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R. A. Butler: Member of Parliament for Saffron Walden, 1929-1964

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Rab Butler in the market square after being elected MP in May 1929, succeeding Sir William Foot Mitchell. ©Saffron Walden Town Library.

With those initials it was inevitable that he would be known as Rab. Richard Austen Butler was born in India to a family steeped in colonial administration and with a formidable educational background.

Like so many before and after him Rab developed an interest in politics at Cambridge University. Debating in the Cambridge Union, of which he became President, is useful groundwork for anyone who is prepared to face election hustings and ultimately the House of Commons. Nevertheless Rab did not appear to leave university with any kind of relentless ambition to be a Member of Parliament. It seemed to happen in

the most relaxed of ways. He was travelling abroad when a tip-off from a family member advised him that a vacancy would be occurring in the Saffron Walden constituency. Sir William Foot Mitchell had announced that he would be retiring when the next General Election occurred. Rab did not exactly rush home. However, once he was back, he was interviewed by the Saffron Walden Conservative Association. He obviously gave a good impression to back up the recommendations which had preceded him. He was selected as prospective parliamentary candidate without anyone else being seen. It would not be so easy for his successors!

Rab's belief was that the first two years in a constituency were crucial. Get off on the right footing and you would have to be very careless indeed to lose the goodwill of your constituents, but make a poor start and you would struggle to recover. Whether this approach was born of Rab's own instinct or instilled in him by his superlative constituency agent is unclear. What is known is that Rab soon acquired the reputation of being an assiduous constituency M.P. And he never lost it.

This record is all the more remarkable in light of Rab's rapid immersion in national politics, the gravitational pull of London which that brings and his raising of a young family in the wake of his marriage to Sydney Courtauld in 1926.

Part of the explanation lies in the different tempo of politics in those early days of Rab's tenure of the seat. Voters were still electing someone to represent them at Westminster. The emphasis was very much on that function and less on the need to be ever present in the constituency. In December 1938 the Clerk of Dunmow Rural Council wrote to thank Rab for his apologies for not being able to attend the opening of the new water scheme saying 'the committee realises however that your (ministerial) duties are of paramount importance'. A sitting Member was unlikely to attract criticism for his absence from local events. Conversely his presence, the more important in national politics he became, made all the greater impression. This was perhaps reinforced by the nature of constituency events. Large-scale functions, even if fewer in number, attracted more attention. People came out to public meetings on a scale which is rare in modern times.

The volume of mail was much lower than now, but there was no less variety. A disgruntled farmer wrote to Rab to refute a speech given by Earl de la Warr in Halstead on the introduction of unemployment insurance. A ground keeper in Tilty Green protested to Rab that members of the landowner's farm were 'over running the shooting season'. After a series of Roman Catholic Mission meetings in Saffron Walden Rab was requested to introduce a bill for the inspection of convents and monasteries. The birth of Rab's third son in 1936 was greeted with a

suggestion from Miss Rose Hockley of Debden Road, Saffron Walden, that he should be named Baldwin, adding 'may he be a future Conservative M.P., Mr. Baldwin Butler'. He was in fact christened James and chose a different career!

Having spent time in the constituency to good effect between his selection in 1927 and the General Election of 1929, Rab established himself in Saffron Walden with a majority of 4,919 in what was not a good year for his party. With that foundation laid Rab enjoyed majorities of 16,033 and 10,036 in the two remaining pre-war elections. The closest he ever came to being threatened after that was in the Labour landslide of 1945. The much respected, long-serving Mayor of Saffron Walden, Stanley Wilson narrowed the gap to 1,158. Although the five general elections which Rab subsequently fought in Saffron Walden never yielded a majority in excess of 6,782 no-one seriously regarded the seat as marginal. All Rab's victories, be it noted, were against Labour. The political make-up of the constituency would change significantly for his successors.

The raw figures do not tell the whole story. Throughout his 36-year spell as Member for Saffron Walden, he was served by two of the astutest and most effective agents in the history of the Conservative Party: first B.T. Powell and then Kenneth Baker. To some extent they were his gate-keepers and in other respects, his publicists. They maintained a formidable voluntary party structure throughout the constituency. Rab was apprised of everything that moved in the organisation and his grip was solid. Likewise no issue escaped his attention. It was a very impressive operation and was, of course, a necessary counterweight to an M.P. whose increasingly onerous responsibilities at national and international levels impacted on the time he could spend in the constituency.

In the politics of those days it was seen as perfectly natural that the Member of Parliament could have two homes. Rab fulfilled an early promise to acquire a constituency home in which to live. He and Sydney moved into Church Hall, Broxted, which is known today as the Whitehall Hotel and Conference Centre. In 1934 they moved across the constituency to Stanstead Hall, Halstead, which would remain the family home until he left the House of Commons in 1965 to become the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. After a few years living in flats the Butlers' London home became 3 Smith Square at the heart of Westminster. By that time Rab was at the heart of Westminster in other respects as well.

There is no complete record of how time was shared between Essex and London. The family, which comprised three sons in the pre-war period (Sarah, Rab's daughter was born in 1944) probably saw more of Stanstead Hall than 3 Smith Square. Rab took satisfaction from being

seen as a country squire. Photographs abound of him being in the company of farmers and he was a regular visitor to the livestock markets which once existed in the constituency. Rab did not hunt, but he enjoyed shooting parties which were a feature of life at his country home.

Saffron Walden above all was a rural constituency. Even today a bird's eye view reveals the territory as predominantly farming land. Livestock farming may have declined over the years, but crop growing was always vital. Rab never consciously neglected the importance of agriculture even though, like his successors, he was not immune from farmers' complaints. It was hardly surprising therefore that the occasion for his maiden speech in the House of Commons on 30 October 1929 was a debate on the dumping of German wheat. Describing his constituency as 'probably one of the most arable districts in England', he said that it had been 'extraordinarily struck by the unfairness of the competition of bounty-fed German cereals'. He spoke up for the working classes of the district, making it clear that he bracketed both the workers and the farmers in that category.

As a maiden speech it did not conform to the template which has become established in more recent years. His predecessor was not mentioned at all. Today it would be obligatory to pay tribute to the previous Member whoever he/she had been and to whichever party he had belonged. Nor was there any descriptive passage about the character of the constituency as a whole. But Rab's choice of subject simply emphasised that agriculture was the heart-beat of the area he represented. There was no Stansted Airport then!

A sample of the speeches made and questions put thereafter by the M.P. for Saffron Walden continued to show Rab's concerns for agriculture and for the welfare of agricultural workers. He persisted in asking Ministers for information about the level of unemployment in his constituency and it was clear that this was mostly associated with agriculture. In June 1932 he was telling the House that he found 'in North Essex a position which is increasingly serious and very grave'. He painted a dire picture of the losses being suffered by farmers at the time – a phenomenon not unique in the history of East Anglia.

Rab's speech of June 1932 provided an interesting insight into the wholly different conduct of political life in that decade. More than once he mentioned that he had been absent for four or five months 'owing to work in India' and that 'in the few weeks since I have been back, I have taken the trouble to ascertain the facts from those concerned'. I doubt whether an M.P. today could contemplate such a period of absence from constituency duty or being so frank about it prior to departure and on his return. Times have indeed changed.

However, it is not what goes on the record in terms of speeches and questions which solely determine how successful a new, young M.P. will be in establishing a parliamentary career. Rab got off to a flying start by being taken under the wing of Sir Samuel Hoare (Secretary of State for Air) even before the 1929 election. During the next two years he was loyal to the Conservative Leader, Stanley Baldwin, out of conviction rather than opportunism. Yet when Sir Samuel Hoare became Secretary of State for India on the formation of the National Government Rab was invited to become his Parliamentary Private Secretary, traditionally the first rung of the promotion ladder. It was a post he held for a negligible length of time, because after the 1931 election had taken place he was tempted to join a constitutional body given a remit to tour India in search of progress towards a political settlement. In view of his family's strong connections with India this was an understandable move. If his absence did him no harm in his constituency, nor did it interrupt for long his career at Westminster. He re-joined Sir Samuel Hoare as P.P.S. and when fortuitously a vacancy occurred in the Government Rab was appointed Under-Secretary at the India Office. Thus he was a minister whilst still under thirty. Of the next 33 years he was out of office for less than seven.

The India Bill gave Rab one of his greatest parliamentary trials and his first House of Commons success, publicly acknowledged by Winston Churchill, who had been the Government's chief protagonist throughout. It was also the cause of perhaps the one time when his relations with the Saffron Walden Conservative Association were strained. India gave rise to great passions in the party with those who were loyal to empire having difficulty with their young M.P. piloting through a measure of self-government for the sub-continent. The disaffection of his supporters in Saffron Walden must have been temporary in light of his 10,000 majority in the 1935 General Election.

Further ministerial preferment had to wait longer than Rab would have wanted. Not until 1937 did he move from the India Office to the Ministry of Labour. This proved to be a short but moving experience. His first-hand witnessing of the depressed areas shaped his later politics. However, what happened next had a negative and, arguably, enduring effect on Rab's career. He was appointed by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain as Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office in the wake of Anthony Eden's resignation. Thus he became closely enmeshed with the appeasement policy towards the fascist dictators which was Chamberlain's dominating purpose.

The ever more demanding duties of office which Rab assumed during the thirties must have taken their toll in terms of his constituency and indeed family life. It should also be remembered that as a minister he could no

longer table questions or make speeches in the House of Commons about issues arising in Saffron Walden. The fact that he could not have been seen quite so often in the villages or chatting with farmers, was probably counter-balanced by the pride which local people felt in their young M.P. being given such recognition at national level. And, as a mark of his success in steering through the India Bill, the constituency was able to enjoy a visitation by Prime Minister Baldwin, who spoke at a fête which attracted 8,000 people. Rab's growing status was further enhanced by his appointment to the Privy Council in the New Year Honours of 1939 at the tender age of 36.

Rab's approach to politics was by now set. He was already in his generation classified as a modern Conservative, presaging the work he would do at a later date to revive the post war Conservative Party. He was also a pragmatist, linked forever with the expression, 'the art of the possible.' This could be said to have led him successively into one of his costliest mistakes and one of his lasting triumphs.

Rab had survived the upheaval in the Government which saw Churchill replace Chamberlain and continued to serve in the Foreign Office under Lord Halifax. Despite the bellicosity exuded by the new Prime Minister not everyone in the Government had given up on appeasement. As the real horrors of war were unleashed across Europe in the spring of 1940 there was understandable anxiety about what the blitzkrieg would do to Britain. The risk of invasion may have seemed too high a price to pay. On the day when France fell Rab by chance, not design, met with the Swedish Minister in London. No official record of the conversation was kept. The version which emerged was the message which the Swede sent back to Stockholm. It reported Rab as saying that compromise was still possible. In contemporary language this would have been described as distinctly off-message. Whilst Rab was excused at the time the indiscretion reached a wider public only many years later. A much smaller and influential circle of people was in the know and bore it in mind.

In 1941 Rab became the President of the Board of Education. In his own words he set out "to give the educational system of the country a real helping hand." There were many rocks his ship of reform had to navigate, not least the one which was Winston Churchill. Protracted negotiations and manoeuvring were required before a new education settlement could be reached. His dealings with the churches showed Rab's skills at their most diplomatic and cunning. Through a White Paper in 1943 to the Education Act of 1944 Rab showed courage and political acumen. The legislation was ground-breaking and laid the foundation for an educational system which is largely recognisable today.

After Churchill's cataclysmic defeat in the election of 1945 Rab was out of office, but not out of power within the party. He was given control of the Conservative Research Department. Together with a team of rising stars he re-fashioned the Conservative brand and championed the 'one nation' image. A series of charters were produced covering different aspects of national life. Rab sensed the direction which the party had to take. He was brilliant at understanding the mood of the people. The manifestos which the Conservatives put forward in 1950 and 1951 owed much to his craft. Both of them were winning documents.

The post-war years also offered some personal respite giving Rab an opportunity for a more normal pattern of existence. He was able to see his young family, his country home and his constituency with reliable frequency. For all that he had built a solid relationship with his electorate in the early years this had been put under strain by the demands of ever higher ministerial office and the dislocation of war. Politically Rab was doing enormously important work designed to get his party re-elected to government. Equally he could not afford to ignore his own re-election prospects. He had been run close by Stanley Wilson in 1945. Much work had to be done to re-construct the party organisation, a task in the capable hands of his agent, B.T. Powell, whilst Rab put himself about in the constituency. His election address in 1950 carried the words: 'his constituents of every shade of political opinion have learnt to turn to him in their troubles and he has never failed them'. This claim could fairly be said to have been upheld when his majority rose from 1,158 to 4,889 against the same Labour opponent.

There was never any further risk to his holding the seat. The voluntary party organisation once re-built was skilfully managed by B.T. Powell and his successor, Kenneth Baker. The demands of high office dominated Rab's remaining years as M.P. for Saffron Walden and placed limits on the time during which he could be on the ground in a constituency which covered 400 square miles and 100 villages. His agents would ensure that he spent that time well. Almost invariably Rab attended the pre-Christmas Fatstock Show in Saffron Walden. As President he would present the prizes at the luncheon which followed in the Town Hall. No part of the constituency felt neglected. At elections it was, of course, fever-pitch activity with Rab doing four meetings a night often supported by his son, Richard, to satisfy the then public appetite for live hustings.

Rab could not have been better sustained by the two great ladies he married. His beloved, Sydney, who was the mother of his four children and helpfully a highly capable stand-in at functions which Rab himself could not attend, died in 1954. Rab visibly suffered. However, his personal life revived when he formed a blossoming friendship with Mollie

Courtauld, herself widowed. They married in 1959 and Mollie was a devoted wife and conspicuous asset to him thereafter.

Still in essence a rural county constituency Saffron Walden had acquired some centres of industrial and commercial activity outside agriculture, notably the opening of Acrow's Coronation Works. This was necessarily so as farming had become much less labour intensive than of old. However, by the late 1950's a new spectre had arisen: Stansted Airport. The first battles of Stansted were fought (successfully) on Rab's watch. As he put it himself (with a degree of immodesty) at his adoption meeting ahead of the 1964 General Election: 'There is no one better than me to put your case'. So, for a while, it proved. His successors faced a more uphill task.

It took 18 months beyond 1950 for the Conservatives to obtain a national majority. Rab then became Chancellor of the Exchequer in difficult economic times, but with a country tiring of post-war austerity. In his book, *The Treasury under the Tories*, the distinguished commentator, Sam Brittan, offered the theory that those who were the least financial experts made the best chancellors. He put Rab at the top of the list! Looking back, it is hard to deny that his tenure at the Treasury helped to create the basis on which the Conservative Party stayed in government for 13 years.

During those years Rab was a reforming Home Secretary, a masterly Leader of the House of Commons and finally a heavyweight Foreign Secretary. He also had a spell as Chairman of the Conservative Party. Why then did this hugely talented man of vast experience in government with an extraordinary understanding of the public mood fail to become the leader of his party and Prime Minister?

The first opportunity came with the resignation of Anthony Eden in the wake of the Suez fiasco. The Conservative Party was painfully bruised by this episode. It was felt by many of his colleagues that Rab's attitude throughout had been ambivalent. Perhaps this revived memories of his identification with the appeasement lobby in the 1930s. Rab had not been at the forefront of the flag-wavers around Eden and nor had he resigned. Harold Macmillan by contrast had been enthusiastic for action to seize back the Suez Canal and had then led the retreat once the extent of American displeasure had been recognised. Despite what might have seemed cynical calculation on Macmillan's part his ebullience was felt to be more what the Conservative Party needed if it was to dig itself out of a very deep hole. It might well have been right – then.

But the second time? 1963 was another bad year for the Conservative Party. The Macmillan resignation was a bombshell. Coming in the middle of the party's conference in Blackpool it was a disaster in the sense that

the opportunity for calm reflection went out of the window. These were not the best circumstances for Rab's virtues to come to the fore. It has to be remembered that those were the days when no actual election for leader took place even within the confined limits of the Conservative Parliamentary Party. Yet it is difficult to believe that, if Conservative M.P.'s had been left to reason among themselves quietly and discreetly at Westminster, events would have evolved as they did.

Rab was urged by some of his closest supporters to shipwreck the succession of Lord Home. He put the party's interest before his personal ambition and refused to play a game of such high stakes. The story of those weeks in 1963 has been told and re-told, but it struck many observers in the year which followed that, if the Conservative Party under Sir Alec Douglas-Home lost the 1964 General Election by four seats, it would surely have had a better chance of winning under Rab's leadership. The contest between Harold Wilson and Rab would be likely to have played very differently. But that is one of the great might-have-beens of British political history.

In 1964 Rab was out of office and by then a declining influence in the defeated Conservative Party. Within weeks came the offer to be appointed Master of Trinity and the formal end of his relationship with the Saffron Walden constituency. But in a way it was not the end. The bond which had been forged over almost four decades was strong and enduring. Memories of 'Mr. Butler' remained in the hearts and minds of his constituents. His successors know that well. Whenever they were introduced as the Member for Saffron Walden the response would be: 'That was Rab's constituency, wasn't it?' In many respects it still is.

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