

# Assess mrs thatcher's impact on british government and politics



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Mrs Thatcher was Prime Minister of Great Britain from the Third of May 1979 until November 22nd 1990. She was the first female and the longest serving Prime Minister of the twentieth century. She brought with her a completely new ideology to base policies upon and a controversial style of leadership leading to nick-names such as ' the Iron lady' and ' Tina' The mere fact that she was in power for eleven years means that there must have been a significant impact on British Government and politics. The reason that Mrs Thatcher can be seen to have had a significant impact on British Politics is because she was elected to power with a set of ideas that were not widely held by anyone else, she then used her power to push forward her personal agenda in the face of resistance from many areas such as public opinion, Whitehall, Cabinet, Parliament and social institutions such as universities and Trades Unions.

Despite this resistance, she managed to pass much of her legislation and have many of her ideas accepted onto the political agenda. To answer this essay I will define Mrs Thatchers' style and show the changes that Mrs Thatcher took after coming to power, I will also discuss some of the areas where Mrs Thatcher had a significant impact and how they relate to her ideology. I will examine public opinion of Mrs Thatcher during her hold of office and why she managed to keep power during the whole of the eighties. I will then compare Britain to the experiences of other Western democracies over the same period, and examine to see what John Major has continued and discarded, and finally, what Labour have incorporated into their policies.

John Benyon argues that Thatcher brought many significant changes during her premiership. Issues such as privatisation are now part of the main

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political agenda. Actors such as the Trades Unions and Local government now are generally accepted as having a diminished role. However public attitude does not appear to have moved away from the collectivist ideas of Keynesianism, this brings up the interesting question that if most people did not agree with her ideas, why was she re-elected twice? Mrs Thatcher is referred to as a conviction politician, she was a political activator (as opposed to a stabiliser or conciliator).

She believed that she knew best both for the country and individuals, it is an absolutist style, " absolutely in favour of one thing, absolutely against another". In 1979 she told Keith Harris of the Observer that her government " must be a conviction government, As Prime Minister I could not waste time having internal arguments. " She believed in hard work, self reliance, self discipline, moral property and patriotism. ' Thatcherism' is a short hand term for the New Right policies and ideological values of Mrs Thatcher.

Thatcherism is not an ideology that can be repeated by anyone else, as it is a style which reflects her manner and approach to British Government. Her use of Prime minister power, with frequent reshuffles, referring to cabinet less often, increasing the use of inner cabinets and committees and energetically interfering in departments increased her authority many times over and led to worries about an ' elected dictatorship' first pondered upon by Lord Hailsham in 1978 Thatcherism broke the previous ethos of the Consensus in terms of the ' central planks' (policy areas where both parties were in broad agreement) and the style of party leaders. Thatcherism attempted to redress the problems that the Consensus period failed to solve, these included Britains' relatively inferior economic performance and the <https://assignbuster.com/assess-mrs-thatchers-impact-on-british-government-and-politics/>

growing welfare state. In the 1970s there was a feeling that the government was not in control of the economy, nationally stagflation (rising inflation and high unemployment together with low growth) was occurring, when this put against excessive wage demands by militant unions, failed incomes policies - firstly for politicising wage increases and secondly for contributing to the Winter of Discontent (1978/79) - Britain could be seen to be ungovernable.

Internationally, the breakdown of the world economy, the oil crisis, the decline of United States hegemony and fordist methods of production meant the world economy was volatile and unpredictable making international trade dangerous. The Labour party (1974 - 1979) initiated a number of changes from the Consensus in their period of power, for example in 1975, Dennis Healey refused to stimulate aggregate demand to decrease unemployment, instead favouring a control of inflation. Dennis Kavanagh called this "a historic breach with one of the main planks of the post-war Consensus". Secondly, the Sterling crisis of 1976 led the government to adopt monetary targets, something Mrs Thatcher was to continue. Although the Labour party initiated these new ideas in economic management and public expenditure control it was not launching a new ideology for government, it was done out of necessity from the economic problems of that time, for example the International Monetary Fund (IMF) demanded that monetary policies were introduced into the United Kingdom as part of their conditions for the loan needed in 1976. Mrs Thatcher embraced the ideas of Milton Friedman and Fredrik Hayek who constituted significant writings on the New Right and systematic criticisms of Keynes.

Andrew Gamble argues that Thatchers' policies were aiming for two higher objectives, the free economy and the strong state. Analysis of Thatcherism in this way shows a move away from the traditional notion of 'high' and 'low' politics to 'high' and 'no' politics: government should either withdraw completely from certain areas or insist upon its absolute and unchecked right to govern. The Conservative Party has never believed that the business of Government is the government of business" The removal of unnecessary interference of the state in many areas meant that government was being stretched too far, individuals are more capable of dealing with certain issues on their own than the state, therefore the state should remove its interference in those areas. This attitude is particularly relevant in the economy. Thatcher believed that it was the states' role to just create a broad framework in which individuals could work within. The key to this was low inflationary pressures, policies to promote this changed over Thatchers' reign but the objective never did.

Specific policies included the privatisation of private industries, the signing of the Single European Act (SEA) in 1985, the introduction of market principles in the public sector and the prevention of excessive influence by the Trades Unions. The withdrawal of state intervention allowed the government to take a firmer grip on areas they deemed important. Strong government is needed to stop itself and other actors such as the trades Unions from interfering in the 'free areas' (i. : the economy). Both these objectives can appear to be separate and indeed on policies such as the Trades Unions, it can be seen to contradict, but they do in fact compliment each other well to create a single coherent ideology which policies can be based on. The main belief for Mrs

Thatcher underpinning this theory is individualism, removing state control was intended to allow individuals to freely reach their full potential.

Examples where this is clear include policies orchestrated towards the removal of the growing reliance by some on the Welfare State - the so-called 'Dependency Culture'. Instead of the state creating work for the unemployed (as under Keynes), training schemes were introduced, for example the YTS and Training Credits, which were designed to improve an individual's talents and so make them more employable in real jobs. A second part of this was to encourage individuals to set up small businesses creating an 'enterprise culture'. These proliferated through the eighties but were some of the first to feel the effects of the recession of the second half of the decade.

The sale of council houses which began in 1980 and was intended to allow individuals to become home owners and therefore freer from the state. The privatisation of parts of the public sector allowed individuals to become part of 'a share owning democracy' and be more involved in the private sector as well as removing some of the reliance on the state. It confronted the idea that the state should provide for all 'from cradle to grave'. 'Mrs Thatcher will probably be most remembered for her privatisation policy. Broadly this took on three strands, the de-nationalisation of public companies, the sale of council houses and the introduction of market principles into local authorities and agencies.

It is however de-nationalisation with which privatisation is most associated with. generally there are two main periods during Mrs Thatchers' reign as

Prime Minister, 1979-1984 saw the sale of more traditionally private companies, such as Amersham International and Jaguar. 1984 onwards saw the sale of public utilities – gas water, electricity and telecommunications, these are much more controversial and had to overcome greater resistance. The Housing Act (1980) permitted council tenants who had been living in their home for three years the right to buy the property at a discounted rate from the local council.

This proved to be electorally very popular but underwent resistance by local authorities who saw increasing problems in housing stock. The introduction of 'Next Steps' agencies, semi-autonomous units within Government departments is seen as the biggest shake up of the Civil Service for 130 years. Mrs Thatcher believed that the Civil Service was too large to manage and had become too powerful. The Next Steps initiative aimed to create a more efficient Civil Service which was more under central control.

The Civil Service was to be split up, firstly by separating the small group of policy makers (Mandarins) from the bulk of the service who deliver goods and services, secondly this delivery side was to be run more as a private business. Despite the criticisms of impracticability and unaccountability the policy has found support outside of the Conservative Party and has been carried on by John Major. Whatever happens to the policy in the future, it still remains that Mrs Thatcher has had the more impact on the Civil Service than any previous Prime Minister and it appears largely irreversible.

Internationally, the threat of Communism was of great concern for Mrs Thatcher who saw Britain as a major partner to the United States against the USSR and Defence Policy became of increasing importance during her years

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in office. This has generally subsided for two main reasons, the fall of the Soviet Union and the perception that the world is now a less volatile place and so less justification for high spending, secondly the replacement of Mrs Thatcher by someone who does not share such a conviction for defence.

Andrew Gamble also argues that liberal democracies are open to subversives and militants who can easily penetrate social institutions such as universities, the schools, the media, the unions, the churches, local authorities, the Civil Service and the security forces. From these vantage-points they seek to stir up discontent, undermine the institutions and propel society towards chaos where then the 'left' can take over and impose an authoritarian state. Therefore, a major objective of the New Right is to stem this chaos, when this is put in the context of the 1970s as discussed earlier, it is of little surprise that each of these institutions have undergone reform to reassert the Governments authority. The second prong of this attack was to change the way people thought about politics, in short, shift the political agenda to the right so New Right ideas were on central ground.

Success on these ideas is mixed, while it is true that institutions have been marginalised but the shift in public opinion has been less marked. With exception to the church which was simply ignored, all the above mentioned institutions have undergone legislative changes which have led to a restructuring in their finances, what they legally are allowed to do and a shift to being held accountable directly to Central Government. To demonstrate this I will show some of the main changes that have occurred to the Trades Unions. Before 1979, the power of the Trades Unions was immense. Mrs Thatcher legislated against the Trades Unions to weaken them, strengthen <https://assignbuster.com/assess-mrs-thatchers-impact-on-british-government-and-politics/>



an individuals rights in a union and make the unions financially responsible for their actions. This, when put together against a background of distrust of the unions as being counter productive to the British economy, high levels of unemployment which meant no guarantee of work for a sacked worker and Mrs Thatchers determination to win meant that the unions basically did not have a chance, they did however their best, the most remembered disputes were the miners' strike (March 1984 - March 1985) and the Print unions dispute with News International Group (January 1986 - February 1987).

Both these cases highlighted the futility of strike action under the new legislation and has resulted in a large drop in membership figures, 12. 1 million in 1979 to 8. 6 million in 1989, and the number of days lost through strike action has diminished greatly. Thatcherism seems to have altered the agenda for mainstream debate, and the ideological context within Westminster has definitely shifted to the right. However, it does seem to have had less impact on the publics' attitudes and values. In 1987, six out of ten voters were opposed to the Conservatives.

On important issues such as welfare, Labour were preferred. Gallup in 1987 and MORI in June 1988 showed that a significant amount of people still favoured the ideas championed by Keynes such as higher taxes if it meant better services provided by the state. Because of this, some intellectuals within the New Right believe that Mrs Thatcher was not radical enough and needed to further consolidate herself within the Conservative party. It can be seen that the reason why the Conservatives won three consecutive elections under Mrs Thatcher was not because the general public empathised with her ideas but rather saw no realistic opposition against her. At the time, the <https://assignbuster.com/assess-mrs-thatchers-impact-on-british-government-and-politics/>

Labour party were in complete disarray, the 1983 Labour Party Election Manifesto was dubbed " the longest suicide note in history" and they suffered the worst election results in terms of percentages of either the two main parties since the Second World War, in 1983 only managing 27.

% of the vote and doing little better in 1987 with 30. 8%. They were seen as the puppet of the Trades Unions, championing old extremist policies associated with extreme characters such as Tony Benn, Derek Hatton, Ken Livingstone, Ted Knight and Arthur Scargill; leading them to be dubbed ' The loony left' by the media. However, the work of Neil Kinnock to reform the party and now being led by John Smith then Tony Blair has boosted the credibility of the Labour party to such an extent that it is almost inconceivable that Labour could loose the next General Election. It is hard to understand just how much an impact Mrs Thatcher had on British politics unless it is compared to similar experiences in other Western democracies.

With the exception of France, every country elected a right wing party to power at the beginning of the 1980s. For example, In the United States President Reagan, another believer in New Right ideology was elected twice and his successor, George Bush, was also from the political right. Helmut Kohl was elected Chancellor of (the then) West Germany and remains more or less in power. It is understandable that this international shift occurred when it is remembered that many of the contributing factors as (discussed previously) to the breakdown of Keynes (an internationally accepted economic doctrine) were international pressures, and the ideas of the New Right were engaged in an international ' campaign' for their ideas to be accepted. The impact of Mrs Thatcher would have not been as great if this <https://assignbuster.com/assess-mrs-thatchers-impact-on-british-government-and-politics/>

international context had been different, indeed as most Western countries began to move back towards their previous position, Mrs Thatcher began to lose a great deal more of her popularity.

Mrs Thatcher certainly had more of an impact than other right wing leaders, for example, no other country experienced such a large shift of public companies into the private sector or underwent such scathing reforms of the Civil Service. The impact of Thatcherism from a liberal perspective was not as large as it could have been.. Liberals are committed to the individual enjoying the benefits of their labour. Mrs Thatcher went some way to allowing this but the traditions of the Conservative party which are still strong on the most dynamic leaders means it is impossible to reach the full Liberal potential.

herefore, for Liberals, Mrs Thatcher had a limited impact on British government and Politics. From a Conservative point of view, the impact is very large. traditionally, the Conservatives have stood for pragmatism, not ideology; slow evolutionary social change; a general distrust of legislative innovation; and a safeguard to economic and professional interests. As can be seen, Mrs Thatcher did not stand for any of these ideals and therefore can be seen as a large impact on British politics.

From a New Right point of view, it was understood that their policies were hard to put in place. the best way to overcome this is to change public opinion, as already discussed, this did not occur. Therefore, from a New Right perspective, Mrs Thatcher did as well as she could be expected but

could theoretically have done better. Following Mrs Thatchers' downfall in 1990, it is now possible to see what is left of Thatcherism.

John Major was supported by Mrs Thatchers' supporters and all those against Michael Heseltine. He was seen as the person most likely to unify the party and win the next General election. He has kept a number of Mrs Thatchers' policies, most notably de-nationalisation. He was perceived as more positive towards the Welfare State and was better trusted with education and health policy.

His vision of a 'classless' society showed a more consensual approach to government. His scraping of the Poll tax and negotiating the Maastricht Treaty gained him a lot of support. The continuities in John Majors' policies include further de-nationalisation, with British Rail, the Coal Mines, the Post Office and of course the recent Electricity producing companies; he has increased the opportunity for schools to opt out of local control and Next Steps has been continued. Although he is viewed as less aggressive towards the Trades Unions, it was under Major that the National Economic and Development Council (NEDC) - a symbol of the Tripartite period - was finally abolished. These policies can be seen to be some of the central policies of Mrs Thatcher, what is of significant difference is Mr Majors' approach to leadership being much more consultative and quicker to back down, e. g.

the closure of the coal pits; which have led calls of him being weak. The Labour party has embrace a number of Mrs Thatchers' policies in order to become electable, the main themes of these include; the sale of council houses, the marginalisation of the Trades Unions; an acceptance of the Next

Steps reforms, the de-nationalisation process and the move away from full employment as their main economic objective (clearly shown by the rewriting of Clause IV). Mrs Thatcher came to power in 1979 and became the longest serving Prime Minister of the Twentieth century. What makes her interesting is she brought with her an ideological break with the past and a large project to change nearly every aspect of Britain in the belief that it would make the country great again.

Her confrontational style of leadership is an important factor of Mrs Thatchers' legacy. She still has a large impact on British politics; Many of the ideas first put forward as a coherent ideology by Mrs Thatcher remain central to the political agenda, these include the reform of the Civil Service and local authorities, her privatisation policies and the reform of the Trades Unions. She did have a number of failures, the most significant being the Poll Tax, even so reform of the old rates system was finally accepted by all. However the conclusion remains that Mrs Thatcher came to power with set of unpopular ideas but yet still managed to have them acted upon and a number of them incorporated onto the main agenda. For this reason, Mrs Thatcher did have a significant impact on British Government and Politics.