

From youthful talent to pillar of government

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By Julian Haviland

Lord Carrington was a chief pillar of the Government in which he had served as Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary since it was formed by Mrs Margaret Thatcher in May, 1979.

His career had not been without blemish. In his first political post as a parliamentary secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, to which he was appointed by Churchill, in 1951, he had some responsibility for the mishandling of the Crichel Down affair. But his offer to resign was refused and his qualities kept him on the front bench in the Lords, alternately in Opposition and Government, except for a notably successful term as British High Commissioner in Australia, from 1956 to 1959.

Peter Carrington — the family name is spelt with one "r" — was born in June, 1919, and succeeded his father as sixth Baron in 1938. After Eton and Sandhurst he was commissioned in the Grenadier Guards, serving in north-west Europe in 1944-1945, reaching the rank of major, and earning a Military Cross.

The House of Lords in the fifties was not overstocked with youthful talent, and Lord Carrington was highly regarded by his seniors from the first.

On his return from Australia he was given senior rank by Mr Harold Macmillan as First Lord of the Admiralty,

and showed some of his steel by his robustness in routing press and parliamentary critics who tried to involve him in scandal over the spy Vassell.

He was promoted to the Cabinet as Leader of the House of Lords by Sir Alec Douglas-Home in 1963. His value to successive leaders of his party ensured his retention as Leader of the Opposition in the Lords throughout each of the last two Labour administrations, 1964 to 1970 and 1974 to 1979.

Mr Edward Heath appointed him Secretary of State for Defence. There were opposition complaints, not for the last time, that the head of an important department should sit in the Lords, but his competence silenced them. Wide travel in this post a decade before the Falklands invasion, convinced him of the limited role which Britain's reduced naval strength now allowed.

In April, 1972, he took on the additional task of chairman of the Conservative Party to prepare for the next general election, and at the height of the crisis over the miners was made Secretary of State for Energy. He received and accepted much of the blame for the defeat in the election.

The Prime Minister's reluctance to let him go, is proof he served her well.