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**‘Mrs Thatcher’s Praetorian Guard’: The 92 Group and
the defence of Thatcherism, 1979-83.**

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Abstract

Ever since Mrs Thatcher's departure from office Conservative politicians have rushed to invoke her name, her legacy, and her policies, in one form or another. Being the 'Thatcherite' candidate still has value within the party. This research examines Mrs Thatcher's backbench supporters and their contribution to the development of Thatcherism, the people we look back and call the first 'Thatcherites'. It concludes that she needed the 92 Group, her so-called 'Praetorian Guard', within her first term. Led by George Gardiner, Ian Gow and William Clark, they were indispensable counterweights to those Conservative MPs who could never accept Mrs Thatcher's leadership or policies. Using archival material, interviews with contemporaries, and private papers, this thesis demonstrates how the activity of leading members of the 92 Group ensured Mrs Thatcher's survival in her first term. Without these backbench supporters, she would have been forced into a U-turn in 1981, or toppled from power, and Thatcherism, as we know it, wouldn't exist.

Formed in 1964 the 92 Group got its name from 92 Cheyne Walk, the London home of its first chairman Patrick Wall. To most observers it was solely a dining club. Yet archival material demonstrates that it was more than that. It discussed 'conservative principles' and how the Conservative party had lost its way at the end of thirteen years of governance. Intellectually it fit within the New Right. It was unhappy at the increased size of the state, planning, high taxation and universal welfare. To some extent it was uneasy with the permissive society. It was unreservedly nationalistic in sentiment, a reaction to the end of Empire and new Commonwealth immigration. In all of these we see the intellectual hand of Enoch Powell and many of the principles that came to be associated with Thatcherism.

The Heath years were as symbolic in shaping the 92 as they were the Thatcherites who became Mrs Thatcher's key economic ministers. The 92 grudgingly sided with Heath, supporting his prices and incomes policies only because they were a weapon to stifle trade union power. This did not stop them complaining in private at the direction of policy away from the 1970 manifesto. Unsurprisingly, they enthusiastically supported Mrs Thatcher for the leadership in 1975, their opportunity to keep the Conservative party 'conservative'.

With Gardiner and Gow joining the 92 in the late 1970s they saved it from atrophy after the Group's convenor died. This is key as Gardiner became Mrs Thatcher's staunchest defender in the press and Ian Gow her assiduous Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS). With

William Clark elected chairman of the backbench finance committee, they had their positions and roles to defend the Prime Minister. The Group supported her economic policy when it looked as if it was not working. Their pressure forced Jim Prior, the Employment Secretary, to concede to more trade union reforms, against his wishes, reforms that were central to the Thatcher project. The 92 organised to ensure her supporters were elected to the backbench policy committees, a vital barometer of opinion in the party. Such was the strength of its activism and support for the Prime Minister that a leadership challenge to Mrs Thatcher was averted in 1981.

This is not to say the 92 were the brains trust of Thatcherism. From 1985 the No Turning Back group became the intellectual guard of Thatcherism. They published sophisticated papers developing Thatcherism by calling for the introduction of market mechanisms into public services. Mrs Thatcher recognised their talent and appointed several of them within her administration. Yet had the battles of the early 1980s not been won by the 92, historians must ask whether what followed would have been possible.

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Chapter One: 'I hope the 92 Group are mobilised'

When Michael Heseltine challenged Margaret Thatcher for the leadership of the Conservative party in 1990 the Prime Minister is reported to have said to her campaign team: 'I hope the 92 Group are mobilised'; such was the reputation the 92 had as Mrs Thatcher's devout supporters.¹ The founding chairman of the 92, Sir Patrick Wall², christened the 92 Mrs Thatcher's 'Praetorian Guard' in 1981³ and his successor as chairman, George Gardiner⁴, also used the term in his end of session report.⁵ In her first term members of the 92 held important positions within the party's backbench committees and were vocally supportive of the Prime Minister against criticism. They were her personal 'Praetorian Guard'. By defending her position and policies they were defending the virtues and ideology that came to embody Thatcherism. This is not to say the 92 articulated policies to develop Thatcherism; Norman Tebbit was heard to remark that the 92 had no 'taint of intellectualism'.⁶ In the early Thatcher years it was a 'marker of allegiance' to the new Prime Minister and against all that represented by the Heathites.⁷ As Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders wrote of 'Thatcher's people', 'these were prophets not policy makers' and the 92 had 'the flavour of a rebel movement'.⁸

Another backbench formation, the No Turning Back group (NTB), published sophisticated policy documents for the next steps. The NTB, however, was a phenomenon of Mrs Thatcher's second and third terms. They were her intellectual 'Praetorian Guard'. This thesis therefore argues that had the 92 not served as Mrs Thatcher's guard in the important backbench elections of her first term, she would have been weakened to the point of being forced into a policy U-turn, or even toppled from power. Without the support of the 92 Thatcherism, therefore, would not have become the 'ism' academics, journalists, politicians, and writers have argued over for the last forty years.

¹ Mrs Thatcher quoted in Robin Harris, *Not for Turning: The Complete Life of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2014), p. 324.

² Major Sir Patrick Wall (1916-1998), Conservative MP for Haltemprice, February 1954-1983; Beverley, 1983-87. Chairman of the 92 Group, 1964-84.

³ Hull, Hull History Centre, Papers of Sir Patrick Wall, U DPW, U DPW/37/22, 'The 92 Committee', p. 20.

⁴ Sir George Gardiner (1935-2002), Conservative MP for Reigate, February 1974-97; Referendum Party, 1997. Chairman of the 92 Group, 1984-96.

⁵ Cambridge, Churchill Archives Centre, The Thatcher Archive, THCR2/1/4/42 f108, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 23 December 1981.

⁶ Julian Critchley, *Westminster Blues* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985), p. 47.

⁷ Robert Saunders, 'Crisis? What Crisis? Thatcherism and the Seventies' in *Making Thatcher's Britain*, ed. by Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 25-42 (p. 26).

⁸ Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders, 'Varieties of Thatcherism' in *ibid.*, pp. 1-21 (p. 12).

The 92 Group began as a backbench Conservative dining club. So secretive was the Group that a former Conservative MP wondered why I was researching the 92 in the 1979-83 parliament as he assumed, from the name, that the Group was formed in the 1990s.⁹ Although the Group is briefly mentioned in memoirs and diaries, only one study exists as an MA dissertation.¹⁰ My thesis uses archival material and interviews from MPs serving in the 1979-83 parliament, and beyond, to provide a better understanding of the 92 Group and its role in defending Mrs Thatcher and Thatcherism.

The 92 has enjoyed three lives. This thesis examines the first two relevant to this study of the 92 and Thatcherism. Under the chairmanship of Major Sir Patrick Wall, from 1964-84, it was as a dining club. It evolved into a discussion group for policies to keep the Conservative party 'conservative' after the elevation of Sir Alec Douglas-Home to the premiership in 1963. To keep the party 'conservative' the Group sought to elect its members to the chairmanship of backbench policy committees. In government the chairmanship of these committees was a powerful office for backbenchers and was used to measure opinion within the parliamentary party. As the Conservative historian Philip Norton wrote, the backbench committees, rather than the 1922 Committee, saw the party factions argue over policy.¹¹ The ideological contests between the different strands of opinion surfaced in the backbench policy committees and the 92 clashed with its 'wet' rival, the Lollards. The 92 and the Lollards took their names from the respective London homes of their chairmen. The 92, contrary to the belief held by the Conservative Lord mentioned above, took its name from 92 Cheyne Walk, the London home of Patrick Wall. William van Straubenzee¹², the chairman of the Lollards, lived at the Lollards Tower in Lambeth Palace.¹³

Wall's successor, George Gardiner, maintained the secretive habits of the Group in its second phase but, paradoxically, it became more conspicuous due to Gardiner's tactical leaking to the press and his regular on the record quotes and columns. Although elected official

⁹ Correspondence with Conservative Peer, 16 March 2022. In his defence he was not on the right wing of the party and would not have been considered for membership.

¹⁰ Lucy Grant, "'The 6.28 from Brighton'". An historical study of the 92 Group 1964-1984', MA dissertation submitted to the University of Hull, Hull, 2000 (unpublished).

¹¹ Philip Norton, 'The party in Parliament', in *The Conservative Party*, ed. by Philip Norton (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), pp. 127-141 (p. 127).

¹² Sir William van Straubenzee (1924-99), Conservative MP for Wokingham, 1959-87. Minister of State, Northern Ireland, 1972-4.

¹³ Critchley, *Westminster Blues*, p. 47.

chairman in 1984, he became its chief organiser in 1979 and saved the Group from atrophy. He turned the Group into a significant backbench organisation in the Thatcher and Major administrations. Another backbench group, the Progress Trust, for instance, described the Group as ‘influential’ but also ‘viewed with suspicion’, as the Group became associated with Gardiner’s plotting and scheming.¹⁴

Its final phase was subdued, a shadow of its success under Wall and Gardiner, overtaken by new groups reflecting the party’s differing opinions on European integration. Like the rest of the Conservative party, European integration divided the Group. It struggled to come to terms with a post-Thatcher Conservative party. It split between those who supported John Major and those who wanted more robust policies they believed Major’s predecessor would have followed. These tensions brought about Gardiner’s resignation from the 92 and its influence in the party waned thereafter.

Structure

The next two chapters introduce the 92 and argue that it was more than a dining club. Although it did not publish pamphlets, it circulated amongst its members policy papers and discussed the future direction of the party after Harold Macmillan’s resignation in 1963. While true that it did not have the taint of ‘intellectualism’ mentioned by Norman Tebbit, it challenged the post-war consensus and the policies of Conservative and Labour governments. Its papers and discussion documents demonstrate how it was caught up in the thinking of the New Right, debating alternatives to high taxation, nationalisation, and expanding trade union powers.

These were transformative years for the parliamentary Conservative party. Prior to the 1970 election Willie Whitelaw¹⁵ confided to the journalist Hugo Young that the retirement of the ‘squires’ from the backbenches had seen a ‘departure of instinctive loyalty’ in the parliamentary party, and thus a greater tendency to challenge the policies of the leadership.¹⁶ When Heath departed from his 1970 manifesto commitments this loyalty was tested. Chapter Two therefore argues that the 92 was torn between members’ commitment to conservative

¹⁴ Richard Ritchie, *Without Hindsight: A History of the Progress Trust* (Croydon: OS Publishing, 2018), p. 223.

¹⁵ William Whitelaw, Viscount Whitelaw (1918-99), Conservative MP for Penrith and the Border, 1955-83. Secretary of State: Northern Ireland, 1972-3; Employment, 1973-4. Home Secretary, 1979-83. Made Viscount Whitelaw, 1983.

¹⁶ Ion Trewin, *The Hugo Young Papers* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 8.

principles, its loyalty to the leader, and the threat of Harold Wilson returning to power. Chapter Two also highlights how carefully the 92 approached entry to the European Economic Community (EEC). Given that European integration would split the party after the fall of Mrs Thatcher, the 92 was relatively united on entry, although prominent members such as Ronald Bell¹⁷ and William Clark dissented. Wall, wisely, did not seek to define a collective Group view on entry to the EEC and Chapter Two describes how he communicated with Chief Whip Francis Pym to keep the party leadership informed of Group opinion.

Chapter Three examines the Group's reaction to the election defeats of 1974, the rise of Mrs Thatcher, and introduces the MPs who would champion her in office. Evidence suggests an overwhelming majority of Group members supported Mrs Thatcher as leader. Yet the Conservative party's period in opposition stymied the growth of the Group, despite the party electing a leader to keep the Conservative party 'conservative'. Shadow cabinet members automatically took the chairmanships of their backbench policy committees, diminishing the Group's influence. It was also a period where the Group became less organised, and its convenor died. In that crisis George Gardiner emerged. Elected in February 1974 he manoeuvred to organise against Scottish devolution and joined the 92 as its organisation frayed. Chapter Three introduces Gardiner, but also Ian Gow and William Clark, arguing that these three MPs changed the fortunes of the 92 and gave it prominence not just in the first Thatcher term but in the history of the Conservative party.

Chapters Four, Five and Six explain how Gardiner effectively took the chairmanship of the 92, revived its organisation, and led it to success in the backbench committees despite the immediate unpopularity of the Thatcher government. In the early 1980s the backbench committees were influential and served as a barometer of opinion in the party. Sir Ian Gilmour, an arch-critic of Mrs Thatcher sacked from the cabinet in September 1981, saw the backbenches as the 'critical element in producing change', the means to bring about a U-turn in policy or even a change in leadership.¹⁸ Gow, Clark and Gardiner demonstrated, in their own individual ways, that the backbenches supported Mrs Thatcher's policies as a counterweight to those, such as Gilmour in the cabinet, who wanted a departure from policy.

¹⁷ Sir Ronald Bell (1914-1982), Conservative MP for Newport, 1945; South Buckinghamshire, 1950-February 1974; Beaconsfield, February 1974-1982. Knighted, 1980.

¹⁸ Trewin, p. 156.

Ian Gow's role as Mrs Thatcher's parliamentary private secretary (PPS) is introduced and it is argued that he acted as a bridge between the Group, the backbenches, and the Prime Minister.

Chapter Four demonstrates how Gardiner seized control of the 92 and recruited new members to the Group. It also notes the importance of William Clark's election as chairman of the backbench finance committee. The 92 welcomed the first budget and it helped to avoid a bloody parliamentary split on Rhodesia. The Group opted to support the Prime Minister's policy against its members' instincts. The issue needed to be resolved, Gow arguing that the party had to abide by its manifesto commitment to agree a solution in Rhodesia that would gain international recognition. Such recognition required majority rule; the Carter administration in the USA would not accept anything less. By abiding by the manifesto on Rhodesia the 92 demanded in return that the party abide by its pledge on trade union reform. This brought it into conflict with Jim Prior, the Employment Secretary.

The Group's organisation against the Employment Bill is discussed in Chapter Five. Group members tabled amendments to strengthen the Bill against trade union immunities, recognising that Prior's Bill, and his instinctive opposition to further changes, would derail Mrs Thatcher's plans to reform the economy. Gow and Gardiner covertly organised a backbench rebellion against their own government, and with Mrs Thatcher's blessing. The reasoning for this was that Mrs Thatcher, in a minority in her own cabinet, wanted to go further on trade union reform. But her caution and the substantial threat of concerted trade union action gave strength to Jim Prior's step-by-step approach. The problem was that Prior only wanted one step. The 92 thus viewed Prior's strategy as an attempt to dilute the Prime Minister's reform programme. He was seen as her biggest threat and an opponent of the radical steps the 92 wanted, and what it believed the Prime Minister wanted.

The challenge to Mrs Thatcher came, though not from Prior. Chapter Six explains the showdown between the 92 and the 'wets' in 1981, Mrs Thatcher's toughest year in office until the Westland crisis in 1986¹⁹ and the leadership challenges of 1989-90. It argues that the 92 fought off any challenge to her policies or leadership. As the economy faltered, pressure came

¹⁹ The Westland crisis came from a clash between Mrs Thatcher and her Defence Secretary, Michael Heseltine. Mrs Thatcher supported an American purchase of British helicopter manufacturer Westland, Heseltine a European buyer. Heseltine famously walked out of Cabinet and resigned in January 1986. Mrs Thatcher was dragged into the furore over whether she authorised the leaking of legal advice contradicting Heseltine. See Harris, pp. 283-5.

on Mrs Thatcher to depart from her monetarist experiment. Unpopular, but nonetheless strategic, U-turns on pit closures were compensated by a dogmatic budget that further cut public spending to bring the money supply under control. The rise of the Social Democratic Party created a new, moderate electoral threat to the Conservatives. Labour's divisions were on display throughout 1981 in their bitter deputy leadership election between Tony Benn and Denis Healey, which came to a head in September. The cabinet 'wets' thus believed these pressures would spook Conservative backbenchers into action against Mrs Thatcher. For the 92, therefore, this was its strongest test. A challenge to Mrs Thatcher from Heathite ex-minister Geoffrey Rippon was mooted, then dropped. Former Treasury Minister Maurice Macmillan challenged Sir William Clark for the chairmanship of the finance committee. Clark was specifically targeted because of his vocal support for the Prime Minister and his symbolic position as chairman of the finance committee. Macmillan, as Clark's most high-profile challenger, reflected the seriousness of the contest. Clark's victory put an end to the threat, despite the government's unpopularity in the opinion polls.

Chapter Seven is an epilogue explaining, first, the rise and fall of George Gardiner. Gardiner became official Group chairman upon Wall's retirement from the post in 1984. Towards the end of the Thatcher administration it was in majority control of the 1922 Committee. However, the strength of the Group could do nothing to prevent Mrs Thatcher's downfall. The unpopularity of the Community Charge, and Mrs Thatcher's evolving hostility to further European integration, split the party. One may argue that unpopularity was no barrier to supporting the Prime Minister: the 92 had stood by her in 1981 when the Conservatives were polling third behind Labour and the SDP. But after eleven years of Conservative rule the parliamentary party had changed with retirements and two landslide wins in 1983 and 1987. Whereas the party unified around the early Thatcher priorities to transform the economy and restore national self-confidence, by the late 1980s those had been settled with the unions cowed and the Falklands retaken. Moreover, the growing number of MPs who relied on their salary and connections to make a living had their seats to worry about, and this was as much a motivating factor as policy and principle. It all made for a bitter end to the Thatcher years, something Gardiner didn't forget when he sensed betrayal under her successor John Major. Gardiner overreached in 1994, demanding the Prime Minister reshuffle his cabinet and produce 'conservative' policies. It backfired, and Gardiner's political standing was mortally wounded. He saw off a challenge for the chairmanship of the 92, saved by a commitment to step down from his position by the next election.

The second section of Chapter Seven acknowledges the complementary role played by the No Turning Back group. Some interviewees insisted that the NTB was Mrs Thatcher's Praetorian Guard. To an extent it was, as an intellectual force. It supported the Prime Minister by advocating new policies to develop Thatcherism after 1985. It was the product of a debate within the party between those who wanted to consolidate after the 1983 election and those who wanted reforms to go further by introducing market forces into public services to reduce the size of the state. Mrs Thatcher had a close relationship with the NTB, encouraging their first paper and a second, radical piece in 1990. Yet had the difficult battles not been won by the 92 in the first term, none of this would have happened.

The influences over Mrs Thatcher changed over time, and different authors writing about different periods of the Thatcher years reflect this. For instance Caroline Slocock, who worked as a private secretary to Mrs Thatcher from 1989, argued the civil servants around Mrs Thatcher became her 'Praetorian Guard' towards the very end of her premiership, noting the powerful roles Charles Powell²⁰, Bernard Ingham²¹, and Alan Walters²² had vis-a-vis her cabinet and MPs.²³ The 92 and NTB therefore fulfilled different roles at different times in the Thatcher years but with the same aim, to defend the Prime Minister, her policies, and those policies they believed she wanted, the fusion of which became Thatcherism. In the first term the 92 was essential in protecting the Prime Minister from attack and demonstrating that the backbenches supported what she was doing. By 1985, however, the Thatcher revolution had, to some observers, run out of steam. A new generation of Conservative MPs sympathetic to the Prime Minister, and what they saw was her mission, supplemented her agenda with new ideas.

The NTB and 92 had many members in common, notably Neil Hamilton²⁴ and Sir Gerald Howarth.²⁵ The former stood as chairman of the 92 in 1996 and the latter became chairman after the 2001 election. One difference, however, is that the NTB was ambitious and some of its members achieved high office. Peter Lilley joined the cabinet in 1990, and many

²⁰ Baron Powell of Bayswater (1941-), private secretary to Mrs Thatcher, 1984-90.

²¹ Sir Bernard Ingham (1932-2023), chief press secretary to the Prime Minister, 1979-90.

²² Sir Alan Walters (1926-2009), economist and the Prime Minister's economics adviser, 1981-3 and 1989.

²³ Caroline Slocock, *People Like Us: Margaret Thatcher and Me* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2019), p. 56.

²⁴ Neil Hamilton (1949-), Conservative MP for Tatton, 1983-97. UKIP Member of the Welsh Assembly, 2016-2021.

²⁵ Sir Gerald Howarth (1947-), Conservative MP for Cannock and Burntwood, 1983-92; Aldershot, 1997-2017.

NTB members were in John Major's administration. The 92, by contrast, was primarily a backbench group, and when a member was promoted to the front bench he or she may have stayed as a member but was less involved in the operations of the Group. Gardiner and Wall wanted to preserve the independence a backbench group had. For instance, upon his appointment as a Whip in 1976, Carol Mather²⁶ wrote to Wall that he would rather not attend the dinners so that members could discuss matters without the thought that a Whip was keeping notes.²⁷

This thesis concludes that the 92 was Mrs Thatcher's 'Praetorian Guard' within the parliamentary party, led by Gardiner, Gow and Clark, with its greatest influence in the first Thatcher term. Had these three MPs not been in the 92 in 1979, it is arguable the Group would have withered after the death of Sir John Hall, its convenor, in 1978. Wall was struggling with the responsibilities, not all members were receiving dinner invitations, and the membership lists were not thoroughly updated. It was Gardiner who reinvigorated the Group with new members after 1979 and reformed its campaigning methods, as proved by the difficult backbench elections in the first half of Mrs Thatcher's first term. With its job done, however, it resorted to its dining club roots, and the NTB became the brains trust of the parliamentary Thatcherites. Yet without the 92 performing its essential mission in 1979, 1980, and 1981, there would not have been 'Thatcherism', a concept that captivated the Conservative party for over forty years.

Sources and Methodology

This thesis has used primary sources from written and oral history, archives, and secondary materials. The limited secondary literature on the Group is influenced by George Gardiner's leadership during the Major administration when he publicly clashed with the Prime Minister and it is thus seen as eurosceptic. For example Arthur Aughey, writing in 1996, categorised the 92 with other eurosceptic Conservative groups such as the Fresh Start Group, the Bruges Group and European Foundation.²⁸ Jerry Hayes, the former MP for Harlow, described the 92 as a right-wing group demanding insurance-based healthcare, that the unemployed should have

²⁶ Sir David Carol Mather (1919-2006), Conservative MP for Esher, 1970-87. Government Whip, 1979-83; deputy Chief Whip, 1983-6.

²⁷ U DPW/37/13, Carol Mather to Patrick Wall, 11 February 1976.

²⁸ Arthur Aughey, 'Philosophy and Faction', in *The Conservative Party*, ed. by Philip Norton (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), pp. 83-94 (p. 94).

to ‘work for their benefits’, and that Britain should have left the European Union ‘years ago’.²⁹ While the first two propositions have some degree of accuracy, the 92 did not have a united position on the EEC as it did on trade union reform. This thesis will argue that, whilst the Group’s steering committee in 1996 was eurosceptic, on the critical issue of European integration the views of the 92 changed over time. When the 92 discussed entry to the EEC in 1971, Patrick Wall decided that the issue was so divisive that he opted not to have a Group position on entry. An overwhelming majority of Group members voted to join the EEC; only Ronald Bell and Michael Clark Hutchison voted against the Second Reading of the enabling legislation.

Gardiner’s memoirs are an excellent starting point to understand the 92. He genuinely cared about the Group. In October 1980 Gardiner was due to host a constituency dinner in the House of Commons. When he found out it clashed with a 92 dinner, Gardiner asked Rhodes Boyson³⁰ to stand in for him so that he could attend the 92. He wrote to Wall, ‘we must give the “92” priority’.³¹ However, Gardiner himself wasn’t always accurate about the history of the 92. In a letter to *The Times* in 1993 he corrected the journalist Nicholas Wood on the origins of the 92. He was right in reminding Wood that the 92 was not born out of opposition to majority rule in Rhodesia. Instead, Gardiner claimed it was formed in 1965.³² As will be shown in the next chapter, the 92 germinated in 1963 and was officially constituted in 1964. It arose from supporters of Reginald Maudling who were disappointed after thirteen years of Conservative governance. While Rhodesia became a motivating factor, it declared unilateral independence in 1965 a year after the Group’s formation.

Sir Patrick Wall’s papers at the University of Hull have been the strongest primary source for this study. Wall was the MP for Haltemprice and Beverley from 1954 until 1987. He kept detailed notes and minutes of the 92 from its foundation until his retirement as chairman in 1984. They include not just Wall’s notes, but letters from members, membership lists (including complaints from Gardiner that Wall’s lists weren’t up to date), the early discussion documents on conservative principles, and a summarised history of the 92 between 1964 and 1984. The papers of Sir John Biggs-Davison, the MP for Chigwell and then Epping

²⁹ Jerry Hayes, *An Unexpected MP: Confessions of a Political Gossip* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2014), p. 187.

³⁰ Sir Rhodes Boyson (1925-2012), Conservative MP for Brent North, February 1974-1997.

³¹ U DPW/37/17, George Gardiner to Patrick Wall, 13 October 1980.

³² George Gardiner, ‘Origins of 92 Group’, *The Times*, 10 June 1993, p. 17.

Forest between 1955 and 1988, at the Parliamentary Archives also contain papers on the 92 and the 1922 Committee, which have complemented Wall's papers. Ian Gow's correspondence with Mrs Thatcher within the Thatcher archive at Churchill College has been useful detailing Gow's manoeuvres behind the scenes and his appeals for a tougher Employment Bill. Papers from the backbench policy committees held at the Bodleian Library have revealed the internal discussions on trade union reform and economic policy that divided the 'wets' and 'dries', showing the importance backbench committees had at the time. Gow's reports on backbench committees have also been contrasted with official minutes and those reported in newspapers to provide a stronger argument that the 92 used the backbench committees to pressure the party to keep to its course. The *Parliamentary Profiles* archive of journalist Andrew Roth has been a reliable source of information on MPs who did not have a significant public profile. Roth published regular profiles of individual MPs, and his files contain speeches, correspondence, and meticulous newspaper clippings.

This study has also benefited from access to private papers held outside formal archives. The diaries of Sir Neil Marten, Conservative MP for Banbury from 1959-83, provide an unpublished running commentary of Conservative politics from his election in 1959 until his death in 1985. The papers of Sir William Clark have been useful in demonstrating Clark's unwavering support for Mrs Thatcher. I am also grateful to several former politicians and journalists for granting access to interviews. Even though the 92 formed a minor part of the tumultuous and transformative Conservative politics in the 1980s, and whilst the details of the period have relied more on written materials, the analysis of each interviewee has helped guide the argument of this thesis.

Within this thesis colloquial terms will be used that require definition. 'Wet' and 'dry' were both used as terms describing the political and economic views of Conservative MPs. To be a 'wet' was to be opposed to Mrs Thatcher's monetarist economic policies (which required strict control of the money supply), referring to the likes of Ian Gilmour, Jim Prior, and the Lollards. The 'wets' called Mrs Thatcher's supporters 'dry' in return, Sir William Clark was often referred to as a 'dry'. Mrs Thatcher's aide and biographer Robin Harris credits Ian Gow with the definition of the 'wets', and Mrs Thatcher, and those around her, used it often. In her memoirs she described it as the weakness of those opposed to her policies.³³ I have also

³³ Harris, p. 119.

capitalised 'Group' to refer to the 92 where stylistically 'Group' is a better fit and to set it apart from other backbench groups.

What was Thatcherism: A Literature Review

Thatcherism as Ideology

Whether one views Thatcherism as an ideology, as a product of historical circumstances, or as a personal leadership style, what is common amongst all (and is imperative to clarify first) is what it opposed: the set of ideas comprising the post-war consensus. Indeed by the time Mrs Thatcher became Conservative leader there 'seemed no doubt that some such consensus had existed in the post-war period'.³⁴ Research in the mid-1970s, notably Paul Addison's *The Road to 1945*, argued that the post-war consensus was built during the conflict by the extension of the welfare state, public healthcare and education. Dennis Kavanagh wrote that by the 1950s it was possible to define a consensus across all parties on 'many, though not all, policies'.³⁵ These centred on economic planning through state intervention to maintain full employment, a mixed economy of the public and private sectors, and increased public spending to maintain the arrangement. As a set of ideas it became known as Keynesianism, heavily influenced by the work of economist John Maynard Keynes who argued that state intervention in the economy through public spending could generate demand. The intellectual historian Norman Barry has described Keynesianism as 'the political consensus' that emerged after the Second World War.³⁶ It was the political and economic means for providing the new welfare state for a generation returning, and recovering, from war.

Consensus politics was given a political label: 'Butskellism', a symbolic merger of the names and economic views of Conservative Chancellor 'Rab' Butler and Labour politician Hugh Gaitskell, who preceded Butler as Chancellor in 1950-51 and then shadowed him until he became leader of the Labour party in 1955.³⁷ Ronald Butt argued that towards the end of its life the consensus became 'Neo-Keynesian [...] whereby government printed money to

³⁴ Richard Toye, 'From "Consensus" to "Common Ground": The Rhetoric of the Postwar Settlement and its Collapse', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48 (2013), 3-23 (p. 4).

³⁵ Dennis Kavanagh, *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 34.

³⁶ Norman Barry, *The New Right* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 11.

³⁷ Kavanagh, p. 4.

cover spending' in the hope that 'pay policies', i.e. prices and incomes policies, could keep inflation down.³⁸ John Burton argued that successive Conservative and Labour governments abided by 'the proposition that a reduction in unemployment could be "bought" by an increase in inflation' from increased expenditure, known as the Phillips Curve.³⁹ After the Heath U-turns in 1972, cartoonists pictured Heath wearing Wilson's trademark Gannex raincoat, representing the two parties' adherence to the same policies of increased state intervention in the economy.⁴⁰ Indeed, after Heath implemented his first prices and incomes policy in late 1972, the backbencher Neil Marten recorded in his diary wry comments from Conservative MPs suggesting that they now join the Labour party. He concluded that 'we have adopted the policies of the Socialists'.⁴¹ To Conservative MPs, at the very least, there was a consensus.

The consequences of these policies, the expansion of the money supply beyond what was required for economic growth, brought about high inflation and powerful trade unions who sought higher pay demands in response to it. This was the cost of 'buying' full employment. For the purposes of this study, therefore, it is imperative to highlight the status of full employment as the top priority of all post-war political parties, and the lengths both Conservative and Labour administrations went to achieve this aim. It is also necessary to highlight the consequences of this, inflation by expanding the money supply and the resultant power this gave to trade unions on pay bargaining, all to meet the goal of full employment.

Thatcherism has multiple definitions. It was a product of ideology, history, and leadership or personal style. Jim Bulpitt highlighted how these interpretations have differed across partisan lines be they 'Thatcherite, centre opinion and Marxist'.⁴² Thatcherism gained particular interest among the academic community in *Marxism Today* who argued that it represented an ideology. The product of this debate was *The Politics of Thatcherism*, edited by Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques. Thatcherism was an ideological 'gospel' of free market liberalism and 'organic patriotic Toryism'.⁴³ As Marxists they were deeply critical of Thatcherite reforms to traditional industries where, according to their theory, the working class

³⁸ Ronald Butt, 'Thatcherissima: the politics of Thatcherism', *Policy Review*, 26 (1983), 30-35 (p.32).

³⁹ John Burton, 'The Muddle of the Middle Way', in *The New Right Enlightenment*, ed. by Arthur Seldon (Sevenoaks: Economic and Literary Books, 1985), pp. 91-101 (p. 94).

⁴⁰ Alton, *The Private Diary of Sir Neil Marten*, entry for 21 January 1972.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, entry for 12 November 1972.

⁴² Jim Bulpitt, 'The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft' in *Political Studies*, 24 (1986), 19-39 (p.19).

⁴³ Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, 'Introduction', in *The Politics of Thatcherism*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 1983), pp. 9-16 (p. 2).

could organise. The assault on manufacturing was a means to cripple working class organisation against the ruling class, proved by the subsequent fall in trade union membership.⁴⁴ Thatcherism was therefore an expression of class interests, the defenders of capital against those immiserated and then alienated, through unemployment, from the workplace and society.⁴⁵

As Marxists, however, theirs is a predictable analysis as they ‘rarely think other than ideologically’.⁴⁶ They see history as a battle of competing class interests between those that own capital and those who do not. To them the conclusion is inevitable. They argue that as economies industrialise, the numbers owning capital decreases and those not owning it increase. They see this disparity growing to a point where the masses force political change and the transformation of capitalism into a socialist economy. The relative mass unemployment of the 1979-83 parliament fit their analysis. The Thatcher administration was defending its class interest by creating three million unemployed. According to their theory, however, the working class should have mobilised and sought socialist change.⁴⁷ That they didn’t exposes a great weakness of economic determinist Marxist analysis. That they also view politics, economics and society through these determinist eyes explain their view that Thatcherism was an ideology. It was shaped by its class and therefore acted in accordance with its class interest.

Mrs Thatcher’s Conservative critics, Ian Gilmour foremost among them, described her as a nineteenth-century liberal, and that Thatcherism represented an ‘ideology, style, and mood’.⁴⁸ This is unsurprising, as Gilmour was critical of ideology; and his description of Thatcherism as ideology had a political motive. He believed Mrs Thatcher’s politics were alien to the Conservative tradition. To Gilmour conservatism⁴⁹ was not an ‘ism’, rather it was a governing behaviour that adapted to changing circumstances. It is conservatism’s adherence to circumstance and empiricism rather than abstract theories that set it apart from liberalism

⁴⁴ Andrew Gamble, ‘Thatcherism and Conservative Politics’, *ibid.*, p. 124.

⁴⁵ Michael Bleaney, ‘Conservative Economic Strategy’, *ibid.*, pp. 132-3.

⁴⁶ Eric Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), p. 3.

⁴⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 11-12.

⁴⁸ Ian Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 10.

⁴⁹ The text of his speech is capitalised, so it is difficult to tell whether he means the capitalised Conservatism, i.e. the acts of party, or the small ‘c’ conservatism of ideology. Given his position as a Cabinet minister, and his opposition to Mrs Thatcher’s policies, we can assume both.

and socialism.⁵⁰ As will be discussed later, the abstract theory that was a defining part of Thatcherite statecraft was monetarism, which Gilmour opposed. Yet Gilmour has a point on Mrs Thatcher's liberalism. One tenet of liberalism is the belief in swift or radical change. By upending full employment as a political priority and in tackling the power of the trade unions, Mrs Thatcher's politics were radically liberal.

Those sympathetic to Mrs Thatcher, at one time or another, have also sought to codify Thatcherism not so much as an ideology, but as a collection of principles, virtues, and values. Mrs Thatcher used the term 'Thatcherism' shortly after becoming leader in 1975, saying that it represented standing 'up for liberty'.⁵¹ Nigel Lawson, Mrs Thatcher's Chancellor from 1983-89 and one of the architects of Thatcherism, despite his later policy of shadowing the Deutschmark, characterised it as 'a mixture of free markets, financial discipline, firm control over public expenditure, tax cuts, nationalism, "Victorian Values" (of the Samuel Smiles self-help variety), privatisation and a dash of populism'.⁵² Lawson's conclusion represents his own analysis of politics according to frameworks. For instance, his approach to economic policy before entering government was that 'Rules rule: OK?'.⁵³ The Medium Term Financial Strategy, which he helped draft, was an innovation of 'rules rule' to keep the growth of the money supply within certain limits. Like Harold Wilson's and George Brown's National Plan in 1965⁵⁴, it was ambitious, a failure, and quickly dropped soon after. One of the contributing factors to Lawson's departure from cabinet was that he switched his counter-inflation strategy from monetary control to exchange rate control. Covertly he shadowed the Deutschmark and supported entry to the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, something Mrs Thatcher instinctively opposed, but later conceded to join.⁵⁵

Shirley Letwin's *Anatomy of Thatcherism* argues that, rather than being an ideology, Thatcherism comprised a series of abstract vigorous virtues, not too different from Lawson's codification. Letwin differs from Lawson by describing an abstract Thatcherite analysis of politics and economics that can be separated from what Mrs Thatcher or her ministers said or

⁵⁰ THCR2/1/4/44 f69, Ian Gow to Ian Gilmour (speech in Cambridge), 14 February 1980.

⁵¹ E. H. H. Green, *Thatcher* (London: Hodder Education, 2006), p. 26.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Nigel Lawson, 'The economic perils of thinking for the moment', *The Times*, 14 September 1978, p. 16.

⁵⁴ An ambitious proposal from the Wilson administration to increase growth by twenty-five per cent from 1965-70. See Hansard, Commons Debates, 3 November 1965, Vol. 718, Col. 1041 onwards.

⁵⁵ This concession came after she lost both Nigel Lawson and Alan Walters, her economic adviser. Her new Chancellor, John Major, supported ERM entry, and thus Mrs Thatcher conceded. To lose one Chancellor is unfortunate, to lose two is careless.

did.⁵⁶ Published in 1992, however, it interprets Thatcherism as one set of policies and beliefs across the three terms and glosses over the differing priorities within each Thatcher term. It is therefore better understood to see waves or phases of Thatcherism rather than a unified approach across the three parliaments. For instance, the first term was a monetarist one where the control of the money supply was paramount to reduce inflation. As a supplementary goal, trade union power, and the unachievable wage demands that went with it, were brought under control. The second and third parliaments, however, were characterised by different outcomes. For instance, the second parliament rolled out privatisation, and in the third the radical Lawson income tax cuts of 1988. These contrast heavily with the aid to British Leyland and British Steel in 1981 and that year's freezing of tax thresholds that equated to a substantial income tax increase. Indeed, Lawson abandoned monetarism when he opted to shadow the Deutschmark from 1987. This is where Bulpitt acknowledges that too sympathetic accounts 'overstress their radical character and their consistent, even coherent, purpose'.⁵⁷

Thatcherism as History

Even though there are analytical weaknesses in describing Thatcherism as an ideology, both critics and supporters of Mrs Thatcher acknowledge ideological influences on Thatcherism, and that these developed within the changing historical context of post-war Conservative politics. Thatcherism can therefore be seen as a reaction to events supported by a favourable intellectual climate supplementing her instincts. The formation of the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) in 1955 brought together intellectuals from across the parties and from none to promote market-based solutions to policy questions. Its effect on Mrs Thatcher and Conservative politics was considerable. In 1968 the left-of-centre Fabian Society recognised the influence the IEA had in challenging consensus politics.⁵⁸ Enoch Powell and, later, Geoffrey Howe became regular visitors to the IEA and published through them. Enoch Powell introduced Keith Joseph to the IEA after the 1964 election defeat. Mrs Thatcher ennobled its director Ralph Harris, who had himself been a Liberal Unionist and a Conservative candidate.⁵⁹ The IEA and Powell were great influences on Thatcher and Thatcherism, something even her

⁵⁶ Shirley Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* (London: Fontana, 1992), p. 26.

⁵⁷ Bulpitt, 20.

⁵⁸ Richard Cockett, *Thinking the Unthinkable: Think-Tanks and the Economic Counter Revolution, 1931-83* (London: Fontana, 1995), p. 4.

⁵⁹ Nicholas Maloney, 'Harris, Ralph, Baron Harris of High Cross', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/97453> [accessed 14 April 2024].

political opponents observed. Norman St. John-Stevs told the journalist Hugo Young in 1986 that Mrs Thatcher's 'relations with Powell and his ideas were crucial'.⁶⁰ Indeed, Mrs Thatcher wrote in 1998 that Thatcherism had grown out of Powell's thinking.⁶¹

Powell broadened 'the accepted areas of political discussion and debate' by intellectually challenging the assumptions underpinning the consensus.⁶² He was one of three Treasury ministers to resign from the government in 1958 over £50 million of public spending increases which Powell, Chancellor Peter Thorneycroft, and economic secretary Nigel Birch believed to be inflationary. Powell's biographer Simon Heffer argues that Powell's thinking influenced these resignations.⁶³ By explaining the link between increased spending, and with it the supply of money in the economy, and inflation, Powell was foreshadowing the arguments Milton Friedman later made, arguments that became known as 'monetarism', and Thatcherism in practice.

During Thorneycroft's tenure at the Treasury the government convened a study of monetary policy, the conclusions of which contradicted Powell's view and justified increased public spending. The 1959 Radcliffe Report, published after the Treasury resignations, was interpreted by the economist Victor Morgan as 'a complete rejection of the quantity theory of money and the denial of any necessary causal connection or any stable and predictable relationship between the quantity of money and the price level'.⁶⁴ It was an official reprimand to those who wanted to control the money supply to keep control of inflation, and to the memory of Adam Smith who shaped the orthodoxy until the advent of Keynes. Such was the report's controversy that the IEA produced a paper responding to it, especially as the Report concluded the first act of monetary policy was 'a high and stable level of employment', with the stability of the 'purchasing power of money' as a second consideration.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Trewin, p. 236.

⁶¹ Margaret Thatcher, 'When Powell was right', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 November 1998, p. 20. In the article Mrs Thatcher also wrote that Powell had been right and that she had made a mistake signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985.

⁶² Douglas Schoen, *Enoch Powell and the Powellites* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 157.

⁶³ Simon Heffer, *Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), p. 231.

⁶⁴ Victor Morgan, 'The Radcliffe Report in the Tradition of British Official Monetary Documents', in *Money in Britain 1959-69*, ed. by David Croome and Garry Johnson (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 3-12 (p. 11).

⁶⁵ Peter Thorneycroft, 'Policy in Practice', in *Not Unanimous: A Rival Verdict to Radcliffe's on Money*, ed. by Arthur Seldon (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1960), pp. 1-14 (p. 3).

Within the Conservative party Powell was a relatively lonely voice articulating an alternative. His colleague and occasional friend Iain Macleod famously wrote that ‘sometimes I leave Powell’s train a few stations down the line, before it reaches, and sometimes crashes into, the terminal buffers’.⁶⁶ Powell toured the country making speeches and published books of them. The historian E. H. H. Green credits Powell’s influence so highly that after 1965, when Powell ironically came last with only fifteen votes in the Conservative leadership election, the ‘Conservative approach to the governance of the economy veered towards Powellism’ with regard to liberal, free-market economics.⁶⁷ This culminated in the characterisation of Edward Heath as ‘Selsdon Man’ in 1970, a supposed free-marketeer tough on law and order.

From the 1970s the intellectual climate was changing with the development of the ‘New Right’. Andrew Gamble traces the ideological origins of the Thatcher ‘project’ to the New Right theorists of the 1960s and 1970s within politics, the IEA, and academia.⁶⁸ Gamble, Levitas⁶⁹ and Barry all agree, from different ideological perspectives of their own, that the New Right consisted of a liberal and a conservative strand. The former emphasised sound money through a stable currency, free markets, and the limitation, or complete withdrawal in its purest form, of state intervention in the economy. The conservative strand emphasised nationhood and law and order. Gamble argues that Thatcherism was a blend of the two. The state withdrawing from the economy but exercising its authority to uphold the framework within which the free economy operated, thus necessitating higher police spending and anti-trade union legislation.⁷⁰

For Thatcherism to work however, it was essential that Mrs Thatcher understood where Edward Heath’s attempted reforms failed. Mrs Thatcher’s actions in 1981 were shaped by the Heath U-turns of 1972. This is perhaps the most persuasive factor in explaining the Thatcher programme as a pragmatic reaction to consensus policies that simply didn’t work. This argument also encapsulates Mrs Thatcher’s cautious and strategic character, something contradicting those who view her as a dogmatic, unbending ideologue. Heath’s manifesto for

⁶⁶ Iain Macleod, ‘Enoch Powell’, *Spectator*, 16 July 1975, p. 7.

⁶⁷ Green, p. 39.

⁶⁸ Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1994), p. 34.

⁶⁹ Ruth Levitas, ‘Introduction’, in *The Ideology of the New Right*, ed. by Ruth Levitas (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), pp. 1-23 (p. 6).

⁷⁰ Gamble, ‘Thatcherism and Conservative Politics’, in *The Politics of Thatcherism*, p. 116.

the 1970 election raised expectations amongst Conservatives disillusioned with consensus politics, increasing trade union power, and growing state power. Heath's biographer John Campbell called it a 'fatal error' for Heath to go along with this interpretation.⁷¹

The resistance to U-turns in the 1979-83 parliament was shaped by the unravelling of the 1970 manifesto. Whilst there was disagreement about the degree to which Heath's platform was a free market Thatcherite progenitor, or a propagandistic creation of Harold Wilson, that the myth caught hold is a sign that there was something to the argument that Heath wanted reform. For instance, on industrial relations, Heath opined at the shadow cabinet meeting at the Selsdon Park Hotel in January 1970, in very Thatcherite terms, that in wage bargaining the government should have no role. He said that the private sector should 'deal with their own wage negotiations' and not come to the government and say, 'why didn't we do something?'.⁷²

Historians, however, disagree whether Heath was wholly convinced or committed to reforming the post-war settlement. Sir Anthony Seldon wrote that the conclusions and radicalism of the Selsdon Park conference and 1970 manifesto were 'exaggerated' by the Labour party.⁷³ By contrast, Martin Holmes wrote that the 1970 Conservative manifesto 'made the control of inflation the priority for the next administration', and therefore was an attempt to transform the economy.⁷⁴ Campbell, however, observed that Heath had 'near universal support' for his U-turn in 1972 in response to the increase in unemployment.⁷⁵ It is therefore prudent to argue that the package of reforms of either the 1970 or 1979 manifestos were not right for the early 1970s. The country was not ready for economic liberalism and trade union reform in 1970. Dominic Sandbrook wrote that politically there was still huge support for trade unionists in the early 1970s. He notes the negative public reaction to *Carry on at Your Convenience*, a film from the popular *Carry On* comedy franchise, was a sign that the public had great sympathy with the trade union movement. Released in December 1971, five months after the passage of the Industrial Relations Act, it was a flop at the box office. Its representation of a bungling and pedantic union shop steward, a parody of the successful 1959

⁷¹ Cockett, p. 203.

⁷² Robert Taylor, 'The Heath Government in Industrial Relations: Myth and Reality', in *The Heath Government 1970-74*, ed. by Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (London: Longman, 1996), pp. 161-190 (p. 168).

⁷³ Anthony Seldon, 'The Heath Government in History', in *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷⁴ Martin Holmes, *The Failure of the Heath Government* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. x

film *I'm All Right Jack*, didn't appeal to a largely working-class audience and was seen as an attack on trade unionism.⁷⁶

The irony of Mrs Thatcher's industrial relations legislation is that it came in incremental steps compared to Heath's sweeping omnibus legislation, the 1971 Industrial Relations Act. She had learned from his experience and implemented change one step at a time, a point acknowledged by Michael Heseltine.⁷⁷ So gentle were they that the academic Brendan Evans observed that on industrial relations the 'Thatcherite approach had been temporarily abandoned'.⁷⁸ This point will be challenged in Chapter Five. Mrs Thatcher wanted a tougher Employment Bill but her caution, and the lessons of the failure of the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, made sure she eventually supported a gradualist approach to legislation. Rather than the debate being about the strength of the Employment Act 1980, Chapter Five argues the debate was ultimately about whether there would be more industrial relations legislation to follow, a battle Mrs Thatcher won.

There was, however, one clear difference between Mrs Thatcher's and Edward Heath's approach to politics. Heath's U-turns meant he was still motivated by full employment. The swift departure from policy, as unemployment passed the symbolic figure of one million in January 1972, demonstrates this. Martin Holmes wrote that the figure caused 'panic' amongst those who remembered the mass unemployment and deprivation of the 1930s, as Heath did.⁷⁹ Thus Heath increased public expenditure, saved 'lame duck' industries with proposals for unlimited levels of support through the Industry Act, and implemented a prices and incomes policy, on which he had criticised his predecessor Harold Wilson. Not unrelated to this, however, was Heath's desire for Britain to join the European Economic Community. That the U-turns happened after the passage of the second reading of the European Communities Bill adds to the argument that Heath used public money to prop up British industry through the Industry Act, in the desperate hope to make industry more competitive and ready to export to the Community.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way we Were: Britain 1970-1974* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 107.

⁷⁷ Trewin, p. 282, although Hugo Young points out that Heseltine said that on Trade Unions and privatisation there wasn't 'a millimetre of difference between him and the Thatcherites'. The exchange is worth reading in full as it discloses how the split on European integration influenced Heseltine's opposition to Mrs Thatcher.

⁷⁸ Brendan Evans, *Thatcherism and British Politics 1975-1999* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1999), p. 60.

⁷⁹ Holmes, *The Failure of the Heath Government*, p. 61.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Mrs Thatcher benefited from more fortuitous circumstances in 1979. The ‘Winter of Discontent’ in 1978-79 had seen the trade unions overplay their hand with sweeping and often co-ordinated industrial action. The intervention of the International Monetary Fund in 1976 to spare Britain from bankruptcy had forced the Labour government to experiment with monetarism in return for IMF help, making Mrs Thatcher’s transition easier than it would have been otherwise. Finally, and erring towards Sandbrook’s argument, the country was psychologically ready for Thatcherism, the old was making way for the new, a feeling Jim Callaghan confided to his aide Bernard Donoghue before the 1979 election when he sensed a ‘sea change’ in the country.⁸¹ For example, during the deep recession of 1980-81, as the traditional industries were shrinking and forced to increase productivity, there was no such recession for firms selling synthesizers and the new Walkman portable cassette player, with demand and sales in new technological industries booming.⁸²

As Nigel Lawson put in his speech on Thatcherism in 1981, the Thatcher administration, unlike Heath’s, put control of inflation above full employment as a priority, and stuck to it rigidly despite circumstances.⁸³ These circumstances, however, were more fortuitous for Mrs Thatcher than Edward Heath, and it is questionable whether Heath even believed in the principles of the 1970 manifesto. Her determination to stick to a course when a decision was made is where her critics point to her dogmatism, conflating it with being ideological. In some ways it was, but no different from rigidly adhering to full employment by printing money, a point her detractors are reluctant to acknowledge.

To M3 or not to M3⁸⁴: Thatcherism in Practice

The synthesis between Thatcherism as ideology and as a product, or reaction to, historical factors and circumstance was the government’s adherence to monetarism. Bulpitt argues that all interpretations of Thatcherism agree that with monetarism it ‘represent[ed] a radical break with past Conservative practice’ and the ‘post-war Keynesian consensus’.⁸⁵ What set the first

⁸¹ Philip Whitehead, *The Writing on the Wall: Britain in the Seventies* (London: Michael Joseph Limited, 1986), p. 366.

⁸² Dominic Sandbrook, *Who Dares Wins: Britain, 1979-82* (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 282 and p. 301.

⁸³ THCR, Nigel Lawson, ‘Thatcherism in Practice’, 14 January 1981, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/128106> [accessed 4 May 2024].

⁸⁴ M3 is a measure of money in the economy known as broad money, including deposits, notes and coins.

⁸⁵ Bulpitt, p. 20.

Thatcher administration apart from its predecessors was that it prioritised controlling inflation through monetarism. Even the Callaghan government, whilst embracing some form of monetarist control, was still committed to full employment as its primary objective. The government's 1979 White Paper on future expenditure, however, committed the government to reducing inflation by controlling the money supply, restoring incentives by lowering marginal rates of income tax, and reducing spending to keep within the parameters of the first two objectives. Full employment, therefore, had ceased to be the primary objective of government economic policy.⁸⁶

Keith Joseph and the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) were a tremendous influence on Mrs Thatcher's monetarism;⁸⁷ although, as we have discussed, Enoch Powell's monetarist thinking predates them. Powell had split from the party in February 1974 on the EEC and called for the country to vote Labour in the election. Joseph filled the gap Powell had left as the Conservatives' intellectual challenger to the consensus. After the election defeat in February 1974 Joseph announced he had 'converted' to 'Conservatism' and deeply criticised the Heath administration.⁸⁸ With Mrs Thatcher, Joseph constituted the Centre for Policy Studies in March 1974. It held its first meeting in June with Edward Heath's blessing. Cockett believed Heath only agreed to this venture as it would distract Joseph and he would eventually, politically, 'blow himself up' with it.⁸⁹

Heath's adherence to the same policies after the defeat in February 1974 intensified Joseph's, and Mrs Thatcher's, determination to change course. In a shadow cabinet review of the 1970-74 administration in the summer of 1974, Sir Donald MacDougall, until the previous year head of the Government Economic Service, suggested that the money supply needed to swell by twenty-five per cent or 'unemployment might reach one million or more [...] He did not think that inflation was a consequence of money supply increases'. Expecting agreement, Heath then asked Professor James Ball, from the London Business School, to review the administration and he, to Heath's horror, said that they had been 'completely wrong' on inflation.⁹⁰ Heath would not admit they had done anything wrong and thus John Ranelagh

⁸⁶ Martin Holmes, *The First Thatcher Government 1979-83* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1985), pp. 33-4.

⁸⁷ It must be said, however, that Joseph also published a pamphlet in 1975 entitled *Monetarism is not Enough* and Mrs Thatcher wrote the foreword.

⁸⁸ Joseph capitalised his Conservatism, which confuses the lower case 'ideology' and upper-case party politics.

⁸⁹ Cockett, p. 236.

⁹⁰ John Ranelagh, *Thatcher's People* (London: Fontana, 1992), pp. 125-6.

argues that Heath, from this point, ‘lost his sense of objective reality’.⁹¹ Thus ‘the division was forming between those who could not accept the post-war consensus had got things wrong in a fundamental way’ and those who believed a monetarist cure should be pursued.⁹² Joseph outlined this alternative view in a series of speeches that autumn at Preston, Leith and Upminster with a monetarist analysis, which Powell had articulated since the late 1950s, that ‘inflation is caused by governments’ who instigated an ‘excessive’ increase in the money supply.⁹³ Slocock wrote that Joseph, his colleague Alfred Sherman⁹⁴, and the CPS gave Mrs Thatcher the ‘confidence’ to develop her policies in preparation for government.⁹⁵

The rigidity of Mrs Thatcher’s first term monetarist strategy led some commentators to call it ‘ideological’ in the sense that it obeyed abstract principles and was adhered to regardless of changing circumstances.⁹⁶ But in some ways it was pragmatic. Whilst the government’s commitment to controlling the money supply through the M3 calculation was ridiculed as a failure, M3 was the Treasury’s preferred measure of money she had inherited from the previous Labour government.⁹⁷ M3, however, was difficult to control. The 1980 Medium Term Financial Strategy aimed to restrict growth of the money supply between eight and eleven per cent a year. This was wildly overshot; M3 grew by five per cent in July 1980 and a further three per cent in August, compared to an average of nine per cent across the year.⁹⁸ Sir Peter Hordern, a founder member of the Economic Dining Club and a member of the 92, remarked that the debate on monetarism not only went above the heads of much of the public, but of many MPs also.⁹⁹

As will be argued in Chapters Four and Five, the tensions between freeing the economy and controlling the money supply frustrated Mrs Thatcher’s monetarist experiment. The tax cuts and spending commitments announced in 1979 made it harder to control the money supply and this led to tough decisions in the 1980 and 1981 budgets. The 1979 manifesto sought to reduce public expenditure whilst committing itself to increased spending on defence, police, and the public sector comparability pay awards from the Clegg Commission. It cut income

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 127.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 128.

⁹⁴ Sir Alfred Sherman (1919-2006), first Director of the Centre for Policy Studies.

⁹⁵ Slocock, p. 103.

⁹⁶ See Gilmour’s January 1980 speech, cited above.

⁹⁷ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 461.

⁹⁸ William Keegan, *Mrs Thatcher’s Economic Experiment* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1985), p. 152.

⁹⁹ Sir Peter Hordern, interview with the author, Kent, 25 January 2022.

taxes but increased VAT, seen by some critics as adding to inflation.¹⁰⁰ It aimed to control the money supply but abolished exchange controls. Mrs Thatcher was also not helped by ministers unwilling to bring their departmental budgets under control. Interest rates had to increase to control the money supply. North Sea Oil had made the pound a petro-currency, and high interest rates sent the value of the pound even higher, hurting exporters. Despite these contradictions, Mrs Thatcher would not change course even when Milton Friedman and the monetarist economist Jurg Niehans criticised the government's approach.¹⁰¹

An explanation, according to the monetarist economists Gordon Pepper and Michael Oliver, was that Mrs Thatcher was a monetarist by conviction, rather than science or economics.¹⁰² They argue Mrs Thatcher's instincts drew her to monetarism. She accepted the principle of monetary control at her Conservative Political Centre lecture in 1968, drawing on the influence of Powell's earlier thinking, and wrote in her memoirs that Joseph's analysis of monetary control in his speeches of 1974 were 'the most powerful and persuasive analyses' she had heard.¹⁰³ But she also believed in tax cuts, a smaller state, yet more spending on police. The confluence of her convictions, built from instinct, upbringing and environment, and the ideological discussions within conservative politics, produced the Thatcherite creed with its amazing contradictions. Her character, however, was central to the belief system.

Personality and Leadership Style

The historian E H H Green asserts that Thatcherism sprang from both the evolving policy debates within the Conservative party, the philosophical influence of Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, and contemporary New Right thinkers and politicians.¹⁰⁴ Mrs Thatcher routinely called herself a conviction politician, and the power and influence she had over British politics generated numerous biographies and studies. The most thorough study is Charles Moore's three-volume biography. Written with her authorisation and with the author given access that no other researcher has had, the study has received plaudits from those who worked for Mrs Thatcher. Robin Harris, who published his own biography of Mrs Thatcher

¹⁰⁰ Keegan, p. 128.

¹⁰¹ Gordon Pepper and Michael Oliver, *Monetarism under Thatcher: Lessons for the Future* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2001), p. 20.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁰⁴ Green, p. 30.

after her death, reviewed Moore's work as 'the definitive account of Mrs Thatcher's life and times'.¹⁰⁵

In examining Mrs Thatcher's life and personality, recent studies and biographies explain the caution and pragmatism that her public commitments to conviction and ideology concealed. Moore's biography described her hesitation over the 1979 budget. She was against price controls, yet it took a debate and agreement at the economic E-Committee to abolish the Price Commission.¹⁰⁶ On exchange controls, she showed some degree of hesitancy, warning Geoffrey Howe 'on your head be it'.¹⁰⁷ Her style also underwent revision; she was less autocratic early on. When she became leader in 1975, she went to great lengths to meet backbenchers, aware that Heath had been distant from them and that this had contributed to his downfall. Neil Marten wrote in his diary that Mrs Thatcher 'listened and it went in – so unlike Ted'.¹⁰⁸ From being seen as a leader who would not listen, Mrs Thatcher appears as a leader who expected to be challenged in debate and would not countenance those who had not prepared their argument. Robin Harris called this brusque attitude 'a weakness' but also 'a strength', her 'short fuse' due to the pressures of the job and a determination to see through her policies.¹⁰⁹ This determination and toughness of character, Martin Holmes argues, arose because many of her colleagues believed events would push Thatcher into a U-turn and reflation.¹¹⁰

Mrs Thatcher's upbringing, her femininity and her scientific training are all important if one is to understand her style of government.¹¹¹ Much has been written about Mrs Thatcher's references to her upbringing in Grantham living 'above the shop' and the influence of her father on her politics to whom she said, on the steps of 10 Downing Street, that she owed everything: 'He brought me up to believe all the things I do believe'.¹¹² This goes to represent the support Thatcher gave for 'our people', the small businessman, the homeowner, the entrepreneur. For

¹⁰⁵ Robin Harris, 'Mrs Thatcher's Traitors', *New Criterion*, <https://newcriterion.com/article/margaret-thatchers-traitors/> [accessed 21 April 2024].

¹⁰⁶ Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorised Biography: Volume One* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 459.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

¹⁰⁸ Alton, *The Diaries of Sir Neil Marten*, entry for 16 February 1975.

¹⁰⁹ Harris, p. 161.

¹¹⁰ Martin Holmes, *The First Thatcher Government 1979-83* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1985), p. 8.

¹¹¹ Harris, p. 163.

¹¹² Jonathan Aitken, *Margaret Thatcher: Power and Responsibility* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), pp. 19-20.

instance, during the riots of 1981, Mrs Thatcher looked on in horror and allegedly despaired for the ‘poor shopkeepers’. The phrase has been attributed to Mrs Thatcher in Hugo Young’s ‘hostile’ biography *One of Us*. Moore concludes that there is no proof that Mrs Thatcher made the remarks, but it played up to the Thatcher myth.¹¹³ The ‘our people’ thesis also further highlights the contradictions within Thatcherism. Monetarism means increasing interest rates to bring the money supply under control, with the consequence being higher mortgage rates. As Moore observed, she was always conscious of the effect of interest rates on homeowners and those wanting to own their own home, and consistently challenged the Treasury when they wanted to increase interest rates.¹¹⁴

Caroline Slocock’s study provides a recent account of Mrs Thatcher’s personality from someone who worked closely with her but was not politically aligned. Whilst she was resolute and did not change her views after a decision had been made, which, per Gilmour, has been conflated with her ideological politics, her abrasive nature was, Slocock argues, a manifestation of insecurity that she was under constant threat. As a result, she ‘took it out on her peers and protected her servants’.¹¹⁵ This isolation extended from the view that she was not clubbable, but Slocock argues this was a product of the time; most of the clubs in London were all male, not too dissimilar from the House of Commons itself.¹¹⁶

Conclusion: A Thatcherite Party?

This thesis argues that the 92 Group served Mrs Thatcher and Thatcherism out of support for the Prime Minister both personally and because of what she stood for. It accepted her course of action when the alternative, reflation and incomes policies, were arguably at their most compelling. As the monetarist experiment appeared to falter with increased inflation, interest rates, and unemployment, the 92 doubled down to support the Prime Minister. The barometer for this was the backbench elections between 1979 and 1981 when, despite the grim economic conditions, the parliamentary party endorsed Sir William Clark as chairman of the backbench finance committee and several other members of the 92 were returned as chairmen of other committees. Kenneth Minogue has therefore written that Mrs Thatcher ‘took the party

¹¹³ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 635.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 462-3.

¹¹⁵ Slocock, p. 160.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

with her' on economic policy but also 'the highly traditional moral convictions' of her instinct and upbringing.¹¹⁷ This view is too broad. Rather it was the 92 that corralled enough MPs to support Mrs Thatcher's proxies in the backbench elections in the first term. It led an anonymous critic to admit that Mrs Thatcher had 'more support on the backbenches, which is her natural constituency, than any other leader I have known'.¹¹⁸ Relevant to our study in the first Thatcher term, this thesis agrees with Norton's view that the Prime Minister was 'more dependent upon her parliamentary party' than her predecessors.¹¹⁹ It will demonstrate that backbench support for Mrs Thatcher's policies, orchestrated by the 92, safeguarded her position in the first term, when she was at her weakest. From then on, Thatcherism, in all its forms, could develop.

¹¹⁷ Kenneth Minogue, 'Introduction', in *Thatcherism: Personality and Politics*, ed. by Michael Biddiss and Kenneth Minogue (London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. x-xvii (p. xv).

¹¹⁸ Philip Norton, 'Mrs Thatcher and the Conservative Party', *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹¹⁹ Philip Norton, "'The Lady's not for turning" but what about the rest?: Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party 1979-89', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 43 (1990), 41-58 (p. 45).

Chapter Two: Conservative Principles

This chapter introduces the 92 and argues that in the 1960s and early 1970s it embraced ideas that became broadly associated with Thatcherism in the 1980s. It combined liberal and conservative elements of the ‘New Right’ that Andrew Gamble called the ‘seedbed’ of Thatcherism’.¹²⁰ Yet given the 92 would become fervent critics of the Heath administration in the Thatcher years, it was not an explicitly rebellious faction within the parliamentary party under Heath. It was not ‘Thatcherite’ when Heath committed his U-turns, nor for that matter was Mrs Thatcher. The 92 had private doubts about Heath’s prices and incomes policy but grudgingly supported it to combat trade union power, not as a tool to fight inflation. Whilst some rebelled on immigration, power sharing in Northern Ireland, and Rhodesian sanctions, an overwhelming majority voted for entry to the European Economic Community. By contrast, under Mrs Thatcher members of the 92 would argue against prices and incomes policies and Group members led the Conservative European Reform Group that was sceptical of European integration.

Within the history of Conservative politics the 92 Group has received little academic study. It was not a mass membership organisation like the Monday Club. Whilst the Club and 92 had similar membership and views, the Club was a grassroots organisation, the 92 a backbench parliamentary grouping. 92 membership was confined to Conservative MPs and, mostly, subject to unanimous approval by existing members. It did not publish articles or pamphlets like those of the Selsdon Group, the Institute of Economic Affairs, or the Centre for Policy Studies. Indeed, contemporaries and some members of the Group considered it to be solely a dining club. Yet the 92 thought deeply about Conservative principles and it made an ideological journey during the tumult of the Heath years and after the election of Mrs Thatcher as leader. It had few senior political figures as members, Norman Tebbit reaching the highest office of any of its members. Members of the No Turning Back group (NTB), an ideologically similar parliamentary group launched in 1985, went further in their parliamentary careers than members of the 92. Peter Lilley, John Redwood, Michael Portillo, and Michael Forsyth all became cabinet ministers. Sir Patrick Wall, Sir George Gardiner and John Townend¹²¹ of the

¹²⁰ Ruth Levitas, ‘Ideology and the New Right’, in *The Ideology of the New Right*, ed. by Ruth Levitas (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), pp. 1-23 (p. 6).

¹²¹ John Townend (1934-2018), Conservative MP for Bridlington, 1979-97; East Yorkshire, 1997-2001. Chairman of the 92, 1997-2001.

92 did not. There was a difference in generation, ambition, and arguably political quality between the two groups. The NTB were vastly more ambitious and sought to achieve high office, and all but one of its members elected after 1983. The 92, by contrast, took pride in its backbench status and its leading members, especially William Clark and George Gardiner, were content being backbench heavyweights. Its senior leadership was elected before or at the 1979 election.

Junior members of the Thatcher and Major administrations held memberships of both the 92 and the NTB, but these MPs were elected after 1983. Sir Gerald Howarth served as parliamentary private secretary to Mrs Thatcher, secretary to the NTB, and was chairman of the 92 after 2001. Neil Hamilton served as a Whip and junior minister. If one were to analyse which group nurtured more promising political careers of its members, the NTB would win hands down. Individual members of the 92 had influence, and this gave the Group its prominence. George Gardiner, before he was a member of the 92, edited the party's official newsletter *Conservative Monthly News* and, along with fellow 92 member Norman Tebbit, was a member of the 'Gang of Four' that helped prepare Mrs Thatcher for Prime Minister's Questions. Ian Gow was Mrs Thatcher's ubiquitous parliamentary private secretary from 1979 to 1983 and was dubbed 'supergrass' because he would attend committees and report back to Downing Street. Scratch the surface and the 92 has an interesting and complex history.

The assessments of the 92 don't necessarily reflect the ideological views of their authors. One former MP, a committed Thatcherite and joint member of the NTB and 92, was critical of the group and its limited focus, as he saw it, of getting right-wing MPs elected to backbench committees.¹²² Those MPs not in line with the 92, Julian Critchley¹²³ for example, suggested that the purpose of the 92 'was to keep the party firmly to the right (at which it has clearly succeeded)'.¹²⁴ One former MP not sympathetic to the 92, in reply to a request for interview on the activities of the 92 during the 1979-83 parliament, mistakenly believed the 92 was founded in 1992 and therefore felt he had nothing to contribute.¹²⁵ This confused reply can, in part, explain the Group's secrecy. Members had to get on politically and socially, and the Group's papers are littered with pleas for confidentiality.

¹²² Michael Brown, interview with the author, Kent, 25 January 2022.

¹²³ Sir Julian Critchley (1930-2000), Conservative MP for Rochester and Chatham, 1959-64; Aldershot, 1970-97.

¹²⁴ Julian Critchley, *Westminster Blues* (London: Futura Publications, 1986), p. 47.

¹²⁵ Private correspondence, Conservative Peer.

After Wall resigned the chairmanship of the 92 in 1984 he was replaced by the former journalist George Gardiner. The Group remained ‘undercover’¹²⁶ and ‘highly secretive’.¹²⁷ Extensive evidence from published works and interviews with Gardiner’s contemporaries allude to his guarded nature. For instance, Gardiner deliberately misinformed parliamentary reporters on the whereabouts of 92 dinners to keep the Group’s membership secret.¹²⁸ This chapter will argue that the 92 was indeed secretive, but under Wall it sought to lobby the party leadership. During the troubled premiership of Edward Heath, Wall was in regular correspondence with the Chief Whip Francis Pym, even supplying him with the cherished 92 membership list. Its secrecy was not a means to foster rebellion.

A Changing Conservative Party

The 92 formed when the Conservative party was undergoing a period of relative factionalisation. Barnes argues ‘the most severe tensions came about’ in reaction to the party’s changing view of ‘Empire and England’ as these were ‘so deeply embedded in the party’s mindset’.¹²⁹ This made the consequences of the end of Empire, and then European integration, difficult for the party to navigate. Reaction to the United Kingdom’s changing role in the world led to the formation of the parliamentary Suez Group in 1953, protesting against the British military retreat from the Suez Canal base. Although short lived, and a ‘spent force’ by 1957, it was not ideologically united. It contained free-marketeers, Imperialists, One Nation Conservatives and even those who supported ‘the Chamberlain government’s pre-war policy of appeasement’.¹³⁰ In 1961 the Monday Club formed in reaction to African decolonisation and took its name from the day of the week Harold Macmillan made the *Winds of Change* speech.¹³¹ The Monday Club, however, began as an extra-parliamentary force and whilst it would attract MPs, it lost influence after 1970 and descended into infighting.¹³² It is within

¹²⁶ London, Bishopsgate Institute, Parliamentary Profiles Archive (PPA), 3/608A (Sir Patrick Wall), Chris Hampson, ‘Tories’ secret club’, *Daily Mirror*, 13 March 1984.

¹²⁷ Anthony Bevens, ‘Right-wingers choose Tebbit ally’, *The Times*, 25 May 1984, p. 4.

¹²⁸ Lucy Grant, ‘An historical study of unofficial parliamentary groupings in the Conservative Party from 1830’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Hull, 2010), p. 163.

¹²⁹ John Barnes, ‘Ideology and Factions’, in *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party Since 1900* ed. by Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 315–45 (p. 340).

¹³⁰ Sue Onslow, ‘Suez Group’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 22 September 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/92384>.

¹³¹ Mark Pitchford, *The Conservative Party and the Extreme Right 1945–75* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 108.

¹³² John Groser, ‘50 expelled as move to oust Monday Club chairman fails’, *The Times*, 25 July 1973, p. 2.

this context that the 92 Group formed in 1964.¹³³ Although he was a Club member at the time, Wall did not believe that the Club had a coherent, complete or unified set of policies apart from decolonisation and Africa.¹³⁴

The original members of the 92 were disappointed supporters of Reginald Maudling's failed bid for the party leadership in 1963. The behind-the-scenes resolution to the leadership crisis was against the interests of the founding members of the 92. Whilst Maudling, as Chancellor, was in a key position to succeed Macmillan, on Macmillan's recommendation to the Queen Sir Alec Douglas-Home became Conservative party leader in late October 1963. Whilst Sandbrook argues the 'left of the party' were 'extremely disappointed' to hear Home had 'got the nod', this didn't stop the right-wingers of the 92 organising.¹³⁵ The 92 eventually became strong supporters of Douglas-Home. On 28 October 1963 Frederic Bennett¹³⁶, a founding member, wrote to Wall to take soundings on potential members of the Group. Bennett recommended some who worked 'very hard for Reggie', such as Sir John Hall¹³⁷, who later became convenor of the Group. To Bennett those who supported other potential leadership candidates, like Lord Hailsham, should be ruled out as 'John Eden [...] is, I believe, an unrepentant Hailshamite'.¹³⁸ This, however, did not stop Sir John Eden later becoming a member of the 92.¹³⁹ Again, whilst the 92 had a reputation of blackballing potential members, there are instances where membership was more fluid, Sir John Eden's being the first name to get past the blackball.

Formed by the MPs Bennett, Wall, Victor Goodhew¹⁴⁰, Bryant Godman Irvine¹⁴¹ and William Clark, the group got its name from 92 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, Wall's London home. Wall was its chairman from 1964 to 1984 and he did not use the Group as his personal political vehicle. An obituary in *The Times* referred to Wall as one of the 'most right-wing' members

¹³³ In Wall's papers it is interchangeably referred to as the 92 Committee and the 92 Group. For the purposes of this study, it will be referred to as the 92 Group.

¹³⁴ Pitchford, p. 117.

¹³⁵ Dominic Sandbrook, *Never had it so Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2005), p. 703.

¹³⁶ Sir Frederic Bennett (1918-2002), Conservative MP for Reading North, 1951-55; Torquay, December 1955-74; Torbay, 1974-87.

¹³⁷ Sir John Hall (1911-1978), Conservative MP for Wycombe, 1952-78. Knighted, 1973.

¹³⁸ U DPW/37/1, Sir Frederic Bennett to Patrick Wall, 28 October 1963.

¹³⁹ U DPW/37/7, List of 92 Members, 1970.

¹⁴⁰ Sir Victor Goodhew (1919-2006), Conservative MP for St Albans, 1959-83.

¹⁴¹ Sir Bryant Godman Irvine (1909-92), Conservative MP for Rye, 1955-83. Deputy Speaker, 1976-82.

of the party.¹⁴² On his recruitment to the Conservative Research Department in 1969, the journalist Patrick Cosgrave was warned that ‘you will have, from time to time, to deal with Enoch Powell, Ronnie Bell, and Major Patrick Wall. And they are a formidable trio.’¹⁴³ They were also all right-wing in different ways, reflecting the change in Conservative thought and the influence of the liberal and conservative New Right. Enoch Powell, for instance, was opposed to capital punishment, laws against homosexuality, and the continuation of the fantasies of empire wrapped up in the Commonwealth. A *Crossbow* profile of Wall in 1966, however, revealed that he wasn’t an uncompromising right-winger and that he wanted the parliamentary party to work ‘as a team’.¹⁴⁴ George Gardiner wrote of Wall’s ‘easy manner’ with colleagues he disagreed with.¹⁴⁵ His strategy as chairman of the 92 therefore was to influence and not challenge the authority of the party leadership. Wall navigated the 92 between support for the Conservative party leadership, whatever its character, and as a vehicle for those who wanted a return to ‘conservative principles’.

In the run up to the 1964 General Election there was unease on the backbenches that the Conservative party had lost its way. The 1961 pay pause in the public sector, the failure to join the EEC, and the 1963 Profumo affair had brought ‘some measure of party disunity’.¹⁴⁶ The Chief Whip Martin Redmayne wrote to Alec Douglas-Home that April on the appalling morale in the parliamentary party. ‘The fact is that twelve years of Conservative Government and a five-year parliament have brought morale to a low ebb’.¹⁴⁷ Wall welcomed suggestions from his allies to counter the dissatisfaction in the party. Emphasising caution, Hall wrote that it was ‘essential to avoid being labelled as a right-wing group’. On the one hand Hall saw a majority for right-wing opinions in the party. Yet he believed the party’s MPs had been cowed to ‘support progressive policies’ and would thus ‘disassociate themselves from an avowedly right-wing group’.¹⁴⁸ Michael Clark Hutchison¹⁴⁹ took a different view and sounded out names

¹⁴² Obituary, ‘Sir Patrick Wall’, *The Times*, 19 May 1998, p. 27.

¹⁴³ Obituary, ‘Major Sir Patrick Wall’, *Independent*, 20 May 1998, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/obituary-major-sir-patrick-wall-1158610.html> [accessed 18 September 2022].

¹⁴⁴ Lobbyman, ‘Assessment: Patrick Wall MP’, *Crossbow*, October-December 1966, pp. 12-14.

¹⁴⁵ George Gardiner, *A Bastard’s Tale: The Political Memoirs of George Gardiner* (London: Aurum Press, 1999), p. 135.

¹⁴⁶ John Turner, ‘1951-64’ in Anthony Seldon eds., *How Tory Governments Fall: The Tory Party in Power Since 1783* (London: Fontana Press, 1996), pp. 317-60 (p 346).

¹⁴⁷ Tim Renton, *Chief Whip: People, Power and Patronage in Westminster* (London: Politico’s, 2004), p. 301.

¹⁴⁸ U DPW/37/1, Sir John Hall to Patrick Wall, 7 May 1964.

¹⁴⁹ Michael Clark Hutchison (1914-93), Unionist and Conservative MP for Edinburgh South, 1957-79.

that ‘would support a “right” approach’, favouring capture of the ‘next lot of party committee elections’, an idea that became the 92’s signature tactic.¹⁵⁰

The Group launched itself with a memorandum written by Wall on 12 June 1964. The piece reflects the strains in the New Right between liberal and conservative tendencies, the former embracing freedom, the latter tradition and authority. Of the conservative tendency, Alan Clark described the old post-war Conservative right appropriately as the ‘Union Jack Right’.¹⁵¹ These Tories would ‘go to the stake’ on law and order, immigration, and defence of white rule in Rhodesia and South Africa. They were ex-servicemen and the remaining knights of the shires. It set them apart from the younger liberal, perhaps Powellite, MPs who were swayed by liberal economics rather than post-Imperial attachment to the White Commonwealth. This generational cleavage is clear in the Group’s attitude to Rhodesian sanctions. It staged relatively strong rebellions on Rhodesian sanctions up to and including 1978, when members of the 92 in Mrs Thatcher’s shadow cabinet either resigned or were sacked by opposing renewal of sanctions. Older MPs of the Union Jack Right gave way to younger liberally minded free-marketeers as the generations changed on the backbenches. Indeed, it is noteworthy how little resistance came from the 92 when Mrs Thatcher handed Zimbabwe to Nkomo and Mugabe in 1980. The 92, however, were not habitually rebellious and some members went into the lobbies to support sanctions. On the initial motion to support oil sanctions in 1965 only five of the nineteen members of the 92 members voted against, Wall being the only member to make a speech in the debate.¹⁵² Yet it motivated a significant number of the 92 until Mrs Thatcher resolved it in 1980. That it staged relatively little protest demonstrated its loyalty to her leadership.

On matters of conscience and the liberalisation of personal morality, there were also divergences of opinion. Early in the life of the 92, existing and future members of the 92 were divided on Sydney Silverman’s Bill to abolish the death penalty. On its second reading in December 1964 Bell, Fred Corfield¹⁵³, Hall, Peter Hordern¹⁵⁴, Clark Hutchison and Anthony

¹⁵⁰ U DPW/37/1, Michael Clark Hutchison to Patrick Wall, 18 May 1964.

¹⁵¹ Alan Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2000), p. 174.

¹⁵² Hansard, 21 December 1965, Vol. 722, Col. 2057. The rebel votes were Stephen Hastings and Victor Goodhew as tellers, James Allason, Patrick Wall, and Peter Hordern. Taken from U DPW/37/2 92 Member list 1965.

¹⁵³ Sir Frederick Corfield (1915-2002), Conservative MP for South Gloucestershire, 1955-74. Minister of State, Board of Trade, 1970-1; Minister for Aerospace, 1971-2.

¹⁵⁴ Sir Peter Hordern (1929-2024), Conservative MP for Horsham, 1964-97.

Kershaw¹⁵⁵ voted for abolition. Mrs Thatcher voted to retain.¹⁵⁶ By contrast, in 1980 George Gardiner led a campaign to restore capital punishment. From its papers it is clear the 92 was evolving under the influence of New Right thinking, as limited as it was by 1964. Although it had the Institute of Economic Affairs and Enoch Powell questioning the political consensus, the papers we will discuss came before the existence of the Centre for Policy Studies, the Freedom Association, the Conservative Philosophy Group, and the Adam Smith Institute.¹⁵⁷ The tensions between liberal individualism and conservative authoritarianism are evident in the Group's discussion documents, especially its initial paper on Conservative principles.

While members split on issues of conscience, it is wrong to assert, as Brand does, that the 92 had 'not published its aims'.¹⁵⁸ It defined its principles in Wall's first memorandum. Wall's piece stated that the 92 believed 'that the Conservative Party must not depart from Conservative principles'. Wall then described these principles as a combination of tactics and ideas. The party had suffered by 'the adoption of policies based on short term expediency rather than long term principle'. He called for greater cooperation between the backbenches to 'expose Socialist policy' and 'be constantly on the attack in the press, on radio and television'. Bridging to policy, the 92 memorandum showed its conflicted feelings towards economic reform. The paper opposed the abolition of Resale Price Maintenance (RPM)¹⁵⁹, increased taxation and other 'unpopular legislation', suggesting they be deferred until after the next election. Fisher argues the debate over RPM went to the heart of the cleavage in Conservative politics between the traditionalists and the progressives, who favoured reform.¹⁶⁰ The Union Jack Right were unnerved that the abolition of RPM risked the place of the small shopkeeper in 'traditional British life'.

Wall argued that the party must 'bring out the essential differences between Conservatism and socialism', and prophesied Thatcherite individualism:

¹⁵⁵ Sir Anthony Kershaw (1915-2008), Conservative MP for Stroud, 1955-87.

¹⁵⁶ Our political correspondent, '91 Absent from Hanging Bill', *The Times*, 23 December 1964, p.5.

¹⁵⁷ Brendan Evans, *Thatcherism and British Politics 1975-1999* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1999), p. 207.

¹⁵⁸ J. Brand, 'Faction as its own reward: groups in the British parliament', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 42 (1989), 148-164 (p. 155).

¹⁵⁹ Resale Price Maintenance meant a supplier required onward sale of their good at a certain price. Abolition was a liberalising measure and allowed shopkeepers to set prices according to the market. The worry for conservatives was that this would lead to a race to the bottom, hurting the incomes of shop keepers.

¹⁶⁰ Richard Findley, 'The Conservative Party and Defeat: the Significance of Resale Price Maintenance for the General Election of 1964', *Twentieth Century British History*, 12 (2001), 327-353 (p. 342).

‘Labour believes that the Government should do things for and to the people; Conservatives believe that the Government should provide the conditions under which people can do things for themselves’.

Its policies to achieve these ideological aims departed from the universalism of the post-war welfare state. Wall argued for means tested social benefits and that budgets should be balanced. It called for a ‘preliminary report on rates’, chiming with Mrs Thatcher’s long-held hatred of them. Traditional to the ‘Union Jack Right’, the memorandum called for support for ‘white settlers in emergent territories and the local Africans’ therein. Finally, and a policy where the 92 showed consistency throughout, it criticised ‘restrictive practices’ of the trades unions.¹⁶¹ Whilst the 92 would repeatedly oppose sanctions on Rhodesia, it continued its agitation against trade union power and immunities long after Zimbabwe had gained independence. It even challenged the Thatcher government on its trade union reforms, which it believed did not go far enough.

Although the 92 was formed by supporters of Maudling, they became allies of Alec Douglas-Home as Prime Minister. On 15 June 1964 Wall sent the memorandum of policies and principles to Frank Pearson, Douglas-Home’s parliamentary private secretary, as a gesture of support. Wall described the memorandum as an organised attempt ‘under my chairmanship to consider action that might be taken under the next few months to ensure our victory at the polls’. The Group had grown from the initial five members too. Wall told Pearson ‘those directly’ concerned with the memorandum now included James Allason, Ronald Bell, Sir John Eden, Michael Clark Hutchison, Anthony Kershaw and Tim Kitson.¹⁶² Pearson replied positively and notified Wall that the Prime Minister would dine with the 92 on 30 June.¹⁶³ Indeed, so supportive were the 92 that after the Conservatives lost the 1964 general election it ‘agreed that Sir Alec be backed whole-heartedly and that Reginald Maudling should be supported as his eventual successor’.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ U DPW/37/1, 92 Memorandum, 12 June 1964.

¹⁶² U DPW/37/1, Patrick Wall to Frank Pearson, 15 June 1964.

¹⁶³ U DPW/37/1, Patrick Wall to 92 Committee, 26 June 1964.

¹⁶⁴ U DPW/37/1, 92 Minutes, 19 October 1964.

Despite the election defeat Wall saw room for the 92 to grow. He encouraged members to invite other centre and right-leaning MPs to the Group and that existing members should 'interest themselves in a wider field of politics than heretofore'. Hall agreed and suggested that 'we must become actively aggressive as a group, if we are not to go the way of past groups'.¹⁶⁵ Hall's attitude had changed. It was he who initially suggested to Wall that the 92 not appear right-wing. On matters of race and immigration, members were already active. Ronald Bell, for over a year, had been anonymously objecting to backbench Labour MP Fenner Brockway's attempt to introduce racial discrimination legislation.¹⁶⁶ This agitation had not prevented Bell's promotion to the opposition front bench. Indeed, the Group requested members support Bell's continued opposition to the Bill whilst he was a junior member of the shadow cabinet.¹⁶⁷

Although Douglas-Home had no appetite to remain as leader of the Conservative party after the election defeat, the 92 encouraged him to remain. He appointed members of the 92 to his shadow team after the election. William Clark and John Hall had been among Home's 'original sessional appointments', and in February 1965 Ronald Bell was promoted as a spokesman on labour issues.¹⁶⁸ With his friends being promoted to Home's team, Wall proposed a discussion with Home on policy, 'opposition tactics and long-term planning'.¹⁶⁹ The conclusions of the dinner show no signs that the 92 was wavering, 'we should do everything possible to back Alec'. The only slight hedge was support for Maudling to 'take over in all external affairs'.¹⁷⁰

The resignation of Douglas-Home ended the 92's chances of influencing Conservative policy. In Wall's papers no information exists on the Group's reaction to Home's resignation. Evidence exists signifying that they all backed Maudling against Edward Heath and Enoch Powell in the 1965 leadership election. The Group's original members backed him in 1963 and supported his position in the Douglas-Home administration and shadow cabinet. The recorded minutes from October 1964 recommended that it support Maudling as successor, and

¹⁶⁵ U DPW/37/1, Sir John Hall to Patrick Wall, 20 October 1964.

¹⁶⁶ Our political correspondent, 'Wilson pledge on racial bill', *The Times*, 17 February 1964, p. 6.

¹⁶⁷ U DPW/37/2, Patrick Wall to Anthony Kershaw, Sir John Hall, Victor Goodhew, and William Clark, 7 April 1965.

¹⁶⁸ Our political correspondent, 'Sir A. Home adds five to team', *The Times*, 25 February 1965, p. 6.

¹⁶⁹ U DPW/37/2, Patrick Wall to Frank Pearson, 25 February 1965.

¹⁷⁰ U DPW/37/2, Patrick Wall to Anthony Kershaw, Sir John Hall, Victor Goodhew, and William Clark, 7 April 1965.

a canvass sheet from the Andrew Roth archives lists all the original members of the 92 as Maudling supporters. The only highlighted error on the voting list is Henry Kerby¹⁷¹ down for Maudling, which an annotation notes is 'untrue'.¹⁷² Other sources can critique the value of the list, however. Geoffrey Howe is registered as a Heath supporter, although in his memoirs he says he switched from Powell to Heath only a few days before the vote. Michael Alison is also listed for Heath, but this is in error. Howe wrote that after a discussion with Alison they switched votes, Alison to Powell and Howe to Heath.¹⁷³ Future members of the 92 were not solely Maudling supporters. According to the voting list both Hordern and Stephen Hastings supported Heath and became Group members. Tellingly, no Group members were declared supporters for Enoch Powell. Their sympathy for him came later. Bell voted for Maudling¹⁷⁴ but would become one of Powell's closest parliamentary friends. Powell gave the address at Bell's funeral in 1982.

After Heath's victory, relations between the 92 and the new leader were nowhere near as cordial as they were with Douglas-Home. The Heath front bench comprised few 92 members in junior positions, those who remained were continuations from the Douglas-Home's front bench. Bell and Sir John Eden worked under Powell at defence. Clark was a junior to Iain Macleod at treasury, economic affairs, and trade.¹⁷⁵ Wall tried to reach out to Heath in February 1966, but the wording is strained. Wall asked, 'if you could give us half an hour', inferring a distant relationship between the Group and the Conservative leader and that Wall may have tried to arrange a meeting before. Wall wanted to raise with Heath the 'trade unions, Rhodesia and taxation' and 'make some points on defence East of Suez, comprehensive schools and incomes policy', showing their unease about a whole range of policies.

1967: A False Start

After Heath lost the 1966 election, Wilson's majority of ninety-six was a far greater margin than his four seat majority over Douglas-Home in 1964, the 92 revisited the search for Conservative principles in 1967. Digesting the landslide Wilson victory the 92 discussed what

¹⁷¹ Henry Kerby (1914-71), Conservative MP for Arundel and Shoreham, 1954-71.

¹⁷² PPA, 5/218 (Lord Clark of Kemptson), 'John Paul', Conservative voting list for the 1965 leadership election, circa July 1965.

¹⁷³ Geoffrey Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 39.

¹⁷⁴ Private information.

¹⁷⁵ Unattributed, 'The Shadow Cabinet in Full', *The Times*, 6 October 1965, p. 7.

the Conservative party should stand for, again. Soon after the election a dock strike brought the Labour government into conflict with the unions. Wilson angered the left by blaming the Communists for the strike.¹⁷⁶ It was not a good parliament for relations between the government and the trade unions. A voluntary incomes policy became statutory in July 1966.¹⁷⁷ The unions retaliated by accusing the Labour government of betrayal.¹⁷⁸ Deflation after devaluation in November 1967 brought them into further disagreement. But the union bosses were losing control of the shop floor. Sandbrook calculated that ninety per cent of strikes were unofficial and against union rules.¹⁷⁹ In response Wilson and his ally Barbara Castle, the Employment Secretary, sought in 1969 to introduce the *In Place of Strife* reforms limiting the power of trade unions. Wilson, however, launched it from a position of weakness, having just been defeated by a band of opponents led by Powell and Michael Foot over plans to reform the House of Lords. Without support from the Conservative leadership Wilson backed down on trade union reform, giving the Labour left and the unions a symbolic victory. It is within this context that the 92's hostility to the trade unions intensified across the parliament.

Wall's second memo in 1967 was more theoretical than that of 1964 with no discussion of party tactics or parliamentary strategy. Wall discussed the balance between the state and the individual, another emerging theme in New Right thinking. As government grew, 'individual freedom suffers allegedly for the good of the State'. For Wall individualism was not an end in itself, despite individual rights being at risk in the modern state:

‘To my mind the root cause is clear: if you no longer believe in a supreme being or in your country what else is there to believe in but self?’.¹⁸⁰

Social attitudes were breaking a simplistic left-right view of politics according to one's view of economic freedom. The 92 took different views on legislation liberalising personal morality. Many 92 members, including Wall, Bell, Paul Channon and Viscount Lambton, supported Conservative MP Humphrey Berkeley's Bill to decriminalise homosexuality in 1966.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A history of Britain in the swinging Sixties* (London: Abacus, 2007), p. 281.

¹⁷⁷ Warren Fishbein, *Wage Restraint by Consent* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 45.

¹⁷⁸ Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p. 707.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ U DPW/37/4, Patrick Wall, 1 February 1967, 'Conservative Principles'.

¹⁸¹ Hansard, 11 February 1966, vol. 724 col. 872-3.

Anthony King found that votes on Rhodesian sanctions, homosexuality, and capital punishment blurred the traditional left-right axis. Channon is described as a 'left wing rebel', but he was a member of the 92 in 1966.¹⁸² King also noted Channon's liberal heresy of supporting immigration controls, placing him in good company within the 92.

Wall's second pamphlet shows the indirect influence Powell had over the 92.¹⁸³ In April 1964 Powell wrote a series of articles critiquing the Conservative administration. These had arguably spurred Wall's effort in 1964, and Wall referenced them in his 1967 paper. These articles, under the authorship of 'A Conservative', appeared in *The Times* and heavily criticised the Conservatives' thirteen-year rule. They deplored the Conservatives' 'expansionist policy' of higher spending, implementing a capital gains tax, the formation of a National Economic Development Council (NEDC), a National Incomes Commission, and planning.¹⁸⁴ These policies were paradoxical for Conservatives. If the party believed that the 'profit motive and private choice' were good things, why did it tolerate institutions that sought to interfere with or regulate such virtuous means and goals?¹⁸⁵ *The Times* leader believed the author spoke for many in the party, that 'there are plenty of other Conservatives who have long been muttering in private much of what he has now made public'.¹⁸⁶

There were suspicions at the time that Powell was the author of the anonymous articles. Indeed, the second was a critique of Conservative attachment to the Commonwealth, something attributable to Powell in Tory politics, although the *Guardian* believed Nigel Birch had written it.¹⁸⁷ Powell told his biographer Simon Heffer in 1995 that he was the author of the articles and delivered them to the editor of *The Times* in the dead of night to maintain secrecy.¹⁸⁸ The value of the articles was that their message lasted long enough for Wall to reference them three years later. To Wall the criticisms were still appropriate, and the Conservative party had not learned from them. His criticism of the previous Conservative administration included the failure to denationalise steel, a tendency to 'compromise on a pay claim' rather than risk a strike, continuing 'to pour money down the drain of the Health Service' and, finally, that the Conservatives 'appeared more anxious to appease their opponents than help their

¹⁸² Anthony King, 'The Changing Tories', *New Society*, 2 May 1968, p. 631.

¹⁸³ Powell didn't join the Group, although he did dine with them when invited.

¹⁸⁴ A Conservative, 'From the Years of Protest to the Year of Disasters', *The Times*, 1 April 1964, p. 11.

¹⁸⁵ A Conservative, 'The Field Where the Biggest Failures Lie', *The Times*, 3 April 1964, p. 13.

¹⁸⁶ Leader, 'A Conservative', *The Times*, 4 April 1964, p. 9.

¹⁸⁷ Simon Heffer, *Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), p.351.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

supporters'.¹⁸⁹ The last is key. While Powell in 1964 argued that the Conservatives were keen to embrace modernisation defined by their opponents, so Wall alleged in 1967 the Conservatives had not learned to embrace their own principles and instead continued to follow Labour's policies.

The pamphlet contained what David Edgar called 'the contradiction between the anti-statism of free market ideology, and the authoritarianism of the traditionalists'.¹⁹⁰ Wall began with a conservative argument that 'everyone has a personal responsibility to his Creator' and country. Wall attacked the permissive society, notwithstanding his vote decriminalising homosexuality in 1966. He lauded the family as the 'smallest unit in the state' and therefore 'fundamentally important'. He saw the family unit weakened by 'easy divorce, free abortion and free love' all of which were 'detrimental to family life'.¹⁹¹ Assuming these politics were faith-led, they contrast with the Methodism and religious faith that many writers argue influenced Mrs Thatcher's politics.¹⁹² Wall's sentiments match neatly with Thatcher's politics defending the individual and the family unit. Taking the oft-misquoted interview with *Women's Own* that while there may be 'no such thing' as society, there are instead 'individual men and women and there are families'.¹⁹³

While individualism may not have been all Wall stood for, he took issue with the growth of the state, 'Conservatives stand for the rights of the individual which have been circumscribed in the modern industrial state'. Given Wall's attacks on 'permissiveness', his individualism is solely in the economic sphere. In policy terms this manifested itself in a call for greater productivity and a cut in high taxation that 'impedes initiative' and 'restricts enterprise'. All of this, however, was within the structure of the post-war welfare state. Wall accepted 'that State spending will continue to rise', but this should be paid for not by higher taxes but by 'the expansion of our economy'. Productivity depended on freeing industry; and Wall extended this principle to defending the right of individuals not to join a trade union. Reform of public services was encouraged, with tax allowances for those who opted out of

¹⁸⁹ U DPW/37/4, Patrick Wall, 'Conservative Principles', 1 February 1967.

¹⁹⁰ David Edgar, 'The Free or the Good', in *The Ideology of the New Right*, ed. by Ruth Levitas (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), pp. 55-79 (p. 75).

¹⁹¹ U DPW/37/4, Patrick Wall, 'Conservative Principles', 1 February 1967.

¹⁹² Kwasi Kwarteng, *Thatcher's Trial: Six Months that Defined a Leader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 20.

¹⁹³ THCR 5/2/262, Interview for *Women's Own*, 31 October 1987, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>.

state-run healthcare and education.¹⁹⁴ This would not be a million miles from the inaugural pamphlet of the No Turning Back group in 1985.¹⁹⁵

Wall and his colleagues, however, were not motivated solely by economics or the permissive society. Nationhood mattered. Divergent and passionate attitudes to immigration and European integration would linger within the party for decades to come. Immigration would be an issue the 92 took a strong interest in for some time, well into the first Thatcher administration. In the 1967 pamphlet Wall suggests that the ‘country has made up its mind’ on immigration and, anticipating the prominence Powell was to give it, the country ‘is waiting for positive leadership’. To Wall immigration policy was unbalanced. Whilst it opened the door to the new Commonwealth, it shut out Britain’s kith and kin from the ‘Old Commonwealth’, and this would lead the 92 to rebel on immigration rules in the Heath years.¹⁹⁶

Like the rest of the Conservative party, the 92 wrestled with the concept of European integration. In 1961 Wall abstained in the vote on the principle of joining.¹⁹⁷ In 1967, however, Wall considered it inevitable that ‘Britain can no longer remain outside one of the major economic groupings of the world, the EEC, the USA or the USSR’. Wall gave the EEC conditional support, but stressed an alternative should be found if Wilson’s application failed.¹⁹⁸ This is a reference to General De Gaulle’s expected veto. As French President he vetoed Britain’s initial application in 1963 and did so again in November 1967. In the division of 10 May 1967, only Ronald Bell from the 92 voted against, and many previous anti-marketeers, like Wall, voted for entry.¹⁹⁹ An explanation can be found in Heath’s three-line whip for entry and that De Gaulle was still in office. Several anti-marketeers, in both parties, supported the motion on the basis that De Gaulle ‘will save us from our own folly’.²⁰⁰

Wall’s alternative to the EEC was an Anglosphere. He was open to the possibility of ‘closer association’ with the USA, the ‘white commonwealth’ of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand and, controversially, ‘with South Africa and Rhodesia’.²⁰¹ Yet to mark the hesitation

¹⁹⁴ U DPW/37/4, Patrick Wall, ‘Conservative Principles’, 1 February 1967.

¹⁹⁵ Michael Brown MP, Christopher Chope MP, et. al., *No Turning Back* (Sussex: The Conservative Political Centre, 1985), p.29.

¹⁹⁶ U DPW/37/4, Patrick Wall, ‘Conservative Principles’, 1 February 1967

¹⁹⁷ Hansard, Commons Debates, 3 August 1961, Vol. 645, Col. 1782-83.

¹⁹⁸ U DPW/37/4, Patrick Wall, ‘Conservative Principles’, 1 February 1967

¹⁹⁹ Hansard, Commons Debates, 10 May 1967, Vol. 746, Col. 1650-55.

²⁰⁰ Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Life* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 332.

²⁰¹ U DPW/37/4, Patrick Wall, ‘Conservative Principles’, 1 February 1967

that was to overshadow the Conservatives and their association with the EEC, the 92 held further discussion. Sir John Hall notified members that Wall was to draft a pamphlet on the EEC and that a sub-committee would be formed to discuss ‘basic principles’ that should guide future European policy.²⁰² Debate in the 92 would continue right up to the vote on the principle of entry in October 1971.

More than a Dining Club

Following Wall’s treatise on Conservative principles there was internal pressure for the 92 to become more than a dining club. Sir John Hall encouraged more political action. The dinners, he argued, should have a purpose and future activity agreed and ‘pursued by all the members during the following month’ via ‘parliamentary questions, representation in party committees, speeches in the House and in the Constituency and letters to the press.’ Replying to Hall, Wall showed that the 92 had moved on from being merely a social gathering. He agreed that more political action was necessary ‘otherwise the group might degenerate into a dining club’. He recommended a list of subjects ‘of a controversial nature’ which members may adopt and then write a paper. That Wall believed the 92 must ‘re-state our principles as we did when we saw Alec Home’ showed their distance from Heath and lack of faith that he would steer the party in their direction.²⁰³

By the end of April 1967 Wall and Hall had motivated more members of the 92 to think about their approach to Conservative principles. The submissions vary in their quality and demonstrate how politicians conveyed their political views at the time. They were a world away from the sophisticated pamphleteering of the No Turning Back group in the 1980s. For instance, Michael Clark Hutchison’s submission was a hand-written statement of broad Unionist values lauding ‘the preservation of Crown and Parliament’ and supporting ‘the maintenance of the liberties of the people’. There was little detail behind his support for ‘a just and simplified tax system’.²⁰⁴

Sir John Hall’s paper combined theory and practice and was a more intellectual offering. To Hall the choice facing Conservatives was between ‘a policy which assumes

²⁰² U DPW/37/4, Sir John Hall to the 92, 15 February 1967.

²⁰³ U DPW/37/4, Patrick Wall to John Hall, 16 March 1967.

²⁰⁴ U DPW/37/4, Michael Clark Hutchison, ‘Conservative Principles’, 26 April 1967.

planning and makes concession to freedom' and 'one which assumes freedom and holds the power of the State in reserve to correct its excessives'. Again, reflecting their lukewarm confidence in Heath, Hall suggested that the 'Party is poised to go either way, but it is the second we must choose'. Like Wall, Hall spoke of moral politics, but without a religious tone. To Hall morals in public office were 'respect, honesty, self-discipline, sense of responsibility and selflessness, not prescription'. Bryant Godman Irvine listed a set of policies for the group to advocate. He called for the party to 'take the heart out of government [...] demolish the apparatus of Socialist control'. Prophetically he advocated the sale of council houses. Predating Powell he suggested a 'full stop' for immigration but made an allowance for students. On the EEC he saw British membership necessary to build a coalition 'to prevent Germany taking over if France collapses' after de Gaulle. 'Much could now be done behind the scenes with EEC countries other than France and Germany'.²⁰⁵ To nationalist politicians in the 92 who erred towards membership, British participation was a means to safeguard British interests and sway the balance of power in Europe away from German domination.

Ronald Bell's submission was the most radical and he would spur the 92 to campaign against trade union powers. Bell was a controversial MP. After Edward Heath dismissed Powell from the shadow cabinet due to the tone of the Birmingham Speech²⁰⁶ in April 1968, Bell defended the language used. He wrote that if the tone had been less abrupt, the force of the speech would have been lost 'by wrapping it up in obscure and qualified verbiage'.²⁰⁷ When asked in 1972 if he supported Powell's views on immigration he said 'I antedate them'.²⁰⁸ There is proof of this in Bell's speech of 1967, which he submitted to Wall as his contribution, where he called for an end to the 'inflow of tropical immigrants' and that 'voluntary repatriation' should be 'strongly encouraged'. On matters of economics and individualism Bell was in line with his Group colleagues. He was critical of big government that provided 'security, not encouragement' and fostered a culture where 'envy, not admiration, has been the reward for merit'. There was, however, one paradox to Bell's speech. Commenting on Wilson's pay policy, Bell warned that if industry abandoned restraint, then 'inflation will return like a hurricane'. This can be interpreted as mild support for an incomes

²⁰⁵ U DPW/37/4, Brant Godman Irvine, 'Conservative Principles', 26 April 1967.

²⁰⁶ Also known as the 'Rivers of Blood' speech.

²⁰⁷ Aylesbury, the Buckinghamshire Archives, Records of Beaconsfield Constituency Conservative Association (formerly South Bucks), 1948-85, Scrap books of press cuttings about the activities of the South Bucks Constituency Conservative Association and Ronald Bell, MP, D163/7/24-26, Ronald Bell MP, letter, *Windsor, Slough and Eton Express*, 20 April 1968.

²⁰⁸ D163/7/27-29, unattributed, 'Mr Bell – Triumphant', *Bucks Free Press*, 21 July 1972.

policy. Yet it should not be read, however, as support for strict government management of pay, incomes, and prices. Bell was not a corporatist in that regard. Indeed, in his submission he argued for a reduction in public spending and ‘personal responsibility in all fields including health and education’.²⁰⁹ Rather, his support for incomes policy – and why many 92 members came to grudgingly support it under Heath – was to use it as a weapon to curtail the power of the trade unions.

Taking a lead from Powell, Bell challenged the spread of the closed shop in industry. As was his style, Powell used explosive language to elevate an issue to national discussion. On 3 March 1967 he used a speech in Salford to criticise the strongarm tactics of the trade unions. The management of a tool making company told Powell that unless their workers joined a union, a trade union official would make sure ‘that no more orders were received from a certain large, internationally famous undertaking’. The company named in the article was the Wolverhampton Tool Design Company and the ‘undertaking’ was thought to be Rolls Royce of Derby. After the threat the workmen in Wolverhampton had agreed to join the union.²¹⁰

The day after, the Draughtsmen’s and Allied Technicians’ Association (DATA) confirmed that they were the union in question. Their campaign for a compulsory closed shop was to ‘end the abuses of so called self-employment among draughtsmen’. They did not hide their closed shop policy, ‘DATA’s insistence on 100% trade union membership amongst contract design firms provides the only guarantee that such firms do not act as agencies for so called self-employed men’.²¹¹ The union’s tactics spread to other shopfloors. The following Monday the *Daily Express* wrote that all 350 men working for Hebron and Medlock in Bath would have to join DATA or Medlock would have to ‘sack those who will not agree to’ join the union.²¹² Bell wrote to Lord Kindersley, chairman of Rolls Royce, on 7 March alleging that Rolls Royce supported a closed shop. Bell argued, not least from the articles in the *Times* and *Daily Express*, that DATA’s behaviour was widespread and declared to Kindersley his interest as a Rolls Royce shareholder. Bell wanted to know if Rolls Royce was complicit in

²⁰⁹ U DPW/37/4, Ronald Bell, undated speech, ‘Conservative Principles’, 26 April 1967.

²¹⁰ Unattributed, ‘Clash over union “threat to firm”’, *The Times*, 4 March 1967, p. 1.

²¹¹ U DPW/37/4, DATA press release, ‘DATA’s efforts to eliminate so called self-employment and some of the more undesirable features of contract work’, 5 March 1967.

²¹² U DPW/37/4, John King, ‘In Union or get out’, *Daily Express*, 6 March 1967.

‘threatening companies [...] to force them to become closed shops for that Union’. He called on Kindersley to publicly state that Rolls Royce would never be a party to such activity.²¹³

What followed between Bell and the Rolls Royce leadership demonstrated industry’s inability to bring unions to heel. Rolls Royce consistently denied that it supported a closed shop. But it was unable to stop the trade union blocking work going to firms using self-employed draughtsmen and insisting on a closed shop workforce. Its acquiescence to the militancy of the union therefore was enough proof that it did support a closed shop. The episode demonstrated the complicity of industry with union intimidation. It was a symptom of the increasing power of shop stewards and the inability of union or industry leaders to control what was happening on the shop floor. Denning Pearson, chief executive of Rolls Royce, replied to Bell’s letter claiming to be ‘concerned’ at the conduct of the DATA union. Pearson told Bell the agreement with DATA did not stipulate that Rolls Royce would ‘only deal with contract firms operating a closed shop’. Yet Pearson would not put that in print as it would ‘serve no useful purpose at this time’.²¹⁴ But events were getting out of control.

On 11 March 700 Rolls Royce draughtsmen supported a resolution giving two-months’ notice to firms engaging self-employed workers to sign up to the DATA agreement prohibiting contracts going to non-closed shop firms.²¹⁵ Whether Rolls Royce liked it or not, its workers were stating clear support for the closed shop in firms contracted by Rolls Royce, and a determination to implement it through industrial muscle. A letter from Sir Keith Joseph to *The Times* finally prompted Rolls Royce to reply. Joseph questioned whether DATA’s activity came within the scope of the 1906 Trade Disputes Act that gave trade unions immunity from liability for damages that came from industrial action arising from an industrial dispute. To Joseph there wasn’t cause for action as the self-employed draughtsmen were not in dispute with anyone. The only dispute came from a third party. DATA’s issue with contracting firms and the employment of self-employed draughtsmen was ‘a separate, but overlapping, question’. Instead of a dispute, it was an attempt by a union to ‘impose a closed shop by threatening to cause a cessation of orders to companies’ who employed self-employed workers.²¹⁶

²¹³ U DPW/37/4, Ronald Bell to Lord Kindersley, 7 March 1967.

²¹⁴ U DPW/37/4, Denning Pearson to Ronald Bell, 14 March 1967.

²¹⁵ Our correspondent, ‘Draughtsmen back their union’, *The Times*, 11 March 1967, p. 2.

²¹⁶ Sir Keith Joseph, ‘Draughtsmen in Design Firms’, *The Times*, 15 March 1967, p. 15.

When Rolls Royce finally responded to Joseph in *The Times* it showed that it was unable to commit to Bell's proposal that they distance themselves from a closed shop in practice. Whilst Rolls Royce 'does not operate a closed shop for any kind of labour' it had 'entered into an agreement' with DATA 'about conditions of employment in drawing office firms to whom we provide work'.²¹⁷ That agreement, stated in the DATA press release of 5 March, was that no work would go to firms that did not operate a closed shop. Bell made this point to Denning Pearson on 21 March. Whilst Rolls Royce gave a public commitment that it did not have a closed shop it 'was not giving work to people who are not approved [...] by the union'. To Bell the union was pulling the strings of industry and Bell told Pearson he would not let the matter lie.²¹⁸ Bell lobbied members of the 92 and it filtered through. In Sir John Hall's submission on Conservative principles he included a section opposing 'restrictive practices wherever they may be found'.²¹⁹

Bell demanded that Conservatives deal with restrictive practices through legislation. On 10 April 1967 he moved to repeal the Trade Disputes Act 1965. It was unlikely to succeed, but it showed support for legislation to deal with trade union immunities, a legacy project for the 92 that would continue until the repeal of the closed shop in 1990. The reasoning for Bell's Bill was found in a letter to *The Times* in reply to Sir Keith Joseph from the barrister Harry Samuels. The 1965 Trade Disputes Act gave power to unions to use these means 'to achieve a closed shop' and came 'within the immunity'.²²⁰ Bell's proposals would therefore 'withdraw protection from threats when used to coerce people into union membership'.²²¹

This conflict with DATA is important because Bell ensured the union's activity was publicised to all members of the 92, entrenching their anti-trade union views. Bell's correspondence and speeches are in Wall's files at the Hull archives. Further, by emphasising the power of the militants on the shop floor it brought home to the 92 the need to reform trade union immunities by legislation. From here on trade union reform was central to the 92's agenda right through the 1980s. It equated freedom with economic freedom and it saw two institutions that impeded that freedom: the state and the trade unions. In Mrs Thatcher's first term there was a pitched battle between the 92 and the government over trade union reform

²¹⁷ D. J. Pepper, 'Draughtsmen in design firms', *The Times*, 21 March, 1967, p. 13.

²¹⁸ U DPW/37/4, Ronald Bell to Denning Pearson, 21 March 1967.

²¹⁹ U DPW/37/4, Sir John Hall, 'Conservative Principles', 26 April 1967.

²²⁰ Harry Samuels, 'Draughtsmen in Design Firms', *The Times*, 18 March 1967, p. 11.

²²¹ Hansard, Commons Debates, 10 April 1967, Vol. 744, Col. 654.

they believed didn't go far enough. Although some of the future rebels were not in parliament during these formative years for the 92, the events of 1967 created a legacy that would put anti-trade unionism at the heart of its thinking, more so than immigration or Rhodesia. Ironically it also meant it gave Edward Heath the benefit of the doubt as he U-turned.

Heath

Up to 1970 Wall's papers reveal a trend. When the Conservative party suffered at the polls, the 92 campaigned for a return to Conservative principles and there was a great deal of correspondence between members of the Group. When the Conservative party was doing electorally well, the 92 remained quiet, still holding dinners but less politically active. Indeed, devaluation appears to be the break, bringing the Group's activity on Conservative principles to a halt and turning its attention to increasing its representation on backbench committees. By the end of the 1967, members of the 92 held the vice chairmanship of the finance, defence, and foreign affairs committees.²²² It trod a fine line between advocating views out of the mainstream of the parliamentary party and securing enough backbench support to retain influential positions on backbench committees. For example, on the contentious subject of race, whilst Schoen argues that no significant Tory move was made to alter Heath's position on Race Relations legislation in 1968 after Powell's Birmingham Speech²²³, there is evidence that members of the 92 were not going to let the issue lie. Although Heath whipped for the party to abstain on the third reading of the Race Relations Bill in July 1968, Bell led a rebellion against. Whilst 13 members of the 92 voted against the Bill, it was less than half their number. Wall, with his fierce reputation, abstained.²²⁴ Even on the issue of race relations, which had fired up the right of the party, the 92 did not act with one voice. Its more radical members were free to vote as to their principles. But Wall, as chairman and figurehead, abstained as to not insult the leadership.

Towards the late 1960s the right of the Conservative party was changing under the heavy influence of Powell and the Institute of Economic Affairs. The parliamentary party returned at the 1964 election was, according to John Nott, largely 'unideological, loyalist,

²²² U DPW/37/22, Sir Patrick Wall, 'The 92 Committee', p.6.

²²³ Douglas Shoen, *Enoch Powell and the Powellites* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 34.

²²⁴ Hansard, Commons Debates, 9 July 1968, Vol. 768, Col. 483. Against the third reading were Bell and Gurden as tellers, Allason, Bennett, Biggs-Davison, Tom Boardman, Goodhew, Sir John Hall, Hordern, Bryant Godman Irvine, Sir Ronald Russell, Teddy Taylor, and Donald Williams.

traditional, and disciplined', although as we have seen members of the 92 dabbled in abstract thinking on Conservative principles.²²⁵ To the journalist David Wood the Tory right-wing of the mid 1960s was 'by instinct paternalist-imperialist', in other words Alan Clark's 'Union Jack Right'.²²⁶ Their conservative views on immigration and race were tempered by loyalty to the party. The proposals to take the 'heart' out of the state and Bell's views of individuals taking personal responsibility for health and education were before their time. The 'key men' at the top of the party all took a 'paternalist, collectivist consensus view of the Tory mission', and it was left to the 'younger members' to challenge the party's attitudes.²²⁷ Indeed, this proved to be so, but not for some time. With each new cadre of MPs returned in the elections of 1974, 1979 and 1983, there were elected more radical Conservatives that pushed the 92 in a liberal, free market direction and away from the Union Jack Right. From their discussion papers the 92 had their doubts about Heath, but there was no realistic alternative prior to the 1970 election. Powell eschewed factions and, aside from a brief stint as a notional chair of an anti-EEC parliamentary group in 1972, he avoided organised collaboration. Under Wall's leadership the 92 chose to work with Heath and try to influence his agenda.

Defeating Wilson was a factor unifying the Conservative party under Heath. While 1967 had spurred the activity of the 92, it was not a good year for the Labour Prime Minister. Devaluation on 18 November hurt Wilson badly and the resulting deflationary policies put a further wedge between Labour and the trade unions. The consequent rejection of EEC membership on 27 November gave a pyrrhic victory to his anti-market rivals and backbenchers. Wilson's leadership was under threat, with George Brown and Callaghan circling. From Autumn 1967 until the general election in 1970, the Conservatives won eleven parliamentary by-elections from Labour and in July 1969 the Conservatives had a twenty-point opinion poll lead.²²⁸

Yet Labour's electoral misfortune had little to do with anything the Conservatives were doing or offering in contrast to Wilson. When in 1969 *In Place of Strife* came before the Commons, the Conservative line was to abstain. Although Heath admitted that 'Mrs Castle had helped herself to some of our own proposals' in the Conservatives' *Fair Deal at Work*

²²⁵ John Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Memoirs of an Errant Politician* (London: Politico's, 2003), p. 129.

²²⁶ David Wood, 'Profile of Tory right and Powellism', *The Times*, 15 July 1968, p. 8.

²²⁷ Nott, p. 133.

²²⁸ Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998), p. 299.

policy, Heath argued later that he could not support the government's proposals on trade union reform.²²⁹ Given Heath implemented legislation not so dissimilar from *In Place of Strife*, this was either hypocrisy or opportunism. So conservative were Castle's proposals that Wilson congratulated her for having 'out-Heathed' Heath and said she had 'outflanked' the opposition.²³⁰ Considering the difficulty the Conservatives were to face with the implementation of their own Industrial Relations Act, their job would have been easier had they supported Castle's plans and then amended them in office. Instead, Labour was to reunite with the unions in shamefaced opposition to Heath's plans as if *In Place of Strife* had never happened, a point noted by Ian Gilmour during the Heath administration.²³¹ By not supporting Wilson, Heath made it easier for the left to unite against him after he won office.

Selsdon Man

By 1970 it was arguable whether the Group needed to influence Heath. The Selsdon Park conference of January 1970 convinced many that the Conservatives had embraced classically liberal, free market economics. As a historical moment it became 'important' to those who weren't there, crucial when analysing those who accuse the Heath administration of betrayal in the 1970-74 parliament.²³² The Selsdon Conference has sparked significant debates on the history of Conservative politics. The first is whether Heath believed in what became the 'Selsdon Manifesto', therefore justifying his U-turns against it in 1972. Revisionists of the Heath years argue that Heath didn't believe in Selsdon as a *laissez faire* forerunner of Thatcherism.²³³ Yet to the emerging Tory radicals at the time Selsdon was a 'breakthrough', and thus the departure from it was political treason.²³⁴ Heath, however, led some Conservatives to believe he was at least heading in the direction of Selsdon prior to the 1970 conference. Even those sympathetic to Heath noted the Conservative leader's more strident rhetoric after 1968, that he 'acceded' to pressure to sound more 'capitalistic'.²³⁵ Whilst Heath's biographer John Campbell argues that Heath genuinely wanted to transform British society, he had little idea of how to do it. What radicalism existed was confined to relatively small measures like

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 298.

²³⁰ Ziegler, *Wilson*, p. 300.

²³¹ Philip Ziegler, *Edward Heath: The Authorised Biography* (London: HarperPress, 2001), p. 339.

²³² Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The Politics and Social Upheaval of the 1980s* (London: Simon and Schuster UK, 2010), p. 34.

²³³ Anthony Seldon, 'The Heath Government in History', in *The Heath Government 1970-74*, ed. by Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Publishing, 1996), pp. 1-19 (p. 13).

²³⁴ Nott, p. 134.

²³⁵ John Campbell, *Edward Heath: A Biography* (London: Random House, 1993), p. 246.

the abolition of Resale Price Maintenance²³⁶ and his fundamental belief in European integration.

In the literature on the Heath U-turns, both Conservative left and the liberal New Right agree that Selsdon was a myth. Richard Cockett, firmly of the liberal right, agrees that Heath's 'ambiguity of purpose and lack of clear ideological interest' were shown at Selsdon.²³⁷ Heath was a manager rather than an ideologue. Taking the two examples of Campbell and Cockett, despite the ideological differences between them, there is agreement that Heath's free market beliefs have been overstated. Both agree that Heath was never that ideological and what Heath had in mind wasn't as revolutionary as was thought. To emphasise this point, Harold Wilson and the press were just as vital in promoting Selsdon Man, i.e. Heath, as a free marketeer strong on law and order that it worked to Heath's credit. That Wilson needed to do this meant Heath, even if he wanted to dress up as a right-winger, wasn't doing a good enough job of it himself.

It didn't matter what Heath thought of Selsdon, the narrative painted Heath accordingly. The left of the party knew he didn't believe in it; the right believed that the party was moving its way. Each had equal reason to believe Heath was doing what they wanted. *The Times* leader noted that after Selsdon the differences between the parties were 'clear enough', Heath giving emphasis to law and order and thus 'catching a popular wind'.²³⁸ After Wilson went on the attack over Conservative proposals on industrial relations and squatting, Butler and Pinto-Duschinsky argue both Heath and Wilson believed they had come out better after Selsdon. Heath had generated interest in Conservative policy. Wilson had his right-wing bogey man to unite the Labour party behind him.²³⁹

It is against Selsdon, myth or not, that charges of betrayal were later made. Heath was elected as Selsdon Man in 1970, to the great surprise of many. This elevated the expectations of those new MPs elected in 1970, like Norman Tebbit, who held out high hopes for a transformative Conservative government.²⁴⁰ The 92, however, were tentative in their response to Selsdon. Discussing policy after the Selsdon Conference, Sir John Hall's talking points

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 248.

²³⁷ Cockett, p. 202.

²³⁸ Leader, 'Tory Prospectus', *The Times*, 2 February 1970, p. 9.

²³⁹ David Butler and Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, *The British General Election of 1970* (London: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 129-130.

²⁴⁰ Campbell, *Edward Heath*, p. 266.

eschew any mention of industrial relations, signalling that their demands on that, for now, were met. Indeed, every other talking point or discussion document in the 92 papers to date mentioned industrial relations or trade unions except this one, signalling their satisfaction with party policy. Other topics included longstanding 92 bugbears such as capital punishment, concerns over the continuation of Rhodesian sanctions, immigration, and ‘what form’ the ‘first Tory budget’ should take. Wall’s annotated copy approves of Tory policy to maintain defence forces East of Suez.²⁴¹ This, again, refers to Campbell’s point about the increased expectations of the right. Even though Heath was committed to keeping British bases East of Suez, by mid-1970 Wilson’s plans for withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia were already too far down the line. As Ziegler concluded, ‘Heath in the end had to accept that a British military presence East of Suez was unsustainable’.²⁴²

Significant for the development of the 92 was its swift enrolment of new members after general elections. The 92 sought to recruit new MPs quickly, generating loyalty by providing much-needed support for the newly elected. This was Norman Tebbit’s experience. Tebbit, elected in 1970, arrived at parliament and ‘realised how little I knew’. There was no welcoming committee, no automatic right to an office, no induction infrastructure that MPs nowadays enjoy. James Allason helped Tebbit find a desk and encouraged him to stand for a committee, something ‘dull’ at first, to get his first foot on the ladder. Allason suggested the housing committee, volunteered to nominate Tebbit, and said he would ‘speak to my friends’ to rally support.²⁴³ To his surprise Tebbit, with the support of the 92, duly won and at a dinner on 10 March 1971 the 92 agreed Allason could formally recruit Tebbit to the Group.²⁴⁴ The recruitment process of the 92 involved discussion over dinner and whether the member would fit in. Despite its private members’ club-like exclusivity, Tebbit wrote that the Group was ‘less hidebound and utterly snob-free’. He recalled that many members were ‘content’ to remain on the backbenches representing their constituencies ‘as a form of public service rather than out of ideological conviction’.²⁴⁵ Of course, and Tebbit would not have known this at the time, the 92 had discussed Conservative ideology between 1964 and 1967 and was starting to think beyond Wood’s ‘paternalist-imperialism’, however unrefined by standards of the 1980s.

²⁴¹ U DPW/37/7, Sir John Hall to 92, 6 April 1970.

²⁴² Ziegler, *Heath*, p. 393.

²⁴³ Norman Tebbit, *Upwardly Mobile* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 122-3.

²⁴⁴ U DPW/37/8, Memo on Conclusions of 92 dinner of 10 March, 12 March 1971.

²⁴⁵ Tebbit, pp. 122-3.

Membership rules for the 92 had some exceptions. Nicholas Winterton, elected at the Macclesfield by-election in September 1971, sat in the 92 for much of his parliamentary career. Yet his membership came as a shock to the Group's convenor, Sir John Hall. Such was the rate at which the 92 was growing that it appears Wall and Hall had forgotten who had been approved and not. To Wall, Hall said that Biggs-Davison had invited 'Neville (sic) Winterton' to join at Wall's request. The problem for Hall was that 'a number of our colleagues expressed surprise that Winterton had joined the Group [...] we were all unanimous in statements that the name was suggested but formally rejected'. Hall therefore believed Wall should not have asked Biggs-Davison to recruit Winterton. However, politeness took over and Winterton was allowed to remain as 'it is probably a little difficult to do much about this now'.²⁴⁶

The 92 also dithered over admitting female members. A notable case in the literature is the membership of Jill Knight, MP for Birmingham Edgbaston. Whilst not the first female MP to be nominated - that fell to Joan Vickers in 1966 who was nominated but not accepted²⁴⁷ - Knight was the first female MP to receive support from the 92 for backbench elections without being a member.²⁴⁸ The 92 discussed the principle of admitting female members at dinner on 1 May 1974, where both Jill Knight and Betty Harvie Anderson²⁴⁹ were proposed. Notice of the discussion ends with the double qualification of membership, a readiness to support Conservative principles and an ominous reference to 'fit readily into the Group in personal terms'.²⁵⁰ The conclusions were not positive for the female nominees. 'In accordance with the unanimity rule, it was decided not to admit women members'.²⁵¹ Both Tebbit and Wall claim that Ronald Bell was the member prohibiting female members. Tebbit went further to say that women would be admitted to the 92 over Bell's dead body.²⁵² This, however, is not accurate, as female members were admitted before Bell died in 1982. Jill Knight's name appears on the 92 membership list in 1979.²⁵³ Wall's papers say that Knight became a 92 member in 1978

²⁴⁶ U DPW/37/9, Sir John Hall to Patrick Wall, 17 July 1972.

²⁴⁷ U DPW/37/3, Patrick Wall to Sir John Hall, 30 June 1966.

²⁴⁸ BD/1/393, 92 Whip, November 1973.

²⁴⁹ Betty Harvie Anderson, Baroness Skrimshire of Quarter (1913-1979), Conservative MP for East Renfrewshire, 1959-79. Deputy Speaker, 1970-3. Ennobled, 1979.

²⁵⁰ BD/1/393, 92 Memo, 5 April 1974.

²⁵¹ BD/1/393, 92 Memo, 6 May 1974.

²⁵² Tebbit, p. 123.

²⁵³ U DPW/37/16, 92 Member List, December 1979.

owing to ‘Ronnie Bell having died’, which is also inaccurate.²⁵⁴ Gardiner’s more likely explanation is that Bell must have been absent at the dinner when Knight was accepted.²⁵⁵

Across the 1970-74 parliament the 92 hovered between twenty-eight to thirty members. Yet the 92 would not be as rebellious as one would believe, especially as the 92 came to view the Heath years as a betrayal of Conservative policy. Bound by its traditional loyalty to the party and its dislike for radical trade unionism, the 92 sought to influence Heath’s government rather than openly rebel as each U-turn occurred. Wall attempted to influence Pym, the government Chief Whip, to suggest policies to feed back to Heath. While this did little to steer Heath off his course, it shows the 92 tried to help and not just oppose the government.

Heath had promised a ‘quiet revolution’ at the victorious party conference in October 1970, playing off his new Selsdon persona, and promised great things for those MPs who wanted free market policies. After the death of Iain Macleod on 20 July, Tony Barber became Chancellor and his first budget on 27 October 1970, where he reduced spending and taxes, was met with a ‘standing ovation’ by his backbenchers.²⁵⁶ On 2 November 1970 the government announced the abolition of the Prices and Incomes Board. The government even weathered a small rebellion on Rhodesian Sanctions on 9 November, only five members of the 92 voted against.²⁵⁷

The passage of the second reading of the Industrial Relations Bill greatly pleased the 92. Wall wrote to Hall that the Group ‘fully supported’ the Bill.²⁵⁸ It met their previous demands to curtail trade union powers and immunities. Offering encouragement, Wall wrote to Pym in January 1971 urging the government to hold steady. Although Wall foresaw difficulty with the Industrial Relations Bill the benefits, he said prophetically, ‘are likely to be long rather than short term’.²⁵⁹ Therefore by spring 1971 the 92 saw no real need broadly to oppose the government’s direction of travel. Wall had opened lines of communication with Pym to keep Downing Street abreast of their views and opinions. On their cornerstone issue

²⁵⁴ U DPW/37/22, Sir Patrick Wall, ‘The 92 Committee’, p. 16.

²⁵⁵ Gardiner, p. 135.

²⁵⁶ Bruce-Gardyne, p. 23.

²⁵⁷ Hansard, Commons Debates, 9 November 1970, Vol. 806, Col. 103. The rebel 92 members were Bell, W. H. K. Baker, John Biggs-Davison, Stephen Hastings, and Rear-Admiral Morgan-Giles. Taken from U DPW/37/8, 92 Member list 1971.

²⁵⁸ U DPW/37/8, Patrick Wall to Sir John Hall, 27 January 1971.

²⁵⁹ U DPW/37/8, Patrick Wall to Francis Pym, 26 January 1971.

of Rhodesia, only a small number of Group members had voted against the government. On the government's two contentious issues to come, the U-turn on economic policy and entry to the EEC, the overwhelming majority of the 92 provided public support but registered grave internal doubts about the new economic policy.

Europe and the U-turns

The divisive legacy of the Heath administration was the United Kingdom's accession to the European Economic Community and the change in economic policy from perceived non-interventionism to Keynesian demand management to boost growth and cut unemployment. Opposition to the first did not necessarily translate into opposition to the second. Indeed, aside from Ronald Bell, no other members of the 92 were excessively rebellious on both. Heath intended to take the UK into the EEC at the earliest opportunity. For the 92, there was still no united position. Wall wanted to manage the debate carefully. He told the Chief Whip that 'the Group has differing views on this matter'.²⁶⁰

At one end of the spectrum Ronald Bell faced deselection over his anti-EEC views and went the furthest in challenging the leadership's position. In June 1971 Bell argued that parliament should 'formally and clearly indicate their dissent and disapproval'²⁶¹, which can only be read as encouragement for his parliamentary colleagues to vote down entry to the EEC. Against the wishes of his South Buckinghamshire constituency association, Bell initiated a private referendum on the EEC, reporting a sizeable anti-market verdict days after the Conservative party conference in October 1971.²⁶² Boundary changes gave Bell's pro-market opponents an opportunity to deselect him, which they attempted from January to July 1972. Local reports suggested this was motivated by Bell's anti-EEC position.²⁶³ Although Bell was one of the fifteen Tory MPs to vote against the EEC legislation at second reading, the pressure of the deselection campaign against him tempered his future voting on the legislation. John Biffen claimed the second reading was the 'high water' mark of the rebellion, meaning

²⁶⁰ U DPW/37/8, Patrick Wall to Francis Pym, 26 January 1971.

²⁶¹ D163/7/24-26, Ronald Bell, 'Letter from Westminster', *Windsor, Slough and Eton Express*, 11 June 1971.

²⁶² D163/7/24-26, unattributed, 'Common Market Referendum', *Buckinghamshire Advertiser*, 21 October 1971.

²⁶³ D163/7/24/29, unattributed, "'Ultimatum" for Ronald Bell', *Slough Observer*, 10 September 1971.

sustained rebellion became less attractive as the Bill progressed, giving Bell ample cover to scale back his dissent.²⁶⁴

On the other side in the 92, Biggs-Davison was a passionate pro-marketeer. Such was his pro-Europeanism that he was asked by Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalgeri, the longstanding president of the Paneuropean Union, to help distribute pro-EEC materials to ‘Conservatives and Liberals, the leading members of the European Movement and the chief editors of the most important papers’.²⁶⁵ Both Biggs-Davison and Bell were in lockstep on Northern Ireland, Rhodesia, and immigration. Both were members of the Monday Club. Yet both had opposite views on the EEC. These two examples reflect the extreme ends of the spectrum on the EEC that Wall had to balance, and he urged Pym to delay an initial vote on entry until early 1972 so that MPs could consult with their constituents.²⁶⁶

Others staged temporary protests against the EEC without significant backlash. When William Clark announced he would be voting against the principle of entry his constituency association voted forty to eight to support accession.²⁶⁷ Clark voted against the principle of entry in October 1971 but supported the enabling legislation in 1972. Patrick Wall, after raising issues surrounding the protection of British fishing waters, duly came down on the side of the EEC. Wall reasoned in the October debate that ‘we cannot continue as we are’, evoking Dean Acheson’s phrase that Britain had not found a role after Empire. Yet Wall was not completely won over to European integration. Hesitantly, he called upon those vehemently supporting entry ‘to not push matters too hard once we get in. I do not believe that the British people want a united states of Europe’.²⁶⁸ At the division on the principle of entry, twenty of the twenty seven members of the 92 supported entry.²⁶⁹ At second reading, only two of the 92 voted

²⁶⁴ Philip Norton, *Conservative Dissidents: Dissent within the Parliamentary Conservative Party 1970-74* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1978), p. 74.

²⁶⁵ BD/1/393, Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalgeri to John Biggs-Davison, 12 September 1969.

²⁶⁶ U DPW/37/8, Patrick Wall to Francis Pym, 16 March 1971.

²⁶⁷ PPA, 5/218 (Lord Clark of Kempton), Denis Herbstein, ‘High cost of a Tory “No”’, *The Sunday Times*, 7 November 1971.

²⁶⁸ Hansard, Commons Debates, 22 October 1971, Vol. 823, Col. 1176-7.

²⁶⁹ Hansard, Commons Debates, 28 October 1971, Vol. 823, Col. 2217. For entry were James Allason, W. H. K. Baker, Sir Frederic Bennett, John Biggs-Davison, Winston Churchill, Douglas Dodds-Parker, Bryant Godman Irvine, Harold Gurden, John Hall, Peter Hordern, Ian Lloyd, Rear Admiral Morgan Morgan-Giles, John Page, Trevor Skeet, Norman Tebbit, Patrick Wall, Kenneth Warren, Roger White, Nicholas Winterton, and Jerry Wiggin. Those voting against entry were Ronald Bell, Carol Mather, Michael Clark Hutchison, Lt. Col. Colin Mitchell, Jasper More, Sir Ronald Russell, and Teddy Taylor. All MPs taken from the 1972 92 Member list. Curiously, William Clark’s name is not on the 1972 member list (U DPW/37/9, 92 Member list November 1972), but was listed as a member in 1971 on Patrick Wall’s list (U DPW/37/8 92, 1971 Member list). Clark

against the accession legislation, Bell and Clark Hutchison.²⁷⁰ Like the Conservative party, the 92 split heavily over entry.

Whilst the entry of the United Kingdom to the EEC was a success for the Heath administration, it was having great difficulty with the economy, unemployment, and Northern Ireland. As with Europe, on economic policy a strong majority in the 92 gave Heath the benefit of the doubt whilst harbouring private concern over the party's direction. By the beginning of 1972, just as the EEC Bill cleared its second reading, the government's economic policies were under considerable strain. Unemployment reached one million at the end of January. Martin Holmes says this created the 'Heath dilemma'. Facing high unemployment and sluggish growth, Heath needed to boost employment and private investment to prepare the UK for EEC entry, and the subsequent U-turns can be traced to this point in January 1972. Heath reversed policies of disengagement from industry resulting in the interventionist Industry Bill and the Counter-Inflation Bill later in the year.²⁷¹ Adding to this the coal strike, in support of a forty-seven per cent pay claim, caused a state of emergency on 9 February. By making the second reading of the EEC Bill on 17 February 1972 a confidence measure, Heath put wavering anti-marketisers in an impossible position. Had the EEC Bill been lost Heath would have called an election, and the circumstances would not have been favourable to the Conservatives. Labour led in the polls from February 1971.²⁷²

Although Holmes points to the unemployment of January 1972 sparking the U-turns, Cockett argues that the nationalisation of Rolls Royce in February 1971 started the slip from Seldon.²⁷³ Only a few months prior, at the party conference in October 1970, the Industry Minister John Davies had said the government would not provide aid to 'lame duck' industries.²⁷⁴ Yet the rescue of Rolls Royce, whilst a violation of the Davies policy, was not seen as purely an economic issue. Lord Carrington framed it as a defence issue. Rolls Royce had contracts with the American government to provide engines for the Lockheed airbus and the Royal Air Force. Allowing Rolls Royce to cease production would have soured relations

became a party fundraiser in 1974. Clark returns to the 92 Member list in 1978 (U DPW/37/15, 92 Member List, 26 June 1978).

²⁷⁰ Hansard, Commons Debates, 17 February 1972, Vol. 831, Col. 755-6.

²⁷¹ Holmes, *The Heath Government*, pp. 77-78.

²⁷² Stuart Ball, 'A Chronology of the Heath Government' in *The Heath Government 1970-74*, ed. by Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Publishing, 1996), pp. 391-405 (p. 394).

²⁷³ Cockett, p. 216.

²⁷⁴ Philip Norton, 'Heath, Thatcher and Major' in *The Conservative Party*, ed. by Philip Norton (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), pp. 52-68 (p. 54).

with the USA and Carrington's argument was that 'the Armed Forces would not have survived the bankruptcy of Rolls Royce'.²⁷⁵ Only Powell protested against the nationalisation but was unable to vote against it as no other MP shared his view. To force a division Powell needed two tellers to act for the opposing lobby.²⁷⁶

The bailout of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders caused concern and was arguably another U-turn. The announcement came on the day parliament discussed the second reading of the nationalisation of Rolls Royce, 11 February 1971. Tom Boardman, who had been in the 92, asked Davies to 'avoid any misunderstanding' and 'give an assurance that it is not the Government's intention to under-write future commitments of these yards'. Davies said that the administration would not 'bail out concerns which cannot see their way through to viability'.²⁷⁷ It was an ominous suggestion from Davies, as the previous Labour government had bailed them out once before.²⁷⁸ As the first bailout had not worked, there was little chance a second one would succeed as well. Indeed, it laid the ground for the Government's turn to reflation to supplement industry and tackle unemployment.

Jock Bruce-Gardyne²⁷⁹ traced the U-turn to the government's reflationary mini-budget of 19 July 1971.²⁸⁰ Faced with problems in shipbuilding, the government announced an increase in public spending. The aid package included £70 million for shipbuilding and, eventually, £200 million for 'capital expenditure' in the nationalised industries. Barber concluded that 'it is now right to take action to provide some further stimulus to demand'.²⁸¹ This grew into the Industry Bill of May 1972. The Bill proposed massive government intervention in private industry 'to provide, maintain, or safeguard employment'. Although it was criticised on the backbenches, and even by Mrs Thatcher in cabinet, no Tory MP would join Jock Bruce-Gardyne to vote against it at Second Reading.²⁸²

Amidst the slowly unravelling 'Quiet Revolution', the 92 was not primarily concerned with fiscal and monetary strategy. It gave support to the government over the Industrial

²⁷⁵ Holmes, *The Heath Government*, p. 41.

²⁷⁶ Heffer, p. 583.

²⁷⁷ Hansard, Commons Debates, 11 February 1971, Vol. 811, Col. 811.

²⁷⁸ Bruce-Gardyne, p. 33.

²⁷⁹ Jock Bruce-Gardyne (1930-1990), Conservative MP for South Angus 1964-October 1974, Knutsford March 1979-1983. Economic Secretary to the Treasury, 1981-83.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁸¹ Hansard, Commons Debates, 19 July 1971, Vol. 821, Col. 1038.

²⁸² Norton, *Conservative Dissidents*, pp. 92-93.

Relations Bill and did not dissent on Rolls Royce or the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders. The consensus in the 92 was that, economically, the 'next six months will be tough'.²⁸³ Instead it was on matters of nationhood that the 92 had problems with government policy. On the Immigration Bill there was disappointment: 'the Bill was not satisfactory' and did not address voting rights, the reciprocity of treatment across the Commonwealth, nor the 'concentration' of migrants 'in certain areas'. Despite the issues the 92 had with the Bill on an issue fundamental to many of them, the 92 resolved to 'take no action'.²⁸⁴ Wall raised these concerns with Pym and reassured him that while the Group discussed 'Rhodesia and the closed shop', they were going to 'leave these matters [...] for a month or two in order to give time to see how they develop'.²⁸⁵ In reply Pym pledged to take the immigration points up with Maudling, but Maudling was noncommittal: 'There are limits to what can be achieved'.²⁸⁶

On Rhodesia they gave Douglas-Home, the Foreign Secretary, one last chance to negotiate a settlement with Ian Smith. On 27 April 1971 the Group agreed that 'the Chief Whip' should be told that they 'would find it difficult' to support the renewal of sanctions unless the government opened negotiations with Smith's government.²⁸⁷ In the debate on the renewal of sanctions on 10 November 1971, Douglas-Home introduced the motion and asked for support so that he could 'go to Salisbury with the best hope of reaching an honourable settlement' to bring sanctions to an end.²⁸⁸ Those in the 92 that spoke in the debate gave the Foreign Secretary, whom they had enthusiastically supported as Prime Minister, one opportunity to resolve the impasse. Bennett told Douglas-Home that 'there will not be many more occasions, when he will be able to call on the support of those who are convinced [...] that sanctions have proved to be ineffective'.²⁸⁹ Wall also warned that his patience was running out. In 1970 his colleagues had said 'this time, but never again' but, as negotiations were due he 'decided that it is unnecessary to divide the House on this matter'.²⁹⁰ With little progress by November 1972, the 92 staged their biggest rebellion on Rhodesian sanctions.

²⁸³ U DPW/37/8, Patrick Wall to Sir John Hall, 27 January 1971.

²⁸⁴ U DPW/37/8, 92 Memo on Conclusions of the Dinner of 10 March, 12 March 1971.

²⁸⁵ U DPW/37/8, Patrick Wall to Francis Pym, 16 March 1971.

²⁸⁶ U DPW/37/8, Reginald Maudling to Francis Pym, 2 April 1971.

²⁸⁷ BD/1/393, 92 Memo, 10 May 1971.

²⁸⁸ Hansard, Commons Debates, 10 November 1971, Vol. 825, Col. 1091.

²⁸⁹ Hansard, 10 November 1971, Vol. 825, Col. 1102.

²⁹⁰ Hansard, 10 November 1971, Vol. 825, Col. 1110.

On Northern Ireland, however, Pym put his foot down. In July 1971 there was an increase in violence and Maudling spoke of ‘open war’ on the IRA.²⁹¹ On 22 July Hall encouraged Group members to raise the issue at the 1922 Committee executive and in the home affairs committee.²⁹² Pym then wrote to Wall to ask for restraint, that members of the Group should express ‘tentative views’ rather than ‘assert that any particular solutions would solve the problem’. Pym’s message implied the government would not stand for the hard-line Unionist views of some in the 92, ‘I really do feel that the situation in Ireland is altogether more complex than many of our colleagues realise’.²⁹³

Breakdown

Significantly in November 1972 the Heath government U-turned on its promise not to impose a prices and incomes policy, despite abolishing the Prices and Incomes Board on 2 November 1970. Yet the 92 reacted more to Rhodesian sanctions and Immigration rules than the heresy of the Counter-Inflation Bill. On 6 November Heath announced to the House the breakdown in tripartite talks with the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the imposition of a ninety-day freeze on prices and incomes.²⁹⁴ This encouraged Powell to ask Heath if he recognised that he planned to govern ‘in direct opposition to the principles on which they were entrusted’ and if Heath had ‘taken leave of his senses’.²⁹⁵ Writing in *The Times* Hugh Noyes noted how rare it was for a Prime Minister to be so bitterly denounced by one of his backbenchers. Whilst Powell protested, Heath was supported from his backbenches by ‘cheers more of understanding than of delighted support for what the Government was doing’.²⁹⁶ Only Teddy Taylor of the 92 spoke in the debate, requesting that the price freeze be extended to the nationalised industries, hardly a statement of objection.²⁹⁷ On 8 November, the government moved the second reading of its Counter-Inflation Bill. No Group members spoke in the debate and only Peter Hordern abstained.²⁹⁸

²⁹¹ Norton, *Conservative Dissidents*, p. 51.

²⁹² BD/1/303, Sir John Hall to 92 Group, 22 July 1970.

²⁹³ U DPW/37/8, Francis Pym to Patrick Wall, 5 August 1971.

²⁹⁴ Hansard, 6 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 626.

²⁹⁵ Hansard, Commons Debates, 6 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 631.

²⁹⁶ Hugh Noyes, ‘Mr Powell launches a ferocious attack’, *The Times*, 7 November 1972, p. 1.

²⁹⁷ Hansard, Commons Debates, 6 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 634.

²⁹⁸ Hansard, Commons Debates, 8 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 1147.

The day after, the 92 appeared in number and rebelled significantly and vociferously on the Rhodesian Sanctions Order. Biggs-Davison branded the sanctions as ‘Labour Party sanctions’²⁹⁹ and a ‘tedious and futile farce’.³⁰⁰ Bell opposed sanctions on principle, ‘the case that they are intended to support is itself wrong’.³⁰¹ Bennett was more measured. Whilst in 1971 he had warned that the government could not continue to call on the support of those opposing sanctions, he did not vote against sanctions in 1972 and dissented by abstaining out of respect to the Foreign Secretary.³⁰² Those 92 members who supported the order did so with reservations - Douglas Dodds-Parker (‘regretfully, but firmly’³⁰³), Carol Mather (‘I hope for the last time’³⁰⁴), and Roger White did so despite warning that sanctions would drive Rhodesia into the arms of South Africa.³⁰⁵

At the division the 92 split three ways. Six MPs voted against sanctions and the government whip, five for, and the remaining sixteen abstained.³⁰⁶ Finally on the 1972 Immigration rules, the 92 protested the weakening ties between the UK and Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, as explained in Wall’s 1967 pamphlet. The *Economist* called the rebellion the ‘worst in this Parliament’³⁰⁷, yet of the 92 only Bell voted with the Labour party against the government. Biggs-Davison had initiated an Early Day Motion against the rules in October 1972 but abstained in the vote on 22 November.³⁰⁸ Therefore, while there was discomfort within the 92 towards the government, it did not reflect itself in the division lobbies on matters that would come to haunt the Heath government, namely the U-turn on economic policy and prices and incomes legislation. The 92 would later become the vanguard of Thatcherite monetarism and hostile to reflation and prices and incomes policies; yet there was no dissent at the introduction of the Counter-Inflation Bill. It took a noticeable change of personnel in the intervening years, as well as two election defeats, for the 92 to take a resolute line against such interventionism. Instead, during the Heath years the 92 rebelled on matters of nationhood, and only marginally. It was still a body of the ‘Union Jack Right’ than economic liberals.

²⁹⁹ Hansard, Commons Debates, 9 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 1214.

³⁰⁰ Hansard, Commons Debates, 9 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 1319.

³⁰¹ Hansard, Commons Debates, 9 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 1238.

³⁰² Hansard, Commons Debates, 9 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 1254.

³⁰³ Hansard, Commons Debates, 9 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 1261.

³⁰⁴ Hansard, Commons Debates, 9 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 1268.

³⁰⁵ Hansard, Commons Debates, 9 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 1311.

³⁰⁶ Hansard, Commons Debates, 9 November 1972, Vol. 845, Col. 1336. They were Ronald Bell and John Biggs-Davison as tellers, Stephen Hastings, Teddy Taylor, Patrick Wall, and Nicholas Winterton. For the motion were Winston Churchill, Douglas Dodds-Parker, Sir John Hall, Carol Mather, and Roger White.

³⁰⁷ Norton, *Conservative Dissidents*, p. 129.

³⁰⁸ Hansard, Commons Debates, 22 November 1972, Vol. 846, Col. 1455-6.

Simmering Rage

While the votes in parliament tell one story, private papers tell another. On economic policy the 92 chose to keep its dissent private. Remembering that 1972 began with the government in immense difficulty and that it barely survived the vote of confidence at the second reading of the EEC Bill, party unity weighed heavy on many MPs. EEC rebels had been threatened with deselection and their anti-market votes were seen as proxy votes for Harold Wilson.³⁰⁹ The party had passed the EEC legislation bruised and the risk of Wilson returning to Downing Street provided a necessary incentive for party unity. Behind the scenes, however, there was disquiet, not just confined to Powell and his allies Biffen, Richard Body and Nick Ridley.

There was growing concern that the government had strayed from its manifesto. In a letter to Biggs-Davison, Lord Barnby explained that ‘there exists a similarity of unhappiness about Government policy [...] the absence of resolution in asserting the basic Conservative principles, even at variance with the Conservative election manifesto’. Barnby described where the government was going wrong. It sought ‘compromise’ in Ireland in response to ‘violence’, the lack of immigration controls, ‘sanctions against Rhodesia’, and ‘too free extension of subvention to industry and impingement on principles of private enterprise’.³¹⁰ The last is noticeable as there had been little parliamentary resistance to the government’s aid to Rolls Royce, Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, or the Industry Bill. Barnby felt he had to confide in Biggs-Davison because of his role on the 1922 Committee and being on the ‘right’ of the party, ‘you are so alertly in contact in your House and with the Committee that you could be most helpful’. Biggs-Davison replied that the mood was similar amongst Conservatives in the Commons, ‘your points are much in the mind of all colleagues as well as myself’.³¹¹

Critical MPs took their disquiet to Heath directly. Unable to attend a 1922 Committee dinner with Heath, Bennett wrote to Heath criticising aspects of the government’s programme that resulted in the party ‘losing paying subscribers to the local Conservative Party of many, many years’ standing [...] Their theme song is always identical’, the Conservative party is ‘not

³⁰⁹ Tim Aker, ‘Re-assessing the Conservative Anti-EEC Rebellion of 1971-2’ in *Parliamentary History*, 42 (2023), 391-408 (p. 404).

³¹⁰ London, the Parliamentary Archives, the papers of Sir John Biggs-Davison, BD/1/204, the papers of the 1922 Committee, Lord Vernon Barnby to John Biggs-Davison, 20 November 1972.

³¹¹ BD/1/204, John Biggs-Davison to Lord Barnby, 24 November 1972.

Conservative enough'. Bennett argued that Heath was too lenient on the trade unions, despite the Industrial Relations Bill, and was soft on the IRA and immigration, especially after Idi Amin had expelled Ugandan Asians in August 1972. The letter is important for two reasons. The first is that Bennett hoped to keep his views private between himself and Heath; Bennett would not broadcast his disagreement with him. If he could attend he would 'listen and not repeat what I have now written to you', although he did send a copy of his letter to John Biggs-Davison.³¹² This letter is therefore not a demand, but a letter of concern and an appeal for Heath to act in the fields of industrial relations, Ireland, and immigration for the good of the party. Second, there is no mention of economic policy after the Counter-Inflation Bill. To Bennett, at least, other matters showed the Conservative party changing course.

After the U-turns were complete, with reflation, interventionism, and a statutory prices and incomes policy, the 92 finally conveyed its private concerns to Pym in December 1972. With the government directing its economic policies to a five per cent annual growth target, Wall cautioned that there was 'considerable anxiety [...] about the amount of public funds the government were now dispensing and the effect that this would have on an inflationary situation particularly if the target of 5% expansion was not met'.³¹³ Aside from Wall's earlier missive to Pym calling for a tighter monetary policy in January 1971, the 92 had remained relatively silent as the government loosened monetary policy and increased public spending. The inflationary consequences of Heath's dash for growth, also known as the Barber boom, were now worrying the 92. Yet it all fell on deaf ears. Despite Wall encouraging protests to Pym, Biggs-Davison told the Chief Whip that 'backbench representations seem to have been ineffectual of late'.³¹⁴

While it had reservations about the U-turn, some Group members had sympathy with the government's predicament. As the tripartite talks collapsed Ian Lloyd³¹⁵ wrote to Heath encouraging him to stand strong against the trade unions, hoping that 'the government has no intention of abdicating or of allowing the nation to be held to ransom by any group, however powerful'.³¹⁶ The 92 was united in its anti-trade union policies and saw the government's

³¹² BD/1/204, Sir Frederic Bennett to John Biggs-Davison, 17 December 1972.

³¹³ U DPW/37/9, Patrick Wall to Francis Pym, 14 December 1972.

³¹⁴ BD/1/393, John Biggs-Davison to Francis Pym, 19 December 1972.

³¹⁵ Sir Ian Lloyd (1921-2006), Conservative MP for Portsmouth Langstone, 1950- February 1974; Havant and Waterlooville, February 1974-1983; Havant, 1983-1997.

³¹⁶ Cambridge, Churchill Archives Centre, The Papers of Sir Ian Lloyd, IILD, IILD/2/11/1, Ian Lloyd to Edward Heath, 27 October 1972.

prices and incomes policy as a move against the trade unions, and not necessarily as a symptom of increasing corporatism. It 'unanimously' believed that the government should 'alter the payment of supplementary benefits to strikers' wives and families' and make payments to striking workers a 'loan' instead of benefit payments. The authority of the state was at risk, so the 92 signalled to Pym that 'there must be no retreat from Phase II' of its prices and incomes policy. They 'felt the Government had little alternative but to introduce the present legislation even though it was in conflict with Conservative principles'. The government was under pressure from the trade unions, who had successfully undermined the Industrial Relations Act, leading to unofficial dock strikes and a miners' strike in 1972. Giving into their demands on the Act or on escalating pay demands would have itself been a U-turn. Hence the 92's conditional support of the government at the time. The 92 was 'alarmed at what appears to be a continuing trend towards a socialist solution which is hardly compatible with Conservative principles' and the Group wondered how the next manifesto could be reconciled with the last.³¹⁷ The 92 and the government were in a difficult situation.

As Heath stuck to his guns on his Keynesian dash for growth, the free market opposition within the wider Conservative movement mobilised, with support from some members of the 92. In 1972 Nick Ridley formed the Economic Dining Club, with Peter Hordern from the 92 acting as secretary. Ridley wrote that the Dining Club, aside from discussing free market politics, was used to 'anchor' Enoch Powell to the Conservative Party after the EEC rebellion.³¹⁸ More worrying for Heath was the explosive launch of the Selsdon Group on 17 September 1973 at the very hotel the shadow cabinet had crafted 'Selsdon Man'. Ridley, Bell and William Clark were Vice-Presidents.³¹⁹ Ridley's opening speech lamented the policies of the U-turns.³²⁰ Under Ridley's chairmanship of the backbench finance committee it 'became a rallying place for critics of Government policy'.³²¹ Yet despite this, the 92 put a candidate up against Ridley in that November's backbench committee elections. Hall stood against Ridley and, 'in what was described as an astonishing result', beat Ridley for the chairmanship of the backbench finance committee. The 92 had tactically leveraged Heathite support to oppose Ridley and secure an influential backbench position. *The Times* noted that Ridley 'in

³¹⁷ U DPW/37/10, Patrick Wall to Francis Pym, 22 February 1973.

³¹⁸ Nicholas Ridley, *My Style of Government: The Thatcher Years* (London: Fontana, 1992), p. 20.

³¹⁹ Cockett, p. 213.

³²⁰ Our political staff, 'Selsdon man resurrected', *The Times*, 20 September 1973, p. 2.

³²¹ Norton, *Conservative Dissidents*, p. 269.

the past year openly attacked the Prime Minister and his former ministerial colleagues'.³²² Whilst the 92 had doubts about the Heath administration's direction of travel, it did not countenance complete public opposition before the general election.

Test Your Powellism

The 1970-74 parliament marked the start of the breakdown of the post-war consensus within the Conservative party. Soaring unemployment put Selsdon Man out of work. Heath responded by increasing the size of the state and intervening in industry. A statutory prices and incomes policy was the point of no return. In Norton's study on the 1970-74 parliament he notes that Powell articulated an alternative 'intra-party view' to that of the Heath government. The Powellite alternative gained new adherents, but this did not translate into support for Powell himself. His departure from the Conservative Party after the February 1974 election ended that possibility. Caught between Heathite managerialism and Powellite absolutism, the 92 were in a difficult position. Whilst Powell's influence is clear in Wall's papers of 1964 and 1967, the seeds of rebellion took longer to germinate. To the 92 Group of the 1964-74 period, monetarism and liberal economics were marginal topics. They opposed attempts to increase the size of the state under Wilson but acquiesced under Heath. To the 92 this was a compromise position. The prices and incomes policy in 1972 was an attempt to curtail the powers of the trade unions. In the 1980s they viewed a prices and incomes policy as a sign that the unions had undue influence on the government and that they should become part of a corporatist state combining government, industry, and the unions.

For the 92 the politics of the 'Union Jack Right', such as Rhodesian sanctions, immigration, and Northern Ireland, motivated them more. Yet it is ironic that as the EEC and the economic U-turns were to cause division within the Conservative Party in the latter quarter of the twentieth century, the 92, barring one or two exceptions, opted to side with the Heath government on both. On the EEC, Ronald Bell was nearly deselected because of his views, but he was a lone example. The 92 rebelled on Rhodesian sanctions and the Immigration Bill in greatest numbers, but without much consequence. Whereas Powell's method of opposition was to defy the whip in the division lobbies the 92, despite having concerns about Heath's U-turns, opted for different tactics. When the 92 had concerns over a particular issue,

³²² Our political staff, 'Tory critic of Mr Heath defeated in vote', *The Times*, p.3.

communicating through Patrick Wall to Francis Pym was the preferred option of registering discontent rather than a public display of opposition in the division lobby.

In a study of key parliamentary votes in the Heath administration, Norton singles out six divisions where MPs could ‘test their Powellism’.³²³ Many in the 92 were not as rebellious or Powellite as one would believe, especially in the context that the 92 became vociferous opponents of the Heath government. In the table below, a positive sign supports the government and a plus one score, a negative signifies voting against the whip and a minus one score, and o signifies abstention or absence and a neutral score.

	EEC vote in Principle, 28 October 1971.	EEC Second Reading, 17 February 1972.	Northern Ireland Temporary Provisions, 28 March 1972.	Rhodesia Sanctions, 9 November 1972.	Immigration Rules, 22 November 1972.	Counter- Inflation Clause IV, 28 February 1973.
Allason	+	+	o	o	+	+
W. Baker	+	+	+	o	+	+
Bell	-	-	o	-	-	o
Bennett	+	+	o	o	o	o
Biggs- Davison	+	+	-	-	o	+
Churchill	+	+	+	+	+	+
Dodds- Parker	+	+	+	+	o	+
Gurden	+	+	+	o	+	+
Hall	+	+	o	+	+	+
Horder	+	+	+	o	o	o
Clark Hutchison	-	-	+	o	o	+
Godman Irvine	+	+	o	o	o	+

³²³ Philip Norton, ‘Test your own Powellism’, *Crossbow*, February 1976, pp. 10-11.

Lloyd	+	+	+	o	+	o
Mather	-	+	o	+	o	+
Mitchell	-	+	+	o	o	+
Morgan-Giles	+	+	o	o	o	+
More	-	+	+	o	o	+
Page	+	+	o	o	+	o
Russell	-	o	+	o	o	+
Skeet	+	+	-	-	o	+
Taylor	-	+	+	-	o	+
Tebbit	+	+	+	o	+	+
Wall	+	+	o	-	o	+
Warren	+	+	+	+	+	+
White	+	+	+	+	+	+
Winterton	+	+	-	-	o	+
Wiggin	+	+	+	o	+	+
Score	+13	+22	+12	0	+10	+22

The least enthusiasm for government policy was on Rhodesian sanctions, followed by the immigration rules, and then Northern Ireland, all matters central to the Union Jack Right. However, Rhodesia was far from being an important issue by 1973. Only 159 MPs bothered to vote on that year's Sanctions Order.³²⁴ More significantly, as the 92 was to become supportive of Mrs Thatcher in opposition and then government, was its near-unanimous support for extending Stage II of the government's prices and incomes policy. In the division lobby it achieved as much support as the three-line whip confidence vote in the second reading of the EEC Bill.

Another inference to be drawn from the voting pattern is that it did not act as one in the division lobbies. Referring to Nott's description of the 1964 intake, Tory MPs were not as ideological as they would be in later parliaments. While some MPs disliked what the government was doing on a particular issue, duty and commitment to service prevented them from taking a Powellite line of absolute opposition in public discourse and the division lobbies.

³²⁴ Hansard, Commons Debates, 8 November 1973, Vol. 863, Cols. 1319-20.

It is therefore prudent to see the early 92 as a group of the ‘Union Jack Right’ being motivated more by the politics of kith and kin in Ulster, Rhodesia, and the White Commonwealth than economic liberalism. Whilst many in the Group agreed with Powell on some issues in one way or another, to quote Iain Macleod many departed the Powellite train before it crashed into the buffers.³²⁵ Under Heath the Group had to reconcile support for policies to reduce the powers of the trade unions with a ‘Conservative’ commitment to free enterprise and the rights of the individual. For the 92 this meant temporarily sacrificing liberal economics for a prices and incomes policy that, it hoped, would curtail the power of the unions, and strengthen the authority of the state. The unravelling of this policy and the election of a new generation of Conservative MPs would radically alter the direction of the 92 as it sought to support and maintain Mrs Thatcher’s leadership and reject Heath’s legacy.

³²⁵ Iain Macleod, ‘Enoch Powell’, *Spectator*, 16 July 1965, p.7.

Chapter Three: ‘It is some time since we had a meeting’

As Mrs Thatcher prepared to enter Downing Street the 92 Group were less organised, meetings and dinners were held less often, and its members had lost their positions of influence on the backbench committees as fewer of its members turned up to vote. The death of Group convenor Sir John Hall in 1978 left a gap Patrick Wall was unable to fill adequately. Yet with the election of Mrs Thatcher as leader of the Conservative party in 1975 the 92 had arguably achieved its objective of keeping the Conservative party ‘conservative’. The Group had largely supported her election. It recruited new members who would transform the 92 after the 1979 election, when power swiftly shifted to this cadre led by George Gardiner. The first section of this chapter will argue that, out of government between 1974-79, the Group’s political role was limited. As shadow spokesmen took the chairmanship of the key backbench committees there was little room for advancement. Beyond ideological commitment to their brand of conservatism and the social setting of a dining club, there was little incentive to join if an MP wished to increase his influence on a particular backbench committee. As a consequence the Group wasn’t as well organised as it had been.

The second section will argue that the 92 became more ideological and reflected the views of the emergent New Right. Since 1955 the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) had been challenging the post-war consensus. Within the party Enoch Powell, who worked closely with the IEA from 1958 onwards, articulated an alternative to the consensus; his ‘Morecambe Budget’ in 1968 called for swift denationalisation and a halving of income tax.³²⁶ Whilst Powell’s critique of consensus economics was well respected in conservative circles outside of Westminster, Powellism had little support amongst Conservative MPs. He received only fifteen votes in the 1965 leadership contest.³²⁷ Within the Conservative party the reaction to Heath’s U-turns and the unravelling of what Powell had deemed to be the heretical prices and incomes policy justified Powell’s critique. As Neil Marten observed when Tony Barber, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, went to the 1922 Committee to explain the ailing economy in late 1973, ‘Enoch Powell just sat there – no need for him to ask any questions!’³²⁸ He well knew his arguments against prices and incomes policies had been proved right. Powell’s breaking of the consensus meant more Conservative politicians questioned the *status quo*. Late

³²⁶ John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), p. 94.

³²⁷ The 92 supported Reginald Maudling, see Chapter 1.

³²⁸ Alton, *The Private Diaries of Sir Neil Marten*, 11 November 1973.

into the 1974-79 parliament the 92 Group explored taking an ideologically rigorous approach to new recruits, grading each MP according to how he or she voted in specific divisions. These were on issues that were antithetical to the post-war consensus. The preponderant view within the 92 opposed the permissive society as an attack on the family with easier divorce and abortion laws, an increased role for the state in 'anti-discrimination' legislation on sex and race, and devolution to Scotland and Wales. While not a golden rule for recruitment, it had not been mooted before and shows how the Group gave more thought to the views of new recruits.

The concluding section will introduce the MPs who built the 92's influence under Mrs Thatcher in her first administration, namely George Gardiner, Ian Gow, and William Clark. Gardiner was particularly vocal in his support for Mrs Thatcher before becoming a member of the 92 and was part of her leadership campaign. It will be argued that he joined the 92 because it served as a convenient vehicle for the advocacy of his, and Mrs Thatcher's, politics. This section will also challenge the historiography and argue that Gardiner was a more influential figure than has been given credit. Gow's influence is well documented. Mrs Thatcher wrote that his promotion as her PPS was her 'best' appointment³²⁹, even though he had supported Geoffrey Howe in the 1975 leadership election. Gow and Gardiner complemented each other. It was Gardiner's activism within the 92 that gave the Group its significance in Mrs Thatcher's first administration. It was Gow's proximity to her, in office, that made her aware the Group supported her and was her supporter base on the backbenches. Of the founding members only Clark played a significant role after 1979. Indeed, Clark was not a member of the 92 for the period in opposition as he had, ironically, been promoted by Heath as a party vice-chairman and kept on by Mrs Thatcher. From 1979-81, at the very least, Clark's position as the chairman of the backbench finance committee was symbolic. His position was a sign that the party on the backbenches had confidence in Mrs Thatcher's economic policies. His re-election in 1980 and 1981 were vital endorsements of the Prime Minister and a signal that the parliamentary party would not countenance an 'official' U-turn.

The Fall of Heath

The parliamentary Conservative party was increasingly discontented with Edward Heath's leadership from the U-turns of 1972 onwards. This feeling wasn't confined to the 92 who, as

³²⁹ Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 29.

we saw in the last chapter, turned to Francis Pym to convey its displeasure at government policy. Privately members sent angry memos to Heath critical of the direction in which the government was headed; but the 92 was also determined that the government should stick to its policies rather than give in to the trade unions on pay. The first clear warning to the Prime Minister had been the election of Edward du Cann as chairman of the 1922 Committee in 1972. Neil Marten sat on the 1922 executive with du Cann and his unpublished diaries provide a useful resource on Conservative backbench opinion. Marten observed that du Cann was elected because he was ‘an independent [and] somewhat anti-Heath man’. Marten’s insights lead us to believe that du Cann’s election was primarily an anti-Heath vote ‘because he [du Cann] is not a House of Commons man – he’s never there – so it must have been for that reason’.³³⁰ Du Cann and Heath had had a bad relationship ever since du Cann became Minister of State to Heath at the Board of Trade in 1963. Heath’s sympathetic biographer John Campbell wrote that Heath and du Cann did not work well together, Heath did not delegate, and when du Cann’s wife was unwell Heath ‘barely spoke a word to him’.³³¹ Douglas-Home had made du Cann party chairman, and when Heath was elected leader the two clashed. Du Cann had backed Maudling in 1965 against Heath. Jim Prior observed that they ‘could not stand each other’ and when Heath was elected, du Cann offered to resign.³³² Heath kept him there until after the party’s defeat in 1966 and du Cann resigned in 1967.

Dissatisfaction with Heath also meant the party was becoming more sympathetic to monetarism. Marten noticed this, that the ‘general trend of elections to Party Committees was to [the] right’.³³³ Patrick Cosgrave’s contemporary analysis also explains the growing unhappiness within the party. Cosgrave reported that Fred Corfield, a minister in Heath’s administration and formerly of the 92, had been sacked by Heath for committing the sin of ‘sticking to the industrial policies laid down in the 1970 manifesto’. Corfield announced he was standing down from parliament because ‘he could no longer support the Government’s economic policies’. Indeed, Cosgrave argued that Heath’s critics believed their time would come. He quoted a dissident who said ‘they [the government] know in their hearts that we are right, and they’re afraid their gamble will not come off’.³³⁴

³³⁰ Marten, *Diaries*, 19 November 1972.

³³¹ Campbell, *Edward Heath*, p. 149.

³³² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

³³³ Marten, *Diaries*, 11 November 1973.

³³⁴ Patrick Cosgrave, ‘Factions right, left and centre’, *Spectator*, 1 December 1973, p. 6.

Industrial action from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) briefly squared the parliamentary party behind Heath, despite their many misgivings. On 6 October 1973, two days before Heath's Stage III prices and incomes policy capped pay increases at seven per cent, conflict broke out in the Middle East leading to an oil embargo and a quadrupling of oil prices. Seeing their hand strengthened overnight the NUM, in a dispute with the Coal Board, instituted an overtime ban. The government implemented energy rationing, a state of emergency, and a three-day working week. After the miners voted to strike on 4 February 1974, Heath called an election on 7 February on the subject of 'Who Governs?'.³³⁵ For the Conservatives this gave them a reason to unite behind Heath, despite their unhappiness with the prices and incomes policies and policy U-turns. Fred Bennett wrote to John Biggs-Davison afterwards that they were sure of victory, 'we were sufficiently misguided by the polls to have written out all the invitation cards' for a 'victory party'.³³⁶

The irony of the 1970 election and the February 1974 election is that the loser expected to win each, and the loser took the blame for going to the country early. In 1970 Harold Wilson had been so sure of victory that he had used the election campaign as a personal tour; by contrast in 1974 he had convinced himself of defeat.³³⁷ Even though the Conservatives ended up with more votes in February 1974, Labour got more seats but not enough for a majority. Marten's judgement reflected the views of many of Heath's critics, 'Ted H had brought his Government down'. He questioned why Heath had called an early election and concluded that he 'had landed his Party + his country in a fantastic mess - + the responsibility was entirely his'.³³⁸ The 92 used the opportunity to seek policies for an alternative to that of the February 1974 manifesto. Through John Hall, the convenor, members were to recommend issues the Group should campaign on. To facilitate this 'a tighter method of liaison between all members should be evolved'.³³⁹ While this was a noble aim in 1974, it was only seriously brought into practice by Gardiner in 1979. He was not at that stage a member of the Group and had only been elected in February 1974.

The Group was limited in what it could achieve with the party in opposition. Senior committee chairmanships, for example finance and foreign affairs, were automatically taken

³³⁵ Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 607.

³³⁶ BD/1/393, Frederic Bennett to John Biggs-Davison, 8 March 1974.

³³⁷ Pimlott, p. 648.

³³⁸ Marten, *Diaries*, 3 March 1974.

³³⁹ BD/1/393, 92 Group Memo, 6 May 1974.

by shadow ministers still loyal to Heath. Worse for Heath, his allies were accused of interfering in backbench elections. This assumption further angered the 92. In the elections to the backbench foreign affairs committee, nominations were kept open beyond the deadline to allow Dennis Walters, Conservative MP for Westbury, to enter the contest. Walters had previously worked for Sir Alec Douglas-Home, who was now chairman of the foreign affairs committee. Bennett took issue with the bending of the rules and complained to Douglas-Home. Although a procedural issue, Bennett's letter to Douglas-Home explains the tinder-box atmosphere in the party; the 92 had been strong supporters of the former Prime Minister. Bennett wrote that 'in the present rather unhappy state of the Party, I do think it essential that absolute fairness must be observed, if we are to remain united at all.'³⁴⁰ Bennett also complained to Edward du Cann that he, John Biggs-Davison, and Carol Mather would 'have nothing to do with these elections' unless the situation was resolved. Bennett even threatened to take the issue into the party in the country, 'our Constituency Associations would obviously wish to know why we have ceased to be actively associated' with the committee.³⁴¹ It seems absurd to believe that an MP would take a matter of backbench committee procedure to such levels, but it shows how unhappy the backbenches were and how they believed the leadership were bending the rules to suit themselves. Neil Marten later observed that the 'Heathmen' were doing all they could to retain control of the party, even running a slate to oust the 1922 Executive that had called for Heath to stand down after the second election defeat in October 1974.³⁴²

Despite Bennett's concerns, the 92 held some ground on the backbench committees after the second election of 1974, but Patrick Wall described it as 'not quite as good a result as in earlier' committee elections.³⁴³ They returned Sir John Hall and Peter Hordern to the finance committee under Robert Carr. On foreign affairs there was less success for the 92. The late entrant Walters was successful and only Bryant Godman Irvine remained on the committee for the 92. Carol Mather and Ivor Stanbrook took the joint secretaryship of the home affairs committee and John Biggs-Davison regained the chairmanship of the Northern Ireland committee.³⁴⁴ Between the elections of 1974 and Mrs Thatcher's election as leader in 1975, the 92 only increased its membership from thirty-two to thirty-five MPs.³⁴⁵

³⁴⁰ BD/1/393, Frederic Bennett to Alec Douglas-Home, 22 March 1974.

³⁴¹ BD/1/393, Frederic Bennett to Edward du Cann, 25 March 1974.

³⁴² Marten, *Diaries*, 10 November 1974.

³⁴³ U DPW/37/22, Patrick Wall, *The 92 Committee, 1964-1984*, p. 13.

³⁴⁴ U DPW/37/11, List of Committee positions, 5 December 1974.

³⁴⁵ U DPW/37/12, 92 Membership List, May 1974.

Decline

The 92 suffered in this period of opposition as Wall did not allocate roles or prepare younger MPs to succeed the founding members. This is shown in the sparse records Wall kept between 1975 and 1978, indicating few meetings and dinners. Gardiner expands on this point, arguing that the 'left' of the party used this fallow period to increase its representation on the backbench committees after Mrs Thatcher's election.³⁴⁶ Gardiner described the ailing organisation of the Group, that there were times 'when the 92 slate was not available' until after the backbench elections had taken place.³⁴⁷ This contrasts with the observation from William Waldegrave, who at the time worked in the Conservative Research Department, that new Conservative MPs entering the February 1974 parliament were on the right of the party, and therefore no allies of Heath.³⁴⁸

In 1975 the Group enthusiastically supported Mrs Thatcher for the leadership. On 17 February, shortly after she won the second ballot, Wall wrote to her stating the Group's support that 'all, except, I believe, two supported you for the leadership'.³⁴⁹ This is a larger figure than in Philip Cowley and Matthew Bailey's research, which found eighty-five per cent of the 92 supported Mrs Thatcher. Of all conservative groups within the party, however, the 92 showed the greatest degree of unity in its support of Mrs Thatcher.³⁵⁰ Wall kept up good relations with Thatcher and Keith Joseph, inviting them to Group dinners and liaising with Joseph to discuss party policies as well as 'the kind of positive political philosophy' the Group would like to see.³⁵¹ Yet as the parliament went on the Group's activity waned when its convenor fell ill.

Sir John Hall had been convenor of the 92 since its foundation, organising dinners and meetings, and Wall could not find anyone to replace him when Hall's health deteriorated. In 1977 Hall suffered a heart attack and announced he would not stand at the next election.³⁵² In September he returned from hospital and told Wall he would have to give up his

³⁴⁶ Gardiner, p. 134.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

³⁴⁸ William Waldegrave, *A Memoir: A Different Kind of Weather* (London: Constable, 2016), pp. 143-4.

³⁴⁹ U DPW/37/12, Patrick Wall to Margaret Thatcher, 17 February 1975.

³⁵⁰ Philip Cowley and Matthew Bailey, 'Peasants' Uprising or Religious War? Re-Examining the 1975 Conservative Leadership Contest', *British Journal of Political Science*, 30 (2000), 599-629 (p.614).

³⁵¹ BD/1/393, 92 Group memo, 9 December 1975.

³⁵² Obituary, 'Sir John Hall', *The Times*, 20 January 1978, p. 16.

responsibilities.³⁵³ Bennett offered to take up the role as he had been ‘performing at least 50% of this chore for some time’.³⁵⁴ Yet Bennett, and Wall, were not good whips for the Group. For example, in the 1977 committee elections ‘under 50% of members’ attended the votes.³⁵⁵ Wall confirmed that this slip in cohesion was due to the lack of meetings, normally Hall’s responsibility as convenor. In January 1978 he wrote that ‘it is some time since we have had a meeting’ and he wasn’t sure ‘whose turn it is to be host’.³⁵⁶ As a consequence Wall confirmed the 92 had lost ground on the backbench committees in 1977. In his notes for a dinner with Mrs Thatcher in 1978, Wall attributed the setbacks to the ‘left’ of the party; not recognising his own fault in letting the Group drift as chairman.³⁵⁷

It wasn’t long before Bennett wanted to relinquish his responsibilities. In a letter to Wall in November 1978, Bennett said that he ‘cannot continue to do the administrative work’ for the Group’s dinners and meetings. He was abroad ‘too much’ with the Council of Europe. Whilst he was still committed to the 92, Bennett would see out the rest of the term but stressed to Wall the necessity of the Group’s survival. According to Bennett it ‘was worthwhile to keep the organisation going because quite different circumstances may well arise in the next Parliament’. Indeed, he argued, prophetically, ‘if we win [the general election], Committee Chairmen may have far more influence than they do to-day’.³⁵⁸

The Group were extremely loyal to Mrs Thatcher. When it disagreed with her, it never directly blamed the leader herself. It was either her advisers or her cabinet members it objected to. Wall wrote to Mrs Thatcher explaining the Group’s role as a defender of the values the Group believed she held, and that she was being ill advised by those around her. On Rhodesian sanctions in 1978 - the biggest rebellion against the whip during her period as Leader of the Opposition - the official party line was to abstain. Wall was unhappy with this, as ‘some of us are getting worried about the advice you appear to be getting from some of your senior colleagues’. Wall encouraged her to ‘follow your own instincts’ and she would ‘sweep the country’. But he warned that her ‘instincts are being diluted by the views of some of your advisers’, so much so that ‘your most loyal backbenchers are getting worried to say the least’.³⁵⁹

³⁵³ U DPW/37/14, Sir John Hall to Patrick Wall, 5 September 1977.

³⁵⁴ U DPW/37/14, Frederic Bennett to Patrick Wall 21 September 1977,

³⁵⁵ U DPW/37/14, Patrick Wall to 92 members, 16 November 1977.

³⁵⁶ U DPW/37/15, Patrick Wall to 92 members, 23 January 1978.

³⁵⁷ U DPW/37/15, Patrick Wall notes, undated but circa 1978.

³⁵⁸ U DPW/37/15, Frederic Bennett to Patrick Wall, 8 November 1978.

³⁵⁹ U DPW/37/15, Patrick Wall to Margaret Thatcher, 9 November 1978.

After the Rhodesia vote Mrs Thatcher lost two front-bench members from the 92: John Biggs-Davison resigned, and Winston Churchill was sacked for defying the whip. Yet as Gardiner observed, Mrs Thatcher did not mind in the slightest that there had been a rebellion. As organiser of the revolt, he too expected some retribution, but Mrs Thatcher brushed it aside.³⁶⁰ As Robin Harris observed, the rebellion came ‘from people who were basically committed to her leadership.’ Whilst embarrassing, it was not a threat to her.³⁶¹

A More Ideological 92

The Heath U-turns coincided with the ongoing intellectual review of conservatism. Thinkers, academics, and politicians challenged the consensus with classical liberal economics, nationalism, and social conservatism, forming a school of thought called the New Right. Andrew Gamble has described the ‘New Right’ as ‘the most powerful and influential’ of forces on the politics of the 1970s, and the Conservative party in particular.³⁶² Gamble argues that Thatcherism emerged from the New Right advocating a free economy and strong state.³⁶³ The liberal strand of the New Right rejected the post-war consensus of prices and incomes policies, the principle of nationalisation, Keynesian demand management³⁶⁴, and corporatist governance that brought industry and trade unions into economic decision making. The conservative strand emphasised a stronger role for the state in aspects of nationhood, family values, and law and order.³⁶⁵ Just as the liberal New Right had been a reaction to the U-turns of prices and incomes policies and state intervention in the economy, the conservative New Right was a reaction to the permissive society, waves of New Commonwealth immigration and the perceived breakdown in law and order. The 92 Group had been discussing these themes since its foundation³⁶⁶, but now it discussed whether acceptance for entry into the 92 should be according to specific ideological grounds.

³⁶⁰ Gardiner, p. 127.

³⁶¹ Robin Harris, *Not For Turning*, p. 139.

³⁶² Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1994), p. 34.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Where governments use tax and spending policies to stimulate demand in the economy, leading to deficit financing, borrowing, and, consequently, inflation.

³⁶⁵ David Edgar, ‘The Free or the Good’, in Ruth Levitas eds., *The Ideology of the New Right* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 55-79.

³⁶⁶ See chapter 2.

In January 1979 Ivor Stanbrook³⁶⁷ wrote to Wall setting out an ideological test for potential new recruits to the 92. Stanbrook had ‘looked at the division lists’ when ‘the Party has found itself divided during the present Parliament’ and graded each Conservative MP according to how he or she voted. This, he argued, would help with recruitment.³⁶⁸ These divisions were a vote in 1974 on Jill Knight’s amendment supporting the death penalty for terrorists, a motion in 1974 assenting to the Church Worship and Doctrine Measure³⁶⁹, second reading of the Sex Discrimination Bill in 1975, the second reading of the Race Relations Bill in 1976, Ronald Bell’s Clause against the Seat Belts Bill 1976, a religious exemptions Bill in 1976 to crash helmet legislation, the proportional representation amendment to the Scotland Bill 1977, the guillotine to the European Assembly Bill 1978, Bernard Braine’s amendment to the Abortion Bill 1978³⁷⁰, and the Southern Rhodesia sanctions vote in 1978. These votes cover both conservative and liberal strands of the New Right; the former were reflected in measures supporting the death penalty, traditional Christian practice, and opposition to existing abortion legislation. The latter aimed to restrict the increasing role of the state in regulating domestic affairs, including Bell’s amendment against compulsory seat belts³⁷¹ and sex discrimination and race relations legislation.

The results did not show tight ideological unity amongst the 92 or its soon-to-be members, but it did clearly split the party between the ‘wets’ and ‘dries’, anticipating the significant divisions within the first term of Mrs Thatcher’s administration. On positions Stanbrook believed the 92 should have taken, he gave each MP a plus vote. On votes against the 92 position, he gave a minus point. Of the ten divisions, Nicholas Winterton and Ronald Bell top Stanbrook’s list of all Conservative MPs with eight points and both were members of the 92. Five of the top ten of all Tory MPs were existing members of the 92, and within the top ten John Stokes and Michael Neubert joined the 92 in the following parliament.

While there was coherence in the top ten, that is where the unity ended. The remaining members of the 92 had varying scores. Of the three who would take a significant role in the

³⁶⁷ Ivor Stanbrook (1924-2004), Conservative MP for Orpington, 1970-92. Member of the 92. The earliest record of Stanbrook’s membership in Wall’s files is from June 1978.

³⁶⁸ U DPW/37/16, Ivor Stanbrook to Patrick Wall, 31 January 1979.

³⁶⁹ A measure giving power the general synod of the Church of England to sanction alternative services to those of the 1662 Prayer Book. Stanbrook’s whip was to oppose this measure.

³⁷⁰ Braine’s Bill sought to ‘end the destruction of a baby capable of survival under 28 weeks’, which was the limit for abortions under the 1967 Act. See Hansard, Commons Debates, 21 February 1978, Vol. 944, Col. 1212.

³⁷¹ The irony here is that compulsory wearing of seat belts was introduced in 1983 under Mrs Thatcher.

1979-83 parliament, Ian Gow scored six, William Clark five, and George Gardiner only one point. By contrast, Mrs Thatcher scored a neutral zero. Of the remaining members of the 92 all but one MP, Ian Lloyd, were in positive territory. Stanbrook's list, however, shows that if they were to have aligned with Mrs Thatcher in the lobbies, most were well wide of the mark. Only Gardiner, who was not in the 92 at the time of Stanbrook's analysis, was closest with one point to Mrs Thatcher's zero. Just as the 92 had, mostly, positive scores, Mrs Thatcher's biggest detractors were in negative territory. Heath scored minus two, Nick Scott (of Nick's Diner, the 'wet' dining club) minus four, and Ian Gilmour (notwithstanding his frontbench position) minus five. Stanbrook's list, therefore, served as an early gauge of Tory MPs in the Thatcher era, dividing them broadly between 'left' and 'right'.

The Angel of Death: George Gardiner

The soubriquet 'Angel of Death' befits George Gardiner's reputation as a partisan plotter against 'Conservative liberals, wets and lefties'.³⁷² Gardiner joined the 92 immediately before the election in 1979. It was fortuitous as, without him, the 92 would have atrophied, and the left of the party, the Lollards, could well have captured the chairmanship of the backbench finance committee and symbolically demonstrated that the parliamentary party was disillusioned with Mrs Thatcher's economic policy. This, in turn, would have precipitated either a leadership challenge or a painful U-turn and, arguably, the end of her administration. Without Gardiner's plotting and scheming, and his journalistic eye for propagandising, the 92 and Mrs Thatcher would have been less well served. They were all helped by Gardiner's lack of ambition. He saw his 'vocation' as a 'back-bench mover and polemicist' which, to him, was a 'cause for pride'.³⁷³

Gardiner was of the new generation of upwardly mobile Conservatives. He was far from the old Tory template of landed gentry; his father was a manager of a gas works, and his mother a bookkeeper. Born in 1935, Gardiner was educated at a grammar school and won a state scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, where his lack of deference and penchant for plotting soon got him in trouble. Gardiner's scheming was evocative of his later machinations in the 92. To become president of the Oxford University Conservative Association (OUCA)

³⁷² Gardiner, p. 1.

³⁷³ Ibid.

he made alliances with Conservatives in other colleges and didn't shy from dirty tricks. Although his rival, the future party chairman Kenneth Baker, was 'a good political friend', it 'counted for little in that rat race. It was all a great game, and the game was everything'.³⁷⁴ Gardiner was eventually beaten by Baker, but learned a lesson, suspecting that votes had been 'bought' and that 'with my limited resources, there was no way I could join in that game'. Therefore, it was suggested to him that if he couldn't buy the votes, he should print them.³⁷⁵ That he did, almost too well, as at the next election the turnout 'was in danger of exceeding OUCA's actual membership'.³⁷⁶ An errant full stop on the copied ballots was enough for Baker, the current president, to sense something was awry. As the establishment at Balliol grew increasingly aware that there could be trouble, Gardiner quietly turned himself in with a deal that the entire episode ended there and that he wouldn't name 'all those who had indulged in previous malpractices'.³⁷⁷

With Gardiner's calling as a plotter and schemer established, as a journalist he developed the traits of a propagandist. In 1964 he was made chief political correspondent for Thomson Regional Newspapers.³⁷⁸ In 1972 he was contracted by Conservative Central Office, and thereby given Heath's blessing, to edit the party's internal paper *Monthly News*, which became *Conservative News* shortly after.³⁷⁹ He became friends with 'many of the CCO apparatchiks' and even 'Jim Prior', whom Gardiner would go to war with over the 1980 Employment Bill.³⁸⁰ In 1976 Gardiner began writing articles in the *Sunday Express* and these were taken very seriously by his colleagues.³⁸¹ These articles served two purposes in the first Thatcher administration. The first was to support government policy in the press to counter rebellious members of the cabinet briefing against Mrs Thatcher. The second was to rally the party in the country behind Mrs Thatcher's policies and resist a U-turn. Gardiner also knew the art of the 'leak', to gain an advantage over his, and Mrs Thatcher's, opponents. Sometimes he went too far, and his tactics would turn senior colleagues against him, especially when confidential correspondence found its way into the newspapers.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

³⁷⁸ Mark Garnett, 'Gardiner, Sir George Arthur', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 6 January 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/77387>

³⁷⁹ Gardiner, p. 104.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Vivian Bendall, interview with the author, Kent, 19 January 2023.

After the Conservative defeat in February 1974, Gardiner was 'still a Heath supporter'³⁸², and as editor of *Conservative News* he 'justified' Heath's U-turns 'much as a lawyer will protest the innocence of his client, knowing full well he will go down in the end'.³⁸³ After his election to parliament he was recruited by the Lollards, the parliamentary grouping that rivalled the 92. He initially took the 'Wet Whip', learning how the Lollards operated; knowledge he would use against them later.³⁸⁴

Gardiner's account is like that of many who became disillusioned with Ted Heath. He described the short February to October parliament of 1974 as 'the most miserable' of his career. Heath was remote, surly, uninterested in the Conservative party and more concerned with forming a government of 'national unity'.³⁸⁵ Like many of the disillusioned Gardiner followed Keith Joseph, attracted to his monetarist critique of the Heath administration. After Joseph withdrew following remarks made about the unsuitability of single mothers from lower social classes to raise children³⁸⁶, Gardiner didn't hesitate to support Mrs Thatcher, and Mrs Thatcher duly asked him to 'help me with my press work'.³⁸⁷

Despite being one of her biggest supporters, Gardiner was not offered office in 1979. This is used as an argument to claim he was not influential. Yet he was close to Mrs Thatcher. After her succession to the leadership two biographies were published, one by Gardiner, the other by Russell Lewis.³⁸⁸ Of the two, only Gardiner was given access to Mrs Thatcher for the preparation of *Margaret Thatcher: From Childhood to Leadership*. Gardiner then became a member of the 'Gang of Four', Mrs Thatcher's coterie of MPs advising her on Prime Minister's questions, but his precise role in the gang came into question.

How Gardiner resolved this question demonstrated his ability to manipulate the press and his opponents, both inside and outside the party, to write himself into prominence. In 1978 he goaded Labour general secretary Ron Hayward into replying to a comment he made about 'reds in Labour's bed'. Hayward replied that such comments were 'only to be expected' from

³⁸² Gardiner, p. 107.

³⁸³ Ibid., p. 105.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 134.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 108.

³⁸⁶ Gardiner had been raised by his mother as a single parent when his parents divorced in 1945.

³⁸⁷ Gardiner, p. 110.

³⁸⁸ Russell Lewis (1926-2022), journalist and author. Director, Conservative Political Centre, 1967-75. Founding member of the Selsdon Group.

‘Gardiner and the rest of Mrs Thatcher’s “gang of four”’.³⁸⁹ Gardiner replied with faux surprise that he was part of this ‘gang’, ‘I gather I am supposed to be a member of this august body. But could he [Hayward] identify the other three? I would be most interested to meet them’.³⁹⁰

Julia Langdon, the journalist for *Labour Weekly* who had exposed the ‘gang of four’ in February 1978, duly confirmed Gardiner’s role in the gang, and thus his influence at the top of the party. She wrote that Gardiner was a member along with Airey Neave and Norman Tebbit. Langdon continued, ‘Methinks Mr Gardiner doth protest too much for after the names had first been printed he was reported to us as having had considerable amusement identifying his equivalent in the original Chinese “Gang”’.³⁹¹ This did not go down well with the ‘wets’ on the Tory backbenches. Shortly afterwards, a diary piece alleged that Gardiner had only just joined the gang in the last few months ‘when he read of its existence’, and that the original members were ‘Adam Butler, Nigel Lawson, Geoffrey Pattie, John Stanley and Norman Tebbit’.³⁹² Notwithstanding there being five names given in this version of the gang of four, had Gardiner not successfully made the point that he had influence with the leadership, this anonymous briefing would not have appeared to try and burst his bubble.

Gardiner was, by the end of the parliament, carving out a reputation on the right of the party. Julia Langdon confirmed the gang of four soubriquet came from left-of-centre Tory MPs who were disgruntled at the influence the right of the party was having under the Thatcher leadership, and that the author of the term was Keith Hampson.³⁹³ But they had been right to be concerned. It was reported earlier in 1978 that Gardiner’s influence was pushing the Conservatives in a more rightward direction, especially on immigration. With Gardiner still editing what was then called *Conservative Monthly News*, there is evidence that he and Mrs Thatcher were coordinating action on immigration policy. On 30 January Granada TV aired Mrs Thatcher’s pre-recorded comments on communities being ‘swamped’ by new Commonwealth immigration.³⁹⁴ Two days later *The Times* reported that it was a coordinated campaign, Gardiner’s *Monthly News* led with an article that ‘the biggest threat to racial peace

³⁸⁹ Ron Hayward, ‘Letters’, *The Times*, 7 June 1978, p. 19.

³⁹⁰ George Gardiner, ‘Labour after the election’, *The Times*, 9 June 1978, p. 15.

³⁹¹ Julia Langdon, ‘Conservative differences’, *The Times*, 17 June 1978, p. 13.

³⁹² Diary, ‘How many are in Gary’s Gang’, *The Times*, 23 June 1978, p. 14.

³⁹³ Julia Langdon, interview with the author, Kent, 3 October 2022. Dr. Keith Hampson (1943-), Conservative MP for Ripon, February 1974-83; Leeds North West, 1983-97.

³⁹⁴ Thatcher Archive: Granada transcript, 27 January 1978.

in Britain today is the fear that the queue for further immigrants is never ending'.³⁹⁵ Either it was blind luck that the article and Mrs Thatcher's comments were published at the same time, or there was some coordination. That complaints over Gardiner's proximity to Thatcher came only weeks after gives strength to the argument that he had some hand in Thatcher's messaging at the time.

In opposition Gardiner honed his organisational strengths that were to be so successfully deployed after 1979. He was the chief organiser for the 'Union Flag Group' formed to fight devolution for Scotland and Wales.³⁹⁶ After her election to the leadership, Mrs Thatcher had to wrestle with inherited Conservative policy that supported devolution to a Scottish assembly. It had been in the 1974 manifestos, and Neil Marten wrote at the time that the position generated considerable confusion and unease. 'The Conservatives are in a mixed up situation – some say we are committed to it because it was in our Manifesto [...] some say we will lose Scottish seats if we don't devolve, some want to devolve legislative functions to a directly elected Assembly'. There was hostility to any devolution when the 1922 committee met to discuss it.³⁹⁷ The eventual compromise was to support assemblies but oppose government proposals for any elected element, which Gardiner supported but called 'meaningless'.³⁹⁸

In response to this compromise a group of forty Conservative backbenchers organised under the banner of the 'Union Flag Group' to fight devolution. Gardiner became its chief organiser and they coordinated with Teddy Taylor, a member of the 92 and the anti-devolution shadow secretary for Scotland who 'did all he could to encourage us'.³⁹⁹ The Union Flag Group moved amendments to government devolution Bills to slow their progress, filibustering where they could, and exacerbating the splits on the government benches. The crucial input from the Union Flag Group, according to Gardiner, was its support for the amendment to the devolution Bill that implemented a turnout threshold in the devolution referendum. Under the rule the referendum would fall if forty per cent of the population did not endorse devolution, even if the vote was in favour under the threshold. Such was the strength of the organisation that Francis Pym, the shadow spokesman, abstained on the amendment and several frontbenchers

³⁹⁵ Fred Emery, 'Storm over remarks by Mrs Thatcher', *The Times*, 1 February 1978, p. 1.

³⁹⁶ Gardiner, p. 119.

³⁹⁷ Marten, *Diaries*, entry for 18 January 1976.

³⁹⁸ Gardiner, p. 119.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

joined Gardiner in voting for what they saw was a wrecking amendment. That it passed by fifteen votes, and that the subsequent referendum failed to meet the turnout threshold, was heralded by Gardiner as a turning point. It enraged the Welsh and Scottish nationalists to the point that when the government faced a confidence vote in 1979, the government could not count on their support. It therefore gave the opposition the one vote needed to topple the Callaghan administration.⁴⁰⁰

These rebellions in opposition taught Gardiner the strength of backbench power. He wrote that the election of Mrs Thatcher as Conservative leader was a prime example of how ‘the back benches could overthrow an entrenched establishment’.⁴⁰¹ The anomaly, however, is that if Gardiner was such a strong supporter of Mrs Thatcher, why did he rebel against her party line? He answers that in his memoirs. To him, and many historians, Thatcher was not in total control of her own ship. As Peter Dorey argues, ‘Thatcherism’ was not fully developed for some years after her election in 1979.⁴⁰² An impediment to the development of Thatcherism, as Gardiner saw it, was the constant plotting against her by senior colleagues, so much that from the moment when she became leader ‘there was a conspiracy’ against her.⁴⁰³ From Gardiner’s perspective, as the backbenches had overthrown the Heathmen, backbench strength was now needed to solidify the new regime. Gardiner joined the 92 in April 1979, just before the election, following his success in organising the Union Flag Group. Gardiner observed that ‘there were no other officers at the time’, except Patrick Wall.⁴⁰⁴ From this position, as following chapters will argue, Gardiner had his base from which he could defend the Prime Minister and Thatcherism from those within the party who sought to undermine both.

Supergrass: Ian Gow

Ian Gow became indispensable to Mrs Thatcher as her parliamentary private secretary. Her biographer, Charles Moore, called Gow’s tenure ‘extraordinarily successful’. He would keep Mrs Thatcher aware of backbench opinion, and, given his relationship with Geoffrey Howe, act as a bridge between the two.⁴⁰⁵ Robin Harris wrote that Mrs Thatcher ‘was fortunate’ to

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 124.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., p. 125.

⁴⁰² Peter Dorey, *Thatcherism* (Newcastle: Agenda Publishing, 2023), p. 23.

⁴⁰³ Gardiner., p. 132.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 134.

⁴⁰⁵ Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography: Volume Two* (London: Penguin, 2016), p. 72.

have Gow beside her in her ‘difficult early days’.⁴⁰⁶ Gow revelled in the job and when he was promoted to government office after the 1983 election he took the news badly. He confided to Alan Clark months after his promotion that he had not seen ‘the Lady’ since and ‘he was not’ happy.⁴⁰⁷ That Gow preferred to be at Mrs Thatcher’s side shows he displayed a lack of ambition similar in his 92 colleagues Gardiner and William Clark.

Born in 1937, Ian Gow attended Winchester College and ‘undertook his national service in the 15th and 19th hussars’. Mark Garnett described Gow’s service in Northern Ireland as ‘crucial’ to his views on the province. As Unionist feeling ‘became even more hostile’ towards the concept of ‘reabsorption by the south’ Gow ‘was strongly influenced by these views’.⁴⁰⁸ It would lead to his break with the government in November 1985 when he resigned over the Anglo-Irish agreement. In his resignation letter to Mrs Thatcher, he said he could not support the agreement as it allowed ‘the involvement of a foreign power in a consultative role in the administration of the Province’.⁴⁰⁹

After his service Gow trained as a solicitor, fought two Labour seats in 1964 and 1966, and was returned as member for Eastbourne in February 1974. His maiden speech in the April 1974 budget debate revealed the flavour of his politics. He attacked Labour’s ‘interventionists, centralisers and subsidisers’, displaying his free market credentials. Gow then went on to express his disappointment at the party under Heath, ‘I was uneasy at the extent to which the Conservative Party when in Government followed the very course which my right hon. Friend [Keith Joseph] warned against’.⁴¹⁰ The fact he had been a follower of Keith Joseph and had been burned by the Heath years ensured that he was a prime candidate for the 92.

Yet despite Gow’s later adoration of Mrs Thatcher, he did not vote for her in the second round of the leadership election. Instead, he voted for Geoffrey Howe. Gow and Howe had initially supported Joseph but the Edgbaston speech had made them think again. Howe’s leadership team was comprised of Bow Group members, and Howe recorded that the most

⁴⁰⁶ Harris, p. 166.

⁴⁰⁷ Alan Clark, *Diaries* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993) p. 35.

⁴⁰⁸ Mark Garnett, ‘Gow, Ian Reginald Edward’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47318> (accessed 9 September 2023).

⁴⁰⁹ THCR, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106174> [accessed 28 April 2024].

⁴¹⁰ Hansard, Commons Debates, 1 April 1974, Vol. 871, Col. 925.

enthusiastic of these was Gow.⁴¹¹ After the election, Gow developed a friendship with Enoch Powell, and Airey Neave asked Gow to work with him on ‘front-bench’ duties in 1978.⁴¹² In Wall’s files the earliest recorded note of Gow’s membership of the 92 is June 1978⁴¹³ and Garnett argues that he was soon identified as ‘one of us’⁴¹⁴, having introduced a bill to denationalise the steel industry in 1977.⁴¹⁵

In the following chapters it will be argued that Gow acted as a bridge between the 92 and the Prime Minister. On one issue in particular, the Employment Bill 1980, Gow used his position to lobby the Prime Minister for a tougher Bill and encourage his contacts within the 92 to press her for a tougher Bill in the Commons. This was done for two reasons. First, reducing trade union power was what they were elected to do. Second, it was necessary to strengthen Mrs Thatcher’s hand against her Employment Secretary, Jim Prior. For Gow it was the confluence of devotion to the Prime Minister and his conviction about what was right for the country.

Thatcher’s Mouthpiece: William Clark

As chairman of the backbench finance committee from 1979, William Clark was the most senior of the three members of the 92 who would form Mrs Thatcher’s guard in her first term. Born in 1917, Clark was educated at Battersea Polytechnic and trained as an accountant, formed his own practice, a property company, and invested in the sugar cane industry.⁴¹⁶ Elected for Nottingham South in 1959 he was a founding member of the 92. Clark lost his seat in 1966 but returned for East Surrey in 1970. Heath and Clark did not get on. He voted against EEC entry in 1971, but that did not stop Heath appointing him as joint treasurer of the party in 1974, despite the ‘unease’ of the Heathmen.⁴¹⁷ This was more out of respect for Clark’s fundraising abilities than personal favour. Clark served as national director of Lord Carrington’s ‘£2 million Appeal’ for party funds in 1967-8.⁴¹⁸ After the election of Mrs

⁴¹¹ Howe, *Conflict of Loyalty*, pp. 91-92.

⁴¹² Garnett, ‘Gow’, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47318>

⁴¹³ U DPW/37/15, 92 membership list, 27 June 1978.

⁴¹⁴ Garnett, ‘Gow’, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47318>

⁴¹⁵ Hansard, Commons Debates, 19 January 1977, Vol. 924, Col. 339.

⁴¹⁶ Obituary, Lord Clark of Kempston, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 October 2004, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1473509/Lord-Clark-of-Kempston.html> [accessed 9 September 2023].

⁴¹⁷ PPA 5/218, Philip Rawstone, ‘His job is to run the machine’, *Financial Times*, 8 November 1975.

⁴¹⁸ PPA 5/218, Andrew Roth’s Parliamentary Profile of Sir William Clark, 11 May 1988.

Thatcher in 1975, Clark was made joint deputy chairman of the Conservative party under Lord Thorneycroft, resigning from the post in 1977.

Accounts differ as to why Clark resigned. He made himself unpopular by instituting budget cuts within Conservative Central Office, such as banning plastic cups. An obituary in the *Independent* suggests that Clark resigned because he wanted greater control over the party's budget. Thorneycroft, the party chairman, refused this request, and Clark resigned.⁴¹⁹ Contemporary accounts suggest that Clark had fallen out of favour with Mrs Thatcher, and that is why he went.⁴²⁰ Andrew Roth suggested that Clark left because he was not offered the chairmanship of the party when Thorneycroft fell ill in 1977.⁴²¹ An earlier profile of Clark suggested that Mrs Thatcher wanted to keep Thorneycroft on as she expected an election in 1978.⁴²² As will be argued in later chapters, it appears to have been the bad blood that existed between Thorneycroft and Clark that contributed to his departure from the deputy-chairmanship. When the party chairman spoke of 'rising damp' in 1981 it was interpreted as disillusion with Mrs Thatcher's economic policies. In response Clark defended the policies of Mrs Thatcher and the government.⁴²³ Indeed, Thorneycroft developed a reputation for removing deputy chairmen who were supportive of Mrs Thatcher. In 1980 he tried to remove Alistair McAlpine as his deputy chairman.⁴²⁴

Like Gardiner and Gow, Clark did not seek ministerial office or personal advancement. He was a member of the 'Naafi (No Aims, Ambitions or F***** Inhibitions)' dining club.⁴²⁵ After the 1979 election, Clark vocally supported Mrs Thatcher, rebutting the idea that she had removed him or that he fell out with her, and the two had a good working relationship. Indeed, this thesis argues that Clark represented Mrs Thatcher's policies in the backbench elections. Andrew Roth called him the 'conscience' of the party.⁴²⁶ Even though Clark never held

⁴¹⁹ Obituary, Lord Clark of Kempston, *Independent*, 29 October 2004, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/lord-clark-of-kempston-545370.html> [accessed 9 September 2023].

⁴²⁰ PPA 5/218, Our political staff, 'Tory office chief resigns', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 1977.

⁴²¹ PPA 5/218, Parliamentary Profile of Sir William Clark, 11 May 1988.

⁴²² PPA, 5/218, 'William Clark', undated but circa 1980, p. 1.

⁴²³ Philip Webster, 'Deepening Tory rift on economic policy', *The Times*, 3 August 1981, p. 1. This is explored further in chapter six.

⁴²⁴ Alistair McAlpine, *Memoirs: Once a Jolly Bagman* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), p. 227.

⁴²⁵ Obituary, Lord Clark of Kempston, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 October 2004, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1473509/Lord-Clark-of-Kempston.html> [accessed 6 October 2024].

⁴²⁶ PPA, 5/218, Andrew Roth, 'William Clark' profile, undated but circa 1980, p. 11.

ministerial office, he was recommended for a knighthood by Mrs Thatcher in 1980 and made a Privy Councillor in 1990, a rare feat for a backbencher and a sign of the respect Mrs Thatcher had for him.⁴²⁷ Upon hearing of Clark's death in 2004, Mrs Thatcher wrote to Clark's widow, Irene, that 'Bill [...] was a great asset to the Conservative cause in Parliament [...] and he was always right'.⁴²⁸

Clark's politics were consistently and firmly on the right of the party. Andrew Roth's *Parliamentary Profile* described him as 'hard-Right, Thatcher-loyal', a 'hard-line monetarist' opposed to immigration, and a 'previously anti-EEC ex-Powellite'.⁴²⁹ A leader in *The Times* in 1975 described him as having 'narrow right wing views which appeal to a minority of active Conservative workers [...] a remote and rather unsympathetic figure to many middle of the road Conservatives'.⁴³⁰ By 1979, however, he was chairman of the backbench finance committee and regularly referred to as one of the party's senior backbenchers. He already had experience on the backbench finance committee when not holding front bench or party responsibilities. He was first elected to the committee in 1962 as joint secretary, and in 1964 became vice chairman.⁴³¹ He gained a reputation as an economic liberal, defending the interests of the middle class and self-employed. In the early 1970s Clark became chairman of the Income Tax Payers Society, a group aimed to defend middle earners. He summed up his view in a *Times* profile where he said his 'aim in life is to pay less tax'.⁴³² He spoke out against the Heath U-turns, calling for a return to the 'Selsdon' principles of the 1970 election which, he saw, included 'cuts in government expenditure, an end to the subsidising of strikes by the taxpayer, and a firmer attitude on industrial disputes'.⁴³³ Accordingly he joined the Selsdon Group as a vice president in 1973, in opposition to the Heath government's policies.⁴³⁴ It is therefore unsurprising to see Clark as one of Mrs Thatcher's strongest supporters as she entered Downing Street in 1979.

Conclusion

⁴²⁷ Potterne, the private papers of Sir William Clark, WC, Margaret Thatcher to William Clark, 4 May 1990.

⁴²⁸ Potterne, WC, Margaret Thatcher to Irene Clark, 12 October 2004.

⁴²⁹ PPA 5/218, draft Parliamentary Profile of Sir William Clark, 11 May 1988.

⁴³⁰ Leader, 'The Undertaker of Smith Square', *The Times*, 7 March 1975, p. 15.

⁴³¹ PPA 5/218, Conservative and Unionist Central Office biographical details of William Clark, October 1965.

⁴³² Margaret Stone, 'Fighting for the taxpayer', *The Times*, 8 January 1972, p. 19.

⁴³³ Our political editor, 'Conservatives choose the middle of the road', *The Times*, 13 July 1972, p. 2.

⁴³⁴ John Groser, 'Tory conference will reassure doubters that policies are working, Lord Carrington says', *The Times*, 8 October 1973, p. 2.

The 92 Group rode a double wave in the years before the 1983 election. Its first wave was upon its foundation and the unlikely support it gave to and received from Sir Alec Douglas-Home when he became leader in 1963. The slump for the 92 came in the Heath years and the period in opposition thereafter. Heath disappointed the 92 by retreating from the Selsdon programme, although not entirely. The Group's opposition to trade union immunities, and its support for the Industrial Relations Act, meant the Group was bound to support Heath in his showdown with the unions. Yet the criticism directed at Heath, through memos and internal discussion, was blunt. It led two of their number, William Clark and Ronald Bell, to join the Selsdon Group as vice-presidents.

The election of Mrs Thatcher as leader, ironically, demonstrated the continuation of that slump, though not because of anything she did to prolong it. Being in opposition robbed the 92 of the opportunity to increase its power on the backbench policy committees as senior ministers took the chairmanship of the committees representing their shadow portfolio. It immediately clipped their wings. Organisationally, it was left wanting. Barely half of the members would turn up to vote in backbench committee elections, and the frequency of Group dinners declined. To make matters worse, John Hall, the Group convenor, died in 1978. His replacement, Frederic Bennett, did not hold the post for long.

The slump therefore led to an opportunity George Gardiner seized, leading the 92 to the crest of its second, and important, wave in the first Thatcher term. After organising the Union Flag Group, Gardiner joined the 92 as he saw it as a vehicle to promote the newly elected Prime Minister and the beliefs they shared. Although Wall remained notional chairman, Gardiner became the organiser of the 92. In the 1979-83 parliament the Group's membership nearly doubled, it controlled the party's most senior backbench policy committee, and the Group's senior members worked hard to defend Mrs Thatcher against those who sought to undermine her, and even to replace her.

Chapter Four: From Rhodesia with Love

This chapter argues that Ian Gow, George Gardiner, and William Clark emerged as Mrs Thatcher's significant supporters in the 92 Group. Gow and Clark held influential positions in the party, and Gardiner strengthened his position in the 92, widened its membership, and defended Mrs Thatcher in the press through his columns in the *Sunday Express* and regular commentary in newspaper articles. Having won the general election with a majority of forty-four, Mrs Thatcher found that her plans to turn around the British economy would prove controversial. Martin Holmes noted that the divisions over Thatcherite economic policy 'dwarfed' those over Suez, making the contributions of Gow, Clark, and Gardiner even more important in defending her position against internal critics.⁴³⁵ The monetarist experiment to control the money supply and to cut public spending in a recession, all to bring inflation under control, came under intense pressure as unemployment soared. In implementing these policies the government faced difficulty of its own making. During the election it had pledged to honour public sector pay awards recommended by a Commission set up by James Callaghan. This and other spending commitments conflicted with the government's approach to cut taxes, reduce overall spending, and control inflation.

George Gardiner's increased influence within the 92 made it a stronger group. Nearly all new members were suggested by Gardiner. His recruits became active members. He changed the way the 92 fought committee elections, learning from their underperformance before the 1979 election. Even though Patrick Wall was still the chairman of the 92, Gardiner became its Whip and took a greater interest in backbench elections. Founding member Sir Frederic Bennet recommended that Gardiner succeeded the late Sir John Hall as convenor.⁴³⁶ Gardiner's role, however, was not just confined to parliamentary tactics. His articles in the *Sunday Express* were a constant reinforcement of Mrs Thatcher and her policies and were taken very seriously by colleagues within the parliamentary Conservative party.⁴³⁷ Any disagreements with the government were more out of frustration that Mrs Thatcher was being constrained by those in her cabinet who did not support her policies.

⁴³⁵ Martin Holmes, *The First Thatcher Government: 1979-1983* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1985), p. 74.

⁴³⁶ U DPW/37/19, Sir Frederic Bennett to Patrick Wall, 30 March 1984.

⁴³⁷ Vivian Bendall, interview with the author, Kent, 19 January 2023.

Ian Gow's appointment as Mrs Thatcher's parliamentary private secretary (PPS) after the 1979 election gave the 92 an immediate link to the Prime Minister. This section will argue that Gow used the role to reinforce Mrs Thatcher's free market policies, but also to damp down rebellion over Rhodesia. His promotion came somewhat surprisingly given his support for Geoffrey Howe in the 1975 leadership election and his rebellion over Rhodesian sanctions in 1978. Nevertheless, when in post he served Mrs Thatcher loyally. Reporting back to Mrs Thatcher he made it clear the 92 were her staunchest supporters on the backbenches. Indeed, John Campbell argues that Gow 'played a crucial part in Mrs Thatcher's survival in the dark days of 1981-2 when her premiership hung in the balance'.⁴³⁸

William Clark's position as chairman of the backbench finance committee ensured a member of the 92 controlled the most important backbench policy committee.⁴³⁹ This thesis argues that Clark's position was symbolic. His re-election to the post was an endorsement of Mrs Thatcher's economic policy when it was at its most vulnerable. It was a victory for the monetarists and supporters of Mrs Thatcher in their proxy war against her critics. Clark also used his position to suggest policies to aid Mrs Thatcher's plans to reduce public spending. Towards the end of the Thatcher administration's first six months, Clark brought forth significant proposals to cut public spending that were considered at the cabinet's economic E-Committee.

On the backbench committees the 92 lobbied to strengthen Mrs Thatcher's policies. On the economy, members of the 92 called for her government to go further in cutting public spending, and there was strong support for her economic strategy within the first six months. It is on Southern Rhodesia, however, that the 92 put its loyalty to Mrs Thatcher above principle. Support for Southern Rhodesia and opposition to sanctions had been important to many members of the 92 since 1965 when Ian Smith declared unilateral independence and Harold Wilson implemented sanctions. The intensity of the rebellion in November 1978 showed that passion was still there, even among those who had not been in parliament when sanctions were first imposed.

⁴³⁸ Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*: p. 32.

⁴³⁹ Whilst the 1922 is a backbench committee, it rarely discussed policy.

Yet under Mrs Thatcher the 92 did not openly oppose government policy to create an independent Zimbabwe. The Lusaka Commonwealth heads of government meeting in August 1979 resolved, through the Lusaka Declaration, to encourage political and racial equality in Rhodesia. This meant integrating the Patriotic Front guerrilla forces into the Rhodesian political system, a controversial measure given their participation in the ongoing civil war. Given this controversy, the Rhodesia rebels in the 92 grudgingly supported legislation to give Zimbabwe independence in 1980. Gardiner, who helped organise the 1978 parliamentary rebellion against a Conservative whip to abstain, was key to ensuring the 1979 party conference did not erupt over Mrs Thatcher's Rhodesia policy. It was a remarkable about turn that demonstrated two points. The first was that it showed the loyalty of the 92 to Mrs Thatcher. The second was that the issue was overshadowed by the economic challenges of the time. To members of the 92 it was not worth taking a significant stand as it could have damaged Mrs Thatcher and the wider project to revive the British economy. The Rhodesian issue had also gone on for too long. A compromise solution of independence and an end to sanctions was enough to mollify those who had rebelled the previous year. This chapter will argue that Gardiner and Gow had a role in placating the rebels and provided some stability on the issue for the government. This was quite the reverse of their actions in November 1978.

Walking a Tightrope

Mrs Thatcher's administration was marked by how many of her critics appeared in her first cabinet. It gave credence to the argument, often advanced by Gow and especially Gardiner, that there was a conspiracy against her and that her policies would be diluted. James Prior, Peter Walker, Mark Carlisle, and Sir Ian Gilmour were all vocal supporters of reflation and an incomes policy. They believed that Mrs Thatcher's rhetoric in opposition would be moderated in government by political reality. Although Prior later admitted that the country was ready for Mrs Thatcher's policies, he wrote that in 1979 they did not believe she would go as far as she did.⁴⁴⁰ By contrast, Patrick Cosgrave's study of Mrs Thatcher's first term concluded that 1979-80 was a lost year, again feeding into the conspiracy narrative. Cosgrave, a supporter of and former speechwriter for Mrs Thatcher, but distant from her after the 1979 election, complained that she did not go further, sooner. The manifesto was 'imprecise' enough to give

⁴⁴⁰ Jim Prior, *Balance of Power* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), p. 112.

hope to Mrs Thatcher's opponents in the cabinet.⁴⁴¹ There was a tension between what she wanted to do and what she could do. As Campbell wrote, 'she was driven by a burning sense of patriotic mission and historic destiny'. Yet that sense of destiny was tempered by a persistent caution, she knew 'she would be given only one chance to get it right'.⁴⁴²

The appointments of Willie Whitelaw as Home Secretary and Lord Carrington as Foreign Secretary were important. They were respected on the backbenches and legitimised, from the mainstream of the party, what Mrs Thatcher was doing, particularly as they had been close to Heath in government and opposition and Whitelaw had stood against her in 1975. Without Whitelaw's support, and Carrington's until the invasion of the Falkland Islands, Mrs Thatcher would have been in a weaker position during the crisis period of 1980-81. Despite not sharing her ideological convictions, both served her loyally in public. In private, however, they could be deeply critical. Alan Clark recorded a conversation with Anthony Royle⁴⁴³ who suggested that Carrington 'hates her'.⁴⁴⁴ After Mrs Thatcher's remarks in 1978 that the United Kingdom was being 'swamped' by New Commonwealth immigrants, Whitelaw contemplated resignation, telling Roy Jenkins 'how absolutely ghastly life was with that awful woman'.⁴⁴⁵ Yet both were ex-servicemen with a strong attachment to duty. Whitelaw wrote in his memoirs that he did not hesitate to endorse Mrs Thatcher after she became leader due to his 'strong natural feelings of loyalty', even though he had just been beaten by her.⁴⁴⁶ Their perceived loyalty acted as a unifying force on the backbenches, despite their private frustrations with Mrs Thatcher. They were men of experience who could steady the ship, helped by the absence of any ideology of their own.

Although he was not an instinctive monetarist, Carrington went along with government economic policies because 'every other nostrum for reversing our decline had failed'.⁴⁴⁷ It was in foreign affairs that Carrington was most effective, often leading Mrs Thatcher to compromise. Carrington praised her ability to 'yield, albeit grudgingly, to her highly intelligent

⁴⁴¹ Patrick Cosgrave, *Thatcher: The First Term* (London: The Bodley Head, 1985), p. 102.

⁴⁴² Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁴³ Sir Anthony Royle, Baron Fanshawe (1927-2000), Conservative MP for Richmond (Surrey), 1958-83. Created Baron Fanshawe of Richmond, 1983.

⁴⁴⁴ Alan Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), p. 139.

⁴⁴⁵ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 382.

⁴⁴⁶ William Whitelaw, *Memoirs* (London: Headline Book Publishing PLC, 1989), p. 186.

⁴⁴⁷ Jonathan Aitken, *Margaret Thatcher: Power and Personality* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2014), p. 300.

head'.⁴⁴⁸ This was especially true on Rhodesia. With Carrington she successfully disarmed the issue and handed the country independence without a damaging protest from the Rhodesian lobby within the parliamentary Conservative party. It also kept Carrington out of domestic affairs. Douglas Hurd wrote that by maximising his influence in foreign policy he had 'no time' for domestic politics.⁴⁴⁹ From his seat in the House of Lords Carrington could not challenge Mrs Thatcher for the leadership, either. Therefore in foreign affairs there was balance and compromise within the first six months, brokered by the moderate Carrington, that the 92 ended up supporting.

By contrast on economic policy there was radicalism in policy and personnel. All the economic departments were taken by 'dries',⁴⁵⁰ Conservative MPs who believed that controlling the money supply was the way to bring inflation under control. The 'five' of Geoffrey Howe, John Biffen, John Nott, Keith Joseph, and Nigel Lawson all held the key economic portfolios and were 'the group in charge of the Government's economic strategy'. The only other addition to the economic portfolios was Jim Prior at Employment. The *Guardian* suggested that Prior's appointment was there to mollify the unions and a sign that the government did not want an early fight.⁴⁵¹ As Thatcher wrote in her memoirs, despite their differences, 'Jim was the badge of our reasonableness'.⁴⁵² This explains her caution, but her backbench supporters later detected a plot from Prior to stifle significant trade union reform.

Outside the economic departments the right of the party had little to cheer. It is ironic that Gardiner and Clark weren't given government posts, especially as they had served her in opposition, Gardiner in the 'Gang of Four' and Clark as party deputy chairman until his resignation in 1977. Campbell argues that the imbalance in the cabinet didn't matter, however. If the 'wets' didn't control any of the economic departments they couldn't 'develop an alternative economic policy' to challenge the Prime Minister.⁴⁵³ Cosgrave agreed, writing that

⁴⁴⁸ Peter, Lord Carrington, *Reflecting on Things Past: The Memoirs of Lord Carrington* (London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), p. 276.

⁴⁴⁹ Douglas Hurd, *Memoirs* (London: Abacus, 2004), p. 287.

⁴⁵⁰ The 'dries' were known as supporters of monetarism and Mrs Thatcher's policies. The 'wets' were known as critics of monetarism, but not necessarily Mrs Thatcher. In her memoirs Mrs Thatcher argues the origins of the term 'wet' came from public school slang meaning 'feeble' or 'timid'. It subsequently became a badge of honour for the 'wets' who called their opponents 'dries', see Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 51.

⁴⁵¹ Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, p. 11.

⁴⁵² Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 28.

⁴⁵³ Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, p. 13.

‘from the beginning of the life of the government’ the cabinet had not had a single discussion on the general nature of economic policy, so it was near impossible for an alternative policy to be agreed.⁴⁵⁴ But this was to miss the point. Without ‘true believers’ in the spending departments they were relying on Mrs Thatcher’s critics to bring spending under control. They were less inclined to approach the issue with the zeal of a ‘true believer’. This caused the government problems when it tried to stop the growth in public spending. The only benefit of having so many ‘wets’ in cabinet and leaving Gardiner and Clark on the backbenches, was that the two Thatcherites would be vocal counterweights to the muffled voices of dissent within the cabinet.

With Mrs Thatcher in a clear minority in her own cabinet, it could therefore be argued that the ‘right’ of the party was in retreat, despite her victory. The *Daily Telegraph* noted that no members of the Monday Club had been appointed. The newspaper speculated that Stephen Hastings and Patrick Wall, both Club members, could have been promoted. Had John Biggs-Davison not resigned over Rhodesian sanctions in 1978, he could well have been in the cabinet. The article also noted that Teddy Taylor was set for cabinet, but he had lost his seat at the election.⁴⁵⁵ Norman Tebbit, however, had secured a junior role, giving the 92 some representation in government. Nonetheless, it all made Mrs Thatcher appear quite isolated, feeding the belief, especially in the mind of George Gardiner, that there was an internal conspiracy against her.

Mrs Thatcher had the complete loyalty of the 92, but they thought she was under pressure to compromise. This was especially true of George Gardiner who, throughout his political career, constantly plotted against those within the parliamentary Conservative party who he thought were out to undermine Mrs Thatcher or Thatcherism. After the 1979 election Patrick Wall wrote to Mrs Thatcher pledging the loyalty of the 92, that ‘you have the complete loyalty of all members’, despite many members being passed over for promotion to government.⁴⁵⁶ Gardiner, however, was concerned that Mrs Thatcher was outnumbered in cabinet and on the backbenches. He wrote ‘there was a conspiracy within the Tory party against her’, only holding ‘its breath’ during the Falklands War. It wasn’t just in the cabinet

⁴⁵⁴ Cosgrave, p. 93.

⁴⁵⁵ Unattributed, ‘Missing Mondays’, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 May 1979, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁶ U DPW/37/16, Patrick Wall to Margaret Thatcher, 22 May 1979.

that Gardiner saw threats. He wrote that personnel from the Heath era ‘had proved very hard to shift’.⁴⁵⁷

Gardiner’s analysis shows how the 92 had been fading in strength. If the left had gained ground, the right – the 92 – had lost it, which is a fair assessment. The Lollards, an informal group organised by Tory MP William van Straubenzee and so-called because it met at the Lollards Tower at Lambeth Palace, where he had his London flat, were winning ‘in key backbench committees’. The Lollards were reinforced by a group called ‘Nick’s Diner’. This was a left-of-centre Conservative dining club organised by Nick Scott, formed in 1975 as an ‘antidote’ to the right-ward drift of the party under Mrs Thatcher.⁴⁵⁸ Worse, ‘thanks to its superior organisation’ the Lollards’ ‘influence extended after Thatcher’s election’ as leader.⁴⁵⁹ To Gardiner the Lollards would become a problem when ‘the effects of monetary discipline were felt’. If the left had control of the important policy committees, it would show the party was turning against her politics.⁴⁶⁰ The first backbench elections of the 1979 parliament proved Gardiner had a point. They showed the limited reach of the 92 and gave reason for Gardiner to step in and sort out its organisational disarray.

The 92 had some success in the first polls for the 1922 committee after the 1979 election, but it was underwhelming. Four members of the 92, John Biggs-Davison, Jill Knight, Winston Churchill, and Peter Hordern were elected to the 1922 Executive. The 92 offered no candidate for chairman of the 1922. Instead they whipped support for Edward du Cann, who was re-elected.⁴⁶¹ Peter Hordern and Victor Goodhew stood for vice chairman and secretary respectively. Hordern wrote to Wall asking for the support of the 92, signalling that Wall still had some sway on the backbenches.⁴⁶² But it wasn’t enough. Hordern lost as vice chairman but retained his position on the executive. Goodhew was successful and returned as joint secretary.

⁴⁵⁷ Gardiner, p. 129.

⁴⁵⁸ Lucy Grant, ‘An historical study of unofficial parliamentary groupings in the Conservative Party from 1830’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Hull, 2010), p. 353.

⁴⁵⁹ Gardiner, p. 134.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴⁶¹ U DPW/37/16, Handwritten whip for the 1922 Executive Committee Elections, undated but circa 17 May 1979.

⁴⁶² U DPW/37/16, Peter Hordern to Patrick Wall, 16 May 1979.

The 92 were quite disorganised heading into these first backbench elections. Some MPs were proposed by the 92 but did not want to stand. John Page⁴⁶³ told Wall before the vote in the employment committee that he was ‘not certain that he wants to stand’.⁴⁶⁴ Other members of the 92 were put down for the wrong positions. John Hannam⁴⁶⁵ had been vice chair of the energy committee in the previous parliament and wanted to stand as chairman of energy and vice chairman of the arts committee. Hannam was therefore ‘concerned’ that the opposite had been allocated. He had been nominated for vice chairman of energy and chairman of arts.⁴⁶⁶ Wall suggested Hannam discuss the matter with Trevor Skeet⁴⁶⁷, who was also standing as chairman of energy, to see if he would make way. This didn’t work. Skeet felt ‘we must go ahead and oppose each other for the Chairmanship’. Hannam complained to Wall that he stood a better chance than Skeet and that by standing against each other ‘it undermines the purpose of the group’.⁴⁶⁸ On Wall’s whip sheet he ticked Hannam’s name, and not Skeet’s, indicating he had voted for him and that Hannam was successful.⁴⁶⁹ It was a victory despite the organisational chaos of putting two 92 members up against each other.

The 92 was successful for the chairmanship of only four cabinet-rank committees. They were energy, environment, finance, and Northern Ireland.⁴⁷⁰ William Clark’s election at finance was a victory for Mrs Thatcher and the 92. His grip on the chairmanship would be presented as the parliamentary party’s symbolic endorsement of Mrs Thatcher’s economic policy and her leadership. Accordingly, it was a position the ‘wets’ were determined to capture in 1980 and 1981 to demonstrate the party rejected her economic approach. What was disappointing for the 92 was that employment had gone to Nicholas Scott, of Nick’s Diner. His victory at employment meant that the 92 did not have a platform to hold Prior to account on his trade union reforms, which they doubted would be strong enough. Summing up, Ian Gow confided to Mrs Thatcher that ‘the Left has done rather well’.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶³ Sir John Page (1919-2008), Conservative MP for Harrow West, 1960-87.

⁴⁶⁴ U DPW/37/16, John Page to Patrick Wall, 17 May 1979.

⁴⁶⁵ Sir John Hannam (1929-), Conservative MP for Exeter, 1970-97.

⁴⁶⁶ U DPW/37/16, John Hannam to Patrick Wall, undated but Wall replied on 23 May 1979.

⁴⁶⁷ Sir Trevor Skeet (1918-2004), Conservative MP for Willesden East, 1959-64; Bedford, 1970-83; North Bedfordshire, 1983-97.

⁴⁶⁸ U DPW/37/16, John Hannam to Patrick Wall, 1 June 1979.

⁴⁶⁹ U DPW/37/16, 92 whip for backbench committee elections, 11 June 1979.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ THCR 2/6/2/15, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 26 June 1979.

The appointment of Ian Gow as Mrs Thatcher's Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) brought the opinions of the 92 and its members closer to the Prime Minister. Mark Garnett called Gow one of Mrs Thatcher's 'most inspired appointments'.⁴⁷² Jonathan Aitken, a Conservative MP at the time, wrote later that Gow was appointed for his 'harrying' of the Labour party over its increased public spending. He had the combination of immense personal loyalty to Mrs Thatcher and a radical commitment to liberal economics. Thatcher, however, appointed Gow without realising 'the importance of the job he has to do', making it a providential promotion. His talents made up for what Mrs Thatcher lacked. The election had seen a high turnover of Tory MPs, and a third of the parliamentary party were unknown to her.⁴⁷³ The House of Commons had the atmosphere of a private members' club, which Gow revelled in, and Thatcher did not. Indeed, the 92 had been dining at the St. Stephen's Club for years. Many parliamentary groups dined in the Commons to replicate that Club-like environment when late night debates and divisions required attendance in parliament. Mrs Thatcher, however, was automatically excluded from the all-male St James's Clubs and was distrustful of the public school attitudes within these societies. This is where Ian Gow's great strengths lay: he was clubbable. He had an extensive network within the parliamentary party and its backbench committees. He studiously attended these forums and earned the soubriquet 'supergrass' because he always reported back to Mrs Thatcher. This, Aitken argues, kept Mrs Thatcher 'attuned to her power base' within the party. Gow was also 'a straight arrow', MPs from all wings of the party could confide in him, and Mrs Thatcher would damp down problems by replying to worried supporters or troublesome MPs that 'I have asked Ian Gow to have a word with you'. Finally, he had a rapport with Mrs Thatcher that 'no other MP had'. Their working days would end with late night whiskies and gossip. Ideologically he was in line with Mrs Thatcher. He was a hawk on public spending and wanted reductions. He was a monetarist. He was also a critic of the EEC long before Mrs Thatcher was.⁴⁷⁴ He was the voice in Mrs Thatcher's ear willing her to go further, especially on public spending and trade union reform.

Within the first two months of Mrs Thatcher's administration, therefore, the 92 had members in key positions. William Clark was chair of the backbench finance committee that would scrutinise economic policy, the record on which Mrs Thatcher would be judged. Ian

⁴⁷² Mark Garnett, 'Gow, Ian Reginald Edward', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47318>.

⁴⁷³ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 437.

⁴⁷⁴ Aitken, pp. 266-7.

Gow was her PPS, the link between Downing Street, the 92, and opinion on the backbenches. George Gardiner was without a role in the government but was the voice of Thatcherism in the media through his articles in the *Sunday Express*. Yet despite these members of the 92 holding serious positions in the parliamentary party, the 92 itself had been surpassed by the Tory left on the backbench committees. There clearly was still work to do. The next section will examine how Gardiner increased his role in the 92, how members of the 92 supported the radicalism of the first Thatcher budget, and how an explosive row over Rhodesia, that could have soured relations between the 92 and the Prime Minister, was avoided.

Thatcherism Begins... Slowly

The government began to distance itself from the previous Heath administration, specifically its policy on prices and incomes. In the first Queen's Speech on 15 May the government committed itself to 'effective competition and fair pricing policies' and the end of the Price Commission, which was wound up in 1980.⁴⁷⁵ It was a symbolic display that the government would not return to a statutory prices and incomes policy favoured by some in her own cabinet, especially Jim Prior. The National Enterprise Board was scaled back. It disposed of its 'holdings in profitable companies'. Inter-city coach services were denationalised.⁴⁷⁶ The message from the Queen's Speech was that the government was going to do what Mrs Thatcher had said it would do. By comparison with the Heath years, there would be no deviation from the path set out. Aitken wrote that the speech demonstrated Mrs Thatcher's 'reforming passion', and it left the House of Commons 'stunned'. As expected, it went down badly with the Lollards. Van Straubenzee said Mrs Thatcher needed 'hosing down with the waters of reality'.⁴⁷⁷

The radicalism of the Queen's Speech, however, was tempered by short term caution that created long term difficulty. Mrs Thatcher did not lose her 'Cautious Margaret' reputation she gained in the opposition years. Prior to the election Mrs Thatcher had pledged to increase spending that made it difficult to bring public finances under control. Pre-election promises to increase funding of the police and armed forces were also matched with a form of incomes policy, quite contrary to Mrs Thatcher's rhetoric. During the election campaign the

⁴⁷⁵ Hansard, Commons Debates, 15 May 1979, Vol. 967, Col. 49.

⁴⁷⁶ Moore, p. 460.

⁴⁷⁷ Aitken, p. 251.

Conservatives had committed to implementing the Standing Commission on Pay Comparability recommendations on public sector pay and conditions. It was chaired by Professor Hugh Clegg, became known as the Clegg Commission, and was constituted under the previous Labour government in January 1979. It was an effort by James Callaghan to tame the trade unions at the height of the Winter of Discontent. By the election the Commission had just started examining pay in the local authorities, NHS ancillary workers, ambulance staff, nurses, and midwives, meaning Thatcher committed herself, by endorsing Clegg, to increased pay awards for much of the public sector.⁴⁷⁸ By its abolition in 1981 the public sector wage bill had increased by twenty-five per cent.⁴⁷⁹ Therefore even before the first budget, the Conservatives had made it harder for themselves to control spending and bring inflation under control.

Although Mrs Thatcher later argued that the Clegg Commission did not address over-manning and inefficiency within the public sector, she was persuaded by Prior and party Chairman Lord Thorneycroft to go along with it. The ‘wets’, however, weren’t the only ones suggesting this path of action. John Nott, a ‘dry’ ally, also supported maintaining Clegg.⁴⁸⁰ Charles Moore concluded this cautionary step was necessary because ‘doing otherwise would have sparked industrial action’ and reignited the Winter of Discontent later in 1979, barely six months into her administration.⁴⁸¹ These arguments counter Tim Lankester’s thesis that Thatcher should have abandoned Clegg and been more hawkish on trade union reform sooner.⁴⁸² The problem, however, was Mrs Thatcher’s caution. The lessons of the Heath administration made her tread careful on trade union reform, which meant accepting the Clegg awards. Therefore, at the very least, it bought Mrs Thatcher some time, but this didn’t appease those who wanted firm action on spending and trade union immunities. Cosgrave’s assessment was less forgiving. When they endorsed Clegg, the Conservatives did not foresee how damaging Clegg’s recommendations would be to the public finances, and Cosgrave suggested that Howe ‘forgot’ about the Clegg Commission.⁴⁸³ This, however, is wide of the mark, even

⁴⁷⁸ Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, p. 48.

⁴⁷⁹ John Nott, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Memoirs of an Errant Politician* (London: Politico’s, 2003), p. 190.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Moore, pp. 458-9.

⁴⁸² Tim Lankester, *Inside Thatcher’s Monetarism Experiment* (Bristol: University of Bristol Press, 2024), p. 123 and pp. 132-3.

⁴⁸³ Cosgrave, p. 458.

if written with tongue in cheek. Howe recommended keeping Clegg at an E-Committee meeting of 30 October 1979, after the first round of pay recommendations had been made.⁴⁸⁴

Jim Prior had an explanation for the monetarists' endorsement of Clegg. According to monetarist theory 'there would be no pay policy, since control of the money supply would force down the level of settlements'.⁴⁸⁵ Yet Campbell disagreed. Clegg 'ran directly counter to the Tories' intention to abandon any form of incomes policy'.⁴⁸⁶ The most damaging element was that it hindered the Tories' ability to bring spending under control and critical friends of Mrs Thatcher would blame Clegg as the font of her problems. Looking back, she saw it was a mistake. She later wrote in her memoirs that a combination of Clegg, the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement of over £8bn, and her own election promises, had 'boxed' her into a difficult position.⁴⁸⁷ Whilst Clegg was not an issue for the budget on 12 June, it was a straitjacket the government became tied into as each wage settlement put more pressure on the public finances. Each pay claim increased public spending, necessitating cuts deeper and harder elsewhere.

Despite Clegg, Mrs Thatcher's allies looked optimistically towards the first budget on 12 June. George Gardiner's *Sunday Express* article, days before the budget, defended the tough choices to be made. Despite being an ardent tax cutter, Gardiner supported Howe's plans to increase some taxes, writing that the Chancellor had to 'start with the Treasury books as he finds them'. Healey's last budget, he wrote, had planned £8.5bn of borrowing and 'another £700m on top of that'. This meant that if Howe didn't do something to change direction, it would require borrowing of £10.5bn. Therefore, he welcomed an increase in Value Added Tax (VAT) to pay for the reductions in income tax. He wrote 'if he is to make really significant cuts in income tax, he will have to raise VAT' as well as duties on alcohol, tobacco and 'maybe even petrol' to cover the cost. Tax cuts had 'to be matched with hard decisions elsewhere', referencing the increases in indirect taxation and spending cuts.⁴⁸⁸ The Conservatives, technically, stuck to their manifesto commitment ruling out a doubling of VAT. It went from eight per cent to fifteen. But it was also seen as inflationary, contradicting the Conservatives'

⁴⁸⁴ Richmond, The National Archives, TNA, CAB 134/4335, Minutes of Ministerial Committee on Economic Strategy - E (79), 30 October 1979.

⁴⁸⁵ Prior, p. 121.

⁴⁸⁶ Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, p. 48.

⁴⁸⁷ Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 50.

⁴⁸⁸ PPA, 3/210 (Sir George Gardiner), George Gardiner, 'A bold Budget that could start to make us all rich again', *Sunday Express*, 10 June 1979.

commitment to tackling inflation. The journalist William Keegan, who had also worked at the Bank of England, wrote that the VAT increase added four percentage points to the Retail Price Index (RPI).⁴⁸⁹ Although this was disputed as transitional inflation, meaning inflation would come down after the VAT increase had been properly integrated into the economy, it was, still, inflationary. The important principle to Gardiner, however, was that the income tax cuts rewarded work and enterprise. Paying VAT was a choice made through individual purchases. Income tax was unavoidable. Even though the price was a steep increase in VAT, to Gardiner it was worth it. Gardiner's arguments revealed the tensions between simultaneously trying to free the economy and control the money supply.

There were attempts to bring spending under control, but by the end of 1979 it was clear these were not good enough to control inflation. Departmental cash limits did not rise with inflation and Howe hoped these would save £1bn. Unpopular measures were also introduced. Prescription charges increased, and it was announced that the link between pensions and average earnings would end. Spending cuts totalled a reduction of £3.5bn. But this would not satisfy the spending hawks in the 92. Regularly in the backbench finance committee members from the 92 would consistently call for further reductions in spending. As for the money supply, Howe forecast growth between seven and eleven per cent. It turned out to be very ambitious as the Chancellor stated it would have been 'quite impossible' to meet the last government's target of money growth between eight and twelve per cent had spending not been cut.⁴⁹⁰

The 'free economy' aspect of Thatcherism took priority in the first budget, unlike that of 1980 and especially 1981. These measures were necessary to lower income tax to reward work, reducing the top rate from eighty-three per cent to sixty, and the basic rate from thirty-three to thirty per cent. Most revolutionary of all, the government announced that it would phase out exchange controls on sterling. Historians sceptical of monetarism have argued this demonstrated a contradiction between a free economy and controlling the money supply. To John Campbell the abolition of exchange controls combined with high levels of government borrowing rendered Howe's money supply targets 'unattainable'.⁴⁹¹ Monetarists, however,

⁴⁸⁹ William Keegan, *Mrs Thatcher's Economic Experiment* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 122.

⁴⁹⁰ Hansard, Commons Debates, 12 June 1979, Vol. 968, Col. 242.

⁴⁹¹ Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, p. 51.

argue that the government's high levels of borrowing and issuing of government debt made the inflationary situation worse.

All of this, however, very nearly didn't happen. Mrs Thatcher's innate caution made her think twice on income tax cuts, whether it was wise to cut so much so quickly,⁴⁹² and whether the government should move so swiftly on the abolition of exchange controls. She told Howe 'on your head be it', which he interpreted as a joke.⁴⁹³ Nonetheless it gave Howe a sleepless night purely because it was an ideological leap of faith. As Aitken observed, it was implemented without a clear indication of what would happen.⁴⁹⁴ Howe's insistence on abolition and the tax cuts confirms that in the early days he was the bolder of the two.

Mrs Thatcher also fell out with Howe on the early increase in interest rates. This is surprising as controlling the money supply with interest rates was a monetarist mechanism. Howe was adamant the signal should be sent that the government was determined to bring inflation under control, and he got his way on the rate increase.⁴⁹⁵ These early disagreements with her Chancellor exposed the contradiction in Mrs Thatcher's approach. Her concern for the homeowner with a mortgage, 'our people', was incompatible with her support for using monetary policy, i.e. interest rates, as a tool to reduce inflation. Indeed, the abolition of exchange controls could have caused the value of the pound to plummet, causing the government further problems.⁴⁹⁶ Mrs Thatcher's pragmatic political instincts to protect her natural constituency of support conflicted with her ideological remedy for Britain's economic ills.

The reaction to the budget was one of shock, drawing a line down the Conservative parliamentary party. To Peter Hordern it was an astonishing event, and it left the House stunned, especially the announcement on exchange controls, which he enthusiastically welcomed.⁴⁹⁷ Jim Prior was horrified, writing that 'it was an enormous shock' that the budget 'was so extreme'.⁴⁹⁸ Yet the budget was welcomed by some in the Heathite camp. Lord Carr, Heath's Employment Secretary, wrote to Howe in October commending the budget. He told

⁴⁹² Moore, p. 463.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., p. 478.

⁴⁹⁴ Aitken, p. 252.

⁴⁹⁵ Moore., p. 465.

⁴⁹⁶ Aitken, p. 252.

⁴⁹⁷ Sir Peter Hordern, interview with the author, Kent, 1 December 2021.

⁴⁹⁸ Prior, p. 119.

the Chancellor that his budget was reminiscent of a speech he had given to the Institute of Chartered Accountants in 1977, where he called for a cut in the standard rate of tax to thirty pence, a cut in higher rate 'earned income' tax to sixty pence, and all to be paid for by 'raising VAT to a single rate of 15%'. Carr wrote that he was 'astonished to find how closely I had forecast the main measures in your first budget'.⁴⁹⁹ Even those who did not wholly agree with Mrs Thatcher acknowledged the necessity of her economic reforms.⁵⁰⁰

Gardiner welcomed the budget, repeating the message from his pre-budget article, ignoring its inconsistencies. He wrote that the budget was a sign that Mrs Thatcher's job was to 'reverse the economic decline of our country'. To Gardiner it was a win-win, despite the perceived inflationary effects of the VAT increase. Indeed, workers could cheer the increase in take home pay. It rewarded work, and he insisted that it should be welcomed by the trade unions. He wrote that 'most of your [union] members will be better off even after the rise in VAT'. There was, however, a caveat, recognised at the time by many 'dries'. It would take a considerable amount of time to turn the economy around. Gardiner had a message for those prone to wobbling. He wrote that it 'will take time to work, but work in the end it will'.⁵⁰¹ To John Nott the policy's weakness was the time lag between implementing monetarist policy and seeing a successful outcome. Nott reflected that it was greatly problematic in the first two years of Mrs Thatcher's administration that 'there was no sign of the monetary squeeze having much effect on inflation'.⁵⁰² Mrs Thatcher's supporters, especially Gardiner, therefore needed to rally forces to the 92 to strengthen the Prime Minister's position in the party against impatient criticism that her policy wasn't working. Their faith in her prescription being the right one for the country overrode evidence directed at them that it was increasing unemployment, closing businesses, and prolonging recession.

The 92 Regroups

With a bold budget causing concern on the left of the party, Gardiner recommended a recruitment drive. An overwhelming majority of names recommended for membership of the

⁴⁹⁹ Oxford, The University of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Archive of Geoffrey Howe, Baron Howe of Aberavon, Correspondence, 1916-2000, MS. Howe dep. 42, f39, Lord Carr to Geoffrey Howe, 12 October 1979.

⁵⁰⁰ Waldegrave, p. 210.

⁵⁰¹ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'What would you like to hear Mrs Thatcher tell the Unions', *Sunday Express*, 24 June 1979.

⁵⁰² Nott, p. 191.

92 were suggested by Gardiner and assented to by Patrick Wall. On 8 July Gardiner proposed Vivian Bendall, Michael Colvin, Tim Brinton, Bob Dunn, John Browne, Allan Stewart, John Mackay, Michael Brown, John Townend, Robert Cranborne, Gerry Neale, and Sir Nicholas Bonsor. Wall agreed to these by ticking their names.⁵⁰³ These members are significant because most of them became active on the backbenches. Colvin became chair of the backbench industry committee, John Townend joined the finance committee, and Michael Brown would be the only member of the 92 from the 1979 intake to join the Thatcherite No Turning Back group in 1985. Other members that Wall was hesitant about also got through, for instance Tony Marlow and Paul Marland.

As they were recommended by Gardiner and accepted, despite Wall's hesitation on some, it demonstrated Gardiner's increased influence within the 92. Once the names were agreed existing Group members were allocated to extend invitations to join the Group. John Wilkinson recruited John Mackay in late July 1979.⁵⁰⁴ Victor Goodhew recruited Sir Nicholas Bonsor on 25 July 1979.⁵⁰⁵ Wall recruited Bendall on 27 July.⁵⁰⁶ Michael Shersby recruited Bob Dunn and John Loveridge on 31 July.⁵⁰⁷ The growth in membership, however, did not translate into better organisation, at least as reported in Wall's papers. The names of the new members do not appear in Wall's dinner invitations or membership lists for 1979 or much of 1980. It demonstrated Wall's gradual disengagement. In September 1980 Gardiner wrote that Wall's lists were out of date, 'a number claiming they had never been invited' to 92 dinners.⁵⁰⁸ Whilst Gardiner knew of the new members, and would be in contact with them personally, Wall's official register wasn't complete. The new recruits finally appear in full on the membership list for November 1980. By then Gardiner had taken over control of the 92 whipping operation after the underwhelming 1979 backbench elections.⁵⁰⁹

With an increased membership, Wall set new rules for the 92 regarding backbench elections to avoid the mess of the July elections. After the dispute between Hannam and Skeet in the energy committee, Wall wrote that 'the Committee will decide who is the most able candidate for any particular post'. Rather than asking for nominations as it had done

⁵⁰³ U DPW/37/16, George Gardiner to Patrick Wall, Circa 8 July 1979.

⁵⁰⁴ U DPW/37/16, John Wilkinson to Patrick Wall, circa late July 1979.

⁵⁰⁵ U DPW/37/16, Victor Goodhew to Patrick Wall, 25 July 1979.

⁵⁰⁶ U DPW/37/16, Vivian Bendall to Patrick Wall, 25 July 1979.

⁵⁰⁷ U DPW/37/16, Michael Shersby to Patrick Wall, 31 July 1979.

⁵⁰⁸ U DPW/37/17, George Gardiner to Patrick Wall, 4 September 1980.

⁵⁰⁹ U DPW/37/17, 92 Membership List, 7 November 1980.

previously, the new rule was to hand-pick the best candidate for the position. The Group also aimed to maximise its chances of success at the elections. Wall wrote that members standing for the position of secretary should also stand as vice chairman to 'enhance their chances of gaining the earlier position'. To smooth the process, George Gardiner and Tony Durant were to 'act as Whips' for the 92.⁵¹⁰ Given Wall's inability to maintain an accurate membership list, it could be argued these new rules were Gardiner's rather than Wall's.

This was a turning point for the 92, a subtle transfer of power from Wall to Gardiner. Gardiner had recommended a significant number of new members, many elected in May. He corralled these new members to follow him in the division lobbies, and to whip up protest whenever he saw an opportunity to support Mrs Thatcher against the saboteurs in cabinet. His regular columns in the *Sunday Express* were a vehicle to convey support for Mrs Thatcher, which he had already done over the controversial budget. The next section will argue that Gardiner and Gow's role on Rhodesian policy helped Mrs Thatcher to avoid a disastrous split within the Conservative party. They were ready to compromise their instinctive beliefs to strengthen her position as Prime Minister.

Rhodesia to Zimbabwe

Rhodesia had haunted the Conservative party since Ian Smith unilaterally declared independence in 1965. Harold Wilson responded by imposing sanctions on Rhodesia. This split opinion in the Conservative party between those MPs who thought Smith was wrong, and those who had sympathy Smith for various reasons, ranging from personal solidarity with Smith owing to his service in the RAF to support for white rule. The near-annual vote to renew sanctions brought regular rebellions in the division lobbies populated by significant numbers of the 92 opposing the embargo. Within the first year of Mrs Thatcher's administration, however, the government had given independence to Zimbabwe under the control of guerrilla-turned-politician Robert Mugabe. As David Owen recorded, Conservative MPs had criticised him when he had, as Foreign Secretary, advocated the integration of the Patriotic Front guerrilla forces of Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo into the political process. When Mrs Thatcher

⁵¹⁰ U DPW/37/16, 92 Memo, 24 July 1979.

produced a similar policy, that the rebel fighters also be a party to any settlement, Owen's critics 'were strangely silent'.⁵¹¹

The important aspect of Rhodesian policy for many members of the 92 was the sanctions. It must be remembered, however, that the 92 did not march as one on the issue, but it was one of the key issues, along with trade union reform, where a significant number did vote together. By 1979 there was fatigue over the issue. Many of the early Rhodesia rebels had left parliament, and the issue had ceased to be relevant in the country and parliament. The crisis in the economy, where Mrs Thatcher's credibility was at stake, meant that Rhodesia needed to be solved quickly. Thatcher's supporters wouldn't risk her rule for the Smith-Muzorewa regime. To the 92 this meant ending sanctions, to save face, and support the transfer of Rhodesia to independence.⁵¹² This section will therefore argue that Ian Gow and George Gardiner were important in dampening down any rebellion from within the 92, and the wider party, to the agreement that settled the Rhodesian dispute.

The omens of an easy settlement to the Rhodesia problem were not good. In 1978 there had been a particularly scarring rebellion for Mrs Thatcher at the party conference and then in parliament on the sanctions vote. At the conference John Davies, foreign affairs spokesman, was constantly interrupted from the floor by delegates and a report in *The Times* noted that the exchanges were so unruly that it 'was a debate they will quickly want to forget'.⁵¹³ The press, however, gave more column inches to Edward Heath's endorsement of pay policies on the same day from the conference platform.⁵¹⁴ To Thatcher's supporters, whatever happened on Rhodesia paled in comparison to the anger they felt towards Edward Heath. They would not do anything to jeopardise Mrs Thatcher's position that would enable Heath, or his politics, back into power in the Conservative party.

The parliamentary rebellion on Rhodesian sanctions in November 1978 would, ironically, have been more damaging had it not been orchestrated by Mrs Thatcher's supporters. The last thing they wanted was to damage her. Gardiner recorded that this rebellion

⁵¹¹ David Owen, *Time to Declare* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 317.

⁵¹² Vivian Bendall, interview with the author, Kent, 19 January 2023.

⁵¹³ Michael Hatfield, 'Jeers for Mr Davies over policy on Rhodesia Sanctions', *The Times*, 12 October 1978, p. 1.

⁵¹⁴ Alan Wood, Robert Morgan, John Winder, Bernard Withers, and Colin Ivermee, "'Nothing for gloating" if pay policy fails, Mr Heath says', *The Times*, 12 October 1978, p. 6.

was different. In March 1978 Bishop Abel Muzorewa joined the Ian Smith government, creating a multi-racial administration in Salisbury. It therefore justified the relaxation of sanctions. By rebelling it also signalled that an incoming Conservative government would do away with sanctions, which it eventually did. Gardiner therefore wrote in his memoirs that ‘there was no danger’ of this rebellion harming Mrs Thatcher. As Gardiner had organised the rebellion it lacked any anti-Thatcher sentiment.⁵¹⁵ Two 92 members in the shadow cabinet stuck with their principles and opposed renewal, defying the whip to abstain. Accordingly, Winston Churchill was sacked from the shadow cabinet and John Biggs-Davison resigned. Gardiner, however, suggests that Mrs Thatcher took this in her stride. He and Geoffrey Pattie, members of the ‘Gang of Four’, were worried how Mrs Thatcher would react to their rebel votes when they met the next day to discuss Prime Minister’s Questions. Rather than reprimand them for their votes the night before, she was ‘in a buoyant mood’ and ‘cared not a jot’ that they had both voted against the whip.⁵¹⁶ Indeed, she said publicly she ‘felt just as strongly as her party rebels did’.⁵¹⁷

The 1979 Conservative manifesto gave the party flexibility to dispose of Rhodesia. It crucially stated they would ensure that ‘the new independent state [in Rhodesia] gains international recognition’.⁵¹⁸ The Muzorewa government had been returned in April 1979 in the country’s first black majority election. But to other African states it was not a free or fair election as both Front leaders Mugabe and Nkomo had been barred from participating. Rhodesia’s neighbours therefore did not accept the result, and therefore neither did much of the international community. A solution required acceptance from both the Americans and the African states, and it was clear that all parties in Rhodesia had to be included in the settlement. Hence the subtle detail in the Conservative manifesto that a deal had to be internationally recognised. It was the last hurdle in the dispute.

Mrs Thatcher set out her position on 25 July, that Rhodesia become independent and that it be internationally recognised. Her biographer, Charles Moore, records that this was a success of Carrington’s. She had effectively distanced herself from foreign affairs,

⁵¹⁵ Gardiner, p. 126.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., p. 127.

⁵¹⁷ Fred Emery, ‘Mrs Thatcher shares feeling on Rhodesia but unity must come first’, *The Times*, 10 November 1978, p. 2.

⁵¹⁸ THCR, The Conservative General Election Manifesto 1979, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110858>

concentrating on economic and monetary reform, and went along with Carrington's proposals to bring together all parties in the Rhodesian dispute, including the Patriotic Front.⁵¹⁹ To soften the blow for those who wanted to accept the Muzorewa government, Mrs Thatcher gave an interview in Australia where she declared that 'British sanctions [...] would lapse in November and we doubt very much whether a renewal of sanctions would go through the British parliament'.⁵²⁰ Gardiner referenced this quote in an article in July to calm his allies. He complimented Mrs Thatcher's approach, emphasising her stand on sanctions rather than bringing the 'terrorists' to the settlement. He wrote 'the new British government is paving the way to recognition – and Margaret Thatcher has stated the obvious fact that Parliament will not renew sanctions this autumn'.⁵²¹ While Gardiner held out hope that Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Lusaka prior to the Commonwealth Conference would 'temper opposition to the multi-racial government in Salisbury', his article strongly praised Mrs Thatcher on sanctions. By supporting Mrs Thatcher, Gardiner was signalling to his pro-Rhodesian colleagues that they should support Mrs Thatcher's entire Rhodesia policy.

The agreement reached at the Lusaka Commonwealth leaders' summit demonstrated Gardiner and Gow's faith in Mrs Thatcher. The Prime Minister had agreement from Commonwealth leaders for a constitutional conference to take place at Lancaster House in September to be chaired by Carrington involving all the parties, the Muzorewa government, and the Patriotic Front. By having Carrington chair the conference, Mrs Thatcher had deferred to his greater knowledge of foreign affairs and put distance between the outcome and her standing in the party. Moore argues that it worked, the settlement passed 'with little mumbling from the Right in parliament'.⁵²² Patrick Cosgrave suggests that Mrs Thatcher's 'new approach' went almost unnoticed as *The Times* and *Hansard* went out of print due to industrial action.⁵²³ Jonathan Aitken suggests that it was a U-turn, but one 'on her terms'.⁵²⁴ Yet it wasn't exactly a U-turn. The manifesto commitment resolved to find a deal acceptable to the international community, and this point won round critics to the government's new policy.

⁵¹⁹ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 452.

⁵²⁰ *Hansard*, Commons Debates, 25 July 1979, Vol. 971, Col. 633.

⁵²¹ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'The Big prize the Queen could bring home from Africa', *Sunday Express*, 8 July 1979.

⁵²² Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 454.

⁵²³ Cosgrave, pp. 78-9.

⁵²⁴ Aitken, p. 290.

Gow played a balancing act between defending the government line and maintaining his links with the Rhodesian lobby. Stephen Hastings, a 92 colleague, wrote to Gow on 10 August concerned about the government's Rhodesian policy. In reply Gow said he, too, would have recognised the April 1979 election but 'it became clear that if we were to recognise the present Government in Salisbury, we would have carried no other Government with us [...] that would have meant the war would have gone on', the white exodus would have continued and the Rhodesian economy suffered.⁵²⁵ In a note to Mrs Thatcher informing her of the exchange, Gow stressed that Hastings 'is a good man, with a strong personal loyalty to you', thus emphasising that any disquiet on Rhodesia was not a criticism of her leadership.⁵²⁶ Indeed, despite his misgivings on Rhodesia, Hastings praised Mrs Thatcher in his memoirs, and wrote that international pressure from the 'Commonwealth, to the Afro-Asian lobby, and the Americans' made the eventual deal impossible to avoid.⁵²⁷ By requiring international recognition there was little that could be done, and it was not worth sacrificing Mrs Thatcher's broader domestic goals.

Gow's membership of the Anglo-Rhodesian society gave him an insight into Ian Smith's thinking, encouraging Mrs Thatcher to follow Carrington's course. Reporting to Mrs Thatcher on a dinner in September, Gow told her that Smith was prepared to compromise further. Smith said that his overriding consideration was 'how to maintain the confidence of the European' settlers in Rhodesia regarding any outcome. Gow spoke with Smith and reminded him that 'an exodus of Europeans [from Rhodesia] at the rate of 1,000 a month [...] showed no sign of diminishing'. This demographic change was detrimental to Smith's position. Therefore, in Smith's own interest, any deal had to be done quickly under the terms of the Conservative manifesto. When he left, Gow told Mrs Thatcher 'I was, on the whole, of the opinion that Smith would be prepared to compromise'. An additional note from Gow added that 'Smith said he did not see fresh elections as a stumbling block'.⁵²⁸ The government could push at an open door.

That Gow was quietly placating his Rhodesian-supporting allies went unnoticed by those on the left of the party. In October Mrs Thatcher received a complaint from van

⁵²⁵ THCR2/1/4/55 f131, Ian Gow to Stephen Hastings, 23 August 1979.

⁵²⁶ THCR2/1/4/55 f131, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 23 August 1979.

⁵²⁷ Stephen Hastings, *The Drums of Memory: The Autobiography of Sir Stephen Hastings* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2004), p. 233.

⁵²⁸ THCR2/1/4/47 f116, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 19 September 1979.

Straubenzee that Gow was on the Council of the Anglo-Rhodesian Society. Van Straubenzee had interpreted Gow's position on the Council as one that conflicted with the reformist character of government policy. He said of Gow's position that 'if ever there was a time, surely, for supporting the Government over Rhodesia and not rocking the boat, it is this'.⁵²⁹ But Gow had been supporting the government line. He had been talking round members of the Rhodesia lobby and feeding back information to Mrs Thatcher that supported the government's position, especially Smith's willingness to compromise. Indeed, those formerly supportive of Smith and Muzorewa opted to support Mrs Thatcher's new position. Patrick Wall, writing a Monday Club article, suggested that it would be 'counter-productive' to attack Mrs Thatcher and Lord Carrington over Rhodesia policy. Even though, to Wall, the Lusaka agreement had been a 'bitter pill to swallow', criticising the government would only 'play into the hands of the real enemy in Moscow'.⁵³⁰ This was a useful intervention from Wall, as Carrington recorded that the Monday Club were his most vocal critics, turning up at the 1979 party conference with 'hang Carrington' placards.⁵³¹ Wall risked becoming unpopular with the Club in his attempt to support Mrs Thatcher.

Gardiner meanwhile kept up the campaign for Mrs Thatcher in the press. He praised her performance at the Lusaka Conference. Gardiner wrote that 'with quiet dignity' Mrs Thatcher was fulfilling a responsibility to 'secure a settlement with Zimbabwe Rhodesia'. He broached the issue of whether she had paid 'the blackmailers' price' for giving into those who wished to see the Front integrated into the political system. Gardiner rebuffed this accusation, writing that 'those who see her speech on Friday as conceding victory to the terrorists led by Messrs Nkomo and Mugabe' were 'very wide of the mark'. It was, after all, a manifesto commitment and Mrs Thatcher was being 'realistic'. By setting up the Lancaster House conference 'Mrs Thatcher's words on the need to change the Constitution were not so much a concession as a statement of fact'.⁵³² He was commending her statesmanship, safe in the knowledge that she had committed herself to abolition of sanctions in November, before independence had been granted.

⁵²⁹ THCR2/1/4/108 f273, William van Straubenzee to Ian Gow, 1 October 1979.

⁵³⁰ PPA 3/608A, Tony Conyers, 'Tory right-wing urged to accept Lusaka accord', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 August 1979.

⁵³¹ Carrington, p. 298.

⁵³² PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'Now is the time for Mrs Thatcher to prove she's an iron lady', *Sunday Express*, 5 August 1979.

Gardiner's role in preventing a rebellion came at the party conference in October. In September the constituencies put forward forty-two motions on Rhodesia, more than 'almost any other subject'. Michael White in the *Guardian* noted an 'ominous silence from the Tory Right-wing' in the build-up to the conference and that a difficult motion threatened to bring the issue out into the open and risked a split that Gardiner and Gow had worked hard to avoid. They did not want a repeat of the disruptive party Conference of 1978 where Conservative foreign affairs spokesman John Davies was heckled from the floor.⁵³³ While Mrs Thatcher was in Lusaka, Chief Whip Michael Jopling represented her at the meeting that selected conference motions. He wrote to Mrs Thatcher that every other motion was acceptable apart from that selected to discuss Rhodesia. It had been tabled by a party activist from Truro, Richard Stewart, and called for immediate recognition of the 'internal settlement', the Muzorewa government returned in April 1979, and the lifting of sanctions.⁵³⁴ It was a clear contradiction of government policy. Gardiner had already put down a motion on development and home ownership, but within weeks he had tabled a new motion on Rhodesia and withdrew his original motion. At a subsequent meeting of the National Union, Gardiner's motion was selected instead of Stewart's. It reflected government policy, affirming that 'this conference looks forward to full recognition by H.M. Government of a multi-racial Government in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, in accordance with the Conservative Manifesto commitment', which meant the deal needed international recognition, and therefore was supportive of the Lancaster House conference.⁵³⁵ Gardiner, the Rhodesia rebel of the year before, had now stepped in to prevent embarrassment on the conference floor.

The Rhodesia debate passed without significant disruption. Even an amendment, which Gardiner accepted, did not contradict government policy. It called for the ending of sanctions as soon as practically possible. In his speech Gardiner was unambiguous in his defence of the government, 'unless the constitution proposed by the Foreign Secretary is accepted, we are wasting our time by going on'.⁵³⁶ Elinor Goodman described his performance as a 'plea for an end to sanctions without doing anything either to undermine Lord Carrington's authority at Lancaster House, or upset Mrs Thatcher'.⁵³⁷ Andrew Alexander of the *Daily Mail* said that no

⁵³³ Michael White, 'Tories playing down Rhodesia issue', *Guardian*, 20 September 1979, p. 4.

⁵³⁴ THCR 2/9/6, Michael Jopling to Margaret Thatcher, 4 August 1979.

⁵³⁵ THCR 2/9/6, Richard Ryder to Margaret Thatcher, 16 August 1979.

⁵³⁶ Nicholas Comfort, 'Tories told "time to lift sanctions cannot be far off"', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 October 1979, p. 13.

⁵³⁷ Elinor Goodman, 'Tory school of etiquette subdues its rebel pupils', *Financial Times*, 11 October 1979, p. 12.

one, critic or supporter of the Rhodesia policy, could hardly disagree with any of it. To smooth the process Mrs Thatcher arrived for the debate, her appearance 'the signal for ecstasy' on the conference floor, her popularity giving cover to the Foreign Secretary. Alexander commented that the remaining critics of the government's Rhodesia policy were 'being totally outflanked', although there were pockets of 'fury on the conference floor'. Some 'overplayed their hand', suggesting Mrs Thatcher 'wipe the blood' from her dress. In his winding up speech Carrington 'was at his most persuasive' and 'sterner than usual'. Sitting down to 'thunderous applause', Carrington had easily won the day.⁵³⁸ Had Gardiner not provided a new motion, and had he not been previously supportive of the Smith-Muzorewa administration, then a split on the conference floor would have been likely, reopening old wounds within the party. By supporting Mrs Thatcher, he signalled to pro-Rhodesian Conservatives that they too should support her policy.

The government kept to its word on sanctions. On 7 November the government ended sanctions the same day it introduced legislation for a new Zimbabwean constitution. It was a promise kept to the 1978 rebels who yearned for an end to the embargo. By then there was hardly a murmur of protest. Even Julian Amery, a staunch opponent of the Patriotic Front, was reconciled to compromise, 'we want to see all parties committed to the agreement'. His only caveat was that Mugabe and Nkomo not be given a veto to any deal.⁵³⁹

The second reading of the Southern Rhodesia Bill passed without rebellion. The government, with some help from Gardiner and Gow, had weathered the storm by emphasising Mrs Thatcher's commitment to ending sanctions and providing necessary endorsement of what little she was able to do given feeling in the international community. The struggle for a solution in Rhodesia had gone on for too long. By 1979 many MPs were weary of it, Mrs Thatcher among them. The Lancaster House agreement concluded on 17 December 1979. With independence granted after fresh, supervised elections in February 1980, including the Front parties of Nkomo and Mugabe, Robert Mugabe became the first president of independent Zimbabwe. As Campbell concluded on the result that handed power to those she had opposed as terrorists before the general election, 'all Mrs Thatcher wanted in 1979 was to be honourably rid of it'.⁵⁴⁰ The boil had been lanced, with the help of Gardiner and Gow.

⁵³⁸ Andrew Alexander, 'Love me, love my Foreign Secretary', *Daily Mail*, 11 October 1979, p. 4.

⁵³⁹ Hansard, Commons Debates, 7 November 1979, Vol. 973, Col. 410.

⁵⁴⁰ Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, p. 74.

Don't Wobble

The Government had set itself a task to reduce public spending. Towards the end of 1979 it was not meeting its goals. The Clegg Commission had recommended in August public sector pay increases of as much as twenty-six per cent.⁵⁴¹ This had not helped the control of the money supply. In June, before the Clegg pay award, interest rates had increased to fourteen per cent.⁵⁴² There were already concerns that not enough was being done, and the contradictions in the government's approach were becoming clear. As Dominic Sandbrook commented, 'it sometimes seemed that as soon as Geoffrey Howe fixed one part of the machine, steam burst out of somewhere else'.⁵⁴³ The abolition of exchange controls on 23 October had made it more difficult to control the money supply. Interest rates increased further to seventeen per cent on 17 November, hurting 'our people', the private homeowners Mrs Thatcher cared deeply about and was meant to be helping.⁵⁴⁴ This section, therefore, will show how Gardiner, Gow, William Clark, and other members of the 92 sought to support Mrs Thatcher despite the difficulties the government found itself in, sometimes of its own making.

To the monetarists on the backbenches the government's public spending White Paper of 1 November did not go far enough. Whilst the 92 did nothing to oppose the £3.5bn reduction in spending, there were appeals for the government to go further. Eric Cockeram, a 92 member and MP for Ludlow, told John Biffen, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, that his proposals would 'have the effect of not reducing the percentage of the gross national product spent by the State'.⁵⁴⁵ Whilst Tory MP Jock Bruce-Gardyne, not a member of the 92 but a prominent monetarist, welcomed the White Paper in parliament⁵⁴⁶, he later reflected that it was 'a slim document' that did not plan for the long term. He put this down to John Biffen's dislike of long-term planning rather than Mrs Thatcher's demands.⁵⁴⁷ Martin Holmes, however, suggests that this short document was revolutionary. It was the first White Paper since 1944 where the reduction of unemployment had not been the government's primary objective.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴¹ Dominic Sandbrook, *Who Dares Wins: Britain, 1979-1982* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), p. 92.

⁵⁴² Ibid., p. 102.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., p. 110.

⁵⁴⁴ Hugh Stephenson, *Mrs Thatcher's First Year* (London: Jill Norman, 1980), p. 55.

⁵⁴⁵ Hansard, Commons Debates, 1 November 1979, Vol. 972, Col. 1457.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., Col. 1456.

⁵⁴⁷ Jock Bruce-Gardyne, *Mrs Thatcher's First Administration: The Prophets Confounded* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), p. 52.

⁵⁴⁸ Holmes, *The First Thatcher Government*, pp. 33-4.

On 4 November George Gardiner rode to the government's defence and appealed for patience. Mrs Thatcher had been dealt a terrible hand by the last government, he said. By implementing tougher cash limits to departmental budgets, the government had introduced spending restraint. To Gardiner it was the trade unions who were making matters worse. They 'grabbed their slice in pay rises first'. By accepting higher pay deals, they were limiting service provision as pay took a bigger section of the cash limited budget. This comment from Gardiner, however, conveniently ignored the fact the Clegg Commission had awarded these pay claims, and that Mrs Thatcher had approved of the Clegg Commission. The trade unions could hardly be blamed for accepting something given to them. In the government's defence, it must be remembered, Clegg was only there because of the threat the unions played. Whilst Gardiner would return to fight the trade unions in 1980, he meanwhile kept the faith; the White Paper was a first step. The country had to live within its means, and he supported its contribution to that objective. Quoting the White Paper, he wrote 'higher public expenditure cannot any longer be allowed to proceed, and thus prevent growth in the private sector'.⁵⁴⁹

Moore argues that the likes of Gardiner were in the majority in their assessment. It was the Tory grandees who opposed the spending cuts and economic strategy, rather than the rank and file.⁵⁵⁰ But there were growing divisions on the backbenches. In a sign of things to come, Julian Critchley petitioned the government not to cut funding for the BBC foreign service and it was signed by 'more than 100 MPs, most of them Conservative'.⁵⁵¹ Despite voting for Mrs Thatcher in the leadership election of 1975, Critchley became a vocal critic of Mrs Thatcher's economic programme, his broader campaign beginning with an anonymous article in the *Observer* in February 1980.⁵⁵²

The monetarists and economic liberals within the 92, however, wanted more spending cuts. The 92 had welcomed the budget and Ian Gow reported back the enthusiasm that greeted the summer announcement of the sale of council houses.⁵⁵³ But by November the momentum had waned. Even Alan Clark, who despite being in the 92 was a protectionist and could not be described as an economic liberal, wrote that the failure to provide sufficient spending cuts was

⁵⁴⁹ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'Beware the Brigade of Bleeding Hearts', *Sunday Express*, 4 November 1979.

⁵⁵⁰ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 477.

⁵⁵¹ Richard Last, 'BBC foreign service cut angers tory MPs', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 November 1979, p. 13.

⁵⁵² Julian Critchley, *A Bag of Boiled Sweets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 164.

⁵⁵³ THCR 2/6/2/15, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 29 June 1979.

causing considerable harm. He said to Howe that ‘if we really had cut public expenditure then we would not need such devastatingly high interest rates’.⁵⁵⁴ Mrs Thatcher had been lucky, though. The economic consequences of not cutting enough, and thereby allowing interest rates to rise painful levels to squeeze the money supply, were kept off the front pages of the newspapers. The revelation that Sir Anthony Blunt, the former surveyor of the Queen’s pictures, had been a Soviet Spy and the fourth member of the Cambridge Spy ring caused considerable outrage and publicity, fortunately not personally directed at Mrs Thatcher.⁵⁵⁵ These revelations shielded what Sandbrook called the most ‘punitive’ increase in interest rates in history.⁵⁵⁶ Although Moore suggests the hike in interest rates ‘did not immediately’ affect Mrs Thatcher’s public standing⁵⁵⁷, Sandbrook argues this affected the mood on the Tory backbenches.⁵⁵⁸ There were worries that the worse the economy got, the greater fear that a ‘coup within the party’ could bring Mrs Thatcher down.⁵⁵⁹

Although the journalist Hugh Stephenson argued that it was the early months of 1980 that created the first ‘crisis of confidence’ in Mrs Thatcher’s leadership⁵⁶⁰, Gow was worried far earlier. Gow told Alan Clark that Mrs Thatcher was outnumbered ‘three to one in cabinet’ and that Jim Prior and Peter Walker were her ‘principal opponents’.⁵⁶¹ More dangerously, other MPs reported how bad things were for the Prime Minister. Anthony Royle told Alan Clark that ‘a mass sacking or resignation of the old guard heavies’, pointing to Prior, Walker, and Gilmour for example, ‘would create an alternative Cabinet and one which would open its doors to the [...] expectant Edward Heath’.⁵⁶² Alan Clark concluded that if the moderates left the cabinet there ‘was a danger that more than half the parliamentary party might be drawn off to fill their wagons. Margaret would be left with a few young [...] monetarists [...] and a rabble of African Rightists, Hastings, Winterton etc. and the 92’.⁵⁶³ Yet had Mrs Thatcher’s opponents been as powerful as Alan Clark suggested on the backbenches, William Clark would not have remained chairman of the finance committee.

⁵⁵⁴ Clark, *Into Politics*, p. 136.

⁵⁵⁵ Sandbrook, *Who Dares*, p. 112.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵⁵⁷ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p.482.

⁵⁵⁸ Sandbrook, *Who Dares*, p. 112.

⁵⁵⁹ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 481.

⁵⁶⁰ Stephenson, p. 94.

⁵⁶¹ Clark, *Into Politics*, p. 138.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*

The 92 was now recognised as Mrs Thatcher's most ardent supporters and Gow made sure to show Mrs Thatcher demonstrations of support. He passed her a letter from Michael Colvin, who had organised a supportive 'Group of Six' new members. Gow wrote at the bottom that they were all members of the 92, many of the names suggested by Gardiner that July. These members, Tim Brinton, Bob Dunn, John Townend, Sir Nicholas Bonsor, John Browne, and Colvin were to 'sustain the Leader and her policies at all times'. Gow wrote that 'it is good that we have this Group to counter the "Lefties"', the 'group' referring to Colvin's clique or the 92 itself. Under the note Thatcher welcomed this and wrote 'very good'.⁵⁶⁴ According to one of the Group of Six, however, it was purely an invention by Colvin to ingratiate himself with the party leadership. Bonsor was surprised to hear his name had been mentioned as a member and he said Colvin's 'group' didn't do anything.⁵⁶⁵ Its importance, however, lay in that all members were in the 92. Gow told Mrs Thatcher that they came from the 92, a far bigger Group that the Prime Minister could rely on. Indeed, the 92 had strengthened its position on the finance committee. John Townend had just been elected to the backbench finance committee after the resignation of Geoffrey Dodsworth on health grounds.⁵⁶⁶

Townend's election to the finance committee showed that Gardiner's whipping operation had an effect. For a supporter of spending cuts and low taxes to be elected to the finance committee demonstrated backbench support for the government's direction of travel. With Townend increasing the 92's representation on the backbench finance committee, there were cries for more spending cuts, that the Thatcher project should go further, quicker. At the backbench finance committee meeting at the end of November, Peter Hordern stressed the government was borrowing too much. He also highlighted a further problem brought about by the removal of exchange controls in October. He argued that 'in the past, when there was exchange control, it was easier for the government to sell its own debt'. The liberating move of removing exchange controls therefore necessitated moves towards a smaller state to bring spending and borrowing under control. Like Hordern, John Townend wanted to go further. He specified that 'transfer payments', redistributive state benefits, 'could not and must not be exempted' from cuts. Even Charles Morrison, not inclined to support Mrs Thatcher's economic policy, suggested that deeper cuts should come sooner rather than later in the election cycle as

⁵⁶⁴ THCR2/1/4/29 f13, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 29 November 1979.

⁵⁶⁵ Sir Nicholas Bonsor, interview with the author, Kent, 19 January 2022.

⁵⁶⁶ Geoffrey Dodsworth (1928-2018), Conservative MP for South West Hertfordshire, 1974-79.

‘people liked public expenditure’. The closer to an election these cuts occurred, Morrison argued, the more of an electoral risk it posed. Gow concluded to Mrs Thatcher that ‘the overwhelming majority of members present would not merely assent to further reductions in Public Expenditure, but would welcome them’. It was necessary as the seventeen per cent interest rates were the ‘clearest indication’ that borrowing was too high.⁵⁶⁷ To press this point Gow sent Mrs Thatcher a list of MPs ‘broadly sympathetic to the free market economy and to you personally as leader of the party’. The list includes nearly all the members of the 92 again stressing, in different ways, the loyalty of the 92 to her.⁵⁶⁸ By showing her the list, Gow was also demonstrating that support was there for Mrs Thatcher to go further in her radicalism.

William Clark, the chairman of the backbench finance committee, intervened and offered a solution to help Mrs Thatcher cut public spending. In a speech on 8 December Clark said: ‘We cannot afford to increase social security benefits in line with inflation. Each time these benefits are increased the difference in take-home pay between the worker and non-worker is decreased’. This is what Townend had called for at the November finance committee meeting. Michael White in the *Guardian* wrote of the synergy between what Clark had said and how Mrs Thatcher and Nigel Lawson felt. Lawson had complained that social security spending was a quarter of all public spending, whilst Thatcher had complained ‘in private’ at the costs of indexation of unemployment benefits. Indeed, White suggested the cabinet warmed to the idea of deindexation of benefits because of Clark’s statements. It was a sign of Clark’s influence and the importance his views had in Downing Street.⁵⁶⁹

There is evidence that Mrs Thatcher was listening to William Clark’s message. At a speech to the 1922 Committee on 13 December, the Prime Minister stressed that the government had to tackle ‘the why work?’ syndrome in the country.⁵⁷⁰ Clark seized the opportunity to go further and added more detail to his policy in the following days. In addition to cutting unemployment benefits Clark called for them to be included in annual income when calculating income tax. His justification was that ‘we have made unemployment an attractive proposition’, referencing the seventeen per cent increase in unemployment benefits announced

⁵⁶⁷ THCR 2/6/2/15, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 28 November 1979.

⁵⁶⁸ THCR 2/6/2/98 pt2 (71), Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 11 December 1979.

⁵⁶⁹ Michael White, ‘Cabinet may end indexing of benefits’, *Guardian*, 10 December 1979, p. 3.

⁵⁷⁰ THCR2/1/4/36 f43, Sir John Eden to Ian Gow, 13 December 1979.

in November.⁵⁷¹ Clark was determined to increase the gap between the rewards for work and unemployment. Before Christmas he criticised the public sector, emphasising the unjust difference between the private and state sectors. He said ‘there had been strong support for the taxing of short-term social security payments’, justifying his earlier policy. He now called for ‘an end to the protection through the index-linking of pensions given to civil servants and other public service administrators when they retire’. Clark said that those who generate the wealth of the country should receive higher rewards than the unproductive sections of the economy. Whereas the public sector administrators were ‘insulated’ from ‘the ravages of inflation’, the private sector was not, and this situation was ‘manifestly unfair’.⁵⁷²

Although the earnings link with pensions was cut in the 1980 Social Security Act, Mrs Thatcher did not go as far as Clark would have liked. But his proposals were considered at the highest level. Whilst Thatcher highlighted public spending as one of her three big challenges, by the end of 1979 there was little to show for it. Indeed, she later conceded that the government’s plans for reducing public spending in 1980 had been too optimistic.⁵⁷³ This is where her caution got the better of her. Geoffrey Howe offered a solution that would have further reduced public spending but was politically risky. He recommended de-indexing public sector pensions on 1 February 1980, meaning Clark’s message had resonated.⁵⁷⁴ Peter Cropper, a Treasury special adviser supportive of Mrs Thatcher’s policies, outlined the problems she faced, ‘any proposal to break or modify index linking will meet with strong opposition from those affected. But a failure to act will draw strengthening criticism from the private sector’.⁵⁷⁵ At E-Committee on 21 February 1980 Mrs Thatcher took the route of least resistance. Howe noted the ‘growing sense of injustice about the extent of protection given to public service pensioners’ and recommended ‘a limited measure of de-indexation [...] so that the smallest pensions would not be affected’. Paul Channon, Minister of State for the Civil Service department, preferred higher pensions contributions rather than de-indexation, and this is what Mrs Thatcher supported. Channon had been a member of the 92 in the 1960s but left when promoted to government by Edward Heath. His caution here shows how radical the 92 had become on economic policy. Summing up, Mrs Thatcher said that the ‘most fruitful’ approach

⁵⁷¹ PPA 5/218, David Fletcher, ‘Tax on unemployed benefit urged by Tory MPs’, *Daily Telegraph*, 13 December 1979.

⁵⁷² George Clark, ‘Tory backbenchers press Cabinet to end index-linked pensions for employees in public service’, *The Times*, 24 December 1979, p. 2.

⁵⁷³ Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 123.

⁵⁷⁴ TNA, PREM19/185 f188, Chancellor of the Exchequer minute to Margaret Thatcher, 1 February 1980.

⁵⁷⁵ TNA, PREM19/185 f167, Chancellor of the Exchequer minute to Margaret Thatcher, 18 February 1980.

would be to ‘preserve index-linking’ of public service pensions ‘but to increase the contributions required from those in work’.⁵⁷⁶ Again, it was safety first.

Conclusion

By the end of 1979 George Gardiner, Ian Gow, and William Clark had clearly demonstrated their support for Mrs Thatcher’s monetarist policies, arguing from within the party and the press that her course was the right path. This was significant because Mrs Thatcher’s economic policies were dividing the parliamentary party, and she was outnumbered in her own cabinet. The 92, driven more by Gardiner than Patrick Wall, would be the counterweight to Mrs Thatcher’s opponents, especially on economic policy. Gow and Gardiner also provided an essential role in calming tensions on Rhodesia. They would have far preferred the government to recognise the Muzorewa regime elected in April 1979 and be done with. Yet the international community made this difficult, but perhaps not impossible. It would, however, have taken up too much political capital. The government’s task to turn around the economy was too important to risk. It therefore fell to Gow and Gardiner to act, in their own ways, to placate colleagues and the party in the country to support Mrs Thatcher’s policy. Gardiner defended the Prime Minister in the press and provided a face-saving conference motion. Gow quietly worked to reassure Mrs Thatcher and placated pro-Rhodesia colleagues. Whereas in 1978 Gow and Gardiner had opposed Mrs Thatcher on sanctions, in 1979 they supported her entire Rhodesia policy, and she met them halfway by lifting sanctions. Although not entirely responsible for the smooth passage of Zimbabwean independence, Gardiner and Gow did play a hitherto unacknowledged role in making it easier for Mrs Thatcher to solve the problem.

On the economy, however, the 92, Gow, Gardiner and Clark all supported the direction Mrs Thatcher was heading in. Clark’s role as chair of the backbench finance committee became symbolic. While he was there, it was a sign a majority of the parliamentary party supported her economic policies and her leadership. Yet the 92 recognised she was in a minority in her own cabinet and therefore limited to what she could do to reduce spending and control inflation. But such was its loyalty to her that members also overlooked the bigger problem that was the Clegg pay awards. Increasing the public service pay bill by a quarter was an enormous commitment, which meant further cuts were needed in other departments the ‘wet’ Secretaries

⁵⁷⁶ TNA, CAB 134/4442, Minutes of Ministerial Committee on Economic Strategy – E (80).

of State were not prepared to make. Nonetheless, Mrs Thatcher's supporters recognised the journey would be a long one. In Clark's case he provided ways in which she could successfully reduce public spending.

For the 92 it was a transformative six months. The backbench committee elections had been a disappointment and showed that Wall was losing his grip. Yet Gardiner's more active role recruiting new members, and becoming Group Whip, ensured the 92 had a stronger election machine for the future. It needed one, as Mrs Thatcher's economic policies faced considerable criticism in 1980-81. John Townend's victory in the by-election for the vacant seat on the finance committee is proof, however, that there was support for the economic strategy and that Gardiner was proving an effective Whip.

Mrs Thatcher's approval ratings had not yet been significantly hit by the worsening economic conditions, but Gow made sure to inform her that the 92 were her loyal supporters. The parliamentary party still gave her the benefit of the doubt and was not ready to divert to an alternative. Pressure to do so would come in 1980 and 1981 as the recession dug deeper. In 1980, however, Mrs Thatcher's biggest rebellion did not come from her opponents in the cabinet, Lollards or Nick's Diner. It came from her own supporters on the right and in the 92. Swallowing the bitter pill of the Clegg Commission and Rhodesia, they now wanted the government to abide by its manifesto commitment to substantially reform trade union powers and immunities. Mrs Thatcher was with them. Her administration was not.

Chapter Five: Get Prior

This chapter argues that the 92, influenced by George Gardiner, waged a campaign to undermine the Employment Secretary Jim Prior, who became the biggest threat to Mrs Thatcher. From April 1980 Gardiner led the first significant parliamentary rebellion of Mrs Thatcher's first administration against the 1980 Employment Bill. This was, ironically, done in support of Mrs Thatcher rather than against her. Indeed, she encouraged the rebellion. Ian Gow, as Mrs Thatcher's PPS, prompted MPs to lobby her for a stronger Employment Bill against Jim Prior's wishes. He could not have done this without Mrs Thatcher's blessing. His loyalty to her meant he would not have done so without it. Although Gow voted for the Bill, behind the scenes he was as fervent as Gardiner in pushing for stronger reform. As they had abided by the manifesto on Rhodesia, it was time for the government to stand by its words on trade union reform, despite Jim Prior's stranglehold on the employment portfolio. The battle between Gardiner and Prior was a rear-guard action to support Mrs Thatcher, and Gardiner enlisted many members of the 92 to join him.

Mrs Thatcher's supporters rebelled against her own administration because of the weakened position she was in. They had to show there was strong support for her and the policies they believed she wanted to implement, and this was done through rebellion in parliament, comments in the press, and signatures gained to Early Day Motions (EDMs) and round robin letters. Specific to trade union reform, the 1979 manifesto called for a review of the existing law on trade union immunities.⁵⁷⁷ One of the five themes of the manifesto was to 'restore the health' of the nation's 'economic and social life' by controlling inflation and 'striking a fair balance' between the rights and duties of the trade unions.⁵⁷⁸ Trade union reform was therefore central to the government's plans to turn the economy around and the 'analysis' of the trade union problem written into the manifesto was Mrs Thatcher's.⁵⁷⁹ The tension came from Prior's resistance to these demands, which the 92 saw as Prior's attempt to weaken Mrs Thatcher and her policies. For the 92, therefore, the long campaign for trade union reform was a means to defend Mrs Thatcher. The future development of Thatcherism hinged on there being more trade union legislation to follow.

⁵⁷⁷ THCR, Conservative General Election Manifesto 1979, 11 April 1979, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110858>

⁵⁷⁸ Robin Harris, *Not For Turning*, p. 151,

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

Before discussing the attempts by Mrs Thatcher's supporters to strengthen the Employment Bill, however, this chapter will begin by explaining the pressures Mrs Thatcher was under from Conservative critics. It explains why Gardiner and the 92 had to be overt in their criticism of Prior. Mrs Thatcher's weakened position was, partly, a consequence of her own caution. Some argued her policies, such as the tax cuts and Clegg pay awards, stoked inflation by increasing pressure on borrowing, and with it the money supply, without significant spending reductions. The VAT increase led to higher prices, adding further problems to the economic situation. It was a result of her cabinet being a construct of compromise. By including those who did not share her politics, she gave them senior positions and the responsibility to draft policy in their respective areas, sometimes not to her liking. This explains why Mrs Thatcher made few detailed policy statements in opposition.⁵⁸⁰ *The Right Approach* (1976), the first policy paper of her period as leader of the opposition, was 'a statement of aims' rather than a policy blueprint to bind a future administration. Its author, Chris Patten, described it as a treaty between the Heathites and Thatcherites, and Charles Moore concluded it was 'almost Thatcherite enough' for the Conservative leader.⁵⁸¹

This compromise situation elevated Jim Prior. Mrs Thatcher made him Employment Secretary after the 1979 election, continuing his shadow responsibilities, and thus gave his views on trade unions credibility, storing trouble for later. For example, in 1978 she had warned Geoffrey Howe from speaking on issues that were outside his portfolio and within Prior's. In a draft speech sent to Mrs Thatcher in 1978 on trade union reform, Mrs Thatcher reminded Howe that 'this is not your subject'. Where Howe challenged the power of the unions, Mrs Thatcher wrote that 'it would be better if Jim Prior said these things'. Finally, Mrs Thatcher told Howe that 'the press will crucify' him if he made the speech.⁵⁸² Although Mrs Thatcher was disparaging towards Prior in her memoirs, she wrote that he was 'a badge of our reasonableness', again a sign of her careful approach.⁵⁸³ Robert Behrens concludes that while trade union policy in opposition did not change, this was both out of caution and the desire not to re-run the mistakes of trade union legislation in 1971.⁵⁸⁴ This created the tension between

⁵⁸⁰ Robert Behrens, *The Conservative Party from Heath to Thatcher* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1980), p. 126.

⁵⁸¹ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 339.

⁵⁸² Thatcher MSS (2/1/3/9), Geoffrey Howe draft speech, 11 January 1978.

⁵⁸³ Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 28.

⁵⁸⁴ Behrens, p. 99.

the manifesto, Mrs Thatcher's supporters, and Prior when the party discussed trade union reform in office.

Stirrings of a Plot

In February 1980 Mrs Thatcher faced open rebellion in her cabinet from Sir Ian Gilmour, on the backbenches from Julian Critchley, and from Geoffrey Rippon, a senior backbencher, cabinet minister under Edward Heath, and a prominent ally of the former Prime Minister. By banding together to oppose what became Prior's Bill - it was never known as Mrs Thatcher's or the government's - the 92 showed that it could mobilise forces against those critical of Mrs Thatcher. So determined was the 92 to 'get Prior' that some of the moderate members of the 92 became concerned at the sustained personal campaign against the Employment Secretary.

There is also evidence that Mrs Thatcher looked approvingly on the rebellion and that rebel amendments became known as the Prime Minister's amendments.⁵⁸⁵ Rather than a rebellion, it was another means for the 92 to prove its loyalty to the Prime Minister. In doing so the 92 acted more cohesively in this rebellion than it had under Heath, although the membership of the 92 was significantly different. Newly elected members were more likely to rebel. Critchley wrote in *The Times* that by 1980 the party had become 'more politicised', 'it now consists of capitalists without capital, opinionated, vigorous and in no way deferential'.⁵⁸⁶ The battle of the Employment Bill therefore signified a radicalisation of the 92, reflecting the new, younger, middle-class, and ideological intake of Tory MPs elected in 1979 recruited to the 92 by Gardiner.

During the battle for trade union reform from December 1979 to July 1980, when the Employment Bill gained Royal Assent, the economy deteriorated. Inflation reached nineteen per cent in February, peaking at twenty-one point nine per cent in May 1980. With interest rates at seventeen per cent there was increasing concern that the government's policies were not working, despite the recognition from government supporters that it would take time for them to take effect. To Thatcher's devotees in the 92, namely Gow and Gardiner, this fuelled the long-held belief that Thatcher's critics were out to topple her.

⁵⁸⁵ Aitken, p. 305. Aitken described them as 'Margaret's amendments'.

⁵⁸⁶ Julian Critchley, 'Dining out with the Class of 59', *The Times*, 28 January 1980, p. 12.

The first heavyweight attack came from Rippon. His article of 29 January was critical of government economic policy. According to Rippon they had failed on pay restraint, where ‘the average pay rise’ was nineteen per cent. On control of the money supply, which led to painfully high interest rates, Rippon suggested the policy was not working. He criticised the government’s over-reliance on monetarism, ‘monetary management can do a limited amount of good’.⁵⁸⁷ Although Rippon called for reductions in public spending, Gow was concerned that the article encouraged dissent. Whilst he agreed with Rippon’s assertion that spending was too high and his article was ‘not as hostile as it appears at first sight’, there was an undercurrent to the message. The Chief Whip, Michael Jopling, stressed to Gow that he was ‘concerned about a possible Heath/Rippon axis’, that Rippon’s manoeuvres could be a proxy for Heath, or start a campaign for the bitter ex-Prime Minister’s return.⁵⁸⁸

On 7 February Gilmour became the first cabinet minister to dissent publicly from within, even if his terms were abstract enough to keep within the confines of collective responsibility. He delivered a speech at the Cambridge Union articulating a different style of Conservatism to that of Mrs Thatcher. *The Times* journalist David Wood suggested the speech argued for a change of course, that Gilmour argued that the Conservatives must ‘find another prospectus that would be more attractive to the electorate’.⁵⁸⁹ Coming so soon after Rippon’s article, it was another rallying cry for dissent. Critchley followed Gilmour’s speech with an article in the *Observer* encouraging opposition to Mrs Thatcher’s economic policies from the backbenches. To add to the intrigue Critchley initially published the article anonymously, but was found out within a matter of days, leading to greater coverage in television interviews. Unlike Gilmour, Critchley voted for Mrs Thatcher in the 1975 leadership election. By 1980, however, Critchley was against Thatcher as ‘a matter of both policy and personality’. She was not a ‘Conservative’, her obsession to reduce public spending made ‘her economic policies [...] “Thatcherite” rather than Conservative’. Like Gilmour, Critchley highlighted the alleged heresy of Thatcherism, that it deviated from traditional Conservatism. The warning for Gardiner and Gow was Critchley’s call to arms for the ‘moderates on the backbenches’. According to Critchley they had ‘kept an embarrassed silence, torn between loyalty and

⁵⁸⁷ Geoffrey Rippon, ‘We just cannot afford any more wrong guesses’, *News of the World*, 29 January 1980, p. 12.

⁵⁸⁸ THCR 2/6/2/136 part 2 f61, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 29 January 1980.

⁵⁸⁹ David Wood, ‘Sir Ian comes out of his shell’, *The Times*, 18 February 1980.

irritation', and now they had to question monetarism. Critchley concluded: 'There are many of us left who have no wish to be consumed by it'.⁵⁹⁰

The Employment Bill 1980

After the Grunwick dispute⁵⁹¹ and the Winter of Discontent, Mrs Thatcher's ardent supporters demanded legislation to tackle trade union immunities. They wanted something in return for accepting the Clegg pay deals that were causing havoc with the public finances. To many of them the trade unions appeared to be a legitimate danger. Writing in his *Sunday Express* column, Gardiner considered the strength of trade union powers a threat to the legitimacy of the state. Unless action were taken on trade union immunities, 'the crisis for our democracy, and for the rule of law, will still be there'. To combat this Gardiner called for legislation to guarantee the rights of workers to cross picket lines and to refuse to join a trade union, undermining the principle of the closed shop.⁵⁹² To emphasise how far union powers had been extended the previous Labour government had defended the use of trade union intimidation 'of a lawful character'.⁵⁹³ Therefore, trade union immunities, the closed shop, secondary picketing, *and* secondary action would be the dividing lines on Conservative trade union policy in 1980. To many in the 92 the only way forward was sweeping legislation reminiscent of the 1971 Industrial Relations Act. To those who experienced the shortcomings of Heath's omnibus legislation, Prior especially, there was a preference for gradual legislation. But in reality Prior only wanted one tame Bill. To the 92, Prior's approach conflicted with the Conservative manifesto. The 92 saw that he did not want to introduce further legislation. Consequently, after the first Employment Bill, it sought his removal.

The Conservative manifesto of 1979, like that of 1970, raised expectations on union reform. Crucially it called for changes to secondary action, which was broader than secondary picketing. The Conservatives legislated in 1980 that picketing be restricted to the place of work or 'any premises of his employer', thus limiting picketing directly to the premises of a

⁵⁹⁰ Julian Critchley, *Westminster Blues* (London: Futura Publications, 1986), pp. 6-7.

⁵⁹¹ Between 1976 and 1978 an industrial dispute at the photograph processing factory, Grunwick, caught the national headlines over the right of the owner to recognise a trade union. The dispute began when a worker, Jayaben Desai, was dismissed for refusing to work overtime. It became a national focus for trade unionists, flying pickets, and frequent clashes with the police.

⁵⁹² PPA 3/210 (Sir George Gardiner), George Gardiner, 'Now We've Had Ten Days of Rule by Commissars...', *Sunday Express*, 21 January 1979.

⁵⁹³ Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 400.

dispute.⁵⁹⁴ On secondary action, however, it was more complicated. Such action included sympathetic activity by one union to aid another, or members of the same union but not employed in a workplace engaged in dispute with an employer. An example was Royal Mail's refusal to deliver to Grunwick during the factory's industrial dispute, or the DATA union's activity that caught the interest of the 92 in 1967.

In the manifesto the Conservatives pledged to 'ensure that the protection of the law is available to those not concerned in the dispute but who at present can suffer severely from secondary action' such as picketing, blacking, and blockading.⁵⁹⁵ On the closed shop the detail was less precise. Whilst the manifesto wanted protection for those who risked losing their 'union cards' if they failed to cooperate, it did not rule out the abolition of the closed shop. To Prior, it was a more moderate manifesto than that of 1970. Whilst he conceded that 'the realities of government' may moderate Mrs Thatcher, he later wrote that 'Margaret had caught the new mood; she was more in tune with people than I was' on trade union and economic reform.⁵⁹⁶

In office Prior advanced his moderate agenda successfully. He had won Mrs Thatcher round to the public sector Clegg pay awards, which had been a compromise between free collective bargaining and a statutory incomes policy. Prior had survived the election in cabinet and found himself on the economic E-Committee, the only 'wet' represented. His was a position of relative security and his supporter Nicholas Scott⁵⁹⁷ had been elected chairman of the backbench employment committee. Given how insulated Prior was, there was going to be an inevitable clash. Gardiner wrote that from the moment Mrs Thatcher was made Prime Minister 'there was a conspiracy within the party against her'.⁵⁹⁸ He saw it as opposition to 'monetary discipline' and the rising 'unemployment figures', mostly from Prior. Gardiner took it upon himself to lead the public salvo against Prior in the press and in parliament, and his arguments ranged between demands for tougher laws and the removal of Prior altogether.

⁵⁹⁴ Employment Act 1980, Section 15, Clause 2, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1980/42/enacted>.

⁵⁹⁵ THCR, Conservative General Election Manifesto 1979, 11 April 1979, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110858>.

⁵⁹⁶ Prior, p. 112.

⁵⁹⁷ Of Nick's Diner, the 'wet' backbench dining club and rival of the 92.

⁵⁹⁸ Gardiner, p. 132.

Prior's critics, Gardiner first amongst them, suspected he didn't want to go too far in reducing trade union power. The Employment Secretary harked back to the collapse of the 1971 Industrial Relations Act as a reason for colleagues to support his approach. Setting out his legislative plans to the party's backbench employment committee on 11 July, Prior confirmed legislation to amend the law on the closed shop, picketing, and postal ballots for union elections. This was uncontroversial. But the way in which Prior was advancing concerned those on the right. With memories of the Industrial Relations Act still fresh, Prior played on the fear of concerted union action. It was therefore essential 'for the legislation to survive and prove itself effective'. In response to questions Prior refused to endorse making secondary picketing a criminal offence, it would 'put the police in an intolerable position'. It risked making martyrs of trade unionists by sending them to prison, just as the Industrial Relations Act had done.⁵⁹⁹ Instead, Prior opted for tightening the civil law and urged colleagues not to 'launch fierce attacks on the unions'.⁶⁰⁰

As Prior prepared to publish the legislation in December 1979, the proposals fell short of the manifesto.⁶⁰¹ His junior minister Patrick Mayhew briefed the employment committee that the proposals 'constituted neither an assault on the basic rights of the trade unions nor a fundamental revision of industrial relations law'. He said existing laws on picketing were 'sufficient if enforced'. Yet he, like Prior, was able to get away with it as it was essential 'to avoid a re-run of the 1971 Act'.⁶⁰² Gardiner saw backtracking, 'there were glaring gaps in his [Prior's] proposal package'. The stark absence was legislation on secondary action. 'Though secondary picketing' was made more difficult, 'secondary blacking and blockades were allowed to continue under protection of the law'.⁶⁰³ Prior, however, wrote that there was little he could do to counter the mood amongst Gardiner and his colleagues. He wrote that 'we could not prove in a short time that their ideas were wrong. We could not even say that ours had been particularly successful, because in the 1970s they had undoubtedly not succeeded'.⁶⁰⁴ Instead he 'was striving to impose some form of legislation on the unions while repelling the right-wing demands for extreme measures'. By coming under attack from the party's right

⁵⁹⁹ In 1972 the 'Pentonville Five' were shop stewards who refused to obey an order from the Industrial Relations Court to stop a picket at a container port in Hackney and were sent to prison. This precipitated a wave of unofficial stoppages across the country. The Five were released within a week.

⁶⁰⁰ Oxford, The Bodleian Library, The Conservative Party Archive: Conservative Research Department (CPA CRD), CRD/4/4/33, Minutes of the Parliamentary Employment Committee, 11 July 1979.

⁶⁰¹ Stephenson, p. 68.

⁶⁰² CRD/4/4/33, Minutes of the Parliamentary Employment Committee, 14 November 1979.

⁶⁰³ Gardiner, p. 140.

⁶⁰⁴ Prior, p.118.

wing, Prior was made to 'look the reasonable man and therefore difficult for the TUC to attack', which would aid the passage of his Employment Bill.⁶⁰⁵

Prior introduced the Employment Bill on 7 December 1979 and protests from the right gave him cover to proceed with his gradualist approach. Criticism from the likes of Gardiner meant it became harder 'for both the Labour party and trade unions to resist'. The legislation's aims were to provide government funding for ballots on union election, strike demands, and amending trade union rules. It limited picketing to an individual's place of work and made it tougher to introduce a new closed shop. Learning their lesson from the 1971 Act, civil penalties for breach of the picketing law would be placed on the person who organised the picket and not the trade union. Prior judged later that making the unions liable for the actions of individual radicals 'could become the cement of union solidarity'.⁶⁰⁶ Utmost in the minds of the government, Thatcher included, was to avoid a re-run of the Winter of Discontent that unified the trade union movement against the government. With Prior's proposals there was less of a pull for unions to unite against the Bill as fundamental union immunities were not at risk. This, however, was a problem for the Conservative right and the leadership of the 92. It didn't go as far as the manifesto.

A legal ruling legitimising secondary action and a strike in the steel industry gave Gardiner and Gow reason to press for stronger legislation. With unfortunate timing for Prior, on 13 December the House of Lords overturned the Court of Appeal judgement on *Express Newspapers v MacShane*, just four days before the second reading of the Employment Bill. The case involved Denis MacShane, president of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and later a Labour MP and minister, calling out members of the Press Association to strike in sympathy with local journalists in a dispute with provincial newspaper owners.⁶⁰⁷ It was a classic case of the secondary action the Conservative manifesto sought to abolish, but was not in the draft Bill. The Lords' decision 're-established the unions' comprehensive immunity from legal action for breaches of contract granted by Labour's 1976 legislation', the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act. To Prior this 'gave unions virtual *carte blanche*' for any action they chose to take.⁶⁰⁸ *The Times* reported that the judgement was a powerful

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 154-55.

⁶⁰⁶ Prior, pp. 158-9.

⁶⁰⁷ Stephenson, p. 69.

⁶⁰⁸ Prior, p. 161.

‘reaffirmation’ of union immunities, crucially, ‘in “secondary” industrial action’.⁶⁰⁹ Prior therefore had two options. The first was to limit immunities solely to an individual’s place of work. The second was to ‘allow some scope for sympathetic, or “secondary” industrial action by unions in furtherance of an original dispute’.⁶¹⁰ He chose the second, although at the time of *MacShane* he kept his options open, paying lip service to the backbenches. It was reported that it was ‘Prior’s intention to outlaw the kind of action taken by journalists’ in the *MacShane* case, and this included ‘action on secondary picketing, blacking and blockading’.⁶¹¹ He did nothing of the sort.

In the second reading debate there was little resistance to the Bill from the 92, although there was concern. Den Dover⁶¹², who joined the Group in 1981, used the occasion for his maiden speech to welcome the Bill but stressed there were unanswered questions on ‘blacking’ and the closed shop. He said that the UK was the only country in Europe that tolerated it.⁶¹³ Tony Marlow⁶¹⁴, who had joined the 92 after the election, asked Patrick Mayhew whether there could be a constant review of a closed shop in the workplace. Under the proposed Bill support from eighty per cent of the workforce was required to create a new closed shop. Conversely, Marlow wondered if a twenty per cent vote could break up an existing closed shop. Mayhew dodged the question and said they were not going to outlaw the closed shop.⁶¹⁵ The Bill passed second reading without a rebellion or notable display of parliamentary drama. *The Times* journalist Hugh Noyes suggested it was anti-climactic. The only concern was the Government’s ability to demonstrate that its legislation could resolve the *MacShane* ruling legitimising secondary action.⁶¹⁶

Recognising the Bill did not go far enough to undo *MacShane*, arguments were brewing to toughen up the Bill. The Solicitor General, Sir Ian Percival⁶¹⁷, a critic of Prior’s gradualist approach, wrote to Prior on 21 December that the European Court of Human Rights was likely

⁶⁰⁹ Fred Emery, ‘Lords ruling in NUJ blacking case faces Government with dilemma on new Bill’, *The Times*, 14 December 1979, p.2.

⁶¹⁰ Prior, p. 161.

⁶¹¹ Paul Routledge, ‘Worse relations with unions likely’, *The Times*, 14 December 1979, p. 2.

⁶¹² Densmore Dover (1938-), Conservative MP for Chorley 1979-97, MEP for the North West 1999-2009.

⁶¹³ Hansard, Commons Debates, 17 December 1979, Vol. 976, Col. 85.

⁶¹⁴ Tony Marlow (1940-), Conservative MP for Northampton North 1979-97.

⁶¹⁵ Hansard, Commons Debates, 17 December 1979, Vol. 976, Col. 168.

⁶¹⁶ Hugh Noyes, ‘Bill creeps in like a mouse’, *The Times*, 18 December 1979, p. 2.

⁶¹⁷ Sir Ian Percival (1921-98), Conservative MP for Southport 1959-87, Solicitor General 1979-83.

to rule in favour of railway workers sacked for not joining a closed shop.⁶¹⁸ To Percival the Commission was likely to find that ‘the right to associate includes a right not to associate’.⁶¹⁹ Gow briefed Mrs Thatcher that the case was a way to ‘toughen up the Closed Shop provisions in the present Employment Bill’. He told her that the Freedom Association⁶²⁰ had ‘always taken the view’ that the closed shop should be unlawful. Mrs Thatcher underlined the word ‘unlawful’, signalling approval. Gow ended by saying that it was a view he shared.⁶²¹

A strike instigated by the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) on 2 January 1980 also put pressure on Prior for a tougher Bill. He wrote that ‘the action of the steelworkers and their supporters led to renewed demands for much tougher measures to curb union power’.⁶²² On 16 January the strike spread to private steel firms who were not part of the dispute, leading John Hoskyns⁶²³ to write to Mrs Thatcher and argue for tougher measures. Instead of going after individuals, legislation should target unions and their funds, going to the heart of their immunities.⁶²⁴ In the 92 there were concerns too. Michael Shersby⁶²⁵ asked that the Group discuss over dinner a *Sun* editorial from 24 January that the government was ‘too readily diverted from its course’.⁶²⁶ Gardiner asked Mrs Thatcher at Prime Minister’s Questions on 29 January to strengthen the industrial relations legislation to ensure that workers who did not want to strike were protected from intimidation. Mrs Thatcher’s reply was that violent intimidation was a matter of criminal law and that he well knew ‘the difficulty is in getting evidence’.⁶²⁷ Her reply reflected the difficulty in implementing the legislation the rebels wanted. As was shown in the Heath administration, if it did not work it would undermine the whole argument.

⁶¹⁸ The case of Young, James and Webster found on 13 August 1981 in favour of the claimants that their human rights had been breached when forced to join a closed shop. It led to calls that Prior may be forced to abolish the closed shop. Paul Routledge, ‘Railman’s case may force Prior to ban closed shop’, *The Times*, 14 August 1981, p.1.

⁶¹⁹ THCR 2/6/2/90, Sir Ian Percival to James Prior, ‘Further Stages in the “Closed Shop” case (Young, James & Webster v the UK) before the European Human Rights Commission’, 21 December 1979.

⁶²⁰ Formerly the National Association for Freedom (NAFF), founded in 1975 and renamed the Freedom Association in 1978. Described as a conservative pressure group, it campaigned against trade union powers.

⁶²¹ THCR 2/6/2/90, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 24 December 1979.

⁶²² Prior, p. 161.

⁶²³ Sir John Hoskyns (1927-2014), businessman, Director of Number Ten Policy Unit 1979-82.

⁶²⁴ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 509.

⁶²⁵ Sir Julian Michael Shersby (1933-97), Conservative MP for Uxbridge, 1972-97.

⁶²⁶ U DPW/37/17, Michael Shersby to Sir Patrick Wall, 29 January 1980.

⁶²⁷ Hansard, Commons Debates, 29 January 1980, Vol. 977, Cols. 1119-1120.

Yet, to the rebels, the law was heavily on the side of the trades unions and needed to change. Echoing the *MacShane* case, the BSC sought an injunction against trade union secondary action at the Court of Appeal on 26 January 1980.⁶²⁸ Party Chairman Lord Thorneycroft warned Prior that if the Lords overturned the Court of Appeal judgement ‘the political pressure for tougher action on union immunities would become irresistible’. Prior knew that ‘there was concern on the back benches’ and his ‘enemies were doing their best to whip it up’.⁶²⁹ Thorneycroft’s warning was apt. As in the *MacShane* case, the House of Lords overturned the Court of Appeal injunction preventing the spread of industrial action to the private sector and the strike was back on.⁶³⁰

Gardiner used his *Sunday Express* column to target Prior personally. The Lords’ ruling was ‘the most dreadful warning of industrial anarchy threatening to engulf us’. Their judgement offered ‘no protection [...] to employers who have no quarrel with their workers’. Prior’s Bill, Gardiner wrote, would do nothing to prevent intimidation and threats to remove union cards, ‘which means robbing a man of his job’ in a closed shop. To Gardiner the problem was Prior: ‘I have the greatest respect for Jim Prior, and for his concern to appear reasonable to everyone. But events this January, like those of last January, show that the time for wearing kid gloves is past’.⁶³¹ Prior interpreted this as the start of ‘a new campaign’ from Gardiner against him and for ‘more drastic action’.⁶³² But he was not going to be rushed into ‘introducing new laws on secondary industrial action’.⁶³³ In reply, one hundred Tory MPs signed an Early Day Motion from Group member John Browne⁶³⁴ calling for a vague promise of ‘industrial equity’ and compulsory ballots before strike action.⁶³⁵

Gow, as Mrs Thatcher’s PPS, was at work for a tougher Bill, indicating that Mrs Thatcher wanted a tougher policy. On 5 February he prompted Alan Clark to ask Mrs Thatcher at Prime Minister’s Questions ‘to put some teeth into the Employment Act’. Clark saw this as a sign of weakness, that Mrs Thatcher was so isolated in cabinet that she ‘has to send her PPS

⁶²⁸ Donald Macintyre, ‘Steel corporation and 11 unions make productivity progress’, *The Times*, 28 January 1980, p. 1.

⁶²⁹ Prior, pp. 162-3.

⁶³⁰ Paul Routledge, ‘Private steel firms strike is on again’, *The Times*, 2 February 1980, p. 1.

⁶³¹ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, ‘Must we hand victory to Scargill and Co. on a plate?’, *Sunday Express*, 3 February 1980.

⁶³² Prior, p. 163.

⁶³³ David Felton, ‘Mr Prior says failure cannot be risked’, *The Times*, 4 February 1980, p. 1.

⁶³⁴ John Browne (1938-), Conservative MP for Winchester, 1979-92.

⁶³⁵ Stephenson, p. 72.

out [...] and raise support at random from backbenchers at Question Time'. It wasn't random, however: they all had membership of the 92 in common. Sir William Clark, knighted in January 1980, the chairman of the backbench finance committee and Gow's colleague in the 92, 'got in with a similar question' and Alan Clark assumed it 'had also been planted' by Gow.⁶³⁶ William Clark's proposal was a one-clause Bill for mandatory strike ballots if five hundred workers, or ten per cent of the workforce, demanded one. Mrs Thatcher replied promising more action after the steel strike had subsided and that the 'Employment Bill will help considerably with the closed shop'.⁶³⁷

The first showdown between Prior and his critics in the 92 came at the 1922 Committee on 7 February, and accounts differ on who came out best. Prior's account claimed his gradualist approach received popular support in the parliamentary party. Yet, he conceded, despite being elected to 'curb union power' the government was 'unable to say anything more than some limited reforms' were being offered.⁶³⁸ *The Times* reported that Prior had 'survived' but had also won over and 'silenced' his critics on the backbenches. But this was not due to Prior's present legislative offering, as his memoirs allude. Instead, it was due to the possibility 'of a further industrial relations Bill' providing his first Bill succeeded.⁶³⁹ By contrast, Gow's record of the Committee shows a majority of speakers against Prior, by eleven to five. Prominent against the Bill were MPs from the 92. Gardiner criticised the weakness of the Bill, that it did nothing on 'violent' action or 'intimidation', and not even on strike pay pickets received from the Treasury coffers. Sir William Clark reminded the room that the government was returned because of its commitment to rein in trade union power. Ronald Bell urged immunities be limited to only those in a dispute. Ian Lloyd summed up, saying that 'we have compromised'.⁶⁴⁰ It was hardly the resounding success Prior, or the newspaper reports, claimed.

Mrs Thatcher's first attempt to seize the initiative from Prior, however, hit the buffers. She attempted to table a one-clause Bill banning secondary picketing 'immediately'. Prior retaliated with a threat to resign and lobbied colleagues Carrington, Walker, and Gilmour to

⁶³⁶ Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics*, p. 144.

⁶³⁷ James Wightman, 'Private sector protest', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 February 1980, p. 36.

⁶³⁸ Prior, p. 163.

⁶³⁹ Fred Emery, 'Mr Prior wins over backbench critics', *The Times*, 8 February 1980, p. 1.

⁶⁴⁰ THCR 2/6/2/114 pt2 (61), Gow record of conversation, 7 February 1980.

support him.⁶⁴¹ At the E-Committee Carrington, Walker, Heseltine, and St John-Stevas were also present, forming a counterweight to the Thatcherites who normally formed a majority against Prior. Accordingly, Prior's strategy held. He had urged support of his position to avoid a repeat of the 1971 Act.⁶⁴² Jonathan Aitken concluded that the 'wets' had 'gained a victory' over Thatcher by frustrating the one-clause Bill.⁶⁴³

Conservative backbenchers were conflicted. The 92 knew Prior was not 'one of us' and was one of the biggest threats to Mrs Thatcher in cabinet. For the rest of the backbenchers, the gradualist approach was necessary for those who had bad memories of the failure of the Industrial Relations Act, a point made by Prior at the cabinet's E-Committee on 13 February. Yet the government was backsliding because Mrs Thatcher's position in cabinet was weak, and this could have had disastrous consequences for wider government policy. Ivor Stanbrook⁶⁴⁴, from the 92, wrote to Mrs Thatcher telling her so. While he was content to support tougher trade union laws, he would make do with Prior's offering, purely for the sake of party unity. 'Unity and loyalty on the backbenches and in the country will not be possible so long as the Cabinet itself is feuding publicly'. Gilmour's Cambridge speech and Critchley's anonymous attack in the *Observer* within weeks of each other put the seriousness of Stanbrook's letter into context. He wrote that 'your own personal reputation and prestige in the party and in the country is still very high indeed, but some people wonder whether you are master of your own ship'. In a reply Gow drafted for Mrs Thatcher, she said that she thought the 'anxiety' Stanbrook professed was 'well founded', conveying to the backbencher that Mrs Thatcher knew the difficulty she was in. In his note to Mrs Thatcher, Gow wrote that Stanbrook's feelings were 'very widely held in the Parliamentary Party' and that sections of the letter should be read to the cabinet as a warning.⁶⁴⁵

After her defeat at E-Committee on 13 February, Mrs Thatcher bypassed Prior to launch her own policy and undermine her Employment Secretary. The circumstances of this manoeuvre revealed a nascent relationship between Thatcher and her supporters in the 92. On 14 February at Prime Minister's Questions Mrs Thatcher announced, without consulting Prior, that the government would introduce plans to ensure that those on strike would be assumed to

⁶⁴¹ Aitken, p. 305.

⁶⁴² CAB 134/4442, Minutes of the Ministerial Committee on Economic Strategy, 13 February 1980.

⁶⁴³ Aitken, p. 305.

⁶⁴⁴ Ivor Stanbrook (1924-2004), Conservative MP for Orpington, 1970-92.

⁶⁴⁵ THCR2/1/4/106 f66, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 19 February 1980.

be taking strike pay from their union. This meant cutting welfare benefits for pickets.⁶⁴⁶ The prompt for this was a question from Michael Brown⁶⁴⁷, elected in 1979, a member of the 92, and a committed Thatcherite.⁶⁴⁸ Given Gow's previous form prompting MPs to ask favourable questions to Mrs Thatcher, and his disdain for Prior, there was a possibility that that this was a repeat performance of William Clark's presumably planted call for a one-clause Bill. Brown, however, dismissed this. It was, instead, his own reaction to what was happening and the timing purely coincidental. Brown's Cleethorpes constituency had a large steel sector, and he recalled that he was outraged at the strike, and angry at the oddity of workers being paid to strike out of taxpayer funds.⁶⁴⁹ However, Mrs Thatcher would have known what his question was, thus giving her the opportunity to announce the change to strike pay. Gow would have clearly brought all this to her attention beforehand. He was, after all, giving her sight of correspondence critical of the Employment Bill. Collusion or not, it demonstrated that she and the 92 wanted the same outcome. Gow had shown her the minutes of the employment committee where Gardiner had called for action on strike pay. With Michael Brown's suggestion she had sidestepped Prior and publicly slapped him down by announcing a curb on strike pay. She was, slowly, taking back control. As Prior noted, 'the right wing loved it'.⁶⁵⁰

Rather than concede that he had been outflanked, as Aitken claims⁶⁵¹, Prior, instead, argued that Mrs Thatcher's move on strike pay was a response from the pressure put on her by her own backbenchers, especially the 92. But she was also responding to events that were testing her caution. Over the weekend of 17 February Mrs Thatcher 'felt ready to explode' as Arthur Scargill⁶⁵² initiated a secondary picket at the private Hadley steelworks in Sheffield. She continued her demands for a one-clause Bill outlawing secondary picketing.⁶⁵³ On 18 February 92 member Ray Whitney⁶⁵⁴ wrote to Prior criticising the 'fundamental flaws in your basic approach to our industrial relations problems'. Whitney told Prior that 'your fear of the working class is exaggerated and out of date [...] We are the populist Party now'. By trying to work with the unions, the unions had succeeded in slowing the government down, and Prior

⁶⁴⁶ Aitken, p. 305.

⁶⁴⁷ Michael Brown (1951-), Conservative MP for Brigg and Cleethorpes, 1979-97.

⁶⁴⁸ Michael Brown, interview with the author, Kent, 25 January 2022

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Prior, p. 165.

⁶⁵¹ Aitken, p. 305.

⁶⁵² Arthur Scargill (1938-), President of the Yorkshire Area of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), 1974-81; President of the NUM, 1982-2002.

⁶⁵³ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 511.

⁶⁵⁴ Sir Ray Whitney (1930-2012), Conservative MP for Wycombe, 1978-2001.

was to blame for this. Gow replied to Whitney that he had shown the letter to Mrs Thatcher.⁶⁵⁵ On 24 February Gardiner wrote in the *Sunday Express* that ‘the only ones who can rob us of success are ourselves’, an attack on the ‘faint hearts’ in the ‘upper echelons of the Tory Party’.⁶⁵⁶ Towards the end of the month Mrs Thatcher rebuked Prior in a BBC interview in what was a very public humiliation for the Employment Secretary.⁶⁵⁷ The 92 rounded off the month with correspondence to Thorneycroft and Michael Jopling, the Chief Whip. On 22 February John Wilkinson⁶⁵⁸ wrote to Jopling complaining about the dissension in the cabinet and that Mrs Thatcher ‘is fully entitled to reshuffle her Government’ if it continues. Tony Marlow also sent Gow a copy of his letter to Thorneycroft along the same lines, but his letter was co-signed by members of the 92 and other Thatcher supporters. Again, Gow made sure to show these to Mrs Thatcher.⁶⁵⁹

Just as the steel strike had put pressure on Prior, the unravelling of the strike strengthened the case for his gradualist policy. Patrick Cosgrave⁶⁶⁰ and Alan Clark believed that what brought the trade unions under control was the state of the economy rather than legislation.⁶⁶¹ Rising unemployment and recession diluted the desire for strike action. These assessments, however, came after the battle over the Employment Bill. But by the end of the steel strike, the evidence for their conclusions was building. On 5 December 1979 the mineworkers’ union had voted against a strike, and a potential re-run of the Winter of Discontent.⁶⁶² Martin Holmes credits Thatcher for ‘skilfully’ avoiding a repeat of the miners’ strikes of 1972 and 1974 by distancing the government from direct intervention and leaving negotiation to the National Coal Board.⁶⁶³ Although he came to question the government’s macroeconomic policy, Michael Edwardes, the Chairman of British Leyland, fired the militant shop steward Derek ‘Red Robbo’ Robinson in late 1979 and neutralised any sympathetic industrial action with the threat that the whole British Leyland board would resign. As one

⁶⁵⁵ THCR2/1/4/121 f192, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 19 February 1980.

⁶⁵⁶ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, ‘Keep your nerve, Margaret, and you’re on a winner’, *Sunday Express*, 24 February 1980.

⁶⁵⁷ Clark, p. 147.

⁶⁵⁸ John Wilkinson (1940-2014), Conservative MP for Bradford West, 1970-74; Ruislip Northwood, 1979-2005.

⁶⁵⁹ THCR2/1/4/122 f155, Ian Gow MP to Margaret Thatcher MP, 28 February 1980.

⁶⁶⁰ Patrick Cosgrave, *Thatcher: The First Term* (London: The Bodley Head, 1985), p. 167.

⁶⁶¹ THCR 2/6/2/48 part 2 f10, Peter Cropper Minute to Treasury, 11 November 1980.

⁶⁶² Cosgrave, p. 92.

⁶⁶³ Holmes, *The First Thatcher Government*, p. 39.

worker said, ‘like a lot of people at Longbridge, I get fed up with strikes and disputes’.⁶⁶⁴ There was to be no solidarity with Robinson and his campaign evaporated within days.

The steel strike ended in April without sweeping secondary action feared by many of Prior’s critics. Private steel producers were importing enough steel through non-union ports. Whereas the union militants had succeeded at Hadfields, they had not at Sheerness, and private steel production continued.⁶⁶⁵ Trade union militancy did not spread as far or as fast as the government feared. Indeed, on the day the steel strike ended, British Leyland’s biggest unions ‘pulled back from calling a strike’.⁶⁶⁶ Aitken called it a success for Mrs Thatcher, with the ISTC accepting a pay deal three per cent below inflation.⁶⁶⁷ Moore, however, suggested it was higher than the government would have liked.⁶⁶⁸ But in a boost for Prior’s strategy, these victories were all achieved without the sweeping legislation demanded by Mrs Thatcher, leading members of the 92, and other backbench critics of the Employment Secretary.

Even though the strike had ended, the 92 still pressed for tougher reforms, arguing that they would lose public support without them. The Southend East by-election in March returned Teddy Taylor to parliament with a bare majority of five hundred, reduced from ten thousand at the 1979 election.⁶⁶⁹ To Gardiner, who by now was taking an ever-increasing role in marshalling the 92, this poor showing at the polls was ‘the heavy price to be paid’ for timid trade union reforms.⁶⁷⁰ The *Sunday Telegraph* reported that Gardiner spoke on behalf of ‘right-of-centre’ Tories, highlighting his leadership role on the backbenches. In a speech in his constituency Gardiner said that ‘second doubts’ have set in ‘over the government’s determination’ to rein in union power.⁶⁷¹ Gardiner correlated the dilution of Tory policies with a plot to oust Mrs Thatcher. Hugo Young wrote that the ‘scheming and deferential’ Gardiner warned ‘there are people in the Tory Party who are out to get the Prime Minister’.⁶⁷² To Gardiner, as the steel strike collapsed, there needed to be unity between the tough macroeconomic policies of the government and ‘a continuing onslaught against excessive trade union power’. In an article for the *Sunday Express* he outlined the ways the Employment Bill

⁶⁶⁴ Dominic Sandbrook, *Who Dares Wins: Britain, 1979-82* (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 318.

⁶⁶⁵ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 513.

⁶⁶⁶ David Felton, ‘BL’s big unions pull back from stoppage’, *The Times*, 2 April 1980, p. 1.

⁶⁶⁷ Aitken, p.378.

⁶⁶⁸ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 513.

⁶⁶⁹ Cosgrave, p. 93.

⁶⁷⁰ U DPW/37/17, George Gardiner MP to Sir Patrick Wall MP, 18 March 1980.

⁶⁷¹ Unattributed, ‘Warning to “timid” Tories’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 16 March 1980, p. 40.

⁶⁷² PPA 3/120, Hugo Young, ‘Why is the Lady not for burning?’, *The Sunday Times*, 10 March 1980.

could be strengthened. If Prior's step by step approach were to be the means, the ends Gardiner wanted went further than Prior would countenance. This included ballots to undo closed shops, opening union funds to compensation claims, and plans to 'make union leaders properly responsive to the views of their members'. As a concluding warning to Prior, Gardiner wrote 'let us hope Jim Prior, and successive Employment Secretaries', have learned their lesson.⁶⁷³ Gardiner had in mind the removal of Prior as the solution to the party's problems. The lines were drawn as the Employment Bill returned to the Commons in April.

A Supportive Rebellion

The rebellion over the Employment Bill was the biggest Mrs Thatcher faced in her first year. It was led by members of the 92 who placed and supported amendments to toughen up the Bill. Superficially it pitted Mrs Thatcher's strongest supporters against her administration. In reality it was a manoeuvre to put 'Mrs Thatcher's amendments' on the Bill to do as she wished. Like the announcement on strike pay, it was arguably a coordinated effort to wreck Prior's strategy. The 92 were not the only ones unhappy at the Bill. Percival also conducted a clandestine campaign against it from within the government as Solicitor-General. The only thing that kept Prior's strategy in place was the promise of more legislation that would gradually cut away union powers. Had the 92 not put up this campaign, it is doubtful that Prior would have conceded as much.

The government took the rebellions very seriously and the Whips tried to limit their size. On 16 April government Whip Peter Morrison offered to 'help' arrange a 'pair'⁶⁷⁴ for Alan Clark for the following evening's vote on John Gorst's rebel amendment. The amendment sought to place 'an even greater restriction on trade union immunity to legal action'.⁶⁷⁵ Clark wrote after that 'there had been a revolt of 37 backbenchers against a provision of the Employment Bill and he [Morrison] had wanted to get me out of the way'.⁶⁷⁶ Although it was defeated by 475 to thirty-five⁶⁷⁷, the significance was disclosed in Clark's diary: he wrote that Morrison was an 'implacable pairing whip who, if he had his way, would

⁶⁷³ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'Now we need a strategy to beat the wreckers', *Sunday Express*, 30 March 1980.

⁶⁷⁴ A 'pair' arrangement is when MPs from opposing parties agree to absent themselves from a division, organised through the Whips offices of both parties.

⁶⁷⁵ Hugh Noyes, 'Mr Prior finds a moderate path through the crossfire', *The Times*, 18 February 1980, p. 2.

⁶⁷⁶ Clark, p. 152.

⁶⁷⁷ The votes of the tellers are not counted in divisions.

never register *any* pairs'.⁶⁷⁸ The Whips were therefore using the pairing scheme to get as many potential rebels away from parliament as possible.

In the debate Prior was heavily criticised. Whitney continued his campaign against him. Prior's legislation was opaque and not understood in the country, making it quite different from the Conservative election manifesto.⁶⁷⁹ Ironically, however, Whitney did not vote for Gorst's amendment. Gardiner and John Townend acted as tellers for the rebels, and, with them included, seventeen of the 92 Group voted for the amendment.⁶⁸⁰ With just under half of the rebels members of the 92, there was far greater unity than in the Heath years, especially on an amendment not from one of their own.

The following week 'Margaret's amendments' were heard, placed by members of the 92.⁶⁸¹ The first, on 22 April, was John Browne's amendment for secret ballots if fifteen per cent of the workforce or 500 employees, whichever was smaller, demanded one. Yet this received mixed signals from the Prime Minister. Mrs Thatcher, *The Times* reported the day before the debate, disappointed those who wanted tougher amendments. Yet the excerpts quoted concentrated on forthcoming legislation, and not a repudiation of Browne's proposal. Mrs Thatcher said that 'by the summer [...] the very wide legal immunities [...] will have been narrowed [...] if necessary we will legislate further'.⁶⁸² It was a message to placate the radicals *and* Prior. As Gow mentioned to Alan Clark, Prior would be 'more dangerous' as a focus for 'old Heathites' if he were on the backbenches. With Mrs Thatcher publicly standing by Prior, it was therefore left to Gow to rally votes for the rebel amendments behind the scenes, mentioning to Clark that should he vote for the amendment it would not affect his standing in the view of the Prime Minister.⁶⁸³ Cosgrave claimed that Mrs Thatcher 'made it clear her heart was with' the rebels.⁶⁸⁴ Aitken summed up the odd situation that 'the PPS to the Prime Minister was seen to be fermenting opposition to the legislation proposed by the Secretary of State for

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., p 159.

⁶⁷⁹ Hansard, 17 February 1980, Vol. 982, Col. 1573.

⁶⁸⁰ Adding Den Dover MP, who joined in 1981, the number would increase to 18. Hansard, 17 February 1980, Vol. 982, Col. 1613.

⁶⁸¹ Aitken, p. 305.

⁶⁸² George Clark, 'Mrs Thatcher hints at more laws on trade union immunities', *The Times*, 22 February 1980, p. 1.

⁶⁸³ Clark, *Into Politics*, p. 155.

⁶⁸⁴ Cosgrave, p. 165.

Employment’.⁶⁸⁵ The *Daily Mail* forecast that rebel numbers had grown to a point that ‘only the Opposition can, and will, rescue the government’.⁶⁸⁶

Prior was concerned that the rebels’ activism was helping the unions and the opposition. The unions declared a ‘day of action’ for 14 May 1980 to protest against government economic policy. Prior was worried that tougher legislation would unite the unions for prolonged industrial action, something that had not yet materialised. Again, he did not rule out further legislation, but the rebel amendments ‘would undermine moderate union membership’. This argument did not dissuade the rebels. Michael Colvin gave a comment to the *Scotsman* that alluded to more organised behaviour from the 92. Colvin had already informed Gow that he had organised a core of Thatcherites from the 92 the previous Autumn. Now he indicated that the amendments were part of an organised campaign, writing that ‘under *our clauses* (author’s emphasis), the workers themselves within the unions will trigger the process’ of initiating a secret strike ballot.⁶⁸⁷

As the rebellion went on, more members of the 92 rebelled. Whilst the Browne and Colvin amendments were heavily defeated, they brought more united support from the 92 than Gorst’s amendment the week before. There was momentum behind them with nineteen members voting for the amendment, up two from the week before. It was a more organised effort. Again, Gardiner was a teller for the rebels, this time with Gorst. The debate was well attended by members of the 92, and nine made substantive speeches in the debate, more than in the debate the previous week. In a subsequent division that evening on an amendment to ‘make it unlawful for a customer to write into his contract with his supplier’ an obligation that the supplier’s workforce be in a closed shop or be a member of a trade union, fifteen Tories voted in favour and six belonged to the 92.⁶⁸⁸

These defeats did not stop the rebels. Gardiner acted as teller for an amendment to put existing closed shops to a ballot if there were a demand for one. Twenty-two members of the 92 rebelled and voted for what Labour MP John Evans declared was a repeat of the Industrial Relations Act and an attempt ‘to outlaw the closed shop’.⁶⁸⁹ This explains the vigour behind

⁶⁸⁵ Aitken, p 305.

⁶⁸⁶ PPA 3/210, John Harrison, ‘Maggie faces revolt by Tory MPs’, *Daily Mail*, 21 April 1980.

⁶⁸⁷ Unattributed, ‘Impassioned plea by Prior’, *Scotsman*, 13 April 1980, p.7.

⁶⁸⁸ Michael Hatfield, ‘Mr Prior stands firm against Tory revolt’, *The Times*, 23 April 1980.

⁶⁸⁹ Hansard, Commons Debates, 23 April 1980, Vol. 983, Cols. 525-6.

Prior's repudiation of 'another assault by militant Conservative backbenchers' on his moderate approach.⁶⁹⁰ For Gardiner, it was imperative to repeatedly defy the three-line whip to strengthen the Bill, to ensure subsequent Bills were introduced, and that they represented the manifesto.⁶⁹¹ To emphasise the battle wasn't over, Gardiner published a pamphlet calling for widespread dilution of trade union immunities.⁶⁹²

The Whips' office seems to have taken the most offence at the rebellion, not recognising it was done out of support for the Prime Minister. Towards the end of the week's rebellion, Alan Clark received a brusque rebuke from Jopling when conversation turned to the 'quality' of those who had voted against the whip. Jopling's view was that it was a vote against the government.⁶⁹³ It was not and shows how removed Jopling was from the 'dries'. It was a vote to shore up Mrs Thatcher against those who would weaken the government's agenda. An example of this was a letter Vivian Bendall wrote to Mrs Thatcher 'to explain' his position. He told the Prime Minister that the Bill 'did not match our manifesto'. It was not, however, a rebellion against her. Bendall wished 'to place on record my complete confidence [in] and loyalty to you'.⁶⁹⁴

Prior Warning

As the Bill went to the Lords unamended, the campaign against it turned into one against Prior. At the conclusion of the April rebellions, Gardiner claimed 'nearly 100' had protested, not just the Bill, but Prior's 'softly softly' approach, and a 'further 25' had 'deliberately abstained'.⁶⁹⁵ For the first time, too, Gardiner called for Prior's dismissal. He suggested 'that the Employment Secretary James Prior ought to be sacked'. Prior's policy had put backbenchers in a terrible position to choose between 'honouring the spirit of their election speeches and supporting the Government'.⁶⁹⁶ Yet again events would save Prior. The scheduled 'day of action' for the trade unions on 14 May was a disaster. *The Times* called it 'a qualified flop' with patchy industrial stoppages. It was far from a national show of defiance from the trade

⁶⁹⁰ Hugh Noyes, 'Mr Prior stands firm against Tory rebels', *The Times*, 24 April 1980.

⁶⁹¹ Gardiner, p. 140.

⁶⁹² Holmes, *The First Thatcher Government*, p. 133.

⁶⁹³ Clark, p. 156.

⁶⁹⁴ THCR2/1/4/7 f32, Vivian Bendall to Margaret Thatcher, 24 April 1980.

⁶⁹⁵ PPA 3/210, unattributed, 'Tory rebel warns government', *Western Mail*, 25 April 1980.

⁶⁹⁶ PPA 3/210, Robert Carvel, "'Sack Prior" – hints Tory', *Evening Standard*, 29 April 1980.

unionised working class.⁶⁹⁷ Prior's strategy, from his point of view, had not united the trades unions to fight Conservative industrial relations legislation like they had in the early 1970s. On trade union reform what was bad for the rebels and Mrs Thatcher was good for the country.

Restive backbenchers now asked Mrs Thatcher to intervene as the House of Lords considered the Bill. Sir William Clark wrote of his concerns. 'I really think that this one is so urgent that I should bring it to your attention', he wrote. He doubted that Prior could mollify the unions, 'I do not subscribe to this view'. The unions, he wrote, would oppose whatever was put before them. As for the detail of the Bill, Clark was not sure it would do anything on secondary action. As he saw it, a strike in the workplace of a supplier could be used to instigate industrial action in another workplace where a grievance did not exist. Ultimately, he feared a repeat of 'the trouble [...] in 1978-79'. It was his interpretation that, after the dismal day of action, the trade unions would regroup and press for more organised resistance. With his point made, Clark ended by loyally affirming 'how very much we admire your leadership and at last Britain is getting firm government at home and leadership in the world'. Mrs Thatcher replied that she had 'asked Ian Gow to have a word with' him.⁶⁹⁸

Gow continued to push Mrs Thatcher in what he considered the right direction, sending her press cuttings and the views of backbenchers in sympathy with his own. At the 1922 Committee meeting on 22 May he listed 'Stanbrook, Bill Clark, Hastings⁶⁹⁹, and Jack Page⁷⁰⁰', all of the 92, against Clause 16 of the Bill on picketing. In the Commons Michael Shaw⁷⁰¹ criticised the weakness of the Clause. Shaw and Prior disagreed about the clarity of the legislation, and that the legislation would still allow picketing at premises not engaged in a dispute.⁷⁰² To Gow's surprise the Chief Whip said Shaw had been put up to it, not by anyone from the 92, but by the Solicitor-General. Gow informed Mrs Thatcher that 'Jim knew that Ian Percival was behind the voices of the dissidents'.⁷⁰³ The rebellion was much wider than the backbenches. Percival had been unhappy with the Bill for a long time, and in February Mrs Thatcher was told that he wanted to be relieved of it, feeling it did not go far enough. Whilst

⁶⁹⁷ Leader, 'Mr Murray's Off Day', *The Times*, 15 May 1980, p. 15.

⁶⁹⁸ THCR2/1/4/29 f35, Margaret Thatcher to William Clark, 22 May 1980.

⁶⁹⁹ Sir Stephen Hastings (1921-2005), Conservative MP for Mid Bedfordshire, 1960-83.

⁷⁰⁰ Sir John (Jack) Page.

⁷⁰¹ Michael Shaw (1920-1921), National Liberal and Conservative MP for Brighouse and Spenborough (1960-64), Conservative MP for Scarborough and Whitby (1966-92). Created Baron Shaw of Northstead, 1992.

⁷⁰² Hansard, Commons Debates, 17 April 1980, Vol. 982, Cols. 1523-4.

⁷⁰³ THCR 2/6/2/56 part 2 f53, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 27 May 1980.

Mrs Thatcher acquiesced and allowed Percival to be removed from the team overseeing the Employment Bill, Percival was not happy with its contents or with Prior.⁷⁰⁴ Without a strengthened Bill, Percival sought to influence changes behind the scenes. Another front had opened up. As Gow reminded Mrs Thatcher, ‘the truth is that the critics are right’.⁷⁰⁵

Whereas Prior could at least claim victory in the 1922 Committee earlier in the year, by the summer he was still under pressure from members of the 92 on secondary action. Yet these pleas give the impression that they knew it was their last chance. Gow, for instance, wrote to Mrs Thatcher twice in one day on the subject. Reporting on the 1922 Committee meeting of 13 June, Gow informed Mrs Thatcher that Stephen Hastings and William Clark wanted the government to accept Lord Orr-Ewing’s amendments to the Employment Bill. These, introduced the next day, called on the government to abolish ‘all secondary action which interfered with commercial contracts’, going much further than Prior’s legislation.⁷⁰⁶ Another letter from Gow on the 13 June pleaded with Mrs Thatcher to strengthen the Bill, ‘bearing in mind’ that pressure in the party and country was building ‘is it really not possible to ask Jim to look’ at the legislation again?⁷⁰⁷ Even Edward du Cann, the chairman of the 1922 Committee, reported that ‘a substantial body of opinion’ in the country did not believe the legislation went far enough.⁷⁰⁸

The government, however, would not be moved, nor would they accept the amendments. Prior privately placated du Cann on 11 June with the promise of further action on trade union immunities, precisely what the Orr-Ewing amendments had aimed at. Prior wrote that the coming Green Paper would cover ‘immunity of union funds [...] extent of the immunity for secondary action’, compulsory ballots and ‘the definition of a “trade dispute”’. Although du Cann knew this at the 1922 Committee meeting of the 13 June, he did not say anything. Prior, in his letter, swore him to secrecy, ‘I know you will use the contents of this letter with discretion’.⁷⁰⁹ The promise of further significant and precise action over trade union immunities was enough to keep the party’s backbench grandee onside. But it wasn’t just a

⁷⁰⁴ TNA, PREM 19/263 f141, Tim Lankester to Margaret Thatcher, 19 February 1980.

⁷⁰⁵ THCR 2/6/2/56 part 2 f53, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 27 May 1980.

⁷⁰⁶ Unattributed, ‘Secondary action clause’, *The Times*, 14 June 1980, p. 3.

⁷⁰⁷ THCR 2/6/2/56 part 2 f52, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 13 June 1980.

⁷⁰⁸ THCR 2/6/2/114 pt2 (47), Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 13 June 1980.

⁷⁰⁹ BD/1/204, James Prior to Edward Du Cann, 11 June 1980.

matter of strengthening the Employment Bill. As it moved to the Lords, Prior noted that it was ‘the right wing’s last effort to unseat me’.⁷¹⁰

Gardiner’s strategy of mixing parliamentary and public pressure through the media backfired and cost his cause vital support. He annoyed the Executive of the 1922 Committee by leaking a letter to the newspapers. On 1 July he wrote to Edward du Cann ‘as a matter of urgency’ to summon Prior to the 1922 Committee to discuss the Lords’ amendments to the Employment Bill. Gardiner demonstrated popular will behind his suggestion by having the letter signed by thirty-eight MPs and almost half, eighteen, were existing members of the 92.⁷¹¹ Rather than list signatories Gardiner had MPs sign the letter itself and the text is covered with legible and illegible signatures. Gardiner evidently had a network of like-minded MPs, not just of the 92, that he could call upon to back him up at short notice. The names included the rebels on the Employment Bill from the 92, Clark, Brown, Colvin, Bendall, Nicholas Winterton, and a rare appearance from Patrick Wall. Julia Langdon, in the *Guardian*, reported the following day that the letter was signed by forty MPs, a slight exaggeration, and that MPs were coming under pressure within their constituencies for a tougher Bill.⁷¹² It surprised and upset du Cann that the existence of the letter was reported in the press. Whilst he had discussed it with the vice-chairmen of the 1922 Committee, they were ‘surprised to learn that somehow the Lobby were aware of the proposal’. Gardiner’s strategy had backfired, and the Executive refused his request to demand Prior attend the Committee. Du Cann reprimanded Gardiner for leaking the letter, writing that it was ‘unusual to say the least for the business of the 1922 Committee to be conducted in public’. He told Gardiner he couldn’t ‘recollect this happening before’.⁷¹³

The irony is that Prior got his Employment Bill, but in doing so he unleashed a determined campaign to remove him and bring forth proposals for tougher union measures he had been hesitant to include in the first Bill, if at all. It was a victory of sorts for Gardiner and his colleagues, but they were not content to let matters rest. On 7 July he wrote in the *Daily Express* and the rhetoric was noticeably harsher, the attacks more personal. The legislation was ‘Jim Prior’s Bill’, and it ‘will give trade unions the right to call for sympathy strikes and

⁷¹⁰ Prior, p. 166.

⁷¹¹ The letter also includes other MPs who would later join the 92, like John Stokes and Densmore Dover. BD/1/204, George Gardiner to Edward Du Cann, 1 July 1980.

⁷¹² PPA 3/210, Julia Langdon, ‘Pressure Grows on Government to toughen Employment Bill’, *Guardian*, 2 July 1980.

⁷¹³ BD/1/204, Edward Du Cann to George Gardiner, 2 July 1980.

“blackening” at certain firms where there is no dispute’. He wrote that Prior’s legislation was worthless and that gave readers reason to ‘complain that Margaret Thatcher’s government was elected to stop this sort of thing’. The Lords’ amendments were ‘one last chance to stop the wreckers’. It is arguable that rather than the union militants being the ‘wreckers’, Gardiner meant Prior and the ‘wets’. Prior’s legislation, ‘his Employment Bill’, was undermining the manifesto Mrs Thatcher had won the election with. If Prior succeeded, it would weaken her.⁷¹⁴ In return, Prior published an open letter ‘which strongly rebutted his attacks on my policy’, creating a public war of words between the two.⁷¹⁵

The fact that Prior needed to engage Gardiner confirmed his leadership position amongst the rebels. As Gardiner accused Prior of undermining the Conservative manifesto, it demonstrated the debate on the Employment Bill was over and became one on broader government policy. Meanwhile the Lords’ amendments were going nowhere. Mrs Thatcher had been placated by Lord Hailsham, the Lord Chancellor, that while the Bill ‘might have been drafted differently’ it was nonetheless ‘workable’.⁷¹⁶ Gardiner tried his own futile lobby operation on Hailsham, sending a telegram signed by fifty Tory MPs asking him to support the Lords’ amendments. The *Daily Mail* described it as a ‘cheeky’ move, inviting one member of the cabinet to rebuke another.⁷¹⁷ That the telegram ended up in the press was also a distinctive Gardiner tactic. He would demonstrate relevant support of his position through a letter or petition, and then leak it as a piece of propaganda. But the die was already cast. Mrs Thatcher had met the rebel Lords the day she agreed the course with Hailsham. The Bill ‘goes as far as we can at present’. The face-saving caveat was that ‘this is only a beginning’, there would be a subsequent Green Paper and it was ‘highly likely another Bill’ will come ‘this session’.⁷¹⁸

The Lords’ amendments failed, and the rebellion was as good as over. An amendment to strengthen the proposals on the closed shop was withdrawn at the last minute and the crucial amendment to prohibit all secondary strike action was defeated in the House of Lords by 244 votes to forty-one. Compromise and caution had won but Thorneycroft, the party chairman, admitted in the debate that the Bill was ‘slightly different’ from that offered in ‘the party

⁷¹⁴ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, ‘One last chance to stop the wreckers’, *Daily Express*, 7 July 1980.

⁷¹⁵ Prior, p. 166.

⁷¹⁶ THCR 2/6/2/56 part 2 f17, Tim Lankester to Mrs Thatcher, 2 July 1980.

⁷¹⁷ Political Editor, ‘Strike law revolt by 50 MPs’, *Daily Mail*, 7 July 1980, p. 4.

⁷¹⁸ THCR 2/6/2/16 f50, Ian Gow to Mrs Thatcher, 2 July 1980.

manifesto'.⁷¹⁹ Gardiner's warning had been proved right. Hailsham attacked the rebels in the debate, saying they should 'have more faith in the Cabinet', but in a nod to the strength of the rebellion he announced a Green Paper would be published in November. It reflected Gardiner's clout that his campaign had roused such interest. Hugh Noyes of *The Times* called it a 'much publicized revolt' and Gardiner's name was all over the reports at the time.⁷²⁰

Gardiner argued that militant union leaders had not gone away, and Scargill could make matters worse if there was not more legislation. He used his next *Sunday Express* article after the defeat of the Lords' amendments to point out that Scargill was standing to lead the National Union of Mineworkers. Scargill's name had become famous after organising the flying picket that forced the closure of the Saltley coke works in 1972.⁷²¹ Although the Employment Bill had clamped down on secondary picketing, it was Scargill's threats of wider secondary action during the steel strike that had pushed Mrs Thatcher to try and force a one-clause Bill through parliament to outlaw it completely. Scargill's elevation as leader of the NUM was a threat Gardiner played on. He claimed Scargill was determined to force 'a pay confrontation next winter', thus articulating the need for more legislation. 'If Scargill wins, he could be there for 20 years', and it was therefore vital to make the laws on secondary picketing 'stick', but, highlighting the weaknesses of the Prior Bill, 'that depends on employers taking individual picket leaders to court'.⁷²² For the law to succeed, it therefore meant employers had to have the funds to get an injunction, adding a further cost to business and industry and exposing the limits of Prior's legislation.

With the Bill unamended, Prior lauded his strategy, which, he claimed, had worked. The unions had not united against the government. The day of action on 14 of May was a 'disaster for the TUC' and 'management says that there is a greater spirit of cooperation with the workforce than for the past fifteen years'. As an olive branch to the rebels, he gave more detail to the November Green Paper, that it would target 'union funds, secondary action, and immunities', just what the rebels had sought to put into the first Bill. It won over some of the

⁷¹⁹ Hansard, Lords Debates, 8 July 1980, Vol. 411, Col. 1095.

⁷²⁰ Hugh Noyes, 'Tory revolt over unions Bill fails', *The Times*, 9 July 1980, p. 1.

⁷²¹ Paul Routledge, *Scargill: The Unauthorised Biography* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 70.

⁷²² PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'Will the miners let themselves become the Marxist pawns of King Arthur?', *Sunday Express*, 13 July 1980.

critics. Michael Shaw wished ‘him and the Bill well’. Gardiner still pressed for legislation ‘because old bad practices will recur when the recession is over’.⁷²³

For the 92 it had been the most united campaign seen to date. Although it was ironic that it rebelled against Mrs Thatcher’s administration, its leading members saw it as an attempt to shore up her position. Gow continually pleaded with Mrs Thatcher in private, whilst whipping up discontent in the Commons, seeking out members of the 92 to place questions for a stronger Employment Bill. Gardiner was the ringleader of the Commons rebels, acting as teller for the amendments, and was author of several round robin letters to strengthen the Bill. He overreached, however, by leaking to the press. But that was his style as a schemer and propagandist. He sought to motivate the grassroots and put pressure on MPs via the press. He had done this through *Conservative Monthly News* and the *Sunday Express* for years, yet it did not work on the Employment Bill. It turned the 1922 Executive against him, and had no effect on Hailsham who, by the time the Lords’ amendments were discussed, was in favour of Prior’s Bill. Gardiner’s victory came through Prior’s concession that there would be more legislation to come. The Employment Secretary needed this to win round the mainstream of the party worried about both union militancy and the possibility of a repeat of the Industrial Relations Act. By the end the campaign had become personal, with Gardiner repeatedly calling for Prior to be replaced. So personal did it become that Group member Paul Hawkins wrote to Patrick Wall with concerns about the Group’s attitude to Prior. He wrote ‘I am worried that our Group – as a Group – might become identified with attacks on Jim Prior’.⁷²⁴

Not for Turning

This section will argue that Gardiner’s whipping operation for the backbench policy committees was a success at a time of a worsening situation for the government. The 92 held steady and retained control of the backbench finance committee, although fell short of increasing its membership there. This becomes more impressive considering the sustained attacks on the government’s economic strategy from the opposition inside and outside the Conservative party. This section will conclude that the 92 were more organised than their rivals, who had no substantial alternative policy of their own.

⁷²³ THCR 2/6/2/56 pt2 (43), Gow record of conversation, Backbench Employment Committee, 16 July 1980.

⁷²⁴ U DPW/37/17, Paul Hawkins to Patrick Wall, 10 October 1980.

During the battle on trade union reform the government stuck to its economic strategy, despite rising inflation and unemployment. In the March 1980 budget spending was cut by £1bn. Tax thresholds were increased in line with inflation. Whereas in the 1979 budget the Conservatives prioritised the free economy ahead of inflation control, Holmes suggests the reverse was now the case.⁷²⁵ This view, however, can be challenged by another of Howe's policies that freed the economy and made it harder to control the money supply. In the budget Howe committed the government to abolish the 'supplementary special deposit scheme' also known as the banking 'corset'. Under the corset banks were penalised for allowing lending to go above a certain rate. After the abolition of exchange controls the banks found new ways to get around the corset.⁷²⁶ The economist William Keegan wrote that after the abolition of exchange controls the corset was doomed and the government had initially wanted it abolished in 1979. The simultaneous abolition of exchange controls and the corset, however, when interest rates and inflation were increasing, would look contradictory and, in Keegan's words, 'odd'.⁷²⁷ As for the effect on the money supply, Howe admitted in his budget statement that 'sterling M3 will be swollen' after the abolition of the corset as private bank lending increased.⁷²⁸ Much of this flew over the heads of many backbenchers. Peter Hordern said MPs thought of something completely different when they heard about the 'corset'. Many simply did not understand the complexities of monetary policy and how technical the debate would get.⁷²⁹ Yet it exposed the difficulty in trying to liberalise the economy and bring inflation down at the same time through monetary controls without the necessary and swift reductions in public spending. It was also a reason why Mrs Thatcher's supporters reasoned that the recovery would take time.

Controlling public spending was made more difficult because of the Clegg pay awards, which amounted to £2,000 million of extra spending in the 1980 budget.⁷³⁰ Holmes suggests the attempts to reduce borrowing were also 'blown off' by the surging social security payments from higher unemployment.⁷³¹ Most radical of all was the plan for a Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) that intensified the government's monetarism. The aim was to control the

⁷²⁵ Holmes, *The First Thatcher Government*, p. 54.

⁷²⁶ Keegan, p. 149.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁷²⁸ Hansard, Commons Debates, 26 March 1980, Vol. 981, Col. 1445.

⁷²⁹ Sir Peter Hordern, interview with the author, Kent, 1 December 2021.

⁷³⁰ Cosgrave, p. 70.

⁷³¹ Holmes, *The First Thatcher Government*, p. 55.

growth of the M3 measure of money, itself a controversial measure⁷³², and plan for a seven to eleven per cent growth in M3, dropping to a range of four to eight per cent in 1983-84. Although Mrs Thatcher secured cabinet approval of the MTFS prior to its publication, the ‘wets’ were still grumbling on union policy, pay policy, and spending cuts.⁷³³

Events showed that the monetarist experiment was not bringing immediate benefits. By April inflation was at nineteen per cent. Mrs Thatcher, however, would not be diverted and would not reflate. Her critics in cabinet also had no alternative.⁷³⁴ The problem for the government was that this monetary tightening was not immediately cutting inflation. By May the inflation rate had reached twenty-one point nine per cent, a high for the government. William Clark encouraged more spending cuts to ease the interest rate, thus helping homeowners with mortgages.⁷³⁵ Gardiner reminded his colleagues that inflation was a ‘virus’ and the cure would take time. In a speech to his constituency business club, he reiterated the campaign would take years not months. He returned to attack the trade unions, who ‘will succeed in killing off more companies and jobs’. For the first time he hit out at Clegg saying that pay ‘comparability’⁷³⁶ should be ditched. Gardiner also recognised the subtle change in government policy away from tax cuts to monetary control, ‘as inflation comes under control this will permit tax cuts to stimulate growth’. This was a change of view from his article of June 1979 where he advocated income tax cuts come what may. His peroration encouraged his parliamentary colleagues to hold the line: ‘There will be voices urging apparently “soft” options – like a formal incomes policy – that would simply postpone the day of recovery.’ Staying the course meant ‘we shall enjoy the almost forgotten luxury of sound money’.⁷³⁷ William Clark echoed Gardiner. At a finance committee meeting of 8 July he said to Howe ‘we are with you all the way’.⁷³⁸ It would not be the last time Clark felt he needed speak on behalf of Conservative backbenchers.

In August 1980 the 92 set up an ‘election planning group’ in preparation for choppy backbench elections in November. Emphasising the importance of William Clark’s position

⁷³² M3 was the measure of money in the economy quantified by the amount of notes, building society and bank deposits. M3 had been used as a monetary measure by the previous Labour government.

⁷³³ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 505.

⁷³⁴ Aitken, p. 302.

⁷³⁵ Peter Simmonds, ‘£1,000m more cuts may be ordered’, *Daily Telegraph*, 29 June 1980, p. 1.

⁷³⁶ Its full name was the Pay Comparability Commission.

⁷³⁷ PPA 3/210, CCO News Service, George Gardiner, Speech to Reigate and Banstead Conservative Business Luncheon Club, 25 June 1980.

⁷³⁸ Our political correspondent, ‘Tory MPs urge more pay curbs’, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 July 1980, p. 1.

as backbench finance chairman, he was included in the panel along with Gardiner, Tony Durant⁷³⁹, and Michael Colvin, who, along with Gardiner, were closely aligned with many of the new intake of the 92. This was organised by Gardiner as Wall was away in Taiwan, further demonstrating Gardiner's leadership role in the 92, and Wall's detachment.⁷⁴⁰ It was well worth early organisation as on 4 August du Cann, as chairman of the 1922 Committee, fed back to Mrs Thatcher that 'there is great anxiety amongst the Executive' of the 1922 about the economic situation and the 'wets' on the Committee wanted to raise the unemployment figures with her.⁷⁴¹ If members of the Executive were getting jittery, then considerable numbers on the backbenches were too. Du Cann, however, was not opposed to the policy, but he was desperate for the government to show that monetarism was not an end in itself. He conceded that the unemployment figures were due 'largely to a world recession', but the party was fed up with monetarism; it 'had become a term of abuse in the mouths of our political opponents'.⁷⁴²

The ongoing attacks from within the cabinet were frustrating some of the party's backbenchers. Alan Clark wrote to Gow about the ceaseless attacks on the government and how certain journalists spent their 'whole time emphasising alleged divisions within the Parliamentary Party, forecasting a "U" turn etc'.⁷⁴³ Gardiner's articles, therefore, were important to counter the negative press coverage. A fortnight after Clark's complaint, his *Sunday Express* article drew on the wartime spirit of attrition to encourage colleagues to steady their nerves. Just as in the first six months of war 'everything was going badly', things eventually turned around. The same was true of the economy. By August inflation had fallen 'dramatically' by four per cent. But this was not time to relax the policy. Gardiner had a message for the 'wets', 'short-sighted politicians will seize on the evidence of improvement' to reflate to 'save jobs'.⁷⁴⁴ William Clark's message that weekend was the same as Gardiner's. He wrote to the Chancellor to encourage further spending restraint, inflation had to reach single figures before Tories 'could claim that the Government was achieving its objective'.⁷⁴⁵

⁷³⁹ Sir Robert Anthony Durant (1928-2019), Conservative MP for Reading North, 1974-83; Reading West, 1983-97.

⁷⁴⁰ U DPW/37/17, George Gardiner to Patrick Wall, 7 August 1980.

⁷⁴¹ THCR 2/6/2/114 pt2 (9), Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 4 August 1980.

⁷⁴² THCR 2/6/2/114 pt2 (7), Gow record of conversation, 11 August 1980.

⁷⁴³ THCR 1/3/5 (118), Alan Clark to Ian Gow, 5 August 1980.

⁷⁴⁴ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'Don't cheer yet – but the time for cheers will come', *Sunday Express*, 17 August 1980.

⁷⁴⁵ Peter Simmonds, 'Howe makes new plea', *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 August 1980, p. 1.

Just as Mrs Thatcher announced that she was ‘not for turning’ in her 1980 party conference speech, the Heathites on the backbenches made a concerted push to undermine her policies in the run up to the backbench elections. In January Geoffrey Rippon had fired the starting gun with a series of attacks on government policy. At the end of October he would do the same though this time Edward Heath, the bogeyman of the 92, was in the wings. In a letter to *The Times* Rippon called monetarism a ‘statistical gamble’, interest rates were too high, and the government was borrowing ‘a massive £2,000m or more a year’ to pay for unemployment.⁷⁴⁶ On monetary targets, Rippon had a point; the government had overshot its targets massively. After some initial success after the March budget, in September M3 grew by eight per cent in two months, rather than nine per cent across the whole year.⁷⁴⁷ Yet on spending, the £2,000 million figure Rippon decried was similar to that of the Clegg pay awards, a policy welcomed by those on the ‘wet’ edge of the party.

Rippon’s intervention was significant, but he had overplayed his hand in the finance committee, exposing his minority position. Rippon reiterated his critique that the government could not control M3 by interest rates alone, and within the confines of a private forum said the government should have ‘abolished Clegg sooner’ and ‘acted more forcefully on public sector pay’, criticisms left out of his *Times* letter and points that could easily have been made, and were made, from the monetarists and the 92. Peter Hordern exposed Rippon’s position, that he ‘had not said what alternative there was to the government’s policies’ and ‘you would either have to resort to incomes policies or adopt the position that M3 did not matter’. Both had failed in the past, he said. In Gow’s record other members of the 92 feature prominently rebutting Rippon. John Browne called for more time and said that inflation was falling. John Townend called for lower taxes and cuts to public sector pay. Robert Taylor⁷⁴⁸ ‘was the only open critic of Geoffrey Rippon’s *Times* letter’ saying ‘in 1972 we had lost our nerve’, a direct swipe at Rippon’s ally Ted Heath.⁷⁴⁹

Heath duly followed Rippon’s lead with a withering attack on Mrs Thatcher that energised her supporters in the 92. Jopling, the Chief Whip, had warned Gow that this concerted action might happen earlier in the year. In a radio interview Heath said that ‘people

⁷⁴⁶ Geoffrey Rippon, ‘Questions over monetarist strategy’, *The Times*, 28 October 1980, p. 13.

⁷⁴⁷ Cosgrave, p. 114.

⁷⁴⁸ Robert Taylor (1932-1981), Conservative MP for Croydon North West, 1970-81.

⁷⁴⁹ THCR 2/11/9/29 f232, Peter Cropper Minute to Treasury, Conservative Backbench Finance Committee Minutes, 4 November 1980.

realise now what the merits of the last Government, the last Conservative Government, were, compared with the catastrophic things which they see happening to themselves today'.⁷⁵⁰ The following day Ian Lloyd⁷⁵¹ suggested to Mrs Thatcher that getting advice from Heath was like Lord Nelson receiving counsel from Admiral Byng.⁷⁵² Alluding to Heath's U-turn, it was a gift to Thatcher's supporters as Heath had asked the party to choose between Mrs Thatcher's and Heath's policies.

Gardiner seized the opportunity, thanking Heath for speaking out as it drew 'attention to the real danger lurking in the seductive argument that the Government should ditch its anti-inflation policy, slash interest rates and make a dash for growth'. Gardiner stated that taxes had been cut, inflation was coming down, and that the policies had been endorsed at the polls, unlike Heath who lost twice in 1974. Gardiner again emphasised the 'time lag' of Thatcherite economic policy, suggesting that the near twenty-two per cent inflation was a result of Labour's spending spree towards the end of the last administration. Indeed, Gardiner reminded Heath that the after-effects of his own dash for growth was inflation 'soaring by nearly 27 per cent'.⁷⁵³ Heath's intervention had failed to convince members at the backbench finance committee the following week, and they went on the offence against the 'wets'. Only one speaker addressed unemployment, but Alan Clark suggested that high unemployment 'was what was holding the Party activists steadfastly together [...] for better or for worse it was seen as giving the Trades Unions their deserts (sic)'. Townend said that unemployment was 'not the worst problem. In any case, it was attributable to past trade union tactics'.⁷⁵⁴

Resisting pressure from the left and right, Howe opted to try and offer something to both wings in a November package that reduced spending and cut interest rates. Despite not providing the right with the tax cuts they wanted, they opted to support Howe rather than criticise the package. Gardiner took aim at Thatcher's opponents in cabinet who had not cut their budgets deeply enough. Gardiner 'warned ministers that they would face problems with a number of the party's backbenchers if they deviated' from spending cuts. He urged a

⁷⁵⁰ Fred Emery, 'Mr Heath's taunt on "ruinous monetarism"', *The Times*, 6 November 1980, p. 2.

⁷⁵¹ Sir Ian Lloyd (1921-2006), Conservative MP for Portsmouth Langstone, 1964-February 1974; Havant and Waterloo, February 1974-83; Havant, 1983-92. Knighted, 1986.

⁷⁵² Admiral Byng was executed after a court martial concluded that Byng 'failed to do his utmost' to fight the enemy, see Daniel Baugh, 'Byng, John', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4263>.

⁷⁵³ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'Why I'm glad Ted Heath spoke out', *Sunday Express*, 9 November 1980. The record of 26.9 per cent was reached in August 1975.

⁷⁵⁴ THCR 2/6/2/48 part 2 f10, Peter Cropper minute to the Treasury, 11 November 1980.

reshuffle if ministers lacked the resolution to pursue the Government's policies.⁷⁵⁵ Indeed, it was widely recognised within Thatcher's circle of supporters that it was the fault of her ministers by not cutting enough. John Hoskyns wrote to Howe to lament that there was 'not a Cabinet majority of people [...] picked because they do understand what we're up against'.⁷⁵⁶

The compromise package reflected this stalemate in cabinet, but this did not diminish the resolve on the backbenches for the party to go further. On 24 November Howe cut interest rates by two per cent, cut one billion from spending, and increased national insurance. Publicly William Clark supported the package, despite the tax increases and minimal spending cuts. He said that 'by and large' the party would support the package. The national insurance increase was 'necessary' and cuts to interest rates were justified as 'enough progress had been made on inflation and in other respects to justify it'.⁷⁵⁷ In a sign of Clark's loyalty to Mrs Thatcher, all of this was a contradiction of his statement in the summer that spending cuts should go further and that inflation be reduced to single figures before the government cut interest rates.

Privately, however, there was concern from Thatcher's supporters in the 92. Alan Clark reflected that 'it is perfectly plain that Government policy is now seriously off course' and that 'every speaker was in one way or another critical'. At the finance committee meeting the Chief Secretary to the Treasury John Biffen sat 'with his head in his hands'.⁷⁵⁸ Minutes of the backbench finance committee meeting after the mini-budget provide a more balanced version of events than Alan Clark's, however. Those with some generous words to say about the direction of government, if not its precise policies, were mostly from the 92. Peter Hordern 'welcomed' the Chancellor's statement 'primarily for its reiteration of commitment to the MTFs'. Gardiner 'detected disappointment in the Party over the inadequacy of the cuts'. Those not in the 92 who spoke wanted the government back on track. Terence Higgins 'was worried about the inconsistency of cutting the MLR⁷⁵⁹ when the PSBR was running so far ahead of target'. Esmond Bulmer⁷⁶⁰ asked what 'was the Chancellor's estimate of the cost of Clegg?', a further detection that Clegg had pushed spending too far.⁷⁶¹ Howe, much like Thatcher in her memoirs, conceded that the government had been 'boxed in' by its electoral

⁷⁵⁵ Nicholas Comfort, 'Cabinet Doubters Warned', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 November 1980, p. 34.

⁷⁵⁶ Howe dep. 42, f223, John Hoskyns to Geoffrey Howe, 18 November 1980.

⁷⁵⁷ Our political correspondent, 'Measures worry Tory MPs', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 November 1980, p. 1.

⁷⁵⁸ Clark, *Into Politics*, pp. 177-8.

⁷⁵⁹ Minimum Lending Rate, i.e. the Bank of England interest rate.

⁷⁶⁰ Esmond Bulmer (1938-), Conservative MP for Kidderminster, February 1974-83; Wyre Forest, 1983-87.

⁷⁶¹ THCR 2/6/2/48 part 2, Cropper record of conversation, 25 November 1980.

pledges, mentioning ‘in particular the findings of the Clegg Commission on pay comparability for the public sector and to increase pensions’.⁷⁶²

Overall the party was content, if not delighted, with Howe’s statement. Gardiner wrote that the ‘Left-wing Press’ called it a humiliation for Mrs Thatcher.⁷⁶³ But MPs wrote to support Howe. Peter Hordern congratulated the Chancellor, an endorsement from a leading monetarist despite the rate cut.⁷⁶⁴ David Crouch⁷⁶⁵ thought Howe ‘had got it about right’.⁷⁶⁶ Michael Colvin explained why the backbenches united behind the Chancellor. At a ‘private dinner with the PM [...] she said “well really its very lonely. It’s really Geoffrey and me against the rest of them”’. Colvin wrote that ‘more of us on the backbenches realise this and appreciate not only what you are doing but also the way in which you are doing it’.⁷⁶⁷ It was a sign the 92 were more organised and ready to defend against a ‘wet’ offensive. Despite the worsening economic situation, the ‘wets’ would not advance, and the 92 could claim a win on points.

‘This issue will not go away’

The biggest coup for the 92 at the 1980 backbench committee elections was Gardiner’s election as chairman of the European affairs committee. Although the 92 did not oppose entry to the EEC, with only a couple of exceptions, the 92 was changing to a degree that many of its new members were critical of membership and formed the Conservative European Reform Group (CERG) to demonstrate unease at Britain’s place within the EEC. Indeed, Mrs Thatcher is recorded to have said that had she not been Prime Minister she would have been a member of the Reform Group.⁷⁶⁸ It is thanks to CERG that Gardiner was elected chair of the European affairs committee, even though he was not a member of CERG. CERG was formed on 17 November 1980 through ‘the initiative’ of Teddy Taylor⁷⁶⁹ and Tony Marlow, both members of the 92. In all, nine of the twenty-nine members of CERG were from the 92. Including its

⁷⁶² James Wightman, ‘Cabinet “boxed in” by pledges’, *Daily Telegraph*, 26 November 1980, p. 1.

⁷⁶³ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, ‘Is there a traitor at the cabinet table?’, *Sunday Express*, 23 November 1980.

⁷⁶⁴ Howe dep. 42, f236, Peter Hordern to Geoffrey Howe, 27 November 1980.

⁷⁶⁵ Sir David Crouch (1919-1998), Conservative MP for Canterbury, 1966-87.

⁷⁶⁶ Howe dep. 42, f234, David Crouch to Geoffrey Howe, 26 November 1980.

⁷⁶⁷ Howe dep. 42, f267, Michael Colvin to Geoffrey Howe, 2 December 1980.

⁷⁶⁸ Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorised Biography: Volume Three* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), p. 124.

⁷⁶⁹ Taylor had been re-elected to parliament in March in a by-election, representing Southend East, and had re-joined the 92. Taylor’s lead on this is noteworthy. In 1971 he resigned from the government to vote against the principle of joining the EEC.

first chairman, Sir Nicholas Bonsor, all the leadership positions in CERG were held by members of the 92. Notable by their absence was Gardiner, who had supported entry in the 1970s but would stand for the Eurosceptic Referendum Party in 1997, and Sir William Clark who, by the 1980s, had discarded his anti-market views, having voted against the principle of entry in 1971.⁷⁷⁰ Whilst not advocating withdrawal from the EEC, a policy Labour affirmed at their annual conference only a few months before, it was interpreted by Conservative pro-Europeans as stirring anti-EEC feeling.

On 1 December it was reported that Mrs Thatcher was to meet a delegation from CERG, and this caused outrage on the pro-European wing of the party. Anthony Meyer⁷⁷¹ wrote to Gow complaining that if ‘Margaret is seen to be countenancing the activities of Teddy Taylor’s Group, we shall be compelled to seek publicity for our activity’ as pro-Europeans. Gow replied that Thatcher had never ‘refused to see any Member or Group of Members’, emphasising the difference in attitude between Thatcher and her predecessor, Heath. He reminded Meyer that Mrs Thatcher supported continued membership of the EEC.⁷⁷² This wasn’t enough to placate the pro-Europeans. On 5 December Thorneycroft, the party chairman wrote to Gow worried that CERG was increasing in number and ‘we should do what we can to cut it down to size’.⁷⁷³ Gow was very firm with him: ‘The PM will be seeing members of this Group [...] I expect others to join’ and, with a prophetic warning for the next forty years of Conservative politics, ‘this issue will not go away’.⁷⁷⁴ Indeed, the 92 gained their first scalp in the backbench elections when Gardiner defeated pro-European Hugh Dykes for the chairmanship of the European affairs committee. Gardiner had the 92 whip, was the Group’s organiser, and ‘was also backed by the newly-formed CERG, known to pro-marketeers as the “Gang of 36”’. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that two of its supporters had also been elected as officers in the committee.⁷⁷⁵

In the crucial election of the backbench finance committee, William Clark was successfully re-elected. His challenger was Peter Tapsell⁷⁷⁶, a sceptic of dogmatic monetarism,

⁷⁷⁰ THCR 2/11/7/1 (21), Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 17 November 1980.

⁷⁷¹ Sir Anthony Meyer (1920-2004), Conservative MP for Eton and Slough, 1966-64; West Flint, 1970-83; Clwyd North West, 1983-92. Challenged Mrs Thatcher for the Conservative leadership, 1989.

⁷⁷² THCR2/1/4/79 f72, Ian Gow to Anthony Meyer, 2 December 1980.

⁷⁷³ THCR 2/11/7/1 (39), Lord Thorneycroft to Ian Gow, 5 December 1980.

⁷⁷⁴ THCR 2/11/7/1 (39), Ian Gow to Lord Thorneycroft, 8 December 1980.

⁷⁷⁵ Nicholas Comfort, ‘Tories oust Pro-Market MP’, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 December 1980, p. 6.

⁷⁷⁶ Sir Peter Tapsell (1930-2018), Conservative MP for Nottingham West, 1959-64; Horncastle and then Louth and Horncastle, 1966-2015. Father of the House, 2010-15.

who had given a speech critical of the government's approach, timing, and policies, just days before the 1980 budget.⁷⁷⁷ Whilst Tapsell was not calling for a U-turn, his approach was different from the loyalty shown by Sir William Clark. Clark easily won as, according to Elinor Goodman in the *Financial Times*, 'the left found it very difficult to find a candidate of sufficient stature', which is unfair to Tapsell, who had worked in the City and served as a front bench spokesman in opposition.⁷⁷⁸ Yet Clark's victory was spoiled by the 92 losing ground on the committee. John Browne, a monetarist, and proposer of the rebellious amendments to the Employment Bill, lost his seat. Goodman said it was a setback for the right of the party that William Waldegrave had been elected to the committee. But this, too, misreads his election. Whilst Waldegrave was not an instinctive monetarist he, on balance, supported government policy. He had said so repeatedly at backbench finance committee meetings, and although he was on a 'wet slate' for the 1980 elections, more out of his previous association with Edward Heath, he supported 'a dose of economic liberalism', providing incentives for private enterprise, and felt that 'monetary policy should be used to control inflation'.⁷⁷⁹

Gardiner's role in whipping up support for 92 members was not going unnoticed. Ian Aitken in the *Guardian* wrote that Gardiner was on the warpath in these committee elections. What scared 'Mr Gardiner's Conservative colleagues' was that 'he may be after their blood'. Gardiner was 'the supreme schemer behind [...] the 92 Group of right-wing Tory MPs – a group whose sole purpose is to purge the party's upper ranks of anti-Thatcherites'. Aitken concluded that the invigorated activity of the 92 was a result of Mrs Thatcher 'giving her party an ideology'.⁷⁸⁰

Gardiner's official report to Gow on the elections emphasised the difficult conditions and the essential role the 92 played to support Mrs Thatcher. They retained nineteen offices but failed to gain the secretaryship of the Northern Ireland committee⁷⁸¹ and the chairmanship of employment, which further protected Jim Prior's position and policy on trade unions. Gardiner wrote that only one member lost office, Browne on the finance committee. The results, he wrote, could have been worse. Gardiner had consulted William Clark on the best way to proceed. Clark recommended supporting only members of the 92 for the finance

⁷⁷⁷ George Clark, 'Tory MP lists party's mistakes', *The Times*, 22 March 1980, p. 2.

⁷⁷⁸ Elinor Goodman, 'Tory Right win on finance committee', *Financial Times*, 10 December 1980, p. 10.

⁷⁷⁹ Waldegrave, pp. 172-3.

⁷⁸⁰ PPA 2/210, Ian Aitken, 'Seasons of ghosts and Gardiner', *Guardian*, 9 December 1980.

⁷⁸¹ There had been some concern earlier in the year over government policy regarding Northern Ireland.

committee. There was a danger of diluting ‘our voting strength’ by supporting compromise candidates. Gardiner concluded to Gow, affirming the growing strength and importance of the 92:

‘since our opposing organisation was “plumping” for single candidates at every level, I remain convinced that if we had spread our support this could well have resulted in our own candidates being defeated [...] our conclusion, looking back, must be to echo the words familiar on school reports: the “92” has done quite well - but could do a great deal better’.⁷⁸²

Conclusion

The battle over the Employment Bill demonstrated the 92 was more radical than it had been thus far. To the 92, and especially Gardiner, it was a battle for the survival of Thatcherism. If Prior had got his way with only one tame Bill, Thatcherism would have collapsed before it really got started. The 92 had to press for more legislation, and they were successful. The detachment of Patrick Wall meant that Gardiner was now in effective command of the Group. He was able to muster votes to support the position the 92 believed the Prime Minister wanted. That they convinced MPs only elected a year beforehand to defy the whip shows how radical the Group’s new recruits were. Yet the Prime Minister could not afford to have Prior on the backbenches, and her caution meant that she had to keep Prior in place *and* promise more legislation to appease her own views and those in the 92. Although Prior got his legislation, he had to commit to further reforms against his judgement. The consequence of this was the continuous struggle between Prior and Gardiner in the press.

Despite predictions of defeat at the backbench elections, the 92 defied expectations and held its ground. The re-election of Sir William Clark as chairman of the finance committee was crucial. In 1981 the government would face its toughest year, and Clark would use his position as proof that the backbenches supported government economic policy. Clark’s chairmanship would therefore become a coveted prize for the ‘wets’. Had they claimed it, it would have been a great blow to Mrs Thatcher, a symbol that the party had turned away from her policy. The next chapter will discuss the ways in which the 92 defended Mrs Thatcher and

⁷⁸² U DPW/37/17, George Gardiner to Ian Gow, ‘Approved Report’, undated but circa December 1980.

its positions on the backbench committees; and will argue that Gardiner, Gow, and Clark were the head of her Praetorian Guard in her toughest year so far.

Chapter Six: ‘We have really done rather well’

This chapter explains the symbolic and vital part the 92 played in defending Mrs Thatcher as leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister in her toughest year of domestic politics. Towards the end of 1981 she was under great pressure to change course and faced the direct threat of a leadership challenge. The quotation, ‘we have really done rather well’, comes from a report Ian Gow sent to Mrs Thatcher after the 92 defied expectations and increased its representation on the backbench committees in November 1981.⁷⁸³ These elections became a symbolic contest between the Thatcherites and ‘wets’. At best they were a tussle over the direction of the party, at worst for the Prime Minister, a proxy leadership election. The ‘we’ Gow mentioned could indicate that he, as a member of the 92, was speaking on behalf of the group. The ‘we’ could also, however, be the broader political wing identified with Mrs Thatcher, including her, and implying therefore that the 92 were her representatives in these elections. Either way, the letter symbolises the argument of this thesis that, for the first half of her first term, the 92 was Mrs Thatcher’s line of defence in the parliamentary party. It represented her in the backbench elections, and votes for its candidates were endorsements of her policies, especially on the economy. This letter from Gow recognises this, and the ‘we’ informs us that Mrs Thatcher understood it too.

The circumstances of the Group’s victories in November 1981 shows the difficulty in which these backbench elections were fought. The year began with wobbles over party management and the formation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). The SDP were seen as a viable alternative to a Labour party drifting ever leftward with the election of Michael Foot as leader in 1980, mandatory re-selection of MPs, EEC withdrawal⁷⁸⁴, and Tony Benn’s determined challenge for the deputy leadership in 1981. Rumours swirled that numerous left-leaning Tories would defect to the SDP, when only a lone Conservative MP eventually crossed the floor. An unpopular U-turn on coal pit closures gave the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) a short-term victory over Mrs Thatcher, with grim echoes of the Heath years unnerving government supporters. The March budget of 1981 is recognised as one of the most unpopular in history. Collective responsibility broke down as Francis Pym and Lord Thorneycroft

⁷⁸³ THCR 2/6/2/15 part 3 f20, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 20 November 1981.

⁷⁸⁴ In the 1970s and 1980s EEC withdrawal was predominantly associated with the left wing of British politics. Labour whipped against entry in parliament in 1971 and 1972. Although Wilson supported remaining in the EEC in the 1975 referendum the largest trade union, the Trade and General Workers’ Union, and Labour left-wingers like Tony Benn supported the ‘No’ vote in 1975.

coordinated calls in the press for a change of course. These were interpreted by Mrs Thatcher's supporters as a bid to replace her; and Geoffrey Rippon, a close ally of Edward Heath, planned to stand against her in a leadership election that November. Yet after the summer riots in Liverpool, Manchester and other urban centres, and another climbdown in July where Mrs Thatcher was overruled by her cabinet on plans for £5bn in spending reductions, Mrs Thatcher ended the year in a far stronger position: so much so that by early 1982, before the Falklands war, 'all talk of unseating her, or even seriously pressurising her, [was] dead'.⁷⁸⁵

Sir William Clark emerged as her champion in the press, much like Gardiner in 1980, defending the government's economic policy and declaring that the party was behind her, regardless of how bad things looked. Ironically, given his rebellion on the Employment Bill, Clark acted as a Thatcherite shop steward. That he was elected chairman of the backbench finance committee meant he spoke for the backbenches, and that they supported government policy. The symbolism of his devout support for government economic policy, whilst holding the chairmanship of the finance committee, made him a target for Thatcher's internal critics. She reshuffled her cabinet in September 1981, finally removing Jim Prior from Employment, and this raised the stakes. Replace Clark, weaken the Prime Minister, change the course. That Clark was challenged by a far more formidable contender with his own ideological symbolism proves this point. Clark was victorious and so, in consequence, was Mrs Thatcher. This chapter argues the backbench victories in November 1981 validated the September reshuffle and killed off any challenge to Mrs Thatcher's leadership in her first term.

Nadir

The stalemate backbench elections of 1980 did not remove the pressures on Mrs Thatcher or her economic policy. She took the initiative by slightly reshuffling her cabinet after the new year, demoting Francis Pym from Defence Secretary to Leader of the House⁷⁸⁶, removing Norman St. John Stevas, and promoting more MPs aligned to her economic policy - for example Norman Tebbit as Minister of State for Industry. Accordingly, *The Times* correspondent Michael Hatfield wrote that the Tory 'left' saw the reshuffle as a 'toughening of government economic policy'.⁷⁸⁷ Yet between January and the budget in March, there were

⁷⁸⁵ PPA 3/210, Hugo Young, 'Papering over the cracks', *Sunday Times*, 31 January 1982.

⁷⁸⁶ Pym had successfully rebuffed plans to cut defence spending in 1980.

⁷⁸⁷ Michael Hatfield, 'Mrs Thatcher drops three senior ministers in reshuffle', *The Times*, 6 January 1981, p. 1.

more calls for compromise and a U-turn from within the cabinet. In January Thorneycroft wrote that ‘even among our loyalist supporters’ the government was ‘failing to present our case with the clarity and force that is required’. Whilst he said there was ‘strong faith’ in Mrs Thatcher, the government was losing the debate on economic policy. He wrote that it had become too ‘technical’, that the debate over M3 and controlling the money supply was lost on the ‘ordinary man’ and ‘even those normally well versed in these subjects’. In what could be interpreted as either a lack of judgement on Thorneycroft’s part, or an attempt at sabotage, he recommended Pym to present government strategy. Gravely, he warned that something had to be done, ‘we expect to do very badly in the local elections’ but still forecast that ‘despite the polls’ the Conservatives would still win a general election.⁷⁸⁸

The grim feeling towards economic policy was highlighted a few days later at a backbench finance committee meeting. Peter Cropper⁷⁸⁹ noted that ‘the mood had changed’ since last December, ironically after the 92 had held most of its chairmanships on the backbenches. The government came under attack from all sides, even from members of the 92. Julian Amery wondered what the purpose of government policy was when ‘public expenditure and M3 are out of control’ and there were two million unemployed. Amery had underestimated the unemployment figures, they were 2,419,452.⁷⁹⁰ Natural allies of the Chancellor criticised the borrowing figures, expected to be fifty per cent over target. Peter Hordern blamed the Clegg public sector pay awards that had resulted in the booming borrowing requirement.⁷⁹¹ Of all the minutes of the backbench finance committee available, this is arguably the most despondent. Edward du Cann, as chairman of the 1922 Committee, conceded after that, on monetarism, ‘I don’t understand this policy myself’.⁷⁹²

Du Cann had reason to despair. This period in Mrs Thatcher’s first administration is where she came closest to a U-turn, and the parallels with 1972 are stark. In 1981 Mrs Thatcher faced trouble with the miners, the economy, and Northern Ireland, just like Heath in 1972. Worse than Heath’s experience she also faced a summer of rioting. The significance of the 1981 budget is that it eclipsed the embarrassing decisions made prior to it. Indeed, Charles Moore wrote that by the middle of February the Mrs Thatcher’s leadership was in considerable

⁷⁸⁸ THCR 1/9/19 A2 f22, Lord Thorneycroft to Margaret Thatcher, 19 January 1981.

⁷⁸⁹ Peter Cropper (1927-2020), Director of the Conservative Research Department, 1982-4.

⁷⁹⁰ Hansard, Commons Debates, 27 January 1981, Vol. 997, Col. 366.

⁷⁹¹ THCR 2/6/2/48 part 3 f11, Peter Cropper record of backbench finance committee meeting, 21 January 1981.

⁷⁹² THCR 2/6/2/114 part 3 f19, Ian Gow record of conversation, 28 January 1981.

danger.⁷⁹³ The budget therefore demonstrated her resolve that had so recently been questioned. It also explains her doggedness thereafter, especially in relation to the strike in the civil service.

It is surprising that Mrs Thatcher was not accused of a U-turn in early 1981. That January the government injected nearly £1,000 million into British Leyland, seen by ‘many Thatcherites as a tremendous disaster’. Robin Harris wrote that Keith Joseph ‘proved incapable of turning off the financial tap to nationalised industries’.⁷⁹⁴ It wasn’t that dissimilar to the Heath government bailing out Rolls Royce or the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders. John Nott, as Trade Secretary, had warned Mrs Thatcher that the government would be ‘ridiculed’ if it went ahead with, what was essentially, a bailout.⁷⁹⁵ Responding to Keith Joseph’s announcement, Conservative MP Robert Adley⁷⁹⁶ felt ‘that there is a horrible sense of *déjà vu* about this’, referencing previous administrations’ troubles with Rolls Royce. His colleague John Stokes⁷⁹⁷ compared the exercise to filling ‘the bath with the plug out’.⁷⁹⁸

It was the low mark of Sir Keith Joseph’s tenure in government. Whilst in opposition he had strongly advocated monetarism and reducing the size of the state. In government his record as Secretary of State for Industry was, in this context, abysmal, and he soon lost the confidence of his like-minded colleagues.⁷⁹⁹ He handed out millions to shipbuilding and even the American car manufacturer DeLorean got funding, all quite contrary to his views from 1974.⁸⁰⁰ After victory in the steel strike in 1980, in 1981 the government handed the BSC another £100 million in ‘emergency aid’.⁸⁰¹ It was frustrating for Mrs Thatcher: she demanded that steel ‘must stand on its own feet’. She rejected the notion that steel was a ‘strategic industry’, taking the view that ‘the size of an industry is determined by what it can sell’.⁸⁰² The problem at British Leyland and British Steel was how badly they were controlling their own finances. They had asked for, and got, nearly a billion more than forecast. On paper a Thatcherite would have said no, but again ‘cautious Margaret’ went through with it.

⁷⁹³ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 623.

⁷⁹⁴ Harris, p. 168.

⁷⁹⁵ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 517.

⁷⁹⁶ Robert Adley (1935-93), Conservative MP for Bristol North East, 1970-4; Christchurch, 1974-93.

⁷⁹⁷ Sir John Stokes (1917-2003), Conservative MP for Oldbury and Halesowen, 1970-74; Halesowen and Stourbridge, 1974-92.

⁷⁹⁸ Hansard, Commons Debates, 26 January 1981, Vol. 997, Cols. 624-644.

⁷⁹⁹ Harris, p. 168.

⁸⁰⁰ Andrew Denham and Mark Garnett, *Keith Joseph* (Chesham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2002), p. 351.

⁸⁰¹ Unattributed, ‘£100m emergency aid for steel corporation’, *The Times*, 9 February 1981, p. 1.

⁸⁰² Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, pp. 98-9.

Thatcherites had ridiculed Heath spending money on lame ducks, now she was doing it herself. Unlike their Heathite predecessors, however, from then on ‘privatisation’ would feature ‘strongly’ in government discussion on British Leyland but was only implemented in the second and third terms.⁸⁰³

The other disaster was a U-turn on pit closures. This episode even brought loyalists such as Gardiner close to questioning the government’s strategy. On 29 January the National Coal Board announced that it wanted to close twenty-three uncompetitive coalmines. Mrs Thatcher agreed on 28 January that there was ‘no alternative but to speed up the closure of uneconomic pits’.⁸⁰⁴ But, as Kwasi Kwarteng noted in *Thatcher’s Trial*, Mrs Thatcher ‘could not countenance’ a fight with the miners’ union so close to a budget and with the economy on such a fragile footing.⁸⁰⁵ The lessons of the Heath administrations were stark: coal stocks at the power stations were not sufficient and a U-turn was swiftly ordered.⁸⁰⁶ Unlike Heath she opted not to fight the NUM from a position of weakness, Heath having challenged the miners in winter during the 1973-4 oil crisis. In her memoirs Mrs Thatcher, however, blamed her ministers and the National Coal Board, noting that the Board especially had U-turned and sided with the NUM to focus on lowering imports of coal and increasing investment and subsidies. To Mrs Thatcher the NCB ‘was behaving as if it entirely shared the interests of the union representing its employees’.⁸⁰⁷ On 18 February the government abandoned the closures and provided more state aid. It was humiliating. Labour leader Michael Foot welcomed ‘a great victory for the miners’ and invited her to dinner. In reply Mrs Thatcher took the bait and said, ‘on occasion it is a lady’s prerogative to say “No”’, leading Labour MP Joe Ashton to interject, ‘not to the miners’.⁸⁰⁸

So serious was this that at the end of February Ian Gow wrote to Mrs Thatcher that there was ‘a noticeable deterioration in the morale of our backbenchers’, all linked to the failure to control spending, the coal climbdown, and the ‘insatiable appetite of the public sector’.⁸⁰⁹ The Thatcherites were ‘dismayed’ at what was happening.⁸¹⁰ On 24 February a headline linked

⁸⁰³ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 518.

⁸⁰⁴ TNA, PREM19/539 f96, No. 10 record of conversation, 28 January 1981 dated 29 January 1981.

⁸⁰⁵ Kwasi Kwarteng, *Thatcher’s Trial: Six Months that Defined a Leader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 43.

⁸⁰⁶ Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 141.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁸⁰⁸ Hansard, Commons Debates, 19 February 1981, Vol. 999, Col. 447.

⁸⁰⁹ THCR 2/6/2/15 part 3 f43, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 27 February 1981.

⁸¹⁰ Kwarteng, p. 44.

Gardiner to accusations that Tory voters were losing faith. This, however, isn't exactly what Gardiner said. He blamed 'ministers' for losing their way, not the Prime Minister. Just as he had criticised ministers for not controlling their departmental budgets, to Gardiner this was the failure of another minister unable to command his brief. Elinor Goodman described 'serious disquiet' in the party. She was right, but Gardiner was not one to criticise his leader in public. Rather he 'defended Mrs Thatcher's handling of the situation', although it had been 'bungled'. Sometimes, Gardiner surmised, it took more courage 'to order a retreat than to attack'.⁸¹¹ This is quite a prophetic analysis from Gardiner as the lessons learned from the 1981 climbdown set in place the plan to hoard coal for the inevitable, and final, showdown with the NUM, which took place in 1984.

Gardiner wasn't alone in pointing the finger at ministers rather than the Prime Minister. Patrick Wall, speaking to the Monday Club, defended Mrs Thatcher: 'the nation cries out for firm leadership and only the Prime Minister can give it. She is the boss. She chooses her Cabinet. If they will not support her, let her choose those who do'.⁸¹² To the likes of Wall and Gardiner, the hubbub over British Leyland and the NUM was not a result of Mrs Thatcher's governance, but of the threats inside and out, and that it wasn't *her* cabinet. Despite how bad it got, her admirers in the 92 and on the backbenches didn't blame her.

Enemies Within

As ministers openly called for a change in direction, Gardiner hit back that these criticisms were a means to remove the Prime Minister altogether, rallying the party in the country to Mrs Thatcher. On 25 January 1981 her Tory opponents were given a boost by the publication of the Limehouse Declaration. In setting up the Council for Social Democracy, disaffected Labour MPs called for a 'realignment' and the inevitability of a new centre party.⁸¹³ Charles Moore argues that the Declaration and subsequent formation of the SDP had taken the heat off her and exposed the deep divisions within the Labour party.⁸¹⁴ The debate surrounding a new 'centre' party, however, caused immediate unease within the Conservative party, leading Gardiner into another foray to support his leader.

⁸¹¹ Elinor Goodman, 'Tory voters losing faith – Gardiner', *Financial Times*, 24 February 1981.

⁸¹² PPA 3/608A, Unattributed, 'Tory split shows', *Birmingham Post*, 25 February 1981.

⁸¹³ Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 94.

⁸¹⁴ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, pp. 548-9.

Although only one Conservative MP, Christopher Brocklebank-Fowler, ended up defecting to the SDP, ‘wet’ critics of Mrs Thatcher fuelled speculation that many Tory MPs would defect to pressure her to change course. On 29 January, four days after the Limehouse Declaration, Robert Hicks⁸¹⁵ claimed that ‘up to twenty Tory MPs’ might join a new centre party. Fred Emery, writing in *The Times*, thought the claim unrealistic but possible. He argued that ‘wet’ Tory MPs had two views on the centre party. The first was that they need not join as they believed Mrs Thatcher was changing course, as shown by increased spending on British Leyland and then the reversal of pit closures. The second was that they ‘perceived real trouble ahead’, that Thatcher was not going to change and thus making defection desirable. This, Emery said, was Hicks’s view.⁸¹⁶

Within the cabinet, however, despite Mrs Thatcher’s mini-reshuffle on 5 January, criticism from within did not die down. Francis Pym became the most notable challenger to Mrs Thatcher, taking over from Jim Prior. Hugo Young interpreted his reshuffle from Defence Secretary to Leader of the House not as a demotion, but as an opportunity, placing him ‘at the very centre of this government’s life’.⁸¹⁷ Unlike Prior, Pym’s appeal crossed into the 92. For example, even though Pym had been an ally of Edward Heath, serving as his Chief Whip, some in the 92 found Pym appealing. In October 1980 Alan Clark met Francis Pym and told him that should he stand against Mrs Thatcher, his appeal stretched across the whole party as Pym had resisted defence cuts. Clark believed Pym was the only cabinet member whose resignation would not split the party, and should he do so, he would be Prime Minister in ‘two years’ time.⁸¹⁸ Although, when this exchange is set in context, Clark, it could be argued, was cosying up to Pym in the hope of preferment, rather than supporting Pym’s politics. Although it is also true that Clark had sympathy with Pym’s stand against defence cuts in 1980.⁸¹⁹ Sir Nicholas Bonsor, a eurosceptic right-winger and member of the 92, explained in interview that had Mrs Thatcher been challenged by Pym, he would have supported Pym, although this had more to do with their friendship than politics. Despite holding different views, they were good friends.⁸²⁰ At the formation of Pym’s short-lived group ‘Centre Forward’ in 1985, Bonsor was

⁸¹⁵ Robert Hicks, Conservative MP for Bodmin, 1970-74, 1974-83, and South East Cornwall, 1983-87.

⁸¹⁶ Fred Emery, ‘Search for “defecting Tory 20”’, *The Times*, 30 January 1981.

⁸¹⁷ Hugo Young, ‘Is Thatcher a secret wet?’, *Sunday Times*, 11 January 1981.

⁸¹⁸ Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics*, p. 176.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid.

⁸²⁰ Sir Nicholas Bonsor, interview with the author, Kent, 19 January 2022.

a signatory to Pym's fleeting campaign and the only one who could arguably be on the 'right' of the party, the rest being notable 'wets' like Rippon, Julian Critchley, and Sir Ian Gilmour.⁸²¹

Between the bailout of British Leyland and the pit U-turn, Pym and Gardiner clashed publicly as Pym called for a different approach. In the wake of the emergency aid to the steel industry, Pym phrased the move as a sign that the government was changing direction. He said 'commonsense tells us that changed circumstances make adjustments necessary in both tactics and timing, to meet altered conditions'. The speech was unambiguous, 'the present critical state of public opinion and the depth of Britain's economic difficulties must give any Conservative pause for thought'. Whereas Gilmour had advocated a change of philosophy the year before, Pym was now articulating a change in policy. To give the impression of coordination David Knox⁸²², another 'wet' critic, gave a speech at Cambridge calling for a return to 'traditional centre policies', interpreted as reflation and incomes policies.⁸²³ That the reversal in policy on the pit closures came a week after Pym's intervention not only justified his point but also showed that he was, or at least seen to be, influencing policy.

Gardiner hit back criticising a reflationary policy of 'tipping umpteen millions of taxpayer's money' into 'nationalised loss makers'.⁸²⁴ But Pym had momentum. He was warmly congratulated by Geoffrey Rippon, and on 13 February pressure was building for a cabinet review of government economic policy before the budget. Fred Emery attributed this to Pym's speech calling for an 'adjustment'.⁸²⁵ It put Mrs Thatcher's administration in its most precarious state yet, especially as she had been persuaded by Thorneycroft to give Pym the platform to make these interventions. Yet the value of the 1981 budget is that it drew a line under the debacles of British Leyland and the Coal Board. Its radicalism put the 'wets' in a position where they had to strike if they were going to, rather than make coded speeches. From then on Gardiner mocked the cabinet 'wets', such as Prior, Gilmour, and Walker, for their pusillanimity, knowing they were as wet as their label. That they did not resign was, for them, a 'regrettable' mistake.⁸²⁶

⁸²¹ Philip Webster, 'Tory MPs' group aims to change policies, not oust Thatcher, Pym says', *The Times*, 13 May 1985, p. 4.

⁸²² David Knox (1933-), Conservative MP for Leek, 1970-83; Staffordshire Moorlands, 1983-97.

⁸²³ Fred Emery, 'Adjustment in tactics admitted by Mr Pym', *The Times*, 12 February 1981.

⁸²⁴ PPA 3/210, CCO News Service, George Gardiner speech to University College London, 12 February 1981.

⁸²⁵ Fred Emery, 'Full Cabinet economic review sought', *The Times*, 13 February 1981, p. 1.

⁸²⁶ Prior, p. 140.

The 1981 Budget

The 1981 budget has been judged, along with the Falklands War and the 1984 miners' strike, as one of the defining moments of the Thatcher administration. Patrick Cosgrave called it the 'strategic beginning' of Thatcherism⁸²⁷ and compared it to a coup within the party, the effective routing of the 'wets'.⁸²⁸ Whilst Cosgrave's analysis praised Mrs Thatcher's determination not to U-turn, it could be argued that the reductions in the marginal rates of income tax in 1979 owed more to the development of Thatcherism than the 1981 budget that increased the tax burden by freezing thresholds. The former rewarded entrepreneurial activity, the latter constituted a punitive tax increase due to the inability of the government to bring spending under control. The budget, however, drew a line under the policy wobbles of January and February by sticking broadly to the government's monetarist strategy. The budget cut public spending but, acknowledging the pain caused by higher interest rates on industry, reduced interest rates, all, interestingly, foreseen by (or leaked to) Gardiner in a *Sunday Express* column the weekend before the budget. Gardiner argued that the recession had forced companies to 'shed those for whom there were no real jobs', to aid competitiveness. He even accepted the need to adjust interest rates by one or two per cent, which is what the Chancellor did a few days later.⁸²⁹ But, in the press, Gardiner was in a minority. The economics editor of *The Times* summarised that the 1981 budget was a sign that the 1980 Medium Term Financial Strategy had failed and that rather than recognise its failings, the Chancellor 'has driven on as hard as he can'.⁸³⁰ Moore wrote that so unpopular was the budget, and the press coverage of it, that it could have precipitated a cabinet and backbench 'palace revolution'.⁸³¹

The 92 rallied support for Mrs Thatcher. Gardiner's rhetoric alerted Conservative members in the country that she was under threat. In his memoirs Gardiner wrote that the 'conspiracy reached its peak' with the budget. To him that conspiracy centred upon Mrs Thatcher's critics in cabinet, and not on the backbenches. Jim Prior's complaints could be heard 'three tables away', and Ian Gilmour and Peter Walker briefed journalists on their opposition to the budget. Gardiner wrote that from this point 'the 92's objective was to do

⁸²⁷ Cosgrave, p. 96.

⁸²⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

⁸²⁹ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'The ghosts that will haunt Sir Geoffrey on Tuesday', *Sunday Express*, 6 March 1981.

⁸³⁰ David Blake, 'Is there another tunnel at the end of the tunnel?', *The Times*, 11 March 1981, p. 14.

⁸³¹ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 630.

what we could to ensure the conspirators never had such a chance again'.⁸³² At the 1922 Committee meeting after the budget, 92 member John Loveridge⁸³³ tabled a motion congratulating the Chancellor, and was sponsored by Sir William Clark and Michael Grylls, both 92 members, and Sir John Eden, formerly of the 92. The report from *The Times*, however, noted that Edward du Cann, and Maurice Macmillan were also sponsors and that it was an example of the party closing 'ranks when their Government is under attack'.⁸³⁴ It was, nonetheless, an initiative from a member of the 92.

The budget itself did not lack critics in the 92, however. Nicholas Winterton was heard by Alan Clark complaining about the increase in petrol taxes as soon as the Chancellor announced it.⁸³⁵ Indeed, an entry in Clark's diary recording the 92 dinner on the evening of the budget gives the impression that its members were frustrated. Many MPs also believed the Gardiner line that there could be a realistic move made against the Prime Minister. Bob Dunn⁸³⁶ said none of the Whips could be trusted and he 'would not dream of talking to his Whip about anything concerning his real anxieties'. In a discussion Gardiner called for the 92 to create a 'manifesto' group and 'used this as a justification for our taking a more positively critical role', showing that whilst they had concerns, Thatcherite ideas needed to be put to counter calls for reflation.⁸³⁷ Afterward Patrick Wall went to see the Chief Whip to put the views of the Group to him.⁸³⁸ Previously Wall had only done this when matters were serious, an example being his memorandum to Pym on the EEC in 1971.

The Budget showed no side would budge. Thatcher would not depart from her course; her critics would not give up their dissent from within. The *Guardian*'s Ian Aitken reported to Alan Clark that 'conspiracies to displace the Prime Minister were now becoming quite flagrant'.⁸³⁹ It was barely a day after the budget that Prior pledged to 'continue the fight' within cabinet, a red flag to Gardiner. St. John-Stevas went on television to predict cabinet resignations, and Peter Tapsell called for the Chancellor's resignation.⁸⁴⁰ Even du Cann, chairman of the 1922 Committee, called for a 'programme for national recovery', citing the

⁸³² Gardiner, p. 137.

⁸³³ Sir John Loveridge (1925-2007), Conservative MP for Hornchurch, 1970-4; Upminster, 1974-83.

⁸³⁴ George Clark, '1922 Committee close ranks in crisis', *The Times*, 13 March 1981, p. 2.

⁸³⁵ Clark, *Diaries: Into Politics*, p. 211.

⁸³⁶ Bob Dunn (1946-2003), Conservative MP for Dartford, 1979-97.

⁸³⁷ Clark, *Into Politics*, p. 212.

⁸³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 212-3.

⁸³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁸⁴⁰ Fred Emery, 'Mrs Thatcher delivers scathing denunciation of her critics', *The Times*, 12 March 1981, p. 1.

‘intolerable’ damage caused by the level of unemployment and the reduction in manufacturing output.⁸⁴¹ Although du Cann was on the Treasury select committee, that the article referenced his position as the chairman of the 1922 reflected the growing unease in the party at the budget.

Members of the 92 began coordinating their responses to cabinet ministers who openly attacked government policy. With so few supporting the budget, and Mrs Thatcher coming under continuous attack, Gardiner broadcast that there was a plot from within the cabinet to remove her, thus hoping to rally the party in support. Alan Clark recorded in his diary that there was due to be a coordinated attack on Mrs Thatcher from within the cabinet over the weekend of 21-22 March. Gardiner had heard from Gow that Adam Raphael of the *Observer* had a piece that Sunday on the threats to the Prime Minister. Thus, Gardiner was briefed by Gow to counter with his article in the *Sunday Express* and a speech in his constituency, in what Alan Clark described as a ‘pre-emptive attack’.⁸⁴² Clark’s warning was apt as on 21 March Peter Walker ‘criticised the government’s economic policies’.⁸⁴³ In a speech in his constituency that day Gardiner alerted ‘party supporters all over the country to what was really happening’. He claimed it ‘coincided’ with Peter Walker’s speech, but the Clark diaries demonstrate that it was a pre-prepared rebuttal.⁸⁴⁴

Gardiner rounded on Thatcher’s critics, deciphering the coded messages they had been making since early 1980. Those who wanted ‘a radical change of course’, Gardiner said, hoped that Mrs Thatcher ‘will be discredited, then disowned’.⁸⁴⁵ The intervention boosted Gardiner’s public reputation. Peter Simmonds in the *Sunday Telegraph* described him as ‘the Prime Minister’s staunchest’ backbench supporter. Unlike the statement in his memoirs, the *Sunday Telegraph* claimed Gardiner knew of Walker’s planned speech and used his own to warn of the coup attempt. By ‘making public the manoeuvrings’ Gardiner detected within the cabinet, ‘he was also seeking to undermine them’.⁸⁴⁶ It had taken the sting out of Walker’s criticisms.

That weekend Gardiner dominated the news coverage in defence of the Prime Minister. His speech was reported across the newspapers, and he joined it with his *Sunday Express*

⁸⁴¹ Hugh Noyes, ‘Mr du Cann calls for recovery programme’, *The Times*, 12 March 1981, p. 2.

⁸⁴² Clark, *Into Politics*, p. 218.

⁸⁴³ Peter Simmonds, ‘MP warns against bid to topple Thatcher’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 22 March 1981, p. 1.

⁸⁴⁴ Gardiner, p. 138.

⁸⁴⁵ PPA 3/210, Victor Knight, ‘A real shower! Tory wets get soaking’, *Sunday Mirror*, 23 March 1981.

⁸⁴⁶ Peter Simmonds, ‘MP warns against bid to topple Thatcher’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 22 March 1981, p. 1.

column denouncing the plotters. It was a forthright defence of the government, irrespective of the Budget's tax increases, and thus a far cry from his tax-cutting articles right after the election in 1979. All was focused now on defending the Prime Minister. The danger to the party's standing, Gardiner wrote, had not come from the fallout from the budget, 'but from panic amongst' his colleagues. Gardiner called on his fellow MPs to back their leader. He reminded them that 'since 1975 there have been some Tories at Westminster who have not really accepted Mrs Thatcher's leadership'. They had been patient and now, 'when the going is toughest', they were looking to sack the Chancellor, and, consequently, the Prime Minister.⁸⁴⁷

Whereas Walker had used part of his speech to plead with moderate MPs not to leave the party, Gardiner said it was 'good news' that Brocklebank-Fowler⁸⁴⁸ had crossed the floor of the House in the budget debate to sit with the Social Democrats.⁸⁴⁹ In his diaries Sir Neil Marten⁸⁵⁰ observed that Brocklebank-Fowler was 'an odd fellow, a publicist + and emotional person' who had attacked the government 'in anger'⁸⁵¹, although Alan Clark reported that Prior had said Brocklebank-Fowler's oration was 'very good'.⁸⁵² It was perhaps therefore welcome, from Gardiner's perspective, to have one fewer 'wet' in the party to vote against the 92 slate when the backbench elections came later in the year.

An Attempted Coup

Mrs Thatcher's doggedness would be put to the test as, later in 1981, there was open talk of a challenge to her leadership. In October 1981 Geoffrey Rippon, the Heathite critic of the first eighteen months of the administration, announced his willingness to stand against the Prime Minister that November when the party's rules allowed for a leadership challenge. Although this faded, the proxy war continued. It then fell to Maurice Macmillan, former minister, and son of Harold Macmillan, to challenge Sir William Clark for the chairmanship of the backbench finance committee. It was the peak of the proxy war for the ideological soul of the party, and Mrs Thatcher's leadership. Rather than it being a Heathite challenge, the 'wets' went back a

⁸⁴⁷ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'Are the top Tories going to keep hiding behind Maggie's skirts?', *Sunday Express*, 23 March 1981.

⁸⁴⁸ Christopher Brocklebank-Fowler (1934-2020), Conservative MP for King's Lynn, 1970-74; North Norfolk, 1974-1981; Social Democratic Party, 1981-83.

⁸⁴⁹ PPA 3/210, George Gardiner, 'Are the top Tories going to keep hiding behind Maggie's skirts?', *Sunday Express*, 23 March 1981.

⁸⁵⁰ Sir Neil Marten (1916-1985), Conservative MP for Banbury, 1959-83.

⁸⁵¹ Marten, *Diaries*, 22 March 1981.

⁸⁵² Clark, *Into Politics*, p. 217.

generation to champion the One Nation politics of Harold Macmillan. Heath's criticisms of Mrs Thatcher were seen as too personal and bitter.⁸⁵³ The re-election of Sir William Clark as backbench finance chairman was the test for Mrs Thatcher's leadership. He was the Thatcherite shop steward, stating that his position as chairman of the backbench finance committee was proof that the party supported her policies. Had he been defeated it would have been very difficult indeed for the Prime Minister to continue with her monetarist policies and may have precipitated a leadership challenge, especially if Clark's defeat had brought about a U-turn in economic policy.

The first challenge after the budget was a strike in the civil service and, unlike on the pit closures, Mrs Thatcher resisted. At the end of March the civil service unions implemented a 'selective strike' that significantly reduced the government's ability to collect tax payments, further worsening the economic situation.⁸⁵⁴ At a backbench employment committee meeting those not aligned with Mrs Thatcher's strategy had received constituent correspondence urging a firm line. Robert Atkins⁸⁵⁵ told the meeting that 'if the Government gave into the Civil Service it was "finished"'. William Clark supported the firm position the government took to stick to a seven per cent pay offer, 'where did the union leaders expect go get the money to pay more', he asked. He highlighted the largesse of the public sector that for every twelve redundancies in the private sector there had been only one in the public sector. To Clark it was a point of principle that the government should see this dispute through.⁸⁵⁶

The strike in the civil service reignited the battle for more trade union legislation. At the end of April a delegation from the 92 in the form of Browne, Dunn, Bonsor and Gardiner went to the employment committee to demand tougher laws. Browne argued that the support had been there in 1979 for tougher trade union legislation, and they could have passed sweeping legislation when the government's popularity was high. The longer they waited, the greater the risk of support waning. Gardiner suggested the small business community preferred making union immunities 'conditional'.⁸⁵⁷ Dunn and Gardiner followed this up with a Commons motion demanding more anti-union legislation, singling out the closed shop. This

⁸⁵³ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 645.

⁸⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 632.

⁸⁵⁵ Sir Robert Atkins (1946-), Conservative MP for Preston North, 1979-83; South Ribble, 1983-97; Conservative MEP for the North West, 1999-2014.

⁸⁵⁶ CRD 4/4/33, Conservative Backbench Employment Committee Minutes, 8 April 1981.

⁸⁵⁷ CRD 4/4/33, Conservative Backbench Employment Committee Minutes, 29 April 1981.

was in response to the case of Joanna Harris, who was fired from Sandwell Council for refusing to join the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO), which operated a closed shop in the Council. Gardiner said in a speech that he preferred action in the autumn with a new parliamentary session, giving him enough time to lobby and for Mrs Thatcher's fortunes to improve.⁸⁵⁸

Over the summer months the tug-of-war over union legislation exposed deep divisions on the backbenches, with the 92 Group leading the assault for tougher measures. The left of the party, represented by Richard Needham⁸⁵⁹, believed that 'further legislation would give the unions the political motive' to try and bring the government down. This validated the suspicions of Gardiner and his colleagues that Prior still only wanted one Bill, despite a Green Paper the previous November. Meanwhile Gardiner's anti-closed shop motion had collected 140 signatures, showing the numbers for reform were increasing.⁸⁶⁰ The fears of Prior's critics were confirmed at a subsequent meeting with Sir Leonard Neal, former director of industrial relations at British Rail. He recalled a meeting with Prior 'four years ago' where Prior 'said that under the next Conservative Government there would be no major reform of industrial relations'.⁸⁶¹

That the 92 called for union legislation in the autumn, rather than the spring, reflected the disastrous situation Mrs Thatcher found herself in. Had Prior been given the option to veto further legislation, he probably could have. The 'wets' were getting the upper hand as the Prime Minister's situation worsened. In April riots had broken out in Brixton and would flare up in Liverpool and other cities in the summer. Gardiner wrote that the 'wets' used the riots 'as evidence that social order was breaking down under Thatcherite policies'.⁸⁶² In May Bobby Sands, the IRA terrorist prisoner, who had been elected as MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone at the beginning of April, died after a hunger strike. Combined with the unpopular budget and the civil service strike, Helmut Schmidt, the German Chancellor, was recorded telling President Reagan that Thatcher's government was 'not all that stable'.⁸⁶³

⁸⁵⁸ Peter Simmons, 'Prior facing Tory revolt over Unions', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1981, p. 1.

⁸⁵⁹ Sir Richard Needham, the Earl of Kilmorey, Conservative MP for Chippenham 1979-83; North Wiltshire, 1983-97.

⁸⁶⁰ CRD 4/4/33, Conservative Backbench Employment Committee Minutes, 13 May 1981.

⁸⁶¹ CRD 4/4/33, Conservative Backbench Employment Committee Minutes, 10 June 1981.

⁸⁶² Gardiner, p. 137.

⁸⁶³ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 543.

The fluid mood in the parliamentary party was captured in two letters Gow sent to Mrs Thatcher within a fortnight of each other. Gow wrote on 18 June, after she had met the Executive of the 1922 Committee, that he was ‘genuinely surprised at how good morale is at present’, attributing to it to Mrs Thatcher’s resolute stand against the civil service strike.⁸⁶⁴ Indeed, such a position had been demanded at the employment committee shortly after the strike began. On 1 July, however, the mood had changed. Gow warned Mrs Thatcher that there would be ‘more restlessness’ at the Conference and that ‘you know, already, that there is substantial disquiet not only in the Parliamentary Party’.⁸⁶⁵

That disquiet was being spread by Heath. On 1 July, the day of Gow’s letter warning of a trouble ahead, Heath blamed Mrs Thatcher’s policies for the disruption in the country. At a business conference he announced his opposition to new trade union legislation the 92 had been lobbying for, and delivered a speech saying the government’s policies had created a ‘crime wave and racial tension’.⁸⁶⁶ Heath’s speech kicked off what Bernard Ingham, Mrs Thatcher’s press secretary, called her ten worst days in office.⁸⁶⁷ Within the first fortnight of July, rioting had flared up in Liverpool and the Conservatives lost their deposit at the Warrington by-election as Roy Jenkins nearly took the seat for the SDP. And yet, underneath the abysmal headlines, inflation was markedly down to 11.3 per cent.⁸⁶⁸ To Thatcher’s loyalists the medicine might have been bitter, but it was working.

Clark to the Rescue

During the summer Sir William Clark’s standing as chairman of the backbench finance committee was crucial. He claimed that a majority of backbenchers supported government economic policy as he had been elected to head the most powerful backbench policy committee. It was a bold presumption that put him in the crosshairs of the ‘wets’. By the end of the year the focus had gone from replacing Mrs Thatcher to toppling Clark from the finance committee. Such was his identification with Mrs Thatcher’s policies that, if he were defeated as chairman, it could force a change of direction, or even lead to the resignation of the Prime Minister.

⁸⁶⁴ THCR 2/6/2/114 part 3 f9, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 18 June 1981.

⁸⁶⁵ THCR 2/6/2/113 part 3 f31, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 1 July 1981.

⁸⁶⁶ Philip Webster, ‘Heath says Thatcher’s policies breed crime and race hate’, *The Times*, 2 July 1981, p. 1.

⁸⁶⁷ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume One*, p. 636.

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Fortunately, Mrs Thatcher's popularity among backbenchers was far stronger than the cabinet. The contrast was clear on 23 July 1981. At cabinet she was rebuffed by her ministers on demands for more public spending cuts. Only Joseph backed her and the Chancellor's call for reductions of £5bn in 1982-83. Jonathan Aitken wrote that the astonishing defeat, where even erstwhile allies like John Nott and John Biffen had sided with the 'wets', brought home to Mrs Thatcher that the 'whole strategy' was at stake.⁸⁶⁹ That same day she received a roaring reception at the 1922 Committee, an amazing juxtaposition to the defeat in cabinet. Nigel Fisher⁸⁷⁰, on the Executive of the 1922, wrote to Gow that her speech was 'superb', and that everyone seated near him thought so. So good was her speech that it was the best he had heard in thirty years, 'comparable to the best ever delivered'.⁸⁷¹

Yet with Mrs Thatcher, and by association Geoffrey Howe, in their weakest position, their critics inside the cabinet pounced, and it fell to Sir William Clark to rebut them. Both Pym and Thorneycroft, the party chairman, had criticised the Chancellor's claim that the recession had ended. Robin Harris wrote that party chairman Thorneycroft, in particular, was showing his true colours as one of the anti-Thatcher plotters. Harris argued that the concerted action by Thorneycroft and Pym had been planned between them since the autumn of 1980. Thorneycroft had recommended to Mrs Thatcher that Pym take a greater role presenting government policy earlier in 1981. Further, Thorneycroft's name kept coming up in plots to oust Mrs Thatcher. Harris recalled Gordon Reece, Mrs Thatcher's media adviser, warning her to expect a deputation from Thorneycroft 'telling her to step down'. Thorneycroft had also attempted to remove Alistair McAlpine, a strong supporter of Mrs Thatcher, as deputy chairman.⁸⁷² George Jones, writing in the *Scotsman*, added Thorneycroft and Pym's name to that of Peter Walker urging a change of direction.⁸⁷³ It was a brazen breach of collective responsibility, and infuriated both Clark and Gardiner. Gardiner wrote to Mrs Thatcher on 3 August pledging support, that 'throughout' he 'supported the Government's economic strategy, in Parliament and Press'. But he said the time had come for her to 'demonstrate' her authority

⁸⁶⁹ Aitken, p. 313.

⁸⁷⁰ Sir Nigel Fisher (1913-1996), Conservative MP for Hitchin, 1950-55; Surbiton, 1955-74.

⁸⁷¹ THCR 2/6/2/114 Part 4 f32, Nigel Fisher to Ian Gow, 23 July 1981.

⁸⁷² Harris, p. 185.

⁸⁷³ Potterne, The Private Papers of Sir William Clark, George Jones, 'Howe talks of "long and slow" recovery', *Scotsman*, 3 August 1971,

and reshuffle her cabinet, lest loyal backbenchers start to ‘hedge their bets’. Mrs Thatcher replied that she appreciated Gardiner’s final paragraph that called for a reshuffle.⁸⁷⁴

Later that week Clark went to see the Prime Minister to assure her of backbench support ‘to counter the impression that the Government had lost the support of its own backbenchers for its economic strategy’.⁸⁷⁵ Clark’s position was now a symbolic endorsement of the Thatcher position. As he supported the policy, so did the backbenchers. Thus, Clark became a target for the ‘wets’. In response to Clark’s assertion that the party was united behind government economic policy Jocelyn Cadbury⁸⁷⁶, the MP for Birmingham Northfield, replied that ‘I’m not sure who Sir William Clark thinks he is talking for’. While Cadbury asserted ‘100 per cent’ support for Mrs Thatcher, it was ‘very wrong to suggest that the large majority of Conservatives’ were angry at the Pym and Thorneycroft criticism.⁸⁷⁷ Other MPs were angered by Clark’s suggestion of near-universal support for the economic policy that ‘some discontented backbenchers’ were ‘discussing the possibility of seeking a senior MP who would be prepared to stand against Mrs Thatcher’ in the November elections.⁸⁷⁸

The cabinet reshuffle in September 1981 aggravated tensions between Thatcher’s supporters and the ‘wets’. Out went Gilmour, Thorneycroft, Lord Soames, and Mark Carlisle, all critics of Mrs Thatcher. What pleased the 92 greatly was the demotion of Prior from Employment to Northern Ireland, replaced by their ally from the 92, Tebbit. William Clark rejoiced, saying with relief that ‘there are more Ministers in it [Cabinet] who are wholeheartedly in support of government policy’.⁸⁷⁹ This gloating only confirmed Clark’s place on the hitlist. The *Coulsdon and Purley Advertiser* and *Private Eye* reported that, in retaliation, Clark was being targeted by the ‘wets’ to rid the committees of ‘Thatcher-backers’.⁸⁸⁰ Indeed, *Private Eye* suggested that Cadbury was the ringleader to oust Clark, that ‘he was the first to go for the jugular of the Thatcherite Chairman’ of the finance committee. The animosity was mutual. In Clark’s copy of *Private Eye* ‘the curse of Gnome’ is written

⁸⁷⁴ THCR2/1/4/103 fl14, Margaret Thatcher to George Gardiner, 4 August 1981.

⁸⁷⁵ Potterne, The Private Papers of Sir William Clark, Elinor Goodman, ‘Hard line Tories rally round Thatcher’, *Financial Times*, 7 August 1981.

⁸⁷⁶ Jocelyn Cadbury (1946-82), Conservative MP for Birmingham Northfield, 1979-82.

⁸⁷⁷ Potterne, the Private Papers of Sir William Clark, unattributed, ‘MPs set to fight Cabinet reshuffle’, *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 8 August 1981.

⁸⁷⁸ Peter Simmonds, ‘Premier’s recipe for Cabinet unity’, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 1981, p. 1.

⁸⁷⁹ Philip Webster, ‘Conservative right-wingers rejoice at Prior switch’, *The Times*, 15 September 1981, p. 3.

⁸⁸⁰ Potterne, the Private Papers of Sir William Clark, unattributed, ‘“I’m not a target” says local MP’, *Coulsdon and Purley Advertiser*, 9 October 1981.

with an arrow pointed to Cadbury's photograph, either wishing the curse on him or that he already been cursed by the *Eye*'s legendary and fictional proprietor Lord Gnome.⁸⁸¹

Heating Up

As Ian Gow had forecast, the 1981 party conference was a difficult one for the Prime Minister. The 'wets' had been outraged at the reshuffle, which had put more of Mrs Thatcher's critics on the backbenches beyond the confines of collective responsibility, not that many had obeyed it in cabinet. The publication of *Changing Gear* by the Blue Chip group of young, aspirational and centrist Conservative MPs called for a change to government policy. It was interpreted, however, as a call for a U-turn. The authors were clearly criticising Thatcherite conservatism when they wrote that 'no-one can deny that in the last few years we have come close to abandoning our traditional approach to politics'. In a swipe at monetarism, they wrote that 'we have swallowed down a great dose of liberal political nonsense'. Further, they advocated 'demand management', that 'without a rapid reversal of inflationary expectation' the government could create 'sufficient demand' for business. Mrs Thatcher's archived copy of the booklet is heavily annotated, expressing her displeasure on page seven with the Blue Chip argument that the government express 'a willingness to abandon [...] our commitment to lower income taxes', albeit temporarily.⁸⁸² Of note amongst the contributors was Lord [Robert] Cranborne, heir to the Marquessate of Salisbury, on paper a member of the 92. He was by then, however, a 'country member' and was disengaging from it.⁸⁸³

The Blue Chips weren't helped by Heath's call at the conference for 'Conservatives to join him in "saving our party"', interpreted as a call for a leadership challenge. This naturally infuriated the 92, as its members equated the pamphlet with Heath's overt call for a change of leadership. Ivor Stanbrook called the pamphlet's authors 'a group of conceited and arrogant young men' and accused them of being a Heathite front in that 'they were saying much the same as the former Tory leader, whose trouble was that he was as out of touch with Conservative backbenchers now as he was then'. Gardiner, speaking in his constituency, warned that the 'Heathmen' were 'crawling out of the woodwork' seeking 'a respectable figure

⁸⁸¹ Potterne, the Private Papers of Sir William Clark, Backbiter, 'The New Boys', *Private Eye*, undated. Tragically Cadbury shot himself the following July after an apparent battle with depression.

⁸⁸² William Waldegrave, eds., *Changing Gear* (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 1-7.

⁸⁸³ Lord Salisbury, interview with the author, Kent, 11 April 2022.

to challenge [Mrs Thatcher] for the leadership' in November.⁸⁸⁴ Ronald Bell questioned Heath's judgement, noting that 'good wine is not made from sour grapes'.⁸⁸⁵

The Challenge

In early 1980 Michael Jopling, the Chief Whip, had written to Gow that Rippon's manoeuvres were proof of a Heath/Rippon axis. The two had timed their attacks on the government the year before, and the alliance was evident after the 1981 party conference, as, after Heath's call for change, Rippon was put forward as a leadership challenger. After the party conference, Geoffrey Johnson-Smith⁸⁸⁶ analysed that if Mrs Thatcher would not move on policy, as the Blue Chips and 'wets' wanted, then the only option was possibly 'running a candidate against Mrs Thatcher for the leadership' in November. Johnson-Smith suggested that 'if there is such a move much of the strongest choice would be Mr Geoffrey Rippon, a senior and respected backbencher'.⁸⁸⁷ For much of October Rippon's name was kept in the press as a likely challenger, with differing interpretations of how serious the challenge would be. A week after the conference, Rippon confirmed that he would 'offer himself for the party leadership', but only in exceptional circumstances.⁸⁸⁸ Given the serious nature of the circumstances throughout 1981, this comment from Rippon wasn't to be taken lightly. He described himself as a 'Conservative of the Macmillan school', clearly putting himself apart from Mrs Thatcher, and, ironically, Heath.

Harold Macmillan had advised the party earlier in the year to tread carefully with Thatcherism. In a speech to the Primrose League⁸⁸⁹ Macmillan had some personal praise for Mrs Thatcher's courage but 'several times said that the Tories must be the One Nation party; a wet code phrase'.⁸⁹⁰ Peter Walker quoted Macmillan in his criticism of monetarism in June, that rather than adhering to abstractions the party should adopt 'sane and pragmatic decision-taking'.⁸⁹¹ Indeed, Macmillan's publishing house had printed *Changing Gear*. So rather than

⁸⁸⁴ Peter Simmonds, 'Thatcher challenge to Tory critics', *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 October 1981, p. 1.

⁸⁸⁵ Nicholas Comfort, 'Backbenchers attack Heath and "Blue Chip" MPs', *Daily Telegraph*, 12 October 1981, p. 28.

⁸⁸⁶ Sir Geoffrey Johnson-Smith (1924-2010), Conservative MP for Holborn and St Pancras South, 1959-64; East Grinstead, 1965-83; Wealden, 1983-2001.

⁸⁸⁷ Geoffrey Johnson Smith, 'How strong is the revolt?', *The Times*, 13 October 1981, p. 10.

⁸⁸⁸ Philip Webster, 'Rumblings of revolt among Tory dissidents', *The Times*, 20 October 1981, p. 2.

⁸⁸⁹ A Conservative organisation to promote Toryism. Founded in 1883 it was wound up in 2004.

⁸⁹⁰ Frank Johnson, 'The Macmillan view', *The Times*, 30 April 1981, p. 3.

⁸⁹¹ George Clark, 'Walker monetarism attack', *The Times*, 23 June 1981, p. 26.

being an off-hand comment, Rippon was identifying himself with a mainstream alternative to Thatcher still held in affection by the 'wets'. By attaching themselves to Macmillan they had sidelined Heath, admitting his unpopularity and the toxicity associated with, what even some of his friends considered, his ongoing sulk since losing the leadership in 1975.

By the end of October the prospect of a leadership challenge had fizzled out, but not because the 'wets' had given up. Rippon did not want to be, what became known as, a 'stalking horse' and instead wanted the names of fifty supporters before standing. Some colleagues believed he could get as many as eighty. But they also changed tactics to avoid the challenge being 'a mere gesture of protest'.⁸⁹² The humiliating by-election defeat to the Liberals in Croydon North West forced a re-think of 'wet' tactics. David Watt in *The Times* suggested that rather than press the 'nuclear option' of a leadership challenge, with no obvious chance of success, the 'wets' might rather chip 'away at the edges by trying to capture the chairmanship of the backbench committees'.⁸⁹³ This plan had been mooted after the party conference, with du Cann and Sir William Clark at the top of the 'wet' 'hit list'.⁸⁹⁴ After Rippon backed down, the 'wets' also took their eyes off du Cann, and instead focused them all on Clark.

Over the summer Clark had played an important role as the backbench counterweight to Mrs Thatcher's critics. Being such a devout supporter, and chair of the finance committee, he raised the ire of 'wet' colleagues when he said that his position as chairman was a validation that the party backed Mrs Thatcher. Indeed, one of the reasons the 'wets' pulled away from challenging Mrs Thatcher was that they claimed 'to be winning the economic policy argument within the party'.⁸⁹⁵ Thus, the removal of Sir William from the backbench finance committee would be seen as proof that the ground had shifted.

The 92 met the challenge head on. On 1 November it was rumoured that Maurice Macmillan would challenge Clark for the finance committee. That a former Treasury minister would stand for a backbench policy committee demonstrated the importance the position held, and the necessity of removing Clark. That a Macmillan also stood against Clark was symbolic:

⁸⁹² Potterne, the Private Papers of Sir William Clark, Elinor Goodman, 'Tory wets retreat from challenge for party leadership', *Financial Times*, 27 October 1981.

⁸⁹³ David Watt, 'Westminster, where the battle rages faintest', *The Times*, 23 October 1981, p. 14.

⁸⁹⁴ Our political correspondent, 'Du Cann heads Tory left "hit list"', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 October 1981, p. 32.

⁸⁹⁵ Potterne, the Private Papers of Sir William Clark, Elinor Goodman, 'Tory wets retreat from challenge for party leadership', *Financial Times*, 27 October 1981.

it was interpreted as the archetypal ‘wet’ against Mrs Thatcher’s mouthpiece. As a sign of how bullish the ‘wets’ were, Macmillan’s challenge was met with demands from Gilmour for five billion pounds of reflation rather than spending cuts. This provoked a response from Gardiner, organising the 92 slate for the upcoming elections. In a speech in his constituency he warned against a retreat from government policy that if the government ‘sought to raise taxes [...] they would not be able to count on my support’.⁸⁹⁶

When nominations opened on 5 November, the 92 had its own plot to topple the ‘wets’. Elinor Goodman reported that Rippon, as chairman of the powerful foreign affairs committee, was now a target along with other MPs who ‘criticised the Prime Minister’. She wrote that these elections ‘provide an annual barometer’ and the votes in 1981 were ‘more important than ever’ given the antagonism between left and right in the party. The 92 put Ray Whitney against Rippon, and John Browne sought to regain his position on the finance committee.⁸⁹⁷ Michael Grylls, of the 92 and incumbent chairman of the industry committee, was challenged by Hal Miller⁸⁹⁸ from the One Nation wing. The 92 organisation was ‘headed’ by Gardiner and Jill Knight and, according to the *Economist*, was dubbed Mrs Thatcher’s ‘Praetorian Guard’. Conversely, the ‘opposition’ to the 92 was reported to come from the One Nation Group, whose president was Harold Macmillan.⁸⁹⁹

Although the 92 held on in 1980 and the political and economic circumstances were worse in 1981, the backbench elections were a resounding success for the 92. William Clark defeated Macmillan, justifying Clark’s commentary in the summer that the party was behind the Prime Minister. As *The Times* reported, Macmillan’s candidature was ‘made into a symbol of opposition to Treasury policy’.⁹⁰⁰ The 92 also advanced on the finance committee as Browne was re-elected, having lost his position in 1980. Grylls beat Miller at the industry committee. Perhaps the biggest scalp of all was Whitney’s victory over Rippon to become chairman of the foreign affairs committee. Philip Webster, writing in *The Times*, described it as a ‘coup’ and ‘the Party’s left and centre were furious at being out-flanked’. The ‘right’, by contrast, were organised and ‘furious’ at Rippon for his campaign against Mrs Thatcher’s policies for the past

⁸⁹⁶ Peter Simmonds, ‘Plan to curb rates stirs Tory revolt’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 November 1981, p. 4.

⁸⁹⁷ Potterne, the Private Papers of Sir William Clark, Elinor Goodman, ‘Power struggle starts for Conservative back bench elections’, *Financial Times*, 6 November 1981.

⁸⁹⁸ Sir Hal Miller (1929-2015), Conservative MP for Bromsgrove 1974-92.

⁸⁹⁹ Unattributed, ‘Backbench Boys’, *Economist*, 14 November 1981, p. 42.

⁹⁰⁰ Our political editor, ‘Thatcher’s supporters beat wets’, *The Times*, 18 November 1981.

two years.⁹⁰¹ What was not recognised in the commentaries was that all the ‘right’ victors were members of the 92, prompting Gow to write to Mrs Thatcher that ‘we have really done rather well’.⁹⁰²

Conclusion

The 92 had successfully seen off the biggest threat thus far to Mrs Thatcher’s leadership. Had Clark lost his position as chairman of the backbench finance committee, it would have been a significant blow. To have lost her cheerleader, who represented her views on the backbenches, would have been a repudiation of her strategy. After the formation of the SDP as an acceptable alternative to Labour, an unpopular budget, riots, and mounting troubles in Northern Ireland, Mrs Thatcher reshuffled her cabinet slightly in her favour and her backbench allies gained a tighter grip on the party policy committees.

For all the talk of leadership challenges, Mrs Thatcher was still held in high regard on the backbenches. Her bravura performances at the 1922 Committee, and the positive feedback Gow received, were proof of this. Gardiner played on this with an extensive network of supporters to vote for her candidates in the elections. A ‘daily whip’ was issued in ‘breast-pocket size’ to aid discretion. Mutual aid was given to sympathetic candidates to widen the voting base for the 92’s candidates. Gow wrote to Mrs Thatcher after the elections that ‘although Patrick Wall is Chairman of the “92”, your Praetorian Guard, George Gardiner is the effective power and is a superb organiser’. Gardiner’s report to Gow put this success in context. The summer was dominated with briefing that ‘the elections would mark a backbench revolt against Margaret Thatcher’s leadership’ and ‘our members’ were ‘put on an advertised “hit list”’. Gardiner confirmed the reports to Gow that the 92 went on the offensive to ‘teach those who sought to undermine Margaret Thatcher’s leadership a lesson’. With a campaign team involving Gardiner, Durant, William Clark, Dunn and Colvin, they adopted a new ‘cell’ structure to rope in sympathetic MPs not yet inducted into the 92. As a result, the 92 controlled half the ‘chairmanships of the main Committees’. Tebbit acknowledged the role they had played, thanking Durant ‘and all those who have been so helpful in organising one or two things of late’.⁹⁰³ Gardiner concluded:

⁹⁰¹ Philip Webster, ‘Rippon loses Tory foreign affairs job’, *The Times*, 25 November 1981, p. 2.

⁹⁰² THCR 2/6/2/15 part 5 f32, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 20 November 1981.

⁹⁰³ U DPW/37/17, Norman Tebbit to Anthony Durant, 28 November 1981.

‘The “92” has been described as the “Praetorian Guard” of our Prime Minister. I like to think we performed that role with success in these elections’.⁹⁰⁴

⁹⁰⁴ THCR2/1/4/42 f108, Ian Gow to Margaret Thatcher, 23 December 1981.

Chapter Seven: No Turning Back

Whilst 1981 had been Mrs Thatcher's most difficult year of her administration thus far, with the aid of the 92 Group she ended it in a stronger position. A leadership challenge had been deterred and Mrs Thatcher's proxies in the 92 had improved their position on the backbench committees against their toughest challenge yet. Sir William Clark's victory against Maurice Macmillan ensured that Thatcherism would develop beyond monetarism after 1981. The two men were candidates representing their own distinctive ideological vein. Since his reintegration into the 92 and his election as chairman of the backbench finance committee in 1979, Clark had robustly defended the government's monetarist economic strategy. Throughout 1981 it was he who led the public response to 'wet' attacks and demands for reflation, notably countering the Pym/Thorneycroft campaign the summer. In Macmillan the 'wets' had a challenger of serious pedigree. The son of the former Prime Minister who had written of a 'middle way' between capitalism and socialism, the younger Macmillan was high profile enough to make a credible challenge, and one that mattered. Clark's victory confirmed the backbenches were content with Mrs Thatcher as leader, and her economic strategy. Behind this victory was the protective spectre of George Gardiner. He had reinvigorated the 92 and mobilised it to defend the Prime Minister and secure the election and re-election of her allies to backbench committees.

Given the 92 had worked so hard to sustain Mrs Thatcher, it is surprising that it has not emerged in the history of the Conservative party as the group most associated with Mrs Thatcher or Thatcherism. The No Turning Back group (NTB), described by Charles Moore as 'the main Thatcherite backbench grouping'⁹⁰⁵, developed a reputation as the most formidable Thatcherite group in equal parts due to the publicity it generated and the high profile of its membership. The 92 had been invaluable in protecting the Prime Minister from internal attack in the early, formative years of her administration, but it did not act as an ideological think tank to supplement her agenda after it had secured her position. That is the legacy of the No Turning Back group. It effectively used the media to promote policies it believed would progress Thatcherism.

⁹⁰⁵ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Three*, pp. 685-6.

As a generation of new MPs revitalised the 92 in 1979, the new intake in 1983 formed the backbone of the NTB. Members of the NTB were also singled out for promotion, with its members joining the government in junior roles. Towards the end of the Thatcher administration NTB founding member Peter Lilley was promoted to the cabinet. In the Major years the 92 grew in number but lost its influence, which was unsurprising given Major's promotion of and reliance on Ken Clarke, Douglas Hurd and Michael Heseltine. It became personally associated with Gardiner, and his attacks on John Major weakened the 92 considerably. Although John Campbell argues that the NTB 'remained angry that [Mrs Thatcher] had been deposed', some of its members held cabinet office under John Major and their loyalty to the new Prime Minister mitigated that anger, at least in public.⁹⁰⁶ And yet, without the 92 performing the essential function of defending Mrs Thatcher in her first term, there would not have been a No Turning Back group to follow it in the parliament thereafter and arguably no Prime Minister Major, either.

This chapter is therefore divided. First, it will argue that Gardiner made, and broke, the reputation of the 92 after 1981. He built on the success of the 1981 backbench elections and became chairman of the 92 after the 1983 election. However, from then on, it lost its mantle as the standard-bearers of Thatcherism. In the mid-1980s Gardiner sought, and failed, to build a grassroots Thatcherite base within the Monday Club. In the 1990s he overreached by challenging John Major's authority. It is within this context that the Thatcherite flame was taken up by the No Turning Back group in 1985. The second section will explain the development of the No Turning Back group and will argue that a new generation of ambitious MPs launched policy documents to breathe new life into Thatcherism. These groups had their limits, as proven by the fall of Mrs Thatcher not at a general election, but by a ballot of Conservative MPs. Neither group was involved in her leadership campaign, a consequence of complacency and Mrs Thatcher's poor choice of personnel to run that campaign, which proved a stark contrast to the battles of the early 1980s.

The Rise of King George

George Gardiner emerged from the 1981 backbench elections victorious. His triumphalist memorandum declared that Mrs Thatcher's Praetorian Guard had 'performed' their role 'with

⁹⁰⁶ Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, p. 750.

success'.⁹⁰⁷ The 'wet' challenge had been routed, but Gardiner did not stop there. In an attack coordinated with Norman Tebbit, the new Employment Secretary, Gardiner rallied MPs to encourage Mrs Thatcher to stick to her policies. Shortly after the backbench elections a last gasp 'wet' rebellion was threatened by the 'Gang of 25' against the government's economic policy. It was named after the number of signatories to a letter written by Conservative MP Patrick Cormack. The 'Gang' warned that they would vote against an economic package that would 'deflate aggregate demand in the economy'. It was a coded argument for reflation.⁹⁰⁸

Only fourteen MPs abstained on the Chancellor's White Paper, thus representing how cowed the 'wets' had become, with the 'dries' in the ascendant. This is remarkable considering the unpopularity of the government at the time. They had lost the Croydon North West by-election in October to the Liberals and the safe seat of Crosby in November to the SDP. Lord Cormack, in interview, said that it was not an organised plot and there was no official 'Gang', nothing coming remotely close to the organisation of the Lollards or the 92.⁹⁰⁹ Gardiner replied by organising a 'round-robin' letter that received over 100 signatures supporting the government position opposing reflation. It was a typical Gardiner ploy, reacting to Mrs Thatcher's critics with show of force of numbers behind the Prime Minister, always in the form of an open letter or petition. Gardiner later wrote that Mrs Thatcher 'used to keep it in the drawer of her desk' and would brandish it in front of any minister or Whip who urged a change of course. Gardiner wrote that his methods were 'to give her the weapons with which to fight back', specifically demonstrations of support on the backbenches.⁹¹⁰ Gardiner's tactics received grudging admiration. Hugo Young in *The Sunday Times* wrote that it was a 'concoction designed to catch the headlines', and Young concluded that 'there is no more skilful artificer' of this 'than Mr George Gardiner MP'.⁹¹¹

In 1982 the 92 had another clash with Jim Prior that could have escalated further had Gardiner not been hospitalised at the time. After the September 1981 reshuffle Prior had been moved to become Northern Ireland Secretary. His subsequent proposals for a Northern Ireland Assembly were deeply unpopular within the 92, as they resurrected the concept of power sharing in Ulster. John Biggs-Davison, chairman of the Northern Ireland committee, wrote

⁹⁰⁷ U DPW/37/18, George Gardiner to 92 Group, circa December 1981.

⁹⁰⁸ THCR 1/14/7 f23, 'Gang of 25' letter to Chief Whip, 25 November 1981.

⁹⁰⁹ Lord Cormack, interview with the author, London, 1 April 2022.

⁹¹⁰ Gardiner, p. 139.

⁹¹¹ PPA 3/210, Hugo Young, 'Inside Politics', *Sunday Times*, 31 January 1982.

that 'Ulster is bigger than Mr Prior and certainly bigger than me'. But as it appeared that the 92 were, again, targeting Prior, Biggs-Davison denied the 'allegation that we were an anti-Prior faction'.⁹¹² Yet the 'get Prior' brigade was still there, as noted by Don Concannon, a Labour MP. He identified Ian Gow, in particular, giving 'a nod here, a wink there' to direct dissent against the Northern Ireland Secretary.⁹¹³ Although Gardiner opposed Prior's policy, he acknowledged that with the Falklands conflict under way there was little interest in challenging the government and fewer rebels willing to make a stand.⁹¹⁴ He was also hospitalised with fever and it was recommended that he take a holiday. The Whips had given him permission to take as much time as he needed to recover, relishing the prospect of a leaderless rebellion fading away.⁹¹⁵

Gardiner also changed tactics on the Employment Bill in 1982. Whilst Robin Harris argued the 1980 Employment Act made no difference in curtailing trade union power, the 1982 Act, introduced by Norman Tebbit, made 'two key changes'. It gave employers the power to sue trade unions for damages and allowed trade union funds to be seized in the event of unlawful industrial action.⁹¹⁶ Gardiner, however, tried to strengthen the Bill, as he had done with Prior's. This time, however, he was less confrontational with an Employment Secretary with whom he was in ideological sympathy. In March 1982 Gardiner sought to amend the Bill with a provision that unions went through 'agreed disputes procedures' before a strike, thus making a strike the last resort.⁹¹⁷ This time Gardiner sought support from employer organisations rather than fellow MPs, a much less confrontational campaign. He was, after all, an ally of Tebbit. Whilst it was far less intense than the 1980 rebellion, Gardiner's pressure was necessary to show a desire for further trade union legislation as the Conservatives weren't the only party campaigning for reform. An *Observer* analysis showed that the SDP sought to 'out-bid' Tebbit with their own amendments to toughen the Bill, including proposals for secret postal ballots for all union elections and the right for trade union members to decide which party union funds went to, if at all.⁹¹⁸ With their victories the previous year, and a victory at

⁹¹² BD/1/719, John Biggs-Davison notes for 1922 Committee meeting, 17 June 1982.

⁹¹³ Peter Pryke, 'Guillotine Falls on Tory Attempt to Kill Ulster Bill', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 June 1982, p. 10.

⁹¹⁴ Gardiner, p. 147.

⁹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁹¹⁶ Harris, p. 225.

⁹¹⁷ PPA 3/210, Elinor Goodman, 'Pressure on Tebbit to tighten Employment Bill', *Financial Times*, 4 March 1982.

⁹¹⁸ Robert Taylor, 'Tebbit takes a right hook', *Observer*, 7 March 1982, p. 18.

Glasgow Hillhead in March 1982, Gardiner's move was to ensure the Tories weren't outflanked by the SDP on trade union reform.

1982 was not a time for rebellion. The invasion of the Falkland Islands by Argentina on 2 April 1982 signalled a potential existential crisis for the Prime Minister. Most of the Group's members were solidly behind the call to forcibly retake the Falklands and supported Mrs Thatcher in her desire to do so. Ray Whitney was the most outspoken supporter of a diplomatic solution.⁹¹⁹ Whilst Gow's record of the 1922 Committee meeting after the invasion shows a great majority across the party determined to retake the Falklands⁹²⁰, a later analysis by Michael Jopling, the Chief Whip, showed different strands of opinion in the party. Jopling found six groups, ranging from a 'no surrender' all-in group demanding a 'return to the status quo with no compromises', to a 'do not fire a shot in anger' group on the more pacifist end. This list shows no ideological coherence in relation to any group, as members of the 92 appear in all, although the 'no surrender' group had the highest concentration.⁹²¹ Jopling did not believe these factions to be serious, however, he noted that the majority would support the Prime Minister 'in any settlement which eventually emerges'.⁹²² Gardiner took a different view that, privately, 'many of us would feel obliged to resign the Tory Whip' if the 'merest' fraction of sovereignty over the islands were ceded.⁹²³ Patrick Wall wrote to Mrs Thatcher to convey the support of the 92 for 'returning the Falkland Islands to British sovereignty' and, importantly, to resist pressure from those 'even within the ranks of our own Party' suggesting 'that decisive action be avoided'.⁹²⁴

After victory in the Falklands, the Group formalised its organisational structure. Instead of *ad hoc* committees, it finally constituted an official steering committee 'to co-ordinate and extend the Group's activities'.⁹²⁵ This was necessary as by April 1982 the 92 had sixty-three members, a significant increase on the thirty-eight it had before the 1979 general

⁹¹⁹ Obituary, 'Sir Ray Whitney', *The Times*, 29 August 2012.

⁹²⁰ THCR 2/6/2/67 Part 1 f213, Ian Gow notes of 1922 Committee meeting, 3 April 1982.

⁹²¹ Ray Whitney, the vocal critic of Jim Prior in 1980, was alone in the 92 in questioning the wisdom of sending a task force to the Falklands. John Biggs-Davison called his intervention 'defeatism'. See Hansard, Commons Debates, 3 April 1982, Vol. 21, Col. 655.

⁹²² THCR 1/20/3/8 f6, Michael Jopling to Margaret Thatcher, 21 April 1982.

⁹²³ Gardiner, p. 150.

⁹²⁴ U DPW/37/18, Patrick Wall to Margaret Thatcher, 7 April 1982.

⁹²⁵ U DPW/37/18, Patrick Wall to 92 Group, 28 July 1982. The members of the Steering Committee were Wall, Gardiner, Tony Durant, Michael Colvin, Sir John Biggs-Davison, Winston Churchill, Jill Knight, John Browne, Ivor Stanbrook, and Bob Dunn.

election.⁹²⁶ If it was to win further elections on the backbench committees, it needed a sophisticated organisation. Gardiner's illness had demonstrated how much of the Group's organisation depended on his activity. Bob Dunn therefore proposed rules for the Group to diffuse power and create a more robust structure, including regular elections for the chairman, secretary, and the steering committee. The steering committee members were to act as Whips and were 'required to keep in contact with a sub-group of 6 other members'. To prevent members standing against each other, the steering committee were to draw up lists of candidates.⁹²⁷ Not all members were happy with the changes. Michael Colvin thought it would be 'too unwieldy', despite being a member of the steering committee himself.⁹²⁸ As the backbench elections in 1982 weren't heavily contested the new rules were not properly put to the test as Mrs Thatcher's popularity grew after the Falklands war.

In 1984 Gardiner became the elected chairman of the 92, though he had effectively run it since 1979. It was an amicable succession. Wall's resignation statement thanked Gardiner 'for the sterling work' he had done, an endorsement in all but name.⁹²⁹ Ian Gow was also pleased Wall 'paid tribute to George Gardiner' as 'he has made a very special contribution as well'. Gow also congratulated Wall for forming a Group that had become an 'effective and much needed influence', a nod to the Group's pivotal role in the recent backbench elections.⁹³⁰ It was not, however, a coronation for Gardiner. He was challenged by Peter Hordern, who scored a respectable twenty-two votes to Gardiner's forty-one.⁹³¹

The once secretive 92 now received press coverage as Gardiner took over, a reflection of his campaigning style. *The Times* profiled the Group as a 'right-wing version' of the 1922 Committee, a compliment to the Group's influence or a warning that it was becoming a party within a party. Gardiner's elevation was noted as a boost for Norman Tebbit, with Gardiner described as one of Tebbit's 'closest parliamentary allies', thus also explaining Gardiner's different approach to the 1982 Employment Bill.⁹³² From then until 1996 Gardiner was in charge with a close coterie of supporters including Jill Knight, Bob Dunn, James Pawsey and Vivian Bendall. A new intake after the 1983 Conservative landslide swelled the Group's

⁹²⁶ U DPW/38/18, 92 Group membership list, circa April 1981.

⁹²⁷ U DPW/37/18, George Gardiner to 92, 14 July 1982.

⁹²⁸ U DPW/37/18, Michael Colvin to Patrick Wall, 14 August 1982.

⁹²⁹ U DPW/37/19, Patrick Wall to 92 Group, circa early March 1984.

⁹³⁰ U DPW/37/19, Ian Gow to Patrick Wall, 12 March 1984.

⁹³¹ U DPW/37/19, 92 Group election results, circa May 1984.

⁹³² Anthony Bevins, 'Right-wingers choose Tebbit ally', *The Times*, 25 May 1984, p. 4.

number further. New members such as Neil Hamilton and Gerald Howarth joined, and Howarth would become chairman of the 92 after the 2001 general election. In 1987 the 92 routed the Lollards on the 1922 Committee, producing a 92 majority. *The Times* described the Group's advance as a 'coup', whereby Gardiner, Elizabeth Peacock⁹³³, and Rhodes Boyson were elected to the 1922 at the expense of Fred Silvester, who had lost his Westminster seat in 1987; a double setback for the Lollards as Silvester had taken over the organisation of the 'wet' Group earlier in the preceding parliament.⁹³⁴

With the 92 growing steadily and secure on the backbench committees Gardiner attempted, unsuccessfully, to turn the Monday Club into a Thatcherite grassroots organisation. He wrote, maybe with tongue in cheek as he was looking to do the same thing, that by 1985 the Club had become a vehicle for MPs to promote their own particular interests. Gardiner left the Club in 1988 when they tried to forge links with Jean Marie Le Pen's *Front National*. Whilst he had successfully reformed the Club's immigration policy from compulsory to voluntary repatriation⁹³⁵, he could not build a base in the Club. Gardiner found its constitution and policies could be easily controlled by a mobilised minority, 'all its officers could be thrown out and its policies reversed simply by packing an AGM'.⁹³⁶ There is a delicious irony in Gardiner's own tactics for the backbench committees being used against him in the Monday Club.

The Fall of King George

From 1984 until 1990 George Gardiner's stewardship of the 92 was a success. He increased the Group's membership to over 100; the 92 retained the chairmanship of the backbench finance committee, which Sir William Clark held for the entirety of Mrs Thatcher's premiership; increased its representation on the 1922 Committee; and it was recognised in the press as a significant backbench group. For all their efforts to keep Mrs Thatcher in power in the early 1980s, however, the 92 Group were powerless to stop her downfall in 1990. It was astonishing that neither Gardiner nor any senior member of the 92 steering committee was involved in Mrs Thatcher's leadership campaign. The only member of the 92 involved was

⁹³³ Elizabeth Peacock (1937-), Conservative MP for Batley and Spen, 1937-97.

⁹³⁴ Diary, 'The ranks move right', *The Times*, 16 July 1987, p.12.

⁹³⁵ Gardiner, p. 166.

⁹³⁶ Ibid., p. 167.

Michael Neubert⁹³⁷, but he had been a minister since 1983 and, accordingly, whilst he had remained a member he would not have actively been involved in its activities. Charles Moore wrote that the 92 and No Turning Back group were ‘assiduously kept away’ from her during the campaign.⁹³⁸ In her memoirs Mrs Thatcher pondered that had there been even a drop of their evangelical ‘spirit in higher places [...] it might have indeed been possible’ to turn things around after the first ballot.⁹³⁹

The exclusion of the 92 from these events is inexplicable when one considers that Mrs Thatcher said to her leadership team, when the contest was announced, that ‘I hope the 92 Group are mobilised’.⁹⁴⁰ Her call to arms, however, fell on deaf, or unwilling, ears around her. After Mrs Thatcher technically lost the first ballot by not winning by the fifteen per cent margin demanded in the rules, the 92 became involved too late. When Gardiner and his allies appeared in Downing Street to prevent the Prime Minister resigning on the evening of 21 November, Tebbit exclaimed ‘Thank God the 92’s arrived’. But its arrival would not change the Prime Minister’s mind; the ‘battering’ she had received from her cabinet had convinced her to go.⁹⁴¹

There are many explanations for Mrs Thatcher’s defeat in November 1990. Her critics point to her isolation, both literally and politically. She was abroad for the first ballot at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe; and she refused to campaign, believing that after eleven years her MPs should know what she stood for. Politically her judgement had waned. Her opponents argued that the Community Charge had made her unelectable. These concerns were amplified by heavy by-election losses in Eastbourne, caused by the murder of Ian Gow by the IRA, and Mid Staffordshire in 1990. Even George Gardiner protested against the Community Charge rates in his own county borough.⁹⁴² Mrs Thatcher’s developing euroscepticism was also a factor, not least in Geoffrey Howe’s devastating resignation speech that spurred Michael Heseltine into making his leadership bid.⁹⁴³ The coalition that supported her in the party had differing views on European integration. Her Bruges speech in 1988 had redrawn the lines within the party. For instance, Peter Hordern agreed wholly with the

⁹³⁷ Sir Michael Neubert (1933-2014), Conservative MP for Romford, February 1974-97.

⁹³⁸ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Three*, p. 703.

⁹³⁹ Thatcher, *Downing Street Years*, p. 855.

⁹⁴⁰ Harris, p. 324.

⁹⁴¹ Gardiner, p. 218.

⁹⁴² Renton, p. 38.

⁹⁴³ Howe ended his resignation statement with such an appeal, ‘The time has come for others to consider their own response to the tragic conflict of loyalties with which I myself have wrestled for perhaps too long’. Hansard, Commons Debates, 13 November 1990, Vol. 180, Col. 465.

monetarist experiment. Yet as an active pro-European he was not prepared to follow Mrs Thatcher's euroscepticism.

Her supporters also point to her choice of personnel as a significant contributing factor. Two landslide election victories had not persuaded her to appoint a cabinet more attuned to her thinking. At one NTB dinner in 1986 Mrs Thatcher asked Eric Forth why everyone looked so glum. Forth's response was to ask the Prime Minister when she was going to appoint someone 'decent' to her cabinet. Her PPS Michael Alison⁹⁴⁴ then asked the group who that might be, a question Gow would not have had to pose.⁹⁴⁵ Robin Harris and Gardiner both argue that the choice of Tim Renton as Chief Whip was detrimental to her cause as he 'never supported her', even in the first ballot.⁹⁴⁶ Renton was an ally of Geoffrey Howe; and to have kept him as the Chief Whip after Howe's bitter resignation put her in an impossible position.⁹⁴⁷ An apathetic Whips' office also deprived the Thatcher camp of the knowledge and influence needed to twist the arms of Conservative MPs. Her choice of campaign manager owed more to pity than merit.⁹⁴⁸ By then Peter Morrison, her PPS, was an alcoholic with a complicated private life, and he badly misjudged the mood of the party; his complacency practically gave the field to the Heseltine camp. Finally, the cabinet turned on her. By seeing them one at a time Mrs Thatcher was beaten down by the same message from different messengers: we support you, but you will lose. After notifying her cabinet that she would resign the next morning, one minister blamed Heseltine for her defeat. 'Oh no', she replied, 'it wasn't Heseltine, it was the Cabinet'.⁹⁴⁹

The 92 split three ways during the first leadership contest. Although most backed Mrs Thatcher in the first and would have supported her in the second ballot, not all did. Elizabeth Peacock wrote in her memoirs that she was 'accused by George Gardiner and the dreaded Alan Clark of speaking against [Mrs Thatcher] in a '92 meeting'. She voted for Heseltine in both ballots.⁹⁵⁰ Ivor Stanbrook, a leading member of the 92 in the early 1980s, voted for Heseltine

⁹⁴⁴ Michael Alison (1926-2004), Conservative MP for Barkston Ash, 1964-83; Selby, 1983-97.

⁹⁴⁵ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, p. 425.

⁹⁴⁶ Harris, p. 331.

⁹⁴⁷ Geoffrey Howe used his resignation speech to call for a challenge to Mrs Thatcher's leadership. It was a coded message for Heseltine to strike. See Hansard, Commons Debates, 13 November 1990, Vol. 180, Cols. 461-5.

⁹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 318.

⁹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 339.

⁹⁵⁰ Elizabeth Peacock, *A Yorkshire Lass at the Court of Thatcher* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2013), p. 149.

in the first ballot, arguing that Mrs Thatcher could not win an election. Consequently, his constituency association tried to deselect him, an attempt he survived by 221 votes to 138.⁹⁵¹ Sir Philip Goodhart, another member of the 92 from the early 80s, also faced deselection for not supporting Mrs Thatcher, although Goodhart had said he would stand down at the next election, making a deselection attempt worthless. Whilst no MP was deselected, that constituency associations tried to remove six MPs after the leadership election shows the degree of anger in the party. Two days after Mrs Thatcher resigned, two members of the Torbay Conservative Association chained themselves to the railings outside the London home of Michael Heseltine ‘in protest at his part in Mrs Thatcher’s downfall’.⁹⁵²

After Mrs Thatcher’s resignation, and freed from the obligation to support her, some members of the 92 opted to support Heseltine. Alan Watkins, in his detailed account of the leadership election, lists the MPs who publicly declared for each leadership contender.⁹⁵³ Tony Marlow, Den Dover, Jill Knight and Ivor Stanbrook joined renowned ‘wets’ Patrick Cormack, James (by then Lord) Prior, and David Knox to support Heseltine. Worse for the reputation of the 92, Nick Budgen and Sir Peter Hordern supported Douglas Hurd, whose campaign manager was Tristan Garel-Jones, a man claimed to have spent his time in government ‘recommending for promotion the Prime Minister’s enemies’.⁹⁵⁴ Garel-Jones had a formidable reputation, much like Gardiner, as a plotter and schemer. Julia Langdon wrote that Garel-Jones had a ‘lack of personal ambition for anything other than the advancement of his friends and the political causes in which he believed’, especially the European Union.⁹⁵⁵ Regarding the downfall of Mrs Thatcher, his heart was not in the fight. Although he had worked for Mrs Thatcher against Sir Anthony Meyer’s challenge in 1989, in 1990 he wrote to the Chief Whip to suggest it was the ‘beginning of the end’. Although he served Mrs Thatcher ably as a Whip, and supported her against Meyer in 1989, his colleagues distrusted him as a ‘wet’ out of step with her philosophy.⁹⁵⁶ Indeed, some members of the 92 had warned Gow and Mrs Thatcher about Garel-Jones as far back as 1982. Gow reported to Mrs Thatcher that Bob Dunn, John Townend,

⁹⁵¹ Richard Duce, ‘Tory MP survives move to oust him’, *The Times*, 12 January 1991, p. 3.

⁹⁵² Sheila Gunn, ‘Tory supporters claim treachery’, *The Times*, 24 November 1990, p. 1.

⁹⁵³ Alan Watkins, *A Conservative Coup: The Fall of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1992), pp. 215-4.

⁹⁵⁴ McAlpine, p. 261.

⁹⁵⁵ Julia Langdon, ‘Lord Garel-Jones obituary’, *Guardian*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/mar/30/lord-garel-jones-obituary> [accessed 1 May 2024].

⁹⁵⁶ Obituary, ‘Tristan Garel-Jones’, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2020/03/24/tristan-garel-jonestory-wet-able-deputy-chief-whip-margaret/> [accessed 1 May 2024].

and Archie Hamilton ‘had learnt with disbelief, that you had appointed Garel-Jones as a Whip’, such was his reputation.⁹⁵⁷

That most of the 92 followed Mrs Thatcher’s advice and voted for John Major was a source of further trouble, and Gardiner’s eventual downfall, as it increased expectations that he was a Thatcherite. After his abortive attempt to turn the Monday Club around, Gardiner helped form a grassroots organisation to defend Thatcherism, Conservative Way Forward.⁹⁵⁸ Predominantly led by Conservative activists, its first general secretary was Mark Allatt and it represented ‘nine principles’ of conservatism endorsed by Mrs Thatcher.⁹⁵⁹ It operated at the grassroots to influence candidate selection, one notable victory being the adoption of Gerald Howarth in Aldershot in 1997, having lost his Cannock seat in 1992.⁹⁶⁰ It was a symbolic for the Thatcherites, replacing the ‘wet’ Julian Critchley with Howarth, a strong supporter of the former Prime Minister and her PPS after her resignation.

After giving Major the benefit of the doubt and supporting him through the 1992 election, Gardiner attempted to use the weight of the 92 to move Major, and the government, in a more conservative direction. This clash resulted in Gardiner’s ejection from the chairmanship of the 92. By 1994 the Conservatives had suffered two years of internal splits over the Maastricht Treaty and the government’s attitude to European integration. Gardiner and the 92 steering committee went to see Major on 1 February 1994 to demand he reshuffle his cabinet with a ‘stronger right-wing voice’, providing a list of names for promotion including ‘Jonathan Aitken, Michael Forsyth and Neil Hamilton’. The Group demanded Major cut public spending and reduce taxes before the next election. In return ‘the right will promise an end to the feuding and sniping’.⁹⁶¹ The meeting with the Prime Minister was a disaster for Gardiner. It lasted all of two minutes, and Major’s allies used the opportunity to humiliate Gardiner and strengthen Major’s authority.⁹⁶² It worked, as within a fortnight Gardiner was under threat of being challenged for the chairmanship of the 92.

⁹⁵⁷ THCR 2/6/2/15 Part 4 fl15, Ian Gow minute to Margaret Thatcher, 17 March 1982.

⁹⁵⁸ Gardiner, p. 8.

⁹⁵⁹ Those nine principles were democracy, capitalism, deregulation, freedom, community, enterprise, nationhood, security, and choice. See Donal Blaney, ‘A new dawn for Conservative Way Forward’, *ConservativeHome*, 8 February 2013, <https://conservativehome.com/2013/02/08/donal-blaney/> [accessed 1 May 2024].

⁹⁶⁰ Conservative activist, interview with the author, Kent, 12 April 2023.

⁹⁶¹ Arthur Leathley and Nicholas Wood, ‘Right-wingers offer Major a lifeline in party strife’, *The Times*, 31 January 1994, p. 1.

⁹⁶² Philip Webster, ‘Rightwingers rebuffed by angry Major’, *The Times*, 2 February 1994, p. 1.

Gardiner's last achievement was to see off Sir Anthony Durant for the chairmanship of the Group, but it was on the condition that he stood down as chairman before the next general election.⁹⁶³ His challenger, Durant, had been on the first 92 backbench election committee with Gardiner in the early 1980s. But times had changed. The departure of Mrs Thatcher and the growing importance of European integration in Conservative politics had split the 92, as it had the Conservative party. Durant was a strong supporter of Major, supported him over Maastricht⁹⁶⁴ and was a founding chairman of the secretive 'Q' group of senior backbenchers, Whips, and Major's PPS, created to support the Prime Minister.⁹⁶⁵ Durant challenged Gardiner on the basis that 'the loyalty of the Group to the Prime Minister was in doubt', attempting to move the Group on from its Thatcherite roots. Durant got a respectable vote. *The Times* speculated that Gardiner won with a majority of between twenty and twenty-five⁹⁶⁶ although Gardiner wrote that he won by sixty votes to forty-one.⁹⁶⁷

Gardiner would not see out the parliament as a Conservative MP, either. He stood down from the 92 on 31 January 1996, replaced by his ally John Townend, who beat Neil Hamilton for the position.⁹⁶⁸ Without a power base Gardiner was vulnerable to the wrath of the party, both centrally and locally. In April 1996 he faced deselection by his Reigate constituency party for supporting John Redwood in the 1995 Conservative leadership election. In reply he threatened to force a by-election if he was removed as candidate, which would have eroded the government's majority altogether.⁹⁶⁹ Even though Gardiner lost the confidence of his executive by one vote, fifteen to fourteen⁹⁷⁰, he wrote that this was because a local vice-chairman was blocked from voting because he lived outside the constituency.⁹⁷¹ Before the full vote of the constituency association, 117 MPs, led by 1922 chairman Marcus Fox, himself of the 92, wrote to the local party urging Gardiner's retention. They listened and on 28 June 1996 Gardiner was re-selected by 311 to 206.⁹⁷²

⁹⁶³ Unattributed, 'Gardiner to step down', *The Times*, 12 February 1994, p. 2.

⁹⁶⁴ Gyles Brandreth, *Breaking the Code: Westminster Diaries* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001), p. 159.

⁹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁹⁶⁶ Nicholas Wood, 'Tory right elects Euro-rebel in rebuff for John Major', *The Times*, 15 March 1994, p. 13.

⁹⁶⁷ Gardiner, p. 29.

⁹⁶⁸ Nicholas Wood, 'Major's critic to lead from the back', *The Times*, 13 February 1996, p. 2.

⁹⁶⁹ Jill Sherman, 'Tory threatens to force by-election if deselected', *The Times*, 22 April 1996, p. 2. By-election defeats and defections had eroded away the government's majority of twenty-one.

⁹⁷⁰ Andrew Pierce, 'Gardiner reselection setback', *The Times*, 18 May 1996, p. 1.

⁹⁷¹ Gardiner, p. 229.

⁹⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 234-6.

Gardiner, however, would not stop criticising the government and this instigated a second, successful, deselection attempt. The final straw for the Reigate Conservative Association was an article by Gardiner in the *Sunday Express* on 8 December 1996 captioned with a mock-up photograph of Major as the ventriloquist's dummy of Kenneth Clarke, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Gardiner's message was that Clarke was pulling the Prime Minister's strings on European policy, taking it in an integrationist direction. By then Gardiner's constituency opponents were mobilised in greater numbers and instigated a fresh vote of confidence. Gardiner alleged that eighty members had re-joined to vote against him.⁹⁷³ Gardiner lost the vote on 30 January 1997 by 272 votes to 226, his local party having 'finally lost patience with his outspoken criticism of the leadership'.⁹⁷⁴ Those close to him politically commented that he brought it on himself and failed to heed the warning of the first deselection attempt.⁹⁷⁵ In the end those eighty returning members were the deciding factor. Acting on his threat to stand against the party, Gardiner joined the eurosceptic Referendum Party shortly after, becoming the party's only MP. He contested the Reigate seat at the 1997 election, saving his deposit but coming a distant fourth.

Whither Thatcherism?

Despite growing to over 100 MPs - almost a third of the parliamentary party - the 92 had little power and influence in the Conservative party after Mrs Thatcher left office. The fate of Sir George Gardiner, knighted in Mrs Thatcher's resignation honours as a 'loyalist'⁹⁷⁶, tells us that much. Thatcherism, however, did not end with the 92. As argued by Michael Brown, the former Conservative MP, it has been supplanted as the standard-bearer of Thatcherism by the No Turning Back group (NTB). This section will argue that the NTB filled a gap as a group that sought to develop, rather than just defend, Thatcherism. Whereas the 92 succeeded by defending Mrs Thatcher and her policies in the early 1980s, it did not have a role in the intellectual or policy development of Thatcherism.

⁹⁷³ James Landale, 'Gardiner threatens to stand as an independent Tory', *The Times*, 30 January 1997, p. 12.

⁹⁷⁴ James Landale, 'Gardiner deselected after losing confidence vote', *The Times*, 31 January 1997, p. 1.

⁹⁷⁵ Donal Blaney, interview with the author, Kent, 5 April 2023.

⁹⁷⁶ Nicholas Wood, 'Members of the kitchen cabinet reap rich rewards', *The Times*, 21 December 1990, p. 2.

The NTB and 92 overlapped in membership, but not greatly. Had Neil Hamilton defeated John Townend for the chairmanship of the 92 in 1996, it would have been a symbolic merger of the two groups, Hamilton being a member of both, and a founding member of NTB. The NTB represented a new generation of Conservatives, much like the intake of the 1979 election filled the ranks of the 92. The figures who drove the 92 had been elected prior to the 1983 general election. This included most of the longstanding steering committee, Bob Dunn (elected, 1979), Jill Knight (1966), Vivian Bendall (1978), James Pawsey (1979), and Gardiner (February 1974). The NTB, on the other hand, were all elected at the 1983 election or after, the one exception being Michael Brown (1979).

This section draws on the private papers of Sir Gerald Howarth, who became the secretary of NTB, and argues that the NTB was a far more sophisticated and ideological group than the 92; and it concentrated more on the ideology and policies they believed represented Thatcherism. Unlike the 92, whose prominence stemmed from organising backbench MPs to demonstrate support for Mrs Thatcher, the NTB sought to develop Thatcherite policy. It defended the Thatcherite agenda from ‘consolidation’ and fought maintain the Thatcherite revolution. The 92 defended what existed; the NTB asked ‘what next’.

After the 1983 election landslide, with its 144-seat majority, the conditions were right for further Thatcherite reforms; but these were lacking. The monetarist experiment, abolition of exchange controls, the 1981 budget, the Falklands War, and the beginning of trade union reform were all radical courses of action that set Mrs Thatcher apart from her predecessors in her first term. Yet after the 1983 election it appeared that the revolution was stalling. The first error was the promotion of Ian Gow from his position as Mrs Thatcher’s PPS, a move Charles Moore argues ‘weakened’ her connection with the parliamentary party and ‘did serious damage’.⁹⁷⁷ She lost a vital link between Downing Street and the backbenches, and Gow’s successors lacked his knack for judging opinion in the party.

Despite victory in the miners’ strike and the roll out of privatisation, the second Thatcher term was riddled with concern that the government was not going far enough in tackling the growth of public expenditure. Moore wrote that as early as July 1983 there was a ‘lack of direction’ and although Mrs Thatcher had a vision for Britain, there was ‘no

⁹⁷⁷ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, pp. 72-4.

programme for achieving it'.⁹⁷⁸ John Campbell suggests the government stumbled into privatising nationalised industries 'by accident, driven more by Treasury cost-cutting than ideological conviction'.⁹⁷⁹ Indeed, for all the reforms that were to follow, state spending continued to climb because Mrs Thatcher would not tackle spending on social programmes.⁹⁸⁰ This is the context within which the NTB germinated for two years until its launch in 1985.

The Disciples

Whereas the 92 was and remained a backbench group in the Commons, the NTB evolved out of the House of Lords Repeal Group chaired by Lord Harris of High Cross.⁹⁸¹ Harris was the Director General of the Institute of Economic Affairs that, since 1955, had been challenging the post-war consensus with market-based solutions to curb the growth of the size of the state. In July 1981 Lord Harris brought together a dozen like-minded peers to 'repeal outright laws that might be considered obsolete or unduly restrictive of personal freedom'. Its early targets were uncontroversial measures such as the 'prohibition on the free sale of spectacles'.⁹⁸² After the 1983 election the Repeal Group attracted observers from the Commons, including Michael Brown, Robert Jones⁹⁸³, and Neil Hamilton, all members of the 92. From here they coordinated tactics across both Houses, adding wages councils⁹⁸⁴ to their list of targets for repeal.⁹⁸⁵

Shortly after, on 22 November 1983, the first Commons meeting of the unnamed group gathered.⁹⁸⁶ It followed in the steps of the Lords Repeal Group by seeking to repeal out of date legislation. It also agreed to campaign for 'reform of the NHS in the direction of charges and insurance'. This was extremely controversial. In 1982 the government's Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) had sealed its fate by suggesting charges in the National Health Service.

⁹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

⁹⁷⁹ Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, p. 94.

⁹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

⁹⁸¹ Ralph Harris (1924-2006), Director General of the Institute of Economic Affairs, 1957-87. Created Lord Harris of High Cross, 1979.

⁹⁸² THCR2/1/4/54 f152, Lord Harris to Ian Gow, 10 July 1981.

⁹⁸³ Robert Jones (1950-2007), Conservative MP for West Hertfordshire, 1983-97.

⁹⁸⁴ Established by the Wages Councils Act 1945, Wages Councils set minimum wage rates in specific industries and sectors and encouraged collective bargaining. They were reduced in number in 1986 and finally abolished in 1993.

⁹⁸⁵ Chelsworth, the private papers of Sir Gerald Howarth, Repeal Group Minutes, 9 November 1983.

⁹⁸⁶ The twelve MPs were Michael Brown, Peter Bruinvels, Michael Fallon, Michael Forsyth, Alan Howarth, Gerald Howarth, Robert Jones, Francis Maude, Richard Ryder. Invited but not attending were Christopher Chope, Peter Lilley, and Neil Hamilton.

Mrs Thatcher was horrified, but Moore wrote this was ‘her direction of travel’.⁹⁸⁷ As punishment the CPRS was abolished in 1983. Undeterred, the NTB would campaign on charges and liberal reforms in the NHS for the entirety of Mrs Thatcher’s government.

This free-market fervour revealed itself in the names mooted for the new group. Suggestions included the Free Market Group, The Marketeers, Privateers, The Radical Reactionaries, and The Choice Group. Gerald Howarth annotated his copy with ‘The Crusaders’.⁹⁸⁸ There was no broad agreement on the name, although the ‘83 Group’ garnered most votes, a sign they had all, bar one, been elected in 1983.⁹⁸⁹ At their meeting of 23 February 1984 it was agreed to call themselves the ‘Disciples [...] without specifying of Hayek, Friedman, Adam Smith or any other compatible force’.⁹⁹⁰ Members were asked to contribute £1,000 to the cost of employing a research assistant, Rachael Tingle, and £3 to £5 for the cost of regular dinners.

The launch of the Disciples on 2 March emphasised their role opposing the consolidators within the party. Whereas the Repeal Group focused on ‘specific issues’, the Disciples would ‘provide a commentary on all aspects of economic and social policy’. By doing so it would ‘provide a strong counterweight to those they think are pushing Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher towards the centre’. The article lined the Disciples up with the 92, that ‘there are now two prominent right wing groups, the other being the secretive 92, set up in the last parliament’. That *Financial Weekly* incorrectly asserted the birth of the 92 in the preceding parliament owed much to Gardiner’s role as chairman by giving it a public face after the secrecy in which it operated for the twenty years under Patrick Wall.⁹⁹¹ Publicity had its downside for the Disciples, however, as ‘strong regrets’ were raised at the group’s name, and they agreed to drop it.⁹⁹²

What the ‘Disciples’ got right, however, was that the government was drifting. Reports in early 1984 lamented the government’s remoteness from its backbenches, clearly missing the

⁹⁸⁷ Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: Volume Two*, p. 27.

⁹⁸⁸ Howarth papers, Group Minutes, 22 November 1983.

⁹⁸⁹ Howarth papers, Lord Harris to Group members, 17 February 1984.

⁹⁹⁰ Howarth papers, Minutes of the 3rd Meeting of the Disciples, 23 February 1984. That one of their number, Alan Howarth, defected to Labour in 1995, their name appears prophetic.

⁹⁹¹ Howarth papers, Nigel Dudley, ‘New Disciples set to wring out wets’, *Financial Weekly*, 2 March 1984, p. 1.

⁹⁹² Howarth papers, Lord Harris to ‘Disciples’, 28 March 1984.

essential role played by Ian Gow.⁹⁹³ Lord Harris highlighted two editorials in *The Times* shortly after the launch that were critical of the government for not going further in its reform programme. The first, dated 23 March, decried the government's 'lack of progress' in reducing 'the role of the state in people's lives'. Granted, it had brought down inflation in the first parliament, but this was 'because the reduction in inflation was a paramount objective to which all else was subordinated'. *The Times* concluded that the same revolutionary zeal was not directed to 'the Government's commitment to get the state off people's backs'. The same paper the next day attacked the Prime Minister's caution. It laid out a series of cuts that could be made in a retort to the Prime Minister's comments that 'it is not possible to cut public expenditure below the plans we indicated'.⁹⁹⁴

In late 1984 the group published an open letter calling on the government to go further on trade union reform. In doing this, it was continuing the campaign of the 92 in the previous parliament. The open letter to Mrs Thatcher called for the prohibition of the closed shop and that trade unions be open to 'civil proceedings for damages caused by breach of contract'. Broadly they asked the Prime Minister for 'further denationalisation, deregulation and competitive contracting' to reduce the size and scope of the state.⁹⁹⁵ A leader in *The Times* the next day was more candid. The government had let itself 'be deflected into unnecessary battles'⁹⁹⁶ [...] over what are essentially secondary issues instead of [...] a clear and coordinated strategy for disciplining public spending'. Like the Disciples' letter the day before, the article claimed that decisions would have to be taken in 1985 that would be 'key' in combating increased public spending.⁹⁹⁷

Still unnamed, they asked to meet Mrs Thatcher on 18 June 1985 for a discussion that prompted their first pamphlet. They stressed they were not 'a party within a party' and that whilst they did not 'accept the government has run out of steam', there were 'people behind her with marginal seats who support what she is doing' but were 'underutilized'.⁹⁹⁸ The meeting was a success, and the pamphlet *No Turning Back* 'in part [...] sprang' from the

⁹⁹³ THCR 2/6/3/16/part2/ f53, Peter Riddell, 'Tories increasingly critical of Thatcher's inner circle', *Financial Times*, 21 February 1984.

⁹⁹⁴ Howarth papers, Lord Harris to 'Disciples', 28 March 1984.

⁹⁹⁵ Lord Harris et. al., 'Jobs: a blueprint for 1985', *The Times*, 20 December 1984, p. 10.

⁹⁹⁶ The government had recently avoided rebellions on rate capping and abolition of the Greater London Council.

⁹⁹⁷ Leader, 'Target for 1985', *The Times*, 21 December 1984, p. 15.

⁹⁹⁸ Howarth papers, annotated agenda for meeting with Margaret Thatcher, 18 June 1985.

meeting they had with Mrs Thatcher.⁹⁹⁹ Gerald Howarth wrote to Mrs Thatcher afterwards that he and the others were ‘heartened’ and ‘much encouraged by your determination to continue the programme of reform’.¹⁰⁰⁰ Indeed, Mrs Thatcher had confirmed to the group her intention to put competitive tendering in the public sector into the next legislative programme.¹⁰⁰¹ This relationship between the NTB and Mrs Thatcher was closer than that of the 92 and the Prime Minister. She had not coordinated with the 92 directly, although in the previous parliament she had not needed to as that responsibility was Ian Gow’s.

From that meeting with Mrs Thatcher the group published *No Turning Back: A New Agenda from a Group of Conservative MPs*, which gave the group its final name. Compared with the 92’s discussion documents, it was a more sophisticated contribution to the debate on Conservative policy. After the 1983 general election the 92 wrote to the Chief Whip recommending a series of policies merely in bullet point form. These included ‘cuts in taxation and reduction in government expenditure’ and ‘privatisation of the NHS’, with little other detail.¹⁰⁰² By contrast *No Turning Back* combined policy proposals of a think-tank paper with the propaganda value of a political communication. It was interpreted as a plea for the government to ‘stay radical’, and that market forces and competition be extended to education, health, employment, and housing. Some of its proposals were before their time. For example, student loans and the abolition of rent controls on new lets were introduced later. Indeed, student loans had been rejected by Mrs Thatcher previously when the CPRS mooted them in 1982,¹⁰⁰³ but were introduced under Tony Blair in his first administration: such was the influence of Thatcherism on its political opponents as well as on the Conservative party. A leader in the *Daily Telegraph* commended their proposals for being ‘popular as well as right’.¹⁰⁰⁴

The NTB followed *No Turning Back* with a pamphlet on education in 1986 and one on the NHS in 1988, both building on the themes of the initial paper, that market forces be extended into public services. Indeed, the proposals in *Save our Schools* for testing and grant maintained schools were accepted by the government in the 1988 Education Act.¹⁰⁰⁵

⁹⁹⁹ THCR2/1/4/40 f25, Stephen Sherbourne to Margaret Thatcher, 3 November 1985.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Howarth papers, Gerald Howarth to Margaret Thatcher, 20 June 1985.

¹⁰⁰¹ Howarth papers, Gerald Howarth to Margaret Thatcher, 1 July 1985.

¹⁰⁰² U DPW/37/20, Patrick Wall to John Wakeham, 3 November 1983.

¹⁰⁰³ Howarth papers, Peter Riddell, ‘Tory group in “stay radical” plea’, *Financial Times*, 2 November 1985.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Howarth papers, Leader, ‘No Backsliding’, *Daily Telegraph*, 4 November 1985.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Howarth papers, Charles Hymas, ‘Right turn ahead?’, *Yorkshire Post*, 18 September 1990.

Foreshadowing the party's decades-long division, the NTB produced a pamphlet on Europe after Mrs Thatcher's Bruges Speech in 1988. In *Europe: Onwards from Bruges* it endorsed Mrs Thatcher's warning that the European Community was centralising and becoming interventionist. The NTB endorsed a Europe of 'free competition without frontiers, to the spontaneous harmony achieved by the interaction of sovereign states'.¹⁰⁰⁶ On a European single currency the paper argued that 'the political will has not been established [...] nor has the necessity been shown', further endorsing Mrs Thatcher's line.¹⁰⁰⁷

There were, however, attempts to rein in the NTB and prevent it publishing a manifesto to rival the official party platform. Eric Forth oversaw efforts to draw together a manifesto for the 1987 election, tasking individual members with a portfolio for 'developing (and radicalising?)'¹⁰⁰⁸, which the government quietly prevented being published. Jittery MPs warned Mrs Thatcher that 'the Opposition will point the finger at the more radical proposals and say this is what you really mean to do', and the NTB were dissuaded from issuing their document.¹⁰⁰⁹ In 1989, looking towards the next election as early as 1991, the NTB would not be deterred again. In a memorandum to the NTB Angela Rumbold¹⁰¹⁰ proposed combining existing government departments to 'reduce the overall size of Government'. Energy and Employment would go to Trade and Industry, Social Security to the Treasury, and Fisheries and Food to Health.¹⁰¹¹ Edward Leigh¹⁰¹² concurred and looked to appeal to the 'skilled working class' by highlighting policies on law and order and welfare. Being radical on social security was important because 'most of our natural supporters don't think they are ever going to have to rely on it'. On pensions 'more and more are making provision by way of occupational pensions' in order not to turn to the state. Finally, social security reform showed 'that the Government has not "run out of steam" and "still has a job to do"'.¹⁰¹³ Mrs Thatcher encouraged this development at a private dinner at the Institute of Economic Affairs. She said

¹⁰⁰⁶ Michael Brown, Gerald Howarth, et al., *Europe: Onwards from Bruges* (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1989), p. 27.

¹⁰⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Howarth papers, Eric Forth to NTB, 30 October 1986.

¹⁰⁰⁹ THCR 6/2/3/35 f136, Stephen Sherborne to Margaret Thatcher, 24 February 1987.

¹⁰¹⁰ Dame Angela Rumbold (1932-2010), Conservative MP for Mitcham and Morden, 1982-97. Held junior ministerial posts in the Thatcher administration. Conservative party deputy chairman, 1992-95.

¹⁰¹¹ Howarth papers, Angela Rumbold to NTB, circa July 1989.

¹⁰¹² The Rt. Hon. Sir Edward Leigh (1950-), Conservative MP for Gainsborough since 1983. Parliamentary Under-Secretary, DTI, 1990-93.

¹⁰¹³ Howarth papers, Edward Leigh to NTB, circa July 1989.

she was ‘disappointed that the group [...] had not yet drawn up its “shopping list” for the next election’.¹⁰¹⁴ As with the first NTB paper, she had prompted another.

The resulting pamphlet was *Choice and Responsibility – The Enabling State*, the NTB’s most radical set of proposals for the ‘next ten years’. It lauded the free market achievements of the government’s first decade. Its opening section demonstrated the effect that Europe already had on Conservative politics as they made ‘no apology for starting with our nation’s sovereignty [...] *there can be no equivocation about maintaining the sovereignty of the United Kingdom Parliament.*’¹⁰¹⁵ It opposed a single currency and preferred an opt-in Exchange Rate Mechanism without a treaty obligation, one ‘we can enter when we can, and should leave when our own interests so demand’. If other nations signed up to the single currency, then the UK should become ‘a kind of free port linking Europe and the world’.¹⁰¹⁶ On privatisation it urged the government to go further, selling off British Coal, the London Underground, British Rail, and the Post Office. It is worth acknowledging the power of the document at this point. The Major administration, much decried by Thatcherites for its moderation, privatised British Coal in 1994 and completed British Rail denationalisation by 1997. It also attempted liberalisation of the Post Office in 1994, defeated by a rebellion within the party, and in their 1997 manifesto they pledged to privatise the London Underground.

Its final and most radical section came under the title ‘The Withering of the State’, a play on Marxist terminology. Using Maoist phraseology, it called for ‘a great leap forward’ with citizens providing ‘themselves with non-emergency health care, education and pensions’.¹⁰¹⁷ This included portable pensions, abolition of the forty pence higher rate tax bracket, a reduction of the lower rate to fifteen percent, state benefits to be converted into ‘a private insurance system’, and a gradual transfer of mortgage tax relief into ‘a single, new investment relief’.¹⁰¹⁸ Mrs Thatcher is unlikely to have supported this last point. She had battled her previous Chancellors over this, such was her ‘devotion to the cause of the homebuyer’ and mortgage interest relief.¹⁰¹⁹

¹⁰¹⁴ Howarth papers, Our chief political correspondent, ‘Thatcher to fight election “on radical manifesto”’, *The Times*, 22 May 1990.

¹⁰¹⁵ Michael Brown, Gerald Howarth et. al., *Choice and Responsibility – The Enabling State* (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1990), pp. 7-8. Italics are their emphasis.

¹⁰¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁰¹⁹ Nigel Lawson, *The View from No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical* (London: Transworld Publishers, 1993), p. 11.

The media fallout split an already fractious Tory party. Mrs Thatcher had been challenged for the leadership in 1989, and the implementation of the Community Charge was proving deeply unpopular. Jerry Hayes, the Conservative MP for Harlow, said the policies would prove to be ‘an electoral albatross’ and lead to ‘fratricides of Bennite proportions’, Tony Benn having split the Labour party in 1981 with his deputy leadership challenge on a left-wing platform.¹⁰²⁰ The ‘Tory press’ were more welcoming. *The Times* wrote that ministers had ‘been parroting the speeches used by Labour and Tory ministers alike since the war’, accusing them of going ‘public-sector native’. Public spending, the article argued, was running ‘10 per cent higher in real terms’ than when Mrs Thatcher took office. Rather, the government should heed the proposals as ‘The New Right still has some of the best tunes in British politics’.¹⁰²¹ The *Daily Telegraph* said that whilst ‘there is much [...] with which we cannot agree [...] the group is surely right to demand debate’,¹⁰²² and the *Daily Mail* said knee-jerk reactions were ‘no reason for dismissing the suggestions out of hand’.¹⁰²³

Unlike the 92, the NTB were engaged in a public battle of ideas. The 92 had been in the battle for survival, routing the ‘wets’ and demonstrating Mrs Thatcher’s personal support on the backbenches. The NTB instead waged a public debate to shift the government’s policies in a more ‘Thatcherite’ direction. They were guided by the principles of sound money, a smaller state, and national sovereignty, that came to embody Thatcherism in after 1988. Whilst they had some success in education policy, Mrs Thatcher was removed from office not long after the publication of the NTB’s most radical paper. That John Major adopted some of its economic policies is a tribute to its influence.

The Unravelling of the Thatcherite Coalition

Both the NTB and the 92 acted too late to stop the downfall of Mrs Thatcher, if that was even possible. Within two months of the publication of *Choice and Responsibility* Mrs Thatcher had resigned and a new Prime Minister, John Major, was in office. Although an overwhelming majority in the 92 supported Mrs Thatcher, that some voted for Heseltine shows that the

¹⁰²⁰ Howarth papers, Alan Travis, ‘Thatcher told to disown welfare plans’, *Guardian*, 17 September 1990.

¹⁰²¹ Howarth papers, Leader, ‘Still the Best Tunes’, *The Times*, 17 September 1990.

¹⁰²² Howarth papers, Leader, ‘Time for Debate’, *Daily Telegraph*, 18 September 1990.

¹⁰²³ Howarth papers, Leader, ‘Right foot forward’, *Daily Mail*, 17 September 1990.

devotion to Mrs Thatcher was not unequivocal. The same is true for the NTB. Whilst the NTB, along with the 92, went to see Mrs Thatcher on the evening of the 21 November to try to persuade her to stay on, some had already thrown in the towel. Peter Lilley, a founder member of the NTB, was claimed to have told Mrs Thatcher she could not win, the ‘game was up’.¹⁰²⁴

Just as monetarism and privatisation had dominated the party debates in the 1980s, Europe consumed the Conservative party in the 1990s. For example, in his interview, Sir Peter Hordern recalled a deeply eurosceptic 92 Group. This, however, owes more to the reputation Gardiner had at the end of his political career than much of the history of the 92. Indeed, Gardiner initially supported Major over Maastricht and was not as troublesome a rebel as those who lost the whip in 1994. Even in the NTB Europe and their loyalty to the Prime Minister divided opinion. Michael Portillo decided not to challenge Major in 1995, but John Redwood did. Both were members of the NTB. Remarkably, NTB member Alan Howarth left the Conservative party to join Tony Blair’s reformed Labour party in 1995.

The 92 and NTB complemented each other during the Thatcher years. Some MPs were members of both, some not, bearing in mind MPs join different groups for varying reasons. Late night sittings meant that MPs dined together for company, gossip, and camaraderie. That clubbability, after all, was one of Gow’s major strengths. For the 92 it served its purpose by defending the Prime Minister in her tough first term. For the NTB, it provided ideas to keep Thatcherism alive. Without the 92, however, it is fair to say the NTB would not have existed. Without Mrs Thatcher in Downing Street, there would not have been ‘Thatcherism’.

¹⁰²⁴ Watkins, p. 10.

Conclusion: Mrs Thatcher's Praetorian Guard

This thesis has argued that the 92 Group was Mrs Thatcher's 'Praetorian Guard' in her first term. It was led by and recruited individuals committed to Mrs Thatcher's leadership and values. This research has filled a gap in the literature by arguing that Mrs Thatcher's supporters organised and acted through the 92 Group in the first Thatcher term. It was a crucial counterweight to her critics in the press and parliament. Its members' representation on the backbench committees was vital in blocking a policy U-turn and threats to Mrs Thatcher's leadership. They kept her in office and ensured the development of Thatcherism would continue.

Looking at its origins, it is unsurprising that the 92 came to be Mrs Thatcher's defenders on the backbenches. After the party's election defeat in 1964 Conservative MPs, thinkers, commentators and academics reviewed the state of Conservatism (big and small C). The 92, formed by disillusioned MPs on the right of the party, engaged in this exercise too. It examined the growing size of the state, the power given to trade unions, and Britain's changing role in the world, and concluded that it was not happy with the state of the country after thirteen years of Conservative rule. Accordingly, it resolved that its mission was to keep the Conservative party 'conservative' by advocating lower taxes, ending trade union immunities, restricting immigration, and providing a tough line on law and order. Its way to do this would be via control of the backbench committees.

The Heath administration put the 92 in a difficult position. Heath had been elected in 1970 on a manifesto aimed at reducing the size of the state and its influence in the economy, all positions the 92 endorsed in its discussion documents. Yet as unemployment increased, Heath lacked both the will and the courage to stick to the course. Whilst the 92 had deep reservations about the U-turn away from Gladstonian economics to intense state intervention, they were assuaged by the government's reform of industrial relations law. The 92 had called for changes to trade union immunities since its foundation. With Heath's legislation it got them, and it backed the government. It also went along with Heath's flagship policy, British entry to the European Economic Community. This has shown the 92 in a different light, other research has labelled it as a Eurosceptic group. Although its steering committee was what came to be known as 'eurosceptic' in the 1990s, this research has presented the Group's pro-

European roots. In the event only two members of the Group voted against the second reading of the enabling legislation, which Heath made a confidence measure.

When it did disagree with the Heath administration the 92 sought to keep its criticisms internal and not through dissent in the division lobbies. The disquiet intensified and the 92 supported Mrs Thatcher as leader of the Conservative party in 1975. Yet the period in opposition after 1974 clipped its wings and that period nearly finished off the 92. Shadow ministers took the chairmanship of the backbench committees and neutered the Group's influence. Further, its organisation was fraying. Patrick Wall did not keep the Group up to date and the whip for the junior positions on the backbench committees was often late. Barely half of its members turned up to vote. Compounding this, the Group's convenor John Hall fell ill and died in 1978. Frederic Bennett was a brief and unsatisfactory replacement, unable to provide the time needed. Prophetically, though, he saw that the Group could have substantial influence when the party returned to power, and he encouraged Wall to keep the Group going.

George Gardiner and Ian Gow both joined the 92 in these opposition years and reinvigorated it after the 1979 election. Gardiner used his skills as a journalist to counter cabinet leaks and attacks on Mrs Thatcher in the press. As a parliamentary organiser he recruited new members to the 92 shortly after the 1979 election. Gow, as Mrs Thatcher's PPS, was a vital link between the Group and the Prime Minister. Within Mrs Thatcher's first year both Gardiner and Gow helped avoid a potentially dangerous party rebellion on Rhodesia. Both had rebelled on the issue in 1978. After the election, however, they were not going to jeopardise Mrs Thatcher's project to transform the economy and restore national self-confidence. Gow placated his backbench colleagues from a position of trust. His membership of the Anglo-Rhodesian Society meant he could persuade pro-Rhodesian colleagues that Mrs Thatcher's policy was the only viable option, even if it meant eventually handing power to Mugabe and Nkomo. Gardiner also had the trust of the Rhodesian lobby. He had organised the 1978 rebellion despite being in Mrs Thatcher's 'Gang of Four'. Rather than risk the first post-election party conference erupting in dissent, as had happened in 1978, Gardiner proposed a motion supporting the government's Rhodesian policy. Both Gardiner and Gow had the trust of those who could have caused the government trouble on this question. Their support for Mrs Thatcher was a signal to their colleagues that there was no alternative. Zimbabwe thus became independent without rancour, even though many had private misgivings, which were

sadly fulfilled during Mugabe's brutal rule. Their loyalty to Mrs Thatcher trumped their personal views.

The battle on trade union reform, however, was more complex as it appeared that Mrs Thatcher's supporters in the 92 were going against her administration. The leadership of the 92 had stood by the manifesto on Rhodesia, and believed it was time for the government to do the same on trade union reform. Mrs Thatcher agreed. Her instincts, at times, were against her own administration's, as Jim Prior's Employment Bill did not match what was offered in the 1979 manifesto. Yet her caution ensured she backed her Employment Secretary, but only just. Prior's step-by-step approach masked his real intentions to avoid any significant trade union reform. Mrs Thatcher saw Prior's obstinacy and his opposition to a one-clause Bill on picketing as a sign that he could not be trusted with serious reform. Gow and Gardiner, with her distant blessing, launched a campaign to undermine the Employment Secretary. Gow arranged for questions to be put in the Commons that were critical of the legislation and he showed Mrs Thatcher correspondence from backbenchers who were concerned that Prior's Bill did not go far enough. Gardiner, meanwhile, attacked Prior in the press and circulated letters for a stronger Bill. Group members tabled 'our amendments', also known as 'Margaret's' or 'the Prime Minister's', to strengthen the Bill. It amounted to the largest rebellion of her first eighteen months in office, with sympathy from Downing Street. The pressure from the 92 forced Prior to commit to more legislation to prevent the parliamentary rebellion growing.

Prior was lucky, however. The collapse of the steel strike showed that his strategy had not united the trade union movement or instigated prolonged industrial action. His Bill passed because the Conservatives had memories of the sweeping 1971 Industrial Relations Act, and they did not want to unite the trade union movement and provoke widespread industrial action. The experience made Mrs Thatcher determined to implement further reforms with new legislation, which Prior did not want. The episode therefore sealed Prior's fate, and he was moved to Northern Ireland in the September 1981 reshuffle. In his place Norman Tebbit, a veteran of the 92, became Employment Secretary. The 92 supported his legislation, knowing that the direction of travel might not be at the pace it wished, but it saw where the process was headed. So gradual was the pace that the closed shop was finally abolished in 1990, ten years after the first Employment Bill.

1981 was a crucial year for the 92, and it met the challenge and increased its representation on the backbench committees. It was Mrs Thatcher's worst year in office so far. She began the year with U-turns on pit closures and increased spending to nationalised industry. The formation of the SDP provided a moderate alternative to the Labour party. The controversial 1981 budget didn't help her popularity, its brutality interpreted as a sign that her economic policies were not working. A summer of rioting in urban cities was blamed, including by Heath, on Thatcherite policies. The momentum behind a leadership challenge that November grew to the point where Heathite ex-minister Geoffrey Rippon invited backbench MPs to endorse his proposed candidature against Mrs Thatcher. At the party conference, however, the 92 went on the offensive, criticising the Blue Chips and their paper *Changing Gear*, tying it to the alleged plot between Heath and Rippon to topple Mrs Thatcher.

The 92's greatest service was to act as a proxy for Mrs Thatcher in the backbench elections, those in 1981 being the most important of the first term. Never content that she was leader, or Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher's critics in cabinet had wagered that pressure from the backbenches would force a U-turn on economic policy, or even her removal. This is where William Clark's position was important. A founding member of the 92, Clark returned to the backbenches after resigning as deputy chairman in 1977 and was elected chairman of the backbench finance committee in 1979. It was the biggest gain for the 92 in the backbench elections as the party split over economic policy between the monetarist 'dries' and the 'wets' who backed state intervention, reflation, and an incomes policy. Clark therefore became Mrs Thatcher's proxy. Clark had a reputation as a free market liberal, described by the journalist Andrew Roth as a 'Powellite' on economics. He didn't need to be converted to Mrs Thatcher's monetarist policies; he antedated them.

From his position as the chairman of the backbench finance committee Clark spoke for the backbenches. As far as he was concerned as they had elected him, they supported Mrs Thatcher's policies. This angered MPs who didn't agree with his assumption and wanted a change in policy. In retaliation for the September reshuffle, they targeted Clark in the 1981 backbench elections. Clark's victory against Maurice Macmillan put an end to the idea that the backbenches could turn on Mrs Thatcher. Michael Heseltine observed that, in his analysis, the 'right' of the parliamentary party had a 'veto' at the early stage of Mrs Thatcher's

government.¹⁰²⁵ The 1981 backbench elections confirmed this proposition. Rippon lost his chairmanship of the foreign affairs committee, punishment for his public plotting, and the 92 increased its representation on the finance and industry committees. Rather than calling for a change of course, the elections confirmed the backbenches wanted the Prime Minister to keep going.

As Thatcherism developed, however, the 92 had a limited role. By defending Mrs Thatcher's position it enabled Thatcherism to progress further during her administration. The security the 92 gave Mrs Thatcher ensured she could be more radical. Yet some found that that radicalism was left wanting, shown by the formation of the No Turning Back group (NTB) in 1985. This, unlike the 92, was the brains trust of Thatcherism. The 92 defended whatever Mrs Thatcher was doing. The NTB articulated what it thought should happen, hence its activity focused on ideas and pamphlets, where it believed Mrs Thatcher wanted to go. Mrs Thatcher recognised this, encouraging its first pamphlet *No Turning Back* and its final one of the Thatcher years, and its most radical, *Choice and Responsibility*. In these pamphlets it turned the theories of the liberal New Right into policies. It called for market mechanisms to be introduced into public services. Whilst recognising the government's enormous achievements in reforming the trade unions and the British economy, including privatisation, the NTB lamented the increasing involvement of the state in welfare provision and that public spending continued to climb.

Yet without the 92 providing a necessary defence of Mrs Thatcher and her policies, she would have been vulnerable to pressure to make a U-turn, or even face an early leadership bid. Without the 92 there would not have been the fertile ground from which the NTB sprung. The 92 shored up the backbenches, supporting the Prime Minister's economic policies that were the foundation of Thatcherism. Indeed, without the leadership of George Gardiner on the backbenches, it is true that the 92 may not have been up to the task itself. Looking at Mrs Thatcher's achievements thereafter, retaking the Falkland Islands, victory in the 1984-5 miners' strike, and the substantial transformation of the British economy, historians must now ask whether this would have been possible had the 92 not been there to defend Mrs Thatcher's position in those early, turbulent years, and preserve her for the greater challenges of the middle and later years of her administration.

¹⁰²⁵ Trewin, p. 293.

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