

# Reflections After Thatcher

The end of the Thatcher era is an opportunity for political and cultural reassessment. **Bhikhu Parekh** introduces our series of reflections on the last 11 years

The premiership of Margaret Thatcher lasted for 11 long years, during half of which she enjoyed rare personal ascendancy. She became so central a feature of British political life and so mesmerised the country that hardly anyone managed to remain emotionally neutral about her. One had therefore feared that her departure would cause deep psychological disorientation, a big hole at the centre of national self-consciousness, an unbearable silence in a politically-addicted nation.

She has now been gone for some weeks and is hardly missed. How is this possible? Dominant leaders do not spring from nowhere, nor do they function in a vacuum. They are produced, sustained and allowed to become dominant by the prevailing cultural climate and institutional structures and their ascendancy gives us rare insights into the latter.

I am not here concerned with assessing Thatcher's achievements, which were many. I am concerned instead with the deep questions of social and political morality and the health of British democracy. Rather than judge the Thatcherite years, we might more profitably use them as a tool of much-needed national self-understanding.

Margaret Thatcher highlighted and exposed some of the profound limitations of British democracy and society. She dominated the cabinet by fair and foul means and reduced it to a mere

sounding board. By concentrating power in her private office and using it to keep a close watch on and occasionally terrorising her ministers, she acquired the power and authority of a headmistress controlling a bunch of raw and nervous junior assistants.

She also reduced her parliamentary party's influence on decision-making, and manipulated it into endorsing policies about most of which they knew little or were deeply uneasy. Indeed, parliament itself ceased to matter much. A large chunk of the national press, most of it Tory anyway or only too happy to oblige those in power, ceased acting as the national watchdog and virtually became part of the government's public relations exercise.

One would have thought that a plural and decentralised society with multiple centres of power within and outside the political system would have put up some resistance. The ease with which most of them caved in was startling. The BBC, the trade unions, the local authorities, the CBI, the churches, the universities, were disempowered and rendered silent.

How each institution was pressurised, trapped, cornered and tricked into making mistakes and misjudging its power and range of choices will repay close study. Not all the blame lies at the door of Margaret Thatcher. Most of the institutions had already become hollow and without a sense of pur-

pose. They were sometimes led by careerists, ready to oblige if the price were right, and had forfeited a good deal of their moral authority. Rather than build them up in the larger interest of British society and democracy, the Thatcher government exploited their vulnerability to the full.

Margaret Thatcher could not consolidate her domination without the help of mini-Thatchers in major institutions. She and her colleagues made sure that only those were appointed at their helm who were sympathetic not just to her ideas but also to her style of management and with whom they could 'do business'. In other cases, the institutions involved felt that they could not survive in a Thatcherite climate without electing or appointing such men and women to run their affairs.

Since the 'iron lady' was inimitable, the mini-Thatchers became fake and extravagant versions of the original, playing comically with idioms and modes of behaviour that did not come easily to them. Wherever one went, one heard only one language spoken in only one accent. A country known for its eccentricity and variety became suffocating.

An anglophile diplomat from a poor country, who had known Britain since the early-70s, confided that whenever he went to visit a university, its administrators lobbied him for students, scholarships, endowments and exchanges of staff at his



government's expense. He wondered why Britain had 'suddenly' become a nation of hucksters and high-pressure salespeople.

As for British society at large, we have learned mixed lessons from the Thatcher

