

The Past is a Foreign Country

They do Things differently there.

by Wolfgang Geissler | First published on June 9, 2020, reviewed and revised March, 2023



I shall attempt carefully, and as far as possible in-depth, to shed light on events **as I have experienced them** over the past five decades, events, I believe, are **responsible for the way of behaviour in the U.K. today**. I am trying to collate the facts as they have occurred throughout my 40 years (1969-2009) in the U.K., whose impact I consider in retrospect to be far-reaching and, at the same time, keep my personal opinions to a minimum but will include memories, which are intended to emphasise the situation described. I feel it is also essential to compare the same timeline developments in Europe and Austria with those in the U.K. This article is not to be seen as a scientific, political or economic treatise, commentary or “dissertation” but merely my personal account of things in an effort to offer an explanation.

PART I - THE ANSWER LIES IN THE DISTANT PAST.

When faced with the present conundrum involving **Brexit and Covid-19**, I struggle and have struggled now for over fifty years, to find a satisfactory explanation for the idiosyncratic behaviour of Great Britain internally and externally, which was always paradox, mildly illogical and oddly out of step with the rest of us in Europe.

I was born in **Vienna** in 1943, so I was, by definition, a war child. As such, I grew up in a war-torn and post-war Vienna. The Vienna of the “*Third Man*”: The bomb craters, destroyed apartment blocks, blown up bridges, no food, no gas, no electricity, no wood or coal for heating, no glass for the windows. I experienced the occupation by the Big Four and

remember very well the demarcation line, in my case the Danube Canal, between the British-occupied 3rd district, my home, and the Soviet-occupied 2nd district where the vast meadows and woodlands of the *Prater* lie, which my father and I visited regularly.

I remember the **State Treaty** on 15 May 1955, when my parents and I, together with thousands of elated Austrians, gathered on that Sunday in Belvedere gardens in front of the Upper Belvedere Palace to be told that "*Austria is free!*" and subsequently been shown the signatures of the Four Powers from the balcony by the Foreign Minister **Leopold Figl**, too far away from us to make them out. In case of questions, why was there not a Peace Treaty first or instead? There could be no Peace Treaty with the Republic of Austria because no Austrian government ever declared War on a Member State of the Allies, who were victorious in 1945. In those days, it is fair to say that a vast majority of my compatriots loved and admired the Americans and the "English". Most people thought then of Britain as "England", an oversight that lasted unrectified for decades.

The adoration felt for the English was sincere. The elegance and aloofness, not arrogance, and correctness of the English gentleman and Officer, the English lady, pale-skinned, flaxen-haired with large watery blue eyes, the English lifestyle whether as a city gent with rolled-up "brolly" (umbrella) and bowler hat with "*The Times*" folded under his arm as he rushes to the Tube after office hours or as a tweedy country gentleman with the particular upper-class nasal accent with his love for racing, hunting or fast cars was much admired by us over here. English movies and English detective stories became ever so popular. So was England, to which every ambitious parent, who could afford it, would want to send his offspring to learn the language. I was lucky enough to have been one of them when in 1959, I was sent on exchange with the help of the venerable **Anglo-Austrian Society** for five weeks to Grimsby, two of which I spent in the local Grammar school in the 5th form. It left me with a lasting impression. I loved it, and it formed an overpowering desire that I once wanted to live there.

The Marshall Plan

Like the 16 participating Western European countries, Austria benefited enormously thanks to the Marshall Plan, from which Austria received almost \$1b. This, hard work and good fortunes helped Austria on the road to recovery.

Not quite the same in the U.K. Successive governments squandered billions of Marshall Plan Aid to support British world power pretensions, and so jeopardised the economic future of Britain. The Labour government chose not to use the \$2.7 billion (West Germany, by comparison, received \$1.7b) in aid for industrial modernisation like Germany had. Germany rebuilt factories like the Volkswagen plant in Wolfsburg. Germany, France, Italy and Austria were fully re-engineered with all electric rail lines. In Britain, steam engines, mechanical semaphore signalling and old tracks would remain into the 1960s. In addition, Britain's road and telecommunications network remained equally inadequate, ill-maintained and out-of-date. **1945–1951** was, for Britain, generally the **Age of Austerity**.

From a European perspective, Britain was not keeping pace. Between 1950 and 1970, it was overtaken by most **European Common Market** countries in terms of the number of telephones, refrigerators, television sets, cars, and washing machines per 100 of the

population. Education provision expanded, but not as fast as in neighbouring European countries. By the early 1980s, some 80% to 90% of school leavers in France and West Germany received vocational training, compared with only 40% in the United Kingdom.

Countries like Italy, France and Spain, overwhelmingly rural in character at the end of the Second World War, were experiencing a process of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation that Britain had already passed through in the 19th century. This explanation is known as the "*early start theory*" among economists. It explains why European nations showed markedly stronger levels of absolute growth in the industry compared to the U.K. This country was already transitioning into a post-industrial, service-based economy. These countries had **large surplus agricultural populations** to draw into the cities to work in factories. In contrast, the U.K., the most heavily urbanised nation in Europe, had only a mere 5% of the population employed on the land by 1945 (dropping to 2.7% by 1977). As such, the traditional source of new labour for low-wage factory work, rural labourers, was virtually non-existent in Britain, which constrained growth potential. **Immigration from the Commonwealth, and later from Europe**, was one policy response to this officially perceived labour shortage.

There was also a systemic malaise in British industry, which was famously inefficient and opposed to innovations. **Tony Judt** (English-American historian and University Professor of European History) described the prevailing attitude of post-war industrialists: "*British factory managers preferred to operate in a cycle of under-investment, limited research and development, low wages and a shrinking pool of clients, rather than risk a fresh start with new products in new markets.*"

In its effort to repair the nation's dollar deficit, the British government's overriding emphasis on exports made things worse because it encouraged manufacturers to place all investment in expanding output at the expense of updating machinery and introducing new technologies, improving production methods, etc. This policy was sustainable in the short term because in the late 1940s and early 50s, world trade boomed, and Britain, with its large and relatively undamaged industrial base, was in a uniquely advantageous position to satisfy demand.

In 1950, 25% of world exports were British-made, and the total volume of British manufactured goods was double that of France and Germany combined. However, by the late 1950s, the economies of West Germany, France, Japan, and Italy, had recovered from wartime infrastructure damage, replacing the destroyed stock with state-of-the-art machinery and applying modern production methods in a process called "*rejuvenation by defeat*".

Continental governments actively encouraged recovery through direct investment/subsidies in targeted industries, in the case of Italy and France, or more widely through encouraging easy access to credit through national banks, a marked characteristic in France and West Germany. British industrialists saw no such intervention from their own government, which more or less left the private sector to itself. British goods were also more expensive abroad because of Sterling's overvaluation but inferior in quality compared to the products flooding the world market from the United States, Germany and Italy.

Social Partnership.

In Austria, often criticised until needed, is the **Sozialpartnerschaft**, the Social Partnership, which guarantees social peace and stability in many difficult times. It was born out of the painful experience of the First Republic, with the "*never again*" promise made by the former political opponents imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camps, remembering the political hatred and subsequent disunity in that rump state of 1918 of the great old empire. This disunity ultimately led on 13 March 1938 to the tragic *Finis Austriae*.

The term social partnership refers to the cooperative relationship between the social partners (mainly employers' and employees' associations) with the aim of resolving conflicts of interest through consensus policy and curbing open disputes. Social partnerships are structured differently in different countries. **Switzerland** created an instrument of a balance of interests even before the start of the Second World War with "*Peace of Work*" (**Arbeitsfrieden**). In **Germany**, the social partnership was judged more ambivalently. At first, it was more of a goal for socially engaged circles (social theologians, Christian entrepreneurs, social-liberal politicians and scientists), who only gradually began to put it into practice.

In Austria in 1946, the social partnership was formed by **five social partners**, each representing the interests of different groups of people. The workers are represented by the two social-democratic-dominated interest groups, the **Chamber of Labour (1st Social Partner: Arbeiterkammer. AK)** and the **Austrian Trade Union Confederation (2nd Social Partner: Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund. ÖGB)**. The interests of employers are represented by the Christian Democrat-dominated **Austrian Chamber of Commerce (3rd Social Partner: Wirtschaftskammer Österreich. WKO)**. The fourth representation of the interests of the farmers is the Christian Democrat-dominated **Chamber of Agriculture (4th Social Partner: Landwirtschaftskammer. LK)**, which faces the **Chamber of Agricultural Labour (5th Social Partner: Landarbeiterkammer. LAK)**. AK, WKO and LK are all interest groups created according to Austrian law. The membership to these three organisations (all employees must be members of the A.K., all economic operators must be members of the WKO, and all farmers must be members of the LK) is by law a **compulsory membership**. Only the ÖGB is a voluntary association of all its members.

The respective members of the four social partners AK, WKO, LK and ÖGB decide in elections which (party-political) group sets the tone in their representation of interests. Apart from the political parties, the four social partners greatly influence Austria's political system. They are often involved in the legislative process and can, among other things, review laws.

Social Contract.

An attempt in the U.K. on something similar was a brief period of calm negotiated by the recently re-elected Labour Government of 1974, known as the **Social Contract**. Still, a breakdown with the Unions occurred again in 1978, leading to the "*Winter of Discontent*" and eventually to the end of the Labour Government led by **James Callaghan**.

Austria's Rise to Wealth.

Since the end of World War II, Austria has achieved sustained economic growth. In the soaring 1950s, the rebuilding efforts for Austria led to an average annual growth rate of more than 5% in real terms and averaged about 4.5% through most of the 1960s. Following moderate real GDP growth of 1.7%, 2% and 1.2%, respectively, in 1995, 1996, and 1997, the economy rebounded, with real GDP expansion of 2.9% in 1998 and 2.2% in 1999.

Austria became a member of the **EU** on 1 January 1995. Membership brought economic benefits and challenges and has drawn an influx of foreign investors attracted by Austria's access to the single European market and proximity to the aspiring economies of the European Union. GDP growth accelerated in recent years and reached 3.3% in 2006.

Germany has historically been the main trading partner of Austria, making it vulnerable to rapid changes in the German economy. However, since Austria became a member state of the European Union, it has gained closer ties to other European Union economies, reducing its economic dependence on Germany. Austria also has made progress in generally increasing its international competitiveness. By 2018 Austria was the fourth richest country in the European Union, and by 2019 one of the fourteen richest countries in the world.

PART II - THE STARK REALITY OF THE YEARS 1969-1979. RACISM, BIGOTRY, EUROPEAN COMMUNITY AND THE "MILITARY COUP".

I arrived in Britain in 1969 when **Harold Wilson** 1964-1970 was Prime Minister, one year after **Enoch Powell's** infamous and inflammatory anti-immigration "*Rivers of Blood*" Speech (there were a number of **Race Riots** in England during that period) and in the same year (12-16 August 1969) of the outbreak of political and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, the beginning of the thirty-two-year conflict known as the **Troubles**. Sporadic violence arose from the civil rights campaign, which demanded an end to discrimination against **Catholics**. Civil Rights marches had been repeatedly attacked by **Ulster Protestant loyalists** and often came into conflict with the **Royal Ulster Constabulary**, the overwhelmingly Protestant police force. I was astonished to learn so soon that **racism** and **anti-Catholicism** in Britain combined with **anti-Irish** sentiments but also **anti-Semitism** (!) were endemic. Surprised because I automatically assumed that only we, Austrians and Germans, had been guilty in the Past of racism and anti-Semitism, something today you could even go to prison for. A 1970 Notice in every B&B guesthouse window in Blackpool read "*No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs*".

TV shows at that time featured: "*Love Thy Neighbour*" since 1972 with **Jack Smethurst** and **Rudolph Walker**. "*Till Death Us Do Part*" since 1965 with **Warren Mitchell** as Alf Garnett and **Dave Allen's** weekly anti-catholic "*Dave Allen Show*" since 1968. In the first, a white racist working-class socialist heckles a black guy who happens to be also a Tory voter, in the second, Alf Garnett a white working-class racist, misogynist guy rants against women,

blacks and Irish in his weekly show and in the third, the Irish comedian Dave Allen exclusively makes embarrassing and insulting jokes about the catholic church, Catholics in general and the Pope. Also, the "**Gnomes of Zurich**", a disparaging term used by British parliamentarians to describe Swiss bankers, appeared then. The term rose to prominence during the British currency crisis of the 1960s, which was blamed largely on Swiss banking practices. Frequent strikes and violent clashes with the police followed frequent strikes and violent confrontations with the police. And that was only the beginning!

Then came along **Edward (Ted) Heath** 1970-1974, Conservative and a strong supporter of the **European Community** and after winning a decisive vote in the House of Commons by 336 to 244 he led the negotiations that culminated in Britain's entry into the EC on 1 January 1973, "*Heath's finest hour*". Groundbreaking and, at the same time, traumatising the British nostalgically clinging to **£sd** (Pounds, shillings and pence, the duodecimal system) was the **Decimalisation** of the U.K. and Irish currency to Pounds and 100 New Pence on 15 February 1971.

Although he planned to be an innovator as Prime Minister, his government foundered on economic difficulties, including high inflation and major strikes. That was the time when I experienced the "*Three Day Week*", which was introduced to conserve electricity, the generation of which was severely restricted owing to the effects of the 1973-1974 oil crisis on transportation and inflation. Later industrial action by coal miners further compounded events! Ted Heath became an embittered critic of **Margaret Thatcher**, who supplanted him as party leader.

Now we are back again to **Harold Wilson**, 1974-1976, Labour. My first-hand experience of what was called the "**seesaw effect**": to change rapidly and repeatedly from one position, situation or condition to another and back again, which happens, whenever Labour replaces Tories and vice versa. Privatisation led to Nationalisation, then back to Privatisation and so on, which was one of the problems that investments were seldom forthcoming because of the lack of stability or continuity. Otherwise, this two-year period was much the same: strikes, strikes and more strikes. But something else took place that stunned me.

Wilson told two BBC journalists, **Roger Courtiour** and **Barry Penrose**, who recorded the meetings on a cassette tape recorder that he feared MI5 was undermining him. The first time was in late 1960 when Wilson devalued the pound, but in 1974 there was again the talk of a military coup, with rumours that **Lord Mountbatten** as head of an interim administration after Wilson had been deposed. (Ex-military leaders had been building up private armies anticipating a "*wholesale domestic liquidation*".) In 1974 the Army occupied Heathrow Airport on the grounds of training for a possible IRA terrorist action at the airport. However, **Marcia Williams**, a senior aide and close friend of Wilson asserted that the operation was ordered as a practice run for a military takeover or as a show of strength, as the government itself was not informed of such an exercise based around a key point in the nation's transport infrastructure. These events made me think! In this context, I remember watching a TV sci-fi thriller series by London Weekend Television broadcast in the U.K. on ITV network between 10 July 1971 and 2 October 1971 called "**The Guardians**". The programme is a dystopian political thriller set in the 1980s.

Following economic chaos, the democratic government was overthrown in a bloodless coup, the Royal Family fled into a self-imposed exile, and the United Kingdom was ruled autocratically by Prime Minister Sir Timothy Hobson alongside "*the General*", a military officer called Roger, who later becomes the Minister of Defence. Political opposition is being suppressed by uniformed paramilitaries called "*The Guardians of the Realm*", "*The Guardians*", or simply "*The Gs*". Things were seen then really that seriously!

In July 1987, Labour MP **Ken Livingstone**, "Red Ken", used his maiden speech to raise the allegations of a former Army press officer, **Colin Wallace**, that the Army press office in Northern Ireland had been used in the 1970s as part of a smear campaign, codenamed **Clockwork Orange**, against Harold Wilson and other British and Irish politicians.

In 1976 Harold Wilson resigned in poor health having previously implemented pay restraints to control global inflation coupled with stagnation and unemployment at record post-war levels. He was followed by **James Callaghan** 1976-1979, Labour. No "*seesaw effect*", then! Callaghan was widely expected to call an election in September 1978 but decided against it, hoping he would fare better in a year's time once the economy had improved. However, the winter saw a prolonged period of industrial unrest known as the "*Winter of Discontent*", severely reducing Labour's popularity. By that time, people had had enough of unchecked union power and permanent strikes. A vote of no confidence in the British Labour government of James Callaghan occurred on 28 March 1979. The vote was brought by Opposition leader Margaret Thatcher and was lost by one vote (311 votes to 310), which was announced at 10:19 pm. Going to bed that Wednesday night, I was about to wake up the following day to a completely different world.

Before I continue, let me summarise what essential events took place until 1970:

There were three Prime Ministers during the period, **Macmillan** (Conservative 1957-63), **Home** (Conservative 1963-4), these two were in Number 10 before I moved to the U.K., and **Wilson** (1964-70). General elections were held in 1959, 1964, 1966 and 1970. During the 1959-64 Parliament, the Conservatives held a majority of just short of 100; at the start of the 1964-6 Parliament, the Labour Government had an overall majority of just three; and during the 1966-70 Parliament, a majority of around 100.

The 1960s are generally believed to have been a decade of rapid change in British society. Yet, it was also a period of preoccupation with **national economic decline**. Both Conservative and Labour Governments attempted various experiments to boost Britain's underlying growth rate and competitiveness. But most of their energies came to be absorbed in "*crisis management*" as they had to fight off a series of balance of payments and currency problems. We will see that all of this directly affected the question of **whether the U.K. should join the EC**.

The governments of the time found themselves caught between external economic constraints, **rising public expectations as to living standards and public welfare** and their own claims that the economy was, in principle, manageable by the state to a high degree of precision.

Each government of the period thus found itself victim of a high level of **public disillusionment**, with large “*mid-term*” swings and by-election losses entering the political equation for the first time since the War. Economic “*panaceas*” accordingly succeeded one another in quick succession. The conversion of the Labour Government seemed to complete the construction of a domestic consensus on E.C. membership. Governments of both major parties had come to similar conclusions about the need to join.

Also, don't forget that by then, the “*mixed economy*” came under pressure, as did the institutions of the welfare state, especially the **National Health Service (NHS)**. In the 1970s, in particular, older beliefs in constitutional methods came into question—for instance, in the **first national Civil Service strike** ever, in 1973, and in the strikes and political violence that marked that decade as a whole. The result was a **revolution in the relationship between the state and society**, whereby **the market replaced society as the state governance model**.

PART III - FROM MARGARET THATCHER, THE SUPPLY-SIDE MIRACLE TO “LOADSAMONEY” ESSEX MAN.

When I woke up on Thursday, 29 March 1979, I stepped into the world of **Margaret Thatcher**, 1979-1990 Conservative. Her political philosophy and economic policies emphasised deregulation (particularly of the financial sector), flexible labour markets, privatisation of state-owned companies, and reduced trade-union power and influence. Her popularity in her first years in office waned amid recession and rising unemployment until victory in the 1982 **Falklands War** (I remember that suddenly, and from then on, especially during the Christmas period, we were inundated with British War movies on domestic T.V. and a marked rise of militarism) and the recovering economy brought a resurgence of support, resulting in her landslide re-election in 1983. Her subsequent support for the **Community Charge (“poll tax”)** was widely unpopular, and her increasingly **Euro sceptic** views on the E.C. were not shared by others in her Cabinet. (This, too, heralded the beginning of a sustained anti-European propaganda campaign by the print media)

I remember that she introduced the poll tax first in Scotland, claiming cynically that since the Scots were essentially socialists in her mind, it would not lose her any votes over it. She resigned as prime minister and party leader in November 1990, after **Michael Heseltine** launched a challenge to her leadership (the journalist **Simon Heffer**: “*a rare coup d'état at the top of British politics: the first since Lloyd George sawed Asquith off at the knees in 1916*”)

During the 1980s, Thatcher cut the tax rates for **high-income** earners. (“*Supply-side economics*”, a Theory that focuses on influencing the supply of labour and goods, using tax cuts and benefit cuts as incentives to work and produce goods. It was expounded by the U.S. economist **Arthur Laffer** (b. 1940) and implemented by Pres. **Ronald Reagan** in the 1980s. More about it later.)

As a consequence of tax cuts and growth in the finance sector, inequality in the U.K. widened. Margaret Thatcher accepted inequality although she did not entirely break up the Welfare State, but increasingly there was greater means-testing as there was also inequality in the U.K. Poll Tax, which arguably led to her downfall.

Margaret Thatcher – a strong leader but a resolute failure by any other measure.

The 1980s saw a return of **mass unemployment levels** not seen since the 1930s and **two recessions by deliberate policies**. Although inflation needed controlling in 1980, arguably, the government deflated the economy too much by chasing unreliable money supply targets. The cost was unemployment and social disorder, which need not have been so profound. This again led to a growth in the north-south divide and regional inequality. Unemployment mainly affected former industrial areas, but then she was too slow to help deal with the problems of structural unemployment. The **Lawson boom** was a missed opportunity. The government deliberately allowed a **boom and bust**, which caused an unnecessary and painful recession in 1991. For all Thatcher's claims to see the importance of keeping inflation low! It is ironic that the government made such a mistake in allowing an inflationary bubble in the late 1980s. Part of the reason is that they really felt they had created a supply-side miracle – which hadn't actually occurred.

The Supply-Side Miracle.

Let's be clear. **Supply-side economics**, also known as **voodoo economics** or **trickle-down**, does not work. As the Harvard Business Review put it: *"When we compare Europe with the U.S., or China with India, it is clear that countries that experienced a higher rise in inequality were not better at lifting the incomes of their poorest citizens. Indeed, the U.S. is the extreme counterargument to the myth of trickle down. While incomes grew by more than 600 percent for the top 0.001 percent of Americans since 1980, the bottom half of the population was actually shut off from economic growth, with a close to zero rise in their yearly income."* The traditional supply-side argument (that if you increase production, primarily by reducing taxes on the rich, you can get the economy going) is now busted.

Trickle-down depends on hope—the hope that the owners of production will spread their wealth around on their own or invest it. In reality, those that inherit wealth tend to hoard it rather than spend it, so the idea that they will immediately start using it to pay wages doesn't hold up. As **The Simpsons'** Mr Burns (cartoon character) said when asked what he would do with an unexpected million-dollar windfall, *"Oh, I don't know; throw it on the pile, I suppose."* In the more precise words of professor **Eric Beinhocker** of **Oxford University's Institute for New Economic Thinking**: *"Trickle-down economics'... has created the myth that helping powerful plutocrats is somehow the same as encouraging the free market. Orwell would have admired the doublespeak. But the true history of American capitalism has not been trickle down,' it has been 'middle out.'...Trickle-down economics may work in textbook economic theory with ivory-tower assumptions about perfectly rational people and perfectly efficient markets. But in the real world of politics and interests, it simply provides a cover story for 'rentier economics'. It dresses up anti-market behaviour in free-market rhetoric."*

(“Rentiers” derive income from the possession of assets that are scarce or artificially made scarce. Most familiar is rental income from land, property, minerals or financial investments, but other sources have grown too. They include the income lenders gain from debt interest; revenue from the ownership of 'intellectual property'; capital gains on investments; 'above normal' company profits [when a firm has a dominant position]; income from subsidies; and income of financial intermediaries derived from third-party transactions.)

The rise in **homeownership** was suitable for those who could buy but has increased wealth inequality in the U.K. The supply of council homes is now at record lows because many were sold off. The economists were right: **Monetarism was a failure**. The social cost of **3 million unemployed** is not a price worth paying for being a “strong” leader as she claimed to be.

What was Margaret Thatcher’s Legacy?

“*Loadsamoney*” and “*Basildon man*” to Towie and Brexit - Essex has long been held up as both the authentic England and the crudest, stupidest symbol of Englishness. (**Tim Burrows**, *The Guardian* 27 June 2019.) (“*Loadsamoney*” is a fictional character portrayed by the Comedian **Harry Enfield**.)

In 1990, a new term, “*Essex man*”, was coined by the **Sunday Telegraph** journalist **Simon Heffer** to describe a new type of Tory voter: a “*young, industrious, mildly brutish and culturally barren*” worker in London’s financial centre, whose roots lay in East London, and whose political views were “*breathtakingly rightwing*”. The piece was accompanied by an illustration of a small-foreheaded bloke in an expensive yet ill-fitting suit, drinking a can of lager in front of a shiny new motor and an ex-council house (presumably acquired thanks to Thatcher’s right-to-buy reforms), resplendent with a satellite dish to pick up Rupert Murdoch’s new Sky television service, which was launched in the U.K. in 1989. Although Essex man voted Conservative, many Conservatives viewed him with fear and horror. More than just brashly consumerists, Essex was also painted as a hotbed of bigotry. (**Lord Inglewood**, pro-European MEP, blamed the influence of Essex for increasing “*public bad manners, aggressiveness and yobbishness*” in the Tory party). It also came to represent “*white flight*” in the U.K. There is much evidence of xenophobia and racism in Essex: the county was a hotbed of **BNP (British National Party)** membership during the first decade of the 21st century.

Margaret Thatcher left Number 10 sobbing as she scrambled into her car, and **John Major**, 1990-1997, Conservative, followed her. Personally, he was a nice guy, and I liked him, but he had some difficult times. The shameful ejection of Britain from the **Exchange Rate Mechanism**, constant battles within his party over Europe and his famous outcry “*Put up or Shut up*” and “*Tory Sleaze*”, several press stories about infidelity and poor moral behaviour within the Cabinet and wider party, caused him a lot of trouble.

But then, under John Major, Britain’s most prolonged period of continuous economic growth began. He also started engaging with the **IRA** to work towards a peaceful end to the conflict in Northern Ireland, his work there leading the way for the **Good Friday Agreement in 1998**.

The Golden Age.

Indeed, what followed could have been **the Golden Age** had there not been **Iraq**. **Tony Blair**, 1997-2007, “New” Labour. In my opinion, as someone who never before nor since has voted for **Labour**, he was by far the best prime minister during my 40-year stay in the U.K. (if I overlook Ted Heath and the E.C.). He was everything Margaret Thatcher could never have even aspired to become. There was a John F Kennedy in him, a second kind of Camelot. Blair’s governments enacted **constitutional reforms**, removing most hereditary peers from the **House of Lords**, establishing the U.K.’s **Supreme Court** and reforming the office of **Lord Chancellor** (thereby separating judicial powers from the legislative and executive branches). His government held referenda in which Scottish and Welsh electorates voted in favour of devolved administration, paving the way for establishing the **Scottish** and **Welsh Parliament** (both in 1999).

Interestingly, at the **North East England Devolution Referendum** held on 4 November 2004, only 22.07% voted Yes and **77.93% No**, with a Turnout of 47.71%. The campaign against the proposed Assembly was successfully led by the local businessman **John Elliott**, founder and chairman of Ebac Ltd, who argued that the institution would have no real powers and be a “*white elephant*” and too centric to Newcastle upon Tyne. Whether that circumstance had something to do with the high **Leave** vote of almost all North East areas 12 years later? Tony Blair was also involved in negotiating the **Good Friday Agreement**. His time in office occurred during a period of continued economic growth, but this became increasingly dependent on mounting debt. In 1997, his government gave the **Bank of England** powers to set interest rates autonomously, and he later oversaw a **significant increase in public spending, especially in Healthcare and Education**. He championed **multiculturalism** and, between 1997 and 2007, **immigration** rose considerably, especially after his government welcomed immigration from the **new EU member states** in 2004. This provided a cheap and flexible labour supply but also fuelled **Euroscepticism**, especially among some of his party’s core voters.

His other social policies were generally progressive; he introduced the **National Minimum Wage Act 1998**, the **Human Rights Act 1998** and the **Freedom of Information Act 2000** in 2004, allowing **gay couples** to enter into **civil partnerships**. With his “*tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime*” he oversaw increasing incarceration rates and new **antisocial behaviour legislation**. In his first six years in office, Blair ordered British troops into combat five times but it was the **Invasion of Iraq** on the side of George W Bush that broke his political back because it attracted widespread public opposition and 139 of Blair’s own M.P.s opposed it. On a personal note, Tony Blair converted to **Roman Catholicism** only after leaving office since, traditionally, no serving prime minister may be a Catholic.

PART IV - THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY AND AN ATTEMPT OF AN ANSWER TO A BURNING QUESTION.

The Past is a Foreign Country, and my journey has nearly ended.

The final prime minister who followed Tony Blair was **Gordon Brown**, 2007-2010, Labour and Blair's former Chancellor. In contrast to the charismatic Blair, he had a rather dour and humourless personality. I did not like him. Brown's premiership coincided with the global recession, during which Brown called for fiscal action in an attempt to stimulate aggregate demand. Domestically, Brown's administration introduced measures including a **bank rescue package** worth around £500 billion, a **temporary 2.5 percentage point cut in VAT** and a **"car scrappage"** scheme. But that was it then.

In 2009 I returned to Vienna and across the Channel in the UK, **David Cameron**, 2010-2016, Conservative, followed Brown describing the economic situation as he came to power as **"even worse than we thought"** and warned of **"difficult decisions"** to be made over spending cuts. A **period of Austerity** has begun that is lasting to this day. Thus, my journey into the Past has finished, and we all know what has happened since. Two prime ministers in succession, **Theresa May** 2016-2019, Conservative, followed by **Boris Johnson**, 2019-2022, Conservative. On top of all this: Brexit and now Covid-19. Two horrible events, one of which has plagued the nation for four long years.

This is my attempt at an explanation.

All governments since the War, with perhaps (?) the notable exception of Tony Blair's, seemed to have **ruled over the people, often against the people**, prioritising economic and monetarist concerns and concentrating for a long time on the pursuit of World Power Pretence over the many social problems and ills at home still unsolved. The reaction to that were strikes and bitter riots. Margaret Thatcher's legacy, with her many failed economic philosophies, all designed for quick fixes, ended woefully in busts, left inequality in its wake and divided not only the country over Europe but also the Conservative Party. A disappointed, disillusioned and increasingly angry people watched their former wartime foes across the Channel achieving a higher living standard and a sounder economy than they who had been through a hard but victorious war. When things go bad internally, an external enemy is needed, and consequently, the enemy was Europe and the European immigrants!

The constant, incessant heavy barrage of anti-European and xenophobic propaganda delivered by the big guns of the Murdoch Press and Sky T.V. and the Warlike language and jingoism by politicians and media alike began to affect the population. Hatred has replaced what little there was of reason. In the meantime, Covid-19 has killed well over 40,000 people in the U.K., mainly due to the deplorable inefficiency of Boris Johnson and his government. However, most of the population still believes Boris is doing a **"good job"**. People got used to bad news being delivered as **"world-beating"** good news. It's safe to say that Britain has been made docile. All they now want is to **"get it all done!"** Better an end with horror than a horror without end. Who can blame them?

As **Prime Ministers** go, the drama continues: Britain was not spared a disastrous **Liz Truss**, who followed Boris Johnson. She was the short(est) lived PM from September 6, 2022, to October 24, 2022, followed by **Rishi Sunak** on October 25, 2022.

Finally, things have not improved in the U.K. since I wrote this essay in 2020. If anything, it got worse!

The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and comments!



About the author

Wolfgang Geissler is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society, its Treasurer and a Committee Member of the United Kingdom Citizens in Europe. He has lived and worked for 40 years in the United Kingdom.

The opinions expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the views of the ABS.