

A PERSONAL POSTWAR POLITICAL TRAVELOGUE

As we approach a UK General Election, I wanted to reflect a little on my own experiences of them starting with my first in 1945. This is not an attempt at an academic piece of writing. Think of it as an untidy unloading of observations and feelings. Yes, I taught and examined government and politics, but so often do I hear people expressing their views on those subjects from the heart as well as the head. So I aim to do the same with little editing. Don't expect the sub-headings to be perfectly composed. I am recovering from an eye operation.

J.E.D. Hall describes the beginning of Attlee's first administration in **LABOUR'S FIRST YEAR, PENGUIN BOOKS (1947)**. A bankrupt and very tired country had elected a government to transform society. It made mistakes, particularly in foreign policy when put under pressure by the USA (Israel and the Korean War), but created what was later to be called the **Postwar Consensus** lasting until Thatcher. In effect it created a society based upon the **Beveridge Report of 1942**. And we might remember that not only was Beveridge a Liberal MP but that the person who did the research for the Report was also then a member of that Party, Harold Wilson.

Hall quotes an exchange in the Commons between a flamboyant Churchill and a quiet Attlee.

"The gloomy vulture of nationalisation hovering over our basic industries", Churchill on the attack.

"Is it his view that our basic industries are so rotten that they attract the vultures?", Attlee's clever response.

Today I see privatisation as a gang of vultures.

Not only were the arguments between the two major parties intense but the volume of work, the amount of legislation, was record breaking. In 1945 we did not need a lazy government. And we did not have one.

I have two strong personal memories of that time.

Before the NHS I remember our GP at the foot of the bed where I lay reminding my mother to pay her for treating my measles.

But after the NHS I could not believe how quickly I recovered from pneumonia, an illness that my parents were scared of. I had been given tablets that we later learned to call antibiotics. We thought they had just been invented. Actually, they had been available for years to those that could afford them.

Pushed into the Korean War by the USA the Labour Government had to double our military budget and prescription charges were introduced to pay for war. A young member of the government resigned on principle, Harold Wilson. Now I struggle to think of an MP climbing his way up the greasy pole who would resign on any kind of principle.

1951 gave us a General Election whose significance we continue to ignore.

In terms of popular vote Labour broke the record. But it lost because of our First Past The Post system. We still have that system. Blair, you may remember, was interested in adopting a system of proportional representation and got Roy Jenkins to design a proposal. When, however, his New Labour won the General Election of 1997 with such a big majority his interest in change faded fast.

But perhaps the major significance of 1951 is just how little change there was when the Conservatives took over. Harold Macmillan was Housing Minister and built 300,000 Council Houses a year. You might call that a socialist achievement. In fact the continuation of policies based upon Labour's social values paid off for the Conservatives when they increased their seats in the 1955 General Election. The Consensus was popular.

Ah but, then came Anthony Eden and his Suez adventure in 1956. It was a disaster and reminded us of two changes that some Tories thought had never taken place. First, we no longer had an Empire on which the Sun never set; and second, we were now a US vassal state. Do you think that there might be some politicians today convinced that Brexit was the opportunity to bring back gunboat diplomacy? That was how we had dealt with China and many other countries in the past. The Opium Wars.

In 1959 Prime Minister Macmillan gave us the prototype for how a General Election should be won. The Easter Budget put money in voters' pockets. Then followed a long hot summer when they spent it. Yes, he was lucky with the weather but by then if he had claimed that it was he who switched on the sunny weather many would have believed him. And in October he called a General Election. A big Tory win. And all still maintaining Attlee's Postwar Consensus. Vicky, the cartoonist, gave him the title SuperMac. Today we would use the word Teflon.

In **1962**, however, as the Poet Laureate Philip Larkin told us, sex was invented. Poor old Macmillan had no notion how to cope with Mandy Rice Davies, Christine Keeler and good grief, Profumo. Scandal! It hit him in 1963 and suddenly parliamentary history had to be made. To get a new prime minister we had to go to the House of Lords. And we had to learn to pronounce Home as Hume.

How could Sir Alec possibly compete in the 1964 General Election when up against the very clever Harold Wilson? He actually did exceptionally well. Maybe we have to remember that all of our major political parties were still operating within the Consensus. Thatcher was years away then. Not now.

I remember vividly the General Election of 1966. Against the newly appointed leader of the Conservative Party, Edward Heath, Wilson's Labour came very close to matching the 1951 record vote. Between then and 1970 there were a number of social reforms, but perhaps the most memorable was the establishment of the Open University. I am told that Wilson, a former member of the Liberal Party, had a picture of Gladstone on his wall and regarded the Open University as completing the educational policies of Gladstone who in 1870 had made school education both free and compulsory up to the age of 14.

Domestically we might also remember that under Wilson capital punishment was ended and that he supported David Steel in the passing of the Abortion Act.

In foreign affairs perhaps there were two prominent events. One was the referendum about us staying in the 'Common Market' that we had joined under Heath. Voters were overwhelmingly for what today we call 'Remain'.

The other event was Vietnam. Unlike Blair Wilson provided the Cabinet with full information in 1967 and called for a collective decision. It was a loud NO!

There was a brief but entertaining diversion on the travelogue. In late 1967 with the balance of payments not doing so well some people began a campaign called I'm Backing Britain. There was even a memorable song of that name. It did not exactly overwhelm the hit parade but some of us can still attempt an imitation of Bruce Forsyth singing it.

On the lamp posts outside the classroom where I was teaching were strapped the signs, Bootle is Backing Britain.

Heath's victory in 1970 was a surprise, given that the polls placed Labour well ahead. Yes, there was economic bad news in the days before the election, but some political scientists attributed the loss of Labour votes to the influence of Enoch Powell stirring up working class racism. Not every political scientist of the day agreed with such an analysis.

Under Heath, however, possibly the key new feature on the horizon was the Common Market, as we called it back then. We had joined on the First of January 1973.

But then the oil crisis, the three-day week. Another General Election in March 1974. Wilson back as PM with a Hung Parliament. That was an exciting year because there was yet another General Election in October giving Wilson a three-seat majority.

And then in 1976, at the age of 60 Wilson announced his retirement.

It was a shock and many explanations have been made. Prominent among them was the role of MI5 in treating, at least for a time, Wilson as an agent of the USSR. Certainly, there were plots to bring him down and they included the editors and owners of newspapers. It might surprise you to know that the then editor of the Times was notable in calling for a national coalition government. Name of that editor? William Rees-Mogg, father of Jacob. There was even an attempt to involve the Royal Family in the form of Mountbatten. He refused to become involved.

Yes, our media do influence our politics.

A good book on Wilson is **HAROLD WILSON - The unprincipled prime minister? - REAPPRAISING HAROLD WILSON EDITED By Andrew S. Crines and Kevin Hickson (2016).**

There are twenty-four contributors to the book and their judgments are positive.

Wilson was replaced by Jim Callaghan, 'Sunny Jim'.

Taking over from Wilson he needed an agreement, not a coalition, with the Liberal Party in order to maintain his government. He was also the last Prime Minister to have had active experience of warfare.

In education he began what was known as the Great Debate which years later gave us the National Curriculum. My personal opinion of this was that once again here was a politician of zero experience, very disconnected from the professionals but interfering. Baker, Ken Clark, Major, Blair and Gove are further examples of politicians refusing to hear the voices of the workers in education.

Economically part of his time was caricatured as The Winter of Discontent. Prior to that it looked in 1978 that had he called a General Election he would probably have won it. Later he admitted that leaving it till 1979 had been a mistake.

And so, Thatcher.

In her first administration unemployment officially almost trebled. What we forget is how often she changed how unemployment was measured so that it almost always came down. Instead of three million unemployed we probably had more than four. In other words, she almost quadrupled the numbers of people out of work. She was lucky to have the discovery of North Sea Oil to exploit, but unlike Norway that used it to benefit its social services Thatcher used it to fund her economic experiment.

Her economic and social guru was Sir Keith Joseph who brought to her attention the works of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek. Among her advisors was Patrick Minford.

I once attended a small seminar managed by him at the University of Liverpool. Suddenly I 'got' Thatcherism.

If you want rich people to work harder you offer them more riches. And if you want poor people to work harder you threaten them with more poverty.

A lot happened during her eleven years as Prime Minister. A list of events would be very long. But the theme of her administrations was markedly different from the previous Postwar Consensus. Today I use the phrase, 'Greed disguised as Growth.' I think that pretty well sums up her approach.

It has meant much suffering in society. And in fact, she told Women's Own that there was no such thing as 'society', only individuals and families. Her husband, by the way, was given an hereditary knighthood. That is why her son is Sir Mark.

Her favourite son?

He is also now a knight, Sir Anthony Blair.

Having been stylishly assassinated by Geoffrey Howe she was replaced by John Major who did not like GCSE coursework and introduced silly tiers into the examination papers. Writing papers became like playing three-dimensional chess and gave me the most nerve-wracking professional time of my life. A very stupid grammar school had told parents that their kids would all get the top grades. They did not because their teachers had failed to read the syllabus properly, ignored how the assessment objectives worked and merely fed candidates lots of knowledge to regurgitate. They seemed to think they were still teaching O-Level. In the final appeal of three sessions, I was not allowed to say out loud that the teachers were unprofessional, but managed, thank goodness, to win the appeal.

Then I got drunk.

Chair of the appeal was a cousin of the Queen who told us that she liked visiting Manchester because so many of the roads were named after members of her family.

Perhaps you can remember Major's Citizens Charter that was supposed to make clear the standards that public services should be trying to reach. They were, however, accompanied by privatisation, noticeably of the railways and profit making rather than public service became their purpose. And who can forget the Cones Hotline?

He had to cope with Tory Eurosceptics, of whom he said,

"Calling three of my colleagues, or a number of my colleagues, 'bastards' was absolutely unforgivable. My only excuse is that it was true."

Of his successor he said the following while giving evidence to the Leveson Inquiry into hacking by the News of the World,

"In many ways he (Mr Blair) was to the right of me," said Mr Major, who was prime minister from 1990 to 1997. "I remember joking once that I had gone swimming in the River Thames and left my clothes on the bank - and when I got back Mr Blair was wearing them. "He told the inquiry: "I don't think it was very surprising that they (The Sun) decided to support Labour."

POLITICAL STORY TELLING

Also called **LEGACIES**.

Sometimes I think I need counselling because I have read and written about so many autobiographies by politicians. What do I learn from them? Objective accounts of events? They are often dressed up to look like that. A fair distribution of praise and blame? I am not sure the word 'fair' always applies.

What I do see so often is self-justification. In his book Cameron first justifies his involvement in the destruction of Libya and then, when he admits that it all went wrong, tells us that it was not his fault.

Nadine Dorries, disappointed that she did not get into the House of Lords as she was sure Boris, her hero, wished, calls her book **THE PLOT**. Clearly, she wanted us to believe that it took a well-organised evil plot to thwart her and him.

Great gossip in her book though.

Trickle Down Truss? She might have simply written, "Greed is Good, but let us call it Growth."

What I learned from her was that she so truly represents the current Conservative philosophy that the Party has to keep shouting that she does not. They know that being honest will lose them votes.

I called my review of Blair's book **FROM ILLUSION TO DELUSION**.

At the end of his reign the only person left who was deluded was himself. He really believes in his own religion. Clearly neither his family nor his cronies had the guts to tell him any home-truths.

From Bercow, **UNSPEAKABLE, 2020**. I felt that I really was getting honesty.

But what prompts me now to reflect on such autobiographies is the thought of what Sunak will write.

Who shall he blame?

In my head is that great Snoopy cartoon of him leaving the tennis court saying, "It matters not if you win or lose, it's how you place the blame."

THAT is how so many politicians approach the writing of autobiographies as they attempt to convince us of the great value of their legacy.

The U.K. Two Party State now looks more like a Twenty Two Party State.

While we contemplate the virtual disappearance of the Tories and a vast majority for **Under New Management Labour**, we should also be asking ourselves how and why the old 'system' is no longer working.

Farage is little more than a huckster who keeps changing the name of the product he is selling, hoping to make a profit each time. His current product is not even a political party. It is a private company posing as a party. It makes him wealthy while indulging his desire to spout his personal prejudices.

And Starmer has not only removed from the Labour Party anyone who can spell 'socialism' but has drained it of excitement. Do you see hordes of voters eagerly waiting to place an X next to a Labour candidate?

After fourteen years of Tory Misrule instead of Labour giving us a well-articulated vision of social justice for the many not the few, we must watch it cuddle up to the Sun and wealthy donors while failing to oppose apartheid and genocide.

Some say that at least they will be less inefficient than the Tories, meaning?

Better capitalism?

No thank you.

I cannot keep up with the growing number of political parties. Possibly at the General Election there will also be more Independents than ever. In other words, while small parties proliferate so do the number of people who prefer to think for themselves rather than join a club with rules.

Perhaps we might remember when Henry VIII rejected the authority of the Pope. It did not take long before we grew a variety of chapels and churches.

We might also remember that the Civil War was not unconnected to this. And Charles I? Head chopped off just a short distance from 10, Downing Street.

I believe that the significance of the next General Election will not be about which major political party shall obtain power.

It will be about the collapse of what for years we told ourselves was a reliable system.

Facing me on a shelf is **The Blunders of our Governments by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe, 2013.**

No Minister of the Crown should ever be appointed without being able to prove that they have read this book.

The authors demonstrate how our governments act without thinking and then try to escape being blamed when it all goes horribly wrong. Cameron was PM when it was researched, written and published and Osborne was Chancellor of the Exchequer.

"We are all in it together."

Gove was in charge of education and the reduction in the number of teachers began with him.

Eleven years have passed since the book was published and we should ask ourselves what improved afterwards. Anything?

No, things became worse.

The late Anthony King often referred to the habit of governments to hoard power. When they do that they also hide it from being challenged. And if power is not challenged politicians cannot claim to be democratic.

Next candidate who knocks on my door will be asked if they have read the book.

The word **MANIFESTO** relates to the word **MANIFEST**.

In other words, it is a document that makes intentions clear. This can go wrong in two ways, at least two ways.

If the number of intentions is very small, they may be so general that readers are unclear: "We intend to make the World a better place." is hardly helpful.

Recently there have been attempts to write long essays with lots and lots of points. Not only will there be many opportunities for opponents to find things to criticise, but it will also be boring.

Probably my favourite Manifesto was by the Monster Raving Looney Party in which, from memory, Screaming Lord Sutch wrote, "Warning, Voting Can Seriously Damage Your Brain".

In 2010 the Tories produced a blue hardbacked book with glossy pages that you would have had to pay me to read.

In that same year Clegg's LibDems made one absolute commitment: an end to Tuition Fees. In invisible ink was also written, "Unless we are offered power."

A confession: for many years I collected Party Manifestos. This year I have chosen not to. Yes, I am bound to read a bit about them here and there, but what do they try to tell me?

"Our lies are cleverer than the lies of all the other parties."

I did read Corbyn's 2019 Manifesto. It was too long but what struck me was its similarity to that of the 1929 Liberal Party that was based upon the work of Maynard Keynes and Lloyd George.

Back then our economy was struggling to recover from the effects of Churchill's appalling budget of 1925 that gave us the General Strike. It was a restorative budget. And like Corbyn's it did not generate votes.

We think of the Depression of the Thirties as entirely due to the Wall Street Crash, but Churchill caused Britain's earlier.

Corbyn's Manifesto might have succeeded if he had not been assassinated by Starmer and Israel.

Yes, my mind is wandering and I am utterly disgusted to see politicians and journalists celebrating Israel's 'release' of a tiny number of hostages by means of multiple murder. How many thousands of hostages does Israel hold?

My diligent research among neighbours, in the pub, the newsagents and the Co-op tells me that 'excitement' is not the word for this General Election.

JUST A LITTLE WITTERING

Llandudno 1981, remember those words, **"Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government."**

Lovely man David Steel.

And now I am thinking of Kinnock.

Why on Earth do so-called political journalists regard Militant Tendency as even remotely on the Left?

They believed in AUTOCRACY and destroyed Labour voting communities in Liverpool because they dared to express their own views that did not match those of Militant.

As for feminism and anti-racism, Militant considered them irrelevant.

Derek Hatton remains a sick joke in Liverpool, a rich sick joke.

Kinnock's speech about the redundancy notices? I still have mine.

At the time I was working to support kids who were in danger of dropping out of school. My colleague and I had to use our own money to keep the project going. Expenses? Never claimed them.

What am I looking for, hoping for?

I want politicians who are absolutely opposed to apartheid; who never make excuses for genocide; and who will bravely stand up for humanity.

Where are they?

TWO THOUSAND AND TEN, what a great year for politics.

Surely I am not the only observer of U.K. politics since 2010 who has struggled to make sense of things. Gordon Brown, **MY LIFE, OUR TIMES, 2018**, acknowledges that, having rescued the banks he ought to have punished the bankers. He did not cause the crash of 2008. He dealt with it. And by the time of the General Election the U.K. economy was recovering.

But then came Osborne who very deliberately gave us Austerity. Despite his words we were not 'All In It Together', just most of us who had not been members of the Bullingdon Club.

Not only did the Postwar Consensus remain in its grave and but Small Government became a phrase often repeated by Cameron. Thatcher had told us that there was no such thing as 'society'. Cameron actually used the phrase 'big society'. He actually meant a Do-It-Yourself society.

You want a local library? D.I.Y.

And the Liberals, now known as the LibDems? These descendants of Gladstone promised the end of Blair's tuition fees. What happened to that promise?

It would actually have saved public money but hurt the private companies that profit from it.

Ah then! **That Referendum**. The entire electorate was deceived into thinking that it had something to do with them. It was only ever an internal Conservative Party fight pretending to be about democracy.

It is very interesting to read **UNLEASHING DEMONS, The Inside Story of Brexit, 2017**, by Cameron's spin doctor **Craig Oliver**, now knighted. And in his own book **For The Record, 2019**, Cameron almost sheds tears as he describes his shock as two best mates, Boris and Gove, stab him in the back because they were only interested in climbing up the Tory greasy pole.

"You were only supposed to blow the bloody doors off" is what Gove's wife told us she said to him when Leave won.

Winning meant having to do something, having to actually run a country. They had never thought of that.

Afterwards Theresa May, Boris and hardly anyone in Parliament seemed to have the slightest idea about how the Commons was supposed to deal with a result in which only 37% of the electorate advised (yes, the Referendum was merely advisory) Parliament that they preferred to Leave.

Bercow's attempt to keep order in the Commons kept him out of the Lords.

And then **Covid**.

Wow! Money to be made and peerages to be given.

More on this later as I attempt to calm my excitement about the next General Election.

Which political party is now pulling in the pounds from the rich?

Lord Sainsbury has just found two and a half million quid down the back of his sofa to give to Starmer. Previously he was the main financier of the SDP, remember them? And then he kept the Blairite **Progress Group** going in the Labour Party.

The Starmer Party is beating the Tories hollow when it comes to sitting on Capitalist laps. People used to say to dogs, "Let me see you beg".

I can just see Starmer sitting on his bum with his arms out hoping for some cash. And he is getting it.

Socialism?

Starmer campaign song.....

The best things in life aren't free. Money, that's what I want.

I once set a question in a CSE exam paper on Government and Politics in which I asked if Direct Action could be justified.

As a Chief Examiner my belief was that from time to time we examiners would read totally unexpected responses to questions. When we did we had to ask ourselves if we were learning from the candidates.

Would you have failed Alexander Fleming because he accidentally discovered penicillin? It was not in the mark scheme! How dare he go off the subject?

One particular candidate gave me a totally unexpected response.

She wrote about the impact of the Miners' Strike upon her family, what it was like to be involved in such a huge event with devastating consequences for the community. Suddenly it was as if Government and Politics as a 'subject' was invited into a family kitchen to sit round the table to watch, listen and learn.

I felt proud of myself for asking that question. I was not reading an 'answer', I was reading and learning from a 'response'.

I showed that response to fellow examiners. They, too, found it thrilling.

And so.

GCSE was invented and I became Chief Examiner for the same subject. That meant going to meetings of teachers round the country to give them an idea of what to expect. There I was in the hotel next to Leeds railway station, a very big dance hall. It was packed. To illustrate my approach to setting exams I distributed photocopies of that response, anonymised of course.

About two thirds of the teachers thought it was wonderful. A minority did not. I asked why they did not like it.

"The candidate has written in the First Person and failed to quote a single academic source." I assumed that they were the grammar schoolteachers.

So, when you write about the Strike do remember that you, your family and your community are only relevant if their humanity is drained out of them. If they are a statistic they can be included, especially if there is a quotable source.

Third Person. All that human stuff?

Forget it.

A government of all the talents.

According to Disraeli the last words of William Pitt the Younger, a great prime minister, were:

“I think I could eat one of Bellamy’s meat pies.”

He was seriously ill and had not eaten for days, so a dash was made to get him a meat pie from the shop.

But when they got it to him he was dead.

There was a more official version that had him expressing his love of his country, but I put my bet on the Disraeli version.

The next prime minister was Grenville who, facing a powerful Napoleon, formed a Ministry Of All The Talents, a coalition. The war, however lasted much longer than Grenville’s government.

But, guess what, it abolished slavery.

There have been many coalitions since, but I think the last time we were promised a government “Of All The Talents” was when Gordon Brown became PM.

Er...whatever happened to that?

Since 2010?

A Government Of All The?

I think a Bellamy meat pie could do a better job than any of the prime ministers we have had since 2010.

LIMBO DANCING.

I need to hurry if I am to finish this before the election. I don’t think I shall dive into all the detail of policy-making that is just about to be thrown into the dustbin of history.

There is a story that when Cameron was asked by his tutor why he wanted to be a prime minister he replied, “I think I would be rather good at it.”

Yes, you do need a sense of humour to be a student of politics.

When Theresa May took over after Cameron’s seemingly eager resignation from the job that he was so good at I began to think of political limbo dancing. You thought no-one could get lower than the previous dancer, but they did.

Theresa goes to church every Sunday and gave me the impression that for her running the economy was no different from passing round the plate for collection.

Boris? No friend of the starving barber, while Trump was telling citizens of the USA that a swig of bleach would cure Covid Boris was painting double yellow lines everywhere for us, but not for him and his mates. Sales of Prosecco must have gone up.

And Ukraine? He could not wait to do his impression of Churchill.

I think of Gladstone and into my mind comes free schooling and social justice. I think of Boris and I think of a piss-up. Is that unfair?

He now has a big house with a moat around it. Might that be a symbol of how the job of Prime Minister has to be carried out? How does the hymn go?

“The rich man in his castle, the poor man at the gate.”

Something like that.

But before we get to our current Rich Man I must remind myself of Liz Trickle.

One way of looking at her is as a prelude of chaos so that we would all find reassurance when Sunak took over.

Have we?

Sunak was to be the steady hand on the tiller, the adult whose hand we could hold as we children crossed the busy road.

He has become an unfunny comedian, a fool with his hands on the levers of national power. Try to imagine yourself as a lifelong Tory supporter. What do you think of his running of this election campaign?

When he first came along I could not help myself extending his surname to Sunacker’s Yard. It seemed as though he was in a policy rubbish tip trying to piece together bits of rusty metal to create a car that would drive in one direction.

Where has it been driven?

His legacy shall be someone writing a book on how to cock up an election campaign.

There should be lots more to write but here I am in the opticians with lots of drops in my eyes so shall close.

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