

Margaret Thatcher – why the The Iron Lady?

Baroness Margaret Thatcher¹ is one of the most known political figures, with her name being recognisable not only in the United Kingdom, but also the world at wide. Her history consists of as many as three parliamentary election victories in a row and 11-year long tenure as Prime Minister² during which her global visibility was further increased by the fact that she was the first woman to become the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Her popularity was further influenced by her friendship-like connection to the President of the United States Ronald Regan or Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.³

Margaret Thatcher was not only a diplomat or economist but a great orator known throughout the world. It is believed, that it was her astounding eloquence and fluency of speech that allowed her to proclaim the famous phrase 'rejoice',⁴ during her joint speech with the Secretary of Defence, she announced the recapture of the Falkland Islands by the British military force – 'rejoice' was her sole response to all the questions posed by the reporters.⁵ As Professor Richard Whitman points out, her almost theatrical, unyielding body language left the opposing politicians astounded, when on the 30th of October 1990 she said the other words she is known for 'no, no, no'.⁶ This was her way of shielding the United Kingdom from what could have been an early 90s Brexit.

A particularly noteworthy and later on defining her image was the speech she made referring to the soviet newspapers calling her 'The Iron Lady'.⁷ This monicker was meant to highlight not only her persona within global politics but also mock her as a person. 'The Iron Lady', after all, was not associated with anything pleasant, elegant or beautiful. Contrary to the expectations of the public, who was accustomed to Margaret Thatcher responding negatively to them, she embraced their not yet pleasant nickname, giving it a whole new meaning:

Mr Chairman, Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you tonight in my red star chiffon evening, my face softly made up, and my fair hair gently waved, the Iron Lady of the Western World.⁸

This nickname became so well entrenched in the culture that it now appears on the official website of the Government, alongside her name and title.⁹

The story of Margaret Thatcher is also filled with unpleasant words directed at her often. In the face of major economic problems, Madam Prime Minister often made various controversial decisions. One of them was the withdrawal of milk from schools, something that was introduced in 1940.¹⁰ During the time when this rule was introduced, it made a lot of sense, as it supported

1 UK Government, *Margaret Thatcher (1980–1990), Past Prime Ministers*, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-prime-ministers/margaret-thatcher>> [accessed 8 December 2024].

2 Hugo Young, *Margaret Thatcher*, in Encyclopaedia Britannica, [online] <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Margaret-Thatcher>> [accessed 8 December 2024].

3 Hugo Young, *Margaret Thatcher*, in Encyclopaedia Britannica.

4 The Telegraph, *Archive: Thatcher 'Rejoices' At Falkland Victory*, online video recording, YouTube, 8 April 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHwCbIEVmG0>> [accessed 8 December 2024].

5 The Telegraph, *Archive: Thatcher 'Rejoices' At Falkland Victory*.

6 The I Paper, *'No, No, No!' Margaret Thatcher's Most Iconic Speech | Greatest Speeches #3*, online video recording, YouTube, 27 September 2024, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EmsMNQ17V0>> [accessed 8 December 2024].

7 Admin and Eric Lambrecht, *Why Was Margaret Thatcher Called The Iron Lady*, (DailyHistory, N.A.) <https://www.dailyhistory.org/Why_was_Margaret_Thatcher_called_the_Iron_Lady#google_vignette> [accessed 8 December 2024].

8 Iconic, *Margaret Thatcher's Iron Lady Speech*, online video recording, YouTube, 8 November 2010, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAgM6YHioxI>> [accessed 8 December 2024]

9 UK Government, *Margaret Thatcher (1980–1990), Past Prime Ministers*.

10 Paul Schwarcz, *Thatcher, Thatcher, Milk Snatcher*, webpage, 20 March 2017, <<https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/food-history/thatcher-thatcher-milk-snatcher>> [accessed 8 December 2024].

young people through hard times, but at the time when Margaret Thatcher became the Prime Minister, almost no one drank milk at school. The cost of milk distribution to schools was high, yet completely redundant, as almost no one would drink it. Margaret Thatcher decided to take a step that gathered no support from British society by going against a decades-old tradition, Margaret Thatcher offended the public, and the press attacked her feverishly, with one of the most often repeated headlines being 'Thatcher, Thatcher, Milk Snatcher'.¹¹ She would even be often called a cow that provides no milk.

Building an appropriate image of the Iron Lady was no easy or inexpensive task. The War in Falklands, during which the aircraft carriers departing from the port resembled ships taking part in military parades, with the helicopters and planes proudly displayed for the public to see.¹² To this day this is considered Thatcher's personal war meant to solidify her position as the 'Iron Lady' she was known to be.¹³ At the same time it was a bloodied war, that regardless of how short it was, cost over thousands of lives.

The moniker 'Iron Lady' was often misused by people who wanted to paint her in a negative light. Even today, the phrase 'Iron Maiden' can be perceived in various ways, but it leaves no doubt that the monicker refers to Margaret Thatcher.

A perfect example of Prime Minister Thatcher being presented as such is in the lyrics of a Swedish Heavy Metal band Sabaton, which counts amongst its members historians who use wars, sacrifice and glorification of victory as the basis for their songwriting.

The lyrics of the song 'Back in Control' dedicated to the recapture of the Falklands, do not contain the words 'Iron Lady', but instead use 'Iron Maiden', yet despite the negative association of the name, leaves no doubt who those words refer to, as the image of a woman made out of iron projects even more strength, presenting Prime Minister Thatcher as even more powerful: 'Orders from the Iron Maiden: get the islands back, failure will not be accepted, call for artillery strike, launch attack. We are back in control...'.¹⁴ The song is beloved by millions of fans throughout the world.

As Professor Richard Whitman explains, Prime Minister Thatcher's speeches are known for their extraordinary theatricality.¹⁵

Over the years, Iron Lady became the subject of numerous fictional films, including the 2011 'Iron Lady' starring Meryl Streep as Thatcher herself. Her person was also portrayed by Gillian Anderson in the fourth season of the popular Netflix show 'The Crown', who masterfully captured the essence of the Iron Lady, not only her body language or accent but also the intonation of her voice, using to her advantage her experience as a voice actor. It may remain unknown whether, by portraying the Iron Lady, Gillian Anderson wished to perfectly embody the character of one of the most powerful individuals in the British political world, or if she aimed to add a touch of sarcasm by overdramatising not so much her facial expressions, but rather her tone of voice, giving the viewers a reason to smile, as she played her role better than the original. It is especially noteworthy as Margaret Thatcher was not only criticised by the general public of the United Kingdom but also strongly disliked.

Margaret Thatcher's speech shaped not only the persona she presented herself as for over 11 years but also the memory left of her in the minds of millions of people throughout the world. History is full of extraordinary speeches that were capable of causing a change, yet it is hard to come by one that could be considered the beginning of a persona.

11 Paul Schwarcz, *Thatcher, Thatcher, Milk Snatcher*.

12 On Demand News, *Margaret Thatcher's Victory In The Falklands*, online video recording, YouTube, 8 April 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmlzDKev4ec>> [accessed 8 December 2024].

13 On Demand News, *Margaret Thatcher's Victory In The Falklands*.

14 Sabaton, *Back In Control (Official Lyrics Video)*, online video recording, YouTube, 17 February 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPFllaiz_Xo> [accessed 8 December 2024]

15 The I Paper, 'No, No, No!' *Margaret Thatcher's Most Iconic Speech | Greatest Speeches #3*.

The Iron Lady started a school of political thought known as Thatcherism.¹⁶ The rule of iron fist being at the basis of its ideology. Amongst its main goals was an investment in the younger generations, which initially caused an increase in unemployment. In the case of Thatcher's rule, it was 12,9% in 1983, but the general notion was a show of strength, firmness and investment in private property. One of the acts strongly associated with Thatcher is the Housing Act of 1980 allowing for the purchase of Council Properties.¹⁷ Thatcherism also referred to the increase in competitiveness amongst the business and free market which was meant to ensure survival of the strongest British business by sacrificing smaller, less lucrative business.

Initially, it may be seen as cruel, but ultimately, it had a positive effect by allowing the big companies to establish themselves and compete in the global market.¹⁸ Thatcherism also focuses on limitation of influence of work unions.

The massive strikes of the miners and Thatcher's unyielding actions in the face of their notions are perfectly presented in the 2014 film *Pride*, which shows the relationship between the miners and the LGBT community, who decided to gather resources to support the miners, instead of focusing on their own goals, such as promotion which aimed to present them as part of the community and provide them with the same rights as heteronormative relations (the civil partnerships were not yet legalised then) decided to send the community's representatives to the then very conservative Wales to support the miners, who because of exercising their ability to strike, lost their livelihood. Politics are often compared to acting, as the accents, oratory abilities, presentation, and public perception are essential. The goal of every politician is not only to rule but also to maintain it, as the smallest mistake can lead to their downfall. The persona of the Iron Lady crafted by Margaret Thatcher led to 3 consecutive parliamentary victories.

The creation of the icon that Margaret Thatcher surely was in the world of politics, an embodiment of strength, stability, and confidence based on her history, would not be so complete if not for the speech she made in which she proudly referred to herself as the Iron Lady. During the speech, she was dressed elegantly in a red star chiffon evening gown and allowed herself to ridicule the soviet press but also to express herself firmly about her political choices. It was this persona of a woman made of iron that she upheld for the years that she approached the miner's strikes, displaying the might of the British army securing the victory over Argentinian Forces during the War for Falklands, as well as rejecting the pro-social political movement for the sake of more capitalism based on, often reiterating, that what people need, is 'good work'.¹⁹ In her later appearances and the decisions she made she would use the image of the Iron Lady she crafted, one of a strong, firm, powerful woman with a lot of authority.

16 The Editors Of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Thatcherism*, in Encyclopaedia Britannica, [online], <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Thatcherism>> [accessed 8 December 2024].

17 UK Government, *Margaret Thatcher (1980–1990)*, *Past Prime Ministers*.

18 The Editors Of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Thatcherism*, in Encyclopaedia Britannica.

19 60 Minutes Australia, *George Negus' Iconic Interview With British Pm Margaret Thatcher | 60 Minutes Australia*, online video recording, YouTube, 17 O 2024, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTIUJgnqoE8>> [accessed 8 December 2024]

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