

Tories increasingly critical of Thatcher's inner circle

"I HAVE a feeling that it will be downhill from now on—Mrs T's concentrating on foreign affairs and getting out of touch. And the banana skins don't seem to be stopping."

These comments by a senior Tory MP typify a growing feeling of unease among backbenchers at Westminster.

Moreover, this talk is not confined to the so-called wets or to disappointed office seekers. The worries are shared by loyalists and are being focused on political weaknesses among some of Mrs Thatcher's closest advisers, as well as in the

Peter Riddell reports on backbench unease over the 'remoteness' of Downing Street

balance of the Cabinet.

During her first term, and particularly after the autumn of 1981, Mrs Thatcher had an effective political team which worked well and helped to win last June's election victory. But the team changed last year with a new party chairman, a new parliamentary private secretary and a major ministerial reshuffle. The critics argue that the replacements

lack the effectiveness of their predecessors.

The problems should not, of course, be exaggerated. The Conservative Party continues to enjoy a remarkably high standing in the opinion polls, the Opposition remains divided and the Prime Minister herself seems as determined as ever.

Yet there is often a time lag before a weakening at the centre ripples outwards. The same tell-tale signs which appeared after the Macmillan and Wilson election victories in 1959 and 1966 have started to appear.

There has been a succession of difficulties—the mishandling of the Grenada and GCHQ issues; the recurrence of apparently peripheral but nagging "scandals," such as the Parkinson and Mark Thatcher/Oman contract affairs; the increasing strains in press relations and the internal party arguments over local rates.

Ever sensitive to changes in political mood, Mr John Biffen, leader of the Commons, went out of his way in a weekend speech to reject any comparison with the undermining of Government credibility in the early 1960s.

Now, he said, the Government would endure "the contrived and febrile world of banana-skin politics" because it was strengthening Britain's position in "the real world."

As one former Cabinet minister sympathetic to Mrs Thatcher remarked: "It all needs careful handling. If the domestic scene is undramatic she's got to work hard to keep the political initiative. Talking to the Soviet Union is all very well, but the trouble is she'll start to believe she really is a world statesman."

At present, the criticisms are concentrated more on Mrs Thatcher's advisers than on herself, and mainly turn on the theme of Downing Street's being out of touch.

There are several lines of attack. First, there is Mr Michael Alison, her PPS. His job is to act as the Prime Minister's eyes and ears at Westminster, picking up the gossip and backbench opinion.

Mr Alison, a former Minister of State at the Department of Employment, is universally liked and trusted, but he is a shy and reserved man.

As one of his colleagues remarked: "What you need in that job is a bit of a boozier who will go into the Smoking Room and the bars talking to everyone." And Mr Alison, a strong evangelical Christian, is not that.

Whereas his predecessor, Mr Ian Gow, now the Housing Minister, was regarded by some as too much of an intriguer, Mr Alison seems to have gone to the opposite extreme. For instance, new MPs complain of having little contact with him.

Consequently, some MPs are suggesting that Mrs Thatcher should appoint a second PPS—possibly from among the younger backbenchers—as other Prime Ministers have done in the past.

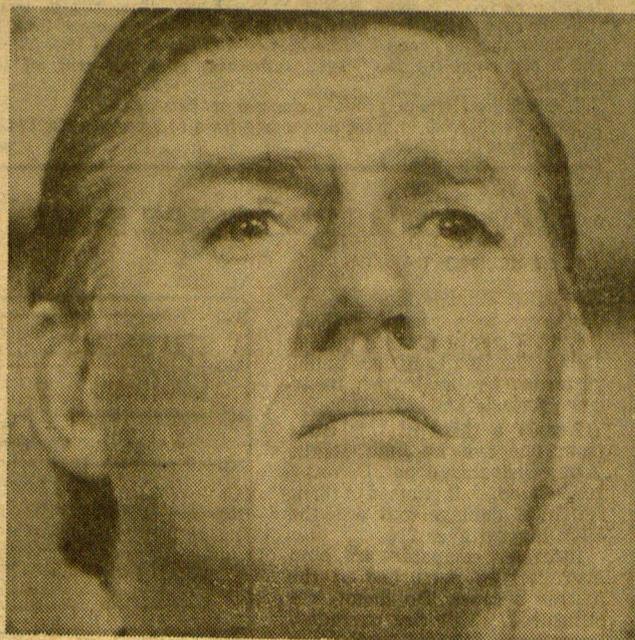
A related criticism is that Downing Street has become more isolated. Some ministers, as well as backbenchers, argue that the political advisers around Mrs Thatcher—as distinct from the Civil Service private secretaries—are zealots without any roots in the party.

Mr John Redwood, the new head of the policy unit, is seen by officials as a sharp and clever man, who has yet to show that he has political weight.

Downing Street officials have developed a siege mentality towards what they see as unjustified press and Labour attacks over Mr Mark Thatcher's involvement with the Oman contract won by Cementation. The result has been to make the Prime Minister and her advisers appear prickly and defensive—whatever the merits of the case.

Mr John Gummer, the party chairman, is also seen by some MPs as lacking the clout of Mr Cecil Parkinson, his predecessor. In part this is not his fault, since he is being required to combine the chairmanship with the post of Minister of State at the Department of Employment—which involves two full days a week on the committee stage of the Trade Union Bill before all his other duties.

The result is complaints



Mr Cecil Parkinson: He has won respect, and some say he may be brought back into the Government

from both sides. Hence, Mr Gummer, who is clearly on his way up, is likely to give up one of his posts before too long.

In contrast, Mr John Wakeham's performance as Chief Whip is seen by Tory backbenchers as an improvement on what went before. Managing a large Commons majority is always difficult and, despite complaints about occasional clumsiness, the whips have generally succeeded in defusing the impact of revolts.

Mr Wakeham is more aware of policy issues with much less of the "loyalty to the regiment" approach than his two predecessors, Sir Humphrey Atkins and Mr Michael Jopling.

Yet there are broader doubts about the balance of the Cabinet. The argument is that the ministerial changes last year weakened the public impact of the Government.

While Mr Nigel Lawson, the Chancellor, and Mr Leon Brittan, the Home Secretary, undoubtedly have considerable influence with Mrs Thatcher and within Whitehall, the have, so far, not established public reputations comparable to either of their predecessors, Lord Whitelaw and, even in his stubborn way, Sir Geoffrey Howe.

On this view, there is an absence of good communicators (like say, Mr Kenneth Clarke or Mr Kenneth Baker, who are outside the Cabinet) a criticism underlined by the effectiveness of some of Labour's new shadow team.

The critics feel that these points have been reinforced by Mrs Thatcher's failure to involve the Cabinet as a whole in the decision to ban trade union membership at GCHQ.

Overall, what has been missing has been a sense of political feel, and many MPs attribute this in part to the absence of Mr Cecil Parkinson.

His role as a close and valued adviser of Mrs Thatcher is being appreciated in retrospect. Indeed, Mr Parkinson's stock is rising at Westminster, following what is seen as his dignified behaviour in recent months.

After a rough personal period following his resignation in mid-October, Mr Parkinson is now back on form and active behind the scenes. Talks of his going to Brussels tends to be played down by friends.

There are even suggestions—unthinkable a couple of months ago—that he might be brought back to the Government in a future reshuffle to help correct the present weaknesses.

APPOINTMENTS

Top posts at Touche Ross

Sir Douglas Morpeth is to retire from TOUCHE ROSS & CO in April 1985. In anticipation of this he is retiring as chairman of the board of partners. Mr D. R. P. Baker who has been managing partner for nine years has been elected to succeed Sir Douglas as chairman and Mr M. J. Blackburn has been elected to succeed Mr Baker as managing partner.

As part of its management restructuring, due to recent acquisitions and expansion, the BEAZER GROUP has appointed Mr Don Evans as managing director of Beazer Commercial and Second City Properties. Mr Evans, who will be based at the group's head office in Bath, will be responsible for further growth of property activities.

Mr Timothy Aitken has resigned from the board of CHEMICAL METHODS ASSOCIATES, INC.

Mr John Watson is leaving ENSKILDA SECURITIES at the end of the month to take a post in the City. Prior to joining Enskilda Securities as executive director in charge of administration he was deputy chief executive of the Stock Exchange. Mr Anthony Hammond is assuming responsibility for administration, replacing Mr Watson. Mr Hammond was previously an executive director of Bank of America International in charge of administration.

Mr L. G. Clugston has relinquished the chairmanship of CLUGSTON HOLDINGS. He will continue as a director and has been appointed president. Mr

J. W. A. Clugston has become chairman and remains group managing director. Mr C. A. Gillott has been appointed an executive director and also an executive director of Clugston Construction.

Mr Iain J. S. Murray has been appointed finance director of SLOANE INDEPENDENT HOSPITALS, a subsidiary of The Fleming Mercantile Investment Trust.

THE PEART GROUP has appointed Mr R. F. Lombard as operations director of its pipeline products division. Mr Lombard, previously with Rolls-Royce Motors and Colts Cranes, assumes total responsibility for the division in order to permit the group managing director, Mr J. P. Glithero, to devote more time to the general engineering and industrial infra-red divisions.

Mr T. A. Welsh, at present a director of Turner & Newall's subsidiary Ferodo, has been appointed a director of PAYEN INTERNATIONAL, another T&N subsidiary, and general manager of PAYEN UK from March 1.

Mr Peter Rooke has been appointed managing director of BURRUP MATHIESON & CO, a member of the Burrups Printing Group. Previously he was employed by Burroughs Corp as general manager of the European and Africa business forms and office supplies operations. Mr David Alder has joined as an associate director. He was previously with Greenaway Harrison and will be responsible for new Business development.