Evelyn Sharp (1903-85)

Here are extracts from a number of articles etc. concerning Evelyn Sharp.

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Abstract

Evelyn Sharp was a maker of civil service history: a pioneering woman in Whitehall's top ranks as permanent secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government 1955-66. The publication of the Crossman Diaries in 1975 gave us a vivid but incomplete picture of 'the Dame', as she was known to all who dealt with her. In this article, Kevin Theakston has pieced together the story of her whole 40-year-long career in the civil service (which she joined in 1926, only the second year in which the examination for the administrative class was open to women). She was widely recognised as one of the most formidable civil servants of her day, her unique specialist knowledge of the field of local government, housing and planning (in which she spent virtually her whole career), and her forthright manner and tough-minded approach marking her out. Ministers from both main parties - Hugh Dalton, Harold Macmillan, Enoch Powell, Charles Hill, and even Richard Crossman himself - testified to her power and brilliance. All her life she believed passionately in local government and was its champion inside Whitehall; after her retirement from the civil service she was one of the dominant figures on the Redcliffe-Maud Royal Commission on Local Government (1966-69). She is undoubtedly a unique, one-off figure in the Whitehall pantheon, and this is the fullest account yet of her career.

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1920s – 1930s The Increasing Role of Women

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She started her career in 1926 at the Board of Trade as an Administrative Trainee (a Fast Stream grade), joining what was undoubtedly a male dominated environment. Many women worked in junior levels of the Civil Service, but as in many other organisations of the day, women earned less than men and until 1947, they were expected to resign if they married.

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Dame Evelyn is acknowledged as one of the most outstanding and formidable Civil Servants of her day. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography describes her as inventive, resourceful and committed to achieving results and positive action– exactly what civil servants are expected to show today.

1959-60: APPRENTICE LEGISLATOR

By a stroke of luck MT came to prominence very quickly. At the beginning of each Parliamentary Session, backbench MPs enter a ballot for the chance to introduce their own legislation (known as "Private Member's Bills"). The top half dozen have a reasonable chance of becoming law, provided the Government doesn't oppose them. MT came second in her first try and so within weeks of election was in the unusual position of doing serious business with senior ministers and officials, attracting a lot of attention from the national press. Many MPs pass their entire careers without an opportunity as good as this.

In the months that followed there are numerous foreshadowings of later themes in her political life . She unhesitatingly chose a controversial subject for her Bill, involving trade union power, a move that was shrewd as well as brave, because the topic was inherently newsworthy. That summer a number of Labour Councils had withheld access to their meetings to provincial newspapers involved in an industrial dispute with print workers: her Bill would force all local authorities to open up to the press (and public), like it or not. The files show that Ministers and officials were wary of such a head-on attack, preferring instead the negotiation of a "code of practice". MT found herself particularly at odds with Dame Evelyn Sharp, Whitehall's first woman Permanent Secretary and a strong personality. Dame Evelyn found the new MP for Finchley demanding and unrealistic, an unwelcome interloper in the close (perhaps cosy) relationship between the Ministry and local government. She plainly hoped the Bill would fail; in fact MT recalls her saying as much, face to face.

Another long-term theme reveals itself in these early documents. Although she was the daughter of a long-serving councillor, mayor and Alderman of Grantham, MT was no admirer of British local government. By the 1940s and 50s party politics were coming more and more to dominate local elections, ending a long tradition of independent and ratepayer rule in which her father had played his part. (He never ran under a party label.) MT saw the trend as inevitable, and broadly accepted the logic: "Politics touch every sphere of personal life", she wrote in an article on this topic in 1949. But it had some painful results. When Labour captured Grantham in 1952 one of their first acts was to remove Alf Roberts from the Aldermanic Bench, an event which still had the power to bring MT to tears when she recalled it on television over 30 years later.

All this jarred on ministry officials, but MT got on much better with her political colleagues. She won over the Minister, Henry Brooke, during a chat in the Commons Library (and many years later took pleasure in promoting his son Peter to a job in her own cabinet). And meeting his deputy she had her earliest dealings with a man who

was to have a huge influence on her career and outlook: Sir Keith Joseph. She was struck by his intelligence, helpfulness and charm, an impression that she never had cause to revise in more than 30 years of friendship and close cooperation.

To get her Bill passed, MT had to make compromises, and in making the necessary deals she showed what became a familiar blend of pragmatic toughness with a touch of theatricality. She understood from the first that Ministers would only allow the Bill through if they had drafted it, so she asked for precisely that. But when the first draft was delivered she made the demand - unheard of, but successful - to speak directly with the parlimentary draftsman and damned one clause after another as "far too weak", "impossibly weak", or "quite useless". As chief official, Dame Evelyn found this an "extremely unsatisfactory discussion", but as political head Henry Brooke saw the point at once: "Her technique is to say she must have much more than she really expects to get!" (MT wrote to Keith Joseph a few days later in a slightly contrite tone, as if fearing she had overdone things a little.) In the weeks that followed, she gained as well as conceded ground, pressuring ministers without ever losing their sympathy. Ministers played their own game too, using the threat of Mrs Thatcher to scare the local authorities - probably the first time this tactic was used, certainly not the last.

As well as finding her feet in Whitehall, MT had to steer the Bill through the Commons herself, opening her campaign in a thorough if exhausting way by sending 250 handwritten letters to Parliamentary colleagues asking for their support. She worked hard to win a measure of Labour backing for the Bill, realising that heavy attack from the Opposition would make the measure harder to pass and finding it no strain to be on good terms with some of her political opponents. (She always had a few friends on the Labour side, to the very end of her career.)

Her newness to it all is underlined by the fact that she made her maiden speech moving the Second Reading of the Bill, dispensing with the customary introduction praising her own constituency: straight down to business was always her rule. Notes for the speech survive and can be read here, prepared in much the style she used for important Parliamentary occasions throughout her time in the Commons. She made an impressive job, not aspiring to eloquence or grand effects, but marshalling her facts and making her case with clarity and force. Not only did the speech go down well in the Commons, MT found herself on ITN's *News At Ten* the following day, giving her first ever television interview, in what was considered an appropriately feminine context - on the sofa at home, flanked by twins Mark and Carol.

The vote on Second Reading was the decisive moment in the life of the Bill. Opposition to it among local authorities had grown sufficiently strong to pose a threat, with some Conservative backbenchers (and many Labour) hostile. The Government took a cautious line, not committing itself to support until the result was known, keeping the "code of practice" up its sleeve, neutral in a benign style. Victory by a good margin brought ministers off the fence. They even provided extra time for debate when a technical motion had to be moved to allow the public to be granted the same rights as the press, Keith Joseph doing the honours. MT had to pay a price, however: the scope of the Bill was narrowed to exclude most council committees, greatly diminishing the collective *angst* of the local authorities and their supporters in the Commons, but still banning a classic procedural manoeuvre by

which the press had been ousted from meetings (when the whole council would announce it was "going into committee" and clear the gallery). MT accepted the compromise with reasonable grace, Bill Deedes among others expressing the view that otherwise the Bill would have been lost.

The measure became law on 27 October 1960 and came into effect in June the following year.

Tristram Hunt nominates: Dame Evelyn Sharp

My Worst Briton is Dame Evelyn Sharp. A legendary figure in Whitehall, "the Dame", as she liked to be known, ran postwar planning as permanent secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government from 1955-66. Well versed in departmental cunning, she outmanoeuvred a series of ministers including the great Richard Crossman. Yet she was also the civil servant who presided over some of the most hideous and unsympathetic urban developments of the past 50 years. With an unbridled faith in the power of Whitehall, she sanctioned the mass destruction of historic street housing in favour of bleak modernist developments. Described as having "no aesthetic sense whatsoever", Dame Evelyn was typical of an arrogant bureaucratic elite who severed our architectural bonds with the past, destroyed the civic fabric and delivered the British city over to the automobile. We are only just emerging from her dark reign.