



Rachel Stroud

YOU DON'T GET a much sharper eye for detail than that of Alistair Campbell. Or do you? Apparently the foresight which made the former New Labour PR guru such a success is failing him in middle age. But then, we all knew that before his optician did. The evidence of his newfound short-sightedness was right in front of us when he decided it would be a good idea to take to the stage with his memoirs of back-room politics last year. Now it all becomes clear: he couldn't see the front row's faces well enough to distinguish their responses, and when it came to reading his reviews he must have got small print copies. They said "bemusing", not 'amusing'.

As a veteran of the perils of impaired vision, I can sympathise. Life's tough when everything seems to melt into a confused blur of colours and people you don't recognise keep pointing at things you can't see and laughing. After taking my contacts out, I frequently find myself lost on the short walk from the bathroom to my bedroom, and get confused when someone other than me appears to have crept into my room and fallen asleep in my bed. Not, regrettably, as confused as my sleep-fuddled but endlessly patient housemates, who generally do a pretty good job of guiding me to my own door on these occasions.

Of course, poor sight isn't always a disadvantage. It has benefits not only for opticians (who obviously make quite a lot of money out of it), and guide dogs (who...er...don't), but also for your friends. A former hall-mate of mine, Oliver, once provided the residents of my floor with hours of fun after a night out at Varsity by getting all of us to examine his eye in the hope of finding a contact lens that, in his drunken panic, he was convinced must have become lodged behind his eyeball. After about forty minutes of puzzled investigation, someone thought to check his lens case: he'd already taken it out. Ok, so we lost some sleep, but the opportunity to remind him of this incident at every available opportunity afterwards more than made up for it.

Even for the unfortunate possessors of the defective visual equipment, there are

perks. With a little effort, you can usually get out of navigating on long journeys, and glasses can be quite trendy on the right person, even providing an extra opportunity for accessorising.

If you're secretly a superhero, they can turn out to be of even greater use. They are foolproof as a disguise (who could ever have imagined that the mild-mannered Clark Kent could possibly be Superman's alter-ego?), and also a good way of shielding your friends from the adverse effects of the occasional involuntary laser stare during a momentary lapse of concentration. For the mere mortals among you, there is the endless appeal of the Eye Test. The prospect may not seem so great now, but, when you graduate, this will be the only time you get to take the afternoon off work on the premise of a search for the Holy Grail, the answer of all answers to the question of all questions: which are clearer, the red or the green circles?

For Alistair personally, there are more specific benefits. Now

that he fully understands the difficulties of

poor eyesight, perhaps he'll find himself able to explain how exactly it was

that British Intelligence workers came to see Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq that were never even there, and perhaps be able to offer advice on how to get them better specs (perhaps he can recommend the place he got his) in order to stop it happening again.

Realistically, this probably won't happen. But there's no immediate cause for alarm. This particular spin-doctor's influence is, of course, somewhat diminished. And perfect eyesight is required to fly a plane: if yours is even the slightest bit dodgy, you can rest assured that even if we did get dragged into another war and conscription was reintroduced, you'd never be called upon to drop bombs from a fighter jet for your country in a war that your country never wanted in the first place. Positions that enable you to alter the destiny of entire nations require precision, and are best left to those who can focus clearly beyond the ends of their own noses. Isn't that right, Mr Campbell?

