

**Tribute to the late
Baroness (Margaret) Thatcher
By Sir Jeremy Heywood and Sir Bob Kerslake
Daily Telegraph 15 Apr 2013 (See Note 1)**

Much has been written about Margaret Thatcher's extraordinary career as a political leader, but much less attention has been given to the indelible impression left on the Civil Service, and on the civil servants who worked closely with her, by Britain's first female prime minister.

When she came into power in 1979, after the so-called winter of discontent, many saw the Civil Service as the all-too-willing stewards of the "orderly decline of Britain". By the time she left office 11 years later, the landscape was transformed and the Civil Service modernised. As Lord Wilson, her former Cabinet Secretary of the late 1980s, said, "she made us positive about the revitalisation of the British economy". Her drive and determination changed the way people, including civil servants, thought about their own country.

Alongside radical tax reforms, the abandonment of exchange controls and prices and incomes policies, the introduction of Right to Buy, a major overhaul of industrial relations law and the world's first privatisation programme, Margaret Thatcher also led a significant programme of Civil Service reform. She began with an attack on waste and red tape designed to make the Civil Service more businesslike – through a programme of intensive "efficiency scrutinies" inspired by Derek Rayner, the former CEO of Marks & Spencer. Then, following a review by Sir Robin Ibbs of ICI, she launched the Next Steps Initiative, which led to the creation of executive agencies, transforming the Whitehall landscape. According to Lord Butler, who worked closely with Margaret Thatcher as a parliamentary private secretary in Downing Street, this meant that "instead of looking up to their ministers, chief executives looked down to the performance of their agencies" and out towards the public.

And – perhaps of even greater long-term significance – she opened up key Civil Service posts to external competition. Reflecting her commitment to reducing the size and scope of the state, the number of civil servants fell by 171,000 in her term. This felt like a seismic shift – but, as the Institute for Government has noted, the reductions seen in the past three years are going further and faster. (See Note 2)

Despite her "Iron Lady" image and her conviction politics – and a deep distrust of certain Whitehall departments – Margaret Thatcher mostly held a rather traditional view of the Civil Service, supporting its values of impartiality and integrity. Instead of setting herself up in conflict, she found allies for reform within. As she said in her autobiography: "The sheer professionalism of the British Civil Service, which allows governments to come and go with a minimum of dislocation and a maximum of efficiency, is something other countries with different systems have every cause to envy."

Contrary to what many have suggested, Mrs Thatcher never sought to staff No 10 with "Yes men" or civil servants who shared her politics. Rather, as her foreign affairs private secretary Charles Powell rather colourfully puts it, "she saw us as court eunuchs". (See Note 3)

Above all, she valued civil servants who did not simply defend the status quo, and civil servants, no matter how junior, who could back up their arguments with clear evidence and withstand a barrage of forensic questioning at all hours. As Lord Armstrong, her long-serving Cabinet Secretary, recounted: "She was a glutton for work and took an infinity of trouble to master the detail of every subject that she was called on to consider." Her infamous working hours allowed the prime minister to consume vast quantities of briefings and from her No 10 flat she would nourish her civil servants with home-cooked shepherd's pie whenever they were working late. Though she demanded the highest standards of analysis, accuracy, and grammar, official advice that did meet those standards was always read with care and perhaps on at least some occasions helped inform her decisions. (Note 4)

Talking to the civil servants who worked most closely with Margaret Thatcher, their overriding memory is of a prime minister who – whatever the pressures – was the best kind of boss. She was

kindly and unswervingly loyal to her team and, once she had decided what she thought, provided clear and consistent direction. To the country she was an Iron Lady, to those who worked with her she was a kind and considerate boss.

Notes

1. Sir Jeremy Heywood is the Cabinet Secretary and Sir Bob Kerslake heads the Home Civil Service. It is hard to understand what made two supposedly apolitical officials feel they had to write this tribute to a controversial politician, to appear in a newspaper with very strong political views. Sir Bob and Sir Jeremy will seldom if ever have met Baroness Thatcher, and their supposed recollections are rather different from those of the officials who worked closely with the then Prime Minister in No. 10. – see further notes below.

2. Former senior officials do not remember her being hugely keen on opening up top civil service jobs to outsiders. It was Ted Heath and Harold Wilson who were rather more keen, albeit on a limited scale - Wilson with his Hungarians Kaldor and Balogh in the Treasury, and Heath with his team of businessmen under Sir Richard Meyjes from Shell. That agenda then resurfaced under PMs Blair and Brown.

Indeed, Mrs Thatcher actually refused to give permission for the continuation of the excellent Direct Entry Principal scheme which brought good people into the civil service at a relatively senior level, for reasons senior officials could never understand. Sir Derek Rayner was one of a few exceptions to the norm.

3. Others' experience was that, while those who worked in No 10 were treated as "one of us", she did not really like dissent, especially if she felt that those giving the advice were not her natural acolytes. "Ask the senior folk in the Department of Employment then under Jim Prior if she liked dissent or indeed those who tried to brief her on civil service pay. Even Cabinet Minister Christopher Soames used to moan that being in Government was not fun any more. "

4. Although the final sentence of this paragraph is clearly a veiled mandarin's criticism of a woman who was very sure of her own opinions, the wider point is true in that Mrs Thatcher did indeed read her papers, attended to the evidence and was rarely interested in 'presentation', which she left to Bernard Ingham.

The most famous example of her lack of interest in others' opinions was [the famous dinner](#) between her and Permanent Secretaries which the Head of the Civil Service (Ian Bancroft) set up to try to mend fences with the PM after early signs of strain. This was a failure because allegedly she spent too long haranguing them - with the famous unfortunate result that when Ministry of Defence Permanent Secretary Sir Frank Cooper had to leave for a loo break, Sir Laurence Airey said too audibly that "Frank has gone to get the SAS to get us out".