“There is no such thing!”: On Public Service, Broadcasting, the National Health Service and “people” in the 1980s

Patricia Holland and Georgia Eglezou

“People” and “the public”

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand “I have a problem, it is the government’s job to cope with it!” or “I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!” “I am homeless, the government must house me!” and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing!

(Thatcher 1987)

Three months after Margaret Thatcher was elected as prime minister for her third term (June 1987) she gave an interview to Woman’s Own magazine in which she condemned those “children and people” who expected the government, as the representative of “society,” to sort their problems out. These reflections on personal, social and governmental responsibility, succinctly encapsulated later in the interview as “there’s no such thing as society, only individuals and families,” have resonated across the intervening years. That statement, made with such conviction, has become part of cultural history, fusing the image and the very person of Margaret Thatcher with the policies she was pursuing.

It remains as a sort of pivot, a useful shorthand which pulls together many aspects of cultural attitudes and social policy in the Conservative 1980s. It is possible to develop its multiple strands: the shrunken conceptualization of “society” and its responsibilities, the oversimple elision of “government” with “society,” the evocation of “families” and family responsibilities (Nunn 2002, Chapter 4). Above all it has come to encapsulate a “hollowing out of citizenship” and the public realm
(Marquand 2004) and a shift in the very grounds of ethical and practical judgments. Significantly in the interview, the prime minister moved on to discuss “people” in general, and added, “no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first.” That image of individual men and women who “look to themselves first” and are criticized when, like children, they cast “their problems upon society,” will be at the center of this chapter. We will be considering ways in which that Thatcherite conceptualization of “people” and “the public” was expressed and circulated in television programs of the 1980s, against the background of that image of “society” as no more than a comforting myth.

This chapter is part of a larger research project which traces the ideas and attitudes of the 1980s across the broadcast media, noting the ways in which factual information and shifting ideologies are embedded in interweaving debates, impressions, opinions, jokes, narratives and emotional attitudes across the genres. By winding back the clock and experiencing the television programs in their context, we aim to observe a cultural and ideological shift as it was happening. We document the ways in which political and organizational changes were reported and commented on and note the ways in which they became part of cultural expression. Our aim is to observe the political project of the 1980s as it entered popular culture and became a new common sense (Hall and Jacques 1983).

Our focus is on those aspects of “society” most decried by Margaret Thatcher, the public services. In particular we consider those two institutions, often described as quintessentially British, the National Health Service (NHS) and public service broadcasting, both of which came under intense pressure from the Thatcher governments (Leys 2001). Issues of health and sickness demonstrate the prime area where problems are unavoidably “cast on society.” In dealing with those problems, public life is lived out in a particularly powerful way, and the vulnerability and interdependence of individuals becomes an unavoidable issue. As the sociologist Rudolf Klein has pointed out, “health policies inescapably raise questions about the nature of our society and our political system” (Klein 1996, p. 505). Debates around the nation’s health have been central to a national public sphere, and the UK system of public service broadcasting has provided an important space for those debates. By focusing on the NHS, this chapter aims to illuminate the links between policy and media representations.

Stories of doctors and nurses, hospitals, accidents, birth and death have long been a fruitful source of fascination on the small screen (Jacobs 2003; Hallam 2000). Fantasy, humor and fiction have been