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A leader at war : Margaret Thatcher and the Falklands crisis of 1982

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Résumé

The victory in the Falklands War was the triumph of Margaret Thatcher. While the Argentine invasion of the islands was the fruit of a lack of leadership in managing the Falklands issue, the positive resolution of the crisis owed much to Thatcher's ability to react rapidly to the initial shock, to achieve and maintain firm control of the political handling of the crisis, to clearly identify objectives, and to pursue them with a persistence that never lost contact with diplomatic prudence. The episode, which could have caused her political death, ended up giving her unassailable force, for many years. The first part of this essay analyses the major problems which the outburst of the crisis created to Mrs Thatcher and defines her strategy for resolving it. The second part goes deeper into the management of the crisis by Mrs Thatcher, by highlighting her swiftness of response and clarity of intentions, her elaboration of a positive values system, her capacities of managing international relations, and, last but not least, her luck. The last paragraph analyses the consequences of the war both on the representation of Margaret Thatcher leadership and on the British political landscape as a whole.

Entrées d'index

Keywords : Thatcher (Margaret), leadership, Falklands Crisis 1982, Falklands War, British Political Parties

Texte intégral

- 1 In their general aspects, the Anglo-Argentine dispute over the possession of the Falkland Islands, the immediate causes of the 1982 armed conflict, and the responsibilities of Margaret Thatcher and her government have been well-known topics for quite some time. The declassification of documents from the 1970s and 80s has enabled scholars to reconsider these matters, providing highly useful details that have enriched the comprehensive picture¹. This same process now permits sharpening the focus on the role of the 1982 war in the construction of Margaret Thatcher's leadership, giving order to the array of data found in the vast personal memorial archive of the protagonists and witnesses of the events in question. The following pages will analyse how Margaret Thatcher confronted the crisis during the spring of 1982, how this experience came to characterise her image as a leader, and with what particular consequences.

The Crisis

- 2 The Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands created two major problems for Margaret Thatcher: the need to respond to attacks against her government for not having prevented the disaster; and the need to develop and carry out a strategy to repair the damage.

Critical attacks against Thatcher's government

- 3 The first problem erupted following the release of the news that the Islands had been occupied, but created briefer concerns and worries than did the second. It reached its climax during the day of 3 April, with the debate at the House of Commons, and with the subsequent meeting of the 1922 Committee. For the government, the degree of risk was determined by the reaction of the Conservative Members of Parliament, whose prevalent mood was one of anger at the United Kingdom's humiliation². Despite her less than brilliant performance in opening the parliamentary debate³, the Prime Minister left the Commons substantially unscathed. Firstly, because she astutely began her speech by affirming her intention to restore the British administration of the Falklands, at the same time communicating that her government had already decided to equip a task force which would be sent to the South Atlantic. Secondly, because the necessity of responding to a military attack imposed within the House the tacit agreement not to weaken too much who had to tackle the Argentine invasion. It was the very gravity of the situation, in short, that allowed for a convergence towards a sort of suspension of judgment, which Enoch Powell expressed with particularly dramatic *ars oratoria*⁴.
- 4 The ones who came under fire were instead the Minister of Defence, John Nott, and the Foreign Minister, Lord Carrington. Not surprisingly, critiques came from the benches of the opposition parties. Nonetheless, the criticism that rendered their position truly precarious was launched from within the parliamentary majority. With only one exception⁵, every speech made by Conservative MPs were aimed against the heads of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). It quickly became clear that at least one of these two ministers would need to be sacrificed, as a political scapegoat⁶. In the afternoon of 3 April, the 1922 Committee held a decisive meeting, during which

the rancour of numerous back-benchers emerged with even greater vehemence⁷. Both Nott and Carrington took part in this meeting. The former managed the encounter better than the latter. In fact, Carrington « as a peer [...] had struck up none of those friendships and understandings with back-benchers on which all » front-benchers « have to rely when the pressure builds »⁸. Additional heat arrived from critiques made by the press, starting with *The Times*. All these factors led to Carrington's resignation on 5 April, despite the Prime Minister's pressures to the contrary.

Toward what goal, and by what means ?

5 The second problem, namely that of the strategy for resolving the crisis, proved to be much more intricate. The thorny question was how to pinpoint the goal to pursue, and the means by which it could be achieved. This process imposed managing the crucial aspect of the legitimacy and advisability of an eventual use of arms. It was on this terrain that Margaret Thatcher had to confront the greater dangers. From the moment of receiving the news of the imminent Argentine landing on the Falklands shores, the Prime Minister firmly identified the objective that the government needed to achieve: the re-stabilisation of the status quo. In order to accomplish this mission, it would be necessary to consider using all available resources, including military ones. Consequently, on the evening of 31 March Thatcher already authorised the preparation of a naval task force. Its departure for the Southern Atlantic was approved by the government on 2 April, in a meeting during which only one cabinet member, John Biffen, expressed some doubts⁹. Appreciation for the measure was conveyed even by those who spoke in the House of Commons on 3 April. The Prime Minister, however, was aware of the fact that support for her decision was more apparent than real, both within the House and within her own party and government¹⁰.

6 One part of the problem was represented by the Labour Party. The opening outburst of Michael Foot, in his speech of 3 April, was considered to be excessive not only by Labour left-wingers, but even by Denis Healey, the moderate deputy leader¹¹. Labour MPs were divided between those who declared their opposition to the task force expedition, and those who instead held the deployment of force in the Southern Atlantic to be inevitable. Within this second group, there were those who sought to limit the military role to a simple element of reinforcement of the British diplomatic position, in view of negotiations with Argentina, and on the other hand those who were disposed towards accepting the recourse to arms as an *extrema ratio*. Not even among this latter group, however, was there a fixed consensus about what might be considered as the right quantity of force to use. These divisions were destined to grow even more pronounced, and in dramatic fashion, with the development of events¹². The result was the continual re-positioning of the PLP. At first, the Party supported the sending of the task force, while insisting that it would be used only as a means of applying pressure to obtain the retreat of the Argentines via diplomatic actions. Once military operations had begun, involving the Navy and Air Force as well, Labour moved to impede an escalation, and invited the government to involve the UN in the management of the crisis. Finally, Labour split in two, on the occasion of the vote in the Commons on 20 May, which gave the green light to the counter-invasion of the Falklands: the majority of Labour MPs abstained, but more than thirty dissidents voted against military operations. Inevitably, the status of parliamentary minority undermined the possibility of the Labour Party to influence the decisions of the government. Nevertheless, Foot's conduct had

points of contact with that of Francis Pym, the successor to Lord Carrington at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Pym would have been able to concede some space for manoeuvre to Labour, insofar as the ideas of the new Foreign Minister were shared by a majority of his cabinet's colleagues.

- 7 Even within the Conservative Party and the government itself, in fact, the determination of the Prime Minister to pursue the objective of reinstalling the status quo provoked some bewilderment. Many held doubts about the potential of obtaining victory, in case of an armed conflict, whether for logistical or diplomatic reasons. Such reasons made it all the more necessary to guarantee the benevolent neutrality of the United States, something which could not easily be taken for granted¹³.
- 8 Together these factors at first led the Minister of Defence to sustain the impossibility of re-taking the Islands by force, and to hold serious doubts about the Prime Minister's instinctive decision of 31 March. According to John Nott, the doubts regarding the decision to launch the task force, expressed by John Biffen in the Cabinet meeting of 2 April, were shared by several others¹⁴. John Major recalls being aware of tensions existing within the government, after listening to a private conversation in which two Cabinet members labelled the expedition as « 'ludicrous' and 'a folly' », because of limited air cover¹⁵. The prevailing idea within the government was that of the difficulty of the enterprise, a scepticism kept in check only by the shared understanding that some kind of action was needed as payback for the national humiliation. While for Margaret Thatcher the final objective had to remain the re-claiming of the status quo – to be attained if possible by diplomatic means, or by arms if necessary –, for other members of the Cabinet the reaching of an accord, which could be presented as honourable even if it conceded something to the Argentines, was in any case preferable to a risky military operation, with unpredictable outcomes. For these latter, the task force was an instrument of pressure, to be used during diplomatic negotiations. According to John Nott on the evening of 2 April only a few believed that the force would have entered into actual combat¹⁶. Two politically distant men, Nigel Lawson and Jim Prior, fully agree that if the Argentines had accepted one of the proposals for peace debated between April and May, the majority of the Cabinet members would have imposed the recall of the task force¹⁷. This move, according to Prior, would have had dramatic repercussions for the Conservative Party, breaking it in two: sixty or more MPs would have voted against such a hypothesis, and some of them would have resigned the whip¹⁸.
- 9 However, the so called 'war cabinet' was the place where Mrs Thatcher encountered « the most precarious moment in her pursuit of complete victory over the invaders »¹⁹, because of her disputes with Lord Carrington's successor. Personal relations between Thatcher and Pym were not of the best. In addition, Mrs. Thatcher harboured the same mistrust regarding the desire of the FCO to defend British interests that was diffuse among many Conservatives²⁰. In the case of the Falklands, the roots of the debates can be traced to the difference between pursued objectives. The FCO was fundamentally convinced that, even if they were reconquered, the Islands would have posed a problem for Great Britain. In any case, it would be necessary to sit down at the table with the Argentines, and reach some kind of an agreement. A war, however, would have inevitably made such negotiations impossible for many years to come. Thus the FCO's goal was to resolve the crisis through a diplomatic process. As a consequence, for the FCO « force would not be used as long as negotiations were continuing »²¹. Even after the beginning of military operations, the FCO sought to verify the validity of any hypothesis that might lead to a cease-fire. In contrast, the Prime Minister acted on her conviction that the Argentines had committed an

unjustified aggression in contempt of international law, and in violation of the Falklanders' rights of self-determination. The only possible objective, therefore, was to re-establish the status quo in the South Atlantic by any available means, while recognising that the specific logistical and environmental conditions reduced the amount of time during which the British government could allow itself to negotiate. From this perspective, the FCO attitude appeared as lacking determination, conditioned by a propensity towards appeasement, and intolerably bereft of those moral principles that for Margaret Thatcher needed to form the basis of political action²². This difference between viewpoints had two major consequences. The first was a divergence concerning the minimum requirements for attaining an acceptable diplomatic resolution of the crisis. The second involved a differing order of priorities. For Mrs. Thatcher it was necessary to subordinate diplomatic action to the chronological limits identified as impassable, in order to guarantee the security of the task force and the efficacy of its mission. For the FCO, the diplomatic possibilities had to determine the rhythm of the handling of the crisis, and therefore also the use of arms.

10 At least to a certain extent, such a position rendered Francis Pym's action potentially convergent with the views of Labour leadership. Above all, his action could solidly sustain the international pressures – especially those exerted by the United States – aimed at preventing an armed conflict between the UK and Argentina. The preference of Washington was to avoid a war between two allied countries, all the more so because there was little faith in Great Britain's chances for success. In the worst hypothesis, the US would have compromised its relations with Latin American countries, and found itself with its principal ally humiliated on the battlefield. Both results would have worked to the advantage of the USSR²³. The gap between Margaret Thatcher's and Francis Pym's positions was immediately clear to the US Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, during his first visit to London as a mediator. He not only was astonished by the fact that Pym « went surprisingly far » in expressing his own strong dissent in the presence of the Prime Minister. Haig also underlined how the modest results obtained were reached « only after much effort by me with considerable help not appreciated by Mrs. Thatcher from Pym »²⁴. This situation was a constant one, which reached its apex in the War Cabinet meeting of 24 April. On that occasion, Pym decisively supported the opportunity to accept the final plan worked out by the Americans, to which he himself had contributed during his visit to Washington in the two preceding days. Mrs Thatcher was determined to reject it. The divergence of positions risked breaking the unity of the War Cabinet, in one of the most delicate moments of the crisis. The solution was the compromise formulated by Nott: the British government requested the US to present the proposals first to those who had set off the crisis. Their rejection by the Argentines saved Mrs. Thatcher from the danger of being caught within a vise from which she would have found it very hard to free herself²⁵.

Mrs. Thatcher's Response

11 In what way did Margaret Thatcher manage to confront these problems?

Swiftness of Response, and Clarity of Intentions

12 Above all, there was the exceptional swiftness with which the Prime Minister took the initiative after the surprise attack. From the beginning Margaret Thatcher clearly identified her final goal – the re-establishment of the status quo in the South Atlantic – and made this primary for the choice of the means and of the political course needed to accomplish it. Already on the evening of 31 March she issued the order enabling the preparation of the naval task force. On 2 April the government approved its sending. On 3 April the Prime Minister was able to offer to the Commons a response already *in fieri*. All that, together with the resignation of Lord Carrington and the naming of his successor, curbed the indignation within the Conservative Party. The criteria for the selection of the new Foreign Minister were dictated by the need to rectify the difficulties that emerged on the day of 3 April. It was opportune to find a member of the House of Commons capable of placating the wrath of Conservative MPs, and endowed with enough prestige to receive favour even from the opposition. The choice fell upon the Leader of the House, Francis Pym. Because of the deeply negative relationship between him and Thatcher²⁶, it was not an easy decision. The fact that it was taken underlines yet one more time the difficulty of her situation. In any case, Pym « was the best available choice »²⁷, both for reinforcing the status of the government in the House of Commons²⁸, and for maintaining steady equilibrium within the government itself²⁹.

13 Thus the Conservatives re-obtained an acceptable level of compactness, even if it was fragile and mainly superficial³⁰. This allowed the Prime Minister a certain measure of tranquillity when meeting the attacks of the opposition regarding the incapacity of her government to prevent the Argentine invasion³¹. To remove this argument from the political terrain, Margaret Thatcher assumed responsibility for instituting a commission of enquiry into the events leading up to the Argentine attack, once the crisis was resolved. This move made it easier to have the collaboration of the SDP and the Liberals, in order to guarantee political support for the armed forces that were about to be deployed in Southern Atlantic³². It also further reduced Labour's margins of manoeuvre. To avoid appearing more interested in contesting the government rather than the Argentine invasion, even the Labour MPs decided to walk the path that the Prime Minister showed them. In this way, the debate over the government's faults was temporarily suspended, averting the risk of controversies that could distract the attention and energies of the Cabinet, and of the Prime Minister, at the very moment when they needed to be focused on resolving the crisis.

The Elaboration of a Positive Values System

14 One of the crucial questions at the centre of the crisis pertained to the legitimacy of the use of arms. One of the keys to Margaret Thatcher's success was her ability to resist all the efforts being made to reach a diplomatic agreement with the Argentines at any cost. Some of her own personal gifts were a determining factor³³, strengthened by the knowledge that she would not politically survive a failed conclusion of the crisis.

15 Still, the Prime Minister's firm resolve also stemmed from her deep-rooted idealistic convictions. These can be summarized in the three conceptual foundations on which she constructed the pursuit of her own political objective: the principle of sovereignty, the right of self-determination, and the respect for international law. Margaret Thatcher had absolutely no doubts: since the United Kingdom held sovereignty over the Falkland Islands, the invasion constituted a manifest violation of international law, which in addition denied the will of the

Islanders to remain under the Queen's rule³⁴. This allowed Mrs. Thatcher to turn to positive advantage the element that had determined her own and her predecessors' incapacity to resolve the Falklands problem: the right of the Islands' inhabitants to decide their own destiny. It was necessary to re-establish the status quo, in order to guarantee the Falklanders' rights of self-determination, and to demonstrate in the clearest terms that acting in an illegal and violent manner on the international scene would not bring any advantage. For the Conservative leader, the ongoing crisis went beyond the contingent episode involving an archipelago in the South Atlantic Ocean. In reality, it involved a much more important matter: the necessity for Western liberal democracies to demonstrate to any kind of dictatorship their ability and readiness to fight for the defence of their political values, without being tempted by forms of appeasement³⁵.

¹⁶ The elaboration of an interpretive framework for the crisis, capable of inserting the British response in a positive values system, constituted a fundamental resource for legitimising the recourse to the use of arms. By insisting on the fact that the invasion of the Falklands was an unjustified act of aggression, a violation of the principle of sovereignty, and a suppression of the right of political self-determination, Margaret Thatcher was able to remain within the boundaries designated by the United Nations Charter, which sanctioned the right to self-determination as well as that of self-defence. This position gained solid support from Resolution 502 of the UN Security Council, approved on 3 April. This resolutions did not authorise London to use military force. It did, however, stigmatise the invasion as *a breach of the peace*, and it did request the government of Buenos Aires to withdraw from the Falklands, to respect the United Nations Charter, and to find a solution to the territorial dispute through negotiations between the two contenders³⁶. Moreover, appealing to the principle of self-determination, and emphasising the risks of appeasement made it more difficult for the United States not to support London.

¹⁷ Finally, the elaboration of this values system allowed for the postponement of the emerging opposition from the Labour Party. The speeches by Michael Foot to the Commons on 3 and 14 April did not acknowledge the appeal to the principle of sovereignty. Foot did, however, agree that the Argentines had violated international laws, and that there was a need to defend the rights of the Falklands Islanders. In addition, given that Argentina was ruled by a military dictatorship, reminders of the events of the 1930s and of the dangers of appeasement put the Labour Party in risk of being censured as the « Munich party »³⁷, in case of their refusal to authorise the use of any kind of military force.

Capacities of Managing International Relations

¹⁸ Another factor which contributed to Margaret Thatcher's success was her ability to manage the crisis at the international level. Her determination was continuously linked to the commitment to seeking, until the end, a diplomatic solution. Mrs. Thatcher showed that she had fully learned the lesson of the Suez crisis, which for the entire duration of the Falklands one remained a kind of « *how not to guide* »³⁸. Since the reasons for the failures of 1956 were the isolation and especially the open hostility of the US, it was necessary to ensure the widest possible consensus of global public opinion, along with American support. Mrs. Thatcher was attentive to joining firmness of intention with sensitivity to the signals coming from Washington. Moreover, British diplomatic action aimed at consolidating the support of the Commonwealth countries³⁹ and

of European allies, and achieved an initial fundamental result with the approval of Resolution 502 by the UN Security Council. To maintain this consensus for as long as possible, it was crucial not to appear unreasonable. This meant avoiding the mistake of being the first to leave the negotiating table.

19 Such awareness attenuated the intransigence of the Prime Minister, and not only from a tactical point of view. As Alexander Haig recognised, Margaret Thatcher thoroughly discussed every proposal that he had drafted for a diplomatic resolution of the crisis⁴⁰. After the sinking of the *Belgrano* Mrs. Thatcher was persuaded to uphold the initiative of Peru, and then that of the UN Secretary General for a resumption of negotiations, even on the basis of a proposal that left her « deeply unhappy »⁴¹. On 16 May, the government of London again offered that of Buenos Aires a final series of proposals for the suspension of hostilities, and the start of a pathway toward consensual solution to the dispute over the Falklands. Although with much reluctance, the Prime Minister had to bow down to pressure, and soften her position. She eventually accepted the impossibility of a full return to the status quo, the commitment to debating the sovereignty over the islands, and some form of provisional administration that foresaw a role, however limited, for the Argentines.

20 At the same time, Margaret Thatcher deemed irrevocable the guarantee that the reaching of an accord with Buenos Aires would sanction the respect of two other principles: the reaffirmation of international legality, and the right of self-determination for the inhabitants of the islands. The withdrawal of the Argentines would be required, before the beginning of any negotiation. In addition, it had to be clear that the result of the negotiations would not necessarily be the handing over of the Falklands to Argentina.

21 Finally, the Prime Minister was resolute in regard to the need for setting a time limit on the holding of negotiations, to avoid remaining enmeshed by the predictable dilatory tactics of the Argentines. On this point, Mrs. Thatcher succeeded in imposing her own viewpoint, despite the different approach of the FCO: the maintenance of the task force, and of the possibilities for its efficient usage, had to regulate the pace of the diplomatic actions, and not vice versa. Haig's mediation in any case would have to end during the period necessary for the naval task force to reach the archipelago, while the negotiations re-started at the beginning of May could not be prolonged beyond the final useful date for assuring the success of the troop landing operations. There could no longer be any space for any agreement, once the counter-invasion had begun.

Luck

22 Last but not least, the Prime Minister benefitted from a considerable dose of good luck, offered up by the incapacity of the Argentine military junta to control events, during both the course of diplomatic negotiations, and of the conduct of military operations. The Argentines were always the first to reject every proposal formulated between April and May for a diplomatic solution to the crisis. The success of the British naval blockade, and of the landing of the task force, was at least partially due to the submissive martial behaviour of the Argentine navy and air force. In the end, the military junta of Buenos Aires significantly helped to determine the British victory. Nonetheless, Mrs. Thatcher had the undoubted ability not only to seize the opportunities offered her by the Argentines' imprudence⁴², but also to construct the premises and the context which permitted her to exploit such opportunities to the full. Without her courage in taking determined decisions, and without her tenacity in following up on them,

the Conservative leader would not have been able to turn her adversaries' weaknesses to her own advantage. Without her capacity to unite her resolve with diplomatic pliability, the Prime Minister could not have guaranteed the support of the US, nor could she have so thoroughly exploited the Argentine diplomatic suicide⁴³.

Results of the Victory

23 The victory in the South Atlantic was the triumph of Margaret Thatcher. If the Argentine invasion was the fruit of a lack of leadership in managing the Falklands issue, the positive resolution of the crisis owed much to Thatcher's ability to react rapidly to the initial shock, to achieve and maintain firm control of the political handling of the crisis, to clearly identify objectives, and to pursue them with a persistence that never lost contact with diplomatic prudence. The episode, which could have caused her political death, ended up giving her unassailable force, for many years.

24 It is a well-known fact that until the spring of 1982, Margaret Thatcher's leadership was precarious⁴⁴. Her unpopularity in the polls, and the less than brilliant results of her first three years of government gave many Tories the notion that the Prime Minister was a problem, rather than a resource for their party. As a consequence, deep fissures opened up among Conservative MPs, as well as within the government itself⁴⁵. Mrs. Thatcher sought to confront the situation utilising the means allowed her by her position of power as head of government. Hence the reshufflings that led to the expulsion from the government of several wet Tories in January and September of 1981⁴⁶. Nonetheless, such attempts to confirm her own political will through the use of power did not find a corresponding or sufficiently shared recognition of the authoritative quality of her guidance, as a winning resource for the party and for the nation. In other words, Mrs. Thatcher tried to make up for a lack of *auctoritas* by resorting to mere *potestas*.

25 Victory in the Falklands War was the turning point. It decisively transformed the balance of power within the Conservative Party, to Margaret Thatcher's advantage. The consequences of the changed equilibrium were soon visible, even in the affirmation of a new "style of governing," which Peter Hennessy has identified in the Prime Minister's wish to push her influence more deeply into the different governmental departments. The result was the attempt of limiting the autonomy of single ministries, and confronting more important questions in small *ad hoc* groups, demoting the Cabinet to a site for ratifying what had already been decided elsewhere⁴⁷.

26 The impact of the "Falklands Factor" went still further. Nigel Lawson has underlined how its force resided in its capacity to make a paradigm out of the energy and resolve of Margaret Thatcher and her government, in comparison with the weakness of her predecessors⁴⁸. This same interpretation was already articulated by Simon Jenkins:

The Falklands war was the quintessential act of political intuition. It required no election, no legislation, no inquiry, no cabinet discussion worth the name. It was one of the most definitive acts of prime ministerial rule Britain has seen this century. I believe it is this display of positive generation rather than the fact of victory that underlies the "Falkland spirit". It is a display which will not necessarily be to Mrs. Thatcher's long-term advantage. The Falklands success rekindled the public's belief in the capacity of government to achieve stated aims. [...] The public saw what

government could do when stung into action. [...] The war unlocked a conviction that government “can do”, which transcended and still transcends normal party political allegiance. That is why Mrs. Thatcher is still considered the best leader to cope with unemployment. The war proved that even the most pedestrian civil service can have its cynical assumptions blasted aside by an assertion of strong individual leadership⁴⁹.

27 The victory over Argentina was the proof that strong individual leadership – the personification of the « transatlantic concept of “strong-leadership government” », in Jenkins’s terms – was equipped to guarantee the attainment of pre-determined objectives. This made the difference in the political consciousness of British people, in contrast with the pragmatic deficiencies of 1970s governments⁵⁰.

28 Such positive appreciation was not a transitory phenomenon, but one that had a permanent impact on the way of perceiving and evaluating political leadership. The theme was brought into clear focus by a study commissioned by the Social Democratic Party in the summer of 1982. The war was an event that radically altered the previous general picture, because it had created « new criteria for “strength” and “leadership” for political parties:

The Falklands, however, are fundamental to political judgements and in our view will remain so because they have seriously – possibly irreversibly – changed the evaluation of personalities. The Falklands crisis was more than a distraction, it served as an acid test for politicians (“What did you do in the war?”)⁵¹.

29 The study highlighted another structural element: public disaffection for politics, and the consequent loss of enthusiasm for “participation”:

Participation seems to be an outmoded/overrated enthusiasm – indeed we found far more interest in the notion of “leadership” and certainty of purpose than of participation and consultation on everything. This view extends from the area of government to industry – thus we constantly heard expressed the idea that at some point leaders must stop talking and start doing, the need for ‘decisiveness’ and so on⁵².

30 These two interwoven factors played to Margaret Thatcher’s advantage. At the moment when public opinion called for strong and efficacious leadership, the Prime Minister stood out as the only British politician able to satisfy such a request. The « acid test for politicians » provided by the Anglo-Argentine war not only demonstrated that Thatcher was « the *only* leader with “war-time qualities” », but also that, in the absence of an effective alternative, the said qualities were perceived as favouring the Prime Minister’s capability « to lead in *the economic war* »⁵³. The study also shed light on another crucial element. Margaret Thatcher was now identified as a leader in full control of her own political party. Her government was judged not « as a collection of types with a class interest, but a collection of henchmen working for a charismatic figure »⁵⁴. Both these factors stood in even more marked contrast with the possible alternatives. The Labour Party, which cracked apart at the decisive moment of the Falklands crisis, offered a spectacle of pronounced infighting, and a leader of notable weakness. On the other side, even while it could count on leaders who held a certain appeal for the electorate, the alliance between Liberals and Social Democrats was still a long way from defining a unified political platform. Furthermore, the complex negotiation among them for the allocation of parliamentary seats, in view of future elections, gave public opinion the image of two traditional parties intent on squabbling with each other. This was the exact

opposite of « stop talking and start doing », in glaring contrast with what seemed to be the government's capacity to realise objectives. As a result, even among the potential SDP voters the predominant idea was that of a lack of alternatives: « there is not real *leadership* which rivals Tories manic strength »⁵⁵. This opinion was not based on a judgment of the Conservative Party's actual policies, which were neither fully understood nor even known, as much as on a judgment of the single person of the Prime Minister. There was the widespread notion that the Conservatives had « a plan » for the country, and for this reason they were in power. Still, the essence of this project was inseparable from the figure of Margaret Thatcher: « *the plan, in short, is Mrs. Thatcher's personality* »⁵⁶.

31 That evaluations of the leader had assumed decisive influence over the political fortunes of the respective parties, and that the Falklands war played a crucial role in such evaluations, are factors that appear not only in the revelations made a few weeks after its conclusion. They also are evident in the analyses of the results of the 1983 general elections. Beyond any differences among the various interpretations, there is substantial agreement that personal appraisal of the leaders of the three major parties running in the 1983 elections was among the main motivations – if not *the* main motivation – conditioning the choice of the electorate, that resembled how appreciation for Margaret Thatcher's leadership abilities were linked to her conduct during the crisis with Argentina⁵⁷.

32 It is in the light of all these circumstances, then, that one needs to evaluate the impact of the “Falklands Factor” on the 1983 general elections. The standpoint for consideration of the facts is not offered by the question: “how many points of popularity, and therefore votes, did the government acquire from the military conflict in itself and by itself?”. Instead the question is: “in what way and to what extent did the war condition public opinion regarding the Prime Minister's abilities to achieve pre-established goals?”. In this context, it would make little sense to exclude the influence of the Falklands crisis over the results of 1983, on the basis of an absence of direct references to the crisis of spring 1982 made by Conservative candidates during the electoral campaign. The presence of the Falklands in the 1983 electoral campaign is not to be understood in terms of “how many times Conservative candidates made explicit citations of the re-conquest of the Islands”, but instead through consideration of the degree to which the Tories' electoral campaign sought to valorise those leadership traits of Margaret Thatcher which emerged in fully evident ways during the 1982 crisis. Comparison with the preceding electoral campaign is illuminating. While in 1979 the Conservatives mainly concentrated on proposing specific political alternatives to the ones made by Labour, in 1983 the constant emphasis was on the characteristics that a Prime Minister must have in order to take on the problems facing the United Kingdom. The *resolute approach* of the 1983 Manifesto was in fact the proposal of a precise model of leadership, which came off as a credible one, since it was already put to the test, with success, during the Falklands crisis⁵⁸.

33 The effectiveness of using the Falklands Factor – or better yet, the Thatcher Factor – calls for its being measured, indubitably, in relation to the actual electoral results. At the same time, it would be a mistake to limit analysis to a comparison between the percentage obtained by the Conservatives in 1983 (42.4%) with that of 1979 (43.9%), then register the decline of support, and consequently underestimate the weight of the Falklands Factor. The results need to be inserted into their context. First, it is plausible to suppose that the presence of the Liberal-SDP Alliance reduced, if only minimally, the amount of votes won by the Tories. Nor can one forget that the United Kingdom went to the polls with a rate of unemployment three times higher than that of 1979. Moreover, in every

Western country hit by the economic crisis, where elections were held between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the non-confirmation of the incumbent government was the rule. The substantial continuity of consensus maintained by the Conservative Party therefore can be seen as a definite success. In addition, one needs to consider that in 1983 :

- a. for 72% of the electorate, unemployment was the principal problem of Great Britain;
- b. for 80% of the electorate, the Conservatives, if victorious, would not succeed in solving this problem;
- c. the consensus for specific policies of the Tories diminished by 10%, with respect to 1979; again with respect to 1979 there was an increase of the percentage of voters who declared themselves opposed to possible tax cuts that would have negative repercussions for health, education, and welfare⁵⁹.

³⁴ Given these statistics, the importance of the “Thatcher Factor” to the electoral result is even more conspicuous. The impact of victory in the Falklands thus can be identified by the way in which it changed appraisals of the political leaders on the part of public opinion. In this regard, a final consideration needs to be made.

³⁵ As has been rightly observed, the full force of such an impact was due to the “psychological need” for « a success of some kind », that would put a stop to an entire series of post-WWII events experienced by Britons as failures and humiliations⁶⁰. Margaret Thatcher was adept in presenting such a specific success as tangible proof of the possibility of reversing the parabola of the British decline. At the same time, she linked this point with the necessity of a political leadership – her own – that could achieve a definitive rupture with the establishment held responsible for the decline⁶¹.

³⁶ There is yet one more element to consider. The possibility of fully profiting from the military victory also resided in Margaret Thatcher’s ability to exploit the patriotic re-awakening that the Falklands War had fostered. In this light, a crucial factor for Mrs. Thatcher was the system of values in which she located her political and military response to the Argentine attack. Having defined the British position on the basis of values such as “self-determination,” “sovereignty,” and “international rights,” and on the basis of the risks associated with any kind of appeasement, she transmitted clear and resounding appeals to a tradition of foreign policy that had a unique, unparalleled identifying trait in the UK’s role as bulwark against Nazism, forty years earlier. Thus Margaret Thatcher’s use of Churchillian language in relation to the Falklands crisis cannot be deciphered as merely a rhetorical expedient⁶². It was an instrument of connection with a crucial resource of national identity. In the Thatcherian narrative, victory in the southern Atlantic was the triumph of values essential to the past glories of the UK. The military triumph demonstrated that Great Britain was still able to fight with success in attaining its own objectives. This was the shining proof that the country’s decline was not irreversible⁶³. The Falklands War was thus presented as a kind of bridge between the past and the future. It is in the potential for nourishing hopes for the future, by stressing memories of a glorious past, that we perhaps can identify one of the “secrets” of the Falklands Factor.

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Notes

1 Freedman, L., 2007; Donaghy, A., 2014.

2 House of Commons, *Debates*, 3rd April 1982. Alan Clark wrote: «We've lost the Falklands [...] It's all over. We're a Third World country, no good for anything». Clark, A., 2000, p. 310.

3 According to Julien Critchley, it was the worst speech by Mrs Thatcher ever (Critchley, J., 1985, p. 125). For Kenneth Baker, «she was not at her best» (Baker, K., 1993, p. 67). For

Norman Fowler, «her speech went as well as was possible, given that it was being made on the stickiest of sticky Parliament wickets» (Fowler, N., 1991).

4 Powell concluded his speech as follows: «The Prime Minister, shortly after she came into office, received a soubriquet as the “Iron Lady”. It arose in the context of remarks which she made about defence against the Soviet Union and its allies; but there was no reason to suppose that the right hon. Lady did not welcomed and, indeed, take pride in that description. In the next week or two this House, the nation and the right hon. Lady herself will learn of what metal she is made», House of Commons, *Debates*, 3rd April 1982, col. 644.

5 Ray Whitney. It could be of some interest what the Speaker of the House of Commons refers in his memoirs: «During the course of the debate, I saw Mrs. Thatcher’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, Ian Gow, talking to the right-wing Conservative MP Ray Whitney, a former diplomat. It was therefore obvious that the government wanted him to speak in the debate», Thomas, G., 1985, p. 208.

6 According to David Owen, «at the end of the debate there were few people in the House who believed that both [Nott] and Carrington could stay on. At least one of them, perhaps both, would have to resign» (Owen, D., 1991, p. 547).

7 Julien Critchley described the atmosphere of the Committee meetings as follows: «The ’22 meets once a week in ‘peacetime’; in times of crisis it can become a theatre of cruelty and of the absurd, offering an element of drama which the Commons’ chamber seems reluctant to provide. The run-of-the-mill weekly meeting is to be avoided. A whip reads out the business of the coming week, the minutes of the last meeting are recited, there may be a listless question or two from a predictable source and that is that. What humour there is can only be of the unconscious kind. But when the party’s dander is up, the ’22 can be every bit as Gothic as its High Victorian surroundings. [...] It is on occasions such as these that the worst side of Our Great Party manifests itself. Unleashed, we run the gamut of our emotions: jingoism, anti-semitism, obscurantism, cant and self-righteousness; all play their part. We can, when pushed to do so, flourish our political prejudices like so many captive princes paraded through the streets of Imperial Rome. Why not hold such meetings in the Coliseum?», Critchley, J., 1989, p. 127. According to Critchley the meeting on 3rd April was «the most exciting committee meeting I ever attended [...] Mrs. Thatcher had made what was probably her lamest speech in the Chamber, and the party was reeling from shock and indignation. There was to be blood all over the floor», *ivi*, p. 55. Nott, J., 2002, p. 268 and Clark, A., *Diaries*, p. 313 provide reports of that meeting in line with Critchley’s one. On the contrary, the account of the chairman of the Committee is more sugar coated. See Du Cann, E., 1995, pp. 213-215.

8 Thatcher, M., 1993, p. 185. See also Nott, J., 2002; Whitelaw, W., 1989, p. 203; Parkinson, C., 1992, p. 190; Prior, J., 1986, pp. 147-149. The Foreign Secretary himself was well aware that his membership in the House of Lords was a weakness for the Cabinet in that moment: Carrington, P., 1988, pp. 368-372.

9 Nott, J., 2002, p. 264; Parkinson, C., 1992, p. 190; Howe, G., 1994, p. 245.

10 Thatcher, M., 1993, p. 184-185.

11 Benn, T., 1992, p. 203; Healey, D., 1989, p. 496. Foot’s speech was such that the Conservative MP Edward Du Cann could begin his by saying: «the Leader of Opposition spoke for us all» (House of Commons, *Debates*, 3rd April 1982, col. 642).

12 For details about the divisions within the Labour Party see Benn, T., 1992, p. 200-232.

13 See Freedman, L., 2005, vol. II and Boyce, D.G., 2005, p. 39-97.

14 Nott, J., 2002.

15 Major, J., 1999, p. 77.

16 Nott, J., 2005, p. 57-63.

17 Prior, J., 1986, p. 148; N. Lawson, 1993, p. 126-127.

18 Prior, J., 1986, p. 148.

19 Hennessy, P., 2005.

20 Parkinson, C., 1992, p. 196.

21 Boyce, D.G., 2005, p. 86.

22 Mrs Thatcher’s reaction during the meeting of 16th May is paradigmatic. The Fco was trying to convince her to soften the British position in order not to irritate the UN or the US. «The PM veered the whole time towards being uncompromising, so that the rest of us, and in particular the Fco participants, constantly found themselves under attack from her for being wet, ready to sell out, unsupportive of British interests etc. [...] Did not people

realise that it was the Argentines who had committed aggression? Did the Foreign Office have no principles? She said that while we were content to be dishonest and consult with dishonest people she was honest. Were the Fco prepared to hand over people who believed in democracy to a dictatorship? She would never abandon the Falkland Islands any more than she would fail to uphold the principle of self-determination which must, indeed, be written into the draft agreement, not just once but several times - though we told her that to do so would make everyone think that we were not serious because the Argentines would reject it out of hand». Henderson, N., 1994, pp. 461-462.

23 For the US stance during the crisis, beyond the works by Boyce and Freedman, see also Haig, A., 1984, chapter XIII; Richardson, L., 1996, p. 111-159; Borsani, D., 2015.

24 Haig telegram to Reagan, 9th April 1982, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109216>. *James Rentschler's Falklands Diary*, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/arcdocs/Rentschler.pdf>, p. 11 describes Pym as «the only British peace party we seem to have in this room».

25 The meeting on 24th April is vibrantly recalled in the memoirs of both Margaret Thatcher and John Nott.

26 According to Mrs Thatcher, Francis Pym was «the quintessential old style Tory [...] a proud pragmatist and an enemy of ideology», Thatcher, M., 1993, p. 187. For Cecil Parkinson, Pym «and Prime minister were happy to see the minimum of each other», Parkinson, C., 1992, p. 198. For Geoffrey Howe, Pym «and Margaret had often before shown their incompatibility», Howe, G., 1994, p. 247. According to Charles Moore, an «additional reason why Mrs Thatcher felt she had to promote Pym was that he was now the favourite to succeed her as leader», Moore, C., 2013, p. 676.

27 Hurd, D., 2003.

28 Parkinson, C., 1992, p. 198: «Francis commanded the respect of the House of Commons and was the right man to rally and reassure the badly shaken conservative parliamentary party and to unite the opposition behind the government's policies». Francis Pym «did a superb job in the most difficult circumstances. His speeches in the House were balanced and well received», Prior, J., 1986, p. 149. See also Whitelaw, W., 1989, p. 204.

29 Howe, G., 1994, p. 246: «any other choice would have meant a series of Cabinet upheavals, which was clearly not on».

30 Hugo, Y., 2008, p. 182-183.

31 House of Commons, *Debates*, 6th and 7th April 1982. See also Moore, C., 2013, p. 682-683.

32 Owen, D., 1991, p. 548.

33 For Kenneth Baker, the Falklands war suited Margaret Thatcher very well, because it allowed her to fight in her favourite situation: «back to the wall in a tight corner». Baker, K., 1993, p. 72.

34 Boyce, D.G., 2005, p. 8-60.

35 From this perspective, the crucial issue in Mrs Thatcher's view was the UK's role on the world stage. See Thatcher, M., 1993, p. 192-193 and Haig, A., 1984, p. 267.

36 Toase, F., 2005, p. 147-169. Moreover the resolution allows the British government to avoid a further involvement of the UN until the beginning of May. Trying «to keep our affairs out of the UN as much as possible» was one of the goal of Mrs Thatcher. See Thatcher, M., 1993, p. 182.

37 So Eric Heffer during the NEC International Committee meeting on 11th May. See Benn, T., 1992, p. 221. According to Heffer, «there was a dilemma at the heart of the problem. We could not allow a bunch of military fascist thugs to take over the islands and it was right that the Falkland people should be able to live in peace, but neither could we support rampant jingoism and warmongering», Heffer, E., 1991, p. 196.

38 Hennessy, P., 2005. John Nott recalls that «Whitelaw [...] and I, in the early stages, thought 'Suez, Suez, Suez' in many of our waking hours», Nott, J., 2002, p. 247.

39 Yorke, E., 2005, p. 170-192.

40 Haig, A., 1984, chapter XIII. See also *James Rentschler's Falklands Diary*, p. 5: «for all her the rigidity and indignation on Mrs. Thatcher's side, it is clear that she and her colleagues really do trust us and hope we can pull off some mediatory intervention which can avert hostile engagement of the fleet».

41 Thatcher, M., 1993, p. 217.

42 Clarke, P., 1999, p. 306.

43 In other words, «the way Thatcher rode and exploited her luck is more significant than the fact that she had it, and this was further testament to her distinctive leadership role». Moon, J., 1993, p. 123.

44 Vinen, R., 2009, p. 75-133.

45 «People forget how vulnerable Mrs Thatcher was in her first years in office. Thatcherism was vigorously opposed by many backbenchers, senior Cabinet Ministers and much of the Party. True believers were in a minority. Keeping my fellow MPs on side was a hard labour», Du Cann, E., 1995, p. 214. «We must have been the most divided conservative cabinet ever», Prior, J., 1986, p. 134.

46 Campbell, J., 2003, p. 104-125.

47 Hennessy, P., 2000, p. 397-436. See also Hennessy, P., 1986.

48 «The reason why the so-called Falklands Factor was so powerful, and lasted so long, was that it was more than a military victory: it symbolized and reinforced the image of the government, and of Margaret in particular, as tough, resolute and different from previous wishy-washy governments right across the board, not least in economy policy». Lawson, N., 1993, p. 245.

49 Jenkins, S., «The Birth of the Thatcher Factor», *The Times*, 31st March 1983.

50 Taking into account the 1970s and the early 1980s, Himmelweit, H., Humphreys, P., Jaeger, M., 1985, chapters 13 and 14, highlights the rising scepticism of the British voters about the ability of both Labours and Conservatives in tackling the main problems of the UK. The study also stresses that «voters' attitudes towards the leaders have become increasingly important, even decisive».

51 The Albert Sloman Library, SDP Archives – Papers of Lord Rodgers, box 33, *SDP Research: Final Report (August 1982)*, p. 9.

52 Ivi, p. 10.

53 Ivi, p. 9.

54 Ivi, p. 20.

55 Ivi, p. 23.

56 Ivi, p. 20.

57 The most complete and convincing study on this aspect is Himmelweit, H., Humphreys, P., Jaeger, M., 1985. See also McAllister, I., Rose, R., 1984 and Crewe, I., 1985, p. 155-196. This study gives more relevance to Foot's liabilities than to Thatcher's strengths in order to explain the electoral results. Crewe's analysis – published even as *Why Labour Lost the British Election*, «Public Opinion», July, 1983 – is discussed by Miller, W.L., 1984, p. 364-384.

58 Himmelweit, H., Humphreys, P., Jaeger, M., 1985, p. 220-222; Crewe, I., 1985, p. 160-161; Burch, M., 1986, p. 65-76; Butler, D., Kavanagh, D. (eds.), 1984, p. 288-294.

59 Crewe, I., 1985 and Himmelweit, H., Humphreys, P., Jaeger, M., 1985, chapter 14.

60 Jenkins, P., 1987, p. 163. See also Jenkins, S., 2006, p. 74-75. The topic of the Great Britain's decline is crucial in the British public debate after 1945. For an assessment of the issue see English R., Kenny, M. (eds.), 2000.

61 King, A., 2002.

62 Monaghan, D., 1998.

63 Mrs Thatcher's speech at Cheltenham on 2nd July 1982 expresses this idea at the best.

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