

'No such thing as society'

Book review by Alistair Tice

MARGARET THATCHER said "there is no such thing as society", the title of Andy McSmith's recent book, "a history of Britain in the 1980s". Today David Cameron says he wants a "Big Society". So is Cameron disowning Thatcher?

No, these seemingly contradictory mantras are both ideological justification for cutting back collective state provision of public services and replacing them with privatisation. Thatcher sold us "share-owning democracy," Cameron urges us to 'do-it-yourself' through charities, the voluntary sector and mutuals. Both roads lead to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

McSmith says the 80s were Thatcher's decade - elected prime minister in May 1979, kicked out in November 1990. Along with thousands of others, I spent that decade trying to get rid of her. Thatcher was unpopular from the beginning. McSmith writes that he saw long faces the day after Thatcher was elected - I saw those same faces in Hull. We knew what was coming!

In chapter one, entitled "Lady not for turning", McSmith catalogues how Thatcher's monetarist policies turned a recession into a depression, pushing unemployment over three million by 1986. She said: "There is no alternative" and was not turning, but even she admitted after the 1981 budget of public spending cuts and tax rises: "They may even get me for this!"

And things got worse for her - following the Toxteth inner city riots in Liverpool in July 1981, The Times headline read: "The most unpopular PM since records began." Yet it took another nine years to get her out - let this be a warning to today's trade union leaders, if you don't lead the

fightback, the Con-Dems could last five years!

Thatcher, in speech notes preserved from 1984, wrote: "Enemy without - beaten him. Enemy within. Miners' leaders, Liverpool and some local authorities - just as dangerous, in a way more difficult to fight." The enemy without were the Argentinians, jingoistically defeated by Thatcher in the 1982 Falklands War, creating the 'Falklands Factor' which helped the Tories to a record re-election majority the next year.

Miners' strike

THEN THEY prepared to take on the enemy within. The chapter "We work the black seam" describes the epic year-long miners' strike in 1984-85. McSmith writes affectionately about the miners and their families, having helped raise money for them. He mixes human stories with cold facts: 11 deaths, 7,000 injured, 11,000 arrested, 1,000 sacked or victimised.

However, defeat was not as inevitable as McSmith suggests: if the pit deputies had carried out their 83% strike vote, if the dockers' strikes had continued, if the TUC had called a one-day general strike, if...?

But defeat cost 90% of miners their jobs within ten years, scarred communities to this day, and blackened the industrial and political landscape for 20 years after.

In the chapter on Live Aid, "Feed the World", McSmith says that under Thatcherism there was "more politics in British popular music, and more political activism by performers, in the first half of the 1980s than at any time before or since." This reflected the growing inequality in society and the big class struggles taking place. In turn, radicalised



Margaret Thatcher resigned as prime minister on 22 November 1990. Author McSmith says the 80s were Thatcher's decade. photos D. Sinclair

musicians, comedians, and playwrights influenced a generation of young people.

While Toxteth was in flames in 1981, The Specials topped the charts with 'Ghost Town', their prophetic warning of desolation and doom: "This town's becoming like a ghost town... government leaving youth on the shelf... no job to be found in this country..."

'Flying Pickets'

A BRUMMIE band called themselves 'UB40' after the unemployment benefit form a tenth of us had. Another was called 'Flying Pickets'. McSmith helped set up Red Wedge, a pro-Labour group of musicians including Billy Bragg and Paul Weller. Comedian Harry Enfield's 'Loadsamoney' character personified yuppies who got rich overnight following the Tories' Big Bang deregulation of the City of London. Even TV soap Brookside had its own 'militant' trade union official Bobby Grant, played by Ricky Tomlinson who himself had been jailed as a Shrewsbury building worker picket in the 1970s.

In contrast, McSmith pours scorn on the "escapist phenonema" of the 1981 Royal Wedding in a chapter "Diana and the New Romantics." Are they trying the same thing again? Economic crisis, unpopular government, let's have a royal wedding! Announcing Will and Kate's engagement, The Times headline read "The New Romantics".

How apt. McSmith calls Diana "the princess of all that was bland", in which he includes her favourite New Romantic band, Duran-Duran,

and the Social Democratic Party (SDP, a right-wing breakaway party from Labour in 1981).

The other 'enemy within' was Liverpool city council. Under the influence of Militant, the Socialist Party's forerunner, McSmith concedes that the left-wing council won an extra £20 million funding from the Tory government in 1984. But he approvingly writes about the other 'hard-left' Labour councils' capitulation, which left Liverpool isolated. Liverpool council was later 'stabbed in the back' by Labour leader Neil Kinnock in his infamous 1985 conference speech.

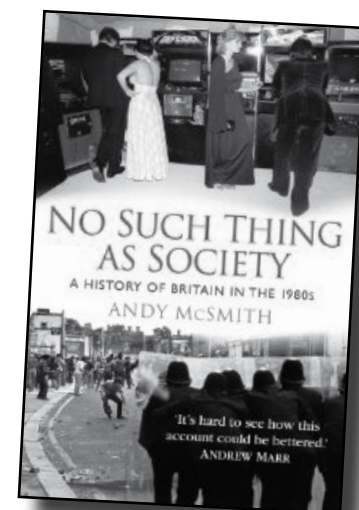
McSmith does not even mention Liverpool council's achievements. This socialist council mobilised mass popular support, increased its vote in elections, kept its manifesto promises, built 5,000 council houses and created 2,000 council jobs.

Can't pay, won't pay

WORSE, MCMITH says Thatcher's final denouement was not due to the mass anti-poll tax movement but Tory splits over Europe. Like they would have dumped her if she hadn't again become the most unpopular prime minister ever, even more unpopular than in 1981!

Militant, who provided the political and organisational leadership to the 18 million poll tax non-payers, does not even get a mention in the two pages (out of 300) devoted to the biggest movement of civil disobedience in British history, except that Militant MP Terry Fields was jailed for two months for non-payment.

McSmith underplays Militant's role, but he is spot on with the La-



bour Party, which began the 80s being pushed further Left. But he says: "by 1990, it took a specialist to tell you where Conservative and Labour policies diverged." Confirming the Socialist Party's analysis of the qualitative change in the Labour Party, McSmith says that "at some point in the 1980s or early 1990s the Labour Party ceased to be socialist."

Thatcher was later to claim 'Tory' Blair as her greatest legacy. From that viewpoint, Thatcher did "roll back the frontiers of socialism" but McSmith falls short of accepting the neoliberal myth of 'The end of history'. And with good reason, as he must have written this book during capitalism's worst crisis for 80 years and the re-emergence of class struggle and socialist ideas.

For the older generation this book reminds us of what we went through, for a young reader it's a taste of what's to come. But read The Rise of Militant (available from Socialist Books) straight after to get the politics right!

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A Liverpool march against Thatcher's Tory government.

What's behind corporate charity donations?

I AM a 'redeployee' with BT, actively seeking another job in the company. BT recently suggested I apply for a temporary job arranging public events for a charity that BT sponsors, helping children with speech and language difficulties.

On the charity's website, a section entitled 'Corporate Support' brazenly says: "We are able to deliver individually tailored fundraising programmes to meet the needs of your business". It also says: "A specially developed and strategic programme of support could help you leverage your Social Responsibility Values in the areas of 'children', 'education', 'special needs education' or 'social inclusion'" and refers to "Branding and coverage on our websites which receive in excess of

30,000 visitors a month from a range of stakeholders."

This kind of 'charity involvement', called Cause Related Marketing, has a 'positive' impact on consumer behaviour. Research reveals that seven out of ten consumers taking part in such a programme reported a positive impact on their behaviour or perceptions. 48% of consumers say they switched brands, increased usage or tried or enquired about new products. 46% said it made them feel better about using the product, company or service. Such marketing helps businesses and charities enhance their brands.

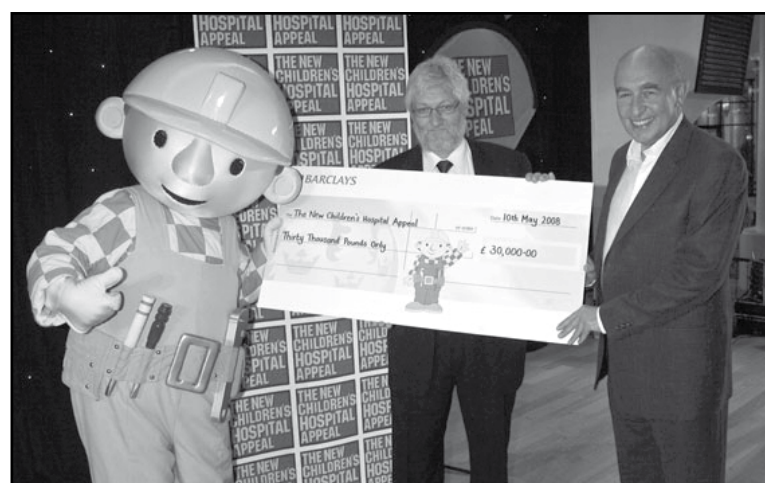
I'm not knocking the charity. They clearly do vital work that the NHS and local authorities are unable or unwilling to fund and their activi-

ties make a difference to many children's lives.

But this should all be publicly funded and not rely on corporate charity donations. How much money would big business donate to charity if there weren't commercial benefits from exploiting people's sympathy towards the unfortunate? And businesses don't publicly support more 'political' voluntary organisations like War on Want and Amnesty International that campaign against the actions of governments supported by big business.

If you hear a firm is a major donor to a charity, ask if this is an altruistic donation or just a marketing opportunity?

Clive Walder
Birmingham Socialist Party



Manchester Children's Hospital managers were grateful for a donation from their new PFI building contractor.