

Margaret Thatcher: how she reshaped politics and political communications

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2013-4-8



Mistress of the media

Two great quotes from veteran journalists of the Thatcher era:

Max Hastings: 'I went in to ask awkward questions and came out feeling like I'd been hit by a truck'

Elinor Goodman: 'She used her eyebrows as quotation marks in case you didn't know what the soundbite was'

Margaret Thatcher was the dominant figure in the period of British politics after Harold Wilson. What she represented continues to shape the parameters of Westminster policy, practice and party strategy up to the present day. But she was also a break-through figure in terms of political communications.

Thanks partly to figures like her advisor Tim Bell and her press officer Bernard Ingham, she took political presentation and media relations into the modern age of spin. And yet she was also remarkably untypical in that she dealt with (un)popularity in a manner that few contemporary politicians would dare.

As Prime Minister she was divisive in an age when most party leaders are desperate to appeal beyond their base and to avoid being seen as ideological. The controversy around George Osborne's recent attempt to exploit the Philpott case to make a point about Welfare benefits would hardly have bothered the woman who was happy to compare state finance to household budgets and quote the Bible (St Francis, Samaritans) in favour of market forces.

PR Pioneer

In many practical ways she was a political PR pioneer. I remember a serious discussion in the BBC newsroom in the mid 80s about whether we should cover political PR stunts because they weren't 'real news events'. It was a pointless debate by then as Mrs Thatcher's Conservative Party had already turned elections into a procession of calf-cuddling photo opportunities, poster launches and Saatchi broadcasts.

She was also central to the creation of 'presidential' style politics. Leaders like Wilson were media-obsessed and nurtured a cult of personality with props like pipes and raincoats. But it was Mrs Thatcher who understood how to convert that into the domination of cabinet government and to identify her own will with that of the nation.

Her characterisation of the miners as the 'enemy within' was a nasty act of verbal hostility to a group who had represented the symbolic heartland of the British working class. It was a risky but highly effective way of dramatising the NUM's disconnection from the economic and social tides of the 80s.

Unsurpassed Rhetoric

We can debate endlessly how much responsibility she had personally for the shift in the political public sphere over the last 30 years. Much greater forces of globalisation carried her particular set of values along. She 'got lucky' with North Sea oil. As Hugo Young's biography showed some time ago, she was much more pragmatic and less certain of her own convictions than the 'Iron Lady' caricatures have suggested. But as a leader trying to use political rhetoric

to reshape attitudes as well as actuality, she has been unsurpassed.

In media terms she was helped hugely by a right wing dominated UK press that was far more aggressively partisan in the 80s than it has been in the last 20 years. And where – like the BBC – the media was critical she was not afraid to attack her attackers. Yet she had an incredible gift of being able to embody as well as convey in simple images and idiom what she believed in a way that was always convincing. Some might dislike what she said but she rarely dissembled.

I first voted in 1979 and she dominated the politics of my generation. Her shadow continues to fall across British politics. Those of us who opposed her will have mixed emotions today. I am personally surprised at how moved I am by her demise. No doubt she will continue to divide opinion in her departing as she did while alive, but no one should doubt her impact. The fact that she continues to provoke debate is a testament to her legacy.

Postscript:

Fantastic [clip from 1981](#) of an Australian journalist interviewing Thatcher and having the tables turned on him.

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