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Margaret Roberts THATCHER

UNITED KINGDOM

Prime Minister

Addressed as: Prime Minister

“I have changed everything,” Margaret Thatcher announced when she became Prime Minister in 1979. A woman of relentless energy, she proceeded to use a combination of grit, determination, and overwhelming 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 claim that she is autocratic, inflexible, and narrowminded; the Labor Party’s Dennis Healey has accused her of practicing “Rottweiler politics.”



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Thatcher prefers the counsel of a small “kitchen cabinet,” claiming that the presence of such personal advisers ensures that she and other ministers do not end up “in a prison of civil service advice.” The practice has, however, prompted public allegations that she is increasingly isolated and unable to work effectively with her Cabinet. Reliance on her personal economic adviser, Sir Alan Walters, generated a widely known dispute with longtime Chancellor Nigel Lawson that culminated in Lawson’s resignation in October 1989. (Walters also quit.) Labor Party leaders claimed that in explaining her conduct in the incident Thatcher was “economical with the truth,” a phrase that was also applied to her handling of the Westland helicopter crisis in 1985.

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“I Am a Warrior”

Sir Crispin Tickell, Thatcher’s Permanent Representative to the UN, has said that he has always seen a substantial likeness between his boss and Queen Elizabeth I. Thatcher herself has taken Abraham Lincoln as a model, noting that, like her, he had to fight for what he believed in. “I have to fight every day still,” she told an interviewer earlier this year. A self-described conviction politician, she battles constantly—to eliminate socialism in Britain, to augment free market principles, to maintain UK sovereignty as the EC moves toward a single market in 1992, to privatize Britain’s water and electricity, to ensure a strong Western defense in the face of a changing Communism, and to secure international cooperation to save the environment. London is currently rife with rumors, denied by Tory politicians, that next month she will face a challenge to her 15-year leadership of the Conservative Party. Although Thatcher—currently in her third term as Prime Minister—recently indicated that she would not seek a fifth term, she insists that she will contest a fourth election

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Observers note that Thatcher loves to argue and relishes a debate with someone worthy of her mettle. she especially likes her meetings with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev because he gives as good as he gets. “Get me a drink,” barked Alexander Haig after one encounter, “That’s a hell of a tough lady.” Tory stalwart Lord Whitelaw, who served Thatcher for eight years, says that she uses exchanges with her colleagues to test the strength of her own case.

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“99.5 Percent Perfect”

“Margaret is 99.5 percent perfect,” her father once reportedly said. “The other 1/2 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 talk of business. She has a legendary lack of humor and claims that vacations interfere with one’s working rhythm and cause colds. 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, 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, she still sleeps only three to five hours a night. 

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The daughter of the late Alfred Roberts, a greengrocer and local politician, Thatcher 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 stand up and 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, also plays little part in her life. Alfred Roberts instilled in his daughter a respect for independence and hard work, and, encouraged by him, she secured admission to Oxford. There she became the first woman to head the Oxford University Conservative Association; she used the post as a springboard to local and national Tory politics. 

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Thatcher began campaigning for a seat in Parliament in 1950, but it was nine years before her attempts proved 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. 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 and was deposed as Tory leader almost a year later—Thatcher then made her bid for the party leadership. 

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

. . . or so Francois Mitterrand reportedly quipped. Thatcher has made conscious efforts to improve both 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. 

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 Downing Street insiders say that she lives on vitamin C, coffee, and royal jelly. (A colleague once recalled, however, that she made the best lemon meringue pie he had ever eaten.) 

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Thatcher’s husband, Denis, is a blunt, rightwing conservative. 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 one 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 for the first time in February. 

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