
United Kingdom

Who's afraid of Mrs. Thatcher?

by Laurent Murawiec

That minor differences among two British Cabinet ministers on whether an ailing British helicopter manufacturer should be rescued by associating itself with either of two competing industrial consortia, should have led to the resignation of the defense secretary, and shape into possibly the worst political crisis suffered on her home ground by Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, simply reveals that the affair that exploded around the rescue of the Westland firm, and the resignation of Michael Heseltine, has very little to do with helicopters.

The suspicion looms large in London that "Tarzan," the nickname awarded to the ex-defense secretary by London's popular press, would have resigned on any pretext, ranging from trivial squabbles to his "monumental rejection" of signing an agreement with the United States on Anglo-American SDI cooperation, which the prime minister forced him to do last December.

On Jan. 9, Heseltine stunned his ministerial colleagues by storming out of a Cabinet meeting, announcing his resignation to the policeman usually assigned to guard the front door of 10 Downing Street, hastily convening a press conference hours later to assail Mrs. Thatcher, and splashing himself on the front pages as the forthcoming challenger for leadership of the Conservative Party, and the prime ministership.

"Is it the beginning of the end for Thatcher?" asked grandly *The Observer*, the country's leading liberal Sunday weekly. Many commentaries noted that Heseltine's manner of quitting was unprecedented in 20th-century history, that he had shown greater courage than the many closet opponents of "one-woman-rule," that many a disgruntled Tory backbencher not-so-secretly now would rally around the blonde mane of Tarzan, and that in short, Mrs. Thatcher, who is trailing in the polls—many a poll was swiftly taken within minutes, one may say, of the flap breaking out—had for the first time found a political rival her size in the Conservative ranks.

True enough, since she booted defeated Prime Minister Edward Heath from his leadership of the Opposition, and successfully contested the 1979 elections, Mrs. Thatcher had

effortlessly bounced all of her internal opponents. Lord Carrington had to find shelter abroad; his companion Sir Ian Gilmour took refuge in back-bench mutters; Jim Pryor held out longer, only to be offered Carrington's succession as chairman of General Electric Co.; Norman St-John Stevas had to seek a cultural job; sacked defense minister Francis Pym mounted last year a cultural job; sacked defense minister Francis Pym mounted last year a lamentably ineffective caucus named "Center Forward," and a few other political corpses went to oblivion as years went by. All received from the prime minister and her chorus the unenviable title of "wets."

"Wets" meant two things—which Mrs. Thatcher is now going to have to disentangle in her own mind. On the one hand, the "wets" were the Keynesian and post-Keynesian opponents of the wild "monetarist" policies she followed, politicians who opposed their own brand of deindustrializing disaster to hers. They were "wet," so the Thatcherite theory went, because they did not have the guts to pursue the policy-prescriptions authored by the clique of Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman, and other ideologues of the anti-industrial society. On the other hand, "wets" has a deeper meaning which Heseltine's coup is bringing to the fore: The "wets" are the political frontmen of the British Liberal Establishment, properly identified with the Chatham House policy establishment—the Royal Institute for International Affairs—and its American offshoot, the New York Council on Foreign Relations. This Liberal Establishment runs the Foreign Office, and has its spokesmen in the major British media—*The Economist*, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the *Financial Times*, etc.

Now, why should this Liberal Establishment suddenly grow tired of Mrs. Thatcher? The spokesmen provide the answers: Former RIIA director David Watt, now a columnist for *The Times*, said on Jan. 10 that "Europeanism versus the Atlantic 'special relationship'" was the real, underlying issue of the break. Heseltine had snapped because of "his real commitment to a European defense identity . . . [and] his suspicion of American domination." Heseltine had always "signally failed to hit it off with Caspar Weinberger . . . he was initially reluctant and sceptical about British participation in President Reagan's Star Wars 'bonanza,' and the fact that he was outmaneuvered by the prime minister and obliged to toe her line on that issue probably fueled her determination in this case."

Wanted: an 'Anglo-European'

True enough, the *issue* on which Heseltine—or whoever pulls his strings by promising him a great future as a statesman—*chose* to fall, is not truly the Westland case, but an issue that can be summed up as "Anglo-American" versus "Anglo-European." The minor battle for the company involves a bid by a Sikorsky-Fiat group against a European consortium. But what matters is the extraordinary anti-Amer-

ican outburst Heseltine indulged in in Parliament on Jan. 15—which had the unmistakable hallmarks of the “independent Europe” rhetoric that usually goes along with “New Yalta” and decoupling talk: “The issue [is] the relationship of Britain with its European and American allies within NATO . . . the issue is about the [NATO] relationship, whether it should be one of partnership . . . the political processes in my view will be uncontrollable if on either side of the Atlantic the tensions developed whereby either side felt it was disadvantaged by the processes of the Alliance.” America would technologically swallow Europe.

The tirade is underscored by an intervention, a few weeks before the Westland crisis broke out in London, from EC Commissioner for Industry, Trilateral Commission executive member Karlheinz Narjes, who “gave a warning that Britain could be shut out of European helicopter deals *and military projects* if Westland went into partnership with the United States. . . . The Europeans would not only refuse to cooperate with Westland but boycott its products if they went ahead with the American deal” [emphasis added—ed.]. Narjes recently addressed a circular letter to European high-technology companies threatening them with a similar treatment if they joined the SDI, since this would have constituted a “violation” of the “priority” assigned to the empty Eureka project. On Jan. 7, the Socialist defense ministry of France distributed hints of the same sort on Westland case.

The Times of London swiftly picked up the undertone in the crisis opened by Heseltine in a Jan. 16 editorial: “The prime minister’s enemies may well be thinking now that there is some deep and undisclosed reason why she lent her weight to the Sikorsky proposal as she is alleged to have done. The talk turns to Star Wars. . . .” and further that “the nastiest taste [of the affair] which may linger longer than any but Britain’s enemies would wish, is *the exploitation by Mr. Heseltine above all of growing anti-American feeling.* . . .”

It should not be surmised, based on the above, that Mrs. Thatcher has been a paragon of pro-American virtue. We have not failed to pinpoint some very dubious aspects of policies followed in the last year, from the Middle East to the SDI. However, a more fundamental issue is now raised, in the context of the transformation of the Reagan White House into a lame-duck regime: Since Reagan will go at the very latest in 1988, Mrs. Thatcher, whose “handling” of the American President had not dissatisfied the Liberal Establishment, can and must go too. The British Liberal Establishment wants to resume in full the “European” game, “a Europe equidistant from the superpowers” in the framework of an American military disengagement from Europe as advocated by Z. Brzezinski, H. Kissinger and company. Mrs. Thatcher is too heavily “marked” in the Atlantic direction to be useful in running that game. She must go, the powerful Liberal Establishment has decided, and be replaced by a European-minded, Trilateral creature of some sort.

Michael Helestine, nicknamed “Michael Philistine” by his Oxford contemporaries, appears to have been picked up as a front-runner (or at least as a crucial factor in weakening Mrs. Thatcher) because, contrary to the pitifully ineffective “Whig” patricians and aristocrats of the wet bag, Carrington, Gilmour, Stevas, Pym, he enjoys great grass-roots popularity in the Conservative Party. “Tarzan” has roused the annual party congresses at Brighton with fiery speeches liturgically attacking Labour’s “socialism,” the “militants, the Trotskyists, the trade unions,” which provides great comfort, if little enlightenment, to the Tory electoral machine. The challenge, this time, is from within. As David Watt reports, and as many London sources reported in the last few months, “It has been virtually impossible to talk to any minister or senior official outside the cabinet office for many months without hearing another tale of woe—about prime ministerial high-handedness, about Downing Street interference in detailed departmental matters. . . . Irritation within some parts of the cabinet is now frothing over in this affair.”

Heseltine, described in the press as “a closet wet,” will be setting up his ambushes, notably in the case of severe Conservative defeats in upcoming by-elections and local elections. Conveniently released polls place the Conservatives a poor third, with 29.5% of voting intentions, compared to Labour’s 34% and 35% for the so-called ‘Alliance’ of the Social Democrats (SDP) and the Liberal Party. Thatcher’s authority will be further eroded by a public inquiry into the Westland affair to be held by the House of Commons’ Select Defense Committee.

Labour leader Neil Kinnock, an inept leftist phrase-monger, has refurbished his image toward a more “moderate” rhetoric, to come closer to the “Alliance,” led by Trilateral Commission member David Owen and Liberal David Steel. Along with the Tory “wets,” such are the outlines of a future government coalition which would revert, after six or seven years of a passing ideological phenomenon called “Thatcherism,” to Edward Heath’s stridently anti-American “European” option of the early 1970s. The defection of Tory MPs Enoch Powell and Ian MacLeod in 1963, and Powell’s 1974 call to vote Labour, are being conjured up as an example of Conservative in-fighting leading to Opposition victory.

If Mrs. Thatcher wants to survive, she will have to move against the Liberal Establishment, which may take more “iron” than whatever else she’s done so far in her career. This would allow the British government to cooperate in SDI, and the West to avoid the swing of Britain to a Trilateral government in the short period before the coming U.S. presidential elections. This would be a good way for her to draw the lessons of the fate of Richard Nixon in 1974: It was not anything that he had done *per se* that provoked American Liberal Establishment to oust him, but the mere fact that he had ceased to fit their specifications. Apparently, the same circles have reached the same conclusion concerning her today.