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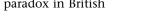
Introduction: Progress and its Paradoxes

Post-war Britain was a remarkable economic success story by historical standards.[1] Yet this tremendous material success did not translate into a boom in political popularity. Economic growth did bound ahead, far outstripping pre-war performance and reaching a climacteric of over 3 per cent a year in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[2] Total economic output rose by 83 per cent between 1951 and 1973, while real personal disposal incomes rose by 77 per cent and consumer expenditure by 79 per cent.[3] Consumer goods of all types filled British homes. The figure for households containing televisions leapt from 35 per cent to 96 per cent between 1955 and 1975, and the figure for telephones rose from 19 to 52 per cent.[4] Governments constantly entreated British workers to greater efforts, but as the economist Clare Griffin noted as early as 1950, 'the worker is told Britain is poor ... but the worker doesn't feel poor. He has more money than before and his job is more secure'.[5] This book intends to examine this central paradox in British economic, social and political life.

Most Parliaments saw the incumbent government falling further and further behind its principal rival as measured by the opinion polls. The Conservatives fell 20 percentage points behind Labour in June 1963; Labour 26 points behind the Conservatives in December 1968; and Edward Heath 24 points behind Harold Wilson during 1971. All of those governments went on to lose office at the next General Election. The evidence is, to be sure, scattered and difficult to interpret before the early 1970s.[6] The immediate post-war period had hardly been a time of all-round consensus and agreement, after which there was only precipitate decline.[7] There was enough apathy and alienation to go round even in 1944, as Mass Observation's qualitative surveys revealed. That year *Picture Post* thought soldiers' wariness of signing up to vote evidence of 'a distrust, wide and deep, of politics in general and politicians in particular'.[8]

Still, what statistics there are demonstrate that there may thereafter have been a marginal drift downwards in the public's regard for their governors.

In 1944, 36 per cent of the Gallup Poll's respondents thought that politicians were out to help 'the country', and a bare minority, at 35 per cent, 'themselves'. By 1972 some citizens took a more jaundiced view, for only 28 per cent of the public thought that politicians were patriotically motivated, while 38 per cent thought that they were primarily selfish.[9] By 1973 39 per cent of electors trusted governments 'just about always' or 'most of the time', but 57 per cent did not. Large majorities agreed that 'those we elect as MPs ... lose touch with the people pretty quickly' and that 'public officials' did not care much about 'what people like me think'.[10] Nor were the new welfare services immune from public doubts. The National Health Service remained broadly popular throughout our period, but some other sectors – for instance the welfare state's 'wobbly pillar' of housing policy – attracted increasing opprobrium and scepticism as the post-war era wore on.[11]

This volume intends to look at one specific element in the British state's travails: the unintended consequences of purposive government action itself. The American sociologist Robert Merton's classic 1936 essay on the theme is a necessary starting point, and he brought out three key reasons why the type of 'purposive social action' launched in 1944–48 might have different consequences to those intended. The existing state of knowledge can form an insuperable barrier, especially for the stochastic understandings so familiar in the social sciences, in which past associations have to stand in for the 'functional associations' of the physical sciences. There is also the problem of allocating enough time and energy to break through those limitations, especially when trying to make many complex decisions and judge many interrelations at once; and third and finally, the 'immediately of interest', one's own investment in or commitment to a certain set of end points, may prevent policy actors from assessing all possible outcomes.[12]

Many other theories have been put forward to explain the contradiction of a successful material politics that still failed to evoke popular contentment. But most of these are highly instrumental and focus on what Colin Hay, focusing on a later era, has termed 'demand-side' politics which blame the electorate for its own disenchantment. This book, like Hay's recent contributions, will focus on the supply-side of political and governmental performance itself.[13] The idea of class dealignment, detaching electorates from the rhetoric and social experiences of party leaders, has often and firstly been utilised to explain post-war political disengagement.[14] National politicians' declining ability to act on their own has been another important trope.[15] Those same politicians' lower apparent fidelity to their promises in an age of media intrusion and scrutiny, as well as 'focus group' politics, is a third subject of critical interest – for trust seems to have receded even as 'openness' and 'transparency' have increased. Politicians' declining trustworthiness became a powerful late-century discourse. In Pietre Sztompka's influential treatment, the 'normal' function of distrust that helps to keep democracy flourishing, including

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the institutional checks and balances of the courts and the press, perhaps became hyperactive or overloaded.[16]

Competitive scrambles for social position have also been blamed for post-war 'affluenza' – though more recently than they were at the time. As more and more consumer goods became available to an increasing number of citizens, a type of social crowding developed that caused individuals to compete more and more desperately for indicators of status and success.[17] Avner Offer's work on the challenges of affluence has brought this concept of 'myopic consumption' centre stage.[18] Finally, declining levels of 'social capital' and citizens' links with one another have been shown to have knock-on effects on trust and even competence in the political sphere.[19] Francis Fukuyama has posited that a 'balkanised' British social system always suffered from low levels of political trust between classes, while Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's influential *The Spirit Level* controversially argues that levels of social trust have deteriorated as societies (particularly the USA and UK) have become less equal.[20]

These explanations do not, however, really pertain to the period stretching from the 1950s and 1970s. Class 'dealignment' occurred only slowly and sporadically.[21] By any objective measure, globalisation and the apparent feeble incapacity of national states' economic and social policies had reached only a nascent stage compared to its heights in the 1990s and early 2000s.[22] Political leaders were not as distrusted, nor as lacking in decisive power, as they were later to become. As the British economy recovered after the disastrous sterling crisis and IMF intervention of 1976, Prime Minister James Callaghan's standing slowly but surely rose until he could feel reasonably confident of winning a General Election held in the autumn of 1978. His mixture of social conservative and centrist Labourism seemed to chime well with voters' own views.[23]

The so-called 'Easterlin paradox', in which developed societies become richer but no happier due to raised expectations and competitiveness, has recently been assailed from many directions.[24] Reassessments of the international data, using new evidence from East Asia in particular, has tended to show that there *is* at least some relationship between Gross Domestic Product per capita and life satisfaction.[25] Once we control for unemployment and other life-cycle setbacks such as divorce, British people may have experienced a gradual increase in their life satisfaction since the 1960s.[26] Even aside from these concerns, the 'hedonic treadmill' of competitive consumption began to turn only slowly in the post-war era – one of the reasons why the 'embourgeoisement' or increasingly middle-class outlook of working-class voters, and 'dealignment', proceeded so slowly.[27]

It does not seem as if 'social capital' and charitable association fell away either. Lawrence Black, for one, has recently pointed out just how prevalent broader political engagement really was in post-war Britain: whether in the Young Conservatives, the Consumers' Association, or in narrower groups

such as the Viewers' and Listeners' Association.[28] Britons' membership of and involvement in voluntary organisations may have reached its peak in the post-war era. Youth work, sporting community and community volunteering all rose between the 1950s and the 1970s.[29] The churches did well at recruitment throughout a brief golden age in the 1950s, though involvement with organised religion did fall away precipitously from about 1960 onwards. Trade union membership kept on growing until the end of the 1970s.[30] Lastly, inequality did not rise in the post-war 'golden age': the disparities of income across most geographical regions and social classes were greatly lessened by the post-war economic boom and the welfare state.[31]

On the other hand, ever more complex ambitions and trade-offs definitely *were* a characteristic of post-war governance. Governments of that era aspired generally to 'modernise' their own country's economy and society, most explicitly during the winter of 1962–63 when Harold Macmillan reacted to public and expert pressure by pursuing an agenda he himself specifically termed 'the modernisation of Britain' in a series of diatribes in full Cabinet. Central government itself, Macmillan urged, should at one and the same time relieve economically 'distressed' areas, re-equip British industry and raise productivity.[32] The very idea of 'modernisation' became an all-encompassing aim at the time.[33] Its theoretical implications have been incisively analysed by Helen Margetts: it focused, first, on economic efficiency and the application of high technology; second, on social integration and interconnectedness; and third, on the application of 'specialization, scientific advancement, expert knowledge and technology in economic, political and social life'.[34] This cluster of concepts was borrowed, however distantly, from American structural sociology and development theory – ideas that posited an irreversible and homogenising 'progress' towards both knowledge of, and the ability to change, 'man's environment'.[35]

Many wartime or post-war reforms buttressed post-war Britain's own 'modernisation'. Three of the most powerful and problematic will come to the fore in the present volume, for together they help to explain some of the most critical relations between state and citizen: an emphasis on international expertise and co-operation, dedicated to concert national efforts in the common good; the managed economy, so administered as to ameliorate the perceived evils of the inter-war Depression and to some extent to democratise decision-making; and national education, which would create a citizenry that was both democratically well informed and economically efficient. The first two ambitions were admirably expressed in the wartime coalition's White Paper on *Employment Policy*, published in May 1944. This promised not only 'the maintenance of a high and stable level of employment' after the war, but also 'to create, through collaboration between the nations, conditions ... which will make it possible for all countries to pursue policies of full employment to their mutual advantage'.[36] The concept therefore presaged a thoroughgoing regeneration of transnational economic

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co-operation, and the creation of a General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), an Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC), 'Marshall Aid' and the Organisation for European Economic Co-Operation (OEEC).[37]

The 1944 Education Act made similarly far-reaching claims: secondary education would be free at the point of use, and separated from primary or 'all-in' schools to provide a rigorous training for all children; every state school would be brought under the same code.[38] R.A. 'Rab' Butler, the Conservative Minister of Education, argued that this would promote a conjoined moral and economic revolution. As the 1943 Education White Paper had it, young people would be provided both with 'a fuller measure of opportunity' and a 'means ... of developing the various talents with which they are endowed and so enriching the inheritance of the country whose citizens they are'.[39] The radicalism of these new measures can be exaggerated. The Education Act, for instance, did little to wipe out geographical or class inequalities in access to secondary education truly separate from the old elementary schools.[40] But these were still key elements in post-war Britain's political settlement, which owed a great deal to the Labour Party's social democratic outlook but also built on older Liberal and Conservative traditions.

The problem with such 'modernisations' was that, as its theorists increasingly understood, they were extremely homogenising and centralising.[41] And a world too complex fully to analyse and understand can defy and then undermine solutions. The public policy expert Christopher Hood had pinpointed just this phenomenon as the process by which 'policy' can become 'its own worst enemy': 'as it develops, a policy can come to weaken the social foundations on which it rests, like ivy killing the tree on which it grows'. Many of the concepts integral to modernising social democracy – internationalism, regulation, nationalisation, highly progressive taxation, public spending and management – came to seem outdated by the 1980s. To be sure, a new and extremely virulent set of alternative ideas emerged; and the populace's interest in co-operating with government deteriorated in the stagflationary 1970s. But 'institutional self-destruction' among social democratic organisations struggling with unintended consequences and complexity also played a critical role, as we shall see.[42]

One might end any such a survey of faltering public confidence with an appeal to the acute economic crisis of the 1970s, an approach evident among political scientists such as Dennis Kavanagh who have stressed the 'specificity' of discontent at that time, as well as familiar from synoptic accounts of that decade.[43] The economic pain of those years was real enough. Inflation surged upwards due to the shock of oil-producing OPEC nations refusing supply in 1973, as well as the country's relatively poor productivity performance. Rising prices soon became the public's top priority, helping to set off a series of wage-related strikes across industry.[44] In November 1973, successive clashes with the miners left the Heath government no choice but

to announce the fifth state of emergency in three years, followed up the next month by restricting industry to a three-day week.[45] By 1975 a Labour Secretary of State for the Environment, Anthony Crosland, was telling local councils and trade unionists that, as far as public spending was concerned, 'the party's over'. Some of the deepest public expenditure cuts in post-war history followed.[46] The run of policy humiliations culminated in the emblematic September 1976 run on sterling, which forced Chancellor Denis Healy into his famous return from Heathrow Airport to try to stem the crisis and then convinced the Cabinet to apply for the IMF loan.[47]

Even so, the mood of self-flagellation, at popular and elite level, went too far back to be explained only by this immediate crisis. Public discontent was widespread by the mid to late 1960s: in the aftermath of devaluation in 1967, only 24 per cent of the electorate expressed any confidence in the government's ability to handle the economy, a figure that fell further by the end of the year.[48] The state of the political book market, for instance the popularity of radical and critical Penguin Specials in the late 1950s and early 1960s, also illustrates this point. Michael Shanks' 1961 book *The Stagnant Society* – which sold 60,000 copies – is usually cited in this regard.[49] But many others chimed in with Shanks' view that Britain was becoming economically and socially outmoded. To be sure, as Matthew Grant has reminded us, these were the preserve of the 'commentariat'; they often focused on foreign affairs. And they were by no means straightforwardly gloomy.[50] But their overwhelming thrust, and their sales figures, are also indisputable.[51] Geoffrey Moorhouse's *The Other England*, which spread the poverty debate to deprived areas in the south and south-east of England and showed just how distant London's 'commuterlands' were from the rest of the country, started to sell out within hours of its publication.[52] Rex Malik's 1964 Penguin Special *What's Wrong with British Industry?* was only tepidly received on its publication.[53] But it still managed to reach the relatively impressive sales figure of 15,000 copies in a year.[54]

The conjoined ideas of complexity and its oft-attendant unintended consequences will allow us to witness the emergence of these problems, if in inchoate form at first. No attempt is made here to argue that these were in any sense confined to late twentieth-century Britain. To take just one other example: British liberalism, in general the governing credo of the country's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century elites, always contained its own store of paradoxes and unforeseen knock-on effects. An ideology that stressed the promotion of self-help and independence was enmeshed in a world in which state action might be required to underpin its achievement.[55] More narrowly, reform after reform often had more radical effects than were ever intended – for instance, entrenching national party politics via avowedly localist municipal government reconstructions during the 1830s.[56] Elsewhere, 'progressive' legislative action inevitably involved governments in apparently unrelated controversies that Whitehall and Westminster had

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never foreseen. 'Democratic' reforms of the franchise, in particular rural electoral rolls in the counties during the 1880s, were intended to secure 'sensible' Liberal influence in country areas, ended up speeding the progress of aristocratic conservatives out of the party.[57] Nor were the domestic or practical consequences of liberal 'progress' immune. The heat and light brought by local gas and electricity networks were often interrupted as increasingly sophisticated infrastructure broke down.[58]

However, what is most obvious with hindsight about the three policy areas under investigation in this volume during the 1950s and 1960s is that they above all invoked synoptic, linear solutions that operated to some extent in 'straight lines'.[59] These plans were furthermore dependent on a certain level of mid-century optimism that outputs would bear some, albeit imperfect, relationship to the inputs that drove them. The moral or even religious elements of liberal Victorian governance usually implied an ongoing series of *acts* that in themselves defied Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' if it implied only a collection of mere unintended but munificent consequences.[60] These had by our period been gradually replaced with an emphasis on final *outcomes*.[61] Victorian political parties were loose coalitions; local government was highly variegated; more humdrum gas, light and sewerage duties were local responsibilities, albeit under national guidance. But during the twentieth century governments were increasingly expected to provide universally, across the entire geographical space of the state – a much more difficult *political* proposition, and one more likely to reveal any caesura between state and people. James C. Scott has analysed just these problems in his classic *Seeing Like a State*, in which he emphasises how these problems were multiplied by the sheer magnitude of planners' large-scale development schemes during the twentieth century.[62]

The evident decrease in confidence came increasingly to the fore as layers of complexity – and therefore the extent of uncertainty – increased. Historians have hardly been unaware of them. Nirmalo Rao, for instance, has emphasised how the comprehensive revolution in England's secondary schools often achieved exactly the opposite – lower social mobility for working-class children – that Labour ministers at the time hoped.[63] Policy results were inevitably as varied as their convoluted birth. Labour and Conservative governments of the 1940s and 1950s wanted to plug the gaps caused by labour shortages, and to hold together a Commonwealth that was increasingly passing its own national citizenship laws. They ended up acquiescing in the large-scale arrival of African, Commonwealth and Asian immigrants that they certainly did not intend or welcome.[64] The spread of mass radio and television ownership and the provision of more and more programming was supposed to elevate the populace; many elite politicians, commentators and theorists alike eventually regretted the broadcast media's supposed powers to coarsen and to distract.[65]

Knock-on effects can then amplify the unintended outcomes. The impact of immigration policy was increasingly met with hostility on the part of the

'host' population, to the shock of many political leaders; taste, refinement and the choice of entertainments became defining hallmarks of class and 'civility'.[66] These policy arenas also had implications just as far-reaching as transnational advice, economic management and education, interacting with understandings of nationality, class, employment, housing tenure and even the desirability of new foods.[67] That is, of course, one of the key reasons that unintended consequences were so ubiquitous in all of these areas – both those covered here, and those addressed by other authors. But there has been some reluctance to knit different instances of such unexpected effects together, and to see them mutually as one of the key reasons for Britons' political scepticism and the apparent infirmity of state action by the late 1970s.

What follows will redress this imbalance by mobilising cross-disciplinary theories of policy uncertainty and perverse effects, as well as new archival evidence, in some of the most intricate and multi-dimensional areas of public policy. This will provide us with a series of 'core samples', in-depth studies of 'the sites and hosts of bigger' debates on lines recently recommended by Black among others, and drawing up those samples in policy areas as general as global currency markets and as specific as specific schools in particular cities.[68] These will help reveal the acute complexities of 'progress' itself, as well as being subject to rich and detailed examination given the wealth of materials available.

Bringing Britain's future successfully into being depended on involving the country in a worldwide thrust for 'progress', on managing the economy, and on securing mutually dependent social well-being and productivity yoked to nationally determined 'goals'. All of these projects were to be managed by central government, in an attempt to meet and satisfy the demands for planned outcomes, universal benefits and geographical equality outlined here. It is this technocratic focus which means that most of the evidence is drawn from the archives of central government, politicians and national political parties, though given governments' aims and reach those files are often more revealing as to interactions with 'mid-level' advisers and voters than might be expected.[69] Chapters 6, 8, 9 and 10, on the Parliamentary 'Ombudsman', land reform, education policy and selective educational funding for 'priority' areas of social need are necessarily the most revealing in the latter respect. However, we turn first to our opening topic, which set the tone for the entire intellectual debate and for different administrations' relationship with 'experts': the post-war world of transnational policy advice.