



EALING
INDEPENDENT
COLLEGE



The Making of Modern Britain 1951-2007



Britain in 1951



A different country

- * Britain was still visibly damaged from WWII.
- * Rationing had just ended.
- * Young men still had to do 2 years in National Service.
- * Class loyalties were still strong.
- * Population boom.
- * Increasing social tensions.
- * Start of mass immigration.
- * Increasing social mobility.
- * There was powerful debate about the organisation of education.
- * Birth rates were consistently ahead of death rates - NHS and welfare state only increased that gap.
- * There was inward migration from the Republic of Ireland, West Indies and countries that had just gained independence from Britain.
- * Also a lot of migration outward (mainly to Australia and America).
- * People were moving away from town centres and city centres to new towns ("green field sites").
- * Invention of cars - people could live further away from where they work.

Politics

- * Three key turning points during this period
- * 1951 election > start of 13 years Conservative rule
- * 1979 election > start of Thatcher dominance lasting 11 years
- * 1997 election > start of New Labour dominance (13 years)

- * 1951 saw end of Labour and Attlee in government - had achieved all promises outlined in 1945 election manifesto and legacy remains for (arguably) twenty years. Impact on society and politics until mid 1970's despite Conservative dominance, and Welfare State and NHS continue to date.

- * 1951-1997 - Conservatives 'natural party of government' for 35 of the 46 years. Labour Party showed a mentality of an opposition party rather than governing party (even when in power) until Blair arrived.

- * Two party electoral system 1951 onwards: Labour and Conservatives enjoy near total dominance of politics. Due in part to the FPTP electoral system effects as well as the insignificance of Liberals, lack of parliamentary support for nationalists, and negligible impact of other smaller parties.

- * Rise of consensus politics - political gulf between major parties narrower than ever before. Labour moderate and patriotic (not extreme socialism as expected) and key policy makers in Conservatives were 'One Nation Tories' (reformist) keen to build on national cooperation to maintain an essential post war consensus.

Economy

- * Contradictions: a curious mixture of difficulties and decline versus optimism and growth
- * Huge difficulties - damaged infrastructure, saddled with massive debts, pre-war markets lost, old staple industries in decline, Britain reliant on US to begin economic recovery, key industries (coal, steel, rail) had been nationalised by Attlee (hopes of faster modernisation), many consumer goods scarce and expensive, rationing only just coming to an end. Britain sliding down the league tables of the world economy 1951-2007 - economic growth slower than competitors, successive attempts by British governments for economic modernisation (improve productivity, competitiveness) were never fully realised.
- * Optimism - still one of leading economic powers in world, British companies still at forefront of key sectors (oil, chemicals, shipping), British firms major manufacturers and exporters, other European competitors had suffered more during the war. Living standards were rising, people better dressed, owned more consumer goods. By 2007 'poverty' very different from version in 1951.

At home

- * Most towns and cities dominated by heavy industry, female employment restricted to mainly single women, and shortages of consumer goods. Sense of national unity fostered by war years, however class divisions remained clear cut.
- * NORTH-SOUTH divide easy to recognise with **Establishment** dominating public life
- * property owning middle class lived in the suburbs voting Conservative
- * areas of heavy industry (e.g. north, West Midlands) saw working classes living in urban areas close to factories, loyal to TU's, generally voting Labour.
- * Social mobility had been increased by some extent by impact of war but Britain remained very class conscious and deferential society - class system had to break down.

Abroad

- * Deceptive position in the world
- * Outwardly: still a world power: part of the Grand Alliance that had won the war, possession of a great empire, pride of war victory amongst public, 1 of 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council, key ally to US in Cold War (e.g. Korea), vast stretch of Navy, independent nuclear power, British expectation to remain at the 'top table' of international affairs
- * Reality: emerged from war weakened and impoverished, role as colonial power declining since WW1 (1947 withdrawal from India symbolised inability to maintain former imperial status), militarily and economically overstretched and could not compete with US/USSR. Idea of Britain as a great power built mainly on illusions which took a long time to die
- * 1951 was a missed opportunity, should have been making a fundamental reassessment of position in the world by scaling down military commitments and accepting the days of imperial grandeur were over ◻ missed EEC 1950-1 formation as eyes were fixed on the world beyond Europe, on the 'special relationship' with the US, on the Empire and Commonwealth.
- * Two momentous decisions:
- * Britain's decision to go ahead with independent nuclear deterrent
- * Decision to stand aside from the process that led to the formation of the EEC (1956 Suez Crisis shattered British illusions but by then door to Europe was slammed shut by De Gaulle)
- * Led to next half century of British foreign policy continuing to revolve around the consequences of these decisions