

The politics of a cream cracker

When watching, or reading, Alan Bennett's *A Cream Cracker under the Settee* you need to consider the political climate of the UK at the time that Bennett wrote the play - but why? The play was first published in 1988 and Doris's experiences and attitudes give us a view of life in Britain at that time – but we can only fully appreciate the performance if we know the context of the play.

Read through the following information about the political landscape of the UK in 1988 when the play was first published:

Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister at the time – she held the post from 1979 to 1990. She was the UK's first female Prime Minister and was a member of the Conservative political party.

The following information comes from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservative_Party_\(UK\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservative_Party_(UK))

Margaret Thatcher won her party's leadership election in 1975. Following victory in the 1979 general election, the Conservatives briefly pursued a monetarist economic programme. More generally, the party adopted a free-market approach to government services and focused on the **privatisation** of industries and utilities nationalised under Labour in the 1940s and 1960s. Thatcher after her initial election led the Conservatives to two landslide election victories in 1983 and 1987. She was greatly admired by many for her leadership in the Falklands War of 1982 and policies such as the **right of council house tenants to buy their house**. However, she was also deeply unpopular in certain sections of society, in part due to the temporary **high unemployment** which reached unprecedented heights, peaking at over 3 million following her economic reforms, and also for what was seen as a heavy-handed response to issues such as the miners' strike.

Privatisation:

The Conservatives took a number of industries and services out of the public sector and away from government control, selling them off to private industry. Amongst these were British Gas (now you can have your gas supplied by a number of different companies); British Telecom (this telephone company used to be the only one) and British Rail (now a great number of train companies run services along the railways in the UK).

The Conservative Government also advocated the privatisation of services such as living accommodation for the poor (the 1980s saw the introduction of the policy whereby homeless people were housed in private Bed and Breakfast facilities rather than council run accommodation) and the elderly (official statistics from the Department of Health indicate that between 1979 and 2000 the number of beds in the independent sector, which is run mainly for profit, increased from 23 000 in 1983 to 193 000 in 2000).

Right of council house tenants to buy their house:

Being a property owner was an idea that the Conservative government fully supported and so they sold off large parts of council estates to tenants at reduced prices. Some thought it was an excellent idea as it gave those who had never previously had a stake in anything worth very much financially an immediate boost, however others saw it as a way for the government to make money quickly through the sales and to get rid of the financial burden of maintaining the council houses in the long term.

High unemployment:

Because the Conservatives made some sweeping changes to the way businesses, industries and financial markets were run unemployment went up to numbers never seen before in the UK. Britain changed from a country with a lot of manufacturing industries (such as shipyards, steelworks, factories etc where items are made) to one that has a lot of service industries (such as telephone call centres, shops, restaurants etc which offer services) so often whole communities were affected by the closure of a factory or a shipyard and there were vast number of unemployed people in one area. See the films *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot*, amongst others, which deal with unemployment in 1980s Britain.

Margaret Thatcher herself was often seen as a strong leader and someone who propelled policies through Parliament single-handedly (the 1980s TV programme *Spring Image* originally had the puppet of Thatcher dressed as a businessman in a pin-striped suit, smoking a cigar with all the Cabinet scurrying around behind her while she shouted at them to do her bidding). Here are some of the things she said whilst in power:

'Pennies don't fall from heaven, they have to be earned here on earth.'

'No-one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well.'

'My policies are based not on some economics theory but on things I and millions like me were brought up with: an honest day's work for an honest day's pay; live within your means; put by a nest egg for a rainy day; pay your bills on time; support the police.'

'From France to the Phillipines, from Jamaica to Japan, from Malaysia to Mexico, from Sri Lanka to Singapore, privatisation is on the move. The policies we have pioneered are catching on in country after country. We Conservatives believe in popular capitalism—believe in a property-owning democracy. And it works! ... The great political reform of the last century was to enable more and more people to have a vote. Now the great Tory reform of this century is to enable more and more people to own property. Popular capitalism is nothing less than a crusade to enfranchise the many in the economic life of the nation. We Conservatives are returning power to the people. That is the way to one nation, one people.'

'They are casting their problems on society. And, you know, there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours.'

1. In what ways do privatisation, property ownership, and unemployment, and their effects, appear in *A Man Called Cracker*? Explain your ideas. Remember that Doris does not have to mention any of them explicitly; you might comment on her loneliness or her remarks about people coming in the garden – these, and others, can be linked to the context of the play.
2. Do you think Doris would support the comments made by Thatcher? What makes you think that? Can you see any similarities between Thatcher's comments and remarks made by Doris?
3. Do you believe Alan Bennett was a supporter of the Conservative government or an opponent? What evidence is there, in the play, to support your view?