My Recollections
John Major, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
By SGI President Ikeda

British Prime Minister John Major has been called "the Velvet Steamroller."1 He has earned a reputation for being neither arrogant nor conceited, yet he possesses a will of steel which is as if enfolded in soft velvet.

In February 1991, IRA terrorists launched a mortar attack on the prime minister's official residence at 10 Downing Street. One mortar exploded in the back garden, the blast fracturing the windows of the conference room where Prime Minister Major was meeting with his cabinet members. Unshaken, the prime minister said, "I think we had better continue in another place, gentlemen," and calmly gathered his papers.2

The prime minister greeted me with a warm, open smile at our meeting in June 1991, a mere seven months after he had become prime minister at the youthful age of 47. In Britain's still highly class-conscious society, this son of former vaudeville performers had become the nation's top political leader — an event that captured headlines around the world. Though the days may be waning when senior positions in Britain are dominated by Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge) graduates, vestiges remain stubbornly ingrained. And in a society that places such strong emphasis on the "right" schools, the future prime minister had left school at 16.

John Major may rightly be called a self-made man, and his life is a fine example of the saying "Heaven helps those who help themselves." A country where this spirit of self-reliance prevails will prosper. I feel the real, underlying strength of British society is revealed in choosing a self-made individual for its leader.

When I asked the prime minister, "What is your grand vision for the United Kingdom?" he smiled warmly and replied that he wanted to create a free society, and that the promotion of free markets and a free economy was necessary to achieve that. He also went on to explain that by a free society he meant a society in which people could develop their potential and achieve their hopes and dreams through their hard work and effort. Behind that vision seemed to lie the prime minister's anger at social injustices —an anger arising from his bitter struggle against the invisible barriers of class and education.

Suffering can either warp people's spirits or make them deeply compassionate. What is it that makes the difference?

When John Major was 10, his family's fortunes took a turn for the worse. His parents had retired as vaudeville performers and were running a garden ornament business, but financial debt drove them into bankruptcy and they had to sell their house. They had lived until then in a working-class bungalow with a spacious backyard. But now the family of five were forced to moved into a tiny, cramped, two-room apartment in one of London's low-rent areas.

Their rooms were on the top floor of a crumbling building. Bath and toilet facilities were communal. Furthermore, the rooms had no heating in winter. At the time, the young John Major's father was 75 and his mother 49, and both were constantly plagued by ill health.

When one is poor, many are the hurts and slights one suffers. John Major passed the exam to enter the grammar school of his choice. However, his family couldn't afford to buy him a new uniform, and the secondhand one that he obtained was only by applying for special assistance from the school, a humiliating experience. The young John Major experienced such painful and mortifying situations again and again.

The poverty of his youth is one of the reasons why Prime Minister Major dislikes inflation; he knows firsthand that it has the greatest and most direct effect on the poorest

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citizens.

To help earn money to support his family, he quit school at 16 and experienced the harsh reality of British social prejudice. He chafed under the common assumption that anyone who hadn't been to university was incapable and worthless. He worked as a day laborer, but the work wasn't steady. He was out of work at one point for more than nine months, and he fought off starvation on the meager unemployment benefits he received. He would never forget those experiences, he once said.

When he served as undersecretary of state for social security during the Thatcher administration, Britain was struck by a severe cold spell (the winter of 1985–86). There were provisions for a special allowance for the elderly under such conditions, but the methods of application and payment were too bureaucratic. He promptly met with Prime Minister Thatcher and the chancellor of the exchequer to negotiate the revision of the regulations — and he succeeded. He was motivated by his conviction that government officials and politicians live on the taxes that the poor have paid from their very limited funds, and as such have a duty to do their very best to help the most needy.

Everyone pays lip service to democracy, but what is the blood that keeps the heart of democracy pumping, alive and vital? It is the commitment of leaders to keep the people's needs and welfare foremost in their minds at all times and take concrete measures. "Government exists for the sake of the people," I said to Prime Minister Major. "As a result, I believe that those who govern need to be more aware than anyone else of the sufferings, the pains and the wishes of the people."

In his youth, face to face with the harsh realities of society, John Major realized that he would simply have to show what he was made of. He had only himself to rely on. He resumed his studies by correspondence. Every day he rose at 5:00 a.m. He worked all day, while at night devoting himself to Conservative Party activities. He never went to sleep until after midnight.

At 19, he lost his father. The senior Mr. Major had always shared the experiences of his rich and varied life, its turbulent ups and downs, with his son. He had never fawned over or flattered the high-ranking or powerful. And he had always been kind to the poorest of the poor.

John Major's mother also had the same generous spirit. All sorts of people came and went in the Major home. Mrs. Major was always quick to give lodging to those with no place else to go.

From around this time, new horizons began to open for John Major. He found employment at a bank, and he worked with unbelievable energy and determination to demonstrate his abilities. He became a success. He wished his father could have seen him.

During a work assignment at a British bank in Nigeria, he was seriously injured in a car accident and almost lost a leg. He spent a year recuperating, but he never gave in to despair during that painful time.

The prime minister has been quoted as saying, "Nothing makes me more determined to do something than someone telling me I can't."3

While continuing to pursue his career in banking, he became a local council representative, and finally, on his third bid for office, was elected to the House of Commons. Everyone who met him was charmed by the young man's integrity and commitment. His character had been polished and forged by suffering — probably because he never lost his desire to learn from painful experience.

Common sense, John Major maintained, is extremely important for government officials. He observed that though he might not have an impressive educational record, he had certainly mastered common sense in the "university of life."

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The true mark of such common sense is, no doubt, a humanity that never forgets the cause of the poor. The people are always of foremost importance. Government, the economy and religion all exist for the sake of the people. They are means to bring happiness to the people. When the means become the end, society's ruin has begun.

What is greatness? Is it to belong to the aristocracy? To be a member of parliament? To have a fancy education? Prime Minister Major struggled against such notions and those who held them, and he won.

Is the fact that he became prime minister the sign of his victory? No. His victory is proven by the fact that he has sought to translate into action his determination never to become the sort of person who looks down on those who have fewer advantages.

When I asked him what books had recently made an impression on him, he first replied that there were several, and then he mentioned *The Crowthers of Bankdam*, by Thomas Armstrong, the story of the bitter struggles of a family working in a cotton mill in 19th-century Yorkshire. The lives of ordinary people, it seemed, were never far from his mind.

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1. Nesta Wyn Ellis, *John Major* (London: Futura Publications, 1991), p. 118.
2. Ibid., p. 63.
3. Ibid., p. 361.

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