

Sir Anthony Part

Anthony Part was born into a well-to-do family in 1916. His grandfather had made his fortune in industry in Lancashire before moving south where various members of the family established the Sloane Rangers favourite shop, the General Trading Company. He was educated at Harrow School and Cambridge University where he was a scholar and a real tennis half-Blue. His parents divorced when he was 14 years old.

He joined (what is now) the Department of Education in 1937 as an Assistant Principal on a salary of £275pa. He later noted that *'The idea that control, particularly of the curriculum, should be the hands of Ministers of the Crown was regarded as abhorrent - and even constitutionally dangerous. The example of Nazi Germany was often cited as an undesirable precedent.'*

He had never seen a state-funded school so asked if he could visit some - and was told *"No, because if you were to visit some schools you might begin to think you knew something about it and that would be very dangerous. The HM Inspectors are your advisers on the ground.'*

Just before the war, he was appointed Assistant Private Secretary to a Minister in the newly formed Ministry of Supply. He was then called up in 1940 and became Rifleman Part, narrowly escaping - he noted - the fate of becoming a Private Part. His training and subsequent wartime experience had the great advantage, for his subsequent career, that he came into contact with a wide range of humanity. *"We were a mixed bunch, mainly young men from London already well acquainted with the sole conversational adjective."* He was only allowed to shoot on one occasion during his three months training owing to a shortage of ammunition. And he was never in the front line in the war as his skills were put to better use in the Intelligence Corps, including serving under General Montgomery at Alamein.

Anthony was eventually promoted to lieutenant colonel but his subsequent army career ended abruptly, and in a way that taught him a salutary lesson: *'Partly from my nature, partly in my anxiety to do the best possible job, I had developed a sort of fierce efficiency. A similar characteristic, with its associated abruptness of manner, was shared by a number of people who had served previously under Montgomery. But I was startled [to receive a letter] saying that there was no further place for me at the Headquarters of 21 Army Group ... The crucial sentence read ... 'I must have a happy ship' ... My number two ... said with some relish 'You're finished'. The central fact was that I had become too intense and had paid inadequate attention to the sensibilities of those who worked for me and they had reacted against this. This was a mistake that I resolved never, if possible, to make again.'*

A few years after the war, having returned to Education, he spent a year in the USA, supported by a Harkness Fellowship. The low point was being knifed - only an inch from his heart - by the son of a friend who thought he was an intruder in his house. Having recovered from this he contracted tuberculosis and was unable to work for well over a year.

Back at work, as is fairly typical for those from a privileged background, he was an effective networker. He later recognised that one of his strengths as a civil servant derived from the fact that *'if you are going to get involved in a continuing operation with a number of different organisations it greatly increases your chances of success if you have made friends with the key people in these organisations'*. He was also a great proponent of 'teams of mixed skills' for which he was praised in an official inquiry into the (supposedly excessive) cost of the school building program.

He was in due course appointed Deputy Secretary (now Director General) in which role he was keen to improve the professional standing of school teachers. He made little progress and subsequently commented (showing that he was no thoughtless Tory supporter) that *'had they succeeded - or even made substantial progress ... the standing and attitudes of teachers would over time have been constructively transformed. The opportunity missed was matched later on by the destructive attitude of Mrs Thatcher's government towards Local Education Authorities. Impatience at the inefficiency of a few ... was allowed to escalate into an undeserved denigration of local authorities as a whole.'*

Anthony transferred to the (soon to be enlarged) Ministry of Works in 1963 where he worked closely and effectively with a wide range of professions - engineers, architects etc. He saw the administrative civil service as another profession, and regarded it a vital that they should work as equals with 'good quality' professional from other spheres. Indeed, he argued that students should not be allowed to drop all science or arts subjects after the age of 16 - advice that has been ignored in the UK well into the 21st Century.

He also argued - correctly but against common perception - that *'the administrative class [spends] most of their time initiating or implementing change'*.

Then, in 1968, he was appointed Permanent Secretary at the Board of Trade. He was very aware that he had much to learn - and set about doing so - and subsequently commented as follows:

Some civil servants ... consider that being a Permanent Secretary is a skill readily transferable from one department to another. This certainly applies to some of the work ... but some knowledge about the department's fields of activity and contacts is essential. To think otherwise is rather like assuming that a good managing director of one firm will necessarily make a good managing director of another.

His department was then subsumed into the Department of Trade and Industry whose challenge lay in its very wide policy scope. Prime Minister Edward Heath and Secretary of State John Davies were as clear and confused as many of their predecessors and successors when it came to defining their industrial policy. 'Disengage from industry' was one message. 'Act like Great Britain Ltd', 'Support the defence industries' and 'Maintain regional investment grants' were others.

He visited Australia as part of effort to assure the Commonwealth countries that they would not be forgotten if and when the UK joined the European Community.

He was flattered to be told that one Australian said "That is the most unstuffy Pom I have ever met'.

His department was torn apart again in 1974 and Anthony took charge of the Department of Industry, reporting to Tony Benn. The latter was understandably but possibly unfairly suspicious of the civil service in general and Mr Part in particular, as evidenced by Mr Benn's diaries. It was probably the case that Anthony Part had a deeper and better understanding than Mr Benn of actual working conditions and management/staff relations in industry. Mr Benn was certainly surprised to find that his Permanent Secretary was on first name terms with Trade Union leader Len Murray. Be that as it may, Mr Part greatly disliked his Secretary of State's confrontational style, and found it to be a 'lonely and stressful time'.

Sir Anthony retired in 1976 and embarked on a wide-ranging private sector career as a non-executive director of six businesses. He died in 1990.

These notes are based on Sir Anthony's autobiography ***The Making of a Mandarin***.