

Margaret Thatcher

Margaret Thatcher, the United Kingdom's first female prime minister, served from 1979 until 1990. During her time in office, she reduced the influence of trade unions, privatized certain industries, scaled back public benefits and changed the terms of political debate. Nicknamed the "Iron Lady," she opposed Soviet communism and fought a war to maintain control of the Falkland Islands. The longest-serving British prime minister of the 20th century, Thatcher was eventually pressured into resigning by members of her own Conservative Party



Margaret Thatcher: The Early Years

Margaret Roberts, later Margaret Thatcher, was born on October 13, 1925, in Grantham, a small town in England. Her parents, Alfred and Beatrice, were middle-class shopkeepers and devout Methodists. Alfred was also a politician, serving as a town council member for 16 years before becoming mayor of Grantham from 1945 to 1946.

Thatcher studied chemistry at Oxford University in 1943. After graduation she worked as a research chemist, but her real interest was politics. In 1950 she ran for parliament in the Labour-dominated constituency of Dartford, using the slogan "Vote Right to Keep What's Left." She lost that year and again in 1951, but received more votes than previous Conservative Party candidates.

Margaret Thatcher Enters Parliament

In December 1951 Margaret married Denis Thatcher, a wealthy businessman. Less than two years later she gave birth to twins, Carol and Mark. Meanwhile, she was studying for the bar exams, which she passed in early 1954.

Thatcher ran for parliament once more in 1959—this time in the Conservative-dominated constituency of Finchley—and easily won the seat. In her maiden speech, she focused not on freedom of the press but instead on the need to limit wasteful government expenditures—a common theme throughout her political career.

Thatcher became secretary of state for education and science when the Conservatives retook power in 1970. The following year she was demonized by her Labour Party opponents as "Thatcher the milk snatcher" when she eliminated a free milk program for schoolchildren. Nonetheless, she was able to keep her job, and in 1975, with the Conservatives back in the opposition, she defeated former Prime Minister Edward Heath to take over leadership of the party.

Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister

Thatcher was now one of the most powerful women in the world. At her first conference speech, she declared: "A man's right to work as he will, to spend what he earns, to own property, to have the state as servant and not as master—these are the British inheritance." Soon after, she attacked the Soviet Union as "bent on world dominance." A Soviet army newspaper responded by calling her "the Iron Lady," a nickname she immediately embraced.

Margaret Thatcher won the 1979 election, and became Prime Minister. During her first term, the government lowered direct taxes while increasing taxes on spending, sold off public housing, put in austerity measures and made other reforms, even as rising inflation and unemployment caused Thatcher's popularity to temporarily wane.

In April 1982 Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands, a sparsely populated British colony located 300 miles from Argentina and 8,000 miles from the United Kingdom. Thatcher dispatched troops to the area and defeated Argentina.

The war and an improving economy propelled Thatcher to a second term in 1983. This time around, her government took on the trade unions, requiring them to hold a secret ballot before any work stoppage and refusing to make any concessions during a yearlong miners' strike. In what became a key part of her legacy, Thatcher also privatized British Telecom, British Gas, British Airways, Rolls-Royce and a number of other state-owned companies.

Finally, Her relationship with her own continent's leaders was complicated, particularly since she believed the European Union should be a free-trade area rather than a political endeavor.

Margaret Thatcher's Fall From Power

After Thatcher was elected to a third term in 1987, her government lowered income tax rates. On November 14, 1990, former Defense Minister Michael Heseltine challenged her for leadership of the party, partly due to differences of opinion on the European Union. Thatcher lost and that night, her cabinet members visited her one by one and urged her to resign. She officially stepped down on November 28.

Thatcher remained in parliament until 1992, at which time she entered the largely ceremonial House of Lords and began to write her memoirs. Though she stopped appearing in public after suffering a series of small strokes in the early 2000s, her influence remained strong. In fact, many of her free market policies have since been adopted, not only by Conservatives, but also by Labour Party leaders like Tony Blair. Margaret Thatcher died on April 8, 2013, at the age of 87.