

# A Murder in Mayfair

Robert Barnard

Poisoned Pen Press



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## *Author's Note*

This is not a political novel, but the quest of Colin Pinnock to discover his own origins. Nevertheless, he is a politician—an MP and a junior government minister—and there are one or two aspects of British practice that may puzzle American readers.

When a party wins a general election in Britain, its leader goes to the Queen the next morning and is asked to form a government. He immediately sets to work to choose the most important members of that government, the Cabinet. The less important members of the government will be chosen and begin work in the subsequent couple of days. Colin Pinnock is a junior member of the government, with special responsibilities within a larger Ministry, the Department of Education.

Many MPs have no particular connection with

the constituencies they are elected for. Some, indeed, even today, show a marked disinclination even to visit the area they are MP for. Colin Pinnock is lucky to sit as MP for a constituency in the area where he grew up and was educated.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Office

I spent May 2, hungover, waiting by the telephone. Practically every one in the Parliamentary party did the same. Even newly elected MPs, callow youths of twenty-three who against every possible expectation of pundit or psephologist had taken seats from crusted and crusty sitting members, sat by their phones if they had them, wondering if their stunning victories had somehow caught the new Prime Minister's eye, and he would ring them and offer them something. Only the party's gadflies, too pleased with themselves and their careers as comic irritants, kept up the victory celebrations and let the phone go hang—and even one or two of them by the next day had received

a call and had had to be paged in alcoholic dens or discreetly fetched from houses of ill-repute.

Because it was the next day that mattered, of course. May 2 was for cabinet posts and for important noncabinet jobs in the Foreign Office or the Treasury. May 3 was for the lesser jobs in the lesser ministries—posts that people like me, four years in Parliament and an occasional Opposition front-bench spokesman, might hope for. And how we did hope! How we did watch the television, dash out for an evening newspaper and dash back to the phone, ring our friends for hurried conversations about who was in, who had heard nothing yet, who was sure to hear before long.

At ten past two the phone rang. And it wasn't a friend, wasn't a constituent congratulating me or a local newspaper wanting a quote. It was Downing Street, inquiring whether it would be convenient for me to come and see the Prime Minister. Suppressing any inclination to irony or witticism, I murmured respectfully that it was quite convenient and that I would be there as soon as possible. I put the phone down reverently, but with a sudden rush of blood to the head I burst out into Cavara-dossi's "Vittoria! Vittoria!"—the cry of triumph turning into a horrible shriek on the high C as I

ran to the door of my flat, straightening my tie in the hall mirror. I was already wearing my only suit.

I wonder what it felt like for those who didn't get a call, taking off their suits at night.

Twenty minutes later it was over. The scenario was this: drive from my Pimlico flat to the House, walk across Parliament Square to Downing Street, greet the policeman on the door and be ushered in (*first time ever*), brief wait, then into the PM's office, get the offer, restrain extravagant thanks (he'll have had enough of those, with nearly a hundred jobs to fill—already the grin is a bit strained), then back to the front door, and out into Downing Street again.

There were still flushed and happy crowds at the gates that lead into Whitehall. As I'd gone through them I had heard people ask, "Who's that?" As I stood for a moment on the step, with the odd camera flashing, I wanted to go over to them and say: "I'm Colin Pinnock, and I'm the new junior minister in the Department of Education and Training, with special responsibility for the handicapped and the disadvantaged." On second thought it didn't seem like a good idea—politicians have to have a quick nose for the

potentially ridiculous—and with one more smile to the much-diminished band of photographers, who were snapping as much for the record as for the newspapers, I walked directly to my new department in the tall, gloomy building in Great Smith Street.

They knew I was coming, of course. They'd been alerted from Downing Street as soon as I'd accepted. I was the fourth new minister they had received in two days.

“Welcome to the Department, Minister,” said the doorman, and gestured to a little knot of well-comers, including the civil servant who was to be my private secretary and several members of his staff. After routine, slightly wary greetings all round they led me to the obscure part of the building from which our section functioned, and to my private office, where I was to assume responsibility for the halt and the blind, the slow learners and the underachievers, the late developers and the kids with special needs, the dyslexics and the inner-city dropouts.

“Let's get down to work,” I said to my private secretary. “That means you briefing me.”

Five hours later, in mid-evening, I decided to call it a day. I had learned volumes in that time. I

decided I liked my private secretary, Patrick Latterby—liked him in a trusting, low-keyed kind of way: I would no doubt have a drink with him from time to time, but it was never going to be a socializing, buddy-pal kind of relationship. He was straightforward, dependable, unexciting. Would anybody want an exciting civil servant (supposing one could be found) as his private secretary? I decided I was lucky.

I realized quite quickly that my predecessor had been a career politician with no interest in his particular responsibilities at the Ministry. All the initiatives and projects had come from his civil servants, and Patrick went over not only these but also various other options which had been discarded or put on the back burner and which he thought I might want to revive. We discussed the parameters of my job, the possibilities of it—and, most usefully, the dangers. I was taken to meet the permanent secretary, a woman close to retirement age called Margaret Stevens, and we had a getting-to-know-you chat. She is the Secretary of State's principal adviser, a great force in the Department, practically a god. She dropped by into my little portion of her kingdom later on—a most unusual occurrence, but changes in government

bring exceptional necessities with them, and this dropping in brought the only oddity of my first day at the Department.

Patrick and I were going over papers, and I was conscious of the door opening. I glanced up, only to see her start. It was a tiny jump—almost imperceptible, yet I perceived it, in the fraction of a second before my eyes tactfully went back to my papers again. Then she came forward and I rose to welcome her. She was entirely self-possessed by now, and put a folder down in front of Patrick.

“Potential land mine,” she said. “Utmost secrecy and action soonest.”

“Nothing to do with my appointment, I hope,” I said smiling.

“Nothing at all. A matter your predecessor said he’d seen to six months ago but hadn’t, and it could blow up in our faces. Patrick will fix it. You concentrate on the future.”

That was all, and I put it out of my mind, and that tiny start as well. At eight o’clock we wound things up.

“You’ll want to get back to your family,” I said to Patrick, “and all I want to do at the moment is get back to my flat, pour myself a drink, feel

chuffed with myself for an hour or two, then have an early night.”

“Sounds sensible,” Patrick Latterby said. “You’re sure there’s nothing else you want from me?”

“Nothing that can’t wait till tomorrow.”

He went off like a man who’s beginning to think he’s in luck with his new boss. I packed a pile of papers into my nice new red box and walked back to fetch my car from the Palace of Westminster parking lot. I’d told Patrick I wouldn’t want an official car and driver until next morning. The policeman on the gate gave me a broad grin.

“Got yourself a nice new job...sir?”

PC Marrit was always perky and always friendly. He had been complained about several times by ministers in the former government who equated friendliness with lack of respect. No doubt some of our people, with time, would contract the disease of self-importance.

“Department of Education. Couldn’t have asked for anything more to my taste. Dealing with the handicapped and the deprived.”

“Well, I’ll expect results for my daughter, then.”

“Is your daughter handicapped?”

“Not really—only by the school she goes to.

They don't expect anything from the kids so they don't get anything out of them."

I nodded.

"London schools are going to be one of our problems, or our challenges I suppose I should say."

I stayed talking to him for a minute or two, and then went to get my car. Even now, the evening after our election victory, driving was still that bit hazardous around Westminster—there were people milling around, some of them drunkenly lurching off onto the road, camera crews still interviewing new MPs and in the interval sampling vox pop. I made it home, though—in any case the intoxication of victory would not register on a Breathalyzer.

My flat is in a block called Ruskin Terrace that used to be all Council tenants. Some of them had been sold to tenants by Westminster City Council, and the man who sold me his made a breathtaking profit on the deal. It's on the third floor, has a view of the river, and is a good-sized family flat. I should feel guilty about living there, but mostly I just don't think about it. Someone farther along the balcony clapped as I approached my flat, and I grinned and waved like royalty. I took the lift

up, let myself into the flat, stepping over a small mountain of post, and switched on the lights. The living room was clean and welcoming—I had tidied up in the morning, while waiting for that phone call. I went into the kitchen, pulled out from the freezer a frozen portion of Bolognese sauce, then put it into a saucepan on the hot plate and began boiling water for the spaghetti. I stood for a moment savoring normality in the midst of tremendous upheaval. I opened a bottle of red wine, poured a good-sized glass, and went back to the living room.

Alone. Alone as a member of the government. Alone as a minister of the Crown. Alone as the minister responsible for children and adults who'd had a raw deal. The opportunities! The challenges! The dangers! I was high on the future, high on my career. I felt my life had been leading up to this, every tiny event a step forward, culminating in that handshake in Downing Street. I wondered if it would have felt even sweeter if I'd still had Susan to share it with me. Being honest with myself I didn't see how it could have been.

Music. I needed music. Not anything raucous and triumphal now—something gentle, ruminative. Maybe something English. English

music isn't usually one of my things, but I found Vaughan Williams's Fifth and put it on the CD player. Then I went back to the hall to pick up my post.

Most of it wasn't post. The normal business of living and working and sending bills somehow gets suspended in Britain at election time. The real post at the bottom of the pile, which had been there when I left the flat that afternoon, was dwarfed by the cards, notes, scruffy pieces of paper that had been stuffed through my letterbox by neighbors and by friends who lived in the vicinity. Somehow or other the news of my appointment had got around. The cards and notes were congratulatory, hortatory, humorous, or satirical. Only one was a little snide—not bad by the standards of political life. An Australian research assistant I'd used, a young student with the most exquisite English accent, had scrawled "Good on yer, Cobber" on a National Portrait Gallery card of Clem Attlee. I chuckled, suspended operations for the moment, and went to put on the spaghetti. Then I came back to continue going through the pile.

The top one was an old-fashioned plain postcard, rather grubby round the edges. It had a stamp on it, but the stamp hadn't been postmarked. The

address was correct, in easily legible, rather old-fashioned handwriting which somehow suggested to me that the sender didn't do a great deal of writing these days. I turned the card over. On the blank reverse there was written, in capitals, one stark question:

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

## CHAPTER TWO

# Back to My Roots

I can't pretend I thought much about the postcard and its message during the rest of the evening. The euphoria gripping me was too powerful for that. Yesterday I had been a newly reelected MP known to few, tonight I was a minister of the Crown. A minister of the Crown known to few, I told myself, in a vain attempt to keep my feet on the ground. But there were enormous opportunities to do good, and to be seen to be doing good, and promotion in a year or two's time was a definite possibility. My state was like what people always say champagne induces, though it only seems to induce flatulence in me.

So if I thought about it at all, it was as an attempt to cut me down to size, tell me I was getting a lot too big for my boots. It did seem to

me that it was awfully early for a condemnation of this kind: getting above yourself usually takes time. But perhaps it was a prophecy more than a judgment. Someone could have heard of my appointment (how? on the radio? in the *Evening Standard*?) and decided to give me a dour warning. Someone jealous, presumably. Then, also presumably, someone who knew me. But with a politician that “knew” could be wide, covering a variety of different kinds of knowing. It could be a constituent, for example, who had taken against me—perhaps over something I’d done for him, or failed to do. It could be someone whom I’d been involved with years ago in student politics. It could be someone who’d been a rival for the nomination when I got my Milton seat. Equally it could be someone who knew me well, someone, even, whom I liked, without realizing their jealousy of me.

I didn’t give it much more thought than that. As I sluiced my plate under the hot tap I realized the Vaughan Williams had failed to calm me. I put on *Showboat* instead. To hell with calming down. I needed something to match my excitement.

But I did think of that card again in the early hours, when I was drowsing between sleep and

waking, wanting to go in to start work in earnest but knowing I couldn't do that at 5 A.M. At one transition from sleeping to waking my half-conscious mind said to me: "That was not what the writer meant."

It came into my mind, apparently from nowhere. He was not telling me I was too big for my boots. Otherwise he would have made it more explicit: YOU'RE GETTING ABOVE YOURSELF. WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? But he (or she) didn't. The writer just asked the bleak question, in capitals for dramatic effect: WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? Put baldly like that, it was almost like asking you what you thought the point of existence was. At a more specific level it seemed to want me to focus on how I had come into the world.

I lay there, luxuriously, thinking about the postcard. It was stamped, with no postmark. That meant it could have come through the post—it happened quite frequently these days. But if that was the case, it would mean that it was posted before I had been given my job in the new government. As far as I could remember it lay in the midst of personal messages posted through the letterbox by people in the flats or living nearby. Since there was no second post on a Saturday, it

seemed likely it was pushed through the door by the sender. Why? A change of mind? Or because the postcard was already stamped for another use, and he/she then decided to use it on me?

That seemed unprofitable speculation. So did consideration of the grubbiness of the card. More interesting was the fact that there was apparently no attempt to disguise the handwriting, beyond the use of capitals. The writer had no fear that I would recognize it. Or did not care whether I did or not.

I put the thoughts from me. What a daft thing to mull over on a wonderful day. Seven o'clock. Soon the wonderful day would start in earnest. I shaved, showered, and slotted two pieces of toast into the toaster.

“Oh, what a beautiful morning!” I sang.

*Oklahoma*, the best musical there ever was. No, the second-best. After *Showboat*.

It was a Sunday, a silly day to begin work. Patrick Latterby had told me that I could get into the Ministry from nine o'clock onward, and had promised that he would come in for a couple of hours around eleven, to point me in the direction of the first substantial issues I was likely to face. I rang to cancel the official car and set off to walk

to work. Grosvenor Street and Millbank were warm, with a haze that was just lifting. I could still sense excitement in the air. That's a politician for you. What's the betting that a new minister in a Tory government reelected for the fourth time also felt excitement in the air on his way to work? You sense around you what you feel inside you. I dawdled along, had a cigarette in Victoria Gardens, and promptly at nine o'clock was at the door of the Ministry.

"Well, you're keen," said the doorman, smiling in an I've-seen-it-all way.

"I suppose new young ministers are always keen," I said. "Sorry to bring you in on a Sunday."

"No sweat. Double time suits me fine," he said, grinning. "Always happens when there's a new government with new faces. Now, can you find your way?"

I assured him I could find my way, and I spent the next couple of hours partly in rereading the stuff I'd gone through sketchily the day before, partly in walking round the Ministry and finding where every subsection was. When Patrick came in we had a good, hard session dealing with problems on the horizon and discussing the prioritization of several possible contributions of my

section to any government legislative program. At a quarter to one I asked him if he had time for a drink, and he nodded.

“Have to be a quick one, though.”

We went to the Bull and Barrel, and I managed to get a thickly filled sandwich with my pint. We stood drinking companionably by a window, talking with a degree of ease, but keeping off issues we shouldn't be discussing in a public place. He told me about his background, about where his children went to school, and what his wife was thinking of doing when they were a bit older. We were just getting to a transition point when he would ask me for matching personal details when, out of the blue it seemed, I heard myself asking:

“Do you know if my appointment got any coverage in the media?”

Patrick smiled secretively, apparently registering that I was not immune to the vanity of politicians.

“There was a picture in the *Evening Standard*. They had a whole page of junior ministerial appointees, so you were one of twelve or so, all photographed arriving at No. 10 or leaving it.”

“I see.”

“Are you wanting a photograph to send your parents?”

“I’ve only got a father, and I’m afraid he’s past registering. What about television?”

“I don’t know. My wife didn’t mention seeing my new minister. I’d doubt it. With television news these days you’d be lucky to be mentioned on a quick run-through of junior posts. Why?”

I decided to go carefully here. If someone was wanting me to focus on my own background there might be reasons to keep other people out of the matter.

“Oh, I just got rather an odd postcard yesterday, and I wondered what sparked it off.”

“Can’t be the *Standard* photograph if you got it yesterday.”

“I suspect it was put through the door.”

“What kind of thing was it?”

I took a swill of my beer.

“Seemed to think I was getting above myself.”

Patrick laughed.

“In record time! You could say that in time every government minister gets above himself, but on the first day!”

“When the process does start you’ll have to give me a warning.”

“Oh, we always do, in subtle little ways. Most politicians find subtle little ways of ignoring the

warnings. But you're worried about this postcard, aren't you?"

"I just wonder what kind of person would send something like that on my first day as a minister."

"Some kind of nutter, I imagine. We can screen nutters at the Department. Most of them are totally harmless. A nutter who has your home address and access to your letterbox is a bit more worrying. You could inform the police at the Houses of Parliament, but I think I'd wait before doing that."

"Oh, sure. I've no evidence it's anything other than a harmless crank. You seem to have a lot of experience of the type."

Patrick took a pull at his pint before he replied.

"I do, but the type may change with the new government. The previous lot had been in a long time, so people had had time to develop personal obsessions: they had conceived a desperate passion for Michael Heseltine, for example, convinced themselves that Michael Portillo was the father of their unborn child."

"*Real* nutters," I commented. Patrick smiled a Civil Service sort of smile. He was telling me that

jokes about our opponents were out of bounds.

“But hardly any of the new men are widely known on a personal level,” he went on. “By that I mean few have become public personalities whom people feel they know. So I would guess that your correspondent either *does* know you personally, or else his or her grievance is political: someone who really feels it an affront for you people to get into power at all.”

“Plenty of those, I suppose,” I said. “So all things considered, the best thing to do is put the whole thing out of my mind, unless she comes back for a second go at me.”

“He or she. Yes, I think so.”

“He or she, of course. I don’t know why I said she. Perhaps it was the handwriting, or because the nutters you mentioned must have all been women.”

“They come in all shapes and sizes and sexes, I assure you. The difficulty is to sort out the difficult and dangerous ones.”

“Of course. I suppose the truth is all that the others call for is a thick skin.”

Patrick raised his eyebrows.

“Surely you’ve got that already.”

“I suppose so. I’m a Yorkshireman, and a York-

shire MP. I've had to get used to bluntness. Somehow personal things are different."

"I'm not sure that they are," Patrick said, finishing his pint. "The political slides quite easily into the personal. You'd be well advised to get an all-purpose thick skin pretty damned quick. This government will have a honeymoon period, but after that, if there are any peccadillos, political or personal, to make capital out of, the opposition and the tabloids will make sure the shit starts flying—pardon my off-duty language—the same as with the last government. Are there any skeletons in your cupboard?"

I shook my head with more confidence than I felt.

"I haven't even got a girlfriend at the moment. We split up last year. We'd lived together for two years."

"That counts as respectability these days."

"But I've had no illegitimate children, never molested minors, haven't even had a boyfriend."

"That's starting to count as respectability with your lot."

"Looking back, I feel almost ashamed at the dullness of my personal life."

"You should be grateful for it. But it's a pity you

and your girlfriend split up.”

I shrugged.

“Politicians are a bit like policemen: they need a stable home base more than most, but the conditions of the job make it very unlikely they’ll have one. I think for the moment loneliness is the lesser of two evils. The thought of having a relationship that I had no time to give anything to is not attractive.”

And, symbolically, off he went home to family and Sunday lunch, and off I went back to the Ministry.

It was not this talk of a stable family base that decided me to go and see my father the next weekend. My father was not in a condition to provide me with any sort of base. I had decided, whether I got a job in the government or not, to be as good a constituency MP as I had been in the last Parliament. Many of the MPs who were joyfully thrown out at the election were men (usually men) who had treated their constituencies as a sort of fief-dom: they gave voters the impression that they believed they held their seats as a right. The voters had taken pleasure in showing them that they were mistaken. Arrogance is not a preserve of any one political party, and I was resolved not

to fall into that trap.

So on Friday night, at the end of a week of stimulus and discovery such as I had never had in my life before—I was, I think, drunk with delight in power, experiencing all its aphrodisiac qualities—I took the train to my constituency, to my home.

That is not quite true: my constituency is Milton in South Yorkshire, and my home—the home where I grew up—is in the nearby village of Bardsley, which has become over the years a sort of dormitory suburb of Milton, but which lies in a neighboring constituency. However, I represented the place where I had gone to school, where all my oldest friends were, where I had seen my first films and plays and concerts, where all my early memories were. It is a matter of pride that they chose me.

It was natural that in the train I should think about that, and about my early years. I hadn't been born in Bardsley, but my parents had moved there when I was only a few weeks old. My father had had a job in local government in Milton, in the planning office. He had retired ten years before, and he and my mother had had a happy time pottering, doing charity work, and watching my

political ambitions bearing fruit. This last made them very happy. I know neither of them sympathized with my views, but nevertheless the day I was elected to Westminster was the proudest of their lives, and the village joked about the fact that they could only with difficulty be persuaded to talk on any other subject.

Then, two years ago, my mother had been diagnosed as suffering from cancer, which had been mercifully fast in its progress. After her death my father had been a lost man, and had declined mentally so badly that six months before he had had to go into a nursing home. It was there I would go to visit him the next afternoon, tell him my news, and know that he would nod and understand almost nothing. Seventy-five is too young to be in that state. I asked myself if, had I been living at home, the decline would have come more slowly.

I slept in my old bed, in the house I grew up in, then I held a “surgery” at my party headquarters (half the people seemed to come along not with a problem, but to tell me how delighted they were with the change of government). Then the local party chairman drove me to the Ivies.

I did the best I could for my father, and the

Ivies was it, granted that he wanted (in so far as he could formulate a preference) to stay in the area that had been his home for thirty-five years. The street frontage was a modest-sized Victorian home, the windows of which peered through trailing stems of ivy and other climbing creepers. Behind it, at the end of a long, well-stocked garden, was a modern annex, with big windows, better central heating, and every sort of provision for the disabled. I opted for the annex, for comfort rather than style. My father was not in a condition to care for style.

My instinct was always to walk straight through the place to my father's room. There is altogether too much of memento mori about these homes, however well run—or rather, not reminders of the horrors of death, but of the horrors of the approach of death. But I am an MP—and there were plenty of very spry people there, people with a lively interest in the great world around them. People with a vote, who would use it if possible. I'd got to know many of them, and they wanted to stop me, congratulate me, ask what it felt like to be in government, and so on. "I won't keep you," they all said, as they launched into stories of what it felt like when the election results of 1945

came through, or how they'd once met Harold Wilson. It was half an hour before I could get to my father.

The sun was shining into his room, which was cheerful if inevitably slightly hospital in feel. He was half awake and half asleep, as he is for much of the time.

“Hello...Colin,” he said.

He always dredges up my name, eventually. It will be horrible when he finally fails to do so.

“Hello, Dad.”

“Still...*there*?”

By now I knew what he wanted to ask me.

“That's right,” I said, sitting down by his bed. “Still MP for Milton. We had an election last week. I got in with a much bigger majority. We're the government now.”

That was too much for him. His eyes glazed over and he just murmured, “Good, good.”

My father's face has always been rather gaunt—and his body, too. I've always thought of him as a rather splendid old Viking leader, though not a ravaging and pillaging one. When I was small he was keen to join in whatever game I wanted to play: he went at it with a will, but he was a little short on fun. He was just, he was dependable,

he was undemonstrably loving, but I was always conscious that he was old. Older, at any rate, than other children's fathers. My mother was softer and sweeter, and it wasn't so noticeable with her.

"How's...Susan?"

Oddly enough he always remembered Susan's name. I'd told him a year ago that we had split up, but if it registered then it had been eradicated since. He'd liked Susan, and perhaps to him she represented the continuation of the line. Absurd that ordinary people should think in those terms, but they still do.

"Susan's fine, Dad."

"You haven't...?"

"No, Dad. No wedding plans yet."

I'd toyed with the idea of lying to him about that, of inventing wedding plans to string him along. But it seemed to strip him of still more of his dignity (he'd been, in his later years, a very dignified old man). And in any case in his mental state he couldn't be said to *worry* about that or anything else—not, anyway, for more than a few seconds.

He nodded regretfully and then seemed to sink back toward slumber, or at any rate toward that twilight state that is neither consciousness nor

unconsciousness. I took his hand, which was lying on the counterpane, and a tiny smile from him registered my having done so.

I stayed there for a long time, his hand in my hand. A lot of my visits were like this—just my being there with him. I could have thought about all my departmental concerns, but oddly enough that day I could think only of the past: of cricket games on the beach at Bridlington, with Dad’s splendidly gangling overarm bowling; all of us round the table at one of my mother’s Sunday teas; coming home from school to tell them I’d won a scholarship to St. John’s College. The light in their eyes was one of the things I could always bank on when I brought them good news of myself.

I was suddenly conscious that my father had opened his eyes. He was looking at me—his eyes bleary still, as they always were now, but in the back of them something of that same light, that irrepressible pride.

“We were so happy when you came,” he said.

Then, after a moment, the old eyes closed again, and I sat there pondering over that word “came.”