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Rt. Hon. Mrs Margaret Thatcher, M.P., Leader of the Opposition

Mrs Thatcher, who will be 52 next month, took over the leadership of the Conservative Party 2½ years ago from Edward Heath in a - particularly behind the scenes - bitterly contested election. The private relationship between the two has since remained cool and despite feelers from time to time from the Thatcher camp about a possible full reconciliation and a return to a senior Shadow Cabinet post (Foreign Affairs), no response has been forthcoming from the former Prime Minister. It remains to be seen however whether, with the recent swing away from the Conservatives in the opinion-polls (their lead over Labour is now only 4½%, as against 11% last month and 14% in July) and the continuing poor performance and public image of her Shadow Cabinet, Mrs Thatcher may not feel compelled to try again to woo her predecessor back onto the front bench. It should be said at the same time that she has been in complete control of the party for at least the past twelve months.

There is on occasion a certain conflict between the inner and the public instincts of Margaret Thatcher. She is at heart a (right-wing) believer in laissez-faire capitalism, in small business (her father left school at 12 but managed successfully to build up his own grocery business), and in the achievement of progress and prosperity through individual enterprise and the minimum of government interference. She does not, however, allow her tough right-wing instincts to cloud to any significant degree her political judgment of what policies are possible and wise for her party. She is, in public, a cautious, calculating and disciplined politician whose Shadow Cabinet is a clever balance of right (Thatcherites) and left (one-time Heathites) and who, on sensitive issues like the closed shop legislation and the Scarman inquiry on the Grundwick dispute, is quite prepared to forego principle for pragmatic politics.



The massive question mark hanging over any Thatcher-led government, and one exploited on a daily basis by Labour politicians, concerns the ability of the Tories to govern in cooperation with the unions. It is an emotional issue in the party and one which, as was seen most recently in the differing responses of two Shadow Ministers (Jim Prior and Sir Keith Joseph) to the Searman inquiry report, can threaten Shadow Cabinet unity and, of almost equal significance, adversely affect three years of careful work, particularly by Prior, in repairing relations with the unions. It may have been in the hope of lessening this severe political pressure on her party that Mrs Thatcher, in reply to a question about her response to a confrontation of the kind which faced Mr Heath in 1974, said recently that in such circumstances she would give consideration to holding a referendum on the issue. Apart from the immediate and inevitable trade union criticism of her suggestion, most objective opinion also saw enormous practical difficulties in implementing it (how, for instance, could any referendum question of this kind be phrased and what would happen to the issue in dispute while the arrangements for holding the referendum, which could take months, were put in train). The old Thatcher answer to this question, which would claim that the 1974 confrontation could not be repeated since her front-bench had foresworn statutory incomes policies and had been mending their fences with union leaders, was perhaps a wiser though no less political response. The episode serves to show, however, how strong the pressure is on the Tories in this area, both from their own right and from a public fearful of a further head-on collision with union power. Their ability to handle this issue and to show that the Tory alternative to a Labour Government need not necessarily mean continuing confrontation with the trade unions, will go a long way towards deciding the outcome of the next election.



Mrs Thatcher has not to date made a major speech on Northern Ireland nor has she given very much indication either in public or in private about her views on the situation. She is however strongly committed to the Union (hence her distrust of devolution for Scotland and Wales) and has also given the impression to some of her friends that she holds a certain instinctive sympathy for Ulster Unionists of the straightforward (Harry West) variety. At the same time, the Ambassador, when he called on her in June last, found Mrs Thatcher to be very friendly and amiable. Apart from the Strasbourg case, which she feels strongly about, she did not touch on any controversial matter. Likewise when the former Foreign Minister, Dr FitzGerald, called on her last October, to express disquiet about remarks by Airey Neave which suggested a weakening of Tory support for partnership government, he received a positive response and indeed the party's position was firmed-up a short time later. If she came to power, she would more than likely be extremely cautious in her handling of the Province, given in particular her fear - particularly understandable in a member of the last Heath Cabinet - of a return to the high level of violence and confrontation of the last period of Tory Government (1970-'74).

Mrs Thatcher, who has practised both as a Research Chemist and, later, as a Barrister, was Secretary of State for Education from 1970-'74.