

Exchange of Letters between

Tony Benn and Sir Antony Part

Mr Benn had been a semi-detached member of Harold Wilson's Cabinet and was transferred from the Department of Industry to the Department of Energy in June 1975. He had inevitably also had a fairly fraught relationship with his senior officials, including his Permanent Secretary, Antony Part. They nevertheless exchanged **the attached letters** after Mr Benn had left the department.

(Roy Williams, who is referred to in Sir Antony's letter, was Mr Benn's Principal Private Secretary.)

Those interested in this period of British history should definitely read Tony Benn's Diaries 1973-76 "Against the Tide".

Martin Stanley

Monday 30 June

When I got home I found in my box a farewell letter from Sir Antony Part. It read:

Personal, 29 June

1975

Dear Secretary of State,

It was sad that, for whatever reason and perhaps due to a misunderstanding, we did not say goodbye to each other when you left the Department. At any rate I want to write now on behalf of the staff of the Department as well as myself, to thank you for all the many courtesies you displayed towards your civil servants, and so far as I am concerned, the sympathetic consideration you showed to me during my recent illness.

It was especially kind of you to find the time to come and visit me in the hospital and write as you did to my wife with your programme of radical change. Granted the political balance within the Cabinet, you were bound

to face your senior advisors with some difficult problems, but whatever our professional anxieties were from time to time, we enjoyed the challenges and the stimulation, and you were generous in your appreciation of the support that you received on such key subjects as the Industry Bill and the Post Office.

We admired your outstanding skill in communication (even when, occasionally, we were worried about what you were communicating!) and the deftness of your drafting. But, important though these are, they are less significant than the general thrust of your philosophy, so clearly illustrated in its many facets in the book of speeches* (and it is characteristic I know that they were speeches and not private memoranda) that you kindly gave me.

In our different careers we have both sailed through rough waters and, indeed, I expect we should each be surprised if the waters were ever to become smooth, and possibly not know what to do with ourselves if that were to happen! For the marriage of ideas and reality is unending and fascinating, and the responsibility for the fate of others is an unremitting burden for people who are in positions of leadership.

But where would either of us be without such challenges – and how would either of us fare without the imperturbable and invaluable help of such people as Roy Williams?

I send you from myself, Peter Carey and all those who served you in this Department, the most sincere salutations together with my own warm thanks for your personal kindness.

Yours sincerely,
Antony Part

No one can resent a warm letter; in the end I sent the following reply:

Dear Sir Antony,

It was very good of you to write and I appreciated it. I well realise that my brief period in the Department of Industry imposed a heavy strain on you and your officials arising from new policies and initiatives which in turn aroused a major public debate.

Throughout all this I received every possible personal help and I hope you will convey my gratitude to all those involved at various levels, from your own throughout the Department, and including the Private Office.

I am sorry that the pace of the reshuffle made personal farewells impossible, but that is one of the hazards of political life. I do hope you are completely fit again and that the anxieties of the winter will never recur.

With kind regards,
Tony Benn.