

Will Great Britain's oligarchy give Prime Minister Thatcher the sack?

by Laurent Murawiec

A cartoon of a lady's shoe about to slide on a banana skin, the title "Thatcher steps out," and a lead editorial on the same theme by *The Economist*, the weekly voice of the appeasement-minded British oligarchy, signaled to all but the blindest that something serious was afoot in British politics. Lord Peter Carrington, now the Secretary-General of NATO, and the boys at the Foreign Office have decided to dump their tool, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in order to push through with their "New Yalta" accord with the Soviet government.

Although she has turned from an "Iron Lady," strident in her anti-Soviet rhetoric, to something approximating a wet noodle in dealings with the East under Foreign Office control, Thatcher is still too much associated with her former posture and with U.S. President Ronald Reagan. She is a liability in the "New Yalta" context, not the politician who can carry through the military and economic "decoupling" of Europe from the United States that Carrington's deal with Moscow calls for.

In consequence, the British press has been ferociously attacking her almost daily. *The Economist*, otherwise identified with such policy-making institutions as the "liberal-conservative" Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House), began it all with a vicious lampoon of the Prime Minister on July 7. "Mrs. Thatcher has lost the ability to move . . . without slipping on a banana skin and falling on her face. She looks alarmingly like Mr. Harold Wilson in the closing years of his 1966 administration," a compliment as devastating as they come.

The Economist tore into her handling of European Community negotiations on the British budget contribution, reporting that she "put Europe into repeated crisis over relatively small amounts of money," mainly because of "her notoriously short attention span. She became bored with the Europe affair."

In all ways she has abused "the dictatorial powers granted by the British Constitution. . . . She is the boss. . . . She does not find it easy to think long-term . . . nor does she value help in adversity. Her cabinet is more dominated by its Prime Minister than any since the war. . . . She suffers from the occupational hazard of all egocentric leaders: having rid

herself of dissident ministers, she is increasingly inclined to confuse independence of judgment with disloyalty.

"Number 10 Downing Street, the epicentre of British political life, is a curiously empty place. The prime minister flaps round its corridors like a solitary hawk looking for prey. . . . Nowhere in [her] entourage is the wisdom of experience or the leavening of an independent view. . . . Since much of what is wrong with the government is rooted in *the Prime Minister's own personality it is hard to say what can be done about it. . . . If Mrs. Thatcher is not prepared to open up government to advice . . . the revolt will spread from the Lords to the Commons. . . . It will do no good Mrs. Thatcher blaming the country. Ultimately, the country will blame her* [emphasis added]."

After years of virtual personality cult around the Iron Lady, the shock was rude; the next day, *The Times* gave unusual front-page coverage to *The Economist's* outburst. Floodgates were being opened. "The country is watching," the *Financial Times* chimed in with a July 12 editorial on her failure to end an 18-week-old miners' strike. "If [the government] were to falter now, its entire reputation would collapse. We should be back in the 1970s, with a vengeance, and Mrs. Thatcher's administration would be seen as no different from what has gone before."

Labor and economic trouble

Of late, barely one initiative taken by her government has met with anything but embarrassing to abject defeat on the domestic front. On the parliamentary scene, the presumably Conservative-oriented House of Lords inflicted a devastating late-June defeat of a government proposal to cancel Metropolitan Council elections.

On the economic side, the pound sterling sank to an historically-unprecedented \$1.30 and below—in spite of two successive rises in the base lending rate taking it up 3% in a few days. "The government's financial strategy is in ruins," the *Daily Telegraph* commented. It started with ridicule: Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson stood up in the House of Commons to say that the base lending rate would not move; one day after, the pound sinking under foreign-exchange pressure, the rate was increased by 1%. The week

after, the same scenario occurred, except that it was Thatcher herself who spoke out, and the rate then went up by 2%. Nevertheless, sterling is now trading at lows around \$1.32.

The much heralded policy of privatization of public enterprises suffered an embarrassing set-back with the failure of the Enterprise Oil stock sale. A *Financial Times* opinion poll taken among senior directors of British companies—a key component of Mrs. Thatcher's middle-class electorate—revealed July 16 that “confidence in the government is waning.”

Labor strife is reaching 1970s-like intensity: The miners' strike now in its 18th week, featuring mass violence at the pits and having serious side-effects for the already faltering steel sector, has been joined by a dock workers' strike, which stops 80% of the country's foreign trade. Criticism of the government's inability to settle the miners' strike, which has officially been left for the Coal Board and the National Union of Miners under Communist agent Arthur Scargill to resolve, has been rife. Laws are being violated by the pickets, by solidarity strikers, but the government does nothing, critics rail, for fear of confrontation with the Trade Union Confederation.

“The side effects are beginning to mount,” the *Financial Times* comments. “Mrs. Thatcher could find something like a general strike on her hands,” *The Economist* complains, “just after she has expended much political capital on less essential things. . . .”

Trouble with the services

Another blow came on July 16, when High Court Judge Justice Glidewell threw out the government's ban on unions at the top-secret Government Communication Headquarters at Cheltenham. The decision had been taken in January by Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe, and its nullification is a slap in the government's face.

An even more serious event occurred on July 2, when the chief of the defense staff and the chiefs of staff of the Royal Navy, the Army, and the Royal Air Force exercised their right to go over the head of defense minister Michael Heseltine, and make representations directly to the prime minister, to protest a planned radical reorganization of the defense staff and ministry. Heseltine's cost-cutting and cost-benefit purge was even made the subject of a biting published satire by Admiral of the Fleet Sir Henry Leach, First Sea Lord in 1979-82. But Thatcher backed her technocratic minister to the hilt, and the entrenched powers representing various currents of the British military imperial bureaucracy have now publicly broken with her.

She has staked British military strategy on the effort to reestablish the credibility of the independent British nuclear deterrent in the form of the new, MIRVed Trident II missile, which is to equip British submarines at a cost of \$12-15 billion, a sum which will prohibit, if spent, the maintenance of either a seaworthy fleet or the British Army on the Rhine

(BAOR)—something which Carrington's “decouplers” intend to withdraw anyway. The minority in favor of scrapping the Trident overlaps broadly with the minority advocating British support for the American Strategic Defense Initiative.

But here also, Thatcher has demonstrated how much the Iron Lady has turned into a wet noodle. On July 11, in a speech in front of the Euro-Atlantic Group, the prime minister stated the necessity to turn “to the new and urgent challenge of arms control in outer space.” That outright opposition to President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative was called “a damn fool thing” for her to do by a right-wing think-tanker—but it proved how far her subservience to the “Foreign Office boys” of Lord Carrington has gone.

A conservative strategist explained that “Thatcher is entirely in the hands of the boys at the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office, this gang of appeasers, should be disbanded. They have misled the British people for 30 years. Thatcher is a shop-keeper who is no Iron Lady at all.” A City source commented that her attack on U.S. beam-weapon development was “a pathetic attempt to fend off her critics by adopting their line.” In spite of her innumerable concessions to the Foreign Office, which still considers Peter Carrington the legitimate boss, she is now considered a liability.

In the theater which reflects such strategic choices at the higher level, the House of Commons, transitions have to be made possible. Succession is already on the drawing boards. Former Foreign Secretary and “wet Tory” (liberal) imperialist Francis Pym recently issued a book devoted to lambasting Thatcher. Heseltine advertises himself freely, and Northern Ireland Secretary Jim Pryor and Energy Secretary Peter Walter—all three former associates or lieutenants of Edward Heath—are mentioned as potential successors, as well as Industry Secretary Norman Tebbit.

“It is very difficult to unseat a ruling British Prime Minister,” another observer noted. Chamberlain was ousted during a national and world crisis clearly of his making; MacMillan was made to resign by the devastating Profumo scandal in 1962. How could Thatcher be made to resign without general elections? The key could well be her personal psychology, so sharply assailed by *The Economist*. Said the observer: “The weakness of her ego, which is a shopkeeper girl's, controlled by her ego-ideal—the aristocracy—could easily be shattered if her models rebuke her strongly. She has amassed so much rancor against her, the bloodhounds are out for her now.”

The scheme of things in Britain requires that the Lords effectively rule without governing; governance of day-to-day affairs is left to the powerful civil service which the Lords influence, and in turn, the civil service runs the clown-show known as parliamentary government and the political parties. As *The Economist* said, “The revolt will spread from the Lords to the Commons,” from the aristocracy to the plebes, through the bureaucracy. When will Thatcher be given the sack?