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Ken Thomas: Civil Service trade union leader

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After a short spell as a trainee journalist in Cardiff, Thomas became a career Civil Service trade union leader and is accepted as the architect of the modern Civil Service pension scheme introduced in 1972/73. He felt it was his greatest achievement at that time and union chiefs applauded him for his efforts. He was General Secretary of the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) from 1976 until 1982, a spell which saw him take a leading role in Whitehall pay disputes, both in 1979 (the Winter of Discontent), and during the bitter six-month pay dispute with the Thatcher government in 1981.

Although he was no mob orator, he was a rare breed of Civil Service union chief who could have held his own speaking on behalf of striking miners or bus crews. He came across as a left-winger at a time when Civil Service unions were regarded askance by their blue-collar brethren as timid, right-wing and somewhat inferior in terms of militancy. He attended most fringe meetings and backed the majority of worthy causes, when campaigners bombarded him with leaflets. He disliked unionists who crept into buildings by the back door instead of the front. He said: "Once you hide from your members you are dead in the water."

Thomas, a quiet intellectual of Welsh stock, accepted he was leading an army of pen-pushers, but was proud to represent the biggest Whitehall union at a time in history when the media and public had been used to firebrands like the engineers' Hugh Scanlon and the transport union's Jack Jones, both feared in their day by Downing Street.

Thomas preferred what he called the "gentle approach of waving a big stick behind your back at the same time as having tea on the lawn" and was always keen to remind ministers that the government's then 500,000-strong army of white-collar employees should not be regarded as supine. He drove that point home when leading his union's national pay dispute in 1981.

He was a proud member of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) governing body, the General Council, a group of around 50 men and women who collectively boasted a membership in the late Seventies of almost 10 million workers. He hated militants and union leaders who went on strike at the drop of a hat and believed that militancy should always be used as a last resort. He used to say: "We are trade unionists, not stormtroopers."

"Ken was quite a character and loved music. He even built his own harpsichord after researching the subject at a museum in Edinburgh," Sir Alistair Graham, his successor at the CPSA, recalls:

But he will be best remembered for his work on pensions, and he was the only CPSA General Secretary to win a standing ovation at the annual conference. This was quite a feat, because our conference was known as the "Beirut of the trade-union movement" because of the militants. Upon his retirement he persuaded the Welsh musician Dan Jones to write him a symphony as a gift. He often threatened to learn the Welsh language.

Thomas enjoyed the company of journalists who covered trade-union affairs and the business of his union, and was an excellent host at annual conferences. He also enjoyed a tippie or three, in Welsh tradition, and loved a singsong after midnight. He was a devoted family man, and was rarely seen without his spouse on the union conference circuit.

When he retired at 55, the age at which Civil Service union leaders were obliged to quit, he was like a lost soul for months afterwards. His love of the trade union movement never left him, and he and his wife, Nora, continued to be regular attenders at the annual Trades Union Congress in Blackpool or Brighton.

He was widely respected and admired by friends and foes alike, and there were plenty of foes about at that period within his own union. Hard leftists enjoyed tearing their leaders apart during debates, but Thomas was more than a match for them. He once downed a heckler with the words: "Your knowledge of negotiations could be written on the back of a postage stamp." To another delegate who yelled "I deserve to be crucified if I am wrong", he retorted: "Since when have you had this delusion of grandeur?"

Thomas, a softly spoken man, was always immaculate, always kept his cool and his sound judgement, and those one-liners became a trademark. He was no joke-teller but had a wicked sense of humour. Because pensions were his speciality long before the Maxwell Mirror Group pensions fraud, he approached me at a hotel reception in 1984 and asked me if my Mirror colleagues would welcome some free advice. When I asked why, he replied: "Because Count Dracula has just bought your blood bank." I came to realise, painfully, how prophetic his words would turn out to be. To a barman who once told him that "pensions are boring", he simply answered: "Let us see if you can ever live without one."

Although he liked the company of the trade-union hierarchy, Thomas was not comfortable in top-class hotels with fellow union officials all the time, and often sought the company of the vociferous rank-and-file and Fleet Street's industrial correspondents on pub crawls. He said: "Far too many people in this business forget their roots."

Terence Pattinson

Kenneth Rowland Thomas, trade unionist: born Penarth, Glamorgan 7 February 1927; trainee reporter, South Wales Echo and Western Mail 1943-44; Assistant Secretary,

Civil and Public Services Association 1955-67, Deputy General Secretary 1967-76, General Secretary 1976-82; Member, TUC General Council 1977-82; OBE 1995; married 1955 Nora Hughes (four sons); died 12 August 2008.