

CHAPTER 12

The Fractious Fifties



Spedan at the council meeting on the day of his retirement, 22 September 1955, his seventieth birthday. Bernard Miller is standing on the right, behind the flowers.

What is the Chairman to do? As little as possible. That is the essence of the plan. In theory the Partnership should get along perfectly well without any Chairman.

SPEDAN LEWIS'S FIRST WORDS IN HIS CHAPTER ON
THE CHAIRMANSHIP, IN PARTNERSHIP FOR ALL, 1948

I think when history is written it will be said paradoxically that Spedan Lewis was the only man who could not have run his own constitution.

LAWRENCE NEAL, FROM A SPEECH AT THE PARTNERSHIP COUNCIL
DINNER FOLLOWING SPEDAN'S DEATH, SEPTEMBER 1963

The Gazette of 29 April 1950 contained a nine-page supplement explaining the details of the 'Final Settlement' and its 1929 forerunner, the articles of the constitution, together with some explanatory notes. Spedan explained that he'd originally intended to wait only about ten years from 1929 before finalising the settlement, but the war's disruption inevitably delayed it. It's expressed as an exchange of promises between Spedan and the Partners. He undertakes to hand over to them his controlling share, in exchange for a promise that the Partnership will continue to be conducted as he had laid down. Bernard Miller later summed up the two legal stages in simple terms:

The first settlement established that the profit belonged to the workers. The second settlement established that the property of the business belonged to the workers. A very important step forward.

The Succession

Spedan may have handed the business over in trust for the Partners, but he still saw himself as its monarch: 'It is a constitutional monarchy, with as much as seemed safe of democracy and correspondingly little of monarchy.' But he was still a king, one with far more powers than any since James II. He was one who expected to retire in five years time to become a wise old adviser, but a monarch nonetheless. And monarchs don't usually abdicate willingly. Who should succeed him? Of those outside his family, Michael Watkins had clearly been the preferred choice, but his illness had gradually worsened. Spedan was assiduous in finding ways to reduce the strain and keep him going part-time from the wartime home he'd found for him in Leckford, but in late November of 1950 he died. The news came in a telegram from Spedan as a Partnership council meeting was about to start. The meeting was abandoned, with members in shock and tears, one saying, 'This is the worst news the Partnership has ever had.' Any lingering hope Spedan had that Watkins might ever become well enough to take over the Chairmanship had vanished long before, and now he decided to announce his successor as Chairman.

The safe pair of hands of Bernard Miller was the obvious default option. Calm and unemotional, with a quick mind and a prodigious appetite for work, he had been a key player as director of estimates for ten years. He was now a committed Partnership man living down at Odney with his family, and would be fifty-one in 1955. Was he the man? Spedan still had one surviving son, Edward, and he'd become increasingly keen on the idea of starting him in the Partnership and encouraging him to take over in five years' time. After studying Law at Oxford, Edward went to work in the hardware department of the partial bomb site that was John Lewis. He was known to be uneasy about a job in his father's Partnership. Robert Owen, the man who as a lad had watched