

The Iron Lady

On Wednesday, April 17th, 2013, a couple of days from now, from the early morning onwards, the crowds will begin to gather in central London, along streets guarded by her favourite regiments of troop and veterans of distant conflicts, replete with their hats, flags, and other ornaments of heartfelt patriotism. At eleven o'clock the procession will commence, a long line of black cars bearing the great, the good, and a flag draped coffin from the heart of politics, Westminster, to the heart of the City, St. Paul's Cathedral. How appropriate, the Iron Lady embodied the art of politics and the art of making money. And there in the cathedral, to the music of Elgar, pomp and ceremony, global leaders and every one of her political successors will pay homage to the grocer's daughter, Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady.

Her father, Alfred Roberts, was a devout Methodist, general store owner, post office manager, and for twenty years a town councillor in the dull middle-England town of Grantham. He had two daughters, of which Margaret the younger one was the more driven. She won scholarships to good schools, and earned a place at Oxford University in 1943 to study chemistry. No mean feat, women in universities were rare, women at Oxford even rarer. She won her place because she was brighter than the others, harder working than the others, and because too many of the other potential applicants had gone to the front and died there.

At university she joined the Methodist society, drank a little wine, tried smoking then gave it up (spending the money she saved on a newspaper subscription), she despised most of the professors who seemed to her liberal snobs, and she threw herself into local politics, becoming president of the university's influential conservative society. A report by a potential employer, written in 1948, summed her up pretty well. She was, the report concluded, "headstrong, obstinate and dangerously self-opinionated". Unsurprisingly, she didn't get the job.

Two facets of her character had already become clear by this point. First, she had transformed her outward appearance from grocer's daughter to oxford educated elite. As prim and proper as the primmest and propperest of her contemporaries, her accent had become a model of upper-class received pronunciation, crystal clear, sharp to the point of cutting, betraying none of her forbearers' regional lilt and provincial colloquialisms . Furthermore, she was always impeccably well turned out, suit, gloves, hat, totemic handbag, and she was always exquisitely well-mannered. It is so much harder to argue against those we find charming.

Secondly, she had a formidable but narrow mindset. Untroubled by a liberal education, as her finest biographer, John Campbell, put it, "her mind dealt in facts and moral certainties." New information didn't raise doubts, it simply confirmed existing convictions. Britain was in decline, it had gone to the dogs; the British establishment, its intellectual and social elite, was spineless

and corrupted; socialism and the growth of government threatened prosperity, liberty, and morality. The unions had brought Britain to its knees. These views informed her politics in 1945 and they never left her. They were her truths and she saw no reason to jettison them.

For a few short years she did find work in research and development at large pharmaceutical companies, then she studied law, spent a few years dealing with tax cases, and finally achieved what she had all along desired, in 1959 she was elected to parliament, young, attractive, and relentlessly driven. In the meantime she had married a prosperous businessman, Dennis Thatcher, who was quite prepared to play second fiddle to Margaret's ambitions. He made a few million with various company directorships, and she made her way up the slippery pole, from newly elected MP, to junior minister, to the cabinet, to leader of the opposition, and finally in 1979 Prime Minister.

None of that ascent was easy. Dennis Thatcher had given her two children, twins, one of each sex fortuitously, so that, as her daughter later observed "that was the end of it...she needn't repeat the process". There were, of course, a succession of nannies to help with the child raising, but still not all of the duties of motherhood could be ignored. Moreover, she was a career woman in what was still very much a man's world. She encountered, all too frequently, scepticism, condescension, and the constant suspicion of tokenism that could only be overcome by working harder and being better than everybody else – that took time which could have, should have, been spent with her family.

Moreover, rising to the top in British politics imposed its own set of onerous demands. There were her ministerial posts, rotating from one government department to another, mastering each new brief, learning the minutiae of government, and the working of government officials who always seemed intent on meddling and sabotage, who behaved as if they, rather than the politicians, were the ones in charge of the country. Then there were the duties of parliament, to attend crucial votes, to participate in debates, to answer questions from the dispatch box or pose them when in opposition. Parliament ran on unsociable hours, with late sittings and later votes. Throw in an hour of commuting to her home outside London and she rarely got home before midnight. Then of course the formal duties of being in parliament were only one part of the aspiring politician's responsibilities. There were the party affairs, the plans, the plots, the gossip, the building of connections, the making of friends that could only be done through the investment of time, effort, and an increasing amount of alcohol consumption – whisky I am told, with water. A suitably British drink, avoided by wimps and Europeans.

And last but not least, there were the constituency duties. She represented a district of north London, Finchley, with plenty of left-leaning voters. To win every election from 1959 to 1987 took effort, attending meetings, meeting with voters, addressing the concerns of constituents, flattering key interest groups, an endless series of lunches, handshakes, and speeches that she always took seriously. No matter how high the politician climbs, there is still the vote, the

judgment of the voter to contend with. Then the corridors of power must be temporarily exchanged for the windswept shopping plaza; rather than preening government officials it is the old woman with her shopping basket who must be convinced of the merits of voting for this party or the other. It is, for example, a hallowed tradition of British politics that all candidates for parliament should go from door to door “canvassing for votes” as the expression goes. Before each and every election, Mrs. Thatcher walked the streets of Finchley, ringing bells, knocking on doors, debating, defending, asking, pleading for votes. Such experiences harden people. They forge them into something new. Moral certitude, a workaholic lifestyle, the determination to do anything to succeed, these were the things that made her the Iron Lady.

If we were to delve deeper into her ideology, other convictions would rapidly become apparent. She was, for example, ferociously hostile to the Soviet Union which she regarded as the quintessential example of the horrors that result when an ideology elevates the state above the individual. At every opportunity she denounced the Soviet state and the timidity of the west, and she lapped up the writings of Russian dissidents such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, just as she lapped up the writings of men like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman for they confirmed what she already sensed, affirmed what she already believed. The Soviet Press was quick to denounce this latest manifestation of a western reactionary, terming her the Iron Lady; typically she revelled in the nickname.

Another conviction of Mrs. Thatcher was that, whereas the Soviet Union could do no right, the United States could do no wrong. Ingrained in her memory were the American flyboys stationed near her home in Grantham who took to the skies night after night to help the British defeat Hitler. That so many of those young, handsome men never came back left her with a debt that she, and so many of her generation, felt duty bound to honour. She first visited this country in 1966 and again in 1968 as a guest of the English Speaking Union, and from these visits onwards she was smitten. The spirit of America, its optimism, was a welcome antidote to the sense of perennial declinism that infused the British establishment. It was here that she found a new wave of politicians who were eager to roll back the state and enact the conservative revolution, personified by Ronald Reagan who she adored from the moment they first met in 1977. The relationship between Reagan and Thatcher was cruelly parodied in the British press as a torrid love affair but the caricature contained a kernel of truth. There has always been a part of British society that has fallen in love with the promise of America. I remember, for example, a very erudite British presenter talking about his first visit to the United States. "Oh", he remarked, "I fell in love with America the moment I got off the plane – my God, you should have seen the size of the sandwiches!" It was more than sandwiches that bound Mrs. Thatcher to America, but the motive was identical. America was the land we, she admired - Europe was Britain's neighbour but the United States was family and a darn good living family at that.

The final conviction I must mention was Mrs Thatcher's philo-semitism. Like all European politicians there were times when she voiced sharp criticism of the policies of the State of Israel. The Palestinian leadership had to be visited, a two-state solution had to be advocated, the violence employed by both sides equally reproached. That was what diplomacy demanded. But her admiration for the Jewish people, wherever they were or had been in the world, was unbounded. It helped that Jewish voters were well-represented in her electoral constituency of Finchley but electoral calculations were of merely secondary importance. Rather, the Jews for Mrs. Thatcher personified the very values that she sought to re-instil into the British people. They had, she explained, earned their success through hard work, self-help, and life-long learning; they had received nothing from any state, earning everything by their sweat and by their genius.

We may cast doubt on such simplifications but simplifications were the intellectual currency in which Mrs. Thatcher traded, for she saw no fault in simplicity. Truths were self-evident, only deception required endless complexity. And when she rose in parliament to denounce her opponents, she always she spoke in the blunt language of home truths and compelling clarity. The voice was imperious but the arguments were those of the ordinary housewife, common sense, facts, and values. 1970s socialist Britain, the land of the three day week and the frequent power cut, where unions went on strike in opposition to a twenty-five percent pay deal was an easy target for her

lacerating wit; the socialist disease, she explained, was that they keep on running out of other people's money!

All this went down well in parliament, it went down well on television, and it went down well at the Ballot Box when in 1979, Mrs. Thatcher led her conservative party to victory and became the first woman to occupy 10 Downing Street, where she would remain prime minister for the next eleven years.

Now, my fellow literarians, you must forgive me for having spent the first part of this paper seeking to unravel the strands of her ideology. I shall now turn to the facts of her premiership, facts which have become no less brutal as the archives are slowly opened according to the thirty year rule, and the inner workings of her government are slowly revealed to the prying eyes of historians and journalists still eager to understand how the Iron Lady forged anew her country. It makes tough reading. But on that day in May in 1979 few suspected just what Mrs. Thatcher was about to unleash. Returning from Buckingham Palace, having been entrusted by the Queen to form a government, she turned to the television cameras and declaimed, in the crispest of tones, a nineteenth century embellishment of the famous prayer of St. Francis of Assisi.

Where there is discord, she intoned, may we bring harmony;

Where there is error, may we bring truth;

Where there is doubt, may we bring faith;

And where there is despair, may we bring hope.

And with that she turned her back to the cameras, went into Number Ten Downing Street, and began enacting the revolution.

First for the chopping board were the government officials, the men in the ministries, whose job it was to run the country. All recruitment was suspended, wages were frozen, and within a decade twenty-three percent of all government employees had been fired or forcibly retired. Then she did the same to local government. The council that ran London was abolished, the councils that ran everything else were squeezed as ruthlessly as the top officials. Out went over-optimistic budgets and ever more generous provisions, in came the new language of efficiencies, targets, and (horror of horrors) performance-based salaries. The axe fell at the top and then it fell everywhere.

Next on the list were government subsidies, the taxman's money that kept wages high and prices higher. In budget after budget her chancellors slashed tariffs with the one hand and squeezed out tax cuts with the other. Government run industries were slimmed, stripped, and privatized. British Steel, British Airways, British Ports, British Telecom, and most bloodily of all, British Coal.

There was, her ministers pointed out, enough coal already lying on the surface to satisfy Britain's energy needs for a decade. Why then should the miners be paid to dig out yet more of the stuff? The miners of course thought differently. Whole communities were bound to the mines across generations, their wages, their culture, their music, their very sense of themselves had been

mined out of the rock of northern England. So when the government drew up its first list of mines to be closed, the great strike began.

Not all the miners striked, not all those on strike did so voluntarily. Three times in previous years, aware that the axe was falling, the union had called for a strike and three times the members had voted for work not confrontation. This time, the strikes began small and local then they spread across the nation. The miners union denounced its traitors as “scabs” and Mrs. Thatcher denounced the union as “the enemy within”. Soon words became actions, pickets, blockades, stone throwing and police batons, two dead, hundreds wounded. After nine months the union was broken, a face-saving deal was offered, hollow claims of victory, a face saving review. Mrs. Thatcher wasn’t interested. It’s not enough to win, she explained, you have to be seen to have won. Three more bitter months later, the striking miners snapped, returning to work to close down their mines and prepare for unemployment.

It’s worth taking a walk around the old mining villages, the slag heaps are green with freshly planted grass, trees grow where the great wheels once turned, and the old men still line up for their bi-weekly welfare checks. When you spent your finest years down the mines, what use is talk of “re-skilling” and “labour mobility”. Even the anger appears to have faded, kept alive only by disgruntled London playwrights and the soundtrack to Billy Elliot.

Old industrial Britain, proud, community-bound and hopelessly inefficient went the same way as the free milk I used to receive at school

between classes. They even fired the canteen ladies who cooked our school lunches. Informed that they could reapply for employment by a sub-contractor they walked out in protest, and the subsidized canteen was closed. As you might expect, the local fish and chip shop, however, did a roaring business.

Where there are losers, there were always plenty of winners. Annual tax cuts helped; new entrepreneurs flourished amidst the carnage. The stock market boomed for it liked what it saw. Anyone could invest in a slice of the newly privatized companies. State pensions were slashed so people turned to the private sector. The evening knock on the door and the “may I interest you in one of our pension plans” became the quiet refrains of 1980s middle-class Britain. The travelling salesman, replete with company car, new suit, and mobile phone became the symbol of the British workforce, and of course he always voted for the Iron Lady.

For the first few years of Mrs Thatcher’s premiership the losers outnumbered the winners and her reign looked set to be brief and even worse, a failure. There were calls for a change in policy, or at least a change in pace. She would have none of it. “To those waiting with baited breath for that favourite media catchphrase, the U-turn”, she once famously declared “...you turn if you want, this lady’s not for turning”.

The bluster by itself would not have been enough. It was the Falkland Islands that really saved Mrs. Thatcher’s premiership. In 1982, Argentina’s ruling military Junta seized the islands in a vain bid to forestall the pressure for

democracy with an easy military conquest. They knew, as we now know, that Britain had been attempting to get rid of the Falkland Islands for at least the previous decade. Did Britain really care about some far away islands where the sheep outnumbered the people and the subsidies outnumbered the sheep.

How wrong the Junta was. For Mrs. Thatcher, the Argentine occupation of the Falkland Islands was not about practicalities and probabilities. It was a wrong that had to be righted. The cost to the British taskforce was six hundred dead and several thousand wounded but I still remember a joyful teacher informing my class at school, “boys we have retaken Stanley!”

Last year I wandered around the British Army Museum in Kensington, West London. It's a decent museum with some splendid pictures of cavalry charges and a half-hearted effort show how the modern British soldier lives and fights in Iraq and Afghanistan. But what I was most struck by was an exhibition of photos from the Falklands war. The long lines of Royal Marines and Paratroopers, marching across a land I shall never visit. They had strapped a Union Jack to the antennae of a radio receiver, amidst the black-green of the land and the black-green of the uniforms. For a county that had lost an empire and not yet found a role in the world, , as Dean Acheson's caustically put it, the Falklands war was proof in flesh and blood that Britain was not yet a second rate power. The national euphoria swept Mrs Thatcher to re-election in 1983 while the opposition Labour Party's manifesto, which promised to reverse

everything that she had accomplished in the previous four years, was dismissed as the longest suicide note in history.

It is an axiom of politics that when the economy declines politicians make excuses and when the economy booms politicians take the credit. Between 1983 and 1987 the British economy boomed and Mrs Thatcher took the credit. As Industrial production collapsed, the service industry expanded, and imports exploded. Not just coal from Germany and steel from Europe but beer, and wine, and everything from everywhere. Not just an economic revolution but also a cultural revolution embodied in that most loaded of phrases “conspicuous consumption”. Napoleon was only half right, the English were not just a nation of shopkeepers, they had become a nation of shoppers. Even on Sundays, the streets were filled with the search for bargains and the search for profits.

In foreign affairs Mrs Thatcher marched in step with Reagan and no one else. She relished the opportunity to bash the mild-mannered European leaders engaged in their great project to build a United States of Europe. Treaties were occasionally signed, a common market was slowly constructed, she even signed off on the plan to build a train link between London and Paris but she never felt comfortable in Brussels. In 1979 it was the British Labour Party that feared European integration with its talk of a free market in goods and services. By 1990 the Labour Party saw in Europe that gentle socialism which Mrs. Thatcher had expunged from British life and from then until now the rank and file of the

Conservative Party still regards European integration as “socialism by the backdoor”. That too is a part of Mrs. Thatcher’s legacy.

Only with Reagan was Mrs. Thatcher truly at ease and when he shifted she did likewise. Like him, she denounced the Soviet Union as an evil empire, like him she believed that nuclear deterrence was the only guarantee against Soviet aggression, and like him she found it impossible to dislike Mikhail Gorbachev who she grew first to trust and then to admire, he was, after all, “a man with whom we can do business”.

There is the myth that it was Thatcher and Reagan, implacable foes of Soviet Communism, who stood together and won the cold war. It is, of course, more complicated than that. But it remains a fact, and one I have heard on several occasions, that when the two of them spoke of the Soviet Union as an evil empire, western academics recoiled from this gross simplification while the subject peoples behind the iron curtain quietly applauded. There are still plenty of smart people in Warsaw, Prague, and Budapest who regard Mrs. Thatcher as a hero. Not every politician can claim that as a legacy.

In the end she was done down by her own party. Another recession hit Britain in the late eighties and the unemployment numbers, in spite of relentless fiddling, kept on rising. Her rhetoric remained as confrontational as ever but it grated on the ears of a growing number of listeners. New plans for the privatization of the post office, the railways and, or so it was rumoured, the

National Health Service, were regarded as a step too far. Such policies were, one conservative Grandee, muttered, akin to selling off the family silver.

One policy failure, above all others, proved decisive. Seeking to reform the funding of local government, her government proposed that instead of setting the tax rate in accordance with the size of one's house, it should simply be levied upon each person equally. After all, why should the owners of large houses be penalized for their success, and don't we all consume roughly the same amount of water and put out roughly the same amount of trash? The Community Charge, or Poll Tax as it was rapidly dubbed, was first applied to Scotland and then to the rest of the country. The Scots, for being treated like guinea pigs never forgave her; the English meanwhile took to the streets in protest.

After eleven years in power she had made too many enemies. Not just among the public, but even within her own party, too many people had been overlooked, mistreated, or dismissed. When one of these disgruntled Tories, the mild-mannered ex-foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe, rose up in parliament to condemn the Mrs. Thatcher's policies, the wits described it as akin to "being savaged by a dead sheep" but the savaging still mattered. Bitter rivals demanded that the conservative party hold its own leadership election, a delegation of senior party leaders paid her a private visit, and the Iron Lady broke, resigned, proving yet again the old adage that every political career is destined to end in failure.

And so she was gone, teary eyed, bitter at her betrayal, to take up a place in the House of Lords, rack up a lucrative second career as an after dinner speaker, and pocket a couple of million for writing yet another unapologetic memoir. For a while she sought to run the Conservative Party from afar, stirring up revolts, anointing favourites, denouncing anything that smacked of socialism whether it came from the Left or (worse) the Right. And then she grew quiet, her voice was exhausted, she no longer gave speeches, and then her own daughter admitted that Alzheimers had claimed her. In the end it was a stroke that brought things to a close, she was 87.

Not too long ago a friend invited me to watch a videotape of Mrs. Thatcher's last appearance in parliament at Prime Minister's Questions. She was magnificent. The leader of the opposition rose three times to pose his questions, she batted him away. Labour MPs carped and sneered, but even they laughed at her humour. Conservative MPs swooned, she steeled them. Over and over she rose to the dispatch box to do battle with her enemies; her eyes alight, her confidence unbreakable, and then she would sit again on the green baized benches, surrounded by the dull-suited men who had stabbed her in the back and forced her resignation. What did it matter, she had fought the good fight, and there on the videotape she would always be victorious.