

Tributes paid to union leader Ken Thomas

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A WELSH union leader who was involved in a bitter civil servants' pay dispute with the Thatcher government has died aged 81.

Tributes have been paid to Penarth-born Ken Thomas OBE, former general secretary of the Civil and Public Services Association.

The former TUC general council member was instrumental in the 1970s in negotiating the civil service pension scheme which still benefits civil servants of all levels today.

He later took on Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in an industrial dispute when she withdrew the link between civil service pay and private sector wages.

Sir Alistair Graham, who succeeded him at the CPSA and became chairman of the committee on standards in public life, said Thomas had been "an outstanding trade union leader".

Sir Alistair said: "Numerous civil servants have benefited from the fact he was one of the main negotiators for the civil service pension scheme.

"Civil servants of all levels, including the lowest tiers of the civil service, benefit from the scheme and that to a large extent is down to Ken Thomas."

Born Kenneth Rowland Thomas in February 1927 in Penarth, South Wales, Thomas was brought up by his mother Anne as his father William died when he was nine.

After Penarth Grammar School, he joined the Western Mail and Echo as a trainee reporter before leaving to join the civil service and later the Civil and Public Services Association, where he had a particular interest in pensions.

Thomas was a passionate sailor, musician and family man. On holidays, he took his wife Nora and four children Chris, Mark, Simon and Paul sailing across the English Channel to Holland and France and passed on his love of boats to all four children.

Two of his sons also became music teachers.

His widow Nora said: "When Jim Callaghan wanted to get hold of him, he was told that Ken was on his boat.

“So Callaghan came down to the quayside. You don’t often have a prime minister meeting you off the boat.”

When his son Paul suffered kidney failure, he became one of the first people in Britain to become a live kidney donor during an operation at King’s College Hospital in London.

On his retirement from the CPSA, Thomas asked for the union to commission a symphony from the Welsh composer Daniel Jones as his leaving gift.

The resulting work, Daniel Jones’ 12th Symphony, was the composer’s final symphony.

After retiring, Thomas took on many public roles including becoming chairman of the British Telecom pension fund and joining the West Midlands Enterprise Board, a role he continued until his death from cancer on Tuesday.

He was also a member of the Bangor Civic Society, where he had moved in retirement.

Thomas leaves his wife Nora, sons Chris, Mark and Simon, seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

His funeral will be held at the Church of Our Lady and St James in Bangor next Friday.

A spokesman for the Public and Commercial Services union, formed through a merger of unions including the CPSA, said: “Our thoughts and sympathies are with Ken’s family for a man who was widely respected and held in high regard across the civil service and trade union movement.

“Renowned for his invaluable work on pensions, Ken also showed the way in standing up for fair pay for civil servants in leading the ’80s pay dispute against the Thatcher government.

“He will be sorely missed by friends and colleagues alike.”