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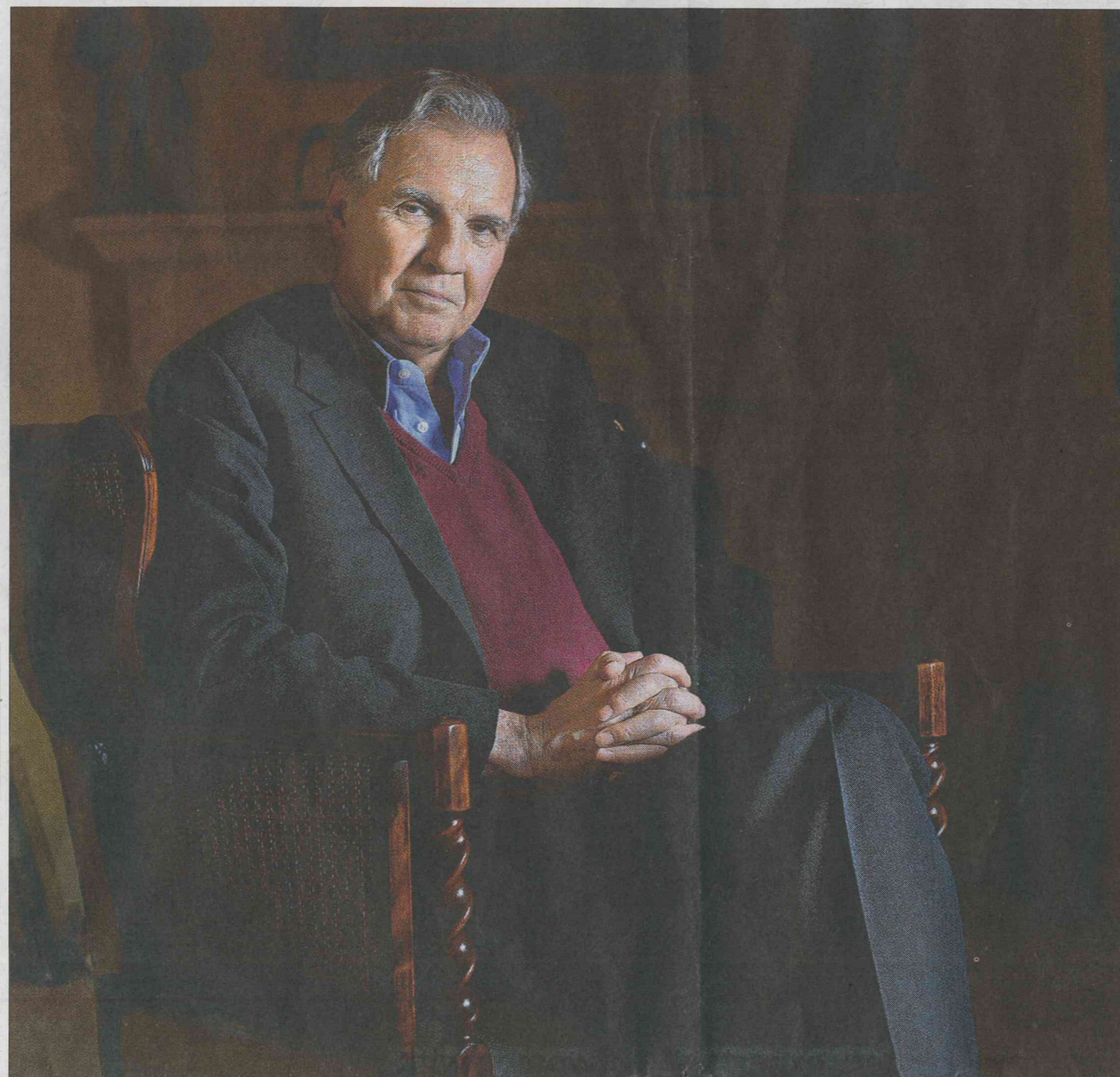


A tearful Jonathan Aitken on the kindness of the Thatchers after his fall from grace, his Christian faith – and a lingering predilection for those in power

Tears begin to well up in Jonathan Aitken's eyes as he talks about Margaret Thatcher. "She came to dinner here about a year ago," says the former Conservative minister, in the study of his mansion-block flat in Earl's Court, west London. "She has been quite a few times. She was in and out of the conversation."

He knows how she is perceived at the moment, thanks to *The Iron Lady*. "I have seen the film. I was fundamentally disappointed in everything except the marvellous acting of Meryl Streep. I felt uncomfortable and a bit upset about the vehicle of the dementia-ridden lady who flips in and out."

That is, however, very close to how he describes her himself. All Lady Thatcher's other friends



DAVID ROSE: JAMES FRASER; DYLAN MARTINEZ; CHRIS EADES

had deserted him. Although not, he reveals now, the Thatchers. "I don't know if this is public knowledge, but in the weeks after I came out of prison, two very surprising things happened. One was that Denis called me up and

Someone mentioned David

prefer to remember the former Prime Minister in her pomp, and refuse to talk about what it is like to be in her company now. In the light of this, Aitken's candour is astonishing. "When she came in [to the dinner party conversation], there were one or two marvellous moments. She suddenly started to talk about Keith Joseph [the politician credited with inventing Thatcherism], then later about the preparations for her wedding. Sir Clive Bossom, who is aged 90, was here. Her reception was held in Clive's house. There was a wonderfully funny little ding-dong [between them] about how the arrangements were made."

But other moments were much harder to take. Aitken clears his throat. "I had one member of the Cabinet [at the table] who asked something about David Cameron. She obviously didn't get who David Cameron was..."

His voice falters. It can be distressing to see a person you love in that condition, I say. "Yes." Now the tears in his eyes are obvious and his voice wobbles. "I found it all rather sort of moving and touching. I mean - ha! - I can't say I ever felt protective to her when she was in power, but I felt very lovingly protective towards her then."

I wonder why on earth he would be so frank, until I remember something Aitken said two years ago: "I am much more fond of Margaret Thatcher now she is vulnerable than I was when she was powerful."

What did he mean by that? He reflects for a moment before answering. "When she first lost office, and she was certainly all there, I really felt for her, the agony of losing the power. She was in a pretty mixed-up, emotional, bitter mood. I felt really sorry for her. I felt emotionally fonder of her as the post-Number 10 years rolled by."

Aitken is approaching 70. The lick of black hair that so many women found attractive in his younger days has gone grey and receded, but he's still a handsome man in his dark blazer, burgundy sweater and open-necked blue shirt. Does he think he will see Lady Thatcher again? "Oh, I hope so. She goes to places more than people think. She has had dinner with friends in the House of Lords, and she's rather better there, I'm told."

What does he think she would make of the film? "I think she'd cringe over the dementia stuff. Then I think she'd say, 'Well this is Hollywood, isn't it?' Hollywood and history are not easy bedfellows."

Aitken is writing his own biography of the former Prime Minister for the publishers Bloomsbury. "I'm going to go and see the film again. I was underwhelmed by the script. It was very one-dimensional. Her relationships with her colleagues

were never anything like the feminist Queen Boadicea trampling over the shoulders of the cowering, cowardly Cabinet. Margaret Thatcher didn't think like that."

Does she know he is writing the book? "Yes, she does." And does she approve? "She doesn't really communicate. I wrote to her and got a message back from one of the people around her. There would have been a moment when she knew..."

Again, the thought tails off. There were stories, long ago, that Mrs Thatcher had never forgiven him for ending a relationship with her daughter, Carol. It is true that after being elected as a dashing MP in 1974, the former television presenter spent the Thatcher years on the back benches. But he denies it was because of any damaged maternal feelings. "I had

a good conversation with Margaret Thatcher about that. There are always two sides to a story or a romance. I don't think the lioness being angry for her cub is anything other than admirable, even though I probably wouldn't have said that at the time. I really got to understand her and Denis quite well."

Aitken did join the Cabinet under John Major - but then fell from grace in a spectacular way. Accused of inappropriate dealings with Saudi businessmen, he famously vowed to fight back and wield "the simple sword of truth" against "the cancer of bent and twisted journalism". He smiles ruefully at the memory. "I quite often have to watch it on some television quiz show or something. I say to myself, 'Crikey, who is that arrogant berk up there, telling all those porkies? And so

angry, too. There was quite a lot of bad blood flowing."

He sums up the allegations made against him at the time as "effective pimping, effective arms dealing and being a corrupt minister. I really can, hand on my heart, say those allegations are and always were substantially - if not wholly - untrue. For better or worse, I have never made a penny from an arms deal. That's not to say I don't deeply regret telling a lie about the Ritz."

The question of who paid the bill for his stay at the hotel in Paris proved his downfall during the libel case that followed the claims. He lied about it on oath, and in 1999 he was sentenced to 18 months in prison for perjury. Aitken remains the only serving Cabinet minister ever to go to jail. He came out after seven months to find that many of his friends

'Fulfilled, peaceful and happy': Jonathan Aitken at home in west London. Above right, clockwise from top: at an election rally with Mrs Thatcher in the 1980s; with wife Lolicia and daughter Victoria in 1999 during his trial for perjury; leaving HMP Elmley in 2000 after serving seven months



I feel emotionally fonder of Mrs Thatcher as the years roll by

said, 'Would you do me the honour of coming to lunch with me in my club?' I chose the most obscure, the East India Club. We had a very good lunch and talk."

"And then, at [Margaret Thatcher's] initiative, a very small dinner was arranged at the home of Michael Alison, who had been her parliamentary private secretary. We went on long into the night. She and Denis went out of their way to be privately as kind as anyone could possibly be to me in the aftermath of prison."

Aitken emerged from prison to declare that he had repented of his sin and turned to Christ. His very public conversion led to books and speaking engagements that many believers have found inspirational. There seems no reason to doubt his faith. Nor can one deny his good works as a campaigner for prison reform whose views have been sought by the current Government. But there are still doubters, who suggest his spiritual transformation was a rather neat and easy way of rebuilding a shattered reputation. What does he say to that?

"First of all, I'm not bothered what they think. Anything I say or do in the spiritual field is done for an audience of one, who would sure know if I was playing a charlatan's con trick. But I do have some sympathy. In a different era, I myself would have been cynical about a colleague who had a career disaster and came out of prison saying, 'I've found God.' I think I might well say, 'How very convenient.'"

Nevertheless, the faith endures, and he keeps telling his prison story "because people get something out of it". But Aitken has also gone looking for other tales to tell. His first job was as a journalist, and he has written more than a dozen books including biographies of Nixon and Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of Kazakhstan.

His latest publication is a second look at that former Soviet state, whose reputation was done such damage by the comedy film *Borat* - portraying the Kazaks as a crude, backward people who drive around in cars pulled by donkeys. "They were quite shaken by *Borat*. Nazarbayev makes quite good jokes about it now, but I think he and many other Kazaks didn't see the joke and were really hurt. They then said they must do something about their international public relations."

Is he part of that? Aitken describes Kazakhstan as a one-party system with too much corruption and a restricted media. He also says "regrettable episodes of torture have occurred in some prisons". But overall, his books are very positive about the nation and its leader. Is he being paid to promote Kazakhstan? "Absolutely not."

Aitken praises President Nazarbayev's charm and says

mentioned David Cameron. She obviously didn't get who David Cameron was..

"Papa" is revered as the founding father of the nation. But isn't he also a dictator? "No, he's not a dictator. He is an autocratic head of government, but sensitive to all kinds of pressures and criticisms in a way that dictators are not. We shouldn't sit here in the comfortable West judging everyone by our highest standards."

Aitken seems to have a strong attraction to people in power. Is that fair? "Yes," he says quickly, "because this is an arena I have been in and aspire to." He was once proposed as the successor to John Major. Is there any chance of a return to politics now? "Out of the question."

These days his daughters make the headlines, too. Last year Alexandra, 31, who was best known as a socialite, married a member of a Sikh warrior caste and went to live in the foothills of the Himalayas. Aitken was unable to attend the wedding but insists, "I have been out to see her, and she came here. I talked to her this morning, as it happens. She is wonderfully happy. Her husband is a rather marvellous man. I do worry a bit about whether the cultural gaps are too great, but we get on."

Then there's Petrina Khashoggi, the child of an affair, who didn't know she was his daughter until she was 18. She recently told a magazine that she still felt like an outsider in his family, and never called him Dad. "I was a bit surprised and troubled when I first read that interview. Petrina says she was unfairly quoted out of context. But one strange by-product of the article was that she now does call me Dad. We get on well. We're fine."

All is well, then. The former bankrupt lives in a fine flat with his second wife, Elizabeth, who was once married to the actor Richard Harris. They are happy, he says. And I must say - as others have done - that even after his famous trial and tribulations, Jonathan Aitken seems rather happy with himself.

"I remain embarrassed by all kinds of past mistakes and past grievous failures," he says in that familiar, lazily elegant voice. "But on life's rollercoaster ride, I am a fulfilled, peaceful and happy person. So three cheers for that."

● *'Kazakhstan: Surprises and Stereotypes'* by Jonathan Aitken (Continuum Publishing, £20), is available from Telegraph Books at £18 + £1.25 p&p. Call 0844 871 1516 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk