

## MARGARET THATCHER: AS THE BRITISH SAW HER

By Ivor Crewe

Mrs. Thatcher's forced resignation last November shocked as well as surprised many leaders and commentators outside Britain. On the world stage she was the best known and most admired British prime minister since Churchill. Richard Perle, former assistant secretary of defense, probably spoke for many: "She has been done in by her lessers...She has been an exemplary prime minister. For many Americans it will recall the ingratitude of the first post-war election in 1945."<sup>1</sup> Were the British ungratefully blind to her exemplary qualities? If so, why?

First, let's be clear that it was Conservative MPs, not voters, who forced Thatcher to quit. The British political system is parliamentary not presidential: a prime minister's tenure depends formally on Parliament, in practice on the largest party in the House of Commons. Thatcher fell because she lost the confidence of almost half her parliamentary party and, immediately that became clear, of most of her ministers. The secrecy of the vote means we cannot be sure of the identity or motives of the 168 MPs who declined to support her in the first ballot. No doubt policy differences over European integration and the 'poll tax' (a flat-rate local tax), as well as personal resentments, played a part. But almost certainly the decisive factor was their conclusion that Thatcher had become a serious and irreversible electoral liability. Under her leadership, they believed, the Conservatives would lose office at the next election. Even worse, under her leadership many of them would lose their seats.

### An Electoral Liability

This pessimism arose from a variety of poll findings over the course of 1990. Three are worth highlighting:

1. Thatcher ceased to outshine her party. For the first six years of her premiership, irrespective of conservative fortunes, her popularity consistently ran about 5% ahead of her party's. She was therefore a potential vote puller in an election campaign. Between the Westland affair in early 1986 and the October 1989 resignation of her Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, she ran equally with her party. But thereafter she ran 3 or 4% behind—and in that sense had become an electoral burden.

2. By 1990, Thatcher's "satisfaction rating" as prime minister had dropped very low. In April, when people received their poll tax bills, the proportion saying they were satisfied with her fell to 23%, a record low for any prime minister. Over the entire year (up to her resignation

in November) it averaged 29%, the lowest recorded annual mean.

3. Thatcher's continuation in office became a damaging electoral issue in itself. In March 1990 the Government lost a by-election (special election) in the hitherto ultra-safe Conservative seat of mid-Staffordshire. The Conservative-to-Labor swing was the largest in over fifty years. According to the ITN/Harris exit poll, 90% of Conservative defectors agreed that Thatcher had "gone too far in her policies and lost touch with ordinary people," and 77% agreed that she should "not remain as leader at the next election." Among loyalists, the proportions were 41 and 27% respectively.<sup>2</sup> No other issue divided defectors from loyalists so sharply. Another by-election poll suggested that Thatcher's departure would produce a "resignation bonus" of up to 14 percentage points: 15% of respondents were "more likely" to vote Conservative and only 1% "less likely," if Thatcher were to resign as prime minister.<sup>3</sup>

By mid-November, Conservative MPs contemplating for whom to vote in the leadership contest were saturated with polls suggesting that she was a vote loser while her challenger, Michael Heseltine, was a vote winner. The "resignation bonus" had increased to 21%.<sup>4</sup> In the week before the leadership contest seven polling organizations conducted "trial runs" of the next general election; with Thatcher as leader the Conservatives *trailed* Labor by an average of 10 points; with Heseltine as leader they *led* Labor by an average of 5. Two thirds of the electorate thought that Thatcher should resign immediately or "if a significant number of MPs vote against her or abstain."<sup>5</sup>

### Never Loved

Thatcher's supporters attributed her downfall to a loss of nerve in the face of a temporary dip in her popularity. She had recovered from similar troughs before and won three successive elections for the Conservatives, they argued; she could have done so again.

Myths abound about her electoral prowess. One myth is that Thatcher "won" the three elections of 1979, 1983, and 1987 for the Conservative party. It is true that the Conservatives won the three elections under her leadership. It is not true that they won solely because of her leadership. In 1979 the Conservatives won—or, rather, Labor lost—despite her. Voters preferred James Callaghan to Thatcher as prime minister.<sup>6</sup> In 1983, her post-Falklands popularity did add a few percentage points to the Conservatives' margin of victory, but even under a different leader, and without the Falklands campaign, the Conservatives would have been reelected on the back of a credit-led economic recovery and the implausibility of Labor's leader, Michael Foot. In 1987, her net impact was probably neutral.

The second myth is that Thatcher was an exceptionally popular Prime minister with a special relationship to the British electorate. The "satisfaction" ratings in the monthly Gallup poll show that, in fact, Thatcher was the second least popular prime minister since the war, surpassed only (and just) by Edward Heath (Table 1). The "dissatisfied" outnumbered the "satisfied" in 120 of her 138 months at Number Ten. Her mean satisfaction score was 39% during her 1979-83 administration, 39% again in her second government of 1983-87, and 38% in the three and a half years she presided over her third administration. There was no sudden deterioration from an earlier period of adulation. There was a consistent lack of adulation.

Of course, the mean figures contain fluctuations, but these ups and downs cannot disguise an enduring lack of enthusiasm among British voters. There was never a love affair between the electorate and Thatcher. Her peaks of popularity did not approach Callaghan's in the 1970s, Wilson's in the 1960s, Eden's and Macmillan's in the 1950s, or Attlee's after the war. Her troughs, however, sunk lower than those of any other prime minister. Despite the force of her personality, a personality that stamped the decade, she rarely won the hearts of British voters—and only sometimes their minds.

### A Dominant and Domineering Prime Minister

These electoral myths about Thatcher have arisen because of the kind of prime minister she was. Most peacetime prime ministers in Britain this century have been healers, not warriors—consensus politicians without strong opinions on most issues, anxious to ensure unity in their party and cooperation in the country. Thatcher, by contrast, was a "warrior": "I am a conviction politician," she claimed in the 1979 election campaign, "The Old Testament prophets did not say, 'Brothers I want consensus.' They said, 'This is my consensus.' They said, 'This is my faith and vision. This is what I passionately believe. If you believe it, too, then come with me.'" She was the most opinionated prime minister since Gladstone, the most combative and radical since Lloyd George, the most dominant since Churchill.

This distinctive style of leadership was reflected in her sharp-edged profile among voters. Most political leaders in Britain get middling scores across a range of attributes. Thatcher was different: As Table 2 shows, she obtained notably high scores for "warrior" like qualities—determination, courage, the ability to earn respect abroad, and overall leadership ability; but notably low scores for "healing" qualities—"understanding the problems of the people," compassion, capacity to compromise, and the "ability to unite the country." Many non-conservatives acknowledged that she had the former qualities, while many conservatives acknowledged that she lacked the latter qualities.

### Intense Support, Intense Opposition—And Intense Ambivalence

To this unbalanced repertoire of leadership qualities the British electorate responded with both intensity and ambivalence. Precise and direct measures are not available, but impressionistic evidence strongly suggests that, like that other peacetime warrior, Lloyd George, Thatcher polarized opinion. Fervently admired by her supporters, she was detested by her detractors. One reason for the myth of her general popularity is that her conservative supporters admired her more than any previous party leader since Churchill.

But another reason is that many who disliked her lack of "caring" qualities grudgingly respected her "warrior" qualities. A Gallup poll in July 1990 found that 61% respected her but only 28% liked her.<sup>7</sup> The number who both liked and respected her was a small minority of 21%. The number who both disliked and did not respect her was also a minority—30%. The single largest category of electors—40%—respected her, while disliking her.

To be respected as a leader but disliked as a person carries an electoral disadvantage. In times of success voters swallow their irritation at the leader's personality and reward his or her competence. But in times of failure or disappointment, the leader has no reserve of personal popularity on which to draw. Such was Thatcher's weakness in 1990. As interest rates and inflation rose, and the poll tax (with which she was closely identified) came into effect, the public turned against her with more ferocity than they displayed towards previous prime ministers, who had blundered but were personally more liked.

The public's ambivalence continued to find expression after Thatcher quit. The day after her resignation a 60 to 31 percent majority felt she had brought more discord than harmony to Britain; and a 55 to 36% majority maintained both that she had both brought more doubt than faith, and more despair than hope. Yet 59% said that "on balance" she was "good for Britain," only 34% that she was "bad for Britain."<sup>8</sup> The public was not blindly ungrateful to Thatcher's qualities of leadership, but neither were they unaware or forgiving of her recent failures. Like patients under a strict nurse, they tolerated Thatcher's bossy ways as long as they thought the treatment was doing them good. Once convinced it was failing, they shed few tears when the nurse was replaced.

### Endnotes

1. The Independent, November 23, 1990, p. 10.
2. See David Cowling, "Detailed Findings of the ITN/Harris On-The-Day Poll in the Mid-Staffordshire By-Election (March 22, 1990)," Mimeo, March 1990.

3. Numbers Market Research poll of March 14-15, reported in Nicholas Comfort, "Disillusioned Homeowners and Skilled Workers Desert Thatcher," Independent on Sunday, March 18, 1990.  
 4. Gallup Political Index, Report No. 363, November 1990, p. 2.  
 5. Gallup Political Index, Report No. 363, November 1990, p. 3.

6. See Ivor Crewe, "Why the Conservatives Won," in Howard R. Penniman (ed.), Britain at the Polls, 1979 (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), p. 274.  
 7. Gallup Political Index, Report No. 359, July 1990, p. 5.  
 8. Gallup Political Index, Report No. 363, November 1990, p. 6.

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**Table 1**

**POPULARITY OF POST-WAR PRIME MINISTERS**

**Question:** Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with...as Prime Minister?

Period	Prime Minister	% Satisfied		
		Mean	Low	High
1945-51	Attlee (Lab)	47	37	66
1951-55	Churchill (Con)	52	48	56
1955-57	Eden (Con)	55	41	70
1957-63	Macmillan (Con)	51	30	79
1963-64	Douglas-Home (Con)	45	41	48
1964-66	Wilson (Lab)	59	48	66
1966-70	Wilson (Lab)	41	27	69
1970-74	Heath (Con)	37	31	45
1974-76	Wilson (Lab)	46	40	53
1976-79	Callaghan (Lab)	46	33	59
1979-82	Thatcher (Pre-Falk)	36	25	46
1982-83	Thatcher (Post-Falk)	47	44	52
1983-87	Thatcher	39	28	53
1987-90	Thatcher	38	23	52

**Note:** Gallup Political Index.

**Table 2**

**MRS. THATCHER'S PERSONAL QUALITIES**

**Question:** Different political leaders have different personal qualities. Who do you think has more of each of the following, Mrs. Thatcher or Mr. Kinnock?

	% Answering Mrs. Thatcher
Determination	78
Courage	68
Ability to earn the respect of foreign leaders	60
Leadership ability overall	58
Forward looking	45
Ability to face up to reality	32
Ability to unite the country	26
Honesty	20
Knowledge of when to compromise	17
Compassion	13
Understanding of the problems of ordinary people	9

**Note:** Gallup Political Index, Report No. 356, April 25-30, 1990.