Kenneth Berrill

Kenneth Berrill (1920–2009) was an economist and economic historian of considerable ability. His strong analytical powers, combined with his frank way of speaking and his engaging personality led him to be chosen to fill an extraordinary range of high-level public and private roles. He was in turn bursar of two Cambridge colleges, chairman of the University Grants Committee, Chief Government economic adviser, head of the CPRS (Central Policy Review Staff), chairman of a major stockbroking firm and head of the Securities and Investment Board, to name only the more prominent of the positions held by him. But he ranged far more widely than this, in both his public and his personal life.

Kenneth Berrill was born in 1920. From a London grammar school he won a scholarship to University College, London, to read geography, but soon managed a transfer to the London School of Economics, which must have taken some nerve. There he concentrated on economic history and was a self-confident and prominent member of his undergraduate cohort. He spent some time in Cambridge, to which LSE had been evacuated in 1939, and then the rest of the war in REME (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers). He returned to Cambridge in 1945 with a senior studentship at Trinity College, where he pursued his economic and economic history studies.

In 1949 Kenneth became the economics fellow of St Catharine’s College and university lecturer in economics. He also became Bursar of St Catharine’s — not a rich college — and showed his bursarial abilities by adding considerably to the wealth of the college. Later he displayed his wide scope by establishing an African studies centre, attached to the Economics Faculty, and undertaking a range of government missions on the economic development of a number of countries, including British Guiana, the Cameroons and Turkey. He spent the year 1951-2 on a Rockefeller fellowship at Stanford and Harvard universities, and later, in 1962, was a visiting professor at MIT.

Kenneth was a successful teacher and lecturer, but preferred advisory work to pursuing a conventional academic career. He produced valuable reports on this advisory work, but published relatively little academically. He did however edit a major International Economic Association volume — Economic Development with Special Reference to East Asia, which was published in 1964.

Outside Cambridge Kenneth was a keen and experienced mountaineer, skier and sailor. His most dramatic mountaineering exploit was the first ascent, with three Swiss colleagues, of the 7,355 metre peak of Abi Gamin in the Himalayas in 1950. Kenneth wrote up this experience in the Climbers Club Journal in 1952.

At Cambridge Kenneth was a member of the so-called ‘Secret Seminar’, run by Richard Kahn and Joan Robinson. He so impressed Richard Kahn that Richard persuaded Kenneth to migrate in 1962 to King’s College as fellow and first Bursar. This was the position that had previously been held by Keynes. King’s of course was a much wealthier college than St Catharine’s, and Kenneth was as successful there as he had been at St Catharine’s. At both colleges their principal stockbroker was the firm of Vickers da Costa, and Kenneth began at that time a long and friendly association with this firm.

In 1967 Kenneth became special adviser to the Treasury on public expenditure issues, and two years later was plucked, rather unexpectedly, out of Cambridge to become chairman of the University Grants Committee, a position he held until 1973. This was a period of university expansion, and Kenneth held this tricky job with calm and impartiality. His success was marked by the grant of a knighthood in 1971, after two years only as chairman. In 1973 he left the UGC to become Chief Economic Adviser to the Treasury, but held this position only for a year before he succeeded Lord Rothschild as head of the Central Policy Review Staff. The CPRS had a wide remit, and its head had direct access to the prime minister. Kenneth created a good relationship with senior civil servants and assumed easily the role of Whitehall mandarin. He recruited a young and lively staff, and gave his habitual impartial advice on a range of policies to successive prime ministers — Wilson, Callaghan and Thatcher. The most controversial moment came in 1977, when the CPRS produced a report on the diplomatic service which proposed drastic cuts in overseas embassies and other Foreign Office activities. This caused a public uproar, and was strenuously opposed by David Owen, the new Foreign Secretary. Kenneth left the CPRS in 1980, and Mrs Thatcher, who had always been deeply suspicious of it, abolished it in 1983. Kenneth’s experience there was reflected in his Stamp Memorial Lecture of 1980, where he advocated the creation of a prime minister’s department.

After the CPRS Kenneth left government service to become chairman of Vickers da Costa, having first passed the stock exchange examination. This was a position he enjoyed, and in which he could display all his old bursarial expertise, but in 1985 (at the
age of 65) he was called on by government once again to become chairman of the newly created SIB (Securities and Investment Board), the forerunner of the Financial Services Authority. There he began to lay down rules for City activities following the Big Bang, and found much opposition in the City, which regarded him, unjustly, as an outsider. Kenneth ploughed on regardless, with his usual determination, and constructed a novel rulebook, but after three years he was replaced as chairman by an undoubted city insider, Sir David Walker.

Apart from the positions mentioned, Kenneth Berrill had a very wide range of other interests and positions. To name a few — he was an adviser to the World Bank and the OECD, a member of the UN Committee on Development Planning, a member of the governing council of Lloyds of London, adviser to the Royal College of Defence Studies, a governor of the Administrative Staff College at Henley, deputy chairman of the Universities Superannuation Scheme, and a trustee of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. He had a close connection with the Open University over many years. He was Pro-Chancellor and Chairman of Council from 1983 to 1996, and his services to the university were recognised when a prominent building near the entrance to the university campus was named after him.

Kenneth was a vice-president of the Royal Economic Society and chairman of the executive committee of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research. He was awarded honorary fellowships by LSE, St. Catharine’s and King’s Colleges, and honorary degrees by a number of universities, including Cambridge, Bath, East Anglia and the Open University. He was created GBE in 1988.

Kenneth Berrill not only had a keen analytical brain. He was courageous — as exemplified by his Himalayan activities — and feared no one. He was generally relaxed in manner and sometimes appeared almost cynical. But although he did not openly espouse causes passionately, he felt strongly about his conclusions and expressed them without fear, no matter to whom. His was a valuable and remarkable life.

Aubrey Silberston