

Commentary

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Margaret Thatcher, Thatcherism and Education

The changes in educational policy in Britain that are being promoted by Margaret Thatcher's government are of such significance that educators in North America might be well advised to take notice of them. Professor Buck, in the Winter issue of this journal, detailed many of these changes and compared them to the policies of Matthew Arnold.

In this commentary, an attempt is made to examine the personal and political background of Margaret Thatcher and to draw some inferences about the origin of her ideas and policies, which have come to be known commonly as "Thatcherism."

Thatcher's personal background

Margaret Roberts, born in Grantham, Lincolnshire, in 1925, began her education in a local primary school, and at the age of eleven began secondary education at the Kesteven and Grantham Grammar School for Girls. Admitted to Somerville College, Oxford, in 1943, she graduated in Science in 1946. In her final year she was the President of the Oxford University Conservative Association and, in this capacity, was invited to her first Annual Conference of the Conservative Party in 1946. She attended her second conference in 1948, as the representative of the Graduates' Association, and met representatives of the Dartford constituency. Asking to submit her name as a candidate for nomination, she was accepted, and she contested, unsuccessfully, the elections of 1950 and 1951 for that constituency. Through her political activities she met Dennis Thatcher, whom she married in an East London Methodist Chapel in December 1951. After marriage she began to study law, specializing in taxation law, and was admitted to the Bar in 1954, one year after giving birth to twins.

Adopted for the Conservative North London seat of Finchley, in 1957, Thatcher was duly elected to Parliament under Harold Macmillan in 1959. She has been returned as M.P. for that constituency in eight succeeding elections from 1964 to 1987, the last three as Leader of the Conservative Party, and hence becoming Prime Minister of Great Britain. She describes herself as a conviction politician, and the policies, ideas, and activities arising from her convictions have given rise to the term "Thatcherism," the first Prime Minister ever to give rise to such an abstract noun, though two previous Chancellors of the Exchequer, one Tory, R.A. Butler, and one Labour, Hugh Gaitskell, had the general agreement of their policies dubbed "Butskellism." The expression of Mrs. Thatcher's convictions led one of her Cabinet members to nickname her TINA (There is No Alternative), an acronym for one of her favourite expressions, and for *Pravda* to call her the "Iron Lady." She herself told one Annual Conference, "the Lady's Not for Turning," to indicate that she would not deviate from her policies, whatever the political or economic consequences. To understand more fully what is implied by Thatcherism it is necessary to discuss further her family background in terms of the politics of the time, and her own political actions throughout her Parliamentary career.

Thatcher's political background

Politics is concerned with the acquisition and use of power – power to control the lives, occupations, and activities of others. Power can be acquired through hereditary title, by a military coup, or by controlling some "democratic" process of selection and election; its use is channelled through existing institutions and processes or by the initiation of new ones or the subversion of existing ones. In Britain from the 18th century onwards, power has been exercised increasingly by groups of individuals who, temporarily or for longer periods, could agree upon its exercise; this eventually led to the formation of political parties. As expressions of their aims, or ideologies, the abstract nouns of conservatism, liberalism, and socialism have endured in the political vocabulary, though there are, and have been, many varieties of each. Thus the conservatism of Disraeli would not coincide with that of Chamberlain, nor should the socialism of Attlee be equated with that of Benn. Leadership of a political party may be decided in different ways. Since Thatcher's election, and since her triumph of 1979 when she became Britain's first woman Prime Minister, the new -ism, Thatcherism, has gradually replaced but not supplanted that of conservatism. In Russia, Lenin, holding aloft an electric light bulb, once defined Communism as "Electrification and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)." In a similar manner Thatcherism might be defined as "Alderman Roberts' daughter and the Conservative Manifesto of 1950."

Margaret Roberts' father was a tall man of a commanding, some would say forbidding, presence. His elder daughter, Maureen, reported: "He

was a severe man, but we were not frightened of him, and he was tremendously ambitious for us. To know Margaret you have to know him." By occupation he was a grocer, with his own grocery store, which also included a sub-postoffice. He was a member of the local Chamber of Trade and, by inclination, a politician. He served as a member of the local Council, an alderman, and for one year, the Mayor of Grantham. Since the Council was charged with the control and provision of street lighting and police services (its original mandate) together with education, through a Local Education Authority (LEA), public health, housing, slum clearance, roads, town planning, and public assistance and welfare (and in some councils, electricity, gas, water, and public transport) Councillors became important local power figures. The impact of food rationing from 1939 to 1945 gave tremendous authority and control to grocers, and the payment of military allowances and pensions at the sub-postoffice all contributed to the influence of Alderman Roberts in the local community. As a lay preacher in the Methodist chapels he was regarded also as a person of moral stature. His children were expected to be different, and their upbringing likely to be closely supervised. The family attended Chapel and Sunday School three times each Sunday (although the chapel was at least a mile away), games and dancing were forbidden, but reading and discussion encouraged. Margaret was the one entrusted with bringing from and returning to the library his weekly ration of reading material, especially in the fields of history and biographies. With filial admiration she declares him to have been the best-read man she ever met. The shop where they lived occupied the front portion of the building, with living accommodation behind the store and above the shop. There was no bathroom in the house.

When Mrs. Thatcher campaigned it was recorded that "her attacks on the Labour Party were in the mode of Churchill rather than Butler; the election was between the party of freedom and the party of Serfdom." There was many a reference to the 1950 Conservative Manifesto, "The Right Road for Britain," which spoke of socialist failure, socialist deception, and socialist mismanagement, and promised to cut government expenditures, to end food subsidies but to compensate those most affected, to lower taxes, to maintain full employment, "to bring Nationalization to a full stop here and now," to stimulate and reward free enterprise, to move towards a "Property Owning Democracy," and to trust private developers to meet part of the need for houses to rent. It concluded, "We shall make Britain a place in which hard work, thrift, honesty and neighbourliness are honoured and win their true reward." In his previous Manifesto, Churchill had spoken of "the genius of the British people, who mean to be free to use their own judgment and never intend to be State serfs," a reference to the thesis of the Austrian born economist F.A. von Hayek (1944) that centralized planning inevitably involved the creation of a permanent class of serfs. "The alternative to 'planning' is the 'rule of law' " (Chamberlin, cited in van Hayek, 1944).

It cannot escape our notice that Mrs. Thatcher's political ideas seem similar to the political economic ideas put forward by the Scots philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776), who had argued that man by his nature was acquisitive, and pursued his own self interests to the exclusion of the interests of others. Unrestricted acquisition would bring a man into conflict with similarly motivated neighbours; security of possessions for each, and some form of stability, would only emerge as a contractual agreement, or code, between men, which he termed the "rules of justice."

If fortune smiled on Mrs. Thatcher in securing the nomination for the safe seat of Finchley, it smiled on her even more when she entered Parliament in 1959 and drew second place in the ballot for Private Member's Bills. Most House of Commons time is for government business but some time, usually on Fridays, is found for Private Members to introduce bills of their own. Hence Mrs. Thatcher's maiden speech, contrary to precedent, was devoted to proposing legislation of her own choice. Most such bills are "talked out," that is, never come to a vote, but hers received government support and eventually became law, guaranteeing freedom for the press to attend all meetings of local councils. It is ironic that her present government has severely restricted the freedom of the press to report on events which her Ministers decide should not be reported.

The Meaning of Thatcherism

Thatcherism, in practice, has meant several things, but central to the whole has been the creation of a conviction cabinet entirely subservient to the Prime Minister. Originally all cabinet members took part in discussions and shared responsibility. Mrs. Thatcher worked by restricting access to the decision-making process, by-passing cabinet members but still requiring full collective responsibility. Gradually she eliminated all those who did not fully share her convictions. What has evolved has been Prime Ministerial Government. Thatcherism began to be discerned as having three major aspects: 1) fiscal and monetary policy directed towards a freer economy and to reducing inflation, 2) limitations of the power of unions, and 3) attacks upon the perceived enemy of free enterprise, socialism, and Labour controlled Local Councils. Against each of these "targets" she adopted a policy of *étapisme* – a law-by-law attack, and a budget-by-budget control, each phase being encapsulated in some terse slogan.

Monetarism and privatization

Monetarism was the first catchword. As advocated by Milton Friedman (1977) it alone was touted as being the cure for inflation, though this could not be brought about in one year. The shift to 15% Value Added Tax (VAT), the rise in taxes on gasoline, drink, tobacco, and automobile licences shifted the burden of taxation to indirect from direct taxation, which

was lowered. The bank rate was increased by 2% to make money dearer. Inflation immediately soared from 9% to 20%. Unemployment, then of the order of just under one million, began to rise. A rise in oil prices when North Sea oil was bringing in enhanced revenues saw the value of the pound soar; exports fell and imports rose, as did unemployment, to over three million. Sixteen different changes were made in the manner of calculation of the number of unemployed, but still the numbers remained high, though inflation began to fall, eventually to a low point of 4%. Industries were encouraged to declare redundancies, and in the state-assisted industries money was found to make generous redundancy payments to remove workers from employment, prior to privatization of the enterprise.

The total effect of her privatization policy has been to produce a massive redistribution of wealth, regionally, from Scotland, Wales, and the North to South East England, and in monetary terms, from poor to rich. The top 1% of income earners now pay, on average, \$38,000 less income tax per year, while the average member of the lowest 50% of income earners pays \$500 less. The vast majority of the two and a half million (officially) unemployed pay no income tax at all, but indirect taxation has risen for everyone.

Legislation regarding unions

The second aspect of Thatcherism, the attack upon the unions, too, has been progressive. First, sympathy strikes were once again banned. Then came the law providing money for unions to organize ballots, but requiring a secret ballot before a legal strike could be declared. Next, individual members of unions were required to "contract in" to pay a political levy which the union could give to the Labour Party, where previously the individual had to "contract out." Finally, certain government employees were forbidden to belong to unions, and laws were passed making it possible to sequester (confiscate) union funds if a strike were declared illegal, together with rules which permitted Holding Companies to create a lockout of workers in one company whilst its other companies remained immune to compensatory strike action. The former was employed to end strike pay during the miners' strike, the latter enabled Richard Murdoch to fire 5000 printers whilst remaining strike free in his other companies. Further legislation is now promised, in the words of the 1987 Manifesto, to "empower individual members to stop their unions calling them out on strike without first holding a secret ballot of members" and to "protect individual members from disciplinary action if they refuse to join a strike they disagree with." These laws, and a large pool of unemployment, should certainly deter union activity, which has decreased markedly.

Dealing with Socialism

The destruction of Socialism, in all its forms, was the third task of Thatcherism. In the attack upon the perceived enemies of free enterprise and the operation of a free market economy, those Local Councils controlled by members of the Labour Party have been a special target. Financial powers (of fixing the rate of local taxation) have been withdrawn from some, and controlled for all councils, by a process known as "rate capping." Thus, Whitehall (the government) sets the "millrate" for each local council whilst requiring it to perform all or nearly all the statutory duties which were present in Alderman Roberts' day. All Labour controlled local councils have had to cut services in road maintenance, housing, transport, and especially in education. Since the easiest method of cutting educational expenditure is to discharge teachers, this has been the approved way. Recently, so severe were the cuts required to be imposed in one area that schools were closed for two days per week, and the teachers rotated between schools, until some other solution could be found. Metropolitan Councils (set up by a previous Conservative government) in Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, and Birmingham were all abolished as was the Greater London Council. Household taxation for local purposes will end in 1990 and be replaced by a "poll" tax, i.e., every one over 18 will pay exactly the same amount irrespective of income or ownership.

The foregoing were aspects of Thatcherism which could have been presaged from Churchill's 1950 Manifesto and the expressions of Mrs. Thatcher's electoral declarations, but there have been other aspects not foreseen. There have been restrictions on the press and news media, an increase of violence and crime – so that Britain has the largest (per capita) prison population in Europe – and the prevalence of "guilt free greed" during her period in office.

These have been evidenced in such notable events as the "Spycatcher" affair, overcrowding of prisons, the miners' strike, violence of soccer supporters, the ostentatious display of wealth in public, and questionable financial transactions involving billions of pounds.

Educational changes

Mrs. Thatcher has now promised to turn her attention to the fourth characteristic of the "Britain of the Future" Manifesto, that of neighbourliness or community. Education and educational changes are in the forefront of this campaign. Education had previously felt the impact of Mrs. Thatcher and her policies, when as Minister of Education, she had made possible a move away from the establishment of comprehensive schooling, and had abolished the supply of free milk to school children. The monetarist

policies behind the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement (PSBR) had been felt in educational cuts forced upon the LEAs, by virtue of "rate capping," and grants to universities had been directly and severely curtailed. This had resulted in a reduction in the number of teachers in schools and the closing of teacher training colleges, and forced "early retirement" and reduction of research funding for universities. University budgets have been reduced by 20% and 6000 university teachers "released." (One consequence of this was the refusal by the academic members of Thatcher's *Alma Mater*, Oxford, to grant her an honorary degree.)

The real struggle for education came with the appointment of Sir Keith Joseph, as Minister of Education. Not only did he concede greater "economies" in the Departmental budget than those asked for by the Treasury, but his first request of his officials was for information about a system of teacher payment, instituted in 1862, called the Revised Code but more commonly known as "Payment by Results." The author of that Code had told the House of Commons, "I cannot promise the House that this system will be an economical one and I cannot promise that it will be an efficient one, but I can promise that it shall be one or the other. If it is not cheap it shall be efficient; if it is not efficient it shall be cheap." Schools with poorer teachers would get less money, schools with better teachers would get more money. These regulations were made possible by the Newcastle Commission Report of 1861, before school boards, LEAs, and compulsory schooling existed. It had recommended two kinds of grants – one paid from general taxation, based largely upon attendance, and a second paid from county funds "in consideration of the attainment of a certain degree of knowledge by the children in the school," this to be established by examiners appointed by the county who "shall examine every child presented to him... individually in reading, writing, and arithmetic. . . ." The Revised Code did not establish the dual grant system, but paid a single grant. It established a lower class of teacher certification, and it increased the number of pupils who could be taught by a single teacher. It also laid down the standards of what was to be taught in reading, writing, and arithmetic in each of the six standards of the elementary school. A product of such a school should be able to read a newspaper; complete a dictation from a newspaper; know the four rules in arithmetic in number, weights, and measures; and be able to make bills of parcels and know the method of practice. Sir Keith found that over the years the system of payment had been modified by subsequent codes. By 1925, at the time of the Burnham Committee Report, teachers for elementary schools were trained in two-year training colleges, and for secondary schools they were trained in universities with professional training under the control of university education departments. The examinations and certification for all were conducted by Joint Examining Boards representing the training colleges and university departments. Scales of teacher pay were established

by an independent committee, henceforth producing pay scales known as the Burnham Scales, which reflected length of training and years of service.

Sir Keith sought to apply a modified version of "payment by results" to reclassify existing teachers, to award "merit pay" to better teachers, and to gradually eliminate the less efficient ones. What followed was a series of teachers' strikes, amounting to over a million "teacher-days" of work, the withdrawal of all voluntary services, no games, no school societies, and no supervision outside of class hours. The representatives of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) on the Burnham Committee were able to block these payment moves of Sir Keith, but his successor as Minister of Education soon altered that by reducing the NUT representation and finally disbanding the Burnham Committee. The Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act (1986) gave the Minister the final say in teachers' salaries and their conditions of work, introduced a modified system of "merit pay," and required teachers to cover for absent colleagues for the first three days of absence (thus reducing the need for "supply" teachers).

In another area, that of examinations in secondary schools, he did achieve what may be a more permanent record; he changed the form of leaving examination for 16-year-old pupils from one of an external examination to one which included a large component of "continuous assessment" throughout school life, and, as such, required better teachers and more, much more, time and effort on their part for its success. This was tried for the first time in 1988. There was one further innovation associated with Sir Keith – the Technical and Vocational Educational Initiative (TVEI).

The alarming increase of unemployment amongst the 18-year-olds had caused the Manpower Commission to establish the Youth Training Scheme designed to provide some form of work training, during which they could not be considered unemployed, thus reducing the numbers of unemployed. This training was provided by industry with half of the meagre wage provided by the government. By some this was considered as merely a cheap source of labour, and there was, of course, no guarantee of employment when trainees finished the "training." Keith Joseph's initiative was directed to pupils between 14 and 18, those who had become disgruntled or bored with existing school life and conditions. For them, eventually, industry was to be invited to establish some twenty-two institutions, to hire the teachers, provide the equipment, devise the curriculum, set the salaries of the teachers, be independent of LEAs, and receive compensation directly from the government. The experimental part was the establishment, from 1983 onwards, of 14 schemes by cooperating LEAs; the new institutions, to be known as City Technical colleges, are now in process of establishment. They are expected to provide, in the coming years, a pool of

labour, responsive to the needs of industry. Preliminary reports (from the experimental trials) have shown that those enrolling are of average or below average ability, and opponents charge that "TVEI is a crude experiment in social engineering designed to reduce the expectations of working class youngsters."

Under the heading of "The Next Move Forward," the Conservative Manifesto of 1987, Mrs. Thatcher proposed four major reforms, which were set out as follows:

- . First, we will establish a National Core Curriculum.
- . Second, within five years governing bodies and head teachers of all secondary schools and many primary schools will be given control of their own budgets.
- . Third, we will increase parental choice.
- . Fourth, we will allow State schools to opt out of LEA control.

The Education Bill of November 1987 added a fifth, the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority and the redistribution of its educational services among thirteen different Local Authorities.

The Education Bill gives regulatory control over these proposed major reforms. The National Core Curriculum requires compulsory testing of children at ages 7, 11, and 14, whilst at 16 there will be Sir Keith Joseph's General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). To ensure that the curriculum is being followed, and thus to curb the discretionary powers of teachers; parents have the right, and in fact will be encouraged, to complain if they fear that their children are not following it. To restrict the powers of LEAs, budget control for each individual secondary school will be available to head teachers, and boards of governors of such schools, extending to the payment of teachers from the lump sum disbursed by the LEA. There will be no "catchment areas" for schools; each school must take in pupils up to the maximum accommodation provided. There will be parental jockeying for places at the preferred schools, which accordingly will have bigger budgets. Poorer schools will decline.

This is the application of market forces to education, which is now being treated as a commodity which can be "purchased" for maximum utility later. There will be a variety of schools. In the words of the 1987 Manifesto, "We will therefore support the co-existence of a variety of schools – comprehensive, grammar, secondary modern, voluntary controlled and aided, independent, sixth form, and tertiary colleges – as well as the reasonable rights of schools to retain their sixth forms, all of which will give parents greater choice and lead to higher standards." (Independent schools in this context are the so-called Public Schools, such as Eton and Winchester, which are independent of public control.)

The City Technical Colleges being sponsored by industries are listed under these new provisions. An Assisted Places Scheme, to be increased to 35,000 to "enable talented children from less well-off backgrounds to gain places at the 230 Independent Schools currently in the scheme," will syphon off many who would otherwise attend local grammar and comprehensive schools, presumably to the detriment of such grammar and comprehensive schools.

Under the fourth reform, it will permit schools to "opt out" of control by the LEA. With the consent of the headmaster and the governing body of a school, a majority of the parents may opt to take the school out of the LEA control, and receive the full government grant direct from the Department of Education and Science. The Minister of Education has recently approved the first applications for "opted-out" status. During the election Mrs. Thatcher also suggested that parents may levy fees, a promise denied by Mr. Baker, and not in the current legislation. The Election Manifesto said borough councils who were members of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) would be permitted to take over and provide their own educational services; it now appears that all will be told to do so.

Outside primary and secondary education, tenure for university staff has been abolished, and the University Grants Committee also has been abolished. It is to be replaced by a Universities Funding Council, 50% of whose members will be drawn from business and industry, which will make separate contracts with each university, each contract being in terms of the service performed by that institution. Some departments might be found to provide no service and hence closed down. So far eleven departments of philosophy have disappeared. An annual assessment will be made of the members of each department of each university in terms of teaching duties performed and research conducted. A "league table" will be prepared to show the standings of departments within and between universities. To gain funds outside the contract, Oxford has launched an appeal for £220 million. Other universities may follow suit.

During the 1960s degree granting polytechnics and colleges of higher education were established, under LEA control, to distinguish them from universities, in operation and in financing. In the current fight against local government control, these will now be controlled directly by the Department of Education and Science.

Tuition fees in British universities have always been low in comparison with those in North America, and only recently were they raised significantly for students from abroad, a move which caused some universities to look more favourably upon foreign students. Since 1945 each student's LEA has paid these fees and awarded also a maintenance grant

based upon the parent's ability to provide support. The average student has been committed to finding an extra \$300 per year to meet all the costs of a university education.

Two new proposals have now been made. The first proposal has suggested that universities increase their tuition fees, not necessarily to be absorbed by the LEAs, and the vice-chancellors appear to have agreed. The second proposal would freeze maintenance grants at their present level, and offer government backed loans, repayable during a set period of years after graduation. A similar scheme was defeated in 1985 due to pressure from the middle-class parents in the "shires" – the homes of traditional Tories. This time there is wider support, though 16,000 students marched on Whitehall in protest. The probable effect will be greatest upon women who have tended not to have continuous employment during the first ten years after graduation; it may also incline more and more students to study only in fields related to immediate employment prospects.

Under the new University Funding Council's contracts with universities, more university departments would be in danger of closure. There is talk of issuing "vouchers" to accepted students, valid for a certain proportion of fees and maintenance, with the remainder to be filled by personal and governmental loans and family contributions. Already the armed forces recruit commissioned personnel by offering complete university tuition and maintenance in return for a promise of seven or more years of commissioned service. Some industrial enterprises, seeking high level personnel without the high turnover associated with rising salaries, are thinking of a similar scheme of "indenturing" students by providing a free university education. The label of "social engineering" seems more and more applicable to such changes, though the relatively small number of United Kingdom university students would still be more privileged than their American counterparts.

Some observers see these educational changes as no more than the financial concomitants of "setting parents free" as envisaged in the 1950 Manifesto, which will then have run its course. Others see Mrs. Thatcher as determined to seek a fourth term in office, and as searching for some policy to put in place when privatization is complete, when the "property owning democracy" has reached a maximum, when direct taxation is reduced still further, and when the Socialist era has ended. With the major aims of the 1950 Manifesto achieved, policy now surfaces from her dispensation of favour to the ideas of her favourites, members of her "kitchen-cabinet," and rejection of the ideas of others. Her strongest support to date has always come from the financial community, with its representatives in her party, and *The Economist* and *Financial Times* as their legitimate voices. But now, *The Economist*, in particular, views "Social Thatcherism" with some

disquiet. It concludes that, "Enough Britons knew that they needed Nurse Thatcher's economic medicine. Nanny Thatcher telling everybody to wash their hands before tea will be ignored."

On the European scene, the European Common Market has been hectoring increasingly by Mrs. Thatcher, and has just been warned that she has not set Britain free, only to see it subjugated to a bureaucracy in Brussels, which does not operate in Thatcherite terms. As she by-passed the "wets" in her Cabinet, she is being increasingly by-passed by other European countries. Germany and France, for example, conduct separate arrangements, as witness the creation of an independent Franco-German Army Brigade to operate outside of NATO control. The influential *Washington Post* has recently editorialized that she is becoming the "Wall-flower of Europe," but no one yet foresees or confidently predicts the end of Thatcherism. Given the fractured nature of the Parliamentary opposition into three parties, it is extremely unlikely that Mrs. Thatcher can be defeated electorally. Only a revolt within her own party could effect that. At the moment she appears to have alienated the Crown, antagonized the bishops, and upset many members of the House of Lords, but remains secure in her Parliamentary majority.

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