

GOVERNMENT CAR AND DESPATCH AGENCY



The Outer Cabinet

A History of
The Government Car Service

Geoffrey Dudley

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Contents

	Authors Note	vii
CHAPTER 1.	A Special Relationship	1
CHAPTER 2.	Fulfilling a Need: 1939–51	21
CHAPTER 3.	A Modern Service: 1952–69	55
CHAPTER 4.	Expecting the Unexpected: 1970–79	99
CHAPTER 5.	Living Dangerously: 1980–89	135
CHAPTER 6.	In SAFE Hands? 1990–97	173
CHAPTER 7.	A Phoenix Rising: 1997–2006	199
CHAPTER 8.	Service and Business	239

Author's Note

It has been a tremendously enjoyable and rewarding experience to research and write the history of the Government Car Service. Sensitivity and discretion is of course at the centre of all the work done by GCS, but the necessity to remain out of the limelight means that its fascinating and unique story is largely unknown to the outside world. For myself, therefore, it was a revelation to discover the extremely close relationships that have often developed between drivers and the Ministers and officials they carry, and also the personal interest in its development taken by a succession of Prime Ministers. As an organisation, GCS has inevitably experienced some ups and downs over its sixty years, but invariably the great quality and character of its staff have seen it through each crisis, so that today it is probably in its strongest ever position.

I would like to thank all the former and current members of GCS who gave so unstintingly of their time to help and advise me, and to answer all my queries. It has been a great privilege to meet and speak to all of them. However, special mention must be made here of one unique source – the scrapbook compiled over her thirty-five-year career with GCS by driver Beryl Osborne. The wealth of material included in the scrapbook, including reminiscences, letters, photos and press cuttings, is a treasure trove for anyone researching the history of GCS. There is no doubt that ‘Ossie’s’ scrapbook is an important historical document in its own right, and a tremendous credit to her conscientious effort in compiling it over so many years. This book would certainly have been much the poorer without it.

I would also like to thank staff at the National Archives at Kew for their advice and assistance in identifying material from the earlier history of OCS/GCS.

Finally, I would like to thank all at the Centre for Transport and Society at the University of the West of England for their unfailing support. In particular, I am grateful to Professor Glenn Lyons and Dr Graham Parkhurst for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of the book.

With reference to the book itself, unless otherwise stated, all material is either from GCS files or from interviews with the author.

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CHAPTER 1

A Special Relationship

Personal Service

Before the Government Car Service was even founded, the unique character of its relationships with its principal customers was already being moulded. This was perfectly illustrated one day towards the end of the Second World War, when Tom Hughes was summoned to 10 Downing Street to see Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Hughes was in charge of the Ministry of Aircraft Production vehicle fleet, but his responsibilities also included maintaining the Prime Minister's car.

Unfortunately for Hughes, he found that the great wartime leader was not in a happy mood, and Churchill complained that rain was getting into his car. Hughes went away and tested the vehicle, but was puzzled when he found that it seemed to be completely waterproof. He therefore arranged for someone to follow the car when the Prime Minister was riding in it, and from this discovered that Churchill always dropped the window an inch when smoking his trademark cigar, in order to be able to flick out the ash! Hughes reported his findings to the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, only to receive the abrupt message from Churchill to 'stop the rain coming in!' Typically, the Prime Minister was not going to compromise, and so Hughes had to find a solution. He achieved this by arranging for two sets of louvres (horizontal slats sloping outwards to throw off rain) to be fitted, to allow the rear windows to be dropped a couple of inches without the rain leaking in.

Having led Britain to victory against Hitler, Churchill was heavily defeated in the general election of 1945, but then returned as Prime Minister in 1951, when the Conservative Party won the election of

that year. By the early 1950s, Hughes himself was Superintendent of what in 1952 became the Government Car Service, and so the two resumed their encounters. Taking no risks, Hughes immediately arranged for two shields to be fitted to the rear windows of the Prime Minister's car. A few months later, however, Hughes was concerned to find two bad burn marks on the rear seat of the car. He rang Churchill's Private Secretary to inform him of the cost of re-covering the seats, but then asked if the Prime Minister would object to seat covers, as these could be changed economically in future. Nevertheless, Churchill remained stubborn, and replied brusquely: 'If Hughes put a decent ashtray in the car, the cigar would not fall off the ashtray.'

Anxious to please, Hughes arranged for a huge fourteen-inch-long ashtray to be made in the workshop. It seemed that this would settle things, but he then heard from Churchill's driver that the Prime Minister kept his matches in his trouser pocket, and that it was quite a performance for him to roll over to one side and retrieve them to light his cigar. As an extra touch, Hughes therefore saw to it that a well was fitted at the end of the ashtray to hold the matches. At last, the Prime Minister could smoke his cigar in peace, and he sent a message to Hughes thanking him for his good work.

Hughes had still not quite finished, however, and in a thoughtful gesture he arranged for the pistons from Churchill's old wartime car to be remoulded into a castle turret shape, and used on the GCS car to hold Churchill's flag, as holder of the ancient ceremonial office of Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports. Churchill was so pleased with both the ashtray and the turret flag that, when he resigned as Prime Minister in 1955, he obtained permission for them to be moved to his private car.¹

This story may now of course be very much of its time, in terms of the social acceptability of smoking, but the vital point is that, for Churchill, the cigar was an essential tool in projecting his large and pugnacious political personality. In later times, similar functions would be performed by Harold Wilson's reassuring pipe (in fact, significantly, GCS also provided a special ashtray for this Prime Minister) and Margaret Thatcher's swinging handbag. Hughes therefore no doubt understood implicitly that there was a practical

purpose to the service he was providing, above merely catering for the Prime Minister's smoking needs.

The encounters between Churchill and Hughes capture particularly well both the tangible and, perhaps even more importantly, intangible elements in the relationships between GCS and its customers. On one level, a GCS driver is there to provide transport for a Minister or official, and get them to where they want to go as quickly and efficiently as possible. However, Ministers in particular often lead quite lonely, stressful and insecure existences. They are frequently on the move, and so a close relationship can develop, in which the driver becomes a friend and discreet confidante, or at times even an adviser. The driver and Minister may initially be thrown together, but their experiences in the political 'trenches' can forge a close relationship.

The highly distinctive character of GCS, and the quality of the relationships it engenders, is expressed particularly well by one of its longest serving users in modern times (as Minister, Prime Minister and former Prime Minister), the Prime Minister from 1990 to 1997, Sir John Major:

I have been a 'customer' of the Government Car Service for nearly a quarter of a century and, throughout all that time, I cannot recall a single occasion when I required a car and it was not immediately available. This includes not only my period as Prime Minister and beyond, but also my early years as a Junior Minister. I do believe that consistency of service is quite remarkable, not least because of the extraordinarily uncivil hours that politicians are required to be on duty.

One other characteristic of the GCS is that when you have a dedicated driver (as opposed to a changing pool of drivers) he becomes part of an extended family, and I have never once in my years of contact with GCS found a single confidence misplaced. It is a remarkable service, and one that can be very proud of its contribution to government.²

One vivid memory for Sir John concerns that of the distinctive type of music that accompanied his twice-weekly journey to the House of

Commons for Prime Minister's Questions: 'One of my drivers had the habit of playing rousing patriotic marches during the short drive between Downing Street and the Palace of Westminster each Tuesday and Thursday. I am not sure how much this helped, as I was usually focused on preparation for Prime Minister's Questions, but there was no doubt it stirred the blood.'³

Given the nature of the deliberately unobtrusive service provided by GCS, it is perhaps inevitable that these relationships largely remain unknown to the public. Occasionally, however, circumstances may at least briefly expose them to the public gaze. This has perhaps never been better illustrated than in the case of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. GCS driver George Newell had driven Mrs Thatcher since she had become Conservative Party Leader in 1975, but in March 1981 he had died suddenly, while the Prime Minister was visiting Northern Ireland. When she was told the news, Mrs Thatcher burst into tears and immediately rang George Newell's wife, and made a car available to her. Against established practice, the Prime Minister insisted on attending the funeral, and was accompanied by husband Denis and son Mark. Despite her 'iron lady' public image, Mrs Thatcher again showed considerable emotion at the funeral, and paid a warm tribute to her driver: 'A wonderful man, a marvellous chauffeur and a good friend who could always make me laugh.'⁴ There was also a wreath from former Prime Minister Edward Heath, as George Newell had previously been his driver.

Mrs Thatcher subsequently developed another relationship of high mutual regard with her GCS driver Denis Oliver, who drove her for a total of fourteen years. This included getting the Prime Minister out of the Grand Hotel in Brighton in 1984, after the explosion of an IRA bomb that killed five people.

Thatcher resigned as Prime Minister in 1990 in highly controversial and emotional circumstances, famously leaving Downing Street in tears. GCS wanted Denis Oliver to take over as driver for the new Prime Minister, John Major, but he felt a great loyalty to the now ex-Prime Minister, who in this role was still entitled to an official car: 'I reckoned Mrs Thatcher had been through a lot, and needed me more than ever now.' Margaret Thatcher showed her

appreciation for Oliver's help and friendship by holding a party in her driver's honour when he retired in 1998, and he continues to keep in touch, and to periodically visit his former boss.

Another remarkable GCS career was that of Bill Housden, who drove Harold Macmillan as Minister and Prime Minister from 1951 to 1963, and then followed that up by driving Harold Wilson as Prime Minister (1964–70), Leader of the Opposition (1970–74), Prime Minister again (1974–76), and then former Prime Minister. In fact, Housden developed a particularly close relationship with Wilson, whom he had first driven when the Labour politician joined the Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade in 1947. The closeness of this relationship was such that Mr and Mrs Wilson acted as godparents for the Housdens' daughter when she was baptised in 1951. Later, as we will see in Chapter Four, Housden became something of a co-opted member of Wilson's powerful 'Kitchen Cabinet' during the latter's second period as Prime Minister.

A senior ministerial colleague of Harold Wilson during the 1960s and 1970s, although also one of his severest critics, was Tony Benn. With characteristic frankness, Benn leaves no doubt as to how highly he valued his GCS drivers:

I knew some of the drivers during my eleven years as a Minister, and the ones who looked after me were all very competent and friendly. My drivers, especially Ron Vaughan, became real friends, and we talked for far longer every day than I ever did with my Permanent Secretary, including deep discussions about government business and my Department, apart from confidential matters.⁵

In his *Diaries*, Tony Benn vividly, and at times movingly, illustrates how at times he came to rely on his sympathetic driver. For example, the entry for 26 July 1976 reads simply: 'I came home and talked to my driver Ron [Vaughan]. I tell him everything. It is a day when politics was perfectly bloody and I have a thumping headache.'⁶ Ron Vaughan became a close family friend, and this included Benn and his wife attending Vaughan's wedding in 1977.⁷ On a more sombre note, in May 1978 Benn's daughter-in-law Rosalind was diagnosed with lung cancer. As Tony Benn describes: 'I did tell my driver, Ron

Vaughan, about it and he said, “It’s turned summer into winter”, which I thought was touching.’⁸

On occasions, a Minister may find an opportunity to express an appreciation of their driver in practical terms. This was well illustrated in 1994, when Beryl Osborne, a GCS driver with over thirty years service, was awarded an MBE. Sir John Cope, a former Conservative Paymaster General whom she had driven for several years, took the opportunity to drive her to Buckingham Palace for the presentation, and then picked her up for the return journey.

To a high degree, there is a continuity about these Minister–driver relationships that runs like a thread, across the political spectrum, throughout the sixty-year history of GCS, and operates regardless of Party and personality. This thread undoubtedly continues up to the present time. Nick Matheson, Chief Executive of the Government Car and Despatch Agency (GCDA) (that includes GCS) from 1997 to 2005, sums up the essence of what the relationships mean: ‘What matters is what actually works. With GCS, you have the remarkable relationships between Ministers and drivers. There is something of huge intrinsic value here. Basically, there is a bit of magic about it.’

For the current Chief Executive of the GCDA, Roy Burke, there is a similar respect for these relationships:

The last thing I would want to do is to destroy the link with the customer sitting at the back of the car. He or she has a relationship with the driver that is truly our golden asset. For example, the driver may have a call in the middle of the night from a Minister who has been abroad, saying that they are arriving back home early, and the driver will willingly go and pick them up.

Nevertheless, Roy Burke is also aware that GCS has to be seen to be working efficiently and effectively: ‘The people sitting at the back of the car like the idea that they have got a personal servant in many respects. You can understand that they like it. However, from the general public’s perspective they will quite rightly ask if we are delivering something efficiently. I think that we are.’

THE ULTIMATE ‘INSIDERS’

In one episode of the classic television situation comedy series *Yes Minister*, the Minister, Jim Hacker, is unable to find out what is actually going on with regard to a particularly sensitive issue from any of his ministerial colleagues, or the Permanent Secretary, Sir Humphrey Appleby. Desperate for information, he consults his driver, who proceeds to put the Minister fully in the picture with the inside story from Westminster and Whitehall. As so often was the case with this well researched series, the reality can bear a close resemblance to the fictional story. Lady Falkender (formerly Marcia Williams) was Personal and then Political Secretary to Harold Wilson from 1956 to 1995, and therefore at the centre of government throughout Wilson’s two periods as Prime Minister in the 1960s and 1970s. In discussing GCS drivers, she describes them as the ‘Outer Cabinet’ because they are the depositories of every possible political confidence.⁹ This inside knowledge can be particularly important at the time of ministerial reshuffles, when a driver is often in a position to reassure (or alarm!) a Minister about his or her impending fate. At the same time, as Sir John Major emphasises, the unique position of GCS drivers places a huge premium on discretion, as the golden asset of the relationship between a driver and Minister can only work efficiently if trust and goodwill is maintained.

GCS Director Jerry Doyle, who in one capacity or another has been associated with the Service since 1972, acknowledges that the relationships between Ministers and drivers lie at the heart of the business, and argues strongly that only GCS can do this effectively:

This is something that could not be reproduced by the private sector or the security services. In fact, drivers often come to believe that they work for a particular Minister rather than the Government Car and Despatch Agency, and develop a huge loyalty. At the same time, a large number of the drivers have been with us for many years, and so can provide a great continuity. For example, when a new government comes in, a driver knows exactly the routine that a Minister has to follow, and this can prove invaluable.

The political significance of GCS is made clear by Labour MP, and former Minister, Sir Gerald Kaufman, in his handbook on *How to be a Minister*. As an Environment Minister from 1974 to 1975, Kaufman himself was responsible for GCS, and was well aware of the powerful position he held: ‘When I was at the Department of the Environment supreme authority over the GCS rested with me, a position of greater power than anyone except the Prime Minister himself enjoys. The allocation of cars to Ministers arouses violent emotions (more among the drivers than the Ministers).’¹⁰ Nevertheless, Kaufman describes how pleas for vehicular favours came thick and fast, and that everyone wanted a Rover, but there was a shortage of these. Consequently, he decided arbitrarily that only Cabinet Ministers could have Rovers, an edict that resulted in several Junior Ministers presenting a variety of arguments as to why they too should have a Rover!¹¹

Kaufman emphasises that a sensible Minister will do a great deal to please his or her driver, as they are highly dependent on them.¹² At the same time, a Minister should always bear in mind that a GCS car and driver is a prized privilege, and so should be ready to give a lift to backbench MPs after a late night Commons’ sitting: ‘After all, the backbenchers have been kept behind at the House to cast a vote that sustains the government in office, and keeps you in your ministerial job and car.’¹³ He also warns that, after leaving office, Ministers will probably suffer withdrawal symptoms, and that after several years of pampered travel in a ministerial car, the now ex-Minister will once more have to get used to using public transport in company with their fellow citizens.¹⁴

The political strength of the Minister–driver relationship made itself felt particularly on former Conservative Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine, who describes how his plans to privatise GCS in the 1990s were thwarted by his fellow Ministers’ fears about losing their own drivers.¹⁵ In fact, it was perhaps a telling factor that at this time Heseltine was one of the few Ministers to actually use his own limousine and driver! Nevertheless, significantly, there remains a strong GCS connection here, as in his earlier years as a Minister, in the 1980s, Heseltine himself used a government driver. When he dramatically walked out of the Cabinet as Defence Secretary in 1986, Heseltine offered his GCS driver the option of going with him. In the

event, the driver did choose to stay with Heseltine, and has remained with him ever since.¹⁶

For most GCS drivers, however, Ministers and governments eventually move on, and it is ultimately the day-to-day professionalism of the Service that carries things forward. One GCS driver describes well how this professionalism works in practice:

You can get quite close to a Minister and his family, and even become good friends. The strange thing is that the Minister will then assume that you must have the same political views as himself, and will see you as a colleague here. He will tell you that 'We are doing this' and 'We are doing that' and take it for granted that you are supportive. In reality, you may totally disagree, but of course you don't tell him that. I guess it shows that you are doing your job efficiently, that Ministers automatically see you as 'one of them'.

In many respects, the unsocial hours required of a driver allocated to a Minister can demand some tough sacrifices. As GCS Director Jerry Doyle describes, family life can be the first victim:

Being a GCS driver is not necessarily the best job for a happy marriage. From Monday morning to Thursday evening, a wife has to be prepared not to see her husband. For example, there may be a late night Commons' sitting, and the driver has to wait around for hours, but can only come home when the Minister's day is finished. Ironically, marriages can also sometimes fail when the driver gives up the job or retires. A wife has got used to a routine, and finds that her husband is about the place too much.

Traditionally, for GCS drivers basic pay has been relatively low, with much of the salary made by means of large amounts of overtime. Nevertheless, the low pay has led to some harsh impacts, such as poor pensions, even after many years of service. In recent years, significantly more of the salary has been consolidated into basic pay, but the nature of the job, in terms of hours worked, means that there can still be a strong reliance on overtime. Given these sometimes difficult conditions, there is a concern within GCS that, with a

generally ageing workforce, it may become increasingly difficult to attract younger people to this type of work.

Just as behind the efficient professionalism of GCS drivers there may be a more difficult personal reality, so for the organisation itself within Whitehall, despite its 'insider' status, there is a paradox that, for much of its sixty-year history, it has been systematically overlooked and undervalued by successive governments.

THE LONG SEARCH FOR A GOOD HOME

It could be said that GCS represents a typically British pragmatic solution to the problems of providing official transport. It was born out of the necessity during the Second World War to find a means to ferry around Ministers and officials, military leaders and assorted VIPs. One solution arrived in the perhaps unlikely form of the Motor Transport Corps. This consisted largely of well-to-do ladies, keen to volunteer for the war effort, who also donated their vehicles, often of the luxury variety, such as Rolls Royces and Bentleys (a good fictional example of the MTC at work is provided by the character Samantha Stewart, who drives around Detective Chief Superintendent Foyle in the television series *Foyle's War*).

In the post-war world, the virtue of having an organised and professional car service for Whitehall was quickly recognised, and in 1946 the MTC was merged with the fleet of the Ministry of Aircraft Production to form the Official Car Service. From the outset, however, the OCS had severe problems forging an identity as an organisation. This was chiefly because it was placed within the giant Ministry of Supply that, apart from providing massive supplies to the armed services, also, incredibly, had responsibility for the iron and steel industry, and the development of nuclear power. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that OCS became a very small cog in a large wheel. There was also the serious difficulty that OCS became defined as a supply organisation, rather than its true character as a type of transport operator. A remarkable feature of the 1950s was the degree to which the modern GCS was forged by the personal initiatives of Prime Ministers Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan, yet despite this care and attention from the very top of

government, the Service still failed to find its true identity as an organisation.

In the event, these organisational and identity problems would dog GCS (as it became in 1952) for the next forty-five years, and it has had a variety of homes. These include, after the Ministry of Supply, the Ministry of Works, the Department of the Environment (and a spell here of over twenty years within the Property Services Agency), the Cabinet Office, and, since 2005, the Department for Transport.

The persistent uncertainty, and lack of identity and leadership, appeared to sap morale over the years, and for much of the 1980s and 1990s GCS as an organisation struggled (although, fortunately for the future existence of the Service, the quality of the driver–Minister relationships remained as high as ever). In the 1980s, there was a long debate within government about the possibility of privatising GCS. This was eventually rejected, chiefly on security grounds, but the uncertainty continued, and for a period in the late 1980s there was a distinct possibility that GCS might disappear altogether, particularly in the form of a takeover by the Metropolitan Police.

GCS survived by the skin of its teeth, and in 1993 it appeared that the Service was finally entering a new and more stable era when it joined the ranks of the Whitehall trend towards arm’s-length Executive Agencies, and became part of the Securities and Facilities Executive (SAFE). However, this proved to be a false dawn. As part of SAFE, GCS was strangely defined as chiefly a security organisation, while the Service once again found that it suffered from neglect by the central management of the Agency.

By 1997, GCS was in a poor financial state and at a very low ebb generally, but it was then that its fortunes took a turn for the better. It came together with the InterDespatch Service (the government’s internal mail service) to form the Government Car and Despatch Agency. Within Whitehall, there were very low expectations for the new Agency, but under a highly proactive Chief Executive, Nick Matheson, the formation of GCDA proved to be a key turning point in the history of GCS. For the first time, it enabled GCS to forge its own identity, and to plan more strategically. With the stronger and more commercially aware leadership, GCS, in many ways against the

odds, was able to reach its sixtieth birthday in 2006, in a much healthier state than would have seemed possible only a few years earlier.

EFFICIENCY ALLOCATIONS AND GREY AREAS

Some challenges to the GCS have a persistent and repetitive quality. In particular, over decades the Service has consistently been required to rebut charges from political critics that it provides a luxurious service to public servants at the taxpayers' expense. It is perhaps almost inevitable that GCS is seen as a soft target by those keen to score points against the government of the time, and at least since the 1970s it has had to deal with efficiency reviews by government itself. A lack of attention here undoubtedly damaged the organisational status of GCS in the 1970s and 1980s. As with Whitehall generally, there has been a major culture shift within GCS over the past two decades, which places much greater emphasis on monitoring and measuring costs and efficiency. GCS Director Jerry Doyle describes the contrasts since the 1970s, when he worked in the Department of the Environment (DoE) workshops, where the responsibilities included maintaining GCS vehicles:

I found it very difficult at first. I had previously worked in the private sector, where I was expected to do a large number of jobs as quickly as possible. However, with the DoE I was told to take as long as it took to do the job, and costs did not really matter. However, over the years that culture has totally shifted, and it is essential to control costs and to do the job as efficiently as possible, although the ethic of public service is still vital.

A major moment of truth for GCS arrived during the late 1980s, after a series of efficiency scrutinies of the Service exposed serious deficiencies. In the early 1990s, strenuous efforts were made to reduce costs, but with mixed success, while relationships between management and staff deteriorated markedly. In the late 1990s, the brave decision was made to reduce charges, which in the event proved to be

a great success, as business was boosted, and revenues actually increased, particularly in the area of short term hire. This has meant that GCS has been able to declare a surplus in all its years with the GCDA. In 2005–06, GCS income totalled £11.7 million, and there was an operating surplus of £122,000. Nevertheless, dilemmas remain. For example, as a public sector organisation GCS profits are returned to the Treasury, yet it requires significant funds for investments, such as in new vehicles and technology, which can improve efficiency.

At the same time as greater emphasis has been placed on efficiency, so it could also be said that the scope of GCS services has tended to expand gradually but steadily over the years. In recent years this has tended to be chiefly in the area of short term hire, where GCS provides an ad hoc chauffeur-driven saloon car service within Whitehall. In this area, it is clearly in intense competition with the private sector, but this has proved to be a great success for GCS (with the help of the reduced rates), and revenues increased from £750,000 in 1999–2000 to over £2 million in 2005–06. Nevertheless, revenues from so-called allocated services continue to dominate GCS finances (over 80 per cent of the total). These allocated services refer to those provided specifically for Cabinet Ministers and Junior Ministers, senior Whitehall officials such as Permanent Secretaries, and a number of public sector Chief Executives, such as the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Inspector of Schools, and the Comptroller and Auditor General. In contrast, pool services, such as short term hire, are provided on a first come first served basis. In 2005–6 the GCS fleet consisted of 186 vehicles, with 114 Allocated services, and a staff of 164.

GCS also employs private contractors, although the cars and drivers must be specified, with all the drivers of course cleared for security. These contractors operate in the regions as well as London, and are required to maintain exacting standards. As Jerry Doyle comments: 'They know that they are only as good as their last job, and must perform, or else we will get someone else.' The only central government Departments not to use GCS for all Ministers are the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office, where some Junior Ministers are driven in departmental vehicles, although the

Secretaries of State for both Departments do use GCS vehicles and drivers. GCS covers England, Scotland and Wales, but not Northern Ireland, while the Scottish Office does also have its own transport. In addition to its main London base, GCS has smaller sites in Birmingham, Bradford and Cardiff.

It is the allocated services that tend to attract the most public attention, although there can be some misconceptions. For example, in recent years a great deal of attention has centred on the GCS vehicles used by former Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott (given the nickname of ‘Two Jags’ by the media, because of his own and official Jaguar cars). In fact, GCS officially provides vehicles on a departmental basis, and not to individual Ministers. The regulations for vehicle use, and the list of vehicles available in the various categories, are set out in the Prime Minister’s Rules, which are periodically reviewed. Nevertheless, it could be said that developments in allocations often owe as much to responses to events as codified rules, while there can be significant grey areas in vehicle use.

For example, we will see in Chapter Four how, in the 1970s, GCS cars were made available to the Leader of the Opposition and ex-Prime Ministers. However, great consternation was caused in Whitehall when former Prime Minister Edward Heath used his pool car well beyond the stipulation that it should be driven only ‘in and around London’. The situation only changed when an IRA bomb exploded outside Heath’s London home, and he was immediately given an allocated car on security grounds.

The right of ministerial spouses and partners to use official cars is another sensitive area. Prior to the mid-1970s, a spouse was only allowed to use an official car when the Minister was actually in it. However, a heartfelt letter from the wife of the Lord Chancellor to the Prime Minister’s Secretary in 1974 led to a relaxation of this rule, so that spouses could use a car on their own, provided it was on official business. The situation with regard to spouses can still be sensitive, and in recent years there has been controversy over the decision to give an allocated car on security grounds to former Prime Minister’s wife Cherie Blair.

A Minister can only use a GCS car on official business, and probably the longest standing, and most persistent, grey area is what

exactly constitutes 'official business'. In general, it has become accepted that a Minister can be transported to and from home to the office, on the grounds that he or she is working on the departmental red boxes. Similarly, although a GCS car cannot be used for Party business, some relaxation has taken place over the years, so that an official car can be used for a Party meeting if it takes place between official engagements. For the Prime Minister and other Ministers with high security needs, GCS cars can be used for all journeys, including those for private or Party purposes.

We will see in Chapters Two and Three that in the 1940s and 1950s lengthy debates and arguments took place on who should be allowed to have an official car, and on what basis they should be allowed to use it. In contrast, the Prime Minister's Rules in modern times have tended to become more stable from one government to another, and although critics periodically call for economies, particularly in the aftermath of any ministerial embarrassments with regard to car use, the Rules have changed little for several decades.

THE PRICE OF SECURITY

The needs of security have inevitably been an important and sensitive area for GCS, particularly after the growth of IRA terrorism in the 1970s. Such dramatic events as the assassination of Conservative MP Airey Neave by a car bomb in the House of Commons underground car park in 1979, and the Brighton Grand Hotel bomb during the 1984 Conservative Party Conference, changed for ever a world where Ministers could more or less assume that the worst thing that might hit them would be a rotten egg or tomato, thrown by a disillusioned voter.

For GCS, apart from the obvious needs for greater vigilance, and practicalities such as armoured vehicles for vulnerable senior Ministers, the threats to security in many ways symbolised a watershed, between a basically certain and predictable world from the 1940s to the 1960s, and a much more unstable existence in later decades. In many respects, the culture of GCS was constructed on the ethics and values of service to the community, built up by the volunteer ladies of the Motor Transport Corps. Ironically, although

this culture developed first during the cataclysmic events of the Second World War, the danger was chiefly external, and so the drivers could do their job largely without fear of a direct threat to themselves and their passengers.

Many GCS drivers, particularly women, were recruited from the armed services in the 1950s and 1960s, and so they brought these disciplines to the Service. Nevertheless, the threat of urban terrorism offered new challenges in terms of driver professionalism in potential emergency situations, and in this new world the traditional service qualities of the GCS driver, as a type of high quality chauffeur, could suddenly appear rather out of date. As we will see in Chapter Five, in the wake of the 1984 Brighton bomb there was considerable internal pressure within government for GCS drivers in protected ministerial cars to be replaced by drivers from the Metropolitan Police. These pressures were relieved only when Environment Secretary Kenneth Baker, the Minister responsible for GCS, stood firm in defence of the Service. Significantly, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher also had a particularly high regard for the GCS drivers, and this high level political support proved decisive.

Subsequently, security training for GCS drivers was greatly enhanced, but the Service could no longer assume that it would automatically continue to be responsible for driving all Ministers. This delicate situation came to a new head in the light of fresh terrorist threats at the beginning of the twenty-first century, illustrated particularly by the devastating 2001 9/11 attacks in the United States. GCS took pride in the fact that it had driven every Prime Minister since the war, but in 2003 responsibility for driving Prime Minister Tony Blair was handed over to the Metropolitan Police on security grounds. As we will see in Chapter Seven, GCS has an agenda to regain this responsibility as soon as possible, but there appear to be significant obstacles to be overcome.

‘BUY BRITISH’ REPLACED BY GREEN VEHICLE AGENDA

For decades, a type of at least unofficial ‘Buy British’ policy existed with regard to the purchase of GCS vehicles. Perhaps nothing

epitomised this relationship more than the classic Rover P5 series, which carried a succession of Prime Ministers, and appeared in a variety of models from 1958 to 1973. Sometimes known as a ‘middle-class Rolls-Royce’ it provided the chief means of transport for Prime Ministers Harold Wilson, Edward Heath, James Callaghan and Margaret Thatcher. Commonly called 3 litre and 3.5 litre, because of the engine displacement, it was highly significant that the last batch of P5s produced by Rover, known as the P5Bs, were reserved for government use, and were still familiar sights in Whitehall more than a decade after production had ended. Consequently, when Margaret Thatcher entered Downing Street in 1979 for the first time as Prime Minister, she did so in a 1972 P5B, although it was during her tenure, from 1979 to 1990, that the P5 was eventually phased out as a Prime Ministerial car in favour of the Jaguar XJ.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Margaret Thatcher did have a particular affection for the P5, as described by her driver, Denis Oliver: ‘I think that one of the reasons Mrs Thatcher liked the P5 was that it had a good step up into the car. This meant that she could get in and out of it quite elegantly and comfortably, without, as you might say, showing yesterday’s washing!’

If the P5 represented the high point of design and reliability in the relationship between GCS and the British car industry, then much of the subsequent story has seen quite a steep downward slope. Rover itself became part of the conglomeration of companies and models that in 1968 became British Leyland, a merger encouraged by the government in the hope that it would promote commercial development and efficiency. Unfortunately, these hopes were never fulfilled, and in 1975 the company was taken into public ownership. As we will see in Chapter Five, this gave the government a vested interest in promoting the company’s models, and Margaret Thatcher and her Ministers became unofficial salespeople for BL.

BL was privatised in 1987 and became the Rover Group, but in 1994 it was taken over by the German company BMW. The last UK volume car manufacturer was now in overseas ownership, but its fortunes could not be revived, and in 2005 the end of an era arrived with the demise of Rover. In 2006, GCS continued to run sixteen Rover 75s, and the chief role in GCS cars manufactured in the UK

has been taken over by Jaguar, with twelve vehicles in the government fleet (although Jaguar is owned by the US company, Ford).

In reality, the ever-growing globalisation of the vehicle industry means that it is increasingly difficult to identify cars that are truly UK manufactured. In any case, GCS points out that EU regulations now prohibit it from specifically favouring UK cars, while the end of Rover means that pressure from MPs with a constituency interest to 'Buy British' has significantly decreased.

Instead, as Chapters Six and Seven describe, it is the environmental agenda that increasingly dictates the GCS vehicle purchasing policy, although the character of this has shifted significantly over the years. In the 1990s, the chief concerns tended to be about the direct adverse effects of vehicle emissions on air quality, and their role in damaging human health, such as in inhibiting learning processes in children, and contributing to the increased incidence of asthma and certain cancers. In recent years, the chief attention, at least in terms of the political agenda, has tended to switch the emphasis on to how emissions may contribute to climate change, and in particular the role of the chief so-called greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide (CO₂).

GCS policy has tended to reflect these changes. For example, in the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century, the emphasis was on the purchase and development of alternatively powered vehicles, such as gas powered cars, but these have now almost disappeared from the GCS fleet. More recently, official targets centre specifically on the reduction of CO₂ emissions. It could be said that this shift reflects the concern of the government to set a good example, given its own commitment to reduce CO₂ emissions through such international agreements as the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, together with goals set domestically, and reflected in the publication of the 2007 Climate Change Bill.

Perhaps nothing illustrates this policy more than the meteoric rise within the GCS fleet of the Toyota Prius, a hybrid electric–petrol vehicle with relatively low CO₂ emissions. In 2006, there were thirty-five Priuses in the GCS fleet (out of a vehicle total of 186) and this figure is bound to increase significantly over the next few years. This is even more likely, given that GCS now runs its own Green Car Service, as an option for those ordering short term hire vehicles. The

fact that the Prius is manufactured in Japan is much less important for GCS, than its fitness for purpose in achieving the Service's modern objectives.

NOTES

1. Memoir written by Tom Hughes, and included in ex-GCS driver Beryl Osborne's scrapbook.
2. Letter, 24 April 2007.
3. Ibid.
4. *Daily Mail*, 14 March 1981.
5. Letter, 11 March 2007.
6. Tony Benn, *The Benn Diaries* (Hutchinson, 1995), p. 322.
7. Ibid., p. 404.
8. Ibid., p. 443.
9. *Mail on Sunday*, 8 May 1983.
10. Gerald Kaufman, *How to be a Minister* (Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 20.
11. Ibid., pp. 20–1.
12. Ibid., p. 21.
13. Ibid., p. 88.
14. Ibid., p. 176.
15. Michael Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle* (Coronet Books, 2000) p. 489.
16. Letter, 12 March 2007.
17. From *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RoverP5>.

CHAPTER 2

Fulfilling a Need

1939–51

THE MTC: FROM THE RITZ TO THE BLITZ

Although the Official Car Service was not founded until 1946, its eventual structure and culture were forged in the crucible of the Second World War. Several vital strands contributed towards the organisation and character of the post-war OCS, but they all fulfilled a basic wartime need to provide essential and efficient transport for a wide variety of Ministers and officials and military leaders. Of these strands, none was more important than the remarkable, but highly unorthodox, Motor Transport Corps. The MTC was composed of socially well connected and generally well-to-do women who volunteered their driving services, and sometimes also their very upmarket vehicles, including Bentleys and Rolls-Royces.

Of these MTC women, the best known is Kay Summersby, who from 1942 to 1945 drove the United States' General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the man who became Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, and was in charge of the decisive 1944 D-Day landings in Normandy that began the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe. Later, Eisenhower would serve two full terms, from 1953 to 1961, as President of the United States. The wartime relationship between Summersby and the married Eisenhower was given new interest after the latter's death with claims, including those from Summersby herself, of an affair between the pair.

In 1948, Kay Summersby published an account of her wartime MTC experiences, entitled *Eisenhower Was My Boss*.¹ This makes no mention of an affair. In the 1970s, however, when she knew that she was dying of cancer, Summersby wrote a second account, which was

published posthumously, with the title *Past Forgetting: My Love Affair with Dwight D. Eisenhower*.² In turn, this second account had been triggered by a statement from former US President Harry S. Truman that, just after the war, Eisenhower had sought permission from Chief of Staff General George Marshall to divorce his wife and marry Summersby. This permission had been refused, and Truman, as President at the time, had seen to it that the correspondence was destroyed.³ Although the claims of an affair remain disputed,⁴ there is no doubt that Eisenhower and Summersby formed an extremely close relationship, and in this respect at least they provide an outstanding early illustration of the remarkable empathy that can develop between a driver and passenger. Summersby's two books also have the great virtue of providing unique, detailed insights into how an MTC driver operated during the war, and how the women were virtually defining a job description as they went along, for what would eventually become OCS.

Kay Summersby grew up in Ireland, but then moved to London, and became a model for the fashion house Worth of Paris. When war was declared in September 1939, she immediately joined the MTC. Summersby describes vividly the quite remarkable origins of the outfit that would eventually form the basis of OCS and GCS:

I soon learned . . . the MTC was looked on as a sort of social function. A newspaper writer had noted that the qualifications for admission seemed to be: (1) an ability to drive a car, and (2) ability to drape oneself in chic fashion at the Ritz or Dorchester bars. One joined the MTC because it was The Thing One Must Do Y'know . . . if one had the money. With disappointment, I discovered there was no pay (when we received a pittance, the girls at headquarters looked down upon us for accepting it). The smart uniform – a skirted version of that worn by British officers, complete with Sam Browne [a type of belt that combines a pistol belt and a shoulder strap] – consumed almost fifty pounds of my thin savings.⁵

At the outset of the war, Summersby was not driving VIPs, but found herself assigned to a post in Lambeth in the East End of London. She describes how, initially, the MTC uniforms 'drew only hate from the

class-conscious cockneys',⁶ but that once the German Blitz started in earnest, her life was transformed:

Our little social set became the busiest rescue squad in all of London. London and the dock areas rocked under the Nazis' bombs. We had twenty-four hours on duty, twenty-four hours off, and rarely got even a wink of sleep on the broken cots.

Now, it's difficult to try to re-create that life. I was an ambulance driver. The only concession granted me as a woman was unofficial permission to stuff cosmetics in my gas mask bag. It was sheer Hell, living and driving and working in a bomb-made Hell. Blood and death became as commonplace as a cigarette.

... Bodies, bodies, bodies, each with a tragic tag on one foot... Driving ambulances loaded with bodies... Sick with the stench of burnt flesh... Being turned away by mortuary after mortuary: 'Sorry, we're full.'⁷

WITH EISENHOWER ON THE ROAD TO VICTORY

Once the worst of the Blitz was over in 1941, Summersby was among the first of the MTC women to be transferred to US Army Headquarters, where they needed drivers who knew London. It was there in 1942 that she linked up with the then unknown Eisenhower when he first arrived in Britain. Ironically, she was allocated Eisenhower only because she arrived late to meet the newly arrived group of American officers, and Eisenhower and General Mark Clark were the only two without a driver.⁸

Once Eisenhower became Commander of the European Theatre later in 1942, he gathered a number of aides around him who became like a family, and Summersby found herself an integral part of this group, to such an extent that she and Eisenhower became virtually inseparable for the remainder of the war. In a manner that would find echoes with many later GCS drivers, one of Summersby's key roles was to act as a sympathetic and discreet confidante for Eisenhower. As she describes:

Ike [Eisenhower's nickname] knew that I was utterly discreet, and he had slowly got into the habit of talking things over with me in the car or over a drink when we arrived at Telegraph Cottage [Eisenhower's country retreat] after work. My contribution to these conversations was very limited. I rarely said anything more than 'Hmm, yes, I see. Is that so?' Non committal, sympathetic sounds, so that he had the feeling that there was someone responding to his thoughts. But I never disagreed. I never made suggestions. I was just there – like a hum in the background.⁹

Remarkably, despite the tough responsibilities of women such as Summersby, the MTC remained an ad hoc civilian organisation. As Summersby acknowledged, 'The uniform did not mean a thing.'¹⁰ Nevertheless, she joined Eisenhower in North Africa (being rescued from a torpedoed ship on her way there), got to know Churchill well, and while in North Africa drove both King George VI and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt (despite protests from the US Secret Service, who claimed that no woman had ever driven the President!).¹¹

When Eisenhower returned to Europe to lead the invasion of mainland Europe, known as Operation Overlord, Summersby also became his Appointments Secretary, and was given her own secretary and office. After the invasion, she drove him all over Europe. Eventually, she was awarded the British Empire Medal, and describes her surprise:

I had never imagined that I would get a medal – any kind of medal. The thought had never crossed my mind. Medals were for people who had done something extraordinary, not for a woman who had spent most of the war behind a steering wheel. When I said as much to Ike, he leaned back in his chair and said, 'I don't think you realise how valuable your services have been. I do. And so does the PM [Prime Minister Winston Churchill]. If I were you, I'd just say "thank you" and stop arguing.' I took his advice and immediately wrote to the PM telling him how surprised I was and how humbly appreciative.¹²

At the culmination of her wartime travels, Summersby became the first 'British' woman (as the book describes her, although she was in

fact Irish) to enter defeated Berlin, and one of only three western women permitted to witness Nazi Germany's formal surrender.¹³ At the end of the war, Eisenhower promised her that he would appoint her to his staff when he returned to Washington, but the call never came. Nevertheless, Summersby became a US citizen, and settled there. She met Eisenhower on several occasions, but their close relationship never resumed.¹⁴

Discretion at a Moment of Destiny

Perhaps nothing better represents the discreet understanding and empathy between a driver and passenger than Summersby's moving description of the eve of D-Day, when she was present at one of the great defining moments in the history of the twentieth century.

Eisenhower had the awesome responsibility to give the go-ahead for the Normandy invasion, and adverse weather conditions were causing endless doubts, for an operation where the price of failure would be unimaginable. The attack had already been postponed once, but after hours of agonising, Eisenhower finally made the decision for the huge undertaking to take place on 6 June. He then went to meet the paratroopers who would form the advance force of the invasion behind enemy lines, and watched them take off. In Summersby's description of what happened next, it is remarkable to note how, despite their close relationship, or perhaps because of it, she understood instinctively the precise moment to keep her distance and say nothing:

'It was such a gigantic moment! My heart was pounding, and I was practically crying. I knew I had never seen anything like it before and never would see anything like it again. We stayed on the roof for a long time watching the planes. Ike stood there with his hands in his pockets, his face tipped towards the sky. The planes kept circling, and then they began tailing off and headed towards Normandy. We sighed. A lot of those men, men whom Ike had just been walking with, shaking hands with, were going to their deaths.

*'The General turned and left the roof without saying a word to anyone. I hurried after him, but then I stopped. He was walking very slowly, his head bent. I could not intrude. He needed to be alone. Before he got into the car, he turned to me and said, "Well, it's on. No one can stop it now." There were tears in his eyes. We were silent as we drove back along the moonlit road to the trailer in the woods at Southwick.'*¹⁵

THE MTC AND HEROISM OVERLOOKED

A wartime Air Ministry file fascinatingly reveals how the minds of officials had great difficulty in accepting and classifying the sterling work done by the volunteer women of the Motor Transport Corps, and that consequently there was a real danger that acts of great heroism could be overlooked. In a strange way, the difficulties in defining the MTC seemed to portend the persistent problems GCS would later encounter in finding a suitable administrative home.

In March 1941, a letter from the Treasury to the Air Ministry proposed commendations for five women of the MTC, for their valour during the German invasion of France in 1940: Section Leader Olive Sherington, and drivers Ursula Bennet, Marjorie Juta, Penelope Otto and Elizabeth Stockley. In the case of Otto, Juta and Bennet, this was because they had been taken prisoner by the Germans, but had escaped and assisted a Flying Officer and his crew to escape. The Director of Military Intelligence at the War Office recognised that at the time they were under the orders of the French, but that given the invasion, it was unlikely that they would be recognised by the French government.

It was stressed that the MTC, unlike the Red Cross, did not just operate at bases, but with the French forces, and up to the collapse they were working close to forward troops. The letter acknowledged that a number of commendations had been granted for British Army officers and men. On the other hand: 'These women were in a similar position, but were, of course, not part of the British Expeditionary Force, and must, it is agreed, be treated as civilians.'

Sherington and Stockley were recommended for awards because they had taken charge of tending the wounded on a boat from Bordeaux to Falmouth, and had earlier carried a number of British Flying Officers to the French coast. The War Office also noted that they had managed to bring their ambulances back to England. On the tenuous grounds that the women had rescued Air Force personnel, the War Office was insistent that the Air Ministry should handle the commendations.

The Air Ministry was clearly unhappy about being given this responsibility, and on 19 March a letter to the War Office was

accompanied by a cutting from the *Sunday Dispatch*. The cutting quoted Mrs Cook, the Corps Commandant of the MTC, who described the remarkable details of how the three women drivers had escaped from the Germans: 'The girls were given their chance to escape when they were ordered to turn their ambulance at a crossroads. Instead of turning, they drove at full speed for two miles through the length of a German Division. The Germans seemed so surprised at their audacity, they gaped and did nothing. Eventually, the girls reached the French Division.'

Nevertheless, the newspaper article also revealed that the women had been awarded the Croix de Guerre with Palm by Marshal Petain's Vichy government. The French Vichy government had been set up after the German invasion, but it was a largely puppet regime, discredited for its collaboration with the Germans.

The Air Ministry letter, however, made it clear that they were now ready to wash their hands of the matter: 'In view of the Vichy award, we hardly think the award of commendations as well is either necessary or desirable.' In addition, in the case of the other two women recommended for awards, the letter pointed out that they had helped soldiers as well as airmen, and so it was up to the War Office to sponsor commendations if desired!

It was to be nearly another nine months before the War Office replied to this classic piece of buck-passing, but on 1 December 1941 a War Office letter stressed that the MTC did not come under their control, and so they could not sponsor commendations.

Things might have continued on this basis for ever, but perhaps imbued with some Christmas spirit, the Air Ministry relented, and on 26 December wrote to the Home Office stating that they were now recommending commendations for Sherington and Stockley.

Even then, things were not straightforward, as no record of Elizabeth Stockley could be found. She was only able to receive her award when it was discovered that her name was in fact Stucley!¹⁶

KEEPING MINISTERS MOBILE

Just as the extreme circumstances of the war created the need for a body such as the MTC, so for Ministers themselves, the declaration of

war on 3 September 1939 ensured that their travel arrangements would never be the same again. Prior to this time, the only Minister who had use of an official car was the Home Secretary, who was allocated a police car, although service Ministers could call on service vehicles as necessary. For the other Ministers, it was basically a matter of providing their own transport, whether cars or public transport.

The degree to which the declaration of war changed the whole pace and culture of government, however, is very well illustrated by the fact that, after only two days had elapsed, on 5 September, it was suggested at a meeting of the new War Cabinet, and approved by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, that all members of the War Cabinet should be supplied with official cars and drivers. It was now considered essential that, for senior Ministers, mobility was at a premium, and that official cars were the only means of ensuring this.

In fact, the War Cabinet was much smaller than its peacetime equivalent, and in addition to the Prime Minister, consisted of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Foreign Secretary, the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Secretary of State for Air, the Lord Privy Seal, and the Minister Without Portfolio. Nevertheless, it was decided that arrangements should be made with the motor hire company of F. Kidner and Sons to hold six 20-horsepower Austin chauffeur-driven cars to be permanently at the disposal of the War Cabinet. Perhaps surprisingly, Chamberlain himself retained his own private vehicle.

In the event, Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax was able to arrange something a bit grander for himself than the Austins allocated to other Ministers. On the one hand, Halifax emphasised that he 'desired use of an official car with chauffeur to save him undue fatigue during the emergency'. At the same time, he reported that he had taken up the offer by a Mr Lees of a Rolls Royce, which would be loaned at no charge.

Even in that first month of the war in September 1939, it was highly significant that two events occurred that would have many echoes for GCS in later decades, even up to the present time. Firstly, in a manner that would be familiar to generations of GCS drivers, on 15 September it was reported that the driver of the Lord Privy Seal's

(Sir Samuel Hoare's) car was asking for extra subsistence, in view of the long hours, but this had been turned down, with the advice to the driver to take it up with his employer.

Secondly, by 20 September the restriction of official cars to the War Cabinet was already breached, when a car was offered to the Head of the News Department at the War Office, as it was considered that he had an essential need for quick transport. It seems that, even in those days, the government understood the importance of news presentation and management!

As the war progressed, so the demands on the use of official cars would increase inexorably. In the case of the Prime Minister, when Winston Churchill succeeded Chamberlain in 1940, he was given use of an Austin hired from Kidners. With typical audacity, however, Churchill decided that his 23.5 h.p. Austin was not fast enough, and a 28 h.p. Austin was substituted. No doubt emboldened by Churchill's success, Minister for Labour and National Service Ernest Bevin shortly after also requested a faster car, on the grounds that he had a lot of travelling to do. However, like many later Ministers, Bevin was to discover that there could be considerable political sensitivity on these matters, and his request was turned down, on the grounds that the public could be critical of high-powered cars being supplied at public expense. Instead, it was advised that the general line should be one of moderation.

Churchill himself did not retain his new Austin for long, and in July 1941 he took over a bulletproof War Office Humber, with the Austin returned to Kidners, although a driver from Kidners continued to drive the PM.

By 1942, it was acknowledged that, although official cars had originally been restricted to members of the War Cabinet, it had subsequently been extended to others on health or accessibility grounds. Consequently, by May 1942 the number of official cars totalled nineteen – six for the War Cabinet, three for Service Department Ministers, and ten for other Ministers. In addition, two Ministers used their own cars, but had chauffeurs at public expense. It was therefore clear that the provision and use of official cars for Ministers was becoming established, and moving beyond the ad hoc arrangements set in place in 1939. This was reflected in the decision in

December 1942 to centralise arrangements for dealing with War Cabinet cars at the Treasury.

Nevertheless, in 1943 the pressure to extend official car use continued unabated, and there is a tone of impatient exasperation in a Treasury memo of 4 February that noted the Colonial Secretary had been making demands on the voluntary car pool run by the Women's Voluntary Service (presumably referring here to the MTC). Unfortunately, these demands had involved him in a number of unhappy arguments with Ministers, and the memo noted that the provision of official cars was liable to attract public criticism, and should be kept within the narrowest possible limits, particularly as there had recently been Parliamentary Questions on these matters.

Having taken this tough line, however, the impact of the memo was diluted when it was conceded that Ministers needed cars, particularly at night, when it could be impossible to get taxis. Consequently, in borderline cases, it was endeavoured to arrange that requirements were met by the car pool maintained by the Ministry of Aircraft Production.

The government's inability to take a hard line was even more evident later in February 1943, when it was agreed that all senior Ministers should be provided with an official car at public expense, 'senior' in this context meaning all Ministers who would normally have been members of a peacetime Cabinet. Although it was emphasised that Ministers must pay for private use, it was also stipulated that, where possible, the car should be made available to senior officials.

Lord Halifax may have requested an official car to 'save him undue fatigue during the emergency', but by the end of the war it had become evident that the official car had come to stay, and that some sort of formal organisation was required to take things forward on an efficient basis.¹⁷

Carrying Clementine Churchill

A delicate dilemma that arose during the war, and would recur persistently over the years, was how to treat Minister's spouses with regard to official car use. Particularly in the case of a Prime Minister, it is almost inevitable that a spouse will assume some sort of official role, yet there has generally been a reluctance to acknowledge his or her place in the scheme of things.

On 17 May 1942, a letter from the Prime Minister's office to the Treasury revealed that Clementine Churchill, the Prime Minister's wife, was using his official car during the day, particularly with regard to her work for the Aid to Russia Fund. The possibility had been considered of giving her an official car of her own, but as she used it only two or three times a week in this way, this was not considered necessary. Instead, she wished to make some payment for her use of her husband's car.

Nevertheless, it is intriguing to note that an official car was considered for Clementine Churchill. In fact, it was to be another sixty years before a Prime Minister's spouse was treated in this way, when Cherie Blair was allocated her own car on security grounds.

*By December 1942 a Downing Street letter confirmed that Mrs Churchill was using the car herself for official purposes. The letter also revealed that there were significant security advantages in giving Clementine use of her husband's car: 'The car is never cancelled when the PM is away on a secret mission, as this would be an open advertisement he is not in London.' The letter was also pleased to note: 'The driver is a picked man and can be trusted.'*¹⁸

THE BIRTH OF OCS

At the conclusion of the war, Prime Minister Winston Churchill is reputed to have asked, in a rhetorical fashion, what would be the cost to the government in taxi fares, if the official cars were abandoned. Regardless of the truth of this statement, we have seen that, as the war years progressed, the practical necessity of having official cars and drivers readily available had become widely acknowledged and appreciated.

In the event, Churchill was denied any opportunity to establish an official car service in peacetime, as in the general election of July 1945, he and the Conservative Party were defeated in a landslide victory (an overall majority of 145) for the Labour Party led by Clement Attlee. Crucially, however, the train of Whitehall thinking on these matters was made clear in a Treasury memo that was waiting for the new government when it took office.

Intriguingly, the memo began by comparing the current situation with that at the end of the First World War, and noted that, at that

time, the National Expenditure Committee had recommended that provision of cars for the use of Ministers, officers and officials should be discontinued. In these earlier days, when the motor car was in its infancy, it had therefore been concluded that a Minister would only need an official car at a time of extreme national crisis. The 1945 memo, however, reflected greatly changed times, and stressed that the position on official cars needed review. The memo followed this up by setting out the case for a permanent official car service!

In particular, it quoted from a House of Commons speech made in May 1945 by the Conservative MP Sir Herbert Williams. In this speech, Williams had argued: 'Every decent business provides managers or managing directors with facilities for transport. Now, twenty or twenty-five Ministers have cars at public expense. I think this is right, although it has never been properly sanctioned. We ought now to regularise the position.' Williams was rightly pointing out that the official cars had been introduced, two days after war broke out, as an emergency measure, although by the end of the war it was clear that they had become an integral part of the Whitehall machine.

The memo confirmed that, since 1943, what it called Ministers 'above the line' had been allocated an official car, i.e. those Ministers who would in peacetime normally have a place in the Cabinet, rather than the much smaller War Cabinet. The memo concluded by succinctly presenting an argument that it could be said would form the principal justification for GCS over the next sixty years: 'It can be said with truth that a Minister is a Minister for twenty-four hours a day, and it is not unreasonable that they should be allowed to use it [an official vehicle] at public expense.'¹⁹

The new government lost little time in taking the advice of the memo, and in August 1945 Prime Minister Attlee set up a committee under the chairmanship of the Financial Secretary to the Treasury to ascertain what economies could be effected with regard to official cars. The government was therefore clearly sensitive about how the use of official cars had grown during the war, and of the public reaction if this were to continue in peacetime. This was likely to be particularly sensitive, given that Britain was basically bankrupt after the huge cost of winning the war, and there were serious shortages of food and basic materials. In this climate, when for the

vast majority of the population a private car remained an unobtainable luxury item, the sight of Ministers riding around in chauffeur-driven upmarket saloon cars was not likely to be well received.

The government committee was obviously sensitive to these matters, and recommended a broadening of the pool system, which would serve the purpose of providing essential transport, but at the same time would restrict the number of cars allocated for personal use, so that Ministers not of Cabinet rank could utilise the pool. The intention was therefore that only Cabinet Ministers should have cars allocated to them for use on a personal basis, while everyone else would call on a general pool on an ad hoc basis.²⁰

Nevertheless, the question of who should be entitled to an allocated car was only one half of the equation. The other half concerned on what basis this was all to be organised. The wartime official transport had grown in an ad hoc unco-ordinated fashion, with vehicles provided by private hire, the MTC (under the control of the Ministry of Supply), and also a car pool operated by the Ministry of Aircraft Production, while individual departments also supplied their own transport.

Context is important here in terms of pointing the way forward, and the Attlee Labour government had a radical commitment to socialist principles that promoted the benefits of planning and public ownership. Consequently, during its six years in office, it not only set up the National Health Service, but also implemented a huge nationalisation programme, including the railways, coal, electricity, gas, iron and steel, and large sections of the road haulage and bus industries. It was almost inevitable, therefore, that official transport would be placed on a similar basis.

The trigger that brought about the birth of the Official Car Service was the merger of the Ministry of Supply (MOS) and the Ministry of Aircraft Production (MAP) in April 1946. The MOS had been set up in 1939, and was basically responsible for the supplies essential to support the war effort. MAP had been set up in 1940 to relieve the Air Ministry of responsibility for the procurement of supplies, but in 1945 it was decided that MAP should be wound up, and merged with the MOS. Consequently, in October 1945 the Prime Minister announced the government's decision to establish a new MOS.

This restructured MOS was a truly massive organisation, with a mind-bogglingly wide array of responsibilities. In addition to its own supply function for the armed services, and taking over those of MAP, it was given the responsibility to develop new types of civil aircraft; to sponsor production of certain goods of wide economic importance; to carry primary government responsibility for the development of many sections of the engineering industry, including motor vehicles, and domestic items such as refrigerators and washers; and to administer controls on the iron and steel industry. Amazingly, to add to all this, it was also charged with the massive task of undertaking research on, and production of, atomic energy! Finally, and in an official list placed ninth in a list of nine responsibilities, the MOS was to operate the government's Official Car Service in London and certain provincial towns.²¹

By placing OCS within the overwhelming environment of the MOS, the government was to pose a massive problem for the Car Service that would bedevil it, and later the GCS, for decades to come. Although governments might discuss endlessly who should or should not be entitled to an official car, minimal attention was given to such vital matters as the basis on which the Car Service should be organised and operate. On the one hand, it could be said that this neglect allowed those working at the grassroots to get on with the job. On the other hand, it also meant that the Car Service was given little strategic direction, and that when crises finally arrived, as they did in the 1980s and 1990s, GCS would find itself as an organisation in a terribly weak and vulnerable position. It was only with the creation of the Government Car and Despatch Agency in 1997 that this position would finally be reversed.

Meanwhile, in 1946 it was up to those working day to day, to get the vehicles on the road to ensure that the new OCS could be made to work effectively.

Cripps the Big Spender!

A fascinating exchange of correspondence early in 1946 reveals deep differences within the Labour government on the question of investment in the official car fleet. This correspondence was triggered by a request from the President of the Board of Trade, Sir Stafford Cripps, to purchase two new

Daimlers for use by his department. The quite remarkable thing here is that Cripps was legendary for his extremely frugal lifestyle, and in the public mind came to symbolise the government's austerity policies in the early post-war years. Yet here he was ordering two luxury cars! The explanation for this uncharacteristic behaviour perhaps lies in Cripps' official position, and that he saw purchase of the cars as a means of promoting the British vehicle industry. If this was the case, then he was foreshadowing generations of politicians, who would press a 'Buy British' policy on OCS and GCS.

Nevertheless, Chancellor of the Exchequer Hugh Dalton was clearly alarmed at Cripps' request, and in a letter to Minister of Supply John Wilmot, argued that it should be fairly simple to provide him with a vehicle from the car pool, without embarking on new purchases. A few days later, Dalton wrote to Cripps himself, emphasising that the Prime Minister had already approved proposals for a general pool of cars, and advising him to pick a vehicle from this source.

Cripps, however, was clearly determined to press his case, and in a remarkable letter to Dalton expressed his concern about the 'undesirable effects of Ministers being seen driving about in a dilapidated pre-war car'. In contrast, he wanted 'a decent British car', and regarded a sufficient pool of official cars as just as much part of an efficient administration as is a good staff of messengers.

Cripps concluded by noting that, although parliamentary under-secretaries may not require cars of their own, they must be mobile for their many meetings. He believed that, at the end of a twelve-hour day, a half-hour's wait in the rain for a bus was not a very efficient way of dealing with what should be a high-powered man, and that he was sure an incident of this sort had been responsible for the recent illness of the Overseas Trade Minister.

Ironically, a letter a few days later from Supply Minister Wilmot to Hugh Dalton appeared to confirm Cripps' arguments. Wilmot warned Dalton that he was not optimistic about the quality of the pool cars, and that many of them were worn out. He went on: 'I had a parade last week of the best cars left to us and, believe me, they were a sorry lot.' Wilmot was also clearly aware of the sensitive political implications here, and added: 'The greater proportion of decent cars are likely to be American, but in my view it would be unwise to use American cars for Ministers.'²²

MAKING OCS WORK

Given the Minister of Supply's views on the state of the car pool vehicles, it was clear that actually turning OCS into a workable operation would be far from an easy task. We saw at the beginning of this book how Tom Hughes ministered to the needs of Winston Churchill, and it was Hughes, as the OCS Garages Superintendent, who was presented with this formidable challenge.

Prior to his new job, Hughes had been in charge of the Ministry of Aircraft Production vehicle fleet, and in his memoir he describes how this consisted mainly of RAF vehicles, supported by gift cars that were used in the Emergency Transport Pool. The ETP was based at Horseferry Road in Westminster, but also at various aircraft factories for visiting VIPs. The fitters and drivers were RAF personnel, and numbered around 450.

In April 1946, the MAP ETP was merged with the Motor Transport Corps, to form the OCS. At the time of the merger, Hughes describes the OCS fleet strength as consisting of 720 vehicles, comprising thirty heavy lorries, 152 light vans, 498 cars of all types, from Rolls-Royces to Hillman 10 h.p. saloons, and forty motor cycles. However, given Wilmot's poor view of the state of the fleet, it was perhaps not surprising that only two months later, in July 1946, the number of cars had been basically halved, from 498 to 253. Part of this reduction came about through the return of gift cars, which many prominent people had donated for the war effort. Hughes arranged for these to be rebuilt, and he describes the surprise of owners, many of whom had written off their cars, only to find that they were to receive them back in new condition. These cars included Rolls-Royces, Daimlers, and Bentleys (one of which was an 8 litre).

The switch to OCS and a peacetime operation meant that the RAF maintenance and driving staff were replaced by civilians, while many of the remarkable MTC volunteer women left the Service, leaving, as Hughes put it bluntly: 'those who required to work for a living'²³ (although we will see in the next chapter that at least some of these upper-set women remained with the Car Service until well after the war). By the end of 1946, Hughes was left with an OCS staff of around 350.

The most vital challenge for the infant OCS was to firmly establish its profile within Whitehall. It was one thing to set up the new organisation, but it desperately needed to assert itself within the fragmented official vehicle service that had built up throughout the war. The chief prize here would clearly be the members of the Cabinet themselves.

As we saw, at the outbreak of war the members of the War Cabinet had been supplied with privately hired cars from F. Kidner and Sons, and this arrangement was still operating in 1946. However, a Treasury memo of 14 May 1946 indicated that the position was under review. The memo noted that there had been a Parliamentary Question about the expenditure on private hire cars for Cabinet Ministers. In the subsequent discussion, it had been queried if the committee set up in August 1945, to look for economies in the use of official cars, had considered the possibility of persuading Cabinet Ministers and Ministers of Cabinet rank to use cars from the Ministry of Supply pool, although these cars would of course be available for their personal use all the time. Significantly, the memo revealed that the 1945 committee had come to no definite conclusion on this matter, but that it should be considered by the MOS as part of its general review.²⁴

Official figures show that, in 1945–46, the total amount paid to private hire companies for cars used by Ministers totalled £12,219. Tom Hughes clearly spotted an opportunity here, although the method he chose was certainly unorthodox, as he describes:

The majority of Ministers were supplied with cars from a private hire firm for over £2000 each per annum, which was a lot of money in 1946, when drivers' wages were around £4 per week. The service provided by the hire firm was poor, so I arranged for twenty limousines to be pulled off the RAF dump at Bourne in Cambridgeshire, and after rebuilding these, we set about capturing the VIP service. By the end of 1946 we had sixteen Ministers using the OCS, and our service had spread to take in all Departments, but some continued with a fleet of their own.²⁵

Hughes' entrepreneurial spirit had paid off, and the Labour Cabinet were now using Hillman cars supplied by OCS, although one

wonders what Sir Stafford Cripps made of being driven in a car obtained from an RAF dump! Nevertheless, in winning the contract, and pushing out the private hire company, OCS had established a position that would continue unbroken for the next sixty years. It could fairly be said, therefore, that it was this landmark change that truly symbolised the birth of OCS.

THE BRIDGES' PLAN

In fact, Hughes' initiative did not go unnoticed in the highest Whitehall circles, and ironically, for a time, it placed OCS in a tricky position. In July 1946, an ominous Treasury memo revealed that the Chancellor was concerned that expenditure on Ministers' cars was growing (after his argument with Cripps it appeared that Hugh Dalton was clearly not prepared to let this matter go). In particular, the Chancellor was perplexed to reconcile this rise with the gradual shift over from the private hire service of Messrs Kidners to the MOS pool service, since he would have thought that the pool, with its centralised administration, would have been more economical, in terms of cost per mile, than Kidners. The Chancellor did concede that an alternative explanation might be that any economy on the part of MOS might be offset by an increased use of official cars. Nevertheless, he believed that the matter should be looked into.²⁶

The matter certainly was looked into, and in August a memo followed from Sir Edward Bridges, the Permanent Secretary at the Treasury. Bridges was also Head of the Home Civil Service, and as a former Cabinet Secretary during the war years was an enormously powerful figure within Whitehall. Peter Hennessy describes Bridges as 'artistic, informal, intuitive. His preferred method of running the Civil Service was a discreet chat over tea and buns.' Nevertheless, Hennessy emphasises that a summons to tea with Sir Edward was an awesome thing for the eminent as well as the lowly, and that he had a great talent for concentrating on the main issue, leaving the detail to others.²⁷

Any view on OCS by Bridges would therefore carry great weight, and the memo began on a low note by observing that the new arrangements for official cars had not been free from difficulty, and were of course controversial. Bridges believed that the government

was likely to be attacked on this matter, and so it ought to take stock before the attack developed.

Taking up the point raised in the earlier memo, he emphasised that the government ought to know how costs per unit or per mile compared between the pool cars run by the government and the private hire cars. However, Bridges clearly saw the need for a lot more information than this, and argued that the government should have readily accessible information as to the number of cars operated on official business, the approximate mileage they were run, the approximate cost, and the extent to which they were used for private purposes, together with the arrangements for payment for such use. He also wanted to make sure that really adequate logs were kept, and in appropriate cases inspected, in respect of the journeys run by these cars.²⁸

Reflecting the ability of Bridges to get to the heart of things, there is a curiously timeless quality about this memo. He had identified the potential political sensitivity of any official car service, and had recognised that it was necessary for as much information as possible to be obtained, so that the government would not be at risk from any nasty surprises were the cost of the Car Service to be publicly questioned.

In the event, the 1946 Treasury concern proved to be misplaced, and in December an MOS memo confirmed that the pool cars were indeed cheaper than privately hired cars. The MOS had not had time to work out the full costs, but in fact had found a tendency for pool car costs to decrease.²⁹ As the year of its creation drew to a close, therefore, the fledgling OCS could breathe a little easier.

Jetting Away!

Over the years, many VIPs have been separated from their official cars only with great reluctance. One early example of this phenomenon was the engineering genius Sir Frank Whittle, the father of jet propulsion. During the war, Whittle had been supplied with a Rolls-Royce from the MAP Emergency Transport Pool for the purposes of demonstrating his jet engine. Tom Hughes describes how Whittle became very attached to his Rolls, so that it became a terrific job to get it back from him! Eventually, this was achieved only with the intervention of Air Chief Marshall Sir Alex Coryton, who was Controller of Air Supplies.³⁰

OCS GROWING PAINS

The supply of allocated cars to senior Ministers may have been the flagship element of the OCS operation, but below that there were large grey areas, where the situation was much less clear-cut, and presented significant difficulties. In particular, two persistent problems confronted the growing OCS. Firstly, many Departments had significant car pools of their own, which continued to operate autonomously from OCS. Secondly, there was the sensitive question of exactly who, outside Cabinet Ministers, should be entitled to regular use of an official car. Here, as the 1940s progressed, it became clear that things had moved significantly beyond what had been envisaged in 1945.

The large size of the departmental fleets outside OCS was vividly set out in a Treasury memo of April 1946 (the month OCS was set up). Consequently, the memo described how, in October 1945, the number of official cars controlled by Departments and operated in the UK totalled 15,780. Of these, 9,434 were used by the three Service Departments, 1,559 by the National Fire Service, and 4,787 by the civil Departments. In London, however, twenty-five Departments had cars that were used in effect as departmental taxis, although the memo pointed out that there were wide variations, with the Air Ministry having 206 cars, the War Office 160, but many Departments having less than thirty. The memo also noted that there was little co-ordination on repairs, although many did use MOS. In setting out the detailed figures for departmental transport, the inference of the memo was clearly that the system for official cars was not efficient, and required greater co-ordination. It was highly significant for the establishment of OCS, therefore, that the memo concluded that, from 17 June 1946, all applications for use of official cars, and for additional cars or replacements, would be required to be submitted in the first instance to MOS.³¹ This process was consolidated in a later memo, that revealed it had been agreed that from February 1947 MOS should maintain and repair departmental cars.³²

It was clear, therefore, that OCS (through its parent MOS) had a very powerful ally in Whitehall in the form of the Treasury, which

saw it as an effective means of saving money by co-ordinating the highly fragmented departmental services.

This support was set to continue, and is very well illustrated by a letter sent to MOS by the Treasury in July 1947. The letter noted, with a tone of regret, that MOS was now no longer taking steps to absorb further departmental car pools into their organisation. The reason for this was apparently to keep the total number of pool cars down to 700. The letter declared, however, that there was no need for the MOS to restrict itself in this way, and that the Treasury 'would not object to you going over 700, provided that there was a commensurate reduction in the departmental pools'.³³

The Treasury, therefore, was urging the MOS to be more aggressively proactive in its takeover plans! In the event, however, it would only be with the switch from the OCS to GCS in 1952 that major steps would finally be taken to absorb the departmental pools into the Car Service itself.

Meanwhile, OCS had to concern itself with the second major problem, of controlling and regulating exactly who should have access to official cars. In particular, the rather curious system of nominated cars proved to be a generally unsatisfactory solution to a delicate problem. The essence of the problem was the feeling within Whitehall that, although it was necessary to restrict the number of allocated cars to senior Ministers, there were those officials, such as Permanent Secretaries, who should not be expected to take their chance with the rest in ordering a pool car!

Initially, an April 1946 Treasury memo laid it down firmly that, outside the Cabinet, only the Service Heads of the three fighting services and the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury (as Head of the Civil Service) should be entitled to allocated official cars and drivers. The memo noted that a committee had been appointed in October 1945 to consider the arrangements for official travel for people other than those supplied with allocated cars. The committee found that there was a need here, given that there was a poor taxi service in London. In addition, there was not enough accommodation in central London for government officials, meaning that some would have to be located away from the centre, leading to access problems.

The memo therefore announced that Departments which satisfied the Treasury that they needed ten cars or more should be allowed to run strictly limited departmental pools in London, with a number of high grade cars supplying the needs of Junior Ministers, senior officials, distinguished visitors, etc. It was emphasised that the number of high grade cars should be less than the number of individuals entitled to use them, but that they should be adequate to meet all but abnormal demands. In addition, the memo noted that there should also be a general pool (run by OCS) and that small pools should also be set up in each of government regional headquarters towns. It was also stipulated that there should be no private use, although, significantly, the memo added here that there could be discretion in the case of senior officials.³⁴

The Treasury clearly hoped to keep the lid firmly on official car use, particularly given the fact that this had grown in a rapid ad hoc way during the war years. A year later, however, it was clear that all was not working out as planned, and a letter from MOS to the Treasury in May 1947 set out the position.

The letter began by noting with some concern that the list of Ministers with allocated or nominated cars had increased, even over the previous month. The peculiar principle of nominated cars appeared to have evolved over the previous twelve months. The letter explained that nominated cars were in principle entirely distinct from allocated cars. Consequently, allocated cars were solely at the disposal of Ministers, whereas nominated cars were technically on pool duty, and should be available for the pool. The letter pointed out, however, that the nominated car was not available for the pool unless the senior official using it said that he did not need it. In practice, because the senior official required it each day, this meant that nominated tended to approximate to allocated! (Tom Hughes describes how there were thirteen nominated cars, with Permanent Secretaries and others at that level nominating cars that could be driven by any driver available.)³⁵

Significantly, the MOS appeared to be accepting the reality of the situation, and was not recommending abolition of the distinction between allocated and nominated. Instead, it was considered that particular attention should be given to the manner in which nominated cars were now being used for private purposes, such as for

travel to and from homes and to lunch. The problem was that discretion had been given to the user, as the logs showed only the mileage driven, but the MOS felt that there was a need to recover the costs for private use.³⁶

The MOS was clearly not prepared to let this matter go, and in a June 1947 minute it noted with concern that, instead of occasional private use, certain officials were now using their cars regularly for such purposes, such as to and from their homes in the ordinary way, a practice which had not been envisaged when the regulations for use of car pools had been framed in 1945.

Once again, the letter recognised the reality of the situation, and pointed out that in these situations it was difficult for junior officials responsible for dealing with official cars to reprimand senior officials. Instead, it was felt that it would be better to ask the officials to pay for private use, rather than to stick to the official rules.³⁷

There was clearly now a feeling that something had to be done here, and a Treasury memo followed that warned the nominated system could grow into a wholesale evasion of the restrictions that applied to allocated cars. It therefore recommended that the nominated system should cease to be recognised.³⁸

A Treasury memo of July 1947 defined the new situation. There was now no objection to nominated cars being used for official lunches, and also to bring officials to early meetings or home from late meetings. At the same time, it was acknowledged that private use of nominated cars had hitherto not been recognised. Consequently, it would be necessary to rely on the discretion of officials to report private use, as was already the case with Ministers.³⁹

Officials were therefore to be put on their honour to 'play the game'. Nominated cars had clearly been introduced as an unofficial means of extending the allocated list, but once these officials, perhaps understandably, had started using these cars as a matter of course in their daily routines (even perhaps more than Ministers!), then alarm bells had begun to ring in Whitehall. In the highly austere world of early post-war Britain, any suggestion of Ministers and senior officials making extravagant use of official vehicles would inevitably be very badly received by the general public.

Nevertheless, the case of the nominated cars did reveal some tricky grey areas as to what exactly constituted official business, such as the journey from home to work, and this persistent problem would continue to resurface over the years.

Moving with the Times

Tom Hughes' account of the development of OCS makes it clear that the Service was by no means restricted to ferrying around Ministers and officials, and in fact was involved in many of the major events in the early post-war period around Europe as a whole.

For example, MAP had a large car fleet in Germany, with a reporting base at Horseferry Road in Westminster, from where vehicles were supplied to the Control Commission in Germany. Eventually, the Control Commission took over all the Humber 4x4s operating in Germany, in exchange for new Wolseley and Vauxhall cars that would form the basis of the OCS – no doubt much to the relief of Supply Minister John Wilmot, after the shock of his vehicle inspection!

During 1945–46 cars were sent out from Horseferry Road for various conferences in Geneva and the Paris Peace Conference, and were even used at the Nuremberg War Trials in Germany. There were also car pools based in Paris and Geneva at this time, although these had a separate organisation and were not included in the OCS fleet. Eventually, these European pools were run down, but their existence illustrates again the huge and rapid growth in official transport as a result of the necessities of war.

In 1947, the biggest OCS commitment was for the World Monetary Conference held in London, in which 142 cars were used by representatives who all arrived at the same time at Victoria Station!

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

Two former drivers with vivid memories of the early OCS days in the 1940s, when it was based at Hobart House, are Ann Riley and Dorothy Spoor. Their remarkable experiences reflect a time when OCS, and later GCS, had a much wider variety of responsibilities than in modern times, a fact that meant both women had to be literally ready for anything.

Ann Riley

Ann Riley was just 20 years old when she joined OCS in September 1946, four months after it was founded, yet she had already had three years wartime experience in the WRENS. As she explains:

I grew up as very much a country girl in Sussex, but at seventeen I was determined to help the war effort, and joined the WRENS. I was stationed in the London docks during the time of the flying bombs – one of them hit our rest room there. I then spent six months at the Admiralty, but at the end of the war I left the WRENS and needed a job. One of my friends from the WRENS had already joined OCS, and recommended that I should follow her. Because of my wartime driving experience, I immediately began driving the official cars. I stayed with the pool because of the huge variety of the work, whereas with allocated you could be stuck with one person for some time.

The wide and highly unpredictable experiences were there almost from the beginning. For example, Ann remembers suddenly receiving an invitation to go to what is now Heathrow Airport, to help them choose the curtains for the VIP lounge at the original terminal building! As she comments: 'I think the people in charge hadn't much idea about this sort of thing, and so were very keen to have my advice.'

One passenger she did carry on several occasions was Lord Ismay, the Chairman of the Festival of Britain Committee. The Festival was officially designed by the Labour government to commemorate the centenary of the 1851 Great Exhibition, but in reality it acted as a symbol for the rebirth of post-war Britain. Many futuristic buildings were constructed on the south bank of the Thames in London. Nearly all of these were dismantled at the conclusion of the Festival, but one that has survived is the Royal Festival Hall. In 1949 Ann Riley took Lord Ismay to the laying of the foundation stone for the Festival Hall by Prime Minister Clement Attlee. As she comments: 'I have attended many Festival Hall concerts over the years, and always think how I was there at the very beginning.'

A particularly memorable and moving occasion for Ann was the lying-in-state in Westminster Hall of King George VI, who died in February 1952: 'One of the Ministers in the Colonial Office arranged for me to go in through a side entrance, and I was able to stand and watch what happened. I will never forget the rivers of people moving quietly down the steps and into the Hall to pay their respects.'

In those years, GCS did quite a lot of work for the Royal Family, such as carrying members of the press to various events. On one occasion, Ann was driving a car accompanying the Queen Mother on a visit to Hemel Hempstead, after which they were going to Hatfield House for lunch. Ann was driving the car behind that carrying the Queen Mother, and on the way to Hatfield House it soon became evident that the driver in front had no idea how to get there. It was therefore up to Ann to save the day:

As it happened, I did know the way, so I started making hand signals to show the driver of the Queen Mother's car the direction to follow at each turning. He could see these in his rear view mirror, and eventually got back on the right track, so that we arrived safely. When we arrived, he came over and thanked me for getting him out of a hole!

The huge variety of work included many visits to prisons, usually carrying performers who gave concerts for the prisoners. People she took included the opera singer Joan Hammond; the jazz singer George Melly; the first man to run the mile in under four minutes, Sir Roger Bannister; and the television presenter Sir David Frost. It was a visit to Wandsworth prison, however, with the great violinist Yehudi Menuhin, with his accompanist sister Hephzibah, which provided Ann with one of the most memorable experiences of her life. As she explains:

When we arrived, we were taken to see the prison Governor. It was in the days when capital punishment was still in force, and the Governor told us that there was about to be a hanging. Consequently, the atmosphere in the prison was extremely tense and on a knife-edge. The Governor asked Menuhin what he proposed to play, and he replied, 'Bach.' The Governor was not at all happy about this, and

asked if, in the circumstances, he could play something lighter, but Menuhin was adamant that he would stick to his programme.

When we arrived in the hall, sure enough the prisoners were stamping and shouting, and were not at all in the mood to listen to a classical recital. It seemed hopeless, but then Menuhin began to play. Incredibly, within a few minutes you could have heard a pin drop. The Bach, played by a great artist, seemed to have a calming effect in an almost miraculous way.

A much lighter occasion for Ann occurred when she took the Poet Laureate, Sir John Betjeman, to a presentation at the Department of the Environment. Ann found that he immediately treated her like an old friend:

When I arrived at his home to pick him up, he asked me in to help him choose a suitable tie. When we were ready to leave, I opened the rear door of the car for him, but he insisted on riding in the front seat with me. We then arrived at the DoE, and found the Minister, the Permanent Secretary, and other senior officials, all lined up to greet him. However, when Betjeman got out of the car, he said to them, 'This is my friend Miss Riley', and made sure that I was also presented to them all. You should have seen their faces! I could see why Betjeman had a reputation as a ladies' man.

Probably the most dramatic incident in Ann Riley's career as a GCS driver came in 1969, when she was sent to the Heathrow Airport to pick up Gerald Brooke, who had spent four years in a Soviet Union jail for smuggling anti-Soviet leaflets. The British government had controversially agreed to release Soviet agents Peter and Helen Kroger in exchange for Brooke. When Ann arrived at the airport, she found a huge number of reporters and photographers waiting to meet him:

I picked up Brooke and his minders, and then found myself being furiously pursued by the paparazzi. They tried to overtake us on the A4 to get pictures, so I kept weaving across the road to keep them behind me. It was like a motor race all the way into central London.

When we arrived at our destination, I told Brooke and his minders to jump out and make a run for it. Once they were inside, I expected the paparazzi to really come at me for frustrating them. Amazingly, instead they all came over and congratulated me for successfully keeping them at bay. I don't think that happened very often!

Ann Riley retired in 1986, after forty years service for OCS/GCS.

Dorothy Spoor

In the early days of the war, Dorothy Spoor attempted to join the MTC, but found that there were no vacancies at that time. As she explains, it would probably not have suited her: 'The pay was almost non-existent, and I couldn't have afforded that.' Instead, she drove ambulances in her native Yorkshire, before joining the WRENS in 1941, where she spent some time in Rosyth in Scotland, before spending twelve months in Australia towards the end of the war. Like Ann Riley, a contact from the WRENS recommended that she joined OCS, which she did in December 1947.

She began driving the government messenger and postal vans, in order to learn her way around London. She was then sent to work in Cambridge. As she comments, in those days OCS had a large number of regional offices. After a few months, however, she returned to London, and an early memorable experience arrived with the Olympic Games in 1948. The most remarkable feature of these Games, financed on a shoestring by modern standards, and centred on Wembley Stadium, was that they were able to be held in a city still suffering severe austerity and shortages only three years after the war. Nevertheless, the great benefit was that they lifted the spirit and demonstrated that some sort of normality was returning to the world. For its part, OCS purchased fifty Ford car/vans, each of which could convey ten competitors. These Fords had timber bodies, with side sliding windows and double rear doors, and in his memoir Tom Hughes was happy to report that the whole operation was extremely successful.⁴⁰

Dorothy Spoor remembers the period of the Olympics as extremely hectic. The OCS office was situated opposite Wembley Stadium, and she could work from 6 am until midnight. This was chiefly because the events and accommodation for competitors were very dispersed,

including a campsite in Richmond Park. As Dorothy comments, it's hard to imagine this happening for the 2012 London Olympics! Competitors were also accommodated in many schools, which could be extremely difficult to find. One occasion she remembers particularly was when she took a group of Korean cyclists to train in Windsor Great Park: 'The Ford vans had seats lengthwise, so that they could carry their cycles. They also took food stored in large cans. However, at lunchtime they offered me one of their sandwiches. I found it was a mixture of jam, cheese and beef! Apparently, they felt it was the right diet to get them fit for the cycling.'

Another incident involving food concerned members of the Australian delegation, who asked Dorothy to transport them to an event to see some of their people compete. She was very tired, but they offered her a tin of pineapple if she agreed. In those austere 1940s days, this was a great luxury, and so she took them to the event. She was very disillusioned, however, when the tin of pineapple never appeared!

Dorothy did not have any close family, and so made herself available for trips abroad that were then common for the Service. These usually concerned conferences, and could involve being away from home for long periods of time. The first of these trips for Dorothy was to Paris for a United Nations conference, where she thoroughly enjoyed her stay of six months. After that, she went for a trade conference to Annecy in France, near the Swiss border. She found this a beautiful place, although a dark reminder of the recent past was the fact that the Australian delegation were housed in the place that had been the Gestapo headquarters during the war. Odette and Peter Churchill, the famous Allied agents, were captured near there.

One traumatic incident at Annecy involved an arsonist setting fire to the garage where the OCS cars were housed. While the drivers were dealing with this, the arsonist went to their unoccupied hotel rooms and stole a large number of items. Remarkably, the culprit turned out to be the son of the local gendarme!

Dorothy also made several lengthy trips to Geneva. Probably the most memorable of these was for the 'Big Four' conference of 1955 (involving the leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain and France). For this, Dorothy led a large convoy of cars from London.

As she remembers: 'Most of the other drivers did not know the way, so Miss Bridger, the OCS Deputy Superintendent, stood up in her car with the roof open, making sure that no one got left behind. On these trips, we would stop for picnics in France as a break.'

A great occasion in the early 1950s was the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953. A few weeks prior to the event, Dorothy took Prime Minister Winston Churchill's daughter Mary on a tour of the museums in the East End of London, in order to pick out large vases that could be used for holding flowers for the ceremony in Westminster Abbey. Another moving occasion in which Dorothy participated was the funeral of Winston Churchill in 1965. As she recalls: 'We carried the pallbearers to the service in St Paul's Cathedral. I will never forget the huge crowds, often twenty deep, yet standing in almost complete silence. One of the pallbearers was Churchill's great friend, the former Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden. He was not in good health, and we had to carry an oxygen mask for him.'

After her many trips abroad, Dorothy joined the group led by the Head of Government Hospitality, Sir Geoffrey McNab. He acquired a set of Daimlers to deal with all the visiting dignitaries from overseas.

Dorothy Spoor retired in 1982, after thirty-five years of service to OCS/GCS.

TOWARDS A REBORN CAR SERVICE

As the 1947 Treasury memo had demonstrated, towards the end of the 1940s OCS was being officially encouraged to expand its empire, by absorbing fleets run by other Departments. OCS had established its identity since 1946, yet in many ways it remained in a relatively weak and vulnerable position. As a small part of the giant MOS, it was only one of the transport providers within Whitehall, with other departmental fleets still operating autonomously.

This vulnerability was well illustrated in a document produced by MOS in January 1949, which listed the various functions of the Ministry. The listing for OCS made it clear that it was still considered subservient to the Departments in providing official trans-

port: 'It [OCS] provides an official passenger car service in London and certain large provincial towns for other government Departments whose needs are too small to make it economical for them to operate cars of their own.'⁴¹

The MOS therefore appeared to see OCS as a body that was basically there to fill in the gaps that other departments could not meet themselves, and this interpretation suggested quite severe limits to its development. However, Tom Hughes himself states that a suggestion was put forward in 1949 to absorb all the Ministers' allocated and hired cars within OCS, together with the various pools operated by government departments, and that this suggestion went to a very high level. These remarks by Hughes appear to indicate that the earlier Treasury arguments were being carried forward, with much brighter prospects for OCS.⁴²

The other major question of this period concerned the place of OCS within MOS. As an MOS memo of February 1951 makes clear, by the early 1950s the realisation had dawned that the giant Ministry was hopelessly overloaded with responsibilities. The memo considered the future of MOS, and acknowledged that the current Ministry was open to the criticism that it covered too wide a field, and that the load at the top was too great in peacetime, and would be impossible in war. The memo therefore went on to say that the services may well be justified in thinking that MOS should give its undivided attention to defence supplies (significantly here, British forces were by now involved in the Korean War).⁴³

Change was in the air, but the Labour government was now running out of steam. An election in 1950 had severely reduced its overall Commons' majority to only five, and another election was called for 25 October 1951. Whitehall officials clearly saw the possible change of government as an opportunity to push through changes that had been pending for some time, as is well illustrated by a letter sent on the day before the election to the Head of the Civil Service, Sir Edward Bridges, by the Permanent Secretary at the MOS, Sir Archibald Rowlands.

Rowlands enclosed papers which he said he had prepared against the eventuality of a change of government. In particular, they examined the question of whether the MOS was overloaded, and if so,

which parts of it might be hived off. Rowlands recommended transferring the responsibilities for atomic energy and iron and steel, but then made a quite remarkable statement: 'I have also included, as you will see, my King Charles' Head – the Official Car Service.'⁴⁴ By 'King Charles' Head', Rowlands meant that the OCS had become his obsession! Sadly, in the letter he did not elaborate on exactly why this was so (possibly the controversial system of nominated cars had something to do with it), but once again we see the peculiar situation of the ability of the Car Service to consistently hold the attention of senior Ministers and officials, yet be persistently neglected as an organisation.

Nevertheless, OCS had been slated for a move away from the MOS. The following day saw the return of a Conservative government, and Winston Churchill as Prime Minister, with an overall Commons' majority of seventeen, and so a new era was about to begin for the Car Service.

NOTES

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
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CHAPTER 3

A Modern Service

1952–69

TAKING IT FROM THE TOP

On 1 April 1952, the Official Car Service became the Government Car Service. The fact that the word ‘Government’ was adopted, in itself provides an insight into the events that were to come in the 1950s. The return of a Conservative government in October 1951, with Winston Churchill as Prime Minister, did not signal any major ideological shift in policy. In general, despite talk in the election campaign of freeing the nation from the shackles of socialism, the Conservatives retained the vast bulk of the huge public ownership programme undertaken by the Attlee Labour government. GCS was no exception here, and although a private company had provided cars for the Cabinet during the war, there was no suggestion of a return to these policies. Instead, the aim was to improve the organisational structure and efficiency of GCS. In the event, as we will see in Chapter Five, it would be the 1980s Conservative government, led by Margaret Thatcher, which would seriously consider privatising GCS.

Nevertheless, the 1950s was to prove a period of great upheaval and change for GCS, in which undoubtedly the modern Service, still recognisable today, was constructed from the foundations laid by OCS. The most remarkable feature of this period was that all the initiatives and decisions came from the very top of government. This was to the extent that Prime Ministers Winston Churchill (1951–55) and Harold Macmillan (1957–63) could be described as the twin fathers of the modern GCS. In this process, they were closely abetted by successive Heads of the Home Civil Service, Sir Edward Bridges

and Sir Norman Brook. There appeared here to have been an implicit recognition of the political sensitivity of the Car Service, and the importance of managing change efficiently in order to avoid adverse publicity and public reaction. In fact, there was generally an anxiety not only to make sure policy was made well away from the public gaze, but also to ensure that any public pronouncements put the best possible gloss on government policy.

The story of GCS in this period therefore provides important insights into the personalities and styles of both Churchill and Macmillan, two of the key figures in post-war British political history. There was a great contrast between the two Prime Ministers, which reflected both their personalities and the great social and political changes that were taking place in the 1950s.

Immediately on taking office, Churchill instituted a radical programme, designed to save money and improve the efficiency of official cars as a whole. This proved to be of huge importance and benefit to GCS, in that a decree went out from 10 Downing Street that all the many departmental fleets should be taken over by a central pool, managed by GCS (now a component part of the Ministry of Works). Despite some strong protests, this was pushed through with ruthless determination by Churchill, so that by 1953 GCS completely ruled the roost in supplying official cars to Whitehall. In this respect, it could be said that Churchill proved to be the one major political figure who instinctively understood the key importance of GCS organisation and efficiency.

Remarkably, in setting out the rules for official car use, Churchill was, if anything, even more ruthless with his own Ministers and officials! Consequently, only three Ministers (the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary) were allowed allocated cars, with all other Ministers and officials having to take their chance with the pool (this also meant that the controversial system of nominated cars was quietly ditched). All this frugality enabled Churchill to announce to Parliament significant savings in official car use.

Over time, however, it became clear that all was not well with the strict policy laid down by Churchill, and by the mid-1950s it had become evident that his system was unworkable. The person who

took the initiative in changing things, first as Chancellor of the Exchequer and then as Prime Minister, was Harold Macmillan, who considerably widened the scope of allocated cars, and generally loosened the rules on the use of pool cars.

In this respect, it could be said that Churchill had lost touch with the changing times. By the time he finally left office in 1955, he was 80 years old, and had grown up in an age before any cars were seen on the road. As a Minister in pre-war governments, official cars were almost non-existent, and although their use had mushroomed during the war, it was possible that Churchill saw this as a temporary expedient, with the need in post-war years to return to basically the policy of earlier days.

Although Macmillan was himself a product of the Edwardian age, he was also an extremely shrewd political operator, who recognised that the British people were desperate to put the years of austerity behind them, and that a new age was at hand, where what had once been considered luxury consumer goods, including cars, would become widely available. This great change is indicated by the fact that, in September 1956, there were 3,887,906 cars in use in Britain, but by September 1964 this figure had more than doubled to 8,247,000.¹ Macmillan was therefore able to capture the mood of the nation, summed up in the 1959 election-winning slogan, 'You Never Had It So Good.' Ministers and officials are of course not immune from these wider social changes, and by the late 1950s many saw an official car as an essential tool in order to perform their work efficiently, rather than an optional luxury.

Macmillan therefore framed the first modern Prime Minister's Rules for official car use, that in amended form remain in operation today. Perhaps inevitably, after the great changes of the 1950s, the 1960s was largely a relatively stable period of consolidation for GCS, with the chief feature being a growing awareness that the rules for Junior Ministers were also becoming out of touch with modern times.

ECONOMIES AT ALL COSTS

On 24 October 1951, the eve of the general election, Treasury Permanent Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, Sir

Edward Bridges, prepared one of his trademark single-page minutes, on official cars, for the incoming government. This succinctly set out the current position and the available options. With regard to the existing situation, Bridges described how all Cabinet Ministers, all other Ministers in charge of Departments, and a number of other Ministers, totalling thirty-seven in all, had official cars. Their total cost was around £45,000 per annum, or about £1,300 per Minister.

Bridges warned that if any change were to be made in these arrangements, it would have to be done urgently, since Ministers might assume that they should continue to use their predecessor's car, and it would be a matter of some difficulty to deprive Ministers of cars after they had been using them. He therefore presented three alternatives:

- (a) to continue the present arrangements
- (b) to restrict the use of official cars to Ministers who were members of the Cabinet
- (c) to restrict the use of cars to a very small number of Ministers who could show that the use of a car was a necessity in connection with their official work.

He concluded that Ministers not allocated an official car would be able to obtain suitable transport from the Ministry of Supply pool. He warned, however, that experience suggested that when cars were allocated to a large number of Ministers, there was no obvious relationship between mileage run at public expense and what might be regarded as the burden of official travel falling on each Minister. He acknowledged that it was not easy to draw a clear line between public and private travel, and that it was almost impossible to enforce rigorously any policy adopted in this matter.

As we described in the previous chapter, Bridges had a considerable talent for getting to the essence of a matter in his memos and minutes, and here the underlying tone was very much one of scepticism about the value of the allocated system that had developed over the previous five years, and a strong sense that it required some sharp reductions.

Churchill and Bridges knew and understood each other well from their war years together as Prime Minister and Cabinet Secretary, and it soon became clear that, on his return to Downing Street, Churchill himself was in a bullish mood to push ahead with some severe economies. It was therefore evident that Churchill had earmarked official cars as one area where he could quickly produce results that would demonstrate the new government was more efficient than its Labour predecessor, and was not going to be thwarted. Consequently, at a Cabinet meeting on 31 October, the Prime Minister stressed that substantial reductions must be made in the use of official cars by Ministers, and that detailed proposals to this end should be worked out without delay.

Bridges indeed wasted no time in acting on this order, and on 12 November produced a minute that continued to push a hard line. It began: 'The essential thing is to avoid the impression that cars represent a privilege conferred on Ministers at the public expense. One of the best ways of avoiding this impression is that, Ministers, instead of having cars allocated to them, should draw upon a pool when they need a car for official purposes.'

Bridges conceded that there must be a limited number of exceptions to this rule. These included the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, and the Home Secretary, who each had police protection, and the Commissioner of Police had said it was much easier for him to look after these Ministers if they went about by car instead of walking and travelling in taxis. It was suggested, therefore, that these Ministers, but no others, should have allocated cars, and that suitable arrangements should be made for them to pay for any private use.

The idea that a Minister should only have an allocated car on security grounds approximated much more to a pre-war approach, and was a long way from the climate that had seen OCS set up in 1946, with a philosophy of 'a Minister is a Minister twenty-four hours a day', and requiring a car in order to perform his job more efficiently.

Bridges continued the extremely hard line when he also recommended that no Ministers, apart from the three protected ones, should be allowed to use a car for any private purposes, even if he was prepared to pay, as he believed that this system had not worked very

happily. On the question of whether 'official purposes' should cover Ministers who lived in London travelling from their homes to the office and back in the evening, he considered that a ruling was required. On the other hand, he recommended that 'official purposes' should not cover taking a Minister from London to his home in the country.

Finally, Bridges was equally censorious with regard to the cars themselves: 'Up to the present, Ministers have always been provided with Humber limousines. These are expensive to run and look luxurious. It is for consideration whether the use of this type of car should in general be limited to Cabinet Ministers, smaller and less expensive cars being generally used for other ministerial journeys.'

It was clear that Bridges had become completely disillusioned with what he saw as the extravagant use of official cars, and that economy and austerity were to be the new watchwords. Equally, there was no doubt that the Bridges' strategy was in total harmony with the Prime Minister's views, and Churchill kept up the pressure with a minute to Bridges and Cabinet Secretary Sir Norman Brook that he hoped to see the MOS fleet of 250 cars reduced by at least 100. On fixing the strategy as a whole, he warned: 'I want all this settled in the present week because I suppose the cars are being used freely at the present time. This has to stop.'

Churchill was determined to maintain the momentum for action, and later in November a draft answer to a Parliamentary Question indicated that he had accepted the Bridges proposals concerning allocated cars being restricted to only three Ministers. The answer also contained a sentence with enormous future implications for OCS: 'A single central pool will be formed for all official cars in London whether belonging to the Ministry of Supply pool, to the Service Departments, or to other Departments.' Before Churchill could make this public announcement, however, Cabinet Secretary Sir Norman Brook stepped in with a memo that warned: 'there may be some administrative difficulties with the pool proposal', and so recommended that the Prime Minister should omit this from his statement to Parliament.

Brook was no doubt only too aware that several Departments would not be at all happy about handing over all their official cars to

a single pool. Nevertheless, at a Cabinet meeting on 27 November, the Prime Minister announced that he had now formulated his proposals regarding the use of official cars by Ministers, and these proposals included reference to a single central pool in London. As Brook had anticipated, several Ministers picked up on this recommendation, and argued that there might be some loss of efficiency in a single pool, and that there might be advantages in allowing several departmental pools to continue. It was therefore agreed that further consideration should be given to this point.

The alarm bells had clearly begun to ring in some Departments about what was in store for them, as demonstrated by a letter Churchill received from the Minister of Labour and National Service, Walter Monckton. The Minister argued that an alteration of the present pool arrangements would not make for efficiency and economy. He described how there were three departmental cars kept for use by the Minister, Permanent Secretary and other senior officials, and explained: 'When we want the cars they are on the spot and great care is taken to limit waiting times.' Monckton's pleas fell on deaf ears, however, as far as the Prime Minister was concerned, and he was told that there were no special reasons for making the Ministry of Labour an exception.

Sir Edward Bridges also received a similar letter from the Foreign Office, arguing that it would be a great pity to eliminate their small car pool, particularly as the accounts showed their running costs were lower than the Ministry of Supply pool. Another letter to Bridges, this time from the War Office, warned that there would be serious physical difficulties in working a single pool.

A letter from the Treasury to the Prime Minister's Office, therefore, warned that, on the proposal for a central pool, 'Objections have started to stream in', and to prove it enclosed copies of letters. Bridges recognised the need for action, and sent a minute to the Prime Minister stating that the Treasury had convened a meeting to verify the present position about official cars in the London area, and to explore the possibility of forming a central pool under one organisation. Bridges described how there were 159 OCS cars, while in addition there were 273 cars run by Departments other than MOS. As ninety-four of these were self-drive and used by inspectors and

technical staff, they should be excluded. With regard to the remaining 179, however, the Treasury was satisfied that it would be practicable to extend OCS to meet the needs of all Departments, provided that they were located in three or four garages.

Bridges acknowledged that it would be difficult to make accurate comparisons between OCS and other Departments on accounting grounds but, crucially, he argued that the creation of a single organisation would facilitate the enforcement of uniform standards in the use of official cars, and on these grounds he recommended its adoption. Bridges warned, however, that if the Prime Minister agreed, he should mention his intentions in Cabinet, in view of the strong feelings some Ministers had against the proposal.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the Treasury had been encouraging OCS to take over departmental fleets since the late 1940s, and now saw the opportunity to complete the process. Ironically, however, this was now not on the grounds of economy, but of equity.

Churchill himself was sensitive to the objections from Departments, and in his answer to the Parliamentary Question that he had postponed for this reason, he was careful to omit the word 'all' when mentioning the absorption of cars into a central pool. Nevertheless, by 7 December Bridges was writing to the Prime Minister's Office announcing that, although it would take some time, they would get on with bringing together the various cars owned by Departments into OCS.²

SANDYS STEPS IN

Up to this point, all the running on the reform of official cars had come from Bridges and Churchill, but they were now to be brought up short. On 11 December, a letter had been sent out from the Treasury to all Ministers' Private Secretaries stating that, from now on, Ministers would have to call on OCS for a car, and that the Private Secretary should inform the Car Service of the journeys that a Minister would make in the course of a day. The Private Secretaries were warned that, as the Prime Minister had instructed, cars could not be ordered for a day or series of days. The letter also instructed that 'official purposes' had now been defined as including journeys to

and from Ministers' official work within seven miles of the Palace of Westminster.

Unfortunately, the problem here was that the circular had not actually been seen by the Minister of Supply, and at a Cabinet meeting on 20 December the Minister in question, Duncan Sandys, objected that the arrangements proposed in the circular seemed to be inconvenient, if not impracticable. He would therefore arrange for it to be recalled, and would send the Prime Minister a report covering not only the questions raised by the circular, but also the whole issue of a central car pool.

Before the end of the month, new instructions were issued by the Treasury, describing how all Departments would have to work through the OCS Superintendent (Tom Hughes) based at Kingston House in Kensington. It was March 1952 before things began to sort themselves out, and in a memo that month to the Prime Minister, Bridges apologised that consultations had taken so long, but explained that Departments had raised a great many difficulties, and it had been hoped to present an agreed scheme. Bridges concluded that the Post Office should be left out of any pooling arrangement, but for the rest he recommended that Churchill should issue an instruction that all the other civil Departments should be served by OCS and not have separate pools.

If this was decided, he promised that it would be seen to that OCS garages were so located as to give an efficient service. With regard to the Service Departments, two options were presented of either the Air Ministry and War Office retaining their own fleets with a reduced size, or to be absorbed in OCS. Bridges stressed that decisions were required urgently, as OCS had not got rid of cars and drivers made redundant through the stricter rules, pending a decision on the other Departments. He warned: 'The extent to which drivers and cars are at present under-employed at the OCS main garage could easily become the subject of public criticism.'

Up to this point, despite the memo on the eve of the election from the Ministry of Supply Permanent Secretary, Sir Archibald Rowlands, recommending that OCS should move away from the MOS, there had been no suggestion that this would take place. Events were now to take a new turn, however, with an intervention

from the Minister of Supply, Duncan Sandys, in a dialogue with the Prime Minister. There was an extra personal dimension here in that, at that time, Sandys was married to Churchill's daughter Diana, making him the Prime Minister's son-in-law! As we saw, Sandys was unhappy at not being consulted on the future organisation of OCS, and by March 1952 it was clear that he continued to have doubts about the value of the whole enterprise. In a personal minute from Churchill to Sandys, the Prime Minister noted that Sandys had told him no economy had been effected, for all the inconvenience incurred on official cars, and so Churchill suggested that they should discuss things at Chequers.

Sandys seized the opportunity to put his point of view to the Prime Minister in a minute that pulled no punches. He reminded Churchill that, from the start, he had expressed doubts about the efficacy of the tighter rules, and having tried to operate them, was satisfied that they would produce no appreciable economies. He emphasised here that savings would only come about when a single pool was set up, and recommended that a single Department, whether the Treasury, MOS or Ministry of Works, should be given undivided responsibility for administering OCS.

By now, Churchill was clearly becoming impatient and irritated about the lack of progress, and in a personal minute to Bridges on the matter of OCS stated plainly: 'This has not gone at all well, and deserved criticism must soon be expected in Parliament.' No doubt encouraged by his discussions with Sandys, Churchill set out the case for the Minister of Supply taking full responsibility for OCS.

Sandys, however, was about to provide a fresh twist to the story. Churchill had copied the Bridges' minute to Sandys, and in his response the Minister of Supply now argued that the Ministry of Works should be the Department responsible for OCS. This was chiefly on the dual grounds that the MOW provided common services for all government Departments, and already had a transport branch, whereas OCS was unrelated to any other MOS function.

Perhaps partly through the family connection, but probably more because he wanted to get a long-running problem sorted out, Churchill wasted no time in taking Sandys' advice, and on 18 March wrote to the Minister of Works telling him that he had reached the

conclusion it would be more appropriate for him to take responsibility for OCS. Churchill really was wasting no time, and named 1 April, barely two weeks ahead, as the takeover date! Tellingly, Churchill sent a minute to Sandys with a copy of his minute to the Ministry of Works. The Prime Minister told his son-in-law simply: 'I think that this is what you wanted.'³

Keeping Sandys Satisfied

It was ironic that, as Minister of Supply, Duncan Sandys should be instrumental in shifting OCS to the Ministry of Works, as he was to have an important collaboration with GCS. Sandys was seriously wounded during the Second World War, and GCS Superintendent Tom Hughes describes how the Minister found the rear compartment of his car uncomfortable due to the effects of his war wounds. Consequently, Hughes redesigned the rear interior in consultation with Sandys. These changes were so successful that other Ministers using the car on odd occasions asked for their cars to be modified. Eventually, the redesigned rear compartment became a standard for Ministers' cars, and was used by the manufacturers as a specification for VIP cars. In addition, several overseas heads of government who used the cars on visits to Britain, also adopted the GCS design.⁴

Perhaps because of his serious disabilities, however, Sandys was known as one of their most awkward passengers by GCS drivers. On one memorable occasion, Sandys poked his driver in the neck with his stick. The driver immediately got out of the car, and refused to go on! The driver then walked to GCS headquarters at Kingston House, and told them that they would have to send another driver to Sandys' car, in order to complete the journey.

A LOW-KEY BIRTH FOR GCS

On 1 April 1952, without any public fanfares, the Official Car Service switched from the Ministry of Supply to the Ministry of Works, and was immediately renamed as the Government Car Service. Strangely, given the lengthy top level discussions on OCS matters generally, this change in name appears to have happened instantaneously, and with no prior discussion. The government files of the time carry no record of why the change happened, and GCS simply appears as the name on

Ministry of Works papers. It seems, therefore, that the MOW wished to re-brand the Car Service in order to distinguish it from its previous life at the Ministry of Supply and, as we have noted earlier, chose the word 'Government' as it denoted more clearly who actually owned and operated the organisation.

Significantly, in a minute to the Prime Minister on 9 May, Sir Edward Bridges continued to refer to the 'Official Car Service'. By this time, draft rules had been formulated for official car use, and the Treasury Permanent Secretary was submitting them to Churchill. However, the draft rules themselves referred to 'the Government Car Service in London'. The rules basically set out the much restricted formula approved by Churchill several months earlier – now, of course, with a central pool operated by GCS.

In organisational terms, therefore, something quite recognisable as the modern GCS was now in operation. In taking over nearly all the departmental pools, its position had been hugely strengthened, and for the first time it could emerge as *the* supplier of official transport (in this context we can perhaps understand why, as described at the beginning of Chapter One, Tom Hughes was so keen to keep Churchill happy).

Crucially, Bridges had been sceptical about the savings that might be made in setting up a central pool, and finally recommended it on the grounds that it would produce a more consistent and fairer system. Ironically, however, little more would be heard about this equity argument, and certainly Churchill's attention was almost entirely focused on how much setting up the remodelled GCS would produce in savings to the government.

There were definitely no signs that Churchill was any less interested in the now GCS, and on 11 May he sent a personal minute to Minister of Works David Eccles, with a copy of the new draft rules. He asked Eccles: 'What do you say about all this and how are you getting on? Let me have a page report.' Churchill was famous for his liking for concise one-page reports, and so Eccles duly delivered this on 13 May.

Eccles reported that the transfer of cars to a single pool was almost completed, although he had agreed to leave in a separate pool of Foreign Office cars, which fetched and carried diplomatic bags. He

was still in discussions with the Admiralty and Air Ministry, but the War Office had agreed that all except purely military needs should be met by GCS. On forming the pool in London, he had dispensed with thirty-five cars and drivers, while further economies in London and the provinces would enable him to dispense with a further fifty-five cars and drivers. Some of the cars were to be kept at Church House in Westminster, but these required some repairs. On the question of the draft rules, Eccles (unlike Sandys) thought that these were about right, although he noted that Junior Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries were not mentioned, and he proposed that they should be treated in the same way as Permanent Secretaries (in the event, the question of official transport for Junior Ministers would be a sore point for GCS for many years to come). Eccles concluded that economies would be achieved by better management of fewer cars, and 'by relying on responsible people to play the game'.

That Churchill had carefully studied Eccles' report was quite clear in a further personal minute he sent to the Minister of Works the following day. With perhaps a hint of Churchillian tongue-in-cheek, he asked pointedly: 'What is "the game" responsible people are expected to play?' As we saw in the previous chapter, the peculiar system of nominated cars had depended on senior officials 'playing the game', but with little proof of success. Churchill's drastic tightening of the rules had been designed to cut out this type of individual initiative, and the Prime Minister's remark to Eccles suggests that he understood this only too well! At the same time, Churchill's own tight rules depended for their effectiveness on senior Ministers 'playing the game', but as we will see later in this chapter, few of them would be prepared to do as they were told.

Nevertheless, Churchill was happy to tell Eccles: 'The reduction of ninety cars in London seems to me a considerable achievement, and presently we must make a statement to Parliament about the economies effected.' Churchill was of course also very well aware of the political value to be gained in an announcement of savings in the sensitive area of official cars, and so was encouraging Eccles to get on with the job.

For his part, Eccles must have been only too conscious of the importance of keeping the Prime Minister happy, and on the

following day he replied to Churchill's minute, saying that he would send material as soon as possible to answer an arranged Parliamentary Question. He also referred to 'the game' and pointed out that he referred here to the sections of the draft code that allowed Permanent Secretaries discretion to authorise journeys outside the rest of the code. Eccles supported this discretion, provided that he was able to achieve his main objective of cutting down the number of cars and the expense of the Service. In other words, Eccles was very well aware of the meaning behind Churchill's question!

From now on, Churchill was set on being in a position to publicly announce the GCS savings at the earliest opportunity. On 12 June, therefore, Eccles sent a minute to the Prime Minister stating that the GCS car fleet had been reduced by a grand total of 116. In addition, 100 drivers had been discharged, while those drivers left were also doing the work of forty-one service personnel who had gone back to their units. Overall, there were £65,250 in estimated annual savings. Churchill was obviously pleased at this result, and replied to Eccles: 'You have done a fine piece of work. Please draft a friendly question which might be asked by one of our side, and the proposed answer I should give. I will consider both.' In fact, no doubt encouraged by the Prime Minister, Eccles made an announcement of the savings at a meeting of the Cabinet on 19 June, and it seemed that all was set fair for a public announcement.

In the event, the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, David Pitblado, was not quite as satisfied as his boss was with the figures, and made some enquiries. It transpired that savings had not been included for the Service vehicles, and when these were included the annual savings totalled £104,500. Churchill answered a Commons' Question using these figures in July, but Eccles was obviously keen to keep the Prime Minister informed, and in December sent Churchill a minute stating that he had now reduced the GCS fleet by a further 112 cars, mostly in the regions, bringing the total annual savings up to £160,000. Significantly, given the radical reorganisation and the departmental protests, he reported that he had not had any complaints about the Service. In response to Eccles' minute, Churchill made a handwritten comment: 'Very good. I must answer a question about it when I come back.' Once again, therefore, Churchill was very

keen to take political credit for GCS savings! (In the event, however, it was Eccles himself who eventually reported the good news to Parliament.)

Meanwhile, with regard to the draft rules for official car use, the Minister of Works' earlier reference to Junior Ministers being treated the same as officials had not gone unnoticed in Whitehall. This was made clear in a letter from the Treasury to the Prime Minister's Private Secretary, where it was pointed out that Junior Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries were entitled to call on cars for any official journeys, whereas a civil servant, including a Permanent Secretary, would have to use public transport where it was available. It was acknowledged, however, that there was a proviso to the effect that, if a Permanent Secretary was under severe pressure of work, he could as a special concession use an official car for home-to-office journeys, whereas Junior Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries did not have this privilege. There was no doubt that this discretion was what Eccles and Churchill had in mind when they referred to 'the game', but obviously the Treasury was sensitive about the possibility that Permanent Secretaries might be getting a better deal than Junior Ministers, and wanted to clarify things. In any event, the draft rules became official without amendment.

Churchill had therefore personally overseen the creation of a modern GCS, and had taken significant interest in its operation, even if there were some personal political motives at work here. Rules for official car use had also been set down for the first time, and by the end of the 1950s would become the Prime Minister's Rules that continue to this day. It might well have been that Churchill would have continued this personal interest, but in June 1953 he suffered a serious stroke. The full truth of his condition was withheld from the public at the time, but he was incapacitated for several months, and although he was to continue as Prime Minister for nearly another two years, he found it increasingly difficult to keep on top of the details of the job. It would therefore be another four years before a review of GCS affairs, and this time conducted by a Prime Minister with a very different personality and outlook.⁵

Kingston Home

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, GCS had a distinctive home underground in Kingston House in Kensington. Long-serving pool driver Irene Maykels, who joined GCS in October 1956, stresses that there was a great camaraderie amongst the drivers: 'Everyone was together, in contrast to later years, when people stayed at the Department where they worked, and so became more separated.' Irene Maykels has particularly fond memories of the big Christmas parties, which in fact were usually held in January: 'Outsiders would feel quite honoured to receive an invitation to the Christmas party, and they were much sought after. We would create huge tableaux, including special features such as waterfalls. People would be given three months off to organise it all.'

Driver Beryl Osborne, who joined GCS in 1961, also enjoyed the sense of community at Kingston House, but recalls that this did not necessarily extend to everyone: 'There was a strict demarcation between the limousine drivers and the rest of us – I think they felt a cut above!'

Former driver Chris Green, however, reflects that there could also have been a darker side to life at Kingston House: 'Not only was it underground, but it also had a petrol store. The atmosphere down there was generally unhealthy, and health and safety regulations would never allow it today. Sadly, several people who worked there died quite young with cancer, and you can't help thinking that the working conditions may well have had something to do with it.'

SYSTEM FAILURE

Winston Churchill, with the considerable assistance of Sir Edward Bridges, had moulded a modern GCS, but with an extremely strict set of rules for official car use that would be proved unworkable in the changing times of the 1950s. Once again, it was left to Superintendent Tom Hughes to try and make things work on the ground.

Hughes describes how the GCS car fleet in London was reduced from 225 at the time of the merger with the Ministry of Works on 1 April 1952, to 136 a year or two later, while there were also drastic cuts in the provincial pools. Hughes confirms the radical reductions initiated by Churchill, with all the so-called nominated cars abolished, with Permanent Secretaries and other VIPs only allowed

cars under special circumstances. For their part, Parliamentary Secretaries were allowed the use of GCS from office to the nearest station only if taxis were difficult to obtain. A pool of self-drive vehicles satisfied a lot of transport requirements to establishments that were not served by public transport. Again as instructed by Churchill, an officer could not use his car freely on the mileage rate, and use of a private car on official duties was a last resort.

Nor were the strict rules the only difficulties for the new GCS. Hughes also highlights that staff problems were caused by the transfer to the MOW. This was because the GCS drivers and maintenance staff were graded as industrial, and the MOW drivers were non-industrial. Eventually, it was decided that all drivers would be graded as industrial. This would cause some long-standing problems, as industrial Civil Service pay was generally lower than non-industrial. As we will see in Chapter Four, this lack of parity would eventually lead to industrial action by GCS staff.⁶

In the mid-1950s, however, attention was focused on the austere rules for official car use that had been introduced by Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Once Churchill had departed the scene in 1955, together with Head of the Civil Service Sir Edward Bridges (who retired in 1956), then it was inevitably only a matter of time before a reaction set in to their strict regime. Churchill was replaced as Prime Minister by his protégé and long-designated successor Sir Anthony Eden. The Minister who took the lead in seeking a reform of the rules, however, was the wily and politically astute Chancellor of the Exchequer, Harold Macmillan.

In August 1956, therefore, Macmillan wrote to Eden explaining that, on the Chancellor's behalf, the Financial Secretary had been looking into the rules for GCS use authorised by Churchill in 1952. Macmillan set out plainly the unsatisfactory situation:

He [the Financial Secretary] tells me that these rules have not been working altogether satisfactorily: Ministers do not always know quite where they stand under them, and the Ministry of Works which supplies the cars is sometimes placed in difficulties. I am satisfied that there is much to be said for replacing them by a more workable and realistic code. I have also borne in mind, as I think you

wished me to do, the desirability of helping Ministers towards getting through their heavy working days without loss of time and without unnecessary personal expense.

Macmillan attached a copy of his proposed new rules, but also outlined for Eden the four main changes. Firstly, and crucially, Macmillan proposed that in future not only Ministers with police protection, but all Cabinet Ministers, and Ministers in charge of Departments, would be entitled to have cars personally allocated to them for official purposes. It was very telling here that Macmillan added: 'This is already tacitly accepted in practice; I suggest that it would be sensible to regularise it.' Despite Churchill's strictures, it was clear that senior Ministers had not taken at all kindly to the prospect of taking their chance with the car pool, and in reality many had continued to use their cars and drivers on a continuous basis. It was also significant that Macmillan himself, although a very senior Minister, was not one of those with police protection, and so, at least officially, was not allowed an allocated car!

Secondly, Macmillan suggested that all these senior Ministers should be able to use their allocated cars for private purposes at a cost of 1s 6d per mile, a privilege previously restricted to the three Ministers with police protection.

Thirdly, Macmillan proposed that all the Ministers with allocated cars would be entitled to treat as official travel the journeys they made between home and office, provided that the distances did not exceed fifty miles. The former limit was seven miles. Macmillan concluded: 'This will considerably help Ministers who live near but outside London, and at present have either to travel to and fro by train, or to use their private cars at their own expense.'

Fourthly, the Chancellor proposed that a Minister travelling on official business would be free to use his private car and claim mileage allowance on Civil Service terms. Macmillan pointed out to Eden that this was the only one of the four reforms that would need to be announced to Parliament, as Churchill had expressly forbidden it in a Commons' statement in 1952.

If Macmillan had been hoping for a sympathetic hearing from Eden, however, he was soon to be disillusioned. In fact, Eden's Private

Secretary took the lead in sending a note to the Prime Minister that poured cold water on the plan:

It seems to me that it may not be quite the right time to make these changes in the rules about cars for Ministers. I don't think the present arrangements are causing any serious difficulty, and certainly they won't during the recess. It might be better to let things run on as at present until the Autumn.

This is the sort of change – especially c. [a reference to the proposal concerning Ministers being entitled to travel up to fifty miles between office and home] – which could leak and lead to a silly story in the press.

In a personal minute to Macmillan, therefore, Eden chose to follow this line, pointing out that concession (c) could be misrepresented at a time when the aim was further economy in government expenditure.

The line taken by Eden and his Private Secretary was thus very much that which echoed Churchill's hard line approach, and was not at all sympathetic to Macmillan's expansionary plans.

Eden had written to Churchill on 15 August, and although the Chancellor did not respond until 5 October, his lengthy minute demonstrated that there were now deep differences between them on the subject. At the outset, Macmillan emphasised to Eden that, having made further inquiries, there was rather more urgency about the proposed changes than perhaps his earlier minute had succeeded in making clear. He went on: 'First, there is undoubtedly a good deal of confusion in the minds of Ministers about the circumstances in which they can use cars, and this of itself imposes difficulties which we ought not to allow to persist.'

In particular, Macmillan focused on the point highlighted by Eden of the proposal for Ministers to have home-to-office journeys up to fifty miles. Clearly writing from personal experience, and with barely concealed irritation, the Chancellor put the Prime Minister in the picture:

The present rule operates so severely that it is not proving fully enforceable. For instance, I have ascertained that in the last three

months there have been quite a number of cases in which senior Ministers felt themselves justified in using official cars for home-to-office journeys although the distance substantially exceeded seven miles. I do so. And so I suppose do you. Frankly, I could not do my work if I had *always* to go home by train and stand in the corridor – as is usual on Mondays or Fridays. It puts officials of the Ministry of Works in an extremely difficult position when government cars are thus used by Ministers outside the limits which the rules permit; but I have no doubt that each of the Ministers concerned had good practical reasons for thus using a government car, and the essence of the matter is that the rules are out of date and unreasonable in relation to practical needs.

Macmillan also pointed out that, because Ministers could not claim mileage on their private cars, they used their official cars, thereby costing the government more. With regard to public sensitivity, he emphasised there was no reason why the other changes should be publicly known, ‘any more than the existing rules have become known’.

Despite Macmillan’s strong words, or perhaps because of them, Eden was still not at all disposed to give any ground, and instead chose to refer the whole matter to his Chief Whip, Edward Heath. In fact, it is tempting to speculate to what extent Eden was able to concentrate on these matters at all, given that by this time international events were escalating quickly to a climax that would bring an abrupt end to his period as Prime Minister.

In July 1956, President Nasser of Egypt had nationalised the strategically important waterway, the Suez Canal. This act had enraged Eden, who saw it as a personal insult and blatant provocation, that threatened Britain’s key trade routes between East and West. A top secret plan was then hatched between Britain, France and Israel, whereby the latter would attack Egypt, leading the other two countries to themselves invade Egypt, ostensibly as a peace-keeping force, but in reality to secure the Suez Canal. The plan was carried out in October and November 1956, with the Anglo-French force quickly seizing control of the Canal Zone. Eden’s strategy, however, split the country and caused huge controversy. Even more

crucially, US President Eisenhower flatly refused to back the invasion, leaving Eden with no choice but to order a troop withdrawal. On top of this humiliation, a run on the pound produced an economic crisis, while the trade fallout from the loss of the Canal included petrol rationing.

In this desperate position for the government, the question of Ministers' transport was decidedly not at the top of the political agenda. By the time Chief Whip Edward Heath replied to the Prime Minister's Office about Macmillan's proposals, therefore, there was an irrelevancy about his conclusions. Ironically, Heath, no doubt recognising the political reality spelt out by Macmillan, basically backed the Chancellor's proposals. At the same time, he stressed that this was not the time to make the changes, and instead they should be reconsidered when petrol rationing was abolished.

Similarly, a letter from the Prime Minister's Office to the Treasury stressed that with regard to Macmillan's proposals: 'We are putting the papers on the shelf for the time being.' Indeed, far from Ministers being given more travel privileges, a Cabinet meeting of 26 November decided that, other than those requiring police protection, they should use smaller cars, and that drastic reductions should be made in the number of central pool cars. A subsequent letter from the Lord Privy Seal's Office instructed senior Ministers that they should abandon their large Humber Pullmans in favour of smaller Wolseley 18s. The letter was also concerned about the effects on GCS itself. It was pointed out that, during the crisis, pool drivers would be underemployed and lose overtime, while drivers of allocated cars would continue to work long hours. The letter warned: 'This would lead to a very big discrepancy of earnings, between the two categories of drivers, and would, I am told, lead to serious discontent.' Ministers were therefore asked to accept pool drivers in the evenings, in order to give a fair share of overtime, and avoid trouble with the unions.

The travel problems for Ministers, although obviously a small matter in the great scheme of things, seem somehow to symbolise the terrible mess the government had got itself into over the Suez crisis. Eden's health had been in a fragile state for some time before Suez, but it was utterly broken by the humiliation of the crisis, and he was compelled to resign in January 1957. Ironically, his

successor as Prime Minister was the man who had attempted to make Eden see the reality of the modern situation on official car use, Harold Macmillan.⁷

Suez Fever

The memories of the Suez crisis by long-serving GCS driver Denis Oliver conjure up well the fevered atmosphere within the government at that time.

Oliver had joined GCS in May 1956, and was working night shifts. Around the time he was due to finish one morning, he had a call to pick up Lord Salisbury and take him to an emergency Cabinet meeting. Salisbury was Lord President of the Council, and in the 1950s an influential figure in Conservative Party circles, known as 'the Kingmaker'.

Oliver waited while the Cabinet meeting continued all morning, when Salisbury emerged and told his driver to take him home for lunch. Oliver was again told to wait, before Salisbury came out again, and said that he had to attend yet another Cabinet meeting. Oliver took him back to Downing Street, and waited until early evening in order to take Salisbury home again. By now, Oliver was almost due to start his next night shift!

YOU NEVER HAD IT SO GOOD, MINISTER

Even allowing for the distraction of Suez, it could be said that the differences between Eden and Macmillan on official car use represented a sharp dividing line between the old world and the new. Eden, like Churchill, had been a Minister in pre-war days, and apparently saw having use of an allocated car as a non-essential luxury for most Ministers. In addition, Eden appeared uninterested in the fact that the strict rules were being widely flouted. Macmillan, on the other hand, recognised that the rules had become badly outdated and unworkable, in an era when individual mobility through car use was beginning to be the social norm.

The Suez crisis and petrol rationing had put a stop to any reforms, but once installed as Prime Minister, it was only a matter of time before Macmillan would return to the subject of official car use. The opportunity came with the end of petrol rationing, and in May 1957 Macmillan called a Downing Street meeting on the subject of Ministers' use of official cars to be attended by, in addition to himself,

the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Home Secretary, the Minister of Works, the Chief Whip, and the Financial Secretary to the Treasury.

The outcome that the Prime Minister was looking for to this high-powered meeting was made clear in a preparatory note produced by Cabinet Secretary (and now Head of the Home Civil Service) Sir Norman Brook. Having outlined the history, Brook emphasised that the 'austere' rules introduced by Churchill were generally regarded by Ministers as unduly rigorous, and after a time were not strictly observed. Consequently, the principle of 'no allocation' had been tacitly abandoned. On the other hand, Brook warned, the rules had never been formally withdrawn or altered, and as a result Ministers were uncertain what the existing practice was supposed to be. This risked embarrassment in Parliament, and difficulty with the Comptroller and Auditor-General. Recognising past failures, Brook acknowledged: 'The worst course of all would be to adopt new rules without a reasonable assurance that they will be observed.'

In acknowledging present realities, Brook described how in fact cars were allocated to all Cabinet Ministers and Heads of major Departments, as well as the Attorney-General, Paymaster-General and some Ministers of State. Consequently, he recommended that the rules should refer to 'Cabinet Ministers, Ministers in charge of Departments, and such other Ministers as the Prime Minister may decide'.

Brook also referred to how the 1952 rules had emphasised 'official purposes' in terms of daily travel. In contrast, Brook pointed out that in practice, Ministers used their official cars during normal working hours for all journeys, including, for example, a visit to the dentist or a private lunch engagement. In addition, many Ministers had found the seven-mile radius restriction for home-to-work journeys unacceptable, and had been in the habit of using their cars for home-to-office journeys over greater distances, either at weekends or even daily. The Cabinet Secretary therefore wondered if reference to 'official purposes' should be abandoned, and discretion left to the good sense of the individual Minister, with repayment made for any private use.

Brook also referred to the long-standing thorny subject of the long hours worked by allocated drivers, and the problems here not only on

the grounds of safety and humanity, but the high overtime costs for GCS. On the other hand, he recognised that there would be obvious objections to a firm rule that a Minister's personal driver should not be employed after a certain hour in the evening, and so he again suggested the option of leaving it to the Minister's discretion.

Brook had set out a framework that was hugely more liberal than the Churchill rules, but that nevertheless appeared to recognise the realities of present practice. Perhaps surprisingly, given the personal interest of Macmillan and Brook, after the Downing Street meeting, the job of drawing up a draft of the new rules was left to the Minister responsible for GCS, Minister of Works Hugh Molson. In the event, this proved to be an unfortunate decision, as Molson chose to adopt a stricter interpretation of the rules than several Ministers had anticipated.

In several respects, Molson did follow the line set by Sir Norman Brook. This included the allocation of cars to Cabinet Ministers, Ministers in charge of Departments, and such other Ministers as the Prime Minister might indicate could have cars allocated to them. The seven-mile limit for home-to-work travel was also extended to fifty miles, although it was stipulated that this should happen only when the Minister was seriously delayed through official duties and if no other means of transport was reasonably available.

One rule that was to have later repercussions concerned the right of Ministers to call on their own allocated car and driver in the evenings. Here, Molson stipulated that from dinner-time on Mondays to Fridays, and during the whole of Saturdays and Sundays, allocated cars would be withdrawn, and a Minister requiring the use of a car would draw on the car pool. This left no room for discretion on the part of the Minister.

Molson was clearly wary of the whole business of setting out the new rules, and in a covering note to Macmillan stressed that his task in administering GCS had been difficult. He therefore wanted the Prime Minister to issue the rules over Macmillan's own signature. This would have the effect of making 10 Downing Street ultimately responsible for administering the rules.

As perhaps Molson had anticipated, his draft raised several objections from a number of Ministers, particularly the point

concerning no discretion in the evenings for Ministers with allocated cars. In the light of a variety of comments, it fell to Sir Norman Brook to produce a new draft. With regard to the use of allocated cars in the evening, the wording had now been changed to: 'Therefore, after dinner-time on Mondays to Fridays, and at any time during Saturdays and Sundays, a Minister will not, save in exceptional circumstances, use his allocated car, but will draw on the car pool.' Crucially, the addition of 'in exceptional circumstances' gave Ministers the discretion to decide exactly what this meant.

The Minister of Works clearly saw the implications here, and in commenting on the new draft recommended to Macmillan that 'in exceptional circumstances' should be struck out. Molson also suggested several other amendments, but Brook was clearly becoming impatient with the Minister of Works, and in a sharply worded memo to Macmillan the Cabinet Secretary stressed: 'The important thing at this stage is to get these rules out.' In his reply to Molson, therefore, the Prime Minister was not going to give way, and on the question of the 'exceptional circumstances' reference stressed: 'This is a point to which some of my colleagues attach special importance.'

Nevertheless, as Molson had earlier requested, Macmillan did put his name to the document, and so the first official Prime Minister's Rules for official car use were published (although not made public) in June 1957.

By now, however, there was a distinct edginess in the relationship between the Minister of Works on the one side, and Macmillan and Brook on the other, and this was set to continue. In October 1957, therefore, Molson sent a minute to the Prime Minister warning him that the rules he had issued in June were not working satisfactorily. In particular, he claimed that the drivers of allocated cars were continuing to work overlong hours, due to what he considered to be the misuse of the 'exceptional circumstances' provision. Molson went on to explain:

In a typical week, before the Summer recess, these 'exceptional circumstances' occurred on more than forty occasions amongst twenty-one Ministers, and in the case of two Ministers, on every one of the five working days of the week. On the night of 25 July, twelve

Ministers kept their own drivers when a pool car could have been provided.

The fact is that Ministers are regularly employing their own drivers and are paying no attention to the rules. I can only report to you these facts, which make it impossible for me to administer the Car Service satisfactorily.

If the Minister of Works had been looking for sympathy from the people at the top, he was to be sorely disappointed. Sir Norman Brook was still clearly irked at Molson's whole attitude to the new rules, and in a minute to the Prime Minister pointed out that, in his original draft, Molson had forbidden any discretion to Ministers. Brook believed this was calculated to inconvenience Ministers and to reduce the earnings of their drivers, and concluded:

I am not therefore surprised to hear that it is not working at all [although it was Brook himself who had drawn up the new rules, and included the 'exceptional circumstances' provision] . . . I certainly do not see why the Prime Minister should put himself to the trouble now of giving an interpretation of the rule which the Minister asked him to adopt. On the whole I am disposed to recommend that the Prime Minister should not reply to this minute from the Minister of Works.

Macmillan left no doubt about his own attitude, with a handwritten note at the bottom of Brook's minute that read: 'What a splendid suggestion' (i.e. not to reply).

In the event, Macmillan and Brook were not allowed to let the matter rest. This was because Minister of Housing and Local Government Henry Brooke had written to Molson complaining that they were the only two Ministers sticking to the rules, with the result that their drivers were highly indignant at the lack of overtime compared with other allocated drivers.

On this occasion, Macmillan decided that he had to reply, but did so in a highly pointed manner. In a minute to the Minister of Works, the Prime Minister pointed out that he had been sceptical from the start about a rule that tried to enforce use of pool cars for senior

Ministers in the evenings, and that practical experience had now confirmed that this was impractical. Macmillan concluded with the icy remark: 'I should be interested to know what recommendation you, as the responsible Minister, now wish to make.'

The Prime Minister was clearly determined to do nothing to help Molson. The clear inference of his message was that there was little point in trying to enforce, as was surely the intention from the moment the 'exceptional circumstances' provision had been inserted. At this point, it might have been thought that Molson would have considered it prudent to placate the Prime Minister, but remarkably he chose instead to escalate the argument still further. The Minister of Works was clearly by now incensed about the human and economic costs of drivers working long hours of overtime, and so in his reply to Macmillan he complained: 'I cannot approve a state of affairs in which four drivers are working more than seventy hours a week and two nearly eighty... No commercial organisation would, I believe, dare tolerate such long hours being worked by drivers, nor can I justify this waste of public money.' Rather than scrap the rule, Molson recommended that, as in his original draft, the reference to 'exceptional circumstances' should be dropped, thereby compelling Ministers to use pool cars in the evenings.

Macmillan did not reply immediately to this challenging minute, ostensibly on the grounds that he was about to leave on a visit to Australia. However, in a minute to the Prime Minister when he returned from his Australian trip, Brook confided, 'We thought it best to let this simmer a bit.' The degree to which things were allowed to 'simmer' is indicated by the fact that Molson had sent his minute to the Prime Minister on 20 December 1957, but it was to be 3 April 1958 before Macmillan issued a reply! In this minute, not surprisingly, the Prime Minister stated plainly that he would be reluctant to issue an instruction that allocated cars could not be used in the evenings and at weekends: 'A rigid rule of this kind would in some cases cause serious inconvenience.' Instead, Macmillan again put the ball back in the Minister of Works' court by encouraging him to speak to those Ministers using their allocated cars for more than fifty-five hours per week, and ask them what they would do to avoid this.

Macmillan was therefore basically prepared to let the matter rest. He had introduced rules that considerably liberalised official car use, and was happy to turn a blind eye to those grey areas where discretion could be exploited, even if GCS costs increased considerably as a result. In fact, as we will see in Chapter Seven, the issue of whether Ministers should use only one driver remains a live one to this day, and goes to the heart of the delicate question of the degree to which the special relationship between a single driver and Minister should be preserved at all costs.

It is also worth noting that the preoccupation of Macmillan and Brook was with the finer points of when Ministers might or might not use their official cars, rather than the implications for GCS as an organisation in terms of strategy and costs and revenue. To a large degree, this set the tone for a succession of governments over the next four decades, that by the late 1990s would lead GCS to the edge of economic oblivion.⁸

MODERNISATION BY STEALTH

Meanwhile, having settled the Prime Minister's Rules for official car use by Ministers, in July 1957 Sir Norman Brook turned his attention to the question of officials. Having consulted with the Minister of Works and the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Brook reported that, during petrol rationing, all allocated cars for Permanent Secretaries had been withdrawn. As this had produced savings estimated at £15,000 a year, the Minister of Works was keen to retain this permanently. Historically, however, by far the most significant section of Brook's minute was where he sketched the situation he had found within the Departments with regard to official car use. This description is worth quoting at length, as it sums up perfectly the tension in the 1950s between the old Whitehall world and the new:

I have had a talk about this with some representative Permanent Secretaries. This showed that there are two attitudes of mind, and pretty strong feelings, about it. On the one hand, the Heads of the older Departments, with memories and habits going back to the pre-

war days when there was no GCS, tend to make little call on official cars except for urgent official business, and occasionally for attendance at evening functions; and for these purposes they are quite content to rely on the car pool system. On the other hand, the Heads of the newer Departments and those with close links with industry take the view that cars are part of 'the tools of management' and that senior officials should have discretion to use them for home to office journeys, for meals in the middle of the day, and for evening functions. They say that they are embarrassed when they are without transport, and are offered lifts by business executives who regard with derision the restrictions imposed on the use of cars by civil servants... I have much sympathy with the 'modern' view. An intelligent use of cars saves time; and most of the time saved accrues to the public service, not to the private life of the individual.

Nevertheless, Brook was politically sensitive enough to note that Parliament was jealous of 'perquisites' for bureaucrats, and that the Civil Service would not preserve its reputation unless it maintained its humility. Brook's solution was therefore a compromise that superficially seemed to accept the old world view, but implicitly left the way open for the new world. Consequently, although he suggested that all departmental cars should be operated from a central pool, Permanent Secretaries under heavy pressure of work would be allowed home-to-office journeys. Similarly, a Permanent Secretary would have an allocated car only if he was ill or regularly obliged to attend so many social functions in an official capacity that he could not get through his day without one.

Given that many Permanent Secretaries could claim to be permanently under heavy pressure of work, and also attended many official social functions, it would not necessarily be too difficult a task to exercise discretion. In many respects, therefore, this had the appearance of an unofficial revival of the system of nominated cars, with much left to the discretion of officials to, as David Eccles had put it, 'play the game'.

In his minute, Brook himself concluded that he would like to have recommended a rather more liberal policy, but that political sensitivities prevented this. In reality, however, the Cabinet Secretary,

like his Prime Minister, surely understood very well that his rules were paving the way for the inevitable victory of the modern world.⁹

Ike Returns

*In August 1959, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower paid an official visit to Britain. In his honour, GCS Superintendent Tom Hughes pulled out all the stops, and arranged for twenty limousines to be made available for the President and his entourage, for which he received an official thank you from Head of the Civil Service Sir Norman Brook. As Hughes describes: 'On arrival at the pick-up point, the convoy of limousines were a credit to the Service, being highly polished (the normal standard) with not a speck of dust to be seen. The drivers looked immaculate in their ex-service type of green uniform, which blended very well with the black limousines of the day.'*¹⁰

Being surrounded by this fleet of GCS cars and their drivers, it must surely have evoked poignant memories for Eisenhower of being driven around wartime London by Kay Summersby, and perhaps also some feelings of what might have been.

THE MAKING OF A SERVICE

Just as GCS as a whole was entering the modern age in the 1950s and 1960s, so individuals were joining the Service in those years, and helping to build its distinctive standards and traditions. GCS is of course built on the work of many hundreds of individuals, but as a representative sample, in this section we will concentrate on the experiences of three particularly long-serving drivers, with between them well over one hundred years of service.

Denis Oliver

Denis Oliver was working in the pathology laboratory at Great Ormond Street Hospital when in 1956 he heard that his friend Peter Smithson had joined GCS as a driver. Smithson recommended to Denis that he should also apply, and so on 8 May he too became a driver. GCS had done little recruiting in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as they had many people still serving from the wartime Motor Transport Corps and Ministry of Aircraft Production. As Denis remembers: 'The large majority of drivers were women, and some of

the former MTC people were quite aristocratic, such as Lady Patricia French. This meant that Peter and I were two of the first of the younger generation of that era to join GCS.'

As we saw in his recollections of the Suez crisis, Oliver began his GCS career working on nights, which he regarded as good training, as he got to learn the best routes between the Departments when the streets were quiet. However, he quickly graduated to the allocated cars, and drove a succession of well-known Ministers of that era. The first of these was Geoffrey Lloyd, who had been a Minister under Churchill during and after the war, but in 1956 was Minister of Education. Oliver found that Lloyd was a very wealthy man, who had a *laissez-faire* attitude towards his job: 'He would not get up until 10 am, and then he would read all the newspapers. I would pick him up around 11 am. Once at the Ministry, he would have people put his letters up on a notice board, and then he would go along signing them. I think that this did lead to a few queries.'

One particularly memorable passenger for Oliver arrived when he took Lloyd to the home of Winston Churchill for dinner: 'Churchill's driver was Sergeant Murray, his police driver from the war. However, he wasn't about at that time, and Churchill had received a call to be at the House of Commons for a vote. He jumped in my car, and asked me to take him there. He left his cigar in the car, and I still have it today.'

Oliver also filled in for other drivers while they were away, which meant that he got to know a lot of people. One of his passengers was Sir Gilmour Jenkins, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Transport: 'During the week, Jenkins would stay with the composer Vaughan Williams and his wife. Vaughan Williams was very bad on his feet, and wore carpet slippers all the time.' For a period, Oliver drove the Minister of Transport, Ernest Marples, who had a great talent for self publicity, including placing a sticker in his own private car saying 'Marples Must Go.' This was at the time that he introduced parking meters to the streets of Britain, and caused a public outcry. Oliver was with him during this period, but found him to be one of the few Ministers with whom he did not get on well: 'He was a dapper little man, who often wanted me to pick him up at about 6.30 am to take him to play tennis. I felt it all got a bit much.'

Oliver managed to switch with another driver, and found himself driving Minister of Health Enoch Powell. Throughout his political career Powell went his own way and usually courted controversy, most notably in 1968, when he was sacked as an Opposition spokesman by Prime Minister Edward Heath for his 'rivers of blood' speech, warning of the dangers of large-scale immigration. Powell was noted for his intellect, and had become a professor at the age of 25, and Oliver found him to be 'in many ways the most remarkable man I ever met. He had an incredible brain, and there seemed to be nothing he didn't know about.'

In the 1960s, Oliver drove Labour Minister Harold Lever, like Geoffrey Lloyd a fabulously wealthy man. As Oliver observes: 'Lever became a Treasury Minister. I think that the Labour government wanted him for his economic expertise! He did have a lot of famous friends. I remember on one occasion we picked up the film star Kirk Douglas, and another time Lauren Bacall.' A further glamorous encounter for Oliver occurred when he took Lord Hailsham to the opening of the National Film Theatre. Hailsham was accompanied by the glamorous Italian film star Gina Lollobrigida, although as Oliver recalls: 'She wasn't made up or dressed glamorously, and so it was hard to recognise her from her films.'

In his early days at GCS, Denis Oliver became the Transport and General Workers Union representative for the drivers, and as he puts it: 'I could never find anyone to replace me, so I kept the job until six months after I retired in 1998!' As we will see in Chapters Four and Six, labour relations within GCS were fraught at certain periods, particularly on the delicate issue of overtime, and the relatively low basic pay for drivers. Given these union links, it might seem surprising that Oliver drove Margaret Thatcher for fourteen years as Prime Minister and former Prime Minister! However, as we described in Chapter One, they developed an extremely high mutual regard, that continues to this day. In 1989 Denis Oliver was awarded the British Empire Medal.

Irene Maykels

Like many GCS women drivers of that era, Irene Maykels had a military background, and in the army drove brigadiers for three-and-a-half

years. When she left the army, a contact in GCS suggested that she should apply, and she took her test driving a van around central London, before joining GCS in October 1956. Her career began with driving vans carrying messengers around Whitehall, but she eventually graduated to become a pool driver, where she remained by choice, because she preferred the regular hours of work. As she describes, in those earlier GCS days many of the drivers were women, but there was some resentment that they earned lower pay than the men drivers, apparently on the grounds that they generally drove smaller cars.

One of the greatest changes within GCS in modern times has been the decline in the number of women drivers. In the 1960s around half the drivers were women, but the numbers nowadays are only a handful. The chief reason for this appears to be the loss of the link with the services. For those who had driven in the services, joining GCS was seen as a natural transition, but in the twenty-first century there are many other options for these women. One Minister who appreciated a driver with a service background was Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1983 to 1989. His driver during these years was 'Cindy' Ash. Lawson emphasises that he was excellently served by Cindy, who acquired this inevitable nickname in the army, and henceforth was never known as anything else.¹¹ As we will see in the concluding chapter, there are those who believe GCS needs to re-establish its service links in order to solve current recruitment problems.

For Rene Maykels, the traditions and culture of GCS are an essential part of its character, and she regrets the trend away from the more formal approach:

Current drivers say to me that nowadays Ministers ask drivers to call them by their first names. I don't think this is right. Even if they asked me to call them by their first names, I would insist on calling them 'Minister'. In the earlier days, there was a mutual respect between drivers and Ministers, but this seems to have been eroded over the years.

Rene Maykels tells a story that illustrates very well the culture clash between the traditions of the MTC and a more informal approach:

In the early days, reflecting the MTC origins, some of the women drivers were quite posh. One of these was Barbara Forbes. In the days of the Conservative government in the 1950s and early 1960s, she drove Lord Perth, and got on with him well. However, when a Labour government was elected in 1964, she went to pick up her new Minister [the story was in fact told to Irene by this Minister]. He said to Barbara, 'Good morning, love', and got in the front seat. She promptly told him in a haughty tone to call her 'Miss Forbes' and to get in the back seat. She also warned him that she would give him a month's trial, at the end of which she would decide whether she would continue to drive him. At the end of the month, the Minister asked politely if he was still to be her passenger, and received the reply: 'I will give you a further trial, provided that you behave yourself, and you can call me Barbara.'

She also recalls how, even in the 1960s, ministerial routines and schedules could be much more relaxed than in the fraught modern times:

In the days of Harold Wilson's Labour government, Ministers would generally leave when Parliament rose at the beginning of August, and things wouldn't get going again until early October. The traditional start of the new Parliamentary year was the Judges' Breakfast, when we took all the judges to the House of Lords. While the Ministers were away, the drivers would spend the time painting and cleaning the cars. The cars were not replaced so often in those days, and some of the Wolseleys had seven coats of paint!

As a pool driver, Rene Maykels drove many Permanent Secretaries. In her later years with GCS, these included particularly Cabinet Secretary Sir Robin Butler. She remembers that, during the Falklands War in 1982, when Sir Robin was Private Secretary to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, he often had to work late, and so she went to McDonalds in Victoria Street to collect meals for him and his staff.

In 1988, Rene Maykels was awarded the British Empire Medal, the first pool driver to be given this accolade. She saw this honour as a tribute to the often unsung work done by all the pool drivers. By this

time, the wearing of hats by drivers had largely disappeared but, true to the traditions of GCS, she insisted on wearing her hat and uniform to receive her award.

Beryl Osborne

Beryl Osborne (universally known as Ossie) joined the Service in April 1961, by coincidence on the same day that the InterDespatch Service, that delivers official mail, was founded. She had a background as a Sergeant Instructor in the Territorial Army. In fact, she drove IDS vans for five years, then pool cars for around another five years, before finally moving on to the allocated cars and Ministers in the early 1970s, driving first Fred Corfield, and then John Nott.

One significant sign of the times in the 1960s was a change in the GCS uniforms. Until 1966, the women drivers wore uniforms that were basically in the wartime tradition of the MTC, with battledress blouse, shirt and tie. By the standards of the 'swinging Sixties' these uniforms looked rather old-fashioned, and so couturier Charles Creed was hired to design new ones. The new uniforms were in an air-hostess-style green barathea with a waisted jacket and a light beige rayon blouse without a tie. GCS Superintendent Sheila Thomson confirmed that they had been very dissatisfied with the old uniforms, and added: 'After all, we were wearing the same style before 1948 in khaki.' At the same time, she was adamant that the modern style stopped short of following the 1960s fashion for mini-skirts, and declared: 'We are not having our drivers jumping out of cars with the present-day ridiculous length of skirt.'

Beryl Osborne remembers that the new uniforms were much more stylish, and that with the old uniforms you had to starch the collars that went with the tie, whereas with the new ones there was just a blouse. On the other hand, she found that the new uniforms did not wear so well: 'They looked good at first, but tended to lose the stylish look when they had been worn for a bit.' In the event, these 1966 uniforms did not have a long life, and in 1969 were replaced by one designed by GCS section leader Irene Gale, and pool driver Violet Leach. It was reported that the new uniforms cost £13 6s each to produce, compared with £13 4s for the old one, a cost which no doubt added up for supplying to the many women GCS drivers.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ossie visited Geneva for World Health Organisation conferences, and stayed for several weeks each time. In the 1970s and 1980s, she carried a succession of high-profile Ministers. One of these was John Gilbert, a Labour Treasury and Transport Minister in the mid-1970s. As Ossie recalls: 'One hot Summer, John Gilbert wanted to work on the roof of the Treasury, but they would not give him permission. He had a flat in Earl's Court, and so worked from there quite a bit on the roof. I had to keep taking him his red boxes, and it was quite a climb each time to the roof.'

In the 1980s, she experienced one strange encounter with Alan Clark, the wealthy and eccentric Minister in the Thatcher government, who became famous (or perhaps infamous) for his graphic diaries that charted his experiences in those years. Clark let it be known that he had a Renault car to sell, and Beryl and another driver went down to his Sussex home to have a look at it. She explains:

He had told us that we could take the car, and keep anything over £1,000 we got for it. However, when we arrived at his home and he showed us the Renault it was not at all what we had expected. It was in a very poor condition and was full of sand! Nevertheless, we decided to take it, but had a terrible job getting it back to London. We never could get it in a presentable condition, and in the end got just £75 above the £1,000. It was hardly worth the trouble!

Also in the 1980s, Ossie drove Norman Tebbit. As we will see in Chapter Five, this included the traumatic time of the 1984 Brighton Grand Hotel bomb, when Tebbit and his wife were seriously injured. However, Tebbit and Ossie also experienced the lighter side of security, when they were travelling on the motorway with a police escort behind them: 'One of the special tyres on our protected vehicle burst. It was full of a thick gluey material, which enables you to drive some distance with a burst tyre. This gluey stuff splattered all over the windscreen of the following police car! It was like something out of a comedy sketch.'

In the 1990s, Ossie applied to drive the Prime Minister while John Major was in Downing Street. She went for an interview, but then had second thoughts: 'I was driving late one night in fog and

thought, "Do I need this?" I was over fifty at the time, and driving the PM is a big tie. For example, you had to drive up to Scotland to meet him when he flew up there. I decided then to withdraw my application.'

In 1994, Ossie was awarded the MBE for her services to GCS.

No Wedding Bliss for Chancellor

In July 1967, Chancellor of the Exchequer James Callaghan discovered that, when it came to official car privileges, some senior Ministers were more equal than others. Callaghan had sought permission to use his GCS car at his daughter's wedding, with the condition that he repaid the costs for the day.

This request did not go down well, and in considering it, one official noted that the press would put the wrong construction on it. The reply to the Chancellor noted that cars were generally only used for official business, although it was conceded that there was some limited discretion for journeys where time was saved. The Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary were allowed to use their cars for private purposes, on the repayment terms of 1s 9d per mile. However, it was stressed that the Chancellor was not entitled to this privilege, and so Callaghan's request was summarily refused.

JUNIORS MAKE THEIR PRESENCE FELT

The 1960s was basically a period of steady development and consolidation for GCS, and was the most stable of its six decades. Even then, the Service found itself part of an even larger Ministry, for in April 1963 the Ministry of Works took in the Air Ministry, Army and Navy Works Departments to become the Ministry of Public Building and Works. Tom Hughes describes how the fleet strength for the new Ministry went up from 1,000 to 3,600 in the UK, and 1,600 overseas, and he undertook a survey of all the transport operations and maintenance in the London and Home Counties area. GCS was of course only a small part of this, and by 1967 the GCS fleet consisted of 175 cars, of which eighty-eight were allocated.¹²

There continued to be no indication, therefore, that GCS as a separate entity, with its own specialist needs, was to be given any sort of proper attention by government. Instead, the decade was

marked by periodic attempts to widen the use of allocated cars, to take in Junior Ministers and Permanent Secretaries. The Prime Minister's Rules, framed by Harold Macmillan in 1957, may have greatly liberalised car use, but there remained an underlying feeling that the modern needs of government, and a greater emphasis on personal mobility in society generally, required a further expansion below the top rank of Ministers.

The push for this widening of the allocated base began in May 1962, when a letter to Macmillan from the Commonwealth Relations Office stated that they now had only one allocated car, and requested a second to be shared between the Joint Parliamentary Secretaries, and also to be available for use by senior officials. This was justified on the grounds of the heavy workload of the Junior Ministers, and the fact that the car pool was not always able to meet requests at short notice. In a pointed remark, the Ministry noted that it could be analogous with the Foreign Office, which was one of the few Departments not to be totally dependent on GCS, and had its own service for Junior Ministers.

Cabinet Secretary Sir Norman Brook recommended to Macmillan that this request should be granted, but only if the Minister of Works was satisfied that it would not lead to similar requests from other Junior Ministers. In reality, of course, it was only too likely that, if this request were to be granted, other Departments would quickly follow suit.

This had the effect of concentrating minds, and by February 1963 the Chief Secretary to the Treasury was writing a memo to the Prime Minister revealing that, after consultation with the Minister of Public Building and Works, he was now proposing a 'modest relaxation of the rules governing use of cars by Junior Ministers'. It was noted that Junior Ministers were not allowed official journeys between home and railway station and office, or to and from lunch. In contrast, Permanent Secretaries had the discretion to use official cars to and from work when pressed for time, although they were urged to exercise this discretion sparingly. It was emphasised that, for both categories, the situation was accentuated by the fact that there were in any case very few pool cars available. Significantly, as in the 1950s, the letter invoked the comparisons with business in

justifying a change: 'I do not think this makes for efficiency, particularly as measured by the standards of modern business.' It was therefore proposed that Junior Ministers should be placed on the same footing as Permanent Secretaries, and that a small separate pool of cars should be created to serve these two groups. Even then, the new pool would contain only ten cars to serve sixty people.

These changes were accepted, but the degree to which Ministers and officials were extremely nervous about the public reaction to any information about official car use being made public is intriguingly evident in advice given by his Office to Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas Home in December 1963, about answering Parliamentary Questions on official cars: 'It would be advisable to avoid any reference to rules for use of official cars by Ministers, since this might entitle Members to ask for these rules to be laid before the House. This would be undesirable in the case of this confidential document.'

MPs and the public were therefore kept completely in the dark about the very existence of the Prime Minister's Rules, which had already been operating for over six years! (It would be the 1990s before the Prime Minister's Rules were publicly available.) On the one hand, there was a growing awareness within Whitehall that the modern needs of government required an expanded Car Service, yet at the same time there was a huge fear that any public recognition of this fact would create great political embarrassment.¹³

STILL WAITING

The return of a Labour government in 1964, with Harold Wilson as Prime Minister, did not herald any kind of significant changes with regard to GCS. In fact, Ministers seemed quite content to accept the system moulded by Churchill and then Macmillan. It was to be the late 1960s before a new push was made to win more privileges for Junior Ministers. This was triggered by a request from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in October 1968 to solve what it saw as an anomaly with regard to its Junior Ministers. One of these Ministers, Maurice Foley, was the only Parliamentary Secretary with an allocated car. As we saw in the previous section, the Foreign Office had enjoyed a special status here, and although this system had now

lapsed, Foley continued to enjoy its benefits. The Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart was therefore requesting that the Department's other Parliamentary Secretary, Will Whitlock, should also have an allocated vehicle, rather than having to draw on the pool.

For his part, the Minister of Public Building and Works, Bob Mellish, thought that a solution might be for the Foreign Office to follow the example of the Ministry of Transport, where the two Junior Ministers shared one allocated car. The Foreign Office, however, was not happy to accept this, and Michael Stewart pointed out to Harold Wilson that the Prime Minister himself had previously granted an allocated car to one of their Junior Ministers in 1965. This was on the grounds that Foreign Office Ministers had to fulfil more official social engagements than Junior Ministers in other Departments. This argument may have worked in 1965, but by 1969 it became clear that sympathy for the Foreign Office was wearing thin. This was evident in a minute to the Prime Minister from his Private Secretary, who stated plainly: 'I must say I begin to tire of the preferential treatment which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office claims for itself in so many spheres against the Home Departments.'

As in the early 1960s, concern was also expressed about setting a precedent, and in March 1969 these fears proved well founded when the Prime Minister received a letter from the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Edward Short, requesting an allocated car for Minister of Sport Denis Howell, who was based in his Department. Short cited the examples of Foley and the two Junior Ministers at Transport, but was no doubt also well aware of the request for Whitlock to have his own car.

For the Prime Minister's Office, the warning lights were now flashing, and in a minute to Wilson his Private Secretary pointed out that the Howell request underlined the difficulties in conceding the Whitlock request. He saw the choice as being an ad hoc decision on individual cases, in which case both Howell and Whitlock would probably qualify. Alternatively, the Prime Minister could choose to hold firm. Harold Wilson left no doubt about his response, and in a handwritten note on the minute declared: 'No change – I'm not all that keen on Foley continuing!'

For now, the spirit of the times was against any change, but the question refused to go away, and the need for a fresh outlook was finally acknowledged by the Conservative government elected in 1970. Although these events took place in the early 1970s, they are dealt with in this chapter, as they provide a conclusion to a preoccupation of the 1960s.¹⁴

The Crossman View

In his classic Diaries, describing his period as a senior Minister in the Labour government from 1964 to 1970, Richard Crossman captures beautifully the spirit of the relationship between a Minister and 'his' driver. For most of his period in government, Crossman was driven by long-serving GCS driver Molly Crawford, and an entry from December 1964 describes a family visit to Bertram Mills' Circus at Olympia:

*'And then Molly arrived at two o'clock and we swept down to Olympia in the Ministry car (Crossman did not appear concerned whether this constituted 'official business'!). One of the few really nice perks a Minister gets is that black saloon car always at his disposal. In London, where parking is a nightmare, this is a tremendous thing. The children can sit in front with Molly and I can start pressing on the handle and make the glass screen move up and down. So the children like being in the Minister's car.'*¹⁵

*Yet, as so often in close relationships of this sort, it was not always plain sailing. For example, Crossman describes his reaction when going to Buckingham Palace in August 1966 to receive the seals of office on becoming Leader of the House of Commons: 'I really hadn't the courage to tell Molly that I find her driving impossibly slow, so I took her and my old Super-Snipe with me to the Palace.'*¹⁶

Eventually, in October 1968, there came a parting of the ways, and in describing this, Crossman gives perhaps the definitive summary of how the Minister – driver relationship works:

'Molly, by the way, is leaving me. I have had her for four years and we get each other down. I now have a new kind of Austin which she hates. However I am getting a new driver now, a man (Peter Smithson), who will be at Paddington when I arrive on Monday morning. A driver is important to a Minister because he is the person with whom you are together more than anyone, except perhaps your Private Secretary. Somebody once said in a very biting leading article that Harold Wilson can't nominate

peers because the only person he knows intimately is his driver. There is something in this. You do get to know him or her extremely well and you chat together.

'Well, Molly couldn't love me, compared with Keith Joseph (her previous Minister) whom she could mother. I was rough and I shocked her in every way because of my attitude to royalty, to the Privy Council, and so on. I am only relieved that the change has taken place with the change of office (Crossman had just been appointed Social Services Secretary), although for all I know the young man may actually be unbearable.'

*In the event, Crossman got on well with his new driver, and when he left office in June 1970, he expressed concern about Peter Smithson's immediate future: 'My last day with an official car... What will poor Peter be doing? He used to tell me that he always liked driving for the government because he could choose his own master but I hope he will be able to, because it looks to me as if he might find himself unallocated and put back in the pool.'*¹⁸

MOVING ON

Harold Wilson may have put a block on allocated cars for Junior Ministers, but it was very much a finger-in-the-dyke type of exercise. Times were moving on and, by the early 1970s, what had been in the air for a decade finally came to pass. The indication of change came in a letter on 6 December 1972 from Head of the Civil Service Sir William Armstrong to Prime Minister Edward Heath's Private Secretary, Robert Armstrong. From the outset, Sir William made it clear that a new age had dawned:

There has been for some time dissatisfaction with the arrangements for official cars both for Parliamentary Secretaries and Permanent Secretaries. The limited number of cars allocated to individual members of these categories, and the provision of car services for the rest through the VIP car pool and the night pool, patently fail to correspond to real need. They reflect historical attitudes and circumstances, not current ones, and in the case of Permanent Secretaries (and as far as I can judge some Parliamentary Secretaries too) inflict needless strains and inefficiency.

The Head of the Civil Service went on to explain that in June 1970, the month the new government took office, he had commissioned a thorough study of the matter. The report had presented options, but Sir William now took it on himself to make several recommendations. At that time, twenty-four Permanent Secretaries continued to rely on the pool, including the Heads of several major Departments. Armstrong proposed that the Permanent Secretaries of nine major Departments, including the Treasury, Cabinet Office and the Department of the Environment, should have an allocated GCS car, although the remainder would continue to use the pool.

The study also covered Parliamentary Secretaries, and although Armstrong felt it was for Ministers to make decisions here, he pointed out that eighteen out of twenty-five of these Ministers relied on the pool, and that this was as unsatisfactory as the situation for Permanent Secretaries. However, recognising the political sensitivities, he conceded that giving an allocated car to every Parliamentary Secretary could probably not be justified.

In a note following up Sir William's letter, Private Secretary Robert Armstrong told the Prime Minister: 'I suspect that our rules are now very old fashioned (as William Armstrong suggests) and that it would be reasonable for *all* Ministers (including Parliamentary Secretaries) and all Permanent Secretaries to have allocated cars. But perhaps the right course is to take each change as it is suggested, rather than to force the pace from here.'

Prime Minister Edward Heath quickly accepted Sir William's recommendations for Permanent Secretaries, and asked Environment Secretary Geoffrey Ripon (the Minister now responsible for GCS) to draw up recommendations for the Parliamentary Secretaries. Following the lead given by Armstrong, Ripon agreed that giving an allocated car to all Parliamentary Secretaries could not be justified. Instead, he recommended that allocated cars should be made available to eleven additional Parliamentary Secretaries, in addition to the six allocations already made. A competitive element was introduced in that the eleven cars would go to those Junior Ministers whose workloads demanded above average use of GCS, compiled by reference to GCS records of those Parliamentary Secretaries who had made the greatest demand on the pool in the period October to

December 1972. Ripon believed that this arrangement would result in most Departments having an allocated car, although these would only be granted on the clear understanding that cars were to be made available by the Department for use by other Parliamentary Secretaries in the Department concerned, whenever the need arose.

This compromise was eventually accepted by Heath in May 1973. At the time, it might have seemed only a short step to giving all Junior Ministers an allocated car. Remarkably, however, the nervousness of Ministers on this point meant that the concession would not arrive officially for another twenty years, in the early 1990s, although it appeared by this time that the new rules were only catching up with what in reality had become accepted practice.

Meanwhile, for Edward Heath and his government, the stakes would soon become very high, as they became enmeshed in the chronic economic and political crises of the 1970s.¹⁹

NOTES

1. William Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics in Britain* (Penguin, 1973), p. 482.
2. All material in this section from National Archives (Kew) File Ref. PREM 11/2232.
3. Ibid.
4. Tom Hughes' memoir.
5. All material in this section from National Archives (Kew) File Ref. PREM 11/2232.
6. Tom Hughes' memoir.
7. All other material in this section from National Archives (Kew) File Ref. PREM 11/2232.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Tom Hughes' memoir.
11. e-mail, 21 March 2007.
12. Tom Hughes' memoir.
13. All material in this section from National Archives (Kew) File Ref. CAB 21/5261.
14. All material in this section from National Archives (Kew) File Ref. PREM 13/2522.
15. Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, Volume One (Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1975), p. 107.
16. Ibid., p. 610.
17. Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, Volume Three (Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 244.
18. Ibid., p. 953.
19. All material in this section from National Archives (Kew) File Ref. PREM 15/1326.

CHAPTER 4

Expecting The Unexpected

1970–79

GCS IN THE PUBLIC EYE

In its first quarter of a century, GCS built a firm position in Whitehall by providing a service which ministers and officials of successive governments found invaluable, despite lengthy internal arguments about their scope of use. At least in certain respects, it could be said that being a small part of large Ministries helped the development of the Service, as it could find its feet largely away from the public gaze. Even to this present day, GCS drivers generally believe that remaining out of the public eye is proof that they are doing a good job, and for most of the 1950s and 1960s, with a few exceptions, such as the issue of new air-hostess-style uniforms to the women drivers, they largely got their wish.

Ironically, in 1970 GCS became part of another huge Ministry, the new Department of the Environment, but the decade was to see GCS thrust more into the public eye, chiefly through the swiftly changing tide of events. This reflected a wider 1970s world that was more unpredictable and less secure than the previous two decades. For example, the sudden and unexpected quadrupling of the price of oil in 1973–74 triggered huge problems for the British economy, and led to both Conservative and Labour governments battling with crises of high inflation and the collapse of sterling, that at times seemed beyond their control. Associated drastic cuts in public expenditure in turn placed the spotlight on previously overlooked areas for possible savings (at least by the public and media) such as GCS.

In the earlier decades, most of the focus on economies was generated internally, but in the 1970s GCS found itself the subject of public debate concerning the cost of the Service, and the degree to which it provided value for money. Throughout these debates, the underlying persistent critical theme was that, at a time when Ministers were demanding sacrifices of the public, was it right that these same Ministers should be ferried around in chauffeur-driven limousines?

In addition, in the later years of the decade, the economic crises and the Labour government's attempts to impose a limit on pay increases, culminated in the catastrophic 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978–79, when widespread public sector strikes produced images such as uncollected rubbish piling up in the streets. Once again, GCS found itself caught up in this industrial unrest, and unable to prevent a landmark half-day strike in 1978.

Meanwhile, the deepening crisis in Northern Ireland in the early to mid-1970s saw the spread of IRA terrorism to the British mainland on a large scale. As bombings became a frequent occurrence in London and other cities, so the need for security took on new dimensions. For GCS, security became a preoccupation that would continue until the present day, and, as we will see in the following chapter, for a period in the 1980s even threatened the identity of the Service itself. From the early 1970s, however, drivers were made to realise that the old, more relaxed world of the 1950s and 1960s had gone for ever, and that they were potentially on the front line in the need to protect Ministers.

Nevertheless, alongside the impact of these dramatic external events, there was still of course a strong element of 'business as usual' for GCS in the 1970s, with the Service continuing to be in demand from its ministerial clients. In fact, the Service saw some significant additions to its customer base over the decade, with from 1970 official cars provided for the Leader of the Opposition, and from 1975 ex-Prime Ministers. Indeed, the inside story of how these expansions came about, and how they were affected by external events, provides fascinating insights into the workings of government at that time, and in particular the characters of Prime Ministers Edward Heath and Harold Wilson.

A Damp Welcome

After becoming part of the new Department of the Environment in 1970, in 1972 GCS moved from its long-time home in Kingston House in Kensington to a headquarters adjacent to the DoE in Marsham Street (now the site of the Home Office). GCS driver Beryl Osborne recalls that she had mixed feelings about this move:

‘An advantage of the new headquarters in Westminster was that it became much more convenient to pick up Ministers and officials than being located in Kensington. On the other hand, the actual buildings at Marsham Street were not very pleasant. In particular, the underground car park had a great deal of moisture seeping through the ceilings. This would drip on to the cars, and it became a terrible job to keep them clean.’

Former long-serving GCS driver Chris Green remembers that, when a move from Kingston House was first proposed, a strange suggestion was made that GCS should be moved to a site owned by Hammersmith and Fulham Council. However, when, as a trade union representative, he went to inspect these proposed premises, he realised that they would be completely unsuitable, and quickly made his findings known to the DoE. Shortly afterwards, the proposal was quietly dropped.

EDWARD HEATH, HAROLD WILSON AND A MAGNANIMOUS GESTURE

From the outset, the 1970s provided unexpected outcomes, with the first surprise being victory in the 1970 general election by the Conservative Party led by Edward Heath. As Leader of the Tories, Heath had already been defeated by the Labour government, under Prime Minister Harold Wilson, in the general election of 1966, and the opinion polls widely forecast a repeat result in 1970. The Labour government elected in 1964 had survived a number of economic crises, but by 1970 these conditions were much more favourable. In the election campaign Harold Wilson projected an image of statesmanlike calm, but in the event this backfired badly, and appeared to be interpreted by the public as complacency. Consequently, Edward Heath was carried into Downing Street with an overall majority of thirty.

The arrival of Heath as Prime Minister had a significant impact on GCS on two counts. Firstly, the Service found a new departmental home in the Department of the Environment (DoE). The Labour government had already been planning to merge the Ministry of Housing and Local Government with the Ministries of Transport and of Public Building and Works (the existing home of GCS). In October 1970, however, the Heath government announced that these Ministries would be merged into one huge DoE.

If GCS had been dwarfed within the Ministries of Supply and of Public Building and Works, then it was an even smaller element in the giant DoE. As for much of its history, despite the high value placed by Ministers on the relationships with their drivers, GCS itself appeared to be overlooked as an administrative entity. There appears to have been no significant assessment of how it might fit into the DoE structure, such as placing it closer to a possibly more natural home in Transport (in the event, it was to be another thirty-five years before this alliance took place), and so almost inevitably GCS found itself as part of the Property Services Agency, basically the component parts of the former Ministry of Public Building and Works, but now located within the DoE.

This fashion for large scale planning and organisation was very much a feature of the 1970s, and Edward Heath was one of its key advocates. In this context, Peter Hennessy observes that no Prime Minister since Lloyd George in 1916–17 had made such a deliberate and determined effort to remodel the whole machinery of state. Like Lloyd George, Heath saw such matters as first order problems, to be tackled as a priority, and not as optional extras. They were integral to what he saw as a more focused form of Cabinet government.¹ In setting up giant Ministries such as DoE (the Department of Trade and Industry was also founded on similar principles at this time), Heath believed that more rational and strategic planning could take place. The danger was that an organisation such as GCS could become lost within the grand vision, and fail to develop and implement a long term strategy that suited its particular strengths.

Intriguingly, it is also possible to detect Edward Heath's desire to construct a more rational framework for the whole machinery of government in his second decision to impact on GCS – to provide

an official car for the Leader of the Opposition. As Heath had himself been Leader of the Conservative Party for five years before he became Prime Minister, he must have been all too aware of the travel strains and inconveniences in fulfilling these responsibilities without the use of an official car. Consequently, in October 1970 he provided this privilege to his recently defeated Labour opponent, Harold Wilson.

It says much for Heath's perspective that he was prepared to place his vision of how the needs of a Leader of the Opposition should be officially recognised above narrower party political considerations. At the same time, it could be said that the problems in actually supplying the necessary vehicle to Wilson strangely foreshadowed the huge problems Edward Heath would encounter generally as Prime Minister in matching his vision to the reality of events.

In the case of Wilson, he was due to be supplied with a new Rover 3.5 litre car costing £2,640. At that time, as we have seen, these P5s were the standard issue for Cabinet Ministers. Unfortunately, it was reported that normal waiting lists had been aggravated by strikes, and Wilson had to wait his turn for the Rover. Instead, he had to make do with a 5-year-old Austin Princess, with a trade in value of around £400. In fact, eight Cabinet and senior Ministers were also waiting for new Rovers, and so were being moved around in Princesses.

Looking on the Bright Side

A relative of a senior Minister in the 1970s remembers that their GCS driver had a valuable saying: 'If you don't have time to clean the whole car, then clean the side the Minister gets in!' This driver also apparently had a close affinity with GCS headquarters in Marsham Street, as for every journey he went via that location, regardless of where he had started.

As the relative comments: 'It seemed that he had to go to Marsham Street to find his bearings, and would have lost his way otherwise.'

The driver had previously driven the Labour peer Lord Longford, and on one occasion Longford asked the driver to take him to the 'House of Horrors'. The driver was a bit mystified by this, and so took his passenger to the House of Lords, only to find that in fact Longford actually wished to visit Madame Tussauds Waxworks, and their Chamber of Horrors!

At the same time, the relative also recalls the characteristically high degree of trust and friendship that developed between the driver and the Minister:

'The driver of course bears everything that is said in the back of the car, much of it very private. If you couldn't trust him to be discreet, then it would be very difficult to carry on the business of government, but I never heard of this trust being misplaced. The driver was also a real friend of the family, and never regarded as a member of staff. Yet at times it seemed it could be an awful life for the driver, having to keep such long hours, in order to accommodate the Minister's needs.'

POLITICAL DEFEAT BY THE TIDE OF EVENTS

The delays in supplying new Rovers because of strikes was just one small indication of the problems with industrial relations that would eventually bring down the Heath government in 1974. Even in 1970, strikes were at their highest level since the general strike year of 1926, and the government's solution was an Industrial Relations Act that set up an Industrial Relations Court, with the powers to fine unions for ignoring new procedures for settling disputes without strikes. In reality, the Act only served to antagonise the trade unions still further, and industrial unrest became even more widespread. The climate of unrest was not enhanced by the government's decision to impose a compulsory prices and incomes freeze in November 1972, that extended in modified form into 1973.

The situation was aggravated still further by wider economic circumstances. In particular, the Yom Kippur offensive by Israel against Egypt in October 1973 led to the oil-producing states within OPEC immediately increasing prices by 70 per cent, and at the same time cutting production, in protest at United States support for Israel's action. This totally unexpected turn of events badly hit the British government's anti-inflation policy, and in November 1973 a State of Emergency was declared as power workers and miners began industrial action. As the crisis deepened in December, the government declared a three-day week, and cut £1,200 million from public spending.

Nevertheless, the strikes continued, and led to lengthy power cuts, so that in February 1974 Edward Heath declared a general election on the basic question: 'Who Governs Britain?' In the event, this call rebounded on Heath, and although the election produced no overall majority for any party, the Prime Minister was unable to construct a coalition with the Liberals, and resigned. Consequently, in March 1974 Harold Wilson returned as Prime Minister.

Edward Heath came to office as a Prime Minister with good intentions and high principles, but the tumultuous tide of events tended to reveal an obstinacy in his nature that manifested itself in a lack of political judgement and timing. Hennessy comments here that, although Heath inspired great loyalty in close associates, to many colleagues he could appear stiff and remote.² Ironically, the traits of character evident in Heath during the 'Who Governs Britain?' election were also to be seen in his use of an official car as an ex-Prime Minister.

Exits and Entrances

A description of how GCS handled the departure of Edward Heath and the return of Harold Wilson to 10 Downing Street in March 1974 provides a textbook example of the quiet efficiency with which the Service deals with these types of momentous political events:

'The day Edward Heath handed over the Premiership he was driven to Buckingham Palace in the PM's Rover, and a short while later Bill Housden {of GCS} followed in a smaller car with Harold Wilson. While the statesmen were in the Palace, Bill and Mr Heath's driver changed cars. In due course, the new Leader of the Opposition left Buckingham Palace in the smaller car, and later, Bill drove away with Mr Wilson in the PM's Rover. The wheels of fate had indeed turned full circle'.³

The poignancy of the harsh changing fortunes of politics are also beautifully illustrated in a letter written in March 1974 by John Nott, a Minister in the Heath government, to his GCS driver Beryl Osborne (as we have seen, known universally as 'Ossie':

'Dear Ossie,

I am so sorry that I have not written to you earlier to thank you for all your help over that two years. You did a marvellous job. Your smiling face and bappy disposition were always a pleasure to your boss. In spite of all those late nights I hope that life was not too dull under the Tories – if you know what I mean!

Thank you so much for all your good work. I enjoyed having you as my driver very much. As soon as we get rid of this lot – including your new charming boss (whoever he may be) I hope that your services will be available again!

*Yours ever
John Nott.'*

In the event, 'Ossie' did indeed once more become driver for John Nott, when he returned as Trade Minister in the Conservative government elected in 1979.

AN EX-PRIME MINISTER'S EXCURSIONS

The following year did not see a revival in the political fortunes of Edward Heath. In October 1974, as Conservative Leader, he was for the third time out of four defeated in a general election by the Labour Party led by Harold Wilson, who was returned as Prime Minister with an overall majority of three. In February 1975 he was challenged for the Conservative Party Leadership by Margaret Thatcher, and in the ballot of Tory MPs was defeated by 130 votes to 119. At this point Heath resigned, and he was succeeded as Conservative Leader by Margaret Thatcher, when she defeated three male rivals in a second ballot.

This sequence of events left Heath with the status of an ex-Prime Minister and Party Leader. Ironically, he had not enjoyed a long period with use of an official car as Leader of the Opposition, since his defeat as Prime Minister in February 1974. At least some consolation was shortly to be at hand from his old political adversary Harold Wilson. In deciding to make an official car available to ex-Prime

Ministers, it could be said that Wilson was returning the favour bestowed on him by Heath in 1970, when a GCS car was made available to the Leader of the Opposition. At the same time, as we will see, there were perhaps also more personal motives behind the Prime Minister's decision. Nevertheless, on 12 February 1975, only eight days after Heath's defeat by Thatcher, Harold Wilson wrote in friendly terms:

My Dear Ted,

I have for some time had in mind the possibility of providing access to the Government Car Service for former Prime Ministers. It has long seemed to me that the extent to which former Prime Ministers are left to fend for themselves in these matters is not really consonant with the dignity of the office and the distinction which attaches to having held it. To that sort of consideration we now have to add considerations of security. Against that, of course, it is important that any arrangement should be defensible in terms of use of public funds.

I should like to make the following proposal:

- (i) A former Prime Minister should be entitled to have access to the Government Car Service without charge for attendance at official engagements and functions in and around London for which he is invited as a former Prime Minister and for Parliamentary business connected with his former business as Prime Minister. It would be for the individual to exercise his judgement as to what Parliamentary business qualified in this respect.
- (ii) A former Prime Minister should be entitled, if he so wishes, to have access to the Government Car Service on a repayment basis for other journeys in and around London. The repayment could be calculated on the basis of a mileage payment made to civil servants who use their own cars for journeys on official business. This arrangement would apply only for journeys in and around London, but it would enable a former Prime Minister coming up from the country for an

official engagement to be met at the station or airport and conveyed to and from his engagement in reasonable comfort and speed.

The cars would not be provided on an allocated basis, and it would be necessary to make arrangement on an ad hoc basis for each journey.

I will also write and tell Anthony Avon, Harold Macmillan, and Alec Home what is proposed.

Yours sincerely,
Harold Wilson.

The references to the three other living former Prime Ministers at the end of the letter was a reminder that, at that time, former Prime Ministers were generally expected to assume the role of elder statesmen. In fact, the tone of the letter, with such phrases as ‘coming up from the country for an official engagement’, has almost Edwardian echoes of the country gentleman making the occasional visit to the capital city. It is interesting to note that the reply Wilson received from Lord Avon (as Anthony Eden, Prime Minister 1955–57) seemed to fit this stereotype: ‘A car could be useful when I have to attend official or semi-official memorial services as, for instance, I am due to do next week.’ Lord Home (as Alec Douglas Home, Prime Minister 1963–64) also expressed gratitude for the offer and expected to avail himself of it. In contrast, Harold Macmillan (Prime Minister 1957–63) replied with what might be described as characteristic understated scepticism and detachment: ‘This is a kind thought, but I seldom come to London, and can manage all right when I do. But I may ask for help later on.’

The letter written by Wilson might have been sufficient for these three former Prime Ministers, but it proved to be totally inadequate in the case of Edward Heath. To a large degree, this was understandable. It could be said that Heath represented an early example of the modern trend towards younger Prime Ministers (he was to live for another thirty years after leaving Downing Street), and

in the mid-1970s showed no signs of becoming any kind of elder statesman. On the contrary, he remained an active MP, and a particularly voluble critic of Margaret Thatcher, his successor as Tory Leader. In these capacities, he displayed every inclination of a person determined to remain at the forefront of political debate, and perhaps to return to high office at some time in the future.

In this context, giving Heath use of an official GCS car was never likely to just mean 'travelling up from the country for an official engagement'. In fact, within three months of Heath being granted a car, official concern was mounting within Whitehall about not only where he was taking it, but also his interpretations of official business. This manifested itself in a number of memorandums between the DoE and the Prime Minister's Office, and culminated in a draft letter of May 1975 which it was suggested should be sent from the Prime Minister to Ted Heath. The draft letter emphasised that 'the Government Car Service is embarrassed by your recent request for a car from London to Gosport [on the south coast of England], as the instructions are to provide transport just in and around London ... It is also emphasised that this must be a repayment service.'

In the event, this letter was not sent to Heath. In any case, as we have seen during his period as Prime Minister, by nature Heath was a man with a strong will of his own, and was not likely to accept with equanimity attempts to curtail his movements in a GCS car. Nevertheless, Whitehall officials were not about to give in easily, and continued to closely monitor Heath's GCS movements. Consequently, only a month after the first draft letter, the Prime Minister was confronted with a new draft, that was even more strongly worded than its predecessor: 'I have been advised that you have made journeys to Oxford, East Hendred, Gosport, Southampton, Hamble, and West Malling (this latter a 232-mile journey), whereas I had in mind only journeys in and around London. I would be grateful if you would limit use of the Government Car Service to journeys in and around London or we could assess repayment rate for such journeys.'

The officials appeared to be particularly concerned about the cost of Heath's excursions well beyond the outskirts of London. When he was given details of Heath's movements and this draft letter, however, the Prime Minister was clearly reluctant to take any action. Although

he had set out the rules in his original letter, he appeared sensitive about confronting his former political adversary with the hard facts. In any case, the original letter had not been specific about exactly what constituted 'in and around London', and had left it to Heath's discretion as to what Parliamentary business qualified for these journeys. Consequently, on 24 June 1975 a letter was sent from the Prime Minister's office to the DoE that postponed the possibility of any immediate action (this was always one of Wilson's great strengths as a political tactician): '... The Prime Minister has noted this [the record of Heath's GCS movements]. He does not wish to take any action at present, but has asked that the matter should be reviewed in the Autumn.'

In the light of this recommendation, a schedule was kept of all Heath's GCS journeys from 1 June to 31 October 1975, but on 2 December 1975 Wilson finally put the issue to rest. In a letter from the PM's Office to the DoE it was stressed: 'The Prime Minister does not think it necessary to undertake regular six-monthly reviews [of Heath's GCS movements] whose results are reported to him. He will leave it to you to raise any problems which arise in the future, but there is no need to make regular reports.'

In the event, Wilson must have been aware by this time that, as so often, events had radically changed circumstances. This was because, in November 1975, for the second time in twelve months, an IRA bomb exploded outside Heath's London home. This was a period of particularly intense IRA activity in the capital. For example, on 23 October a car bomb had exploded outside the London home of Conservative MP Hugh Fraser, and had killed a passer-by, Professor Gordon Fairley, a renowned cancer specialist. In addition, on 27 November, the campaigner and television personality Ross McWhirter was shot dead at his home by an Irish gunman. Finally, on 12 December, the Balcombe Street siege ended peacefully, six days after four IRA gunmen took a husband and wife hostage in their Marylebone flat.

In this tense security climate, it was perhaps hardly surprising that a Home Office Memo of 12 December 1975 (the day the highly charged and emotional Balcombe Street siege ended) recommended that, at a stroke, Heath's status as a GCS customer should be trans-

formed. The memo noted: 'In view of the current threat assessment, the Metropolitan Police thought it necessary to allocate personal protection to Mr Heath. This provision will be reviewed weekly. The Police consider that it would greatly improve protection if Mr Heath could be driven in a Government Car Service car for all journeys while personal protection is considered necessary. It would be helpful if a car could be allocated to him. This is covered by government rules concerning Ministers and security.' A letter from the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary of 16 December noted that the Prime Minister had been consulted, and strongly supported the view taken by the Home Office. Consequently, Heath would have his GCS car. This vehicle would be provided without payment for official engagements, but with repayment when on private or party business.

Although the security problems were all too real, it could also be said that providing Edward Heath with an allocated car precluded any further political embarrassment over what exactly constituted travel 'in and around London'.

BILL HOUSDEN, HAROLD AND MARCIA, AND TURMOIL AT NUMBER TEN

As we have seen, it was the GCS driver Bill Housden who took Harold Wilson back to 10 Downing Street as Prime Minister in March 1974 after an absence of nearly four years. In fact, as we briefly described in Chapter One, Housden had one of the most remarkable careers of any GCS driver, and had long and close associations with two Prime Ministers. Having been one of the early drivers to join the Official Car Service in 1946 at the age of 28, in 1947 he became driver to the President of the Board of Trade in the Labour government, Harold Wilson. At 31 years of age, Wilson was by far the youngest member of the Cabinet, and he and Housden built a close relationship. However, in 1951, when the Conservatives returned to power, Housden had to find a new Minister. Remarkably, he was allocated (apparently despite Churchill's strict rules) the Minister for Housing and Local Government, Harold Macmillan. Housden then stayed with Macmillan in his rise up the ministerial ladder, culminating in the latter becoming Prime Minister in 1957.

Housden drove the Prime Minister until Macmillan resigned in 1963, but when Harold Wilson returned to government in 1964 as Labour Prime Minister, he specifically requested that Bill Housden should be his GCS driver. Housden then stayed with Wilson throughout his two Premierships, his spell as Leader of the Opposition, and later as an ex-Prime Minister. Not surprisingly, given this long association, Housden and Wilson became extremely close, and this relationship extended to the families of the two men. Housden had first met his wife Doris at Kingston House in 1947 when she was also an OCS driver, and in 1951, when their only child Jill was christened, they invited Harold Wilson and his wife Mary to be her godparents. The Wilsons were also in attendance when Jill was confirmed in 1967, and then when she was married in 1971.⁴

Housden was therefore immeasurably more than just a GCS driver for Wilson, and was surely the type of figure Lady Falkender had in mind when she referred to the drivers as the 'Outer Cabinet'. However, a unique and highly controversial account by an insider of life within 10 Downing Street during Harold Wilson's second term as Prime Minister, between 1974 and 1976, suggests that life at the top of British government was anything but an easy ride for Housden.

Bernard Donoughue was Senior Policy Adviser to Harold Wilson, and Head of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit, a body independent of the Civil Service. As such, he was a key member of the tightly knit so-called 'Kitchen Cabinet' that surrounded the Prime Minister. Other members here included the Prime Minister's Press Secretary, Joe Haines, and his Private Secretary, Albert Murray. Donoughue's detailed and intimate diary account of the period paints a picture of life at Number Ten totally dominated by the powerful personality of the Prime Minister's long-serving (1956–95) Private and Political Secretary, Marcia Williams (although she became Lady Falkender in 1974, Donoughue refers to Mrs Williams throughout his diary by her earlier name).

There is something of a paradox at the heart of Harold Wilson's second period as Prime Minister, for although he successfully steered the government through difficult economic conditions and a politically sensitive 1975 referendum on Britain's continued

membership of the European Economic Community, he seemed to lack the energy that had characterised his earlier spell as Prime Minister. Peter Hennessy notes that Wilson's return had a lacklustre feel about it, and that he himself had no illusions about being a renewed hero, even to his party.⁵ In fact, it appears now that the Prime Minister was contemplating the date for his retirement almost as soon as he returned to Number Ten. This climate tended to leave the way open for strong-minded characters such as Marcia Williams to dominate the scene, and apparently left Bill Housden in a vulnerable position.

Bernard Donoughue describes Bill Housden as 'the Prime Minister's colourful driver for many years, [who] also assisted Marcia in many capacities including chaffering her on shopping trips and ferrying her mail from Downing Street to her home. He was often unhappy, and frequently held informative conversations with the author, Joe Haines and Albert Murray.'⁶

That Housden was apparently being asked to serve well above and beyond the call of duty clearly became a sensitive matter for GCS, and something of an embarrassment for other drivers generally, as Donoughue describes here in an entry from 13 November 1975:

Since she [Marcia Williams] is in bed ill, Bill Housden has spent the day doing her shopping and errands in the PM's car. One of the drivers has complained to the Civil Service Department that the Number Ten drivers cannot log all their journeys, and so claim precise overtime, and implied that it was because too much time was spent on non-governmental duties. I know that the other drivers are angry that Bill is always occupied on Fridays taking Marcia to the hairdresser's, shopping, etc. So they have to go away for the PM's trips to Liverpool [location of his Huyton constituency], etc, and Bill usually stays in London.⁷

Housden clearly confided on a regular basis with Donoughue about his extremely stormy relationship with Marcia Williams. This is well illustrated in a detailed and graphic diary entry from 2 July 1974:

As I [Donoughue] arrived in Downing Street, Bill Housden was driving away from the door in the PM's car. He pulled up and talked bitterly of Marcia's attacks on him. She had called him a liar, accused him of being friendly with Albert [Murray] and me – clearly a criminal offence – and of conspiring with Albert to prevent her attending the Socialist International at Chequers [the Prime Minister's country home] last weekend. She had ordered him not to come into her house, but to leave her letters [which he took round to her house every day] on the doorstep.

Bill, who gives me the latest information nearly every day, had complained to the PM, who had said, 'It was best not to have anything to do with her.' The PM apparently has not communicated with her for a week. Bill said he had nearly had enough and dare not tell his wife, who would make him leave – 'and then it would be in the newspapers within 48 hours'.⁸

On another occasion (8 January 1975), Housden offered Donoughue a lift home in the Prime Minister's Rover:

He [Housden] told me how Marcia had been attacking him every day. This morning she was so awful that he finally plucked up courage and walked out of her bedroom where she was lying sick – and went downstairs saying that he could not put up with any more. After a few minutes the Asian maid came down with a long letter of apology.⁹

Yet amidst this turmoil, we should bear in mind that Bill Housden found himself in this situation only through his extremely long and close relationship with Harold Wilson. This clearly placed him in a unique position to gain an insider's view of the Prime Minister's mind and character. For example, Wilson's announcement in March 1976 of his intention to resign as Prime Minister came as a great public shock, and triggered a great deal of speculation about his motives for this decision. Housden, however, had for some time been confiding to Donoughue that he did not expect the Prime Minister to serve out his full term, and in January 1976 correctly forecast that Wilson would go by Easter.¹⁰

Despite the close relationship, Housden was also capable of delivering a coolly analytical and quite profound analysis of Wilson's character:

Bill Housden says that Harold Wilson has no lasting personal loyalty. Once he has gone, none of us will hear another word from him. 'Once you have served your purpose, you will be dropped, that applies to all of us.' Bill says he knows Wilson better than anybody, having worked closely with him for twenty years. In 1970 Bill never heard a word from him after his election defeat until Wilson was given the use of an official car – then he telephoned Bill to come and be his driver again.¹¹

Housden was to continue serving Wilson, as by now, as Wilson himself had ensured, former Prime Ministers were entitled to an official car! As we will see, this again caused some controversy. Nevertheless, given the quality and length of his service, the award of an MBE to Housden in the Prime Minister's resignation honours list was an undisputed accolade in a generally controversial list of names.

Saying Goodbye

Barbara Castle was a close associate of Harold Wilson, and had been a senior Minister throughout his two periods as Prime Minister. When James Callaghan took over as Prime Minister in April 1976, she suddenly found herself out of favour and out of office. In her autobiography, she describes how a sympathetic word from GCS driver Winnie Dabin (long-standing driver for Labour Minister Michael Foot) was able to make this traumatic experience more bearable:

'The transition from power to powerlessness is full of awkward moments ... One of an ex-Minister's duties is to say goodbye to the Queen, and I stood in Speaker's Court at the House (of Commons) wondering about the best way to get to Buckingham Palace – the ministerial car is the first thing to go. I rang Ted Short (a Cabinet colleague), also on his way to the Palace, to ask if he would take me in his car. Winnie, Michael Foot's driver, took pity on me as I stood waiting for him in the cold. Did I not know I was allowed to use my ministerial car for an occasion like this? "It is absurd the way no one explains this to you."¹²

THE PRICE OF BEING AN EX-PRIME MINISTER

When Harold Wilson resigned as Prime Minister and left Number Ten in April 1976, he became eligible for an official GCS car and driver, as a privilege that he himself had initiated a year earlier. In fact, there were those who believed that this had been his main motive all along! Amongst this number was Tony Benn, a senior Minister throughout Wilson's two terms as Prime Minister, who had nevertheless become semi-detached from the government through his opposition to UK membership of the EEC during the 1975 referendum, and his interventionist strategy as Industry Secretary in 1974–75. Hennessy describes Benn as the chief tension-arouser for Wilson's Cabinets, and suggests that the Prime Minister used the fledgling but quickly influential Policy Unit (headed by Bernard Donoghue) to combat Benn's interventionist industrial strategy, so that Benn was moved to the post of Energy Secretary in 1975.¹³ Benn cannot therefore be described as an unbiased observer of Wilson's activities. Nevertheless, Benn's analysis, with the aid of his GCS driver, does throw an interesting light on Wilson's thinking and state of mind during his latter days as Prime Minister.

As we saw in Chapter One, Tony Benn and Harold Wilson at least had one thing in common, in that they both built up a close relationship with long-serving GCS drivers. In the case of Benn, the driver was Ron Vaughan, who had driven him as a Minister since 1968. In his diaries, Benn describes a conversation with Vaughan on 25 April 1975 that suggests, as so often, GCS drivers had wind of a major change in government long before anyone else:

I learned from Ron Vaughan that Harold Wilson had arranged that in future all former Prime Ministers were to have their own car and chauffeur for life. That's never happened before, and indeed even until 1970 even the Leader of the Opposition didn't have a car and a chauffeur. It was Heath who agreed that for Harold. Of course now Harold has returned the favour, but he has also given a car and driver for life to Home and Macmillan. The drivers in the car pool are saying, 'The crafty bugger must be preparing to get out, and then *be'll* have a

car for life.’ That’s the conclusion to be drawn, because when he does go, he’ll never be made Leader of the Opposition again.¹⁴

Intriguingly, on 22 March 1976, just after Wilson had made his surprise official announcement of his intention to resign as Prime Minister, Benn confronted Wilson directly with the GCS theory from nearly twelve months earlier:

‘By the way, Harold, I’ll tell you who knew your secret before anyone else’, I said.

Harold had been boasting how it had been a well kept secret, and he said, ‘Who?’

‘The Government Car Service.’

‘What do you mean?’

I said, ‘As far as I remember, Ted Heath provided you with a car when you were Leader of the Opposition, the first time that had ever happened, and you gave him a car when you won in 1974. But last year when Ted Heath gave up the Leadership of the Tory Party, you made a ruling that *all ex-Prime Ministers* would have a car. I gather you foisted a car on Sir Alec Douglas-Home, who didn’t want one, and Lord Avon, who didn’t want one. Well, the word went round the Government Car Service that the reason you’d done this was because you were going to retire.’

I said this jokingly, but Harold began to look very sick. He said, ‘Not at all, it’s for security reasons.’

Marcia [Williams] was just smirking and it was obvious Harold didn’t like it. She said to me, ‘You are a naughty man – of course that’s right!’

So Ron Vaughan had been absolutely bang on.¹⁵

As we have seen in the case of Edward Heath, by 1976 there was of course a security element in providing a car for an ex-Prime Minister, but this had not been to the forefront in Wilson’s original letter to Heath in February 1975. Nevertheless, a letter from the Prime Minister’s Office of 25 March 1976 makes it clear that, as an ex-Prime Minister, Wilson should be treated in the same way as Heath was at that time, and be allocated a vehicle.

Ironically, within a few months, there was to be official concern expressed about the use of an official car made by Wilson, in a similar tone to that adopted for Heath a year earlier, although again with apparently no satisfactory resolution. In this case, a DoE memo of 1 July 1976 expressed concern that Wilson had recently been at his holiday home on the Scilly Isles but that, in contravention of the rules, his GCS car had not been returned to headquarters. Instead, it had been reported that the car was 'being used by a certain lady'. It was emphasised that any such use was quite improper, but that when the driver Bill Housden was tackled about this, the questions were met with evasion.

Sensitivity about the use that was being made of Wilson's car was no doubt heightened by the fact that, at this time, the whole question of the cost of the GCS fleet had become a matter of public debate, with controversy over the basic idea of the ex-Prime Minister being given use of an official car. Consequently, a report in the *The Times* in May 1976 gave leaked details of a review on the case for revising the system of providing cars for use by Ministers and Civil Servants, conducted by an interdepartmental committee under the chairmanship of the Civil Service Department. In a tone that would become increasingly familiar to GCS over the decades to follow, it was alleged that many junior civil servants had been making use of costly chauffeur-driven cars for routine work, and that too many vehicles were kept ready outside London for visiting Ministers and senior civil servants. The threat to the GCS was clear in that *The Times* reported there was argument in Whitehall over the merits of preserving the present Service, which cost about £2 million a year, or using more hire and self-drive cars.¹⁶

At that time, the GCS fleet comprised about 480 cars, with seventy-two allocated vehicles. The chief concern in 1976, however, appeared to be the situation in the regions. It was reported that in the previous year the southern region had claimed that significant savings could be made by tighter controls and regular use of hired cars. The southern region had made radical changes some years previously, but these had not been followed in other parts of the country. Consequently, the interdepartmental committee had been set up to look into the whole matter. An official investigator had

discovered that about half of journeys made outside London were by junior staff of various Departments. The investigator found that chauffeurs were kept waiting, and that often journeys were short but with long waiting periods. Among people found to be using GCS cars were health and social security officers making circular tours of claimants' homes, Inland Revenue officers collecting taxes and making property valuations, and DoE staff inspecting construction and maintenance works.

Nevertheless, the Property Services Agency, that controlled GCS within the DoE, argued that there was strong opposition to the idea of using more self-drive cars and hiring cars for peak periods of demand. This was because it was necessary to keep a minimum number of drivers and cars round the country for visiting Ministers and high civil servants. Junior staff could use these cars when they were not needed elsewhere.

The interdepartmental report also highlighted the sensitive matter of Ministers using GCS cars for private or domestic purposes, and found here that in the past few years just over £800 had been received by the DoE from Ministers authorised to take vehicles for private, political and personal use on payment terms.

Perhaps surprisingly, *The Times* reported that, although the report contained recommendations for changes in the interests of economy, it was unlikely to be shown to Ministers, as the matter was regarded as administrative and best handled by departmental managers.¹⁷ This suggested that the changes would be more in the form of incremental economies, rather than any basic appraisal of GCS as a whole. In the event, as we will see in the next chapter, it was only in the second half of the 1980s that the whole of GCS and its regional structure would be placed in the melting pot with its very existence at stake.

In the mid-1970s, it was perhaps the fact that the interdepartmental investigation had taken place at all that demonstrated changing times for GCS, and that from now on it could expect to be subject to greater public scrutiny. It was significant here that *The Times* report chose to place the examination of GCS in the context of the government also seeking to limit the use of cars by businessmen. This point illustrates the hard political and economic reality that, in the mid-1970s, the British economy remained in a highly delicate

state, with high oil prices, high inflation, rising unemployment, and a serious balance of payments deficit combining to maintain the state of crisis that had continued unabated since 1973. In this climate, any hint of extravagance by ministers and officials in their style of travel could have disastrous political consequences.

This new GCS prominence was well illustrated in June 1976, when Conservative MP Neville Trotter tabled a series of Commons questions on the cost of GCS. Trotter revealed to the *Sun* newspaper: 'I put down these questions after seeing Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey drive away from the Commons, without offering anyone a lift, at 12.45 am, after delivering his attack on company cars.'¹⁸ Healey had plans to tax private industry employees with company cars and homes, and Trotter saw it as hypocritical that Ministers' cars and living accommodation would be excluded from the plan. He believed that a hired bus could be used to take both Ministers and MPs home from the Commons.¹⁹

The answers given to Neville Trotter included the information that average weekly overtime for GCS drivers came out at forty hours and two minutes, although one driver had logged the huge total of seventy-four hours and twenty minutes overtime, costing £118. In fact, without overtime, drivers' pay would have been halved. Consequently, average earnings came out at £4,628, but this comprised £2,250 in basic pay, £130 disturbed meals allowance, and £2,248 overtime.²⁰

It was perhaps not surprising, therefore, that officials should be so sensitive about the use ex-Prime Ministers made of their official cars. In fact, that Harold Wilson should have use of a GCS vehicle at all had become a matter of some political controversy, and officials had to respond to some hostile correspondence. Although Tony Benn and the GCS drivers had picked up on Wilson's original decision, the initial supply of vehicles to ex-Prime Ministers appeared to pass without much public attention. It was only when Wilson himself received a vehicle that the media highlighted the fact, and provoked a public reaction. This contrast could perhaps be explained by the fact that Wilson's sudden departure had generated an avalanche of speculation about the reasons, and the supply of a GCS vehicle seemed to somehow suggest something of a feathering of the nest.

Amongst the correspondence received by the Property Services Agency was a letter of 24 June 1976 from a Mr C. P. Coulson, who, clearly with some feeling, wished to make a request of the government: 'The tax payers are providing the sum of £10,000 per annum to run Mr Wilson's official car. Why is this so, and if this offer is available to every motorist, could you let me have details of this allowance?'

Coulson was obviously determined not to be ignored, and on 17 July wrote again, complaining that he had yet to receive a reply. Eventually, on 13 August, Coulson's letter was answered by W. F. Hutchings, Principal Transport Officer at the PSA, who chose to adopt a similarly ironic approach: 'My advice to you is to become an ex-Prime Minister at a time when, following IRA action, security deems it dangerous for certain ex-Prime Ministers to travel on public transport or in their own cars as freely and safely as you or I can do.'

The controversy over ex-Prime Ministers and their GCS vehicles would eventually blow over, but out of the public eye there were also other sensitive aspects of official transport where change was afoot.

RELIEVING THE LOAD ON MINISTERS' SPOUSES

Given the character and sensitivity of the Service, the official Prime Minister's Rules on use of GCS cars are never likely to change in a sudden and radical manner. In reality, changes appear to take place either as a result of accepted practice becoming a norm that is then officially acknowledged, or through discreet elite lobbying for 'special case'. In the former case, grey areas such as travel by Ministers from work to home, or the entitlement of Junior Ministers to an allocated vehicle, can shift almost imperceptibly in terms of accepted practice over a number of years, so that an eventual change in the rules, in effect, only accepts what is already happening.

A good example of the latter 'special case' is provided by a letter sent from the wife of the Lord Chancellor to Marcia Williams in 1974. The rights of Ministers' spouses to use official cars is always likely to be a contentious and politically delicate matter, but at this time at least one wife of a Minister had reached the limits of her

endurance. Elwyn Jones had been a Labour MP, but in 1974 moved to the House of Lords to become Lord Chancellor. This involved taking an official residence, but for his wife, Polly, the limitations on her using her husband's GCS car had become too much, and she was clearly letting off a considerable head of steam when she wrote to Marcia Williams on 18 November 1974:

I am working all out to help Elwyn and to do a good job, for the country generally.

It is a question of transport. We have no car of our own. I don't drive. I am seventy, and have an arthritic back. The rule apparently is that only the Lord Chancellor may use his car, even when he is out of London. This makes it impossible to get about on errands running this place in the Lords without transport. Instead, I have to hang about in the rain waiting for taxis. This wastes valuable time and I catch cold. I do think something should be done to help me, and other Cabinet wives who don't have cars of their own.

I talked to Mary [the wife of Harold Wilson] the other day, and she tells me that she is allowed to have use of Harold's car (when he is not needing it) on condition that she pays the proper taxi fare. This seems to me absolutely fair and reasonable... The Lord Chancellor's Department says that I must never use the car unless Elwyn is sitting in it. This ridiculous veto can only be changed by specific instructions from the top man.

So, dear Marcia, I would be deeply grateful if you could bring this matter to Harold's attention.

Given the account by Donoughue, there was perhaps some irony in the fact that the wife of the Lord Chancellor chose to write to Marcia Williams about this matter! Nevertheless, there did appear to be significant inconsistencies between the Lord Chancellor's and Prime Minister's Offices about when and how a spouse could use an official car. When the letter was passed on to Principal Transport Officer, W. F. Hutchings, he was unsympathetic, and commented with some of the irony he also employed in his reply to the Coulson letter on ex-Prime Minister's vehicles. Consequently, Hutchings wondered why the Lord Chancellor's wife could not order taxis

ahead, and commented that some Ministers had in fact complained about the need to share cars with others. He also pointed out that there were insurance aspects, and continued to emphasise that, when a Minister was away, the GCS driver was told to report to headquarters.

In the event, as in the case of Edward Heath and his trips beyond the environs of London, Harold Wilson proved to be more sympathetic to a 'special case' than his officials. If the letter from the Prime Minister's Office to GCS of 12 February 1975 had a sexist tone about it, it did at least give the Lord Chancellor's wife the basic concessions she had been looking for:

With regard to the clarification on rules for use of cars by wives of Ministers. The Prime Minister does not object in principle to the proposed clarification of rules on use of cars by wives [that they should be allowed to use the car alone on certain occasions], but would like the drafting tightened to make it absolutely clear that the concession does not apply to wives representing Ministers at private or political functions, only to wives representing husbands at official and public functions.

It was perhaps understandable that the change should be referred to as a 'clarification', given the apparent inconsistencies between Departments, but a line had been crossed in that spouses were now recognised as having a certain official role to play, with associated rights.

As a footnote, when a new Prime Minister's memorandum on the use of GCS vehicles was produced in 1979, on this occasion it contained an acknowledgment of a change in the rules through a shift in accepted practice. Consequently, a letter from the Cabinet Secretary to the Controller of PSA Supplies noted that the new memorandum was little different from its predecessor, except for 'weekend concessions' for Cabinet Ministers. This would allow them to use cars from regional pools for journeys to their homes in the regions at weekends. However, it was acknowledged that this would in fact do no more than regularise the de facto position that had emerged in recent years.

Miss Bunny and the GCS Women

During the 1970s GCS women drivers continued to make the news for a variety of achievements and activities. Particularly prominent here was one of the original GCS drivers, Nancy Simmons, universally known by her nickname of 'Bunny'. In the early 1970s, Bunny was invited to visit Malaya by the Chief Minister, Prince Abdul Rahman. Bunny had driven the Prince on two occasions when he visited London to discuss Malayan independence. On the second occasion, he specifically asked for 'Miss Bunny', and invited her to Kuala Lumpur for the independence celebrations.²¹

Bunny Simmons was involved in a more controversial visit to London in 1973, when she drove Portuguese Prime Minister Marcello Caetano. The presence of Caetano provoked large-scale and violent demonstrations, and the Evening News described how 'The star of this week's Caetano circus was the buxom woman driver who whisked the Portuguese premier around at the wheel of an official Daimler.' The paper was not able to gain the identity of Bunny, but it described how 'this fearsome woman driver threw the big car around with the nerve and skill of a {former World motor racing champion} Jackie Stewart'.²²

Bunny Simmons finally retired in 1979, after thirty-three years service to GCS. Her final job was to drive Chinese Leader Chairman Hua on his visit to Britain. After Hua had flown off, Bunny was congratulated and thanked for her service by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.²³

Another long-serving GCS employee was Section Leader Irene Gale, who retired in 1972 after twenty-four years in the Civil Service. Her retirement card was signed by, amongst others, Prime Minister Edward Heath and Environment Secretary Peter Walker. However, the newsletter DoE World described how she was retiring 'after just over a century in government work'.²⁴ This unfortunate mistake was picked up by the national press, with one newspaper commenting: 'Never ever say women drivers are without experience.'²⁵

Irene Gayle was succeeded as Section Leader by Joyce Hinchcliffe, who in 1977 was awarded the British Empire Medal after only nine years service with the DoE, because of her exceptional ability.

DoE World was on better form when they interviewed GCS driver Ena Green in 1975, who told them that she preferred working as a pool driver

because of the regular hours. She confided that her dream was to one day hire a Rolls and drive around in it all day: 'And the day after I'm going to get myself chauffeur-driven in one.' On a more mundane level, she described how her duties included the cleaning of the Wolseley car: 'Many's the time I've been up at the crack of dawn with my bucket and sponge.'

*The author of the article noticed that on the dashboard was a notice in red: 'WARNING. It is the responsibility of the driver to ensure that there is a minimum of 2 mm of tyre tread.' DoE World commented dryly: 'This is not a job for the rebellious.'*²⁶

SECURITY MATTERS

Probably the most basic way in which the nature of the GCS job changed in the 1970s was the change required in the need for security. A portent of things to come occurred early in the decade, although perhaps not from the source that might have been expected. As we have seen, the industrial relations legislation planned by the Heath government proved to be highly controversial, and in January 1971 a bomb exploded outside the Hertfordshire home of Robert Carr, who as Employment Secretary was the Minister responsible for the Industrial Relations Bill. Responsibility for the bomb was claimed by an extremist group calling themselves The Angry Brigade, which had previously claimed responsibility for, amongst other things, planting bombs near a BBC van during the Miss World contest, and at the Department of Employment offices in Westminster.

Neither Carr nor his family was injured, but damage was done not only to the house, but also the Minister's official Daimler car, and this narrow escape clearly pushed GCS into an urgent realisation that security needed to be taken to a new level. Consequently, by the end of January a ruling had been sent out to drivers that, from now on, they would not be allowed to take cars home. Instead, away from the Kingston House Headquarters, vehicles would only be allowed to be kept overnight in a locked garage that had been checked and approved by Metropolitan Police Special Branch. At the time, the *Evening Standard* reported that many of the GCS drivers were not happy about this change. It quoted one driver as saying:

Most of us are a bit upset about this because it puts us in an awkward position for getting home at night. Very often we could find ourselves stranded. Not many of us can put the car in a locked garage, so we have to leave it at Kingston House. For people who live out of town – where the public transport system is not very good late at night – this new rule is a bad blow.²⁷

As the threat from the Angry Brigade was supplemented, however, and then replaced, by even more savage and deadly attacks from the Provisional IRA, GCS had to learn to accept security as a way of life, with a need to provide a number of senior Ministers with armoured vehicles, and generally to ensure frequent visual checks. In 1972, it was agreed that the Prime Minister should use official cars for all journeys in Britain on security grounds, although when on private business, he would pay using Civil Service rates.

At that time, it was decided that these security arrangements should apply to the Prime Minister alone, but in October 1973 Ministers came up against a tricky dilemma between security risks and political sensitivities. Party conferences are usually classed as private business, but on this occasion the police recommended that, for the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool, official cars should be used by the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Home Secretary, and the Northern Ireland Secretary. However, a memo from Downing Street to the Head of the Civil Service, Sir William Armstrong, stressed that a separate political question was whether it would be a good idea to have five large official cars to be seen driving around Blackpool. As we have seen, Britain was in the midst of an energy crisis at the time, and there was obviously a great deal of sensitivity about the public image of Ministers preaching restraint while being seen in a popular holiday resort, riding around in official limousines. In the event, a Downing Street memo a couple of days later revealed that the Prime Minister was indeed considerably worried about the political impact, and after discussions with the Ministers concerned, it was decided that only Heath himself would use an official car in Blackpool.²⁸

Perhaps two entries from the diaries of Tony Benn provide the best flavour of these fraught 1970s times, when GCS had to adapt to the

realisation that urban terrorism had come to stay as a perceived means of attempting to secure political ends. Firstly, the entry for 9 December 1975:

Ron Vaughan told me this evening that government drivers had been told to take Ministers a different route home tonight because with the Irish terrorists holding two hostages in Marylebone [the Balcombe Street siege], there is a real fear that the IRA might try to kidnap Ministers to trade them off. I spoke to Stan Orme [a fellow Minister], who said that his government detective is desperately worried. I rang Caroline [Benn's wife] to tell her to bolt the front door and close the shutters and not let anyone in. What an extraordinary time.²⁹

Secondly, the entry for 1 April 1979:

Hilary [Benn's son] gave me for my birthday... a long stick with a mirror and torch attached so that I could look under my car for bombs. Joshua [another son] had given me exactly the same. So touching.³⁰

These gifts had been given extra point because of the events two days earlier, when Conservative MP Airey Neave was killed when a bomb attached to his car exploded as it left the underground car park at the House of Commons. Neave was Shadow Northern Ireland spokesman and had taken a hard line on Ulster and terrorism, but he was also a close advisor of the Conservative Party Leader (and shortly to become Prime Minister) Margaret Thatcher. As Benn commented, the death of Airey Neave introduced the possibility of tremendous police protection, and pressure for a tightening up of security measures.³¹

Although Neave was not a Minister, his death within the boundaries of the Houses of Parliament brought security matters very close to home for GCS. Jerry Doyle, now GCS Director, describes how the security needs that first arose in the 1970s destroyed for ever some of the traditional and distinctive charm of the Service:

In earlier years Ministers' cars were always black, but in the 1970s we started to use all colours, as this is an effective security device. We also used to use a Crown signatory badge instead of Vehicle Tax. This was signed by me. However, for the cars we now use just the standard tax disc, and then claim the tax back. This makes the cars more inconspicuous.

In addition, the Prime Minister has always had four cars. For many years these cars always had the same number plates, which were carried on when we purchased new cars. The increased security concerns of the 1970s meant that this had to go, and the Prime Ministers cars now have assorted number plates. I would say that the assassination of Airey Neave, combined with the Brighton bomb at the 1984 Conservative Party Conference, were very big factors in the tightening of security.

As we will see in the next Chapter, the Brighton bomb triggered a series of events that would threaten the very existence of the GCS.

GCS and The Lighter Side of Security

One retired GCS driver remembers that security alerts in the 1970s could have their lighter side. He describes how, on one occasion during the period of Edward Heath's government, a GCS driver was carrying as his passenger Northern Ireland Secretary Francis Pym. They were travelling down Whitehall, with the car in front of them containing an elderly couple. For some inexplicable reason, the man at the wheel of this car decided to perform a slow U-turn. This meant that the car was now blocking the road ahead of Pym's GCS vehicle.

Given the high level of security at that time, and the passenger he was carrying, the driver feared the worst, and assumed they were about to become victims of an IRA ambush. He shouted out to Pym: 'It's a bit. Get down!' The GCS driver then accelerated at high speed straight into the car in front, hurling it to one side, and careered away down Whitehall. This left one bemused elderly couple literally wondering what on earth had hit them!

One another occasion, the driver himself had been detailed to go to the Foreign Office and pick up Lord Cromer, the British Ambassador to the United States, in order to take him to Chequers, the Prime Minister's country home. He had to wait for his passenger, but eventually he saw a

group of five men coming down the staircase. Assuming they were the people he wanted, and without looking too hard, he went up to the man in the middle of the group and introduced himself. He then realised that in fact he was talking to United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and that the people with him were all secret service men! Kissinger looked quite angry and disconcerted, and was immediately hustled away by his bodyguards. As the driver describes, it was very interesting to see the aftermath of this incident:

'I think that the secret service men must have had a good telling off from Kissinger for allowing me to walk up to him like that. Later that evening, I was waiting at Chequers when Kissinger appeared again. He isn't very tall, and you could hardly see him for the secret service men, who totally surrounded him. On their way out, they kept looking all around, and were checking everything. They were obviously determined to take no chances this time!'

BENDING WITH THE ECONOMIC WINDS

Underscoring the great majority of the 1970s years were the succession of economic and industrial crises that punctuated the decade. From the quadrupling of the oil price in 1973–74 there was no settled period of stability, and in fact the public and political mood of unease tended to intensify as the decade progressed.

The trend of events certainly had an impact on GCS, with the first indication of this in October 1973, when several Ministers in the Heath government were anxious to set a good example in economising on fuel. The matter was discussed at Cabinet, and in a follow-up, Housing Minister Paul Channon wrote to the Prime Minister advising that, after discussions with ministerial colleagues, it had been agreed that a low-key presentation would be appropriate. Channon therefore suggested that the economies should be presented not as an important initiative, but as a responsible piece of housekeeping, which the government was undertaking as a matter of course. He also advised that it would be best to avoid large concentrations of GCS cars, particularly at Parliamentary divisions.³²

As things turned out, however, Ministers' new travel arrangements proved to be anything but low-key, and instead received a great deal

of press coverage, much of which was by no means what the government had been looking for. At the suggestion of Junior Environment Minister Reginald Eyre, several of the twenty-mile-per-gallon 3.5 litre Rovers were taken off the road, and were replaced with what became known as 35 mpg ministerial Minis. Many years before official concerns about global warming through carbon dioxide vehicle emissions and the greenhouse effect, Paul Channon was shown bent double getting into a Mini, with Reginald Eyre squeezed into the back of the car, ready for the GCS driver to carry them the short distance from the DoE to the Commons³³ (the press did not appear to consider the possibility that the two Ministers might have chosen to walk).

Reginald Eyre hoped that the economy exercise could save around 1,500 gallons of petrol per week. The impact was lessened when it was reported that a senior member of the Cabinet, thinking he was helping the 'save petrol' drive by using a small car in London, was astonished to be passed by his regular car full of his Junior Ministers! Consequently, he immediately switched back to his larger car until the situation could be sorted out. A somewhat embarrassed DoE spokesman admitted: 'It is possible that something like this has happened. But it should not happen. Perhaps someone needed to get from A to B in a hurry and had to take a big car.' The by now somewhat desperate spokesman added hopefully: 'It could happen that in order to carry out the changes some junior people had to move the big cars about. And of course junior people could possibly have used big cars to carry some vital message.' Nevertheless, the spokesman claimed that two thirds of the 'big cars' were already off the road and were being replaced with the British Leyland 1800. Even Prime Minister Edward Heath had cut back from three to two 3.5 litre Rovers.³⁴

Even though it might be easy to smile now at the largely cosmetic attempts at fuel economy in 1973, the energy and economic crises for the government were real enough, and within four months were instrumental in prematurely seeing off the Heath government. The British economy remained in a highly fragile state when James Callaghan succeeded Harold Wilson as Prime Minister in April 1976, and by September Britain was compelled to borrow £2.3 billion, its

maximum entitlement, from the International Monetary Fund to prop up the pound. Sterling continued to collapse, however, and embarrassingly for the government, Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey had no choice but to turn back from Heathrow Airport and return to Westminster in his GCS car, only minutes before he had been due to take off for a financial conference in Hong Kong. At the Labour Party Conference, the Prime Minister made an uncompromising speech, saying that the option of cutting taxes and boosting government spending 'no longer exists'.

Inflation continued unabated, and trade unions were unwilling to accept the pay increase restraints suggested by the government, with strikes, particularly in the public sector, becoming rife. By February 1978 Ministers were again being asked to economise on fuel, but it was a sign of the times that by now this was because of a go-slow by tanker drivers rather than fuel prices as such. However, reporters found that Ministers seemed little inclined to heed the plea from the DoE. Typical of the response was that by Overseas Development Minister Judith Hart, who said that she would happily go by tube, but would not be allowed to take her ministerial red boxes, containing confidential papers, on the train.³⁵

In July 1978 the industrial unrest finally spread to GCS itself, when the drivers went on strike for half a day. The drivers historically were classed as industrial civil servants, and were protesting at the government's 10 per cent pay offer. Instead, they wanted parity with the non-industrial civil servants, who had been awarded a consolidated pay increase of 10 per cent, plus a further 9.5 per cent. The industrial action was part of a wider action by 4,000 London civil servants, but 150 GCS drivers and 200 Metropolitan Police drivers stopped work from noon until midnight. It meant that Prime Minister James Callaghan had to use his own Rover 2000, driven by his Parliamentary Private Secretary, to travel from Downing Street to the Commons for Question Time, and had to pass through a picket line outside Parliament.

Long-serving GCS driver Peter Smithson vividly expressed his dissatisfaction to *The Guardian*: 'I have never been on strike before and have never considered it until now, but we are all getting to the desperation stage. The man driving a Cabinet Minister gets less than a

lavatory attendant, and yet we are expected to shoulder a lot of responsibility for a Minister's safety.'³⁶

Denis Oliver, Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union GCS branch, emphasised to the *Evening Standard* that when Parliament was in session he rarely saw his family in the evenings, and was also called upon to work at weekends. He also set out the problems concerning the traditional emphasis on overtime amongst GCS drivers:

For five months of the year, when parliament is in recess, we have practically no overtime at all. That means in these periods we are taking home a little over £40 a week. The argument is constantly being put forward that we have the option of overtime. But why should we be penalised for working all hours of the day and night?³⁷

Oliver also argued that in the private sector the drivers would be earning £65 a week, plus perks and overtime.

It could be said that the unrest within GCS was a barometer of the national mood, and in the 'winter of discontent' that followed during 1978–79 a succession of strikes placed the Labour government in an even more defensive position. Consequently, in the general election called in May 1979, the Conservatives were returned with an overall majority of forty-three, and Margaret Thatcher became Britain's first woman Prime Minister. In the event, her close relationship with GCS would become almost literally a matter of life and death for both parties.

NOTES

1. Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister* (Penguin, 2000), p. 337.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 341.
3. *DoE World*, April 1974.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Hennessy, *Prime Minister*, p. 359.
6. Bernard Donoughue, *Downing Street Diary: With Harold Wilson in No. 10* (Pimlico, 2006), p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 567.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

10. Ibid., p. 617.
11. Ibid., p. 618.
12. Barbara Castle, *Fighting All the Way* (Macmillan, 1993), p. 491.
13. Hennessy, *Prime Minister*, p. 369.
14. Tony Benn, *The Benn Diaries* (Hutchinson, 1995), p. 317.
15. Ibid., p. 353.
16. *The Times*, 4 May 1976.
17. Ibid.
18. *The Sun*, 9 June 1976.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. *Daily Mail*, 1963.
22. *Daily Mirror*, 19 July 1973.
23. *Daily Mail*, 6 November 1979.
24. *DoE World*, June 1972.
25. *Sunday Express*, June 1972.
26. *DoE World*, October 1975.
27. *Evening Standard*, 29 January 1971.
28. National Archives (Kew) File Ref. PREM 15/1325.
29. Benn, *Diaries*, p. 339.
30. Ibid., p. 467.
31. Ibid.
32. National Archives (Kew) File Ref. PREM 15/1325.
33. *Daily Express*, 7 November 1973.
34. Ibid.
35. *Daily Mail*, February 1978.
36. *The Guardian*, 26 July 1978.
37. *Evening Standard*, 31 July 1978.

CHAPTER 5

Living Dangerously

1980–89

THE THATCHER EFFECT

As with the rest of the political world, for GCS the whole of the 1980s was dominated by the personality, policies and political style of the Conservative Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, Margaret Thatcher. Never an individual to be easily deterred from her purpose, the length of her term as Prime Minister, brought about by three clear-cut election victories, allowed her the opportunity to attempt a fundamental shift in the culture and values in Whitehall and well beyond.

At certain crucial times, the fate of GCS appeared to become entwined with that of the Prime Minister herself, and to a surprisingly significant extent the course of events reflected the complexities of her character. On the one hand, there was Mrs Thatcher's powerful ideological commitment to the virtues of privatisation, competition and the free market, together with associated suspicions concerning what she saw as the inefficiencies of the public sector. To a remarkable degree, these enormously strong beliefs were shaped from an early age, living above her father's grocery shop in Grantham, and in turn they had a significant influence over GCS. As she herself describes in her autobiography:

My 'Bloomsbury' was Grantham–Methodism, the grocer's shop, Rotary and all the serious, sober virtues cultivated and esteemed in that environment . . . For the truth is that families and governments have a great deal more in common than most politicians and economists like to accept. Although the consequences of flouting funda-

mental rules are somewhat different for states than for households, they are still ruinous – indeed, more ruinous in the case of states, because they have the power to bring whole nations down with them.

... The great advantage I had over many of my contemporaries in politics was that whereas they had first to be persuaded of the theoretical advantage of monetarism, free trade and deregulation, the technical arguments and insights were so completely in harmony with my fundamental instincts and early experience that I was much more easily convinced – and my convictions helped me to convince others.¹

These firm beliefs apparently had some ominous implications for GCS. Peter Hennessy quotes the Conservative MP Julian Critchley: ‘She [Mrs Thatcher] cannot see an institution without hitting it with her handbag.’² Indeed, from the mid-1980s GCS found itself exposed to some hefty blows, and this proved to be a tremendously difficult period for the Service, with many treacherous pitfalls to be avoided. After thirty-five years in which, despite habitually finding itself as a small cog within giant Ministries, GCS had established itself firmly in the Whitehall structure, the Service survived to the end of the decade only by the skin of its teeth. The crisis was such that the distinctive identity, and even existence, of GCS was under threat from the possibility of, successively, privatisation, a takeover by the Metropolitan Police, or the Service being dispersed to the parent Departments.

Ultimately, GCS survived through two other important facets of the Prime Minister’s personality and priorities. Firstly, there was the sensitive matter of security. One of the defining moments of Mrs Thatcher’s period as Prime Minister was the IRA bomb which exploded at the Grand Hotel in Brighton, where she was staying during the 1984 Conservative Party Conference. Although the Prime Minister herself had a narrow escape, five people were killed. The bomb understandably triggered new concerns about the security of Ministers, and there was strong pressure for responsibility for driving senior Ministers to be taken away from GCS and handed over to Metropolitan Police Special Branch.

As we will see, however, in one of the key turning points in GCS history, the Prime Minister and other Ministers resisted this pressure, and the Service retained its key responsibilities. In turn, this acknowledgement of the strategic importance of GCS on security matters significantly reduced any possibility of privatisation. As a Prime Minister who always stressed the importance of national defence and security, it was unlikely that Mrs Thatcher would risk losing control of GCS.

Secondly, it is possible to see a more personal element in Mrs Thatcher's loyalty to GCS. We described in Chapter One her considerable emotion at the funeral of her GCS driver George Newell in 1981, and her emotions were always more complex than the one-dimensional 'iron lady' image suggested. Significantly, Peter Hennessy observes that a combination of assertiveness and sensitivity was at the heart of her style throughout the days of her ascendancy. He quotes the journalist Woodrow Wyatt (a friend and admirer of Mrs Thatcher) as observing: 'she's very sensitive underneath and it takes a lot for her to screw herself up to face all the hostility she is getting unjustly'.³

Once again, it was here that the GCS' golden asset of the personal and intimate relationship between driver and Minister could come into its own, and the Prime Minister was noted for her appreciation of good personal service. In this context, it is possible to see how GCS fitted in to her analogies with running a family business. Significantly, Mrs Thatcher referred to living in the flat at the top of 10 Downing Street as (like Grantham) 'life above the shop', and she and her husband Denis decided that they would not have any live-in domestic help.⁴ The combination of attention to domestic detail, combined with matters of high state, make Mrs Thatcher's period as Prime Minister unique. Here, Jerry Doyle, Director of GCS, describes his surprise at seeing Mrs Thatcher clearing glasses and bottles after an official function; even as Prime Minister she liked to tidy up. It is certainly difficult to imagine any other British Prime Minister doing this work! In turn, as part of the 'family business' aspects of being Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher could appreciate the quality of personal service and consideration given by GCS.

Away from domestic life, however, it was the drama and tragedy of the Brighton bomb and its aftermath that truly defined the relationship between Mrs Thatcher's government and the GCS.

The Rover P5 Grand Entrance

As with so many Prime Ministers, it was the moment when Mrs Thatcher emerged from Buckingham Palace in the GCS Rover P5 when the full impact of her new status began to sink in:

*'Denis and I left Buckingham Palace in The Prime Ministerial car. My previous car (as Leader of the Opposition) had already gone to Mr Callaghan. As we drove out through the Palace gates, Denis noticed that this time the Guards saluted me. In those innocent days before security had to become so much tighter for fear of terrorism, crowds of well-wishers, sightseers, press and camera crews were waiting for us in Downing Street itself. The crowds extended all the way up Downing Street and out into Whitehall. Denis and I got out of the car and walked towards them.'*¹⁵

SECURITY AND THE 1984 BRIGHTON BOMB

A welcome early indication for GCS of the new Prime Minister's sympathetic regard for the Service came early in her period as Prime Minister. Given Mrs Thatcher's enthusiasm for economies in the public sector, it might have been thought that GCS would present an early target for her handbag. In May 1979, however, the month she took office, a letter from her Private Secretary to the Department of the Environment acknowledged her agreement that any attempt to achieve savings in the area of GCS- allocated cars to Ministers would probably be a false economy. She was therefore content with the allocation proposed by the DoE.

At this time, of course, the assassination of Airey Neave in the House of Commons car park was still an extremely recent event, and the need for ministerial security was clear. The fact that the IRA was continuing its campaign of murdering high-profile targets was demonstrated even more starkly a few months later, in August 1979, when Lord Mountbatten was blown up by a bomb on his boat while holidaying in Ireland. Three other people were also killed. Mountbatten, a cousin of the Queen, and the last Viceroy of India,

had a huge public profile, and although he himself had rejected any personal security, his death highlighted still more the potential vulnerability of public figures.

These types of attacks continued periodically over the next few years. For example, in October 1981 the Royal Marines chief, Lieut General Sir Stuart Pringle was injured when a bomb went off under his car, while in November of the same year a bomb exploded at the home of Attorney General Sir Michael Havers while he was away. The highest profile IRA attacks in London during this period occurred in July 1982 when bombs exploded in Hyde Park, killing two guardsmen and seven army horses. Later that same day, a bomb exploded under the bandstand in Regents Park, killing six soldiers.

In March 1979, it had been decided officially that the senior Ministers who would be allowed to use their GCS cars for all journeys would be the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The level of security given to these Ministers was upgraded in the early 1980s, although in June 1983 the Prime Minister did feel the need to issue a note which warned that since travel by Ministers was often very much in the public eye, they must all strive to make the most efficient and cost-effective arrangements for travel, using common sense about the means they adopted.

By 1984, the Prime Minister herself was looking for a new driver, and the long-serving Denis Oliver was proposed for the job. Oliver himself, however, was initially reluctant to take it on:

I had been driving Humphrey Atkins in the earlier years of the Thatcher government. He was one of the Foreign Office Ministers who resigned at the outbreak of the Falklands War in 1982, but he had earlier been a Northern Ireland Minister, and so he continued to use a GCS car on security grounds. I enjoyed driving him, and when it was suggested that I should switch to Mrs Thatcher, I wasn't too keen. Nevertheless, Humphrey Atkins himself persuaded me that it was too good an opportunity to miss, and so in the end I accepted.

Crucially, Denis Oliver makes it clear that there were also other pressures at work here that gave an extra urgency to ensuring his appointment, and in fact would prove to have enormous implications for the whole future of GCS:

At the time, the police were pushing very hard to take over responsibility for driving the Prime Minister. However, Mrs Thatcher was a big supporter of GCS, and was determined to retain one of our drivers. I think it was also very important that her Private Secretary [later Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service 1988–98], Robin Butler, had a very high regard for GCS. I believe that, apart from the personal relationships that were built up with GCS drivers, they both thought that GCS could be trusted to be more discreet than the police.

In the event, within a few months of taking over the job, Denis Oliver found himself at the heart of a massive security crisis. In the early hours of the morning of 12 October 1984, a twenty-pound IRA bomb exploded in the Grand Hotel in Brighton during the Conservative Party Conference. Many senior Ministers, including the Prime Minister, were staying in the hotel at the time. Five people were killed, including Conservative MP Sir Anthony Berry and the wife of the government Chief Whip, John Wakeham. Those seriously injured included the Employment Secretary, Norman Tebbit, and his wife, and John Wakeham himself. The Prime Minister had a lucky escape when the bathroom she had been in shortly before was badly damaged. Nevertheless, the bomb sliced four floors out of the centre of the building, and was the most devastating terrorist attack ever perpetrated against British politicians.

Denis Oliver's account of the dramatic events of that night speaks for itself:

I was sharing a room at the Grand Hotel with the Downing Street number two driver, Bob Rumble. When the bomb went off, it blew in the door of our room. The Grand is a Victorian hotel with a lot of old plaster, and I will never forget the thick dust that seemed to fill the air. It clogged up your lungs, and I could taste it for days

afterwards. It seemed very strange to look out from our room and see rubble, and an open view of the sea beyond, as the whole frontage had been blown off.

We managed to make our way to the Prime Minister's room, wondering what we were going to find. We were the first to get there. She was with her Private Secretary Robin Butler, and was still in her evening dress from the event the previous evening. They had been working on her big Conference speech for the next day, and she was putting it into her case. She was very calm, and said to me, 'Denis, I can't believe that this has never happened before now.' Denis Thatcher emerged from an adjoining room in his dressing gown and said, 'What's going on?' With all the chaos around, it could have sounded an amusing remark, if the situation had not been so serious!

Fortunately, the stairs were still intact, and I made my way down to the ground floor, and over rubble, and out through a window in the bar. The original idea was to get the Prime Minister away from the hotel as quickly as possible. However, some people had been seen in the grounds of the hotel, and there was a fear of snipers. This meant Mrs Thatcher had to stay in the hotel while the surrounds were checked.

Another problem was that the Prime Minister's car had been left at the police station, and so I needed to find a way of collecting it. I spotted a car with the keys still in the ignition, and assumed that it was a police car. No one seemed to know anything about it, so I decided to 'requisition' it! When I arrived at the police station I informed them that one of their cars was standing outside, then left them to it while I went to collect the Prime Minister's car. I was able to pick her up at the hotel, and we spent what was left of the night at Lewes police station. We had to make an early start, as Mrs Thatcher was determined to go back to Brighton to make her Conference speech as planned.

Denis Oliver's coolness and presence of mind at a moment of great crisis proved beyond doubt the ability of GCS to rise to the occasion. In the light of later events, it is impossible to overestimate the value of this in ensuring the continued existence of GCS.

Some of the most dramatic pictures from the bombing were of the badly-injured Norman Tebbit being carried carefully from the hotel wreckage. Beryl Osborne was Tebbit's driver at that time, and she recalls her initial shock and the dramatic aftermath:

As the Tebbits were based in Brighton for the week I was at home in London. I woke at about 7.30 am to hear the news. I thought that I would be travelling to Brighton that day to pick them up and bring them back to London, but instead I had to take the Tebbits' children down there to be with their parents. I went with them to see Margaret Tebbit in intensive care, while Norman Tebbit had to have a skin graft. It all meant that I was working from the hospital for some time. The wards where they had been taken were full of flowers and gifts – almost too many to manage. However, Norman Tebbit would still have his ministerial red boxes while he was in hospital, and I had to take these down to him.

Incredibly, Norman Tebbit had a bottle of whisky in his hotel room at the Grand, and it was found intact in the rubble. On the other hand, Margaret Tebbit lost her engagement ring, and sadly it was never found.

Later, Margaret was taken by helicopter to Stoke Mandeville hospital for specialist treatment, and I took the children there to see her arrive. As it happens, Stoke Mandeville is quite near to the Prime Minister's country home at Chequers, and Mrs Thatcher allowed Norman Tebbit to stay there so that he could be near to his wife.

GCS CRISIS AND A VITAL VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

It was almost inevitable that such a traumatic event as the Brighton bomb would have some serious implications for GCS. The manner in which the IRA had come so close to assassinating the Prime Minister and a large number of her Ministers could only place an even higher premium on the need for high-quality security at all times. One of the key factors that gives the GCS its unique character is that, despite the obvious serious security implications of its work, it has always maintained a separate identity and character from the police and

security services. However, particularly at times of crisis such as in the mid-1980s, this distinctive character in itself leaves GCS vulnerable to pressure from within government that some of its responsibilities should be taken over by others.

This was precisely what happened during this period, and on 27 March 1986 a letter was sent from Home Secretary Douglas Hurd to Environment Secretary Kenneth Baker (the Minister responsible for GCS) that had extremely serious implications for the Service. Hurd set out the situation plainly:

The Interdepartmental Committee on Ministerial Protection, which is chaired by Home Office officials, recommends that in future ballistically protected vehicles used by Ministers should be driven by police officers rather than GCS drivers.

A small number of Ministers . . . are driven on a regular basis in vehicles that are specially armoured against rifle, grenade and mine attack. These cars are driven by GCS drivers.

The police say that in emergency the extra training and wider experience of police officers may be crucial. Some GCS drivers receive additional training at Hendon [the Metropolitan Police Training College], but Metropolitan Police Special Branch do not feel this equates to the rigorous selection and protracted training procedures which their own officers have to undergo.

It is also the police view that in critical situations in which the skill of drivers could be crucial, opportunities for misunderstanding between the Special Branch protection officer and the driver are much greater when there is a GCS driver rather than a police officer.

However, the Controller of the Crown Suppliers pointed out that this would have an adverse effect on GCS morale.

It could be said that Hurd's last observation represented a particularly good example of Whitehall understatement. In suggesting that GCS staff lacked the skill and professionalism to drive senior Ministers, the tone of the letter undermined the *raison d'être* of the Service. The loss of these senior Ministers to police drivers therefore risked sending out the message that GCS fell short of the necessary high standards to do the job. Even more seriously, in practical terms, the reality of the

police driving senior Ministers could be seen as the thin end of the wedge, that would eventually lead to a full takeover. In fact, as we will see, later in the 1980s the Metropolitan Police attempted exactly a takeover of this sort, and their chance of success could have been considerably higher if they had already been driving Ministers.

Given that Hurd was reporting a recommendation by the authoritative Committee on Ministerial Protection, the tone of the letter has a great deal about it of a *fait accompli* – that the DoE should be expected to swiftly fall in line with the expert advice offered. In the event, however, the reply sent to Hurd by Environment Secretary Kenneth Baker, on 17 April 1986, could hardly have been more dismissive of the Home Secretary's arguments:

I am bound to say that I do not find the basic arguments put forward about the use of police drivers convincing.

As far as I am aware, no one has ever criticised the reactions of the GCS drivers on those rare occasions when they have faced a potential threat. Just the contrary, they have usually been highly commended. If their present level of training is thought to be inadequate let us, by all means, improve it, but personally I doubt if the Prime Minister and our other colleagues would want to make the changes proposed by the police, particularly if they involved the provision of armed police officers at nearly three times the cost of the present service. I believe they greatly value the level of service and close rapport they enjoy with their present GCS drivers.

In recognising the gravity of the threat to the GCS, Baker took the proactive and combative approach of totally defending the Service. Crucially, in referring to the Prime Minister, and the value placed on the close relationship with GCS drivers, Baker was playing his trump card, given Mrs Thatcher's high regard for the Service and her own drivers. Kenneth (now Lord) Baker recalls that although he was sympathetic to Ministers in some cases having police drivers, he felt that the proposal from the Home Secretary was totally unnecessary: 'The great majority of Ministers were not threatened by the same level of threat as of today. I think the recommendation had arisen because some Ministers had had a rough ride when they had visited

university campuses, as indeed I was to [as Education Secretary]. However, the GCS drivers were quite capable of dealing with those situations.’⁶

Lord Baker also acknowledges the importance of the golden GCS asset of the driver–Minister relationships:

Having been a Minister for many years, including in Edward Heath’s government, I came to realise that it was very easy to create bonds between Ministers and their own drivers, and indeed with the Minister’s family. I felt this was a much better relationship which should be maintained. As far as I could recall I do not think I consulted other Ministers. I thought the Home Office was overreacting.⁷

Crucially, in this potentially life-and-death struggle for GCS, it was Baker’s arguments that won the day. In a letter of 26 June 1986 from Douglas Hurd’s Private Secretary to the DoE, the Home Secretary conceded defeat: ‘Having considered the matter further in the light of Mr Baker’s letter, the Home Secretary is not now minded to pursue the proposal.’

As Baker had acknowledged, however, there was a need for GCS drivers to upgrade their training on security. It took some time for the necessary courses to be put in place, but at a meeting of the Committee on Ministerial Protection in July 1989 it was reported that a three-week course had been introduced at Hendon Police College the previous September, to provide police training for GCS drivers. The Committee hoped that all the drivers would attend the course, and would like it extended. GCS entered six candidates of their choosing per course on the anti-terrorist driver training courses held every six months.

A particularly intriguing contribution at the meeting came from Commander Howley of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch, who made it quite clear that they had by no means accepted defeat on their hopes of assuming responsibility for driving senior Ministers. In a pointed discussion on the perceived problem that some GCS drivers might well be too old and unsuitable for the job, Howley observed that there was an underlying difficulty because of the inevitably close relationships between GCS drivers and Ministers. Confirming the

principal reason for the outcome of the crucial Hurd–Baker exchange, he complained that the driver–Minister relationship was the major stumbling block to Special Branch taking over responsibility. He also believed that there was a problem in flushing out unsuitable drivers because of difficulties in justifying this with the trade unions.

Moving forward to the present time, selected GCS drivers continue to take the anti-terrorist course, although this is now mainly operated in-house by GCS. In addition, all new drivers take the Advanced Driving Test, as it is considered that this provides an effective stepping stone to the security training. Nevertheless, as we will see in Chapter Seven, the points raised in the Hurd–Baker exchange remain relevant, with responsibility for driving Prime Minister Tony Blair being transferred in 2003 from GCS to the Metropolitan Police on security grounds.

The Minster Men

In the mid-1980s, some light relief from heavy matters of security was provided by the saga of two former Prime Ministers vying for the GCS car of their choice. The story began in 1984, with a memo to Environment Minister Sir George Young from Senior Transport Officer B. R. Wilson. It was pointed out that James Callaghan used a Ford Minster as his GCS vehicle, but this had done 130,000 miles and needed replacing. Mr Callaghan was requesting a new Minster. This was because he had arthritis and needed a larger car to stretch his legs out.

Wilson observed that a new Minster was not really on, as it would cost £20,000, and this was about three times the cost of the Austin Ambassador or Montego, the type of car that would usually be supplied to Mr Callaghan and other ex-Prime Ministers. Callaghan had been given a Montego and Vauxhall Carlton to try out, but they did not suit. He was now being driven in a Ford Granada diesel.

The situation was far from being resolved, as in July it was reported that the Granada was unsuitable because it could not keep up with Callaghan's escort vehicle. Consequently, in order that he could be supplied with a Minster, he was being asked to pay the difference between this and the usual car supplied. This request clearly did not meet with success, and in August it was finally decided that the Management and Personnel Office should pay the full cost of the replacement Minster.

The story resumed in February 1985, when Wilson reported that he had heard from Ted Heath. Because of increased travel commitments, the ex-Prime Minister considered that the size and power of his present GCS car was insufficient to enable him to properly discharge his duties. It was noted that Heath's present car, an Austin Ambassador, was due for early replacement, and that he would generally have been provided with one of the new 2 litre Montego Automatics, but in view of his increased level of need, this would not be ideal. Wilson concluded: 'Mr Heath would, we understand, like to have a Minster, such as that recently allocated to Mr Callaghan.'

It was clearly difficult to favour one ex-Prime Minister over another, and so in June 1985 Ted Heath duly received his new Minster!

EFFICIENCY FIRST

The victory for GCS on security did not mean that the Service had left its survival problems behind. On the contrary, to a large degree the crisis on security marked just the beginning of a very long and precarious journey for GCS, which would continue to the end of the decade. This new uncertainty revolved around a major culture change in Whitehall that placed much greater emphasis on efficiency and value for money, through better financial management, improved information systems, and clearer objectives. In addition, as the 1980s progressed, the radical remedy of privatisation emerged as the preferred solution for large chunks of the public sector. From 1985, GCS found itself pitched into the heart of these tumultuous changes, and there was no doubt that the Service was a vulnerable target. Although no one ever doubted the high quality of personal service that GCS provided to its customers, when light was shone on the darker corners of its organisation and finances, some serious criticisms emerged. At least to some extent, there was perhaps an inevitability about these shortcomings, given that for so many years GCS had formed a small part of giant Ministries, and lacked a focused leadership. Nevertheless, it became clear that the status quo was not an option for GCS, and that within government and Whitehall its very existence was being seriously questioned.

The chief catalyst for change was a 1985 Efficiency Scrutiny of GCS carried out under the supervision of the Cabinet Office Efficiency Unit. The existence of the Efficiency Unit in itself graphically demonstrated the priorities that Mrs Thatcher had set for Whitehall. The individual chosen by the Prime Minister to lead the new order was Sir Derek Rayner of Marks and Spencer, and Mrs Thatcher describes her thinking behind this innovation:

I...asked Sir Derek Rayner to set up an Efficiency Unit that would tackle the waste and ineffectiveness of government. Derek was another successful businessman, from what everyone used to describe as my favourite company, Marks and Spencer. The two of us used to say that in politics you judge the value of a service by the amount you put in, but in business you judge it by the amount you get out. We were both convinced of the need to bring some of the attitudes of business into government. We neither of us conceived just how difficult this would prove.⁸

Peter Hennessy describes how the chief weapon employed by Rayner was a scrutiny programme conducted by young officials who became known as 'Rayner's Raiders'. Their task was to examine specific blocks of work, rather than to take on the impossible job of looking at everything. They were to work to a strict timetable, and report to Rayner himself as well as their Permanent Secretary. The thinking behind this focused approach was that an investigation in depth would yield lessons that could then be applied over a wide area. The purpose of the scrutinies was therefore action not study.⁹

Hennessy also describes how Rayner reasoned that Ministers and their officials are better equipped than anyone else to examine the use of their resources for which they are responsible. Nevertheless, Rayner required, and received, the wholehearted support of the Prime Minister for his programme of scrutinies, and that without this key element he would have had little chance of success in pushing through his reforms, given the many sceptics of their value within Whitehall.¹⁰ In 1983 Rayner was succeeded as Head of the Efficiency Unit by Sir Robin Ibbs, but the programme of scrutinies continued.

In 1982, and arising from the results of the scrutinies, the Efficiency Unit carried its reforms a step further and produced a management blueprint in the form of the Financial Management Initiative (FMI). This was intended to be a system in which managers at all levels would have a clear view of their objectives; well defined responsibility for making the best use of their resources; and the information necessary to exercise their responsibilities effectively.¹¹

The reference to information highlighted the role of one other key individual in this drive to imbue new values in Whitehall. By chance, the first Environment Secretary (the Department responsible for GCS) in the Thatcher government was Michael Heseltine who, unusually for a Minister, had a keen interest in management and information systems, and was determined to push through reforms in his own Department, and then see them spread throughout Whitehall. The process of management control he introduced became known as the Management Information System for Ministers (MINIS).

Heseltine himself intended that MINIS would give Ministers a thorough understanding of what each activity of the Department cost, by defining each task in detail and allocating the costs of the civil servants involved. He believed that no such system had existed before, and although MINIS in itself was neutral in its effects on staff numbers, under this detailed scrutiny the opportunities for economies would soon become apparent. Consequently, when Heseltine took over at the DoE in 1979, it employed some 52,500 people (including the Property Services Agency, the home of the GCS). By the time he left three years later, the numbers had been reduced to 37,500.¹²

The efficiency and economy armoury of 'Rayner's Raiders', FMI and MINIS took internal scrutiny and appraisal to new levels of intensity, and from 1985 GCS was to feel the full force of these radical new methods.

'One Jag' Willie Whitelaw

As we saw in the case of ex-Prime Ministers, it could be difficult for GCS to enforce economies on eminent figures, and this could also prove the case with senior Ministers. William Whitelaw was Mrs Thatcher's valued

Deputy, and had served as Home Secretary since 1979, but in 1983 he received a peerage and became Leader of the House of Lords. In June 1984 Senior Transport Officer B. R. Wilson received a letter from Whitelaw's Private Secretary saying that, as Home Secretary, Whitelaw had used a Jaguar provided by the Metropolitan Police. However, as Lord President of the Council (his new office) he had been using a Rover, but had found this too small. He had then been provided with a Ford Granada, but this was also unsatisfactory. The letter concluded by stating plainly: 'Lord Whitelaw has had enough.' The message clearly had the desired effect, for in July Whitelaw was issued with a 4.2 litre Jaguar with automatic transmission, in sapphire blue.

Nevertheless, Wilson was clearly mindful of the pressure to make economies, and was not prepared to let the matter rest. Consequently, in September he issued a memo that, without naming Whitelaw, was clearly aimed at him, and in contrast cited the good example set by Education Secretary Sir Keith Joseph. As one of the chief advocates of monetarist policies, Sir Keith had emerged as a severe critic of what he saw as extravagant public expenditure, and Wilson's memo suggested that, at least in this case, the Education Secretary was determined to practice what he preached. Wilson therefore wished to issue a reminder:

'Ministers should not expect to change their car for a more expensive model just because the Department is prepared to pay. . . Individual requests for change are considered on their merits. I would like to note that last year Sir Keith Joseph gave up his Rover in favour of an Austin Ambassador, and consequently saved his Department £2,000–3,000 per annum'.

PRIVATISATION AND THE LADY'S NOT FOR TURNING

In the early 1980s, as with much of the public sector, it would still have been almost unthinkable that an organisation integral to the workings of government, such as GCS, might be privatised. As Margaret Thatcher herself acknowledges, the Conservative election manifesto of 1979 had been quite cautious on the subject, and the depth of the recession in the early 1980s meant that there was not much prospect of successful privatisations in these years, due to low market confidence and large losses by the nationalised industries.¹³ In

attempting to curb the high inflation rates of those years by controlling the supply of money, the government found unemployment rising rapidly, and by 1983 it stood at a post-Second World War record level of 3.25 million. In 1981 a number of inner city urban riots, most notably at Brixton in London, and Toxteth in Liverpool, had further threatened the credibility of the government.

The Prime Minister, however, was determined to stick with her economic strategy, and in a landmark speech to the 1980 Conservative Party Conference declared: 'The Lady's not for turning.' As the decade progressed, her political and economic position did indeed strengthen, notably through such events as the retaking of the Falkland Islands from Argentina in 1982, the government's landslide victory in the 1983 general election, and in 1985 the dramatic victory over the miners at the end of their year-long strike. The gradual falls in inflation and unemployment in the second half of the decade also made market conditions more fertile for government sell-offs. As Hennessy describes, from the mid-1980s, the high Thatcher years took hold, and with them came a much more personal style of government, in which the Prime Minister was able to implement policies based on her fundamental ideological beliefs.¹⁴

The big privatisations commenced with British Telecom in 1984, and this was swiftly followed by British Aerospace (1985), the shipbuilding industry (1986), the National Bus Company (1986), British Gas (1986), British Airways (1986), Rolls-Royce (1987), British Airports (1987), Leyland Bus and Truck (1987), and BP (1987).¹⁵ The huge size and high speed of these privatisations demonstrated that there were no longer any sacred cows in terms of being kept in the public sector, and it was during this period of momentous change that GCS also found itself as a possible candidate for a trip to the market.

Hard Driving

Margaret Thatcher's driver Denis Oliver leaves no doubt that she was not at all keen on leisure time or days off, and 'absolutely hated holidays'. Instead, she always yearned to be at the centre of things, although this placed stiff demands on her staff.

One such occasion he remembers was at the time of the terrible Hungerford massacre in August 1987, when Michael Ryan killed fourteen people, before shooting himself. On that day, Denis Oliver and Mrs Thatcher were in Cornwall in the south-west of England. The original plan was for the Prime Minister to fly up to Edinburgh for an engagement the next day, where she would be met by Bob Rumble, the Downing Street number two driver. When Mrs Thatcher heard about events in Hungerford, however, she decided that she must go there immediately, and a helicopter was laid on to take her. Denis Oliver contacted Bob Rumble, who was driving up to Scotland, and had got as far as Milton Keynes. Denis told him to turn round immediately and go to Hungerford, so that he could pick up the Prime Minister.

The problem was that there would now be nobody on hand to meet Mrs Thatcher when she arrived in Edinburgh the next day. Denis Oliver decided that the only thing for it was to do the job himself, and so he drove overnight from Cornwall to Scotland, in order to make the early morning rendezvous with the Prime Minister! As he says: 'Long hours never bothered me, and you had to be ready for anything when you worked for Margaret Thatcher.'

THE BARROW REPORT EXPOSES GCS WEAKNESSES

In 1985 'Rayner's Raiders' finally arrived at GCS when an Efficiency Scrutiny of the Service, together with the InterDespatch Service, was carried out under the Supervision of the Cabinet Office Efficiency Unit. The scrutiny itself was led by Bruce Barrow, an official at GCS' parent, the Crown Suppliers (a component part of the Property Services Agency). The final report was placed in the libraries of both Houses of Parliament. Barrow stressed that both GCS and IDS provided an extremely high standard of service, but nevertheless he found a number of areas where efficiency could be improved. Significantly, many of Barrow's criticisms concerned problems of unclear objectives and poor communication. Given the enormously long-standing problems of GCS' lack of identity in giant Departments, it was perhaps surprising that he did not deal with this fundamental cause of the problems, but instead he concentrated on finding specific solutions to individual difficulties.

For example, Barrow concluded that management objectives and responsibilities were not sufficiently clearly defined, and were not understood by all levels of staff. He argued that the GCS and IDS Superintendents, responsible for day-to-day running of the services, were key personnel, but were not geared to achieving financial targets because budgetary information was retained and monitored centrally at Headquarters. Unfortunately, Barrow found that communication between Headquarters and the Superintendents tended to be poor, particularly in the case of IDS. He believed that a fundamental problem was that management was hindered severely rather than helped by being tied to the Property Services Agency's computing and accounting systems, which limited flexibility and sometimes prevented proper commercial decision making. Nevertheless, he did find that GCS driver costs were lower than many commercial analogues (although the reverse was true for IDS).

On repair and maintenance, Barrow emphasised that his terms of reference did not include reviewing the Central Vehicle Workshop at Peckham, although this did not stop him from commenting that, from what he had seen, there was much scope for improvement. In particular, he believed that vehicles were kept off the road for longer than necessary. In addition, maintenance costs, which were adversely affected by security requirements, London traffic conditions, and a particularly demanding clientele, could be improved.

It could be said that, although these criticisms exposed some serious weaknesses, at least, after forty years of life, GCS was for the first time receiving detailed attention that treated it as a separate entity with an existence in its own right. In his recommendations, Barrow recognised the urgent need for improvement when he argued that GCS and IDS should introduce a new management structure and ensure that there were proper job descriptions and financial targets clearly understood at all management levels. Significantly, he believed that the Department should bring in help from elsewhere in the Civil Service, or outside if necessary, to assist in implementing the recommendations, with particular emphasis on a review of workshops. For example, a reduction in downtime for all vehicles would bring down the numbers of spare vehicles and thereby improve costs. In total, Barrow argued that there was scope for

savings of over £1.6 million, or approximately 28 per cent of the budget.

Barrow also conducted a survey of GCS customers, and significantly, from the point of view of any possible privatisation plans, this was particularly favourable to GCS. The survey found that, when compared with the private sector companies used by GCS to supplement its own service, the customers valued the much higher level of service from the pool's own drivers, who were found to be more reliable and who knew their way around better. Consequently, Barrow recommended that Superintendents should take a tougher line in letting contracts, and place business elsewhere if there was insufficient improvement. Nevertheless, Barrow believed that individual users should also consider carefully the cost benefits of making maximum use of taxis, as these could be 60–70 per cent cheaper than pool cars.

Crucially, therefore, Barrow came to the conclusion that it would not be appropriate to privatise GCS, partly for security reasons, but also because, when the market was tested, the private sector was found to be quoting prices some 30 per cent higher than GCS were quoting at that time. In addition, the overwhelming response from customers was that GCS provided good value for money.

Later in 1985, an Action Plan for implementation was agreed after consultation, and this absorbed the main elements of the Barrow Report. This included the appointment of a fleet manager and an accountant within the Transport Branch of the Crown Suppliers, as well as upgrading the GCS Superintendent post in order to give wider responsibility, including management of the Trading Account. In addition, it was decided that a new management structure was needed, including proper job descriptions and financial targets understood at all levels. It was also hoped that new computer systems at Crown Suppliers would bring about a more interactive means of monitoring performance and improved systems of reporting.

A letter from the Head of the Efficiency Unit, Sir Robin Ibbs, to Environment Minister Sir George Young in December 1985 made it clear that there had been differences of opinion with GCS on the need for a fleet manager, but Ibbs argued that the Barrow scrutiny recommendations would rely heavily on this individual, and it was vital

that this person should be in place as soon as possible. Ibbs was also heartened to see accepted targets for reductions in vehicle downtime, while there was also a need for specific financial targets, as these would provide much sharper aims.

The Barrow Report had exposed many aspects of GCS that had previously been given little or no detailed attention, and at least the workings of the Service were no longer being taken for granted. At the same time, in attracting this political attention to GCS, the Report also encouraged further debate about its future, and so prolonged the period of uncertainty.

REPERCUSSIONS OF BARROW

It was not only the Barrow report itself that exposed weaknesses in the management of GCS, and raised questions about its future. In particular, evidence provided to Barrow by the Branch Chairman of the Transport and General Workers Union pulled no punches. As we saw in the previous chapter, in 1978 the GCS unions took industrial action on pay and conditions, and seven years later it was evident that relations had not improved. The TGWU evidence therefore began by stating that management had for some time received intense criticism from the union side, and also noted what they regarded as disturbing articles in the press, most notably a recent one in the *Daily Mail* that was headed 'Ministers' Cars to go Private' and appeared to emanate from the office of the Crown Suppliers.

The union clearly feared that GCS privatisation was in the air, and complained also about what they saw as excessive cuts in the size of the car pool since 1979. It was concluded: 'Doubtless the economies can be justified, but at what cost?' The evidence also criticised what it saw as the ever-increasing volume of paperwork generated by top-heavy management, and recommended that GCS be separated from the Crown Suppliers which, because it operated as a trading fund, was incompatible with running such a highly specialised and sophisticated service. Even allowing for its clear vested interest, the union's overall judgement on GCS was terribly negative. Ominously, it also went on to emphasise the threat from an emerging rival: 'The present state of GCS is pitiful. Staff-management relations could not be

worse, and morale among staff is at an all time low. Among our “predators” are the police, with seemingly no financial restrictions. In fact, they have recently ordered six new fully armoured Jaguars.’

In fact, the union’s suspicions about the possible privatisation of GCS, despite the Barrow findings, appeared to have some credibility from evidence emanating from the DoE. In June 1985, a DoE ministerial memo, whilst quoting the Barrow Report, emphasised that GCS privatisation was being re-examined as part of a wider review of the Crown Suppliers by the Cabinet Office. The memo also referred to the plan for GCS to change its headquarters from Marsham Street to a new site in Ponton Road in Nine Elms, and it was concluded here: ‘Relocation can only make the business more attractive in the event of any privatisation venture taking place.’

The reality that GCS privatisation was still very much on the policy agenda was made quite explicit in a letter of 7 August 1985 from Environment Minister Sir George Young to the Head of the Efficiency Unit, Sir Robin Ibbs. Young made it clear that the two men were in agreement on this matter: ‘Like you, I am not convinced by the case made in the Barrow Report against privatisation, and I do not accept that some move could not be made in this direction.’ In the event, the question of GCS privatisation would remain open for some time to come.

TO PRIVATISE OR NOT TO PRIVATISE?

Remarkably, between 1985 and 1987, four more government reviews of various types would consider the sensitive question of whether to privatise the whole, or at least part, of GCS. The situation was complicated by the eventually separate decision to privatise the Crown Suppliers. There appeared to emerge a general recognition that GCS could not be treated in the same way as the bulk of government suppliers. Indeed, part of the long-standing GCS problem was caused by classifying it as a supplier, rather than a provider, of a specialised service. However, the spirit of the late 1980s favoured privatisation of almost any public sector assets, unless a strong case could be made otherwise, and so for GCS to remain in the public sector, the case had to be proved beyond reasonable doubt.

Given Sir George Young's doubts about the recommendations of the Barrow Report, it was perhaps not surprising that another review would quickly follow. This arrived later in 1985, in the form of a Cabinet Office led team known as the Turton Review. This did not disagree with the conclusions of Barrow, but nevertheless proposed that the Crown Suppliers should at least test the water by means of a formal tender that evaluated the cost of providing a predetermined level of service by the GCS, and by private chauffeur-driven services with adequate security safeguards.

Before any prospect of the Turton proposals being taken forward, another review arrived in the form of one carried out in 1986 by the Central Unit on Purchasing. Unlike Barrow and Turton, this review was on the wider question of the future of the Crown Suppliers as a whole, and concluded that all those services not associated with the main procurement activity should be contracted out, but significantly certain parts of the car service were identified as possible exceptions for security reasons.

The next review was carried out in 1987 by the consultants Coopers and Lybrand and Samuel Montagu, on the more direct question of the feasibility of privatising the Crown Suppliers. On GCS, this review concluded that it would not be feasible for the small protected fleet used by senior Ministers to be privatised, although it could be transferred to come under the control of another government body such as the police force (as had of course been recommended by Douglas Hurd in 1986). With regard to the remaining larger proportion of first call cars, the consultants believed that these could be provided by the private sector. They recommended therefore transfer to the private sector as part of an existing business on a stand-alone basis, or a management buyout. It was argued here that contracting out would not provide acceptable continuity, although it was also acknowledged that GCS privatisation would be a particularly sensitive issue. Nevertheless, the consultants had apparently opened the door to splitting GCS, and then privatising the great bulk of its services.

Yet another review of the Crown Suppliers was carried out by Dewi Jones, in parallel with the Coopers and Lybrand/Samuel Montagu study, and this also reported in 1987. Like its parallel study, the review by Dewi Jones concluded that the high-risk vehicles and

drivers should not be privatised, but in contrast it was recommended that they should be transferred to the Departments concerned, with backup drivers and vehicles provided by the Metropolitan Police. In the case of the remaining first call cars, Dewi Jones sided with the Turton Review, and recommended a market testing. At the same time, the report also recommended that if the first call cars and drivers remained in the public sector, then they should be transferred to the relevant Departments. It was also recommended that the pool cars should be tendered to the private sector.

The bewildering array of recommendations and solutions provided by the various reviews illustrated the complexity and sensitivity of GCS privatisation, but the overall effect appeared to be to muddy the waters, and to make an actual decision even more difficult. At least a small resolution arrived in February 1988, when in a statement to the House of Commons, Junior Environment Minister Christopher Chope confirmed that some Crown Suppliers activities would have to remain in the public sector for security and other reasons. These activities included the GCS secure car service. Given that none of the reviews had recommended privatisation of this service provided for a few senior Ministers, Chope's announcement was hardly a surprise, and left open the larger question of the fate of the remainder of GCS services.

Around this time, Chope asked for ministerial views on the possibilities of the private sector providing government cars. In January 1988, however, it was reported that Environment Secretary Nicholas Ridley had accepted advice from Chope to privatise the Crown Suppliers. Ridley was one of the chief long-standing advocates of the benefits of privatisation generally, and a key supporter of the Prime Minister in her crusade to improve Whitehall efficiency. It was therefore enormously significant that it was also reported that Ridley had backed away on the prospect of privatising GCS, as he was alarmed about the security implications for Ministers.¹⁶ It illustrated the special regard that even the most hard line Thatcherites had for GCS, and that in these circumstances a sell-off of any section of the Service was highly unlikely.

One Department clearly disturbed about the turn of events was the Treasury, where it was hoped that at least some parts of GCS would be sold to the private sector. In a letter from a Treasury official to Don

Routh, the Controller of Crown Suppliers, surprise was expressed that the Chope statement had given such a categorical assurance that GCS would remain in the public sector. Surprisingly, the Treasury had apparently not picked up on the fact that Chope had been referring to the relatively small protected part of the GCS service provided for senior Ministers, but nevertheless they had no doubt got wind of Ridley's opposition to a sale of any part of GCS. The Treasury letter claimed that the statement was not consistent with ministerial policy. Instead, it was argued that government policy rested with a letter written to the Environment Secretary in November 1987 by Civil Service Minister Richard Luce. In this letter, Luce stated: 'Provided certain security conditions were met, I would not rule out privatisation of some parts of the GCS, on security grounds at least.'

The Treasury argued strongly that this option needed further investigation. It believed that this involved defining fairly rigorously what the relevant security criteria were, and then ensuring that privatisation plans met them, as well as meeting the more specific views of Ministers. The Treasury letter concluded: 'I suspect we will want to give Ministers a range of options for consideration, ranging from retention of the whole of GCS within the public sector and retention of various parts.'

The Treasury intervention was significant given its enormous power within Whitehall, and given that it clearly saw privatisation of at least part of GCS as a viable option. It demonstrated that the fate of GCS still hung in the balance, and that almost anything was still possible.

Nevertheless, a decisive turning point arrived on 11 April 1988, with a letter written from the Security Division of the Cabinet Office to Bruce Barrow, now at the Crown Suppliers Transport Department (TCS) Privatisation Unit. The letter confirmed some crucial definite recommendations:

The Security Services have come down firmly against privatising three out of four components of the GCS (the secure cars, the remainder of first call cars, and the pool) . . . They leave open only the possibility of privatising the regional GCS, provided that suitable vehicles can be supplied from London for the transport of Ministers

known to be under a higher than average threat. However, you may now feel that there is no point in pursuing the possibility of privatising any part of GCS.

The intervention by the Security Services carried enormous weight, particularly in a decade where ministerial security was a hugely important issue. To go against this advice would therefore carry enormous political risks, and so explained Nicholas Ridley's apparent disinclination to consider privatising any part of GCS. Consequently, the intervention quickly appeared to settle the long-running debate. This was illustrated in a July 1988 letter from the DoE to the Regional Director of the Yorkshire and Humberside Region. It confirmed that Ministers had accepted the advice of the Security Services, but also referred to the situation with regard to the regional GCS:

The privatisation of the Regional GCS, with the possible exception of the Belfast service, was not ruled out on security grounds, but the scattered regional units without London would be unlikely to be attractive to purchase. It is therefore recommended against including the Regional GCS in the package for sale. Instead, there should be separate consultations to ensure that satisfactory arrangements continue for the regional services once the remainder of TCS' regional transport operations are privatised.

In the event, as we will see, the 'satisfactory arrangements' for the Regional GCS, at least in England, basically entailed its closure. Meanwhile, back in Whitehall, a memo from the Private Secretary of Environment Minister Christopher Chope pointed out that an early announcement not to privatise GCS could avoid industrial trouble, which was considered more likely here than in other parts of TCS. This confirmation duly arrived on 28 July 1988, when Chope announced to the House of Commons the package of Crown Suppliers activities to be privatised, but that this would not include GCS.

With the privatisation question finally settled, attention turned to where GCS could now find a home, but here the options considered, together with the general uncertainty, only served to place the survival of the Service in even more doubt.

'Take Courage' for a New Home

In December 1986 GCS moved to its current site at Ponton Road in Nine Elms. The whole site was originally redundant railway marshalling yards that had been partly occupied by the former Courage brewery distribution warehouse, and GCS took over this lease (owned by the BBC Pension Fund). Nevertheless, the GCS headquarters became known as 'the Courage Building' in order to distinguish it from the purpose-built, but now separate, Transport Crown Suppliers workshop next door.

A DoE memo of 1985 stressed that relocating GCS could only make the business more attractive in the event of any privatisation venture taking place, which suggests that this was one of the key motivations for the move. However, in the event the whole situation at the site was considerably complicated by the decision to privatise the GCS parent group the Crown Suppliers, but to keep GCS itself in the public sector.

Significantly, a Metropolitan Police letter to the Crown Suppliers of 1988 stated that the police assumed they would have the TCS Workshop if they took over GCS. In practice, however, TCS decided that they would keep their present workshop, and let go the 'Courage' GCS workshop. In turn, this meant that the GCS workshops were now required to become self-contained. In order to achieve this aim, in 1989 the PSA confirmed that work would begin shortly to replace the existing three 'fast turn-round' bays with six bays capable of providing full service facilities for all GCS vehicles.

A further complication was the intention in the late 1980s to privatise IDS, and so it was decided that GCS would have exclusive use of 'the Courage Building' for security reasons. However, these IDS plans failed in 1990 when the management buy-out team, who had submitted the only acceptable bid, withdrew from the competition.

Pool driver Irene Maykels was the staff representative for Health and Safety, and remembers that there was a lot of union opposition to the Ponton Road move. She was asked by management if she would help in organising the staff facilities at the new headquarters, and she agreed, on condition it was recognised that she was doing it for all the staff, and was not taking sides. Consequently, she was able to ensure that the rest rooms were decorated and had all the necessary fittings, and that there were separate rest rooms for men and women. She also discovered that the heating was turned off each night at 8 pm, and saw to it that it remained on for the benefit of drivers who had to wait until the early hours to pick up Ministers.

GCS SURVIVES!

Given the decision to privatise the Crown Suppliers, a decision had to be made about the future of GCS. As so often throughout its history, however, there was clearly considerable uncertainty within Whitehall about what to actually do with GCS, and it has to be said that there was not exactly a queue to acquire it. This lack of interest was made clear in a 1988 DoE memo that emphasised the final destination of GCS was not yet settled. There was a slight hint of desperation in the memo when it concluded: 'We are seeing if any Departments want to take it on, but none has so far shown an inclination to do so.'

The moment of truth arrived in December 1988, with a memo from the Home Office Procurement Unit that weighed up the various options available for the future destination of the London GCS. The options were listed as:

- (a) The Cabinet Office
- (b) The Home Office
- (c) The Metropolitan Police Office
- (d) The Property Services Agency – as an interim measure.

Perhaps surprisingly, but fortunately for GCS, the option suggested by Dewi Jones in 1987, of each Department taking responsible for its own transport, was not amongst the options considered. Nevertheless, at least two of the options proposed, of takeovers by either the Home Office Supply and Transport Branch or the Metropolitan Police, threatened the basic existence of the GCS. The fate of the Service therefore was now truly in the balance. However, the memo quickly dismissed option (a) by stating that the Cabinet Office did not want to take responsibility for GCS (ironically, in the 1990s GCS would come under Cabinet Office control). With regard to the Home Office, it was concluded that there was no obvious relationship between the Home Office Supply and Transport Branch and GCS. Crucially, in the case of the Metropolitan Police, which as we have seen had been pressing for some time to take over at least some GCS responsibilities, the memo pointed out that the Metropolitan Police was not a government Department and did not have resident

Ministers. Consequently, GCS would be separated from its customers. In addition, it was argued that any police takeover would be likely to raise objections from the London local authorities. That left the fourth option of GCS remaining with the PSA, and the memo recommended this course of action, on the grounds that GCS provided a 'common service' for central government.

The evaluation of the options again illustrated the difficulties for government in classifying exactly what GCS does. In the end, there was something of a 'least worst' feel about the recommendation to keep GCS with the PSA, on the basis that none of the other options considered was really appropriate. At least the likelihood of GCS staying with the PSA, even as an interim measure until something more appropriate could be found, offered genuine hopes that GCS would survive intact. The problem now was to find exactly where within the PSA the GCS should be placed, and even here the process was by no means simple.

After all the uncertainty, there was clearly pressure to settle matters before the end of 1988, and on 22 December a meeting was held to discuss the transfer of GCS and IDS from the Crown Suppliers to the PSA Directorate of Home and Regional Services (DHRS), involving 215 GCS staff. Things had clearly been happening at a very fast pace, and this was illustrated at the meeting when Mr Kent of DHRS Management complained that, for reasons unknown to his section of the PSA, the original intention to transfer the London GCS to Staff Management General Services had fallen through, and he had been advised only a week previously that his Division was to assume responsibility for GCS. It was explained to Kent that Staff Management General Services was ultimately rejected because it provided domestic services for only PSA itself, and not for other Departments. It was also mentioned at the meeting that the PSA had been favoured over the Metropolitan Police as the destination for GCS.

The narrowness of the verdict was illustrated on the day after this meeting that settled the fate of GCS, when the Crown Suppliers received a letter from the Metropolitan Police Receiver. The letter made it clear that the police had by no means given up hope of taking over GCS, and were still pressing for a decision in their favour. In order to sweeten the pill, the letter emphasised that the police would

be happy to take on all the GCS drivers. If the decision had gone this way, however, it would surely have spelt the end for GCS in any recognisable form.

In any case, the die had already been cast, and on 1 April 1989 the PSA Directorate of Home and Regional Services formally took responsibility for GCS. This did indeed prove to be an interim measure, and as we will see, in the 1990s, the GCS would find itself swept up in a new Whitehall revolution for creating arm's-length Executive Agencies. Nevertheless, GCS had survived the truly momentous events and changes of the 1980s, and lived to fight another day, although this was to be at the expense of losing its regional services.

The 'Outer Cabinet' Strikes Again

As in the decades before and since, the 1980s was no exception to the 'Outer Cabinet' of GCS drivers knowing more about the outcomes of reshuffles than many of the Ministers themselves. This was well illustrated in a newspaper report of July 1989 that speculated on an imminent Thatcher reshuffle from the perspective of the drivers. Arts Minister Richard Luce (who as we saw in 1987 left open the possibility of GCS privatisation!) was particularly grateful for some welcome reassurance here:

'I was being driven along Whitehall when, apropos of nothing, my chauffeur said over his shoulder, "By the way, Minister, I thought you might like to know that there's a reshuffle coming up." I was a bit shocked and said, "Good God, that's terrible." But my driver smiled reassuringly and said, "Don't worry, Minister, your job is safe." He was right on both counts.'

On the other hand, the odds against Environment Secretary Nicholas Ridley remaining in his post had lengthened to 17–2, and one driver was quoted as saying that he had settled for much shorter odds only ten days ago, but still expected a handsome return for his £40 investment. The driver's money was safe, as Ridley was moved to the Department of Trade and Industry in the reshuffle.

Further GCS tips included the switch of Tom King to Defence Secretary, but also the sacking of Paul Channon from Transport, and both of these also came to pass. However, Welsh Office Minister Wyn Roberts explained that he was excluded from the loop: 'Although there is a great network of this kind of information among all drivers, none of it reaches my ears because my chap knows more about horses than reshuffles.'¹⁷

THE DEMISE OF THE REGIONAL GCS

There was some irony in the fact that the GCS Regional Offices were the one section of the operation that the Security Services considered might be suitable for privatisation, but from the outset they were not considered viable for any sort of sale. Instead, while the remainder of GCS survived, it was quickly decided that the regional structure was expendable. In fact, the Regional GCS was of only limited size, and in 1988 consisted of a pool of twenty-four cars in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, together with centres in England in Leeds, Newcastle and Bristol. The situation was further complicated by GCS frequently employing private contractors in the regions to complement their own services, and this tended to compromise the case in favour of maintaining a specific regional presence. Nevertheless, once it became clear that their services were in jeopardy, the regions themselves were anxious to emphasise the specific advantages of maintaining a GCS presence, and to point out occasions when this had proved valuable. In particular, several DoE Regional Directors argued strenuously in favour of retention.

For example, a letter of 12 November 1987 from the DoE Northern Regional Office Director in Newcastle to the Controller of the Crown Suppliers stressed the value of retaining the unique assets of GCS drivers:

My concerns are centred around confidentiality, security and reliability. Ministers and senior officials must feel that they have a freedom to discuss confidential issues with us as they are driven about. They cannot do this in a private hire car. The drivers know the police, and are trained to drive under police escort. I shudder to think what might have happened during the Prime Minister's visit if we had not had the GCS cars from here and from Leeds. On reliability, we have one or two horror stories already this year on the use of private hire services. One involved a Minister left in the lurch sans car, sans red box! Not all Ministers would have been prepared to laugh that off.

A similar style of letter was written on 3 May 1988 from the DoE Regional Director in Leeds to the Crown Suppliers Privatisation Unit:

Ministers that live in the region tend to be fairly regular users of GCS and are fairly regular in their habits. When Leon Brittan was Home Secretary a GCS car was almost on permanent duty in and around Ripon [part of his constituency] each weekend. When the Prime Minister visits the North of England (including the North West), it is the Regional GCS from this Region that provides the cars for her party. On the one occasion that I was travelling with a Secretary of State (Patrick Jenkin) and pickets made a determined effort to turn over the car, it was reassuring to know that we were being driven by a competent GCS driver. That occurred in this Region.

If Ministers are to be consulted, I would suggest that consultation should extend beyond Mr Chope [the DoE Minister responsible for GCS], who is not a typical user. He only uses the Regional GCS occasionally. Other Ministers, including those in other Departments, have an interest.

These pleas from the Regions failed to cut any ice with the DoE, and in July 1988 a letter from an Establishment Officer to the trade union side Secretary spelt out the fate for the English Regional offices in Leeds, Newcastle and Bristol, where five drivers were employed. It was made clear that the Regional operation was now viewed as financially untenable, although the writer, no doubt sensitive to the decision at that time not to privatise GCS as a whole, was also anxious to emphasise that the situation with regard to London was very different:

The results [of a review of the Regional GCS] have shown that the services in Leeds, Newcastle and Bristol are not cost-effective, and cannot be made so. Because demand is uneven, frequent use is made of private contractors to cover for peaks. Our analysis of the position shows that the private sector can provide a comparable service more cost-effectively than the Regional GCS (this is not, however, the case in London, where, because of the larger size and broader customer base, the GCS is more effective than the private sector).

We have therefore decided to accept applications for voluntary redundancy we have received from the drivers, and to close down the Regional GCS in Leeds, Newcastle and Bristol . . . We shall establish contracts with approved private sector contractors to provide a chauffeur-driven car service that Departments can use if they so wish.

The decision to close the Regional operation was made somewhat easier by the fact that two of the five drivers involved were on long term sick leave, while the other two drivers in Leeds and Newcastle themselves set up as private sector contractors. An internal Crown Suppliers memo of June 1988 expressed some concern that the fact these GCS drivers were setting up as private contractors might be seen by rival companies as unfair competition and patronage. Nevertheless, it was considered that the solution had the virtue of satisfying the Regional Directors, and so would allow the Crown Suppliers to dispose of the Regional GCS in the North and North East.

The situation with regard to Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast was somewhat more complicated because of the need to consult with the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Offices, while in the case of the latter there were also obvious security implications. The basic plan was to hand over these operations to the respective national offices, and by December 1988 (at the meeting that settled the destination of GCS within the PSA) it was possible to announce the outcomes.

In Scotland, the situation was complicated by the fact that the Scottish Office already drove its own Ministers, and so were only minority users of the Edinburgh GCS. As it had been decided that the eight Edinburgh cars were unlikely to be attractive to any purchaser, the Environment Secretary would remain in control (a 1988 GCS memo had emphasised that the Edinburgh cars were under-utilised and losing money, and that there was a need to use more outside contractors).

In Wales, the Secretary of State Peter Walker had agreed that the Welsh Office should take over the two Cardiff cars, of which they were virtually the exclusive users.

Similarly, Northern Ireland Secretary Tom King had agreed that his Office should take over the six Belfast cars, for security reasons.

There had also clearly been a rethink about the situation in Bristol since earlier in the year, and here, unlike the situation in the north of England, it had now been decided that the PSA South West should take over the single car and driver.

At the meeting where these changes were announced, it was considered that it might be better not to announce the Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast changes, as there might be some sensitivity in drawing attention to the Northern Ireland service.

The decisions made in December 1988 brought to a climax the tremendously turbulent Thatcher decade for GCS. It was reduced in size, and clearly continued to face large-scale organisational and financial problems, but at least it could enter the 1990s basically intact and in a position to hope for a period of greater stability.

Dear Denis

Driver Denis Oliver remembers Margaret and Denis Thatcher as a devoted couple, but that there could be some great banter between them. He recalls one occasion when he was driving Mrs Thatcher to Chequers, the Prime Minister's country home. On the way there, they were due to drop off Denis Thatcher, who was to make a speech at the annual dinner of Buckinghamshire Rugby Referees' Society:

'Mrs Thatcher knew what this type of affair could be like, and so she kept warning Denis that he must be careful, and not have too much to drink. However, as soon as we pulled up outside the venue, the doors burst open, and two men came staggering out, obviously the worse for wear. They immediately spotted Denis, and gave him a cheery wave and greeting. Mrs Thatcher sighed, and said "Oh dear, they're drunk already." I think she realised that there wouldn't be much point in lecturing her husband after that!'

On another occasion, the official car was stuck in heavy traffic, and time was running short for the next appointment. It was clear that Margaret Thatcher was getting impatient, and eventually she said to her husband Denis: 'All this traffic congestion nowadays is terrible.' Denis Thatcher replied: 'The trouble is Margaret, you've made everyone too prosperous, they've all got cars now.' The Prime Minister clearly didn't think much of this remark, and in her most exasperated tone said: 'That's what I intended to do Denis, but now can you tell me what we can do about this awful congestion?'

It could be said that this story sums up well the transport policy dilemmas of successive governments over the past fifty years!

THE BRITISH LEYLAND DILEMMA

The long-standing relationship between GCS and the largest UK vehicle group British Leyland (BL) illustrated particularly well the 'Buy British' dilemmas for both the Service and successive governments. Given BL's strategic position as an employer and manufacturer (when Mrs Thatcher came to power in 1979, BL accounted for around 45 per cent of the vehicles produced in the UK), it was always inevitable that there would be great political pressure on GCS from MPs with a constituency interest for the Service to purchase these vehicles. However, although BL vehicles (particularly Rovers, Jaguars, Austin Princesses and Austin Montegos) formed the backbone of the GCS fleet, they were not always the most reliable of vehicles or necessarily the most appropriate for the requirements of the Service.

The situation was still further complicated by the fact that in 1975 BL had been acquired by the government after the company fell into deep financial trouble. This meant that government now literally had a vested interest in BL's recovery, and this was well illustrated in October 1980, when GCS accepted an invitation from BL to take twelve Metros on a week's trial. The Metro was BL's new small car model, and carried many hopes on the part of both the company and Ministers. It was therefore ideal publicity for BL when Mrs Thatcher arrived to open the Motor Show at the wheel of a Metro, and was able to reveal that she had already driven the model in Downing Street: 'While they were parked outside Number 10 I asked the chauffeur to move over and I had a quick drive.' The Prime Minister was even able to work in a reference to her recent 'the lady's not for turning' party conference speech when she declared: 'I managed to do it without any U-turns... these only get you back to where you started.' GCS drivers were also quoted with highly favourable impressions of the Metro. For example, Peter Smithson, driver for Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir Geoffrey Howe, revealed that: 'Sir Geoffrey had a go and he said "We've got a winner here."' ¹⁸

The Metro was one of the more successful BL models, although it was too small to ever be considered for regular GCS use. The wider dilemma for the government was that Ministers, such as Mrs Thatcher, who were firmly wedded to free market principles, had too much invested politically and financially in BL to see the company slide into oblivion. This delicate situation was particularly well illustrated in the case of BL's 1981 Corporate Plan, with BL seeking the huge sum of a further £990 million of public funding as the price to be paid for maintaining the volume car business. The Prime Minister had hoped to find a middle way between total closure and fully funding the Corporate Plan, but ultimately was compelled to bow to political imperatives: 'We agreed to accept BL's Corporate Plan, involving the division of the company into four more or less independent businesses. We settled the contingencies which would lead to the plan being abandoned. We set out the objectives for further collaboration with other companies. And – most painfully – we provided £990 million.'¹⁹

For the moment, all the government could do was to continue to support BL and hope that, eventually, a recovery would allow the company to join the list of privatisations. Meanwhile, the GCS loyalty to BL did have its critics, even, perhaps surprisingly, amongst the trade unions. For example, in its evidence to the 1985 Barrow Report, the Transport and General Workers Union argued: 'The GCS choice is restricted to BL principally for political reasons, but this tends to inflate costs due to their unfortunate record of mechanical unreliability. The vehicles are also kept out of service too long for minor repairs.'

Nevertheless, in time the fortunes of BL did improve, and in 1988 the company was sold to British Aerospace and became the Rover Group. By the end of the decade, the company continued to dominate GCS vehicle purchases. It was significant, however, that, for the first time, environmental criteria were now beginning to influence the choice of vehicles. Consequently, a PSA memo of September 1989 listed the current allocation of vehicles between Ministers:

- (a) **THE PRIME MINISTER:**
Daimler Sovereigns

- (b) **CABINET MINISTERS AT HIGH RISK:**
Jaguars
- (c) **CABINET MINISTERS UNDER NO SPECIFIC THREAT:**
Rover 820 series
- (d) **OTHER MINISTERS AND SENIOR OFFICIALS:**
Austin Montegos, Ford Sierras, and Vauxhall Cavaliers.

It was explained that GCS continued to operate only British-built and badged cars. However, the introduction of the Sierras and Cavaliers (owned by US companies) had been authorised by the Secretary of State for the Environment in order to promote the government's policy of lead-free fuel. Lead in petrol had become a hot political issue at that time, particularly due to its alleged adverse effects on the learning capabilities of children, and there was great pressure on the motor industry to produce vehicles that did not require this fuel ingredient. Significantly, the memo also pointed out that having a wider range of vehicles and colours was also a good security safeguard.

In the years that followed, environmental criteria would become much more to the forefront in GCS vehicle purchasing policy. At the same time, the gradual decline of the Rover Group, combined with the inexorable trend towards the globalisation of car manufacture, inevitably led GCS away from a 'Buy British' policy, towards one of purchasing the vehicles that best suit its purposes.

NOTES

1. Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 565–2.
2. Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister* (Penguin, 2000), p. 401.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 426–7.
4. Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (Harper Collins, 1993), p. 21.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
6. Letter, 8 March 2007.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, pp. 30–1.
9. Peter Hennessy, *Whitehall* (Fontana, 1990), pp. 594–6.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 596–7.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 606.
12. Michael Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle* (Coronet, 2000), pp. 190–2.

13. Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, pp. 677–8.
14. Hennessey, *Prime Minister*, p. 422.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 425.
16. *The Guardian*, 22 January 1988.
17. *Today*, 1 July 1989.
18. *Daily Express*, 18 October 1980.
19. Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 121.

CHAPTER 6

In SAFE Hands?

1990–97

TAKING THE NEXT STEPS

After the intense dramas and crises of the Thatcher era, it was perhaps inevitable that GCS, and indeed Whitehall and Westminster as a whole, would be anticipating a somewhat quieter life in the 1990s. At least superficially they achieved it in the years presided over by Mrs Thatcher's successor as Prime Minister, John Major. He served as Prime Minister from 1990 to 1997, which included an unexpected general election victory in 1992, but his political style was the exact opposite of his predecessor. Where Mrs Thatcher led unambiguously from the front, accompanied by her swinging handbag, Major had a much quieter and softer style, and placed far greater reliance on consensus and teamwork.

Similarly, for GCS, after apparently living on the brink of privatisation, and then even extinction, for much of the 1980s, the early 1990s offered at least a brief respite of consolidation. However, just as John Major's public image as a grey personality and cautious politician could be deceptive, and hide an at times quite zealous public service reformer, so, just below the surface, GCS continued to exist in a climate of considerable uncertainty, with many of its organisational and financial problems continuing to be unresolved. In the event, in 1993 GCS was carried forward by one of Whitehall's most radical reforms that had begun in the Thatcher era, but was continued with great enthusiasm by the Major administration. Consequently, in that year GCS became one part of the new Security Facilities Executive (SAFE), one of the so-called Next Steps Executive Agencies.

The term 'Next Steps' was coined by the Efficiency Unit in its 1988 Report, *Improving Management in Government: The Next Steps*. It was therefore intended to indicate where reforms should now be taken after the years of detailed scrutiny reports by 'Rayner's Raiders' and the innovations of the Financial Management Initiative. The solution that the Efficiency Unit came up with was the truly radical proposal for a basic separation within government Departments between the making of policy and its implementation. In essence, it was argued that it was not practical to expect Ministers or senior civil servants to actually manage their Departments, and that consequently there should be a fundamental split between a small corps of senior officials who would advise Ministers and sponsor policies and services, and a range of Agencies where staff would actually deliver the services. In order to achieve this arm's-length relationship between Department and Agency, each Next Steps Agency would be headed by a Chief Executive with real power to determine pay and recruitment policies, as well as developing their own style of management. In turn, the Chief Executive's performance would be assessed through the achievement of agreed organisational and financial targets.

In reality, of course, it can prove far from straightforward to genuinely separate policy making from implementation, and there can be many grey areas. For example, an Agency Chief Executive will almost inevitably at times take quite basic policy decisions in order to do the job and hit the targets. Nevertheless, the Next Steps Agencies have given much greater autonomy and responsibility to a huge range of government activities. Given the long-standing difficulties for GCS in finding an appropriate home, therefore, the Agency approach offered real hope of an identity that would not only give greater independence and a proper recognition of its distinctive place in the Whitehall world, but would also allow it to find its own destiny and explore areas of potential growth.

Unfortunately for GCS, however, as a Next Steps agency SAFE was not really the ideal home. Having been identified for over forty-five years as part of the government supply chain, as the title of SAFE implied, GCS was now reclassified as principally a security organisation. The specific aim of SAFE, therefore, was to be a first choice

supplier of quality security related services which fully met the needs of its customers, and offered good value for money. This meant that GCS' fellow organisations within SAFE included not only the InterDespatch Service, but also London Custody Services and the Special Services Group, both of which were explicitly security organisations.

There is, of course, a very significant security element to the services provided by GCS, but ultimately it is a great deal more than that in terms of fleet management and its unique relationships with its customers. Ironically, in the mid-1980s GCS had nearly lost its most significant security responsibilities to the Metropolitan Police, but by the early 1990s it appeared that the large number of security crises over the previous twenty years had given a restricted perception of what GCS actually did.

Consequently, as part of SAFE, GCS still really failed to find its own identity. In fact, its financial position tended to deteriorate, and by the mid-1990s it was making heavy losses, so that once again its whole future appeared to be in doubt. Into this void stepped the distinctive presence of the newly appointed Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine. As Environment Secretary in the early 1980s and then 1990s, Heseltine had been the Minister responsible for GCS, but his 1995 appointment as official Deputy to John Major based him in the Cabinet Office, and gave him considerable powers and responsibilities, including that for the Next Steps Agencies such as SAFE.

With his characteristic enthusiasm for reforming the machinery of government, Heseltine once more raised the possibility of privatising GCS. In the event, however, he discovered, like several before him, that there was little enthusiasm amongst his fellow Ministers for this course of action. Instead, in April 1997, and just before the Conservatives left office after eighteen continuous years in power, GCS and IDS were split from SAFE and combined to form the Government Car and Despatch Agency. The new Agency did not in itself solve the GCS financial crisis, but at least, after over half a century in existence, the Service finally had the opportunity to determine its own destiny.

Steven Norris and the Transport Case for GCS

One 1990s Minister who understood clearly the key importance of GCS as a transport organisation in oiling the wheels of government was Steven Norris. As a Transport Minister from 1992 to 1996, in his autobiography Norris acknowledges the loyalty and discretion of his two GCS drivers, John Underwood and John Hougham, and stresses that a Minister's relationship with his or her driver is as important as that with any Whitehall official. He also emphasises that the phrase 'ministerial limo' would cause a hollow laugh in his tiny Rover 400 issued to a Junior Minister, particularly with three officials cramped into the rear!

Norris goes on to spell out perhaps the definitive case for the essential value of GCS:

'The Minister's car is frequently targeted by the tabloids as a great luxury, but the truth is the job could simply not be done without it. The timetable is so tight, and the amount of paperwork each Minister has to take home so great that, however much I would have enjoyed coming in on my bicycle, the whole notion was simply impractical. A tight programme of meetings, speeches, conferences, seminars and more meetings in the Department, the Cabinet Office, Parliament, and every major venue in the City, not to mention frequent trips out of London by rail and air, all require precision, timing, and a minimum of delay.

'I was actually unusual in being the first and probably only Minister to decide to use the tube to avoid delay and sample the product at first hand. On occasions it made real sense, but normally there simply wasn't the time to indulge in politically correct tokenism. And at the end of a seventeen-hour day, a lift home was more of a necessity than a luxury.

'In any event, in typically British fashion, the car disappeared on Thursday evening, because Friday is traditionally a constituency day for Ministers as it is for backbenchers. As it is only available for government business, I would bid John a good weekend on Thursday evening and meet him again on Monday morning.'

TRANSITION AND CHANGE

Although the early 1990s was in part a period of transition for the GCS, it was also a time of continued uncertainty and change. This was primarily because Whitehall reforms such as Next Steps were

working their way through the system, while the John Major government itself injected some fresh ideas and policies.

As Peter Hennessy explains, although the Efficiency Unit produced the *Next Steps* Report in 1988, it was never intended that they would implement the plan once it had been approved by the Cabinet. The idea was always to turn it over to foster parents, who turned out to be the new Head of the Home Civil Service, Sir Robin Butler, and the man he picked for the post, the Project Manager recommended in the 1988 Report, Peter Kemp. It was Kemp who provided the entrepreneurial drive and enthusiasm that allowed the Executive Agency concept to take off, and ensured that it would permeate Whitehall as a whole. The basic plan was that Departments were required to review all their activities and consider five possibilities: abolition; privatisation (the government's preferred course); contracting out the work; putting it into an Agency; or leaving it as part of the departmental workload. Once an activity had been identified as a candidate for Agency treatment it would pass through a Project Liaison Group to the Project Executive made up of representatives from Kemp's Project Team, the Treasury, the Efficiency Unit and the sponsoring Department itself. The charter for each Agency was to be set out in a Framework Document.²

Kemp saw the Next Steps project as producing a new hybrid, combining the best characteristics of both the public and private sectors. However, from the perspective of SAFE and GCS it was enormously significant that Kemp warned against the dangers of 'badge engineering', whereby blocks of work would be labelled as 'Agencies' just for the sake of it. In fact, in his first year in the job (1988–89), Kemp scaled down the rate of creation of Agencies from sixteen to eight.³ It has to be said that this focus on what constituted a legitimate Agency appeared to be lacking a few years later in 1993, in the unusual mixture of organisations that made up SAFE.

Next Steps was a programme that the Major government inherited from Margaret Thatcher, although much of its great momentum took place during his administration. Major succeeded Thatcher as Prime Minister in November 1990, in the middle of a Parliament. In the run-up to the general election of 1992 the opinion polls suggested

that his tenure at Number Ten might be relatively brief, but against expectations Major won an overall majority of twenty-one, and so was able to make his own impact on the Whitehall machine.

Two of his own initiatives he had already set in motion were the Citizens Charter and Market Testing. The Citizens Charter was launched in 1991, and aimed to improve public services in order to respond better to the needs and wishes of customers and users, and to find more effective ways of organising and delivering public services. In practical terms, this meant that many Agencies developed a range of key targets relating to customer service.

Perhaps of deeper significance was the Market Testing concept introduced in the 1991 White Paper *Competing for Quality*. This identified competition as an effective means of improving quality and value for money for the customer and taxpayer, and set out proposals with the aim of promoting fair and open competition in the provision of central government services throughout the public sector. This meant that Departments and Agencies reviewed their activities to see how value for money could be improved. Activities could be abolished, privatised or contracted out, or awarded to an in-house team following a competition.

Hennessy observes that, in one area of public service reform, Major 'out-Thatchered' Thatcher by shifting certain Civil Service activities permanently from the public to the private sector. Here, he emphasises particularly that in the first two operational years of Market Testing (1992–94) some £1.8 billion of state activity was subjected to the process, and 55 per cent of it eventually shifted to the private sector.⁴ However, we will see that, in the case of GCS, Market Testing and privatisation came up against the by now well established arguments concerning security.

Nevertheless, Hennessy argues that the political storms which enveloped the later years of Major's period as Prime Minister have distracted attention almost totally from Major the incremental constitutional reformer – and continue to do so.⁵ The problems included particularly the economic crises that followed Britain's enforced departure from the European Union's Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1992, and the increasingly wide and tense differences on EU policy within the Conservative Party itself.

However, the period 1990–97 was to effectively carry GCS from a small cog in a large departmental wheel, to being given the opportunity to prove itself as an Executive Agency in its own right.

A Major Hazard

Twelve months before he became Prime Minister, John Major found himself literally stuck at the end of Downing Street. We saw earlier how Margaret Thatcher greatly enjoyed getting out of her car in Downing Street to greet the welcoming crowds when she first arrived at Number Ten as Prime Minister in 1979. At the same time, she regretted that by the end of her premiership, the needs of security no longer made such an event possible. This was because, in December 1989, large security gates were constructed – controversially – to control access.

When Chancellor of the Exchequer John Major was leaving Downing Street after a Cabinet meeting, he found his GCS Rover grinding to a halt in the wet cement that had been laid to hold the new gates. No amount of manoeuvring could remove the vehicle, and Major was forced to switch cars in order to leave for his next meeting. Meanwhile, a tractor was called to haul out the Rover from the rapidly setting cement. Fortunately for John Major, the stalled Rover proved not to be an omen for his own 1990 arrival at 10 Downing Street, by now complete with security gates.⁶

THE MAKING OF AN AGENCY

Although the 1989 transfer of GCS to the Property Services Agency Directorate of Home and Regional Services marked the climax of a long period when its identity and even existence was at real risk, it did not in any way provide the Service with a more stable and certain future. Instead, on 1 April 1990, just a year after joining Home and Regional Services, GCS was on the move again. This time, it formed part of Property Holdings, a new section of the DoE that absorbed a range of miscellaneous functions that, like GCS, were required to stay within central government. These formed the Directorate of Special and Central Services (DSCS). Just another year later, however, on 1 April 1991, signs emerged that at least some sort of longer term plan for GCS was being formulated when four assorted organisations, including GCS, were brought together to form the Transport and

Security Services Division (TSSD). In addition to GCS, the other three organisations forming the new Division were the long-standing GCS associate the InterDespatch Service, London Custody Services (LCS), which provided security guards for government buildings, and the Special Services Group (SSG), which offered a range of technical security services. The new TSSD had a total of around 1,200 staff and a 1991–92 turnover of £45 million. The Division was to be headed by John King.

In forming TSSD, there were clearly thoughts that it might have the makings of a Next Steps Agency, but in 1991 this was apparently still seen as only a possibility. The continuing uncertainty was reflected in a DoE memo of 20 March 1991 that announced the launch of TSSD. The memo acknowledged that the Department was not yet ready to come to any conclusions about Executive Agency status for GCS and LCS, because it had only just been possible to consider the organisational implications of the decisions to place IDS and SSG within Property Holdings. The memo, however, mused that there might be something to be said for creating one Executive Agency covering all four units, but this was just one option.

Significantly, it was admitted that the miscellaneous components within DCSS were not large enough to form individual Agencies, but equally they were not sufficiently interrelated to form a discreet unit of work (the problem of ‘badge engineering’ warned against by the Head of Next Steps, Peter Kemp). Consequently, it was considered that full Agency status was unlikely. On the other hand, it was argued that Next Steps principles could be applied to those units that were separately accountable and wholly concerned with service delivery, and that this could offer the best way forward.

In this context, the memo was clearly keen to stress that, since 1989, there had been a recognition that GCS should be given more freedom to stand on its own feet, and so it emerged as one of the organisations where the Next Steps principles could apply. Consequently, it was emphasised that GCS now operated with much greater freedom, and that its 189 cars and 200 staff charged levels intended to recover full costs – £4.2 million in 1989–90. GCS was now responsible for determining its own charging rates, although there was some concern about cross-subsidy within the various levels

of service available to customers of the first call fleet, and between the first call fleet and other services.

That the DoE was seeing GCS in Next Steps terms was also made clear in the memo's observation that it was possible to compare charges with those levied by private car hire and taxi firms, and that performance indicators were to be introduced in order to achieve this and to measure the ratio of overheads to costs. Crucially, it was concluded that GCS met the government criteria for Next Steps to a reasonable extent, although one cautionary note was sounded in that the Service did make policy decisions on behalf of government (possibly referring here to such matters as vehicle investment), and so could be unsuitable under the Cabinet Office guidelines on the separation between policy making and implementation.

If the 1991 memo was reluctant to commit itself on Agency status for TSSD, by the end of 1992 any doubts had apparently evaporated. In December 1992, therefore, Environment Minister Tony Baldry announced that TSSD was now indeed a candidate to become an Executive Agency, some time between October 1993 and early 1994. Baldry revealed that detailed negotiations on an Agency framework document had been set in hand, and that the final shape of the Agency would depend on the outcome of Market Testing and other organisational and efficiency initiatives. For his part, John King, the Head of TSSD, believed that 'TSSD is a natural candidate for Agency status because it offers a clear-cut and coherent set of services. We now have a clear remit to forge a strong identity, and market what we believe are top quality services.'⁷

Consequently, there was no doubt that TSSD was now well advanced in the pipeline to become a Next Steps Agency. A key fact here was that, by 1993, the arm's-length Executive Agency concept had taken off in a big way, and there was by now an inexorable process for large areas of government activities to be treated in this way. So much so that by the end of 1993 the number of Agencies totalled ninety-two. Together with the thirty-one Executive Units of HM Customs and Excise and the thirty-three Executive Offices of the Inland Revenue, which were also working fully on Next Steps lines, they now employed 60 per cent of the Civil Service. Taken in this context, it was clear that Next Steps had moved rapidly from an

experimental concept to standard procedure, and that TSSD was in line to join the torrent of new Agencies. On the other hand, the enthusiasm for the new concept had perhaps caused some of the earlier warnings about 'badge engineering' to be laid to one side.

A Lonely Heath

We have seen in previous chapters how former Prime Minister Edward Heath somehow never appeared to be far from controversy on matters concerning his GCS car, and the trend continued in early 1990 when he intended to travel to the Savoy Hotel in London for a lunch to celebrate his fortieth anniversary as an MP.

Vince Dennis, the former PM's driver for the previous three years, was suddenly transferred to other duties that morning, leaving Heath to complain: 'Why does this always have to happen to me?' Eventually, another GCS driver was sent to rescue Heath and take him to the Savoy.

For his part, Vince Dennis stressed that he had been upset not to take Mr Heath to his big do, but he had decided to finish being his driver because he (Dennis) wanted to spend more time with his own family: 'Because Mr Heath is single he spends a lot of time on the road.'

As we saw in the case of Edward Heath's early experiences with his ex-Prime Minister's GCS car, this was by no means the first time that concern had been expressed about his extensive use of the vehicle!

SOME COST CONTROL OBSTACLES

As GCS moved towards Agency status as part of TSSD, so there was clearly concern within the organisation that every effort should be made to control costs and improve efficiency. One individual user clearly targeted for these economies was Lord Tonypandy, who as George Thomas had been Speaker of the House of Commons from 1976 to 1983. Consequently, a GCS memo of April 1993 to the DoE explained that in March 1989, Environment Minister Christopher Chope had agreed that GCS should, exceptionally, provide Lord Tonypandy with the occasional use of a pool car. The memo left no doubt, however, that this arrangement had by now exploited the goodwill of the Service:

The expectation was that this would be a short term arrangement, but Lord Tonypany continues to use GCS and the current cost is £6,000 per annum. In the past, we have unsuccessfully tried to get the House of Lords Fees Office and the Speaker's Office to meet the cost. We have also approached the Lord President's Office for advice but have got nowhere. GCS cannot afford to continue to subsidise Lord Tonypany. He is the only person who gets free service from GCS.

In the event, these pleas appeared to fall on deaf ears. At other times, GCS found that questions of cost took second place to matters of security. This was evident in the case of Lord Howe, who as Sir Geoffrey Howe had served as both Chancellor of the Exchequer and Foreign Secretary in the 1980s governments of Margaret Thatcher. By the early 1990s he was no longer a Minister, but continued to be given a GCS vehicle on security grounds. Lord Howe himself had made it clear that he wanted to pay when the vehicle was used for private purposes, but a memo to GCS from the Home Office Central Unit (which had the responsibility for security matters) made it clear that this was not a course of action that would be officially encouraged:

The Home Office Central Unit and his police protection officers would encourage him to use the GCS car as much as possible while the terrorist threat against him warrants it. He is obviously more secure inside the official car with its trained driver and radio communications than he would be in his own car or on public transport.

Therefore to charge Lord Howe for private use of an official car might be counter-productive in that at times he could be dissuaded from using it. Moreover, the Cabinet Office, the GCS and the Home Office Central Unit cannot recall a non-ministerial protected principal paying for the use of an official car, so we would be setting a precedent if we asked Lord Howe to pay.

The examples of Lords Howe and Tonypany illustrate that, at times, GCS can be powerless to control costs when wider security and

political considerations receive precedence. In fact, Lord Howe relinquished his GCS car only in 2006, amidst some public controversy about his continued use of an official vehicle.

Nevertheless, in the early 1990s GCS was making a concerted attempt to improve its efficiency. This was illustrated in a GCS memo of May 1993 that explained how a report in March 1992 by consultants Coopers and Lybrand had identified potential operational savings of £616,000 per annum. Of these, savings of £324,000 per annum had already been realised, and the remainder would be delivered in accordance with the Coopers and Lybrand programme by April 1994.

In addition, as GCS and IDS were now both within TSSD, and occupied the Ponton Road site together, the memo explained that integration of the businesses included the appointment of a business manager to run both operations; a combined accounts section and information systems; and that the GCS workshop facility on site now supplied and maintained all IDS vehicles.

PRIVATISATION HINTS AND THE CREATION OF SAFE

Even as GCS was moving towards Agency status as part of TSSD, and despite the clear rejection of privatisation for the Service in the 1980s, there continued to be hints that a sale of GCS, or at least of parts of it, had still not been entirely excluded from the policy agenda as an alternative to Agency status. In particular, press reports in March and April 1993 suggested that the Trade and Industry Department, headed by President of the Board of Trade, Michael Heseltine, had put forward a plan whereby private contractors would provide Ministers' cars. Allocated cars for Ministers would be abolished, apart from those using protected vehicles, and would be replaced by a fleet of pool cars. It was reported, however, that the plan had been rejected after Cabinet Ministers realised that they would lose their Rover Sterlings, and also that a car could not be guaranteed when they needed it. In addition, Cabinet Secretary Sir Robin Butler was said to be worried about losing the team of tried and trusted GCS drivers.⁸

Concern was also expressed a few months later, in September 1993, at proposals (eventually rejected) to privatise the financial management of GCS/IDS. This was as a result of the Market Testing programme. Trade unions were worried that handing these responsibilities to the private sector could breach the vital and long-cherished security by revealing personal details of drivers and vehicles.⁹

Despite these distractions, the Security Facilities Executive (SAFE) was officially launched at a ceremony held at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre on 15 October 1993. The four organisations put together in TSSD (GCS, IDS, LCS and SSG) were now joined by Security Furniture Services, a supplier of approved security furniture to the public sector. At the launch ceremony, Environment Minister Baroness Denton handed over the Agency's Framework Document to John King, now the Chief Executive of the new Agency. The Minister wished the agency a most successful future, and stressed its emphasis when she explained: 'Its new name signifies the important role that it plays in providing security for government.'¹⁰

Princess Diana and the Bottomley Effect

GCS drivers are well known for their self-effacement and general reluctance to court publicity, and this modesty caught even Princess Diana unawares when she visited the Department of Health in 1992.

The Health Secretary, Virginia Bottomley, was keen for the Princess to meet the drivers who looked after the various Health Ministers, but the then Princess of Wales was somewhat confused when the drivers all introduced themselves according to the names of the Ministers they drove. The introductions thus went as: 'Hello, I'm Virginia Bottomley', and 'I'm Brian Mawbinney', and 'I'm Baroness Cumberlege'.¹¹

Virginia Bottomley and her husband Peter are one of the very few examples of a husband and wife team serving simultaneously as government Ministers. This came to an end in 1990 when Peter Bottomley left the government. In a nice touch, he wrote a letter to all GCS drivers thanking them for their help during his time as a Minister. The note concluded with a personal plea: 'Do continue to care for the Minister of Health – she matters to me.'

SAFE LIMITATIONS FOR GCS

SAFE was launched as an Agency in October 1993, undoubtedly with high hopes and good intentions. For example, in preparing for Agency status a number of service improvements had taken place, particularly in response to the objectives of the Citizens' Charter. These measures included (as we have seen already in the case of GCS) major cost savings intended to result in nil or minimal 1993–94 price increases for most services; Supply and Service Agreements established with most key customers; an extended programme of customer visits; and regular customer satisfaction surveys conducted and feedback provided.¹²

The objective with all the various organisations making up SAFE was clearly to maintain and strengthen the customer base while keeping a tight control on costs. From an early stage, however, it became clear that, for both GCS and IDS, whose fates were by now closely interlinked on the Ponton Road site, long-standing and quite deep-rooted organisational and financial problems would not be overcome easily.

A major warning of what lay ahead came with the Market Testing of IDS services in 1993–94. The comparisons with the private sector were highly unfavourable for IDS, and placed the whole future of the organisation in doubt. Consequently, Jerry Doyle, who had taken over as Fleet manager of GCS in 1993, suddenly found himself thrust headlong into a first-degree crisis:

IDS had done extremely badly in Market Testing, and was on the verge of going under. I was then given just six months to save it, and fortunately was able to bring things round. However, by the mid-1990s in many respects the problems at GCS were just as serious, and so I was involved in performing a similar task for the Car Service as I had for IDS.

In particular, Doyle found that communications within the organisations at Ponton Road left much to be desired:

There was very poor communications between accounts and operations, and this obviously had extremely serious implications for the efficiency of the whole organisation. The chief problem was that accounts used one information technology system, and operations another. I consulted all sides, and then produced an integrated bespoke system we called, quite appropriately, Phoenix. Fortunately, this has worked well ever since, and in fact the system has been adopted by the Scottish Office.

As part of an Executive Agency, GCS was now more publicly identifiable as an organisation in its own right than previously, but this in itself did not offer any magic solutions to its problems. In fact, as IDS discovered with Market Testing, and GCS itself in the 1980s in the case of scrutiny by 'Rayner's Raiders', the modern trends towards generally more detailed comparative examination of government activities, associated with the setting of strict operational and financial targets, could suddenly leave apparently stable organisations in an exposed and vulnerable state. There was of course no doubting, as ever, the high quality personal service provided by GCS to its customers, but as the 1990s progressed it became clear that the organisation could not progress, or even survive, unless a major transformation took place in its vision for future growth, combined with a more methodically organised approach. For all its good intentions it appeared that SAFE, with its peculiar mixture of organisations and focus on security, was not the ideal vehicle to turn things around for GCS. This view is confirmed by David Turner, who was a member of the Advisory Board of SAFE (and would later become a non-executive director of the Government Car and Despatch Agency). Turner found that 'SAFE was a peculiar organisation with no real focus, and its reputation within Whitehall was not particularly good.'

As GCS attempted to control costs, it was perhaps inevitable that this would cause tensions with drivers, and matters came to a head in February 1995. The drivers were looking for a 2.5 per cent increase on their £13,000 salaries, but GCS was offering 1.96 per cent. The drivers were also unhappy about what they believed were attempts by GCS to restrict overtime. As we have seen, the drivers had

traditionally worked long hours of overtime to supplement their basic salaries, but this inevitably made it difficult to predict costs. On 2 February, 150 drivers stopped work at 6 pm and held an emergency meeting to discuss grievances, although drivers serving the Prime Minister and other members of the Cabinet with police protection supported the action, but continued to work for security reasons. For other Ministers, private chauffeurs had to step into the breach. One GCS driver summarised their disquiet:

In forty years, GCS had only one half-day of action before now (in 1978), so we are very loyal and discreet. But we feel very strongly about this. On average, a driver will do eighteen to twenty hours overtime a week because the basic wage of £13,000 is so low, and some of the Ministers have actually said we should stand up for our rights.¹³

The industrial action by the drivers reflected a poor trading position for GCS in the mid-1990s, and by 1996 the situation was quite serious. The depressing news was spelled out in February 1996 by the new GCS Operations Manager, Norman Kemp, in an Operations and Business Briefing issued to staff. The Briefing revealed that difficult trading conditions were badly affecting GCS. This was blamed on a combination of financial cutbacks in government departments and a light programme of parliamentary business that had caused pool use, and therefore revenue, to fall during the previous few months. It was also pointed out that the recent death of former Prime Minister Lord (Harold) Wilson had also removed an allocated vehicle.

The Briefing stressed that GCS was going all out to find new work, but the overall financial position was very weak, as costs remained the same but income was down. Consequently, a loss approaching £100,000 for the financial year 1995–96 now seemed likely, growing to £500,000 in 1996–97 unless action was taken immediately.

One problem highlighted was that although daytime pool work had been particularly badly hit, business in the evening, when there was often resistance by GCS drivers to working overtime, still required some hiring-in of vehicles and drivers. In an attempt to reduce these evening hirings, volunteers were now being sought

amongst pool drivers to move to late attendance. It was perhaps a reflection of changing attitudes in society that GCS drivers, who had traditionally worked long hours overtime, should now be more resistant to working unsocial hours.

The Briefing also pointed out the continuing necessity for GCS to replace over forty vehicles every year of its 170-car fleet, and that this investment needed to be maintained in order to uphold the quality of the Service. For example, in the medium saloon car range, the new Vauxhall Vectra was particularly popular.

By the time of the March 1996 Briefing, the situation had if anything deteriorated still further, due to more industrial relations problems. In the Autumn of 1995 a working party comprising trade union and management representatives was set up to examine the by now outdated 1990 pay agreement and to recommend changes. However, when formal negotiations were due to begin in February 1996, the trade union side had refused to meet management and no new dates for meetings had been fixed. It was clear, therefore, that considerable ill will continued to exist after the walkout of 1995.

The result of all these difficulties was that it had been decided to write to all GCS drivers with details of a voluntary retirement/severance scheme. One early outcome of this offer was that the May Briefing announced that two Briefing Officers (who perform the crucial function of taking orders for vehicles and scheduling them) had left under the Voluntary Redundancy Scheme, with more expected shortly. It was emphasised that the financial targets set by SAFE and the Cabinet Office (which by now had taken over responsibility for SAFE from the DoE) were tough, but it was hoped that the measures being taken would prove sufficient.

BEGINNING AGAIN

Beyond the struggles within GCS and SAFE, a new broom was by now sweeping through the Cabinet Office in the form of Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine. Complete with his trademark zeal for reforming the machinery of government, in its difficult circumstances it was unlikely that GCS would be left untouched, and this certainly proved to be the case. Heseltine describes his Cabinet

Office base as being home to a glorious confusion of responsibilities. In a description of what he found at the Cabinet Office that seems particularly apt for GCS and SAFE, he concluded: ‘It was a “bran tub” – an accumulation of central government activities that did not fit easily into any of the other departments and all incorporated into the Office of Public Service (OPS) under the day-to-day supervision of a Minister with the splendid title of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.’¹⁴

Not surprisingly, Heseltine once again introduced his Management Information System for Ministers (MINIS) that he had developed at DoE in the early 1980s. He believed that MINIS was particularly appropriate here so that, as he put it, he could establish what was going on in the Cabinet Office’s rabbit warren of offices and myriad Agencies. Significantly for GCS and SAFE, he was not satisfied with what he found: ‘There was no evidence that Ministers had ever subjected this miscellany of activities to critical scrutiny. What were we doing these things for? Why did the public sector need to provide services of this sort? Within a very short period of time, we had a list of candidates for privatisation.’¹⁵

Heseltine makes it clear that he looked highly favourably on a possible privatisation of GCS,¹⁶ but as we have seen there were many political and security obstacles barring the way to this objective. Nevertheless, one SAFE organisation that was privatised was London Security Services, and in turn this brought into still sharper focus the future structure and identity of SAFE. David Smith worked in the Cabinet Office at this time, and was the person responsible for overseeing SAFE, and basically acting as an intermediary between the Department and the Agency (after his retirement from the Civil Service in 2001, he was to become a non-executive director of the Government Car and Despatch Agency). He confirms that Heseltine was keen to privatise whatever was possible of his Cabinet Office responsibilities, and successes here included Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, the Chessington Computer Centre, the Occupational Health Agency and the Recruitment and Assessment Services Agency. He stopped short with GCS, however, and David Smith explains that what could be described as a high motive and a low motive were at work here:

The high motive was that there were not really any private companies suitable to take over GCS. This was in contrast to activities such as HMSO, where there were certainly private companies dealing in printing and publishing well able to operate it. The low motive could be said to be that Ministers greatly valued their drivers, and were loathe to see anything happen that might disrupt this. A third factor was of course the security aspect.

As Heseltine described, the Minister in day-to-day charge of the OPS was the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, at this time Roger Freeman. Heseltine describes Freeman as highly competent in administration and the very exemplar of a safe pair of hands, who could be relied upon to throw himself into any challenge he faced.¹⁷ By October 1996 the new challenge for Freeman was to decide exactly what to do with GCS and IDS. Consequently, on 7 October he paid a visit to Ponton Road, and on 14 October sent a letter to SAFE Chief Executive John King with some heartening news, particularly given the severe problems GCS faced at that time: 'I was very impressed by the quality and importance to government of what I saw on my visit to Ponton Road. I can assure you that, apart from any essential changes associated with restructuring, it will be business as usual for the foreseeable future.'

The Freeman letter cleared the air in terms of confirming the continued existence of GCS and its retention in the public sector, but its destination as an organisation remained undecided. This uncertainty was reflected in a SAFE memo from John King on 31 October in which he emphasised that the Treasury and the Home Office still had to be consulted. Nevertheless, King revealed that the options included a restructuring of SAFE or, more likely, two separate Agencies.

The uncertainty was finally resolved in a memo from Roger Freeman that announced, in the light of discussions at Ponton Road, and of what he had seen there, that it had confirmed his view that two organisations should succeed SAFE, with GCS/IDS splitting away to form their own Agency. Freeman argued that he had decided GCS and IDS should be established as a stand-alone Agency because he believed this would enable both the Services to focus on service

delivery in order to meet their customers' needs in the most effective manner. Although the wording is somewhat cryptic, it suggests that Freeman had understood how uneasily GCS and IDS fitted into SAFE.

Nevertheless, the degree to which the security preoccupation continued to dominate thinking is indicated by the fact that, until quite late in the day, the planned name for the new Agency was the Security Transport Agency. Only in the final draft of the Framework Document, shortly before the new agency began life on 1 April 1997, was the more general and appropriate name adopted of the Government Car and Despatch Agency (GCDA).

There was perhaps some irony in the fact that, just a month after the birth of GCDA, the Conservatives were heavily defeated in the May general election after eighteen years in office, and so it was left to the New Labour government under Prime Minister Tony Blair to oversee the new Agency's progress. However, as part of the Cabinet office 'bran tub', at least GCS, effectively for the first time in its history, now had the opportunity to win prizes in its own right.

Blair Versus Howard – Part One

In 2005, Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair won a third successive election victory, this time at the expense of Conservative Party Leader Michael Howard. By a quirk of political fate, fourteen years earlier the pair had an encounter involving a GCS car that somehow seemed to foreshadow their later battle of wits, although on this earlier occasion it could be said that the outcome was a score draw.

In July 1991 Michael Howard was Employment Secretary, and Tony Blair his Labour shadow. On this occasion, the pair were invited on the BBC Radio Four Today programme to debate Labour's proposals for a statutory minimum wage. Howard was left stranded at the studios when his ministerial car broke down, and so Blair stepped into the breach and gave his opposite number a lift to Conservative Central Office. Unfortunately, on leaving the car Howard absent-mindedly walked off with all Blair's briefing papers, leaving the Employment Secretary with more information on Labour's proposals for a minimum wage than the future Prime Minister!¹⁸

DRIVEN BY THE ENVIRONMENT

The 1990s was the decade when the relevance of environmental factors to transport issues really took off on the political agenda. In particular, from the late 1980s, the politically potent concept of sustainable development (defined at that time as development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs) began to have a real impact. This new environmental awareness was particularly evident in the area of the harmful effects of vehicle emissions, where knowledge was increasing quickly about potentially deadly health impacts. This concern could be heightened still more by particular incidents. A particularly vivid example occurred in London in December 1991, when for four days abnormally high concentrations of nitrogen dioxide were recorded. There was strong evidence to suggest that vehicle emissions were the dominant source of the pollution, and the Department of Health reported that the death rate in London rose by 10 per cent during those four days.

The quest for sustainable development therefore had particular relevance in the policy area of vehicle emissions. We saw in the previous chapter how the question of lead in petrol and the link to learning problems in children became a live issue in the 1980s, but in the 1990s these concerns with vehicle emissions became much wider, with the substances involved linked to the increasing incidence of respiratory diseases such as asthma, and a potentially catastrophic warming of the earth's atmosphere through the production of so-called greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide.

These health and environment warnings had a major impact at the level of the European Union. Consequently, from 1993 there was a requirement that all new cars be fitted with three-way catalytic converters which, once the exhaust reaches a high enough operating temperature, eliminate 90 per cent of harmful nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons, as well as measures on ambient (i.e. 'in the atmosphere') air quality management and assessment. In addition, the EU nations signed, at the landmark Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which included a commitment to take measures aimed at returning

emissions of carbon dioxide to 1990 levels by the year 2000. Later, at the Kyoto climate change conference in 1997, the UK made a binding target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 12.5 per cent below 1990 levels by the period 2008 to 2012. The British government had first set out its strategy for sustainable development in the 1990 White Paper, *This Common Inheritance*, but in 1994 the government produced simultaneously four White Papers on the implementation of sustainable development itself; climate change; biodiversity; and sustainable forestry.¹⁹

In this new climate of environmental awareness, it was clearly important for a government flagship in the shape of GCS to set the best example with its fleet of around 200 vehicles. This it did, being particularly active in looking at alternatively fuelled vehicles. In particular, from 1993 it trialled a number of vehicles able to run on natural gas, including a specially converted Rover Sterling and a Rover 827 on long term evaluation in an agreement with British Gas. The engine of the Rover Sterling had been adapted to run on either gas or petrol, with the gas going into a tank in the boot. It was found that the gas car was quieter, could go longer without petrol changes (because total fuel capacity is greater with the two tanks than with a petrol only vehicle), and (at that time) had a much cleaner exhaust than a petrol vehicle, with the only drawback being a 5 per cent drop in performance. A wider concern, however, was that the tax on gas was higher than that for petrol, making the two about even in running costs, but hardly justifying the £1,200 engine conversion. GCS therefore hoped that a tax reduction could make the gas car more financially attractive.²⁰

GCS was also active in a feasibility study of electric powered vehicles, including an evaluation of Ford's Ecostar all-electric vehicle. In addition, it also trialled a refrigerant for air conditioning units which did not contain CFC gases (that deplete the ozone layer), while the Service also offered free exhaust emission tests to staff working in the DoE and the Department of Transport.²¹ As the 1990s progressed, therefore, it became increasingly clear that environmental concerns would in future play a much greater role in GCS' vehicle purchasing and operational policies. This occurred particularly at the expense of earlier priorities to 'Buy British', a

phenomenon accelerated by the long term decline of the Rover Group. In any case, Rover passed out of British hands when it was purchased by the German BMW Group in 1994.

A Drop of Dewar's

In December 1995, government whip Michael Bates was waiting for his GCS car to collect him at his Kennington home and take him to Westminster. He found, however, that he had a long wait. This was because, at the same time, Labour Chief Whip Donald Dewar, who lived near to Bates, was also waiting for a BBC courtesy car to take him for an interview at Television Centre in Shepherd's Bush. When the car arrived, Dewar got in and asked the driver to head for the Television Centre.

It was only on the way there that the GCS driver realised that he had got the Kennington addresses confused, and had picked up the wrong passenger. In the circumstances, the driver was content to take Dewar to his BBC appointment, while Bates had to wait for a driver able to find his address.²²

GCS ALLOCATION AND USE DILEMMAS

Over the years, the so-called Prime Minister's Rules that govern the allocation and use of GCS cars for Ministers and officials have tended to change in an incremental way. As we noted earlier, changes tend to develop either from an official recognition of what is widely happening in practice, or from the consideration of special cases. As we saw in Chapter Three, the rules for allocating vehicles to Junior Ministers were relaxed in the early 1970s, yet it was to be another twenty years before the privilege was extended to all Ministers of this type, although in reality this had already become the common practice. Consequently, a 1992 review of the rules officially gave Junior Ministers use of a first call car. The new arrangements were set out in a Cabinet Office letter of 3 June 1993, and noted that the chief features of the review were that Cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State, Parliamentary Undersecretaries and ex-Prime Ministers would be provided with first call cars from the GCS pool. In addition, First Permanent Secretaries and certain designated Chief Executives would also be provided with a first call car.

The letter also set out the range of models that would be available for each category of users, and this indicated that vehicles from the Rover Group continued to dominate the list, together with UK manufactured Fords and Vauxhalls. Consequently, Cabinet Ministers and ex-Prime Ministers would be given the choice of a Rover Sterling, Rover 827, or any other vehicle from the Rover 800 series. The less exalted Ministers of State and Parliamentary Undersecretaries would be given a choice of a Rover 416, a 2 litre Austin Montego, a 2 litre Ford Mondeo, a 2 litre Vauxhall Cavalier, or the diesel equivalents. First Permanent Secretaries and the Chief Executives would also be given this latter choice. The only exceptions would be where Ministers (such as Michael Heseltine) provided cars at their own personal expense. The letter also announced that a review of the Prime Minister's Rules would take place every three years.

In fact, there was one contribution to the 1992 review that did make a plea for a more fundamental reappraisal of the rules governing use of GCS cars. Perhaps not surprisingly, this came from the office of Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine (the Department responsible for GCS), who perhaps because he did not use a GCS car felt more able to comment freely on these rules. As we have seen, Heseltine was never one to shy away from challenging Whitehall accepted wisdom, and a memo from his Private Secretary of 26 March 1992 in essence argued that the government was too sensitive about public reaction to when and how a Minister used a GCS car. Instead, it believed that a more open acceptance of reality would remove several long-standing dilemmas. The memo therefore questioned the basic thinking underlying the guidance governing GCS car use:

The structural problems with the guidance are that it tries to avoid the reality that Ministers regard 'their car' and 'their driver' as one of the perks of the job. The public see it in that way too. I suppose the arrangements are described in this artificial (i.e. impersonal) way to avoid creating a tax liability. But the structure gives rise to the unreality that the use of the car from home to office is supposed to be dependent on working on official papers. And there is no provision for use in London in the evening where the Minister has been

out on a purely social occasion. Yet the reality is cars are uniformly used in these cases. It would be better for the rules to recognise this.

The memo went on argue that the rules would be improved if they also were more sensitive to the interconnections between party and official business:

The only area of practical difficulty concerns car use for party political events. The rules provide for use of a car if the event occurs between two official engagements. But they make no provision for use of a car – typically first thing in the morning – to take the Minister to the station or airport en route for a political engagement where the air or rail ticket is being paid by the Party. It would be reasonable to allow for this. At present, the practice differs between Departments – and indeed offices. It is a source of friction.

The memo was perhaps intended to provoke thought rather than lead directly to action, but it did set out clearly some of the dilemmas in framing rules for GCS use, and offered an alternative perspective in looking at the problem. Meanwhile, however, by the late 1990s, GCS was more concerned with preserving its very existence, rather than with reforming some of the anomalies of the Prime Minister's Rules.

NOTES

1. Steven Norris, *Changing Trains* (Hutchinson, 1996), pp. 183–4.
2. Peter Hennessy, *Whitehall* (Fontana, 1990), pp. 623–4.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 624.
4. Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: The Office and its Holders Since 1945* (Penguin, 2001), p. 450.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 452.
6. *The Times*, 20 December 1989.
7. *DoE World*, December 1992.
8. *Daily Mail*, 23 April 1993.
9. *The Guardian*, 27 September 1993.
10. *DoE World*, November 1993.
11. *Sunday Express*, 13 December 1992.
12. *Next Steps Review 1993*, p. 101.
13. *The Times*, 2 February 1995.
14. Michael Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle* (Coronet, 2000), p. 485.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 489.

16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. *Sunday Express*, July 1991.
19. Geoffrey Dudley and Jeremy Richardson, *Why Does Policy Change? Lessons from British Transport Policy 1945–1999* (Routledge, 2000), pp. 154–71.
20. *Safetalk*, Spring 1995.
21. *Staff Cabinet Office News*, February 1996.
22. *Evening Standard*, 20 December 1995.

CHAPTER 7

A Phoenix Rising

1997–2006

BEATING THE ODDS

In 2005, a large scale End-to-End Strategic Review of the performance of the Government Car and Despatch Agency, since its foundation in 1997, provided a graphic summary of the highly precarious state in which the new Agency had commenced its life:

As part of SAFE, GCS and IDS had not received effective senior management and direction. There were no overarching and cohesive strategies in place to deliver effective services, and the management information systems were very weak. Morale was very low, and trust had broken down between the industrial workforce and Agency management, leading to hostile and uncooperative trades union relationships. The perception by key stakeholders was one of a run down operation that would probably not survive in the long term.

It could be said that after fifty years of suffering from a lack of identity, for GCS the chickens had come home to roost. It was clear that to have any kind of viable future things had to change both quickly and drastically, and in this context the creation of GCDA arrived in the nick of time. The result was that, in its sixth decade, GCS could at last shape its own destiny, working alongside IDS as a free-standing Agency.

The 2005 Review makes it clear that this major organisational change of the switch to GCDA in itself acted as a catalyst for beneficial progress, and that the clear focus and accountability of Agency status provided a sound basis on which to develop and

manage the recovery plan. Consequently, the freedoms accorded to the Chief Executive Nick Matheson and the management team meant that new strategies could be put in place quickly, and managed effectively, due to short spans of control and un-bureaucratic decision making processes.

We saw in the previous chapter how the creation of the Phoenix information system dramatically improved the link between administration and operations, but perhaps the culture shift that took place within GCDA is best indicated through the development of the Short Term Hire (STH) business, where GCS is in strong competition with the private sector. The development of STH, basically a type of chauffeur-driven saloon service for Whitehall, confirms the fundamental character of GCS as a transport organisation, and not just the security body defined by SAFE. Consequently, STH revenues increased from £750,000 in 2000, to around £2 million in 2005. This meant that, although allocated cars remain the core business for GCS, STH grew from under 6 per cent of total GCS income in 2000, to around 11 per cent of total income by 2005. A further example of the greater entrepreneurial attitude within GCS has been its success in winning the contract to transport Crown Court judges in England and Wales.

We saw in the previous chapter how, by the mid-1990s, GCS was in severe financial trouble. It was found that one of the chief reasons for these problems was that GCS prices were perceived as being too high by many of its customers. This led to the innovative policy of actually reducing prices in real terms. In the event, it was found that the boost in demand as a result of these price cuts actually increased revenue overall. Alongside these pricing policies, considerable progress has also been made in rationalising pay systems for both industrial and non-industrial staff. A key to these successful pay negotiations was that the Chief Executive made it a high priority to construct a more open and conciliatory relationship with the workforce. As Nick Matheson puts it: 'The vital thing is to unlock the human potential that you have in the organisation. You have to ask, "What can each individual bring to the table?" Then you can set about making things operate as they should. This approach was totally lacking under SAFE.'

Since the turn of the century, therefore, GCS finances have been placed on a stable basis, with the Service reporting surpluses each year until the present time. Another major area of change over the past decade is that the environmental agenda has now supplanted the 'Buy British' lobby as the chief external and internal pressure on GCS vehicle purchasing and operation policy. One major factor in this process is that the long-standing relationship between GCS and Rover came to an end with the demise of the latter company in 2005. In reality, however, EU competition policy has for several years precluded GCS from operating a 'Buy British' policy, with cars purchased on the basis of fitness for purpose and cost.

On the other hand, the environmental debate has moved on rapidly in recent years, although in some respects this has created problems for GCS, as shifting priorities have caused targets to change in character quite rapidly. For example, the chief environmental target at the creation of GCDA was to improve average miles per gallon for the GCS fleet, but in 1999 this was changed to emphasise use of alternatively fuelled vehicles. In 2002 this was changed yet again, to encompass government policy on climate change to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide (the chief greenhouse gas). As part of its response, GCS has again taken an entrepreneurial initiative in operating a Green Car Service for short trips by civil servants. In addition, Cabinet Ministers are now offered the option of using the electric-petrol hybrid Toyota Prius. It could be said that the fact the Prius is manufactured in Japan is less important for the credibility of GCS policy than its strong environmental credentials.

In 2005, Roy Burke succeeded Nick Matheson as Chief Executive of GCDA, and was instrumental in producing the first five-year Corporate Plan for the Agency. A particular feature of this Plan, and a reflection of the greater emphasis on the commercial approach as a transport organisation, is a considerably strengthened marketing capability. The new Chief Executive also separated for operational purposes the component parts of GCS and IDS.

One outcome of GCDA forming a component part of the Cabinet Office 'bran tub' set of responsibilities (as defined here by Michael Heseltine), has been that over the past decade the Agency has largely been left alone to find its own destiny. In some respects this true

arm's-length relationship has clearly been an advantage for the Agency. At the same time, as the years progressed, there is perhaps some irony in the fact that GCDA itself became concerned that its affairs were being given insufficient attention amongst the Cabinet Office's unfocused responsibilities. Consequently, in 2005 the Cabinet Office acknowledged the unsatisfactory state of affairs, and the departmental home of GCS was shifted once more, when operational responsibility for GCDA passed to the Department for Transport (DfT). This change remains controversial, although it could be said that, by this time, it was GCDA itself that truly defined the modern GCS.

Security Dilemmas Revive Echoes of the Past

Although the creation of the Government Car and Despatch Agency moved GCS away from the central focus on security found in SAFE, events in the twenty-first century have of course ensured that questions of safety remain a major consideration. In particular, the 9/11 2001 terrorists attacks, including those that destroyed the World Trade Centre in New York, and the series of public transport suicide bomb attacks in London on 7 July 2005, that killed fifty-two people, have intensified the need for watchful protection. Ironically, two measures taken in the light of the 9/11 attacks, involving former Prime Minister Tony Blair and his wife Cherie, provide strong echoes of GCS events in earlier decades.

Firstly, in 2003, responsibility for driving the Prime Minister was passed to the Metropolitan Police on security grounds. GCS has driven every Prime Minister since the war, and GCDA Chief Executive Roy Burke is anxious for the Agency to regain this responsibility. He acknowledges, however, that GCS needs to win the respect of Downing Street, and that this may have gradually eroded over the years:

'Although GCS has a fantastic history, it was, and to some extent still is, quite reactive, and can even at times be a bit arrogant. Downing Street has told us that we are not quite as efficient as we think we are, and that the service we provide can leave something to be desired at times. We have to address these problems, and improve customer service. There also needs to be a better career structure for GCS drivers, with a clear pattern that culminates in driving the Prime Minister. This should mean particularly that advanced driving courses for security purposes are accredited and

overseen by professionals outside the Agency, instead of being approved in-house as at present. Overall, we need to put in place new processes so that Downing Street will say: "Yes, they are the best, we can use them now."'

These concerns about GCS driver training, of course, have powerful echoes of the Douglas Hurd–Kenneth Baker exchange in 1986, and in this context Roy Burke emphasises that GCS has some catching up to do, compared with police training and qualifications.

Nevertheless, GCS does continue to have a number of Downing Street allocations, including a relatively recent one for former Prime Minister's wife Cherie Blair. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Cherie Blair became the first Prime Minister's spouse to be given a car and driver for her personal use. Although this car was awarded for security reasons, and caused some public controversy on the grounds of its expense, it could be argued that historically it represented a belated acknowledgment of the essential official role played by the spouse of a Prime Minister.

In this context, it could be seen as something of a natural progression from the events that originated in 1974, when it took the desperate pleas of the Lord Chancellor's wife to obtain the breakthrough of a Minister's spouse being allowed to use a car alone for official purposes. Given the reality of events altering circumstances, particularly where security matters are concerned, there are also echoes of Edward Heath's experiences as a former Prime Minister in 1975. On this earlier occasion, it required an IRA bomb outside his home for him to be given an allocated car, and official permission to travel beyond the confines of 'in and around London'.

A NEW DAWN

The SAFE legacy was clearly evident in the official aim of GCDA, set out in the Framework Document that was required to outline the responsibilities of the new Agency. As we noted earlier, it was originally intended that it should be called the Security Transport Agency, and although this title was changed, the aim of GCDA was given as: 'to be the first choice supplier of secure transport, distribution and mail related services to central government, the wider public sector and other approved customers'. The fact that the emphasis remained on the security aspects of the business, indicated that a relatively narrow vision of its focus continued to hold sway in

official circles, and that not a great deal of thought had been given as to how GCDA might break out from this restricted view.

Nick Matheson, who as Chief Executive led the new GCDA from its inception until his retirement in 2005, had a very different and much wider view of what he believed was the real purpose of SAFE:

Security was apparently the purpose of SAFE, but in reality each of its component parts was about providing a personal service. Unfortunately, SAFE management did not understand this, and a bullying culture of staff had developed that was totally counter-productive in terms of good labour relations and providing an efficient and good quality service. I saw it as my main priority to rectify this terribly negative force in both GCS and IDS, that was threatening to disable the whole viability of the new Agency.

The main GCDA objectives as listed in the Framework Document also reflected the old emphasis, in that the Agency was required 'to meet customers' needs for the secure provision of services'. Perhaps the most significant objective, emphasised that the new Agency should 'meet financial targets, particularly to recover all costs through charges to customers'. As we saw in the previous chapter, by the mid-1990s GCS was losing money heavily, and it was clearly now imperative that this haemorrhaging of cash had to end, if the Service was to survive. On the other hand, the public service element of the Agency was evident in the fact that the aim was to recover all costs, rather than to make a profit. The implication here was that any profits made would be returned to the Treasury.

As with all the Executive Agencies, the Chief Executive was directly responsible to the Minister (in this case the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster) for the efficient planning, management and performance of the Agency against the agreed strategy, objectives and targets laid down by the Minister. In the case of GCDA, the Chief Executive each financial year was required to prepare a three-year Corporate Plan that would outline the Agency's strategy, its resource requirements, efficiency improvements and operational plans needed to meet the Agency's longer term objectives. Complementing this longer-term vision, the Chief Executive was also required to prepare

a business plan for the financial year ahead. This would include specific objectives and targets, and was intended to be a key document against which the Chief Executive's performance would be assessed. On a shorter timescale, the Chief Executive also reported to the Minister on the Agency's performance against published performance targets at quarterly intervals, or as otherwise agreed.

These official statutory requirements of the Framework Document set out, in their dry way, the basic requirements of what the agency was expected to do, but of course supplied no sort of guidelines as to how GCDA might be able to reverse the fortunes of GCS and IDS. The true scale and nature of the problems confronting GCS, and the lack of official faith in the new Agency, was made brutally evident in a conversation between Nick Matheson and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster Roger Freeman, at the time the new Chief Executive took up his post. As Nick Matheson remembers:

Freeman wished me luck, and told me that I had a very big job on my hands. He then said that he did not suppose the Agency would survive for more than a year! However, he concluded that it was unlikely to be his problem, as the Conservative government was likely to be defeated in the forthcoming general election. At least the Minister was correct with his second prediction, if not with his first!

Matheson had come to GCDA with extensive private sector management experience working for transport and logistics conglomerate P&O, while latterly he had worked for Hampshire County Council, managing the wide variety of services that had been put out to tender by the local authority. This experience placed him in a good position to assess not only where efficiencies could be made and the business developed commercially, but also to manage resources that are operating at arm's length from central government. From the perspective of a personal management style, Matheson also believed strongly that the situation at GCDA required a strong hands-on approach:

I know that some people called me a control freak, but it is important that you get people to justify things, and not just go off

and do as they want. In fact, in arguing a case people often start to think more constructively and creatively, and then see better how to overcome problems. The chief objective is to find out what actually works.

Matheson was also greatly concerned that no one involved with GCS or IDS was taking a strategic view, and that this reflected a deep-seated culture within the organisations to passively accept the status quo: ‘Things were happening because they had always been that way. It perhaps needed an outsider such as myself to come in and assess how things could be changed. You could say that the Agency needed to be “match fit”.’

BENCHMARKING FOR FITNESS

As a starting point towards achieving this ‘match fitness’, in 1997 Matheson conducted a benchmarking exercise of structure and resources, in order to provide a baseline assessment of the situation on the ground. This ascertained that permanent allocations amounted to 119 drivers and 122 cars, with an income of £6.97 million per annum, or 92.1 per cent of GCS income. In contrast, pool operations amounted to twenty drivers and thirty-two cars, and income of £0.6 million per annum, or 7.9 per cent of GCS income.

Traditionally, the scope for expansion of the allocated side of the business is strictly limited, given the fact that at any one time there are a more or less fixed number of Ministers and senior officials. On the other hand, there is clearly much greater scope for driving large numbers of Whitehall officials on an ad hoc basis, and it was in this area that GCS had been slow to exploit the opportunities.

In this context, the benchmarking analysis went to the heart of the problems, by identifying the urgent need for improved organisation and more competitive pricing of the pool services. It was revealed that the previous management had sought to sell the surplus capacity of the pool fleet, and it was argued that whilst this approach appeared commendable, in that it sought to generate income in a marginal resource, it had caused both market and operational difficulties. Firstly, this was for the reason that pool

capacity was highly variable and unpredictable, as was customer demand. This meant that services could not always be delivered using GCS drivers, and had led to confusion and dissatisfaction. In turn, this was reflected in the poor customer satisfaction rating for this element of the service.

Nick Matheson found here that much of the Short Term Hire business was being run with outdated vehicles, and made it a priority to rectify this poor service:

A great deal of STH was being operated with cars that had been discarded by the allocated service, and were just being run into the ground. It meant that inevitably we got a lot of complaints. I negotiated with the Treasury the resources to buy a totally new fleet, dedicated for use by STH. This greatly improved the quality of the service, and also raised morale within GCS.

The second element of the problem was that pricing for the pool resources reflected the cost structure of the allocated car services, and was above what the market could bear for ad hoc personal transport. Consequently, it was emphasised that the GCS pool services were correctly perceived by customers as expensive. Crucially, it was concluded that in business terms the case for increasing pool resources merely to meet peak demand was not proven. On the other hand, the new Chief Executive believed that GCS was in a strong position to act as the 'intelligent' co-ordinator of personal transport at times of peak demand by utilising properly controlled sub-contracted resources to strictly monitored service standards, and these issues were under active review.

By radically improving its organisation of the pool services, therefore, including use of reliable subcontractors, and also reducing charges to customers, at least one solution could be found that might boost business and save GCS. Nick Matheson was disturbed to find that the relationships with subcontractors relied excessively on unofficial and sometimes obscure practices. Matters were therefore placed on a more official basis, and although this meant that some of the established contractors were jettisoned, there was an overall gain in quality.

The benchmarking exercise also identified the long hours required to be worked by drivers as another problem area. It was acknowledged that, to accommodate the long working day of many customers, GCS drivers were contracted for a fixed forty-nine-hour week, but in practice worked considerably longer hours on an overtime basis. Although these arrangements appeared effective from the point of view of the customer, in that their drivers were constantly available, from the perspective of the business it was not cost-effective, as much of the working day involved waiting and so was non-productive. The difficulty for GCS management was that it had not been possible to change working practices because of union resistance, while there was also little control over drivers, because for most of the day they were with the customer.

It was in the area of labour relations, even more than the financial situation he inherited, where Nick Matheson concluded that the most deep-seated and serious problems confronted the Agency. He found that relations between management and workers had broken down completely, and the two sides were not talking to each other. He therefore made it his top priority to restore communication and trust, and to construct a more open and approachable relationship with the workforce. This included such initiatives as the Chief Executive joining GCS drivers on a driving course, and adopting a more conciliatory line on disciplinary procedures that had been the cause of considerable ill feeling with the particular driver involved. Above all, Matheson was determined to send out the message that the bullying culture he believed dominated SAFE had been replaced with a more consensual culture. He found that it took around two years before the new approach was accepted as the norm by the workforce, and so allowed a major renegotiation of pay and conditions. Overall, key objectives on pay and conditions included a simplification of the pay structure, in particular the consolidation of overtime rates to match industry and competitive standards.

In addition to pay and conditions, new technology was also a potential area for conflict, although it offered the opportunity to enhance GCS efficiency, in that the means were now available to monitor vehicle locations. The Chief Executive believed that this new so-called telematics technology would enable GCS to monitor a

driver's use of the vehicle, enabling reallocation of work during the slack periods of the day, and so allowing costs to the customer to be reduced. He was also aware, however, that this location tracking might be seen as 'big brother' snooping by the drivers, and so it was acknowledged that a co-ordinated approach was needed to the new technology.

The Chief Executive was also concerned that driver costs could be as much as 65 per cent of the total service charge to customers, and he considered the pay structure to be both cumbersome and uncompetitive. He was particularly concerned that the large amounts of overtime worked were rewarding anti-social work hours, and he believed that this whole question required a radical review in order to rationalise and reduce the cost base.

Overall, in his benchmarking exercise Matheson concluded that the first requirement was a comprehensive market analysis, which would seek to identify and quantify all transport related target markets for GCS services. This would be followed by an objective business analysis to inform future strategy development. The results of this two-pronged approach were therefore expected to go a long way to answering a variety of key questions, including the services that GCS should seek to provide; whether the pool resources could ever be effective on a market basis; if GCS could provide a wider transport co-ordination role; and the particular strengths that GCS may have in targeted markets.

It could be said that, through GCDA and the innovative approach of the Chief Executive, long-standing problems for GCS were now for the first time receiving the undivided attention of Agency management. From now on, questions of market potential and costs would be daily considerations at the heart of the business. This fresh approach was illustrated particularly at a management meeting of 30 September 1997, when it was decided that GCS needed to send clear signals that it was becoming cost conscious. Consequently, it should not be automatically putting up prices each year in line with inflation. Instead, holding prices for a year would send out an important signal. The concept of lowering charges in the hope of actually improving revenue was therefore at an early stage targeted as one of the chief means to bring GCS out of its financial crisis.

Nick Matheson remembers that there was quite a bit of internal opposition to the concept of reducing rates:

It took a couple of years before we were able to do this, and it was certainly a gamble, but it paid off in a big way in that our revenues actually increased! We were able to justify reducing prices on the grounds that our customers were gaining the benefits of our improved efficiencies. The previous method of just increasing prices by a certain percentage each year was a good example of people accepting things because they had always been that way.

Another strand of the recovery strategy was also in place, when it was reported in July 1998 that the first live run of the Phoenix software up to invoice stage had been successful. As we saw earlier, the development of the coordinating Phoenix programme enabled much improved communications between administration and operations.

In 1998–99 GCS was able to make a net contribution of £501,000 to the GCDA surplus that was returned to the Treasury, and in 1999–2000 the GCS contribution was £319,000, despite the strategy being put in place of holding down prices. In 1999–2000 GCS sales revenue stood at £8.39 million, of which the allocated cars contributed £7.54 million, and short term hire £768,000. Significantly, STH attracted twenty-one new accounts, worth around £102,000, and undertook over 26,700 separate journeys. As we noted earlier, a major car investment programme was also put in place for STH, with a fleet of new Vauxhall Omegas costing £100,000 replacing the existing old fleet. In addition, £796,000 was spent on new allocated cars.

A MILLENIUM REVIEW

By 2000, GCDA was due for an official triennial review, three years after its inception. This was clearly an important opportunity to show what the new Agency had achieved, but it also contained potential hazards, given the mood of foreboding and crisis that had surrounded GCS in 1997. It was therefore vital for GCDA to demonstrate to the Cabinet Office that the Agency had taken a turn in the right

direction, and that the government could have confidence in a viable future for GCS and IDS.

The review was undertaken by the specialist Cabinet Office Agencies Unit, in association with consultants Lorien. In the event, the Review was able to report the good news that GCDA had performed very well financially, meeting all its financial targets in 1997–98 and 1998–99, and generating comfortable surpluses that had been returned to the Treasury (although it was noted that GCS had performed considerably better than IDS). The Review was particularly pleased to see these results, given the Agency's bold strategy to freeze GCS' 1999–2000 prices at 1998–99 levels. Given the low-key expectations that had attended its birth, the Agency had been set modest growth targets, involving small or no annual growth in cash terms, but actually a reduction in real terms. This had been justified on the grounds that both GCS and IDS operated in small markets, in which the scope for growth was limited. There had also been some uncertainty about allocations in the wake of the 1997 general election, together with GCS' own strategy of pursuing price reductions.

However, GCDA had achieved significantly better growth in cash terms than anticipated, with 2.5 per cent against a target of 0.5 per cent in 1997–98; and 3.8 per cent against a 0 per cent target in 1998–99. In fact, with the benefit of hindsight, the Review concluded that the success in meeting the growth targets might not have fully stretched the Agency. On the other hand, the Review observed that the value of growth targets might be limited, given that GCS had a virtual monopoly, and in any case always had to be in a position to respond to changes in the allocation after a government reshuffle, or a need for greater security. The Review therefore concluded that serious consideration should be given to setting targets on an alternative basis.

Significantly, the Review conceded that verification of GCDA's performance in the areas of efficiency and productivity had proved difficult because of the poor accounting and management information systems that GCDA had inherited from SAFE (it was these weaknesses that the Phoenix programme was designed to address). It was also acknowledged that weaknesses in customer satisfaction

surveys had been inherited from SAFE, but that GCDA had introduced improvements, including the commissioning of two customer perception surveys for GCS and IDS from consultants, and the establishment of customer groups.

The Review also addressed the situation with regard to GCDA having to operate within the restricted scope of the Cabinet Office's annual financial regime, that included the stipulation of surpluses being returned to the Treasury. This meant that GCDA was not able to set aside surpluses or borrow money to fund capital improvements, and must seek parliamentary approval for any increase in business that affected its forecast revenue or costs. The Review therefore recommended that further consideration should be given to the delivery of services within a less restricted trading fund regime, which would allow the Chief Executive much greater freedom to pursue commercial objectives. It could be said that the fact a more commercial trading fund status was even being considered for GCDA reflected the improvements in its fortunes since 1997 (although in the event the trading fund option was eventually rejected on the grounds basically that GCDA was an organisation with a public service ethos, and that the surpluses earned did not justify the Agency having this more independent status).

The outcome of the Triennial Review was confirmed in March 2000 in a letter from Ian McCartney, the Cabinet Office Minister responsible for GCDA, to Treasury Chief Secretary Andrew Smith. As well as reporting on the evaluation of the Agency, the letter also gave details of the review of options carried out by consultants Lorien. This review endorsed the evaluation study, and recommended Agency status for GCDA for a further five years offered the best value for money, taking into account the security requirements of customers.

Intriguingly, with powerful echoes of the turbulent privatisation debate that had continued for several years in the 1980s, the report concluded that the unique nature of the personal service provided to Ministers by GCS, customers' high security requirements, and lack of credible private sector providers or partners, meant that the Service should remain wholly in the public sector. The main focus of recommendations was therefore internal, and to a large extent these reflected those set out by Nick Matheson in his benchmarking

exercise of 1997, including a package of reforms aimed at modernising drivers' terms and conditions, and reducing costs while developing the existing pool service. The report also – perhaps hopefully given past experiences – identified scope for improving the efficiency and productivity of various parts of GCS through rationalisation and cooperation with other public sector providers of cars and drivers, such as the Ministry of Defence and the Metropolitan Police.

One other significant issue raised by the report sought to address the concerns over the perceived high costs of GCS. It was recommended that a pilot scheme be undertaken to determine the demand for, and the improvements in efficiency to be gained from, pooling allocated services to Ministers on a departmental or wider basis. It was clearly hoped here that improvements in efficiency could be achieved by GCS being in a position to rationalise its services, and it was reported that Nick Matheson intended to approach customer departments to seek volunteers to take part in the pilot. In his letter, Ian McCartney also noted that he would wish to see closer relationships developed between GCS drivers and Private Office teams, and that he would be consulting colleagues separately on this.

Overall, the 2000 Review presented a positive picture of GCDA and GCS that could hardly have been anticipated in 1997 (certainly not by Roger Freeman!), and ensured that the Agency would be given the opportunity to build on this success over the next five years.

GCS Passes an Official Inspection

It is often overlooked that, in addition to Ministers and senior Whitehall officials, GCS also provides transport for a number of Chief Executives of official bodies. These include the government's Chief Scientific Adviser, the Chief Medical Officer, and the Comptroller and Auditor General. Another office in this category is the Chief Inspector of Schools at the Office for Standards in Education. In 2003, the holder of this office, David Bell, wrote to GCS to express his appreciation at the quality of service they provided for him on his travels. Bell's letter illustrates well not only the ability once again of GCS to aid an official in performing his job efficiently, but also that it is not only Ministers who can build close relationships with drivers:

'On every single occasion I have needed it, the car has been exactly where I wanted it at the right time. Given the rather busy schedule that I have, this quality of service has been absolutely crucial in helping me to do my job more effectively.

'I should also like to pay tribute to GCS drivers. They have been unfailingly helpful; highly professional; supportive; and discreet. I have also found them to be, without exception, extremely pleasant. I am pleased to say that I have been able to strike up a good relationship with whoever has been allocated to drive for me. Contractors also clearly know what is expected of them when carrying out GCS work. There is obviously a very effective system for identifying who is suitable to carry out this work.'

In 2006 David Bell himself joined the ranks of senior Whitehall departmental officials, when he became Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education and Skills.

ESTABLISHING A NEW IDENTITY, 2000–05

If the 2000 Review set a marker that confirmed the presence of GCDA as a valid and viable Executive Agency, then the first years of the twenty-first century provided the opportunity to establish an identity that finally allowed GCS to break away from the constrictions that had contained it for five decades. Nothing illustrated the shift in culture towards a more entrepreneurial and proactive perspective than the growth of Short Term Hire, and the associated market initiatives. Although the allocated sector remains predominant for GCS, by deliberately seeking out business in the more variable and competitive STH market, where the customer has a potentially huge choice of private hire, taxi and minicab operators, the Service has found a means of projecting a more positive image.

By 2005, STH had become a stand-alone operation within GCS, and demand had grown substantially from around £750,000 in 2000 to £2 million in 2005. A large contributory factor here was the bold decision to hold, or even reduce, prices that had previously been considered excessive by many customers. This was illustrated particularly well in the GCDA 2000–01 Annual Report and Accounts, where it was stressed that STH prices had been frozen at

1999–2000 levels. This was on top of the previous year's price reduction of 14 per cent. In other words, the cost of using STH had fallen by over 18 per cent in real terms over the previous two years.

In fact, STH evening rates rose only in 2003, and day rates were held until 2004. Yet as we have seen, STH revenues continued to rise, and by 2005 stood at 11 per cent of GCS income, up from 6 per cent in 2000. GCS estimates here that its rates are generally 20–30 per cent cheaper than those of its competitors, and makes the significant point that GCS is required to make full cost recovery only, without the profit margin impact on charging. In this context, it could be said that there is considerable irony in the public sector ethos that underpins GCS, in practice actually providing it with a significant commercial advantage! It is also the case that the long experience of GCS in the area of reliability and developing close relationships with its customers is an asset that money cannot buy. At the same time, the expansion of STH places an even higher premium on GCS dealing with reliable sub-contracted operators.

Perhaps of equal significance was that in the annual customer satisfaction survey, those scoring the STH service as 'excellent' or 'very good' rose from 54 per cent in 2000 to 75 per cent in 2004. Nevertheless, the comprehensive GCDA 2005 End-to-End Strategic Review (that was carried out mainly internally, and was set up by the Cabinet Office as the successor to the 2000 Triennial Review), emphasised that failure to anticipate developments and manage the future could leave the Agency with reduced business volume, leading to expense overhang and financial viability issues. The determination not to rest on its laurels was therefore evident in the intention to lead the debate and thinking. It was concluded that this required a marketing-led approach to explore customer needs and the different ways these could be met, and entailed undertaking deeper research into customer attitudes. The intention was that this would enable the Agency to be more proactive in advising customers on service options available, and on the most suitable alternatives for individual circumstances. This need for a more sophisticated marketing strategy was also recognised by Roy Burke, who succeeded Nick Matheson as Chief Executive in 2005, and as we will see later in the chapter, he has made this area a priority.

Another example of the greater entrepreneurial spirit within GCS is also illustrated by the Service's success in winning the contract to provide vehicles for Crown Court Judges in England and Wales. The previous system entailed using local companies, and it was believed that GCS almost halved the customer's previous costs. In fact, GCS had to overcome scepticism from some judiciary staff as to whether the Service could operate at lower costs without sacrificing quality. Another notable occasion where GCS won customer approval during this time was in the highly delicate area of the Northern Ireland peace talks, where the very specific demands of the event resulted in the Agency receiving several plaudits. At the same time, the need to be ready for unanticipated events was exemplified by the advent of the London Congestion Charge in 2003. Given the nature of its business, by 2004–05 GCS was paying the quite large amount of £158,000 in Congestion Charge fees, and this sum would have been still higher if the Service had not been using several hybrid electric–petrol Toyota Priuses, that are exempt.

Complementing the drive to increase income was the quest to rationalise the pay structure. As we have seen, for GCS drivers there has traditionally been a reliance on large amounts of overtime. Particularly for those driving allocated vehicles, with Ministers working long hours, and sometimes being required to be in Parliament until the early hours of the morning, irregular hours go with the job. However, a relatively low basic salary can have some serious implications, given that this is used for calculating pensions. In addition, the unpredictability of overtime can make it difficult for GCS to predict costs. The 2000–01 pay talks therefore aimed to simplify the complicated pay structure, and at the same time to find a way to increase basic pay significantly. Nick Matheson argues also that raising basic pay raised the self-respect and public credibility of the drivers: 'It meant that a driver could go to a bank or building society and obtain a loan on the basis of guaranteed pay. The new package took a lot of negotiating, but it was eventually accepted.'

Because the new package required a large increase in the Agency's payroll costs, special permission had to be obtained from the Treasury. The package resulted in major increases in staff costs of 10–12 per

cent in 2002–03 and 2003–04, although by 2004–05 the figure was much lower, at 3 per cent.

On the other hand, a continuing problem for GCS is driver recruitment. Although the Service has many outstanding examples of drivers with decades of experience, it is generally an ageing workforce, with insufficient suitable younger people coming forward. GCS here has to contend with changing times, where people are perhaps less prepared to make the necessary sacrifices in terms of the working pattern required of allocated drivers.

Despite its commercial growth, GCDA has not found it easy to measure efficiency. A major problem here is that placing the emphasis on one area can result in offsetting detrimental effects elsewhere. It could also be said that calculating efficiency reveals some of the dilemmas in pushing for commercial growth, in an organisation with an essential public service ethos. These difficulties were set out well in the 2002–03 Annual Report, when it was revealed that no less than three different efficiency targets had been tried. Initially, the pressure to lower running costs had been a driving factor, but this precluded growth because growth inevitably brings increased running costs.

Secondly, the ability to generate sales revenue was chosen, but by 1999–2000 this began to conflict with the primary aim of breaking even. As a non-profit organisation, pursuing greater profits could have caused the Agency to make decisions not always in the customers' best interests, and so this target was dropped from 2000–01.

Thirdly, the target of increasing income per £1 expenditure on direct labour costs was developed, as a basic measure to ensure the Agency had a robust income-to-expenditure ratio. This target was introduced in 1998–99, and worked well for two years, but as the target increased, the point was reached in 2000–01 where to meet it would have meant raising prices more than necessary to meet business needs. This target was therefore dropped for 2002–03.

Subsequently, the focus moved towards a wider and more consensual criterion involving the efficient management of overall financial performance, taking into account all cost impacts and the needs of customers through price constraint.

The Agency also found it difficult to fulfil some of the goals set in the 2000 Review. For example, as we saw, it had been

recommended to investigate and consider the options for merger or rationalisation of the protected fleet with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Metropolitan Police and the Ministry of Defence. Perhaps inevitably, however, given the history of rivalry between the parties concerned, any progress was blocked by a general lack of cooperation.

Similarly, the 2000 recommendation for identifying Departments that might be suitable for carrying out a trial of pooling allocated cars was also dropped after several attempts, because conflicting requirements made it impractical for Ministers to share resources.

Nevertheless, Nick Matheson and GCS staff were able to make some significant breakthroughs in the relationships with individual Departments that had previously been based on the close relationships between Ministers and drivers. As Matheson explains:

What you had was drivers lobbying 'their' Ministers about pay and conditions. In turn, the Minister would lobby the Cabinet Office on the drivers' behalf. This would cause a great deal of aggravation to the Cabinet Secretary. However, I contacted the Departments, and said that rather than this indirect and inefficient system, they should contact me to discuss any problems. A few Departments did do this, and from there I think it quickly went round Whitehall that I meant business, and things improved.

The 2005 End-to-End Strategic Review was therefore able to conclude that the clear focus and accountability of Agency status had provided a sound basis on which to develop and manage the recovery plan. The financial management information system also met specific business needs, and the Agency was able to extend delegation of responsibility and accountability to each business. The Review therefore argued strongly that the government's best interests were served by GCDA continuing to provide its existing range of services in its current overall configuration.

The publication of the 2005 End-to-End Review coincided with the retirement of Chief Executive Nick Matheson, and its generally positive findings and conclusions demonstrated that, in its eight-year

life, GCDA had confounded the expectations of many by not only surviving, but also firmly establishing its distinctive identity in the Whitehall world.

THE ECLIPSE OF 'BUY BRITISH'

For decades, the close relationship between GCS and the Rover Group, in its various manifestations, provided the mainstay of the car fleet. Over the years, Jaguars became more evident as a choice for senior Ministers (as we saw in Chapter Five, some Ministers, such as Lord Whitelaw, demanded nothing less!), while UK-manufactured (if US-owned) Fords and Vauxhalls were also popular, at least for Junior Ministers. From the 1970s, there was an influx of Japanese investment in the UK, with Nissan, Toyota and Honda all opening plants, although relatively few of these models joined the GCS fleet. Given its official position, it was inevitable that GCS would be lobbied and pressured to 'Buy British', particularly from MPs with a constituency interest in car manufacture. From the 1980s, however, the definition of what exactly constituted a 'British' vehicle became more and more problematic. For example, the close association on vehicle development in this period between Rover and Honda led many to assert that new Rover models were little more than Hondas in disguise. In any case, in 1994 Rover was taken over by the German group BMW.

As globalisation has pervaded car manufacture, it has become even more difficult to give a national identity to a model, with component parts often manufactured in several countries, and then shipped to another location to be assembled. There is also UK membership of the EU to consider, with all the political and legal implications of dealing with a market of twenty-seven nations. For GCS, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it was also becoming increasingly evident that it could no longer assume a reliance on Rover. The BMW ownership did not prove to be a lasting success, and in 2000 Rover was sold for a knockdown price to UK investors. From this time, it was evident that the company was in a highly precarious state, with no guarantees for its long term future.

It was in this climate that in August 2000 GCDA Chief Executive Nick Matheson wrote a memo to the Cabinet Office Press Office. This was in response to the recent announcement that the Department of Social Security and the Inland Revenue had each signed large-scale three-year vehicle contracts that did not include Rover. Matheson took the opportunity to spell out the new reality of 'Buy British'. Firstly, he emphasised that although GCS continued to use Rover cars, the vehicles for Ministers were purchased according to their fitness for purpose and cost, not country of origin. He added here that European procurement rules were designed to ensure that all EU manufacturers had an equal opportunity to bid to supply cars, and it would be wholly improper to discriminate.

More generally, Matheson pointed out that it was worth bearing in mind that the country of manufacture could be misleading. He gave here the example of the Nissan Primera, at that time a GCS choice for Junior Ministers:

The Primera probably contains a higher proportion of British manufactured parts than any traditional British badged car, including Rover. Cars that are thought of as traditionally British (such as the Vauxhall Vectra and Ford Mondeo) are actually manufactured in Europe. The Jaguar company is now owned by Ford, and some Jaguars have a high proportion of imported component parts. Until Rover was purchased by BMW, many Rover components, including engines, were of Japanese origin. Nevertheless, currently British manufactured cars make up 34 per cent of the ministerial fleet.

The negative tone of Matheson at this time on the subject of 'Buy British' might have been partly influenced by the difficulties that GCS was encountering with Rover. Cabinet Ministers had been using the Rover 800, but this was now out of production, and had been replaced by the Rover 75. GCS was due to test this new model, but in his memo to the Cabinet Office he expressed concern that the Rover 75 shared the same 2.5 litre engine as the old Rover 800, and GCS had suffered some bad experiences with this. Matheson was also concerned that the Rover 75 was a smaller car than the Rover 800, and so might not be suitable for rear seat passengers such as Ministers.

In fact, Matheson had already had some bad experiences in actually obtaining the new Rover 75. In June 1999 he had written to the Director of Corporate Sales at Rover Cars expressing his frustration: 'I am disappointed in the delays in receiving the Rover 75 to test. I find myself in the embarrassing position that, having persuaded others to delay a decision, so that the new Rover could be included, I now have to explain to Ministers why it is that Rover have chosen not to cooperate.'

In the event, the Rover 75 was eventually adopted into the GCS fleet, and Nick Matheson describes how he was able to persuade the company to manufacture a larger version of the vehicle:

I asked Rover if they had ever calculated the advertising value to the company of their vehicles being regularly seen by millions on TV pulling up outside 10 Downing Street. They agreed that you could not calculate this, and emphasised that they wanted to cooperate with us in any way possible. This led to them manufacturing for us a larger long wheelbase version of the 75, that was previously unavailable. In fact, they were so pleased with this model that they then put it on general sale. We have also been through this same process with Jaguar. I think it does demonstrate that in many ways GCS is quite an important and influential organisation.

In 2000–01 the GCDA Annual Report listed 236 vehicles in the GCS fleet. These included nineteen Rover 800/Sterlings and one Rover 75, as well as eight smaller Rover 45s. There were also fifteen Jaguars. The fleet also contained forty-nine Ford Mondeos, manufactured in Belgium, and forty-four Vauxhall Omegas, manufactured in Germany.

The GCS fleet at this time also contained eight Nissan Primeras, manufactured at the company's plant at Washington in the north-east of England, but the Primera was living on borrowed time as a GCS vehicle. Its final fate was described when Fraser Kemp MP (representing the Houghton and Washington East constituency) asked a House of Commons' question in January 2005, as to why the Primera was no longer on the official list for GCS vehicles. The reply came from Cabinet Office Minister David Miliband, who acknowledged that the

Primera had been on the list of cars available to Ministers when the Guidance was reviewed in 1997. Unfortunately, it proved not to be a popular choice, due to its size and comfort. Consequently, only nine were selected by Ministers and senior officials between 1997 and 2000. An updated model was introduced in the Spring of 2002, but this did not meet the fitness for purpose criteria. The last Primera to be selected by a Minister had been in December 2000, and so it had been deleted from the list in Spring 2004, because of lack of demand and also to reduce costs of holding unnecessary spare parts and maintenance equipment.

More significantly for GCS, in 2005 the demise of Rover in the UK brought to an end the relationship that had been at the heart of its vehicle investment almost through its history. At least initially, this tended to place even more emphasis on the Jaguar as a suitable GCS car manufactured in the UK. This was illustrated in the GCS vehicle list for 2005–06, which still included sixteen Rover 75s, and also twelve Jaguars. Out of the total fleet of 186, however, there were also sixty-five Belgian-manufactured Ford Mondeos and thirty-three German-manufactured Vauxhall Omegas. Crucially, the fleet now also contained thirty-five hybrid electric–petrol Toyota Priuses, manufactured in Japan (up from only six in 2004–05). The ever-growing presence of the Prius symbolised how the environmental agenda had now become the predominant consideration in GCS vehicle purchase, with considerations of ‘Buy British’ forced into the background. At the same time, GCS environmental objectives had themselves shifted considerably in just a few years.

COMPLICATIONS ON THE ROAD TO GOING GREEN

Perhaps no event since 1997 has so symbolised the manner in which the environmental agenda has invaded the national consciousness, as the now notorious incident at the 1999 Labour Party Conference in Bournemouth, involving Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott and his official Jaguar. In fact, the Bournemouth escapade represented a culmination of a joust between Prescott and the media that had begun shortly after Labour came to power. As Colin

Brown describes in his biography of Prescott, when Prescott became a Minister, he already owned an old second-hand Jaguar saloon that he continued to use for private engagements, and on joining the Cabinet he was allocated a Jaguar, as a senior Minister.¹ The problem for Prescott was that, as well as being Deputy Prime Minister, he was also Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and in 1998 his Department had published a Transport White Paper, *A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone*. This White Paper set out proposals designed to promote an integrated transport policy, and in the Foreword, Prescott stressed that hard choices had to be made on how to combat congestion and pollution, while persuading people to use their cars less – and public transport a little more.²

As Brown comments, it was therefore inevitable that as Prescott called for restraint in the use of the car for short trips, the media would accuse him of being a hypocrite for using not one, but two, thirsty Jaguars. Consequently, *The Sun* began calling him ‘Two Jags’.³ These accusations clearly had an effect on Prescott, and on March 9 1998, in reply to a House of Commons question concerning the cost of leasing his GCS Jaguar, Prescott himself added a note that for technical reasons his official car could not be converted to run on less polluting alternative fuels. However, the Deputy Prime Minister was pleased to announce that Jaguar had offered GCS the opportunity to replace his current car with an ex-test vehicle that could be converted easily to run on less polluting liquefied petroleum gas.

Nick Matheson describes how he visited the Deputy Prime Minister to suggest the converted car: ‘Prescott was happy to agree. The only condition he made was that there should be sufficient room in the boot, where the gas is stored, to accommodate all his wife’s luggage!’ Prescott was clearly keen to emphasise his environmental credentials by arguing that the Jaguar offer represented an excellent opportunity for the government to work with a major British engineering company, to achieve a showcase environmentally-friendly vehicle development. In fact, Nick Matheson points out that Prescott was the first person in the world to have an LPG converted Jaguar, and that he was even issued with his model before the Queen, who had also ordered one!

There was to be little public respite for Prescott, however, and on that fateful day in 1999 Prescott and his wife Pauline were staying at a hotel 250 yards from the conference centre. A strong wind was blowing, and the couple made the journey in their official car. On arriving at the conference centre, Prescott was asked by a journalist why he had taken the car, and replied: ‘Because of the security reasons for one thing and, second, my wife doesn’t like to have her hair blown about. Have you got another silly question?’²⁴ Brown claims that Prescott had intended the mention of his wife’s hair to be a joke, and that the chief reason for them taking the car was that they were late, with the Deputy Prime Minister due to make a speech five minutes after leaving the hotel.⁵

Regardless of the true reasons, the story of Prescott making a 250-yard journey in a Jaguar in order to protect his wife’s hairdo has achieved almost legendary status, and ensured that the ‘Two Jags’ nickname would be impossible to shake off. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the whole affair is exactly why such an essentially trivial incident is remembered at all. If it had happened only a few years earlier, it is almost inconceivable that even an Environment Secretary taking a 250-yard car journey would have attracted the slightest bit of attention. In fact, the politician concerned might well have been keen to use the car, in order to publicly demonstrate his government’s ‘Buy British’ credentials. Ultimately, therefore, what makes the story really memorable is that it represented a symbolic political landmark, in demonstrating that the environmental agenda had become an integral part of mainstream politics, and that in future no government could take these issues for granted.

David Cameron and the Politics of Green Travel

Perhaps no politician has exploited more his official travel facilities, in order to demonstrate his environmental credentials, than Conservative Party Leader David Cameron. As we have seen, the provision of a GCS vehicle for Opposition Leaders dates back to Edward Heath granting this privilege to Harold Wilson in 1970. Ironically, Cameron’s environmental campaigning has involved him in quite frequently not actually using his GCS vehicle, although he has discovered that this can be a two-edged sword.

From the first day of his appointment as Conservative Party Leader, in December 2005, Cameron was anxious to make a political point about reducing emissions, and this included at times being seen to cycle to work. Unfortunately, the impact of this green campaigning was diluted significantly, when a newspaper photographed Cameron's official car following him, in order to carry the Tory Leader's shoes and briefcase. An embarrassed Cameron explained that he could not find a pannier large enough to carry all his things, although he did subsequently attach a cycle basket, and reassured the media that he would no longer use his car on the days he cycled to work.

Cameron has nevertheless also aroused controversy over his decision to switch his GCS vehicle. After originally using a Vauxhall Omega as his official car (with CO₂ emissions of around 276 grams per kilometre), in common with government Ministers, Cameron was offered a hybrid Toyota Prius (with its CO₂ emissions at the much lower level of 104 g/km). However, Cameron turned this offer down, in favour of a commercially-leased, but significantly larger and more expensive, hybrid Lexus GS 450h (like the Prius, manufactured in Japan), emitting 186 g/km. In reply to critics who accused the Tory Leader of environmental hypocrisy in turning down the Prius, Cameron claimed that he would have needed two of these cars to hold his entourage that travelled with him.⁶

NEW ENVIRONMENTAL GOALS

The potential threat of global warming, perceived particularly through emissions of so-called greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), is something that no government can afford the risk of ignoring, regardless of the heated arguments that continue on both sides of the debate about the exact nature of the threat. Similarly, over the past decade it has become increasingly important for GCS to demonstrate its credentials in this area.

In 1997 the Kyoto Protocol (part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) set a UK target of a 12.5 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2008–12. The British government itself decided to set a more ambitious domestic goal of reducing CO₂ emissions by 20 per cent by 2010. In the event, although the Kyoto target is on course to be met,

the government itself has conceded that the 2010 target is unlikely to be fulfilled. Nevertheless, this has not deterred Ministers from setting longer term targets, and in his Foreword to the 2003 Energy White Paper, Prime Minister Tony Blair confirmed that the government had set a UK target of a 60 per cent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2050.⁷

In recent years, the momentum gained by the politics and economics of climate change has been particularly demonstrated by the 2006 Stern Review, on the economics of climate change. Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown commissioned economist Sir Nicholas Stern to consider the economic costs of the impacts of climate change, and the costs and benefits of action to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases. The Review came to the plain conclusion that ignoring climate change would eventually damage economic growth, and that the benefits of strong, early action considerably outweigh the costs.⁸

The government has followed up these findings in 2007 with a Climate Change Bill. This proposes legally binding limits for the UK to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 60 per cent by 2050 (in line with the earlier commitment), but also an interim target of a cut of at least 26 per cent by 2020. Governments will therefore be required to set five-year 'carbon budgets' stipulating maximum emissions with tax changes, regulations and 'cap and trade' mechanisms to achieve the desired cuts. The government anticipated that the Bill would become law in 2008, and so make Britain the first country to commit to legally binding targets for medium and long term cuts in carbon emissions. Significantly for GCS, in launching the Bill Environment Secretary David Miliband explained that the carbon savings would be achieved across all sectors of the economy, through improvements in energy and fuel efficiency, and new technology such as electric cars.⁹

The economics and politics of climate change is of course a massive subject in its own right, but as the government's flagship transport organisation GCS clearly has to set an example that others can follow. The transport sector, including aviation, produces about one quarter of the UK's total carbon emissions. Road transport contributes 85 per cent of this, with passenger cars accounting for around half of all

carbon emitted by the transport sector.¹⁰ The government here has a Powering Future Vehicles strategy, designed to provide a framework aimed at promoting the development, introduction and take-up of low carbon vehicles and fuels.¹¹ It is in these areas that GCS has worked hard to successfully make major changes, although progress has certainly not been straightforward.

SHIFTING GEARS

The degree to which the environmental debate and goals has moved on over the past decade is illustrated by the fact that, at its inception in 1997, GCDA had a straightforward target of averaging 25.5 miles per gallon for its entire fleet. At this time, the GCS fleet consisted of 179 cars, all petrol driven. We saw in the previous chapter how in the early 1990s GCS had trialled gas-fuelled cars, and from the late 1990s it appeared that these types of vehicles would form the basis of the Agency's strategy to reduce its carbon emissions. As we saw with John Prescott and his Jaguar, the trend was to convert cars to LPG, and in 1998 GCS was able to announce that for official duties, 10 Downing Street operated an LPG converted Ford Galaxy and compressed natural gas (CNG) converted Rover Sterling.

Around this time, GCS announced that it would gradually replace its fleet with cars capable of running on alternative fuels over the next five to six years, and fifteen to twenty cars were expected to be converted each year. The Agency believed that there was a strong business case to be made for gas powered vehicles, as well as the benefits in reducing harmful emissions.

At this time, GCS targets revolved around conversion of the fleet to alternatively fuelled vehicles, with a particular emphasis on LPG. For example, twelve cars were converted to LPG in 1998–99, nineteen in 1999–2000, and ten in 2000–01. On 29 August 2003 Cabinet Office Minister Douglas Alexander wrote a letter to Transport Minister David Jamieson, in which he stated that he was pleased to see that, in the context of the Powering Future Vehicles Strategy, GCDA had 29 per cent of its fleet running on alternative fuels. Of these, 20 per cent were running on LPG. However, he sounded a significant warning note in the fact that a number of new

models were not capable of conversion to LPG. On the other hand, GCS now had four of the hybrid electric–petrol Toyota Priuses on long term evaluation.

In fact, Alexander's letter indicated a shift in objectives by GCS. As the 2005 End-to-End Review explained, from 1999 the emphasis at the Agency had been on a switch to alternatively fuelled vehicles, with a target of converting 50 per cent of all cars purchased that were capable of being converted (this was later raised to 75 per cent). By 2002, however, the problems in obtaining vehicles capable of LPG conversion, and the often poor after-sales service, had led to second thoughts. Consequently, in 2003 the Agency target was switched to reflect government targets to lower CO₂ emissions. The intention was to establish a benchmark of average amounts of CO₂ emissions expressed in grams per kilometre (g/km), and thereafter reduce the average by 2 per cent each year. This target switch allowed the Agency to introduce a number of new engine technologies.

In particular, it is the hybrid Toyota Prius that has emerged as the chief trailblazer in the quest to achieve the new targets. The rapid switch to the Prius has resulted from a change in the vehicles available to Cabinet Ministers under the Prime Minister's Rules. The choice is now between the Prius and the Jaguar XJ 2.7 litre diesel that takes a blend of 5 per cent biodiesel, and ultra low sulphur diesel (sulphur is the pollutant avoided). Significantly, the Agency failed to hit its CO₂ reduction targets of 2 per cent per year in 2003–04 and 2004–05, but comfortably achieved the target in 2005–06 (204 g/km achieved against a target of 227.39 g/km). A major factor in this success was the increase in the use of the Prius, with its average CO₂ emissions of 104 g/km.

The success of GCS here has led to a tougher target for 2006–07 of 194.67 g/km. This reflects new Department for Transport targets for the Agency to reduce average tailpipe emissions by 5 per cent in 2006–07, compared with 2005–06. GCDA also now has a target to increase the use of alternative engine and fuel technology by 10 per cent in 2006–07, compared with the previous year.

The Prius is also now the mainstay of the innovative Green Car Service that GCS runs to supplement its STH service, and this has also proved to be very successful, with charges below those for an

equivalent black taxi cab. GCDA Chief Executive Roy Burke emphasises the achievements, but also the necessary choices involved in hitting the environmental targets:

This year alone (2006–07), our fleet average CO₂ emissions have reduced by nearly 16 per cent. This is a massive decrease, and I would be astonished if any other fleet in the country could match that. When I came here in 2005, the garage was full of Omegas and Peugeot 607s, but the fleet has changed massively, and the garage is getting full of Priuses. The only way realistically at the moment that we can hit our targets is through the use of hybrids such as the Prius and Honda Civic. The only alternative would be to go for smaller cars. However, we have to take the realistic view. We are driving some of the most important people in the country, and should we really be driving them around in small cars? Can you see John Prescott getting into a Mini? It's not going to happen!

A Different Perspective

David Turner became a non-executive director of GCDA in 1998, after previously serving on the Advisory Board of SAFE. He brought to this a background as a chartered surveyor, who joined Barclays Bank to manage their property interests, but also became responsible for a car service operated by the Bank. He believes that, as a non-executive director, he can provide perspectives and advice from the private sector, and also act as a sounding board.

He found that morale was low when he joined GCDA, and that there were a lot of lax practices in ways of operating that had previously not been questioned. He believed that it was this culture that needed to change, and was a bigger obstacle to progress than any single financial policy. Nevertheless, with his Barclays car service experience, he was able to provide advice on Nick Matheson's strategy of reducing charges. He argues that this type of expertise is definitely transferable: 'For example, a restaurant and a steel mill may apparently do completely different things, but in many ways the service they provide is the same, and the business solutions may be very similar.'

He emphasises that he has seen a radical improvement in working practices within GCS over the past decade, and also in the financial

performance. Nevertheless, he believes that there are still significant battles to be won in managing demand:

'Cabinet Ministers probably need to be provided with official cars seven days a week, but for nearly everyone else these could be purchased on the basis of just a relatively short period of time each day, and given a price, with a guarantee that a car can be provided at this time. I think we have to lead a shift in the Whitehall culture in these matters.'

One important feature of the Agency that Turner believes is particularly important is that it continues to have its own in-house workshop: 'This is an unusual feature nowadays, with the work more likely to be handed over to the manufacturers. The Agency workshop is a profit centre in its own right, and so this brings in outside work. It again demonstrates the highly distinctive culture of GCS.'

It is this culture that, coming in as an outsider, Turner found to be the most remarkable feature of GCS:

'I saw a great deal of loyalty in the car service I managed for Barclays, but this has been taken to another level at GCS, with its remarkable culture of loyalty and discretion. I think that nearly all the staff pride themselves on this. I remember once coming out of the Institute of Directors and being hailed by a taxi driver. I wondered what he was doing, then I realised that he was an ex-GCS driver, who wanted to stop his taxi and make a point of speaking to me. I think this is typical of GCS, and to a large extent the values and culture become self-selecting. One or two people have joined GCS from good quality car hire companies, but then found that they just couldn't adapt to the new way of life, and so left.'

DESTINATION TRANSPORT

As so often throughout its history, GCS (as part of GCDA) found its sponsoring Department, this time the Cabinet Office, at least in some respects a less than ideal home. Amidst the 'bran tub' of the Cabinet Office's assorted responsibilities, and with the latter's central strategic co-ordinating function for the government as a whole, it was perhaps inevitable that GCDA was not a high priority interest, and so was pushed to the fringes. Against this, it could also be said that there were some advantages here for GCDA, in that the Agency was basically left alone to get on with the job!

Until 2002, the Cabinet Office had at least operated a specialist Agencies Unit that could liaise with GCDA, and provide objective comment and analysis to the Permanent Secretary on the Agency's performance. When this Unit was abolished, however, responsibility for overseeing GCDA passed to the Managing Director of the Cabinet Office, and consequently the relationship between Agency and Department became more distant. The ambivalent attitude of GCDA was made clear in the 2005 End-to-End Strategic Review, where it was pointed out that the Agency's relationship with Ministers had been a very passive one, with very little engagement for a number of years. For example, quarterly reports were sent out, but the Chief Executive had never been required to present these in person. This was at least interpreted in a positive way in the Review, as signifying that the Agency was seen as being well managed and capable of resolving issues before they became politically sensitive. Consequently, ministerial intervention was seldom required.

Nevertheless, the Review stressed that an ability to engage at the level below Managing Director would be very helpful. The re-establishment of the Agencies Unit was not being suggested, but it was believed that a focal point was required within the Cabinet Office that GCDA could work with on a regular basis.

Before the end of 2005, however, the Cabinet Office itself recognised the need for GCDA to find a new home. The new situation was set out in a letter of 7 November from Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell to David Rowlands, the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Transport. The letter revealed that the Prime Minister had said he wanted to have a smaller and better focused Cabinet Office. As GCDA was principally a fleet management organisation, it was considered the Agency had stronger synergies with the DfT than with the Cabinet Office. Equally important, the Cabinet Secretary believed that the DfT had a large and well-run delivery function that his own Office lacked. Nevertheless, O'Donnell was clearly anxious to retain some of the more politically sensitive aspects of GCS functions set out in the Prime Minister's Rules, and so the letter stressed that the Cabinet Office would continue to have responsibility for guidance about decisions on choice of cars available for individual Ministers, together with any related propriety issues.

It could be argued that an official recognition of the essential character of GCS as a transport organisation was overdue, although GCDA Chief Executive Roy Burke points out that in some ways the Agency remains one that it is difficult for government to categorise:

We are not a core business for the DfT, but we are an Agency that is trying to implement some of the direct results of their policies. In this respect you could say that we are consumers of their policies. Nevertheless, they are very interested in what we do. This can be a bit of a two-edged sword. The Cabinet Office was too remote, but under the DfT it means that people here spend a lot of time feeding information to the Department. This entails a great deal of work. On the other hand, the DfT has been very supportive on issues such as carbon dioxide emission targets, and we can liaise with a wide range of DfT Agencies, such as Driving Standards, MoT Testing and Vehicle Certification. In addition, I chair the UK Vehicle Security Advisory Group, and DfT people are providing valuable data here on important technical matters. We could never have worked on that basis with the Cabinet Office.

The Intermediary Role

David Smith served as a GCDA non-executive director from 2001 to 2006, after a long career in the Civil Service, first in the Department of the Environment, and latterly at the Cabinet Office. As we saw in the previous chapter, he oversaw SAFE for the Cabinet Office, and in this role acted as an intermediary between the Department and the Agency. He continued this role for GCDA, although he points out that, over time, GCDA became the only Agency left within the Cabinet Office, which made it quite isolated.

In overseeing the Agency, David Smith had a significant role in developing its targets, in consultation with Chief Executive Nick Matheson, and a particular feature here was the greater emphasis on environmental goals. As a non-executive director, he was Chair of the Audit Committee, and had a significant role in the official reviews of the Agency in 2000 and 2005. As he observes: 'I think that taking up a position as a non-executive director reassured the Cabinet Office that someone familiar with both the Agency and the sponsoring Department was involved in its operation.'

David Smith's role in both camps places him in a particularly authoritative position to judge the merits of the Agency's switch from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Transport, and on the whole he sees this as a move with more drawbacks than advantages:

'GCDA's isolation was the chief reason for leaving the Cabinet Office, but it was probably more appropriately placed there. It does not have a lot in common with much that happens at the DfT. One area where the DfT has helped is with the environmental agenda, such as on technical questions concerning the cars. On the other hand, when we joined the DfT, I found myself involved in a lot more meetings, mainly liaising with other DfT Agencies and functions. This was all very interesting, but not really central to the work of GCS. The Agency will carry on OK, as it has its own identity, but time will be taken up in becoming involved in matters that are somewhat removed from its main functions. In fact, having to attend so many more of these meetings was one of the chief factors in persuading me to leave the Board in 2006'.

DEVELOPMENT AND TRADITIONS

Roy Burke, GCDA Chief Executive since May 2005, emphasises that, unlike Nick Matheson in 1997, he was not taking over a failing organisation, and so came in from a different direction. As a career civil servant, Burke had extensive Home Office experience, particularly in the areas of immigration and probation legal processes, and prior to joining GCDA was Head of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Appeals Panel. Nevertheless, he realised that GCDA would present very different challenge to his previous experience:

I knew the job would be interesting, but I was really rather nervous, as GCDA is predominantly an industrial unit and very different from the mainstream Civil Service. However, I had built up some useful knowledge of management practice, and had not had the opportunity previously to implement my ideas. Dare I say it, I was also considerably younger than many of the people working at the Agency, and so came in as, you might say, a new broom sweeping clean.

On becoming Chief Executive, Burke was immediately struck by what he perceived to be the too-narrow structure of the Agency:

For example, Jerry Doyle was Director of Operations for GCS and IDS. Everything went through that channel, but the Board of Directors, although obviously involved in the running of the business, was not part of that narrow funnel. Consequently, I decided on my first day to split up the Agency from an operational perspective into its two very distinct arms of mail and cars. I gave Jerry responsibility for GCS, which is far and away the largest part of what we do, and gave Nigel Bennett the opportunity to manage IDS. We had a consultation process, but it was implemented in August 2005.

Perhaps even more fundamentally, Burke was unhappy with what he saw as the serious lack of knowledge about what the customers actually wanted:

It struck me forcibly in the face, and I realised that we had to take action quickly, that we provided the allocated cars on the basis of how we wanted to sell it. What we were experiencing here was a complete lack of customer service. One of the first things I did was to ask Andrew Gardner, working on business development, to go out and speak to all our customers and to ask them if we were meeting their expectations. From this, a clear picture emerged that we were providing the service that we wanted rather than what the customer wanted. We were demonstrating all the worst possible habits of a monopoly. However, it is important to recognise that the customers do not have to use us, although they may think that they do.

Roy Burke acknowledges that, from any marketing perspective, it can be dangerous to interfere with the mindset of its main customers, but given that these customers did stay with GCS, he believes that this gave him the clear mandate to offer an alternative service. One of the first opportunities he had to put this fresh approach into practical action was with the then Transport Secretary Alistair Darling, shortly after GCDA was transferred there from the Cabinet Office:

I was talking to Darling about efficiencies, and pointed out to him that, as he was also Secretary of State for Scotland, he went to Scotland every Friday. However, the Department for Transport paid for a five day a week service, even though the Transport Secretary did not use this car on a Friday. This came as a bit of a surprise to him, and so I suggested that we should provide him and his colleagues with a four day a week service.

Burke found that the reply he eventually received was what he regarded as typical for the Civil Service:

The DfT said to us, 'Make sure that the driver does not lose out.' This is a manifestation of the power of the relationship between the passenger and driver for GCS. A private company would have just implemented the cost savings, but we went ahead with the four-day week, while also reassuring the drivers that they would not lose out financially. This means that the Agency picks up the cost, but we went ahead with it, and now forty of our 114 allocations have taken the four-day week.

A further potential saving identified by Burke was in the category of senior civil servants, who use their cars only at certain times of the day:

The Permanent Secretaries tend to come in to the Department in the morning, and go home at night, but spend the day in the office. This means that they are paying GCS for a twelve-hour day, where we pick them up at 7 am, and take them back at 7 pm, but what about all the unused hours in the middle? Instead, why not pay for a car in the morning and evening, and then just at the times they want it during the day? I am looking here for savings for government as a whole, and a few Departments have taken up this suggestion.

Roy Burke acknowledges that, in seeking to build up the GCS marketing capability, he is building on the work done by Nick Matheson, who identified this as a weakness in the Agency. A Business Development Unit has now been set up, with a specific aim

that the Agency should provide its services to more people. Consequently, a marketing professional, Harvey Leonard, has been recruited. A key element here is clearly the continued expansion of STH, but Roy Burke is particularly keen to link this with the environmental targets of the Agency, and sees the Green Car service as one with great scope for expansion. Green Cars was originally a joint venture with a private company, but now GCS mainly runs the operation in house, with the hybrid Prius once again at the forefront of the service.

Burke points out that Green Cars is almost a subset of STH:

People will migrate from STH to Green Cars. The Prius is particularly suitable for the relatively short journeys as it operates best in town, and the engine cuts out when the car is slowing down or stopping. It means that when customers contact us saying they want to order a STH vehicle, we have a responsibility to say that we can provide a Green Car that will cost them less. From the customer perspective, it is better for us to influence their choice.

It is a measure of how far GCDA has come over the past decade that GCS is now considering wider questions of the degree to which they can encourage Ministers and officials to become more environmentally aware, rather than being compelled to design a strategy for survival, as was the case in 1997. Indeed, if Ministers should gradually place less emphasis on the value of personal mobility, then this could cost GCS revenue. This is a new type of twenty-first century dilemma, where past experience carries few guidelines, but nevertheless requires new ways of thinking and innovative solutions.

NOTES

1. Colin Brown, *Prescott: The Biography* (Politico's Publishing, 2005), pp. 404–5.
2. *A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone: The Government's White Paper on the Future of Transport* (1998), Cm 3950, p. 3.
3. Brown, *Prescott*, p. 405.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 405–6.

5. Ibid., p. 406
6. *The Guardian*, 3 May 2006.
7. *Our Energy Future: Creating a Low Carbon Economy* (2003), Cm 5761, p. 3.
8. *The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* (2006), p. ii.
9. *The Guardian*, 14 March 2007.
10. Cm 5761, p. 63.
11. *Powering Future Vehicles: The Government Strategy* (2002), DfT, DTI, Defra, HMT.

CHAPTER 8

Service and Business

PENALTIES OF SUCCESS

At the heart of GCS for much of its sixty-year history is the paradox of how it could, on one level, be so highly valued by Ministers and officials for the service it provides, yet at the same time have been so neglected and basically taken for granted as an organisation by successive governments.

Perhaps one of the explanations for this peculiar split character of GCS lies in the very success of the service it provides. For many senior Ministers and officials, their experience of GCS exists largely on a one-to-one basis. As former GCDA Chief Executive Nick Matheson explains, some Ministers can take this to extremes:

Basically, Ministers think in terms of 'their' car and 'their' driver, although really they are hired from GCS by the Department concerned. Nevertheless, Ministers can be very possessive, and not really keen to share resources. I have even known Ministers to pass by other Ministers standing by the road, and simply refuse to give any of them a lift!

In one sense, therefore, the Minister–driver relationship is undoubtedly the GCS golden asset, and at times, such as in the case of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, it has probably been the single factor that has ensured the survival of the Service. On the other hand, Ministers can come to see GCS in terms of one single driver, and overlook the organisation that has to underpin the whole operation.

This blind spot can in turn have serious consequences for GCS. As we saw in Chapters Two and Three, Prime Ministers in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson, tended to deal with GCS in terms of the use and misuse of vehicles by Ministers, with the development of the Service itself very much a background concern. Over the years, this order of priorities can become something of a self-fulfilling vicious circle, with the organisation treated as a closed 'black box', that can somehow take care of itself. For many years, of course, successive generations of GCS people proved themselves to be masters of adaptation and the art of survival. In fact, the origins of the Service lay in the ad hoc, and quite unorthodox, development of the Motor Transport Corps during the Second World War, and this very British talent to improvise and make things work, often at its best in conditions of adversity, has served GCS particularly well.

In this sense, GCS turned the organisational difficulties to its advantage, but over the years the lack of strategic direction left the Service in an increasingly vulnerable position. This trend was aggravated as the Whitehall culture itself shifted radically in the 1980s and 1990s, towards one based more on market and business values. GCS came relatively late to this modern environment, but since the creation of the Government Car and Despatch Agency in 1997 it has been making up for lost time, with much greater emphasis on strategic planning, business expansion and the achievement of stated goals. GCS is therefore one organisation of which it can be safely said, that the arm's-length Executive Agency model has proved an undoubted success. Nevertheless, some tensions do remain between the established traditions of the Service, that have made it such a distinctive success, and the need to adapt to the modern world.

STRENGTHS AND VULNERABILITIES

The traditions and values of GCS, and the nature of the service it provides, inevitably make it vulnerable to critics seeking ways of undermining the government of the time. The fact alone of a Minister being transported around in the back seat of an upmarket vehicle will, perhaps inevitably, conjure up images of an over-privileged elite, that is indulged at the taxpayers' expense. Seen in

this light, GCS cannot win. If the government or individual Minister has, for whatever reason, become controversial and unpopular, then the GCS target will be seen as even easier to hit. In recent years, former Deputy Prime Minister ‘Two Jags’ John Prescott is the prime example of a Minister suffering in this way.

As we have seen, from the 1940s, Ministers themselves have been highly sensitive to criticisms of extravagance, and at least periodically demonstrated their desire to economise. At times, such as during the energy crisis of the early 1970s, GCS has been at the forefront of the government’s need to set a good example, with Ministers riding around in Minis. In recent years, the demands of the environmental and climate change agendas have exerted new pressures to demonstrate green credentials. In other areas, the long resistance to Junior Ministers being granted allocated vehicles also indicated the sensitivity of governments on issues of economy.

In modern times, GCS is perhaps even more vulnerable to these attacks than in former years. Firstly, it could be said that GCS was founded in a more openly hierarchical and class-conscious age, when personal service was more widely accepted as a way of life. In this context, the GCS golden asset, the Minister–driver relationship, can be interpreted by critics as a reflection of the values of a bygone age.

Secondly, the increasing importance of the environmental agenda places even greater emphasis on the need for economy and efficiency. Espousing environmental priorities, however, can also lead to some strange conclusions. For example, in February 2007 the Liberal Democrats obtained figures from GCDA, showing that the Agency drove 2,394,200 miles in 2004–05, and 2,834,000 miles in 2005–06. The Liberal Democrats interpreted these figures in terms of their relevance to climate change, and their transport spokesman, Alistair Carmichael, declared: ‘Climate change is the biggest threat our planet faces. It is vital that everyone does as much as possible to cut down on carbon emissions. Transport currently accounts for over a quarter of the UK’s CO₂. Government Ministers need to start leading by example.’¹

In reality, most of this increase in GCDA mileage was accounted for by the success of GCS in winning a greater share of the short term hire market and the expansion in the environmentally-friendly Green Cars

Service. On the Liberal Democrat reasoning, this apparently presents GCS with the difficult dilemma referred to at the conclusion of the previous chapter – that it should be less efficient as a business, in order to promote its environmental credentials! The great strengths of GCS in recent years, in terms of quality of service and business expansion, can therefore ironically themselves make the Service vulnerable to critics with a point to prove.

GCS AS A PRACTICAL NECESSITY

In fact, the true essence of the value attached to GCS lies in the necessity of the service that it provides on a day-to-day basis. Fundamentally, as was first recognised during the Second World War, it is attempting to help Ministers and officials do a better job. Apart from the relationships with drivers that may produce intangible benefits, such as less stressful decision making, the basic logistics of the job require at least a type of GCS service. As Conservative Party Leader David Cameron discovered, even if you like to ride a bike to work, a car has to follow to carry the briefcases, papers, etc. In the case of Ministers, the ever present red boxes have to be dealt with, and the GCS trips to and from the office do at least extend the working day, and allow extra time to fit everything in.

We saw in Chapter Six the detailed case made out for GCS by former Transport Minister Steven Norris, and in the basic terms that he sets out, the Service provides an essential tool in performing the job more efficiently, and is anything but a luxurious optional extra.

In this context, it is also important to bear in mind that Ministers and officials themselves are not immune from the ever-quickenning pace of the modern world. In Chapter Three, long-serving GCS pool driver Irene Maykels described how, as relatively recently as the 1960s, a driver could have little to do from the time when Parliament rose for the Summer recess at the beginning of August, until things got going again in October. Such a relaxed way of doing things would now seem inconceivable, in an era where the news media have a 24/7 agenda, and there is little respite for Ministers in the need to meet public expectations, that themselves have tended to become higher with the passage of time.

Ministers are therefore frequently on the move, with official visits and receptions, groups and delegations to meet, debates and votes in Parliament, media interviews, and so on. As the pace quickens, so the need for an official vehicle becomes even more of a necessity, while in these circumstances it could also be said that the intangible benefits of a GCS driver also become of increased value.

Consequently, governments do not exist in a vacuum, and themselves reflect changing social patterns, economic circumstances, and public expectations. There is no doubt that the scope of GCS, including the allocated vehicles, has grown over the years. It would of course be naive to overlook the element of ministerial self-interest here, such as in Prime Minister Harold Wilson's decision to grant a GCS car to former Prime Ministers, just a year before he became one himself. Even here, however, we saw how the need for security was eventually the deciding factor in the decision to grant former Prime Minister Edward Heath an allocated car, when officials were despairing of his refusal to restrict his trips to 'in and around London'.

Similarly, as we emphasised in Chapter Four, Heath himself represented an early example of a modern trend towards younger Prime Ministers, and therefore ex- Prime Ministers, who are not inclined to play the role of the retired and immobile elder statesperson. Modern trends can also be detected in the decision to grant an official car to former Prime Minister's wife Cherie Blair, a facility which, fascinatingly, was first considered for Clementine Churchill during the Second World War. Although made officially on security grounds, it could also be said to reflect the higher public profile and role of a Prime Minister's spouse in an age of heightened media attention, and a preoccupation with celebrity.

For many years, successive governments resisted special pleading from a variety of Departments for 'their' Junior Ministers to be given allocated vehicles. Again, there is no doubt that considerations of status and self esteem play a significant part here. At the same time, the increased demands and public expectations placed on governments in modern times have intensified pressures for Ministers to be seen to be 'doing something' about topical issues. A visit from a Junior Minister, if the Cabinet Minister is unavailable, can perform an important political function. In addition, as events and the art of

government become more complicated, with the need for European and international bargaining and agreements, all kinds of groups and interests to be consulted and kept informed of developments, and issues that cut across a number of Departments, so a team of Ministers is required to take on these tasks, with mobility an essential ingredient of doing the job.

In this context, to a significant extent the development of GCS services reflects much wider political and social changes. Nevertheless, GCS as an organisation has itself had to adapt to changing times. For example, as former GCS driver and union representative Denis Oliver puts it:

In my early days with GCS, it was a case of being given an annual grant from the Treasury, and just getting on with the job. Nowadays, it has to be run as a business in its own right, with everything costed in detail and accounted for. The basic job may still be the same, in terms of the car and the driver, but everything that lies behind it seems to be a great deal more complicated.

Former GCDA Chief Executive Nick Matheson makes a similar point in a different way: 'I have said that there is something magic about the relationship between a Minister and a driver. However, like all the best magic, there has to be a lot going on that remains unseen to the outside observer. This has to work efficiently, otherwise the whole thing falls flat.'

In the past decade, GCS has had to reinvent itself in order to literally keep the show on the road. There is no doubt that the Service is a great Whitehall survivor, but hard experience has taught it that the future cannot be guaranteed. The service GCS provides may be essential in order to keep the wheels of government moving, but events in earlier decades, particularly the 1980s, made it clear that others were ready and willing to step in and do the job, if given the opportunity. In recent years, as part of GCDA, GCS itself has been proactive, and taken a significantly greater share of the short term hire market from the private sector. On the other hand, the Metropolitan Police, that tried so hard to take over GCS responsibilities in the 1980s, has finally won the responsibility for driving the Prime

Minister. A development of this type emphasises the challenges for GCS that continue to present themselves.

TRADITION DRIVING THE FUTURE

Some of the biggest challenges facing GCS are concerned with routines and practices that are rooted deep in the culture of the organisation. In particular, although the basic salary has risen significantly in recent years, there is a continued reliance on overtime by many drivers. GCSA Chief Executive Roy Burke is keen to change this culture, but recognises that, in turn, new working practices may threaten the Minister–driver relationship:

Our staff do too much, and I find it totally unacceptable that we expect them to work such long hours. They cannot possibly have a life outside this Agency. The standard for an allocated driver is twelve hours per day, or sixty hours per week, when the standard for the Civil Service is around thirty-six hours per week. These long hours are not acceptable. We could make things more efficient for Ministers with two drivers – one doing the morning shift and the other the afternoons. However, I put this to Alistair Darling when he was Transport Secretary, and he said immediately, ‘I only want one driver.’ This means that you come up against our golden asset of the relationships between Ministers and drivers, but you cannot introduce savings with one hand tied behind your back. There is no reason why a Minister cannot have a relationship with two drivers, but they insist they only want one.

Roy Burke emphasises that there are big issues of health and safety here, and that such measures as EU working time Directives cannot be overlooked indefinitely, so that Ministers may be compelled to bite the bullet and accept change:

We opted out of the forty-eight-hour week, but we have to comply with the EU Directive in terms of adequate breaks each day. This means that drivers cannot work more than thirteen hours per day. One problem here is that you are capping earning potential, and this

could have an adverse impact on future recruitment, to the extent that it could threaten the existence of GCS. Nevertheless, I cannot condone anything that breaks the law. This is a live issue, and we are working very hard on it. It may be that in future drivers will have to work shifts, and Ministers must accept having more than one driver. After all, they voted for the EU legislation, and it is not going to go away!

As Roy Burke points out, the delicate question of drivers' hours can have important implications for driver recruitment. In general terms, GCS has an ageing workforce, and it is not always easy to find the right type of younger recruit for this specialised job. However, former GCDA Chief Executive Nick Matheson argues that there can be serious pitfalls in hiring young drivers:

You can find with some young drivers that they may not be discreet, and can be rather edgy and pushy in their manner. Being a GCS driver is perhaps a job for a more mature person. I think that people who have had extensive experience as chauffeurs, or perhaps have driven top brass in the services, are those best equipped to do the job. You have to look at the roots of GCS here. Significantly, the last of the old Motor Transport Corps drivers only retired shortly before I arrived at the Agency in 1997, and in the earlier days many drivers were recruited from the services. I think that we need to re-establish these links if the numbers and quality of drivers is to be maintained.

Another live issue for GCS brought about by rapid technological development is in so-called telematics, whereby data on a wide range of subjects can now be obtained from cars, including distances travelled and the position of the vehicle. The introduction of many of these devices has been resisted by the unions, on the grounds that they constitute an invasion of privacy, so that the driver can feel that he or she is being spied on. On the other hand, Roy Burke argues that the wider introduction of telematics can have significant benefits:

A lot of things would be so much easier if we had telematics devices. For example, when the Liberal Democrats asked us the Parliamentary

Question on the total mileage by the Agency in 2004–05 and 2005–06 [quoted earlier in this chapter], we gave them the factual answer that mileage had increased. Unfortunately, this answer was spun by the Liberal Democrats to make it sound environmentally bad. We argued that the real reason for the increase was because of the expansion of short term hire and Green Cars, and that the figure for allocated mileage was about the same for the two years. With telematics, we would have known the exact figure for allocated cars. In addition, we have to do the calculations for CO₂ emissions manually. For the last two years, it required four people working on the figures, but the telematics devices would allow us to do the calculations instantly. Nevertheless, there is a lot of union resistance here.

One significant organisational change for GCDA in recent years has been the switch from responsibility for the Agency being held by the Cabinet Office, to that of the Department for Transport. After sixty years of searching for an appropriate home, it could be said that the DfT represents belated recognition that GCS is basically a transport organisation. However, Nick Matheson, strongly disagrees with this move, and argues that it places the agency in a less politically secure position:

I think that there were considerable advantages for GCDA in staying with the Cabinet Office. Apart from suffering very little interference, it was placed right at the centre of government, and did not belong to any departmental interest. The big problem in being linked to the DfT is that you can become identified with the interests of that Department, and so become alienated from other Departments. In turn, the Transport Secretary may or may not be sympathetic to the Agency. On the whole, it leaves GCDA more vulnerable.

Nevertheless, it could also be argued that the DfT represents a significantly more natural home for GCS than any of its many previous Whitehall affiliations, and that in any case it is the development of GCDA itself that will decide the fate of the Service.

Perhaps more crucially, Matheson also argues that the unique culture and traditions of GCS have to be preserved, and that these can

guarantee the survival of the Service if things should again turn against it financially. Amidst the need to adapt to a changing world, it is easy to overlook the degree of continuity and recurring challenges that run like a thread through the history of GCS. This can even be evident in GCS entrepreneurial plans for business expansion. For example, GCS Director Jerry Doyle emphasises that the Service is keen to provide transport for special events, and in 2005–06 drove Ministers from around the world at the G8 summits held in the UK. This initiative produced over £500,000 in business for the Agency. Doyle is now looking to provide transport for officials in the build-up to the 2012 London Olympics. In this respect, there are clear echoes of the vans provided by the Official Car Service, bought to transport competitors at the 1948 London Olympics!

Similarly, in stressing the need for GCS to retain the quality and integrity of its service, it is impossible to avoid conjuring up images, amongst many, of Kay Summersby driving Eisenhower round wartime Britain; Tom Hughes catering for Churchill and his cigars; the long-suffering Bill Housden patiently dealing with the assorted needs of Harold Wilson's 'Kitchen Cabinet'; Ron Vaughan's sympathetic understanding of Tony Benn; Denis Oliver ensuring that Margaret Thatcher safely left the bombed Grand Hotel in Brighton; Beryl Osborne looking after Norman Tebbit and his family in the aftermath of the Brighton bombing; Kenneth Baker stoutly defending GCS against its challengers; John Major's driver inspiring him for Prime Minister's Questions with patriotic marches; and Nick Matheson and his team leading GCDA from the edge of oblivion to prosperity.

It is in the nature of the service provided by GCS that much of its work is unobtrusive. Yet telling its story makes clear the degree to which it forms an integral part of political history, and reveals the many remarkable individuals involved. If these traditions are maintained, then the 'Outer Cabinet' can surely retain its status as a national asset.

NOTE

1. *Daily Telegraph*, 27 February 2007.