

Leading Sacred Cows to Slaughter



Left to right, Sir Stuart Hampson, David Young, David Felwick and Brian O'Callaghan.

We need to do better ... Are we a sufficiently 'can do' organisation? Every time we find ourselves saying 'no' or 'can't do' we need to be asking why ... 'It's not Partnership' should not be an excuse for failing to pursue new ideas vigorously ... We all think the Partnership is special, but the competition does not share our enthusiasm.

STUART HAMPSON, ADDRESS TO THE PARTNERSHIP COUNCIL, MAY 1993

At the beginning of the decade, Waitrose had been losing direction. It had hung on to the sacred cows of outdated policy in the belief that its customers had accepted them because Waitrose was 'special' ... Fortunately many of its sacred cows had been slaughtered.

TREVOR ELLIOTT, A WAITROSE COUNCILLOR,
SPEAKING IN THE 'FLOTATION' DEBATE, SEPTEMBER 1999

Soon after the start of the 1980s, the Partnership's personnel director Stephen May had been concerned at the shortage of strong leadership candidates coming through in the next generation. May placed a small advert in the *Sunday Times* for 'senior learners'. The ad picked up three high-powered civil servants, Oxbridge graduates all in some way dissatisfied with the service, and a fourth arrived a few years later. An RAF officer in the middle of a promising career wrote in out of the blue and joined them. All five were prepared to shift to an unknown horse in mid-career stream, and all began with the usual selling floor immersion. They became the men who would steer the Partnership through the 1990s.

Learning on the Selling Floor

Stuart Hampson in fact had a retailing childhood, for his mother ran the little family draper's in Oldham. (His father had died when Stuart was four.) As a boy he'd gone with her to Manchester on buying visits. By the time he joined the Partnership he had worked for several government ministers of different political colour, from Roy Hattersley to John Biffen, and ended in Lord Rayner's team charged by Mrs Thatcher with improving the efficiency of the civil service. David Young had worked for three defence ministers, ending with William Rodgers, and finished that career as head of the MOD's budgetary division. He chose the Partnership in spite of being tempted by Rodgers' suggestion that he manage the new breakaway Social Democratic Party (SDP), started by the so-called Gang of Four, which included the ex-Partner Roy Jenkins. Ken Temple had started as a diplomat, worked for Nicholas Ridley in the 1979 Thatcher government, then found himself on diplomatic missions to the Falklands both before and after the war. Another new entrant with a Falklands link soon joined them. David Felwick was a career RAF officer whose last job had been chairing jointly with an army brigadier a staff college review of the Falklands War. He turned down an offer of a prestigious job as Serjeant-at-Arms at the House of Commons. Five years later Ian Alexander joined them from the DHSS, where he had been helping implement pension reforms – he'd come to the right place for those.

What these men had in common was that they were prepared to slog it out on the selling floor, and that they really enjoyed the work there. They speak of the expertise and kindness of their first department and section managers. Being on their feet selling all day, smiling heroically at awkward customers, they soon knew what it was like to be a Partnership foot soldier. Hampson started out selling pyjamas at John Lewis in Oxford Street. Young, Temple and Felwick began on the selling floor in Peter Jones. The brigadier who had just chaired that Falklands review with David Felwick was perplexed to find him up a ladder in the basement of Peter Jones unscrewing a chandelier. Some of the customers of Peter Jones in particular were notoriously demanding or