

Research finds Thatcher least active premier

MARGARET THATCHER is the least active Prime Minister in the House of Commons since 1868, according to an analysis of *Hansard* records carried out by a group of academics at the London School of Economics.

Their findings, published by the Royal Institute of Public Administration in a special issue of the *Journal Public Administration*, show that she has made a distinct break with tradition and, apart from her necessary appearances at Prime Minister's Question Time, has become something of a parliamentary recluse.

That conclusion could undermine her frequent attacks on other EC leaders, who, Mrs Thatcher argues, are not as accountable to their parliaments as she is at Westminster.

Because Prime Minister's Question Time only took on its twice-weekly, quarter-hour format in 1961, there is no difference between her Question Time record and that of other recent premiers.

But Mrs Thatcher's delivery of statements — on which she can be cross-questioned — set-piece speeches, and impromptu interventions in debates, mark her down as the most inactive parliamentary prime ministerial performer since Disraeli became Prime Minister in 1868.

Among post-war Prime Ministers, Mrs Thatcher stands out for her lack of statements and speeches. As for spontaneous interventions in debates — which is the second most common activity for Prime Ministers over the survey period — she has departed radically from previous patterns of behaviour.

During the 508 days on which the Commons sat between 1985 and 1988, she did not make any debating interventions, and it is doubted whether she has made any since.

Professor Patrick Dunleavy, a member of the LSE research team, said: "No one else, not even Lloyd George, comes anywhere close to her level of diffidence about Parliament. What's more, the longer Mrs Thatcher has been in power, the less and less she has done in the Commons. The objective evidence does seem consistent with the popular view that Mrs Thatcher has increasingly devel-

oped a 'bunker mentality' during her period as premier."

The research findings also show that Neil Kinnock's task has been more difficult than that of other Opposition leaders in modern times. Brendan O'Leary, the third member of the research team, said: "She is present only in the Commons for Question Time, for which she is thoroughly briefed, or to speak about overseas conferences which she has attended and Mr Kinnock has not. In these circumstances, Mr Kinnock's parliamentary performance could be seen as more creditable than previous commentators have allowed."

By Anthony Bevins
Political Editor

In their conclusions, the LSE researchers offer a number of possible explanations for Mrs Thatcher's "reclusive" style.

They say that she might prefer to run the Government than answer to Parliament, or that she might have observed and built on James Callaghan's "minimalist" tendencies. But it is also suggested that Mrs Thatcher "could have adopted a non-reactive parliamentary approach because of her well-attested general preference for presenting herself in public only in scripted and carefully-controlled events ..."

"This concern with being prepared and shielded from potentially discomfiting experiences is also evident in Thatcher's infrequent electioneering, and her unwillingness to speak before non-Tory audiences or undertake walkabouts (in the UK, although not abroad).

"However, Thatcher's reclusiveness in the Commons may reflect the fact that she is the first woman at 10 Downing Street, operating in an overwhelmingly male parliamentary context.

"Many of her statements seem to express a perception of the Commons as a distinctively hostile environment, rather than the friendly male debating club which so many previous premiers enjoyed dominating."

■ *Public Administration: Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*, Vol 68, No 1, available from Basil Blackwell, 108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, £8.

Frequency of Commons speeches of 15 minutes or more (excluding Queen's Speech debate)

	Domestic Issues	Foreign affairs
Thatcher	every 160 days	every 176 days
Callaghan	every 52 days	nil (in 518 days)
Wilson (74-6)	every 36 days	every 356 days
Heath	every 41 days	every 204 days

Frequency of non-routine Commons statements

	Domestic Issues	Foreign affairs
Thatcher	every 176 days	every 33 days
Callaghan	every 35 days	every 25 days
Wilson	every 25 days	every 36 days
Heath	every 28 days	every 87 days

Source: LSE Government Department.