Margaret Thatcher entered the record books as the first female leader of the Conservative Party and as the longest continuously serving Prime Minister in modern British history. She was leader of the party for fifteen years (1975–90) and Prime Minister for eleven-and-a-half (1979–90). We are here concerned with the four years she spent as Leader of the Opposition.

There are two hypotheses as to the relationship between Margaret Thatcher as Opposition Leader and Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. The first hypothesis is that one leads naturally to the other – in essence, a Whig interpretation of history: Margaret Thatcher crafted an intellectually coherent philosophy – one that was to take shape as Thatcherism – which was to prove popular and was able to craft an electoral base that was sufficient to establish Conservative hegemony in the polls and to lead to a period of uninterrupted Conservative rule. This hypothesis has been influential in prompting criticism of later party leaders who have failed to lead the party to victory.

The other is to see the two as primarily distinct periods, with Thatcherism and predictable Conservative victory at the polls not deriving from what happened before, but rather as a consequence of what happened after Margaret Thatcher strode across the threshold of 10 Downing Street in 1979, after Labour lost the election. What was to become the Thatcher era was not predictable from Mrs Thatcher’s period, a somewhat troubled period, in Opposition.

Dennis Kavanagh has elsewhere addressed the first hypothesis and found it wanting (Kavanagh, 2005: 219–42). Though the period spent in Opposition was a formative one for Margaret Thatcher – being party leader was necessary but not sufficient for achieving her goals – she neither forged a clear philosophy nor established strong and consistent electoral support for her beliefs and her party. She did not transform the party into a party destined for victory, though – rather like David Cameron thirty years later – she was to render it at least not unelectable (Norton, 2009: 31–43). That, however, was no guarantee of success.
What delivered victory to the Conservative Party in 1979 was the ‘Winter of Discontent’. Labour had been clawing back support until the trades union unleashed industrial action that heavily impacted on the Government’s support (Butler and Kavanagh, 1980: 29). Had Prime Minister James Callaghan opted for an election in October 1978, there was a distinct possibility that Labour would have won. ‘If that had happened’, writes Dick Leonard, ‘and she [Thatcher] had gone down to defeat, she would most probably have been dumped in short order by the Tories, and would have rated no more than a footnote in the history books’ (Leonard, 2005: 308). In essence, she became party leader because of the failings of Edward Heath and Prime Minister because of the misjudgement of James Callaghan.

The Thatcher legacy derives from her Premiership rather than from her period leading the party in Opposition. It was only as a result of being Prime Minister that she established an international reputation. ‘She became more readily recognised worldwide than any figure in British public life, except perhaps the most prominent, or notorious, members of the royal family’ (E. Evans, 1997: 2). However, until she entered Downing Street, she was little known outside the UK. She is the only modern British politician to generate an eponymous philosophy. A veritable library has been written on Thatcherism (see, for example, Gamble, 1988). However, the philosophy emerged from the Premiership rather than the other way round. Though Margaret Thatcher espoused a distinctive set of beliefs, Thatcherism did not develop as a discrete philosophy until she was ensconced in Government.

Perhaps ironically, its coherence was first discerned not by adherents to Margaret Thatcher but rather by her opponents. It was Marxists and opponents within her own party, such as Sir Ian Gilmour, who identified a distinctive and essentially un-Tory set of rigid principles (Hall and Jacques, 1983; Gilmour, 1992). She was to acquire a reputation as the ‘Iron Lady’. Although the term itself was coined in 1976 by the Soviet army magazine Red Star, it did not resonate until she was in office. She proved a doughty fighter against communism, alongside US President Ronald Reagan, and acquired her reputation as a defender of British interests through the Falklands conflict in 1982. Before she entered Downing Street, she was seen as a shrill politician, no match for Labour Prime Ministers Wilson and Callaghan. Margaret Thatcher as Leader of the Opposition was seen in a very different light from Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister.

Indeed, initial concerns as to her leadership provide the basis for exploring the different aspects of her period in Opposition. As Patrick Cosgrave wrote:

The four points of consideration of her leadership – its initial hesitancy, the refusal of some to serve or express loyalty, the puzzled distance between her and the Party organisation, and the question of how she would set about both establishing her authority and hammering out