

Thatcherism: A phrase coined here in Birmingham

Peter Kerr

I often tell my students that the term 'Thatcherism' was quite possibly coined in the Muirhead Tower, here at the University of Birmingham. Whilst this is perhaps wishful thinking, it is certainly the case that the man credited with coining, or at least providing definition to the term, Professor Stuart Hall, was working here in 1979, in the then Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, when he wrote a seminal article that gave expression to the term Thatcherism and sparked off a lively academic debate over Mrs Thatcher's likely future impact. That debate has now spanned five decades and has been reignited this week by Baroness Thatcher's passing.

Back in 1979, even before Mrs Thatcher's election victory, Hall foresaw Thatcherism as one of the most significant and radical political projects of the 20th century and one that was likely to leave a lasting impact, not only on the British political and social landscape, but also on the very consciousness of the British public. To Hall, Thatcherism was a project which aimed to transform the 'hearts and minds' of the electorate and to change the way we instinctively think about politics. That prediction has proved to be an enduringly impressive and scholarly contribution to the study of British politics.

The debate over Mrs Thatcher's legacy is one of the most important political debates of our time. At stake is not simply an evaluation of recent history; it is as much about the current and future direction of Britain as it is about the past. In that sense, Mrs Thatcher's legacy has not yet played itself out. She continues to be the benchmark against which every leader who has come after her has been judged, while her project, Thatcherism, is arguably still going strong.

Sadly though, too many of the contributions to the debate over Thatcherism have been tainted by the desire of supporters and critics alike to distort our collective memory of the Thatcher governments. It seems that most have a vested interest in exaggerating their radical impact. Supporters have been guilty of exalting Mrs Thatcher to the status of a heroine or saviour of the British nation, whilst her critics indulge in over-vilifying her by routinely attributing every contemporary social ill in the UK to her personally. As such, it is very often difficult, when discussing the legacy of Thatcherism, to easily separate the myths from the facts.

Take for example the popular impression that Mrs Thatcher dismantled British manufacturing. Her governments may have helped that process along, but in fact, manufacturing in the UK had been undergoing a much longer-term decline and the rate of that decline surprisingly slowed under the Thatcher governments. Or the popular view that Mrs Thatcher 'marketised' large swathes of the public sector. That process – as much as it can be said to have happened at all - only really began in the final years of Mrs Thatcher's reign, and much of it was left to the Major and Blair governments to implement. Similarly, Mrs Thatcher did not radically trim back the welfare state or indeed, succeed in either cutting public expenditure or lowering the overall tax burden on the British public. Likewise, the Thatcher governments did not operate with a 'laissez-faire' mentality; rather they implemented a style of government that relied upon a centralised, top-down, state-centred and highly combative approach.

In reality, Thatcherism was a complex and often contradictory political project which defied easy definition. At times it was visionary and radical, whilst at others it was ad-hoc, short-termist and quite incoherent. It was every bit as pragmatic as it was ideological. Likewise, it was as much about the state as it was about the market. In that sense, many of the assessments of the Thatcher governments by both the Right and the Left, are based, not on sound scholarly evidence, but on deliberate misinterpretations based around commentators' own political allegiances. Perhaps now is the time for a more balanced evaluation.

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