

## **Chapter 11**

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# Welfare, Affluence, and Consensus, 1945–1970

In the years since 1945, three themes have stood out in British history: (1) the creation of a welfare state built on a remarkable political consensus; (2) the faltering performance of the British economy; and (3) the decline of Britain from the status of a great world and imperial power to that of a middle rank European nation. These themes were, as one would expect, deeply interrelated. With the benefit of hindsight, which is always twenty-twenty, one might argue that the British could have done better in any one of these areas. But it is important to remember that the British have not been able to act entirely as they pleased, for they have been limited by institutions and attitudes inherited from the past and by forces in the world beyond their control. In recent decades, observers have frequently asked, “What’s wrong with Britain?” Yet one might just as well ask, “What’s right with Britain?” For on the whole, the British have achieved a comparatively decent, civil, humane society. If their recent history holds warnings for nations like the United States, it also serves as an admirable model.

The period from 1945 to the present is too close for historians to see the structure sharply. However, with regard to domestic matters, it seems reasonable to view the period as broken into two chronological parts: first, a time of consensus, from 1945 to about 1975; and second, a period during which the consensus was broken, from 1975 to the present. Immediately after 1945, there emerged in Britain a consensus involving a commitment to full employment, a comprehensive system of state-sponsored social welfare, nationalization of certain industries, and governmental management of economic demand by Keynesian techniques. This consensus coincided with, and contributed to, a period of consumer affluence. Consumer prosperity had major effects on British society and culture, but it was built on the shaky grounds of a British industry that was not very competitive in the increasingly harsh world economy.

### **BUILDING THE WELFARE STATE, 1945–1951**

As the Second World War drew to a close, the British political parties began looking toward a fresh general election, the last having occurred in 1935. The



*Clement Attlee, soon to be prime minister, and the Labour party celebrate their electoral victory, 1945.*

Labour party was anxious to compete as an independent party, and many Conservatives wanted an early election in order to cash in on Churchill's immense personal prestige. No one wanted to repeat the experience of the Lloyd George coalition. Churchill himself wanted to delay until the end of the war but gave into pressure and set the election for July 1945. This decision was to have surprising consequences.

Churchill dominated the campaign, but the Labour party exploited popular belief that they would deal with peacetime issues better than the Conservatives. Public attention was shifting strongly to domestic concerns. Labour candidates embraced full employment and the Beveridge Report, whereas the Conservatives were more cautious in their promises. Labour meanwhile benefited from the participation of men like Attlee and Bevin in the wartime coalition and from the growth of the trade unions to more than eight million members. Churchill did not benefit his party when in a radio broadcast he said that a Labour government would introduce something like the Gestapo into Britain. He made funny remarks about the modest Attlee (whom he called "a sheep in sheep's clothing"), but these did not sit well with an electorate that appreciated Attlee's role in the war coalition. The British public profoundly admired Churchill's wartime leadership, but they separated that genuine emotion from their sense of political interests. Most of the voters wanted to correct the ills of the 1930s by means of programs and planning con-

ceived during the war. Thus Labour won a major victory in the election, with 393 seats to 210 Conservatives and only 12 Liberals. Labour won not only the great majority of working-class votes but also about a third of those cast by the middle class.

The Labour party that came into office in 1945 was strongly reformist but not revolutionary. The party had been founded as a nonrevolutionary alliance of trades unionists and democratic socialists. Its most fervent element, the ILP, was an undogmatic collection of ethical socialists. Its principal theorists, the Fabians, were gradualist utilitarians. Its main electoral force, the trade unionists, were essentially devoted to defending the position of working people within the capitalist system. The party in the latter 1930s had set aside its vaguely utopian socialism and pacifism in favor of detailed plans for reform, Keynesian economics, and a realistic foreign policy. The cabinet formed in 1945 was led by men who had learned their politics during the early years of the century: Clement Attlee (1883–1967), the prime minister, had served in Parliament since 1922 and was uncharismatic but efficient and a good chairman of the cabinet; Ernest Bevin (1881–1951), foreign secretary, had an imposing stature and an aggressive personality, but he had made his name largely as a trade union leader and spokesman; Herbert Morrison (1888–1965), lord president of the council, had long been prominent in local government and in effect was a British-style political boss; and Aneurin Bevan (1897–1960), minister of health, was a former coal miner and passionate spokesman for the miners of South Wales. Of the leaders Bevan was the only representative of the party's left wing. All of these men had powerful memories of the 1930s and were determined to prevent a repeat of its poverty and unemployment.

The Attlee government's years in office from 1945 to 1951 formed one of the most productive legislative periods in British history. In six busy years, the Labour government established the superstructure of the welfare state, which in more or less modified form stands in place today. It also nationalized a number of major industries, all of which remained in state hands until the 1980s.

The welfare state consisted of government efforts to maintain full employment plus a comprehensive system of social services. Its purpose was not social revolution but assurance that henceforward no one would fall below a minimum standard of living and that everyone would have equality of opportunity. Its goals arose from a consensus that began building in the 1930s and reached maturity during the war. Both parties had committed themselves to full employment by 1945. To sustain full employment, the Labour party adopted Keynes's ideas of using the government's budget to manage demand and keeping interest rates low to encourage investment. (The Conservatives would do likewise until 1979.)

It is uncertain how far these economic policies were effective in the late 1940s, because the general increase in demand for industrial and consumer goods and the serious shortage of labor together kept the employment rate in Britain at close to 100 percent. Both factors were beyond the control of the government. What the Labour government contributed beyond its basic fiscal policy was negotiation of a massive loan from the United States. Because the Americans cut off Lend-Lease in

1945, with British industry in disarray and the country deeply in debt, the British were desperately in need of help. The government sent Keynes to the United States to seek a grant or loan in the fall of 1945. He found that the Americans drove a hard bargain; the British had to settle for a \$3.75 billion loan, repayable at 2 percent over fifty years. Moreover, the British had to agree to give up their imperial trade arrangements in favor of multilateral free trade and to allow sterling to be freely convertible (that is, exchangeable) into gold and other currencies in 1947. (The British also received a smaller loan, on more favorable terms, from Canada.) The American loan received strong criticism from both the extreme left and the extreme right in Britain, and the convertibility provision, as we will see, caused severe hardship. But in the short run the loan enabled the British economy to begin to rebuild, employment to rise, and the Labour government to construct the welfare system.

The government's objective in its social legislation was to provide a *universal* system of social services for all British citizens "from the cradle to the grave." The system would make for equality of opportunity on the one hand and assistance with social problems like illness and old age on the other. The government would not prohibit individuals from buying services like insurance and schooling privately, but the state's social services were to be as good as money could buy, so that wealth would no longer command superior social security. That the government fell short of these noble goals should not be surprising; what is surprising is how close to their target they came.

The welfare legislation had four major elements: (1) comprehensive social insurance; (2) a national health service; (3) state-supported housing construction; and (4) public education. The principal legislation for social security (old age and unemployment benefits) was the National Insurance Act of 1946. This act established a contributory system whereby people paid a flat rate to buy insurance against those times when they could not work. The National Assistance Act of 1948 completed the system by including those who somehow did not qualify for social insurance—and abolished the vestiges of the 1834 Poor Law to boot. The idea of a "dole"—something for nothing—was abolished. Much modified, this system remains in place today. The system in theory assured that all citizens would have a minimum standard of living. However, the rate of benefits was specifically set in the act, and the benefits have inevitably failed to keep up with the cost of living. Although they have repeatedly been revised upward they have not always provided the desired minimum standard of living. The insurance system has not been self-supporting, and it has had to be subsidized by the Treasury. Moreover, certain pockets of poverty have proved to be stubborn, and recent governments have tended to focus on them rather than try to maintain a universal minimum. Nevertheless, it is clear that the system of social security has mitigated the severity of old age and unemployment, even as the age structure of the population has grown older and the rate of unemployment in the 1980s reached a level not seen since the 1930s.

All parties supported the National Insurance Act. Such was not the case with the National Health Service. This proved to be the most popular part of the Labour

party's program, but the Conservatives had strong reservations about it. Health insurance in Britain dates from Lloyd George's National Insurance Act of 1911, and public health services were much expanded by the Emergency Medical Services of World War II, but in 1945 health insurance covered only about half of the population and did not extend to either hospitals or specialists. Doctors and hospitals tended to be centered in the prosperous South and Southeast of England. Hospitals—voluntary (that is, independent) and local authority—varied widely in quality. The rich had access to much better medical care than the poor. The Labour minister of health, Bevan, was determined to establish a medical system that made no distinction between rich and poor; thus he resolutely rejected the idea of a public medical service open only to people with incomes below a certain level. "The essence of the satisfactory health service," he declared, "is that the rich and poor are treated alike, that poverty is not a disability and wealth is not an advantage." His solution, embodied in the National Health Act of 1946, was to nationalize the hospitals, organize them around twenty regional schools of medicine, and establish a national doctors' service. The public was entitled to free medical care, either with a physician or in a hospital if necessary. Doctors could join the National Health Service (NHS) or not as they pleased; those that did were paid a basic salary plus a capitation fee for each patient on their lists. A doctor joining the National Health Service could also maintain a private practice if he or she desired. Patients remained free to choose the doctor they preferred, but through incentives the government distributed doctors more evenly around the country.

The Conservative party resisted nationalization of the hospitals, and the British Medical Association (BMA) feared loss of their independence and their personal relations with their patients. Bevan pointed out the advantage of improved state support of hospitals and medical training, and after lengthy negotiations with the BMA, he was able to launch the National Health Service in 1948. Most of the doctors joined, and by 1950, 97 percent of the population registered as patients. People flocked to their doctors' offices, many seeking eyeglasses and dentures they had never been able to afford. Within a decade, the number of hospital patients had risen by 30 percent. Waiting lists for noncritical surgery and other treatment quickly formed; they remain a major concern and have, especially from the 1980s, spurred the foundation of new private hospitals and the purchase of private care by those who can afford to "jump the queue." The cost of the NHS also went up, at first because of inflation and then from the 1970s because of the rising level of medical technology. The nation, as we will see, was hard-pressed economically and financially, and the government was not able to invest in hospital construction and improvement to the extent it had hoped. In the early 1950s, charges had to be set for eyeglasses and prescriptions. From time to time, British doctors have become unhappy with their rate of pay under the NHS, and significant numbers have emigrated to the United States before the government of the day could respond. Nevertheless, for all its problems, the NHS has provided good medical care free of charge to the entire population. It remains the boldest achievement of the British welfare state and the one that the populace would least readily give up.

Housing was the part of welfare provision that the British people wanted most urgently in 1945. Churchill's government had forecast a long-term need for three to four million new houses. The Labour government simply was not able to provide funds for new housing on that scale, but they made a start. The responsible minister, Bevan, elected to work through state subsidies to local authorities, leaving it to them to contract for new construction. Between 1945 and 1951, 1.5 million new houses were built, but because of the population increase and the formation of new households (both the results of the postwar baby boom), the demand for new houses ran ahead of the ability to build them; thus the need for houses was as great in 1951 as it had been in 1945.

In regard to education, the main legislation, Butler's Education Act of 1944, had been passed before Labour came into office. Labour's job was to implement it. The act of 1944 provided for secondary education for all to the age of fifteen—a great step, though probably seventy-five years too late. As implemented, this meant that all schoolchildren had to take an examination at age eleven (the dreaded “eleven-plus”), which determined whether they would be placed in a college-prep type high school (the grammar schools), a technical high school (few of which were actually provided), or the ordinary high school leading to employment (the secondary modern schools). This tripartite system was not a great success. Not only did the eleven-plus exam terrorize many ambitious households, it also failed to make the kinds of distinctions in ability that it was supposed to. Moreover, it did not democratize education or open British society to merit as the Labour party had hoped. Middle-class children on the whole did better than working-class children, who came from families that normally did not cultivate academic achievement. Butler's Education Act left the elite public schools untouched, and the Labour party did not have the nerve to attack them. Thus the new educational structure, which existed until the 1970s, increased social mobility for some working-class children but not as many as expected; on the whole it helped preserve the class system.

At the same time, the British university system remained relatively small. During the 1950s, the state increased its funding to the universities, so that in 1957 nearly 70 percent of university funds came from the government, and 75 percent of all university students held public grants paying for both their fees and their “maintenance” (room and board). That support made it possible for a British student to go to any university to which he or she was admitted. The problem was that the number of spaces available was very small. In the 1950s and 1960s, the number of universities in Britain grew from seventeen to forty-four, as the new “Plate-Glass” universities like Sussex, Essex, and Lancaster were built and certain technical colleges were raised to university status. The number of full-time students grew from 83,000 to more than 200,000 in 1968 (and 460,000 in the 1970s). Yet until the 1990s the proportion of the British population of college age who attended a university never went above about 8 percent, which was a figure below that of European countries and far below that of the United States. The British university system in the welfare state was less elitist than in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, but it remained closed to the bulk of the population.

The Labour party's record in social legislation was thus very impressive, and its supporters greeted it with idealism and hope. But the welfare state fell short of creating a classless society. At the time the legislation was enacted, some critics on the far left argued that the welfare state was a betrayal of true socialism, and some on the far right contended that it was too expensive and too corrosive of the necessary disciplines of work and thrift. As we will see, both critiques, especially that from the right, gained ground in the 1970s. Criticism and defense of the welfare state are thus part and parcel of current politics. From the historian's perspective, what can be said is that the welfare legislation was a significant but reasonable extension of earlier structures, that it was a humane response to the problems of the interwar years, and that it flowed along lines of state intervention emphasized by the necessities of the two world wars.

The Labour party in 1945 set high priority to nationalization of certain industries as well as to welfare reform. They believed that selective nationalization would enable the state to run these industries more efficiently than private enterprise, provide more ample capital investment, manage the industries for the benefit of society rather than for the profit of the capitalist, and improve industrial relations. They also believed that control over "the commanding heights of the economy" would enable the state to plan and direct the economy as a whole. In fact, however, the government for the most part nationalized only the older, more troubled industries, and they never decided for certain whether the principal objective of nationalization was to be greater efficiency or social service. Several industries, including the Central Electricity Board and British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC), had been nationalized before 1940. Now, in 1945, the Labour party nationalized the Bank of England, but this was mainly symbolic, for the bank already functioned as an arm of the state. Then came nationalization of the coal mines (1947), the railways (1947), trucking (1947), and electrical and gas distribution (1948). The iron and steel industry was nationalized after much controversy in 1949; it was the only one that was fairly healthy at the time. (It was denationalized, renationalized, and denationalized again in subsequent years.)

The method of nationalization chosen in each case was neither syndicalism nor Guild Socialism but rather the public corporation. Share owners were bought out, and the nationalized industries were put under the control of appointed boards responsible to a government minister, who in turn was responsible to Parliament. The chair of the board in most cases operated as an independent chief executive officer. The managerial force generally came from the ranks of the industries themselves; hence to the workers, the "bosses" looked the same as before. Nor did industrial relations improve. Few workers were appointed to the governing boards, and anyone who was came to be regarded, as Attlee said, "as a bosses' man." The history of each nationalized industry was different, but in general it cannot be argued that they functioned as well as Labour hoped. It is true that they brought about useful rationalization of the industries. Yet, management and workers remained remote from each other. The nation was too strapped financially to provide the capital that the industries needed; thus they did not become paragons of productivity. They

were run at a loss to keep prices and fares down or to keep staffing levels high. Because they tended to be troubled industries, they did not provide a means of directing the whole economy. Whether the nationalized industries would have performed better if they had remained in private hands cannot be known; what is known is that where they brought about increases in production they did not come up to the growth standards of either Western Europe or Japan, and when efforts were made to denationalize road haulage in 1953 and steel in 1954 there was no strong buyers' demand for either.

### **THE ECONOMY FROM AUSTERITY TO AFFLUENCE, 1945–1970**

Labour carried out its program of welfare and nationalization in conditions of extreme austerity. Bomb damage, run-down factories, used-up investments abroad, and foreign debt all made for grim times in which the privations and controls suffered by the people during the war had to be continued. Regulations requiring governmental permission or licenses controlled practically every enterprise, from equipping a shop to purchasing a new bathroom sink. Food rationing remained in place; indeed, rations sank to below their wartime level, and even bread had to be rationed in 1946. Because popular demand for consumer goods was very high, the government had to keep taxes up in order to suppress inflation of prices. The bitterly cold winter of 1946–1947 revealed a shortage of coal. Further, because British exports had collapsed during the war, the nation faced a serious balance of payments problem. The Labour government gave high priority to building up the export industries and restricting imports. Even so, a shortage of dollars and the convertibility of sterling, dictated by the American loan, caused a balance of payments and sterling crisis in 1947. Only the arrival from America of \$3.2 billion (more than any other nation received) in Marshall Plan aid saved Britain from further cuts in rations, high unemployment, and an end to the house construction program.

Gradually, economic conditions turned for the better. The export campaign was successful, especially in the automobile industry. Between 1946 and 1950, British exports rose by 77 percent. Bread was derationed in 1948, followed by flour, eggs, and soap in 1950. Even so, some foodstuffs were rationed until 1954 and coal until 1958. In 1951, in order to mark the end of austerity and to celebrate the hard-won accomplishments of the British people, the government staged the “Festival of Britain,” with exhibition halls to display British products and the new Royal Festival Hall on the south bank of the Thames for concerts. Unlike the Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851, the Festival of Britain was not international, or even imperial, but was purely British—a celebration of the material pleasures that the populace could soon hope to enjoy. In 1952, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, who succeeded her father, George VI, likewise marked the beginning of a new, more affluent time. It even gave rise to talk of a “New Elizabethan Age.”

The period of postwar affluence in Britain lasted from the early 1950s to the early 1970s. Its positive features were full employment, fairly strong economic

growth, and a consumer boom. Despite continuing popular fear that 1930s-level unemployment might reappear at any moment, the number of jobless people never rose above a million between 1945 and the early 1970s. So strong was employment that “full employment” came to be defined as an economy with only a 2 percent unemployment rate—a concept that was beyond the fondest hopes of interwar economists. The causes of full employment over the two decades of the 1950s and 1960s were (1) the postwar rebuilding from wartime destruction and expansion of exports; (2) low interest rates inspired by Keynesian financial policies; and (3) the influence of the huge American economic expansion. As the American economy grew, it pulled much of the world economy with it. In Britain, full employment allowed wages to rise, and although wages pushed prices up with them, real earnings improved for Britons by 80 percent between 1950 and 1970.

The high rate of employment and increasing real wages together generated a long consumer boom—the most notable in British history up to that point in time. People were weary of hardship and deprivation, which for many families had lasted since 1919, and they were eager to take advantage of consumer pleasures. Domestic demand soared for telephones, televisions, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, refrigerators, and the like. Installment buying, which had first become common between the wars, now broke down old standards of prudence and thrift. No doubt the welfare state enabled families to ignore saving for a rainy day. By the early 1970s half of British households owned their own homes, half had cars, two-thirds had washing machines, three-fourths had refrigerators, and nine-tenths had televisions. As Prime Minister Macmillan was to say, “Most of our people have never had it so good.”

The booming domestic consumer market, plus considerable success in exports overseas, contributed to vigorous economic growth. The total of goods and services produced at home (the GDP) grew by an annual average of 2.7 percent in the 1950s and almost 3 percent in the 1960s. This was a better record for the British economy than at any time since the 1870s. The industries that carried the growth were new ones—automotive, electronics, aircraft, and industrial chemicals. The old staples of coal, iron, textiles, and shipbuilding continued to recede into the background. Both the growth record and the new industries were encouraging; yet British growth was only mediocre compared to that in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. In the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, British output rose by about 60 percent, but that of West Germany shot up by 250 percent and Japan by 300 percent. The British share of world trade in manufactured goods fell from 22.8 percent in 1938, to 19.8 percent in 1955, and to 10.8 percent in 1970. Britain lost overseas markets to more efficient industrial powers and even began to be crowded out of significant sectors of the domestic market. In these facts and figures lay a crucial story for post–World War II Britain: British economic growth was good but not good enough.

The British age of affluence, therefore, involved not only welfare, full employment, and a consumer boom but also the short-term problem of chronic balance of payments crises and the long-term problem of inadequate productivity. These problems of the 1950s and 1960s grew to crisis proportions in the 1970s. Some detailed

analysis is therefore necessary. Given the sensible decision after 1945 by the Labour government not to shut Britain off from the rest of the world and run a self-sufficient “fortress” economy, the British had to import large quantities of foodstuffs and raw materials every day. In addition, the demand for consumer goods—mainly American goods in the 1950s and 1960s but increasingly European and Japanese—contributed mightily to the import bill. As in the nineteenth century, the British had to pay for imports by a combination of visible exports (manufactured goods, mostly) and invisible income. The British achievement in exporting manufactured goods between 1950 and 1970 was much better than between 1919 and 1939, though not as strong as it needed to be. In no year between 1945 and 1975 did British exports alone pay for imports. Meanwhile, invisible income from foreign investments, brokerage of foreign trade, international insurance, shipping, and so on, had been radically reduced by the two world wars and by the emergence of the United States as the world’s financial power. Thus from 1950 to 1970 the British experienced recurring shortfalls in the balance of payments.

Balance of payments deficits meant that Britain faced serious problems in paying for its imports. These difficulties were aggravated both by threats to the value of sterling and by the various governments’ (Labour and Conservative alike) efforts to preserve it. Whenever the balance of payments fell into deficit, it meant that businessmen around the world were accumulating excess pounds whose value was being drained by inflation; thus holders of sterling around the world periodically rushed to trade their pounds for gold or other currencies—normally the dollar. Since the British had created the Sterling Area in 1939, and now sustained it as a symbol of British power, many countries held vast quantities of sterling as reserves (backing) for their own currencies. The British felt responsible, therefore, to maintain the convertibility of sterling at a high value. As balance of payments deficits reached crisis levels, the government of the moment either had to devalue sterling (which it did twice) or clamp down on imports and dampen domestic consumer demand.

The periodic restriction of imports trapped both Labour and Conservative governments into a cycle of policies called “stop-go.” All the cabinets of the 1950s and 1960s wanted to let the British consumers have the goods they desired and to encourage the economy to grow. Hence in the “go” phase of the cycle, they eased import restrictions, provided cheap money for investments, and encouraged installment buying. But as the economy heated up, it increased inflation, sucked in imports, created a balance of payments deficit, and caused the government to adopt “stop” measures: import restrictions, tight money, and controls on installment buying. Stop-go made for an uncertain economic environment and discouraged investment and production.

Stop-go, however, was not the underlying problem of the British economy. Inadequate industrial production was the fundamental long-term flaw. British industry in the 1950s and 1960s (and as we will see in Chapter 14, in the 1970s and 1980s as well) neither captured enough foreign markets nor held a sufficient share of the domestic market to enable Britain to pay its way. The explanations for this

failure—or “British disease,” as it has been called—are hotly controversial. The trade unions blamed incompetent management, and management in turn blamed the trade unions. Both are probably correct. In addition, economists tend to cite purely economic factors, whereas social and cultural observers emphasize factors in British society beyond the market itself; again, both are probably correct. In general one may say with confidence that (1) British economic troubles began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and were seriously aggravated by the two world wars; (2) British industrial relations in the post–World War II period were poor; (3) the level of investment was low; and (4) British culture discouraged aggressive business practices.

To elaborate, we have already seen that Britain in the late nineteenth century grew less fast than newly industrializing nations and that the British tended to retreat into imperialism and dependence on invisible earnings rather than face hard competition. The two world wars injured British industrial capacity while dealing a blow to the traditional British success in foreign trade and investment. Poor labor-management relations, which hampered British productivity and which afflicted British industry through the 1980s, grew out of the long history of class conflict. Even in the 1950s and 1960s, management and trade unionists viewed each other with suspicion and thus tended to escalate every dispute, no matter how trivial, into a battle in the class war. British executives, who were no longer the owner-operators of the nineteenth-century type but salaried professional managers, were aloof from the workers. Heaven forbid that they eat in the workers’ canteens! They normally were dismissive of workers’ demands.

The workers for their part assumed that company profits in some vague way represented exploitation, and they displayed an “instrumental” attitude toward their work. Thus they showed little company loyalty and regarded their jobs as a necessary evil for earning enough money to pay for consumer pleasures. Moreover, the British trade union movement remained both highly bureaucratized and highly fragmented. Union officials had relatively little control over their workers, who looked to shop stewards for leadership; and the multiplicity of unions within any one industry (or company) caused much scuffling among the unions for jurisdiction as well as hypersensitivity about gradations in pay. Finally, British trade unionists were scarred by the experience of unemployment in the 1930s. In the postwar period they fought to keep high manning levels (overmanning and feather-bedding, according to managers) and absurdly restrictive job descriptions. For all these reasons, reform of the trade unions and of the legal structure that controlled their activities became an important issue from the late 1960s. Meanwhile, the restrictiveness and conservatism of the unions often minimized the productive advantages of such investment as management attempted.

Investment in British industry was low for many reasons. The stop-go policy cycles discouraged long-term investments, as did poor industrial relations. Government research and development funds, which were ample, were directed largely toward military projects. The welfare state removed an incentive for private savings, and the population as a whole seemed to prefer social security and satisfaction of

immediate consumer desires to investment for the future—a problem faced by every mature industrial society. In general, the rate of return was not high enough to induce people to invest in British industry; hence Britain in the 1950s and 1960s actually had a net *outflow* of capital. This was an old feature of the British economy but one that the nation could no longer afford.

British business practices were wedded to the past and not sufficiently innovative, especially in design, marketing, and customer services. Too many British managers looked back to the past, when British industry had every thing its own way. An American think tank, the Brookings Institution, concluded in 1968 that British managers tended to be amateurish and lethargic. An “old-boy” network and social status prevailed in recruitment and promotion of the managerial class. Britain had no business schools until the 1960s, and engineering (unlike pure science) remained a relatively low-status profession. Moreover, the old landed ideal, with its prejudice against hard work and commercial profit, softened the drive of British businessmen. An American diplomat in 1955 noticed

a sense of doubt concerning the social utility of industry and the legitimacy of profit, a sort of industrial inferiority complex often suffered by business leaders themselves. . . . In the extreme, some British industrialists seem almost ashamed of their vocation, looking on their jobs as a necessary evil or—in the case of family businesses—an inherited “white man’s burden.”

The traditional British sense of their nation as the countryside—typified by stately homes and the Lake District—directed the energies of British executives toward acquiring landed estates and retiring from the commercial fray. The ablest young people studied the arts subjects and entered the professions (law, medicine, academe, the civil service) rather than industry. In fact, the more the professions dominated British society, the less the nation valued profit and production.

The age of affluence in Britain, then, was marked by economic growth and consumer prosperity but also by increasing competitive shortcomings in the world economy. The quality of life as well as the quantity of life was never higher for most people, but both in retrospect were enjoyed on borrowed time. As Prime Minister Edward Heath was to say in 1973,

The alternative to expansion is not, as some occasionally seem to suppose, an England of quiet market towns linked only by trains puffing slowly and peacefully through green meadows. The alternative is slums, dangerous roads, old factories, cramped schools, stunted lives.

## **AFFLUENT SOCIETY**

To the ordinary British citizen of the 1950s and 1960s, the great new fact of life was a higher standard of living. The welfare state assisted the majority of the population by its “transfer payments”; thus most people received from social services more than they paid in through taxes. Moreover, as we have seen, average income went up faster than prices, and families were able to buy homes, automobiles, tele-

visions, and the like. These material comforts took less work to purchase: the average work week fell to less than forty-five hours, and most people had three weeks' holiday a year. The standard life-style became more "privatized"—that is, it centered on the home and revolved around activities like watching television, gardening, and working on do-it-yourself projects on the house or car.

Superficially, the new affluence tended to diminish class differences. Working people could now afford mass-produced clothes that resembled the finery of the upper classes. In fact, in the 1960s, "classless" clothes like blue jeans and T-shirts became the fashion for middle-class youth. Working-class and middle-class people became more alike in material comforts and leisure activities. Middle-class families could no longer afford servants, and many working-class families could have homes, cars, and holidays. As the number of professional administrators in the society grew, there was some increase in upward social mobility for working-class boys. White-collar workers, who occupied a middle ground between workers and managers, increased as a percentage of the work force. The distribution of incomes became somewhat less unequal: by one account the richest 1 percent of the population owned 43 percent of all wealth in 1954 but only 30 percent in 1972.

Nevertheless, class and class consciousness remained the keys to British social structure and social relations. "Embourgeoisement"—the conversion of working people to middle-class attitudes—was much talked about in the 1950s, but it never really came about. One major poll in 1972 showed that 95 percent of the British people identified themselves with some social class. In general in such polls about two thirds said they were working class, slightly less than one third said they were middle class, and 1 percent said they were upper class. People's sense of what they could aspire to also revealed the continuing realities of class divisions. For most working people, hard manual labor with no real possibility of promotion was reality. Middle-class people could aspire to "get another couple of notches up," as one chemist put it, and "send the boys to boarding school." Middle-class and professional men and women had job security and rising promotion (and salary) scales, whereas working-class people were stuck with the same jobs and faced layoffs whenever times were bad. Upper-class types still enjoyed a graceful and comfortable life. As one upper-class Labour cabinet minister, Richard Crossman, put it, "Ann and I have a facility of freedom and an amplitude of life . . . which cuts us off from the vast mass of people."

The solidarity of the working class was shown by the power of the trade unions. The years of full employment encouraged trade union membership among workers, especially males. In 1971, 58 percent of all male employees belonged to unions. (The respective figure for women was 32 percent, because the union leadership continued to think of their organizations as male institutions.) Overall, union membership reached 44 percent of the total work force, which was the highest level in British history except for the unusual years of 1919–1920. "White-collar" unions among administrative personnel became important for the first time. The number of strikes averaged about 2,500 a year, causing the annual loss of some three million workdays. As we will see, industrial conflict got worse, not better, in the late

1960s and early 1970s, and this was eventually to help bring the age of consensus to an end.

Meanwhile, a new division was emerging in British society: race. After World War II, the number of immigrants into Britain from the Commonwealth, as the Empire was now called, grew rapidly. Both “push” and “pull” forces were involved. Colonial peoples from the West Indies, Africa, India, and Pakistan came to Britain seeking better jobs and wider opportunities, and sometimes they were fleeing from postcolonial political troubles. The British government and employers encouraged them to come in the 1940s and 1950s because of the labor shortage. Labour also was idealistic about the Commonwealth: in 1948 the Labour government adopted the British Nationality Act, which allowed citizens of the Commonwealth to come to Britain with full rights of British citizenship. By 1951, the black population of Britain had doubled to 200,000, and in 1961 alone, 113,000 “colored” (including blacks, Indians, and Pakistanis) immigrants arrived. The immigrants did not disperse evenly across the country but concentrated in a few urban areas, notably London, Birmingham, and Bradford. Because the British were accustomed to a relatively homogeneous population, many of them did not readily accept the newcomers. As early as 1958 the Notting Hill area of London suffered serious race riots. Pressure quickly built for legislation to limit immigration. A law was passed in 1962 establishing a quota system. Further restrictions followed in 1965, along with Britain’s first Race Relations Act. Although racial discrimination was thereby banned, serious racial prejudice and tensions continued to exist. As we will see, race and immigration became important political issues in the 1960s.

The effects of the affluent society on women were decisive in favor of normalizing work outside the home and creating a greater degree of equality with men. It is important to remember that most women in Britain had always worked and that economic necessity had from the nineteenth century led many women to take jobs outside the home. The proportion of women in the work force was very stable (at about 30 percent) from 1851 to 1951. Likewise, the percentage of women who worked *outside* the home stood at about 35 percent between 1851 and 1951. Not even the two world wars, which had temporarily drawn large numbers of women into industry, significantly altered these long-term figures. What *had* changed between 1914 and the 1950s was a greater *diversity* of jobs held by women and an increase of *middle-class* women in gainful employment. Thus in the early years of the twentieth century, about 40 percent of all working women were in domestic service, but by 1951 only 23 percent were; in the 1950s over 32 percent were employed as clerks and secretaries in business and commerce.

After World War II, the number of *married* women working outside the home increased radically, and in the 1950s and 1960s the proportion of the total female population who were employed went up as well. In 1931, work was still for single women, but in 1951 the proportion of working women who were married reached 40 percent and in 1961 over 50 percent. Women as a proportion of the labor force now grew to about 35 percent, when 42 percent of all women were employed. Women flowed into office jobs, retail clerks’ positions, and teaching, and in lesser numbers into the professions. This amounted to a social revolution, which

occurred despite the assumption by Beveridge and other founders of the welfare state that the woman's proper place was in the home with the children.

The causes of these increases were both demographic and economic. The average age at marriage was declining, but the birth rate remained low. Hence married women on average in Britain now spent only four years in pregnancy and caring for infants, as compared to fifteen years in the late nineteenth century. They were much more inclined in the 1950s and 1960s to return to work once their children reached school age. Middle-class inhibitions against female employment had long since disappeared. Moreover, the ever-growing expectations of material goods by families drew women into employment, at the same time as domestic labor-saving devices made it possible.

The rising number of women at work contributed to expansion of equality for women, though complete equality, whether formal or informal, was not attained. Employment gave a growing number of women a sense of economic and psychological independence, especially because female employment was no longer concentrated in subservient fields like domestic service. The women's liberation movement, which as we will see in the next section became highly influential in the 1960s, both expressed and advanced the sense of women's independence. The results of the movement were significant: the Divorce Reform Act (1969) made irretrievable breakdown of the marriage the sole ground of divorce, and one that was equally open to women and men; the Matrimonial Property Act (1970) recognized women's contributions to marital property in kind as well as in money; and the Equal Pay Act (1970) established the principle of equal pay for equal work.

No doubt most of these steps were thwarted to a degree in practice. And in informal terms the advance of equality for women was slower. In some British homes, men in the 1960s helped more in housework and childrearing, but this was more true of middle-class families than those of either the rich or the working class. "Separate spheres" still existed, though in a changed form: men tended to wash dishes, repair the house, and tend the garden, and women did the shopping, cooking, and child care—while *also* holding down a job outside the home. Men still got the lion's share of higher education: in the 1960s only about a quarter of university students were female. And something of the old double standard continued to exist in matters of sex. In a survey completed in 1969, for example, 63 percent of the women reported that they were virgins at the time of their marriage, as compared to only 26 percent of the men.

Affluence had as big an impact on the lives of young people as on women. The youth of Britain had more money, more freedom to spend it, and more to spend it on than ever before in British history. Teenagers, in fact, enjoyed more disposable income than any other age group. Inevitably, they came to dominate a major segment of the consumer market. This revolved around clothes, records, radios, record players, and other items subject to commercialized trends in fashion. From 1950 Britain experienced waves of youth-oriented fashions: in the 1950s, the "Teddy Boys" affected Edwardian-style suits; in the 1960s came hippies, miniskirts, hot-pants, and the boutiques of King's Road and Carnaby Street; in the 1970s followed "skinheads" and "punks." Throughout the period "youth" tended to become almost



*The Beatles: John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr.*

a separate social class, knit together by fashion and pop music. Rock 'n' roll, introduced into Britain by the American group Bill Haley and the Comets in the 1950s, became a major feature of popular culture. Bands like the Beatles in the 1960s, the Rolling Stones and the Sex Pistols in the 1970s, and the Police and Boy George in the 1980s, expressed the age-old rebelliousness of young people in a new, highly marketable form and gave them a culture—complete with heroes, icons, rituals, and discourse—closed to their elders, to whom its attractions remained an unpleasant mystery.

The advent of youth culture coincided with the growth of what was called “permissiveness.” The relative independence of young people from parental control was one of many causes of this permissiveness in Britain. Another was the long decline of Christianity, which gradually loosened the hold of Victorian morality on the middle class and the “respectable” working class. (The aristocracy and the nonrespectable stratum of the poor had always indulged in permissive behavior.) The rapid expansion of the universities took many thousands of young people away from home to institutions that were not interested in acting in *loco parentis* (in place of the parents). This bred a number of student “revolutionaries” who sought to accelerate the pace of social change, democratize the universities, and destroy the capitalism whose affluence and welfare state made it possible for them to attend universities in the first place. Their ideology was part uninhibited personal pleasure, part idealistic socialism, and part hostility to authority; it peaked between 1967 and

1970 in numerous protests and sit-ins. A fourth cause of permissiveness was the improvement and spread of contraception, including “the pill,” which was introduced in the 1960s and which had a major impact on sexual attitudes and behavior. Finally, there was affluence itself, which gave people, young and old alike, greater freedom from the traditional discipline of economic survival and encouraged immediate gratification of personal desires.

To conventional Britons, the consequences of permissiveness were clear: sex, drugs, and crime. There was enough evidence in each case to make the proposition plausible. One indication that Victorian morality regarding sex was eroding was the acquittal on charges of obscenity in 1960 of the publisher of D. H. Lawrence’s sexually frank novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Another was passage in 1967 of laws making it easier to obtain an abortion and decriminalizing homosexual acts between consenting adults. In addition, by 1970, three-fifths of all couples were using contraceptives, and 20 percent of all married women were taking the pill. Women in greater numbers assumed that sex was something for them as well as for men to enjoy. The frequency of premarital sex increased, as the “sexual revolution” of the Western world occurred even in Britain: at one university in 1970, almost all the girls surveyed said that they were virgins when they arrived but that by their third year less than half were. The number of illegitimate births went up by 60 percent between 1950 and 1970, even though the number of abortions tripled in the five years after passage of the Abortion Act of 1967. Censorship of sexual material in the theater ended and became less strict over such material in films.

Drug use was a key feature of youth culture, but it was not restricted to young people by any means. Drugs were available by prescription through the National Health Service. In the 1950s the users were mainly middle-aged and elderly people, who took them as sleeping pills, tranquilizers, and antidepressants. In the 1960s, however, young people in large numbers began taking nonprescription amphetamines, heroin, cannabis, and LSD. In Britain, hashish (from the cannabis plant) became the preferred drug, though the Beatles’ hit song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” was thought to be a tribute to LSD. A law was passed in 1964 making possession of nonprescription drugs illegal, but it had little effect.

The crime rate in Britain went up from the late 1950s about 11 percent a year. Between 1951 and 1972, cases of crimes against property tripled, and cases of assault increased tenfold. The highest rates of increase were for people under twenty-one years of age. Britain remained much more peaceful and law-abiding than the United States; however, the number of police officers had to increase by almost 40 percent and police officers more frequently had to carry arms. The reasons for the increase in crime are not certain. Many conventional folk blamed the courts for “coddling” criminals and for abolishing the death penalty in 1965. Probably the actual culprit was affluence itself, along with its spin-off, self-indulgence. As standards of material acquisition went up, so also did the gap between those who could buy the goods and those who could not. Advertisements made consumer goods infinitely desirable; perhaps this incited some have-nots to crime. In the words of one official report:

The material revolution is plain to see. At one and the same time, it has provided more desirable objects, greater opportunity for acquiring them illegally, and considerable chances of immunity from the undesirable consequences of so doing.

### THE CULTURE OF AUSTERITY AND AFFLUENCE

High culture in Britain from 1945 to the 1970s was exceptionally vigorous. The Labour government intended to promote the “quality” as well as the “quantity” of life and therefore renamed the wartime CEMA as the Arts Council, giving it funding to support the arts, which it has done with distinction. But this was only a relatively small factor in creating conditions for cultural and intellectual vitality. Of greater consequence was the sense that between 1945 and 1951 Britain had experienced a sharp break with history. This notion simultaneously caused regret, high hopes, and disillusionment. World War II was seen as decisive not only for the defeat of Germany but also for the cooperation between the Soviet Union and the West. The hopefulness of that cooperation soon collapsed in the bitterness of the Cold War. Likewise, the use of atomic bombs in 1945, and the subsequent proliferation of atomic weapons, cast a pall on victory itself. The welfare state gave reason for celebration by the idealistic left, but its shortcomings spurred the elaboration of strong critiques, including some from extreme socialists. The sense of a clean break with the past gave rise to ideas of liberation—in social thought, in theology, and in feminism—but each generated strong reactions.

More than ever, the universities served as the locales for intellectual life in Britain. Not only natural scientists, social scientists, and humanistic scholars found their outlets for teaching and research in the universities, but also a growing number of novelists, poets, and critics. This was not entirely healthy, for the specialization encouraged by universities made a holistic view of life and the world nearly impossible. In 1959, the eminent scientific administrator and novelist, C. P. Snow, called attention to the fragmentation of high culture in his famous “Two Cultures” lecture at Cambridge. He argued that scientists knew little about literature and literary folk knew nothing about modern science and that this was a regrettable fact since the world needed an integrated vision of things from its intellectuals. Revelation of the split in culture was shocking enough, and then Snow was fiercely attacked by the leading Cambridge literary critic, F. R. Leavis, for preferring the scientists to the literary intellectuals. The two men proceeded to show by their dispute that the divide between the two cultures was all too real. At its base the debate was about industrialization and whether the kind of society it created was morally superior to the preindustrial world: Snow said yes and Leavis said no. This was a theme that ran throughout the period.

Meanwhile, the writers who reacted most sensationally to the materialism of Britain in the age of the welfare state and affluence were the novelists and playwrights known as “the Angry Young Men.” They included Kingsley Amis, John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, and John Osborne. Most of them were from the working

class, and all of them opposed the materialism of British life and expressed a pervasive restlessness and purposelessness. They were angry because things had not changed enough despite the war and welfare: snobbery, class divisions, conventional morality, and traditional institutions like the monarchy and the church still remained. Amis satirized academic life in his novel *Lucky Jim* (1954). Braine attacked the cynical scramble for corporate power in *Room at the Top* (1957). Sil-litoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) revealed the mindless pleasure-seeking of a young factory worker, who lives only for his weekends of drinking and womanizing and who is unconscious of the Labour party's long struggle to attain the welfare state. Most famous of all was Osborne's play, *Look Back in Anger* (1956), in which the hero rages against conventional pieties, the lack of "commitment" among those around him, and his own powerlessness. The Angry Young Men were the precursors of the student revolt of the 1960s, but they thought, as Osborne put it, "There aren't any good, brave causes left." All they could do was use their anger to try to make other people feel things more intensely.

Other intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s found a channel for their criticism of modern life in campaigns for *liberation*—the sense that the time had come to liberate the British people from obsolete or oppressive attitudes and institutions. One of the most important of these liberationist movements was the New Left. This grew out of university-based Marxism in the 1950s and produced the *New Left Review* in 1960 as well as three major socialist thinkers: Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson. All three of them turned away from Stalinism and a clanking, deterministic type of Marxism toward a more subtle and humane form looking back to Marx's early writings on alienation. On this basis they offered a radical critique of British society and culture. Hoggart criticized the mass media for eroding the ability of the working class to sustain its own authentic perspective on life and work. Williams explored the social foundations of literary culture, which he saw as now regrettably separate from the lives of ordinary people. He explained that the idea of "culture" itself had developed as a moral reaction against capitalist industrialism but had turned in self defense away from involvement with society. Thompson, the most influential thinker in the British New Left, was a social historian and polemicist of great passion and insight. He showed in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) how the English laboring poor had made themselves into a new community—the working class—during the period of the Industrial Revolution. His sense of people's active role in forming their own lives led him to battle Continental, Stalinist-style Marxists and to engage in the crusade against nuclear weapons.

A second intellectual movement for liberation was feminism. British feminists of the 1950s and 1960s, many of whom were associated with the New Left, realized that the advances toward equality for women had not gone far enough. By the 1970s, many also felt that the sexual revolution had resulted in the sexual objectification of women, and that society's norms and expectations for women were too limiting. Hence they consciously tried to resurrect the "heroic" militancy of the pre-1914 suffragettes and to eradicate the deep cultural roots of the oppression of

females. They established strong movements against rape and wife battering. The two leading British feminists were Doris Lessing and Germaine Greer. Lessing, a socialist and a psychological novelist of great power, wrote of the difficulties women faced in attaining psychic wholeness in a society dominated by men. For her, liberation lay in self-understanding and the integration of personality. Greer, the ablest feminist polemicist, argued that the new objective of the women's movement had to be a revolution in gender relations. In *The Female Eunuch* (1970) Greer channeled her anger into an attack on gender stereotypes and on the means of their social construction. Greer contended that in capitalist society women were taught to be both the big spenders and the emblems of big spending; thus they were made into servile and thoughtless sex objects. She also delivered smashing assaults on Freudian psychoanalysis, myths of love and marriage, popular romance fiction, and the image of the female in male literature. Amid all these ideas was work for a generation of feminists.

In theology, the quest for liberation took the form of rejection of "old-fashioned" ideas of God and Christ. These were regarded by liberal Christian theologians as outdated and therefore obstacles to faith. They should be replaced, the liberals thought, by the idea of God as a force working *within* creation. The best-known expression of these views in Britain was *Honest to God* (1963) by Bishop John Robinson. He put forward an existentialist theology, declaring that God is not "up there" or "out there" but is the very "ground of our being." Moreover, Christians must find Christ in the hungry and needy of the world. *Honest to God* sold 350,000 copies in its first year, but it caused a storm of controversy. It may have driven away as many people from Christianity as it attracted. Christian church membership, especially in the Protestant denominations, continued to decline in Britain. By the 1970s, only 5.5 million Britons (including those in Northern Ireland) were active members of Protestant churches, and 5.3 million were practicing Roman Catholics.

Liberationism took a very different form in the ideas of environmentalists and opponents to economic growth. Many of these notions, best seen in the works of the economists Ezra Mishan and E. F. Schumacher, were based in romanticism and religion—in the ideas that there are higher values than materialism and that humanity should practice proper stewardship over God's creation instead of exploiting and wasting it. Schumacher's best-seller, *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), drew attention to the destruction of the world ecosystem by rampant greed and technology. Schumacher urged that people liberate themselves from false assumptions that all economic growth is good and that bigger technology is better. They must understand that from recognition of limits on human desire comes wisdom. Perhaps it can be argued that as a citizen of a country afflicted by low growth, Schumacher was making a virtue of necessity. Yet his solutions—"Buddhist economics," reverence for creation, and appropriate technology—were (and are) eminently sensible.

In imaginative literature, novelists and poets expressed very different reactions to the postwar world, but all in one way or another expressed profound alienation. Doris Lessing contended that capitalism was making life "petty and frustrating"



*Recumbent Figure*,  
by Henry Moore,  
1938.

while debasing popular culture. George Orwell, who had been an ardent if cantankerous socialist before the war, now expressed grave doubts about the leviathan states created by total war. In *1984* (1949), Orwell painted a bleak picture of a world dominated by warring, mind-warping superpowers and warned against the totalitarianism of communism. He became the most widely read of all serious writers in the English language. Evelyn Waugh, a prominent satirist during the interwar period, now expressed archconservative disgust for the modern world; as he says of one character in *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* (1957), “He abhorred plastics, Picasso, sunbathing and jazz—everything in fact that had happened in his own lifetime.” Joyce Cary, in novels like *The Horse’s Mouth* (1944) and *Not Honour More* (1955) displayed a wonderful ability to imagine a wide range of characters and celebrated through them the free imagination, which clashes tragically or humorously with the established order of things. Graham Greene, like Waugh a convert to Catholicism, expressed a somber sense of the imperatives and dilemmas of religion and morality in the bleak conditions of decolonization, wartime, and the Cold War.

The writing styles of the two ablest British poets (other than the Scotsman Hugh MacDiarmid) of the period were quite different from each other. Philip Larkin believed in clear, accessible, technically proficient poetry that adhered to traditional rhyme and meter. A poet with a mundane view of life, Larkin took as his themes the distance between hope and reality, the deceptiveness of choice, and the certainty of old age and death. Ted Hughes (1930–1998) was a poet of violent emotions and seeming admiration of violence. His poetry reveals an awareness that in the modern world miracles and madness are scarcely distinguishable. Hughes admired the capacity of animals to do what humans can not—to see clearly—thus the hawk

Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.  
His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet  
Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air.

Hughes was made poet laureate in 1984; he died in 1998 and was succeeded by Andrew Motion.

In the visual arts, two figures stood out (and still do): the painter Francis Bacon and the sculptor Henry Moore. Bacon (1909–1992) was a self-taught artist who mysteriously combined expressionism, cubism, and realism in deeply disturbing—even unnerving—paintings. Bacon did not care at all what people thought of his work and made no effort to make his paintings beautiful. Yet his images of monstrous, half-human creatures, often crouched in tortured postures, are not easily forgotten. Somehow they express the horror and violence that are part of the modern world. Moore’s work is equally powerful, but it emphasizes formal qualities and is less disturbing than Bacon’s. Moore was strongly influenced in the 1920s by pre-Columbian Mexican sculpture and in later years by England’s rolling landscape. His massive works are not realistic, but they do abstract the essence of real objects, whether they be reclining female figures, helmeted heads, or atomic explosions. They give a sense of solidity and order that is missing from many of the other products of British high culture since 1945.

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