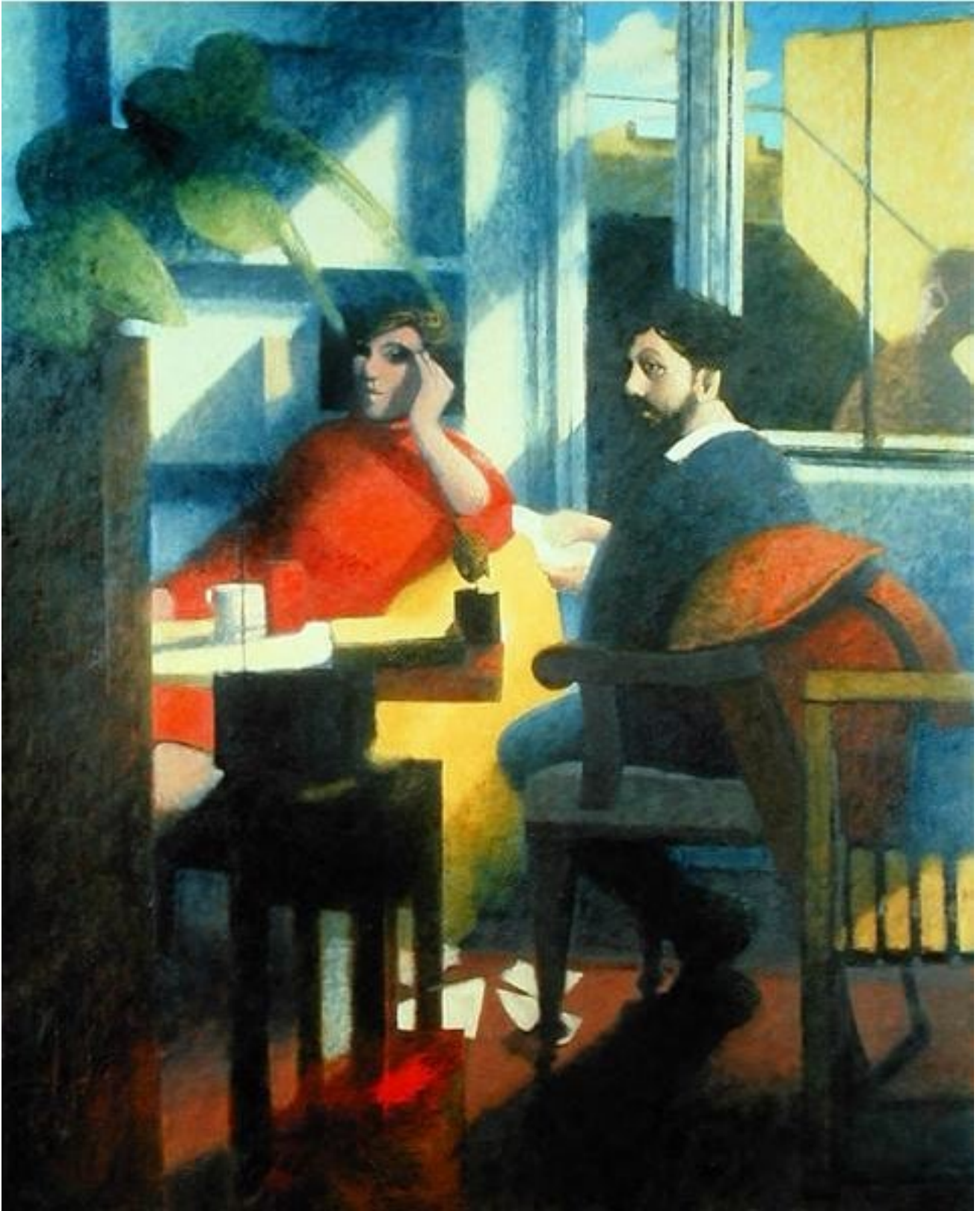


Thatcher's Thinkers: Anecdotes of a Bit-Player

by [Jillian Becker](#) (July 2021)



The Conversation (The Discussion), Bill Jacklin, 1983

Forty years ago, when I was still immortal, I saw conservatism triumph and believed it would endure. Margaret Thatcher came

to power in Britain and Ronald Reagan in America. The post-war leftward drift from liberty to tyranny was arrested.

For British conservatives, the new morning was brighter than expected. The swing to the right by the electorate was stronger than they had ventured to hope, because conservatism by its nature is not optimistic. It visualizes no utopias. It expects no human being to transcend human nature. Its highest political value is personal liberty protected by law. It wants to preserve the achievements of the past, add to them as the era permits, and hand on the augmented inheritance to new generations. It is not against changes, but against Change, against Transformation. And it knows that to preserve and extend traditions and accomplishments, the guardians must fight unremittingly forever.

In the event, the brightness lasted for a decade. When Thatcher fell from power, Britain's leftward drift soon resumed.

Some of her reforms have remained—extensive home ownership, trade union constraint—but there was no permanent change of direction. Perhaps she could have done more to reduce the power of the state, or to bring Britain out of the European Union, or to stem destructive immigration. But even had she served another few years in office, I doubt those goals could have been accomplished.

She did, however, win two wars. One against the Argentines when they tried to take the Falkland Islands from Britain. And one which stands among the greatest victories, against the “evil empire”—as Ronald Reagan called it—of the Soviet Union.

I was a colonial immigrant. Twenty years earlier, I'd left South Africa—a geographical paradise, a moral outcast among the nations, a cultural flea market—to live in the

culture in which I'd been raised and educated. I found it to be under threat of destructive change until Thatcher came to power.

I was lucky, and pleasantly surprised, to be admitted into the company of a small group of intellectual fellow conservatives. I was introduced into it by Baroness Caroline Cox. She was our engine driver. She gathered about her thinkers and doers: teachers, school principals, writers, researchers, people who could influence others. She is illustrious and unpretentious, gentle and effective. Her maiden name was Love, and it could be the motto of her life. With love as a practice rather than an emotion, she devoted her life to alleviating human suffering, and I honor her for it though I cannot emulate her. She trained and practiced as a nurse and a teacher, with spectacular achievements in both professions. She was ennobled as a Life Peer in 1982, shortly before I met her. She became a deputy speaker of the House of Lords in 1985.

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My qualification for entry into her smallest and closest circle, the special knowledge I could contribute, came from my self-assigned mission to investigate the rise and spread of terrorism and publish what I found about it. We met

to talk about political issues such as the too great and ever-growing power of government; the unique power of the free market to raise everyone's living standards; terrorism in South Africa, Rhodesia, South-West Africa, Angola, Israel, and Britain. (The Irish Republican Army nearly succeeded in assassinating Prime Minister Thatcher with a bomb in the Brighton Hotel where she was staying during a Conservative Party conference in 1984. It exploded in the bathroom she had vacated a few minutes earlier.) The Baroness and two other members of the Upper House, Alun Chalfont and Ian Orr-Ewing, both Life Peers who had been ministers of defense—composed the Advisory Council of the Institute for the Study of Terrorism (IST), which I—rushing in where others more experienced in warfare had hesitated to tread—founded and directed.

I also attended meetings of a larger group which Baroness Cox convened once a month in a conference room on the Lords' side of the—gloriously *Gothick*—Palace of Westminster, to discuss education and what might be done to make it better. They may not have been fruitless discussions. The Baroness took their recommendations to Prime Minister Thatcher, and the Education Reform Act of 1988 embodied some of them (but I now suspect that might have been coincidence). My personal interest was a wistful hope that our IST publications would become set textbooks in high schools and universities. It did not happen. I had no idea then what a long and complicated process a book is put through before it is accepted as a standard text in government schools.

One of Baroness Cox's closest political associates—one of our small group—was the philosophy professor Roger Scruton. One day he said, "Something must be done about South Africa." He asked me—I suppose because I could reasonably be expected to know what was happening there—if I would organize a meeting of persons who "knew something about it." I was not expected to know such persons. My only suggestion, Denis Thatcher—whom I'd heard, at social gatherings when his wife was not present,

expressing strong opinions on political developments in southern Africa—was ignored. I was given a list of names and telephone numbers. Eager to see how powerful people went about directing the course of history, I called them. Most of them agreed to come to a meeting. It took place in a private room at the Reform Club, to which most of my political friends belonged, and where the rule is that only in special rooms behind closed doors are members allowed to “shuffle papers.” Of the ten or twelve men who were there I now remember only Scruton and Peter Utley, the distinguished blind journalist from the Daily Telegraph. All agreed on the diagnosis of what ailed the land of my birth: the apartheid regime was deservedly sinking under the pressure of international odium, and the Communist-dominated African National Congress was rising. Could anything be done by the British government to change the far leftward trend? Nobody suggested anything. I wondered then what usually happened after such meetings. Would some message be taken to Downing Street, and if so by whom, and what would it be? I came away feeling a little like Kafka’s protagonist in *The Castle*.

Scruton was in his early forties then, and in trouble for expressing his conservative opinions in the *Salisbury Review* which he edited and for a while largely wrote. The criticism in the columns of rival journals, particularly the leftist *New Statesman*, was harsh. I felt that he was sensitive, vulnerable, but courageous and not likely to give an inch to a hostile critic; that he would not suffer fools gladly but suffer them anyway, because he was resolutely kind.

He lived in a ground-floor-and-basement apartment in Notting Hill, near Hyde Park. The large single room in the basement was almost entirely filled by a long dining-table surrounded hospitably by chairs. It was also a kitchen where he would fry heaps of sausages when, in his turn, he hosted our lunch-time meetings or gave an evening party.

At an evening party he introduced me to the brilliant

and despised, famous and infamous Enoch Powell. "The best prime minister Britain never had," was often said of him. He had lost his chance. He had fallen from grace. Whereas Scruton annoyed a few hundreds, and Thatcher angered a few millions, Powell, far more lethally, enraged the entire commentariat. He had made a speech in 1968 warning that if thousands of immigrants from the West Indies were let into Britain there was likely to be violent conflict. It was called his "rivers of blood" speech, though he did not use the phrase. He was punished for being "racist"—which he was not—by being expelled from the Shadow Cabinet in which he served as shadow defense secretary. Of his own accord he left the Conservative Party but returned to the House of Commons as a member of its ally, the Ulster Union Party. He was not one of Thatcher's thinkers, but his fall was a powerful lesson to all conservatives about what not to say if you want to be elevated to power. The Party decides what ideas may be spoken, what prejudices can be displayed, what sentiments must be worn on a sleeve.

Scruton told Powell what it was I did. "Oh?" Powell said to me. "You know there's no such thing as terrorism?" Obviously, I did not "know" that. He was telling me my work was pointless, nugatory, a silly occupation. He looked at me the way a boxer might look at his opponent to gauge whether a blow had hurt and what he might be thinking of doing in retaliation. I was perplexed. Why would a representative of a Northern Ireland constituency deny the existence of the province's biggest problem? "There's no such thing as terrorism," I repeated, not as a question but an echo of his statement, and I waited, looking at him as interrogatively as he had looked at me. He turned away. Whatever argument he had ready to release remained behind the gate. If it was there at all. I suspected he had nothing to say in support of his declaration. I guessed that what really lay behind it was the thought, not that what I was doing was superfluous, but that it was ridiculous for me—a middle-aged woman—to be doing it. Little said, much implied. Now I deeply regret that he didn't

pursue the argument, that I didn't insist on it, didn't accept the gift of the thought, however aggressive it might have been, of that extraordinary man.

Some days later a friend of Powell's brought me a collection of his speeches. Would I, he asked, publish them under our IST imprint? The project had been turned down by the big publishing houses, not because they couldn't have made money from it—they could—but because they feared a storm would break over them if they published Enoch Powell. The “political correctness” demanded by the New Left was starting to gag conservatives.

Even before people were murdered for publishing Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* (which happened in 1989), editors, journalists, and writers themselves, as well as publishers were becoming fearful of the violence that the New Left had brought to Western Europe. I wondered if that very fact would justify our publishing the book. While I was sorry that such a man should have to come to us for this, I confess that I did rather relish the irony if the imprint on *his* book would contain the word “terrorism.” But we were not the right publisher for Enoch Powell's speeches. I returned the collection with my explanation and regrets.[\[1\]](#)

Among those who contributed, directly or indirectly, to Thatcher's successes, I came to know her adviser and excellent speech-writer John O'Sullivan. He has lucidly related how she, with Reagan and Pope John Paul II, won the Cold War, in his book *The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World*.[\[2\]](#) (He is now editor-at-large of National Review.)

Thatcher's thinkers met in “think tanks.” There were quite a lot of them. I sometimes sent a few pages of information to the Prime Minister, so I considered IST to be one of the lesser tanks. We—I and my permanent staff of four—got information, additional to whatever we found out

ourselves, from politicians, academics, journalists, intelligence agents, military, and police officers—including Scotland Yard's Special Branch—and occasionally from reformed terrorists. Some of our informants came from Western Europe, Africa, Australia, the Middle East, and the Americas. They gave formal talks, answered questions, and exchanged views over sandwich lunches in our (literally) underground offices, and some of them acted as our "foreign correspondents." Now and then I got a note of thanks from the Prime Minister's secretary.

I frequently attended meetings at two other "tanks." One was the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies (IEDSS) partly funded by the powerful American think tank, the Heritage Foundation. Its clever, witty, able, and endearing director was Gerry Frost. (I modelled our system of collecting data, publishing studies, inviting lecturers, holding discussion meetings, on his.) Through him I was invited to join the St. James Society, a group so exclusive that even Google hasn't heard of it. We met over occasional weekends in country hotels and listened to lectures. On one such weekend I first met the economics professor Peter Bauer. He was famously against the giving of foreign aid. He tried through his teaching and writing to persuade political leaders in the First World to stop treating the Third World as its dependent, taking money in taxes "from the poor in the rich world and giving it to the rich in the poor world." Thatcher wanted him to be heard in Parliament, so she made him a Life Peer. But—he told me—nobody in the House of Lords listened to him, so he stopped attending it.

When Gerry Frost left the IEDSS to take over the running of the think tank that most often had the ear of the Prime Minister, the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), it thrived under his management, but the IEDSS declined without him and disappeared. The CPS was the forum where one of the longest lasting and most often consulted of Thatcher's

advisers and speech writers, Alfred Sherman, exercised very considerable influence on her decisions. He was a sharp, erudite, utterly charmless man whose company I much enjoyed. Acutely aware of what he lacked, he asked Michael Ivens, the director of the think tank Aims for Industry who was charm personified, to teach him how to acquire the precious thing for himself. Ivens gently explained to him that teaching it was impossible; that charm came naturally or not at all. Not liking to deny a service to a friend, however, he made a helpful suggestion or two about being agreeable. For all I know, Sherman may have tried them out, but if he did, they made no observable difference. So intensely did Sherman irritate his colleagues at the Centre, they changed the locks of the office and locked him out. The Prime Minister, who knew she owed him much, consoled him with a knighthood.

The greatest of her thinkers, the beacon light of her premiership, was Friedrich Hayek, whose "short popular book" (as I heard him call it) *The Road to Serfdom* [\[3\]](#) is an essential text of "Thatcherism." I did not know him personally, but I tried never to miss any of the public lectures he gave in London. He was one of the great economists whose portrait photographs hung—and I hope hang still—on the walls of yet another conservative think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA).

I was delighted to be invited to his 80th birthday celebration, a banquet held in one of the grand old Guildhalls in the City of London. I expected the Prime Minister to be among the several dozen guests, but she wasn't there. Hayek talked for the most part about a discovery he had made of a letter written by David Ricardo in which the early 19th century political economist stated that his Labor Theory of Value had been a mistake. In *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx declares that if that theory—which he claimed as his own but had in fact derived from Ricardo—was wrong, his entire thesis was wrong. Many critics had pointed out that it *was* wrong, but

until that night very few had known that Ricardo himself had seen it as an error and abandoned it.

Another free-market economist who deeply impressed Thatcher and whose photograph hung among the great at the IEA, was Milton Friedman. He impressed all the conservatives I knew. My father shared his last name. Was he, I asked my father, a relation of ours? "No," my father joked, "but he deserves to be!" I told this to Milton Friedman when he came to give a talk at a book shop in London and sign copies of his book *Free To Choose*.^[4] "Actually," he told me "Friedman was not my father's name. It was the name of his half-brother who came to America first, so when my father arrived, he was constantly referred to as 'Friedman's brother,' and after a while he accepted the name as his own."

In 2008 I had my only conversation one-to-one, very brief, with Lady Thatcher. I had been in the same room with her now and then, one of the crowd, but only at the memorial meeting for Alfred Sherman, when she made a point of speaking to everyone there—about twenty in all—did I have a few moments talk with her. She came towards me, a small slim neat figure, still beautiful, her right hand extended to shake mine. The hand was soft but the grip was firm. I asked her what she thought of the vast influx of Muslim immigrants into Britain, the growing number of Islamized no-go areas, the increasingly frequent acts of "Islamist" terrorism. She said she knew nothing about any of it, which I found hard to believe. These had become burning issues, and all the abuses had begun under her watch.

Later I learned that she had been afflicted with Alzheimer's disease since 2004, the year of Ronald Reagan's death. She lived until 2013. Both he and she suffered from dementia in their last years; the two who saved the free world from Communism. Until now?

[1] Enoch Powell's speeches were eventually collected in a book published probably by himself or his friends. It is out of print. His books deserve to be kept in print. He was a scholar, a poet, an orator, and more than a politician—a statesman. His dire prediction about the West Indian immigrants was wrong, however; they turned out to be assets for Britain.

[2] *The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World* by John O'Sullivan, Regnery, Washington, DC, 2001.

[3] *The Road to Serfdom* by F. A. Hayek, University of Chicago, 1944.

[4] *Free To Choose* by Milton Friedman, Secker & Warburg, London, 1980.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published

studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary*, *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), *Encounter*, *The Times* (UK), *The Telegraph Magazine*, and *Standpoint*. She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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