

Service of Thanksgiving for the life of Michael Barnes
5th April 2018 St John's, Notting Hill

Eulogy by Hugh Barnes

Enoch Powell famously said that all political lives end in failure, but it isn't true in the case of my father, Michael Barnes. His political life ended in success, in a great personal sense of fulfillment as Legal Services Ombudsman. The failure, such as it was, happened in the middle of his career, in the early 1970s, when he lost his seat on Labour's front bench and then on the back benches as a result of his principled stand on Britain's relationship with Europe. In 1969, Mickey had supported Labour's Prime Minister Harold Wilson when he opened negotiations to join the EEC. After Wilson called and lost a snap election in June 1970, he whipped the party in opposition to vote against joining Common Market as a way of keeping the anti-European left on board. Labour's cynical tactics only highlighted the extent to which Britain's long-term interests can be jeopardised by intra-party disputes, as with the Tory feuding that led to the Brexit referendum, but Mickey refused to emulate Wilson's 180-degree u-turn. When the legislation came before the House, he voted for Heath's Vote of Principle to join the EEC – the principle having originally been Labour's, you understand – and was then one of only five Labour MPs to abstain on the Second Reading, which passed by exactly five votes. In his autobiography Roy Jenkins, who unbelievably (along with the other members of the Gang of Four) voted against joining the EEC that day, 17th February 1972, recalled "shamefacedly slinking through the No lobby" and described Mickey as [I quote] "a young man with the gallantry of a 1916 subaltern ... [who] at once provided us with an essential little shield behind which to shelter and who made our political calculations seem rather tawdry. It is never comfortable to be dependent on men braver than oneself," Jenkins added.

Mickey was born in Gloucestershire, in 1932, in a village called Painswick described by Laurie Lee in *Cider with Rosie*. His mother Katherine was Irish, from a Protestant family who lived at Frescati, the former home in Dun Laoghaire of Edward Fitzgerald. Like Fitzgerald, Kitty and her siblings had strong nationalist and republican sympathies. One of Mickey's uncles was in the IRA during the Troubles in the early 1920s, and his mother's idol was the Irish rebel Michael Collins after whom he was named. Ironically Mickey's parents only met because his father Cecil, known as Fluffy, a subaltern of 1914 wounded and captured at the battle of Ypres, a military intelligence officer who fought for the White Russians against the Bolsheviks, had been sent to Dublin to hunt down Collins but ended up playing tennis at Frescati on weekends.

During the Second World War Fluffy was Commanding Officer of the Wiltshire Regiment at Devizes and afterwards the Conservative agent for Bill Astor and for Douglas Hurd's father in Wycombe and Newbury. At Malvern, where Mickey was Head Boy, and at Corpus Christi College Oxford, where he was President of the JCR, he seemed destined for a life that was conservative with a big and a small c.

Except two things happened in his final year at Oxford. The first thing was the Suez War which politicised him and informed his fierce opposition to the Vietnam and Iraq Wars much later on. The other thing was meeting Anne, who had been at school with Mickey's sister Cecily, and whom he married 56 years ago this month.

In the late fifties and early sixties Mickey worked in advertising for Crawfords and then for Foot Cone & Belding, later for J Walter

Thompson, but after reading Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* he wrote to its author for advice on how to get into parliament. Crosland put him in touch with the former Labour chancellor Hugh Dalton who dispatched Mickey, in the summer of 1958, into the phantasmagorical world of the Durham Miners' Gala. Two years later the Wycombe Labour Party sent Mickey as its delegate to the Labour Conference in Scarborough where he heard the party leader Hugh Gaitskell make his famous pledge to 'fight and fight and fight again to save the Party we love'. Both Hughs had a profound impact on Mickey, who always stood up and fought for the things he believed in. Dalton died in February 1962, Gaitskell in January 1963, so it's hardly surprising that when I was born the following month I was named Hugh.

Mickey fought and lost the Wycombe constituency in the 1964 general election but two years later he was victorious in Brentford & Chiswick, becoming a leading light in the youthful Labour intake to the Commons. He was a gifted backbench MP who campaigned with the same vigour against Heathrow noise pollution or traffic congestion on the A4 as he did against genocide in Biafra or Bangladesh. In 1968, after Nigeria's eastern province seceded as Biafra, Mickey called an Emergency Debate in the House of Commons urging the Labour government to stop supplying arms to the federal forces. His speech opening that debate was a clarion call for peace that has been ignored too often over the past half century. "I do not believe," he said, "that it is the job of British politicians to take sides in this tragic dispute. But I do believe that it is the job of British politicians to make sure that British policy is fair, just and honourable. It can always be said that there are arguments in favour of policies which continue the status quo, the traditional policy. It is easy to let things continue as they have done and to reassure oneself that this is realistic or

pragmatic, but every now and then in politics principles arise which politicians cannot afford to dodge, and we are faced here with such a principle. It cannot be right for this country to be organising peace talks in London with one hand and supplying arms with the other.” Theresa May, David Cameron, Gordon Brown, Tony Blair, please note.

When his intervention fell on deaf ears, Mickey flew to Biafra to meet its leader General Ojukwu and the de facto information minister Chinua Achebe, author of *Things Fall Apart*, one of the greatest novels ever to come out of Africa. Incongruously, as the British-manufactured bombs fell on the Biafran capital, Achebe told Mickey that he had been sitting in the public gallery of the House of Commons and cheering when he made his speech in the emergency debate the previous summer.

Mickey was an internationalist who believed that Britain as a former colonial power had a duty not to encourage the use of force if civil war threatened a Commonwealth country. In 1971, however, history repeated itself and Sheikh Mujib’s declaration of independence for Bangladesh prompted a crackdown by the Pakistan army that killed up to half a million people and created 10 million refugees. Mickey visited the frontline on three separate occasions to highlight abuses that were being perpetrated. In 2012, he was back in Dhaka to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Bangladesh’s independence, and to receive an award from Mujib’s daughter Sheikh Hasina, now Bangladesh’s prime minister, commemorating his role as a Friend of the Liberation War. His acceptance speech on that occasion was, in his own opinion, the best speech he ever made, and there were tears in his

eyes as he drew to a close with a raised hand and the words,
'Long live Bangladesh! *Joi Bangla!*'

Back in London, following the toxic debate over Europe and his ejection from parliament, Mickey took a number of part-time jobs, at the Gulbenkian Foundation where he worked on a committee of inquiry into drama schools that led directly to the establishment of the National Council for Drama Training, and on another looking at the training of musicians. At the National Consumer Council, and as Chairman of the Electricity Consumer Council, he stood up fearlessly for the rights of consumers. In some ways these were difficult years for Mickey. There is nothing so former as a former MP, and his income was as precarious as his family was dependent and constantly demanding. At times he was stalked by what he called the 'black dog' of mental exhaustion but he never compromised on his principles just to pay the bills.

In 1984, he became the director of the United Kingdom Immigrants Advisory Service, a registered charity funded by the Home Office and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Nowadays the very existence of an organisation like UKIAS seems quaint, even utopian. After Mickey left, in 1990, to become the first Legal Services Ombudsman, a statutory role appointed by Act of Parliament, the Conservative government renamed it the Immigration (as opposed to Immigrants') Advisory Service – a telling change of emphasis because it signalled that the organisation no longer belonged to the immigrant communities that Mickey had been proud to serve.

He was, in the best sense, a public servant, and it's fitting that his political career ended as an ombudsman because that Swedish word

dating back to the nineteenth century essentially means someone who *acts for* the citizen, someone who stands up for the ordinary person, without fear or favour. And that's exactly what Mickey did all his working life.

He also stood up for his family, of course, for Anne and for his children, and for his grandchildren Tatiana, Alik, Alfie, Harry, Stanley and Daisy, who made him so happy and so proud. He loved his family and he loved life. The day before he died I was sitting by his bed in the hospital. His eyes were closed and he wasn't obviously conscious but even so I told him for the umpteenth time how grateful I was for all he'd done for me and how he'd been such a wonderful father. Suddenly his eyes opened and he said, "You're both wonderful, you and Katy," and then he slipped away again. But of course the most wonderful person in the whole world, as far as Mickey was concerned, was his darling wife Anne who looked after him with such love and devotion to the very end.

In this speech, which I was up writing in the early hours, I think I've probably got the balance wrong. I've spent too much time talking about my father's political achievements and moral bravery, and not enough about his kindness or his sense of humour, or even about his love for the black dog called Dudley that stalked him in the final decade of his life, as can be seen from the photograph on the back page of the Order of Service. I've suggested that Mickey was an exceptional politician because he was prepared to sacrifice his career on a matter of principle. But that isn't really what I wanted to say. What I wanted to say was just that I loved him very much. We all did. *Joi Bangla!*