

Margaret Thatcher: Reggae, Royalty and Riots

Margaret Thatcher and her impact on the people of Essex was the centre of national debate after the 1993 general election, when one of the first constituencies to declare, Basildon, did so for the Conservatives, and which signalled yet another Labour party defeat. There seemed an unbreakable affinity between much of the Essex population and the Tories. Author Michael Collins comments,

‘This development revived fears that the working class were forsaking community for individualism. Instead of living behind the same cobalt-coloured door as all their neighbours, they were choosing their own, and maybe adding a pane of glass with a rain-effect and a brass doorknob. The concern now appeared to be not that the owner-occupiers from the working class might become bourgeois, but that they might not. They were becoming something far worse, apparently – the lower middle class... Now the terms “Essex Man” and “Thatcher’s children” became shorthand for those who moved into the suburbs and made it into the middle class via new money...’(1)

It is important to assess the impact of Thatcherism on Harold Hill and to review how and why she rose to power.

Margaret Thatcher, born Margaret Hilda Roberts in 1925, remains a pivotal Conservative politician in British history. Indeed, she was a Prime Minister whose authority and influence over the course of the twentieth century is equal to that of other Prime Ministers such as Lloyd George, Clement Atlee and – in a comparison that would thrill her – Winston Churchill.

Born in Grantham in the East Midlands, her father, Alfred Roberts, was a shopkeeper who had held office as an Independent councillor for 16 years, including for a period as alderman and mayor. Particularly active in the Wesleyan Methodist church, he was more Conservative than Liberal.

Margaret Roberts grew up in the strata called the middle middle class.

It was a spartan, strict upbringing that would see the whole of Sunday donated to at least four separate church services.

It is these roots that help explain her later political philosophy – a celebration of the work ethic, as opposed to receiving state benefits; individual hard work, rather than the collectivism and group solidarity; marriage and family, rather than divorce or single parenthood.

As she herself later remembered:

‘You were taught to work jolly hard, you were taught to improve yourself, you were taught self-reliance, you were taught to live within your income, you were taught that cleanliness was next to godliness, you were taught self-respect, you were taught always to give a hand to your neighbour, you were taught tremendous pride in your country, you were taught to be a good member of your community.’ (2)

Although in the seventies and eighties Margaret Thatcher announced that her ideas were inherited from her father, in truth, like any intelligent woman, she took some and abandoned others. Indeed, she would only really refer to her father’s influence after

arriving in 10 Downing Street - upon leaving home at 18 she saw very little of him or Grantham ever again.

A bright but unassuming student, she joined Oxford as an undergraduate studying chemistry. The most notable aspect of her time there was becoming active in the Oxford University Conservative Association.



After graduating she spent years as a research assistant but that was merely a backdrop to her greatest passion: politics. In the 1950 and the 1951 general election she stood as the Conservative parliamentary candidate for Dartford, after which she married Denis Thatcher and forever lost her maiden name of Roberts. By now she had transformed herself, as one of her contemporary college students remembered after a 1953 reunion:

‘She had lost the Midlands accent that her fellow students had known. Now she sounded more like Princess Elizabeth, who was not yet Queen... Princess Elizabeth used to talk of ‘May Husband and Ay’, which was quite a joke among our... generation. To our surprise Margaret, newly married, now said just that and we, her contemporaries, felt ashamed that one of us could be so embarrassing. She then gave us her views on marriage and home life expressed in such sanctimonious platitudes that we were even more embarrassed to be associated with her.’ (3)

Margaret, ‘the Grocer’s Daughter’, made much play of her humble beginnings, especially after becoming Prime Minister in 1979. Although leading an austere childhood, Thatcher had never experienced poverty, indeed, she quickly became accustomed to luxury, moving on from Oxford University she married into wealth and became the MP for Finchley in 1959. Living in Chelsea, her two children were sent to Britain’s most prestigious public schools. Later, she would repeatedly make claim to

her modest beginnings without also being so candid to admit that she was married to a millionaire and presided over a Cabinet of millionaires.

She was an anti-intellectual, a gut politician whose own arrogance and self-righteousness found, for a period, an affinity with much of the British electorate. A humourless, disciplined woman who impressed (and repulsed) countless acquaintances throughout her life with her absolute confidence and self-assuredness in both her own ability and the rightness of her mission. Towards the end of her Premiership this unflinching self-belief was perceived by many as a form of madness.

Although she won many admirers over her long rise to power, she always alienated many other fellow Conservatives. Chris Pattern recalls her voice being 'rather like a friendly dentist's drill' ; Peter Rawlison remembers her incessant chatter: 'How she talked!... I believe she honestly did not realise how irritating she was.'; another colleague remembers that 'At moments I thought she was nothing but ice; I never felt there was any warmth at all.'(4)

Nevertheless, her detractors grudgingly admired her as an extremely committed and passionate politician.

In October 1961 she was invited to join the government as Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance – the youngest woman to have gained ministerial office. Although Labour resumed government in 1963, whilst in opposition she took a succession of portfolios which is a measure of her ability to get to grips with any new responsibility on any subject.

Gradually, throughout the Sixties, she built a limited but steady reputation as an MP who was decisive and thorough. Politically, she was identified with the rightwing of her party, but never greatly so. In the 1966 election campaign the features of her politics which she chose to emphasise were tighter industrial relations laws, the defence of grammar schools and greater home-ownership, about the last of which she declared 'These are fresh fields to conquer'(5) .



After the surprise Tory general election victory of 1970 she was appointed Secretary of State for Education and Science – a post she held for almost four years. Here, she exhibited little of the political doctrine to be called Thatcherism other than gaining the nickname of 'Thatcher the milk snatcher' for taking away free milk from schoolchildren. Her time was yet to come – and that started after the Conservative election defeat of 1974 amidst widespread economic and social chaos.

The later political ideas of Thatcher were a reaction to the consensus that came after the war. The Labour Party won an historic victory in 1945 and immediately set about implementing a programme of nationalisation, house building and expansion of the welfare state.

The Conservative Party was happy to follow in the footsteps of Labour as prosperity for all seemed the key to stability - the economy in the fifties and sixties was the most

buoyant in British history. Full employment, now a distant memory, gave way to a rise in consumerism and the mass usage of television, washing machines and annual holidays.

The Tory Prime Minister, Macmillan, famously announced in late 1959 that ‘you’ve never had it so good’ with the Evening Standard editorial declaring on New Years Day 1960 that we had all arrived in an ‘Age of Plenty’:

‘The age of scrimping is over. The age of affluence has begun. In the past 10 years Britain has passed through a social revolution whose full impact is only likely to be felt in the new decade that has just begun. For the first time in history the greater part of this country’s people—and not just the fortunate minority—have money to spare beyond their immediate needs.’

By the 1970s the economy began to shudder and then decline, unemployment rose to Depression-era levels, industrial relations were fractured and the nation had a deep-seated fear of crime and immigration. Where there was once peace and love in the sixties, now there was a Clockwork Orange, violence on the terraces and loose talk of a military coup in the officers’ mess.

From the late 1960s onwards there was a growing counter-revolution against post-war Conservative orthodoxies. Led by Enoch Powell, this faction was increasingly vocal in calling for the privatisation (then called denationalisation) of major industries, tax cuts and laws to restrict trade unions. Disgraced by his 1968 anti-immigration speech, Powell was banished permanently to the obscure political hinterlands, and in his place came to prominence Arthur Seldon, Alan Walters, Geoffrey Howe and Keith Joseph who were right-wing prophets for the new Tory age.



Against all expectations, in 1975 Margaret Thatcher beat Edward Heath to become the Leader of the Opposition. The subsequent years, from 1975 to 1979, were a good grounding in experience rather than a triumphant success. In parliament, she failed to leave a mark as Leader of the Opposition, but at the annual Tory conference she shone with confidence.

The latter success a reflection of the increasing evangelical zeal found amongst the rank and file of a party with Thatcher at its head.

Her real saving grace though was the so-called ‘Winter of Discontent’ in 1978/9 when a series of public sector strikes met with howls of outrage from the press –the Labour Party subsequently became associated with industrial unrest and chaos for the next 20 years.

Thanks, in part, to media-savvy campaigning the Conservative Party won the 1979 general election with 44 per cent of the vote. Upon victory, on the steps of Downing Street, she famously quoted a prayer of St Francis:

Where there is discord, may we bring harmony;
Where there is error, may we bring truth;
Where there is doubt, may we bring faith;
And where there is despair may we bring hope.



The Right to Buy – as selling council homes become known – had for a number of years been an important plank of the Tory platform, although Margaret Thatcher rarely showed much enthusiasm for the policy until its popularity amongst the people became evident later on.

By the time of the 1974 general election she wrote and distributed a circular letter to Conservative candidates outlining policy. In reply to the rhetorical question ‘Why should council tenants be allowed to buy their houses?’ she answered,

‘Everybody wants to own their home, because of the security and pride of ownership that a house-owner enjoys. Also, people who have bought their own homes have benefited over the years from increases in house prices—

while people who have lived in council houses or flats have nothing to show for all the rent they have paid.'

To the question 'The price... (is) below market value. Is this justified?' she replied,

'The justification from the ratepayer's and taxpayer's viewpoint is that he is already paying out revenue subsidies in respect of council houses, and would continue to do so if the house remained rented. Further, the maintenance costs are transferred to the tenant. If he becomes a home owner it is possible that his own family will then think of buying a home when the time comes, instead of going on to the council waiting list. Finally, bearing in mind that about 70% of council houses were built before 1964, when building costs were very much lower, the buyer is still paying a lot more than historic cost, and the profit will accrue to the local authority.' (6)

In fact, money from the sale of council houses was 'ring-fenced' and not spent. By the time of the 1979 general election she was once again explaining the Conservative housing policy, this time on the television programme TV Eye:

'They might just as well have the chance to buy it when they're comparatively young, and then they'll know that after twenty-five years or so, they won't have to pay any more rent...' (7)

In truth though, she was initially hostile to the idea of discounts to tenants wanting to buy their own homes - she worried that it was unfair to all the other homeowners who were paying full price. Eventually, as the years passed and the massive political capital from the policy became apparent, Margaret Thatcher cooed warmly of, what she called, popular capitalism:

'In about twenty-five years' time there will be quite a lot of people, who will be inheriting something, because for the first time we will have a whole generation of people who own their own homes and will be leaving them, so that they topple like a cascade down the line of the family, leaving to others not only their houses but some of their shares, some of their building-society investments, some of their national-savings certificates - only on a bigger scale than ever before.

The overwhelming majority of people, who could never look forward to that before, will be able to say: 'Look, they have got something to inherit. They have got the basis to start on!' That is tremendous. That is popular capitalism.' (8)

After the 1979 general election the Tories had a 43-seat majority, by the 1983 general election that had gone up to 144, despite of one of the worst economic depressions this country has ever seen.



There were three things that saved the first Conservative government: the Falklands war, North Sea oil and the selling of council housing stock.

The revenue from North Sea oil paid for the unemployment and housing benefit for those out of work; the Falklands War in 1982 ushered in a period of nationalism unseen since the Second World War, while the 500,000 dwellings sold by '83 at give-a-way discounts ensured an added bonus of electoral support, mainly from the skilled working-class.

And that support from some sections of the working class were crucial. Consecutive budgets cut back public spending, prescriptions increased five-fold over a one year period, sickness and unemployment benefit were subject to income tax, in effect, cut; further education funding was slashed. What's more, the inner-cities erupted into riots that shocked the nation. Firstly, Brixton went up in flames, followed in July 1981 by Toxteth in Liverpool and over the next few weeks Manchester, Birmingham, Blackburn, Bradford, Leeds, Derby, Leicester and Wolverhampton: 'One colleague observed, 'the Prime Minister's nerve seemed momentarily to falter.' Political opponents she could deal with, but widespread civil insurrection might destroy her. On television she looked unusually nervous...' (9)

In July there was also the wedding of the century when Prince Charles and Diana married, while as a soundtrack to rioting and Royalist fervour the reggae song Ghost Town was number one in the charts:

'This town, is coming like a ghost town
 Why must the youth fight against themselves?
 Government leaving the youth on the shelf

This place, is coming like a ghost town
No job to be found in this country
Can't go on no more
The people getting angry'

Echoing the opinions of politicised ska bands, the late and influential Romford Recorder journalist, Roy Weal, was writing that,

'Hundreds of Havering teenagers will form an army of jobless kids when they leave school this summer.
Many of them face a miserable life as "no hoppers" when they step out of the school gates for the last time. This picture is one of desperation with youngsters facing a dead-end situation: NO work; NO education; NO money.'

(10)

If the soundtrack to 1981 was reggae, Royalty and riots, then the build-up during the previous summer— when Maggie came to Harold Hill - resounded to the sounds of another Two Tone band, The Beat, and their rousing sing-a-long anthem, Stand Down Margaret:

'I said I see no joy
I see only sorry
I see no chance of your bright new tomorrow
So stand down Margaret
Stand down please
Our lives seem petty in your cold grey hands
Would you give a second thought
Would you ever give a damn, I doubt it
Stand down Margaret
Everybody shout it
Stand down Margaret!'

Whilst this song was in the charts, Prime Minister Thatcher and a gaggle of pressmen came to the estate. The occasion for the visit was to see the Patterson family of 39 Amersham Road who were to be the 12,000th household in the country to buy their house under the new housing legislation.

They had lived at their three-bedroomed, semi-detached house for 19 years, and purchased it for £8,315 after being given a 47 percent discount. After enjoying a cup of tea and an inspection of their house she decamped to the front lawn where in front of dozens of journalists she ceremoniously handed over the deeds of the house. Questioned whether it was sensible to remove the home from the housing pool when there were currently 3,305 families on the waiting list in Havering, she declared:

"Many council tenants live there for the rest of their lives. The house is already off the market, why shouldn't they have a chance to buy and hand something on to their children? Why shouldn't they have the chance to become little capitalists?
"Mr. and Mrs. Patterson have put a lot of work into this house and it is better for it. They should have the chance to benefit." (11)

Echoing the sentiments of many who brought their house from the council, Mrs. Patterson said, 'We felt we couldn't turn down a marvelous bargain.' (12)

Not long after, the Patterson household fell behind on repayments to the mortgage company, their marriage fell apart, and the house was repossessed.

- (1) Michael Collins, *The Likes Of Us: The Biography of the White Working Class*. Granta, 2004.
- (2) Margaret Thatcher, *The Times*, 16/04/83
- (3) Margaret Thatcher: *The Grocer's Daughter*. Campbell, John, p.98
- (4) Margaret Thatcher: *The Grocer's Daughter*, Campbell, John, p.176
- (5) Finchley Press, March 25, 1966
- (6) Circular letter to Conservative candidates. September 25, 1974
- (7) TV Interview for Thames TV Eye, April 24, 1979
- (8) Margaret Thatcher, *The Times*, 28/03/86
- (9) Margaret Thatcher: *The Grocer's Daughter*, Campbell, John, p.114
- (10) Romford Recorder, Spring, 1981
- (11) Romford Recorder, August 15, 1980
- (12) Romford Recorder, August 15, 1980