

JACK STRAW, M.P.



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

22nd March, 1982.

The Rt. Hon. Sir Geoffrey Howe, QC, MP,  
Chancellor of the Exchequer,  
Treasury Chambers,  
Whitehall,  
London S.W.1.

Dear Sir Geoffrey,

In the course of opening your Budget statement on the 9th March, you said (having referred to Britain's relative decline over the previous decade) that:-

"At the last election, we made all this very clear. We made it plain, too, that reversing this decline would require a major effort - an effort that would need to be sustained over the lifetime of more than one Parliament. And so it will be."  
(Hansard 9.3.82 Co. 727)

You opened your Ministerial radio and television broadcast that evening in similar terms.

I have now read through every speech in the House of Commons Library made by you, and by the Prime Minister during the course of the 1979 General Election campaign. It is possible (though, unlikely) that the Library's collection of your speeches is incomplete, but in those that I have read (35 in all) I can find no reference that "the effort" required by the Conservatives' programme would need to be sustained "over the lifetime of more than one Parliament". Nor is there any specific reference that I can see within the Conservative Party Manifesto to such a time scale of "more than one Parliament".

There are, of course, some general references within both the Manifesto and your speeches to things taking a little time. The Manifesto said at the end "We make no lavish promises ... Too much has gone wrong in Britain for us to hope to put it all right in a year or so". But one of its opening pledges was "We may be able to do more in the next five years than we indicate here. We believe we can".

In a speech in Birmingham on the 19th April, 1979, the Prime Minister said:-

"It will take time to turn things round." She went on to say:-  
"There's nothing inevitable about rising unemployment".

And in a speech on the 24th April, 1979, in Whitefield, you said:-

"We do not claim to be able to work a miracle cure to solve all the problems of the economy."

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But all the specific indications made by you both during and before the Election which I have found make clear that, while you foresaw some period of difficulty, the time scale of success which you had was within the lifetime of one Parliament.

For example. in a major interview in The Times on the 3rd August, 1978, you said:-

"Of course we should want to alter the whole climate as soon as possible, not least because the benefits will be some time a-coming. That is why we are talking about three to four years...

"Fighting inflation is top priority, with the eventual aim of reducing British inflation to between 2 or 3 per cent in about three years' time...

"Of course, we should not want to proceed in such a way as to produce what some people would call a dramatic short-term recession."

In a speech to the Conservative Party Conference on the 5th October, 1976 (Conference Record, page 24), you said:-

"We shall announce, and shall stick to, clear targets for the control of the money supply. They will be designed to reduce inflation over three years to the level that was acceptable in the 1950's."

(The average level of inflation in the 1950's was 3-4%.)

In a speech at the close of the General Election campaign on the 30th April, 1979, in Pentlands, Edinburgh, you said:-

"Creating secure jobs: the Conservative way ... It's high time for a fresh approach, in Scotland as well as in the rest of the United Kingdom. The next Conservative Government will give Scotland that new approach. We must make sure the next five years are not as bad as the last."  
(My emphasis)

Moreover, if the idea of the Conservatives' "effort" taking two Parliaments was central to your Election message, one might expect some reference to it to be found in the Prime Minister's Election broadcast on the 30th April, 1979, and her final major speech in Bolton on the 1st May, 1979. But both are silent on this matter.

This Government, like any other, will be judged at the next Election by the degree to which its promise, and the expectation it created, has been matched by its performance. The expectation which I remember you creating at the last Election was one of lower taxes on incomes, less crime, and less unemployment. (The Labour Party are "the Party of unemployment. We are the Party of opportunity" were the Prime Minister's words on the 23rd April, 1979, in Darlington.)

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So where, during the Election, did you specifically refer to this "effort" needing to be "sustained over the lifetime of more than one Parliament"?

Since you no doubt had the reference to hand when you wrote this part of your Budget speech, I shall look forward to an early reply.

Yours sincerely,

Jack Shaw