

ROBIN'S FUNERAL: TRIBUTE TO ROBIN

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have come together today to pay our last respects to Robin. We are here, family and friends alike, to give support and comfort to Anne, Helen, Nick and Ed, who are most grievously affected by Robin's death. But we are also here to give thanks for Robin's life. There will be another occasion, in March, to celebrate Robin's life and achievements with a wider group of friends and colleagues.

My name is Bob Dobbie, and I am an old friend of Robin's. I am not a minister of religion, nor do I believe in any higher-or lower- destiny. Reflecting Robin's wishes and beliefs, this is not a religious ceremony, although there will be an opportunity for prayer for those with religious beliefs, for Robin admired Christian ethics.

Robin was the younger of two sons, and was born and brought up in Liverpool, for which he kept a soft spot throughout his life. His father was general manager of the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, a senior and influential position. No doubt Robin's lifelong left of centre views were strongly influenced by his parents. As a teenager Robin had two major achievements. First he won a scholarship to Magdalen College Oxford. Second and far more important he won Anne's heart. Their love for each other-sustained over more than 55 years- was wonderful to see and enjoy. And beneath the love was a bottomless pool of affection, with constant kindnesses and thoughtfulness to each other.

Not surprisingly Robin was a successful student at Oxford. He then passed the Civil Service entrance exam for high fliers and spent almost 40 years in public service. He joined the Ministry of Power in 1961- Peter had joined the Treasury three years earlier. The result of Whitehall reorganisations was to take him to the key ministry that deals with business, the Department of Trade and Industry. DTI was his spiritual home in the civil service. He was rapidly promoted as he showed what he was capable of. In 1980, at the age of only 40, he was promoted to the rank of under secretary, already one of the top officials, as head of Vehicle division.

It was a time of crisis for the UK motor industry, with BL on a tightrope and a general lack of competitiveness in their suppliers. Car production was falling. But Robin was the key to unlocking a brighter future for the industry. He worked for four years as the lead negotiator- and key strategist- for the British government to bring Nissan to this country. He overcame many obstacles in these four years, winning the trust, respect and eventually friendship of the top people at Nissan in the process. His negotiating skills gave the UK a new car plant. The impact on the motor industry and on the wider engineering industry was massive. I do not think any other civil servant- or indeed any other person-could have reached the same deal, or any deal at all in the circumstances Robin faced. His work on Nissan was his greatest contribution to the country.

After further promotion in DTI he was clearly in the running to become Permanent Secretary, the most senior official in the department. Many thought him the best qualified candidate ... but Permanent Secretary at DTI he was not to be. At that level, the views of politicians are important. While Robin was extremely correct and professional in his manner to his political masters, it is possible that in the long period of Conservative rule in the 1980s he was seen as "not one of us", despite his achievements.

So instead Robin moved to the Treasury after the 1992 election. This was not his favourite posting. he liked neither the culture within the Treasury nor the job he was asked to do.

However, better times lay ahead. He transferred in 1994 to the Cabinet Office as permanent secretary with a range of management functions till then discharged by the Treasury. He was now one of 25 or so top mandarins out of over 500 000 in the civil service. He was knighted in 1999 for his services, becoming Knight Commander of the Bath, or KCB.

On his retirement Robin continued to work in the public sector, and added fresh commitments in the voluntary sector, and in the private sector, including an appointment as an independent director of Times Newspapers ... which he was very pleased to take on, as he had been a reader of the Times for over 50 years. He gave long service to Essex University as a member of Council, and was a trustee of the British Heart Foundation, in addition to other voluntary sector posts. He was an advisor to a number of overseas governments, especially in Eastern Europe, on the issues of civil service reform. And at home he remained an active supporter of an independent and impartial civil service, arguing the case powerfully from his years at the heart of Whitehall. His commitment, his experience, his strategic approach to issues, and his ability to work with others made him a most welcome addition to any Board.

This dry account of his business life does not account for his successes, nor does it explain why he had such a wide circle of friends and admirers.

Robin had all of the qualities of an outstanding civil servant. He was highly intelligent. He made sound decisions, and he made them quickly, unlike public expectations of civil servants. Although he wanted clear blue water between civil servants and Ministers' political advisers, he was deeply interested in politics and his political judgements were spot-on, sometimes to the annoyance of Ministers who were less sure-footed than Robin. Most of the senior Ministers he advised quickly came to trust and rely on him. A few of them did not join his fan club, perhaps fearing the incisiveness of his thinking and the logic behind his advice, or Robin's recognition of the wider social consequences of their political imperatives.

Robin was a leader - but he did not lead by issuing peremptory instructions. He led by building successful teams of colleagues, recognising what each had to offer to the collective effort, and making sure that they had the opportunity to use and develop further these

skills. I remember when his secretary Maria had a new young clerk, David, to help her with the administrative chores in the office. Normally a clerk so young and so far below Robin in authority and status would be more or less ignored by the boss. That was not Robin's way. He befriended David, and gave him fresh opportunities in the office. The result was a happy and more effective David, quite devoted to Robin. Robin was an excellent listener as well as a convincing communicator. He was really interested in your ideas, although that interest did not mean he agreed with you.

All this makes Robin sound very worthy but rather dull, which is quite the wrong impression. Robin was a keen craft worker, especially enjoying carpentry. And he delighted in the performance of digital cameras, allowing him to capture even more arresting images from his foreign trips- 38 countries visited since his retirement.

Robin had a lively sense of humour. He could be extremely amusing with trusted friends about our political masters, allowing his impish mind to wander through recent or imagined conversations. He also enjoyed a joke against himself. I well remember a long-running one based on the Mountfield range of garden equipment, then in full production, and the copy used in their adverts. "Even better value from Mountfield". "The best cut of all from a Mountfield"- this at the time of Mrs Thatcher's governments -gave lots of scope for fun and re-interpretation alongside the serious work, and appealed to his partiality for black humour.

Eventually, and reluctantly, Robin had to give up his work as his health and strength waned. The discovery of a malignant growth and subsequent complications led to prolonged visits to Guy's hospital. Even here in his terminal illness, Robin and Anne were able to share, and subsequently retell, the joke that the only parts of the hospital he had not visited were the Chapel of Rest and Sexually Transmitted Diseases. Robin was admitted to Lewisham General Hospital with severe breathing difficulties in the middle of October and his condition deteriorated quickly. In an inspired move, Anne arranged his transfer to the Greenwich and Bexley Cottage Hospice on 27 October. He died there on 9 November. The care and comfort Robin received at the hospice were wonderful. He had a view from his bed of the autumn colours in the wood, and Anne and the family were able to visit at any time, with Anne able to stay with him throughout his final days and nights. You will have noticed the request for donations to the hospice instead of flowers in the notice of his death.

This was a fitting end for a lovely man taken away much too early. I speak for all of us when I say that we shall miss him greatly.