

Book Review: “There is No Alternative”: Why Margaret Thatcher Matters

Although Claire Berlinski's book represents an insightful account of Margaret Thatcher's background and years as Prime Minister, [Daniel Sage](#) finds the descriptions of British politics and society a little far-fetched.

“There is No Alternative”: Why Margaret Thatcher Matters. Claire Berlinski. [Basic Books](#). August 2010.

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Within the literary field of political biography, there are surely few politicians who have been so fully dissected and scrutinised as Margaret Thatcher. With her recent account of the Thatcher legacy, this is the difficult and challenging context which American journalist [Claire Berlinski](#) finds herself in.

Throughout the book, Berlinski adopts a typical biographical style, recounting many of Margaret Thatcher's most important and infamous political episodes. In the UK, Berlinski talks through Thatcher's upbringing as a grocer's daughter, her commitment to free market reforms and her bitter travails with trade unionism. Abroad, we are reminded of Thatcher's most important foreign endeavours, such as the Falklands war, her dealings with Europe and the final years of the Cold War.

Amidst these stories, Berlinski uses a wealth of data from original interviews with key political figures, as well as documenting a large amount of archival material from a diverse range of sources. As such, she manages to succeed in recounting the major events of the Thatcher era in a well researched and highly sourced style.

However, a biography of such a highly studied figure requires a strong narrative and original argument to tie and connect the key events under scrutiny. On this measure, Berlinski's account falls short; she fails to answer her central question of exactly why Thatcher matters in a wholly convincing or innovative way.

According to Berlinski, the thread which connects all the major markers of the Thatcher revolution, such as economic policy and trade union reform, is the success which such policies had in defeating socialism. This is the central thesis of “*There is No Alternative*”: that Thatcher saved Britain, and perhaps even the world, from the advances of socialism. Margaret Thatcher matters because “she perceived that the effects of Marxism upon Britain had been pernicious” and, ultimately, had the foresight and mastery to defeat the socialist threat.

However, Berlinski is only able to uphold such a thesis by formulating a highly exaggerated description of pre-Thatcher Britain as a fundamentally socialist, perhaps even Marxist, state. While she is correct to argue that the post-war consensus was fashioned by the British left, Berlinski is profoundly disingenuous in her description of what was an avowedly social democratic –not socialist – settlement, which promoted the goals of a mixed economy, the welfare state and full employment.

To support her thesis, Berlinski portrays a much embellished picture of a highly socialistic society. For example, she employs the tired and simplistic clichés of 98% tax rates, Labour's Clause IV (never a genuine aspiration) and “human corpses piled high on the streets” during the Winter of Discontent to illustrate an image of a British socialist dystopia. Equally, Berlinski draws a highly far-fetched dichotomy between pre- and post-Thatcher Britain. According to Berlinski, while Britons were once “ragged and worn down”, they now have “better skin and glossier hair (and) are well dressed”. Similarly, London – once a “dreary and sullen capital” – is now “pristine and gleaming”, “packed with purveyors of organic linens and upscale aromatherapists”.

Nevertheless, despite these often unsubstantiated generalisations, “*There is No Alternative*” is not an excessively politicised account of Thatcherism. While Berlinski is openly sympathetic to Thatcher's brand of economic liberalism, she does not shy from the problems wrought by free market reforms, such as inequality, worklessness and the damage done to many communities. Further, Berlinski's lengthy accounts of interviews with key political figures – such as Bernard Ingham, Neil Kinnock and Nigel Lawson – are



illuminating to read. Berlinski thus succeeds in producing a highly readable biography, rich in insight from many of Margaret Thatcher's contemporaries, which often evokes the subtleties of her complex character. What is far less insightful, and sometimes infuriating, is Berlinski's exaggerated descriptions of British politics and society. Without such annoyances, there is an entertaining read to be had.