



It was a tough week for home secretary Willie Whitelaw. One Tory paper had dubbed him "Wetlaw" and he faced gruelling questioning over his law and order policies. But — as the headline above shows — on Friday he won over even the hardline Tory central council. How does he do it? PETER DUNN reports

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Wily Willie

NOTHING more neatly demonstrates the style of Her Majesty's Secretary of State for the Home Department, Willie Whitelaw, than the Great Water Cannon Drama which followed last summer's street riots. Television viewers had seen him stumble through the rubble of Brixton, eyes rolling in that big concerned face. At the earliest opportunity, a Monday, he told a grim House of Commons that urgent consideration would be given to providing riot gear for the police ("Whitelaw Cracks Down"). He mentioned water cannon but would not be drawn on the subject.

Next weekend's newspapers turned nasty, reflecting the impatience of many local Tories who had written to their MPs asking when the Government would bring back the rope. "The following Monday," recalls one of Whitelaw's parliamentary critics, "he addressed the home affairs backbench committee. He really thumped the table and breathed fire. Most anxious that water cannon should be available... Hoped some police forces would take them up... Dye in the water... That sort of thing. You came away feeling that here was a man almost ready to go in the front line himself. Everyone said 'Good old Willie.'"

There has not been much talk since then about water cannon. But Whitelaw's deployment of them through the fevered imagination of hard-line Tories showed once more his consummate political skills. His confrontation last week with the party's home affairs group was another virtuoso performance. Huffing like the steam engine Mallard, named after his grandfather, a one-time chairman of the LNER, Whitelaw hauled himself up a great Shap of backbench hostility. Only when the steam had cleared did some of them realise that the home secretary had given them — what? — a vision of policemen "going in hard" on rioters, a sideswipe at the liberal West Country police chief John Alderson, and a prison building scheme which has been moving up the pipeline for two years.

"The Tough New Whitelaw" (as the Daily Mail called him afterwards) had won a reprieve without prejudicing a long-term strategy which will certainly offer no place to the gallows or the judicial lash.

It was vintage Whitelaw—a blend of bluff confrontation and calculated charm. In his rural Cumbrian constituency of Penrith and the Border, where he farms extensively, he would be known as a "flarch", one who gets his way by flattery and coaxing. At Westminster his talent for telling people what they want to hear without always giving them what they want has a cruder name: baffle-gab. The word is not used in a

derogatory sense. Although Whitelaw is an emotional man, whose twitching features express vivid changes of mood — bellowing laughter, tears and occasional bursts of quite terrifying rage—in Westminster his reputation, securely founded in Northern Ireland, is that of a conciliator who dislikes extremism in any form.

His critics regard him as an old-fashioned paternalist from the shires — Whitelaw, the absolute party loyalist, always voted for hanging until it was abolished — and question his commitment to penal reforms. Time will tell — as they say at the Home Office. Many there regard Whitelaw's attempts to tackle, with the judges, the problem of lighter sentencing and so reduce prison overcrowding as an act of some courage — the start of a debate which must accommodate a great deal of prejudice inside and outside parliament over the next decade.

His ability to further his reforms is the more feasible because of his loyalty towards the office of Leader. Although he neither knows nor cares much about the nuts and bolts of the economic squabbles in Cabinet, his soothing influence over wets and dries has made him one of the most trusted and possibly most powerful figures in Thatcher's government. Suggestions, mostly from Fleet Street, that Whitelaw is the target of a parliamentary "Willie Must Go" move, or that the Police Federation is out to get him because he will not support their campaign for capital punishment, underestimate his position in the Tory hierarchy.

"As far as I can tell you," says one Tory right-winger, "there has never been on the Tory back benches a Willie Must Go campaign. There's a lot of that outside parliament. One gets plenty of letters. But he's underpinned Margaret in some pretty difficult situations and I'd certainly not expect her to drop him now. For one thing it would be seen as repaying his loyalty in a very bad way."

As for the Police Federation, its leader Jim Jardine quickly rejects any anti-Whitelaw suggestions. Only last Thursday he dropped in to Whitelaw's office to explain there was nothing personal in the hanging campaign. "I've always known he didn't support capital punishment," says Jardine. "I get very angry at people trying to use our campaign as an attack on him. I'm a great admirer of his as I am of the Prime Minister."

"He's always supported the police and he's kept his promises about pay. He didn't hesitate to support us over protective equipment. Not only that, he visits far more police stations than any other home secretary and never forgets a face. He's a thorough gentleman and no coward. People sometimes forget he was a war hero."



WHITE LAW AND ORDER

WHITELAW'S war, and in particular one brief appalling tank duel, had a profound effect on his later conduct.

His father was gassed during the First World War and died in a flu epidemic in 1919 when Willie was seven months old. He had a happy though lonely childhood, cushioned against the depression by astute marriages of property, including 2,000 acres owned by the Baird iron and coal masters near Glasgow. He diverted his loneliness into golf, which he loved, at Winchester and Cambridge — where he took a third in law, a second in history and a golfing Blue.

As a Scots Guards tank officer in Normandy after the invasion he enjoyed the comradeship but was badly-shaken by a vicious skirmish near Caumont. His own squadron had been ordered to take and hold an exposed hill called Les Logues. Whitelaw returned from a briefing with his CO to see a German tank slip through an exposed flank and destroy 11 of the 16 British in five minutes. Whitelaw remembers watching a massive Churchill gun turret blown into the air; even more he remembers the next day when he helped the chaplain recover the bodies, many of them close friends.

Years later, when someone was teasing him about his liberal views, Whitelaw declared with sudden passion:

"Look, I'd had a safe and easy life. I'd never seen any members of the working class and therefore didn't like them very much. Then came the war and I saw how these desperately poor and disadvantaged people fought their guts out to save my England rather than theirs and I've never forgotten it."

IN 1943 Whitelaw married Cecilia Sprot, an ATS officer and friend from way back. He served in Palestine during the troubles and left the army for politics in 1947. Two unsuccessful attempts on working-class Clydeside taught him, he says, to talk very fast at meetings, never stop and never ask yourself rhetorical questions be-

cause some humourist in the audience always answers them. In 1955 an old army friend invited him to apply for the Penrith seat, which he still holds.

He was a whip when Ted Heath was chief whip and became chief whip himself in Opposition in 1964. "He had one very useful quality," says one Tory MP, "He looked much less intelligent than he really was."

Whitelaw still regards Heath as a friend, even though Heath's behaviour in the 1975 leadership election — when he refused to resign until voted out and Whitelaw, through loyalty, refused to stand against him as leader — almost certainly deprived Whitelaw of his one and only chance to become prime minister.

When Heath finally admitted defeat in the Tory leadership race, Whitelaw put in a half-hearted — and unsuccessful — challenge to Mrs Thatcher. When she triumphed, his instant moves to reconcile himself with the new Leader were entirely in character with his reputation as one of nature's second-in-commands.

At the Home Office — 200 years old this week — Whitelaw's splendidly old-fashioned paternalism has come under pressure from community groups in violent and troubled areas. He has proposed replacing the hated "sus" laws with a "stop and search" system that organisations like the National Council for Civil Liberties fear will cause even worse aggravation in black areas. Having failed to persuade the judiciary to accept his particular path to lighter sentences and a radical form of remission, he is anxious not to antagonise judges and magistrates against accepting a milder form of partial remission. "I'd like this recorded," he told me sharply last week. "They all accepted, from the Lord Chief Justice downwards, at once and completely, that if parliament decided to do it, they would honestly work it. Any decision [to change policy on remission proposals] was mine and mine alone."

Whitelaw will be 64 this summer and he looks to the political future with something akin to distaste. With the SDP/Liberal Alliance becoming stronger, he shudders at the thought of serving in a coalition cabinet with Cyril Smith.

"He feels he's a bit of an anachronism, politically speaking," says a one-time political opponent. "He believes in an England that's dead and it's a bloody great shame that it is, the England of Joe Gormley and Harold Macmillan. The Tories around him now are in a completely different tradition. They're not officers and gentlemen who wrote letters to widows."

Of his generation and type of Tory Whitelaw himself says simply: "We've done our best"