

What impact did the
thatcherite
governments have on
active citizenship in
britain...



For the purposes of this essay the term Thatcherite government will refer to both the Margaret Thatcher government 1979-1990, and the John Major government 1990-1997. In looking at the impact of eighteen years of Thatcherite governments it is important first to look at the role of active citizens, if there was any, before 1979 as well as during the period of Tory control. I will also look at the changes in legislation and how this affected the role of the citizen and what sections of society benefited from the Thatcherite ideal of "Rolling back the state" in other words reducing government intervention in business and every day life.

This approach to government has been referred to by some commentators, such as Hayek and Nozick as Neo-Liberalism. In the post-war period 1945-1979 saw the development in Britain of not only civil and legal rights, enshrined and protected in law, but also social rights. Soldiers returning from service in the Second World War felt that the nation owed them a debt or reward for the duties they had performed for the state. Indeed the birth of the National Health Service following the Beverage Report in 1948 and the widening of the welfare state beyond the simple state pension gave citizens more social rights than ever before.

The access to free medical care, education and benefits such as sickness benefit, child benefit all expanded these rights for all citizens and was funded from the introduction of the National Insurance scheme or "Stamp" as it was known. This in essence meant that citizens felt that although they did pay an amount towards these benefits through National Insurance it provided a safety-net for all. During the period immediately after the war until the late 1960's Britain enjoyed considerable economic success and

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growth and as a result successive governments could afford to retain and improve the state welfare provision.

At the same time during this period Trade Unions and other groups in gained considerable influence over employers and government. However from the late 1960's through to the late 1970's Britains economy suffered from successive governments with narrow majorities of only a few seats in parliament. External factors such as the oil crisis of the early 1970's, when the world oil price rose dramatically in a very short time which led to interest rate rises and inflation rises.

The unions held a series of crippling strikes, in search of above inflation pay rises, and the government introduced a three-day working week and the country suffered power-cuts and no waste collections during what became known as the winter of discontent. The final nail in the coffin for the then Labour led government of James Callaghan was to approach the IMF (International Monetary Fund) to bale out Britains failing economy. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher came to power with a parliamentary majority of 43 seats (1), on the back of a campaign fought on Labour's failings in the running of the economy and rising unemployment.

The 48 sheet poster sites which proclaimed " Labour isn't working" and the promise of raising the state pension in line with inflation and " protecting the NHS"(2) but making no commitments in other areas all helped in the Tories gaining office. From 1979 onwards however a major problem facing the government was the spiralling cost of welfare benefits, such as sickness and unemployment benefits, caused by increasing levels of unemployment and

thus in Thatcherite eyes passive rather than active citizenship. In essence this was seen as those who expect the state to provide for no effort and those who work and provide for themselves.

The government was desperate to reduce the cost of paying these benefits and by various means attempted to reduce the cost of the welfare state. One method by which it was hoped this could be achieved was to raise benefits at a level below inflation (3). However this plan was flawed as unemployment levels kept rising so the amount of housing, unemployment and other benefits rocketed. The Thatcherite government attempted to de-regulate capitalism rather than stick to the idea of a planned economy with state intervention where necessary, a model which had been followed by both Labour and Conservative governments since the war.

The Thatcher government set itself five main tasks: 1. To restore the health of economic and social life. 2. To restore incentives. 3. To uphold Parliament and the rule of law. 4. To support family life. 5. To strengthen Britains defences. (4) This again was an attempt to stop citizens from becoming state dependent and more self-reliant. In fairness the incentives introduced to allow citizens to spend their money as they saw fit did benefit certain groups of the population, mainly those in work and who owned property.

The introduction of tax cuts from 33p in the pound to 30p in 1979 and further cuts in successive parliaments did increase the spending ability of those in employment. The right to buy scheme for council properties also had an empowering effect on many citizens who had previously been excluded from property ownership. This it was hoped by the government

would also encourage hard work by individuals to generate the income needed to buy a house and thus generate increased productivity and wealth for the nation as a whole.

Equally the role of the family was seen as central to the fabric of society and tax incentives for families were introduced. Family values were held in high regard as a platform for political success in particular by the Major administration where the rise of the lone parent was attacked and deemed as a further sign of society's moral breakdown. It was said at the time that some Tory MP's took the family so seriously that they had two, a reference to the large amount of sex scandals which dogged the Tories in the late 1980's and early 1990's.

However, although the levels of direct taxation were falling, indirect taxation rose steadily in the form of increased VAT rates, fuel duties, National Insurance contributions and corporation tax. Britains defences were certainly strengthened following a return to power in 1983 and a huge parliamentary majority of 144(5) after the euphoria of the Falklands conflict victory the previous year defence spending rose considerably and included Britains purchase of Cruise Missiles from the USA.

This aside it was in terms of upholding Parliament and the rule of law, which brought some of the biggest changes to citizenship in Britain. Laws introduced during the miners strike preventing secondary picketing, in that other miners were stopped by police from travelling to other parts of the country to support other striking miners at other locations by force, a curb on

their civil liberties. The ban on union membership at GCHQ in Cheltenham and the abolition of the closed shop seriously affected citizens' legal rights.

The introduction of the stop and search laws for the police, or "suss" as it became known alienated sections of ethnic minorities, as it was often young black males who were targeted for this kind of treatment by the police. The right to assembly laws were also changed in the wake of inner-city riots in Brixton and Toxteth in 1981 again limiting the rights of the individual. Far from curbing the rise in crime these new laws actually ended up in criminalising large sections of society. It appeared to many observers at the time that compassion under Thatcherism was an optional extra.

Changes in the way in which the state provided care for the elderly were also made making the provision of care an individual rather than a state responsibility. This also had the effect of denying women certain rights to work and lead an active role in society as the duty of caring for old and infirmed relatives fell to them as well as what was seen as their traditional role as homemakers and mothers. Under Thatcherism there was an almost unstated aim of limiting social and political rights for "unworthy citizens", whilst active citizens were seen as dynamic and self-reliant and obviously not dependent on the state.

This notion of active citizenship was underpinned by the perceived need for shared values and a set of networks of reciprocal obligations and loyalties (6). Douglas Hurd in Tamworth in 1989 stated "... freedom can only flourish within a community where shared values, common loyalties and mutual obligations provide a framework of order and self discipline." (7). Other

Thatcherite policies which affected active citizenship were the privatisation of several previously publicly owned industries such British Telecom, British Gas, British Petroleum, Rover (British Leyland), British Rail and the water and electricity utilities.

These privatisation's themselves in some ways did benefit citizens as the income the sell-offs created was used to pay for further tax cuts, a great idea for those citizens in work. It did however create a wider gap in society between those who could afford to actively take part in the share issues by buying shares with their new tax cuts and those who disenfranchised by the all the sell-offs through their inability to purchase shares and benefit from share ownership.

Douglas Hurd further emphasised this point in the Independent on Sunday in 1989 when he argued, " Modern capitalism has democratised the ownership of property, and we are now witnessing the democratisation of responsible citizenship. " (8) Under the Major administration this concept of active citizenship was taken a step further through the launch of the Citizens Charter. Having being preceded by the 1988 and 1993 Education Acts, the Housing and Local Government Act 1989 and the NHS Community Care Act of 1990 (9).

All these acts attempted to shift the responsibility of government away from Westminster and to the organisations themselves such as LEA's and NHS Trusts. Active involvement in the running of schools through parent governorships and the Local Management of Schools (LMS) and the 1994 Parents Charter which stated, " the parents charter will help you get the best

education for your child. You can do this most successfully as an active partner with the school and its teachers... it is true that discipline begins at home ... This means that parents, relatives and friends have a big responsibility. " (10)

All these measures removed government responsibilities from many aspects of these areas and in some ways reduced the state. However, the regulatory bodies which replaced direct government agencies were even less democratic, and had no demands on them to be responsible to the electorate, namely non-departmental public bodies (NDPB's) or Quango's such as the FEFC or HEFC both of which decide and allocate funding for Further and Higher Education establishments. To show how effective or ineffective they were all public service providers had to provide information on performance, in what have now become league tables.

In education and health care these show statistics such as how well a school does in exams or a hospital in providing care. These performance indicators (PI's) were meant to lead to greater choice for the citizen in where they chose to educate their children or get healthcare. Rather than helping the citizen make an active decision these PI's have succeeded in setting school against school and NHS Trust against NHS Trust to achieve higher ratings by excluding those citizens who may affect there figures from using them.

For example children with learning difficulties do not achieve high grades and some patients may need expensive operations with only a low recovery rate. All this was designed to give the consumer of these services a better level of choice and more social rights but in effect limited it for many. Labour

MP Tony Benn argued that the " Citizens Charter has nothing to do with real rights. It is an attempt to mobilise public opinion against the public services. " (11)

In conclusion the role of the active citizen under eighteen years of Thatcherite government was espoused as the way forward for society. Unfortunately because this was largely based on a trickle down of wealth from above and individual endeavour the ultimate result was to create a society of " haves and have-nots. " Basically wealth from above did not reach down to all of society which means that active citizenship however desirable as an end result became unachievable for many members and groups of society, and thus ultimately elitist by nature.

Thatcherite policies merely paid lip service to actively empowering the citizen in many ways the individual was disenfranchised from politics and society often through circumstances beyond their own control. The major changes to the economy in the 1980's and 1990's saw a shift from a manufacturing based economy to a service based economy. Those without the necessary skills became unemployed and created no wealth for the nation and were thus seen as undesirable as citizens and a drain on resources such as benefits and become second class citizens of a dependent nature.

True Thatcherites believed the state had no duty of care to this group of society effectively creating an underclass of passive citizens. As Ignatieff states " the history of citizenship has been the struggle to make freedom real, not to tie us all in the leading strings of therapeutic good intentions.

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"(12) The future for active citizenship under the New Labour government since 1997 is as yet unclear, although it is clear that many of the Thatcherite policies of the previous governments are unlikely to be reversed.

Re-nationalisation of privatised industries will not happen and the proposed part privatisation of Air Traffic Control is proof of this. Equally the divisiveness of PI's and increased indirect taxation look set to continue. However, the proposed introduction of " Citizenship Studies" into the national curriculum may help the next generation understand the social, civil and political responsibilities citizens are entitled to and how government expects them to play a role in society.

Finally, it can be seen that the Thatcherite view of active citizenship was one that although at the time was meant to empower individuals right to choose, how to spend their money, educate their children and provide for their future failed to do so by excluding many members of the society it was meant to help. It is true to say that Thatcherite governments had a major impact on active citizenship, unfortunately this impact was to the detriment of the majority of citizens they sought to empower.