Editorial
A Major reassessment

At the time when this issue of British Politics Review is released, twenty years have passed since John Major secured a Conservative victory in the first post-Thatcher elections in Britain. Against all odds, he did so in a most impressive way. With a popular vote of 14.05 million, it was the highest score ever obtained at a British general election, higher too than what New Labour obtained in 1997.

The election result captures an essential characteristic of Major’s premiership. Seldom praised, he is more often castigated for perceived failures leading to electoral disaster in 1997. In reality, his accession to the post of prime minister had given the worst of conditions to begin with. Margaret Thatcher’s eleven years in Downing Street had not only earned her many personal critics, but the government was held responsible by voters for the economic difficulties which were starting to become evident in Britain (as in many other European countries) by the start of the 1990s. Against Major in 1992 was a Labour Party on course for modernisation, and within the Conservative Party itself, “the evil of faction” had taken root, with central figures holding the Prime Minister in distrust.

The challenges awaiting Major following the election victory were immense. Domestically, his essential task was one of implementing “Thatcherism with a human face” while regaining strength in the British economy. Internationally, the major undertaking was no less than the re-formulation of Britain’s foreign policy for the post-Cold War era. Unmerciful critics have concluded that Major was a weak leader, wavering where stern leadership was needed and heading a government unable to deliver on anything but cheap slogans and political scandals. More sympathetic observers might note that during the Major years Britain worked its way out of economic recession, brought the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to the negotiating table and secured tailor-cut arrangements for Britain in Europe within the frames the Maastricht Treaty.

In this issue, we have invited contributors to reflect upon various aspects of John Major’s premiership. They range from observations on his leadership style, via internal party dissent and economic policy to Major’s difficult relationship with the press - and more.

It would be wrong to say that, twenty years later, Major’s premiership is a celebrated one. Still, the reading of his government is generally more sympathetic, as commentators and observers wonder whether Major, looking back, may have been a somewhat misunderstood and underestimated prime minister. “Where there is discord, may we bring harmony”, stated Margaret Thatcher on becoming prime minister in 1979. Her words, quoted from the Prayer of St. Francis, would perhaps have been a more appropriate portrayal of the quiet premiership which succeeded her; John Major’s spell in 10 Downing Street.

Kristin M. Haugevik & Øivind Bratberg, editors

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John Major: a compassionate Conservative?

Ever since the end of Margaret Thatcher’s premiership in 1990, Conservatives have struggled with the question of whether to embrace or distance themselves from her legacy, controversial as much of it remains. In the case of John Major’s government, there has been great debate as to whether it sought to depart from the policies of the Thatcher years, or to continue them. One way in which it has been argued is that the Major administration may have been very different is the notion that it was a more caring or compassionate one. This is what will be addressed in this article.

Leaving aside the many difficulties involved in trying to define Thatcherism, for present purposes it will be sufficient to note that it focused on promoting, in the characterisation of Andrew Gamble, “the free economy and the strong state”. The contention that the Major government’s philosophy may have differed from this centres on the belief that it possessed more of a social doctrine, being concerned less with a dogmatic commitment to free-market economics or buttressing the power of the state, and more with the wider good of society. This would also stand in sharp contrast to Margaret Thatcher’s notorious declaration that “There is no such thing as society.”

At the intellectual level, the passing of the Thatcher era clearly provoked a wave of self-reflection on the Right, including various responses to the criticism that the untrammelled market forces released in the 1980s had greatly damaged the social fabric, destroying communities and undermining the values that bind society together. Notions such as the social market and caring capitalism began to be advanced – supported, for example, by Chris Patten, Conservative Party Chairman from 1990-1992. However, one of the most significant Conservative attempts to answer critics’ charges was articulated by David Willetts (who also served in the Major government) in his notion of Civic Conservatism. Willetts’ vision sought to reconcile a commitment to free markets with a belief in the value of historic communities and a sense of social obligation.

The idea that a more socially minded conservatism might even be caring or compassionate has probably become best known as a result of George W. Bush’s adoption of Compassionate Conservatism, which he espoused during his 2000 presidential election campaign, and continued to refer to at least during the early years of his presidency. The central policy prescription of this doctrine is to devolve responsibilities for delivering welfare services to groups like churches and charities, since they are believed to be much better vehicles for compassion than is a bureaucratic state. In Britain, Conservative Party leaders William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith expressed interest in this philosophy, and it has found echoes in David Cameron’s notion of the Big Society. Yet in terms of the Major years, the main idea behind the suggestion that his was a more compassionate government is simply that it sought to move away from the harsh, “unfeeling” policies associated with Thatcherism.

After Major took over as Prime Minister, there was a conscious effort to project a very different image to that of his predecessor. Whereas she had been strident and combative, Major was presented as a more consensual, caring figure, a depiction that was strongly emphasised during the 1992 general election campaign. Major himself had talked, on becoming Prime Minister, of building a “genuinely classless society”, which was intended to suggest a more inclusive and socially concerned Conservatism. Even his later, much-derided Back to Basics campaign was supposed to be about finding common values the nation as a whole might share. For such reasons, the essence of Major’s philosophy was often seen as seeking to revive the tradition of One Nation Conservatism, with its commitment to social unity and justice, that had been marginalised during the aggressively individualistic Thatcher years.

Yet the abolition of the poll tax aside, in most other areas any talk of embracing a more caring credo appeared to be not much more than rhetoric. In particular, Thatcherite neo-liberalism was far from abandoned, as shown by the Major government’s similar enthusiasm for privatisation, which it extended most notably to the railways. Indeed, in many respects rail privatisation advanced the idea even further, since the sale of the railways took place despite there being very little in the way of clear economic or social benefits. It was, in other words, undertaken largely as an ideological project. Furthermore, many policies showed limited compassion for ordinary families. For example, VAT was extended to domestic fuel, which had previously been zero-rated, hitting lower-income groups hardest of all.

Similarly, many pronouncements emanating from the Major government hardly fitted the idea of a more caring Conservatism. For example, Peter Lilley, Social Security Secretary– and ardent Thatcherite– launched a scathing attack on single mothers, many of whom he accused of being benefit cheats, at the 1992 Conservative Party conference. Yet Major himself also at times displayed at the 1992 Conservative Party conference a scathing attack on single mothers, many of whom he accused of being benefit cheats. Yet Major himself also at times displayed at the 1992 Conservative Party conference a scathing attack on single mothers, many of whom he accused of being benefit cheats.

Ultimately, then, although in some regards the Major years represented a shift in style and tone from the Thatcher era, attempting to put a more human face on Conservative policies, there was not a great deal of substance behind this effort. The Major government failed to articulate a coherent or consistent alternative to Thatcherism, and in the end, mainly delivered simply more of the same.
Jean-Paul as prime minister and political leader

By Kevin Theakston

The British Conservative Party’s leadership culture has sometimes been characterised as a system of autocracy tempered by assassination. Margaret Thatcher’s style of leadership and her brutal and dramatic overthrow in 1990 certainly fit that model.

Thatcher was toppled because the Conservatives feared that they would go down to election defeat with her as leader. Crucially, however, the party did not seek or intend an ideological break with Thatcherism. Tory MPs wanted a change of face and a softer or more emollient public image, “Thatcherism with a human face.” John Major was elected leader because of his perceived capacity to bridge divisions and unite the party through a consensual style of leadership. Major was initially backed by Thatcher and by the right (and Eurosceptic) wing of the party. Later, however, they were to feel betrayed and to turn against him when they discovered that he was not in practice either very right-wing or an out-and-out Euro sceptic, but instead more of a pragmatic party loyalist.

Major seemed instinctively to take a middle position on most issues. But the Conservative divisions in the 1990s proved to be too deep for his preferred method of accommodating dissent — balancing the factions and tactical manoeuvring, rather than risking open confrontation. Over time, his grip on the leadership seemed increasingly insecure and there were regular rumours of plots to challenge and unseat him. With various rivals marking out positions for the future, Major seemed almost like a caretaker leader, which weakened his authority. In 1995 he triggered a surprise party leadership election aiming to face down his critics. But a third of Conservative MPs refused to back him and the manoeuvre did not heal the factional divide. Originally elected leader mainly with the votes of the right, Major paradoxically survived because of his perceived capacity to bridge divisions and unite the party through a consensual style of leadership aiming to face down his critics. But a third of Conservative MPs refused to back him and the manoeuvre did not heal the factional divide. Originally elected leader mainly with the votes of the right, Major paradoxically survived because of his perceived capacity to bridge divisions and unite the party through a consensual style of leadership. Major did not cut a presidential figure and ran his Cabinet in a collegiate and inclusive style, trying to carry colleagues with him, reconciling differences and teasing out a consensus. He was very dependent on the Cabinet’s “big beasts” – such as Ken Clarke, Michael Heseltine and Douglas Hurd — who were powerful ministerial “barons”.

At first Major’s brokerage approach worked well, but in time his unwillingness or inability to assert himself led to charges of weakness, dithering, and letting circumstances and the push and pull of other people determine issues. The drift and indecision in the Major years – the lack of a firm personal lead from the top – was acutely felt by experienced Whitehall insiders, who complained about “a hole at the centre of the machine”.

As a political operator, Major excelled at networking, the deployment of charm, cultivating personal relationships and friendships. In good times, his public character as a decent, reasonable and capable man, with more of a common touch than the imperious Thatcher, was undoubtedly an asset. But his background seems to have left a personal insecurity and a thin-skinned over-sensitivity to criticism (media pummelings knocked him off balance). This meant that when the political going got harder (as it did after 1992) he did not have the inner resources and confidence to provide steely leadership.

Political Skills and Style

No one would or could look to Major for visionary or innovative leadership. His skills were primarily those of a political manager. His approach was reactive, tactical and problem-solving. He had won his reputation as a political technician: a details man, good on short-term tactics, “micro” politics, one-to-one negotiation, conciliation and man-management. As a former whip in the House of Commons, he practised a politics of negotiation and deals, rather than Thatcher-like drive and momentum. He showed some skill in “high” politics — dealing with Kohl, Yeltsin, Clinton and other world leaders and in the handling of complex European negotiations (as seen in his Maastricht success). But he was not so good on long-term strategy and objectives. In contrast to Mrs Thatcher, Major was furthermore a leader with a grey public image. There was little sense of prime ministerial presence, he was a poor communicator, an indifferent performer on television and the public platform, and he hated the “packaging” of modern media-driven politics.

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Ideology and Aims

Major arrived in Downing Street with very little ideological baggage - a pragmatist who could not be “labelled”.

He had won the leadership by not taking a strong ideological line and because of his chameleon-like appeal. In practice he was far from being an instinctive Thatcherite, tending to the left of centre on social issues though a free-marketeer on economic issues.

His government completed the Thatcher agenda in many areas, privatising the coal and rail industries, for instance. But uncomfortable with ideological or conviction politics, Major did not have the political space to articulate and pursue a distinctive agenda of his own. Thatcher scornfully derided his “wavering around all over the place”. He did not project a clear ideological position or strong sense of policy direction. He backed off attempts to define “Majorism” or to come up with a “big idea”. Neither the ill-fated “back to basics” theme nor the Citizen’s Charter programme had much purchase in this respect. Even his rhetoric often seemed backward looking and nostalgic (the England of “warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers . . . old maids bicycling to communion through the morning mist”) rather than mobilising support for a new agenda and new goals.

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Kenneth Clarke MP, presently the Secretary of State for Justice. Clarke played a pivotal role throughout John Major’s government and was one of the key ministers sustaining his premiership.
Strikingly, the qualities that made a desperate party turn to him in 1990 were those for which he was later most fiercely criticised. He had won the leadership after a decade of assiduous parliamentary networking, but after 1992 his parliamentary base became increasingly fractious and unreliable, and by the end, the dominant feeling was virtually one of mutual contempt. His “Honest John” image - that he was trustworthy, likeable, competent, sensible, sincere, unflashy - had been an asset for the first few years, the perceived contrast to both Thatcher and Labour’s Neil Kinnock registering with the public. But the broken promises on tax rises; the apparent incompetence in the situation he was in, but not in power”, as Norman Lamont put it after being sacked as Chancellor in 1993.

It is sometimes forgotten that Major enjoyed a political honeymoon period, helped by his successful low-key leadership during the Gulf War, and that in 1991 opinion polls, he registered as more popular than Thatcher had ever been. He then won the 1992 election against the economic odds, amassing a higher vote total (14 million votes) than any prime minister in British history. But after the forced ejection of sterling from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) on “Black Wednesday” in September 1992, he was weakened by the Conservatives’ nose-diving electoral fortunes, rapidly becoming the least-respected prime minister in polling history. The Tory press turned hostile and was never won back; the bitter and sustained media attacks keeping him always on the defensive.

Major had inherited an economy moving into recession but derived little electoral benefit from the economic upturn after 1994. The ERM debacle, together with the imposition of massive tax increases, shattered the Conservatives’ reputation for economic competence. This was a key factor in boosting Labour’s poll ratings, and after 1994 a Tory election defeat seemed inevitable when Major was faced by one of the most formidable Leaders of the Opposition in modern British politics (Tony Blair) and a rejuvenated Labour Party.

The Conservatives’ civil war over the European issue tested to destruction Major’s conception of politics and his skills as a political leader. For him it was not a ‘gut’ issue - he described himself as agnostic, a ‘Europragmatist’. It was a question of practicalities, clever negotiation and realism, going for the best possible deal. However, his approach of trying to bridge the party splits by keeping options open could never be a viable long-term policy. The Eurosceptic right mistrusted him because they felt that there were no firm personal or political convictions behind the negotiating positions. The pro-Europeans feared that his instinct was always to trim and to reach a compromise to buy off the sceptics.

Factionalism between Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans weakened the foundations of the government and drained Major’s personal authority. The fact that he would talk tough (as over qualified majority voting, or the “non-cooperation” tactic in the BSE crisis over British beef exports) but then back down, further underlined his apparent weakness. But against this critique that his emollience and prevarications allowed divisions to grow, is the argument that anything other than a balancing act (and any other possible leader) would have split the party even more.

Major’s 1992 election was something of a hollow victory because it left him with an overall parliamentary majority of only 21 (compared to the 100 plus majorities which had bolstered Thatcher in the 1980s), and this was steadily whittled away by by-election defeats. Backbench rebels could be ignored by Thatcher’s steamroller. But Major’s room for manoeuvre was limited and he was massively vulnerable to disruption and blackmail by dissident backbenchers, many of the new MPs first elected in 1992 were on the Eurosceptic right ("Thatcher’s Children") adding to his problems.

Context

Beyond the differences of personality and style that made Major appear to be a weaker leader than Thatcher, is of course the fact that they were prime ministers in very different contexts. Major often seemed trapped by events, not on top of them - “in office but not in power”, as Norman Lamont put it after being sacked as Chancellor in 1993.

The future... once. As youthful Labour leader, Tony Blair, celebrates victory at the 1997 election with his wife Cherie. The election marked the punctuation of 18 years of Conservative dominance. Event from 1997 magazine for Labour party members, kindly reproduced from labourarchive.com
An underrated prime minister?

By Jan Erik Mustad

In the refrain on modern British politics John Major and his political achievements are often spoken about in parentheses. Squeezed in between two of Britain's longest serving Prime Ministers, Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) and Tony Blair (1997-2010), Major's premiership is often a forgotten chapter. His early years were dominated by coming to terms with the postscript of Thatcher while his later years were overshadowed by Labour's modernisation process and the increasing popularity of the Prime Minister (PM) in waiting, Tony Blair.

Major, however, deserves credit for a number of political initiatives as well as for the way he handled a strongly divided (if not suicidal) Conservative party in the wake of the Thatcher era. He was Prime Minister for seven years from 1990-1997, winning, although marginally, the General Election in 1992 under highly adverse circumstances. Assessed on this victory, winning, although marginally, the General Election in 1992 under highly adverse circumstances. Assessed on this victory, Major proved many of his mentors wrong. Serving for seven years is a sole proof of that, let alone winning the election in 1992, an election dubbed by many as unwinnable for the Conservative party. Furthermore, he resigned as party leader in 1995 to confront his critics, especially those critical of his policies in Europe, claiming it was time “to put up or shut up”. The likes of John Redwood, Michael Portillo, Michael Howard and Peter Lilley, all with blatant comments about Major’s policies, were asked to challenge him for party leadership. Only Redwood came forward and stood against Major, but Major brushed all the sceptics aside, beating Redwood soundly in the first round.

The Soapbox Election

Despite a declining economy, Major had made some political initiatives that went down well with the electorate prior to the election. In the “The Citizen’s Charter” the government’s aim was to create a “classless” society by forming a pact between the state and the citizens of the UK as to what kind of public services the state could provide for the individual. After years of public sector neglect under Thatcher, Major wanted to give people better services that they could rely on. Moreover, Major replaced the controversial Poll Tax with a Council Tax, a property tax that did not hit the poor in the same way as the Poll Tax.

With this short background in mind, it is not difficult to envisage the many questions that were posed after his successful challenge for the leadership. Was Major the right leader to succeed Thatcher? Did he have what was required to heal the party divisions and at the same time grapple with the national and international political issues that lay in front of him? And not least, was the choice of Major as leader intended to restore the state of the party or that of the nation, as the new leader would also be appointed PM? And who was Major to believe that placing himself in the ‘position of death’, after eleven years of Thatcher, the greatest election winner in modern British politics, could ever turn out to his advantage? Under the circumstances, there were many questions and few answers.

Retrospectively, and with the benefit of hindsight, it seems fair to claim that Major proved many of his sceptics wrong. Serving for seven years is a sole proof of that, let alone winning the election in 1992, an election dubbed by many as unwinnable for the Conservative party. Furthermore, he resigned as party leader in 1995 to confront his critics, especially those critical of his policies in Europe, claiming it was time “to put up or shut up”. The likes of John Redwood, Michael Portillo, Michael Howard and Peter Lilley, all with blatant comments about Major’s policies, were asked to challenge him for party leadership. Only Redwood came forward and stood against Major, but Major brushed all the sceptics aside, beating Redwood soundly in the first round.

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Even though the polls in the month ahead of the election were tight, few predicted that Major would win the election on 9 April 1992. However, with the lack of trust in Labour and Neil Kinnock combined with Major’s very targeted efforts during the election campaign, the Conservatives won their fourth successive election victory. It was widely held that the victory was secured because the electorate did not trust Labour’s economic policy while Major, on his soapbox, had managed to reach out to people. He travelled around with his box and addressed smaller groups of people warning them against Labour’s proposed tax regime and assuring people they were safe with the Conservatives.

The Tories, as had been a long tradition in Britain, were also supported by most of the national newspapers, and the Sun regarded its own front page as a clear election decider on election day. Carrying the headline – “If Kinnock wins today, will the last person to leave Britain please turn out the light” – the paper claimed to have secured Major the victory. As it turned out, the victory was a massive personal triumph for Major, who had been written off both as party leader and Prime Minister. Major and the Conservative Party polled over 14 million votes, the largest ever popular vote in British political history and 500,000 more votes than Tony Blair and Labour polled in their landslide victory in 1997. But biases in the electoral system translated Major’s victory into a small overall majority of only 21 MPs while Blair in 1997 secured a majority of 179 MPs. The result was nevertheless a confidence boost for Major who proved to be his own man while avoiding by lengths the electoral abyss that many, particularly in Conservative circles, had anticipated.

But on the other hand, the numerous political challenges ahead tore the party even further apart, enhancing division lines that would not have been equally exposed had the Tories lost the election. These divisions had arisen under Thatcher, but it was Major who was left to deal with these tensions in a tough political landscape. On “Black Wednesday” 16 September 1992, the Major government had to withdraw the pound sterling from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) as the pressure on the pound became too strong. Major and his Chancellor of the Exchequer Norman Lamont were determined to keep the pound in the ERM with the other European currencies, but had to give in as the pound had fallen under the agreed lower limit. Economically, this was a blow to the UK while it politically was a blow to Major, who in fact had written his letter of resignation in the wake of the inevitable decision. Ultimately, both Major and Lamont remained in their positions as the national crisis was severe enough without them resigning.

A brave Major never managed to come back in pole position. Even though the economic situation improved somewhat, the Conservative Party, with a reputation of always being on top of the economy, was broken and divided. Moreover, with the scarce parliamentary majority of 21 MPs, it was only a matter of time before the government would be in minority with by-elections and defections continuing to dilute the parliamentary party. Thus, Major battled on three fronts: nationally with an economy in recession, internally in the party with huge divisions and politically in the House of Commons where his majority was gradually slipping. Unfortunately, though, the small overall majority signalled difficult years ahead for Major and his divided party as Britain stumbled on in their rocky relationship with Europe.

The beginning of the end

In retrospect, winning the election of 1992 turned out to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, remaining in governmental control was positive for a party used to be in government. Although Major the moderator is often remembered for non-visionary terms such as “back to basics” and “decency”, his reputation also been unfairly blamed for dysfunctions in his party and unavailing electoral tides. The other side of that argument is of course that if the times had not been like they were, Major would probably never have ended up as party leader and Prime Minister.

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The other side of that argument is of course that if the times had not been like they were, Major would probably never have ended up as party leader and Prime Minister.

Major battled on three fronts: nationally with an economy in recession, internally in the party with huge divisions and politically in the House of Commons where his majority was gradually slipping. As British politician Enoch Powell once said, “All political lives end in failure”, a remark relevant for many politicians. It can be argued though that Major found himself in a position any leader would find it impossible to navigate themselves out of.
When the Conservatives unexpectedly won the 1992 election, the Sun boldly announced: "IT'S THE SUN WOT WON IT". The claim was disputed at the time, but for years to come, many politicians and sections of Fleet Street acted as if they believed that the newspaper press, and even individual papers, had the power to make or break governments.

It was only incidentally that the Sun's election coverage had amounted to active championship of John Major, however. It could more aptly be described as a sustained rubbishing of the Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, which culminated in an outrageous front page illustration and caption on Polling Day. Since the Sun, like the rest of the tabloids, tended to describe the election as a battle between the Good Guys and the Bad Guys, its recurrent theme - "Which man do you trust?" - was often put across in juxtaposed pictures and captions: "I honest John Major" versus "Crafty Kinnock", etc. But in view of its subsequent turnabout, it is significant that the Sun had made few references to the Conservative Party and its leader during the 1992 campaign. From the Sun's point of view, the glorious age of Conservatism had come to an end in December 1990: the paper's absolute adulation of "Maggie" meant that it suffered a great loss when its heroine was replaced by John Major.

Mrs Thatcher's successor had not been one of her challengers, and initially got off more lightly than those who were dubbed her "backstabbers", but he had never been good copy. As cabinet minister he had made no allies in Fleet Street; as PM he had bestowed no favours and got none in return, and when his political position could be seen to be weakening, the Tory press soon turned against him, having never been truly for him. His biographer suggests that a certain type of newspaper, like some of his colleagues, despised him for snobbish reasons:

Mr Moore of the Daily Telegraph wrote an astonishingly patronizing piece effectively intimating that the Tories, having rejected the godlike Douglas Hurd, must make do with this bemused little man and his mousy wife from some godforsaken part of south London.1

John Major got his own back when he wrote in his autobiography:

Moore, a clever but foppish figure... adored Margaret Thatcher and was heavily influenced by her. He was a convinced Euro-sceptic and threw the weight of the Telegraph ... behind our rebels and against our policy.2

The Telegraph, The Times, the Daily Mail and the Sun appeared to be edited and staffed by Thatcherites who, like an increasingly vociferous faction of the Conservative parliamentary party, were inclined to regard Euro-scepticism as the litmus test of Conservatism itself, and to treat every attempt at bridge-building with contempt. In 1993, Conservative papers came out in favour of Major's challengers when he put his leadership on the line to secure the passage of the Maastricht bill.

From the mid-90s onwards, New Labour ran a brilliant, though hardly principled, operation to discredit him. It was started by Alastair Campbell, then Political Editor of the Mirror, but it soon became fashionable for journalists of the left, right and centre to imitate John Major's voice and mannerisms, and to portray him as ineffectual and cack-handed. Cartoonists had initially despaired of Mrs Thatcher's "grey" but "nice" successor, but, as Kenneth Baker observes, although the Iron Lady had a rough time at their hands, John Major the consensus politician got even harsher treatment:

The cartoonists have been unrelenting in their depiction of him as indecisive, grey, stubborn and hapless. His personal success in Northern Ireland and in securing the economic recovery were [sic] either ignored or attributed to factors beyond his control. The press and cartoonists have hunted him like a pack of hounds in pursuit of a fox.3

In retrospect it is easy to see that certain sections of the Conservative Party regarded the 1992 election victory as proof that Labour would never raise its head again, and that Tory mistakes and misbehaviour would not matter in the long run. But the decision to close unprofitable coal mines had been presented so clumsily that it triggered off the first backbench rebellion, and the Government was blamed for inaction and worse as interest rates remained high and the recession showed no signs of abating. "The Chancellor is wrong. The government is wrong", said the Express, and the Sun asked: "Is Major a goner?" It is hardly an exaggeration to say that between 1992 and 1997, tabloid editors gave him front page coverage only to castigate him, and otherwise concentrated mainly on sex and sin in high places.

1992 had witnessed the first of a series of scandals which probably did more than anything else to prevent the Tories from winning their fifth consecutive victory. In its two aspects, "sleaze" referred to lack of financial probity and to adulterous, promiscuous and/or deviant sexual behaviour. The Tory MPs whose (trans) actions were denoted by this term were not many; nor were they, with one notable exception, holders of high office, but after 13 (let alone 18) years the Tories were infinitely more vulnerable, and more easily damaged, than they would otherwise have been. The anti-sleaze campaign against specific politicians in the run-up to the 1997 election, which was largely spearheaded by the Guardian, was brilliantly executed and did great harm to the Government's image.

The Hamilton case, which was a media issue in more than one sense,4 attracted so much attention that it threw the Tory agenda out of joint at two crucial stages of the election campaign. The report of the Commons Standards and Privileges Committee was not due until after the election, but was expected to confirm that Hamilton was as guilty as those MPs who had already confessed to sleaze.

For John Major this was a no-win situation in which no possible counter-attack was likely to have any effect. It certainly was not possible to score points against the Guardian by querying the probity of its informant, Mohamed al Fayed.
The Guardian and the Independent looked forward to Polling Day 1997 as the “historic chance for change”, not because they espoused Tony Blair and what he stood for – the challenge to the Conservative regime was coming from a man who had taken care not to distance himself from Conservative policies – but because the New Labour election machine seemed most likely to bring about a change of government. Both papers carried on a spirited advocacy of constitutional and social reform, more women MPs, etc., positioning themselves, in these and other matters, well to the left of New Labour.

The Guardian’s fight was with Conservatives and Conservatism, not with John Major either as a person or as Prime Minister. While the Independent frequently contained articles which were remarkably intertemperate, the Guardian was conspicuously even-handed, even generous, towards the Tory leader: in fact, it was one of the few papers that did not say, or imply, that John Major was stupid, or weak, or a complete failure.

The Sun’s defection, which “knocked [Major] off his soapbox” according to the Mail but which almost certainly did no such thing, came at a stage when the Tories were trailing 25 points behind Labour in the polls. For more than a year, the Sun had been positioning itself for being on the winning side in the next election, but in the absence of a clear indication of the country’s mood, it had contented itself with railing at all three party leaders. John Major tended to get the worst of it – in early 1996 he was called a “No Notion Tory” – but the Sun had not fallen in love with Tony Blair prior to his landslide victory. (The general drift of its front-page headline and photo caption on Polling Day was that it must be HIM, because it so obviously was going to be HIM.)

The Mirror had the satisfaction of having stuck to its principles, and conducted a pro-Labour campaign that was in most respects better and more convincing than that of the Sun. (Since Rupert Murdoch did achieve what was probably his main aim – to make the Sun the largest-selling tabloid on the winning side – this fact was probably one that he viewed with complete equanimity.) Faced at long last with a Labour leader who spoke the Mirror’s language when he talked about his aspirations for a better and more caring Britain, the paper now put to good use the sort of rhetoric which it had employed to little avail in 1992. Its anti-Conservative campaign was hard-hitting, person-oriented and scurrilous. Systematically and with an insouciant disregard for facts, the PM was presented as gullish and gormless: “what a dope box!” etc. Realising that cries of “sleaze” were an effective stick with which to beat the Tories, the Mirror wielded it happily from the beginning of the campaign. That sleaze was endemic in the governing party (“the biggest collection of philanderers, adulterers and love-cheats in political history”) might not be an irrefutable claim. It is nonetheless typical that not even those few organs which came out for the Conservatives made much of an effort to refute it.

The Labour landslide in 1997 marked an unprecedented re-alignment of the national press. New Labour was endorsed by a majority of daily and Sunday papers; The Times advised readers to vote Euro-sceptic irrespective of party; the Telegraph, the Mail and the Express came out for the Conservatives, but with no great show of enthusiasm. The sheer size of the Labour majority took everybody by surprise, and actually changed people’s perception of what had happened. As of the day after the election, Tony Blair had always been the People’s Choice and a certain winner; the electorate had not just tired of the Conservatives but had actually hated them ever since the fall of Mrs Thatcher. And for more than a decade after 1997, the Major Government continued to get a bad press, a state of affairs which lasted until popular opinion had swung well away from both Blair and Brown.

In early 2010 Peter Oborne, a vociferous right-wing journalist who had joined the anti-Major claque in the 1990s, was probably one of the first to concede that it was time for a re-think. In an article amounting to a generous apology for having swallowed “the narrative of John Major’s hopelessness”, Oborne argued that people should celebrate John Major instead of deriding him, for his government was “stunningly radical and initiated most of Blair’s so-called reforms”: he kick-started the Northern Ireland peace process, restored the economy, and implemented important public sector reforms. And his party was actually less sleazy than New Labour.

John Major was good at substance, but wretched at spin. New Labour was the opposite. … [Over] time I believe that John Major will come to be regarded as a more honest, decent and competent prime minister than either Tony Blair or Gordon Brown. He left Britain, as he might himself have remarked, a not-inconsciderably better place than he found it.

Notes
4. The Guardian claimed to have evidence that Neil Hamilton, MP for Tatton, had received ‘cash for questions’ from the owner of Harrods, Mohamed al Fayed. When Hamilton refused to stand down, the Guardian was instrumental in persuading Martin Bell of the BBC to stand as an independent challenger. 5. 18 March 1997.
6. There was nonetheless a marked contrast between the content of its editorials and that of its signed political columns, notably those written by Matthew Parris and Simon Jenkins.
7. The Express changed sides shortly afterwards.
Not as bad as you thought? John Major’s parliamentary party

By Philip Cowley

It was once said that the Conservative Party’s secret weapon was loyalty. It was always a dubious claim, and for most of John Major’s premiership it seemed an absurd one. During parts of 1996 opinion polls found that the percentage of the public considering the Conservative Party to be united had fallen to single figures. “Not since polls asked the question in the early 1970s,” remarked Ivor Crewe, “has the party been so widely regarded as split.”

The blame for this has been laid largely at the feet of the party’s parliamentarians and their behaviour. Just before the 1997 general election John Major confessed to his biographer, Anthony Seldon, that he loved the Conservative Party, but he added: “I do not love my parliamentary party”. A few months later, writing in the The Times after his massive defeat in the 1997 election, he was to claim that “divided views - expressed without restraint – in the parliamentary party made our position impossible” (8 October 1997).

One of the ironies was that seven years earlier, things had started so well. As well as experiencing a honeymoon with the electorate - overnight John Major had transformed the Conservative Party’s standing in the opinion polls - he was initially to enjoy a similar relationship with his own parliamentary party. For the first two years of his premiership backbench opposition was extremely limited. Prior to the 1992 election, the largest rebellion Major’s whips had to face - during the passage of the Dangerous Dogs Act in June 1991 – consisted of just 19 MPs. For a government with a majority of around 90, this was small fry.

The election of April 1992, however, changed things. It had two significant effects. First, it shifted the centre of gravity in the parliamentary party. A sizeable number of MPs left, through retirement or defeat, and were replaced by a new cohort of markedly more Eurosceptic MPs. This altered the balance of power in the parliamentary party because, probably for the first time, the majority of the party were now either Eurosceptic or had Eurosceptic leanings.

Second, and just as significant, the peculiarities of the electoral system meant that, despite receiving the largest number of votes cast for a party in British political history, the Conservatives began the 1992 parliament with a majority of just 21. By-election losses, coupled with the withdrawal of, or resignation from, the party whip were to whittle that away even further and by 1997, Major was to finish the Parliament with a “majority” of -3. More than one study of this period describes Major as “weak” without once acknowledging the difficulties of governing with a majority that was often in single figures, if not lower.

These were difficulties of which the Prime Minister was well aware. The supposedly off-the-record (but in fact recorded) conversation in April 1993 in which he appeared to label three members of his cabinet “bastards” was also noticeable for his acceptance that the size of the majority was his “real problem”. “Don’t overlook that”, he argued. “I could have [sic] all these clever decisive things which people wanted me to do – but I would have split the Conservative Party into smithereens”.

Yet despite the small majority the Major government had not initially anticipated significant problems with its legislative programme when parliament resumed after the 1992 election. First and foremost, they anticipated small, but manageable difficulties with the legislation required to ratify the Maastricht treaty. But the result of the Danish referendum in June 1992 – in which the Danes narrowly voted against the treaty – forced a postponement of the legislation, and hardened resistance within the parliamentary party. Rather than being shuffled through parliament by the summer of 1992 as thewhips had initially hoped, the European Union (Amendment) Bill did not receive its Third Reading until more than a year after its introduction into the House of Commons, with the Prime Minister facing the most sustained backbench rebellion in post-war history.

The Maastricht rebels were not as one in their beliefs. Some were die-hard opponents of British membership of the EU per se. Some objected to further integration on constitutional grounds, others on economic grounds. But their disparate membership did not prevent them making coming cause against the treaty, reinforced by their own whipping system. The government suffered two Commons defeats during the bill’s passage, and avoided others only by a series of retreats and U-turns.

The Prime Minister required support from the Liberal Democrats to win one crucial vote and only finally managed to get the treaty ratified after making the vote in July 1993 on the social chapter (from which UK government had gained an opt-out) a formal vote of confidence. Conservative rebels were then confronted by a stark choice: if they supported the government they got the Maastricht treaty, but if the government fell, any incoming Labour government would both ratify the Treaty and opt-in to the social chapter. “The Prime Minister” said one rebel, “has got the party by the goolies”.

“Division and dissent. The House of Commons was one arena for Conservative disunity to be displayed, yet the internal strife often took other forms than voting against the government.”
Maastricht was the first, but certainly not the last, of whips’ problems. A broad range of policies met with backbench dissent from eclectic – and often inconsistent – parts of the parliamentary party. Plans announced in October 1992 to close 31 coal mines and make over 30,000 miners redundant had to be postponed when it became clear that enough Conservative MPs would rebel to defeat the government. Plans for the privatisation of Royal Mail were shelved in 1994, again after it became clear that there was sufficient backbench opposition to defeat the scheme. In November 1994, the government was forced to make the passage of the European Communities (Finance) Bill another issue of confidence to ensure its passage. Eight Conservative MPs still failed to support the government and had the party whip withdrawn as a consequence. (A ninth of the European Communities (Finance) government was forced to make the passage defeat the scheme. In November 1994, the was sufficient backbench opposition to

1994, again after it became clear that there

witnessed 76 Conservatives vote for Bill

Cash's bill requiring a referendum before any

change to the relationship between Britain and

the EU could take effect. Although

private member's bills such as these are

traditionally unwhipped, the government

whips advised MPs to abstain. Over 90

rejected that advice and voted for one or

both of the bills. The largest

rebellions took place in the final

session of the parliament when

up to 95 MPs – over a quarter of

the parliamentary Conservative

Party – voted against parts of

the Firearms (Amendment) Bill.

It is important to put these

rebellions into some perspective.

There were 1294 divisions


In total Conservative MPs cast
dissenting votes in 774, or 13

per cent, of those divisions.

In absolute terms, this is clearly

not a high figure, with only one

in every eight votes witnessing

any Conservative dissent.

The other seven saw complete

Conservative cohesion. More importantly,
in relative terms this figure is not especially

high when compared to other parliaments. It

is of roughly the same level as that seen in the


And the 1992 parliament was less troublesome

than Mrs Thatcher’s middle (1985) parliament, and it was noticeably less troublesome than two of the parliaments of the 1970s: Edward Heath saw his backbenchers defy the party

whips in 19 percent of divisions and between October 1974 and 1979 Harold Wilson and James Callaghan saw their MPs revolt in 21

percent of divisions. And compared to some of the parliaments that were to follow, it looks quite peaceful with hindsight: both the 2001 and 2005 Parliaments would see higher rates of rebellion than that endured by Major. And at the time of writing, the current coalition government, formed in 2010, has seen a rate of rebellion by government backbenchers more than three times that of the 1992 Parliament. Even the rate of rebellion by Conservative MPs alone is more than double that seen under Major.

There was, then, no collapse in party
discipline during John Major’s premiership. More than four out of every five divisions saw all the Conservative MPs present enter the same lobby. When the government’s ranks
did break, the number of Conservative MPs dissenting was usually fewer than ten. Even the most rebellious MP was loyal in more

than nine out of ten votes. In this, the voting behaviour of the Conservative party in the 1992 parliament was of a type seen regularly

since 1979.

This is not to argue that Conservative MPs were not behaving rebelliously during Major’s premiership, and especially after 1992. By 1995, things had got so bad that Major felt forced to resign as leader of his party, triggering a leadership contest in an attempt to reassert his authority. A full third of the parliamentary party did not support him in the subsequent ballot. His premiership could not, therefore, be described as one where there was harmony within the Conservative Party. But what was unfolding took the form of stealthy conversations with journalists or sniping at the leadership rather than votes against the government in the House of Commons.”

Government plans to privatise Royal Mail had to be withdrawn in 1994, when it became evident that Conservative backbenchers would reject the scheme. It is an instructive example of how internal disunity under Major was not only about Europe.

Photograph: Ross Holdway.
Austerity is not enough: the coalition government and the lessons of the ERM

By Steven Kettell

The UK’s recent local election results have brought home the scale of the political, as well as the economic challenge that currently bedevils its Coalition government. In office for just two years, and amidst a backdrop of recession and stringent austerity measures, ostensibly designed to rescue the country’s finances, both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have suffered heavy losses, compelling the party leaders to publicly “relaunch” their political union in an attempt to reinvigorate the government’s sense of purpose.

But with three years still to run until the next general election (assuming that the Coalition manages to hold for the duration), with both parties struggling in the polls, and with the full force of the austerity programme yet to bite, the electoral omens do not appear to be auspicious. In these circumstances, it may well be an opportune moment to reflect on some of the key lessons from the last Conservative administration, and its experience of austerity during the early 1990s.

The central governing dilemma facing the Conservatives at the end of the 1980s contained both economic and political quandaries. On the one hand, the government’s reputation for economic competency, a central element in its electoral success since 1979, was in an increasing state of disrepair. For government officials, these conditions were expected to produce a number of benefits. First, by effectively removing (or, at best, severely limiting) their ability to exercise discretion in the use of economic policy instruments, officials believed that ERM membership would significantly enhance the government’s anti-inflationary credibility, sending out a clear signal to domestic producers that continued poor economic performance would no longer be accommodated by more flexible economic policy measures, but would instead result in falling profits, growing unemployment and rising bankruptcies. Economic conditions, then, would have to adjust to the constraints of the policy, and not the other way around. These pressures were compounded by the eventual choice of a relatively high exchange rate for sterling’s participation in the ERM, with this (at DM2.95) being selected on the grounds that departing from the rigours of the ERM, as an “external” set of constraints bound up with broader European commitments, would be far more costly for participants than abandoning a domestically framed policy.

Moreover, since the ERM was underpinned by the German Deutschemark (DM), and by Germany’s constitutionally independent Bundesbank, the ERM effectively imposed anti-inflationary discipline on all its members. Anti-inflationary pressures were further enhanced by strict rules precluding devaluation, and by the fact that departing from the rigours of the ERM, as an “external” set of constraints bound up with broader European commitments, would be far more costly for participants than abandoning a domestically framed policy.

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Another anticipated benefit of being part of the ERM, however, was that it would ultimately enable a lowering of interest rates, and that this, in turn, would deliver a boost both to economic growth as well as the political fortunes of the Conservative party. While cutting rates outside the ERM would be a dangerous endeavour, not least since it would lead to a fall in the exchange rate and create further inflationary pressures, membership of the ERM, by providing the government with a credible anti-inflationary commitment, would allow interest rates to be gradually reduced with no (or at least fewer) destabilising effects.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Norman Lamont, with the Prime Minister, John Major, at the European Bank Conference in April 1991.  

The UK’s recent local election results have brought home the scale of the political, as well as the economic challenge that currently bedevils its Coalition government. In office for just two years, and amidst a backdrop of recession and stringent austerity measures, ostensibly designed to rescue the country’s finances, both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have suffered heavy losses, compelling the party leaders to publicly “relaunch” their political union in an attempt to reinvigorate the government’s sense of purpose.

But with three years still to run until the next general election (assuming that the Coalition manages to hold for the duration), with both parties struggling in the polls, and with the full force of the austerity programme yet to bite, the electoral omens do not appear to be auspicious. In these circumstances, it may well be an opportune moment to reflect on some of the key lessons from the last Conservative administration, and its experience of austerity during the early 1990s.

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At the same time, just as the confines of the ERM would preclude the discretionary use of economic policy, the same constraint would provide officials with an effective means of shifting the responsibility for any unpalatable consequences that might result from it. This depoliticisation of economic conditions would be all the more effective for the fact that ERM membership enjoyed the support of the main political parties, along with the majority of the media, public opinion and all sides of finance, commerce and industry.

While joining the ERM was seen by government figures as the keystone for reducing inflation, lowering interest rates, revitalising the government's popularity and displacing responsibility for economic revitalising the government's popularity reducing inflation, lowering interest rates, government figures as the keystone for economic policy-making, the conventional view of Britain's participation in the ERM, which lasted from October 1990 to September 1992, is that it was an unmitigated disaster. According to received wisdom, the decision to join the ERM at an overvalued exchange rate, and at a time when the economy was entering recession, forced the maintenance of excessively high interest rates and thus exacerbated the effects of the downturn. As a result, the poor state of the economy eroded the credibility of the government's commitment to the constraints of the ERM, leading to an enforced withdrawal from the regime on "Black Wednesday" amidst a speculative attack on the pound. The political fallout from these events is seen to have fatally undermined the economic credibility of the Conservative party, and to have played a key part in its own ejection from office in 1997.

The actual effects of Britain's ERM membership, however, were more beneficial (at least for the Conservatives) than is typically imagined. Although it is certainly true that domestic economic conditions deteriorated markedly, with large falls in production, rising bankruptcies, record home repossessions and chronic levels of unemployment, other key economic indicators were more positive. Prior to its ungainly exit from the regime, sterling had been more stable than at any time in the preceding decade, while inflation, a central problem for most postwar governments, declined by almost 6%, reaching its lowest level for thirty years in 1993 and remaining consistently low thereafter. Successfully reducing inflation also allowed the government to gradually lower interest rates, which fell from 15% to 10% (notwithstanding a brief reversal immediately prior to Black Wednesday), a reduction that arguably would not have been possible had Britain remained outside the ERM.

The political dividends of ERM membership also proved to be considerable. Just as the regime enabled interest rates to be reduced, so its constraints also provided ministers with an effective justificatory device for resisting calls for larger or swifter cuts in order to alleviate the effects of the recession. The persistent declaration from ministers, when faced with calls for ameliorative measures, was that the primary objective was to maintain the value of the pound, a policy that continued to attract broad support from all sides of finance, commerce and industry. Similarly, the displacement effect of the ERM was also noticeable in electoral terms too. Although the overall popularity of the Conservatives remained weak, with polls putting them behind Labour on virtually every single issue, their continued lead in terms of economic management (for which their ratings improved after joining the ERM), along with the fact that most people placed the blame for the recession on the international economic situation or the policies pursued by the Thatcher governments during the 1980s, proved crucial in enabling the Conservatives to secure an improbable fourth consecutive general election victory in April 1992.

The lessons of the ERM were not lost on the Conservative's eventual successors. Upon gaining power in 1997, New Labour moved swiftly to establish a new framework of depoliticisation based on Bank of England independence and a series of fiscal rules, a regime that proved largely effective [until] the onset of the financial crisis from 2008."

"The lessons of the ERM were not lost on the Conservative's eventual successors. Upon gaining power in 1997, New Labour moved swiftly to establish a new framework of depoliticisation based on Bank of England independence and a series of fiscal rules, a regime that proved largely effective before the onset of the financial crisis from 2008 led to extensive state bail-outs and transformed economic policy into a key political issue once more. The Coalition government put together after the 2010 general election, however, has sought to re-establish a means of displacing responsibility for economic management, although the key features of this, without an institutional framework such as the ERM to turn to, have centred on rhetorical mechanisms. The primary focus here has been an unremitting emphasis on the external constraints imposed by the international market, and on the absence of any feasible alternative to austerity measures.

But while an economic policy rooted in the institutional constraints of the ERM may have provided an effective framework for shifting blame for the unpalatable consequences of recession, the approach willed by the Coalition has few such virtues. One problem is that membership of the ERM, for all its faults, continued to attract wide levels of support in a way that bending to the will of "the market" - a term often taken to be synonymous with the financiers, bankers and speculators that many consider to be the real cause of the economic crisis - simply does not.

A second dilemma is that the government's claims about the lack of a credible alternative are themselves without credibility. Recent elections in Greece and France have shown that a rejection of austerity remains entirely possible, and with the government's economic policy to date failing even to deliver on its own terms, having produced a predictable double-dip recession and still-rising levels of debt, the rhetorical underpinnings of the austerity programme look far from secure. Should the Coalition's attempt to displace responsibility for the consequences of its actions fail, then the results of the local elections may well prove to be the precursor to a wider, national change.

Lessons to learn? Failing to steer the economy safe through an international downturn may bring a government away from the rose garden, in 1992 as today.

Unseen copyright / The Cabinet Office
Major and British foreign policy in the post-Cold War era

By Kristin M. Haugevik & Øivind Bratberg

Flanked by the two longest-serving and probably most contested British Prime Ministers in modern time, John Major tends to be devoted less attention in international relations history books than one might expect from a six and a half year long premiership. This is of course partly due to the fact that Major – for better or worse – was a less colourful politician than both his predecessor Margaret Thatcher and his successor Tony Blair. Indeed, his political legacy cannot as easily be summed up under memorable headings such as “Thatcherism” or “the Third Way”.

This does not, however, mean that Major’s premiership was an uneventful one, or that it was marked by political tranquillity. Quite the contrary: Major served as prime minister during a time when key international changes were in process. While Thatcher’s name, along with Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, became inextricably linked with the Cold War, Major’s premiership began with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, marking the end of the Cold War. Consequently, in the early years of his tenure, Major’s government was faced with the challenging task of identifying the post-Cold War path for Britain’s foreign policy and revising the country’s relationship with external partners. A question of key concern was what kind of relationships Britain should now seek with its main Cold War allies – the United States and its partners in Europe. Moreover, what vision should be promoted for the European continent as a whole?

When it comes to the de facto contents and manifestations of British foreign policy, it could be argued that there were few obvious differences between the two Conservative governments. Indeed, Major himself had seen a brief spell as Foreign Secretary under Thatcher, and his successor, Douglas Hurd, remained in place until 1995, when he was followed by Sir Malcolm Rifkind. The loyalty and competence of both Foreign Secretaries matched the Prime Minister well, and behind them he relied on his own strategy of “caution with a purpose”. While Thatcher’s bold, confrontational way had earned her the nickname “the Iron Lady”, Major left a milder political imprint, preferring a consensual decision making style both at the domestic and international arena.

A softer style, however, should not conceal the fact that Major governed Britain through international waters which were in many ways as stormful as those of the Thatcher era. Under Major as under Thatcher, Britain sought to maintain its basic foreign policy identity as a hands-on player “punching above its weight” in world affairs, a privileged partner of the United States and a cautious participant in the institutional cooperation structures of Europe. The new Prime Minister may have brought the British government fewer admirers than in the preceding decade; however, despite insincerity over Europe, the government also acquired more friends.

British Euroscepticism, at least rhetorically, had reached a high towards the end of Thatcher’s premiership. Under Major, the rhetoric was toned down, and a more cooperative approach deployed, one which in a sense mirrored how the British government had operated in the successful negotiations for the Single European Act in 1985-86. There is little doubt that Britain played a tough hand in negotiations over the Maastricht Treaty. The Treaty, which established the European Union with all its supranational connotations, was understandably controversial, representing both a turning point in the history of European integration and a defining moment for Britain’s relations with Europe.

Major, it could be argued, was faced with the same balancing act as British Prime Ministers both before and after him: Ensuring British influence over developments in Europe and the EU, while at the same time safeguarding national interests and territorial integrity. He returned from the Maastricht treaty negotiations, proclaiming “game, set and match” to Britain. Major’s approach was solidly planted in the British tradition of pragmatic internationalism: Britain would play an active part in European affairs, while at the same time securing reservations on sensitive issues related to foreign, security and defence policy and the single currency.

His attempt to placate both sides of the political argument in Britain met with little enthusiasm. Major was faced with harsh criticism from the opposition parties. The then leader of the Liberal Democrats, Paddy Ashdown, concluded that it was “a bad agreement for Britain”, while the Labour leader at the time, Neil Kinnock, claimed that the Major government had “sidelined” Britain in European affairs. Despite considerable casualties, Major succeeded in landing the Maastricht ratification from the House of Commons. There is reason to doubt whether any alternative Prime Minister at the time could have achieved better.

When it comes to the Major government’s relations with the United States, they were, in different ways, coloured by two of the major wars of the 1990s: the First Gulf War and the War in Bosnia.

In the First Gulf War, Britain committed the largest European contingent to the US-led combat operations. In this period, US-British relations appeared rock-solid both at the state level and at the personal level between Major and George Bush Sr. In contrast, disagreements between the British and US governments over the the Bosnian War gave the impression of an alliance under pressure. While the rhetoric about “the special relationship” was maintained also during this period, personal relations between Major and Bill Clinton were reportedly less heartfelt.

Major’s foreign policy unfolded in a tense and challenging period, navigating through the debris of the Cold War and trying to strike out a new path for Britain in an emerging multipolar world. When Blair’s New Labour came to power in 1997, this assertion was that British foreign policy too would be subject to modernisation and change. Yet, while the foreign policy of the Major years served as a useful “Old Britain” cliché for Blair, it may well be argued that the old-fashioned pragmatism of Major’s foreign policy was precisely what Britain needed to clear the path through the post-Cold War years.
"A Britain unamendable in all essentials": speech to the Conservative Group for Europe, 22 April 1993

Two years ago I said I wanted to put Britain at the heart of Europe. And the heart of Europe is where I still want us to be.

It is now 20 years since we joined the European Community. Since then, a whole generation has grown up. A generation free of the legacy of the old animosities. A generation which takes for granted the fact that we do it.

We take from the Community. And we put into it. Europe needs Britain just as Britain needs Europe. We have just completed the biggest free trade area in the world. A British initiative, started by a British Prime Minister, driven by a British Commissioner, and brought to fruition under a British Prime Minister. A single market that makes full use of the Treaty of Rome as a charter for economic liberty. A single market that helps us capitalise on the things Britain does uniquely well - our financial services, our transport and aviation and our telecommunications companies. (…)

Thirty years ago the economist, James Meade wrote a famous pamphlet. An outward-looking Europe was good, he said, an inward-looking Europe should make us flee to the hills. We are fighting and winning the battles he identified. Historically, some of our partners are protectionist by instinct. But Britain with her outside links, American and Commonwealth, will always thrust Europe outwards.

We have also led the way to bringing in our old EFTA partners and friends Austria, Norway, Sweden and Finland. They share our instincts as global free traders. Many of the traditions on which our Parliamentary democracy is based come from the Scandinavian part of our heritage.

"We have also led the way to bringing in our old EFTA partners and friends Austria, Norway, Sweden and Finland. They share our instincts as global free traders. Many of the traditions on which our Parliamentary democracy is based come from the Scandinavian part of our heritage."

"…and eventually 20 plus nations it is a grandiose doodle. It is not what the people of Europe want. We Conservatives, must have the confidence and the sharp-edged determination to stay in the heart of the European debate to win a Community of free, independent members. The nations must be free-standing - a colonnade, not a set of bars. (…)

The Single Market was a British idea; breaking open state monopolies was a British idea. CAP reform and enlargement have been British goals. If we tried to huddle back into some private yesterday we wouldn't have any alliances we could make. Others would make the rules. And they'd impose the rules on us. That's what our EFTA partners have learned. It's one reason why they are queuing to join.
"A Britain unamendable in all essentials"

I know there are those who have many objections to the Community. But I notice they offer no satisfactory alternative. What are the theoretical options? There are three:

- to leave altogether. Put that bluntly, they shrink away from that choice;
- to form some kind of association with an American free trade area. That is a sugar coated turnip and the economic hole that leaving Europe would open up cannot be filled with turnips;
- third, to stick at "a Common market and no more". That's such a narrow, unexcited vision. Britain has long argued for a more coherent foreign policy for the Twelve. Because it makes sense for us to work together as we did in providing safe havens for the Kurds of Northern Iraq.

So what really moves the opponents of Britain's full participation in the EC? As much as anything it is frustration. Frustration that we are no longer a world power. Frustration that nowhere is the nation state fully sovereign, free to conduct its policies without concerning with ruddy foreigners. There is frustration that some of the fixed and treasured aspects of our national life are subject to seemingly relentless change. They practice a sort of phantom grandeur, a clanking of unusable suits of armour.

I understand these feelings but I cannot share them. The world has moved on. Britain has to take its rightful place in it. Though no longer a global power we still have global interests and we need to defend them with determination but also with subtlety. We cannot afford to subject ourselves to the despotism of nostalgia. We need to use cleverness and shared strength. We must operate a network of little threads to make most use of the influence we do have. And the European Community is a handful of threads for the pursuit of our domestic and foreign interests.

We hear a lot about principled opposition to Europe. Let's not forget that there is a great deal of principled support too. Looking around, I see a great many who have been principled supporters of our place in Europe for as long as I can remember.

The sly argument that to be a principled supporter of Europe is somehow to put Britain's interests second needs dismissing for the nonsense it is. It's precisely because we put Britain's interests first that we need to be in there shaping the new Europe. A new Europe that is larger, more open and less intrusive. That's not throwing away history, that's not knocking down traditions. We are digging straight ditches and putting layers of bricks into them - what builders call a foundation. (…) Let's not forget, that when we joined the Community, Spain Portugal and Greece were still governed by men in sunglasses and epaulettes. The dictators were booted out. Stability and democracy have been locked in - by membership of the Community.

The tragedy in Bosnia on our borders is a terrible reminder of the loss of that blessing we here take too much for granted. It is an irony that many who protest most loudly that "Britain only joined a common market" are the first to complain that the EC has not secured a political or military settlement to the conflict in Bosnia. Our long term purpose must be the whole continent of Europe with free democracies and without trade barriers. We are backing freer trade with more aid. A great swelling tide of humanitarian and technical aid flows to Russia and central Europe. The EC is by far the largest donor. (…)

Fifty years from now Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers - and as George Orwell said - "old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist" and if we get our way - Shakespeare still read even in school. Britain will survive unamendable in all essentials.

Surely we trust our own integrity as a people quite enough to fear nothing in Europe. We are the British, a people freely living inside a Europe which is glad to see us and wants us. After 20 years we have come of age in Europe. One Conservative leader put us there. This Conservative leader means us to thrive there. So let's get on with it.

The full text of the speech can be accessed at http://www.johnmajor.co.uk/page1086.html. The web domain provides access to thousands of speeches and statements relating to both Sir John Major and the 1990-1997 Conservative government.

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Forthcoming edition of British Politics Review

British military intelligence is a topic frequently on the agenda, popularised in novels and television while also a matter of public debate.

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