

”margaret thatcher”
by kenneth harris
essay sample



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Introduction and Synopsis:

They say, some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them. Margaret Thatcher belongs to the second category. Political revolution is the word associated with her governance of Britain. It was during her reign, that the influence of Communism was at peak, and her resolute efforts to contain it, will be remembered by the democratic forces all over the world. One can find in her decisions and actions, the best qualities of the politician as well as the perfect administrator. According to Kenneth Harris, she knew how to frame a policy and implement it in any area. Tough political leaders invite tough responses. Those who did not like the policies of Thatcherism have liked nonetheless, Margaret Thatcher, the person. 'Do not strike, if you strike, strike hard and see that there is no need strike again,' was her policy as for important issues on which she took decisions. Her political convictions were strong, and her opponents knew that once she arrived at a decision she will not budge an inch from that position.

To be the Prime Minister of a country like Britain, which has dominant role in world politics, during toughest peace-time history of the 20th century, is no ordinary achievement. She richly deserved the Iron Lady 'title.' Harris traces the history of her political ascendancy in the first term, and goes to analyze the dynamics of Tory politics that capitalized more than its expectations, during her second term. The incomplete third term was more eventful. In May 1979, Margaret Thatcher occupied 10, Downing Street; little did she realize that it was the beginning of her illustrious career as Prime Minister for 11 eventful years. Britain was passing through a period of sluggishness on all

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fronts according to Thatcher on account of post-war policies adopted by Attlee and the Governments later on. By the time she laid down the Office in 1990, Britain was a different country both politically and socially. " The power of trade unions had been rolled back considerably, privatization was a reality rather than the dream of some conservative think-tanks, and Socialism was dead as a serious political ideal or movement in British politics and society."(www. suite...)

Analysis:

All the three above developments had to happen because they are inter-related, each one influences and leads to the other. Did these developments take place on account of the dynamic initiatives of Margaret Thatcher- is the question raised by many. In a democratic set up, the Opposition needs certain issues for its survival and growth as a political force, and this is one such issue. In democracy, the top leader does invariably get rewards for the good results and reprimand for the wrong policies. The changes were substantive, without the solid backup and support, they would not have happened. Supporting this view Kenneth Harris argues that " the Thatcher Government must be seen as one of the most important Governments in the twentieth century Britain, and the most important since the legendary Attlee Government of 1945-51. Yet while the individual members of the Attlee Government could later claim shared responsibility for the changes they implemented, Harris argues that only Thatcher can rightfully claim personal credit for the changes implemented under her three Governments.(Harris, 1988), p. 216.)

As for this argument, many divergent views are expressed. Some agree about the changes that took place, but say that they were not totally retained by the successors. Another viewpoint is that changes did happen, but that was not the doing of Thatcher, they were the consequence of long-term trends in the pipe-line, long before Thatcher arrived on the power-scene. No credit is given to her interventions. Kenneth Harris brushes past these objections. As for her victory in the First Elections in 1979, the critics say, that she was given an opportunity, not the endorsement for her policies. In the democratic set-up, every Party is given an opportunity. That is the precise job of the enlightened voters. But what is noteworthy is the landslide, precedent-shattering victory of Thatcher in the 1983 elections. That was the stamp of her political authority and approval of her economic and social policies, according to Kenneth Harris. The people of Britain trusted her vision. Kenneth Harris observes and pinpoints the similarities between Thatcher's and Atlee's Governments. Both are mentioned as significant governments as " both came to power promising... controversial and sweeping programs intended... to change society." (Harris, 1988, p. 2)

Harris throws light on her economic policies thus: When she took over as the Prime Minister, the annual rate of inflation was over 20 percent. To contain this trend, she chose to implement a set of severe deflationary set of policies. That increased taxes and pruned spending as part of her anti-recession measures instead of lower taxes and increased spending. She stood her ground in the face of severe political pressure mounted on her. Was that the economist outsmarting the politician in her or the politician outsmarting the economist in her? In reality it was the mixture of both, she

played her economic cards as per the demands of the politics, as perceived by her. Thatcher did deliver the expected results to the citizens of Britain. The inflation, threatening the British economy by 20% increase per year, came down to 4 percent at the end of 1980. And the economic growth accelerated.

That was the ' double-benefit scheme' for the people of Britain-lower inflation and increase in the economic growth, according to Harris. But an important question is why John Major, Thatcher's successor, did not continue with Thatcherism, and made structural changes in her policies that were quite opposite to her initiatives. Harris has no complaints against the style of functioning or the economic policies of Margaret Thatcher, and from the consistent stand he has taken, on issues, he is right. Like a politician, he doesn't criticize her for the sake of criticism. He is consistent in his approach and invariably comes to favorable conclusions. And 2-3 decades in the political or economic history of any Nation is too short a period, for evaluation and come to indisputable conclusions. The future generation and the budding scholars will be able to do proper research and come to unbiased opinions, as for the long-term impact of the policies pursued by Thatcher.

Her humble beginning, she was the daughter of a grocer, her education at Oxford, her two successive defeats in the elections for Parliament in 1950 & 1951, and then studying law—with these mixtures of hurdles and advantages, she evolved herself as a tough personality. In 1979 she won the landslide victory for her Conservative Party. She won three successive Elections, 1979, 1983 and 1988. War either builds political personality or

breaks one. Thatcher's military response to the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands, which resulted in the victory for the British forces in the Falkland War, increased her popularity. She allied with Ronald Regan's policy, who was another tough leader to oppose Soviet Union, and Thatcher did the same with her opinions on USSR invasion on Afghanistan.

But something unexpected was in store for her, at the height of her popularity. Her selling unprofitable and loss-incurring government companies were part of the Conservative policy. But some of her decisions cost her chair of the Prime Minister. " Thatcher strongly pursued Conservative policies in domestic affairs by cutting public spending and selling government companies. She lost popularity when she attempted to impose a flat poll tax instead of local taxes. Her support for Britain to join the European Monetary Union was very unpopular within the Conservative Party, and she was forced to resign in 1990."(www. multied..) In any case, politics is the game of opportunism. Three terms in the Office of the Prime Minister was too long a period for the aspiring and budding politicians in Britain. Politicians of the party to which she belonged and those of the Opposition were waiting in the wings to grab power! This could be one of the reasons, due to which she had to quit.

She handled the tactics and strategies of the trade union leaders with the finest sense of anticipation coupled with toughness. The trade union fraternity was humbled by her counter-measures to curb their illogical actions. She was bent upon to curb the powers of the trade unions. The trade unions took to the offensive with the intension to damage her politically. Several unions declared strikes. How she defeated the nefarious

designs of the union leaders of National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) will go down in the history. She had built up sufficient stocks of coal. With no cuts in electric power people did not suffer. The violence resorted by the strikers and the legal lacuna in launching the strike—NUM had not held a ballot to approve strike action, swung the public opinion in favor of Margaret Thatcher.

Any trader big or small is worldly-wise and an individual and practical in dealings. One's interaction with people of various temperaments on a routine basis teaches one many things in this ' College of Self-Education.' To successfully tackle a national-level strike, Margaret Thatcher just used her trader's sixth sense. Keep sufficient stock of the commodity that is likely to affect the people! This assumption is not the wild assumption. Thatcher has acknowledged the predominant influence of her father during the formative years of her life. He was a small-time local level politician too. How she utilized her academic studies to practical application is cited through an example. She took note of the monopoly of professions and introduced suitable remedial measures. (Margaret Thatcher has studied Law). The traditional division between the barristers and solicitors got the deserved correction course through legal reforms. Solicitors got the right to try cases in the high courts along with barristers. " On the economic and political right and centre right, Thatcher is often remembered with some fondness as one who dared to confront powerful unions and removed harmful constraints on the economy. On the left she is still reviled as the politician who cut funding of the public services to support the rich." (www. lycos..)

Develop your own interpretations and opinions of the topic. Decide whether or not the author's interpretation of the event fits your interpretation and explain 4 to 5 reasons why:

I entirely agree with the observations and conclusions of the author as for the acumen and political accomplishments of Margaret Thatcher. (i) She successfully retained the Chair of Chief Minister for three terms in a powerful and industrialized country like Britain. (ii) She took on a strong Communist country like Russia, on international issues and policy matters. (iii) She brought the annual inflation rate from 20% to 4%. (iv) Her major accomplishment is to tame the trade union leaders who used the methods of coercion to browbeat the Organizations and the Government and who practiced the policy that the management is the permanent enemy and the trade unions should be at war with them at all times .

(v) Even though she has not campaigned as such for women's rights, her life is the sterling example, and she had shown the path to women, how it is possible for them to come up in life with one's own efforts. (vi) Falkland War is an example of her courage and willingness to take hard decisions. She was a politician who would decide, act start and finish by sticking to most of her decisions. She was clear-headed and level-headed, both. " To those waiting with bated breath for that favorite media catchphrase, the U-turn, I have only one thing to say: You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning!"

(Ezine....)The toughest time in her political career was on 31st March, 1990, when 200, 000 protestors marched to the Trafalgar Square, London, to protest some of her policies. This was the beginning of her end in the active political scene.

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