

HENRY PLUMB: THE INSTINCTIVE POLITICIAN

What makes Henry such a successful politician? The question continually formed itself in my mind during two decades of working with Henry. In a world where politicians are unpopular and at a time when British Conservatives were regarded with suspicion by a majority of the Continent, Henry remains the only British politician and the only Conservative to have been elected President of the European Parliament. Surely there must be lessons for lesser mortals in Henry's rise and rise?

Some of Henry's assets are very clear. He has an easy charm and an effortless approachability. He is at ease with monarchs and peasants. He has a commanding physical presence but one that is not threatening. He has stamina. Margaret Thatcher told me in 1975, when she swept into my office at the Britain in Europe Referendum Campaign, to discover an exhausted 25 year old. "British politics selects on the basis of stamina. Either you have it, dearie, or you don't". Henry has bags of it. He also has the ability to take infinite pains over those things which matter to him, while delegating to the point of recklessness on subjects in which he has no interest. Writing speeches for Henry must have been an uncertain business for those who worked for him. On some subjects he would read out anything you put in front of him; while on others he had the eye of a hawk for the tiniest misplaced nuance or bogus statistic.

For two years after the European Parliament election disaster of 1994, which reduced the British Conservative delegation from 36 members to 18, I shared the leadership of the Conservative MEPs with Henry. Henry had the title of Leader and I had the title of Chairman. Due to some overly clever footwork by Christopher Prout, who had previously led the Conservative MEPs, we inherited a condominium in which the Chairman made all the appointments and exercised executive power. Henry instantly developed the script for a successful double act, in which he cast me as the hard working intellectual and himself as the laid back father figure, returning in a crisis to a job he'd previously held before he became President of Parliament. Our joint period of office covered some of the most bloodstained years of the Conservative Party's civil war on Europe, when ideologues tore John Major and Tory Party apart. It also coincided with the growing horror of BSE. Henry never faltered and never panicked. He seemed to have eyes in the back of his head, but was never paranoid. South American Shaman say that the supreme gift when travelling in the Nagual, the spirit world, is "to know what to do when you don't know what to do". Henry trusts his instincts. More politicians would be more successful and politics would have a better reputation if more people shared Henry's gift.

I instinctively feel that this retained ability to trust your intuition goes right back to Henry's undisturbed roots in the politics of agriculture. An understanding of the land and of its imperatives shapes a certain kind of non-ideological Burkean Conservative. It gives a sense of time and place. It makes the possible paramount and guards against unseemly ambition. Of course there are other Conservative politicians who feel comfortable in wellies. Michael Heseltine has his arboretum and Ken Baker compulsively plants and clips his Surrey hedges. However for them and for most other prominent politicians the lessons of the land have been drummed out of them by formal education, polished by brilliance of intellect. Henry is simultaneously proud

of his success despite a lack of formal higher education and his Chancellorship of the University of Coventry.

Henry likes to succeed. He likes to deliver real change in the real world without expressing this through the traditional route of a ministerial career. He has been a parliamentarian, a lobbyist, a fixer, a networker of global reach, yet he never appeared to play overtly by the rules of simple political ambition.

The experience of leading the NFU was clearly formative. The need to balance different sectoral interests and yet to command 80% support each year imprinted on Henry the many uses of ambiguity in politics. Both in the NFU and COPA at the European level, Henry knew in his bones that being right was not enough. His talent for making friends was less important than his talent for not making enemies. Henry understands, what many more intellectual politicians never learn, that there is always tomorrow. His humour and his charm are used to win many a point, while making a minimum of enemies.

All these gifts could have gone to waste without an instinctive sense of when courage was necessary and ruthlessness essential. The coup d'etat against Jim Scott-Hopkins which won Henry the leadership of the Conservative MEPs in the second half of the first European Parliament was a model of political destruction, organised by David Currie. I did not vote for Henry, but I admired the steel. Similarly, the seizure of the European Parliament Presidency when Henry, the Blue Knight, defeated Enrique Baron Crespo, the Red Baron, was presented at the time as a tactical retreat on bull fighting to secure Spanish Conservative votes. In fact as we know from Henry's autobiography, the electoral arithmetic turned on the votes of Jean-Marie Le Pen. Henry had the courage to secure Le Pen's votes, when knowledge of the meeting in Paris might well have destroyed his campaign. At the height of the BSE crisis the British Government machine effectively closed down. Neither Henry nor I could get guidance from Number 10, from the Ministry of Agriculture or from Conservative Central Office. For four days in Brussels we made up British policy as we went along, with Henry using every trick of the trade and calling in every old debt to defend the British interest.

Henry however was and is a great deal more than a successful defender of the status quo. When agricultural reality changed, so did Henry. The arch defender of the primary producer evolved into the proponent of genuine CAP reform. The great agriculturist recognised the hypocrisy of dumping Europe's food surpluses on Africa much earlier than his peers. In his last job in the European Parliament, as Co-Chairman of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Parliamentary Assembly, he became a development expert of world class and global compassion. To be friends with everybody is pleasant. To use those friendships to bring about policy change is the mark of a serious politician.

Of necessity Henry's career is probably unique, but its lessons have wider applicability. If you want to change the world, stay centred in reality, strategically wise and tactically fleet of foot. If you are honest with yourself and trust your instincts, the complexities of the political world may just dissolve in the face of your determination.