

Thatcher rallies Tories in defence of Pinochet at British Conservative Party conference

Julie Hyland
9 October 1999

The highlight of the past week's Conservative Party conference was a packed meeting on Wednesday evening addressed by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, entitled "General Pinochet: the only political prisoner in Britain".

In a hall bedecked with Chilean flags, Thatcher was flanked by two Chilean senators, former chancellor Norman Lamont and Pinochet's son, Marco Antonio. Met by rapturous applause, she decried the extradition proceedings against the former dictator as "international lynch law", "judicial kidnap" and the equivalent of a "police state".

The case against Pinochet was a "Marxist" plot, Thatcher claimed. "The left can't forgive" Pinochet for defeating communism and successfully transforming Chile into a model free market economy, she continued, and were taking revenge on one of "Britain's greatest friends".

Thatcher had not addressed a Tory Party conference for nine years. That she used the occasion to make such an outspoken defence of a fascist dictator epitomised the lurch to the right witnessed throughout the conference. On every front, Thatcher loyalists dominated proceedings and advanced policies that went further than those implemented by her government, prior to her fall from leadership in 1990.

The new policy document introduced by party leader William Hague, "The common sense revolution", contained five central "guarantees": the complete deregulation of education, rationing healthcare in the National Health Service, a "one strike and you're out" policy towards people on benefits who refuse employment, tax cuts to be funded by cuts in welfare, and no acceptance of European Monetary Union for at least five years.

Conference went on to pledge the introduction of fast-

track detention for young offenders, a 40-hour working week for prisoners, boosting police numbers, making release from prison dependent on rehabilitation, and halting asylum claims. It promised, in response to Scottish and Welsh devolution, that under a Tory government at Westminster there would be "English votes on English laws". The conference also went on record as opposing any reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary in Northern Ireland.

For much of this decade the Tory party has been bitterly divided, particularly regarding its attitude towards European Union. The party's drubbing in the 1997 general election added another element to these differences—how the party should respond to a Labour Party that had, in all essentials, adopted its free market agenda and won the backing of big business and former Tory voters in the process.

Broadly speaking, the line-up on this issue has mirrored the differences on Europe. The pro-Euro wing grouped around former cabinet ministers Michael Heseltine and Kenneth Clarke argue that Labour's shift to the right has established a new consensus in Britain. Having won the case for the free market, the Conservatives should project a more "compassionate" stance in order to win back "the disengaged centre".

The anti-European wing around Thatcher rejects this. Rather than fight on territory they have already captured, they insist that the party must seize the opportunity to shift the political agenda even further to the right.

Hague became party leader with Thatcher's backing. But for the past two years he has been forced to steer an unsteady course between the two wings of his party. The conference demonstrated that this balancing act was over.

On the evening before her appeal on behalf of

Pinochet, Thatcher told Scottish Tories, "In my lifetime all our problems have come from mainland Europe and all the solutions have come from the English-speaking nations across the world." The Tories must take power again, she continued, and "build a great future for Britain and America and the whole of the English-speaking people". Thatcher's strident anti-European line was endorsed by conference and in Hague's closing remarks.

This met disapproval both inside and outside the Conservative Party. As conference opened, the *Financial Times* carried a front-page article warning that investment into the UK would dry up should the country remain outside the euro-zone indefinitely. In numerous meetings and in the press, Heseltine, Clarke, and others attacked the policy.

Many political commentators declared the decision to allow Thatcher centre-stage at the conference was a serious miscalculation. In a conference special headlined "Why Maggie must be laid to rest", *Times* columnist Alice Miles complained, "Hague has turned his back on the centre ground and fallen into the embrace of the Right, to be met by the party's lunatic element".

During the previous week's Labour Party conference, Prime Minister Tony Blair called on Heseltine and others to recognise there was no longer a place for them in the Tory Party and that Labour was now their natural home. Within British ruling class circles there is concern that the re-emergence of Thatcher and the ascendancy of extreme-right elements may lead to the Tory party's break-up.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact