

Margaret Thatcher's Speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning': The Discourse of Determination and Political Authority

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Abstract:

The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning' is a significant demonstration of the leader's power in using metaphorical language to construct a resolute political persona in a moment of crisis. Though many studies focused exclusively on the political content of the speech from a historical perspective, this article examines Thatcher's political communication and the inherent messages embedded in her political discourse. Particularly, it highlights how language as a political tool for leaders can serve multiple functions including policy legitimation via linguistic framing and identity construction through rhetorical formation. To achieve this purpose, Critical Discourse Analysis is used as a research methodology to investigate the linguistic strategies used by Thatcher. Norman Fairclough discourse theory is used as a framework for analysing Thatcher's leadership style which fuses language, power, and ideology. The result of the study reveals Thatcher's strategic use of language to dismiss critics and maintain authority as the first female Premier in Britain.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language and politics has always been fundamental in leadership studies and political communication. The interaction between language and politics continues to evolve in the digital age with the emergence of new technologies and communication platforms. However, the essential mechanisms of power dynamics, identity construction, and social change remain central for understanding the nature of political discourse. Margaret Thatcher as one of the towering figures of British politics in the twentieth century is a good example of a Leader who employs the power of words to strengthen the legitimacy of her policy. In this regard, Thatcher's speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning' (1980) is a practical illustration that demonstrates how the oratory skills can shape the political persona in the leader's political discourse. Many academic papers have discussed Thatcher's speech from different perspectives, yet this article is focused on specific research area of leadership communication. It intends to answer the following questions: what strategies does Thatcher use in the speech to establish her power and authority as a Leader? How does she confront political opposition in moment of crisis? More precisely, how does her political discourse reflect her political persona and the way she defends Conservative ideology?

To answer these questions, we should adopt a methodological pattern. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the most

appropriate approach for analysing political speeches. Though many discourse analysts have provided valuable methods for discourse analysis, Norman Fairclough discourse theory is relevant to a great extent for analysing Thatcher's speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning'. Accordingly, this article begins with a social context analysis to set the text within its historical context. Next, a textual analysis framework is followed in the second section. This analytical structure is meant to reveal how the lexical choices and the rhetorical devices used by Margaret Thatcher have laid the foundation for her political style as a conviction politician who is strongly determined to implement her new Conservative policies against the mounting criticism from the public; the Labour Opposition; and from some members of her own Conservative cabinet.

2. The Socio-political Context Analysis

The role of context is fundamental in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It helps to interpret the different functions of language in society. Investigating the socio-political, economic, and cultural aspects that contributed in shaping the particularity of a text can provide deeper understanding of the implied meaning of the discursive formation. In his book *Discourse and Social Change*, Norman Fairclough emphasises the relationship between three interlinked dimensions for discourse analysis: 'textual analysis', 'discursive practice', and 'social practice'¹. Each of the three

dimensions is concerned with exploring a specific area that helps identify the social function of discourse.

In the present study, Fairclough's three dimensions are reproduced under a two-parts study which involves text and context. Accordingly, it is crucial to start the analysis of Thatcher's speech by presenting the socio-political and economic contexts that shape the specificity of the text. The contextual study is meant to reveal how power dynamics is asserted through language use. Critical Discourse Analysis provides a methodical framework to examine the intricate interplay between language and power and this relation will help understand the structural and ideological making that are embedded in the speech. The importance of Norman Fairclough's work relies on its transdisciplinary orientation. He emphasises the intersection between linguistics, politics, and how language and power are all connected issues for the study of political discourse.

2.1. The Emergence of Thatcherism as a Response to the Post-war Consensus

The election of Margaret Thatcher as leader for the Conservatives in 1975 was the beginning of her path to power. Her premiership of Britain had been significant to replace what was viewed as an 'old-fashioned' political system. Since her election as a Prime Minister in 1979, Margaret Thatcher strived to reverse the post-war consensus – the British political agreement between the Conservatives and the Labour Party from

the mid-1940s till the end of 1970s. Both parties agreed to govern post-war Britain following the same programme. It was based on Keynesian economy, the Welfare State, and Trade Unions conciliation. These policies were suggested initially by the Labour Government of Clement Attlee in 1945 for the purpose of rebuilding Britain after the hard consequences of World War II.

Despite the profound transformation of British politics and the positive results on its society, the pillars of the post-war consensus started to shake by the late 1960s. Continued economic failure and mounting social unrest had made the situation even worse. In fact, many reasons may have taken Britain to austerity, but the economic and social policies of the post-war consensus were viewed responsible for the British relative decline. To reverse the failing principles of the post-war consensus in the late 1970s, Margaret Thatcher introduced her political doctrine that marked a radical shift towards an authoritative decision-making approach.²

At the beginning of her first administration, Margaret Thatcher had shown a strong determination to counter the post-war consensus principles including state management of the economy, social welfare provision, and full employment. For her, these Leftist concepts were the reasons behind the British recession. Conversely, Thatcher advocated free-market values, individual responsibility, free enterprise, and limiting state

intervention. These issues constitute the essential virtues of Thatcherism which emerged as a response to the failure of the post-war consensus.

As a political theory, Thatcherism promoted to reduce public spending to control inflation through tight monetary regime. It encouraged free market economy to boost competition. It aimed to restore the Government authority to establish law and order³. Moreover, it supported the traditional Victorian beliefs of hard work, self-reliance, thrift, and discipline to reinforce the spirit of independence for the individual against the 'culture of dependency' that had been developed for many decades with the social welfarist programme of the post war consensus. This idea will be further explained through examples and illustration from 'The Lady's Not for Turning' speech in the textual analysis section of the present article.

Though Thatcher faced severe difficulties in the early years of her administration, she did not change her course of action. She did not opt for a U-turn. She insisted on the validity of her political project and stood firm implementing her monetarist policies against the wave of criticism on the negative results. She reacted with resolution and tenacity and emphasised the fact that this economic and social pain was part of the process leading to recovery. She believed that her policies would be proved effective in the long-term. In *The Free Economy and the Strong State. The Politics of Thatcherism* (1988), Andrew Gamble confirmed the fact that from 1982 onwards, the political debate in Britain started to emphasise on recovery, not recession⁴.

The Thatcher Administration therefore, succeeded in confronting much of the opposition, especially from the ‘wets’ – those Conservative MPs like Francis Pym and Ian Gilmour who criticised the ‘radicalisation’ of the Conservative politics. The Lady proved the legitimacy of her policy and succeeded in her ‘revolution’ to change the British economic and socio-political spectrum which had relied on the Keynesian-welfarist-post-war consensus since 1945.

Though criticism and opposition grew at the beginning of her premiership, Thatcher continued her rightward expansion, ignoring in her move any attempt to compromise with the ‘old’ Left or even negotiate with the so called ‘wets’ from her Conservative Government. Her speech ‘The Lady’s Not for Turning’ came as a reaction to the mounting dissatisfaction of her policies and confirmed her conviction in the values she adopted for her style of leadership.

2.2. The Historical Setting of the Speech

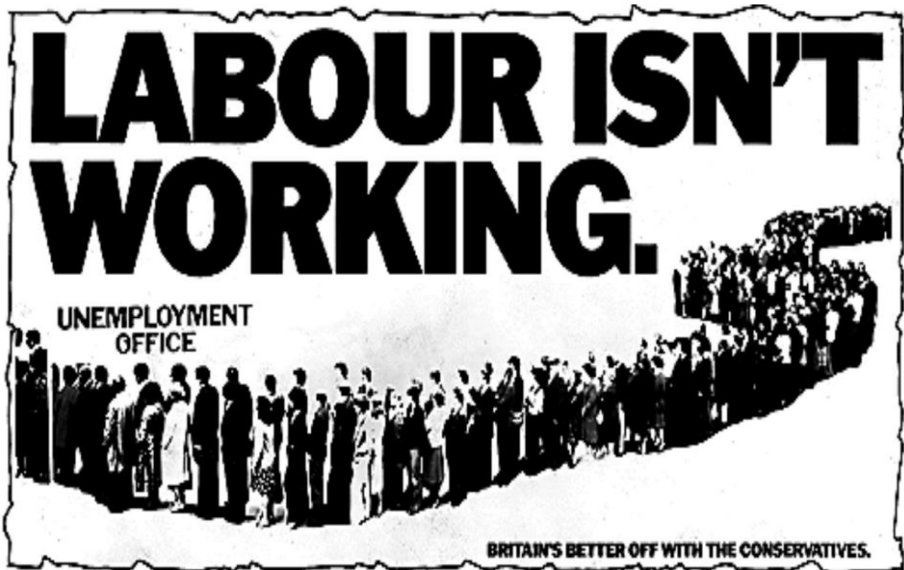
‘The Lady’s Not for Turning’ speech was delivered to the Conservative Conference in Brighton, England on October 10, 1980. The speech came as a reaction to the increasing criticism for the Thatcher Government after one year in power. By the historic landslide election victory in 1979, Margaret Thatcher started implementing new policies that were basically meant to reverse the failure of the post-war consensus. But the early results of those policies were even worse on the British people.

Though many observers were expecting a 'U-Turn', Prime Minister Thatcher defined her position in the famous answer: "The Lady's Not for Turning". The expression appeared in her speech of October 10, 1980 which established her reputation as a firm leader who would not change her policies under pressure. In doing so, Thatcher was differentiating her political style from Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath (1970 - 1974), who was obliged to make a historic policy reversal because of the economic crisis at the beginning of the 1970s. Initially, Heath came to power with policies based on free-market principles that aimed to reduce state intervention to beat inflation, but he was faced with rising unemployment, high inflation and worse economic conditions. Though Heath's U-turn was aiming to stabilise the troubled British economy, it was viewed by Thatcher (who was a member of Heath Government) as sign of weakness and 'betrayal' to the Conservative ideals.

Thatcher's opposition to Heath's U-turn reinforced her intention to challenge the prevailing Labour political and economic strategies. Few weeks before the 1979 General Election that secured for Thatcher a historic success, she delivered a speech to the Conservative Party Central Council meeting on April 22, 1979, in which she phrased her new policy in her famous statement: "I am a reformer and I am offering a change". The two keywords 'reformer' and 'change' were significant at that time. The wording was suggesting the beginning of a new era in contemporary British politics. It was meant to 'reform' the Socialist management of economy and social services which dominated the British political system

since the end of the Second World War. That post-war consensus system culminated in the infamous ‘Winter of Discontent’ (1979), a period of series of bitter strikes in Britain. In reaction to the social turmoil on the eve of the General Election of 1979, Thatcher presented the Conservative Party as the only solution for the extensive public discontent against Labour’s policies that had taken the country to social disappointment and economic failure.

The primary slogan for the Conservative election campaign ‘Labour Isn’t Working’ was another indication of how language was used skilfully to confront the Labour’s ideology as a whole. The slogan and poster were developed by the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi. The wording of the slogan was emphasised with a poster containing the image of a long queue of unemployed people twisting around the street. Though it was not originally framed by Margaret Thatcher herself, it was used by Thatcher to reinforce her condemnation of the Labour Government policies regarding its commitment to maintain full employment. In *Why Did Britain Come to This?* (2023), Gwyn Bevan explained how the Labour failed to provide jobs to people and illustrated with the Conservative campaign poster for the 1979 General Election as shown below:



Source: Gwyn Bevan, *Why Did Britain Come to This?* (2023), page, 110

Yet, after one year in Government, Prime Minister Thatcher started to be criticised for the British disastrous economy and the social upheaval in 1980, particularly the increasing rate of unemployment that reached 2.13 million, inflation raised up to 21.9 per cent in May 1980 and Thatcher's popularity dropped to the lowest⁵. For many of her opponents, the crisis at that time was the result of Thatcher's strict monetarist regime. Many critics urged a 'U-turn' on her free-market policies which caused a sharp rise of unemployment, but the difficulties she faced at the beginning of her administration did not stop her from pursuing her project. In her speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning' (1980), she spoke in defiance of all expectations of changing her policy agenda.

3. Textual Analysis of the Speech

As mentioned earlier, Critical Discourse Analysis provides a comprehensive framework for analysing power dynamics and ideological positions inherent in political texts. The intricate interplay between power, ideology and the linguistic structure of meaning is emphasised in Norman Fairclough's approach of discourse analysis. His focus on power relations, social change, and the institutional foundation that shaped the political persona aligns perfectly with Thatcher's speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning'. For instance, the examination of some selected passages of the speech in this article can demonstrate how Thatcher used language to construct reality, establish authority, and legitimate policy decisions.

Moreover, political discourse theory is mainly concerned with investigating the role of language in shaping political reality and analysing the leadership communication strategies in policy formation. Accordingly, Thatcher's speech will be examined to show her powerful command of language in legitimising her political commitment and thus construct a resolute identity that argues in defence of her political conviction.

3.1. Legitimizing Conservative Policies

While many of her supporters regarded the speech as a powerful projection of convictional politics, Critical Discourse Analysis reveals Thatcher's attempt of legitimising a radical shift in economic and social policy. Legitimation is deployed as a rhetorical device by policymakers to gain support for their actions. It is usually practiced by leaders to avoid resistance when some of their actions are criticised. In *Political Discourse Analysis* (2012) Isabela and Norman Fairclough explain Legitimation as “public justification, an argumentative process in which an action is justified in terms of *reasons which can themselves, in turn, be justified, as (worthy of being) collectively accepted or recognize.*”⁶. In this quote, Fairclough clarifies the function of legitimation in political discourse and how it serves in strengthening the argumentative process. Fairclough generates the link between ‘legitimation’, ‘public justification’, and ‘argumentation’. The three elements are connected and reinforced by the skilful choice of language. And this chosen language helps to maintain the link between three other concepts that are fundamental in political discourse: power, ideology, and the construction of a given social reality.

Accordingly, Thatcher's legitimation of the Conservative ideology in ‘The Lady's Not for Turning’ is meant to justify the radical shift towards the free-market-oriented society. At the opening of the speech, she confirms the Conservative challenge of changing the national spirit: “last year I said that the task in which the Government were engaged—to change the national

attitude of mind—was the most challenging to face any British Administration since the war. Challenge is exhilarating.”⁷ As a leader, she assumed a very challenging task. In addition, she claims that the Conservative Government has laid the foundation for “recovery’ which is not only economic recovery, “but a new independence of spirit and zest for achievement.”⁸ So, liberating the individual British mind from the ‘old Left’ practices is crucial for achieving national prosperity. And this ‘prosperity’ according to Thatcher “does not come from grand conferences of economists but by countless acts of personal self-confidence and self-reliance.”⁹ Thatcher therefore is promoting individualism as a Conservative principle which comprises the qualities of an independent spirit, self-confidence, and self-reliance to achieve personal accomplishment in society.

Advocating the spirit of independence is part of the challenge of reforming the British society. And to foster that independence for the individual, she encouraged the tenets of free enterprise which includes initiation, innovation, risk-taking, and competition – the values of entrepreneurial behaviour. The enterprise culture is heavily endorsed in Thatcherism because it is meant to oppose the culture of dependency that was nurtured by state intervention of the post-war-consensus. In ‘the Lady’s Not for Turning’ speech’ (1980), Thatcher admitted explicitly her support for the free enterprise saying: “I do care about the future of free enterprise, the jobs and exports it provides and the independence it brings to our people.”¹⁰ In fact, her support for

the enterprise culture is dominant in the whole speech as she encourages and legitimates its functions in different fields.

She frames the benefits of free enterprise in terms of economic and social achievements. "Without a healthy economy" Thatcher says, "we cannot have a healthy society. Without a healthy society the economy will not stay healthy for long."¹¹ Despite the simple wording deployed in this quotation, Thatcher sends a definite message to her opponents who blamed her economic policies for the social pain it resulted after a short period in power. Her statement in the above quotation serves as a public justification for the neoliberal principles of the New Right Government she was leading. She believes that a strong economy is an essential requirement for a strong society. A flourishing economy is the foundation for the social well-being, though social prosperity for Thatcher is not created by the state. A healthy and prosperous society depends on individual responsibility which is flowing from the enterprise culture in a free market-oriented society. Thatcher therefore is arguing for the legitimacy of her own political vision and its fruitful results for Britain in the long-term. The seemingly simple language she uses in the speech entails a powerful message about Thatcher's firm intention of pursuing the implementation of her policies despite an expectation of changing the radical economic reforms that caused mass unemployment.

3.2. Rhetorical Strategies in the Speech

As mentioned earlier in the previous sections, the speech was delivered in a context of crisis and opposition, during a period of hostile political climate and severe economic recession in 1980. In addition to its thematic argumentation, the wider significance of the speech relies on Thatcher's exceptional rhetorical and oratory skills. Her deductive reasoning in the process of arguing for the commitment to her radical policies is reinforced by the rhetorical strategies she uses in the speech. In fact, many discourse analysts like Jonathan Charteris-Black and scholars on her communication strategy like Andrew S. Crines, Timothy Heppell, and Peter Dorey are still discussing Thatcher's leadership style which is based on conviction, resolution, and certitude in the language of her presentation (Charteris-Black 2011: 46). In *Politicians and Rhetoric* (2011), Jonathan Charteris-Black writes extensively about Thatcher's "moral conviction that was her defining ethos, by combining the rhetorical strategy of contrast with metaphor and that an interaction between metaphor and antithesis was at the basis of a rhetorical appeal to having the right intentions."¹² This attitude of confronting opposition through metaphor constitutes an essential characterisation of Thatcher's 'The Lady's Not for Turning' speech.

Her famous statement in that speech in which she dismissed critics who demanded a U-turn on her contentious free-market oriented policies can be considered as a reflection of

what Jonathan Charteris-Black held in the above quotation. She addressed her opponents defiantly saying: "To those waiting with bated breath for that favourite media catchphrase, the "U" turn", I have only one thing to say. "You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning." I say that not only to you but to our friends overseas and also to those who are not our friends."¹³ This statement is a clear and strong message of refusal to abandon her policy conduct. The concept of 'U-turn' in politics implies a sudden change of policy, an unexpected switch in political direction. This shift can happen in response to strong public dissatisfaction with the governing practices. In fact, this was the case in Britain when Thatcher was facing intense public and governmental pressure to reverse her programme. But Thatcher was far from surrender. If a leader opts for a U-turn like Edward Heath, it is a sign of weakness and uncertainty and the whole political project will be attacked. The media in particular will be very critical of the leader and his politics. However, Thatcher's announcement 'the lady's not for tuning' explains the metaphorical implication for her choice of using the lexicon 'U-turn' and how she opposed its meaning in her next expression. Her language revealed certitude and resolution in showing the 'correctness' of her policies. Her refusal to 'turn' indicated her strong commitment in the ideological principles she set for her doctrine as explained above.

Moreover, the use of 'U-turn' as a rhetorical device of managing opposition had been effective for Thatcher who emphasised the power of the Lady in moving forward in her political journey. Her stress on the title 'Lady' was rhetorically

strategic. In *Politicians and Rhetoric. The Persuasive Power of Metaphor* (2011), Jonathan Charteris-Black admits that “Thatcher used her femininity to communicate a unique political identity through exploiting the ‘The Iron Lady’ epithet.”¹⁴ The label ‘Iron Lady’ was given to Thatcher by Yury Gavrilov, the Russian army official and journalist for *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star) in 1976 when he reported on her speech ‘Britain Awake’ (1976) while she was leader of the Opposition. He was impressed by the defiant character of a new kind of British leader¹⁵. The title ‘Iron Lady’ survived during the whole period of her leadership to the Conservative Party and continued to live for generations even after her death in 2013. The metaphorical use of ‘the Lady’ in her speech ‘The Lady’s Not for Turning’ (1980) was another indication of projecting the political persona of the female leader who was ‘fighting’ for her ideological principles in a field dominated usually by men. This choice of metaphors created the image of a powerful female leader who was constructing a strong-willed identity of the first female Prime Minister in the history of British politics whose leadership style became strongly associated with ‘conviction rhetoric’.

In *Analysing Political Speeches* (2018), Charteris-Black explains the concept of ‘conviction rhetoric’ saying: “this is where a speaker conveys a strong sense of purpose and self-belief through a range of word choices, figures of speech and delivery features such as fluency, volume and intensity of expression. The combined effect of these rhetorical features is to convey certitude and authority.”¹⁶ It was this ‘certitude and

authority' that became the driving force in Thatcher's political discourse. Her speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning' had shown intensity of expression and conveyed a sense of certitude and authority which characterised the concept of 'conviction rhetoric' as explained by the discourse analyst Charteris-Black. Her contempt for consensus politics was one important factor which reinforced her belief in redirecting the course of British politics towards a New Conservatism.¹⁷

On the other hand, it is important to highlight the public reception of Thatcher's speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning' and how it was perceived mainly by the people who were suffering from the consequences of her economic policies. For these people, the speech highlighted her uncompromising, inflexible, and resolute political style. The speech represented her strong commitment to maintain the conservative ideological principles despite opposition and criticism. Though her supporters praised the defiant character of the Lady, the speech also underscored her 'uncaring' attitudes. This perception of being 'uncaring' to social exigencies stems from her refusal to negotiate the very concept of society as she declared in an interview in 1987: "There is no such thing as society." Her denial to cope with public needs or pressure remained central to her politics.

Overall, the public reception of the speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning' was divided between supporters and detractors. This polarising reaction to the speech will become a defining characteristic feature of Thatcherism as a political theory. Though Thatcher's language in the speech indicated opposition and refusal to change direction, the enduring controversy to her

leadership style proved the ‘conviction rhetoric’ of the Lady which had been sharpened throughout the whole period of her leadership. So, the rhetorical strategies she deployed in the speech were integral with her political style.

4. CONCLUSION

In her speech ‘The Lady’s Not for Turning’ (1980), Thatcher deployed language strategically to serve multiple purposes. She used a defiant language to represent her new conservative vision against the consensus politics of the late 1960s and 1970s. Throughout the speech, Thatcher framed her conviction in the rightness of her policies and thus defended the legitimacy of her programme. She displayed firm confidence in the new role of the individual in a society which depended primarily on a ‘healthy economy’. The speech dismissed forcefully the Labour Party foundational principle concerning the state commitment to maintain full employment. Meanwhile, Thatcher rejected the blame of being responsible for the mass unemployment of 1980. Instead, she boosted the enterprise culture in Britain where the state ‘should’ encourage individual qualities like self-reliance and self-help to foster the spirit of independence. Furthermore, the rhetorical techniques in the speech had also been instrumental in confirming Thatcher’s resolution in projecting the power of her political persona. Her language reinforced the image of the ‘Iron Lady’ personality who rejected public expectation of a ‘U-turn’ in her iconic line in the speech: ‘You turn if you want to. The lady’s not for turning.’ The expression became a slogan of her determination, decisiveness, and conviction. On the whole, Thatcher’s language in the speech

portrayed the power of words in shaping the power of the leader in moments of crisis, notably in the way of dismissing critics and rallying supporters.

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6. Endnotes

¹ Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (1992).

² The idea is discussed by the following authors: Kavanagh 1987, Gamble 1988, Heffernan 2000, and Veldman 2016.

³ Dennis Kavanagh, *Thatcherism and British Politics. The End of Consensus*. (1987), page: 12-13.

⁴ Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*. (1988), page: 113.

⁵ Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*. (1988), page: 101, 108.

⁶ Isabela and Norman Fairclough, *Political Discourse Analysis. A Methods for Advanced Students*. (2013), page: 242.

⁷ Margaret Thatcher speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning', October 10th, 1980.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric. The Persuasive Power of Metaphor* (2011), page: (167).

¹³ Margaret Thatcher speech 'The Lady's Not for Turning', October 10th, 1980.

¹⁴ Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric. The Persuasive Power of Metaphor* (2011), page: 169.

¹⁵ Gardiner and Thompson, *Margaret Thatcher on Leadership. Lessons for American Conservatives Today*. (2013), page: 06.

¹⁶ Jonathan Charteris-Black *Analysing Political Speeches* (2018), page: 116.

¹⁷ Meredith Veldman, *Margaret Thatcher. Shaping the New Conservatism* (2016), page: 92-93.