

Robin Mountfield

Address by Peter Hennessey

A Treasury friend of mine once said that what kept him in the Civil Service, despite the pay and lack of grateful hosannahs from both the spending departments and the general public, was the appealing combination of high mindedness about public service and cynicism about politicians which he found among his colleagues. That pairing, however, did not fit Robin. For a start, he really didn't like the Treasury in which, for a time, he served; and he had a genuine human sympathy for most of his ministers. High mindedness and scepticism laced with wit was, I think, Robin's combination and very attractive it was, too. It made him great company.

Robin believed in all the eternal verities of our public service tradition – of a career Civil Service recruited and promoted on the basis of intelligence and merit rather than for their pliability and the harmony of their political views with those of their Secretary of State. He was never gushy about the gold standard of career service – speaking truth unto power – but he believed in it all right. And in Robin's case it once took the funniest and most idiosyncratic form I have ever encountered – so much so that it had entered Whitehall legend even before he left the service.

The legend runs like this:

In the early days of the first Thatcher Government, Robin was summoned from the Department of Industry to No 10 to brief her on some aspect of the nationalised industries – a subject on which she lacked both tendresse and finesse. Before he went in, the kindly Private Office briefed him on her likes and dislikes, including the fact that she detested men with beards, 'not that that applies to you, added the private secretary.

Robin promptly grew one and there it stayed until long after Mrs Thatcher had resigned. Anne tells me the story is rather more complicated than that. What is true, she said, is that Robin had been planning to shave off his beard after Labour returned to power in 1997, but, on hearing that Tony Blair, too, disliked men with beards, decided to keep it (which he did).

For me, this easily beats William Armstrong's wearing a black tie to work for a week after Sir Anthony Eden put the troops down the Suez Canal in 1956. Flaunting bristles unto power will remain part of Whitehall legend; at least as long as I'm writing about the Civil Service.

Robin only slipped up once on this front and he was characteristically honest about it afterwards. The television cameras caught him amongst the largely bussed-in labour supporting crowd as the Blairs made their faintly toe-curling progress up Downing Street before TB delivered his well-rehearsed spontaneity on the steps of No 10.

Robin was interesting about Civil Service careers. He used to come down the Mile End Road to Queen Mary to have lunch with me and Jim Bolton, his old friend from Oxford days whose wisdom we both revered and who's here today. Robin would tell us how fortunate Jim and I were as teachers because we could actually see – year on year - the

results of our efforts as our students grew before our eyes. A touch wistfully, Robin would say that given the collective nature of Whitehall work, an official could rarely experience anything comparable. But, as Jim reminded me, that prime piece of inward investment so crucial to the well-being of the North-East – the Nissan factory near Sunderland – could well not be there but for Robin's tireless and protracted work behind the scenes. And, despite claims to the contrary, he did coin the phrase 'joined up government'.

Robin was an open government man – but he was no leaker. The nearest I got – again over lunch at Queen Mary in the early 1990s – was the faintly acid aside, that after all those accumulating years of Conservative governments – he hoped one day once more to live in a liberal democracy where administrations changed. This, I think, explains his presence in Downing Street on Blair Day One.

But there was one secret I really wish he had divulged to me while he was still in Crown Service – about the piece of legislation whose place in the statute book he craved. This was pure Robin. Its full title was *the Dogs Abolition Bill*. And, as Anne explained it to me, it 'was a model of simplicity, cooked up with a friend in the Civil Service Box' in the House of Commons Chamber 'while listening to ministers drone on about a new bill.'

It was only 2 clauses long, Anne continued. Clause 1 said that anything in the current or subsequent schedules 'could be deemed a dog'. Clause 2 'said that anything or anyone deemed a dog under the terms of the Act was thereby abolished!' One of the many reasons people loved working with Robin was that during particularly tiresome interventions at meetings, Robin would mutter to his team "deemed a dog" and the fog of tedium would lift. And it wasn't just his senior colleagues who relished working with Robin. It was true right down the line.

Robin's gift of fun and friendship spread far beyond his official life. They were very apparent in university settings – at Essex, in particular, as well as during his visits to the Mile End Group at the Queen Mary. He believed in scholars and scholarship; and was forever urging me to get on with my post-war histories. To his friends, his love of family was palpable. I'm sure his glorious home life was one of the reasons he never lost perspective through all the ups and downs of a professional life at the top of Whitehall. He had, too, an eye for art and photography and enviable practical skills. Anne told me that his abilities as a woodworker were such that they led builders' jaws to drop on a Monday morning when they saw what he had fashioned over the weekend. They afforded him the highest accolade in their honours system and called him 'Guv' with great respect.

I was truly lucky to have known Robin. Our fathers had met as fellow fell-walking and rock-climbing Liverpoolians during the interwar years as members of the Wayfarers' club – and I knew this because my Dad would say, on our trips to see the relatives in Liverpool, that he knew the man who ran the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board. Robin was a great friend to me, one of the wisest I've ever had, and always tolerant about my irritating questions as a journalist-turned-historian. I'm so relieved I was never 'deemed a dog'. For Robin's friendship was something I greatly prized – as I did his gentle

chastisement when I was thinking or saying something foolish or unjustified. I valued it and I shall miss it. A lovely man.