

Public Opinion and Thatcherism

BY

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ABSTRACT

PUBLIC OPINION AND THATCHERISM

Scanning a ten-year period of public opinion polls by Gallup, this paper tries to assess the successes and weaknesses of Thatcherism in getting its message across. The ratings of personalities, and policies, are scrutinized as are responses to the basic tenets of Thatcherism.

RÉSUMÉ

LE THATCHÉRISME ET L'OPINION

En confrontant les sondages d'opinion effectués dix ans durant par l'institut Gallup, cet article essaie d'évaluer les succès et les faiblesses du message thatchérien. Ainsi est examinée la popularité des personnalités, des politiques, de même que les réactions aux principes de base du crédo thatchérien.

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« Thatcherism » has recently been defined as « a political outlook associated with Margaret Thatcher but stemming from an individualist view found in Britain's 19th-century Liberal and 20th-century Conservative parties. Thatcherism is an ideology no longer confined to Britain and comprises a belief in the efficacy of market forces, the need for strong central government, and a conviction that self-help is preferable to reliance on the state combined with a strong element of nationalism. »

Personality

In any discussion of the British public's attitudes to « Thatcherism » it makes sense to begin briefly with the lady herself. She was not only the first woman Prime Minister ; she had won three general elections, being in office for a near record period ; yet she resigned undefeated — probably in line for a fourth election victory — and rated as the least popular Prime Minister since Chamberlain. As a member of the Opposition, Mrs Thatcher did not make much impact on the general public until 1974, when around one in four felt that she was an asset to the Conservative party. This then leapt to three in five after she won the Leadership battle in early 1975.

Fourteen years ago, and again just a little over two years ago, when the public were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with 17 statements about Mrs Thatcher, the top four were highly complimentary :

— « She's trying hard in her job » (99 per cent and 83 per cent respectively).

— « She is a strong personality » (84 per cent and 93 per cent).

— « She speaks her mind » (83 per cent and 90 per cent) and

— « She is a good speaker » (81 per cent and 80 per cent).

But over the twelve years separating the two studies, the public's image of Mrs Thatcher had decayed : they were more inclined to see her as divisive, with destructive, rather than constructive ideas, snobbish, egotistical and out of touch ; and less inclined to think

of her as knowing about the problems of the cost of living. Similarly, between 1975 and 1990, Mrs Thatcher's status as a strong, forceful and experienced personality grew but declined in terms of her sincerity and warmth of character.

Parties

In the run-up to the 1979 election and the first of Mrs. Thatcher's three victories, the Conservatives enjoyed a substantial advantage over Labour as being the best party to cut income tax, reduce crime and vandalism and make Britain more prosperous — all three aims the public would now say 12 years later the Conservative party has failed to meet. Asked in April 1979 what the effect would be if the Conservatives won the election, majorities expected less government help for the nationalised industries, less union power, less direct taxation but more encouragement for small businesses and more law and order. If Labour remained in office, the expectations were more government help for the nationalised industries, more union power, more control of incomes and more inflation, with less encouragement for small businesses. The public's priorities at this time were to maintain law and order, control inflation, reduce unemployment, reduce taxation and control immigration. Among these top five priorities the Conservatives were seen to be particularly good for four of them, while the two main parties were just one point apart on the fifth. When asked which party overall had the best policies, the Conservatives were the public's favourites, with Labour thought to have the best leaders and the better Prime Minister in Mr Callaghan. But policies not leadership qualities appear to have won the 1979 election for Mrs Thatcher. An approval rating of the Government's handling of thirteen issues between June 1979 and September 1990 shows a consistent deterioration over the period, with two exceptions: the Common Market and strikes and labour relations. It would appear that, in general, in terms of both Mrs Thatcher's personality and her policies, there were unfulfilled expectations as far as the public was concerned.

Policies

There are a number of areas however, that have been, and always will be, strongly identified with Thatcherism. The first of these is

the aim of reducing taxation. At first, in early 1979, the public were evenly divided between cutting taxes or extending government services. Twelve years later almost three in four opted for extending government services, even if it meant some increases in taxes. Similarly, public reaction to the so-called « flagship » of Thatcherism — the abolition of domestic rates to be replaced by the community charge, or « poll tax » — although enthusiastic when first launched, deteriorated and it was soon thought to be a less fair system than the one it was trying to replace.

The change from the unloved nationalised industries to the private sector was a further example of learning what the public wanted, yet failing to produce the correct remedy : one monopolistic organisation was replaced by another monopolistic organisation in the name of increased competition. Even where that butt of numerous comedians was concerned — British Rail — one in two of the public felt that its privatisation would be a bad idea. At the extreme, three in four were against privatising the water industry, but that did not stop Mrs Thatcher doing precisely that. It was partly, no doubt, the public's perceived link between privatisation and the National Health Service that led to 4 in 5 of them disapproving of « *the changes that are currently taking place in the way the National Health Service is run* ». This issue has already resurfaced as a potential problem for the Conservatives in the next general election. A similar question at the same time, September 1990, about the education system, found two in three disapproving of proposed government changes.

The trade unions too, came to the fore during Mrs Thatcher's term in office. They had slowly declined in public esteem during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s until they reached a low point in the late 1970s as a result of the miners' dispute and the « winter of discontent ». Mrs Thatcher gauged the public's concern over industrial disruptions but through her policies to curb the excesses of the unions, partly by curing the problem and partly by going too far in making them impotent, the ratings of the trade unions has risen during the 1980's so that they are now as popular as they were forty years ago and lacking the power that made them a « bogeyman » institution. The public now believe that the balance of power is tilted too far in favour of British management.

Government

In the decade between 1980 and 1990, Gallup tested various « issue effects », that is, whether a particular issue, or the Government's

handling of it, made people more favourable or less favourable towards the Government. In all, there were twelve such studies, asking about a number of issues. The following items were included in at least five of the studies — in all twelve in the case of Mrs Thatcher and the cost of living.

| | Made | | |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| | More favourable | Less favourable | Net difference |
| The Government's policy on trade unions | 43 | 30 | + 13 |
| The Government's policy on the Common Market | 33 | 38 | — 5 |
| Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister | 32 | 42 | — 10 |
| The Government's privatisation policy | 29 | 48 | — 19 |
| The Government's taxation policy | 23 | 44 | — 21 |
| The cost of living | 17 | 56 | — 39 |
| The number unemployed | 10 | 66 | — 56 |
| The Government's handling of the National Health Service | 9 | 77 | — 68 |

Thatcherism scale

The less specific tenets of Thatcherism also achieved less support among the public. A set of five questions were designed to create a « Thatcherism Scale ». In June 1983 only one of the five achieved majority support and six years later even this had dropped to a little over one in three. The five items were:

- sticking firmly to one's beliefs when dealing with political opponents (50 per cent in 1983 declining to 37 per cent in 1989)
- no government can do much to create economic prosperity; it is up to people themselves (48 per cent and 43 per cent respectively)

— in difficult economic times, the government should be tough rather than caring (46 per cent and 39 per cent respectively)

— in its relations with the rest of the World, Britain should not compromise (30 per cent and 23 per cent respectively)

— trade unions and business should be kept at arm's length when making decisions about the economy (28 per cent and 25 per cent respectively).

Foreign affairs

It was on the international stage, rather than at home, that Mrs Thatcher earned her sobriquet, « The Iron Lady ». The Falklands, in particular, showed her strength during her first term in office. Recent academic writings, however, suggest that an upturn in the economy, already underway in early 1982, was more important to Mrs Thatcher's victory in 1983 than the defeat of the Argentinians a year earlier. There is no doubt that the public's confidence in the Government's handling of the economy rose in the first few months of 1982 and by May all the indicators had moved strongly in the Government's favour :

— 18 per cent more than in January thought the Government was handling the economy properly.

— 30 per cent more thought the Conservatives were popular.

— 12 per cent more were satisfied with Mrs Thatcher.

— 14 per cent more were prepared to vote for the Conservatives.

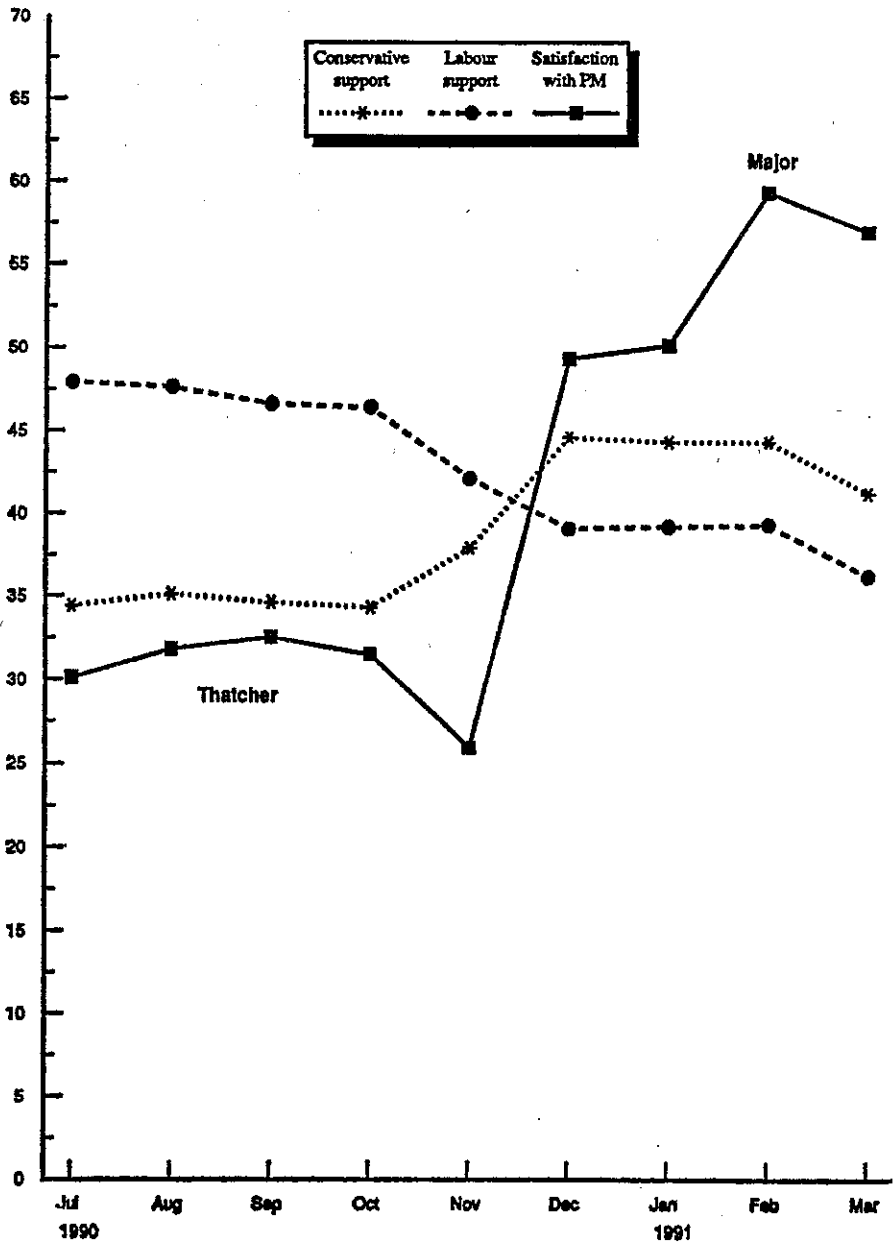
The Gulf Crisis in 1990-1991 had no such impact on the fortunes of Mrs Thatcher or the Conservative party — she had resigned before the Allies victory. Between July and October, for example, Mrs Thatcher's personal popularity remained virtually static at a little over 30 per cent of the public satisfied with her performance and around 35 per cent saying they would support the Conservatives, giving Labour a 12 point advantage. By December, however, after Mr Major had taken over, the Conservatives took a 5 per cent lead and Mr Major had one in two satisfied with him. This level of popularity actually increased through the early months of 1991, but the Conservative lead over Labour remained stuck at 5 per cent. This was in spite of substantial majorities of the public supporting almost any Allied action in the conflict, short of using chemical or nuclear weapons or the bombing of civilian targets.

Leaders

As might be expected, the public's perception of the two Conservative leaders was as diverse as the individuals' popularity ratings. Between 1980 and 1990, for example, when asked to position Mrs Thatcher on a verbal « Left-Right Scale », the proportion saying she was « Far Right » increased from 24 per cent to 45 per cent. This was in sharp contrast to the public's rating of both themselves and the Conservative party. When asked to position Mr Major on the same scale in January 1991 only 9 per cent thought that he was on the « Far Right ». Three times as many (30 per cent) said he was « Moderately Right », compared earlier with 6 per cent for Mrs Thatcher. Similarly, while 60 per cent of the public disliked Mrs Thatcher personally, 60 per cent liked Mr Major. The picture was fuzzy where policies were concerned : although 71 per cent disliked Mrs Thatcher's policies (in March 1990) compared with 39 per cent in the following January disliking Mr Major's policies, the proportions actually liking the policies were much closer, 26 per cent for Mrs Thatcher's and 39 per cent for Mr Major's.

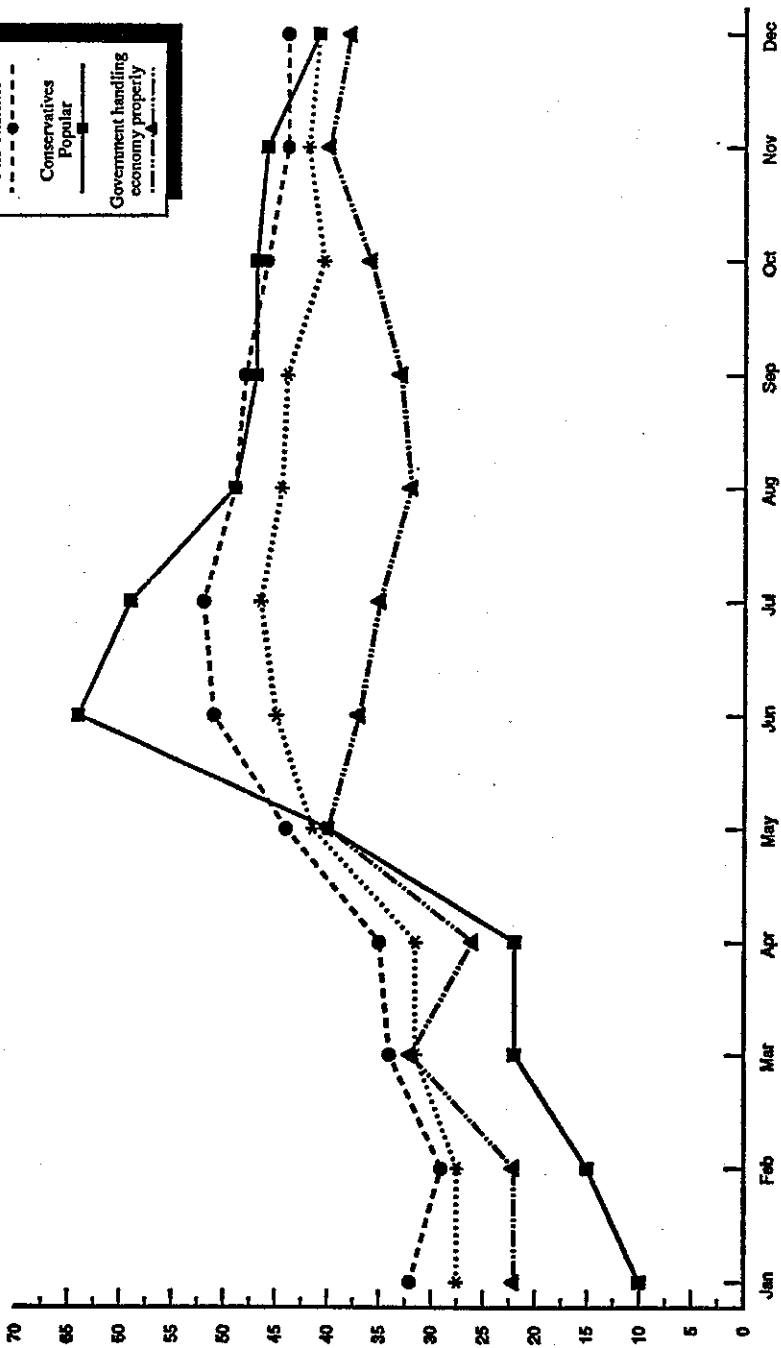
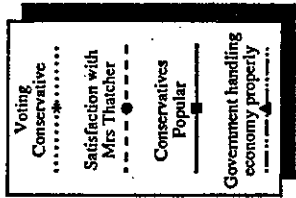
Finally, to the public's image of the two leaders. Naturally, when compared with Mr Major, Mrs Thatcher enjoyed a huge advantage in terms of experience of government and having a strong personality, but the position was reversed when it came to the more humane, caring dimensions.

THE GULF CRISIS AND THE BRITISH POLITICAL SCENE



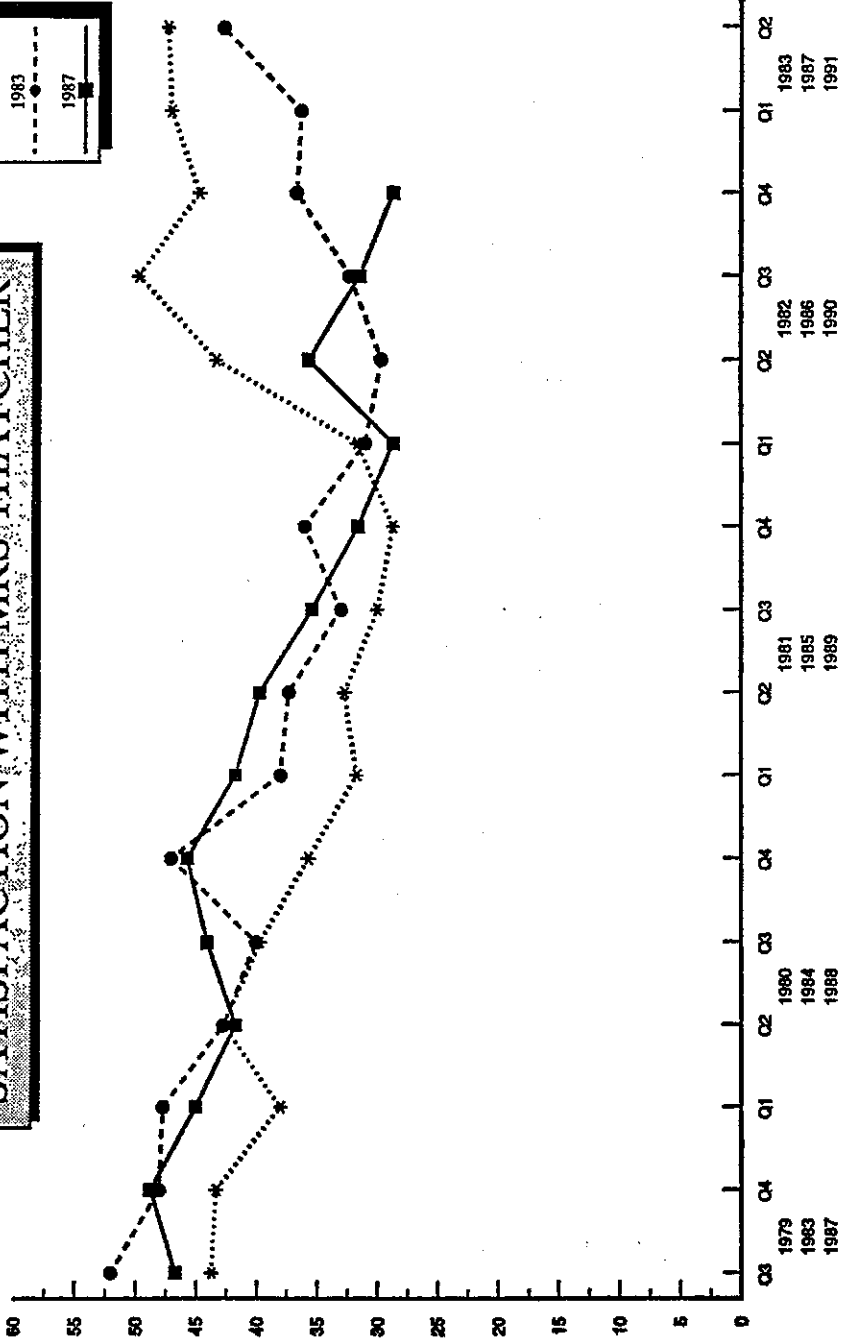
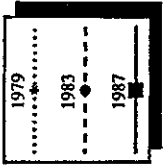
Gallup.

THE FALKLANDS: 1982



Gallup.

SATISFACTION WITH MRS. THATCHER



Gallup.

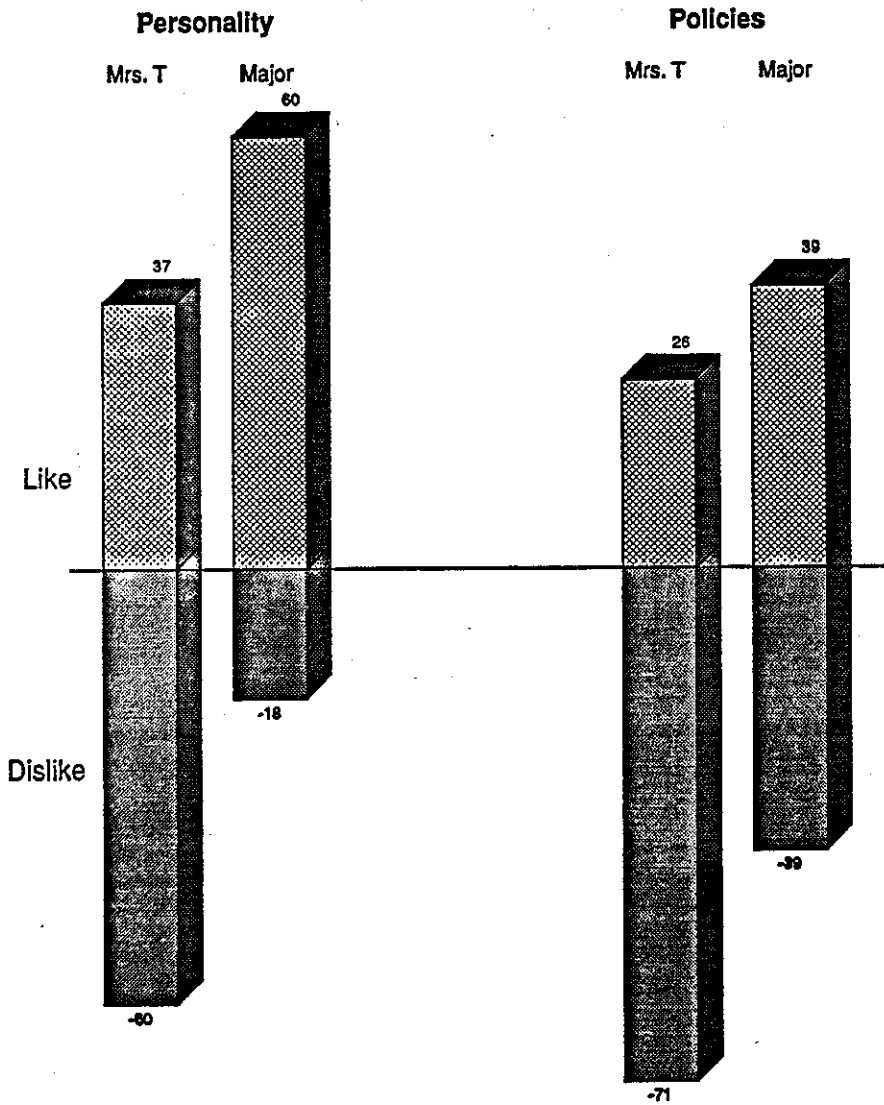
MRS THATCHER vs MR MAJOR

Q *Who do you think has more of each of the following qualities, Mrs Thatcher or Mr Major? (February 1991)*

| | Thatcher | Major | Difference |
|---|----------|-------|------------|
| Experience of Government | 78 | 8 | + 70 |
| A strong personality | 76 | 12 | + 64 |
| The ability to lead | 46 | 28 | + 18 |
| The ability to deal with other world leaders | 42 | 30 | + 12 |
| The ability to talk straight to people | 25 | 43 | - 18 |
| Imagination | 25 | 38 | - 13 |
| Knows what he or she is talking about | 18 | 31 | - 13 |
| Honesty | 5 | 48 | - 43 |
| Ability to unite the country | 12 | 64 | - 52 |
| Sincerity | 9 | 61 | - 52 |
| An understanding of the problems of ordinary people | 3 | 73 | - 70 |
| Friendliness and warmth | 5 | 80 | - 75 |
| Willingness to listen to other people | 4 | 84 | - 80 |

Gallup.

PERSONALITY AND/OR POLICIES?



Gallup.
March 1990/Januar 1991.

POLL TAX

Q *Would you describe yourself as very strongly in favour of the new poll tax, fairly strongly in favour of it, fairly strongly opposed to it or very strongly opposed to it?*

| | June 1990 | Sept. 1990 |
|---------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Very strongly in favour | 6 | 6 |
| Fairly strongly in favour | 22 | 16 |
| Fairly strongly opposed | 19 | 22 |
| Very strongly opposed | 49 | 54 |
| Don't know | 5 | 3 |

Gallup.

PRIVATISATION vs NATIONALISATION

Q *Some industries today are in private hands and some are nationalised, owned by the government. What do you think of the present combination of public and private ownership? (February 1989)*

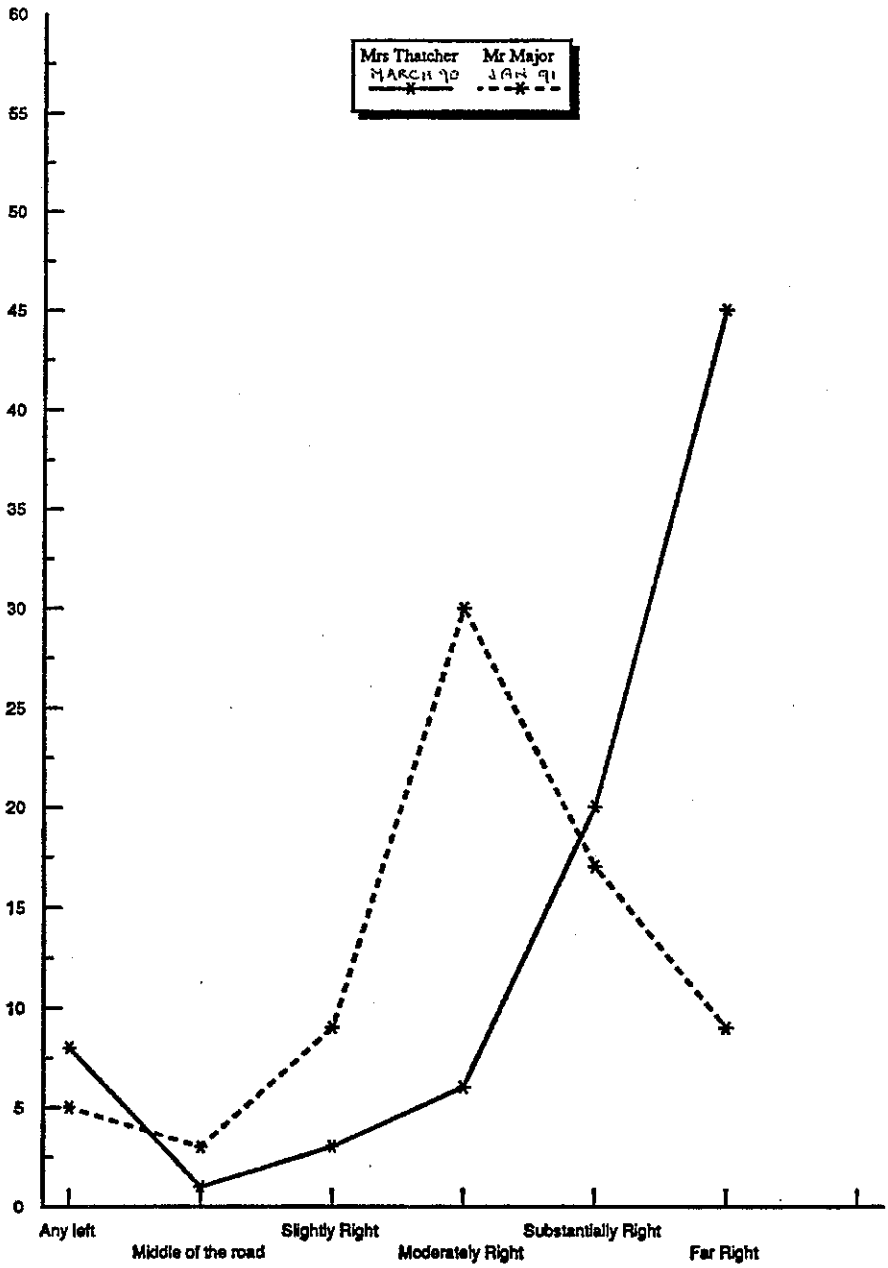
| | |
|---|----|
| More should be privatised/sold off | 20 |
| About right | 38 |
| More should be nationalised/in public ownership | 32 |
| Don't know | 11 |

Q *Do you think it would be a good idea or a bad idea if the government decided to sell any of the following nationalised industries by offering shares to the general public and private companies? (February 1989)*

| | Good Idea | Bad Idea | Don't know |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| British Rail | 36 | 53 | 12 |
| Steel | 35 | 49 | 16 |
| Coal board | 32 | 56 | 11 |
| Electricity | 22 | 68 | 10 |
| Water | 15 | 75 | 10 |

Gallup.

THE LEFT-RIGHT SCALE



Gallup.