

CLOSE • UP
ON

John Smith

Alan Rusbridger

Mildly overweight, beaming through black-framed spectacles but able, I always feel, to stamp on the odd windpipe if required to.'

It is thus that Edward Pearce, caustic *Telegraph* sketch writer, sums up the Rt Hon John Smith in his latest book of parliamentary pen portraits, and it is not far wrong. Pearce clearly admires Smith - indeed, he admits that Smith has a devoted Tory following. He evidently likes him. But at the same time he is nigglingly aware of the edge of steely ruthlessness and driving ambition without being quite sure what it is that drives him.

What is not in doubt is that John Smith has become a formidable operator. Devotees had always known it, but his spectacular debating skills, speed of thought and withering way with a dry humour burst upon a much wider audience during the Westland affair. He rapidly reduced Leon Brittan to the mannerisms of a dazzled rabbit and time after time tripped the government as they ran backwards as fast as their little legs would carry them.

It would have been a good month's work by anyone's standards. But no sooner had the dust settled than Smith was back again, helping to pile on the humiliation over the government's back-down over Austin-Rover. And he has been back again dishing out punishment over the inept handling of the Land-Rover sale. Trade and Industry has been a cursed chalice for recent Tory incumbents. It has, in its shadow form, done very nicely for Mr Smith.

But then Mr Smith has, in his own quiet way, been doing very nicely for some time now. He was the youngest member of Callaghan's cabinet in 1978-10 weeks younger than Dr

Owen. He owed his position there to work he had done on North Sea oil and then on devolution under Michael Foot. The work was for the most part unspectacular. But no-one else much wanted to do it, and it was perfectly suited to Smith's legalistic skills at mastering mind-numbing amounts of small detail.

It is that skill - and his nimble parliamentary performances - that have won him the respect of the Left, though he himself is broadly of the Right. 'He is,' says a colleague, 'a bloody good performer and the safest pair of hands we've got.' Tam Dalyell describes him as 'glitteringly bright in a forensic way'. A senior Tory backbencher says of him: 'Heisvery, very able indeed. There's no doubt we fear him. Whether or not he makes it to the top in his own party is a different matter.'

Smith is now in his late 40s. He was born and brought up in a small west coast of Scotland village, the son of the local schoolmaster. His father was a radical and a socialist, not at all well-off but a respected figure in local society. He was also ambitious for his son. At the age of 14, young John Smith was packed off to live in lodgings in the local town; the village had no secondary school, let alone a grammar school.

He read law at Glasgow University and stood twice as a student as Labour candidate in Fife East. He was, according to his contemporaries, 'quite a wild young man'. The book he ran on the 1966 general election was so successful it paid his way through the end of his legal training, qualifying as an advocate the following year. He made it to the Commons in the safe seat of North Lanarkshire in 1970.

Since being in opposition, he has steadily climbed the shadow cabinet ranking and, though he inevitably has his eye on the chancellorship, enjoys



John Smith MP

trade and industry and the opportunity of working as a co-ordinated team with Hattersley and Prescott.

A fair amount of his time has recently been taken up with discreet background spadework with both industrialists and trade unionists. He believes there is no difficulty in finding common ground to march over, but is equally clear that, should Labour win, the time available in which to regenerate British industry will be desperately short. He is thus keen to sort out as many potential areas of disagreement as he can before he strictly needs to.

In his earlier career there was a whiff of opportunism which some of his colleagues objected to. Tam Dalyell, for instance, recalls one occasion some years ago when Smith publicly attacked him over Ireland. He felt then that Smith had his eye on the main chance, but happily concedes that Smith is now not only a very nice man, but also his own man.

Some of his colleagues will tell you he lacks any deep convictions, socialist or otherwise. They suspect that he would soon be off to a lucrative practice at the Scottish bar if faced with the prospect of too many terms on the shadow benches. But he himself speaks convincingly enough of his passionate urge to harness

socialism to pragmatic ends. Ideology doesn't much excite him.

Restructuring a banking and finance system that would fuel his plans for a mixed but broadly based industrial regeneration does,

Above all he has the ideal temperament to succeed. It is perfectly true; he can be ruthless. 'He operates,' says an admiring colleague, 'on that excellent maxim never kick a man until he's down.' But he is also completely unflappable and utterly easy going. 'I've never seen him worry about anything for more than a day,' says a lifelong friend. He just wakes up the next morning and says: 'What the hell. Let's get on with it.'

He lives in Edinburgh with his wife, Elizabeth, who works for the GBUSR Society, and three children. There are plenty who will tell you his attachment to the cause of Scottish devolution was never - isn't still - more than skin deep. But he has always refused to move his family to London, and speaks with considerable force about Scotland and of the need for regional government. It may, of course, simply be the talk of a glib barrister or of a cynic. But one suspects that behind the mildly-overweight, beaming, slightly threatening figure there does lurk a passion, not simply for the means of politics, but for its ends.