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- 1 A political legacy is a tricky concept. The term came into usage near the end of the Thatcher and the Blair premierships, probably because they had been in office for so long. Used positively, it often refers to significant new legislation, a new policy direction or a shift in the climate of opinion in the country or in the party and which lasts beyond a Prime Minister's term of office. But few Prime Ministers leave a positive legacy. The view among most commentators is that only Attlee and Thatcher in the post-war period might be said to have achieved lasting changes in political agendas. In Attlee's case it was a combination of the welfare state, public ownership, full employment and the retreat from Empire, in Thatcher's privatisation, reform of trade unions and a break with incomes policies and corporatism.
- 2 Major served as Prime Minister for 6½ years, a period only Asquith, Thatcher and Blair have exceeded for continuous service in the last century. Major, however, was the only one who became Prime Minister of a government which had already been in office for a long time. Both Blair and Thatcher had a fresh start and Asquith became Prime Minister two years into the life of the 1906 Liberal government. The timing and circumstances of Major's accession, involving the sudden overthrow of a long-established leader, presented him with great problems of balancing the needs for continuity and change.
- 3 The verdicts of historians on Major are pretty bleak. The titles of some articles and book chapters convey the flavour – “Weak and ineffective? Reassessing the party political leadership of John Major”, or ‘In office but not in power’, or ‘The government that could do no right’. They are reflected also in a relative neglect – perhaps because he was a transitional figure between the two dominant post-war Prime Ministers, Thatcher and Blair. The literature on Major and his government is thin and much of it is written in relation to the disastrous impact of Europe on his and the government's fortunes. By contrast, Thatcher and Thatcherism and Blair and New Labour have inspired cottage industries in publishing and even university courses.
- 4 His premiership is indelibly associated with the collapse on September 16 1992 of Britain's membership of the ERM, an event that quickly became known as “Black Wednesday” and that he regarded as a failure and a humiliation. The ERM experience

effectively decided how he was perceived for the rest of his premiership. The party's manifesto for the general election a few months earlier had stated that "membership of the ERM is now central to our counter-inflation discipline". The party lost its long-established and electorally crucial reputation as a party of economic competence, and only recently under David Cameron has it begun to challenge Labour on this ground. The most electorally successful centre right party anywhere in the twentieth century ended in 1997 with its worst ever election defeat. It was wiped out in Scotland, Wales and parts of northern England and reduced to a rump.

- 5 But there were other problems. His government was also associated with sleaze (for example, "cash for questions" or Conservative MPs being paid by outside interests to ask questions in Parliament, and sex scandals), though none of it touched him. Above all, his party had been in office for too long. Having led his party to its fourth successive election victory he later reflected that the victory had 'stretched the elastic of democracy too far'.
- 6 Two groups have had an interest in denigrating Major or airbrushing him from the history books. Labour at times appeared to believe and act as though history began in 1997, or perhaps 1994 when Tony Blair became party leader. In office Labour claimed to have ended sleaze, begun the economic recovery, placed Britain at the heart of Europe and restored trust in government. For a time people seemed to believe the claims. But Labour was to have its own sleaze with cash for honours and (in the case of exempting Formula 1 from its ban on tobacco advertising) cash for policy, remained outside the ERM and the main forum of EU economic policy-making, and suffered record low levels of trust in government. And the economic recovery began in 1993 not 1997.
- 7 More damagingly for Major's reputation, the Thatcherites soon seemed to think history ended in November 1990, with the fall of Mrs Thatcher. They refused to come to terms with the coup against the beloved leader and seemed to deny the legitimacy of her successor. According to them, most of the failings of the party after her downfall are to be blamed on him. After less than 18 months into his premiership she was declaiming:
 

and he inherited all these great achievements of the past 11½ years which have fundamentally changed Britain, ridding it of the debilitating, negative aspect of socialism.
- 8 And :
 

There isn't such a thing as Majorism. There couldn't be at the moment. My colleagues and I turned round the whole philosophy of government. We restored the strength and reputation of Britain. We did it on fundamental principles.
- 9 And she would hold him to this.
- 10 She continued
 

Thatcherism will live, it will live long after Thatcher has died because we had the courage to restore the great principles and put them into practice (...)
- 11 As far as she was concerned any Conservative victory in 1992 would be a vote of gratitude to her.
- 12 It is of course easy to forget that the majority of her Cabinet colleagues refused to back her continuation in office. And the bulk of her party's MPs were convinced that if she stayed on she would lead them to defeat. Major reflected: "Myth and legend were already displacing reality" about her premiership. In addition, bitterness and self-delusion gradually coloured her supporters' analysis of her downfall.

## Major and Majorism

- 13 Major was a more recognisable Conservative than Mrs Thatcher. He was no follower of doctrine and his conservatism was based on experience, intuition and commonsense. A One-Nation Conservative he believed in opportunity and even what he called “the classless society”, in such a thing as society, and in the capacity of government to organise public welfare. Alone of post-war Conservative leaders he served his political apprenticeship in local government and he had been chairman of the Lambeth housing committee. Unlike Mrs Thatcher, his natural good manners and tolerance made him more of a healer than a warrior. And, also unlike her, he had no wish to handbag the major institutions of the country.
- 14 For the first couple of years of his premiership Major's staff and colleagues tried to discern Majorism, just as there was Thatcherism. Over time they abandoned the quest. It was an exercise he never encouraged and he frowned on the use of such proxy terms as the social market or caring capitalism. Mrs Thatcher's claim that there was no such a thing as Majorism was in part a rebuke but to Major it was also a statement of the obvious. Being a Conservative was enough for him. He may also have calculated that cultivating his own 'ism' risked echoing or inviting comparisons with his predecessor. And if he adopted a politically distinctive approach, it might emphasise discontinuity and exacerbate divisions in the party. Although Mrs Thatcher was to express doubt that he believed in anything, I shall argue that he not only continued the Thatcherite agenda, apart from the poll tax, but by winning the 1992 general election he saved a good part of it.
- 15 There was nothing in his political career to suggest that John Major would have a distinctive agenda. On issues, he usually sought to narrow the focus of the discussion to a specific issue which could be assessed pragmatically, as his first biographer noted. From the start of his premiership to the end some of his colleagues regarded him as a slightly left of centre, others as slightly right of centre. This quality was crucial to his being elected leader in 1990. But what might have been useful for winning the leadership did not prove effective for exercising leadership. A quintessential Majorism was his remark in early January 1996 on Conservative divisions over Europe. He complained of the polarisation between those 'who were very hostile to it and those who see nothing wrong with it. The truth, I believe, lies somewhere down the middle.' In the end, of course, he disappointed both sides; neither felt there was a middle way.
- 16 The ERM will be engraved on John Major's heart. Entry in October 1989 had been his policy. As Chancellor of the Exchequer he had taken Britain in and at a rate that proved unsustainable. He had asked his Chancellor Norman Lamont to raise interest rates to a mind-boggling 15% in an abortive effort to persuade the markets. He felt the failure and the humiliation keenly. His memoirs revealed that he drafted a resignation letter and still wonders if he should have submitted it. He realised that the Party was almost certain to lose the next election and the euro-sceptics in the party and the media savaged him for the rest of his premiership. The budgets in 1993 imposed tax increases despite the 1992 election being fought on a tax-cutting platform. Voters felt betrayed. The 1992 election victory had been a grudging one, more to do with distrust of Labour than a vote of confidence in the Conservatives.

- 17 The opinion polls graphically illustrate the collapse in John Major's reputation and support for the government after September 1992. Comparing attitudes before and after the exit, figures for the approval of John Major, support for the Conservative party, approval of the government and voters' sense of economic optimism all declined dramatically. Perceptions of the competence and unity of the government and of Major providing strong leadership all collapsed. Very rarely have the opinion polls recorded such a sharp and dramatic fall in a government's public standing.
- 18 Any assessment of Major's record must be judged in relation to the context. Apart from a popular mood for change, understandable in a government that had been in office for so long, four other features are important. He prosaically notes: "My inheritance (in November 1990) was unpromising", with 14% interest rates, inflation near double figures, and his party bitterly divided and trailing badly in the opinion polls. The shrewd commentator, the late Hugo Young appreciated early on that Major was almost oppressed by a contradiction in his inheritance. Having rejected Mrs Thatcher in large part because of her overbearing and rebarbative personality, the party sought "an emollient, listening figure and in John Major it found him". It did not, however, wish to break with Thatcherite policies but "wanted Thatcherism pursued by non-Thatcherite means, (while) neglecting to consider the possibility that this might be an unattainable ambition". In trying to present Thatcherism with a human face John Major personified a dilemma that he never resolved.
- 19 Secondly, there were the limited opportunities that came from a small and unsustainable Parliamentary majority after the election in May 1992. Third, Europe would not go away over the lifetime of the 1992 Parliament. Emboldened by the ERM fiasco his Eurosceptic critics pressed their attacks over the tortuous passage of the Maastricht treaty in 1993, then rows over changes to qualified majority voting in 1994, then the Budget, and then the battles over BSE, or the "mad cow disease", in 1996. The Conservative party did not want to be led; the habit of dissent seemed to be too deeply embedded. Fourthly, many of the more obvious and unpopular targets had been achieved by Mrs Thatcher, notably tackling the trade unions, nationalising industries and public spending.

## Achievements

- 20 A list of achievements might include the following.
- 21 First, he stopped the party from splitting though it continued to be divided, notably over Europe. If he came down on one side or the other he risked splitting the party. It was not party management that was at work because, as noted, he did not have strong views either way. The stance angered those who had strong views for or against the European project. He suffered only one resignation from his Cabinet, whereas Mrs Thatcher suffered five resignations on Europe alone. And he lanced the boil of the poll tax which had proved so disastrous for Thatcher and the government. It was an unheroic and reactive style of leadership, one in which he played the role of a tactician more than a strategist.
- 22 Second, there was his commitment to ending the killing in Northern Ireland. There were no votes in this, he showed great patience and negotiating skill and began the peace process that Tony Blair continued.

- 23 Thirdly, there was the economic recovery following the exit from the ERM. Inflation, unemployment, living standards, and economic growth all moved in a positive direction. He bequeathed to Tony Blair a more favourable economic legacy than virtually all of his predecessors. But it was a vote-less economic recovery. The government gained no credit for an economic up-turn which followed the exit from the ERM.
- 24 A little-regarded success was the way in which he was able to consolidate the Thatcher agenda. The 1992 election victory was crucial here. It was a remarkable achievement to lead the party to a fourth successive victory during a recession and after thirteen years in power. He remains the only Prime Minister to have gained more than 14 million votes in a general election. It was only the vagaries of the first-past-the-post electoral system that prevented such a clear victory in the popular vote being reflected in a handsome majority of seats. The result forced Labour to go further in coming to terms with the changed Britain. In 1992, Labour was still something of a tax and spend party; it was not yet New Labour. Blair and Brown were forced to move more to a centre ground defined by the Conservatives. Labour after 1992 further reduced the role of the trade unions in the party and scrapped the traditional Clause IV. As Labour's Shadow Chancellor, Gordon Brown accepted Ken Clarke's spending plans for the first two years of a Labour government.
- 25 The new common ground included an acceptance that public services had to be more responsive to consumers, there should be more selectivity and conditionality in allocating welfare benefits as well as a greater role for markets in macro-economic policies and more flexible labour markets. In health and schooling the steps to consumer choice and diversity in provision have been carried further by Labour since 1997 (8). Even on the euro, John Major's position of 'wait and see', so roundly ridiculed by both supporters and opponents of Britain's membership, has not been dissimilar from Labour's policy over the past decade.
- 26 Finally, Major did much to reconfigure the role of the state. Modernisation of the civil service continued and the creation of agencies, bodies concerned with the delivery of services, gathered pace. By 1997 nearly 80% of civil servants were employed in agencies. His Citizen's Charter also reflected a new perspective on public services. Having rejected privatisation of health and education, he wanted to raise the standing of the services and insisted that consumers should be treated more sensitively. He and his family had personal experience of these services in a way that some of his colleagues, and Mrs Thatcher in particular, did not. In his memoirs he writes that the taxpayer supported the services and "deserved a personal, prompt and quality service". The Major government opted to import the disciplines and incentives of the private sector. These included performance indicators, greater information about the rights of consumers and the performance of services, greater choice and more effective complaints procedures. Again, Labour since 1997 has taken this agenda further.

## Failures

- 27 There was a downside. During the 1980s and 1990s the Conservatives became associated with niggardly funding of public services. By 1997 education, health and transport were all visibly suffering from under-investment over several years. Despite his commitment to the Citizen's Charter the voters no longer trusted the Conservative

party on health and education, core public services used by most voters. It was a damaging legacy for the party over the next decade. Anthony King has suggested that “There is a sense in which the 1997 election was a referendum on the future of the welfare state and the public services – and the Conservatives lost it”. The botched privatisation of British Rail and the decision to separate the running of the trains from control of the rail infrastructure set back rail transport for a decade.

- 28 Major never managed to put Britain at the heart of the European project. Britain remained an outsider, an ‘awkward partner’ and Major’s relations with leaders of other states after his handling of the exit from the ERM were tense. His “wait and see” approach to entry to the euro proved a fragile basis for party unity and broke down in the 1997 election campaign.
- 29 Under his government the habit of disloyalty seemed to harden, although this was not entirely his fault. The long shadow of Mrs Thatcher hung over the party for years after 1990, inhibiting Major and his successors. She forcefully intervened in leadership elections - determined to keep out Kenneth Clarke and protect “my legacy”. The result was to weaken all her successors, until Cameron, exacerbate party divisions, and encourage many in the party to look backwards. William Hague at one time threatened to resign as leader, when faced with disloyalty, and Ian Duncan Smith was sacked by a vote of MPs in 2003. Blair’s Labour government had it easy. The Conservative party needed not just a shock defeat, as in 1997, but a series of defeats sufficient to bring it back to its senses – to restore discipline and a will to win elections, and to extract the poison from the European virus.
- 30 Finally, the Major government never constructed for the commentariat a narrative, or what Enoch Powell once called “a tune for people to whistle”. The election campaigns in 1992 and 1997 were almost wholly negative, providing few positive reasons for returning a Conservative government once again, but plenty for not voting Labour. It has been left to David Cameron to articulate a more socially liberal and inclusive view of Conservatism, one which accepts a good part of Labour’s post-1997 reforms and goes beyond Thatcherism.

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## ABSTRACTS

The author explains why, in his view, John Major has not received a fair hearing from historians. The party had been in office too long and for much of the 1990s was more interested in fighting internal battles than in looking outwards to the country. While accepting that most Prime Ministers fail to leave a positive legacy the author analyses the achievements and failures of Major's premiership, and emphasises its success in consolidating much of the Thatcher agenda and establishing common ground with Labour after 1997.

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