

## Margaret Thatcher: they underrated her, and always paid the price

Mrs Thatcher was not regarded as much of a threat by the Labour Party when she became Conservative leader in 1975



Margaret Thatcher with Michael Foot, who became the leader of the Labour Party in 1980 Photo: Daily Mirror

By David Owen

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Not many people in 1975 believed that Margaret Thatcher would be as serious a threat to Labour as she became. Barbara Castle, however, sensed immediately that she was a star: “She has lent herself with grace and charm to every piece of photographers’ gimmickry, but don’t we all when the prize is big enough?... She is in love; in love with power, success and with herself... If we have to have Tories, good luck to her.”

No male MP could have written those words. Many, on all sides of the Commons, underrated Mrs Thatcher throughout her leadership. Few male MPs would have been ready to adapt as she did to her leadership: changing her voice, clothes and hairstyle.

She was in that respect a consummate professional. To be one of the opposition party leaders up against her as prime minister in the Commons was no easy task, mainly because her image was very different from the reality. She was, in truth, a cautious politician and all the more deadly for it. I can almost hear some readers objecting to that description. “Cautious! What about ‘The lady’s not for

turning'?"

Yet consider her actions, not her rhetoric. She cautiously packed her bags in No 10 ready to depart before each election, as a reminder to herself not to take victory for granted. Her first U-turn came early, with a pragmatic acceptance that recognising Bishop Abel Muzorewa's government, as she had pledged to do before the election, was not credible internationally. Instead, she reluctantly but wisely took the advice of her foreign secretary, Lord Carrington, and began a process that ended in the Lancaster House conference and the settlement allowing Southern Rhodesia to move to independence as Zimbabwe.

On February 18 1981, in the face of a strike threat from the popular miners' leader, Joe Gormley, she paid up rather than risk defeat. Yet she sensed that a full-blown confrontation with the NUM under its next leader, Arthur Scargill, was inevitable. She ordered the building up of coal stocks in power stations. Even during the long miners' strike of 1984-5, she never used the new powers over unions she had put on the statute book.

I saw her on Privy Council terms privately during the Falklands war and encountered her on the floor of the House frequently. During the tumultuous emergency debate on the Saturday after the invasion, she was vulnerable. Apart from one occasion when, in relief at having retaken South Georgia, she used the word "rejoice" in Downing Street, she was constrained publicly and worried privately.

After she had ruled out any attack on Argentine air bases, I saw her on a Privy Counsellor basis. She was defensive when I warned that she might have to bomb Argentine airfields if Ark Royal was hit by a missile, and could only steam slowly out of range. Only in victory did she make the mistake of taking the salute at a parade in the City of London that should have involved the Queen.

It was not always easy for the SDP to support her government. Denis Healey called me "Mrs Thatcher in trousers". It was a jibe that I could live with as the price for demonstrating that the SDP was a different force in politics, supporting her on some issues but critical on others. Yet she never gave any credit to the SDP. In that sense, she was fiercely party political, saying, inexplicably given her views on defence and economic policy, that we should have stayed and fought our ground within the Labour Party. She even tried to exclude the SDP from being represented at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day – a battle we won with the quiet support of the British Legion and Conservative-supporting newspapers.

It was not until after her third general election victory in 1987, and after Willie Whitelaw left the Cabinet, that she began to display signs of a gathering hubris that led to her downfall. Her strengths, in part, proved to be weaknesses: huge insensitivity to non-achievers, a narrowness of vision, and certainty that she was right. She was ideological, patriotic, politically partisan but intelligent, well-

briefed and committed. The objective record was never as perfect or as planned as many of her supporters liked to believe. Nevertheless she was, after Clement Attlee, easily the best of our post-war prime ministers.

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