

## APPRECIATION

**Britain's last great diplomat***Carla Powell*

It's hard to list many great British diplomats: the most memorable figures have historically been colonial viceroys, rather than conventional ambassadors. But Michael Butler, who died on Christmas Eve, was one of the country's greatest and possibly the last of his kind. The Foreign Office would do well to reflect on what made him exceptional.

Michael Butler was a man with a mission in life, not simply a diplomatic mission on his CV. He was a passionate believer in Britain's membership of the European Union (initially the EEC). He was involved in the negotiations to get us in as well as the 1975 referendum to keep us in, and he spearheaded Margaret Thatcher's campaign to get our money back from Europe. During his career, he worked for prime ministers who were besotted with Europe (Edward Heath), indifferent to Europe (Harold Wilson and James Callaghan) and hostile to Europe (Thatcher). At every stage he adapted his personal views to the requirements of the elected government while keeping in his sights the ultimate goal in which he, if not they, believed.

In this way, he showed that it is perfectly possible to be a loyal civil servant while having strong views of your own. It is actually a huge strength when it comes to speaking truth to power, and few civil servants have done that more vigorously than Butler. We have all heard of conviction politicians; Butler was a conviction civil servant.

He was an example not only of independence of thought but also independence of action. It was quite something for a young member of the British embassy in Paris to be declared *persona non grata* by the French government for

getting up General de Gaulle's nose and subverting his efforts to keep Britain out of Europe. Later, when Butler was Britain's permanent representative to Europe, his clashes with his French opposite number were legendary. I used to be smuggled into the back row of meetings to witness them and learned that diplomacy could be a blood sport.

He was also a man who came up with solutions rather than tepidly reporting the views of others. Britain's budget contribution to Europe, launching the single market and the idea of the European Currency Unit (the precursor to the euro) all bore Butler's imprint, demonstrating that real diplomacy is about doing rather than elegant drafting.

He was not especially popular with the Foreign Office or the rest of Whitehall. He was unusually disinterested in promoting his own career. Perhaps this stemmed from having a much broader hinterland than most diplomats. He was a leading collector of 17th-century Chinese porcelain. I recall his days in Washington where, far from Europe and visibly out of his element, he roamed antique shops and market stalls, triumphantly carrying off masterpieces unrecognised as such by their previous owners.

The Foreign Office has many talented and courageous diplomats but diplomacy has changed, with more and more business conducted directly between ministers, reducing the role of many ambassadors to little more than hotel-keepers for visiting delegations.

Diplomatic memoirs increasingly read as slightly desperate appeals for personal recognition: "Remember me: I was there even if you couldn't see me in the pictures." Michael Butler wrote about his subject – Europe – rather than himself, reflecting the self-confidence and independence that made him a great practitioner of diplomacy as it used to be. ●