

5. Peter Riddell, *The Thatcher Era and its Legacy* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991; first edition published in 1989), pp.219–20, 222, 230–1, 245

[p.219] 'Nothing lasts forever. Even the longest, most glittering reign must come to an end some day.'

Ian Richardson as Chief Whip Francis Urquhart in BBC television's 'House of Cards', November 1990, when looking at a photograph of Mrs Margaret Thatcher...

[p.220] Mrs Thatcher lost office because she had become a political and electoral liability in the eyes of a significant number of her Cabinet and parliamentary colleagues. They believed that it was necessary to modify some of the more unpopular aspects of Thatcherism. I see the events of November 1990 primarily as a change of personality and style, rather than a fundamental strategy. The Major government maintained the direction of the Conservative economic and industrial policy (the poll tax apart), even though the pace and method of implementation may alter with his less ideological tone. He also responded to a changing public agenda, [such as increased concern with] the quality of public services and the environment, which was already developing before her departure. These issues would require a different approach in the 1990s from whichever party was in power. Many of Thatcher's policies will none the less continue. Much of the shift from the post-war economic and industrial consensus has been accepted, consciously or otherwise by the opposition parties – perhaps her main

achievement – even if neither they nor the [British] parties would go so far in a free market direction as she would like to have done.

[Riddell then discusses Thatcher's achievements, p.222] Lord Blake, foremost Conservative historian, was in no doubt. Writing in *The Times* just after she resigned, he argued that 'Margaret Thatcher's place in history is assured; the first woman to be prime minister, the first since Palmerston to win three successive general elections, the longest continuous holder of office since Lord Liverpool... She was on the British political scene a giant amongst pygmies. She was one of the two greatest Conservative prime ministers in the 20th century and one of the half dozen prime ministers of all parties at all times.' A more centrist commentator, Robert Skidelsky, wrote in the *Guardian* that 'The historian will see the Thatcher premiership as a never-ending campaign, punctuated by set battles, sometimes broken off, but always resumed, against all those forces, which in her view, had brought, or were bringing, Britain low.'

[pp.230–1] Mrs Thatcher herself would list restoring Britain's place in the world as among her main achievements. She certainly banished the half-heartedness and implicit defeatism of much of British foreign policy in the 1970s. The voice of Britain, and Mrs Thatcher, was heard around the world. Her unabashed Atlanticism and hostility to closer European integration served her well politically for most of her premiership. [In the first half of the 1980s her stand for Britain's money in the European Community outflanked Labour, which was eventually forced to come to terms with membership.] But in time she lost touch both with changes in the community itself and with opinion inside her own Cabinet...

[p.245] Mrs Thatcher's record inevitably appears flawed both because of the forced manner of her departure and because of the serious economic problems at the time. Apart from her loyal band of followers, Mrs Thatcher may now become an unfashionable figure, as President Reagan did in the US after he left office in January 1989. Mrs Thatcher's Conservative successors, as much as the opposition parties, may want to distance themselves from her era as they attempt to change the agenda of British politics. The same has happened for previous prime ministers; it was many years after they left office before Lloyd George or Attlee received a favourable reappraisal. A balanced assessment of the Thatcher era will take at least a decade. For the moment, she stands as one of Britain's most remarkable prime ministers. She helped to shift the

political debate in Britain. If she did not halt Britain's decline – and no one could do that – she did what a politician could do. She challenged and shook up British industry and society with effects which will last well into the 1990s.

?

[a]