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PRIME MINISTER

POLISH INTERVIEW: DOMESTIC QUESTIONS

I have had a go at recasting Bernard's  
excellent answers in a form which may be more  
adapted to a Polish audience.

Content for them to issue?

C D P

yes - Vaughan

C. D. POWELL

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very much  
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1. Prime Minister, you are now in your tenth year of office, having been the longest serving British Prime Minister this century and three times an election winner - unequalled during the last two centuries. What is the secret of your success?

From the outset I believed first that the Government should behave according to certain principles, and second that governments should face up to difficult problems, and not run away from them, even when this involves unpopular decisions. When I became Prime Minister in 1979, I knew we had to tackle certain basic problems if we were to turn Britain round. We had to get the economy right - to conquer inflation, to get public spending under control, to reform our industrial relations and to encourage initiative and enterprise. To achieve all these things, we had to take many hard and difficult decisions which were not at all popular, and then stick to them. It was because we persevered then that the country is now reaping the benefits.

2. Britain in 1979, when you first moved into No.10 Downing Street, and 1988 are two different countries. What changes would you emphasise as most profound and important for your country?

I think the first and most important change is the difference in attitude. In 1979 there was a mood of defeatism. Now people believe in themselves again. This change in attitude stems in part from the change in our economic fortunes. Inflation and spending are under control. Taxes have been reduced. And our reform of industrial relations legislation has greatly diminished the number of strikes. But the change in attitudes also arises from the Government's determination to encourage individual responsibility and enterprise. By getting the economy right and promoting a society in which enterprise and initiative are rewarded we now have one of the fastest growing economies in Europe. This in turn has given Britain's voice more weight in world affairs.

3. You have your admirers who applaud successes and critics who despair over their social costs. What is the price that the British pay for transforming their country from pessimistic and apathetic, as in 1979, into a dynamic enterprising one in 1988?

The question you ought to ask is this: what would have been the price of failure to transform our country? A chronically inflationary, uncompetitive and strike-ridden country is by definition one which also has considerable social problems. For one thing, inflation eats away the value of savings and guarantees a hard time for the elderly. And an uncompetitive economy is simply incapable of generating the funds necessary to finance proper health and welfare spending. By tackling these problems we have indeed transformed Britain. And by doing so, we are now generating the wealth required to expand and improve health, welfare, education and other social services. Moreover, the benefits of our expanding economy are now spreading to all parts of the country.

4. One often hears attacks - and praise as well - on your policy towards the trade unions. What is the essence of it? Where has the political leverage of trade unions gone?

To understand my approach, you need to look at the situation as it was in Britain. Our trade unions were not democratically run. Rather the Trade Union bosses were able to dictate to their members and over-ride their individual interests. In many areas, we had a closed shop, which meant that you could not work unless you were a member of a Trade Union. We also suffered from secondary picketing, where trade unions would call out their members on strike in support of a dispute in another sector of the economy, even where their members were not directly involved.

We have now changed the law to take power away from union leaders and give it back to their individual members - notably by introducing secret ballots for deciding whether or not to strike and for electing union officers. We have outlawed secondary picketing, we have acted against the closed shop and we have made trade unions legally responsible for their decisions. The result is there for all to see - the lowest number of strikes for half a century and an economy which is among the fastest growing in Europe.

5. To put it in a nutshell, what is the essence of Thatcherism?

I am not very keen on this modern passion for labelling everything. Much of what is called Thatcherism has roots which go back very much further than me. The absolutely fundamental starting point is a belief in freedom under a rule of law which is impartially administered. It means acceptance that the law imposes restraints on the power of those who govern, as well as on the actions of the individual citizen. It also means that government should not try to do the things which people can do better themselves. The task of government is to provide the basic framework of sound finance: to protect the weak in society by providing the basic social services including health and education: and to secure the country's defence. For everything else, it is better to let people run their own lives and take their own decisions, participating fully in government at every level. When all is said and done, the essence of Thatcherism is a profound belief in democracy and sheer commonsense.

6. You are a lady in the tough mans world of politics. Does it help or hinder to be a woman in the driving seat? Some say that you use that unique situation skilfully.

I cannot tell you whether it helps or hinders because I have never been a man! And I am not that unique among

leaders. After all Golda Meir, in Israel, and Mrs. Gandhi, in India, were in power before me. I do not look at the job of leading a Government or representing one's country in terms of gender. My task, like that of any head of government, is to serve the best interests of his or her people both at home and abroad. In doing so, I most certainly do not think I am handicapped by being a woman. We may not be the world's most natural orators but we are pretty shrewd, perceptive and, above all, practical people. And what ordinary people perhaps look for more than anything else in their leaders is for sound, practical commonsense.