

ONE dark November night in 1982, Sir Geoffrey Howe woke up in his first class compartment on the overnight sleeper from London to Manchester to discover he no longer had any trousers. The news was soon all over the media.

The trousers later turned up, minus the cash from his wallet, lying beside the railway track in Warwickshire; but the damage was done.

A kindly policeman told the down-market tabloid the *News of the World*: "I don't suppose the thief had anything against Sir Geoffrey." But the message that the Chancellor of the Exchequer lost his trousers had got across to the public.

Banner headlines screaming "Money-minister loses his shirt" might have been worse. But only just.

A lesser politician might have found it hard to live down such a blow to his dignity. Sir Geoffrey barely blinked — and having engineered the fiscal and monetary policies which formed the foundations of Thatcherism, went on to become Foreign Secretary in Mrs Margaret Thatcher's second government and one of the chief architects of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration signing Hongkong over to China.

But it was not the only embarrassment in Sir Geoffrey's long and distinguished career. Every profile of him written recalls the time the Labour Party's Mr Denis Healy described a parliamentary row with the softly-spoken Sir Geoffrey as being savaged by a dead sheep.

He suffered many other indignities over the years, most of them at the hands of Mrs Thatcher, the prime minister he served so loyally for more than 11 years. Time after time she would turn patronisingly to the Foreign Minister at her side after some Britain-versus-the-rest set-to at a European Community summit or a meeting of Commonwealth leaders — especially after a dispute where Sir Geoffrey was thought to harbour views less radical than her own. She would say: "We told them so, didn't we Geoffrey?" or

PROFILE: Sir Geoffrey Howe Jonathan Braude

"We explained it to them, didn't we Geoffrey?"

On other occasions he was sent off to do Mrs Thatcher's dirty work, leading fact-finding missions to South Africa as a ploy to postpone a decision on European Community sanctions or — in his final public relations flop — travelling to Hongkong in the aftermath of Tiananmen Square and facing the wrath of a community that felt betrayed and let down by Britain.

"Howe can you sleep at night?", "Howe Honourable?", read the posters carried by thousands of marchers as his car raced past them to Government House. "This bull**** speech!" shouted District Board Chairman Mr Lee Wing-tat at a luncheon speech Sir Geoffrey gave.

Through all this the quiet, unflappable Sir Geoffrey continued to put his case, repeating the characteristic phrase "I fully understand... I fully understand..." and then countering whatever he fully understood — demands for the right of abode in Britain, calls for more democracy — with a flat refusal.

Only once did he show a flash of impatience, telling one heckling journalist "I will take no more questions from you, sir."

But Sir Geoffrey was not Mrs Thatcher's doormat. It was their disagreement over European policies, rather than the debacle in Hongkong, which led her to remove him from the Foreign Office and — to his dismay — appoint him to the lacklustre post of Deputy Prime Minister. It could have been a position of power as it had been under Lord Whitelaw, but it was made known unofficially he had, as one commentator described it, "achieved zombie-status... one of the living dead".

Fifteen months later Sir Geoffrey took his revenge. He resigned from Mrs Thatcher's government and one week later, in a speech that betrayed years of suppressed rancour, he accused her of lack of vision. Then, inciting fellow Conservatives to revolt against her

A China veteran open to all options

leadership, he said: "The time has come for others to consider a response to the tragic conflict of loyalty with which I have perhaps wrestled for far too long."

It was political suicide at home, though he took Mrs Thatcher down with him. But it has left him free for new opportunities elsewhere. Only 64, he has already announced he will not be running for parliament in the next election, and has begun to acquire directorships in major companies to keep the money flowing in after his retirement.

It also leaves him free to take on the kind of job on which elder statesmen thrive. Like Lord Carrington, who shortly after resigning as Foreign Secretary over the Falklands war became secretary general of NATO, Sir Geoffrey will be looking for an outlet for the considerable political and intellectual skills his unassuming manner has so carefully disguised. Speculation is rife that his cur-

rent visit to Hongkong is tied to a possible future bid for the post of Governor of Hongkong; if and when Sir David Wilson moves on, Sir Geoffrey is thought to be attracted by the idea of seeing the job through.

He has repeated Prime Minister Mr John Major's phrase that "the situation is not vacant", but that need not exclude him from the job should the situation change.

As Sir David's former boss at the Foreign Office and the man who steered Britain's Hongkong and China policies through the Joint Declaration, the first draft of the Basic Law and the Tiananmen Square crisis, he has a better grasp of the job than most of the names mentioned as possible successors to the Governor.

Those qualifications would also be the most compelling reason not to appoint him to the job. Mr Major, on his trip to Beijing, is thought to have taken a deep dis-

like to the attitude of the old China hands at the Foreign Office who are so closely associated with Sir Geoffrey's China policies.

Sir Geoffrey would also be an unpopular appointment, a snub to the people of Hongkong and a clear signal Britain does not intend to take their electoral representatives seriously. He will always be remembered as the man who negotiated Hongkong's return to Chinese control without consulting its people.

Yet if that were the signal Britain intended to send, Sir Geoffrey could live with it. After 23 years in parliament, 15 of them operating and defending often unpopular policies, the Winchester and Cambridge educated Member of Parliament for Reigate and a former Solicitor General has the experience to handle any crisis, and the political skills to find his way back into the hearts of the people of Hongkong.

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