



MARGARET THATCHER

Interviewed by Terry Coleman
of *The Guardian*

Margaret Thatcher (b. 1925), the English politician, was the first woman to be Prime Minister of the UK. She was born in Grantham, Lincolnshire, where her father was a grocer and a local alderman. She was elected to parliament as a Conservative in 1959 and entered the cabinet in 1970 as Secretary of State for Education. She replaced Edward Heath as leader of the Conservative Party in 1975, after Heath had lost two successive elections. In the 1980s she dominated British politics and exerted considerable influence internationally as a champion of free market economies, privatisation and tough defence policies. This interview gives one of the earliest glimpses of her particular brand of conviction politics.

The capital and most valuable virtue of most Conservatives is their conservatism, which often shows as a conservatism of manner, a kind of moderation, an urbane self-assurance that everything will be all right if only you leave it alone. This is most attractive. It also gives some substance to the idea that Conservatives are above the fight, and that only the beastly Socialists drag politics into politics.

This moderation is an incalculable asset, but not one possessed by Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the present Conservative Secretary for Education and Science. She is an evangelist, and sets about her busily evangelising. She will say I have got her all wrong, and so I may have. This is only one man's opinion, and I have formed it on my own and not, as she may suspect, after secret discussions with the corps of Fleet Street education correspondents, whom she dislikes. I only know our own education man, and he is in South America.

Well, I met Mrs Thatcher the other day in her room at the House of Commons and we talked for rather under an hour. Knowing that I came from *The Guardian* she must have mistaken me for some kind of radical, to be led into the True Faith. This was rather funny. We sat one at each end of a sofa, and she said: 'The object of the exercise is what?' I said I should like to write a profile, based on an interview. She said, 'Oh dear, those things always came out awfully artificial'. Since I know this to be sometimes true, and since I have written my fair share of profiles which for one reason or another have missed the point, I just mumbled something placatory and asked whether her father's grocery shop at Grantham had been a great big one.

She said it was not big, just a family grocer's, where some people paid by account and

others, having drawn their 10s pensions at the subpost office attached, paid in cash. They also sold tobacco, sweets, and fruit, and she got to know a good cross-section of the community. She sometimes served behind the counter in the post office.

She was a capable girl, won a bursary from grammar school to Somerville where she read chemistry, and worked as a research chemist for British Xylonite and then for J. Lyons. I said I did not know what xylonite was or what it was, for, and she said I wouldn't. Often they made a new and beautiful plastic and then sat round wondering what use there was for it. At Lyons she did pure research, which had very little to do with what a cake looked like.

Then she read for the Bar. She had always been interested in law since she used to watch her father in court when he was mayor and a magistrate. She used to have lunch with the Recorder. So she became a barrister and practised at the Revenue Bar. She also married the director of an oil company and had twins, one boy, one girl, who are now eighteen. She also became MP for Finchley in 1959. I think it is probably unfair to say she is the same age as the Queen, since you would not say of a man that he was the same age as the Duke of Edinburgh, but there it is. Since last year she has been Minister of Education, and has had lots of abuse thrown at her.

'Mm,' she says, 'an unjustified amount, I might say. However, I usually think that epithets signify more about the author than about the subject. Do they not?'

Several times in the course of the conversation she used this kind of rhetorical question, in this archaic form, with the *not* stuck at the end. Do they not? Is it not? Only barristers don't say isn't.

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I suggested that any Tory Minister of Education, unless he is a Butler, is going to have to put up with a lot of criticism because so many people in education, particularly in the unions, will be out of sympathy with the Right. She replied that it has sometimes struck her that more people are interested in education for reasons of egalitarianism than for reasons of education.

But surely, in England, education had traditionally been part of the egalitarian process? Hadn't it been Disraeli who said in 1867, when the franchise was widened, that we must educate our masters?

'Of course you must,' she said. 'No one quarrels with that for one moment.' But one should educate children taking account of differences in ability, and not with the idea of producing all the same. And it was perfectly right that one should be able to choose to send one's children to independent schools.

I agree with this, and said so. I think it would be an intolerable interference with liberty to close independent schools. So there was nothing between us, but she made her point again, that it was educationally wrong to demand that 'everyone-shall-have-the-same'. She stressed each word. No one demanded this of housing. People could live in different kinds of houses.

Yes, I said, but that was another matter. Living in a big house was pleasant but the sort of house one lived in didn't affect one's whole life prospects, as education did.

'Oh,' she said, very quietly now, 'but it does. Look how wrong you are.' Living in a council house was different, was it not, from living in Bishop's Avenue. She explained that Bishop's Avenue was wealthy. You could spend your money on better houses, or on a good Savile Row suit, or on sending your children to the continent every vacation, so was it wrong to buy a different education? Mr and Mrs Thatcher sent their son to Harrow.

I was busy murmuring of course it wasn't wrong, and yes she was right, and something or other about us all agreeing on equality of opportunity. Exactly, she said. By then I was anxious to put forward an idea with which she could agree, so I said of course if you gave children equality of opportunity, then you gave them what amounted to an opportunity to prove themselves unequal.

'I wouldn't quarrel with one word of that,' she said. 'How do you think I got where I am?' Both she and Ted Heath had floated to the top. Anxious to get Mrs Thatcher in competition with her leader, I suggested she had had a better raft to float up from: hadn't his mother been a maidservant?



She said her own mother had been a dressmaker and had served in the shop. I said yes, but her father had become mayor. She asked what that mattered.

She had said in the Commons that she resented the 'suggestion that some mothers were not able to look after the nutritional needs of their children. Surely, inevitably, there were some who couldn't? She thought the vast majority could. It was wrong that, because of a small incapable minority, you should be expected to provide for the vast capable majority. 'And that,' she said, 'seems to me to be the false argument. Because if that is the case, then you're going to take children away from their mothers practically at birth and say, because a few are incapable of providing, THE STATE must provide free everything, not merely providing it but seeing that it goes down their throats.'

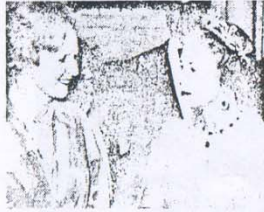
I thought this didn't seem to follow at all, and asked her if it wasn't a bit harsh. 'No, no,' she said. 'It isn't.'

Now, I asked, it had been said that she was necessarily a long way in her circumstances (a Minister herself and the wife of an oilman), and therefore in her understanding, from a poor woman with children. Was this fair? - 'No.'

Why not? Because, she said, she had known what it was like to have to stretch her money. She had started work when she came down from Oxford at about £8-10s a week.

Yes, but she had never in her life been poor? 'It depends what you mean by poor. It so happens we've always had access to food. Obviously, being a grocery store.'

But wasn't there *some* substance in the suggestion that she was distant from a poor mother? She evidently thought not, and I must say it seems to me she could safely have admitted to some difficulty of understand-



ing. If you won't admit that understanding someone very different from yourself may be difficult, you aren't exactly helping yourself to achieve that understanding.

'Now,' she said, 'why do you go for me much more than you went for my predecessors? Why, why? Why are you doing it?'

I didn't think I was. I would do the same for any Labour Minister.

So I asked if she really thought I was going for her, and she said I was, and that I ought to ask myself why. I said she was defending herself pretty vigorously.

I asked how much longer she could let me have. She said ten minutes, that I had asked her very little about education, and that this was wrong. She had expanded education, and neither I nor anyone else would give her any credit for it.

I asked her about a Bible which had been presented to her recently, and she said she was a Christian and prayed when she had need of it. This was part of her background and upbringing and it would be very difficult to cut herself off from it. I said most people did, meaning that most people forgot their Christianity, but she took me to mean that most people cut themselves off from their origins, and remarked that this was where we all got her wrong. She said her beginnings were just as much a part of her as what she is now. She didn't think I could know what it was like to have the sort of beginnings she had.

A little later she said: 'You're getting a totally false impression of me. Because you're taking such selective subjects. I know, and it will come out wholly artificial. And this is just exactly how all the others come out. They come out devoid of flesh and blood, full of artifice, full of cynicism, full of the epithets of their writers.'

She said she was an ordinary woman, fundamentally interested in education, but that I was trying to veer my way, as so many correspondents did, towards saying this was the typical middle-class Tory woman who had never known anything else and didn't know what it was like. But she could go back to almost any standard of living, having been through most. She was living in a small house and was desperately trying to sell her other, large one. She had a second hand Viva, four years old. She did not spend money on furs.

So, I said, she had little hope that what I wrote would be fair? 'No,' she said. We were both jolly and related about this. We laughed a bit, and she said she didn't see how I could write anything fair after so short a time with her. I said well, if she had a day free . . . She didn't seem to think that would work either *Panorama* had taken three days and her opinion of their programme was not high.

I said she might be right, but wasn't she perhaps being a bit too cynical herself?

'Well, is it because I have seen what I have done being totally disregarded, and seeing the other played up?'

But not disregarded by everybody, surely?

'No, no, no,' she said. 'I can go round to an old people's meeting. What do they say? "You stick to your guns, Margaret."'

Submitted by Julia Pykhina

“Margaret Thatcher” Vocabulary I

Match the words on the left with their adequate definitions on the right according to their meaning expressed in the sentences given below. The first has been done for you in italics.

1. *a grocer* (ˈgrəʊsə) - to give a short description of a person's life or character, esp. as given on TV or in a newspaper. She comes from the family of grocers.

2. *an alderman* (ˈɔːldəməŋ) - to give a cheque or credit card in exchange for goods that one has brought. Shakespeare must have had home tutors and, as one would expect of the son of a Stratford alderman, from the age of six or seven went to the King's New Grammar School.

3. *to be elected to Parliament as a conservative* – a person, who fights for, supports strongly or defends a free market economy principle. They elected her to represent them on the committee.

4. **to lose elections** – to receive an amount of money paid by government or company, to someone who can no longer earn money by working. They lost to Brazil by two goals.

5. **to exert considerable influence** – to begin to do or deal with sth. She couldn't open the door even by exerting all her strength.

6. **a champion of free market** – to fail to win, to be unsuccessful in voting. Maria Arbatova is a prominent champion of women's rights.

7. **tough policies – a dealer in foodstuffs and other household supplies.** The government must introduce new tough policies to reduce unemployment.

8. **to give glimpses** – a person who travels from place to place and holds religious meetings in the open air to persuade people to become Christians. I only caught a glimpse of the thief, so I can't really describe him.

9. **to set about smth** – a strong and severe course of action for dealing with a particular matter or situation. He set about this job in completely the wrong way.

10. **an evangelist** (i`vændʒilist) – (in England and Wales until 1974) one of the senior members of a local council, elected by other councilors. Moses was an evangelist who spread the gospel of Jesus Christ through evangelism.

11. **the other day** – to use power to gain a desirable result. I met Peter the other night.

12. **to miss the point** – to have a quick look at or incomplete view of smth. His remarks always missed the point at English.

13. **to write a profile** - recently, not long ago. There is an exclusive profile of the new American president in the "Economist" leader.

14. **to pay by account** – to fail to reach one intended result. "Are you paying cash?" " No, I'll pay by account."

15. **to draw a pension** – to choose a representative of the Conservative Party for an official position by voting. She went to the post office to draw her pension.

Margaret Thatcher Vocabulary II

1. **to read for the Bar** – the belief that all people are equal and should have equal rights. She is reading for a degree in physics.
2. **trade unions** – to make a small sum of money last long. Trade unions staged a demonstration against cuts in welfare spending.
3. **egalitarianism** – an unbearable act of entering into or taking part in a matter which doesn't concern one, and in which one is not wanted. Margaret Thatcher is a champion of egalitarianism.
4. **to widen the franchise** – used of the process of giving or getting food. The 15th and 19th amendments widened the franchise for women and black Americans.
5. **independent school** – which cannot be avoided or prevented from happening. The Harrow school is the most prestigious independent school for boys in England, once finished by George Byron, Winston Churchill and other celebrities.
6. **intolerable interference with/in** – to feel anger and dislike about a proposal that hurts, offends or annoys one. Count Yusupov could not bear Rasputin's intolerable interference with Russia's internal affairs.
7. **to make one's point** – the smaller number, or part less than half. She always makes a point of being punctual.
8. **to murmur** – an organization of workers in a particular trade or profession, formed to represent their interests and deal as a group with employers. Some people are murmuring against the government.
9. **to amount to** – free from government control, private. Her reply amounts to a refusal.
10. **to have a better raft to float up from** – to have advanced or accomplished much in one's career at a particular time. Now you are a prosperous businessman: you must have had a better raft to sail up from.
11. **to resent a suggestion** – to give more people the right to vote in a public election, esp. one held to choose a parliament. I strongly resent her attempts to interfere in my work.
12. **nutritional** - to cause or arrange for somebody to have or use something needed or useful, to supply. Vegetables are good nutritional products.
13. **inevitable** – to study in order to get a university degree in law, to become a lawyer. A confrontation was inevitable because they disliked each other.
14. **minority** – to take particular care about. Boys are very much in the minority in the dancing class.
15. **to provide for** – to complain not officially, but in private. The course is free but you have to provide your own books.
16. **to be a long way in one's circumstances** – to have considerable help or support at the beginning of one's career. The senior manager has been a long way in his circumstances.
17. **to stretch money** – to be equal to in quality or in meaning. Most students have to stretch their money while studying away from home. At first Tommy earned little and had to stretch his money.