

Margaret Thatcher

By Kimberly Gomoll

Personal Reflection

What I have learned in researching Margaret Thatcher is her thoughts, political patterns, economic, political and social concerns are extremely complex. I have an understanding about a character that is almost myth, complete with school children rhymes and varying opinions from scholars, friends, family, stories and even art exhibits at the Tate Modern. She has generated so many opinions that there is no clear way to pin her down and say "this is Margaret Thatcher." Rather, the research has generated more questions: questions that I believe would be fascinating to look for the answers.

Biography

Margaret Thatcher and the politics of Thatcherism are complex creatures. Chemist, mother, wife, patent solicitor, politician and leader of the Tory party and first woman Prime Minister, Thatcher managed to break class, education and gender barriers. She came to age during the outbreak of World War II, was strongly influenced to have the confidence and knowledge to *think* independent of culture, media and politics by her father Alf Roberts, a self educated man, Methodist lay-preacher, shop keeper and Mayor of Grantham. A local grammar school and Somerville Oxford¹ educated daughter of a specialist grocer who grew up above the shop with her political active parents and her older sister, Margaret Thatcher has all the makings of a person ready to change on a national and political scale gender, class and social boundaries.

Margaret Thatcher may possibly be considered one of the most powerful women in Britain from 1979 until 1990. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative or Tory Party which became known as Thatcherism during the 1980's was a political leader and politics that the British public loved to hate. She may have been a women working in a male dominated world of party politics, but first and foremost she was an intellectual, sharp politician who was determined to keep socialism out of England and reclaim economic stability for Great Britain.

Margaret Thatcher is a Conservative, and during her years as Prime Minister (1979 - 1990) she focused on conserving what she believed to be key principles of British society and politics. World War II shaped her opinion that the kind of life that the people of Grantham had lived before the war was a decent and wholesome one, and its values were shaped by the community rather than government.² Her efforts, and to the greater extent success, as Prime Minister in competitive business solutions and de-regulation³ of national government services shows evidence of this faith in community.

¹ Completed a 2:1 degree in Chemistry 2:1.

² *The Path to Power*, Page 31.

³ *The Thatcher Effect*, Page 44

The consequence in these policies have weakened the effectiveness of social benefits. This effected the National Health Service (NHS), the emergence of Local Education Authorities (LEA's), social housing, unemployment benefits, child support agencies and other social service, shows the trend of Thatcher to decentralize benefits and place accountability back within the community. The somewhat paradoxical experience of the 1980s has been that Mrs Thatcher is the most effective manager the nationalized industries have ever had.⁴

In Margaret Thatcher's first year as Prime Minister the world's oil prices skyrocketed and the value of the British pound depreciated. The result of these two simultaneously economic crisis was that the first three years as Prime Minister, Thatcher, and, subsequently the Conservatives, were determined to stabilize the economy before Britain entered a recession. The concept that public expenditure was the cause of the difficulties meant that long-term solutions had to be found. In 1970 five million people within the United Kingdom had been below the national poverty line.⁵ 1980 was an exceptionally hard year on Britain, and especially on the working class. There were strikes, mass lay-offs and the closure of many factories. Within the span of one year unemployment had risen by 836,000.⁶ Thatcher's reaction to the economic crisis that Britain was faced with was the first trade union bill with the United Kingdom that *restricted picketing and defined tighter limits for the closed shop*.⁷

During the early 1980's the government was establishing alternative power sources to its previous reliance on fuel. When a dramatic supply and demand shift occurred, many miners and previously suppliers of Britain's key power source were concerned about the stability of their jobs and income. In 1984, the coal miners went on an eleven month strike. To Margaret Thatcher, a union strike was a threat of socialism, and was necessary to stamp out. The strike proved a costly endeavor for the government. However, once the Conservative Party had forcefully ended the strike *the government was able to demonstrate* to the whole Labour movement that nothing was to be allowed to stand in the way of restructuring industries to make them profitable and internationally competitive.⁸

Margaret Thatcher believed forty years after her marriage to Denis Thatcher that her *decision to say "yes"* was one of the best decisions she ever made.⁹ As a mother and wife she was very lucky in her personal life, and, perhaps even could be termed *old-fashioned* by her contemporaries in ideas about family and the household. She did not advocate for serial monogamous families to receive social benefits. Nor was she in favor that unmarried stable couples or same sex couples be recognized. But she was most adamantly opposed to the single never married mother. She viewed this emergence of single mother's in this class as an enormous social and economic

⁴ *The Thatcher Effect*, Page 42.

⁵ *Mrs Thatcher's Revolution*, Page 13.

⁶ *The Free Economy and the Strong State*, Page 110.

⁷ *The Free Economy and the Strong State*, Page 112.

⁸ *The Free Economy and the Strong State*, Page 125.

⁹ *The Path to Power*, Page 67.

problem. The social housing system in Britain is organized in a manner that priority for state-subsidized housing is given to single mothers. There is a shift in patterns of single parenthood and Margaret Thatcher believed¹⁰ that many females were becoming mothers for the sole purpose of acquiring housing. Thus, instead of marriage being a financially sound decision for a young working class woman, Margaret Thatcher believed that being a single mother who can go on benefits and receive housing is a very practical career choice. Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, believed that Child Benefit¹¹ needed to be restructured to be a fair system. However, this is a continual quandary. To make child benefit fair for parents, yet so that children do not suffer due to their parents means or interests. Thatcher's policy sought to encourage *traditional* families by increasing their tax cuts.

It is plausible to view the Thatcher legacy as one that restricted the rights of gender, women, sexuality, parenthood, unions and the working class. It was a call to return to the world of her childhood and place responsibility in the individual rather than the state. Thatcher looked upon the greater masses of England as a society that had to be guided and taught how to be responsible for themselves. The manner which she believed she could best manifest this goal, was to restrict state aid in every sector from allowing doctors in the NHS¹² to shop around for pharmaceutical companies, creating LEA's¹³ whom took on the administrative responsibilities for the running and organization of education service from primary to higher education, a strong decrease in the power of unions to organize and protect workers rights

Margaret Thatcher was a woman who had every chance to shape British policy for more constructive social reform, to improve the conditions of workers, women, children and the disadvantaged. She showed the world that she was sharp, on the ball, and an organized political agenda. By breaking the gender barrier in politics, she has left a bargaining room for other women Members of Parliament to become Prime Minister. She reshaped the economic crisis and found a solution for the economic downturn. The long term effect of policies that came into being during her time as head of the cabinet is still being discovered. She has left the world for food for thought about the myth of a woman's rule. But, my goodness, she had to be a Conservative!

Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES

Thatcher, Margaret, *The Path to Power*, Harper Collins Publishers Inc., New York, 1995.

Thatcher, Margaret, *Speeches to the Conservative Party Conference 1975 - 1988*, Pardo Blacker Ltd, London, 1989.

¹⁰ Many other members of British society shared this opinion.

¹¹ Social support for children in which their parent(s) were unemployed or below the national poverty line.

¹² National Health Service

¹³ Local Education Authorities

SECONDARY SOURCES

Anonymous, *Women's History Timeline*, www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/timeline, BBC, London, 2002.

Anonymous, *British History Timeline*, www.britishempire.co.uk/timeline.

Brock, George & Wapshott, Nicholas, *Thatcher*, Macdonald & Co. Ltd., London, 1983.

Collings, Daniel & Seldon, Anthony, *Britain Under Thatcher*, Pearson Education Limited, 2000.

Gamble, Andrew, *The Free Economy and the Strong State*, Macmillan Press Ltd, Houndmills, Harlow, 1988.

Jenkins, Peter, *Mrs Thatcher's Revolution: The Ending of the Socialist Era*, Jonathan Cape Ltd, London, 1987.

Kavanagh, Dennis, *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990.

Reitan, Earl A., *The Thatcher Revolution: Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair and the Transformation of Modern Britain, 1979 - 2001*, Rowan & Littlefield Publishers Inc., Maryland, 2003.

Sharp, Paul, *Thatcher's Diplomacy: The Revival of British Foreign Policy*, Macmillan Press Ltd, Houndmills, 1997.

Sloman, Anne & Young, Hugo, *The Thatcher Phenomenon*, BBC, London, 1986.

Timeline

1925 Margaret Roberts (later Margaret Thatcher) was born in Grantham, Northamptonshire.

1926 General Strike, Queen Elizabeth II born

1928 Equal Franchise Act - women over 21 given the vote

1930 Margaret Robert's begins attending Huntingtower Road Primary School

1931 Great Depression

1936 Margaret Robert's begins attending Kesteven and Grantham Girls' School

1937 Chamberlain Prime Minister

1938 September Munich Agreement. IRA bombings in England, British Manufacturing and Research Company (town munitions factories) came to Grantham

1939 May Official WWII Recruiting Campaign in Grantham was opposed by many Methodists, Britain enters WWII

1941 January Bombs fell in Grantham & 22 people died in the raid

1943 Margaret begins Oxford, joined the Oxford University Conservative Association (OUCA)

1944 D-Day

1945 Margaret as an officer for OUCA becomes involved with the general election campaign in Oxford

1945-46 Margaret Robert's Father Mayor of Grantham

1946 Robert's becomes Treasure of OUCA; later President, attends the Federation of University Conservative and Unionist Association (FUCUA)

1947 Margaret graduates in Chemistry, recognizes that she wishes to become an MP

1949 31 January Margaret becomes the Conservative Candidate for Dartford MP.

1950 Margaret loses election, begins studying law, marries Denis Thatcher and becomes Margaret Thatcher

1952 Labor won council elections in Grantham voted Margaret Robert's father out of his seat

1953 Margaret Thatcher gives birth to Carol & Mark

1955 Conservative Government formed 58 majority

1956 Suez Crisis, Six Day War, Hungarian Revolution and Soviet Reaction

1958 Margaret Thatcher becomes the Conservative candidate for Finchley in North London

1973 Britain joins European Community

1979 Margaret Thatcher Prime Minister

1981 Social Democratic Party formed a split in the Labor Party

1982 Falkland War

1983 US Cruise missiles installed

1984 Miners' strike, Equal Pay Act

1985 Anglo-Irish agreement, Britain isolated in Commonwealth over South African sanctions

1986 Peak Unemployment of 3.5m

1988 Liberal Democrats formed

1990 Margaret Thatcher resigns as PM and John Major becomes PM