

THE BATTLE FOR THE PITS: Margaret Takes On King Coal

‘ Britain could not be made ungovernable by the Fascist Left. ’

The rest of 1982 saw Margaret Thatcher again visiting several countries, taking in a twelve-day tour of the Far East (visiting Japan, China and Hong Kong), dropping in on the new German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, and attending a summit in Copenhagen. In January 1983, she and her husband Denis secretly spent a few days in the Falkland Islands.

Also in that month, she once again reshuffled her Cabinet, substituting Michael Heseltine for John Nott as Defence Secretary. In May, she called a general election for 9 June, causing her to cut short her attendance at the G7 summit in Williamsburg so that she could campaign.

On election day, the Thatcher government was returned with a majority of 144 seats, and the new Cabinet saw Geoffrey Howe moving to the Foreign Office, while Leon Brittan became Home Secretary. Nigel Lawson became Chancellor of the Exchequer and had not been in the job more than a few weeks when he announced a step forward in terms of Mrs Thatcher's economic goals: public expenditure cuts of £500 million.

In October, Cecil Parkinson – who had been

appointed as Tory Chairman in 1981 – caused a major embarrassment for the party which had at various stages in its history tried to sell itself as representative of ‘family values’. Parkinson had been instrumental in the Tories’ success in the 1983 general election, before which he had been a close confidant of Mrs Thatcher during the Falklands crisis. His future in the Tory government seemed secure. His affair with his secretary, Sara Keays – who became pregnant by him – proved to be his undoing, however. Margaret Thatcher urged him to remain with his wife and refused to ask for his resignation, even when the matter became public. It was only when it became clear that the matter was not going to die down quickly that she accepted his resignation from the Cabinet and the chairmanship. She had proved herself to be a loyal colleague in this case, but at the expense of undermining some of her party’s much-vaunted Victorian values.

Nevertheless, as is the case with so many politicians who find themselves disgraced, Parkinson was able to bounce back once any residual ignominy had left the minds of a fickle public, and he would return to the Conservative cabinet to serve as Energy Secretary and Transport Secretary. The episode would come back to haunt him eighteen years later, when it transpired that he had unceremoniously dumped his daughter, Flora, after her birth, and she had been brought up by her mother, Sara, who had seen her through many childhood difficulties. It further emerged that Parkinson had put a legal gag on anything to do with his daughter, effectively