Trevor Fishlock on
TOUGHING IT OUT IN BRITAIN

The British general election in June marked in clear and dramatic fashion the end of a political era and the transition to a new, more abrasive and tougher one. It shook long-held assumptions and emphasized profound changes in British society that many politicians evidently had failed to perceive. Margaret Thatcher is not responsible for these changes. But, just as a sailor senses a shift in the weather even before the meteorologist, so Mrs. Thatcher sensed how the winds of change were blowing.

A year and a quarter ago the polls revealed Mrs. Thatcher to be the most unpopular prime minister since the Second World War. Unemployment was running close to three million—more than 13 per cent of the working population. Several regions were corroded by economic failure, there was an unprecedented stream of bankruptcies among small businesses, and economic despair was among the causes cited for the racial troubles in run-down districts of south London and the north of England. Areas once considered industrial engine-rooms now had the smell of the '30s about them. There were fears that the government's economic ligature was creating two Britains: an affluent south and a deprived Midlands and north. Even in big business and Mrs. Thatcher's own Conservative party there were misgivings about the way the prime minister was determinedly riding her right-wing instincts.

Then came Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands. The prime minister saw at once that from the moment Argentine soldiers entered Stanley, Britain's credibility, and her own, were on the line. The British could scarcely believe their eyes as a naval task force sailed south to the strains of "Rule Britannia."

Mrs. Thatcher was made by the Falklands. With her every action she proclaimed, "Nobody pushes us around." And most of the people stood with her in what they saw as a just war. She became a Boadicea, an Elizabeth I, a leader with a capital L., the very embodiment of that quality of defiance the British admire in themselves. Just when it was needed, she supplied a boost to self-respect, and a win.

Mrs. Thatcher had already demonstrated that toughness was her stock in trade, and this confirmed it. She had earned respect, if grudging from some quarters, for her willingness to confront, to say no and no again. The Russians had called her the "iron lady." She had thrust out her chin at the European Community and had wrested a large rebate from it. She had faced down the unions; had cut public spending and held down wage increases; had gritted her teeth as unemployment had grown and industrial production fallen badly. "Never mind," she shouted, lashing herself to the wheel, "we're on course."

Although the war made her secure, there was more than the Falklands factor working in her favor. Although at high cost, Thatchemomics had brought down inflation. It had been at 22 per cent during her first year but fell steadily to 4 per cent. Second, she disproved the myth that high unemployment means a rising public anger that is dangerous to government's health. Most Britons can remember when it was the general wisdom that if unemployment went to half a million, the government would tremble. But people out of work in Britain receive benefits large enough to act as a cushion in bad periods. Thatchemomics is therefore itself partly protected by the welfare state. At the same time, many people came to accept Mrs. Thatcher's argument that unemployment was not her fault but one of the effects of recession. She constantly stated her belief that any programs that might cause refiation would be wrongheaded.

Over recent years it was she who defined the terms of the new political game. She used the scornful term "wets" to describe those not a hundred per cent with her—the waverers and moderates who questioned where she and the party were heading. It became commonplace to hear her called "the best man we have."

Moreover, Mrs. Thatcher represented the new kind of Conservative, one with roots in the humbler sections of a
class-conscious society, who had gone through the grammar schools and pulled himself up by the bootstraps to get to the top; she herself is a grocer’s daughter. The rather gently, school-lie flavor of the Tory party began to change. Mrs. Thatcher’s is a more abrasive party. Significantly, it cuts across a broader social range and is now the vehicle for a middle class in evolution.

The Labour party, meanwhile, was coming to the end of its long march. Born of a desire to work major social reform, to provide free health care for all, to bring such basic industries as coal and steel into public ownership, it was the party of the unions and largely funded by them. But with the achievement of many of its aims, Labour inevitably lost much of its sense of purpose. The working classes were no longer the clothcaps of old, struggling for justice. Education and broader opportunity had created a larger property-owning meritocracy and social divisions had blurred. In the much-publicized Bermondsey by-election last year, the militant left-wing candidate found to his chagrin that he had been harboring a romantic view of the old working class. It had vanished; he lost the election.

As if the decline of purpose and identity were not enough, there were other problems for Labour. The entry of left-wing militants in growing numbers had already driven some moderates to split and form the Social Democratic party, which eventually made an alliance with the Liberals to create a third force in a traditionally two-party system. Within Labour there were serious ideological differences on nuclear defense and membership in the European Community. The party leader, Michael Foot, was sincere, decent, and honest, but old. When Mrs. Thatcher called the election, Labour looked a mess, uncohesive and uncertain. Even its own people saw its election platform as a kind of suicide note.

In fact, the election issue was not unemployment. It was essentially Mrs. Thatcher herself. In the 650-seat House of Commons she won 397 seats, a majority of 144 over Labour and the SDP-Liberal alliance. Thus Britain voted for more of the same—for firm government with a strong Right emphasis.

Mrs. Thatcher’s legislative program for the next eighteen months indicates that she will persist in attempts at keeping inflation down by squeezing public spending and resisting wage increases. She will not be deterred by still-growing unemployment; the road is rough, she says, but it is still the right one. She will keep her pledge to denationalize the mighty state-owned telecommunications corporation. The property-owning class will be enlarged as government-built homes are sold to the tenants.

Conservatives have longed for the chance to tame the unions and will now set about teaching them democratic manners by enacting laws requiring secret ballots for union-leader selection and the calling of strikes. They may attempt to pass legislation barring strikes by workers in essential services. If the unions want a fight, Mrs. Thatcher surely will not shrink from it. She, and the Labour party, will have noted that many of the unemployed, the skilled working class, and even trade unionists voted for her.

She will also try to revive the controversial proposal to give the police more power to search and detain suspects. There may also be an attempt to bring back capital punishment, eighteen years after its abolition, although Britain’s judiciary largely opposes it. In many areas Mrs. Thatcher shares the outlook of Mr. Reagan. She has underscored her strong commitment to United States and NATO defense strategies. She supports the plan to base Pershing and cruise missiles in Europe. She believes that her election, following on Chancellor Kohl’s in Germany, has strengthened the Alliance and has improved the prospect of progress in arms talks.

She is deeply committed to the European Community but equally determined to see that Britain pays no more than its fair share. She has made it plain that the costly “Fortress Falklands” policy will be maintained.

With her massive mandate, Mrs. Thatcher looks unsailable. Labour, on the other hand, will elect a new leader in October, who will have the arduous task of reshaping a shattered party. The trade union movement, too, has a crisis of identity and is in for an agonizing period of reappraisal. Although it would be premature to write Labour’s obituary, for the moment the SDP-Liberal alliance seems to have greater credibility. The new alliance received 25 per cent of the general election vote, Labour a mere 28 per cent; the Tories commanded 42 per cent. It will be fascinating to see how opposition politics develop.

Mrs. Thatcher believes herself amply rewarded for trusting her instincts. But there is a difference between attitude and policy, and even Mrs. Thatcher’s instincts may fail her on occasion. She is tough, but will she also be flexible? Will she listen to others when the going gets tough, as one expects it will when employment rates rise even further? She is hardly likely to amend her style. As she once said, “The lady’s not for turning.” She is not for wavering either.

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EXCURSUS 2

Gerald Hyman on
A LARGER ROLE FOR JAPAN

Two items have dominated talks between the United States and Japan in the past two or three years, and the meeting between the prime minister of Japan and the president of the United States a few months ago was no exception. First and foremost was the huge—and growing—trade imbalance between the two countries—at least $7 billion last year. Second was Japan’s defense posture in general and its defense role in Asia in particular. The Reagan administration was unusually enthusiastic about the prime minister’s visit. The newly elected Yasuhiro Nakasone was said to be willing to make concessions on the former issue and, on the latter, to hold views that were consistent with, even identical to, those of the administration. Himself once the head of the Self-Defense Forces, Nakasone has long advocated a more certain build-up of the armed forces and a more forceful international political role for Japan.

Though Nakasone served in the Imperial Army, he is perhaps the first real postwar prime minister and is thought of as a “new generation” leader, or at least a transition to such leadership. Less consumed by the need to guarantee Japanese economic power and less scarred by the defeat in World War II, he is willing on Japan’s behalf to play an international role commensurate with the country’s actual strength. He is also less likely than previous postwar premiers to wit and defer to others in public forums. Yet the vagaries of the Japanese election system—the fluidity of its coalitions and the political and monetary debts that are incurred in its campaigns—mean that Nakasone’s main concern for the foreseeable future will be to consolidate his own power, taking care to avoid a misstep. The recent Upper House elections will certainly strengthen the prime minister’s hand in his Liberal Democratic party.