



The Reading Of A Decade

Thatcherism continues to be the subject of a flood of new books. **Andrew Gamble** reflects on the history of the concept, while **Chris Pate** provides a guide to some of the books which have shaped it

Nobody writing about British politics today can avoid using the term 'Thatcherism' even if only to dismiss it as a tendentious, incoherent, and insubstantial idea. The widespread use of the term reflects the dominance which Margaret Thatcher, after 10 years as prime minister and 14 as leader of the Conservative Party, now enjoys over her colleagues and her opponents.

Thatcherism in its simplest commonsense meaning refers to the opinions and beliefs of Margaret Thatcher herself, which are taken to be the driving force of the government's policies and actions. This meaning may explain why the term is so disliked, since many think that personalising politics in this way also trivialises it.

The concept of Thatcherism, however, always meant much more than the personality of a single politician, however dominating. The term was first used by Stuart Hall in *Marxism Today* to define the new turn in political strategy and ideology that was taking place on the right in the late 70s. Stuart Hall's seminal article 'The Great Moving Right Show' appeared in January 1979 and followed *Policing The Crisis*, co-authored with colleagues from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Thatcherism was understood as a response to the latest stage in the development of the deep-seated crisis of the British State.

The nature of this crisis and

the exhaustion of the traditions of both British Conservatism and British Labourism in seeking to resolve it drew on the analyses developed in *New Left Review* in the 60s by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn. Emphasis was placed on the political and ideological peculiarities of the British state.

The concept of Thatcherism first emerged during a period when the Conservatives were in opposition - 1975-1979. The politics of this period were shaped by the strong reaction inside the Conservative Party against the 'betrayals' of the Heath government and by the travails of the Labour government as it attempted to wrestle with the first phase of the global recession.

Thatcherism developed as a reaction to the dominant ideas and forms of corporatism and social democracy.

In this early period Thatcherism often appeared fragile, and Margaret Thatcher's grip on the leadership seemed unlikely to survive a general election defeat. Until the Winter of Discontent there was no certainty about a Conservative victory.

Thatcherism was far from being an unstoppable force. One strength of the *Marxism Today* concept of Thatcherism was the insight into its potential for transforming British politics.

After 1979 the policies of the new government became the focus of attention. Were they radical and would they work? The evaluation of Thatcherism shifted away from ideology towards policy. The first two years of the Thatcher government, dominated by the attempted monetary cure of inflation, seemed to more than justify the idea of Thatcherism as a new radical force. These were the Armageddon years of Thatcherism, establishing a reputation for radicalism and ruthlessness which has not been shed even now.

The conception of Thatcherism shared, although not uniformly, by contributors to *Marxism Today* emphasised the success of Thatcherism in establishing a new agenda for policy which forced the Left onto the defensive. By contrast, adherents of class politics such as Ralph Miliband, Andrew Glyn, and John Ross, interpreted the

policies of the Thatcher government primarily as a ruling-class offensive against organised labour, and debated the rationality of the policy for British capital. They disputed that it had novel ideological and strategic features which needed to be understood if the Left was to respond effectively.

The energy the Left put into debating the meaning of Thatcherism was derived from its concern with strategy, and the increasingly critical outlook for socialism and the Labour movement. Among Conservatives anxieties were less acute, but there was a sharp division between those like Sir Ian Gilmour who saw Thatcherism as breaking with the Conservative mainstream and those like Patrick Cosgrave who saw it as marking a return to true Conservatism. Others like Jim Bulpitt, in an article in *Political Studies* (1985), emphasised that Thatcherism conformed closely to traditional Conservative conceptions of statecraft.

After the government had survived its early period, it achieved a position of exceptional dominance. It defeated its enemies and was able to reward its friends. These were the years of the Falklands War, the miners' strike, the economic recovery, popular capitalism, and privatisation.

Many continued to dispute how much Thatcherism had changed. Critical, if sympathetic, analyses of the concept of Thatcherism ap-