Transcript

The Thirtieth Anniversary of Margaret Thatcher's Downfall

Lord Moore of Etchingham

With Robert Orchard

The Strand Group

King's College London

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Jon Davis: Good evening, everyone, and welcome to the forty-fifth Strand Group meeting. I'm the director, Jon Davis. Tonight we are so fortunate to host Lord Moore of Etchingham to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of Margaret Thatcher – one of the most remarkable events of modern political and governmental history.

They say everyone remembers where they were when JFK died; well, I was in a sixth-form politics class, out in Hornchurch, at Abbs Cross Comprehensive, in Essex, when one of our particularly left-leaning history teachers burst in with the news that Thatcher had fallen. To this day I can still see that quite weird mixture of glee, and some awe, actually, about what had just happened.

This event also marks the paperback publication of the third and final volume of Lord Moore's extraordinary authorised biography – this one subtitled, "Herself Alone" – all three absolutely essential for our Number Ten-partnered classes here at King's.

To kick this evening off, we are delighted to welcome back to King's Robert Orchard, who in 1990 covered the whole affair for the BBC. Robert: you're most welcome.

Robert Orchard: Thank you, Jon, and I'm delighted to be taking part in this Strand Group session, both as a political journalist who covered this momentous event, as you say, and also as a former – very mature – MA student of Jon's at King's a few years ago.

It seemed to me that an event marking the dramatic fall of Mrs Thatcher would be incomplete without seeing, and hearing from, the "Iron Lady" herself. So I've put together a rudimentary – very rudimentary – TV-style report of how this historic event came about, with enormous assistance from my two producers and picture editors, the excellent Greg Owens in Cardiff, and Martin Stolliday for King's. So bear with us, please, for any technical gremlins: we can't promise to be as slick as the TV news.

Now, the political assassination of Margaret Thatcher in broad daylight is still probably Britain's most dramatic political story since the war, but it's three decades since the Conservatives bundled out of office their triple-election-winning Prime Minister, and for many people, as Jon was saying, it now seems almost a historical event. She's a historical figure – almost like Lloyd George, Attlee… even Churchill. But for many of us who lived through the 1980s, she was very real. Love her or loathe her

– and there were few voters who had no opinion – the Iron Lady was a force of nature, who dominated British politics for a decade; and her stunning fall in November 1990 – which I covered, as a BBC political correspondent – split her party, inflicting wounds that some say have yet to heal, thirty years on.

[Audiovisual report]

Mrs Thatcher had been the "dark horse" candidate who vanquished Ted Heath to become Conservative leader. It meant an uneasy start to her premiership: her first Cabinet included many one-nation party grandees – the so-called wets – who mocked and opposed her. Two of her most able ministers were Geoffrey Howe, her first Chancellor, and Michael Heseltine, an impulsive, charismatic figure and Party Conference favourite. Back then, both men cheered her uncompromising message:

[**Margaret Thatcher**, addressing Party Conference:] *I have only one thing to say: you turn if you want to.* [Sustained applause] *The lady's not for turning.*

Mrs Thatcher routed her political enemies and won a second election, but trouble was looming with Michael Heseltine. A passionate pro-European, he fought for the ailing Westland Helicopter company, but felt he was gagged from setting out his solution in a crucial Cabinet meeting:

[**Michael Heseltine**, later:] *That was the point at which I folded my papers and said, "I have no place in this Cabinet."*

[**Michael Heseltine** in 1986:] *I have resigned from the Cabinet and will make a full statement later today.*

[**Bernard Ingham**, later:] *If you are going to have a Cabinet, then you'd better have collective responsibility, and Heseltine wasn't prepared to live by it. He was prepared to die by it – as he did… Oh, I think that there was no doubt about it. We actually expected him to cause trouble.*

Robert Orchard: Bernard Ingham was right. As Mrs Thatcher's irascible press secretary predicted, Michael Heseltine did cause trouble, prowling the back benches for nearly five years, the "king across the water", as rumblings grew about Mrs Thatcher's abrupt style, her lapses of judgement and rudeness to colleagues:

… Rudeness, particularly, to the mild-mannered Sir Geoffrey Howe, who seemed to irritate her more and more. By now Foreign Secretary, Howe was another Euro-enthusiast like Heseltine. He and Nigel Lawson, his successor as Chancellor, sat in pride of place next to their leader in the official Cabinet photo for 1989. But their efforts to ambush Mrs Thatcher into backing their wish to join the ERM – precursor of a European single currency – backfired. Howe was shocked when Mrs Thatcher demoted him to a junior Cabinet post. He was also furious to learn the identity of his replacement: the relatively junior, and little-known, John Major – Mrs Thatcher's latest protégé.

But Major would soon be on the move again, to replace Nigel Lawson at the Treasury in the latest round of Cabinet musical chairs. Mrs Thatcher had called Lawson unassailable, but he resigned, rocking the government by claiming she'd undermined his authority. Other Cabinet ministers closed ranks, despite feverish talk of a leadership challenge, and Michael Heseltine judged that the time wasn't right. Instead it fell to Sir Anthony Meyer, a quixotic Europhile patrician, to offer himself as a "stalking horse" candidate, asking his fellow MPs: "Do we want to fight the next election with a leader who claims infallibility?"

That struck a chord with as many as sixty Tory MPs, who didn't back the Prime Minister – though she still won easily enough. The government's Machiavellian political fixer, the late Tristan Garel-Jones, helped get out the vote for his leader, but he warned the PM that many more MPs were close to breaking ranks.

[**Tristan Garel-Jones**:] *I think my departing phrase was, "Don't forget: there are a hundred assassins lurking in the bushes, and in a year's time they're going to come out and kill you."*

But Mrs Thatcher wasn't in a listening mood. There was rioting in central London in spring 1990 over the controversial "poll tax" – the Community Charge – and growing protests, even in true-blue Kent and Surrey, over its alleged unfairness. Many Tory MPs voiced their growing concern, but Mrs Thatcher refused to abandon her flagship policy. And, in the Commons, the Prime Minister stepped up her increasingly strident opposition to European integration:

[**Margaret Thatcher**, addressing the Commons:] *The President of the Commission, Mr Delors, said at a press conference the other day that he wanted the European Parliament to be the democratic body of the Community; he wanted the Commission to be the executive; and he wanted the Council of Ministers to be the senate. No; no; no.* [Loud applause]

Robert Orchard: For Howe, bruised and humiliated by another tongue-lashing in Cabinet, enough was enough. Two days later, he resigned. His departure caused few serious ripples immediately, so when MPs and journalists crowded into the Commons chamber and press gallery to hear his resignation statement, few of us were expecting verbal fireworks. After all, Howe had never quite managed to shrug off the stinging gibe, by Labour bruiser Denis Healey, that being attacked by him was "rather like being savaged by a dead sheep". But not *that* dead…

Howe ruthlessly mocked what he called:

[**Geoffrey Howe**, addressing the Commons:] *… the nightmare image sometimes conjured up by my Right Honourable friend, who seems sometimes to look out from a continent that is positively teeming with ill-intentioned people, steaming – in her words – to extinguish democracy.*

Listening grimly were Mrs Thatcher, John Major, and party Chairman Kenneth Baker, as behind them Howe denounced the PM's hostile rhetoric on Europe in terms he thought the cricket-mad Major might appreciate:

[**Geoffrey Howe**:] *It's rather like sending your opening batsmen to the crease only for them to find, the moment the first balls are bowled, that their bats have been broken, before the game, by the team captain.*

The effect was electrifying. Michael Heseltine declared he would challenge Mrs Thatcher, promising to scrap the hated poll tax. His chances were bolstered by favourable opinion polls, while a shambolic campaign for Margaret Thatcher saw her support ebbing away.

Huw Edwards was another BBC political correspondent covering the leadership race:

[**Huw Edwards**:] *There were epic levels of hypocrisy involved. Lots of the people I interviewed were incredibly strongly in favour of Mrs Thatcher, publicly, but once you switched the microphone off, they were viciously critical and begging her to leave.*

Mrs Thatcher did leave, but only to attend a major conference in Paris, instead of staying to urge wavering MPs to support her:

[**Reporter**:] *Mrs Thatcher is in Paris where she is carrying on with the business of an international summit.*

[**Reporter**:] *For Mrs Thatcher, three days in Paris to mark the formal ending of the Cold War are a welcome respite from political pressures at home.*

[**Kenneth Baker**, later:] *I said, "Don't go to Paris for this meeting, but stay in London, and I'll bring in MPs to talk to you, and you must talk to them and persuade them to support you." And she said, "Kenneth, I've won three elections. I haven't got to do that again, have I?" She had to do it again.*

Party Chairman Kenneth Baker was right. On the first ballot, Mrs Thatcher fell just four votes short of winning outright. Hearing that news, the PM bustled straight out of the British Embassy in Paris to try to steady her supporters' nerves.

[**Reporter**:] *Mrs Thatcher, could I ask you to comment?*

[**Mrs Thatcher**:] *Good evening – good evening everyone. I'm naturally very pleased that I got more than half the parliamentary party, and disappointed that it's not quite enough to win on the first ballot, so I confirm it is my intention to let my name go forward for the second ballot.*

Robert Orchard: Back at Westminster the next day, there were desperate attempts to shore up the Thatcher campaign, but support was ebbing away. Most of the Cabinet now believed Mrs Thatcher would lose to Heseltine in the second ballot. They were summoned to her office in the Commons to meet her, one by one.

They had cheered Mrs Thatcher at Party Conference for years, but not today. The pugnacious Ken Clarke told her, bluntly, that her campaign to survive was like the Charge of the Light Brigade. Peter Lilley, a fervent supporter, said it was "inconceivable that you will win". Malcolm Rifkind – no Thatcherite he – warned the Prime Minister she was "holed below the waterline". Even John Wakeham, her reluctant campaign manager, was saying the PM was "living in Cloud Cuckoo Land" – although not to her face. If she stood down, nearly all agreed, other ministers could enter the race and keep Heseltine out.

A late-night visit to Downing Street by younger supporters urged Mrs Thatcher to stay and fight on, but now she seemed resolved to go… though she still planned to sleep on it. 9am on Thursday 22nd November, and the Cabinet Room stood empty as ministers gathered expectantly outside, summoned for a special meeting. Once all were seated around the famous coffin-shaped table, Mrs Thatcher read out a short resignation statement – breaking down, but then continuing. Some of her all-male Cabinet were also tearful. A private secretary recalls Home Secretary David Waddington mopping his eyes with a large, white handkerchief. When the news was announced minutes later, it stunned the nation, and Mrs Thatcher's supporters weren't the only ones to be dejected by her decision:

[**Michael Heseltine**, later:] *Well at half past ten I heard the news on the radio that she had decided to stand down, and I knew at that time I would not win the next round. I had become very divisive in the Conservative Party – quite understandably.*

[**Neil Kinnock**:] *The day that Margaret Thatcher resigned as leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister, Labour's best asset went through the door.*

Little-known John Major, the Thatcher protégé, and Douglas Hurd, immediately entered the race. Both promised they too would radically change the poll tax. In just five days, John Major's slick

campaign saw him surge into the lead, and on Tuesday 27th November, after the second ballot saw Heseltine and Hurd concede, John Major emerged into Downing Street to greet the world's media – including me, on the right, in the red scarf, live on Radio 4 – as our next Prime Minister.

Next day, Margaret Thatcher left Downing Street – her home for more than a decade – in what was clearly, for her, a highly emotional farewell:

[**Margaret Thatcher**:] *Ladies and Gentlemen, we're leaving Downing Street for the last time, after eleven-and-a-half wonderful years, and we're very happy that we leave the United Kingdom in a very, very much better state than when we came here eleven-and-a-half years ago.*

Robert Orchard: So, Mrs Thatcher was gone. Britain's longest-serving Prime Minister, she'd won back the Falklands, humbled the miners, curbed trade union power, privatised gas, water, telecoms, and won three elections. And she was brought down by her own MPs, who feared she'd lose them their seats at the next election: the victim of a party renowned for its ruthless focus on winning and retaining power above all else – a warning Boris Johnson might do well to heed.

Mrs Thatcher stayed too long; she became too isolated, too difficult to work with. The disastrous poll tax helped undo her, though her hostile attitude to Europe, and EU ambitions, was the key issue for many in the Cabinet. Nowadays, though, her European views would probably have been mainstream in Boris Johnson's Conservative Party:

Many believe the aftershocks from the humiliating way she was ousted continued for decades, and Margaret Thatcher never really forgave her Cabinet colleagues for their forthright advice that fraught November day:

[**Margaret Thatcher**:] *It was treachery with a smile on its face.*

Robert Orchard: Margaret Thatcher; Maggie; the Iron Lady: a very controversial figure in British politics, but a hugely significant one, certainly. And a far cry from the rather one-dimensional caricature of her now on show in *The Crown* on Netflix. Back to you, Jon.

Jon Davis: Thank you so much, Robert: wonderful stuff, wonderful. Certainly brings back some memories.

OK. Charles: welcome back to the Strand Group. You are so welcome. Let's kick off: what's your appreciation of this tumultuous time?

Lord Moore: Well, people say that it was inevitable that this would happen to Mrs Thatcher. I don't think that's quite right; I think if it had been handled differently she could have won that first ballot, and then she would, in the short term, have continued as Prime Minister. So the particular way that it happened didn't have to be that way; but it's interesting that it did happen that way, because it shows that the thing was falling apart – that the organisation wasn't good enough any more – and you have to ask yourself why. And I think the key to it is that a lot of the parliamentary party – and above all, at the top of the parliamentary party – were sick of her.

And so when you look at this leadership race, you have to get a bit granular: you can talk about very wide issues that were going on through the country, and they mattered very much – the poll tax, Europe and so on – but you also have to think about what those individuals were thinking, and I think what they were thinking was, "We've had enough of her," or "We're fed up with her, and we need to find a decorous way of moving on." Now, unfortunately for them it wasn't decorous, but I think that's what they thought, and what they tried to do. And when I say "they", I don't mean the

people who followed Michael Heseltine so much; I mean the people who were actually in the government, and still, in theory, supporting her.

But I think they'd learnt, from the previous year – the challenge by Anthony Meyer in 1989 – that things were not good; and they made a sort of tacit decision that she was on the way out. I found a document by Tristan Garel-Jones, who was Deputy Chief Whip in 1989, which made that clear, really – he writes to the chief whip, Tim Renton, who was no friend of Mrs Thatcher, and says: "I think Heseltine will win next year, when there will be a challenge – unless…", he says – "unless, dot, dot, dot." And this was a very interesting document, because I was trying to find out what the "unless" meant; and what it meant, I think, was that the top people had to coordinate, in a very quiet way, to make sure that she did leave if there was a challenge, but that she left in a sort of orderly way with their apparent support.

Jon Davis: She mentioned… the last phrase, there, from the BBC video documentary, I think it was – "treachery with a smile on its face". Do you think Thatcher was correct about that?

Lord Moore: Well, of course, "treachery" is a very harsh word, and you could put forward a lot of justifications for what they did. They were right to think, perhaps, that she'd gone on too long; they naturally wished to consider their own futures. They understandably didn't want Heseltine, the "assassin", to benefit from the situation; they wanted one of their own number – as it turned out, John Major – to benefit. All those are reasonable things, but I think it's not surprising that she called it treachery, because that is what it must have felt like to her: here were people who were always telling her she was marvellous, and were working closely with her, and actually they were rather hoping that she'd be defeated. And when it went badly in the first ballot for her, they didn't try to save her; they were, very quietly, very much the opposite.

So you can understand why she took that view; and politics involves a certain level of treachery, so I mustn't be moralistic about it, but I suppose treachery is what it was. The question, of course, is why didn't she see it? And there are various reasons for that, but one would have to be in her character, I think. The good side of that is that she is always pressing on to do the next thing: she's thinking much more about what'll happen next, rather than constantly going over and over what might be happening behind her back. And the bad thing is a sort of hubris by that point – there's no doubt about that – so she was more experienced than anyone left in her Cabinet; she'd done more, achieved more, and she thought she deserved not to be challenged.

Jon Davis: Do you think that Michael Heseltine played it well – do you think that if he'd have done this or that differently, he might well have become Prime Minister?

Lord Moore: Well, Michael Heseltine – who I talked to a lot for the book, and was very helpful – he played the first half brilliantly, but he hadn't planned the second half. So he thought that, by a brilliant challenge, he would then be the natural heir… the natural beneficiary. And as he himself would admit, he misunderstood the psychology of the Tory party. He had provoked and initiated the contest, and therefore he could be blamed for its divisive character rather than benefiting from the overthrow of Mrs Thatcher, which many of them wanted. So the psychologically natural thing for the Tory party to do was to breathe a private sigh of relief that she was going, but then put in somebody else in her place, and not Heseltine. And Heseltine's view, which he formed very quickly, was that what he should have said after the first ballot result was: "Fine. Mrs Thatcher's won, though she hasn't won enough to prevent a second ballot; I'm not going to go on to the second ballot; I'm going to loyally serve her, and we'll go on like that." And then, he believes, it would have fallen into his lap a few months later.

Jon Davis: Do you think John Major was just lucky?

Lord Moore: No. I think he was very skilful; and I think he was, in a way, the most skilful of the main actors in this drama. I found two letters from him that he wrote on the fateful night, just before she resigned, to Peter Morrison, her Parliamentary Private Secretary, which made clear what he was essentially doing. And what he was doing was trying to succeed her, and obviously he wished to succeed her without challenging her, and he couldn't challenge her while he was a Cabinet minister. She wanted him to second her nomination for the second ballot; he didn't want to do that, because that would rule him out: if she went forward to the second ballot, he couldn't challenge her. But he didn't want to *tell* her he didn't want to do that, because then she would regard that as treachery.

So what he had to contrive was a way in which he *said* he would nominate her for the second ballot, but actually privately making sure that his nomination would not be cashed in. And so there were late-night conversations with Peter Morrison to establish this; and therefore when it was announced that Major would second her, it was on the private, unannounced condition that that wouldn't happen, and that she would actually go. And so he sort of had it in the bag, because then he could say to Thatcherites, "Well, look, I'm her candidate" – which was true: if she *was* going, she wanted him – and Heseltine was the assassin. So he scooped up the votes both of people who wanted Mrs Thatcher to go, and of people who were furious with Michael Heseltine. And therefore he won.

Jon Davis: I've obviously bought the hardback… and it's not just me who thinks this, but the days when she falls – it's an emotional rollercoaster, the way that you write about it; and I'm sure that it's partly the material and partly your great skill. Is there something that particularly surprised you while you were writing about these days – these particular, tumultuous days… Was there something that was new?

Lord Moore: Well, the most key bit of information that was new was the Major letters that I found – which proved, I think, exactly what he was up to, and how he very skilfully did it. I think the thing that always does puzzle me – that still puzzles me somewhat – is how in the last year of her time, and in those very last days, people weren't telling her what she needed to know, or possibly she just wasn't listening, or both. And I think I've got the explanation for that; but it still does surprise me, the extent to which – you know – here are all these people at the top of politics, and they don't necessarily really know what's going on. And so those who were inclined to support her – and many of them did, actually, fervently support her – just didn't know what to do about it; didn't know how to coordinate; didn't understand what the grassroots – not the grassroots of the party in the country, but the grassroots in Parliament, the back benches – were really thinking; and didn't understand what colleagues were up to.

In this respect, I think the people organising to help her towards the door were very efficient – and I don't mean the Heseltine people; I mean the people within the government, who were therefore doing it surreptitiously – and the people who were trying to save her were not efficient, and just didn't think straight. And the more I think about it, over the years, it is largely the passage of time that makes that happen. If you've won three times, and you've been in for eleven-and-a-half years, you do get out of touch, and you don't really understand what's going on, and you have become used to people not telling you the truth. And then on top of that you have these massive, real issues, like the poll tax – and what was more important than the poll tax among Cabinet colleagues: Europe. And I think there was a very, very deep schism on Europe, which has persisted ever after, really; and Geoffrey Howe said that in his resignation speech; and Heseltine said that in his challenge, when he stood for the leadership.

Europe was their issue, not the poll tax; they'd all more or less agreed on the poll tax, and they had all signed in blood, except Nigel Lawson, on that one. But with Europe there was a real disagreement, and she was really outnumbered. And I think they thought it was – which indeed it was – a very serious matter, whichever view of it you took. So they had a profound impetus for getting rid of her, as well as a personal one.

Jon Davis: Certainly I remarked, reading these particular pages, that when we talk about Europe, it is the reunification of Germany that really destabilises the Cabinet; and even many of her most fervent supporters thought that she was on the wrong side of history when it came to the reunification of Germany. First of all, do you agree with that point of view; and secondly, do you think that once Germany had reunified – and once you had that huge, new, beating heart of independent Germany in the centre of Europe – that what happened was that, in effect, on foreign policy, Margaret Thatcher was no longer needed… after the fall of the Berlin wall, as well?

Lord Moore: I think that's a pretty good analysis, and I think one of the problems with Mrs Thatcher was that she was very viscerally anti-German, and therefore expressed herself in ways that people couldn't associate themselves with. She once took me aside at a party, as if she was telling me a secret, and she said: "You know what's the matter with Helmut Kohl?" So I said, "No, no, what's that?" And she said: "*He's a German*." Which I was aware of… and this was visceral. But I think, to be fair to her, she had noticed something very important about how Europe was changing.

She was, first of all, right to be worried about the reunification of Germany – though not to hate it – because there was a real danger that Gorbachev would be overthrown, and the hard-liners would come back in the Soviet Union; and indeed that did happen, but then they failed, too. That was a serious issue. Also, the price of reunification was European union in a form which she felt was dangerous – and in particular, at that time, the key issue was the coming of the single currency (what's now the euro). And she was absolutely right that the French government, and Delors – and in a way, Kohl – agreeing to the idea of the euro was considered to be a way of tying Germany down; it was actually – and she said this at the time, in private, to Mitterand – a way of giving Germany the greatest power in the European Community, because the whole financial structure would be built around Germany… The economic structure.

She was right about that, and she was right about how the reunification of Germany – combined with the single currency – would mean that Germany became "top dog" in Europe, and that Britain would find it very hard to accept that sort of united Europe… or that sort of European union. So she was simultaneously behind the curve, in not accepting, readily enough, the reunification; and in front of everybody else in seeing what was going to happen later.

Jon Davis: How fascinating. These are the big issues… Extraordinary stuff.

Now, many years ago, when I was coming up under Peter Hennessy, at Queen Mary, I remember Robin Butler talking to Peter about the way that Thatcher fell, in effect, being a real lesson for all of us – not least future Prime Ministers: that no matter how electorally successful and powerful you may be, you can fall. And when you really think deeply about this, it's only just three years after she wins her third election, with a *huge* majority, and she's out. Would you buy into that analysis – that this is one of the great moments of British history, for that particular point?

Lord Moore: I would, with that; and I would say that it's very two-edged, because on the one hand it's an excellent thing, in a parliamentary system, that the leader can be thrown out. You can't have a situation… It's not like an elected president, where they ought to serve a term because they're head of state. If they can't satisfactorily command a majority in the House of Commons any more, they

should be out. And they all need to be reminded of that. On the other hand, if there's something frivolous-looking or nasty-looking about the expulsion of a leader – particularly a great leader – this does fantastic damage to the party that's done it, and perhaps to the body politic. And I think both of those things – both the good and the bad – were illustrated in the fall of Mrs Thatcher.

It also tells you something about her psychology. I saw her not long after she left office, and she said she was writing her memoirs; and I said, "What are you going to call them?" And she said, "*Undefeated.*" And the reason for that was that she *was*. You see, she won every single general election when she was leader, and she won the leadership election which caused her to resign. People forget that, but she won it. And a good trick quiz question is: Who got the largest number of votes in the Tory leadership election of 1990? Answer: Margaret Thatcher; because she got more votes in the first ballot than John Major did in the second.

So if you see it from her point of view, she's thinking, "What on earth has happened? I've won everything; everything you've ever asked me to win, I've won. And you've got me out." So you can see why it's such a trauma – and obviously that's mainly a trauma in *her* heart, but it actually is a trauma for the Conservative Party, and caused tremendous trouble for many years afterwards.

Jon Davis: Now, I'm just a layman when it comes to world affairs – well, I'm a layman in any sense. But one of my "shorthand" ideas – and bear with it for a moment, Charles – was to do with the Arab Spring, and that moment when it looked like one generation was about to hand on to another, and the people revolted. I always thought – not being in those circles at the time – that when in 1989 Mrs Thatcher had her tenth anniversary, and there was the singing of "Ten more years, ten more years"… I always thought that was one of the key moments when a lot of people around her went, "Not a chance."

Is there something in that – about this idea that she was saying that she was going to go on, and on, and on?

Lord Moore: Yes; and she said it because – well, possibly because she did really want it… but also because you can't say you're going, because then people bring that forward. But I think you're right that people did not like the idea of her going on and on and on; and the most important person who didn't like it was Denis, her husband, because he said to her privately, in the May '89 celebrations of the tenth anniversary: "You should now go." And she actually agreed with him – I don't think she really agreed, but she said, "Yes, yes, you're right," and made as if she might do something about it. But then she started making excuses about how the Queen wouldn't want it, because it would be difficult at some particular moment for some invented reason, and that sort of thing, knowing full well that she could speak of the Queen's opinion without fear of contradiction, because nobody could prove it. And of course, she didn't want to go; and if she wouldn't listen to Denis, she certainly wouldn't listen to everyone else.

Jon Davis: Now, you knew Margaret Thatcher, and she asked you personally to write her authorised biography. You've also spoken about the "rough and tumble" of politics – let's not be too precious here: at the very top of the game, this is hard stuff. Even so, while you were writing this, did you feel for her – was there a degree of emotion there?

Lord Moore: Oh, yes… oh yes. Because she had worked so hard, and done so much, and given so much. She gave a great deal to the country. And to be politically killed in this way – particularly in this way; it wouldn't have mattered nearly so much if it had been a general election defeat – felt fundamentally unjust… And one does sympathise with her, and I did sympathise with her very much indeed on that. And I do think there's an element of the sex difference here, too: I do think it's

important that she was the one and only woman. It meant that she was outside the workings of the club – which was very powerful in those days – of male Tory MPs; and she didn't know what they thought, and they often mocked her. And there was a sort of collective cruelty there, and a collective isolation of her, which was tragic really, and which cut her deeply. She was very brave about it – she always was very brave – but she was also very hurt; and I think, when you see this wounded beast, I think that is a shocking thing.

Jon Davis: Now, my final question – well, not quite. Last week we had Lord Adonis, giving a lecture to mark one hundred years since Roy Jenkins was born, and looking at his life; and I particularly like Roy Jenkins's biographies of Gladstone and Churchill. There's a point in them where Roy mused on the idea that when he started writing about Gladstone he was in no doubt that this was the greatest specimen of humanity ever to occupy Number Ten; but by the time he'd finished the book on Churchill, actually It was Churchill who was the real "biggest of beasts".

Now, you've known many leaders – you know many leaders – and you've thought about this deeply: now you've finished your three [volumes]… where would you rank Thatcher since the Second World War?

Lord Moore: Well, the novelist Philip Hensher wrote a novel called *Kitchen Venom*, which was based on his experience of being a young clerk in the House of Commons at the end of the 1980s. And so Mrs Thatcher is seen a little bit in the novel, from the point of view of an underling, as it were. And they're discussing [this question], and one of them says, "She's the only one that's remarkable." And I think that's the thing: she could be terribly wrong; she could be terribly difficult; she made great mistakes, as well as great positive achievements. But she was truly remarkable. And that's testified to by the fact that people are still so interested in her; that she's still world-famous; that she features in *The Crown*, just as it comes out now; and that she was the first and only woman.

She broke through so many ceilings. And there was a sort of electricity about her. So it seems to me perfectly clear that she was by far the most important post-war Prime Minister. Though Attlee would be very important in many of his actual actions, I think in terms of both her actions, her ideas, and her character, [Thatcher] was clearly the most important. And actually I would also say the most successful – by which I don't necessarily mean she was right. I mean that she simply won more often, and bigger, and achieved more of what she wished to do than any others. Blair, I think, won even bigger majorities, but achieved less – though he certainly achieved something; but I think, in [terms of] the normal criteria by which one judges success in politics, she was the most successful.

Jon Davis: Just before we come to the questions – of which there are many – could you just wrap up for me… Why does this matter? Why does the fall of Thatcher matter, thirty years on?

Lord Moore: Partly because it's a great drama… and it was the end of an era; partly, deriving from that – as from the whole of her career – is the sense that the government of this country really mattered under her. And so what you have in those eleven-and-a-half years, and the dramatic end to them, is a story of real importance; and I think one of the things we're wrestling with now is that so many things seem very unimportant – or at least, if they're important, no one seems to be able to do anything about them. And so the confidence in leadership, now, is so much weaker than it was then. Her leadership came under tremendous challenge – and some of that challenge was correct – but nobody could call that leadership negligible; it was very remarkable. And so when people are studying history, they turn to it, as they do to other characters in British history – whether it's Elizabeth I, or Wellington, or Gladstone… big, big things; Cromwell… It's become sort of mythological. And I think Mrs Thatcher understood that, because one of the things she had, as well

as this tremendous hard work and application, was that she was much more imaginative than people think: she had a sort of romantic idea about her country, and about what could be done with it – and about how to perform as a leader. And I think she captured the historical imagination.

Jon Davis: Thank you. OK – we'll turn to the questions, and get through as many as possible. Lloyd Rees asks:

Lord Moore mentioned that those around Thatcher were fed up of her… but was the country? Could she have won a fourth election?

Lord Moore: Thank you: it's a good question. The colleagues who were trying to get Mrs Thatcher out would always say that they were frightened that she would lose the next general election for them. But sometimes I say, partly in joke, that I think they might have been frightened that she'd *win* the next election – because then she really would have been unassailable; and it really would have been rather terrifying. I never like to speculate on what an actual result would have been; and I do fundamentally think that it was time for her to go. But I think behind your question lies the idea that she had not lost all traction in the country, and I think that's true – and opinion polls showed that, and they showed it particularly in relation to Europe.

So while she was extremely unpopular, in the country, about the poll tax, she was not unpopular about Europe. And I think that tells you something about what happened next.

Jon Davis: James Heale, of *The Mail on Sunday*, asks:

Did Neil Kinnock fluff the occasion, as he did during Westland, by calling a no-confidence vote, which gave her a virtuoso exit and united the Tories?

Lord Moore: Yes, is the simple answer to that. In Robert's introduction, Neil Kinnock said that, with her departure, Labour had lost its best asset. That's a tremendously mistaken analysis of the effect of Thatcher, and I think the fact that Mr Kinnock thought that showed why they kept on not winning. The first Labour leader to understand – and he told me a lot about this for my book – about the power of Thatcher, and her power to take Labour votes, was Tony Blair. And he firmly believed – it was one of his biggest beliefs about reforming Labour and leading Labour – that they had to understand what a successful leader Thatcher was in order to understand how they could win.

And I think Neil Kinnock always thought, "No, no, she's a bad person… Our rhetoric will carry through, and we'll explain to people why she's a bad person, and we'll win." Blair said, "No, that's *not* how it works. She's a very remarkable, innovative leader, who touches a lot of chords with natural Labour voters; what we have to do is to separate the good bits of her, and learn from her leadership; jettison the bad bits; and – as it were – 'suck' the Thatcher effect over to us." And that's what he did, pretty successfully.

Jon Davis: One of our current students, Donald Beaton, asks:

Why do you think that Mrs Thatcher promoted John Major, when on the face of things he was relatively inexperienced? Did she regret her decision in retrospect?

Lord Moore: Well, John Major was a very able young minister – a successful Chief Secretary to the Treasury – and he was not, at least apparently, an anti-Thatcherite. (She indeed thought he was a Thatcherite, though that wasn't the case.) She was right to be looking in the new generation; Major – along with Chris Patten, Waldegrave, Ken Clarke, etc – were able people in the next generation, so it was natural that Major should rise; but I think she miscalculated the effect of Major as it pertained to *her*. Partly because he was her protégé, it was natural for him to wish to get out from under her

shadow, and, I think, to resent her; and I think he did resent her. And after she left office, of course, he had cause to resent her, because she behaved pretty badly towards him later on.

So, as is often the way when you promote people who are your favourites, it doesn't necessarily help you. I think it was Walpole who defined gratitude as "a lively sense of favours to come" – and once the favours were no longer to come, but had come, Major wasn't so keen on Mrs Thatcher.

Jon Davis: OK. Our old friend Alun Evans asks:

Thatcher only fell four votes short of winning the first ballot. Had she had a more effective campaign manager than Peter Morrison, she would almost certainly have won. What might have happened then – would it simply have delayed her inevitable departure, and enhanced Labour's electoral chances?

Lord Moore: Well thank you. As I've said before, I'm always hesitant about the "what-ifs": I don't think historians can answer them with the authority they claim. But you're perfectly right that it was so close that a better campaign could surely have carried her over the line and prevented a second ballot… and particularly if she hadn't gone to Paris, I think. But where would that have got anybody? It might have got her a breathing space; it might have got her the capacity to wait until the end of the Iraq war, which was just coming – to win it, and then gracefully go.

But it wouldn't have saved her; it might have been better for her, and the party, but it wouldn't have saved her.

Jon Davis: Now, forgive me if you've mentioned something here, but did she have an idea of how long she ideally wanted to stay? Was it truly "on and on", or was it something like 1996, or to get through to the end of a full fourth term?

Lord Moore: I think that really it was just the equivalent of Augustine's famous "Lord, make me chaste, but not yet" – so she accepted that she would one day have to retire, but not yet.

Jon Davis: Tony Brophy asks:

What advice would you give Boris Johnson now, learning the lessons of Thatcher's downfall, and given the current threats to his position, that might prevent him from [suffering] a similar fate to Thatcher?

Lord Moore: Well, the situations are very different, because he's only a year into his leadership since the last election. So there are the most tremendous ructions going on at present, and everybody's at loggerheads, and the situation's very bad, with Covid and so on and so forth. It's not at all like the fall of Thatcher: he's had eighteen months, and only one year since the election; she had had eleven-and-a-half years. So I think that's a really important difference, and in that sense he is more secure than she was at the time of her fall. However, where I think Boris has not done well in this – well, there may be more than one thing, but this particular thing is like her, and it started at the beginning rather than the end – is a loss of contact with Tory MPs. And this of course is partly not Boris's fault, because of Covid: they're simply not physically there, to a large extent. But it's a really difficult thing, and he's never been good at cultivating the House of Commons; he didn't really come up *through* the House of Commons like Mrs Thatcher did. Nobody worked harder than she at knowing the House of Commons – though she wasn't really a natural House of Commons person – as she rose in her career.

Boris is not like that at all, and the lack of system and organisation now, in the party, about how to use your MPs in the right way and make them feel better, is quite alarming, I think; and in that way resembles a fag-end of an era, rather than the beginning of one.

Jon Davis: Really interesting. We were lecturing this week on the fall of Edward Heath, and there's a really intriguing link there around losing touch with the party – being captured by the Treasury, or the Civil Service, or whatever. Really interesting.

Lord Moore: Very much, yes.

Jon Davis: John Rentoul, of the *Independent*, and one of our visiting professors, asks:

One of the high points of the third book, for Whitehall-watchers, is the bust-up between Robin Butler and Charles Powell. Could you just comment a bit further on that, please?

Lord Moore: Yes: this was something that I basically discovered. It was a little bit known about before; but largely with the help of Robin Butler, actually – and indeed Charles, but particularly Robin, because he showed me some paper about this which had never been seen before – I was able to understand better what had happened.

Basically, Robin – and Patrick Wright at the Foreign Office – were desperate to get rid of Charles Powell from Number Ten, because he'd been, in their view, far too long as her Foreign Affairs Private Secretary. He'd been, I think, by this time, five years [in the role], when normally you do three; and he had this extraordinarily powerful, relatively junior position… but he was extraordinarily powerful. And he rather reluctantly agreed, and Mrs Thatcher had agreed: they'd lined up an embassy for him, in Madrid, which I think perhaps wasn't quite good enough – certainly not in the view of Carla, his wife. But the real key player here was Mrs Thatcher, who at the last minute really, really didn't want him to go. Because what I think Robin hadn't quite taken in – actually he would admit this – was that this coincided with the so-called Madrid ambush, when Geoffrey Howe and Nigel Lawson were ganging up on her about going into the ERM.

And so she felt she was being betrayed on all sides, or attacked on all sides: that her two most senior Cabinet ministers were trying to force her into what would ultimately lead to the single currency; and that the Cabinet Secretary and the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office were trying to tell her who she could employ in her office, and get rid of her most important adviser, Charles Powell. And so there was a most tremendous row – fantastic ructions – and Robin threatened to resign, and quite nearly did, I think. And I think he would perhaps admit that he did mishandle it, because when you make that sort of threat and you don't fulfil it, your position's weakened, and it would have looked quite odd if he *had* resigned, so he perhaps shouldn't ever have made that threat.

Anyway, the long and short of it was that Mrs Thatcher succeeded in keeping Powell, but at a high cost – because although he was an absolutely brilliant adviser to her, it reinforced the idea that he, Bernard Ingham, and one or two others were really running the government, and everybody else was excluded. So it sort of added to the problem.

Jon Davis: Let me ask my own follow-up question there. One of the really interesting points, I find: our new professor at King's, Ed Balls, talked about the incredible full-spectrum support for joining the Exchange Rate Mechanism in the late eighties and early nineties – that just about everyone was in favour of it apart from Margaret Thatcher. And it's slowly dawning on me that she was right. Would you agree with that?

Lord Moore: Well I can honestly, truthfully boast that I was dead against it at the time, too, and I wrote about it in public. But you're basically right, that there were people – of course, Alan Walters, her adviser, fervently against… so it was half-baked. But the fundamental point was that British politics kept on looking at this question in the wrong way, because they kept regarding it as an economic question – which obviously in a certain sense it is, but of course that's not what all this was about. It was a political question; and the point was that she well understood – and others denied – that Delors and co wanted to use it in order – explicitly, actually – to move forward to the single currency: stage three of Delors. So this was part of European union; that's where it was leading, and that's why she didn't want it. There were important economic reasons why she didn't want it, but the fundamental reason was a political one: that it would bring about the single currency, and that that was trying to bring about union in all forms – political as well as economic and monetary.

She was actually right about that – whether or not you support the move towards it – and the other analysis was mistaken.

Jon Davis: OK. Moving on: Hannah Coltman says:

First, I would like to thank you, Lord Moore, for your book – it was this that inspired me to look at Thatcher's downfall for my MA dissertation. I was wondering: what do you make of the comparisons between Theresa May and Thatcher, particularly regarding the way May was pushed out over Europe, yet Boris Johnson manages to hold on.

Lord Moore: Well, thank you for those kind words, Hannah. Mrs May had a superficial similarity with Margaret Thatcher, because she's a woman coming up through the Conservative Party – very serious; very hardworking; very close to the roots of the party, and so on. But I think fundamentally different, because I don't think she knew what she wanted to do – and I think that became apparent. And Margaret Thatcher fundamentally did know what she wanted to do. So it's true that Mrs May was sort of brought down by Europe – though I suppose you could also say she was brought down by calling the election in 2017, and getting such a poor result, because it was the lack of a majority that was doing her in. But the thing is, Mrs Thatcher might have been brought down by Europe too, but she had an idea about Europe – a very clear idea; it was just that her colleagues didn't agree with it.

I don't think Mrs May did really have such an idea, and therefore it was likely, with this tiny majority, that she would be pushed hither and thither. And that's what happened. And Boris understood that, and he took up, very successfully, the most basic point, which is: we promised the people that they could have the result of their referendum, so we've got to do it. And that was more important, actually, than whether you're pro-Brexit or not. It was the "Get Brexit done" point – which of course still hasn't quite happened; we shall see – that really resonated, because that got Brexit support, and it got the support of people who felt that the referendum should be fulfilled even if they didn't agree with the way it had gone. And that gave him the majority that he now has, and it gives him a fundamental coherence, which unfortunately seems to be lacking in a lot of other aspects of the present government.

But I think Mrs May was – though with the best experience and motives – confused about what it was she was doing, and she paid the price for that.

Jon Davis: Gareth Davies of BEIS returns to the question:

Was there any scenario wherein Margaret Thatcher would have stood down at the time of her choosing, or would she always have needed to be forced out?

Lord Moore: Ah, well… The obvious way for her to be forced out was by a general election. That would have been appropriate; it might well have happened; and she would have hated it, but she would have recognised it as wholly legitimate.

Jon Davis: Former student – and proud Mancunian – Thomas Robinson asks:

It is often said that the departure of Willie Whitelaw as deputy leader had a destabilising effect on Thatcher's premiership, particularly over the Cabinet. Given the decreasing median age – and the nature – of her Cabinet by 1989-90, how true would you say this is?

Lord Moore: I think the departure of Whitelaw was important, though he was getting on a bit, and it wasn't surprising that he moved towards the door. But you have to remember the history of Willie Whitelaw, which is that when [Thatcher] got rid of Heath in the first round of the leadership contest in 1975, Willie then challenged, as did she. And so she beat him. He represented a very different side of the party, and very different groupings and social background and so on, and he immediately offered her his loyalty; and essentially, Willie was like the Heineken advertisement: he refreshed the parts that she couldn't reach. And he could bring to her people who were not her natural supporters.

And so, while he was a Tory wet, his actual effect was to bolster Thatcher, because the critics would come to him, an old chum, and say: "Oh, she's ghastly, she's frightful… Dreadful." And he'd more or less say yes. But he'd say, "I know, I know, I know…" – he was very repetitive, but inarticulate; so he'd say: "Yes, yes, terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible… but we've got to support her." And he'd bring people in, when there was some sort of difficult piece of legislation, and he'd say: "She wants this done, she wants this done, she wants this done… I don't know why; I haven't the faintest idea; but we've got to do it." He brought in the old regimental aspect of the Conservative Party, where you felt, "Look, she's the leader – you've got to follow her."

And he was also good at listening – he was pragmatic. And he could sense where there was danger. And from the beginning of 1988, I think I'm right in saying, he goes… and nobody replaced him. Of course – I think the questioner mentioned the passage of years – it wasn't just him going. It was also that she was much less inclined to listen, because the passage of years affected her, and almost everyone was younger than she, by now, and she didn't really know what the younger generation thought, and so on. So that greatly contributed to her isolation.

Jon Davis: Do you know, it's one of our trick questions when it comes to exam time, Charles – where we say: "Examine Margaret Thatcher's style." And the ones who fall into the trap think that she was one, continuous Margaret Thatcher… and there were so many, right? This is what your books so wonderfully do – they chart the shifts, and the ebbing and the flowing.

Our transcriber of the Strand Group, Susanna Richards, asks:

Good evening. I was surprised to hear that Mrs Thatcher was possibly quite disparaging about women's suitability for high office, and I wondered whether you think a) that this is the case, and b) that her attitude changed much during her own time in government.

Lord Moore: It's very interesting, this; and I think that wasn't the case, but I think she also felt that the Conservative women MPs in Parliament in her time were not, on the whole, good enough for the highest office. And this may simply be a fact, but that would be very arguable. I think, more to the point, that Mrs Thatcher was very conscious of women's rivalry, and she didn't like it. And she of course loved being the only woman among all the men. Some people call that the "Queen Bee syndrome", and they don't like it, for understandable reasons. But it does not mean that Mrs

Thatcher thought that women in general were not up to it; in fact, quite the contrary. She based a lot of her most popular political approaches on the idea that women had a better understanding of life than men.

And that was really what all her "housewife economics" was about: she said, in so many words, "The men have tried to pull the wool over your eyes with jargon all these years, but we women know. We know about the household budget; we know about the effect of inflation." And she would use that constantly – holding up a shopping basket, and so on – to show that women have their feet on the ground in a way that men don't. And also that women are more truthful, and less boastful, than men – she greatly believed that.

There was a brilliant occasion when she went to the 25th anniversary dinner of the Institute of Economic Affairs, and she was the last speaker. And she was fed up, because they'd gone on, and on, and on, and on, congratulating themselves. And so when it came to her, she said: "I've just listened to six speeches by men. And all I want to say is that the cocks may crow, but the hen lays the eggs." That summed up her view.

Jon Davis: OK – we've got a very bright, recent former student, Luca Ingrassia, who asks:

Thank you all for such an informative discussion. Lord Moore, how durable do you believe Thatcherism has proven to be since her downfall; and does the expansion of the state during the coronavirus pandemic threaten to permanently suppress similar small-state thinking?

Lord Moore: I'm thinking a lot about this, and on this last point, about Covid, I would only have a rather tentative answer. I think Thatcherism will survive; it's not exactly a doctrine – it doesn't have an exact theory behind it. It's more like a disposition: it's a way of approaching politics, which mixes doctrine and character, and is a sort of idea – particularly of British history, but it wouldn't be confined to Britain. And I think it's very powerful: it's to do with opportunity, and rising in the world, and greater freedom, and believing in your country, rather than more abstract concepts. All those things matter a lot; and she sort of embodied them. That's why it's called Thatcherism. It's not because she wrote a brilliant theory; it's because she *was* it, in some sort of way. And you can learn, from studying her life, how to do that.

Covid has of course reversed – perhaps temporarily, perhaps not – many, many aspects of, if you like, a Thatcherised state, as you observed. And I suspect that, in the medium to long term, the effect of that will be to get people *more* interested in the small state again, because it was the 1970s – culminating in the "winter of discontent" – which made people very fed up with government direction. The British are not profoundly averse to a strong state, but it simply grew so much, and became so inefficient – and ceased to work, in the late '60s and the '70s – that they began to look for other ways, and Mrs Thatcher produced those ways.

I think the way in which there's a great danger of us going is similar – so we more or less nationalise all sorts of businesses without thinking about it, just by handing out so much money to them; and we think that the handling of a pandemic is best done by a centralised state; and we get ourselves into strange situations when we actually make it illegal, for example, to go to church, or something like that – that's what's happened in this. And though many people think this is broadly necessary because of the "plague", obviously very few people like it. And it's building a habit of government control, which is very dangerous, and which, after this is all over, people will revisit and review – and I tend to think they will turn away from it; and when they do that, they will be looking at Thatcherism.

Jon Davis: Our mutual friend Roger Smethurst, of the Cabinet Office, asks:

Did Mrs Thatcher enjoy the post-office period of her life?

Lord Moore: Well, thank you, and good evening, Roger. It gives me a chance to thank all those in the Histories Unit, and you, for helping me – because without all that I couldn't have studied all these fantastic papers. I also studied her own papers, with which she kindly gave me free range, but these were the government ones. Marvellous.

I would say that, on the whole, Lady Thatcher didn't enjoy her time after office, because first of all she never quite got over having been kicked out; and what she always said – "There's so much to *do*" – meant, "I want to get back in there and do it." *"So much to do"* – and so she felt very frustrated. However, when she got very old – and when her mental powers failed – all these feelings diminished, and she became rather a sweet old lady, rather than a very agitated one. And of course it was terribly sad that her powers did diminish – and it was frustrating to her – but there was a sort of inner core of Mrs Thatcher which was very simple, and was a bit like her own propaganda about being a housewife of a provincial kind, and that sort of thing.

So, for example, she loved talking about how to sew; she loved feeding the dog, or the cat; she loved having the house neat, and nice flowers arranged in it, and that sort of thing. And those simple pleasures gave her more and more pleasure as she got older, and she became a calmer person. There are these very touching scenes of her in old age – going to a park; going for a walk; meeting members of the public; going to Chelsea hospital, where she used to go to church, and talking to the pensioners – that sort of thing. And there was a sort of directness and simplicity, and in that sense she never got too grand. She could be bloody terrifying – but she didn't sort of say, "Run away, little man… *I was Prime Minister*." She wasn't that sort of person at all. She would talk to anybody, in a rather direct way; and I think some of those pleasures came through in old age. But essentially, she was one of these people who is constantly devoted to work, and so if she couldn't work, that made her angry.

Jon Davis: A touch of nepotism, now, Charles. The manager of the Strand Group, Martin – his dad, Ivor Stolliday, asks:

In your brilliant biography, you refer to an incident I remember well, as it was much in the news at the time: John Major's disappearance at the crucial moment, because of dental problems. Given that you say he was playing a subtle hand, was this "convenient"?

Lord Moore: I think, though he was playing a subtle hand, he jolly well did have impacted wisdom teeth, and there's no question about that – I didn't ask to see Sir John's dental records, but I believe him. It was, however, convenient. And he knew how to exploit that convenience, because he understood that it was advantageous not to be there, which is counterintuitive – you'd think that if all this important stuff is going on, and you're not there, you are suffering; but actually it made it much easier for him to organise a leadership campaign if he *couldn't* organise it… if it had to be delegated to others.

If he could sit there quietly on the phone in Huntingdon, and get told things by people who were acting on his behalf – it gave it a sort of deniability. And it was extremely well done.

Jon Davis: I've got Andrew Heron of the Treasury, who asks:

What was Thatcher's relationship like with the Treasury, especially over the ERM issue? Was she more the First Lord of the Treasury than other holders of the office?

Lord Moore: She loved to remind her Chancellors that she was First Lord of the Treasury; and it's interesting to note that when she was rising in politics, if asked what her highest ambition was, she would always say to be Chancellor of the Exchequer. I think that was partly because she was frightened of saying she wanted to be Prime Minister in case that sounded too absurd, because people would have thought at the time that a woman can't make it. But also, it was a genuine ambition to be Chancellor: she was fascinated by economic policy; and she also felt that, as a woman, she wished to conquer things which the men thought they owned – and there was nothing they thought they owned more than money. And war – that was the other big thing they owned. And so that gave her a challenge; and that, of course, made her a very difficult Prime Minister for Chancellors, because she wasn't going to let them get on with things peacefully.

At its best, it was very dynamic, and that was true of a lot of the chancellorship of Geoffrey Howe, and the first part of the chancellorship of Nigel Lawson. It was actually rather fantastic, because so many things could happen, and there was such a strong understanding in Number Ten – reasonably harmonious with the Treasury, most of the time… not always; not on the ERM – about how to concert these policies. But my goodness it was dreadful when the clashes became endemic. And they began over the ERM; they came to a head for the first time in 1985, and they went on for ever afterwards, until we entered, greatly against her will – it showed how powerless she had become – in October 1990, only about six weeks before she resigned.

It's a bit of a tragedy with her and Nigel Lawson, I think, because if she had reshuffled Nigel after the '87 election, the credit that he would have built up would have been pretty unassailable – and indeed, the word she used about him, actually, was "unassailable". And it would have looked very good for her, that she'd chosen such a successful Chancellor, and then she'd made him Foreign Secretary instead or whatever. Instead of which it all became bitter and sad, and this was very much part of the declining years – of the last eighteen months of her time in office.

Jon Davis: Lloyd Rees asks:

Which of the three volumes did you find most interesting to write?

Lord Moore: Well, of course – as I want you to buy them, if you haven't got round to it – I would say that they're all very interesting in their different ways.

Jon Davis: You can't understand one of them without buying the other two, right? [*Laughter*]

Lord Moore: I think the most difficult one to write was the middle one, because it doesn't have a rise or a fall: it's her zenith. I found the rise absolutely fascinating, because of her – as it were – coming from nowhere; and the huge amount of discovery I made about her private life, and her as a woman, and her as a young woman, and the immense difficulties she overcame. And the third volume has this tremendous triumph at the end of the Cold War, and her third election victory, and the tragedy of the fall – so full of drama.

However, I would say one thing in favour of Volume Two, and its pleasure to do, was the absolute fascination of how she dealt with the Cold War, and Gorbachev, and how she moved from being the "hawk" almost to being the "dove". I mean, she didn't really ever become a dove, but this is the funny thing about her: she almost sold herself on being rigid, and never changing; but that was almost a device for concealing when she *was* changing. And she was quite subtle; and she was a good diplomat, at a human level. If she was interested in a person – like Reagan, or Gorbachev – she really knew how to play that. And I found that all deeply fascinating, and I think it actually matters.

Jon Davis: Following on from that, a late question coming in from Gordon Corera of the BBC, who asks:

What were the roots of Mrs Thatcher's distrust of Germany, and would she have got on with Angela Merkel?

Lord Moore: Thank you, Gordon. The roots of her distrust of Germany were the war – but I actually think that something else happened. When she came into office – and when she became leader, before she went into office – she was actually very admiring of the German economic recovery, though she was always aware that the German situation was very different from ours. And she studied the success of Ludwig Erhard, for example; and she got on quite well with Helmut Schmidt. So I think some of her resentment against Germany that came later was a bit of a cover, or a psychological thing; and I think what she was really annoyed about, towards the end of her time in office, was the fact that Germany was beating us. And particularly that they were beating us, not so much economically, actually – though there was stuff about that, with the stability of the Deutschmark – but diplomatically.

She was deeply upset by George Bush succeeding Ronald Reagan. She liked Bush, but when Reagan sort of did the tilt to Germany – seeing Germany as the key to the end of the Cold War – she was deeply upset by this; and she hated the rise of Helmut Kohl as a world statesman, bringing about effects which she thought – for reasons we've already discussed tonight – dangerous. And Kohl himself, I think, brought out all that anti-Germanism.

I just can't imagine her and Angela Merkel: I just don't know what it would be like. Mrs Thatcher, on the whole, didn't get on well with women politicians; the exception, actually, is Indira Gandhi, with whom she had a good relationship. But there, I think, they enjoyed talking about the problems with their children – which were considerable.

Jon Davis: OK. I've got Matthew Lloyd, a PhD student from Queen Mary, who asks:

Is there anyone who you believe is the true Thatcherite torchholder in the Conservative parliamentary party today?

Lord Moore: Well, what I always think about this is that… I'm slightly evading the question, but I don't think the best Thatcherites are those who simply repeat her doctrines as if nothing had changed. Because what she was was a change-bringer, rather than trying to produce a steady state. And I think some ardent Thatcherites don't understand that, so they just sort of look up the "Book of Thatcherism", as it were, and say: "We must do what she did." That's not how politics works, and she understood that, but some of them don't.

So it could be that a successful Thatcherite, in modern times, would not necessarily share quite a lot of her views; but somehow they would share the essential spirit of them. I'm not sure that such a person is apparent right now in the absolute front rank; I think Jacob Rees-Mogg is very good at articulating many aspects of it. But if you're thinking about people who are actually deciding what we're really doing, at the top of the government, it's not clear to me.

One Thatcher dictum I would pass on to Boris – and it's one that he doesn't always pay much attention to – is one of her favourites: time spent in reconnaissance is never wasted.

Jon Davis: I'm going to draw it to an end, but I'm going to ask Robert, who I think has one last question. Robert, over to you.

Robert Orchard: It's been a fascinating discussion, Charles; I'm fascinated to hear it all. Two quick questions: in the later years, I covered the Lords as well as the Commons, and Geoffrey Howe had obviously been very close to Thatcher, and her political soulmate for years. When he made that speech, she turned to Ken Baker and said it was a mixture of bile and treachery. [Howe] in effect began the process that brought her down, yet years later, in the Lords, I saw them having what looked like a friendly conversation.

So my first question is, did she ever forgive Geoffrey Howe; and my second, brief question: in *The Crown*, there's an extraordinary scene where, in one of the private audiences with the Queen, Margaret Thatcher – in the middle of the leadership crisis – asks the Queen to dissolve Parliament so that she can call an election and save her bacon.

Is there any basis whatsoever for that?

Lord Moore: To answer your second question first: none whatever. Mrs Thatcher did occasionally invoke the Queen, as I mentioned briefly, in trying to avoid leaving; but she might do this in relation to the coming Iraq war, for instance, as a reason why there shouldn't be a leadership contest. But no – absolutely [not]; she would have known at once that it was wholly unconstitutional, and dotty, and it wouldn't have helped her anyway if the Queen were to dissolve Parliament. And I think it's a very bad mistake by *The Crown*, because first of all it's absolutely untrue, and secondly it shows Mrs Thatcher in an unbelievable light; and it also doesn't make any sense with the Queen, either. I can't understand why it's there at all.

With Geoffrey Howe – it's interesting, this… Did she forgive him? Shortly after he'd done what he did, and she had left office, he wrote her a letter of attempted reconciliation, which she rejected. And I'm sure his motives were of the best, but it was much too early to write such a letter: the wound was much too raw. But what you observed was correct: that when you saw them together, that reflected something, which was that later, they were sort of reconciled; and she – I think I'm right in saying – invited him to her eightieth birthday party, for example.

You have to remember that one of the sad things about their relationship was that it had been very close. And rather touchingly, when Geoffrey was old, and he himself had lost some of his mental faculties, he spoke to me sometimes about her, and he said: "When Margaret and I were married, we… " – this, that and the other. And it's interesting that that thought was, in a muddled way, in his mind: he did feel rather as if they had been married, and then they'd got divorced, and that he had sought a reconciliation. And in a way he got it – I mean, I don't think she ever perhaps fully forgave him, but she was no longer angry with him.

Jon Davis: Well, thank you so much – that brings us to an end. I've got to tell you that I thought that was wonderful; this is the third time, Charles, that you've come and spoken to us, and I think that this is just a wonderful series of events. A big thank you to Robert, for what I thought was an excellent presentation; and Charles, I can't recommend your books highly enough… I think they are really quite remarkable. So a huge thank you – and we'll raise a glass, in happier days.

Thank you to everyone who took part.

Lord Moore: Thank you.