

Margaret Thatcher Interview, “We Can Do Business Together”

John Cole:

[Summary of question] Does meeting Gorbachev, make you more optimistic or less regarding detente and world peace next year?

Prime Minister:

I am cautiously optimistic. I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together. We both believe in our own political systems. He firmly believes in his; I firmly believe in mine. We are never going to change one another. So that is not in doubt, but we have two great interests in common: that we should both do everything we can to see that war never starts again, and therefore we go into the disarmament talks determined to make them succeed. And secondly, I think we both believe that they are the more likely to succeed if we can build up confidence in one another and trust in one another about each other's approach, and therefore, we believe in cooperating on tradematters, on cultural matters, on quite a lot of contacts between politicians from the two sides of the divide.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] Gorbachev spoken of as possible successor to Chernenko, more flexible and, in Soviet terms, liberal. Did you form that view of him?

Prime Minister:

[Mikhail Gorbachev] He was very ready to enter into full, detailed discussion; not to stick to prepared statements. So we had a genuine discussion. As a matter of fact, I also had a genuine discussion with Mr. Chernenko , President Chernenko , when I visited Moscow in February last year, and I also got on very well with President Chernenko , so the two things, really, were very very well worthwhile doing and I am very pleased he is here, and I hope he has an extremely successful visit.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] You see President Reagan at the end of the week. Any chance of Summit meeting in New Year between President Chernenko and President Reagan ?

Prime Minister:

I should not hurry along a Summit meeting too fast. I think the most important thing is to try to decide what form the disarmament talks shall take; what shall be discussed; in which group of Ministers; and to try to make progress there.

I am sure that both sides want to make progress, because it is in both of our interests to do so, and I think it is important that some progress is made first and then perhaps to think of a Summit later. But I think it is wrong to raise expectations too high at the beginning, because then people might be disappointed. If they approach it in the framework that we both want to succeed and then take the progress steadily, that

will be better in the longer run.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] So arms talks first. And Star Wars?

Prime Minister:

Well that, of course, is part of the disarmament talks. Obviously, you cannot stop research going ahead, but I think one does not want to go into a higher and higher level of armaments because between the two main power blocs, the Warsaw Pact countries and NATO, we have got to have balance if we are both to feel secure, but we are only going to feel secure on the basis of a balance of armaments, and obviously, it does not make sense to have balance at a higher and higher level. We want to get the level of balance down and that is why we are entering into the talks; because we want that level of balance down and also because I think both of us feel that more monies should be spent towards raising the standard of living of people and perhaps less on armaments, provided we can keep that balance and that mutual respect for one another's security.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] Mrs. Gorbachev, a guest to lunch at Chequers yesterday. More involved in her husband's work than previous Soviet leaders' wives you've seen?

Prime Minister:

I do not know. [Raisa Gorbachev] She is a person of very much her own interests. As you know, she is very interested in political philosophy and she was delighted to spend some time going round Chequers' library, which she found very very fascinating, and we were very pleased that she came along too and my husband and a number of other people looked after her while Mr. Gorbachev and I and his advisers and mine were talking.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] You are now leaving for China to sign Hong Kong Agreement. Do you think after 1997 Chinese will maintain present status of Hong Kong or even democratize it further?

Prime Minister:

I believe that that Agreement will be honoured. We are both committed to it and we are trying to demonstrate the commitment of both China and of the United Kingdom to the future of Hong Kong in its present life style by going and having it signed at Prime Ministerial level.

The Chinese have negotiated in detail, again to show that they are committed to the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong in the future, and it continuing as it is now, and they put in the period of fifty years. I think there is also one other very encouraging thing: there will be a Liaison Committee, so that we can keep closely in touch with the Chinese, although we shall be absolutely in administrative control until 1997. That Liaison Committee, on which we consult one another, will continue after 1997 until the

year 2000, and I hope that that will give some extra confidence to the people of Hong Kong that the Agreement will be fully honoured and that we are both committed to it.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] 1984 a year to put behind you - Brighton bomb, high unemployment, troubles on your backbenches ...

Prime Minister

... and, of course, with the prolonged coal strike.

John Cole

[Summary of question] ... that too. Many found it a depressing year. Did you?

Prime Minister:

The two things that obviously stand out to me have been the coal strike which, when it started, none of us would have expected that it would go on this long—and also the way in which it has been conducted with the violence and intimidation which has gone to the root of everything that is unBritish. We did not expect it and we do not like it.

The Brighton bomb, of course, was absolutely terrible and we lost many many dear friends, and we keep our very firm attitude to terrorism. It does not affect our views and will not be seen to affect our views. The ballot is the way to make for differences and not either terrorism or intimidation.

So in that respect, I hope it is a year that one does not see again.

Certain good things always emerge out of bad things.

Out of the coal strike, we have seen the moderate trade union members reassert leadership, a sense of responsibility for the future of their union, a sense of responsibility to see that the union rules are upheld, and that, I think, is the thing—the reassertion of responsibility of moderate trade unionism—which will last far longer than the effects of the coal strike.

Obviously, I am the first person to want the coal[fo 6] strike to end. I never wanted it to start. We gave the very best deal to miners that they have ever had in this country, and I want it to end, but that can only end by negotiations between the National Coal Board and those who are on strike in exactly the same way as we had effective negotiations between the National Coal Board and NACODS.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] You and Mr. Scargill have been arguing over the strike for nine months. Can you predict how this strike is going to end in 1985? Government so far relying on it crumbling away. Not happening quickly.

Prime Minister:

Well now, there are more people at work than there were at the beginning of the strike—quite a lot more—and they are very widely spread in a lot more mines.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] But still substantial strike underway!

Prime Minister:

Oh yes, indeed, but over 36% of the members of the NUM are at work, most of them producing coal. The strike will not end while the National Union of Mineworkers' leadership has as its proud boast that it has not budged an inch. So long as that is so, there can be no effective negotiations and then, this strike can only end by more and more people coming back to work.

It is not up to me to say which way will be chosen, but negotiations cannot be effective so long as the National Union of Mineworkers' leadership boast that it has not budged an inch. It is not good enough to say: "We are prepared to go to a negotiating table" if that is the attitude they take with them.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] No point in you personally intervening in this strike, with TUC, or anyone else?

Prime Minister:

No, indeed not! The coal mines are managed by the National Coal Board under the objectives given to them by Government and therefore any decisions have to be taken at the level of the National Coal Board, and by negotiations with them. Those can be successful, as they were with NACODS, and the NACODS Agreement is a good one and if we just work out what they had as an independent local review body as part of the colliery review procedure, then they could go back to work tomorrow.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] Do you feel any human sympathy for the miners and families during a cheerless Christmas?

Prime Minister:

Yes, of course I do! Not merely human sympathy, but some anger that there are people who, for their own political ends, are prepared to put the striking miners under privation, when they could in fact be earning a good living for their families and having a very good Christmas and having a really prosperous future to look forward to.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] Backbenchers revolted number of times during past year, especially during the past few months — on overseas aid, student grants, the GLC, etc — but their underlying anxiety, you

would accept, is unemployment.

Can you give them and us hope of reduction in unemployment in 1985?

Prime Minister:

I wish I could give you a forecast as to when. I can only say that in the past months, in the last year, something like a quarter of a million new jobs have been created. Ironically enough, they have not taken a lot of people off the unemployment register—they have taken some—but not a lot, because a number of people who have not been on the register and who have not been working previous, married women for example, have come in and taken those jobs because they are, a lot of them, part-time jobs and require people prepared to work very very varied hours, and married women are prepared to do that and, of course, are very very good employees; very loyal, very hardworking. And so, the hope is that there are new jobs being created. There are, of course, Mr. Cole, unfortunately, still redundancies coming out, but also the strikes are stopping jobs. They are finishing jobs. All of those supply industries which supply the coal mines, they are not working very much now or much less, and it is thought that if the strike goes on some 30,000 of those will not have jobs.

I had a letter from someone who has garment shops in Yorkshire. He is having to close his shops because the miners are not earning and therefore they are not spending. So, as hard as we are trying to go to create jobs, there are still some redundancies coming as companies become more and more efficient as they take on the new technology, but there are also some people who blame us about unemployment, but who are themselves creating unemployment by encouraging every single strike in the country—the miners strike, the strike in various industries—and if they would stop supporting strikes we would do far better about keeping the customers we have and getting more. In the meantime, we will do everything we can to help reduce unemployment. That is one of the most important things both from the economic viewpoint but, of course, from the human viewpoint, most important of all!

John Cole:

[Summary of question] If you don't get unemployment down before next General Election do you accept that will make it less likely you will win?

Prime Minister:

I think our task is to get across to people that we are doing every single thing we can. You see, unless you can get more business started up and successful and other businesses expanding, which depend upon winning more customers, and all you can do is shuffle round the business and shuffle round the shekels, and frankly, that is not good enough. So you have got to have the right framework of taxation, incentives, getting rid of a lot of regulations, to encourage the people who want to start up business to start.

I think it is very ironic that there are far fewer people in this country who have as their ambition to start up a business and build up a business than there are, for example, in Japan and the United States. But we are getting back to that. We are getting back to that. But that, in the end, is the only way to provide more

jobs. New businesses, expanding business. How do you get it? By embracing change, creating tomorrow's products, doing the things in all the service industries that people want, because do not forget leisure means business for quite a lot of people. Maybe new things in sports, maybe new things in Disneyland; maybe new things in culture and entertainment. It is business. But we have to go into those things and only by getting more business shall we get more jobs.

So we have got to compete with others. We have got to go out into the world's markets and we have got to win them.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] Human side of unemployment: reported you will stop benefits of school leavers. Divides nation and gives impression of hard approach?

Prime Minister:

No, Mr. Cole, I do not. I think most parents would join me in saying that unemployment ought not to be a choice up to the age of eighteen. It certainly ought not to be a choice. Young people ought not to be idle. It is very bad for them. It starts them off wrong.

We have been waiting for a time until we could make certain that there are enough places for training. But young people, if they want to leave school at sixteen and can find a job—and many of them do ... the unemployment among school-leavers is actually lower than it was this time last year—then they can leave and go to a job. But they ought not just be able to leave and go to a job. But they ought not just be able to leave and go to unemployment. If they cannot find a job, they have the option to go into many forms, different forms, of higher education—maybe in further education colleges, it may be in taking more advanced qualifications, I hope of the kind where skills are short, because there is still a skill shortage among unemployment, in those skills that we need to help them get a job.

So, either get a job —and many of them do—get some form of further education qualification in the skills that are short, particularly in computer work, or go to training. We can give training for every young person up to the age of eighteen and when we are absolutely sure we can do that.

They should not have the option of being unemployed. It is bad for them, bad for the country, bad for future skills, and I believe most parents would be absolutely with me on that.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] You told Tory backbenchers last week your door always open, but you are criticised for not always listening, being domineering in style and strident.

Prime Minister:

I cannot change my style. There are many many people who are reasonably pleased that one gives a firm lead. My job also is to persuade and I do that, and that is why, we always when they come, we will argue

things out. Sometimes, many many times, we take just exactly what they say and incorporate it into our future policy. This has always been done and there have always been a certain amount of differences among numbers of backbenchers. When I came into the House in 1959, there was what was known as the Suez Group. In my first Parliament, there were very considerable battles on resale price maintenance. In Government again later, on negotiating with the European Community, there were very considerable differences of opinion on that. Indeed, we only got that Bill through—the second reading of that Bill through—by eight, so of course, there is nothing unusual in having discussion with one's backbenchers. Of course, there is not. That is what makes a party!

John Cole:

[Summary of question] More dissent in this Parliament than in your first?

Prime Minister:

No, I do not think it is. We had a number of differences. Of course you have differences. I do not think there has been much more dissension in this Parliament than in my first Government or in the Government between 1970 to 1974 or in the Government between 1959 to 1964. My goodness me, I can remember some battles then! I can remember them, for example, on the widowed mothers' earnings rule, something about which a number of us felt very very strongly.

No, I do not think there is more dissension now than there was then.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] No change of style in running Party or Government?

Prime Minister:

I cannot change my style. I do hold to things very very firmly, as you know. I am always not merely prepared to explain, but anxious to explain what I am doing and why. Anxious to take other people along with us because ...

John Cole:

[Summary of question] ... and to listen?

Prime Minister:

... anxious to listen. I spend a lot of time listening, Mr. Cole, a tremendous lot of time listening. Otherwise, I would not get the messages I do. But if people come, it does not necessarily mean that you are automatically going to adopt what they say. It does mean that you are going to say the reason why. It does mean that you are going to make one other point: people come to you with a series of special interests. A party is about more than a whole series of special interests. A party is about adding up those special interests and making certain that the views of the whole majority, the majority of taxpayers, the majority of consumers, the majority of people in this country on law and order, that they are upheld, and that you do not say "Yes, yes, yes" to so many special interests that when you have added them up you

have got a result which the majority of taxpayers, which the majority of people who believe in defence, the majority of people who believe in order, would not agree with.

So always, but always, in the Cabinet, in my policies, we have, as well as looking at minority interests, to look at the broad majority interests of the great mass of British people, both together and believing in their right to liberty, their right to an ordered society under the rule of law.

John Cole:

[Summary of question] Finally Government refuses to waive VAT on Bandid record for Ethiopian famine victims. Could you not follow Irish Government in giving an equivalent sum to the Fund?

Prime Minister:

Mr. Cole, we have paid far far more, even proportionately than the Irish Government, to Ethiopia. Indeed, I think you will find that of all the people in Europe, this Government has—representing the British taxpayer—been the most generous to the people of Ethiopia, both in the actual amount of aid we have given as Great Britain, the amount also we have given as partners in Europe. Not only the aid we have given in getting the grain out there, but the Hercules which are out there together with about a hundred people distributing it. All of that has come, of course, through the taxpayer.

Now, we cannot make special provision for a particular cause. There are so many others. There is Barnados; there is the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children; there are the Waifs and Strays; there is Save The Children; there are Help the Aged. All of them have special Christmas cards. All of them have special fund-raising things. Some of them have special records, and they are continuing. We cannot do something for one particular thing without doing it for all, but unless after all, you get in the tax from the generality of taxpayers as a whole, then we have not the money in fact to give to these very very good causes.

While we were all so extremely affected and moved by the terrible thing of children not having enough to eat, do not let us forget the work that goes on day in, day out, on the part of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children—cruelty in our own country! They are raising £12 million for their centenary year. They need £8 million every year. The War on Want and the Oxfam, the Barnados, those are continuous, so let us also this Christmas give to them and, of course, let us also remember Stoke Mandeville which, of course, you know Jimmy Savile raised that £10 million for that extension to that hospital. Let us remember other things as well as the children and parents in Ethiopia which we are doing so much to help and I am so grateful to the people who made that record. It was a wonderful idea.

Source: Margaret Thatcher, interview by John Cole, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, *Archive*, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/> (accessed September 21, 2006).