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## The Thatcher Years: A Reappraisal of the Impact of the Administration of Margaret Thatcher on the British People

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### ABSTRACT:

*The impacts of the administration of Margaret Thatcher, 1979 to 1990 has remained a controversial debate in Britain. Some analysts and historians have eulogised the administration for its privatisation and deregulation of the economy coupled with its popular capitalism as the best thing to ever happen to Britain. while other scholars vilified the government for institutionalising poverty and lopsided wealth distribution in Britain. this research examined the various policies of the Thatcher government from privatisation, housing, trade union and diplomatic policies to her attempt to Thatcherise the people of Britain culturally and socially. This study, using both primary and secondary sources, finds out that the people of Britain were never changed by Thatcher instead it was the people who called for the changes. And the changes or impacts were outside the control of the government.*

**Keywords:** *Margaret Thatcher, Administration, Impact, Britain*

Margaret Thatcher during her resignation speech in 1990 said “we are leaving Downing Street for the last time after eleven-and-a-half wonderful years, and we're very happy that we leave the United Kingdom in a very, very much better state than when we came here eleven and a half years ago”.<sup>iii</sup> In a tribute to Thatcher, then Prime Minister, David Cameron said “Margaret Thatcher didn't just lead our country – she saved our country”.<sup>iii</sup> To further emphasis the effects of the administration on the British society, Seldon and Collings concludes that the thatcher government “was one of the three great reforming administrations of the 20th century (alongside the Liberals in 1904 -1914 and Labour in 1945 – 1951)”.<sup>iv</sup> Several questions beg for answers considering these claims; did the Thatcher administration really change Britain? How much really changed at the end of her Premiership? How much of these changes can be attributed to the direct influence of Thatcher? Was Thatcher able to ‘Thatcherise’ the people of United Kingdom? From the observation of this study, though Thatcher was able to implement some significant policies which altered the lives of the British people like increase in wages, privatisation of parastatals, reducing the strength of the Trade Unions but these changes succeeded because they appealed to the people and the most significant changes such as differences in wealth distribution, NHS, constitutional issues, British values and culture all remained the same in 1990 and up till date. This article attempts to analyse the policies of Margaret Thatcher and the successes. Thereafter, a thorough explanation on how unintentional these successes are and what issues remained untouched by the end of her administration will be observed.

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**MARGARET THATCHER**

The former Prime Minister was born Margaret Roberts in Grantham in 1925. Her father was Alfred Roberts who was a grocer and a Methodist lay Preacher. He also participated in politics and became the Mayor of Grantham. He was a motivation for Margaret as he encouraged her to join college politics while taking her to Parliamentary sessions. Margaret studied Chemistry at Oxford University and was a leading Tory student member. Her first furore in politics was when she contested for Dartford Seat through Conservative Party. Though she lost the election, she caused a stir as she performed beyond expectations. After marrying Denis Thatcher, a wealthy businessman in 1951, she stayed away from politics to take care of her children. She came back to politics in 1959 and was elected Conservative MP for Finchley. She gradually rose through the ranks and was made the Education Secretary in 1970. She became unpopular and nicknamed 'Thatcher the milk Snatcher' after withdrawing free milk from children in primary schools. The Conservative Party fell into disarray after successive defeats. Margaret Thatcher was elected leader of Conservative Party on 11th February 1975 after contesting as an underdog against Ted Heath. She became the Prime Minister of Britain after a successful general election in 1979. With this she became the first female Prime Minister of United Kingdom and the first female executive leader of a country in Europe.

It is also important to examine the mindset and views of Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher believed that "there is no such thing as society; we are individual men and women, and there are families". She opines that people should not rely on the state to provide for their needs but people should strive to create their wealth, save enough, spend as they wish and pay appropriate taxes to the government. She said, "pennies don't fall from heaven, they have to be earned here on earth". She wanted to roll back the frontiers of government. That is, government should reduce spending and allow the private sector to manage the economy while making the people 'responsible for the state'. She presented herself as a feminist when she said, "if you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman". Her bullying nature was also confirmed when she said, "I do not care about what my cabinet members say as long as they do what I say".<sup>v</sup> Coincidentally, it was this disdain for her cabinet members that brought her down.

**THE SUCCESSES OF THATCHER'S ADMINISTRATION**

The Thatcher administration came up with several policies which undoubtedly had tremendous impact on United Kingdom. One of such was privatisation. There were two elements to the policy: denationalisation (sale of state shares and assets) and liberalisation (the eradication of statutory monopoly). The aims of the 'big bang' were both ideological and pragmatic. Ideologically, privatisation produces an extension of economic freedom and in the neo-liberal view thereby increases political freedom. Nationalised industries were unpopular, and deprived consumers of choice due to their monopoly status. In pragmatic terms, the absence of commercial disciplines in the state sector led to bad management and deficient performance. In what Lord Stockton regarded as 'selling off the family silver', the assets sold included jaguar cars, British telecom, British Aerospace, Brioil, Cable and Wireless, the Trustee Saving Banks, British Gas, British Airways, and Rolls-Royce. "Five industries that together were losing over £2 million a week in the public sector are now making profit of over £100 million a week in the

private sector"<sup>vi</sup> totalling about £24 billion by 1989. This 'big bang' has been described by Seldon and Collings as "probably the most far reaching achievements of the Thatcher era".<sup>vii</sup> At the beginning of Thatcher government in 1980, share ownership in United Kingdom was 3 million but became 11 million in 1990 when she left office.<sup>viii</sup> Campbell describes Privatisation as an outstanding political success due to the electoral success it gave Thatcher in her second general election. The privatisation and deregulation of the economy changed Britain forever as it increased competition among businesses, created more choices for consumers and made United Kingdom retain her status as one of the most advanced country in the world.

The housing policy of Thatcher government describe by Nigel Lawson as Popular capitalism and regarded by Margaret Thatcher as 'property-owning democracy', council houses were sold to occupiers at subsidized rate. Home owner-occupation grew from 55% of the population in 1980 to 64% in 1987 and 67% in 1990 which translated to about 10.2 million in 1981 and 13.4 million in 1990. It reduced the number of household living in social houses by close to a million.<sup>ix</sup> In England alone, more than 970,000 local authority-owned houses were sold through the scheme during Thatcher's premiership, more than have been sold in the two decades since. This helped in reducing local authority provision, reducing public expenditure and increasing Conservative electoral advantage. The 'icing on the big bang cake' is unique and outstanding because up till date, no government has been able to match the home ownership figure of Thatcher.

On the industrial relations front, successive attempts had been made to bring trade unions within the law, by Wilson and by Heath. It was James Callaghan who initiated the 'Great Debate' on educational standards. Yet it was Margaret Thatcher who had the will to do these things, to succeed where others had failed and to press forward where they had drawn back. Thatcher chose 'incrementalism' in her policy implementation. Prior to the emergence of Thatcher, the Trade Unions were probably the most influential group in the United Kingdom. Their votes could influence the party that got to power. Total trade union membership stood at 13.3 million by 1979. The trade union on its own through industrial actions contributed immensely to the failure of the governments of Harold Wilson, Ted Heath, and Harold Macmillan. However, Thatcher came up with three Employment Acts which ultimately subdued the powers of Trade Union in Britain till date. The 1980 (Prior) Employment Act outlawed secondary picketing and restricted the operation of the 'closed shop'. The 1982 (Tebbit) Employment Act made unions liable for damages if held responsible for unlawful industrial action, while narrowing the definition of a lawful trade dispute, and strengthening individual protection against closed shop. By the time she left office in 1990, the membership of Trade Union had fallen to about 9 million and has continued to dwindle. The membership today is less than 6 million.<sup>x</sup> Most remarkably, the days lost to industrial actions dropped from 29.5 million in 1983 to less than 2 million in 1990. This increased productivity, profits for companies and tax for government.

One achievement of the Thatcher government that is worthy of mention is the blurring of the class divide through better distribution of wealth. Families during Thatcher years enjoying telephone increased from 62 percent to 85 percent and central heating from 54 percent to 77 percent.<sup>xi</sup> Available figures show that households got richer under Thatcher. In 1979, the average weekly earnings of the upper class, middle class and working class were £472.98, £270.70 and £151.58 respectively. But by the time Thatcher left office the earnings had increased tremendously. The middle class was earning approximately £341.58 by 1990, the working class earned an average of £158.57 while the upper class raked in an average weekly income of

£694.83. This upward income trend has continued till date. Families are getting richer by the day. The 'big bang' was significant in the blurring of class divide in the United Kingdom. The 'Yuppies' which represented fast upstart of American style saw people of working class origin rubbing shoulders with the upper rich families.

Another aspect of governance that Thatcher has continually received praise is in the diplomatic relations of Britain in the 1980s. The success of her foreign policy started few years into her first tenure with the invasion of the Falklands Island by Argentina. Thatcher courageously sent out British troops to reclaim the territory which they did. With the troops' 'triumphant entrance' into the country, Margaret Thatcher's rating soared above 50%<sup>xii</sup> but honourably she did not capitalise on the advantage to call for early general elections. Her relationship with Ronald Reagan (the US president 1981 - 1989) proved critical, not just in helping ensure US support for the British campaign in the Falklands, but in raising the standing among world leaders. Easy relationship with Gorbachev of Russia between 1984 - 1985 allowed her to play a key brokering role between USA and Russia and the end of socialism.<sup>xiii</sup> This is outstanding considering that former Prime Ministers Churchill and Macmillian did not succeed with trying to end the Cold War. She was well respected world over especially in Europe even though not so regarded in UK and European Community.

Cutting government spending was one of the policies dear to Thatcher all through her reign. At the assumption of office in 1979, government spending was about 44.6% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) but through rigorous and thrift spending, Thatcher was able to reduce public spending to 39.1% of GDP by the time she departed.<sup>xiv</sup> Although inflation hit the double digit during Thatcher administration, it is commendable that she reduced it to 8% by 1990 down by 2% from the 1979 figure of 10%. Although critics have vilified the administration on the rise in unemployment, its worthy of note that Thatcher's was able to reduce it to 6.9% in 1990 after it peaked at 11.9% in 1984.<sup>xv</sup> It is also worthy to note that 'Brexit' is a vindication of Thatcher's Eurosceptic position which contributed badly to the irreversible discord within her cabinet.

## THE DOWNSIDES OF THATCHER'S ADMINISTRATION

With all the popular capitalism, big bang, lean public spending, diplomatic prowess etcetera, several issues beg for objective answers as it concerns Thatcher years. Were there negatives? What were the salient consequences of the policies of Thatcher administration? How did the people of Britain grapple with the gains and losses of the policies? Did Thatcher really change anything? Did Thatcher implement any strategic policy that was not expected? Did Thatcher change the people or did the people force Thatcher's hands? Most of Thatcher's policies turned out to be unpleasant in the long run. Also, many of the issues of discuss in Thatcher administration were not unique to it. People are naturally dynamic and Thatcher's government was a 'government of coincidence' in the sense that Thatcher came to power when there were similar global trends and the people were already in the process of transformation. If the British people did not want some of these reforms, they would have 'revolted'. As this study observes, Thatcher was actually a 'child of the people's transformation'.

The most impactful programme of the Thatcher administration was probably the house owner occupier scheme. The Conservative Party had committed itself to introducing a Right to Buy before Margaret Thatcher became Party leader. It was largely in place in 1974, but did not prove



an asset in the two general elections that year because of high interest and mortgage repayment rates.<sup>xvi</sup> As commendable as it may seem, the programme led to a gradual drop in the availability of social housing thereby causing a long queue on the housing list. This was disastrous considering that Britain was a fast-growing population in the eighties. Another adverse effect of the housing scheme was the outrageous increase in the cost of houses. The price of a house which was less than £20,000 in 1979 tripled to about £59,700 by 1990. When this is considered side by side with the prevailing inflation and unemployment of that period, it means only very few well to do people will be able to afford houses. In effect, she engineered a huge switch of govt subsidy from the poor to the better-off. Decline in the stock of council houses and explosion in house prices in the late 1980s led to appearance of homeless people sleeping on the streets of London and other major cities. Thatcher closed her eyes to it.<sup>xvii</sup>

Some of the features of Thatcher government were steep increase in poverty and a sharp polarisation of Britain. There were disparities in household income. Between 1979 and 1990, the upper class enjoyed a whopping 68 percent increase in earning, the middle class had 26 percent increase while the lower class had a paltry increase of just 4.6 percent.<sup>xviii</sup> Although, the standard for measuring poverty varies at separate times, the international standard during Thatcher government showed that the number of children under poverty went up by over 100 percent from 1.7 million in 1979 to 3.3 million in 1990. And 17 percent (about 8 million) of the entire population was living below the poverty line by 1987.<sup>xix</sup> Thatcher which is controversially associated with the demise of the mining industry of Britain (this will be expatiated later in this study) saw the decline in the number of coal miners from 230,000 in 1979 to under 57,000 in 1990. There was polarisation of prospering South and declining North, between well-off suburbs and market towns, and decaying and conflict ridden urban centres. That is an urban habitation of both the poor and yuppies. The report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on the Urban Priority Areas, Faith in the City, painted Britain in 1986 as 'an elaborate picture of inequality': 'In the foreground appear the shabby streets, neglected houses and sordid demolition sites of the inner city, in the middle the vandalised public spaces of the peripheral estates, while in the background are the green and wooded suburbs of middle Britain.' As for the city, the report went on, it remained 'part magnet to the disadvantaged newcomer, part prison to the unskilled, the disabled, and the dispirited, part springboard for the ambitious and vigorous who find escape to suburbia, and part protection for enclaves of affluence. In other words, the inner city was a paradigm of Thatcherite Britain.<sup>xx</sup> It was a case of Disraeli's 'Two Nations' i.e 'Privileged' and 'People'. Inequality of income and living standards between different areas, it is the emergence of two entirely different socio-economic systems. In the rest of the nation there is a market economy. On the outer estates, there is a local economy which subsists entirely on state provision and administrative fiat.<sup>xxi</sup> Poverty soared under Thatcher.

“The poll tax was the most spectacular failure of Mrs Thatcher's premiership and it cost her the Premiership job”<sup>xxii</sup>. The Local Government had always enjoyed the patronage of Conservative government but that was not to be during Thatcher era. Thatcher felt LGA was wasteful, unaccountable and ultimately undesirable. In 1987, the Thatcher government came up with a Local Government Bill which prevented local authorities from levying rates on property, replacing local government funding with a combination of a nationwide tax on business, a central government grant and the 'community service charge', also known as the poll tax. This tax affected mostly the middle-class people which made up majority of the voters. Local

governments could increase the charge, but this would penalise the least affluent electors, so effectively their hands were tied. But because the Central government continually withdrew funding of Local governments, some workers were levied up to 20 percent of their earnings. In response, the people took to the street demonstrating against the tax in what was regarded as ‘the Middle-class revolt’. Of all Mrs Thatcher’s confrontation with the institutions, that which she had fought with local govt has been the most prolonged and is arguably the most significant of all. The Prime Minister lamented the effect of this when she said, “I was really worried, what hurt me was that the very people who had always looked to me for protection from exploitation by the socialist state were those who were suffering most”.<sup>xxiii</sup> With the poll tax, Thatcher lost her ‘bridegrooms’- the Middle class, making her vulnerable and terribly unpopular as the people’s income reduced coupled with the stifling inflation.

But how much of these impacts both positive and negative were deliberately caused by the Thatcher government? That is, how unique were the policies? As Macmillan said, “governments are subject to the pressure of events”.<sup>xxiv</sup> Margaret Thatcher has always been presented by Thatcherites as a revolutionary leader but she was not actually a radical but a cautious pragmatist. A vivid example was her believe that ‘there is no such thing as society’ but she later claimed that ‘man is a social creature, born into a family, clan, community, nation, brought up in mutual dependence. None of us can opt out of the society of which we are a part’. Marwick opines that accidents and contingencies of politics and the vagaries of personality are real. Most of the important characteristics of the 1980s had little to do with political choices or events. Venin vilified Thatcher for having no success except the storming of the Iranian embassy in the first three years of her government. Concluding that Thatcher was lucky not to have been forced into early elections when SDP popularity was high.<sup>xxv</sup> Marwick and Jenkins conclude that Thatcher was re-elected in 1983 because of a divided opposition which lacked senior, experienced and formidable figures then. The popular claim that the Falkland war was a significant factor in re-electing Thatcher was rubbished by the election results of 1983. British elections are won at the margins and do not reflect popular voting preferences. e.g 1983 election, voter turnout down to 72.7%, Conservative won nearly 700,000 less than the 1979 figure, which represented 1.5% to overall 42.4% despite the Falklands factor. The June 8th, 2017 election validates the opinion that British electorates are not significantly influenced by foreign affairs and popularity. The people has left Prime Minister Theresa May hanging with a minority government despite her overwhelming popular rating before the elections which was down to her firm and hard Brexit stands.

## THE REAL CATALYSTS FOR THE CHANGES

Economically, it is fair to say that inflation and unemployment under Thatcher were caused by the world trade recession in the mid-1970s. Inflation and unemployment had always been national issues right from the era of Wilson. The mining industry had started decreasing drastically since the 1960s thereby increasing unemployment particularly in Northern Britain. 1982 global trade revival especially renewed growth in American economy was a critical factor in the growing sense of well-being of the world (Britain inclusive) in later 1980s. Favourable to Thatcher was Large scale British extraction of oil began at almost the same time that the world oil price, driven by the Iranian revolution of 1979, reached a new height. In the long term, North

Sea oil obviously helped the government, if only by giving it additional resources to tax. Pounds sterling as petrocurrency, government control of money supply and the weakened dollar due to deficit spending by Reagan helped to boost the pound.<sup>xxvi</sup> This period also witnessed the global 'third industrial revolution', information technology (IT). Information technology transformed the world and it was instrumental in executing the privatisation of Britain and creation of about 3 million small scale businesses especially in the service sector. It was a spectacular success that made London compete favourably with emerging computerised global economy e.g Tokyo, Frankfurt and New York.<sup>xxvii</sup> These obviously were not down to Thatcher's policies. And as Seldon and Collings conclude, with advancement in technology and industrial change, the unequal society under Thatcher would still have occurred.

Margaret Thatcher is usually credited with bringing the Trade Unions to their knees. While it is fair to say Thatcher contributed, but "Trade union declined because of declining demand for coal, competition from oil, nuclear energy, and more cheaply mined coal imported from abroad" which had started decades from her era.<sup>xxviii</sup> She was aided by Union unpopularity, heightened above all by their role in the 'winter of discontent' (1978 - 1979), and by widespread beliefs, encouraged by an unsympathetic press, that trade unions had become over powerful and insufficiently accountable.<sup>xxix</sup> She tried to abolish 'welfare statism' by reforming NHS and substituting 'dependency culture' with "self-help" culture as child benefit was frozen yearly. Whereas the longstanding rate of state increased on welfare spending slowed, there was still a real rise in public spending on welfare by a fifth, with health and social security a third higher in real term in 1990 than in 1979. Thatcher herself exclaimed that 'the NHS is safe in our hands'. Moreover, the "quantitative attack on the welfare state was initiated by the Wilson/Callaghan administration in 1975".<sup>xxx</sup> Therefore, there has been no Thatcherite transformation of attitudes or behaviour among the British people. In fact, Polls consistently showed that the British people were suspicious of free-market values and sympathetic to notions of communal solidarity - particularly as expressed in the welfare state.<sup>xxxi</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This research has been able to examine the policies of Margaret Thatcher's government and concludes that changing the public mindset from welfarism to enterprise failed. Also, she cannot be described as a constitutional reformer; The House of Lords and The Monarchy remained. Conservative Party 's organisation was largely unchanged by her. She started with 'Wet' opponents and was succeeded by 'Wet'. She had far greater impact on the structure of the Liberal and Labour Parties than on the Tories. Liberal became Liberal Democrats and socialism was relegated by Labour as reluctantly admitted by Neil Kinnock, the Labour leader during Thatcher's government.<sup>xxxii</sup> She developed some presidential traits, becoming autocratic and sidelining her cabinet members. State became less respectful of civil liberties, police more repressive especially of ethnic minority and notified crime increased by 60% between 1979 and 1990 despite police brutality.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Although her achievement of been the first female Prime Minister motivated women generally in all works of life, but despite her 'Lady-Champion' outlook, Thatcher did virtually nothing to encourage women in politics. In her over eleven years of reign, she appointed only one female cabinet minister despite having over forty female MPs.

As much as Thatcher tried to promote or revive the 'Victorian values' of morality, cohabitation without marriage, premarital sex, abortion, divorce and homosexuality increased.

During Thatcher time, Trade unions modernised: more accountable and cooperative with business, British industry became more outward - looking and competitive internationally, higher quality of management "more people were encouraged to become 'stakeholders' in the country's wealth, most importantly through house purchase and ownership of shares".<sup>xxxiv</sup> Diplomatically, United Kingdom became more regarded even though as appendage to the US. While Thatcherites see the Thatcher era as a revolution against the establishment,<sup>xxxv</sup> the increasing opportunities for working mothers, the rise in teenage pregnancy, the decline of traditional manufacturing industry and the rise of service sector – all these developments were in progress before Thatcher took office, and operated autonomously upon British society.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Today's levels of economic inequality are roughly the same as those when Thatcher departed. The number of people classed as long-term sick, and relying consequently on the state's support, remains the same.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Although, Campbell opines that "but for better or worse the Britain we live in today – and which our children will live in for decades to come – was forged in the 1980s",<sup>xxxviii</sup> Britain remains not only 'Two Nations' but in two minds, torn between the old welfare ideal and the new enterprise ideal, rejecting socialism but not yet at moral ease with total capitalism.<sup>xxxix</sup> Essentially, the people are dynamic in the sense that they determine what they want, how they want it and when they want it. politics is usually about what people want, what they want for themselves and their families, what they want for their society and their country. Therefore, Thatcher or no Thatcher, the British people would still have made those choices in the 1980s. Although the privatisation and deregulation policies of Thatcher advanced the economy of Britain, but these policies and others discussed coupled with their implementation, left most British people worse off. The adverse effects of these policies are still being felt today in Britain.

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<sup>xxxv</sup> Thatcherites like Bernard Ingham, Cecil Parkinson, Nigel Lawson, Madsen Pirie, Janet Daley and Kenneth Baker in Margaret Thatcher...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VlcjyNwA10&t=1764s> (Accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> May, 2017)

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Jackson and Saunders, *Making Thatcher's...* p. 16 and 135

<sup>xxxvii</sup> The Thatcher Effect... <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/12/thatcher-britain> (Accessed on 15th May 2017)

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Campbell, *Margaret...* p. 801

<sup>xxxix</sup> Jenkins, *Mrs Thatcher's...* p. 378

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