

John Burgh

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Thatcher decade examined in Bartels lecture

By Darryl Geddes, Cornell Chronicle

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Since Margaret Thatcher's departure as the British prime minister in late 1990, numerous books by her aides, colleagues and historians - even Thatcher's autobiography - have attempted to assess the triumphs and failures of her 11 years in power.

Sir John Burgh, president of Trinity College in Oxford, joined the chorus as he discussed "The Thatcher Decade" during the Bartels Lecture March 29 on campus.

Burgh, who was a member of a think tank created in 1970 by Prime Minister Edward Heath, called Thatcher a "remarkable and powerful leader," "a radical in conservative clothes" who never wavered from her strong conviction that socialism should be obliterated from Britain forever.

Thatcher was elected leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 and became prime minister in 1979. She was re-elected in 1983 and in 1987.

Not only was she Britain's first woman prime minister but she also was the first British leader in 160 years to be elected to three consecutive terms as prime minister.

Her greatest successes, according to Burgh, were her taming of the trade unions, the sale of public housing and the improvement of Britain's reputation abroad, due largely to the Falklands War victory. "No one can contest the quality, courage and determination of Mrs. Thatcher once hostilities commenced," he said. "She was a brave, calm and steadfast leader."

Burgh's appraisal of Thatcher's stewardship of England was far from sterling. Her economic policies, he said, were hurtful to many. During her tenure, unemployment wavered between 9 and 13 percent, inflation averaged 7.4 percent and the number of people living in poverty rose from 7.7 million to 11.3 million.

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While she reduced income tax rates, she raised the value-added tax rate from 8.5 percent to 15 percent. "These tax shifts accorded with Thatcherite philosophy – let people choose how to spend their money instead of taking it from them in direct taxes," said Burgh, who served as a deputy and assistant undersecretary of state for various government departments during the 1970s. "But inevitably stiff increases in indirect taxation resulted in substantial price, increases which the poor could ill afford."

One of Thatcher's biggest economic blunders, according to Burgh, was the abolition of the rates - or property taxes – in favor of the community charge or poll tax. "It became the flagship of Mrs. Thatcher's policies," he said. "It proved a disaster. Her flagship was torpedoed, and the sinking ship helped to drag the leader from power."

The poll tax was levied on every adult; only the poorest received a partial rebate. "For the first time a government had declared anyone who could reasonably afford to do so should at least pay something towards the upkeep of the facilities, and the provision of the facilities, from which they benefited," said Burgh, quoting from Thatcher's memoirs. "A whole class of people - the 'underclass' if you will- had been dragged back into the ranks of responsible society and asked to become not just dependents but citizens."

The poll tax was abandon Thatcher resigned as prime minister.

Adding to Thatcher's downfall, Burgh noted, was her hard-line stand with Europe and her personality. The prime minister became increasingly rigid in her dislike for the European Economic Community's (EEC) desire for monetary union.

Her disapproval of having Britain join the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) caused great friction between the prime minister and her top aides, especially Geoffrey Howe, the foreign secretary, had been one of the principle architects of Thatcherism.

After other disagreements, Howe was removed from his cabinet post. He finally resigned from Thatcher's government.

Burgh contends that Howe's resignation speech before the House of Commons "was a clear incitement to mutiny" that signaled Thatcher's final days.

"It was the most dramatic and momentous occasion in the British parliament for many years," Burgh said. "He made clear his increasing unease and disagreement with her European policies and attitudes, his conviction that the place of Britain was in Europe. It was evident to any serious observer of the British political scene that his speech dug the pit into which Margaret Thatcher would finally fall." Thatcher resigned as prime minister in November 1990.

"She undermined pluralism and greatly strengthened central government against local government," Burgh said. "She centralized power in her own hands. And as we all know, power corrupts."

Thatcher's legacy, Burgh believes, is a Britain where the citizenry is a more materialistic and where the pursuit of money is now more respectable.

"She encouraged the enterprise culture. She wanted to eliminate the dependency culture," he said.

When asked by an audience member whether Thatcher's future held for her a major political or corporate post or obscurity, Burgh sharply replied, "Obscurity".

The Bartels World Affairs Fellowship was established by Henry E. and Horton Bartels in 1984 with a mission to foster a broadened world perspective among Cornell students.