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When will the political U-turn be the right turn?

Graphic: ANNETTE HUDSON

Is it wrong for governments to carry out U-turns? Political editor **CHRIS FISHER** considers that question against the backcloth of the current cluster of policy changes by the Cameron-led coalition.

Opposition to government policy U-turns is one of the most defining images of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister. "To those waiting with bated breath for that favourite media catchphrase, the U-turn, I have only one thing to say: You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning!" Those words still ring out clearly – not least as a warning to her successors – 31 years after they were delivered at a Tory conference.

She was referring to pressure on her to reverse the thrust of her counter-inflation policy. And she meant what she said. The policy was not merely maintained but reinforced in Sir Geoffrey Howe's famous/infamous budget of 1981 which cut public spending and increased taxes in the depths of a recession.

Notwithstanding this she was not totally adverse to major shifts in policy. She had been quite wobbly in the steel strike of 1980, which was the first main trade union challenge to her authority. Let it not be forgotten, moreover, that Britain actually went into the EU exchange rate mechanism on her watch. But the latter was a great exception to an attitude of standing firm that generally hardened the longer she went on, and her 'Not for Turning' reputation was worn as a badge of pride through much of her premiership. In the end, however, many of her Tory colleagues came to see it as a liability rather than an asset. In refusing to back down on the poll tax she effectively dug her Downing Street grave.

In the matter of U-turns, the present government is plainly very different from the ones she led. Of late, indeed, the difference has become more clear with virtually every passing day. Big policy shifts on NHS reform and refuse-collection have been announced this week, and confirmation of another, on 50pc cuts in sentences for early guilty pleas, is imminent. U-turn watchers are spoilt for choice.

A very big element in this is the fact that the government is a coalition. The two parties in it do not always see eye-to-eye, and that has been



THE LADY'S NOT FOR TURNING!
How would Baroness Thatcher head a coalition government, asks Chris Fisher.

Government U-turns

NHS reform:

Flagship policy to transfer bulk of spending on patient treatment to GPs' consortia has been greatly watered down and modified after protests from NHS professionals and the Liberal Democrats.

Sentencing:

Plans to cut sentences in half if there has been an early guilty plea are being re-thought. Proposal will definitely no longer apply to rape and other sex offences.

Bin collections:

Communities secretary Eric Pickles this week abandoned a plan to force councils in England to provide weekly bin collections.

Forestry:

The government had committed itself to privatising England's public forest. But in February environment secretary Caroline Spelman told the Commons: "I am sorry, we got this one wrong."

Coastguards:

In December the government announced a consultation on cutting the number of coastguard stations, including Great Yarmouth's from 18 to eight. But last month transport secretary Philip Hammond said it was "looking again" at the proposal.

Fuel duty:

Increase due in April stopped, 1p per litre taken off and 'fair fuel stabiliser' introduced.

heavily underlined in respect of the NHS reforms. Had opposition been coming just from inside the NHS, it is possible that health secretary Andrew Lansley would have had the prime minister's blessing for pressing on. But the deputy prime minister and his Liberal Democrat colleagues had also become determined to make a stand on the issue, and the legislation was not going to get through parliament in its original form.

Readiness to carry out U-turns can also be a matter of personality, rather than political circumstance, of course. (By the way, can anyone imagine Lady Thatcher heading a coalition government?) But any Thatcherite interested in sniping at David Cameron on that score should acknowledge that on sentencing policy his U-turn-producing intervention has been welcome to the Tory Right and has troubled rather than pleased the Lib Dems. On this matter he is up against a sort of coalition composed of justice

secretary Ken Clarke and the Lib Dems.

One of the first words from Labour shadow health secretary John Healey in the Commons on Tuesday after Mr Lansley's statement on the changes now being made to his policy was: "Humiliating." In saying that he was continuing one of the silliest traditions of Westminster whereby opposition parties clamour for government U-turns and then heap ridicule on ministers when they are made.

The public as a whole are not party to that game. And when the prime minister said, with reference to the NHS U-turn, that the government had been 'listening, learning and improving', he did so against a background of some (still largely anecdotal) evidence that many 'ordinary' voters are rather taken with such an approach.

What, after all, is the point of consulting and listening if you are not prepared to change policy

afterwards? It can be argued that governments shouldn't get it wrong in the first place. But why should anyone suppose that governments are infallible? There is an infinite amount of evidence by now that none of them can be.

The main criteria by which U-turns are judged should be these: Why are they being carried out? Is government policy better after the turn than it was before? Are they being conducted with the actual intention of securing a better policy? Or is the main purpose to shore up a struggling government – and, in the current case, keep it together? Mrs Thatcher could convincingly argue for much of her time in No 10 that her administrations were made stronger by the absence of U-turns. Have the present government's changes produced policy improvements? In most cases, including sentencing, yes, in my view. On the NHS, I'm not at all sure.

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