

• WESTLAND FALLOUT

Troubles pile on troubles for the government. When Willie Whitelaw tried to defend his embattled leader he spoke of the great services Margaret Thatcher had rendered to the nation. It sounded like a political obituary. The resignations of Heseltine and Brittan, the steady drip of new disclosures, the morass of rumour and innuendo, have plunged the party into its deepest internal crisis since Thatcher became leader. The lid has blown off and cabinet ministers have been enjoying themselves. The media treated every ministerial speech at the recent Young Conservatives' conference as a bid for the party leadership, and many cabinet ministers have openly begun to dissent from key aspects of government policy. The most dramatic evidence of the new assertiveness of both ministers and backbenchers came with the about-turn on the possible sale of Austin-Rover to Ford. Once alerted, the cabinet moved swiftly to overrule the prime minister and limit the damage.

The reasons for the nervousness and the turmoil inside the Conservative party are not hard to seek. The Newsnight poll of February 10, (*Guardian* 11/2/86), said it all. Conservative support has slumped so badly that 247 MPs in the present House of Commons would face defeat in an early election. The

poll suggests that the causes of the disaffection of so many Conservative voters is linked directly to the government's handling of the Westland affair. Only 21 % of voters polled in the four marginal constituencies thought the government honest; only 17% thought it truthful. 70% of the sample agreed that Mrs Thatcher had not given a satisfactory account of the Westland affair. Voters were dissatisfied with government policies on defence, education, the health service and unemployment - the last three by overwhelming margins. These results are in line with other recent survey evidence - only Conservative partisans continue to support key elements of the government's programme.

The Westland affair was a trivial matter at first, as trivial as the landing of some scrap metal merchants on South Georgia in 1982. What it has become however is a searching test of the authority of the government. The greatest strength of the Thatcher government before Westland was that unlike its recent predecessors it had not suffered a major loss of authority. It had successfully projected itself as a government with a coherent and consistent programme, able to meet and master every challenge which faced it. The image was wearing thin, errors and misjudgements were multiplying, but the government remained strangely untouched by them. It was astonishingly popular for a government in mid-term. The prospect of two major tax-cutting budgets in the run-up to the next election put the government in a very strong position.

Westland has changed all this. Thatcher's reputation will not be the same again. She may well have suffered the kind of reversal in her political fortunes which Macmillan experienced in 1963 during the Profumo scandal. Only four years before he had been Supermac, apparently invulnerable, supremely in control, supremely confident. Both prime ministers were forced into defences of their action before the House of Commons in which they either had to plead incompetence (I was not told) or deceit. They could not be acquitted of both. After Profumo Macmillan's hold over his party was never restored.

Like Macmillan, Thatcher could now step down as party leader before the next election. But it is unlikely. Despite all the pressure for his resignation Macmillan decided to remain as leader and fight the next general election. Then his illness intervened. A leader of the Conservative party that is determined to stay is very hard to remove. After an

election defeat Thatcher would be certain to face a challenge in the annual leadership election, but she may succeed in avoiding an earlier contest. There is no agreed successor, and Conservative MPs must be fearful of the internal party feuding which a leadership contest could unleash.

This is part of Thatcher's legacy to her party. She has been such a dominant leader, and has been so determined to impose her line that debate inside the party and the cabinet have been curtailed. She has many enemies. The way in which she won the leadership and has run the party has created festering resentments. Francis Pym warned in 1983 about the dangers of large majorities. She was sure she could handle it.

Her difficulty now, in the aftermath of Westland, is that she leads a government whose image of competence and integrity has been seriously undermined; a government whose central policies are not achieving what was hoped; a government which seems now to be losing the political argument, no longer winning the key debates and no longer holding together its electoral coalition; a government unsure of its purpose and direction. The tide has been with Thatcher for most of the last 10 years. The Westland affair may be the moment at which it turns. Has she now the political skill to fight back, to find new political strategies and define new political options? She is a formidable politician. But she has also built her political reputation on her inflexibility in the pursuit of principle. She has declared that she is 60 now and too old to change. But change she now must if the 'Thatcher Revolution' her supporters speak of is to regain its momentum.

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