

Mrs. Thatcher's Return to Victorian Values

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I

'VICTORIAN' was still being used as a routine term of opprobrium when, in the run-up to the 1983 election, Mrs. Thatcher annexed 'Victorian values' to her Party's platform and turned them into a talisman for lost stabilities. It is still commonly used today as a byword for the repressive just as (a strange neologism of the 1940s) 'Dickensian' is used as a short-hand expression to describe conditions of squalor and want. In Mrs. Thatcher's lexicon, 'Victorian' seems to have been an interchangeable term for the traditional and the old-fashioned, though when the occasion demanded she was not averse to using it in a perjorative sense. Marxism, she liked to say, was a Victorian, (or mid-Victorian) ideology;¹ and she criticised nineteenth-century paternalism as propounded by Disraeli as anachronistic.²

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¹ Margaret Thatcher, Address to the Bow Group, 6 May 1978, reprinted in Bow Group, *The Right Angle*, London, 1979.

² 'The Healthy State', address to a Social Services Conference at Liverpool, 3 December 1976, in Margaret Thatcher, *Let Our Children Grow Tall*, London, 1977, p. 81.

Celebrating, at one moment, the achievements of Victorian philanthropy and quoting the example of Dr. Barnardo, she was ready, at the next, to strike at one of its taproots, and to proclaim her freedom from what she derisively termed, in an early address as Party leader, 'bourgeois guilt'.³

Mrs. Thatcher's traditionalism was perhaps more a matter of style than of substance. If in one voice she regretted lost stability, in another she seized on what was new and developing. Monetarism was the 'modern view' of the role of government rather than (or as well as) a revival of 'old-fashioned laissez-faire'. Privatisation was hard-nosed realism. For all her denunciation of permissiveness and 'TV violence', Mrs. Thatcher felt no compunction about licensing Cable TV (in the name of free consumer choice), or conveying a knighthood on that pioneer of 'bubbly' journalism, the editor of the *Sun*. Her well-advertised attachment to the work ethic did not exclude an enthusiasm for hi-tech industry or a willingness, indeed eagerness, to contemplate the robotisation of the motor-car factories, or the substitution of nuclear power for coal. 'Enterprise culture', the flagship of Mrs. Thatcher's second term of office, probably owed more to the inspiration of contemporary America (or Japan) than to the railway mania of the 1840s. BUPA, Mrs. Thatcher's preferred alternative to the National Health Service, was modelled on Medicare, the corporation-funded medicine of the United States; the great working-class friendly societies of the nineteenth century, the Buffaloes, the Oddfellows or the Foresters, though monuments to the spirit of self-help, might have existed on another planet for all the attention they received.

In her modernising moments, Mrs. Thatcher had a radical contempt for the antiquated and the out-of-date. Restrictive practices were a relic of nineteenth century industrial relations. Government subsidies or 'hand-outs', were a throw-back to the past 'protecting yesterday's jobs and fighting off tomorrow's'.⁴ Manning agreements, though supported by unions and management, were a recipe for industrial decline, ossifying labour where it should be mobile, strangling innovation at birth.⁵ Mrs. Thatcher believed that 'traditional' British industries unless they adopted advanced technology, would vanish, and that without a radical restructuring of the labour market, enterprise would wither.⁶ Whatever the pain associated with redundancy and the return of mass unemployment, she feared entropy more, a Britain (as she warned the Institute of Directors in 1976) 'living in the nostalgic glories of a previous industrial revolution', a 'Museum

³ Address to the Institute of Socio-economic Studies, New York, reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 4. As she acknowledges, she owed the phrase to Helmut-Schoeck, *Envy*, London, 1969.

⁴ Margaret Thatcher, *The Revival of Britain*, London, 1989, p. 98.

⁵ Speech to the Conservative Party Conference, *The Times*, 17 October 1981.

⁶ The *Guardian*, 9 October 1982.

Economy' dedicated to obsolete practices and wedded to the production of uncompetitive goods.⁷

Mrs. Thatcher's attitude to traditional institutions, so far from being reverent, was iconclastic. She deregulated the City of London and destabilised (or abolished) the County halls. She attacked by turns those erstwhile pillars of the Establishment, the Higher Civil Service, the Church of England, the House of Lords, the Universities and the Bar. She was even impatient, it seems, with monarchy. Nor did she demonstrate any particular regard for things Victorian. As one who made a fetish of never using public transport, her attitude towards that 'typical illustration and symbol of the nineteenth century, the railway train',⁸ was the reverse of nostalgic, and she was equally unsentimental about such relics of Victorian achievement as free libraries and the penny post. Above all, identifying it with jobbery and bureaucracy, extravagance and sloth, she attempted to put an axe to what is arguably the most substantial twentieth-century legacy of the Victorian era, the public service ethic.

Yet it was as a traditionalist that Mrs. Thatcher set out her stall as Party leader, and made a pitch for the minds and hearts of her followers. She presented herself as a conviction politician, standing up for old-fashioned values where others were apologetic or shamefaced. In a climate of permissiveness – or what many Conservatives thought of as moral anarchy – she called for a restoration of the authority principle in society. She denounced those who were 'soft' on crime. She defended the family as the bedrock of national life. She advocated 'parent power' in the schools. Economically, she declared her faith in the principles of laissez-faire, quoting John Stuart Mill on the perils of over-government, Adam Smith on the need for the unfettered pursuit of wealth.⁹ She appeared concerned to vindicate nineteenth-century capitalism and rescue it from the opprobrium of posterity. She argued that 'the heyday of free enterprise in Britain' was also 'the era of selflessness and benefaction'. She complained (in 1976) that 'the Victorian Age' had been very badly treated in socialist propaganda. 'It was an age of constant and constructive endeavour in which the desire to improve the lot of the ordinary person was a powerful factor'. She quoted with approval Samuel Smiles, a joke figure to generations of progressives, enlisting him to support the proposition that 'the sense of being selfreliant, of playing a role within the family, of owning one's own property, of paying one's way, are all part of the spiritual ballast which maintains responsible citizenship, and provides

⁷ Address to the Institute of Directors, 11 November 1976, in *Let Our Children Grow Tall*, p. 70.

⁸ Havelock Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century. A Dialogue in Utopia*, London, 1900, p. 144.

⁹ For Adam Smith, *Let Our Children Grow Tall*, pp. 15, 98, 212; for J.S. Mill, *Sunday Times*, 6 February 1975.

the solid foundation which people look around to see what they might do for others and themselves'.¹⁰

Mrs. Thatcher aimed in the modernising programme to restore business to a place of honour in national life, and reverse a century of denigration by those, in her Party's own ranks as well as among its opponents, who affected to despise money-making and who wanted to keep commerce and trade at arm's length. She adopted business maxims as her watchwords – e.g. 'Value for Money' – drafted in businessmen as her advisers, watchdogs and trouble-shooters; advocated business patronage for the arts and the appointment of businessmen as the governors of schools and colleges. 'The discipline of market forces' was government's sovereign remedy for social ills; the revival of enterprise the object of its policy. Historically, Mrs. Thatcher was concerned to identify business with the creative forces in national life, the risk-takers and the innovators, the doers and the makers. She gave it a heroic pedigree, offering an alternative version of the national epic, in which there was a merchant-adventurer in every counting-house, a village Hampden in every store. In place of constitutional development – the traditional basis of Whig narrative – or its Tory counterpart, statesmanship and the rise of government, she offered, as the national epic, the romance of trade, conjuring up an age of primitive virtue where nothing was easy and everything had to be earned.

Mrs. Thatcher seems to have stumbled on the phrase 'Victorian Values' as a rallying cry, by accident, conjuring the phrase out of nowhere, and launching it on its public career in the course of an interview with 'Weekend World' (January 16, 1983).¹¹ Only those who are privy to the secrets of the television studio will know whether it was an inspiration of the moment, or a premeditated plant. However that may be, it was a rhetorical trope which seemed both to thematise her causes and to give them a retrospective dignity. In the following weeks she elaborated it, invoking on the one hand 'the Puritan work ethic'¹² on the other a leitmotif of the election campaign – 'family values'. Her followers added inflections of their own. Thus Mrs. Winterton, the candidate for Congleton, who 'agreed wholeheartedly' with Mrs. Thatcher's Victorian Values, interpreted them benignly as 'thrift, kindness and family values'¹³ On the other hand, Dr. Rhodes Boyson, Minister of State for Education, and himself an ex-headmaster (and an ex-historian), argued that they meant a return to strictness.¹⁴

¹⁰ *Let Our Children Grow Tall*, p. 101.

¹¹ Interview with Brian Walden, *Weekend World*, 11 January 1983. Typescript in the writer's possession.

¹² *Daily Telegraph*, 29 January 1983; *Guardian*, 29 January 1983.

¹³ *Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 1983.

¹⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 April 1983.

He said parents did not want their children to be taught 'deviant practices by proselytising homosexuals'. What parents want is for their children to learn discipline, self-discipline, respect, order, punctuality and precision . . . Parents expect their children to be punished when they step out of line . . . No discipline, no learning. Good old-fashioned order, even Victorian order, is far superior to illiterate disorder and innumerate chaos in the classroom.

It seems possible that, as so often when speaking her simple truths and advertising her hostility to the post-war social settlement, Mrs. Thatcher was deliberately courting outrage. If so, she was duly rewarded by the chorus of indignation which greeted her remarks. For Labour, already convinced that the Tories were planning to destroy the National Health Service and dismantle the welfare state, it was proof positive that they wanted to turn the clock back. It showed yet again that the Tories were 'uncaring' and was of a piece with their 'callous indifference' in other spheres. Just as, in the sphere of family policy, the Tories supposedly wanted to return women to the kitchen sink, and were even toying (it was believed) with eugenics, so in welfare they wanted to go back to the Poor Law. 'Victorian Values', we were told by the opposition, meant each man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. Some invoked the spectre of the workhouse, some of child labour, some of the Dickensian slum. 'Victorian Britain was a place where a few got rich and most got hell', Mr. Kinnock, then shadow minister of education, told the Labour Club at Workington. 'The "Victorian Values" that ruled were cruelty, misery, drudgery, squalor and ignorance'.¹⁵

Victorian Values, though a latecomer to Mrs. Thatcher's political platform, had been anticipated in a whole series of prior tropes. She had come to the leadership of the Conservative Party, in 1975, on a gospel of 'self-reliance and thrift'.¹⁶ In government she liked to say that her monetarist policies were inspired by 'an old-fashioned horror of debt'. The 'work ethic' was her favoured idiom when arguing for fiscal reform. 'Privatisation' was her tonic for energising the economy and 'rolling back the frontiers of the state'. 'Personal responsibility' was the mantra of her addresses on moral questions, 'parent power' her grand specific for schoolroom disorder and youth unrest.¹⁷ It was not hard to slot 'Victorian Values' into this continuum.

'Victorian Values' were also of a piece with Mrs. Thatcher's personal mythologies. She presented herself to the public not as a scholarship girl

¹⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 April 1983.

¹⁶ Russell Lewis, *Margaret Thatcher*, London 1975, p. 113; *Let Our Children Grow Tall*, p. 34.

¹⁷ *The Times*, 8 May 1977.

who had found her vocation in the city of dreaming spires, nor yet as a successful tax lawyer and denizen of Chelsea, but as a grocer's daughter from Grantham who was still living, metaphorically speaking, above the shop. Her father, as she portrayed him in countless interviews, was a very personification of the Victorian worthy, a self-made (and self-educated) man who had left school at thirteen and who had pulled himself up by the bootstraps, ending up as an alderman on the town council and a lay preacher at the chapel. In Mrs. Thatcher's account of Victorian Values, as also when she spoke of 'traditional' Christianity, there was a conflation between the precepts of her Grantham childhood there and those of an earlier past. 'I was brought up by a Victorian grandmother' she told an *Evening Standard* reporter:

'we were taught to work jolly hard. We were taught to prove yourself; we were taught self-reliance; we were taught to live within our income. You were taught that cleanliness is next to godliness. You were taught self-respect. You were taught always to give a hand to your neighbour. You were taught tremendous pride in your country. All of these things are Victorian values. They are also perennial values'.¹⁸

In another and earlier interview, she describes these values as follows. 'You didn't live up to the hilt of your income; you respect other people's property, you save; you believe in right and wrong; you support the police'.¹⁹

If the call for a return to Victorian Values struck a chord in 1983, it was perhaps because it corresponded to widespread disenchantment with the modernisations of the 1960s, together with a post-1960s awareness of the limits of economic growth, and also to transformations in the perception of past-present relations. Perhaps, too, it drew subliminal strength from the revival of period styles and the rage for the restoration of 'period' interiors. A concurrence of different influences could be hypothesised here. In the property market, the conversion of run-down Victorian terraces and the elevation of Victorian mansions to the status of 'period' residences: in marketing the mushroom growth of what came to be known, in the 1980s, as the 'Laura Ashley' look, and in heritage, the proliferation of open-air and industrial museums. All of them had the effect, so far as popular taste was concerned, of rehabilitating the notion of the Victorian and associating it not with squalor and grime, but on the contrary with goodness and beauty, purity and truth.

Victorian Values also created a metaphorical space for the expression of moral anxiety. As a rhetoric, it spoke to those who felt bewildered or alarmed by the shape of cultural change. It ministered to the belief, widely

¹⁸ 'The Good Old Days', *Evening Standard*, 15 April 1983.

¹⁹ Reference temporarily mislaid.

canvassed in the public press, that Britain was becoming ungovernable, in Mrs. Thatcher's words, 'a decadent, undisciplined society'. It played on fears that the family was in crisis and marriage falling apart. In one aspect, the invocation of Victorian Values was a counterpart to Conservative demands for a 'crack-down' on crime; in another it was perhaps an alarmed response to the coming out of previously stigmatised (and criminalised) sexual minorities. It could be seen as a late echo of the purity campaigns of the 1970s and the mass mobilisations of the Festival of Light.²⁰ Affirming the need for clearly-defined standards of right and wrong, it questioned the wisdom of past reforming House Secretaries. Against the pleasure principle, it counterposed the worth of self-control and self-restraint.

One aspect of moral anxiety was fear of 'welfare scroungers', seen as early as 1975-6, when a whispering campaign against welfare state 'spongers' swelled into a chorus of newspaper complaint (even, it has been argued, an orchestrated campaign) against those who were allegedly living it up on the dole.²¹ With the acknowledgement of unmarried mothers and single parent families as categories in need, numbers dependent on social security payments had risen to new heights. At the same time the extension of 'supplementary benefit' to take account of previously unrecognised contingencies (e.g. rent, mortgage payments, clothes and more generally 'child poverty') narrowed the gap between waged and unwaged almost to vanishing point at the bottom of the social scale. Those caught in the 'poverty trap' (it was then argued) had little or no inducement to get out. Welfare was producing the very condition it was supposed to alleviate, reducing its recipients to a state of dependence and calling new classes of idlers into being.

Mrs. Thatcher appealed directly to this sentiment, indeed anticipated its public expression by some months, when, campaigning for the leadership of the Conservative Party in January 1975, and addressing the annual conference of the Young Conservatives, she appealed to the Party to 'back the workers and not the shirkers'; she coupled this, in a five minutes *credo*, with a ringing declaration of faith in the individual as earner. 'The person who is prepared to work hardest should get the greatest rewards and keep them after tax. It was not only permissible but praiseworthy to want to benefit your own family by your own efforts'.²² In the years of

²⁰ For the Festival of Light, Dallas Cliff, 'Religion, morality and the middle class', in ed. Roger King and Neill Nugent, *Respectable Rebels, Middle Class Campaigns in the 1970s*, London, 1979.

²¹ For an excellent account of this 'moral panic' and the very effective political campaign which followed in its wake, Peter Golding and Sue Middleton, *Images of Welfare: Press and Public Attitudes to Poverty*, Oxford, 1982.

²² Lewis, *op.cit.*, p. 129.

opposition these were her constant themes. People wanted to be left to get on with their own lives 'and have more of their own pay packets to spend'.²³ Welfare hand-outs sapped initiative.²⁴ Food subsidies 'had gone to people who did not need them',²⁵ housing benefits unfairly advantaged the Council tenant:

'The Britain I want is a land where a man can know that if he works hard and earns money for his family, he will be allowed to hold on to most of what his efforts have brought him rather than have it seized to build Ministerial empires . . . The Britain I want is a land where people are not ground down in the name of false equality to the point where a man is better off on the dole than at work'.²⁶

In the leadership election, Mrs. Thatcher opined (presciently as it turned out) that these sentiments would have as much resonance on the working-class council estates as in the dormitory towns and suburbs. In the following years she was to deploy them with singular effect, discovering, or creating, a new constituency of Tory voters, many of them working class. They were quite undeferential to the rich but had a considerably developed hostility to those further down the social scale. Here is a letter in 1983 from one of them, a real-life original, it may be, of that 'Essex-man' who by the end of Mrs. Thatcher's term in office, was to be recognised as her most faithful supporter.²⁷

Returning to Britain after a five-year absence, I have noticed a wonderful transformation. People are tired of featherbedding for those too lazy or inadequate to fend for themselves. They want an end to our sick, inefficient welfare state. They realise the nation is not a charitable institution and has no business running free hospitals and soup-kitchen benefits, or interfering with private enterprise. They applaud the curbing of the union and want to see our nation great once more. Who has brought about this change? Mrs. Thatcher, of course. Her resolution in rebuilding our country after decades of mismanagement is awesome. A new spirit walks abroad – and this is only the beginning. Well done, Maggie. It's great to be back.

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II

When, in the early days of her Party leadership, Mrs. Thatcher called for a 'restoration' of parental authority, as later when she took up the

²³ *Sunday Express*, 8 February 1976.

²⁴ *Let Our Children Grow Tall*, p. 108.

²⁵ *Financial Times*, 18 July 1976.

²⁶ *The Sun*, 2 May 1979.

²⁷ *The Mail on Sunday*, 24 April 1983.

call for a return to Victorian Values, what mattered was less the words themselves than the character she projected of one who was not afraid of sounding reactionary, but on the contrary gloried in old-fashioned ways. As a piece of symbolic reassurance it was magnificent, convincing her Party followers that Conservatism was returning to the paths of faith. It enabled her to magnify differences with her predecessor – always, it seems, a consideration with Tory leaders – and further to distinguish herself not only from Mr. Heath but also from Mr. Wilson and Mr. Macmillan. Where they made a fetish of tacking to the winds of change, she was by contrast sternly inflexible.

One of Mrs. Thatcher's strengths, and not the least of the reasons why she was able so frequently to wrong-foot her opponents, was that of translating policy issues into questions of what has been called, in another context, 'moral economy'. Even the Poll Tax, the wildly unpopular reform which helped to bring her down, was conceived of as an act of justice, applying nineteenth-century principles of fair play and fair shares to local government taxation, and bringing home a sense of personal responsibility to the local electorate. Private enterprise, Mrs. Thatcher argued, was not only economically efficient, it was also ethically beautiful, harnessing the self-regarding virtues to the higher good. Protectionism, whether in the field of trade unionism, state intervention or local government, bred monopoly; welfare was enervating; bureaucracy was an invitation to extravagance and sloth. Competition on the other hand was bracing, putting workers and employers on their mettle. The market generated an equitable distribution of the available goods, making producers directly accountable to consumers. Job-shedding was a way of losing weight and producing a leaner, fitter labour force. Monetarism was an exercise in frugality, applying the principles of household budgeting ('living within your means') to the management of the national economy. 'Some say I preach merely the homilies of housekeeping or the parables of the parlour', she told the Lord Mayor's banquet in November 1982, when anger about monetarism was at a peak, 'But I do not repent. Those parables would have saved many a financier from failure and many a country from crisis'.²⁸

Mrs. Thatcher used 'Victorian Values' as a way of conjuring up lost innocence. Against a background of inner-city disturbances, such as those which swept the streets of Toxteth and Brixton in 1981, she pictured an older Britain where parents were strict, children good-mannered, hooliganism (she erroneously believed) unknown. At a time when both the struggling and the prosperous were mortgaged up to the hilt, she recalled the virtues of penny saving. In a contracting economy, where,

²⁸ Speech at Lord Mayor's Banquet, November 1982, reported in Hugo Young, *One of Us*, London, 1989, p. 5.

under the shadow of microchip technology every occupation was under actual or potential threat, she looked back to a time when labour was a means of self-fulfilment, when occupations were regarded as callings, and when jobs – or businesses – were for life. In the face of multi-culturalism, she resurrected the mythology of a unified national self.

In all these instances, Victorian Britain was constituted as a kind of reverse image of the present, exemplifying by its stability and strength everything that we are not. The past here occupies an allegorical rather than temporal space. It is a testimony to the decline in manners and morals, a mirror to our failings, a measure of absence. It also answers to one of the most universal myths, which has both its left-wing and right-wing variants, the notion that once upon a time things were simpler and the people were at one with themselves. Like the small town America of Mr. Reagan's rhetoric – God-fearing, paternalistic, patriotic – Mrs. Thatcher's Victorian Britain is inhabited by a people living in a state of innocent simplicity. Instead of nationalised industries there are small businesses and family firms. Work is accorded dignity, achievement rewarded rather than taxed. Families hold together and put their savings by against a rainy day. People know right from wrong. By a process of selective amnesia the past becomes a historical equivalent of the dream of primal bliss, or to the enchanted space which memory accords to childhood. By metaphorical extension, Victorian Values thus passed from the real past of recorded history to timeless 'tradition'. They were, Mrs. Thatcher assured us, like those of Christianity, 'perennial', the values which had made Britain great.²⁹

Other people of Mrs. Thatcher's generation and earlier, it is worth noticing, recall things with a different emphasis. In working-class accounts of the 'good old days', as recorded in oral history and written memoirs, it is the images of sociability that prevail – the sing-songs in the pubs, the funeral processions, the 'knees-up' street parties, the summer outings. The canvas is crowded with characters; street performers will sometimes get a page or two to themselves and there may be a whole chapter for Whitsun or Bank Holiday. Shopping is remembered for its cheapness – 'packet of fags and a pint of beer and you could still get change from two bob'. People are forever in and out of each other's houses: 'everyone was in the same boat together' 'everyone was the same'. Children make their own toys, stage their own theatre, invent their own games. The street is their playground, waste lots their battlefields, bunkers their lairs. Pleasures, though simple, are treasured. As Lionel Bart put it, both

²⁹ *Evening Standard*, 15 April 1983.

sentimentally and sardonically, in his musical *Fings Aint What They Used to Be*:

It used to be fun
Dad and ole Mum
Paddling dahn Southend
But now it ain't done
Never mind chum
Paris is where we spend our outings.

Mrs. Thatcher's version of the 'good old days' is altogether more severe. Her lost Eden is one where resources were scarce and careful husbandry was needed to ensure survival. She remembers her childhood not for its pleasures but for its lessons in application and self-control. Reading is not a form of escape but a means of improvement; library visits are compulsory.³⁰ There are no outings or beanos, though she goes to chapel three times a day on Sunday, no remembered holidays (though at Guides she learnt the lifelong motto 'be prepared'),³¹ no secret gardens or ways of playing truant. 'Was she happy?' a journalist asked in an interview. 'We didn't take happiness as an objective. We did a lot. Our parents worked. Our house was always spotless. Cleanliness and hard work were next to Godlines'.³²

Mrs. Thatcher's values, as many commentators have pointed out, were Puritan values. A literal belief in the devil³³ may help to account for her readiness to discover 'enemies within', while a Puritan alertness to backsliders might be seen in the vigour with which she attacked fainthearts and waverers in the ranks or, worse, in her immediate Cabinet entourage. As a political leader, Mrs. Thatcher was happiest in the role of an evangelist confronting the country with uncomfortable truths. She despised 'soft' options:³⁴ she used the word 'easy' in a consistently pejorative sense 'a generation of easy liberal education has accustomed many to suppose that Utopia was soon to be achieved';³⁵ 'freedom is not synonymous with an easy life';³⁶ 'the world has never offered us an easy living'.³⁷ She made a fetish of plain speaking, 'calling things by their proper names'. She prided herself on never flinching from making 'painful' decisions, following unpopular

³⁰ Young, op.cit., Margaret Thatcher, *The Revival of Britain*, London, 1989, p. 63.

³¹ *Sunday Mirror*, 31 July 1972.

³² Interview with Jilly Cooper, *Sunday Times*, 19 September 1976.

³³ Address at St. Lawrence, Jewry, 30 March 1978, reproduced in *The Revival of Britain*, pp. 67-8.

³⁴ Speech to Conservative Party Conference, *Guardian*, 7 October 1981; *Sunday Express*, 8 February 1976.

³⁵ *The Right Angle*, p. 4.

³⁶ *The Revival of Britain*, p. 70.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

courses, or speaking up for unfashionable truths. She relished the idea of struggle, picturing herself romantically as travelling rugged roads, navigating shoals and rapids, braving stormy weather. Even after eleven years in office she still pictured her life as a succession of uphill fights. 'Work is the ethic', she told an interviewer shortly after her resignation³⁸

. . . Decide what you think is right to do and try to persuade other people to try *your* way. That was instilled in me in childhood . . . That's my life. If you believe something passionately and do something that is really worthwhile you will get opposition from people who believe differently, so my life will always be uphill all the way . . . I have never been worried about being unpopular if I thought I was doing right'.

In nineteenth century terms, Mrs. Thatcher spoke in the accents of chapel rather than the church. Brought up a Methodist and a provincial, with a father who had left school at thirteen and started his own business, she seems to have felt an elective affinity with the culturally underprivileged, and a corresponding suspicion of those who used to be called 'the comfortable classes'. Her version of Victorian Values reflects this, invoking the plebeian virtues of self-reliance and self-help rather than the more patrician ones of chivalry and *noblesse oblige* and in her radical contempt for paternalism, and her suspicion of philanthropically-minded 'do-gooders', whether in the socialist or the Conservative ranks, it is not difficult to find echoes of her Northamptonshire shoemaker forbears – 'the radicallest set of fellows in the radicallest town in England', as one of their number told the *Morning Chronicle* Commissioner when he visited Northampton in 1850.³⁹ If, as Arthur Marwick has interestingly suggested, the post-war social consensus was sustained by a kind of 'secularised Anglicanism';⁴⁰ and if the Attlee welfare state was, as Gareth Stedman Jones has eloquently put it, 'the last and most glorious flowering of late Victorian liberal philanthropy',⁴¹ then Mrs. Thatcher's revolt against it might be seen as nineteenth-century Methodism's revenge.

Mrs. Thatcher's values were also grammar school values, those of a scholarship girl who had come out top of the form. Hence, it may be – the matter is speculative – her insistence that she had been born with 'no privilege at all', and had had 'precious little' of it in her early years⁴² – a distinctive note in her leadership campaign of January 1975, as it was to be in that of her successor, John Major, – and her fierce resentment of

³⁸ Interview in *The House Magazine*, reported in the *Independent*, 15 December 1990.

³⁹ 'The Manufacturing Districts . . .', *Morning Chronicle*, 1850.

⁴⁰ Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945*, Harmondsworth, 1982.

⁴¹ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class, Studies in English working class history, 1832–1982*, Cambridge, 1983, p. 246.

⁴² Lewis, *op.cit.*, pp. 112, 115.

those who, whether by reason of hereditary title and wealth, or expensive education, or, as in the case of one of her adversaries, Mr. Wedgwood Benn, both⁴³ – had started life with unfair advantages. Hence, too, one could argue her belief that the failures in life were the lazy. Like that other grammar school star to whom she has some uncanny resemblances, Mr. Wilson, she made a great point of having all the facts and figures at her fingertips, of being prodigiously industrious and well-prepared. Her economics, too, has a distinctively prefectorial tang. Competition kept people up to the mark; 'merit' and 'distinctions' spurred them onwards. Success was a recognition of ability: progress was achieved by diligence, application and efforts. The virtues ascribed to Mrs. Thatcher's Methodist upbringing – 'order, precision and attention to detail'⁴⁴ – were, of course, also grammar school values. It was Mrs. Thatcher's originality to project them out to the national stage.

All this has some political relevance if, rather than seeing the cultural revolution of the 1960s as an outcome of the campus revolt (which followed rather than preceded it), one were to seek its roots instead – as I have tried to argue elsewhere⁴⁵ – in a prior sixth-form dissidence. It may be that at the heart of the 1970s call for a return to 'standards' was outraged grammar school sentiment, the bewilderment and anger of those who found that the very qualities which had served them so well in life were, under the impact of the counter-culture, deliberately transgressed. It is strikingly the case that, from the publication of *The Black Papers on Education* (1969) down to current calls for a return to the 3Rs, the crusade for the defence of 'standards' has been voiced most urgently by right-wing scholarship boys, Professor Cox, the editor of *The Black Papers*, Mr. Boyson, an erstwhile Lancashire lad, Paul Johnson, a Merseyside Catholic and by his own account a youthful swot being striking cases in point. Mrs. Thatcher, from the moment she was elected Party leader, weighed in on their side. 'Our schools used to serve us well' she told Party Conference in 1975. 'A child from an ordinary family, as I was, could use it as a ladder, as an advancement. The socialists, better at demolition than reconstruction, are destroying many good grammar schools. Now this is nothing to do with private education. It is opportunity and excellence in the state schools that are being diminished'.⁴⁶

Mrs. Thatcher's Victorian Britain, like that of Asa Briggs – one of the 'new wave' social historians who, by their scholarly work, prepared the

⁴³ Patricia Murray, *Margaret Thatcher*, London, 1980, p. 178.

⁴⁴ Young, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Raphael Samuel, 'Born-again Socialism' in ed. Robin Archer *et al.*, *Out of Apathy, Voices of the New Left Thirty Years On*, London, 1989.

⁴⁶ Speech at Conservative Party Conference, *Guardian*, 11 October 1975.

way for the rehabilitation of Victorian Values – is an ‘age of improvement’. There is space for the Mechanics Institute, but hardly for the free-and-easy nor yet for that class who are so inescapable a presence in the novels of the period, the shabby genteel. While not exactly filled by Grammar school types, it is peopled by humble, striving, God-fearing folk who might be thought of as their spiritual ancestors. They are artisans and tradesmen rather than carriage folk, the industrious sorts of people rather than those who were called, in the literature of the time, the Upper Ten Thousand. People rise, but they do so in a modest way, advancing socially by degrees, rather than meteorically, by flying upward leaps. Tradesmen prosper not by speculation (or the adulteration of goods) but by punctilious attention to their ledger books. School leavers learn to educate themselves, in the manner of Mrs. Thatcher’s own father. The self-made men whom she celebrates are not the commercial adventurers, like Mr. Merdle, nor the fraudulent projectors, like those presiding over the Anglo-Bengalee company in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, nor the stock jobbers attempting to corner the market in cotton on Manchester or Liverpool ‘Change. They are rather the patient who better themselves, moving up in the world without losing their family roots.

III

Mrs Thatcher’s rhetoric of Victorian Values was, on the face of it, a remarkable example of ‘a political attitude’ struck for purely symbolic rewards. Except for the restoration of hanging – something which she voted consistently whenever the issue of Capital Punishment came before the House of Commons – Mrs. Thatcher showed no signs of wanting to translate it into legislative enactment or administrative practice. No attempt was made to impose any modern equivalent of the workhouse test on welfare claimants (during Mrs. Thatcher’s period of office the number of those depending on supplementary benefits rose by leaps and bounds, from 3.4 million in 1979 to 5.6 million in 1988). For all her well-advertised horror of debt, Mrs. Thatcher made no attempt to curb consumer credit; indeed if her precepts had been taken seriously, the economy would have been in ruins. In the consumerled boom of the 1980s, when credit facilities multiplied, outstanding debt (excluding home loans) grew in real terms by 3% a quarter between the end of 1981 and the first quarter of 1988, rising from 8% of annual household disposable income in 1981 to 14% in 1987. In the same period personal savings (excluding life assurance premiums) fell from 16.3% in 1980 to a mere 1.3% in late 1988. Frugality and thrift,

in short, so far from staging a come-back during Mrs. Thatcher's period in office, all but disappeared.⁴⁷

If one turns, however, from the real to the imaginary, and from literal to figurative meanings, then it can be seen that, if short on legislative pay-offs, the metaphor of Victorian Values was a rich political source of psychic satisfactions. It confirmed misanthropists in the belief that the country was going to the dogs, while rallying traditionalists to the defence of 'standards'. In a more egalitarian register, it peopled the past with familiars, picturing Britain as a nation given over to honest toil. As an allegory of the bourgeois virtues, it celebrated ordinariness, treating humble origins as a mark of distinction and family fortune as the sign of grace. It gave serious money a pedigree and offered class exiles – among them, one might suggest, Mrs. Thatcher – an ideal home, a little commonwealth where birth and breeding counted for nothing, and character was all.

Victorian Values also helped the Conservatives to turn the tables on their opponents by presenting Labour as ossified and sclerotic and the Conservatives as the true radicals, destabilising the Establishment. Where its opponents kept whole armies of wage-earners in thrall, Conservatism was emancipatory: Victorian Values also released the more Utopian strains on Conservative thought, and in its more exalted moments, seizing on privatisation as a token of the shape of things to come, the party could even appropriate the old Marxist dream of the 'withering away' of the state. They pictured the new Britain which 'enterprise culture' made possible as a capitalism without classes and a society without the state. Equipped with the precepts of self-help, claiming the protective mantle of tradition for a born-again radical individualism, and evoking that archetypal figure of national myth, the Free-born Englishman, Conservatives could thus present themselves *both* as the party of the future, championing what was new and developing where their opponents were stuck in a time-warp *and* as the party of precedent, restoring a spirit of republican independence to national life and character.

Within the Conservative Party, Victorian Values gave a voice to the Tory unconscious, licensing the public expression of sentiments which would have been forbidden in the liberal hour of the 1960s. It also provided an idiom or code within which intra-party differences could be fought out. For Conservative loyalists, adopting laissez-faire economics as though it was a long-lost Tory creed, monetarism was a test of stamina; state intervention,

⁴⁷ Ivor Crewe, 'Ten Years on', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 May 1989; Sarah Hogg, 'How did we do under Thatcher?', *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 November 1990; Vivien Goldsmith, 'Thatcher's Legacy to Homeowners', *Independent on Sunday*, 25 November 1990; Christopher Huhne, 'From the horn of plenty to the poisoned chalice', *Independent on Sunday*, 25 November 1990.

however benevolently intended, a confession of weakness; Conservative dissidents, the high Tories or 'Wets', plucking up courage to speak for the unemployed, or, during the strike of 1984–5, for the miners, but fearful of being tarred with the brush of post-war 'consensus' politics, invoked the counter-tradition of nineteenth-century paternalism and philanthropy. In the coded meanings that, in the 1980s, seemed *de rigueur* at Party conferences, they invoked a Disraelian notion of 'one Nation' against the laissez-faire 'dogma' of the government. The rhetoric of Victorian Values could be seen as an example of what the post-modernists call 'double-coding' and sociologists 'cognitive dissonance' – i.e. of words which say one thing, while meaning another and camouflaging, or concealing, a third.

Mrs. Thatcher's traditionalism allowed her to act as an innovator – arguably the most ruthless of our twentieth-century Prime Ministers – while yet sounding as though she were a voice from the past. By turns radical and reactionary, modernising and atavistic, she moved from one register to another with the dexterity of a quick-change artist. Her political career exhibits the same paradoxes. At one moment she was the Little Englander, proclaiming the virtues of splendid isolation, or speaking up for old-fashioned sovereignty; she was a globetrotter at the next, making the world her oyster, and trying out the part of statesman on an international stage. In one role, sniping at the mandarins of Whitehall and Westminster from her Downing Street redoubt, she was the insider playing the system against itself; in another speaking up for 'ordinary people', she was the great outsider, rallying the country against the court. Victorian Values were similarly double-coded, a programme for the future disguised as a narrative about the past. The watchwords may have been conservative, but they were used for subversive ends, to destabilise established authority; to mobilise resentment against the *status quo*; to give historical precedent to what was essentially a new turn. She could thus appear simultaneously as a fierce iconoclast and a dedicated restorationist, an avatar of the future, pointing the way forward, and a voice from the past, calling on the British people to return to its traditional ways.

In each of the different phases of her career, Mrs. Thatcher, taking up the age-old radical cry of corruption in high places, pictured herself as at war with an *ancien regime*. In a remarkable inversion of the Marxist theodicy not capital but labour appeared as the fetter on the forces of production, the feudal integument which had to be broken if capitalism was to resume its forward march. There were in the first place the trade unions, with their privileged immunities, and oligarchic government, strangling innovation by restrictive practices and over-manning. Their leaders were accused of being overmighty 'barons', holding the country to ransom, as

in the 'winter of discontent' which did so much to bring Mrs. Thatcher to power. Shop stewards, too, were overmighty subjects, with their flying pickets intimidating the public and defying the forces of the law. Then there was the Labour Party, with its vested interest in the extension of public sector employment, its 'client' vote, its state monopolies, its town hall 'czars' and regional fiefs. It was, Mrs. Thatcher argued, a paternalism turned sour, a benevolent despotism whose day was done, protecting dying occupations, shoring up declining industries, multiplying benefits to hold on to a contracting electorate. It fed on the weakness of its constituency, levelling down rather than up in the schoolrooms, maintaining claimants in a state of dependence, lording it over council house tenantry and preventing individuality and excellence from leaving their mark:⁴⁸

It is now our turn to take a major step towards extending home ownership to many who have until now been deliberately excluded. Councils, particularly socialist councils, have clung to the role of landlord – they love it because it gives them so much power – so that more than 2 million families have seen themselves paying rent for ever. Petty rules and restrictions, enforced dependence. There are the marks of this last vestige of feudalism in Britain.

The Welfare State, under this optic, appeared as Old Corruption writ large, a gigantic system of state patronage which kept its clients in a state of abject dependence, while guaranteeing a sheltered existence for its officials and employees. A hundred years of collectivism (one of Mrs. Thatcher's new circle of intellectual advisers argued) had produced powerful interest groups and influential lobbies whose privileges were bound up with the extension of the public service. 'Every reform ends up by increasing the number of jobs for the boys'. The Whitehall world of 'big government' was a Dracula devouring an ever-increasing quantity of both human and financial resources, and insatiable in its appetite for more (public expenditure consumed 40% of the national product in Mr. MacMillan's premiership; under Mr. Callaghan the proportion had risen to 55%). In office, Mrs. Thatcher translated these precepts into practice, abolishing at least a token number of Quangos, the advisory bodies of the great and the good which had grown up to serve the machineries of state intervention, depriving the higher civil service: attempting to restrict supplementary benefits, and to disqualify whole classes of claimants; imposing cash limits on health and hospital authorities, slashing education budgets, ratecapping local councils, cutting off the life support for ailing industries, selling off state assets. But the 'nanny state' turned out to be a many-headed hydra, with Establishments in every reach of public life, and sympathisers in the highest circles in the land. Professional bodies, such as the British Medical

⁴⁸ Speech to Conservative Party conference, *Guardian*, 7 October 1981.

Association and the Royal College of Nurses, sprang to its aid; the House of Lords and the Church of England came to its defence; the universities and the polytechnics, notwithstanding the attempt to introduce business patronage, remained wedded to the idea of public service, the schools to the principles of universalism, the town halls to the provision of welfare. One adversary was no sooner slain than others rose in their stead.

Victorian Values formed part of a wider discourse in which Mrs. Thatcher sought, with remarkable success, to replace the antique divisions between capital and labour, or class and class – ‘pernicious relics’ of the nineteenth century as she called them – with a whole set of new ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ antitheses which pitted private sector against public sector employment, business against the professions, ‘enterprise culture’ against ‘the dependency’ state. Consciously or otherwise, she brought into requisition the age-old radical opposition between the ‘productive’ and the ‘unproductive’ classes, the ‘industrious sorts of people’ and the idle rich. ‘Business’, a term which by metaphorical extension included both workers and employers – was cast in the role of the wealth-producing sector of the community. The professions, by contrast, with the privileged exception of the army and the police, were treated as social parasites, feeding off the country’s ‘trading base’, running up inflationary costs. The ‘caring’ professions, with their heartland in the Welfare State, and their outriders in the churches and the charities, were particularly suspect, protecting their privileges and comforts while pretending only to be concerned with others. In another frequent opposition the free market economy was contrasted to the dependency state, the one a democracy of strivers, the other a protectionist racket. In either case business, like the agricultural interest of the nineteenth century was ‘the backbone of the country’, the doers rather than the talkers, the hardheaded rather than the soft-hearted, the active rather than the passive. As in other matters where ‘tradition’ was at stake, Mrs. Thatcher was able to relate these antinomies to her own family history. She told a TV interviewer:⁴⁹

. . . My father (was) a grocer . . . he employed some people in the shop and in another small shop at the other end of town. So he having left school at thirteen provided employment for other people. There was a great fashion in that time that (the) next generation should go into the professions because quite honestly in our town the people who had the greatest security were in the professions. So I took a science degree and I was employed in a scientific job and then I came into law and politics. I with much higher education have not actually created jobs. And I often think of my father when I hear some academics pontificating about how to solve the unemployment problem . . .

⁴⁹ TV interview with Gill Neville, reproduced in Sheila Harding, *Orderly Freedom: The Common-sense of Margaret Thatcher*, Sheffield, 1985, pp. 7–8.

I'm tempted to say to them well if you find it so easy to solve why don't you go out and start a business by your own effort and employ – five, ten, fifteen, twenty, a hundred, two hundred. Why don't you? I will tell you why – because you can't. It's easier to tell other people what to do about it than it is to sort it out for yourself. But in the end we have to provide the kind of society where people who can do this who can build up a business are prepared to start . . . Of course . . . you've got to have the good administration in government . . . you've got to have good education – you've got to have good health – don't think you can do without the professions . . . But in the end we rely on those who say . . . 'I've always wanted to build up a business' . . . because they are the people who spot what you and I will want . . . – and they are the people who create the jobs.

Politically, Victorian Values may have made some contribution to the degentrification of the Tory Party, a process which Mrs. Thatcher's successor, with his declared attachment to 'classlessness', shows no sign of wanting to reverse. It offered an alternative tradition to that of the Altar and the Throne, or for that matter of Empire 'Kith and kin'. It had no place for the great public schools (though many of them were Victorian foundations), no room for stately homes, not even those such as Hatfield which had been the country seats of Tory leaders. The parson and the squire were not there, nor were the Upper Ten Thousand, i.e. the world of rank and fashion, the metropolitan rich, or those whom Mrs. Merdle called 'Society'. The most interesting absentee of all was the nineteenth-century Tory Party itself. Perhaps because of its nineteenth-century association with protection and paternalism, Mrs. Thatcher was happier to invoke the liberal-radical John Stuart Mill and the ex-Chartist Samuel Smiles. She has a good word for the nineteenth-century trade unions, quoting them as an example of public-spiritedness, none at all for the Marquess of Salisbury.

After her own fashion, Mrs. Thatcher was offering her Party 'a history from below', one which gave pride of place to those whom she called 'ordinary people'. Mrs. Thatcher had no feel for the traditions of the British governing class, or perhaps, despite the Falklands War, for the imperial dimension of British history. She did not, like her rival, Mr. Heseltine, set herself up as a country gent: and a lifetime spent in politics seems to have insulated her from, rather than drawn her towards, the mystique of Westminster and Whitehall. She reached out instead to the provincial England of her childhood and constructed out of it a family saga. In the process she domesticated the idea of tradition and feminised it. Her narrative concentrated on the small details of everyday life. It was exclusively concerned with the private sphere, omitting such traditional ingredients as wars and diplomacy, monarchy and government, the nation and the state. As she put it in perhaps her best-known aphorism, 'There is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families'.

Victorian Values, if the argument of the foregoing is accepted, was modernisation in mufti. It marked a historic check to the collectivist idea which had been gathering strength, almost unopposed, ever since the discovery (or rediscovery) of the social question in the 1880s. It signalled a sea-change in attitudes to poverty and welfare. It dramatised public disenchantment with the cult of planning. It registered the exhaustion of the programme of state-led modernisation, an idea which has been on the agenda of British politics ever since the Safeguarding of Industries Act (1922) and the formation of the National Grid; which had been vigorously canvassed by 'middle opinion' in the 1930s; and which the 'comprehensive redevelopment' and state-engineered amalgamations of the 1960s had seemed to carry to new heights.

In economics, the call for a return to the market cloaked a rationalisation of British industry more ruthless than ever before. It put trade unionism on the defensive and heralded a remarkable erosion of those craft practices which had survived and indeed flourished in the interstices of modern industry; it heralded the emergence of 'flexible' work-forces and the spread of part-time employment. Most interestingly of all – for the term 'Victorian Values' was coined in the pit of a recession – it seized on what were to be some of the leading strengths of 'born-again' capitalism, in particular the new vitality of small-scale enterprise, and the emergence of the market as a universal panacea for political and social skills, a phenomenon not less marked, at time of writing, in Russia and Eastern Europe than it is in Britain. 'Back to the future', in a word, has proved a more convincing paradigm for change than 1960s gigantism or 'going-for-growth'.

In education, the call for a return to the traditional standards, though framed, by the *Black Papers* of 1960s, as an anguished plea by traditionalists in the humanities has now broadened out into a covert, concerted assault on its predecessor – the idea of a 'liberal education', campaigned for in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. When the Minister of State attempts to resurrect 'Payment by Results' it is not Matthew Arnold who is the presiding spirit, but if one were to look for Victorian Values in the current revival of the idea of 'useful' knowledge, and the talismanic importance currently being attached to 'performance indicators', it is Mr Gradgrind who is the presiding spirit.

As one who traced a line of descent from the Northamptonshire shoemakers, whose father was a lay preacher and who had herself a strict chapel childhood, Mrs Thatcher has better credentials than most for speaking about Victorian Values. Historians, however much they might want to qualify or question her version of the nineteenth century, ought to acknowledge their indebtedness; as those who assembled last December for the British Academy conference on the subject acknowledged, we would be

envious of one of our colleagues who, ten years on, was still able to kindle the fires of scholarly controversy. But it is a sad irony of our time that Mrs Thatcher, though espousing the work ethic, presided over a decade which saw more job losses than at any other time in twentieth-century British history, and which witnessed (or confirmed) a decisive shift from a manufacturing to a service economy. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Mrs Thatcher's professions of faith, but if one were to look for those who, during her period of office, most obstinately stood out for Victorian Values generally, whether one interpreted them in terms of family solidarity, the dignity of work, the security of the home, or simply the right of the Free-born Englishman to stay put, it would be not the Prime Minister, but the miners defeated in the strike of 1984-5 – her 'enemy within' – who would have the stronger claim.