

# European role in Thatcher's demise

by Mark Burdman

There is an exquisite historical irony in British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher having received news of her electoral defeat while she was in Versailles, France, attending the 34-nation Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) heads of state summit. Imagine: a British prime minister receiving news of a crushing domestic political setback, in the heartland of the United Kingdom's main historical rivals, "the Gauls"!

In Europe, it is not only the ghost of Charles de Gaulle who is undoubtedly having a few good chuckles at Thatcher's expense. Across the continent, there was a feeling that a Thatcher-led Great Britain and a developing and prosperous European continent can no longer coexist. This sentiment is increasingly linked to an evaluation that Thatcher was the outstanding obstacle to achieving a European policy vis-à-vis the Gulf crisis, based on war avoidance and the use of diplomatic and political means to effect an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait.

On the same Nov. 20 date that Tory parliamentarians were voting, Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González dropped a diplomatic bombshell, demanding that Britain move toward giving up control over Gibraltar, the which control, he insisted, was a vestige of a "colonialist" policy that was proving an obstacle to the formation of a "new Europe." The pro-Thatcher *Daily Mail* tabloid Nov. 21 denounced this as a "cheeky Spanish bid."

Also on Nov. 20 at the CSCE summit, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl issued a broadside against what he called "backward-looking nationalism" that was being used to impede closer relations between European states. According to the same *Mail* article, Thatcher "resented the timing of Kohl's criticism," which she assumed to be aimed at her, and was "annoyed" that he had chosen polling day in Britain to make it.

## 'The aroma of decomposing lame duck'

While these and other European battles with Thatcher did not directly influence the voting among parliamentarians on Nov. 20, Thatcher's former defense minister Michael Heseltine campaigned to a significant extent on the issue of his differences with Thatcher over Europe, and had made his decision to run against her on Nov. 14, following an impor-

tant two-day visit to Hamburg, Germany. Similarly, Sir Geoffrey Howe had resigned from his position as deputy prime minister on Nov. 1, largely on this issue, as he explained in his devastating Nov. 13 House of Commons speech, which effectively initiated the Heseltine challenge. As Howe argued, Thatcher's intransigence toward Europe was undermining Britain's traditional role of playing European politics from the inside, and was weakening Britain's presence in Europe to the point of hurting the financial and economic situation in the United Kingdom.

The majority faction of the British Establishment rallied behind such arguments. The main signal that troubles would arise for Thatcher on Nov. 20, was the editorial in the *London Sunday Times* on Nov. 18. Entitled "A Reluctant Goodbye," it broke with the paper's 11 years of support for Thatcher, and endorsed Heseltine, complaining that the Thatcher government lacked "economic competence" and was needlessly alienating Europe.

The pro-Heseltine, or anti-Thatcher, mood was otherwise orchestrated. Between Nov. 18 and 20, six opinion polls were published in the press, the most devastating being the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* on voting day, showing a large voter preference for Heseltine over Thatcher, particularly among lukewarm, or former, Tory supporters.

Heseltine's final count of 152 was much higher than was anticipated, especially since he had only announced his challenge six days before the voting. Thatcher's vote of 204 (there were 16 absentions) was too small to comply with the Conservative Party regulation that the winner must have a margin over the nearest contender of 15% of the total voters. Rather than face a second ballot on Nov. 27, Thatcher resigned Nov. 22.

Peter Jenkins, senior political correspondent of the liberal *Independent* daily, wrote Nov. 21: "It is too soon for obituaries, but the sense must surely be that something is now ending. . . . The aroma of the coming week at Westminster will be that of decomposing lame duck, which is not an inspiring smell for a party with such keen nostrils for governmental power."

The pro-Thatcher press howled. On Nov. 21, the *Mail* ran an editorial entitled, "The worst of all worlds." It said that, for the Tories and for Thatcher, "all prospects look bleak beyond belief." The paper forecast (wrongly), that Thatcher would not voluntarily step down, but would "go down blazing like a long boat in a Viking funeral," and commented that there was "more than a little of the Twilight of the Gods about the political tragedy now being enacted."

Thatcher's troubles have the potential of braking the drive toward war to some extent. An anti-Thatcher Conservative influential told *EIR* Nov. 21: "The main British policy toward the Gulf won't change, but the momentum toward war has been jolted, it has been slowed down. Her influence, which has been paramount, has been dented."

Will George Bush draw the appropriate conclusions?