One difficulty in discussing ‘an American view’ of Mrs Thatcher’s Britain is that the great majority of Americans have no view or any bases for a view, and this is true even of the best informed. In general, the view of Mrs Thatcher and what she has meant for modern Britain is positive, but less because of what is most interesting about her – the introduction of radical new ideas on how to remake Britain, its economy, its social services, and its social institutions – than because her foreign policy has been so supportive of that of the United States. But most Americans know little of all this because their newspapers and magazines tell them little. The American newspaper and news magazine is events-based, as is not surprising: something has to happen to draw any attention to a foreign nation, even one so large and important, and one so closely connected with us, as Britain. The things that have happened during Mrs Thatcher’s ten years and have been ‘news’, and which have therefore received attention, are her three electoral victories (but British campaigns are short, and don’t give American reporters much opportunity for coverage), and the Falklands war. As for the rest, if one doesn’t read the section on Britain in *The Economist*, as some of its 140,000 American subscribers must, one will not know much.

Of course it is the same in the other direction. In a front-page story in the *New York Times* on the government’s new health plan (a unique case, for there never has been front-page coverage, I believe, of any British domestic policy initiative), Craig Whitney writes, in connection with the fear that Mrs Thatcher’s government ‘wants to make over the health service along American lines’, that ‘in the British public mind, this means snarling doctors turning indigent patients untreated onto the streets, personal bankruptcy for the uninsured middle-class patient, and superb care depending on ability to pay. No one has heard of Blue Cross, charitable in-patient admissions or municipal hospitals’. Well, no one aside from the
experts — which is the same when it comes to knowledge of British social policy for the United States.¹

Nevertheless, there are a number of groups of Americans among whom there has been great interest, and informed interest, in the remarkable developments in Britain over the last ten years. Among these are economists who study problems of economic growth and the effect of alternative policies, and social policy analysts in the universities and in the various research institutes such as Brookings and the Urban Institute, for whom developments in British social policy, and social policy in Europe more generally, have in the past served as a benchmark against which to measure American progress, or lack of it, in the development of a welfare state. Along with them have been other economists and policy analysts, of a somewhat different stamp, associated with free-market-oriented or conservative think-tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Manhattan Institute in New York, and others. (I concentrate in this chapter on social policy, rather than economic policy.) As the most accessible and best-known of the welfare states of Europe, Britain's health and social services and educational system have been steadily studied by American experts both liberal and conservative as examples to be followed, and among some as examples to be avoided.

The international movement in ideas on the progressive approach to health and educational and social services has in general moved from Britain to the United States. But in the past twenty years, this international traffic has also included a stream of criticism of British welfare, health and educational services, flowing from Britain to the United States and surprising American analysts whose standard posture was admiration for how Britain managed these things, whether in its National Health Service, voluntary non-profit blood services, infant schools, council housing, or general social services. The role of the Institute of Economic Affairs is particularly important. Its work and publications precede those of most of the conservative American research institutes; its free-market orientation has been intriguing to many American policy analysts, particularly those, like the present writer, who have wondered whether there are not some good reasons, as well as bad ones, for the failure of the United States to develop its social services in the pattern of Britain. American policy analysts had been raised on work that applauded the huge British investment in council housing, comparing it with the paltry quantities of public housing we built in the United States; on admiring