

Suzanne Moore



The politics of hate

Political Poison

'Because there's one thing I know, I'd live long enough to savour/That's when they finally put you in the ground/I'll stand on your grave and tramp the dirt down'

This is one of our most respected songwriter's view of Margaret Thatcher. It's from Elvis Costello's 1989 album *Spike*. Morrissey wanted to see Margaret on the guillotine. 'When will you die? When will you die?' he wailed plaintively in an acute piece of political analysis. Hanif Kureishi's reaction on Thatcher's resignation was: 'I just feel sorry she didn't suffer longer at the end.'

Howard Brenton in *The Guardian* wrote of the Thatcher decade: 'It may seem exaggerated but it was as if some kind of evil was abroad in our society.' At the battle of Trafalgar, the chant went up among anti-poll tax demonstrators 'Ceausescu's gone, Thatcher's next'. The woman was clearly inspirational. It takes more than a few unpopular policies to bring out this level of vitriol. And now she is gone, who will we hate?

Can you imagine anyone working themselves up like this over John Major? The man with no upper lip, who, as someone pointed out, ran away from the circus to join a firm of accountants, who is described even by fellow Tory MP Julian Critchley as having 'all the excitement of a provincial bank manager'.

Will right-on pop stars be baying for the blood of Mr Major? Will he be compared to Hitler or even Winston Churchill? Will he present himself as the Tin Man in contrast to the Iron Lady? I hardly think so. For after a decade of personality politics - Thatcher here and Reagan in the States - we have ended up with a prime minister who appears to have had his personality surgically removed. Kinnock too has been so busy of late repressing any traces of individuality that he is now rivaling the Tories in the bland-leading-the-bland stakes.

But whether you like it or not, the politics of hate has been important for the Left in the Thatcher era. For a long time it has been enough

to hate what she stood for, to hate what was happening to Britain, but above all to hate *her*. And I can't help feeling that the depths of hatred, and conversely loyalty, that Thatcher inspired, were tied to the fact that she is a woman.

After 11½ years, we should have come to terms with the centrality of gender to her reign; but reading her political obituaries it seems in many ways we are just as much in the dark as ever. She was a woman, but she did nothing for women. She destroyed once and for all the idea that being a woman necessarily meant you were softer, more caring, more sympathetic than a man. Yet she didn't disturb gender relations enough to ensure there would be more women in the cabinet or even in parliament.

And less than two weeks after she had gone the veil was being lifted. Teresa Gorman will squat the front benches, Edwina Currie has murmured her discontent, 'the woman problem' is being debated publicly in the most right-wing papers. It is as if the figure of Thatcher herself blocked any discussion of gender. Now finally it is being talked about.

The 'Thatcher factor' was thought, like the woman herself, to be somehow above gender. More manly than any man, and yet a housewife who liked baking cakes as much as international politics. While we on the left talked endlessly about the fluidity of subjectivity, sexuality and identity, here was a woman who slid effortlessly from one identity to another. A woman who instinctively knew that femininity was a masquerade and that contradiction was not a flaw but a fact of life.

But culturally and politically there has been a failure to deal with that. Anti-Thatcher imagery has always been at base crude, even in its most sophisticated guise. *Spitting Image* took away the handbag, the ultimate and for some disturbing symbol of mysterious femininity (What do they keep in there?). It was replaced with the obvious signifier of masculin-

ity, the big cigar. Thatcher was (surprise, surprise) really a man, right down to wearing a shirt and tie. The woman with power can only ever be seen in terms of masculinity - the phallic woman - never on her own terms. But her great strength, surely, was that she changed those terms.

Alternatively, Maggie was arch-dominatrix or nanny, the nation and her colleagues finding their thrills in some strange sado-masochistic relationship that exploited the innate British desire for punishment. Trying to get to the bottom of this in a ludicrously literal application of Freud, Leo Abse attempted a psychobiography of the woman.

She had, he told us, despised her mother, glorified her father, had a peculiar time on the potty and a bad time on the breast. That's why one of her first public acts was withdrawing free school milk, geddit? Germaine Greer gave us an analysis of the Thatcher bosom. Was its appeal asexually matronly or invitingly motherly? Meanwhile, Mitterrand drooled at the woman 'with the eyes of Caligula and the mouth of Marilyn Monroe', while a couple of drunken Tory MPs had the audacity to make passes at her.

Yet the Left has always denied her sex appeal. Its stock reaction has always been that she is not a 'real woman'. However you view her, Maggie was enough of a woman for misogyny disguised as political analysis to rule the day. Remember Labour's cries of 'ditch the bitch'. Sure enough, I hate her too. Always will. But now we have to face up to the business of dealing with Thatcherism without Thatcher, maybe we have to realise that it wasn't all Her.

There is something pure about the politics of hate. It doesn't even feel like politics any more, just good old-fashioned morality. I think she understood that. But without her as the target I wonder what is to become of all that venom, all that hatred, all that righteous anger? After all, it's far too good to waste.0