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SYNDROME**

**Margaret Thatcher's Hubris and her relations with William Whitelaw  
and other Cabinet colleagues**

It was Margaret Thatcher who coined the phrase “Every Prime Minister needs a Willie”, initially quite unaware of the sexual double entendre, about her *de facto* Deputy Prime Minister, William Whitelaw. It was during a speechwriting session at a Conservative Party Conference. When her team roared with laughter she extracted a promise that the remark would not be repeated. But it was too good a joke to not leak out and like all good humour there was an underlying truth. She did need him and not for the reasons often quoted of his influence over her policies, but for his influence over her personality.

William Whitelaw stood for the leadership of the Conservative Party after Edward Heath had lost two General Elections in 1974. The first in February was very close; Labour was the largest party with 301 seats, the Conservatives were second with 297, yet the Conservatives had won the largest number of votes. Heath tried, but failed, to remain in office with the support of the small parties. At the October election, Harold Wilson had as Prime Minister won eighteen seats from the Conservatives but only had an overall majority of four over all other parties. Heath unwisely stood again for the Conservative leadership under new voting rules but was, surprisingly for many, beaten in the first round by Margaret Thatcher by 130 to 119 votes. With Heath out of the contest, Whitelaw entered the race.

He was what is sometimes called a patrician politician. Those seemed born to rule but from the position that their privileged background carries with it a duty to serve the public good. An earlier relative, Archibald Whitelaw, who died in 1498 was a clergyman who became tutor to two Scottish kings and was Secretary of State under James III of Scotland. Another Whitelaw, John, was hanged in 1683 for being part of the Covenantor's rebellion. In 1892 Whitelaw's grandfather, at the age of 24, won the City of Perth for the Conservatives. His mother's maternal grandfather was Henry Baille MP and a great friend of Disraeli.

He never knew his father; his mother was widowed at 25. He went to Winchester School where Hugh Gaitskell, the Leader of the Labour party also went. Its motto is "Manners Maketh Man" something which became a characteristic feature of the man and his main ambition was to "excel" at golf. He went to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1937 and was captain of the University golf team. He served throughout the Second World War in the Scots Guards and was the holder of the Military Cross and ended the war second in Command of a tank battalion. After fighting on Clydeside, he became, in 1955, MP for the safe Conservative seat of Penrith stretching from the Scottish border down to the Lake District and included part of the Pennine mountain range. He moved his home from Gartshore in Dumbartonshire, where he had inherited his grandfather's estate, to Cumberland and became one of the English gentry. He was as far removed socially from Margaret Thatcher, the daughter of Alderman Roberts, a grocer in Grantham, Lincolnshire, as it was possible to be. Both served in Heath's Cabinet, she as Secretary of State for Education and he as Chief Whip and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Liked by his fellow MPs for his general bonhomie, yet with a reputation for shrewdness, he should have been on the conventional wisdom a shoe-in for the

leadership of his Party. But it was not to be, in part because of the delay in his candidature and the success of her skillfully conducted campaign which meant the momentum was with Thatcher and momentum is a feature of successful politics. Surprisingly resistant to the more traditional Tory approach, Willie Whitelaw's candidacy was brushed aside by MPs. The Party that had chosen the first Jewish Prime Minister, Disraeli, was ready to take a gamble and start the process of electing the first woman Prime Minister.

A new generation of Conservative MPs from a much wider social base had been changing the social base of the Conservative Parliamentary party for some time and Heath was the first beneficiary of this. Yet something much deeper was afoot. There was as I saw from the Labour government benches and in my marginal constituency of Plymouth a harder, more ideological Conservative party was emerging. In all shapes and sizes it was becoming impatient with the British relative economic decline and Margaret Thatcher spoke a language they wanted to hear - of pulling yourself up from your bootstraps; of wanting to reward achievement and to earn more and keep more money. She also had considerable support from those from whom Whitelaw might have expected automatic support - the "knights from the shires". 'Shakes' Morrison, the previous longstanding Chairman of the backbench MPs' 1922 Committee, had for some time referred to Thatcher as a future leader of the party. The enigmatic figure of Sir Airey Neave, a famous prisoner of war at Colditz, was her campaign manager.

From the start of her leadership Whitelaw decided to be loyal but he was one of nature's gossipers and his support was often couched in mild exasperation over the monetarist fervour and its economic consequences stemming from those who she identified as "one of us". Willie Whitelaw

was never in that category. Probably the high water mark of his time as a real influence on her actual decisions was serving on the small War Cabinet at the time of retaking the Falkland Islands in 1982. But soon after, in May, he was humiliated by a party conference vote refusing to back the government's law and order policies much to his chagrin after Thatcher had loudly applauded a speaker supporting the death penalty.

After the 1983 General Election victory Whitelaw became an appointed peer and Leader of the House of Lords. His widespread support in the Conservative Party now did not stem from his support among MPs or for his support for policies which were in the distinction highlighted by the Thatcherites, as "dry" supporters or "wet" opponents. Whitelaw's policies were often portrayed as "dripping wet". The party loved his style nevertheless. His patent honesty and bluff humour, well summed up by his handwritten comment on a speech written for him " Weak point - Shout!" They knew on the things that really mattered Whitelaw was no softy but sound and that stemmed from when he was Home Secretary in April 1980 when he earned the respect of the SAS Commander Peter de la Billiere and dealt very well with the seizure of twenty six hostages at the Iranian Embassy by six Iranian opponents of the Iranian Government. Thatcher, he claimed very specifically to his biographers, had given him authority to act on his own initiative. By contrast, she claimed, in her biography, the ultimate decision to go in was hers. A small sign that there was little real generosity in her relationship with him that she could not even let him have the full credit on this single issue.

When Whitelaw stepped down at the end of 1987 following a minor stroke and collapse at a Carol Service in Westminster, Thatcher recommended a hereditary Viscountcy to the Queen as she did a hereditary knighthood for

her husband when in 1990 she was forced out by her own MPs. But with one other exception those were the only hereditary honours she agreed to. She was in this respect, as in many others, a pragmatist and not a traditionalist.

It was Nigel Lawson in his biography who wrote about Whitelaw's departure from government in very moving terms and with considerable insight:

"Only someone who served at the heart of the Thatcher Government can fully appreciate the key role Willie played. He was irreplaceable. It was not simply that he was a wise elder statesman of immense experience and acute political instinct, unfailingly loyal and devoid of personal ambition, to whom Margaret could always turn. He also resolved many of the tensions that arise between Cabinet colleagues in any government before they even reached Margaret. And when she was involved, it was he alone who could sometimes, although inevitably not always, prevail upon her to avoid needless confrontations or eschew follies. Certainly, from my own point of view he could scarcely have gone at a worse time"

He went on to add, "when she needed him most she ignored him completely, and instead retreated even further into her Downing St bunker."

The man who could have been the "toe holder" in her life and stopped her hubris developing as Louis Howe did for Franklin Roosevelt was from 1988 shut out of her life by her own choice.

Sir Geoffrey Howe was removed by Thatcher as Foreign Secretary in July 1988 following a joint resignation threat with Lawson prior to the Madrid European Council. This she, not unreasonably, deeply resented though she did modify her hostility to joining the Exchange Rate Mechanism at the Council meeting. As Lawson wrote, "Margaret Thatcher went out of her way to humiliate him at every turn, berating him in front of colleagues and conspicuously excluding him from ad hoc meetings of senior Ministers. It was extraordinary conduct..."

It was also another manifestation of contempt, one of the key signs of Hubris Syndrome. Another was recklessness and Lawson records that "It was yet another example of her recklessness which one senior official, a particular shrewd and close observer, described to me as the outstanding characteristic of her long-drawn-out final phase."

In Lawson's view, and one that I shared, not from her party but watching her from the opposition benches, she was reckless over Europe, reckless over the Poll Tax, reckless over what she said in public, and reckless over her colleagues.

By October 1989 Lawson too had resigned. She had refused at his suggestion to sack within the year her part time economic adviser, Alan Walters. He was telling Wall St, through US bankers and policy makers, that sterling needed to fall, thereby openly contradicting, with the tacit support of Thatcher, the Chancellor on a traditionally core and highly sensitive issue on which only the Chancellor spoke publicly in Government.

Her refusal to give any ground made his task impossible. In the words of the *Economist*, "The day Nigel Lawson said 'enough' may be the day that

Mrs Thatcher's term of office started to draw to its close.” Perceptive words.

Lawson spoke effectively on the floor of the House of Commons, using the tradition of personal statements by resigning Ministers. Speaking after Question Time to receive maximum media attention, he was heard in silence with no interruptions. Sitting huddled up on the Front Bench I watched Sir Geoffrey Howe appearing to have been sidelined into oblivion. How wrong I was. Nearly a year later Nemesis struck in the most unlikely shape of Howe, always far more ambitious than anyone gave him credit for.

On 22 October 1990 I attended a memorial service for Ian Gow who had been Margaret Thatcher's Parliamentary Private Secretary and very close to her. He had been murdered by the IRA. Our offices were near to each other in Parliament and we often chatted. I could not stop thinking of how on the eve of the General Election in 1997 as Foreign Secretary I had attended the memorial service for Airey Neave, following an IRA car bomb attack in the precinct of the House of Commons. It meant that Thatcher had lost two strong people ready to talk truth to power. What fascinated me at the funeral was that Howe gave the address. I had never known that Gow and he were friends. So she had lost a person who could at least talk privately to her as well as Howe. Again on display were the intrusive security measures introduced for her protection following the Brighton bomb attack that had nearly blown up the entire Cabinet. Wherever she went security measures contributed to a more general isolation. A democratic politician needs to be able to "touch the flesh" and feel people through the rough and tumble of the hustings. All that has left British politics and it later contributed to the isolation of Tony Blair. They move and live in a bubble, very conducive to hubris.

The following weekend in October the Rome Summit took place and the Italian Prime Minister Andreotti was party to a political ambush on Thatcher. To which she responded with her famous series of "No, No, No" statements. She appeared in the House of Commons on 30 October on an emotional high and the adrenalin, as I saw from opposite her, on the front bench below the gangway, was pumping round her system as she handbagged every European federalist proposition.

Howe's face was a picture of misery as she opposed a single currency and even backtracked from the government's position over the hard ecu. He looked like the "dead sheep" of Denis Healey's famous jibe but we were soon to fully discover his capacity to "ravage" her in a way which neither Denis, nor any other parliamentarian, including myself, had ever been able to do.

At a Cabinet meeting Margaret Thatcher "lost it" in the sense that there was no longer any reserve in her handling of Geoffrey Howe sitting beside her on her left with the Cabinet Secretary on her right. Had Willie Whitelaw been present, however, I have no doubt that she would never have embarked on what can only be called a rant and a humiliating evisceration of Howe in terms which made many members of the Cabinet ashamed and angry at her behaviour. That Cabinet had watched over the years as at least over her behavior and conduct how Whitelaw had been a constraint. Even just as a reminder of what constituted good manners. That meeting was the straw that broke the camel's back. Not just stimulating Geoffrey Howe to resign as Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Lords on 1 November, the day Parliament prorogued until the next Session. But all Thatcher's Cabinet had collectively seen that she was no longer the person they had elected back in 1975 and that she had acquired a personality change in office. Hectoring was now the norm.

The evidence for what actually happened at this Cabinet meeting has not



emerged in full. Perhaps because what happened led to the bloody and divisive crisis that still bedevils the Conservative Party on Europe in 2013. The best reconstruction of what happened in dramatic terms appears in the film *Iron Lady* with Meryl Streep brilliantly depicting Thatcher. It is not accurate in every detail, but as a portrayal of what hubris is in action, it is unlikely to be easily matched.

It starts with Thatcher calling in question their collective lack of courage. "May I tell you on behalf of those who have to fight their way up and don't feel guilty about it..." she goes on, "some of you agree with the latest French proposal, then why don't you get on a boat to Calais."

Then to Geoffrey Howe on the timetable for the new session of Parliament, "Lord President, why have we not made more progress....,"

Looking at his papers in front of him on the Cabinet table, she says sharply "What is that? Is that the timetable? May I see it!" She looks at the paper "the wording is sloppy here...and here!"

"If you say so" says Howe.

"I do say so" says Thatcher, "It's ridiculous two t's in committee!" The personal contempt must have been evident to everyone around the long table whatever the exact words.

The dialogue continued but it appears from its reference to hospital more like an earlier conversation she had had with Geoffrey Howe on 2 December 1981, when according to her official biographer<sup>1</sup>, she burst in unannounced to a late night meeting in the Treasury 'quite full of whisky'

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher. The Authorised Biography. Vol I Not For Turning* (Allen Lane, 2013), p.650.

and berated Howe who records her saying "If this is the best you can do, then I'd better send you to hospital and deliver the statement myself." So the tension between the two was long standing. But the contempt nine years later had reached a far higher level. In the film she ends "as the Lord President has chosen to come to Cabinet unprepared, I will have to close the meeting."

The touch paper was now in place for a challenge to her leadership but it was not to be lit until the debate on the Queen's Speech on 13 November. Howe then used his right to make a resignation speech after becoming very annoyed by days of briefing from No 10 which tried to portray his resignation as an argument about style not substance. Having thought long and hard on what to say and consulted close friends, in particular his wife, who in one interview with her official biographer Denis Thatcher referred to as "that bitch of a wife" he decided in a measured tone to deliberately focus on one central purpose; namely to encourage an election to choose a new party leader and Prime Minister. The speech was a full frontal attack, the speech of an assassin, with every word crafted and sharpened to penetrate ever deeper. He ended, "The time has come for others to consider their response to the tragic conflict of loyalty with which I have perhaps wrestled for too long. "

Michael Heseltine, who had literally walked out of the Cabinet a few years earlier, announced he would challenge her for the leadership. On 19 November while Thatcher was in Paris attending a CSCE Conference the first ballot showed that even though Heseltine was 52 votes behind her she was three votes short of the 56 she needed to avoid it going to a second ballot. On Thursday 22 November at 10 am, after it had become clear to her from talks with every Cabinet Minister that she had lost the confidence

of her parliamentary colleagues, Margaret Thatcher resigned. A fate that was to befall Tony Blair sixteen years later.

It was the ultimate demonstration of how hubris is followed by my nemesis and that in a system based on the fusion not the separation of powers a Prime Minister is, unlike a President, answerable to the legislature. Whereas a US President, apart from Congressional impeachment, is answerable to the people. Their fellow MPs sustain the executive in the division lobbies in the House of Commons, they choose their leader and they can throw them out. The traditional justification for such a system is MPs know their leader's strengths and their weaknesses and they can detect far earlier than the people whether their leader has acquired Hubris Syndrome. In her case it was impairing her judgement and when that happens it is the duty of MPs to withdraw support.

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