

P.M. - INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN WALDEN IN LONDON - 26 APRIL 1988

FROM JAMES LEE FOR COI RADIO TECHNICAL SERVICES

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MRS. THATCHER, IN LONDON, ON TUESDAY, 26 APRIL 1988

INTERVIEWER: BRIAN WALDEN

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INTERVIEWER:

I am not asking you a great deal about policy. I am much more interested in you.

I want to start with a question that is not impertinent, even if it sounds it.

Everybody who knows you well says the same thing: they say: "She is vivacious; she is good-humoured, she has not got any snobbery, quickly forgives a fault, easy to get on with!" Everybody says that, so what do you think about this constant characterisation of you as an authoritarian virago?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, it is absolutely ridiculous. You cannot have my job and have had a vision, a dream, a will, to turn Britain round to live up to the best of herself without being more than a chairman of a committee.

The view that I take of my work as a prime minister has a task of leadership; it is if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound (?) it. All right, you give a certain sound. This is the

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direction in which I am going. You are not deflected by difficulties in the past, because this is your vision for the people of Britain and if you are not deflected, of course you have to thrust some things aside. You are not deflected by the false, plausible half-truth of those who wish just to use the increase of wealth just to redistribute everything, disregarding the fact that soon you will not have any wealth to redistribute.

And so you go on. Yes, you do go on with singleness of purpose. Yes, you do have to be very firm and in being that very firm, you may well get this kind of reputation, but if I might say so and speak up for myself, look what it has done for Britain, because if I might say so, I was right.

The people of Britain did not like Britain in decline, being downcast. They like to be proud of being British, so I knew that what I was doing was in tune with the hearts and minds of people, but of course, in doing it, one has had to be quite "firm" is the word. I do not think I have ever been ruthless. Ruthless is quite different. Firm, a sense of direction, a sense of purpose, and therefore, they turn that firmness into an attack on authoritarianism. It is totally wrong; it is totally false, but there you are.

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INTERVIEWER:

Why do they do it, Prime Minister? You see, I do not agree with them, but I can understand someone who says: "Look! I do not believe in Thatcherism and I do not believe in Thatcher. I think the policies are quite wrong! Of course, you know, she is a vivacious, amiable old thing and she is really very nice!"

Why can't they say that? Why must they hate you so much and discover that you have got all the qualities - that you are heartless and ruthless and merciless and whatever? What lies behind it?

PRIME MINISTER:

Success is not an attractive thing to many people - they do not like it.

Having come through nearly nine years of seeing what we tried to do - and through the early years sticking to it in spite of the fact it was difficult - they do not like the success and, of course, there are some people who can never forgive me for coming from a very ordinary background and having felt and being in tune with the hearts and minds of what Britain wanted, and the combination of those two things makes them really attack.

It does not bother me at all. I cannot stand snobbery of any kind.

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INTERVIEWER:

I resent the attacks on you bitterly because I think they are unfair. I do not mind someone saying they do not agree either with you or me or anybody else, but you have said something that interests me very much. Let me press you a bit on that!

I have said this to Bernard - when I contemplate what it is that I like about you, it is partly because I honestly think I understand you and the reason I think I understand you is that you come from a background I understand. You have got the values of the respectable, old, provincial, lower middle-class who were not so very different from the old, provincial, respectable working class. I understand all that.

I wonder if a lot of the people who you have to deal with and who criticise you so bitterly simply do not. They have never met a person of your prominence who has come from that background. Do you think that is part of it?

PRIME MINISTER:

I do not know. I do not think it is only that, although I do find sometimes that when I have been discussing politically - this has gone on through the years - I have heard politicians with far more seniority than I sometimes say: "The country will not understand that!" It is a way of saying the people will not understand that and I very often said: "You under-estimate them! They will understand it!" Because usually, it is not a thing of

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detail - it is a thing of a great broad principle - and a great broad principle they will understand. I used to talk with my father many many times. If I say he was a very clever man who never had an opportunity of education, but I could have talked with my father on one of the broad financial matters of the country. I talked with him on the broad values.

I remember, during the rise of Hitler, there was no saying: "He makes the trains run!" He could see some of the articles that were coming through - the Douglas Reed Inanity Fair (phon) - and all the time, he could see, as you say, the fundamental things and still, if you really want to get people who hate, despise, detest crime and want people to be really tough on it, you will get it from people who suffer most for it and who live decent, honourable lives among terrible things that sometimes go on on some of the worst housing estates that we have got.

So certainly that one knows. I know that when we get a policy matter down to the fundamentals..this is why defence strikes such a chord..you have always got to keep up your guard, so then you will not fear anyone. It is basically as simple as that - and you do not keep up your guard unless you keep things modern. It is as basic and as simple as that.

You then turn round and start on social services and, again, this is where you will find an echo in the hearts of all the people.

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PRIME MINISTER (CONT):

Look! Our task in the social services is to look after people who are genuinely unfortunate. We look after them in two ways:

First, through a basic state system to which we all contribute. The fundamental of Beveridge was that if you cannot earn money because you either genuinely cannot find a job, you are too sick to earn money or you are too old to earn money, then you all contribute to a great basic scheme and you get a basic amount, so you need never fear any more that you will not have any money because you cannot find a job or are sick, and then you get supplementary benefit above that.

What most people understand is if you rely on other people to look after you when you are unfortunate, the reciprocal is that you look after them when they are unfortunate, but you never twist the system as if to say: "Well now, I have a choice as to whether I work or not!" because life is a reciprocal basis. If I look after you when you cannot find a job, you look after me, and everyone understands this, and so do I.

It is when you get to the difference between us, when you get to people who regard society as a matter of entitlements without obligation, that therein lies the difference, whereas we regard it as obligations, which gives rise to entitlements.

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

If I can go on, there was something else I was going to say - it was part of the first point:

And you will find quite a difference now in people which I think is a difference which did not occur many years ago.

First you will find - and this is the second point but is related to the first - a whole academic approach or attitude which has grown up among a few people who have got a great deal of publicity, which has either undermined the basis of the family or said that all charity is not good, you really should never have to depend upon charity, and it somehow undermined some of these fundamental principles and made people feel guilty about them.

Another thing that they have undermined is that you should never send children to different classes because they have different abilities in different subjects. It is absolutely absurd! If you do not, if you stop a child from taking a particular higher class in mathematics or in English language and literature when they are capable of doing that, then you are not doing what I believe in giving them the maximum opportunity.

They say: "Select by ability - that makes some children fail! Have an exam? That makes some children fail!" All of this was totally false and one began to think: "Well what has happened to these people? How did most of us come up? Because some said: this child has talent and ability. Come on, let us bring it up!"

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

All of that was an absolutely terrible twisting of the purpose of education: they undermined the family, they undermined that.

A long time ago you had this "all property is theft!" Absolutely ridiculous. They undermined the basic feeling of most people: "This is my land, I work it, I look after my family, etc.!" They undermined that.

INTERVIEWER:

You have always believed in the wider spread of property ownership,

PRIME MINISTER:

Always. This has been one of the great successes, because you cannot have freedom without responsibility and in enlarging your responsibility why should you not have your own property just as much as anyone else does?

And so you had that intellectual thing and there is still quite a strong strand of academics who are putting out what I call poison.

Did you ever read "The Rape of Reason" by Caroline Cox?

INTERVIEWER:

Yes, I did.

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PRIME MINISTER:

You will see it at its best in there. I say "at its best". You will see it at its most vivid in there, where the young academics took children who were thrilled to bits to get to university, they had worked hard, they had got there and they went and read sociology and they had every decent value pounded out of them by being cross-examined in front of a group. Some of the communitis..the way people almost reduce a person to jelly..and so they destroyed it and this was absolutely appalling.

I think it is those two things. I am sorry it is a little bit muddled.

INTERVIEWER:

Not it is not, it is very clear.

PRIME MINISTER:

First, the fundamental things and second, the academic - and I have forgotten the link that I was going to do between them.

Never mind, we will go on!

It is wrong, but it takes a long time, you know to destroy fundamentally what people feel and I just got it in time.

Had we had another ten years of that it would have been gone beyond repair, except that even the Soviet Union is finding the truth of what I am saying.

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INTERVIEWER:

Oh yes! There are very few socialists left, Prime Minister, very few, least of all in the socialist countries! That is where they really do not believe in it any longer!

Let me ask you a different thing, but a related thing, of course:

Obviously, you are the first woman Prime Minister and even your worst enemy would say: "Yes, she has very great courage!"

Do you think that is part of the problem? Do you think a lot of men subconsciously - not of course consciously, because we are all equalitarians (sic) these days, we say - but a lot of men subconsciously think that a woman ought to be a bit sort of dithery and a bit weak because she is a woman, and you are not, and therefore they find you profoundly puzzling. Do you think that is part of the problem?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think it is part of it, because as you know, the House of Commons is still very much male-dominated and there is something about them, a sort of "little woman" thing.

INTERVIEWER:

We are back to patronage again, aren't we?

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PRIME MINISTER:

Yes it is patronage, yes, rather patronising. You still find that patronising. The best compliment they can give a woman is that she thinks like a man. I say she does not, she thinks like a woman. You do get that to some extent.

It is absolutely absurd. It would be all right if I had gone into one of what they would regard as one of the traditional professions. All right if one had followed Florence Nightingale. All right, you know, if one had followed into teaching.

INTERVIEWER:

It is a horrible word, but it is what they call "sexism" really, but they do not realise it. They are actually prejudiced.

Let me ask you something else:

They keep on about this awful heartlessness, etc. I said to someone the other day: "Why do you say that? It is not true, you know? Why do you say that about her?" and he said: "Well, she never expresses any feeling!" and that made me think of something. The plain truth is I have known a lot of politicians, some of them would not have wept at their own mother's funeral, but they fake it, they pretend. Why don't you fake it? Why don't you pretend?

PRIME MINISTER:

I could not! I could not, because quite frequently I think, if I do not say it often enough, that some politicians think their duty ends by finding a cause, going out with a placard or a banner,

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protest, more money for this person. It is easy to do that. It makes you feel good. You have a demonstration and so consequently, one will get Mrs. Bloggs down the road is suffering because it is cold. You must have more severe weather payments. Someone else is suffering; the paint is peeling off her kitchen wall; she must have an improvement grant. So often, I have longed to say: why don't you go in, several of you, see if she is all right and, in a period when it is more prosperous than ever before, say: "Well come on love! This will help you get through! Share your fuel bills!

INTERVIEWER:

And there is nothing morally wrong with that is there?

PRIME MINISTER:

Or why do you not form a whole group of people - and there are voluntary groups of people who say: "Look! I cannot give money. I have my own family to look after, but I can do things and I could re-do this kitchen for her. Someone else will find the emulsion paint and I could re-do it for her!"

It is not enough to go round and say: "Protest! This is this week's cause. I feel so strongly that I am going to stop all the traffic and march up and down and march to Trafalgar Square!" It is not enough. If you just do that, then it is not what I think life is about.

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INTERVIEWER:

I find that kind of thing, if I may say so, inspiring, but let me put something to you that someone who obviously does not...it interests me...I saw John Mortimore, the playwright, on television and he was with Willie Whitelaw, I think it was the Vogan programme..Willie was all right, but Mortimore really got up my nose.

They asked him about you, you see, and he said: "Well you know, the woman has got a colossal majority. Everybody is terrified of her. They all cower every time she speaks, the BBC.."

PRIME MINISTER:

Not true!

INTERVIEWER:

Exactly, but this is the line I did not like.

PRIME MINISTER:

Has he ever watched an interview..cower!

INTERVIEWER:

Exactly! It is not true but it is his version. I do not suppose he has even met you, but this is his version. He had obviously said all that in order to deliver the punch-line which was this: "Why is she always so cross with us?" he said.

Now, are you always so cross with them?

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PRIME MINISTER:

Cross with who?

INTERVIEWER:

The British people, I suppose.

PRIME MINISTER:

Good Heavens, no! Why do you think I have been through all this if I am cross with them?

The whole purpose of this has been to say we are capable of doing more.

INTERVIEWER:

Why does he think you are?

PRIME MINISTER:

He does not like the policies. He does not like the success and he finds that the firmness that one has had to take it through with he thinks is unfeminine, as you said, and therefore he tries to attack that. He is probably also quite cross that one still stays as fresh at it after nine years and even more determined than at the beginning.

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INTERVIEWER:

There is a great deal of jealousy that I accept on that.

Let us broaden it out from Mortimore. I will not personalise it.

PRIME MINISTER:

Do tell him to look at some of the interviews.

INTERVIEWER:

Exactly. We do not spend our time covering, Prime Minister, but still, he would not believe me anyway!

Let us broaden it out from him.

What is the matter with some of these people? Here they are, successful men, wealthy men; they have had their taxes cut; the country is extremely well-governed. Instead of declining - the thing that used to worry me sick, that we were going to decline to a kind of Third World status - none of that has happened. We bounced back magnificently, superb wealth rates, best in the world bar one. What is the matter with them? They are well-to-do; they have done all right in the country; the country is doing well; they are proud of it again. What is bugging them? What is it they hate so much about you?

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PRIME MINISTER:

I do not know. There is something in this country. I think most people realise that we have a higher standard of living than ever before and, actually, we have a higher standard of social services, but they are trying to undermine that, but actually we have, and so much so that when I give all the facts and figures -- and they cannot forgive one for having them at one's finger-tips -- they try to argue, but most people know in their hearts that it is better and that the people who have very little also have more than they would otherwise have had, so they do in fact know that.

What really thrills me..we went to Nottingham the other day, just outside the town hall where I was going, there was a whole crowd, lots of old-age pensioners and you know, they were among some of the kindest, nicest, most welcoming really and they were really proud that the country was back to what they remembered; they were really proud that a woman prime minister had done it; really proud. You know, all the genuine feelings.

But among the others, I think you have got two things:

I think that some people who have done well have been almost made to have a guilt complex about it. Some of the questions you get: if you have built up a great big industry, some people just have this feeling they want to build up, they are the great builders of society..built up a great industry and done well..well then you have done it by grinding the faces of the poor, etc.

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

Capitalism only works by selling goods to the great mass of the people. In other words, they choose to buy this.

Capitalism only works by doing goods....communism works by giving privilege to the minority. It is totally opposite. They have been made somehow to feel a little bit guilty.

Now, after nine years, some of them are not feeling guilty at all. They really are enjoying their success, thank goodness, because in being successful themselves, they will bring it to others, so you have got that sort of guilt complex.

There is another thing and it depends again on this academic thing. I told you about the other side. There is a terrible intellectual snobbery that communism came out of the top drawer - it did not come out of the bottom drawer; it was not a revolution from the bottom up; it was an intellectual top-drawer argument. It was that fantastic intellectual snobbery - we can plan it all better than this; we who are made of the same human clay as the rest, have the right not only to be free to do what we say but to tell them what do do. The ultimate, worst form of snobbery that there is - and you will still find it among people. We can do it. We destroy all this and then we will have the talent and ability that none of the rest of the human race have - and they use the old revolutionary phrase - "You the poor put us in power and we will give you everything!" so the poor put them in power and then the rulers have everything and the poor have nothing.

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

There is still that intellectual snobbery which I cannot stand. You can still see it. And they cannot stand me either, because I have given power to the people, because I believe in the people - and they cannot stand it.

INTERVIEWER:

Let me ask you something different, Prime Minister, again related.

This comes, I am ashamed to say from my old friend Bruce Adamson (phon), who really ought to know better, but I shall not mention him in the article.

PRIME MINISTER:

Bruce has got his fundamental things right normally.

INTERVIEWER:

I am going to read you something he says, but I have heard from other Tories and it frankly gets on my nerves, and also they are not grateful because you have won three times for them, but Bruce says:

"Of course, Mrs. Thatcher personally militates against secure majorities. She is a storm crow with a temperament far better suited to a dolomite opposition than to serene enjoyment of placid success!"

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INTERVIEWER (CONTD):

Prime Minister, why don't you laugh back and have serene enjoyment of placid success like Bruce wants you to?

PRIME MINISTER:

For the same reason that anyone who has been successful does not lie back. Success consists in re-interpreting in contemporary and in future times.

Do you think Marks & Spencer would be a success if it were still producing the goods which were successful ten years ago? Of course it would not!

Success has to be earned...its Goethe: "That which thy fathers bequeathed thee, earn it anew if thou wouldst possess it!"

You have to re-earn your success anew every year, so you always keep going. The moment you lie back, you are finished, because you are no longer re-interpreting.

Take the other thing. It comes from one of the hymns: "New occasions teach new duties. Time makes ancient good uncouth. They must upwards still and onwards. Who would keep abreast of truth!"

Is it Longfellow? New occasions teach new duties. Is it once to every man and nation comes a moment to decide between truth and falsehood..yes it is.

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

There it is. New occasions teach new duties. Time makes ancient good uncouth. I notice it. I notice Disraeli. All right, they did have it, but Disraeli felt that in those terrible cities, if you wanted to get good health, the real thing you had to do was to get fresh water and get the drainage right. They are now re-finding that again in Africa. You have to do that. You have to do it in the Latin-American countries too, but that is not enough now. You have to have the opportunity and so on.

But that is what it is. You never sit back, because you would lose. Once you have lost the inspiration..good heavens, your brain, your personality, is with you from the day you are born to the day you die. Use it!

INTERVIEWER:

Is that the answer then, Prime Minister?

This is a slight policy question. I mean, the things we have been discussing so far are policy in the broadest sense. This is a little bit narrower, but the only reason I put it is that it is so important at the moment.

Some Tories have said to me: "Well you know, you are crazy about the Prime Minister, but she is dead wrong about this poll tax! If only she would leave the bloody thing alone! Of course, the rates is a thoroughly bad system, but it will do and she should not

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INTERVIEWER (CONT'D):

meddle with it and by meddling with it, it will cost us votes and if we did not do anything, we would have all those votes. She is bound to win in '91 if she does not have the poll tax!"

Is what you have just told me about just not letting things go like that, but being determined to get it right, is that why you press on?

PRIME MINISTER:

We never let go and we never take that attitude, never.

INTERVIEWER:

Why?

PRIME MINISTER:

I will tell you why.

I have heard it said: "Well, there are so many losers, there are so many gainers!"

I said: "Do you really think one determines one's policy on losers or gainers? Do you really think that just because we have got a lot of people who have never paid rates and they are now going to pay Community Charge, that we say 'Goodness me, they will be losers! We cannot do it!' How absurd!"

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

The fact is it has been totally inequitable that a lot of people pay far too much and some people pay nothing, and you determine your policy on the best thing you can with equity and fairness, so you have a Community Charge.

The services given by local government are personal and they should be met to some extent on a personal basis.

Now the Community Charge is only meeting a quarter of local government expenditure - a quarter. Now, what you say is the same words you say to a person on supplementary benefit. You pay that quarter unless you have not the ability to pay, and then you take it right down to 80% rebate or not. It only meets a quarter. Half is met by the tax-payer on a progressive tax.

And also, this is what I might call the other side of the coin: freedom has two sides - the personal freedom and the other side - and you cannot have a coin one side without the other - a sense of responsibility and if you want the freedom you cannot opt out of responsibility.

It made me very cross, someone asked me a question about the Church, about vicars having to pay Community Charge: "Don't you think it is scandalous?" I said: "Really! Are you saying that the Church should opt out of the responsibilities of citizenship?"

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PRIME MINISTER (CONT'D):

You do not do it on a basis of expediency, and that I might say, is something absolutely deeply ingrained in the British character. Fairness is the most deeply ingrained thing in the British character. Do you know the old poem of Kipling's, of the Norman king to his son?

INTERVIEWER:

Now that one I do know, my son leads the Saxon.....

PRIME MINISTER:

It is not fair, my son, leave the Saxon alone. It is not fair.

Fairness. I cannot get everything absolutely fair, but I can get it reasonably fair, so if you cannot pay it you get a rebate. It only meets a quarter, so the tax-payer is meeting a half and business the rest.

But you see, what the Left Wing is doing is saying to people: "You have got all the rights and you have no responsibilities!"

INTERVIEWER:

But Prime Minister, you know you still amaze me in many ways.

I agree with you about the Community Charge, I always have. That is neither here nor there.

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INTERVIEWER (CONTD):

Have you not got any fear? I mean, I am frightened for you. I think: well, if they have got any sense they will re-elect her. They are bound to have her back and again after that, but I worry. I think: oh maybe, they will be all worried about the poll tax and they will not vote for her. Are you not ever afraid of anything?

PRIME MINISTER:

No.

INTERVIEWER:

Why?

PRIME MINISTER:

Because I think I can explain, just as I have explained, and I can explain.

You say that I am wrong to say that a widow who lives alone must pay less than five wage-earners in the house next door, so you are against the widow, you are against the single person who looked after her parents all her life and they died. She is living alone in the same house; Dealing with some of those people.

And are you saying that you want all the benefits, but you want to opt out of paying the only local tax there is?

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INTERVIEWER:

And you will take the risk of saying that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes I will and I will even point to it and say: "Why do you want to opt out?" because my Young Conservatives are being marvellous. They say: "But we have not paid when we are living at home, we are 21, 22, earning quite well, why shouldn't we?"

INTERVIEWER:

Why don't you give yourself a bit of a better chance - I do not say I advocate this, but I have heard intelligent people advocate it. They say: "Well now, look! Most of local authority expenditure - not by much - but the majority of it goes on education. Why the devil should it? Education is really a state matter. Why not take education away from them, put the Community Charge on, then the Community Charge will be fair and it will not come to so much?"

PRIME MINISTER:

First, because that means taking enormous extra powers to the centre. Whichever way you looked at it - and I have worked in the Department of Education and Science - they have no way in which they could totally administer education throughout the country. They could not make all the decisions with regard to schools. It would

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

just not be possible. They would not know the circumstances. It is difficult enough when you have education at county level, it really is.

So my answer is to take education nearer to the people. You have certain basic rules. You must teach certain things in the curriculum up to certain standards and then, if you are not satisfied with the education you are getting, we will give you in fact a direct grant so you can have what I would call a "public independent school". To take it nearer to the people and to involve people more, but I can only tell you there is no way in which I would like all the decisions to be taken in the Department of Education and Science and no way in which we have that colossal administrative system which you have when children change schools. You could make them agents, but I do not wish to.

And also, you see, the local authority decides how many teachers you shall have and to some extent the increments and the the level at which they teach, so really you could not control it in any way.

So my answer is to take it nearer to the people, but to do it in a way which says: "Now look! If you are happy in your own local authority!...the best thing for a good school is a good head teacher and I think schools that are not too big, because I think if children are difficult - and some people do not have the sort of home life that we expected to be our birth right, just have not -

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

then the best thing you can do is put them in a smaller school and this also we need to do.

INTERVIEWER:

Can I ask you something else, again on the same lines of making sure that nothing goes wrong for you.

Ferdi Mount (phon), an old friend of yours, wrote an interesting article which I am sure Bernard saw and probably drew to your attention. What Ferdi said - I was closer to agreement with this - was: "Yes, let us have the Community Charge. It is fair. She is quite right to do it, but let us be sensible about it. Let us cap it when it becomes too onerous. If, say, there were six young people in the house, by God that is going to come to a tidy sum, do not let that happen; let us put various limits on how much people can in fact have to pay!"

Would you ever consider anything like that?

PRIME MINISTER:

But why? Why?

It is a personal charge. Six people in the house means six people have had education. That is the biggest thing. Why, because there are six choosing to live under less expensive conditions, should they opt out of paying for education when there are six of them to have it? Why?

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

Why, because there are six living in a house, should they say: "We should pay less income tax!" You do not say that.

INTERVIEWER:

I cannot persuade you, can I, Prime Minister..

PRIME MINISTER:

No, because it is not right.

INTERVIEWER:

..to be afraid of it. It is quite astonishing to me.

PRIME MINISTER:

The other thing about Community Charge is, I said it is only a quarter of local authority expenditure, which most people do not realise..going to meet all..and we at last have got some measure..bearing in mind it is part of Parliament's job to see that the Executive does not take too big a proportion of people's income. That is how we started. It was to control the expenditure of the Executive. Today it has come to accelerate it. Sometimes I think it has become a public auction on one person believing he keeps in with his constituents by spending the money of another people's constituents, which is ridiculous. Morality has become how deeply you can put your hand into your constituents' pockets for the taxpayer. Totally the reverse from what it was.

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

The thing about Community Charge that other people have not got is this: the varying needs of local authorities are going to be taken care of in the tax-payers' portion, the amount which goes to them, which is right - the varying needs. It is really like paying a bill unless you have not got the ability to pay when you get a rebate.

Now, it is so geared that after the transition period the same level of services in every local authority, delivered with the same efficiency, should result all over England in the same Community Charge, so you have a quick ready reckoner to say: "Ah we are paying 250-100 more than that authority. What are we getting for it? Is it that they are inefficient? Are they choosing to do things which we think really should be more done personally?"

INTERVIEWER:

Do you think, in time, they will do that, Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh yes, I most certainly do, and certainly, as we are capping rates we are retaining the capacity to cap the Community Charge. They cannot just go up and up because it would be quite possible for a local authority who had most people on what are heavy rebates still to go on putting the thing up and up.

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INTERVIEWER:

Let me ask you just one question about property.

Here is this heartless woman who has no feelings, in charge of this terrible Government, does not look after the poor. We are budgetted - you will correct me, because you know better than I - but I think I am right in saying we are budgetted to spend £54 billion next year on various aspects of the security and welfare system.

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, quite apart from the Health Service, in addition to the Health Service.

INTERVIEWER:

And yet still we cannot get rid of primary poverty?

Now, it is not your fault, Prime Minister. What the devil is the matter with the system so that £54 billion cannot get rid of primary poverty?

PRIME MINISTER:

What do you call "primary poverty".

INTERVIEWER:

Well, it is not a phrase.. I put it in inverted commas.. I read an article and put it in inverted commas..

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PRIME MINISTER:

Basically, as you know, they have enough. Obviously, this is the fundamental Beveridge equation.

INTERVIEWER:

Well, all the whingeing pressure groups say that these people are below the acceptable poverty standard. Why should anybody....

PRIME MINISTER:

Would you know what the acceptable poverty standard is? It is being constantly revised upwards.

INTERVIEWER:

In other words, you think as I do, that it is a comparative thing?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh yes, of course it is. So that the bottom is higher up. You know, there are some people who would rather the bottom were lower down, provided the top were a lot lower down. They hate the top going up and pulling up the bottom. Because the top goes up, we are able to distribute much much more. Even with a lower level of tax, if obviously you have got more pounds you can take less from each pound and still deliver and still distribute much much more and just look at what we have now done for families.

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PRIME MINISTER (CONTD):

The bottom, of course it has been coming up. Of course it has been. There are some people who would rather push it down, provided you can say the top has come down as well. Really, it is a policy of despair and envy and hatred and jealousy.

When you said "primary poverty", I was thinking that you were saying that there are some people who do live what one might call a life in which they are very suspicious of any institution, whether the state or voluntary, and they go round and they sleep in Hyde Park and they sleep rough, etc.

INTERVIEWER:

I do not think anybody can do anything for them, can they, Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

It is very very difficult underneath the arches. That is what I was thinking you were meaning and there are some of those whom, as I gathered when Mother Teresa came...she said they will not go to any voluntary institution, but they will come to my sisters..because that is interesting because they recognise goodness, someone who is pure goodness and therefore a whole life dedicated..they will go.

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INTERVIEWER:

It is no sense your fault, Prime Minister, is it?

PRIME MINISTER:

It is not, no. Well, bureaucracy they tend to be a little bit fearful of.

INTERVIEWER:

~~You look as fit as a fiddle to me. I am not your doctor so I might be wrong. You might be suffering from all kinds of terrible ailments, but you do not look it. Are you going to run again in '91?~~

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I hope so, I hope so.

INTERVIEWER:

And how about '95?

PRIME MINISTER:

It is not only up to me, Brian. The fact is that I have to be reappointed as Leader of the Party. That is a strength - it is not a weakness.

INTERVIEWER:

There is not going to be any competition is there?

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PRIME MINISTER:

Well, you never know. It is a strength, it is not a weakness. I hope so. I hope so.

But eventually there will come a time, you know, when people will say: "Well, she has had a good go and is it not time for one of the younger ones to have a go?" Now that time will come when there are several who are there who are capable of taking on.

What I am saying to you is I do not know when that time will be.

I am equally saying to you that I do not hang on for the sake of hanging on. I hang on - and then when I believe there are people who can take the banner forward with the same commitment, belief, vision, strength, singleness of purpose..

INTERVIEWER:

You know that I am not a flatterer, so I will make sure that it does not appear in the interview in any embarrassing form.

Someone said to me the other day: "When she goes, who will you support instead of Thatcher?" "Nobody!" I said. "I do not trust anybody else" - and I do not, and I suspect that there are a lot of people like me. You could choose any of your colleagues and there are aspects of them I simply do not trust.

Do you realise that is why some of us want you to go on and on and on, because we have got used to nurse and we do not really want her to go. We do not trust the others. We are not natural Tories. We are Thatcherites, and if you go we do not feel secure. Do you understand that?

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PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, I do understand, because what you have said is that the very reasons which have driven me to do what I thought was the right things are the very reasons which people understand, and they do not think it is hard and uncaring. They just have some appreciation that it is because you care so much about the future of Britain that you have been prepared to go and do these things in spite of what people say.

INTERVIEWER:

And you are not going to pack up and leave us just because you have struck some arbitrary date, are you?

PRIME MINISTER:

Oh no, no, because that would be throwing away everything for which I have fought.

What I am saying is the things for which I have fought and believe in passionately are the most important things and the question is who can take the banner forward best, but there will come a time, as I say, when people will say: "Well, she has had a good run and look, there are those several young people!" I will tell you when the microphones are off who I think at the moment could take it forward.

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INTERVIEWER:

All right, when the microphone is off, between ourselves, you can tell me that, but you see, Walpole.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well he was led a sleeping dog's you see...

INTERVIEWER:

You are more vigorous but, I mean, you could beat his record and then retire. Would you settle for that? With the microphones off!

PRIME MINISTER:

I think Salisbury was the next - 13 years.

INTERVIEWER:

~~I tell you one thing, Prime Minister. Again, it is an impertinence for me to say so. A lot of my remarks verge upon impertinence though they are not meant to, but of course,~~ There is one great advantage which you said yourself: that if you go on and on, it will be one of the younger Thatcherite generation. It will be somebody perhaps I can trust and not people who from the past I have several suspicions of.

PRIME MINISTER:

Not people who constantly compromise.

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INTERVIEWER:

For instance - this will not appear in the interview, and indeed, do not respond to it. Let me just say that I see Heseltine is doing terribly well. There is no way I would vote for a Conservative Party led by Heseltine, no way at all. I do not trust him an inch. I think I might even prefer Kinnock and I would certainly prefer Owen. By the way, let me ask you about Owen.

Again, this may not appear in the interview. I am not putting anything in that might embarrass you, but I ponder about him, you know. Think of this, Prime Minister.

How many candidates is he going to run - 50, 100 - at the next election? But he will have nationally about four or five percent of the vote won't he? What is he going to advise his supporters to do in the constituencies where he is not running a candidate?

PRIME MINISTER:

I think he has a very big decision to take. I think he will have to make up his own mind, because really, there are basically only two ways in which to run a country - one is the Socialist way and one is the Conservative way - and I think he perhaps realises that at the back of his mind. He has very little in common with socialism.

The questions he asks are what I call "splinter thoughts from the great stem of the oak tree" and he just has to decide whether he is going to join the basic stem of the oak tree or not. That is a decision for him to take.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you have any respect for him?

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes, I do have some respect for him.

INTERVIEWER:

If I said that in the article, would you find that embarrassing? Would you sooner I did not mention it?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, I would not find it embarrassing. I do have some respect for him. I will tell you why.

He has a feel for what is concerning ordinary folk and that I recognise. He has a feel for crime. He has a feel for defence. He has a feel for these fundamental things. He can spot what ordinary people are concerned about.

I do not want you to put this in. I think sometimes he chases after it because he has spotted that, whereas I am with them right from the beginning.

INTERVIEWER:

Instinctively, yes.

I will say this, Prime Minister - again, I shall not put this in the article - and I never say anything to create mischief. I am not a gossip-monger at all, but I do not see any harm in saying - of

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course, he likes you very much indeed. Indeed, Owen is one of the few senior politicians I know who in private has nothing but good to say of you, so that is why I was interested in your reaction to him. He greatly admires you.

PRIME MINISTER:

But he does have a big decision to take. At the moment, what they have got there in the middle is a very miscellaneous party. A miscellaneous party is only a protest; it is not a forward...

INTERVIEWER:

Steel is quite useless. I am not even going to ask you if you have got any respect for him, because I know the answer.

By the way, why have so many of those votes apparently gone to Labour?

PRIME MINISTER:

What, just recently?

INTERVIEWER:

The Alliance vote seems to have shrunk a lot, which is not surprising in view of the antics they have been up to.

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PRIME MINISTER:

I will tell you. They do not expect the Tory Party to be split. They do not expect it. Yes, they expect it from Labour. They do not expect the Tory Party to be split and that is what has happened and as it comes up to elections they will not be split, and they wanted us to have a fundamental manifesto and then some of them run away from the effect of the fundamentals.

INTERVIEWER:

~~Of all your achievements, Prime Minister, and I mean that.~~
Bernard and I discussed this on the phone. I think your achievements are incredible. The only reason I do not say it every single week is that I think the editor would sack me on the grounds that it was becoming pure propaganda, but of them all, which is the one you are most proud of? If God allowed you only one sentence to say the good that you had done as Prime Minister, what sentence would you choose, what topic?

PRIME MINISTER:

I cannot put it into one particular policy. I can only say this:

That I believe that our policies have brought out the very best in British character.

INTERVIEWER:

Which is?

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PRIME MINISTER:

~~The very best. I would say two things:~~

It is a sense of personal initiative. You do not have to be told what to do. ~~If we are in a tough corner, in a battlefield or anywhere else, we think what to do. British people do not have to be told.~~ This fundamental British initiative coupled with a sense of responsibility towards your fellow men.

So the fundamental British initiative has brought out the enterprise enterprise, this fundamental voluntary principle, which is why when we colonised the world we did it in a way that no other nation did. We took the best of administration, the best of the rule of law, the best of generosity. So what we did was to operate on the best strands of the British character - this sense of initiative and responsibility, freedom and responsibility, the two sides, and it is that that I am proud of, because it is that which made Britain great, and I will tell you, I used to have a nightmare for the first six years in office that when I had got the finances right, the Government doing the finances right, when I got the background of law right, the deregulation etc., that this sense of enterprise and initiative would have been killed by socialism.

INTERVIEWER:

You were really afraid of that?

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PRIME MINISTER:

I was really afraid that when I had got it all ready to spring back it would no longer be there and it would not come back, and it did not really show for about six years, and after about six years, about eighteen months before the last election, the place began to smile, the spirit began to lift. The face was right.

INTERVIEWER:

You were not 100% sure yourself?

PRIME MINISTER:

I was not 100%. I knew that if that was still there it would come out. My agony was had it been killed by prices and incomes policies, by high taxation, by nationalisation, by central planning, had it been killed?

INTERVIEWER:

Do you mind if I put that in?

PRIME MINISTER:

No. And it had not. It is there. The face began to smile, the spirits began to lift, the pride returned.

(END OF TRANSCRIPT) ~~END~~

Why I can never, never let up

Brian Walden is a master interviewer whose subtle probing persuades his subjects to open up where more aggressive questioners might fail. In a fascinating heart-to-heart with the prime minister at Downing Street, he unveils:

- *Her hatred of snobbery and snobs;*
- *Her belief in the essential fairness of the British people;*
- *Her wish to carry on as prime minister for two more elections;*
- *Her feeling that she has not yet found a worthy successor;*
- *Her faith in the values learned from her father;*
- *Her fears that she would not succeed*

The Margaret Thatcher I know is not the one I read about. I find her frank, good-humoured, entirely without snobbery and willing to tolerate a fair measure of leg-pulling, vulgarity and impertinence. I have never met this other Thatcher, the arch-fiend, who has no human feelings and cannot be contradicted.

“What do you think of this constant characterisation of you as an authoritarian virago?” I asked her.

“Well, it is absolutely ridiculous,” she replied. “You cannot have my job and have had a vision, a dream, a will to turn Britain round, to live up to the best of herself, without being more than a chairman of a committee. The view I take is: that a prime minister has a task of leadership. If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? All right, so I give a certain sound.

“Yes, you do have to be very firm and so you may well get this kind of reputation. But, if I might speak up for myself, look what it has done for Britain.

“I do not think I have ever been ruthless. Ruthless is quite different. But if one has a sense of purpose, they call that authoritarianism. It is totally false, but there you are.”

This covered the authoritarian part of the question, but I remained interested in the “virago” bit, the “loud, violent and ill-tempered woman” as the dictionary defines that word.

So I tried again: “I can understand someone who says ‘I do not believe in Thatcher or Thatcherism, but I admit she is a vivacious old thing’. Why can't they say that? Why must they hate you so much?”

That one touched the spot. Though she always denies it, the personal attacks do wound her and, in my opinion, drive her back inside herself, so that her seeming indifference acts as a shield. Her reply came rapidly.

“Success is not an attractive thing to many people - they do not like it. They do not like my success. And, of course, some of them are snobs. They can never forgive me for coming from a very ordinary background. It does not bother me at all. I cannot stand snobbery of any kind.”

Was there also, I wondered, an old-fashioned feeling that a woman ought to be dithery and weak? Wasn't she puzzling to some because she wasn't like that?

“I think that is part of it, because, as you know, the House of Commons is still very much male-dominated and there is something about them, a sort of 'little woman' thing. It would be all right if I had gone into what they would regard as one of the traditional professions. All right if I had followed Florence Nightingale. All right, you know, if I had gone into teaching.

“Yes, it is rather patronising. The best compliment they can give a woman is that she thinks like a man. I say she does not, she thinks like a woman.”

Many politicians who speak of compassion would not weep at their own mother's funeral: why did she not copy them and fake some emotion? Why not pretend to feel it, even when she didn't?

She was shocked: “I could not! I could not!” Pretence is alien to her, part of the foreign world of the snobs and patronisers. She wants to persuade, but will use no artifice to do it.

This reminded me that I had seen my old friend John Mortimer on the Wogan programme where he had said something along the lines of: “Thatcher has an enormous majority. Everybody is terrified by her. They cower when she speaks. Why is she always so cross with us?” I thought the comment unfair, but it tickled me.

Her reaction to this remark was surprising. It was the claim that people were afraid of her she found annoying: “Cower! Not true! Cower indeed! Has he ever watched an interview?”

‘AM I CROSS WITH THE BRITISH PEOPLE? GOOD HEAVENS, NO. WHY DO YOU THINK I HAVE BEEN THROUGH ALL THIS IF I AM CROSS WITH THEM?’

Tell him to watch an interview. The interviewers do not cower.” She gazed fixedly at me, daring me to cower.

But was she cross with the British people? “Good heavens, no. Why do you think I have been through all this if I am cross with them?”

So why did Mortimer and people like him think she was? “He does not like the policies. He does not like the success and he finds the firmness one needed to carry it through unfeminine, so he tries to attack that. He is probably also quite cross that one still stays fresh after nine years and even more determined than at the beginning.” [end p1]

Not that she did not feel a certain pity for Mortimer and his ilk, poor things: "I think that some people who have done well, especially under my government, have been almost made to have a guilt complex about it."

Of course, she reflected, revolutionary doctrines, like communism, usually came from intellectuals and academics: "They have a terrible intellectual snobbery and their socialistic ideas come out of the top drawer. They think that they can destroy what exists and that only they know what those who come from the same human clay want.

"They think they have a talent and ability that none of the rest of the human race has. That is the ultimate snobbery, the worst form of snobbery there is. Only put them in charge and the poor will have everything. So the poor put them in power and discover the rulers have everything and the poor have nothing."

For a moment she looked sad as she reflected upon the intellectual vanity that leads the top drawer to ruin the lives of the bottom drawer. But she remembered modern Britain possessed one great consolation: "I have given power to the people - because I believe in the people."

She believed in giving people what they wanted, not what the snobs thought they ought to want. She had always believed in a wider spread of property ownership, because she understood what the vain, clever people did not understand - that you cannot have freedom without responsibility.

"And in enlarging your responsibility, why should you not have your own property, just like the top drawer does? But some academics and intellectuals do not understand that and are putting out what I call poison. Some young people, who were thrilled to bits to get to university, had every decent value pounded out of them.

"Luckily it takes a long time to destroy fundamentally what people feel, and I just got it in time. Had we had another 10 years of that, it would have been gone beyond repair - except that even the Soviet Union is finding the truth of what I am saying."

Very Well, as she had stemmed the infidel tide and put things right, why did she not take things easy, do what one of her supporters suggested and luxuriate in the "serene enjoyment of placid success"?

"For the same reason that anyone who has been successful does not lie back. Do you think Marks & Spencer would be successful if it were still producing the goods which were successful 10 years ago? Success has to be earned. As Goethe said: 'That which thy fathers bequeathed thee, earn it anew if thou wouldst possess it'.

"You have to re-earn your success anew every year, so you always keep going. The moment you lie back, you are finished, because you are no longer re-interpreting. I remember the lines of James Lowell:

New occasions teach new duties: time makes ancient good uncouth.

They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of Truth.

“You never sit back, because you would lose. Your brain, your personality, it is with you from the day you are born to the day you die. Use it!”

She was animated and firing on all cylinders, so I judged this the moment to introduce policy questions. As re-interpretation was in her mind, what about re-interpreting the poll tax? Some Tories thought it was the only issue that could cost her the next election. So why not muddle on with the rates?

“I will tell you why. People said to me: ‘Well, there are so many losers, there are so many gainers’. But do you really think one determines one's policy on losers or gainers? Do you really think that just because we have got a lot of people who have never paid rates and who are now going to pay community charge, that we say ‘Goodness me, they will be losers’? We cannot do it.

“The fact is the rates situation has been totally inequitable: a lot of people pay far too much and some people pay nothing. You determine your policy on the best thing you can do with equity and fairness, so you have a community charge.”

There now followed an amusing and revealing interlude. I suggested a series of dodges, expedients and compromises. Her eyes sparkled at the chance of a thunderingly good argument, complete with gesticulation, interruptions, cut and thrust. What fun! No, she wasn't going to budge. The community charge would only meet a quarter of local government expenditure. Those who really could not pay would be [end p2] helped. The national taxpayers made a huge contribution and income tax was a progressive tax.

Then why not, I wondered, take education away from local authorities, since that is what most of their money goes on? That would reduce the poll tax (I kept calling the community charge by its nasty name).

But, no, that would not do either. She had been education secretary and knew the administrative limitations. “The department of education and science could not make all the decisions with regard to schools. It would just not be possible. They would not know the circumstances. It is difficult enough when you have education at county level, it really is.”

Some of her supporters thought the poll tax was fair, but sometimes too onerous on one household. If there are six young adults at home, that is going to come to a tidy sum. Why not put a limit on what any one household had to pay?

“But why? Why? It is a personal charge. Six people in the house means six people have had education. Why should they opt out of paying for education when there are six of them who have had it? Why?”

I decided to put the frighteners on. What about the votes she would lose? Why risk everything for this damned charge? I feared for her. Didn't she fear for herself?

“No.”

“Are you ever afraid of anything?”

“No”

“Why?”

“Why should I be afraid when I have an explanation for what I do? Are you saying it is wrong for a widow who lives alone to pay less than six wage-earners in the house next door? You are against the single person who looked after her parents all her life until they died and who is now living alone in the same house.

“You want all the benefits, but you want to opt out of paying the only local tax there is. Watch it, or you'll end up like the left-wing who tell people they can have all the rights and no responsibilities. Morality for them is how deeply they can put their hand into the taxpayer's pocket, a public auction in which they keep in with their constituents, by spending the money of somebody else's constituents.

“But I trust the instincts of the British people. Fairness is the most deeply ingrained thing in the British character. My opponents can tell all the lies they want, but fairness, that is my aim. I cannot get everything absolutely fair, but I can get it reasonably fair.”

We had both thoroughly enjoyed this passage of arms. I reflected how little her critics understand Margaret Thatcher. She loves a fight and expects you to fight back. The sly courtesy of the old ruling groups she distrusts. Speak your mind, tell the truth and stand your corner. She likes that, because she is a child of her background and feels at ease when the talk is plain. It helps her to think.

While she was in the mood, I asked her why, despite all the money the government spends, she had not got rid of primary poverty?

She wasn't falling for that. She agreed that £54 billion would be spent next year on various aspects of the security and welfare system, and that did not include the health service. But what did primary poverty mean? Eventually we agreed on a definition. However she had another bone to pick with me. “Would you know what the acceptable poverty standard is? It is being revised upwards constantly.”

I said I thought that the poverty standard was a comparative concept. “Oh yes,” she said. “Of course it is. So that the bottom is higher up. You know, there are some people who would rather the bottom were lower down, provided the top were a lot lower down. They hate the top going up and pulling up the bottom.

“Because the top goes up, we are able to distribute much, much more. There are some people who would rather push it down. It is a policy of despair and envy and hatred and jealousy.”

She talked a lot more about poverty, stressing the need for those who are not poor to be generous with their time and money. She showed no regret that so much money was being spent and seemed willing to spend more.

Rather to my surprise, she expressed great sympathy with those who slept rough. She gave an imaginative account of how they came to distrust the welfare bureaucracy and, to my ‘The question is: who can take the banner forward best?’ secret amusement, informed me: “It is very, very difficult underneath the arches.”

Thinking we had had enough sweetness and light on that subject, I tried another line of questioning and brought up a most gratifying gusher of revelation.

“You look fit as a fiddle to me. I am not your doctor so I might be wrong. You might be suffering from all kinds of terrible ailments, but it doesn't look like it. Are you going to run again in '91?”

“Well, I hope so, I hope so,”

“And how about '95?”

“It is not only up to me, Brian. The fact is I have to be reappointed as leader of the party.”

No denial about running in 1995. This was promising stuff and I wanted more. I said, quite truthfully, that I did not want to see her go.

“I do not hang on for the sake of hanging on. I hang on until I believe there are people who can take the banner forward with the same commitment, belief, vision, strength and singleness of purpose.”

Inwardly, I became very interested in these banner carriers and most anxious to know whether they were among the present generation of Tory bigwigs. If not, the banner carriers she had in mind were still maturing, and plainly she would have to soldier on until they were ripe. Another question got me no further forward. Finally, I pressed the right button:

“You are not going to pack up just because you have reached some arbitrary date, are you?”

“Oh no, no, because that would be throwing away everything for which I have fought. What I am saying is the things for which I have fought and believe in passionately are the most important things, and the question is: who can take the banner forward best?”

“There will come a time when people will say: ‘Well, she has had a good run and, look, there are these several young people who could be leader’.”

I had got what I wanted. At some unspecified future date the Tory party is going to notice the leadership potential of *young* ministers. My opinion is that Margaret Thatcher is certain to lead the Tories into the election of 1991 and, if she wins, very likely to lead them into the election of 1995. Those who fancy a bet on the closing date of the Thatcher era could do worse than put a bob or two on 1997.

Poking about to see if I could elicit any other characteristics of the coming men, apart from their adherence to Thatcherite principles, I was readily supplied with one by the prime minister. They will “not be people who constantly compromise”.

This emphasis on personalities had led to the conversation drifting onto leading contemporary political figures, and I was in for another surprise. I spoke kindly of Neil Kinnock, which provoked no interest, and then said I admired David Owen. She at once became enlivened.

“I think he has a very big decision to take. There are basically only two ways in which to run a country - one is the socialist way and one is the conservative way - and I think he perhaps realises that at the back of his mind. He has very little in common with socialism.

“The questions he asks are what I call ‘splinter thoughts from the great stem of the oak tree’ and he just has to decide whether he is going to join the basic stem of the oak tree or not.”

I asked her if she respected Owen.

“I do have respect for him. He has a feel for what is concerning ordinary folk, and that I recognise. He has a feel for crime. He has a feel for defence. He has a feel for these fundamental things. He can spot what ordinary people are concerned about.”

Thinking of Owen put the collapse of the Alliance into my mind. For the moment, many of its former voters seem to have gone to Labour, which is [end p3] currently very close to the Tories in the opinion polls. A slippage in the polls between elections is not all that significant; nevertheless, dreams of the future depend upon winning general elections. So why was Labour recapturing electoral favour?

“I will tell you,” she said. “The voters do not expect the Tory party to be split. Yes, they expect it from Labour. They do not expect the Tory party to be split, and that is “I have respect for David Owen. He has a feel for what is concerning ordinary folk’ what has happened. But when it comes up to the election the Tory party will not be split.”

Obviously the split - she used the word several times - in the party was admitted and it rankled rather more than I had expected, because further questioning produced a pained rebuke to the Tory malcontents. “They wanted us to have a fundamental manifesto, and then some of them run away from the effect of the fundamentals.”

Her mind dwelt on the difference between her vision and that of traditional Toryism. “I have heard politicians with far more seniority than I sometimes say: ‘The country will not understand that’. It is a way of saying the *people* will not understand that, and I very often said: ‘You underestimate them. They will understand it.’

“In the hearts of the people, they want those who are genuinely unfortunate to be looked after. Never fear that I don't understand. Those are the fundamentals. I learnt them from my father”

“A great broad principle they will understand.”

There followed an explanation of her reason for being so confident that, whatever their reservations, most people understand what she is trying to do. It took the form of an affectionate and most touching tribute to her father. Her eyes shone as she delivered it. Her ideas are inherited from her father, as is her courage and strength of character. In my view, he has been the moving spirit of her entire life.

“I used to talk with my father many, many times. If I say he was a very clever man who never had an opportunity of education, you will know exactly what I mean. But he had great breadth of vision. I could talk to him about anything. I could talk to him about the great financial matters of the country. I talked with him on the broad values.

“He was not fooled by Hitler. Long before most people, he saw what was happening. He did not say of the dictators: they make the trains run on time. He could analyse a situation. He

understood the fundamentals. He taught me to respect people who live decent, honourable lives among terrible things.

“And I know there are terrible things and I am going to get rid of them - for the sake of everybody, but especially the decent people they hurt most.

“This is where you find an echo in the hearts of the people, because they want those who are genuinely unfortunate to be looked after. Never fear that I don't understand. Those are the fundamentals. I learnt them from my father.”

Alderman Alfred Roberts, ordinary grocer of Grantham, had a hard time before he succeeded. But was any man better loved by his daughter?

Seeking a way to round off the interview, I asked her which of her achievements she valued most, a somewhat limp question, which got a better answer than it deserved.

“I believe that our policies have brought out the very best in the British character, a sense of freedom and responsibility, and it is that I am proud of, because it is that which made Britain great.”

I was starting to stand up, thinking it a good point at which to conclude, but she had not finished. She was eager to say more.

“I want to tell you something. I used to have a nightmare for the first six years in office that, when I had got the finances right, when I got the law right, the deregulation etc, that the British sense of enterprise and initiative would have been killed by socialism.

“I was really afraid that when I had got it all ready to spring back, it would no longer be there and it would not come back. And it really did not show for six years, not until 18 months before the last election.”

I do not associate Margaret Thatcher with nightmarish doubts, and on her own assertion she never shows fear. Now she was telling me she had secret fears. To be certain I had heard her correctly, I asked: “You were not 100% sure yourself?”

“Indeed I was not 100% sure. I knew if that enterprise and initiative was still there it would come out. My agony was: had it been killed? By prices and incomes policies, by high taxation, by nationalisation, by central planning? Had it been killed?”

Even though I knew an anti-climactic happy ending lurked just around the corner. I was a little taken aback by this admission of the “agony” going on under the surface. Never at the time had I guessed that she regarded national regeneration as a toss-up.

“But then it came. The face began to smile, the spirits began to lift, the pride returned.”

So that was all right then. But it makes one think. I claim to understand Margaret Thatcher, but I wonder if I do? I wonder if anybody does? How much does this passionate, repressed woman keep to herself? Is the certain sound of the trumpet a necessary outer protection for a deep loneliness within?

Not that she has the time, let alone the inclination, for an introspective grope into her own psyche. After the interview she posed obligingly for photographs, though she had a schedule of meetings for the day which would have killed a horse.

Finally, she bustled away: a unique politician and the choice and master spirit of this age.