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INTRODUCTION

Margaret Thatcher's political career has been one of the most remarkable of modern times. Born in October 1925 at Grantham, a small market town in eastern England, she rose to become the first (and for two decades the only) woman to lead a major Western democracy. She won three successive General Elections and served as British Prime Minister for more than eleven years (1979-90), a record unmatched in the twentieth century.

During her term of office she reshaped almost every aspect of British politics, reviving the economy, reforming outdated institutions, and reinvigorating the nation's foreign policy. She challenged and did much to overturn the psychology of decline which had become rooted in Britain since the Second World War, pursuing national recovery with striking energy and determination.

In the process, Margaret Thatcher became one of the founders, with Ronald Reagan, of a school of conservative conviction politics, which has had a powerful and enduring impact on politics in Britain and the United States and earned her a higher international profile than any British politician since Winston Churchill.

By successfully shifting British economic and foreign policy to the right, her governments helped to encourage wider international trends which broadened and deepened during the 1980s and 1990s, as the end of the Cold War, the spread of democracy, and the growth of free markets strengthened political and economic freedom in every continent.

Margaret Thatcher became one of the world's most influential and respected political leaders, as well as one of the most controversial, dynamic, and plain-spoken, a reference point for friends and enemies alike.

1925-1947: GRANTHAM & OXFORD

Margaret Thatcher's home and early life in Grantham played a large part in forming her political convictions. Her parents, Alfred and Beatrice Roberts, were Methodists. The social life of the family was lived largely within the close community of the local congregation, bounded by strong traditions of self-help, charitable work, and personal truthfulness.

The Roberts family ran a grocery business, bringing up their two daughters in a flat over the shop. Margaret Roberts attended a local state school and from there won a place at Oxford, where she studied chemistry at Somerville College (1943-47). Her tutor was Dorothy Hodgkin, a pioneer of X-ray crystallography who won a Nobel Prize in 1964. Her outlook was profoundly influenced by her scientific training.

But chemistry took second place to politics in Margaret Thatcher's future plans. Conservative politics had always been a feature of her home life: her father was a local councillor in Grantham and talked through with her the issues of the day. She was elected president of the student Conservative Association at Oxford and met many prominent politicians, making herself known to the leadership of her party at the time of its devastating defeat by Labour at the General Election of 1945.

1950-1951: CANDIDATE FOR DARTFORD

In her mid-twenties she ran as the Conservative candidate for the strong Labour seat of Dartford at the General Elections of 1950 and 1951, winning national publicity as the youngest woman candidate in the country.

She lost both times, but cut the Labour majority sharply and hugely enjoyed the experience of campaigning. Aspects of her mature political style were formed in Dartford, a largely working class constituency which suffered as much as any from post-war rationing and shortages, as well as the rising level of taxation and state regulation. Unlike many Conservatives at that time, she had little difficulty getting a hearing from any audience and she spoke easily, with force and confidence, on issues that mattered to the voters.

1951-1970: FAMILY & CAREER

It was in Dartford too that she met her husband, Denis Thatcher, a local businessman who ran his family's firm before becoming an executive in the oil industry. They married

in 1951. Twins — Mark and Carol — were born to the couple in 1953.

In the 1950s Margaret Thatcher trained as a lawyer, specialising in taxation. She was elected to Parliament in 1959 as Member of Parliament (MP) for Finchley, a north London constituency, which she continued to represent until she was made a member of the House of Lords (as Baroness Thatcher) in 1992. Within two years, she was given junior office in the administration of Harold Macmillan and during 1964-70 (when the Conservatives were again in Opposition), established her place among the senior figures of the party, serving continuously as a shadow minister. When the Conservatives returned to office in 1970, under the premiership of Edward Heath, she achieved cabinet rank as Education Secretary.

1970-1974: EDUCATION MINISTER

Margaret Thatcher had a rough ride as Education Minister. The early 1970s saw student radicalism at its height and British politics at its least civil. Protesters disrupted her speeches, the opposition press vilified her, and education policy itself seemed set immovably in a leftwards course, which she and many Conservatives found uncomfortable. But she mastered the job and was toughened by the experience.

The Heath Government itself took a beating from events during its tenure (1970-74) and disappointed many. Elected on promises of economic revival through taming the trade unions and introducing more free market policies, it executed a series of policy reverses — nicknamed the 'U turns' — to become one of the most interventionist governments in British history, negotiating with the unions to introduce detailed control of wages, prices, and dividends. Defeated at a General Election in February 1974, the Heath Government left a legacy of inflation and industrial strife.

1975: ELECTED CONSERVATIVE LEADER

Many Conservatives were ready for a new approach after the Heath Government and when the Party lost a second General Election in October 1974, Margaret Thatcher ran against Heath for the leadership. To general surprise (her own included), in February 1975 she defeated him on the first ballot and won the contest outright on the second, though challenged by half a dozen senior colleagues. She became the first woman ever to lead a Western political party and to serve as Leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons.

1975-1979: LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION

The Labour Government of 1974-79 was one of the most crisis-prone in British history, leading the country to a state of virtual bankruptcy in 1976 when a collapse in the value of the currency on the foreign exchanges forced the government to negotiate credit from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF imposed tight expenditure controls on the government as a condition of the loan, which, ironically, improved Labour's public standing. By summer 1978, it even looked possible that it might win re-election.

But over the winter of 1978/79, Labour's luck ran out. Trade union pay demands led to an epidemic of strikes and showed that the government had little influence over its allies in the labour movement. Public opinion swung against Labour and the Conservatives won a Parliamentary majority of 43 at the General Election of May 1979. The following day, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

1979-1983: PRIME MINISTER - FIRST TERM

The new government pledged to check and reverse Britain's economic decline. In the short-term, painful measures were required. Although direct taxes were cut, to restore incentives, the budget had to be balanced, and so indirect taxes were increased. The economy was already entering a recession, but inflation was rising and interest rates had to be raised to control it. By the end of Margaret Thatcher's first term, unemployment in Britain was more than three million and it began to fall only in 1986. A large section of Britain's inefficient manufacturing industry closed down. No one had predicted how severe the downturn would be.

But vital long-term gains were made. Inflation was checked and the government created the expectation that it would do whatever was necessary to keep it low. The budget of spring 1981, increasing taxes at the lowest point of the recession, offended conventional Keynesian economic thinking, but it made possible a cut in interest rates and demonstrated this newly found determination. Economic recovery started in the same quarter and eight years of growth followed.

Political support flowed from this achievement, but the re-election of the government was only made certain by an unpredicted event: the Falklands War. The Argentine Junta's invasion of the islands in April 1982 was met by Margaret Thatcher in the firmest way and with a sure touch. Although she worked with the US administration in pursuing the

possibility of a diplomatic solution, a British military Task Force was despatched to retake the islands. When diplomacy failed, military action was quickly successful and the Falklands were back under British control by June 1982.

The electorate was impressed. Few British or European leaders would have fought for the islands. By doing so, Margaret Thatcher laid the foundation for a much more vigorous and independent British foreign policy during the rest of the 1980s. When the General Election came in June 1983, the government was re-elected with its Parliamentary majority more than trebled (144 seats).

1983-1987: PRIME MINISTER - SECOND TERM

The second term opened with almost as many difficulties as the first. The government found itself challenged by the miners' union, which fought a year-long strike in 1984-85 under militant leadership. The labour movement as a whole put up bitter resistance to the government's trade union reforms, which began with legislation in 1980 and 1982 and continued after the General Election.

The miners' strike was one of the most violent and long lasting in British history. The outcome was uncertain, but after many turns in the road, the union was defeated. This proved a crucial development, because it ensured that the Thatcher reforms would endure. In the years that followed, the Labour Opposition quietly accepted the popularity and success of the trade union legislation and pledged not to reverse its key components.

In October 1984, when the strike was still underway, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) attempted to murder Margaret Thatcher and many of her cabinet by bombing her hotel in Brighton during the Conservative Party annual conference. Although she survived unhurt, some of her closest colleagues were among the injured and dead and the room next to hers was severely damaged. No twentieth-century British Prime Minister ever came closer to assassination.

British policy in Northern Ireland had been a standing source of conflict for every Prime Minister since 1969, but Margaret Thatcher aroused the IRA's special hatred for her refusal to meet their political demands, notably during the 1980-81 prison hunger strikes.

Her policy throughout was implacably hostile to terrorism, republican or loyalist, although she matched that stance by negotiating the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 with the Republic of Ireland. The Agreement was an attempt to improve security cooperation

between Britain and Ireland and to give some recognition to the political outlook of Catholics in Northern Ireland, an initiative which won warm endorsement from the Reagan administration and the US Congress.

The economy continued to improve during the 1983-87 Parliament and the policy of economic liberalisation was extended. The government began to pursue a policy of selling state assets, which in total had amounted to more than 20 per cent of the economy when the Conservatives came to power in 1979. The British privatisations of the 1980s were the first of their kind and proved influential across the world.

Where possible, sale of state assets took place through offering shares to the public, with generous terms for small investors. The Thatcher Governments presided over a great increase in the number of people saving through the stock market. They also encouraged people to buy their own homes and to make private pension provision, policies which over time have greatly increased the personal wealth of the British population.

The left wing of the Conservative Party had always been uneasy with its chief. In January 1986, enduring divisions between left and right in the Thatcher Cabinet were publicly exposed by the sudden resignation of the Defence Minister, Michael Heseltine, in a dispute over the business troubles of the British helicopter manufacturer, Westland. The fallout from the 'Westland Affair' challenged Margaret Thatcher's leadership as never before. She survived the crisis, but its effects were significant. She was subjected to heavy criticism within her own party for the decision to allow US warplanes to fly from British bases to attack targets in Libya (April 1986). There was talk of the government and of its leader being 'tired', of having gone on too long.

Her response was characteristic: at the Conservative Party's annual conference in October 1986, her speech foreshadowed a mass of reforms for a third Thatcher Government. With the economy now very strong, prospects were good for an election and the government was returned with a Parliamentary majority of 101 in June 1987.

1987-1990: PRIME MINISTER - THIRD TERM

The legislative platform of the third-term Thatcher Government was among the most ambitious ever put forward by a British administration. There were measures to reform the education system (1988), introducing a national curriculum for the first time. There was a new tax system for local government (1989), the Community Charge, or 'poll tax' as it was dubbed by opponents. And there was legislation to separate purchasers and

providers within the National Health Service (1990), opening up the service to a measure of competition for the first time and increasing the scope for effective management.

All three measures were deeply controversial. The Community Charge, in particular, became a serious political problem, as local councils took advantage of the introduction of a new system to increase tax rates, blaming the increase on the Thatcher Government. (The system was abandoned by Margaret Thatcher's successor, John Major, in 1991.) By contrast, the education and health reforms proved enduring. Successive governments built on the achievement and in some respects extended their scope.

The economy boomed in 1987-88, but also began to overheat. Interest rates had to be doubled during 1988. A division within the government over management of the currency emerged into the open, Margaret Thatcher strongly opposing the policy urged by her Chancellor of the Exchequer and others, of pegging the pound sterling to the Deutschmark through the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). In the process, her relations with her Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, were fatally damaged, and he resigned in October 1989.

Behind this dispute there was profound disagreement within the government over policy towards the European Community itself. The Prime Minister found herself increasingly at odds with her Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, on all questions touching European integration. Her speech at Bruges in September 1988 began the process by which the Conservative Party — at one time largely 'pro-European' — became predominantly 'Euro-sceptic'.

Paradoxically, all this took place against a backdrop of international events profoundly helpful to the Conservative cause. Margaret Thatcher played her part in the last phase of the Cold War, both in the strengthening of the Western alliance against the Soviets in the early 1980s and in the successful unwinding of the conflict later in the decade.

The Soviets had dubbed her the 'Iron Lady' — a tag she relished — for the tough line she took against them in speeches shortly after becoming Conservative leader in 1975. During the 1980s she offered strong support to the defence policies of the Reagan administration.

But when Mikhail Gorbachev emerged as a potential leader of the Soviet Union, she invited him to Britain in December 1984 and pronounced him a man she could do business with. She did not soften her criticisms of the Soviet system, making use of new opportunities to broadcast to television audiences in the east to put the case against Communism. Nevertheless, she played a constructive part in the diplomacy that

smoothed the break-up of the Soviet Empire and of the Soviet Union itself in the years 1989-91.

By late 1990, the Cold War was over and free markets and institutions vindicated. But that event triggered the next stage in European integration, as France revived the project of a single European currency, hoping to check the power of a reunited Germany. As a result, divisions over European policy within the British Government were deepened by the end of the Cold War and now became acute.

On November 1 1990 Sir Geoffrey Howe resigned over Europe and in a bitter resignation speech precipitated a challenge to Margaret Thatcher's leadership of her party by Michael Heseltine. In the ballot that followed, she won a majority of the vote. Yet under party rules the margin was insufficient, and a second ballot was required. Receiving the news at a conference in Paris, she immediately announced her intention to fight on.

But a political earthquake occurred the next day on her return to London, when many colleagues in her cabinet — unsympathetic to her on Europe and doubting that she could win a fourth General Election — abruptly deserted her leadership and left her no choice but to withdraw. She resigned as Prime Minister on November 28 1990. John Major succeeded her and served in the post until the landslide election of Tony Blair's Labour Government in May 1997.

CONCLUSION

After 1990 Lady Thatcher (as she became) remained a potent political figure. She wrote two best-selling volumes of memoirs - *The Downing Street Years* (1993) and *The Path to Power* (1995) - while continuing for a full decade to tour the world as a lecturer. A book of reflections on international politics - *Statecraft* - was published in 2002. During the period she made some important interventions in domestic British politics, notably over Bosnia and the Maastricht Treaty.

In March 2002, following several small strokes, she announced an end to her career in public speaking. Denis Thatcher, her husband of more than fifty years, died in June 2003, receiving warm tributes from all sides. After his death her own health deteriorated further and faster, causing progressive memory loss, and she died in London on 8 April 2013. She was honoured at a ceremonial funeral in St Paul's Cathedral nine days later.

Margaret Thatcher remains an intensely controversial figure in Britain. Critics claim that her economic policies were divisive socially, that she was harsh or 'uncaring' in her politics, and hostile to the institutions of the British welfare state. Defenders point to a transformation in Britain's economic performance over the course of the Thatcher Governments and those of her successors as Prime Minister. Trade union reforms, privatisation, deregulation, a strong anti-inflationary stance, and control of tax and spending have created better economic prospects for Britain than seemed possible when she became Prime Minister in 1979.

Critics and supporters alike recognise the Thatcher premiership as a period of fundamental importance in British history. Margaret Thatcher accumulated huge prestige over the course of the 1980s and often compelled the respect even of her bitterest critics. Indeed, her effect on the terms of political debate has been profound. Whether they were converted to 'Thatcherism', or merely forced by the electorate to pay it lip service, the Labour Party leadership was transformed by her period of office and the 'New Labour' politics of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown would not have existed without her. Her legacy remains the core of modern British politics: the world economic crisis since 2008 has revived many of the arguments of the 1980s, keeping her name at the centre of political debate in Britain.

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