

AUSTERITY BRITAIN

1945-51

David Kynaston



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spent most of the evening first at a 'Jazz Jamboree' at the Midland Institute and then at the Birmingham University Students' Union, before heading towards Moseley:

We walked along in a colossal line spread out across Bristol Rd – all except Joy and Bernard, who walked ecstatically in front, embracing each other every few yards. Then I got mad. I went completely berserk and walked bang into the headlights of a car approaching along Priory Rd. I was utterly, utterly despondent . . . I dashed off after Joy, croaking in a reedy hoarse treble that I was taking her home and that I would slit both their throats if they didn't stop. Of course, they didn't. They stopped, *laughed at me* (O Christ) and proceeded to neck in front of me in the middle of the road.

It took eight of them to stop me from strangling the filthy bitch and that low bastard.

A provincial wannabe being laughed at: a terrible moment, but he would soon enough be on the fast track to exact cosmic revenge.

About the same time as Tynan's humiliation, the Chelsea-based Mass-Observation investigator was returning home. She had spent the evening in the West End, mainly outside Buckingham Palace watching the crowds waiting for a balcony appearance and eventually getting it at about 10 p.m.: "Doesn't the Queen look lovely?" says F35C. "The princesses were among the crowd last night, only nobody recognised them," says somebody else. The gates were closed at both Piccadilly Circus and Green Park stations, so she walked home. Her report finished with a post-midnight vignette: 'On a piece of waste ground in Flood Street ten or twelve children are silently gathered round a bonfire. They look tired but happy and absorbed. One says in a low voice, "It'll last a long time yet." A man at the end of the street is striking matches and says he is looking for a shilling he has dropped. Throws match away angrily, saying, "They don't last long enough."'”¹²

Broad Vistas and All That

Britain in 1945. No supermarkets, no motorways, no teabags, no sliced bread, no frozen food, no flavoured crisps, no lager, no microwaves, no dishwashers, no Formica, no vinyl, no CDs, no computers, no mobiles, no duvets, no Pill, no trainers, no hoodies, no Starbucks. Four Indian restaurants. Shops on every corner, pubs on every corner, cinemas in every high street, red telephone boxes, Lyons Corner Houses, trams, trolley-buses, steam trains. Woodbines, Craven 'A', Senior Service, smoke, smog, Vapex inhalant. No launderettes, no automatic washing machines, wash day every Monday, clothes boiled in a tub, scrubbed on the draining board, rinsed in the sink, put through a mangle, hung out to dry. Central heating rare, coke boilers, water geysers, the coal fire, the hearth, the home, chilblains common. Abortion illegal, homosexual relationships illegal, suicide illegal, capital punishment legal. White faces everywhere. Back-to-backs, narrow cobbled streets, Victorian terraces, no high-rises. Arterial roads, suburban semis, the march of the pylon. Austin Sevens, Ford Eights, no seat belts, Triumph motorcycles with sidecars. A Bakelite wireless in the home, *Housewives' Choice* or *Workers' Playtime* or *ITMA* on the air, televisions almost unknown, no programmes to watch, the family eating together. Milk of Magnesia, Vick Vapour Rub, Friar's Balsam, Fynnon Salts, Eno's, Germolene. Suits and hats, dresses and hats, cloth caps and mufflers, no leisurewear, no 'teenagers'. Heavy coins, heavy shoes, heavy suitcases, heavy tweed coats, heavy leather footballs, no unbearable lightness of being. Meat rationed, butter rationed, lard rationed, margarine rationed, sugar rationed, tea rationed, cheese rationed, jam rationed, eggs rationed, sweets rationed, soap rationed, clothes rationed. Make do and mend.

For the policy-makers, the planners, the intelligentsia, the readers of Penguin Specials, everyone with an occupational or emotional stake in 'the condition of the people', there was no shortage of problems to be tackled.¹ Some flowed directly from the war – three-quarters of a million houses destroyed or severely damaged, huge disruption to public services, Britain's debt a record £3.5 billion – but others were of longer standing. Life expectancy had increased from some 50 years in the Edwardian era to about 65, and classic killer diseases like tuberculosis, scarlet fever and typhoid were almost under control; yet access to the medical services remained for many far from free or equitable, and considerable suffering resulted from an unwillingness or (more usually) financial inability to use them. Despite a reasonably energetic slum-clearance programme between the wars, there were still many appalling Victorian slums in the major cities and large pockets of overcrowded, inadequate-to-wretched housing almost everywhere. About seven million dwellings lacked a hot-water supply, some six million an inside WC, almost five million a fixed bath. Above all, there was the profound emotional as well as practical legacy of the economic slump between the wars – at its worst from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, causing widespread poverty and destroying or at best stunting millions of lives. The resonance of 'Jarrow', the 'murdered' north-east shipyard town that famously marched against unemployment, or indeed 'the thirties', would last for half a century. Even a Prince of Wales had once murmured that something had to be done; it had become a less than revolutionary sentiment to agree.

Wartime developments had – at least in retrospect – a seemingly irresistible momentum. As early as January 1941, while the bombs were falling, *Picture Post* outlined in a celebrated special issue (complete with six naked, presumably impoverished small children on the cover) 'A Plan For Britain'. The magazine recalled the sudden end of the war in November 1918: 'The plan was not there. We got no new Britain... This time we can be better prepared. But we can only be better prepared if we think now.' Accordingly, a series of articles (including 'Work for All', 'Plan the Home', 'Social Security', 'A Plan for Education', 'Health for All' and 'The New Britain Must be Planned') offered an initial blueprint for 'a fairer, pleasanter, happier, more beautiful Britain than our own'.²

Over the next 18 months or so, the concept began to be accepted that the British people, in return for all their sufferings in a noble cause, deserved a new start after the war. December 1942 saw the publication of the Beveridge Report, drawn up by the eminent economist and civil servant Sir William Beveridge. In it he set out proposals for a comprehensive post-war system of social security, in effect laying the foundations for the 'classic' welfare state – an attack upon what he memorably depicted as 'the five giant evils' of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness – and in so doing caused such a stir that an extraordinary 630,000 copies of the report (mainly the abridged, popular edition) were sold. Then, in 1944, as the war began to draw to a close, there were two major 'reconstruction' moments: in May the publication of a White Paper that committed the British government to the pursuit of full employment as the highest economic objective; and in August the arrival on the statute book of R. A. ('Rab') Butler's Education Act, which, among other things, created free, non-fee-paying grammar schools.

To all appearances the reforming, forward-looking tide was running fast. *Who Else Is Rank* was the symptomatic title of an unpublished novel co-written the following winter by a 22-year-old Kingsley Amis and a fellow Signals officer. 'We must see to it after we're demobilised,' the Amis figure (a sensitive young lieutenant) says at one point, 'that these common men, from whom we're separated only by a traditional barrier – we're no more than common men ourselves – benefit from the work that has been done, and if the system won't let that happen, well, we shall just have to change the system.'³

In April 1945, as Hitler made his last stand in Berlin, the Labour Party issued its manifesto for the election that was bound to follow the end of the war. Called *Let Us Face the Future*, it demanded decisive action by the state to ensure full employment, the nationalisation of several key industries, an urgent housing programme, the creation of a new national health service and (in a nod to Beveridge) 'social provision against rainy days'. The tone was admirably lacking in bombast but distinctly high-minded. 'The problems and pressures of the post-war world,' the fairly brief document declared, 'threaten our security and progress as surely as – though less dramatically than – the Germans threatened them in 1940. We need the spirit of Dunkirk and of the

Blitz sustained over a period of years. The Labour Party's programme is a practical expression of that spirit applied to the tasks of peace. It calls for hard work, energy and sound sense.' The manifesto's principal author was Michael Young, not long before his lunch with Hugh Dalton. Aged 29, he had been educated at the progressive Dartington Hall and been director of a newish organisation, Political and Economic Planning (PEP), before in February 1945 moving to the Labour Party's research department. Young in later life was self-deprecating about the manifesto: 'The mood was such that second-class documents were going to be thought first-class with a star.'⁴

Two crucial questions suggest themselves, however. How by 1945, at the apparent birth of a new world, did the 'activators' – politicians, planners, public intellectuals, opinion-formers – *really* see the future? And how did their vision of what lay ahead compare with that of 'ordinary people'? The overlaps and mismatches between these two sets of expectations would be fundamental to the playing out of the next three or more decades.

There would be no fly-pasts in its honour, but arguably 1940 was the British state's finest hour, as the nation – under the iron-willed direction of Ernest Bevin as Minister of Labour in Churchill's coalition government – mobilised for total war more quickly and effectively than either Germany or Russia. The state, in other words, proved that it could deliver, as it also did by introducing wide-scale rationing in a way generally seen as equitable. Simultaneously, the first half of the war saw the creation of a plethora of new ministries: not only Labour but Economic Warfare, Food, Home Security, Information, Shipping, Aircraft Production and Production. By 1943 there were, not surprisingly, well over a quarter of a million more civil servants than there had been before the war. It was soon clear, moreover, that all the work of these ministries, as well as of the traditional ones, was now predicated upon assumptions of co-ordinated central planning – an utterly different mindset from Whitehall's customary approach and propagated by some exceptionally talented temporary recruits there, often operating at a very high level.

How, if at all, might this translate into peacetime economic policy? Relatively early in the war, the great economist John Maynard Keynes

had more or less won the battle within the Treasury to persuade that deeply conservative institution to accept at least a substantial measure of demand management as the principal way of regulating the economy in order to keep the level of unemployment down. Thereafter, the real intellectual conflict among radically minded 'activators' was between Keynesians and those whose ideal was wartime-style (and Soviet-style) direct physical planning. For the former, there was still a significant role – at least in theory – to be played by the price mechanism of the market; for the latter, that role was fairly surplus to requirements. By the end of the war, it seemed that the force was with the out-and-out planners, with their emphasis on investment planning and, through direct controls over labour, manpower planning.

Indeed, such was the temper of the times that even most Keynesians had, in a visceral sense, little real faith in, or any great intellectual curiosity about, the possible economic merits of the market or of supply-side reforms. Hence the largely stony academic-cum-intellectual reception accorded in 1944 to *The Road to Serfdom* (dedicated 'To the Socialists of All Parties') by the Austrian economist F. A. Hayek, who was based at the London School of Economics (LSE). 'His central argument was that a modern economy was a vast system of information flows which signal to everyone indispensable facts about scarcity and opportunity,' a latter-day follower, Kenneth Minogue, has helpfully summarised. 'The vitality of modern Western economies, and the best use of scarce resources, rested upon the workers and entrepreneurs having these signals available to them. No planning committee could possibly plug into them. Central direction could lead only to poverty and oppression.' Such was the loss of confidence among economic liberals following the events of the previous 20 years – the inter-war slump, the lessons of the war (including the apparent Russian lessons) – that it would be a long time before a critical mass of politicians began to make a full-bloodedly coherent or attractive case on Hayek's behalf.

Unsurprisingly, then, the inescapable necessity of a substantial portion of the economy being in public ownership was hardly questioned for many years after 1945. Indeed, such had arguably become the prevailing activator consensus from well before the war. The BBC (1922), Central Electricity Board (1926) and BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation, 1939) were all examples of important

new organisations being set up on a public rather than private basis, while Harold Macmillan, the rising force on the Tory left, called in *The Middle Way* (1938) for a programme of nationalisation at least as ambitious as that then being advocated by the Labour Party. To many, the arguments seemed unanswerable: not only were there the examples of major, palpably enfeebled industries like coal mining and the railways as clear proof that private enterprise had failed, but in economies of scale, especially as applied to utilities (the so-called natural monopolies), there was an even more powerful siren call, very much reflecting what the political economist John Vaizey would term the prevailing 'cult of gigantism'. During the last year of war, a quite sharp leftwards shift in the Labour Party – identifying public ownership with both economic efficiency and, in an ominously fundamentalist way, socialist purity – resulted in a fairly ambitious shopping list in *Let Us Face the Future*, featuring the Bank of England, fuel and power, inland transport, and (most contentiously) iron and steel, though with the high-street banks, heavy industry and building all excluded.

What sort of nationalisation would it be? The key text was the 1933 treatise *Socialisation and Transport* by the leading Labour politician Herbert Morrison, creator of the London Passenger Transport Board and, in due course, grandfather of Peter Mandelson. Notably short of hard economic analysis, Morrison's paper nevertheless put forward a plausible enough public-corporation model that envisaged publicly appointed managers running monopoly industries in the public interest, though in a more or less autonomous way. Morrison did not have any truck with the notion of democratic control over these nationalised industries – certainly not democratic control as exercised from the shop floor. 'The majority of workmen are,' he insisted, 'more interested in the organisation, conditions, and life of their own workshop than in those finer balances of financial and commercial policy which are discussed in the Board room.'⁶ The assumption was that the managers of these public corporations would be exemplars of scrupulous, objective professionalism – and that the workers in them should know their place.

A similar faith in the beneficent, public-minded expert underlay the creation of the modern welfare state. There was in December 1942

no greater expert than Beveridge himself, who summarised his Report as 'first and foremost, a plan of insurance – of giving in return for contributions benefits up to subsistence level, as of right and without means test'. This last point was crucial, given the widespread detestation that had developed between the wars of the many forms of means testing. And this in practice meant that the social insurance provided – essentially against loss or interruption of earnings due to unemployment, sickness or old age – would be *universal*. Beveridge's proposals engendered serious consternation on the part of Churchill, most Conservative MPs and some top Whitehall officials. But by March 1943 it was clear, following a clutch of by-elections, that there was an unignorable head of steam behind them. That month, Churchill – in a broadcast called 'After the War' – solemnly promised 'national compulsory insurance for all classes for all purposes from the cradle to the grave' – not the first use of that striking phrase but the one that made it famous. There were still plenty of debates and committees to go through, but by the time the war in Europe ended, family allowances – the first of the Beveridge-inspired pieces of legislation, providing 5s a week (more than 5 per cent of the average male wage) for each child from the second onwards – were virtually on the statute book.

From the perspective of more than half a century later, three of Beveridge's central assumptions are especially striking, starting with what one might call the 'Nissen hut' assumption. Beveridge's insistence that contributions be levied at a flat rate, rather than in the earnings-related way that tended to be adopted in other advanced industrial economies, was perhaps appropriate in an age of austerity. But that would change in an age of affluence with its inflationary implications and, above all, financially onerous concept of *relative* poverty. Secondly, there was Beveridge's assumption that married women would – following their wartime experience – return to and stay at home, given that their prime task was to 'ensure the continuation of the British race', which at 'its present rate of reproduction . . . cannot continue'. In administrative terms this meant that a married woman would be subordinate to her husband, with benefits to her coming only as a result of his insurance. Beveridge's third, equally Victorian assumption, befitting a Liberal who was already in his teens when

Gladstone had been Prime Minister in the 1890s, was that in the post-war world enhanced rights would be matched by enhanced responsibilities. Not only did he insist that his social-security system be contribution-based rather than tax-based, but he was also determined that his ultimate safety net of means-tested national assistance would be pitched at such an unattractively minimalist level that it would 'leave the person assisted with an effective motive to avoid the need for assistance and to rely on earnings or insurance'. And he added sternly that 'an assistance scheme which makes those assisted unamenable to economic rewards and punishments while treating them as free citizens is inconsistent with the principles of a free community'.⁷ Beveridge's welfare state – a term not yet invented but one that he would come to loathe – was not, in short, to be a soft touch.

Integral to the Beveridge vision of the future was a free and comprehensive national health service. The key propagandist, in terms of preparing the intellectual ground for such a development, was undoubtedly Richard Titmuss – a remarkable person who would become (in Edmund Leach's words) the 'high priest of the welfare state'. Titmuss was still a young man, the son of a failed farmer-turned-haulier, when he researched and wrote *Poverty and Population* (1938), which he somehow managed to do while holding down a full-time job as an insurance actuary. In it he examined the depressed areas of industrial Britain and showed in irrefutable detail the appalling human wastage resulting there from poverty and inequality. Other books followed, including (soon after Beveridge) *Birth, Poverty and Wealth* (1943), which put infant mortality under the microscope of social class and found that each week almost 2,000 lives were lost unnecessarily. 'The writings of Titmuss set a new standard,' the historian of the NHS has written. 'Their influence was extensive and immediate. His method of demonstrating inequalities found its way into popularisations aimed at various classes of reader.'

In February 1944 the Conservative Minister of Health in Churchill's coalition government, Henry Willink, issued a White Paper that spoke of 'the need to bring the country's full resources to bear upon reducing ill-health and promoting good health in all its citizens' – in effect making it clear that a post-war Conservative administration would bow to Beveridge's wishes and introduce a national health service.

Nevertheless, 'there is a certain danger in making personal health the subject of a national service at all,' the document added. 'It is the danger of over-organisation.' One way in which Willink intended to minimise that danger was through combining free, universal access on the one hand with diversity of provision on the other – above all through not nationalising the hospital stock as a whole, maintaining instead a mixture of voluntary and municipally run hospitals.

The attitude of the medical profession to all this was ambivalent. It broadly accepted the case for a free and universal health service, but it was understandably reluctant to abandon its profitable private work, feared political interference (whether at a local or at a national level) and – on the part of GPs, who usually operated solo – saw in the increasingly fashionable nostrum of the health centre a dastardly socialist plot. 'We have entered a new era of social consciousness,' the *Spectator* – hardly noted for left-wing views – observed in the spring of 1944. 'Some of the doctors seem not to have realised that fully, and it is desirable in everyone's interest that they should.'⁸ A year later there was still a significant degree of consciousness-raising to be done.

If in health there was still much to play for by 1945, the same was rather less true in education, where in outline anyway the post-war settlement had already taken shape. In a flurry of wartime action, it had three main elements: the Norwood Report of 1943, which examined what should be emphasised in the curriculum at secondary schools and (to the private satisfaction of the President of the Board of Education, Rab Butler, in theory a reforming Conservative) plumped for the time-honoured virtues of PE, 'character' and the English language, as opposed to anything more technical or modern; the Butler Act of 1944, which vastly expanded access to free secondary education; and, from the same year, the Fleming Report on the public schools, which in retrospect represented the spurning of a realistic chance to seek the abolition of the independent sector.

Relatively few people at the time appreciated the negative significance of Norwood and Fleming, amid a general preference for concentrating on provision and numbers, whereas even at its outline stage the Butler legislation was widely seen as historic. 'A landmark has been set up in English education,' the *Times Educational*

Supplement declared. 'The Government's White Paper promises the greatest and grandest educational advance since 1870.' The paper's editor, the progressive-minded Harold Dent, claimed that the government now accepted two key principles – 'that there shall be equality of opportunity, and diversity of provision without impairment of the social unity' – and boldly prophesied that 'the throwing open of secondary education, of various types, to all' would 'result in a prodigious freeing of creative ability, and ensure to an extent yet incalculable that every child shall be prepared for the life he is best fitted to lead and the service he is best fitted to give'.

Did that innocuous phrase 'of various types' catch some eyes? Quite possibly, for although Butler's subsequent legislation would have nothing specific to say about different types of secondary school within the state sector, the fact was that at the very time of his White Paper the Norwood Report was not only enshrining as orthodoxy a tripartite system of grammar schools, technical schools and secondary moderns but explicitly avowing that 'in the Grammar School the pupil is offered, because he is capable of reaching towards it, a conception of knowledge which is different from that which can be and should be envisaged in other types of school'. A former headmaster of Bristol Grammar School, Marlborough College and Harrow School, Sir Cyril Norwood had no qualms about pecking orders. In fact, there was an incipient movement under way in favour of the comprehensive school (or the 'multilateral', as it was then usually called), a movement in which Dent cautiously participated; yet even in one of English society's more egalitarian phases, such a concept was far removed from practical politics. Significantly, when Dent in early 1944 wrote a pamphlet entitled *The New Educational Bill*, he neither questioned tripartism nor mentioned the comprehensive alternative.

There seems, moreover, to have been a similar lack of concern about the inevitable selection implications of a tripartite structure. 'The Government hold that there is nothing to be said in favour of a system which subjects children at the age of 11 to the strain of a competitive examination on which not only their future schooling but their future careers may depend,' wrote Dent about the White Paper in wholly sanguine mode. 'In the future, children at the age of 11 should be classified, not on the results of a competitive test, but on assessment

of their individual aptitudes largely by such means as school records, supplemented, if necessary, by intelligence tests, due regard being had to their parents' wishes and the careers they have in mind.' Just in case anyone was worried, he added that there would be arrangements for children to transfer at 13 in the unlikely event of a mistake having been made two years earlier.⁹

If for Keynesians, social reformers and educationalists the war provided unimagined opportunities for influencing the shape of the future, this was even more true for architects and town planners and their cheerleaders. In their case a momentum for fundamental change had been building inexorably between the wars, and now the heady mixture of destruction and reconstruction gave them their chance. That gathering impetus was perfectly encapsulated as early as 1934 by a young architectural writer answering the question 'What Would Wren Have Built Today?' After diagnosing the City of London as overcrowded, badly lit and generally impossible to work in either efficiently or pleasantly, he went on:

We must give up the building rule which restricts the height of buildings, and we must not only do that, but we must build office blocks twice as high as St Paul's, and have green spaces and wide roads in between the blocks... Two dozen skyscrapers, though they would obviously dwarf St Paul's, would not take away from its beauty if they were beautiful themselves. They would alter the skyline, certainly, yet we should not sacrifice health, time, and comfort to one skyline because we have not the courage to create another.

The author of this confident, uncompromising clarion call? John Betjeman, that future doughty conservationist.

Crucially, this rapidly swelling appetite for the new embraced not only the horrors (real and perceived) of the unplanned Victorian city – above all, understandably enough, the horrors of the industrial slums. It also addressed the much more recent blight, as received 'activator' opinion had it, of the suburbs, sprawling outwards through the 1920s and 1930s, especially around London, in a spectacular and apparently unplanned way. They were, declared the Welsh architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis in 1928, full of 'mean and perky little houses that surely

none but mean and perky little souls should inhabit with satisfaction', while ten years later, according to Osbert Lancaster (cartoonist, architectural writer and coiner of the derogatory term 'Stockbroker Tudor'), the certainty that the streets and estates of the suburbs would 'eventually become the slums of the future' unless they were obliterated did much 'to reconcile one to the prospect of aerial bombardment'. Even George Orwell could not see their point. In his last pre-war novel, *Coming Up for Air*, he wrote contemptuously of 'long, long rows of little semi-detached houses', of 'the stucco front, the creosoted gate, the privet hedge, the green front door', of 'the Laurels, the Myrtles, the Hawthorns, Mon Abri, Mon Repos, Belle Vue', and of the 'respectable householders – that's to say Tories, yes-men, and bumsuckers who live in them'. To someone like Thomas Sharp, a planning consultant as well as a university lecturer in architecture and town planning, 'suburbia' – where by the end of the 1930s about a quarter of the population lived – was complete anathema; without compunction he condemned 'its social sterility, its aesthetic emptiness, its economic wastefulness'. In short: 'Suburbia is not a utility that can promote any proper measure of human happiness and fulfilment.'

Sharp had been implacably anti-suburb through the 1930s, but this particular broadside was published in *Town Planning*, an influential 1940 Pelican paperback. 'However little can be done in wartime towards the achievement of the ideals I have tried to set out, it is essential that we should get our minds clear *now* as to what we are going to do when the war is over,' he stressed. 'The thing is there for us to do if we will. We can continue to live in stale and shameful slum-towns. Or in sterile and disorderly suburbs. Or we can build clean proud towns of living and light. The choice is entirely our own.' Two years later, *When We Build Again* (a documentary focusing on Bournville Village in Birmingham) was even more idealistic. 'There must be no uncontrolled building, no more ugly houses and straggling roads, no stinting of effort before we build again,' declared the film's narrator, Dylan Thomas, who also wrote the script. 'Nothing is too good for the people.' The Beveridge Report did not concern itself specifically with town planning, but in February 1943 – the same year that a bespoke Ministry of Town and Country

Planning was set up – it was Beveridge who opened a notable exhibition, *Rebuilding Britain*, at the National Gallery. 'How can the war on Squalor be won?' asked the accompanying catalogue, referring to one of the five evil giants that Sir William's report hoped to slay. The answer was sublime in its certainty: 'The very first thing to win is the Battle of Planning. We shall need to have planning on a national scale, boldly overstepping the traditional boundaries of urban council, rural council, County Council. Boldly overstepping the interests described so often as vested.'

The following year's Town and Country Planning Act did indeed give far-reaching powers to local authorities for reconstruction and redevelopment, and by the time the war ended it was almost a truism that the future lay with the planners. Entirely characteristic was the plan published in March 1945 for the future of Glasgow, with the most stirring of mottoes on its front cover: 'The Voice of Time Cries out to Man – ADVANCE!' One old man, though, was unconvinced. 'Ah, yes,' said Churchill, as towards the end of the war he looked round the Cabinet and considered his minister's favourable assessment of the latest town and country planning reports. 'All this stuff about planning and compensation and betterment. Broad vistas and all that. But give to me the eighteenth-century alley, where foot-pads lurk, and the harlot plies her trade, and none of this new-fangled planning doctrine.'¹⁰

Among those actively seeking a new and better post-war environment for the British people there were two main camps: baldly put, those who did not believe that the future lay in the big cities, and those who, broadly embracing modernism, did believe just that. They were, with on the whole unfortunate results, almost diametrically opposed to each other.

To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform was the title of Ebenezer Howard's influential 1898 treatise, a utopian vision (heavily influenced by William Morris) of dispersal of population from the huge industrial cities and the creation of new, self-supporting towns of some 30,000 residents of mixed social background, living in light, airy surroundings and surrounded by a 'green belt'. The first 'garden city' was established five years later at Letchworth, in Hertfordshire, and it was followed in 1920 by Welwyn Garden City. During the

war, the Howardian agenda entered the political mainstream, as a series of reports and plans, culminating in the *Greater London Plan* published in 1945, recommended a less populous inner core, a suburbia contained by a substantial green-belt ring and, beyond that ring, the building of environmentally favoured new towns.

Howard's direct successor, and a formidable but in many ways attractive figure in the planning world, was Frederic Osborn, kingpin by the 1940s of the Town and Country Planning Association and an indefatigable propagandist as well as administrator. 'It is not a passion for order, or even for harmony (desirable as they are in measure) that has produced the demand for town planning,' he wrote shortly before the end of the war. 'The thing that has produced the dynamic for planning – the really big and fundamental thing that is wrong with our cities – is congestion: too many buildings and too many people in too little space.'¹¹ Osborn, though just about willing to concede that suburbanites might actually enjoy living in the suburbs, never really faced foursquare the possibility that life in a high-density, imperfectly planned city might have its positive attractions. But unlike many planners, he was well aware that planning did not automatically fit the crooked timber of humanity.

The other camp comprised architects as much as town planners, with many (but not all) looking to the alternative utopia set out in the pronouncements and example of the charismatic French architect Le Corbusier. His *La Ville radiense* had been translated in 1929 and *Vers une architecture* in 1931; in them he demonstrated his belief in the future of great cities – but great cities entirely transformed along ultra-modern lines. 'Men can be paltry,' he declared, 'but the thing we call Man is great... What gives our dreams their daring is that they can be realized.' There were also his four famous, increasingly verbless propositions: 'Architecture has for its first duty that of bringing about a revision of values. We must create the mass production spirit. The spirit of constructing mass production houses. The spirit of living in mass production houses.'

Le Corbusier's English followers had established the MARS (Modern Architectural Research) Group in 1933, with the young Maxwell Fry as one of its most active members. 'Courts and alleys are swept away' ran part of the caption to the visual plan of Fry's

ideal city published in the *Picture Post* special issue in 1941. 'New flats stand in a park.' These high-minded, modern-minded, well-intentioned men – who for a mixture of pragmatic and more or less socialist reasons tended to look to public housing (as yet the Cinderella of the British housing stock) as the likeliest opportunity for making an impact – took few prisoners in either their drawings or their writings. Another such individual with high ambitions and limited tolerance was Ernő Goldfinger: born in Hungary in 1902, a student in Paris until moving to England in 1933, a larger-than-life presence with a frightening temper. Writing in 1942 in the *Architectural Review* (one of modernism's strongholds), he gave a hostile appraisal of a clutch of publications in Faber and Faber's 'Rebuilding Britain' series, masterminded by Osborn and including Osborn's own *Overture to Planning*. After noting that all the publications 'state as axiomatic truths the one-sided arguments of the Garden City Movement', Goldfinger went on: 'The problem before the re-planners of the country can be neatly and precisely defined by saying that *it is to create a frame for human life*, liberated as far as possible from the drudgery of material need. Modern technology enables this to be done. But this aim will not be furthered by the introduction of sentimentality.' Justifying this charge by picking out phrases from Osborn's pamphlet like 'values of our civilisation' and 'sacred fires', Goldfinger then put his modernist cards on the table:

In all these publications the problem of the size of cities is treated again and again with an unrealistic and sentimental bias. The tendency to industrial concentration is brushed aside as one of the evil consequences of modern ways and not as it should be treated, as one of the basic means of efficient production... All the authors seem to be smitten by a kind of agoraphobia and a tendency to animize at the same time. The small, the child-like, seems to haunt them, they transpose their feelings for persons to geographical units.

He added, with a final put-down from a considerable height, that such infantilism was 'noticeable not only in Garden City circles, but in a large section of well-meaning, so-called progressives'.

Fundamental to Le Corbusier's vision was the high-rise, with his

ideal city featuring at its centre towers of as many as 60 storeys. However, even though a fair number of new blocks of flats (rarely above four or five storeys) were built in the 1930s, that aspect of his vision elicited relatively little enthusiasm before the war, with even a modernist like Fry somewhat sceptical. The real flats versus houses (or, as they were often called, 'cottages') controversy only seriously flared up during the war. 'It is eventually undeniable,' insisted Sharp in his 1940 *Pelican*, 'that the flat, if its own particular problems of design are sufficiently studied, *can* afford the pleasantest possible conditions of living for a very considerable proportion of the inhabitants of our towns.' And although he conceded that flats were not ideal for everyone, there were 'hosts' of people who 'could live far more happily in a block of flats, among all the communal facilities and advantages which that form of dwelling can offer, than in the social isolation of the small house, burdened with a private garden which they have neither the time nor the inclination to cultivate'.¹²

Two key documents produced during the second half of the war tilted the balance towards flats. The first was the 1943 *County of London Plan*, the work of Patrick Abercrombie (the leading town planner of the day, with a foot in both camps) and J. H. Forshaw. They concluded that if even six out of ten former inhabitants of bombed-out inner London (above all of the East End) were to be rehoused in their own familiar districts, this would entail a density of 136 people per net residential acre – which in turn meant that only a third of these resettled residents would be in houses and almost two-thirds would be in flats of eight or ten storeys. A deeply disappointed Osborn was convinced that Abercrombie had been nobbled by the London County Council (LCC), to which Forshaw was Architect. He was probably right. The LCC, which unlike the subsequent Greater London Council did not include the new outer suburbs, was dominated by inner-London Labour boroughs; and their councillors were naturally fearful that excessive dispersal would not only play havoc with rateable values but significantly diminish their reliably loyal working-class electorates.

The other pivotal document appeared a year later, with the Dudley Committee's report *The Design of Dwellings*, which for 'large concentrated urban areas' recommended a maximum density of 120

per acre – again, in other words, with significant high-rise implications. Importantly, the submissions that seem to have pushed the committee towards this conclusion were not from zealous architects but from thoroughly 'sensible' organisations like the National Council of Social Service, which argued that most of the low-rise housing estates built between the wars by the LCC had lacked adequate communal facilities, something that well-designed blocks of flats could provide, thereby obviating social problems. Between them, with fateful consequences, the plan and the report went a long way towards making the flat officially acceptable as a standard form of housing, especially public housing.

What gave such matters a new urgency was the Luftwaffe. 'Hitler has at last brought us to our senses,' declared Max Lock, a young architect and planner. 'We, the British public, have suddenly seen our cities as they are! After experiencing the shock of familiar buildings disembowelled before our eyes – like an all too real surrealism – we find the cleared and cleaned up spaces a relief. In them we have hope for the future, opportunities to be taken or lost.'¹³ It was apparent from soon after the worst of the Blitz that the government was broadly backing, albeit with considerable financial nervousness, major reconstruction in the most badly affected cities, so that by the end of the war a series of plans for the future of those cities had been published and/or exhibited.¹⁴ Southampton was to have a wholly new road system and city centre; Portsmouth a rather more modest redevelopment; Bristol a heavily zoned new city centre, including an ambitious new shopping precinct in the Broadmead area; and Hull (through the joint efforts of Abercrombie and Lock) a fairly ambitious redevelopment that included segregated industrial zones and a new, semi-pedestrianised shopping area.

Abercrombie – in his mid-60s, exceedingly well connected, author of the hugely influential textbook *Town and Country Planning* (1933) that saw virtually no role for preservation, even in the most historic cities – was also persuaded, for a not especially generous fee of 250 guineas, to submit a plan for Plymouth. The doyen of town planning did not disappoint. 'The outworn street pattern was totally abandoned, the old Devonport shopping area was swallowed up, and the precinct principle was applied to the civic, business and shopping areas' is how the planning historian Gordon Cherry has aptly summed up

Abercrombie's 1943 vision for a city where less than a tenth of its pre-war housing stock was irrevocably beyond repair as a result of enemy action. 'Unified architectural treatment would be introduced. A new central area road system was decided. One monumental feature was provided: a garden parkway from the station to the Hoe constructing a backbone to the whole of central Plymouth.' It was, Abercrombie himself insisted, the only possible way 'out of the disasters of war to snatch a victory for the city of the future'. There was little or no local consultation, with all objections overruled.¹⁵

In one blitzed city, even more than Plymouth, the man and the hour came together. 'Every town should have in its architect's department a group of town planners . . . Building science is advancing so rapidly that we have no right to build for a thousand years . . . A house should be regarded as permanent only for about thirty years and should then be replaced by an up-to-date one . . . For the good of the community private interests must be subordinated to public ones.' The speaker was Donald Gibson, City Architect of Coventry, addressing the Royal Society of Arts in early December 1940, less than three weeks after a night's intense bombardment had destroyed or seriously damaged most of the medieval city centre. Since his appointment a year before the war, he had been working on radical, more or less modernist plans for the city's future, culminating in May 1940 in a MARS-influenced exhibition on the 'Coventry of Tomorrow'; but the devastation only six months later created a wholly new opportunity.

As early as February 1941, the city council was able to make the choice between two competing plans for the centre's redevelopment. One plan (by Ernest Ford, the City Engineer) emphasised continuity and traditional street patterns; the other, Gibson's, envisaged an entirely new centre that, set inside an inner ring road, would boast not only impressive – and culturally improving – municipal facilities (including library, civic hall, museum, adult educational institution, and school of art and art gallery) surrounded by large open spaces but also a largely pedestrianised shopping precinct of six- or seven-storey buildings. Perhaps emboldened by Gibson's appeal – 'Let it not be said by future generations that the people of Coventry failed them, when the ideal was within their reach' – the Labour-controlled council voted 43 to 6 in his favour.

The decision immediately attracted considerable national attention, and in a visit about a year later the King himself made approbatory noises and 'expressed the opinion that in all schemes of re-planning towns and cities which had been badly bombed, the future amenities for the citizens were of supreme importance'. During the rest of the war, despite concerns from Whitehall about cost and precedent, the City Council held firm to Gibson's plan. 'A cauldron in which experiments were taking place' was how the Bishop of Coventry proudly saw his city early in 1945. Speaking to the local Rotary, he added, 'England was watching to see if the city was going to do its job and allow a full life to the people.'¹⁶ Given Coventry's unique pre-war place in the national psyche as the hub of the thriving British motor industry, the cutting edge of the second Industrial Revolution, this was perhaps not an absurd claim to make.

But would the new, rebuilt, reconstructed Britain enjoy – as Gibson in his plans clearly hoped it would – a new, more democratic, more socially concerned, more politically conscious culture? 'When Work is Over' was J. B. Priestley's contribution to *Picture Post's* 1941 'Plan' for Britain and, apart from 'real holidays for all', his main vision of leisure in the post-war age seemed to involve more facilities to study the arts and the setting up of civic centres of music, drama, film and talk. Increased leisure as such, he emphasised, was not necessarily a boon: 'We do not want greyhound racing and dirt track performances to be given at all hours of the day and night, pin table establishments doing a roaring trade from dawn to midnight, and idiotic films being shown down every street.' Priestley himself kept his distance from the Labour Party, but during the war there was a comfortable, almost automatic assumption on the part of Labour politicians and activists that the conflict was producing a more egalitarian society and thus a more serious-minded, socialist people. Herbert Morrison, for example, was apparently convinced by the spring of 1944 that there now existed a 'genuine social idealism', reflecting the 'altered moral sense of the community', and that accordingly the British people were 'moving into an altogether different form of society, working in an altogether different atmosphere of ideas' – a revolution of outlook, shifting from the values of private enterprise to the values of socialism, that meant that the people would never again 'be content with limited and material aims'.¹⁷

These were not assumptions shared by Evan Durbin, the Labour Party's most interesting thinker of the 1940s and arguably of the twentieth century. Durbin – born in 1906, the son of a Baptist minister – was an attractively paradoxical figure. He once remarked that his three greatest pleasures were 'food, sleep and sex' but accused D. H. Lawrence of 'shallow abstractions' in relation to 'freedom in sexual relations'; politically, he defined himself as a 'militant Moderate'; and, as a trained economist who had lectured through the 1930s at the LSE, he combined a strong belief in economic planning with the conviction that the price mechanism was indispensable if the liberty of consumers in a modern democracy was to be ensured. During the 1930s, Durbin became close to the young psychiatrist John Bowlby, and the influence of Bowlby ran through much of his major work, *The Politics of Democratic Socialism*, published in 1940. As for economics itself, Durbin made a brave gesture towards the 'sound money' school – its citadel the City of London – that had wrecked Ramsay MacDonald's 1931 Labour government, by declaring that 'it is not wise in the long run to expect to live upon golden eggs and slowly to strangle the goose that lays them'.

Towards the end of his book, an arrestingly bleak passage shows how far removed Durbin was from the average political or economic thinker:

Although wealth, physical health and social equality may all make their contributions to human happiness, they can all do little and cannot themselves be secured, without health in the individual mind. We are our own kingdoms and make for ourselves, in large measure, the world in which we live. We may be rich, and healthy, and liberal; but unless we are free from secret guilt, the agonies of inferiority and frustration, and the fire of unexpressed aggression, all other things are added to our lives in vain. The cruelty and irrationality of human society spring from these secret sources. The savagery of a Hitler, the brutality of a Stalin, the ruthlessness and refined bestiality that is rampant in the world today – persecution, cruelty and war – are nothing but the external expression, the institutional and rationalized form, of these dark forces in the human heart.

Among the many phrases that stand out is 'the brutality of a Stalin' – language not yet much heard (as George Orwell had already lamented) on the left.

In 1944, by this time seconded to Whitehall and contemplating standing as a candidate in the next general election, Durbin locked horns with Hayek after the latter's *The Road to Serfdom* was published. Planning, Durbin insisted, was used by socialists to 'indicate a principle of administration and not an inflexible budget of production'; and he emphasised anew that 'the centrally directed economy can be, and should be, instructed to adapt its programme to the changing wishes of the consuming public and the changing conditions of technical efficiency.'¹⁸ It was the characteristically assured, with-the-grain response of a man seemingly poised for the most glittering prizes.

How in fact *did* all these noble aspirations for a better post-war world strike the much-invoked, less often consulted and still heavily (about 75 per cent) working-class British people?

Some observers as well as politicians were convinced that the plates had shifted not just in terms of the formation of an elite progressive consensus (though with hindsight one can see how the extent of that consensus was possible to exaggerate) but also in terms of opinion and sentiment at large. 'At every period,' reflected a Political and Economic Planning (PEP) broadsheet in the winter of 1941/2, 'there have been idealists who have wanted to reform the world; only at rare moments has the demand for the assertion of new principles and new liberties surged from the bottom of society upwards with such overwhelming force that serious opposition is not possible. Now is one of those moments.' The well-informed journalist and author James Lansdale Hodson, in the overall 'ledger of war' that he drew up in February 1945, might not have disagreed: 'Glancing, if one may, at the minds of our people, I think we have moved Leftwards, i.e. turned more progressive in the sense that not many would wish to go back to where we were in 1938–9. The love of books and good music has grown. Our A.B.C.A. [Army Bureau of Current Affairs] and other discussion groups in the Forces have encouraged a number, at all events, to enjoy arguments and the methods of democracy, and our production

committees have worked similarly in factories.' Such was also the conviction of Richard Titmuss, who in 1942 was commissioned to write an official history of the wartime work of the Ministry of Health.

The eventual magisterial account, *Problems of Social Policy* (1950), would make canonical the interpretation that there had indeed been a sea-change in the British outlook – first as the mass evacuation of women and children from the main cities brought the social classes into a far closer mutual understanding than there had ever been before, then as the months of stark and dangerous isolation after Dunkirk created an impatient, almost aggressive mood decrying privilege and demanding 'fair shares' for all. Between them, according to the Titmuss version, these two circumstances led to a widespread desire for major social and other reforms of a universalist, egalitarian nature. The Beveridge Report and the rest of the reconstruction package followed. Tellingly, in his treatment of the Blitz, Titmuss noted that 'there was nothing to be ashamed of in being "bombed out" by the enemy' and that 'public sympathy with, and approval of, families who suffered in the raids was in sharp contrast to the low social evaluation accorded to those who lost material standards through being unemployed during the 1930s'.¹⁹ In the round, such a Whiggish, feel-good reading – unity forged through adversity, irresistible pressure from below leading to longed-for change, human nature actually improving – would, not surprisingly, take some shifting.

And of course, there were plausible grounds for it. In August 1942, a year and a half after Orwell in *The Lion and the Unicorn* had detected a 'visible swing in public opinion' towards socialism and a planned economy since the fall of France, Mass-Observation asked working-class residents of Holborn and Paddington what changes they hoped to see after the war. 'Well, I can't say I'm sure,' was the rather helpless reply of one middle-aged woman, but others were more forthcoming. 'C' in M-O annotation referred to 'artisan and skilled workers', with 'D' being 'unskilled workers and the least economically or educationally trained third of our people':

There'll have to be more equalness. Things not fair now. Nobody can tell me they are. There's them with more money what they can ever use. This ain't right and it's got to be put right. (M65C)

I think the biggest change of all should be security for the ordinary people; I mean, nothing like the depression that followed the last war. I think a lot could be done to avoid that. (*Inv. asked how*). I'm afraid that's too big a question. (M30C)

I think I'd like a lot of changes. (*What particularly?*) I don't know. (F50D)

I do feel that the schooling of children should be a sort of pooled schooling; every child should be allowed to have the same chance; not because a mother has more money she should be allowed to send her child to one school – the class distinction in the schools, I think that should be wiped right out... (F30C)

Oh, lots. (*asked what*) Much better living for the ordinary working man. (*Anything else?*) Better housing and everything. (F25C)

There'll have to be changes. Did you read about that old bitch Lady Astor? She's one that'll be changed, if I had my way. It's the likes of her that causes revolutions. (M45C)

Later that year, in early December, the publication of the Beveridge Report caused a sensation. One London diarist noted that it had 'set everybody talking', and Beveridge himself conceded that 'it's been a revelation to me how concerned people are with conditions after the war'. Among 'my friends and colleagues', stated an engineering draughtsman, 'the publication of the Report caused more discussion and interest than any war news for a long time,' and he added that 'the tone of *all* the discussions was favourable.' From Mass-Observation's national panel of some 1,500 regular correspondents (from 'all walks of life, living in all parts of the country', though in practice almost certainly with a middle-class bias), more than 300 wrote in to express their views, with only a handful against. Reconstruction hopes seemingly remained high and widespread later in the war. Debates in 1943/4 in the Forces 'Parliament' in Cairo saw strong support for bills to nationalise the retail trade and restrict inheritances; a poll by Gallup in July 1944 found 55 per cent welcoming the idea of a national health service (and 69 per cent preferring the prospect of health centres to the normal doctor's surgery); and shortly before Christmas that year almost one in four of the adult population listened to a series of eight Home Service programmes about full employment.²⁰

One activator who had no doubt that things were going the right way was Mrs Madge Waller, who in March 1942 chaired a meeting at the Housing Centre in London. In her introductory remarks she assured the audience that 'there seemed to her to be a fairly general opinion that after the war everything was going to be better, especially among young people'; remarked that 'she had come in contact with several who were thinking and talking about planning for post-war Britain'; and declared that after 'an almost wasted quarter of a century – muddled thinking and mere talking about planning, without any real plan – we would probably not be allowed to "muddle through" again'. She then introduced her main speaker, Tom Harrisson, co-founder five years earlier of Mass-Observation.

Almost certainly the audience, including Mrs Waller, sat up in their seats as Harrisson at the outset stated bluntly that the growing assumption 'that everyone wanted a better Britain in future' was 'rather a false one':

There was quite a striking number of people who were thinking not in terms of helping to make this country better to live in, but of getting out of the country after the war and going to America, Australia, etc. A strong feeling was growing up that people should have less planned and ordered lives and could be themselves more. Certain types of people were in favour of more co-operation in planning, but a very large number of people of the working-class population were so appalled by what would have to be done after the war that they felt rather hopeless about the task.

For elaboration, Harrisson then turned to the study that Mass-Observation had been making of what people wanted after the war compared with what they expected:

What were most hoped for were equality of opportunity, better housing and education, socialism, security, abolition of unemployment, and a mass of other things which might be lumped together as town planning, but was not consciously thought of as such. Their expectations were far inferior to their hopes... People had the right hopes, but the feeling that these hopes would not or could not materialise was very strong.

Overwhelming emphasis was laid on what had happened after the last war. Disappointment then had created a kind of neurosis that seemed unconquerable to a lot of people.

He ended this section of his talk with his killer facts: 'It had been found that five people were pessimistic to every one that was optimistic about reconstruction plans in general after the war, and that proportion increased to nine to one in certain heavily-raided areas.'²¹

The evidence suggests that Harrisson was broadly right – that although in 1940/41 there was at least some popular, largely positive engagement with post-war reconstruction issues, from 1942 the trend was (apart from a blip at the time of the Beveridge Report) the other way. Indeed, some qualifying remarks even need to be made about Beveridge. Before it appeared, a wide-ranging survey (supervised by G.D.H. Cole, a leading socialist intellectual) into popular attitudes to welfare found that, in the words of its Manchester investigator, 'some seemed to be quite satisfied in an inarticulate sort of way' and 'the majority just *did not know*'. At the time of the report's celebrated publication, there was a significant minority of dissenters ('If people here stand for the trades unions putting this bloody Beveridge scheme across they deserve to lose the sodding war' was how one middle-aged man, who called himself a 'Jack of All Trades', put it to an Mass-Observation observer in London), and it is far from clear how many outside the middle class were among those who bought the report in either of its forms. Moreover, from soon afterwards there was widespread cynicism about whether it would ever be implemented, typified by a 55-year-old woman of the 'artisan class' telling an interviewer that 'soon as it's over and they've no further use for you, they'll have a general election and apologise that they can't stand by the promise of the war government – it'll happen just as it did last time'.²²

A Gallup poll taken in April 1943, asking people whether they would like to see 'any great changes' in their way of life after the war, probably captured accurately enough the popular political mood. Of the 57 per cent who agreed with that proposition, 35 per cent had 'no comment' on what changes these might be; 16 per cent hoped for 'better working conditions, better wages, work for everybody, no unemployment'; 15 per cent nominated a 'better standard of living all round, pension and security when old'; a bare 3 per cent mentioned 'socialism' or a 'changed

economic system'; and only 1 per cent plumped even more idealistically for 'no more wars, better international understanding'. The widespread middle-class feeling that the focus on reconstruction was premature may well have been shared instinctively by at least some in the working class. 'Meeting many people in various occupations daily, I find, with my own opinion, too much is being broadcast by the BBC, and circulated in the newspapers, re post-war plans,' wrote a correspondent styling himself 'Commercial' to his local paper in Wolverhampton later that year. 'It is generally agreed that these plans could be arranged without all this prattle, because it definitely tends to make everyone certain that our Government know just when this war will finish, and encourages people to sit easy, instead of getting on with the job.'²³

In the workplace there was (in the context of full employment in a wartime economy) an undeniable new self-assertiveness – Hodson in his 'ledger of war' complained that 'the working-classes, feeling their power, have often shown some ruthlessness, manifested by bus drivers refusing to stop at halts, transport workers striking on Christmas Day, coal-miners refusing sometimes to do a decent day's work' – but this was far from automatically translating into any enhanced political radicalism. *War Factory*, Mass-Observation's 1942/3 study of a Gloucestershire factory producing radar systems where the workers were mainly women, revealed resentment, boredom and alienation as the predominant sentiments, including predictably little interest in the progress of the war. Soon after Beveridge, an engineer from Dudley told M-O that, as far as his fellow-workers in an electrode factory were concerned, the prevailing atmosphere of each man for himself had 'dulled the mind to all except personal problems'. Nor were the armed forces quite the radical hotbed they have sometimes been depicted as. Analysis of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs suggests that their debates were seen more as an opportunity for a welcome respite from military duties than as an occasion to engage in serious political discussion; the future novelist Nicholas Monserrat wrote of the sailors under his command that 'there is no time and, in effect, no occasion for political interest'; or as Hodson heard an officer with the 79th Armoured Division in Germany put it just before the war's end, 'in fifteen months in the ranks I never heard politics mentioned'.²⁴

Was there perhaps widespread popular anticipation of a future

national health service? Those who have scoured wartime diaries report remarkably few sightings, and indeed the 1944 Gallup poll revealing 55 per cent approval also showed a not inconsiderable 32 per cent in favour of the status quo. Polling evidence demonstrated that approval towards the end of the war for Labour's nationalisation plans was reasonably broad (usually in the 40–60 per cent range) but invariably shallow, with few people seeing it as a high-priority issue. As for education, a poll in early 1945 found less than half those questioned had heard of the recent Education Act and a mere 13 per cent were aware of its provision to remove fees from grammar schools. Understandably, Orwell's earlier optimism about a newly radicalised people had by this time completely vanished. 'I overhear very little discussion of the wider issues of the war,' he told his American readers in autumn 1944. 'Everyone expects not only that there will be a ghastly muddle over demobilization, but that mass unemployment will promptly return.' And he added, 'Everyone wants, above all things, a rest.'²⁵

There was plenty of further statistical underpinning available for these and similar assertions. In the autumn of 1943, for example, more than 500 interviews by Mass-Observation across the country found that 43 per cent expected heavy post-war unemployment, 46 per cent another war after the present one, 50 per cent uncertain or without an opinion as to whether the government was paying too much or too little attention to post-war reconstruction, and 49 per cent (up from 19 per cent a year earlier) saying that their main priority after the war was to 'relax or have a change'. But in the end, over and above the figures, we need to listen to the voices, as in the cynical, mistrustful, rather truculent tone of four young tradesmen in an army unit – reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's 'Tommy' – describing their expectations of demobilisation:

It'll be the same old story, those who can pull the strings will be all right, the other poor buggers can look after themselves.

Just the same mess as last time.

Personally I don't trust the Government and I don't suppose they're likely to worry much about us. We're heroes while the war's on, but we can look after ourselves afterwards.

I can't see they can afford to unload everybody at once, or there'll be a lot of trouble. Chaps aren't going to stand for it.

In August 1944, with the long war clearly drawing to an end, an M-O team was in Gloucester. 'What do you feel the next ten years of your life will be like?' it asked a group of working-class mothers. 'Are you looking forward to them, or aren't you looking forward to them much?' The replies have a wonderful – and revealing – authenticity about a world where the big picture was infinitely more local and immediate than any of the activators ever imagined:

Oh God! I'm not good at answering questions.

Well, yes and no. As long as I don't have any more kids I shall be all right.

Don't know. Really I don't.

Why, yes.

Well, I suppose I am – we like to think the future's going to be better.

Oh yes, I don't want to die yet!

Am I? I'll say I am. I want to buy my own house if I can. But it won't be in Alma Place – the row here is terrible, and they keep the kids up till 11 and 12 at night, yelling about the street.

Oh, well, of course I am, hoping for the war to end and things to improve.

Well, it's all according. It all depends on if it's any better than the last two or three.

One of the women was the 'worn and dirty' 43-year-old mother of fourteen 'filthy and ragged' offspring aged between twenty and eight months. 'Well,' she answered when she found a moment, 'I hope I live to see 'em all grow up to look arter theirselves.' She was also asked whether she was religious. 'Well, I believe in God but I can't say I'm religious. You get a bit hasty when you've so many children.'²⁶

These were the sort of people whom Harrisson surely had in mind when in March 1942 he turned specifically to his lecture's title, 'Propaganda for Town Planning', and let rip:

The idea that places really were going to be rebuilt and better new houses constructed had not penetrated down to the large masses of the population. While there had certainly been much talk and propaganda

about town planning, about 95 per cent of it had been quite above most people's heads. Mr Harrisson said that he was worried most by the way that planners and others associated with the matter talked as if they were winning over the general public when really they were only winning over each other. He had never met any group of people who 'scratched each other's backs' more than planners did.

For those in the audience bitten with the planning bug there was worse to come:

The planning conferences were only for those who knew about the subject; the talks on the wireless probably did not reach the people for whom they would be most use; the majority of the planning exhibitions seemed to mean little to any of the general public who saw them. The people needing planning propaganda are those who are used to thinking in concrete terms – who could talk for ages about things connected with their own house, but could not frame a single sentence about planning.

'Planning will have,' Harrisson concluded bluntly, 'either to find out what people want and design propaganda that will have an immediate appeal, or educate people to appreciate how their own lives could be improved by putting into practice the theories held by the planners.'²⁷ The record of the meeting does not, sadly, include any ensuing discussion.

Was Harrisson being unfair to the planners? Significantly, only a few months earlier, the editor of the *Architectural Review*, J. M. Richards, had strongly criticised organisations like Mass-Observation ('a phenomenon very typical of recent years') as tending to block properly visionary town planning. 'The needs of society are a fit subject for scientific study, but they cannot be elucidated by a gigantic piece of consumer research' was the Richards line. 'It is a fallacy that the needs of society are the aggregate of as many individual demands as can be ascertained.' In practice, many planners, exemplified by Max Lock at Middlesbrough, did try quite hard to initiate and then sustain a dialogue with public opinion at both a local and a national level, in order to try to keep that opinion broadly on side with their plans; any view that sees the planners (of the 1940s anyway) as crazed, tinpot dictators is simply a caricature. The fact that there were so few opportunities

during the war, and indeed afterwards, for those being planned for to express an explicit democratic verdict on the plans was less the fault of the planners than of local (and arguably national) politicians.

Nevertheless, to read Thomas Sharp's presidential address in 1945 to the Town Planning Institute is still to be struck by his profession's ultimately top-down assumptions. He did not deny that people had 'the inalienable right to know fully what is being planned for them' – including 'the right to comment on the plans, to require alterations in them, and, if necessary, to reject them'. What Sharp explicitly repudiated, however, was 'actual participation in the act of planning', in other words before draft plans had been drawn up; the notion that the planner should essentially be the servant of the people, putting their wishes into technical form, he castigated as nothing other than 'sheer demagoguery, rather than a manifestation of the working of a true democracy'.²⁸

That the language of the Rebuilding Britain exhibition in 1943 was so notably circumspect and reassuring presumably reflected the lack of popular enthusiasm for town planning. 'Don't get the idea,' it insisted in almost hurt tones, 'that the planner is a robot of a man without sentiment or good manners, whose *idée fixe* is to tear out the ancient core of our towns in the cause of traffic-flow or Brave New Worldliness. The truth is the exact opposite. The move for planning in England has come largely from those who loved old buildings and could see no other way of saving them than by getting "building development" controlled. It is not the dream of the planner to recondition towns until nothing of their personality remains.' They did not see it quite that way in Bristol, where in the last two years of the war a sustained, unavailing campaign (mostly waged by traders but not entirely) sought to reverse the planners' decision to create a large new shopping centre in the 'off the beaten track' Broadmead area at the expense of the city's traditional shopping core. Nor did they in Wolverhampton, where in early 1945 what response there was to the plan for thoroughgoing redevelopment was typified by the view of one correspondent to the local paper: 'I think Wolverhampton people's best interests will be served in the preservation of much that is old in the town, rather than the sweeping away of familiar landmarks in a fetish or orgy of modernising that is almost an obsession today.'²⁹

The same, crucially, may well also have been the case in Coventry, or at least on the part of the middle-aged and elderly suddenly finding themselves living in the middle of the new symbol of the new Britain. Barely a week after the decisive vote by the city council in February 1941 in favour of Gibson's radical plan, a local paper published a cry from the heart by 'An Old Citizen': 'It is to be hoped that the citizens as a whole will have the opportunity of expressing their views before any irretrievable step is taken, for the views of local government officials are not necessarily those of Coventry people who, after all, may want to live here after the war. We should like the new Coventry to be something of the old Coventry, and not merely a fourth-rate provincial city on futurist lines.' Over the next three years there seems to have been relatively little expression of popular feeling either way, as local traders tried unsuccessfully to persuade the City Reconstruction Committee that, in the words of the President of the local chamber of commerce, 'the old idea of street shopping was much better than "cloistered precincts"'. But in December 1944 the issue did briefly if obliquely break cover after the pro-plan *Coventry Evening Telegraph* reported Gibson's talk on 'The New Coventry' to a meeting of Armstrong Siddeley workers. After stressing the need for 20,000 new houses in the city, Gibson had 'pointed out the need for a departure from tradition in building methods' before remarking in conclusion that 'the people themselves would decide how they would be housed in the future'. This brought a double negative response: from 'Coventrian', arguing that 'the people will decide that it is bricks and mortar they require, and perhaps a few less planners,' and from 'Longview', who was 'certain that if a referendum could be taken there would be an overwhelming majority in favour of the orthodox brick and mortar house'.

But for most Coventrians in the years after their devastating Blitz, the top priority was not to take part in controversies about a nebulous future. Rather it was to regroup, to retrench and to try to get back as soon as possible to something like normality, which in essence meant life before the war. 'For the majority of the city's population,' the historians of this strong trend have noted, 'abstract ruminations were simply irrelevant.' By 1944 local cinemas were attracting record attendances, organised cricket and football were once again being played on Saturday afternoons, the Coventry Amateur Operatic Society was

meeting for the first time since 1939, and the National Federation of Anglers was choosing Coventry as the venue for its AGM, reflecting the city's almost 7,000 members of that decidedly non-reconstructionist body. Perhaps most telling of all was the behaviour of Coventry's gardeners. Amid warnings from civic leaders that the proper business of horticulture was still the cultivation of vegetables, they quietly and privately during the last fifteen months of the war grew flowers and shrubs – potent, non-utilitarian reminders of a peaceful way of life that perhaps had not been irretrievably fractured.³⁰

Above all, across the country, it was on the home that most people's hopes and concerns were really focused. 'Home means a place to go to when in trouble,' a female Mass-Observation panellist declared in 1943. 'A place where bygone days were happiest. A place sadly altered by the war. A place where you can do as you like without landlords to consider . . . A place to glorify when away and rely on always.' The same year M-O published *People's Homes*, a comprehensive survey of working-class attitudes to housing. 'One often hears planners argue that ordinary people have no idea of what they want in housing,' the survey's introduction noted. 'This is a satisfactory argument when you are planning for others without knowing their hearts and minds. The many verbatim remarks in this report put that tale out of court once and for all.' Among those quoted was a 50-year-old working woman who lived in an upper tenement flat 'with a husband, two children working and two children still at school'. She was asked about her dream home:

I'd like a sitting-room-kitchen, so that you could have meals in it, and a nice garden at the back for vegetables and chickens, and a flower garden in front. A nice bathroom all done with lino . . . Coal fire in the living room and none in the bedrooms, I don't think fires in a bedroom are healthy. I'd like a sort of sunshine paper, if you know what I mean, with just a little beading round the top, flowers or fruit. That for the sitting room, and blue for the bedrooms. I like boards in the bedrooms, not polished or anything of that, but scrubbed, so that they come up lovely and white. Just scrub them with a bit of soap. The same in the kitchen unless we had a bit of lino there. I don't like the stone floor in the kitchen. It's so cold and damp.

On the basis of this and much other evidence, the survey concluded that 'the "dream home" of the majority is still the small modern suburban house, preferably possessing all modern conveniences, such as a labour-saving kitchen, hot and cold water laid on to a sink in the scullery, and a bathroom with a separate lavatory'. It would also have 'small but light windows, built-in cupboards, coal fires for warming, electric points in most rooms – these and a hundred other things would be appreciated'. Inevitably, 'the range of personal wants is immense – but happily the elasticity of true democratic planning can offer an almost infinite variety, and so satisfy the healthy, contradictory categories of human need and hope and hate.'

This was not good enough for one of the book's reviewers, the economist P. Sargant Florence. 'The most that can be deduced is that some people like one thing, some another' was his unenthusiastic response, and he argued that the book once again pointed 'to the moral that standards it is desirable to achieve cannot safely be left to housewives who are not equipped with the necessary knowledge of what lies within the realm of possibility'. Accordingly, 'architects and planners must give the lead and the target must be placed higher than the inarticulate yearnings of the average working-class housewife, if the same ill-defined sense of dissatisfaction is not to be perpetuated'.³¹

Over and above 'all mod cons', what people wanted – and clearly, unambiguously wanted – was privacy in their homes. 'A garden that is overlooked, windows into which neighbours can see, balconies visible from the road or from houses opposite are all deplored,' the report noted. 'But above all, people dislike sharing a house with another family or even with one person, as many have to do.' The unashamedly unemancipated Mrs Michael Pleydell-Bouverie, who by 1944 had spent three and a half years on behalf of the *Daily Mail* talking to 'the Women of Britain' about present and putative homes, agreed: 'Speaking generally the people want to breathe and move, to be rid of neighbours' wireless, and the clatter of early-risers and late-bedders . . . The community life of which everyone has had experience to some degree or other in this war, has not endeared or recommended itself as a permanent state of affairs.' This strong desire for greater privacy was hardly a new phenomenon – historical demographers have shown that the 'privatised', home-centred domestic unit, founded on the

on the

nuclear family, goes back to pre-industrial England – but undoubtedly the war's more or less enforced communal sociability sharpened such instincts. 'Emphatically, no' and 'We prefer to wash our dirty linen in private' were two typical, highly symptomatic contributions to discussions in 1943 by almost 300 Townswomen's Guilds about the desirability of developing communal laundries.³²

There is evidence, moreover, that if having to move some distance (usually out of a city centre) was the only way in which the desired mixture of greater privacy and more amenities-cum-space (including a garden) could be achieved, then most people were prepared to do that. A cross-class survey in 1943 of 2,000 women in their teens and 20s found that over half wanted to live in a suburb or small town and nearly a third in the country; while a study the same year by the Society for Women Housing Managers discovered that 'an overwhelming majority plumped for a suburban house' if given the choice between different types of modern housing. Nevertheless, the very understandable wish for modern conveniences far from implied an unambiguously positive attitude towards the modern as a whole. An official survey carried out in the closing weeks of the war saw a random sample of 1,727 housewives being shown four photographs of bedroom furniture. Number 1 was 'plain and fairly modern', number 2 'the most old fashioned', and numbers 3 and 4 'extremely modern'. The preferences respectively expressed were 27, 45, 13 and 12 per cent. Significantly, in terms of the breakdown of these preferences, 'the upper economic group tend towards modernity rather more than the lower economic groups' and 'the younger age groups like modern furniture more than the older age group'.³³

It was the overwhelming desire for privacy that pervaded what was nothing less than a mass aversion towards the whole idea of flats – despite, as Frederic Osborn caustically put it in 1942, 'the most persistent propaganda by architectural playboys who want larger boxes of plasticine with which to indulge their creative fancy'. A year earlier, the *Picture Post* special (including Maxwell Fry's modernist vision) had prompted congratulatory letters (with a fair sprinkling from the great and the good), but Margaret Blundell dissented: 'Your Brave New World plan is all very well in some respects, but will "the workers" be satisfied even if it is put into practice?' asked this gasfitter's wife from Sirdar

Road, Wood Green, N22. 'I doubt it. Your flats would never be home to me. You can clear away whole towns of ugly old houses in one sweep, but you cannot change human nature so quickly. Slow change is better in the long run.'³⁴

Over the rest of the war, a series of surveys showed how far from unusual Blundell's dislike of flats was – a dislike, it must be remembered, at a time when 'flats' meant in most people's minds a handful of storeys, not a high-rise in the modern sense of the term. Whereas 49 per cent of those asked in the *People's Homes* survey wanted ideally to 'live in a small house with a garden', only 5 per cent of the sample 'would by choice inhabit a flat, and even among flat dwellers only 28 per cent would not prefer to move to some sort of house, if they had the choice'. Soon afterwards, a submission made to the Dudley Committee by the Women's Advisory Housing Council similarly asserted that only 5.7 per cent of its respondents preferred flats to houses, with drawbacks of the former including not only lack of privacy but noise, fears over children's safety, 'gangsterism' and problems of coal deliveries and refuse disposal. And Pleydell-Bouverie confirmed that 90.2 per cent of the women she had polled had expressed a preference for a house or a bungalow, a preference partly explained by one of her more graphic chapter titles, '99% Want a Garden'. Still, as the *People's Homes* report had wryly concluded about working-class people and such apparently firm wishes, 'Happily for the planners, they will make the best of a bad lot or a good little.'³⁵

What about 'community'? That bewitching, tantalising word would be the subject of many facile generalisations and much mental anguish in the years ahead but was not yet on the lips of every social investigator. Probably the closest to a 'community study' undertaken during the war was Dennis Chapman's survey of Middlesbrough (a town not short of slums and industrial pollution), based on interviews in the summer of 1944 with 1,387 'housewives', 971 'men workers' and 238 'women workers'.

Almost three-quarters expressed the wish to continue living in Middlesbrough after the war, with easily the most common reason being 'born here, used to it', followed by 'reasons connected with employment', 'friends and relatives here', and 'like it'. Predictably, it was younger people and higher earners who most frequently expressed

the wish to live elsewhere. Asked about Middlesbrough's post-war problems, most people put unemployment and housing as their two main concerns; but although 'neither men nor women in Middlesbrough considered problems of physical planning to be of first importance', they were prepared to express views when asked what 'should be done after the war to make Middlesbrough a better place to live in', with 'improved roads and traffic circulation' seen as the top priority. Most people also wanted to see more libraries, theatres, playing fields, play centres, swimming pools and health clinics, but there was no majority support for more meeting places.

In answer to the question 'In what part of Middlesbrough and its neighbourhood would you prefer to live – why?', the most popular reason for choosing a particular district was 'healthier, better air, better for children', followed by 'like country, open', 'like the district' and 'better housing', with 'near relatives and friends' trailing badly behind. Asked if they wanted to move to a new house, in practice almost certainly in a suburb, more than two-thirds answered in the affirmative – with the desire for better amenities (including a garden) as the principal motive but with what Chapman called 'dissatisfaction caused by the social quality of the neighbourhood' also playing a part. He got closer to that factor by asking the pertinent question 'If you were entirely free to choose, would you want to live amongst the same kind of people that are in your neighbourhood now, or would you prefer to live amongst a different group of people?' In reply, 55 per cent said they did want to go on living among the same kind of people; 28 per cent would prefer to live among different people; and 17 per cent were 'unable or unwilling to express an opinion'. By far the most common reason given by the satisfied was 'like them, they are all right, etc', while among the dissatisfied a pervasive complaint was that 'people are noisy, rough, etc', though 'don't have much to do with neighbours – don't like people round here' was also popular.

Chapman further found that 'neighbourly relations are of considerable extent and play an important part in many fields of the daily life of the housewife', though he added the crucial qualifying point that 'the unit of neighbourly relations appears to be very small, a handful of families participating in each group'. Moreover, not only was it the case that 'the common social institution has so far been an

insignificant source of "best friends" and even the common school is of very minor importance', but 'visits to common social institutions between neighbours who are friends are likewise seen to affect only a small number of people'. There were, accordingly, no strong grounds for 'centring a residential unit around a common social institution – a community centre or a school – from the point of view of creating social integration'. Put another way, 'the evidence is fairly conclusive that the idea of a neighbourhood unit [à la latest American town planning] which should be a microcosm of the social structure of the whole community is incorrect'.³⁶

All in all, Chapman's report was sober, unsentimental stuff. It realistically portrayed people's strong desire for improvement in their personal conditions, preferably as part of a suburban lifestyle; their almost equally strong wish to live among those whom they perceived to be their own kind of people (whatever that kind might be); and their strictly limited appetite for the communal.

Was 'the Titmuss version' a complete myth, then? No, not quite. An official survey in late 1942 into public attitudes to plans for reconstruction located what it called a 'thinking minority' that was *actively* in favour of more state intervention in order to implement policies (in areas such as employment, welfare, housing and education) that would seek to benefit all – even if such policies involved higher taxation. The size of this 'thinking minority' was reckoned at between 5 and 20 per cent. Beyond that point it is difficult to salvage the myth. Indeed, the probability is that the size of this minority (inevitably disproportionately middle-class in composition) was actually shrinking towards the end of the war. Penguin Specials, originally launched in 1937, probably hit their peak in February 1942 with the publication of Archbishop William Temple's *Christianity and the Social Order*, which sought to marry faith with socialism and rapidly sold 140,000 copies. But by 1945 sales of the Specials had slumped to such an extent that the series was temporarily abandoned.

Fundamental social and cultural continuities remained – indeed, were arguably strengthened rather than lessened by the war. 'Class feeling and class resentment are very strong,' Harold Nicolson observed with foreboding soon after the European conflict ended. The Cutteslowe walls – built across and even along a north Oxford road in 1934 in

order to separate private from council housing – stayed obstinately in place. The most-watched films during the war were Gainsborough melodramas, virtually without political or even social content, while the plots of the ever-popular Mills and Boon novels coursed along almost regardless of what was going on in the outside world. A culture that was still holding its own was that of the improving, intensely respectable, wanting-no-hand-outs working class. The gasfitter's wife Margaret Blundell spoke eloquently for it in her 1941 letter to *Picture Post*: 'What sort of men and women will the New World children turn out to be if they are to have no struggle? One must strive if one is to develop character. Your picture of Rich v Poor does not ring quite true. A considerable number of working-class manage a holiday every year, all the more enjoyable when one has struggled for it. You would make things too easy. Jealousy is the canker of our time. The rich will always be with us in one form or another and rightly so.' But within the working class the cultural future lay elsewhere – a future simultaneously epitomised and hastened by the startling rise in the *Daily Mirror's* popularity (beginning in the mid-1930s but accelerating from 1943, with circulation rising from two million that year to three million by 1946). Drawing inspiration directly from America, it successfully relied on a threefold formula: a brash irreverence (not only in peacetime) towards the authorities; a Labour-supporting politics of a far more populist, less heavy-duty type than that ponderously upheld by the Trades Union Congress-backed *Daily Herald*; and a very professionally assembled tabloid blend of cartoons, comic strips (the legendary Jane), human interest, sport and (often Hollywood) celebrities. 'Catering for short tea-breaks and even shorter attention spans', in the regretful but probably accurate words of one historian, it was a formula whose time had come.³⁷

A final survey. *Patterns of Marriage* by Eliot Slater (a psychologist) and Moya Woodside (a psychiatric social worker) was not published until 1951, but its richly suggestive fieldwork comprised a detailed survey conducted between 1943 and 1946 of 200 working-class soldiers and their wives, mainly from the London area. Slater and Woodside's central focus was on courtship, marriage and sex – revealing in the last area an extensive amount of what the authors called 'passive endurance' on the part of the wives, typified by one's remark: 'He's very good,

he doesn't bother me much.' But there was much else. Both men and women, they found on the class front, 'were dominated by the distinction that is expressed in "We" and "They"', and, even in this war in which all were involved together, by the feeling of a cleft between the "two nations". Typical assertions quoted were: 'there'll never be much improvement so long as the country is run by people with money', 'the working class should be given a fairer do than they have had', and 'MPs have no worries, they've all got money in the bank.' The war itself had done little or nothing to broaden horizons. Nearly all the male conscripts, Slater and Woodside found, 'were bored and "fed up"', took little interest in wider and impersonal issues, and were only concerned to get the war over and get home again'. As for their wives, 'the war was a background to daily life, irritating, endless, without significance other than its effects on their personal lives.' And for 'men and women alike patriotism was a remote conception, not altogether without meaning, but associated with feelings which were entirely inarticulate'.

For the husbands in particular, Slater and Woodside emphasised, one concern dominated above all:

The spectre of unemployment is never very far away. Some have experienced it themselves; others remember its effect on their own childhood; and for still others it exists as a malignant bogey that must dog the steps of every working man. Again and again a preference is expressed for the 'steady job' as opposed to high wages, more especially by the older men. It is not likely that the lesson that England learned from the years of the trade depression will ever be forgotten... There was a strong feeling that the fate of the individual under the capitalist system had little to do with merit, and depended on nebulous and unpredictable social forces. If only these could be controlled, a rich reward for personal ambitions was of secondary importance.

None of which guaranteed any more than a minimal interest in politics: 'Politics, it was felt, had nothing to do with their ordinary lives, in which other interests, sport and home, predominated. Politics was a special subject, beyond the understanding of the uneducated, or too vast and impersonal for any individual effort to influence.' A mere 21

out of the 200 men took 'an active interest in politics', but the attitude of the overwhelming majority was summed up by assertions like 'I'm not interested in politics, it isn't my job', 'politics are a pain in the neck, I've not the education to understand them', and 'me being an ordinary working-class man, politics is nothing to do with me; we're too busy with our families and jobs'. Politicians themselves, moreover, were generally seen in a dim light – 'all politicians are rogues', 'I'm against political parties, they're only out for their own gain,' 'no government is any good'.

The wives, meanwhile, were not sufficiently engaged with politics even to be cynical, with 'a serious and intelligent interest' being taken by only seven out of 200. 'The remainder showed an extreme apathy and lack of interest. Politics are felt to be remote from real everyday life, as incomprehensible as mathematics, the business of men. Preoccupation with personal concerns, the affairs of the home, children, leave little room.' Slater and Woodside quoted some of them: 'I married young, and had no time, with the children', 'I don't read papers much about the Government', 'After being on your feet all day, you just want to sit down and have somebody bring you a nice cup of tea.' With a note of palpable disappointment, the authors concluded about the wives that 'their effect as a whole is negative, conservative, a brake on any change from the established order'.³⁸

It hardly took a Nostradamus to see that the outriders for a New Jerusalem – a vision predicated on an active, informed, classless, progressively minded citizenship – were going to have their work cut out.

Britain in 1945. A land of orderly queues, hat-doffing men walking on the outside, seats given up to the elderly, no swearing in front of women and children, censored books, censored films, censored plays, infinite repression of desires. Divorce for most an unthinkable social disgrace, marriage too often a lifetime sentence. ('I didn't want it,' my own grandmother would say to me in the 1970s when, making small talk soon after my grandfather's death, I said that at least he had lived long enough for them to have their Golden Wedding party. 'All I could think about was the misery.') Even the happier marriages seldom companionable, with husbands and wives living in separate, self-contained

spheres, the husband often not telling the wife how much he had earned. And despite women working in wartime jobs, few quarrelling with the assumption that the two sexes were fundamentally different from each other. Children in the street ticked off by strangers, children in the street kept an eye on by strangers, children at home rarely consulted, children stopping being children when they left school at 14 and got a job. A land of hierarchical social assumptions, of accent and dress as giveaways to class, of Irish jokes and casually derogatory references to Jews and niggers. Expectations low and limited but anyone in or on the fringes of the middle class hoping for 'a job for life' and comforted by the myth that the working class kept their coal in the bath. A pride in Britain, which had stood alone, a pride even in 'Made in Britain'. A deep satisfaction with our own idiosyncratic, non-metric units of distance, weight, temperature, money: the bob, the tanner, the threepenny Joey. A sense of history, however nugatory the knowledge of that history. A land in which authority was respected? Or rather, accepted? Yes, perhaps the latter, co-existing with the necessary safety valve of copious everyday grumbling. A land of domestic hobbies and domestic pets. The story of Churchill in the Blitz driving through a London slum on a Friday evening – seeing a long queue outside a shop – stopping the car – sending his detective to find out what this shortage was – the answer: birdseed. Turning the cuffs, elbow patches on jackets, sheets sides to middle. A deeply conservative land.