

## **SOCIAL HISTORY OF POST WAR BRITAIN (1945–1979)**

The United Kingdom was one of the victors of the Second World War, but victory was costly in social and economic terms. Thus, the late 1940s was a time of austerity and economic restraint, which gave way to prosperity in the 1950s.

The Labour Party, led by wartime Deputy Prime Minister Clement Attlee, won the 1945 post-war general election in an unexpected landslide and formed their first ever majority government. It governed until 1951 and granted independence to India in 1947. Most of the other major overseas colonies became independent in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Following a long debate and initial scepticism, the United Kingdom joined the European Economic Community along with the Republic of Ireland and Denmark on 1 January 1973.

The discovery of North Sea oil eased some financial pressures, but the 1970s saw slow economic growth, rising unemployment, and escalating labour strife. De-industrialisation or the loss of heavy industry, especially coal mining, shipbuilding and manufacturing, grew worse after 1970 as the British economy shifted to services. London and the Southeast maintained prosperity, as London became the leading financial centre in Europe and still played a major role in world affairs.

Substantial educational reform took place in this period with developments which included raising the age at which students could leave school, the introduction of the modern day split between primary and secondary school and expanding and eventually dismantling the grammar school system.

Liberalising social reforms took place in areas such as abortion, divorce, LGBT rights and the death penalty. The status of women slowly improved. A youth culture emerged from the 1960s.

### **Age of Austerity**

In May 1945 the governing coalition dissolved, The new Prime Minister Clement Attlee proclaimed, "This is the first time in the history of the country that a labour movement with a socialist policy has received the approval of the electorate."

As the war ended and American Lend Lease suddenly and unexpectedly ended, the Treasury was near bankruptcy and Labour's new programmes would be expensive. The economy did not reach prewar levels until the 1950s. Due to continued and increased rationing, the immediate post-war years were called the Age of Austerity, (not to be confused with the 21st century United Kingdom government austerity programme)

The war almost bankrupted Britain, while the country maintained a global empire in an attempt to remain a global power. It operated a large air force and a conscript army. Without Lend Lease, bankruptcy loomed. The government secured a low-interest \$3.75 billion loan from the US in December 1945. Rebuilding necessitated fiscal austerity in order to maximise export earnings, while Britain's colonies and other client states were required to keep their reserves in pounds as "sterling balances". An additional \$3.2 billion – which did not have to be repaid – came from the American Marshall Plan in 1948–52. However the Plan did require Britain to modernise its business practices and remove trade barriers. Britain was an enthusiastic co-founder of the NATO military alliance formed in 1949 against the Soviets.

Rationing, especially of food, continued in the post-war years as the government tried to control demand and normalise the economy. Anxieties were heightened when the country suffered one of the worst winters on record in 1946–47: the coal and railway systems failed, factories closed, and a large proportion of the population suffered due to the cold.

### **Rationing**

Wartime rationing continued and was for the first time extended to bread in order to feed the German civilians in the British sector of occupied Germany. During the war the government had banned ice cream and had rationed sweets such as chocolates and confections; all sweets were rationed until 1954. Rationing was beneficial for many of the poor because their rationed diet was of greater nutritional value than their pre-war diet. Housewives organised to oppose the austerity. The Conservatives gained support by attacking socialism, austerity, rationing and economic controls and returned to power in 1951.

## **Welfare state**

A British 1948 National Insurance stamp, which workers had to purchase to contribute to benefits and pensions. The most important Labour initiatives were the expansion of the welfare state, the founding of the National Health Service and nationalisation of the coal, gas, electricity, railways and other primary industries. The welfare state was expanded by the National Insurance Act 1946, which built upon the comprehensive system of social security originally set up in 1911. People of working age had to pay a weekly contribution (by buying a stamp) and in return were entitled to a wide range of benefits, including a pension, health and unemployment benefits, and widows' benefits.

**The National Health Service** began operations in July 1948. It promised to give cradle to grave free hospital and medical care for everyone in the country, regardless of income. Labour went on to expand low cost council housing for the poor.

The Treasury, headed by Chancellor of the Exchequer Hugh Dalton, faced urgent problems. Half of the wartime economy had been devoted to mobilising soldiers, warplanes, bombs and munitions; a transition to a peacetime budget was begun while attempting inflation.

## **Housing**

There was a critical shortage of housing. Air raids had destroyed half a million housing units; upgrades and repairs on undamaged units had been postponed. Three-quarters of a million new dwellings were needed. compared to the maximum pre-war rate of 350,000. However, shortages of builders, materials, and the lack of money limited progress. Not including 150,000 temporary prefabricated units, the shortage reached 1,500,000 units by 1951. Legislation kept rents down but did not lead to an increase in the number of new homes.

The ambitious New Towns project did not provide enough units. The Conservatives made housing a high priority and oversaw the building of 2,500,000 new units, two-thirds of them through local councils. Haste made for dubious quality and policy increasingly shifted towards renovation of existing properties rather than the construction of new ones. Slums were cleared, opening the way for gentrification in the inner cities.

## **Nationalisation**

There was Labour Party consensus by 1945, on the National Executive Committee and at party conferences, on a definition of socialism that stressed moral as well as material improvement. The Attlee government was committed to rebuilding British society as an ethical commonwealth, using public ownership and controls to abolish extremes of wealth and poverty. Labour's ideology contrasted sharply with the contemporary Conservative Party's defence of individualism, inherited privileges, and income inequality. Attlee's government nationalised major industries and utilities. It developed and implemented the "cradle to grave" welfare state conceived by liberal economist William Beveridge. The creation of Britain's publicly funded National Health Service under health minister Aneurin Bevan remains Labour's proudest achievement.

However the Labour Party had developed no detailed nationalisation plans. Improvising, they started with the Bank of England, civil aviation, coal and Cable & Wireless. Then came railways, canals, road haulage and trucking, electricity, and gas. Finally came iron and steel, which was a special case because it was a manufacturing industry. Altogether, about one-fifth of the economy was taken over. Labour dropped the notion of nationalising farms.

## **Cold War**

Britain faced severe financial constraints, lacking cash for needed imports. It responded by reducing its international entanglements as in Greece, and by sharing the hardships of an "age of austerity". Early fears that the US would veto nationalisation or welfare policies proved groundless.

Under Attlee foreign policy was the domain of Ernest Bevin, who looked for innovative ways to bring western Europe together in a military alliance. One early attempt was the Dunkirk Treaty with France in 1947. Bevin's commitment to the West European security system made him eager to sign the Treaty of Brussels in 1948. It drew Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg into an arrangement for collective security, opening the way for the formation of NATO in 1949. NATO was primarily aimed as a defensive measure against Soviet expansion, while helping bring its members closer together and enabled them to modernise their forces along parallel lines, also encouraging arms purchases from Britain.

Bevin began the process of dismantling the British Empire when it granted independence to India and Pakistan in 1947, followed by Burma (Myanmar) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1948. In January 1947, the government decided to proceed with the development of Britain's nuclear weapons programme, primarily to enhance Britain's security and also its status as a superpower. A handful of top elected officials made the decision in secret, ignoring the rest of the cabinet, in order to forestall the Labour Party's pacifist and anti-nuclear wing.

The 1950s and 1960s experienced continued modernisation of the economy. Representative was the construction of the first motorways. Britain maintained and increased its financial role in the world economy, and used the English language to promote its educational system to students from around the globe. With relatively low unemployment during this period, the standard of living continued to rise, with new private and council housing developments increasing and the number of slum properties diminishing.

During the period, unemployment in Britain averaged only 2%. As prosperity returned after the war, Britons became more family-centred. Leisure activities became more accessible to more people. Holiday camps, which had first opened in the 1930s, became popular holiday destinations in the 1950s – and people increasingly had the ability to pursue personal hobbies. The BBC's early television service was given a major boost in 1953 with the coronation of Elizabeth II, attracting a worldwide audience of twenty million, plus tens of millions more by radio. Many middle-class people bought televisions to view the event. In 1950 just 1% owned television sets; by 1965 25% did, and many more were rented. As austerity receded after 1950 and consumer demand kept growing, the Labour Party hurt itself by shunning consumerism as the antithesis of the socialism it demanded.

Small neighbourhood shops were increasingly replaced by chain stores and shopping centres. Cars became a significant part of British life, with city-centre congestion and ribbon developments springing up along major roads. These problems led to the idea of a green belt to protect the countryside, which was at risk from urbanisation

By 1963, 82% of all private households had a television, 72% a vacuum cleaner, 45% a washing machine, and 30% a refrigerator. Ownership had spread down the social scale so that the gap between consumption by professional and manual workers had considerably narrowed. The provision of household amenities steadily improved in the late decades of the century. From 1971 to 1983, households having the sole use of a fixed bath or shower rose from 88% to 97%, and those with an indoor toilet from 87% to 97%. In addition, the number of households with central heating almost doubled during that same period, from 34% to 64%. By 1983, 94% of all households had a refrigerator, 81% a colour television, 80% a washing machine, 57% a deep freezer, and 28% a tumble-drier. Relative to Europe, however, the UK was not keeping pace. Between 1950 and 1970, it was overtaken by most of the countries of the European Common Market in terms of telephones, refrigerators, television sets, cars and washing machines per household. Education grew, but not as fast as in rival nations. By the early 1980s, some 80% to 90% of school leavers in France and West Germany received vocational training, compared with 40% in the United Kingdom. By the mid-1980s, over 80% of pupils in the United States and West Germany and over 90% in Japan stayed in education until the age of eighteen, compared with barely 33% of British pupils. In 1987, only 35% of 16-to-18-year-olds were in full-time education or training, compared with 80% in the United States, 77% in Japan, 69% in France, and 49% in the United Kingdom.

### **1970s economic crises**

In comparing economic prosperity (using gross national product per person), the British record was one of steady downward slippage from seventh place in 1950, to twelfth in 1965, to twentieth in 1975. Labour politician Richard Crossman, after visiting prosperous Canada, returned to England with a sense of restriction, yes, even of decline, the old country always teetering on the edge of a crisis, trying to keep up appearances, with no confident vision of the future. Economists provided four overlapping explanations. The "early start" theory said that Britain's rivals were doing so well because they were still moving large numbers of farm workers into more lucrative employment, which Britain had done in the nineteenth century. A second theory emphasised the "rejuvenation by defeat", whereby Germany and Japan had been forced to re-equip, rethink and restructure their economies. The third approach emphasised the drag of "imperial distractions", saying that responsibilities to its large empire

handicapped the home economy, especially through defence spending, and economic aid. Finally, the theory of "institutional failure" stressed the negative roles of discontinuity, unpredictability, and class envy. The last theory blamed trade unions, public schools, and universities for perpetuating an elitist anti-industrial attitude.

In the 1970s, the exuberance and the radicalism of the 1960s ebbed. Instead a mounting series of economic crises, including many trade union strikes, pushed the British economy further and further behind European and world growth. The result was a major political crisis, and a Winter of Discontent in the winter of 1978–79, when widespread strikes by public sector trade unions seriously inconvenienced and angered the public.

### **Long term economic factors**

While economic historians concentrate on statistical parameters, cultural historians added to the list of factors to explain Britain's long-term relative economic decline. These include:

- Excessive trade union power.
- Too much nationalisation.
- Insufficient entrepreneurship.
- Too many wars, both hot and cold.
- The distraction of imperialism.
- A feeble political class.
- A weak civil service.
- An enduring aristocratic tradition disparaged management.
- Weak vocational education at all levels.
- Social class rigidities interference with progress
- Northern Ireland and the Troubles.

In the 1960s, moderate Unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland Terence O'Neill tried to reform the system and give a greater voice to Catholics, who comprised 40% of the population of Northern Ireland. His goals were blocked by militant Protestants led by Reverend Ian Paisley. The increasing pressures from nationalists for reform and from unionists for "No surrender" led to the appearance of the civil rights movement under figures such as John Hume and Austin Currie. Clashes escalated out of control, as the army could barely contain the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Ulster Defence Association. British leaders feared their withdrawal would lead to a "doomsday scenario", with widespread communal strife, followed by the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of refugees. The UK Parliament in London shut down Northern Ireland's parliament and imposed direct rule. By the 1990s, the failure of the IRA campaign to win mass public support or achieve its aim of a British withdrawal led to negotiations that in 1998 produced what is commonly referred to as the 'Good Friday Agreement'. This won popular support and largely ended the most violent aspects of The Troubles.

### **Status of women**

The occupation housewife - The 1950s was a bleak period for feminism. In the aftermath of World War II, a new emphasis was placed on traditional marriage and the nuclear family as a foundation of the new welfare state. Women were expected to raise children and maintain the home while their husbands worked. The result was the popularization of the term 'occupation housewife', which emphasized a woman finding full-time work inside the home through childcare, cooking, cleaning and shopping.

In 1951, the proportion of adult women who were (or had been) married was 75%; more specifically, 84.8% of women between the ages of 45 and 49 were married. At that time: "marriage was more popular than ever before." In 1953, a popular book of advice for women states: "A happy marriage may be seen, not as a holy state or something to which a few may luckily attain, but rather as the best course, the simplest, and the easiest way of life for us all." Age at first marriage had also fallen consistently. By the end of the 1960s, men and women were marrying at the lowest average age recorded for the past century at 27.2 and 24.7 years respectively.

While at the end of the war, childcare facilities were closed and assistance for working women became limited, the social reforms implemented by the new welfare state included family allowances meant to subsidise families, that is, to support women in their "capacity as wife and mother".

Women's commitment to traditional marriage was echoed by the popular media: films, radio, books and popular women's magazines. In the 1950s, women's magazines had considerable influence on forming

opinion in all walks of life, including the attitude to women's employment. A book published in 1950 called *The Practical Home Handywoman* was a guide for the 'occupational housewife' on topics including sewing, cooking, and basic carpentry.

Daytime television also served to reinforce gender roles. As men were frequently at work during the day, programmes were primarily aimed at women. Marguerite Patten, a cooking show host during this 50s and 60s, became a household name. Her shows discussed ideal recipes for women to use during a time when rationing was still very much in place by incorporating easily accessible ingredients.

### **Sexuality in 1960s and 1970s**

In the 1960s, the generations divided sharply regarding sexual freedoms demanded by youth that disrupted long-held norms such as no sex before marriage, and no adultery. Sexual morals changed rapidly. One notable event was the publication of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by Penguin Books in 1960. Although first printed in 1928, the release in 1960 of an inexpensive paperback prompted a court case. The prosecutor's question, "Would you want your wife or servants to read this book?" highlighted how far society had changed, and how little some people had noticed. The book was seen as one of the first events in a general relaxation of sexual attitudes. The national media, based in London with its more permissive social norms, led in explaining and exploring the new permissiveness.

Other elements of the sexual revolution included the development of the contraceptive pill, Mary Quant's miniskirt and the partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1967. The incidence of divorce and abortion rose along with a resurgence of the women's liberation movement, whose campaigning helped secure the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. Irish Catholics, traditionally the most puritanical of the ethno-religious groups, eased up a little, especially as the membership disregarded the bishops' teaching that contraception was sinful.

### **Teenagers**

"Teenager" is an American word that first appeared in the British social scene in the late 1930s. National attention focused on them from the 1950s onwards. Improved nutrition across the entire population was causing the age of menarche to fall on average by three or four months every decade, for well over a century. Young people aged between 12 and 20 were physically much more mature than before. They were better-educated, and their parents had more money. National Service—the conscription of young men aged 17–21 for compulsory military service—was introduced in 1948; when it was abolished in 1960, the young men who would have reached conscription age had eighteen more months of freedom. The widespread use of washing machines, vacuum cleaners, kitchen appliances and prepared foods meant that teenage girls were no longer needed for so many household chores.

### **Educational reform**

The Education Act 1944 was an answer to surging social and educational demands created by the war and the widespread demands for social reform that approached utopianism. It was prepared by Conservative MP Rab Butler after wide consultation. The Act took effect in 1947 and created the modern split between primary education and secondary education at the age of eleven years, previously, state educated children had often attended the same school from enrolment at about five years old until leaving school in their early teens. The newly elected Labour government adopted the Tripartite System, consisting of grammar schools, secondary modern schools and secondary technical schools, rejecting the comprehensive school proposals favoured by many in the Labour Party as more equalitarian. Under the tripartite model, students who passed an exam were able to attend a prestigious grammar school. Those who did not pass the selection test attended secondary modern schools, or technical schools. The school leaving age was raised to fifteen years. The elite system of public schools was practically unchanged. The new law was widely praised by the Conservatives because it honoured religion and social hierarchy, and by Labour because it opened new opportunities for the working-class, and also by the general public; because it ended the fees they previously had to pay. The Education Act became a permanent part of the Post-war consensus.

While the new law formed a part of the widely accepted Post-war consensus agreed to in general by the major parties, one part generated controversy. Left-wing critics attacked grammar schools as being elitist because a student had to pass a test at the age of eleven in order to enrol. Opponents, mostly in the Conservative Party, argued that grammar schools allowed pupils to obtain a good education through merit rather than through family income. By 1964, one in ten students were in comprehensive schools

that did not sort children at the age of eleven. Labour education minister Anthony Crosland (from 1965) crusaded to speed up the process. When Margaret Thatcher was appointed as Minister for Education in 1970, one in three schools were comprehensives; the proportion doubled by 1974, despite her efforts to resist the trend against grammar schools. By 1979, over 90% of schools in the UK were comprehensives

### **Higher education**

Higher education expanded dramatically. Provincial university colleges were upgraded at Nottingham, Southampton and Exeter. By 1957, 21 universities were in existence. Expansion came even faster in the 1960s, with new universities such as: Keele, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex and York—bringing the total to 46 in 1970. Specialisation allowed national centres of excellence to emerge in Medicine at Edinburgh, engineering at Manchester, Science at Imperial College London, and Agriculture at Reading. Oxford and Cambridge; however, remained intellectually, culturally and politically dominant. They attracted top students from across the Commonwealth, but lost many of their best researchers to the United States, where salaries and research facilities were much more generous. Into the 1960s, student bodies remained largely middle and upper-class in origins; the average enrolment was only 2,600 in 1962.

### **Media**

For the BBC, the central post-war mission was to block threats from American private broadcasting and to continue John Reith's mission of cultural uplift. The BBC remained a powerful force, despite the arrival of Independent Television in 1955. Newspaper barons had less political power after 1945. Stephen Koss explains that the decline was caused by structural shifts: the major Fleet Street papers became properties of large, diversified capital empires with more interest in profits than politics. The provincial press virtually collapsed, with only the Manchester Guardian playing a national role; in 1964 it relocated to London. Growing competition arose from non-political journalism and from other media such as the BBC; independent press lords emerged who were independent of the political parties.

### **Sport**

Spectator sports became increasingly fashionable in post-war Britain, as attendance soared across the board. Despite the omnipresent austerity, the government were very proud to host the 1948 Olympics, even though Britain's athletes won only three gold medals compared to 38 for the Americans. Budgets were tight and no new facilities were built. Athletes were given the same bonus rations as dockers and miners, 5,467 calories a day instead of the normal 2,600. Athletes were housed in existing accommodation. Male competitors stayed at nearby RAF and Army camps, while the women were housed in London dormitories. Sporting competitions were minimal during the war years, but by 1948, 40 million a year were watching football matches, 300,000 per week went to motorcycle speedways and half a million watched greyhound races. Cinemas were jammed and dance halls were filled.

### **Cinema**

The United Kingdom has had a significant film industry for over a century. While film output peaked in 1936, the "golden age" of British cinema occurred in the 1940s, during which the directors David Lean, Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger, Carol Reed and Richard Attenborough produced their most highly acclaimed work. Many post-war British actors achieved international fame and critical success, including: Maggie Smith, Michael Caine, Sean Connery, Peter Sellers and Ben Kingsley.

### **Immigration**

Demonstration in June 1978, after the killing by racists of Altab Ali, a young Bangladeshi man, in May 1978, against the National Front and other racists who were active in the Brick Lane area. After decades of low immigration, new arrivals became a significant factor after 1945. In the decades after the Second World War immigration was greatest from the former British Empire, especially Ireland, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Caribbean, South Africa, Kenya and Hong Kong. The new immigrants generally entered tight-knit ethnic communities. For example, the new Irish arrivals became integrated within a working-class Irish Catholic environment that shaped their behaviour whilst maintaining a distinct ethnic identity in terms of religion, culture and Labour politics.

Enoch Powell, a Conservative MP, broke from the broad consensus supporting immigration in April 1968 to warn of long-term violence, unrest and internal discord should immigration continued from non-White countries. His speech foresaw "Rivers of Blood" and predicted that White "native" English citizens would be unable to access social services and be overwhelmed by foreign cultures. While political, social and cultural elites were harshly critical of Powell and he was removed from the Shadow cabinet, Powell developed substantial public support.

End.