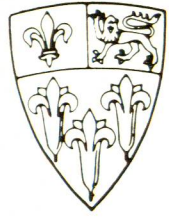


ETON COLLEGE



CHRONICLE

THE PRIME MINISTER TEN YEARS ON



You sent your own son to a public school, which suggests that you believe in the public school system. Do you think it will continue to have a role in the Britain of the future?

Yes, people have the right to choose private education and if the public schools offer what parents want for their children they will continue to flourish. But as someone who believes in competition I look forward to seeing the state schools increasing the pressure of excellence. My hope is that people will become less concerned with status and more concerned with performance.

You are a strong believer in the market economy and aim to reduce the size of the civil service. Yet for over a century the public schools have believed they have a special responsibility to prepare people for the public service. Do you think that major changes are needed in the public schools? In what direction?

The public service needs the best people it can get regardless of which school they went to. Where we need changes is in the qualifications of those who enter the public service, with many more technically qualified people. I hope that the public schools will contribute to

producing more such people rather than generalists. Historically our education system prepared people for administration both at home and in overseas territories. Now the latter demand is no more, we have to switch to more education for technology where we are still short of skills.

You have cut university allowances, especially for foreigners. Do you not think that this will seriously damage Britain's connections and influence in the long term with other countries, especially our traditional contacts in the third world?

2 The Government's aim is to reduce the share of national wealth absorbed by public expenditure which has grown to a frightening 43%. Achieving a reduction inevitably poses difficult choices and there are some things which, while we would like to go on doing them in an ideal world, we simply cannot afford: and overseas students grants on the scale which existed previously is one of them. But your question exaggerates the problem in two ways. Britain's long term influence on the rest of the world will depend crucially on our economic strength. Securing that has to be the Government's first priority. But we have alleviated the difficulties for some overseas students by increasing substantially the number of scholarships, particularly for students from Commonwealth countries.

Would you advise a young man leaving university to set his sights on politics as a career?

No, not immediately. What we need in politics are people with practical experience of life. I have a distrust of the professional politician who has never done anything else. Too often they are pre-occupied with theories of politics and with manipulating people rather than bringing practical experience to bear on everyday problems.

What led you to go into politics?

Well, I can't say I wanted to be an MP

from the moment I could talk. But I was brought up in a political household — my father was Mayor of Grantham — and we discussed the great issues of the day from an early age. I joined the Conservative Club at Oxford simply because I was interested. My first thoughts of a Parliamentary career came at a friend's birthday party when someone suggested what I would really like to do was to be an MP. That was the very first time it occurred to me that perhaps one day I could be one if the chance ever came. But I was still at university and I knew my first priority when I came down was to earn my own living and get established. I'm delighted my friend planted such a good idea in my mind.

Do you regret in any way having such a large majority in the House of Commons?

No, of course not — but you are right to emphasise by implication the importance of having an effective Opposition acting within our democratic traditions.

You are said to believe in conviction politics rather than consensus. Do you think you have actually changed the nature of politics in Britain?

I have a horror of fudges which obscure problems and never produce real or lasting solutions. For many years after the war there was a growing feeling in this country that the world

owed us a living, that we had an automatic right to an ever higher standard of living even if we did not work for it. I hope I have contributed to changing that perception and to increasing a sense of self-reliance. Look for instance at the number of self-employed which has grown dramatically. I think the right political approach is first to decide what you believe in and then to try to persuade others that you are right. But to go out into the world and say "Brothers I believe in consensus" — what sort of lead is that?

You fought for the Falklands, and yet returned Hong Kong in a treaty. Is there any underlying principle of democracy behind these decisions, or are they merely realpolitik?

Your question fails to distinguish between freehold and leasehold. By far the greater part of the territory of Hong Kong was leased to Britain under a treaty which expires in 1997. Our aim has therefore been to make the best possible arrangements for the people of Hong Kong to preserve their unique way of life after that date while complying with our treaty obligation to restore sovereignty over Hong Kong to China. No such considerations apply in the case of the Falklands whose people have a right to self-determination. They have never wanted to fall under Argentinian control; and after what happened in 1982 that feeling is stronger than ever.

Many other western leaders have to operate in political systems which impose severe constraints on them, for example coalition governments in Germany and Italy, the stand-off between president and congress in America. Do you feel that the British system gives you an advantage when it comes to handling international issues?

The actions of any British Government in foreign affairs are subject to the scrutiny of Parliament. If that is not a constraint it is certainly a very rigorous test. But our system does encourage clarity and decisiveness and I do not always find these in all of our partners.

One reads that there are certain demons in your political firmament, one of them the Foreign Office. Do you believe that the foreign office has failed Britain over the 40 years since the second world war?

The Foreign Office has a very specific role; that of representing Britain, and British views and policies, to the outside world and of ensuring that the views of other countries are understood here. That is very important. But the job of determining what our interests are is one for the Government as a whole and the considerations which are properly advanced by the Foreign Office are only one element in this. The Foreign Office does not make foreign policy; it executes the decisions of the Government as a whole. I can point to several examples where it has done this brilliantly, for instance over the independence of Rhodesia and the recent negotiations over the future of Hong Kong. The Foreign Office — and Britain — had a very good — indeed, distinguished — year last year with the Fontainebleau, Hong Kong, Gibraltar accords; and our policy on East/West matters has helped secure the return of the Soviet Union to the arms control talks.

It is commonly said that all Prime Ministers as they go on take a more direct interest in, indeed control of foreign policy. Do you feel that is true of you? Do you find foreign affairs intrinsically more stimulating than some of the details of domestic policy?

Inevitably, as more and more international matters are dealt with between heads of government; moreover continuity of experience and a position at the centre of Government puts any Prime Minister in a central position in determining foreign policy. But a foreign policy can only be as successful as the domestic base from which it is created and inevitably it is to this which any Prime Minister must give priority.

Despite publicity claims to "Give you a share in British Telecom's future", have not the results of the stock-market really delivered it into the hands of a few big corporations? Is this a fair way to dispose of a national asset?



I am glad to say British Telecom's flotation did not deliver it into the hands of the big battalions. It did indeed lead to the biggest increase in share ownership which this country has ever seen — something like 2 million — with applications for shares deliberately restricted to favour small buyers. I want to see it become as common to own shares in this country as it is to own a house. I want every man and woman in Britain to become a capitalist, and BT's flotation was a huge step towards that goal.

Ireland, and in particular the Irish, have been the bane of British politicians for well over 150 years. Can you see any long term solution to this persistent problem?

Certainly the problem of Ireland is one which has been with us for a very long time. It is not difficult to see what the framework for a long-term solution

should be: recognition that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and must remain so for as long as the majority of people in Northern Ireland so wish: the renunciation of violence; respect for the identities of both the majority and minority communities in Northern Ireland; a willingness on the part of the representatives of the two communities in the North to work together: cooperation between the United Kingdom and Irish Governments in matters of security. The problem is overcoming hundreds of years of suspicion and hatred which make it so difficult to achieve these aims.

A trip around the World in 5 days hardly seemed to affect you. What is the source of your stamina?

A perpetual interest in anything and everything which is going on. And, of course, I love my job. I can't think of anything I would like to do more.



11 Roland Way
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17th February.

Dear Prime Minister,

Thank you very much for giving an interview to the Eton College Chronicle. I enclose our latest edition: as you can see, we have 'splashed' you, and it has already generated more interest and controversy than any Chronicle in the last hundred years. I am looking forward to filling up the next Chronicle with letters to the Editor on the subject of your views.

It was really very kind of you to go to the trouble, and it was a great honour to the Chronicle - and indeed the School.

I hope that your visit to Washington is a success - again.

Yours Sincerely
Hugh Powell.