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## MARGARET THATCHER

Margaret Thatcher was one of the most influential prime ministers in British history. She showed that the daughter of a hard-working shopkeeper could lead the Conservative Party to become the first female political leader of a major western country. She showed what could be achieved by hard work.

She was the longest-serving British Prime Minister since 1827, winning three consecutive terms. She never lost an election as party leader.

Her major achievement as Prime Minister was the radical change to the British economy. Although now out of office since 1990, her economic philosophy still guides the British Government – and is an example to other governments (such as Australia's).

Before May 3 1979, the Labour and Conservative Parties both agreed on the need for government intervention in the economy. The Great Depression in the 1930s meant that the British expected their government to get far more involved in running the economy, and providing health and welfare services and houses.

The Labour Government 1945-51 began this massive intervention with the nationalization of failing industries, such as coal, railways and steel. The Conservatives were in power 1951-64 and they continued that philosophy.

It worked for a while. But by the time that Labour returned to power in 1964, the British economy was running out of steam. Taxation was high, nationalized industries were inefficient and trade unions had too much power (and so could block reforms). Edward Heath's Conservative Party came to power in 1970 and continued that same philosophy. He tried to take on the coal miners in 1974 but was defeated by them – and then he was defeated by the Labour Party in the 1974 election.

In October 1974, Margaret Thatcher ran against Edward Heath for the party leadership and she became Leader of the Opposition. The 1974-9 Labour Government lurched from one economic crisis to another.

On May 3 1979 she won the general election with an overall majority of 43 seats out of 635. The result was not so much a victory for her as a defeat for the Labour Government, which was seen as weak and indecisive in the face of trade union power. Even the grave diggers had gone out of strike. The unions helped bring her to power.

But most of Mrs Thatcher's new Cabinet colleagues still supported the traditional Labour-Conservative economic philosophy. "Thatcherism" – the belief in small government, selling off government assets, and greater reliance on the market – was a minority viewpoint. Few people expected her to last long.

The early years of reform were very rough. The gross domestic product fell by 3 per cent, unemployment rose by a million to three million, and inflation went up to 20 per cent. There were even more strikes by angry unionists. Factories were closing down. Britain – which invented the Industrial Revolution in 1775 – was now importing for the first time in its history more manufactured goods than it was exporting. Bankruptcies were at a record level.

She was the most unpopular prime minister since opinion polling had started in Britain. Her Cabinet colleagues pleaded with her to slow down the radical economic reforms. But she pressed on. "I am the rebel head of an establishment government", she said. At the 1980 Conservative Party Conference she confronted her worried colleagues: "Turn if you like. The lady's not for turning".

Suddenly on April 2 1982 Argentina invaded the Falklands Islands. She decided to defend the islands and the Argentinians were beaten in June 1982. There was a new mood of victory in Britain – even if the strikes did begin again after the British military victory.

At the 1983 general election she won a huge majority (144 seats) – the largest landslide since the 1945 Labour victory. Now she was in a position to take on the coal miners – one of the most powerful economic groups in British history. Many of the mines were unprofitable and should have been closed down years earlier. But the miners had beaten all the previous governments (including Heath's in 1974).

The coal strike began in March 1984. But the Government was well prepared for it and had coal stockpiles. There was not so much chaos as there had been in 1974. Eventually after a year the Government won and the unions defeated.

Selling off government assets gave people an opportunity to buy shares in the privatized corporations. Previously only the elite owned shares (the rest gambled on horses and dogs). By the time that she left office more people in Britain owned shares than belonged to trade unions.

Thatcher's third election victory in 1987 confirmed that "Thatcherism" was here to stay. One of her converts was the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who also sought to reduce government intervention in the economy. But his reforms got out of control and he was swept from power in 1991.

Mrs Thatcher was destroyed not by others - but by her own arrogance. By November 1990, at the height of the build up to the first Iraq War, she was removed by her own party

colleagues. They had become sick of her over-bearing style of leadership and her unwillingness to listen to others.

She suddenly realized that she had lost the confidence of her colleagues – even though she was still the most popular party leader in Britain. She was replaced by John Major, a dull accountant whose father had been a trapeze artist.

Margaret Hilda Roberts was born on October 13 1925. Her father was a Methodist who believed in hard work and ran the family on strict lines (few toys or entertainment) with a heavy emphasis on reading. He was very involved in local politics.

She worked hard studying chemistry at Oxford and was for a few years a research scientist. She also had a passion for Conservative politics. She lost her first election in 1950 (in a strong Labour seat). But there she did meet and married Denis Thatcher in 1951. She became a mother of twins (Carol and Mark) in August 1953 and qualified as a barrister in December 1953.

She entered the Commons in 1959. She soon made a name for herself as a hard worker and good speaker. In the Heath Government (1970-4) she had the traditional female portfolio of Education.

Her time in office coincided with the upsurge in IRA terrorism. One of her closest advisers, military hero and Conservative MP Airey Neave, was blown up by the IRA on the eve of the 1979 election.

She herself was almost killed on October 12 1984 by an IRA bomb planted under her hotel bedroom at the Conservative Party Conference. The IRA did not believe the stories of how little sleep she needed, and assumed that she would be in bed in the middle of the night. In fact, she was at the other end of the hotel suite still working. That hard work saved her life.

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