

**Former Cabinet Secretary Lord Butler
Interview with Anthony Seldon
Friday 16th November 2012 at 10 Downing Street**

Key

LB: Lord Butler

AS: Anthony Seldon

AS: This is an interview with Lord Butler of Brockwell. Lord Butler was Cabinet Secretary between 1988 and 1998. And the first question that I'd like to ask you, Lord Butler, is what was the most difficult moment in your tenure as Cabinet Secretary?

LB: Well I think the most difficult moment for me personally was when I had to investigate some of the allegations that were made by Mohamed Al Fayed against Cabinet ministers, not all Cabinet ministers, ministers and MPs, about various forms of corruption. I had to look into those, and it was made particularly difficult because I was misled by Jonathan Aitken. I was foolish enough to say publicly that I believed his story, and then of course in a court case his story turned out to have been untrue. So I think, you know, if I think back at what was the most difficult for me personally, most embarrassing, that was the most difficult episode.

AS: And could you explain why as a Cabinet Secretary you were being involved in that legalistic area?

LB: Well, because I was advising the Prime Minister on whether ministers had broken the Ministerial Code, and, of course, in some cases some of the allegations against ministers or MPs, the evidence is in the government files – that's not always the case. Now, if... if there are charges of criminal behaviour, well that's not something the Cabinet Secretary ought to look into, it's something that the police ought to look into. Sometimes the right form of an inquiry is judge led. But when the evidence was internal and it was a question of advising whether a minister had broken the Ministerial Code, that's the sort of thing that the Cabinet Secretary used to be asked to advise on. There's now an independent advisor to the Prime Minister on whether ministers have broken the Ministerial Code, and I think that's rather an improvement.

AS: Yes, indeed. Were there other particularly difficult times, Robin, or episodes in your period as Cabinet Secretary?

LB: Oh yes, well I... almost every day had difficulties of one sort or another. I mean in some ways some of the, you know, the most critical was the first Gulf War when Britain went to war, and I had to set up a system of support for ministers – get the Whitehall machine so that it was working in a way that would support the decisions that the ministers had to make. And these decisions very often had to be made early in the day, and so what used to happen was that the... the assessment staff in the Cabinet Office would meet at about 4.30 in the morning. The Joint Intelligence Committee would meet at 6 o'clock. The

Permanent Secretaries would meet at 8 o'clock, 8.30, and the ministers would meet at 10, so that decisions were taken early in the day and also so that we could deal with the lobby at 11 o'clock. So that was obviously a tense and difficult time. When I was Principal Private Secretary before, I'd lived through the miners' strike, and the... that was a tense time. So...

AS: And, that's referring to the period from 1982 to '85 when you were Margaret Thatcher's Principal Private Secretary here in Number Ten. You were also there in the Grand Hotel in Brighton, I think, when the bomb went off. Can you tell us about that?

LB: Well it was during the Conservative Party Conference and, of course, the Principal Private Secretary has not got no part to play in a political... the political affairs of the Party Conference but I used to attend. I think my predecessors attended in order to carry through the government business, because the Prime Minister has to go on doing government business, and also there's part of the Party Conference speech that... parts of the speech that have to be cleared with Whitehall to make sure that what's being said is right. Anyway, Mrs Thatcher used to work long into the night before completing her Party Conference speech, and on this particular occasion she actually finished quite early. She finished - by her standards - she finished at about 2:30 in the morning, and I had a document that Number Ten wanted to get a decision from her on by breakfast next morning. So I said to her would she take this and look at it overnight and let me know what her decision was in the morning. By this time all the speech-writers had left the room and it was just she and I in the... in her sitting room in the Grand Hotel. And she said, 'If you don't mind I'd like to look at it tonight and then I can concentrate on my speech overnight.' So she was sitting in this armchair, about as far away as you are, and looking at this document, and I was sitting in an armchair facing her, just thinking how nice it would be to get to bed quite soon. And, while she was looking at the piece of paper a... there was this loud explosion. And I'd heard several bombs in my time at Number Ten - I'd heard the Price Sisters' bomb during Ted Heath's time, the bomb that blew up Airey Neave, the Carlton House bomb - so I knew at once what it was, and so I came to rather rapidly and thought, well now, here you are with the... alone with the Prime Minister, somebody's trying to blow her up, so you better do something sensible. So I said to her, 'I think you ought to come away from the windows in case there is another bomb.' Now the extraordinary thing was that the lights didn't go out, so the lights stayed on, by some extraordinary chance. And we went across the room, and she said, 'I must see if Denis is alright', and so she opened the door to the bedroom, and through the door of the bedroom you could hear the sounds of falling masonry, which was actually the bathroom ceiling collapsing. And what I should have done is to say, 'Stand back Prime Minister, I'm more dispensable than you are. I think I should go and see', but not wishing to stand between a lady and her bedroom I let her go in. And it seemed like minutes but it was only a few seconds and she emerged with Denis Thatcher pulling flannel trousers over his pyjamas. And we went out into the corridor, and as we looked up the corridor we saw what looked like smoke coming out of the door of the rooms two doors along, which I knew were Geoffrey Howe's rooms. So I said, 'Oh gosh, it looks as if there's been a bomb in Geoffrey Howe's room', but then the door beyond opened

and out came Geoffrey, in his dressing gown, blinking. Anyway, we stood there in the corridor, and I said to Margaret Thatcher, 'Well there's been a bomb. I think what I ought to advise you to do, is to get you back to London.' And she said, 'I'm not leaving'. And at that moment a fireman arrived and said, 'Follow me', and we followed him and he took us down the corridor, and we got to the end of the corridor, and it was a cul-de-sac. So he said, 'follow me back', and we went along, and, as I say, the lights were still on, and we went downstairs in the Grand Hotel and where the foyer had been was full of rubble. And so, my next assumption was that the bomb had been placed down there. Margaret Thatcher broke off to see if everybody who was in the front desk was accounted for, which they were. And then we went out of the back where there were Number Ten cars. And the police contingency plan worked very quickly... moved very quickly into action. But at that point I thought, well now, all the Number Ten papers are lying about upstairs, and also the Prime Minister's clothes, and my clothes, and so on. So, with one of the Prime Minister's detectives, I went back up, not realising that the hotel was hanging by a thread above our heads. And I packed away the Number Ten papers, and I packed her clothes, and my clothes, and Denis' clothes, and we went down, and we joined the car, and caught up with the party at Hove Police Station, where by this time the good and great of the land, in various stages of undress, were being collected up. And I remember at that point I thought it would be helpful if Number Ten switchboard rang people's relations and so on, so that when they heard the 7 o'clock news they'd know that their loved ones were safe. So I collected the names of those who'd like to have their relations rung up, and I rang the Number Ten switchboard and asked them to do it. But unfortunately they - certainly in my case - misunderstood the instruction and my wife was fast asleep in bed at 4 in the morning and the telephone rang, and the Number Ten switchboard said, 'We just want to let you know that Robin's alright.' And she said, 'Very kind of you but I never supposed he wasn't.' Anyway, by the time the... by the time the 7 o'clock news came on she knew.

AS: And she was calm and resolute?

LB: Extraordinarily so. It was one of those moments where there can be no prepared reaction. You react, as it were, by instinct. Her first instinct was to see if her husband was all right. The second instinct, when we'd got to the Lewis Police Training College, where they took us to, and I turned, she... there was a room for her, and she went there, and Denis also had a room, and I slept on the bench in the day room where there was a telephone. And after we'd been there for about half an hour the telephone rang, and it was John Gummer, the Chairman of the Party, saying, 'things are much worse than we'd supposed. They've already found some people dead, and if you turn on the television, the cameras are here. They're digging for Norman Tebbit and John Wakeham.' And so, I thought, well shall I wake the Prime Minister up? And then I thought no, let her get some sleep. By this time it was 5, after 5 in the morning. And I turned on the television, watched Norman Tebbit being brought out - they were still digging for John Wakeham. And at 8 o'clock in the morning Mrs Thatcher appeared, and I said, 'It's much worse than we'd supposed, and Norman Tebbit and John Wakeham are seriously injured, and Roberta Wakeham is dead, and Margaret Tebbit is seriously injured, and the Macleans are dead.' And she hardly hesitated for a

moment, and said, 'Well it's 8 o'clock, and the Conference must begin on time at 9 o'clock.' I was appalled. I said, 'Surely you can't go on with the Conference? You know, some of your closest colleagues have been killed, and others are injured'. And she said, without any hesitation, 'We must show that terrorism can't defeat democracy.' And of course she was right. And so the Conference did start at 9 o'clock. She was on the platform, dressed in the clothes that I'd brought out of the Grand Hotel, looking like a new pin. And she said, 'Here we are, shaken but not daunted.' And it was a marvellous gesture of strength.

AS: That was one of the most remarkable moments in post-war premiership for the Prime Minister being so tested. Towards the end of your time, back as Cabinet Secretary, and just to take one more episode, Lady Diana was in Paris. How much did you see personally of that whole drama?

LB: Well I wasn't rung up in the middle of the night. My wife and I woke at 6.30 in the morning and turned on the radio, and there was an account of... said the Princess died and something about her life – didn't say Princess Diana. And my wife and I, at first, thought it was a historical thing about Princess Grace of Monaco. Anyway, it soon was clear, and so then I had to decide what to do. So, I rang up Robert Fellowes, the Queen's Private Secretary, who was also, of course, Princess Diana's brother-in-law. And I got, actually, on the phone, Princess Diana's sister, Jane Fellowes, commiserated, and said, you know, 'What... what was to be done? What could be done?' And the immediate thing was that Robert was preoccupied, was getting a Queen's Flight Plane out to Paris and to collect Diana's body, and bring her back. And then in the course of the day there were other things: where the body would lie, whether there would be a memorial service before the funeral, whether it would be a state funeral. And those were the things we were... we were preoccupied with during that day. Then after that I wasn't really very much involved. The Palace managed a lot of that week. My most striking memory of the week was another Permanent Secretary ringing me up and saying, I think it must have been on the Tuesday evening, or the Wednesday evening, 'You must walk across the park and see what's happening in the Mall. It's the most extraordinary event.' And so I did. I walked across St James' Park and it was amazing because there was complete silence in the Mall, complete silence. And yet, thousands of people lining up to put their tributes down, and I've never seen anything like it - I don't think there's ever been anything like it. But it was the... it was the silence of the crowd that was the most extraordinary thing.

AS: Was the job of Principal Private Secretary essential, or merely very helpful, for that of being Cabinet Secretary?

LB: Well it was certainly very helpful. No, I wouldn't say it's essential, I think people could become Cabinet Secretary perfectly well without it. And... but really knowing how Number Ten works and the central machinery of government works is, of course, enormously helpful. In some... in one respect at least, I think you can be misled having been Principal Private Secretary because you're no longer - when you're Cabinet Secretary - just the Prime Minister's servant. You're the servant of the whole Cabinet. You're that little bit more detached and, of

course, when I came back as Cabinet Secretary it was the same Prime Minister – Margaret Thatcher was still Prime Minister – and I had to get used to the idea that I wasn't a member of the Number Ten family in quite the same way.

AS: Did you ever feel just a little bit jealous of not having that very close proximity to the Prime Minister?

LB: Yes, I did. I found that quite difficult in some ways, because at... by that time - it was coming to the end of Margaret Thatcher's time - she was very dependent on Charles Powell in particular, and Bernard Ingham, and I certainly didn't have quite the same standing and influence with her that I had when I'd been her Principal Private Secretary.

AS: So, how would you describe the job of Cabinet Secretary?

LB: Well I think my predecessor Robert Armstrong described it as well as I could, which he described it as 'the Chief Engineer in the ship of State, making sure that the machinery works, that the Prime Minister and the ministers on the bridge, the Cabinet, pull the levers, and that they're connected up to something, and that the government responds.' So, to make sure that the business of government is carried through, is presented in the most helpful way to the Cabinet and to the Prime Minister, and that decisions get taken in a timely way and then get acted on.

AS: Did the nature of the job change during your ten years at it? A long time, and serving three different Prime Ministers – quite unusual for a Cabinet Secretary.

LB: Yes, and of course it changed with the Prime Ministers because Margaret Thatcher, by the time I became Cabinet Secretary was very well established, was predominant in the Cabinet, had a huge national and international reputation, and I think was more tired than when I served her as Principal Private Secretary, understandably. And the form which her tiredness took was not that she was any less acute, but she wasn't as keen to argue long into the night as she had been previously. And so she was a bit shorter with... a bit more abrupt in taking decisions and a bit more dependent on other people in her private office. And you know, one could say that in the end that was her undoing, over both Europe and the council tax - the community charge. So, that was how she was when I became Cabinet Secretary. And then John Major arrived, whom I knew well, because when he first entered the Cabinet I had been the Second Permanent Secretary in the Treasury dealing with public expenditure and he was Chief Secretary so we worked very closely together, knew each other well, shared a passion for cricket. And so... but he, I think, wanted to establish... he wanted to re-establish Cabinet Government. He wanted to be less dominant in the Cabinet. He wanted to encourage Cabinet discussion. But by this time, and particularly with the divisions over Europe, the Cabinet wasn't as self-disciplined as it should have been, and there were a lot of leaks, and these were damaging to the government. There were also the accusations of sleaze, which were very difficult for him. And more, his... his position as Prime Minister was really secured by his winning the 1992 election, but then that was followed, of course, by Black

Wednesday, and a lot of things that shook the government. So he had... he had a difficult time. He ran for re-election... without resigning as Prime Minister, he ran for re-election as Party Leader in...

AS: ...'95.

LB: ...'95, and he won that. That was quite a shake-up in the government. And then he almost, in my view, fought the 1997 election single-handed. I mean he... it was a terrific performance but he knew that the Conservative Party were doomed in that election. And then, of course, Tony Blair arrived. And that was a very exciting time for all the Civil Service because it was a change in government after eighteen years. We wanted to show that we would serve a Labour government as committedly as we'd served the Conservative government. We didn't know them as well. I wanted to manage the transition to the new government smoothly. And so, you know, that was a challenging but also exciting time. I felt very fortunate really, because I had 8 months of the Labour government. If we hadn't got on well together well, you know, they weren't going to keep me forever. Actually I think, personally anyway, I got on extremely well with Tony Blair. He thought the transition went well. He was grateful and kind to me personally. And so, you know, I left feeling I'd really left at the right time and had a very good time.

AS: And, the task of managing the home Civil Service also, if the job of Cabinet Secretary was not enough, how did you possibly manage that on top of it?

LB: By having very good lieutenants. And by, of course, you know, the politicians aren't here all the time, so Fridays were days when I could get out to go round and visit the Civil Service, could do it in the recesses as well. So, I didn't think... I didn't think it was impossible. And I also thought, actually, that it was an advantage to the Civil Service that, as Cabinet Secretary, I had very good access to the Prime Minister because, of course, you know, senior politicians, however conscientious, don't find management the most exciting thing that they have to do. But I could, you know – Robin Armstrong, Richard Wilson, Andrew Turnbull – could all deal with the management issues affecting the Civil Service at their weekly bilaterals, or at other times, because they had such easy access to the Prime Minister. So I thought, actually, that that helped and that was... that was possible. What it did do, of course, meant, it was... one of the most difficult things was the Cabinet Secretary is a 'behind the scenes' post, but when you're head of the Civil Service you've got to have a bit of profile. You know, you've got to stand up for the Civil Service, you've got to represent them and so combining these two things can be difficult. I didn't find combining them difficult in terms of the time or the demands but, you know, that, as it were, standing up for the Civil Service in public while at the same time trying to do your 'behind the scenes' job as Cabinet Secretary was a bit more difficult.

AS: And what advice did your predecessor, Robert Armstrong, give you in 1988?

LB: Well I don't remember him giving me any particular advice but, of course, I was his boy, I was his lad, I was his protégée. He'd been my mentor over many

years. He was Principal Private Secretary in Number Ten, 1972, and he really secured my appointment as one of the Private Secretary team in 1972. So I'd worked very closely with him between 1972 and 1975. And then, in 1982, he was the Cabinet Secretary and so when I came back as Principal Private Secretary there he was and we worked very closely together again. So really, by 1988, I'd learnt just about everything that I could learn from him. I don't think there were... I don't remember any specific advice at that moment when I took over.

AS: And did you have Robert Armstrong, or perhaps any of the earlier Cabinet Secretaries – Edward Bridges, Norman Brook, John Hunt, Burke Trend – as exemplars in your mind about the kind of public service leader you wanted to be?

LB: Well, yes, up to a point I think. I hugely admired Burke Trend who, you know... he was... struck me as lean, aesthetic, devoted to the job, not looking for any frills, no self-indulgence, very self disciplined. And so I... but my **(INDECIPHERABLE 28.19)**, my main model, was Robert Armstrong whom I'd seen at first hand. But the job changed, particularly the head of the Civil Service job changed, by the time I came in because the government was just launching a big reform of the Civil Service called 'The Next Steps' initiative and this was a very big project which really involved making changes across the whole of the Civil Service, turning the executive roles of the Civil Service into agencies, very often run by people who were recruited from outside. I think about half the Chief Executives of the agencies were recruited from outside, and half from inside. And concentration on their delivering the results that the government had set them to... to achieve. And that really started, pretty well, at the moment that I became head of the Civil Service in 1988. I had an absolutely wonderful lieutenant who, as it were, drove that, called Peter Kemp, who had been in the Treasury, as well as in departments, and knew how to drive them. And with a big initiative in Whitehall it's very difficult, of course, to get the machine going. There's some inertia that you have to overcome but I was lucky in that I had ten years to do it and the government remained committed to the programme and so we did manage to get it established. We had 75% of the Civil Service were in the agencies. I think that it did improve the services that the agencies delivered to the public. So that, again, you know, I found a very worthwhile thing and an enjoyable part of the job.

AS: So a strong public face required for the head of the Civil Service part of the job, but a retiring face for the Cabinet Secretary. Somewhat difficult to have both faces but you...

LB: Yes, and of course sometimes it went wrong. When I was having to look into the behaviour of the ministers I had to... you know, I got a certain amount of very unwelcome public profile out of that. And then, of course, there was, you know, what was developing – had developed – but was the giving evidence to parliament, to select committees. And then, during the latter part of my time as Cabinet Secretary, sort of second half, was the Scott Inquiry into the export of arms to Iraq which had a very high profile and, I think that a lot of the media

hoped, you know, well I don't say hoped, but thought that might be Watergate and terrible skulduggery on the part of the government was going to be revealed. And so they were always looking for that and that went on for three years. And so that took up quite a lot of time and involved a certain amount of public exposure. I remember, I think Private Eye had a story headlined, 'It Was the Butler What Did It', and I was... I was quite clear that I hadn't done anything that I had to be worried about and that gave me confidence. But nonetheless, you know, we were all under very, very, very intensive scrutiny.

AS: Did you sit there in that rather grand office in the Cabinet Office, and look at the portraits of previous Cabinet Secretaries and think, 'I am the most powerful public servant in the land', and did you have a real sense of pride, and a sense of history in that job?

LB: Well I think I had the latter two. I don't think I had any great sense of power because, of course, you know, one of the things is that the Permanent Secretaries - the other Permanent Secretaries - have their own responsibilities to their Secretaries of State. It's not for the Cabinet Secretary to boss them about. And so you're really leading a team rather than having any great power. But I certainly did have a sense of pride in the post and in the Civil Service. I was very... you know, I've never regretted having become a civil servant. I always thought that our Civil Service had very high standards and I was very proud to be head of it. And I certainly had a sense of history. You can't avoid having a sense of history as you sit both in the Cabinet Office with the Conference Room, the Treasury Board Room, just opposite where King George III used to meet his ministers in the eighteenth century. The room, the Cabinet Secretary's room, is over the site of the old cockpit where in Tudor times there were the... where the sports were held. You're in a palace. And then you come into Number Ten and all the things that have happened here since it became the Prime Minister's residence more than 250 years ago. You think of Churchill at the beginning of the war meeting Chamberlain at Halifax. You think of Churchill at the end of the war. So, you can't help having a very strong sense of history and that adds, I think, to one's pride in the post. But in terms of power, no, I don't think that... you know, people say, 'oh, this is the most powerful position in the country'. It didn't feel like that, and I was always looking for, you know, as far as, sort of, trying to get my colleagues in the departments to do what the Prime Minister wanted them to do, I was always looking for, sort of, means of leverage to make that happen. And there were, of course, things that one could do for them in return for them doing things for you, and I was always looking for those.

AS: It's sometimes suggested that this is no longer an appropriate office for the Prime Minister because it's too small. Could you imagine the British premiership anywhere else other than in Number Ten?

LB: No I couldn't. And I think that the fact that Number Ten is a house, rather than a department, is a terrific asset because the lines of communication to the Prime Minister from the people who work in Number Ten were always very short. And, you know, there weren't people sort of falling over each other trying to get their message through to the Prime Minister. I'm not sure that things

aren't... are quite like that these days, I think there are far more people here, but when I first came to work in Number Ten in 1972 there were five people in the Private Office. There was the Prime Minister's Political Private Secretary in the room on the other side of the Cabinet Room. There was the Press Office, and there was the Appointments Office, and there was the garden rooms and the messengers – and that was about it. And there was a terrific sense of family, of being involved intimately in a very important operation, and I think it worked really well like that. I think that one of the things however that involves, is that Number Ten mustn't try and second-guess the departments. Of course, the Prime Minister will want to have his own, or her own, views but you have - if you're a very small office - to rely a lot on the secretaries of state and their advice, and that is, in my view, as it should be.

AS: Collective Cabinet responsibility. You've referred there to the problems of keeping confidentiality within that Cabinet Room. Did that principal change during your time as Cabinet Secretary, or indeed your whole involvement in your career from 1972 when you first came into this building?

LB: Well, people said, you know, 'has Cabinet Government broken down?' and I think in some ways it has, of course it has changed, because the focus on the Prime Minister has become much stronger. I always used to say that the Prime Minister had four sources of power. One was the power of hiring and firing which, of course, is a very strong power and had existed, though it's not always quite as unconstrained as one might suppose. Of chairing the Cabinet and running the Cabinet Committees. And those, in a sense, had always been there. But as time has gone on there were two more powers that became very important. One is that the Prime Minister is very much more involved in foreign affairs. You know, in the old days if you wanted to communicate with the head of another government, instructions were given to the Foreign Office, they sent a telegram to the ambassador, the ambassador would seek audience with the other government, report back to the Foreign Office, and it would come back. Now the Prime Minister picks up a telephone and an awful lot more happens from here, and because travel is so much easier there's an awful lot more personal relations and personal visits on both sides. And, of course, the other thing is the media. You've got 24/7 media, very much more concentrated on the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister's Press Secretary has become a very much more dominant figure within Whitehall on behalf of the Prime Minister. So the focus on the Prime Minister has definitely increased. However, it doesn't follow from that, in my view, that the government has got to become a presidency and I think it's a very bad thing if it does. Some of the worst decisions... some of the worst mistakes that I saw government make, during my time both as Private Secretary and as Cabinet Secretary, were when things, for one reason or another, hadn't been discussed in the Cabinet, very often because it was thought they were too confidential to discuss. And if you don't discuss things in the Cabinet three things can go wrong. One is that you can overlook some part of the decision that affects a bit of government that you hadn't thought of, whereas if you'd discussed it the minister for that department would have been alerted to it and would have raised the point. The second is that very often ministers who are directly dealing with an issue, a very important issue, get almost too close to it. They lose their

perspective and to have the advantage of some advice from other politicians, senior experienced politicians, who can see things more generally I think is important. And the third thing is ministers who have not taken part in a momentous decision don't feel bound by it and, although they may conventionally be bound by collective responsibility, if they disagree with it the government is more fragmented and divided. So I think that Cabinet Government remains very important. It is more difficult to achieve in a very much faster moving world, but not impossible, and in my advice to a Prime Minister would be to make sure that collective government continues.

AS: Would you have other items of advice for a modern Prime Minister in the twenty-first century?

LB: Yes I would...

AS: [Laughter] Go on.

LB: Well, I mean, I think... I think the most important thing is not to take too much notice of the media because they will push you about and they will demand immediate responses and immediate responses are often wrong. And, my model in that respect was Margaret Thatcher, who didn't like reading the media. When there was a story that she had to answer in the House of Commons Bernard Ingham had to say, 'Prime Minister, you may not want to but you've really got to read this because you're going to be asked about it this afternoon.' The one thing she did do was to listen to the Today programme while she was having her hair done in the... in the morning, but in general she didn't read the media and so she wasn't pushed about by them. If you were watching the television with her she'd turn it on because perhaps there had been an air crash or something had happened. When the next bit was about her, the Prime Minister, she would always turn it off. She couldn't bear to watch herself on the, on the television. So, anyway, I think that... And then my other piece of advice which is really connected with that is, 'Lead, don't follow'. Lead...

AS: The difference being...

LB: Well, because if you try to give people what they want, they always want something different every five minutes. And so, it's best to have a firm direction that you're going in, firm principles, and then people will follow. They may not like it, and you may get a lot of criticism and attack, but nonetheless people like to be led. Actually, as a civil servant I liked to be led. I very much preferred a strong minister, a strong politician, to a... to a weak one.

AS: Do we have the same quality of leadership in both ministers and civil servants as when you first entered the Civil Service?

LB: Well all ministers and all senior civil servants are different and I... when people say which of the Prime Ministers that I worked for did I admire most – not ducking the question – I always say, 'well, nobody becomes Prime Minister of this country without having very great qualities, but they're different qualities,

and so it's, you know...' And they all did, all the ones... all the Prime Ministers that I worked for did have great talent, but different qualities. Now is the... well, is the quality of leadership the same? Yes, I mean I don't think it's diminished in any way. I think it's very more under strain due to 24/7 media. You know, when you think of Harold Macmillan saying being Prime Minister was the easiest job he ever had, and he spent a lot of time reading Trollope and Jane Austen, it's an illustration of how things have changed.

AS: And what is the magic ingredient of true leadership?

LB: Ah well, it's knowing where you want to go, and your troops knowing where you want to go and knowing that you're not going to retreat at the first sound of gunfire. And moreover, that when they are trying to do what you... they believe you want them to do, that you will stand by them.

AS: And did Mrs Thatcher ever shout at the Today programme, at the radio, if she disagreed with it?

LB: No, I think Denis shouted but I don't remember Margaret Thatcher ever... I think she would have tutted, 'oh, these people!' but I don't think... I mean, forceful though she was, I can't remember her ever shouting.

AS: It's half past and we have two questions to go. You asked for the... me to notify you. I'm sure there'll be more than two questions but there are two questions on my sheet to go, but we'll break them down. Are you all right Robin?

LB: Of course.

AS: You've met so many interesting people, it would be impossible to pick, I imagine, two or three who most struck you, but I'm going to ask you to do it nonetheless.

LB: Well, yes you're right. I met so many... It's a privilege, I met so many interesting people and, of course, famous people, and powerful people, and so on. But I think if I look back on it, the people I think of who interested me most were people who had had experiences that I could hardly imagine. And so, if I had to pick out three people I would say Nelson Mandela, Oleg Gordievsky, and Deng Xiaoping.

AS: I'm going to ask you to say a word about each of those if you would?

LB: Well, you see, can you... can you imagine Nelson Mandela, having spent all those years on Robben Island, having been treated brutally in many respects – his eyesight and his health affected – and yet coming out of it and taking the statesman-like, charitable, role that he did. I couldn't imagine myself doing it. Oleg Gordievsky living for so many years in acute danger of being detected... a person who spied because he didn't believe in the system and he did believe in the Western system. An ideological spy who took... risked his life every day for it. And Deng Xiaoping who had been imprisoned in China, had lived through the

Cultural Revolution, and had then come out and was leading this huge, huge, country. You can't meet those people and not be fascinated by them.

AS: And, to conclude on incidents, the 1974 General Election, amidst strikes in the country, a very vexing time for Britain. What was that... what was Number Ten like at that time of that February 28th election in '74?

LB: Well of course it was fraught, and it was under siege. The crowds could come in to Downing Street then, and did, and were chanting 'Heath Out!' and so on. And, you know, up and down the country there were fights between the miners and the... and the police. We in Number Ten were working 18 hours a day in support of the government. And then, just speaking as a civil servant, Labour come back in, and the first thing Harold Wilson says was, 'we must settle this strike.' I mean, we'd been... I'd been, in particular, I was the Economic Private Secretary and then I'd been writing speeches for Ted Heath about how important it was that the government's law on prices and incomes was upheld, 'who rules Britain?' And so, it was a great trauma really to find yourself then having to write speeches saying almost exactly the opposite. But it brought home to me the role of a civil servant - you work for the government that had been elected. But also, you know, it also brought home, because I was very fond of and admired Ted Heath, and it brought home something I think that people find in Number Ten a great deal: you support the Prime Minister, you admire the Prime Minister, you do your very best for the Prime Minister, your close, almost intimate, relationship develops, and then a week before a general election you look at each other and the Prime Minister suddenly realises that you, who he's trusted and liked, is going to be working for his, or her, chief political opponent in a week's time. That's quite a moment actually and... but it's something you've got to... you've got to get used to. So yes, that was a very fraught time, but I suppose the other... you know, the incident we haven't mentioned in Number Ten - which, in a sense, was one of the most memorable - was the Mortar Attack. And, sitting in the Cabinet Room, there was a meeting going on of the Gulf War Cabinet. I was sitting next to John Major and what I remember clearly, I don't think it's come out in any of the memoirs, was what we were worried about was Iraq might launch a terrorist attack in London, and the last word I remember John Major uttering before the mortar bomb exploded was the word 'bomb'. And suddenly, there's this bomb. The room shakes, the windows shiver, shatter - not shatter but craze. The French windows at the end of the Cabinet Room blow in and what I immediately supposed had happened was that this is a terrorist attack and people had come over the back wall and they were going to appear at the Cabinet windows spraying sub-machine guns at us. And so, I got under the table pretty quick, I found John Major was under the table beside me, and... but quite soon it was clear that hadn't happened and we got up and restored what dignity we could. But then, Charles Powell said, 'Put into action the drill again', and the drill was: Prime... Number Ten under attack, you got the Prime Minister to a safe area, and that happened very quickly. And we did get the Prime Minister to a safe area, and since it was a safe area I followed him as closely as I could, and got into the safe area too. And then, after about ten minutes it was clear that there was no follow-up attack. We didn't know that there had been a mortar shell, we thought it had been... at that time, we thought it had been a bomb, a car bomb, outside the

back wall of Number Ten. And we went through to the Cabinet Room to COBRA, and resumed the meeting, and it wasn't for another twenty minutes, half an hour, that we were told what the nature of the attack had been. And, of course, mercifully nobody was killed. The worst thing that happened was some people... one person got a cut in the back of their scalp through a piece of flying glass, and that was the worst that happened, but it was another memorable moment.

AS: And lets finish with the transition in May 1997. John Major, talking to everybody in this room here, and then his successor arriving. What can you recall of that?

LB: Well it was a beautiful day and, of course, there were all the crowds outside waving the flags and so on. And I was standing outside the Cabinet Room. The Number Ten staff were lined up either side of the front door in the traditional way. And I think it was best summed up by the Blairs coming in, the Blair family, and Tony Blair acknowledging, clapping, and so on. And there was one of the garden room girls with tears pouring down her face, and he stopped and said, 'what's the matter?' And she said, 'well, you're very welcome but I do so miss that nice Mr... going to miss that nice Mr Major, so much.' And, of course, Tony Blair entirely understood. And, I shook hands... I received him at the end of the corridor, shook hands with him, opened the door of the Cabinet Room, went in. As I say it was a beautiful day and so we went and sat in the wicker chairs outside on the top of the steps overlooking the garden and set about the things that a Prime Minister immediately has to do, which is making his most senior appointments. And Mr Blair, understandably, apart from the rush of adrenalin, was absolutely exhausted and... The American system is crazy when you have three or four months, you know, of a lame duck President while the administration gets itself together. But our system, when you have two or three hours sleep, after you've been going round the country campaigning for three, four, five weeks - that is even more crazy.

AS: And do you miss it all, here?

LB: I'm not a missing person. I'm just lucky in that respect. I'm very pleased and proud to have worked here, I feel very privileged. But it's just always been in my character that I get excited about the next thing, so I... I wouldn't apply to come back.

AS: And the next thing is Twickenham. England against Australia tomorrow.

LB: At the moment it is, yea.

AS: Very good. Lord Butler, thank you very, very, much indeed.

LB: Great pleasure.

