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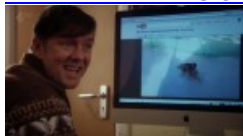


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MARGARET THATCHER: MY PART IN HER DOWNFALL by Toby Miller

Friday 12 April 2013 Last updated at 11:00

I talked to a cab driver the day after Margaret Thatcher died. He was worried about congestion during her funeral the following Wednesday. Should he respect his birthday and take the day off, as planned, or cash in on the commemoration?

The cabbie was three years old when Winston Churchill died in 1965, but he recollected that the funeral had been on a weekend, to minimize social disruption. He was [right](#).

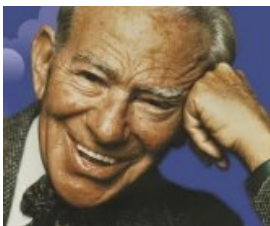
Our conversation took this form as we made our way from London's inner east to the Houses of Parliament, where the Dirty Digger has his lair and I was to be interviewed on Sky News about the cultural impact of Thatcherism.

The recording took place in front of Parliament. Tory grandees, by contrast, [spoke live](#) and out of the wind, perhaps to protect their make-up and comb-overs.

Most of the words I offered, such as 'hegemonic,' 'black,' 'Afro-Caribbean,' and 'Billy Bragg,' did not make it to air, and I was asked to repeat an answer to a question without mentioning the BBC, which I had done initially. Tsk, Toby.

I presume this Sky opportunity arose because of [my interview](#) with National Public Radio's *Marketplace* on the same topic a day before. *Marketplace* generally contacts me when it needs someone vaguely English to comment on one of the [Queen's corgis](#) suffering hip dysplasia, Oprah [catching cold](#), or Piers Morgan's [bitchiness](#) with a British accent'. Remember the opening voiceover to *Danger Man* (in the UK)/*Secret Agent* (in the US)? 'A messy job? Well that's when they usually call on me—or someone like me.'

The day after promising Sky News not to mention the BBC, ZDF invited me back to Abingdon Green. When I arrived, they told me "Ding Dong! The Witch is Dead" was [zooming up the charts](#) in terms of downloads, sales, versions, and discourse. I gave them a rendition, which, astonishingly, appears not to have made it [to air](#). Meanwhile, the BBC was [tying itself in knots](#) over whether to play the song on its "Official Chart" radio show.



During the interview, I thought of *Democracy Now's* [moving tribute](#) to the song's lyricist, Yip Harburg. It reminds us that *The Wizard of Oz* was a musical paean to socialism, a site where people whose lives had been wrecked by capital might imagine a new world. Harburg's reward was a decade exiled from Hollywood after the War due to his politics. And as is so often the case with popular song, the sign was untimely ripped from its referent. But history is seeing a remarkable return to Yip's original meaning.

In any event, the opportunity to comment on Thatcher's cultural impact also led me to reflect on my experience as a television pundit. I'm not a significant figure on TV. I'm not a significant figure anywhere. But sometimes I transcend corgis and colds.

Just before September 11, 2001, I appeared on CNN International to talk about Afghan refugees in peril off the Australian coast. The anchorman looked at me disbelievingly as I explained the history of racialization by the Australian state. Incredulous, he countered with 'are you telling us that the Australian Government is racist?'

Just after the attacks on the US, I was invited onto New York 1, a local cable news channel, to comment on the psychology of terrorists. The questions coming at me included: 'What makes people do these things?' and 'Are they maladjusted?' I endeavored to direct the conversation towards US support of totalitarian regimes that restricted access to politics, hence turning religion into a zone of resistance. The production staff later told me that when the program accepted phone calls from the public, the board lit up, and viewers I spoke with thanked me. The channel said I'd be asked back. Perhaps they say that to all the boys. It didn't happen.

But those live appearances did enable me to make some points on my own terms. Pre-interviews and recorded TV are another matter, as per Sky.

When CBS News contacted me after the *New York Times* revealed that George W Bush had instructed the National Security Agency to spy on US citizens without judicial review, a producer asked me to explain the history of censorship during wartime. I replied that whilst most critics would agree that the precise timing and location of an event such as D-Day should be secret, concealing the contravention of domestic civil liberties was another matter.

The producer advised me that my services were not required. He didn't want the history of censorship during wartime. He wanted a nationalist opposed to civil liberties.

Of course, going 'live' can be hazardous. BBC Three once invited me to talk about footage of hostage executions. I agreed, then received a bizarre email: how old was I? Given the answer—'43'—the producers vetted my looks on line to establish my appeal to their youth audience. There was a clear connection in my mind to when *The News Hour* on PBS had interviewed me about *American Beauty* the year before. As we waited to go live, a producer screamed down the line to the camerawoman, 'Do something about those fucking bags under his eyes!' Ten seconds later, Jim Lehrer said: 'Going to you first, Toby Miller, what does *American Beauty* tell us about the crisis of American men over 40?'

It's no surprise that after hundreds of years, my sense is that I've achieved little more than please the press officers of my employers.

And my part in Margaret Thatcher's impact was virtually zero. Maybe I inspired her. I was a member of The Specials and The Jam, encouraged references to Red Wedge and the Flying Pickets, and got someone to dwell for a few minutes on the subject.

But that doesn't take away from the fact that she was forced to engage cultural politics by Margaret Thatcher's demise.

She personified the neoliberal regime of Thatcherism. Freedom to prosper was heralded, and greed wasn't just good—it was great. There was an historic redistribution of income to the rich. The industrial regions of the UK were devastated. North Sea oil was squandered. The economy lost its productive heart, displaced by a bloated, decadent services sector. Scotland and Wales were left to rot, victims of electoral calculation. Local government was eviscerated. Queer activism was criminalized. Football fans were chided. Hundreds lost their lives on a retreating Argentine ship. *Apartheid* was defended. The division of Germany was trumpeted. Morrissey has [listed](#) the many horrors of which her supporters are so proud.

There may well be misogyny lurking behind the way some people are chanting "Ding Dong." Nevertheless, we should weep not for the departed incarnations of Thatcherism and Reaganism, but for those who suffered under their rule.

Yet the profound cultural response to that devastation was a beacon. Many folks are [cataloguing](#) anti-Thatcher songs of the '80s. My favorite is [Elvis Costello's "Shipbuilding"](#). It gives us reason to reflect on today's indissolubility of beauty and desolation, an indivisibility guaranteed when punk, and pop, and dub met Thatcherism. Now that's a legacy. Can we remake it?

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