

British parliament unites in praise of Margaret Thatcher

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Yesterday's reconvening of Britain's parliament to mark the death of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was a gathering of her political offspring.

Baroness Thatcher, who led the Conservative government between 1979 and 1990, died Monday of a stroke, aged 87. Her premiership was the expression in Britain of a right-wing shift in international politics aimed at removing any obstacles on the accumulation of private wealth at the expense of the working class.

In little over a decade under her rule, the social gains made by working people in the post-war period were sent into sharp reverse. By the time she left office in 1990, the proportion of wealth controlled by the richest ten percent of the population had doubled. So too had child poverty.

In the following decades, not only has social inequality become more ingrained. The processes she helped set in motion—of rampant and criminal financial speculation—are directly responsible for the global banking crisis of 2008, and the policies of mass austerity being rolled out internationally: more than £150 billion in spending cuts in Britain alone, and counting.

This social misery accounts for the massive security operation being put into place for her funeral next Wednesday, including threats that police may make “pre-emptive arrests” of potential protestors. It is why, even amid the sycophantic coverage of her passing, the media acknowledged Thatcher as a “divisive” figure. What this means is that she was widely despised by working people and remembered with fondness primarily by a much smaller number of the wealthy whom she served so well.

The parliamentary tribute to Thatcher expressed the sentiments of the rich and powerful towards their political mentor. They united to celebrate as a great

stateswoman, even a national heroine, the “shopkeeper's daughter” who “broke the glass ceiling” to become the UK's first female prime minister.

A hagiographic presentation of Thatcher's life and political career by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron was to be expected. He praised her agenda of privatisation and union-busting, making the absurd claim that she had “made Britain great again.”

The Britain of the 1970s had been characterised by the “disease” of industrial militancy and nationalised industries, he said. “Though it seems absurd today, the state had got so big that it owned our airports and airline, the phones in our houses, and trucks on our roads. They even owned a removal company.”

More nauseating still was the glowing tribute paid to Thatcher by Labour leader Ed Miliband.

The leaders of all three official parties—Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour—“came of age in the 1980s” and were shaped by her politics, Miliband said.

What he meant, as his remarks made clear, was that on all fundamentals those leaders agree.

The former prime minister was a “unique and towering figure,” Miliband said. While one “can disagree” with some of what she had done, her achievements were to be admired. She was “someone with deep convictions, willing to act on them.”

Thatcher had also been right, according to the Labour leader, to wage war against Argentina in 1982 over the Malvinas/Falkland islands—an imperialist adventure during which the retreating *ARA General Belgrano* light cruiser was deliberately sunk outside the British imposed exclusion zone at the cost of 323 lives.

As MP for Doncaster, a former mining town, Miliband was obliged to pay reference to the catastrophic impact of Thatcher's assault on the mining industry, which turned entire areas of the country into

industrial wastelands.

Mining communities felt “angry and abandoned” by her actions, he said, while stressing that she was “right to recognise our economy needed to change.”

The only other difference with Thatcher that Miliband stipulated was his criticism of the legislation barring the “promotion” of homosexuality in schools put in place by her government that had made gays and lesbians “feel stigmatised”. Even then he was at pains to praise “today’s Conservative party” for repudiating the legislation.

Before the debate began, Miliband had urged Labour MPs to speak of Thatcher with “respect.” He faced no dissent on that score. A handful of Labour MPs stayed away from the tribute, while others were mute.

As for the trade unions, they have been conspicuous by their silence. No official statement has been issued by the Trades Union Congress. As for Arthur Scargill, leader of the National Union of Mineworkers during the 1984-85 strike, he has repeatedly turned down requests for a comment on Thatcher’s death.

All that has appeared is an op-ed piece in the *Guardian* by TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady that says nothing about Thatcher’s union-busting, but instead criticises her government for squandering the proceeds of the privatisation of state assets on “bribing voters rather than modernising the economy.”

These events underscore the essential point made by the *World Socialist Web Site* that for all the portrayals of her as the “Iron Lady”, “Thatcher’s great advantage, which accounted for all her much vaunted victories, was that she only ever confronted enemies that were determined to lose.”

That verdict applies to the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and its satellite states.

The portrayal of Thatcher in the parliamentary debate as someone who “saved” the world from communism is ludicrous. When the Soviet Union was liquidated in December 1991, one year after she left office, it was the tragic end result of decades of political betrayal by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which had determined to set out on the restoration of capitalism.

It holds true especially for the Labour Party and the trade unions. By the time of Thatcher’s confrontation with the miners in 1984, they both had already given up the ghost of opposition.

Throughout the year-long strike the miners were

subject to harsh state repression, while neither Labour nor a single union lifted a finger in their defence. Having isolated and betrayed the strike, the Labour Party seized on the defeat to refashion itself as an overtly right-wing party of big business in Thatcher’s image.

When Cameron boasted that the parties might argue about tax, but “none of us is arguing for a return to [the 1970s] tax rates of 98 percent,” he was on safe ground.

Above all, the parliamentary leaders and parties are united in sharing Thatcher’s visceral hatred of the working class—epitomised by her description of miners fighting to defend their jobs and communities as “the enemy within”—and their determination today to make working people pay for the crisis of global capitalism.

As Danny Finkelstein, executive editor of Rupert Murdoch’s *Times* newspaper, set out in a BBC *Newsnight* programme on Thatcher’s legacy, the 2008 economic crisis meant there is “massive work to do, cutting expenditure” which will “force all the political parties to ultimately accept a Thatcherite verity, which is you can’t spend what you haven’t got.”

In Wednesday’s parliamentary recall, Miliband laid down Labour’s marker for this agenda.



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