

Volume 26, Number 2, November 2023

## Revision

# The Miners' Strike

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Consider the following question, then look at the sample student response and the examiner's commentary (in red).

## Question

*How serious was opposition to Margaret Thatcher during her years as prime Minister, 1979–90?*

### Student answer with commentary

Despite winning two elections as Prime Minister in 1983 and 1987, Thatcher faced opposition throughout her time in power. Given the controversial nature of some of her policies it is hardly surprising, although the level of unrest was generally low and largely not a serious problem. Ultimately it was not opposition from the unions, Ireland or the urban riots that proved to be the most serious, but opposition from within her own party that led to a leadership challenge and her subsequent resignation in November 1990.

The opening is well focused with the candidate setting up a debate and offering a view that unrest was not serious. The question is very broad in scope and the candidate identifies a wide range of issues that they go on to discuss in the main body of the essay, however, examiners would not expect all the issues to be discussed in depth in the time allowed in an examination. The candidate also offers the view that unrest within her own party was the most serious and offers a brief justification for this view. If the response is able to sustain and support this line of argument it is likely that they will score well.

The first clear sign of opposition to Thatcher was evident in the early 1980s as a series of urban riots gripped inner city areas of Britain, including Brixton, Toxteth, St Paul's in Bristol and Moss Side in Manchester. These were, at least in part, the result of local conditions, but also due to the government's monetarist policies that created high levels of unemployment, particularly among school leavers. However, the unrest was never a serious threat as Thatcher had the support of government, most notably Norman Tebbit who urged the unemployed to 'get on their bikes' and look for work. It did, however, cause a decline in support for her in the country, but this was reversed following victory in the Falklands War which led to soaring popularity and helped her win a resounding victory in the 1983 election, suggesting that opposition was both transient and not deep-rooted.

The first main paragraph focuses on inner city unrest. There is good knowledge of the scope of the disturbances. Although there is some consideration of the causes, the majority of the paragraph focuses on the issue of 'serious' and there is a wide-ranging discussion with good examples from Tebbit and opinion polls to inform the argument. The concluding sentence reaches a supported judgement and helps to build up the case that opposition was not serious.

The longest lasting opposition was from the mining union led by Arthur Scargill. Her determination to close inefficient and unprofitable mines led to a year-long strike, but unlike the Heath government this strike did not bring about the collapse of the government. The strike was not a serious threat to Thatcher as, unlike Heath, the government had prepared well for the confrontation, coal had been stockpiled, emergency plans were in place and legislation in 1980 and 1982 had undermined the legal defences of the union. Most importantly, police actions did much to ensure supplies reached power stations as they were able to allow strike breakers in and lorries carrying coal out. As the strike dragged on it became harder for Scargill to maintain union unity, seen in the breakaway and return of the Nottinghamshire miners. It may have appeared to be a serious threat with the infamous Battle of Orgreave where 6000 pickets faced 7000 police, resulting in 93 arrests and numerous injuries. However, public opinion was behind the government, reflected in an opinion poll that showed 65% support for the government, suggesting that union disruption was not a serious threat. Although some social commentators have argued that such action did encourage lawlessness, the dispute also resulted in many arguing that such intimidation and violence was no way to settle a dispute, further lessening the threat opposition posed to Thatcher.

The social unrest that resulted from the miner's dispute is also well-handled. The candidate might have placed this in the wider context of union unrest but given time constraints and the breadth of the question the decision to focus on the major clash is justifiable. Once again there is detailed supporting knowledge and comparison with Heath's handling of the miner's dispute is useful. Once again, there is a balanced discussion of the threat using Orgreave and the opinion poll to support their discussion. A judgement is reached, but this would have benefited from further development.

Opposition to the government from sections of the Irish community was a direct threat to the government. Thatcher had already seen the death of her close friend Airey Neave just before she became prime minister and this was soon followed by the IRA's assassination of Earl Mountbatten and members of his family, synchronised with the killing of 18 British soldiers at Warrenpoint. The death of the hunger striker Bobby Sands created a martyr for Irish nationalism and added to the anger of the nationalist community, but despite this the gaining of votes by Sinn Féin suggested that there were many among the nationalist community who were now willing to use the ballot box rather than violence to bring about changes, suggesting that opposition was becoming less of a direct threat. However, the IRA attack on the Grand Hotel in Brighton in 1984 during the Conservative Party Conference was a direct and serious threat, killing five and injuring 30. Although Thatcher escaped, it could have been very different as she was lucky to leave unharmed. Her impressive performance at the Party Conference reassured many and was a clear indication she would not be intimidated. It could also be argued that by the end of her premiership some stability had been brought to Ireland through the Anglo-Irish agreement and measures such as the Fair Employment Act of 1989.

The issue of Ireland is perhaps the most difficult to discuss given how close the IRA came to achieving their goal with the attack on the Grand Hotel. However, having acknowledged this, the response does successfully suggest that in broader terms the threat was not serious and that there had been moves towards stability, supported by some precise examples. The paragraph continues to show an ability to use a wide range of supporting material to underpin the argument. Once again, the discussion is balanced and a judgement is reached linking back to the focus of the question on the seriousness of the opposition.

The most serious challenge to Thatcher came from within her own party. Initially her Cabinets had seen a balance between 'one nation Conservatives' and others, but gradually the 'Wets' (as her opponents became known) were removed. The first clear sign of tensions was Lord Heseltine's resignation following the Westland affair, but the divisions this revealed were not reflected in the results at the 1987 election and it was only during her final term that opposition became serious. Two issues, the Poll Tax and Europe created divisions within the party. The Poll Tax had already alienated many in the country who saw it as a regressive tax which hit the poorer in society and this opposition was reflected in the March 1990 Trafalgar Square demonstrations. Most importantly for Thatcher it also led to backbench rebellions, suggesting she was losing control of her MPs and with opposition in the country from many in the middle class she also faced opposition from loyal supporters. It was ultimately the issue of Europe that showed how serious opposition was, both Lawson and Howe resigned, an indication that she had lost the support of senior members of the party and previously loyal supporters. Surprisingly, it was the resignation speech of Howe that was the most serious indication of opposition, a measured resignation statement in the Commons by a man known for his moderation was the final straw as he attacked her for her obstructive attitude towards Europe and for undermining his position. It was this that led to a leadership challenge by Heseltine and her resignation in November 1990, a clear indication that this was the most serious opposition as it ended her premiership.

There is much that could be considered in this paragraph and other examples of divisions could have been provided and more might have been said about both opposition to the Poll Tax and European policies, but given the constraints the response does manage the factor well, providing a wide range of examples and successfully arguing as to why this was the most serious problem, which is clearly supported by reference to her resignation.

The most serious opposition ultimately came from within her own party as they brought her down through a leadership challenge, realising in their view that she had become an electoral liability, most notably with her Poll Tax policy. She had been able to withstand other attacks throughout her three terms in office, although she was perhaps fortunate that initial opposition reflected in the inner-city riots was deflected by success in the Falklands. The threat from miners that had been such a problem for Heath was managed well and although she lost the support of many of pit communities, she maintained support in much of southern England and the Midlands. Opposition from nationalists in Ireland was a direct challenge that was serious as it could have brought about her demise, but again her handling of the attacks won much support. It was therefore the policies of her last years and growing opposition within the party that was the most serious challenge.

The conclusion does follow from the opening paragraph and this line of argument has been followed throughout the response. Each of the potential opposition issues is evaluated and an overall judgement is reached. In light of the supported interim and overall judgements, as well as the breadth of the response and continual focus on the question the answer would reach the top level.

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