

LORD GILBERT (1927 - 2013)

An appreciation by Lord Faulkner of Worcester

"Shrewd, adroit, articulate in debate and penetrating in select committee questioning," was how *The Times'* obituarist described Lord Gilbert on 6 June.

His former boss at the Ministry of Defence, Lord Robertson said in the parliamentary journal *The House Magazine* Gilbert was "Never, ever a grey conformist on the greasy pole, he paraded his views and his convictions with force and without regard for political correctness."

The Guardian described him as "a brilliant, charismatic and controversial Labour politician whose contributions to public debate over nearly half a century at Westminster illuminated his life and times because of his eloquence, skilful political footwork and an exciting readiness to throw a firework when he felt like it."

John William Gilbert was born on 5 April 1927. His father was Stanley Gilbert, a civil servant, and his mother was the former Mary Davies. He came to Merchant Taylors' as an Entrance Scholar in Christmas Term, 1940, and was placed in Modern Division B. He was in Spenser House. There is little known about his school career – perhaps some of his contemporaries could fill in the gaps - but he passed his School Certificate and Higher Certificate Examinations and went on to St John's College Oxford where he read philosophy, politics and economics, and became secretary of the university Labour Club in 1950. After Oxford he took a PhD in international economics at New York University – he insisted on being called *Dr* Gilbert until the time he became a peer – and worked in banking in the US, and then qualified as an accountant in Canada.

Returning to Britain in the mid-1960s, he worked as an economist and accountant, and started looking for a parliamentary seat. In 1968 George Wigg, the MP for Dudley in the West Midlands resigned, and Gilbert was chosen as the candidate in this apparently safe Labour seat, but lost it on an astonishing swing of 21 per cent. Never one to give up, he remained the candidate and won Dudley back for Labour in 1970 by a majority of just 336. Boundary changes created a new seat of Dudley East in 1974, and he held that comfortably until his retirement from the Commons in 1997.

Gilbert's career in the Commons was not uneventful. Harold Wilson made him financial secretary at the Treasury, and then minister for transport in the Department for the Environment in 1975, where he spent an uncomfortable year defending the virulently anti-rail policies of his boss, Tony Crosland. He much preferred motor cars and owned variously an Aston Martin convertible and a

Mustang. In 1976 he was moved to the Ministry of Defence and became minister for procurement, and a Privy Counsellor in 1978.

After Labour's defeat in 1979, Gilbert left the front bench in protest at the party's move to the left and its adoption of an anti-nuclear defence policy. He was thought by some to be a natural recruit for the new SDP, but he dismissed the defectors in forthright terms and his strong anti Common Market views kept him in the Labour Party – he had campaigned for a "No" vote in the 1975 referendum. Various efforts were made in the 1980s to deselect him in Dudley, but he saw off his opponents with superior organisation.

Arguably Gilbert's most effective time in Parliament came after 1986 when he was a member of first the defence and then the trade and industry select committees – he was named "Inquisitor of the Year" by *The Spectator*. He played a highly successful part in both the Westland and Matrix Churchill enquiries.

By the time of the 1997 election Dr Gilbert was 70, and was prepared to retire from the Commons in exchange for a place in the Lords and the promise that he would return to his old job as a defence minister, where he could again demonstrate his support for the nuclear deterrent and euro-scepticism. The promise was kept and he served in that role until 1999.

Gilbert was twice married – first in 1950 to Hilary Kenworthy, daughter of Lord Strabolgi; this marriage was dissolved in 1954. He married again in 1963, to Jean Olive Ross-Skinner. He had two daughters from his first marriage, one of whom predeceased him.

Gilbert's last speech in the Lords was on 14 May, in the debate on the Queen's Speech. His body was wracked by cancer and the effects of chemotherapy, but his mind was as sharp and acerbic as ever. He himself described it as a "rant on transport", railing against the state of Heathrow airport, HS2, and the uselessness of roundabouts. He died on 2 June.

In 2005 I organised the first of what has now become the annual OMT parliamentary dinner. Lord Gilbert regularly attended, entertaining and occasionally shocking the head monitor – and perhaps the headmaster too – with the forthrightness of his right-wing views. As is reported elsewhere, this year's dinner was held a little over a month after his death. We started the meal with a toast to "absent friends".