What if.....

In 'The future's not ours to see,', his review of Atkinson and Elliot's *Going South*, in *Lobster* 65,[1] Simon Matthews offered a kind of alternative history of British history in the 1970s and 80s, in which Mrs Thatcher did not win the general election of 1979. Michael Morton contacted me to let me know such speculation had already been done by Andrew Marr in 1993 on BBC television; and that the scenarios discussed by Marr and various interviewees had originally been published in his magazine *Alternate Worlds* in January 1995.[2]

Very kindly, Michael Morton supplied a copy of the transcript of that Andrew Marr piece.

Without Her by Andrew Marr

[Michael Morton's note: This article is derived from the transcript of WITHOUT HER, broadcast on Sunday 24th October 1993 on BBC2. It is reprinted with the permission of Martin Davidson, the producer, and Andrew Marr, the presenter of the programme, who was the Chief Political Commentator of the *Independent* at that time.]

It's a disorienting thought. What would the 1980s have been like had Margaret Thatcher never happened to them? Where would we be now? Would we have been richer? Poorer? Kinder? What about privatisation? The Falklands war? Yuppies? If this sounds like a parlour game for the 1990s, it's also a way of reconsidering what DID happen. Trying to guess way through a lost, never-to-be-be

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1 <http://lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster65/lob65-going-south.pdf>

2 This article first appeared in January 1995 in *Alternate Worlds,* still available from 28 Bruce Street, Even Swindon, Swindon SN2 2EL for £6. Other articles include an introduction to Alternate Worlds by Brian Stableford; A Discussion of Likely Change Points for Alternate Realities, Universes and Histories by Evelyn C. Leeper; The Year It Happened Otherwise; An Alternate History Divergence List by R. B Schmunk and Evelyn C. Leeper; An Introduction to Sealion by Michael Morton and extensive review/analysis of books by Norman Longmate, Richard Cox and Kenneth Macksey; and book reviews in its 48 pages.

Such historical speculation is known as uchronia, and is the subject matter of the website <www.uchronia.net/>.

recovered parallel Britain, which didn't know what Thatcherism meant, has is serious side. I mean this as a sort of wry, oblique portrait of an age and the woman who dominated it. Welcome to Britain Without Her.....

Scenario One; the Sea Change: October 26 1978.

Guess What? Jim Callaghan listens to his cabinet. They're telling him to take advantage of economic growth and lower inflation and go to the country. The polls show only a small Tory lead of 8 points. It vanishes during a dirty, emotional campaign as Uncle Jim's reassuring presence turns the tide. His appeal rests on one simple question. Are you, the British people, ready to tear up the roots just as things are getting better and trust your nation's destiny to this extraordinary woman? Hardly a socialist question. Indeed, a conservative one. But it works. No, the nation rather comfortably replies, on the whole, we ain't. It was a victory for consensus politics and the British way, rather than for Labour. But Labour, the natural party of government, did it all right, with a 21-seat majority and another five years.

Earlier that year, Margaret Thatcher had told a chum that if she lost the election, her party might sack her. And so it did. The gentle-natured baronets and vengeful Heathites blamed her for scare tactics directed at the trade unions, for being too shrill, a little too right-wing and, frankly for being a woman. She refused to serve under the new leader, Jim Prior, but retired with some grace to the Tory backbenchers, along with a cohort of bitter followers, determined to keep the flame of free market radical alive in corporate Britain. But she was clearly finished. Atilla the Hen sitting on an egg that had addled.

And meanwhile on the pavement outside Number Ten, Mr Callaghan promised Britain a new start. "Where there is discord may

I, and the Labour Party bring harmony ...."

Interviewees: Denis Healey, Labour Cabinet Minister 1974-79; Shirley Williams, Labour Cabinet Minister 1971-79.

And her victory in doing so started from 1979. Small decisions or mistakes can produce historical hinges, moments of destiny, even if they don't feel that way at the time.

Interviewees: Robert Skidelsky, historian; Hugo Young, The Guardian *political commentator; Tony Parsons, rock critic; Bryan Gould; Will Hutton,* The Guardian *economics editor.*

The sea-change of 1978 then produced a whole new political climate. Events occurred, actions were taken, which reshaped the balance of forces in British politics and Margaret Thatcher a decade of omnipotence.... But of course it needn't have been like that. Without her the politics of the 1980s would have been a whole different world.

Scenario Two: Under James Callaghan and his chosen successor Denis Healey, Britain embarks on a period known as the politics of the hard centre. Tough but Tender becomes the catchphrase of the rampaging Labour right-wing, refreshed and embolden by victory. Although Healey loses power, narrowly in the 1983 election, the policies of the Walker Government, summed up by his slogan One Nation, One Family, are a continuation of the consensus. Just as Labour in the Callaghan, Healey, Owen years believed that the party's own resentful left represented a real threat to the British way of doing politics, so the Tories, dominated by Walker, Ian Gilmour and, latterly, by Kenneth Baker and Michael Heseltine, looked on the free marketeers Joseph, Thatcher and Tebbitt as a perpetual menace. Margaret never realised that we can move forward together, as they used to complain. Prime Minister Walker would occasionally complain about how the BBC gave an unrepresentative and minor fringe excessive publicity. This was

widely taken as a reference to the famous Tory dissident Mrs Thatcher, a darling of the Today programme and Newsnight.

The most radical policies were pursued outside Westminster, since the Eighties were the decade of devolution and powerful local government. The Scottish and Welsh assemblies opened for business in 1980. In Edinburgh in 1987, the Assembly declared itself a Parliament and by the late 1980s, to the unease of the London establishment, a debate on whether the Queen should any longer be the Scottish head of state was convulsing the Labour party, north of border.

Interviewees: Neal Ascherson, Independent on Sunday; *Denis Healey: Neil Kinnock, Labour Party Leader 1983-92; Norman Tebbitt, Conservative Cabinet Minister 1981-97; Beatrix Campbell, author* Iron Ladies.

The politics that did happen in the Thatcher years, the division of the left, the Falklands war, the winning of the C2s, that gave Margaret Thatcher the base from which to launch an economic programme which seems, even now, breathtaking in its audacity. In just a few years, the Thatcherites hoped to transform the way a nation earned its living. Unions were to be broken, the state was to be shrunk, taxes cut, markets deregulated. It may not have amounted to a blueprint but it certainly was a programme. It was what British politics spent the Eighties arguing about. Was there any choice? Could another political style have taken us through with less pain?

Scenario Three: The Eighties proved to be years which tested Britain's moderate political culture to the limits. The Healey and Walker governments struggled to keep unemployed below a million but were savagely attacked by both the Marxist left and the radical right for their heartlessness. When, at one point the jobless rose to 1.5 million, Mrs Thatcher and Tony Benn, who had resigned from the

Cabinet, were to agree in a Question Time debate that Labour isn't working. Though oil revenues helped to pay part of the cost, huge subsidies were poured into coal mining, steel, shipbuilding, and British Leyland. After crisis mini-budgets in 1980 and 1981, the basic rate of income tax was forced up to 50p in the pound. Inflation, the British disease of the Eighties, provoked bitter protests by pensioners and contributed to the short-termism and air of uncertainty which plagued industry.

A form of workers' ownership with a large private-sector share for some state enterprises was briefly considered as a way of raising cash. But this quickly dubbed privatisation in an enthusiastic editorial by the *Economist* newspaper, and in the ensuing row was quickly dropped. But, by the mid-Eighties, consensus politics seemed to have produced dividends, after all. Big nationally-subsided projects helped revive a sense of national pride. Ten Mark 3 Baby Concordes were bought by Pan-Am as well as the British State airline. The Prince of Wales was launched on the Clyde in 1987, the first Cunard liner for a generation. And even the much derided British Leyland scored a popular success with its updated and sporty Austin Healey.

Interviewees: Denis Healey; Shirley Williams; Ian Gilmour, Conservative Cabinet Minister 1979-81; Andrew Neil, editor, The Sunday Times*; Sir John Egan, Chairman Jaguar 1980-1990; David Willetts MP.*

A golden age that never was? Or is this all self-justifying hogwash, purified with a drop of holy hindsight?

Without her decision to take on the unions, who had been cast as a sort of shadow government by the 1970s, Mrs Thatcher's economic revolution would never have had a chance. She might have imposed the same monetarist squeeze in the early Eighties, but union power would have made it that much harder to shrink the public sector and a more rigid labour market would have slowed the subsequent boom. The fight with union power was a precondition.

But maybe some sort of union reform would have happened anyway?

Scenario Four: No issue caused the Callaghan-Healey administration more anguish than that of the trade unions. Pay policies were agreed and for a while, sort of stuck. Roy Hattersley's 1981 White Paper *Let Us Be Friends*, proposed a national compromise between principled socialism in office and patriotic trade unionism. But he was howled down at the Trade Union Congress. Mr Healey then announced, in his famous 'Enough is Enough' speech, that he would impose two restrictions on union power: a ban on mass picketing and compulsory ballots before strike action. Some right-wing Tories wanted the Government to go further, including banning secondary action and threatening the seizure of union assets. One Conservative backbencher, Geoffrey Howe, demanded tougher anti-union laws but the Prime Minister denounced him as a Thatcherite extremist. This, said an unperturbed Howe, was like being attacked by a dead sheep. The Walker Government was elected on a promise to give more rights to individual trade unionists and extend the balloting procedures.

Denis Healey had been replaced as Labour Leader by Neil Kinnock after losing the election. By the early 1990s, though British wage costs were generally accepted to be dangerously high, some of the larger unions were adopting consensus bargaining with company management, on the German model.

They (the unions) were still a drag on the economy, but a problem which, like wet summers, Britain seemed to have learned to live with.

Interviewees: Bill Jordan, leader, Engineering Union; Denis Healey; Will Hutton; Norman Tebbitt; John Mortimer, novelist; John Biffen MP, Conservative Cabinet Minister 1979-87.

If breaking the back of union power was the precondition of the

Thatcher programme, it was of course, only the beginning. If the Thatcher years had only been about defeating organised groups then they would not have lasted very long. But she was also able to hand economic power to others, building a base of support in all sorts of places.

There were the new owners of council houses, and the recipients of windfall privatisation profits. There were the hundreds of thousands who got jobs in the deregulated financial sector, or in Japanese or American factories attracted here by the Thatcher revolution. There were the millions warmed and cheered by the easy credit and rising house-prices of what become known as the Lawson Boom. For many of us, the later Thatcher years were fat years. Without her, the winners wouldn't have won as much, or maybe at all.

Scenario Five: The losers during the Consensus Eighties tended to be people on fixed incomes, like pensioners, and the overtaxed, under represented small businesses. There was an anguished national debate about whether it was inevitable that the City of London, stuck in its Dickensian time warp, should be ceding its once-dominated position to Frankfurt and Paris. The Labour Government argued that the problem was one of under-regulation and a more up-to-date system of scrutiny would help the City's international prestige. The Minister of State for Business Ethics, Lord Maxwell, introduced a package of new laws. It was no longer enough to assume that an Englishman's word was his bond, said Maxwell. Yet the City continued to decline. The Big Five US Banks decided to leave London. The Walker Government announced a bonfire of financial controls and won outline approval for the new European Central Bank to be based at Canada House on the Isle of Dogs, but it was all a little too late.

While trade union employees and those working in northern engineering companies seemed to be well-protected, a tide of

anger rose among the excluded Britain of the south. A protest march organised in 1983 by Surrey Shopkeepers and the Association of London Estate Agents resulted in a riot in Trafalgar Square. *[2013 note: this was illustrated in the broadcast by footage of the poll tax demonstration.]* Nicholas Ridley praised the marchers as lions and suggested that the police had overreacted. The National Union of Mineworkers leader, Arthur Scargill, in supporting police action, protested strongly about the use of violence for political ends by people he termed sinister right-wing extremists. Margaret Thatcher defended them as true patriots. But the polls suggested voters had a lot of sympathy with the estate agents and the riot was popularly supposed to have contributed to the Labour defeat later that year.

I*nterviewees: Andrew Neil, Peter York, management consultant; Ian Hislop, editor,* Private Eye*; Will Hutton; David Willetts.*

Again, though, if the Thatcher Eighties had been merely an economic project, they wouldn't have aroused a fraction of the controversy they did. Whether she wanted to or not, Margaret Thatcher stood for a revolution in values. She picked up the phrase "Victorian values" but while she meant thrift, hard work and self reliance; others took it to mean a return to crude, coarse, meritocratic, individualism. Let the devil, or rather the dole, take the hindmost. So she took the rap for Britain's discarded and disposed as well for the upwardly mobile and new rich. Was the cost too high? Certainly, without her, our social values and perhaps our private ones to would have been..... well how different would it have felt?

Scenario Six: Everyone agreed that, whatever their downside, the great achievement of the Healey-Walker years was holding the social fabric of the country together; but the compact came at a price. The ever-swelling public sector took on huge new projects to

provide jobs – that was how the outer orbital London railway got built, never mind the famous sprawl of council housing in the Yorkshire new town of Beveridge. The liberal elite or the caring classes, as they were sarcastically known, prided themselves on the building of the decent society. They flocked to state-subsided films like Ken Russell's "Life of Shelley" and hit musicals like Andrew Lloyd-Webber's "Wigan Pier Show". Kenneth Branagh's film of "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist" was held to be a vindication of the subsidised cinema industry, while the cult thriller, "Grabber!" starring Martin Shaw, deals with the exploits of a cynical but dashing tax inspector.

But there was a darker side too. There was, for one thing, the ever-wagging finger of the Nanny State, the first signs of homelessness tackled under a "New Roofs for the Young" programme. Council house tenants on the Isle of Dogs petitioned the government to buy their own homes but were curtly refused permission. Scuffles also took place in Beveridge new town, during a visit by Tony Banks, the Shadow Housing Minister. The number of institutions entitled to call themselves universities was halved to preserve excellence. Britons were denied the right to see new fangled satellite and cable television on the grounds that, as the Home Secretary Francis Pym put it, this would undermine the BBC and threaten our great English literary culture. Rupert Murdoch's withdrawal from British newspapers was blamed by the National Union of Journalists on red tape.

Increasingly, younger Britons looked enviously at their stylish, flashier and richer counterparts on the continent – particular The German upwardly mobile bankers and business folk, or Guppys as they became known as. It was all, at home, just a little grey and timid, a gentle slither downwards with no exit routes. Even so, the decade of decline was also one in which Britain, under Denis Healey and Peter Walker, stayed together, stayed calm, stayed, well, very British.

Interviewees: David Jenkins, Anglican Bishop of Durham; Tony Parsons; Billy Bragg, rock musician; Janet Daley, The Times*; Beatrix Campbell; Mike Philips, novelist; Neil Kinnock; Hugo Young; Bhikhu Parekh, University of Hull.*

Yes, but before it undid her, she had time to undo quite a lot of those parts of Britain that Britain that particularly irritated her. Her economic foes may have been socialists, but her cultural ones were the liberal establishment, the old Britain of the civil service, the universities, the leftish Tories of club land, the smugger professions, the BBC.

And if Margaret Thatcher made us ask ourselves who we were as individuals, she posed the same question to the nation as a whole. What was Britain? How big could our influence be – in the world, at the core of NATO, in the fast-developing politics of the European Community? No part of the Thatcherite project spawned as much hyperbole and derision, patriotic pride and liberal embarrassment, as her vivid eruptions on the world stage. The verve, the ambition, the self-dramatisation were unforgettable. But did they really make that much difference? What would the world have been like in the Eighties without her?

Scenario Seven: They were placid years for the Foreign Office, the early 1980s. The biggest threat came in the south Atlantic where Argentina made various military feints against the little-known Falkland Islands. But Healey, under Callaghan's naval influence, sent enough vessels regularly enough to prevent an outright Argentine assault. Instead, after a long period of negotiation, Britain ceded the islands to Argentinean control in the mid-1980s in return for a large payment to the British treasury and mining and exploration rights in the Antarctic. The poet Philip Larkin wrote his final public work about this; a bitter lament for national dignity which was published in the very last issue of the *Spectator* magazine. The

islanders who felt betrayed were, at public expense, moved to the uninhabited Scottish of St. Kilda. They were heavily subsidised and seemed to settle pretty happily, except for the incident in 1989 when they used a flock of several hundred long-horned sheep to block Princes Street, Edinburgh, during a state visit by General Galtieri.

The end of the cold war and the debate over European Union dominated the latter half of the decade.

The defence secretaries David Owen and George Younger backed the arrival of American Cruise missiles despite protests from Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the woman's movement. Prime Minister Healey seemed to get to get on quite well with President Reagan, though his private assessment of the former actor, salty and uncomplimentary in equal measure, caused a diplomatic storm when it leaked out.

Trident was voted through the Commons but Prime Minister cooled towards the idea when the Berlin Wall fell. The government set up a Royal Commission to review Defence Expenditure. Walker had already declared that Gorbachev was a man with whom Europe could do business. Though Britain's role in all this was rather minor, the Bratislava Accord between Moscow and the European Community helped Gorbachev's Glasnost programme, and silenced the more extreme critics of his speed of reform, such as Boris Yeltsin.

In the late Eighties and early Nineties came the great Labour split over European Union. A small number of Tory dissidents, or utter bastards as Peter Walker called them privately, voted against the Maastricht Treaty for Perpetual Union but despite a fierce campaign led by right-wing backbenchers, this was narrowly approved at the subsequent referendum. Overall it all had been a decade of characterised by Britain's drift towards the continental mainland and by a lessening of the country's role in world affairs.

I*nterviewees: Denis Healey; Norman Tebbitt; Ian Gilmour; Robert Skidelsky; Casper Weinberger, United States Secretary of Defense 1983-87; John Pilger, journalist; Norman Tebbitt; Isabel Hutton,* The Independent.

If the American relationship was Mrs Thatcher's strongest card, then the long Tory war over European Union was the Achilles heel that her famously sensible shoes never quite covered.

The Verdict: It's impossible to do more than vaguely guess at whether Britain would have a better or a worse country had we gone through the Downing Street Years with someone else. And our guesses are the product of our prejudices and instincts. For what it's worth, I think we would have more industry, fewer jobless, less of a division between north and south and a healthier, more pluralistic and optimistic political culture. But I also think we would be facing grim and hard decisions in the Nineties.

Perhaps the sense of disillusion and national despair would have been stronger.

We would have would have been kinder but uneasy, but I'm not sure that the overall result would have been so terribly different. The politicians mostly disagree.

But if, Without Her, we now face the rest of the Nineties struggling with deep structural and political conflicts, a more sclerotic society, what would be looking for now, in 1993? Would it be a radical break from consensus? A strong leader? The one confrontation that we didn't mention in discussing Margaret's Thatcher in the world was the one she probably influenced most; the decision to go to war in the Gulf.

Final Scenario: In July 1990. Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Partly on British advice, President George Bush led a United Nations campaign for sanctions. But when it came to the use of force in a

dangerous and faraway theatre.... George wobbled. One by one the Gulf states decided it was safer to deal with Iraq than to defy it and at the Treaty of Baghdad in 1992 agreed to raise oil prices to pay for a programme of Islamic industrialisation. Prime Minister Walker won a third majority. But then he announced that the times demanded compromise and reconciliation more than ever. As a symbol of Britain's unity in time of trouble, he invited Labour to help prepare austerity measures. It was too much for the Tory backbenchers who finally revolted.

In November 1993, to the shock and amazement of the outside world, the Conservative Party in Parliament forced its leader to undergo the humiliation of a challenge. The result was even more unsettling. The veteran fringe backbencher and darling of the BBC, Margaret Thatcher won on the second ballot and became Britain's first female Prime Minister.

This week, she promised as you may recall, in the Prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi:

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is discord, harmony.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is darkness, light.
Where there is sadness, joy.

But tonight I suspect many of us are wondering just what the secrets the Thatcher Nineties have in store.