

Sexing Up Maggie

BY HARRY REID

ONE OF THE many silly myths about Margaret Thatcher enthusiastically propagated by her detractors is that she was losing electoral popularity by the mid-1980s, particularly after the miners' strike.

The fact is that in 1987 she won her third general election victory in a row, receiving well over 13.5 million votes, significantly more than she had in her first general election victory eight years earlier.

Tony Blair also won three general elections in a row, but in his third he received four million votes fewer than he had when he swept to power in 1997. While Blair shed support during his first eight years, Thatcher actually gained in electoral endorsement. In her third victory Thatcher received more than four million votes more than Blair did in his third victory. In terms of electoral success, Thatcher wins hands down.

What is most remarkable about Thatcher's electoral achievement in her third general election victory is that she received this colossal support (she was more than 3.5 million votes ahead of Labour) despite being utterly humiliated in Scotland, where only ten Tories were elected (compared with 22 in her first general election victory).

By 1987, after eight years of Thatcherism, the lady was well and truly disliked north of the Border. Many, possibly most, Scots, had contempt for her policies and what she seemed to stand for. A large minority actually detested her.

In 1987 a third of Scots wanted independence. It is indisputable that Margaret Thatcher did immense damage to the Union. The growing Caledonian antipathy to her was partly predicated on her policies, notably the poll tax, but the dislike was also fuelled by her persona, which so many Scots found repellent.

The distinguished Scottish academic (now a nationalist MSP) Professor Chris Harvie wrote that Thatcher was intensely hated in Scotland because she personified every quality the Scots had always disliked in the English: snobbery, bossiness, selfishness – and stupidity. This was perhaps over the top: whatever Thatcher was, she was not stupid, and I doubt if she was selfish. But Harvie was authentically reflecting the public mood.

In his excellent new account of Thatcher's disastrous relationship with Scotland, the contemporary historian David Torrance mentions the behaviour of another eminent Scottish academic whose aversion to Thatcher was even more intense than that of Harvie. This man, the educationist Professor Nigel Grant, could not contain himself when the prime minister spoke at a charity lunch in Glasgow early in 1989. He abused her loudly and long, such was his ferocious contempt for the lady.

When Thatcher started her address, the audience was palpably hostile, but the majority remained silent. Grant leapt to his feet and booed loudly and then hissed and hissed again. Throughout her speech, he heckled her with venom. I remember this well because I was sitting next to Professor Grant.

His behaviour was extraordinary but it was manifestly spontaneous; he simply lost control. It was clear that most of those

attending the lunch (and it was a large one; several hundred were present) were with him, despite the appalling discourtesy.

The fact is that by the mid-1980s Thatcher had lost Scotland. This was a disaster for such an enthusiastically Unionist politician, a leader who grandly claimed that the Tory party was a "national party or nothing". This was a quote from Disraeli, which Thatcher duly delivered to an audience of Scots Tories. In this context, national meant British. So, in Scotland anyway, the Tory party became, by her own admission, nothing.

Thatcher could never really grasp that Scotland itself was a nation, and a proud one; that was part of the problem. For her, much as she tried to respect and to understand Scotland, the country was just a component part of the UK. In losing Scotland, she grievously diminished her party's unionist credentials, and she helped to pave the way for the fragmentation of the Union she cherished.

Thus the most successful and controversial British leader of modern times, and the most politically talented Unionist, could not maintain the unity of the UK. That is, in essence, her legacy in Scotland. It could be argued that she, more than anyone, paved the way for eventual Scottish independence. If that seems far fetched, let me predict that the results of the 2010 general election will confirm this inexorable trend. The Tories may well recover overwhelming popularity in England, but not in Scotland. The Union will become a nonsense if the governing party is strongly endorsed in England and contemptuously dismissed in Scotland.

Even well before she was first elected prime minister in 1979, some of Thatcher's more astute advisers were seriously worried about how she would "play" in Scotland. At that time I was friendly with Alex Fletcher, a decent Scottish Tory MP of the old school who was to become a junior minister in her first administration. Alex arranged for me and another Scottish journalist (Julie Davidson, who was to become my wife) to have an informal chat with Thatcher's senior media adviser, Sir Gordon Reece, at the Tory headquarters in Smith Square, Westminster. This was early in 1978. At that time Thatcher had been leader of HM Opposition for three years but she was still an unknown quantity. She had not made much of an impact, despite the fact that the Labour Government of Jim Callaghan was clearly floundering.

Even those closest to her did not quite know what to make of her. Reece, an urbane Liverpudlian, was in the business of reshaping her. He was, among many other things, a PR genius. It was he who hired Saatchi and Saatchi as the Tories' advertising agency. One of his tasks was to "transform" Thatcher in readiness for government. He had twin and apparently contradictory aims: to smooth the rough edges of her persona, but also to toughen her up.

Reece received us in his large office with courtesy and not a little curiosity. I was surprised by how much time he gave us. As the wide-ranging conversation developed, it became clear that even then, in 1978, this most shrewd man had serious concerns about how Thatcher should present herself in Scotland. He was uneasy about her potential inability to relate to the Scottish people.

I recall him telling us, with remarkable candour, that he had arranged for Thatcher to take advice from a professional actress. One of this lady's tasks was to be in effect a voice coach; she was to try to get Thatcher to soften and deepen her rather shrill tones, and to make her voice more "sexy".

As we discussed the wider implications of this, the conversation took an extraordinary and somewhat fanciful turn. We actually talked about the possibility of Thatcher trying to adopt a gentle Scottish accent when she was in Scotland. In retrospect, this seems utterly ridiculous, though she did later have a tendency to call individual Scottish men "laddie" when she was north of the Border. She also took to quoting Burns and extolling the sublime virtues of whisky, a drink of which she was genuinely fond.

Of course this came over as insincere and patronising. You sensed that it would not have taken much to persuade her to do an impersonation of Portobello's finest, Sir Harry Lauder. But what was most significant about our chat with Reece was that even as early as March 1978 there were clearly serious worries, among those

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around her, about how she would be received in Scotland.

In a sense, Torrance's book is a protracted account of this very factor. She was not well regarded in Scotland from the start; she never even enjoyed a honeymoon with the Scots. And there was an inevitability in the ongoing deterioration of her relations with the chippy Caledonians. I think that one of the keys to this is that she was a genuinely world class politician. She was at her best on the grandest of stages.

To write that in any Scottish publication is to invite withering vituperation, but I reckon that Thatcher will be celebrated most for her considerable global achievements. She played an indubitable and crucial role in ending the Cold War, and even if she is remembered mainly for her ability to persuade her good friend Ronald Reagan to take her other good friend Mikhail Gorbachev seriously, for that achievement alone every single citizen of the world owes her gratitude.

In terms of UK politics, I think her major success was to kickstart the Northern Ireland peace process (something for which she is given scandalously scant credit). It was in 1985 that she courageously, and against all her own atavistic instincts, came to the conclusion that there could never be a successful process if the Dublin government was to be permanently excluded from it. So she took a momentous and genuinely historic decision; the Dublin government would be given the right not just to be considered directly on Northern Irish matters, but even more remarkably, to play

a part in the constitutional negotiations.

This was far-sighted and courageous, but it produced a pitiful if predictable reaction of vicious fury from the so-called loyalists in Ulster. Ian Paisley fiercely told her that she had capitulated to the IRA and called her a "Jezebel". Back in Westminster, the anger could not be contained. Her closest political ally, her PPS Ian Gow, resigned in protest. The most cerebral right wing politician of the time, Enoch Powell, denounced her in the Commons for her "treachery". A prominent Northern Ireland MP actually called her a prostitute.

Indirectly, the visionary decision rebounded on her in Scotland; in the 1987 general election the Tory vote went down in certain Scottish seats partly because of anger at this "cosying up" to Dublin. In Scotland, ancient prejudices run deep.

Funnily enough, in Scotland itself she never did anything quite so bold or so provocative. Despite the bitterly contested imposition of the dreaded poll tax, her instinct regarding Scotland was often to try to appease. In this she evinced an unusually emollient tendency. One of her younger Scottish ministers, George Younger, claimed that she made "a terrific effort" to understand Scotland and to win the hearts of the Scottish people.

And as has been pointed out, and not always by observers overtly sympathetic to her, she presided over a significant growth of individual opportunity in Scotland. She enfranchised many individual Scots, both socially and economically. The *Herald* journalist Ronnie E Dundas – for many years a respected commentator on Scottish business – wrote in 1987, with some prescience, that "we are all Thatcherites now".

Here Dundas was, though he didn't know it, anticipating the invention of New Labour and the rise and rise of Tony Blair. While Dundas was to a large extent right (without Thatcher there could not have been New Labour, in which so many able Scots politicians were to play a leading role) most Scots would to this day, 22 years on, refuse to accept that "we are all Thatcherites now". The Scottish dislike, even hatred of her, was sometimes irrational. That perhaps enhanced rather than diluted its potency.

David Torrance is sympathetic to Thatcher and her party, but his balanced and very thorough book is not an exercise in special pleading. It is careful and judicious in tone. He concedes mistakes by Thatcher; for example, she was not subtle enough to give a Scottish dimension to some of her controversial privatisations. And she fast tracked a clever but combative firebrand, Michael Forsyth, as one of her main men in Scotland; he was in some ways brilliant, but he wasn't yet mature enough for the role she gave him, and he was far too abrasive. Yet it has to be said that the elegant smoothie George Younger had fared little better.

Most of civic Scotland was against her; most of the indigenous Scottish media were against her; and that great distinctive pillar of Scottish public identity, the Kirk, was against her. Torrance, in an interesting addendum, quotes the whole of her famous address to the General Assembly in 1988. Reading it again, a generation forward, I cannot see what the fuss was about.



Cartoon by Richard Cole (www.richardcoledtd.com)

But some puffed-up Scottish clerics chose to regard it as a grievous piece of insolence.

She did have some friends north of the Border. There were senior Scots lawyers and senior Scots academics who admired her and dared to say so publicly, but there were not many of them. And in her own party many of the leading figures who really understood Scotland and the Scots – such as the late *Herald* columnist Brian Meek – were constantly thwarted by her inability to listen to what they were telling her.

Meek was special; a consummate politician who confined his talents to local government, he could foresee the necessity of devolution and tried bravely and doggedly to convert his party. His was a sage voice in the Scottish Tory wilderness.

Meanwhile Thatcher grated, and how. Torrance, sympathetic as he is, notes that

there was something in her voice, something unpalatable in her style and manner, which ensured that Scotland was never going to warm to her (despite the considerable efforts of Sir Gordon Reece). The problem was twofold: her own personal style, and her political creed. As Torrance shrewdly suggests, hating Thatcher became a convenient distraction from addressing some of the hard choices that she herself was always prepared to confront.

Thatcher had no intention of destroying Scotland, but she could never understand Scotland. In that respect, dare I say it, she was not unlike Mary, Queen of Scots. That unfortunate woman divides us to this day. I suspect that Thatcher will still divide people several centuries on. But it is unfortunate sad that so few prominent Scots, even today, are prepared to be in any way gra-

rious about Thatcher. The wrath is still nursed, to keep it warm.

Torrance, an assiduous historian, interviewed many people in the course of his researches; praise for Thatcher was hard to come by. (A significant exception was the historian Tom Devine, always a generous and warm hearted man who, while conceding that Thatcher could have handled economic change with greater sensitivity, reckoned that she presided over a process of transition and even transformation in the course of which the generality of Scots became undeniably more affluent.)

Torrance concludes, rather bleakly, by invoking the “seemingly insurmountable force of Scottish mythology”. In his blunt but apposite phrase, a “corrosive unthinking anti-Thatcherism” persists.

And that, it would seem, is the settled

conclusion of most of the Scottish people; they loathed Thatcher when she was in power, and they still loathe her now. You sometimes wonder if the Scots would recognise a world class politician if he or she smacked them in the eye. Many Scots have persuaded themselves that Thatcher did smack us in our collective eye, but maybe because of this, are blind to her achievements on a bigger stage.

Scots clearly do not loathe Gordon Brown with the same intensity. Indeed, despite his faltering performance as leader of the British state, many Scots still admire him. He is a less courageous, less globally admired and (in UK terms) less popular politician and he also lacks the bonus of endorsement as prime minister in a general election. But in Scotland he remains respected by many.

Thatcher was very English; she tried to understand the Scots, and to communicate sympathetically with us, but she failed abysmally. Brown is by contrast a Scot whose political career has been predicated on his consistent emphasis on Britishness. He detests Scottish nationalism, regarding it as an affront to both his own political ambitions and to his defining notion of the importance of the British state.

After the scrupulously researched, lucidly presented and extremely readable work of Torrance, it is something of a chore to wade through the new collection of essays on Britishness which has been edited by the right wing London journalist Matthew d'Ancona. The standard of these pieces is variable and while some of them are plausible and engaging, altogether they hardly amount to a convincing case for Britishness.

Not one of the contributors seriously confronts the myriad and grievous failures of the British state, from its founding in 1707 right up to the present day. There have been successes and heroic periods, of course there have, not least in the middle of the last century, but there have also been many defeats, much shoddiness and corruption, corrosive incompetence, and in the last 20 years or so, an alarming and precipitate decline in almost everything, including social standards.

To be fair to Gordon Brown, his introduction to the book is one of the better essays. The Prime Minister is nothing if not intelligent, and he tries hard – and almost convincingly – to argue that the most important, and quintessential, British quality is liberty. But then I recall what his own government is trying to do to some of our liberties. And in any case it is wrong to suggest that the British state has been celebrated for valuing and defending liberty. Just look at how it treated the great Tom Paine – a salutary tale if ever there was one.

Brown insists that with “a clearer sense of our common nation [here, like Thatcher, he means British] purpose” we shall be “better equipped to address the challenges that Britain faces in a rapidly changing world”. Is this the heroic rhetoric of an inspirational leader, or is it the dismal vapidity of a tired speechwriter? It could be either, but I cannot regard as a stirring clarion call.

Here is a simple and fair question: If David Cameron's Tories win the next general election, and at the same time Scotland overwhelmingly rejects these Tories, where then will our so-called common British purpose be found?

We In Scotland – Thatcherism In A Cold Climate
David Torrance
Birlinn, £20.00
pp320 ISBN 1841588164

Being British – The Search For The Values That Bind The Nation
Edited by Matthew D'Ancona
Mainstream, £9.99
pp288, ISBN 1845964144