Former Cabinet Secretary Lord Wilson Interview with Anthony Seldon
Friday 2nd November 2012 at 10 Downing Street

Key
LW: Lord Wilson
AS: Anthony Seldon

AS: Lord Wilson, first of all thank you very much indeed for agreeing to be interviewed. And your distinguished career in the civil service culminated with this highest post of all of Cabinet Secretary. And a difficult question first: what was your most difficult moment in your tenure?

LW: It's a difficult choice to make because there are quite a lot of competing events which were not easy. I think of 9/11 for instance which was a very difficult moment. I remember in my room around the corner in the Cabinet Office ringing up all the people we needed to mobilise to help deal with contingency in London. Watching in real time what was happening on television, I'm thinking this is an absolute nightmare. I think that probably was the most difficult, but there are a lot of other events that compete for the title. The Foot and Mouth disease, when it was clearly going very badly wrong in March 2001, and Mr. Blair called me down first thing and said, 'I want you to take control and to have a meeting of COBRA and to get this sorted out,' and it was not easy. We had to call in the army and it was a meeting where sixty people turned up all with complaints and very few of them with solutions, so that was a difficult moment. The fuel protest when four and a half, sorry when less than a hundred people with no organisation except mobile phones came as close to anything to bringing the economy to a complete halt in four and a half working days. That was a pretty difficult moment. The truth is, any Cabinet Secretary will tell you, there is a flow of events, of one sort or another, all of which challenge for the title of the most difficult moment.

AS: And taking 9/11, the Prime Minister wasn't in London when the planes hit, is that right?

LW: That's entirely correct, the Prime Minister was in Brighton about to address the Trade Union Congress, TUC conference, about to go on the stage at three o'clock. I had been out at luncheon. When I got back in the car my driver said to me, 'someone's flown a plane into the World Trade Centre,' and we chatted about it and I said this must be an accident, a fearful accident. And then turned on the radio and it turned out another plane had just gone into the second World Trade Centre and I said, 'this was not an accident; this is a horrible event that's happening'. I spoke to Number Ten, Jeremy Heywood, and he said he'd just heard that the White House might be about to evacuate and he said, 'should we be evacuating Number Ten?' And I said, 'if you evacuate where do you go to?' And he said, 'I'm not sure.' And I said, 'well there's probably a rule of life that you don't evacuate until you know where you are going to.' I had this image of all the Number Ten staff with their laptops and briefcases standing on the pavement looking for somewhere to go. And luckily we didn't need to. But then we had to

ring Mr. Blair, we had a very rapid discussion… All the people who dealt with emergencies, for one reason or another, were out of London. We'd just set up the previous week a whole brand new unit for dealing with civil contingencies and they were up in Yorkshire bonding at Easingwold, and the people who ran the COBRA, the overseas defence secretariat, were on their way to Hertfordshire to bond with the SAS or someone and they were just outside Heathrow and I made them turn around. We had to mobilise a lot of people and we had to ring all of parliament, Buckingham Palace, the intelligence agencies. We drew up a list of everyone to ring and had to mobilise quite a big immediate plan of action - which we put to Mr. Blair rapidly on the phone - for banning aircraft over London because we had no idea if we were about to attacked. I kept looking out of the window across Horse Guards there looking for a plane about to approach and go through this room. So it was a scary moment.

AS: So what exactly is the role of Cabinet Secretary at the moment of grave national crises?

LW: Well generally the Cabinet Secretary is there to support the Prime Minister as chairman of the Cabinet and to support the Cabinet collectively in the running of government both in the policy-making, decision-making, ensuring they have the best decision-making material you can have in front of them when they come to decide important matters of national interest. But also then to ensure that the government machine and beyond know what has been decided and implemented and have the clear instructions that they need to be able to get on with the job. So you are there fundamentally to support good, strong, effective, collective government.

AS: And did the nature of the job change during your tenure?

LW: The job never remains the same. The civil service never remains the same. The civil service which I joined in 1966 was not the same as the civil service which I left behind in 2002. And the same is true of the jobs. I remember, I worked in the Cabinet Office in 1972 and I met Burke Trend a few times. The job that Burke Trend did as Cabinet Secretary was not the same job as I did as Cabinet Secretary. I remember giving a talk to a group about the job of Cabinet Secretary when I was in post and it was chaired at a gathering by John Hunt who had been predecessor but three. And I remember him saying to me at the end, 'the job was not the job that I did'. Partly because management had become important, and I mean management in the old civil service was something you delegated to the executive class. Under Mrs. Thatcher people suddenly began to see Permanent Secretaries and Senior Civil Servants as people with management responsibilities. And the head of the service when it was merged with the Cabinet Secretary job meant that that job became the key leadership post for ensuring that the service had a sense of direction and attached importance to proper management and proper delivery of results. And in my time I think Mr. Blair ratcheted up this requirement for delivery - which was his word - achieving results in a way that was quite new in terms of what Prime Ministers were looking for from the Cabinet Secretary.

AS: I remember Burke Trend saying to me back in the 1980s that this job is almost impossibly difficult because of the technical complexity of the material that comes up to him and the Prime Minister. Did it seem to you that the just utter complexity of material was almost overwhelming?

LW: You have to develop a skill of dealing with complex issues, even though you don't understand the detail but you understand the direction and the issues which need to be resolved at a high level. I remember one discussion on social security - I won't go into it, but believe me it was hideously complex - and yet when you boiled it down and listened to the problem it resolved itself into a number of issues which could be dealt with by senior officials or by ministers on the advice of officials. And that is true. The problem of the job is that the sheer wealth of issues which need to come to the centre to be resolved is great and it is part of the delight of it. You never know what you'll be dealing with next and the challenge of getting it right and getting the key pieces of information together in a form which ministers can absorb, assimilate and give a sensible decision on is hugely challenging but also very rewarding if you get it right.

AS: And did you look on your own appointment at a job description of what the Cabinet Secretary does and did you follow that or is it just much more amorphous?

LW: I came to the job having worked quite closely with Robert Armstrong and having worked with Robin Butler both in the Cabinet Secretariat where I'd worked for Mrs. Thatcher for three years but also as one of his Permanent Secretaries for five. So I knew roughly how Robin did the job and knew how Robert had done the job and I took up the reins with my own conception of what the job was and of course, as Harold Macmillan would say, 'events dear boy,' then dictate and you actually have your priorities, the things that you must do, which you wish to ensure that you don't lose sight of but you also have the day to day, the things that go up and down not necessarily forward which you have to attend to. And the routines, there is a rhythm to the life at the centre which is no doubt different under different Prime Ministers but there is always a rhythm to the week, a structure to the week, with PMQs in the middle and a meeting of Cabinet at its appointed time. Mr. Blair used to see me for an hour every Monday for an hour just to go through the current issues in government. And that kind of structure shapes your life and then within it you have all sorts of things that you have to fit in, like Permanent Secretaries on a Wednesday morning at ten o'clock. Those things I knew. What you don't know is what life will throw at the government and throw at you in the post.

AS: So there's the job of the management of the civil service which has changed probably quite a lot over the last thirty years…

LW: …Yes…

AS: …and then there's the job of organising Cabinet…

LW: …Yes…

AS: …and Cabinet meetings that probably changed less?

LW: Well the only thing that has really changed on that side of the business is the pressure of the media. Because if you are a good civil servant, a good bureaucrat - to use that word which is a word of praise you remember not condemnation - if you're a good bureaucrat you would like ministers to take their decisions on the basis of a best statement you can put together of the facts, of the options, the arguments, the costs, all the considerations and for them to have sufficient time to reflect and to discuss that you ensure that you've got proper collective involvement in the decision and then you take the decision and announce it. That's what your heart yearns for. But of course in an age when the media are bellowing through breaking news and through headlines in newspapers, what the issue is, governments have to be much speedier than that. And that changed, the pressure of media for answers, and for government action and announcements is one that is now with us to stay, and has been I think with us for a decade or more, or longer than that, 15, 20 years. But it's grown and it does alter the way in which you do business and the capacity of the machine to provide ministers with that kind of service. I'm out of touch now, I don't know how the machine, the government machine grapples with that problem but it is still to my mind a matter of public interest that ministers have long enough to equate themselves with the issues and to make sure they take their decisions on an informed basis rather than shooting from the hip. It is not in anyone's interest that they do that.

AS: And did the pressure of the 24 hours news media intensify during your four years in post as Cabinet Secretary?

LW: I can't objectively measure it but I think it did intensify and Alastair Campbell who was very astute I think in his own way and brilliant at handling the media had his own philosophy of how you dealt with it. And I used to debate with him the issues I'm talking to you about now and we had to compromise because he would want immediate decisions and I would say, 'this is actually a complex issue and if you get it wrong you're going to make things much worse for yourself.' And he had a view which he, and you should speak to him yourself, that it's sometimes a bit like a soap opera because what the media need is a story that goes on for four or five days. Each day they can cut and paste quite a lot of it but there's a twist which they give at the beginning. And the job of a good HR no, PR man, you know Director of Communications at Number Ten is to write, help the press write the next stage in the soap opera rather than letting them do it themselves because if you help them write it, it may be more congenial to the government.

AS: And the job of managing Cabinet: did Cabinets change in their importance in British Government significantly over your period either as Cabinet Secretary or more generally your acquaintance with the Cabinet Office's work?

LW: Yes is the answer. I think Mrs. Thatcher, I think there's been a tendency over a long period of time for the role of Cabinet to become more one of a weekly

meeting of a group of colleagues who are close together and who need to have a common vision and a common view and need to cohere than of a major, the top supreme decision taking body. But Mrs. Thatcher was very punctilious about using Cabinet and the cabinet committee system, the image she has of someone who drained the power away from it is not fair. And she was, if you said to her this is something that should go to LG committee or something she would say, 'of course, of course', and she'd accept your advice. And Cabinet itself was one which I used to minute all the domestic business in Cabinet in the late eighties and she would ensure that there was a proper discussion around the table, that people understood the issue, the arguments and there's a proper paper and she would sum up and it would be in the Cabinet minutes. I think under Mr. Blair particularly with the pressure of media and this conscious wish to, as it were, be on the front foot in dealing with public opinion. It was more Alastair Campbell's famous grid: it is what the big decisions that the government's going to have, what are the themes we wish to pursue this week, informing ministers what the themes were. But that's not wholly true, they did have discussion on issues like the legislative programme. Gordon Brown would do his presentation on the budget, at high speed I have to say, very hard for a minute taker! Dread to think what my notebooks will read like for those! And there were a number of other occasions when big issues were discussed and Northern Ireland would be discussed or foreign affairs would be discussed and there would a proper discussion of them. So I don't want to imply that there wasn't substantive discussion, but as the supreme place where decisions are taken I think it, the power shifted away from Cabinet over my, in my career.

AS: And the advice you gave to, what advice did your predecessor give you? And that of course was Robin Butler.

LW: Advice on what? On doing the job?

AS: Yes, did he, did he, did he, was there a formal transition process?

LW: My appointment was announced in July 1997 and after the summer break Robin was due to stand down at the end of December and through that autumn I had in my diary a series of regular meetings with Robin Butler and we went through the whole business of government in a number of meetings and in which he would say, 'you should be aware of this' or 'there has been a problem on that which people don't know about, but you ought perhaps to be aware of.' And he would say, 'my own view is… but it will be for you to decide.' You know, that joyous business of saying to your successor, 'it's your problem now'. We would… and I would look slightly paler as each meeting went by. But he, in terms of advice he gave me, whenever I asked for his opinion on things he was very generous in helping me. And I don't think there was advice on what is the role I think we both recognised that the role which was then Cabinet Secretary and head of the civil service covered a broad span and we both knew from our own experience that it was partly a question of pursuing your own priorities, the government's priorities and discussions of the Prime Minister but also ensuring that you were there for the government and for the Prime Minister whenever something needed attention. And it is, all the things I am saying are of course are

informed by the fact that the two roles were combined. The position now we have of Cabinet Secretary, and the head of the civil service separate, it's quite different, it's back, it's harking back to the old regime.

AS: Yes, with hindsight it appears that it was almost a job for a superhuman to combine both those.

LW: No, no, no.

AS: You managed it

LW: No we all managed it I think.

AS: Err…

LW: I don't think we were superhuman no.

AS: And did you…

LW: …Just mere mortals struggling with the challenges!

AS: With monumental challenges. Did it require a public face? And what was your view on that side of the job?

LW: I mean the traditional view of the Cabinet Secretary, the one, the view which I was brought up with taking, if you like, Burke Trend as my model but also Robert Armstrong and I think to quite a large degree Robin Butler was that you were not a public face. Indeed the view in the civil service for many, of much of my career was it's ministers that are the people who need the publicity and win it and you should not get in the way of ministers. And your job is to be the person who, if you think of it as a stage production, they're in the limelight and your role is to scuttle on the stage and move the furniture around in between the acts. And you don't develop your own public persona and indeed the civil service I think attracts people who don't particularly want to be in the public eye but who would prefer to be the people who give advice and provide a really excellent service to the people who are, who are accountable to the public through the, you know, the election and through the electoral system. But the press are hungry for entertainment, forgive me, but they are hungry for faces and for new stories and in my time as Cabinet Secretary I did find that I attracted a growing amount of comment. People don't remember it now. You only ever remember the publicity about yourself, no one else remembers the publicity about you. But there was a tendency to, for instance, to televise select committee hearings, even as a Permanent Secretary I found that happened. More than that the civil service clearly needed a lot more visible leadership than traditionally it had been giving. But I very much made it part of my job to go out, I used to do a hundred speeches a year or more to civil service audiences. So you needed to be visible to the civil service in a way that I think hadn't originally earlier on been needed. And there were occasions when the press would want to talk to you and would want to present you and I think the most striking recognition of that in my time was

when we did a, we drew up a civil service reform programme which Mr. Blair agreed we should, the civil service should propose its own reform programme and we drew up, we had a number of working groups and we had a conference at Sunningdale and every Permanent Secretary signed up to the reform programme and we, Mr. Blair and his colleagues collectively endorsed it, and we the Permanent Secretaries then presented it to the media. We did it in conference room C in the Cabinet Office. We had an enormous, amazing turnout of the press who couldn't believe this spectacle of Permanent Secretaries delivering publicly, announcing their own policies. We had every possible publication, no standing room, the place was absolutely jammed and it went down very well. So after that I think we crossed a kind of threshold where we were taking visible responsibility in the public eye in a way we hadn't done before.

AS: So the head of the civil service aspect of your combined job was much more giving to a public face than the Cabinet Secretary?

LW: Cabinet Secretary post, you didn't have a public face on at all because you are supporting the Cabinet and the Prime Minister's chairman of the Cabinet in implementing or devising, taking their decisions and implementing their policy. But primarily, formulating the decision-making. And that's something which is very much done. There has to be a private space in government. If anyone wants good government and I believe there is such a thing as good government and that some governments are successful in a way that others aren't. And governments do some things better than others. And if you want good government it is important that there's a space in which Cabinet Ministers and other ministers can debate and discuss and say silly things or try out and have disagreements, resolve them before they then face the world and present their decisions to the world and defend it. And that is the space protected by the Cabinet Secretary, where the Cabinet Secretary operates. And it's one which in interests of good government I think is one where the role is much more behind the scenes than in the public eye.

AS: So the notion of collective Cabinet responsibility still very much a desirable facet, quality of British Government?

LW: Of course! I'm never absolutely clear where we are with collective responsibility at the moment when but my orthodox view is that ministers should have a chance to influence decisions before they're taken, and the Cabinet committee system should be drawn up in a way which represents the full spread of spectrum of opinion in government. And that once, and that everyone should sign up to the structure of decision-taking but once a decision is taken everyone should assemble behind the decision and they should defend it or resign. If you can't live with the decision you shouldn't be part of the government. And that is sensible in our two party system where, or three party system, where you have fierce opposition it makes sense to have the government being coherent and it's good once you've had a decision that people mobolise behind it and try to make an effort. If they've got it right they need to be foursquare behind it and not still squabbling after the event.

AS: But, but coming under a great pressure with the media avid to find dissent, how did one get around that? I remember an earlier Cabinet Secretary describe to me how difficult it was to keep divisions out of the late evenings of later editions of the *Evening Standard* that day.

LW: Looking back it's not a problem. I can recollect episodes when people would brief against the decisions that had been taken, and there occasionally there'd be witch hunts and you never find out who did it because they never leave fingerprints. On the whole though I think in the Blair years when I was there and indeed certainly in the Thatcher years when I was in the Cabinet Office I don't believe it was, we had major problems of collective responsibility or with holding the line. People knew where the line was. The very fact that if they broke the ranks and talked against it afterwards, it became a matter of comment proves the rule.

AS: And that therefore speaks of the need to have secrecy in government…

LW: Privacy!

AS: …privacy and thirty year rules or a set period in which divisions are closed.

LW: You need to have a space where civil servants can give their advice and where people can have discussions and disagreements. I can remember all sorts of arguments in, say, the Thatcher government where people would try out ideas and then be encouraged by their colleagues to stop it. But it's important that they've had the chance to air it and it's important that they should and I think it's, you're more likely to get a good decision if there's a group of people, big enough group of people who are likely to raise all the points that could be raised, and where they can argue it out and come to a conclusion which is summed up and everyone assents to. You are more likely to have a good decision than if it's something in the public eye, if it's in the public eye you'll drive the arguments off paper into the corridors into in, into the sort of whatever, inner recesses and you'll drive it into small groups. And in small groups you tend to have fewer people able to contribute, you are less likely to get every argument and they'll be more likely that the small group consists of like minded people, so you won't have the challenge which you need to have for good decision taking. And I think you'll get less good government. You know, it's a choice.

AS: And does a Labour Cabinet feel differently to a Conservative Cabinet?

LW: Yes but it may just be personalities. And different periods. But it felt different in some ways. I mean Mrs. Thatcher was very, and it may be personalities, you know different generations. She was very formal. No one went into the cabinet room before she went into the cabinet room. Everyone hovered outside, no coffee or tea then. We all waited and then a buzzer would sound in the lobby downstairs and we'd all clear away from the two main entrances into the lobby and she would go into the room first. And then we, there would be a slightly unholy rush to get into the room after her. Because she would sit down, put her handbag down there, put the papers in front of her and be ready to start

the meeting while people were still getting through the door. And there were occasions when she would say, 'Well I think this is a terrible paper, I mean it's quite clear we shouldn't be doing this we should be x, y and z.' If you were the minute taker and you missed x, y and z or if you were the responsible minister and missed x, y and z… So, but that was the way she did it. And she was, and sometimes she was very formal I'm being slightly unfair but she was, she had, and she would call everyone Secretary of State and she would, and you'd give her an order in which she should invite people to speak. On occasions if she thought she was going to have trouble she'd sandwich, she'd ask for the people that were going to be difficult to be sandwiched between two heavyweights so they, as it were, sound as if they were isolated. And she would, she would manage the meeting and she would be very, she's got a stereotype which is not helpful in terms of history. She was much more interesting and subtle and much more cautious and much more unsure ever of winning than people attribute to her. But she was, that was her style. Come to Cabinet with Tony Blair, we'd have coffee and tea outside the room, the Cabinet doors would be open. People would saunter backwards and forwards they'd put their papers, you'd still have a seating plan. People would put their papers on and go do business in the corners of the room. And Tony Blair would be having a bilateral with John Prescott in his study below here and would sort of saunter in eating an apple in his shirtsleeves. I remember watching for the first time and thinking, 'this is a different generation'. This is, this is Prime Minister's **(INDECIPHERABLE 28:18)** this is… I don't know, yes.

AS: And the Cabinet Secretary always on the Prime Minister's right?

LW: Always, yes. The Prime Minister sits there. My first morning when I was head of the economic secretariat I had a half hour handover with my predecessor and I said to him, 'any tips for dealing with the Prime Minister?', because she had a reputation. And he thought for a moment and he said, 'well you'll be sitting next to her and she will put her handbag down between her chair and yours and you'll be sitting down after her. Don't get the legs of your chair mixed up with the straps of her handbag because if you do she, at the end of the meeting, she likes to reach down and pick up her handbag and say, "We've got to get on with business" and if you spoil the exit because you have to unwrap it from your chair she really won't like it!'

AS: Important governmental matters!

LW: Yes these are all small things, but they add colour.

AS: No they say a lot about people. And with Tony Blair, does the Cabinet Secretary ever make interjections?

LW: I've always taken the view that you don't. You're not elected, you're not a minister. You're there to serve them but you're not there to express a view. And I don't think, I can't, I mean there will be people who rush forward and say I got it wrong. I don't recall saying anything unless it was a very strictly sense, you know, are we meeting next week on this? And you'd say yes or might say

something briefly. But on the whole you'd not use your voice. In cabinet committees or other meetings Mr. Blair would occasionally appeal to me to say something and I would occasionally do that. But on the whole I did my, I leant very heavily against it. Because you're not a minister, you're not elected, you're not accountable, you are there to support them. You are not there, as it were, as a major player and if you start intervening you're taking on a political role.

AS: And if you spot somebody on the other side of the table who wanted to speak would you pass notes to Mr. Blair?

LW: I'd pass notes, yes, absolutely. Yes, very much. There was one awful occasion with Mrs. Thatcher when someone was in the room and I had no idea who they were! I suddenly saw them in the meeting and I passed a note to the Prime Minister saying, 'Prime Minister, I'm not sure I know the person sitting at the far end' and she looked and she said to me, 'I don't know them either.' So we had to stop the meeting and they'd actually come to the wrong meeting and they very sweetly said, 'I came to see – I think - Brian Griffiths in the Policy Unit, but I thought this was so marvelous I'd stay!'

AS: Did Tony Blair enjoy Cabinets? Or would he expand or would he rather dread them? Or did it depend?

LW: I don't think he dreaded them but I don't think he relished them particularly. I think he, they were not his style. His style was one to one, terrific persuasive power or small groups. I think he, I don't think he particularly relished them, you'd have to ask him.

AS: Yes, the length, the coming down from two Cabinets a week to one, was that a significant change?

LW: Yes it was! We were all, in the seventies, you were always used to Cabinet meeting on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And more than that, you know, full morning meetings and if you were in private office - which I was in the sixties - and you had a minister at a Cabinet meeting, you would be very wary of having a lunch at one for them because Cabinet would run on and you'd spend your life on Tuesdays and Thursday ringing up and saying, 'I'm terribly sorry, so and so is going to be running late and they may not be with you until quarter to two.' So, that was one of, seen as the big decision-making body and they had an agenda as long as certainly an A4 piece and quite often two sides of A4. Well now there's only four headings, I don't know what it is now, but there were only very brief routine headings.

AS: And with your experience going back to the sixties including experience of being here in this building.

LW: I wasn't in this building. I was in the Board of Trade.

AS: So, with your experience of being in a Cabinet Minister's private office going back that far, what kind of advice would you give to a future Prime Minister?

LW: Just to correct the record, I was a Minister of State in the Board of Trade private office, and I saw quite a lot of Anthony Crosland's private office. What advice would I give…

AS: …to a future Prime Minister?

LW: Oh goodness! I mean one always remembers Mr. Macmillan's advice to his future Prime Ministers, to his successors, his advice was, 'never invade Afghanistan!' And I think that was quite a good bit of advice. Is that the sort of advice you had in mind?

AS: Yes!

LW: I mean, you know it'll do!

AS: Yes. Or what about, is there a similar domestic, not invasion of Afghanistan, but piece of port mantle advice you could give?

LW: Not as succinct as that. I think that, I still believe the role of Prime Minister is one of chairing meetings. You remember the role of Prime Minister scarcely exists in law. It's not, there are one or two statutes which refer to it but not in a major way. And it is, and the power, executive power is vested in the Secretaries of State. And the Prime Minister can advise Her Majesty the Queen on the exercise of the royal prerogative. Things like declaring war and suing for peace and **(INDECIPHERABLE: 34.06)** and all those other constitutional sayings. But, he, he or she fundamentally is there, exerts their power on the basis of advising the Crown on the appointment of ministers and on the ability to sum up meetings without taking a vote. It's quite important that you, your job as Prime Ministers is sense the mood of meeting but you don't, you're not required ever to take a vote on it. And that gives you considerable leeway because if you are strong enough, which occasionally Prime Ministers are, to sum up in a way which is completely contrary to what everyone else has said, but they are not going to challenge you, you can get away with quite a lot. So you're powerful, you're influential but you're not, you're not a formal, formally you're not the CEO. And I think Prime Ministers need to remember that they are there to chair the meeting and stand one, and to let their colleagues shine and to let their colleagues take the responsibility and though they are there to intervene and to take control when it requires the Prime Minister. But not to devalue the currency by trying to be in charge of everything and present themselves as being in charge of everything. If you do that, you'll lose status as Prime Minister. That's what I'd say to anyone.

AS: Sound Advice!

LW: Hmm, whether they'd listen of course is completely another matter!

AS: Course they'd listen! Of all the people you met in your period as Cabinet Secretary under Tony Blair - impossible question this - who was the one who personally intrigued you the most?

LW: In my time as Cabinet Secretary under Tony Blair?

AS: Yeah.

LW: Well I think Tony Blair himself is an endlessly intriguing, interesting character who presents himself - and at some level is - the most good natured, easygoing chap. I never saw him angry. And I've been more blunt with him I think than any Minister who'd been very direct with him. And he accepted that and didn't hold it against me. And so, but equally he's a man who with vision and a kind of sense of his own role in history who's driven to hurl himself at challenges which have defeated previous generations of politicians, making the Labour Party elected, or electable. Or Northern Ireland. Or Kosovo, which was kind of Balkan Northern Ireland. Or the whole Afghanistan or Sierra Leone or Iraq. His career was a whole succession of growing levels of challenge where he got growing confidence. That's a whole side of him which is quite different from the easygoing, good-natured chap, and then he could also be as ruthless as any Prime Minister has to be. You know the second time Peter Mandelson went he was absolutely like stone and it had to happen. All of those different people kind of co-existing within one person, those different sides to his personality, constantly interesting.

AS: And did you have a sense that you were dealing with somebody who was a real figure in history? Does it feel like that at the time when you are here at the heart of decision-making or is it all rather prosaic?

LW: Well you're conscious, it's very unusual to be Prime Minister, very few people get there. And the people who get there tend to be unusual, however much they may present themselves as someone who will buy you a pint in the bar. Though they are actually usually quite, quite, quite exceptional. So, you do, and it's the building! You know you are in the room where… Britain ran an Empire from the Cabinet Room. And people, generations of ministers and generations of civil servants have sat in that room, each of them in a different context and different time, different political circumstance wrestling with the nation, the challenges of the nation. And although those challenges change, the sense of being part of that history imbues it anyway.

AS: And are the people who rise to the top of the civil service as unusual as those who rise to the top of politics?

LW: No. Civil service is much more, is a selection process which goes on for a much longer period. And it will rule out the wholly exceptional character. I think we are much more middle of the road, orthodox, you know, serviceable people for any government.

AS: And that's not you being modest?

LW: No I think it's true.

AS: Ok. You still have to be pretty extraordinary… If we look back at these Cabinet Secretaries since the war: Bridges, Norman Brook, Burke Trend, a particular hero of yours, I mean they were pretty special people.

LW: Service attracted remarkably highly talented people and they had a huge degree of commitment. And they were, in their own way, all of them outstanding. I think the service did the country very well in bringing them forward.

AS: Is it still attracting such…

LW: I believe so.

AS: …distinguished…

LW: I think so.

AS: …people?

LW: I think absolutely. I think until recently as Master of Cambridge College we have sent, I do my best to recruit for the service and make sure people I think have got the temperament and the skills and to try interest them in applying. And a number of them I'm pleased to say have succeeded, they're terrific! I mean my goodness, they are really first class. The generation of people, the generation coming through now are a really excellent generation and they are very talented. They work very hard, they're full of interesting interests and other activities in their lives, I think we should be very proud of them.

AS: Now the final question is one that in a sense we've already covered which was the most memorable event or incident and you mentioned 9/11 and Foot and Mouth and the fuel problems. Are there any other events, incidents that happened while you were Cabinet Secretary that we haven't covered, or anything else you would like to say about any of those?

LW: Oh there's so much jostling. Can I give you two incidents…

AS: Of course.

LW: …over a long period of time, which are two sides of the same coin. I remember when I was in the Cabinet Office in the early seventies being at my desk. I had my feet on my desk to tell you the truth. And I was discussing a problem, quite a difficult problem with a colleague. And there was suddenly, there was a bang, an explosion at Whitehall and I can remember the windows rattling in their frames. And it was the first IRA mainland bomb outside the recruiting office just off in Whitehall Place just opposite the theatre. And that was a watershed moment for us because it was the beginning of the IRA problem becoming something on the mainland. And then I contrast that with an incident

that was as near as anything thirty years later, when I was talking to my private secretary in the room outside just in the Cabinet Office and looking out in the garden of Number Ten and Mr. Blair's children were playing skateboarding. They had a plank on a barrel and they were going up the plank and it would tip and go down the other side. And there was Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness watching them and then Gerry Adams saying, 'let me have a go,' and actually falling quite badly. However, but I just thought those two events were sort of bookends of the Northern Ireland story. I think for my generation Northern Ireland was one of the big things running through it, certainly through my time at the Home Office and then as Cabinet Secretary. And that's one of the things I remember.

AS: That's certainly a remarkably vivid sense of bookends of your career, with that defining episode in modern British history.