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Sir Anthony Meyer, Bt

Backbencher who ended his surprisingly rebellious parliamentary career by standing against Margaret Thatcher

DIFFIDENT and self-depreciatory, Sir Anthony Meyer disliked the idea of office and was a natural backbencher. Headline writers unkindly called him "Sir Nobody". He was a most unlikely candidate for the task of toppling a prime minister who appeared to be in complete control of her party.

Yet, when others held back, it was Meyer, repelled by Margaret Thatcher's confrontational style and her attitude to Europe, who insisted on standing against her for the party leadership in 1989. He failed, as he knew he would, but as he said later: "It made the unthinkable thinkable."

His Establishment background was impeccable. He went from Eton and Oxford to the Scots Guards. He inherited a baronetcy and enough money to provide a substantial private income. He served for 15 years as a diplomat. Until middle life there was little to suggest that he would become one of the most persistent parliamentary rebels of his time. His personal life, too, proved to be irregular and unexpectedly exotic.

His grandfather arrived in England from Hamburg towards the end of the 19th century, joined Rothschild's, made a modest fortune and gave considerable sums to establish a national theatre. For this he was rewarded with a baronetcy. Meyer's father became chairman of De Beers and was Conservative MP for Great Yarmouth in the 1920s. Meyer helped in his father's campaigns when he was a schoolboy but had little interest in politics otherwise. He became captain of Oppidans at Eton and was reading history at New College when war was declared.

He enlisted in the Scots Guards and soon after D-Day he was in a tank hit by a German shell. Part of it lodged near his spine, and the wound kept him on his back in a Normandy hospital for nine months. He joined the Foreign Office, spent five years in Paris where he developed his European faith, served less happily in Moscow, and came back to work in the Foreign Office Common Market unit where Edward Heath was starting the first round of negotiations to enter the Community. When Meyer was due to be posted abroad again he resigned in order to campaign actively for British entry.

He worked for the pro-Market committee under Lord Gladwyn, and it was at this point that he decided to become a politician. "Europe was the reason I came into politics," he said. He admitted that it was touch and go whether he joined the Conservatives or the Liberals. His admiration for Harold Macmillan proved the deciding factor. Generations of Tory Whips must have regretted this. He obtained the nomination for Eton and Slough, worked hard and defeated the veteran Fenner Brockway by 11 votes. He took the realistic view that he was in the Commons on borrowed time, and he was duly defeated

in the 1966 election by Joan Lestor, who always respected him for refusing to play the race card, a tactic which could have won many votes with black immigration becoming a sensitive issue in the constituency.

Shortly before the 1970 election he was chosen to fight Flint West with its handsome Conservative majority. It seemed that he was in place to represent the seat for the rest of his career.

During his previous 18 months in the House he had revealed his liberal tendency, voting against hanging and for oil sanctions against Ian Smith's Rhodesia. In the years after his return his voting record read like a roll call of lost causes. He was, in his own words, "an old-fashioned, sloppy wet".

Apart from a period as PPS to Maurice Macmillan — a post he accepted reluctantly and only because of long-standing friendship — he was a persistent rebel. He defied his whips on the closure of Shotton steel works, on devolution and on rate increases. He joined a handful of other Tory MPs in voting with Labour on cuts in unemployment and overseas aid. When Labour opposed the bombing of Libya from UK bases he was the only Conservative to go into the opposition lobby.

Although there had been one attempt by Clwyd North-West (a new seat at the previous election which incorporated part of his former Flint West constituency) to de-select him in favour of the MEP, Beata Brookes, he managed to avoid too much trouble with his party until two events which brought him excessive publicity: the Falklands conflict and his challenge to Thatcher.

He opposed the Falklands operation from the beginning. He told a largely hostile Commons that he was not part of the consensus to recover the islands by force. He reinforced his opposition in a TV programme and described the affair as "an insane way of settling a problem".

But it was his challenge to Thatcher in December 1989 which made him temporarily a national figure — and a figure of hatred for many party activists. As a Macmillanite One Nation Tory he had become overtly dissatisfied with the Prime Minister's style of government. He described her twice-weekly question times in the House as "an increasingly sickening spectacle". He disliked what he regarded as the rude confrontation of the Thatcher years. But it was her attitude to Europe which convinced him that somebody had to make a formal challenge to her leadership.

He allowed his name to go forward after a conversation with Chris Moncrieff, of the Press Association. "He talked me into saying that if somebody had to stand it had better be me," Meyer recalled without rancour. The press promptly described him as a stalking horse and, indeed, Meyer believed he would be replaced by Ian Gilmour.

There was so much publicity, however, that he was forced to carry on. In the event he was defeated by 314 votes to 33, but when abstentions and spoilt ballot papers were added to his vote, it emerged that 60 MPs had not voted for Thatcher. This meant she had lost the support of a sixth of her parliamentary party. People, as Meyer said, then started to think seriously of what had been considered unthinkable.

He never regretted his action and believed, with some justification,

that his apparently foolhardy action had helped to pave the way for her ultimate defeat a year later.

One result of his challenge was that in 1990 his Clwyd North-West constituency party rejected him as its candidate for the next election by 206 votes to 107. He was in the process of trying to get the decision reversed when it was revealed in the tabloid press that he had had a relationship for more than 20 years with Simone Washington, a West Indian model and blues singer. He immediately abandoned his attempt to fight the seat again.

After leaving Parliament he devoted himself to the pro-European cause. In addition to his work for the Franco-British Council — for which he had been awarded the Légion d'Honneur in 1983 — the British European Movement and the Federal Union, he embarked on a career as a lecturer, speaking widely to schools and universities on the merits of European integration. He is survived by his wife Barbadee, whom he married in 1941, and their four children.

Sir Anthony Meyer, Bt, Conservative MP for Eton and Slough 1964-66; West Flint 1970-83; and Clwyd North-West 1983-92, was born on October 27, 1920. He died on December 24, 2004, aged 84.

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