

before the election. There is little doubt that the Chancellor knew exactly where the money — and his aides' wages — were coming from. Although receiving no per-

become a very dangerous commodity. But there are others — especially among Labour's more traditionalist elements — hoping that last week's events will spell the

difficulty, Mr Blair may have felt that he needed help from a man whose advice he values above all others; he needed Mr Mandelson beside him.

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# My friend Peter the Puritan

**I** KNOW a man called Peter Mandelson but I don't think he can be the same man everyone else knows; he certainly doesn't have much in common with the media's Mandelson, let alone with the treasured target of sour-faced critics on the old Left.

The trouble with Peter is that he doesn't fit. He cannot be squeezed into the made-to-measure stereotypes that the media reserve for politicians. He refuses to be corralled within the normal boundaries of class-based British politics.

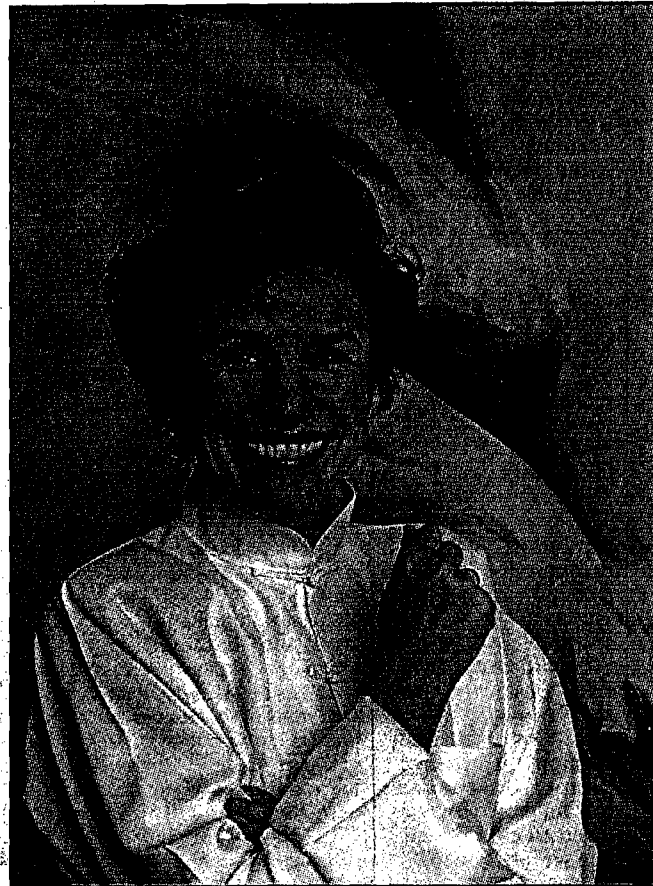
A Champagne socialist? If only. Despite all my efforts to lead him astray, he sticks to puritan hot water and lemon, and his preferred social activity is supper in the kitchen with a few friends. True, he has a passion for dancing, but you are much more likely to encounter Jack Cunningham or John Prescott than Peter in a disco.

The reality is that he is a man who puts in the hours. I have known some serious Stakhanovites in my time — Margaret Thatcher among them — but Peter Mandelson is right up there, even though he prefers to make success seem effortless.

He was one of the very few members of the present Government to grasp from the first day the difference between opposition politics and ministerial life. In opposition, you can get away on a wing and a prayer: make a speech, issue a press release, and then go home for the night. In government, you have to master a brief, take decisions, follow them through, and be answerable for the consequences. Few present ministers had more of an appetite for solid work than Peter.

Is he really a master of the dark arts of media manipulation? He has benefited from that reputation. And certainly he is a master of getting across messages. But a man who can end up launching his flagship White Paper on competitiveness on a day when Iraq is being pulverised and the American President is being impeached may still have something to learn in this field.

The Peter Mandelson that I



Lady Powell: 'The Peter I know has a rare ability to listen'

**Carla Powell doesn't recognise the media image of Mandelson as a sinister manipulator: she knows a hard working, caring man whom she likes and respects**

know has another characteristic rare among politicians, and that is the ability to listen and be genuinely interested in the views of others. That is what makes him such an attractive friend and confidant, especially to women.

He has time for people, especially for people who have problems that seem important to them if not to anyone else. This is the quality that enables him to cut across the class barriers of British life in a unique way, acting as sympathetic friend to his Hartlepool constituents and the Prince of Wales alike. Peter is a man who knows no boundaries.

He is a "groupie for greatness", adoring the opportunity to talk to Henry Kissin-

ger or Lee Kwan Yew or a host of other towering figures. What his envy-riddled critics fail to perceive is that this is the way to learn; and he has the grace to recognise that New Labour has a lot to learn.

Am I just a push-over for the legend of the avuncular Peter, bouncing friends' babies on his knee, the generous godfather and ersatz family man? I disagree with him on a great deal. His approach to Europe is too idealistic and trusting. He was wrong to re-open the wounds of Pinochet. And, until recently, I thought that the Third Way was a shortcut between Notting Hill and Millbank Tower known only to ministerial drivers.

But I am an unabashed

admirer of politicians who set out to break the mould and change things rather than just run along a groove. That matters much more to me than party loyalty. It is what attracted me to Margaret Thatcher and Jimmy Goldsmith, and what does attract me to Tony Blair.

They are not bums-in-ministerial seats. They have a passion for change, and no one has been more of an agent for change within the Labour Party than Peter. He represents the politics of the future.

It is fear and hatred of change that bring out the bile in Peter Mandelson's critics, above all those in his own party, particularly the old Left, who brought Britain to the brink of disaster in their times.

**T**HEY cannot bear Peter Mandelson's — or, let's face it, Tony Blair's — ability to reach beyond Labour's barricades and win support from a wider constituency. Like Aztec priests, they know that when they lose their ability to cower their captive congregations, they become irrelevant.

Peter made a mistake; not a very grave one and I doubt that the building society cares one way or the other as long as his mortgage payments are made. But, unlike many others in the last government or this one, his fingers did not have to be prised from the ministerial red box. He did the decent thing and deserves respect for that. Not since Peter Carrington's resignation over the Falklands invasion have we seen that kind of honourable behaviour.

Governments need characters and this one will be much weakened by Peter's absence. Let's hope he uses his time to refine further the strategy that has so changed the face of the Labour Party and that he returns in due course to implement the next phase of changing the face of British politics.

In the meantime, those of us who revel in his friendship look forward to enjoying more of his company. The Government's loss is our gain.