

# Medical condition of leaders can affect their de

By Daniel Finkelstein

*There is compelling evidence that the course of history has been changed again and again by the ill-health of world leaders*

ALL was quiet in the early hours of May 24, 1920, at the railway crossing at Montargis, a commune sitting a little more than 100km outside Paris, when the stationmaster encountered a very odd man indeed.

Wandering alone, dressed only in his nightclothes, the old boy had blood all over his face. Clearly confused, he had no clue where the blood had come from, or, for that matter, where he himself had come from. And to cap it all, this demented vagrant responded to inquiries about his identity by claiming unhelpfully that he was the president of France.

Naturally a doctor was called. But what he said rather surprised the stationmaster. For the bloodied old man in his pyjamas, the doctor revealed, was exactly who he claimed to be. He was Paul Deschanel, president of the Third Republic.

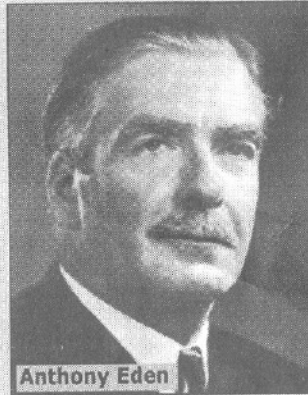
I came across the story of the mental decline of Deschanel and his fall from a train when reading a riveting new book on the health of statesmen. It is one of dozens of stories in this important volume that has introduced an issue to which until now I'd never given much thought - that the medical

condition of leaders can profoundly affect the decisions they make, and yet even the most debilitating illnesses often remain concealed.

I should have worked the importance of this out for myself. At the last general election, the Liberal Democrats put forward an alcoholic as their candidate for prime minister. They knew that this was what they were doing, pretty much all of them. Charles Kennedy was so far gone that he turned up drunk to the launch of his own manifesto. Yet when journalists wrote about his drink problem, the Lib Dems lied and forced retractions using the threat of lawsuits.

Now this was a genuine, and shaming, scandal. A scandal far more important than whether the MP for Waverhampton East's wife has purchased too expensive a dessert spoon. Yet unlike Dessertspoongate, the exposure of Mr Kennedy's condition and the lies told to protect him have not led us to question the rules of politics. This engrossing new book has persuaded me that it should have.

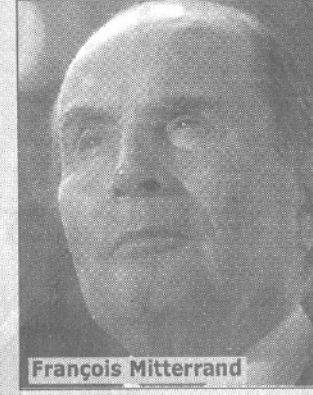
In *Sickness and in Power* is written by the former Foreign Secretary and doctor David Owen. The relationship between health and ability to govern has long been an interest of his. I recall him returning from the funeral of the Soviet leader Yuri Andropov. He didn't think the new leadership would last long. He had shaken hands with Konstantin Chernenko



Anthony Eden



Charles Kennedy



François Mitterrand



Winston Churchill

One main theme of Lord Owen's book is the impact of drug use. Eden's doctor describes him as living on stimulants. Similar reliance may also explain the actions of Kennedy in the early days of his presidency. The man who later dealt so capably with the Cuban missile crisis made a total hash of the Bay of Pigs adventure and his summit meeting in Vienna with Nikita Khrushchev

and, on hearing him wheeze, thought he was suffering from emphysema. Just 13 months later that disease did indeed kill

Chernenko.

The book presents compelling evidence that the course of history has been changed again and again

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by the ill-health of world leaders. Suez is perhaps the best example. By the time Eden entered Downing Street in 1955 he was not a well

man. What should have been a routine operation to remove his gall bladder went badly wrong. Over the succeeding years he

# Decision-making

required several further operations and a cocktail of drugs.

In the days leading up to his disastrous decision to collude in the Suez Canal adventure, Eden was in quite a mess. He was sleeping badly, was weak and in a sort of odd euphoric state. And he was admitted to hospital as an in-patient with a temperature of 106. It is difficult to believe that his condition did not have an impact on his decisions.

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Drug use may explain the disparity. In his first year in office Kennedy was being given drug treatment for Addison's disease by one set of doctors while, behind their back, he was being injected by another medic, a man known as Dr Feelgood. He obtained this nickname because of his cavalier attitude to amphetamines. Dr Feelgood was flown to Vienna and injected Kennedy less than an hour before his meeting with Khrushchev, a meeting that persuaded the Soviets that here was a weakling they could roll over.

It's not merely the detail in

these studies that strikes one, however. It's the sheer number of instances of ill-health. A medical paper suggests that in the 20th century as many as seven US presidents suffered mental illness in office; Mitterrand concealed that he was dying of cancer throughout his time in power; Churchill, still clinging tenaciously to office in the 1950s, had his signature forged regularly by his son-in-law because he was too ill to sign papers himself; and on and on and on. There is one case after another of vital decisions made by sick leaders under the influence of drugs. Often in secret.

What can be done? We need regular medical bulletins on heads of government and those seeking to be heads of government. And they need to be independent. They can't be provided by the politician's personal doctor since the duty to tell the truth to the public conflicts with the duty to keep patient information confidential. Mitterrand's doctor ended up lying repeatedly in his medical bulletins.

When Giscard d'Estaing was asked if, as President of France, he was told by French Intelligence of the Shah of Iran's fatal cancer, he magnificently replied: "Indirectement." When it comes to knowing about the medical condition of our democratic leaders, I don't think "indirectement" will do any more. COURTESY THE TIMES