

We're still only beginning to see the lethal unintended consequences of Thatcher's legacy

There were two moments in my life when I found myself in direct conflict with Margaret Thatcher, as a politician and as a priest.



When Mrs Thatcher came to power I was a local politician, a member of Sheffield City Council. David Blunkett became leader and I was his deputy and chair of the finance committee. It was a bleak time for northern cities like Sheffield. On the one hand, the economic base of the city was collapsing. Older, smoke-stack industries - steel, cutlery, coal-mining - were in decline, unable to compete with cheaper imports from abroad. The consequences for the city were high levels of unemployment and falling revenues for the council from business rates.

I met with ministers and wrote to the Prime Minister. There was little sympathy. The view was that unemployment was 'a price worth paying' (Norman Lamont) because that older economy had to make way for the new economy based on financial services and higher value technology. As one junior minister said to me, 'We can't save an industry for the sake of a local community. Sometimes a city has to die.' Councillors found themselves struggling to maintain the very services that a community in trouble needs - help for the unemployed, for families struggling with childcare, for young people.

One consequence of government policies was the urban riots of 1981 - and this led to my second brush with Mrs Thatcher. I was one of 18 people commissioned by the then-Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, to produce a report - Faith in the City - on the reasons for the disturbances. My contribution was partly as a politician and partly as a priest from the inner city. We found growing inequality in the country, not just in the inner city but also on the outlying estates, and coined the term 'urban priority areas' to make the point. The report was bitterly attacked by the Government. One cabinet minister, Norman Tebbit, in an attempt to discredit it, called me 'the Marxist deputy leader' of Sheffield Council on national television.

Mrs Thatcher was hardly responsible for the global economic forces that meant that Britain had to shift

from an old to a new economy, but her governments could have done more to appreciate how devastating it was for both individuals and communities to have three million people on the dole and to incentivise new industries to locate in old areas.

In addition she bequeathed a legacy that was to have lethal consequences in these latter days: an unhealthy dependency on relatively unregulated financial services and the denigration of the public sector and all who work in it. The first meant that successive governments failed to see where financial irresponsibility in the housing market (sub-prime mortgages) and the sale of financial products would lead - the great crash of 2008. The second meant that many vital services have come to be privatised and outsourced and so at the mercy of market forces: their unintended consequences are only gradually becoming apparent.

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