

## Margaret Thatcher (1925 – 2013)

Margaret Thatcher (born in Grantham, England) was a British Conservative Party politician and Europe's first woman prime minister (1979–90). She was also the only British prime minister in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to win 3 consecutive terms, and Britain's longest continuously serving prime minister since 1827. She became the most renowned British political leader since Winston Churchill.



### Early years

Margaret Roberts was the daughter of Alfred Roberts, a grocer and later, mayor of Grantham, and Beatrice Stephenson. Margaret became interested in politics at an early age. She studied at the University of Oxford, where she studied chemistry and immediately became active in politics, becoming president of the Oxford University Conservative Association. After graduating in 1947, she worked as a research chemist while studying to be a lawyer in her spare time. In 1954, she became a lawyer and specialized in tax law. In 1951 she married a wealthy industrialist, Denis Thatcher (1915–2003), who supported her political ambition. She adopted his family name and became Margaret Thatcher. They had twins, a son, Mark, and a daughter, Carol.



Margaret first ran for Parliament in 1950 but was unsuccessful, but in 1959 she entered the House of Commons by winning the Conservative seat of Finchley, London. She worked as a parliamentary secretary (1961–64), as chief opposition spokesman on education (1969–70), and as secretary of state for education and science (1970–74). While working for Edward Heath, the then prime minister, she eliminated a program that provided free milk for schoolchildren, creating a storm of controversy and causing her opponents to provoke her by shouting "Thatcher the milk snatcher". She also opened many comprehensive schools around the country in order to make good academic education available to poor children. After Edward Heath lost the election in 1974, Margaret Thatcher was the only minister prepared to challenge him for the party leadership. With the backing of many of her peers, she was elected leader of the Conservative party in February 1975.



## Europe's first woman prime minister

Margaret led the Conservatives to a decisive victory in 1979 following a series of major strikes during the previous winter (known as the “Winter of Discontent”). As a prime minister representing the right wing of the Conservative Party, she advocated the privatization of state-owned companies, the sale of public housing to tenants, reductions in spending on health care, education, and housing, limitations on the printing of money and restrictions on trade unions. Her style of leadership became known as “Thatcherism”, and it referred to her moral absolutism, fierce nationalism, a zealous regard for the interests of the individual, and a combative approach to achieving her political goals.



The main impact of her first term was economic. She had inherited a weak economy, and she quickly reduced or eliminated subsidies to businesses, effectively eliminating many inefficient manufacturing firms. The result was a dramatic increase in unemployment, from 1.3 million to 2.7 million in just two years. During this time, inflation doubled from 10 to 20 percent, and the country’s manufacturing output fell sharply. Unemployment continued to increase, reaching more than 3 million in 1986.

Margaret Thatcher had an ambitious program of privatization of state-owned industries and public services, including aerospace, television, radio, gas, electricity, water, airlines and steel. Also, by the end of the 1980s, the government had sold 1.5 million publicly-owned houses and flats to their tenants.

However, rising unemployment and opposition to her policies during her first term made her extremely unpopular. It seemed certain that she would lose the general election of 1983, but she was saved by two events: victory in the Falkland Islands War (1982) and the deep divisions within the Labour Party. Thatcher won the 1983 election with the biggest electoral victory since 1945.

When Margaret became prime minister, she had promised to reduce the power of the trade unions, because they had brought the country to a standstill by six weeks of strikes in the winter of 1978. In 1984 the National Union of Mineworkers began a nationwide strike to prevent the closing of 20 coal mines that the government claimed were unproductive. The strike, which lasted nearly a year, became a symbol of the fight for power between the government and the trade unions. Thatcher continuously refused to meet the union’s demands, and eventually she won the battle. After a one-year strike, the miners returned to work without winning a single concession. The winning of this battle consolidated her reputation as a brutally stubborn leader.

A terrorist bombing at a Conservative Party conference in Brighton in 1984, the work of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), nearly killed the prime minister and several other politicians.



Thatcher had an excellent relationship with Ronald Reagan, the then president of the United States (1981–1989). Together, they made the 1980s “the decade of conservatism”, both sharing a vision of the world in which the Soviet Union was an evil enemy. The cold war continued until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, when he dissolved the Soviet Union. Due to Thatcher’s strong anticommunism position, she was given the nickname “Iron Lady”. She strongly supported the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Britain’s nuclear deterrent, a position that was popular with many people.

The second half of Thatcher’s leadership was marked by a controversy over Britain’s relationship with the European Community (EC). In 1984, despite fierce opposition, she succeeded in significantly reducing Britain’s contribution to the EC budget. After her third electoral victory in 1987, she adopted a more hostile position towards European integration. She resisted the pressure to adopt the single European currency and a stronger political union. Her Conservative peers became divided, and many of her senior ministers resigned in protest.



The implementation of the Poll Tax\* in 1989 produced street protests and violence, which worried the Conservative party, who started to feel that Margaret Thatcher could not lead the party to a fourth term. Due to immense public disapproval of the Poll Tax and Thatcher’s increasingly stubborn position, her peers moved against her and, in November 1990, she lost the vote to keep her as leader. On November 22<sup>nd</sup> she announced her resignation as Conservative Party leader and prime minister. John Major became the new prime minister 6 days later.



### **Later years**

In retirement, Margaret Thatcher remained a political force. She continued to influence Conservative Party politics (often to the frustration of John Major). She remained a politician until 1992 when she was elevated to the House of Lords as a Baroness. She continued to speak and lecture, notably in the United States and Asia, and established the “Thatcher Foundation” to support free enterprise and democracy, particularly in the ex-Soviet countries of eastern Europe. In 1995 she became a member of the “Order of the Garter”, an honour that she received from Queen Elizabeth II. It is an honour similar to becoming a “Knight of the British Empire”.

Following a series of small strokes, she retired from public speaking in 2002. According to her daughter, Carol, she had been showing symptoms of dementia since the year 2000. She died on April 8<sup>th</sup> 2013, at the age of 87, after suffering another stroke. Reactions to her death were mixed across the UK, ranging from tributes calling her “Britain's greatest-ever prime minister” to public celebrations of her death and expressions of hatred. Queen Elizabeth attended her funeral. During her life, the Queen attended only 2 funerals of former prime ministers – Margaret Thatcher and Winston Churchill. Margaret Thatcher was cremated and her ashes were buried in the grounds of Royal Chelsea Hospital, next to those of her husband, Denis.

Source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Margaret-Thatcher>



*\* The “Poll Tax” was a tax created to replace the “Council Tax”. The Council Tax was a tax on housing – if you owned a house, flat or other property, you had to pay a tax to the government, proportional to the value of your property (similar to the IPTU tax in Brazil). The Poll Tax, however, also known as “Head Tax”, was a fixed tax on every adult, without reference to income or resources. It was extremely unpopular because rich people could pay it easily, while poor people found it more difficult. It lasted only 4 years, from 1989 to 1993, when Council Tax was reinstated.*