Shepherd Offshore’s success shows that North Eastern industry is not doomed; 
Paul Benneworth says Tyneside can survive as a high-technology industrial core

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It was Margaret Thatcher who brought the phrase “there is no alternative” into the popular political imagination. It became her catchphrase and underpinned her radical reforms, with repercussions that are still being felt today.

Along with “there’s no such thing as society”, it popularised a view of Britain as a country of individuals without collective interests. And, in the absence of these collective interests, we faced the threat of being endlessly buffeted by the winds of global change.

The reality remains that we were, until very recently, the world’s sixth largest economy, with a top seat at every global decision-making table, whether Europe, NATO or the United Nations. So the reality is that we are making the weather ourselves rather than being at the mercy of others.

But Osborne, and Thatcher before him, found that playing on these fears could justify otherwise unpalatable policy interventions. We all know close-up what madness rail privatisation was but, once you say there’s no alternative, then you have to believe that it will work out.

And we’ve suffered in the North East time and again as we had to swallow the harsh medicine doled out by Tory governments who viscerally hated the industries at our industrial heart. As she ruthlessly cut them down, we were told our coveted mining, steel and shipbuilding industries were uncompetitive and a threat to Britain’s place in the world.

We were told they’d become lame ducks, cosseted by state support and hamstring by lazy unionised workers. Rail privatisation was the brainchild of John Redwood, who wrote whole screeds on how only privatisation and market discipline could take back control of the British economy.

Former Newcastle United owner Freddy Shepherd helps bring 400 jobs to Tyneside

If you believed the Tory spiel then, then you’d have expected our “lame duck” local industries to have completely died out. So what to make of The Journal’s story this week that the Shepherd Offshore facility is booming as regional shipbuilding and engineering reinvest themselves as marine energy production sectors?

This is partly classic entrepreneurship with old companies seeking out new markets, and declining industries being replaced by new ones. But there’s an unsung role here played by different public bodies who refused to swallow the line that there was no alternative to our industrial decline.
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Thatcher’s Development Corporation may have ignored the shipyards in their race to tart the riverside up with marinas, convention centres and dry ski slopes. But our local authorities have strived tirelessly since the late 1980s to throw their weight squarely behind industrial production and modernisation.

North East leaders say Brexit poll reflects the 'uncertain times' we live in

Today's success with Shepherd shows you don't have to believe the big story that North Eastern industry is doomed. We don't have to be at the mercy of global forces and, with a little willpower, ingenuity, and smart policy intervention, Tyneside can survive as a high-technology industrial core.

These big stories often hide an unpalatable political agenda. Thatcher wanted to smash the institutions that she saw as the bedrock of her opposition, whether unions, local authorities, or extractive and manufacturing industries.

And today, the same hard-line Brexiteers that sold us rail privatisation are lining up the harsh medicine for us once more. They want to scrap all the workforce protections that give employers incentives to create high-skilled creative jobs that are at the heart of these emerging industries.

Brexit survey revealed: What you would do if given second shot at EU referendum

"There is no alternative", they cry once more, "we must become Europe's sweatshop to take back control". It was a lie with rail privatisation, and it is a lie today.

There’s always an alternative, if you don’t let yourself be gulled by those who have everything but your best interests at heart. Let’s remember that clearly as we start to clear up the mess these Brexiteers are leaving behind.