

Mrs Thatcher's Children

■ by Phil Jump



The recent death of former premier Margaret Thatcher seems to have opened up a number of old wounds in Britain's industrial landscape. For all the polarisation of public opinion, supporters and opponents alike acknowledge the Thatcher era as one that ushered in a series of changes that no serious politician of any hue will be mindful to reverse. At the heart of these seems to lie the enthronement of the free market economy as the unassailable ruler of our commercial and industrial endeavours.

I am of that generation that is often tagged "Thatcher's children". It was just a year after she first ascended to power that I reached the age of political consent and joined the nation's electorate. I well remember my early years as a graduate engineer, when it was repeatedly pumped into me that the only reason that any business enterprise exists is to make money. The ideas that a company might operate simply to create meaningful employment, or reside in public ownership so as to serve the common good rather than reward its private investors, were dead in the water. This was the age of privatisation, and before I had even finished paying for my first car, like thousands of other ordinary citizens, I was the proud owner of a share portfolio that included several former public utilities.

There are many convincing arguments as to why things needed to change, but I am left wondering how all of this has shaped attitudes to work, and created an understanding of its purpose that needs to be challenged. It is interesting that for all the protestations that are forthcoming from the political classes, the word on the ground is that the general public largely welcome the present Government's intent to ensure that those who work always enjoy an economic advantage over those who don't. The unchallenged assumption underpinning this logic is that we work to make money.

But making money alone can be a soul destroying occupation, and those of us of Christian persuasion are offered some quite different perspectives. Even against the present backdrop, the emergence of terms like "social enterprise" and "not for profit" sector indicate that engagement in work offers other incentives and rewards, that many consider worthwhile.

It is this reality that causes organisations like Industrial Christian Fellowship and Faith in Business to relentlessly seek to bridge the gap between issues of faith and work. Human endeavour and collective enterprise may well offer economic rewards, but their roots lie in something far more profound and meaningful. The God we encounter through the Scriptures is introduced to us as a God at work, crafting and commanding a world into being, and placing at its centre a humanity in His own image. We are invited to participate with God in the harnessing and stewardship of His creation – a disposition that we more regularly describe simply as "work".

There may well be no way back to public ownership of our manufacturing and service industries; (though given the amount of the banking sector that has been acquired by the tax-payer in recent years who knows?) and a free market economy might well be the only realistic means of regulation in an industrial context that has become global and corporate. But work will always be more than simply economic output, and our humanity is undermined when we forget that – whatever its material consequences, purposeful and fulfilling work is part of God's intent for humanity. When economic ends override that reality, whatever their political origin, then our society is becoming something that it should not be. ■

Phil Jump is Chair of Industrial Christian Fellowship and Regional Minister of the North Western Baptist Association. He entered Christian Ministry after a career in marine engineering and is married to Janice. They live in north Liverpool and have three children.

