

Anne Lester

Dr. Nancy Christiansen

English 327R

December 12, 2017

Margaret Thatcher

Margaret Thatcher was the first female Prime Minister of Great Britain. Often called “the Iron Lady,” she was known for her strong positions in politics and in life (Margaret). While many of Thatcher’s policies were controversial, I would like to argue that she was an effective leader. She was able to persuade fellow Brits, even those who didn’t agree with her, to back her proposals, which she often did through appeals to the Christian nature of her followers, thus allowing her to get done what she set out to do in the government. Throughout this paper, I will more deeply examine her rhetoric, leadership skills, and ethics to prove Thatcher’s effectiveness as a leader.

For the purpose of my argument, I will be defining rhetoric not only as spoken and written words, but also as the actions taken by a person. Rhetoric truly makes up all that a person is. Isocrates argued that we cannot judge a person until we have thoroughly examined their rhetoric, which he defined as all communication to ever proceed from them. “The argument which is made by a man’s life,” he said, “is of more weight than that which is furnished by words” (339). I believe this is the standard to which all leaders should be held regarding rhetoric. Every communication, be it a speech, a written declaration, or even body language, reveals a part of their character. In an effective leader, this communication should be consistent. Their political stances should match their philanthropic actions. The way they talk about a person should be

reflected in the way they treat that person. A leader must be themselves. They may change as they learn more through experience or by trial and error, but as they adapt one part of their communication, the other parts must follow suit.

Thatcher was famously herself, no matter the situation. Cynthia Crawford, Mrs. Thatcher's personal assistant during her time as Prime Minister, and a very close friend to Mrs. Thatcher, once said "She was so incredibly strong and determined. Not once did she flag" (Gorbachev). Whether at home or standing before the country, Margaret Thatcher *was* Margaret Thatcher.

Thatcher's rhetoric throughout her speech "The Lady's Not for Turning" is exactly what you would expect from a woman who truly earned the nickname "Iron Lady." In fact, the title of Thatcher's speech comes from a line that may be one of the most telling of Thatcher's character in the entire speech. It reads: "To those waiting with bated breath for that favorite media catchphrase, the 'U' turn, I have only one thing to say. 'You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning'" (Thatcher). In these two sentences, Thatcher references a popular media term, the "U" turn, which refers to politicians sticking close to their beliefs until it appears they aren't getting their way, at which point they make a "U" turn in order to make progress (Robin). She then plays on the term ("you turn" sounds an awful lot like "'U' turn") and follows with her iconic line.

However, we know, based on our definition of rhetoric, that Thatcher simply saying she refuses to turn does not make for sound rhetoric. We must examine her actions. We must find consistency before we can commend her rhetoric. A few of the stances Thatcher is talking about when she makes her bold refusal to turn include her involvement with the Soviet Union, the liberation of Rhodesia, and her goal to "defeat" inflation, calling it the "prime economic

objection” of her party (Thatcher). There are other points that we could use to exemplify Thatcher’s continuity, but for brevity’s sake, we’ll focus on these three.

The first point we will examine is the tension with the Soviet Union. In her speech, Thatcher talks about her own vocalization against problems in the East during her campaign for Prime Minister. She then describes how she believes the situation should be handled (not allowing the Soviet Union to “conduct business as usual” when they’re clearly misbehaving) and assures the people that this will be addressed at the next international summit (Thatcher). The international summit held following Thatcher’s speech was in 1981, however, a Google search of the summit doesn’t provide any information about what was discussed. The closest summit to Thatcher’s speech about which I could find information was held in 1983, already four years after the speech. Records show that tensions with the Soviet Union were among the primary issues at the summit, with discussions being led by US President Ronald Reagan and PM Thatcher (9th). Throughout the rest of the Soviet Union’s existence, Thatcher continued to oppose it. She is even said to have been instrumental in ending the Cold War and tearing down the Iron Curtain (Gutterman).

Next, we will look at Thatcher’s involvement in the liberation of Rhodesia, where a civil war had been going on for over a decade. The liberation not only ended problems with Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), but helped ease tensions in Southern Africa, where people were suffering the awful reality of apartheid. Of the liberation, Thatcher said: “Now it is for the new nation, Zimbabwe, to build her own future” (Thatcher). Her following interactions with the country of Zimbabwe were consistent with this. For example, when Robert Mugabe was elected Prime Minister, Thatcher was upset. “She detested Mugabe as much as I did,” said Robin Renwick, British ambassador to South Africa under Thatcher, “but he had won the election and when the

Rhodesian military appealed to her to nullify it, she faced them down” (Renwick). Thatcher had granted the people of Zimbabwe to do what they wished with their freedom, whether good or bad. She was criticized for these decisions (Thatcher: No), but it showed that she was consistent in her rhetoric.

Lastly, we will examine Thatcher’s stance on economic practices, specifically the “defeat” of inflation (Thatcher). At the time Thatcher took office in 1979, inflation was about 10% in Britain (Matthews) and one of Thatcher’s main goals as Prime Minister was to see that inflation declined for good. In “The Lady’s Not for Turning,” Thatcher provides examples of where decreasing inflation has worked before, but more importantly, she addresses the concerns of the people regarding the steps she wants to take to eradicate it, which were many. To do this, she lists short, simple facts about where the country is already at, followed by a declaration that solving these problems does more than help the economy, it provides people with a sense of purpose. She claims that “a country’s most precious assets” are “the talent and energy of its people” and that the government is responsible for making sure these assets, and in essence, the people, are protected (Thatcher). This speech was given during the time of a terrible recession in Britain (Pettinger) and seems to be Thatcher’s way of saying that she is not backing down from her economical stance, but that all the hardships will be worth it.

The economy under Thatcher was rocky, to say the least. Besides the recession at the time of “The Lady’s Not for Turning,” Britain was hit with another recession later in her term. Prices in telecom, airlines, and electricity were lowered, but unemployment rose drastically. Home ownership became much more common among all social classes, while trade unions saw a decline in efficiency (Pettinger). Overall, we cannot say that Thatcher’s economic success was great or terrible, but we can say one thing for sure: she stuck to her guns. Throughout every

crisis, every downfall, Thatcher was determined to beat out inflation and erase the notion of Britain as “the sick-man of Europe” (Pym), and by the time she left office, she *had* lowered inflation by half (Matthews). Of Thatcher’s determination, one politician said “The establishment didn't want change, there was so much opposition but she transformed the economy - without her it wouldn't have happened” (Pym).

Given these three examples, I think it is safe to say that Thatcher’s words and her actions lined up. She remained consistent in her policies, even if this led to a great dislike of her as a person. Her rhetoric remained strong throughout her service as Prime Minister.

Next, we will examine Thatcher’s leadership skills. For this section, we will define leadership as the uniting of people with different views to pursue a common goal. A hallmark of an effective executive, according to John P. Kotter in The Harvard Business Review’s On Leadership, is that they are able to “align [people].” He defines this alignment as “trying to get people to comprehend a vision of an alternative future” and says that “aligning leads to empowerment” (47-48). The ability to align a group of people, no matter how different each individual member might be, is what moves an organization forward.

In Thatcher’s case, the “organization” was an entire country in which political opinions varied from person to person. Thatcher certainly couldn’t align every single person in Britain, but many of her policy changes moved forward, as we have seen highlighted with the way she changed the economy. So what did Thatcher do to get the support of not only her followers, but that of her enemies?

Perhaps one of Thatcher’s most brilliant tactics was her unrelenting collection of proof. At least in “The Lady’s Not for Turning,” Thatcher was able to back up almost everything she

said with some kind of source. For example, she talks about the worry that an increase in public spending will negatively affect private businesses (Thatcher). If you look up “public spending and private business,” there are a plethora of sources and studies that prove that when there is an increase in government public spending, private businesses suffer (Hall). Thatcher made sure to become an expert on whatever subject she was going to address so that she could address it in full.

This also meant she never shrank from the negative truths. She was well aware that the opposition against her was massive and growing every day, but she refused to let this get to her. Rather, she would address the points of the opposition in a way that validated their worries, but then refute them with sound evidences. A great example of this can be found in her section on unemployment. In this section, she even uses some of her own party’s counterarguments, saying that no matter what you may say, the fact remains that 2 million people are unemployed and something must be done (Thatcher). The working class was one of Thatcher’s bitterest foes but no doubt felt a twinge of hope upon hearing these statements.

Thatcher was not known for being a “warm-fuzzies” kind of person. She did little to appeal to her audiences emotionally. However, she always provided a sense of optimism. Throughout her speech, Thatcher voices her pride in not only her country, but the way the government she has been leading has worked. She gives examples of the ways they have paved the way for more changes. She also offers examples of how the changes made have benefited the citizens of the United Kingdom and how they have bettered their lives. For example, she talks about how breaking down monopolies has given more opportunities for tenants to buy their homes, thus gaining “the right to the most basic ownership of all” (Thatcher).

She doesn't stop with all the good things that have already been done, though. Rather, she encourages her countrymen to continue working toward improvement. Thatcher has already expressed that the people are the lifeblood of the country and now she works to show that the government is here to work with and for its people, if they will let it. She provides examples of how the government has already worked with other nations for the people's best interests (increasing the nation's nuclear missile system "for our citizens," resolving problems with New Zealand to "protect the interests of the farmers... while giving our... housewives an excellent deal," etc.), emphasizing that the people should trust that the government is doing what's best for its citizens. Thatcher finishes her speech by paraphrasing Peter Thorneycroft, then serving as the Chair of the Conservative Party, by saying that "when people are called upon to lead great nations they must look into the hearts and minds of the people whom they seek to govern" and adding that "those who seek to govern must in turn be willing to allow their hearts and minds to lie open to the people" (Thatcher). In this quote, Thatcher truly drives home her desire for the government and people to be able to work together for everyone's best interest. She has expressed how much she loves and respects her citizens and asks them to at least have the same respect for her and her fellow politicians. She has also driven home the urgency of an alignment. If the people will not work with the government, she seems to say, then the government cannot do anything for them.

Lastly, we will look at ethics. Ethics make up the foundation on which rhetoric and leadership are built and can work hand-in-hand. They are the driving force behind everything a leader does and says. Steven R. Covey does a phenomenal job of incorporating ethics into his leadership skills in his book The 8th Habit. While Covey may never come out and say that he is

driven by his beliefs in the Mormon church, his references to “agency” and his focus on man’s good nature show that he is driven by some sort of ethical code (Covey).

Thatcher, too, was led by a strong ethical and moral code. In an essay detailing how ethics shaped Thatcher’s political stances, Dr. Eliza Filby writes: “‘Economics is the method; the object is to change the soul,’ Thatcher once declared, revealing that the way she conceived her free-market ideology was as much about transforming values as about improving Britain’s ailing GDP.”

To anyone who has studied Margaret Thatcher’s personal life and not simply her politics, it should come as no surprise that she lived by strong ethics. Thatcher’s father had been a lay preacher and Thatcher herself dipped her toe into the preaching pool while she was a student (Filby). The Christian code of ethics taught Thatcher that all men were created equal, leading to her friendship with Nelson Mandela and help in ending apartheid (Renwick); it instilled in her a belief that blessings would come after hardships, which likely added to her optimism even in the face of recession; it even helped her understand that war and violence should be avoided when possible, helping her to form friendships with both US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev and use discussion to bring an end to tensions between the two countries before they erupted (Gorbachev). Some have even said that Thatcher’s economic views “always owed more to Methodism than to Monetarism” (Filby).

If we line up Margaret Thatcher with our definitions of rhetoric, leadership, and ethics, she seems to come out on top. Thatcher was consistent in word and deed, even to the point of making enemies; she helped align a country of people, some who loved her and some who detested her, to vote on and pass policy changes that moved forward her goals for economic improvement; and the guiding force behind everything she did, the foundation for her rhetoric

and leadership, was always her strong, Christian ethics. Thatcher may not have been one of the world's most beloved leaders, she may not have even been particularly *liked*, but her skills as a leader were impressive and it is my belief that it would be unfitting to say that she had been anything less than an effective leader.

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