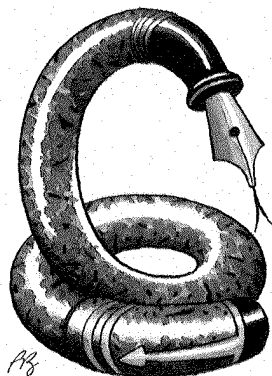


DIARY

CARLA POWELL



Pope Benedict's visit to Britain next year is a true historical landmark, as it will be the first official visit of a reigning pontiff in history. John Paul II's visit in 1982 was a private one. Gordon Brown says he invited his Holiness, which — if true — would represent a gross breach of protocol. Only the Queen can invite a head of state to Britain. Baroness Thatcher also discussed the prospect of a visit when she met the Pope in Rome earlier this summer. But the real go-between was Francis Campbell, Britain's ambassador to the Holy See, the first Catholic to be appointed to that post. Aged just 39, he is immensely knowledgeable about every aspect of Vatican doctrine and, importantly, Vatican politics. A diplomat forgets at his peril the considerable political influence the papacy wields — not just in Italy but globally, as far afield as China and Latin America. Having a top-notch ambassador to the Holy See is a huge asset to the United Kingdom. Mr Campbell will be a very hard act to follow.

Father Forrester is an unusual Catholic priest, successively the Catholic chaplain to Oxford University and then to Eton, and extraordinarily popular at both. His early life, as recounted in his recently published autobiography *Lead by a Thread*, is not exactly characteristic for a priest. It includes tap-dancing, loitering on pub doorsteps, a military school and an attractive Jewish fiancée. All of which made him able to understand the young and

their troubles, leading him to take on such tasks as finding girlfriends for Eton boys. He also taught them the importance of listening to God as much as talking to God. In my eyes he should have been a cardinal or at least a bishop. But a late start and an unconventional past has counted against him. I once asked him to be my father-confessor but he said it was bound to be a full-time job. Well, really!

There has been great sadness at the premature death of Jessica Catto, wife of President George Bush Sr's ambassador to London, Henry Catto. Jessica came from a well-known Texas political family and was a wonderfully independent-minded lady. No great respecter of political parties, she was a supporter of Bush 41 (but not Bush 43) and an early backer of President Obama. Aspen was her home in the Rockies and it was there that she had Margaret Thatcher and President Bush Sr to stay on the day after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. It became known as the Woody Creek summit and the local tavern used to sell T-shirts advertising 'Woody Creek: where George Bush and Margaret Thatcher slept together'. Well, up to a point. Jessica was one of those people you will simply never forget.

Italian politics are once again in turmoil, with Silvio Berlusconi being stripped by the constitutional court of immunity from prosecution, which sometimes seems to be his main reason for having gone into politics in the first place. There is much speculation about what would follow were Berlusconi forced to resign — improbable as that seems. I went to hear Francesco Rutelli, deputy prime minister in the last government and a popular former mayor of Rome, launch his new book *La Svolta*, meaning 'About Turn'. More than anyone else he represents the moderate centre of Italian politics. He suggests as a way out of Italy's present woes a presidential government with a cabinet of technocrats under the benign guidance of President Napolitano. He fears that otherwise the present series of scandals could hasten the break-up of Italy, with a party of the South confronting the Northern League, which already demands quasi-independence for the richer North. The more likely outcome is a government headed by the present Speaker and Italy's most able politician, Gianfranco Fini, now far removed from his neo-fascist roots. He has written an introduction to the Italian edition of *Cameron on Cameron* calling for a government of pragmatic conservatism on the lines advocated by the leader of the opposition. That would be a good basis for a more elegant Anglo-Italian entente than we have at present.

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Our elder son is just back from 17 months as Our Man in Helmand Province, based in Lashkar Gah as the Foreign Office's representative. I can stand down with unbounded gratitude the cardinal, two bishops, numerous priests and nuns who have been praying for his safe return. The truth is he thoroughly enjoyed his time there, feeling that it beat pushing paper around in Whitehall. What he admired most was the extraordinary courage of young British soldiers going out on three-day patrols in over 50°C carrying all their kit and frequently engaged in firefights. Nothing made him prouder to be British. His experience illustrates the difficulty of Nato's role in Afghanistan. Attending a *shura* in a recently recaptured village, he asked the elders what three things they most wished for. After consulting among themselves they replied: first, the Taleban to go away; second, Nato to go away; and third, neither of them to come back. But they were very polite about it, he says.

The convergence of cultural riches, autumn sunshine and political squalor makes me reflect that perhaps it's just as well that politics and bureaucracy make Italy so unattractive. Otherwise everyone would want to live here — and that would be unbearable.