

Social, political and economic change

The experiences of people in Britain during the Second World War marked a watershed in ideas of society and political organisation. In contrast to the mass unemployment, food queues and slum housing of the depression in the 1930s, the government proved capable during the war of organising full employment, an effective system of rationing food and other necessities, and providing accommodation of some kind for those whose houses were destroyed or damaged. The war proved that centralised and planned government control could deliver (to a large extent) the basic needs of its population, at least when politicians had the will to do so. When Ernest Bevin, the trade-union leader, joined Winston Churchill's government in 1940, he famously declared that if the labour movement and the working class 'now rise with all their energy and save the people of this country from disaster, the country will always turn with confidence to the people who saved them'. It was implicit in this statement, and in many others of the time, that a debt was owed to the working class in Britain for sacrifices suffered in the war, that the poverty and injustices of the 1930s could not be allowed to happen again. Instead of the unfettered market economics of the thirties, Britain would adopt a system of welfare-capitalism for the immediate post-war period, on the implicit understanding that there had to be state intervention to protect the poor from unemployment, hunger, homelessness or slum conditions, sickness and illiteracy. In the general election of 1945, the Labour Party commanded the vast majority of working-class support, winning some 12 million votes. On the back of that support, Labour engineered much of the social reform and welfare provision which has cushioned the impact of unemployment and poverty in post-war British society. The National Health Service, a commitment to full employment, universal full-time secondary education, pension rights and public provision of affordable housing were all introduced in British society in the late 1940s. They represented a promise that society had to be structured along more egalitarian lines, and that government had a social responsibility to protect the poor from the capitalist drive for wealth.

Historians often refer to this promise as the basis for a social consensus which lasted for over three decades in British politics. Both Labour and Conservative governments pursued, to varying degrees, the aim of regulating or offsetting capitalism with welfare reforms. In some cases, this produced a gradual inclination towards social harmony. Class divisions were eroded a little by common experiences of the health service, for example, or for men in the national military service. Even by the late 1940s, however, Labour had ceased to endorse fully the ideology of welfare capitalism, and had shifted towards an acceptance of market economics as the motor of generating wealth. The consensus concerning welfare provision remained broadly in

place until the 1980s, but the Conservative Party won the election in 1951 on the promise that the 'bad old days' of Labour rationing and restrictions would be replaced by affluence and consumer goods. The Festival of Britain in 1951 also marked a departure from the gloom of the war and the austerity of the forties by imagining Britain as a modern, bright society, driven by technological advancement and affordable new material goods. The fifties have since become known as a decade of ideological conservatism, in which women were encouraged, sometimes even compelled, to become housewives, and leave the world of public work to men, and in which the timidly socialist commitment to welfare became subordinate to the drive towards greater production and consumption. One explanation for the anti-feminism of the fifties, for example, is that women were needed in the home not primarily as housewives or mothers, but as consumers, supposedly with the leisure time to spend their husband's disposable income on a greater range of foods, household goods and labour-saving devices. But this could not have taken place, of course, were it not for the economic boom which brought an increase in living standards for the majority of people in Britain. Successive Conservative governments in the fifties were able to turn voters' minds away from the fear of poverty (which

The welfare state

The development of welfare-state provisions in Britain after the war is broadly in line with trends in many democracies in Europe and abroad. Sweden and New Zealand, for example, had already developed welfare-state policies in the 1930s. The Labour government of 1945–51 is generally credited with introducing a welfare state in Britain, although its measures were widely based on the recommendations of the Beveridge Report of 1942, which argued the case for the welfare state. In successive acts of legislation, and involving substantial investment, the Labour government introduced the National Health Service (1946), national insurance scheme (1946), unemployment and low income assistance (1948), and a commitment to more publicly owned housing. Arguably, one could include the nationalisation of major industries as part of the government's welfare reforms in the sense that this allowed greater state control of employment and income levels also. Several planks of the welfare state remain in altered and diminished forms today, but since the 1980s, an increasing trend towards the USA's model of minimal welfare services has taken hold in Britain. In particular, untested American arguments that welfare makes people dependent and lazy have influenced both the practice and rhetoric of British policies on social-welfare provision.

fuelled a desire for social and welfare reforms) by appealing to consumer desires for televisions, refrigerators, washing machines and cars. The rise in living standards was also greatly enhanced by the advent of the credit society, in which private ownership of houses, as well as the purchase of all sorts of material goods and services, became more accessible to greater numbers of people through an expansion of mortgage lending and financial credit schemes. This meant that relatively low-earning households could buy into the consumer economy, by placing themselves in long-term debt. From this point onwards, one could argue, consumerism and free-market economics were bound to come into conflict with the promise of social reform.

In the late fifties and early sixties it was possible to believe that Britain was becoming a classless society. The expansion of secondary and university education, and the availability of