SIR JOHN NOTT OBITUARY: SHARP-TONGUED DEFENCE SECRETARY

The defence secretary during the Falklands war who also made his mark in the City

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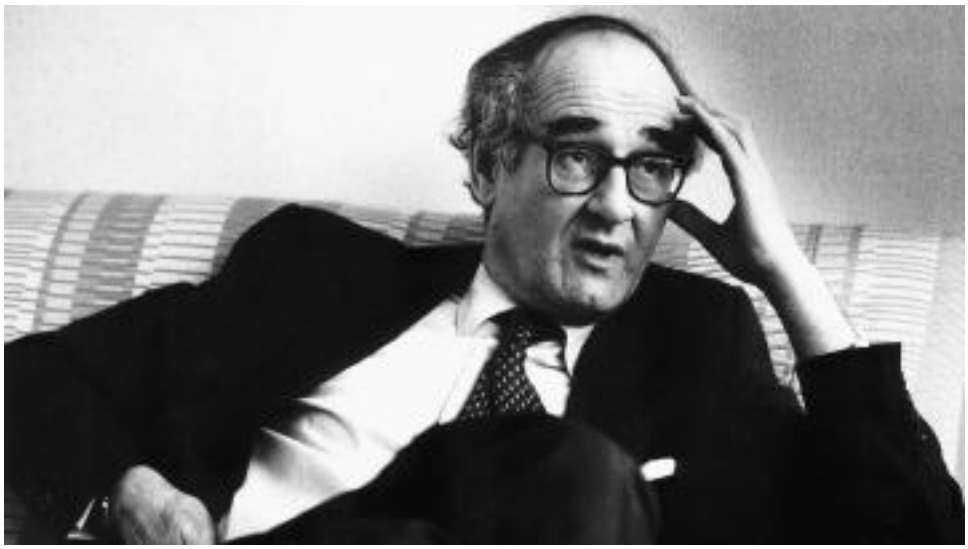


1 John Nott was appointed defence secretary in January 1981 ALAMY

When the Argentine forces invaded the Falklands on April 2, 1982, John Nott, the defence secretary, was taken by surprise. Although he had a reputation as a go-getter with a short fuse and a glint of mischief in his eyes, his speech the following day seeking to defend the government's position was poor, provoking calls for his resignation even from his own side. At the outset, he believed that once seized, the Falklands could not be recaptured. Perhaps his self-assurance was also undermined by a sense of guilt at having not long before insisted that the ice patrol ship Endurance, Britain's last naval vessel in the South Atlantic, should be withdrawn as part of the government's cost-cutting measures.

In the days after the Argentine invasion, Nott twice offered his resignation, but Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister, refused to accept it. By then the foreign secretary, Lord Carrington, was insisting that he should be the one to fall on his sword and he could not be persuaded to reverse his own decision to resign.

Nott, then, remained in post as a member of the five-man war cabinet, although Thatcher and the chief of the defence staff, Admiral Lewin, took the key decisions. When he asked to stand down again at the end of the war, Thatcher again refused his request because, she said, she wanted him to see through the review being prepared by Lord Franks into the origins of the conflict.

2 Nott and Rear Admiral Linley Middleton ALAMY

After that, Nott became best known for walking out in the middle of a live BBC television interview with the fearsome Sir Robin Day during the Conservative Party conference in October 1982. He did not much care to be interviewed. Day persistently asked about cuts to the navy budget and the criticisms of him by navy chiefs. He asked why assurances from Nott, “a transient, here today, gone tomorrow politician”, should be believed. Already irritated with the conference and wishing to return to his farm, Nott stood up, removed his microphone and walked away, saying: “I’m fed up with this interview. Really, it’s ridiculous.”

It was dramatic television. Day was crestfallen but Nott was always amused by the resulting publicity. When reprimanded afterwards by the chief whip, Michael Jopling, he replied: “You are just the chief whip and I do not think anyone is going to take much notice of your view.” With commendable irony, he entitled his memoirs *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* (2002).

For her part Thatcher simply could not fathom him. Her memoirs recalled him as “a mixture of gold, dross and mercury”. She never forgave his decision to leave politics at the age of 50.

John William Fredric Nott was born in 1932 in Bromley, the son of Phyllis and Richard, a wealthy rice broker whose family had been professional military men for generations. After Bradfield College he followed family tradition and was commissioned with the Gurkha Rifles and served in Malaya for three years during the Communist insurgency. He then went up to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1956 where he read economics and law. He already had a career in politics in mind.

3 Margaret Thatcher shared Nott's dislike of the BBC, the EU, Germans and the Foreign Office ALAMY

Although he became president of the Cambridge Union he found undergraduate life tedious compared with his earlier excitements. He enjoyed country sports more than studying and despite his best friend being the father of Nick Clegg he detested Liberals ("They'll say anything for a vote").

The main gain from his Cambridge time was marriage to Miloska, a striking Yugoslav ex-Communist. They first met at her engagement party to a Cambridge don and he told her after five minutes that he was going to marry her. Four days after his own proposal, two years later, they married. They had three children, Julian, a film composer who wrote the theme music to *Peppa Pig*, Sasha, wife of the former Conservative MP Hugo Swire, and William, who works in the oil industry.

Always confident, he wrote to Warburgs, the merchant bankers, expressing his admiration for the way that they had recently shaken up the City and advised that they now needed “a gentile like me” with the same robust approach. An intrigued Sir Siegmund Warburg took him on. Nott seized the opportunity to make money before entering politics. After six years he left richer but with a distaste for what he regarded as the arrogance of many bankers.

In 1966 he was elected as National Liberal and Conservative MP for St Ives, dropping the National Liberal label in 1974. The seat included the Isles of Scilly and a constituent was Harold Wilson, the Labour prime minister who in later years regularly tipped him as a future Tory leader. That was never realistic, for Nott had no following among MPs and did not cultivate one. Although an admirer of the free market economic views of Enoch Powell, Nott was one of only 17 Conservative MPs who voted against the Labour government’s decision in 1968 to remove the UK passports of the 200,000 Asians expelled from Kenya.

In 1972 he served as a junior minister at the Treasury in Edward Heath’s government. However, after the Tory general election defeat in 1974, he refused an offer to join the opposition front bench, having had grave misgivings about Heath’s policies. He backed Thatcher when she successfully challenged Heath for the leadership in 1975. She made him an economic spokesman, then spokesman on trade in December 1976. In government in 1979 she appointed him as minister for trade and industry, where he played a part in abolishing exchange controls. In January 1981 he moved to defence, replacing Francis Pym. Thatcher shared Nott’s dislike of the BBC, the EU, Germans and the Foreign Office, as well as a mutual impatience with diplomatic niceties.

4 Nott famously walked out in the middle of a BBC TV interview with Sir Robin Day – Jeremy Young

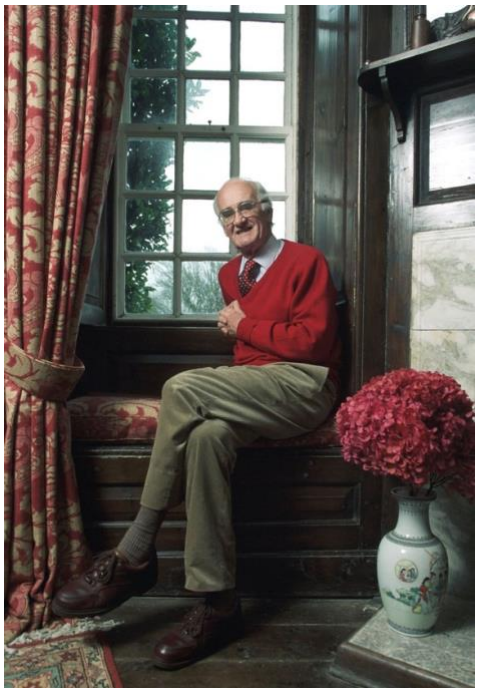
Nott’s view was that the defence budget was overstretched and the rising costs of sophisticated weapons necessitated a fundamental review. His appointment promised

a tough time for the defence chiefs. His commitment from the start to the Trident II missile system was so expensive that it was bound to strain the budgets for practically everything else. He decided the main burden would fall on the navy's surface fleet.

Throughout the review Nott was bitterly opposed by Sir Henry Leach, the first sea lord. When Keith Speed, the navy minister, went public with his opposition to the cuts Nott, ordered by Thatcher, phoned him when he was dining with Chinese diplomat and ordered him to resign. A robust manner could verge on rudeness. Speed (obituary, February 20, 2018) refused and it was left to Thatcher to dismiss him.

At first Thatcher liked Nott's irreverence, his mix of humour and controlled irascibility. However, relations between them became strained when he joined the cabinet critics of Sir Geoffrey Howe's demands in July 1981 for further cuts in spending. He later said that she treated him like a "deserted wife" but, because as a child, his nanny had forced cod liver oil down his throat, he had "good training" for dealing with her. In December 1981 Thatcher was taken aback when he told her that he planned to leave politics at the end of the parliament and wished to resign; he wanted to do other things, including making money. She would not hear of it and soon he was engulfed in the Falklands war.

When the Franks White Paper was published in 1983 it argued that the priorities which Nott had adopted before the invasion, such as cutting the surface fleet and buying Trident, were right. It also judged, however, that Nott's decision to withdraw Endurance had signalled to Argentina that Britain was no longer committed to defending the islands.



5 In retirement Nott put politics and business to one side and concentrated on his 200-acre farm in St Erth, Cornwall - REX

A few months before its publication, Nott had finally got his way and not only resigned from the cabinet but had announced that he intended to leave parliament at the next election. He was bitterly disappointed to be awarded only a KCB. Compared to the peerages that Thatcher bestowed on virtually all her former cabinet members, as well as many junior ministers, it was a matter of comment and seen as a mark of her disapproval. Yet he had been offered and refused a peerage only to regret it and request in vain if the offer could be repeated. In public he said he was glad not be in the Lords and did not need the £300 daily allowance. His former colleague Lord Jopling said: "I would have much enjoyed his companionship in the Lords, where his pointed comments would have been very well received."

He immediately joined the board of Lazard, the merchant bank. He became chairman and chief executive of its London operation in 1985, holding the post until 1990. His original intention had been to use the Lazard post to land a position in industry, but none materialised. In October 1987 he angered leading City figures when he refused to join the underwriters for the BP privatisation. A week later the stock market crashed and Lazard was the only big British bank not to incur significant losses from the sale. He took on the chairmanship of Etam and in 1992 the challenge of leading Hillsdown, the food conglomerate.

Nott was too proud and sensitive a man to survive happily the knocks, humiliations and harsh criticisms to which every politician, especially those in senior ministerial posts, inevitably is subject. With what his cabinet colleague John Biffen called a "quicksilver mind", he sometimes courted trouble with his sharp tongue and an offhand manner to colleagues. Yet he was a man of real capacity and certainly more than a merchant banker turned politician.

In retirement he put politics and business to one side and concentrated on his 200-acre farm in Cornwall. He and his wife spent much time restoring it and planting trees, and he enjoyed hunting, fishing and shooting.

In later life he also wrote books about his family and his farm. More controversial and provocative were his *Mr Wonderful Takes a Cruise: The Adventures of an Old Age Pensioner* (2004), followed ten years later by *Mr Wonderful Seeks Immortality: The Diary of a Restless Man*. The books described his sex fantasies about attractive women and many dislikes, particularly of the BBC, Old Etonians (although he sent his sons there), the EU (he voted for Brexit in 2016), Tory conferences, the City and what he called the horsey set, with "their ghastly noise and drunken hunt balls".

He seemed to relish the attention his memoirs attracted but when taxed with embarrassing his family with his indiscretions, he said: "Bugger this. I'm 82."

Sir John Nott KCB, politician, was born on February 1, 1932. He died on November 6, 2024, aged 92