
Opening Extract from...

No Such Thing as Society

A History of Britain in the 1980s

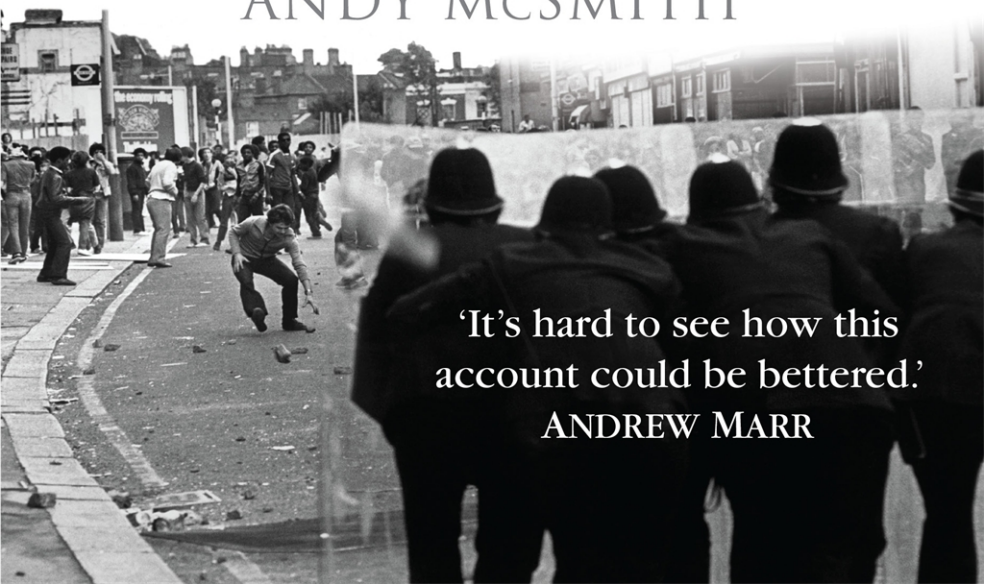
Written by Andy McSmith

Published by Constable

NO SUCH THING AS SOCIETY

A HISTORY OF BRITAIN IN THE 1980s

ANDY McSMITH



'It's hard to see how this account could be bettered.'
ANDREW MARR

Andy McSmith has been a senior writer at the *Independent* newspaper since April 2007, having previously been a political correspondent on the same paper, and political editor of the *Independent on Sunday* and chief political correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* and *Observer*. He is the author of four books: biographies of John Smith and Kenneth Clarke, a collection of short biographies called *Faces of Labour*, and a novel, *Innocent in the House*. He has also contributed to numerous other books. He lives in London.

No Such Thing as Society

Andy McSmith

CONSTABLE • LONDON

To Nick
who was twelve weeks and five days
old when the 1980s ended

Contents

Acknowledgements

There are numerous people I should thank for help and information, including Sue Dearie, Nigel Farage, Andy Grice, Adrian Hamilton, Lucy Hodges, Richards Ingrams, James Manning, Amol Rajan, Simon Redfern, John Rentoul, Steve Richards, Belinda Salt, Kim Sengupta, Ben Summerskill, Peter Tatchell, Francis Wheen, the compilers of the excellent Margaret Thatcher Foundation website, my agent Andrew Gordon and publisher Andreas Campomar. Any errors, omissions or misjudgements I may have made are, of course, entirely the responsibility of next door's cats.

Introduction

The Decade of Greed and Live Aid

First, you had to find a ticket. They could fit 80,000 in Wembley Stadium even with a massive stage at one end, but there were many more than 80,000 kids who would have liked to have been there on 13 July 1985. Some queued all night outside the ticket points. Tickets cost £25, at a time when jobs advertised in the local Jobcentre paid £1.20 an hour or less,[1] making it probably the most expensive live show that many in the crowd had ever attended. Yet no one complained, because there was a promise that £20 out of that £25 would go towards famine relief in Africa, and, more to the point, that the precious square of watermarked paper was a pass to the Greatest Gig in the Galaxy.

The crowd began to pour in as soon as Wembley's gates opened at 10 a.m., two hours before the start. Some people had numbered seats in the stands; the rest staked out patches of ground on the tarpaulin-covered pitch. The more ambitious had brought blankets and cool boxes, thinking it was a good day for a picnic, but they were soon disabused as the crowds piled in, pushing everyone forwards, until they realized that they were going to spend the whole day on their feet, with just about enough space to wave their arms. This was a problem for anyone who was hungry or needed the toilet during that long, hot day. Beating a path out of the crowd was difficult enough; the really tricky part was finding the way back to rejoin friends amid a sea of sun-baked bodies. Stewards sprayed the crowd with hoses. The fans begged them to keep doing it. Light rain in the early evening came as a relief.

At last, there was a roar from the crowd as something stirred on the distant stage. It was noon, and to a loud fanfare that day's king and queen of rock 'n' roll had entered the royal box, accompanied by the putative future king and queen of the United Kingdom. First on was Paula Yates, in a jeans suit with close-cropped dyed white hair, carrying her bewildered infant daughter, Fifi Trixibelle. Next, Bob Geldof, scruffy in sweatshirt and jeans jacket. He was hardly still all day, running on adrenaline, rushing from his seat on to the stage to perform with the Boomtown Rats, or to a nearby studio to harangue a live, worldwide television audience, estimated by the BBC at 1.5 billion viewers in 160 countries. At one point in the day, he caused a ripple of disapproval as he swore on live television. He was expected to read out an address to which donations could be sent but exclaimed 'fuck the address', and instead gave out a telephone number. It did not stop the money coming in. He was seen on camera taking a call from the Sheikh of Kuwait, who gave £1m.

By contrast, the man who filed into the stadium beside him had probably never experienced an adrenaline rush in a lifetime in the public eye. Prince Charles looked older than his thirty-six years and quite out of place, in a dark suit with a folded white handkerchief in the breast pocket, striped pale-blue shirt, tie, and perfectly combed and parted hair that left his large ears in view. He endured the music with a fixed smile, apparently feeling overdressed. 'I'll have to buy myself a pair of denims,' he is alleged to have muttered.[2] At one point, he leant over to invite Geldof, in a whisper, to a concert at Buckingham Palace the following week, where they would be playing Bach and Handel.[3] But, the handsome young woman at his side, in a low-waisted, short-sleeved pale-blue dress with padded shoulders, was having the time of her life. Princess Diana was the most photographed woman in the world. To look like Diana was the summit of many a teenage girl's sartorial ambition. Her influence was one reason that padded shoulders had stayed fashionable years after models had walked the Paris catwalk without them; one fashion writer accused Diana of having pads that 'zoom ever further off into the outer limits of Dynastic bad taste'.[4] (Or perhaps the blame should be directed at the boy-kings of fashion, Duran Duran, Diana's favourite band, or at Joan Collins, the grande dame of the American TV soap *Dynasty*.) Diana had lived under the public's gaze for more than four years, but still had a way of lowering her

head as if she were trying to hide her face behind her short blonde hair. It was already rumoured that the royal marriage was not the happy-ever-after romance that it had first appeared to be. Their contrasting musical tastes were just one aspect of their incompatibility.

After a few bars of the national anthem, the audience went wild with excitement as those old 1960s rockers, Status Quo, strutted on stage looking like 'a cartoon encapsulation of everything rock 'n' roll is supposed to be – ordinary blokes with long hair in denims playing 12-bar load',[5] to perform 'Rocking All Over the World'. There were no support acts during this unique concert; every band was big enough to top the bill, almost every number performed was a rock classic. Between the acts, there were sombre interludes as the crowd was shown images of hunger and poverty in Africa. It is a tall order to expect adolescents who have paid money and travelled long distances to hear live rock, to sit patiently through an instructive film about hunger and poverty, but on this unusual day even these bleak messages were received in respectful silence, particularly when 'Drive', by The Cars, which included the line 'Who's gonna pick you up when you fall down?', was played as the soundtrack to a searing video of a child weakened by hunger and struggling to stand up on thin legs. By nightfall, Live Aid had raised £30m, three times what had been expected.

The worst that could be said about that extraordinary day was that most of the people in the crowd had very little idea of the scale and complexity of Africa's problems; £30m was an astonishing sum to raise from one charitable event, but it was nowhere near enough to impact on world affairs. As a comparison, two months after Live Aid, the British government sealed an arms deal with Saudi Arabia that was worth £43 billion, or more than 1,400 Live Aid concerts. The slush fund that the British contractor BAE set aside in Swiss and Panamanian bank accounts to pay commissions, or bribes, to various middlemen involved in the arms deal is thought to have been more than three times the amount raised by Live Aid.[6]

Geldof, to his credit, was quick to realize that if he was to take famine relief seriously he would have to immerse himself in the politics of world trade, because all the energy and goodwill of that summer's day hardly made a ripple on Africa's problems. Even so, Live Aid was one of the greatest displays of generosity that Britain has ever seen, and it is the single most lasting image

of Britain in the 1980s – which might seem odd, because the decade is not thought of as a charitable one. In the USA, the 1980s is known as the 'decade of greed' because of the way light regulation and tax changes allowed money to pour into the bank accounts of those who were already wealthy, creating a culture in which the corrupt investor Ivan Boesky told an audience in California that 'you can be greedy and still feel good about yourself'.[7]

There was a similar phenomenon in 1980s Britain, though the phrase used to sum it up was not coined by an investor but by a satirical stand-up comic, Harry Enfield. It was the 'loadsamoney' culture. Salaries were rising, and the higher tax rates had fallen and fallen for those who were paid enough to be affected; the generous cuts came at the start of the decade, but the biggest of all was in 1988, when the top rate went down from 60p to 40p, which put up the disposable income of the well-off by up to one-fifth overnight. It was one of those rare cases when London led the way, and Washington followed. When Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as president of the USA in January 1981, the phenomenon known in Britain as Thatcherism was already almost two years old.

The politics of the 1980s was dominated by Margaret Thatcher – who was prime minister from May 1979 to November 1990 – in a way that no other decade is associated with one individual. And there is no other prime minister about whom opinion is so divided. Her arrival in Downing Street brought hope to people who feared that a sickness had overtaken the western democracies, in which individual liberty was being sacrificed to an obsession with social justice. One of the many messages of congratulation sent to her in May 1979 came from California, from Milton Friedman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist who had developed the theory called monetarism, which hypothesized that the government's first and almost its only responsibility in managing the economy was to ensure that the currency was sound. The orthodox ideas that the state should intervene to keep prices and wage inflation under control, or increase public spending to escape from recession, were rejected by monetarists such as Friedman, who would later take up a post as President Reagan's economic adviser. Thatcher and the new chancellor of the exchequer, Sir Geoffrey Howe, were the first converts to monetarism to hold office in any democracy. Hence the enthusiasm of Friedman's telegram, 'Britain can lead us all to a rebirth of freedom – as it led us all down the road

to socialism', and the solemnity of Mrs Thatcher's handwritten reply, 'The battle has now begun. We must win by implementing the things in which we believe.'[8]

The 'we' in that sentence was not meant to be all-inclusive. The beliefs that Mrs Thatcher held with such conviction were minority beliefs. There was not even a majority for them in the Conservative cabinet, but she was very confident that public opinion would rally if she held fast and explained herself clearly. Not for her the middle ground where consensual politicians build their majorities on bland statements with which no one could disagree. So little of what so many politicians say is worth memorizing that the few quotations that people can remember usually turn out to be inaccurate. Thatcher's predecessor, Labour leader James Callaghan, never said 'crisis, what crisis?' Nor did her cabinet ally Norman Tebbit precisely tell the unemployed to get 'on your bike' to look for work. But the things people think Margaret Thatcher said, she did indeed say, including her pronouncement that 'there is no such thing as society'.[9]

When she said this, she was expressing a widely shared view that the welfare state was too bloated, too much of an expense for people who worked hard and paid their taxes, and too easy an option for those who preferred not to work at all, if they could avoid it. When Mrs Thatcher's father was building up his business, it was success or ruin; there was no safety net to catch him if he fell. Necessity made him self-reliant. Mrs Thatcher feared that the welfare state was sapping that self-reliance and she wanted to remind those who fell back on it that they were creating a burden that other people had to carry. It was not something she said on the spur of the moment, but a long-held belief. In 1979, she included a similar sentiment in her handwritten notes for a speech she was preparing. She wrote that there is 'no such thing as a collective conscience, collective kindness, collective gentleness, collective freedom'[10] but was persuaded by advisers not to be so blunt in public. Eight years later, after she had steered her party through three general election victories, there was no need to be so cautious.

It has been said many times that she created a more selfish society, in which the rich flaunted their wealth and the poor were forgotten. Since the Second World War, the United Kingdom had been slowly but steadily becoming a more equal society, as the gap between richest and poorest

closed. The Thatcher government reversed that. Between 1949 and 1979, the share of the nation's wealth received by the top 1 per cent fell from 6.8 to 4.7 per cent; in the next ten years, it rose to 7.1 per cent. In 1980, a man in the top 10 per cent of earners would, on average, have been on 2.5 times the weekly income of a man in the bottom 10 per cent, after income tax. By 1990, it was more than 3.5 times.[11] This was achieved partly through tax reductions and deregulation, which allowed net incomes to rise at the top end of the pay scale. Further down, restrictive laws to curb trade unions kept a check on wages. A week after Live Aid, the government turned its attention to the very lowest wages. There were certain groups of workers, such as hotel and restaurant staff and shop assistants, who were protected by the government through agencies known as wages councils, established by Winston Churchill early in the century to set the minimum pay rates for groups of employees who were not protected by strong unions. In July 1985, the government announced that in future no one under the age of twenty-one would be protected by wages councils. Teenagers who had responded to Bob Geldof's call to give to the needy would be repaid with lower-paid jobs. The government believed that lower pay would lead to more jobs, much needed when unemployment was heading up towards the post-war peak of more than 3m that it reached early in 1986.

Nineteen weeks before Live Aid, there was another symbolic image that burned into the memories of those who were alive at the time. The politically minded would say it was more memorable even than the concert in Wembley. Columns of miners marched under their lodge banners back to the pits, defeated, after one of the longest and bitterest strikes in history. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was one of Britain's most politicized unions; its president, the charismatic Arthur Scargill, was a Marxist and its vice-president was a Communist, but the cause for which the miners struck was deeply conservative. They wanted to conserve their way of life. They wanted to go on living in pit villages, working down mines owned by the government, and where there was coal that could not be extracted profitably, they wanted the National Coal Board to keep them open anyway, running at a loss subsidized by the government. But Mrs Thatcher believed that too much industry was owned by the state, that too much was subsidized and that the authority of the elected government was being challenged by an alien

organization, the domestic equivalent of the Argentinian junta that challenged British authority by trying to seize the Falkland Islands in 1982. To her, the miners' union was the 'enemy within' – another famous quotation attributed to her that turns out to be wholly accurate.

The miners' defeat was the most serious reverse that the British trade union movement suffered in its long history. The unions had become used to being treated almost as partners in government, with a part to play in setting wage levels, drawing up industrial law and developing economic policy. Mrs Thatcher put an end to that. When she came to power, there were 167 unions affiliated to the Trade Union Congress (TUC) with a combined membership of 12m, plus other professional organizations outside the TUC, that did not shy away from industrial action. The Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) alone had a membership of more than 2m. That was the high point of union power; from that point onwards it was all downhill. The strikes that broke out in the late 1970s, including those that occurred in the winter of 1978–9, actually had less impact on everyday life than the miners' strike of 1972 (which put everyone on a three-day week), or the earlier postal strike that meant everyone went without mail for two months; but too many strikes had worn away public tolerance. Even paid-up union members were declaring that unions should be curbed. Mrs Thatcher's government tapped ruthlessly into the changing public mood by cutting the trade unions out of all decision-making and passing laws to curb their freedom of action. In this confrontation, the government was the stronger side. As the decade ended, major strikes had become almost a thing of the past.

Generally speaking, on economic issues the government succeeded in carrying public opinion with it. Its trade union legislation, the tax reforms, the selling-off of nationalized industries and the attacks on local government spending all provoked ferocious opposition, but the opposition never really had public opinion behind it until Mrs Thatcher overreached herself in 1989 by introducing the poll tax.

In the circumstances, it might be expected that right-wing opinion would also carry the day on other issues, such as sexual morality or race relations. Perhaps surprisingly, this did not happen. People who were basking in the experience of having 'loadsamoney' may have been selfish, but they were not trying to force everyone else to be like them. Race and sexuality were the

greatest social issues of the 1980s, and on both counts society was more liberal at the end of the decade than at the start. In the final years of Nelson Mandela's long imprisonment an increasing number of white Britons saw him as a prisoner of conscience, despite the prime minister's unchanging belief that he was the head of a terrorist organization. It is claimed that gays suffered a setback at the government's hands with the introduction of Clause 28, which banned local authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality. Gay men suffered something much worse than a setback in the 1980s, not from bigots, but from the AIDS epidemic, while Clause 28 had almost no effect on them. The only harm it really did was to the Conservative Party, which had to spend years trying to shake off its reputation as a party for bigots.

Though there was a great deal more political activism in the 1980s than in the two decades that followed – more marching, protesting and standing on picket lines – it should not be forgotten that most people did not become involved if they could avoid it, but got on contentedly with their lives. Despite the economic and political upheavals, there were plenty of visible signs that life was getting better, including the arrival of new time-saving or leisure-improving technology. The first video cassette recorders went on sale in 1978, giving rise to the possibility that people could free themselves from the television schedules and watch the programmes of their choice at the time of their choosing. The cheapest VCR advertised in the *Birmingham Evening Mail* in January 1980 cost £172.80, whereas a washing machine or a fridge-freezer could be bought for £140, and a black-and-white television for £70. It was during 1980 that the first affordable home computer, the Sinclair ZX80, went on sale; it had no sound or colour, and was very slow, but it cost less than £100. People in the larger towns had recently been introduced to the new machines in the walls of banks, where they could use plastic cards to withdraw cash, but never more than £50 at a time. Shoppers who visited the Keymarkets store in Spalding, Lincolnshire, would have noticed something unusual. In 1979, this shop was the first in the UK to introduce scanners that read the barcodes on certain products, starting with Melrose tea bags. In 1980, barcodes spread for the first time beyond the grocery trade, when they were introduced by WH Smith.

For male university students, the most interesting innovation of 1980 was the noisy, bulky Space Invaders machines that turned up in every student

bar. For teenage schoolchildren, the biggest intellectual challenge of 1980 was trying to solve Rubik's Cube. This new craze was a three-dimensional puzzle, devised in the 1970s by a Hungarian sculptor and licensed by Ideal Toys in 1980, comprising six faces covered with nine stickers in six different colours, which could be turned independently, mixing the colours to one of 43,252,003,274,489,856,000 permutations. The challenge was to turn them back again so that each face was a solid colour once more. By September 1981, 50m cubes had been sold, fifty books had been written about it and there was a magazine devoted specifically to the cube, edited by David Singmaster, a mathematics lecturer from London's South Bank Polytechnic. Children were better at it than grown ups; some could solve it in seconds while an adult could sweat unavailingly for hours. A twelve-year-old boy named Patrick Bossert, from Ham, Surrey, devised a system for solving the cube in thirty-five seconds, which he wrote down on two sides of A4 and sold to other children at his school for 30p a copy; Penguin bought the rights, and *You Can do the Cube* sold 500,000 copies in four weeks, and 1.4m in all, making it the fastest-selling title since *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Its young author had to take action in the high court to prevent pirated copies going on sale.[12] Hobbies such as this were more fun and less divisive than politics.

Even in 1981, when the inner cities were torn apart by race riots, there was a yearning in society to put aside ideology and civil conflict, and muddle along together. In that year, for the first and only time in the twentieth century, a new political party made an impact on national politics. This was the meteoric Social Democratic Party (SDP), formed in reaction to the left-right divide separating Labour and Conservatives, and which looked briefly as if it might be the next governing party, but which had gone out of existence by 1989. The same longing for something uncontroversial and unifying explains the astonishing popularity of the royal wedding of 1981, and the cult of Princess Diana. It also goes a long way towards explaining the phenomenon of Live Aid, which offered the young a way to be involved in one of the great issues of the time, without being divisive or dull.

In 1980, the developed world was cut in two by the military border that ran through Germany, between the communist and capitalist blocs. They had learnt to coexist, but no one knew how long peaceful coexistence could

last. The capitalist system was more dynamic and more successful economically than its rival, but once communism took hold of a country, it seemed that nothing could turn it back. No established communist system had ever been dismantled or overthrown from within. People expected this contest between rival systems to continue indefinitely. Instead, they saw it coming to a quick, decisive and non-violent end. As communism rolled out of Eastern Europe in 1989, an American philosopher forecast that the end of history was approaching[13] and that every other political system in the world would evolve into the western model of liberal capitalism.

These developments were mirrored in domestic politics. Since 1945, the UK had edged towards becoming more 'socialist', with free medicine, free schools, state pensions and more than 40 per cent of the country's industrial capacity owned by the state. Within the Labour Party, there was a vigorous movement led by Tony Benn to give the country another sharp push in the same direction. Mrs Thatcher, however, was determined to 'roll back the frontiers of socialism',[14] which she succeeded in doing. Though her economic legacy is highly controversial, no government has attempted to undo it. The Thatcherite mix of privatized utilities, low taxes for the highly paid and restrictive trade union legislation survived even thirteen years of Labour government. The end of ideology changed the language. Words like 'Marxism' and 'capitalism' went out of everyday use, while 'political correctness' and 'spin doctor' entered the language, as people stopped thinking about where politics might go and turned their thoughts to personal behaviour and the political process.

More change and more conflict were crammed into the 1980s, particularly the first half of the decade, than any other decade in the second half of the twentieth century. Out of political chaos, Britain arrived at a settlement that lasted, for better or worse. The way we live now follows directly from the tumultuous events of the 1980s.