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IS CAMERON ON THE RIGHT TRACK?

Despite points failure in the polls and Boris coming up fast, he's certain he's still ahead. Eleanor Mills shares a carriage with the PM

HOLLYWOOD MUSE
Kate Hudson, showbiz royalty, and her Brit rocker

RUNNING JOKER
Eddie Izzard tells Lynn Barber why he wants to be mayor



JET SET
The prime minister in the glare at the Rolls-Royce factory in Derby

DAVID
CAMERON

The day before I was due to meet the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher died. David Cameron's three-day tour to drum up support in the Midlands, the Northwest and Cornwall for this week's local elections was cancelled. Instead, he recalled parliament and announced Lady Thatcher would be having a blockbuster funeral, so all arrangements, for everything, were up in the air. Texts pinged from his special adviser: it's all on, then it's all off. Finally, I'm told to meet our dear leader at 8.55am the next morning at St Pancras, to catch the train to Derby.

At the station, it's not hard to spot the PM's carriage; it's the only one flanked by a copper and a police dog. Huffing, I arrive with only minutes to spare; the London Tube was appallingly crowded and I missed three trains before I could get on. "Blame Boris," quips Cameron as he greets me.

The long shadows of Boris and the Baroness loom large over our encounter. The truth is that compared to either, our prime minister comes >>>

'I HAVE PROBLEMS WITH THE THATCHER LEGACY'

With Thatcher's shadow receding and that of Boris looming, the prime minister is on the ropes. The coalition is floundering, yet David Cameron still exudes supreme self-confidence at the dispatch box — and manages to take the kids swimming. As the PM campaigns for this week's local elections, **Eleanor Mills** pins him down. Photographs by **Simon Roberts**

up short in the popular imagination – and though he'd rather die than admit it, Cameron is intelligent enough to know it.

In his first-class seat, with his red box on the table, the PM seems taller and more Technicolor than he does on television. He exudes prosperity and good health. His shirt is bright white, his tie an appropriately mournful dark purple and his eyes piercingly blue-green against his navy suit.

Compared to his small, grey-suited advisers, he is a startlingly superior physical specimen: a silverback gorilla surrounded by inferiors. During our two days together I begin to suspect this dynamic is not an accident.

As I slide into the seat opposite him, he launches into a breezy tale about the lambs he rescued over Easter at a farm in his constituency that has a “lamb orphanage” — one has been called David Lamberon. Then he's telling me about the “joys of Family Floatarama” at Chipping Norton swimming pool (“I can take all three of the kids and give Sam a morning off”) and how pleased he is that Sainsbury's has opened in the town. Apparently he does the family shopping there, on his own, accompanied only by his police protection team.

In Westminster he has been basking in the success of the debate about Margaret Thatcher's legacy and fending off criticism of her £10m funeral. “It was important to give Mrs T a good send-off, we wouldn't want anyone to say it was undercooked.”

Cameron says he isn't sure when he first met Thatcher. He thinks it might have been when he was around 16 and dropped into Downing Street to see his cousin, Ferdinand Mount, who was then running Thatcher's policy unit.

In his memoirs, Mount says he was taken by Cameron's precocious self-confidence and chutzpah. Cameron, by contrast, says he was “terrified” by Thatcher as a young researcher at Conservative Central Office (where he embodied that establishment phrase “start at the top and work upwards”, by working there straight after university). He tells me he hadn't been there long when she swept into a Christmas party and mentioned that day's trade figures. He was “terrified” because he didn't know them — trade and industry was his brief.

Given their differences in age and political temperament, it's not a surprise that Cameron and Thatcher were not friends. In fact, he hadn't seen her in the last 18 months of her life. I ask him if he regards himself as a Thatcherite.



“I would say I was a big Thatcher supporter,” he replies carefully. “I joined the party when she was in the ascendant.”

What's the difference between a Thatcher supporter and a Thatcherite? He is momentarily flummoxed. “That's a good question,” he says, playing for time. “There are lots of things she did which had my support and other things she did which needed to be changed; some of those things I like to think I have helped change.”

I try again: are you a Thatcherite? “No,” he concedes at last. “Other people might call me that. I think the label's now... it's slightly become... labels now don't quite mean what they did then.”

Many of the 2010 Tory intake of MPs proudly call themselves Thatcherites, I say, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, such as Priti Patel or Kwasi Kwarteng.

ARE YOU A THATCHERITE? ‘NO. LABELS DON'T QUITE MEAN WHAT THEY DID THEN’

“Each to his own,” he responds blithely. Call-me-Dave Conservatism was always a more fudgy, green-washed version of Tory thinking with a dash of gay marriage and Big Society thrown in. To his backbenchers it often seems a rag-bag of what he can get past Nick Clegg and the focus groups, often forged on the hoof in a crisis or after an interview with unforeseen ramifications. “I was a tremendous Thatcher supporter,” he explains, “but there are now other challenges that need to be dealt with. I have problems with some of the Thatcher legacy — I've been more socially liberal.”

Whatever spin he puts on it, the country remains firmly in the economic mire. The mind-boggling £121bn budget deficit is not shifting, the unemployment rate is up, pay rises are down and there is no sign of a retail recovery. Surely there is a case for a strong, Thatcher-esque leadership? Cameron nods.

“The challenges we are facing today are equally mighty, if not bigger, than what she faced in terms of the turnaround and rebalancing the economy,” he says, accepting the cup of coffee-flavoured hot water you are served in first class. “The resolve required is the same. But I'm trying to re-industrialise Britain,” he stresses, implicitly conceding that Thatcher did the opposite.

“I'm a one-nation conservative, I try to take the whole nation with me and the whole notion

CLASH OF THE TITANS David Cameron unveils a statue of Lady Thatcher in 2008. ‘It was important to give Mrs T a good send-off,’ he says, defending her £10m funeral. Right: with the other political heavyweight in his life, London mayor Boris Johnson, in 2011. Below left: a ‘meet the people’ roadshow at Eon's headquarters in Coventry. Below right: at Nunu nursery in Loughborough



of the Big Society is fantastically important, the thickening, the enriching of society...” Aah, the Bisto PM.

“Thatcher was so focused on the economics,” he continues. “I want to take the best parts of her

economic renewal — engaging with the large private sector, backing small business and entrepreneurs, getting down tax rates on business and trying to combine that with a conservatism that is also about social renewal and communities.”

Yet Thatcher's populism sprang from her empathy with people who want to better themselves. That's a trajectory that, given his own background, Cameron is finding impossible to replicate. I hear his mantra about how he will kick-start the economy so often that his aides notice that I'm not scribbling

frantically enough. One of them leans over. “The PM's time is precious. In fact it's the most precious commodity he has,” he chides me. “He needs to do some real work now, you have time in the diary tomorrow.” It is motioned that I should leave his presence and take a seat further down the carriage.

When we arrive in Derby, I discover the prime minister runs on a different time plane from the rest of us. He tells me that he is “Germanic” about time efficiency. “I like meetings with a purpose, that begin and finish

‘THE CHALLENGES WE ARE FACING TODAY ARE AS BIG, IF NOT BIGGER, THAN SHE FACED’

on time,” he says. His day is choreographed to the minute. It begins at 5.45am in his kitchen where he goes through his red box, making decisions and writing notes.

An aide tells me cheerily that if she “pops something in the box” of an evening, “it's always there, answered, the next morning”.

Cameron explains that some civil servants still suffer

night sweats over Gordon Brown's chaotically messy desk with its teetering piles of unmade decisions. I can't help wondering if the busy-bee shtick is intended to counteract the suggestions that Cameron — unlike Thatcher — is actually a nine-to-five, a bit too keen on “chillaxing” and those idle sessions of the computer game Fruit Ninja.

He confesses that his current “guilty pleasure” is the music-streaming service, Spotify. The difference, I suppose, is that you can listen to music while working. Our first stop in Derby is the Rolls-Royce factory and academy just outside the city — a mighty industrial campus of roundabouts and steel-roofed hangars. Cameron is intrigued by a full-scale Lego model of a jet engine, and chats to the bosses and apprentices about their careers. As we wander around the factory — all sparkling shiny floors and similarly scrubbed-up workers — Cameron's aides tell me how important such visits are and that I'd be “amazed” by how much of what the PM

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BOXED IN
Travelling first class to Derby from London, on his way to the Rolls-Royce factory

I can just nip up for a hug," he says tenderly. "She is often a bit confused when I disappear again because she's not quite sure where I go. She was in the garden [right outside his office] with friends

I don't think he is. There's definitely a whiff of the ham actor, or Barbie's boyfriend, Ken, about him. Cameron is a polished performer, but perhaps we might warm to him more if he made the odd Boris-style howler.

After Loughborough, we head to Coventry station and home. Cameron is pleased with himself, expansive. It's as if he's been surfing a

mighty wave all day and has got to the shore, unscathed. The tension dissolves.

More telling, however, is a little to and fro with his civil servant: "Did I get all my facts right?" he asks, bullishly. "Yes prime minister, just as you always do," he responds sycophantically.

The next day I arrive in Downing Street for a more formal sit-down interview. At 10am sharp we are ushered down a long corridor into his private office. "Take the chancellor's chair," he says, guiding me to one of two high-backed red and cream chairs. He takes the other and talks me through his mantelpiece: a memento from Camp David, a china drinking horn from Medvedev, a sausage-shaped silver mirror from the G8 in Maryland. He is proudest, though, of a picture by his eldest daughter Nancy, 9, of the Mona Lisa (which appears to be a portrait of Samantha).

There are grey hairs now, particularly around the nape of his neck, and he says, "I've never worked so hard in my life. I feel the responsibility more than I ever have done, I feel more passionate and I have more worries than I've ever had in my life, but I don't think I am a changed person." So how does he relax — Tony Blair wrote in his memoirs about hitting the bottle of an evening — does Cameron like a tippie? "No, I don't do that. I like a glass of wine, but not every night, it's important not to do that, though I like a glass of wine with dinner and a pint in the pub...

"I like to get out, go for a run, you do feel a bit like a caged animal sometimes. Running round the park clears the head, I'm a great believer in fresh air and exercise, I love going for long walks at the weekend. Fresh air, cycling with the kids. I'm a very outdoors person. That said," he laughs, "our walks with the kids often end up in a pub." When was he last drunk? "Not for a long time," he says a little ruefully. What, not

'I HAVE MORE WORRIES THAN I'VE EVER HAD IN MY LIFE. RUNNING CLEARS THE HEAD'

since the Buller (he was famously a member of the Oxford drinking club, The Bullingdon)? There is a nervous laugh. "Not even at Christmas."

I ask whether he is still a hands-on husband, especially as Samantha works two days a week. He laughs shiftily. "The deal is not quite what it used to be, though I did cook last night: steak and baked potatoes — that sounds rather unhealthy, but there were some French beans and courgettes involved, I promise. We do try and make sure we have time for each other, but nothing is sacrosanct, anything can suddenly come up and it takes priority. The phone is always ringing, there are always calls to make. I'm frequently in the car on the phone to the Israeli prime minister telling the kids in the back to shut up. There's a lot of that, this job is exceptionally demanding and you have to make yourself available at the drop of a hat."

His staff tell me that Florence, 2, often wanders into the press office or private office in her pyjamas with her bottle to see daddy. "Florence has never known any other home, she does sort of wander about not knowing which is home and which is office, it does all meld together, though we try to keep the flat separate, that is home, it's where homework takes place. I do nip up a bit, because you can and with Florence it's very spoiling because

yesterday and looked in through the window and was slightly baffled to see me there. She's always asking 'whose house?' or 'whose car?', because she gets confused going about in different police cars, but she'll work it out."

The spin doctor says we've only got a minute left, so I remind him that when I was late for the train the day before, he said: "Blame Boris". "Did I?" he laughs. "I meant Bob Crow." Is Boris a thorn in his side? "Boris is one of the greatest assets that the Conservative party has," he says to my surprise. "That's why I emptied campaign teams round the country to help him win."

But does he not feel threatened by Boris's easy charm and popularity (he outscores Cameron in some opinion polls and is widely tipped as the next leader)? "No, I love Boris." Would he be a good prime minister? "He'd be a..." he stops. "It's not up to me to pick the next leader of the Conservative party, or the one after that, but I'd never want to put a limit on Boris, I encourage him. Boris can do anything." Surely Boris has been the man Cameron had to beat, ever since they were at school together. "This is one of the great myths of politics," says the PM. "These things grow up and it's so long ago no one challenges them, but I don't think we really knew each other at school, he was a couple of years ahead of me. He was very clever."

Then Cameron explodes into a beaming grin. "But," he says exultantly. "Boris didn't get a First! I only discovered that on the Panorama programme the other night... I didn't know that." He is suddenly lit up, almost punching the air with joy.

And in that outburst of public-schoolboy competitiveness — Cameron of course, did get a First — he reveals everything we've always thought about him ■



A week in the life of David Cameron — exclusive behind the scenes images: thesundaytimes.co.uk/davidcameron