

# Margaret Thatcher's rejection of consensus was symptomatic of an anti-democratic tendency in a political system dominated by the executive

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One of the positions receiving widespread agreement in the ongoing debate about the legacy of Margaret Thatcher has been that she was a politician who rejected consensus. **Martin Smith** reflects on this claim, taking issue with the underlying assumption that this was a virtue of the former Prime Minister. He argues that this hostility towards consensus has important implications for democracy and policy which have tended to be overlooked.



Of the many obituaries and reflections on Margaret Thatcher's premiership, the notion that seems to have been met with most approval is the idea that she rejected consensus and stood up for her beliefs. As she said in a speech:

*The process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values, and policies in search of something in which no one believes, but to which no one objects; the process of avoiding the very issues that have to be solved, merely because you cannot get agreement on the way ahead. What great cause would have been fought and won under the banner: 'I stand for consensus?'*

Her rejection of consensus is seen as a reflection of her leadership and her ability to stand by principles, unlike the modern day political leaders driven by opinion polls and focus groups. Indeed, for Tony Benn her saying and doing what she believed was an indication of her authenticity as a leader.

Yet, in all this approval of her forthright beliefs, little or no thought has been given to the democratic and, indeed, policy implications of this approach. What her approach illustrates is the problematic relationship of the British political system to democracy. In Britain the Executive dominance of the government and parliament means that the Prime Minister has considerable power over winning an election (especially if they win a large majority of MPs) but they can do so without the support of a majority of voters (majoritarianism with a majority). However, in the period of 1945-1979, whilst there were considerable differences between Labour and Conservatives, they broadly accepted the post-war settlement based on a compromise of welfare and capitalism. This compromise was the basis of social peace, as Keith Middlemas pointed out. Neither party had sufficient support to impose a radically different political economy on the country; they did not have the legitimacy for either a socialist or free market state. In fact, although Labour lost the election in 1951, they won the largest share of the vote, illustrating the precarious position of the Conservative Government and the need for compromise in order to retain support and legitimacy.

Thatcher on the other hand saw the cosy consensus as a result of politicians (as public choice theory would suggest) kow-towing to special interests and raising the welfare burden on the state. It needed determination and strong leadership to break the post war settlement and undermine the trade unions so freeing the economy and reducing the expectations and dependence on the state. As she said in her memoirs, she had no intention of changing course despite the strength of opposition.

Yet this commitment to a unitary perspective raises questions about both democracy and effective policy making. The problem is that that British electoral and political system gives a strong political leader considerable power without having the support of a majority of the electorate. In 1979, with the smallest majority of her time in office, Thatcher won 44 per cent of the vote and it was just over 42 per cent in 1983 and 1987. Indeed the landslide of 1983

is seen as a reflection of her convictions over the Falklands when in fact the percentage vote went down.

Thatcher, then, could impose her convictions without winning a majority of the vote. There was a lack of legitimacy to her policies because they were imposed without consensus and this may account for some of the divisiveness around her premiership and indeed around her funeral. Thatcher did not have the support to impose the policies she supported in many areas and of course this is illustrated by the continued divisions between the North and South of the country and probably in particular for the growing nationalist feeling in Scotland. The dangers of this approach are illustrated by the characterisation of striking miners as 'the enemy within'. In doing so an opposition group were defined as outsiders and, dangerously, their rights as citizens were compromised. The notion that opponents are enemies does not sit easily with a democratic polity.

It is also possible to argue that the opposition to consensus also led to bad policy decisions. Many people would recognise that there was a need for economic reforms in the 1970s and that in particular there needed to be some challenge to the trade unions and increased flexibility in the labour market. Yet the way these reforms were imposed without consultation or compromise – or without the need to take account of different social and geographical interests – has meant that the changes introduced by the Thatcher government have continued to have a devastating effect on communities in many parts of the country today. Council estates in the North of England which suffered the combined impact of de-industrialisation and council house sales are still reeling from the effects of the policies of the 1980s. What were relatively well functioning communities within the terms of the cosy consensus of the post war world are now the sink estates of problem families; and the sites of continuing costly interventions attempting to solve problems of long-term unemployment. If there had been more consensus and less conviction may be the social transitions of the 1980s and 1990s could have been handled in a less damaging way and may have produced economic change without destroying the manufacturing base.

It is also true that conviction did not, ultimately, serve Margaret Thatcher very well. Her commitment to the poll tax and her intransigence in the face of the European community led to a loss of support amongst the voters and her own cabinet. That fact that she was unwilling to compromise and listen to the evidence arguably led to her demise. Had she compromised she may have survived and she may have won the election in 1992.

So to me Thatcher's rejection of consensus is not something to be admired but rather it was a dangerous, anti-democratic tendency in an Executive dominant political system. The problem is that Thatcher rejected the cosy elite view of consensus, perhaps rightly given that it too is undemocratic, but she did not put another legitimising mechanism in its place. Politicians need a way of building broad support if they are to retain the support of the citizens and adversarial politics breed cynicism. If there was not a willingness to reform the electoral system there had to be another way of institutionalising pluralism.

The failure to build consensus creates zero-sum politics with clear losers who feel resentment and it produce policy change as the result of dogma rather than evidence. The absence of consensus or a pluralistic political system is illustrated in Venezuela where electoral outcomes are disputed and one group feels excluded by electoral victory. Or, increasingly, in the United States where the differences between the Republicans and Democrats are growing so wide that politics is losing its centre. Consensus should be lauded as a political good; as a way of compromising between different interests and creating a politics that is above all civil in recognising the rights of all in a political system. Good leadership is based on building consensus not imposing conviction.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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