

# A Taste of Currie

Edwina Currie is one of the new breed of Thatcherite Tories, and one of the most controversial. *Beatrix Campbell* interviewed her for *Marxism Today*



Edwina Currie was born in Liverpool in 1946. Her father was a shopkeeper. She was a councillor in Birmingham from 1975-1986. In 1983 she was elected Conservative MP for South Derbyshire, and was recently appointed junior health minister.

**As part of a generation of Tories around 40, you've lived your life as an adult in the era of Thatcherism.**

Not entirely. I grew up under the Macmillan regime. The first politician I vividly remember is Kennedy. And I can remember being immensely moved by his inaugural speech: 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.' I was 14 at the time and I thought 'Wow'. Macmillan also tried to develop new ways of thinking, like the National Incomes Commission and NEDO, some of which have been shown not to work, and some of which are still in existence. And again I found myself thinking 'Great. There are new ways. We don't have to be run in the way we were in the 1930s. It is a new era.' I was most impressed with his style and obvious concern for the way our people live. So those two were stronger influences at that time than Margaret, who had only just come into politics herself.

**Thatcherism represents a different moment.**

Thatcherism is different, yes.

**How do you feel about that and where do you place yourself in it?**

I think where Margaret made a difference was that instead of being imposed on us from outside, instead of being a person who'd led a different sort of life, a gilded life, Margaret had come from the most ordinary background anyone could have, her father was a shopkeeper. And she had so much more in common with us. She said the things, and she still does say the things, that ordinary working people believe and feel and care about. She cares pas-

sionately about law and order. She puts the victims first. She isn't that interested, I suspect, in theories about the criminal as victim. Neither are most people in this country.

Margaret spoke so much more for the aspirations of ordinary people, what *Marxism Today* would call working class people. I don't believe in class war at all. But it came like a breath of fresh air. And you could hear people all around saying 'That's it. That's the first time I've ever heard any politician say what I want.' Margaret was able, in the most successful way any politician has perhaps since Baldwin - I think he probably had the same sort of talent - to touch the popular soul.

**Beyond the populist voice, where would you place yourself in relation to the radical Right, the ideology that's associated with Thatcherism, and the things that come together in Thatcherism?**

It's a populist voice first and foremost. It derives its strength from Margaret speaking to and for a very large number of people who have felt themselves to be voiceless before.

**It also represents a challenge to the postwar consensus. Do you share that challenge?**

Yes I do. Probably particularly in the business world because she has been saying very strongly that business must run itself.

**Haven't Tories always said that?**

I don't think they've meant it. The first whiff of a strike in Macmillan's day, or Mr Heath's day, they'd have them all down to Downing Street, and try and resolve it. And compromise was the

order of the day. Compromise usually means someone giving way. And the balance of power was very much on the side of the big unions. Not the little unions, and not the little man. Again that's an example where Margaret has realised that reforming the trade unions was terrifically popular.

She's said the state can't do everything. The state shouldn't do everything. The state should do as little as possible. If the central planning system doesn't work then there is broadly only one other alternative which is the market system. And Margaret's breathtaking audacity was to say, 'let's see if the market works'.

**She plugged into the rise of a new body of theoretical work by people like Hayek. How far were you interested in it, how far do you feel that it describes you?**

Well, the theories were around for a long time. I've no idea what Margaret's own reading has been.

**What's yours been?**

Well, at university my economics reading list was much the same as it had been in the 1930s. And I rebelled rather against all that stuff, the trade cycle, Joan Robinson and all that. I did try and read Keynes. I did not plough through the whole of the *General Theory*. I came to the conclusion that his description of the relationship between investment and demand and employment and the use of resources, in other words the level of supply and demand, probably was reasonably accurate. But it seemed a bit slick to me. It wasn't until I got on to books on economics written by Americans like Samuelson that it began to make sense. Because there they were talking about an economy that was strongly market orientated, where business was the main drive. That seemed to me the best way of doing things.

But what influenced me, wasn't so much reading - I'm not a theoretician, though I can pass exams - I'd much rather tap into the culture of real people. One of the influential things for me was going to America between school and university. Everybody I met in America, or almost everybody, believed with some passion - and many of these people were from very ordinary backgrounds - that if they worked hard they could become wealthy. And look at all the people who have.

**Where do you think Thatcherism can go as a political project? Has it exhausted itself or has it a radical new energy? Do your colleagues talk about it?**

Yes we do. Insofar as we want to roll back the frontiers of the state, and we do, we want people to take more responsibility. I think what tends to happen is that the areas we have yet to wade into are so obvious, like local government, that we tend to take a deep breath before the next step.

**Health has been one of the areas where**



**Thatcherism has been rolled back, it has now had to present itself as the defender of the National Health Service. The inauguration of a privatised health service has failed, hasn't it?**

The basis of Conservative thinking is rooted very deeply in what people want. And they want a National Health Service that deals with their needs properly, responsively, cost-effectively, in a caring and consumer orientated way. That's what they want, they've made it absolutely plain. I really do believe very strongly that Thatcherism is a working people's movement. It's a democratic movement.

**You've got a problem with local government, despite all the populist arguments against the 'loony Left'. In many areas of local government you've been annihilated, and if this goes on you could lose a generation of local councillors, who, like yourself, have found a route to power through local government. You were going to be the decentralising party and you've turned out to be the centralising government because you don't like what local government is doing.**

Local government elections, particularly in the major cities, tend to go the opposite way from the government, almost automatically. So I'm not that worried.

**But getting rid of the metropolitan authorities split the party. A lot of people who are loyal to local government and believe in it were very upset on your side.**

On the other hand look at somewhere like Wandsworth, against all those odds and against all that determinism...

**.. . just about hung on.**

No, they hold it, they control it. They'll go on controlling it. And they believe in Wandsworth that they did it because they've managed the whole thing better. Whatever we run, we do it better. If we decide that something ought to be run by politicians or ought to be run by the state then we have a tremendous responsibility to make sure that the public money which has been voted to us is well spent.

**Let's just backtrack to the origins of the question, a third term, a new radical agenda, what next can Thatcherism do?**

There's a real revolution going on in the health service and the whole philosophy of general management is proving its worth more than, frankly, I expected.

**Efficiency is one thing. But a Thatcherite agenda, a radical agenda.. .**

That's part of the radicalism. Radicalism says 'we don't have to run this thing in the sloppy old way it's been run before'.

**Sure. But I could agree with that.**

Well why didn't those people do it?

**So what about local government then?**

Well hopefully doing the same thing with local government.

**Are you going to take even more control over local government?**

I don't know. I think much of the debate revolves around finance.

**That is also about control.**

But do you see how fundamental it is that people should not be able to evade their responsibilities. And so reforming local government in the way that's being suggested, saying everybody must pay at least part of their rates, is actually a very fundamental part of it.

**So is the centrepiece going to be rates reform, or do you have a bigger project?**

I think it comes from, 'what is this local council doing with my money? Why is it taking my money and spending it on a political agenda?'

**Well, they may vote for that. But will you let them vote for it? After all you abolished the metropolitan authorities.**

That's why local government is more difficult because you've got two layers of government. It's fine if they agree. But if they don't that's why, with the system we have now had for a century, there has been conflict.

**Whatever happens, you're going to be part of the successor generation. ...**

Assuming I keep my seat.

**I'm assuming you will.**

I'm assuming I will. I've worked for it.

**... What's your ambition? Do you want to be a prime minister, or party leader? (Silence.) Look me straight in the eye.**

I'm thinking about your question. It never even occurred to me that anyone would even ask that question. And it wasn't till I got to Westminster that anybody asked me. I've spent all my life trying to become a member of parliament.

**You'd have the opportunity to shape the future and to take power. The men who are your contemporaries will be thinking, I have no doubt... .**

Some of them...

**... about their careers and about their positions in the future leadership of the Tory Party. So why aren't you?**

Because I don't think I would enjoy it. I don't think I would be very good at it. My interests lie with the welfare side of our community. I have no real experience of business. I have no experience of the defence side, I haven't driven a tank, or flown a plane, or led a battalion.

**Neither has Mrs Thatcher.**

And she does very well indeed. But my interests are entirely domestic. Insofar as I have any links at all with other countries it's partly to find out how they're managing on their cervical smear campaign, what they're doing in

breast cancer.

**Have you changed your mind about screening? You said you were against universal screening. The evidence now seems to suggest that it would be a good thing.**

I'm still very sceptical about notions of doing everybody in order to catch the few.

**If women want everybody to be done, would you change your mind? A lot of women in your own party did.**

A much better quality of health care is delivered, and much more efficiently delivered, if we target the most obvious groups and do them first. It doesn't make sense to move to the next bunch of low-risk groups until you are sure you've shifted the bulk of the people who are most highly at risk.

**So you haven't changed your mind?**

Well-

**Were you chastened by the criticism of your position on screening?**

No. What interests me is why, when facilities are provided, people don't use them. I'm not in the least bit bothered who I go to for medical care. It wouldn't even occur to me to look to the sex of the person who was treating me. But the message which is coming back to me from women of all ages and all backgrounds, Tory women as well Labour women, is, 'we prefer to be looked after by a woman thanks very much, especially for anything intimate'. And I'm amazed. The resource and cultural implications of that are very considerable, because 80% of our GPs are men. And doctors do not become available by the wave of a magic wand.

**Will you fight for resources for many more women to move into health as a profession, given what you've just said?**

I would need to be convinced of several things before I would say yes to that. I'm not sure that money is the answer as such. The problem is the way we *run* some kinds of health care. For instance, why do we lose staff?

**Low wages? No childcare?**

If you think of a 28 year old staff nurse or sister, the most precious thing we've got in the whole health service - trained, qualified, experienced - and we say to her, 'You're on duty at 7.30 in the morning'. I don't think there's another job in the country where we would say to an educated woman of 28 you're on duty at 7.30 in the morning. And the other educated woman or man in that scenario ain't on duty until 9.30. I'm talking about the doctor. So you have to ask why do we do it like that. If you start prodding around the answers are rooted in tradition, and deep in what you and I would call a prejudice about the way people - men and women - should work. But if you challenge it, really challenge it...

**Are you going to?**

We're now asking the questions. I'll give you another example - a qualified midwife stays with us, the National Health Service, on average, for less than five years. It takes us nearly five years to train them. That's insane, whatever your political regime. So you have to ask intelligent questions about why it happens. I suspect that what happens far too often is that a girl says 'I'm getting married' and they say 'wonderful'. 'I'm having a baby' and they say 'great, when are you leaving?'

**What about childcare? Shouldn't the health service provide it?**

I start off by believing that people should provide for their own children, and provide their own childcare. It's not that difficult.



**Are you opposed then to the health service as an employer undertaking a financial contribution to the cost of childcare?**

I think they already do in one or two places, and they've been looking at a nursery in London.

**Both you and Margaret Thatcher have been actively involved in politics and working from when your children were very small. But you have different ways of talking about it. For Mrs Thatcher, being a housewife and motherhood is a very important part of her vocabulary. For you it's not.**

I'm not a housewife. I'm hopeless in the house.

**You belong to a generation in which the majority. . .**

... are working. 70% of women in my age group are working at paid work, which is higher, much higher, than the national average. So you've probably identified something that I'm not terribly conscious of. I certainly don't think of being a housewife. Ray and I both loathe chores. We roughly agreed that if there was something we didn't like doing, we'd either get a machine to do it, or we'd pay someone else to do it, or we'd do without.

**So you've bought solutions to domestic tasks?**

Sure, or simply done without it. But a housewife is one thing. To be a housewife is to allocate your time. A mother is an emotional task. And I'm a mother. I miss my children. I don't

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think they miss me very much, they've been weekly boarders for a long time.

There has been debate in Europe about legislation on childcare and on time off for parents. Two Conservative NEPs initiated the EEC proposals for parental leave for mothers and fathers. . . I was very scathing about them.

**Have you changed your mind?**

I'm still pretty scathing about it. One of the prime tasks that we have taken on with substantial success, although there is still a lot to do, is making sure that the economy is functioning well. And that means kicking business into running itself. If business is prosperous, if profits are high, then its revenues to the exchequer are enormous and we can do more; so we must keep the costs to business of employment down.

**Lord Young's campaign for 'deregulation' in the EEC has specifically opposed the extension of employment rights for women and parents. Are mothers' employment protection and parental leave off your agenda?**

First of all it doesn't even seem necessary because woman have been moving into jobs in very big ways. Secondly I don't want to impose a conflict between a job and a home. There's no doubt that for very large numbers of people in this country, wanting to stay at home, wanting to look after the children when they're little, is a very powerful desire. I don't think there should be any pressure on people to give that up. I would like to see employment protection in a slightly different way. I would like to see more employers giving people time off for good health. There is a lot of time off for bad health. I'd like to see more employers encouraging their staff to go and get a test, and perhaps have paid time off to do this. I'd like to see them encouraging women to apply for senior positions. But I don't like imposing things on employers. I would much rather - and this is where being a Tory makes a difference - have good practice voluntarily and willingly entered into.

**You're cautious when it comes to employers, but you're really tough when it comes to working people. For example?**

**You don't pull your punches when you're telling people off about fags, beer and chips. But you don't say to the employers, who are involved in the production of alcohol and cigarettes, 'OK, you're part of this deal. We're now going to have a go at you'. So you're a bit of a wimp when it comes to them.**

**How do you know I don't say it?**

**You're not telling us if you are.**

Well, I've met most of the drinks organisations. I ask them what they feel we should be concerned about.

**The government have been criticised for being very tardy in getting the cigarette industry to take responsibility for the consequences of cigarette addiction. Of course there's a sense in which you depend on. . .**

The income. Oh, we could always find something else to tax, don't worry. Governments always do.

**People have been very disappointed with the level of government intervention to support the campaigns against smoking.**

Yes, but the point that I'm making is a slightly different one, and I'm not hedging at all, which is that Tories are very good at listening. We have to explore how we get messages across.

**In the context of Aids, you have expressed forthright views about the need to call a spade a spade. . .**

What naughty words do you want me to use?

**I don't know. What would you like to use? You're blushing Bea.**

**I'm only a young girl after all. What was in my mind was the tone of your interventions in the Aids conversation, and also in relation to things like the Clare Short page three issue which suggest it's important to you to be seen as a sexual women. I wonder whether you feel that some attacks that have been made on you - and you've had lots, for being forthright - are sexist?**

In all honesty, before I arrived at Westminster I didn't meet any prejudice on the basis of sex. And it may be that I've just been lucky. It may be coming from the North of England, a part of the North, Liverpool, where women have always worked. London is different. And Fleet Street is different. Fleet Street has a very old fashioned air about it. When I came to Westminster I got annoyed at the assumption that because I was a woman I probably didn't have any brains. It's no good bleating about it. You might as well simply prove them wrong.

**But when some of your colleagues use expressions like 'iron tits' - that's specific to you being a women. It doesn't worry me.**

**Doesn't it reflect a culture that makes life difficult for women? Do you not feel that part of your obligation as a woman is to change the world for women?**

Being at Westminster does that. What's disappointing is that so few women then follow.

**Are you not hurt by expressions like that? Like iron tits? It depends who says them.**

**Well, Tory MPs apparently say them.**

Well, they've never said them to my face.

**I've no doubt they wouldn't. They wouldn't dare.**

I'm a scouser. And I can turn a phrase if I really feel like it.

**There's a side to Thatcherism we haven't yet discussed - Mrs Thatcher and Norman Tebbit support Mrs Whitehouse and Mrs Gillick, they oppose the liberal sexual legislation of the 60s. What do you feel about the anti-permissive side of Thatcherism, because it doesn't sound like it fits you.**

I think a lot of Tories also have a very tolerant streak. We don't want a rigid society. But the traditions that we value have been repeatedly challenged and derided. When a council goes so far as to employ people to go into classrooms and tell children that homosexuality is alright, which they've been trying to do in Brent, ordinary people simply blow up about it.

**But do you endorse the anti-permissive crusade? Do you think Mr Tebbit is right that the legislation of the 60s has been a bad thing?**

The way I've always tried to function is this: if somebody needs help or advice, then I will try and be a good neighbour and be as tolerant as possible. And I don't feel it's always my business to tick them off, though I occasionally do. But I do have a worry, which comes from my time as a councillor. At one stage we totted up and we had something like 27,000 single parent families in Birmingham, which suddenly started to create a real problem, because many of them were not economically viable, they couldn't manage at all without help. And I found myself feeling increasingly troubled about whether we'd encouraged the creation of groups of people who were going to be permanently unhappy, let alone permanently a drain on national resources. So for reasons of sheer practicality, I began to think that perhaps we were making it too easy for people to put themselves in positions of permanent dependence.

**Would you want to reverse the legislative changes of the 60s, on abortion, divorce, homosexuality?**

Well, we've just made divorce easier. I voted against clause one of the most recent matrimonial clauses legislation which made it easier to get a divorce after a shorter period of time. So you can take that whichever way you like. There's an element of let-sleeping-dogs-lie in me, but I wouldn't want to go further.

**Do you share the tone of the moral crusade of people like Mrs Gillick and Mrs Whitehouse?**

I think I'm more of a pragmatist than that. And I do not like crusades that say that people swirl around in cesspits and all the rest of it, because in sheer practical terms that simply doesn't help anyone.

**You belong to a generation of women who wouldn't see sex as sin.**

Yes, I think that's right for some women.

**The tone of your engagement with all this, the sexual agenda..**

Do you mean is sex fun, is it there to be enjoyed? I think that is probably right. I've always felt that I was part of a fortunate generation - I've talked about it with my mother who said exactly the same to me - you're very lucky, you don't have to worry about all the things we used to worry about. And the sad thing, in many ways, is that those worries are having to come back?

**Have you felt any kind of kinship with women of your generation who would identify with the women's movement?**

I don't know. I've found myself substantially in the world of men.

**Are you a man's woman?**

I like being with men. I like working with men. I like pulling out all the stops and trying to figure out how to get my own way, how to get what I am after. And if that means being slightly underhand and teasing them, or flattering them or whatever, I don't give a damn. I'll just do it. It's often a very calculating and manipulative way of going about things, but I've always done that. When I came to Westminster I found I was in an overpowering world of men, to an almost alarming degree, and I had to dig my heels in a bit more.

But as a minister it's shifted again because a lot of my work brings me into contact now with women who are struggling, sick people, dying people, very skilled women working as nurses and pushing themselves very hard and feeling troubled by the illness that they're having to cope with, women trying to articulate for other women, like the Hackney health promoters I met recently who were a tremendous bunch. I find myself far more in contact with women who are active and thinking and working than perhaps I ever have before. I've become much more conscious of women in recent months than ever before. I also find that, perhaps as a minister, they turn to me and expect me to do something for them. And I've never been put in that position before.

**So it sounds like you're feeling quite changed by it.**

I'm feeling challenged by it, a little unsure, but quite exhilarated. And whatever's coming through I test against my Tory ladies in South Derbyshire. I say 'People in Hackney are saying such and such, what do you think?' If they all nod vigorously and say 'That's it', I know I'm on to something. I think the press, and Fleet Street in particular, are totally out of touch with all of that. That's why I've started reading all the women's magazines. I used to read *Women's Own* when I was a housewife back in the 1970s, and it's changed out of all recognition. So something's happening

that I'm now dimly becoming aware of. It's a movement of people - I am generalising, I haven't got the faintest idea of whether what I'm saying is true - but there seems to be a broad movement of people who have listened to the feminists for years, and rejected them all out of hand, and now find themselves in middle age, questioning why it's assumed they can't do these things. They didn't have the opportunities.

**All the Tory women I've interviewed thought that if women were doing the same job as men they should get equal pay, without exception.**

Oh yes.

**But, you have said - it's here, in *Hansard* - that women are 'cheap and plentiful' and employers should go for them, that we shouldn't be increasing employment protection, we shouldn't be increasing women's pay. Now, that doesn't square with what you've just been saying.**

I was broadly saying that if we restrict business, if we put its costs up, the result of that is unemployment.

**Why should women be the cheap labour?**

Well, it's not why they should be...

**But they are... You wouldn't accept two thirds of the salaries of the men who do your job.**

No, but what I was trying to do in that particular argument, and it doesn't read very well in *Hansard*, was talk about employment and industrial policies. As I said it, as I spoke it, it went down ok...

**I'm sure it did. You also had a go at *Marxism Today*.**

I often quote *Marxism Today*.

**Do you read it regularly?**

Not absolutely regularly, but I do if I want to find out what the Left are thinking. But the argument I was making was that women were cheap almost for the wrong reasons. I was saying that women, as an example, were an inexpensive and very flexible workforce, and that employment of women had gone shooting up, and that therefore if we wanted to increase employment, the wrong way to go about it was to make it more restrictive and put more costs on business. I wasn't endorsing women as a cheap and plentiful workforce.

**You didn't say it was a bad thing that women were cheap labour.**

That goes back to pragmatism versus morality, doesn't it? I mean it's a simple fact. Employment is increasing, especially two years ago when I made that speech, among part-time, low-paid, particularly hourly paid, women. And I was trying to draw an economic lesson, in a way that had no particular morality or philosophy attached to it.

**Right, let's shift on to North South. The**

**Tory Party has always been a national party. It's great strength has been that it's a party that has been into uniting classes and having a national presence.**

Yes that's right. We are not a class party. We're here to represent the nation.

**But aren't you very worried about the North South divide and the way in which the party's base in the North, and particularly in Scotland, is pretty desolate?**

Well, I think one has to wait for the next election to see whether that's going to be the case.

**Are you worried about the notion of two nations, and the sense that the Tory Party is a party of the soft South and that it doesn't represent the working people of the North?**



I think the party represents not the soft South but the hard South and some hard people up North as well. There are a lot of people around who are self-made men and women who have worked hard for what they've got and are providing employment to other people. It is better for the nation if the parties are more evenly spread geographically, and it is better for the nation if the parties are more evenly spread socially. But the only one that draws from all groups in society is us.

**But there are echoes even amongst the Tory rank and file, of the same kind of angst that there was in the 30s, that there are depressed areas, they're the same areas, for the same reasons.**

**There have been the same problems going back to Elizabeth I's time.**

**And this time the Tories have said, 'We're not going to try.'**

Well perhaps letting things take their course, letting industry change, encouraging people to look to new worlds, new customers, new markets, perhaps almost forcing them to do that, is the way that those areas will be redeveloped. It's no good them sneering about tourism and the hotel industry and about how that isn't a replacement for a shipyard. It *is* a replacement for a shipyard. So therefore if the government stay out of it, maybe people will find ways that are more efficient to use local resources. Planners can only make things worse not better.

'March 11, 1985 in a Commons debate on unemployment.