

# Causes of the development of thatcherism



## **Introduction**

Britain has for a very long time been regarded as a model stable democracy.

[1] There was great economic and social progress and a remarkable increase in the living standard and a rate of near full employment in the post war years in Britain. [2] However, in the mid 1970's a lot of factors including high inflation, low economic growth, trade union power and weak government all led to a down turn in the economy and this greatly affected the standard of living in Britain. [3] This was referred to as a crisis of social democracy by the Conservative party. The right wing called for a simultaneous restoration of government authority and reduction in the size of the public sector. [4] The economic recession and slow economic growth greatly undermined popular support for the welfare state; this in no small measure helped the Conservative party to win the general elections in 1979 and Margaret Thatcher became the British prime minister. According to Hugo Young, the election of Margaret Thatcher as the prime minister earmarked ' the beginning of a period which could later be defined as an era, in which an ordinary politician labouring under many disadvantages, grew in to an international figure who did extra ordinary things to her country'. [5]

This essay will look at Thatcherism and if it embodies a consistent body of political principles or if it was essentially an opportunistic response to events.

## **What is Thatcherism?**

The term Thatcherism is very difficult to analyse. Some commentators have described it as, ' a reasonable coherent and comprehensive concept of control for the restoration of bourgeois rule and bourgeois hegemony in the

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circumstances of the 1980's...the restoration of the rule of the state in the economy and finally a re-ordering of the balance of power between different factions of capital in Britain'. [6] Some commentators have also described Thatcherism as an experiment by Margaret Thatcher which was naïve in social engineering, through which it hoped that the behaviour and attitudes of the unions would change and that life would then be easier for entrepreneurs in Britain. [7]

Thatcherism is essentially an instinct, a sense of moral values and an approach to leadership rather than an ideology. [8] Thatcherism is the body of rules and values that are ascribed to British first female Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Margaret Thatcher was born on October 13 1925 in Grantham, Lincolnshire. She was born to be a politician. [9] Her lineage and formation gave her few possibilities. [10] Margaret Thatcher came from a political family that handed down the tradition of political commitment from one generation to the next. [11]

She went to Oxford University in 1943 to study chemistry. In the year she went to Oxford, she immediately joined the Conservative Association, OUCA. [12] She enrolled as a part-time student at the Council for Legal Education and passed her Bar exams in December 1953.

Margaret Thatcher became the leader of the Conservative party in February 1975. She was a formidable leader. She was said to always set out to guide a discussion from the front leaving the others to challenge her. [13] She made it <https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-the-development-of-thatcherism/>

clear from the moment she became the leader of the Conservative party, her determination to create conditions for the revival of Britain. <sup>[14]</sup> She became the prime minister in May 1979.

The 1979 election produced a historic victory for the Conservative party. It was the beginning of an era in which an ordinary politician (Margaret Thatcher) labouring under many disadvantages grew in to an international figure and carried out some extra ordinary reforms in Britain. <sup>[15]</sup>

Margaret Thatcher described her self as a conviction politician. She produces stronger reaction than any other British political leader in modern times.

People either love her or they loath her. <sup>[16]</sup> Thatcher sought to transform Britain's way of life. She tried to create a new spirit of self reliance and enterprise in the British people. <sup>[17]</sup> She saw her self as a strong determined leader whose aim was to allow market forces to shape the development of British industry to the widest possible extent through policies such as privatization. <sup>[18]</sup> The term neo-liberal has frequently been used to define Thatcherite politics. <sup>[19]</sup> Thatcher's conservative policies were different to the neo-Keynesianism of the Macmillan Conservatives. <sup>[20]</sup>

Theorists sometimes refer Thatcherism to the style of Mrs Margaret Thatcher's leadership, which is a no nonsense style of leadership and hostility to premium placed on gaining agreement by consensus. <sup>[21]</sup>

Thatcherism is also referred to a strong state and a government strong enough to resist the selfish claims of pressure groups, traditional moral values and a government that believes in reducing state intervention and

privatization. [22] Thatcherism is also referred to the clamp down on trade union militancy and high inflation that characterised Britain in the mid 1970's. [23]

Thatcherism is not only a set of policies but also involves a set of politically effective discursive strategies. [24] It is obvious that many ideologies of Thatcherism already existed in various forms of popular common sense, however they were inchoate and it was through Thatcher's own self-image and pronouncements that these loose set of ideologies were formed in to ' a popular, chauvinistic and morally righteous discourse with a definite set of referents and clear political implications'. [25]

Thatcherism was achieved through a subtle combination of two forms of populism. [26] The first being an antagonistic discourse calling upon the British people to mobilise against the social democratic state and the second being, a more neutral concept of a consensual and, non-antagonistic people which buries their identity and antagonisms. [27] This is coupled with the highly condensed and complex national popular identity which Thatcherism invoked and the way the ideology looked at complex economic considerations and subsumed them under simple moral ideas. [28]

One of the most common interpretations, especially during the first Thatcher spell in government, is the treatment of Thatcherism as a monetarist economic experiment. [29] Many commentators have tried to find the significance of Thatcherism in its economic policies and the economic interest it serves. [30]

Theorists have sought to explain Thatcherism in one of three ways.

Thatcherism have been explained in relatively instrumentalist terms, through its insistence on economic interests being the corner stone of its ideology; in terms of the functional relationship between these economic policies and the ideology and interests of specific economic interests; or in terms of the autonomous propagation by the Thatcher regime of policies which happen to favour the needs of these economic interests. [31]

Thatcherism in today's political rhetoric does not refer to an approach to economic goals but rather to a right wing Conservative who questions Keynesian policies and is a supporter of the free market on other policies. [32]

Thatcherism in my view does not embody a consistent political principle. It basically embodies the beliefs and policies of Margaret Thatcher on how to jump start the British economy, re-establish the power and authority of the state, dislodge the increasing influence and powers of the trade unions, cut down inflation and get people back to work.

The concept Thatcherism appears to have been used loosely and applied too widely. Thatcherism appears to have no consistent set of policies and which can be used to define its nature. Thatcherism is a broad complex of ideologies whose genealogy, unity and development are far from easy to analyse. [33]

## Conclusion

Love her or hate her, Margaret Thatcher left an indelible mark in the annals of British politics. Many years since she left office, debate still rages on whether Thatcherism is a consistent body of political principles or was it essentially an opportunistic response to events.

A lot of commentators do not believe that Thatcherism really exist but if it does, then perhaps only as a misleading term of political discourse. <sup>[34]</sup> Paul Hirst wrote, ' Thatcherism is a myth that tries to justify Conservative victory by ascribing it to fundamental social and attitudinal changes, rather than to the default of any credible alternative political force. It is a myth propagated by the left ...enthusiastically taken up sections of the mainstream quality media and given wide coverage in the mid-1980s. <sup>[35]</sup>

Thatcher no doubt, made most of the advantages the 1980s had given to her. <sup>[36]</sup> Circumstances helped some of the ideas of Mrs Thatcher to gain prominence and acceptance. The economy was in recession when she took over power. There was rampant inflation by the mid -1970s, industrial disruption was the order of the day, and trade unions were getting more militant and their influence was growing rapidly. Strikes were rampant, cumulating in the 1979 Winter of Discontent strikes.

Keynesian techniques of economic management did not appear to have any answer to the super inflation. <sup>[37]</sup> The economy slowed down and economic growth became stagnated. This greatly affected the purchasing power of the sterling. Coupled with that, many people lost their jobs as a lot of companies closed down; particularly manufacturing companies. The morale and mood of <https://assignbuster.com/causes-of-the-development-of-thatcherism/>

the nation was low. The government were unable to finance a lot of state projects, particularly social welfare. Also in other western countries, governments became more prudent and were spending less. Public expenditure was curtailed, money supply was being controlled and free market forces and expanding the role of the market was gaining greater acceptance. <sup>[38]</sup> Further more, partly in response to pressure from the IMF, the labour government made huge cuts in public spending, introduced monetary targets and continued with incomes policy. <sup>[39]</sup>

Economic regeneration was Mrs Thatcher's major electoral commitment and she pledged to cut the dole queues. <sup>[40]</sup>

The defeat of the labour government in the 1979 general election was due mainly to its own failures in government and had little to do with the opposition. <sup>[41]</sup>

Thatcher then came along and challenged many established beliefs and interests. She brought about a new way of doing things. She hardly compromised on many of her deeply held political beliefs and principles. She was determined to reduce the increase in money supply so that inflation would be squeezed out of the system. She had to abandon formal income policies and 'deals' between government, employees and trade unions as one way of fighting inflation. <sup>[42]</sup> She also sought to reduce public sector spending and encourage a free market orientated economy. This meant selling state- owned industries and services to private individuals, removing stifling regulations on business and encouraging the sale of council houses.



[43] These policies were effectively made to jump start the economy and reduce inflation. Lower public spending will lead to tax cuts and this will encourage economic growth that will in turn lead to creation of more jobs.

[44]

Thatcher also sought to encourage responsible trade union practices. She did not ascribe to the militancy and growing influence of trade unions. She wanted to introduce reforms that will free the labour market and remove some of the immunities that trade unions have long enjoyed under common law. [45]

Thatcher wanted to restore the authority of government once again. This she intended to achieve by resisting the damaging claims of interest groups as well providing significant increases in resources for the armed forces and the police. [46]

Margaret Thatcher, no doubt left an indelible mark on the annals of British history. She was a very determined lady who believed in her own convictions and vividly pursued them.

Finally, I feel that Thatcherism is too wide and does not embody a consistent body of principles. I also feel that circumstances prevailing at the time Thatcher came in to power helped some of her policies and ideas to gain prominence and acceptance. However, I do not subscribe to the notion that Thatcherism is an opportunistic response to events. Mrs Thatcher from the day she was made the leader of the Conservative party made clear her determination to create conditions for the revival of Britain. Thatcherism as a

whole embodies values and principles that Mrs Thatcher felt would cure Britain of all the ills that afflicted her at that time, although the concept was very complex and had no consistent principles.

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**Footnotes**

[1] Kavanagh (1990) p. 1

[2] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 1

[3] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 1

[4] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 1

[5] Young, H (1989) p. 135

[6] Overbeck (1989) cited in Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley, Ling (1988) p. 1

[7] Keegan (1984) Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley, Ling (1988) p. 1

[8] Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley, Ling (1988) p. 1

[9] Young, H (ibid) p. 2-3

[10] Young, H (ibid) p. 2-3

[11] Young, H (ibid) p. 3 -4

[12] Young, H (ibid) p. 17

[13] Cole, J. C (1987) p. 43

[14] Cooke, A. B (1981) p. vii

[15] Young, H (1989) p. 137

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[16] Cole, J (1987) p. 1

[17] Ingle (1987) p. 42

[18] Ingle, S (ibid) p. 42

[19] Ibid p. 42

[20] ibid p. 42

[21] Kavanagh, D (1990) p. 9

[22] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 9

[23] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 9-10

[24] O'Shea, A (1984) p. 35

[25] O'Shea, A (ibid) p. 35

[26] O'Shea, A (ibid) p. 22

[27] O'Shea, A (ibid) p. 21-23

[28] O'Shea, A (ibid) p. 30-31

[29] Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley & Ling (1988) p. 24

[30] Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley & Ling (ibid) p. 29

[31] Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley & Ling (1988) p. 29

[32] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 10

[33] Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley & Ling (1988) p. 12

[34] Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley & Ling (1988) p. 24

[35] Hirst, P ( 1989 ) After Thatcher, William Collins, p. 11

[36] Hirst, P ( 1989 ) p. 16

[37] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 12

[38] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 12

[39] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 12

[40] Young, H (1989) p. 140

[41] Hirst, P ( 1989 ) p. 17

[42] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 11-13

[43] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 13

[44] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 13

[45] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 13

[46] Kavanagh (ibid) p. 13