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EDITORIAL

The Forgotten Treaty: The Single European Act and the Road to Brexit



by Dr Tim Aker

2026 marked ten years since Britain voted to leave the European Union. The passage of the Single European Act forty years ago was a crucial stage in the journey to that vote and is the focus of this year's Margaret Thatcher Centre Academic Symposium.

Since the Suez debacle and the end of Empire, Conservatives had struggled to find a new role for Britain in the world. To some, the answer was the Commonwealth and the need to cling on to Imperial bonds after Empire. To others, European integration was the solution, the pooling of sovereignty a useful tool to raise Europe's collective power. To Enoch Powell, both options were unacceptable. Decolonisation had destroyed the colonies' allegiance to the Crown, and entry to the European Economic Community (EEC) meant the abandonment of political sovereignty that rested with the Crown-in-Parliament.

Given the varying options available, and no clear consensus, a clash was inevitable. When Britain went into the EEC, then Prime Minister Edward Heath led his party into accepting a manifesto commitment in 1970 that Britain would 'negotiate no more, no less', and then issued a merciless 3-line whip for entry during the passage of the enabling legislation in 1972. Local Associations were encouraged to put pressure on MPs who opposed entry, leading to local skirmishes that could have led to the creation of a UKIP variant twenty years before it eventually emerged.

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The designation of the EEC as a 'Common Market' was a brilliant PR exercise. To many Conservatives it was a means to export British products and, politically, it was a check on domestic socialism. A Bennite siege economy was impossible within the 'Market'.

Whilst the opponents of entry in the early 1970s highlighted that the EEC was a political project, this only really cut through during the debate on the Maastricht Treaty, some years after the passage of the Single European Act. It was a paradox in that the Act radically transferred political power to the EEC. It expanded Community competences and removed the national veto in significant areas through the extension of qualified majority voting. But there was limited discussion of it and only a small rebellion on the enabling legislation.

Its political impact became visible in 1988 when the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, called for a social Europe at the Trade Union Congress (TUC). It is hard to believe, and explain to students today, but Labour was traditionally the Eurosceptic party. Clement Attlee opposed entry into the EEC. Hugh Gaitskell said it would end 1,000 years of British history. The country's biggest trade unions opposed entry and provided money and resources to the fledgling 'No' campaign in 1975.

After almost a decade of Thatcherism, Delors told the TUC that Europe was an alternative to it. The European Community, as it then was, would provide for greater worker 'protections' at the European level and foster a 'Social Europe'. Although the Labour movement had been gradually leaving its anti-EEC position, the rapturous reception Delors received confirmed the tide had turned.

Twelve days later, Mrs Thatcher delivered her Bruges speech, against the backdrop of Delors's intervention at the TUC. This had a similar impact on the Conservative side. She said Britain had not rolled back the frontiers of the state only to see them reimposed at the European level from Brussels. She called for a different Europe of liberty, free trade, and small government. It was a shock to the European body politic. Conservatives, the initial pro-Europeans, started to question the project.

For all her complaints at the time, however, the Single European Act had expanded Community competences, including in social policy, giving Delors greater scope to advance a Social Europe. This is why it is such an important, and sadly overlooked, period of the Thatcher years.

In this issue Peter Just explores how Mrs Thatcher struggled to reconcile her support for the Act with her subsequent euroscepticism. It put her in a difficult position: Maastricht built directly upon the institutional changes made by the Single European Act.

The period also raises a remarkable counterfactual. Imagine for a moment that Mrs Thatcher had seen off the leadership challenge in 1990 and had successfully opposed the Maastricht Treaty. Would we have learned the damaging lesson from Black Wednesday which kept us out of the Euro? Would Conservative euroscepticism have developed and led to the proliferation of campaign groups opposed to European integration? Would UKIP have formed in 1993? It could be argued that the removal of Mrs Thatcher and the Conservative civil war of the 1990s were crucial to laying the groundwork for the Brexit vote in 2016. Food for thought for those Conservatives whose reaction to Bruges compelled them to vote to remove the Prime Minister in November 1990.

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Margaret Thatcher and the Single European Act: statecraft scrutinised



by Peter Just

Introduction

After Downing Street, Margaret Thatcher, like many, if not all, ex-Prime Ministers (ex-PMs), found herself having to defend some of her actions as Prime Minister (PM).

Perhaps most contentiously, and significantly, this included the Single European Act (SEA). Her retrospective defence was designed both to influence the history books and to exert contemporary influence in two areas. First, her campaign for an alternative Europe, initiated by her 1988 Bruges Speech and expanded in her 1992 Hague Speech. Second, her activity on the Maastricht Treaty (Maastricht), including her call for a referendum.

In focussing on Maastricht, this article examines the charges levelled against Thatcher, her defence, how she conducted it, the immediate reaction to it, and its long-term impact. It concludes by reflecting on the SEA, its place amongst Thatcher's regrets, and the lessons, if any, for other ex-PMs.

What was the charge?

Thatcher's opposition to Maastricht opened her up to three main charges throughout and beyond its parliamentary passage.[1]

First, it was contrary to her previous views of the European Union (EU). Second, the SEA increased the use of qualified majority voting (QMV). Third, there was no referendum on it and its parliamentary debate was guillotined.

This indictment was made extensively by Maastricht supporters, including, understandably, by ministers, notably John Major, both at the time and as recently as May 2026,[2] and Douglas Hurd, Kenneth Clarke and Tristan Garel-Jones as they took the Bill through the Commons. Maastricht's opponents, including Labour Eurosceptics, such as Barbara Castle, Peter Shore, and Nigel Spearing, and Conservative backbenchers, who would ordinarily be regarded as Thatcher supporters, examples being Nick Budgen and Teddy Taylor, made similar charges.

What was the defence?

Without addressing the Bill's guillotining or why there was no referendum, against the charge that Maastricht was simply an extension of the SEA, Thatcher defended herself on the grounds of context, content and conduct.[3]

On context, the SEA was a way of delivering the Treaty of Rome's objective of a common market on Thatcher's economically liberalising terms. A vehicle for exporting Thatcherism to the rest of the EU, the SEA would help to deliver her vision of Europe, one of 'nation states freely co-operating together', not the other vision of Europe, namely 'an integrated European union'.[4]

On content, she argued that the Treaty of Rome included QMV and its expansion in the SEA was

1 These charges were made during parliamentary debates between 1990 and 1993 and have been repeated in subsequent memoirs and elsewhere.

2 John Major, *Newsnight* interview, 1 May 2026. https://johnmajorarchive.org.uk/2026/05/04/sir-john-majors-interview-on-bbcs-newsnight-1-may-2026/

3 See Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 108314 and Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 108317. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108314 https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108317

4 Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 108314, op. cit.

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supposed to be strictly limited to delivering the Single Market, whereas Maastricht went much further.

On conduct, she complained of the European Commission ratting on assurances about QMV use and extending it to new areas. In line with what, in 2016, Gordon Brown described as 'part of the Thatcher fiction',[5] she also claimed that 'they had not told her', whoever they may be, of the full implications of the SEA for British sovereignty.[6]

As well as guilt about the SEA,[7] a feeling of betrayal added an extra frisson to her activity. Speaking after her death, her one-time Parliamentary Private Secretary, Gerald Howarth, recorded her saying, 'The fact that I was betrayed is why I feel so passionately about it.'[8]

Confirming 'Thatcher's Second Law of Politics' that one needs to learn from history to avoid repeating the same mistakes,[9] she also sought to draw lessons for the present debate. During the Bill's Second Reading in June 1993, she spoke of having had her fingers burnt by the SEA, quoting Rudyard Kipling, 'And the burned Fool's bandaged finger goes wabbling back to the Fire'.[10] A month later, in the referendum amendment debate, she returned to the theme, 'Yes, we got our fingers burnt. Do not now go back to that same fire with a much bigger treaty with many more powers and get both your arms and perhaps your head burnt as well'.[11]

It is also important to note that the inevitable negativity of her work on the Maastricht Bill has tended to obscure the positivity of her broader campaign. Whatever her later views may have been, at this point Thatcher was still working for her vision of Europe, not a Europe of which the United Kingdom (UK) was no longer a member. 'Leading, not leaving' was effectively her mantra.

How was it conducted?

As ever with Thatcher, the way she conducted her defence was almost as important as its content. Theatrical and emotive, if not provocative, lines delivered in full Iron Lady persona excited a similar response.

In February 1993, Philip Webster reported 'flashes of vintage Thatcher' as she 'crushed a hapless reporter who had the gall' to ask why there had been no referendum on the SEA.[12] 'A powerful finger-wagging, spectacle-stabbing, eye-blazing performance,' was how Andrew Rawnsley described her July 1993 speech calling for one on Maastricht.[13]

In addition to speeches, Thatcher conducted her defence in writing, including in articles in, perhaps ironically, *The European* newspaper, and in her memoirs, 1993's *The Downing Street Years* and 1995's *The Path to Power*. The index to the former references the SEA three times, the latter, five.

Illustrating her later claim, as revealed by Conor Burns after her death,[14] that she usually made mistakes when she did not get her own way, Thatcher sought to spread responsibility for the SEA and its consequences to others. This included civil servants. Charles Powell recalled that she was 'persuaded posthumously' that 'she had been conned into it by devious civil servants. In fact, she knew perfectly well what she was doing on the SEA as the price of achieving her other objectives in Europe and was ready to take a chance. Anyway, it would not have been like her to blame civil servants: that was not her style, not least because it would imply that she was not the only true decision-maker.'[15]

Others she extended responsibility to included previous British Governments (including Edward

5 Gordon Brown, *Britain: leading, not leaving*, (Selkirk: Deerpark Press, 2016), p.94.
6 Gillian Shephard, *Shephard's Watch*, (London: Politico's Publishing, 2000), p.47.
7 Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography, Volume Three: Herself Alone*, (London: Allen Lane, 2019), p.773.
8 Hansard, 10 April 2013.
9 Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 147059. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/147059
10 Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 108314, op. cit.
11 Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 108317, op. cit.
12 Philip Webster, 'Thatcher dials "No" for democracy', *The Times*, 3 February 1993.
13 Andrew Rawnsley, Dammit, sir, wouldn't you say it's time for a spot of dinner? *The Guardian*, 15 July 1993.
14 Hansard, 10 April 2013.
15 Interview with Lord Powell of Bayswater, 7 May 2026.

Heath's) and foreign ones, notably Italy's (for engineering the intergovernmental council that gave rise to the SEA) and Germany's (for changing its position on having monetary matters in it).[16]

What was the (immediate) reaction?

Thatcher's defence generated an immediate and strong reaction, both pro- and anti-, which can be gauged both statistically and substantively.

During the 41 days of parliamentary scrutiny of the Maastricht Bill, the SEA was name-checked almost 900 times and Thatcher over 300 times. In comparison, Heath was name-checked just over 90 times, his constituency (Old Bexley and Sidcup) just over 80, and James Callaghan, the third ex-PM active on Maastricht, just under 30.

Extensive media coverage – ranging from news stories and opinion pieces to sketches and leader columns – greeted her speeches on Europe, including on the Bill.

From its supporters, she came in for heavy criticism for what she said and for the way she said it, with their denunciations of her being almost as passionate as her denunciations of the Bill. She was also not immune from criticism from people close to her. Of her July 1993 speech, Woodrow Wyatt wrote she talked 'absolute piffle' and was 'evasive' about why she had not held a referendum on the SEA.[17]

For opponents of the Bill, however, she provided 'spiritual' leadership, her interventions providing encouragement to Eurosceptic Conservative MPs, as noted in the press at the time and in later memoirs.

What was the (long-term) impact?

Thatcher's leadership and encouragement also had long-term impact.

While Maastricht passed, the arguments she made during its passage, rooted in her post-office commentary on the SEA, lived on, arguably becoming ever stronger as the years went by, especially when her campaign for an alternative Europe proved to be 'abortive'.[18] As Charles Moore wrote, the final volume of his biography of her shows how much she did to lay the groundwork for 2016's referendum.[19]

While we will never know how she would have voted in that referendum, her approach to the SEA after Downing Street surely has a famous, or infamous, depending on one's point of view, place in the story of the UK's relationship with, and eventual exit from, the EU.

Conclusion

To conclude, we will reflect on three things.

First, the evidence is clear. Despite what she might have said afterwards, at the time, as Powell has argued, Thatcher 'knew exactly what she was doing' when she agreed to the SEA.[20] She understood what it contained and was warned about its consequences. That things transpired in a way that she did not foresee, or wish, does not – and cannot – absolve her of her responsibility. They do, however, demonstrate that she perhaps broke 'Thatcher's Law of Politics': 'the unexpected happens and when it does, you'd better be prepared'.[21] Or perhaps she was semi-prepared. Speaking in 2003, she said constructing 'a new framework' for the UK's relationship with the EU was one of the things she still wanted to do at the time she left office.[22] Aligning with her famous phrase, 'I hope to go on and on',[23] it may also be that she accepted the political price that had to be paid for the Single Market thinking that if and when the SEA were misused, she would still be in office and able to stop it. Nick Budgen captured this, commenting in 1993, 'Lady Thatcher gave her support to the Single European Act because she made two false assumptions. The first was that she would be the Prime Minister and leader of the Tory party for a long time. Secondly, she believed that the Tory party would

16 See Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, (HarperCollins: London, 1993).
17 Sarah Curtis, ed., *The Journals of Woodrow Wyatt Volume Three*, (London: Macmillan, 2000), p.258.
18 Robin Harris, *Not For Turning: The Life of Margaret Thatcher*, (London: Bantam Press, 2013), p.384.
19 Moore, op. cit., p.xx.
20 Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 111049. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/111049
21 Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 147059, op. cit.
22 Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 109483. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109483
23 Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 106615. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106615

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always be in power and would always control things in Europe.'[24]

Second, Thatcher came to regret several things. Some post-1990 commentary about her includes the word 'Calais', as it related to being written on the heart of Queen Mary I. Powell used it in a March 1991 memo to Major about Hong Kong.[25] In November 2025, Powell used it again, arguing that Thatcher might have thought the same about Northern Ireland and the Anglo-Irish Agreement.[26] Where the SEA ranks in comparison can probably only be speculated upon. Arguably, however, the consequences of Thatcher's regret about it give it a singular importance because Britain today, and the EU today, have both been shaped, for good or ill, very largely by Thatcher's post-Downing Street portrayal of the SEA.

Third, whatever one's views of that portrayal, it provides a model of how ex-PMs can reflect on their work as PM while attempting to influence policy as a former one, sometimes with long-term, profound consequences.

For these reasons, the SEA is, arguably, one of the most significant pieces of legislation passed between 1979 and 1990, with its significance increased by Thatcher's post-prime ministership.

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24 Hansard, 18 January 1993.
25 The National Archives, PREM 19/3386, HONG KONG. Future of Hong Kong: part 24, 1 April 1990-28 March 1991.
26 Thatcher MSS (digital collection), 245160. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/245160

"To Stand, and Lose, Harmlessly": Thatcher's Improbable 1975 Leadership Victory

by Terrence Casey



In February 1975, Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative Party. Even one year before, no one foresaw this, including Mrs. Thatcher herself, expressing no higher ambition than Chancellor of the Exchequer. Thatcher's victory in 1975 sprang from a series of contingent events and the fortuitous actions of others, creating opportunities of which she skillfully took advantage.[1]

The first step in her path to power was the failure of Edward Heath's Government. The 1970 manifesto promised reduced spending and less state interference. Faced with rising prices and unemployment, Heath did his infamous U-turns, jacking up spending and imposing an incomes policy. That led to confrontation with the unions, specifically the miners, in 1972 and again in 1973-74. Heath's inability to resolve this strike led to a state of emergency – his fifth! – and a three-day week. Unable to break the deadlock, he called a snap election on the question of 'Who governs?' in February 1974. The voters' reply: "Not you."

Heath was temporarily shielded in his position as Harold Wilson's Labour Party failed to gain an overall majority. Another election in October gave Labour a

1 For the full narrative, see Terrence Casey, *Forging the Iron Lady: Margaret Thatcher, the 1970s, and the Origins of Neoliberalism* (London: Routledge, 2025) Chapter 4.

small overall majority. Heath had now lost three out of four elections as leader and many in the party thought it was time for him to go. Except Heath himself, who remained convinced he was the best person to run the country. To his advantage, there were no mechanisms for removing a sitting leader. The 1922 Committee, chaired by Edward du Cann, insisted a contest was necessary and, backed by the parliamentary party, forced Heath to concede. Rules were hastily drafted, a key provision being that victory on the first ballot required a majority *plus* 15%. Had Heath called a quick contest after the election, or stepped aside in favor of a trusted colleague, he might have avoided disaster. Instead, he stubbornly clung to his position.

The obvious challenger was Sir Keith Joseph, who served in Heath's Government. The shock of defeat induced deep introspection, during which Joseph made a revelation: *he was not a Conservative*. In office he accepted every step of advancing socialism without complaint. The result? The country was falling apart. Joseph now embarked on a public repentance, launching a speech campaign attacking the entire edifice of the postwar consensus. Salvation could be had, he proclaimed, through a return to smaller governments and freer markets.

Joseph condemned all postwar governments, Labour and Tory alike, including Heath's. Heath declared himself "heartbroken" by Joseph's conclusion yet rejected out of hand that any reassessment of policy was needed. The One Nation Tories dominant in the Shadow Cabinet agreed. However, a growing faction thought Joseph right on the mark in saying the Conservatives went astray, Thatcher among them. Joseph emerged as their champion and Thatcher his unofficial campaign manager.

Joseph's campaign crashed on liftoff following a speech suggesting the proliferation of unwed pregnancies harmed "our human stock." This whiff of eugenics set off a firestorm, one which Joseph managed quite poorly, leading erstwhile supporters to question whether he had what it took for the top job. After weeks of public angst, Joseph called on Thatcher to tell her that he could not run. "Look, Keith," she responded, "if you are not going to stand, I will, because someone who represents our viewpoint *has* to stand." By this point, she was well positioned to make a run at it.

Heading Education under Heath infrequently brought Thatcher into the national spotlight, except for the infamous "milk snatcher" row. During 1974, though, her stature rose precipitously. In the October election, the Tories pitched moderation more than detailed promises, with one exception – a cap on mortgage rates. Thatcher then held the Environment portfolio, which included housing. No fan of price caps, she still accepted her role and became its public face, putting her front and center in the Tory campaign. In an otherwise dismal contest, Thatcher stood out as the star.

Afterwards, she was moved to the Treasury team to assist Shadow Chancellor Robert Carr, an unimpressive debater. Thatcher's remit was to lead the attack on Chancellor Denis Healey's Finance Bill. It was an excellent opportunity to prove her mettle and she did not falter. In the most notorious exchange, Healey dubbed her "*La Passionaria* of privilege," to which she shot back:

> Some Chancellors are macroeconomic. Other Chancellors are fiscal. This one is just plain cheap. When he rose to speak yesterday we on this side were all amazed how one could possibly get to be Chancellor...knowing so little about existing taxes...If this Chancellor can be Chancellor, anyone in the House of Commons could be Chancellor.

The Tory benches loved it. After a year of being battered, someone was finally showing some fight. Thatcher may not have been seen by many as a likely leadership candidate in the beginning of 1974. By December, she was.

It was still a longshot. When she met Heath on 25 November 1974 to tell him she was challenging, he was curt and dismissive, not seeing her as a serious threat. R.A. Butler is quoted as inquiring of Chris Patten, "We don't need to take this Thatcher business seriously, do we?" *The Economist* described her as "precisely the sort of candidate that ought to be able to stand, and lose, harmlessly..." Denis Thatcher was blunter: "You

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must be out of your mind. You haven't got a hope." Several factors conspired to raise the fortunes of this seemingly hopeless endeavor.

First, Edward Heath had alienated a considerable number of Conservative MPs. He characterized the party as full of "shits, bloody shits, and fucking shits." He was notoriously rude to anyone deemed unworthy of his attention, which included all backbenchers. Heath's campaign team attempted to counteract this through a series of meals with MPs. It backfired as Heath failed to engage. One MP commented afterward that previously he had not spoken a word to the leader. After the dinner, he still had not. While his inner circle remained loyal to the end, Heath generated much personal animosity among others.

This included Airey Neave, who blamed Heath for stymieing his career while Chief Whip and was thus dedicated to Heath's political destruction. Du Cann was his first choice, but he had lucrative interests in the City he was loath to surrender (or have scrutinized). As Neave's was a personal rather than ideological grudge, he was happy to throw his weight behind any viable contender. He courted multiple candidates, including Joseph, yet no one moved. With only Thatcher left, Neave offered to take charge of her campaign, which she wisely accepted.

Neave's approach was masterful. He counselled Thatcher to keep a low profile, give few interviews, and keep grinding away in the Commons, which impressed MPs, the only relevant constituency. Neave lobbied the many disgruntled backbenchers, assuring them of Margaret's admiration and her astonishment they never got a government job. (Not that she gave many of them jobs either.) For those who wanted Ted out but were unconvinced by Maggie, he would quietly tell them she was doing well, but not quite well enough to dislodge Heath. (Which he knew to be untrue). The only way to oust Heath was to force a second ballot by voting for Thatcher on the first.

Of course there was Thatcher herself. She articulated a vision for reinvigorating Tory values: individual freedom, reduced state power, keeping what one earned, property-owning democracy and constraining union power. The previous Conservative Government, she openly admitted, failed in this task. She would not. Thatcher presented as a good communicator, a strong Commons performer, and a defender of traditional Conservative principles. Many Tory MPs gladly rallied to her flag.

Raising that flag took courage. Challenging Heath carried enormous political risk. If she lost the odds were she would be permanently relegated to the backbenches and remembered as an historical footnote. The entire party machinery and almost all the Tory press were firmly behind Heath. Arguing against consensus was a ghastly heresy against *bien pensant* opinion, which took real moral and intellectual courage. She was also the first woman to try the leadership in a Parliament overwhelmingly male (Thatcher was one of only 27 female MPs) and quite sexist. A late entry to the contest was Hugh Fraser, an obscure MP with no real chance. In Thatcher's own view he was there for those who hated Heath but would not vote for a woman.

The first ballot was 4 February 1975. In the final weeks, she focused on meeting MPs in small groups or one-on-one and sticking to her Commons work. The Heath team planted a quite absurd story that she was (unpatriotically) hoarding food. The brief media fire was quelched by summoning the press to view the contents of her supposedly offending pantry. Even better, she turned it around; it showed the "grocer's daughter" understood consumers' challenges.

The *Daily Telegraph* invited the candidates to set their stalls under the headline, "My Kind Of Tory Party." Heath's contribution was all centrism, moderation and national unity. Thatcher renewed her call for the defense of middle-class values. This was not a fight for the privileged, she declared, it was the defense of hard work, merit and economic freedom. The juxtaposition between two candidates was quite clear, undermining later claims that the contest was more a vote to oust Heath than for Thatcher. She left no doubt that she intended a new direction of travel for the Conservatives.

The election itself took place in Committee Room 14 with ballots open noon until 3:30pm. Once the balloting was closed, counting went quickly, and the results were announced at 4:00pm. Shortly thereafter Neave poked his head into Thatcher's room. "It is good news...you've got 130 votes to Ted's 119." The Thatcher camp was delighted. Heath, of course, was crestfallen (and never got over it), immediately stepping down as leader.

This meant a second ballot the following week in which other contenders could join. Willie Whitelaw, the biggest threat to Thatcher's ambitions, announced his candidacy that very night. He was amply qualified, having served in multiple important positions in the prior government. His close association with the old regime was a negative, however. Whitelaw was also an uninspiring speaker, and his only rationale was to secure party unity. "Unity for what?" the *Daily Telegraph* inquired. Others entering the fray included John Peyton, Jim Prior and Geoffrey Howe. The latter's entry put a pall on his relationship with Thatcher to the end. The problem for all these candidates was that by waiting for Heath to be dispatched first, they came over as cowardly or opportunistic. Thatcher had been bold when others demurred, which added to her momentum. Anyway, with only a week, not much new campaigning could be done.

The general expectation was that the second ballot would advance Thatcher and Whitelaw to a third and decisive ballot. With the same voting procedures as the previous week, the results again announced: Margaret Thatcher 146; William Whitelaw 79; Geoffrey Howe 19; Jim Prior 19, John Peyton 11, and 2 abstentions. There would be no third ballot. Neave once again poked his head through the door to Thatcher's room in the Commons and quietly stated, "I have to tell you, you are the new Leader of the Opposition."

The 1975 Conservative leadership election was the first stepping stone of Margaret Thatcher's transformative career. As sketched out above, it was an uncertain and improbable result depending upon events and actions opportunely falling into place. It was a fortunate result, but that fortune was constructed upon her own political courage and skill. With her party and country in a slough of despond and in need of decisive leadership, she seized the opportunities presented to her to demonstrate she was, after all, the right woman for the job.

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Winning the Rebate

by Daniel Dieppe

As Leader of the Opposition, Margaret Thatcher fervently supported British membership of the European Economic Community, famously wearing a multi-flagged EC jumper during the 1975 referendum. Yet by the end of her time in office, she became the most Eurosceptic Prime Minister until Boris Johnson, delivering the Bruges Speech in 1988 and the 'No. No. No.' statement against further Community powers in 1990. Central to any understanding of this shift from Europhile to Eurosceptic was her role in negotiating Britain's EEC rebate.

The rebate is still remembered today as one of Mrs Thatcher's most important triumphs. In a 2019 poll, the public said that, alongside being 'the first female Prime Minister' and 'winning three general elections', it was the Falklands War (29 per cent) and EEC rebate (20 per cent) that were her greatest achievements.[1]

The case for a British rebate stemmed from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), a subsidy paid to farmers that comprised 76 per cent of the EC budget.[2] As Britain was not an agricultural economy, fewer subsidies were paid to British farmers than other nations. The matter was compounded by a 10-year transition period, where Britain did not pay full membership fees, as agreed upon entry. By 1979, Britain was one of only two net contributing nations, and soon set to be the largest.[3]

The CAP was, in Mrs Thatcher's view, an unnecessary inflationary subsidy at a time of considerable economic difficulty. The 1979 Conservative Manifesto, therefore, spoke of the need to 'reduce the burden which the Community budget places upon the British taxpayer' through 'radical changes'.[4]

Only a week after being elected, Mrs Thatcher was already making this case, when German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt made an official visit. The declassified records show a feisty exchange: 'the Prime Minister said that it made no sense that the third poorest country in the Community should pay the largest, or according to another calculation, the second largest, Budgetary contribution.'

The German Chancellor responded that 'the Prime Minister should not be too quick to believe her briefs.' Margaret Thatcher retorted it was not from her briefs, 'but from those of the Bundesbank.' The conversation concluded with Schmidt's replying that 'only a very few people in the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany] really understood the finances of the CAP and the Bundesbank was not among them.'[5]

Schmidt's answer indicates just how fiendishly complicated the British Budgetary Question (BBQ) was. Sir Michael Butler, Britain's permanent representative to the EEC from 1979 to 1985, later wrote, 'No one knows everything about what is going on in the Community. Certainly, I don't.'[6]

One important legacy of the BBQ years was how isolated and mistreated Mrs Thatcher was in Europe. This isolation was, admittedly, partly due to her own intransigence — what was later labelled her 'handbagging' style. During the November 1979 Dublin summit, for instance, Mrs Thatcher simply never stopped talking. The German Chancellor 'feigned sleep' and the French President read a newspaper, while French cars revved their engines outside to

1 Matthew Smith, 'Margaret Thatcher: the public view 40 years on', YouGov, 3 May 2019.
2 Stephen Wall, *The Official History of Britain and the European Community Volume III: The Tiger Unleashed 1975-1985*, (London: Routledge, 2019), p.131.
3 David Gowland & Arthur Turner, *Reluctant Europeans: Britain and European Integration 1945-1998*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.253.
4 'Conservative General Election Manifesto 1979'.
5 No.10 record of conversation (MT-Chancellor Schmidt), TNA, PREM19/58 f61, 10th May 1979.
6 Michael Butler, *Europe: More than a Continent*, (London: William Heinemann, 1986), p.10.

apply pressure on the Prime Minister.[7] At the end of it all, most of the British press corps 'stood up and applauded her', a spectacle quite possibly never achieved before or since.[8]

Mrs Thatcher was also isolated on account of her gender. Even arch-Europhile Roy Jenkins conceded she was 'very oddly treated' and had 'every reason to feel offended' after her first EEC summit in June, especially by French President Giscard d'Estaing.[9] When Giscard next visited Downing Street, Mrs Thatcher purposely sat him opposite paintings of Nelson and Wellington by way of payback.[10]

Although difficult on a personal level, the EEC's frosty welcome of Mrs Thatcher was of great help to her public image. Rather than being seen as a cooperative partner of the Europeans, Mrs Thatcher was instead lionised by her supporters as 'fighting', or being in 'battle', helping to secure her Iron Lady status. Headlines in Tory newspapers labelled her deal 'Maggie's Market D-Day' (*Daily Mail*); 'Mrs Thatcher's Victory' (*Daily Express*); and 'It's Waterloo All Over Again' (*Daily Telegraph*).[11]

Her 'handbagging' of the Europeans, Kenneth Clarke later wrote, created a myth of a conservative 'goddess... who swept all before her with her ideological enthusiasm.'[12] Even more cynical was Mrs Thatcher's own Deputy to her Foreign Secretary, Ian Gilmour, who participated in negotiating a temporary EEC rebate in 1980. Representing the Tory 'wet' view of the rebate, he concluded,

> *"Not for the last time during her term of office, foreign policy was a tool of party politics. However badly things were going in Britain, Mrs Thatcher could at least win some kudos and popularity as the defender of the British people against the foreigner. Hence a running row with our European partners was the next best thing to a war; it would divert public attention from the disasters at home, inflaming British antagonism to the Community, but that did not worry her at all; it probably pleased her."*[13]

In a sense, Gilmour was right. The whole BBQ (which Roy Jenkins began calling the 'Bloody British Question') reaped huge political rewards for Mrs Thatcher. On the two occasions a rebate was achieved, they were very timely indeed.

In May 1980, when a temporary rebate was secured, the economy was in turmoil. Inflation was estimated to be 22 per cent with predictions of 'worse to come' from newspapers, unemployment reached a post-war record of 1.4 million, and Britain was feared to be sliding into a recession.[14] As Dominic Sandbrook put it, 'at a time when nothing else seemed to be going right, she had won a significant victory.'[15]

If anything, when the second, lasting rebate was agreed upon in the French Palace of Fontainebleau, in 1984, its arrival was even more opportune. Coming just eight days after the Battle of Orgreave, the height of the year-long miners' strike, it was a nationally unifying achievement amid a sea of division.

Furthermore, Mrs Thatcher's position on Europe was a rare example of her occupying the middle ground. The Labour Party, in this period, was passionately Eurosceptic, calling for withdrawal from Europe altogether. Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary Peter Shore went as far as to say the EEC was the 'rape of the British people and of their rights and constitution.' It was an extreme position, especially so soon after the decisive 1975 referendum.

By contrast, the newly created SDP insisted Mrs Thatcher was being too 'unconstructive'.[16] The party's first leader was Roy Jenkins, who had just stepped down as President of the EC. Yet by supporting the case for a rebate without accepting Mrs Thatcher's

7 Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher*, (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.187.
8 Dominic Sandbrook, *Who Dares Wins: Britain, 1979-1982*, (London: Allen Lane, 2019), p.175.
9 Roy Jenkins, *The European Diary: 1977-1981*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), pp.493-4.
10 Sandbrook, p.173.
11 All headlines from 31st May 1980.
12 Kenneth Clarke, *A Kind of Blue: A Political Memoir*, (London: Macmillan, 2016), p.227.
13 Ian Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain Under Thatcherism*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p.240.
14 *The Times*, 17th May 1980; *The Times*, 23rd April 1980; *The Times*, 23rd May 1980.
15 Sandbrook, pp.177-8.
16 Roy Jenkins, 'Squirrel in Europe's cage', *Guardian*, 10th June 1984.

Winning the Rebate *Cont.*

more abrasive diplomatic style, they got themselves into a muddle as to whether they really wanted a rebate or not. By June 1984, the *Guardian* produced a cartoon of the SDP being bowled out by an EEC cricket ball.

In fact, Mrs Thatcher was following public opinion. As Paul Sharp relates in his book *Thatcher's Diplomacy*, it would have been 'very hard to reconcile parsimony at home with even the appearance of profligacy abroad'.[17] The proportion of British people describing the EC as a 'good thing' fell from 47 per cent to 24 per cent between 1975 and 1981.[18] *Observer* polling on the fifth anniversary of the 1979 election found that only 'relations with the Common Market' and the resignation of Cecil Parkinson were considered problems more people thought were handled 'well' rather than 'badly' by the Prime Minister.

Mrs Thatcher's handling of the issue was, however, abrasive. In the temporary 1980 concession, she reluctantly allowed Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington and Ian Gilmour to negotiate a three-year deal. Yet after an 18-hour 'marathon' negotiation which secured over £700 million per year to compensate for the CAP imbalance, Gilmour and Carrington arrived in Chequers to a hostile reception. 'Had we been bailiffs', Gilmour later narrated, 'arriving to take possession of the furniture, or even Ted Heath paying a social call in company with Jacques Delors, we would probably have been more cordially received.' The Prime Minister was absolutely livid that the pair had 'sold the country down the river.' Gilmour, however, avoided Mrs Thatcher's calls for his and Carrington's resignation by briefing the press of a 'Thatcherite triumph'.[19]

The agreement at the Fontainebleau summit in 1984 was even more significant. Following a protracted 'battle', a permanent 66 per cent rebate was achieved for Britain. Describing the situation, the hostile biographer of Thatcher, Hugo Young, depicts the Prime Minister as 'struggling to the death against no fewer than eight foreign powers'.[20] Robin Renwick and David Hannay, both British diplomatic witnesses of the summit, thought it was 'the most valuable financial agreement this country ever negotiated', and 'no British Prime Minister for whom I worked would have got a better deal'. In a bizarre conclusion to negotiations which befits Young's gladiatorial metaphor, a medal was struck and distributed to each national leader.

Contrary to popular belief, the deal made at Fontainebleau was an example of compromise, as Mrs Thatcher made concessions to the Germans (who wanted separate reforms to CAP) to get the settlement. But overall, even Hugo Young admitted her 'anti-diplomatic style' was effective.

More broadly, the BBQ cemented Mrs Thatcher's reputation as a formidable leader on the world stage. The rebate was part of the restoration of Britain's image following the calamities of the 1970s. Unlike Mrs Thatcher's economic policies, which promised porridge today, but jam tomorrow, her foreign policy achievements were more immediate, rapidly improving Britain's global image.

Come Brexit, Mrs Thatcher's approach was the Eurosceptic model for negotiation with Europe. The Tory press urged Theresa May to 'have her own 'handbag' moment' and channel her inner Iron Lady 'to stand up to the EU' – a reappearance of the heroic Thatcher image Kenneth Clarke so detested. David Cameron agreed with Clarke, later positing that the rebate was the start of the 'awkward partner' depiction of Britain, making working with Europe harder.[21] It also, as Paul Sharp argues, may have distracted the Prime Minister from the bigger issue slowly simmering away in Europe: political union.

Intriguingly, the rebate divides opinion among both Brexiteers and Remainers. For Remainers, it either sowed 'the seeds of Euroscepticism', as the *Guardian* framed it, or briefly 'muted concerns' about leaving, as the *i Paper* suggested.[22] The Brexiteer press, on the

17 Paul Sharp, *Thatcher's Diplomacy: The Revival of British Foreign Policy*, (London: Macmillan, 1997), p.148.
18 Gowland & Turner, p.219.
19 Gilmour, p.238.
20 Young, p.190.
21 David Cameron, *For the Record*, (London, William Collins, 2019), p.326.
22 Lisa O'Carroll, 'The highs and lows of Britain's 47 years in the EEC and EU', *Guardian*, 29th January 2020. C. Milmo, 'A club that we were once desperate to join', i, 31st January 2020.

other hand, struggled to conclude whether the rebate was an example of Britain working well within Europe, or against it.

It was, nevertheless, a very significant victory for both Mrs Thatcher and Britain. It remains the one moment in Thatcher's premiership where almost all observers, sympathetic or hostile, assessed her unorthodox approach positively. Along with the Falklands War, her other foreign policy masterstroke, it greatly contributed to her 'handbagging' image as a fighting heroine. It is rightly remembered today as one of her greatest achievements.

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'A Massive Experiment with the System of This Planet': Margaret Thatcher's 1988 Royal Society Speech in Historical Context



by Anika Sweetland

Introduction

On the evening of 27 September 1988, Margaret Thatcher addressed the Royal Society at Fishmongers' Hall in the City of London. Midway through a speech devoted principally to science, technological innovation and the importance of research, the Prime Minister turned to an issue that few political leaders had yet addressed publicly: the possibility that human activity was altering the Earth's climate. Rising concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluorocarbons, she warned, suggested that humanity might have 'unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of this planet itself' and that these changes had led some to fear the creation of a 'global heat trap' capable of producing climatic instability.[1]

The speech is now routinely treated as an early declaration of political belief in anthropogenic climate change. That description is broadly correct, but incomplete. It can make Thatcher's intervention appear either prophetic or anomalous, while obscuring the circumstances that made it possible. This article argues that the address emerged from a particular convergence of scientific claims, environmental diplomacy, media attention and political opportunity in the late 1980s. Thatcher did not discover climate change, and climate politics did not begin with her speech. Her importance lay in giving the subject the authority of the premiership and placing it within a distinctively Thatcherite framework: scientific inquiry, international cooperation, economic prosperity and caution about acting beyond the evidence, not a programme of emissions controls and carbon taxes.

From scientific concern to political issue

Concern about human influence on climate had circulated through British government well before 1988. During the 1970s officials considered long-range modelling, energy use and the possible effects of atmospheric carbon dioxide, although the Met Office remained cautious and ministerial interest was limited. By the beginning of Thatcher's premiership, Whitehall possessed an informed discussion of the subject but no

1 Churchill Archives Centre, Thatcher MSS, Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech to the Royal Society', Fishmongers' Hall, London, 27 September 1988, pp. 4–5.

'A Massive Experiment with the System of This Planet'... *Cont.*

strong political impetus to make it a priority.[2] What changed in the late 1980s was not the existence of the science, but its visibility and political force.

In June 1988, NASA climatologist James Hansen told the United States Senate that warming had become large enough for a 'cause and effect relationship' with the greenhouse effect to be identified with a high degree of confidence.[3] The statement attracted international attention in a summer of severe heat and drought in North America. At the same time, the World Meteorological Organization and United Nations Environment Programme were establishing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, giving the subject an enduring institutional centre.

The timing mattered. The Toronto Conference on the Changing Atmosphere met days after Hansen's testimony and treated changes to the atmosphere as an issue of global security. In Britain, the Great Storm of October 1987 had made environmental vulnerability vivid, even though it could not properly be presented as proof of anthropogenic warming. Events, scientific claims and institutional developments were reinforcing one another. A problem once discussed mainly in terms of models and distant futures was acquiring recognisable images, diplomatic forums and political urgency.

Climate change also arrived in the wake of a more immediate atmospheric problem. British Antarctic Survey scientists had identified severe seasonal ozone depletion over Antarctica, and the Montreal Protocol of 1987 showed that governments could agree an international response to an environmental risk before every uncertainty had been resolved. Thatcher drew the analogy herself. Although the full implications of the ozone hole were unknown, she called the Montreal agreement 'common sense': it slowed the pace of change while research continued.[4] The example joined precaution to further inquiry, an approach she would apply to climate change.

Public language was changing as quickly as the institutions. A study of 181 British broadsheet articles published in 1988 found that climate change was represented as a many-sided threat, increasingly connected to human responsibility and demands for collective action.[5] Reports about global warming appeared beside stories about ozone depletion, acid rain and tropical deforestation. Scientific uncertainty remained, but the subject was no longer confined to specialist journals and conferences. Environmental concern was also gaining electoral weight: Green support was rising, and its breakthrough in the 1989 European elections was already being prepared by the political climate of 1988.

Thatcher's phrase 'some to fear' belongs to this setting. It acknowledged an atmosphere of public anxiety without converting anxiety into proof. The wording did not dismiss the fear; nor did it endorse every prediction made in its name. It separated the existence of a serious risk from certainty about its scale, timing and consequences. That distinction was central to the argument of the speech.

Why Thatcher?

Thatcher was unusually well placed to make science part of prime-ministerial politics. She had studied chemistry at Oxford, undertaken research on X-ray crystallography under Dorothy Hodgkin and worked as an industrial chemist before entering law and politics. Elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1983 under the Society's provision for conspicuous service to science, she was comfortable presenting herself as a politician with scientific training.[6] This did not make her a climate specialist. It did, however, shape the questions she asked and the authority with which she addressed a scientific audience.

2 Jon Agar, '"Future Forecast—Changeable and Probably Getting Worse": The UK Government's Early Response to Anthropogenic Climate Change', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26:4 (2015), pp. 602–28 (pp. 602–06, 622–25).

3 James E. Hansen, 'Statement to the Committee', in *Greenhouse Effect and Global Climate Change: Hearings before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources*, United States Senate (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1988), p. 44.

4 Thatcher, 'Speech to the Royal Society', p. 5.

5 Rusi Jaspal and Brigitte Nerlich, 'When Climate Science Became Climate Politics: British Media Representations of Climate Change in 1988', *Public Understanding of Science*, 23:2 (2014), pp. 122–41 (pp. 127–33).

6 Jon Agar, 'Thatcher, Scientist', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society*, 65:3 (2011), pp. 215–32 (pp. 216–20, 228–29).

Sir Crispin Tickell supplied an important bridge between atmospheric science and government. The diplomat had studied the international implications of climate change since the 1970s and later recalled encouraging Thatcher to examine the issue. Her own memoirs credit him with drawing the greenhouse effect to her attention.[7] His influence helped to frame climate change not merely as an environmental concern but as a problem of diplomacy, security and long-term statecraft.

The venue carried a domestic political meaning as well. Thatcher's election to the Fellowship had been contested, and relations between her government and parts of the scientific community had been strained by arguments over funding and the purpose of publicly supported research. The address allowed her to present a coherent account of that relationship. She defended state support for basic science, rejected a 'blank cheque' for every project and assigned industry the principal role in commercial development. The environmental passage then demonstrated why government still required independent scientific knowledge: some risks crossed borders, markets and generations. Climate change thus provided both a policy challenge and an opportunity to restate her philosophy of science.

There was also a political opportunity. By speaking before Britain's leading scientific institution, Thatcher could respond to mounting environmental concern, assert British scientific leadership and define the terms on which the issue entered government. Her response neither copied the rhetoric of environmental campaigners nor rejected their subject. Instead, it absorbed climate change into an existing political outlook. Government should support basic science where markets could not predict the return; industry should develop commercially useful research; international problems required cooperation; and policy should follow evidence rather than fashion.

The environmental section therefore belongs to the speech as a whole. Its first half defended curiosity-driven research while insisting on limits, priorities and careful management. Its second half applied the same discipline to planetary risk. Scientific uncertainty was not an excuse for indifference, but neither was concern a blank cheque for intervention. Research would establish causes, likely effects and timescales; only then could governments judge the implications for energy, efficiency and reforestation.

International statecraft – and its limits

The speech's lasting significance lies less in any individual scientific forecast than in the political standing it conferred on the question. Thatcher linked greenhouse gases to deforestation, energy use and population growth, and cited the vulnerability of the Maldives, whose president had raised sea-level rise at the 1987 Commonwealth conference. Climate change was thus presented as a borderless problem whose consequences would be unevenly distributed.

This international framing helped move climate change from expert administration towards high politics. Thatcher's intervention did not cause that transition by itself: Hansen's testimony, the Montreal settlement, the creation of the IPCC and a rapidly changing press all formed part of the same movement. But a British Prime Minister speaking in these terms gave the issue a new legitimacy and helped establish a model later repeated in her 1989 address to the United Nations.

It is equally important not to read later climate-policy programmes backwards into the 1988 text. Thatcher proposed no emissions target, carbon price or timetable for abandoning fossil fuels. She accepted costly action where pollution had been identified and effective remedies existed, but joined environmental protection to prosperity. 'The health of the economy and the health of our environment', she said, were 'totally dependent upon each other'.[8] Her environmentalism was therefore neither laissez-faire indifference nor an unlimited mandate for state action. It was conditional, international and evidence-led.

Her examples make that conditionality clear. London smog, airborne lead and polluted rivers were cases in which causes could be identified and practical measures assessed. Climate change was harder because the Earth

7 Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 640.

8 Thatcher, 'Speech to the Royal Society', p. 5.

'A Massive Experiment with the System of This Planet'... *Cont.*

supplied no controlled laboratory and the relevant processes operated over long timescales. Thatcher did not conclude that government should wait for impossible certainty. She called instead for targeted research into effects and timescales, coupled with consideration of energy production, fuel efficiency and reforestation. The sequence was inquiry, judgement and proportionate response.

Conclusion

The Royal Society speech arose from a rare conjunction: stronger scientific claims, the precedent of ozone diplomacy, new international institutions, press attention and growing environmental anxiety. Thatcher recognised that governments could no longer treat atmospheric change as a specialist concern. In giving it prime-ministerial attention, she helped carry climate change into the language of global governance. Yet the manner of that recognition matters as much as the fact of it. Her key formulations, 'some to fear', 'cause and effect' and 'founded on good science', held concern and uncertainty together. The speech neither permits her to be enlisted straightforwardly for every later climate policy nor supports the claim that uncertainty justified inaction. Its more exact legacy is a demanding one: emerging environmental risks deserved serious political attention, but the authority for action had to be earned through evidence. That combination of vigilance and restraint was not incidental to Thatcher's politics. It was what made her 1988 intervention recognisably Thatcherite, and what gave it a durable place in the history of climate debate.

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She Could Listen While She Talked

by The Rt Hon. the Lord Butler of Brockwell KG GCB CVO



Transcription of reflections at the launch of 'The Elgar Companion to Margaret Thatcher' at the House of Lords on 15 December 2025 and extracts from an interview with Peter Just on 6 January 2026

I saw Margaret Thatcher from the position of a bag carrier. I was her Principal Private Secretary between 1982 and 1985 and then I came back as Cabinet Secretary in 1988.

Margaret Thatcher's personal kindness is not something that is generally understood by the wider public. I saw five Prime Ministers at close quarters in various situations, and I have always said that Margaret Thatcher was the best at comforting the bereaved of any of the Prime Ministers I served. That is not something that the wider public would have known. She had that personal empathy and consideration. She always showed it to her staff.

I would like to concentrate on two aspects. One is the iron quality. I was in her Private Office during the miners' strike. I think that what convinced the Notts, Lincs, and Derby miners to defy Scargill was to know that she was not going to bend. Of course, she had shown that quality too at the time of the Falklands. It was the fact that people knew that when she took up a position she was not going to be pushed off it that I think was an important secret in her success in winning those very difficult crises that she had to face. This was the same over Iraq, when she said, 'George, this is no time to go wobbly.'

The other aspect is that I have always said of her that she talked you down a lot, but she could listen while she talked. You very often found that she did like you to make your point, stand up to her, and not be cowed. I had quite a big row with her very early on in my time as Principal Private Secretary in 1982, but it did not spoil our relationship. You very often found that when you had had an argument with her, her position would not change because, whenever hit, her first reaction was to hit back, but then when the subject came up again, you very often found that her position had changed somewhat.

This is illustrated by a story about her after she ceased to be Prime Minister and after I had left the civil service. I became Master of my old college at Oxford, and I asked her to come and speak. She kindly agreed to do that, and all the students turned up. She said to me, 'Now Robin, what do you want me to do?' I said, 'What they will most remember is the questions they ask you, so I suggest you just speak for 10 minutes and then give the youngsters the chance to ask you a question.' She stuck to it. She said, 'I only have 10 minutes. I can only, therefore, really make two points. I want to tell you that in the last century more people died from tyranny than who died in war, and you have got to be staunch in fighting for freedom and justice. The second point is a domestic point. When I was growing up, 5 per cent of children were born illegitimate and now it is reaching 30 per cent. This is going to be a big problem for your generation.'

The moment passed and we got to questions. A young man said to her, 'Lady Thatcher, don't you think it's a little unfair to describe a child throughout its life as 'illegitimate' when it's had no influence over the circumstances of its own birth?' Immediately, her eyes flashed, and she said, 'Well, what would you call them? I can think of another word, but I think you would think that even more offensive.' I thought, 'Oh dear, what's going to happen?' Well, the moment passed and they gave her a standing ovation at the end. Then she came to dinner and before going back to London she and Denis were having a whisky with us in the lodgings. We were talking about something quite else and then she suddenly said, 'You know, Robin, that young man who asked me about the word 'illegitimate', he had a point, didn't he?' I will bet she never again used the word 'illegitimate'. I tell that story to describe the immediate hit back, but also then the consideration, the thought, and the change that went on after that.

When I came back as Cabinet Secretary in 1988, I noticed a big change in her. She had got tired. She was not keen, mercifully, on long arguments into the small hours of the morning and she relied very much more on Charles Powell, her foreign affairs adviser, and Bernard Ingham on the press. She was not really in for arguments, and she was not listening in the way she had listened in those early years. I know Denis thought that after ten years she had had enough and should have gone. She would never willingly have gone, I think, but she had changed, ten years had been enough, very understandably she was tired, and she had not got the capacity to listen that she had shown in those early years.

Finally, on the evening of the day she resigned, I gave a little party for her in the Cabinet Secretary's room. I got some of the Permanent Secretaries I knew she was fond of to attend. I made a little speech saying, 'When we are old, the one thing our grandchildren will be interested in will be the fact that we worked with Margaret Thatcher.' I have always been pleased I said that. It was true. It is the one thing my grandchildren are interested in. They ask me, 'What was she like?' They are interested in the various adventures I had with her, the Brighton bomb, and so on.

Robin Butler, Lord Butler of Brockwell, was Principal Private Secretary to Margaret Thatcher from 1982 to 1985 and Cabinet Secretary from 1988 to 1998, serving under Thatcher, Major and Blair. He later chaired the 2004 Butler Review into Iraq intelligence.

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