

PETER CLARKE
A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP
GLADSTONE TO THATCHER



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How much difference does a leader make? Did Margaret Thatcher change the course of politics in the 1980's? What was Macmillan's secret? Did the Attlee Government reshape post-war Britain? Why was 1940 Churchill's finest hour? Did Asquith and Lloyd George destroy the Liberal Party? Was Joe Chamberlain more influential than his son Neville? How does it make sense to compare Mrs Thatcher with Gladstone?

This book examines these fascinating questions in a series of a dozen or so portraits of the formative politicians of the last hundred years. Ten were prime ministers (Gladstone, Salisbury, Asquith, Lloyd George, Chamberlain, Churchill, Attlee, Macmillan, Wilson and Thatcher), four came close (Joe Chamberlain, Dalton, Bevan and Gaitskell) and one, though not a politician, set the agenda for fifty years (Maynard Keynes).

With characteristic erudition and wit, Peter Clarke puts the leaders firmly in their place: centre stage. But he also shows how the stage can vary in size and some shows are better than others.

After Thatcher's fall, this book could not be more topical. In a volatile political situation, the issue is more than ever a question of leadership. This is modern history at its very best.

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YAYASAN
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*for Emily and Libby
born 4 July 1974
to explain what happened
before Mrs Thatcher's premiership*





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INTRODUCTION

How much difference does leadership make in politics? Our experience in Britain during the 1980s gives new pertinence to this question. So much has now been written about Thatcherism that we are in danger of supposing that the political impact of Margaret Thatcher has been not so much striking as unique. But though it has been remarkable, it has not been unprecedented. There is a certain symmetry in starting with Gladstone, who was the first British statesman to grapple with a democratic style of government, and ending with Thatcher, who, both consciously and unconsciously, echoes some of the classic themes of Victorian politics.

This book consists of a dozen or so biographical studies of some major figures in the making of British politics during the last century. Nine of the subjects served as Prime Minister at one time or another. One of the others (Hugh Gaitskell) was a party leader who would almost certainly have become Prime Minister had he not died prematurely. Three others were not leaders of major parties, though conceivably each might have become leader, and it is a point of interest in itself to discover why they did not. If Bonar Law was posthumously dismissed – admittedly prompted by the occasion of his interment in Westminster Abbey alongside the Unknown Soldier – as ‘the unknown prime minister’, in a sense Joseph Chamberlain, Hugh Dalton and Aneurin (Nye) Bevan appear here as the antithesis, since their considerable contribution to