

Brittan—a minister with mind of his own

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MR LEON BRITTAN, whose move from the Home Office to the Department of Trade and Industry is one of the big surprises of the reshuffle, is an acutely intelligent and very likeable man. Few people doubt the intellect—many have doubts about his attractiveness.

He is also frequently accused of being one of Mrs Thatcher's acolytes. Lord Annan said recently that he had behaved like a "demented poodle" in seeking to ban the BBC programme on Northern Ireland at the Prime Minister's behest.

Lord Annan seems to have been wrong. It was the Home Secretary who decided that the programme ought not to be shown before Mrs Thatcher knew anything about it. He also went about the banning in a quite open way—no Establishment nudges behind the scenes.

Several other popular beliefs about Mr Brittan are wrong as well. His speech calling for the restoration of capital punishment for terrorist murders, which went down so badly in the Commons shortly after the last general election, was entirely his own work and in no way pandering to the Prime Minister. It reads much better than it sounded.

Nor is it true that he is particularly close to Mr Nigel Lawson, the Chancellor, another senior Cabinet figure who is sometimes criticised in the City and the country for giving the Government a bad name. The two men see each other relatively seldom.

Indeed, when Mr Brittan was promoted to Chief Secretary to the Treasury—and therefore entered the Cabinet—in Mrs Thatcher's first administration, it was Mr Lawson, the older man, who had every reason to feel overlooked. The latter remained Financial Secretary—outside the Cabinet—although he was the principal architect of the Government's economic policy through the medium-term financial strategy. There has been no great reconciliation since.

If Mr Brittan has faults, they are twofold. One is that he wears his ambition too openly on his sleeve. Few people can have been so absolutely determined to go into politics and to reach for the near top, and it shows. He was almost childishly delighted at becoming Minister of State at the Home Office when the Tories won in 1979.

The Home Office was a joy to him. Only recently he was saying that the firm understanding when he became Home Secretary was that he would stay till the next general election. He wanted to codify the criminal justice system as well as reform the prisons, even shocking his officials at the start by insisting on seeing the prison regimes at first hand.

The other fault is that he does not always come over well on television, though he can at times be devastating, having roughed up Mr Denis Healey in the 1979 election campaign. Probably it was a mistake to switch from spectacles to contact lenses.

Mr Brittan was a Heath man, then a Thatcher man. What he has been all along, however, is a Howe man. Sir Geoffrey has been his mentor—the background is similar: Cambridge, the Bow Group and the law. There were also shared holidays when Mr Brittan, still a bachelor, would stay with the Howes.

Today he must have two glad thoughts. One is that his move coincided with the England cricket team regaining the Ashes. He is mad about cricket and a member of the MCC. The other is that he has not yet been upstaged by Mr Norman Fowler, an old Cambridge rival, who always wanted the Home Office and who recently set his eyes on Trade and Industry.

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