

Thatcher protégé who missed stardom

Time 15 OCT 1983

By Ronald Butt

Few politicians have risen to Cabinet prominence so suddenly, and with such little previous public notice, as Mr Cecil Parkinson. Unlike Mr Norman Tebbit (an early ally of his in Tory constituency politics) who had been notorious as a backbencher for successfully rough-handling the Labour front-bench, Mr Parkinson had never been a well-known House of Commons figure.

In 1974, only four years after winning Enfield West in a by-election, Mr Parkinson had been given the job of Assistant Whip by Mr Edward Heath. It was a role in which he was publicly seen but not heard at Westminster, though his growing dislike for the political direction taken by the Heath government was little concealed in private conversations with sympathetic colleagues. Subsequently, he became an Opposition whip until 1976, after which he was made, first, Opposition spokesman for trade before the election, and Minister for Trade after Mrs Thatcher's victory.

'Promoting the party's cause'

It was a job well suited to a personable businessman, well-skilled in the arts of private negotiation, but it was hardly one which gave him any opportunity to make his mark as a House of Commons man, or as a well-known political face in the country. The chance to do this came when in 1981, Mrs Thatcher suddenly promoted him to be Paymaster-General in the Cabinet and made him chairman of the party in succession to the elder statesman Lord Thorneycroft, whom she had brought out of retire-

ment to do the job when she first became leader of the party.

In the Cabinet, Mr Parkinson was the most junior position. In Conservative party terms, however, he had assumed a role crucial to the party and its organization in the run-up to the last general election. He quickly set about creating a more businesslike organization (a marketing director was appointed and word processors came into use) and pulled all the elements of the Tory organization, including the research department, under his control. Every art of public relations was brought to promoting the party's cause.

As Tory chairman (always the personal appointment of the leader of the party) Mr Parkinson was influential with Mrs Thatcher and his dedication to her personally was unquestionable. He was a Thatcherite in politics and economics, and a self-made businessman who had progressed from a Lancashire working-class background through Cambridge to Tory politics. He is affable, good-looking, highly efficient and utterly reasonable in his manner.

All this made him a potentially significant figure in Tory politics, but what turned him into a nationally known politician, who could hope later to lay claim to the highest offices in the state was his appointment as the fifth member of Mrs Thatcher's inner "war cabinet" during the Falklands conflict.

In this rôle he was repeatedly on television where his public relations skills served him well, and where he showed up as an essentially reasonable and attractive figure, never putting a word wrong as he repeatedly explained the Government's

case to the nation. He had become one of the Government's best-known faces.

Still more important, in the inner Cabinet group he was essentially Mrs Thatcher's man, ensuring for her a full "majority" in any policy arguments of differences. Quite suddenly, he had been precipitated into the top rank of Conservative politics over the heads of politicians who had been his seniors. When the Falklands war was over, it was

'Fast and unlikely rise to prominence'

clear that Mr Parkinson was destined for a high Cabinet office after the next election, and he never dissembled his confidence that he would eventually reach the most senior level of the Cabinet.

Cecil Parkinson's rise to political prominence had been smooth, fast and unlikely. He was born in Carnforth, Lancashire, in 1931, went to the Royal Lancaster Grammar School and on to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he first read English and then switched to law, leaving Cambridge with a third. He trained and practised as an accountant and married Ann Jarvis, whose father was a well-off Harpenden builder. He became involved in local Tory politics in the same constituency as Norman Tebbit, went into the house-building and construction business with a partner and achieved the fortune that gave him the financial independence that is so useful in politics.

In many ways he seemed, in his own personality, to encapsu-

late contemporary Conservatism, with its emphasis on classlessness, self-reliance and achievement, and dependent on no supporting interest. Yet in the eighteenth century sense, Mr Parkinson did have a political interest.

It was the Prime Minister's personal patronage which had pulled him so quickly to the top, he was her man and he was as much committed to her interest as any aspiring eighteenth century politician was to that of his patron.

What could have made him an independent Conservative politician in his own right would have been success as Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, to which ministry he was appointed immediately after the election.

How well he would have performed as a departmental minister can now be no more

'Pulled to top by personal patronage'

than speculation; in his short period as Secretary of State for Trade he raised some misgivings by his action in promoting an "out-of-court" settlement of the case of Stock Exchange restrictive practices instead of allowing the proceedings of the court to go on.

What is certain is that his undoubted skill in promoting the Tory victory at the election, and the Prime Minister's support would not alone have sufficed to take him to the top. For that he would have needed to be a success as a departmental minister and in the House of Commons. In neither capacity did he have time to be tested.