

In life as in death? Margaret Thatcher (mis)remembered.

As Tory prime minister from 1979 to 1990, she pursued crazed monetarist economic policies, destroyed millions of manufacturing jobs, slashed public spending and devastated Britain's industrial heartlands. Her star-struck Tory supporters hailed her as a goddess of wealth creation and conqueror of socialism, while millions of angry working-class people saw her - inaccurately - as an evil fascist witch. Far from adopting fascist economic policies for Britain, she was in fact a fanatical believer in the gospel of unbridled free-market capitalism. Together with right-wing US president Ronald Reagan, she sowed the seeds of today's global capitalist crisis, and lit the torch of obscene profiteering and greed which was later eagerly taken up by Tony Blair and new Labour.... Her grip on power was aided and abetted by a rabid Tory press - and by serious divisions on the left.... [She] launched a full-scale onslaught in 1984 against Britain's miners, branding the mineworkers' union and left-wing trade unionists as "the enemy within" and mobilising the police and secret service to harass, infiltrate and destabilise the left during the year-long miners' strike. She also attacked pensions by cutting the link with earnings, introduced vicious anti-union laws, sold off huge swathes of council housing, abolished the Greater London Council and tightened the central government stranglehold over local authorities. Yet she managed to con millions of working people into voting Tory.

This was how the *Morning Star*, by far the least read but also the most left-wing national newspaper in Britain, assessed the country's former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her legacy on the day after she died, aged 87, in April 2013. Not surprisingly, given the right-wing stance which characterises the majority of UK dailies, it stood in marked contrast to most of what appeared in other newspapers that day and in the days that followed. Indeed, its coverage stood out not just because of its tone but because of its brevity. Most other titles not only held the front page but filled many of their inside pages with appreciation, commentary and debate. Many, in

the days that followed Thatcher's passing, also produced special souvenir pull-outs packed with glossy photos of the lady herself. The Sundays followed suit in due course. Nor was coverage confined to the UK itself. Print as well as broadcast media all over the world covered the story.¹

Lady Thatcher, of course, was literally a legend in her own lifetime. However, the construction of a myth is a process of accretion and as such both long and uneven: there are periods in which nothing much is deposited, only for whole layers to be added in the space of a few months, weeks or even days – the time it takes to fight a war or for a scandal to blow up and blow over or to announce a budget, pass a piece of legislation, win an election, quit the top job, set up a foundation, publish one's memoirs, and earn a fortune on the lecture circuit. Death itself is clearly a critical juncture, a heaven-sent opportunity for fans and foes alike to try to polish or tear to pieces a reputation built over a lifetime. For scholars and students of politics, however, it presents another kind of opportunity – a chance to take not a pot-shot but a snapshot of the common wisdom and the causes of contestation which surround that leader. How we do this depends on how we work. Here, we read the (for the most part unsigned) obituaries and editorials published the day after Thatcher died in all Britain's national newspapers and ask what are the main themes and tropes that emerge? What, given what we know from the various primary and secondary sources already published on Thatcher, her party and her government, do those obits and editorials get right (or half-right) and what do they get wrong? And what are the things which we might think are important but which they decide either to play down or to leave out altogether?

Harmony and truth

The one thing that all the obituaries and editorials agree on is that Thatcher was and is destined to remain a polarising figure. Ambivalence, it would appear, is impossible: as the *Daily Star*'s editorial put it, 'The "Iron Lady" was like Marmite - loved and loathed in equal measure'. That trope, repeated again and again (and again) is generally underpinned by an assumption, often made explicit, that the very different reactions she prompted (and continues to prompt) are somehow unique – a claim that easily contested given the devotion and disgust inspired by a more recent occupant of Number Ten, Tony Blair, in the wake of the Iraq war

Another area of agreement between the obituaries and editorials across the political spectrum is the impact of Thatcher's upbringing (and in particular her father) on the values which she went on to import into her politics and her government's policies. That upbringing was variously described as: Methodist, modest, small business, austere, teetotal, narrow-minded, petit-bourgeois. The long list of the values that upbringing gave her included the following: 'the homely virtues of thrift, family and elbow-grease', 'personal freedom, self reliance, strong defences, low taxes, no union tyranny, no nanny state, no EU meddling', 'virtues of independence, of self-sufficiency, of trading and saving to ensure a living, of running a tight household budget' 'hard work', 'integrity', 'a sense of duty, good neighbourliness, and civic pride', 'thrift', 'personal responsibility', 'market forces', 'Victorian' 'ancient English' 'unswerving, iron-clad patriotism', 'aspiration', and 'liberty in the purest sense'. Presumably on the assumption that the stereotypical working class layabout or

champagne socialist couldn't possibly subscribe to them, a number of titles see those values, and indeed Thatcher herself, as being quintessentially middle-class.

There is also some agreement that it was these 'simple truths', as the *Times* editorial calls them, rather than a systematic ideology based on the works of key thinkers often associated with the new right, which drove her: Friedman doesn't merit a passing mention and Hayek gets only three (and only then in editorials rather than the obituaries proper). Even if they fail to mention that Heath's dismissal was initially extremely unpopular among grassroots members (who don't, much like the rest of the Conservative Party's organisation, get much of a look-in in the coverage), one or two newspapers also point out, that it was these gut feelings that eventually made Thatcher such a favourite with the grassroots. She was indeed the first post-war leader of the Party to tell its activists what they wanted to hear, not because she thought it would get her through a tricky party conference speech or because she needed to gee them up at election time but because she genuinely believed it herself.

In keeping with this, many of the obituaries and editorials hint at Thatcher's tendency to think in black and white, good and evil, Manichean terms. Some then go on to suggest that this was a source of both strength and weakness – as the *Financial Times*' obituary put it '[t]he flipside of her courage, toughness and radicalism was an arrogance, obstinacy and remoteness that became more marked the longer she clung to office'. There is also widespread agreement that she found 'her abrupt and forced exit from frontline politics', as the *FT* put it, so difficult to take that she never really managed to come to terms with it, her sense of disorientation, bitterness and betrayal spilling over into her treatment of the man she had originally favoured to succeed her,

John Major. This was particularly the case, the papers note, when it came to his handling of this country's relationship with the European Union – an issue she had by then come to see in essentially either/or terms. That said, so sympathetic to her are some titles, and so keen to believe that she cannot possibly have treated Major as badly after 1990 as Ted Heath treated her after 1975, that they woefully underplay the havoc she wreaked over Maastricht (and more). To read that she was 'less than helpful to her successors' (the *Express*), that she 'returned sporadically, and not always helpfully, to the political fray' after her resignation (the *Times*), that she 'did not consciously wish to undermine her chosen successor' but 'was often indiscreet in her comments' (the *Telegraph*), and that 'her strictures on Major did not carry the bitterness and resentment of Heath's criticisms of her' (the *Mail**) must have provoked some hollow laughter among those who had to manage the consequences at the time.

A number of obituaries and editorials trot out the familiar line that Thatcher liked an argument and admired people who stood up to her. But a few of them – even those published in more right-wing outlets – admit instead that, insofar as this was ever true, it became increasingly less so. They also note that her inability to brook disagreement and her unwillingness to listen was made worse as time went on by her surrounding herself with counsellors who were too prone to confirm rather than question her judgment, with the *Times* for one noting 'her excessive reliance on close personal advisers such as her press spokesman, Bernard Ingham, and her Foreign Office Private Secretary, Charles Powell.' Many papers also recall the fatal damage inflicted on her relationship with Chancellor Nigel Lawson by her seeking the advice of her economic (and then her erstwhile economic) adviser, Alan Walters.

Interestingly, few of the obituaries and editorials – perhaps because they only have limited space in which to capture the essence of the woman, perhaps because they are so keen to fix her as forever the Grantham grocer’s daughter – focus on just how much she changed over the course of her time in Number Ten. This is surprising since nearly all of them, irrespective of their political leanings, emphasise the fact, while very much a warrior, she was, at least at the outset, a warrior who knew when to fight and when to proceed more peacefully. This invariably illustrated by their pointing to her careful handling of the National Union of Mineworkers in her first term, but also (in some outlets at least) by her accepting the inevitable in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Hong Kong, and by her willingness to go ahead with the Anglo-Irish Agreement only a year after the IRA’s bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton in 1984. According to the *Times*’ editorial, for instance, ‘It is wrong to think of her as committed to plunging ahead, whatever the circumstances. She was much shrewder than that.... [I]n pursuit of a firm objective, she was more the clear-sighted politician than she was the wild-eyed revolutionary.’ Meanwhile the *Guardian*’s obituary noted that while ‘[c]onflict was at the heart of Thatcher’s style...it is a myth that she never ducked a challenge. Ever a pragmatist, she was astute in the fights she picked.’ Most also acknowledge, albeit implicitly, that this combination of conviction and canniness never completely deserted her – something that helps explain why, at the end, she accepted the advice of her colleagues to step down so as to prevent Michael Heseltine taking over and (as she saw it) undoing all her achievements.

As for what those achievements are, there is widespread agreement that her biggest impact was on the economy. That said, there is some acknowledgement, even in

some of the more right-wing outlets, that her contribution lay more in shifting the structure of the economy in the long-term than in turbo-charging its performance over the course of her years in office. Indeed, there is some recognition – particularly in the longer, non-tabloid obituaries which get time to trace the recession, boom and bust of the eighties – that on a number of conventional measures, the British economy performed erratically, if not poorly, between 1979 and 1990, by which time, as the *Times*' obituary notes '[t]alk of Britain's "economic miracle" began to sound hollow.' Instead, her outstanding achievements, as outlets across the ideological spectrum acknowledge, are lie in three areas. First, her government accelerated a move away from manufacturing and extractive industries toward services by withdrawing the subsidies and cheap money relied on by the former and deregulating the latter. Second, it shrunk state ownership through privatisation and council house sales. Third, it altered the balance of power between labour and capital, thereby, to quote the *Telegraph*'s editorial, accelerating 'the process of adjustment from a closed, state-dominated, heavy-industry-based economy to a more open, consumercentric and entrepreneurial culture' that, in the words of the *Mail*, 'laid the groundwork for a competitive modern economy, with sustainable jobs for future generations'. There is, however, much less agreement about how the process was handled and its long term consequences – with the arguments running, at least in the case of the first, along a predictable continuum.

The more right wing a paper is, the more likely it is to portray the first of these achievements as painful but necessary and ultimately successful (no mention of David Cameron's call for a 'rebalancing' towards manufacturing here). The more left-leaning a title the more likely it is to highlight the pain and question the gain. Aside

from the *Morning Star*, the mass circulation, Labour-supporting *Mirror* predictably leads the pack on this one, its editorial insisting,

Selfish, reckless greed was unleashed in the City of London while much of the rest of the country endured mass unemployment. Deepening poverty created two nations. And on one side, dumped on the scrapheap, were the bruised and bloodied casualties of her economic and political drive. Margaret Thatcher broke Britain and replaced what had come before with something crueller, nastier. Many of the problems experienced today on bleak estates - joblessness, drugs, despair and hopelessness - can be traced back to her disastrous premiership. The balance sheet weighs heavily against her....

The *Independent's* editorial is more measured but makes some of the same points:

very many of the policies with which her name is identified to this day retain the negative aspects for which they were opposed then. Council house sales depleted the stock of social housing, running up a bill the country is still paying. Popular capitalism produced new shareholders, but new losers, too, when the financial crisis struck. The "Big Bang" that freed trading in the City from many of its constraints can also be seen with hindsight as the genesis of the excesses of the 1990s and 2000s. The de-fanging of the trade unions...also contributed, it can be argued, to the problems of low-wages and low productivity in the largely deregulated economy of today.

Although there is some mention of these downsides in right-wing newspapers, they spend much more time celebrating the upsides of policies, with right to buy being a particular favourite, as much for its apparently fundamental cultural as well as economic consequences.

Those same newspapers also have almost nothing but good to say about what they routinely portray as Thatcher's taming of the trade unions. There are, however, respectful nods made in the direction of ordinary miners in the 1984-5 coal dispute, although mainly along the lines (albeit implicitly) of their being lions led by donkeys, the asses in question being the NUM leadership and in particular Arthur Scargill, who even the left-wing *Mirror* admits 'was too rabid, too unprepared to reason, too much of a bully.' This sentiment is echoed by other left-leaning titles, which (with the partial exception of the *Independent*, which suggests that the taming of the trade unions can be linked to the problems faced nowadays by those at the bottom end of the labour market), exhibit little or no nostalgia for the days of 'beer and sandwiches at Number Ten'. That this is the case reflects widespread agreement that Thatcher's political impact on the Labour Party was profound. That said, while many believe Blair adapted to Thatcherism, they do not – quite rightly – argue that he adopted it wholesale. Indeed, only the *Morning Star* goes so far as to agree with the *Mail* * that Labour won in 1997 'only by imitating much of her style, tone and policies.'

Agreement among obituary and editorial writers across the political spectrum also extends to judgements on one of the key moments in Thatcher's career – the Falklands conflict, which the *Guardian's* editorial goes so far as to suggest may have 'rescued her from the footnotes of political history'. This is surely an overstatement, although few are in any doubt that she played a crucial personal role in determining that this country would despatch a task force to retake the islands from Argentina and that the open-ended support she offered the military was vital in assuring the success of what was a dangerous and risky operation. Still, there remains (as there does among academics) a degree of disagreement – mostly implicit – as to how important

that success (and her exploitation of it) was in turning around her government's fortunes prior to the 1983 election. Generally, the papers are more inclined to argue that beating the 'Argies' (an anachronistic epithet that only the *Daily Star* insists on using) mattered more to this country's government than it did to Thatcher winning a second term. To the Tory-supporting titles especially, it not only put a patriotic spring in the step of the British people but, along with Thatcher's willingness to play hardball in European negotiations and stand up to the Soviet Union, it put the UK back on the map as a country that could no longer be ignored.

Error, discord and doubt

Just because many of the papers agree on something, however, does not of course mean they are right. This is perhaps best illustrated by the column inches devoted to Thatcher's role in another, much bigger conflict and her relationship with its key players. It would be difficult to find an academic specialist who disagreed with the argument that she was particularly committed to the special relationship with the USA or that she enjoyed an especially close ideological affinity with the second of the three US Presidents whom she worked with, Ronald Reagan. Likewise there is little doubt that Thatcher was able, in spite of their obvious differences, to achieve a working relationship with the man who turned out to be the last leader of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev – or that even before the Soviet empire collapsed she was something of a celebrity, perhaps even a heroine, to those who then went on to preside over the dismantling of the dysfunctional and oppressive state socialism that scarred Central and Eastern Europe from the late forties until the early nineties. Yet to read some of

the papers, one might conclude that Thatcher had plucked a fortunate Gorbachev ('still a relatively minor figure in the Politburo' according to the *Guardian*!) out of obscurity, the *Times* noting, for instance, that she 'took pride in the claim that she had "discovered" him in 1984'. Apparently, however, Margaret Thatcher wasn't just Simon Cowell; she was also Cilla Black, the *Telegraph* praising '[h]er work...in bringing Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev together'. Meanwhile, to an extent that would amaze most Americans 'it is even questionable whether the West could have won the Cold War without the Iron Lady to give Ronald Reagan backbone' – at least according to the *Mail's* editorial. It isn't alone: the *Express's* editorial is similarly convinced that she 'stiffened the resolve of Ronald Reagan to stand up to the Soviet menace.' And it didn't stop there apparently: according to the *Telegraph's* editorial 'even in the twilight of her premiership, she stiffened the sinews of her allies - especially Reagan's successor, George HW Bush - in responding to Saddam Hussein's unprovoked aggression in Kuwait.'

That Thatcher is portrayed as both extraordinarily combative and willing to think outside the box on this as on so many other issues is routinely attributed – right across the ideological spectrum – not just to her values but to the fact that she was always something of 'an outsider' (as she was called by the *Times*, *Guardian* and *Independent*), even in the party she led for so long. Here again, however, many of the obituaries and editorials, irrespective of whether the outlets in which they appear are fans or foes, rather overdo it. They are spot-on when it comes to her penchant for populism, her tendency to portray herself as a tribune of the people battling on their behalf against some sort of soggy-centrist establishment elite. And they are right of course to point out (as pretty much all of them do at the same time as reminding

readers that she was capable of exploiting her femininity) that the mere fact that she was a woman in an overwhelmingly male environment meant she could never be run-of-the-mill. But that is no excuse for implying that hers was some sort of unprecedented rags to riches story or (to borrow a phrase from the *Times*' obituary) that she was by the mid-seventies 'the spearhead of a small group of Right-wing ideologues' who had previously had no purchase whatsoever on either the hearts or the minds of a Tory Party. After all, her predecessor, Ted Heath, had come from an even more 'ordinary' background and had made it to the top without, as she did, marrying a millionaire.² Moreover, the manifesto on which he fought the 1970 election – if not the two elections of 1974 – was in many ways the precursor of the neo-liberal, smaller government, tame-the-trade-union pitch she made to the electorate nine years later. Furthermore, there were large numbers of Tory MPs who were already keen or else reconciled to it being pursued when they voted for her rather than Heath in 1975 – a contest in which, academic research has shown (but the obituaries hardly seem to realise), ideology as well as sheer desperation played a big part.

When it comes to the reasons behind her own demise, the papers are divided. Most concur that her campaign, once the contest was declared, was a mess and that she made a bad mistake in assuming that getting on with the job of Prime Minister (which among other things meant going to the CSCE summit in Paris just as Tory MPs were to vote) would be a better way to win them over than wooing them in the tearooms at Westminster. But when it comes to explaining why the contest had to be called in the first place, too many papers overstate the extent to which Thatcher's downfall was due to Europe and to her Cabinet. Indeed, some of the more right-wing titles – rather predictably perhaps – conflate the two, with the Sun naturally in the vanguard: 'The

end only came’, according to its editorial, ‘when Maggie was treacherously brought down by pro-EU fanatics on her own side.’

In reality, of course, as some newspapers implicitly recognise, Thatcher was ultimately brought down not over Europe or by her Cabinet but by her parliamentary party. Tory MPs, in the wake of a run of bad by-election defeats and awful opinion polls, had become convinced that they could not win a general election if she were to remain Prime Minister. Her staying on, they reasoned, meant it would be impossible to get rid of the Poll Tax (which, to be fair, most papers do mention). Had her Cabinet been more determined to defend the Prime Minister, and particularly if Geoffrey Howe had chosen not to resign over her intemperate remarks on the 1990 Rome summit (‘No, no, no!’) but decided instead to carry on putting up with her humiliating treatment, then it might – just – have helped her quell the mounting panic on the backbenches. But how long a show of unity at the top could have held the line as electoral meltdown loomed larger and larger is surely a moot point.

It is not a point, however, that some of the more right-wing titles would be willing to concede. Indeed, so strong is their continued hostility toward those ‘pro-European’ Cabinet ministers who supposedly stabbed Thatcher in the back or else failed to back her to the hilt, that they are lumped together with those who had supposedly made her life so difficult right at the beginning of her tenure as leader, namely what the *Express*’ editorial called the ‘weak-willed Conservative “Wets”’ who, it insists, up until 1982/3 ‘formed a majority in her Cabinet.’ It was her ‘decisive stand’ against ‘the fanaticism with which the Brussels political class pursued its goal of “ever closer

union”’, it goes on to inform readers, which ‘helped to bring the Iron Lady down by finally giving the “Wets” she despised a galvanising motive to topple her.’

This is highly misleading in two ways. For one thing, it totally misconstrues the ideological stances of those involved. None of them (with the possible exception of Chris Pattern) could seriously be associated, for instance, with the kind of patrician centrism that characterised the Toryism of the archetypal ‘Wet’ of that earlier era, Ian Gilmour. Nor, unless one is talking purely in relative terms, were many (if any) of them ‘pro-European’ in the sense of being federalists or even Heath-style enthusiasts. For another – and this is a problem with many academic as well as popular accounts of Thatcher’s early years as party leader and Prime Minister – it completely overstates the number and the influence of the ‘Wets’ back in the late seventies and early eighties. On becoming leader, Thatcher wasted little time in clearing out most of them and shunted most of those whom she still thought were worth keeping in spite of their politics into portfolios which did not touch on the policies she cared most about. The three exceptions to the rule all had a particular logic to them. Peter Carrington was a born diplomat and, as Foreign Secretary, would have no role in domestic policy. Willie Whitelaw, at the Home Office, was her loyal deputy and could normally be persuaded (or bounced) into taking a harder line than he personally might have liked. True, the same could not be said of Jim Prior, at Employment, but he provided useful (if false) reassurance in opposition that the Conservatives were not itching to take on the trade unions once again. Having performed this role for a couple of years in government as well, he was then sent to the Northern Ireland Office in the reshuffle of 1981.

That reshuffle seems (judging by the books as well as the obituaries) to have passed into folklore as the moment at which Thatcher at last assumed control of her government. But this is patently ridiculous: the famously dramatic Cabinet meeting that preceded it represents nothing more than a temporary wobble by some of those loyal to her combined with an unsuccessful rearguard action by a small minority who had been utterly unable to stop Thatcher and her key lieutenants doing what they wanted since she took over. Moreover, look at the three supposedly high-profile wets who left the Cabinet: Gilmour had been in a Cabinet minister for just two months before the February 1974 election before he was made Carrington's junior minister at 1979; Christopher Soames, a former Ambassador and European Commissioner, was no more than the Party's Leader in the House of Lords; and Mark Carlisle was Secretary of State for Education – a post which Thatcher had good reason to know was a complete backwater. Wets they may have been. Big beasts they were not.

This tendency to overstate the calibre of those colleagues whose views were uncongenial to Thatcher in the early years co-exists with a tendency in some of the obituaries and editorials to underplay the quality – and the autonomy – of those who served alongside her in later years. Clearly, the 'tigress surrounded by hamsters' trope has captured the field. True, Geoffrey Howe and Nigel Lawson get plenty of mentions, particularly when it comes to their part in her downfall. But even they are given insufficient recognition – especially when compared to that afforded to Keith Joseph – in the late seventies and early-to-mid-eighties. Others get only the odd mention, with Tebbit and Parkinson topping the list, though more because they were seen to be personal favourites and because of the Brighton bomb (in the case of the former) and the scandal that set back his career (in the case of the latter). Those

papers which carry longer pieces do admit in passing the role one or two of her ministers (namely Baker at Education and Clarke at Health) played in particular policies. But even their accounts fail properly to recognise that many government measures were driven by ministers who, rather than simply dancing to the tune of their beady-eyed mistress, had ideas (and institutionalised powerbases) of their own. And even this, certainly in the eyes of those academics who place considerable emphasis on structures and/or institutions, is to overplay the role of particular individuals – let alone one supposedly supreme being – in policy making and governance.

Carlyle, in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, concluded that the great man was ‘always as lightning out of Heaven; the rest of men waited for him like fuel, and then they too would flame.’ In real life, it rarely works like that. Few if any of the obituaries and editorials come close to making this point, although there are some that, while still agency-centred, do point to the role of contingency: the *Times*’ obituary, for instance, while acknowledging that she ‘rode her good fortune hard’ feels obliged to admit that she was lucky, not least when it came to her enemies. In some ways this tendency to exaggerate Thatcher’s role in driving everything that her governments did is understandable, even excusable: after all, obituaries are almost bound to portray their subjects as the sun around which other stars revolve. What may be less easy to forgive (especially for those of us who lived through some of them) is the complete caricature of the years, indeed the decades, which preceded Margaret Thatcher becoming Prime Minister. There have been some fairly devastating attacks on the purported existence of a post-war consensus by contemporary historians and political scientists in recent years. But it is clear that

outside the academy it remains too convenient a fiction ever to be dispensed with. Even so, to suggest that it was Thatcher who single-handedly, by sheer force of will tore it apart is to completely decontextualise both her and her thinking. After all, it was the Labour government she took over from which had first proclaimed publicly that ‘the party’s over’ and swallowed, not completely without conviction, the idea that traditional remedies for Britain’s economic problems were no longer sufficiently strong medicine. Moreover, those problems were not so much the product of some sort of cosy corporatism but of the failure of that approach to take root in the barren soil of adversarial politics and free collective bargaining which marked this country out from many of its more successful European rivals.

As if this weren’t enough, the majority of obituaries and editorials buy hook, line and sinker into the idea that the seventies were some sort of Sodom and Gomorrah which, were it not for Margaret Thatcher rescuing it from what the Telegraph calls ‘the path of demoralisation, diminishment and decline’, would eventually have witnessed the destruction of life as we know it. According to the *Mail*’s editorial, for instance,

The Britain she wrenched back to reality in 1979...seemed in terminal decline – a deeply demoralised country with an ossified class system, its economy a basket-case, throttled by a monstrous state sector and the rapacious demands of all-powerful trade unions barons.

Abroad, we were dismissed as a power whose glory-days were long past – a nation that had lost an empire and would never now find a role, beyond that of a suppliant, offshore client of Brussels.

The *Times*’ editorial echoes the same sentiment, recalling that she came to power ‘at the end of a terrible decade, two terrible decades, for Britain’, the result of which was

‘a national pessimism bordering on despair’. One doesn’t have to be an apologist for Heath or Wilson or Callaghan, or to look back through rose-tinted spectacles, to wonder if all this isn’t just a wee bit over-the-top. Sure, there were serious problems and periodic crises – it would be hard to identify a period where there weren’t – but millions of people got on very nicely thank you for most of that supposedly benighted decade, just as the majority of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had done throughout the supposedly ‘Hungry Thirties’ without being means-tested and then thrown out on to the streets to starve. Somebody save us, please, from the enormous condescension of posterity.

Despair

As is often the way, what is left out or at least underplayed of the obituaries and editorials is as interesting as what is included and emphasised. By its very nature the list is of course endless but some of the items on it are especially glaring. Rather surprisingly, Thatcher’s hardline and controversial remarks on immigration, for instance, are touched on in just two obituaries (in the *Times* and the *Independent*). And while the majority refer to riots in inner-cities in the early eighties, bizarrely not a single one of them comments on their racial dimension. This is presumably because, like her dismissive attitude to the ANC’s struggle against apartheid (which earns a brief mention only in the *Independent* and the *Morning Star*), all this makes for uncomfortable reading, especially for Conservatives who have apparently moved on since then. That said, nor is there anything but the most fleeting of references (and then only in one paper, the *Independent*) to her surely very contemporary concern with climate change – possibly because David Cameron’s purported desire to ‘get rid

of the all the green crap' has long been the aim of most Tory-supporting titles. By the same token perhaps, only one of them chooses to remember that by signing the Single European Act in 1986, Thatcher was the premier who presided over arguably the biggest single surrender of sovereignty in the history of this country's membership of what is now the EU. Certainly, one cannot imagine her later plea that she had been misled by her advisors being accepted by the media from any other prime minister, Labour or Tory.

Policy cock-ups – with the obvious exception of the Poll Tax – are also conspicuous by their absence. Thatcher's economic programme is routinely labelled 'monetarist' but there are only a couple of articles (in the *Telegraph* and the *Guardian*) that note (and even then only briefly) that gaining control of the money supply, except through interest and exchange rates, turned out to be far easier in theory than it ever was in practice. And while two obituaries mention in passing her government's decision (now reversed by Cameron) to detach state pensions from average earnings, there is no coverage of the inducements given to ordinary folk to buy into the private schemes which led straight to the industrial-scale misselling that cost so many of them so dear. Nor is there anything about the mess created by the Child Support Agency, despite the fact that its setting up was very much driven by bees in her own bonnet.

More generally, there is barely any mention (the *Times* and the *Morning Star* being honourable, if partial, exceptions) of the huge changes made to governance in this country during her time as Prime Minister, be they to do with central government (civil service reforms, agencies etc.) or its local equivalent (competitive tendering, rate-capping, abolition of the GLC, etc. etc.). And even when, as in the case of

privatisation and the diminution of union power, changes are made more of by the editorials and obituaries, there is often little or no hint given of quite how incremental and iterative the process behind them actually was. Scholars have shown again and again that the first moves were tentative, and only extended when they turned out to be surprisingly successful. Instead what we get in the accounts of many of the newspapers is the playing out of some sort of grand plan. It is also noticeable that, when it comes to taming the trade unions, far more emphasis is put Thatcher's humbling of the NUM and on her use of legislation to erode union's privileges than on the impact on their membership and their morale of her willingness to let unemployment rip to over three million. Likewise, one would look almost in vain for a mention of the fact that the huge cost to the Treasury of allowing joblessness to rise so high was offset by the receipts of privatisation as well as by the massive tax revenues generated by North Sea Oil – a commodity that, incredibly, receives only a single fleeting mention in the entire corpus of articles analysed.

But it is not only those academics interested in public policy and administration who would be disappointed in the picture painted by the papers. Anyone seeking a comparative angle would be wasting their time. There is much made, of course, of the blueprint she supposedly provided to those who took control of Eastern European countries after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, although it is difficult to imagine any course other than privatisation that could have been pursued by non-communists of whatever stripe. And the *Guardian's* editorial notes that 'Germany and other northern nations have shown [that] economic dynamism has been possible without the squandering of social cohesion that Mrs Thatcher promoted.' However, there is no mention made anywhere of the fact that neo-liberal, deregulatory policies were

pursued in the eighties by Labour rather conservative governments in Australia and New Zealand.

There is little in the obituaries which speaks to the interests of psephologists either. It has long been something of an old saw among academic analysts of voting that, although Thatcher won three elections on the trot, she did so without for the most part converting the British people to Thatcherite values; indeed, quite the opposite, some would argue. Yet, in the papers anyway, this goes largely unremarked. And when they talk about reasons why she was able to win so easily in 1983 and 1987 many of them take it as read that it had a lot to do with opposition to her being 'split' between Labour and the SDP-Liberal Alliance. Clearly, it never seems to occur to them that the main role of the latter might have been simply to prevent the Tories winning even bigger majorities by providing an alternative for those voters who had rejected Labour outright but who felt that the Conservatives under Thatcher were just a little too 'cruel but competent' for their taste. Nor, incidentally, is there much for media scholars, who will find little mention of Thatcher's incredibly close relationships with certain proprietors and their editors. Indeed, outside the pages of the more overtly left-wing titles like the *Guardian* (whose editorial notes she governed in 'the interests of the British business class as she perceived them') and the *Mirror* (whose obituary notes that Big Bang 'brought untold riches to City spivs' who 'made huge bonuses by shifting money around the globe, contributing nothing but their ability to play a market'), there is relatively little attempt to look across the piece at her policies and ask *cui bono*? Even one obvious and non-controversial answer, namely that the bulk of the South of England boomed while the rest of the country struggled, is barely touched upon.

Conclusion

In 1985, dons at Oxford University voted by a two-to-one majority against awarding her the honorary degree that had hitherto been handed to all Prime Ministers who had once sauntered as students amid those dreaming spires. It was a big story at the time but it receives only one solitary mention (in the *Times*, as it happens) in her obituaries. It's failure make the cut should serve as a warning to anyone who hopes that political scientists or historians are going to be able do much to qualify, contradict or confirm the common wisdom about Margaret Thatcher – at least in the short term. However much we are now all seekers after the holy grail of 'impact', academics enjoy rather less prominence in public discourse than do journalists and politicians – in spite of the fact that we consistently finish way above them in surveys of public trust.³ Scholars are also handicapped by the fact that, unlike those journalists and politicians, we tend to accord as much explanatory value to structures and institutions (and to contingency) as we do to agents. Human beings, however, seem to be hardwired to understand things through stories starring individual heroes and heroines wherein odds are overcome, battles are won, virtue and strength of character are ultimately rewarded, while complacency, arrogance and cruelty are eventually punished. We also remember rhymes and repetition - hence almost every single obituary featuring 'Milk Snatcher' and, of course, 'The lady's not for turning' (which must surely qualify as one of the top ten British political soundbites ever spun). Moreover, many of us, as we get older and especially if we are of a traditional turn of mind, also tend to think rather more of the past than we do of the present – which means that the *Sun* may well have found a ready audience when it asked 'isn't her clarity of purpose what

voters cry out for today? Not for Maggie the wishy-washy fudging of minnows like Dave, Nick and Ed.’

All this inevitably puts us dons (presuming for the moment that anyone gainfully employed in a British university actually describes themselves as a don nowadays) at a considerable disadvantage. All we can hope for perhaps is to have the last word, if not the last laugh. Once politicians have finally faded from folk memory and even their biographers have called it a day, it will be partly through our paltry efforts that they are eventually understood – always assuming, of course, that by then anybody is even the slightest bit interested in understanding them. *Sic transit gloria mundi*, even for Margaret Thatcher.

¹ For a window onto the world’s coverage, see Philipson, Alice, Hough, Andrew and Foreign Staff (2014) ‘Margaret Thatcher: how the papers covered her death’, *Telegraph Online*, 9 April, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/margaret-thatcher/9980529/Margaret-Thatcher-how-the-papers-covered-her-death.html>

² The *Independent*’s obituary noted (and was not alone in noting) that ‘there was no hot running water or inside lavatory in the family flat’, although not before mentioning too that her father, who became Mayor of Grantham, ‘owned two shops and employed five assistants’.

³ The pollster *IpsosMori* has been conducting these trust surveys for many years. In the latest, published in 2011, Professors had a net trust rating of plus-61 while journalists were on minus-61 and politicians on minus-66. <http://www.ipsos->

mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/15/Trust-in-Professions.aspx?view=wide