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THE POLITICAL RHETORIC AND ORATORY OF MARGARET THATCHER

Andrew S. Crines,
Timothy Heppell, and Peter Dorey

Rhetoric, Politics and Society

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The Political Rhetoric and Oratory of Margaret Thatcher

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FOREWORD

Margaret Thatcher understood the power and importance of words in politics. They are the currency of political debate. If a leader or political party devalues their words by reneging on them, the words lose their lustre. When a whole government is no longer believed, it is normally on the way out. To Margaret the truth was vital. Her words had to be forged in a crucible of evidence, as she knew they would be sorely tested by her adversaries, studied by allies and enemies alike, and become the lifeblood of many commentaries and debates.

Helping her write one of her big speeches was a Herculean task. She wanted to be fully involved, as it was to be her speech in every sense. She wanted it to have an argument. She wanted to mix some philosophy with down-to-earth comments on contemporary life. It was to have both policy and vision. To get there required a small group of writers and thinkers to offer her proposals and text. She always had nerves about the forthcoming performance, so she would test each sentence, each promise and even each joke to destruction before allowing them into the final cut.

The early stages of speechwriting were the most enjoyable. We few could range widely, submitting ideas and text. We could assemble a first speech, based on what we thought she was trying to get across, and what we knew to be the topical issues and misconceptions of the day. She would then leave us in no doubt our work was lacking. She began the laborious task of cutting our text up into sentences, rearranging them to try to get 'an argument' she thought was convincing, sometimes indicating to us missing things she wanted included.

Thereafter we went on an iterative journey, limited only by the number of hours and days remaining to the event. It was an extravagant use of Prime Ministerial time, but as her Head of Policy I did not think it wasted. It enabled me to work closely with her, understanding where she had strong views and where she needed more briefing or advice. The team as a whole saw it as a chance to help her review and shape the strategy of the government she led.

She was often at her best in the Commons. She had enormous respect for Parliament. She wanted to inform it accurately, and convince waverers of the rightness of her cause. She was good in the cut and thrust of Parliamentary exchanges. She dealt with Labour both from her superior knowledge of the realities of government and from her philosophical differences with socialism. These made her able to come up with a response in general terms as well as being usually able to outdo the interlocutor on knowledge of the detail.

She took great care to dress well. Always respectful of the office she held and the audiences she spoke to, it was de rigueur to be well turned out. She was keen to argue and discuss with those who came to advise or lobby or demand. She could also be charming when out and about seeking to woo the electors and fulfil the more hospitable parts of her job. In the middle of tense meetings on a subject as abstruse as the money supply or as fundamental as the defence of the realm, she would remember some personal tragedy she had seen in the news or heard of from contacts and ask her office to do more to help. Her long days were interspersed by writing many personal notes and letters to people she was close to or to those she thought would appreciate a direct communication from the most powerful woman in the world.

She had the great advantage of being the first woman in this mighty office, so she could shape it in her own feminine way. It also meant she felt she needed to show certain characteristics like fortitude, conviction and a powerful message as it was still a very male world around her. Many of the men who worked for her did not seem to grasp the feminine niceties she also observed, and some found it difficult to respond to a woman which such a great knowledge of government and politics with a zest for argument. At her best she gave us timeless lessons on the rule of law, personal responsibility, wider ownership and the nature of a free society. Her words remain for later generations to judge.

John Redwood
Member of Parliament for Wokingham

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
CPC	Conservative Political Centre
EC	European Communities
ECU	European Currency Unit
EEC	European Economic Community
EMU	Economic and Monetary Union
ERM	Exchange Rate Mechanism
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRN	Independent Radio News
ITN	Independent Television News
ITV	Independent TV
LWT	London Weekend Television
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NHS	National Health Service
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUT	National Union of Teachers
PCP	Parliamentary Conservative Party
PMQs	Prime Minister's Questions
QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
SDP	Social and Democratic Party
SEA	Single European Act
TUC	Trade Union Congress

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The death of Margaret Thatcher in April 2013 should have provided an opportunity for quiet and considered reflection of her impact as Prime Minister between May 1979 and November 1990. Nearly a quarter of a century had passed since her tearful departure from Downing Street, and although she has continued to play an active (and at times disruptive role) in politics in the 1990s, ill health had forced her to remove herself from public life in 2002 (Theakston 2010: 197–205; Thatcher 2002a). Her increasingly low profile, added to the degeneration of the Conservative Party and the hegemony of New Labour and the Third Way, would lead Colin Hay to argue in 2007 that Thatcherism had 'all but disappeared from the lexicon of British political analysis' (Hay 2007: 183). Thus, by the time that a modernised Conservative Party re-entered government under David Cameron, as part of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, Thatcher seemed a distant memory. Indeed, upon acquiring the Conservative Party leadership in late 2005, Cameron had made a determined effort to distance his brand of Conservatism from that of Thatcherism (for a discussion on the crisis of post-Thatcherite Conservatism and Cameron and the modernisation project see Lee and Beech 2009; Bale 2010; Dorey et al. 2011; Hayton 2012).

However, her death proved not to be a precursor to quiet or considered reflection. Instead, Britain was propelled backwards into a divisive and shrill debate about the impact of Thatcherism (Hadley 2014). The ability that she had to divide public opinion was the inevitable consequence of

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her political style. She despised the consensus-seeking politics of the post-war era, seeing it lacking in principle and being driven by compromise. Rather, she was a self-proclaimed conviction politician. You were with her (for example 'are you one of us?' Young 1990) or you were against her (for example she called the trade unions 'the enemy within', Marsh 1992; Milne 1994; Dorey 1995) and 'her fierce opinions and unwillingness to compromise were what enraptured and captivated her admirers and what so infuriated and nauseated her opponents' (Gamble 2015: 4).

That Thatcher was seen to divide opinion so much was a reflection of her political persona and this was shaped by how she attempted to justify the politics of Thatcherism. Justification was understood by the electorate, and accepted or rejected, by the way in which she constructed and presented her arguments through her public appearances. Her rhetoric and oratory across different forums—in Parliament, at Annual Party Conference and other set-piece speeches, in interviews and press conferences—provides the focus of this book. However, before we map out how we aim to analyse these speeches, it is necessary to position our work within the existing interpretations on Thatcherism.

Interpreting Thatcherism

That Thatcher had an -ism attached to her name was indicative of her impact, both as leader of the Conservative Party (from February 1975) and as Prime Minister (after May 1979). She achieved the primary objective for a Conservative Party leader—power. When she inherited the leadership of her party, they were engulfed by a sense of crisis. The previous ten-year period had seen them contest five General Elections of which they had been defeated in four (October 1964, March 1966, February 1974 and October 1974). Any satisfaction that Conservatives could derive from their victory in June 1970 was short-lived. The Heath administration of 1970 to 1974 not only failed to demonstrate governing competence but appeared to lack a clear political strategy (see for example, Holmes 1982; Kavanagh 1996; Seldon and Ball 1996). A strategic vacuum existed within the Conservative Party in the mid-1970s, and when Thatcher annexed the leadership in February 1975 she exploited that vacuum. In the run-up to the 1979 General Election the supposed discrediting of social democracy and Keynesian economic thinking, evidenced by the IMF crisis of 1976 and the Winter of Discontent in 1978–79, gave Thatcher the window of opportunity through which to advance her new approach (Evans 2004: 9–12; Hay 2010: 465).

The impact of Thatcherism upon the economy and society between 1979 and 1990 was considerable (excellent recent accounts of the Thatcher era are provided by Vinen 2009; Jackson and Saunders 2012; Farrell and Hay 2014). Thatcherism witnessed the transformation of a corporatist economy into an essentially market-based economy (Johnson 1991). This process comprised many elements of which the politics of privatisation became emblematic of Thatcherism (see Young 1986; Wolfe 1991; Martin and Parker 1997) and the privatisation agenda also embraced the sale of council houses through the right-to-buy scheme (see Forest and Murie 1988; Jones and Murie 2006). The logic underpinning the privatisation of state-owned enterprises adhered to their wider belief in liberalisation and deregulation of labour and financial markets to aid competition and to foster an entrepreneurial culture. Incentives were to be created to encourage the accumulation of individual and corporate wealth, and to facilitate this, the case would be made for reducing direct taxation on corporate income, personal wealth and incomes (Riddell 1989). For Thatcher, the rhetorical line of 'rolling back the frontiers of the state' was used to justify her objectives (Green 2010: 27).

Thatcherism unleashed massive social transformations (see Crewe 1988, 1992), which would widen the gap between the richest and poorest within society. These changes included the spread of home ownership (increasing from 57.2 per cent in 1979 to 71 per cent by her third term) and share ownership (up from 7 per cent in 1979 to 22 per cent by her third term). Thatcherism also resulted in the decline of council tenancy (declining from 31.4 per cent to 22.9 per cent by her third term); the contraction of the public sector and heavy manufacturing jobs; the growth of employment in service industries; and the fall in union membership (down from 13.2 to under 10 million by her third term) (Pattie and Johnston 1996: 45–46; Evans 2004: 39–40). Inherent within these assumptions was the Thatcherite rejection of egalitarianism and their willingness to justify the inevitability of inequality. Venerating wealth creators went hand in hand with attributing lower individual incomes to individual failings as opposed to systematic failings within capitalism (see for example, Dorey 2011, 2015; Walker 2014).

Thatcherism was, however, more than just driven by new-right thinking in terms of the economy. It was an ideological amalgamation of economic liberalism or neo-liberalism as advanced by economic dries and neo-conservatism as promoted by social conservatives (Gamble 1988). Neo-conservatism was motivated by three main concerns: issues relating to authority and the maintenance of law and order; issues relating to the importance of tradition, the sanctity of marriage and the centrality of the family within the context of wider morality-based considerations; and issues relating to the preservation of national identity from internal and external threats. Critically, neo-conservatism rejected the parameters of the 1960s sexual revolution and the liberalisation of abortion, divorce and homosexuality. They suggested that a correlation existed between liberal demands for sexual liberation (for example the contraceptive pill), progressive attacks on marriage, motherhood and the family, and increased divorce rates, single parenthood, social disorder, juvenile delinquency and welfare dependency. Neo-conservatism could be reactionary in tone. They were known for their opposition to homosexual rights; freedom of contraception; and abortion; but were supportive of the family; capital and corporal punishment; and censorship (see for example, Durham 1989, 1991). Neo-conservatism was also characterised by a desire to protect, preserve and promote British national identity, and it was this that fuelled their rejection of devolution; their scepticism about the growth of multiculturalism, and their strong rhetoric on immigration (thus fuelling claims of populism within Thatcherite thinking and also links to Powellism, see Fry 1998). Neo-conservative thinking contributed to hostility towards further integration within Europe and a strong desire to protect British national sovereignty (see for example, Lynch 1999; Buller 2000).

Seeing Thatcherism as an amalgam of neo-liberalism in the economic sphere, and neo-conservatism in the social sphere, is a straightforward way of defining Thatcherism. However, we have to acknowledge that over the decades academics have stumbled over each other in an effort to find more complex ways of interpreting Thatcherism. Other perspectives seek not to define the *meaning* of Thatcherism, but seek to explore the *motivations* of Thatcherites, and thus Thatcher herself. Before we proceed with our book it is necessary for us to summarise these perspectives and locate where our book fits into the literature on Thatcherism (for more detailed reviews of the literature on Thatcherism see Jessop et al., 1988: 22–51; Evans and Taylor 1996: 219–46; and Hay 2007). The extant literature can be subdivided into the following schools of thought as to the *primary* driver of Thatcherism.

Economic Interpretations

These suggest that Thatcherism evolved as a response to the wider crisis of capitalist profitability. Thatcherism is therefore viewed as an economic modernisation strategy designed to respond to economic stagnation of the international political economy in the 1970s, and within this Britain's perceived weakness within the global system at that time (see Taylor 1989, 1992; Jessop et al., 1988). Some of those academics who subscribe to this explanatory model emphasise industrial relations strategy for the economic and governing crisis of the 1970s. Within this interpretation of what motivates Thatcherism is the view that (1) trade union power is a constraining influence upon the operation of the free market; (2) this constraining influence is reflective of the incompatibility between the interests of labour and the interests of capital (and this incompatibility explained the failure of corporatist solutions); and thus (3) the solution must involve a rebalancing between the forces of labour and capital. The subsequent strategy of the Thatcherites was thereby designed to work to the advantage of capital, especially the financial sector and transnational capital (Nairn 1981; Atkins 1986; Coates 1989).

Ideological Interpretations

These interpretations argue that Thatcherism was about the pursuit of ideological hegemony. Built within this interpretation is a recognition that Thatcherism embraces more than just economistic objectives. Here the economic objectives are aligned to the pursuit of authoritarian populism (for example neo-conservatism) as Thatcherism seeks to develop into an economic *and* social alternative to social democracy (see Hall and Jacques 1983; O'Shea 1984). This interpretation does tend to imply a degree of coherence and strategic thought with regard to policy implementation that can be challenged (see Marsh and Rhodes 1992). Not only does this interpretation underplay the 'improvisation' and 'opportunism' that defined the Thatcher administrations once in office (Gamble 1996: 23), but it also downplays the extent to which Thatcherite thinking was the minority position within the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP) and within ministerial ranks. Claims of hegemony neglect the disputes within the PCP between economic dries and wets and between social liberals and social conservatives (Norton 1990: 41–58).

Policy Consensus-Based Interpretations

These interpretations on Thatcherism can broadly be defined as political interpretation, but these interpretations can be subdivided into policy-, electoral- and personality-based interpretations. The policy-based interpretation is predominantly based around the supposed shift from the politics of consensus (the pre-Thatcherite analysis of post-war British politics) to the politics of conviction (the policy changes that characterise the Thatcher administrations post-1979). The theory of post-war consensus implies that the Attlee administrations of 1945–51 embedded a policy settlement that the Conservative administrations of 1951–64 broadly accepted (and the Heath era of 1970–74 made an abortive attempt to either modernise or challenge before also accepting). This supposed policy consensus embraced a range of economic, social and foreign policy pillars. It included a commitment to full employment; a belief in the mixed economy; an industrial relations strategy built around a conciliatory approach to trade unions which involved them in the policy-making process; a belief in active government which thus justified expanding the responsibilities of the state; a continuance of the welfare state as a universal right; and a foreign policy stance involving nuclear capability and the Atlantic alliance (Kavanagh 1987). Thatcher questioned why the Conservative Party was accepting these policy pillars, and bemoaned the fact that post-war Conservative governments had 'retreated gracefully' in the face of the 'inevitable advance' of the left (Thatcher 1993a: 104). Thatcherism would repudiate consensus politics. Of the six policy pillars, four can legitimately be described as being overhauled by Thatcherism—full employment; the mixed economy (notably via privatisation); accommodation with the trade unions; and an activist role for government designed to flatten out inequalities. Of the other two—the welfare state policy pillar was modified rather than overhauled, whilst the foreign policy pillar was broadly sustained albeit with a stronger emphasis on reasserting British prestige and influence (Kavanagh 1987).

Electoral Interpretations

The electoral interpretation on Thatcherism is advanced by the statecraft explanation forwarded by Jim Bulpitt (1986: 19–39). Bulpitt argues that statecraft is cyclical and involves the development and sustaining of four dimensions—successful party management; a winning electoral strategy;

political argument hegemony (or dominance of elite debate); and evidence of governing competence. Statecraft theory involves recognising the need to depoliticise contentious issues by placing responsibility for decision-making 'at one remove' from government (see Flinders and Buller: 2006). For example, Thatcherites felt that wage determination was a politicised and intensified conflict between the trade unions and government, and by doing so, increased perceptions of governing incompetence. Thatcherite policy solutions, such as eschewing formal incomes policy, reforming trade unions via extensive legislation, and pursuing privatisation, were all designed to 'take government out of Labour disputes' (McLean 2001: 220). This example demonstrates how statecraft theory helps us to understand how Thatcherism was about *insulating* Conservative governments from pressures that threatened their ability to claim governing competence (Hickson 2005: 182). Therefore, Bulpitt would claim that although the policy solutions may have appeared ideologically loaded (and a break from the consensus post-war era), the primary driver was the quest for governing competence and that this quest was driven by electoral calculation (for a wider discussion on statecraft see Stevens 2002).

Personality-Based Interpretations

Alongside the economic, ideological, policy and electoral interpretations, there is also work that has acknowledged the significance of her persona to the evolution and impact of Thatcherism (Riddell 1983, 2003; King 1985; Jenkins 1987; Minogue and Biddiss 1987). Campbell described it as the 'cult of Maggie' and argued that it was 'a relatively clear, if sometimes contradictory body of ideas, attitudes and values to which her personality gave unusual coherence' (Campbell 2004: 470).

The personality driven explanations of Thatcherism have often seemed to be overshadowed by the economic, ideological, policy and political interpretations. Indeed, when reviewing the biographical literature on Thatcherism, Garnett noted the tendency to downgrade her personality and embrace structural explanations for her impact(s) (Garnett 2007: 173). We reject the notion that she simply rode the wave of ideas that bore her name and those ideas could have been developed and implemented under a different leader (Campbell 2004: 800). We believe that all of the explanations of Thatcherism—both meaning and motivation—carry validity, and that her personality *was* a contributing factor but not the sole factor.

Justifying Thatcherism

Thus our book starts from the assumption that Thatcher was central to the projection of the Conservative Party and through her rhetoric (what she said) and her oratory (how she said it), she was central to justifying Thatcherism. We make this claim for the following reason.

Her Prime Ministerial tenure coincided with the continuing and gradual decline in voting based around stable class-based cleavages and the growth in what has been defined as valance politics (Stokes 1992). In valance, political party identification is not so much about where voters locate themselves on political positions and thus vote for the party closest to their own position. Rather, valance politics refers to how voters evaluate the competence of parties in relation to how they would aim to achieve their policy goals. Critically, the central determinant of perceptions of competence has been identified to be the personality and character traits of party leaders, with perceptions of their individual competence being seen to have an influence upon voting behaviour (Clarke et al., 2004: 9; see also Bean and Mughan 1989; Mughan 2000). The consequence of this has been a trend towards leaders at the expense of parties. Thatcher was part of that process in which leaders played an increasingly dominant role in campaigning and greater care was taken to package and present the party through images and messages associated with the leader (Denver 2005: 292–9).

Therefore if leaders do have an impact upon voter choice then by implication they *do* have the ability to persuade and thus influence public attitudes through their speeches, through their interviews, through their performances in Parliament or in press conferences. Effective or ineffective rhetoric and oratory thus shapes electoral perceptions of the competence of leaders (Finlayson 2007, 2014; Finlayson and Martin 2008; Toye 2011, 2013; Leith 2012; Martin 2014; 2015; Atkins et al., 2014; Crines and Hayton 2015, Hayton and Crines 2015; Gaffney 1991).

That leaders can influence and shape public opinion through their communication provides the rationale for our book. Therefore, leaders need to be effective communicators and need to have the capacity to persuade through their rhetoric and their oratory. Our approach stems from the following assumption that will inform the structure of the book. Our assumption is that the environment in which the political elites communicate will shape their rhetoric and oratory. For example, the demands of answering questions in the House of Commons at Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) tests the communicative skills of a Prime Minister in a very different way to a conference speech, or a press conference, or a television interview.

Structure of the Book

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 will consider her communication in each of the different forums identified above: Chap. 2 covers Parliament; Chap. 3 deals with set-piece speeches, most notably speeches to the Annual Party Conference; and Chap. 4 addresses interviews and press conferences. Each chapter has a similar purpose and method of information gathering. First, they seek to *identify* the key or defining pronouncements that contributed to the construction of her persona as a conviction politician. Second, they consider Thatcher's own interpretation in terms of preparation, advice and reservations. Third, they use biographical and autobiographical observations from both those who held ministerial office under her Prime Ministerial leadership, as well as insights from those from the opposition frontbench. Finally, they use insights from Thatcher's speechwriters and key advisors.

Chapter 2 considers the challenges that Thatcher faced in Parliament and the contribution of her performance in this forum to the establishment and embedding of her political persona. The chapter will open by identifying how and why effective parliamentary communication is so important to the morale of the parliamentary Conservative Party. Numerous parliamentary exchanges will then be examined for the purposes of this evaluation. For example, the chapter will include key interventions such as her infamous opposition to Denis Healey and the Labour Finance Bill in 1975; her contribution to the confidence motion in the Callaghan government in the spring of 1979; her parliamentary statements (and questions) with regard to the Falklands War; her parliamentary justifications for key planks of the Thatcherite reforms, notably in terms of Trade Union reform and privatisation; her parliamentary responses when dealing with the Westland Affair in 1986; and her infamous 'no, no, no' speech in October 1990 and its impact.

Running throughout the analysis will be an evaluation of existing academic work on Thatcher in Parliament, noting the following. First, the emphasis on examining the quantity of parliamentary interventions that have characterised the work of Dunleavy et al. (1993) and Giddings and Irwin (2005), and within this 'activity'-based research, insights into how Thatcher compared to her predecessors will be noted. Second, her approach to PMQs, where although famous for a combative style, the chapter will exploit the work of Bates et al. (2014) to showcase how Thatcher had a stronger record for providing full answers to questions than most other Prime Ministers. Finally, the chapter will consider the impact created by the televising of Parliament towards the end of her Prime Ministerial tenure.

Chapter 3 will examine how her keynote speeches, most notably to the Annual Party Conference, were received and how these contributed to her persona. The analysis which focuses in on conference speeches will note how Thatcher was addressing two audiences through her conference speeches. On the one hand she was trying to convince the party faithful of the political and economic value of Thatcherism. On the other hand, the chapter will emphasise how her conference speeches involved her communicating over the heads of the rank and file in the conference hall, but to the electorate watching the 'sound bite' for the news. Within the conference-speeches section of the chapter, a considerable emphasis will be placed on two speeches: the infamous 'you turn if you want to' 1980 speech and the 1984 speech in the aftermath of the Brighton bombing. From amongst the extensive number of set-piece speeches that Thatcher also delivered, the chapter will also focus on particular speeches given their centrality to the construction of her persona and the narrative of Thatcherism—for example her 'let our children grow tall' speech (1975); her 'Britain awake' speech of 1976 which led to the Soviets attaching the label the 'Iron Lady' to her; and her infamous 1988 Bruges speech.

After Chaps. 2 and 3 consider the shaping of the Thatcher persona via parliamentary debate and set-piece speeches, Chap. 4 broadens the analysis out and considers how Thatcher dealt with the pressure of interviews and press conferences. Utilising the extensive Thatcher Foundation archives, this chapter will examine a range of interviews and press conferences either when campaigning or completing foreign visits or attending international and European summits. Particular attention will be devoted to the 1979 Dublin EEC press conference and her 'give me back our money' intervention; her LWT interview on 'Victorian values' in 1983; her BBC interview about Anglo–Soviet relations (1984) and her *Woman's Own* interview in which the notorious 'No such thing as society' comment was made. Also, given the controversies that surround her acquisition of, and removal from, the leadership of the Conservative Party, this chapter will consider her interviews and press conferences in relation to her position as leader of the party.