

## Lest we forget how terrible things were: The woman who saved Britain - the verdict of three historians

By [SIMON HEFFER](#)

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Britain was on its knees on May 3, 1979 when Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister. Ever since World War II, politicians had made it their priority to manage what they considered to be its inevitable decline.

Mrs Thatcher was having none of that. Her priority was to make Britain powerful again, economically, if not strategically. And by 1983 — the end of her first term — it was clear she had succeeded.

It is hard to exaggerate the pitiful state of Britain in the Seventies. The reckless economic policy of Mrs Thatcher's predecessor as Tory leader, Ted Heath, who between 1970 and 1974 printed money as though it were going out of fashion, had left a legacy of high inflation, peaking at 27 per cent in 1975.



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But the Labour administrations of Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan between 1974 and 1979 made things even worse.

Wilson began by buying off trades unions with budget-busting pay rises and implemented a programme of food and housing subsidies that owed more to the Soviet bloc than to a supposedly western economy.

Jim Callaghan succeeded him in April 1976 and continued to spend money the country did not have.

A refusal to accept that Britain could not spend its way out of trouble led to the International Monetary Fund having to rescue the country from bankruptcy in the autumn of 1976. The severe spending cuts the IMF ordered in return for its financial assistance aggravated relations between the Labour government and its notional supporters in the trade union movement.

Led in those days by hard Leftists such as Jack Jones of the Transport and General Workers Union, militant workers were more than happy to strike recklessly and at will.

Labour was still wedded to the concept of nationalised industries. British Leyland, famed for turning out ugly, rust-bucket cars, went bankrupt in 1975, partly because of the shoddy quality of its products, partly because its productivity and competitiveness were wrecked by its militant workforce.

Leyland was split into four divisions and its strike-plagued Longbridge plant was refitted at the massive cost of £140 million — equivalent to £1 billion today.

The cars still failed to sell, proving that the state was appalling at running industries.



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The other big nationalised industries — coal, steel, power and the railways — were overmanned, heavily subsidised, unable to compete internationally and a drain on the taxpayer. The phones were nationalised, too, and it could take six months to get a line installed. Without a serious restructuring of the economy, Britain would not only never join the modern world — it would go bust.

Things were grim for the private sector. The top rate of tax on earned income was 83 per cent, which drove thousands of the best and brightest abroad.

It was an astonishing 98 per cent on unearned income, such as dividends, which prevented many people from investing in industry. Starved of investment, industry became ever more sclerotic.

The private sector was also held hostage by the unions. From 1976 a dispute had been running for two years at Grunwick, a London photo-processing laboratory, over the management's refusal to recognise unions.

It came to symbolise the struggle between management and unions in pre-Thatcherite Britain.



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Paralysed by strikes: In 1979, rubbish went uncollected in many cities (London's Leicester Square pictured), creating an image of rat-infested squalor and chaos that was beamed around the world

Grunwick was a small company, but the dispute became a flashpoint between the Left and Right, with Marxist supporters of the union members questioning the owners' right to run their company the way they wanted. There were endless confrontations and clashes on its picket line, and the nation was divided over it. However, in the end the House of Lords upheld the management's right not to recognise unions among its workforce.

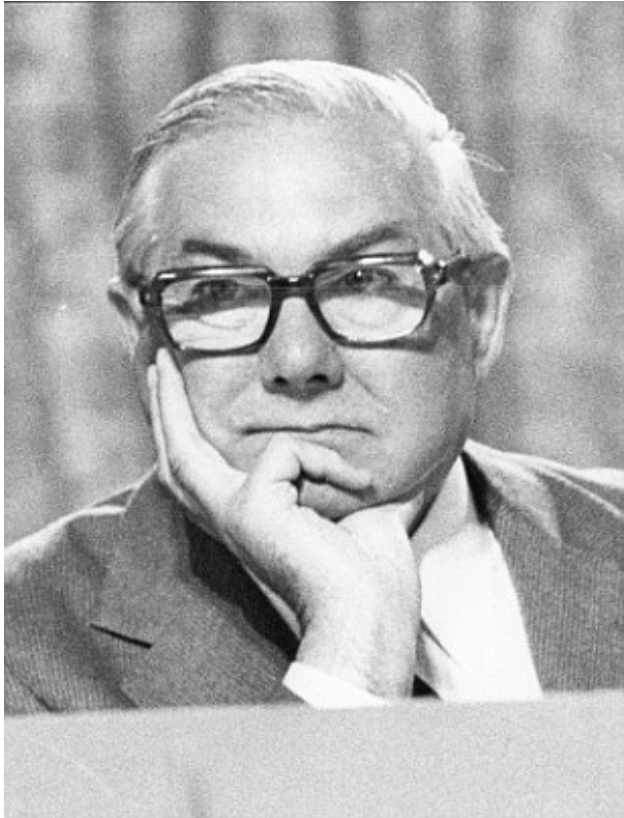
It was the start of the turn of the tide for the union movement, but its most destructive acts were yet to come.

By the winter of 1978-79, the public sector unions — accounting for more than a quarter of the workforce — were petitioning the Callaghan government for massive pay rises, but these were vetoed in accordance with the Labour government's prices and incomes policy.

Callaghan wanted pay rises limited to 5 per cent in the public and private sector. He threatened sanctions on companies that broke the guidelines, only to find that Ford awarded their workers 17 per cent late in 1978. The unions renewed their unaffordable demands.

Lorry drivers — including those employed by oil companies and members of the TGWU — demanded a 40 per cent pay rise. The Army had to be placed on standby in case fuel supplies could not be moved.

From January 3, 1979, an unofficial strike of the drivers began and petrol stations started to close across the country.



The Callaghan government lost a vote of confidence on March 28, 1979, and a general election was called

Flying pickets — politically motivated militants who toured the country looking for workers to intimidate — turned drivers away at oil refineries.

Regulations for a state of emergency had to be drawn up, its implementation averted only when the TGWU agreed to a list of essential supplies that they would allow to be moved.

Eventually their demands were settled with a 20 per cent rise. Meanwhile, fearing they would be left behind, public sector workers organised the biggest day of industrial action since the 1926 general strike.

On January 22, 1979, the country was paralysed by a rail strike. NHS employees worked to rule. Ambulance drivers went on strike, with the Army again having to be called in to deal with emergency cases.

But the wave of strikes achieved their greatest notoriety in the actions of local government employees.

Rubbish went uncollected in many cities, creating an image of rat-infested squalor and chaos that was beamed around the world.

Most infamous of all was the unofficial strike of gravediggers in Liverpool, which led to the dead going unburied and coffins piling up.

In February 1979, when asked what would happen if the strike was not settled, the city's chief medical officer suggested that the authorities would have to consider burial at sea.

The Callaghan government lost a vote of confidence on March 28, 1979, and a general election was called. Against the background of militancy the previous winter, Mrs Thatcher made reform of the unions and the removal of their legal immunities central to her campaign.

None of this was reported by the so-called paper of record, the Times — it was closed down for a year while its workers went on strike.



Restructuring the economy: When Mrs Thatcher won office she delivered on her promises. Unions were forced to be democratic - no longer could they call strikes without a ballot of their members

When Mrs Thatcher won office she delivered on her promises. Unions were forced to be democratic — no longer could they call strikes without a ballot of their members. Flying pickets were made illegal.

Having emasculated the unions by bringing them within the law, Mrs Thatcher was able to proceed with the strategy of restructuring the economy and dragging Britain into the late 20th century.

By 1983, when she faced re-election — after the small matter of the Falklands War — she had won her richly deserved accolade as a transformative prime minister.

Unelected union leaders no longer dictated the terms of the political debate in Britain. For the first time since the Thirties, managers truly did have the right to manage.

Our money was sound again, thanks to her refusal to fund a client state in the way her Labour — and Conservative — predecessors had.

As a result of all this, not only was our country transformed in four short years, but also our standing in the world and our ability to believe in ourselves.

# Greatest women's libber of them all

By Amanda Foreman

They say a prophet is never recognised in their own land. Perhaps only now Lady Thatcher has died will her true worth as the most influential woman of the 20th century finally be acknowledged.

More than the Queen, Mother Teresa, Marie Curie or Emmeline Pankhurst, Margaret Thatcher proved to the entire world that a woman is the equal of a man.



© Daily Mail / Rex Features  
When Margaret married Denis Thatcher in 1951, it was inconceivable a woman would be elected to the highest office in the land. Britain was a country run by men, largely on behalf of men, with women in supporting roles

The real Thatcher legacy — the one that will last for ever — has been the liberation of women from the shackles of male chauvinism.

When Margaret Roberts married Denis Thatcher in 1951, it was inconceivable a woman would be elected to the highest office in the land. For that matter, in Fifties Britain, it was inconceivable that a woman would do a host of things, including arranging her own mortgage, controlling her fertility or receiving equal pay for equal work.

Britain was a country run by men, largely on behalf of men, with women in supporting roles. There were no women ambassadors, judges or life peers. Nor were there women newsreaders, airline pilots, brain surgeons or bankers.

Thatcher was not entirely alone when she entered Parliament in 1959 at the age of 34. There were two dozen women out of 629 MPs.

But she was unique in being a mother of six-year-old twins. She had struggled for a decade to get to Westminster and once there she had to work hard to survive, trying — not always successfully — to achieve balance between home life and high office.

At the beginning of her career, she wanted to tackle issues affecting women that she felt were deeply unfair, but soon came to realise discussing anything 'woman-related' was disastrous for her credibility.

As a newly elected MP, she expressed outrage at the way pensions were skewed against working widows and that women must pay for the cost of childcare out of their post-tax earnings.



© John Twine/Daily Mail

Thatcher was unique in being a mother of six-year-old twins. She had struggled for a decade to get to Westminster and once there she had to work hard to survive, balancing home life and high office

She tried to get her colleagues to listen, but reluctantly gave up the cause when it became obvious that her efforts were destined to fail.

Throughout the Sixties, as her political confidence grew, Thatcher made it her mission to show she was not only as good as the man standing next to her but better.

The first time Thatcher showed what she was capable of was as a junior minister in the Treasury during a debate on state pensions.

Her depth of knowledge, the result of hours of painstaking research and preparation, reduced the House to shocked silence. The Speaker had to call out twice before any MP rose to answer her.

Already an outsider because of her sex and class, this display of political prowess did not endear Thatcher to her colleagues. She suffered brickbats that no man in her position would have had to face.

As Education Secretary in 1970, she survived the single most vitriolic and personal campaign ever mounted against a woman politician. Ending free milk for children to release funds to build new schools was the cause celebre. But the anger against her over the 'Thatcher, Milk Snatcher' episode morphed into something much more sinister. Thatcher had broken the unwritten rules governing the behaviour of women in the public eye: she was acting like a man and must be taught a lesson.





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Scenting blood, the Press, led by The Sun, who labelled Thatcher 'The Most Unpopular Woman in Britain', whipped up a hate campaign that spiralled out of control and became violent. At one student meeting she was pelted with rocks.

Labour cynically encouraged the hysteria. Hoping to drive a wedge through Heath's Cabinet, Labour MPs tried to hound Thatcher into resigning by barracking her every time she appeared in the Commons.

Whenever she attempted to speak, they chanted 'Ditch the B\*\*\*\*' and other humiliating slogans.

Most people, let alone most women, would have thrown in the towel rather than face this onslaught.

But if Thatcher had resigned, it would have sent the message that politics is too rough for women.

Several generations of women, including my own, would have been deprived of their only role model for political success.

Lady Thatcher went on to become the longest serving prime minister of the 20th century. She transformed the political map of Britain in her first two terms and the geo-political map of Europe in her third.

Today, the idea that a woman can lead a democracy is so commonplace that people assume it was an inevitable development of modern society rather than the result of the enormous courage and tenacity of one woman.

# How terror stalked her every hour

By Ruth Dudley Edwards

Margaret Thatcher was still five weeks away from being Prime Minister when terrorists murdered one of her closest friends and colleagues.

In March 1979, the Irish National Liberation Army, a Northern Irish Marxist republican terrorist group, blew up the war hero, Airey Neave, her Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and one of her confidants, as he drove out of the Palace of Westminster car park. Privately, she was devastated; publicly, she was unbowed.

'He was one of freedom's warriors,' she said, and vowed to 'carry on for the things he fought for and not let the people who got him triumph'.



Devastated: In March 1979, the Irish National Liberation Army, a Northern Irish Marxist republican terrorist group, blew up the war hero, Airey Neave, Thatcher's Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

The loss of Neave was the first of many tragedies caused by terrorism that Thatcher would meet unflinchingly. In August in the same year, the IRA struck at the monarchy, when Lord Mountbatten, uncle of the Duke of Edinburgh and mentor of Prince Charles, was assassinated with three others while sailing near his holiday home in the Republic of Ireland.

On the same day, 16 members of the Parachute Regiment and two of the Queen's Own Highlanders were murdered in Northern Ireland.

Violence would be a constant backdrop in her premiership — just four months before its end she would lose another ally when Ian Gow MP died in an IRA car bomb. But there was no chance Thatcher would compromise with those who bullied or threatened her or her country.



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The terrorists' objective was to break her will and force her to give concessions to republicans which would ultimately lead to a united Ireland. All they achieved was the hardening of her heart.

Global pleas in 1981 to give political status to Irish hunger-striking prisoners elicited the response: 'Crime is crime is crime; it is not political'. Ten prisoners from the IRA and INLA would die.

An unintended consequence of the threats and violence from Northern Ireland during this time was to toughen up Thatcher and strengthen her inner warrior queen, her inner Churchill.

This became apparent a year later when Argentina invaded the Falklands in April 1982. The issue to her was clear-cut in terms of right and wrong, good and evil, and she faced down the doubters and dispatched the fleet.

For Irish republicans, on the side of Argentina, her victory accentuated their loathing. She is 'the biggest bastard we've ever known', said one of their spokesmen, and they redoubled efforts to force changes in British policy.

Two bombs in London on the same day in July 1982 blew up four members of the Blues and Royals Household Cavalry and seven of their horses in Hyde Park, and seven bandmen from the Royal Green Jackets in Regent's Park as they performed a lunchtime concert at an open-air bandstand.

The English public had endured terror attacks from 1973, and these would continue long after Thatcher left No 10. But in her time in office it was personal: the IRA was obsessed with avenging the hunger strikers by murdering her.

In October 1984, they bombed her hotel during the Conservative Party conference. Miraculously, she and her husband Denis escaped without serious injury. Though good people did die, it succeeded only in strengthening her.

At 4am, leaving the devastated building, Thatcher told the BBC that the conference would carry on.

And at 9.30 that morning, after saying that the bombers had sought 'to cripple Her Majesty's democratically elected Government', she added: 'The fact that we are gathered here now — shocked, but composed and determined — is a sign not only that this attack has failed, but that all attempts to destroy democracy by terrorism will fail.'



© Getty Images  
The wider public might not always have agreed with Thatcher's political ideology, but they admired her resolution, courage and self-belief

The IRA claimed responsibility and said to her: 'Today we were unlucky, but remember we only have to be lucky once. You will have to be lucky always. Give Ireland peace and there will be no more war.'

But she never showed any fear. In much the same way, she never allowed it to show how hurt she was by the protests from the Unionist community (including burning effigies

of herself) that marked the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. She later regretted signing the accord.

The miners' strike was in full swing at the time of the Brighton bomb, and many on the Left regretted — and still regret — that the IRA had been unlucky. But once again, the wider public rallied to her as they had over the Falklands. They might not always have agreed with her political ideology, but they admired her resolution, courage and self-belief.

A few days after the bombing, she told her constituents: 'We suffered a tragedy not one of us could have thought would happen in our country. And we picked ourselves up and sorted ourselves out as all good British people do, and I thought, let us stand together for we are British!

'They were trying to destroy the fundamental freedom that is the birth-right of every British citizen, freedom, justice and democracy.'

For that defiance in the face of terrorism and tyranny, Lady Thatcher deserves our admiration, our gratitude and her state funeral.