

CONSTANTINE KARAMANLIS

Constantine Karamanlis, Prime Minister of Greece, 1955-63, and 1974-80, died yesterday aged 91. He was born on February 23, 1907.

The Grand Old Man of Greek politics, Constantine Karamanlis spent 14 years as Prime Minister of his country and ten as its President. His dominant personality set a distinctive seal on the political fortunes of Greece for four decades — it was as recently as 1995 that he stepped down from his last term as President. But he will be remembered historically for the lead he gave to his people and their politicians in restoring democracy to his country in 1974 after seven years of military dictatorship which appeared to have removed Greece permanently from the comity of civilised European nations. It was a moment of rich personal triumph when, on the night of July 23-24, 1974, a million Greeks, holding lit tapers as on Resurrection night, turned out in the streets to hail him as he returned from self-imposed exile to take over the reins of government after the downfall of the colonels.

Later, it was under his leadership that Greece became a full member of the European Economic Community. On May 23, 1979, flanked by the leaders of the then nine EC nations in Zappeion Hall in Athens, he signed the Treaty of Accession which brought Greece into a firm and equal partnership with Western Europe, ending symbolically an era of underdevelopment. Under him, too, Greek political parties learnt how to alternate in power without upheaval or convulsions. This had immeasurable benefits in terms of the country's growth to political maturity, on both the national and international stages. For example, in 1981 when his party was defeated at the polls under his successor, the victorious Socialist Pasok party was led by Andreas Papandreu, a man committed to pulling Greece out of the EEC. But, as President, Karamanlis was able to exert a moderating influence gently converting Papandreu to a belief in the European project. Withdrawal has never since been on the political agenda in Greece.

Born in the small village of Protina near Serres in northern Greece, Constantine Karamanlis was the eldest of the village teacher's four sons and three daughters. He graduated with honours from the Law School of Athens University, and set up a law practice in Serres on borrowed money. He was given his baptism of fire in politics in 1935, when he was elected to parliament for Serres on the ticket of the royalist "Populist Party". Although he was re-elected the following year, his term was short-lived, owing to the advent of

the Metaxas dictatorship which suppressed all political activity.

During the Second World War, Karamanlis fled to Athens as the district of Serres was taken over by the Bulgarians, allies of Nazi Germany, who had occupied part of Greece in 1941. His efforts to join the Free Greek Forces in the Middle East were successful only a few days before the liberation of Greece in October 1944. He promptly returned to liberated Athens.

With the Populist Party sweeping the polls in the first postwar elections in 1946, he was returned as a deputy for Serres again. He held several Cabinet posts, but it was as Minister of Social Welfare that he made his mark: between 1948 and 1950 he organised the repatriation of some 700,000 Greek peasants who had fled from their villages during the civil war. Later, as Minister of Defence, he secured the army's help in rebuilding their destroyed villages.

In 1951 he left the Populist Party, which was disintegrating under charges of corruption, and joined the Greek Rally, the new right-wing party founded by Field Marshal Alexander Papagos. When the Rally came to power in 1952, Karamanlis was appointed Minister of Public Works, a post which enabled him to demonstrate in an impressively tangible manner his abilities as a man of action: new ports, highways, bridges and airports were built during his tenure, in a country that had been ravaged by a decade of war, enemy occupation and civil strife.

When Papagos died in October 1955, King Paul, who, like most Greeks, had been impressed by his performance, brushed aside Papagos's feuding successors and asked Karamanlis, then only 48, to form the next government. The King's bold initiative pre-empted the party's choice of a new leader. His opponents promptly coined a Greek word which translates as "favouritocracy", to imply that Karamanlis had become Prime Minister by the grace of the King rather than through the will of the people.

He found the institution intolerable. Although he had inherited a parliamentary majority that could easily have carried his administration for another 18 months, he dissolved the Greek Rally party and founded his own National Radical Union (ERE) party. In the election of February 1956 ERE won by defeating the combined opposition forces of liberals and leftists.

In the eight years when Karamanlis first governed the country, Greece crossed the threshold to economic development and achieved a fair degree of industrialisation under conditions of economic stability. It was these achievements that ultimately gave the Greek economy the resilience



that carried it through the many vicissitudes that were to follow. In February 1959 Karamanlis signed with Turkey and Britain the agreements that made Cyprus an independent republic, putting what turned out to be a temporary end to the bitter strife on the island.

After the elections of 1961, which gave his party a 51 per cent majority vote, his liberal rivals joined forces under the leadership of George Papandreu, a galvanising orator, and launched an all-out campaign denouncing the elections as rigged. Because of his Government's wear and tear, Karamanlis's opponents found the going relatively easy. He began to feel impatient and was increasingly intolerant of criticism. The assassination of the left-wing deputy Gregory Lambrakis by right-wing hooligans in Salonika in May 1963 was a final blow to his frayed nerves, as the Opposition saddled him with moral responsibility for the crime.

A month later he resigned, invoking his disagreement with the King and Queen over their scheduled visit to London; he went to Switzerland for a long overdue rest.

But his five months abroad cut him off from the realities at home. He returned on the eve of the elections of November 1963, confident that he would win a spectacular victory. But he was beaten by a narrow margin by Papandreu's Centre Union party. Shocked and disillusioned, he left for Paris, surrendering the leadership of the party to Panayotis Kanellopoulos, his deputy.

For 11 years he lived in a flat in Paris, keeping a watchful eye on the Greek scene and feeling terribly homesick. He read a great deal and had time to study at close quarters West European politics and philosophy. He became an ardent admirer of President de Gaulle. Then, in April 1967, the gradual decay of parliamentary democracy (which he had prophesied) led a handful of army colonels to seize power in Greece. Karamanlis denounced their action and urged them to go back to their barracks. His appeal caused a stir throughout the country, but the colonels ignored him.

In the years that followed, he made repeated appeals to the junta to give up power. When he became

convinced that they had no intention of relinquishing it, he invited the army to move against them. Those newspapers who had the temerity to publish his text were seized and prosecuted, but the impression created was profound. One major factor in the fall of the junta and the restoration of democracy in Greece was the knowledge that Karamanlis was ready to take over.

On July 23, 1974, after a disastrous coup in Cyprus and with Greece on the verge of war with Turkey, the second junta agreed to hand over power to the elected politicians. Karamanlis was invited to return at once to steer the nation clear of the danger of war and to restore democracy. He was given a tumultuous welcome and was promptly sworn in as Prime Minister.

Within 48 hours he had formed a Government of national unity, which in two months averted war with Turkey (although failing to obtain a Cyprus settlement), placed the armed forces under political control, dismantled the main junta security apparatus, and purged the

administration. Within a year the leaders of the fallen junta were put on trial, convicted and jailed.

In a gesture that won him enormous temporary popularity, but which was to cost him many headaches later, Karamanlis pulled Greece out of Nato's military wing, invoking the indifference the alliance had shown to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus.

After setting up his new party, the New Democracy, and legalising the Communist Party, which had been banned since 1947, he called elections in November 1974, and was returned to power by an unprecedented 54 per cent victory, elected with 230 of the 300 deputies. Four weeks later he gave the Greeks their first genuine chance to determine freely by referendum whether they wanted a monarchy or a republic. His own party refrained from taking part in the campaign, while the Opposition agitated vigorously in favour of a republic. It was said that he opposed the restoration of the monarchy (which had been deposed by the junta) because he saw himself cast in the role of a de Gaulle. The referendum resulted in a two-to-one vote in favour of a republic.

In June 1975, parliament approved a new Constitution, which incorporated all the reforms that Karamanlis had yearned to put through 12 years earlier. Most Greeks were convinced that the new Constitution — which gave the President increased powers — had been tailored to fit Karamanlis, who clearly aspired to end his career as head of state. He himself had not made up his mind, and kept his options open. He nominated a close and trusted collaborator, Constantine Tsatsos, a philosopher and politician, to be the first President, for five years. Meanwhile he carried on as Prime Minister, intent on solving three main problems: Greek entry into the EEC, the reintegration of Greece in Nato, and the resolution of Greece's differences with Turkey.

In the general election of 1977 his New Democracy party again led at the polls and won a working majority in Parliament, but its share of the total vote declined to 42 per cent. More alarming to him was the fact that the moderate centre parties lost second place to the Marxist-Socialist Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) of Andreas Papandreu. This, more than any other single factor, induced him to seek election as President, from which position he believed he could avert a new upheaval if the anti-Western Pasok came to power.

On May 5, 1980, after relinquishing the leadership of his party, he was elected by parliament to be President of the Republic on a three-fifths majority of 183 votes. In

a general election 18 months later, his successor, George Rallis, was defeated by Papandreu whose party was swept into power with 45 per cent of the national vote. During his cohabitation with the Socialists, Karamanlis refrained from meddling in the day-to-day business of government, but his moderating influence was felt more and more, especially in the country's foreign policy. Though the ruling Socialists were pledged to pull Greece out of the Nato alliance, they did not press the issue, and even renewed the agreement on American military bases in Greece for five further years. What is more, Papandreu the anti-marketeer became an ardent supporter of European integration.

All these policy U-turns, however, cost Papandreu much of his popularity with the Left. As the end of the President's five-year term approached in 1985, he vowed to support Karamanlis's re-election, but at the last minute he suddenly switched and nominated a Supreme Court judge, Christos Sartzetakis. At the same time he called for constitutional reforms to curtail the presidential prerogatives.

Without waiting for his term to expire, Karamanlis resigned and went into retirement. Papandreu's ploy to induce his disgruntled left-wing supporters to believe that Karamanlis had been the last obstacle to true socialism had worked. He called an early election in June 1985 and won a second term. But mismanagement, corruption and lack of direction by the new Socialist administration, combined with the absence of inspiring leadership within the Opposition, increased pressure for Karamanlis's return to active politics as the general election of 1989 approached. He resisted the calls, although it was known that if the country faced a serious crisis he would not refuse to serve.

In the event, when neither of the candidates for the presidency (one of whom was the incumbent, Christos Sartzetakis) was able to gain the necessary majority in the presidential election of March 1990, Karamanlis agreed to stand, and that May, at the age of 83, he was elected to his second term.

By this time he was suffering increasingly from ill-health (as was Papandreu, who made a surprise return for yet another term as Prime Minister in 1993). In a confused period in Greek politics, Karamanlis's role as President was far less meaningful than it had been in the 1980s, and in 1995 he resigned to make way for a compromise candidate, Costis Stephanopoulos.

Karamanlis's marriage to Amalia Kanellopoulos was dissolved in 1970. There were no children.