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Five minutes before the end of a Varsity rugby match in 1959 a confident young Oxford forward emerged from a scrum and remarked to his pack leader, "We're going to win this, Steve." "Not if you don't get your arse across that field we won't!" came the tart reply. Little did the player know he was addressing a future Cabinet Secretary but the two are still close. "Rugby created friendships which have lasted all my life," says Lord Butler of Brockwell. "When you've shared a communal bath and wallowed in deep mud, there is a bond!"

These days, Robin Butler is President of Oxford University Rugby Club: "I care terribly." As the head of University College, he also nurtures his undergraduates. After retiring as Cabinet Secretary, he deliberately took a job which involved his wife of 45 years, Gillian, a former teacher. "We both very much like young people; we do it together." Teamwork has been the thread running through his life, and he's proud of it. "I'm a team player, that's what I am. I was a proper civil servant in the sense that I never relished the power the positions I held gave me. I was always content to be a functionary...and I think I people trusted me." He didn't keep a diary of secrets but is planning to record some of his thoughts; to say "some of the things I'd like my children to know about Gill and me....things I've always wished I'd asked *my* parents."

His family are Lancastrian, and his maternal grandfather founded Leyland Paints. On his father's side, Butler comes from a distinguished line of sporting internationals. His great-grandfather, the batsman Richard Daft, played cricket for England; his grandfather played soccer for Switzerland; his father played rugby for England. His grandfather went from Manchester

Grammar School to New College but was unhappy in Oxford and never encouraged his sons to follow. “It was something which my father greatly resented and regretted; he thought Oxford would have changed his life and he was determined I should come. It was a very moving moment for him when he brought me to Oxford for the first time. I can point to the place on the pavement outside this college where he delivered me.” It is still a poignant memory for Robin Butler, whose father saw him become Cabinet Secretary but not college Master.

Butler’s sporting skills helped launch his civil service career: “It made me interesting to the older people in the service ... and I firmly believe that those who are trying to play games have to be well organised and self disciplined.” Early in his career he was sometimes confused with his namesake Rab Butler, then Home Secretary, and it was agreed all correspondence should be sent to Rab’s office first. One day, the younger man received a card reading: “You have been selected for the Harlequins 1st X1 on Saturday. Please be at Twickenham by 2 pm.” Underneath, in Rab’s handwriting, was the message: ‘Dear Robin, I am not free on Saturday. Please could you deputise for me? Rab.’”

John Major called Butler the most competitive man he’d ever met, and close friend (Lord) Terry Burns agrees. “When we were on holiday in Capetown together there was a bit of competition to see who got up Table Mountain first, and that was despite Robin having a new knee.” Butler also competes with his wife each morning to see who solves a newspaper polygon puzzle first. “We say, ‘ready steady go’ and we open it at the same time, and we have a 5-day series and if it’s 2-all on Friday morning there’s such tension - waiting for whoever says ‘Got it!’ - I think I might have a heart attack!”

He survived a different kind of attack in 1984, when he was working late

with Margaret Thatcher the night the IRA bombed her conference hotel in Brighton. The trauma is still with him. He remembers trying to do something sensible, telling her to come away from the windows. *Her* immediate thought was for her husband, sleeping in the room next door. “She opened the door, the room was in darkness, we could hear the sounds of falling masonry because her bathroom ceiling was collapsing... and she plunged into the darkness. I should never have let her do it – should have said, ‘Stand back, Prime Minister, this is something for me to do,’ but there was no stopping her.” The next day, Butler had to tell her about the fatalities. “She hardly paused and said, ‘Well the conference must start on time.’ I said, ‘You must be joking! Some of your friends and colleagues are dead and some are injured; you *can’t* mean to go on with the party conference?’ She replied, ‘We must show that terrorism can’t defeat democracy.’ And she was right and I was wrong. There she was, on the platform at 9 am, immaculate, and, you know, it was a very moving moment - the courage and the principle. We’ve spoken about it quite a lot, about trivial aspects too and she said she was always going to carry a torch in her handbag from then on, and always did. “

In lighter vein, Butler also dreamed up a short comedy script for her to use when she visited the BBC to present the Mary Whitehouse Award to her favourite television series, *Yes Minister*. At first, Thatcher was a reluctant actress, but rehearsed in the car on the way to the studios, with Butler – naturally - playing the Sir Humphrey role. Once in front of an audience, she couldn’t resist and performed like a pro. Butler says Thatcher would never watch herself on television. “She was much less stuck up than people suppose...and she enjoyed hearing the gossip from the Commons. “

He found Harold Wilson the most amusing premier, and laughs heartily as he tells his favourite Wilson anecdote. “When the Crown Agents collapsed, we had to set up an inquiry and there was a senior official called

Sir Edmund Compton, Comptroller General. Wilson wrote to me: ‘The sort of person we want to conduct this inquiry is Denis Compton’, who was of course a famous cricketer, so I said, ‘I don’t think you mean Denis Compton, you mean Edmund Compton, but actually, they’re trying to get a judge called Fay to run it.’ Wilson replied, ‘Excellent! We’ll have Faye Compton!’ ”

After retiring from the civil service, Butler examined House of Lords reform (not surprisingly, he favours a mainly appointed House) and, in 2004, the nature of the intelligence on Iraqi WMD. Terry Burns says his friend was “surprised by some of the things he learned, but he set them out in as even-handed a way as he could.” Butler’s verdict was not that Blair lied, but that he “oversold the evidence... The agencies said their intelligence was sporadic and patchy. And Blair left that bit out from what he told Britain and the world...He correctly stated his belief...but didn’t warn us that the evidence for it was weak.” Butler is widely thought to have been astonished that Blair survived, though he claims he felt – and still feels - neutral about whether Blair should have resigned, although he does concede the Tories’ attack on what was seen to be an open goal in the Commons was “not as effective as it might have been. “

He is more critical, though, of Blair’s armchair style of government and the lack of collective, cabinet responsibility. ” What happened was you didn’t necessarily have an agenda; papers weren’t circulated...a lot of decisions were taken informally in Number 10 without set meetings, or good records being taken. In fairness, the use of the cabinet was already in decline...but Blair and Brown had been used to keeping their cards pretty close to their chest and didn’t necessarily share them with all their colleagues.” Butler liked and admired all five prime ministers he worked with, and praises Gordon Brown, the man who might be the next, as the “engine room” of this government.

Robin Butler retires as Master of 'Univ' next year, when he'll be 70 and still pushing himself to do new things. Meanwhile his college lodgings and "the smaller stage" suit him well. He and his wife share youthful enthusiasms – including owning an i-Pod – though "in some ways working with young people brings it home how old you are." One thing which especially pleases him is the upturn in interest in the civil service as a career. "To my relief, some of the best students here want to go into it." His own civil service career lasted 37 years: "a wonderful grandstand seat on British political life, and the best possible preparation for being head of an Oxford college."

The Lib Dem leader Paddy Ashdown dubbed Butler as "usually deeply discreet" though the ex-mandarin won't have it. "Oh, I'm not at all discreet," he claims, implausibly. "I'm deeply open! I'm quite incapable of keeping a secret." The bad news for historians is that Lord Butler's memoirs will be written for his family's eyes only. Good news, then, for the politicians – unless the memoirs leak. "There's lots more I could have told you," he remarks teasingly at the end of the interview. "But that's enough." For now, perhaps.