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Obituaries

Sir Brian Cubbon

Senior civil servant who became head of the Northern Ireland Office and eased Britain's entry into the EU

The British ambassador's armoured Jaguar had just turned out of the residency in a quiet Dublin suburb on July 21, 1976, when a 200lb IRA bomb hidden in the road exploded. The car was thrown into the air instantly killing the ambassador, Christopher Ewart-Biggs.

As Brian Cubbon, the new head of the Northern Ireland Office, was pulled from the wreckage badly injured he reportedly said to rescuers: "Would you please tell the Irish foreign minister that we may be a little late for our appointment?"

Cubbon himself remembered nothing after the blast until he found himself under arc lights on an operating table and a surgeon was cutting away his suit to deal with severe spinal injuries. In London he was reported to have died in the blast. His 25-year-old private secretary, Judith Cook, was killed in the explosion together with Ewart-Biggs. Later, Cubbon joked that the incident gave him the rare distinction of being one of the few whose death has been announced at meetings of both the Cabinet and fellow permanent secretaries.

Once his survival was confirmed, the prime minister James Callaghan

He felt the physical consequences of the blast as he got older

personally arranged for Cubbon's wife to be flown out to his bedside. Six months later Cubbon was back at work refusing to be moved to a quieter post or allow the attack to cloud his judgment, insisting on completing his tour of duty at the Northern Ireland Office in one of the bleakest periods of the Troubles.

Family and friends say he felt the physical consequences of the blast as he got older but he never complained and the Provisional IRA failed to halt the career of a distinguished civil servant who began work when Clement Attlee was still prime minister.

At the Cabinet Office, he had successfully led the team handling the plans of Edward Heath's government for Britain's entry into the Economic European Community, now part of the EU. The team was responsible for organising the 1975 referendum. Cubbon managed the relevant legislation so efficiently that it went through without a single amendment.

After completing his duties in Ireland in 1979, he became one of the longest serving heads of the Home Office, where he was permanent secretary until 1988.

A genial man, he treated his staff with



The wrecked car of Christopher Ewart-Biggs, the British ambassador to Ireland, who was killed by an IRA bomb in 1976. Cubbon, below, was travelling in the car with him and was badly injured; his private secretary also died in the explosion

respect but was always fully prepared to speak his mind. He said later: "There is inertia in all institutions and one of my tasks was to explode occasionally and see those in the office realise there has been a change of government and a change of home secretary."

Though he was a prime example of meritocracy and insisted that his team worked hard, he was not stuffy. Cubbon abandoned, for example, the tradition that when staff attended a meeting with the home secretary they entered the room by seniority with the permanent secretary first. Instead he always contrived to let others go first or would ensure he was already seated.

He worked with many well-known politicians of his time and later wrote: "We see them, warts and all. Often selfish, vain, ambitious, unreasonable and sometimes personally unpleasant; but at the same time conscientious, honourable and courageous. I would apply these last three adjectives to every minister I have worked with." His personal favourite was Willie Whitelaw.

Brian Crossland Cubbon was born in 1928 in Bury, Lancashire, the son of a primary schoolteacher; he was always proud of his northern roots. Cubbon won a scholarship to Bury Grammar School and then a scholarship to read classics at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1946. He began his National Service in the Royal Signals and

then moved to the Education Corps. In 1951 he joined the civil service and was soon marked out as a high-flyer. Cubbon began in the private office of the permanent secretary and later worked on penal policy before moving to the Cabinet Office.

He became, in 1968, the principal private secretary to Callaghan, who was then home secretary with responsibility for Northern Ireland. As trouble began to brew with a growing civil rights movement among the Catholic population, Cubbon was by Callaghan's side when he visited Ulster to take stock

His coat of arms featured two baboons — a pun on his name

of the situation. Later, as permanent secretary in Northern Ireland, Cubbon resisted army demands that the IRA should be treated as a military enemy (which would have given them a propaganda coup); he believed they should be treated as criminals subject to normal law.

In 1979, when he returned to the Home Office, other senior civil servants fretted about the difficulties of the end of the Labour government. Cubbon was clearcut and pragmatic, saying that civil servants should "take the politics of the time as you find them and get on with it". He suggested that the worriers were behaving like a naval captain blaming his difficulties on the sea (though he increasingly came to feel that ministers were becoming more interventionist and civil servants had less dominance over policy).

When he received his knighthood in 1977, he surprised the College of Heralds with an unusual coat of arms. The crest was surmounted by a Kent oast house — he had converted one on his farm — and supported by two baboons, one blue and one red, which was said to be a pun on his name.

He once managed to ruffle the feathers of Sir David McNee, the commissioner of the Metropolitan police: in 1983, when a burglar named Michael Fagan sneaked into Buckingham Palace and reached the Queen's bedroom, Cubbon forthrightly told McNee that he should resign. Outraged, the commissioner singled out Cubbon in his memoirs, describing his suggestion as "improper and impertinent".

By the late 1980s Cubbon was ready to leave the Home Office but still led an active life, helping to set up a company providing intelligence for businesses working abroad. He was also a member of the commission on the organisation of the Church of England in 1995.

He is survived by his wife Lorin, whom he married in 1956. They had three sons and a daughter: John is a lawyer for the UN; Mark is a client executive for IBM, the technology and consulting firm; Robert is a graphic designer; and Fenella is a finance and administration professional.

Cubbon could still be seen in Whitehall in his 80s and remained interested in government issues. Only a few weeks ago he attended a lecture at the Oxford and Cambridge club on the constitutional consequences of the general election.

Sir Brian Cubbon, senior civil servant, was born on April 9, 1928. He died of a heart attack on May 20, 2015, aged 87

Bob Burns

Drummer in the original Lynyrd Skynyrd line-up

Bob Burns's powerful drumming provided the backbeat to classic songs such as *Free Bird* and *Sweet Home Alabama*, which defined the virile, driving style that in the 1970s came to be known as "southern rock".

Burns was a founder member and key player during Lynyrd Skynyrd's most successful era, which came to a tragic end when the band's plane ran out of fuel and crashed in a Mississippi forest in 1977, killing the lead singer Ronnie Van Zant, the guitarist Steve Gaines and his sister and backing singer Cassie Gaines. Burns escaped the fatal accident, having suffered a different kind of crash of his own: he had left the group at the beginning of 1975 as the result of a breakdown, having become "overwhelmed by life on the road".

Lynyrd Skynyrd were noted hell-raisers and the rock'n'roll lifestyle did not sit well with Burns's fragile temperament, the result of bipolar disorder. But he remained part of the group's



Bob Burns
He claimed credit for the band's name, which was inspired by his gym coach, Leonard Skinner

extended family and reunited to perform with other surviving members when Lynyrd Skynyrd were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2006.

Asked to recall his favourite story of life on the road, he cited a bizarre ride in a limousine with his fellow drummer Keith Moon when Lynyrd Skynyrd were touring America with the Who in 1973. Moon had obtained a blow-up doll, dressed it provocatively and waved it out of the car window.

Robert Louis Burns was born in 1950 in Jacksonville, Florida, and met his future wife, Marsha, when they were teenagers (she predeceased him in 2011). He was inspired to start playing the drums when he saw the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964. The following year he bought a set of stolen drums ("I knew they were stolen but I made sure I got a receipt", he recalled) and formed a band called Me, You and Him, with the guitarist Gary Rossington and the bass player Larry Junstrom, rehearsing in his parents' garage.

When Van Zant knocked on the door and asked if the group needed a singer, Burns initially thought he had come looking for a fight. "He was a pretty notorious fighter, like a bounty hunter," he recalled. With the addition of Van Zant and Allen Collins, the band became the Noble Five.

By 1968 the line-up had expanded further and the following year they were christened Lynyrd Skynyrd, a distortion of the name of a school gym coach. Burns claimed credit: "We were thinking of names for the band and I started laughing my ass off and said 'Leonard Skinner'. They went 'Where?' And I said, 'No, for the name of the band' and they busted out laughing."

Bob Burns, drummer, was born on November 24, 1950. He died in a car accident on April 3, 2015, aged 64