UNIT 2

“We Are All Unequal” (Margaret Thatcher)

Margaret Thatcher (born in Grantham, Lincolnshire, in 1925) was the first woman to serve as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, from 1979 to 1990. She was the Leader of the Conservative Party since 1975, and led it in the successful election campaign which in 1979 brought the Labour Party leadership to an end. The determination with which she confronted the alleged enemies of the United Kingdom and of the Western “free” world, like the Soviet Union and the European leftist parties, gained her the nickname “Iron Lady”. She proved her proverbial resoluteness during the miners’ strike in 1984-1985, when she didn’t yield to any of the trade unions’ requests and forced the miners to go back to work after a year of ineffective fights. She was a champion of radical liberal policies in economy and held an aggressively nationalistic and imperialistic stance in foreign policy. She is by now recognized as one of the most prominent representatives of those conservative and liberal positions that gained a great deal of popularity in the 1980s; the profound affinities of her positions with Reagan’s policies in the USA have exerted a powerful influence on the 1980s culture and society, especially with regard to migration and national identity.

When she was Prime Minister, the British Parliament passed two restrictive laws that regulated migratory fluxes (in 1981 and 1988, known as the “British Nationality Act” and the “Immigration Act” respectively); she also led British troops in the Falklands War in 1982 against the Argentinean military junta, which had claimed back the British overseas territory they called Islas Malvinas.

The speech reported below was delivered in 1975, during the national conference of the Conservative Party, held in Brighton. In her address, Thatcher, who had been recently elected to the leadership of the party, emphasizes some of the questions that would make her so well known both in the UK and abroad. She insists for example on freedom as the central value in her political views and stresses what she considers as the close correspondence between economic and juridical-political liberty. She is also remarkably aggressive in her at-
attacks against the policies of the Labour Party’s cabinet which, with the ideological support of leftist intellectuals, were responsible for the economic and moral crisis that the UK was experiencing during the 1970s. Appeals to ideas of national belonging and pride gained the consensus of white middle and upper classes, at the time worried about the combined threats of socialism and uncontrolled fluxes of Commonwealth and former Commonwealth migrants, a political vision which will bring the Conservative Party to the electoral triumph of 1979 after several years of Labour governments.

“We Are All Unequal”
(10 October 1975)

Whenever I visit Communist countries, their politicians never hesitate to boast about their achievements. They know them all by heart and reel off the facts and figures, claiming that this is the rich harvest of the Communist system. Yet they are not prosperous as we in the West are prosperous, and they are not free as we in the West are free.

Our capitalist system produces a far higher standard of prosperity and happiness because it believes in incentive and opportunity, and because it is founded on human dignity and freedom. (Applause).

Even the Russians have to go to a capitalist country, America to buy enough wheat to feed their people. And that after more than 50 years of a State controlled economy. Yet they boast incessantly while we, who have so much more to boast about, forever criticise and de-cry. Isn’t it time we spoke up for our way of life? (Applause) After all, no Western nation has to build a wall round itself to keep its people in. (Applause). So let us have no truck with those who say the free enterprise system has failed. What we face today is not a crisis of capitalism, but of Socialism. No country can flourish if its economic and social life is dominated by nationalisation and state control.
The cause of our shortcomings does not therefore lie in private enterprise. Our problem is not that we have too little socialism. It is that we have too much. If only the Labour Party in this country would act like Social Democrats in West Germany. If only they would stop trying to prove their Socialist virility by relentlessly nationalising one industry after another.

Of course, a halt to further State control will not on its own restore our belief in ourselves, because something else is happening to this country. We are witnessing a deliberate attack on our values, a deliberate attack on those who wish to promote merit and excellence, a deliberate attack on our heritage and great past. (Applause). And there are those who gnaw away at our national self-respect, rewriting British history as centuries of unrelieved gloom, oppression and failure. As days of hopelessness—not Days of Hope. And others, under the shelter of our education system, are ruthlessly attacking the minds of the young. Everyone who believes in freedom must be appalled at the tactics employed by the far Left in the systematic destruction of the North London Polytechnic. (Applause). Blatant tactics of intimidation, designed to undermine the fundamental beliefs and values of every student. Tactics pursued by people who are the first to insist on their own civil rights while seeking to deny them to the rest of us. We must not be bullied and brainwashed out of our beliefs. (Applause). No wonder so many of our people—some of the best and brightest—are depressed and talk of emigrating. Even so, I think they are wrong at giving up too soon. Many of the things we hold dear are threatened as never before, but none has yet been lost. So stay here. (Applause). Stay and help us defeat Socialism, so that the Britain you have known may be the Britain your children will know. (Applause).

Those are the two great challenges of our time. The moral and political challenge, and the economic challenge. They have to be faced together—and we have to master them both. What are our chances of success? It depends what kind of people we are. Well, what kind of people are we? We are the people that in the past made Great Britain the Workshop of the World. The people who persuaded others to buy British not by begging them to do so, but because it was best.
We are a people who have received more Nobel prizes than any other nation except America, and head for head we have done better than America. Twice as well, in fact.

We are the people who, among other things, invented the computer, refrigerator, electric motor, stethoscope, rayon, steam turbine, stainless steel, the tank, television, penicillin, radar, jet engine, hovercraft, float glass and carbon fibres. Oh, and the best half of Concorde. (Laughter). We export more of what we produce than either West Germany, France, Japan or the United States. And well over 90%; of these exports come from private enterprise. It’s a triumph for the private sector and all who work in it. Let us say so, loud and clear. (Applause).

With achievements like that who can doubt that Britain can have a great future? What our friends abroad want to know is whether that future is going to happen.

Well, how can we Conservatives make it happen? Many of the details have already been dealt with in the various debates. But policies and programmes should not be just a list of unrelated items. They are part of a total vision of the kind of life we want for our country and our children. Let me give you my vision. A man’s right to work as he will to spend what he earns to own property to have the State as servant and not as master these are the British inheritance. They are the essence of a free economy. And on that freedom all our other freedoms depend. (Applause).

But we want a free economy, not only because it guarantees our liberties, but also because it is the best way of creating wealth and prosperity for the whole country.

It is this prosperity alone which can give us the resources for better services for the community, better services for those in need. (Applause). [...] And if anyone says I am preaching laissez-faire, let me say this. I am not arguing, and never have argued, that all we have to do is to let the economy run by itself. I believe that, just as each of us has an obligation to make the best of his talents so governments have an obligation to create the framework within which we can do so. Not only individual people, but individual firms and particularly small firms. (Applause). Some of these will stay small but others will expand and become the great companies of the future. [...]
We Conservatives hate unemployment. We hate the idea of men and women not being able to use their abilities. We deplore the waste of national resources, and the deep affront to peoples’ dignity from being out of work through no fault of their own. (Applause). [...] We are now seeing the full consequences of nearly twenty months of Labour Government. They have done the wrong things at the wrong time in the wrong way. They have been a disaster for this country. Now let me turn to something I spoke about in America. Some Socialists seem to believe that people should be numbers in a State computer. We believe they should be individuals.

We are all unequal. No one, thank heavens, is like anyone else, however much the Socialists may pretend otherwise. We believe that everyone has the right to be unequal but to us every human being is equally important. Engineers, miners, manual workers, shop assistants, farm workers, postmen, housewives—these are the essential foundations of our society. Without them there would be no nation. (Applause). But their are others with special gifts who should also have their chance, because if the adventurers who strike out in new directions in science, technology, medicine, commerce and industry the arts are hobbled, there can be no advance. The spirit of envy can destroy. It can never build. Everyone must be allowed to develop the abilities he knows he has within him, and she knows she has within her, in the way they choose.

Exercise 1 – Discussion skills
Before you move on to a textual analysis of the speech, you may want to become familiar with the following terms. Discuss them with your classmates and, if necessary, check them out in dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Then write a brief definition for each of them.

1. Communist
Exercise 2 – Reading comprehension
As you have noticed, the speech minute also reports the audience’s reaction to Thatcher’s words. There’s a point where they laugh. Do you understand what are they reacting to? What is Thatcher ironically referring to?

Exercise 3 – Vocabulary building
Provide a definition for the following words from the text:

1. Gnaw away
Exercise 4 – Writing tasks

a) Consider the following sentence from the text:

“If only they [the Labour Party] would stop trying to prove their Socialist virility by relentlessly nationalising one industry after another.”

What do you think is meant by the expression “Socialist virility”? In your answer you may want to consider the fact that Margaret Thatcher was the first woman to be appointed as Prime Minister in the UK.
b) Look at this statement in praise of British national identity:

“We are the people who, among other things, invented the computer, refrigerator, electric motor, stethoscope, rayon, steam turbine, stainless steel, the tank, television, penicillin, radar, jet engine, hovercraft, float glass and carbon fibres.”

What do you think of Thatcher’s association of heterogeneous achievements such as the invention of the refrigerator and the penicillin in order to extol the national character?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

c) Reflect on Thatcher’s final remark and its balanced use of words like equal/unequal:

“We are all unequal. No one, thank heavens, is like anyone else, however much the Socialists may pretend otherwise. We believe that everyone has the right to be unequal but to us every human being is equally important.”

How would you describe Thatcher’s rhetorical strategy?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________