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Republican Perspective

By Christopher Panton

Is There Life After Ronnie? Part 2

Author's note: Sorry that part 2 of this column took so long to appear. If you don't remember part 1, or never saw it, stay calm and carry on; it was largely a set-up for part 2. So you should get the gist of this one. There is no part 3. I promise.

The word Thatcherism is still used today in British politics, in both derogatory and praiseworthy contexts, depending upon one's political stripe. In simple terms, it originally meant, chiefly, the superiority of private enterprise over public ownership.

In historical pragmatic detail, it included freeing up markets, radically reducing government regulation of business, reducing the tax burden and removing the temptation of government to micromanage many aspects of life in Britain at the time. Privatization, and the unfettering of business, were Thatcher's greatest triumphs, to the degree that they were imitated to one extent or another in many countries around the world. As if to underline her achievements, when the Labor government was returned to power, post-Thatcher, its leader, Tony Blair, pursued a largely Thatcherite policy for the next 10 years, in the process beating off the extreme, "loony," left wing of his party that wanted to return to the glory days of government takeover and union power.

The point here is that Thatcher saw the crisis (it was hard to miss!), saw her objective, knew how to fix things - her strategy -then, went for the jugular. It is too facile to suggest that a Margaret-Thatcher-type should magically appear on the American political landscape. By inferring that, I was cheating a bit, as I said in Part 1, Thatcher was a product of her time. The scenario was specific and quite different back then. But I stand by my contention that the parallels remain: the eerie simultaneity of crisis, unions and government-run health care.

Naturally, because of my prior experience, I believe that this country needs a leader who possesses the same kinds of attributes of a Margaret Thatcher. That person, if ever there is one, will never come from the Democrats. They are the party of socialism, using the word in its most unflattering context. Which leaves either a Republican candidate or a wraith from a third party, mysteriously coalescing from the political mess we seem to be in today.

While Ronald Reagan and Thatcher had an uncanny knack for setting sound, priority objectives (the what to do), the way that they went about their strategies (the how to do it) was quite different. And there's the rub. Thus, even if an individual emerged with the best of Reagan/Thatcher leadership characteristics, and was duly elected, then - even with sound, salable objectives - that person would still have to be supremely adroit with strategy in order to accomplish anything of note in today's political climate. To me, how to take that hurdle is a mystery. I have opinions, of course (who doesn't?), but since this wonder person is unknown to me at this time, then my thoughts are rather meaningless, notwithstanding that a real live super-person would be unlikely to call me in as an advisor.

It is generally agreed that Thatcher changed Britain completely. Antipathoids say for the worst; realists know for the better. Before Thatcher, Britannia was about to slip beneath the waves that she once so proudly ruled. As I said earlier, resurrecting the economy by completely altering the way business was conducted is her greatest claim to fame. But what about the other two btes noir: unions and national health care? She crushed unionism in the private sector by taking on the most aggressive Coal Miners' Union and essentially starving it into submission - metaphorically speaking.

Following her victory, private sector union membership fell to a shadow of its former self. However, she picked her fights carefully and did not mess with the most powerful public sector union, the teachers'. Pity she didn't; we probably could have used some valuable insights from the resulting fracas!

Even Thatcher could not fix the dysfunctional problems of national health care during her terms of office. However, the foundation for opening up private insurance for those who could afford it was established on her watch, eventually helping to bring some stability to the British health system. She arrived on the scene about 30 years after the birth of a national health system and its performance was still shamefully lacking. Today, after more than 60 years to try and get it right, polls on the availability of medical care in the UK score comfortably positive. But polls on the quality of care score much lower. Currently, in the United States, these scores are reversed.

There is a genuine necessity for social legislation always to be an instrument of politics. The problem arises when extreme socialism takes over. In Britain, this uncompromising, ill-timed lurch to the left occurred almost overnight. Crisis was inevitable and it played out over the next 30 years or so. In the United States, the change is taking place at a more leisurely pace, giving us an opportunity - an incentive even - to nip it in the bud. Unfortunately, this requires a long-term perspective and, as someone once said, in politics two weeks is a long time. This may be at least one reason why I see no trace of a savior on the horizon. Do you?

Finally, there is a saying that "coming events cast their shadow before." If the parallels that I have drawn in these columns have even a shallow-rooted plausibility, then the shadows are already here. So, is there life after Ronnie? I don't know. But if you see a figure in the distance displaying the indomitable spirit of a Margaret Thatcher and the brilliant persuasiveness of Ronald Reagan, and with an elephant logo on the shirt, then please contact the Republican National Committee immediately. Thank you.

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