

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

Margaret Thatcher and the Caribbean

Few politicians can be said to have been responsible for changing the way in which we think, let alone contributing to reshaping fundamentally the geo-political and economic environment in which we live; but that is what the late Margaret Thatcher, Britain's Prime Minister between 1979 and 1990, achieved.

Like what she stood for or not, the long view of history will undoubtedly recognise that her often polarising influence on reshaping our world was exceptional. Whether it was her central part in helping create the climate necessary for dialogue that brought an end to the cold war; her defence of national sovereignty in relation to the Falkland Islands; her attitude and approach to Europe; or her fundamentalist belief in the market, deregulation and the diminution in the role of the state; she contributed to change in a way that few have, other than in time of war.

Committed, driven and in her later period in office obsessive and often out of touch, she, unlike most politicians of today, exhibited a degree of leadership, self-assurance and global influence that for a small country in slow economic, political and military decline was little short of extraordinary.

Because of this, she remains a divisive figure, particularly in Britain in the context of her domestic economic policies where some still suffer her legacy. She also remains internationally controversial as a consequence of her stubborn resistance to seeking an early end to apartheid, her desire to keep Germany divided, or her commitment to individuals like Chile's Augusto Pinochet.

As for the Caribbean, Mrs Thatcher appears to have only visited the region once. That was in 1985 for the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference in Nassau at which she agreed finally to change her position on the apartheid regime in South Africa, and to sign the Nassau Accord.

However, that is not to say that her global view did not have a profound effect on the region and its relationship with the United Kingdom, or that she was ignorant of the Caribbean's concerns.

As recently declassified transcripts of conversations between her and the then US President, Ronald Reagan in 1983 demonstrate, she had a firm grasp of the detail, understood the thinking and personalities of many leading Caribbean politicians at the time, and recognised the supportive, as opposed to interventionist, role that the region wanted others to play. She and her governments also had positive views on the need to improve relations with Cuba, the need to find creative ways to stimulate development in Britain's Overseas Territories, and a genuine warmth towards the Caribbean, albeit often based on an historic appreciation of the relationship.

However, Grenada apart, it is not in the detail that her relationship with the region mattered, rather it is in the effect that her broader and transformative influence on economic policy, the Cold War, and Europe that touched and still touches the region most.

By inviting Mikhail Gorbachev to London and then listening to him, Margaret Thatcher was able to play a central role for those in the former Soviet Union who recognised the need for a dialogue with the US that would end the Cold War. She was able to tell President Reagan personally that there were Soviet politicians who understood, and to provide the seal of approval that Mr Gorbachev was looking for.

It was, however, the first step in a process that led to the Caribbean being sidelined internationally. With the Cold War gone, the region and many other developing nations ceased to be of strategic or intellectual importance in the battle for influence that had raged. It all but brought to an end the high levels of attention, trade preference and development support. Although Michael Manley later recognised the consequences in a seminal speech following the fall of the Soviet Union and demonstrated how the coming uni-polarity would marginalise the region, it went largely unrecognised that this was the moment the region needed to adapt and deliver a new long term strategy.

In a similar way, Mrs Thatcher's approach to Europe also impacted on the Caribbean. From the point at which she addressed the European Council in Bruges in 1988, indicating her concerns about the potential loss of sovereign power, national identity and the implied move towards federalism, the writing was again on the wall. The UK was moving away from Europe, was to become semi-detached and would no longer have the will or influence to support the Caribbean in the preferential and development relationship that it had brought the region into after Commonwealth Preference.

This too was not widely appreciated in the region as a strategic threat. Rather it resulted in a slow economic decline as the UK lost influence in Europe and slowly ceased to be an effective voice for the Caribbean, resulting in a now all too evident disinterest in the region in a Europe of twenty seven states.

But more fundamentally it was Margaret Thatcher's economic and social philosophy that started the process of divergence between the region and its former colonial power. The Anglophone Caribbean had gone to independence with many of the same values as Britain in terms of economic organisation, the role of the state, social welfare, taxation and a commitment to equity. However, Mrs Thatcher's enunciation of a very different philosophy ran counter to that prevailing in the region. She emphasised the individual and economic independence of action, believed that the role of the state had to be diminished through deregulation, lower taxation, and the privatisation of utilities.

Spurred by Thatcherism and like minded individuals in the US and elsewhere, the world began to change around the Caribbean, leaving it less competitive, albeit, until recently, more socially homogenous.

Since then the world has moved on. Mrs Thatcher's policies on deregulation and the pull of her thinking on parties of the centre left like new Labour in Britain, can be directly linked to the 2007/8 global financial crisis, as can the consequent problems of a disintegrated and indebted region.

There is much more that could be written or said about these issues, but irrespective of one's personal opinion about her, Mrs Thatcher remains a largely unrecognised player in the history of the Caribbean.

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