

The Locust Years

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1918 - 1939

BRITAIN IN 1918 WAS A BRUISED, expectant land. Those who had given their all in war believed that national security overseas should breed social security at home. British citizens wanted protection not just against foreign enemies but against want, illness, unemployment and even the unfair distribution of income. This sense of insecurity was increased when, at the very moment peace was declared, the world was hit by an influenza pandemic. In 1918 and 1919 some 228,000 deaths were recorded in Britain alone, heavily concentrated among the young. With returning imperial troops spreading the disease to their native lands, the worldwide death toll was reputedly fifty million, making it the greatest human disaster in recorded history, worse even than the Black Death.

A month after the armistice Lloyd George held an election, the first to include women. He exploited his status as war leader and argued for a continued coalition with the Tories to aid reconstruction. Given the antagonism towards him of Asquith and roughly half the Liberal MPs, he colluded with the Conservatives not to put up candidates against supportive Liberals. These unchallenged candidates were sent a letter signed by Lloyd George and the Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law. The letters were derided by Asquith as 'coupons', causing the 1918 poll to be dubbed the 'coupon election'. The coalition won overwhelmingly, though its 478 MPs were mostly

Conservatives. Asquith's Liberals joined Labour in opposition, but the Liberal party would never again be regarded as a plausible home for the working class. That mantle passed to Labour, dismissed by Lloyd George as 'the extreme, pacifist, Bolshevist group'.

The election was dominated by anti-German hysteria, with calls to 'hang the Kaiser' and 'squeeze the German lemon till the pips squeak'. *The Times* refused to discuss the possible consequences of bankrupting Germany, merely demanding that 'we present the bill'. The 1919 Versailles treaty ignored pleas for caution in treating the defeated enemy from Lloyd George and the young economist J. M. Keynes, and sought the most humiliating way of punishing the Germans. This meant the allied occupation of the Rhineland and heavy financial reparations. Versailles meant that Germany's first taste of democracy was one of unupportable debt, a predicament that was to give Hitler's re-founded National Socialist party an easy ride to power after 1925.

Lloyd George described Versailles as 'wild men screaming through keyholes'. Back home he reigned supreme. He was the first prime minister to govern in what approached a presidential style. He retained his wartime secretariat under Hankey and his outer office of aides in the Downing Street 'garden room'. His Welsh intonation elevated his oratory, said Harold Nicolson, 'to the class of Cromwell and Chatham'. In war he had bullied and cajoled the government machine to get things done. Now he did the same in peace. The government passed a housing act to subsidise 'homes fit for heroes' and required children to stay in school until aged fourteen. War mobilisation had doubled trade union membership and the government faced strikes by police, miners, railwaymen and even soldiers. Where they were in the public sector, the government usually capitulated.

Meanwhile across the Irish Sea, Churchill wearily remarked, 'As the deluge subsides and the waters fall short, we see the

dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again.' While Ulster Protestants continued to balk at home rule, at least without partition, Irish nationalists won almost all southern Irish seats at the 1918 election and, the following January, set up their own independent parliament in Dublin, the Dáil Éireann. This body, under the charismatic leadership of Michael Collins, declared open war on the British state. Ireland at the time was still ruled and policed by the mostly Protestant British. Terrorist outrages by the IRA were met with equal brutality by 'Black and Tan' police auxiliaries, many of them soldiers disbanded from the western front. Ireland was plunged into a guerrilla war, culminating in undisciplined soldiers burning villages and in December 1920, the entire centre of Cork. Even under Lloyd George, British policy in Ireland was repressive and counter-productive. A Labour party report in early 1921 warned that 'there are things [in Ireland] being done in the name of Britain which must make her name stink in the eyes of the world'. Eventually the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 led to a treaty negotiated by Lloyd George in 1921, providing for an Irish Free State, with a separate assembly for Ulster's six counties. The first independent Irish elections were held in 1922.

Lloyd George's coalition soon ran out of political capital. His financing of his private office through the sale of honours had become a scandal (£15,000 for a knighthood, £50,000 for a peerage). The prime minister's womanising was common knowledge, giving rise to the popular song 'Lloyd George Knew My Father', with variations. The coalition's stock fell. The economy entered a new recession in 1920. By 1921 the Treasury was overwhelmed by the burden of the government's social programme and the cost of servicing war debts. The 'Geddes axe', named after Sir Eric Geddes, a coalition minister, proposed cuts in public spending across the board, from defence to schools, and even cuts in the pay of policemen and teachers.

British politics were now complicated by the shifting tectonic plates of the British left, as the Labour vote grew and the Liberals declined and fractured. The Tories were almost always the largest party, but faced the necessity of coalition with one or other of Labour or the Liberals. In 1922 the Lloyd George coalition was increasingly irksome to most Tory backbenchers and, in October that year, a large group of them met at the Carlton Club in St James's and decided to withdraw their support from it. A midland MP, Stanley Baldwin, said he would 'go into the wilderness' if the party continued to back a prime minister who was rarely seen in the Commons and who ruled by a personal 'kitchen cabinet'. Lloyd George was, said Baldwin, 'that terrible thing, a dynamic force'. The prompt collapse of the coalition precipitated a general election that year, which the Tories won with an overall majority. In celebration, Tory backbenchers thereafter called themselves the 1922 Committee. The Liberals remained divided and Labour took the position of official opposition. The 'Welsh wizard' was no more. Lloyd George could take credit as a principal founder of the welfare state and for his role in winning the war, but he had split his party, and done so not, like Peel or Gladstone, on a matter of principle but to hold on to personal power. Faced with the challenge of adapting Liberalism to embrace organised labour, he suffered a failure of political imagination. He condemned his party to the political wilderness for the rest of the century.

Baldwin, the new Tory prime minister, was perfectly cast as reassuring contrast, the archetypal safe pair of hands, a pipe-smoking countryman, sensible, moderate and conciliatory. When trouble beckoned, he was said to retreat to his room with a crossword until it blew over. Yet as soon as he took office, Baldwin was seized by a conviction, borrowed from Joseph Chamberlain, that the recovery of the British economy needed tariffs. This was so drastic a change in policy that, with Liberals and Labour opposed, he felt he should call an early election

on the issue. In this he miscalculated. The 1923 election was fought over 'food taxes' and the Tories lost ground. They were still the largest party but in a minority, with Labour in second place. Asquith, now again official Liberal leader, argued that the electorate had voted overwhelmingly against tariffs and, since Labour was the largest anti-tariff party, it should form a government, with his support.

In January 1924 Ramsay MacDonald was duly sworn in as the first Labour prime minister. The arrival of Labour in power, within living memory of working-class enfranchisement, was considered sensational. Many on the right declared it would mean the Russians would take over, property would be confiscated, marriage banned and free love licensed. Some fled to sybaritic lifestyles in Kenya and Rhodesia in preference. When MacDonald took his senior ministers to the palace, the press debated whether they should wear top hats, bow, kiss hands and appoint hereditary peers. (The question of peers was resolved by appointing only those with no male heirs.) As the new ministers awaited the king's presence, one of them, J. R. Clynes, reflected on 'MacDonald, the starveling clerk, Thomas, the engine driver, Henderson, the foundry labourer, and Clynes, the mill-hand, all to this pinnacle!' MacDonald took easily to the Buckinghamshire mansion of Chequers, recently donated by the Lee family as a place of 'rest and recreation for prime ministers for ever'. He was soon accused of the occupational hazard of Labour leaders, falling under the spell of office and being embraced by high society, so-called 'champagne socialism'.

MacDonald's government was not a success. He relied on the government's minority status to curb the socialist inclination of some of his colleagues, but his every move was treated with suspicion by the Tories and a mostly Tory press. When the government withdrew the prosecution of a communist newspaper for incitement, it was accused of being under the influence of revolutionary groups and lost a vote of confidence.

MacDonald felt he should call what was the fourth election in six years. The cause of the left was not aided by events in Russia, which still cast a shadow over British politics. The opposition, eager to exploit any 'red scare', seized on what turned out to be a forged letter from a Soviet leader, Grigory Zinoviev, advocating 'a successful rising in the working districts of England' and bringing 'the ideas of Lenin to Britain and the colonies'. Baldwin skilfully used the new medium of radio to promise 'sane, commonsense government' and not 'revolutionary theories and hare-brained schemes'. Labour was bundled out of office with 419 Tory MPs to Labour's 151. The Liberals managed to win just forty seats.

Baldwin spoke for a nation that craved a return to pre-war normality. As the peacetime economy began to recover, the benefits of modernisation that had been enjoyed by only the richer Edwardians spread to a wider middle class. The position of women changed radically. A post-war shortage of men demanded a new self-reliance, while the growth of retail and clerical employment offered young women a new urban independence. The apostle of 'family planning', Marie Stopes, preached to a generation with access to the sexual liberation of contraception. Registered divorces increased from 823 in 1910 to 4,522 in 1928. The consumer economy boomed. The number of cars on the roads of Britain was doubling each year. Home ownership rose from 10 per cent in 1910 to a third by the end of the thirties, far ahead of anywhere else in Europe. The resulting low-density housing estates spread in 'ribbon development' across suburban England. A mere 20 per cent of English people now lived in something that could be called the countryside.

In government the spirit of Lord Salisbury returned. The Conservatives' policy of promising 'tranquillity and freedom from adventures and commitments both at home and abroad', never again to be 'the policeman of the world', was popular. The Locarno summit conference in October 1925 saw the war

combatants affirm their everlasting respect for peace and for each other's borders. So enthusiastic was the Foreign Office with 'the spirit of Locarno' that it named its chief reception room after it. Britons yearned to put the trumpets and drums of battle behind them. Even the British empire was amended. In 1926 an imperial conference fashioned a new entity from the old self-governing dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, giving it the Cromwellian name 'Commonwealth'. It did not embrace non-white colonies.

In 1924 Baldwin brought Churchill back to the cabinet as a Liberal-turned-Tory chancellor of the exchequer. Churchill then made a mistake that was to hover over his career like Gallipoli, fixing the pound sterling against a price in gold at a rate considered far too high. Britain's coal exports were instantly rendered uncompetitive on world markets, leading to a cut in mining output and thus in wages. In May 1926 the TUC called on all unions to back the miners in Britain's first and only general strike. The stoppage was near universal across key industries and briefly evoked a wartime spirit among the public. Churchill edited a government newspaper and the brigade of guards escorted food from the docks. Oxford undergraduates had fun driving buses. But opinion was divided, with even the usually conservative king being heard to say of the strikers, 'Try living on their wages before you judge them.'

The cabinet struggled to mediate between the intransigent parties. One minister remarked that the miners' leaders 'might be thought the stupidest men in England, if we had not had frequent occasion to meet the mine owners'. Baldwin was in his element as peacemaker. Despite his reputed remark that a cabinet should never push its nose 'dead against the pope or the National Union of Mineworkers', he succeeded in isolating the coal industry following a commission of inquiry, and the TUC agreed to end the strike after just nine days, though the miners fought on alone and unsuccessfully. The strike took on legendary status as an

example of working-class solidarity, though the union's sense of betrayal at the way it ended also showed the limitations on its power. Baldwin's lack of triumphalism afterwards, indeed his consoling personality, was critical throughout. He was always affable, not least to new Labour MPs, and later supported their demand that unions should be able to levy their members to finance their party. With Neville Chamberlain as minister for health, welfare and local government, the Tories remained in the liberal tradition of Peel, Disraeli and Neville's father, Joseph. The old poor law guardians were wound up and elected county and borough councils made responsible for clinics and the relief of poverty.

Despite Baldwin's personal popularity, the Tories lost the 1929 election, possibly as a result of finally extending the vote to the last disenfranchised adults, women in their twenties, the so-called 'flapper vote' (after a free-hanging dress much in fashion). In another hung parliament the Liberals decided to put Labour and Ramsay MacDonald back in office. The new team had no time to prove itself. Within weeks, on 24 October, a bubble in US bond prices burst, leading to a crash not only on Wall Street but on all western stock markets. Guided by Keynes, the Labour cabinet proposed an immediate programme of public works, but this met with implacable opposition from the new chancellor, Philip Snowden. He demanded curbs rather than increases in public spending.

This familiar conflict yielded economic and political turmoil. Between the 1929 crash and the end of 1930, registered unemployed rose from one million to two and a half million and continued upwards. The following year banks failed across Europe, leading to German hyperinflation and financial collapse. By August 1931 Snowden's May Committee had out-axed Geddes, proposing £24 million in new taxes and £96 million of spending cuts, of which £66 million would come direct from unemployment relief, the so-called dole. Ministers exhibited

every sign of panic. They rushed back from holiday, bank rate soared and gold sales emptied the vaults of the Bank of England, which unhelpfully warned that 'national bankruptcy is near'. The press carried such headlines as 'A Matter of Hours'. The relationship between publicity and confidence was as yet little understood.

Few Labour ministers could stomach Snowden's cuts and the cabinet resigned. But when MacDonald took his resignation to the palace, he returned to tell his stunned colleagues that he and not Baldwin had been asked to head a national coalition with the Tories. He would seek 'a doctor's mandate' from the voters to push through the cuts. MacDonald amazed even the loyal Snowden by telling him, 'Tomorrow every duchess in London will be wanting to kiss me.' On radio he declared, 'I have changed none of my ideals. I have a national duty.' In October 1931 a new election gave MacDonald his mandate, but only thirteen Labour MPs stayed loyal to him and he depended on 473 'national Conservatives'. As with Lloyd George in 1918, ambition had made him a prisoner of the Tories.

Politics was becoming increasingly polarised, driven by a highly partisan press committed to specific parties. Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* and Rothermere's *Daily Mail* were Tory, the *News Chronicle* Liberal and the *Daily Herald* and *Daily Mirror* Labour. Socialism at the time played on continued guilt about the losses of the Great War and the continued poverty of the depression, driven by a mix of pacifism and mild communism. J. B. Priestley made his *English Journey* round the poorer parts of England in 1933. It was followed by the Jarrow 'crusade' of October 1936, in which 200 unemployed walked from Tyneside to London, fêted by the public along the way. George Orwell made more sedate encounters in his documentary account of *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

Some on the left turned to a glamorous labour minister, Oswald Mosley, who resigned over Snowden's cuts to form

a 'new party', initially of Keynesian socialists. After a visit to Benito Mussolini in Italy in 1931, Mosley turned his party into the British Union of Fascists. At a time when democratic governments were failing across Europe, the appeal to 'vitality and manhood' and to modern dictators who, people said of Mussolini, 'made the trains run on time' carried some appeal. Had Mosley not lapsed into un-British uniforms, rallies and black-shirted thuggery, he would have been a considerable leader. As it was, while other nations responded to economic depression with Roosevelt's New Deal, Stalin's five-year-plans and the fascism of Mussolini and Hitler, Britain took comfort in a Scottish clerk and a West Midlands businessman. MacDonald and Baldwin implemented Snowden's plan, devalued the pound, raised income tax and cut the dole.

With recovery from recession, 1930s Britain resumed the economic progress of the mid-twenties. Exotic art deco factories appeared along London's Western Avenue, making consumer goods such as Hoover vacuum cleaners, Gillette safety razors and Firestone car tyres. Woolworth's proliferated in every high street. The previously private British Broadcasting Company was nationalised under charter in 1927. Its director, an austere Scot named John Reith, established a tradition of independence which has held, against many odds, ever since. By 1932 England and Wales had ten million radio listeners and two million telephone subscribers. Britain's answer to America's Model T Ford, the Austin 7, appeared in 1922 and was reduced in price in the 1930s to £125. By the end of the decade there were three million cars on the roads. Super-cinemas with names such as Roxy, Regal, Odeon and Gaumont towered over their communities, offering the escapism of Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. American jazz became a craze.

Thus blessed, the British public took the pacifism of the previous decade to new lengths. In 1935 the biggest ever private referendum, the 'peace ballot', registered eleven million votes in

support of the weak-kneed League of Nations and a prohibition on world arms manufacture. At the general election that year, on which MacDonal lost his seat, Baldwin returned as prime minister having been forced to promise, even to his own Conservative voters, that 'there will be no great armaments'. Ministers were acutely aware that Germany, under Hitler as chancellor from 1933, was not the reliable ally of Locarno and was rearming rapidly, but public opinion at the time was uninformed and naive about events both in Soviet Russia and in Germany. In 1936 it also had another matter on its mind. The death of George V led to his being succeeded by the forty-one-year-old Edward VIII. The new king liked dancing and informality and took a keen interest in public life, famously saying on a visit to the poor of south Wales that 'something must be done'. But he was in love with a married woman, Wallis Simpson, whom he wanted to marry. Despite a clamp on publicity, rumour was rife and the king was eventually told by Baldwin that he would have to choose between Mrs Simpson and the crown. He said, 'In the choice of a queen, the voice of the people must be heard.' While the monarchy no longer carried political weight and Edward enjoyed some public support, the exemplary role a king must play in public life was felt to make his relationship with Simpson unacceptable. In an emotional broadcast on 11 December 1936, he chose Mrs Simpson and abdicated. He was succeeded by his brother, 'shy Bertie', as George VI (1936-52), father of the present queen.

In 1937 an exhausted Baldwin gave way to Neville Chamberlain as prime minister. As chancellor for six years, Chamberlain had steered the country safely out of depression and taken forward the welfare state. But he lacked warmth or a human touch in public, and was abused variously as 'a pinhead' and 'weaned on a pickle'. Nor had he and Baldwin, despite fast growing German belligerence, been able to sell the need for rearmament to the public. However, from 1938 Spitfire fighters

went into mass production, new factories were opened and air-raid shelters planned for civil defence. When in September 1938 Hitler indicated his intentions to occupy the Czech Sudetenland in defiance of Versailles, Chamberlain travelled to parley with him in Munich. The nation was on tenterhooks, fearing war.

Chamberlain's arrival back at Heston airport, waving a paper 'symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again', was greeted with wild enthusiasm. He told a crowd later that he had brought 'peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time.' Speaking on the radio, he added that it was 'horrible, fantastic and incredible ... that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing'. Churchill, now on the backbenches, was a relatively lone voice for openly opposing Germany, later calling these the 'years that the locust hath eaten'. But when he described Munich in the Commons as 'a total and unmitigated defeat', he was howled down. Whatever hindsight may suggest, British public opinion was massively relieved by Munich.

History was not kind to Chamberlain, seeing him as the principal appeaser of Hitler's Germany, though recent historians have been less harsh. Public opinion and most of the press were strongly for accommodating European dictators. They remained averse to a return to war, grasping at anything that might fuel their optimism. In addition this was the first generation of British politicians to govern under the aegis of a universal franchise and to feel bound by what they perceived as public opinion. The concept of consent to rule had finally asserted itself, and ironically done so against the security of the state. Chamberlain and his colleagues were also trapped by their military advisers. They had been rearming since the mid-thirties, but when the prime minister left for Munich, he was warned by the chiefs of staff that they were unready for any war with Hitler. Britain would be overwhelmed by a German attack and Chamberlain

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had to buy time. He bought just six months. In March 1939 Hitler broke his promise to Chamberlain and occupied Prague. In August he signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact with Stalin and, on 1 September, launched his 'blitzkrieg' on Poland. The invasion breached allied guarantees of Polish sovereignty and Chamberlain was forced to announce, two days later, that Britain was at war with Germany. An army of British soldiers crossed the Channel, as they had in 1914 and so often before. This time they returned, at first, defeated.