

THE MEANING OF THE UNIVERSE

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PAGE  
46

DECEMBER 26, 2011/JANUARY 2, 2012

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**A BRITISH PRIME MINISTER**, splendidly isolated, faces down a phalanx of scowling European leaders, all harrumphing censure in accents that are German, French, Italian. We've witnessed the scene before. Decades ago Margaret Thatcher warred with her European counterparts just as David Cameron did this month in refusing to yield control of national budgets to Brussels. The difference is that the Iron Lady did not speak softly when she wielded a big stick. She lambasted ambitious bureaucrats; the artificial Utopian megastate you want to build, she told them, will be a "tower of Babel" dominated by Germany and riven by economic crises. Though she was ousted in 1990 over her refusal to join the monetary union, her skepticism seems to be vindicated with every euro crisis. December 2011 is very much Maggie's moment, and with serendipitous timing, she's there on the big screen in a biopic, *The Iron Lady*, portrayed with preternatural realism by Meryl Streep.

# THE NEW THATCHER ERA

BY AMANDA FOREMAN  
Photograph by Brigitte Lacombe





**M**RS. THATCHER IS 30ish,” stated a BBC memo written in 1957, “very pretty and dresses most attractively.” The aspiring politician “assembles her thoughts well,” but “her main charm,” concluded the report, is “that she does not look like a ‘career woman.’”

It took 22 years for Margaret Thatcher to overcome the pervasive sexism of the *Mad Men* generation to become prime minister in 1979. “I remember everybody was sort of secretly tweaked that she got in,” notes Meryl Streep, now starring as Thatcher. “That a woman got in. We thought any second that meant here we’d have a woman president.”

As she ascended, her paradoxical mystique fueled the fantasies of both critics and fans. Even as feminism evolved along with her career, the metaphors and put-downs—“eyes like heat-seeking missiles,” “Iron Knickers,” “flirt,” “bitch,” “the Handbag” (shortened by her detractors to, simply, “the Bag”)—clung to her as they did not to other powerful women. Her decent and supportive husband would be depicted as a cowering milquetoast, such was the threat she posed to the status quo. And yet she would win three general elections as a conservative revolutionary at home and a world leader, transforming (along with Ronald Reagan) the ideological terrain of the Anglo-American world while bringing the Cold War to an emphatic end.

In the two decades since her fall from power, her mind has faded, as has her once-mythic image, either calcified as a caricature of a union-busting battleaxe or overshadowed by the achievements of other women on the world stage: Angela Merkel, Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice. But that is changing now with the convulsions of the euro she predicted and a return of ideological conflicts in which she was the most passionate advocate of free markets. Equivocation enraged her. When as leader of the party she thought some Tories were showing deviationist liberal tendencies—“wets,” she called them—she marched into the headquarters of the Conservative Party clutching a book by Friedrich Hayek and proclaimed: “This is what we believe.”

The film’s focus on Thatcher’s mental decline has been denounced by her admirers—who, like those of her fellow traveler Reagan, tend to be furiously overprotective of their hero’s image and legacy. But their criticism misses a broader point. Streep’s nuanced portrayal of the vulnerable human being behind the mask of the “Iron Lady” powerfully reminds us of Thatcher’s achievements not just as a politician and leader but as a woman, a wife, and a mother. She is so controversial in Britain, though, that she has never been claimed by the feminist movement. In 2009 it took a public outcry to force a reprint after the deputy leader of the Labour government, Harriet Harman, published an official list of the 16 women politicians who changed Britain and left Thatcher off. Her rejection “even from feminists,” says Streep, seems to “have something to do with our profound ... discomfort with women in power. Or our terror of it.”

More important, perhaps—and this may be her ultimate triumph—she is still relevant for her ideas, not for her having been a feminist pioneer, which she certainly was, even if this

truth goes unacknowledged. All of which raises the question of how we should assess Thatcher today.

The England that Margaret Roberts was born into in 1925 was a country in which class often determined destiny. Her father, Albert, left school at 14 and became the proprietor of his own grocery store and a leading figure in local politics. “Sacrifice today for a better tomorrow” was Albert Roberts’s mantra. He condemned socialism for penalizing the workers in favor of the shirkers. He housed his family in rooms over his grocer’s shop. There were no luxuries at home; an inside toilet, for example, was considered unnecessary. Everything was devoted to furthering Margaret’s education. There were extra books, music lessons, elocution lessons (to erase the provincial accent), and, of course, weekly attendance at town-council meetings so she could watch Mayor Roberts in action and learn from the debates. “Margaret received from her father,” recalls a former aide, “very strong, coherent political views.”

Margaret fulfilled her father’s ambitions for her by winning a scholarship to Oxford when few in Britain could hope for a university education, least of all a woman of her class. Here, though, she had her first personal experience of the barriers that existed to keep out—and down—little upstarts like herself. Grocers’ daughters, even those with elocution lessons, were excluded from many of the institutions aimed at shaping future leaders, including the university’s famed debating society; she didn’t get invited to its May Balls or black-tie dinners. Even at the height of her powers as prime minister she was stigmatized for her petit-bourgeois origins; a Belgian politician once remarked of her to Roy Jenkins, a British president of the European Commission, “Voilà parle la vraie fille de l’epicier”—“there speaks a true grocer’s daughter.”

In 1951, 26-year-old Margaret Roberts was already determined to become a politician when she married a man 10 years older who’d returned from years in the Army only to find his first wife divorcing him. Denis Thatcher was a jocular small-business owner of a third-generation family paint and plastics firm. Personable without being controversial, retiring but not anodyne, Denis was the perfect consort. He had no

## THATCHER’S IMPACT ON THE WORLD WAS ENORMOUS. SHE GAVE THE POLES HOPE AND THE AFGHANS STINGER MISSILES.

envy of his wife’s prominence and, while at least as conservative, was never as colorful as she was—in spite of the best efforts of satirical magazines to talk up his few eccentricities. There was no greater tragedy in Margaret Thatcher’s life than the death, when it came in 2003, of her beloved Denis.

Although he was by no means a plutocrat, Denis’s wealth and social standing made it possible for Margaret to face down the snobbery of constituency-selection committees, since she, too, had the requisite Tory hat and pearls, and could boast of a large house and garden. What she never showed a trace of was the anti-Semitism that lay hidden like a noxious weed in some





Her critics lobbed puerile taunts, with some calling her by her middle name, Hilda, to emphasize her lower-class background, but Thatcher (pictured here in 1980) quickly proved herself a formidable leader.

middle-class gardens. The sizable Jewish population of the North London district of Finchley broke the pattern of rejection she'd faced by selecting her in 1958 as its candidate for Parliament. She won. Later Tory leaders thought of finding her a different constituency when Foreign Office officials told the leader in the Lords, Peter Carrington, that they feared Arab leaders would see her as "a prisoner of the Zionists."

She was tireless as an M.P. The film goes to great lengths to show that she had little time to rear her twins, Mark and Carol, yet she always remained wedded to a traditional view of her role as a wife and mother. No matter how punishing

the hours, she insisted on making breakfast for the family and always—always—cooking dinner for Denis, with whom she forged a magnificent marriage.

In Parliament, Thatcher soon discovered that her sex elevated her visibility but undermined her credibility. "We have to show them that we are better than them," she told the Labour minister Shirley Williams. The first time Thatcher brought out her superior firepower was as a junior minister in the Treasury during a debate on state pensions. Her massive research on the subject reduced the House to shocked silence; the speaker had to call out twice until she received a response.

In 1970 Thatcher's efforts were finally rewarded with a seat in Prime Minister Edward Heath's cabinet as his education minister. "I was principally there as the statutory woman," she wrote in her memoirs, "whose main task was to explain what 'women' ... were likely to think and want on troublesome issues." Heath disliked her personally, and from the outset Thatcher was cold-shouldered by the rest of the cabinet. The sense of being an outsider was soon dwarfed for her by the public outcry over her stoppage of free milk for children in favor of a school-building program. Smelling blood, the Labour Party spearheaded an unprecedented "Ditch the Bitch" campaign that encouraged people to target "Milk Snatcher Thatcher," her home, and even her family. "I learned a valuable lesson [from the experience]," she wrote in her memoir. "I had incurred the maximum of political odium for the minimum of political benefit."

Very soon she was to see that lesson in practical politics inflicted on her leader, Heath. In 1974, having failed to end a coal miners' strike, he called a general election and fought it on the theme "Who governs Britain?" The public, fed up with his imposition of a three-day workweek to save fuel, gave an ambiguous verdict that led narrowly to the return of Harold Wilson's Labour government. Rank-and-file Tories had had enough of Heath but, crucially, not of his cabinet. When Thatcher challenged him for the party leadership, Britain's largest betting chain gave her 50-1 odds. She tried to turn her sex into an advantage: "I've a woman's ability to stick with a job and get on with it when everyone else walks off and leaves it."

A cadre of disgruntled M.P.s helped Thatcher fight her way to victory. "Typical woman," recalled an M.P. who was present when the news came through, "she burst into tears and kissed us all." Down the road at Tory Central Office, the reaction was more visceral. "My God! The bitch has won!" exclaimed the vice chairman of the party. She was the first woman ever to lead the Tories. Heath promptly started a campaign to have TBW—That Bloody Woman—out by Christmas.

Two tours to the U.S. followed in quick succession, where her bold statements on everything from the failure of Keynesianism to the Soviet threat made her a sensation. When asked by the American press about her debt to feminism, Thatcher angrily replied, "Some of us were making it long before women's lib was ever thought of." But on her return home, she allowed the party's media adviser to perform reconstructive surgery on her image. Her hair, voice, and clothes were all modified to make her seem less like a sitcom character and more like a statesman. She gave up wearing hats. Thatcher's new persona was sealed when the Soviet press dubbed her the "Iron Lady." Unyielding metal was just what the people wanted after months of crippling strikes—a "winter of discontent" that had pushed the country to the brink of collapse where the dead were left unburied (thanks to the gravediggers' union) and supermarkets ran empty (the truckers' union). The national chaos was played out on TV—when the technicians' union was not on strike. On March 28, 1978, the Iron Lady won a vote of no confidence against the Labour government—and then the general election the following year.

Her first two years as prime minister were a cautionary tale of failed initiatives and inept implementation. Heath reared his embittered head to denounce Thatcher's monetarist poli-

**1959** Elected M.P. from the heavily Jewish North London neighborhood of Finchley, Thatcher soon established herself as a formidable presence in the Conservative Party.

**1975** Thatcher successfully were defeated at the polls.

**1925** Born Margaret Roberts in Grantham, Lincolnshire, she was raised in an apartment above her family's corner grocery store.



1925

1945

COLD WAR 1946-91



**1950** Roberts worked as a research chemist after graduating college and became the youngest-ever female Conservative candidate when she stood for Dartford at the age of 24.



**1959** Margaret married Denis Thatcher in 1951 and remained devoted to their twin children, Carol and Mark, even while pursuing a political career.

cies as "morally wrong." By the end of 1981 her approval rating had dropped to 23 percent, the lowest ever recorded. She was defiant. In a rousing speech to the Tory party conference, she articulated every syllable as she savaged the liberals for demanding a U-turn. "I have only one thing to say: you turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning."

Thatcher's chief successes again took place abroad—in the pugilistic arena of the EU, where she fought to safeguard Britain's economic interests, and in the U.S., where a meeting with the newly elected Reagan cemented their burgeoning friendship. She never let their mutual regard inhibit her in the slightest. She expressed her rage directly when Reagan ordered the invasion of Grenada, a member of the British Commonwealth, without her say-so. While critics lobbed puerile taunts (some colleagues called her by her middle name, Hilda, to emphasize her lower-class background), her reputation and influence only grew as the decade wore on, prompting one foreign leader, German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, to complain, "She's a bitch, she is tough, she lacks scope, and cannot lead."





**1983** After victory in the Falklands War, she was celebrated by many as a modern-day incarnation of Boadicea, an ancient British warrior-queen.



**1988** Having decided that Mikhail Gorbachev was "a man I can do business with," Thatcher worked with Ronald Reagan to bring about the 1989 collapse of communism in Europe.



**1970** Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath gave Thatcher a seat in his cabinet as education minister.



**1979** The size of Thatcher's electoral victory in 1979—a 44-seat majority in Parliament—stunned not just Britain but the world.



**1984** An IRA bombing in Brighton on Oct. 12, 1984, nearly killed Thatcher and husband Denis.



**1984-85** A yearlong showdown with the miners' union brought misery to many mining communities, but the rest of Britain continued working.

Schmidt was spectacularly wrong about Thatcher's inability to lead. And nowhere was her command, her authority, in greater evidence than in the Falklands War, the event that cemented her reputation as "Leaderene" and as a British prime minister of irrepressibly bellicose patriotism. After Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands in April 1982, Thatcher swiftly dispatched a naval task force to evict the Argentines. The United States reacted queasily to the prospect of war in the Western Hemisphere, and Reagan, to Thatcher's dismay, dispatched his secretary of state, Al Haig, to try to broker a deal between London and Buenos Aires. Not a hope. She'd seen off everyone who behind the scenes pressed her to back down. Henry Kissinger happened to be visiting London at the time and witnessed the caballing against her. Over a lunch at the Foreign Office, Kissinger was informed by the foreign secretary, his staff, and all the former foreign secretaries in the room that they were "in favor of negotiation." Later that day, Kissinger asked Thatcher which of the various negotiating options she favored. "That," Kissinger says, "led

to a general explosion. She said, 'how could you, as an old friend, even suggest this?' I explained that I wasn't suggesting anything, I was repeating what her officials had told me."

Victory over Argentina took 72 days. A total of 649 Argentine servicemen and 255 British soldiers were killed. When the war ended, Thatcher delivered one of her most memorable utterances: "Just rejoice at that news ... rejoice!" For this she was pilloried by her critics, who thought her tone was too triumphalist, too unseemly. But to most Britons the war had made a heroine of her, and she was celebrated as a modern-day incarnation of Boadicea, an ancient British warrior-queen. In the general election of 1983 she romped home with a landslide majority of 144 seats.

There was nothing to celebrate in another war, the one at home with the Irish Republican Army. On Oct. 12, 1984, the IRA nearly succeeded in killing her. She was in her suite in the Grand Hotel in Brighton, polishing her speech for the party conference. The bombs that tore apart the hotel killed five, two of them her ministers. She and Denis narrowly es-



caped injury. She went straight out to the party conference and denounced "an attempt to cripple Her Majesty's democratically elected government."

But there were also tentative signs that at least some of her government's economic policies were working. Inflation had fallen to 5 percent, interest rates went down to 9 percent, and the tiniest shoot of economic growth appeared. Her second term was a juggernaut. Singlehandedly she forced the European Commissioners to return a billion pounds sterling, in effect just by fixing them with her steely blue eyes and banging her handbag on the table. The last of the Heathites were booted out of the cabinet. State monopolies were broken up and privatized. The sale of a million council properties (government-owned subsidized housing) created a new class of homeowners. The so-called Big Bang legislation opened up London's financial sector to competition. The top tax rate was lowered from 60 percent to 40 percent, while average incomes rose by 25 percent. Perhaps most important of all were new laws curtailing the power of the trade unions. She was ready for the showdown with the coal miners that Heath had lost. She piled up coal stocks and went toe to toe with the left-wing miners; their leader hadn't taken a poll of his members, but he had taken money from Libya's Gaddafi. A yearlong strike by the miners' union, dramatized in the film and play *Billy Elliot*, brought violence and misery to many mining communities. But in contrast to its successful strikes in 1973 and 1978, the lights stayed on and the rest of Britain continued working.

Early on, Thatcher often got her way through the skillful manipulation of sexual assumptions. "Lots of politicians I talked to said how attractive and flirtatious she was in the beginning," says Streep. "She recognized the power of femininity, and she really loved being the only woman in the room." At London dinner parties it was customary for the ladies to depart at coffee, leaving the men to smoke and talk politics and sports. But when ladies retreated, Maggie made a point of staying, and, to the intense irritation of other wives, not asking for them to be included.

She never showed a scrap of deference to the men. If you agreed with her on one thing, she expected you to agree on everything. Her energy minister, Lord Howell, and others complained that instead of discussions, there were often confrontations. "She could be very shrill, partly as a tactic," concedes her foreign adviser Lord Powell. "She used being a woman pretty skillfully in many sorts of situations, for instance in getting her way with her political and cabinet colleagues. She knew that public-school-educated British men weren't brought up to argue with women." Thatcher's bossy-boots routine could have a disconcerting effect on some of the younger M.P.s. "I once made a sort of modest intervention," says Francis Maude, paymaster general in the current Conservative government. "Her eyes blazed, and she leaned across the table at me as if she was about to crawl over the table and wallop me with her handbag." Britain's current prime minister had a similar encounter. "I'll never forget my first meeting with Lady Thatcher," recalls David Cameron. "It was at the Conservative Research Department Christmas party. I was a young staffer on the trade and industry desk. Word went round the prime minister had arrived to talk to us

all. I was standing there nervously, clutching a glass of warm wine, when the P.M. stopped right in front of me, looked me in the eyes, and asked: 'Have you seen the trade figures out today? What did you think of them?' It felt like the music had suddenly stopped. Unfortunately, I had not seen the figures. Needless to say, I never made the same mistake again."

After Thatcher's electoral victory in 1987—she was the first prime minister in 160 years to win three successive elections—she turned the bulk of her attention to the international stage, where her impact was considerable. She gave the Poles hope, and the Afghans Stinger missiles. Having decided that Mikhail Gorbachev was "a man I can do business with," she formed an extraordinary troika with him and Reagan that led to the collapse of communism in Europe, though she had grave misgivings about the reunification of Germany.

"She bestrode the world like a colossus," says Britain's chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne. Thatcher's handbag, at first a symbol of weakness, had become a thing of unparalleled power. "The men I talked to about Thatcher," says Streep, "claimed when she reached for the bag, you just never knew what was going to come out. Your heart went into your feet." At one cabinet meeting the ministers arrived

## THATCHER'S HANDBAG, AT FIRST A SIGN OF WEAKNESS, BECAME A SYMBOL OF UNPARALLELED POWER.

to find her absent but the iconic article sitting on the table. "Why don't we start," suggested the environment secretary. "The handbag is here." The handbag became her leitmotif, marking her out as a prime minister who was part Lady Bracknell and part Winston Churchill. Politicians who fell foul of her were often described in the press as having been "handbagged"—a cross, in effect, between a mugging and an evisceration. In 1988 U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz presented her with the Grand Order of the Handbag—an Asprey bag stuffed with her one-liners.

In the end, Maggie was, herself, mugged by the men who had once cowered before her. In 1989, the Conservative Party was splitting over whether to join the euro. Thatcher was adamantly opposed, but two of her longest-serving allies, Geoffrey Howe and Nigel Lawson, broke with her. "Many Tory M.P.s had come to the view that in order for the party to win the next election, and, more importantly, for them to hold onto their seats, they just had to get rid of her," says Osborne. A secret assessment of the situation by party chiefs concluded that Thatcher herself was the problem.

In mid-November 1990, Howe announced his resignation to a hushed assembly of M.P.s, daring them to act. Thatcher's former defense secretary Michael Heseltine answered by initiating a leadership challenge. Thatcher, who believed she was invulnerable, refused to solicit support. Nor would she change her line on Europe. In her last interview as prime minister she warned against the danger of relinquishing fiscal sovereignty: "Are we going to ... have one single currency which we can have no control over, which we cannot determine our own interest rate or anything?" Fatally, Thatcher





PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE

insisted on scheduling the ballot when she would be in Paris at a summit to celebrate the end of the Cold War. "I called her office," recalls Kissinger. "I said she should not go to Paris because I thought that forces were building up against her."

Just over a month later, she was deposed as party leader. Her final speech before the House of Commons is the stuff of legend. "It was one of the bravest things I've ever seen," says Thatcher's close friend Romilly McAlpine. "She was going into a baying mob." Thatcher gave the greatest performance of her career. By the end of her speech M.P.s were cheering and waving their papers; a few were even crying. Outside, crowds sang "Ding Dong, the Witch Is Dead."

After she left office, Thatcher's chief occupation became giving speeches, lots and lots of speeches, for lots and lots of money. Streep happened to stumble on one such event while

Streep's portrayal of the human being behind the mask of the Iron Lady reminds us of Thatcher's achievements not just as a leader but as a woman, a wife, and a mother.

## MERYL ON MAGGIE

### ON THATCHER'S HUMANITY

We give our elected leaders iconic stature almost to have things to tear down, to work out all sorts of our own psychological problems and needs and venomous feelings. So I wondered about all the times that Margaret Thatcher was spoken about being unfeeling. And I thought, well, why was that? Was she really completely unfeeling? And as a public figure in a much smaller way myself, I understand that feeling of being stripped of your humanity. Was she a monster? While we were making the film, people had such strong and particular and specific venom for her. It was sort of stunning. It made me all the more interested in where her humanity lay.

### ON THATCHER'S WORK ETHIC

There were many surprises, like how much she thrived on work. Every year the prime minister goes to Balmoral Castle for three or four days. She was profoundly uncomfortable when she went there. She couldn't work, which drove her insane. She didn't know what to do with herself, didn't like to relax, didn't like to have any part of the day not filled with a task. She was really happy working. And there, you're meant to relax.

### ON WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP

I mean, I did suspect that there was a weird special rage about her because she was a woman. From all sides. The policies that she pursued were the same policies that Geoffrey Howe pursued, although he's not loathed and detested with the same intensity. And I think that it is a discomfort with, and a confusion about, women in leadership roles. For feminists it's a betrayal because she doesn't do the right thing, and so you hate her more than you'd hate a man who stood for the same things.

### ON THATCHER'S EMOTIONS

She was canny about the fact that in order to be taken seriously, she wasn't able to show certain emotions because she was a woman. Churchill could cry over everything, but if she cried it meant something else; it meant she wasn't fit to be leader.





## AFTER SHE WAS DEPOSED, THATCHER STOOD BEFORE PARLIAMENT WHILE CROWDS OUTSIDE SANG 'DING DONG, THE WITCH IS DEAD.'

visiting her daughter at Northwestern University: "She delivered the lecture, which was smooth and very controlled. And then she started to take questions. She continued for over an hour and a half, gaining in animation and zeal as she went on. I thought, oh my God, she's absolutely formidable."

Nothing, though, could heal the wounds inflicted on Thatcher by her own party. In a documentary interview made to accompany her memoirs, she stares straight at the camera and asserts, "It was treachery with a smile on its face." Some would have called it necessity: "But for years afterwards there was the question," says Osborne: "How did you vote as an M.P. in the vote of confidence on her?" The question as to who wielded the dagger played into a shared feeling of guilt among M.P.s that they had participated in a Shakespearean tragedy. But which one?

For Ronald Miller, Thatcher's speechwriter, the answer was obvious as he watched her receive an ecstatic reception from the Tory faithful at the first party conference after her ousting. He joined her for lunch later that day. "By the time we reached the coffee stage the Iron Lady had returned, cannonballs raking the political spectrum from end to end. I was reminded of Coriolanus telling the Romans who had banished him, 'I banish you.'"

For George Osborne, the answer is *Julius Caesar*. "He was killed because he was such a dominant figure. But if you remember, Julius Caesar dies halfway through the play. That

still makes the second half about Julius Caesar's memory and the shadow he casts. Thatcher's premiership may have ended in 1990, but her influence endured long, long after that. The fact that every prime minister since has felt the need to invite her to Downing Street, and felt they could achieve something politically by the invitation, is in itself a statement of how her reputation has grown."

For others, the real analogy is *King Lear*: a powerful leader brought down by hubris. Thatcher raged helplessly from the sidelines as the Conservatives moved closer toward European integration. Her anger led to some highly toxic interventions, notably her 1992 *Newsweek* article "Don't Undo My Work."

Meryl Streep is taken by the *Lear* idea. "I wanted the film to have authenticity ... I don't mean in documentary terms. I mean in human terms—what it's like to be Lear, not on the heath, but cradling Cordelia at the end."

In recent years, Thatcher's own world has shrunk to a tiny circle of friends and caregivers. "I like to take her out," says McAlpine. "At Christmas she loves the ballet, usually *Cinderella* or *The Nutcracker*. The last time we went it was to a matinee, because the evenings are too hard. We were in a box, as it's a little more private for her. During intermission there was a queue of three or four little girls, all wanting her autograph. They were so sweet, and Margaret said to one of them, 'Well, what do you want to be, dear, when you're grown up?' She replied, 'I want to be like you. I want to be prime minister.'" **nw**