MAY 4TH 1979, 30 YEARS AGO, PRIME MINISTER MARGARET THATCHER ARRIVES TO 10 DOWNING STREET AND WAVES TO HER FELLOW CITIZENS WITH HER HUSBAND, DENIS. TODAY, 30 YEARS LATER, FAES WISHES TO PAY A TRIBUTE TO HER CAREER, HER LEGACY, AND HER FIGHT FOR FREEDOM.
In Spain, in 1979, Adolfo Suárez won his second Presidential Elections and a few months afterwards, at the beginning of May, Margaret Thatcher won her first ones in the United Kingdom. Suárez practised consensus politics. It was what Spain demanded deep in the midst of her political Transition. Thatcher became quite restless before any consensus proposal and because of that, because she did not hide this, she was elected leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 and Prime Minister four years later. As the 70’s wore on, consensus did not seem to be the solution for the United Kingdom. This is the inescapable starting point for any reflection on what the era marked by Margaret Thatcher really meant.

All political projects have to do with the exercise of power, but the nature of power consists of adapting to changing circumstances. Thatcherism, like the legacy of Suárez, are clear examples of this. Thatcher did not approve of a certain consensus – the nuance is important – and whoever insisted on the saying that by talking, people came to understand one another was promptly told-off. A specific consensus was not to be talked about and that was that. Those that worked shoulder to shoulder with her called her TINA, obviously not to her face.

TINA meant “There Is No Alternative”, Thatcher received this nickname because she constantly repeated this sentence to her collaborators. It is easy to imagine her using this sentence when saying “IRA terrorists on hunger strike must be left to die in jail; trade union power must confronted; the islet on the opposite corner of the world that has been taken by force by a military dictatorship and where 1500 British subjects are living must be retaken; NATO’s missile deployment in Europe and Ronald Reagan ‘Star Wars’ must be supported. There is no alternative.”

There is much caricature in this TINA matter. I was recently introduced to an important consultant and journalist who was a political advisor to Thatcher in her first government and I asked him, just as anyone would ask, how the heck you advise someone that strides along life and power with a mind so exaggeratedly set. His account was extremely interesting.

He explained to me that whenever Thatcher suggested a political initiative that he considered insane he just said: –“Very well, Prime Minister, if you do that, the following could happen; what would you do then?” Thatcher, an expeditious person if ever there was one, immediately said: –“I would do so and so”. The advisor answered: –“Very well, Prime Minister, you do that and this or that could happen; what would you do then?” I could see that what developed between the politician and the advisor was an intelligent constructive dialogue about political options just as it could have happened between two people who enjoyed playing chess. Thatcher would eventually carry out her initiative which would not necessarily be the one she had considered in the first place. By doing so, she could legitimately say that there was no other option, as she had thoroughly gone through all the other alternatives and none of them achieved the desirable aim.

The policy options that defined Margaret Thatcher went only in one direction. That was, breaking up a certain consensus. It is important to highlight that this did not imply the tearing apart of what was known in the United Kingdom as the Post-War Consensus between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party that would last until well into the 60’s, the “Swinging…” days and the Beatles.

The landmarks of this consensus were the following: Winston Churchill (Conservative) wins the war; Clement Attlee (Labour) wins the elections in 1945 and establishes the grounds for the welfare state, and does not disarm...
the United Kingdom. In fact, the United Kingdom becomes a nuclear power. The Conservatives (Churchill, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan) recuperate power and strengthen the National Health Service; they raise the compulsory education age, etc. Thatcher, who was elected MP in 1959, did not have any problems with this Post-War Consensus and she even admired certain Labour politicians. In fact, although many people may feel the opposite, public spending did not decrease significantly during the Thatcher years, nor did she neglect health care or public education.

As far as Thatcher was concerned, this commendable consensus broke owing to the hard quarrels that took place between Harold Wilson (Labour) and Edward Heath (Conservative), between Heath and the Unions (Thatcher was MP by then) and between the Unions and James Callaghan (from the Labour Party and Wilson’s successor). In the late 60’s the English people – always ready to use French words to explain complex concepts – began to perceive some sort of malaise within the British society which got progressively worse during the 70’s. A different kind of consensus had been imposed upon the United Kingdom and Thatcher struck: “This is it. The only option is for

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Margaret Thatcher and Mikhail Gorbachev managed to forge a relationship based on trust. This picture shows the Soviet delegation’s visit to London on December 7th, 1987 – two years before the tearing down of the Berlin Wall.

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The new consensus in society was more difficult to define but showed very clear signs. The increasing unemployment rate, the burden of drugs and the hooligans phenomenon – which was tinged with racist outbreaks – turned the British society into cynicism and disbelief. The consensus was based on the denial of effort and on an “anything goes” approach. It was a dysfunctional society going adrift. That United Kingdom in times of malaise, with its wave of strikes, its dramatically increasing deficit and its punk-rock had become the ailing patient of Europe.

Thatcher decided then to speak clearly about principles and values and about the return to the foundations, the so-called “back to basics”. Above all, it was necessary to go back to the work well done, to rewarding true merit and to achieving well-balanced budgets. Thatcher was regarded as a very bossy woman, and so she was; but what better defined her was both her austerity and patriotism. She never owned, for example, a credit card. She wanted the word Great to be placed before Britain and the United Kingdom to feel as such. She promised to regenerate and rebuild Great Britain.

Her political message was easily understood and allowed her to stay in power until 1990. Her project was very straightforward and allowed to change the rules of the economic, social and political game. None of it was improvised. Thatcher spent four years as the leader of the opposition designing her programme.

She surrounded herself by many free marketeers and conservative thinkers. She studied and listened to much about individual freedom. That was something unusual at the time, as broadly speaking the English people tend to mistrust ideas, above all the jolly old right-wing people. Thatcher’s public image as the Iron Lady contrasts with the fact that no other British politician, before and after her, ever talked so much about individual freedom.

Thatcher did indeed break the mold both as a woman and as the daughter of a humble storekeeper. She received public education. Her environment little had to do with the traditional families surrounding the Conservative Party, of which she was unaware until she was awarded a scholarship at Oxford to specialise in Chemistry. In this respect, she was a woman of her time, a woman of the post-war years. Social classes in England were already vanishing. It was at Oxford where she grew a special inter-
est in politics and realised that she could get anywhere.

Thatcher won the affections of the Conservative Party. Her MPs, all men, were terrified of her. She would not tolerate the so-called “wets” unwilling to confront challenges and unable to make difficult decisions as a result of their guilt complex. Napoleon wanted to know if his marshals were lucky. Thatcher wanted to find out whether her ministers, MPs, and collaborators where “one of us”.

When those who were “one of hers” backstabbed her, Thatcher reacted with both dignity and sportsmanship. “It is a funny old world”, are the only words that nowadays are recalled she ever said to that. Power implies being able to adapt to any given circumstances, and circumstances do change. Her political project had been fulfilled as Suárez’s had in Spain. In such two different countries at the time, consensus worked for him but not for her.

Margaret Thatcher’s true heir was, in many senses, Tony Blair. Margaret Thatcher handed down a country which boosted confidence. Its economy worked in an unprecedented way thanks to the adoption of deregulation measures, competition, the acknowledgment of effort and responsibility as well as the respect for individual freedom. Blair knew that Margaret Thatcher had set the rules of the game and he stuck by them. It is not surprising that the foreign politician with whom he best got on was José María Aznar, whose political project for Spain in 1996 highly resembles that of Margaret Thatcher’s twenty years before. It was with José María Aznar and Tony Blair – a period when both Spain and England thrived – that the policies of both countries converged, which was something that had been seen in very few occasions. After that, circumstances changed again.