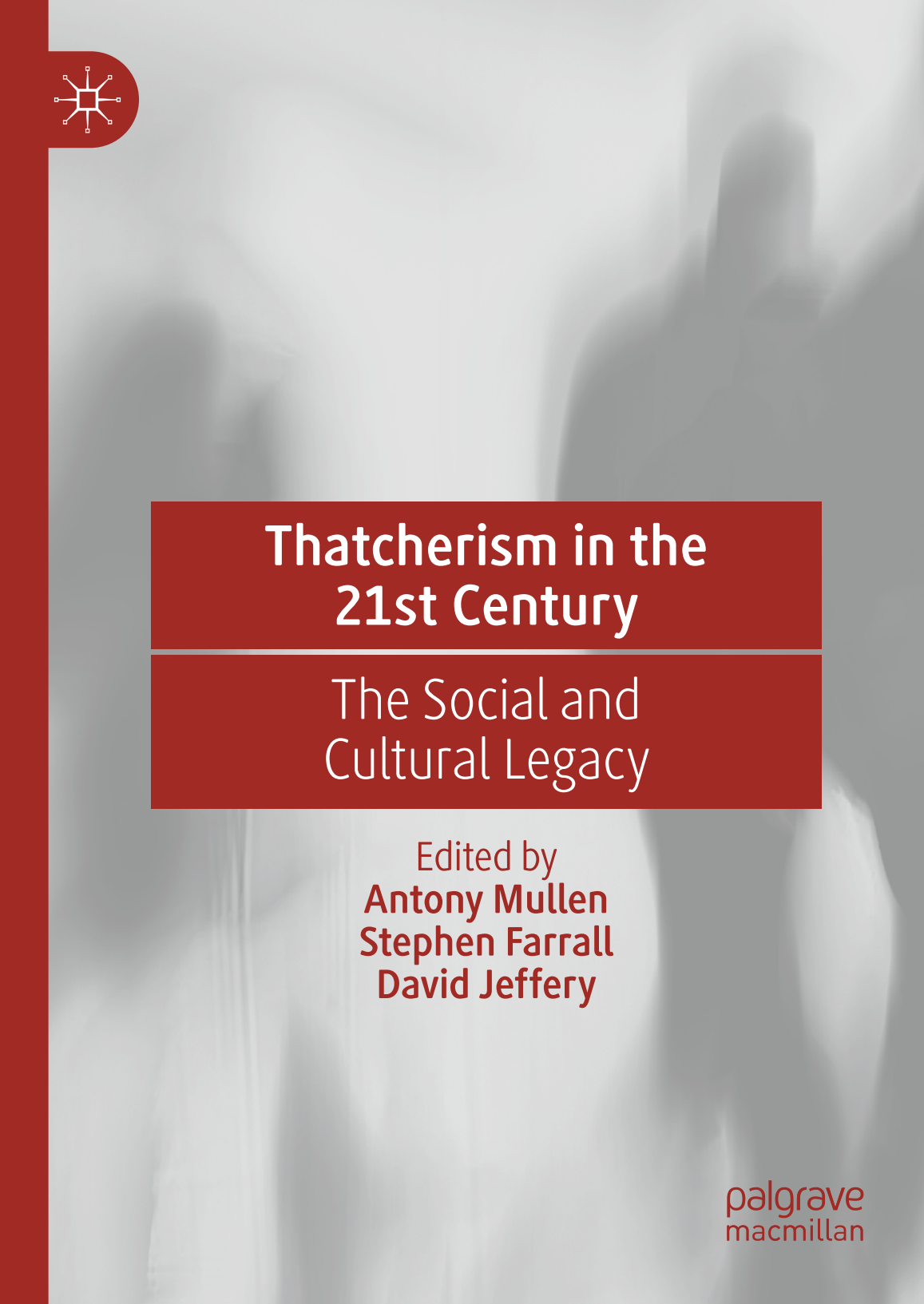

Thatcherism in the 21st Century

The Social and Cultural Legacy

Edited by
Antony Mullen
Stephen Farrall
David Jeffery

palgrave
macmillan

Thatcherism in the 21st Century

Antony Mullen • Stephen Farrall
David Jeffery
Editors

Thatcherism in the 21st Century

The Social and Cultural Legacy

palgrave
macmillan

Editors
Antony Mullen
Department of English Studies
Durham University
Durham, UK

David Jeffery
Department of Politics
University of Liverpool
Liverpool, UK

Stephen Farrall
Department of Criminology and Social Sciences
University of Derby
Derby, UK

ISBN 978-3-030-41791-8 ISBN 978-3-030-41792-5 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41792-5

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Contents

List of Contributors

Sam Blaxland Swansea University, Swansea, UK

Jack Brown King's College London, London, UK

Ruth Davidson King's College London, London, UK

Dominic Dean University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

Stephen Farrall Department of Criminology and Social Sciences, University of Derby, Derby, UK

Martin Farr Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

James Ferns Strathclyde University, Glasgow, UK

Maria Grasso Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Emily Gray Department of Criminology and Social Sciences, University of Derby, Derby, UK

Timothy Heppell University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

David Jeffery Department of Politics, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

Fiona McKelvey Belfast, UK

Antony Mullen Department of English Studies, Durham University, Durham, UK

Edmund Neill New College of the Humanities, London, UK

Kieron O'Hara University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

Andrew S. Roe-Crines University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

List of Figures

List of Tables

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Antony Mullen, Stephen Farrall, and David Jeffery

Margaret Thatcher died in London on 8th April 2013, aged 87. Her death brought to a close the final chapter of her life. Her final years, in stark contrast to her global prominence throughout the eighties and most of the nineties, were markedly private. She gave up public speaking in 2002 following several minor strokes and, though she was able to record a eulogy for Ronald Reagan's funeral in 2004, her health deteriorated so substantially in the years that followed that planning for her own funeral commenced in 2009. Around the same time, Carole Thatcher spoke openly of her mother's dementia. By 2011, the severity of Thatcher's condition led to the closure of her office in the House of Lords, an act described by the *Daily Telegraph* as a sign of her 'final and irrevocable withdrawal from public life' (Walker 2011). Yet, despite her drawn out physical decline and subsequent death, Thatcher remains a prominent and influential figure in British politics. She continues to inspire those on the

A. Mullen (✉)
Department of English Studies, Durham University, Durham, UK

S. Farrall
Department of Criminology and Social Sciences, University of Derby, Derby, UK
e-mail: s.farrall@derby.ac.uk

D. Jeffery
Department of Politics, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK
e-mail: d.jeffery@liverpool.ac.uk

A. Mullen et al. (eds.), *Thatcherism in the 21st Century*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41792-5_1

right who claim to be guided by her memory, while eliciting passionate opposition from those who cite her as an enduring reason to oppose the Conservatives: this volume elaborates upon both examples in chapters by Martin Farr and James Ferns, respectively.

The importance still attributed to Thatcher is such that British political commentators continue to ask, in relation to contemporary events and debates, 'what would Maggie do?'. Would she have supported the UK's withdrawal from the European Union? Would she have maintained a close relationship with the USA during Donald Trump's presidency? Would she agree with the government of the day's approach to housing policy? Would she favour local enterprise zones? All of these are examples of genuine questions asked by journalists and academics, demonstrating the extent to which a series of recent, unrelated political situations have been considered through the prism of Thatcher's anticipated approach to them. The varied nature of these questions, and of the types of people posing them, highlights that to ask 'what would Maggie do?' is not simply an obsession of the right or of pro-Thatcher fanatics, but a line of enquiry considered worthwhile by mainstream journalists and academics of different political persuasions to Thatcher's own.

The premiership of Theresa May, the UK's second female Prime Minister, highlighted a gendered element to the curious practice of imagining Thatcher's approach to contemporary problems. May's premiership was accompanied by multiple articles which considered the extent to which she was like Thatcher, particularly in its earlier days when the pro-Brexit tabloid press supported her (as comparisons to Thatcher in such media, though gendered, are also invariably favourable).[1] One of the most striking examples of this came on January 18th 2017, when the *Daily Mail* published on its front page a cartoon image of May standing on the White Cliffs of Dover, with a Union flag behind her and a Thatcher-esque handbag on her arm, accompanied by a headline which proclaimed her

[1] It should also be acknowledged though that there were serious questions raised about the extent to which May's premiership put an end to Thatcherism. These debates were not concerned with the sex of the two women in question, but with whether May's ostensible shift to the left—economically at least, with suggestions of an industrial strategy, government intervention in the economy and workers on boards (some of which did not materialise)—signaled the end of neoliberal thinking within the Conservative Party. Contributors to this debate include Eliza Filby (2016), Raffy Marshall (2016) and Jason Cowley (2017). George Trefgarne (2017) was among the few who argued that Theresa May's economic and industrial policies would have had Mrs Thatcher's support.

"the New Iron Lady" (Slack 2017). In the run up to the 2017 general election, May's popularity ratings—the highest since records began—caused speculation that the Conservatives might gain seats in Labour's industrial heartlands (Maidment 2017). In response, Labour candidates in areas where Thatcher was unpopular consciously linked May and Thatcher in an effort to counteract May's apparent popularity with their largely Brexit supporting electorate. Labour MP Karl Turner—seeking re-election in Kingston upon Hull East—hired a billboard and displayed upon it a poster which showed May with Thatcher's hair superimposed over her own. The accompanying caption read: 'Be Afraid. Be Very Afraid. They're the Same Old Tories.' By the end of May's premiership though, after she had lost her parliamentary majority and failed (in her own terms) to deliver Brexit, Thatcher supporters like Lord Dobbs were keen to contrast May and Thatcher (as if attempting to rescue the latter's reputation by disassociation), with comments about how Thatcher would not 'have got us anywhere near this mess' (Morrison 2019). The swathe of Conservative victories in former Labour heartlands did not materialise until the general election of 2019, when Boris Johnson won what one Sky News presenter described on election night as "a majority of Thatcherite proportions".

Evidently the continued preoccupation with Margaret Thatcher in British politics—broadly defined—is not the sole preserve of those on the right who seek to emulate her. Her contemporary significance is also bolstered by those who oppose her and the ways they continue to deploy her image, the journalists for whom Thatcher is the go-to figure for recent historical comparison, and academics whose interest in her continues to generate new and insightful takes on her premiership, style of leadership and long-term influence.

The essays in this collection are less concerned with hypotheticals about what Margaret Thatcher *might do* today, focusing instead upon how we can understand the legacy of what she *did do* and how that manifests in the present moment. With perspectives from a range of academic disciplines, the book is divided into four main thematic sections:

- Ideologies—the first and most obvious element of Thatcherism's legacy is surely its ideological transformation of the Conservative Party and, arguably, aspects of British politics more broadly. This section is concerned with the ideological influence of Thatcherism and how intellectual, political and social responses to it reveal the complex nature of that influence.

- Regions—the legacy of Thatcherism is not universal across the UK's four constituent nations. In recognising this, this section draws upon archival findings and oral histories to offer new perspectives on Thatcherism's impact upon, or within, four specific geographic localities: Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London.
- Attitudes—to what extent have Thatcher and Thatcherism altered social attitudes in twenty-first century Britain? This section addresses this question with a focus upon contemporary society's orientation towards issues as diverse as Europe and welfare, examining the role that Thatcherism played in shifting public attitudes.
- Interpretations—if we are truly to understand the legacies of Thatcher and Thatcherism today, then we must look beyond narrow scholarly debates to understand how the period of British politics dominated by Thatcher is recounted and represented in popular accounts with which the public is more accustomed. This section considers how *the idea* of Thatcher has been (re-)constructed by parliamentarians, filmmakers and authors of fiction and how such representations are imbued (sometimes subtly) with ideas of Thatcher's long-term impact on British political life.

Each of these sections provides a way of conceptualising, assessing and measuring 'legacy'. Before we can approach questions of Thatcherism's legacy, though, we must consider first what we mean by it. Scholarly definitions of Thatcherism vary across, and even within, academic disciplines. We do not attempt to offer a single answer to the question 'what is Thatcherism?' here but, in what is an intentionally interdisciplinary collection, it is necessary to consider several conceptual frameworks in relation to which Thatcherism can be understood. We do so briefly, providing only the necessary foundations for the chapters in this collection. What follows are three different but complementary, overlapping strands of the -ism: an exploration of Thatcherism's neoliberal facets, its social and moral concerns, and its relationship with nationalism.

Thatcherism and Neoliberalism

Neoliberal thought is one of the key elements of the Thatcher project, informing the philosophical basis of how Thatcherites believe the economy should be organised. Andrew Gamble argues that neoliberalism, the revival of 'market liberalism as the dominant public philosophy and to create

the conditions for a free economy by limiting the scope of the state', comprised one of the three overriding objectives of the Thatcherite political project—the other two being to deliver electoral success and restoring the 'authority and competence' of the state to act (Gamble 1994, 4).

The centrality of neoliberalism to Thatcherite thought—and the reason why it is such a useful lens for analysing Thatcherism—is due to two key factors. The first is the global rise of New Right ideology, of which Thatcherism was a key example and Thatcher a key proponent. Here, we can analyse the importance and impact of neoliberalism in a comparative, international perspective. The second is the socio-economic context in which Britain found itself, now known as the Winter of Discontent, and which Thatcher used as a spring-board to justify her economic reforms, specifically the desire to boost economic growth, reduce inflation and curtail trade union power (Crines et al. 2016, 31). Neoliberalism is important because it is not a *sui generis* position, but a reaction to the effects of the so-called 'post-war consensus'.

The centrality of neoliberal thought to the Thatcherite project was also recognised by Thatcher herself—a point perfectly surmised by the story from when Thatcher was Leader of the Opposition, berating a 'leftish member of the Conservative Research Department by fetching out a copy of The Constitution of Liberty from her bag and slamming it down on the table, declaring "this is what we believe"' (Margaret Thatcher Foundation 2019). Neoliberalism is a vital lens through which to analyse Thatcherism because it was the very economic philosophy within which Thatcher situated her own economic policy programme.

This is not to say, however, that all policy reform lived up to the neoliberal ideal. In some key respects Thatcher continued the policies of the much-derided 'post-war consensus': the NHS, the education system, pensions, parks, libraries, museums and even the Royal Mail all survived the Thatcher era more or less intact (Reitan 2003). Gamble also cautions against the idea of seeing the Thatcher administrations as a radical neoliberal government. Tax cuts were slower than they could have been, there was a failure to make deep cuts in state spending, and few programmes were terminated altogether. Similarly, the establishment of a monetarist policy regime arguably predates the Thatcher governments, and to the extent that it 'served important ideological and political needs … it was less important as a guide to policy' (Gamble 1994, 228–230).

Thatcherism and Neoconservatism

The links between Thatcherism and neoconservatism are well established (see Hay 1996; Levitas 1986 and Gamble 1994, most obviously). The conservative aspects of Thatcherite thinking have, if anything, been left in the shadows following the focus on neoliberalism which has dominated debates and critiques of late. Thatcher's conservativism was routed in her admiration for and of England of the 1930s (see Green 1999) and found expression via her support for the reintroduction of the death penalty and the rhetorical attacks on homosexuals working in schools (which later underpinned the legislation aimed at preventing teacher's from 'promoting' homosexuality to school children). This neoconservatism, however, had a sometimes uncomfortable relationship with neoliberalism. Sometimes the two homed in on the same topic—such as, for example, the sale of council houses to their tenants. This appealed to neoconservatives because it helped to support the aspirations of families, whilst it also appealed to neoliberals as it was an attached on public ownership of assets. On other matters, however, these instincts clashed. Pushing back the restrictions of what could be bought on a Sunday (the Sunday Trading Laws) appealed to neoliberals. Shops were, after all, a fixed cost, so being able to sell on a Sunday meant that additional revenue could be won, which appealed to neoliberals. Neoconservatives saw things rather differently, however. Sundays were days of both worship (during the 1980s it was jokingly remarked that the Church of England was the Conservative Party at prayer) and of rest. As such, selling things on a Sunday (which implied employing people to do the selling) breached the 'rest' maxim, whilst eating into the time for prayer.

But her conservative instincts went further than the narrowly defined topics of morality (for which read religious values, heterosexuality and no sexual relationships outside of marriage), and embraced topics which bordered on neoliberal concerns, such as the 'duty' to find work (irrespective of where it was—hence Norman Tebbit's quip about his father getting on his bike to look for work), or how well it was paid or what it entailed doing (hence the emphasis on 'flexible working'). These elements of her neoconservatism thus buttressed her thinking on neoliberalism, helping to create a virtuous circle (at least within Conservative Party thinking). Yet some of the (at least initially neoliberal) economic policies were doing great damage to some core pillars of neoconservative thinking. Families and communities were (at least some of them) thrown into disarray, especially after

the miners' strike of 1984–1985 and the wave of pit closures which followed this, and the job losses in associated industries such as the railways. Wherever and whenever one looks at Thatcherism as a critique of society, as an ideological construct, and (or 'or') a set of policy and legislative activities, one finds symmetries and contradictions.

Thatcherism and Nationalism

Nationalism is of major importance to Thatcherism and was central to Thatcher's own social outlook. In her assessment of the country's problems in the late 1970s, Thatcher diagnosed that something fundamental to the British character had been lost. The 1960s and 1970s were, in her view, marked not just by economic decline but by a decline in social standards which contrasted with the Victorian values which had informed her own upbringing. Her promise to the country was not simply economic rescue, but a return to these values and the return of 'true' Britishness. In her own words, Thatcher's mission was to change the 'heart and soul' of the nation—while economics might have provided 'the method', renewing British pride and reviving a lost sense of national identity was the objective (Thatcher 1981). Thatcher presented many of the neoliberal and neoconservative principles which underpinned her political project as an intrinsic aspect of Britishness. In 1999, she compounded this by stating that while she had been influenced by neoliberals like Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek, her 'approach' in the 1980s 'lay deep in human nature, and more especially the nature of the British people' (Thatcher 1999).

If Thatcherism's aim was to alter Britain's place in the world and to restore it to the former greatness Thatcher attributed to it, then it was—at least on Thatcher's own terms—successful in doing so. This was made clear in the Conservative Party's choice of campaign slogan during the 1987 general election: 'Britain is Great Again. Don't Let Labour Wreck It'. But while Thatcher's nationalism may have contributed to the success of her political project (particularly on her own terms), it was not without its critics. In 1997, Stuart Hall wrote that Thatcherism was 'grounded in' a 'narrow, national definition of Englishness, of cultural identity', adding that 'When Thatcherism speaks, frequently asking the question "Are you one of us?" Who is one of us? Well, the numbers of people who are not one of us would fill a book' (1997, 26). Hall's argument was that the

definition of Britishness posited by Thatcherism equated to South East Englishness (something reinforced by the sections of this book on Wales and Scotland in particular) and that it served to exclude more people than it sought to include.

Thatcherism in the Twenty-First Century

This collection is the first major publication of the Thatcher Network, an interdisciplinary research group which aims to promote the study of Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism. At the time of writing, the network has held conferences at the universities of Durham (2017), Liverpool (2018) and Derby (2019).[2] For the most part, the essays in this collection have their roots in the discussions held at the first two conferences and there is, consequentially, a disparate range of disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches throughout the book. They are, however, all underpinned by a mutual consideration of the legacy of Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism the twenty-first century.

The first section of the book opens with Timothy Heppell's assessment of Thatcherism's ideological legacy among Conservative Party MPs. Heppell demonstrates that while there are some clear signs of Thatcherism having triumphed over its critics—those often termed 'Wets'—on the issue of the economy, its ideological legacy beyond the economic sphere is much more complex. Edmund Neill's chapter provides a historical account of intellectual responses to Thatcherism, focusing particularly upon debates about citizenship and civil society in the period 1990–2010. In doing so, Neill reveals that Thatcherism retained much influence—as an idea—long after Thatcher left office, but that thinkers on the right (as well as the left) have increasingly questioned some of the assumptions which underpin it. Kieron O'Hara locates Thatcher's often misrepresented 'no such thing as society' comment, and her wider reflections upon the notion of the individual, within the history of conservative thought and, subsequently, within contemporary debates about big data and cyberculture. O'Hara argues that Thatcher's promotion of a certain style or notion of

[2] If proof of Thatcher's divisiveness was required, the second conference (in Liverpool) was met with opposition from that institution's student Marxist society and members of the local Momentum branch (the Jeremy Corbyn support group within the Labour Party), both of which planned to protest the conference; some of the latter group also threatened to commit acts of violence against its delegates. Reports of these threats featured on the regional BBC Radio news reports and in the *Daily Mail* (Martin 2017).

individualism could have unwittingly given way to a new type of digital modernity with 'the individual' at its heart.

'Regions' begins with Jack Brown's chapter on the birth of Canary Wharf and its association with Thatcherism. Brown uses new archival materials to challenge established accounts of the relationship between Thatcherism and Canary Wharf's development, with a focus upon the role of Michael Heseltine. The chapter challenges not just misconceptions about the 'Thatcherite' origins of Canary Wharf, but about the Thatcher government's relationship with interventionist policies more broadly. Fiona McKelvey's chapter is similarly underpinned by new materials made available in UK and Irish archives. McKelvey explores the reasons behind the sense of ambivalence in Northern Ireland which followed Thatcher's death, particularly among the Unionist community which admired her stance against the IRA, but not her role in laying the groundwork for the Good Friday Agreement. James Ferns uses oral history interviews with former steelworkers in Scotland to provide a comprehensive account of their experience and understanding of Thatcherism, and how that informs a sense of post-industrial identity within communities once reliant upon heavy industry. Sam Blaxland similarly combines oral history interviews with archival research in his examination of Thatcher's legacy in twenty-first century Wales (up to, and including, the 2019 general election). Blaxland demonstrates that, while Thatcher's personal interest in Wales may have been limited, her governments introduced significant policies to strengthen Welsh identity which indirectly paved the way for devolution and the formation of the Welsh Assembly.

Emily Gray, Maria Grasso and Stephen Farrall's chapter opens the 'Attitudes' section of the book. The chapter uses an age, period and cohort analysis to investigate the phenomenon of 'Thatcher's Children', demonstrating that individuals who came of age during the Thatcher/Major years had markedly more conservative (or 'Thatcherite') social attitudes towards issues including crime and punishment and the economy than the generation that first elected Thatcher. Andrew Crines' chapter gives consideration to the claim that Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech, and subsequent Eurosceptic interventions from the House of Lords, helped to set the UK on the path to Brexit. Through an analysis of her rhetoric, particularly post-1990, Crines shows how Thatcher inspired a new generation of Eurosceptic Conservatives who perceived rejecting the EU as a central part of conservatism. Finally, Ruth Davidson examines how Thatcherism

transformed public attitudes to welfare and social security. She shows how Tony Blair's New Labour government was not able to counter the moralising narrative surrounding social security spending that Thatcher introduced into public discourse, and that the associated notions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor remain prevalent today.

The book's final section, 'Interpretations', opens with Dominic Dean's consideration of how authors of contemporary fiction captured and illustrated the complex nature of Thatcherism in their writing, in a way not achieved by conventional political history. Dean looks to works by Hanif Kureishi, Alan Hollinghurst and Kazuo Ishiguro as examples which highlight Thatcherism's contradictions, such as how its nationalist tendencies contrast its orientation towards transnational wealth. Antony Mullen then discusses the significance of the 2011 film *The Iron Lady* and its implications for historical narratives about Thatcher and Thatcherism. Mullen discusses how the film—ostensibly objective, globally successful and acclaimed for its accurate portrayal—de-politicises Thatcher by distancing her from much of what she did in office, encouraging viewers to recognise instead her achievements as a woman. Finally, Martin Farr brings the collection to a close with a carefully curated reconstruction of the parliamentary tributes to Thatcher following her death—an event which served as a de facto debate about Thatcher's legacy (and that of her eponymous-ism) and one which three members of the House of Lords declared would be of great significance to historians. Focusing upon how different generations of parliamentarian remembered Thatcher and the period she dominated, Farr brings strands of MPs' and peers' speeches together in an evaluation of what was a highly publicised media spectacle set against the backdrop of 'death parties', worldwide news coverage and a televised funeral.

References

Cowley, Jason. 2017. The May Doctrine. *New Statesman*, 8 February. https://www.newstatesman.com/2017/02/-theresa-may-method-interview-jason-cowley.

Crines, Andrew S., Heppell, Timothy, and Dorey, Peter. 2016. *The Political Rhetoric and Oratory of Margaret Thatcher*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Filby, Eliza. 2016. What Sort of Toryism Will Emerge from This Fractious Upheaval? *The Guardian*, 3 July. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/03/new-toryism-fractious-upheaval-thatcherism-dead.

Gamble, Andrew. 1994. *The Free Economy and the Strong State*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Green, E.E. 1999. Thatcherism: An Historical Perspective. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9: 17–42.

Hall, Stuart. 1997. The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity. In *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King, 19–40. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hay, Colin. 1996. *Restating Social and Political Change*. Oxford University Press: Milton Keynes.

Levitas, Ruth. 1986. *The Ideology of the New Right*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Maidment, Jack. 2017. Theresa May Most Popular Leader since the Late 1970s as Jeremy Corbyn Hits All Time Low. *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 April. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/26/theresa-may-popular-voters-leader-since-late-1970s/.

Margaret Thatcher Foundation. 2019. Thatcher, Hayek & Friedman. *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/Hayek.asp.

Marshall, Raffy. 2016. Prime Minister May: Post-Thatcherite. *ConservativeHome*, 28 July. https://www.conservativehome.com/thetorydiary/2016/07/theresa-may-post-thatcherite.html.

Martin, Daniel. 2017. Conference on Margaret Thatcher Is Forced to Increase Security after Social Media Threats to Hospitalise Delegates. *Daily Mail*, 29 November. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5127023/Liverpool-Thatcher-event-forced-increase-security.html.

Morrison, Sean. 2019. Margaret Thatcher Would Have Handled Brexit Better than Theresa May, House of Cards Author Claims. *Evening Standard*, 13 May. https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/margaret-thatcher-would-have-handled-brexit-better-than-theresa-may-house-of-cards-author-claims-a4141406.html.

Reitan, Earl A. 2003. *The Thatcher Revolution: Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, and the Transformation of Modern Britain, 1979–2001*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

Slack, James. 2017. Steel of the New Iron Lady: On the Day Theresa May Said Britain WILL Quit the Single Market, She Put Cameron's Feeble Negotiations to Shame with an Ultimatum to Brussels That the UK Will 'Walk Away from a Bad Deal'. *Daily Mail*, 17 January. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4130034/Theresa-s-Brexit-speech-puts-Cameron-shame.html

Thatcher, Margaret. 1981. Interview for Sunday Times. Margaret Thatcher Foundation. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104475.

———. 1999. Speech by Lady Thatcher at the International Free Enterprise Dinner. Margaret Thatcher Foundation. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108381.

Trefgarne, George. 2017. Theresa May Rises in Stature by the Day. *CapX*, 25 January. https://capx.co/theresa-may-rises-in-stature-by-the-day/.

Walker, Tim. 2011. Baroness Thatcher's Office Is Closed. *The Daily Telegraph*, 30 July. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/8671195/Baroness-Thatchers-office-is-closed.html.

PART I

Ideologies

CHAPTER 2

The Ideological Composition of the Parliamentary Conservative Party from Thatcher to May

Timothy Heppell

This chapter will identify how the ideological composition of the parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP) has evolved over the last three decades. The rationale for engaging in this type of research is to establish the ideological legacy of Thatcherism within their parliamentary ranks. Prior to the advent of Thatcherism, the following assumptions existed about the Conservative Party vis-à-vis ideology. First, Conservatives tended to deny that Conservatism was an ideology (Gilmour 1977, 121). Second, rather than being ideological or dogmatic, Conservatives claimed that they were pragmatic. This was tied to their belief in the importance of internal party unity and that oft-used phrase that 'we have our agreements in public and our disagreements in private' (Cowley and Norton 1999, 102). This in turn explained why academics defined the party as one of non-aligned political tendencies, rather than one characterised by ideological factions (Rose 1964). Third, alongside their suspicion towards ideology, which aided their attempts to demonstrate internal unity, was another

T. Heppell (✉)
University of Leeds, Leeds, UK
e-mail: t.heppell@leeds.ac.uk

A. Mullen et al. (eds.), *Thatcherism in the 21st Century*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41792-5_2

oft-repeated claim—that loyalty to their leader was their secret weapon (Garnett 2003, 49).

These claims about the Conservatives were certainly less credible in the post-Thatcher era then they were in the pre-Thatcher era. First, Thatcher rejected the pragmatism associated with consensus politics and she projected herself as an ideologically driven conviction politician (Kavanagh 1987). Second, the fact that Thatcher would ask if fellow Conservatives were 'one of us' (Young 1990) helped to establish a tradition whereby Conservatives became subcategorised in terms of whether they were Thatcherite or non-Thatcherite, a development which her successor John Major thought was immensely damaging (Major 1999). His leadership tenure would witness the consequences of her approach—i.e. an increase in ideologically driven conflict (Cowley and Norton 1999). Third, the claim about loyalty to the party leader was exposed as a myth. Thatcher was challenged twice (in 1989 and 1990); Major survived a de facto challenge in 1995; in opposition Iain Duncan Smith was forcibly evicted in 2003 via the confidence motion procedure initiated in 1998; and Theresa May did survive a confidence motion in December 2018 before eventually resigning in May 2019 (see Heppell 2008; Dorey et al. 2020; Roe-Crines et al. 2020). Moreover, ideology would also become a dominant consideration in the selection of the party leadership. Academic studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between the ideological preferences of parliamentarians and the candidate for the leadership that they voted for in the 1975, 1990, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2016 Conservative Party leadership elections (see Cowley and Bailey 2000; Cowley and Garry 1998; Heppell and Hill 2008, 2009, 2010; Jeffery et al. 2018).

Back in 1990 Norton (1990, 42) examined the ideological disposition of the PCP and asked whether Thatcher, and her administrations since 1979, had acted as a 'transmission belt' for an increasingly Thatcherite parliamentary party. Using a range of sources—i.e. division lists, membership of party groupings, public comments in the media and interviews—Norton positioned each member of the 1987 PCP on an ideological spectrum of Conservatism. The central theme within the Norton typology was opinion towards economic management, thus capturing the wet-dry distinction which was the dominant divide within 1980s Conservatism, but it was a typology that also captured the divide over social, sexual and moral matters. At the time the Norton typology was a credible way of mapping opinion within the PCP. Although it had a number of subcategories within it (see Table 2.1), it identified how Thatcherism was the

Table 2.1 The ideological composition of the PCP 1990 using the Norton typology

Grouping	*Ideological categorisation*	*N = 372*
Critics of Thatcherism		67
(Wets)	Strongly interventionist, pro-European, socially liberal	(27)
(Damps)	Moderately interventionist, pro-European, socially liberal	(40)
Faithful	Loyal to leadership position	217
Populists	Interventionist, Eurosceptic, socially conservative	17
Thatcherites		71
(Neo-liberals)	Economic dries, social liberals, Eurosceptic	(15)
(Thatcher Group)	Economic dries, loyalist on morality and Europe	(30)
(Tory Right)	Economic dries, social conservatives, loyalist on Europe	(26)

Source: Norton 1990, 47–52

ideological amalgamation of neo-liberalism in the economic sphere (as advanced by economic dries) and neo-conservatism as promoted by social conservatives—or what Gamble described as the free economy and the strong state (Gamble 1988). The central finding from Norton's research was that the Thatcherites were a minority within the PCP (Norton 1990, 43–4, 55).

This chapter updates Norton's study to assess how the ideological composition of the PCP has changed in the parliaments since Thatcher. In doing so, the chapter will embrace and extend existing academic studies on the ideological disposition of the PCPs that have followed since 1992. These studies have developed the Norton typology in the following ways:

- First, by expanding the scale of the research undertaken in order to position each Conservative parliamentarian. By using a larger number and wider range of division lists and Early Day Motions in the subsequent Parliaments, and more extensive use of campaign literature and interviews, the number of loyalists (or those who cannot be ideologically categorised) was lower (see for example, Heppell 2002, 2013).
- Second, by modernising the Norton typology to fully engage with the European ideological policy fault-line. This would come to dominate post-Thatcherite Conservatism, but it was not as central as the wet-dry distinction at the time when Norton constructed his

typology, and therefore this need to be addressed, as other academics have identified (see Garry 1995; Heppell 2002; Heppell and Hill 2005).

- Third, by accepting that the spectrum of opinion within post-Thatcherite Conservatism actually covers three *distinct* ideological dividing lines—i.e. on economic policy, on European policy and on social, sexual and moral matters—*and* that these should be viewed separately. This is because some Conservatives do not adhere to a straightforward distinction based on the left of Conservatism being economically wet, Europhile and social liberal, and the right of Conservatism being economically dry, Eurosceptic and socially conservative. A lot of cross-cutting opinions, or zig-zagging, will exist across these three ideological dividing lines, showcasing the complexities of contemporary British Conservatism, and the difficulties that these would create in terms of party management for respective party leaders after Thatcher.

Given these arguments, the chapter will consider the evidence of continuity and change in relation to each ideological dividing line separately in each of the Parliaments since 1992, starting with the economic policy divide, then the European policy divide, and then the divide over social, sexual and moral matters.

The Economic Ideological Policy Divide: Wets versus Dries

Thatcherism was an economic modernisation strategy which was designed to replace a corporatist economy with an essentially market based economy (Johnson 1991). This required a rebalancing of the relationship between labour and capital and addressing the trade union problem—i.e. organised labour was an obstacle to the effective functioning of the free market (Dorey 1995). Running parallel to these assumptions would be the emblematic politics of privatisation, with the sale of state-owned assets and council homes, being aligned to a wider strategy of economic liberalisation (Forrest and Murie 1988; Wolfe 1991). As Thatcherism promoted the merits of deregulation and enterprise, so individuals and corporations were incentivised to generate wealth, and to achieve these objectives

Thatcher made the case for lower direct taxation upon corporate income, personal wealth and incomes (Riddell 1989).

Not all Conservatives were entirely comfortable with the consequences of Thatcherite economic medicine. Those Conservatives who raised doubts about increasing unemployment, or the growing gap between the wealthiest and the poorest in society, or about regional inequalities, would incur the wrath of Thatcher. She would justify the inevitability of inequality and would reject egalitarianism. She could simultaneously praise those who were the wealth creators in the economy, and argue that if social deprivation and poverty did exist, it was due to the limitations of those individuals and not caused by the limitations of the capitalism (Dorey 2011).

Those who did not endorse the Thatcherite approach to the economy became known as wets, and as a consequence her backers became known as the dries. The use of the term wets was said to have been coined by Thatcher as a rebuke for ministers unwilling to fully support her economic strategy, and those she felt too willing to seek compromise with the trade unions. A more detailed delineation of the views of wets and dries is offered in Table 2.2. At its most basic it was clear that the wets were uncomfortable with the anti-union legislation and the tax and public expenditure cuts, and they made the case for a more interventionist and conciliatory approach (Young 1990, 198–202). Over time, Thatcher would use her Prime Ministerial powers of appointment to undermine their influence within Cabinet. Leading wets were either (a) dismissed—e.g. Ian Gilmour in 1981 and Francis Pym in 1983; or (b) resigned—e.g. James Prior in 1984 and Michael Heseltine in 1986; or (c) they were retained but marginalised—e.g. Peter Walker held office throughout but

Table 2.2 The wet-dry distinction and the economic policy ideological divide

Non-Thatcherite wet	*Thatcherite dry*
Mixed economy	Free market economy
Extended and interventionist state	Limited but directive state
Interdependence	Independence
Consultative policy making	Executive policy making
Pluralist society	Individualist society
Trade unions legitimate/constructive	Trade unions undemocratic/destructive
Welfare state as universal right	Welfare state as safety net
Social obligation	Private self-help

Source: Adapted from Smith and Ludlam (1996, 12)