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John MAJOR

UNITED KINGDOM

Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (since July 1989)



Perhaps the only British Cabinet member ever to have been on the dole, John Major has been held up as a shining example of the self-made men who are the epitome of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's meritocratic Britain. His appointment as Foreign Secretary continues his meteoric rise in the ranks of the Conservative Party and has already renewed speculation that Thatcher is grooming him as her crown prince. Major—an aggressive Tory orator since his teens and a well-known Thatcher soldier—has built a reputation as a hard-working, persuasive consensus builder with keen political antennae.

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Major had little foreign policy experience before moving to the Foreign Office and has rarely commented on foreign affairs. Most observers are carefully watching his approach to the EC, where he is expected to need his considerable diplomatic skill to smooth ruffled relations with Brussels while supporting Thatcher's policies. One of his first challenges has been the need to calm the apprehension of Hong Kong residents, who fear that Chinese authorities will institute repressive measures after the colony returns to Chinese rule in 1997. This issue will probably continue to be a high priority. Major is well acquainted with the Chinese business community in Hong Kong, having visited there frequently during his banking career. We expect him to draw heavily on his extensive background in private enterprise, as well as on his widely recognized mastery of detail and negotiating skills, to quickly establish his own identity as Foreign Secretary on this and other policy questions.

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The son of a businessman who once worked as a trapeze artist and played baseball in Philadelphia, Major was born on 29 March 1943. When he was 10 his family moved to Brixton. He left school at 16 in order to help with family finances, working in an insurance office and as a mixer of concrete (he competed for a job as a bus conductor but was rejected because he was too tall). In 1965 he joined the Standard Chartered Bank, and for the next 14 years he held executive posts both in Britain and overseas (he was working in Nigeria during the Biafran war). Upon entering Parliament in 1983, Major was made an assistant in the Government Whips Office, considered by many observers to be a hothouse for party talent. In that position and later, in a series of posts in the Department of Health and Human Services, Major won widespread respect. He continued his success as Chief Secretary in the Exchequer (1987–July 1989), where he adjudicated interministerial spending debates with success and minimal rancor.

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Despite his increasing prominence, Major has remained modest and good humored: even after his elevation to the Cabinet he liked to drop into workingmen's cafes for a breakfast of "triple beans on toast with bacon." He is also genuinely popular; one British newspaper has characterized him as a "good egg." Major has retained a strong social conscience and tends to be to the left of the party on issues of social justice and welfare.

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Major enjoys opera and cricket. He is married to the former Norma Johnson, whom he met while electioneering in Brixton. Mrs. Major has recently published a biography of opera star Joan Sutherland. The couple has two children.

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