-assurance and crystal-clear strategy of Generals Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf in the Gulf war. But at least the Prime Minister is doing what the British like best: giving a lead and having the courage of his convictions.

**E**arlier this month I spent a few days in the hills overlooking Lake Como, taking up oil painting again and trying to put down on canvas probably the most dramatically beautiful scenery in Europe. I then paid my first visit to Palermo. Its exquisite churches and palaces are crammed with treasures. The glorious stuccos of Giacomo Serpotta and the Byzantine cathedral of Monreale were a breathtaking reminder of the richness of Italy's past, whatever the inadequacies of the present day. Many of the palaces are still lived in by the families who originally built them and conjure up the glittering world of Lampedusa's *The Leopard*. Their dignity, pride and determination to keep their inheritance intact for future generations are impressive. We Piedmontese rudely refer to anywhere south of Rome as Africa. The truth is that Como and Palermo are simply different diadems in what constitutes the crown jewels of Europe — the Italian landscape and cityscape.

**A** week back in Italy invariably convinces me that, much as I love my country, I could never live there full-time after 37 years of exile — though where else can a girl still get a morale-boosting wolf-whistle when she is 56? Watching how Britain has changed for the better, I find depressing the failure to tackle fundamental problems in Italy. We have a saying in Italian: *la situazione è gravissima ma non seria*. Italy barely survives as a state even though it flourishes as a country. The national institution which functions best is the Bank of Italy, a fact reflected in last week's election of its excellent former chairman, Signor Ciampi, as President of the Republic. The equivalent here would be to crown Eddie George as king (presumably he would be simultaneously Edward IX and George VII). I suppose I ought to be pleased that an Italian will head the European Commission, but I wish we could be spared Prodi. I know it's the tradition to appoint second-hand prime ministers to this job, but this one's log-book would never survive AA scrutiny. It's an old chestnut that Italians want a federal European state because anything is better than being governed by their own politicians. But in Prodi's case there is general relief in Italy that he is being exported because he is seen as a bumbler and spouter of empty rhetoric. The new Commission will be no better than its discredited predecessor. Same old honey-pot, different bees.