

Shadow of the axe over Whitelaw and Pym

The Times - APR 1983

By Anthony Beville
Political Correspondent

Two of Mrs Margaret Thatcher's most senior ministers, Mr William Whitelaw, the Home Secretary, and Mr Francis Pym, the Foreign Secretary, are aware that they face replacement by the Prime Minister's "own men" in the event of an outright Conservative victory at the next election.

Mr Whitelaw's friends say that he has decided to stand again at the next election simply to block any attempt to replace him at the Home Office with Mr Norman Tebbit, Secretary of State for Employment.

The Home Secretary, who has been one of Mrs Thatcher's most loyal ministers in spite of fundamental doubt about the Government's economic poli-

cies, would have an effective veto on the Home Office succession: he would apply it if Mr Tebbit's name was put forward.

His most likely replacement would therefore be Mr Cecil Parkinson, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who, while one of Mrs Thatcher's inner circle, would not be expected to apply abrasive right-wing policies to a traditionally middle-of-the-road department.

Westminster sources suggest that Mr Whitelaw would probably become Leader of the Lords, while continuing in his unofficial role as deputy Prime Minister; a position which would enable him to block any attempt to extend unbridled right-wing dogma into the Government's social policy.

Mr Pym, on the other hand, appears set for a straight demotion. Sir Geoffrey Howe, Chancellor of the Exchequer, has let it be known that he would like to become Foreign Secretary and some of the Prime Minister's so-called "poisonous acolytes" have gone so far as to suggest that Mr Pym might like to become the next Speaker of the Commons.

The Foreign Secretary has publicly denied any such ambition, and it is therefore possible that Mrs Thatcher might send him back to his previous post as Leader of the Commons; a move which Mr Pym would be unable to resist.

Certainly, given an outright majority in the Commons, Mrs Thatcher would want to con-

solidate her grip on the higher reaches of her Cabinet, a manoeuvre that would be completed by the appointment of either of the two favourites for the Treasury, Mr Nigel Lawson, Secretary of State for Energy, or Mr Patrick Jenkin, Secretary of State for Industry, to replace Sir Geoffrey as Chancellor.

Meanwhile, Sir Geoffrey and Mr Parkinson are thought to have begun preliminary work on the party's manifesto. All nine policy groups, appointed last September to consider aspects of Tory policy "for the second term of office of the present administration", have submitted their reports.

Although the papers are strictly confidential it is understood that they contain none of

the "wilder excesses" of right-wing policy which Conservative moderates had feared.

In fact, there is some suspicion that the groups were created simply as an exercise in party management and that Mrs Thatcher will want to restrict the manifesto to a general theme of free enterprise - "with every man a property-owner, every man a capitalist" - rather than producing a shopping list of detailed commitments.

The only firm, new policy which the Prime Minister appears to insist upon, over and above a continued extension of the borders of free enterprise through further denationalization, is the abolition of the rating system; a prize which has eluded Mrs Thatcher since she became party leader in 1975.