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# 1979 and all that: a 40-year reassessment of Margaret Thatcher's legacy on her own terms

Kevin Albertson<sup>o</sup> and Paul Stepney<sup>★</sup>

*Economics are the method: The object is to change the soul* (Thatcher, 1981)

There is a growing disaffection with mainstream politics in the world's liberal democracies. In particular, the UK has become an increasingly divided nation; as evidenced by, for example, increasing inequality, an emphasis on individualism, the so-called North/South divide and the polarised debate about the UK's leaving the European Union. Many leading UK politicians claim their inheritance of the "Thatcher legacy" to legitimate their proposed policies, yet it is not clear what is that legacy. Thatcher's policies, instituted in the 1980s and broadly pursued by subsequent governments, changed the economic and social outlook of the UK. Criticism of her record is taken to indicate one is a left-wing ideologue. Our contribution in the following is that we judge Thatcher's policies by no standards other than her own. Utilising a holistic approach, we consider whether neo-liberal policies facilitated or undermined the UK's achieving Thatcher's stated moral outcomes: the growth of democratic capitalism and the strengthening of the moral economy. We demonstrate, in contrast to contemporary narratives of her "saving the country", the neo-liberal economic experiment has failed to deliver, even on Thatcher's own terms. This analysis has contemporary domestic and global implications as generally Thatcherite policies continue to be applied in the UK and in other nations around the world.

*Key words:* Thatcher, Neo-liberalism, Economic history, UK politics, Free-markets  
*JEL classifications:* B31, E60, H11

## 1. Introduction

*There is no such thing as society. There is [a] living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate.* (Thatcher, 1987)

The legitimacy of democratic government depends, according to Abraham Lincoln (1854), on its ability to do for a community that which they would have done but cannot do for themselves as individuals. If this is so, it seems recent UK governments

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\*Address for correspondence: Kevin Albertson, Professor of Economics, Faculty of Business and Law, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, M15 6BH, UK; email: [k.albertson@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:k.albertson@mmu.ac.uk)

★Professor of Economics, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK (KA); and Adjunct Professor of Social Work & Social Policy, Tampere University, Finland (PS).

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have not been delivering on voters' aspirations. Every decade-cohort of young people born in the UK since the 1960s has been less enamoured with the democratic process than their elders (Foa and Mounk, 2017). These are the young people who became eligible to vote during the governments of Margaret Thatcher and her successors. We examine below the particular impact of her policies on this generation.

Under Thatcher, leader of the Conservative Party from 1975 to 1990, and Prime Minister from 4 May 1979 to 22 November 1990, data indicate that the economic and social prospects of the typical British household underwent a sea-change. Saluted as a class-warrior (The Herald, 2013; The Telegraph, 2013), whether one saw her policies and her successor's, John Major (Prime Minister from November 1990 to May 1997) as necessary and/or successful depends upon one's point of view (Financial Times, 2013), or so it is said.

She has been voted both the greatest (YouGov, 2013) and the worst recent UK Prime Minister (The Guardian, 2016). During her first term, many predicted the crisis her policies would produce (Courts *et al.*, 1981) yet, by the time of her resignation, the majority (52%) of the British people were of the opinion that her government had been good for the country (IpsosMORI, 2013), even though she was personally disliked by the majority (60%) (IpsosMORI, 2013). At the least, perhaps, most would agree with one-time Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown (quoted in The Guardian, 2016), 'she laid out her stall and she achieved it'. However, it is precisely here where the record is weak.

In the following, we consider the efficacy of these policies from the point of view of Thatcher's and her government's stated aspirations. It is often assumed that Thatcher's goals were purely economic, the re-establishing of the principles of free-market fundamentalism (neo-liberalism as she—and many others—called it, Thatcher, 2003, p. 337). However, that is to underestimate the scale of her ambition. Thatcher (1981) sought to 'change the soul' of the British people: and believed 'Economics is the method' by which this might be achieved.

Although we necessarily focus primarily on her economic policies (assessing the extent to which they delivered, or failed to deliver, the results for which she had hoped) following Thatcher, these are only the method. We cannot judge her legacy in purely economic terms (Stepney, 2014) but rather by whether she wove or unravelled the 'living tapestry' of the UK.

In Section 2, we consider the impact of neo-liberal policies on economic growth and incomes growth. In Section 3, we consider the changing employment and welfare prospects of the British people. In Sections 4 and 5, we assess Thatcher's success in promoting home ownership and shares ownership, respectively. In Section 6, we consider her success in promoting the moral society she sought. In Section 7, we consider explanations for her supposed popularity. Conclusions are drawn in Section 8.

## 2. Economic growth

*everyone in the nation has benefited from increased prosperity – everyone.* (Thatcher, 1988)

In the first instance, we consider the impact of Thatcher's policies on the UK's economic growth in three aspects: national income, household income and poverty. We will consider, in each case, the inheritance of the 1980s and whether it is reasonable to suppose the UK economy was revitalised by the policies of the 1980s.

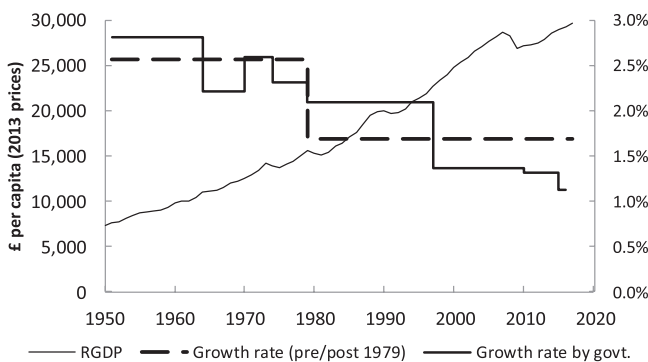
### 2.1 National income

If it is the case that the adoption of free-market ideology improved the UK's economic prospects (Thatcher, 2003), it is reasonable to suppose the rate of economic growth was greater after this adoption than before. However, the data (Table 1, Figure 1) undermine this supposition.

**Table 1.** Annualised increase in real GDP per capita of post-war governments<sup>a</sup>

Government	Years	Annualised growth rate
Conservative	1951–64	2.82%
Labour	1964–70	2.22%
Conservative	1970–74	2.59%
Labour	1974–79	2.31%
Conservative	1979–97	2.09%
New Labour	1997–2010	1.37%
Coalition (Cons./Lib.Dem)	2010–15	1.32%
Conservative	2015–	1.13%

<sup>a</sup>The first post-war Labour term is not included as the nation had not yet fully recovered from the war years—rationing, for example, only ended in 1954. Only the first two years of the government elected in 2015 is considered for reasons of lack of data.



**Fig. 1.** Real GDP per capita (left-hand scale) and annualised growth rates. Source: Thomas and Williamson (2018); and authors' calculations.

Clearly, the sea-change which occurred in UK economic prospects in the 1980s was not a change for the better; per capita real income growth slowed markedly post-1979. Since 1979, each government has underperformed its predecessor in this regard; however, these governments have also adopted broadly free-market policies (Dorling, 2010; Stepney, 2014), including increased labour market flexibility, free-market globalisation, increasing reliance on debt, exploitation of fossil fuels and privatisation of public assets.

This analysis supports that of Cribb *et al.* (2016) who consider, among other measures, net equivalised<sup>1</sup> household income (after housing costs) by birth cohorts. They show incomes have stagnated across much of the economy since the 1980s. In their early 30s, for example, the average household comprised of those born in the 1980s is earning less than their elder siblings (born in the 1970s) did when *they* were in their 30s. Similarly, the 1970s generation, on average, are earning less than the median households of those born in the 1960s, 1950s or even 1940s, despite these latter are generally retired (Cribb *et al.*, 2016).

<sup>1</sup> Income is equivalised, that is to say, adjusted, to take account of differing household composition.

## 2.2 Household income

Since the 1980s, there is evidence that each generation is doing less well financially than the one preceding. However, within this, there were significant differences between the impact on rich and poor (Dorling, 2015). During the 1979–97 Conservative governments, those households with greater disposable income benefited from a greater rate of incomes growth (Table 2). Only households in the top one-third of the distribution saw incomes growing at least as rapidly as GDP per capita. The least well-off households (those in the lowest income decile) saw their incomes decline on average under Thatcher (see also Hills, 1998, figure 9). What growth they did experience during the 1979–97 Conservative government occurred under Major (1990–97).

Despite this reduction in income, the economically vulnerable *were* able to increase their expenditure during the Thatcher years (Goodman and Webb, 1995) through borrowing. Household debt increased from 37% of GDP in 1979 to 73% by 1990 (Cecchetti *et al.*, 2011).

## 2.3 Poverty

Given that the better-off households experienced the greatest growth in incomes, and the least well-off households experienced the lowest growth of incomes, inequality increased significantly during the 1980s. Such an increase might be justified (Rawls, 1971) if the increasing inequality was to the benefit of the most economically vulnerable. Thatcher (1988, 1996) argued this was the case; the data undermine this contention. A recent analysis published by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (Belfield *et al.*, 2016) indicates that this increase in inequality still impacts families today: Much of the relative poverty currently experienced in the UK dates from the 1980s. In particular, the so-called ‘Breadline Poor’, those with insufficient resources to participate in the norms of society (see Dorling *et al.*, 2007 and references therein) have seen their prospects decay since 1980.

## 2.4 Conclusion: income growth

Neo-liberal policies failed to boost the UK rate of growth across the board. Although the incomes of the already affluent grew more rapidly than average national income, Thatcher’s hoped-for trickle-down of prosperity did not occur. Insofar, as anything *did* trickle down, it was not prosperity, but debt. It is also worth noting, the governments of Thatcher and her successors have overseen an increase in health inequalities alongside an increase in income inequalities. This is despite the Thatcher government’s adoption of the World Health Organization’s Global Strategy for reducing such inequalities (Shaw *et al.*, 2005; Dorling, 2018).

## 3. The labour market

*We Conservatives hate unemployment. ... We deplore the waste of national resources, and the deep affront to peoples’ dignity from being out of work through no fault of their own.* (Thatcher, 1975)

Thatcher was not alone in implying (though not stating) that her government would facilitate a reduction in unemployment: It is difficult to find a politician who is in

**Table 2.** Annualised increase in real GDP per capita and real UK equivalised household disposable income by decile

Years	Average annual growth rate									
	Real equivalised household disposable income (by decile)									
RGDP per capita	Bottom	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	Top
	1979–97	2.09%	1.40%	1.56%	1.64%	1.79%	1.88%	2.07%	2.26%	2.53%
1979–90	–0.29%	0.61%	0.71%	1.18%	1.74%	2.18%	2.58%	2.85%	3.39%	5.27%
1990–97	2.23%	2.63%	2.91%	2.37%	1.87%	1.42%	1.26%	1.33%	1.18%	0.77%

Source: ONS (Online e); [Thomas and Williamson \(2018\)](#); and authors' calculations.

favour of unemployment, at least notionally. It is also difficult to find a politician whose policies have reduced unemployment substantially.

### 3.1 Unemployment

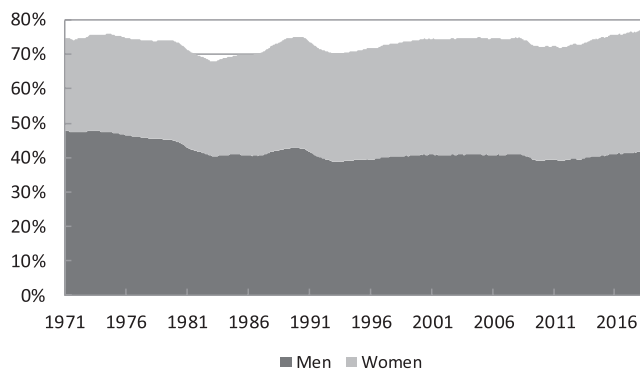
Notwithstanding advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi's assertion 'Labour Isn't Working' (Delaney, 2015) in the run-up to the 1979 election, the lowest unemployment rate recorded during the 1980s was when Thatcher came to office in May 1979: 4.2% (ONS, 2018). In April 1984, the unemployment rate reached its 1980 peak of more than double this: 9.5%. By 1990, when Thatcher resigned, headline unemployment was 6.1%; still around three-quarters of a million people greater than in 1979 (ONS, 2018).

### 3.2 Employment

Perhaps the more telling figure, however, is employment (Figure 2). Over the last four decades, the employment rate in the UK of men aged 16–64 and women aged 16–59 has been reasonably stable, fluctuating from 68% (April/May 1983) to 77% (March 2018). Employment was 74% in both May 1979 and in November 1990.

The 1970s are frequently portrayed (e.g. Mirza-Davies, 2015) as a time of full employment. If one considers male employment (92% in February 1971), this seems to be borne out. The employment rate for women was 56% in February 1971; however, it was considered both more acceptable and more affordable for one or other of a married or cohabiting couple to work as home-maker in the 1970s. Such adults are not in the (paid) labour force and do not count for the purposes of recorded unemployment. Thus, in 1971, the unemployment rates for men and women were very similar at 3% for men and 5% for women.

The relative stability of employment rates over the last four decades rather undermines claims there are plenty of good jobs available if the unemployed would only look. It seems reasonable to suppose an individual who does 'get on yer bike' (Tebbit, 1981) will enhance their prospects of getting a job *relative to another unemployed person*; however, they will not create a job. The evidence indicates that employment levels will remain approximately constant, even if the composition of the employed becomes more skewed towards cyclists.



**Fig. 2.** Employment rates in the UK (men 16–64, women 16–59).  
Source: ONS (2018).

### 3.3 Modernisation of the welfare state

A related political mythos is that reducing social security will create employment (c.f. Osborne, 2014) by making work relatively more attractive. This again assumes there are sufficient jobs available. However, relative to average consumption expenditure in the UK, unemployment benefit for a single person has approximately halved since the 1980s (Atkinson, 2015), yet employment has been stable. A VECM(2) (Johansen, 1988, 1991) analysis of the impact of the level of unemployment benefits on the headline unemployment rate indicates that there is no significant long-run effect—there is no evidence that higher benefits cause higher unemployment. There is, however, evidence of a relationship in the other direction—higher unemployment is related to lower benefits. This supports the proposition that politicians, wrongly diagnosing the impact of welfare, are inclined to reduce social security when it is most needed.

Indeed, 'the development of the conditional and affordable welfare state' (Stepney, 2018a, p. 46) was a policy goal of Thatcher's. This initiative replaced governments' commitment to universal social security with targeted support for the working poor, and policies based on labour market activation (workfare) protection for the deserving poor and those assessed as vulnerable and high risk. These policies are associated with an increasingly polarised and divided society (Stepney, 2018a), but not with an increase in employment.

### 3.4 The 'missing'

At the time of writing, employment in the UK remains at *circa* 75%. Nevertheless, the current headline unemployment rate is not, as we might suppose, *circa* 25%, but a more modest 4%. The seeming paradox arises because the proportion of working-age people entering the labour force (becoming economically active) has been roughly matched by the proportion leaving the labour force. In general, those of working age who leave the labour force, or defer joining, have two major destinations, higher (or further) education and disabilities benefits (soon to be transferred to universal credit).

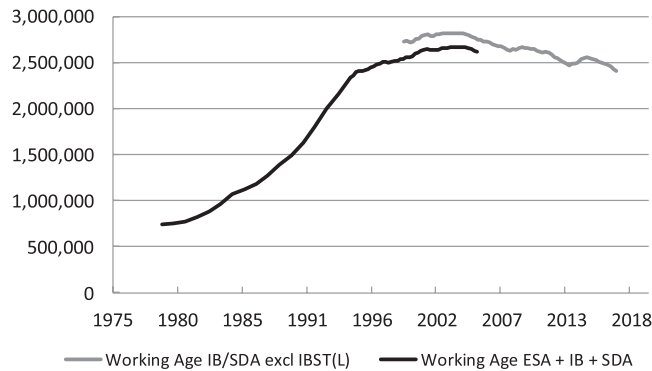
In 1970–71, there were 621,000 students in UK Higher Education (HE) (of which 560,000 were undergraduates) (ONS, 2010), while in 2013–14, there were 2,299,355 (Universities UK, 2015). Students, even if they work full- or part-time, are not considered members of the labour force. This increase in enrolment for higher education has therefore reduced the size of the labour force by one-and-two-third millions.

Alongside of this, the number of people on invalidity benefits (specifically Working Age IB/SDA excluding IBST(L)) more than doubled from 1979 to 1990 (DWP Online a, Online b). At the time of writing, there are approximately two and a half million members of the workforce who are not counted as unemployed while receiving such benefits (Figure 3).

### 3.5 Conclusion: employment

During Thatcher's time in office, and since, much lack of employment did not count towards headline unemployment because of the increase in HE enrolment and disability statistics (c.f. Beatty and Fothergill, 1999; Beatty *et al.*, 2012). Even so, the data do not support the hypothesis that Thatcher's policies were successful in reducing unemployment or increasing employment. Despite welfare reform, it was dependency, not employment, that increased during the 1980s.





**Fig. 3.** *The number of people on Disability Benefits in the UK.*  
Source: DWP (Online a, Online b).

## 4. Housing

*To most people ownership means first and foremost a home of their own.* (Conservative Party, 1979)

A major plank of Thatcher's social policy was to facilitate home ownership (Conservative Party, 1979). This accords with her goal of transforming the UK into a 'property-owning democracy' (Thatcher, 1993, p. 698), in which a high proportion of citizens owns a stake in the nation.

### 4.1 Right to Buy

One of the tools utilised by local government to address the lack of affordable housing in the mid-twentieth century was to build and rent so-called council houses of an appropriate quality and quantity. Council tenants' 'Right to Buy' was foremost amongst Thatcher's policies for increasing home-ownership (Conservative Party, 1979). Introduced in the Housing Act 1980 (HM Government, 1980), and extended in The Housing and Building Control Act 1984, Housing Act 1985 and Housing and Planning Act 1986, the policy gave tenants the right to buy the council house in which they resided at discounts of up to 75% below market prices (House of Commons, 1999).

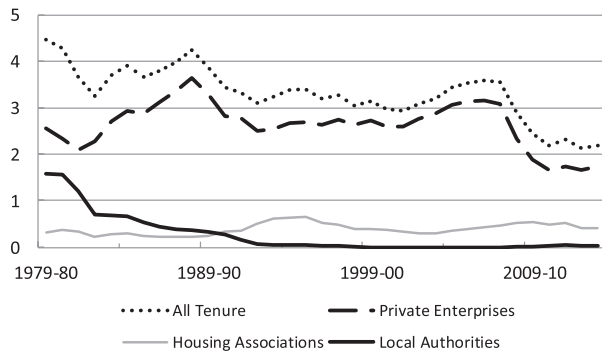
Not all public housing was sold, of course; not all tenants could afford to buy, and not all council houses were desirable properties to own. In practice, the better public properties were sold to the more affluent tenants (House of Commons, 1999). Those fortunate enough to exercise their Right to Buy benefited from the gift of public assets worth over £200 billion (2010–12 values) through the discounts offered (Atkinson, 2015, p. 162). Thatcher thus generated a substantial amount of goodwill towards her government amongst some members of the electorate, even amongst former opposition supporters (Stepney, 2014).

Right to Buy was also good for central government financially, at least in the short term. The bulk of public proceeds went to national, rather than local, government (Disney and Luo, 2017). These proceeds were significant: by 1999, Right to Buy had raised more money than any other privatisation of public assets (House of Commons, 1999); by 2003,

the central government had benefited to the tune of £36.8 billion (Atkinson, 2015). The local government saw little, if any, financial benefit from the policy. Furthermore, it retained the statutory duty to accommodate the homeless despite its much-reduced stock of housing. This proved problematic as the number of applicants for council housing more than doubled during the 1980s (Disney and Luo, 2017).

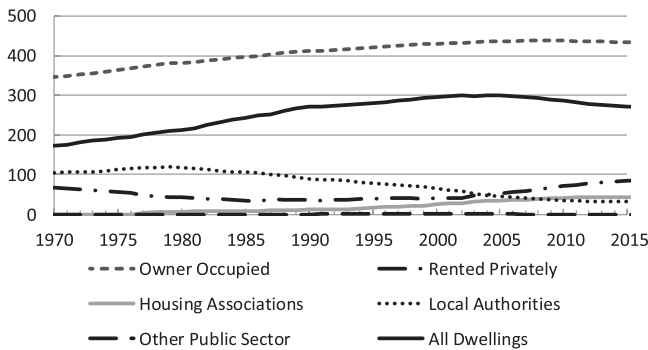
Unsurprisingly, home building by local authorities collapsed after Right to Buy; however, the private sector did not make up the shortfall (Figure 4). Compared to 1979–80, the UK rate of home completions declined 13% by 1990, 29% by 1997 and 51% by 2013/14. Of the housing which was built, an increasing proportion became owned by foreign interests (Dorling, 2015; Valentine, 2015; Atkinson *et al.*, 2016; Fernandez *et al.*, 2016).

The data indicate (Figure 5) that part of the increased prosperity the British enjoyed in the immediate post-war years was invested in property prior to Right to Buy. Insofar, as Right to Buy contributed to the continuation of this trend, it was a one-off effect as it facilitated privatisation of existing housing, but did not promote the building of additional housing. If anything, by discouraging councils from building, Right to Buy may have decreased the supply of homes.



**Fig. 4.** Permanent dwellings completed, by tenure per 1,000 of the UK population. Financial years 1979/80 to 2013/14

Source: ONS (2015a); Thomas and Williamson (2018); and authors' calculations.



**Fig. 5.** GB housing stock (including vacant), by tenure per 1,000 of the GB population. Source: HM Government (2018); Thomas and Williamson (2018); NISRA (2017); and authors' calculations.

Forced through globalisation to compete in the housing market with the international super-rich while UK housebuilding per capita declined, the average Briton has found housing less affordable since the 1980s (Dorling, 2015). The rate of owner occupation (including vacant properties) is currently declining. The vacancy rate is itself an issue: In England alone, it is estimated that over 600,000 potential homes were empty in October 2015; more than 200,000 of these for a period in excess of six months (Wilson *et al.*, 2018).

Neither is renting more affordable; in the three decades from 1987, rents increased at a greater rate than median household incomes less direct taxes (ONS Online e). Over the same period, the real housing benefit (rent subsidy) required by median households more than doubled. In 2017 alone, total housing benefit paid was £22 billion (DWP Online c).

Home ownership, other than through inheritance, amongst younger generations is becoming ever more rare. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Cribb *et al.*, 2016), the UK's millennial generation, born in the 1980s, has only about two-thirds as much chance of owning their own home by age 30 as those born in the 1950s or 1940s. Increasingly unable even to afford rent, many young people are simply living with their parents (ONS, 2016).<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.2 Conclusion: housing

Right to Buy generated funds and goodwill for central government, and boosted home ownership amongst the more affluent former council house tenants in the short run. However, there is no evidence Thatcher's policies made it easier for the typical Briton to buy (or rent) a home in the longer term. The amount paid in housing benefit has increased at more than twice the rate of inflation since 1987, implying the taxpayer is increasingly subsidising, not affordable home ownership, but high rental costs.

## 5. Privatisation

*Why have we allowed people to buy shares in nationalised industries? Only to improve efficiency? No. To spread the nation's wealth among as many people as possible. (Thatcher, 1986)*

Although the Conservative Party (1979) manifesto barely mentions privatisation, undertaking only to 'offer to sell back to private ownership the recently nationalised aerospace and shipbuilding ... [and] ... to sell shares in the National Freight Corporation' (Conservative Party, 1979), privatisation came to define the economic policies of the 1980s (Financial Times, 2011).

There were three main motivations for privatisation (Rhodes *et al.*, 2014). A primary motivation was the need of the government of the day for ready money to boost the economy in a time of recession, while at the same time keeping a lid on public sector debt and taxes. However, as the programme developed, the underlying theory was also developed. Privatisation was promoted to the UK public also as a means of making the UK more efficient and as a means of developing democratic capitalism, under which (some) citizens would have a capitalist stake in the nation. Privatisation was also, of course, pursued for purely ideological reasons; many held to the belief that the public sector simply ought not to own industry, irrespective of its relative efficiency.

<sup>2</sup> This rather makes us wonder how much of the increase in household income at the bottom end of the distribution may have resulted from having an increased number of wage earners in each household as some young people cannot afford to move out.

## 5.1 Motivations and evidence

### 5.1.1 Raising funds.

According to [HM Treasury \(1997\)](#), the UK government realised in excess of US\$80 billion from public flotations between 1980 and 1996. This was far in excess of the more measured approaches of other OECD nations. In this period, the UK accounted for 40% of the total global proceeds of privatisation ([HM Treasury, 1997](#)). Funds raised, along with the billions raised from North Sea oil and gas revenues and further billions raised from Right to Buy gave central government the means to spend its way out of the recession of the early 1980s while maintaining the narrative of cutting taxes and reducing borrowing.

As a windfall means of gaining access to short-term financial resources, the policy was a limited success; limited in the sense that more money could have been raised. The UK's (formerly) public productive assets were generally offered at a substantial discount on market prices ([Laurin et al., 2004](#)). The fact that the fortunate few who bought shares could cash them in at a substantial premium may have generated a lot of goodwill towards the government; although it has been argued that most of those benefiting from the windfall gains of privatisation were Conservative voters already ([Stevens, 2004](#)).

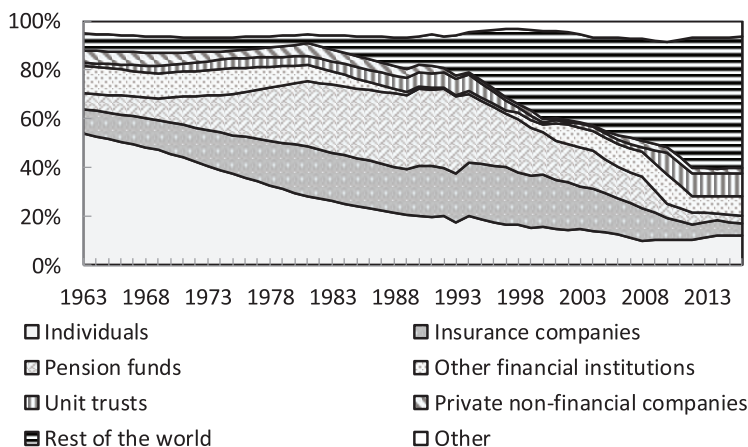
### 5.1.2 Making business more efficient.

A second supposed objective of privatisation was to promote economic efficiency in the UK. This is no straightforward objective. We must bear in mind that what is efficient for an individual business is not necessarily efficient for the economy as a whole. It was for this reason many of the free-market economists of the 1930s and 1940s supported nationalisation of key utilities and transport. They considered only democratic accountability—that is, public ownership—will prevent natural monopolies from exploiting the public (c.f. [Simons, 1934](#); Rüstow, the original neo-liberal, as cited by [Hartwich, 2009](#)). Recent history indicates that these concerns had some merit. Such is the strength of the current narrative of overcharging by privatised utilities sectors and railways, the cold-war political-economic policy of a price cap has recently been resurrected by the UK government ([May, 2017](#)). Notwithstanding, overall, there is scant evidence of efficiency gains ([Hart, 1996](#); [Hall, 2014](#)) or of benefit to the customer arising from privatisation ([Parker and Martin, 1995](#); [Letza et al., 2004](#); [High Pay Centre, 2014](#)).

[Thatcher \(1992\)](#) had also supposed that privatisation would increase investment in British business. In this, she would likewise be disappointed. There is no evidence that UK business invested more as a result of this innovation. From the 1980s to the 1990s, the UK's rate of gross investment by business was one of the lowest in the OECD ([Pelgrin et al., 2002](#)). Privatisation generally has not delivered, therefore, in improving efficiency or promoting business investment.

### 5.1.3 Spreading share ownership.

The overriding goal of privatisation, according to Thatcher at least, was to promote a 'capital owning democracy' (Thatcher, cited in [Yergin et al., 1998](#); c.f. [Howe et al., 1977](#)). However, there are few indications that privatisation has led to this result—rather the opposite; UK quoted shares have been accumulated by foreign interests, including, rather ironically given Thatcher's opinion of the relative efficiency of state ownership, foreign governments ([Figure 6](#)).



**Fig. 6.** Percentage of total market value of UK quoted shares by sector of the beneficial owner.  
Source: ONS (2015b, 2017a).

Although the proportion of shares held in an individual capacity by UK citizens was declining before the Thatcher years, approximately halving from 1963 to 1981, clearly the Thatcher reforms did little to address this decline. Conversely, the proportion of UK quoted shares in foreign hands approximately quadrupled during the Thatcher years, and has quadrupled again since (ONS, 2015b, 2017a).

### 5.2 Marketisation

Alongside of outright privatisation, recent UK governments have also pursued a policy of marketisation. This initiative, based on the ideological assumption of the relative efficiency of the private to the public sector, involved introducing quasi-market mechanisms into public services through a separation of the purchaser and provider functions of state agencies. This facilitated a plethora of private organisations entering the market to sub-contract to government particularly in health, social care and housing (Buchanan *et al.*, 2009). The introduction of quasi-markets in the NHS for example has led to a confusing array of independent and private sector organisations available to commissioning groups to deliver health care services often with no clear lines of accountability (Klein, 2013). Similarly, welfare clients have found it difficult to operate as active and effective consumers in the new care markets, as these favour the more articulate and affluent service users (Clarke, 2004).

Some would argue the privatisation strategy itself was undemocratic, given the hostility of the British people towards the policy. A 1989 IpsosMORI (2013) poll indicated privatisation was the third least popular of Thatcher's policies, beaten only supposed NHS underfunding and the Poll Tax. The majority of the British people remain of the opinion key public services—including utility companies, public transport, schools, the Royal Mail and the NHS—should be in the public sector, not the private sector (YouGov, 2017).

### 5.3 Conclusion: privatisation

It has often been said (e.g. Thatcher, 1992; Lang in Hansard, 1996; The Economist, 1999) that privatisation is one of Britain's biggest export success stories: And it cannot

be denied that, in the short term at least, the nation gained much foreign exchange from the sale of many of its productive assets to global capitalists and foreign governments. Spending the proceeds arising from the sale of public assets may have been politically more acceptable, and more popular, than increasing taxes, (further) borrowing or cutting public expenditure (Brittan, 1984). However, increasing foreign ownership of the UK's productive assets is not compatible with democratic capitalism. Neither is there any evidence privatisation led to efficiency gains which benefited the British people.

## 6. The moral economy

Thatcher (1977, 1980, 1986, 1987, 1993) argued that making the UK great again required, not economic policy, but the re-establishing of the moral spirit of the British people. She further argued that promoting liberal (free-market) economic values would motivate the adoption of conservative moral values (c.f. Cameron, 2012, in a similar vein).

If her policies failed in the major economic dimensions, we might regard her policies as a success (by her standards) if she had improved the moral economy of the nation. There is no agreed metric against which this might be judged. Following Thatcher, we consider the impact of her policies on: living within one's means, the family, crime rates, and philanthropy and community.

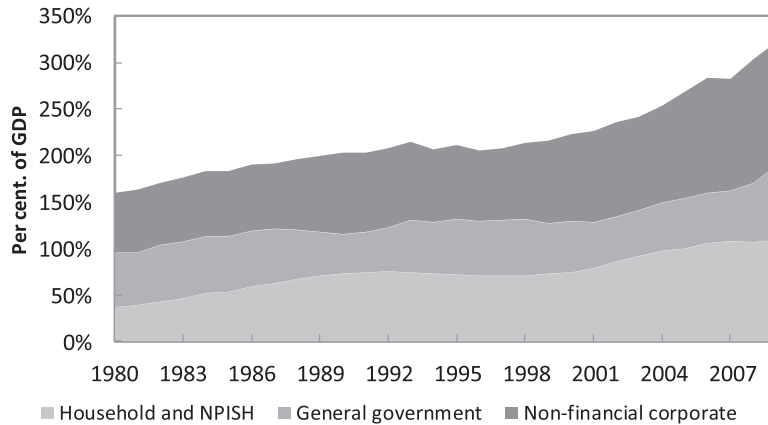
### 6.1 Tax, borrow and spend

Thatcher was convinced that the public share of the economy must be reined in. Apparently unaware of the productive nature of much government spending (Mazzucato, 2013), the 1979 Conservative manifesto (Conservative Party, 1979) stated, where government 'takes too much of the nation's income' and 'spends and borrows too much', in the long term there is 'less wealth'. Yet, insofar as she set herself the goal of reducing these, she failed; neither taxation, borrowing nor spending declined over the course of her government.

The total value of central government receipts was 30.4% of GDP in 1979; by 1990, this proportion had risen to 30.9%. The highest 'tax' take of the 1980s, 33.5% of GDP in 1982, has only recently been surpassed in 2011 (ONS Online a, Online b). Neither did Thatcher's policies reduce government spending. In real terms, the total managed expenditure rose by 7.7% from 1979 to 1990 (ONS Online c, Online d).

The story is, however, rather better with regard to debt, in the short run at least. The billions of pounds arising from privatisation and North Sea oil and gas revenues temporarily reduced the public sector borrowing requirement. As a percentage of GDP, though not in nominal terms, public sector debt fell from 1979 to 1990 (Figure 7).

Privatisation can deliver, however, only a one-off windfall and once the most profitable assets had been sold, government debt began to increase again. By 1997, when the Conservatives left office, public debt was a greater proportion of GDP than it had been in 1979. Rather more worrying, what decline there had been in public sector debt, was more than offset by increasing household debt as many British households resorted to credit to make up the shortfall in their incomes (c.f. Crouch, 2008, 2009). Furthermore, Britons had become more dependent on social security during the 1980s. The ratio of overall cash benefits to the original income of the bottom 10% of UK households increased from 176% in 1979 to 295% in 1990 (ONS Online e): The equivalent figures for the median household were 13% and 17% (ONS Online e).



**Fig. 7.** Household and public sector debt (% of GDP).  
Source: [Cecchetti et al. \(2011\)](#); and authors' calculations.

## 6.2 Families

*we could only get to the roots of crime and much else besides by concentrating on strengthening the traditional family* ([Thatcher, 1993](#), p. 628)

At the core of society, so Thatcher was convinced, were the individual and the (traditional) family unit ([Thatcher, 1987](#)) motivated by self-interest. However, according to [ONS \(2017b\)](#), the family unit was not obviously strengthened by her policies. Rather, divorces increased by 11% between 1979 and 1990; although they subsequently declined by 4% under Major, this might have been simply because there were fewer marriages. The marriage rate for men (per 1,000 unmarried men) was 58 in 1979, the equivalent rate for women was 47. By 1990, these rates had fallen to 42 and 36, respectively; in 1997, they stood at 32 and 28 ([ONS, 2014](#)).

It need hardly be said, the promotion of individual self-interest is hardly likely to increase the possibility of romantic attachment ([Röpke, 1950](#), p. 52). Furthermore, as inequality increases, there is evidence that the economically vulnerable find it increasingly difficult to form long-term romantic attachments ([Gould and Paserman, 2003](#); [Carbone and Cahn, 2013](#); [Schneider and Reich, 2014](#)). This implies that the prospect of achieving Thatcher's goal of strengthening the traditional family was undermined by the impact of her own policies.

The impact of declining family prospects has fallen on British children. Recently, [UNICEF \(2007\)](#) placed the UK at the bottom of a child well-being league table of 21 industrialised nations. The UK's poor showing was attributed, in part, to high levels of inequality, poverty and a 'dog-eat-dog' society (Bradshaw cited on [BBC News, 2007](#); [Dorling, 2018](#)).

## 6.3 Crime

Whether because of the continued weakening of family bonds, social disconnection and stress or for some other reasons, crime rates increased under Thatcher. According to the crime survey of England and Wales ([ONS, 2017c](#)), the total theft offences per 10,000 increased by 53% from 1981 to 1991; the rate of all crimes increased by 34% ([ONS, 2017c](#)). There *was* a sea-change in homicide in the 1980s, but it was not for the

better. According to [Dorling \(2006\)](#), men leaving school in the summer of 1981 (and later generations) had a greater chance of being murdered than did their elder siblings.

Crime rates began to decline under Thatcher's successor, Major. Although the cause of the so-called crime drop—which is, broadly speaking, an international phenomenon—is still much debated amongst criminologists ([Farrell et al., 2011, 2014](#)), none has ascribed it to a renewal of the moral economy. More recently, there is some evidence that the police-recorded crime rate has begun to increase again, particularly the rate of violent crime—for example, the rate of knife crime in London and other major UK cities ([ONS Online f](#)).

#### 6.4 *Philanthropy and community*

Complementing the increase in unemployment and poverty experienced by many in the UK of the 1980s was a decline in economic security. [Thatcher \(1992\)](#) was concerned 'too much security removes a man's dignity', and led to 'dependency culture' ([Thatcher, 2003](#), p. 61). She was further concerned if the state were to eliminate social problems, the nation's moral judgement would atrophy and a typical Briton become 'a moral cripple' ([Thatcher, 1977](#)).

Notwithstanding the opportunities for the British to call on their sense of morality and help out their fellows (so long as they did not support their fellows through unionisation, c.f. [Stepney, 2014](#)), the 'living tapestry' ([Thatcher, 1987](#)) of individuals was rather more unravelled than woven in the 1980s. For example, the share of the population claiming to be members of one or more voluntary associations fell from 52% in 1981 to 43% by 1991 ([Ferguson, 2013](#)).

Community bonds in general have deteriorated since the 1980s, as Britons' social networks decline and fragment, particularly in the inner urban areas ([Stepney, 2018b](#)). There has also been a long-term decline in the proportion of British households giving to charities, which dates from the 1980s ([Charities Aid Foundation, 2012](#)). This decline is particularly marked amongst the under-30s ([Charities Aid Foundation, 2012](#)); that is, those who were born after the implementation of, and therefore most influenced by, Thatcher's policies.

Ironically, the British *were* prepared to make sacrifices to promote social justice—through the state. According to [NatCen \(2017\)](#), in 1983, 32% of Britons thought government ought to increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits; this increased to 54% by 1990 (it was 48% in 2016). Conversely, the proportion of the British who thought government ought to reduce tax and spending declined from 9% in 1983 to 3% in 1990 (it was 4% in 2016) ([NatCen, 2017](#)).

#### 6.5 *Conclusion: the moral economy*

Ultimately, Thatcher's policies failed to build a living tapestry of individuals. Furthermore, her policy regime did not facilitate the UK's living within its means. Under neo-liberalism, the typical Briton became more, not less, dependent on debt and benefits. Rather than promoting ethics and family values, 'liberalism has ruthlessly drawn down a reservoir of both material and moral resources that it cannot replenish' ([Deneen, 2018](#), p. 18).

### 7. The explicable popularity of Thatcher

*she made Britain great again* ([Cameron, 2013](#))

If it is indeed the case Thatcher failed to deliver on many of her stated policy goals, we might well wonder why she appeared, and seemed to remain, so apparently popular with the British people, winning re-election in 1983 and 1987. It may be, however, her



successes were rather more due to the disorganisation of the opposition, along with luck and politics (Stepney, 2014), than sound economics as we discuss below.

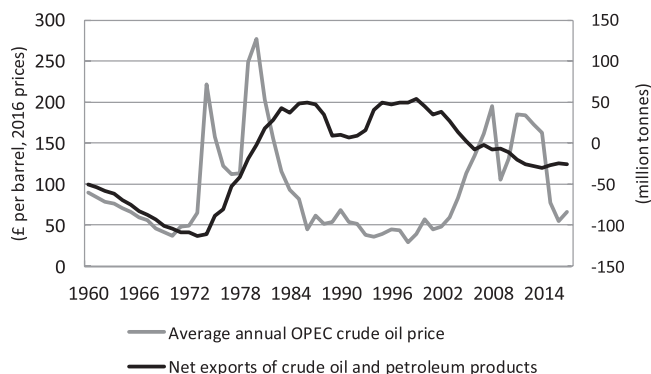
### 7.1 Retaining Keynes at number 10

Reflecting their early poor record on the economy, support for the Conservatives was running at 23% in December 1981, yet by the end of the (1982) Falklands War, their support had rebounded to 47%. They were ahead in the polls from then until the 1983 election (Clarke *et al.*, 1986). However, there are reasons to suppose the populist impact of the Falklands War (which war resulted, at least in part, from the diplomatic errors of Thatcher's government: e.g. Freedman, 1982; Barker cited in Briley, 1997; McClure, 2004) had subsided by the time Thatcher went to the country.

Ironically, in 1983, it might have been neither her own policies nor war—bumbled into but successfully concluded—which saved Thatcher from electoral defeat, but implicit Keynesianism. According to Sanders *et al.* (1987), Howe's expansionary 1982 budget built on and sustained the Conservative's new-found (Falklands) war-time popularity. Notwithstanding their stated aims of rolling back Keynesian economic policies, the Conservatives were apparently not opposed to using the revenues gained from North Sea oil and gas, and the proceeds of their early privatisation experiments, to boost the economy. The total managed expenditure increased by more than 3% in real terms in 1983 and 1984 (ONS Online c, Online d), even while price inflation was declining; for which latter the Conservative policies took the credit.

### 7.2 The oil unshock

How much the Conservative's economic policies contributed to the 1983 reduction in price inflation is debatable. To some extent at least, relative price stability resulted from the easing of the effects of the second oil shock which began in the late 1970s. On coming to power, Thatcher faced a high (in the context of the time) oil price of US\$29 per barrel; by 1982, this had risen further to \$35 per barrel. By 1983, the price had begun to decline, reducing inflationary pressures. For the remainder of the 1980s and 1990s, oil prices were broadly comparable to their levels in the late 1970s (Figure 8; Statistica Online).



**Fig. 8.** OPEC crude oil price (left-hand scale) and UK net exports of crude oil and petroleum products. Source: Statistica (Online); ONS (2013); and authors' calculations.

Furthermore, even while the global price of oil was declining (not such a good time, one might think, for Britain to be selling its non-renewable fuel stocks), the Thatcher government benefited to the tune of £167 billion (in 2017–18 prices) from North Sea revenues (Scottish Government, 2012). There was, however, a downside: As the UK began to export fossil fuels, Britain being barely even able to afford to buy its own oil (Cripps, 1981), the exchange rate appreciated, making it yet more difficult for UK industry to compete globally.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon, known as the 'Dutch disease' (Forsyth and Kay, 1980), was recognised at the time. Sir Michael Edwardes of BL Ltd (aka British Leyland), for example, argued in 1981 that, if the cabinet of the day did not have the wit or imagination to keep oil revenues from hurting the UK economy, it should 'leave the bloody stuff in the ground' (quoted in NY Times, 1981). Sadly, his advice was not followed. In contrast, Norway, which similarly exploited its oil and gas reserves, used much of the proceeds to build a sovereign wealth fund for investment purposes. This offset the impact of fossil fuel exports on the exchange rate and paid for the accumulation of productive public-owned assets for the benefit of current and future generations.

### 7.3 *There is no (political) alternative*

Notwithstanding Thatcher's landslide win in 1983, and a comfortable win in 1987, her popularity never completely recovered from the policy failures of her first few years. The Conservative share of the vote declined with every election she fought.

The Conservatives won 43.9% of the vote in 1979, 42.4% in 1983, and 42.2% in 1987 (Audickas *et al.*, 2017). The increase in the number of seats won by the Conservative Party—339, 397 and 376 in 1979, 1983, and 1987, respectively (Audickas *et al.*, 2017)—has more to do with the 1981 splitting of the main opposition political party into the Labour and Social Democratic Parties. The vagaries of the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system are such that smaller parties with support distributed throughout the country are effectively excluded from government, albeit they draw support away from the main parties. Consider, for example, that in 1983, the SDP/Liberal Alliance polled 25.4% of the vote and won 23 seats, while the rump of the Labour Party polled barely better at 27.6% of the vote, yet won 209 seats (Audickas *et al.*, 2017).<sup>4</sup>

It seems reasonable to suppose the apparent support for Thatcher which might be concluded from a consideration of the numbers of MPs, arose, at least in part, from the disorganisation of the opposition(s). This is not to say, of course, that many, albeit a declining minority, felt her policies were at least as good if not better than those on offer from other parties.

### 7.4 *Popular support for Thatcherism*

Despite her failure to deliver economically or socially for the British people in the long term, it is clear Thatcher played a bad hand well politically. One-time windfalls from North Sea oil and gas, boosted by the proceeds of privatisation and Right to Buy, were

<sup>3</sup> The same thing happens, of course, when UK property or shares are sold overseas, other things being equal.

<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding, Thatcher's share of the vote was greater than that of many recent governments; for example, Cameron's 2015 Conservative government, achieved only 36.8% of the vote (Audickas *et al.*, 2017).

used to cut tax (for the affluent) and increase government spending. On top of this, billions of pounds of (former) public assets were undersold to those British people who were fortunate enough to be in a position to take advantage of the opportunity to make windfall capital gains.

Furthermore, Thatcher was able to rely on support from the popular media, especially the Murdoch Empire (Stepney, 2014). In regard to this latter, historian Niall Ferguson, one of the self-confessed ‘foot-soldiers in the Thatcher Revolution’, opines:

*The generals were the newspaper proprietors – Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black – and the editors – in particular David English of the Daily Mail, but also Andrew Neil of the Sunday Times and Charles Moore of the Spectator. (Ferguson, 2013, ch. 2)*

### 7.5 Conclusion: popularity

Ultimately, whether deserved or not, Thatcher’s government was popular—certainly, more popular than a divided opposition—and her 1979 government owned a greater share of the vote than any UK government has enjoyed since. Many of her policies were by their natures one-off, yet few considered how Britain would pay its way in the world once North Sea oil and gas began to run out, the most valuable public assets were sold, and the proceeds of these windfalls spent.

## 8. Conclusion

Thatcher claimed that she had improved the economic prospects of the UK and all its citizens through the application of neo-liberal policies; that is (according to her definition of neo-liberalism), free-market policies (Thatcher, 2003). The evidence, however, does not support this claim.

Economic growth was weaker under Thatcher than under preceding governments and, if subsequent governments performed no better, this is not because they radically departed from her policy prescriptions (Dorling, 2010). The costs of this lack of growth were disproportionately borne by the poor. The impact of this stagnation was more generally felt, however: Those British born in the 1980s appear, on average, to be less affluent than their older siblings let alone their parents. In fact, they are increasingly likely to be living with their parents.

Data indicate that Thatcher’s housing policies were effective in boosting home ownership in the very short run, but have proved ineffective (at best) in the long run. A recent (Conservative) Prime Minister admitted as much in her 2017 conference speech, going so far as to promise a ‘new generation of council houses’ to ‘fix our broken housing market’ (May, 2017).

Nor were Thatcher’s policies for creating democratic capitalism any more effective in the long run. An increasing proportion of the UK’s productive assets and housing stock is now in the hands of foreign capitalists, while British households run up increasing debt to compensate for stagnant incomes. As a patriot, it is unlikely Thatcher would regard this as a positive outcome of her policies. Neither did her policies foster the moral economy for which she hoped; if anything, rather the opposite.

Thatcher was able to generate and capitalise on a narrative of improving prospects. However, to the extent that such improvement as there was rested on North Sea oil

and gas, and never to be repeatable sales of accumulated public assets, her policies could never provide the foundations of UK prosperity in the long run. Irrespective of whether or not we find ourselves in sympathy with Thatcher's stated goals, it is clear her policies failed to address—arguably they exacerbated—the UK's moral and economic malaise. In short, she might have 'laid out her stall', but she did not achieve it.

Given that many governments around the world continue to apply broadly Thatcherite policies, this analysis implies a substantial reassessment of modern global political economy is overdue. As Thatcher herself argued:

*Those who think they know, but are mistaken, and act upon their mistakes, are the most dangerous people to have in charge.* (Thatcher, 2003, p. 104)

On this, at least, we can all agree!

### Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Cambridge Journal of Economics* online.

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