

## Whitehall Outsider by Laurent Murawiec

### Thatcher due for the 'Nixon treatment'?

*The British prime minister will fight, but the question is, will she fight for a good cause.*

Curious scenes in the House of Commons, these days. Tory Members of Parliament are seen hunting some of Mrs. Thatcher's closest personal associates; cries of "cover-up" rise not only from Liberal and Labour benches, but also from the Conservatives' own. Back-bench discontent has also rippled forward, into circles traditionally loyal to the prime minister. Fleet Street and the rumor mill are making sure that the Westland affair, the trivial incident which set it all off, will not die down.

The latest twist came from the House of Commons Select Committee on Defense, which is investigating the labyrinthine meanderings of the government's handling of the Westland affair. The awkward attempt by the prime minister to ascribe responsibility for various (very trivial, as governments go) wrongdoings, to senior civil servants rather than to her own ministers and associates, has resulted in relentless questioning from the MPs, and a clampdown by the prime minister. Former Industry Secretary Leon Brittan refused to answer questions.

Taking their revenge on years of being bullied by Thatcher, some Tory MPs are even calling for the prime minister to resign, as did Sir Anthony Meyer. The rumor mill has it that some of the Tory opponents will run a "stalking horse" candidate to challenge Mrs. Thatcher for party leadership next fall. "Bewilderment and anger," "outrage" are the most common descriptions of the state of mind of the parliamentary conservatives. Among

the Tory bigwigs, Sir Humphrey Atkins, the head of the Defense Select Committee, is pressing ahead to "get the truth out," and interrogate some of Mrs. Thatcher's closest associates. Sir Anthony Buck is rebuking the government's attempt to protect its civil servants from parliamentary interrogation. Sir Anthony Kershaw, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, also demands "the truth."

The upshot of the burning love for truth that seems to agitate the lobbies of the Commons is that, after having lost two cabinet ministers, Mrs. Thatcher may yet lose two of her trusted personal advisers, Press Secretary Bernard Ingham and principal private secretary Charles Powell, who are bidden to answer the Commons' summons.

Interestingly, the assault against Mrs. Thatcher does not only come from the "wet" benches of Parliament—Labour, Liberals, Social Democrats and liberal Tories—but also from "right-wing" Conservatives, such as Winston Churchill III, whose own record of morality sank a few years ago in the Kashoggi family affairs.

"Thatcher on trial with Tory MPs over leadership," the *Times* headlined a lead article on Feb. 3, reporting that, contrary to the loyalty of rank-and-file Tory members, there was an increasing sentiment about the parliamentarians that she should "bow out gracefully" before it was too late and she dragged them down into defeat: "Even those who had previously stood be-

hind Mrs. Thatcher through thick and thin [are] saying that the time [is] approaching for the leader to come to the aid of her party," by stepping down.

Names of potential successors are being canvassed, from Party Chairman Norman Tebbit to Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe and Home Secretary Douglas Hurd. The liberal establishment, whose control over the media is unchallenged, is fanning the flames. At present, the prime minister is being forced to take a great deal of account of the views of various power groups in the Conservative Party, contrary to her longstanding tradition of rushing ahead regardless, and asking questions later.

It is difficult not to remember the fate of Richard Nixon. Not that there is any useful individual comparison—but just as Richard Nixon had done nothing essential to provoke the wrath of the Eastern Establishment of the United States, but was not considered the appropriate man for the tasks that were ultimately fulfilled by Jimmy Carter, Mrs. Thatcher is too marked in the "Atlantic" direction, she is too strongly tied in the "coaching" of President Reagan. Westland is not Watergate, but the pattern is discernible: from a trivial affair which had little to do with the premier, into forcing the premier to make massive tactical mistakes, enmire him (or her) in a morass of petty maneuvers aimed at saying the skin of her closest associates, losing them one by one as "fuses blow up" to protect the prime minister. Ultimately, her authority gets eroded, her leeway curtailed, rebellion grows, and the choice is presented to her, to leave or lose.

A great difference, of course, is that Mrs. Thatcher will fight—and perhaps this time orient her fighting spirit to a good cause, which might provoke some interesting policy fireworks in London.