**Sue Cameron interviewing Lord Parkinson**

**19/3/2015**

**Sue Cameron (SC):** Cecil Parkinson - in their book about prime ministers, Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon say that No 10 became Margaret Thatcher’s ‘emotional and psychological support system’, in a way that hadn’t happened to her in any previous department. Would you agree with that?

**Lord Parkinson (LP):** I think she did get very personally involved with the people in No 10, and she was very aware of the history of the house, and she wanted it to be elegant… She put a lot of effort into making sure that it was, you know, a sort of beacon, in a way, of what was best in British. She really was very attached to the house, and became very attached to the people. One of the things that, if you talk to people about her, was that she was incredibly caring about the people who worked for her. So this did become a sort of bastion. She loved the place, and she liked the people, and she put a lot of effort into it. And people rallied to her, because she was such a likeable, a warm person – all this will be news to some people – but people were devoted to her. She had… the staff… I remember one of her detectives saying to me, ‘If I had to step in front of her and take the bullet, I’d do it willingly.’ They really were… so it was a mutual thing. She was very committed to No 10, and it was very committed to her.

**SC:** She seemed to regard them – as you’ve said – as a family, in many ways. But it was very much the people in No 10, not necessarily the outsiders. One of her civil servants in her private office said, ‘She loved us, but she loathed the civil service at large.’ How suspicious was she of the civil service in general – not the ones here?

**LP:** Oh, she was. She was particularly suspicious, for instance, of the Foreign Office. I mean, the Foreign Office, to her, were distinctly untrustworthy, and she felt that very, very strongly. But, again, it’s as you say – individual members of the Foreign Office she had a great deal of respect for. She didn’t like the institution. She didn’t like the civil service. But she did admire and respect individual members of both – the civil service and the Foreign Office.

**SC:** She was once heard to say, with reference to the Foreign Office, that when she retired she was going to start a ‘Rent-a-Spine’ business to stiffen their backbones. Was that what she felt, that they were far too willing to be **[Inaudible]**

**LP:** She felt that appeasement was quite high up on their order of priorities. Now, whether she was right about this or not… but you must remember that she was the product of the 30’s, Hitler, appeasement, that whole time. And it dominated her. I mean, Germany was a passion of hers, you know, she was extremely interested in all aspects, she was determined that the Germans wouldn’t become a threat again. And so she had very strong views about appeasement and the role the Foreign Office had played, and she was very suspicious of them. But she liked individual people. I mean, some of the people who worked very closely with her during the Falklands she had great respect for, but as an institution, she really was very suspicious of it. And to a lesser extent, but still to an extent, the civil service. But the Foreign Office was a particular focus of, you know, discontent, if you like.

**SC:** On the civil service in general, when you were a junior minister, I think Hugo Young says that she once came into your department, and she had list in front of her of all the officials in the room, and she put little lines under their names. Some of them were dotted, and some of them were straight. Now, why was that, and was she very quick to make up her mind about individuals?

**LP:** Yes, what she tried to do was to get round the government, and to find out what sort of people were working for ministers. So she went to every department, and she met the permanent secretaries, the deputy secretaries, and the senior assistant secretaries. And she came to the Department of Trade, which I was then in, and we sat round the table, and each of the civil servants gave a description of his or her job, and how they set about it and so on. And she had them all listed round the table. And some of them got one star, two or three, and some of them got a straight line! And I suddenly realised she was sort of making up her mind about them. But, the interesting thing was, there was one particular civil servant who was… collar was always stuck up, and his hair was always on end, and he was very untidy, and he sat with his arm over the back of the chair. Needless to say, there was a very thick black line under his name! But then, when we got into conversation about issues, which we did, she then changed her mind, because he was a very, very clever, bright, unprepossessing-looking fellow, but he really knew his job. In fact, she later got onto first-name terms with him, she used to refer to him as Robin, and he was from the Department of Trade. I remember, on one famous occasion, we were talking about importing Spanish motor cars, and he was going to negotiate the numbers, and she said to him, ‘Robin – if it’s good enough for you, it’s good enough for me.’ And everybody around the table nearly fell off their chair! Because the story had got out that his first impression had been terrible! But she wasn’t closed-minded. She respected bright people and people who were good at their jobs.

**SC:** Now, a lot of people seem to have had a row with her – not a screaming match of course – but a bit of a row with her, before she fully trusted her. Now, I’ve got a couple of examples of this. When she appointed Anthony Parsons, I think, as an outside foreign affairs adviser here, and she had a row with Robin Butler, Sir Robin Butler – Lord Butler now – who was then her principal private secretary. And he thought it wasn’t a very good idea, it might cut her off from the Foreign Office, civil service is always a bit suspicious of outside advisers… and he said he’d got the sort of laser eye treatment, and he said it was frightening! But, he said, they got on much better after that, once she knew that he would stand up for her, and say what was best for her. Was that your experience of her?

**LP:** It was, actually. The truth of the matter was that there were a number of people – especially in the first cabinet – real gents like Francis Pym… And she would rough them up, I mean, she would really take a very confrontational attitude to what they were saying. And they didn’t react well to it, they weren’t used to arguing with ladies, and things like this. But she was just putting them to the test. You know, she couldn’t run every aspect of government. What she wanted to know was the people who were in charge of departments could fight their corner, and really believed in what they were doing. So there was quite a bit of misunderstanding about this confrontational attitude. I always found it her way of forcing you to prove you’d done your homework, you knew your stuff, and you shouldn’t take it personally. But a number of the older members did take it personally, and that made for slightly unhappy relations in that early cabinet.

**SC:** Yes, now, of course, she got rid of a whole load of those wet cabinet ministers, like Francis Pym, and as you said, some of them didn’t take it very kindly. She says in her memoirs that when she sacked Soames, Christopher Soames, she said he reacted as if he’d been dismissed by his housemaid! And she brought in people like you: people who had not necessarily been to public schools, people who had a business background, who’d made their own way in the world… Do you think – or how far do you think – she was deliberately shaking up the whole place, the whole system? I mean, a new generation, a new outlook…

**LP:** Well, it had to happen, because if you look back to the time she was elected, I’ve often thought that at the first shadow cabinet meeting afterwards, there were probably only about three or four people around the table who voted for her.

**SC:** Really?

**LP:** Yes! The overwhelming majority had voted for Willie, or Geoffrey, or Jim Prior, and so she was leading a sort of grouping, the majority of whom were out of kilter with her, not seeing things her way. So it was quite difficult for her, in those early days, and she had somehow to get some people in. In ’81, when the cabinet refused, in July, to approve the public spending plans for the next three years, she took a momentous step – probably the most difficult thing that she did – unlike many of her predecessors, who when they faced that challenge, they changed the policy, she changed the cabinet. She actually said, ‘No, this is what we told the public that we would do if we were elected, and so if these people won’t do it then I must find people that will.’ And so she recast her cabinet in ’81 – she’d been the leader then for quite a long time, and she’d been in a minority – but she really decided enough was enough. That, you know, we might be failures, we might be ejected because we hadn’t carried out our plans, but we weren’t going to be objected because we’d abandoned what we believed should be done.

**SC:** What about the civil service?One of the things that she’s said to have done was sort of beat the bushes of Whitehall pretty hard, and she brought in quite a few outsiders at the very beginning – people like John Hoskyns -and I think the civil servantsused to refer to them as her ‘voices’, and on the whole they didn’t stay the course. Do you think that she was really a reformer of the civil service, or was she perhaps a bit more traditional once she got to know them, as you’ve said?

**LP:** Yes, I don’t think she wanted to take the whole civil service on. She wanted it to adapt, and to work with her. She didn’t want to politicise it, but she wanted competent people. She said ministers should give the instructions, and civil servants should carry them out, and it was for ministers to start doing the civil servant’s job, and it wasn’t for the civil servants to start doing the minister’s job. So she had a clear idea: the ministers set the policy, and the civil servants implemented it, and that was the way she saw that government should work. But she never wanted to take on… I mean, she brought in an efficiency person, who’d been…

**SC:** Derek Rayner…

**LP:** Derek Rayner, and he did some very useful things, but she never took the whole system on. I remember one of her remarks – Derek Rayner because the Chairman of Lloyds – and she once said to me: ‘How can the chairman of Lloyds run the bank with one personal secretary, when every junior minister needs five people in their private office?’ And so, these sort of things, she’d say to Derek Rayner, or to the other man, ‘Look, have a look, see, how is it running?’ But she never, ever sought to take the civil serviceon, and to reform it from top to bottom. She sought to make sure that it could do what we wanted.

**SC:** Now, one of the things that you did was to really modernise the Party machine, which was a bit elderly and creaky, perhaps, and you made big changes there. How did the newly-reformed, souped-up party machine, and the people in it, how did they get on with the civil servants here?

**LP:** They didn’t really have a huge contact. The contact point was David Wolfson. David Wolfson was, he had the title, I think, of Chief of Staff, and he worked here. But his main job was liaison with Central Office. I saw him quite regularly… but, in terms of working with the civil servants, they worked together if they had to, but in the main, Central Office went its own way. We were a political outfit, and the civil servants weren’t. And we didn’t try to politicise them, either.

**SC:** So there weren’t any of the difficulties that we saw later – I mean, a lot later – particularly once the Blair regime came in, where there were huge concerns about the attempts by the party people to get at and organise the civil servants – but that just didn’t happen?

**LP:** No, that didn’t happen. I think there is a tendency, when you have been out of office for quite a long time, to assume that the civil service are all supporters of the predecessor government. So you think, ‘This guy was working for my predecessor a fortnight ago’. So there is a suspicion that when you get there, that, ‘Will these people implement what we want? Or will they be obstructive?’ But, in fact, one of the things that I learned quite quickly about the civil service, is… I hope they won’t be offended if I describe them as mercenaries. They are there to do the job the minister… they make it quite clear to you, ‘Minister, it’s your decision. Minister, it’s your policy. All we do is implement it, and try to help you to form it’. So we didn’t have any hang-up like that, we just accepted - because Margaret was again quite a traditional person – that, provided that the civil service did their job, that we would not politicise them, and they on their part would not become political. And I look back now… I did, in the early days, when the coalition was saying that it was finding it difficult to get things done, well, there never was a more radical Conservative government than the Thatcher government, but the civil service never stopped us from doing from doing any of the things that we wanted. You know what I mean, we made the policy, we laid it down, and we carried it though, and if the civil service had have been obstructive, they had lots of opportunities to be obstructive, but they weren’t. It was a newly-elected government, with a mandate, and it was working with that government to do its job.

**SC:** How did you get on with some of the leading civil servants, because actually Downing Street’s quite a small place as an office, as a centre of government? How did you get on with people like Robin Butler, her principal private secretary, Robert Armstrong, her cabinet secretary?

**LP:** I think I got on quite well with them. I particularly got on well with her… she had a unit here, which was her Policy Unit. And what I discovered quite early on – because, amongst other things, I was privatising electricity – the important thing was to keep them onside. So a lot of departments tried to exclude No 10: ‘Keep those people away’. But it seemed to me that they were some very bright people, and so we would have regular meetings, at which I would explain the way we were developing our policy, and they would be welcome to comment. So when the policy arrived here, it wasn’t greeted by a group of enemies who’d been put off because they hadn’t been consulted; they’d been part of the team that was putting the policy together. So I always had a good relationship with No 10, and with the civil servants here, because they were vitally important. One included them, took them along with them if one could, modify it, listen to them… and as a result, they weren’t the enemy, they were part of a team that was trying to transform Britain, which was the way we wanted them to feel.

**SC:** And what about your relations with her, with Margaret Thatcher? Hugo Young says that you had an ability, rare among your colleagues, to stop and make her listen. He said you made, and I quote, ‘A fussing, worried, preoccupied woman feel rather luxuriously at ease’. What was your secret – and was she really fussing and preoccupied sometimes?

**LP:** Yes, I tell you… I came to the conclusion - I mean, the prime minister is just inundated from everybody - and if you want to discuss big issues, like the reorganising and creating competition in electricity, and floating it, and selling it, then you needed to have her attention. And I worked out – I did this first as party chairman– I said to her, ‘Prime minister, could you set a day aside over Christmas recess, so that we could go through our plans? I would like the day, and we will present to you what we’re doing in different areas.’ This was about the election, in January 1983. So different people presented, and I said, ‘At the end of the day, we need four decisions. So we divide the day up, everybody presents, then we have a discussion, then we take decisions, then we’ve got a working mandate, we can go away and get on and leave you in peace’. And it worked then, and it worked in departments. Because she loved Chequers, but she felt guilty about being there when Parliament was sitting.

**SC:** So did she come here more often?

**LP:** Well, she would come here, but she quite liked being out there, if she had a reason to be. So if you could get her to set a day aside… I mean, on electricity, she set a whole day aside, and Nigel Lawson came, all the key people came, and we had a presentation of the issues, and we discussed them, and we took three or four decisions, and she felt she’d been working. You know, she’d been working but she’d been working where she liked to be, but she hadn’t which was Chequers, but she hadn’t been lazing at Chequers. She hated the idea that she had not been busy. So we kept her busy, but in a place which she liked, and the end result was… and I asked, ‘Could we have no interruptions, and just focus on the issues, and have questions at the end’. And by the end of the day we’d got decisions, we’d got clearer ideas, and she was very happy, and I was very happy, because we’d got things. Whereas if one had tried to steal half an hour with her in No 10 or something, you know, you only do a cursory presentation…

**SC:** …So quite difficult to do business here, sometimes, because of calls on her time?

**LP:** Sometimes. Well, big issues, you know, you need to think through. And Margaret – she had very few weaknesses but she did have one – that she could seize on a point and flog it to death, if you weren’t careful. And it might be a minor point. But I remember, for instance, on the election, when we were having a presentation from the person who was responsible for our broadcasting, and he said: ‘And for your proposed breakfast time appearances…’ And she said, ‘Proposed breakfast time appearances? I have no proposed breakfast time appearances. I have no intention of appearing at breakfast time.’ And so, you’d waste twenty minutes chasing that particular hare, if you weren’t careful. So one wanted to get away from that. One didn’t want that sort of… She just thought, ‘Who’s telling me I’m going to turn up for the television…’ She wasn’t being… she was just being a bit contrary. I mean, ‘Prove to me I need to go’, sort of thing.

**SC:** Which of course they didn’t…

**LP:** They didn’t, no.

**SC:** What about the ’83 election? You were keen to go early, and she was very concerned about it. I mean, everybody thought that she was going to win, as far as I can see. Even Robert Armstrong – now Lord Armstrong – her cabinet secretary, was going round saying, ‘Well, of course, I’m impartial, but the next prime minster, whoever she may be, will do this, that and the other. But you persuaded her to go almost a year before she had to. How hard was it to persuade her? Because she did seem to be very insecure, very bothered, behind the façade…

**LP:** Well, I think its, you know, it’s a huge decision for a prime minister to give up guaranteed office. You know, she had another year, nearly. But, basically, what we looked at, we took a very long view. We looked at every Thursday, right though to the last possible day, and certain things became clear. For instance - I just happen to remember - there were going to be two sets of bad unemployment statistics in September, because the students were going to come onto the unemployed list. And so, you know, the Liberals would have their conference, we would suddenly be faced with two sets of unemployment statistics, which could be a problem, but we could handle it… but we anticipated the sort of problems, and eventually came to the conclusion that there weren’t 52 Thursdays – there were three. And so, which of those three would we go for? And after the local elections, Margaret always said, ‘I will not go until I’m in my fifth year. So we must be in the fifth year. We may only just be in the fifth year, but we must be in the fifth year. Four years looks as if you’re running away. Fifth year’s alright’. So we had a look at these days, and we went through them, and she was quite… it was quite an amusing meeting, actually, because Dennis Healey made one of the great remarks, because when Margaret felt that she was likely to be bounced - or somebody was trying to bounce her, nobody ever really did bounce her – she would ask more people. So there wouldn’t be four people there, there would be seven!

**SC:** Safety in numbers.

**LP:** Safety in numbers. But this seven came, and Denis Healey said that this wasn’t the Magnificent Seven riding out to do battle – this was the seven dwarves going to visit Snow White! Which we thought was very funny. But that day, you know, we went through, for instance, she said things like, ‘The Manifesto’s not finished!’ I said, ‘Prime minister, the Manifesto is finished. We could finish the Manifesto in twenty minutes. It’s just two or three outstanding points, it’s done.’ And she was sort of creating reasons, and people were gradually drifting away. Then she said, when a lot of people had gone, she said, ‘In any case, the Queen’s probably not available tomorrow.’ So Ian Gow disappears, and comes back and says, ‘The Queen is available, at 12 o’clock.’ Well, if looks could kill, he would have dropped dead! But she said, ‘I’m not going to take a decision tonight, I’m going to sleep on it, and I’ll give you my decision tomorrow.’ And the next morning, she telephoned me and said, ‘Could you come round?’ And there she was, with like a shopping list, you know, which started: ‘Queen, Leader of the Opposition, Speaker’… she had a list of the people, all the people who had to be told. But she did, she needed persuading. And she would do until the fifth year. But it was the right time, and we got a thumping great majority. And we were ready to really launch into a new phase of our policies then, too.

**SC:** And there was a bit of a hitch about her going to the Queen, as I understand it. Sir Robin Butler… there was a lot of press outside, so he left by the back door, got on his bicycle, drove to the palace to see the Queen’s private secretary and make the arrangements… but when he cycled back, he found that a trooping of the colour ceremony was being rehearsed, and they wouldn’t let him in by the back door, and he had to go right round the building…

**LP:** No!

**SC:** …and by the time he got here, he said that she was absolutely like a cat on a hot tin roof, saying, ‘Where is he, where is he? Has the Queen… doesn’t like the dates?’ So you’ve quite often got these almost very domestic little hitches, which most of us don’t associate with No 10, but they do happen, don’t they.

**LP:** Oh yes, they do. I mean, there’s the most strange one was poor Alec Douglas-Home, who went off to the palace to resign, came out, and there was no car. And they said… his private secretary said, ‘Where’s the car?’ And they said, ‘The car’s gone to collect the prime minister’. And so, Alec Douglas-Home walked back to No 10, having resigned…

**SC:** Gosh!

**LP:** …from… I mean, it’s a bit of a comedown, isn’t it! I mean, one minute you’re in the prime ministerial limousine, and the next minute you’re walking! But Alec could handle that as well as anybody. But, no, you do get these extraordinary little snarl-ups, you know… all of a sudden, somebody’s missing at a critical moment that you need them, and things like that. But on the whole, things worked pretty well. Denis always said to me that it was the happiest campaign that they had; of course, partly because it looked pretty clear we were going to win, from the beginning.

**SC:** But she was never certain. She actually packed up her belongings before election day, here, just in case she had to move out quickly. What about this sort of underlying insecurity? You must have been aware of it. I mean, it wasn’t apparent to the rest of us…

**LP:** Well, she always regarded, for instance, Finchley as a marginal seat. I mean, in ’79, she got the family together – they were going out to Finchley for the count – and she said to them, ‘Look, I think we’re going to win the election tonight, but I might lose my seat’. So she never took Finchley for granted. And it had an effect on her with certain people. She couldn’t stand people who’d had safe seats and turned them into marginals. She thought that was really unforgivable. And so she was always… she never took Finchley for granted. I think she once told me she did over 130 constituency events a year as prime minister. She never, never neglected it, and was very keen about Finchley, and looking after it. So she never took her own position for granted, that was true. And at every election, she was nervous.

**SC:** Now, most of the campaign – all of it, in fact – she wasn’t here, or she slept here, but she wasn’t here very much. She was out on the stump with you. What was that like? I mean, it was a different world, wasn’t it. She mentioned somewhere that she saw a ‘portable telephone’, she called it, for the very first time! But what was it like out on the stump, with people telling her, you know, ‘Don’t wave except in the marginals’, and this sort of thing?

**LP:** Well, I didn’t travel with her a great deal, because we felt that I should be back at the centre, and should never be more than an hour’s journey from Central Office, because in one election, there had been a rumour that had spread, and there was nobody available to counter it, and it got traction. And so the feeling was that I should see her every morning for the press conferences, and the briefing, but what we were doing - and the whole basis of our campaign with her – was to give her an interesting programme, and to keep her busy, and to get her back here at least two of three nights a week, where she could relax, where we’d got very good footage in the can for the television, where she’d made the speech, we’d got this stuff out, and she could then think about the next day. So the aim was to take a lot of the pressure off her, and the contrast with Michael Foot was quite stark. You know, poor Michael, they’d have to take him for the ten o’clock news, live, wherever he happened to be, and whatever he happened to be saying, because they just hadn’t planned their… I mean, Michael Foot, for me – it may sound funny – but was an heroic figure, because the personal effort he put into it was just enormous, and the organisation behind him was awful. He really did, I mean, for a person of his age and everything, the amount of effort he put in was terrific. We all admired him! But, I mean, when his General Secretary gets up and says in the middle of the campaign, ‘Now, I want to make it clear, Mr Foot is still our leader’. You know, what can you do. He didn’t get a lot of help. But we were determined that we would use every minute of the prime minister’s time well. And if she was going to be away from London, it was all set up. But mainly, two or three nights a week, she would be back here, working on the next day.

**SC:** Now, there was actually at one point a poster suggested to her, with a picture – a rather unflattering picture, I think – of Michael Foot, with the slogan: ‘Under the Conservatives, all pensioners are better off’. And she vetoed it; she didn’t really like personal attacks…

**LP:** She didn’t, and this is one of the things that is rather strange about the present set up: she never attacked Neil Kinnock personally. Never. She never attacked Michael Foot personally. It just wasn’t her style of politics. And she rather admired the fact that he was putting the effort in that he was. So she never, she didn’t want any truck with that sort of politics, and she wouldn’t have it, we just didn’t get involved.

**SC:** Now, one of the things that happened in the election campaign was she flew over to Williamsburg, to the G7 summit with President Reagan, and she was a very thrifty housewife, it wasn’t just a pretence – she refused, apparently, to go by Concorde. But when they arrived at Williamsburg, all the leaders were there, and they found that there were *two* Concordes on the tarmac – both ready to take President Mitterand back to France. Two, in case one of them had a break down! She was extremely self-effacing, in a way, very un-presidential, despite the impression that we all have of her.

**LP:** Yes, she was. It was quite difficult … we had a long discussion about whether she should go to Williamsburg. She said it would look terrible, leaving the country in the middle of the election, and we said, ‘Well, you wouldn’t be going for a holiday in the south of France. You would be going to meet the leaders of the leading nations, and you would be working. And, what’s more, it would be relaxing’ – she loved that sort of exchange of ideas, that sort of conference – ‘It will be relaxing for you, you’ll be seen in your proper perspective as one of the world’s leaders, and we can handle things at home for a couple of days, there’s no problem’. But she then said, ‘We mustn’t waste taxpayers’ money, we mustn’t…’ But she really felt that, you know, it was a big decision to go. Of course, it was wonderful, it revived her, you know, she was the centre of interest, she played a big part, she loved Williamsberg, and she was back two days later and she’d had some wonderful publicity, and we’d – if I may admit it – all had a break!

**SC:** Yes, I’m sure you had! Now, what seems to have happened in that first period in office – culminating, of course, in the landslide victory in 1983 – that she was slowly building up her confidence. Now, you saw her at some crucial points in that period, because you were in her war cabinet, during the Falklands, and by the time of the landslide election – which obviously came as a bit of a surprise for her, as we’ve discussed – that was a big change in a way, wasn’t it, because she’d then got the Falklands victory behind her, the economy was turning, she’d got this huge victory… were you conscious at the time, or perhaps just a little bit later, that it was quite a big turning point? That this woman who seemed so tough was only really, not quite found her feet, but got into her stride after 1983?

**LP:** Yes, I think that the Falklands gave her a great deal of self-confidence. First of all, the military, who had been very suspicious at the beginning… I remember saying to one of them, ‘I looked across the table and I thought, I hope these people are going to be as good as they’re going to need to be.’ And he said, ‘And we looked at you, and thought we hope these people realise what they’ve let themselves in for.’ So there was this attitude to… you know, we didn’t really know each other as well as we got to know each other. But, gradually, they developed a hundred percent confidence in her, and they were a hundred percent committed to her, and to supporting her, and she never let them down. She never tried to run the campaign. She said… we gave political direction, but the military took the military decisions, and we didn’t attempt to interfere in those. In fact, there was a misunderstanding by some of the people on the ground, who felt that we were urging them to get a move on, because the United States was beginning to waver a little, and might have voted in favour of a ceasefire, which would have left us with a tiny force on the ground, and all the rest on ships, bucketing around in some of the worst conditions in the world. So we were very anxious that our troops didn’t get caught at sea. But they were doubly anxious. The military were the ones who were saying, ‘Please get a move on, because if there is a ceasefire, we don’t want to be in a little bridgehead, with all our troops on the ships.’ So there was a misunderstanding amongst the military on the group, that the politicians were pushed. The politicians weren’t – it was the Generals, and the Admirals, who were saying, ‘We cannot allow our troops to be caught in a bridgehead. We’ve gotta get a move on.’ So, apart from that, though, the thing worked like a charm. There was agreement and consensus and we all got on…

**SC:** And a huge boost for her self-confidence, it must have been…

**LP:** Oh, a huge boost, because there was no doubt by the end of the campaign the military were devoted to her. Because they hadn’t known what they were going to get, and what they got was support and encouragement, and so she was very, very popular. And that boosted her, I mean, she’d never planned to go to war, she hadn’t been to a war school or a staff college or… and it just was, that even in extreme circumstances, she could hold her own and play a vital role.

**SC:** And then, of course, came the landslide victory, which was almost… not quite the icing on the cake, but the ultimate. But right after that came the great difficulty, for you, of the Sarah Keys affair. And you all went down to Blackpool, to the Party Conference, thinking that the thing had been more or less sorted out. And then, while at Blackpool, when she was in the middle of sorting out her speech for the next day at Party Conference, came news of the *Times,* Sarah Keys’ damaging revelations in the *Times.* And the news came through, I think, to Robin Butler, who was her Principal Private Secretary, and it was he who came to see you, because neither of you wanted to interrupt her when she was in the middle of the traumatic business of doing her speech.

**LP:** Yes, Robin came to see me. But, by the way, you’re wrong in saying that I thought the thing had gone away…

**SC:** Sorry…

**LP:** …because one of the things… probably the most decisive point, or as decisive a point as there was that I was due to leave for America and Japan on the Sunday. And at the risk of sounding a little bit…you know, I was quite well known, and there was a lot of interest. And a big press corpswas coming with me, and I just felt that far from promoting trade and trade relations, and foreign relations, I would be answering questions about my personal life, in Japan, in America, wherever. And that I couldn’t do that. It would be the reverse of a contribution, it would be a problem. And so, therefore, I was pretty well settled that I would not go to America and Japan. I just didn’t think that would have worked.

**SC:** It was almost a sort of closeness of this family atmosphere. The civil servants, you, worrying about Thatcher being in the midst of this very difficult business of doing the last-minute changes to her speech. It was a sign almost of the closeness, of the way people worked who were used to each other from No 10.

**LP):** Yes, it was a very personal business, and Margaret was not at all… she was very, very good in that she wasn’t at all censorious. She really said, ‘Well, what is this to do with anybody but you and her? And you sort it out’. And I said, ‘I don’t think so’, for reasons which I explained. Nevertheless, the main thing was, on the Thursday I’d had my first speech to the Conference for four years…

**SC:** Which had gone very well.

**LP:** Yeah, Norman Tebbit was in the chair, my old friend, and he… I got a standing ovation before I started, and he said to me, ‘It’ll be very embarrassing if they don’t stand up when you finish!’ And we sort of… anyway, they did. And I went off to Lancaster, to speak at a dinner in my home town, and then I came back, and then the thing had… apparently the *Times* had sent a reporter down, and although there was an agreement not to comment any further, that was broken. And so… the funny thing was, that both Charlie Douglas-Home, and the editor of the *Guardian,* both asked me to write a weekly column for them.

**SC:** What, afterwards?

**LP:** Afterwards, yes.

**SC:** Charlie Douglas-Home was the editor of the *Times.*

**LP:** Yes, and the amusing thing was, Hugo Young was a friend of mine, and Hugo and I had lunch, and Hugo had just left the *Sunday Times.* And there was Hugo, dying to write and no paper to write for, and I had an offer from two! But I had always hated writing, so I was never tempted, but it was rather an interesting sideline.

**SC:** She brought you back, of course, some years later, and I want to ask you about that briefly in a moment, but can we just talk a little bit about No 10, about the house? Because you said she sort of feminised the place, didn’t she, because before, under the Labour prime ministers and under Heath, it had been quite a Spartan sort of place.

**LP:** Oh, it… I mean, forgive me for saying this this morning, but coming in this morning, it looks quite Spartan too. Her study was a most elegant room, where she worked, and where a lot of small meetings took place… where she saw Willy before cabinet and so on like that. And she’d borrowed pictures and silver… she was very proud of No 10, and she really wanted to make something… you know, to make it an elegant place as well as a working place. So she loved the history of the house, and the idea that she could perfect it, and beautify it, and improve it. She set a lot of store… you know, it was her home upstairs, but downstairs it was the home of the prime minister of the United Kingdom, and she wanted people to see it at its best.

**SC:** And she did – she and Denis – did a lot of entertaining, didn’t they, which I think some of which, Denis paid for out of his own pocket, so it was an important part of her role as prime minister, that they did that…

**LP:** Yes, no, they were quite… they were very good hosts, and very active hosts. And she was very thoughtful. For instance, after the Falklands, we had the dinner for the people who’d been the main participants. The dining room here wasn’t big enough for wives – so would either have to halve the number of the servicemen, or not have wives. So she decided that they couldn’t have wives, or it was decided… but then there was a super reception held, and she took the wives round the cabinet room and showed them round the house, and tried to say, if there had only been a big enough room they would all have been here. So she was very thoughtful like that, about people. And she was proud of this house, and I think she did use it to entertain, and she was very proud to show people the place, and she made her mark on it. There were some funny moments. The last *Question Time* programme of the ‘83 election was up at the National Conference Centre in Birmingham. I was up there with Denis Healey and Bill Rogers. Denis had made a rather unfortunate remark the day before – which he subsequently apologized for – about her glorying in slaughter, which was… nobody would have dinner with him, and it was all… but he started the programme by saying that he was sorry, and that was alright. But then I had to get back to No 10, because we wanted to decide about the advertising for the next week, and I wanted to cancel it all, because I felt that it would just be a waste of money. And there were other reasons. So, having left the National Conference Centre by helicopter – I offered Robin Day a lift, but he felt that he should stay with the audience – we landed and we got here. I went up to the flat, and Margaret was in the flat with one or two people, and Denis was at the far end of the flat, looking at *Question Time*. And he sort of turns round to see me coming through the door, and just at that time, I’m on *Question Time*. And he turns, and he says, ‘How the hell are you here if you’re there?!’ He didn’t realise the programme was recorded, and it was just a wonderful double take, you know, he just couldn’t believe that the person that he was looking at was there!

**SC:** Denis was one of the few people – very few people – with whom she was quite meek, was he not?

**LP:** Oh yes.

**SC:** There were stories that sometimes, if she was having a real set-to on the phone with a cabinet minister, he would look up from his paper and say, ‘Margaret! That’s enough of him.’ And she would say, ‘Oh, I’ve gotta go now’. Would she sometimes be quite meek?

**LP:** Well, I’ve been at dinners where he’d say, ‘Margaret, it’s time we left.’ You know, ‘We’ve got to get you back’. And she’d go. She had a lot of respect for Dennis. She really appreciated his common sense, and his down-to-earth, and the fact that he’d say whatever was in his mind, and she really treasured that. He was a great supporter of her at a difficult time, but he was very proud of her too. But she did set a lot of store by No 10, not as a personal thing, but as the home of the prime minister, and a place that people should come to and admire.

**SC:** Now, at the very end – because she brought you back in 1987, and you resigned I think when she did – have you any memories of those last few days, of coming up the staircase here to see her?

**LP:** Yes, I do remember. I’d decided that I didn’t want to work with John Major and John Major’s government. I felt that the cabinet had really let her down, and I just didn’t want to be involved. So, on the Monday – the final vote was on the Tuesday – I came here to say to her, ‘Look, you appointed me. I would like to resign to you, and leave with you’. And I came in here, and so an appointment was made. I came in, and it was the most eerie experience, because every corridor and all the staircases were lined with flowers. There were literally thousands of bouquets of flowers, and they went right up the stairs right to the door of the study. I went in there, and she was sitting behind the desk with four or five papers to sign, and there was the most... I’d been in a similar situation before, but you had the feeling that all power had gone. You know, this was the most powerful person in the land - one of the most - until a few hours earlier and the power had been stripped away. The only other time I had experienced that was when Ted Heath, in ’74, he came into the whip’s office when he’d called the election – I was a whip then, and we had a drink, and we drank champagne – and then he came a few days later, when we’d lost, after the election, and he’d been trying to put a coalition together. He came back into the whip’s office, the opposition… and all the power had gone from him. All the authority. And it was exactly the same feeling in No 10 that night. I just felt, you know, this really is the end of the road. It made me very angry, because in my opinion it was all so unnecessary, but I know there are other views about that.

**SC:** End of a great era.

**LP:** End of a remarkable era. I mean, just… you know, I remember going to Russia in ’79 and being told we were the sick man of Europe, they didn’t want to buy anything from us, we were hopeless, all our stuff was useless, we were always late… going back ten years later, when the Politburowere fighting for the opportunity to have a meeting with me, because Britain was seen as a country that had transformed itself. So it was very sad that it ended the way that it did, but that’s it.

**SC:** Cecil Parkinson – Lord Parkinson – thank you very much indeed.

**LP:** Pleasure.