

Observations

COMMONS CONFIDENTIAL

The Cone Secretary strikes again

Kevin Maguire

Michael Gove, educashon dunce, is one of the most rabid Euroseptics in Little Englander Dave Cameron's jingoistic band. But it's I'm All Right Mick's history as an unruly striker that is of renewed interest, after your correspondent encountered an eyewitness to a notorious incident that ended with the Militant Minister bundled into a police van.

I heard an intriguing explanation for Liam Byrne's "There's no money left" suicide note. Byrne left it for his Tory mate Philip Hammond, who was expected to be chief secretary. Instead the Lib Dumb David Laws briefly got the job and released the letter. I hear Byrne, whose seat is to be axed, fancies running for mayor of Birmingham. Nick Brown has similar designs on Newcastle.

Mike Elrick, on strike with Gove in Aberdeen during a 1989 local newspaper dispute when both were young hacks, spoke out after Gove attacked public servants as "militants itching for a fight" over pensions. Gove, embarrassed by that photograph of a bespectacled him on a picket line, plays down his past. "The 'reluctant' striker," sneered Elrick, "led a deputation of strikers to Strasbourg to lobby MEPs and to Tory conference."

Fast with a retort, Gisela Stuart. On being introduced to Our Man in Kabul, the Tory Bob Stewart quipped that they shared a surname but weren't married. "No," said the Labour woman, "he's my father." Ouch! For the record, she's 56 and he's 62.

Most damaging for Gove, however, is the account of

Elrick, a former adviser to those Labour Johns, Smith and Reid, to an act the minister might well declare worthy of a sacking if committed by a teacher. "I witnessed the future Education Secretary throwing a traffic cone wilfully off a viaduct on Aberdeen's busiest street on to another street below," admitted Elrick. "The incident took place on Union Street. The cone was dropped probably 40 feet. No one else was involved."

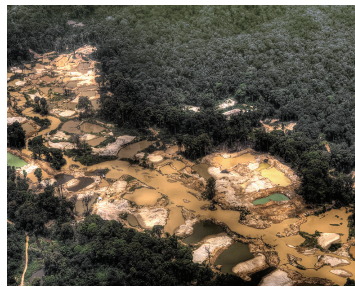
A friendly Conservative revealed why Cameron's backbenchers shake their heads when David Milibrother speaks in the Commons. "We can't believe he's not the Labour leader," whispered the grinning Tory. A growing number on the Labour side agree.



The Cone Secretary, recalled Elrick, was collared: "Gove was spotted by the police doing it and was bundled swiftly into the back of a police van, which then drove off to police HQ."

The Financial Times scribbler Quentin Peel was overheard in Brussels bemoaning Cameron's appeasement of the Euroseptic *Sun*, *Mail*, *Express*, etc. Does the Europhile *FT* regret its May 2010 Tory endorsement?

"Sadly," complained Elrick, "Gove wasn't charged but let off with a warning. But at the end of the day it was an act of hooliganism. Youthful high jinks? Well, by that stage he had already graduated from Oxford. He was, like me, in his twenties and working. He wasn't a student. He was old enough to know better." Quite so. ● *Kevin Maguire is associate editor (politics) of the Daily Mirror*



A gold-mining settlement near Mahdia

GUYANA

Murder in the jungle

Girish Gupta

Six hours' journey through savannah and thick jungle from Guyana's capital, Georgetown, Mahdia boasts no landline telephones or bank machines. But this small dirt town in the Amazon rainforest is experiencing the sharp end of turmoil in the financial markets, as it finds itself at the centre of a new gold rush.

"It's kill or be killed," says Rovin Allen, a young miner who was shot in the leg and robbed of £1,150-worth of gold just months ago. As investors place their bets on gold – a supposedly secure asset in times of crisis – prices have soared. Prospectors have flocked to Mahdia, but so have thieves. The 26-year-old Allen now carries a 38mm pistol when working at his small camp. "You can't trust anyone, even your friends and those you work with."

Vivakeanand Bridgemohan, one of the town's two doctors, is seeing double the number of patients he received 12 months ago. He has treated miners stabbed in the head, face and jugular this week alone. "There are a lot of bandits here," he says, "for the gold and the money."

Allen works at Pamela camp, in the forest that surrounds Mahdia. As I am driven there on the miner's quad bike, a large clearing opens, revealing makeshift huts strung with hammocks, next to a small river cutting through the rock. To the side is an electricity generator, allowing the miners to enjoy pirated music DVDs on an antique television set strapped

with white tape to a wooden joist above a small kitchen area.

Allen's small group will take in about £15 for each ounce of gold they find. Allen tells me he finds roughly ten ounces every four days or so, earning him about 80 times less than a trader in New York. Working 12-hour days, the miners must contend with wild animals and disease as well as bandits. "Had malaria many times, says Neil Hutton, one of Allen's colleagues. "Sick today, tomorrow I get up."

Some days after my visit to Mahdia, I meet Guyana's outgoing president, Bharrat Jagdeo, at a rally in Anna Regina, a town in the west of the country. Gold reserves in Guyana, a former British colony, were neglected until relatively recently, but Jagdeo tells me that the country expects to produce 320,000 ounces of the precious metal this year, up 5 per cent on last year. "We have seen some movement of criminals," Jagdeo concedes.

Patrick Harding, president of the Guyana Gold and Diamond Miners Association, says that mining makes up 70 per cent of the country's economy. "The violence is something we're very worried about," he says from his office in Georgetown. "It could impact the whole industry."

Heavy metal

For the most part, traders on the financial markets make no link to men on the ground such as those in Mahdia. "For 5,000 years, gold has maintained purchasing power for the holders," says George Gero, senior vice-president at RBC Wealth Management in New York, who has been trading and analysing gold for half his life.

"Investors see gold as an additional currency and as an asset-allocation tool," he says. "Nobody is that concerned about the people panning for it."

Bridgemohan, speaking after hours in his hospital waiting room, has one message for the traders. "Enjoy the gold," he says. "It's a great sacrifice the workers are making out here – so just cherish what they are providing for you." ●

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