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Margaret Roberts THATCHER

UNITED KINGDOM

Prime Minister (since 1979)

Addressed as: Prime Minister

“I have changed everything,” Margaret Thatcher announced when she became Prime Minister. A woman of relentless energy, she used a combination of grit, determination, and self-confidence to place her stamp on the decade that followed. Her supporters pay tribute to her command of detail, her directness, and her iron will. Her detractors—who are increasingly vocal—claim that she is autocratic, inflexible, and narrowminded; the Labor Party’s Denis Healey has accused her of practicing “Rottweiler politics.”



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Thatcher began her 12th year in office under fire from several quarters. Her isolation on the issues of South African sanctions and German unification, as well as her continued foot-dragging on EC monetary union, prompted many observers to accuse her of failing to keep pace with a changing world. [redacted] the depth of public resentment of the government’s poll tax triggered widespread calls for her resignation in the runup to local elections in May 1990. Despite open speculation that she could be out of office by autumn, however, she stoutly maintained that there would be “no vacancy” at 10 Downing Street. Thatcher recently hinted at her intention of contesting a fourth national election as leader of the Conservative Party. Despite almost universal approval of her handling of the crisis in the Persian Gulf, however, most political observers doubt that developments in the Middle East will offer her a political windfall like that of the Falklands war. [redacted]

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“I Am a Warrior”

Lord Hailsham, a former Lord Chancellor, and Permanent Representative to the UN Sir Crispin Tickell have said that they see a substantial likeness between Thatcher and Queen Elizabeth I. Thatcher herself has taken Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln as models. She notes that, like her, Lincoln had to fight for what he believed in. “I have to fight every day still,” she told an interviewer in 1989. A self-described conviction politician, she has championed free market principles, a strong Western defense, and the elimination of socialism in Britain and has steadfastly defended UK sovereignty against EC incursions. Her advocacy of international cooperation on the environment recently earned her a Global 500 Award from the UN. [redacted]

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Observers note that Thatcher loves to argue and relishes a debate with someone worthy of her mettle. [redacted] she especially likes her meetings with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev because he gives as good as he gets. Once, after the Prime Minister engaged in a heated debate with John Major (now Chancellor of the Exchequer), her husband, Denis, slapped Major on the back and exclaimed, “She did enjoy that, and it will have done her a world of good.” Tory stalwart Lord Whitelaw, who served Thatcher for eight years, says that she uses such exchanges with her colleagues to test the strength of her own case. [redacted]

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“99.5 Percent Perfect”

“Margaret is 99.5 percent perfect,” her father once reportedly said. “The other .5 percent is that she could be a little warmer.” A notorious workaholic, she has little patience or talent for relaxation or chitchat. In social settings she gravitates to the company of men and the discussion of business. She has a legendary lack of humor and claims that vacations cause colds and interfere with one’s working rhythm. Even during her schooldays, says a childhood chum, she was obsessed with work and politics. During the early 1950s she squeezed part-time legal study into a schedule already filled with work as a research chemist, Tory party duties, and responsibilities as a wife and mother: she passed the bar exam only four months after giving birth to twins Carol and Mark. According to the press, Thatcher sleeps only three to five hours; she recently told the press that she is amazed at how little some people seem to do with the 24 hours of a day. [redacted]

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The daughter of the late Alfred Roberts, a greengrocer and local politician, Margaret Roberts was born on 13 October 1925. She was greatly influenced by her father: “I owe just about everything to him,” she says. The doting Roberts often took schoolgirl Margaret to university lectures, where he encouraged her to question speakers. By contrast, Thatcher’s mother, who died in 1960, was a stolid homebody whom Thatcher rarely mentions. Thatcher’s older sister, by far the more popular of the two girls, plays little part in her life. A devout Methodist, Alfred Roberts instilled in his daughter a respect for independence and hard work. Encouraged by him, she secured admission to Oxford and became the first woman to head the Oxford University Conservative Association; she used the post as a springboard to local and national Tory politics. (She says that she once aspired to a career in the civil service in colonial India.) [redacted]

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Thatcher began campaigning for a seat in Parliament in 1950, but it was nine years before she was successful. Two years later, in 1961, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan appointed her joint parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance. In 1964, when the Conservatives were defeated by Labor, she moved into the Tory shadow cabinet, handling gas, coal, electricity, and nuclear energy; then transportation; and finally, education and science issues. When the Conservatives returned to power in 1970, she retained the education and science portfolio—the only woman to serve in the Cabinet of Prime Minister Edward Heath. Heath resigned the prime-ministership in 1974; almost a year later Thatcher deposed him as Tory leader. [redacted]

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“Eyes of Caligula, Mouth of Marilyn Monroe . . .”

. . . or so Francois Mitterrand reportedly quipped. Thatcher has made conscious efforts to improve her appearance and her delivery. Once strident and shrill in Parliament, she has been turned by experts from the National Theater into a more polished and versatile combatant. Her proper suits have—under the influence of her daughter—given way to power dressing, and media observers have drawn attention to her collection of brooches. Downing Street insiders say that she lives on vitamin C and coffee. [redacted]

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A blunt, rightwing conservative, Denis Thatcher met the woman who would become his wife on the night she was chosen as a candidate for parliament by her constituency. “Who could meet Margaret without being completely slain by her personality and intellectual brilliance?” he once asked. According to the press, he refers to his wife as “The Boss” or “M.” A retired oil company executive, he sometimes accompanies her on her travels. His sense of practicality keeps her on an even keel, and an observer has commented that he is probably the only person who would “tell the empress the truth about her new clothes.” The Thatchers became grandparents in February 1989. [redacted]

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