

**Former Cabinet Secretary Lord Armstrong
Interview with Lord Hennessy
Tuesday 6th November 2012 at 10 Downing Street**

Key

LA: Lord Armstrong

LH: Lord Hennessy

LH: Robert, what are Cabinet Secretaries for?

LA: Well they start, I suppose, by being there to run the business, organize the business of Cabinet, to provide agendas for the meetings and arrange the times and places for meetings, usually always in 10 Downing Street, and write the minutes and circulate them. But, attached to that, there's become a whole raft of other responsibilities. One has to remember that the Cabinet Secretary is responsible to all the Cabinet, all the members of the Cabinet, not just to the Prime Minister, although of course to the Prime Minister, *primus inter pares* as you might say, and I think that all of us have been very conscious of that responsibility. But grafted onto that have been over the years a great many additional responsibilities for running the whole of the committee system and a variety of other duties beyond that, so that it has become not just now the business of organising Cabinet but very much what they call in other countries a government secretary.

LH: Tell me about the preparation for the job. Do you think it was a great advantage that you had been Principal Private Secretary to two Prime Ministers - and also to a couple of Chancellors, if I remember - so that you knew the entrails, the most sensitive membranes you were already deeply familiar with?

LA: Well clearly having been Principal Private Secretary it was very easy to adjust to being the Cabinet Secretary. It's a different role because your responsibility is to the Cabinet as a whole and in a sense you look out to the whole of government in a way when you are the Principal Private Secretary, you are responsible first and foremost, first and last, to the Prime Minister of the day and it's a different relationship, a different job, a different duty, different responsibility, but, you've been around, you know the setup. One thing you have to remember I think always is that though the names, the titles remain the same, what you do and the nature of the job has to be responsive to the different personalities that are in the position. It was quite different dealing with, because I was only Cabinet Secretary to Margaret Thatcher but I was Principal Private Secretary to two Prime Ministers, and being a Private Secretary to Harold Wilson was a different, different duty from being Prime Minister to Edward Heath. It was different because the two men were very different and what they wanted of their Private Secretaries was very different.

LH: Do you think you were blessed with an adaptive personality?

LA: I think I must have been, don't you? I think I did, I was blessed with an ability to switch from one topic, one subject to another in the twinkling of an eye and that's not a matter of credit or anything like that, it's just you either have it or you don't, but in all these jobs, the Principal Private Secretary and the Cabinet Secretary, you have to be able to switch instantly from one subject to another, pick up the threads of when you come back to a subject without a change of gear as you might say, and I think that was one of the things that was most important really.

LH: I've always detected in you since we've known each other, which is quite a long time now, one particular strand where the adaptiveness might not have been complete. For example, if you had served a Prime Minister, and you didn't, who wanted us out of Europe, you might have found that a bit tricky, even though you are the incarnation of the impartial ideal.

LA: Well I, as things happened, I became closely involved with Edward Heath's taking us into Europe in 1970-72 and almost publicly associated with it in a way, but certainly very much associated with it in government, and when Harold Wilson came in, it wasn't very, it wasn't then at all certain whether he wanted to stay in Europe or come out, and I said to him, after the initial few days when he had been forming his government, and I said that I had been in Number 10 for three and a half years with Mr Heath, and I'd had a good innings, I had become rather publicly associated with his European policies and if Mr Wilson wanted to make a change and have a different Private Secretary, no skin off my nose. I did I think, I was pretty sure that some of those around him who came in with him, Lady Falkender and so on, wanted to see me out, but when I said this to Ted Heath, to Harold Wilson, he said 'No, I don't want you to go, you and I are getting along very well together, the office is working far better than it worked when I was here last time, you stay around'.

LH: Good for Harold.

LA: It was flattering. And it, it, it pleased me because it was, it reinstated, restored the tradition that the Civil Service Private Secretary goes on from one Prime Minister to the next, even where there is a change of party.

LH: You profoundly believe in that tradition don't you...

LA: I do.

LH: ...career Civil Service, career public service.

LA: Yes.

LH: Can I ask you about the preparation for the actual job of Cabinet Secretary? Did you feel the shadow of the predecessors, there weren't very many actually, we've got through Cabinet Secretaries at a rather more rapid rate in recent years, but there was Hankey, Bridges, Brook, Trend, Hunt and then you and it's a kind

of apostolic succession, and you knew some of them, you knew some of them very well indeed, so did you feel their shadow?

LA: I suppose I felt most of all the shadow of Burke Trend. He and I had worked closely together in the Cabinet, in the Treasury, before either of us came near the Cabinet Office and then when he was Cabinet Secretary I did a spell as an assistant secretary on the economic side of the Cabinet Office. So I knew him very well as a friend as well as a colleague and admired him very greatly and thought that that was an example which I could do worse than follow.

LH: What was special about Burke Trend's approach to the job?

LA: I think the very professional, in a way the detachment that he brought to it, tremendously thorough, very hard-working, very industrious and all that and very very thorough, but preserving this, this, this detachment so as to be, be seen as independent, as his own man, not just a creature of anybody.

LH: That wonderful detachment, though, irritated Ted Heath as you well knew, because you were on the receiving end of some of the remarks, weren't you?

LA: Well I think Heath admired Trend and respected him, but of course Trend's views on Europe were quite different from Ted Heath's and I think this was why I got so closely involved with Europe really because I think I was doing some things which in another administration would have been done by the Cabinet Secretary, but Burke Trend and I perfectly understood this and it didn't cast a shadow over the relationship between us and so that, so it was alright.

LH: If I remember, there was no competition for the succession to John Hunt because Mrs Thatcher was clear she wanted you.

LA: It didn't seem like that at the time. In the months before, when John Hunt's retirement was looming, there was a good deal of press speculation about who was going to be the successor, as there always is I think, or is in recent years...

LH: I think I wrote some of it myself.

LA: I dare say you did, and you and others had fastened on to two names of possible successors, and it wasn't at all clear who it, which, who it was going to be. I suspect that John Hunt wanted the other man, I don't know this but I am pretty sure...

LH: Frank Cooper?

LA: Hmm?

LH: Frank Cooper.

LA: No, I think he wanted Brian Cubbon.

LH: Oh Brian Cubbon yes, one of the other two.

LA: Not Frank, not Frank.

LH: Not Frank.

LA: Frank Cooper was less, was behind in the running I think. So when I was summoned to Number 10 on the ninth of July of 1970...

LH: ...79?

LA: 1979, that's right and I remember coming upstairs to the study around the corner, being shown into the Prime Minister at ten o'clock and wondering whether this was going to be the interview in which I was invited to take on the biggest job in the public service and I went into the door and she looked up and she said 'Robert, you're looking very tired', so I thought this wasn't a very good introduction, to what I hoped to happen. So, I said something rather lame about having been up late the previous evening or something and then she said 'Robert, I've asked you to come because John Hunt is retiring, as you know, and I would like you to succeed him as Secretary of the Cabinet and I would like you to know that I have not thought of asking anybody else' and that was, again, very flattering and it meant a very good start to our relationship. I went downstairs then afterwards and I told Nigel Wicks, who was the Principal Private Secretary, that I'd been offered the job and accepted it, and so I said 'It was rather, it was rather curious, the first thing she said to me was "Robert, you're looking very tired"', and he said 'Oh, don't worry about that', he said, 'She's saying that to everybody this morning.'

LH: Because of course she wouldn't have looked tired, she'd look as bright as a button wouldn't she.

LA: Of course she, she turned out like a, like a bandbox, not a hair out of place.

LH: In later years, in the Blair years, candidates for the Cabinet Secretaryship had to write personal manifestos. I must admit I found this extremely odd.

LA: So did I. I don't think that happened to Richard Wilson, did it? But it happened to Andrew Turnbull certainly. I don't know about Gus O'Donnell, whether it happened to him, but um...

LH: You wouldn't have done it, would you?

LA: I think. It never occurred to me. It didn't occur to me ever to consider it. I knew, I knew enough about the nature of the job to think I knew what was going to have to be, what I was going to be doing, what I, what the content of the job would be. I had known Mrs Thatcher when she was Education Secretary in Ted Heath's government, so I was coming to something, the dimensions of which I thought I knew. Of course the job didn't turn out quite like that because it's never the same twice running.

LH: Tell me how Mrs Thatcher shaped you and you shaped her, because it is like a marriage, isn't it? It's a marriage without the exciting bits.

LA: Of course it's a relationship which, as I was saying, differs from one Prime Minister and Cabinet Secretary to the next. I think that the, in a way the decisive moment for me with Margaret was, whom I never called Margaret when she was Prime Minister, but always Prime Minister, was one Friday morning. Every Friday morning the Cabinet Secretary used to have a session with the Prime Minister at ten o'clock to discuss the business and Cabinet committee business for the next two or three weeks, and if she had other things in her diary that could be over quite quickly, if she didn't, it could last all morning. And on one occasion, quite soon after I became Cabinet Secretary, we dealt, we polished off the business and she had no other things to, no other engagements and so she started to talk about a memorandum I'd put up to her - I can't remember the subject now, but it doesn't matter - but I had put up a memorandum with a certain recommendation and obviously she was not comfortable with it. She proceeded to discuss it, and she attacked it like a barrister, which of course she was, trying to take apart take apart a brief as it were to, to go for it. And she'd gone on for about five minutes and I suddenly heard, I heard myself say 'No Prime Minister, you're wrong' and I, then I thought well perhaps that isn't what you say to Prime Ministers, Queen Elizabeth saying 'Little man, little man, "must" is not a word you use to Princes' and all that, but when I said that, she, the Prime Minister stopped in her tracks and she said 'Why do you say I'm wrong Robert?' And so I burnt my boats and I said why I thought she was wrong, chapter and verse and all that, and when I had finished, she didn't interrupt and when I'd finished she said 'Thank you Robert, you're quite right, I was wrong', and I realised then that she was, she very much knew her own mind but she was very willing to discuss and she would listen if you knew what you were talking about and that was a very salutary lesson. She didn't like it if you didn't know what you were talking about but if you did, she listened. I never used to tangle with her in public, if other people were in the room, but in private we could have great discussions and after that she knew that I would not put up anything which I hadn't thought through.

LH: On the outside, observers, journalists like me, we soon realised because her Cabinet needed to talk to people about it in a sort of catharsis with them that she had a very commanding style in Cabinet. She would in many ways in her opening remarks pretty well indicate what she wanted the conclusion to be.

LA: Not pretty well. Absolutely.

LH: Almost defy them to defy her.

LA: And, yes, and of course sometimes she'd had preliminary discussions which, which enabled her to know where people stood and as it were she had made a caucus for herself. Other times she hadn't and other Cabinet ministers who might not have agreed with her had to decide whether it was worth the aggro to challenge her around the Cabinet table and nine times out of ten they probably

thought it wasn't worth it. I can remember one occasion when I had done my homework and I thought I had found out on one particular item that no minister would share the view which I knew the Prime Minister had. So, before the meeting I went to her and said I thought I had discovered this and perhaps this was an occasion on which she might do better not to announce her own view at the beginning but to chair the meeting in the conventional way, invite the minister to present the case and listen to the discussion. If I was wrong and other people took her view she would be able to intervene. If I was right then she wouldn't need to waste political capital defending a view which others didn't hold and she looked at me as if I was mad or wet or something, but she agreed to, to chair the meeting in the conventional way, and sure enough we went into the room and she invited the minister to speak and the discussion went on and thank goodness, my homework had, was correct and nobody else took a view, took the view which she did. She didn't say what she thought, she sat there very quietly and it was like sitting next to a piano wire being tensed, strings tightened, taugther and taugther and taugther, and I wondered whether it was going to snap, but it didn't, and she summed up at the end of the meeting, in the sense of the discussion, which was contrary to her own view, quite quietly, and they all packed up their papers and went off, and I was doing the same, and she turned to me and said 'Did I do alright, Robert?' And it was very endearing.

LH: And what did you say?

LA: I said 'Yes, Prime Minister'.

LH: She...

LA: A very conventional reply for a good, for a good Cabinet Secretary I should think.

LH: She liked a good argument before getting her way, didn't she?

LA: Oh she did, oh she liked a good argument and she didn't like somebody who, who gave in as it were, she enjoyed the argument and she enjoyed winning the argument too when she, when that was the way it went.

LH: One of the fascinating things for watchers of the Cabinet Secretary's job, right since Hankey really, the prototypical one, his biography or his, Roskill's biography of him is called *Man of Secrets*, for good reason, because the Cabinet Secretary classically is a man of secrets, we have yet to have a woman, and I've often wondered about that. It is partly I think, isn't it, because no Prime Minister can see the papers of a previous administration of a different colour, whereas you can, you can see everything as Cabinet Secretary, cleared for everything, every archive is available to you and no Prime Minister had that reach, but you did?

LA: Certainly that's true and there are secrets which I shall take to the grave.

LH: Give us a clue.

LA: No I won't give you any clues. But, are you suggesting that that is a burden? I don't think I did find it a burden really. It was part of the job.

LH: I think it is fascinating really because, it is too crude to say that knowledge is power but under our system, which I think is quite right, you can't have new governments raking through the files of the predecessors, I mean nothing would get written down. Freedom of Information worries you I know, we might come to that but that would be even worse...

LA: It would be Freedom of Information squared wouldn't it?

LH: It would indeed. So, I'm not in any way critical, I'm just interested in the fact that, you, you do and must carry things in your head that you can't divulge to the new Cabinet Secretaries... There is a description, for example, of Churchill coming back in the fifties and they're discussing the hydrogen bomb and he turns to Norman Brook, your predecessor, and says 'But um, oh I think Anthony Eden raises it this way but the moral question was settled by the Attlee government going for the atomic bomb. Didn't they?' and Brook looked up or out of the window and was not going to get drawn into saying what Mr Attlee and his Cabinet colleagues had or hadn't done. And so that, it's that sort of thing, isn't it?

LA: In a sense as Cabinet Secretary I didn't have that problem because I only had one Prime Minister. She outlived me as you might say. I'd had the problem of course when I when Harold Wilson followed Ted Heath when I was Principal Private Secretary and there were things which I wouldn't have dreamt of saying to Harold Wilson which I knew and Harold Wilson perfectly understood that. He was a very, he was, he was a very well-disciplined public servant in his own way.

LH: He was very traditionalist...

LA: Very traditionalist.

LH: ...about proper workings of Cabinet, the collective and all that, wasn't he?

LA: Very much so. And so in a sense it never presented a problem because he never went on fishing expeditions as it were.

LH: I think you once described the box that most excites Prime Ministers late at night, 'Old Stripey'.

LA: I invented it.

LH: You invented it, didn't you?

LA: Well we had, for...

LH: Tell us what it looked like and what was in there.

LA: Well, most of the Prime Minister's boxes are bright red and every evening a box of papers is put together and when I came into Number 10 as Principal Private Secretary if you had something which was top secret and codeword perhaps, not to be seen by the duty clerks and people like that, you had to put it in two envelopes, sealed so that the Prime Minister had to open it himself or herself when she got the papers and with the papers you had to put in two more envelopes so that when he or she had read it he could put them back in the envelopes and seal them up and no Prime Minister that I ever worked for much enjoyed doing that, he thought it was a waste of time, sometimes they didn't do it. And so I thought that it would be better to have a more convenient arrangement would be to have a separate box where you put the very top secret stuff with, for which the keys would be in the hands only of the Prime Minister and the Principal Private Secretary and it. We designed a box or I designed a box which was an ordinary red box with a blue stripe across, across the top of it and I introduced this when Heath was Prime Minister and it worked very well and it worked equally well with Harold Wilson who christened it 'Old Stripey'. And of course because it always had all this sensitive stuff it was always the box they looked at first, so that if you if there was something you wanted to be absolutely sure the Prime Minister would read overnight you would put it in 'Old Stripey'.

LH: Even if it wasn't intelligence?

LA: Even if it wasn't quite so secret as some of the rest of the stuff.

LH: Great trick, great trick.

LA: But I did that very seldom actually.

LH: And Mrs Thatcher carried on with 'Old Stripey', didn't she?

LA: Oh yes, I don't know, it may still be here for all I know. It was a ludicrous arrangement really having all that double envelope stuff. It was one of the two simple changes that I made in this place.

LH: What was the other one?

LA: The other one was the writing paper. I got rid of that gothic...

LH: The old gothic stuff yes, which was pretty terrible.

LA: ...and I introduced what, what in essence what is still in use.

LH: Yes, yes absolutely. See the legacy comes in different ways, doesn't it?

LA: Sometimes, it can be very small ways. Maybe it is the small ways that are the lasting ways.

LH: One of the great debates that was raging even when we first knew each other in the seventies was whether we had, or should have a Prime Minister's

Department, as opposed to collective Cabinet Office and you've been very eloquent about Cabinet Secretaries serving the collective, not just the Prime Minister's Permanent Secretary, and yet there has always been tensions there because Prime Ministers, certainly since the seventies, have wanted units, not just the Prime Minister's Policy Unit which has lasted right through under different names but units for this and units for that, temporary ones...

LA: I think that, that, the units for this and units for that dates from later than the seventies, I think that started really with Blair, didn't it?

LH: Well I think it took off in big time, but there were...

LA: We had I suppose, I suppose the CPRS.

LH: Yes the Central Policy Review Staff was very much, it was meant to be a Cabinet resource. Burke Trend was determined that it would be. But also it was very prime ministerial in terms of its workload.

LA: Yes.

LH: And always when Prime Ministers want an innovation they tend to look to the Cabinet Office to warehouse it. So, that gives the impression of a Prime Minister's Department, rightly or wrongly, to the outside world.

LA: Well it's a collective thing, because one of the problems about a Prime Minister's Department is... I think there are two problems. First of all, the resentment that it would create among other ministers. In this system Cabinet ministers are not just the creatures of the Prime Minister. They have independent statutory responsibilities and independent accountability and then, not, they're not just emanations of the Prime Minister and they guard that jealously and certainly when I was, when Mrs Thatcher was Prime Minister, I saw examples of the suspicion and resentment which were created by her relatively limited attempts to build up capacity inside Number 10. Because the other is purely geographical. This place, 10 Downing Street, isn't very big. There isn't room for a lot of people and how do you accommodate a Prime Minister's Department which inevitably would be much bigger? Well they've, they've resolved that by having units which live in other buildings and so on, but I think the combination of these two factors, so long as the Prime Minister resides and has his office here, is probably decisive in what happens.

LH: A Prime Minister's Department would worry you, wouldn't it? If we had one that was avowed...

LA: I should think it was a, I should think it was a mistake which the Prime Minister would come to regret, yes.

LH: Some people say we did have it in a department that dare not speak its name in the Blair years and in a slightly different way in the Brown years, and people

say this current Prime Minister, Mr Cameron, has done it very cleverly, because he's got two big ministers in the Cabinet Office who just work for him...

LA: Yes, yes.

LH:... in Francis Maude and Oliver Letwin.

LA: Well there's some truth in that but the Blair experiment doesn't, doesn't survive well, does it?

LH: You think, you think it ended in tears Robert, do you?

LA: I think it started in tears and I think it went on in tears. I mean he's a very remarkable man but he, he really had no sense of the problems of managing a government I don't think and certainly little problems, with little, only a very small sense of history and what that might have taught him.

LH: Tactfully put, Robert, tactfully put. But there are those who work for Prime Ministers - indeed I've heard this said because my views are pretty much yours - that people like you and Robert Armstrong are terrible old traditionalists. Robert is like so many Cabinet Secretaries, he loves his system, the inheritance of Hankey, the Cabinet committee structure and so on, they love their system, and they don't realise the world has changed and you need something slicker, faster, perhaps more politically charged, that you and I Robert, are dear old dinosaurs.

LA: Well all right, we haven't learnt our lesson but there are disadvantages, there would be disadvantages in the British system of a Prime Minister's Department and it is a great problem now. The government is centred so much on the Prime Minister, the personality of the Prime Minister, it's very, very difficult to, you can't think of really going back to the Attlee kind of Prime Minister.

LH: Never using one word where none would do.

LA: Well there was that, of course, about Attlee. Well he never used two words where one would do did he. And it was all done very deftly and quietly as it were. But you could get away in the House of Commons for instance in saying, 'this is the job of the Minister for X or the Minister for Y, the Secretary of State for Y, you must ask him, or her'. And I think Mr Heath, and to an extent Harold Wilson, were content to say, 'that's his business or her business'. Mrs Thatcher wouldn't. Mrs Thatcher didn't want to be appearing to shuffle off responsibility. She wanted to accept it, she wanted to take it, so when she answered questions she wanted to answer them substantively, even if they were the business of another department. That very much affected the way that this place had to work because she had to have a briefing system which enabled her to cope with questions in this way and she made it her business - as you will remember - to go around departments and get a sense of what they were about and to keep in touch with her ministers individually as well as collectively. And that, and that is partly because I think, particularly the television medium, focuses, almost inevitably focuses, on the man or woman at the centre, at the top.

LH: She seemed to realise that this was quite a useful weapon of intrusion on Tuesday and Thursday mornings before questions because it was twice a week then wasn't it in the old days...

LA: Yes it was.

LH: ... and the private offices went on the *qui vive*, and a degree of neuralgia used to spread around Whitehall on Tuesdays and Thursday mornings incase Number 10 came roaring in on the grounds that she might be asked about it.

LA: Yes.

LH: So it became a weapon of intrusion, didn't it?

LA: I suppose it was regarded as so. I don't think we, I don't think in Number Ten we felt it like that but we did feel intensely the, or they felt intensely because I wasn't here, but, at that time you did feel, if you were the Principal Private Secretary in Number 10, an intense responsibility for making sure that the Prime Minister didn't get up and say 'I don't know'.

LH: I can't hear her saying that somehow.

LA: Not the, well, no Prime Minister likes to do that. She may be more conspicuously different in that respect but she wasn't... No Prime Minister likes to say that.

LH: Is there an ideal configuration for the centre, Robert, because we have these endless debates about whether we should have got rid of the Civil Service Department, whether we should have the headship of the Civil Service combined with the Cabinet Secretaryship and so on we, we tend to make a meal of these things and there's, it's never settled into one pattern that everybody wants to sign up to?

LA: I don't suppose it ever will be because I, it varies with, as the situation varies and as the personalities vary. I personally thought that it was right that the, as the system had developed, it was right that the Cabinet Secretary should be the head of the home Civil Service and on the whole that's still the view I take.

LH: What was your reasoning for that?

LA: My reasoning for that is that at the time that we are thinking of - which is what 1979, 1980-81 - where there was a fierce economy drive, there was a danger that if the, if the head of the Civil Service went back to the Treasury when Mrs Thatcher abolished the Civil Service Department that the Treasury would be too slanted towards its responsibilities for economic management, for financial discipline and that other aspects of the management of the Civil Service would go by the board. And I certainly thought... and the other point is of course that the Cabinet Secretary is the Permanent Secretary who has constant access to the

Prime Minister even when it was Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, the Head of the Civil Service wasn't in and out of the Prime Minister's office and personal office in the way that the Cabinet Secretary is always bound to be and so, in a way being Head of the Civil Service is rather different from being the Chief of the Defence Staff or something like that, or the Chairman of a company because or the Chief Executive Officer of a company because the nature of the responsibility that you have, the fact that you're not a part of the political apparatus means that your capacity to, as it were, be externally in a position which appears to be different or in conflict with the Prime Minister or the ruling party of the day is, would be very difficult. You rely, the Civil Service has to rely really on it being represented with the Prime Minister by a senior person who has her ear constantly and can say the things that need to be said privately to her and the Cabinet Secretary is uniquely in that position.

LH: But you had enough to do, it was a big job anyway, without having the headship of this huge profession, I would have thought.

LA: Well, nobody has thought that being Head of the Civil Service was a job all on its own, have they?

LH: Well Sir Ian Bancroft was. He was the last one.

LA: Well he was Permanent Secretary of a large department wasn't he, he was and...

LH: The Civil Service Department.

LA: ...but before that it was always the Permanent Secretary of the Treasury who had a huge responsibility outside. So it's always, it's always been a post that you combined with something else and I, when it came to me to be, become the Head of the Civil Service after becoming Cabinet Secretary I, of course I did change the way in which I did the job as Cabinet Secretary in order to make room for that and Mrs Thatcher totally understood that. My predecessors had, on the whole, insisted that everything that went to the Prime Minister went over their signature. I relaxed that a bit and if you've got a very good team of deputy secretaries, why shouldn't they brief the Prime Minister direct on some things - on many things - and so I instituted this arrangement whereby deputy secretaries in the Cabinet Office could provide briefs for the Prime Minister if direct. They would always copy them to me and if I had something else to add I added it in a separate, separate note.

LH: It was still Cold War days when you were Cabinet Secretary and you had those very special responsibilities which the, your predecessors had had since the Cold War began to chill, which have all changed now. For example, you were the Accounting Officer for what we still call the secret vote in those days, now called the Single Intelligence Account, and that really mattered didn't it? And you chaired the Cabinet committee of Permanent Secretaries that advised on the money as well as being the person to alert her if there was anything serious that

she needed to know about along with the chiefs of the agencies. I mean, it was very much part of the Cabinet Secretary's job, the security of the realm, wasn't it?

LA: We, we, it was made clear that the Cabinet Secretary was the Prime Ministers principal adviser on intelligence and security matters. It was written down and all that and I suppose that really I don't know how far that was true of Norman Brook, but it was certainly true of Burke Trend. But Burke Trend had been the Accounting Officer for the intelligence services when he was in the Treasury...

LH: He always carried it with him wherever he went, didn't he...

LA: ...and he carried it with him when he came across here and it stayed.

LH: Yes, but that was quite a lot of work and it was delicate work, wasn't it?

LA: It was delicate work but you had to get, you had to accommodate that within the portfolio. The hours were very long, and I say you had to be able to switch subjects very quickly and hold them in your mind from one thing to the next but you weren't put in there unless you could do all those things.

LH: It's interesting how it's been dismantled because the headship of the Civil Service is now not with the Cabinet Secretary and the security functions are with the National Security Adviser because you also had to oversee the nuclear retaliation drills, the last resort letters, briefing Prime Ministers on their instructions from beyond the grave and all that. I mean, that fell to you as well, this awesome system.

LA: Awesome responsibility. They didn't take up all that much time but of course when you were, when you came into the job, you were initiated into it and there were certain things that you had to do and you alone could do. In terms of the time required by them it wasn't, it wasn't, it wasn't so big a responsibility. I mean, of course it was very weighty when it came but I wouldn't, I wouldn't have said that that was, in terms of the workload, tremendous extra burden.

LH: Well there's nothing heavier in terms of weight and awesomeness is there?

LA: Oh no, oh no and you had to, you were of course deeply conscious of it.

LH: The files that were declassified in January by the Cabinet Office, to my great joy, were fascinating on this because Mrs T, as you remember, wanted to change the practice whereby in the transition to World War III exercises it was done by officials, that ministers didn't play themselves and the Prime Minister didn't preside and so you helped set up that special Saturday morning 'end-of-the-world' exercise in the Cabinet Office for her, didn't you?

LA: Yes.

LH: Tell me about it.

LA: I don't remember very much about it Peter really now. I don't really remember.

LH: The build-up took a lot of arranging. I can tell you from the files and you're all over it, you know, in the way that you would be because as you say only the Cabinet Secretary in those days could do certain things. And you had people also indoctrinated but it was very much you wasn't it, all that?

LA: Absolutely. I don't remember very much about how that all worked out, I must say, there were other things going on, of course.

LH: Yes, there are always other things going on in terms of it. Each generation, when governments get into trouble, they tend I've noticed, after two years or so to start blaming the servants i.e. the permanent Civil Service and also attached to that, quite often, resentful Secretaries of State who haven't got their place in the sun that they perhaps anticipated tend to turn on the Cabinet Secretary, albeit in private with each other, not to the Cabinet Secretary, and say 'Overmighty you know, far too much of an influence on the Prime Minister'. Do you think that happened to you a bit?

LA: I don't, I wasn't conscious of it. There must, I'm sure there were people who thought that because there always are, but it didn't deflect me. I was more conscious really, I think, that when Mrs Thatcher got into difficulties she made more use of the Cabinet committee system than when she wasn't in difficulties...

LH: That's interesting.

LA:...she didn't, she thought and on the whole I think I shared the view, that the Cabinet committee system had become over-cumbersome and over-elaborate and over-bureaucratized and so I sympathised with her desire to try to reduce the structure of Cabinet committees but of course there is a need for inter-ministerial, inter-departmental discussion and coordination which the Cabinet committee system is there to achieve and if you dismantle it or disuse it to too great an extent that breaks down. When times were good Mrs Thatcher enjoyed doing without it but when times were difficult she was quick to reinstate it.

LH: Classically the Falklands...

LA: Classically the Falklands.

LH: ...it was a Cabinet exercise. Cabinet and Cabinet committee/War Cabinet exercise, wasn't it? And you persuaded her to set up a special War Cabinet, a sub-group of the Overseas and Defence...

LA: OD(SA).

LH: OD(SA). Overseas and Defence South Atlantic...

LA:...Overseas and Defence, brackets South America, South Atlantic, close brackets...

LH: Yes.

LA: ...committee yes and that was the War Cabinet. Five members, met everyday at half past ten always, or thereabouts, and I attended it of course as the Cabinet Secretary and probably one of my colleagues and the Chief of the Defence Staff came, Terry Lewin. And then when it, the, when the meeting was over, Terry Lewin and I would go back to my room in the Cabinet Office next door and summon Frank Cooper from the Ministry of Defence and Antony Acland from the Foreign Office and any others, some one or two soldiers or sailors, and we would debrief them about what ministers had decided so that we would satisfy ourselves that the decisions were conveyed as quickly as possible and as accurately as possible and we commissioned the briefs that would be required for the, the OD(SA) meeting the following day and this, this meeting was an essential chain in the communication between the War Cabinet and the machine. It became known as the Armstrong Group but we never, I didn't ever give it official status because I didn't want the Prime Minister to think that there was an official committee second-guessing the War Cabinet.

LH: What did you learn about your Prime Minister? You knew her very well already but what did you learn about Mrs Thatcher in those extraordinary weeks of 1982?

LA: She... I think that she lived in those weeks more fully than at any other time in her Prime Ministership. I think, I think she was conscious that this was her hour, and of the responsibility that fell on her to rise to it. I learnt that she had this capacity to take great trouble about coming to difficult decisions, to pursue, she was like other political leaders whom I've known. She was slow to come to a decision. She took a lot of time about it and she didn't want to have to take a decision until it actually had to be taken, but once she'd taken it, she'd taken it and she moved on. She didn't go back and agonise about it and that's a great, that was a great gift and that remained with her. I mean, when we were doing the Anglo-Irish Agreement the same thing happened. She agonised about the process and I ought to write down what, many other people have written down what the process was like, but once she had decided to reach an agreement and she had concluded it she stuck to it and there was going to be no departure from it or any whisper of change and that's a great quality. And of course the other thing I think about the Falklands, I remember, was that in all the big decisions, particularly the decision when and where and whether to, whether and when and where to land the land forces, her constant concern was to minimise loss of life and injury and she, we had a great, before the decision to, put the troops ashore at San Carlos, we, the War Cabinet had a full briefing in the briefing room of the Ministry of Defence, to test whether the, whether the planning of it was sound and so on and her, she constantly came back to it, had they, had they built into their planning the need to keep injuries of British soldiers and sailors and airmen to a minimum? And that was part of her. It came out in other ways, tremendous compassion. I mean she had much more compassion than people have given

credit for I think and it showed in those weeks and showed her concern for the people and for the widows and families of those who were killed. I think she wrote a letter to everybody, the relatives of everybody who died in that war. She had, she was considerate and compassionate in all her dealings, not just in the Falklands but in, in throughout, with the dealings with the people that she was close to. And it was a quality that if you were viewing her from outside you were not so conscious of, and she was conscious that there was a conflict between that and being the 'Iron Lady' and on the whole she thought it more important to be the 'Iron Lady'. So she, and she didn't want as it were, to allow her compassionate nature to show when the real need was to be decisive and to be consistent, to be the 'Iron Lady'.

LH: The other moment where she was truly remarkable, truly truly remarkable, was the Brighton bomb.

LA: Truly remarkable. I wasn't there, I wasn't in Brighton, I was at home and, but Robin Butler was there and...

LH: Who was her Principal Private Secretary then.

LA: ...was Principal Private Secretary at the time and who will tell you about what it was like. I remember it because the news came through. It was late at night or early in the morning...

LH: Small hours of the morning I think.

LA: ...half past one or something like that and I must have been awake and heard about it or somebody rang up and told me about it and I didn't know whether the Prime Minister was still alive. And I went through what I would have to do if she was dead and what would have to be done to find a successor and the process by which one would have to have an interim Prime Minister until the process of election took place and who I would have to talk to and who I would have to recommend and all that.

LH: You'd have to talk to the palace straight away, the Queen obviously...

LA: Obviously the Queen's Private Secretary and all that, and be ready to hold it together as it were. Thank goodness it wasn't needed and after Robin Butler rang, I can't remember, half past three or something and rang up to say that she was alright.

LH: So you straight away got onto the continuity of the state which, of course...

LA: Yes.

LH: ...is a Cabinet Secretary job, another one, isn't it?

LA: That was the, and what was so interesting was the speed with which one was able to, think it through, as it were.

LH: Did you write it all down for posterity?

LA: I haven't written that bit down yet, no.

LH: Was it written down for internal use?

LA: It may have been, I don't remember.

LH: Yes, but that's extraordinary.

LA: I mean it was so, it was in the whole so short, I mean it was in the middle of the night and it was so short a time until we knew that she was alright but, I'd got it all in my mind what was going to have to be done.

LH: Can we talk briefly about a lesser crisis, in terms of because nobody died, which is Westland in '86. The great row in the Cabinet. Michael Heseltine resigns as Defence Secretary. On a tiny nerdy note, is it true that in the minutes, your minutes, the resignation takes the form of 'Rt Hon Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for Defence, present for items one and two'.

LA: No, it's absolutely right. The Cabinet minutes, the official ones, are covered by a list and the list for this particular meeting says, with the list of ministers says, 'Rt Hon Michael Heseltine MP, Secretary of State for Defence brackets items one and two. Rt Hon George Younger MP, brackets Secretary of State for Scotland items one and two, Secretary of State for Defence items three to five.' I think it's unique.

LH: How history records.

LA: And, what was so, one of the extraordinary things was that there was this argument in Cabinet about. The Prime Minister had decided that she wanted all statements about the Westland thing to be cleared, she said with the Cabinet Office, but of course that meant with herself, before being made. And Michael Heseltine had accepted that but didn't want to have to get agreement for repeating statements he'd made before that and, but she insisted that even the repetition of statements that had already been made had to be, had to be cleared with the Cabinet Office. And the tension built up in the Cabinet and people could see that Michael Heseltine was entrenched in his position and the Prime Minister in hers and a number of colleagues around the table tried to bridge the gap, tried to get to a position where there was an agreement but this all failed and then the Prime Minister, as it were, summed up and said that this was had to be the way it was, that every statement had to be cleared through the Cabinet Office and Michael Heseltine drew his papers together and said: 'In that case, Prime Minister, I can no longer remain in this Cabinet.' And we weren't sure whether he was just leaving that meeting or resigning his office. So he sort of stalked out of the room with his papers and we all sat there, licking our wounds as it were after the argument and then a couple of minutes later somebody came into the room and with great excitement said, 'Michael Heseltine is on the doorstep saying he's

resigned' so we knew that, what it was. And then the cabinet adjourned for half an hour while the appointment of Michael, of George Younger was submitted to the Queen and her agreement sought and then it resumed with the new Secretary of State for Defence and without a Secretary of State for Scotland.

LH: It's quite, it must have been quite tricky for you because continuity is your business, the smooth operations of the machine...

LA: Yes.

LH...and all that, and early warning to Prime Ministers if somebody is getting to the point where they can take no more. Did you feel that, Robert?

LA: Oh yes. I didn't, I didn't know it was going to come to a... I mean we all knew that Michael Heseltine was, at some stage, going to challenge the Prime Minister. That was in the tea leaves and in the media and all that. I didn't go to that meeting thinking that this was the occasion which Michael Heseltine was going to choose to resign, as it were, against the Prime Minister but as the meeting went on I realised that he was deciding, I think probably on the spot, that this was the moment to do it.

LH: Very interesting. Robert, do you have any regrets about your time as Cabinet Secretary?

LA: Yes I do. I regret, I regret the way in which Ian Bancroft, who had been Permanent Secretary to the Civil Service Department and Head of the Civil Service, went.

LH: Mrs Thatcher, in effect, fired him. Didn't she?

LA: Well she abolished the Civil Service Department and she didn't really care for him, I think, and...

LH: You did. He was a special man.

LA: ...he was a very old friend and a very good friend and I owed him much kindness when I'd first gone to the Treasury but he'd remained a good friend and that, of course one regretted that because he felt bad about it, and I'm sure he would have felt that I was part of the, part of those who wanted to, who thought it right to abolish the Civil Service Department and with it undermine his position. I did think that the time had come when the Civil Service Department had outlived its usefulness so I accepted that and I accepted, of course, Ian was quite near retirement anyway, that he would go early rather than go and continue in some funny capacity, but that was very unhappy.

LH: Yes. Your friends regretted for you the Spycatcher business because they thought it was quite wrong for you to be asked to go and defend Her Majesty's Government's position in a court of law in Australia, that it should have been a

politician, a minister. So your friends regretted on your behalf that and still do, I think, Robert.

LA: I think they may well do. I don't regret it because there was a lot of discussion as to... We had to pursue the matter in the Australian courts because the book was being published out there and Peter Wright was living, the author, was living in Tasmania. It could only be pursued under the civil law because the Official Secrets Act - of which he was clearly in breach - the jurisdiction doesn't extend outside of the United Kingdom. For the case in the New South Wales court an *affidavit* had to be put in. Who should put it in? It was decided that it should be put in by the principal official adviser to the Prime Minister on security and intelligence and that was the Cabinet Secretary. In Britain, an *affidavit* doesn't necessarily have to be followed by an appearance as a witness. In the Australian court it did. Somebody had to go, and this was discussed, and the choice really was lay between the Attorney General, the Cabinet Secretary, the Permanent Secretary to the Home Office or the Head of MI5. You couldn't send the Head of MI5 because MI5 in theory didn't exist in those days, it was still the secret service and I, everybody thought that it wouldn't be right for the Attorney General, the minister, to appear as a witness in the Australian court, so that left the Permanent Secretary to the Home Office and me. And a) I had signed the *affidavit* and I was the principal adviser and b) I actually knew more about the background to the case than any other person who was not a member of the security service. I'd lived with it since 1972 when I was Ted Heath's Principal Private Secretary and had followed it really throughout my period as Principal Private Secretary and then in the Home Office and then as Cabinet Secretary so I knew probably more than anybody outside the security service the background to it. And I also knew, what I was supposed not to know and couldn't reveal and so the Prime Minister asked me if I would go. She didn't instruct me but she asked me if I would go and I said I would, I thought that was right. It was, of course, a disagreeable experience and people say not only that it was not right to send me but that we should never, that the case should never have been pursued in the Australian courts. But it had to be, I think it had to be pursued in the court because the, what Peter Wright had written had outraged other members of the security service and they, they were saying that if he was allowed to get away with it and publishing the book, they would publish their own books to counter and refute what he had written, which was full of not only breaches of security but misinformation, I mean untruths, inaccuracies, untruths. And the process went on for a long time but the final verdict, the final decision in the House of Lords here, after I'd ceased to be, after I'd retired as Cabinet Secretary, seemed to me to vindicate the process because though the horse had escaped from the stable, in the sense that the book had been, come out, and the injunctions had failed, the judgment in the House of Lords case made it clear that his, Peter Wright's conduct, was a disgraceful breach of confidence as well as would have been a breach of the Official Secrets Act and that any, anything further would be a) disgraceful and b) should be punished to the greatest possible degree. So that I felt that at the end of the process, after I had retired, it had been right to pursue it.

LH: Finally Robert, finally, if you had one piece of advice for a future Cabinet Secretary, what would it be?

LA: I think it would be that you are the point where the administrative machine and the political machine come together and you're the apex of the administrative machine and you should be constantly on your guard against being drawn into doing things which ought to be done at the political level and not the administrative level and I think that some of the, some of the problems that have arisen, possibly Spycatcher - I don't actually think Spycatcher - but, for example, the Jonathan Aitken business with Robin Butler. I don't think the Cabinet Secretary should have been drawn into that.

LH: To have to interview a minister about the veracity of his statements.

LA: Yes.

LH: Yes.

LA: Should have been drawn publicly into it as he was. It was done as a public thing and I twitch rather when the Cabinet Secretary is brought into it as a, as an arbiter as he was then and there have been other cases since when reference has been made to him in that way. And he's not, he's an adviser and in the end on the political things the arbiter has to be the Prime Minister, and so I think that that's something that any holder of the office has to be extremely careful to avoid. I can remember, not actually when I was Cabinet Secretary but when I was Principal Private Secretary, there was a case where a junior minister had to be told that he had to resign in order to pursue some matter out of government and there was some discussion as to who should tell him that he had to resign and it was suggested that the Secretary of the Cabinet should tell him. And I found, when I was going through the papers years later, a little note on the file which I had put to Mr Heath saying, 'isn't this a job for a politician, either the Prime Minister or the Chief Whip?' and I thought, well, I got that one right.

LH: Robert Armstrong, thank you very much.