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Margaret Roberts THATCHER

UNITED KINGDOM

Prime Minister (since May 1979)

Addressed as: Prime Minister

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has led the Conservative Party since 1975 and dominates British politics. She is a demanding leader with unshakeable self-confidence and conviction in her ideological and policy views. Furthermore, she sees any willingness to compromise as a weakness and meets any challenge to her as party leader or prime minister with drive and determination.



Thatcher's uncompromising attitude and passionate commitment—once admired by Britons—are now widely viewed as reflecting insensitivity and inflexibility. As a result, her popularity rating has dropped to its lowest level since 1982. Moreover, the Conservative Party has fallen to third place in recent public opinion polls, causing many political observers and Tory politicians to wonder whether Thatcher has become a liability to the party and should reassess her publicly stated intention of seeking a third term (elections must be held by 1988).

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Thatcher's Team and the Domestic Scene

After she led the Tories to a crushing victory in the 1983 national election, Thatcher chose for her Cabinet mostly men sharing her own strain of rightwing conservatism and commitment to self-reliance. Some Tory politicians doubt, however, whether she is well served by these ministers, inasmuch as many have too narrow a political perspective and lack the experience, intellectual dynamism, and ability to formulate and effectively defend government policies. Also, the British media report that many Britons view her Cabinet as accident prone and uncaring, evident by its muddled and unsympathetic handling of several domestic issues such as social program spending cuts. Finally, with the Cabinet staffed with ministers widely viewed as uninspired Thatcher disciples, several traditional Tory constituencies and large segments of the electorate have become alienated from the government and increasingly call for modification in Thatcher's personal style and policy direction.

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Thatcher has focused her second government's agenda on continuing what she calls the "radical" policies of her first term—reducing the government's role in the economy, reforming social services, creating an enterprise culture to promote job creation, battling socialism, and curtailing trade union power. Most Britons believe these policies are overly confrontational and draconian and defeat widespread desires for political conciliation and moderation. Since Thatcher is pursuing the same policy themes as before, her government may be running out of steam and losing its ability to define the domestic political battlefield. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with Thatcher's priorities and leadership has also increased among Tory parliamentarians, who have demonstrated their unease by refusing to support her on several votes in Parliament. (Thatcher's 140-seat majority in the House of Commons, however, precludes any real chance of her government falling.)

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Thatcher blames poor public presentation of her government's successes for its image problem and geared her September 1985 Cabinet shuffle to highlight more effective spokesmen. She points to the several years of steady economic growth, low inflation, and increased exports as proof of the effectiveness of her fiscal policies. Her government's lack of success on unemployment—now nearly 14 percent and Britain's most politically charged issue—has, however, effectively negated public perceptions of the government's economic gains elsewhere. Indeed, we believe that Thatcher's harsh public image, her government's poor reputation, and its inability to alleviate unemployment have been the primary factors behind her and the Tories' slide in opinion polls. [redacted]

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Foreign and Defense Policy

Thatcher often acts as her own foreign minister. Well known for her sharply worded criticism of the Soviet Union, she has also been a leading voice promoting the expansion of dialogue and greater understanding between East and West. In December 1984 she met now Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and described him as someone with whom the West could "do business." Thatcher is a firm ally of the United States and has publicly stated that Britain cannot defend itself without this country, which she calls the "final guarantor of Europe's liberty." A strong supporter of President Ronald Reagan, she believes he shares her views on the importance of private enterprise and the way to meet the Soviet challenge. Thatcher has repeatedly stated her support for research on SDI and hopes that British companies will benefit from technological and commercial exchanges associated with the project. Despite this, she has at other times been outspoken about US policies with which she disagrees. [redacted]

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Personal Data

Thatcher, 60, is a scathing debater, a tireless worker, and a fast learner who has no tolerance for bureaucracy or bureaucratic delay. A graduate of Oxford, she has worked as a research chemist and a lawyer. She has served in Parliament since 1959. In October 1984 she narrowly survived an assassination attempt when the Provisional Irish Republican Army detonated a bomb in the hotel where she was staying. She and her husband, Denis, a retired oil company executive, have grown twins: Carol, a journalist, and Mark, a business consultant. [redacted]

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6 November 1985

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