

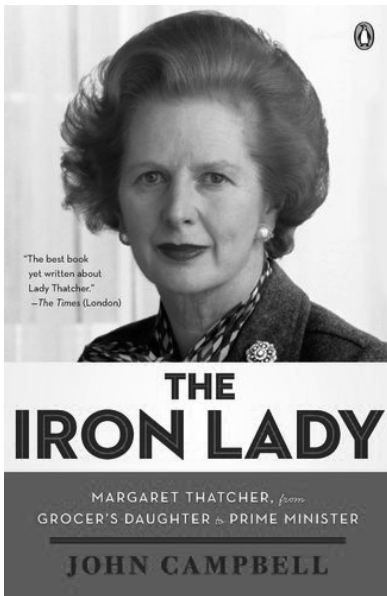
UDC 32:929 Thatcher M.(049.3)  
 Manuscript received: 15.03.2016.  
 Accepted for publishing: 19.04.2016.  
 Book review

Serbian Political Thought  
 No. 1/2016,  
 Year VIII, Vol. 13  
 pp. 169-173

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## The iron lady<sup>1</sup>

### John Campbell, *The Iron Lady: Margaret Thatcher, from Grocer's Daughter to Prime Minister*, Penguin Books, New York, 2011, p. 564.



Recent international context, including the security concerns

regarding global wave of terrorism spurring from the prolonged Middle Eastern crises; uneasy relations between Russia and the West; successful EU withdrawal referendum in the United Kingdom (“Brexit”); and rising authoritarian tendencies in several established democracies – seemed to many as a sign of history repeating itself. A number of researchers, analysts, and commentators predicted the “Second Cold War”, a new era of instability and conflict in international arena. The analogies of this kind are certainly appealing to the general public. Geopolitical reality is, however, more complex. Today’s events

1 This review was created in the framework of the scientific project “Democratic and National Capacities of Political Institutions in the Process of International Integrations” (no. 179009), funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

often have their roots in the complicated network of causes, motives and reasons, a number of them reaching from as far as the original Cold War period. Whatever the readers' approach is, the reviewed book is the perfect read for anyone wanting to know the events of the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, and assess their impact on our time. After all, the book is about a person who so strongly influenced the internal British and global political dynamics, that her legacy is still topical today, 26 years after retirement as Prime Minister.

John Campbell, a master of political biography genre, created this edition as an abridgement of the two previous, much larger volumes ("Margaret Thatcher: The Grocer's Daughter", published in 2000: and "Margaret Thatcher: The Iron Lady", from 2003 – totaling over 1550 pages); but nevertheless presented an important and comprehensive insight in Thatcher's life, from her small town upbringing to the positions of power, painting an image of a person, a party, a country and an epoch. Although the abridged version is more convenient to the general readership, the Campbell provided a mass of material and substance sufficient to stimulate the learned debate about the Thatcher's Era.

The author did not hesitate to make a number of judgments of his own in the process: some of them are poignant, others generous, but most of them are well balanced and fair. Regardless of personal affinities, one cannot deny that Margaret Thatcher is one of the most influential women and at the same time most controversial figures in modern politics, whose impact on history is unquestionable.

Few of the most recognizable characteristics of Mrs. Thatcher, which at the same time made her so controversial, were acknowledged as the specific traits of her personality: inexhaustible energy, work ethics, high confidence and ruthless determination on one hand; but also her uncompromising style of politics, her stubborn Machiavellian reasoning and even her constant moralizing and self-righteousness, on the other. Campbell's approach in research and writing is paying much attention to these features and their influence on politics (and policies), evaluating the input of psychological state and personal values on decision making process, which is often neglected in modern political sciences – which is examining actors more as rational agents. Far from the claim that Mrs. Thatcher was not rational, that

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part of her personality was well founded in the entrepreneurial heritage of her family and her own professional beginnings as the Oxford-educated chemical engineer. Other, more moralist side of her persona rose from conservative and Christian Methodist upbringing, which was heavily influenced by her father. Other influences, which Campbell masterfully observes, include her wartime experiences and memories, legal training, and personal relation and subsequent marriage with businessman Dennis Thatcher.

She also had a constant need for enemies, making all possible rivalries personal. Their name and form varied depending on the period: from trade unions and local self-governments, to Soviet Union, Irish Republican Army and European Community; from UK media to her former political allies. Some of these adversaries would subsequently cost her political career. Although Campbell does not say it explicitly, Thatcher poses as a perfect role model for populist leaders in today's democracies: neglecting the collective decision making, bypassing the formal procedures, dealing with rivals and allies on personal basis, and imposing her morals and worldview in an aggressive manner.

As we already underlined, this well researched book follows the "Iron Lady" (nickname originally coined as an insult by the Soviet media) from her early days, including education, through her first steps in politics as young parliament member and junior minister, to her unexpected rise to power as the successor of Edward Heath at the helm of Conservative party (1975), and finally, as United Kingdom's Prime Minister, after the electoral victory of 1979. But that was only the beginning! During her 11 years at the helm of the United Kingdom, Mrs. Thatcher created cultural, economic and political changes visible even today. She transformed UK into a society of popular capitalism – a "property-owning democracy" – unleashing the forces of market and entrepreneurship, breaking the back of the trade unions (most importantly, the miners) in the process. That made the Britain "governable" once more, having in mind that several governments before her were dismantled by aggressive trade union strikes and uprisings. Her political legacy included the displacement of the whole political spectrum to the right, steering not just her Conservatives, but also the Labor party in the ideology framework of free market capitalism. Thatcherism is even

today, three decades after her downfall, an established political ideology mimed all over the world.

Campbell praised the spirit of cooperation and her careful approach demonstrated in the first cabinet – both in internal politics, and also abroad. However, the results of reforms were slow to arrive, and social discontent grew larger with each new day. This all changed with the Falklands War. As John Campbell notes, this was her “finest hour”, which also gave her the confidence boost needed to clash with all potential enemies, home and abroad – often with a high dose of moral grandeur and self-righteousness. Falklands had triple effect: it established Margaret Thatcher as an uncompromising political figure; it gave the government and their measures high support in general public, making the support for Thatcher almost a civil duty for every Britton; and it re-established UK as global power. Campbell thoroughly examines Thatcher’s special relations with US president Ronald Reagan, her uncompromising attitude toward Mikhail Gorbachev, and her uneasy relations with the European Community.

The European Community, as author stated, gradually evolved into her prime political opponent, fitting perfectly not

just into compulsive need for enemies, but also in her moralist worldview emphasizing British exceptionalism over the rest of continent (stance debated in her own Conservative party and whole UK society even today, culminating with the “Brexit” referendum in June 2016). Campbell considers Europe to be one of the failures of her premiership (with immense consequences for Britain and the EU in the decades to come), finally causing her own downfall. Other causes for “defenestration” of 1990 included fatigue of voters with her hardheaded political style, several minor affairs connected with arms trade, and finally, a growing number of hostilities she created in her own party. Namely, a number of associates and former allies she once discarded, found their revenge in November 1990, siding with internal party opposition, and finally electing John Major as a new Conservative leader and Prime Minister.

It is ironic, as author himself notes, that Margaret Thatcher, who devoted almost entire political career to fighting Communism in all forms she perceived it (both as trade unions and Labour party at home, and as Soviet Union and its satellites abroad), was not in the position to relish the fruits of Cold War victory. But her hawkish and

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dichotomical view on international relations continued, for example in an attitude toward the Yugoslav conflict, which she saw in clear (yet, from our perspective, erroneous) Cold War, East vs. West, frame.

Nevertheless, Thatcher attracted enormous global interest and is often cited as greatest UK prime minister since Winston Churchill. She transformed Conservative Party and modern United Kingdom, simultaneously planting the seeds of the division on the European issue, whose far-reaching consequences are yet to be observed. This actuality is just one of the many values of John Campbell's notable book, presenting an image of dynamic, dominant character, with all of its strengths and flaws; and remarkable legacy she created. Campbell style is fluent and simple, but sometimes burdened with redundant episodes and characters often unknown and irrelevant for foreign readers – an objection which is not diminishing the overall worth of the book, which can be useful not just to the political and social scientists examining the Cold War period or contemporary British society, but also to the general readership eager to find out more about an extraordinary period of history and an extraordinary person. After all,

the new British Prime Minister, Conservative Theresa May, was faced with hundreds and hundreds of comparisons with Mrs. Thatcher in the first days of her rule – and will continue to be compared with the “Iron Lady” during the whole term as her premiership. This is just one of the indicators that Margaret Thatcher is a person whose place in history, for better or for worse, is secured.