



Yes, Minister

by David Brooks

British prime minister John Major's victory over Labour challenger Neil Kinnock was a stunning upset, and shocked nearly all observers except Major himself. Yet, when victory was sure, and Major emerged from 10 Downing Street to greet his delirious supporters, he could do no better than drone on about the virtues of a national health service.

Is there anything that arouses emotion in him? Major built his career in banking, and strikes the casual observer as one who is happy only when working through a mountain of paperwork. Yet in the House of Commons years back, when he was chancellor of the exchequer and *She* was prime minister, he could occasionally be seen during debates with head tilted back and a beatific smile on his face. It was the smile of a man who, after a hard climb up the ladder, discovers that . . . yes, it really is fun to have power. John Major, who dropped out of high school and failed the exam to become a bus conductor, is an establishmentarian, and a happy one.

Major entered the Commons in 1979, the year Margaret Thatcher became prime minister, along with a distinguished crop of young MPs. Its most promising members—mostly Oxbridge graduates who had known each other since school days—formed a dining club called the Blue Chips, so named because each of them was a potential prime minister. John Major was not asked to join. Among the group's leaders were Tristan Garel Jones, now Major's European affairs minister; John Patten,

now Major's education minister; William Waldegrave, who oversees Major's pet project, the Social Charter; and Chris Patten, who was made governor of Hong Kong after managing Major's recent campaign.

The Blue Chips were not Thatcherites but "wets," thoroughgoing moderates. They believed in fiscal prudence but disdained Mrs. Thatcher's confrontationalism and her radical streak. Coming from a higher class than she, they saw less of a need to shake things up. (Had Richard Darman been British, he would have been a good Blue Chip.) In the short run, Major's isolation from them served him well: while the Blue Chips waged a wet counterrevolution against Thatcherism, Major was consolidating his position as a junior minister. Only when he had made something of himself, in 1985, was he admitted to the Blue Chips.

Now he surrounds himself with Blue Chips and embodies many of their

habits. In important ways he is their superior: he shares none of their superciliousness and is allergic to snobbery. But Major is an establishment conservative to the core, one who believes in a government of "the best men." He believes government can perform a wide range of duties if managed well. At the same time, he has no use for intellectuals or for philosophic principles which in today's argot are known as "ideologies."

Yet he is not George Bush, with the attention span of a cartoon character and a domestic policy record all over the map. Major is extraordinarily stubborn, in many ways more unyielding than Mrs. Thatcher was, once he has made up his mind. For example, he seems to be the first British prime minister viscerally to hate inflation. It was only under intense pressure that he gave in and devalued the pound when European currencies went berserk in September.

Major also believes in controlling government spending. To the crucial cost-containment posts in his cabinet he has appointed not Blue Chips but the true Thatcherites who dominate the parliamentary Class of 1983. Members of the hard-line No Turning Back group, these include Michael Portillo, who manages Major's budget; and Peter Lilly, in charge of restraining social security spending. If God loves Britain, Michael Portillo will one day be prime minister.

But Major's lack of true Thatcherite principle is evident. Not too long ago, he was asked by *Time* magazine what he would like to achieve as prime minister, a simple question that should have called forth his highest ideals. This is his complete answer:



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I want to enhance Britain's position as a nation that is at the heart of Europe, in the center of the G-7 process, maintaining its important links to the Atlantic alliance and becoming, to a greater extent than it has perhaps been in some years in the past, the leader of the Commonwealth and again being seen as such. I see Britain as a much more outward-going influence that could be benevolent, and I want to see it exercised.

Not a word about *why* Britain should play a role in world affairs, or about what it could achieve. Major just wants to be part of the process, to sit in well-lit rooms with other successful men and manage the world. Indeed, his most recent foreign policy initiative is a proposal for streamlining the G-7 summits.

Major is good at summits. At Maastricht, where European leaders hammered out the malevolent treaty of the same name, Major made Kohl look like a hapless uncle and Mitterrand a doddering old man. He won those talks, securing Britain the right to opt out of costly EC social provisions. But when the Danes rejected Maastricht and gave Major the chance to deep-six the whole treaty, which had been Britain's wish going in, he instead became the champion of its rescue. A London *Times* editorial titled "Mr. Major Goes Native" expressed the common view that Major was so in love with his amendments to a bad treaty that he wanted to save the whole thing in order to preserve them.

Closer to the truth is that, had Major moved to kill the treaty, it would have upset the other members of the board of directors. It would have soured the working relationship between EC leaders and diminished Britain's influence—as Major defines influence. Major, who felt he had made a personal commitment to the other leaders, is punctilious on points of honor.

After the Danish vote, more than a hundred Tory MPs announced they would oppose the treaty. Major and his whips unleashed a lobbying campaign the likes of which Parliament has not seen in years. Mrs. Thatcher, after all, was a softie, not good at firing those in her party who didn't have her best interests at heart. Major is tougher, and holds oddballs and outside critics in low regard. He managed to have a maverick committee chairman deposed, and

to intimidate a number of rebellious MPs.

We've developed a distrust of establishments over the last few decades, but if anyone can make establishmentarianism work it will be John Major. Moreover, he might be just right for Britain's current role, for Britain is now a nation that often finds its fate in the hands of others. The

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Germans run its monetary policy. The EC sets its tax parameters. Its officials occupy their time with European initiatives. And if the prime minister's role is to play within the EC process, then Major, in his dullness, may be the right man for the job.

If the British start taking their marching orders from Brussels, after all, there will be no need for a prime minister who is often ebullient and overjoyed. □

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Requiem for an Army Wife

by Benjamin J. Stein

Friday

Ring, ring, ring. At about ten to eight, as I was sleeping, listening to the wonderful sound of my boy laughing in my dreams, I was awakened by the telephone. I couldn't get up before the machine answered it, so I went back to sleep. I figured it was probably Citicorp calling about my car lease bill, so why bother racing upstairs for the call?

I was wrong. When I checked my messages, the first one was from my father-in-law, calling to say that my mother-in-law, Norma Jean Denman Warmack, originally of Idabel, Oklahoma, and more recently of Heber Springs, Arkansas, had died that morning in her sleep. I called Col. Denman back. He said that he did not know exactly what she had died of. She had suffered excruciating pain for years from osteoarthritis, and now she was gone. "Maybe she was just worn out," Col. Denman said.

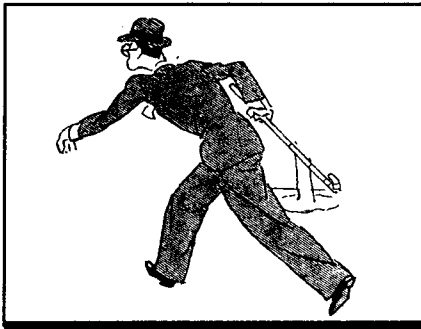
It fell to me to call my erstwhile wife's housekeeper, have her awaken Alex, and then tell her the news. When I told her, she cried. "But I didn't even get to say good-bye," she said. "I was going to see her next week, and now I can't ever say good-bye."

Frantic calls to Zuma Travel, frantic packing, frantic instructions to my assistant, and then we were off on American Airlines to Little Rock via Dallas. We didn't have time to use our fabulous AAdvantage Miles to get into First Class, so we were all three in coach. Every seat was filled, mostly with people in bad moods. Alex sat next to me, occasionally crying, mostly struggling with Tommy, whom we had brought along

just to show us that there is continuity in life. He read a book about sharks and then fell asleep.

If you don't think that this is a class system, try flying coach some sweet day. Then try flying First Class. Then coach again. Try asking a flight attendant in coach for something like a glass of orange juice. Try to survive her basilisk stare. In coach. Then ask for vintage champagne in First. Try to survive her overwhelming smile.

In Little Rock, it was dark. The airport was packed. The air was damp with the kind of humidity we do not know in glorious Los Angeles. A driver of a van hired in Heber Springs drove us through the Arkansas night to Heber, through empty streets. By the time we got to Eden Isle, a glamorous residential



community on a large lake forty miles north of Little Rock, it was midnight. Col. Denman was asleep in bed at the house of his friends.

Alex and I let him sleep. We went to his condo and looked at the room where Mrs. Denman had died that morning. Alex started to read prayers that her mother had kept near her invalid bed. Then she started to look at her mother's jewelry, and at her poems from Pi Phi, her sorority at Stevens College before the

end of World War II. I read some of the mountain of citations and memorials that Col. Denman had won. Silver Star near Zeitlin, Germany. Bronze Star, Vietnam. Distinguished Service Cross. Photos of Fort Bliss, El Paso, Leavenworth, Ansbach, Frankfurt, Alexandria, Arlington, Saigon.

Army wives, army wives, hurrah for the Army wives . . . Where would we be without them, wives who tend the hearth and raise the kids while the husbands are off fighting in Germany and Vietnam? When Col. Denman had to lie low in a marsh in Vietnam, trying to ambush some Vietcong who never came by, at least he had company. Mrs. Denman and Alex and her sister Dale had to hear that their father's quarters in Saigon had been blown up by sappers in 1964, and they had to stay up all night in terror all by themselves.

Saturday

All day long, friends and neighbors came to offer condolences to Col. Denman in his little living room. A doctor who had attended the late Mrs. Denman's arthritis. A neighbor who brought chicken. Another neighbor, also a doctor, with hilarious tales about a small town Southern medical practice. The preacher, likewise an Army brat, with stories of his own father's life in Army blue.

The father and my erstwhile wife talked about how Mrs. Denman would have wanted the ceremony to go. They tried to recall her favorite hymns and psalms. "Perhaps 'The Old Rugged Cross,'" I suggested helpfully.

"Exactly," Alex said. "That was one of Mother's favorites."

"And perhaps 'Rock of Ages,'" I added.

Benjamin J. Stein is a writer, lawyer, economist, and actor living in Malibu, California.