

UKANIA PERPETUA?

SOME SIX DECADES—three generations—ago, this journal developed a set of arguments about British state and society that were distinctive, and controversial at the time, as they have remained since.¹ What bearing, if any, do they have on the present conjuncture, generally—if not incontestably—described as a turning-point in the history of the country? To get a sense of the question, it may be of use to resume briefly the original theses sketched in *NLR* in the early sixties and their sequels. Their novelty lay in both their substantive claims, on which debate has principally focused, and their formal concerns, which set them apart from ways of thinking about the United Kingdom current on the left, and beyond, in those years. Four features in the journal's approach to the country were new. It aimed at a (naturally, schematic) totalization of its object, that is, a characterization of all the principal structures and agents in the field, rather than exploration of partial elements of it. It sought to situate the present in a much longer historical perspective than was customary in political commentary. Its analytical framework was avowedly theoretical, drawing on then unfamiliar resources of a continental—principally Gramscian—Marxism. It was resistant to the typical habits of social patriotism, left or right, folkloric or historiographic, of the period.

The initial *NLR* theses were produced in response to a gathering sense of crisis in Britain. This conjuncture was compounded of a growing realization of economic decline relative to capitalist competitors abroad; popular discredit, amid scandals and divisions, of the Conservative political regime of the period, culminating in its passage from Macmillan to Home; national humiliation at failure in suing for entry to the Common Market, vetoed by France; and widespread disaffection with, and ridicule of, the hierarchical social order presiding over these misfortunes. The novelty of the *NLR* theses was to locate the explanation of this crisis

in the peculiar class configuration of England that developed from the late 17th to the late 19th century, and the institutions and ideologies it bequeathed to the 20th. Telegraphically condensed, the principal points of this explanation, and what ensued from it, went as below. Resuming about half of the 50-plus articles written by editors of the journal in these years, taken as the most significant, the account is selective, and does not distinguish between individual signatures beyond indicating them, though their accents and outlooks of course varied. Where substantive differences developed, sometimes in the positions taken by the same writer over time, these are touched on in conclusion.

I. THESES

i. A highly successful agrarian capitalism, controlled by large land-owners, long preceded the arrival of industrial capitalism in Britain, installing by the 1690s an aristocratic ruling class, flanked by mercantile capital, at the head of a state shaped in their image—one which went on to acquire the largest empire in the world well before the emergence of a manufacturing class of any political consequence. The industrial revolution of the 19th century generated just such a bourgeoisie. But in not having to break feudal fetters in its path, nor possessing either the wealth or political experience of the agrarian aristocracy, the manufacturing class settled for a subordinate position in the ruling bloc, sealed by the reform of 1832, generating no hegemonic ambition or ideology of its own. Ideologically speaking, classical political economy was perfectly palatable to the landowning class, leaving only utilitarianism as a shrunken world-view of distinctively bourgeois stamp. A further

¹ Attracting criticism that began with Edward Thompson's famous essay, 'The Peculiarities of the English', in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds, *Socialist Register 1965*, vol. 2, and has continued, from different directions, to this day: of late, see Mike Wayne, *England's Discontents: Political Cultures and National Identities*, London 2018, pp. 73–80, 141–4, 186–7, 252–3. These arguments, often referred to as the 'Nairn–Anderson theses', were far from the only original lines of work in the NLR of the period. The introduction of different streams of thought from Western Marxism; the development of a series of experiential reports on work, manual or mental; and the first re-theorization of the position of women since de Beauvoir, were no less important for the character of the Review. Nor would writing on the UK itself be confined just to the matrix of its originating ideas about it. But for obvious local reasons, it was these that first established the identity of NLR in an unmistakable way.

powerful motivation for this abdication was fear of the world's first industrial proletariat, which for some three decades rose in a sequence of mutinies against both the bourgeoisie and the landowner state.²

2. With the crushing of Chartism, however, and the subsequent re-composition of the working class, such rebellions lapsed, giving way in the second half of the 19th century to a trade-unionism that was for the most part timorously respectable and largely apolitical, as subordinate to the established order as the bourgeoisie was within it. Nor did any disestablished intelligentsia emerge to challenge the fusion of traditionalism and empiricism that formed the cultural norm of the time. When eventually—not until 1906, exceptionally late by European standards—the working class produced its own political expression in the Labour Party, the resulting formation was dominated organizationally by the block vote of the unions who created the party to further their economic aims, and ideologically by a hand-me-down variant of utilitarianism in the form of Fabianism, counterpointed by a Christian moralism of low church descent. No threat to the state or to capital, Labour became the second party in the political system, once the Conservative Party—in keeping with the logic of aristocratic rather than bourgeois command of the dominant bloc—put paid to the Liberals after the First World War.

3. After two brief fiascos in office between the wars, then reassuring partnership with Conservatives and remnant Liberals during the Second World War, Labour eventually formed a government with a large parliamentary majority in 1945. For six years it administered the British state without modifying its constitution or significantly altering its imperial cast, contenting itself with provision of welfare—creation of the National Health Service its principal achievement—and nationalization of loss-making industries, without any structural encroachment on either the directionality or prerogatives of capital. Restoration to office of

² See, for this section, Tom Nairn, 'Landed England', *NLR* 1/20, Summer 1963; 'The British Political Elite', *NLR* 1/23, January–February 1964; 'The English Working Class', *NLR* 1/24, March–April 1964; 'The Nature of the Labour Party', *NLR* 1/27, September–October 1964 and *NLR* 1/28, November–December 1964; Perry Anderson, 'Origins of the Present Crisis', *NLR* 1/23, January–February 1964. The nucleus of the arguments developed in these texts came from 'La Nemesi Borghese', an essay published in the Italian journal *Il Contemporaneo* in 1963 by Tom Nairn, responsible for over half the articles on the UK written by its editors to date. Tom Nairn, 'La Nemesi Borghese', *Il Contemporaneo*, vol. 6, no. 63–64, 1963.

the Conservatives, under a quartet of rulers of classic aristocratic background, left Labour's welfare reforms untouched. But Tory rule proved no less ineffectual in checking a competitive economic decline of the country—traceable back to its early low-tech manufacturing base, and compounded by the blows of two world wars to Britain's global position, nominal victory in each case preserving rather than destroying accumulated archaisms. If the dominant bloc was to preserve its hegemony, it would have to transform itself, taking up the unfinished work of 1640 and 1832 again. If Labour, under recent new management (Wilson had just taken over) were to come to power in its stead, no socialist transformation of the country would be on its agenda, since it was not a socialist party. Did that mean it would therefore become an executor of bourgeois reform and re-stabilization of British economy and society, or might it release more explosive possibilities?

Wilson

4. Labour in office, any prospect of the former outcome vanished. Within six months, the journal could write its obituary.³ Confronted by its first test with capital, a sterling crisis as the pound plunged on its entry into office, Wilson's government rushed to appease the City by propping up the currency with an international loan and deflationary contraction, in unbroken continuity with the priorities of the imperial past. Moreover, in keeping with the now established post-war premise of these, Labour was still playing aide-de-camp to Washington—just then escalating its war in Vietnam—across the world, while pursuing its own colonial operations in Asia and elsewhere. In such conditions, in yet another failing attempt to shore up British capitalism against competitive decline, Wilson's leading domestic objective was bound to become a bid to batten down trade-union militancy at home. That set the scene for the political turbulence of the next six years: the launching and crushing of the seamen's strike, flare-up of student revolt, outbreak of Catholic rebellion in Ulster, emergence of neo-nationalism in Scotland, first stirrings of popular racism in England.

5. The journal's response to this intensification of crisis came in three directions. Hailing the changing temper of the unions, which for the first time pitted major forces directly against the party they had originally

³ Tom Nairn, 'Labour Imperialism', NLR 1/32, July–August 1965.

created, in an overdue revolt against the deeply unequal society over which Labour presided, NLR organized the production of a Penguin Special on the rise in industrial unrest, excoriating Wilson's red-baiting repression of the long and bitter seamen's struggle, and welcoming the capture by the left of the big Engineering Union of the time, hitherto a stronghold of the right—while noting the structural limits of any trade-union militancy without a political organization flanking it.⁴ Simultaneously, cresting on the tide that took currents of the 'new left' of the late fifties⁵ into the much broader waters of a 'cultural revolution' in the sixties, and taking its cue from Gramsci's systematic concern, alone among thinkers of the Third International, with the role of intelligentsias in the organization of social consent, the journal produced another Penguin Special on the student revolt of 1967–68, seen as the beginning of a radicalization of the newest generation of British intellectuals.⁶ In aid of that revolt, this outlined a map of the prevailing conformism of post-war national culture across the social sciences and humanities—tracing its degree of dependence on White émigrés of conservative stamp, and stressing the historic lack in Britain of either a classical sociology or a native Marxism: a dual myopia that precluded any critical understanding of the totality of insular society, against which campus iconoclasm should take aim.⁷

6. Meanwhile, the Scottish National Party (SNP) had trounced Labour in a sudden, unexpected by-election victory in Scotland, giving the party its first seat at Westminster since the war. Seen from without, this could be viewed as a welcome premonition of possible future dismemberment of the imperial British state. But viewed from within, the SNP had not escaped the inherited deformations of Scottish nationalism—its 'three dreams'—each detached from the realities they sought to represent, and from which caustic historical analysis was required to liberate

⁴ Robin Blackburn and Alexander Cockburn, eds, *The Incompatibles: Trade Union Militancy and the Consensus*, Harmondsworth 1967. NLR also published the first substantial interview with the new leader of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), Hugh Scanlon, whom the Labour Cabinet had done everything in its power, including resort to MI5, to stop being elected its president: 'The Role of Militancy', NLR 1/46, November–December 1967.

⁵ For the role of the early NLR in these, see Perry Anderson, 'The Left in the Fifties', NLR 1/29, January–February 1965.

⁶ Robin Blackburn and Alexander Cockburn, eds, *Student Power*, Harmondsworth 1969.

⁷ Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', NLR 1/50, July–August 1968.

it: first the fixations of Calvinism, then the illusions of Romanticism, then the self-deceptions of belief that modern Scotland was a colonized society, rather than long an eager partner in a vast colonial empire. A sane Scottish nationalism, necessarily socialist, would have to settle accounts with these disabling oneiric legacies of the past.⁸ What then of England? An x-ray of Enoch Powell's literary output—poetic and forensic—laid bare the ways in which a dormant English nationalism, never popular in character since the masses had played so little role in creating the imperial British state that enfolded it, could acquire a more aggressive cast in conditions of establishment crisis.⁹ Once stale middle-class tropes of a Georgian countryside were displaced by raw appeals to anti-immigrant racism, the seeds of radical forms of reaction were being sown, even if—this being Britain—these would no doubt assume outwardly traditional guise.

Heath

7. In 1970 Wilson, having broken one promise after another and left the economy little better than when he took office, was succeeded by Heath, who set off in a sharply different direction. Jettisoning pro-forma gestures of dirigisme in favour of letting markets take their course, the new Conservative administration imposed draconian limits on strike action at home, and veering away from the United States, re-applied for entry to the Common Market abroad. Was this the overdue rationalization of bourgeois state and society at which Labour had so conspicuously faltered? Successive diagnoses in the journal diverged. At the outset: in breaking with industrial conciliation at home and servility to Washington abroad, was Heath offering capital competent class leadership—even if there would be a price to pay in provoking a collision with the unions, which could radicalize them, and in putting Britain's chips on Europe, which was bound to weaken cherished totems of the old order, sapping the integrity of Britain's constitution or absence of one?¹⁰ A year or so

⁸ Tom Nairn, 'The Three Dreams of Scottish Nationalism', NLR 1/49, May–June 1968. In the following year developments in Northern Ireland were covered in a discussion of People's Democracy (PD) strategy with leaders of the movement, accompanied by a study from Peter Gibbon, 'Dialectic of Religion and Class in Ulster': NLR 1/55, May–June 1969.

⁹ Tom Nairn, 'Enoch Powell: The New Right', NLR 1/61, May–June 1970.

¹⁰ Robin Blackburn, 'The Heath Government: A New Course for British Capitalism', NLR 1/70, November–December 1971.

later, when defiance of the government by dockers, miners, railway, shipyard and postal workers had forced Heath to retreat: had not turning industrial disputes over to the courts been a major miscalculation, the opposite of a rational bourgeois strategy? Did that not risk putting in the front line of crushing union resistance not the government which could claim an electoral mandate, but the judicial branch of the state, whose facade of neutrality, crucial for class purposes, was undone if judges were used to bludgeon workers too directly?¹¹

8. Entry into the EEC, approved in 1972 only by the narrowest of margins in the Commons (a majority of eight, dependent on right-wing Labour votes), provoked heated debate in Britain, to which NLR devoted a special number that set out a position which distinguished the journal starkly at the time. In the most sustained single reflection of the period on the issues posed by the Common Market, 'The Left against Europe?' took issue with a broad span of liberal and left thinkers—Leavis and Williams were among the culprits—and virtually every revolutionary group of the period. The Common Market, the essay argued, should be regarded in the way Marx and Engels had viewed the agricultural and industrial revolutions, or free trade: as a progressive bourgeois advance that for all its historical costs offered better ground on which the left could fight its historic adversary. The Conservatives had put (their) class before nation in backing entry, whereas Labour and the left at large were betraying (their) class to the nation in opposing it. "The one thing with which no socialist could conceive of reproaching Heath is "dividing the nation". For unless the proletariat sets out to divide the nation more, to the utmost, it is lost. It has to put class before nation always, and class against nation where necessary."¹²

9. In Scotland, on the other hand, where the SNP had won another by-election, nationalism in 'North Britain' was treated in a quite different register. The anomaly of Scottish nationalism's hesitant, belated emergence in the 20th century was a consequence of the exceptional bargain the country's dominant class had made with Hanoverian England in the 18th century. That pact had given it membership rights in the world's

¹¹ Anthony Barnett, 'Class Struggle and the Heath Government', NLR 1/77, January–February 1973.

¹² Tom Nairn, 'British Nationalism and the EEC', NLR 1/69, September–October 1971, preceding 'The Left Against Europe?', NLR 1/75, September–October 1972; the latter too subsequently appeared as a Penguin Special.

premier empire and first industrial revolution, rendering a separate state unnecessary for entry into modernity, as it was not anywhere else in Europe. Within another year, these reflections had developed into a full-blown historical theory of nationalism as a global phenomenon in 'The Modern Janus'. Constitutively at once progressive and regressive, product of capitalism's uneven development across the world and the need for successive breakwaters against it, nationalism had been the area of Marxism's greatest—theoretical and political—failure of historical understanding.¹³

Wilson–Callaghan

10. The downfall of Heath came at the hands of the miners in 1974, when he called an election for a mandate to deal with them and lost it, the only time in post-war Europe that collective action by workers detonated the overthrow of a government.¹⁴ Returned to power through no merit of its own, Labour spent the next five years to as little avail as its predecessor. Amid continuing industrial turbulence and economic crisis, first Wilson then Callaghan made desperate bids to brigade the unions into a concordat enforcing wage restraint. By now, however, the change in the global conjuncture of capital, as the long downturn set in, had created such acute stagflation in Britain that workers could not be policed from above. Labour's vain endeavours to do so, culminating in another foreign-exchange crisis, another international rescue package, this time with draconian conditions from the IMF, led to another wave of strikes in the Winter of Discontent of 1978–79. Thereafter, having ditched its promise of devolution to Scotland, torpedoed by its own MPs, Labour met retribution from peripheral nationalism, the SNP felling it in a vote of confidence in the Commons.

11. In these years, as the general crisis of the established order deepened, the journal returned to the *longue durée* that lay behind it. Fault-lines now becoming visible followed from the original composite nature of the British state itself. Uniting three disparate realms in the fashion of

¹³ Tom Nairn, 'Scotland and Europe', NLR 1/83, January–February 1974; 'The Modern Janus', NLR 1/94, November–December 1975.

¹⁴ Arthur Scargill, the outstanding union leader of the time, recounted in detail the successive confrontations with the state that led up to this outcome, and the tactics and strategy behind these, in 'The New Unionism', NLR 1/92, July–August 1975.

many dynastic assemblages of the early modern period, the very success of the Anglo-British parliamentary monarchy in overtaking all rivals to become, as early as the 1690s, the most advanced power of Europe, fixed it fast in a shape whose counterparts elsewhere were later swept away. Developmental priority and imperial success had arrested the British *ancien régime*—‘the grandfather of the contemporary political world’—half-way between feudal and modern forms, leaving its structures an ‘indefensible and unadaptable survival’ of the transition from absolutism to constitutionalism.¹⁵ Its famous mastery of the arts of political absorption and social integration, averting any equivalent of the second round of bourgeois revolutions that occurred in other major capitalist countries, had incapacitated the ensuing system for the tasks of economic modernization. Entry into the EEC had come too late to affect its fortunes.

As it floundered, secession threatened to eclipse even class conflict in breaking it apart. Peripheral nationalism, though less powerful and significant than international or social pressures on the existing order, appeared now more likely to precipitate conflict within it. In such conditions, against a receding horizon of socialism, the left would have to revise its view of nationalism. There was still a distinction to be made between nationalist and socialist revolutions, and an order of inter-relations and priorities among them. But these had become more nuanced and analytically demanding than of old, though Lenin’s instinct that the former could in given circumstances form a vital detour towards the latter might prove applicable in the case of Britain.

12. Such were conjectures of 1977. Two years later, on the eve of the Conservative victory of May 1979, an alternative scenario loomed larger. Were the British system of power to crack at the centre rather than the periphery, the break was more likely to come from the right rather than the left. The traditional emergency formula of a cross-party National Government might loom ahead, even if one of the previous conditions of this standby of 1916 and 1940–45 was missing—‘there will never be another imperial war’—and it could now prove only a temporary palliative. A more radical rupture with the status quo was gestating among strata traditionally marginalized and treated with patrician condescension by the establishment. In opposition, this was the direction in which

¹⁵ Tom Nairn, ‘The Twilight of the British State’, *NLR* 1/101–102, January–April 1977.

the Conservative party under Thatcher was moving, the ‘truculent skeleton of laissez-faire’ leaping from its coffin.¹⁶

Thatcher–Major

13. Thatcher in power, a much longer essay, ‘Into Political Emergency’, appeared as a postscript to the second edition of *The Break-Up of Britain* in 1981.¹⁷ This brought together in a single compass themes nowhere else so pointedly inter-connected in the journal’s writing on the UK. For over a generation, socialists had endured ‘a wasting British world where no break gave relief, as socio-economic crisis persisted under one unavailing government after another, while the established political system had seemed more stable than ever. They had looked first to working-class insurgency for a rupture in this order; then to an alliance of students and workers for a combined revolt against it; and finally at the possibility of peripheral nationalism bringing it down. But though not all was illusion in these successive ‘ideological exits’—the first had overthrown Heath, the second had given birth to a less conformist intellectual class, the last had toppled Callaghan—none had struck at the central nervous system of power in Britain.

That lay in the Westminster state and its long-term strategy of economic survival. Imperial expansion had formed this state. When that was no longer available, it followed its traditional outward bent, resolving to ‘press towards the internationalization of the UK economy as the answer doing most good to the flourishing parts of the system and the least damage to the ailing ones’. The civil elite of the state had long ensured that this strategy of ‘eversion’, turning outwards, was consensual among political parties. Out of it had grown the gulf between a prosperous, rentier-financial South and a relegated-industrial North already depicted by Hobson—the larger structural division within which the respective plights of Scotland, Wales and Ulster were lodged. Though rational enough as a grand design of the traditional order, the logic of such eversion was essentially unavowable. ‘A national state formation cannot openly embrace a goal which, by obvious implication, undermines and discredits its own separate existence and power.’ So

¹⁶ Tom Nairn, ‘The Future of Britain’s Crisis’, NLR 1/113–114, January–April 1979.

¹⁷ Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism*, London 1981, pp. 365–404.

while perfectly sound as a strategy, it was 'so unpalatable to so many as to be unsellable'. There was no way of turning its aims into effective political interpellations.

14. Since taking office, Thatcher's one genuinely radical act had been to take this long-term, underlying trajectory of the state a step further, by abolishing all exchange controls. With this bonanza for the City, the prospect in view was that 'the metropolitan heartland complex will become ever more of a service-zone to international capital', while 'the industries and populations of the Northern river valleys will eventually be shut down or sold off' as assembly-stages or branch-units of American, German or Japanese corporations. Too direct a conflict with the working class could still be avoided, given the temporary cushion of North Sea oil—the monetarist belligerence of the government did not necessarily spell any all-out confrontation with the unions. In face of the miners, Thatcher too had so far retreated, in yet another episode of the phoney war between capital and labour in Britain, any dénouement indefinitely delayed. What of the forces of contestation? Scottish and Welsh nationalism had moved to the left, and contrary to earlier predictions, the outlines of an English nationalism not inherently reactionary could be glimpsed in the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES) advocated by Benn, since the opportunities for progress in the EEC had proved less than once believed. Still, the AES contained the obvious danger of a Jacobin centralization blind to the realities of peripheral nationalism. Only if that were overcome, could an English socialism put behind it the 'shame and defeat of British socialism'.

15. In the event, assumptions of a continuing social stalemate at home and impossibility of imperial war abroad were no sooner expressed than confounded. Within six months of 'Into Political Emergency', Britain was at war with Argentina over its colony in the Falkland Islands; and in its after-swell a dénouement of the war between capital and labour would not be long delayed, triumph in the South Atlantic paving the way for victory in Yorkshire. The special issue of *NLR* on the Falklands—like that on Europe, a full-length essay later published as a book by Penguin—opened by observing that the old saw that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce, needed to be updated: in a repeat of a repeat, this time not as farce, but now in the television age as spectacle, elevating Thatcher to a war leader of the nation in three

hours of overwrought debate in the Commons in which every party offered her support for a naval expedition to recapture the colony.¹⁸ The journal had never paid much attention to proceedings in the Palace of Westminster, for all their role in the ‘central nervous system’ of power in Britain. Now it loosed a scathing analysis of the all-party jingoism that had sent the fleet into battle, allowing Thatcher to hail ‘the spirit of the South Atlantic’ in which the country fought to recover its lost possession as the ‘real spirit’ of Britain, proof that it ‘has ceased to be a nation in retreat’. What enabled this paroxysm of unity was the enduring matrix of the Churchillian legend of a people in its hour of trial closing ranks behind a heroic chief. Still living in the mind of the parties that had joined together in the victorious coalition of 1940–45, this was the epic scene reenacted in all absurdity in 1982. That without loss of life, and for a fraction of the cost of the expedition to the Falklands, the tiny island population could have been relocated with munificent compensation to New Zealand or elsewhere—Britain had without compunction or compensation removed the population of Diego García to make way for an American air-base—was publicly unthinkable.

16. A year later Thatcher’s re-election in 1983 with a sweeping parliamentary majority, could not be minimized. Taking stock of it, an editorial in the journal, while pointing out the limited size of the vote that had given her a second mandate, did not understate the depth of Labour’s defeat.¹⁹ The fiasco of Wilson’s ‘modernization’, the debacle of Callaghan’s corporatism, not to speak of the abjection of Foot’s jingoism, had left the working class divided and demoralized, and the party with a mere fifth of the electorate. Thatcher, by contrast, had staged an intra-party coup, routing Tory paternalism as well as Labour corporatism with a cult of the market and a petty-bourgeois zeal no longer restrained by fear of the proletariat. This was not a radical liquidation of the old order. But nor was it a mere sentimental mystification. In offering the masses, from its base in the South-East, the City and the informal economy, hope of new jobs, control of inflation and the promise of information technology, Thatcherism appealed with notable effect to the popular sensibility of what Raymond Williams, in the leading article of the same issue, termed ‘mobile privatization’.

¹⁸ Anthony Barnett, ‘Iron Britannia’, NLR 1/134, July–August 1982: a notable farewell to the journal, Barnett leaving shortly thereafter, then founding openDemocracy.

¹⁹ Robin Blackburn, ‘Themes’, NLR 1/140, July–August 1983.

17. But would Thatcher succeed in reversing the economic descent whose fall-out had brought her to power? In 1987 a reprise of NLR's original problematic measured its characterization of the ruling bloc in Britain and the relation of it to the country's decline against the historiographic evidence that had accumulated since.²⁰ Arno Mayer's *Persistence of the Old Regime* had shown that continuing aristocratic power was the rule, rather than the exception, in Europe down to the First World War. Where did that leave the landed class in Britain among its peers? Sufficiently specified, still a case apart: the wealthiest, most stable and most exclusive of the set, enjoying higher productivity on its estates, greater expanses of urban property and mineral resources, and far longer experience of rule in a parliamentary system. Conversely, British manufacturers were economically much smaller figures than the industrial magnates of Pennsylvania or the Ruhr; and while the City might be the capital of world finance, Britain never knew the world of finance capital emergent in the US and Germany, as depicted by Hilferding. British Labour, for its part, had nothing to show for its spells in office between the wars, compared with German or Austrian constitution-making, French vacations or Swedish public works, and when in 1945 it gained the largest parliamentary majority of any post-war social-democracy, left the general configuration of British capital and state untouched. Unlike any of its major competitors, the country knew no second revolution from above after the settlement of 1689, nor intervening convulsion on the road to modernity. After the Attlee government, alternating Conservative and Labour sequels from Churchill to Callaghan had each proved incapable of reversing post-war economic decline.

18. How far had Thatcher's regime, with its integrated package of labour discipline, state retrenchment and financial decontrol, succeeded where they failed? After its deathblow in 1985 to the miners, deserted by Labour and the TUC, the unions were broken.²¹ Both productivity and profitability in industry had improved, though still lagging well below competitors abroad. But the international position of UK manufacturing had steadily worsened, Britain becoming for the first time

²⁰ Perry Anderson, 'The Figures of Descent', NLR 1/161, January–February 1987.

²¹ 'After the longest epic of collective resistance in the annals of British labour', the isolation of economic struggle, in the pits and at storage depots, from any political relay beyond them was decisive, for reasons indicated already in the sixties: 'The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action', in *The Incompatibles*, pp. 260–80.

in its history a net importer of industrial goods. Markets were not self-redressing: centralized direction of one kind or another was needed to correct them. But of the four variants at work elsewhere—dirigiste planning in France, industrial banks in Germany, state-*keiretsu* coordination in Japan, corporatist concertation in Austria or Sweden—the necessary social agents were all lacking in Britain: neither its bureaucracy, nor its finance, nor its labour movement was equipped for the task. Did that matter? Or did the remorselessly uneven development of global capitalism, and over-competition within it, mean that the British fate might be becoming more general?

19. More systematically comparative than the initial theses in NLR, and a more detailed and documented exposition of them, this was a narrative that accorded far more space to the ruling bloc than to either the intelligentsia or labour. Two subsequent texts sought to make good these lacunae. The first, written in the last year of Thatcher's government, looked at what had become of the intellectual landscape surveyed since the sixties.²² There, it concluded, a major reversal had occurred, change in the eighties moving in the opposite direction to that of government, in good measure because of the animus of Thatcherism against the universities. But it was also because the boundaries of intellectual life had altered, as—in part because of the generational upheaval of the sixties—European currents of thought now percolated through it on one side and American on the other, eroding the philistine provincialism of the post-war matrix. The result was not just to loosen the grip of the 'vacantly asocial and slackly psychologistic' pattern of old, fostering more historical and international ways of thinking, but to weaken the conformism associated with it, including the unthinking male chauvinism of the past, contested by a renewed feminism. While remaining generally liberal within centrist parameters, the political outlook of the intelligentsia had undergone a certain radicalization,²³ hostility to Thatcher becoming

²² Perry Anderson, 'A Culture in Contraflow', NLR 1/180, March–April 1990 and NLR 1/182, July–August 1990.

²³ Its historic disposition having been, in the words of a description on the eve of Thatcher's raking of the academy: 'decidedly Anglican in temper, aware of higher things but careful not to become tedious on that account, and not really in much doubt of the basic good sense of the nation and those who governed it': Francis Mulhern, "'Teachers, Writers, Celebrities': Intelligentsias and Their Histories', NLR 1/126, March–April 1981, the first fully comparative analysis in the journal of a sector of English society, here set against its counterparts in France and America.

widespread, a trajectory exemplified in what had become its most representative periodical, the *London Review of Books*. A marked disjuncture had opened up between high politics and high culture, familiar enough on the Continent, hitherto unknown in Britain.

20. What of Labourism? Its condition was set, first within the transformation of the social and political landscape of the country effected by Thatcher, which rather than any fundamental economic change was her real legacy. There her greatest achievement was the ideological adaptation of the Labour Party to her rule, a make-over confining its aims—this was still prior to Blair—to no more than a mild softening of the impact of a neo-liberal regime.²⁴ Secondly, it should be seen within the framework of its sister parties in the Socialist International. There, once the long downturn of the global economy set in, welfare systems and full employment coming under pressure, social-democracy lost ground everywhere in Northern Europe, and gained it in Southern Europe only by exchanging these for liberal or secular reforms of no particular social connotation. Did that mean Europe was gradually moving towards the pattern of America or Japan, without any social-democracy at all? In Britain, Labour had followed the general parabola of its North European sister parties, if with fewer members, weaker regional sub-structures, lesser command of proletarian loyalties, and scarcely any academic or media supports.

21. Faced with the same fog of political uncertainty as the rest, Labour was confronted in addition with the problems of national decline, which it could not comfort itself were simply those of the chronological priority of Britain as a first-comer to the industrial revolution, since Belgium showed that with the same handicap and its consequences, decline could be reversed. But for that, concertation of some kind was required, typically at the initiative of the executive. In Britain, however, the structure of the legislature, based on an unwritten constitution and a voting system long pre-dating the arrival of democracy, compounded by the structure of Labour—still less democratic than the state itself—precluded the relatively more equitable representation of forces on which effective concertation of capitalism alone could rest. Proportional representation, an intellectual product of the revolutions of 1789 and 1848 in Europe—its

²⁴ Perry Anderson, 'The Light of Europe', *English Questions*, London and New York 1992, pp. 302–53.

pioneers, Condorcet and Considerant—was the only acceptable formula of democratic choice, and the constitutional-reform campaign Charter 88 was right to champion it as the principle of a political reconstruction of the state. The social citizenship theorized by Marshall could only acquire full meaning if the political citizenship he thought had preceded it, but in any true sense had not, at last took hold in the land of first-past-the-post.

Blair–Brown

22. With the arrival of New Labour in 1997, this remained the prism through which in the first instance it was judged. Three years into the Blair regime, what was the record?²⁵ Against the background of a strong currency and business support, steps to quell unrest in the periphery had been carried through smoothly enough: measures of devolution granted to Scotland and Wales, and pacification achieved in Ulster. But amid a whirl of modish slogans and futurist postures, the mainframe of the British state system had remained sacrosanct. So far as any democratic principle went, proportional representation had been consigned to the Greek calends, the House of Lords merely altered from a vivarium of birth to one of patronage. Constitutionally speaking Blairism, vaunting its strong hand, offered a simulation of the caste-power of the old order and last-ditch Britishness. Beneath its posturing lay the country that had not spoken yet, the English, whose voice had long been usurped by a British-imperial class speaking for them. In not affording it any institutional expression, Blair's project made it likely that Powell's intonation of it would be heard once more—that 'England will return on the street corner, rather than via a maternity room with appropriate care and facilities. Croaking tabloids, saloon-bar resentment and backbench populism are likely to attend the birth and have their say. Democracy is constitutional or nothing. Without a systematic form, its ugly cousins will be tempted to move in and demand their rights.'

23. But how far could the path from Thatcher to Blair be reduced to the dynamic of Ukanian constitutional devolution or involution? What such

²⁵ Tom Nairn, 'Ukania under Blair', published in the first issue of the new series of the journal: NLR I, January–February 2000, introducing his now standard sobriquet for Britain, coined after Robert Musil's mockery of the *kaiserlich-königlich* Austro-Hungarian Empire as Kakania in *The Man without Qualities*.

a depiction risked was a conceptual landscape of Britain swept clean of all but 'one significant life-form and one technology: the post-1688 ruling bloc and its prosthesis, the Westminster state'—apart from peripheral nationalism, their potential nemesis.²⁶ In such a contrast, full historical agency was granted only to state-elites and peoples-as-nations. In any vision in which the fate of modernity came down simply to nationality, other manifestations of solidarity or antagonism, above all class relations, could only be relegated to a secondary, intermittent existence. Yet 'any appeal to nationality is always a coded declaration for, or against, a substantive social state of affairs', and if constitutionalism were to become the *passe-partout* of analysis of Ukania, it would have nothing to say even about the social order of an independent Scotland, leaving what actual constitution it should adopt a blank. But politics was a matter of policies as well of charters, and high-minded indifference to the former, as if a budget could not in its own way be as synoptic of a society as a constitution, might come at a political price, leaving in place 'a refurbished social-liberal hegemony for an unalterably capitalist society'. The struggle to foster a popular left alternative to Blairism might be the low road to the constitutional sublime, but if the critical test of New Labour were to become the pragmatic success or failure of its management of capitalism in Britain, it could prove the only one available.

24. On the eve of the 2001 election, verdicts on the trajectory of Ukania could be updated. Thatcherism had wrought many real changes to the country, but the restoration of grandeur was not among them.²⁷ The stability of the old order had rested on the external force-field of empire; once that was gone, the patriciate lost its grip at home, deference giving way to a 'molecular, resentful sort of rebelliousness', disabling the supports of the old regime, and Thatcher's lower-middle-class crusade could finish off the grandees. After her fall had come the miasmic torpor of Major's half-decade, then Blair's nebulous concoction of Enterprise Culture seasoned with the remains of Welfarism. It was a mistake, however, to attribute the ensuing pathologies just to the effects of neo-liberalism. For these were inseparable from futile attempts at retrieving national greatness, in which the very term 'decline' was a lure inviting the notion that 'revival' was possible—changing everything not so that they remained the same, Lampedusa-style, but so that they would become

²⁶ Francis Mulhern, 'Britain after Nairn', *NLR* 5, September–October 2000.

²⁷ Tom Nairn, 'Mario and the Magician', *NLR* 9, May–June 2001.

immensely, improbably better. The forces of British retro-nationalism still had plenty of assets in their fight against the prospect of a liberated archipelago—cadres of the state, much of the intelligentsia, most of the media. Immigrant politicians from Scotland like Brown were among these, servitors of the City and transplants of great-nationalism. But the parabola of Blairism could be predicted. The rules of the system prescribed a concluding Majorite phase of bedraggled sleaze and exhaustion, before eventually, ‘eviction into the frozen wasteland of disgrace and ridicule in its turn’.

25. In 2005 disgrace and ridicule were yet to come. Blair was still in charge of managing British capitalism and there was little sign of popular resistance to his regime, which had consolidated the paradigm set in place by Thatcherism.²⁸ The economic recovery staged by Major after Black Wednesday had been husbanded with a continuing credit and consumer boom, still with low rates of investment and weak productivity growth. Overall income inequality had not been reduced, while wage differentials and the gender gap were widening. Increased public expenditure on health had failed to match European levels, service in hospitals and schools deteriorating. Partial democratization in the periphery—limited devolution in Scotland, less in Wales, pacification in Northern Ireland—had been accompanied by increased authoritarianism at the centre: Blair side-lining his Cabinet and Blunkett stepping up police and legal repression. Abroad, New Labour had distinguished itself as the most aggressive adjutant of American imperialism in post-war history, its eager accomplice and subordinate in Washington’s wars in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Greeted at the outset with euphoria by the intelligentsia, and unprecedented fawning in the media on Blair himself, New Labour had not gained any deep adhesion among the masses. Re-election in 2001 had been secured on a low share of a low turn-out. But with the Conservatives in disarray, New Labour had become the preferred option of British business, as more European than the Tories and better at presiding over deregulation and domesticating the unions. For capital at large, neo-labourism was a satisfactory second round of neo-liberalism, somewhat more flexible and emollient than the first. For the Thatcher-averse intelligentsia, even if by now somewhat crestfallen over Iraq, New Labour

²⁸ Susan Watkins, ‘A Weightless Hegemony?’, NLR 25, January–February 2004.

was still the lesser evil; while for sections of the sentimental or sectarian left, it remained the party of the working class, and ‘the slumbering soul of True Labour’ would eventually awaken.

26. The upshot was that the sway of New Labour over the Ukanian political landscape was a hegemony that was strangely weightless, more negative than positive, lacking any novel ideological interpellation other than the ephemeral vacuities of the Third Way. Resting largely on the absence of any effective opposition from the ranks of a divided Conservatism, it had not produced any cadre of passionate followers or transformation of popular sensibility of the kind which ensured that Thatcher’s hegemony left a much deeper imprint on the country. In this limbo, the *Economist* had decided Blair was the best right-wing prime minister Britain could have, sufficient reason for the left to find any other preferable. What principally distinguished New Labour from its predecessors, going back to the 1950s, was the number of deaths for which it was responsible abroad. The sooner it fell, the better.

27. What of the Conservatives, after a dozen years in opposition? The old governing class, in which a landed aristocracy had—without disappearing—metamorphosed into the figure of the upper-class English gentleman, seconded by a stratum of *haut-bourgeois* professionals, had come to its end with the defeat of Home in 1964.²⁹ Sociological changes—a better educated, less deprived working class and an expanded middle class—had undermined the traditional hierarchies on which this stratum rested at home, while abroad the empire from which it drew its ultimate claim to power and calling had dissolved. This was a double blow, propelling lower-middle-class strivers, first Heath and then Thatcher, into leadership of the Tory party, each of them more combative in fighting the battles of capital against labour and radical in seeking solutions to economic decline. The first failed to break the unions or revive the economy, but succeeded in taking Britain into Europe as a surrogate for Empire. The second crushed the unions and, mauling many old-guard institutions in the process, injected more energy into the economy, if without altering its direction. But in turning a petty-bourgeois nationalism against Europe, Thatcher eventually split the Conservatives, driving them into the wilderness for a decade.

²⁹ Susan Watkins, ‘Toryism after Blair’, *NLR* 38, March–April 2006.

New Labour, bent into shape by Thatcherism, had hewed without compunction to its neo-liberal domestic agenda. But unencumbered by reflexes of national sovereignty that still twitched in the imperial-conservative unconscious, it was happy to play its part in the European Union, and happier still to serve as all-purpose equerry for the United States. Culturally too, it could go one better than Thatcherism by ditching Victorian values for just-in-time helpings of Diana kitsch and Cool Britannia. In face of this mutant heir to its former heroine, the Tories—after three successive zeroes from the lower ranks: products of a comprehensive, a secondary modern and a grammar school—had now finally reverted to form and picked an Etonian to lead them. But Cameron, like his colleague Osborne, though of impeccably upper-class background, was indistinguishable in tastes, outlook and religiosity from Blair, on whom he openly modelled himself: all were friends of Berlusconi. His leadership was a faux restoration. Tory England in the old sense was dead. What had replaced it in the Conservative Party was not better.

28. On the eve of the election of 2010 that would finally propel New Labour into a frozen wasteland, by now overdue, the books on its record could be closed. From 1997 to 2008 it had presided over a boom fuelled by an asset-price bubble, which the global financial crash brought to an abrupt end.³⁰ Under Blair and Brown, the share of finance in the economy had grown more sharply than in the US, that of manufacturing dropped more steeply than under the Conservatives. Mortgage debt per capita was higher than in America, and inequalities of income and wealth had only increased. A fifth of public spending was now sub-contracted to the private sector; 90 per cent of capital expenditure in health. In higher education, quant-mania had gone a pathological step further with the Research Excellence Framework (REF). In the name of the War on Terror, repressive legislation had intensified and numbers incarcerated risen. Constitutionally, pacification of Ulster, and devolution in Scotland and Wales, however limited or grudging, were advances. But against them had to be set corrupt remodelling of the Lords, and grotesque levels of sleaze in the Commons. In foreign policy, Labour's traditional Atlanticism had taken on a new twist, a hyper-subalternity to the US in an era when America had become the sole super-power, whose pay-off overseas was a hugely greater sum of killing and torture

³⁰ Tony Wood, 'Good Riddance to New Labour', NLR 62, March–April 2010.

than under Macmillan, Thatcher or Major: alone reason enough for New Labour to be thrown out of office.

Cameron–May

29. Analysis of the results of the 2010 election showed that it was the scale of the desertion of Labour by the working class, especially in regions of high unemployment, which gave the Tories their qualified victory with no more than 36 per cent of the vote.³¹ Lacking a parliamentary majority, Cameron was swiftly shoe-horned by the civil service into a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, nominally less conservative than the Tories. But there could be little doubt that austerity, predictable enough already under Brown, would be harsh under the coalition. How far would that alter the prospects for Labour? ‘Opposition to Tory cuts may not be enough to return New Labour to government, but it could help to sustain what might be called Corbynism, after the member for Islington North: niche socialist activism of an honest and sometimes effective kind’, but yielding nothing but a parliamentary seat here or there and renewal of the traditional belief on the left that one day the party would be made afresh. Viewed comparatively, the post-crash politics of the West showed tactical adjustment of its bipartisan consensus by the centrist parties, but little change of outlook. The widely proclaimed end of neo-liberalism looked more and more like the continuation of its agenda by other means.

30. In 2015, Cameron was returned to office without need of the Liberal Democrats, who were decimated at the polls, and in the wake of Labour’s renewed defeat, Corbyn was elected its leader in the first one-person-one-vote election in the party’s history. Within a year came the referendum, called and lost by Cameron on Britain’s membership of the EU.³² His decision to call one, product of long-standing divisions among the Tories, was designed to silence the Eurosceptic wing of his party, in a careless display of class insouciance that with united establishment support—extending from the City to the TUC, not to speak of all-party backing—victory was assured. But as in France and the Netherlands, a popular rebellion against the whole governing class led to the opposite outcome. Two thirds of the working class voted for Leave, a higher proportion than any stratum—including even the best-off—voting for

³¹ Susan Watkins, ‘Blue Labour?’, *NLR* 63, May–June 2010.

³² Susan Watkins, ‘Casting Off?’, *NLR* 100, July–August 2016.

Remain, on a larger turn-out than seen in years. London, beneficiary of the financial bubble and closer to Paris than Manchester by rail, voted heavily for Remain; the abandoned industrial North, hardest-hit by austerity, heavily for Leave. On the left, opinions had divided. Those in favour of Remain argued that the xenophobia of Brexiteers of the right made the EU a lesser evil, those in favour of Leave that departure would be a blow to the neo-liberal oligarchies on both sides of the Channel: each voting negatively against, rather than for, anything. But what would Brexit actually mean for the European Union, or for Ukania in parting with it? So far, all that was clear was that ‘Blairized Britain has taken a hit, as has the Hayekianized EU’ and ‘critics of the neoliberal order have no reason to regret these knocks to it’, against which the entire global establishment had inveighed.

31. More fine-grained analysis made clear the extent to which the Brexit result, though certainly multi-stranded in motivation, was the expression of a regional and social revolt in the North of England: Leave majorities were concentrated in former strongholds of Labour, now reduced to a hinterland of decayed industries and discarded proletarian households.³³ There was hostility to immigrants in this part of the country, as elsewhere in Britain. However, that it was not the primary driver of the outcome could be deduced from Labour’s unexpected recovery in the election of 2017, once Corbyn campaigned on a platform amounting to a rejection of the whole neo-liberal order in place since the 1980s. In the face of a high Tory vote, he not only held most of the North, but swept the youth of the country by margins never previously approached by Labour, in what was now a second popular uprising against the entire British establishment. Yet Corbyn’s position remained tenuous in his own party, whose permanent apparatus and parliamentary delegation remained ferociously opposed to him.³⁴ The small team around him lacked any preparation for government in what would be the predictable conditions of an implacable siege by capital and the media. There were no grounds for euphoria.

Resumption

32. Looking back, how might the balance-sheet of this record be read? On the credit side, NLR pioneered critical analysis of half a dozen aspects of British political life that continue to shape events, and was on the

³³ Tom Hazeldine, ‘Revolt of the Rustbelt’, NLR 105, May–June 2017.

³⁴ Daniel Finn, ‘Crosscurrents’, NLR 118, July–August 2019.

whole prescient about them. These were: (i) the historical nature of the ruling bloc; (ii) the deep structures of Labourism as a phenomenon specific to Britain, up to the early 1990s; (iii) the distinctive patterns of post-war intellectual culture, and some of the changes in them; (iv) the eversive form of Ukanian economic development, and its effects on class and region across the country; (v) the eruption of peripheral nationalism, above all in Scotland, as a symptom of the decline of the composite, imperial Anglo-British state, and the tensions and risks of racism in a subcutaneous English identity within it; (vi) the fissiparous impact of Europe on British politics, dividing left and right alike.

33. On the debit side, the ideas and arguments of this body of writing had, each of them, significant omissions or limitations. So far as the first of these went, although it conformed in many ways to the journal's original diagnosis of the metamorphosis the dominant bloc would have to undergo to remain hegemonic, there was a missing element in its analysis of the watershed in Conservative evolution represented by Thatcherism. Focussing on the social shift in the party's leadership, the economic logic of its direction, and the political engineering of its electoral base, despite a preliminary intimation it neglected the specific ideological grip that Thatcherism acquired over active supporters and ostensible opponents alike, not to speak of passive acceptance. Understanding the forms and mechanisms of this sway was the great achievement of Stuart Hall, in the pages of *Marxism Today*. So too, though NLR predicted, even before Wilson came to power in 1964, the contradictions that would in time wrench the combination of party and unions that constituted Labourism apart, and tracked these thereafter, it failed to register the extent of the changes in the country's working class that would become a condition of Blairism. There it was Eric Hobsbawm who saw much earlier and more clearly what was happening, well before New Labour. NLR published both Hall and Hobsbawm, in its imprint and its journal, and critiques of each by others on the Left, without itself engaging them.³⁵

³⁵ See Stuart Hall, 'Authoritarian Populism—a Reply', NLR 1/151, May–June 1985; *The Hard Road to Renewal*, London and New York 1988; Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhern, eds, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, London and New York 1981; Eric Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left*, London and New York 1988; 'Farewell to the Classic Labour Movement?', NLR 1/173, January–February 1989. Critics: Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley, Bob Jessop, Tom Ling, 'Authoritarian Populism, Two Nations, and Thatcherism', NLR 1/147, September–October 1984, et seq; Ralph Miliband, 'The New Revisionism in Britain', NLR 1/150, March–April 1985.

34. Treatment of the intellectual landscape of the country, however ambitious in intention or pugnacious in detail, was wanting in two respects. From the start, insufficient attention was paid to the importance of liberalism, in its variations—economic, political and social—from Victorian times onwards, as a circumambient ether in the mental world of the established order, as it remains today. The links, or lack of them, between selected intellectuals and high politics was another gap in the journal's coverage; the importance of these in Thatcher's rule was overlooked, even though with eminences famously external in origin supplying the theoretical compass of her system, earlier verdicts on the post-war intelligentsia were confirmed. In the same period, the radicalization of macro-economic eversion, delineated starkly enough as a further stage in a long-standing process at national level, set the world-wide arrival of the neo-liberal paradigm—signalled by Mike Davis in 1984³⁶—only in passing rather than with the needed force, in the international regime-change of the time.

35. If Scotland and Europe were each emergent cruces in the trajectory of Ukania from the late sixties to the present, where the Review (though it had little to say about Ireland after 1969) was analytically well ahead of contemporary registration of them, they also formed areas of its thinking where early insights were never stabilized into an integrated conception, with subsequent interventions subject to oscillation and division. Tom Nairn foresaw, when it was still scarcely visible, the take-off of Scottish nationalism, captured its historical exceptional forms and conditions in a set of portraits that scintillate to this day, and developed out of them one of the commanding general theories of nationalism of all time. But as the title of *The Break-Up of Britain*, question-mark declined, would indicate, the coming of an independent Scotland was held too certain. Between prevision and consummation there would be so protracted a delay that in the interim, the original connection between nationalism and socialism in this prospect slipped, hopes in the former eclipsing conceptions of the latter, as Francis Mulhern would point out. One result was that coverage of New Labour in the journal tended to decant

³⁶ Writing under Reagan, of the 'Californianization of America' and 'Americanization of Europe' in 'The Political Economy of Late-Imperial America', NLR 1/143, January–February 1984, p. 13.

analysis of its constitutional and its socio-economic records into separate, successive analyses rather than connecting them in a unified field.

36. In the case of Europe, too, first takes were each in their way clairvoyant. Robin Blackburn's judgement of 1971 that entry into the EEC was 'bound to shake many of the pillars of bourgeois Britain', threatening institutional legitimations of the status quo and sowing discord in the ranks of its defenders, would be confirmed in due course with a vengeance. Tom Nairn's essay of 1972 remains unmatched, half a century later, for depth of historical reflection on the issues posed for the left by the form that European unity had taken with the creation of the Common Market—nothing approaching it having ever appeared on the continent itself, let alone when the same questions were reopened in Britain in and after 2016. The categorical affirmation with which it concluded could not, as the Community later unfolded, remain so unqualified. In 1976, contesting a Norwegian vision that projected the EEC as a future super-power, Nairn observed that this it would never be, because, as with the multi-national empires of the pre-1914 era, any such prospect would be undone by the uneven development of capitalism that had everywhere generated nationalism as a breakwater against it. In the EEC, however, the strengthening of a cross-border capitalism was bound to aggravate uneven development between its regions, weakening the authority of the old nation-states without putting anything as effective in their place. Thus a 'purely economic reinforcement of capitalism does *not* entail a corresponding reinforcement of bourgeois *power* in the crucial state-ideological sense'—a contradiction the left should seize upon. Looking back, another four years on, 'The Left against Europe?' had gone too far, in a stance implying an ultra-Europeanism that disconcertingly, if tangentially, echoed the outward drive of the rulers of the country. Overestimating the genuine but limited possibilities opened up for the left by entry, it had overlooked the extent to which, for the right, "Europe" was a humble predecessor of the monetarist runes of post-1979.³⁷ As runes became reality after Maastricht, and in one trenchant verdict after another, the journal took systematic stock of the

³⁷ 'What it actually bestowed, in conditions of gathering recession, was modest opportunity for the financial sector and galloping de-industrialization up North': *The Break-Up of Britain*, pp. 328, 396.

political and economic dynamic of the Union it created, little was left of the prospect of 1972.³⁸

II. OUTCOMES

What bearing does the record of past NLR writing on Britain have on the present? Perhaps never before has what would be a distinctive problematic of the journal been so vividly concentrated in a single conjuncture as that of the past few years. To all appearances, what Britain has been witnessing are: (i) a sudden recomposition of the dominant political stratum; (ii) a decomposition of the traditional Labourist pendant to it; (iii) the explosive dénouement of long-standing conflicts over Europe; (iv) widespread intimations in the media, not so much of competitive decline, but of suicidal self-harm and proximate socio-economic disaster; (v) clamorous dismay in the intelligentsia; (vi) mounting pressure for secession in Scotland. In other words, closely intertwined, simultaneous crises of class, state and nation. Though on the surface, continuity between the original problematic of the Review and current circumstances may look striking enough, the analytic relevance *in concreto* of past findings cannot be assumed. They have to be tested against the novel particulars of the situation.

There is a preliminary question. The original NLR approach was totalizing: taking the principal structures and features of British society as an integrated complex which it was the object of analysis to capture, in keeping with the injunctions of Lukács and Gramsci. How far does this aim still make sense, in a period where nation-states, permeated or overborne in every direction by transnational market and media forces (not to speak of geo-political pressures) external to them, have ceased to be—even approximately—closed totalities? In the 1980s, something like a parallel enquiry got under way in the journal on the United States, a much larger and more complicated society, in the work of Mike Davis. Prompted by NLR's approach to Britain, a country observed by him first-hand at the time, this body of writing on America—encompassing not

³⁸ Susan Watkins, 'Continental Tremors', NLR 33, May–June 2005, after the rejection of the Draft Constitution for Europe by French and Dutch voters; 'Another Turn of the Screw?', NLR 75, May–June 2012, after the introduction of the Fiscal Compact.

only the working class, the middle class and the exploiting class, but the national and imperial, economic and electoral, cultural and political, demographic and ecological scenery of the United States—would in time expand far beyond what had been attempted in the UK, and in doing so, to the encompassing world beyond America itself.³⁹ Has anything like this, however much more limited in scope, been generated in another country since? Yet, whether or not they continue to form totalities as bounded as formerly, the societies over which nation-states preside unquestionably still represent determinate strategic horizons of political action for those who live within them, and for practical purposes remain in that sense as germane as ever.

Inter-connected with this question is another, bearing no less directly on the problematic of the journal set out in the sixties, one already raised before mid-point in the subsequent years. How far did ‘decline’, as an organizing framework for analysis of developments in Britain, lose its purchase on them once ‘globalization’ arrived, in the shape of a common deceleration of growth and acceleration of financialization across the advanced capitalist world, with the liberation of capital markets, extension of supply chains and generalization of neo-liberal regimes that set in during the eighties?⁴⁰ Could it be said, in Sartre’s terminology, that a double detotalization—of both unit and path of analysis—has since

³⁹ Over forty years, see—*inter alia*—‘Why the US Working Class is Different’, NLR 1/123, September–October 1980; ‘The Barren Marriage of American Labour and the Democratic Party’, NLR 1/124, November–December 1980; ‘The New Right’s Road to Power’, NLR 1/128, July–August 1981; ‘Nuclear Exterminism and Extended Deterrence’, in Edward Thompson et al, *Exterminism and Cold War*, London and New York 1982; ‘The AFL-CIO’s Second Century’, NLR 1/136, November–December 1982; ‘The Political Economy of Late-Imperial America’, NLR 1/143, January–February 1984; ‘Reaganomics’ Magical Mystery Tour’, NLR 1/149, January–February 1985; ‘Urban Renaissance and the Spirit of Postmodernism’, NLR 1/151, May–June 1985; ‘The Lesser Evil? The Left and the Democratic Party’, NLR 1/155, January–February 1986; ‘Who Killed Los Angeles? A Political Autopsy’, NLR 1/199, May–June 1993; ‘Who Killed Los Angeles? Part Two: The Verdict is Given’, NLR 1/199, May–June 1993; ‘The Dead West; Ecocide in Marlboro Country’, NLR 1/200, July–August 1993.

⁴⁰ How relevant a metric, it may be asked, is growth of GDP in any case for assessing the course of a society from the left? By Extinction Rebellion standards, it is actively pernicious. The time has yet to come, however, when it fails to matter politically, as a glance at the distribution of life-chances across the globe makes clear. The form it takes, rather than whether it should exist at all, is the political question.

overtaken the particular line of enquiry pursued by the journal?⁴¹ The answer can only lie in the actual record of the economy, viewed comparatively, and of the agency of the state that has presided over it. The journal's propositions were not confined to these, but in seeing how far they retain contemporary relevance, the economy is a starting-point.

1. *Decline*

The deterioration in the country's position which first attracted widespread debate in the sixties was always relative to that of its peers, never absolute, as growth lifted living standards over the next half century. Between the fall of the Attlee and the fall of the Callaghan governments, there could be little doubt of Britain's loss of competitive ranking, as the table below of performance in what would become the G7 states makes clear. Across three decades, Britain regularly came bottom of the group:

TABLE I: *Average GDP Growth, by decade*

| | 1950s | 1960s | 1970s |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| CAN | 4.79 | 5.13 | 4.4 |
| DEU | 7.7 | 4.56 | 3.11 |
| FRA | 4.31 | 5.7 | 3.8 |
| GBR | 2.35 | 3.19 | 2.66 |
| ITA | 6.13 | 6.13 | 3.49 |
| JPN | 8.38 | 10.71 | 5.28 |
| USA | 3.76 | 4.53 | 3.24 |
| Average | 5.35 | 5.71 | 3.71 |

Source: Conference Board

This was the pattern that Thatcher's regime set out to break with a completely new orientation, which in due course, it boasted, had led to an economic renaissance of the country; a term reiterated by New Labour when it came to power, claiming to have abolished the business cycle

⁴¹ Andrew Gamble pointed out the relationship between the two question-marks, over the nation and over decline—he had written powerfully about both—at the turn of the century: 'Theories and Explanations of British Decline', in Richard English and Michael Kenny, *Rethinking British Decline*, Basingstoke 1999, pp. 17–19.

and be setting an example to Europe in the dynamism of Britain's market economy. Historically, how well do these claims stand up?

The most authoritative case for the success of Thatcherism is made by Nicholas Crafts, for whom its three great achievements were to break the obstructive power of the unions, to lower tariffs, and by deregulating markets and privatizing public monopolies, to unleash competition. In doing so, Crafts argues, it reaped the benefits of information and communications technology (ICT), a general purpose advance to which the more decentralized economic system it created would prove better adapted than its dirigiste predecessor had been to mass production Fordism in the post-war period, even if it essentially presided over technological diffusion rather than innovation. Thatcher's overhaul of the economy was incomplete, since it left the separation between ownership and management of enterprises, a long-standing bane in Britain, untouched. But the balance-sheet was unquestionably positive. The country no longer lagged behind France and Germany, as it had before.⁴²

What of productivity in these years? If overall gains were not much above the European average, in manufacturing there was a marked improvement, rising by 4.7 per cent a year between 1979 and 1989, while profits had jumped 44 per cent by the end of the decade. But, as Andrew Glyn showed, over half of the productivity gains came from shedding labour, while investment in manufacturing underwent a spectacular reversal, as its profits were diverted into financial and business services, where investment leapt 320 per cent during years when investment in manufacturing inched forward barely 13 per cent.⁴³ By 1991, manufacturing output had risen just 6 per cent, compared with an OECD average of 35 per cent, crawling across the whole period from 1973 to 2007 at an annual average of no more than 0.4 per cent.⁴⁴ Overall, between 1979

⁴² Nicholas Crafts, *Forging Ahead, Falling Behind, Fighting Back: British Economic Growth from the Industrial Revolution to the Financial Crisis*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 107–17.

⁴³ In 1979, financial investment was a third of the level of manufacturing investment; in 1989 it was one third higher: Andrew Glyn, 'The "Productivity Miracle", Profits and Investment', in Jonathan Michie, ed., *The Economic Legacy 1979–1992*, London 1992, pp. 77–81, 84–5.

⁴⁴ Michie, 'Introduction', *The Economic Legacy 1979–1992*, p. 6; Michael Kitson and Jonathan Michie, 'The Rise and Fall of UK Manufacturing 1870–2010', in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, Vol. II*, new edn, Cambridge 2014, Table 12.1, p. 314.

and 1990, GDP grew 2.3 per cent a year, below the 3 per cent rate from 1949 to 1973.⁴⁵ Investment in R & D was not only well below competitors, but actually fell in the last thirty years of the century.⁴⁶

With Thatcher's arrival in power, the imposition of a sharp deflation to switch the country across to a new economic regime led to a severe initial recession in 1980–81, and continuing high rates of unemployment thereafter. But the shock was cushioned by revenues from North Sea oil and proceeds from the sale of public assets, allowing the government to exit the recession without fiscal expansion, on the contrary lowering taxes on income and cutting expenditure.⁴⁷ The magnet of deregulation attracting a major influx of overseas capital: foreign ownership of local assets quadrupled, supporting the balance of payments, while household borrowing doubled, sustaining consumption.⁴⁸ With these ingredients in place, a finance-and-debt fuelled boom lasted for nearly a decade, before a second and deeper recession struck in 1990–91, requiring recourse to a devaluation of sterling for recovery, without alteration of the underlying model. Investment remained stuck at the bottom of the G7 through the nineties.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Michael Kitson, 'Failure followed by success or success followed by failure? A re-examination of British economic growth since 1949', in *The Cambridge Economic History of Britain, Vol. III*, Cambridge 2004, Table 2.1, pp. 32, 51–2, also showing that labour productivity from 1979–90 grew at half the rate of 1964–73.

⁴⁶ Crafts, *Forging Ahead*, p. 105; likewise, investment in the literacy and numeracy required for the production of high value-added goods saw a regression, with pupil-teacher ratios in public education rising under Thatcher and Major: Simon Szreter, 'British economic decline and human resources', in Peter Clarke and Clive Trebilcock, *Understanding Decline: Perceptions and Realities of British Economic Performance*, Cambridge 1997, p. 99.

⁴⁷ North Sea oil more or less exactly covered the increased costs of unemployment benefits, while the sale of council housing would prove the most lucrative of the privatizations: Colin Leys, 'The British Ruling-Class', *Socialist Register 2014*, vol. 50, p. 110. For council housing, see Kevin Albertson and Paul Stepney, '1979 and all that: A 40-year reassessment of Margaret Thatcher's Legacy on her own terms', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 44, no. 2, March 2020, pp. 326–7.

⁴⁸ Stephen Cecchetti, M. S. Mohanty and Fabrizio Zampolli, 'The Real Effects of Debt', Bank of International Settlements Working Paper no. 352, September 2011, Table A2.1, p. 24.

⁴⁹ See Table 1, in Florian Pelgrin, Sebastian Schich and Alain de Serres, 'Increases in Business Investment Rates in OECD Countries in the 1990s: How Much Can be Explained by Fundamentals?', OECD Economics Department Working Paper, no. 327, p. 24.

New Labour inherited this model and preserved it with minimal alterations—essentially side-payments to its electorate in the form of increased social expenditures, covered by further financialization of the economy. The Blair–Brown governments saw a continuing contraction of industry; lighter regulation of banking; yet greater inflows of overseas capital—foreign ownership of equities quadrupling again; a still more distended property bubble; and higher levels of household debt. By now the balance of payments was deteriorating, along with a further deepening of the regional divide between London/South-East and the North. After 2004, a steep rise in immigration from the EU helped sustain Ukania’s low-skill/low-wage model of growth by sparing firms training costs. In the same years inequality escalated anew, to a Gini coefficient of 0.36, ‘its highest level since comparable time series began in 1961’.⁵⁰ Summing up New Labour’s record, a survey of 2007 observed that it had relied on a consumption binge to drive demand, whose hangover had yet to come, and ‘washed its hands of rising inequality’, with a policy-set that simply ‘refined and developed the Thatcherism that preceded it.’⁵¹

Punctually, as with Thatcher, after a decade of Blair–Brown government, the economy was in deep recession again. The financial collapse of 2008, Craft confesses, came as a ‘rude shock’ to New Labour, as to admirers of its steady continuance of Thatcher’s policies. Since 2004 productivity growth had already been declining, ICT gains had faded, and in 2007 the crash of Northern Rock, a year before Lehman went under in New York, set off the first bank run since the 1860s. Unlike in 1992, this time there was no political recovery for the regime in place, evicted at the polls in 2010. Looking back at the crisis, from the inner circle around Brown came the plangent query: why so? Lamenting that ‘we were neither aware of the pace and scale in change in the financial

⁵⁰ Maurice Mullard and Raymond Swaray, ‘New Labour Legacy: Comparing the Labour Governments of Blair and Brown to Labour Governments since 1945’, *Political Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 4, October–December 2010, p. 513, who in a by no means hostile account were nevertheless obliged to note that: ‘New Labour became increasingly dependent on the success of financial markets to generate economic growth, high-paying jobs and revenue to finance the increase in public expenditure. Income inequality was not of major concern.’

⁵¹ Michael Kitson and Frank Wilkinson, ‘The Economics of New Labour: Policy and Performance’, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 31, no. 6, February 2007, p. 814.

sector, nor did we comprehend its potential risks’—while not accepting any special responsibility for the outcome, since ‘almost nobody understood exactly what was going on in the markets, or the degree to which moral hazard really was affecting risk-taking. Like so many, the government largely bought into an idea of the financial sector as being the ultimate in efficient, calculating market rationality’—the answer, in its simplicity, supplied the apposite obituary on New Labour: ‘Things went wrong because everyone was fooled by the bubble and it was hard to know what else to do, especially when faced with the prospect that other countries would outgrow us if we just stood still.’⁵² The bankruptcy of 2008 was not just economic.

Quadrupling the public debt to 150 per cent of GDP, the cost of the ensuing bail-outs left the ideological runway clear for the Conservative austerity regime that followed, whose targets were accepted by Labour. Ten years after the onset of the crisis, what is the upshot? An economy in which the stock value of real estate has multiplied 100-fold since the early 1970s, from \$60 billion to over \$6 trillion, attracts nearly 80 per cent of bank loans, as against a mere 5 per cent to businesses, and now accounts for a larger percentage of GDP than the entire manufacturing sector.⁵³ Between 2000 and 2017, an accumulated balance of payments deficit of £1 trillion. In the same period, a monetary base that expanded 15 times over to support asset-price values, and consumption running at over 80 per cent of GDP.⁵⁴ Between 1997 and 2012, an average amount of training per worker that fell by roughly a half.⁵⁵ Between 2007 and 2016, a labour-productivity standstill without historical precedent, at a miserable 0.09 per cent a year, costing an unexampled output shortfall

⁵² Dan Corry, ‘Labour and Economy, 1997–2010: More than a Faustian Pact’, *Political Quarterly: Reassessing New Labour*, vol. 81, special no. 1, September 2010, pp. 133, 135. Corry was Head of the Downing Street Policy Unit under Brown.

⁵³ Ben Ansell and David Adler, ‘Brexit and the Politics of Housing in Britain’, *Political Quarterly: Britain Beyond Brexit*, vol. 90, special no. 2, April 2019, p. 106.

⁵⁴ John Mills, ‘The Demand-side Solution’, in Christopher Bickerton, ed., *Brexit and the British Growth Model*, Policy Exchange, July 2018, pp. 75–7. QE totaled £435 billion in the same years.

⁵⁵ Francis Green et al, ‘What Has Been Happening to the Training of Workers in Britain?’, LLAKES Centre for Research on Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies, Research Paper 43, London 2013, p. 27.

estimated at close to 20 per cent of the pre-financial crisis trend. As for growth, over the same period per capita increase in GDP was just 0.19 a year.⁵⁶ So far as renaissance went, Britain was back at square one.

2. *Ruling Bloc*

From 1874 to 1997, Conservatives—holding power either alone or in coalition—dominated government, an ascendancy which no other party in Europe has ever remotely matched. For the better part of that time, some ninety years, the upper-class character of the elite that led the party remained substantially unchanged. A single index suffices to capture it. In 1950, a quarter of its members of parliament were Old Etonians, coming from a single school of 1,100 pupils, out of a population of some 50 million. Five years later, when Eden formed his government, 10 out of 18 ministers in his Cabinet came from Eton; when Macmillan took over, the number was 8 out of 18; when Home became Premier, 11 out of 24. Macmillan selected Home as his successor after consulting an inner group of just 9 colleagues—8 of them Etonians. The pick was denounced as a coup by a less favoured minister, indignant at the imposition on the party by this ‘magic circle’ of a belted earl of no particular abilities;⁵⁷ and when the Conservatives lost the ensuing election, choice of leadership was transferred to the parliamentary party as a whole. This would come to be seen as the real end of the *ancien régime* in Britain, when a hereditary governing class ceded leadership of the party to lower strata in the ruling bloc over which it had so long presided.⁵⁸ The turn of the *petite bourgeoisie* had arrived. Heath and Thatcher, the next Conservative prime ministers—offspring of a builder and a grocer—set about modernizing the country, as they saw it.

⁵⁶ Crafts, *Forging Ahead*, p. 117; Crafts and Terence Mills, ‘Is the UK Productivity Slowdown Unprecedented?’, Centre for Competitive Advantage in the Global Economy, Working Paper 429, Warwick University, July 2019.

⁵⁷ For vivid details of the succession and Macleod’s reaction to it, see Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *The Strange Death of Tory England*, London 2005, pp. 1–20.

⁵⁸ As would later become clear, matters were not quite so simple: see below footnote 60. The passage of powers was more protracted and less complete than the impression often given by Thatcher’s overwhelming dominance as a personality; she herself was indifferent to the social origins of her colleagues, caring only about their political opinions.

In the Commons, change was slower in the body of the party. By 1970, the 79 Etonians of 1950 had dropped to 59, and in 1979 to 51. But the numbers who had been privately educated, and who had gone to Oxbridge scarcely altered: 75 per cent and 49 per cent in 1964, 74 per cent and 48 per cent in 1974, 73 per cent and 43 per cent in 1979.⁵⁹ At Cabinet level, over half of Heath's ministers were from elite schools; 4 from Eton, 2 from Harrow, 2 from Winchester, 1 apiece from Westminster and Wellington. In Thatcher's first Cabinet, the proportion was even higher: 15 out of 21, including 6 from Eton and 3 from Winchester. But by the time of her last Cabinet, *déclassement* of ministers had set in: 7 out of 21. Further drops came under Major: 5 out of 25 in his first Cabinet, falling further in his chaotic second term.

In the wilderness of opposition that followed, under a triptych of duds—Hague from a comprehensive, Duncan-Smith from a secondary modern, Howard from a grammar school—the process continued. By 2005, the contingent from Eton in the Commons was down to a mere 15. By then a further rule-change had given membership of the party in the country final say in electing a new leader, from the two candidates with most support in its parliamentary delegation. This time, the result was a reversion to type: another Old Etonian at the helm, flanked by an intimate from St Paul's, and a return to power in 2010—Cameron at Number 10, Osborne Number 11, Downing Street. When Cameron resigned in 2016, there was a brief interregnum under May—better-born than Thatcher or Major, from the Anglican middle class—before a second product of Eton was catapulted to power, flanked by a head-boy from Winchester—Johnson at Number 10, Sunak at Number 11, Downing St.

How significant is this reappearance at the head of Conservative government of leaders from the top drawer of the traditional class system? Does it signal the persistence of an underlying DNA of the party for which, in altered circumstances, patrician confidence still counts for a lot in political success? Or might it be no more than a contingent blip in the transition to a more fully plebeianized formation, not just petit-bourgeois, but multi-ethnic in composition? At Cabinet level, Johnson's ministry of 2020 is 69 per cent privately educated, where May's of 2016 was 30 per cent, a conspicuous difference. But at Parliamentary level, the percentage of Conservative MPs who were privately educated,

⁵⁹ Tim Bale, *The Conservatives since 1945*, Oxford 2012, pp. 188–9.

73 per cent in 1979 and still 60 per cent in 2005, had fallen to 41 per cent by 2019, while those coming from Oxbridge, 51 per cent in 1997, were down to 27 per cent.⁶⁰ In other words, socially speaking, over the past decade leaders and cadres have moved in opposite directions. Membership of the party, 130,000 under Cameron, is currently up to 191,000, but two-fifths of these are over 65, and the same proportion essentially passive.⁶¹

If this is now a structure out of balance, far removed from the post-war era when the apex of the party in government and its support in parliament were cut from the same cloth, sustained by the deference of a mass membership a million strong in the country, oligarchic education can still act as a stabilizer of it in reserve. Looking back, after 1964 all of the males picked from the lower middle class for leadership of the party were failures: Heath a fiasco, Major a mediocrity who split the party, Hague, Duncan-Smith and Howard scarcely recallable. Thatcher was the sociological exception, a woman who by force of character and conviction changed the country. After the wash-outs who followed, Cameron brought the party back to life with a shot of born-to-rule confidence. Sure he could carry a referendum he had little need to call, his undoing was an excess of it. Johnson seized power with a bolder, more flamboyant demonstration of the same insouciance, the first politician in his party ever to pull off a capture of it in open revolt against its orthodoxy of the time, succeeding where Churchill's father and then Chamberlain's had failed. How far the will-to-rule may take him remains to be seen.

Sociologically, continuity of background in elite private schools does not mean the formation they offer their charges persists unaltered. In the conclusion to their summum *British Imperialism 1688–2015*, Peter Cain and Tony Hopkins write of two basic changes in the constitution of the country's traditional rulers. Culturally, their training is no longer the same. In public schools, character-building remains central, but there is now

⁶⁰ *Parliamentary Privilege 2019: Educational Backgrounds of the new House of Commons*, Sutton Trust, 13 December 2019.

⁶¹ Tim Bale, Paul Webb, Monica Poletti, *Grass-Roots, Britain's party members: who they are, what they think, and what they do*, Mile End Institute, January 2018, pp. 9, 36. The rudimentary categories of market-research used in this and other studies precludes any precise calibration of the class composition of this Conservative membership, 86 per cent of whom are tabbed 'ABC1'—as likewise 77 per cent of Labour members, and 88 per cent of Lib Dems.

a ‘progressive privatization of character. The new definition emphasizes such qualities as “ambition, self-confidence and bloody-mindedness”. It omits the notions of duty, self-sacrifice and public services that were taught to English gentlemen in the days of imperial glory. The new elite is being shaped by a much more individualistic creed than were its forebears because it is being prepared for entry into an increasingly cosmopolitan, supra-national world, where traditional gentlemanly values are no longer central.’⁶² Economically, as finance and industry in the UK pass ever more widely into foreign hands—banks, utilities, airports, steel, auto, retail, football clubs, appliances—the links between capital, ever more global, and class, still politically local, have weakened. The City, no longer dominated by investment banks of native stamp, has lost the position it once held in the governing firmament. Business at large enjoys less direct purchase in the counsels of party and state than in the past.

The upshot remains ambiguous. If the possessing class can be distinguished as a formation at once ‘in’ and ‘for’ itself, the ruling bloc as such is objectively larger and richer—gorged on asset prices—than ever before, modernized in the sense of increasingly ‘diverse’ (*noblesse d’écran*; brown-skinned duchesses; abolition of male primogeniture in the House of Windsor; an honours system still attracting, like flies to molasses, former feminist firebrands and onetime Marxist professors). But if it’s no longer ‘for itself’ in a coherent sense, this has been the product of a step process, played out across successive generations, in which Britain has experienced neither political rupture nor military occupation, rather a series of relatively painless abdications of sovereignty, but still bolstered by tattered prestige and eventually growing wealth. In effect, slow and well-cushioned regression to drone status: 1914–18, loss of world leadership; 1947–62, loss of empire and in 1956 of international sovereignty; in the 1980s, conversion of the City into a service centre for overseas banks, dissolving recognizably national wealth into more diffuse global holdings; in the 1990s, demotion of regional status with the reunification of Germany; in the new century, of global status with the rise of China.

Yet between the wars it was Keynes, for all his talk of the euthanasia of the rentier, who continued to view the City not just as vital to jump-starting the global economy (no other centre could offer its unique blend

⁶² P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688–2015*, 3rd edn, Abingdon 2016, p. 724.

of investment capital, commercial finance, insurance and other services) but also to securing Britain's leadership as a great power alongside the US, with an international currency independent of it. Half a century later, the aim of the Big Bang of 1986 was not so different. In its battle with New York, Tokyo and other financial rivals, what mattered to Britain was the size and liquidity of the markets and deals done in the City, not who owned the firms betting in them. The City's economic weight and class character may have changed a lot, but even in a subordinate capacity, is it any less a geo-political prize for the British state than before? *Faute de mieux*, and with few other chips to play—ARM and high-tech firms in defence or pharmaceuticals are on the chopping block too—access to the City and its loosely regulated markets and services will no doubt continue to be a bargaining counter in future trade deals.

The social trajectory of the Tories since the break of the sixties is one half of the story. The other, intersecting it, is the political schism that opened up in the party over Europe, once Thatcher's neo-liberal settlement was accomplished. Under Heath, the Conservatives pushed through entry into the Common Market in the belief that Europe could act as a substitute for Empire. Supplying the nation with an alternative platform for its natural role on the global stage, it would 'make Great Britain Greater', Heath explained. Thatcher did not dissent, viewing the European Economic Community—as it still described itself—as a construct whose purpose was to unleash free movement of the factors of production across the continent, which British principles of deregulation would extend and perfect. That was an objective she would be proud of achieving with the Single European Act of 1987, devised by Lord Cockcroft, her emissary in Brussels. A rude awakening lay in store for her. European integration had from the outset, in the time of Monnet and Schuman, always been a political project whose evolving economic arrangements were means rather than ends, serving the goal of an 'ever closer union' of Europe, and regularly bending them to it. That meant: not a Greater Britain, as conceived in the Conservative imagination, but a lesser one, chained by the juridical ball and fetter of Luxemburg and Brussels. On belatedly discovering this, Thatcher recoiled, precipitating her overthrow in the Commons at the hands of colleagues who were not prepared to reject the next steps towards European unity as she wished to do. Two years later, Major signed the Treaty of Maastricht formally creating the European Union, with a clause allowing Britain to choose whether or not to join its future single currency.

By this time a backbench rebellion against the EU, fanned by Thatcher in retirement, had erupted. Soon the Cabinet was split, Major's government destabilized, and after the party went down to defeat in 1997, its Eurosceptic wing gained the upper hand, electing its next three leaders. But voters cared little about Europe, and under the succeeding hapless trio the party lost the next three elections. Cameron took over in 2005 promising to put the issue of Europe, source of discord among members and alienation among voters, to rest. But Europe itself would not stay put. After Maastricht came Lisbon, a further step towards closer union. Still in opposition, Cameron was obliged at first to promise that in government he would hold a referendum on it. Soon, confident that the prospect of political success immunized him from trouble-makers in a party desperate to return to power, he ditched the commitment. But once in power, constitutional objection to the EU, confined to a minority of his MPs, was reinforced by popular opposition to immigration from Europe (juridically guaranteed by its Treaties) that at a time of high unemployment became an electoral threat to the Conservatives in the shape of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). To contain it, Cameron promised a referendum on membership of the EU itself, in a belief that upping the stakes would let him settle the issue once and for all, silencing Europhobia with a conclusive demonstration of the nation's will to remain in the Union. Once called, the referendum split the party's leadership, and the combined forces of Eurosceptics inside the party and UKIP outside it—the smooth and the rough sides of the campaign for Brexit—prevailed. Three years later Johnson, the party in his pocket, cantered home with a large majority in the Commons.

3. *Labour*

In the history of the Labour Party, the advent of Blair marks a break structurally symmetrical with that of Thatcher in the Conservative Party—a neo-labourism as sharp a departure from its traditions as neo-liberalism was to prior Tory dispositions. There were two significant differences, however, between the respective make-over of these central pillars of the political system. They were related. Thatcherism was an original synthesis, leaning on powerful, systematic ideas informing an international reorganization of capitalism, which redrew the map of the country. New Labour was an adaptation to this, an epigone modifying some of its features, adding others, but in essentials a copy rather than an invention. So its rule meant a much less radical change in the

country. But just for that reason, as a derivative of what had previously been an antagonist, Blairism spelt a far more radical transformation of the party itself than Thatcherism had ever involved. Thatcher did not have to repudiate the principles of Conservatism, invent a new term for her party, repudiate its icons, jettison its doctrine, or wrench its machine into another shape, in order to bring it into line with the interests of capital, which it had—for better or worse—always represented, in conditions requiring new directives to maximize them. Blair, on the other hand, was faced with a party whose constitution committed it to public ownership of the means of production; which had historically identified itself with the working class where the Tories had never identified themselves with any class, simply the nation; which still uttered the word socialism; and whose conferences were unpredictable assemblies capable of thwarting the will of its leaders, or wishing on them highly unwelcome policies.

Fortunately for Blair, it was a party so demoralized by fifteen years of Tory rule that it could be taken in hand without much resistance. Within no time, Clause Four was abolished, talk of socialism vanished, class war became an iniquity of the other party, and conferences obedient acclamations of the leader. There was nothing wrong with capitalism: it just needed socially responsible rulers to ensure it benefited everyone. Thatcher had done the country a great deal of good, and far from reversing her achievements—legislation to prevent abuse of union power, privatization of inefficient public industries and services, lowering of corporate taxation, emancipation of finance—New Labour governments would now preserve and, where necessary, extend them: handing independence of action to the central bank, contracting schools and hospitals out to private enterprise, introducing student fees and tougher quantification of research to bring market discipline to universities, and unleashing the City to outpace Wall Street in competitive deregulation; not to speak of sweeping away legal anachronisms—unanimous decision by juries, no detention without an arrest warrant—hampering national security. But there were unattractive sides to Thatcherism that the nation had with good reason disliked, and with which New Labour would do away. It was too indifferent to the needs of the least well-off, who could be helped without affecting the better off, and neglectful of social services that required more funding; it was too strident in its rhetoric, and old-fashioned in its cultural outlook; it didn't understand the advantages of a measure of devolution, or the disadvantages of quarrelling with

Europe. Neo-labourism offered neo-liberalism without tears. Wasn't that what the country wanted, as three electoral victories in a row showed?

The electoral pluralities that Blair received were less than Thatcher's, the last of them on the lowest share of the vote—35.2 per cent—of any government in post-war history, though overall—given the bias to Labour in the distribution of constituencies—a higher average in seats. The most striking difference between the two regimes, however, was the precipitous fall in electoral turn-out from the first to the second—72.7 per cent mid-way through Thatcher, 59.4 per cent mid-way through Blair. New Labour had a significantly weaker base, totaling some 7 million votes fewer than its Conservative predecessor. Thatcher's achievement had been to add C2 strata—better placed working class—to the Tory camp. New Labour sought its gains in ABC1 categories—managerial, professional and white-collar strata, the 'Middle England' of its self-image. This involved a tacit regional and national strategy whose consequences would come to haunt the party twenty years later, its logic already depicted with acid foresight by Tom Nairn at the time. New Labour was becoming 'much more decisively a party of the English South': an 'adjustment towards heartland norms (actual or imagined) which entailed some withdrawal from the Labour Party's old power base in the North and the periphery. Swimming with the tide, instead of floundering ineffectually against it, promised a more solid hegemony. However, this mutation had to be "covered" and justified for such a route-change to work: put more crudely, the North had to be given time to die off decently, while the New Labour authority-structure put down more durable roots in the formerly Tory South.'⁶³

For the time being, all went well. Voters might not be flocking to the polls as of old, but wasn't that a sign of contentment with the state of the country? One big parliamentary majority after another, without precedent in the history of the party, was proof of how well society was being governed, in a nation at peace with itself. Two aspects of the regime, however, undid it. One was a novelty in the party and the country. The other was an atavism ingrained in both. The first was New Labour's style of rule, of which a withering portrait would be drawn in the last year

⁶³ Eventually, he went on, Brown's 'City-led strategy of post-industrialism will presumably bring a graveyard quietus to these ex-industrial zones. Until then, however—while New Labour's successor Britain is finding its feet—it is if anything more essential that Old Labour plays its servile part, by staying loyally in charge of "the North"'. Tom Nairn, *Pariah: The Misfortunes of the British Kingdom*, London and New York 2002, pp. 90–2.

of Blair's tenure by Peter Osborne in his study of the political class of the period—a formation some of whose seeds could be traced back to Thatcher's time, but had burgeoned when New Labour came to power in 1997 with a parliamentary delegation of whom over two-fifths were political newcomers, nearly double the equivalent on the Tory benches of 1979. For Osborne, what then took shape was a novel phenomenon, defined by its existential dependence on political office for material and psychological support, and composed not just of denizens of the two houses of parliament, but a surrounding incrustation of advisers, assistants, researchers, lobbyists, think-tankers, client journalists and broadcasters, whose profile and *habitus* he etched in lethal ethnographic detail, down to its characteristic patterns of endogamy, forms of speech, styles of clothing, affectations of leisure.⁶⁴ Instrumental in all its relationships, without roots or connections beyond its own shallow, insecure, public-relations obsessed, ideas-empty world, this was a stratum infested with pervasive corruption and abuse of office, under a

⁶⁴ Peter Osborne, *The Triumph of the Political Class*, London 2007, pp. 3–25, *passim*. For Osborne, a conservative journalist, the arrival of an admirer and imitator of Blair at the head of the Tory Party signalled its generalization. A glance at Charles Moore's biography of Thatcher indicates the gulf between this glabrous layer and the country-house entourage surrounding her, still continuous with ruling-class patterns of old even at the end of her reign, when she fell in part because of its performance during her final crisis. On November 1, 1990, the day Geoffrey Howe resigned, triggering the countdown to her eviction: 'Peter Morrison [Eton: Parliamentary Private Secretary to Thatcher], like Renton [Eton: Chief Whip], was out of London, having invited Nick Ridley [Eton: recently resigned as Minister for Trade and Industry] to shoot on his family's Scottish estate on the Isle of Islay'; November 2: 'The next morning, Renton returned early and unwillingly to London and saw Mrs Thatcher at 10 Downing Street'; November 3: 'Taking advantage of the brief parliamentary recess before the new session, he (Renton) kept his engagement to spend the following Monday shooting in Lincolnshire rather than trying to secure Mrs Thatcher'; November 5: 'Peter Morrison returned from his Islay shoot just as she (Thatcher) left for Geneva. He brought back a brace of pheasants for John Whittingdale [Winchester: Private Secretary to Thatcher] and of duck for the secretary in his office. Sitting in his plus fours at the shooting tea in Lincolnshire, Tim Renton was telephoned by Cranley Onslow [Harrow], chairman of the 1922 Committee'; 14 November: 'Younger [4th Viscount, Winchester: chairman of her re-election campaign in 1990] had explained in advance that, since he had just become chairman of the Royal Bank of Scotland, he was very busy in Edinburgh. Besides, he was shooting that Saturday.' Drily reporting the political cost of these preferences to Thatcher in her hour of need, Moore tactfully assigns them to gender rather than class: 'As with the shooting in which, each November, December and January, so many of her colleagues indulged, this was a male world almost completely closed to her.' Charles Moore, *Margaret Thatcher, Vol. III: Herself Alone*, London 2019, pp. 650, 654–5, 658, 666, 661.

ruler who never bothered to leave his sofa in Downing St for over 90 per cent of Commons divisions, holidayed with Berlusconi, and ended up amassing millions for favours to petroleum despots.

More politically damaging than venality was the mendacity with which Blair and his ministers took the country into the invasion of Iraq as an auxiliary of the United States, and the disasters of their occupation of it. The war itself was no anomaly, but an exercise in keeping with the imperial past of the party. The Attlee government, which still had 800,000 men in arms in 1949, was a year later devoting 20 per cent of its budget to military expenditure to help the US in Korea, to wage counter-insurgency in Malaya, and to build nuclear weapons in secret, a higher proportion of GDP than in America itself.⁶⁵ The Wilson government waged colonial war in Yemen; Callaghan colluded with Washington to ensure Britain's military redoubt in Cyprus was no obstacle to Turkish ethnic cleansing. Exceeding any of his predecessors in zeal, Blair urged the US to invade Yugoslavia with ground troops, and told Bush 'whither thou goest, I will go', as Washington planned its attack on Iraq, a stamping-ground for Britain's empire of old. After the debacle of the country's return to Basra came the collapse of its financial bubble with the crash of 2008. By the time of electoral reckoning two years later, the two traditional prongs of Ukanian eversion, military and monetary, had each crumpled. Drenched in blood, sleaze and froth, Labour was unceremoniously ejected from power, with its second lowest vote since the coupon election of 1918.

The pit of disgust and derision into which Blair had by then fallen—'the most dishonest and disastrous prime ministership of modern times', who for a good while could not show his face in public⁶⁶—was such that his otherwise natural heir, the older of the Miliband brothers, toast of the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*, was defeated by the younger for the succession. Unlike Thatcherism, still a proud term for many Conservatives, New Labour became such a stigma that no section of the party wanted any longer to hear of it.⁶⁷ In practice—the younger

⁶⁵ Bernard Alford, '1945–1951: years of recovery or a stage in economic decline?', in Clarke and Trebilcock, *Understanding Decline*, pp. 188–9.

⁶⁶ Geoffrey Wheatcroft's verdict: *Yo, Blair!*, London 2007, a savage obsequy of the individual and his record, to set beside Osborne's collective diagnosis of New Labour, published in the same year; both required reading on the left, which produced nothing really comparable.

⁶⁷ For this, see David Kogan, *Protest and Power: The Battle for the Labour Party*, London 2019, p. 95.

Miliband had been a protégé of Brown—departures from its course were modest, and brought no reward at the polls, the Tories winning by a larger margin five years later. But in the interim, a decisive change had occurred. The accident of a drunken brawl in the Commons, leading to a disputed vote over selection of the next Labour candidate in a Scottish constituency, in which Miliband sought to burnish his image by standing up to supposed trade-union pressures, precipitated an unexpected alteration of the rules for leader of the party itself, abolishing not only the block vote of the unions, controlling two-fifths of the ballots in a leadership contest, but the one-third controlled by its MPs, left the individual members of the party for the first time in its history masters of any future choice. Suddenly the ‘dead souls’ of Gogol’s Labourism which had historically secured the grip of its right-wing parliamentary leaders over the party—phantom ‘affiliates’ commanding 90 per cent of votes at its conferences as late as 1981, and still 50 per cent in 2011—were abrogated; and at the same stroke the oligarchs in the Commons who disposed of them.⁶⁸ When Miliband resigned in 2015, the result dumbfounded press and parliamentarians alike: Corbyn was elected with a sweeping majority. Labour had acquired the most left-wing leader in its history, as virtually overnight its membership doubled.

Furious at this usurpation, within a year the parliamentary party voted by over 80 per cent to oust Corbyn after the referendum on Europe, on the grounds that he had campaigned insufficiently for Remain. The party’s membership re-elected him with an even larger majority, and in 2017 he led it to near victory at the polls with the biggest swing to Labour since 1945, on a vote larger than Blair’s in 2001 and 2005,⁶⁹ and a platform calling for renationalization of privatized transport and utilities, higher corporation tax, and more expenditure on welfare. With this triumph, had the Labour left, eternal impotent minority in the party,

⁶⁸ In 2010, 2.7 million ballots had been sent to trade unions and lesser affiliated organizations in the leadership contest won by the younger Miliband, of which just 234,000 were returned, 15 per cent of them invalid, without the union block vote of 50 per cent being in the least affected: *The Collins Review into Labour Party Reform*, February 2014, p. 25. Ray Collins was a former stalwart of the TGWU, on the left of the TUC. The parliamentary delegation retained the consolation prize of being able to strike out any candidate for the leadership from its ranks who enjoyed less than 15 per cent of its support.

⁶⁹ Labour gained 9.6 per cent in 2017; Blair’s peak figure was 8.8 per cent in 1997. The Labour vote in 2017 was over two million more than in 2001, and three million more than in 2005.

finally taken it over? Far from it. The Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) remained implacably hostile to Corbyn, the party apparatus stacked with apoplectic opponents, the press—*Guardian* in the lead, amplified by the BBC—vitriolic: a coalition united in the determination to destroy him. Against these, he had only a tiny group of allies—a handful of aides, scarcely more MPs, two or three union leaders, and a membership on the rebound from New Labour, but in their vast majority, neither young nor old possessing any political culture beyond the enthusiasms of the moment or the illusions of the past. The overturn had been too sudden for there to be time for a serious alternative to the miseries of Labourism to develop. ‘Cadres decide everything’, and there were virtually none. In 2019, amid the disarray of its civil war, under a leader vilified by the media and his colleagues, and a now disjointed manifesto, the party crashed to a massive defeat in an election over Brexit, on which it had never been able to reach a coherent position, as a great swathe of its traditional strongholds in the North went over to the Conservatives.

The indurated organizational form that defined the Labour Party for a century, from 1918 to 2015, lingers on at party conferences. But at leadership contests it is no more. Nor, with still more far-reaching consequences, is the social base on which it rested. In 1950, the British working class comprised over 60 per cent of the population. Over the next half century, the unequal social conditions defining it as a separate class—levels of pay, job security, education—did not change; nor did its identity—self-ascribed, even, by many from working-class families who have risen out of it.⁷⁰ But its size did, radically: by 2010, manufacturing workers were some 20 per cent of the population. In banning talk of class, and adjoining the Conservatives on common neo-liberal and career-pattern ground, New Labour effectively closed off any political space in which workers could find expression, even as belief at large that class differences and social polarization were widening actually increased.⁷¹ The result, Evans and Tilley argue in their fundamental

⁷⁰ Asked to what social group they belong, a majority of the population continues to answer ‘working-class’, subjective identification exceeding objective situation: Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, *The New Politics of Class: The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class*, Oxford 2017, pp. 21–58.

⁷¹ Class differences regarded as fairly or very wide: 51 per cent in 1970, 77 per cent in 2015; society more polarized: 12 per cent in 1970, 31 per cent in 2015: *The New Politics of Class*, p. 53.

study of the ensuing landscape, was a transformation of the ideological scene, economic and ‘social’ (sc. cultural) value-axes coming apart.

Dividing the middle class into three distinct groups, old (owners, managers, professionals), new (salaried employees, non-manual ancillary workers or supervisors) and junior (routine white-collar workers), *The New Politics of Class* classifies the first as economically right-wing and culturally authoritarian; the second and third as economically centrist and culturally liberal; and the contemporary working class as economically left-wing and culturally authoritarian.⁷² As the Conservative and Labour parties converged in economic agenda and politician type (clearly perceived as such by workers), the working-class component of Labour’s electorate dropped vertically. In the post-war years, working-class support for Labour was 30 per cent higher than old and new middle-class support. By the 1990s, it was 10 per cent, and then disappeared altogether, as proletarian abstentions grew. In 2015, for the first time Labour had fewer working-class than new middle-class voters. Four years of Corbyn could not reverse thirteen of Blair and Brown: after such a legacy, realignment of value-axes required an ideal-political synthesis beyond its powers, perhaps any at short notice. By 2019, the Conservatives had a 21 per cent lead over Labour in the working class.⁷³

4. *Intelligentsia*

Demarcation of the country’s intellectual landscape in any given period raises difficult questions of definition. For present purposes, it is enough to point out the obvious centrality of the academy to it, since far the largest number of those who could be described as intellectuals now work

⁷² Or, coquetting with Marx, and renaming the first as the Bourgeoisie, the second and third as the Intelligentsia, the last as the Proletariat, they demonstrate that since the 1960s the proletariat has always been the most left-wing and the most culturally conservative, the intelligentsia always the most culturally liberal and more right-wing than the proletariat, and the bourgeoisie always the most right-wing and less culturally liberal than the intelligentsia: *The New Politics of Class*, pp. 80–1. Description of the new middle class as an intelligentsia on the grounds of a high level of education is obviously forced, and need no more be accepted than the misleading use of ‘social’—an American usage—for cultural values, as substituted above, without affecting the validity of the taxonomy itself.

⁷³ *The New Politics of Class*, p. 152; Geoffrey Evans and Jonathan Mellon, ‘The Re-shaping of Class Voting’, *British Election Study*, 6 March 2020, p. 1.

in universities—though many, perhaps most, of those who teach or research in them would neither accept nor warrant the term. In addition, the penumbra of print media, in its upper ranges, and to a lesser extent, the more ephemeral precincts of broadcasting, offer a related habitat. Uniformity of tendency or outlook is, of course, not to be expected in any of these. But what have been the dominants in the development of the intelligentsia since the turn of the eighties, and deviations from them, as it was buffeted by successive shocks to its post-war placidity—first Thatcherism, then Blairism, then Brexit?

Under Thatcher, the universities became for the first time a direct ideological target of government—a *Kulturkampf* in the words of one of her ministers for higher education—with heavy cuts to their funding and openly expressed hostility to their ethos, viewed as indifferent to the needs of the market and a seedbed of political wrong-thinking. The dislike came to be reciprocated by the great majority of academics. In 1983, the Royal Society could still elect her a fellow by a two to one majority, but by 1985 Oxford famously refused to grant Thatcher an honorary degree by an even larger one, and by 1987 less than a fifth of lecturers country-wide supported the Conservatives. In literary circles outside the academy, hatred of Thatcher, who was widely regarded as an embodiment of philistine enmity to any kind of culture, was loudly expressed. The reality was otherwise. Her administration was more committed to ideas, and hospitable to intellectuals, than any British government post-1945, or since. Simply, these ideas were alien to the mainstream culture of the time. In a throw-back to the pattern of the fifties, her two principal inspirations were both imports from abroad, Friedman and Hayek—Hayek, a classic White émigré from Austria, having relocated from London to Chicago in the wake of a marital imbroglio, much the more important. Relaying their ideas, however, was a thriving cluster of local think-tanks—Institute for Economic Affairs, Adam Smith Institute, Centre for Policy Studies—developing radical recipes for revival of the nation. Leading historians of the right were brigaded for advice on foreign affairs, economists on domestic issues. Beyond this perimeter of counsel and proposal, and closely connected to it, lay the decade's most successful weekly, the *Spectator*, supplying a steady stream of talent to Cabinet or Downing St staff positions—Ian Gilmour, Nigel Lawson, Ferdinand Mount, as ultimately Boris Johnson. Symmetrically, the *New Statesman* had become a shadow of the paper which in the sixties had reached a circulation of 90,000 under Paul Johnson, now another mentor of Thatcher. If in the

academy thought lost its once easy comfort with power, on the front-lines of politics it was never more closely in touch with it.

Blair at the helm, mainstream intellectual opinion swung rapidly from alienation to infatuation. Opposition to Thatcher, vehement in expression as it often had been, was for the most part moderate in substance, reflecting a traditional liberalism on good terms with a traditional conservatism, an outlook deeply embedded in church and state alike, permeating the civil service and the professions as well as the universities.⁷⁴ Jolted by the political polarization of the early eighties, it had found a temporary refuge in the Alliance. But when this faded, New Labour offered a welcome substitute. Since the Murdoch press and in due course most other tabloids switched their allegiance to the new regime, it enjoyed at the outset a rapt consensus, gutter-to-gaiters, unknown since the National Government of 1931. In the chorus of adulation, the leading lights of intellectual opinion in the media outdid all others in sycophancy to Blair as a leader.⁷⁵ Even his launching of the war on Iraq was met at first with dithyrambs to his eloquence. Only when it misfired did enthusiasm cool.

As far as ideas went, the pattern under Blairism reversed the configuration under Thatcherism. The regime itself, basking in a width of acclaim that Thatcher's had never enjoyed, unlike hers had no interest in serious ideas of any sort, subsisting on a diet of spin-doctors and hucksters, or

⁷⁴ Wayne has recently and rightly criticized much NLR writing on Britain for under-rating the importance of liberalism in the ideological make-up of the *ancien régime*: *England's Discontents: Political Cultures and National Identities*, pp. 73–80, 141–4, 186–7, 252–3. In his account, while economic liberalism was a natural component of the conservative aristocratic settlement after 1815, by the end of the century a social liberalism had emerged that created space for the subsequent rise of social-democracy. Under Thatcher, a resurgent economic liberalism moved away from traditional conservatism, while social liberalism became increasingly detached from social-democracy, the two fusing in the cultural energy with which Thatcherism captured C2 workers with a cult of meritocracy. Obviously, much depends here on what is meant by social liberalism. Writing in 2018, Wayne judged the current revival of the left quite shallow, given the deficiencies of its political culture after 40 years of defeat. At present the only way forward lay in the creation of a new historical bloc around a radical version of social-democracy, one that allowed 'a knight's move to socialism', pushing those identifying with liberalism towards socialism as envisaged by Hobson before the First World War.

⁷⁵ For samples of this literature, still capable of shocking, see Susan Watkins, 'A Weightless Hegemony', pp. 21–4.

criers of the Third Way like Giddens and Adonis, fodder for the Lords, leaving not a trace in the memoirs of their book-proof leader. In the intelligentsia at large most, though not all, of the fawning came from liberal journalists, sheltered from the impact of New Labour policies on their kin in the academy. There, hopes that these would repair the damage to higher education left by the Thatcher period were soon gone, as it became clear that, on the contrary, the new regime was going not only to accept, but to extend it, with still more far-reaching measures of managerial control and marketization. By the end of the New Labour era, the universities had been battered thrice over. First, with deep spending cuts and subjection of scholarship to crudely quantified targeting of output under Thatcher; then by imposition of corporate management systems, inflating bureaucracy at the expense of teaching and research; then by the introduction of fees converting students into customers, and of public—sc. market—‘impact’ as a criterion of promotion and funding. No other country in the advanced capitalist world saw a reduction of higher education to commercial logic so extreme. What was the reaction? Within the academy, a single scholar, Stefan Collini, published two books of eloquent protest, each well received; outside it, a single independent researcher, Andrew McGettigan, produced two books dismantling the economics of the changes, each well documented.⁷⁶ Neither to the smallest visible effect. The intelligentsia on the receiving end of two decades of brutal neo-liberal assault lifted scarcely a finger of collective resistance to it. Finally, after twenty-five years, when even its pensions were cut, token strikes (absences of a fortnight at a time), bungled by the union, ignored by the majority of university teachers, and shutting down not a single campus, began in fits and starts in 2018, petering out fruitlessly in 2020—all belated, all confined to narrowly economic issues, none raising broader structural questions.

Passively mutinous under Thatcher, collusively supine under Blair and Brown, the liberal academy sprang to life not over the REF or Iraq but over Europe, once the Referendum on it was lost.⁷⁷ At the oldest universities

⁷⁶ Stefan Collini: *What Are Universities For?*, London 2012, and *Speaking of Universities*, London 2017; Andrew McGettigan: *False Accounting*, London 2012, and *The Great University Gamble*, London 2013.

⁷⁷ A current, ultra-quantified survey, covering all of Europe, comparing the outlook of university teachers with that of managers and professionals, and finding that they are invariably to the left of the latter, takes it for granted that support for further European integration is a marker of a left/liberal orientation, like more equal

Remainer passions ran so high that the occasional Leaver misfit could become a social leper; at Cambridge, the Vice-Chancellor's office censored unwelcome opinion with stone-walling worthy of the Writers' Union under Brezhnev. The correspondence columns of leading dailies overflowed with professorial fury at the prospect of exiting the Union, literary periodicals raised a din such as London had not heard for a century, students chanted in the streets under EU banners. Yet the virtual unanimity of educated opinion, not to speak of the country's wider establishment, had proved unable to sway the outcome of a referendum taken as a foregone conclusion by government and opposition alike only a few months earlier. How far can that be taken as a gauge of the weight of today's intelligentsia in the cultural and political system of the country?

The circulation of the newspapers that different sectors read has declined steadily over the past decade, when the *Telegraph*, *Guardian*, and *Financial Times* all saw their sales drop by over half, *The Times* by a quarter.⁷⁸ Periodicals, on the other hand—costing much less to produce, losses often small change to their proprietors—have held steady or grown. Stripping out free copies and overseas sales, the *Economist* currently has a domestic circulation of some 141,000, the *Spectator* 67,000, the *London Review of Books* 36,000, *Prospect* 29,000, the *New Statesman* 25,000, the *Times Literary Supplement* 12,000.⁷⁹ Online hits are typically multiples of these figures. So far as political impact goes, two of the dailies—the *Telegraph* and *Guardian*—are best seen as structural components of the parties with which they are associated, Conservative and

income distribution and tolerance of immigration: Herman van de Werfhorst, 'Are universities left-wing bastions? The political orientation of professors, professionals and managers in Europe', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 71, no. 1, January 2020, pp. 47–73.

⁷⁸ ABC audited figures: *Telegraph* falling from 691,000 in 2010 to 317,000 in 2020; *Guardian* from 302,000 to 130,000; FT from 390,000 to 157,000; *The Times* from 508,000 to 360,000. Three-fifths of the FT's circulation is overseas, its domestic sales running at 58,000. It should also be said that, because its online version is free, reaching younger readers who never look at a physical paper, the *Guardian's* influence is considerably wider than its print sales.

⁷⁹ ABC figures which reflect neither the economic position nor the intellectual influence of those with an international readership. World-wide print sales of the *Economist* are around 830,000, of which only 14 per cent are domestic (British Isles including Ireland); for the LRB, total sales are 76,000—48 per cent domestic; for the TLS, 24,000—50 per cent domestic. The readerships of the *Spectator*, *New Statesman* and *Prospect*, by contrast, are overwhelmingly national—respectively 88 per cent, 87 per cent and 87 per cent domestic.

Labour respectively, exercising more power over the MPs of each than its members or its apparatus.⁸⁰ Of the periodicals, the *Spectator* alone has furnished leaders and operators to the political class, as well as to the daily press. In sum, this complex is by no means a negligible factor in affairs of state, though obviously—as the referendum on Europe confirmed—its weight in opinion formation as a whole is not to be compared with the tabloid media proper, or television. How durable, of course, the influence of any part of this communications system will prove to be, in a time when younger generations, immersed in social media, bypass newspapers and television altogether, remains to be seen: probably more so than frequently predicted. As for the culture of the country in any wider sense, a symptomatic celebration of it came in 2015 from Dominic Sandbrook, whose *Great British Dream Factory*, hailing the matchless global success of its television series, detective stories, fantasy literature, pop music, children’s books, action films, science fiction etc. across five hundred pages, proudly announced: ‘I have stuck to the middle ground—the “middlebrow” some might say—and have deliberately not picked things that appeal only to self-styled intellectuals.’⁸¹

5. *Scotland*

Scottish nationalism gained its first toe-hold in British politics in the late sixties, when a by-election victory of the SNP moved Wilson to set up a Commission on devolution to see how its possible danger to Labour in Scotland was best handled. Recommending an elected Scottish body with limited powers, it appeared under Heath in 1973. Lifted by this prospect, and the discovery of North Sea oil in Scottish waters, in the election of February 1974 the SNP won 22 per cent of the vote in

⁸⁰ For this reality, see the observations of Tim Bale, who distinguishes between ‘the party in the country’ (members), ‘the party in central office’ (machine), ‘the party in public office’ (elected politicians) and the ‘party in the media’ (press), remarking that ‘the latter may well be as influential in determining a party’s overall direction and its composition as those who are formally its members and its employees—if not more so’: *The Conservative Party from Thatcher to Cameron*, Cambridge 2016, pp. 19–21. In the case of the Tories, editorialists and columnists not just in the *Telegraph* but in the *Mail* and the *Sun*, to a lesser extent *The Times*, play this role; under Blair, the *Sun* and *The Times* played it on the Labour side, before reverting to the Conservatives. Only the *Telegraph* and *Guardian* combine organic connection to their respective parties with non-tabloid readers.

⁸¹ *The Great British Dream Factory: The Strange History of Our National Imagination*, London 2015, p. xxx.

Scotland, and in the October sequel jumped to 30 per cent, giving it 11 seats at Westminster under a Labour government with an overall majority of just 3, soon whittled away. When an Act under Callaghan granting Scotland a devolved assembly, that would be approved by a majority in a referendum, was torpedoed by a Labour unionist amendment requiring a threshold that wasn't met, the SNP brought down the government. Far from benefiting the party, it then slumped throughout the succeeding 18 years of Tory rule, when its average poll fell to 16.5 per cent, and 3 seats in Parliament.

When New Labour came to power in 1997, it passed a Scotland Act, creating a local 'Executive' in Edinburgh along much the same lines as the original commission, confident that its UK-wide electoral strength—it had just won three-quarters of all the Scottish seats at Westminster—meant it could dominate this body, and kill off independence with its measure of kindness.⁸² For the better part of a decade, its calculation appeared to hold good. Having taken the precaution, as it thought, of introducing proportional representation for elections to the Scottish assembly as a safeguard against the SNP ever scooping the pool with a bit more than a third of the vote, as it would itself come to do in Britain, Labour ruled Scotland in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats until 2007. But in that year the SNP got one more seat than Labour in the third election to Holyrood and formed a minority government. This proved so popular that in 2011, the SNP won an absolute majority in the (now renamed by it) Scottish Parliament. By 2016, it had over double the Labour vote in Scotland, and has now been in power in Edinburgh for as long as New Labour was in London.

What is the character of the party that has risen to such a height? Founded in the thirties, it was originally a bourgeois nationalist party pure and simple, whose sole objective, disavowing any connection with right or left, was Scottish independence. Much later, in the sixties, it started to position itself on the centre-left, and by the time of its breakthrough in 1974 was describing itself as social-democratic. At the turn of the eighties,

⁸² Sometimes taken as a commendable measure of democratization redeeming, or at least offsetting, the seamier sides of New Labour rule, devolution was typically cynical in conception, designed in Blair's words to 'remove the danger of separatism', or as George Robertson, the Scot who was his first Minister of Defence, later Secretary-General of NATO, famously put it: 'devolution will kill nationalism stone-dead.'

a more radical group within the party sought to press it in a socialist direction, but was promptly expelled. Though its members were later readmitted, there was little to distinguish the SNP from Labour in social or economic stance until it approved popular refusal to pay Thatcher's poll tax in 1988, a movement which Labour characteristically declined to support. What did set it apart, from the sixties onwards, were two foreign policy goals: ejection of Polaris—later Trident—nuclear submarines from Scotland, and exit from NATO. Under New Labour, the party's leader Alex Salmond denounced Blair's militarism not only in Iraq but Kosovo.

So long as the Tories were in power, Labour had held its working-class strongholds in Scotland without much difficulty. But once it became the government in London, the contemptuous treatment of its proletarian base and corruption in its rotten boroughs, which would undo the party in the North of England, had the same consequences much earlier in Scotland, because there a political alternative to the left of it emerged, which could not be smashed with the sledgehammer of first-past-the-post. In the space created by the Blair–Brown regime, the SNP could win widespread support in attacking not only its imperial record in Iraq, but its neo-liberal record at home—the green-lighting of de-industrialization, contracting out of public services and introduction of student fees. As the extension of a dilute form of proportional representation to local elections—a concession to the Liberal Democrats to keep the coalition with them going—broke the padlocks on Labour's municipal fastnesses, increasing numbers of workers went over to the SNP, bringing it to power at Holyrood after a decade of local Blairism.⁸³

The party that formed a government in 2007 was not untouched by the model it replaced. Competing with New Labour, the SNP reproduced traits resembling it: stardom of the leader, sound-bite culture, on-message directives. Numerically, it was still a small organization of 15,000 members, in which discipline from above could be enforced. Nor were the effects of this imprint just organizational. In power, they set limitations of policy too. The record of the SNP in office has not been a replica of New Labour; but there has been no clean break with it either.⁸⁴

⁸³ For the circumstances, see Iain Macwhirter, *Road to Referendum*, Glasgow 2013, pp. 270–1.

⁸⁴ For this, see Gerry Hassan and Simon Barrow, eds, *A Nation Changed? The SNP and Scotland Ten Years On*, Glasgow 2017, the most acute and best documented survey of the party and its performance, pp. 17–23, 63, 67, 75, 106, 117–20.

On the positive side came complete abolition of student fees. Later scrapping of prescription charges, introduction of free bus passes and provision of personal care; eventually, income tax was lowered a little for the least well-off and increased a little for the best-off. On the other side of the ledger, spending on higher education was cut, the number of school teachers reduced. Above all, the enormities of Scottish real estate were left unaltered—the most unequal distribution of land in Europe: less than a thousand individuals controlling 60 per cent of it; a quarter of all estates over a thousand acres in the same hereditary hands for four hundred years or more; average urban rents over 80 per cent of the minimum wage of 18 to 20 year-olds.⁸⁵ As to financial regulation, Salmond—formerly an economist on the Royal Bank of Scotland payroll, who in office applauded its infamous boss Goodwin and his calamitous operations—could reproach Brown for too heavy a hand on banking. The commitment to expulsion of Trident remains, but departure from NATO has been dropped, and the party now upholds the monarchy.

Royalism is not the result of any deep conversion of SNP membership to the throne, most of the party's historic nucleus no doubt remaining republican. It is tactical, designed to avoid affronting voters whom it seeks to win to the cause of independence. Electorally, the SNP's position appears virtually impregnable, since with even just a core support of some 36 per cent, well below its current levels, it would require an alliance between Conservatives and Labour to dislodge it from power; its opponents are at present too divided to pose much of a threat.⁸⁶ But mere continuity in office cannot suffice for a party whose *raison d'être* has historically been independence. In the eighties, it turned away from the ethno-cultural nationalism of its origins, towards a socio-civic one. Not as far as its most significant theorist of the time, Stephen Maxwell, wanted,⁸⁷ but nonetheless stressing the more equal and just society that independence could bring. Ambiguity, however, has remained: is the prospect of independence the means to such a society, or is the prospect of such a society the means to independence?

⁸⁵ Chris Bambery, *A People's History of Scotland*, London 2018, pp. 307–9, 333.

⁸⁶ Proportional representation favours the SNP because its vote is more evenly spread across Scotland than that of any other party: James Mitchell, Lynn Bennie and Rob Johns, *The Scottish National Party: Transition to Power*, Oxford 2012, pp. 10–11. On the other hand, the same spread works against it in first-past-the-post elections to Westminster, where many of its seats have small majorities, and are vulnerable to tactical voting by Tory, Liberal Democrat and Labour supporters.

⁸⁷ Author of *The Case for Left-Wing Nationalism*, Edinburgh 2013.

In 2014, the referendum on independence the SNP had long sought was held. With Tories, Labour and Liberal Democrats shoulder to shoulder in warning that its economic consequences would be dire, and calling for its rejection, the No camp won handsomely, with 55.3 per cent of those who voted supporting it. On a higher turnout, the losing 44.7 per cent was actually a fraction lower than the SNP's score of 45.4 per cent in its victory at Holyrood three years earlier. It looked as if voters had resolved the party's ambivalence for it: what they were after was not national sovereignty, but a better brand of social democracy. That, at least, was the reading of those who saw in the energy and self-organization of the Yes campaign the impetus of a social rather than a national movement.⁸⁸ For others, it was independence which electrified the newly engaged. On either view, the SNP was certainly no loser. The result of the referendum, far from deflating its support in society, unleashed a torrent of new members into the party, whose membership leapt from 25,000 before the vote to 80,000 a month later. Today it stands at 125,000, making it proportionately far the largest mass party in Britain, with a ratio of members to population ten times higher than the Conservatives (180,000) and nearly four times higher than Labour (580,000). In the election of 2015 that followed the referendum, the SNP hit a full 50 per cent of the vote in Scotland, something no party has achieved in Britain since the war.⁸⁹

In a historical perspective, how do the prospects of the party and its society stand today? The significant comparison is close by, in the other kingdom ruled from London in the composite British monarchy, whose religion determined its contrasting fate. Ireland was a colony, whose Catholic peasantry was for the better part of three centuries ruthlessly dispossessed and exploited, then decimated, while Scotland—its Highlands cleared in similar fashion—became a partner in the global empire of which Ireland was the first victim. Co-beneficiary of the industrial revolution, acting as a military reservation for overseas expansion—'the Punjab of the North'—by the early 20th century Scotland enjoyed a per capita income well over double that of Ireland, as the Easter Rising set the stage

⁸⁸ The position taken by Neil Davidson, 'A Scottish Watershed', NLR 89, September–October 2014, pp. 12–13: a text also containing an outstanding cartography of the vote.

⁸⁹ Winning 60 per cent of the working-class and 45 per cent of the middle-class vote: Evans and Tilley, *The New Politics of Class*, p. 179.

for the Irish War of Independence. Today, the Republic of Ireland has a per capita income some 50 per cent higher than Scotland. More strikingly still, half-way through the 20th century, the Republic—shorn of six counties in the north—had a population of 2.96 million, Scotland 5.09 million. Today, the Republic has 4.86 million, Scotland, 5.44. In other words, where the human proportions of an independent Ireland grew by 65 per cent, a dependent Scotland stagnated at 6.7 per cent. Higher Catholic than Calvinist birth-rates played their part in this, but critical too was greater Irish prosperity attracting immigration,⁹⁰ where emigration was draining energy and ambition from Scotland to England, whose population grew 45 per cent in the same period; even that of Wales at three times the level of Scotland. Could a harsher climate be a factor? Hardly. Further north, Norway grew 62 per cent, Sweden 46 per cent, Finland 36 per cent. Contextually, Scotland is a stark outlier. Economically and demographically, *ceteris paribus* sovereignty matters.

That such figures offer obvious material evidence of the advantages Scotland has foregone by its inability to break with a Union from which it once benefited does not mean that at this point in time independence is either bound to come, or would automatically gain what has been lost. In the consumer capitalist societies of the post-war world, the fire of nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalism has gone. To date, though there have been substantial movements demanding it, no secession has come to pass. There the relevant comparison is not with Ireland under the rule of Dublin Castle, but Quebec and Catalonia in the post-colonial, neo-liberal epoch, two societies which half-way through the 20th century were both smaller in numbers than Scotland, and now larger, and each double the weight of Scotland in the economy of their respective states—Quebec accounting for a fifth of Canada's GDP, Catalonia a fifth of Spain's, Scotland less than a tenth of the UK's. Each possesses a language distinct from that of the rest of the country, Scotland for the most part only a variant of it. Against these potential advantages, both Quebec and Catalonia have large immigrant populations whose native language is not French or Catalan, and which have resisted assimilation. In each case, in good measure for this reason, movements for independence have fallen short of a majority—in the referendums in Quebec, 40 per cent in 1980 and 49 per cent in 1995; in the recent elections in

⁹⁰ In 2008, Ireland had both the highest birth-rate and the highest net immigration rate in the EU.

Catalonia, 47 per cent.⁹¹ In neither case does the central state accept that any secession could be legal. In that respect, Scotland—unlike these, with centuries of prior existence as an independent kingdom—was better placed, London conceding the right to secede. But so far, the same invisible barrier has held at the threshold of a majority, consumer preference trumping national allegiance.

Decisive in the rejection of independence for Scotland in 2014 was the economic argument that its costs to the pocket would be too high, on which London and its parties played relentlessly. For the SNP, Europe offered the answer: joining the EU as another member state would give it the same access to a continental market and the same rights within it as Britain enjoyed: why should it lose, rather than gain from the change? Six years later, Britain now out of the EU, after a referendum in which Scotland voted to remain within it by the largest majority of any part of the UK, where has Brexit left the party? In political terms, in a stronger position to argue that the overwhelming will of the Scottish people has been ignored, and—as widespread commentary in London fears—the only way for it to be respected is a second, successful referendum on independence. In economic terms, in a weaker position, since secession from the UK would no longer guarantee access to the rest of it, on which 60 per cent of Scottish exports depend, as it would have done if both countries belonged to the EU, to which only 15 per cent of Scottish exports now go. In that sense, the logic of Brexit is to close the escape-hatch of Europe, leaving Scotland trapped in the Union bought with English gold in 1707, now far more at the mercy of London than London is to Brussels. Project Fear, which Cameron and Osborne were sure would give them victory once again in the referendum on Europe, did not deter the English from putting considerations of sovereignty before calculations of prosperity. The risks would be much higher for the Scots. Would the same be true of them?

6. *Europe*

Overwhelmingly approved, by a two-thirds majority in the referendum of 1975, and in a dozen successive elections thereafter never an

⁹¹ In 2017, the Catalan government held a referendum on independence, but since participation was denounced as illegal by its opponents, so essentially confined to its supporters, the result—92 per cent in favour, on a turn-out of 43 per cent—was not a measure of the actual balance of opinion in Catalonia. For modern comparisons

important concern of voters,⁹² why was membership of the European Community at length suddenly rejected in 2016? That it soon lost the attraction it possessed in 1975 had long been evident, opinion polls showing consistently significant levels of disaffection with it. But such grumbling remained muted and remote even in the minds of those prone to it, Europe coming very low on the list of issues preoccupying the population at election time. What changed this were two developments, not in Britain, but in Europe. The first of these was the Treaty of Maastricht, proclaiming a European Union with a single currency to match. Its effect was to convert the small band of Conservative MPs radically opposed to the whole institutional complex in Brussels as a negation of the constitutional sovereignty of Westminster, hitherto generally regarded within the party as more or less eccentric bores, into a henceforward powerful wing of it, backed by Thatcher herself. The second was the expansion of the Union to the countries of Eastern Europe, releasing a large pool of poor but relatively skilled labour to seek better opportunities in Western Europe—Britain was swift off the mark in opening its doors, Blair rewarding Poland as a staunch ally in the war on Iraq before even Germany did so. The result was for the first time a major wave of immigrants, no longer just from the former Empire but from the EU, fuelling popular xenophobia and employment anxiety. Unlike the ostensible juridical issues agitating Eurosceptic benches in parliament, abstruse to most, mounting levels of immigration after the Great Recession quickly became a mass concern, capitalized by UKIP, and threatening Conservative rule if it was not contained. To head off the danger, Cameron called his referendum.

Why did he lose it? The Brexit referendum was a domestic quarrel, in which both sides were at mass level essentially oblivious of the ostensible object of the occasion, the European Union itself, other than as an object of polar cathexis; Remain and Leave opinion at large equally ignorant of, and indifferent to, its structures and mutations. At elite level, where the rival campaigns that mattered were ranged against each other within the Tory party, Cameron and Osborne were out-generalled

between Catalonia and Scotland, see J. H. Elliott, *Scots and Catalans: Union and Disunion*, New Haven CT 2018, pp. 225–64: hostile to secession in both, especially in the Catalan case, warm in admiration of the restored Bourbons.

⁹² As late as 2013, Europe was still an important issue for no more than 3 to 7 per cent of voters: Chris Gifford, *The Making of Eurosceptic Britain*, Farnham 2014, pp. 166–7.

from start to finish by the tacticians of ‘Conservatives for Britain’ in the Commons, whose success in determining both the wording and the timing of the referendum was decisive in its outcome, and by the skills of Cummings, the strategist of Vote Leave, inventor of the slogan that won it, ‘Take Back Control’. Believing all they had to do was repurpose the message with which they had won the Scottish referendum and the election of 2015, Cameron and Osborne thought they could neutralize the issue of immigration—record levels of which, making a mockery of government promises to the contrary, were released on the eve of the referendum—by a second Project Fear, warning of the economic catastrophe that would befall the country if it left the Union, and failing to grasp that for many, immigration was not just a nativist identity issue but itself an economic one, the threat of joblessness. Afterwards, a staffer in the Remain HQ would ruefully remark: ‘Project Fear does work, we were just out-project feared.’⁹³ Cameron also forgot that he had won in 2014 and 2015 with the tabloids of the right behind him; this time they were in full cry against him. Labour, unlike the Conservatives formally at one in calling for Remain, did little more than its Tory counterparts to make a positive case for the EU, it too essentially just warning of the costs of exit.

The upshot was a stinging popular rebuff to the political class as a whole, united (the minority of Conservative Brexiteers aside) in an empty defence of the status quo. That ‘Take Back Control’ struck home among large numbers of ordinary people for whom Europe as such had hardly ever mattered was made plain by the turn-out: at 72 per cent, a full 9 points above the average of the four elections before the referendum, with the largest increases in the working-class districts of the North where it had previously been lowest.⁹⁴ There, as detailed cartography has shown, the impact of austerity after 2008—as Crafts describes it, ‘bipartisan fiscal consolidation’—was decisive. While cuts in public expenditure slashed grants to local authorities overall by 36 per cent, drops in spending varied dramatically from 6.2 per cent per capita in the least deprived to 46.3 per cent per capita in the most deprived areas,

⁹³ Tim Shipman, *All Out War: The Full Story of Brexit*, London 2017, p. 308: much the best account of the contest.

⁹⁴ Andrew Cooper, Remain’s leading pollster, would later estimate that over 80 per cent of these new voters chose Leave: *All Out War*, pp. 463–4

hitting the poorest parts of the country, most dependent on social services, hardest. It was these which tipped the balance for Leave.⁹⁵

Overall, the class division of the vote was stark: 57 per cent of the wealthiest AB group voted Remain, the only such stratum in which it held a clear majority: 64 per cent of the poorest C2DE voted Leave. Polarization by age was equally clear-cut—between 18 and 45 years old, majorities for Remain; from 45 years upwards, for Leave. By party, Labour supporters voted 63 per cent Remain, Conservative supporters 58 per cent Leave. Motivations in each camp were no less eloquent. For Remainers, far the most important reason—over two fifths of respondents—was economic: fear of losses if Britain left. Less than one in ten expressed any strong attachment to the EU. For Leavers, the top reason—for nearly half of them—was political: returning decisions affecting the country to Westminster, where they belonged. Immigration was uppermost in the minds of a third.⁹⁶ Youth (18–24) voted 73 per cent for Remain, but this was a mere 26 per cent of this age group, of whom 64 per cent didn't bother to vote, and 10 per cent voted Leave.⁹⁷ Likewise in the Remain stronghold of London the vote rose only 4 per cent over the previous election; in Scotland the vote actually fell. In these figures, the fate of Labour in 2019, when the Conservatives held a lead of 50 per cent over it among workers who voted Leave,⁹⁸ was already written.

⁹⁵ See successively David Innes and Gemma Tetlow, 'Delivering Fiscal Squeeze by Cutting Local Government Spending', *Fiscal Studies*, vol. 36, no. 3, September 2015, pp. 303–25; Sascha Becker, Thiemo Fetzer and Dennis Novy, 'Who voted for Brexit? A comprehensive district-level analysis', *Economic Policy*, vol. 32, no. 92, October 2017, pp. 601–50; Thiemo Fetzer, 'Did Austerity Cause Brexit?', *American Economic Review*, vol. 109, no. 11, November 2019, pp. 3849–86; Nicholas Crafts, 'The Fall in UK Potential Output due to the Financial Crisis: A Much Bigger Estimate', Centre for Competitive Advantage in the Global Economy, Working Paper No. 399, January 2019. The loss per person from the cuts ranged from £177 in the City of London to £914 in Blackpool. On the assembled evidence, Crafts concludes that 'Remain would probably have won in the absence of austerity.' Housing costs were another critical factor, mapping the same kind of divide.

⁹⁶ Ipsos-Mori, 'How Britain voted in the 2016 EU referendum', 5 September 2016; Ashcroft, 'How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday . . . and why', 24 June 2016.

⁹⁷ Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson, *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire*, London 2019, p. 24.

⁹⁸ Evans and Mellon, 'The Reshaping of Class Voting'. Of the 54 seats the Conservatives took from Labour, 52 were in areas which had voted Leave; Labour gained just one solitary Remain seat, in Putney.

Within the overall dichotomy separating them, each camp contained cross-cutting impulses and discrepant constituencies. Status anxieties haunted both: nostalgia for empire among Leavers, fear of demotion at loss of its replacement by the EU among Remainers. Neither knew much or felt strongly about the entity nominally in dispute between, but the passions it masked were real enough. The rustbelt revolted not against a distant bureaucracy in Brussels by which it was scarcely touched, but against the neo-liberal order in London it had endured for a quarter of a century, and the political caste that had imposed it. Youth rebelled against a claustal racism and insular jingoism; in favour of notionally open employment and life-style horizons. But the immigrants with whom it identified were more likely to be black and brown, second-generation Anglophone residents from the former empire, rather than more transient white arrivals from Eastern or Southern Europe. In that sense, its principal cosmopolis may have been less the Union under whose flag it marched than the Commonwealth. Beneath such differences lay a range of alternative identifications. When asked, 60 per cent of Remain voters described themselves as ‘British, not English’; 79 per cent of Leave voters as ‘English, not British’; though, predictably, the two identities could not be easily disentangled in the minds of the respondents, half of each bloc also terming themselves ‘equally English and British’.⁹⁹

How far did the referendum itself crystallize—or give displaced expression to—a growing, if hitherto somewhat submerged, sense of English identity?¹⁰⁰ If it did, would it mean that ‘Englishness’ is today principally an outlook of the kind to which Enoch Powell gave notorious expression at the turn of the seventies? Or might this strain coexist with a sensibility closer to the historic connotations of ‘Little England’—insular, but unambitious and pacific, socially somewhat Scandinavian, free of all illusions of grandeur? Or is the very idea of a distinct English identity something of a mare’s nest, the reality being an unshakeable, if now also malleable British identity,¹⁰¹ of which Johnson’s Cabinet could be taken

⁹⁹ Ashcroft, ‘How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday . . . and why’.

¹⁰⁰ Displacement is the striking theme of Anthony Barnett’s analysis of 2016 in *The Lure of Greatness, England’s Brexit and America’s Trump*, London 2017, which argues that the Leave vote should be understood as a frustrated expression of the rational need for an English parliament in a democratized constitutional settlement in Britain.

¹⁰¹ For a powerful early conjecture of how England might develop as an heir to Ukania, see Francis Mulhern, ‘Britain after Nairn’, pp. 63–5.

as an emblem, encompassing chauvinist natives and go-go immigrants alike, that is unlikely ever to drop the Great before Britain?

On 31 January 2020 Ukania finally left the European Union, yet the issue of its relations with Europe will persist. Some of the Remainer emotion of recent memory, the part reminiscent of mourning for Diana, will presumably fade. But much of it will not, continuing to be a significant current in the life of the country, by no means reconciled to defeat, as further battles lie ahead over the terms of exit. What are likely to be the consequences of a still smouldering culture war over Europe? Could it be simply folded into the party system, Labour eventually becoming a united party of Rejoin as the Tories under Johnson become the party of Never Again? If such a twist seems improbable, it is because Labour's performance over Brexit, immobilized like Buridan's ass while the Tories fought among themselves over the direction of the country, was so continuous with its unbroken record of subalternity in affairs of state—from Macdonald to Attlee, Wilson to Blair without independent initiative: subaltern to the sacristy of Westminster, subaltern to the will of Washington. Now a mutant in so many other ways, in this Labour has remained unchanged.

7. *Nexus*

The upshot? Without any mass upheaval, or even such turbulence as marked the seventies, the order of Ukania has been disrupted as never before since 1911–14, with no new equilibrium in sight. All its components—economy, polity, ideology, territory, diplomacy—have simultaneously and interconnectedly been destabilized. The model of growth around which the country has been built since the late nineteenth century has generated such internal tensions that it has finally backfired. Contracting manufactures, swelling financial and commercial services, deepening regional inequalities, stagnant wages, soaring house prices, escalating inequalities, and when this pattern exploded in a banking crisis, the imposition of austerity to contain it, produced the convulsion of Brexit, and with it the risk of a drop in British GDP potentially greater than any on record. Decline, banished for a season from reputable discourse, has returned in more drastic guise. What lies ahead, many declare, is more like the term in Spengler's mistranslated title—*Untergang*: not decline, but downfall; or perhaps, in its abruptness, the French *dégringolade*.

In reality, though the current dénouement is sudden enough, it is the continuity of a British anomaly that marks the successive phases of development since the fifties. Simply, during the *trente glorieuses* of post-war capitalism, when its war-time rivals were retooling and growing fast, Britain failed to invest and lagged behind the pack. Then, when the long down-turn set in, growth rates dropped and, as Wolfgang Streeck has shown, capitalism became ever more dependent on successive forms of credit to maintain its political stability, Britain—still underinvesting—now led the pack down the path of debt-fuelled accumulation and financialization, boasting of its exemplary performance in speeding ahead of the rest. Such was the neo-liberal recovery of Thatcher and Blair, which ended in tears in 2008, the ‘rude shock’ that so surprised its admirers, driving Britain into a longer recession than its peers, leaving it in the grip of a sharply rising public debt and more cruel fiscal consolidation. Today economic relations between classes under its financialized capitalism are steadily less coherent, as wage earners are exploited along ‘secondary’ lines, as tenants, debtors and savers; foreign firms loom increasingly large in a mainly service-sector economy, itself sustained by surplus value ultimately extracted, often enough, from the Chinese worker. Yet these broken economic relations are still locked within the same political community of fate as in the less troubled past.

If the logic of continuous eversion culminated in Brexit, it was not just in generating a trip-wire of popular revolt against the hardships to which it led, but also in fostering a well-off rebellion against the price it had come to require in loss of the kind of sovereignty it had once embodied: not the autonomy of one empire among others, but the paramountcy of a global imperium inordinate in the system of states, in a class by itself for wealth, power and extent of possessions. Inspired by the latter insurgency, recruiting the former, the Tories swept to victory in 2019 under a leader of postmodern charisma. But the contradiction of its origins, before even the costs of the pandemic weighed on it, persists: combining two antithetical forces with a promise to relieve the lot of the poor by making a break whose immediate effect will be to reduce the resources for doing so, and a promise to all of the ultimate grail of a Greater Britain no more credible than its previous iterations. Not only are the strains in the class coalition Johnson has assembled liable to become acute, but the capacity of the Conservatives to handle them is likely to be weaker than in the past. One-Nation Toryism was a going concern down to the

time of Macmillan, when a ruling elite of long historical experience was still intact, and ‘you’ve never had it so good’ was not an empty bluff. The campaigns of 2016 and 2019 were fought effectively telling the masses that they had never had it so bad, and were won because enough had come to feel just that. But by the end the Conservatives themselves had been in power for a decade, and today their ministerial cadre, purged of Remainers, has (save for the Chancellor) never looked thinner or more brittle. In a way unlike that of any previous Tory administration, the party has become close to a one-man band, under a leader visibly more at ease campaigning than ruling, committing in office one blunder after another whose sum threatens to put his legacy at risk.¹⁰² Numerically, they hold sway; substantively, their command of the situation is insecure, an ascendancy without much ballast.

Labour, having lost the working class in 2019 by a huge margin, is in a still less secure position, penned in to the corral of an increasingly middle-class—professional, managerial, clerical—Europeanist constituency, where it risks competing more with Liberal Democrats than Conservatives, with lesser vote-banks among ethnic minorities and youth. Douglas Carswell gave early expression to a view that has since become common: ‘what is fundamentally happening is the disalignment of the Labour intelligentsia from the working-class Labour vote. The fragmentation of that alliance, which has been in place basically since the 1920s, that is what is going to reshape politics.’¹⁰³ Such is the hope of the right, mainstream and marginal, and fear of the left. If the prediction were accurate, Labour would repeat the trajectory of French social democracy. But for three reasons, this is unlikely. The fate of the Parti socialiste (PS), reduced close to extinction, stands as an obvious warning; the electoral system blocks the rise of a Front National; and though workers may have deserted Labour in large numbers, the trade unions have not, and remain embedded as an institutional force in the party with which, if only on financial grounds, it cannot dispense. Henceforward every effort will be made to paper over the divisions in its traditional constituencies, where the working class as historically understood has itself split along lines of age and asset, as a generation now in its seventies reaps a one-off bonus

¹⁰² It might be wondered whether Tom Nairn’s diagnosis of Powell could eventually acquire some bearing on Johnson, let alone the die-hard Brexiters who backed him—the very extremity of an attachment to tradition undermining its strengths in flexibility and adaptation?

¹⁰³ Shipman, *All Out War*, p. 608.

from council-house sales—a critical factor in defining first-time Tory/Brexit voters in small towns in the North, a legacy of Thatcherism detonating thirty years after her fall—while their children or grandchildren, quite often first-generation university graduates in their families, leave home for precarious jobs in larger, more cosmopolitan cities, electorally still prisoners of Labourism.¹⁰⁴ The party has no option, however forlorn a prospect it might for the moment appear, but to seek a revival of the alliance preached by Hobsbawm and now a mantra across all sections of Labour.

Writing on the eve of the 2019 election, two advocates of this view—critical of Corbyn’s campaign two years earlier as a narrow-minded pitch, incapable of speaking ‘a language that reconciles identity politics and social liberalism’—concluded that ‘only a significant electoral failure and the election of a new party leader would create conditions ripe for a more maximalist strategy that was able to recover losses in places that have drifted away from Labour.’¹⁰⁵ It would be belated to say no sooner said than done, since it is now clear that top levels of the Labour apparatus itself were already hoping, and working, for a defeat of the party in 2017, in order to oust Corbyn, and dismayed that it then did so well. But they did not have to wait long. The arrival of Starmer has restored the party to its normal political self. His Shadow Cabinet indicates the

¹⁰⁴ Responding to critics of *The New Politics of Class*, Tilley and Evans write, in a somewhat Delphic penultimate sentence of their reply, ‘Party differences today are increasingly aligned around issues that also divide the electorate by occupational class and education, but divide people by age to a much greater extent’: ‘The New Politics of Class after the 2017 Election’, *Political Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 4, October–December 2017, p. 714. As it stands, the last clause is ambiguous. Does it mean that divisions by age are much greater than they were previously, or that today they are much greater than divisions by class? The preceding sentence of the reply could suggest the former, the subsequent sentence the latter.

¹⁰⁵ Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker, ‘The Divergent Dynamics of Cities and Towns: Geographical Polarisation and Brexit’, *Political Quarterly: Britain Beyond Brexit*, vol. 90, special no. 2, April 2019, p. 16; a collection (also issued as a book) of like-minded contributors brought together by the Chief Executive of the Resolution Trust, Gavin Kelly, and the former Director of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), Nick Pearce. The Resolution Trust, bankrolled by insurance millionaire Clive Cowderly, a donor to the IPPR, who bought *Prospect* magazine in 2016, is a regroupment of former New Labour nomenclature for a political comeback. Kelly was Deputy Chief of Staff to Brown in Downing Street; Pearce was a special adviser at the Home Office, and Tom Clark, parachuted into the editorial chair at *Prospect*, a special adviser at Work and Pensions, both under Blair.

direction of change. Its two most experienced members—and pointed choices—are veterans of New Labour: Charlie Falconer, who engineered the legal justification for the Iraq War, now Shadow Attorney General, and Nick Brown, Chief Whip, back in his old office; the first a familiar of Blair, the second a henchman of Brown, giving Starmer a direct line to both. Among the rest, two-thirds of them MPs elected since 2010, diversity of race and gender has been amply catered for, of outlook much less. The only significant hold-over from Corbyn's team was soon dismissed on a pretext.

The fact that so many could hope for the best from Starmer, or believed that he would keep the Manifesto pledges while cultivating a better image in the media, has confirmed Nairn's depiction in 1964 of the party, and its left, with a vengeance: there, 'one finds the greatest confusion about simple organizational questions, and the most total ignorance about how the Party works and ought to work.' Socialists could not do without a theory—a culture—that went beyond the hand-me-down Victorian utilitarianism of the Fabians, to whom trade unions were at the outset content to grant control over policy, and who continue to form the right-wing leadership tradition of the party to this day. Even the scandal at the Labour HQ, and the outcry of the left at its effects on the 2017 election, however justifiable, belongs squarely to this uniquely Labourist lineage. Nairn: 'it is doubtful, indeed, if any other working-class movement has produced as many "traitors"—or at least as many *unashamed*, magnificently naked traitors—as has Labourism.' Such a pattern was not just the fault of its leaders, however, but of a 'system' that generated the underlying conditions of betrayal—a fundamental tension going back to 1918 or earlier, between the evolutionary 'reforms' proposed by the PLP, divorced from the goal of building a socialist society, and a left-wing pole of force descended from non-conformism found in the ILP and associated radicalism, too often content to languish as the 'subjectivity' or 'mindless passion' of the party, useful as militants in elections or at party conferences, yet 'completely loyal' to Labour.¹⁰⁶

In the new configuration, Starmer himself has a spotless record of political rectitude: supporting the party's decision, pre-Corbyn, not to oppose Osborne's cuts to welfare in 2015; backing the attempted coup against

¹⁰⁶ Tom Nairn, 'The Nature of the Labour Party-I', *NLR* 1/27, September–October 1964, pp. 55, 41, 64–5.

Corbyn in 2016; leading the demand for a second referendum to overturn Brexit; and now explaining that since Britain has left the Union, there is no point in arguing about the decision any longer. From the start, the primary aim of the campaign against Brexit by the *Guardian* and the Labour establishment was always to isolate and remove Corbyn rather than to defend the Union *à l'outrance*, and once he was gone, the flag of the EU could be dropped without a tremor, no doubt with pragmatic nods from the gargyle heads of New Labour. On arrival, Starmer was conventionally described—along with most of his picks—as ‘soft left’. A more accurate term would be soft right, a surface that is virtually bound to become harder as he settles into power, as with Kinnock and Blair before him, though in a style more sober than that of windbag or disc-jockey.

A reversion to the mean is not an exact reproduction of the same. Though Corbynism was in many obvious ways a version of the emotional Labour left of old whose portrait was drawn by Tom Nairn, Corbyn himself is not a typical product of this strain. What set him apart from it, and made him the object of much more violent vituperation, was his rejection of imperial practices, in whatever guise—humanitarian, anti-totalitarian, patriotarian, testamentarian—they presented themselves: it is enough to compare his record with a Foot or Mikardo, even Benn. Unforgivable, especially, was his stance on Palestine. Under Starmer, a clean slate is being made of all of this. A quarter of his Shadow Cabinet are Labour Friends of Israel. What of Corbyn’s following, the hundreds of thousands drawn into the party as he became leader of it? That they represented something new in Labour is plain. But what was it? No good study of this levy, which suddenly more than doubled the Party’s membership, exists—only surmises are possible. But it now looks as if it was a gust of enthusiasm, not confined to youth, attracted by sheer novelty, rather than driven by conviction, an influx which the culture of Labourism—its ugliest features hidden from sight in nauseous email traffic at party HQ—was incapable of educating, but not of absorbing. Corbyn was elected as leader in 2015 with some 250,000 votes, a majority of 59.5 per cent. Five years later, Starmer was elected with 276,000 votes, and a majority of the same order—56 per cent, if on a considerably lower turn-out, at just under 63 per cent as against 76 per cent. There was no massive turnover of membership in between. The half of the party’s membership that predated Corbyn remained weakly or staunchly Blairite, while the candidate of the left, Rebecca Long-Bailey, received just over a quarter of the vote. In other words, most of Corbyn’s

supporters decamped without compunction to a politician who had conspired with others to depose him within a year of his election. Whether the residue who did not will make more of a difference to the party than their forebears in the time of Foot or Benn remains to be seen.

There are reasons to suspect they might. For the warmth with which Corbyn was initially received among the young, however ephemeral or uncritical, was not just an attraction to his person, but came out of successive reactions, first to the invasion of Iraq and then the crash of 2008 and its consequences. These left a marked generational hostility to both imperial war and economic austerity, an outlook since intensified by conflicts of race and gender, and crises of climate and environment, to which XR and Black Lives Matter testify as much in Britain as in America. There is also the acute material pressure on the newest cohorts to enter the labour market, as they face precarious jobs, stagnant wages, the rising costs and hazards of any kind of urban accommodation, and the burden of student debt. All, in principle, fuel for persisting radicalization. In practice, the possibility that fatigue and demoralization could eventually deaden impulses of revolt, generating a disillusioned inertia, cannot equally be ruled out. Yet should such a shift lead not to apathy, but a slippage in the direction of conformist moderation, Newest Labour would still not be out of the woods. For the party is confronted with the task, not just of reconciling ‘identity politics’ (sc. Leaver proletariat) and ‘social liberalism’ (sc. middle-class and youth Remainderdom), but of developing an agenda to compete with Johnson’s One-Nation Toryism, and not preempted by it.

Recycling amanuenses of New Labour, or scouring for sub-Fabian scrub in the tundra of ‘public policy’ studies, will not be enough. Might the indignation over Brexit of the liberal intelligentsia—understood not as an elevated catch-all for professional and managerial strata intermediate between capital and labour, but in a more classical sense—provide mental fire-power for the job, of the kind that Labour has so long lacked? Its knighted leader, whose London constituency covers Bloomsbury, King’s Cross (with its *Guardian* HQ), Regent’s Park, Primrose Hill, Chalk Farm, Kentish Town, Haverstock Hill and Highgate, could hardly be more symbolically situated for such a rapprochement, eagerly sought by his local backers as soon as he was adopted. Nor is there much doubt that the party can count on the vast majority of intellectuals south of the Tees for its votes, as New Labour could do. To generate creative enthusiasm

and commitment is another matter. The speed with which the banner of Remain has been cast away is unlikely to excite a stratum which mobilized behind it with some delay, but then in overwhelming numbers. The feminization of the PLP, a majority of whose members and half of the Shadow Cabinet are now women, could attract constructive political energy from their counterparts in the academy. But it is difficult to imagine a real change of attitude in the intelligentsia as a whole, or the balance of forces within it, so long as universities creak in the monetized vice, now tightened by the pandemic, left by New Labour and its managers, whose achievements Starmer has declared the party has no intention of repudiating. Bitterness over Europe will remain, not just for reasons of cultural or moral attachment, but also because EU research funds were sometimes a welcome supplement to niggardly local provision, and not least because in Britain so many university teachers themselves come from the EU—a quarter of the total, probably the highest proportion in any professional group of the country. But whether this will issue into spirited mobilization or sullen withdrawal is unforeseeable. The card of Rejoin, were Starmer ever to play it, would galvanize many. But though perhaps held behind his hand for use at some point in the future, for the time being it takes no tricks. Students, equally pro-European, but stultified by their conversion into customers purchasing credentials for the market, are unlikely to spur their teachers into action. The bruise is not healed, and will go on hurting.

In Scotland, the position is very different. While intellectual opinion has long been split between unionism and nationalism, but virtually unanimous in favour of the EU, nationalism became under the rule of New Labour the more dominant and more pro-European of the two camps, as the neo-liberal regime in London, packed with vociferously unionist Scots—Brown, Cook, Reid, Darling, Campbell et al: bards of Britishness to a man¹⁰⁷—antagonized more and more sectors of Scottish society, fueling the rise of the SNP. When Scotland voted heavily for Remain in the referendum on Europe, Brexit came as a vindication, not an alienation, of pre-existing separatist sensibility among the majority of the intelligentsia. Not that the SNP itself paid much more attention to the latter than Labour to its English counterparts, in a political landscape still in some ways remarkably undeveloped for a renascent nation, lacking any

¹⁰⁷ See Tom Nairn, *Gordon Brown: Bard of Britishness*, Cardiff 2006, pp. 5–42.

long-established national—as distinct from principally city-local—press or widely read periodicals of its own. Prudent and pragmatic in office, stressing ‘competency’ and identity as much or more than any consistent policy agenda, the party’s electoral strength—nine victories at the polls in a row—has relieved it of the need to develop any coherent ideology beyond demands for independence.

That despite this score-card, these have so far failed to gain majority support need not discourage it. Had the referendum of 2014 been confined to those born in Scotland, it would have passed by a majority of 52.7 per cent; it was those born in the rest of the UK who defeated it, voting by 72 per cent against independence. Among all those under the age of 54, wherever they were born, there was also a comfortable majority for independence.¹⁰⁸ On this reading, the SNP can outwait the Tory government in London, which has made it clear it will not grant a second referendum, until time does its work and unionist elderlies die off, hoping meanwhile to secure one from a Labour Party needing its votes in a hung parliament, as once Irish nationalists had the necessary leverage to force Home Rule on Liberals in Westminster. Such a prospect, of course, is not without risk. Too long a sojourn in power without delivering the rationale of the party could erode its popularity with voters, allowing a come-back of some unionist coalition. To which a European-minded SNP supporter could reply, in Andreotti’s famous retort to those who said the same of the Democrazia Cristiana in Italy, *Il potere logora chi non ce l’ha*: ‘power wears out those who don’t have it’—not those who do. Alternatively, if the aim of the party is the creation of a just and equal Scottish society, as it claims, where is the prospectus for doing so? Recalling Tom Nairn’s autopsy half a century ago of the three dreams of Scottish nationalism till then—Calvinist, romantic, neo-third-worldist—a mordant compatriot has judged it the fourth: ‘Ultimately, yet another “dream” of Scottish nationalism, one that has carried it into government and to hitherto fantastical electoral heights, seems unlikely to be redeemed, though whether that betrayal will occur pre or post independence is less clear. What was it that Alex Salmond

¹⁰⁸ Ashcroft, ‘How Scotland Voted and Why’, 19 September 2014. Post-Brexit his opinion poll reported five years later an overall majority of 52 per cent for independence: *Holyrood Magazine*, 5 August 2019. By August 2020 it had increased to 53 per cent, with nearly three-quarters of voters under the age of 34 wanting independence: YouGov, 12 August 2020.

proclaimed during his resignation speech? “The dream” he asserted—probably correctly—“will never die”.¹⁰⁹

For the moment, imprisoned within a Britain that has taken Scotland with it out of the Europe to which Edinburgh looked as its better home, the SNP faces more of an impasse than it admits. Entry into Europe as an independent state alongside Britain as another member of the EU was one thing. Despite Spanish threats, Brussels could hardly have expelled a territory up till then an integral part of its jurisdiction. Continuity would have demanded it be retained, as just another flag on the podium. Now, however, negotiation for entry would come from a secessionist applicant outside its jurisdiction. In Yugoslavia, the EU was content to follow Germany’s lead in patronizing its break-up, and then proceed to a piecemeal gradual absorption of its successor states—so far, two out of six, *ab initio* Berlin’s favourites. But Yugoslavia was a communist country, and a federation at that, whose constitution—like that of the USSR—formally permitted secession. Breaking it up was no skin off the nose of capitalism, and whatever the collateral damage in lives, served the geo-political interests of the West. Even so, there was a taboo on boundary changes, Brussels insisting on the retention of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which could only be held together as a protectorate, and when Kosovo was detached from Serbia by NATO bombardment, unable to broker general agreement to its independence—Spain in the lead, Cyprus, Greece, Slovakia and Romania all refusing it recognition, for fear of the example it set. Scotland is not a communist state, and the precedent it might offer to Catalonia would be a red-line to any of the alternative royalist regimes—in complexion PSOE or PP, both unionist *à l’outrance*—in Madrid. Spain could hardly have vetoed Scottish membership of the EU,

¹⁰⁹ David Torrance, ‘Scotland’s Progressive Dilemma’, *Political Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 1, January–March 2017, pp. 52, 59, who points out that so far as socio-economic posture was concerned, Salmond was for a period in many ways Blairite before Blair. In a striking recent analysis, Rory Scothorne has deepened the analogy with a sociological reading of it, suggesting that New Labour and the SNP represented different ways of resolving the unsettled identities of upward mobility in the post-war era—‘England’s expanding home-owning class’ finding in the sequence from Thatcher to Blair a ‘narrative which allowed them to justify openly abandoning the politics of social solidarity’, whereas ‘their equivalents in Scotland found in devolution a means of pretending they hadn’t done the same, benevolently granting the class they’d left behind a voice instead of a future. The self-image of Scotland’s centre-left is, in this sense, impeccably Blairite’: ‘Scotland’s Dreaming’, *London Review of Books*, 21 May 2020.

so long as Britain itself was a member. Once that restraint is gone, it certainly could and in all probability would. In what conceivable ways, if any, Edinburgh could seek to circumvent this obstacle is not a question to be raised at Holyrood, which has its own taboos.

The obstacle is the reflection of a reality that is consistently ignored in Britain. The EU is a political construction, first and foremost. Economic integration, however important in its own right, to a point where it can give the appearance of an aim in itself, is not its *raison d'être*, and where the two conflict, the logic of politics, state or inter-state, over-rides the sense, good or bad, of economics. Obsessed with internal disputes, UKanian perceptions of Brexit have paid little attention to the European part in it. But viewed from Brussels, the priority has been clear from the start, and is political. Britain must be punished for the example it has set in showing that ever closer union is not irreversible, regardless of whether or not the EU itself incurs an economic cost for its retribution, provided the UK pays a greater one. Commercially, it would be less disruptive to the Union to minimize, rather than maximize, the penalties for leaving it, especially to a state of Britain's size and interconnectedness with the EU. But politically, to do so would defeat the purpose of intimidation, emboldening—so it is feared—others to consider departure too. To this intention, Conservative negotiators had no answer, which in logic could only have been political too, a warning that if pressed on this plane, the EU could suffer security—military and diplomatic—costs as well. Any such notion, above all, May and her ministers were voluble in disavowing.

Post-Brexit, the Johnson government faces another version of the same, eminently geo-political, problem. Now that exit from the EU has been, at any rate legally, consummated, what kind of foreign policy is open for London to adopt? Today's Republican administration has little interest in allies of any sort, no matter how eager to please it, and may have only a few short months of life left to it. Tomorrow's probable Democratic administration, Biden on the lead-strings of Obama, will find its ally in the EU. Where then will be the diplomatic space left for Britain? In abstraction, logic would point once again in the direction of a coalition of the wing powers, Britain and Russia, against Continental Europe, as in the Napoleonic and Second World Wars. But could even Dominic Cummings's musings on unsentimental Bismarckian statecraft stretch to that? Cold War ideology in full spate of revival, Tory backbenchers

already barking in chorus against Beijing and Moscow, forbids it. Might just that be the prophylactic against British isolation, the West closing ranks in Atlantic unity against a dual totalitarian menace in Eurasia once again? Surely what is most probable, but also, of course, least self-standing or distinct: not taking, but handing back control, as a dinghy towed by the capital ships of Washington and Brussels.

Meanwhile, at home the emergencies of departure and contagion loom unforgiving ahead of the restyled Conservative administration. Brexit remains unfinished business, its materialization suspended. London may reckon that the shock of a hard exit would not register much amid the larger earthquake of lockdown and a global recession. But how the huge ongoing blow to capital is to be repaired and labour relieved without a fiscal *Götterdämmerung* is clear to no-one in the government or out of it. Before the pandemic struck, two loyalists of the status quo worried that Brexit, by removing the ‘policy anchor’ of bipartisan consensus supplied by the EU—excluding the irresponsible nostrums right or left of those who had opposed entry to it—‘shook to its core the world-view that the big contours of the UK’s economic policy were firmly set and resided outside the reach of democratic contest.’¹¹⁰ Another of the company provided disabused reassurance. The central fact of the country’s modern history was the deep continuity of Britain’s ‘liberal market economy’, whatever its apparent anomalies, from Edwardian times, if not earlier, onwards. That had persisted, its basic shape unaltered, through Keynesian and Monetarist episodes alike. By contrast with both of these, no significant battle of ideas had preceded Brexit, nor had any significant economic interest favoured it—business and trade unions were united in opposition. There was no chance of it representing a paradigm shift. ‘The foundations of Britain’s liberal market economy survived both the Keynesian revolution and the neo-liberal counter-revolution. It doesn’t seem unreasonable to expect they will also weather the leaving of the EU. For all the talk of a radical change in the economic policy set-up, it is just as likely that the end result is a very British attempt to “muddle through” with a model which is itself not working and of which one of the key props (EU membership) has been knocked away. The implication of this is that Brexit will not generate a new model for the UK, but

¹¹⁰ Gavin Kelly and Nick Pearce, ‘Brexit and the Future of the British Model of Democratic Capitalism’, *Britain Beyond Brexit*, p. 4.

simply an inferior version of the existing one.’¹¹¹ Middle England is right to be upset, but need not fret overmuch. Familiar landmarks are not going to be washed away.

Britain’s liberal market economy—read: secular eversion—generated the two-fold revolt that produced Brexit. The victory of Brexit led to Conservative capture of a majority of the working class. Working-class expectations require concessions from a suddenly altered Conservative regime that Brexit impedes. The desertion of its proletarian base leaves Labour sociologically adrift in the eddies of a protean middle class. Its share of the middle class is attached to Europe, no part of it more passionately than the liberal intelligentsia. Attracted towards Labour by its stance in the cultural war over Europe, the English intelligentsia is alienated from it by what became of its own principal habitat under it. In Scotland, alienation of all classes of society from Labour has given power to a nationalism looking to Europe. Departure from Europe has both inflamed Scottish nationalism and entrapped it. The price of departure, indexed by the EU to political not economic considerations, has left Britain’s rulers answerless politically and, in all probability, the wells of Brexit further poisoned economically. No part of the current configuration is independent of the others. Their nexus is bound to dissolve, in one way or another. When or how is anyone’s guess.

¹¹¹ Duncan Weldon, ‘The British Model and the Brexit Shock: Plus ça Change?’, *Britain Beyond Brexit*, pp. 20–1. The author, formerly a special advisor to Harriet Harman—the most prominent female minister in Blair’s successive Cabinets; under Brown, Deputy Chair of the Labour Party—is now at the *Economist*, having been Associate Editor at *Prospect*.