

# Critically review the development of the strategy of the thatcher government towa...

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The Thatcher government's attack on the trade unions was implemented as a control to 'make markets work better.' As this was the declared goal of the government it seems apt to judge its effectiveness on it, as well as the long and short term effects of Thatcher's legislation. With the collapse of the Heath government due to its hard line on the trade unions in the industrial relations act of 1971, the power of the unions was seen as a great threat to the conservative government which undermined the free market system and cut into profits which were greatly needed in the recession of the early 1980s.

However, this put Thatcher's government in a very advantageous position. Heath's government had already failed in the most tragically pathetic way, and left behind a brilliant precedent for the Thatcher government of how not to tackle the issue of union control. Lots of post-heath analysis had been written which formed an easy source for gleaming political insights (as Thatcher later discovered with her co-opting of the Ridley report) and any headway that Thatcher made on the issue would be lauded by the press because of the so recent failure. It is partly the situation that Thatcher was put into which created such 'effective policies'- in comparison to Heath, anyone would be considered more successful. Looking at the industrial relations act of 1971, Thatcher's policies especially those of the employment act of 1982 cannot be wholly called experimental in their content, but merely in their application.

For example, Heath's government tried unsuccessfully to pass through the limitations on legitimate strikes that the Thatcher government passed

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through slowly in three separate acts, rather than one big declaration. The effect was the same but with the disillusionment of the unions because of the loss of the NUM against Thatcher no real opposition to the final act took place. Also the use of civil injunctions on the unions was passed through by the dint of packing the law with other more moderate control laws in the 1982 act such as on closed shop which made justifiably appealing the laws more difficult. By spreading the application of these laws across several years, Thatcher managed to diminish the union's rights without creating the direct challenge that Heath created with the industrial relations act, and therefore keeping public opinion on her side. An effective victory in the terms of legislation which is still upheld to this day.

The industrial relations act tackled all the main points of contention between the conservative ideal of the free market and union controlled reality as did Thatcher's subsequent employment acts, each to a greater level than the one that went before. This undermines Thatcher's effectiveness as a 'developer' of a strategy against the trade unions and leads to the idea that she was only following a slowed down preset form. However, it is clear that Thatcherism cannot be seen as a fully formed set of economic and social guidelines on Margaret Thatcher taking up residence in Downing Street. Several of what have come to be regarded as the basic tenants of Thatcherism were missing in the early years, and some grew to be defunct over her time in office. For example, the use of monetarism as an economic control faded out in 1982 when it became clear that it was ineffective.

Also, Thatcher's lack of direct action of the subject of income policies suggests a play-it-by-ear approach to government. She condemned income policies and yet the uncertainty in to what the Thatcherite government's policies on them was a weakness. This shows that Thatcherism was a developing construct when Margaret Thatcher was in power, and although her treatment of the unions seems organised, when considering her retreat from the near strike of 1981 and her treatment of the steel workers strike of 1981, collectively it shows a pragmatic approach to achieving her goals. In regards to the trade unions, the anti-union ideology was well in place in the doctrine of Thatcherism before any key policy changes were made to limit their power. It seems that Thatcher's control of the unions was more a response to stimuli with a moderated version of a pre-existing conservative game plan - the Ridley report.

The Ridley report shows the NUM as an ideal target for Thatcher's plans to eliminate the threat of the union movement. A middling power union with iconic status after helping to topple Heath, as a syndicated union, the NUM also was a good target for Thatcher. A divided enemy is easy to split, break apart and defeat and the different in conditions and expectations across the members of the NUM was vast. For example, miners in Nottinghamshire were nearly completely unaffected by the government's proposals to close mines across the country, whereas in Yorkshire it is estimated that 20% of the miner workforce would be redundant<sup>ii</sup>. Geographical factors also come into play as to why the NUM was an excellent choice for the decisive battle against the power of the unions. The spread of workers across the country,

each county dealing with its own syndicated issues as well as being far removed from the issues of the movement as a whole (especially Scotland) and notably far away from the political hub centre of the uk.

The steel workers strike of 1981 was used by the Thatcher government as precursor to the inevitable NUM strike. They worked in the ideas of the social security act as a controlling force and learnt ways they could improve control like forcing secret ballots before any industrial action, and making injunctions apply to entire unions. These bills were promptly passed through in the 1982 employment act. This was a very effective trial run and allowed Thatcher to see that the government was not ready to take on the NUM in 1981. The lack of stock piled coal and effective controls on the leadership of the unions needed to be resolved before the first confrontation. As the Ridley report states, the government should always choose the “ field of battle<sup>iii</sup>” and Thatcher followed this while augmenting it with her own pragmatic politics which allowed for tactical retreat.

Some of the Ridley plan was implemented early on in the process, once the target of the NUM had been chosen. The stock piling of coal and oil to avoid a repeat of the events in the 1974 strike began early in 1981- by reducing the supply and demand the damage on the general public would be lessen and there would be less public insistence to give in to the demands of the strikers. This was a very effective strategy as it negated any bargaining power that the NUM had to pull with the government. As well as the contingency plans of importing coal from non-union foreign ports, the Ridley plan made sure that the general public would be as unaffected as possible

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by the strike, to minimise the possibility of a public outcry. Later on, as the strike drew out, Thatcher saw the wisdom in the Ridley report of having a readied police force to deal with 'violent picketing'.

However, it was taken too far as allegations of police brutality and mass arrests on trumped up charges 'breach of the peace' caused apathy towards the police and further contempt of the law. This was one of the most ineffective pieces of Thatcher's campaign against the trade unions as deaths in riots created martyrs for the cause and further galvanised the movement. One of the most important co-opted plans that Thatcher implemented was the social security act of 1980. In agreement with the idea in the Ridley plan of "cut[ing] off the money supply to the strikers and mak[ing] the union finance themiv" Thatcher revoked the rights of the dependants of striking workers to urgent care payments and some benefits. The average mining household lost 17 pounds per weekv.

This extra financial pressure on the strikers caused them to give in when the poverty became to extreme. This move was a cold manipulation which put a lot of people's lives in danger. Although it was successful, Thatcher's policies created widespread poverty in many mining communities which lasted until the mid 1990s. The victorious move that secured the strike for Thatcher was preplanned, but the disillusionment of all trade unionists had little to do with the plight of the miners. The employment act of 1982 forced balloting on prestrike action.

This was a good move by Thatcher as it required time to organise and therefore destroyed any spontaneous or fast moving strikes. It also enforced the divides within syndicated unions like the NUM because for legal national industrial action a vast majority was needed. It is interesting to note that on a nationwide strike being called, Nottinghamshire miners without the pre official striking elsewhere would have refused to strike as they were unaffected by the cuts. As makes it clear that the miners are breaking the law, allowing Thatcher to slam them as the 'enemy within' and degrade them for being lawbreakers. 'The rule of law must prevail over the rule of the mob.

' Nice thatcherite propaganda- even though the mob were attacked in this case by the police. Swaying public opinion and reinforcing north-south divide- those in south couldn't see the plight of the miners. The big victories in the miner strike can be attributed partly to the weakness of the 'enemy' rather than the success of Thatcher. When fighting the government, the people who create laws, who have nationalised forces and support, i. e the police and the bbc, it is sensible to stay within the laws. If Scargill hadn't shown such contempt for the court orders and actually called a ballot to declare the strike, he wouldn't have lost public opinions so fast as the polls show.

The Gallup poll in 1984 showed that 79% of the general public disagreed with the methods used by the strikersvi. If The NUM had voted to strike they probably would have gained some support from the TUC, got greater solidarity strikes and as McGregor says, may have forced a "comprise" at

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the coal board- instead of running home with there tails between there legs. In short, the Thatcher government had it easier than most people believe because of the huge divides in their targets, the party's comparative history with dealing with unions and the lack of reasonable and representative leadership in the NUM. The Thatcher government not allowing the miners to spread their economic ideas until after the strike was another piece of well crafted effective control. In this period 75% of Britain's newspapers were owned by three men and the liberal smear campaigns they published against Scargill and the strikers helped to swash public opinion.

The economic ideas would have appealed to those unsure about Thatcher's free market campaign and would on becoming wide spread have undermined support for the government, because the idea were just, even if the means were not. In conclusion, the backbone of the unions was broken with the num in 1985 that represented an iconic power humbled by Thatcher. Although this is partly down to the great employment of the Ridley plan and timely legislation, that merely end the strike. The loss of power and resolve in the trade union movement came from Thatcher's control of the media, painting the trade unionists as the ' enemy within' and lucky breaks due the weakness and radicalism of her opponents who didn't correctly represent the opinions and needs of the striking workers.