

# Chapter One

## Never Again

(i)

I was nine years old during the days of the Normandy invasion and can remember kneeling beside my bed, praying for the Allies to win. I used to watch the shadows of leaves, cast through the window and playing upon the sheet, and pretend that these were the shifting front lines of the opposing armies. Even as a child I knew what was at stake. In June 1944, we were accustomed to the disciplines of war: rationing, sirens and blackouts. I was always sent to bed before the BBC Nine O'Clock News but I could guess from the tone of the voices downstairs whether the news was good, bad or simply terrible. The BBC had gravitas. It was careful not to be alarmist or over-cheerful, and to keep its emotions in check at all times, for there could be no victory without sacrifice. The formal voice suppressed the anxiety.

But D-Day was different. We were on the front foot and not the back, to use a phrase from cricket, attacking not defending; but this push towards victory held many risks. We were throwing hundreds of thousands of men against a well-fortified coast across the Channel and nobody knew what would happen next. In Cheltenham, the garrison town to which my family were evacuated, wards in the hospital were cleared of all but emergency patients. That was how we knew that something was going to happen but 'Careless Talk Costs Lives', as the posters said, and so we kept quiet and said nothing, and waited for the BBC Nine O'Clock News.

This book is not intended to be about my personal memories but about the climate of opinion in Britain, our changing culture, that led to Brexit and the out-in-out relationship with our continental neighbours that upset what had seemed to be the world order in 2016. But memories do play a part. Within the mixture of motives and facts, legends and myths, that characterised the European Union (EU) Referendum in 2016, there were

many echoes of World War II, and the time when Britain stood alone, and then not quite alone and, finally, with the help of the Americans, Canadians, Poles, Australians and divisions from what was still the British Empire, we managed to push back the Axis forces and won a glorious victory.

That is now the national narrative, celebrated in books, films and YouTube clips, and passed down from parent to child in what has become a collective memory. It is not exactly false or fake but censored here and there, simplified and turned into a ripping yarn. The facts stay the same but certain elements are missing, which prevent the well-documented history from sounding wholly truthful, all Brylcream and stiff upper lips. From my stock of childhood memories, however, I can still remember the ferocious uncertainty, expressed in the voices downstairs, the fear and over-determination, repeated twice a day at school and at bedtime, to believe that God was on our side and would eventually prevail.

This narrative is woven into the fabric of British culture, a distinctive feature, which we take for granted, but from a few miles away, across the English Channel, may seem one-sided and even complacent. That is what a national narrative is like. It offers a useful framework, part history, part legend, in which we can place who we are, where we come from and what our native qualities may be. But when we examine this structure closely, we can notice how fragile it is, how much guesswork went into its making and how under pressure, it can buckle and snap, leaving us with little sense of national identity at all. Where was the Battle of Stalingrad in the British narrative of how we won the war? Just outside the frame.

In his Preface to *A History of the English-speaking Peoples* (1956),<sup>i</sup> Sir Winston Churchill wrote that: 'For the second time in the present century, the British Empire and the United States have stood together, facing the perils of war on the largest scale known among men . . . and [we] have become more conscious of our common duty to the human race.' The special relationship was born, and handed down to Macmillan and Kennedy, Thatcher and Reagan, Blair and Bush, May and Trump. Although his vision was less than messianic and did not preclude 'the erection of other structures like United Europe', Churchill expressed his belief that the English-speaking peoples with the common 'language, law and processes by which we have come into being, already afforded a unique foundation for drawing together and portraying a concerted task', which was to create, although he did not exactly say so, the New World Order.

And so another thread was woven into the fabric, the 'English-speaking peoples', but General de Gaulle, isolated in his country retreat in France, might well have been irritated by the way in which Churchill with such becoming modesty sought the leadership of the Free World

for the English-speaking peoples and won a Nobel Prize for doing so. In his *War Memoirs*, published in the same year, de Gaulle complained that during the war he was kept away from the top-level meetings between the US President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Churchill, although he was the Commander-in-Chief of the Free French Forces and the head of the French Committee of National Liberation, the provisional French government-in-waiting. De Gaulle's resentment was not only personal, but felt as a snub to France itself, whose language, laws and culture were in danger of being side-lined after the war, although they too had influenced 'the destiny of the world'.

'Culture' is one of those awkward words which can be used to cover almost anything. In English, it can mean something broad and generic, like 'Chinese culture', or something rather narrow, to indicate 'the arts', which are supposed to be cultural, as opposed to mere entertainment, which is not. In Eastern Europe under Communism, the ministries of culture were the censors-in-chief as well as being responsible for the churches and appointments to bishoprics and sees, for which they as atheists were the state guardians.

In this book, I will be using the word culture in an equally all-embracing fashion to mean the way in which we as humans think - our habits of mind rather than the neurological functioning of the brain. I would like to be more precise and to demonstrate with the certainty of a phrenological chart that the right side of the brain controls the imagination, while the left organises reason and mathematics. But culture is not like that. It is acquired, rather than innate, and comes from many sources, some of which are derived from society at large, such as a national narrative, while others are very personal.

A culture may contain assumptions or myths that we take for granted, although we cannot prove that they are factually 'true', because they provide a useful way of understanding the world. But they can also be misleading, at odds with other myths and disruptive. We are often told, and have come to believe, that culture is at the heart of civilisation, and so it is, but it is also at the heart of wars, pogroms and genocides.

A culture is many-layered. It may change and evolve but never fully discards. I have past and present memories that influence the way in which I think, although some are very faint, like the echoes from a distant star, while others are close and shine daily, like the sun. I can remember most clearly those events that have been placed in some order, like a mental filing cabinet, which might be a narrative, a religious faith or even a language, for it is hard to think of something without having a name for it. Medieval authorities called them Memory Theatres. These ordering systems belong

to our culture as well, and may break apart, or even explode, so that everything that we have trusted before is hurled into doubt and chaos, which may happen on a personal or a collective level. It can happen to whole nations.<sup>ii</sup>

Culture is the driving force behind commerce and industry. What is money but another language, which loses its value if we play around carelessly with it and gains in value if we respect its limits and what its symbols are supposed to represent? Nor have I mentioned the so-called 'cultural industries', which have often been cited as second only to 'financial services' as the largest earner of foreign currency to the metropolitan city of London. The 'creative industries' are something different, as I hope to explain, but both contribute to what we mean by culture. If it seems that I am loading too much into one hapless, two-syllable word, I must point out that whole sections of the IT industry are devoted to analysing our likes, dislikes and websites that we visit in order to provide algorithms of our behaviour and how we think – in short, our culture.

We allow them to do so. When a website such as Google asks our permission to allow cookies on to our laptops, so that it can follow our tastes and offer suggestions about other websites, few say 'No'; and it would be inconvenient if we did, because it would probably mean that each site would require a separate password. Some are tracking cookies, which provide an overall picture of the user's likes and dislikes, so that he or she can be targeted with posts and images that stimulate predictable reactions. In 2016, Facebook went further. It promised a news-and-information service, tailor-made to the views of their consumers, so that they only saw those news stories in which they were likely to be interested, a news-feed that was 'subjective, personal and unique'.

When this principle is applied to politics, the prospect of receiving news from only one point of view runs the risk of polarising our debates still further. The Internet becomes a better tool for demagogues than democrats, for do we really think for ourselves, if the pre-selection process is done for us? We may have more sources of information, a vast number, but do we still have our own consciences? I belong to a generation that remembers what it was like to live without the Internet, cookies or algorithms, when we took decisions in which the conscience of the individual was expected to play a leading part. This is not to suggest that Millennials do not have a conscience, but that when so much of the pre-selection process can be done in advance, it may seem less essential.

Sometimes this quirky and unpredictable phenomenon, for which there is still no biological explanation, changed, or so it seemed at the time, the course of history.

In 1945, to the shock of the world, the British in a general election voted out their inspirational war leader, Winston Churchill, at the height of his fame and elected instead his second-in-command in the wartime coalition, the Labour leader Clement Attlee, with a mandate for social change. It was not just a choice of political leaders or parties but about what kind of country we hoped that Britain would become. Did we share Churchill's vision for the English-speaking peoples? Were we reformers like William Beveridge, an economist and Liberal MP for Berwick-upon-Tweed, who lost his seat in the 1945 Election and had to be elevated to the House of Lords? Or were we like Willie Gallagher, the Communist MP for West Fife, who thought of democracy as a stage in the class struggle. Tensions ran high. The firebrand Labour MP, Aneurin Bevan, called all Tories 'vermin', while the Conservative MP, Robert Boothby, called all Labour supporters 'scum'.

Nobody in my immediate family was killed in World War II, although a family friend, Bill Blenko, a rear gunner who stayed with us in Cheltenham, died in the Battle of Britain. World War I took a greater toll. My father's brother, Harry, was blown up in the trenches; another died from gas poisoning. My mother's eldest brother, Percy, whom she adored, was killed within days of the Armistice in 1918. To the end of her life, she would murmur, 'How Percy would have loved this!' when she listened to music.

From the broad ranks of human misery scattered across Europe by the two World Wars, ours was still a fortunate family. We knew that we were. We were evacuated from the Thames estuary to be out of bombing range from the continent, but my grandparents refused to move. When my grandfather died in 1943, we returned for his funeral, passing through a gutted London and I saw an aerial dog-fight. But we lived in the upper three floors of a Regency terraced house, 3 Pittville Lawn, with friends and refugees, in a household which varied from nine to fourteen people. It was always crowded but I can remember my mother, grey-faced, standing by a window as a van passed with a loudspeaker, asking for spare rooms for those bombed out of their homes after a raid on Birmingham. She was weeping, because she could not help them.

In times of war, the worst hardship is to have nothing useful to do. She worked part-time as a hospital nurse. My father set up a factory in a garage to make rubber gloves. They were ceaselessly active, ceaselessly touching wood or keeping their fingers crossed and, when the war was over, they prayed that the spirit of common purpose should not desert them in peacetime, so that, with everyone else, they could build a better future. Above all, nothing like this, no wars, no slavery, no genocide, should ever happen again. My father quoted from his favourite play, *King Lear*: "Never, never, never, never, never."

## (ii)

The second referendum on whether to Leave or Remain within the European Union, was held on 23 June 2016. The result was made known at 04.40 on the following morning by David Dimbleby, the BBC's senior presenter of News and Current Affairs and the eldest son of Richard Dimbleby, the BBC's official war correspondent during the Second World War. 'The British people,' he declared, 'have spoken.'

The BBC's gravitas can seem somewhat misplaced. The British people had spoken several times before on this subject, over a period of nearly 70 years, through at least ten general elections, a previous referendum, debates in parliament, on the BBC and through countless opinion polls. It remains to be seen whether the EU Referendum in 2016 was a 'momentous decision', as the Daily Mail, the voice of Middle England, said it was, or another stage in the often painful debate about our national future that the people of Britain had conducted since the end of the war. It may have been momentous but was it a decision?

The country was still deeply divided. The turnout was relatively high, 72.21 per cent, of which 51.89 per cent voted to Leave, 48.11 per cent to Remain. In a previous referendum on whether to remain within the European Economic Community (as it then was) was held on 5 June 1975, the turnout had been 64 per cent of the electorate, of which 67 per cent had voted to Remain, which suggested that, when seen as a proportion of the whole, opinion had changed little over 45 years. It remained obdurately undecided. Most European referendums require a larger majority to be considered constitutionally binding, for a narrower one risks civil disorder, but Britain has a 'first-past-the-post' tradition in politics. This is said to produce clearer results and a more decisive leadership, but not, as it happened, in this case.

Nobody quite knew what leaving the EU might mean. Did it mean leaving all of its institutions, whether they were useful or not, or only some? Did it mean breaking all trade agreements, or only some and, if so, what would replace them? Could we disentangle EU laws from British ones without causing a massive disruption and, if so, whose courts would decide over what? 'Brexit means Brexit', as the Prime Minister Theresa May kept repeating, but was that all it meant? We may have voted to take back control but control over what? Were we gaining an ounce of sovereignty but losing a ton of influence?

Over the years, very similar arguments and counter arguments have been employed, although the Cold War came and went, men landed on the moon and confidential state secrets were sprinkled across the Web. In my lifetime, there have been revolutionary changes in power and knowledge,

exceeding those of any other generation in history: in nuclear physics, space exploration, climatology, genetic engineering and artificial intelligence. 'It has become appallingly obvious,' said Albert Einstein, 'that our technology has exceeded our humanity.' He may be proved right. He often has been. Nonetheless, humanity has precariously kept pace, up to a point, and managed to hold in check the forces that we have unleashed.

The European Union is one of several institutions, admittedly imperfect, designed to cope with the challenges that we have faced or lie ahead. The answers may seem to be technical, just a matter of trade deals and common law, but the real problems lie in our habits of mind, our cultures. It is very difficult to change the ways in which we think. I spent years trying to learn French at school but I still think in English and translate laboriously, word by word, with dubious results. Language is one obstacle. There are others. On my mobile, I can switch from one music station to another. I find the ones I want quickly, instant recognition: BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM offer mainly a classical European repertoire, tending to stay within the parameters of a tradition that can be traced back for centuries; BBC Radio 1 covers contemporary pop music; while BBC Radio 6 offers a compilation of 'world' music.

Different genres of music can exist side by side, appealing to their audiences, without necessarily trespassing elsewhere. There are similar differences in literature, films, fashion and marketing, and in the lifestyles that they influence and reflect. These cannot be so easily contained. Politicians are sometimes thought to be in charge of their cultures. They may have been appointed to some Ministry of Culture and hand out money to the arts, like the patrons of the past. But political leaders are more likely to be the victims of their culture rather than its benefactors. Jean Monnet, the founding father of the Common Market, admitted late in his life that if he could have started the project again, he would have begun with 'culture'. If so, he would almost certainly have failed.

The real significance of the 2016 Referendum has yet to be appreciated. It was not so much that the British agreed to leave the EU, but that they could not make up their minds. The arguments had become circular, the terms less precise, the tempers frayed, the statistics more partisan, the slogans more misleading, the funding more secretive, the parties divided, the threats alarming and the government at odds with itself. Even our special friends on the Continent protested, like the Spice Girls, 'What do they want, do they really, really want?'

A national culture should help us to sort out the differences. There are games we play and courteous ways of agreeing to differ. There used to be a classical tradition, Rhetoric,<sup>iii</sup> which offered instruction on how this could

be done and included logic, a respect for the opponent, a moderation of language, and how to appeal in a final summary to the mind and the heart. But the rules of engagement failed. The problem may be in how our political culture has evolved: two main parties, sworn enemies, which fight during the rutting season for the chance of being in government. These tests of strength may not be appropriate for the challenges ahead. The parties may still be divided or unable to command a majority within the country.

Why should this choice of staying in or leaving the EU have been so controversial, more so than, say, arming ourselves with weapons of mass destruction? The aim of this book is to find out. This could prove, of course, an impossible task. Our national culture differs from county to county, village to village, person to person. It is an amalgam of many mini-cultures. Even Shakespeare, whom many would agree is a personification of our national culture, has so many interpreters that we may be tempted to ask: 'Which Shakespeare? Whose Shakespeare?' And yet Shakespeare should be an easy hook on which to hang national identity, when compared with all the others, such as British values, democracy and way of life. Faced by the contradictions, it is tempting to throw in the towel, admit defeat and protest that there is no such thing as a national culture, except as a rhetorical device. There are tests for those who seek to be British citizens. I would probably fail, although I was born in Britain of British parents.

Nonetheless, from a distance, by squinting to gain a better impression of the whole, we might be able to recognise that there are some habits of mind that characterise Britishness that may not be wholly exclusive but bind together a large proportion of those of us who claim to be British. We may not all regret the loss of Empire but some are still in mourning. Anglican Christianity might be another example, and cricket, and the quaint belief that there must be two sides to every question, for and against, and only two. I share many of them and sometimes have to shake myself vigorously, like a dog after a swim, to get rid of them. They always return, even when I am trying to be cosmopolitan, and I reluctantly conclude that, despite my efforts, I am not as internationally-minded as I would like to be, but rather a little Englander at heart, who lets the cat out at night, the fierce and predatory cat, the would-be British lion.

One such habit is the way in which we British tend to reason inductively, from the example to the principle, bottom-up, rather than deductively, from the principle to the example, which is the more usual approach across the Channel. Essays in French and British schools are constructed along similarly different lines. The British, it has been said, cannot see the wood

for the trees and the French, the trees for the wood. While these habits should never be allowed to colour the whole picture, they help to explain why France requires a written constitution, and has had several, while Britain jogs along without one.

In the most comprehensive parliamentary debate on whether Britain should enter what was then the European Economic Community (EEC), held over six days in October 1971, the terms of entry were known and negotiations conducted, by a Heath-led Conservative government. The Commons had to decide whether the terms were acceptable. Every Member was aware that this was an historic occasion. The debates ran on well into the early hours of the morning and featured some of the best speakers of the day. There was no lack of research. Fake facts were instantly spotted. The subject cut across party lines, to the extent that it seemed strange that we should have party politics at all, and the government offered a 'free' (non-whipped) vote to its supporters, although the Labour opposition did not.

But there were blind spots, very British, or so a continental observer might complain, not a mention of Hegel! If a British opponent of the EU asked scornfully, 'What right has an eighteenth-century German intellectual to interfere in a decision about the future of the UK?', the thickly accented foreigner might retort, 'As much right as your eighteenth-century Scot, Adam Smith, has in pontificating about free trade!' Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was a philosopher, whose views are still much better known in France and Germany than Britain. His explanation as to how societies evolve through a process of 'thesis, antithesis and synthesis', a 'dialectic', coloured their discussions about the future of Europe. But his voice was rarely heard in parliament or the Oxbridge debating societies. As a result, the debate in Britain might have seemed too earthbound from a mere thirty miles away, too much concerned with the details of trade, too little with the expression of a European vision.

On this occasion, the MPs decided to support the government's decision that the UK should apply to join the EEC by a majority of 356 votes to 244, which was endorsed in the House of Lords by an even more substantial majority, and confirmed four years later in a national referendum, promised and delivered by an incoming Labour government, a 'momentous decision', according to the press. But the opposition did not go away. Public opinion has remained more or less evenly divided and, although the whole world was changing around our shores, the nation still continued to worry and fret about whether we should join the European club, or keep away from it, into our current state of near paralysis.

## (iii)

In July 1945, before the war was over in the Far East, the Labour Party forced a general election by withdrawing from the national government. It was a gamble. Labour was following the example of the Bolsheviks in Russia, who got rid of their government in 1917, during the final months of World War I. These were exceptional times. The wartime administrations were tired. The men conscripted into the forces knew the disciplines of war. Many wanted the whole fabric of society to change and were ready to make sacrifices to make sure that this would happen. There was a revolutionary narrative that identified the villains of the past and offered a road map, *The Communist Manifesto*, drafted in 1847 and first published in 1848. The Labour Party reprinted it in 1947 to celebrate its centenary. In its preface, Harold Laski pointed out that Marx and Engels studied the lessons of class warfare in Victorian England.

‘Let Us Face the Future’, the Labour manifesto, began with a bold declaration. The people had won the war; now they must win the peace. It blamed the unemployment and slump that followed World War I on ‘hard-faced men’ who ‘controlled the banks, the mines, the big industries and largely the press and the cinema’ and profited from war itself. War was capitalism’s bloodthirsty expression. Labour would bring into public ownership the commanding heights of British industry – coal, steel and transport – and promised a ‘radical solution for the crippling problems of land acquisition’, which stopped short of full nationalisation. It was almost as revolutionary as the Bolshevik manifesto of 1917 but with one important qualification. It was meant ‘for the Consideration of the Nation’. Labour was seeking a democratic mandate and the nation responded with an unprecedented swing of 12.5 per cent in its favour. Labour was elected to its first majority government in British history.

The appeal of this trenchant document can best be understood by remembering with what resolution people like my parents were determined that nothing like World War II should happen again. It was not so hard-line that it wanted to get rid of all private ownership. It promised not to interfere with ‘many smaller businesses, which can be left to go on with their useful work’, but ‘laggards and obstructionists must be led or directed into better ways’, a powerful warning shot across the bows of private industry. Nonetheless, the ‘Labour Party stood for freedom’, for capitalism was the enemy of freedom, although there were ‘certain kinds of freedom that [it] would not tolerate’, such as the ‘freedom to pay poor wages and push up prices for selfish profit’.

‘Mr. Churchill’s Declaration of Policy to the Electors’, the Conservative manifesto, chose a different theme. ‘This is the time for freeing energies, not stifling them. Britain’s greatness has been built on character and daring, not docility to a State machine. At all costs, we must preserve that spirit of independence.’ Playing to his perceived strengths, Churchill warned that ‘the conduct of foreign affairs [should not be passed] into untried hands’. Britain had ‘gained the confidence of smaller nations, because, although our power has been formidable, we have tried to use it with restraint and for high purpose’.

This trustworthiness was needed in the international arena to ‘prevent future wars of aggression’ and his government would act in the ‘closest possible concert with all parts of the British Commonwealth and Empire’. He praised the newly constituted United Nations and ‘our prevailing hope is that the foundations will be laid on the indissoluble agreement of Great Britain, the United States and Soviet Russia’. He promised that there would be ‘freer movement of men and women within the Empire’ with additional measures to foster Imperial trade. India should be granted dominion status, further efforts would be made to educate the colonies and encourage them to achieve self-government within a reformed Commonwealth and Empire, whose Imperial pink still coloured a third of our school atlas.

Over the manifestos hung unanswered questions. In 1945, Britain had the largest national debt in its history, standing at 250 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP). While this might be reduced in time, both parties were proposing plans for post-war reconstruction that required a great deal of extra money. Would the owners of the industries that Labour intended to nationalise be compensated – and by how much? Who would pay for the modernisation of the factories, the mass building programme and the education of the colonies? Throughout the Empire, there were rebel groups prepared to govern themselves without the help of a British education. Could Britain borrow more money to fund its colonial wars? ‘All this,’ as Churchill admitted, ‘could not go on.’

Within the span of one lifetime, Britain had ceased to be the wealthiest nation in the world and become one in debt to its creditors in the US and the White Commonwealth. Never before had we been so reliant upon the cultural ties of the English-speaking peoples.

Both parties spoke of the Soviet Union as a friendly ally, and so during the war it was, but the crimes that had been committed under Stalinism were well known, the show trials and massacres of the *kulaks*, small-time, farm-owning gentry. Although the scale of these atrocities may not have been fully understood, there were many Russian refugees in Britain who lived to tell their tales: Arthur Koestler’s allegory of Stalinist oppression, *Darkness*

*at Noon*, was published in 1940, when he was under British detention as a potential alien spy. Some left-wingers might dismiss their testimonies as anti-Soviet propaganda or as stages in the modernisation of the Soviet Union but should anyone else? Within months of the election, Churchill was warning American audiences of an 'Iron Curtain' descending across Europe. His hope for an 'indissoluble agreement' lasted for less than a year.

In neither manifesto was much attention paid to the future of Western Europe and, in retrospect, this seems the oddest omission of them all. Our troops were stationed there in large numbers and we had fought two world wars to defend one part of Europe from another. In February 1945, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin had sat down together in Yalta in the Crimea, to split the continent up into spheres of influence with the declared aim of returning all its nations to self-governing independence. Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union formed the triumvirate of the principal occupying forces in Europe, the guarantors of its peace and security. But for the purpose of fighting an election at home, Yalta was not mentioned and all that amounted to a policy for Europe was that Germany should not be allowed to re-arm.

It was a kind of middle-distance blindness. Labour was preoccupied with how to get rid of the 'hard-faced' bosses, while the Conservatives were concerned with what would happen to the Empire. Across the Channel, there were historic cities that had been damaged and gutted as thoroughly as London, even more so. There were twelve million refugees, and more were expected, and there were all kinds of shortages, from coffee beans to electricity, including the threat of outright famine. Only the smaller Liberal Party argued that 'the tasks of peace, like those of war, are too vast to accomplish alone. Much patience and self-control will be called for in harmonising various national interests.' In particular, it warned that the 'threat of famine in Europe, and our own reduced capacity to pay for imports, mean that more food must be produced at home', our own version of a Common Agricultural Policy.

Between July and November 1945, Britain lost the chance to play a leadership role in Europe. It was in a prime position to do so. In September 1946, speaking in Zurich, Churchill called for a United States of Europe and expressed the hope that France and Germany should settle their ancient differences. Their aim should be to create a new grouping of nations that would uphold the high standards of their two civilisations. He did not suggest that Britain should be part of it. Decades later, this speech was cited by both sides in the EU Referendum to suggest that Churchill was in favour (or not) of a more integrated Europe in which Britain would (or not) take part; but he seems to have stood in front of an open door and hesitated to go in.

The 1945 General Election was a disaster for the Liberals, which, until the end of World War I, had been one of the two major parties of government. It was reduced to twelve MPs, starting the spell of ‘born-loser-man-ship’ that continues today. It comes as a surprise to many Liberals to be told that they belong to an *élite* that ruled for decades before the forces of Thatcher, Farage and Trump managed to topple them. To which Liberal Party were they referring?

And yet there is a grain of truth to this perception. Two committed Liberals, John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge, influenced the course of post-war reconstruction as much as any other two political leaders from any other party. Both were civil servants, economists and social reformers. Both were elevated to the peerage, both were academics, both went to public school and Oxbridge, and neither was a business man: the ‘liberal elite’ personified. Since neither could work through a governing party of his own persuasion, each sought to influence one or other of the two main parties.

The results were an amalgam of their Liberal views and those of the host party, which might be, at different times, Conservative, Labour or an informal three-party alliance. Their influence transformed the host parties as well. Conservatives developed a Keynesian wing, which accepted state intervention in the market, while Labour became embroiled in a rivalry between those who favoured outright nationalisation and those who sought a more moderate intervention along Keynesian lines. What began as small cracks in the narratives of the two main parties developed into long-lasting ideological fault lines.

In the interwar years, Keynes was a civil servant who took part in the conference at Versailles, where the peace treaty with Germany was signed. But he did not approve of the ‘astronomically high’ terms of reparation that his superiors at the Treasury had negotiated. He protested that:

the policy of reducing Germany to servitude for a whole generation, of degrading the lives of millions of human beings, and of depriving a whole nation of happiness should be abhorrent and detestable . . . even if it were possible, even if it enriched ourselves, even if it did not sow the seeds of decay of the whole civilized life of Europe.<sup>iv</sup>

Within a few years, the effects would be seen in the rise of Hitler’s National Socialist Party.

In 1933, at the height of the Depression, Keynes published *The Means to Prosperity*, which went against orthodoxy by proposing that a government that was struggling to make ends meet was entitled to borrow

more money to kick-start a sluggish economy. Once the country was back on the road to prosperity, the borrowed money should be repaid but he saw no value in austerity for its own sake. In 1936, he published his *General Theory of Unemployment, Interest and Money*, which would become a standard textbook, outweighing, in terms of Western political influence, *Das Kapital*.

He met Roosevelt, influenced the New Deal, and helped to negotiate the agreements which led to the establishment of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. He died in 1946 but Keynesian economics lay behind the Marshall Plan for Europe and, in 1999, *Time* magazine saluted him as one of the most important people of the twentieth century, because he had 'saved capitalism'. He was more modest about his role in history but hoped that he had contributed towards his true goal – 'the brotherhood of man'.

For many, his theories were counter-intuitive. Why should the victorious nations rebuild the economies of those that they had defeated? Was not that a reward for aggression? Was any government entitled to issue bonds or print money to tackle public works that could be undertaken in time by the private sector? Keynes' brief retort was that in time we are all dead. His detractors pointed out, however, that governments like individuals can borrow beyond their means to repay. The ghost of Keynes the Improvident would come to haunt the Western corridors of power for many years to come. Nevertheless he offered a halfway house between the 'command' and the 'free market' economies. Without him, Britain would not have enjoyed full employment in the 1950s or West Germany its *Wirtschaftswunder*, its economic miracle.

His influence spread in many directions. Keynes was married to a ballet dancer and, as a friend of the Bloomsbury literary circle, he pioneered the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain. He provided the theoretical basis for the economics of the programmes of welfare and social reform, for which his colleague, William Beveridge, became the leading authority. In 1942, Beveridge published his report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, which provided the blueprint for the Welfare State, including the National Health Service that the post-war Labour government brought into being. In 1944, he published *Full Employment in a Free Society*, promoting Labour's goal of fair shares for all without threatening wholesale nationalisation. It provided what became known as the Third Way.

Under those circumstances, why did the Liberals come out of the 1945 Election so badly and go on to lose every election since? The answer may lie in the fact that it had few significant patrons, neither from business nor

the trade unions. It could, however, turn this weakness to its advantage by claiming neutrality in the class war. In 1945, its manifesto was modest, a mere six pages, with twenty bullet points. Where the other parties made bold statements, the Liberal Party offered proposals for reform, nationalisation where appropriate, equality for women *within the workplace*, environmental protection, political harmony within Europe and site-value rating, all the worthy but mind-numbing topics that became the despair of its party conferences. All that can be said of its manifesto was that it tried to offer real solutions to real problems, but where were the fanfares for Liberalism? Where were the grand narratives?

Democratic politics is, at best, one third substance, two thirds show business. Parties need colour, lights and music: they need good stories. Labour summoned up the history of the working-class movement for its benefit, from the Levellers to the Jarrow Crusade in 1936. Conservatives evoked the empire builders, the traders and missionaries whose daring allowed Britain to rule the High Seas and brought Christian values to the darkest parts of Africa. For the purposes of winning an election, it did not matter if their narratives were accurate or not, one-sided or not, useful or not.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the 1945 manifestos is how little the narratives of the three political parties have changed. Labour still sees itself as the party of the working classes, even though the pits have closed, the factories are automated and Fordism has become post-Fordism. Conservatives still see the nanny state as the enemy of freedom, praise the buccaneering entrepreneur and, in the absence of an empire, talk of the Anglosphere. Liberals still want to save the individual from the 'tyranny of the masses' and talk about the 'community' as if it were a synonym for humanity. They sing from ancient hymn sheets.

For professional politicians, the mood music matters. At the time of the 1945 election, the tunes were cheerful. God, having granted victory to the English-speaking peoples, placed upon them the duty to lead mankind towards a world without aggression. International disputes could be settled peacefully in the new United Nations building in New York, generously provided by the US government. By 1948, the circumstances had changed. In Britain, the flush of victory had faded, the Iron Curtain had descended over Europe and we were embroiled in another existential crisis. The Labour government was divided between its Keynesian and Marxist wings and the rest of the country wanted to know when butter rationing would end.

Slowly, the strains of victory became nostalgic, then merely repetitive but we could not get the tunes out of our head. The words might be forgotten, the musicians might have packed up their instruments and adjourned to the

pub, but the melodies lingered on. Whenever a future British government faced a crisis, it summoned up the Dunkirk spirit. It defended the White Cliffs of Dover by evoking the Spirit of the Blitz. The BBC has replayed episodes of *Dad's Army*, Nigel Farage's favourite programme, for more than five decades.

When, during the 2016 EU Referendum, more than 70 years later, a dock worker was asked in a BBC interview why he intended to vote for Leave, he replied, 'Why should Brussels tell us what to do? We won the war, didn't we?'

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