
Original Article

The Thatcher myth

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Abstract Margaret Thatcher's death in April 2013 reawakened the political controversies around her premiership and the adulation and antipathy which she had always attracted. To many of her supporters and opponents she became a mythical figure. The ways in which this myth was constructed are analysed, and how they tend to exaggerate agency and downplay the role of contingency and the structural contexts in which Thatcher operated. Three aspects of her legacy are discussed, first her role in redirecting foreign policy and external relations, particularly with reference to the Falklands War, the revival of Atlanticism and the turn away from Europe; second her role in reversing economic decline, and how far her policies were responsible for irreversible social and economic change; and third her impact on the British party system and the conduct of British politics, particularly her role in changing both the Labour party and the Conservatives.

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When Margaret Thatcher died on 8 April 2013 it was more than 22 years since she had been ousted as Prime Minister in December 1990. She had been ill for a long time and although she made occasional appearances in public, she had ceased public speaking and took no active part in politics. In the time that had elapsed since she was Prime Minister, a new generation of politicians had taken charge and the Thatcher decade had begun to seem a distant memory. Yet, no sooner was her death announced than for 10 extraordinary days Britain was plunged back into that decade. The passions of that era were suddenly re-awakened, and many of the same battles were fought out again through the media. It is hard to think of any other British politician in the last 100 years who has excited such extremes of adulation and hostility. Conservative newspapers like *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail* carried full-page softly lit portraits of Thatcher treating her as some kind of saint, while at the other extreme there were endless requests for Judy Garland singing 'Ding Dong the witch is dead'. In an era of anti-politics and disdain for politicians,



Thatcher remains an exception. She still divides opinion. She manages to evoke huge loyalty and adoration in one part of the British public, huge dislike and fury in another. There is little middle ground.

This divisiveness was inherent in her style. The words of St Francis she quoted on the steps of Downing Street in 1979 were almost the exact opposite of how she intended to govern, and for the most part did govern. She scorned consensus and saw the world in stark oppositional terms, dividing everyone into friends and enemies. Typical of her approach was her enquiry, 'Is he one of us?', her insistence that since the other side had an ideology the Conservatives must have one as well and her characterisation of militant trade unionists as 'The Enemy Within'. Her fierce opinions and her unwillingness to compromise were what enraptured and captivated her admirers and what so infuriated and nauseated her opponents. All kinds of hopes and fears were projected on to her, many of them wide of the mark, but there was enough truth in them to create an unmistakable political personality, which few people were neutral towards. She not only articulated the values and aspirations of a particular stratum of British society, she embodied them. Although there is no evidence that she ever said it, the remark attributed to her that any man still travelling on a bus at the age of 26 could count himself a failure has been quoted again and again. She never failed to exude a very English sense of status, the moral and social superiority of the people she recognised as 'her people'.

The Construction of the Thatcher Myth

It is hardly surprising that she should have become the subject of a great deal of myth-making. This began as soon as she was elected Leader. She became Leader by accident; her decision to stand in 1975 against Edward Heath only came about because first Keith Joseph and then Edward Du Cann dropped out, and there was no other plausible standard-bearer from the right of the party. Standing against Heath was high risk, because if she had lost it would have meant the end of her prospects for advancement within the party. She had no supporters in the Shadow Cabinet, apart from Keith Joseph, and she owed her victory to the fact that many MPs voted for her in the hope they could send a signal to Heath that it was time for him to step down and hand over to Willie Whitelaw or Jim Prior. They famously overdid it, and Thatcher secured a firm lead on the first ballot. The *Daily Telegraph* editorial was headlined 'Consider her Courage'. Heath resigned and Whitelaw, Prior and Howe all entered the fray, freed from their oath of loyalty. But it was too late. Thatcher's momentum was now unstoppable. Her boldness in seizing the opportunity to stand against Heath had paid off. It was characteristic of her subsequent career. She was never cavalier about taking risks, and always calculated the odds with as much precision as she could, and was sometimes (for example, over the calling of elections in 1983 and 1987) over-cautious. Yet her career was built by taking some very big



risks, embarking on courses of action where she could not be certain of the outcome, such as her challenge to Heath, dispatching the task force to recapture the Falklands and confronting the miners. She was not afraid to play for big stakes, and until the poll tax she proved a lucky politician, and came out on top in all the big confrontations, both those she engineered, and those which were thrust upon her.

It was this quality of Thatcher as a warrior, someone prepared to take risks, act on her principles and face down opponents, which became the heart of the myth that formed around her. Soon after she became Leader, one of her first major speeches was a passionate denunciation of the USSR and its expansionist ambitions. She was dubbed the Iron Lady in the Soviet media, and she at once took up the nickname, with its resonance of the Duke of Wellington, the Iron Duke. When Enoch Powell jabbed his finger at her in the Falklands debate and told 'the Iron Lady' that how she responded to this challenge would show the metal of which she was made, she gladly accepted the challenge.

How should we think of her legacy? The Thatcher myth still subscribed to by many on both left and right of the political spectrum is that after Thatcher nothing was the same again. The other view is that she did not really make much difference. It was all *Sturm und Drang*. The changes she was associated with would have happened anyway. On this view she is part of the puppet show of British politics, rather than its inner workings. Subscribers to the Thatcher myth were out in force after her death. For them Thatcher transformed British politics, the British economy and Britain's role in the world. 1979 therefore belongs with 1945 and 1906 as a defining election, because it ushered in a major change of direction in the way in which Britain was governed. The governments that followed Thatcher's, it is claimed, were content to govern within the new parameters she had laid down, rather than challenging them. These interpretations, whether they approve of the changes wrought by Thatcher or strongly disapprove of them, both emphasise her agency. It was the Government led by Thatcher that took crucial decisions to change Britain in particular ways, and that thought through the steps which would be necessary to achieve their goals. Thatcherism was a political project with a strategic intent and long-term ambitions, to which others had to react and adapt. The implementation of the project generated a great deal of resistance, most of it anticipated, and the Thatcher Government was able to defeat most of it. The forward momentum of the project was maintained by successive election victories.

This agency-centred interpretation still captures something about the Thatcher era, which does mark it out from many other eras. There was an ideological ferment and some strategic political thinking that were unusual. But as a complete explanation it suffers from two major defects. The first is that the claims made for Thatcher and for Thatcherism are often exaggerated, even in agency terms. They do not make sufficient allowance for the muddle and confusion in which politics is necessarily conducted, and give too much weight to rational calculation and foresight. The particular contexts in which Thatcher and her ministers were obliged to operate,

meant that their decisions were often ruled far more by particular circumstances and contingencies than they were by ideological goals and objectives. Many of the policies that were adopted had consequences which were not foreseen; others did not achieve the results which were intended. As always in politics, policies were interpreted retrospectively and stories constructed which gave greater coherence than was intended at the time. All the detailed accounts of the Thatcher Government stress how little Thatcher behaved in the way the myth suggested. She was extremely cautious, always aware of practical obstacles, adept at calculating the balance of forces confronting her and determining when it was wise to take a step back or find another way. Successful politicians are always opportunists, but Thatcher was particularly good at seizing opportunities and turning situations to her advantage, while presenting herself as always acting out of principle and conviction.

The second objection to the Thatcher myth is that it ignores the structural contexts in which the Thatcher Government operated, by implying that all that mattered were political ideas and political will. What is often lacking from agency accounts is any sense of the comparative international context of British politics, the factors that made certain policy initiatives plausible and viable, and ruled out others. Some of the crucial changes with which Thatcher is associated, such as the switch in macro-economic policy or the revival of Atlanticism, had already occurred under Labour. The adaptation of Britain to the new dispensation being constructed by the United States would have taken place whichever party was in government, since the proponents of the alternative economic strategy were never likely to prevail. Similarly a major restructuring of the British economy was overdue and could not have been avoided. The specific ways in which the adaptation happened however did owe a lot both to agency and contingency, and this is where Thatcher's particular legacy may be found.

Thatcher and British Foreign Policy

One of the best examples of contingency is the Falklands War, which might well have ended her Premiership. As it turned out, victory became the achievement for which she was most remembered and of which she was most proud. The decision of Galtieri and the Argentinian Junta to launch an armed invasion of the Falklands was a contingency that was not foreseen. Thatcher's Government had been engaged for 2 years in negotiations with the Argentine Government over a plan to cede formal sovereignty to Argentina, and then lease the islands back. In this way it was thought both islanders and Argentines would be happy, and another imperial millstone around the neck of the British taxpayer disposed of. The last thing the British Government was looking for was an opportunity to show its military capability and rekindle a sense of pride in British power and British arms. Yet that was the opportunity which presented itself because the Junta misread the intentions of the



British Government. Thinking the British Government was no longer interested in retaining the Falkland Islands and would not fight to retain them the Argentines launched their attack. This precipitated a full-blown political crisis in Britain, because it was clear that the British Government had been negligent in not anticipating an attack and had made it more likely both by negotiating to cede sovereignty of the islands and withdrawing military cover in the Falklands as economy measures in the defence review. The Falkland Islands were a British overseas territory with less than 2000 inhabitants and a long way away, but their symbolic importance was immense. At the emergency Commons debate on the morning of Saturday, 3 April 1982, Thatcher was under enormous pressure to act decisively to regain the islands. Other leaders might have prevaricated and been lost to view. As it was the course of action which was decided upon, dispatching a task force to conduct a military operation 4000 miles away, was highly risky, since it depended on the goodwill of the United States, and to a lesser extent other states in the region, notably Chile, for it to be logistically possible at all, and even then it could have ended in military disaster, if one of the carriers had been lost, or more of the Argentinian missiles had detonated. Thatcher's future was on the line throughout the conflict. She would clearly not have survived as Prime Minister if Argentina had defeated the task force. But she would have also struggled to hang on if the United States had forced Britain to accept a compromise peace before the task force had reached the Falklands. Instead despite some anxious moments the re-conquest of the Falklands was a complete success, and was accomplished in 10 weeks. The US administration, despite being internally divided, ultimately came down decisively in support of its major international ally, against its regional ally. The British lost 255 and Argentina 649. The war cost £2.8 billion, and scuppered the defence review that had envisioned a drastically slimmed down navy.

The war transformed Thatcher, and prolonged illusions about the role Britain could play in the world. This became an important part of her legacy. It turned out to be the ideal war to fight – it was short, decisive and above all it gave the illusion that Britain was once again acting independently. It was the last fling of Britain as an imperial power, and may prove to be the last time the British military ever engages independently in a foreign war against another state. It would have been Thatcher's defeat if the war had gone wrong, but its successful outcome meant that it became Thatcher's victory, and she was idolised by the Conservative media, particularly the tabloids, with the *Sun* leading the way. The return of the fleet to Portsmouth and the victory parade in the City of London at which Thatcher rather than a member of the Royal Family took the salute sealed the political gain from this extraordinary episode. It made Thatcher's grip on the Conservative leadership unshakeable, and more than any other event created the Thatcher myth, the idea of the indomitable Leader, who stood up for her principles and could not be deflected from her chosen course.

It was the Falklands victory that led to the talk of Thatcher having put the Great back into Great Britain, restored national pride and self-confidence, and ended the years of decline. The reality was more prosaic. It breathed new life into an old



conception of Britain as an island nation able to take on all comers, master of its destiny, not in need of foreign alliances and entanglements, particularly not those involving Europe. But the Falklands war proved to be a final hurrah for empire rather than the beginning of a new chapter. The Empire was dead and could not be resuscitated. In the negotiations over ending the rebellion in Rhodesia in 1980, and still more in the negotiations for the return of Hong Kong to China at the end of Britain's 150 year lease, the Thatcher Government adopted a very different strategy. There was no question of Britain using the card of national self-determination for the people of Hong Kong, as it had used it to legitimate its retention of both the Falklands and Gibraltar. Britain no longer had the power to prevent the re-absorption of Hong Kong into China. That was the more significant imperial story of the Thatcher years, and it was a post-imperial one. The Thatcher Government refused to extend British citizenship to the citizens of Hong Kong or to allow them democratic institutions so as not to complicate the handover to China or establish costly obligations. It had also revealingly refused to give British citizenship to the Falkland islanders before the invasion. That was hastily changed subsequently. But then there were only 1800 Falkland islanders, as against 5 million in Hong Kong, and Argentina was not China.

A second area where Thatcher made a significant difference in foreign policy was her role in reviving Atlanticism. This was closely related to the determined stance she took on the need to confront the Soviet Union and resist its expansion. She became one of the main enthusiasts for the new cold war that developed in the 1970s after the era of *détente*, and lasted until the election of Gorbachev and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The main role was taken by the United States, but Thatcher, particularly through the personal relationship she established with Reagan in the 1980s, was able to breathe new life into the special relationship which had become increasingly troubled in the 20 years after the United States had refused to support the Anglo-French incursion into Egypt in 1956. Harold Wilson had refused to commit British troops to Vietnam in the 1960s while Edward Heath had informed Henry Kissinger, to his considerable dismay, that in future any security proposal from the United States to the United Kingdom would first have to be discussed with the UK's partners in the European Community, rather than bilaterally. Relations had improved under James Callaghan, an instinctive Atlanticist, and they improved still more following the fulsome backing Thatcher gave to Reagan, sharing as she did his enthusiasm for confronting the 'evil empire' and restoring the power of the West. The stationing of Cruise and Pershing missiles in Britain, the willingness to allow the United States to use its airfields in the United Kingdom to bomb Libya in 1986, the enlistment of Britain in the ideological crusade against communism and (increasingly) Islamic fundamentalism, helped transform British foreign policy, and began the tilt away from Europe and back to the certainties of the Atlantic relationship. Thatcher's increasing scorn for many of Britain's European partners, particularly in relation to defence and security issues, reinforced her instinctive Atlanticism. As she later wrote 'Only bad things have come out of Europe in my lifetime'.



Thatcher was never subservient to the United States, and had several sharp disagreements over policy. She was particularly incensed when the United States invaded Grenada, a Commonwealth country, without informing Britain in 1983. She was often more hawkish than her US counterparts, particularly in the run-up to the first Gulf War against Iraq in 1990. But the priority she gave to the United States as the ideological, security and economic leader of the West was unquestioned and formed the foundation of her policy. She wanted Britain to be the United States' chief ally and candid friend. The diplomatic, intelligence, military and financial communities that were already closely intertwined since the Second World War provided the sinews for this policy. Thatcher gave it a sharper definition, and it became the template for governments after her, particularly the government of Tony Blair. This renewal of Atlanticism as the United Kingdom's most important external relationship was the most striking feature of Thatcher's foreign policy and led to tensions with the increasing Europeanisation of British policy following membership of the European Community in 1973.

Thatcher and Europe

Thatcher's strong Atlanticism made her increasingly sceptical about Europe. This has been seen as one of her most significant legacies to British politics. She made herself very unpopular with her partners by demanding and getting a significant budget rebate. She was strongly opposed to Britain's participation in the Exchange Rate Mechanism, and fought a long battle with senior ministers over it, eventually conceding that Britain should join, shortly before her resignation. At the end of her premiership she became an outspoken opponent of the new plans for Federal Union being launched by Jacques Delors, the Commission President. After she left office she supported the Maastricht rebels and flirted with the idea that Britain should leave the European Union. Yet this was the same Prime Minister who was an architect of the single market, and agreed to qualified majority voting rules to ensure that one country could not veto the rules necessary to make the single market work. This was the most integrationist measure passed by any British Government since the treaty of accession, and under Thatcher Britain became more not less deeply involved in the European Community. Much of Thatcher's hostility to the European Union came only after she had left office. It split the Thatcherites, a number of whom supported the single market and even a single currency as the way to entrench a neo-liberal agenda across the European Union. Thatcher in the end came to pose the issue as a choice between Europe and America, but this was a strange formulation, since the United States had always been keen for Britain to be a full member of the European Community to influence its policy in ways which the United States favoured. But Thatcher's legacy was to reinforce the depiction of Europe as fundamentally opposed to British national interests and its 'special' relationship with the United States.



Within a relatively short space of time the Conservative party moved from being the main party supporting a European future for Britain, to being the main Eurosceptic party, with a sizeable minority wanting to withdraw from the European Union and the single market altogether.

Thatcher's commitment to reversing British national decline linked defence and security with economics. She sought the revival not just of Britain but of the West, and that meant the revival of American leadership. The political and economic difficulties of the 1970s required a new set of policies and strategies, a new sense of resolve. She refused to accept that either the West or Britain were in irreversible decline, and set out to challenge the defeatism of the civil service and much of the British Establishment. The setbacks of the 1970s brought forth a political critique on the right of many of the institutions and policies of the post-war western order established in the 1940s and 1950s. There was a revival of the case for freeing markets and reducing the role of government in the economy, curbing the growth of entitlements and the spending commitments which went with them. This had particular applications to each national political system, but it also had implications for the architecture of the international political economy as well. The vision was a strengthened western order.

Thatcher and the Economy

In its economic policy the Thatcher Government developed a clear analysis of the causes of British decline, seeing it as the result of trade unions abusing their power, a demotivating tax system, an over-extended state and a lack of competition in both private and public sectors. At the heart of the strategy was the aim of restoring monetary and fiscal discipline. Controlling inflation became the main policy priority, legitimated by the new fashion for monetarism. As a technical policy monetarism proved a failure, because it proved impossible in practice to control the money supply in the way monetarists advocated. But as part of a shift to a new political economy it was highly successful. It signalled a move away from existing assumptions about macroeconomic management, allowing governments to drop full employment as a policy goal and to concentrate on a stable monetary and fiscal framework which was expected to create the conditions for economic growth. It also helped to insulate government from the demands of spending lobbies, and to prepare the ground for political battles with particular trade unions and other interests demanding government subsidies. The institutional apparatus of *quasi* corporatism which had grown up in Britain over the past 20 years was scrapped. The Government set its face against incomes policies, national plans, public enterprise and industrial intervention. It introduced four bills which steadily reduced the legal privileges of the trade unions and made the costs of certain union actions prohibitive. It drastically restricted the powers of local government by capping their expenditure, limiting their freedom to



raise extra revenue and abolishing whole tiers of local administration including the Greater London Council. It developed a rolling programme of privatisations which saw the denationalisation of almost all the industries nationalised in the 1970s and the 1940s, as well as many which had been public enterprises for very much longer. It also deregulated some major markets, including the foreign exchange market with the abolition of all capital controls, and it presided over the Big Bang in the City of London in 1986, which swept away restrictions preventing foreign banks from locating in London. The tax system was made much more regressive with the doubling of VAT and the sharp reduction in top tax rates. As a result inequality soared, and Britain came to enjoy one of the most unequal distributions of income among OECD states.

These changes were significant, and they fitted into the more general shift at the international level to a new policy framework for the western order. This new framework became known as the Washington consensus, although the previous dispensation after Bretton Woods was also a consensus constructed in Washington, since most of the major institutions charged with governing the international economy were based there. What occurred in the 1980s was a shift in this consensus to accommodate new realities, specifically the desire of the United States to be freed from the restrictions of the fixed exchange rate system set up at Bretton Woods and the need to reinvigorate the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism which was visibly failing in comparison with other models, particularly the German and Japanese. The unleashing of unemployment and bankruptcy, deregulation and privatisation, and spending and tax cuts were designed to reignite the 'creative destruction' and economic dynamism which had always marked the Anglo-Saxon model, shaking out inefficient firms and sectors and making space for new activity. Trust in the spontaneous unplanned restorative qualities of the market was central to the new framework.

The extent of the paradigm shift that was involved can be overdone, however. In the heroic myth of Thatcher she takes on the post-war consensus and its main defenders, the Labour movement, the civil service, the trade unions, local government, as well as the collectivists in the Tory party, and vanquishes them. Those on her side counselling caution or moderation are castigated as appeasers or 'wets', and swept aside. The state is rolled back, and the people set free once more. The traditional British understanding of how the market economy works is restored – sound money, low taxes, individual independence and a limited state – and although the costs are heavy initially in much higher unemployment, the collapse of much traditional industry and a sharp recession, from 1982 the economy starts to recover and within 2 years the economy is booming. By 1987 and Thatcher's third election victory the Government is proclaiming that decline is over, confidence in Britain has been restored, and the enemies of free market capitalism vanquished. The opening of the Berlin Wall 2 years later appeared to confirm that the new free market dispensation was now irresistible throughout the world. The West led by the United States had triumphed.

The reality was rather different. Some significant shifts took place but they hardly amounted to the grand rollback of the state which was proclaimed. The Thatcher Government did not significantly reduce the level of government spending in its 11 years. It restructured spending in some areas but it failed to make many inroads on the entitlement state. Health, education and welfare were not privatised. What did occur were sustained attempts to create *quasi* markets in the public sector through the adoption of the techniques of the new public management, with varying degrees of success. New sectors were created in the economy, particularly in financial services, but unemployment remained permanently much higher than it had been in the 20 boom years after 1950. The policies of the Thatcher Government greatly exacerbated the problem of welfare dependency, by creating a permanent class of workless citizens who could not be absorbed into the new economy. The greater flexibility in the labour market which resulted from the Trade Union reforms did not solve this problem, but it did contribute to the spread of low-paid, temporary, part time and insecure jobs in the economy. The changes in economic policy introduced by Thatcher worked by creating the conditions for the boom in the 1990s and early 2000s, taking advantage of the favourable international circumstances. But the deep-seated problems of the British economy in terms of a chronic lack of skills and investment were not solved, and the economy became increasingly unbalanced, with the hothouse growth of the South East, based on the powerhouse of the City of London. The over-dependence of the British economy on the financial sector was a liability which was exposed in the 2008 financial crash.

Thatcher and British Politics

The third aspect of the legacy is narrower, and concerns the impact of Thatcher and the Thatcher decade on the British party system and the conduct of British politics. Thatcher is venerated now as one of the most important leaders the Conservatives have ever had, but in many ways she was not a normal Conservative leader, but an outsider, like several other major Conservative leaders, notably Disraeli and Churchill. She was an outsider partly because of her gender and partly because she challenged the Conservative establishment, and in many areas was a deeply unconservative figure. She seemed never satisfied with what had been achieved and was always pressing for further reforms. While she was Prime Minister, she sometimes gave the impression that she was campaigning with the people against the government of which she was head. Her instincts were often populist; she rarely saw issues through the lenses of the Establishment, but always from the perspective of the people, her people. She understood how a broad stratum of Middle England felt because she felt the same way. It was one of her greatest strengths as well as one of her greatest weaknesses. It ensured that she inspired intense devotion among many



Conservative party members, as well as among tabloid proprietors and editors. She had a much more supportive press than any Prime Minister in the last 50 years.

Yet although she aspired to be a leader for all the nation, in practice there were many parts of the nation she did not understand and did not succeed in reaching. She wanted to capture the inner cities for Conservatism, to win back the great northern cities, and to make Scotland a Conservative and Unionist stronghold again. But during her time in office the Conservative party lost even more ground in these areas. The narrowness of her appeal and her divisiveness was one of the things which worried many of her colleagues, as did her increasingly autocratic behaviour after 1987. Those in the party who urged that the Government should consolidate the gains it had made and seek to lower the political temperature were peremptorily brushed aside by Thatcher, but she always found it difficult to find allies who were both able and reliable to carry through her project. She did have some, particularly Norman Tebbit and Nicholas Ridley, but most of her Cabinets were populated by Conservatives who did not share her Manichaean view of the world, or her enthusiasm for permanent revolution. Some key ministers who had been loyal Thatcherites fell out with her over substantive policy issues – management of the economy in the case of Nigel Lawson, and Europe in the case of Geoffrey Howe. The resignation of those two ministers paved the way for the rebellion in the parliamentary party which would oust her.

The way in which she fell was even more dramatic than the way she first captured the leadership, and contributed to her myth. Forced to submit to an election under the party's rules she did not lose the vote on the first ballot. She had 52 more votes than her challenger, Michael Heseltine. But she needed a lead of 54 to avoid a second ballot. Although she at first declared that she would contest the second ballot (we fight, we fight to win), support ebbed away from her in the next 24 hours. So dominant had she been that her inability to win on the first ballot damaged her authority beyond repair. When she spoke to members of her Cabinet individually a majority professed loyalty to her, but many of them told her they expected her to lose and that she would hand the leadership to Heseltine. Reluctantly she accepted their assessment and resigned. Thatcher subsequently described the behaviour of her Cabinet as treachery with a smile on its face, and another part of the Thatcher myth was put in place. But again the myth is not quite right. For once in her political career Thatcher uncharacteristically blinked. Her nerve failed her and she gave up the fight. She could have accepted Alan Clark's advice to go down with all guns blazing, but she chose not to do so. She had a majority of 52 on the first ballot, none of her Cabinet colleagues were willing to oppose her openly, yet she walked away rather than risk defeat.

Her decision had a big impact on the Conservative party. The party has struggled with the legacy she left them. No Conservative leader since Thatcher has been able to establish the kind of authority she had, partly because they are all measured against her. Although John Major was her choice as successor and prevailed over the

‘assassin’ Michael Heseltine, she soon despaired of his leadership, and let it be known that she had been deceived by him. The only successor she really warmed to was Tony Blair. He shared her view of the priority which should be given to the Atlantic Alliance and to fighting international terrorism, and she came to regard the creation of New Labour as one of her most important achievements. The transformation of the Labour party into a pro-market, Atlanticist party was remarkable; for a brief period at the beginning of the 1980s it had been neither.

David Cameron after he became leader in 2005, following three consecutive defeats, did try to move the party away from her legacy, but he has faced persistent hostility from a minority of the party, which has repeatedly rebelled against his leadership, aided by a significant part of the Conservative press and Conservative commentators. The issues are above all Europe, but also immigration and the economy, as well as the liberal agenda Cameron has pursued on the family and gay marriage. The Thatcherite opposition within the Conservative party yearns for a new Thatcher figure they can rally round, although in some respects they have also begun to reject Thatcher’s legacy. Many Conservative eurosceptics are opposed to Britain getting involved in any wars or humanitarian interventions which are not directly related to Britain’s national interests. They are sceptical of the benefits of the special relationship with the United States. The vote against military intervention against Syria in August 2013 was a clear instance of this new isolationist mood in the party, one shared fully by UKIP. Thatcher made abundantly clear in several of her writings after she left office that she favoured military action against Syria, Iraq and all other dictatorships in the Middle East which were opposed to the West and sponsored terrorism against it. In taking the stance he did on Syria and support for the United States, Cameron was following in the footsteps of Thatcher and Blair, but a large part of the Thatcherite wing of the party repudiated his stance.

The Thatcher myth is something no Conservative leader can now ignore. Tribute has to be paid to her memory and achievements, as David Cameron did most eloquently at the time of her death. Announcing that the funeral would be a ‘ceremonial’ funeral, similar to those held for the Queen Mother and Princess Diana, he intended to signal how strongly the Government wished to honour her memory. No other Prime Minister had been granted such an honour, and Cameron may have hoped such a gesture would forestall criticism from his Thatcherite critics in the party and the media. If so it was only partly successful. *The Daily Mail* immediately labelled the decision not to grant Thatcher a full state funeral a disgrace, and invited its readers to sign a petition calling for Downing Street to think again.

Churchill was the only twentieth century British Prime Minister granted a state funeral. A state funeral requires a vote in Parliament to authorise it, and the attendance of the monarch, although Queen Victoria refused to attend Gladstone’s. A vote in Parliament would not have been unanimous and therefore potentially embarrassing, so the Government avoided it. The Queen decided to attend the funeral in any case, the only time apart from Churchill that she has attended the funeral of one of her Prime



Ministers. There was some puzzlement as to why she did so, an honour not given to any Labour Prime Minister, not even Attlee. Some suggested it was because Margaret Thatcher was the first woman Prime Minister. She had already been given the final vacant plinth in the lobby of the House of Commons, her statue standing with those of Churchill, Lloyd George and Attlee as one of the four great Prime Ministers of the twentieth century. But another explanation is that it was because Thatcher like Churchill was a war leader. Thatcher's only war was the 10 week Falklands war, but it stood out as a victory won by the British armed forces acting on their own, possibly for the last time. Burying Thatcher was also the final, delayed burial of imperial Britain. Her legacy preserved it a while longer but now it is gone.

When the myth is stripped away Thatcher is still the dominant figure in her era, but her achievements are more qualified and provisional, in the way that political achievements always are. Her legacy has been shaped as much by the unintended as by the intended consequences of her actions. Her intransigence over devolution to Scotland helped create the conditions which led to the collapse of support for Conservative Unionism north of the border, the re-establishment of a Scottish Parliament, and the steady advance of the SNP pledged to taking Scotland out of the Union altogether. Her enthusiasm for free markets assisted the rise of a more individualist and permissive culture associated with forms of individual autonomy which undermined social conservative values. Her support for the European single market created the conditions for the surge in immigration which started during the boom of the 1990s. Her solutions for British economic problems created a deep-seated dependency culture. Setting the banks free unleashed the financial revolution that culminated in the spectacular crash of 2008. There are many other examples. Perhaps the greatest of all was that she divided the Conservative party against itself, destroying it as a credible governing party for 13 years, the longest period the Conservatives had been out of office in the modern democratic era. Even now in 2014 Conservative party hegemony is not yet restored. Thatcher partly succeeded in remaking the main opposition party in British politics in her own ideological image, but she also helped destroy the old Conservative party which had dominated British politics for so long.

At the Carlton Club meeting in 1922, which broke up the Coalition, Stanley Baldwin said Lloyd George was a dynamic force, a terrible thing in politics. He had already destroyed the Liberal Party and Baldwin feared he would in time destroy the Conservative party too. Thatcher was another dynamic force, and many of the consequences of her decade in office still shape British politics.

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