

The Times Profile Francis Pym Foreign Secretary

From cavalry officer to crisis commander: the quiet pragmatist the Falklands could take to the top

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Francis Pym is known in the Commons as the "new Machiavelli". His success, it is believed, is due less to the deftness with which he practises the political arts, a flair which is no less Tory for being carefully understated.

"He is made for the Foreign Office, and the Foreign Office is made for him", is the murmured view of one Cabinet colleague. "Francis", said another of his peers, "believes only in two things: a sound agriculture and the Unity of Europe." There is, I think a little more to it than that.

Pym is hard to read. Is he the leader of the "wets", the possible successor to Mrs Thatcher, were the Falkland Islands imbroglio to end in disaster, or is he little more than a conventionally minded ex-cavalry officer whose apparent dullness serves to reassure the less complicated Tory MP? Or is he a political agnostic in a divided Cabinet who cares deeply what happens to the Conservative Party? What is certain is that he gives little away.

Francis Pym is an untypical politician. He believes silence to be a virtue. He represents

the "old" Conservative Party, which by preferring Ted Heath to Reggie Maudling in 1965 paved the way for the election of Mrs Thatcher to the leadership of the party after the "Peasants' Revolt" of 1975. He is a pragmatist, deeply sceptical of the monetarists within the Cabinet, who believes the Conservative Party to be more important than any ideology.

He did not vote for Mrs Thatcher and has publicly stood out against her in the past. He has nothing in common with the certainties of the new Radicalism and he has found Mrs Thatcher to be, in Bagehot's words, a woman of common views but of uncommon abilities. He is loyal to her but more loyal to the Tory Party.

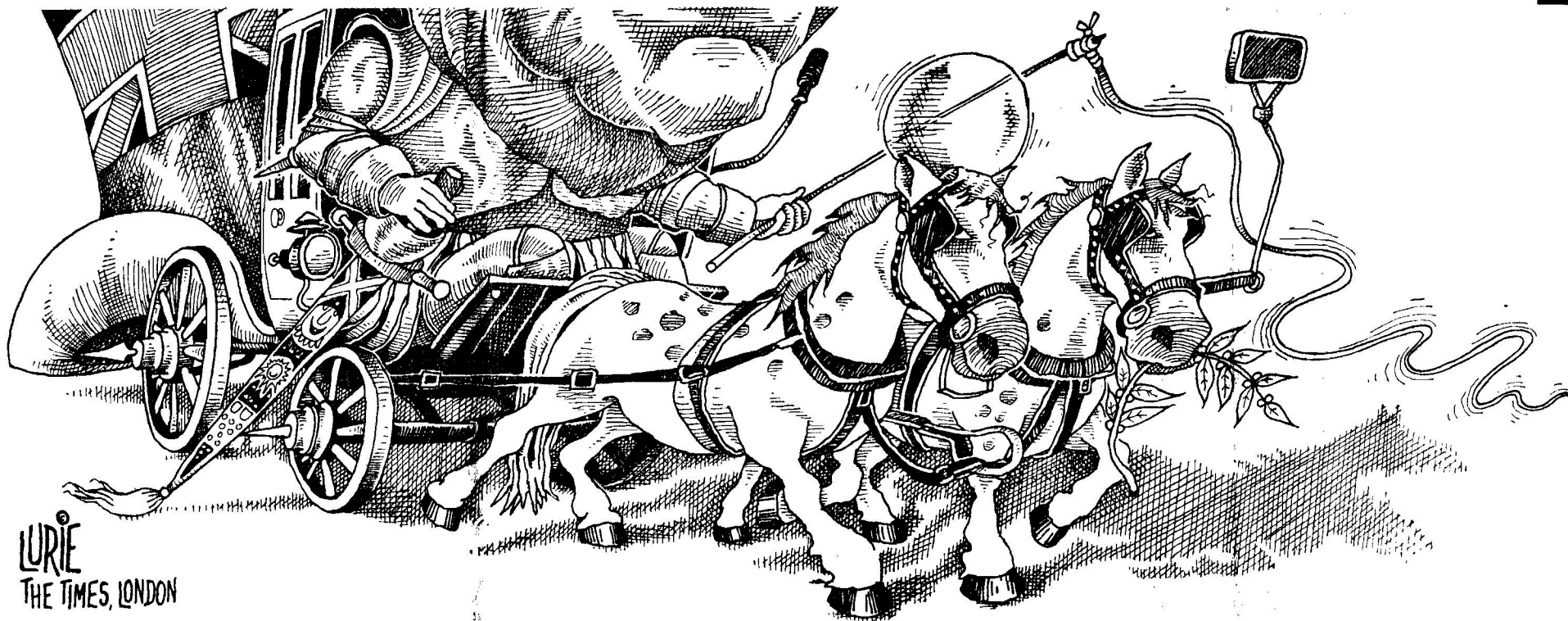
Francis Pym is a very private man who believes that the art of politics lies in anticipation. He believes in the exercise of foresight which is why he finds the Prime Minister's tendency to shoot from the hip alarming at times. It is hard to say what responsibility he bears, if any, for the Government's failure to anticipate the Argentine invasion of the Falklands.

The fault was not so much that of Lord Carrington but of the Whip's Office which took flight at the first rumblings of opposition on the backbenches to the "Ridley Initiative", designed to lease-back the Falklands to Argentina. Had the Foreign Secretary been in the Commons, or had the Prime Minister put her authority behind the initiative, Mr Pym would still be the Leader of the House. But that is another story.

Even before the invasion of the Falklands, Francis Pym was talked about by the daring over dinner as the next leader of the party. Carrington was then stranded in the Lords. Whitelaw seemed beyond ambition. Jim

Prior, on whose behalf many would draw their swords, was fighting the barbarian on the banks of the Danube when he should have been in Rome. Michael Heseltine had too many enemies as well as being, in Mrs Thatcher's words, "not one of us".

Francis Pym was a centrist who could make an appeal to the right of the party and had the good fortune to appear to be in the tradition of Macmillan and Butler, whose appeal, at least for a time, was universal.



Pym's translation to the Foreign Office has placed him in a strong position. The Prime Minister could not lose another Foreign Secretary and Pym is extremely popular in the Commons and well respected by both sides.

Pym has earned the good opinion of the Foreign Office. Events may have caused our honour to have become entangled with our interests, the one demanding the recapture of the Falklands, the other suggesting that a permanent garrison in the South Atlantic cannot be to our advantage, but the Foreign Office has welcomed Mr Pym as a man after its own heart. By all accounts he has responded well to the

pressures of the task which entail "eight to eight in the office plus the Commons and a lot of boxes". And there is the travel.

He is, I am told, just as steady at the end of the day as at the start. He has shown a strong will and a lot of courage, is clever and has a mind of his own. He is cool, reflective and equable. He has striven hard for a settlement: "I am in the business of opening doors not closing them", and has been an influence for the good in the "War Cabinet". Mrs Thatcher has already taken the Treasury and the bank of England to task: she has been trying to do as much to the Foreign Office. In the past Lord Carrington

stood between it and her. Mr Pym has now taken on the task.

Pym is a small man, neat and easy to overlook. He picks his words with as much care as he does his friends. His oratory is careful rather than exciting. His speeches during the series of Falkland Island debates, the fifth of which was held last week, have been belligerent in tone, careful in content, and his utterances both in public and private are frequently Delphic. He is inclined to match the hyperbole of his friends with encouraging grunts.

But he knows the Conservative Party better than anyone else in politics. He knows instinctively that Conservatives are wary about ideas, dislike

disloyalty, abhor extremes and are both pessimistic and patriotic. While not of the party's right he knows what makes it tick. In short, Pym is one of nature's Whips.

Pym's reluctance to respond to gaiety had given rise to two schools of thought: there are the curmudgeons who complain that nobody ever has the faintest idea of what he thinks, or indeed if he thinks anything at all; and there are those who take his silences for profundity. Pym is no intellectual, and would be offended were he to be so charged, but he is astute, intuitive and bureaucratic. He belongs to that section of the Tory Party which used to be known as "the

Knights of the Shire" whom the simpler, in less complicated days, made up the party's ballast.

He entered Parliament for Cambridgeshire at a by-election in 1961 and having led a minor revolt against the Government it was not long before he was invited to join the Whip's Office, where he stayed for 11 years, becoming Chief Whip under Ted Heath. He carried the party successfully through both the Industrial Relations Act and the Common Market legislation, the latter Bill being carried without a single amendment.

Like Ted Heath and William Whitelaw, Pym provides proof, if it were needed, of life after death. He moved on from the Whip's Office to higher things. The first 1974 election interrupted his stint as Northern Ireland Secretary almost as soon as it had begun, and in Opposition he took responsibility for Ulster, Agriculture, and then, most challenging of all, Devolution, where he managed with great success to keep a divided party together and win time for the Callaghan Government to defeat itself over the Scottish referendum.

by £500m in line with economies elsewhere.

This demand he resisted almost to the point of resignation, enlisting the backbench Defence Committee in his campaign against the depredations of the Treasury. Throughout what was to be a long battle, he was determined to protect the credibility of the Prime Minister and to defend his flank against a series of leaks from both Downing Street and the Treasury which served to chart the course of the battle.

Perhaps he defended his corner too well. As a reward he was given two jobs instead of one. Mrs Thatcher made him Leader of the House and, in place of Sir Angus Maude, the Government's propagandist. Pym was very disappointed at not being allowed to complete his task at Defence, where he had beaten the Treasury down to £200m, a post where he had done well.

After Eton and a year at Cambridge reading Politics and Economics, he spent the war as Adjutant of the 9th Lancers in North Africa and Italy where he won the Military Cross. The words of the citation read

"...he carried on as if nothing had happened..." a commendation which covers equally well his coolness under political fire.

Joining the provincial retailing chain of Lewis's, he became general manager of their Merseyside milk distributing subsidiary and then, realizing that he could not run a corporate career with politics, left to run a small tent-making firm in Hereford. By 1961 he had fulfilled the two conditions which he had set himself: he has made himself financially independent; and had found a seat within easy distance of his house in Bedfordshire.

While there are those who think Pym to be a cold fish, hyper-conventional and rigid in his social attitudes (he disapproves strongly of divorce) he is a romantic when it comes to Parliament. He loves it as an institution but fears for its future. He is more or less a secret advocate of electoral reform because he believes that the people must be brought closer to Parliament. He would reform the House of Lords by election.

He is anxious lest the polarization of politics, by which the two great parties draw further apart as they adopt radically different economic policies will serve to make the practice of civilized politics impossible.

His doubts about the speed and direction of the Government's economic policies (he was unhappy about the 1981 Budget) arise not from the fact that he is a "wet" whatever that might mean, but because he stands at the dead centre of the Conservative Party, and shares that scepticism of fashionable dogma which is the hallmark of the traditional Tory.

Julian Critchley

The author is Conservative MP for Aldershot