

## **THE TORIES AND THE FOREIGN OFFICE**

Mrs Thatcher's check list of autumn problems abroad is relatively brief. Hong Kong and Gibraltar loom with a post-Falkland resonance — which the Falklands themselves seem to lack. Fish and money have to be tackled with Europe. The Soviet pipeline and steel must be stopped from causing any further strains with the US. And perhaps a thought should be given to the Third world; after all the whole pyramid of international debt seems to be crumbling.

However, Poland can probably be put to one side, just as the Middle East has been for the past four months. Arms control can as usual be left to the US. The IRA fits in elsewhere as a domestic issue — or so she would say.

As striking as the problems themselves is the extent to which the more burning ones set her at odds with both the Foreign Office and her own vision of the world.

Where the colonies are concerned this year has already shown how far the FO has moved from the atavistic, imperial nostalgia which dominates her wing of the Tories. The FO is relatively cold blooded over these



territories. If they cannot be defended, they should not be wept over. The frigates have long been removed from the China seas and Gibraltar — provided it is in Western hands — has lost its strategic value to Britain itself. The problem is thus how to extricate the country from issues bedevilling relations with the world's largest country and preventing Britain from winning any major public contracts in Spain.

To Mrs Thatcher's Tories such thinking is treachery. They have never forgiven Lord Carrington for delivering Rhodesia 'into the hands of the Marxist leader who has been selected by the Foreign Office to perform that role', as *Crossbow*, the Bow Group's scratchy publication, had to say this summer. Such accusations may be poor history: the FO consistently tried to have Mugabe excluded from the elections, only to find itself blocked by Lord Soames. But they make good polemics. Add in a sentence or two about the FO persistently seeking to surrender the Falklands and the sense that the same is about to happen elsewhere is reinforced.

The charge is not entirely wrong, but it begs the question of what is the alternative.

For the new populist wing ruling the Tory Party this problem does not exist. The sun has never set on Pax Britannica and the imperial writ. Natives exist to be civilised. Right and wrong are defined in the terms of Churchill — and solutions in those of Nelson. Mostly self-made men and women, they believe that it is only a lack of determination and fibre which has reduced Britain. The

country's decline is the FO's fault rather than that of an economy whose share of world exports has halved in two decades and whose average GNP is now only two-thirds of the OECD average.

The situation can be restored merely by standing firm and sticking to the transatlantic alliance which saw Britain through two world wars.

It is easier for the Whig wing of the Tories to understand that the world does not fit into such tidy compartments. The decline in their aristocratic living standards has long brought home to them the extent to which Britain has declined abroad. Heirs to the more tolerant traditions of paternalism, they have found it easier to take on board such developments as third world nationalism. Better travelled, they have often seen this nationalism at first hand and understood better its social origin.

It is the very elitism of the FO which has long made it more responsive to this view than to the red-in-tooth-and-claw populism of Mrs Thatcher. Where recruitment is concerned the elitism is less pronounced than it was. In the two decades to 1970-4 the proportion of private school children among entrants to the top stream fell from 83 to 56%, and of Oxbridge graduates from 90.5 to 67.5%. This trend has continued while senior posts are now also open to those who enter the FO by less exclusive channels, the old second stream.

Yet sadly, such is the selection process that several members of the FO now complain that their juniors are more conservative than their seniors. But change is slow, the promotion system has long made sure that those with heterodox views are more likely to find themselves dealing with consular cases in the Pacific rather than nuclear issues in Europe. Mrs Thatcher is thus unlikely to see in her time a body capable of responding in her terms to the fact that, apart from the colonial issues, she has less immediate problems with her presumed

enemies than with the two alliances which form the premise of her foreign policy.

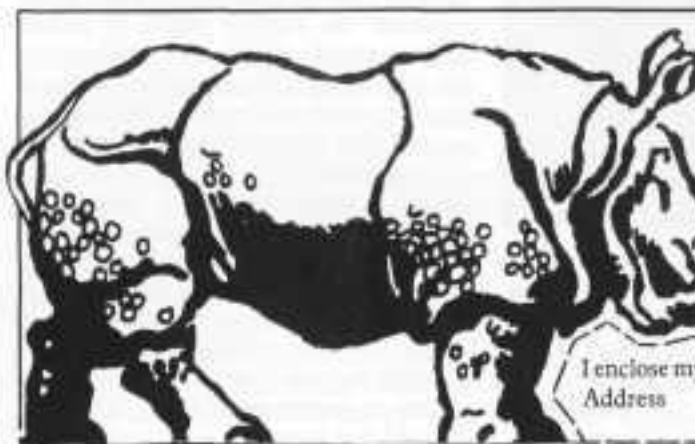
Where the EEC is concerned she finds herself torn between the dictates of short term self-interest and the reluctant realisation that Britain's shrinking voice in the world is better heard when supported by the Community chorus.

With Washington, she is learning that it is not enough to agree with President Reagan on being beastly to the Russians, Cubans, or El Salvadorian guerillas. Nor, to her surprise, is she finding unalloyed support for her decision to buy the Trident: the US Navy fears the implications of this decision for conventional defence of the North Atlantic sea lanes.

Instead, she is being brought face to face with the truth which confronted Churchill late in World War II and which he never seemed to grasp; that Washington will always look after its own rather than its most faithful ally. (*Pace* the Falklands where the US establishment saw that the survival of its main European ally's navy was more important than that of one South American regime.)

The implications of this for Thatcherism are severe, but she has yet to show any sign of coming up with any more realistic definition of Britain's national interests or how they can be protected. Indeed, in these fields she may find herself clashing with the FO, keen as usual to keep peace with governments it cannot push around. All of which increases the chance that Britain will again present the appetising sight it gave in April of the establishment dividing against itself. For if the Franks Commission endorses the widespread view that the FO failed to read the signals coming from Buenos Aires the backbenches are quite likely to react in their time-honoured way to Britain's decline by ordering yet another enquiry into what is already the most enquired into department in Whitehall.

Ken Fowler



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