

OBITUARY FOR LORD ARMSTRONG OF ILMINSTER GCB CVO
By Lord Butler of Brockwell, KG GCB CVO

Lord Armstrong of Ilminster, secretary of the cabinet from 1979 to 1987 and head of the home civil service from 1983 to 87, died on 3rd April, shortly after his 93rd birthday. Over almost 70 years between 1950 and 2020, he had a remarkable career of public service.

During his time as head of the home civil service, the four standards of professional life to which civil servants aspire – integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality – were formulated. They are still the principles on which the civil service code of ethics is based. Throughout his professional life, Robert Armstrong can be said to have personified them.

He was a civil servant of the old school. He was a classicist by education, who entered the civil service through the competitive examination in 1950 and was assigned to the Treasury. His early career followed the established pattern of that time. He served as private secretary to Reginald Maudling as Economic Secretary to the Treasury and subsequently to two Chancellors of the Exchequer, RA Butler in 1954 and Roy Jenkins in 1968, as well as putting his majestic powers of analysis and draughtsmanship to the service of several public enquiries, of which the most important was the Radcliffe Committee on the Working of the Monetary System in 1957- 9.

The decisive point in his career came through his appointment as principal private secretary to Edward Heath when the latter became Prime Minister in 1970. His relationship with Heath and subsequently with Harold Wilson in that role, and later as Cabinet Secretary to Margaret Thatcher, illustrates aspects of the British system of government and of Armstrong's qualities as a civil servant.

Heath, Wilson and Thatcher were very different people in both character and policy. Yet Armstrong held the trust and respect of all three. Wilson did not need to retain Armstrong as his principal private secretary in 1974 and Thatcher did not need to appoint him as Cabinet Secretary in 1979 and subsequently as head of the home civil service. Yet they did; and their confidence was never misplaced.

The years between 1970 and 1987 were characterised by successive crises for the United Kingdom and the Prime Ministers whom Armstrong served. One thinks of the oil crisis of 1973; the miners' strike of 1974; the EEC referendum of 1975; the Falklands war of 1982; the second miners' strike of 1982-84; the Spycatcher case; IRA terrorism and the negotiations leading up to the Anglo Irish agreement of 1983; the Westland affair of 1986; and others. In all these Armstrong was at the side of the Prime Ministers he served and they relied on him.

Through such events, personal relationships become close, and yet Armstrong never crossed the line such that his relationship with one Prime Minister compromised his service to another. Although he was the most civilised of companions, he was in essence a private man. He had a hinterland, of which music was the dominating feature, an inheritance from his father, Sir Thomas Armstrong, formerly Principal of the Royal Academy of Music. During the latter part of his father's life, Armstrong regularly took time off for them to have a holiday together.

Discretion came easily to him. Gossip was not his thing. He never sought publicity and, when it came to him, he did not welcome it. In his later years, in addition to various corporate and public service positions, he was a highly respected member of the House of Lords whose clarity of thought and expression never deserted him. His last campaign was for an inquiry to resolve the few outstanding allegations against Sir Edward Heath left over from the Wiltshire Police investigation, Operation Conifer.

Robert Armstrong upheld and reinforced the reputation of the United Kingdom Civil Service. For anyone in public service, and in particular for all civil servants, his career and professional qualities are a role model.