



Leadership and Change: Prime Ministers in the Post-War World - John Major

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Professor the Lord Butler

As you will know, this lecture by Professor Vernon Bogdanor is the last in the series of Britain under successive Prime Ministers, and this one is Britain under John Major.

It is a great pleasure for me to introduce and to chair Professor Bogdanor even though he needs no introduction here because he is a very popular and well known lecturer at Gresham College. In fact, at other times of the year, he and I do joint seminars in Oxford on various aspects of the British political institutions, but I have not heard his views on Mr Major, and so, like you, I look forward to them with great interest. Professor Bogdanor...

Vernon Bogdanor

Thank you very much for that introduction. I have to confess that I speak with some trepidation because Lord Butler sat beside John Major throughout the whole of his premiership as Cabinet Secretary. He was present I suspect at every Cabinet meeting taking the minutes and so knows him better than I, and will be watching what I say with a hawk-like gaze.

I think the Prime Minister whom John Major most resembles is Stanley Baldwin: the easy-going, tolerant man who led Britain throughout the inter-war years. Baldwin was called 'the unexpected Prime Minister', and I think one could say that John Major too was an unexpected Prime Minister. Baldwin was nearly fifty and an unimportant backbench member of the House of Commons before he became a minister. He was so unsuccessful that he thought of leaving Parliament, but then, through a strange concatenation of events, he became Prime Minister at the age of 55, just five years after he had thought of leaving Parliament.

He seemed very undistinguished indeed, and his defeated rival for the premiership, Lord Curzon, said that he was a person of the utmost insignificance. In the 1930s when Baldwin spent a long time searching for a minister for defence coordination, someone once quipped, rather unkindly, that Baldwin was searching for someone with less ability than himself and this took a great deal of time. There was a cartoon in Punch at the time Baldwin became Prime Minister, with the young Baldwin as a boy, looking up at the older Baldwin and saying, 'What? Prime Minister? You?' I think one might have said the same of John Major. However, Baldwin, like John Major, was strangely formidable, and Baldwin worsted most of the party politicians who tried to unseat him - Lloyd George, Churchill, and others. Churchill said he was the most formidable party politician he had ever known, and perhaps the same could be said about John Major.

He was the unexpected Prime Minister I think, like Baldwin. He became Prime Minister in November 1990. He had been in the Cabinet for just 3.5 years. He had attained a senior Cabinet position 1.5 years before, in July 1989, when he became Foreign Secretary, but he held that position for just three months. Also at the time he became Foreign Secretary, just 18 months before he became Prime Minister, only 2% of the public had heard of him. After three months as Foreign Secretary, he was Chancellor for just over a year,

and did not particularly shine in that position. I believe he was not really thought to be a strong contender for the leadership.

If I can just bring a personal anecdote into this talk - after the first ballot on the Tory leadership in November 1990, when it was clear that Margaret Thatcher could not continue, I was rung up by a friend of mine who was a special advisor to a Conservative minister, and we agreed that Margaret Thatcher could not continue. I said, 'I expect Douglas Hurd will succeed her,' and he said, 'Well, I think John Major could be a strong candidate.' I said, 'Really? You think that, do you?!' I was very surprised. But I was not alone, because a poll taken at that time, in mid-November, just after the first ballot for the Tory Party leadership, which asked 'Who would you like to see as leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister?' The most popular candidate was Michael Heseltine, who had 37%; next was Margaret Thatcher with 22%; then Sir Geoffrey Howe, with 12%, though he was not a contender; Douglas Hurd with 11%; and John Major with just 3%.

But Major defeated his two opponents - Douglas Hurd and Michael Heseltine. He wrong-footed them by saying that he wanted to create a classless society, and his two opponents did not seem quite suitable for that role. Michael Heseltine was photographed outside his large mansion near Banbury which did not look as if that was the mansion of someone who could create a classless society. Douglas Hurd, I think really for the first time in his political career, impinged on the wider public consciousness rather disastrously, because he thought to rebut the accusation that his patrician background rendered him unfit to govern modern Britain. He said he was not really a patrician but really rather poor. He said his father was a tenant farmer with just 450 acres. He said he had gone to Eton on a scholarship and had spent his school holidays planting potatoes to earn pocket money, and he was now reduced to just ten acres. This explanation, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not convince.

In a party and in a society that was ceasing to be deferential, John Major's very lack of grandeur or pomposity helped him. He was elected Prime Minister perhaps less perhaps because of who he was than because of who he was not. He was not Douglas Hurd or Michael Heseltine. He won the General Election in 1992 not so much because of who he was but because of who he was not. He was not Neil Kinnock. In 1995, there was another Tory leadership election, which he won, again, not so much because he was but because he was not John Redwood, who most Conservatives thought would clearly be an election loser.

When John Major became the unexpected Prime Minister in 1990 he was just 47. He was the youngest Prime Minister since Lord Rosebery in the late nineteenth century. Tony Blair was younger still when he became Prime Minister. But John Major's background was rather different from that of Lord Rosebery. Lord Rosebery had gone to Eton and Oxford and was a leading member of the aristocracy. John Major came from a very different strata in society and he was an unexpected Prime Minister in a second sense - that you would not expect someone from that background to become Conservative Prime Minister.

His father was a trapeze artist in a circus, who retired from the circus and became a manufacturer of garden implements - garden gnomes and the like. His business failed, and they had to move from moderately prosperous Worcester Park to a rather unsavoury tenement flat in Brixton, where John Major grew up. His father also lived a rather rickety life. Indeed, John Major confessed that when he wrote his autobiography, he discovered new siblings while he was actually writing it.

John Major himself had an unsatisfactory educational career. He left school at sixteen and did not go to university. There has always been some obscurity about the nature, if any, of his educational qualifications and his O Levels. Of this John Major said that 'never has so much been written about so little'!

After leaving school, John Major drifted for a while and endured a period of unemployment. He was rejected from the position of bus conductor because he was too tall, but he eventually entered the banking industry and made a modest career there.

He found himself in Brixton Young Conservatives, where he used to talk from a soapbox at weekends and found his true metier. Perhaps oddly in a way, he did not feel any sympathy with the Left. His difficult early background did not drive him to the Left, but it drove him to the Conservatives. He thought that the Left would leave you in an underprivileged position, but the Conservatives were the party of popular, individual aspiration, and they would encourage you to make the most of your life, even if you started from highly unpromising circumstances.

John Major's ascent to the leadership of the Conservative Party shows the astonishing adaptability of that Party and how it had changed. Some of you may remember that I lectured a while ago on Churchill and the politics of the 1950s. Churchill was the grandson of a duke; Anthony Eden was the son of a baronet;

Harold Macmillan was a son-in-law of a duke; and Alec Douglas-Home was the fourteenth Earl of Home. After that, the Conservative Party changed. Edward Heath was the son of a builder and a lady's maid; Margaret Thatcher the daughter of a provincial grocer; and John Major we have talked about; followed by William Hague, the son of a soft drinks' manufacturer; Iain Duncan-Smith, the son of an army officer; Michael Howard, the son of an illegal Jewish immigrant in South Wales who'd become a shopkeeper. Now perhaps, with David Cameron, an old Etonian, the Tories may be returning to their roots. Nevertheless, Tony Blair has been the first public school Prime Minister since the fourteenth Earl of Home.

It did not seem at first as if John Major would last very long as Prime Minister. The Conservative Government was in its third term, and no Government had won four successive terms since the time of the Napoleonic Wars. Moreover, the Conservatives seemed to be on a withdrawing tide: they were 10% behind in the opinion polls when John Major became leader. Margaret Thatcher had been removed from office largely for this reason, that people thought that, with her as leader, they would not be able to win the next General Election. Part of the reason for that was the unpopularity of the Poll Tax, the so-called Community Charge, a new method of local government finance introduced. It no doubt had its merit and had its weaknesses, but the important point from our point of view is that it was highly unpopular in the country and the people who benefited from it, as so often happens, did not say thank you, but the people who lost not only objected to it but actually rioted. But the deeper cause of Margaret Thatcher's unpopularity was that she had simply been there too long, and in the Conservative Party, there was a feeling that she had become too imperialist and too unwilling to take advice from others. Moreover, the longer a government is in power, the more disaffected its backbenchers are likely to be. The backbenches had become peopled with sacked ministers who hoped their fortunes might improve under a new regime, and also with people who had never become ministers who knew they would not become a minister under Margaret Thatcher, but hoped that a new Prime Minister might look more favourably on their prospects. It was for all these reasons that Margaret Thatcher was, in effect, rejected.

But this left a deep residue of guilt amongst many Conservative MPs and also amongst Conservative activists in the country, for whom she remained an icon. Many Conservatives in the country said that Tory MPs were traitors, and this accusation rather hit home. This meant that they would look very carefully at Margaret Thatcher's successor to see if he was preserving her vision, her legacy. Indeed, after a brief period, she herself came rather to resent John Major and to feel that he was betraying her legacy - rather unfairly I think.

Despite all this, John Major achieved an absolutely unexpected election victory in 1992, against all the odds. A week before the Election, the polls had shown the Conservatives 6% behind, but in the end he won the Election. The cover of the Economist the week after the Election showed a picture of John Major wiping his brow, with the caption 'Whew!' because the victory seemed a very narrow one. He had an overall majority of 21 seats, barely sufficient for a full Parliament given likely by-election losses, and so indeed it proved to be. By 1996, the overall majority had been lost, and Major had to cope with a hung Parliament and rely upon the votes of Ulster Unionists for his majority. On his European policy, where the Conservatives were deeply divided, he often had to rely upon the votes of Liberal Democrats rather than members of his own Party.

But Major's victory was in fact much greater than the overall majority of 21 indicates. He had achieved the highest vote ever gained by a British political party - over 14 million votes. That is over half a million more votes than Tony Blair gained in his landslide victory in 1997, and it is more votes than either Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair ever achieved, or indeed any other Prime Minister in British history. Moreover, the Conservatives were 7.5% ahead of Labour in the popular vote, and that was the largest victory gained by the Conservatives in the post-War era, with the exception of Margaret Thatcher's two landslides in 1983 and 1987. It was a larger victory than had been secured by Churchill in 1951, Eden in 1955, Macmillan in 1959, or Heath in 1970. Indeed, it was larger than Blair secured in the last General Election - when he had a comfortable majority of 67, he was just 3% ahead of the Conservatives. Major was 7.5% ahead of Labour, with a majority of only 21. You can see that he was a victim of the first-past-the-post system of which he and the Conservatives were strong supporters. That system works erratically, particularly when, as in 1992, you have a strong third party challenge. The electoral system was working against the Conservatives so they needed more votes to win a given number of seats than Labour. It still works against the Conservatives, so that if, in the next Election, the Conservatives and Labour get an equal number of votes, the Labour Party will win many more seats. In 1992, the perverse working of the electoral system prevented John Major from having a genuine working majority, and I think this point must, in fairness, be borne in mind for anyone seeking to evaluate Major's Government.

Nevertheless, his victory had fundamental consequences for British politics, because it meant that the new settlement which had been constructed by Margaret Thatcher would survive and could not be overturned by Labour.

Most important of all perhaps, was that Labour would have to abandon nationalisation as a fundamental principle, which Tony Blair duly did in 1995 when he deleted Clause Four of Labour's constitution committing the Party to the nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange. The General Election of 1997 was the first in which Labour was a national party that the question of nationalisation was not an issue. Indeed, the question about Labour in 1997 was not 'Which industries will it nationalise?' but 'Which industries will it privatise?' Socialism seemed completely dead, one of the great ideological casualties of the twentieth century.

John Major remained Prime Minister until the General Election of 1997, when he was defeated by Tony Blair by a landslide. Although someone said that even the Archangel Gabriel could not have won the 1997 Election for the Conservatives. But John Major was Prime Minister for 7.25 years. We think of John Major as Prime Minister for a short time, but he was there for 7.25 years, and that is a longer continuous period of office than anyone in the twentieth century, except for Asquith, Margaret Thatcher, and Tony Blair. Only three Prime Ministers have held continuous office for longer. Indeed, he had the longest consecutive period of office of any Conservative Prime Minister since Lord Liverpool at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, except for Margaret Thatcher. He was Prime Minister for longer than many people we think of as great Prime Ministers who were Prime Minister for a long time: he was Prime Minister for longer than Lloyd George, Atlee or Harold Macmillan.

However, despite all that, and despite what I have said so far, he is generally regarded today as a comparatively insignificant Prime Minister. I once asked Enoch Powell, shortly after John Major became Prime Minister what he thought of John Major. He replied, 'Does he really exist?'

John Major's period of office seems an interregnum sandwiched between two much longer periods of office, of Prime Ministers who seem to have made the weather much more than he did - Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. He led the Tories, so people say, to their worst defeat in modern times.

I think this perception of John Major as an insignificant and unimportant Prime Minister is mistaken, and I want to outline three great achievements of his period in office, and also his great failure. His three great achievements I think are: that he kept Britain in Europe; that he held the Conservative Party together in very difficult circumstances; and that he reformed the public services. His great failure is his failure to prevent ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, and many may think that failure so great as to nullify all his achievements.

Europe was the issue which dogged John Major's premiership. At the beginning, he told Helmut Kohl, the German Chancellor, 'My aim for Britain in the Community can be simply stated: I want us to be where we belong, at the very heart of Europe, working with our partners in building our future.' In his autobiography, he says, 'I was keen to rebuild shattered fences, to prevent Britain from being seen forever as the odd man out, to be excluded from the private consultations that so often foreshadowed new policy in Europe.' That of course is a dig at Margaret Thatcher, who'd adopted a much more confrontational approach.

John Major's first problem was to secure ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, which he signed on Britain's behalf in 1991. This should not have been a problem for him, and the fact that it was, was due to great bad luck. There was a sense in which Maastricht was a great triumph for John Major because, through his negotiation skills, he had secured two important opt-outs for Britain.

The first was an opt-out on monetary union. Instead of the Government being committed to monetary union, it would be for Parliament to decide whether or not we joined. If it had not been for that, we would have been required to join the Euro in the late 1990s when it came into existence. Margaret Thatcher wanted to go further than that. She proposed, in her last Commons speech as Prime Minister, that there should also be a referendum before we entered the Euro, and that proposal was later adopted by John Major and then by Tony Blair. It is now agreed that in fact we should not enter without a referendum.

The second opt-out that John Major secured was an opt-out from the Social Chapter requiring certain minimum standards of social welfare. That was more symbolic than real I think, because most good companies already observed those standards, but it was of highly symbolic importance to the Conservative Party. The Conservatives would never have accepted adherence to the Social Chapter, and nor would they have accepted a commitment to the Euro. Without those opt-outs, John Major would not have succeeded in getting the Maastricht Treaty ratified, and even with those opt-outs, it proved difficult enough.

John Major said, I think perhaps unwisely, about the Maastricht Treaty that it was 'game, set and match to Britain', an unwise thing perhaps to crow over your fellow negotiators. Douglas Hurd, perhaps more sensibly, said it was 'an honourable draw'.

At first, it seemed as if ratification would not prove a problem. John Major said, 'When I returned to the Commons and made a statement on the outcome, I was received with acclaim and the waving of order papers. It was the modern equivalent of a Roman triumph.' Just seven Conservatives voted against the principle when John Major returned.

But then John Major made a tactical mistake: he delayed ratification of the Maastricht Treaty till after the 1992 General Election, by which time his majority, as we have seen, had fallen very considerably. Even so, when the second reading of the bill ratifying Maastricht came to Parliament, just 22 Conservatives voted against it. Things did not seem too bad because the Liberals would support it. But then John Major had two strokes of very bad luck.

The first was the Danish referendum on Maastricht in June 1992, where the Danes rejected the Treaty, and therefore further negotiations had to be held, with a second referendum, which the Danes then accepted - when the Danes had accepted Maastricht. But this gave rise to Conservative calls for a fresh start: 'why should we accept this Treaty if the Danes did not want it?' Also, it gave rise to demands for a British referendum on Maastricht, because people said 'If the Danes can vote on it, why can't we?' That was a great problem for John Major and it began the problems.

The second episode was even more drastic and it is not, I think, exaggerating to say it destroyed John Major's Government and the Conservative Party for many years - it is only just I think beginning to recover. This was that Britain was forced out of the Exchange Rate Mechanism of the European monetary system in September 1992. We were forced out on a day in which interest rates were raised to 15%, a day in which the general description of it was 'Black Wednesday'. Although Euro sceptics called it 'White Wednesday' for reasons I will go into in a moment.

We had joined the Exchange Rate Mechanism of the European monetary system in October 1990, in the very last days of Margaret Thatcher's premiership. Margaret Thatcher had always been strongly against it and instinctively hostile, but by that stage she could not resist the pressures of her Chancellor, John Major, and her Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, who were urging her to join. This meant that the Pound was pegged with other European currencies - we were in a fixed exchange rate system. But, for all sorts of reasons, perhaps primarily due to the pressures of German Reunification, we could not sustain the rate at which we joined the Exchange Rate Mechanism, and the Pound was forced out of it in 1992. We then adopted, though the Government said temporarily, though I am not sure whether they believed that, the floating Pound. The Pound actually is still floating, though ironically it is roughly the same rate now as it was when it was forced out of the ERM.

The Euro sceptics say this was a blessing in disguise, and that is why they call it 'White Wednesday'. This is because you can draw a line between the performance of the British economy before 1992 and after 1992, and since then, we have seen continuous economic improvement. Indeed, 1992 proved the end of a period of economic fluctuations; in economic growth and in output, the end of a period of very high unemployment, and the end of a period of high inflation. We have had low and stable inflation - between 2% and 3.5% - since. We have had stable growth, we have had lower unemployment, and we have had a lower and more stable rate of inflation. The general view of economists is that this is because since we left the ERM, we have adopted sensible monetary policies to restrain inflation. These policies were set out by Norman Lamont, a much underrated Chancellor in my opinion, in a letter to the House of Commons Treasury Committee in October 1992, shortly after we left the ERM, when he set an inflation target for us to achieve. Those policies were strengthened by the Blair Government shortly after it came in, when it made the Bank of England independent of the Government in monetary policy.

The Euro sceptics thus seem to have a strong argument at first sight: 'we adopted sensible monetary policies in 1992 and afterwards so why did we not adopt sensible monetary policies before? We should not have joined the ERM, we could run our monetary policy ourselves without the need of Europe'. The supporters of Europe say something different. They say we had to join the ERM to squeeze inflation out of the system, an inflation target would not have been credible until inflation had been lowered, and that did require a period of joining a fixed exchange rate, and that no country's inflation target had been credible until the 1990s. The first country to adopt it was New Zealand in 1990. Previous targets had not been credible because they were combined with prices and incomes policies which had been discredited and did not work. So any inflation target before we had squeezed inflation out of the system would not have been

credible, and we had to lock low inflation into the economy.

This is an argument that is still not settled and perhaps it is incapable of being settled. It is basically a political argument: were we incapable of achieving stability without outside help? For the Euro sceptics, joining the ERM seemed an admission of failure - we could not keep our own house in order - and that's a political argument. It is best summed up I think by the words of Alan Budd, the Chief Economic Advisor to the Treasury during this period: 'The period of membership of the ERM was not a very worthy episode. A slightly cruel summary of it would be to say that we went into the ERM in despair and left it in disgrace. Nevertheless, we are still enjoying the benefits of it.'

But whatever view you take about this, whether you think it was an economic triumph due to the ERM or whether you think it was a mistake, there cannot be any doubt about the political judgement: it was a total catastrophe for the Conservative Party. This was because it ruined the Conservatives' reputation for good economic management, which they have still not fully recovered. Before 1992, the general view of the Conservative Party might have been it is perhaps not a very humane party, its policies may be sometimes a bit harsh, but nevertheless, it knows how to run the economy and is effective in government. But that was what was destroyed in 1992.

You may say the General Election of 1992, in retrospect, was an unlucky election for the Conservatives to win, and a lucky election for Labour to lose, because the then Labour leadership of John Smith and Gordon Brown were even more committed to the ERM than the Conservatives and thought the Conservatives should not have left, though of course it did not stop them criticising them for leaving. Indeed, the damage was done not only to the Conservatives but to Gordon Brown's reputation. It was at that point that Tony Blair overtook him in Labour leadership stakes, because Gordon Brown, together with John Smith, was deeply committed to the ERM. That may explain Gordon Brown's current scepticism towards the Euro, because of course if you are in the Euro, you cannot get out of it.

If Labour had won the Election, people would have said 'Labour is a party of devaluation - they devalued in 1949, they devalued in 1967, they devalue again in 1992'. But, as it turned out, it was a traumatic event for the Conservatives. They never recovered their place in the polls, and by June 1993, John Major's standing, which had been high in 1991 and early 1992, was the lowest for any Prime Minister since the polls begun. His Government was electorally doomed. The Conservatives never gained 40% of support in the polls again, until David Cameron became their leader fairly recently. Throughout the rest of the 1990s, the early part of the new Millennium, they were under 40% in the polls all the time, with therefore very little chance of forming a government.

Of course, in the immediate short run, for obvious reasons, it increased Tory hostility towards Europe. Conservatives said 'We must not get involved with that again. If we are in the Euro, we will never be able to get out. We could not leave it or devalue as we did in the ERM.' It increased the hostility of Margaret Thatcher towards pro-Europeans, and she accused Conservative MPs who supported Maastricht of being traitors to their country.

With a majority of 21, it meant obviously that any eleven or twelve Euro-sceptic MPs could completely derail the Government and prevent the ratification of Maastricht, and if Maastricht was not ratified, presumably we would not be in the European Union any more. There were many more than twelve Euro-sceptics in the Conservative Party, so it was a great achievement for John Major to get it through. In the final vote, the third reading, in 1993, there were 41 Conservative MPs who voted against it, and five who abstained, and Major got through on a vote of confidence after that. It required very skilful parliamentary tactics to get that Treaty through with a majority of 21, for which Major has not received credit I think by those people who believe we should remain in Europe, and I think that Margaret Thatcher would not have had the finesse to manage such a small majority. It required great delicacy and parliamentary skill. John Major's stance from this point of view, with the opt-outs, was very much in line with traditional British policy towards Europe, of remaining part of Europe but having our special needs recognised. That was the view of Harold Wilson, of Callaghan and, in her time in office, of Margaret Thatcher, who signed the Single European Act, which was a much greater transfer of powers to the European Community than John Major had done in Maastricht.

John Major was continually criticised by people who said he was a wimp and that he should take a strong line on Europe. People have said that he should either have aligned himself with the pro-Europeans, like Kenneth Clarke and Michael Heseltine, in which case the sceptics like Michael Portillo and probably Michael Howard would have resigned from the Government, but he should have taken a strong pro-European line. Others said he should have taken a strong Euro-sceptic line in which case the pro-

Europeans like Kenneth Clarke and Michael Heseltine would probably have resigned. To have taken such a clear stance would have split the Tory Party from top to bottom and probably divided it into two parties in the way Robert Peel had done with the Corn Laws in 1846. By very skilful tactics, John Major held the Conservative Party together.

As I say, he has been bitterly criticised for not having a clear view on Europe, but you may say, the important thing for him was to preserve the unity of the Conservative Party as an instrument of government. You may say, in later years, people will not care much about the Maastricht Treaty but they will care about the preservation of the Conservative Party - the Conservatives certainly will. Whereas if you had been clear cut on policy, you would destroy your party, the way Robert Peel did the Conservatives and Lloyd George, later on, the Liberals. John Major said the day may come when this sort of judgment is made on the single currency but that it was not worth breaking up a political party on that issue.

Someone, unfairly but not inaccurately, characterised his position as this: that once Hugh Gaitskell had said he was going to fight, fight and fight again to save the Labour Party, but John Major said he would fudge, fudge and fudge again to save the Conservative Party. But at least he may say the Conservative Party lives to fight another day.

In fact, he got exactly the outcome he wanted. He got the Treaty through Parliament, he kept the Conservative Party more or less united, and he kept his Government in office for the full five years of his term. That looks an easier achievement in hindsight than it seemed at the time. It seems to me a remarkable achievement.

I now come on to his third achievement, in the area of public service reforms. Before he became Prime Minister, in 1989, when he was Chancellor, he gave a lecture to the Audit Commission, in which he said that our public services were an immensely valuable inheritance. One cannot imagine Margaret Thatcher saying that. She tended to give the impression that the public services would almost always be somehow second class, and that the best thing people could do would be to opt-out of them by sending their children to private schools or opting out of the National Health Service. John Major took a different view, and that was largely because of his own life history. He said, 'When I was young, my family depended on public services. I have never forgotten,' he said 'and never will, what the National Health Service meant to my parents or the security it gave despite all the harsh blows that life dealt them. These personal experiences left me with little tolerance for the lofty ideas of well cosseted politicians, the metropolitan media, or Whitehall bureaucrats who'd made little use of the public services in their lives and had no concept of their importance for others. They may have looked down on the public sector and described it as second rate, but many of them knew nothing of the people who worked there or the manifold problems they faced.' He said he wanted to reform the public services so that they had the same high standards that the private sector had, and he said the Left should be grateful to him for it, but of course the Left hasn't been particularly. But by improving the public services, he did not mean improving them by the Left wing policy of greater state intervention and greater public expenditure. What he wanted to do was to extend choice in the public sector so that people in the public sector had the same right of choice that people in the private sector had - just as someone using the public schools could choose a school or someone using private medical care could choose their practitioner, he wanted to extend that right in the public services. This policy, which was only hitherto possible to the better-off, should be extended to everyone, and that I think is a central theme of his premiership. In my opinion he was largely succeeded in achieving that.

When he came to power in 1990, over 200,000 patients had to wait over a year for an operation. By 1997, the figure was 15,000. He introduced testing in all state schools, tables of overall school performance. He established grant-aided schools independent of local authorities, attacked by Labour, abolished by Labour, but then resurrected in the form of city academies.

He established National Health Service fund holding, league tables of health authorities and self-managing hospital trusts. The fund holding policy was attacked by Labour, abolished by Labour, but then resurrected in a different form.

He adopted a jobseeker's allowance, that no one should be able to reject a genuine work opportunity and remain in receipt of benefit. That too was attacked by Labour, but resurrected by Gordon Brown in the form of the Welfare to Work policy.

All of these policies were opposed by the Labour Party when in opposition but accepted, and indeed championed, by New Labour in office. Labour would have to accept, in office, that the old principles of the Left in education, the 'one-size fits all' comprehensive principle, would no longer be feasible. It would also

have to accept the introduction of market principles and private contractors into the Health Service. Tony Blair called Labour 'New Labour', but what was new about New Labour was only new for the Labour Party. But they were not new for the country because they had been pioneered by the Government of John Major. So John Major could be regarded as the father of New Labour. Let me give an extract from a speech which emphasises that... 'The aims of government should be to strengthen choice and responsibility for the individual and the family: humanising market forces to make a compassionate society; spreading the ownership of wealth and prosperity in such a way as to facilitate personal saving and the transfer of modest amounts of personal wealth; concentrating social provision on those in genuine need, thus asserting our credentials as a compassionate party with a record of effective care.'

You may think that comes from a speech of Tony Blair's but it does not. It comes from a speech of Keith Joseph's in 1975, and at that time, Keith Joseph was a hate figure on the Left, but it could easily be said by Tony Blair, and that is a sign of how much politics changed on issues of public service provision during the period of John Major's premiership. It is also a sign of how much of the Conservative agenda has been not only accepted by Labour but now regarded by Labour as its own - as its own creation in the form of New Labour - which, as I say, was new for Labour but not for the country as a whole.

I now come to John Major's foreign policy, and in particular Bosnia. At the beginning of my lecture, I compared John Major with Stanley Baldwin. Like Baldwin, John Major was ill at ease in foreign policy matters. In his autobiography, he says, 'Of all the roles in government, the Foreign Office was the one for which I was least prepared.' He describes himself as a relative novice in foreign affairs - a charitable judgement - and said that he was fortunate in having Douglas Hurd and Malcolm Rifkind to guide him.

He came to power at a transitional time in foreign affairs, after the collapse of Communism and the end of the Berlin Wall. At this time, the American President, George H. W. Bush, the father of the current President, was suggesting that there was a new world order with the ending of the Cold War, and that the West should take advantage of that new world order by encouraging the spread of democracy and intervening to end ethnic cleansing and, where it could, totalitarian regimes. That view of George H. W. Bush was shared by Margaret Thatcher and later by Tony Blair in his policies certainly in Kosovo in 1999.

The traditional view held by the John Major Government was that fundamentally nothing had changed - there was no new world order. Douglas Hurd, the Foreign Secretary, said, in April 1994, 'We do not have a new world order. We have a traditional set of world disorders, and we are trying, case by case, and institution by institution, to equip ourselves to deal more adequately with these disorders.' The corollary was the traditional Conservative basis of foreign policy should remain unchanged, that Britain should act in foreign policy only where its interests were directly involved. Malcolm Rifkind once quoted Palmerston and said, 'The furtherance of British interests ought to be the sole object of a British Foreign Secretary' - that we could not afford to be an international policeman.

This led to a difference of view as to the nature of the Bosnian conflict. The American view was shared by Margaret Thatcher, Paddy Ashdown and Michael Foot - an incongruous trio, you may think. It was that what we faced in Bosnia was a deliberate policy of genocide or ethnic cleansing by the Bosnian Serbs, aided and abetted by Milosevic, the leader of Serbia, in order to create a greater Serbia on the ruins of the old Yugoslavia and to drive out the non-Serb element in Bosnia - primarily, though not exclusively, the Muslim element. That was the view that Tony Blair took of the conflict in Kosovo in 1999 and for that reason he intervened, and that led to the downfall of Milosevic.

The view held by the John Major Government was that what was involved were ancient hatreds in a civil war, that one side was as bad as the other, and that we should not get involved. This was a doctrine of Tory realism in foreign policy, that they were in politics to make things work, undistracted by fanciful ideas or utopian sentiments. Douglas Hurd says in his book, 'Waging Peace', 'By the test of the narrow national interest, Bosnia could not rate high for the British. The instinct of the realist was to stay out.'

The United Nations began by sharing that view, but by 1999, the American Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, appreciated that it had been mistaken. In November 1999, he issued a report on the Bosnian crisis in which he apologised on behalf of the international community for the policy of amoral equivalence in the Balkans, which equated victims and aggressors.

Because the old geo-political doctrine of Tory realism did not have much to offer in the world of Milosevic and ethnic cleansing, just as it had little to offer in the appeasement years of the 1930s. Major and Hurd faced what Hurd's Foreign Office successor Malcolm Rifkind was to acknowledge as 'the worst crimes in Europe since the Holocaust'. The Major Government dealt with these crimes by imposing an arms

embargo which prevented Bosnia from exercising her inherent right of self-defence against massacre and rape. There is a similarity here with the policy of appeasement in the 1930s, particularly in non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War which denied arms to the legitimate government of Spain. It was the motif of appeasement, as in the 1930s, that if you put pressure on the weaker side, you can avoid a war or the fighting will end more quickly because the aggressor will win more rapidly, and wars can always be avoided if the weaker side gives way to the side making a threat.

Both the older Bush, towards the end of his administration, and Clinton sought to intervene on the side of Bosnia. This was prevented largely by Douglas Hurd, who also stopped Europe from acting, and caused the greatest rift between Britain and the United States since Suez. The UN Rapporteur on Human Rights, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of Poland said: 'Anytime there was a likelihood of effective action, a particular Western statesman,' by which he meant Douglas Hurd, 'intervened to prevent it.' Douglas Hurd said that lifting the embargo would create what he called a 'level killing field', but he met a devastating response from Margaret Thatcher, who pointed out there was, '...already a killing field, the like of which I thought we would never see in Europe again. It is in Europe's sphere of influence; it should be in Europe's sphere of conscience.'

At the end of the war, it was found that there were 125,000 people in open graves in Bosnia, mainly, though not exclusively, Muslims, the victims of Serb expansionism. Britain, as in the tale of the Good Samaritan, passed by on the other side. British policy was summed up by that late and great journalist Hugo Young of the Guardian, who said, 'Who says Britain no longer has influence? Britain, in all her ancestral wisdom, was more influential than any other country in guaranteeing the washing of the hands.'

Unlike Kofi Annan, Major and Hurd never apologised. They offered the feeble excuse that there was no popular movement against the arms embargo. Even that is not true. In April 1993, over two-thirds in a Mori poll supported the despatch of British troops, while in February 1994, over half wanted air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs. Douglas Hurd minuted to his Prime Minister during the Bosnian crisis: 'More than any country, we have been the realists.' But perhaps you may think the verdict on John Major's administration, as on the Governments of Britain in the 1930s, which practised appeasement, is that realism in foreign policy is not enough.

Perhaps that should not be the final word on the Major years. He sought to create a Britain which was at ease with itself after the long period of Margaret Thatcher's Government. As I said earlier, during his period of government, inflation fell rapidly. It was approaching double figures when he came to office. The rate of interest also fell rapidly when he was in office, and so did unemployment. In 1997, the Nuffield study of the General Election says: 'For the first time since the 1950s, the Government could face the polls with an economic success story to tell.' It is a paradox that John Major won the election of 1992 in the midst of a recession and lost one during expansion, handing over to Tony Blair a strong economy which has proved the foundation of the Labour Party's economic success in running the country. It was not unreasonable for Douglas Hurd to say, in 1997, 'The Conservatives lost the 1997 Election having won the fundamental arguments in domestic policy at least.' John Major said, rightly, 'Labour has left the Tory legacy largely undisturbed.'

The General Election of 1997 at first seems like a radical upsurge, like 1906, 1945 and 1979, but in fact it was not. It was a consolidating election. It confirmed the status quo, like the General Election of 1951 when Churchill came to office and administered the Attlee Government's dispensation. It confirmed the status quo; it did not repudiate it, because the real divide in politics was not so much between John Major and Tony Blair as between John Major and the Tory Right, led by people like John Redwood, who wanted a British nationalist policy, a Euro-sceptic policy, drastic restrictions on immigration, continuation of the radical Thatcherite policies in public affairs, public services, perhaps experiments with vouchers in education, and health insurance in the NHS, radical privatisation of the public services and drastic cuts in public expenditure and taxation. That was the real divide, not the divide between Major and Blair. Therefore, apart from the constitutional reforms of the Blair Government, there was actually less change with that change of government in 1997 than in any previous change of government since the War, except 1951.

I think, to conclude, there is a paradox about John Major's achievement, because his aim after Margaret Thatcher was to be a conciliator. Like Stanley Baldwin, with whom I compared him, he sought appeasement in the best sense, domestically, of that perhaps much abused word. His main aim in politics was simple: that everyone should get on with each other rather better than they had done in the recent past; that we should all like each other a bit more. He wanted to tone down the acerbity of party warfare to

create a gentler society in which class and social divisions were less acute. In Europe, he sought conciliation, a more constructive engagement than had been possible in the later years of Margaret Thatcher's rule. In Bosnia, he fought to persuade warring tribes, whose motives he did not understand, to come to terms with each other.

Yet, just like Stanley Baldwin, who tried to conciliate everyone, in the end, he succeeded in conciliating no one. He was massively rejected by the British people in 1997, the worst Tory defeat since the nineteenth century. He was excoriated by Europhiles and Eurocrats alike - both accused him of betrayal. He was condemned on the Continent as being insufficiently European, and condemned, as I condemned him, for appeasement in Bosnia. This happened also to Stanley Baldwin, who retired, unlike John Major, in a blaze of glory, but he came to be excoriated for his easygoing approach to foreign policy which left Britain in mortal danger in 1940. Indeed, he was advised in that year not to leave his Worcestershire home for London - 'They hate me so,' he said he had be attacked. But his reputation has recovered a little as historians are able, with the benefit of perspective, to take a more charitable view of the 1930s, and I suspect the same will happen with respect to John Major, except with regard to Bosnia, a terrible blemish on his record. Like Baldwin, he would have been a far better Prime Minister in less troubled times. He was a dangerous Prime Minister for troubled times, though fortunately Milosevic did not threaten the peace of Europe as Hitler did.

But perhaps this should not be the last word on John Major, because after all, Britain remains today a tolerant, easygoing society, still capable of adapting radical social and economic changes without damage to our institutions. If we are a society in which party conflict is on the whole restrained and gentle and not marked by any particular acerbity, perhaps the credit for that lies, to some extent at least, with John Major.

Professor the Lord Butler

I think I was billed to do a response to Professor Bogdanor, but I really do not need to do that because I agree with a very great deal of what he said. I agree that John Major was the unexpected Prime Minister, unexpected perhaps even by himself.

I do not agree with all the criticisms of Bosnia. I think it is true that Britain probably did too little and too late, but we did after all join the UN force which eventually went there and we made a contribution to the peacekeeping, and indeed still do, in that country.

There is one omission from Professor Bogdanor's account of John Major's achievement, and it is an important omission, and that is Ireland. I was in the room in Ten Downing Street, and I shall never forget the moment, and you will imagine why, when somebody came in and said, 'There is a message from the IRA' and the message started, 'The conflict is over, but you must help us bring it to an end.' Of course, with all such messages, it was extremely uncertain what the provenance was - it had come by various means. To have any dealings, to make any response to such a message was fraught with danger. It took the risk of antagonising the Unionists of course and there were many Unionist sympathisers in Mr Major's Cabinet who would have been opposed to that. You also ran the risk of naivety, that people warned him that if he did have any truck with this, sooner or later, the other side would reveal it. But I remember very clearly, he said, 'This may be a false message, but if there is any chance that it will lead to a stopping of the conflict in Northern Ireland, I'm prepared to take the risk to do it.' He did take that risk. He responded to the message, and there was a further response to that. There was then the Warrington bomb, which might have stopped it all, but nonetheless, after a period, he continued, to engage the Irish Government, and that led to the Downing Street declaration and eventually to the first ceasefire, which set in train the events that led to the Good Friday Agreement, which Mr Blair pulled off, but the foundation for that was laid by John Major, in circumstances where very great political courage was needed.

As Professor Bogdanor said, I think he was a very talented conciliator. He was the best negotiator of the five Prime Ministers that I worked for, and he was a good negotiator for this reason: that he was capable of putting himself in the shoes of the person with whom he was negotiating. He understood his own objectives, but he also understood the objectives of the person he was negotiating with and tried very hard to find a means of reconciling the two, and showed that he was trying to do that. He was somebody you wanted to agree with, and his success, which Professor Bogdanor has referred to, at Maastricht recognised that, and Mr Blair is going to be in the same position this week. Will his European interlocutors recognise Mr Blair's difficulties at home and want to meet them? That is what Mr Major achieved and Mr Blair will

also have to achieve it.

He tried to reconcile the Conservative Party and hold it together, and as Vernon has said, and he succeeded in doing that in a formal way. I remember Willie Whitelaw saying, in 1989, when he was still Deputy Prime Minister, that the danger was that Margaret Thatcher would split the Conservative Party for a generation, like Peel, and Professor Bogdanor referred to that. The Conservative Party was so split that it was not really reconcilable during that period. John Major had to hold it together, but it had lost self-discipline and that was why it went down so badly in the 1997 Election. Mr Major fought that Election almost single-handed. He was the one we saw on the television the whole time, he never lost his patience, he maintained his good humour, and he left office with dignity, and perhaps with relief.

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