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Commentary: 'A bottomless pit of political surprise'?: The Political 'Mystery' of the Thatcher Era

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Abstract

As what many would call the Thatcherite Revolution recedes into the past, the time has come for historians to reconsider and explain how Mrs

Thatcher's three Governments between 1979 and 1990 and for that matter the build up to them were actually received at the time. The contemporary 'informed' view was that there was not going to be a Thatcher era at all, and that one emerged tended to be attributed to short-term aberrations occasioned by such 'accidents' as the Winter of Discontent and the Falklands War, and it was commonly argued that the ideologically driven Conservative Party and Governments were determinedly going in the wrong direction especially in terms of what the electorate wanted. In some contrast, in the view of this writer, Thatcherism was arguably no more than a mixture of economic liberalism, very mild populism, and pragmatism. This article argues that an explanation for the many misinterpretations on the part of newspaper, television, and academic pundits was that they were 'conviction commentators' as much as Mrs Thatcher was a 'conviction politician'. These commentators clung to various assumptions about the desirable nature of the post-war political and economic settlement. Not the least of these was the assumption that 1945 marked not just the election of the first majority Labour Government but also the birth of modern British politics.

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