

Forensic Speaking: The Case of Margaret Thatcher¹ Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (1979-1990)

A New Plain Style Emerges

The majority of the electorate in the United Kingdom in 1979 was conscious of a need for something new in the political life of the country. The United Kingdom was ready for a different style of leadership. After a number of unsuccessful attempts by successive governments to revive the economy, Margaret Thatcher arrived at Downing Street with her argumentative style, authoritative manner and a whole new ideological package. Her style was built on knowing the facts, analyzing them, and then using this analysis to support her contention. She usually won out in arguments with her colleagues and the opposition, simply because she always did her homework while her colleagues and opposition leaders were not so prepared. It was a rational approach built on long hours of hard work. Hugo Young tells us, "Argument she relished, as long as she won, but persuasion she neglected."² However, the forensic style based on rationalism alone would not be enough – *it needed the force of her conviction and character behind it to be successful.*

How Character Can Influence Credibility

It was the force of her character supported by an artillery of detail that the unfortunate Neil Kinnock, the leader of the opposition Labor Party in Parliament, with his idealistic and "big picture" vision, had coming down on him. He never stood a chance. "The facts? The *facts*? I have been elected to *change* the facts," said Thatcher.³

¹ This case briefly traces the political career of Margaret Thatcher from a communication standpoint. The case is recounted from selected points in her biography with an emphasis on communication issues and is not intended to be a political analysis of Margaret Thatcher's tenure as prime minister.

² Hugo Young, *Supping With the Devils*, p. 18.

³ Peter Hennessy, p. 403.

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However, if we read the speeches of Kinnock, they sound more motivating and inspiring than Thatcher's forensic-type speeches, which were unremarkable and even somewhat boring. Yet she was victorious in her duel with Kinnock. Why is this, when her speeches do not even read well in terms of prose? Was the grand style of Kinnock, which is more inspirational and more motivational than the forensic one, out of place in the economic chaos of Great Britain in 1979? Were people tired of hearing about a promising new world to come? They wanted the country put in order now.

Thatcher Sounded and Acted Like a Leader in Debates

Thatcher had to sound and look like a leader and she achieved this through dedication and hard work to develop one of the most recognizable voices in the late 20th century. How did she do it technically speaking? It was Gordon Reece, a former television producer, who "advised her to lower the tone of her voice and speak more slowly and closer to the microphone to make her voice husky, intimate and, above all, less hectoring."⁴

Charles Moore in his authorized biography explains that she had lessons with a speech coach at the Royal National Theatre which helped her *lower her pitch and develop a calm, authoritative tone*. These classes modified the upper-middle-class accent she had developed from earlier elocution classes and taught her how to *breathe correctly*. Reece also sent her to Sir Laurence Olivier, the famed Shakespearian actor, who taught her the importance of *projecting her personality*. One study that compared the recordings of her speeches found that the reduction in pitch came out at 46 Hz – a figure, according to the study, that is almost half the average difference in pitch between male and female voices.⁵ This helped her tremendously as it gave her greater clarity and a "statesmanlike" character. In other words, *it slows down the normal speed of speaking, which gives a more reflective and authoritative image*.⁶ However, for many others, Thatcher's tonality was deep, forensic, controlled, specific and somewhat icy.

The tonality of Kinnock, the leader of the opposition, on the other hand, was highly pitched, excitable, idealistic and offering little in a practical way to the ears of the listeners who needed specific answers in weekly parliamentary debate.⁷ People wanted a practical approach to reform.

Developing a New Vision

A promonetarist approach as formulated by Milton Friedman (combined with F.A. Hayek's thesis on the relationship between individual liberty and government authority) became her vision as opposed to the existing consensus-type politics of previous Conservative governments. It was her vision and her belief in that vision that gave her the strength and self-

⁴ Patrick Sawyer, "How Maggie Thatcher Was Remade," *Telegraph*, January 8, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/margaret-thatcher/8999746/How-Maggie-Thatcher-was-remade.html>.

⁵ Max Atkinson, "Margaret Thatcher and the Evolution of Charismatic Woman: Part 1. Cultural and Vocal Challenges," *Max Atkinson's Blog*, January 3, 2009, <http://maxatkinson.blogspot.com.es/2009/01/margaret-thatcher-and-creation-of.html>.

⁶ "Margaret Thatcher: Powerful With a Gentle Voice," *Debatrix*, April 15, 2013, <http://www.debatrix.com/en/2013/04/margaret-thatcher-powerful-with-a-gentle-voice/>. And "Margaret Thatcher – Voice Before and After Lessons," *Awesome Stories*, October 7, 2013, <http://www.awesomestories.com/assets/margaret-thatcher-voice-before-and-after-lessons>.

⁷ Brian O'C. Leggett, "Profile of a Conviction Speaker: Margaret Thatcher (Part 2)," *Rhetoric and Leadership* (blog), August 5, 2013, <http://blog.iese.edu/leggett/2013/05/08/profile-of-a-conviction-speaker-margaret-thatcher-part-2/>.

confidence to challenge Edward Heath's party leadership when the opportunity arose. She communicated her vision with the conviction of the converted.

The Use of Contrasting Opposite Viewpoints

At this point, Thatcher began using a type of rhetorical tool known as “contrasting opposite viewpoints” very effectively. A typical example is: “Labor believes in turning workers against owners; we believe in turning workers into owners.” More and more she converted *the struggle into right and wrong*, asking people to choose between prosperity and the policies of old Labor. Her rational message soon became a credo for most of her party supporters, although not all of her party was convinced. Not everyone in her party appreciated her style, and many found her tonality overaggressive and even rude. Many of these Conservatives still believed in the old consensus style of politics, although they now formally supported the new government.

Preparation: The Key to Forensic Speaking

Forensic speakers know they need to prepare thoroughly simply because their argument must be worked out and based on facts and data, and Thatcher was no exception. Forensic speakers know very well that, once credibility is lost, it is hard to regain it. They cannot make a mistake of fact. For example, as prime minister, Thatcher knew quite well that question time on Wednesdays was important in her effort to stamp her authority on the House of Commons and maintain its respect. So for her it always had to be a question of winning on Wednesday afternoons. Preparation was the key to this winning. Thatcher gave us a clue as to her preparation: “I always briefed myself very carefully for questions. One private secretary, my political secretary, my parliamentary private secretary and I would go through all the likely issues which might come up without any notice.”⁸

Her main opponent for most of her period in office, Kinnock, was far too emotional, far too wordy and far too utopian to be successful in open combat with such an argumentative speaker. Thatcher, with her forensic style, minute preparation and assertive nature, held Kinnock's parliamentary skills and his inability to keep to specifics even in question time in low regard. Details were everything for Thatcher. Without accurate details, the argument could not be won.

Conveying Her Difference⁹

Thatcher was different from her colleagues in the Conservative Party, and the country recognized this the moment she became prime minister. She was in many respects the opposite of most of her Conservative colleagues in the cabinet, such as Douglas Hurd, Geoffrey Howe, Ian Gilmour and William Whitelaw, in upbringing, social class and ideological outlook. Her difference marked her out and made her special.

⁸ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 41.

⁹ Hugo Young, *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe From Churchill to Blair*, p. 307.